Epidemic in the Eyes of “Three Generals of Chinese Sci-fi”
– Wang Jingkang, Liu Cixin and Han Song*

Translated by Shanky Chandra
Harvard-Yenching Fellow,
PhD scholar, Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies,
JNU, New Delhi

Summary
According to an online conspiracy theory, the American author Dean Koontz predicted the coronavirus outbreak in 1981. His novel ‘The Eyes of Darkness’ referred to a deadly virus called "Wuhan-400" - strangely predicting the Chinese city where the Covid-19 would emerge. But the similarities end there: Wuhan-400 is described as having a "death rate" of 100%, developed in laboratories outside the city as the "perfect" biological weapon. Science fiction writers, however, have made a point of doing just that. With the devastating effect of the epidemic and a worldwide rise in state-sanctioned authoritarianism, science fiction has been approaching reality at an alarming rate in recent years. But how do Chinese science fiction writers, who have spent much of their lives writing imagining dystopia, react to ultimately live in one? How does reality match fiction? This translation is based on questions asked to the "three kings" of Chinese science fiction, Wang Jiankang, Han Song and Liu Cixin, who are the best practitioners of the genre, to tell us about their experience of the epidemic in China.

Translator’s Note: The Chinese article was originally published as an interview at China Science Writer Association. Later, it was published by the Shanghai Pudong Science Fiction Association and Science Fiction World Magazine, respectively. But after sometime, the article was taken down by the government censor authorities from QQ, WeChat and other social media platforms due to some controversial remarks by the three writers.
During the epidemic period, a sentence in the famous sci-fi novel by Liu Cixin, *Three-Body Problem*, was repeatedly mentioned by netizens at home and abroad: “Weakness and ignorance are not obstacles to survival, but arrogance is.” The “Prophecies of God” of science fiction writers and science fiction novels have also been published by netizens, which is amazing. What exactly is the epidemic in the eyes of China’s science fiction writers? We chatted briefly with Wang Jiankang, Han Song and Liu Cixin

**Wang Jiankang**

(Member of the China Writers Association, member of the China Science Writers Association; member of the Science and Literature Committee and member of the Henan Writer Association.)

*Publications*: So far, nearly 100 science fiction works have been published, including more than ten novels with more than 5 million characters, including "Human", "An Ant", "Be With Me", "Escape from Mother Universe", "Heavenly Father and Earth" Mother", "Wang Jiankang Science Fiction Selection" (four volumes), etc. He has won the Galaxy Award from the 97 International Science Fiction Conference, the Global Chinese Science Fiction Nebula Award for Lifetime Achievement Award, and has won the Global China Science Fiction Nebula Award and the Galaxy Award several times.

**Q: How do science fiction writers view the epidemic?**

Diseases, including infectious diseases, are an inevitable pain for human beings. No matter how advanced a medicine is, humans must always be with them. We can only minimize sacrifices on this premise. For example, for viruses that exist in wild animal populations, we can completely ban eating exotic animals, but as long as the virus exists, it will infect people sooner or later. As the human footprint becomes wider, this prospect is inevitable.

What we can do is to be prepared and respond as soon as possible if an epidemic occurs.

**Q: In addition to the negative impact of the epidemic on human society, what other driving effects are there?**
It cannot be said to be a driving force. It can only be said that because it is unavoidable, humans can only choose to face it, which accordingly promotes advances in medical science. Just like war in human society, although it is disgusting, it is inevitable, at least in the foreseeable historical stage, so all countries have to develop weapons against their victims of helpless process, which also promote the development of science and technology.

Q: What kind of epidemic there will be in the future? How will human beings fight back then? Have you ever imagined this?

Pathogens, especially viruses, have a very simple structure and are easy to mutate, especially in modern society where humans, poultry, and wild animals are more and more frequently contacted. Therefore, the emergence of new pathogens including new viruses is inevitable. Among them, viruses and fungi that are more difficult to deal with (because they have no specific drugs other than targeted vaccines and rely more on the patient’s immunity) are relatively easy to deal with in the long run, but those that can be effectively killed with antibiotics. Bacteria will quickly evolve into drug-resistant strains, making it more difficult to deal with.

Q: What is the most worrying epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers?

This brings me back to the meditation of the young man I mentioned at the beginning: Although there were vicious diseases such as smallpox and Black Death in the history of mankind and the medicine at that time was very underdeveloped, why didn't mankind become extinct? This is because mankind has evolved a powerful immune system, which has equal strength in the fight against diseases, and each has its victories. In other words, it is unlikely that a pathogen capable of overcoming the human immune system will suddenly appear in nature—except for man-made pathogens because it is beyond this balance system and also beyond the capabilities of the human immune system.

Q: What was the background of the creation of the medical science fiction novel "The Cross"?  

