

“Electrical Dragon” and “Hollow Men”: Counter-narratives of Modernity in Han Song’s *Subway*

Mengtian Sun

(City University of Macau)

Abstract:

One of the icons of industrial modernity is the railway. China’s fast modernization process can be epitomized in the rapid construction and development of subway systems in the last two decades, which is ranked as the most extensive in the world today. This “subway carnival” is most consciously and critically represented in Chinese writer Han Song’s novel *Ditie* (Subway). This paper will look at how this novel uses the image of the train to criticize the modernization process in China and create counter-narratives to question the dominant discourses of modernity. It first analyzes how the subway in the novel works to represent modern Chinese society, before then arguing that the novel creates counter-narratives of modernity in terms of both ideology and affect.

Keywords: railway; subway; train; *Ditie*; modernity; progress; China; counter-narrative

Introduction

When people welcomed the new year as the clock tolled midnight, no one knew that 2020 would become such a special year in human history. A highly contagious virus, which is now known as COVID-19, quickly spread throughout the world, changing it so much that some sociologists and anthropologists are tempted to consider 2020 a watershed in modern human history; many argue that the world will never be the same after COVID-19. It is hard to imagine what life will be like after COVID and if we will ever be “post” COVID. What we do know is that after

almost two years since the outbreak of COVID in Wuhan, China, we are living in a world that is immensely altered by the virus. It can be easily argued that the biggest difference compared to a pre-COVID world is the limitation of travel, especially long distance travel. A look at statistics reveals the scale of impact. Data tracking the frequency of international flights in various countries shows a massive decline since COVID broke out (OAG; Statista); most countries have had 50% to nearly 100% less flights compared to the same time before COVID. We are suddenly brought back to a time period when long distance flights were not so common, when the world seemed large and far away, when humans were still living under the “tyranny” of “natural” space-time. Now, we need to get used to a new (also old) experience of time and space, which our grandparents and humans for the most of history have lived.

It is during this time that it is especially worth taking another good look at the role of transportation in industrial modernity. Like the plane, another transportation method that has played a transforming role in the development and experience of industrial modernity is the railway. It is through the railway that humans, for the first time in history, are able to move both mass-produced goods and the masses themselves across a wide distance at a fast speed. As the icon of industrial revolution, the train represented humanity’s increased control over nature, through the “eradication of space by time,” in Marx’s words (524). It has come to serve as the epitome of modernity, especially modern technology, in modern culture across the globe, since it conveniently embodies many concepts and images that are commonly associated with modernity, such as linear time, notions of progress, packed space (urbanization), the stranger, among others.

Many scholars have looked at the key role the railway and the train play in shaping modernity, how we experience it and how we perceive it; their works show that although the train is widely used in our cultural imagination as a symbol of industrial modernity, how the train is represented and perceived and what feelings are attached to it are still largely shaped by specific historical and social contexts. For example, in *Tracking Modernity: India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility*, Marian Aguiar notes how the train functioned as a symbol of British colonial power in India at the beginning, and then “played an active part constructing what Benedict Anderson calls a nation as an ‘imagined community’” in the decolonization context (7); Aguiar argues that the train “helped produce India” and a new collective identity (ibid). Whereas the train symbolizes British colonial power in India at the beginning, the advent of the train in Japan (in the Meiji period) is a showcase of how the Japanese government willingly adopted western science and

technology in the pursuit of modernization. In “Haunting modernity: Tanuki, trains, and transformation in Japan,” Michael Dylan Foster cites historian Steven J. Ericson and argues that the train during Meiji Japan was perceived as the “quintessential symbol of progress and civilization, the very epitome of modern industrial power” (3); he reads several Japanese folklores featuring the train and the Japanese mythical creature named Tanuki and argues that these legends are both about the resistance to modernity and also about the inevitability of its triumph.

It is yet another case when it comes to how the train is perceived when it appeared in China for the first time. Li Siyi’s book *Tielu Xiandaixing* (Railway Modernity) dives deep into the cultural and material history of the train from 1840 to 1937. In one chapter, he focuses on the first railway in China, which was constructed by British merchant Jardine Matheson in 1876 without a permit from the Qing government. This train was soon bought by the Qing government and dismantled. Through an analysis of people’s attitude of the train at that time, Li points out that the relationship between the train and modernity is not always the same: it is not the case that the train is perceived by everyone as the symbol of progress from the very beginning; those seemingly backward anti-train attitudes back then, when put into new cultural and social discourses, might offer resource for more modern introspection (22). Similar to the case with India, the first train in China was perceived as foreign colonial powers’ infringement on China’s sovereignty by some intellectuals and politicians; however, Li argues that the actual case is more complicated than that. Anti-train sentiment did not simply result from the perception of the train as a symbol of British colonial power, it was also fuelled by a fear of the train in itself. Li notices that when the train was on a trial run, it ran over and killed a person passing by the railway; this incident caused widespread objection and protest among the local people (138). Locals demanded the British sentence the train driver to death, but they held a trial and proved that the driver didn’t do anything wrong; the victim had walked onto the railway by himself. Thus, the train driver was cleared of all charges and released. Li argues that this incident was a turning point in Chinese history: it showed to Chinese people that the world was not the same anymore—there are certain spaces at certain times, which are reserved for the machine, that humans simply cannot enter (139); the train demonstrated the immense vulnerability of the human flesh in the face of machines (138).

As can be seen, perceptions of railway and train vary around the world in different historical and social backgrounds. Almost one and a half decade after the appearance of the first railway in China, the railway and the train has taken new

forms in both the material realm (for example, subway and high-speed railway) and in cultural imaginations. It is, thus, worthwhile to see what kind of metamorphosis the train has gone through in contemporary Chinese culture.

