Articles

Leaving the Family to Save It: Posthumanism in Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

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Abstract

This paper is a study of posthumanism as envisioned by the contemporary Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin. From his early works like *China 2185* and *Supernova Era* to his latest works such as *The Three-Body Trilogy*, Liu Cixin's characters consistently demonstrate a tendency to distance themselves from conventional human society to explore new dimensions of time and space. The authors argue that Liu Cixin introduces a posthuman transformation through his portrayal of characters who choose to leave the family constructed by key concepts of Confucian humanism. The journey of "leaving family" begins with an exit from current Chinese society and later extends to leaving the Earth and then the solar system, implying an ultimate departure from any kind of anthropocentric humanism, wherein posthumanism emerges in Liu Cixin's works. The primary driving force for such posthumanism stems from Liu's recognition of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe, his admiration for the high-entropic universe, as well as his criticism of humanity's attachment to systems of "family" for comfort and security. The other force is the tension between "leaving family" and human ethical and moral values that inhibit adventures. While the journey of "leaving family" is justified by the instinct of survival in the event of cosmic catastrophes, humanist values are constantly challenged and redefined to engender a posthumanistic envisioning of home for the future of humanity.

The recent Netflix television series *3 Body Problem* has cemented Liu Cixin's reputation as the face of Chinese science fiction (SF) for a global audience, but his outsized influence on the popularity of the genre has been decades in the making in China. Liu began writing science fiction in 1989. Since then, he has published dozens of novels and many more short stories, including *Zhongguo 2185* 中国 2185 (China 2185, 1989), *Chaoxinxing jiyuan* 超新星纪元 (Supernova Era, 1989), "Xiangcun jiaoshi" 鄉村教師 (The Village Schoolteacher, 2001), *Qiuzhuang shandian* 球狀閃電 (Ball Lightning, 2005), "Liulang diqiu" 流浪地球 (The Wandering Earth, 2008), and *Santi sanbuqu* 三體三部曲 (The Three-Body Trilogy, 2006-2010). *Santi* 三體 (The Three-Body Problem, 2006), the first book of *The Three-Body Trilogy,* was translated into English by Ken Liu and won the Hugo Prize in 2015—one of the many awards that Li Cixin has received. There have been at least thirteen adaptations of Liu's work into TV series or films that are often assisted by the novelist's participation in various roles, including script writing and story consulting. The fictional world of the future that Liu Cixin has constructed for his readers has been a fascinating spectacle of technological wonders and a complex tale of human survival. This world is made vividly enthralling for us by Liu's brilliant storytelling and intricate character portrayal aided by his ingenious scientific imagination. A narrative of the future has been the trademark of SF, but Liu's unique narrative of the future is characterized by historical traumas, human impulse for self-destruction, science's uncertain promises and the ethical dilemma of sacrificing life to preserve it, which jointly point to a form of posthumanism predicting a future of humans under drastic yet uncertain reformation and reconstitution.

The current scholarly research on posthumanism mostly aligns with Western critical posthumanism, an offshoot of critical theory popular in the late twentieth century. Facing the growing competition and conflict between humans and emerging AI-aided machines, critical posthumanism scholars argue that the emergence of posthumans, which highlights the potential for humans to coevolve with machines and animals, provides a significant opportunity to challenge the humanist view of humans as autonomous, self-conscious, cohesive, and self-determining beings. Re-

search on Liu Cixin's posthumanism is usually conducted within this framework, emphasizing Liu's elaborate portrayal of science and technology, which shows a tendency to override human agency and social order. For example, Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin downplays the significance of human moral consciousness in favor of a utopia of science and technology, where the development of science and technology serves as the only absolute truth. The highly technologized and omnipotent perspective in Liu Cixin's works makes his portrayal of the utopia of science and technology a posthuman narrative, in which the human agency is overwhelmed by a cosmic determinism, and human moral society gives way to a universe of zero morality (Song, "Variations on Utopia" 95).

However, other scholars believe that Liu Cixin's works do not qualify as posthumanism, as they do not form a critique of anthropocentric humanism in the same way as Western critical posthumanism does. For example, while expanding on Song's argument about the utopia of science and technology, Justus Poetzsch argues that posthumanism is not "correctly" represented in Liu's novels, in which posthuman can only be described as a form of transhumanism due to the dominance of social Darwinism and technodeterminism where survival of the civilization depends solely on the levels of science and technology. Poetzsch thinks that the views expressed in the novel not only diverge from humanist principles but also run counter to the idea of sympoiesis (collectively producing systems where participants think with and become with each other) advocated by critical posthumanism (Poetzsch 182).

The problem with the argumentation by Song and Poetzsch lies in their teleological approach to studying Liu Cixin and Chinese SF. The advocacy for the sympoiesis of all sentient beings is a prominent aspect of Western critical posthumanism, but it does not cover all situations—much like Western critical posthumanism itself is just one strand of the multifaceted posthumanism. Contemporary Chinese SF is not, by default, a reenactment of Western critical posthumanism, nor is it an imperfect interpretation of it. It is more prudent to say that contemporary Chinese SF represents a new intellectual wave that emerges simultaneously with Western critical posthumanism and that it possesses its own characteristics that are continually evolving. As a significant contributor to this wave, Liu Cixin demonstrates how humans, posthumans, science and technology, and nonhuman beings can interplay in multiple ways, leading to a form of posthumanism that challenges humanism—especially Chinese humanism—and embraces a cosmos beyond the current realm of human beings and human ethics. Here, we suggest using the term *lijia* 离家 (leaving family) to characterize the unique form of posthumanism present in Liu Cixin's works.

By "leaving family," we mean an intellectual departure from Confucius's 孔子 idea of *jia* 家 (family). In Confucianism, "family" serves as a key concept in constructing a utopian social system, within which other concepts can be allocated and function. In a study of "Liyun" 禮運 of *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites), Michael Puett gives an analysis of how a perfect society is constructed in terms of "a single family" in the Confucian tradition. According to Puett, Confucius configures an ideal social system of the "single family," which, as noted in "Liyun," prevailed during the era of sages. The fatherly ruler transmits the ethical values obtained from heaven to his children. Meanwhile, every individual family is a replica of the "single family." Ethical and moral values are transmitted through rituals, with the family unit as the foundation. Confucius contends that only by restoring the social system of the "single family," the chaotic and fragmented world can be reorganized after the passing of the sages. However, Puett argues that the ritual world of perfection is not real, but it is an "as-if world" constructed by Confucius to remedy the chaotic and discontinuous real world. (Puett, "Constructions of Reality" 127)