1 "The Cross" was published in January 2009, produced by Science Fiction World Press, The terrorists belonging to the "Cross Organization" stole the smallpox virus that
I am more interested in medical subjects, and I have created many science fiction novels based on medical subjects. These works actually originated from my childhood imagination: generally speaking, everyone knows that the infectious pathogens among the ferocious ones are not high and the pathogens that are easily transmitted are relatively mild, but if there is a sudden evolution in nature that is both ferocious and extremely strong, will highly infectious pathogens cause human extinction? It is the meditation in these teenage years that have triggered my attention to pathogens.

Liu Cixin

World-famous science fiction writer, member of China Writers Association, member of the Ninth National Committee, member of China Science Writers Association, vice chairman of Shanxi Writers Association.

Mr Liu’s works have a profound impact on Chinese science fiction. In addition to the trilogy of the milestone of Chinese science fiction literature, the trilogy of Three-Body Problem, is his representative work, his numerous writings include novels such as The Supernova Era, Ball Lightning, Wandering Earth, Rural Teachers, Wearing the Road, Festivals That Cannot Coexist, Full Band Jamming, etc.

Q: How do science fiction writers view an epidemic?

An epidemic is a natural disaster. Unlike other external natural disasters, it attacks the inside of the human body and is more difficult to defend against than other natural disasters. In history, the epidemics have made significant and profound changes to the development of human civilization. However, with the advancement of technology, the damage caused by epidemics has been greatly reduced. It is believed that in the future, humans will succeed in eliminating epidemics.

According to Liu Cixin, the impact of any disaster on human society is twofold, and an epidemic is no exception. For example, the Black Death in medieval Europe was one of the most tragic epidemics, killing one-third to half of the European population at that time. But at the same time, it also shaken the absolute authority of the church, enhanced our attention to people's self, and the development of individual liberation, awareness of freedom and equality, are important factors leading to the occurrence of the Renaissance.
In addition to natural occurrences, the cause of future epidemics may include more and more human factors. The out-of-control of genetic engineering and nanotechnology may bring new types of epidemics.

Image: Liu Cixin

Liu Cixin’s biggest worry is that genetic engineering technology and nanotechnology are out of control, or the epidemic that is deliberately used as a weapon. Viruses in nature do not aim to kill humans. The death of the host means that the viruses parasitizing them cannot survive.

However, artificial viruses are used as genetic weapons may be targeted at killing people. Such viruses may have high-efficiency transmission methods that natural viruses do not have, such as causing illness at the same time after a long period of asymptomatic infection. Such viruses may also target specific races or even individuals. Among the possible artificial viruses, viruses produced by nanotechnology are particularly worthy of attention, because such viruses are not life in nature, but microscopic machinery, which may be more difficult to defend.

Han Song

A well-known sci-fi writer, he has served as Xinhua News Agency reporter, Director of the Interview Room, held positions such as the deputy editor and the executive editor of "Looking Oriental Weekly" magazine, and is currently the deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency’s external news-editorial department and deputy director of the Central News Interview Center. Besides, Han Song is Standing Director of China Popular Science Writers Association. He is also a member of the China Writers Association.

He published collections of short stories and novels, which include Universal Tombstone, Recycled Bricks, Soloists, The Ancient Ship of the Desert, The Fear of Seeing, etc. Other feature-length works include Red Ocean, Mars Shines on America: An Account of a Westward Journey in the Year 2066, Metro trilogy, Hospital trilogy, etc.

Among all his works, the Hospital trilogy is called “a milestone in the new era of dystopia.”

His long list of awards and honours include the Science Fiction Galaxy Award, the Chinese

---

2 The Galaxy Award (银河奖 Yínhé Jiǎng) is China's most prestigious science fiction award, which was started in 1986 by the magazines Tree of Wisdom (《智慧树》 Zhìhuì Shù) and Science Literature & Art (《科学文艺》 Kēxué Wényì). After Tree of Wisdom ceased
Science Fiction Nebula Award, the World Chinese Science Fiction Art Award, and the Jingdong Literature Award, respectively.

**Q: How do science fiction writers view an epidemic?**

Since Mary Shelley, the science fiction has been writing about the epidemic. *The Last Man*, is all about the entire human civilization wiped out by the Pandemic. Then there are also Clayton’s *The Andromeda Strain* and Wang Jiankang’s *The Cross*, etc., expressing great concern about the pandemic issue. I believe that epidemic caused by microorganisms is one of the top killers that threaten the survival of humankind today and should not be taken lightly. This is, first and foremost a question of decision-making.

Through summarizing experience and learning lessons, people re-examine the relationship with nature and other species, promote scientific “enlightenment” and scientific research, and at the same time promote social governance, humanistic care and ethical construction.