The subway is a railway train that runs underground. It is not a new phenomenon in any sense. The first subway in the world was constructed in London in 1863 (Han 8). The first subway in China began its operation in Beijing in 1969. However, because of the technical complexity of the construction of the subway, compared to traditional railway running on the ground, the network of subways was developed much later than surface railway. For example, in China, the first Beijing subway took 20 years to complete; the first Guangzhou subway took 32 years; in Shanghai, it took 36 years (Zi). It is not until the 2000s that subway lines started to blossom at a fast rate on the map of China. One key factor that prompted this transition is China's winning of the bid in 2001 to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Beijing's severe traffic jams and air pollution problems which have gained international attention put immense pressure on the Chinese government, which decided to tackle these problems with the expansion of subway lines. In the several years leading up to the Olympic Games, 5 new lines were constructed and put into operation in Beijing itself (Smith). The success of the subway to deal with problems such as air pollution and surface traffic pressures and the development of related subway technologies has resulted into the fastest period of subway development in China (possibly the world too). As of today, the country has the most subway systems in the world, with subway lines in 41 cities, covering a total of more than 6,000 kilometres in length (statista; 163). The boom of the subway in China showcases its rapid urbanization and modernization process.

The writer who is most conscious of this subway phenomenon in China is Han Song. As one of the "big three" among contemporary Chinese science fiction writers (Song, 2013, 87), he chose to feature the subway, an object that cannot seem to be more mundane and less science fictional, in his 2010 novel, *Ditie* (Subway). In the foreword of the novel, which is entitled "Zhongguoren de ditie kuanghuan" (Chinese People's Subway Carnival), Han explains the reason why he wrote this novel. He observes that China was going through a subway frenzy during the 2000s: the country has invested a huge amount of money in the construction of subway lines (8); the opening of the subway lines is celebrated like the New Year's Day (7); everyone, young and old, is excited to catch a subway train (7). Comparing the first Chinese subway line in 1969 with the first subway line ever constructed (in London in 1863), Han argues that Chinese people's subway frenzy is a belated one (8). However, he affirms that the development of the railway in the last hundred years in

China showcases China's modernization struggles and the subway frenzy is a sign of rapid urbanization in contemporary China (9). Han also notices the forming of "subway culture" in China: from Cartoonist Jimi's *Subway* (which has been adapted into movies, TV series, plays, etc) to tons of subway related books and music, such as *Buddha is in Line One* by Li Haipeng and Li Yuchun's "floating subway" (10). He argues that the subway has become a concentrated repository of contemporary Chinese people's emotions, desires, values and fates (11). Han has a keen set of eyes, which might be the result of working as a journalist for the Xinhua News Agency for three decades (or vice versa). He sees not only the subway carnival on the surface of Chinese society, but also the underlying signs of crisis beneath that surface: he notices that the number of homeless people in subways in Beijing is increasing; the number of passengers on the subway is also increasing, and a large security staff is needed to keep order and make sure no one slips off the platform into the railway tracks below; "death is one step away, but no one cares...because everyone wants to catch this train" (11). At the end of the foreword, he argues the time has not come when Chinese people can bask themselves in the heavenly happiness, like the subway frenzy, and that Chinese writers still have a task to do, which is to reveal "the underlying pain in China, the crack in its heart, its struggles against absurdity" (12).

Ditie is Han's answer to this task. This paper will look at how this novel uses the image of the train to criticize the process of modernization in China and create counter-narratives to question the dominant discourses of modernity. Even though Han is, like Liu Cixin, one of the "big three" of contemporary Chinese SF writers, there have been very few studies on his works in English so far in comparison to the number addressing Liu's work. This partly results from his extremely uncanny, eccentric, "cryptic and obscure" (Cigarini 22) writing style, which makes his works hard to understand even for native Chinese speakers. Among the few existing English papers on his work, many are written by Chinese scholars, such as Mingwei Song and Jia Liyuan. Mingwei Song's "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction" introduces the "big three" to Anglo-American readers, in which he gave an insightful analysis of Han's novel *Mars Over America* (*Huoxing Zhaoyao Meiguo*, 2012), which "reveals a hideous side to this success story" of the rise of China (87). Jia Liyuan's "Gloomy China: China's Image in Han Song's Science Fiction" (tr. Joel Martinsen) gives a more comprehensive introduction of the major works by Han, in which he also mentioned *Ditie*, especially pointing out Han's writing is characterized by "impenetrable and illogical dialogue," "peculiar analogies, and difficult language" (111). Cara Healey, in her "Madmen and Iron

Houses: Lu Xun, Information Degradation, and Generic Hybridity in Contemporary Chinese SF,” argues that contemporary Chinese SF are heavily influenced by Lu Xun’s works, using Han’s “Chengke yu Chuangzaozhe” (“The Passengers and the Creator”) and Zhang Ran’s *Yitai* (Ether) as examples. As can be seen, scholarship on Han in English is still mainly at the “introductory” stage, with very few in-depth close-readings of his individual works.

The situation is slightly better in China. Han has been receiving increasing attention from literary critics in China in the last decade. However, most of these essays are either review articles (such as Wu Yan’s “The Speed Paradox in Han Song’s *Gaotie*”) or general studies of Han Song’s works, without going into much detail of one specific novel; for those which did focus on one (for example Chen Yan’s “Unique First-Person Retrospective Narration”), the essays are usually too short to fully explore the text. Past studies, such as Wang Yao’s “Maze, Mirror and cycles,” Jia Liyuan’s “Han Song and Ghostly China,” and Li Guangyi’s “Uncanny and Uncertain,” lay a good foundation for further studies of Han Song; however, more studies need to be done that look at Han’s individual works closely. Several critics did focus specifically on *The Subway* and analyse it from various perspectives. For example, Jia Bin, in his “The Construction of ‘Utopia-Heterotopia-Distopia,’” analysed how the first two sections of the novel constructed a heterotopia with the train and that the last three sections constructed a dystopia; he argues that through the construction of a heterotopia and dystopia with the subway, Han reveals how modern China struggles despairingly under the age-old Chinese problem of “cannibalism” which is now revitalized by western modernity. Han’s criticism of modernity in *The Subway* is also noticed by Kang Ling in his essay “How to Criticize Technological Alienation?” He especially focused on how Han uses the train to criticize the alienation brought by modern technology in contemporary Chinese society. However, how Han uses the train to critically engage with the concept of modernity deserves a closer look and more detailed study. This paper will first analyze how the subway in the novel works to represent modern Chinese society; it will then argue that the novel creates counter-narratives of modernity in terms of both ideology and affect.

