

Feminist Discussions on *The Remembrance of Earth's Past* Trilogy

Pembahasan-Pembahasan Feminis dalam Trilogi *Remembrance of Earth's Past*

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Abstract

As the first Asian Hugo Award laureate, Liu Cixin is an illustrious science-fiction writer in China, whose chef-d'oeuvre is an award-winning trilogy entitled *Remembrance of Earth's Past*, or more widely renowned by the title of its first volume, viz. *The Three-Body Problem*. The series not only features intercivilisational belligerence via a fecundity of imagination and richness of imagery-evoking representation, but also manifests humanity and benevolence, so it has attained a loyal readership and commercial success. Notwithstanding critical acclamation, this male-authored trilogy encounters contentiousness concerning gender discrimination. I propound that the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* series does not exhibit sexism, though there are depictions with gender stereotypes.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction, Liu Cixin, *The Three-Body Problem* series, gender stereotypes

Abstrak

Sebagai peraih Asian Hugo Award pertama, Liu Cixin adalah penulis fiksi ilmiah terkenal di Tiongkok, yang *chef-d'oeuvre*-nya adalah trilogi pemenang penghargaan berjudul *Remembrance of Earth's Past*, atau lebih dikenal luas dengan judul volume pertamanya, yaitu *The Three-Body Problem*. Serial ini tidak hanya menampilkan perang antarperadaban melalui kesuburan imajinasi dan kekayaan representasi yang membangkitkan citra, tetapi juga memanifestasikan kemanusiaan dan kebajikan, sehingga telah mencapai pembaca setia dan kesuksesan komersial. Terlepas dari aklamasi kritis, trilogi yang ditulis laki-laki ini menghadapi perdebatan tentang diskriminasi gender. Saya berpendapat bahwa seri *Remembrance of Earth's Past* tidak menunjukkan seksisme, meskipun ada penggambaran dengan stereotip gender.

Kata kunci: Fiksi ilmiah Tiongkok, Liu Cixin, seri *The Three-Body*, stereotip gender

Introduction

In this research, I investigate an award-winning trilogy entitled 地球往事 *Diqiu Wangshi* 'Remembrance of Earth's Past' (also renowned by the title of its first volume), which is a science-fiction series comprising 三体 *Santi* 'The Three-Body Problem' (2006), 黑暗森林 *Heian Senlin* 'The Dark Forest' (2008) and 死神永生 *Sishen Yongsheng*

'Death's End' (2010) (China Writer 2015, Fan 2019). The first volume, *The Three-Body Problem*, was first published in a leading Chinese magazine 科幻世界 *Kehuan Shijie* 'Science Fiction World' (China Writer 2011a, Li 2015), and it was then bestowed a Hugo Award, the most prestigious international science-fiction prize, by the 73rd World Science Fiction Convention in 2015, rendering its author, an illustrious novelist 刘慈欣 Liu Cixin (1963-), the first Asian writer to win a Hugo Award (Global Times 2015, China Daily 2019).

The writing of Liu Cixin is saliently inspired by the epic science-fiction novel *2001: A Space Odyssey* composed by Arthur C. Clarke (China Daily 2015, Leung 2017). As a prolific writer possessing literary aptitude, Liu embarked upon his science-fiction creation in the 1980s and has been consecutively winning China's highest honour for science-fiction writing, viz. the Galaxy Award, since 1999 (Guo and Basu 2010, Yang and Wang 2019). Apart from the phenomenal trilogy, Liu's chefs-d'oeuvre also encompass the 2005 球状闪电 *Qiuzhuang Shandian* 'Ball Lightning' that has been rendered into English (Dwyer 2018), the 2000 流浪地球 *Liulang Diqiu* 'The Wandering Earth' that has been adapted into an influential namesake film (Si 2019), as well as the 2001 乡村教师 *Xiangcun Jiaoshi* 'Village Teacher' (Trans. Mine) that has been adapted into a hit film 疯狂的外星人 *Fengkuangde Waixingren* 'Crazy Alien' (Qian 2015, Teng 2019).

