

王晋康、刘慈欣、韩松 | “天王级”科幻作家眼中的瘟疫
Epidemic in the Eyes of “Three Generals of Chinese Sci-fi”
– Wang Jingkang, Liu Cixin and Han Song*

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Summary

According to an online conspiracy theory, the American author Dean Koontz predicted the coronavirus outbreak in 1981. His novel ‘The Eyes of Darkness’ referred to a deadly virus called “Wuhan-400” - strangely predicting the Chinese city where the Covid-19 would emerge. But the similarities end there: Wuhan-400 is described as having a “death rate” of 100%, developed in laboratories outside the city as the “perfect” biological weapon. Science fiction writers, however, have made a point of doing just that. With the devastating effect of the epidemic and a worldwide rise in state-sanctioned authoritarianism, science fiction has been approaching reality at an alarming rate in recent years. But how do Chinese science fiction writers, who have spent much of their lives writing imagining dystopia, react to ultimately live in one? How does reality match fiction? This translation is based on questions asked to the “three kings” of Chinese science fiction, Wang Jiankang, Han Song and Liu Cixin, who are the best practitioners of the genre, to tell us about their experience of the epidemic in China.

Translator’s Note: *The Chinese article was originally published as an interview at China Science Writer Association. Later, it was published by the Shanghai Pudong Science Fiction Association and Science Fiction World Magazine, respectively. But after sometime, the article was taken down by the government censor authorities from QQ, WeChat and other social media platforms due to some controversial remarks by the three writers.*



Image: Three Generals of Chinese Sci-Fi—Wang Jiankang, Liu Cixin and Han Song

During the epidemic period, a sentence in the famous sci-fi novel by Liu Cixin, *Three-Body Problem*, was repeatedly mentioned by netizens at home and abroad: “Weakness and ignorance are not obstacles to survival, but arrogance is.” The “*Prophecies of God*” of science fiction writers and science fiction novels have also been published by netizens, which is amazing. What exactly is the epidemic in the eyes of China’s science fiction writers? We chatted briefly with Wang Jiankang, Han Song and Liu Cixin

Wang Jiankang

(Member of the China Writers Association, member of the China Science Writers Association; member of the Science and Literature Committee and member of the Henan Writer Association.)

Publications: So far, nearly 100 science fiction works have been published, including more than ten novels with more than 5 million characters, including "Human", "An Ant", "Be With Me", "Escape from Mother Universe", "Heavenly Father and Earth" Mother", "Wang Jiankang Science Fiction Selection" (four volumes), etc. He has won the Galaxy Award from the 97 International Science Fiction Conference, the Global Chinese Science Fiction Nebula Award for Lifetime Achievement Award, and has won the Global China Science Fiction Nebula Award and the Galaxy Award several times.

Q: How do science fiction writers view the epidemic?

Diseases, including infectious diseases, are an inevitable pain for human beings. No matter how advanced a medicine is, humans must always be with them. We can only minimize sacrifices on this premise. For example, for viruses that exist in wild animal populations, we can completely ban eating exotic animals, but as long as the virus exists, it will infect people sooner or later. As the human footprint becomes wider, this prospect is inevitable. What we can do is to be prepared and respond as soon as possible if an epidemic occurs.

Q: In addition to the negative impact of the epidemic on human society, what other driving effects are there?

It cannot be said to be a driving force. It can only be said that because it is unavoidable, humans can only choose to face it, which accordingly promotes advances in medical science. Just like war in human society, although it is disgusting, it is inevitable, at least in the foreseeable historical stage, so all countries have to develop weapons against their victims of helpless process, which also promote the development of science and technology.

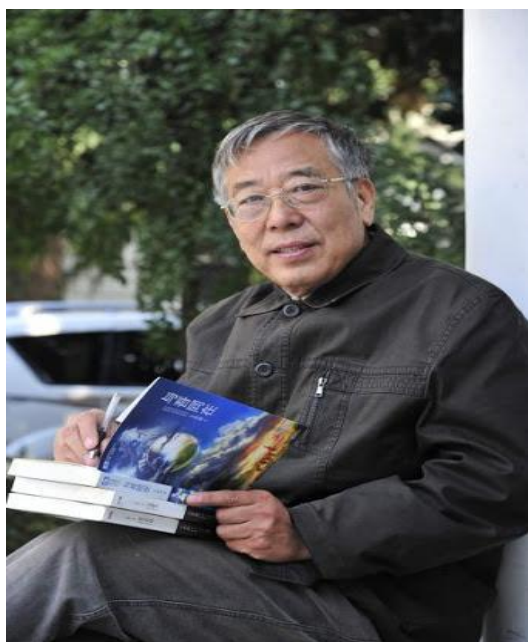


Image: Wang Jiankang

Q: What kind of epidemic there will be in the future? How will human beings fight back then? Have you ever imagined this?

