Empathy, Recognition and Solidarity: Biovalue and Posthumanism in Chen Qiufan's Translated Works of SF

Speculative fiction (SF) is replete with images of posthumans and postanimals that challenge the exceptionalism of humans and essentialism of humanism through futuristic and alien settings. The works of SF selected for this paper are dystopic in nature, such that, instead of challenging anthropocentrism, they are set in landscapes and economies of aggravated capitalism where matter, both organic and inorganic, serves simply as repositories of biovalue to be extracted for surplus profit, where the biosphere has been deteriorated beyond repair, and technology has replaced anthropocentrism with technocentrism. This paper will look into the popular SF works of Chen Qiufan, in translation — the novel, *Waste Tide* and the short stories, 'The Fish of Lijiang' and 'The Year of the Rat' through the lens of critical and existential posthumanism to probe into the definition of 'human' and investigate the underlying politics of biovalue that transform subjectivities in the face of technological, biopolitical and ecological evolution. To problematise the human/animal/machine/ecology divide, the author blurs existing boundaries through the portrayal of discriminatory commodification on selected bodies to fulfil profit quotas and collect biodata. Finally, it will explore the acts of resistance, such as the exercise of empathy and a questioning of the dominant apparatuses of control, which ushers in the possibility of solidarity beyond species, classes and the human/non-human distinction, emblematic of affirmative posthumanities that culminate in renegotiations with identities and an anticipated dismantling of capitalistic and biovalue-centric systems of exploitation.
Keywords: Posthumanism, Animals, Biovalue, Affirmative Ethics, Capitalism, Speculative Fiction

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Upon a cursory search on the internet regarding the definition of a 'human', I chose to look at Oxford and Cambridge, which consolidated my assumption that the branding of 'human' exists entirely on an exclusionary relationship with the rest of the beings we share the planet with (an issue brought up by multiple existing theorists). Human is defined as "connected with people, not with animals, machines or gods; typical of people" ("Human") and "being, relating to, or belonging to a person or to people as opposed to animals" ("Human"). It is a signifier created by 'humans' for 'humans' (not all humans), applied across human-centred endeavours, such as law, politics, and knowledge systems, to debar non-humans, sub-humans and the inorganic from agency and subjectivity. My search, based on human language, grounded in humanist ideologies, is ironic yet reveals the lack of an alternate repository of knowledge where the 'human' might be defined differently, particularly from the perspective of non-humans.

In the context of the 21st century and beyond (if we persist), the 'human' becomes a deeply contradictory figure, punctuated with multiple points of departure from the heterosexual, pure, white body of the Vitruvian Man. It emerges as a constantly changing, fluid set of delenations that

blurs the boundaries previously revered, especially taking into account the pervasive role of technology. Technology contains within itself the various potentialities to nullify the existing hierarchical relationship of entities (human, non-human, and others), but due to its foundation on the orthodox framework of humanism, it aggrandises the differences and systems of extraction. A rethinking of our association with the world and an actualisation of existential posthumanist politics presents itself as incredibly difficult.

Situated in the Global South, the extent of this extractive politics becomes intensified. The selected narratives, set in China, albeit a futuristic one, portray incidents and situations that might as well be happening in our present world. The e-waste dumping ground of Silicon Island, with its migrant workers, technologically modified animals for consumerist purposes and companies employing technology to overwork employees to their death, is not unthinkable in the present world context. As characteristic of speculative fictions, Chen takes it further, defamiliarising our thoughts and understanding so that we might be moved to act.

Introduction to the Selected Works

Waste Tide is set in the polluted Silicon Isle, unique in its kitschy mixture of debilitating living conditions, waste workers and, simultaneously, sprawling streets brimming with Western designer brands and expensive cars. The characters, ranging from a wealthy gang leader who controls the waste centre, such as Luo Jincheng, to the wasted migrant workers, such as Mimi and Brother Wen, all present themselves as posthuman technological subjects. If some of them use artificial body parts, the rest of them use technology as a form of drug to escape the sordidness of life in the Isle. Technology does not simply limit itself to humans but subsumes animals and the environment at large, with its toxic chemical liquids and gases seeping into the water, land and air. The presence of technology with its capitalist focus transforms entities (humans, non-humans) into objects producing surplus capital. In an ironic turn, the market destabilises the existing demarcations between subject/object, human/non-human and absorbs them into an all-encompassing product.