The first volume of the trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem*, is entitled by an astrophysical terminology denoting the Earth-Moon-Sun problem concerning the 'motion of three celestial bodies under their mutual gravitational attraction' (Valtonen and Karttunen 2005: 1), and the narrative has its setting during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) that has left the author scarred for life (Shanxi Evening Newspaper 2015, Alter 2019). The protagonist of *The Three-Body Problem* is an astrophysics student who witnesses her father's excruciating decease in a struggle session initiated by Red Guards. During forced labour afterwards as a political suspect, she is recruited into a secret national defence project deploying high-powered radio waves to annihilate spy satellites as well as searching for extra-terrestrial life (Richardson 2018). Years later, notwithstanding a caveat, she kills her husband and contacts the planet Trisolaris to resolve political predicaments, thereby establishing Earth's initial correspondence with an alien civilisation (Li 2015, Tong 2019). The second volume, *The Dark Forest*, concerns the subsequent defensive efforts against the invasion of the Trisolarians possessing exceptionally advanced technology, via the secret Wallfacer Project designed by three leading scientists and an unambitious, romantic sociologist (Han 2012, Alexander 2015, Liu 2015). In the third volume, *Death's End*, Earth attains peaceful coexistence with Trisolarians and enjoys unprecedented prosperity, yet the subtle balance between two civilisations is imperilled by an aerospace engineer who brings knowledge of an immemorial project, so the intercivilisational war spans across three-dimensional universe and other dimensions (Huang 2011, Hu 2015, Liu 2015).

The creation of the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* series is adulated as a milestone of China's science fiction (China Writer 2011b). Since its publication, the trilogy has attained global popularity and commercial success (Li 2015, Qian 2015, Ruan 2015). Taking *The Three-Body Problem* as an example, it has been translated into twenty-six languages and sold nearly nine million copies worldwide (Fan 2019). Moreover, since the release of its English version rendered by an American lawyer and science-fiction writer 刘宇昆 Liu Yukun (aka Ken Liu), who is also a Hugo Award laureate, in 2014 (Zhang 2016), the work has been granted the ultimate critical

accolade as an 'inventive, hard SF alien-invasion saga' (Roberts 2016: 492) and 'a groundbreaking work of speculative fiction', and attracted legions of non-Chinese-speaking readers exemplified by Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg (Alter 2019). According to a novelist George R. R. Martin, *The Three-Body Problem* 'is a very unusual book, a unique blend of scientific and philosophical speculation, politics and history, conspiracy theory and cosmology, where kings and emperors from both western and Chinese history mingle in a dreamlike game world, while cops and physicists deal with global conspiracies, murders, and alien invasions in the real world' (Martin 2015). The author not only demonstrates a fecundity of imagination and richness of imagery-evoking representation, but also depicts humanity and humans' love, benevolence and broad-mindedness in the face of depredation (Hu 2015, Liu 2015, Fang 2016).

Method

By means of hermeneutically scrutinising the trilogy, I investigate its potential feminist issues. In the three monumental works, Liu encompasses a wide range of disciplines, exemplified by theoretical physics, political theory, game theory, history, sociology and aesthetics (Richardson 2018). He paints a very vivid portrait of legions of multi-faceted characters, by means of unravelling their mentality and ethos in a turbulent context, and he extensively deploys science-fiction elements in both macro and micro manners (Gao 2015, Xu and Wang 2017). As summarised in the preface of *Remembrance of Earth's Past III*, each volume of the trilogy manifests its distinct characteristics and artistic value (Example (1)).

(1) 在整个三部曲中, 我个人认为第一部最有历史感和现实性; 第二部的完成度最高, 结构最完整, 线索最清晰, 也最华丽好看; 而《三体Ⅲ》则是把宇宙视野和本质性的思考推向了极致, 这方面目前无人能及。 In the trilogy, I think the first volume has the most historical and realistic representations, while the second volume has the most complete structure and clearest plot, so it is the most wonderful one. As for the third volume, it displays the utmost universal standpoint and fundamental thinking, which is unparalleled.