The Subway as an Epitome of Modern China

Han Song’s works are often described as “*guiyi*,” a Chinese word which means uncanny and weird. In a recent interview, Chiara Cigarini, a Chinese Studies scholar, asked Han why his writing style is so “cryptic and obscure” (Cigarini 22). He says that form is content. Using the Subway as an example, he explains that he

“used a lot of very sharp and colourful words, sometimes controversial” to represent the subway (21); he felt “the whole [Chinese] society is behaving just like in the subway: people are squeezed together, and they struggle for money, food, basically everything” (ibid). As can be seen, the subway is a metaphor for social conditions in modern China. With uncanny and obscure language and images, Han is trying to represent the very experience of modern China, which he regards as uncanny and obscure.

As a matter of fact, Han self-consciously uses the train as a metonym of modernity in China. In fact, Han considers the train to be such an important image in modern Chinese society that he has written three novels in total, including *Ditie* (Subway), *Gaotie* (High-Speed Railway) and *Dongche* (Bullet Train), which all focus on the image of the train. These three novels are later referred to as the Subway trilogy. The three novels have various similarities in terms of structure and theme. Because of limited space, this paper will only provide an in-depth analysis of the first novel, *Ditie*, which is widely considered as the best one among the trilogy. For readers who are interested in the other two novels, Hua Li’s essay in this issue “Machine Ensemble, Mobility, and Immobility in Two Chinese Railway SF Narratives” gives an insightful read of the second novel in the trilogy, *Gaotie*, and compares it with an early Chinese novel, *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway*.

The Subway is not a conventional novel. It is composed of five short stories which were previously published separately. There is no easily discernible plot that connects them, as they are only loosely related to each other. In section one—“Moban” (The Last Train), the main character, called Lao Wang, catches the last train, only to find that there seems to be something wrong with it: it is not stopping at any stations. In section two—“Jingbian” (Sudden Transformation), the main character, Zhou Xing, is on the subway to work and the train also does not stop at any station. Xiao Ji, another character, climbs outside the carriage, trying to reach the driver and see what is wrong; in each carriage that he passes, there is some uncanny transformation among the humans. Section three is set in a futuristic city called S city. A group of people go underground to try and find out what has happened to the missing subway trains and the people in them. Section four is set in the underground world, where there are different species of degenerated humans and intelligent mice. In section five, a group of humans (the majority of who have already migrated to other planets) take a spaceship to earth to take a look at the ruins of human civilization.

In the novel, Han makes it obvious that the subway serves as the embodiment of modern China. For example, the subway train is described on many occasions

as like a dragon, the totem of the Han ethnic group (the dominant ethnic group in China) and an image that is widely used to symbolize China. In section one, when Lao Wang's train finally stops at a station, he hurries to escape from the train. As he looks back, he sees that the "tragically green train" was a giant dragon (20). The next day, he takes the morning subway to go to work. The train is again described as like a dragon: "The train is dead quiet, except for the dragon scream from the train that expresses contempt and intimidation" (24). The Chinese have always considered themselves as "long de chuanren," the offspring of the dragon, a mythic deity creature in Chinese folklore; the word dragon already was of cultural significance during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600-1046 BC) (Zhang 54). By emphasizing the similarities between the subway train and the dragon, the novel not only constructs the subway as a symbol of China, but also more specifically, the symbol of modern China.

This is most apparent when Lao Wang recalls the memory of many years ago when the subway was first being constructed in China: "the first subway line started to be built around thirty years ago... this is already one hundred years after the world's first railway line was built in London" (38, 39); in order to build the circular subway line around the city, to give way to the "giant electric dragon," the ancient city wall of more than seven hundred years was torn down (39-40); "a new dragon is born by destroying the old vein of the dragon" (40). The subway embodies a modern China that is a latecomer to the modern world; this anxiety about being late to modernity has brought about a frantically rapid and violent modernization process: building a new, modern China—represented by the subway—by destroying the old China—represented by the ancient city walls; a hastened rebirth through self-destruction. Thus, the subway effectively epitomizes China's modernization process.

The subway serves as a potent metaphor to represent Chinese modernity in other ways in the novel too. As one of the newest forms of the railway system, subway—the train that miraculously runs underground—has become the point of encounter with the "future" for many Chinese people in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It epitomizes a whole generations' experience of modernity as something uncanny, luxurious, "dream-like," which seems to have come from the future. As Lao Wang describes in the novel:

It's a whole new experience. The bright train stations, shiny train carriages, and even the electric fans (which were still not very common back then) are uncanny luxuries, giving out an un-describable *modern* vibe.... He

still remembers there were not even many cars back then on the streets; the subway is like an *alien*, an extremely *dream-like* thing, a section of the *future* that has been accidentally inserted into the present reality; all of these made him feel proud as a citizen of this country. (emphasis added, 40)

The subway embodies Chinese modernization also in that the focus and pursuit of high speed for the development of the whole railway system resembles the pursuit of speed in modernization and the fast speed at which China was modernized. This obsession with speed is especially apparent in the modernization process in China. It partly results from a sense of belatedness, being a late-comer to modernity. In the foreword, Han Song notices how the whole China is undergoing a carnival of subways around 2010. However, he also points it out that this is a *belated carnival*—more than one hundred years before China constructed its first subway line, the British government built the world’s first underground subway (8). China’s modernization, as represented by the construction of subway lines, is characterized by a sense of urgency and hastiness. Han describes how people behave in the subway in similar terms, noting that, “everyone wants to catch the train, no matter at what cost” (11). Since China was perceived as late, it has been trying at all cost to catch the train of modernity. As can be seen, the subway works as an apt metaphor for Chinese modernization. Han himself points this out in the foreword of the novel:

