

Identity, Reality, and Anthropocentrism in Cixin Liu’s *The Three-Body Problem*

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Introduction

In the article “Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature”, Cixin Liu outlines his argument that the humanities engage in an “intense anthropocentric narcissism” (22). He explains that in the history of the universe, human development has only occurred in the relatively last moments of that history, yet the focus of literature has remained centered primarily on human history and relationships. Liu has wrestled with this concern throughout his writing career often experimenting with writing less anthropocentric texts¹⁾.

1) In “Beyond Narcissism”, Cixin Liu discusses multiple works that challenge anthropocentric writing, such as *Qiuqzhuang Shandian* that “portrays a non-human figure—ball lightning—and it makes this figure the story’s core. The novel focuses on describing the interaction between this figure of the natural world and humanity, the traditional figure of literature” (26).

At different points in his career, he admits that some of his work was “a forced compromise with the dictates of the market” (23). However, now that he has achieved international recognition, it has created some new space that allows him to once again experiment with these ideas²). In *The Three-Body Problem*, as well as the entire *The Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, Liu begins challenging anthropocentric thought, questions the nature of reality, and the universe. *The Three-Body Problem* is an anthropocentric text; however, it is a text that is creating a theoretical framework to more effectively challenge anthropocentrism in the other two books in the series, *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*. In the twenty-first century, as technology continues to progress, from artificial intelligence, to gene splicing, and other similar advancements, interrogating the development of identity and the influence of anthropocentric thought is vital for the humanities to maintain relevancy. Because of this, analyzing the methods that Cixin Liu uses to negotiate these concepts is especially important.

For Liu, science fiction acts as a framework that allows for the destabilization of identity, reality, and anthropocentric thought. Darko Suvin writes about this in “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre” explaining that “SF shares with myth, fantasy, fairy tale and pastoral in opposition to naturalistic or empiricist literary genres” (Suvin 372). Furthermore, he argues that science fiction “sees the mythical static identity as an illusion, usually as a fraud, in the best case only as a temporary realization of potentially limitless

2) In “The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths: *Three Body* and Chinese Science Fiction”, Liu explains that the first two books in this series were written to “increase the sense of realism for readers” and focused on history, culture, and the present (par. 17). With the third book, *Death's End*, he reached the “conclusion that since it was impossible for [it] to succeed in the market, maybe it was best to give up trying to attract readers” and write the “third volume for [him]self”. Interestingly, the third volume of the series “led to the popularity of the series as a whole” (par. 18).

contingencies” (Suvin 375). Because of the tendency of science fiction to question or interrogate concepts that are thought of as unquestionable, it is the perfect genre for Cixin Liu to use for literary experimentation that challenges dominant theories in literature and the humanities.

One of the difficulties of challenging anthropocentrism in literature is that often even non-human characters reflect humanity in many ways. Darko Suvin writes, “The aliens-utopians, monsters or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world” (374). However, in “Science Fictions: Early Modern Technological Change and Literary Response”, S. E. Kile writes, “What distinguishes the genre from literature more generally, however, is what Suvin influentially termed the *novum*: the presence in a text of a device or machine that is entirely new, which gives us a fundamentally new way of conceiving the world” (118)³. The *Three-Body Problem* has numerous examples of *novum*, including alien intelligence, virtual reality, numerous challenges to scientific laws, and the ability to compress time in a way that might be challenging in other genres of literature. Liu’s use of *novum* as a literary device throughout his work serves as a catalyst for the characters and readers to begin to question the most elemental parts of existence in the universe.

In *The Three-Body Problem*, Cixin Liu frames his narrative with a series of images, metaphors, and allegories about the nature of reality, human identity, and anthropocentric thought. He begins this narrative framework using intertextuality with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* to examine these ideas. The first part of the book is entitled “Silent Spring”, as is the second chapter. These sections of the narrative are focused on the “madness” of the “Great Proletarian

3) Darko Suvin explains this concept further, “a spectrum or spread of literary subject-matter, running from the ideal extreme of exact recreation of the author’s empirical environment to exclusive interest in a strange newness, a *novum*” (373).

Cultural Revolution in early 1966”⁴) (Liu 11). The words “madness” and “crazy” are repeated throughout this section to emphasize that reason and rationality were under an epistemic threat. Later in the book, some of the women involved in this scene would be described as having “demonic spiritual energy” (300). The dramatic intensity of the first chapter reaches its peak in an inquisition-like scene where scientists are asked to deny scientific theories and facts that were discovered or introduced by western scientists (13). One character forced into this situation is Ye Zhetai, a physics professor who is described in Christ-like terms with an “expression [that] clearly said: *Let the cross I bear be even heavier*” (13). Liu is sacrificing these scientists in the text in a way that foreshadows the resurrection of their scientific beliefs later in the book. The fanaticism of the cultural revolution also leads to fundamental changes within the characters that develop later in the narrative.