(From Yan 2010: III. Trans. Mine)

Result

The *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy is censured for poor characterisation and sexism (Gliner 2016). Nonetheless, I propound that the author does not display gender discrimination.

Feminist science theory, as being explicitly captured by a feminist science-fiction writer Katherine MacLean in her portrayal of future science, is constituted of three traits. First, equal opportunities to participating in science should be bestowed upon women, so that men will not be able to define research in terms of men or conduct research that benefits men only. Second, generic and cell research supported by male scientists is potentially detrimental to women. Third, women might construe scientific phenomena from a different perspective and notice 'the possibilities of interaction rather than autonomy in biologic processes' (Rosser 2000: 81, Donawerth 2013: 68-69).

In *The Three-Body Problem*, the heroine discourages her daughter's interest in physics, by means of drawing on Marie Curie and Wu Chien-Shiung, a female Chinese-born American physicist, as examples (Example (2)). The contentiousness of the

character's utterance lies in that she attributes men's dominance in physics to their mentality that is discrepant from their female counterparts. Nevertheless, I propound that the author does not defy the first characteristic of feminist science theory, namely, equal participation in science between two genders, as both the protagonist and her daughter are proactive female scientists, along with other women scientists in the series.

(2) 当她第一次表现出对那些抽象理论的兴趣时, 我告诉她, 那个世界, 女人是很难进入的。她说居里夫人不是进入了么? 我告诉她, 居里夫人根本没有进入, 她的成功只是源于勤奋和执著, 没有她, 那些工作别人也会完成, 倒是像吴健雄这样的女人还比她走得远些, 但那真的不是女人的世界。女性的思维方式不同于男性, 这没有高下之分, 对世界来说都是必不可少的。

When she first expressed an interest in abstract theory, I told her that field wasn't easy for women. She said, what about Madame Curie? I told her, Madame Curie was never really accepted as part of that field. Her success was seen as a matter of persistence and hard work, but without her, someone else would have completed her work. As a matter of fact, Wu Chien-Shiung went even further than Madame up Curie. But it really isn't a woman's field.

(*The Three-Body Problem*. Chapter 8. Trans. Liu 2014)

Furthermore, as can be seen from the posterior context, the author maintains that albeit being divergent, both types of mentality are indispensable to the world (Example (3)). In the English version of *The Three-Body Problem*, the author's stance on the mindset of two genders has not been included (Example (2)), yet it is preponderant in terms of illustrating that the author does not incline to male chauvinism.

(3) 女性的思维方式不同于男性, 这没有高下之分, 对世界来说都是必不可少的。
Women's way of thinking is different from men's, but they are equally indispensable to the world.

(*The Three-Body Problem*. Chapter 8. Trans. Mine)

In terms of Example (4) extracted from *Death's End*, it manifests Liu's observation on feminised masculinity, rather than the male gaze. The post-1980s 'crisis of masculinity' alluded to in Example (4) occurs during the post-Mao period under a global context, ascribed to China's reform and opening-up policies as well as productivism and consumerism, which refrains from orthodox Confucian credos of manhood and asexual revolutionary heroes in the Mao era (Song and Hird 2013: 8). Traditionally, the indigenous Chinese masculine ideal is comprised of two identities, viz. 文 *wen* 'cultural attainment' encapsulating feminine features and 武 *wu* 'martial valour' encapsulating masculine features (Louie 2002), which are not mutually exclusive (Hinsch 2013: 91). However, the *wen-wu* dyad is more 'softened' and feminised in contemporary China, and *wen* has been undergoing transformation from scholastic learning to monetary power since the 19th century (Louie 2000). On the threshold of the 21st century, popular culture industry advocates icons with blurred gender boundaries for youth culture and media in China and other East Asian

countries, which further departs from the orthodox norms concerning Chinese masculinity (Louie 2012).