Through the term "as-if world," Puett deconstructs the Confucian humanist map, casting doubt on the order built on "family" and leading us to consider to what extent we, whose lives are still organized in one way or another by this order and its renewals, can leave "the family" to see the "chaotic yet real" world. In fact, this kind of criticism is already present in Daoism 道家 (a philosophical school originating in China), though in a prehumanist way. Both *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 庄子 contain negative views toward *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) because it is artificially constructed—therefore, detrimental to the natural Dao. Ikeda Tomohisa's study on filial piety showcases how Confucian morality, with filial piety at its core, was recognized as a purported remedy (Ikeda 18). In Chapter 18 of *Laozi*, it says, "When the six family relationships are not in harmony, there are filial piety and compassion." In Chapter 14 of *Zhuangzi*, it says, "Tang. . . asked Zhuangzi about benevolence . . . Zhuangzi said, 'Perfect benevolence knows no (familial) affection'" (Ikeda 13). In both works, filial piety is taken as an inadequate remedy of the Dao. Moreover, Ikeda also demonstrates that *Zhuangzi* ascribed the decline of the pristine virtue of the Dao and an even greater sense of alienation to the invention of filial piety (Ikeda 18). In arguing for a world beyond the Confucian concept of "family," the Daoist perspective leans toward a kind of prehumanism rather than the humanism of the Confucian strand.

The concept of "leaving family" we employ here may evoke *chujia* 出家 (leaving family), which typically refers to the act of leaving the secular life to enter a monastic life through ordination in the tradition of both religious Daoism 道教 (developed from Daoism as a philosophical school but distinct from it) and Buddhism.

At first glance, the practice of *chujia*, especially when it implies leaving no heir, goes against the familial values of Confucianism. In effect, both Chinese Buddhism and religious Daoism have a history of reconciling with these values rather than repudiating them. For Chinese Buddhism, this reconciliation can be traced back to *Mouzi lihuo lun* 牟子理惑論 (Mouzi on the Settling of Doubts), in which Mouzi argues that Buddhists' devoting their lives to cultivating the Way is in no way unfilial. Compared to Chinese Buddhism, religious Daoism in the early medieval period integrated more closely with Confucianism in embracing familial values. In his study, Mugitani contends that religious Daoism highlights its contribution to establishing an ideal world order bound by filial virtue. Moreover, during the Six Dynasties (220-589), loyalty and filial piety were considered even more significant than the virtue of a sage for one's promotion in the afterlife and appointment to the ranks of divine officials, as evidenced by the words of Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456-536), a great Daoist master of the time (Mugitani 118). From this perspective, Chinese Buddhism and religious Daoism have not shown a determination to sever ties with the Confucian values of the "family" despite the ritual of *chujia*.

Therefore, by employing the term "leaving family" to characterize Liu Cixin's SF, we do not mean a reclamation of prehumanist Daoism nor a portrayal of *chujia* with all its religious connotations in religious Daoism and Chinese Buddhism. Rather, we suggest a strong determination to leave the Confucian "family" in a posthumanist manner. Liu Cixin's omnipotent narrative perspective, which views human civilization from a universal scale, parallels Puett's argument about Confucius' as-if world of perfection in some interesting ways. For Liu Cixin, the ordered societies built by humans in different temporal spaces are essentially as-if worlds. The Confucian-constructed utopia, represented by the concept of "family," exists not only in traditional China but also in the modern world and in the future as well. Thus, in his writings, the imagination of a universe governed by the ethics of the "dark forest" can be seen as a continuation of the challenge to the as-if world of perfection, presenting a world liberated from the constraints of the humanist familial order.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that one thing is different from another not because they are the forms of different beings with distinct essences, but because they are composed and decomposed by forces, or "intensities,"[1] interacting with each other in their unique ways. In other words,

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1   Deleuze and Guattari use the term "intensity" instead of "energy" or "force" to stress its intensive attribute. The intensive is fundamentally different from the extensive: While the extensive means energy is organized and expressed to cater to the priori, the intensive emphasizes the neutrality of energy, allowing it to interact with each other in multiple ways without being organized and fixed into the universal form.

things can be seen as assemblages of intensities that interact with one another, leading to both stability and change. In the light of Deleuze and Guattari's theory, we take posthumanism in Liu Cixin's SF as a process of becoming posthuman while taking the "leaving family" journey. First, we will demonstrate that posthumanism is not merely a departure from the socialist utopia through an analysis of Liu Cixin's *China 2185* and *Supernova Era.* In fact, posthumanism directly challenges Chinese humanism centered on the Confucian concept of the "family." Then, we will provide a discussion on how Liu Cixin relocates humankind in the cosmos with an analysis of his short fiction "The Wandering Earth," ascribing the primary driving forces to his recognition of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe while highlighting his vision for a high-entropic (lacking order) universe. Last but not least, through a discussion of *The Three-Body Trilogy,* we contend that human ethical and moral values have also influenced Liu Cixin's portrayal of "leaving family."

Posthumanism: More Than a Departure from the Socialist Utopia

The most relevant instance of the as-if world in Liu Cixin's works is the society of the People's Republic of China (PRC), specifically the one during the period of the Cultural Revolution, which is part of the background stories in *China 2185* and in *The Three-Body Problem*. Liu Cixin's exploration of posthumanism arises from his departure from this as-if world, just as Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin's "hard" SF serves as a response to political appropriation of SF in modern Chinese history (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 128). Thomas Moran also argues that Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* should be understood as "a means of overcoming outmoded or unworkable forms of utopian thought." By the "outmoded or unworkable forms of utopian thought," he refers to the socialist projects of the twentieth century and the technocapitalism of the present (Moran 119). However, we believe that the connotation of "leaving family" is more than just departing from the socialist utopia; it reflects a determination to abandon more fundamental concepts, such as the Confucian concepts like "rite" and "humaneness," "marriage" and "family," which have been in constant debate in modern times. To "leave family" means to renounce the structured society that places humanity at its center. This is to say that Liu Cixin's posthumanism takes shape as he challenges humanism. In this way, a posthuman in Liu Cixin's SF is primarily manifested by the portrayal of a group of people who "leave family." Posthumans break free from traditional living models constituted by the "family" and its figural meanings in the structured human society and civilization.

From both *China 2185* and *Supernova Era,* we see the theme of "leaving family" initially emerging as a departure from the political reality of modern China. In the former, Liu Cixin sketches a future vision of China in which traditional family and marriage have become a hindrance to social development. In *2185*, the most famous and highest-ranked executive in China is a young woman whose foresight and bold decisions have led to significant progress in China, enabling it to become a prosperous and democratic nation. While being genuinely loved and supported by the youth, the executive is facing constant scrutiny and criticism from older adults. People enjoy longer lifespans due to the advancements in medicine, so multigenerational households of six or seven generations are common. However, these families are not as harmonious as expected; on the contrary, the older people create a dull and eerie atmosphere for the children at home, making them feel so stifled that they can only vent their frustration by racing flying motorcycles at night. The older adults oppose social changes, particularly proposals from their country's executive leader to abolish marriage and eliminate the traditional concept of family. Then, the brains of five older individuals are unexpectedly revived, and one of them replicates himself endlessly in the digital realm, establishing a virtue regime called Huaxia Republic. When he attempts to control the real world of China through this digital republic, the confrontation between gerontocracy and young democratic politics reaches a climax.