Pathogens, especially viruses, have a very simple structure and are easy to mutate, especially in modern society where humans, poultry, and wild animals are more and more frequently contacted. Therefore, the emergence of new pathogens including new viruses is

inevitable. Among them, viruses and fungi that are more difficult to deal with (because they have no specific drugs other than targeted vaccines and rely more on the patient's immunity) are relatively easy to deal with in the long run, but those that can be effectively killed with antibiotics. Bacteria will quickly evolve into drug-resistant strains, making it more difficult to deal with.

Q: What is the most worrying epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers?

This brings me back to the meditation of the young man I mentioned at the beginning: Although there were vicious diseases such as smallpox and Black Death in the history of mankind and the medicine at that time was very underdeveloped, why didn't mankind become extinct? This is because mankind has evolved a powerful immune system, which has equal strength in the fight against diseases, and each has its victories. In other words, it is unlikely that a pathogen capable of overcoming the human immune system will suddenly appear in nature—except for man-made pathogens because it is beyond this balance system and also beyond the capabilities of the human immune system.

Q: What was the background of the creation of the medical science fiction novel "The Cross"¹?

¹ "The Cross" was published in January 2009, produced by Science Fiction World Press, The terrorists belonging to the "Cross Organization" stole the smallpox virus that

I am more interested in medical subjects, and I have created many science fiction novels based on medical subjects. These works actually originated from my childhood imagination: generally speaking, everyone knows that the infectious pathogens among the ferocious ones are not high and the pathogens that are easily transmitted are relatively mild, but if there is a sudden evolution in nature that is both ferocious and extremely strong, will highly infectious pathogens cause human extinction? It is the meditation in these teenage years that have triggered my attention to pathogens.

Liu Cixin

World-famous science fiction writer, member of China Writers Association, member of the Ninth National Committee, member of China Science Writers Association, vice chairman of Shanxi Writers Association.

Mr Liu's works have a profound impact on Chinese science fiction. In addition to the

has been conquered by mankind and kept it in the P4 laboratory. Through genetic cultivation, they have made biological weapons intended to exterminate mankind. Ten years later, terrorists disguised as American Red Indians spread the virus in the United States and even hijacked 76 children. Using negotiation as a means, they actually infected those children with the smallpox virus, treating the children as "poisonous people" to release the epidemic. Launched a bioterrorism attack against the United States. The attack resulted in the infection of more than 100,000 people, including more than 30,000 confirmed cases. More than ten years later, the staff of an advertising company over Tokyo drove three airships to distribute paper flower leaflets over Tokyo. The super virus spread with the paper flower throughout the city, and at least one million people were infected. The whole Tokyo was filled with extreme panic.

trilogy of the milestone of Chinese science fiction literature, the trilogy of *Three-Body Problem*, -his representative work, his numerous writings include novels such as *The Supernova Era*, *Ball Lightning*, *Wandering Earth*, *Rural Teachers*, *Wearing the Road*, *Festivals That Cannot Coexist*, *Full Band Jamming*, etc.

Q: How do science fiction writers view an epidemic?

An epidemic is a natural disaster. Unlike other external natural disasters, it attacks the inside of the human body and is more difficult to defend against than other natural disasters. In history, the epidemics have made significant and profound changes to the development of human civilization. However, with the advancement of technology, the damage caused by epidemics has been greatly reduced. It is believed that in the future, humans will succeed in eliminating epidemics.

According to Liu Cixin, the impact of any disaster on human society is twofold, and an epidemic is no exception. For example, the Black Death in medieval Europe was one of the most tragic epidemics, killing one-third to half of the European population at that time. But at the same time, it also shaken the absolute authority of the church, enhanced our attention to people's self, and the development of individual liberation, awareness of freedom and equality, are important factors leading to the occurrence of the Renaissance.

In addition to natural occurrences, the cause of future epidemics may include more and more human factors. The out-of-control of genetic engineering and nanotechnology may bring new types of epidemics.



Image: Liu Cixin

Liu Cixin's biggest worry is that genetic engineering technology and nanotechnology are out of control, or the epidemic that is deliberately used as a weapon. Viruses in nature do not aim to kill humans. The death of the host means that the viruses parasitizing them cannot survive.

However, artificial viruses are used as genetic weapons may be targeted at killing people. Such viruses may have high-efficiency transmission methods that natural viruses do not have, such as causing illness at the same time after a long period of asymptomatic infection. Such viruses may also target specific races or even individuals. Among the possible artificial viruses, viruses produced by nanotechnology are particularly worthy of attention, because such viruses are not life in

nature, but microscopic machinery, which may be more difficult to defend.