Similarly, in “Fish of Lijiang”, the story follows an unnamed narrator suffering from an illness, shipped off to a mandatory leave to Lijiang for recuperation. In Lijiang, technology has replaced most of the organic human/animal population. Machines are more alive than their human counterparts (sick, comatose). The narrator reacts with dismay and disgust at the overwhelming technological presence that has overtaken natural Lijiang — noting, to his shock, that even the sky itself is artificial. Considering himself safe from technological intervention, he soon learns to his dismay that his company, along with others, employs time compression technology to force employees into relentless overwork, accelerating their decline and precipitating an early death. Despite being equipped with this knowledge, the narrator feels trapped, facing no escape but to return to his exhausting life. The story ends on an ambiguous note, inviting readers to imagine the narrator’s next step. At the very edge of pessimism and helplessness lies a tinge of hope.

Though in both previous narratives, the focus is mainly on human bodies with sparse mentions of technologically modified animals, in "The Year of the Rat", 'animals/post-animals' take the central position. It follows the first-hand recollections of the narrator who mourns not only the death of his friend, Pea, but also the condition of the world at large, with its dependence on bio-technology and extractive governments. The position of the human as hierarchically superior becomes even more dubious with the existence of Neorats, technologically modified rats who escape human control and form their own religion, society and knowledge systems. Humans, instead of learning about them and questioning the anthropocentric attitudes still prevalent in technocratic societies, decide to use force (spears, knives, not advanced technology) to eliminate the rats and erase them from the annals of science and history.

Human-Nonhuman Entanglements and Biovalue

What does it mean to be human when the body, mind and environment are intimately, almost intrusively modified by technology? How do we classify a person with artificial organs, or a toxic metal-infused brain living in a place where robots play instruments, fish are projections of a screen, and the sky is digitised to provide a particular/'natural' colour, where even the animals are enhanced to serve human ventures?

Such are the people, animals and 'nature' that populate the narratives of Chen's works. In such a techno-dependent, post-anthropocentric and bio-capitalist China, the meaning of life has been entirely altered. Life has been mutated into a perpetual system of extraction. Bodies are revised and remodelled to produce maximum value and ultimately disposed of. "The body is less conceived as an organic substance and more like molecular software that may be read and rewritten" (Lemke 5). Pervasive in these narratives is the presence of "posthuman technosubject" (Hollinger 26), which Haraway postulates as "a hybrid composed of flesh and machine" (qtd. in Hollinger 28).

In *Waste Tide*, although the waste workers are the direct recipients of pollution and poisonous metals, chemicals and garbage, the natives of the Silicon Isle, located at a higher altitude (spatially above the waste workers) than that of the dumping ground, are no better off. Their bodies, too, are corroding. They, too, are breathing the polluted air, spending fortunes for clean water and consuming toxic and mutated animals and plants. Despite the transparency of the deteriorating condition of life, they hold onto the hierarchies and intensify them by continuing the oppression, the ostracisation of the migrants and a refusal to realise the necessity of an existence that values all entities. Instead of attempting to modify their way of life, techno-dependent humans choose to ignore the crisis at hand and use technology to do quick fixes, for example, artificial noses and "prosthetic respiratory systems". Unknown to them, these bodies are also products undergoing constant upgrades and manipulations to produce value. Not only is life being exploited, but concurrently being extended, suspended and terminated for the sake of biovalue. As Lemke notes, "…death can be exploited, it can be used to optimise and prolong life inside a productive circle: the death of some may guarantee life and survival of others" (Lemke 7).

In order to understand the underlying workings of biopower in these selected works, one has to extend Foucauldian biopolitics. Borrowing from Dr Lemke, there are three reasons why Foucauldian biopolitics might be insufficient in studying current and future economies, especially in this context of a bio-technocratic society, characterised by posthuman bodies. Firstly, there is an absence of "an integral body" – body and mind technologically modified, Foucault's focus on the "fixed and identifiable bodily borders" becomes inadequate. It needs to move beyond to include the many levels of interference and control of technology at the molecular level. Secondly, Foucault's biopolitics was mostly limited to the human. This, too, needs to be extended to incorporate animals, plants and inorganic entities. In advanced techno-capitalism, all entities are deprived of their agencies and generative power to serve only the market. Thirdly, the unique position of technology in these narratives, where limbs, brains and even the sky are being fundamentally reconstructed using machines, demands a shift in thought surrounding the existing knowledge of life and death.