This plot design bears a resemblance to the political realities of China in the 1980s. As Chinese market economy reforms deepened, long-standing ideological control gradually relaxed and democratic ideas were gradually embraced by intellectuals and college students. However, the PRC government soon tightened its control, launching the successive political campaigns of Eliminating Spiritual Pollution (1983-1984) and Anti-Bourgeois Liberation (1986-1987), which slowed down the pace of the economic reform and opening. In her study of Liu Cixin's *China 2185*, Hua Li attributes the motivation of Liu Cixin's writing to this historical context. According to Hua Li,

> Liu shares with most Chinese intellectuals and university students a vision of China's political democratization in the near future. He also sees various hidden problems in China: the aging of the population, the potential conflicts between younger and older generations, and the continuing problem of gerontocracy in Chinese governance. (Li 524)

It is clear that Liu Cixin envisions the success of the young generation against

the gerontocracy in this story as an alternative resolution to China's political uncertainty at that moment. It becomes the starting point of Liu Cixin's departure from the social-political reality of China.

The impulse to "leave family" is also represented in *Supernova Era* written around the same time. In the story, the eruption of an unobserved supernova results in a catastrophic consequence for the Earth: all individuals above the age of thirteen will die, turning the planet into a world inhabited only by children. In a sense, this story can be seen as a sequel to *China 2185*. While in *China 2185*, the idea of "leaving family" is just taking shape, this story showcases an order built upon the foundation of the family disrupted by a little event that happened in the corner of the solar system of our vast and ever-changing cosmos. Humanity, in a cruel manner, is forced to step out of the family. With the story, Liu Cixin explores where humanity will go after the order is undone. When adults learn that they will die in less than a year due to radiation, they carefully teach children how to work in various fields, hoping that the children will maintain the traditional way of life. However, the new world does not operate along the old trajectory. After passing through a period of confusion, children begin to abandon societal frameworks and rules left by adults and to brainstorm ways to make the world "more playable" for them. The world is now their world alone. They activate a super AI to connect the entire nation and create a dazzling playground in the virtual network, and they plan to make it live in the real world. In their pursuit of a "more playable" world, they have created a new world beyond the imagination of their parents, unleashing immense destructive and creative power simultaneously. The narrative of "leaving family" reaches its climax when a new world war breaks out in the form of the Olympic Games. Numerous children from all over the world go to Antarctica to play the game, and many eventually die in it.

It is remarkable that in these two stories, various nonhumans emerge, like the revived men who live in the form of an electronic pulse in *China 2185* and the super AI in *Supernova Era*. These "nonhumans" may be called "transhumans" who are not yet posthumans because we reserve "posthuman" for those who step out of "family" and venture into a new world. In these two stories, those who are being transformed into posthumans include the highest executive, the young generations who support the policies of abolishing the traditional marriage system in the first story, and the children who follow their desires and leave their families in the second story. They collectively participate in the deconstruction of the "family" actualized by leaving and departing. In his article "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature," Liu Cixin explains his impetus for writing SF:

I am not interested in human society, only in the genre's strange beauty and power that thrills the imagination . . . Throughout human history, every culture has used its boldest and most magnificent fantasies to construct its own creation myth, but none has ever been as majestic and thrilling as our modern cosmological understanding of the Big Bang. In the same way, any story about God or Nuwa can never compare to the twists and turns and romance of the endless process of evolution. (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 22-23)

From these words, we see how Liu Cixin marvels at the beauty of the power of the Big Bang and the process of evolution. He is willing to use writing to depict the beauty of cosmic forces amidst chaos, pushing the boundaries of imagination to depict the journey of humanity alongside the universe, and transitioning of human beings to posthumans in a high-entropic context. In these two stories, posthumans allow their vitality to flourish, much like the explosion of stars and the evolution on a cosmic scale. They step out of the bubble of "family" constructed by Confucius and his followers with painstaking efforts, moving toward the dark, unknown, but energetic universe. By comparison, those electronic-pulse beings can only be called transhumans. Even though their form of being changes by virtue of technology, they fundamentally remain where humans are, firmly holding onto the "family" that their ancestors had built, afraid to take a single step beyond the familiar territory.

"Leaving family" implies that becoming posthuman in Liu Cixin's SF is a nonteleological process. By "nonteleological," we mean that the act of "leaving family" cannot anticipate progress in human civilization, nor does it aim at maintaining an as-if harmony between humans and the natural world. While the young executive's decisions in *China 2185* to abolish marriage and break free from the constraints of family may lead China to a more prosperous country, it is hard to argue that the Earth governed by children becomes a better one in *Supernova Era*. After experiencing the cruel war games, the surviving children are awaiting their future after evacuating from the devastated continent of Antarctica, a future that is far from being certain and bright. Moreover, Liu Cixin does not offer a new utopia in which harmony between children and the natural world emerges. Instead, he demonstrates that only by "leaving family" can new relationships be explored, whether it means returning human-occupied cities and industrial lands to nature or transforming the pristine land of Antarctica into a battleground with nuclear pollution. Both the su-

pernova explosion at the beginning of the story and the refreezing of the Antarctic continent at the story's end convey a message that humans are no longer the center of this relationship, let alone the possibility of establishing an as-if harmonious relationship.

In contrast, utopia, whether it is a socialist one or one driven by science and technology, cannot aptly encapsulate the posthuman narrative, given that it is typically characterized by closure and homogeneity. In Thomas More's *Utopia*, the state of utopia is an isolated island. In fact, it is originally a peninsula, and a fifteen-mile-wide channel is dug by the community's founder to separate it from the mainland for the convenience of severing it from the outside world. This is what Fredric Jameson calls "the utopian enclave" (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 10-21). Jameson suggests that utopia is the locus where a series of solutions to problems of the real world are proposed and tested; therefore it is an imaginary enclave set apart from the real social space. The utopia is confirmed by playing down the outside world by depreciating it as the Other. Meanwhile, the confirmation also implies the interior homogeneity of the utopia. In the article "An American Utopia," Jameson gives an analysis of utopia from the perspective of Lacanian psychological analysis, which suggests the other (within the community) is the theft of enjoyment. As far as there is the other, envy comes into play. Only when everyone identifies with each other, the utopia is transformed into a solid group (Jameson, "An American Utopia" 1-96).

