

Mother, Desire, and Oppression: Reading Chinese Modernization in Han Song's *Tuomu*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse the theme of mother-son incest in a contemporary Chinese science fiction story "Cutting Ties with Mothers (*Tuomu*)" by Han Song (b. 1965), one of the giants of contemporary Chinese science fiction. With a gendered perspective, I decode implications behind the mother-son incest in the story. I argue this theme serves as a gender metaphor to delineate the power contestation between a male self and a feminized Chinese state. It also sheds light on a male individual's mental dilemma in contemporary Chinese modernization.

KEY WORDS: mother-son incest, Chinese modernization, Chinese science fiction, Han Song, *Tuo mu*

Introduction

Chinese science fiction has long been read as a literary response to modernization. In *Fin-de-siècle Splendour: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing fiction, 1849-1911*, David Wang detects an ardent desire for modernization and nation-building in late nineteenth-century Chinese science fiction. Similarly, Nathaniel Isaacson's *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* points out the emergence of Chinese science fiction in the late nineteenth-century as representing China's desire for modernization and globalization. Likewise, contemporary Chinese science fiction is also well situated in China's twenty-first-century modernization.¹ As Mingwei Song notes, contemporary Chinese science fiction has gained worldwide attention in the past five years, due in large part to the success of the English translation of *The Three-Body Problem (Santi)* written by Liu Cixin (1963-) in 2015.

Recent heightened interest in contemporary Chinese science fiction requires further research into not only detailed text analyses, but into

1. Here, I follow Mingwei Song to define contemporary Chinese science fiction as Chinese science fiction produced after 1989. For more details about this definition, please refer to Song, Mingwei. "After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction." *China Perspectives*, vol. 2015, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7 – 13, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6618>.

underlying expressions of modernity as coded in texts. However, gender seems to be occluded from the broader framework of discourse on Chinese modernization, a phenomenon conflicting with modern Chinese feminist literary criticism. As feminist researchers Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua contend, gender representations in modern Chinese literature constitute an essential element of the rhetoric of modernity. In her *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (1991), Rey Chow further notes that a writer's gender experience leads to unique interpretation of modernity in modern Chinese literature.

Thus, there is a need for further analyses of Chinese science fiction literature focusing on intertwinement between gender representations in literature considering Chinese modernization. My reading of Han Song's science fiction will narrow this research gap. As a dominating figure of contemporary Chinese science fiction, Han Song is known for his unique writing style. His contemporary Jia Liyuan (b.1983) notes that his writing style, "characterized by its absurdly dark and violently bloody content that is often intentionally obscure and stomach-turning, has baffled fans" (103). The story *Tuomu* is no exception, with its focus on sexual obscurity of mother-son incest along with its rich subtextual political implications.

I will take the theme of mother-son incest as a thread in guiding my analysis through *Tuomu*. In reading *Tuomu*, I pay special attention to gender representations in the story, including characters' gender identities and more importantly, gender symbols. I outline three mother representations in the story. The three mother representations include human mothers of male characters, the state mother (the Chinese state that represents itself as the mother of all Chinese), and mother nature.

I argue that these three mothers are analogous to three specific aspects of individual modern Chinese life: the private, political/social, and mental. Building on metaphorical meanings behind these three mother-images, I delineate the intertwinement of the three mothers, arguing that the Chinese state chooses human mothers as in-home political agents to monitor their sons' behaviours via a surveillance system. In doing so, the Chinese state ensures its governance over individuals. The Chinese state also exploits mother nature for wealth and power. Building on wealth, the Chinese state

realizes absolute authority, thus representing itself as the mother of all.

Through an intertwinement of the three mothers, I show Han Song's exploration in this story of individualism, modern technology, and the history of Chinese modernization. In doing so, I decipher Han Song's interpretation of modernity and more importantly, his gendered views in such an interpretation. Taking *Tuomu* as a significant example, I demonstrate the critical importance of contemporary Chinese science fiction, not only as a relatively young genre in the landscape of Chinese literature, but also as social critique of and reflection on China's reality, both past and present.