The chapter entitled “Silent Spring” begins with the cutting down of a “large Dahurian larch” that is “thick as the columns of the Parthenon”, with a character named Ye Wenjie feeling “the Earth quake” (Liu 23). In the previous chapter, scientific thought had been stifled and silenced through an inquisition-like scene. In this chapter, the damaging of the natural world is being described in terms of the symbolic destruction of western culture and thought that shakes the foundation of the entire Earth. The scene is further described:

Ye Wenjie could only describe the deforestation that she witnessed as madness... whatever they laid eyes on, they cut down. Her company wielded hundreds of chain saws like a swarm of steel locusts, and after they passed, only stumps were left. More than three hundred years! A dozen generations.

4) Han Song writes, “During the chaotic and violent Cultural Revolution (1966-76)—a movement to consolidate the proletarian leadership—Zheng and other sf writers were silenced because the genre was regarded as something from corrupt Western culture that could lead people astray” (16).

When this tree was but a shrub, it was still the Ming Dynasty⁵). During all these years, can you imagine how many storms it had weathered, how many events it had witnessed? But in a few minutes you cut it down. You really felt nothing? (Liu 24-25)

Ma Gang responds: “What do you want me to feel? … It’s just a tree. The only things we don’t lack around here are trees. There are plenty of other trees much older than this one” (Liu 25). In this section, Liu is framing the previous inquisition-like scene with this destruction of the natural world. This section of the text parallels the destruction of the natural world in *Silent Spring*⁶); however, in this case, Wenjie frames this destruction in terms of human history. At this point, for her to identify with the trees, she needs to use an anthropocentric comparison as her mental framework. Later in the book, Wenjie will experience a shift in thought, that will challenge this perspective. With this scene, Liu is emphasizing that both nature and scientific thought tend to recover from periods of destruction or fanaticism. However, specific trees and theories may be lost forever. Ultimately, it is impossible to determine what ideas have been lost to history by this wanton destruction.

Liu returns to using *Silent Spring* as a narrative device as Ye Wenjie discusses the impact of logging with Bai Mulin. Bai explains that he is unsure if the Production and Construction Corps is engaged in “construction or destruction”⁷) as he described a brook that used to teem with life, but now is

5) The Ming Dynasty lasted from 1368 to 1644 and “exerted immense cultural and political influence on East Asia and the Turks to the west, as well as on Vietnam and Myanmar to the south” (“Ming Dynasty”).

6) Just as pesticides interrupted the ecosystems in *Silent Spring*, the destruction of forests devastates the ecosystems in this region.

7) This is a clear allusion to Derridian deconstruction. In this context, the logging company is remaking the world through destruction and construction in a way that is similar to Baudrillard’s simulacra.

“dead”⁸⁾ (Liu 26). This is a pivotal moment for Ye, as acquiring this book, and the parallel with the death of the natural scene before her, will forever change her framework for viewing the world. The narrator explains:

More than four decades later, in her last moments, Ye Wenjie would recall the influence *Silent Spring* had on her life...the perspective taken by the author shook Ye to the core. The use of pesticides had seemed to Ye just a normal – or, at least, neutral – act, but Carson’s book allowed Ye to see that, from Nature’s perspective, their use was indistinguishable from the Cultural Revolution, and equally destructive to our world. If this was so, then how many other acts of humankind that had seemed normal or even righteous were, in reality, evil? (Liu 27)

Cixin Liu uses intertextuality here to set up the framework of *The Three-Body Problem*. *Silent Spring* provokes Wenjie to begin thinking differently. Ye Wenjie and numerous other characters begin moving beyond Rachel Carson’s ideology⁹⁾ seeing humanity as irredeemable; therefore, the only force that can save humanity must come from outside of humanity. Ye explains this with a metaphor about an iceberg. She asks, “Is it possible that the relationship between humanity and evil is similar to the relationship between the ocean and an iceberg floating on its surface? Both the ocean and the iceberg are made of the same material” (Liu 27). She posits that humanity will never be able to change, so the only way that humanity can be prevented from its destructive path is by an outside force or *novum*. *Silent Spring* ends up being the driving

8) This is reminiscent of the scene early in *Silent Spring*, where “some evil spell had settled on the community; mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was the shadow of death” (Carson 2).

9) Philip Cafaro writes about Carson’s “three basic goals”, explaining her primary ideology as, “protecting human health, preserving non-human life, and promoting human flourishing” (63).

force behind Wenjie's shift in anthropocentric thought and her ultimate betrayal of humanity. Through Wenjie, Cixin Liu is beginning to explore what would happen if anti-anthropocentric thought is internalized and then popularized.