Unlike utopia, the concept of "leaving family" represents an unending movement toward an unknown temporal space. It points to an exploratory process that involves continuous attempts driven by different intensities. In this process, we first relinquish the central position of humans and acknowledge the movement of intensities. Therefore, other than "leaving," the movement of intensities does not desire anything, neither the survival of humans nor the evolvement of utopia. The ever-changing intensities could result in different scenarios, including the extinction of humanity, the witnessing of a cosmic spectacle, or the emergence of various forms of existence in any corner of the cosmos. All of these scenarios—resulting from "leaving family"—develop into a temporary stable state, which we would like to call the plateau of "becoming posthuman." While posthuman indicates the complete decentralization and defamilialization of humanity, "becoming posthuman" is a process of infinite approximation to this threshold. In their transformations, humanity strikes to break free from the "family" for exploration, with the progress of science and technology being a by-product of this exploration.

Furthermore, the concept of "leaving family" also implies an intense tension

between human ethics and becoming posthuman. In *China 2185*, an older man who revives and creates the Huaxia Republic recounts his family's past. His great-grandson once had a family, but they divorced because his wife had to leave for work in Antarctica. They later each remarried. Eight years later, his ex-wife returned from Antarctica, and they once again divorced their respective spouses and remarried each other. What the older man could not bear was that all of this was planned, even to the extent that his great-grandson's second wife was introduced to him by his first wife. Later, the four of them gathered like friends, celebrating the start of their respective new lives. The older person witnessed this family chaos and died by suicide by colliding with a pillar. After listening to the older man's complaints, the young highest executive remarks that their way of life is quite normal and healthy in the present. In this story, the younger generation violates ethical and moral values at various levels. First of all, when the younger generation's open contempt for traditional marriage drives the grandfather to suicide, they violate the filial piety required by Confucianism as a base in family relationships. Even more significant is that when they disrespect the significance of the role of grandfather or father, they are breaking the social ethical system that Confucius meticulously constructed through the concept of "family"—a system claiming to correspond to the relationship between heaven, earth, and humanity. Moreover, for the younger generation, ethics and morality are no longer solely centered on expecting lifelong commitment in marriage and family. Instead, they should revolve around considerations for individuals' physical and psychological well-being. Doubtlessly, "leaving family" signifies a conflict with traditional humanistic ethics and morality.

Becoming posthuman may challenge fundamental moral values even more, such as the value of children's lives. In *China 2185,* Liu Cixin extensively elaborates on how the children illegally race flying motorcycles in the night sky, posing significant security risks to the city and to themselves. However, instead of focusing on individual life and social order, Liu Cixin emphasizes the urgency of seeking an outlet for suppressed frustrations and boredom. By the same token, Liu Cixin describes many scenes in *Supernova Era* where children die for various reasons while creating their own worlds. However, it is worth noting that many children's attitudes toward death are far more indifferent than adults are. When the old ethics are broken and new concepts of right and wrong have not yet been established, death seems to be part of their exploration of the world. With such a new ethical approach toward death as it happens in "leaving family," Liu Cixin begins to build his zero-morality dark forest that will recur in his later works, such as the story "The Wandering Earth." Due to a helium flash in the Sun, humanity is forced to leave

the solar system, wandering toward the Centaurus constellation. In this process, humanity witnesses their own insignificance in comparison with the grandeur of the cosmos, which causes them to gradually abandon their old societal norms. Even though they wander with the Earth, they undergo a process of decentralization and defamilialization, ultimately becoming posthuman in the journey.

In a similar fashion, in *Hei'an senlin* 黑暗森林 (The Dark Forest, 2007)—the second book of *The Three-Body Trilogy*, the Earth fleet is almost annihilated under the attack of the droplet-shaped spacecraft of Trisoloaris. Several escaped ships are forced to leave the solar system, heading toward the depths of the universe. The transformation for the people on the ships is almost immediate. Here is a dialogue between the captain of *Natural Selection* and a lieutenant colonel:

> "That's right. The line is severed. The essential change is not that the line has been let go, but that the hand has disappeared. The Earth is heading toward doomsday. In fact, she's already dead in our mind. Our five space-craft are not connected to any world. There is nothing around us apart from the abyss of space."
>
> "Indeed. Humanity has never faced a psychological environment like this before."
>
> "Yes. In this environment, the human spirit will be fundamentally changed. People will become—" She suddenly broke off, and the sadness in her eyes vanished, leaving only gloom, like a cloud-covered sky after the rain had stopped.
>
> "You mean that in this environment, people will become new people?"
>
> "New people? No, Lieutenant Colonel. People will become. . . non-peo-ple." (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 447)[2]

The subsequent plot explains what "leaving family" means. In order to seize others' fuel and spare parts, five spacecraft ultimately surrender their weapons to each other. As a result, all the people, except for those onboard *Blue Space,* die in the fight. No one on the spacecraft blames each other for this behavior because new ethics—the supremacy of survival—has replaced the old humanistic ethics. "The new space humans had passed through their infancy" (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 459), such is the comment by the narrator of the novel.

In some other scenarios, humans effectively distance themselves from the "fam-

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2   Translations of Liu Cixin's *The Dark Forest* are by Joel Martinsen.

ily" even though they do not physically leave the Earth. In *Ball Lightning*, as humans discover that the so-called ball lightning is, in fact, macro-atoms, they are able to catch a glimpse of the vast world. Such an experience fundamentally changes their perception of themselves and the universe, enabling them to move beyond the anthropocentric perspective. In the same vein, in the short story "Zhaowendao" 朝闻道 (Hearing the Tao in the Morning, 2002), scientists and scholars from various fields approach the altar of truth using their own life experiences to seek answers about humanity that they cannot find in their respective disciplines. On the altar, paleontologists get to know the true cause of dinosaur extinction, mathmagicians witness the final proof of the Goldbach's conjecture, and physicists see the unified model of the universe. They forsake loved ones, step out of their families and even do not fear death, gaining a brief yet supreme sense of happiness by exploring a world beyond humanity. The recurring theme of "leaving family" in those scenarios produces a complex and colorful assemblage of "becoming posthuman" in Liu Cixin's SF.

Repositioning Humanity in the Cosmos

There are many apocalyptic scenes in Liu Cixin's SF. Disasters can be caused by the movements of celestial bodies. *Supernova Era* has this grim declaration: "It is on this night that the history known to humanity has come to an end" (Liu, *Supernova Era* 16). When the high-energy radiation emitted by a supernova explosion arrives in the solar system, it triggers a catastrophe for human beings. The story of "The Wandering Earth" begins with the soliloquy of the narrator: "I have never seen the night. I have never seen the stars. I have never seen spring, fall or winter. I was born as the Braking Era ended, just as the Earth stopped turning" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 3). As the helium flash of the Sun—an explosion caused by helium fusion—is going to happen in four hundred years, it will destroy the Earth. In some other situations, disasters do not come from the natural world but from extraterrestrial civilizations. The short story "Ren he tunshizhe"人和吞食者 (Devourer, 2002) starts with this message sent to the Earth: "Warning! Alert! Warning! The Devourer approaches" (Liu, "Devourer" 276). The Devourer, who lives by appropriating the resources of other civilizations, eventually destroys human civilization and enslaves human beings. In a comparable way, in *The Three-Body Trilogy*, as soon as humanity exposes their position, they are swiftly attacked by the Trisolarans. The finale of the trilogy is humanity and the solar system being overwhelmed and transformed into two-dimensional entities by an advanced civilization hidden in the dark universe.