Human Mother: The Ambivalent Mother-Son Incest in *Tuomu*

First published in 2018, *Tuomu* envisions a social movement in a fictional China at an unknown time when people, particularly adult men, publicly disassociate relationships with their mothers. The movement starts subsequent social unrest, attracting the attention of Chinese authorities. Soon an organization (*zuzhi*) is established to crack down on the movement.

The story is narrated from a first-person narrative, and the protagonist 'I' is a member of the organisation responsible for investigating the movement. Through his investigation, the protagonist probes deeply into the psychological motivation behind Chinese men's estrangement from their mothers. He obtains a recording of an underground convention wherein members of the movement explain their ambivalent feelings towards their mothers:

Isn't that absurd to be emotionally attached to mothers? It feels just as disgusting as if to gulp a large bucket of petroleum gas. After all, we are all a lump of meat coming from that pathetic organ—vagina. When I grow up and think about how I was once pushed out of there, I feel so ashamed that I want to dig up a hole on the ground and bury myself into it," said a key member in the recording.

Some men, however, found their mother's used sanitary towels with smelly bloodstains in the bathroom trash bins.

To some boys, however, their mother was also their first woman. When they turned around fourteen or fifteen, they came back home, feeling frustrated for having difficulties with girls at this age for the first time. They then took their mother as a sexual alternative to female peers and tried to comfort themselves by touching her breasts (258-260).²

2. Unless otherwise specified, all English translations here are the author's.

Here, sons' desire for their mothers reminds us of the Oedipus complex, as proposed by Austrian psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. In his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2000), Freud defines the Oedipus complex, stating that, "falling in love with one parent and hating the other forms part of the permanent stock of psychic impulses" (85). He then theorizes this as the Oedipus complex, drawing inspiration from the Greek play *The Legend of Oedipus Rex*. However, sons' lasting obsession with mothers tends to conflict with a Freudian paradigm of mother-son incest, for Freud contends that this incestual desire arises during a young male's psychosexual development, ceasing once he reaches adulthood.

Another variation of the Oedipus complex is seen in explicitly misogynous feelings towards the mother figure, insomuch as sons develop a psychological terror of any sign of femininity, such as feminine sexual organs and feminine hygiene products. In the Freudian paradigm, an Oedipus complex results in a phallic conflict between father and son over the mother, as evidenced in Oedipus Rex murdering his father. In *Tuomu*, however, father representations merely serve as a shadowed existence in the story. What dominates the narrative, however, is the delicate balance between a son's obsession and detestation of his mother.

These variations on the Oedipus complex as found in *Tuomu* indicate how mother-son sexual relations differ from Freud's own textual diagnosis as neurosis. *Tuomu* suggests the Oedipus complex as a social construct, as is suggested by Western psychoanalytical feminist literary criticism. In her *Enforcing Oedipus: Freud and Dora* (1985), Madelon Sprengnether argues that, like gender, the Oedipus complex in literature can also be constructed through narrative. In *Class, Gender, and Family System: The Case of George Sand* (1985), Deutelbaum and Huff delve deeper into gender representations in the writing of George Sand. Although this analysis is not directly related to the Oedipus complex, it highlights interconnection between social context and an author's gender awareness. Social context influences an author's psychological development and later understanding of gender, which in turn shapes gender representations in an author's writing.

This point can be further tested in the following narration of *Tuomu*.

We are informed of sons' ambivalent feelings towards their mothers resulting from their gendered anxiety due the decline of manhood:

Masculinity is declining everywhere in the universe and male creatures across the milky way galaxy are de-evolving at a high speed. In short, this is an era when mothers enforce their thoughts on children and children are spoiled because their mothers dominate the family; thus, a generation of Chinese children grow up to be incompetent adults, failing at both work and life. Children secretly wish that someday they will punish this educator most severely and the easiest way to do so is to fuck her (267-272).

The Confucian concept of filial piety (*xiaoshun*) establishes the authority of parents over offspring. Since, in the story, manhood is declining across the universe, mothers displace fathers as respectable authority in a family. However, a dominating mother mentally suffocates her son, rendering him sexually incompetent, a sign of conventional masculinity, as shown earlier when a son takes his mother as sexual alternative to female peers. Driven by unsatisfied libidos, adult sons dump their sexual energies on their mothers as the cause of waning manhood, thus sexually violating their mothers, causing the Oedipus complex in the story.