As a matter of fact, the construction of the railway in the last hundred years marks the rise of China and is a concentrated representation of the whole process of China’s modernization.... Now, this nation who built the Great Wall has now built a network of railway that spans more than ten thousand miles. It ranks among the top around the world in terms of both speed and length, both density and height. This is hard to imagine even just a decade ago. (9)

In the novel, modernity’s pursuit of efficiency is epitomized in the railway system’s pursuit of speed. This obsession with efficiency and speed is described with immense suspicion and criticism in the novel. One of the characters, who claims to be Frederick Winslow Taylor—known as the father of scientific management who sought to improve industrial efficiency—recounts how the world had changed with the increase of speed that was brought about by industrial revolution:

Before the American Civil War, the world still ran on the speed of

wind, water, animals and human power.... But James Watt was born, and so came the steam engine. Both matter and energy, like girls trying to lose weight, are now obsessed with high-speed movement.... America was the pioneer in increasing speed...by the 1840s, the US had already constructed six thousand miles of new railway lines.... It seems the wheels are cash printing machines. On it rolled mountains of products, transported around the world.... (164-165)

He implies that the world has entered a new era of competition. Not that of arms, but that of speed. In this jungle, the rule becomes “survival of the fastest”; “whoever is the faster can eat its opponent” (165). He expresses his surprise to see how China has become “the best location for the competition of speed” (165-166). But he also laments and cautions that “it’s too fast! The world has changed; nothing can be found; nothing can be seen; everything is disintegrating. Disintegrating!” (166).

Counter-narratives of Modernity

With the subway serving as a symbol of modern China, the novel constructs a set of counter-narratives to the dominant discourses on modernity. Counter-narratives are those which aim to criticize and “offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews 1). Counter-narratives of modernity seek to criticize and overthrow the dominant narratives of modernity. One of the main discourses on modernity is a new sense of time and temporality that is mechanical, linear, one directional and always future-oriented; this temporality works hand in hand with the narrative of progress. The earliest notion of the modern simply designates a transition from antiquity to the new, “a determinate rupture with what came before” (Marian, 2011, 1). However, it can be seen how this notion can give rise to linear notion of time and the narratives of progress. Peter Wagner is among many other scholars who note that modernity “has always been associated with progress” (2012, 28). The narrative of progress, the notion that “historical time had a progressive direction” (Hunt 51), with each human development stage more advanced than the last one (e.g. from hunting and gathering, to agriculture, to commerce), puts different societies and nations on a single developmental timeline—some are modern, some are less modern or even pre-modern. This narrative of progress “dictates that the old ways must give way to the new ones with the inevitability of the past becoming the present” (Rieder 38), all on an eternal pursuit of the “future.”

Since its advent, the train has been a prominent emblem of modernity's new temporality and its narrative of progress. Its fast speed and far reach have changed humans' perception of space and time, which are now experienced in a compressed manner; as was described by English writer Sydney Smith, "Everything is near—everything is immediate: time, distance, and delay are abolished" (549). The train, which runs on an accurate timetable, heralds the birth of a new era that runs on the modern mechanical time—as compared to the natural time (e.g. starting to work on sun rise and finishing work on sun set). As American art historian Leo Marx states, "nothing provided more tangible, vivid, compelling icons for representing the forward course of history than recent mechanical improvements like the steam engine" (13). Because of its relentless forward-driven and destination-oriented journey, the railway has widely been considered as a symbol of the future-oriented modernity and its narrative of progress (Freeman 29).

In Han's *The Subway*, the train performs the duty as a metaphor of modernity to the fullest—it travels relentlessly forward (towards a destination that always seems to be ahead) without ever stopping. However, Han also uses this specific image of the train to create a set of counter narratives in terms of temporality and progress. In this train that never stops, no one knows what direction the train is traveling. The linear and forward temporality is questioned on several occasions in the novel: "suddenly, a strange feeling came to him: the train in fact *didn't move forward at all*, it's the world that is moving backward rapidly" (69, emphasis added); some other characters speculate that the subway lines have been modified into a man-made wormhole that connects to other universes; they wonder, "is it the future, or the past that we are arriving at then?" (137). As can be seen, Han's subway questions the linear and progressive temporality of modernity: what we assume to be forward might be backward; what we are running hurriedly towards might not be the "future," but the "past," or another parallel timeline altogether. This train that forever travels forward/backward creates a temporality that is completely different from the linear and progress notion of time in modernity. What is more, time further rejects this linear and forward temporality by even coming to a full stop in the novel: "he looked at his watch again; it has stopped" (16).

The overall structure of the novel also contributes to creating a counternarrative to modernity's linear and progressive temporality. As has been mentioned earlier, this novel is composed of five chapters which were originally separately published short stories. Each chapter focuses on different main characters and there is no easily distinguishable plotline that runs throughout the novel. The only thread that connects all five chapters is the subway incident, where it malfunctions and travels

without stopping. Chapters one and two—the Last Train and Metamorphosis—depict the incident directly. Chapter three—symbols—follows some characters’ endeavour to find out the truth and the reason behind the subway incident; chapter four—heaven—reveals what happened to humans who lived in the underground to escape the disaster. Chapter five—"Ruins"—is set more than five hundred years into the future where humans have spread to other planets and some have come back to visit earth, which has now become a wasteland. As can be seen, even though the timeline of the novel roughly follows a chronological order, namely “forward,” nothing that happened in the novel can be considered as a form of “progress.” For example, chapter four, which is ironically entitled “Heaven,” delivers a thorough mock of the narrative of progress. It depicts what happens to humanity after they flee to live in the underground world: humans regress to the tribal era, living in eternal complete darkness; since there is no light, not even fire, their sight has regressed; humanity’s language has understandably regressed too (for example, words related to sight, such as “see,” are no longer used); they eat worms and other small animals raw. One revolutionary event that happened in chapter four is one tribe’s discovery of fire. As can be seen, the future of humanity in the underground world is purposefully depicted in such a way as to resemble primitive human civilization. In this way, the future and the past are juxtaposed and meshed together, completely dismantling the linearity of time and the narrative of progress, which are central in the discourse of modernity.