(4) 程心看着街上的行人, 一个女孩子, 两个女孩子, 一群女孩子, 又是一个...都是女孩子, 都很美丽, 穿着闪闪发光的衣服, 像是这梦幻森林中的精灵。好不容易有一个看上去年龄稍大些的, 也是女人, 美丽几乎掩盖了年龄。当她们走到这根树枝的尽头, 面对着下面的灯海, 程心问出了那个她早就想问的问题: “男人呢?” 她苏醒已有四天, 从没见过男人。 “到处都是啊。” AA指指附近, “看那个背靠着栏杆的, 还有那边三个, 还有那两个正在走过来的, 都是男人。” 程心看看那几个人, 她(他)们面容白嫩姣好, 长发披肩, 身材苗条柔软, 仿佛骨头都是香蕉做的, 举止是那么优雅轻柔, 说话声音随着微风传过来, 细软而甜美...在她的时代, 这些人在女人中也都属于女人味最浓的那一类。程心很快想明白了: 其实这种进程早已开始。公元20世纪80年代可能是最后一个崇尚男性气质的年代, 那以后, 虽然男人还在, 但社会和时尚所喜欢的男人越来越女性化。她想起了21世纪初的某些日韩男明星, 第一眼看上去也是美丽女孩的样子, 那时人们称之为男色时代来临。大低谷打断了人类的女性化进程, 但随着威慑时代而来的半个多世纪的舒适的和平, 使这一进程加速了。

Cheng Xin looked at the pedestrians along the street: a woman, two women, a group of women, another woman, three women—all of them were women, all beautiful. Dressed in pretty, luminous clothes, they seemed like the nymphs of this magical forest. Once in a while, they passed some older individuals, also women, their beauty undiminished by age. As they reached the end of the branch and surveyed the sea of lights below them, Cheng Xin asked the question that had been puzzling her for days. “What happened to the men?” In the few days since she had been awakened, she had not seen a single man. “What do you mean? They’re everywhere.” AA pointed at the people around them. “Over there: See the man leaning against the balustrade? And there are three over there. And two walking toward us.” Cheng Xin stared. The individuals AA indicated had smooth, lovely faces; long hair that draped over their shoulders; slender, soft bodies—as if their bones were made of bananas. Their movements were graceful and gentle, and their voices, carried to her by the breeze, were sweet and tender...Back in her century, these people would have been considered ultrafeminine. Understanding dawned on her after a moment. The trend had been obvious even earlier. The decade of the 1980s was probably the last time when masculinity, as traditionally defined, was considered an ideal. After that, society and fashion preferred men who displayed traditionally feminine qualities. She recalled the Asian male pop stars of her own time who she had thought looked like pretty girls at first glance. The Great Ravine interrupted this tendency in the evolution of human society, but half a century of peace and ease brought about by the Deterrence Era accelerated the trend.

(*Death’s End*. Chapter 2.3. Trans. Liu 2016)

Discussion

Given the fact that *Death’s End* was published in 2010, Liu only alludes to androgynous Japanese and Korean idols (Example (4)), without deploying the

neologism 小鲜肉 *xiao xian rou* 'little fresh meat' that was coined in China's cyberspace in 2014 (Morning Express 2014) to refer to the phenomenon of feminised masculinity. The terminology 'little fresh meat' as a cannibalistic metaphor imbued with sexual innuendo denotes effeminate-looking, delicate-featured and makeup-clad youthful male celebrities (Buchenbacher 2018, Keegan 2018, Gao 2019), who epitomise a novel mode of male aesthetics, viz. 'soft masculinity' that embodies the surging consumption culture and women's (purchase) power (Jung 2009, 2011: 39, Louie 2012, Luo 2017, Zhang and Negus 2020). Chinese women adore idols collectively labelled as 'little fresh meat', impinged upon by media promulgation of a gender ambiguous popular culture, and intrigued by a new trend of 'consumption of sexualised men' via the female gaze and gender equality (Hu 2017, Wang 2017, Zhou 2017, Li 2020).