By having sexual intercourse with the mother, an Oedipal son satisfies his needs for physical intimacy, which he cannot attain from other women, and this serves to temporarily relieve his mental distress towards his mother. I use the word 'temporarily,' as a son's sexual intercourse with his mother does not necessarily threaten his mother's superiority at home, and therefore does not ease ultimate resentment towards the mother. When this resentment reaches beyond the point where sexual relations with his mother can satisfy him, he openly dissociates from his mother, hoping to permanently sever sexual attachment to her, thereby re-boosting his masculinity.

The reoccurrence of declining manhood in the story evokes that of a real-world crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, wherein Chinese media and society call for greater focus on this urgent issue. As early as 2010, education expert Sun Yunxiao proposed the concept of 'boy crisis (*nanhai weiji*)' in his book *Saving Boys (Zhengjiu nanhai)*. The book illustrates a various range of challenges faced by modern Chinese

male youth, including academic inferiority to female peers, sexual disorientation, and declining health. The book also pinpoints overwhelming influence of a boy's mother as one of the key causes of this crisis.

A decade after the publication of *Saving Boys*, this concept of 'boy crisis' was escalated to a national concern. In 2020, Mr. Si Zefu (1958-) submitted a proposal addressing the issue of 'effeminate boys' to the Chinese constitutional convention People's Political Consultative Conference (*Quanguo zhengxie weiyuan*).³ The proposal aimed to build up the masculinity of feminized teens boys who wear make-up and exhibit feeble health and gentle personalities. According to Mr. Si, declining manhood is a national threat as feminized men are incapable of defending China on the battlefields (news.sina). Si's call for boosting masculinity received feedback from China's Education Ministry promising to cultivate male students' masculinity through the means of physical exercises (moe.gov).

Han Song then translates this ongoing social anxiety into the representation of Oedipal sons in *Tuomu*. Following Dr. Sun's statement, he locates dominating Chinese mothers as the locus of blame for waning masculinity in the story. However, for Han Song, the concept of manhood refers to more than merely gender and/or national security. Manhood also refers to something far more individualist and important—self-awareness. This following passage depicts the protagonist's appreciation of male sexual organs:

I walk into the toilet. Trembling, I pull out my penis and gently hold it with both hands, as if it accommodates my humble soul, which looks like a grasshopper. Indeed, a penis is a delightful thing. Like planets, photons, and quarks, it used to be a wide and universal existence. But now, it is intricately connected to the ambiguous fact of a mother, or more accurately, becomes a pitiful being living under her shadow (283-284).

Han Song likens the male genital organ, a symbol of manhood, to an individual's self-awareness. A mother, however, is represented as an authoritative being who suppresses the used-

3. Mr. Si Zefu serves as a member of the Thirteenth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (*Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi dishisanjie quanguo weiyuanhui*) (cppcc.gov.cn, 2020).

to-be powerful expression of manhood/selfhood. Thus, the Oedipus complex in the story can be further interpreted as a power contestation between a male self and a feminine authority at home.

Such a gendered individual/authority relationship has some antecedent in traditional Chinese literature. In one of his celebrated poems “Longing for Beauty (*Si meiren*),” Qu Yuan (340 – 278 BCE), an important person in traditional Chinese poetics, depicts an attractive young lady awaiting a man’s courtship. One possible interpretation of the poem is that the lady is a metaphor for Qu Yuan, himself, whereas the man is a metaphor for Qu’s lord. Through these analogies of gender, the poet translates a political relationship between him and his superior into a heterosexual one where, either consciously or subconsciously, he emotionally castrates himself in the face of a great power. Another reference can be found in late seventeenth-century Chinese literati writing, wherein a “*chen* (minister or subject) and *qie* (woman or concubine) were often juxtaposed to underscore their shared servile relationship to their respective ‘superiors’” (Huang 33).