Besides the macro-level of the plotline and human society’s regression in the novel, this counternarrative is also highlighted in several key moments. The notion that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow is better than today is questioned throughout the novel. For example, Zhou Xing, the main character in chapter two, comes to a profound realization about modern life on the train that never stops:

For an iron train with no sensation that travels endlessly in the river of time, whether there is an aim or not is not important. But for the individual passengers who have finite lifespans, this has changed their fate... He was only a member of this crowd, which as a collective is swept forward by a giant force they can not control. Like stinky mice trembling and gathering into a pile, they are stuck together, forever moving forward with the same speed, unable to stop even for one moment just to catch a breath. As a younger generation, Zhou thought his life will definitely be better than that of his parents. But now, as he is stuck in the subway, he realized that that is not the case. (63-64)

This section of the novel is significant in revealing the theme of the novel in several ways. On the one hand, Zhou's realization debunks modernity's narrative of progress: the notion that today is better than yesterday and that tomorrow will be better than today, is nothing but an illusion, a myth. On the other hand, by comparing individual passengers on the train that never stops to piles of mice unwillingly swept forward, Han criticizes the dehumanizing effect on the individual in a society that focuses solely on speeding into the mysterious destination of modernity. Passengers on a malfunctioned train (which never stops) serve as a potent metaphor for the relation between the individual and the nation in modern China: whereas the nation and society as a whole is in frantic pursuit of a destination called modernity which seems to lie forever ahead, individuals in this society—"passengers on this train"—are trapped in an endless struggle in pursuit of the phantom destination; as one character wonders "how big a disaster it is" for people who (trapped on this train) can never reach their station (62). It is implied that the fervent pursuit of modernity might only mean a malfunction for the nation as a whole, but for the generations of individuals the consequence is disastrous.

Closely entangled with the narrative of progress is the concept of technological advancement and urbanization, which are often considered as key signs or criteria of progress towards modernity. The concepts of technology and urbanization provide some of the most common material evidence of modernity, such as the railway, cars, and skyscrapers. They are so key to the whole discourse of modernity that they are often invoked as metonyms for modernity. The novel questions this seemingly self-evident correlation between technology, urbanization and progress. This is shown mainly through the depiction of the futuristic but uncanny S city in chapter three. The advancement of technology serves not to protect the freedom and privacy of the individual, but the opposite: the air is filled with tiny CCTV drones, which is connected to the supercomputer of market data research companies (93). Nature and the environment are distorted and become hostile to lives: "the visible light is black, the main colour of the city" (93); dark red acid rain, filled with industrial pigment chemicals, pours day and night (93). Citizens have become "sexually dysfunctional" (93) and have "implanted artificial gills that look like measles to filter the dirty, poisonous air" (94). Han's depiction of this futuristic, technologically advanced city dismantles the narrative of technological progress and urbanization and the wishful thinking that technology conquers nature.

The narrative of technological advancement is unravelled also through the portrayal of the relation between machines and humans. In the discourse of

modernity, technology and progress have always been considered as a self-evident equation; it seems that technological advancement will automatically equate social progress, that agency lies in the hands of the people to use and make machines serve them. However, Han's novel reveals an uneasy truth: in the modern society, humans have become machines, whereas machines have assumed life of its own and started to dominate and control humans. The central embodiment of technological advancement and modernity in the novel is the subway. It is portrayed in a zoomorphic way on several occasions. For example, when it is approaching the platform:

All of a sudden, it seems that the *loud breathing sound of a giant carnivore* is coming from the centre of the earth... the train which is painted in the military-uniform green *stuck its fat, Plesiosaur-like head out* from the underground hole. What follows is its *disproportionately swelling body. Swaggering, it slowly stopped...* all the doors *screamed* and opened. The “tombstones” on the platform floated inside, as if they are sucked in by a vacuum cleaner... he was also moved into the carriage, unwittingly. (16)

In this description, the train comes alive, whereas humans are lifeless like “tombstones”. It is the train that seems to have agency and control over humans, who are completely passive, soulless machines.

Humans are described as soulless and mechanical on several occasions in the novel. For example, in chapter one, passengers are described as “hollow.” As has been mentioned earlier, the first chapter of the novel depicts Lao Wang on the subway train to go home, when he suddenly notices that the train is not stopping at any station. With growing unease, Lao Wang looks around the carriage; everyone else sits in their seats, motionless and with their eyes closed. He approaches one of them and pats him on the shoulder. To his astonishment, his hand passes through the passenger's body like passing through air. Lao Wang quickly retracts his hand, “as if he was bitten by a zombie” (17). However, his hand passes through his front chest to the back; he realizes he is also a hollow man (17). In fact, “hollow passengers” is the title name of the following section in the chapter.