The Use of Images to Destabilize Reality

Throughout *The Three-Body Problem*, Cixin Liu uses a series of images and photographs as narrative devices that make the reader begin to question the nature of reality in the narrative. For example, Wang Miao, a scientist who "had been in charge of the nanoscale components for the 'Sinotron II' high energy particle accelerator project", begins admiring some of his "landscape photographs" that he was "most proud of" (Liu 59). These images nailed to his wall¹⁰ provide insights into Miao's thoughts and foreshadow events later in the story:

His eyes fell on a frontier scene: a desolate valley terminating in a snow-capped mountain. On the nearer end of the valley, half of a dead tree, eroded by the vicissitudes of many years, took up one-third of the picture. In his imagination, Wang placed the figure that lingered in his mind at the far end of the valley. Surprisingly, it made the entire scene come alive, as though the world in the photograph recognized that tiny figure and responded to it, as though the whole scene existed for her. (Liu 59)

10) Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart remind us that "a photograph is a three dimensional thing, not only a two dimensional object"; and, they are both "images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus [are] social and cultural experience" (1). Because of this, they are "enmeshed with subjective, embodied and sensuous interactions"; therefore, they should not be "reduced to an abstract status" or "commodity" (1). While Wang Miao is interacting with these photographs, they are both symbolic and physical artifacts that serve as symbolic boundaries between his physical past, grounded in human identity, and foreshadowing the future, when all of humanity may exist only as spirit or memory.

He describes the scene as a “frontier scene”, which denotes that it is a boundary or edge. Frontier also has the connotation that it is wild or untamed. It is not clear what kind of physical boundary this is, but it is easy to infer that it symbolizes the boundary between nature and civilization, life and death, and in the next part of the scene, between reality and abstraction:

He then imagined her figure in each of his other photographs, sometimes, pasting her two eyes into the empty sky over the landscapes. Those images came alive, achieving a beauty that Wang had never imagined. Wang had always thought that his photographs lacked some kind of soul. Now he understood that they were missing *her* (Liu 59).

In this section of the text, Maio symbolically disembodies Yang Dong into becoming a part of the landscape¹¹). This act is dehumanizing, but it can also be interpreted as an act of transcendence as well. The image or essence of Yang Dong has transcended the human world and her spirit has been symbolically infused throughout the natural world bringing it to life. This foreshadows the narrative arc of the trilogy, as most of the human population is under threat of annihilation. However, many characters in the book, would view this not as annihilation, but as an escape from the horrors of their flawed human form.

11) As Susan Sontag explains, taking photographs is not a neutral act:

there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (10)

By transposing images of Yang Dong over natural scenes, Maio is symbolically violating both Dong and the natural scenes. He then compounds this act by creating a new scene out of these separate images.

Earlier in the previous paragraph, Liu makes a reference to Qian Zhongshu, that a translator's note explains is like a "Chinese Thomas Pynchon" (Liu 59). Thus, Liu is foreshadowing a transition from reality to a more postmodern world later in the narrative. Postmodernism focuses on the "fragmentation or decentering the subject"; therefore, it is an effective lens for interrogating anthropocentric thought (McHale 100). A few paragraphs later, the daydream that Wang Miao experienced comes to a halt, as he learns that numerous physicists have committed suicide: "The photographs no longer had her figure in the foreground, and her eyes were wiped from the skies. Those worlds were all dead" (Liu 60). As scientists are lost, and scientific thought begins to be silenced, Wang quickly returns to reality. However, throughout the narrative, characters often veer towards more postmodern abstraction, even if they return to reality as Wang did here. This fluctuation between reality and postmodernism is another technique that Liu uses to destabilize anthropocentric thought throughout the narrative.

In the next few chapters, Cixin Liu begins challenging the nature of reality and even scientific thought in the narrative. Ding Ye, a theoretical physicist, explains that previously "[t]he laws of physics [were] invariant across space and time"; however, recent experiments have disputed this fact (Liu 69). A series of five experiments that should have all had the same results, ended up having drastically different findings serving as a *novum* that disrupts the realism of the previous chapters¹²). Ding explains his conclusion based on this information: "it means that laws of physics that could be applied anywhere in the universe do

12) In "The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths: *Three Body* and Chinese Science Fiction", Cixin Liu explains that the science of *Three Body* has garnered a lot of attention in the scientific community in China: "Li Miao, a cosmologist and string theorist, wrote a book titled *The Physics of Three Body*. Many aerospace engineers became fans, and China's aerospace agency even asked me to consult with them" (par. 6).

not exist, which means that physics...also does not exist” (71). At this point in the text, Liu draws the reader into a more postmodern universe, where even proven scientific laws are challenged¹³). In this type of universe, anything can happen, which creates a space for the author and the main characters to begin to question the nature of reality, identity, and anthropocentric thought.

