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The 'Three-Body Problem', the Imperative of Survival, and the Misogyny of Reactionary Rhetoric

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This essay explores how the theories, plot, and characters of the Three-Body Problem series, a bestselling sci-fi trilogy by Liu Cixin, are employed in Chinese digital discourse to illustrate visions of authoritarian, conservative, and misogynistic politics and to interpret the nature of international relations. By revisiting the key theoretical and plot developments of the series, I suggest that the totalising and reductive dualism of (feminised) morality, democracy, and destruction versus (masculinised) reason, autocracy, and survival constructed in the context of a permanent existential threat can provide compelling rhetorical resources for articulating an authoritarian and misogynistic politics of survival.

L iu Cixin's the *Three-Body Problem* book trilogy is one of the world's bestselling Chinese sci-fi series, being read and endorsed by figures such as George R.R. Martin and Barack Obama. In Chinese public debates, however, critics highlight the series' social Darwinist, misogynistic, and totalitarian tendencies, raising concerns about how the trilogy has been used by authoritarian-minded techno-nationalists—known as the 'industrial party' (工业党, *gongye dang*) in digital culture—to dismiss morality and delegitimate progressive social change (see, for example, Xu 2019; Cicero by the Sea 2022). Granted, a novel that depicts a world ruled by the law of the jungle does not necessarily equate to a novel that

advocates for such a world. After all, no-one would read George Orwell's *1984* as an endorsement of totalitarianism. It is also beyond a writer's control how their work is interpreted and used. However, if we take a closer look at the theoretical endeavours and narrative structures of the series, it becomes clear why it holds such appeal for the techno-nationalists, international relations realists, and opponents of social justice struggles.

In the first part of the essay, I revisit the key theoretical and plot developments of the series, noting the striking similarities between its 'cosmic sociology' and neorealism in International Relations (IR) theory. I then look at how the theories, storylines, and characters of the trilogy are employed in digital discourse as metaphors and parables through which to bolster reactionary narratives and interpret international relations. I conclude by putting the derivative discursive world of the *Three-Body* series into a global perspective.

Cosmic Realism and the Polarities of Reason and Morality

The basic premise of the series is the imminent invasion of Earth by the Trisolarans, a race of technologically hyper-advanced beings themselves in a state of permanent existential crisis due to their unstable tri-solar system. For a certain period, humans and Trisolarans maintain a relatively stable mutual deterrence system based on a theory formulated by 'cosmic sociologist' Luo Ji, the protagonist of the second book. The thrust of the theory is as follows.

Luo Ji was inspired by astrophysicist Ye Wenjie, protagonist of the first book, who told him two 'self-evident' axioms: 1) 'Survival is the primary need of all civilisations'; and 2) 'Civilisations continuously grow and expand, but the total matter in the universe remains constant' (Liu 2016). On this basis, Luo develops the idea of the 'chain of suspicion' (猜疑链) and the infamous 'dark forest' theory (黑暗森林). According to the former, one civilisation (A) cannot determine whether another (B) is benevolent or malicious. Furthermore, A cannot determine whether B thinks A is benevolent or malicious. A cannot determine whether B thinks A thinks B is benevolent or

malicious—and the 'chain of suspicion' goes on. Given this ultimate uncertainty and the spatiotemporal scale of the universe—which, according to Luo Ji, means that the difference in capabilities between civilisations is likely to be enormous and unpredictable—the 'dark forest' theory posits that every civilisation is like a hunter with a gun stalking in a dark forest. They must hide themselves and strike at the first sign of other life.

In many aspects the cosmic sociology of the *Three-Body* series is an interstellar version of neorealist IR theory, which also starts from a series of supposedly self-evident assumptions such as survival is a state's highest need and the uncertainty about others' intentions is a permanent, defining feature of the international system (for a detailed comparison of Liu's cosmic sociology and Kenneth Waltz's IR theory, see Dyson 2019). The dark forest theory is a more extreme version of the security dilemma due to the enormity of the universe: the stakes of uncertainty are so high that civilisations must not contact any other, must hide their own location, and must destroy anyone whose coordinates have been exposed. Like neorealism, Luo Ji's cosmic sociology holds that each civilisation's internal social structure and moral system do not matter. The only thing that matters at the interstellar level (or international level for the neorealists) is the structure of the system of which the chain of suspicion is an inherent attribute. 'They're all identical,' says Luo Ji. This could have been taken straight from an academic book on structural realism, which, for example, would state that the units in the international system 'are functionally undifferentiated states that seek survival' (James 2022: 358). Based on this theory, Luo threatens the Trisolarans with mutually assured destruction—a deterrence strategy that neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz consider effective for maintaining international stability. Luo declares that if the Trisolarans launch an assault, he will immediately broadcast the location of Trisolaris to the universe, exposing both Trisolaris and Earth, anticipating the destruction of both.