Modern man is not just hollow, s/he is mechanical too. Lao Wang is a representation of the modern mechanical man in the novel. He is an average office worker whose work is mainly made up of filling out all kinds of forms. After the incident in the subway, he suddenly realizes that throughout his whole life, “he has simply been filling out empty spaces like a *machine*, without trying to figure

out how to get out of this dark maze” (33); after years of office work that follows a rigid routine, “he has become a *clock* himself” (15). Not just him, everyone else has become like mechanical robots: in the morning, “passengers marching in step are like *mechanical machines produced by factories*” (24). The novel criticizes how the obsession with speed, efficiency and profit in modernization has dehumanized men, making them into hollow machines. By depicting humans becoming machines and machines coming to life, *The Subway* breaks the assumption that machines are subordinate to and serve humans; on the contrary, it is humans who are dominated and controlled by machines (such as the clock and the train) in the modern society. In this way, the novel overthrows the narrative of technology and progress.

Humans’ regression throughout the novel also further disrupts the linear temporality and narrative of progress. Human’s alienation in the modern society is represented through human metamorphosis on the subway train which never stops. The train, which travels so fast that it breaks and does not stop at any station, is a metaphor of Chinese modernization. The forward motion itself becomes the end, instead of the means to live better lives. In this abnormal society (carriage), people go through various metamorphoses. In one of the carriages, people become shrivelled old men and women who are fast asleep; in one of the carriages, only a few passengers are left, and they have become “like wolves in the cage of the zoo, pacing back and forth rapidly, howling with their heads up and necks extended” (73); in one carriage, he sees that people are eating, with their mouths bloody and human hands, human livers and other parts in their hands (77); in one carriage, everyone is naked and they have lost human form and become like apes, crawling on all fours (88).

Han’s depiction of the metamorphosis on the broken subway train is highly metaphorical. This is why he has often been compared to Franz Kafka (Luo; Zhang). The metamorphosis in the broken subway train symbolizes the dehumanization in the modern Chinese society (especially the urban space). In this uncanny space, everything—including humans and time itself—is deformed: “it seems the train is now in a strange time-space, and the physical laws there are completely different from the ones humans know” (69). In this uncanny space, this train that travels at a fast speed without an apparent destination, even time is running at a faster than usual speed; young men and women became shrivelled old men and women (73). Humans have degenerated into wolves, cannibals, and apes. When the train finally and mysteriously comes to a stop in the end and the door slides open, everyone rushes to get out; only, none of them are in human forms anymore; “they are in the shape of ants, of worms, of fishes, of trees, of grass...”

(90). Using the subway train as a metaphor of the modern Chinese society, the novel criticizes Chinese modernization's obsession with speed and its dehumanizing effect on individuals.

Affects of Modernity

The discourse of modernity not only provides master narratives such as linear temporality, progress, technology and urbanization, as ways to think and act in the world; it also prescribes ways of feeling in the modern world. Studies on modernity have largely focused on the former (the master narratives of modernity) in the past; however, in the last decade or so, with the rise of affect theory—often termed as “the affective turn” (Clough and Halley, 2007), critics have started to look further into the latter aspect (the affects of modernity). One recent and immensely influential example is Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In it, she looks at the affect of optimism in modernity and how it has become toxic, a “cruel optimism,” in modern American society. She argues that cruel optimism arises when something we desire, such as the fantasy of a good life or a political project, “actively impedes the aim that brought [us] to it initially” (1). She considers the American Dream as the key contributor of a cruel optimism that dominate American society today: the American Dream is turning out to be fraying fantasies of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality” (1), among others; the blind optimism on the attainability of these fantasies is nothing but “cruel” and “an obstacle to [people's own] flourishing” (ibid).

Across the pacific, in China, the situation is both similar and different. Coincidentally, one year after the publication of *Cruel Optimism*, in 2012, the concept of the Chinese Dream (Zhongguo Meng) was put forward and emphasized by Chinese president Xi Jinping in his inauguration speech. Ever since then, this term has been widely promoted and discussed in both Chinese state and popular media; textbooks have also been revised in order to include discussions of it and essay competitions on it are held in schools (Mohanty 34); the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has even commissioned research projects on the Chinese Dream (Mohanty 34-35). The significance of it in contemporary Chinese politics cannot be overlooked. It is the first time, as is noticed by Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai in their discussion of the term, that “dream” (an abstract and affective word) has been used as a party policy guideline in Chinese history (96). This is a conscious, strategic political turn to using affects, especially that of hope, to mobilize the Chinese populace in the twenty-first century.

In a sense, both the American Dream and the Chinese Dream can be considered

as localized versions of the affective narrative of modernity, combined with that of national development. Both, in essence, invokes the prospect of progress and success. Both reflect one dominant affect prescribed by modernity—optimism. However, they differ significantly in terms of success of who or what. The American Dream, according to historian James Truslow Adams, who coined the term, refers to “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (373). The concept of the American dream emphasizes the achievement of a condition that is beneficial for the development of *individual* potential and happiness. However, the Chinese Dream is imagined entirely from the perspective of the *nation*, instead of the individual. Even though “the well-being of the people” is mentioned sometimes in discussions of the Chinese Dream, the term Chinese Dream itself mainly refers and equates to “the rejuvenation of the nation” (Wasserstrom; Mohanty; Winberg Chai and May-lee). As Xi states in a speech: “we must make persistent efforts... and strive to achieve the Chinese Dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (BBC). As can be seen, the focal point for the Chinese Dream is firmly on the nation-state; it is a dream *of* the state and *for* the state; people are second, or means to achieve the end—“rejuvenation of the nation.” In another word, the Chinese Dream is a national project, which everyone needs to work for even when it contradicts with their own wellbeing.

In this sense, the malfunctioned train which persistently speeds forward without caring about anything else and the passengers trapped inside seems to be an apt representation of the Chinese Dream. Whereas Lauren Berlant points out how the persistence on the American Dream, which has turned out to be mere fantasies in contemporary America, creates cruel optimism, Han Song’s *The Subway* reveals a different set of affects that shroud Chinese society today. Affect in this essay means emotional, “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” which travel between subjects and animate and drive us (Seigworth and Gregg 1). I use the term affect, instead of other words such as emotions, to talk about modernity’s influence on the psychological and mental state of humans because it covers a wider range of human feelings, such as that of numbness and sense of crisis that are reflected in Han’s *The Subway*.