Han Song, however, takes a further step in his story than do his predecessors to merge a gendered individual/authority relationship with the Confucian concept of filial piety, delineating the power structure of Chinese families. Notably, within Han Song’s gendered individual/authority analogy, the concept of individuality takes on a masculine form, which not only excludes womanhood, but sees it as its gendered opposite. Here, we are reminded of feminist researcher Veronica Hollinger’s contention that manhood in Western literature is often taken as “the universal expression of a homogeneous ‘human nature’” (126). The universalization of manhood as selfhood further explicates Han Song’s use of the Oedipus complex in his story, in that with this theme, a repressed (male) selfhood can be metaphorized and articulated via a form of male sexual dysfunction.

State Mother: The Gendered Family-State Structure in *Tuomu*

In earlier analyses, we have seen how a human mother acts as an authority at home, jeopardizing her son’s psychosexual development.

However, behind controlling mothers is a political agency that empowers human mothers, securing superiority over male individuals. As narration follows, the protagonist needs to submit the results of his investigation to his director. On his way to meeting with the organization, he sees a red flag:

I rest my gaze on a flag in front of the headquarters of the real-estate association. The flag hangs like a soft menstrual towel and occasionally, one of its corners gets furled up. It seems the flag has never been replaced or washed. It is drenched now like everything else, and its colour turns deep red. Spectators gather around to watch the flag being lowered while uniformed police stand next to police cars, closely scrutinizing the crowd (279-280).

Through simile, Han Song likens a flag to a feminine-hygiene product. The flag, judging by its red colour and the ceremony of flag-lowering, can be identified as the red national flag of The People's Republic of China a symbol of the Chinese state. If we relate this to a man's repulsive reaction to his mother's used menstrual pads, we can hear Han Song's mockery of the Chinese state. Through the analogy of Chinese state and feminine hygiene product, Han Song also merges representations of mother and state into one combined gender symbol, that of state mother (*zuguo muqin*), commonly used in Chinese political and cultural discourses.

Pan Xianghui attributes an emergence of the mother state in Chinese political discourses to surging Chinese nationalism in the late nineteenth century, when a semi-colonized China was represented as a suffering mother whose sanctity was violated by the West (Pan 2018). This nuanced association between a mother and the Chinese state is more explicitly explained in the following narration wherein the protagonist's organization propagates songs about motherhood.

All three hundred thousand loudspeakers around the landing site are turned on at the same time and start to play, one by one, songs dedicated to mothers. In the past decades, songwriters have produced many similar songs, the production of which is funded and promoted by the organisation:

“Goodbye, Mama, Goodbye, Mama. Bugles have been blown and rifles have been wiped clean.”

“You feed me with your sweet milk” (Han 298).

“Goodbye, Mama” comes from a real-world patriotic song under the title of “Goodbye for Now, Mama (*Zaijian ba, Mama*).” It describes a scenario wherein a soldier son bids farewell to his mother before leaving for the army. If we combine representations of the state mother with these lyrics, it is not difficult to decode duo-symbolic representations of ‘Mama’ here. The representation of ‘Mama’ refers to not only the singer’s mother who is seeing him off, but to a personified motherland he vows to defend. The song “Goodbye Mama” portrays a loving relationship between a caring mother and an obedient son, fashioning it after the needs of the Chinese state. Similarly, the second lyric describes the hard labours of motherhood. Together, the two songs eulogize maternity and by extension, show loyalty to the state mother, for which the organization finances songwriting.

With the symbol of state-mother, Han Song further evolves the individual-authority analogy into a gendered family-state power structure in his science fiction. Within this structure, the Chinese state empowers a human mother as a political agent at home, responsible for disciplining her sons. Building on a human mother’s authority at home, the Chinese state ensures its absolute authority over male individuals, representing itself as the mother of all Chinese. Such a family-state structure takes inspiration from, if not derives from, a Confucian classic *The Great Learning (Daxue)*:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons (trans Legge 310-311).

The Great Learning stipulates that the family constitutes a basic unit of a state. Similarly, in *Tuomu*, the Confucianist requirement of filial piety obliges men to obey their mother and follow the family-state social order in obeying the state mother. However, growing up under two mothers’ watch, men suffer from sexual incompetence and attempt to restore manhood via sexual violence towards their human mothers, causing the Oedipus complex in the story. When their longing for personal

freedom overwhelms sexual gratification with mothers, men launch a movement to dissociate from their human mothers, further overthrowing the gendered family-state structure that serves to feminize them. Indeed, the protagonists' director foresees impending peril in this movement:

Eventually, a family will collapse and lead to the destruction of a building that hosts many families, then following in domino effect, the destruction goes from one building to another, one community to another, one city to another. After that, work units will collapse and even organisations will disappear. The end of a state and the world will not be far away by then (268-269).