Liu’s use of photographs to question the nature of reality¹⁴) continues with Wang Miao’s hobby of photographing “wilderness free of human presence” (Liu 73). He only used black and white film to “eliminate the busy colors of the city in the background” (73). Maio is envisioning and framing a world free of humanity with his photography. Then, as he is thinking about whether “the fundamental nature of matter really [could] be lawlessness”, he begins taking photographs (74-75). The photographs end up having white marks with an unexplained countdown that serves as another *novum* to disrupt the realism of the narrative (76). In his forthcoming article, “The Photograph as a Visual Mode of Representation in Penelope Lively’s *The Photograph* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*”, Abdullah Dagamseh writes that photographs “can distort, recreate, and complicate one’s perceptions of reality” (4). Taking these pictures complicated Maio’s perspective of reality and allowed him access into a non-human world. However, the countdown was the product of manipulation by an alien force complicating this view of reality. The countdown ends up eventually appearing on his retinas; therefore, the alien intervention becomes a physical part of his being. Symbolically, this suggests a transition, where Wang

13) Inger H. Dalsgaard argues “literary scholars naturally tend to look less at what natural sciences described in fiction say themselves about the real world or reality than at what fictional texts or literary strategies which include or mirror scientific fields, theories and methods say about the world” (157).

14) Abdullah Dagamseh’s forthcoming article, “The Photograph as a Visual Mode of Representation in Penelope Lively’s *The Photograph* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Slow Man*” informed the analysis of images, photographs, and virtual reality in this article.

Maio is moving from a more realistic world to an abstract and imaginative world. Ultimately, he describes this glimpse into another world as “madness”, “supernatural”, and a “nameless terror” (Liu 78, 86). Wang is tormented by even the smallest glimpse into a different reality. He “felt the road beneath his feet shift like quicksand. The A-shaped building seemed to wobble and sway” (75). This marks a transition from a world that acts rational to one that acts irrationally. Throughout this section of the narrative, Cixin Liu continues to disrupt everything that the characters and readers know to be reality, building a framework to unsettle anthropocentric thought in the other two books in the trilogy.

As Wang Maio begins to find out more about the alien civilization, Trisolaris, Cixin Liu uses another example of symbolism. Maio describes a memory from college when a professor showed his class a couple of images:

One was the famous Song Dynasty painting *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, full of fine, rich details; the other was a photograph of the sky on a sunny day, the deep blue expanse broken only by a wisp of cloud that one couldn't even be sure was there. The professor asked the class which picture contained more information. The answer was that the photograph's information content—its entropy—exceeded the painting's by one or two orders of magnitude. (Liu 112)

When examining *Along the River During the Qingming Festival*, the primary focus of the painting is the daily life of average people. In contrasting this depiction of everyday life with an image of the sky, Liu is clearly privileging the expanse of the endless sky over a focus on human life as he argues in “Beyond Narcissism”. Wang Maio then compares this example that his professor gave to the virtual world of *Three Body* and says that the virtual world has a “hidden deep” meaning in a way that he could not “articulate” (Liu

112). The makers of *Three Body* “compress the information content to disguise a more complex reality” (112). For Maio and Liu, the complexities of the universe and even virtual worlds are more intriguing than focusing on human life and relationships¹⁵).

A more in depth analysis of *Along the River During the Qingming Festival* problematizes Liu’s example even more. Valerie Hansen explains,

(1) the city shown in the scroll is not Kaifeng, but an idealized city; (2) the painting was done not before 1126, but after; and (3) the word Qingming does not mean Qingming festival, but instead peace and order. (184)

This complicates the understanding of the example Liu presents. If the painting represents humanity or literature that focuses on humanity, then Liu is arguing that literary representations of humanity are flawed, idealized, or illusory. Much like Qingming, literary portrayals of human relationships often are shaped and molded by others to convey abstract messages rather than realistic portrayal^s¹⁶. Through the lens of Liu’s essay “Beyond Narcissism”, this scene could be interpreted as a criticism of the humanities or anthropocentric literature. Like

15) Liu elaborates more on this in “Beyond Narcissism” explaining, “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” (24).

16) In “Beyond Narcissism”, Liu describes being interested in “macro-detail” of writers like Herman Wouk and Leo Tolstoy. He then argues that science fiction is unique because it can use macro-detail without becoming historical non-fiction:

Indeed, macro-descriptions of historical events cannot form the main body of a mainstream literary work, for then the novel ceases being fiction and becomes a work of history... In science fiction, on the other hand, macro-portrayals of history can be the focus of an entire work... We might say that mainstream literature described a world created by God, while science fiction takes on the role of God, creating worlds then describing them. (Liu 24)

this painting, literature written about humanity is always filtered through the framework of the individual writer, so it is unavoidably distorted by their point of view.