One key affect that contaminated many characters in the novel is numbness, or a sense of emptiness. Passengers on the train have become “hollow men” in a coma (17); Lao Wang has become a clock (15); people waiting for the train are like “tombstones in a barren plain” (16); everyone has become “mummy-like creatures” (154). All of these descriptions, “hollow man” in a coma, clock, tombstones,

and “mummy-like creatures,” point to the lack of any affect whatsoever. These metaphors emphasize a sense of numbness and emptiness that has taken hold of people. The affect of numbness, or the absence of any affect, is partly resulted from the blurred boundary between the individual and the nation state in contemporary China because of the national project of modernization. As established earlier, the train that never stops is a metaphor of the modern Chinese nation state. Passengers trapped on the train serve as a metaphor for Chinese people. No matter whether the destination is modernity or the “Chinese Dream” of “national rejuvenation,” the individuals, bound on the trains, can not choose their own “route” or “dream.” They have become mere parts of the giant machine of the nation state: “in the end, humans and the train merged together and became one symbiote” (86).

The affect of numbness can also result from over-stimulation. Through the representation of the affect of numbness, the novel also criticizes the rise of consumerism with the development of capitalism. At times, the novel directly links the mummy-like symptom of modern people to the rise of consumerism: “she is like everyone else dominated by the desires of consumerism; like all the other mummies, she is dominated by the C drink company” (168). In some places of the novel, the full name of the C drink company is revealed to be Coca Cola, which is arguably the most famous modern brand whose advertisement can be seen virtually everywhere. The description of Coca Cola is everywhere in the novel too, reflecting how exposed to and dominated by market capitalism and consumerism modern life is. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, as Lao Wang was walking towards the subway station, “the neon light of Coca Cola ads shines through from all directions...overshadowing the moon” (15); his first instinct is to raise his arms to block the lights, but he feebly gave up halfway (ibid). This description shows modern people’s over-exposure to the various products of market capitalism, which threaten to consume humans themselves. His feebleness and failure to block the lights (because he knows that even if he tries, he could not) is an early hint at the forming of the affect of numbness in modern society. Even when he went to ride the train during the day, “he still couldn’t escape the prosperous, apocalyptic coca cola ads flooding towards him” (45). The novel emphasizes the central dominance of market capitalism in modern lives: “The billboards of Coca Cola ads look down on everything like they are gods of this world” (25); “when the big bang happened, only a letter of C can be recognized” (199).

Besides the affect of numbness, another affect that dominates some characters in the novel is anxiety and an acute sense of crisis. This anxiety, which even borders on schizophrenia, is felt mainly by characters who have “woken up” from

the “mommy” state. For example, after experiencing the malfunction of the train, Lao Wang realizes that something has gone wrong; he realized that he was also a “hollow man” (17) and the endless train journey is the true face of the world (18). However, this realization has woken him up from the “coma” state, which the other passengers are all still under; what he thought and felt about afterwards reflects a deep anxiety and paranoia which borders on schizophrenia:

Does the train really travel in the universe?...Is it even really a train? He can't help but started crying. He felt embarrassed and also surprised that he can still cry. So he laughed, laughed at himself... Is it really he who is crying and laughing? Or are all the crying and laughing and the sound of the train just playbacks of what is pre-recorded? It's like a conspiracy... then, has he really existed? And who is he? (18-19)

Schizophrenia has been famously defined by Fredric Jameson in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) as a dominant feature of the contemporary society. He borrows the term from Lacan, who defines it as “a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (25). Meaning is created by the movement from signifier to signifier (similar to how each word in the dictionary is defined and explained by other words and how meaning does not exist on individual single words, but situated within a line of others); the breakdown in the signifying chain thus means the inability to make out meaning from signifiers and to use signifiers to make meaning. This also means the breakdown of the psyche, since the way we make sense of ourselves also relies on the chain of signifiers, of “unify[ing] the past, present, and future” (Jameson 25); In a word, “with the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (26).

The malfunction of the train acts as a break in the signifying chain in the novel. It occupies a space that is not the past, the present, nor the future; it heads to a direction that is neither forward or backward; times itself has ceased to exist on this train; it seems to have been carved out from the normal continuity of space-time on earth. The impact of this “break” is strong enough that Lao Wang has been woken up from the affectless numbness, and it has set him directly into a schizophrenic episode: he does not know what is real and what is not anymore; the meaning of everything seems to be wide open now.

Lao Wang's schizophrenia is accompanied by a strong anxiety and an acute sense of crisis, that something bad is about to happen. He feels that "the train looks like it might explode any time soon" (24). This sense of crisis reflects a general anxiety about the sole focus on speed in the national project of modernization in China. Subway accidents, the main focus of the novel, act as a metaphor for the side-effect of the obsession of speed in modernization. The key event portrayed at the beginning of the novel, which acted as the waking call for Lao Wang, is itself a subway accident: something wrong happened and the train cannot stop. What is disconcerting, however, is not that an accident has happened, but that there is no news about it at all (28); people go about their lives as if nothing has happened. The main characters' endeavours to find out what really happened becomes the main story line in the novel. The subway accident becomes a metaphor for the other, hidden face of modernity, compared to the more glamorous one. This focused attention on subway accidents is strengthened at the end of the book too. The book features two appendices in the last few pages of the novel, among which is a list of the main subway accidents/disasters in the last hundred years.