It is notable that the series is contentious in terms of the author's oversimplified depiction of female characters and his mindset towards women. Although female characters in Liu's narratives are created to convey loyalty, sacrifice and benevolence, they tend to be reduced to flat characters (Fang 2016). Liu is fully aware of such critical comments, yet he admits that he has been concentrating more on plots, rather than characters (Shanxi Evening Newspaper 2015), and characters' gender is not important for him, which means female characters in his writing can be simply converted into the opposite gender (Xu and Wang 2018). Furthermore, Liu is surmised to imply that it is 'nurturing, sentimental and weak' women who exhibit humanity's softness and repeatedly imperil Earth, exemplified by the female protagonists in the first and third volumes, whereas it is men who rescue Earth and human beings (Glintner 2016, Ma 2019). In terms of the second volume, it is also prone to gender discrimination. After the translation of *The Dark Forest* by Joel Martinsen, the book has been made more than 1,000 edits by an American publisher in the English edition for gender discrimination. While a proportion of Liu's fan readers indeed perceive female characters in the narrative as being unfavourably depicted, other readers' stance is that editors are supposed to refrain from forcing their own interpretation of literary works. As for the author himself, Liu accepts the necessity for the edits and attributes them to cultural differences (Zhang 2015); his attitude towards the editing is shown in Example (5) (Shi 2015).

(5) TOR的编辑是个女权主义者, 且极其认真仔细, 这儿那儿都有性别歧视, 像purity和angelic类词用多了也是性别歧视, 要限制其使用数量, 说联合国秘书长是美女是性别歧视, 四个面壁者都是男的是性别歧视 (不过这个没改, 我说那几十届美国总统还都是男的呢? 可人家说马上就有女的了), 这些修改对我和Joel来说工作量都很大, 很累人, 但总算完成了。

The editor from TOR is a feminist who is extremely meticulous in spotting sexist expressions, so words used to describe women, such as 'purity' and 'angelic', cannot appear too much. A reference to the Secretary-General of the United Nations as a 'beautiful woman' involves gender discrimination, and so does the design that the four Wallfacers are all male (but it was not revised, because I said all US presidents were men, although they said there would be a woman soon). Such a large amount of revisions was arduous for both Joel and me, but we managed.

(From Shi 2015. Trans. Mine)

The prototype of science fiction, Mary Shelley's 1818 *Frankenstein* (Donawerth 1990), inspires scientific romances (Attebery 2013) and is regarded as a pioneering work of feminist science fiction and fantasy, in that it 'can be interpreted as a fantasy of "womb envy" (male desire to usurp female productive power), a cautionary tale against irresponsible and unethical (masculine) science, and/or a story about man-made creature whose disempowerment mirrors women's social status, all of which establish the novel as an important originating text for feminist concerns in science fiction and fantasy' (Helford 2005: 290). Science fiction in the modern society, however, is still marked by a stark gender disparity (John 2013, Walter 2013). Women's consumption and production of science fiction depicting their roles in a high-tech future has been intrigued by a 1952 novella entitled *Night of Fire* composed by Helen Reid Chase (Yaszek 2007: 1-2). Nevertheless, as pointed out by a feminist science-fiction writer and critic Joanna Russ in her influential *The Image of Women in Science Fiction* (1971), albeit being more active and livelier than their counterparts created by male writers, female characters in postwar women writing of science fiction are still portrayed as a 'sweet, gentle, intuitive little heroine [who] solves an interstellar crisis by mending her slip or doing something equally domestic after her big, heroic husband has failed' (Russ 1971/2017: 206). In other words, as opposed to feminist fiction, these female-authored works fail to reflect on sex and gender relations facilitated by new science and technologies (Yaszek 2007: 3-4), and are hence referred to as 'domestic' 'ladies' magazine fiction' (Merrick 2000).

Notwithstanding lack of sexism, there is no denying the fact that the male-authored *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy conveys sexual stereotypes. As can be seen from Examples (6-7) extracted from *Death's End*, the female protagonist's self-perception is depicted to be merely an enfeebled woman, instead of a warrior, which implies women in the narrative are stigmatised on the basis of gender identity. Note that the last sentence in Example (7) is 'She was nothing but a woman' (Trans. Mine), in which the expression 只是一个女人 *zhishi yige nüren* 'only a woman' has been omitted in the English version.

(6) 在程心的潜意识中, 她是一个守护者, 不是毁灭者; 她是一个女人, 不是战士。
In Cheng Xin's subconscious, she was a protector, not a destroyer; she was a woman, not a warrior.