Thus, disassociating with one's mother represents the first step of an Oedipal son's long-awaited rebellion against his mother in a family, as well as against the Chinese state that builds on his mother's authority. The movement, therefore, is a conglomeration of many (male) individuals' efforts to overthrow the gendered family-state structure that has long been suffocating/effeminizing them. In order to maintain social order, the state mother invests in a machine to detect men who attempt to cut ties with their mothers:

Finally, the Chinese Academy of Sciences invents a machine to detect men who wish to dissociate with their mothers. Together with other relevant departments, our organization issues the machine and tier-by-tier, equips grass-roots units with this machine. The machine is an enhanced and portable brain electro-wave instrument, capable of detecting suspicious brain wave fingerprints within a hundred-meter diameter (257).

With the state mother's absolute authority, modern technology plays an essentially passive role in Oedipal boys' pursuit of liberty. Technological abuse, therefore, serves as one facet of the state mother's abuse of power. Through the representation of state mother, Han Song rethinks the impact of technological abuse in contemporary China. Such an exploration reoccurs in his science fiction, for instance, *Exorcism (Qumo)* (2017), *Subway (Ditie)* (2020) and *My Country Does Not Dream (Wode zuguo bu zuomeng)*"(2003).

In *Exorcism*, the Chinese state creates a superior artificial intelligence to reform its struggling medical system, cracking down

on backdoor business and bribery. However, as the AI develops self-consciousness, it creates illusions that make people believe they are in a war, manipulating them into mutual destruction. Similarly, in *Subway*, Han Song speculates that the Chinese subway can transform humans into mutated monsters. In *My Motherland Never Dreams*, Han Song envisions that Chinese authorities invent a medicine that forces people to sleep-work, creating an economic miracle.

Han Song's views of technology departs from that of his predecessors, such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Lu Xun (1881-1936). In *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (2017), Nathaniel Isaacson locates the birth of Chinese science fiction in the late nineteenth-century China, during a time of national and military crises due to Western semi-colonialism. Science fiction was introduced to China by Chinese thinker Liang Qichao as a means of both enlightening Chinese readers about Western material sciences and facilitating Chinese modernization. In other words, Liang Qichao associated the concept of Chinese modernity with the instrumental power of science and technology. In Isaacson's reading, Lu Xun also holds a similarly didactic view of science fiction.

Han Song, however, reconsiders the role of technology in contemporary China at a time when the traumatized national memory of late nineteenth-century Western semi-colonization seems to be fading away. What, then, will technological advancement bring to us? He gives his answer in *Tuomu*. In lieu of liberating humans, technology easily destroys the delicate balance between Chinese individuals and a modern government. This answer not only reveals Han Song's insight to technology but shows a different view of science fiction from that of Liang Qichao and Lu Xun. While the earlier two intellectuals view science fiction as an education tool, Han Song uses science fiction as a form of social critique on contemporary Chinese society and politics. With this new view, Han Song propels his social exploration in *Tuomu* to the next level, that of Chinese modernization.

Mother Nature: Rethinking Chinese Modernization after 1949 in *Tuomu*

I see these monstrously gigantic machines thrusting hard metal rods deep into Mother Earth's body and digging out treasures buried inside her, as if cutting open a woman's uterus. As a staff member, I have to carry Mother Earth's 'body parts' with me and tier-by-tier, present them to my supervisors like paying tribute to another mother (274-275).

It is not difficult to decode the victimized representation of mother nature here: powerless and vulnerable to the violence of both machines and her human children's economic exploitation. Through the analogy of Earth or nature as a mother, Han Song introduces a third mother representation into the story, delineating the intertwining of three mothers: human mother (an Oedipal son's biological mother), state mother, and mother nature. The state mother, exemplified by the protagonist's organization, exploits mother nature for wealth and reinforces her power. Mother nature, therefore, becomes victim to the state mother's dictatorship. With absolute authority, the state mother chooses human mothers to propagate the state's ideology at home and monitor oedipal sons.

