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The Development of Chinese and Cuban Science Fiction in Comparative Perspective: From Colonialism to Revolution and Beyond

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Abstract: This essay explores the literary genre of science fiction as a tool for historical and political analysis, focusing specifically on the development and transformation of the genre in China and Cuba. Through an examination of the uses and themes of science fiction literature in these countries, we can gain a deeper understanding of how Enlightenment ideas and socialist ideals merged with nationalist aspirations for independence and development. Given the major socialist revolutions that took place in both China and Cuba, our essay compares the development of science fiction in these nations, exploring how the genre was employed to promote societal projects and the challenges faced in implementing them. In the latter part of the essay, we analyse two contemporary novels that reflect on these revolutions – Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* and Eric Mota's *Habana Underguater* – examining the values of independence, revolution and progress that inspired them. Our focus will be on how these stories articulate the promises and disappointments of their respective revolutions, the impact of the 'new man' concept on the quest for individuality, and the collective memory of revolutionary experiences.

Keywords: science fiction, China, Cuba, Global South, revolution, socialism, international politics.

Introduction

The main objective of this essay is to examine the development and consolidation of science fiction literature in China and Cuba, considering their political experiences with colonialism, imperialism, and revolution. We also explore how contemporary Chinese and Cuban science fiction portrays the successes and shortcomings of these revolutionary experiences. Despite the differences between the two countries, they share significant historical experiences with colonialism, imperialism, and socialism, and are home to some of the most important socialist projects implemented in the Global South. The fact

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that both countries belong to the Global South and have established consolidated socialist regimes has brought them closer in terms of shared ideas and diplomatic linkages. In this sense, a comparative analysis of these ideas and societal projects through literature offers valuable insights into the intellectual similarities between the two countries (Wang 1997: 15-19; Xianglin, Hearn and Weiguang 2015: 141; Dubesset 2021). We chose science fiction because it was initially introduced as a foreign genre but was soon appropriated by intellectual circles in Cuba and China to promote nationalism and, following their political revolutions, the ideals of socialism and the concept of the 'new socialist man,' as we will discuss.

We also consider science fiction as an important instrument of political analysis because, following Frederic Jameson, science fiction as a literary genre is so intertwined with modernity that it became a vehicle for 'maps… and for schemes of all kinds,' which, in turn, echoes the tension between 'expression and construction': expression of the desire for an improved society, and the political plans implemented to make it happen (Jameson 2007: 42-43). Insofar as science fiction writers imagine the future in their stories, they are also capable of helping us understand the present, and to explain the past (Oreskes and Conway 2013), this is where science fiction, history, and political analysis converge.

In China and Cuba, as we will explain, political and intellectual elites adapted Western science and epistemologies to political aspirations for development and independence (Conn 2021: 17). In this sense, utopian science fiction became an important means to educate the population on science, technology, and to propagate specific visions for the future in those countries (Huters 2005; Isaacson 2017: 44-46; Ares 2021: 8). In the 21st century, in new intellectual and political scenarios, sci-fi literature articulates the perils and promises of those projects. We intend to address this issue in our analysis of two novels.

Our essay is organized in two sections. First, we explain how the development and consolidation of science fiction literature in China and Cuba relates to national yearnings for independence and development in face of imperialism, colonialism, and international competition. In this sense, we seek to explore the history of science fiction literature in those countries as a window for the dialectical adaptation of Western values and socialist projects to nationalist aspirations. It is not our intention to analyse the developments of the Cuban and Chinese Revolutions *per se*, nor to argue analytically about socialism. In the second section, we analyse two contemporary works of science fiction, one Chinese, another Cuban, which addresses the promises and shortcomings of their respective revolutions. These works are *The Fat Years* (Chan 2013) and *Habana Underguater* (Mota 2010). We finish the essay with a brief conclusion.

Colonialism, enlightenment, and revolution: sci-fi literature in China and Cuba

Before exploring into the consolidation of science fiction literature in China and Cuba, it is crucial to take a brief detour into the development of science fiction literature in the

West during the Enlightenment era. This is necessary because the perceptions of human nature and political narratives that influenced science fiction in the West, particularly in Europe, were eventually adopted by local intellectuals and political activists who advocated for reform and revolution, as we will see.