Train accidents are only one source for the strong sense of anxiety and crisis that pervade *Subway*. This affect is further intensified in chapter three, where everyone starts to feel that an impending much bigger disaster is around the corner. Chapter three starts by introducing a futuristic city, called S, which is a likely insinuation of Shanghai. There are rumours among people that "a catastrophic disaster is going to befall on this city soon" (94). Many people are buying tickets to migrate to other planets by American spaceships to escape this disaster (94). Other people who cannot afford the spaceship tickets are buying subway tickets to hide underground (94-95). Xiaowu, the main character in chapter three, is trying to escape like everyone else. But he meets a girl named Kaka who is trying to figure out the truth behind a plane crash accident; she thinks that the rising accidents involving all kinds of transportations is a prelude of the incoming disaster (124). They think that maybe if they figure out why those accidents happened, they can find a third way out of this disaster, without needing to migrate to other planets or hiding underground (127-128). As can be seen, chapter three (among all five) occupies a central place in the novel: It reveals what the malfunctioned subway stands for—the harbinger of the larger malfunction of modern Chinese society.

This desire for escape, resulted from the affect of anxiety and sense of crisis, is a recurrent theme throughout the novel. In chapter two, the main character Zhou who was trapped in the malfunctioned train admits that he has been fantasizing about becoming an outlaw: "if there is a chance, he would have killed someone too,

and then he would run away, far far away” (63). On the one hand, Zhou’s fantasy crystallizes the dehumanizing effect of people on this “malfunctioned train”; on the other hand, his fantasies about becoming an outlaw might be because that is the only way to get off the “train.” This becomes apparent when he feels strongly envious about another character, Xiaoji, who has become an outlaw by breaking the window and escaping outside. When Xiaoji suggests breaking the window and getting outside of the train to take a look at what might have gone wrong with it, a policeman on the train rejects the suggestion, saying that it is against the law, because it breaks stability and public order (67). But no one else has any idea about what to do, so Xiaoji goes ahead with it anyway. As Xiaoji is trying to break the window, Zhou excitedly shouts “terrific!” silently in his head. When Xiaoji successfully breaks the window and climbs outside of the carriage, Zhou signs silently again: “such a lucky and hateful escaper,” feeling full of envy (68). When Xiaoji gets out of the carriage, thunders of the wheels attack his ears. He feels that the train is a huge factory operating at an overload, and he is finally out (68-69). Not everyone is lucky like Xiaoji to escape this malfunctioned train, this overworked factory. For those who can not escape, they are trapped forever in it, their lives burnt like engines to keep the machine roaring.

Conclusion: The one shouting in the iron carriage

In the novel, most of the main characters are obsessed with some kind of transportation accidents, for example, Lao Wang with subway malfunction and Kaka with airplane crashes. The reason for the novel’s keen interest on transportation accidents is the conscious neglect of these in the modern Chinese society as is revealed in the novel. For example, after Lao Wang experienced the malfunction of the train, he could not find any news covering of it in the media (28); he tried to report the accident to the subway company, but was received with impatience, indifference and suspicion of trying to cause social unrest (28-29). He thinks about various possibilities: “maybe the editors of newspapers got some orders from the above to not cover the incident” (28); maybe “the subway company is covering up the truth” (29). No matter what reason, there is no discussion of the incident. It is revealed later in the novel that not only subway accidents, other types of transportation accidents are also consciously brushed aside in contemporary Chinese society:

The topics (transportation accidents) that should have been widely and seriously discussed are controlled by the powerful few; the conclusions

are drawn only by them. On the ground, the general public are all silent, pretending that it's not related to them... If we do want to talk about it, we need to hide underground like this to talk secretly. (125)

This conscious effort of covering up the “cracks” in contemporary society is reflected elsewhere in the novel too. For example, in chapter three, a major subway explosion happened: “the ground under his feet exploded open... all kinds of limbs and organs are vomited out like mercury” (95). The next day, everything returned to normal like nothing happened; “the victims’ blood, meat and bones are cleaned away like papers by the robots sent by the laboratory; they are tossed into garbage incinerators and became renewable energy that keeps the city operating” (106). The novel criticizes how accidents like the subway incident have been consciously brushed aside by the authorities. With this novel, Han tries to bring these accidents to the foreground, to remind people of the dangerous cracks in the fabric of modern society.

What Han is doing with this novel is similar to what Lu Xun was trying to do with *Nahan* (*Call to Arms*). As a matter of fact, one scene in the novel is strikingly similar to the famous iron house metaphor put forward by Lu Xun in the preface of *Nahan*, where everyone is fast asleep except one. In the malfunctioned train, everyone is in a coma, without realizing that something has gone wrong. Lao Wang was the only one awake. He ran from the front to the end of the carriage, trying to wake the others up, but to no avail. Han’s allusion to Lu Xun has also been noticed by Song Mingwei, in his “In the Eyes of Everything, I see nothing.” By invoking Lu Xun’s iron house image, Han warns readers that this is a time of crisis similar to Lu Xun’s time. Like Lao Wang in the train, like Lu Xun, Han is trying to sound the alarm and wake Chinese people up to see the underlying crisis of the modern Chinese society. With this book, he tries to wake people up from the numbness of overstimulation and consumerism in the capitalist society to see that the “train” has malfunctioned. The novel also reveals the importance of looking at (not away from) and looking into these kind of “accidents”: “the accidents reveal clearly the underlying relation between each rivet; only if we enter into the core circle of the experiment [of modernization] can we understand the truth of the disasters. *This is the main subject of contemporary life*” (124). Han’s *The Subway* is a difficult but determined look at this main subject of contemporary China.

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Author Profile:

Mengtian Sun is Assistant Professor of English at City University of Macau. She received her doctoral degree in English from the University of Melbourne in 2019. Her research interests mainly lie in fantasy and science fiction, comparative and world literature, and gender studies. She has published articles in *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic and Decolonial Perspectives*, and journals such as *Science Fiction Studies* and *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*. She has also published translations of science fiction short stories in journals and books such as *Edge of the Galaxy* and *Science Fiction World*.

Contact information:

Email: suedemontaigne@gmail.com; mtsun@cityu.mo

Office mailing address: T233A, City University of Macau, Taipa, Macao.