Another example of images subverting reality in *The Three-Body Problem* is as Wang Maio viewed drawings from Yang Dong. Dong was a child at the time and the pictures were “abstract” and “express[ed] a kind of passionate anger”, even though “[n]ormally, children of that age are able to draw humans and objects with clear shapes” (Liu 115). Ye Wenjie explains to Wang Maio that, as a child, she “exposed [Yang Dong] too early to some very abstract, extreme topics” connecting abstract shapes with thoughts (115). In this respect, Liu frames the narrative using these drawings to show that Yang Dong would privilege abstract theory and the universe over immediate human relationships. This was also illustrated using a form of synesthesia, as Dong would visualize complex architecture as she listened to music (116). Liu is creating the framework, through complex abstract thought, that ultimately will lead Dong to embrace radical anti-anthropocentric ideologies.

Virtual Reality and Time Compression

This interrogation of reality continues as Wang enters the virtual reality world of *Three Body*. *Three Body* is a fictional postmodern world that is patterned after the alien civilization of Trisolaris. It contains an “anachronistic mix of historical elements”, including players taking identities of famous scientists, philosophers, and other world leaders (209). This world is similar to Jean Baudrillard’s examination of Phillip K. Dick’s *The Simulacra*, where Baudrillard suggests that “hyperreality will only be able to ‘artificially’ resurrect the ‘historical’ worlds of the past, trying to reconstruct *in vitro* and

down to the tiniest details the various episodes of bygone days: events, persons, defunct ideologies—all now empty of meaning and of their original essences” (Baudrillard 310). This “resurrect[ing]” of “worlds of the past” occurs throughout *Three Body*, as the main characters in this world are famous scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. The civilizations in *Three Body* also participate in this “empty[ing] of meaning” as the characters live through different scientific ages and bridge different cultures from the East and the West¹⁷). *Three Body* acts as a liminal space where experimentation with identity and reality can readily occur.

Cixin Liu uses time compression as a narrative device to challenge anthropocentric thought. In the virtual representation of Trisolaris, time and eras of civilizations are highly compressed. For instance, “the game sped up the progress of time. A month in game time might pass in a half an hour” (Liu 100). Later in the book, it is explained that the real world of Trisolaris also has compressed time. In this world, there are “Stable Eras” and “Chaotic Eras” and it is a “world in which there are no patterns” (101). This new world defies all scientific explanation and continues to make characters like Wang Maio begin to question everything they know about the universe. As outlined both by Liu and Suvin, science fiction allows for endless possibilities to create new and different worlds that encourage readers to reassess reality.

In “Simulacra and Science Fiction”, Jean Baudrillard outlines the three orders of simulacra. He then explains that “SF in the strict sense” belongs to the second category, “productive, productionist simulacra” and asks if there is “yet an imaginary domain which corresponds” to the third (309)? There have

17) Thomas Lee writes that the world of *Three Body* creates a, “united history between the East and the West and overlays this global history onto cyberspace” (43). However, “the united history between the East and the West could not save civilization from destruction” (53). Ultimately, the game results in the criticism of Eastern and Western authoritarian leaders.

been many articles that have argued that virtual reality games, such as *Second Life*, are examples of the third¹⁸). If this is the case, then a virtual reality game within a science fiction book, that is based on an alien civilization, and blends together different historical civilizations must be an example of Baudrillard's third category, "simulation simulacra" (309). Simulation simulacra is explained as "based on information, the model, cybernetic play. Their aim is maximum operationality, hyperreality, total control" (309). Liu transitions between Earth, Trisolaris, and the virtual reality world of *Three Body* in a way that makes the reader question the nature of reality and human identity. *Three Body* acts as a *novum* that blurs boundaries between the worlds Liu has created.

In *Cyberspace and the Post-Cyberpunk Decentering of Anthropocentrism*, Thomas Lee argues that Liu creates a virtual space that "distances itself from Earth" and "use[s] cyberspace as a site of resistance to the anthropocentrism in literature" (iv, 3). At the same time, the virtual world of *Three Body* creates a space where characters can "resist authoritarian regimes", "bridg[ing] cyberpunk's political resistance" and "posthuman" theories (5). Because of the immersive virtual reality suits, and the immersion into a virtual world that is modeled after a real alien civilization, the subject becomes more than human and transcends worlds¹⁹). Liu creates a world that fits with Baudrillard's description of Phillip K. Dick's *Simulacra*, "It is not a question of parallel universes, or double universes, or even of possible universes: not possible of

18) See Lee Barron's "Living with the Virtual: Baudrillard, Integral Reality, and *Second Life*" in the journal *Cultural Politics* as one such example.