The roots of science fiction literature can be traced back to 'utopian literature,' which was first introduced by Thomas More in his famous book *Utopia* (1516). During the period of great navigations, the idea of discovering or creating a new and improved society became a part of European imagination and political thinking (Griesse 2012: 112). Thus, Utopian literature became a representation of the Renaissance aspirations for social transformation and the belief in continuous progress of society through scientific and technological advancements (Vieira 2010: 09-10; Vu 2019: 28-29; Williams 2019: 69). However, it was during the Enlightenment era that political narratives of progress based on science and human rationality spread throughout Europe, influencing political and cultural movements. It was in this context that science fiction as a distinct literary genre began to flourish (Evans 2009: 13-14).[1]

Different philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Paine, Henri de Saint-Simón, Marquis de Condorcet, Robert Owen, and even Mary Wollstonecraft, were important in promoting the Enlightenment aspiration, based on rationalism and scientific mode of thought, that it would be possible to transform society and human nature through educational policies based on scientific discoveries that would apply to the human nature and society (Berlin 2014, chaps 2–3; Reuter 2022).

In the intellectual context of the 19th century, it is important to mention the relevance of evolutionary theories of nature in European politics and culture. By adapting Darwin's concepts of 'evolution' and 'competition' to analyze the social world, some scientists, intellectuals, and other groups in Europe and America came to view themselves as part of a superior civilization, representing the final stage of human development. This idea, a distortion of Darwin's concepts, would be used to justify colonialism, and the discourse of 'the white man's burden': in other words, their situation as more evolved would impose on them the mission of 'civilizing' the world (Bell 2006; Schmitt 2014; Heraclides and Dialla 2015: 31-32).[2]

By the late 19th century, rationalist projects of transforming society and humans into better versions of themselves by science and technology, the idea of a 'New Man'[3] (Williams 2019: 73-79), was steadily propagated by literature, especially utopian literature and science fiction (Gomel 2004: 358-359; Cheng 2008: 8-14; Vieira 2010).[4] Keeping in mind this intellectual and political landscape in which the science fiction genre have consolidated in the West, we can thus 'travel' to the context of the Global South.

Throughout the Global South, bringing about societal and personal change emerged as a critical factor in the struggle against colonialism and for self-rule. Diverse intellectual traditions and political proponents skilfully incorporated Western philosophies, epistemologies, and various ideological frameworks to meet national objectives and challenge imperialistic forces. Science fiction proved to be an invaluable tool in the pursuit

of national independence and progress amid stiff competition from foreign powers (Isaacson 2017: 9-10; Conn 2021: 2).

Although it is possible to find early examples of science fiction literature in both countries since the mid-19th century, science fiction in China and in Cuba became more identifiable in the early 20th century. In both countries, it is possible to explain the consolidation of the science fiction genre as a process divided into three distinct phases: first, the consolidation of a new literary genre inspired by its European counterpart, being slowly aligned with the need for envisioning a new future with nationalist aspirations; second, the instrumentalization of the genre as a means of education and social cohesion; and third, a new phase possible because of the political reforms that allowed the uses of new styles and narratives. It is to this process of insertion and consolidation of science fiction in these countries that we will now turn our attention to.

China has a rich history as a 'Middle Kingdom' between the Russian Empire, Central Asian kingdoms, and Japan. However, by the 20th century, the country's international status had significantly changed, influenced by a range of factors, including the imperialist invasions of Japan and European countries. This resulted in a loss of political autonomy and many important regions of the country. During this period, the term 'sick man of Asia' became popular, characterizing the Chinese nation and its people after a series of wars that had a significant impact on the country's status.[5] It was in this context that science fiction made its first appearance in Chinese intellectual circles (Song 2013; Cixin 2016).

The 'Hundred Days' Reform' was a significant political movement that aimed to change political institutions, education policies, and scientific thinking in China. It took place from 11 June to 22 September 1898. This movement was triggered by China's defeat to Japan in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), which had a profound impact on Chinese intellectuals. It convinced them that it was necessary to implement a wide range of reforms to strengthen the country, including traditional modes of thinking such as Confucianism. One of the leaders of this movement was the nationalist and political activist Liang Qichao (1873-1927).[6]

Liang Qichao believed that wide reforms, not only institutional but also educational and epistemological, would strengthen China to compete with foreign powers and guarantee its independence (Scott 2008: 53-55; Isaacson 2017: 19). He also believed in the potential of fiction literature as a means to promote national pride and individual transformation; this was a revolutionary idea since fiction was not seen as an educational tool in China during this period (Hao 2008: 69-70; Jiang 2013: 116-117; Oufan 2021). After the suppression of the Reformist Movement, Liang Qichao sought refuge in Japan, where he encountered Western and Japanese utopian and science fiction literature. Later, he launched a magazine titled *New Fiction* that published both translated and original fiction and science fiction works in Chinese. This included the first-ever Chinese translation of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1871) by Jules Verne.