Throughout the books, Liu appears to be highly conscious of the question of how 'external threats' and the need to survive under harsh conditions influence the organisation of society. The constant threat of planetary destruction on Trisolaris led to a totalitarian society, which is depicted in the books in ways that are evidently reminiscent of Fascism

and Nazism in Earth's twentieth century. When the Trisolarans' invasion plan becomes known, humans on Earth first undergo a period of 'great recession' because of militarism, environmental degradation (as resources are exhausted for the development of military technology) and authoritarianism. This leads to depopulation and revolutions, which found new governments which reverse the previous trends. No longer obsessed with survival, humans are now seemingly guided by a new principle: 'humanism comes first, and perpetuating civilisation comes second' (Liu 2016). Culture as well as technological progress flourish because of the 'emancipation of human nature' (Liu 2016). At this point, one might expect this storyline to become a critique of emergency politics; however, all the progress made in this period is swept away when it is revealed that the Trisolarans are so technologically advanced that Earth does not stand a chance in the 'Doomsday Battle' between its entire space force fleet and a Trisolaran 'droplet'.

Three characters (apart from Luo Ji) are crucial to the survival of human civilisation in the events following the defeat of the human fleet and occupy the polarities of 'reason' and 'morality' in the narrative structure of the books. Zhang Beihai, a political commissar in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy and a space force officer, is one of the most popular characters among *Three-Body* fans. Known as a man of reason, patience, and determination, he was the only one in the era of optimism to predict that Earth does not stand a chance against Trisolaris and he withholds his plans from both humans and Trisolarans. Driven by the belief that the only way to sustain human civilisation is to escape Earth, Zhang hijacks a spaceship (appropriately named *Natural Selection* [自然选择]) on the eve of the Doomsday Battle and journeys to space. Together with four other spaceships that are initially sent to capture him but instead join him after the defeat of Earth's space force, they form 'Starship Earth'. However, a 'dark battle' soon breaks out between the five ships, each with some 2,000 crew onboard. The commanders of the ships come to the realisation that to maximise their chances of survival, they must attack the others, and they become subject to the 'chain of suspicion', not knowing the others' intentions. Zhang Beihai's *Natural Selection* is struck a few seconds before he

was about to attack the others, but he smiles as his life ends, believing that regardless of his own death, the battle signals the birth of the 'new human'.

In contrast to Zhang Beihai, Cheng Xin, a female aerospace engineer and protagonist of the third book, is one of the most hated *Three-Body* characters in online communities—loathed as someone whose moral self-righteousness destroys human civilisation. Based on the 'black forest' theory mentioned earlier, Luo Ji puts in place a deterrence system of mutually assured destruction after the Doomsday Battle and acts as the first 'Swordholder'—namely, the one authorised to press the nuclear button. As time goes by, however, humans begin to take peace for granted, become 'feminised' (I will get to the misogynistic aspect of the series later), and start to worry about Luo's unchecked power. Cheng Xin is selected as the new Swordholder. For a deterrence system to work, apparently, the other party must believe that you have the willpower to execute mutual destruction. The Trisolarans study the personalities of the Swordholders and estimate that Luo Ji's 'degree of deterrence' is about 90 per cent, whereas Cheng Xin's is only 10 per cent. They are convinced that Cheng Xin will not press the button, and therefore launch their attack immediately after Cheng takes on the role. As predicted, Cheng abandons mutual destruction out of moral concern and Earth becomes subjugated to Trisolaran rule. However, members of Starship Earth in outer space broadcast the location of Trisolaris, which leads to its destruction by another hyper-advanced civilisation acting on 'dark forest' principles. Earth, located close to Trisolaris, is now facing the threat of 'dark forest' attacks from unknown aliens.

Humans come up with different plans. One is to develop light-speed travel technologies enabling some humans to escape from a potential 'photoid' strike. Research into this, however, is soon outlawed because of fears it could be abused by the super-rich. There are also concerns about what wandering in space could do to humanity itself, as Earth learns about the 'dark battles'. In fact, humans trick one of the spaceships into returning to Earth and immediately arrest everyone onboard when it lands. In his trial, one of the commanders famously says: 'When humans are lost in space, it takes only five minutes to reach totalitarianism' (Liu 2017)—more evidence that Liu is

deeply concerned about the question of survival and political regimes, convinced that looming external threats inevitably necessitate totalitarian rule.