19) Lee elaborates on this, writing "In disregarding the mind-body distinction, Liu's cyberspace has the potential to contain political agency because the experience in cyberspace is connected to the body. Wang can perform an event in cyberspace, and the event would affect him outside of cyberspace, and conversely, events in material space could affect him in cyberspace" (61). Of the texts Lee analyzes, he argues that *The Three-Body Problem* is unique in this portrayal of cyberspace.

impossible, nor real nor unreal. It is hyperreal” (311). In *Three Body*, players are participating in a game that has real life consequences, from resisting Chinese authoritarianism to creating multiple anti-anthropocentric movements. It is beyond reality, or as Baudrillard writes, “hyperreal”.

The world of *Three Body* is so compelling that many characters start to prefer the virtual world to reality. For example, a software company vice president explains “[c]ompared to *Three Body*, reality is so vulgar and unexciting” (Liu 227). The players of *Three Body* then express their frustrations with humanity, “I’ve lost hope in the human race after what I’ve seen in recent years. Human society is incapable of self-improvement, and we need the intervention of an outside force” (229). This echoes the earlier sentiment from Ye Wenjie on the same idea. In both cases, a *novum* changed the way they viewed the world and led them to embrace anti-anthropocentric ideologies. Interestingly, a figure described as an author seems to echo Cixin Liu’s sentiments in “Beyond Narcissism”, saying “[t]he human race is hideous. I’ve spent the first half of my life unveiling this ugliness with the scalpel of literature, but now I’m even sick of the work of dissection. I yearn for Trisolaran civilization to bring real beauty to this world” (229). Liu’s essay outlines a similar frustration with the humanities and he strives towards experimenting with different perspectives that complicate anthropocentric thought.

Environmental radicalism and Animal Liberation

In attempting to explore a less anthropocentric mindset in literature, it is necessary to examine ideas like biocentrism or speciesism²⁰ from theorists like Paul Taylor or Peter Singer. Cixin Liu investigates these ideas through

numerous characters and groups in *The Three-Body Problem*. The primary group that he uses to explore these ideas is the Earth Trisolarist Organization (ETO). The ETO has three splinter groups that represent different ideologies in opposition to anthropocentrism: the Redemptionists hope for human salvation; the Adventists advocate for the annihilation of humanity; and the Survivors are willing to betray humanity for a chance at survival. This section will focus on the Adventists, who begin with a belief in biocentrism, then move to more radical ideas. Cixin Liu presents these ideas and groups to problematize the ideologies they represent.

The Adventists were created by Mike Evans, the son of a wealthy oil executive, who became an environmental radical with a biocentric view of the world. As Ye Wenjie meets Evans, she “noticed a copy of Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*” (Liu 304). Evans echoes the main themes of Singer as he argues, “Why does one have to save *people* to be a hero? Why is saving other species considered insignificant? Who gave humans such high honors?” (305). At this point, Evans has committed himself to saving a “subspecies of the northwestern brown swallow” (305). Though he has access to billions of dollars, he has chosen to live in poverty in a Chinese village to save a bird species. His radicalism began as a child when he witnessed an oil spill caused by his father’s company and he helped with the clean-up. After this event, “The eyes of those drowned birds always followed [him] and determined [his] life”

20) *The Encyclopedia of Environmental Issues* defines biocentrism as, “Life-centered stance that rejects the view that only human beings and their interests matter, while recognizing the moral standing of all living creatures” (146). Peter Singer defines speciesism as “A prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one’s own species against those of members of other species” (7). Singer clarified this in his book, *Speciesism, Painism, and Happiness: A Morality for the Twenty-First Century*, that it is not limited to human prejudice against a species, any member of any species can be biased against another species. He explains “if a chimpanzee puts the interests of his troop before that of a troop of baboons then that could be speciesism” (50).

(307). For Evans, the vision of the eyes²¹) radicalized his view of the world and pushed him towards the anti-anthropocentric theories of Peter Singer and ideas like biocentrism.

To contextualize Evans theoretically, it is important to understand the book that was on his table as Ye Wenjie went to visit him, *Animal Liberation*. In *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer compares the movement for equality of different species to the women's movement, equal rights for African Americans, gay rights movements, and other similar rights movements (3-4). He argues that when discussing equal rights movements, it is not important to determine if different races or genders are "genetically" or "intellectually" equal (5). When a society determines equality, it "does not depend on intelligence, moral capacity, physical strength, or similar"; instead, "Equality is a moral idea" (5). Societies often give people of different capabilities equal rights under the law, so giving animals more rights is not a matter of equal ability, it is a "moral idea". Therefore, Singer argues that animals cannot be excluded from gaining more rights based on physical qualities or abilities not being equal to humans.