These disasters convey an unmistakable message: in comparison to the vast and high-entropy universe, humanity and its intricately constructed civilization—"the family"—are minuscule and fragile. The relationship humans have envisioned between themselves and the natural world, which is often anthropocentric, is illusive and unsustainable. In his article "Beyond Narcissism," Liu Cixin expresses this view through his admiration for Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, saying, "I had on countless occasions imagined a type of literature that would reveal the vastness and profundity of the universe to me, that would allow me to experience the shivers brought on by the countless possibilities of worlds beyond number" (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 24). He cannot help but complain that Chinese mainstream literature is still elaborating on minor human actions at length, without even sensing their insignificance on the cosmic scale. For him, what SF can contribute to literature is the ability to reorganize the relationships through "macro-detail" that humans can establish with the natural world. Mingwei Song also identifies the "Kantian feeling of the sublime" in Liu Cixin's narrative in his analysis of *The Three-Body Trilogy*. According to Song, Liu Cixin writes the universe as a "dark forest" so complex and profound, so far beyond human knowledge, that it inspires a keen sense of awe toward the universe. Song summarizes this spiritual experience evoked by the universe as the Kantian concept of the "sublime"—*mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 118).

Liu Cixin uses the term "entropy" to articulate the disparity between human civilization and the universe. "Entropy" is a scientific term used in diverse fields, commonly associated with the degree of disorder and randomness of a system. Entropy and order have a negative correlation, meaning the order of the system decreases if entropy increases in a system. In the new wave of Chinese SF, the notion of entropy captures the attention of many writers, who apply it to their interpretation of the human world and the universe. In *Sishen yongsheng* 死神永生 (Death's End, 2010)—the last part of *The Three-Body Trilogy*—Liu Cixin explains the so-called low-entropy entities. He writes from the perspective of an extraterrestrial singer:

> Entropy increased in the universe, and order decreased . . . But low-entropy entities were different. The low-entropy entities decreased their entropy and increased their order, like columns of phosphorescence rising over the inky-dark sea. This was meaning, the highest meaning, higher than enjoyment. To maintain this meaning, low-entropy entities had to continue to exist. (Liu, *Death's End* 467-68)

All low-entropy entities possessed the cleansing gene, and cleansing was an instinct. (Liu, *Death's End* 470)

These words should help with our understanding of these apocalyptic scenes. It might be inferred that in the process of humans building their "families," they avoid the chaos that exists in the universe, leaving only what humans need. Thus, a correspondence between human society and the "order" of the universe is established, from which humans obtain "meanings." However, the universe has always existed in a high-entropy manner. Liu Cixin's creative endeavors are clearly derived from exploring the vast and high-entropy cosmic reality that humans see after stepping out of a low-entropic civilization and the relationships that humans can reestablish with this high-entropic cosmos. He translates the spiritual experience of the vastness, sublimity and high-entropic state of the universe into a critique of the conventional attempt to construct anthropocentric systems of "the family," thereby crafting a narrative of departure from it.

"The Wandering Earth" epitomizes the conflict between human attachment to "the family" and the vastness of the universe. Around three hundred and eighty years ago, astrophysicists found that the Sun would undergo a helium flash, causing it to expand into a red giant star, which would ultimately engulf the Earth. During these years, humanity established the United Government and spared no effort to build over twelve thousand massive Earth engines on the continents of Asia and the Americas to propel the Earth out of the solar system and toward Proxima Centauri in the Alpha Centauri star system located 4.3 light-years away. They design a five-step escape plan. First, halting the rotation of the Earth; second, accelerating and flinging the Earth from the solar system; third, the Earth continuing to accelerate its flight toward Proxima Centauri; fourth, decelerating; fifth, entering into orbit around Proxima Centauri and becoming its satellite.

Never before has any SF work depicted such a massive plan. When disaster strikes, humanity often escapes in spaceships, never with the Earth itself. What leaves readers in awe is not only the grandeur of the plan and the advancement of technology as outlined by Liu Cixin but also the portrayal of humanity's profound attachment to the Earth. The reason provided in the novel is that the Earth, compared to a spaceship, is a larger ecosystem, which is why it can better ensure human survival while wandering in space. However, we suggest that the deeper underlying reason for this plan is probably the fear of leaving "family." Compared to the unknown depths of the universe that humanity will soon face, the challenges brought

by the Wandering Earth Project may seem mild. By conjuring the vision of the Wandering Earth, Liu Cixin presents a deeper understanding of humanity's attachment to the "family" rarely seen in other SF writers.

On the surface, Liu Cixin empathizes with humanity's attachment to the "family," offering the greatest solace to those facing the ruthless cosmos through the Wandering Earth Project. However, he also questions the meaning of "family" at a deeper level. One inevitably wonders: have the people hiding in underground cities even left the family during the journey of wandering with the Earth? First, the Earth had already undergone a drastic transformation long before it even left the solar system. The Earth's engines have made many places unbearably hot, including where the protagonist is located. In one scene, the protagonist's grandfather, perhaps to relive the old days of drizzling rain in southern China, rushes outside to cool off in the failing rain but is scalded badly by the scorching downpour. Then, when the Earth begins to accelerate around the Sun, creating tidal waves that submerge the once-mighty city of Shanghai, the grandfather cries. Even though the Earth is still there, and the Sun remains unchanged, southern China—the beloved home place of the protagonist's grandfather and many others, has become a nostalgic memory that can never be revisited. In this sense, humanity has already been expelled from the "family" when celestial movements and interactions reveal their grand and disruptive nature before the start of the Wandering Earth Project.

On the other hand, a more chaotic and energetic scene unfolds with the development of the Wandering Earth Project. Liu Cixin depicts the magnificent and bizarre beauty of those sceneries brought about by the project. For example, when the Earth passes through the asteroid belt, the human space fleet must deploy antimatter weapons to eliminate large asteroids. The text reads: "In the bloodcurdling moments that followed the flash, the antimatter shells continued to bombard the asteroid. Ruinous flashes pulsed across the pitch-black sky, as if a horde of colossal paparazzi had descended upon the planet and were frenziedly snapping away" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 28). Then, numerous asteroids crossing the Earth's atmosphere become countless shooting stars. The protagonist witnesses a colossal wave triggered by one of them, a twenty-ton asteroid crashing into the sea. In a formation of black walls that obscures the sky, the wave surges toward the shore, leaving everyone stationed at the entrance of the underground city stunned. At that moment, people redefine the concept of "wave." Whether it is the dazzling encounter between the human fleet and the asteroids, the waves caused by shooting stars or the Earth engines standing lofty like columns of Greek temples on the continents of Eurasia and America, these are the high-entropic scenes only witnessed by those

who venture beyond the "family." Amid the chaos and the terror, there are senses of energy and beauty that send shivers down one's spine. Through what Liu Cixin refers to as "macro-detail" (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 25), we see that "leaving family" is not just a forced acknowledgment of the high-entropic state of the universe but also a form of admiration and even joyous inspiration at witnessing new aspects of the universe, from which emerges a relationship between posthumans and the natural world.