The third key character here is Thomas Wade, a man of 'absolute reason' whose degree of deterrence the Trisolarans estimate to be 100 per cent. He leads secret research on light-speed travel and reveals his plan to the human world after a breakthrough is made. The United Nations decides this is illegal. Wade's space city is on the verge of war with the UN fleet and Cheng Xin is asked to make the final decision. It is here that Wade delivers one of his signature quotes: 'If we lose our human nature, we lose much, but if we lose our bestial nature, we lose everything' (Liu 2017). Cheng Xin declares she chooses human nature and asks him to surrender. Wade is executed.

In the final series of events, Luo Ji gathers formerly arrested scientists from Wade's company and successfully continues the research into light-speed travel. The solar system is destroyed in a 'dimensional strike' (reducing it to two dimensions). The entirety of human civilisation within the solar system is erased, except Cheng Xin and her friend, AA, who escape from the collapse wave on one of the light-speed craft—a legacy of Wade's program.

The Industrial Party, the Imperative of Survival, and the Misogyny of Reactionary Rhetoric

Readers familiar with Chinese digital culture may immediately recognise how the themes of the trilogy are well aligned with the concerns of an online discursive and ideological formation known as 'the industrial party' (工业党 *gongye dang*). It is characterised by a firm belief in technological determinism, a social Darwinist view of the international system in which the survival of the technologically underdeveloped is perpetually threatened by the technologically advanced, and a contempt for anything the techno-nationalists find 'sentimentalist', 'idealistic', or 'moralistic' (for a sympathetic introduction to the *gongye dang* discourse, see Lu and Wu 2018). From this perspective, the main narrative arc of the *Three-*

Body Problem can be easily summarised as humans repeatedly undermining efforts to ensure their own civilisational survival out of concern for morality and democracy. But eventually, the sustaining of civilisation depends on the 'rogue figures' who prioritise rationality and the determination to pursue survival over moral or democratic principles.

The problem with the series is not that it endorses totalitarianism, which it does not. The problem lies in the totalising, reductive, and potentially dangerous dualism of humanity/morality/democracy/destruction versus animality/reason/autocracy/survival on which the plot and character development rest. Liu constructs an ultimate, definitive existential threat to human civilisation—a threat rooted in the assumed dark forest nature of the universe—and builds his characters around these polarities: humaneness leads to self-destruction and survival depends on ruthlessness. When external threats are imminent, law and order are of the utmost importance, as we see with Trisolaris, the occupied Earth, and the society of spaceships. While the science of the series is admirably imaginative, its sociopolitical imagination is impoverished, unlike, for example, one of Liu's earlier works, *The Village Teacher* (an English translation of this short story is included in Liu 2020). In this short story, Earth, again, is about to be wiped out by a hyper-advanced civilisation engaged in some kind of existential struggle. Aliens test the knowledge of randomly selected candidates on a target planet to determine whether to spare it. A village teacher in rural China, tortured by chronic disease and extreme poverty, insists on his students memorising Newton's laws of motion before his death. It is this ordinary, heroic, yet unknown act that saves Earth from annihilation. The world of the *Three-Body Problem*, in contrast, is one in a permanent state of exception, suffocated by moral dilemmas and devoid of politics, insofar as politics is about possibilities for action and the plurality of social relations.

It goes without saying that no-one should take one of the most pessimistic interpretations of the universe in a sci-fi series as a guide for thinking about social reality. However, many readers on social media cite the dark forest theory or Thomas Wade's saying about humanity and bestiality as self-evident truths. In a way, the trilogy has offered a creative language and

set of symbolic resources for right-wing nationalists to enhance and articulate pre-existing beliefs about the imperative of survival and the dangers of whatever they consider detrimental to that imperative, such as 'moral sentiment' or 'liberalism'. Given most readers are sympathetic to the idea of human survival, Cheng Xin's character—who is often labelled a *baizuo* (白左, 'white left', a pejorative slang term and rhetorical device used mainly to ridicule progressive liberalism) and a *shengmu* (圣母, 'holy mother', a pejorative slang term used to ridicule those seen as overly compassionate towards the disadvantaged)—is invoked as a particularly convincing case for the argument that ethical concerns and moral values are self-serving and can potentially lead to self-destruction. The widespread denunciation of Cheng overlaps with the anti-*baizuo* discourse on Chinese social media—a form of reactionary rhetoric similar to the 'anti-woke' discourse in the Anglo-American context (Zhang 2020). These narratives combine a rejection or 'abnormalisation of social justice' (Cammaerts 2022) with articulations of white supremacy and racial nationalism. For example, an essay by a *Sohu* columnist claims that Cheng Xin's character, who ended human civilisation 'in the name of love and equality', is a most pertinent satire of equal rights advocates, LGBTQ+ activists, and feminists. They assert that Liu Cixin's trilogy warns about the 'feminisation' and '*shengmu*-isation' of society, and 'the triumph of political correctness', which lead to human extinction in his books, and are already happening in the real world (Taotao Studies History 2020).