As I stated earlier, the three mothers represent multiple aspects of a modern Chinese (male) individual's life: the private, political/social, and mental. The Oedipus complex acts, as a sexual medium, to connect the three aspects together and, through this complex, Han Song displays how humanity is alienated in contemporary Chinese modernization. This alienation can be better understood in his own research *Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Chinese Modernization* (2013).

In this paper, Han Song historicizes the development of Chinese science fiction in parallel with Chinese modernization from the late nineteenth century to contemporary times. He confirms a positive correlation between Chinese modernization and Chinese science fiction. What is worth noticing, however, is how he perceives the concept of modernization as Westernized, contending that "science, technology, and modernization are not characteristic of Chinese culture. They are like alien entities. If we buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress" (20).

This explains an intentional obscurity in Han Song's writing, as such descriptions of abnormality/monstrosity in literature indicate China's painful efforts to domesticate something extrinsic to its own culture—modernization. Science fiction thus becomes a reflective mirror by which to pinpoint certain problematic aspects of Chinese modernization from the late nineteenth century through today. Thus, the intentional obscurity (in *Tuomu*'s case an Oedipus complex) in Han Song's science fiction symbolizes his revisiting of the history of Chinese modernization, especially after 1949. This can be further evidenced in the following narration of *Tuomu*, wherein the protagonist's director likens men who disassociate with their mothers to mental illness patients in Mao-era China:

It reminds us of the mental illness that permeated in China from the 1950s to 1960s. This illness resulted from the interplay of multiple factors, including genes, famine and other environmental factors (267).

The famine here can be identified as the Great Chinese Famine (*Sannian jihuang*) from 1958 to 1962. In his detailed account of this history, Frank Dikötter attributes the famine to the Great Leap Forward (*Da yue jin*) launched by Mao Zedong (1893 –1976). The movement departed from Mao's expectations for modernizing China's economy and overtaking Western competitors, resulting in chaos for the country, as millions of rural residents were robbed of their property, herded together in giant communes which heralded the advent of communism.

Mao's movement was not only an economic disaster, but more importantly, an ecological crisis. Before the Great Leap Forward, as part of the Anti-Rightist (*Fan youqing*) movement, "hundreds of thousands of China's most distinguished scholars and scientists were criticized, harshly punished, ostracized, and silenced" (Shapiro 21). Without scientific and professional insight, the Great Leap Forward movement mobilized Mao's political philosophy advocating that humans must conquer nature (*Ren ding sheng tian*), altering "the earth's processes beyond nature's ability to recover" (65).

Here, Han Song writes his reflections upon the history of Mao-era

modernization as a form of abnormality, as indeed a mental disorder. More importantly, however, through the analogy between Oedipal sons and mental disorder patients in the 1960s, Han Song reveals the haunting effect of Mao's political trauma on contemporary China's modernization. Although China began to privatize its economy in 1978, centralized authority in Mao's time was strengthened and reinforced, a representation of state mother in *Tuomu*.

The state mother deprives men of their 'property' (self-awareness) and using a human mother's sexual appeal, lures them into a great new commune, as the gendered family-state power structure. With machines, the state mother also cuts off men's natural connections to their genuine mother—mother nature, such that a motherless son is emotionally attached to his 'pseudo' mothers—the state and human mothers. Living under the shadows of two mothers, however, sons must endure more mental torment than in Mao's era, which provokes the protagonist's director to make such an analogy.

Thus, behind the victimized image of mother nature is Han Song's essential question about China's modernization trajectory after 1949, wherein a centralized political system promotes unsustainable economic development at the expense of environment damage. There are, however, some efforts to resolve China's ongoing environmental crisis. In 2022, China's current president Xi Jinping (1953-) called for a shift from a resource-driven mode (*ziyuan qudong*) to an innovation-driven development (*chuangxin qudong*) approach (www.gov.cn). Within this new mode, Xi highlights the power of science and technological innovation to drive an economy, echoing an earlier national policy of invigorating China through science and education (*kejiao xingguo*) initiated in 1995. Both policies aim to unleash Chinese peoples' creativity and increase the sustainability of China's modernization mode.