(*Death's End*. Chapter 2.6 Trans. Liu 2016)

(7) 七年前, 在全人类面前她没能按下那个红色按钮, 现在想到两个朋友, 她也难以吞下这粒会带来解脱的药。她再一次看到了自己无边无际的软弱, 她什么都不是, 只是一个女人。

Seven years ago, she hadn't been able to press that red button in front of all of humanity; now, thinking of her two friends, she could not swallow this capsule that would bring her relief. She saw again her boundless weakness. She was nothing.

(*Death's End*. Chapter 3.2. Trans. Liu 2016)

Moreover, in Example (8) extracted from *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu describes Bach's music as being 'the kind of music that shouldn't have mesmerized a kid (Trans. Liu 2014), especially a girl (Tran. Mine)'. The expression highlighting the child's gender,

namely, 特别是女孩子 *tebie shi nühaizi* 'especially a girl', has been omitted in the English version (Example (8)), whereas it indicates stereotyped gender roles for girls.

(8) 她父亲留下了一堆唱片, 她听来听去, 最后选择了一张巴赫的反复听, 那是最不可能令孩子, 特别是女孩子入迷的音乐了。

Her father left behind some records. She listened to all of them and finally picked something by Bach as her favorite, listening to it over and over. That was the kind of music that shouldn't have mesmerized a kid.

(*The Three-Body Problem*. Chapter 8. Trans. Liu 2014)

Analogously, in Example (9) extracted from the same volume, the same character conveys that women are expected to be as tolerant as water. It is notable that the metaphor regarding water is complimentary in Chinese culture, without discrimination against women. Taking the metaphysical masterpiece *Tao Te Ching* (道德经 *Daodejing*) as an example, the Taoist philosopher 老子 Laozi (aka Lao-tzu) states in this 5thc BC classic that '[t]he man of supreme goodness resembles water' (上善若水 *shangshan ruo shui*) (Trans. Lin 1977: 15). Having said that, the metaphor in Example (9) is inextricably intertwined with a generalised preconception about attributes ought to be possessed by women. Similarly, Example (10) from *Death's End* entails an unconscious idea and stereotypical expectation about women's romantic tendency and their behavioural sequelae of being in love.

(9) “叶老师, 您这么想我觉得也不对, 现在发生了一些让我们难以想象的事, 这是一次空前的理论灾难, 做出这种选择的科学家又不只是她一人。”
“可只有她一个女人, 女人应该像水一样的, 什么样的地方都能淌得过去啊。”

“Professor Ye, I can't say that I agree with you. Right now, events are happening that are beyond our imagination. It's an unprecedented challenge to our theories about the world, and she's not the only scientist to have stumbled down that path.” “But she was a woman. A woman should be like water, able to flow over and around anything.”

(*The Three-Body Problem*. Chapter 8. Trans. Liu 2014)

(10) 程心又忍不住把星星的事告诉了瓦季姆, 后者倒是热烈地祝贺了她, 说她让全世界的女孩都嫉妒, 包括所有活着的女孩和所有死去的公主, 因为可以肯定, 她是人类历史上第一个得到一颗星星的姑娘。试问, 对于一个女人, 还有什么比爱她的人送她一颗星星更幸福呢?

She couldn't help but bring up the star to Vadimov, who enthusiastically congratulated her. “Every girl in the world must be jealous,” he said. “Including all living women and dead princesses. You're certainly the first woman in the history of humankind to be given a star.” For a woman, was there any greater happiness than to be given a star by someone who loved her?

(*Death's End*. Chapter 1.4. Trans. Liu 2016)

Furthermore, in the second volume, *The Dark Forest*, despite the over 1,000 edits to circumvent gender discrimination (Shi 2015, Zhang 2015), there are still stereotypical depictions of female characters' demeanour, which comply with traditional attitudes towards women, as in Example (11). Additionally, Example (12)

bears similarity to Example (11), in that they both ascribe to women features of delicacy and complaisance.