Peter Singer focuses on the role of suffering in the determination of the humane treatment of animals. He uses a utilitarian argument, through the lens of Jeremy Bentham, to argue that "If a being suffers, there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (Singer 8).

21) The eyes of the drowned birds radicalized Evans in a similar manner as Wang Maio's mindset was impacted after the Trisolaran countdown was imprinted on his retinas. Cixin Liu uses eyes as symbol throughout his works, as he does in the first chapter of the sequel to *The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*. In the beginning of *The Dark Forest*, Liu frames the narrative with a description of an ant. As Ye Wenjie and Luo Ji are discussing the creation of a new field, cosmic sociology, Luo Ji bends down as the ant looks into his eyes. The section ends with "neither ant nor spider was aware that they, out of all life on Earth, were the sole witnesses to the birth of the axioms of cosmic civilization" (15-16). In this case, the eyes emphasize that in the universe ants are to humans, as humans are to the Trisolarans.

Mike Evans, as he is reading Singer, begins to reshape his view of the world. Evans takes a Singer-like ideology and turns it into a religious belief. He argues, “Saving a species of bird or insect is no different from saving humankind. ‘All lives are equal’ is the basic tenet of Pan-Species Communism. It’s an ideology I invented. Or maybe you can call it a faith. Its core belief is that all species on Earth are created equal” (307). Not too long after this, he extends his Pan-Species Communism to plants arguing that “there will be a day when humanity can manufacture food. We should lay down the ideological and theoretical foundation long before that” (307). This ideology more closely mirrors the concept of biocentrism than what Singer outlines in *Animal Liberation*²²). According to Paul Thayer, in his book *Respect for Nature*, biocentrism is to believe that “all plants and animals of the Earth’s natural ecosystems” possess an “inherent worth” (71). Thayer argues that humans are part of a “community” and a “system of interdependence” in which “humans are not inherently superior to other organisms” (99). Therefore, the religion that Evans created, Pan-Species Communism, is closer to Thayer than Singer. Cixin Liu uses Mike Evans as a literary device that allows him to explore the boundaries of theories like biocentrism. By using Evans, Liu can explore what would happen if these theories became widely accepted.

Another traumatic event once again reshaped the ideology of Evans. At first, Evans is successful with saving the species of swallows and the “population is rising again” due to his planting of trees in their habitat (Liu 305). However, his success is quickly met with an increase of logging: “In every direction, trees were falling. The entire forest seemed like a mulberry leaf

22) In the final chapter of *Animal Liberation*, Singer argues that “there is no reliable evidence that plants are capable of feeling pleasure or pain...[there is] nothing resembling a central nervous system...Therefore the belief that plants feel pain appears to be quite unjustified (248).

being devoured by silk worms on all sides. At the current rate, it would disappear soon” (309). This radicalizes Evans to the point of moving beyond *Animal Liberation* and even biocentrism. He becomes despondent, saying “The entire human race is the same. As long as civilization continues to develop, the swallows I want to save and all of the other swallows will go extinct. It’s just a matter of time” (Liu 310-11). Evans transitions beyond biocentrism to a belief that places plants and animals above humanity. Unlike previous examples, it was not a *novum* that led Evans to radicalism; instead, it was development by the Chinese government that led him to anti-anthropocentric radicalism.

Many different characters come to similar beliefs as Evans and join groups like the Adventists. For example, a character named Rafael from Israel explains his radicalization with the intractability of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict:

Our home remained trapped in the quagmire of cycles of vengeance... Eventually, I lost hope in the human race and joined the ETO. Desperation turned me from a pacifist into an extremist... The human race is an evil species. Human civilization has committed unforgivable crimes against the Earth and must be punished. The ultimate goal of the Adventists is to ask our Lord to carry out this divine punishment: the destruction of all humankind. (Liu 253)

In a similar manner as Evans, Rafael turned to an ideology for answers, in his case, pacifism. Then, when the problem persisted, he turned more radical joining the Adventists. The Adventists share the goal of the ETO in preparing the Earth for the Trisolaran invasion. However, the Adventists were “the purest, most fundamentalist strand of the ETO, comprised mainly of believers in Evans’s Pan–Species Communism. They had completely given up hope in human nature” (318). The members of each group come from different backgrounds²³) and have different theoretical reasons for turning against humanity, but ultimately,

they all decide that humanity needs to either be saved or eliminated by the Trisolarans. Cixin Liu continues to use each of these groups and individuals to explore the boundaries of anti-anthropocentric ideologies.