Moreover, "family" is more than a dwelling; it also symbolizes an order that humanity has developed over time by observing its interaction with the Sun, the Earth, and other geo forces. Earth, as a planet in the solar system, rotates on its own axis while revolving around the Sun, thereby forming day and night and the four seasons. On this basis, cultural institutions have blossomed in human civilization: marriage, family, metropolis, law, democracy, and modern science, to name just a few. Liu Cixin writes about the vulnerability of this civilization, showing that even during the preparational phase of the Wandering Earth Project, human marriage and the family system had already been in a state of utter disarray. The following conversation between the narrator's father and his wife is an interesting example:

> He paused, suddenly remembering something. "Oh, I forgot to tell you—I've fallen in love with Stella Li. I want to move out to be with her."
>
> "Who is she?" My mother asked calmly.
>
> "My primary school teacher," I answered for him. I had started secondary school two years ago and had no idea how my father knew Ms. Stella. Maybe they had met at my graduation ceremony?
>
> "Then go," said my mother.
>
> "I'm sure I'll grow tired of her soon enough. I'll come back then. Is that okay by you?"
>
> "If you want to, certainly." Her voice was as calm and even as the frozen sea. But a moment later, she bubbled with excitement. "Oh, that one is beautiful! It must have a holographic diffractor inside!" She pointed to a firework blossoming in the night sky, genuinely moved by its beauty. (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 17-18)[3]

Two months later, the narrator's father comes back to his family. His mother feels neither happy nor unhappy about the incident, as if nothing happened. It seems

3   Translations of Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" are by Ken Liu, Elizabeth Hanlon, Zac Haluza, Adam Lanphier, and Holger Nahm.

that the family is no longer a crucial cornerstone in society but rather something that can be discarded at any time. The explanation provided is that in this era, the threat of death and the desire to survive overwhelm everything else. The narrator says: "The hyper-focus gradually changed the essence of human psychology and spirituality. Humans paid scant attention to affairs of the heart, like a gambler taking a swig of water, unable to tear his eyes from the roulette wheel" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 18). We recall that the Confucian ethical system of "family" is an imitation of the cosmic order. The changes in celestial bodies serve as a wake-up call to humans: the assumed cosmic order is nothing more than a brief balance in a tiny part of the vast universe, and the delicately crafted notion of "family" is merely a bubble atop this momentary equilibrium. Realizing the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of humanity, concepts like "family" and "marriage" may be the first among those to lose their significance. Certainly, humans still live through emotions, especially in times of crisis. However, seeking emotions has turned into momentary pleasure, and maintaining love through family and marriage and developing them into part of a harmonious society is no longer valued by humankind. They must step out of this illusory ethical framework and confront the vast and indifferent universe. This may lead to the development of a new ethical framework for the posthuman era—ethics that arise from posthumans living under pressure in the cosmos.

Liu Cixin articulates well the entanglements of old ethics in the process of becoming posthuman, a process that is both compelling and eagerly embraced. On the one hand, posthumans establish the United Government and formulate a new social order with the goal of escaping the solar system and reaching Proxima Centauri. On the other hand, the establishment and maintenance of this new order, centered around "leaving family," are destined to be challenging given people's deeply ingrained attachment to the "family." The Earth is severely damaged during the process by the immense gravity of Jupiter and the rocks from the asteroid belt, and people realize that their "family" no longer exists. They turn against the United Government. Everybody suspects that the helium flash of the Sun is nothing more than a political conspiracy and rushes into the headquarters of the United Government, killing officials in sight. People fervently wish that the helium flash of the Sun is a lie, so they can still hope to return to the "family." The solar system, after all, is where their ancestor built the "family" that they believed would prosper forever.

However, the helium flash eventually exposes the fragility of the constructed "family" and makes it necessary for humans to step out of it to discover the vast universe. At the beginning of the story, the narration has highlighted the gap be-

tween humanity and the universe, stating:

> After the first helium flash, as heavy elements re-accumulated in the Sun's core, further runaway nuclear explosions would occur repeatedly for a period of time. While this period represented only a brief phase of stellar evolution, it might last thousands of times longer than all of human history. (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 9)

Now the people who ignore the warnings are paying the price. The interactions of celestial bodies no longer sustain the "family" as claimed by sages, but they instead reveal a multifaceted and profound structure for human survival that depends not on staying but on leaving the family.

"The Wandering Earth" ends with a remarkable scene. When several thousand government officials are brought outside and executed by the rebel forces, the outdoors are so incredibly cold that the dead bodies freeze before they fall. They stand in this way, witnessing the helium flash, even though none can see it. In that moment, they are minuscule. While standing firm until the end, they seem as rational, cold, and sublime as the universe itself. This scene of the standing corpses and the stunned rebels is both desolate and haunting, but it also speaks eloquently about the state of being posthuman. Who are they? Are they the individuals, like the narrator himself, who have never experienced the alternation of day and night yet yearn for the "family" set in that time and space? Or are they those government officials who make the Wandering Earth Project and hold onto "leaving family" until the very end? Or perhaps posthumans are the descendants adrift in space, having lost any knowledge of what the solar system looks like. One can say that there has never been a clear boundary between humans and posthumans. For Liu Cixin, the transformation into posthuman is never a linear evolution; this process is filled with hesitation and negotiation, as powerfully illustrated by the concluding chaotic scene—a victorious rebellion, an erupting helium flash, a collection of posthumans unsure about themselves. They may soon perish in wandering, or they may arrive at the Centaurus constellation and establish a new "family." But what will the new "family" be like? To what extent will it encompass the high-entropy state of the universe? Liu Cixin does not provide a clear answer, but there might not be an available answer for him to give.