This type of biovalue, centred around profit and technology, is defined by Catherine Waldy as "the yield of vitality produced by the biotechnological reformulation of living processes" (qtd. in Ehlers 136). Foucault defined 'biopower' as "technolog[ies] of power centred on life…the harnessing, intensification and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of [bodily] energies" (qtd. in Walby 33). Waldby takes it further to redefine biovalue, which does not separate human and "other kinds of embodied agents" but deals with how "technics" exaggerates the already existing discriminatory value systems (Waldby 33).

Waldby continues:

> Biovalue is generated wherever the generative and transformative productivity of living entities can be instrumentalised for the use of human projects—science, industry, medicine, agriculture or other arenas of technical culture. Biotechnologies, the body of technique specifically concerned with the generation of biovalue, work to calibrate and order this transformative power, 'the elementary logic of combinations', in order to bring life into the realm of explicit calculations (33).

Thus, the human or animal is transformed into a machine, into a structured and complicated set of tools.

In "The Fish of Lijiang", biovalue is extracted from the labourers, animals and the environment, as well as the affluent, and robots, highlighting a deep-rooted exploitative system. As previously discussed, it begins with the narrator, who has succumbed to "PNFD II". This illness must be treated soon, or else it can turn into "neurosyphilis" and affect all the other employees in the office. So begrudgingly, the employee is given a two-week mandatory leave and sent to a rehabilitation centre in Lijiang. In the beginning, the narrator is a model employee – he is soon up for a promotion, and despite being riddled with problems such as "upset stomach, forgetfulness, headache, fatigue, depression" (Chen 41) and more, he continues to work beyond his limit to reach a higher position in the corporate ladder. However, as he spends his days in Lijiang, his feelings regarding the meaning of existence/goal begin to change. The 'Lijiang' in his memories has now undergone a complete change. It has become a specialised location catering to the ill with slogans

like “Healthy Minds, Happy Bodies” splattered all over and owned by “Lijiang Industries (stock code #203845), backed by several wealthy conglomerates” (Chen 43). The streets are now filled with “robot orchestra” (Chen 45). Even the local people have been replaced by look-alike robots who share ancient lore about Lijiang and the modern advancements that have turned it into a paradise of technology. These robots reveal these stories only after a payment of “five yuan” (Chen 45). In a post-anthropocentric turn, humans and machines have both been converted into raw sources of bio-value. Animals and humans are entangled and affect one another due to unchecked technological innovations. The brain chemistry of dogs has mutated due to exposure to “out-of-sync” humans and are used as messaging devices, paid by swiping “the hotel card through the collar” (Chen 44). The most direct technological device used to extract bio-capital is that of the “tiny gray alarm clock…shaped like a mushroom (which) often runs fast” (Chen 48). This clock is an innovation that alters the “biological rhythms” of the employees to ‘make’ them produce surplus value in a shorter time period. This is what causes the PNFD II. In contrast to this are the wealthy old comatose men who receive the “time sense dilation therapy” that extends their lives to maintain market fluctuations. While it seems that the old men are not products generating biovalue, their deaths are being deterred to accomplish the same end goal, to yield market value. While one is being propelled towards death, the other is being mummified to stave it off.

Diverging from human figures, “The Year of the Rat” focuses on animals. Braidotti writes, “In advanced capitalism, animals of all categories and species have been turned into tradable disposable bodies, inscribed in a global market of post-anthropocentric exploitation” (Braidotti 70). Here, the source of biovalue is that of the rats, which were technologically upgraded into products of consumption with “a set of programmed behaviors” and sold to the wealthy as “luxury pets”. These Neorats were also distributed to farmers who, in turn, attempted to re-modify their genetic structure to increase the female rat population to increase “profit margin”. Thus, the Neorats are a direct example of techno-capitalist-driven products manufactured to generate more capital.

Interchanging Identities

Examining Chen’s usage of imagery brings into view the post-anthropocentric assimilation of all entities into commodified bodies. As Bradoitti notes, the “opportunistic political economy of bio-genetic capitalism induces, if not the actual erasure, at least the blurring of the distinction between the human and other species when it comes to profiting from them” (Bradoitti 63). His use of imagery also sheds light on the tangled, relational aspect of existence where humans, animals and machines cannot be easily differentiated as independent subjectivities.