For its turn, in the early 20th century, Cuba was a newly independent country after a series of wars that were called 'Revolution' among its participants and nationalists – the

idea of 'Revolution' at this time did not convey any specific ideology, it was a concept that implied a new ethics and subjectivity for the nation and its people (Gonçalves 2017: 16-17). However, shortly after its independence, Cuba became a *de facto* protectorate of the United States, and it was occupied by the US-military for four years. This political situation engendered a sense of disappointment among political activists and nationalists; however, it was not long before a new revolutionary movement emerged, aimed at fundamentally transforming Cuba and its people (Fagen 1969: 13; Cheng 2008: 127-128).

In the first revolutionary movement for independence, the political thinker Jose Martí was very important for the ideas of progress and anticolonialism that would permeate the intellectual circles in Cuba for years to come, and his ideas were appropriated by Cuban revolutionaries in the 1950s (Cheng 2008: 129; Babbitt 2014: 13). According to Martí, it was necessary to create a new culture that would help forge a new way of being, a new ethics, that would lead to effective liberty and 'spiritual freedom' (Babbitt 2014: 6).

The arrival of science fiction in Cuba came first through translations of European classics, but those didn't take off in popularity. Instead, pre-existing works of fantastic literature began incorporating science fiction themes; this trend was also seen in other Latin American countries where science fiction wasn't as sought after as in the USA and Europe. Within Latin American intellectual circles, including Cuba, science fiction was regarded as a foreign genre, often relegated to children's literature, and not seen as relevant to the ideas, values, and realities of the region (Ferreira 2019: 665-667). Enrique Labrador Ruiz played a significant role in consolidating science fiction in Cuba. He was among the first Latin American writers to incorporate science fiction themes in fantastic literature, thereby creating a unique genre of Latin American novels. His three novels *El Laberinto de si mismo* (1933), *Cresival* (1933), e *Anteo* (1940), together were named as *Novellas gasiformes*. In those works, Ruiz used the 'fictional double' or doppelgänger, and time-space travel in his stories. According to Ruiz, he brought those literary artifices to engage his readers in exercises of imagination about the past and the future (Fernández and Ruiz 1980: 267).[7]

During the 1950s and 1960s, both Cuba and China implemented a plethora of cultural and educational programs through their regimes. These regimes rapidly incorporated educational initiatives and various forms of artistic expression to transform individuals and create a 'New Man.' Intellectuals and artists were encouraged to participate actively in this socialist initiative (Ferrari 2014: 9), however, some of those intellectuals and artists questioned the pressures from the regime, arguing that it would eventually lead to repression and censure.[8] During this era, the Soviet Russian literature had a significant impact in Cuba and China, particularly in the science fiction genre, which was still not very popular in those countries.

In China, right at the beginning of Mao Zedong's regime, inspired by the Soviet experience, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) encouraged the reading of science fiction literature as a way to propel young people's interest in science and technology, but also to engage them in the regime's vision for the future of the country based on socialist values – in other words, to promote a socialist sociability among the new generation (Song 2016: 286-287). The same process occurred in Cuba during the early years of the

revolutionary government, when science fiction became more popular as it was incorporated into the literacy programs implemented by the government (Redondo 2015: 188-189; Caruso 2020: 17). However, the works of science fiction allowed in both countries were very restricted to the soviet canon; the preferred ones were usually works of 'hard science fiction', sci-fi novels that did not engage in fantastic or scientifically disruptive narratives, dystopias were also restricted (Li 2018: 649).

In the years that followed, Cuba and China grew closer politically. Cuba was the first Latin American country to recognize the People's Republic of China, a symbolic act of recognition towards a 'sister' socialist nation. Despite their differences, Cuba and China had similar political aims. Although Cuba officially sided with the Soviet Union after the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s, mostly for economic reasons, China's cultural strategies for implementing a socialist society were particularly important and inspiring to Cuban officials. This was because the strategies implemented in China for the consolidation of a socialist society – and socialist individuals – were seen among Cuban officials and intellectuals committed to the socialism in the Revolution as more in line with their plans for the future (Cheng 2008: 152-154).