Ethical Restraints

"Advance, stop at nothing to advance!" This is a phrase repeatedly uttered by

Thomas Wade—the chief of PIA (PDC Strategic Intelligence Agency) in *Death's End*. With powerful, possibly illegal and immoral means, Wade first sends Yun Tianming's brain out of the solar system and then develops curvature propulsion spaceships, both of which become pivotal in offering hope to humanity for escaping the solar system and surviving the strike from the dark universe. We see this plot design as Liu Cixin's loudest expression of "leaving family" throughout a series of works that we have discussed above. However, Wade is not a positive character in the fiction in a conventional sense. He employs any means necessary to achieve his goals to the extent that he can be considered a typical representative of social Darwinism, which is a characteristic of Liu Cixin criticized by Poetzsch and a few other scholars. Now that "leaving family" encompasses more than breaking traditional constraints and exploring the high-entropy universe, it also involves the likelihood of betraying conventional human ethical and moral values in many ways. Clearly, anything, including human lives, cannot stand in the way of advancement when one reads the statement by Thomas Wade literally or figuratively. In Liu Cixin's mind, SF is an arena where the intensities of the transition to posthuman and the ethical and moral resistance can contend with each other. In "Beyond Narcissism," Liu Cixin says,

> As has been the case with other readers and authors of science fiction, something almost unimaginable occurred to me as I developed an ever-deeper attachment to the heart and soul of the genre. My moral concepts and my value system began suddenly to waver, which was a very peculiar experience indeed. At this point, my SF writing has entered its third stage, I call this my social experimentation stage. In it, I am focusing my efforts on depicting the effects of extreme situations on human behavior and social systems. (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 29)

As the most splendid work produced in this third stage, *The Three-Body Trilogy* exemplifies the experiment of testing the limits of how much human ethics and morality can endure in the process of "leaving family" and embracing posthumanism, or conversely. It is worth noting that Liu Cixin does not place "leaving family" and human ethics and morality at opposite extremes, despite the significant conflict and tension between them. It is not his position that humanity represents ethics and morality, and posthumans are devoid of them. Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin's text should be read as nonbinary, saying, "Liu Cixin enlivens romanticism and humanism as much as Social Darwinism and technologism in the apathetic dark uni-

verse of posthumanism" (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 288). Despite this fair and nuanced reading of Liu Cixin, we believe that it is precisely the tension between the impulse of "leaving family" and the power of human ethics and morals that shape the ambiguous and difficult process of becoming posthuman.

In the following text, this paper will discuss human ethics and morality as another significant intensity in Liu Cixin's posthuman assemblage by reading *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*. First, we contend that ethical values are primarily manifested in the beauty and order of "family," as demonstrated in *The Dark Forest*. At the start of *The Dark Forest*, while the Trisolaran invading fleet is en route to the Earth, they deadlock the Earth's scientific progress using a pair of sophons—protons manipulated to exist in higher-dimension space. In this situation, the United Government comes up with the Wallfacer Project. The logic behind it lies in the acknowledgment that the presence of the sophons renders all human action and communication completely visible to the Trisolarans. Only human thoughts remain imperceptible to them. To counter the crisis, four Wallfacer candidates from around the world are selected to formulate plans within their minds. The government grants them significant authority to allocate resources, enabling them to put their plan into action. Their actions must be carried out in camouflage and in misdirection, ensuring that the true intentions remain concealed from the enemy until the very end. Luo Ji is one of the Wallfacers.

In the beginning, Luo Ji does not truly discharge his duties. Instead, he uses his privileges to find his ideal girl by the name of Zhuang Yan and leads a blissfully comfortable family life in a picturesque estate in northern Europe. During the tranquil days, not only has Luo Ji himself forgotten about the threat posed by the Trisolarans, but even the Trisolaran civilization also ceases its pursuit of Luo Ji. Zhuang Yan, an art student from an affluent background, is a beautiful woman who seems to have fulfilled the fantasy of an ideal family life that most Chinese men have dreamed of. Some readers criticize Liu Cixin for the male-centric perspective evident in this narrative segment. Such criticism might be warranted, but we believe that this narrative is more of an appropriation of the traditional Chinese concept of "family." Zhuang Yan is depicted in her role not so much because she is the perfect mate but rather because she embodies the ideal woman in traditional Chinese culture of the "family," which means, for a man at least, tranquility, order, and more importantly, the bliss of companionship of a self-sacrificing woman. By appropriating such a connotation of "family," Liu Cixin conveys the message that it is his family, with Zhuang Yan in it, that stands in the way of his assigned mission.

Here human ethical values represented by the concept of "family" become the

greatest obstacle to leaving it. On one end of the balance is Zhang Yan and their picturesque family life; on the other end are the cold-blooded plans of the other three Wallfacers, especially the one designed by Manuel Rey Diaz at the cost of the lives of all humanity. For a long period of time, Luo Ji immerses himself in family life and makes no moves against the Trisolarans. Liu Cixin's slow-paced narration about Luo Ji's storyline suggests that the ethical value of the "family" is the counteracting force to "leaving family." Humans' longing for "family" and the contradiction between this affection and leaving it behind find their greatest manifestation in the characterization of Luo Ji.

However, Zhuang Yan herself is a complex character. Her dedication is directed toward Luo Ji not only as a man but also as a Wallfacer. She comes to him as part of the Wallfacer Project, with the purpose of helping him find a way to depart from his comfort zone. She is a symbol of "the family" but also a reason for Luo Ji's departure from it. When Zhuang Yan intentionally leaves to force Luo Ji to act, Luo Ji starts to focus on the Wallfacer Project, primarily motivated by the thoughts of reuniting with her and their child. He finally becomes the only successful Wallfacer. Zhuang Yan and the family give him strength, helping him calm his mind and allowing him to glimpse the mysteries of the universe on the ice lake. With her support, he becomes a powerful Swordholder, engaging in decades of silent confrontation with the Trisolarans.

The story of Zhang Beihai sees Liu Cixin's strategic use of the father in the Chinese family to portray the tension between ethics and "leaving family." As a commander of the Earth fleet, Zhang Beihai is convinced of humanity's inevitable defeat and sees escapism as the only solution. For him, escapism is not a sign of weakness but an exploration of other parts of the universe in search of new means for the survival of humanity. This leads to careful planning of his escape. He facilitates the development of fusion drive spaceships, enters hibernation, and arrives at the end of the Crisis Era. Ultimately, he manages to steal a spaceship and embarks on a journey into space. Zhang Beihai's departure coincides with the death of his father, a high-ranking government official. At first glance, the timing seems to imply that the explorer is born at the death of the father because they cannot coexist in the same space of the family. However, Zhang Beihai's father is not portrayed as the usual figure of authority and constraint in the family. He is experienced and wise, with whom Zhang Beihai is eager to discuss current affairs. Reticent at times, he urges his son to see the path ahead and to make choices on his own. The father stands as an indispensable part of the family, as does the ideal wife. When Zhang Beihai finally escapes into space, he murmurs to himself, "Dad, I've taken the first

step" (Liu, *The Dark Forest*, 217). Here bidding a farewell to the father is being transformed into a spiritual force, propelling the journey of "leaving family."