Han Song

A well-known sci-fi writer, he has served as Xinhua News Agency reporter, Director of the Interview Room, held positions such as the deputy editor and the executive editor of "Looking Oriental Weekly" magazine, and is currently the deputy director of the Xinhua News Agency's external news-editorial department and deputy director of the Central News Interview Center. Besides, Han Song is Standing Director of China Popular Science Writers Association. He is also a member of the China Writers Association.

He published collections of short stories and novels, which include *Universal Tombstone*, *Recycled Bricks*, *Soloists*, *The Ancient Ship of the Desert*, *The Fear of Seeing*, etc. Other feature-length works include *Red Ocean*, *Mars Shines on America: An Account of a Westward Journey in the Year 2066*, *Metro* trilogy, *Hospital* trilogy, etc.

Among all his works, the *Hospital* trilogy is called "a milestone in the new era of dystopia." His long list of awards and honours include the Science Fiction Galaxy Award², the Chinese

² The Galaxy Award (银河奖 Yínhé Jiǎng) is China's most prestigious science fiction award, which was started in 1986 by the magazines *Tree of Wisdom* (《智慧树》 Zhihui Shù) and *Science Literature & Art* (《科学文艺》 Kēxué Wényì). After *Tree of Wisdom* ceased

Science Fiction Nebula Award, the World Chinese Science Fiction Art Award, and the Jingdong Literature Award, respectively.

Q: How do science fiction writers view an epidemic?

Since Mary Shelley, the science fiction has been writing about the epidemic. *The Last Man*, is all about the entire human civilization wiped out by the Pandemic. Then there are also Clayton's *The Andromeda Strain* and Wang Jiankang's *The Cross*, etc., expressing great concern about the pandemic issue. I believe that epidemic caused by microorganisms is one of the top killers that threaten the survival of humankind today and should not be taken lightly. This is, first and foremost a question of decision-making.

Through summarizing experience and learning lessons, people re-examine the relationship with nature and other species, promote scientific "enlightenment" and scientific research, and at the same time promote social governance, humanistic care and ethical construction.

Maybe like in science fiction movies, there is a virus that quickly infects human brains, causing people to live like zombies. The way of human confrontation is isolation first, but

publication soon afterwards, the award has organized solely by Science Literature & Art, which was renamed to Science Fiction World (《科幻世界》) in 1991.

then another part of zombies must be eliminated through war.

The epidemic caused by the super virus artificially made in the laboratory. It spreads rapidly, causes a lot of death, and has no cure. Human civilization goes extinct within a week.



Image: Han Song

Q: What was the background of writing epidemic-related science fiction?

I have written some sci-fi about the epidemic, including *Sorority of SARS Survivors*, *AIDS: An Airborne Disease*, *Journey to Qingdao*, and the *Hospital* trilogy involving SARS, AIDS, and laboratory virus spills, etc. The background is my own experience, such as SARS being quarantined, having been to Xiaotangshan Hospital, visiting related laboratories, often seeing a doctor, and this situation has emerged as a new trend after industrialization, urbanization and globalization. The emergence of new viruses has caused social panic and economic shock. This is different from the epidemic of an agrarian society.

Key Words

Word	Pinyin	Meaning
艾滋病	àizībìng	AIDS (loanword)
病原体	bìngyúántǐ(med.)	pathogen
超新星	chāoxīnxīng	supernova
传染病	chuánrǎnxìng	infectious / epidemic
掉以轻心	diào yǐ qīng xīn	treat sth lightly / to lower one's guard
短篇小说	duǎnpiānxiǎoshuō	short story
非典	fēidiǎn	atypical pneumonia / Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome / SARS
黑死病	hēisǐbìng	bubonic plague / Black Death
胡思乱想	hú sī luàn xiǎng	to indulge in flights of fancy (idiom) / to let one's imagination run wild
基因工程	jīyīngōngchéng	genetic engineering
科幻小说	kēhuàxiǎoshuō	science fiction novel
科学研究	kēxuéyánjiū	scientific research
免疫系统	miǎnyìxìtǒng	immune system
纳米技术	nànmǐjìshù	nanotechnology
三部曲	sānbùqǔ	trilogy
文艺复兴	Wényìfùxīng	the Renaissance
吸取教训	xīqǔjiàoxùn	to draw a lesson (from a setback)
长篇小说	chángpiānxiǎoshuō	novel
中国作家协会	Zhōngguó Zuòjiā Xiéhuì	China Writers Association

		(CWA)
重新审视	<i>chóngxīnshěnsì</i>	<i>a re-examination / to have another look at something</i>
自然灾害	<i>zìránzāihài</i>	<i>natural disaster</i>

The views expressed here are those of the translator and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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