For Mao Tse-Tung and Fidel Castro, their socialist projects emphasized the transformation of the individual through 'voluntarism' (the belief that individual will should prevail over material conditions), mass mobilization, and moral incentives (Cheng 2007: 726). Accordingly, besides teaching and stimulating interest in science among children, another use among these regimes for science fiction literature was to strengthen the new socialist pact. Because of its proximity to utopian literature, science fiction is especially useful for promoting visions of the future (Lesman 2021: 53) – in this sense, Cuban science fiction writers in the 1960s were greatly influenced by the optimism of the Revolution and its promises of new sociability, often articulating the trope of the 'new socialist man' in their stories (Redondo 2002). A similar process happened in China; under very restricted rules, sci-fi literature was also important to promote confidence on the leadership of the country and in their vision of a better future based on socialist ideals (Major 2004).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, science fiction underwent a transformation in China due to a political and cultural thaw that allowed authors to experiment with their narratives and themes. This transformation occurred under the reformist government of Deng Xiaoping, who enabled scientists and intellectuals to have more freedom to develop their studies, compared to the Mao years. This signalled a shift from Mao's view of scientists and intellectuals as 'suspicious elements' facing the revolution to a more tolerant position toward their activities (Li 2021: 12). In the late 1970s, the China Popular Science Creative Writing Association was founded, and new sci-fi magazines emerged. Although Chinese science fiction continued to exist in a context of cultural repression, it flourished in the 1980s, bringing in new narratives and veiled stories about the traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution, which is referred to as 'scar literature' (Yang 2012; Knight 2016).

In Cuba, at the end of the 'Grey Years' in late 1970s, when the regime also started to thaw its censorship, science fiction literature also flourished: specialized magazines,

literary groups, and prizes for sci-fi writers were established, and science fiction began to achieve more attention as a literary genre in its own right (Garcia 2016: 58). An example of the new status of sci-fi in Cuba is the fact that Augustín de Rojas was the laureate of the David Award (*El Premio David*), the most important literary prize in the country, with his novel *Espiral* (1982). Although still very much attached to the socialist narrative, *Espiral* brought different literary motifs such as civilization in other planets, interplanetary travel, and characters that articulate self-doubt about their actions, and uncertainties about the future.

In the late 20th century, both countries went through different paths politically and economically. China implemented reforms intended to create a 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics' – the implementation of a socialist regime with market economy, and the focus on the creation of a moderately well-off middle class. This strategy was considerably successful in changing China's international standing in the international scenario (Li and Worm 2011; Zhu and Lu 2015: 28-29). Since the 2010s, the primary concerns of the regime have been the economic and political stability, the strengthening of the party's power, and its legitimation in the international scenario (Li 2022).

For Cuba, the end of the Soviet Union led to the collapse of the economy; the so called 'Periodo Especial' (Special Period) in the 1990s was characterized by economic crisis, the collapse of public services, new migration flows from Cuba to the United States and Spain, and the spread of prostitution and organized crime (Pandolfi 2021: 3–4). However, the crisis did not lead to the end of the regime, and the diplomatic and economic ties with China were very important for this development – for China, its political and economic partnership with Cuba is considered to be very important for the South-South relations (Cheng 2007; Santoro 2010). Moreover, for both regimes, the instrumentalization of culture remained crucial in establishing political and social harmony (Braester 2015; Wang 2020; Juan-Navarro 2022; Fusco 2023).

Addressing the promises and failures of the revolutions, as well as envisioning the future, became crucial for intellectuals and artists, including science fiction writers. In the next section, we will analyse two works of science fiction that explore the current challenges faced by the Chinese and Cuban people. Our focus will be on how these stories articulate the promises and disappointments of their respective revolutions, the impact of the 'new man' concept on the quest for individuality, and the memory of revolutionary experiences.

Chan Koong-Chung's The Fat Years

In the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, and amid new, more insidious forms of technological repression, the utopianism that had characterized Chinese literature for a century gave way to critical reflections on utopian narratives and projects of the future, but in an objective context of economic development and the ascendancy of China as an international player (Song 2015). How to deal with those ambivalences became a motif in Chinese sci-fi literature (Song 2013). In this scenario, the novel *The Fat Years* is an important example that illustrates these questions and problems.

Chan Koong-Chung was born in Shanghai in 1952, but he grew up in Hong Kong, where he worked as a journalist and writer. Mr. Chan eventually went back to live in the mainland. Although Mr. Chan's books have been banned in mainland China, he got international notoriety after his sci-fi novel *The Fat Years* was published in 2009 in Hong Kong. The book focuses more on the social aspects of the uses of technology and science than on the intricate details of the workings of technology and futurist realities – it is a soft sci-fi novel that creates a dystopian scenario placed in time not very far from the time it was published. Its main character is named Lao Chen, and it is self-inspired by the author's own life experiences: in the novel, Mr. Lao is a journalist and writer with a focus on culture and a particular interest in Chinese history.