Chen constantly zoomorphizes humans and also uses machine imagery for people and animals. For example, waste people in *Waste Tide* are compared to “worms” (Chen 39), “a sheep, a bag of seeds, farming implement” (Chen 57), “a self-regulating, maintenance-free machine” (Chen 115). Mimi’s pained screams are “metallic howls” (Chen 138). Similarly, people in the “Fish of Lijiang” are like a “nest of ants” and “fish” while the rats in “The Year of the Rat” are “carefully designed

products" (Chen 23). The blurring of fixed identities leads to a breakdown of the ontological divisions between humans and the non-human.

Subverting Expectation and Resistance

The existing system of control and surveillance underpins the production of bio-capitalist value by inhibiting the realisation of mutual dependence and interconnectivity that is true to our existence. However, it is within the generative field of life itself—the very terrain subjected to extraction—which emerges as a source of resistance and subversion.

First, in *Waste Tide*, the figure of the jellyfish, which "breed(s) too fast" (Chen 80) and clogs the pipes through which industries discharge wastewater, emerges as an entity that foils biovalue production. It is in the very act of uncontrollable reproduction (rejection of biological control over species) of radioactive jellyfish (which produces no value for humans and instead requires manpower and money to tackle them) that showcases a challenge, a break in the functioning of advanced industries, a sign of evolving life beyond human control, but emerging, nevertheless, due to entanglements with them. It is reminiscent of Hardt and Negri's conception of life– "If biopower represents the power over life, then it is life that constitutes the terrain where counter-powers and forms of resistance are formed and moulded (Lemke 5). This disruption parallels the Neorats' escape from captivity and the formation of autonomous social structures and religions (pregnancy rooms, sacrificial rituals) that challenge existing knowledge and point to the formation of new subjectivities and agencies. The human failure to comprehend these evolutionary novelties and hide or eliminate them exemplifies the persistence of anthropocentrism and a refusal to learn about new evolutions and workings of life beyond the necessity of value production for mankind. The Neorats, who were always the object of experimentation and technological manipulation, are now capable of "chemically manipulating" the "perceptions, generating illusions that cause (the humans) to kill one another" (Chen 36).

This intermixing of humans, animals and machines creates new and alternative ways of existence that are beyond the control of biopolitics and refuse to produce value in the capitalist sense. It nudges the characters towards a posthuman subjectivity symptomatic of a realisation about the relationality of life - its plurality, and constantly changing existence.

In *Waste Tide*, Mimi (both human Mimi and cyborg Mimi) acts as a subversive figure. While cyborg Mimi projects itself as the "beginning" (Chen 325), as the master of all. As noted by Waldby, "The cyborg figure implies an identity, albeit a hybrid identity, a point of stability around which a new cyberanthropocentrism can coalesce (46). So, while cyborg Mimi extends the same discriminatory and narrow ideals of exclusion and mastery now in the cybernetic turn, human Mimi does something else. She chooses empathy. The qualities of using empathy as a new way of existing in the current context have been discussed by Braidotti.

> "The emphasis on empathy accomplishes several significant goals in view of a posthuman theory of subjectivity. Firstly, it reappraises communication as an evolutionary tool.

> Secondly, it identifies in emotions, rather than in reason, the key to consciousness. Thirdly, it develops what Harry Kunneman has defined as 'a hermeneutical form of naturalism' which takes critical distance from the tradition of social constructivism and situates moral values as innate qualities" (78).

By highlighting empathy, even 'trans-species empathy' (Chew 3), as a transformative force, Chen's narrative models a form of resistance that not only disrupts exploitative power structures but also affirms new possibilities for collective flourishing and post-anthropocentric community building. The characters, some inadvertently and some deliberately, undertake a "...path of self-enquiry and self-discovery, aimed at full existential awareness", explicating that "being posthuman is always a form of 'inter-being'" (Ferrando 17).

The institutions, corporations and people situated in positions of power fail to realise the simple fact that "we are always (p)art of everything" (Ferrando 26). Using technology as a method of furthering discriminatory humanist ideologies will only expedite the end of the human species and other species that will go extinct due to direct human actions—a warning that resonates throughout Chen's works.

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