(11) 罗辑体内的什么东西好像被点燃了,他站起来,在壁炉前躁动不安地来回走着,她...怎么说呢?她来到这个世界上,就像垃圾堆里长出了一朵百合花,那么...那么的纯洁娇嫩,周围的一切都不可能污染她,但都是对她的伤害,是的,周围的一切都能伤害到她!你见到她的第一反应就是去保护她...啊不,呵护她,让她免受这粗陋野蛮的现实的伤害,你愿意为此付出一切代价!她...她是那么...唉,你看我怎么笨嘴笨舌的,什么都没说清。”...门开了,一个纤细的身影随着雨的气息飘了进来。客厅里只开着一盏落地灯,上面有一个旧式的大灯罩,使得灯光只能照到壁炉前的一圈,客厅的其余部分光线很暗。罗辑看不清她的面容,只看到她穿着白色的裤子和深色的外套,一圈洁白的领子与外套的深色形成鲜明对比,使他又想起了百合花。

Something in Luo Ji's mind caught fire, and he stood up and began to pace restlessly in front of the fireplace. 'She... how should I put it? She came into this world like a lily growing out of a rubbish heap, so... so pure and delicate, and nothing around her can contaminate her. But it can all harm her. Yes, everything around her can hurt her! Your first reaction when you see her is to protect her. No, to care for her, to let her know that you are willing to pay any price to shield her from the harm of a crude and savage reality. She...she's so...ah, I've got a clumsy tongue. I can't say anything clearly.'...The door opened. A slender figure floated in on a breath of rain. The sole light in the living room was a floor lamp with an old-fashioned lampshade that cast a circle of illumination beside the fireplace but lit the rest of the room only dimly. Luo Ji couldn't make out her face, but noticed that she wore white trousers and a dark jacket that stood in stark contrast to her white collar and made him think of lilies.

(*The Dark Forest*. Part I. Trans. Martinsen 2015)

(12) 她身材纤小,穿着华美的日本和服,整个人像是被一团花簇拥着。当程心看清她的面容时,花丛黯然失色,程心很难想象有这样完美的女性容貌,但真正让这美丽具有生机的,是控制她的灵魂。她浅浅一笑,如微风吹皱一汪春水,水中的阳光细碎轻柔地荡漾开来。智子对她们缓缓鞠躬,程心感觉她整个人就是一个汉字:柔——外形和内涵都像...两人跟着智子走进庭院,她的圆发髻上插着的一朵小白花在她们前面微微颤动着,她也不时回头对她们微笑。这时,程心已经忘记眼前是一个外星侵略者,忘记在四光年外控制着她的那个强大的异世界,眼前只是一个美丽柔顺的女人。特别之处只是她的女人味太浓了,像一滴浓缩的颜料,如果把她扔到一个大湖中溶化开来,那整个湖都是女人的色彩了。

The gorgeous Japanese kimono on her petite figure resembled a layer of blooming flowers, but when Cheng Xin saw her face, the flowers seemed to lose color. Cheng Xin could not imagine a more perfect beauty, a beauty animated by a lively soul. She smiled, and it was as though a breeze stirred a pond in spring and the gentle sunlight broke into a thousand softly undulating fragments. Slowly, Sophon bowed to them, and Cheng Xin felt her entire figure illustrated the Chinese character 柔, or soft, in both

shape and meaning... The pair followed Sophon into the yard. The tiny white flowers in her bun quivered, and she turned around to smile at them from time to time. Cheng Xin had completely forgotten that she was an alien invader, that she was controlled by a powerful world four light-years away. All she saw was a lovely woman, distinguished by her overwhelming femininity, like a concentrated pigment pellet that could turn a whole lake pink.

(*Death's End*. Chapter 2.3. Trans. Liu 2016)

Moreover, depictions of some female characters' outstanding appearance are not indispensable to characterisation or narration, as in Example (13). Analogously, Example (14) portrays a female military representative from the Intermediate People's Court, who strives to induce the protagonist to sign a document besmirching her father; it is not unjustifiable to describe the appearance of a supporting character, whereas the depiction 'it was clear that she had been very beautiful when she was young' does not necessarily contribute to the character's personality.