The story is set in 2011, after China hosted the Olympic Games, which was an important validation of its international status, and after an international economic crisis which negatively affected the West, pending the international balance of power in favour of China. In this context, Mr. Lao acknowledges the economic development, and is proud of living in a country whose political regime was able to shield its population from chaos and crisis. In this sense, the author is alluding to the ability of the CCP to deal with economic crisis that affected other countries of the Global South years earlier, such as the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and the Ruble crisis in Russia in 1997, but it is also possible to insert the financial crisis of 2008 in this narrative.

On a more substantive level, Mr. Lao is in tune with other intellectuals and the population in general in having a sense of satisfaction with the regime; criticism is almost inexistent in his conversations with friends, in cultural events, and even in television. In his social interactions, he feels that there is no interest in the past among intellectuals or the public in general – no history books are available in the libraries and bookstores. Mr. Lao only hears 'good stories,' about the past and current successes of the regime.

It is not that people have forgotten the past and the excesses of the regime, such as the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre, they just seem not to be interested in that, and this bothers Mr. Lao in an unconscious level. To deal with his own discomfort in not being able to conform completely, he engages in cynicism. As the anthropologist Hans Steinmüller argues, this attitude of cynicism is perceptible among those people in contemporary China who still want to remember and to talk about the bad experiences of the past, but fear that by insisting on it they will be excluded, and they feel embarrassed for not being as satisfied as their peers (Steinmüller 2011: 25).

One day, by chance, Mr. Lao happened to meet an acquaintance named Fang Caodi. Mr. Fang has always been an outsider, an individual who has never found a place in society, he never had a respectable profession, he didn't attend university, and he didn't have many friends. Upon finding him, Mr. Fang asked if Mr. Lao remembered about 'the lost month' – an entire month that, according to Mr. Fang, people did not remember, which existed after the economic crisis that changed China's international status. Although Mr. Lao did not give much attention to Mr. Fang, for he has always been an outsider, he started to feel even more uncomfortable after this encounter.

Things change when he meets a past love interest that he hadn't seen in a long time. Xiao Xi had been a lawyer, but she gave up on the profession because she did not agree with government oppression. Ms. Xiao became active on the internet, where she spends days writing in forums looking for other people like her: outsiders that feel they live in a situation where the discomfort of memory is sublimated by the satisfaction of material needs and a feeling of harmony in society (Steinmüller 2011: 26). Blogging began an important activity among dissenters in the early 2000s, and the regime have been strengthening its supervision on discourse online as a way of restricting criticism of the regime as well as distorting historical sensitive facts (Tavernise *et al.* 2023).

As a successful journalist and writer, Mr. Lao had made many important friends, he knew intellectuals, businessmen and political figures. One of his favourite activities was watching movies at the house of a real estate tycoon, who was friends with a prominent member of the Chinese Communist Party named He Dongsheng. At these late-night movie sessions, Chen admired He Dongsheng's interest in hard-to-find old films from the Cultural Revolution era. Dongsheng was a discreet man who spoke little about his life and his job.

The reference to the works of the Cultural Revolution is important because this is a delicate subject even for the leaders of the regime; in a way, self-deception among leaders and advocates of the Mao years also means they live in a state of cynicism: they respect and admire the efforts of the 'Cultural Revolution' because they believe in those ideals, but must admit its failures and the necessity of reform and accommodation with market mechanisms. In this delicate situation, every criticism is existential and dangerous for the regime, and still is, as historian Stephen Kotkin argues (interview by author, 20 March 2023). However, in the carefully created image in those old movies, the future was 'guaranteed.'

Instigated by Ms. Xiao, Mr. Lao decides to meet Fang Caodi: he learns about his friend's investigation into the 'lost month' and the presumed crisis that preceded that event. Together with Xiao Xi, they find out that other people had also been talking about a missing month but were silenced on social media and discredited in their social circles. All these people shared some characteristics: they used controlled medication of various types and were considered problematic by their friends and family to the point of being exiled from society. In this search, Mr. Lao becomes less of a character than a traveller that serves as a witness to the world of the outsiders, of those who do not accept they live in a state of harmony, and that something must have been done to the population by the government, and this 'lost month' is the key to this mystery.

At last, they come up with the idea to kidnap He Dongsheng and to force him to talk about what really has happened before the economic crisis of 2011. Ultimately, He Dongsheng admits that the government seized the opportunity opened by the world economic crisis, which caused people to fear for their safety, and inserted a substance called MDNA-Ecstasy6 into all the liquid foods, including in the water, which generates a feeling of satisfaction and well-being – the government had been waiting for an opportunity to put this plan into practice but felt that there had to be an event that would allow people

to be willing to accept ample intervention on their lives. Here, the author indicates how much Chinese society has historically been engaged in the quest for China's prominence and nationalism.