Han Song, however, remains very sceptical about China's ability to make such a transition. The intertwining between mother nature and state mother shows that China cannot transform its development mode without decentralizing its authority first, something that grows apparent through Mao-era history of China's modernization. Such scepticism is more explicitly expressed in his non-fictional

writing *The Imagination Manifesto* (*Xiangxiangli xuanyan*) (2000).

In this anthology, Han Song explores the entanglement of creativity, imagination, and technological innovation. He points out that despite the four great inventions (*sida faming*) of pre-modern China, the Chinese contribute much less than the West to modern technologies. He then attributes the stagnation of modern Chinese technology to the Chinese nation's long-standing dictatorial regimes since the imperial era. After the Communist Party won in 1949, the dictatorship was renewed in the name of the people:

It is said that the right half of the brain oversees the imagination. However, in the 1950s, the Chinese people were famous for their anti-rightist attitudes. The movement for many years resulted in many of them still being afraid to think freely. In this sense, our 'brain disability' is not congenital, but results from a frontal lobotomy surgery (15).

As we see in Dikötter's historical account, the Anti-Rightist campaign began with Mao's attempt to democratize China with The Hundred Flower Campaign (*Baihua qifang*). However, the movement backfired into a question about the legitimacy of the Party itself. Mao thus called those scientists and researchers 'rightists,' putting Deng Xiaoping (1904 – 1997) in charge of the Anti-Rightist campaign, which then led to the Great Chinese Famine.

Like the description of mental illness in *Tuomu*, the 'brain disability' (*naocan*) here is Han Song's characteristic portrayal of abnormality in writing via a metaphorized expression of surgical removal, coining Han Song's depiction of political oppression in Mao's era. This political metaphor is later transformed into gender representations of Oedipal sons in *Tuomu*, whose manhood/self-awareness is emotionally castrated first by their human mothers, and further by the state mother.

Mao's sought-after political silence comes at the price of not only repressed freedom of speech in his time, but of restricted creativity in following generations. The Chinese state's political intervention in Chinese scientific and technological innovation continues into contemporary times. A 2014 study points out that despite recent technological breakthrough

in China, “China’s rise in science also faces serious difficulties, partly attributable to its rigid, top-down administrative system, with allegations of scientific misconduct trending upward” (Xie and Zhang and Lai 9437).

Given the influence of Mao’s rule on China today, Han Song has reasonable doubts concerning China’s switch to an innovation-driven development mode. This can be further evidenced in the protagonist’s emotional response to the Chinese real-estate industry:

It turns out we are living in such an expensive city, where a single square meter costs tens of thousands of yuan. Is this how we should buy and sell mother (nature)’s organs? Real estate developers make me realize how shameless and nasty humans are, because they never create new values; instead, they simply buy lands, transform them, and sell them. Ironically, however, when I look at those new buildings, I marvel at their design and craftsmanship. Like IFV-conceived babies, the new buildings seem to be constructed overnight on barren lands, and in such an exquisite and unified manner, perfectly match the operation of this huge machine (278).

The Chinese real-estate industry in the story exemplifies the country’s resource-driven development model, in that while driving the economy, it poses massive challenges to environmental protection. A 2021 study outlines environmental pollution caused by the real-estate industry, including non-renewable resource consumption and air pollution (Gong and Kong). China’s unsustainable development aside, the protagonist’s mixed feelings toward construction projects require special attention. Here, his ambivalence results from an identity conundrum. On the one hand, he sympathizes with mother nature and disapproves of the state mother’s exploitation of natural resources. However, living under the state mother’s governance, he identifies himself as a member of the official organization and, furthermore, the state mother. Thus, he takes pride in the newly built skyscrapers as a symbol of China’s state-managed modernization. To put it simply, the protagonist faces a conundrum wherein he must choose between the two mothers: is he the son of mother nature or the state mother?