Maybe like in science fiction movies, there is a virus that quickly infects human brains, causing people to live like zombies. The way of human confrontation is isolation first, but then another part of zombies must be eliminated through war.

The epidemic caused by the super virus artificially made in the laboratory. It spreads rapidly, causes a lot of death, and has no cure. Human civilization goes extinct within a week.

**Q: What was the background of writing epidemic-related science fiction?**

I have written some sci-fi about the epidemic, including Sorority of SARS Survivors, AIDS: An Airborne Disease, Journey to Qingdao, and the Hospital trilogy involving SARS, AIDS, and laboratory virus spills, etc. The background is my own experience, such as SARS being quarantined, having been to Xiaotangshan Hospital, visiting related laboratories, often seeing a doctor, and this situation has emerged as a new trend after industrialization, urbanization and globalization. The emergence of new viruses has caused social panic and economic shock. This is different from the epidemic of an agrarian society.

\[\text{Image: Han Song}\]

Publication soon afterwards, the award has organized solely by Science Literature & Art, which was renamed to Science Fiction World (《科幻世界》) in 1991.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>艾滋病</td>
<td>àizībìng</td>
<td>AIDS (loanword)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>病原体</td>
<td>bìngyuánkāi</td>
<td>pathogen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>超新星</td>
<td>chāoxīnxīng</td>
<td>supernova</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>传染病</td>
<td>chuánrăn xīng</td>
<td>infectious / epidemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>掉以轻心</td>
<td>diàoyǐqīngxīn</td>
<td>treat sth lightly / to lower one's guard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>短篇小说</td>
<td>duǎnpiānxiǎoshuō</td>
<td>short story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>非典</td>
<td>fēidiǎn</td>
<td>atypical pneumonia / Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome / SARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>黑死病</td>
<td>hēisǐbìng</td>
<td>bubonic plague / Black Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>胡思乱想</td>
<td>hú sī luàn xiǎng</td>
<td>to indulge in flights of fancy (idiom) / to let one's imagination run wild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>基因工程</td>
<td>jī yīng gōng chéng</td>
<td>genetic engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>科幻小说</td>
<td>kē huàn xiǎo shuō</td>
<td>science fiction novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>科学研究</td>
<td>kē xué yán jiū</td>
<td>scientific research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>免疫系统</td>
<td>miǎn yì xì tǒng</td>
<td>immune system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>纳米技术</td>
<td>nà mǐ jì shù</td>
<td>nanotechnology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>三部曲</td>
<td>sān bù qǔ</td>
<td>trilogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>文艺复兴</td>
<td>wén yì fù xīng</td>
<td>the Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>吸取教训</td>
<td>xī qǔ ji ào xùn</td>
<td>to draw a lesson (from a setback)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>长篇小说</td>
<td>cháng piān xiǎo shuō</td>
<td>novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>中国作家协会</td>
<td>Zhōngguó Zuò jiā Xié huì</td>
<td>China Writers Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>重新审视</td>
<td>chōngxīnshěnshì</td>
<td>a re-examination / to have another look at something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>自然灾害</td>
<td>zìránzāihài</td>
<td>natural disaster</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The views expressed here are those of the translator and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies*
PRINCIPAL SUPPORTERS TO ICS RESEARCH FUND

TATA TRUSTS

MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

INDIAN COUNCIL OF
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

GARGI AND VIDYA
PRAKASH DUTT FOUNDATION

JAMNALAL BAJAJ
FOUNDATION

PIROJSHA GODREJ FOUNDATION

ICS PUBLICATIONS

ICS ANALYSIS
A short brief on a topic of contemporary interest with policy-related inputs

ICS OCCASIONAL PAPER
Platform for ongoing research of the ICS faculty and associates

ICS MONOGRAPH
Authored by the faculty, also emerging from research projects and international conferences

ICS WORKING PAPER
Draft paper of ongoing research

ICS JOURNAL

In its 55th year, China Report is a refereed journal in the field of social sciences and international relations. It welcomes and offers a platform for original research from a multi-disciplinary perspective, in new and emerging areas, by scholars and research students. It seeks to promote analysis and vigorous debate on all aspects of Sino-Indian relations, India-China comparative studies and multilateral and bilateral initiatives and collaborations across Asia.

China Report is brought out by Sage Publications Ltd, New Delhi.

Editor
Sreemati Chakrabarti

Associate Editor
G. Balatchandirane

Assistant Editor
Rityusha Mani Tiwari

Book Review Editor
Vijay K Nambiar

INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES
8/17, Sri Ram Road, Civil Lines,
Delhi 110054, INDIA
T: +91 (0) 11 2393 8202
F: +91 (0) 11 2383 0728

http://www.icsin.org/
info@icsin.org