However, the question is still pertinent: what did the government do to make people uninterested in the past? At this point, He Dongsheng admits that he just does not know exactly; according to him that was a choice, not an imposition. The people have chosen to live in a 'fake paradise, ' in a state of irony. Mr. Lao argues that most people in contemporary China are doing exactly this: choosing to forget the past in exchange for material benefits and a feeling of national pride. We believe that this is a point that merits more consideration. It is known that the regime have been apt in using new technologies to curtail the discussion of 'delicate' matters, such as the Tiananmen Square, and determined to silencing dissent, as the recent cases of the disappearance and imprisonment of influential bloggers and fiction writers critical of the government attest (Zhang *et al.* 2023).

We can see how the author engages with an important question that the CCP had to deal with after the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward; both these political projects were design not only to improve economic conditions (although they failed), but also to legitimize the regime by forcibly changing people's allegiances and morals, by making them politically loyal not only to the party but also to a project for the future. This process of engineering national identity and individuality was extremely traumatic and violent (Braester 2015: 436-437), but it does not mean the new strategy, based on technology and silencing instead of on force, is less violent – it might be even more insidious because it makes individuals the censors of themselves.

In this sense, we can see a similarity with a process that has begun in the early 2000s, when the CCP began to worry more about the necessity of legitimizing the regime. Mr. Xi Jinping was incisive in affirming the importance of reinvigorating pride in Chinese culture, and to the goal of creating a harmonious society, inviting teachers, journalists, and writers – especially fiction writers – to 'tell the good story of China' (Povo Online 2017). By inviting the intellectual elite to highlight stories of heroism, strength, courage, and determination, and extolling Chinese and socialist values, Xi Jinping implies his dedication to build a vision of a utopian society that China has historically struggled to achieve in his perspective: development, independence, and social cohesion.

In other words, for the new leadership of China, to control how China is talked about is still as important as the economic projects and international diplomacy; to steer the course of institutional and individual transformations is still important for the regime (Wang 2020: 3-5). In this scenario, creativity in art, even when not directly about the past and personal memories, can be an act of defiance because artistic self-expression is a way of understanding and changing ourselves and our realities. In this context, being a fictional writer becomes a dangerous occupation (Xuecun 2014).

As Chan Koong-Chung suggests, to recognize the ambivalence about the Revolutionary project, especially since the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989), is seen as a difficult process; for most people, the regime was able to fulfil some of its promises,

there is a sense of national pride and some confidence in the future. For others, it is important, still, to recognize the mistakes of the regime and to argue for other narratives about it to be allowed, as a way to break away with the impending feeling that they live in a sort of simulation.

On the one hand, as we have mentioned, the historical yearnings for independence and development among the Chinese people were – at least in the 21st century – at some level fulfilled: China is an important player in the international scenario, it has political, economic, and military power. On the other hand, the opportunities for individual autonomy and flourishing are still being curtailed, albeit in a more insidious way. In this context, to discuss these contradictions openly is not only difficult in the institutional level, but also painful at a personal level.

Erick J. Mota's Habana Underguater

The end of the Soviet Union was devastating for Cuba. Suddenly, the population, which only a few years before was living under a regime that promised them a bright future, with subsidized public services, culture, and access to the arts, found itself in a state of crisis and ideological uncertainty. Among the new problems faced by Cuba, there are the search for new economic partners, social unrest, and the possible effects of climate change (Lopez 2022). The literary circles were profoundly influenced by these transformations and new questions (Juan-Navarro 2022). In this context, influenced by those new problems and by foreign works of literature, we have seen a new generation of Cuban sci-fi writers exploring new themes and narrative styles. In this essay we highlight the author Erick J. Mota, who wrote a novel in the cyberpunk style,[9] or, according to Toledano Redondo, 'ciberpunk' – with the 'i' to highlight its Latin American variation (Redondo 2019: 79).

Aesthetically, Cyberpunk addresses the relationship between individuals and technology in a universe marked by decadence and disenchantment. (Redondo 2005: 448). As Mota has mentioned, science fiction still has a lot of room to develop in Latin America because, in his words: ' [I]n Latin America, our political, economic, and social conditions are so dysfunctional, and at the same time so surreal, that it is not difficult to conceive of extreme scenarios such as those depicted in science fiction. '[10] (interview by author, 13 January 2022). In *Habana Underguater* (2010) Mota broadens the discussion of the challenges faced in contemporary Cuba.