Ye Wenjie was radicalized in a similar manner as Mike Evans. She became despondent at the destructive nature of humanity. She contextualized this destruction describing the “Cold War” and “[n]uclear missiles capable of destroying the Earth ten times” (270). Ultimately, the roots of Ye Wenjie deciding to side with the aliens over humanity “began the day she read *Silent Spring*” (269). It ignited a thirst for knowledge in her that continued with studying “many classics of foreign language philosophy and history” and the “bloody history of humanity shocked her” (370). Because of closely examining human nature, and studying philosophy and history, when the *novum* was introduced into the narrative, Ye decides to tell the Trisolarans “Come here! I will help you conquer this world. Our civilization is no longer capable of solving its own problems. We need your force to intervene” (276). Like Evans, despondency tied to embracing a nature based ideology, while studying literature and philosophy, influenced her to, as Evans says, “Eliminate human tyranny” (251). Through characters like Ye Wenjie, Cixin Liu is building a world where anti-anthropocentric ideologies are cultivated and able to be explored through narrative development.

After Ye Wenjie sends the message to the Trisolarans, her perspective changes even closer to that of Evans. First, she kills her husband and another scientist, Lei Zhicheng, because Zhicheng found out that Wenjie had been contacted by the Trisolarans. When describing this moment, she says she was “Calm. I did it without feeling anything. I finally found a goal to which I could

23) Interestingly, the ETO was made up primarily of intellectual elites because “Most of them had already begun to consider issues from a perspective outside the human race. Human civilization had finally given birth to a strong force of alienation” (317).

devote myself...I also knew that the entire human race would pay an unprecedented price for this goal” (287). Like Evans, she moves beyond biocentrism and now views humanity as something to be corrected or eliminated. Ye Wenjie does suggest that it did not have to turn out this way. She thinks, “If there were more men like [Evans], even just a few more, things would have turned out differently” (308). Both Evans and Wenjie decide that since humanity is destroying the Earth, the only way to save the Earth is to destroy humanity. Of course, this ideology is flawed, as neither of them know the nature of the Trisolarians or how they will treat the Earth²⁴). However, despite this lack of knowledge, they decided to live by the motto Mike Evans created for the Adventists: “We don’t know what extraterrestrial civilization is like, but we know humanity” (318). Ultimately, through many characters and parts of the narrative, Liu presents the idea that anti-anthropocentric ideologies, when popularized, end up even more destructive than the anthropocentric world that currently exists.

Conclusion

In *The Three-Body Problem*, Cixin Liu explores identity, reality, and anthropocentric thought using a number of different narrative ideas. First, each of the primary characters has experiences that make them question the nature of their own identity and the nature of reality. These characters also embrace different ideologies, from pacifism, to Peter Singer’s ideas on speciesism, or Paul Thayer’s biocentrism. Then, each character grows increasingly despondent based on the cruelty of the human population. Finally, they experience a

24) Later in the book it is revealed that “Trisolaran society exists under a state of extreme authoritarianism” (353).

novum, ranging from a countdown on their retinas to direct contact with aliens. This causes them to turn on humanity and side with an alien group called the Trisolarans.

This book encourages the reader to question identity, reality, and the nature of the universe. At the same time, it also challenges anti-anthropocentric ideologies. When these ideologies are taken to their fruition, the groups who embrace them end up supporting the extinction of humanity. *The Three Body Problem* confronts the idea that anthropocentrism often results in destruction and cruelty, yet anti-anthropocentric ideologies often are problematic as well. Ultimately, readers of *The Three-Body Problem* are confronted with the idea that humans are insignificant in the universe, viewed as “bugs” by the Trisolarans. However, despite all the efforts by humans to eliminate bugs, “The bugs have never been truly defeated” (388). Cixin Liu problematizes anthropocentric and anti-anthropocentric thought in a way that challenges previous theory and produces many possibilities for further exploration.

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Identity, Reality, and Anthropocentrism in Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem*

Abstract

★Jeff 성?★

This article examines Cixin Liu's *The Three-Body Problem* using the framework of Liu's essay "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature". In his essay, Liu discusses the idea that literature primarily focuses on human relationships. He then explains that the universe is vast, and in the 13.2 billion years of history, humans have only been present for a small percentage of that time. Because of this, he calls for literature to experiment with challenging anthropocentric thought. This article focuses on how Liu uses images, metaphors, allegory, and virtual reality to challenge anthropocentrism. It relies on close reading and an examination of intertextuality, especially focusing on Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*. This article also relies on Jean Baudrillard's concepts of "simulacra" and "simulation" to better understand Liu's use of images and virtual reality.

Key Words: Anthropocentrism, Cixin Liu, Identity, reality, Science Fiction

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