A similar essay on *Zhihu*, a platform popular among *gongye dang* techno-nationalists, looks to Norway for an analogy of the 'feminised' human society during the period of deterrence-induced peace (Meiri Yijian 2022). With some 100,000 followers on the platform, the columnist's depiction of Norway is reminiscent of what researchers of the far right have identified as an imaginary of the 'Swedish dystopia' (Thorleifsson 2019; Åkerlund 2023). Under the title 'This is Not Trisolaris, This is Europe', the essay asserts that Norway has become the most *baizuo* and *shengmu* (or 'woke', as the Anglophone alt-right might say) country in the world because of long periods of prosperity and peace. They claim that the country has abolished all the 'masculine' (阳刚) social policies of the past and opened its doors to refugees, to the extent that Norwegians will become a minority in their homeland. Through a metaphor immediately recognisable to *Three-Body* fans, they compare far-right mass murderer Anders Behring Breivik to Thomas Wade and Norwegian politicians to Cheng Xin. In other words, they suggest Breivik was forced to sacrifice himself to rescue his nation from liberal self-destruction.

Liu Cixin will most likely be disturbed by the way his books are used for the rendition of far-right tropes. However, his own comments about Cheng Xin also show that these worrying trends may not be entirely based on misinterpretations of the character:

> She would think she was great, not selfish at all, believing that her values and moral principles were universal and correct. She does not care about the consequences of following these principles, but only the peace of her own conscience … [T]he real selfless people with 'bigger love' [大爱] in the novels would think for humanity as a whole. Sacrificing one's conscience is much harder than sacrificing one's life. (Cited in Chen 2016)

Here again we see the false dichotomy of morality or conscience versus survival or 'humanity as a whole' and how it limits the sociopolitical imagination of the *Three-Body* world. Liu's preoccupation with this dichotomy is also reflected in an infamous thought experiment he proposed during a public event. In conversation with historian Jiang Xiaoyuan, Liu asked him whether, if he, Liu, and the woman chairing the event were the last humans in the world and the two men had to eat the woman to survive, 'Would you eat her?' Jiang said no. Liu said that was irresponsible, and that 'only if you choose inhumanity now, humanity will have a chance to be reborn in the future' (Wang 2007). Thought experiments about an 'extreme' situation like this usually tell us more about our understanding of social realities than the imagined scenario itself. Given his totalising logic of survival, which depends on the perpetual presence and reproduction of images of destruction, defeat, and chaos, it is unsurprising that he defended the current Chinese regime with the justification that 'if you were to loosen up the country a bit, the consequences would be terrifying' (Fan 2019).

Three-Body, the Chinese TV adaptation of Liu Cixin's sci-fi novel. Source: Tencent Video.

It has become clear that the narrative structure of the *Three-Bodies* series, just like the *gongye dang* techno-nationalist discourse, is masculinist and misogynistic. Liu explicitly depicts human society under deterrence peace as 'feminised', noting the physical as well as mental feminisation of the 'new era' men. The qualities conventionally associated with femininity, such as love, compassion, and moral sentiments, are blamed for the extinction of human civilisation, whereas qualities associated with masculinity, such as rationality, determination, and aggression, are framed as key to civilisational survival. The reactionary rhetoric adopts a similar strategy, which is not only evidently anti-feminist, but also *feminises* social justice issues 'as a prelude to devaluing and subduing them' (Kaul 2021: 1624). By labelling anyone with any concerns about human rights or equality a *shengmu*, this rhetoric constructs certain ideas and political agendas as feminine as a way of delegitimating them:

they are either hopelessly idealistic or dangerously undermine stability, growth, and 'national interests'. If we come back to the trilogy itself, it is no surprise that the original text is so imbued with sexist language that, according to the writer himself, the 'feminist editor' of the English edition made more than 1,000 edits to the second book (The Paper 2015). For the anti-feminist fans of the series, this anecdote serves as another piece of evidence that 'Western culture' has been taken over by political correctness. The 'thought experiment' mentioned earlier becomes even darker when seen from a gender perspective: the only woman in the conversation (the host) was objectified to be part of the moral dilemma, while only the two male speakers had the agency to make a choice.