In *Habana Underguater*, the Soviet Union is the main international power, while the United States, ravaged by civil wars, have decayed – in a reversal of real events, it is the Americans who risk their lives in boats to seek refuge in Cuba. Hurricane Florinda was the most catastrophic hurricane that hit the country in last years, in the story, and it destroyed part of the island, making the living conditions in it almost impossible. One of the neighbourhoods in Havana most affected by the hurricanes is known as the 'Underguater.' In the story, the 'rusos' (as the Russians are called) built walls to prevent the city from being totally devastated, but they abandoned the country soon after to create

their own colonies on other planets. Since then, Cuba, and especially 'Underguater,' became a locus of violence and poverty.

The hurricane's name, 'Florinda,' alludes to the State of Florida, a significant destination for Cuban exiles since the Cuban Revolution. This ongoing migration has resulted in the loss of intellectuals, activists, academics, and artists—individuals who are vital not only as human capital but also as storytellers and innovators in politics and the arts. Their departure has been a profound and traumatic challenge, leaving the nation in a state of intellectual and artistic stagnation. Additionally, 'Hurricane Florinda' symbolically references the collapse of the Soviet Union, an event with drastic repercussions for Cuba.

As we have mentioned, ever since its alignment with the USSR, and the sanctions imposed on Cuba by the United States, Cuba became extremely dependent on Soviet financial and commercial support. Even though in later years Cuba became close to new economic partners such as China, Brazil, Russia, Canada, Venezuela, and Spain (ONEI 2023), it has not profoundly changed its economic situation. There is not enough infrastructure and economic productivity to allow for a steady economic development, even considering the polemical process of the normalization of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the USA, initiated during the Obama administration (Stelzer 2016). In some ways, the process of normalization can even been seen as an opportunity for the regime to sustain itself even longer without having to promote any significant reform (Brookes 2016).

These new economic partners are referred in the novel as the new corporations and groups that rule the island; international companies, such as a 'Malayocorean-Japanese' oil company, and Brazilian and Chinese technology and infrastructure companies have settled on the island, wielding great political and economic power, but not necessarily brought much improvement, for the country became more indebted with those companies.

Meanwhile, the Soviets, or 'rusos,' have moved from Earth, establishing a separate civilisation in outer space from which they observe everything from afar, occasionally reaching out to their old allies. This situation mirrors the feelings of abandonment and resentment that some people may harbour towards Cuba's most significant political and economic partner for decades. In this context, Cuba became a place dominated by people and groups that do not care about reconstructing the place, but only with taking the most advantage of it while they can. Large faceless corporations and mobsters basically rule the country, an allegory to the real situation that Cuba faces ever since the late 1990s, when tourism was again allowed in the country and, due to the impoverishment of the population, organized crime, prostitution, and drug trafficking became part of the daily life.

In any case, the promises of the 'rusos' for Cuba are depicted as having failed. Yet, it is apathy, not anger or outward opposition that pervades society. Most people in 'Underguarter' live their lives trying to survive among the ruins of the city, and of their own hopes. Some try to escape, but it is too dangerous. The only route of escape is the

cyberspace, where another reality exists. It is on this cyberplace that part of the power game between mobsters, corporations, countries, and even religious organizations takes place. Some entities have a life on their own on the cyberspace, that is why some religious activities are performed there. In this cyberspace, Juan (whose avatar is called Rama), steals an offering (called 'ebbó') that belongs to a religious (and gangster) organization called 'Regla de Ocha. ' A hitman called Pablo is hired to kill Rama and to retrieve the offering from the virtual altar.

The descriptions of the virtual reality that these hackers and groups navigate incorporate elements of Cuban culture and art (for example, the sky of the virtual universe is described as a 'Romañach painting' – Leopoldo de Romañach was a Cuban painter, famous for his portraits and landscapes). It is also where the African cultural background of the country is most present. In fact, it is part of what makes this narrative 'ciberpunk': the narrative acknowledges the rich African influence in Cuban culture and brings it to the cyberspace. However, the fact that the African elements are most present on the cyberspace is a way of telling just how much this part of Cuban culture has been 'hidden' from popular narratives about the country, but the black population in Cuba has been able to retain its cultural practices and autonomy up to some level, they have even been able to establish active ethnic organizations (Farber 2011: 158-159).

However, Pablo protects Juan because he is the nephew of Diana, his lover. Upon discovering that Pablo has not kept his agreement, 'La Regla de Ocha' hires another hitman, Pedro, to kill Pablo. But Pedro is saved from an attack by Pablo, and they become friends. They begin an investigation to find out why a religious offering was so important to the 'Ocha' with the help of a mystic named Miguél and his three hacker daughters. It is worth mentioning that Pedro and Pablo are black men, a change in the traditional hero as a white man, or an immigrant that is lost in the ruins of some other country. Pedro, Pablo, and Juan (Rama) live in those realities, real and virtual, and are part of them, without questioning much about how or why it is the way it is.