(13) 程心最初留给云天明的印象是不爱说话，美丽而又沉默寡言的女孩比较少见，但这并不意味着她是一个冷美人。她说话不多却愿意倾听，带着真诚的关切倾听，她倾听时那清澈沉静的目光告诉每一个人，他们对她是很重要的。与云天明中学的那些美女同学不同，程心没有忽略他的存在，每次见面时都微笑着和他打招呼。

Initially, Cheng Xin gave Tianming the impression of being taciturn. Beautiful women were rarely reticent, but she wasn't an ice queen. Listened. She said little, but she listened, really listened. When she conversed with someone, her focused, calm gaze told the speaker that they were important to her. Cheng Xin was different from the pretty girls who Tianming had gone to high school with. She didn't ignore his existence. Every time she saw him, she would smile and say hi.

(*Death's End*. Chapter 1.3. Trans. Liu 2016)

(14) “程丽华。”女干部自我介绍说，她四十多岁，身穿军大衣，戴着一副宽边眼镜，脸上线条柔和，*看得出年轻时一定很漂亮*，说话时面带微笑，让人感到平易近人。叶文洁清楚，*这样级别的人来到监室见一个待审的犯人，很不寻常*。她谨慎地对程丽华点点头，起身在狭窄的床铺上给她让出坐的地方。“这么冷，*炉子呢？*”程丽华不满地看了站在门口的看守所所长一眼，又转向文洁，“嗯，年轻，你比我想的还年轻。”说完坐在床上，离文洁很近，低头翻起公文包来，*嘴里还像老大妈似的嘟囔着，“小叶你糊涂啊，年轻人都这样，书越读得多越糊涂了，你呀你呀...”*

"My name is Cheng Lihua," the cadre introduced herself. She was in her forties, dressed in a military coat, and wore thick-rimmed glasses. Her face was gentle, and *it was clear that she had been very beautiful when she was young*. She spoke with a smile and instantly made people like her. Ye Wenjie understood that it was unusual for such a high-grade cadre to visit a prisoner about to be tried. Cautiously, she nodded at Cheng and moved to make space on her narrow cot so she could sit down. "It's really cold in here. What happened to your stove?" Cheng gave a reprimanding look to the head of the detention center standing at the door of the cell. She turned back to Ye. "Hmm, you're very young. Even younger than I imagined." She sat down on the cot

right next to Ye and rummaged in her briefcase, *still muttering*. “Wenjie, you’re very confused. Young people are all the same. The more books you read, the more confused you become. Eh, what can I say....”

(*The Three-Body Problem*. Chapter 2. Trans. Liu 2014)

It is worth mentioning that in the English version of Example (14), the expression 嘴里还像老大妈似的嘟囔着 *zuli haixiang laodama shide dunangzhe* ‘still muttering like an old woman’ (Trans. Mine) is rendered into ‘still muttering’ (Trans. Liu 2014: 33), yet the original expression manifests a preconception that elderly women are prone to verbosity and expostulation. Such an expression is correlated with a gender stereotype and might be ascribed to writer’s overgeneralised stances on attributes of elderly women.

Conclusion

Although the *Remembrance of Earth’s Past* trilogy is chastised for poor characterisation and *The Dark Forest* has been made more than 1,000 edits owing to its potential gender discrimination, I postulate that the author is not sexist. In the first volume *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu describes equal participation in science between two genders and acknowledges that both the disparate mindsets displayed by men and women play a preponderant role in the world, which embodies an absence of male chauvinism. Additionally, in the third volume *Death’s End*, Liu alludes to feminised masculinity on the threshold of the 21st century, yet I posit that this observation is not conducted via the male gaze. Nonetheless, there is no denying the fact that some depictions in the series are correlated with sexual stereotypes, in that female characters are stigmatised on the basis of gender identity and featured by delicacy and softness. Moreover, depictions of some female characters’ appearance do not necessarily contribute to characterisation or narration.

Therefore, in order to avoid gender stereotypes and create more complex, multi-faceted female characters, male writers could enhance understanding of the opposite sex in different age groups.

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