Liu Cixin also engages in a discussion on the conflict between "leaving family" and the common human ethics and morality informed by the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (humaneness). In *Analects*, when one of his disciples, Fan Chi, asks about humaneness (*ren*; translated by James Legge as "benevolence"), Confucius responds: "It is to love all men." In the same chapter, when another disciple, Yan Yuan, inquiries about humaneness (*ren*; translated by James Legge as "perfect virtue"), Confucius answers: "To subdue one's self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue."[4] From the dialogue between Fan Chi and Confucius, we learn that humaneness primarily represents a quality of compassion and empathy toward others. The second dialogue, however, reveals a more intricate interpretation of humaneness in Confucianism. It showcases the inseparability of virtue and rite, both belonging to a larger realm where the Way dominates. Herbert Fingarette argues in his study of Confucianism that for men, there is only one way to follow. Other than the Way, men who pursue perfect virtues have no other choices. He writes: "Therefore the central moral issue for Confucius is not the responsibility of a man for deeds he has by his own free will chose to perform, but the factual questions of whether a man is properly taught the Way and whether he has the desire to learn diligently" (Fingarette 35). Fingarette calls it "a Way without a crossroads" (Fingarette 36). If we say that Liu Cixin's "leaving family" is a critique of the Confucian concept of "family," his general reassessment of common ethics and morality is also a critique of Confucius' the Way, specifically its uncompromising advocacy of compassion and love for humanity themselves.

The tension between posthumanism and common human morality is primarily represented through the characterization of Thomas Wade and Cheng Xin in *Death's End*. If we posit that Thomas Wade represents the strongest voice of "leaving family," then Cheng Xin's presence serves as a moral exemplar in stark contrast to Wade. In many scenes, Liu Cixin places her and Wade at the two poles of morality, inviting readers to judge their actions. For example, in PIA's Staircase Program, Cheng Xin faces mostly technical challenges, and the only ethical challenge for her is sending a terminally ill person into space. In contrast, Wade not only engineers the terminal illness of one of his subordinates but also exploits Yun Tianming's love for Cheng Xin by persuading him to willingly send his own brain into space. By doing so, Wade effectively takes advantage of two vulnerable individuals to serve

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4   Translations of *Analects* are by James Legge. Cited from: https://ctext.org/analects/yan-yuan.

his own self-interest. The reader will likely take a sympathetic position toward Cheng Xin, who expresses guilt and remorse, but the same reader may feel repulsed by Wade's ruthlessness even though his decision ultimately enables the nearly impossible mission to succeed. Another example lies in their attitudes and actions regarding the development of curvature propulsion spaceships. For Wade, the only way out is to embark on the journey away from "family" by riding the curvature propulsion spaceships, so he resolutely pushes the research to its final stages. However, given the risk that operating the curvature drive spaceship could expose Earth to more advanced civilizations, Cheng Xin, standing on the moral high ground, ultimately prevents its mass production. Her decision ends the "leaving family" journey and leads to the demise of the entire humanity.

Both scenarios suggest that Cheng Xin represents the one with perfect virtue, who takes humanity and humaneness as a Way without crossroads, but Wade shows a potential for developing such a crossroads. Between following the Way or becoming an immoral man, Wade chooses to follow his own posthuman moral values. This is because human morality cannot withstand the process of "leaving family," as leaving is the beginning of posthumanism. However, we find that Liu Cixin's discourse on morality and "leaving family" as embodied by Cheng Xin is far more ambivalent and nuanced than a simple summarization. Throughout the story, the relationship between Cheng Xin and Wade is more cooperative than competitive. In both the Staircase Program and the Light-Speed Spaceship Plan, it is the cooperation between Cheng Xin and Wade that produces key advancements. Even Cheng Xin's successful election as the second Swordholder is attributed to Wade: Wade's amorality sparks Cheng Xin's moral consciousness, which shapes her decisions along the way. In a sense, the gradual implementation of "leaving family" in human society not only requires individuals like Wade who forge ahead regardless of moral constraints but also individuals like Cheng Xin who continually adapts and compromises.

During the journey of "leaving family," the influence of "family" does not completely vanish. First of all, it is Cheng Xin who eventually embarks on the journey of "leaving family" along with a few others to explore the high-entropy cosmos. Indeed, a new kind of posthuman ethics gradually emerges to replace common human morality. To be sure, Cheng Xin's unwavering commitment to the ethics of "family" persists to the last moment of the journey. When she comes out of her own miniuniverse, believing that doing so can assist the universe in resetting, returning to its initial state in higher dimensions, she takes the ethics of "family" to a new level, for this time her version of "family" not only refers to human civilization but

also to the universe as the "family" for all civilizations. Regardless of how trivial humanity is in the context of the universe and how human morality appears fragile and vulnerable against the challenges of survival, the journey of "leaving family" is already a performative act imprinted with human ethics and morality for future generations. Posthumanism that bears those imprints might just be a viable answer for them as they navigate the vast and uncertain universe of unknowns.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the posthuman in Liu Cixin's works refers not to the physically transformed humans but to a group of people who choose to "leave family." We argue that Liu Cixin's portrayal of posthumans is primarily driven by his understanding of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe, his admiration of the high-entropic universe, and his criticism of humanity's eagerness to cling to systems of "family" for solace and security. This formation, combined with the constraints of human ethical and moral values, creates a distinctive assemblage of posthumanism in the new wave of Chinese SF.

By analyzing *China 2185*, *Supernova Era*, "The Wandering Earth," and *The Three-Body Trilogy*, this paper shows how Liu Cixin continuously challenges the Confucian concept of "family"—those constructed, anthropocentric orders—while pursuing the decentralized and defamilialized relationships between humanity and nature. The pursuit is bold and nonteleological and stretches the limits of imagination yet remains intricately interwoven with ethics and morality, as demonstrated in many of his works. However, in his later works, such as *The Three-Body Trilogy*, although the tension between "leaving family" and human ethics and morality becomes more pronounced, a subtle equilibrium is achieved: ethics and morality have become indispensable parts of Liu Cixin's vision of posthumanism, simultaneously complicating and facilitating the process of "leaving family."

In a sense, Liu Cixin's writing is an experiment in "leaving family" and venturing into the high-entropic universe. This experiment has a starting place but no endpoint. In the process of leaving and departure, multiple intensities—such as the allure of the high-entropic universe, as well as ethical and moral retreats and progress—have contributed to and will continue to shape the assemblage of becoming posthuman, manifesting in his narratives as critical questions to be addressed. We have good reasons to believe that Liu Cixin will continue exploring the emerging questions in his future writings, speculating on the potential destinations of posthumans in the cosmos, the specific form they might take and the extent to which a new order could be reconstructed and how it would compare to existing human

civilizations because these questions not only bear increasing relevance in our era of artificial intelligence, which fuels the decentralized and defamilialized journey of exploration but also offer insights into ecological challenges humanity faces as a whole. From this perspective, we can say that Liu Cixin's narratives of "leaving family," which bridges contemporary Chinese SF and Western critical posthumanism, is a significant contribution to the broader development of posthumanist theory.

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