Through the protagonist’s identity crisis in the story, Han Song blames an authoritarian Chinese state for China’s unsustainable mode

of development. This crisis also projects a broader dilemma onto Chinese modernization; namely, how does an individual self-situate in Chinese modernization? If he politically identifies with the Chinese state, then he must be ready for emotional castration first at home, followed by the gendered family-state structure castration, ready to be a part of the big machine that is state mother. If he refuses, with his connection to mother nature gone, he has nowhere else to be. Thus, contemporary Chinese modernization eventually turns modern Chinese (male) individuals into monsters who sexually engage with their mothers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analyse Han Song's science fiction story *Tuomu* wherein adult men are sexually attracted to yet psychologically detest their mothers. Later, men launch a movement to dissociate with their mothers, known as cutting ties with mothers (*tuomu*). With modern Chinese feminist literary critique, I contextualize the story in the broader framework of Chinese modernization, probing deeply into political and gendered implications behind the mother-son relationship in the story. Through my analyses, I identify three mother representations in the story: mother as an authority at home, the Chinese state, and mother nature. I then delineate the three mothers' entanglement with men in the story.

My analysis begins with men's relationship with human mothers in the story. I argue that the ambivalent mother-son incest symbolizes a power contestation between a male individual and his authoritarian human mother at home. A powerful mother renders a son sexually incompetent with female peers. Thus, a sexually unsatisfied son must turn to his mother for physical comfort and obey her at home. The son detests his mother's absolute authority at home and wishes to overthrow it. Therefore, he launches the movement.

Within this power struggle, I point out a gender analogy from traditional Chinese literature to make an analogy between individual-authority relationships and heterosexual ones, wherein less powerful individuals are feminized by more powerful authority figures. Han

Song merges this analogy of Confucian obligations of filial piety with the ambivalent mother-son incest in the story. In doing so, he equalizes selfhood with manhood and authority with femininity.

Behind the controlling human mother is a more powerful being—the Chinese state. By empowering a human mother at home, the Chinese state further controls (male) individuals. Through entanglement between two mothers, Han Song further evolves ambivalent mother-son incest into a gendered family-state power structure, which stems from Confucian family-state social order. Following this order, the Chinese state establishes its absolute authority over male individuals and glorifies itself as the mother of all Chinese men. In face of the *tuomu* movement, the state mother uses modern technology to monitor men and to stop social unrest. From here, Han Song rethinks the impacts of technological abuse to (male) individuals in twenty-first-century China.

With machines, the state mother exploits mother nature for wealth, reinforcing its political power and estranging Oedipal sons from their genuine mother—mother nature. Through the entanglement of state mother and mother nature in the story, Han Song contends that China cannot realize sustainable development without first challenging the state mother's dictatorship. He then exemplifies his point via a historical analogy that associates men in his story with mental illness patients in Mao Zedong's time. Through this analogy, Han Song revisits political campaigns in Mao's time, including the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Anti-Rightist movement. This historical analogy also allows Han Song to illustrate Mao's political legacy, that of a centralized authority, to contemporary China, exemplified by the state mother in his story.

Living under the double oppression of human mothers and the state mother, men experience a conundrum. With their connections to mother nature gone, they must turn to their human mother and, further, to the state mother for maternal love. However, the state mother's dictatorship mentally castrates them, driving them away from the state mother by first dissociating with human mothers. As a result, they are now left

motherless. Behind the metaphorized motherless description is Han Song's insight into modern Chinese (male) individuals' mental dilemma wherein a male-self loses himself in contemporary Chinese modernization.

Through my analysis, I show how Han Song's interpretation of Chinese modernity differs from that of his predecessor Liang Qichao, who associates Chinese modernity with the instrumental power of technology in science fiction. Nor does Han Song's view of science fiction agree with that of Lu Xun, who sees science fiction as an educational tool. In contrast, Han Song introduces an individualist discourse to his writing, transforming modernity rhetoric in his science fiction into a literary dialogue between a male self and Chinese modernization after 1949.

Tuomu exemplifies such a dialogue. By extension, science fiction becomes a medium by which to articulate Han Song's social exploration of Chinese modernization. However, Han Song's gender views seem less modern than his understanding of modernity, in that his views rather oscillate back to a gender tradition in pre-modern Chinese literature wherein a power struggle is metaphorized into a gender struggle. More importantly, the universalization of selfhood as manhood in Han Song's science fiction sees a potential patriarchal discourse about femininity and technology, wherein femininity is not only excluded from the concept of self but impedes the male self from pursuing liberty via technological abuse.

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