Another theme in the discourse about the *Three-Body* series among techno-nationalists is Chinese international relations, with the relationship between Earth and the Trisolarans interpreted as a metaphor

for Sino-American relations. A popular question-and-answer thread on *Zhihu* about 'why humans chose Cheng Xin as a Swordholder' provides us with ample examples in this regard (Zhihu 2020). The most upvoted answers, including one from the official account of the Communist Youth League, which received more than 80,000 votes, all compare Earth to China and Trisolaris to the United States. Users draw parallels between Luo Ji's deterrence theory and Mao Zedong's nuclear thought, suggesting that humans' underappreciation of Luo Ji and support for Cheng Xin is a result of the Trisolaran cultural hegemony and their strategy of 'peaceful evolution'. In an answer with more than 15,000 upvotes, one influencer writes sarcastically about how humans became convinced that the Trisolarans were the 'beacon of civilisation' and the 'conscience of the universe', referring to the tendency among some Chinese liberals to view the United States as the 'beacon of civilisation' (Lin 2021), and believed that the idea that 'the will of the Trisolarans to destroy us will never die' (a reference to Mao saying 'the will of the imperialists to destroy us will never die') was a lie made up by dictators to justify their rule. The gist of these comments, which can at times be quite entertaining to read, is that the nation should never take peace for granted, should always prioritise developing military strength, and should aways look out for the technologically superior and culturally hegemonic enemy that seeks to destroy us.

Elsewhere I have characterised the ideological orientation of *gongye dang* techno-nationalists as realist authoritarianism (Zhang 2020), where the opposition to progressive social and political change is based less on any adherence to 'traditional' or religious values than on a seemingly pragmatic preoccupation with development and survival in a perceived social Darwinist world. This approach makes their reactionary rhetoric against social justice both resonate with and differ from the far right elsewhere, who may draw on different ideological resources such as traditionalism and individualism. One similarity between Chinese and American right-wing nationalists, apart from the tropes mentioned earlier, is how the image of external threat is employed to delegitimate social justice struggles. Whereas in China

feminists and rights activists are attacked as victims of the influence of 'Western' values, US conservatives connect their 'enemies' such as critical race theory, so-called gender ideology, or more recently, 'wokeism' to communism and the 'Cultural Revolution', conveniently invoking the enduring image of the China threat.

The *Three-Body* Discursive Universe in Global Perspective

This brings me to my final point. Although reading the series and the discussions around it sheds lights on how certain political imaginations take shape in Chinese popular culture, they should not be mistaken for representing some uniquely 'Chinese view of the world'. Neorealism, after all, is an IR theory that originated in the United States and has much in common with the cosmic sociology of the *Three-Body* world. Criticisms of the trilogy and Liu's other works for their social Darwinist and misogynistic themes are not uncommon in domestic debates, as I mentioned at the beginning. Furthermore, the delegitimating of social justice struggles, which are perceived as an attack on (white) masculinity, is a globally resonant feature of contemporary reactionary discourses.

The *Three-Body* readers who see the greatest threat to civilisational survival in the 'feminisation' of society may find sympathetic views among far-right figures like Jordan Peterson, who argues that order is symbolically and 'mythically male' and chaos is 'associated with the feminine' (Mishra 2018), and Marc Jongen. Jongen's concern about Germany's forgetfulness of 'the importance of the military, the police, [and] warrior virtues' because of postwar peace and security (Müller 2016) resonates precisely with the *Three-Body* plotline that its militarist readers like to invoke as a parable—namely, that taking peace for granted in a 'feminised' society leads to self-destruction. In a less discussed chapter of *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama (2006), one of the best-known advocates of liberalism, worries over the fate of democracy in a world of the 'last

man'—a world that has become 'too' prosperous and peaceful and in which people's desire for greatness goes unfulfilled. Interestingly, in an academic paper on the *Three-Body* trilogy, legal scholar Chen Qi uses Fukuyama's terminology to interpret the 'feminised' society of Cheng Xin's era as a society of 'last men', in which people believe they have found 'universal values' and their moralism results in the erasure of human civilisation, or the 'end of history' (Chen 2016). Chen thus builds on the idea of the last man to the degree that it turns the original triumphalist thesis on liberal universalism into a critique of it, by drawing on the narrative resources of the *Three-Body* series. These transnational and translingual linkages and appropriations around the problematics and reactionary rhetoric associated with the trilogy would be a fruitful venue for future exploration. ∎