In some ways, Mota describes a state of apathy, or even a state of irony – as in the case of the characters in Chinese novel *The Fat Years*. Cubans haven't totally abandoned the promises of freedom and development from their old partners, the 'rusos', but they know these promises are now extremely distant. As the writer Jorge Fornet argues, while in other Latin American countries frustration with promises of revolution came early, in Cuba, on the other hand, confidence in the vision of the future that the regime promoted became so essential to the individual subjectivity that abandoning these promises is a very traumatic process (Fornet 2003: 5-7).

After many difficult battles in the cyberspace, Pedro, and Pablo find out that the offering Rama stole was the Nobel Prize medal for literature awarded to Ernest Hemingway – the writer lived in Cuba for years and considered it as his home, but he was forced to leave after the Revolution. On the medal is encrypted a map to access hidden places in the Russian Global Network. Any person or group with access to this map becomes a threat to the Russians and their system of space colonies. The open ending leaves us wondering how the group will use this information against the Russians.

We do not have the ending that we expect, there is no redemption, there is no salvation. As in the end of *The Fat Years*, in the novel, Pedro, Pablo, and Juan must eventually decide what to do with their lives and with what they know. In any case, they feel the weight of the ambivalence, the difficulty of not having anything to believe in, any promise to hold on to. *Habana…* is an allegory of the colonial past of Cuba and of the new configuration of the international system: the rise of new powers, technological development, the way Cuba has sought to reposition itself in this scenario. Mostly, it is a tale about the inconsistencies between development and backwardness, hope and despair, between promises of freedom and real oppression – in sum, the ambivalences of the Cuban revolutionary experience.

Conclusion

The Russian Revolution, along with the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Cuban Revolution, were born from a long-standing human quest for better societies, justice, development, and freedom. The 20th century marked a period where these grand societal projects were put into practice, underpinned by confidence in the potential of rationality, science, and technology (Figes 1998: 781). In China and Cuba, the most significant societal projects rooted in socialist principles outside the European context took shape, providing crucial material for political and historical comparative analysis.

We suggest that exploring the development and use of science fiction in China and Cuba offers an enlightening perspective for examining these revolutions and their afterword within and for the Global South. We encourage more international relations analysts to engage with this agenda, using literature to deepen our understanding of how political ideas are received, adapted, and developed in different political contexts.

Science fiction literature has evolved throughout the 20th century by integrating utopian and dystopian elements and demonstrating, through lived political experiences, that utopia possesses not only an idealistic nature but also a critical drive. By exploring the development of science fiction in these countries, we could better understand how socialist ideals and projects from the West intertwined with nationalist aspirations for freedom and development in countries shaped by the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. The novels analysed in this essay embody those ideals for independence and a critical view of the projects of society implemented in those countries — hence the presence of ambivalence and irony in the narratives.

Notes

1 *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley is a landmark in science fiction and gothic literature. In the novel, Shelley was a pioneer in a theme that would eventually become a hallmark of science fiction: her novel envisions the ambitions and pitfalls of using science and technology to ambitious projects of human transformation.

2 For Darwin, competition and adaptability were at the core of his findings on 'evolution.' In this sense, evolution did not necessarily mean the survival of the 'superior' organism but of the most adaptable to

its environment, therefore, Charles Darwin did not consider his ideas on evolution suitable for analysing differences between individuals nor human societies (Richards 2013; Lightman and Zon 2014: 4).

3 We use the term 'new man' because this is a specific concept. The concept of the 'new man' was the basis of cultural and educational policies in socialist Russia, China, and Cuba (Serra 2007; Cheng 2008; Dikötter 2017). In narrative terms, the 'new man' is defined by social consciousness, clarity of purpose in society, ideological conviction, willingness to self-sacrifice, and, most importantly, by demonstrating unwavering confidence in socialist principles and in the possibility of realizing the socialist utopia (Terz 1960: 48-49).

4 William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888) were two popular books that influenced socialist groups in the United States and Europe (Ferns 1999: 74), and Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1905) was very important among socialists.

5 The 'Opium Wars' (1840-1842), the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the Boxing Revolt (1900) and the first Sino-Japanese War, as mentioned.

6 In an essay entitled 'On the relationship between fiction and ruling the people,' Liang argued that the path to political reform should go through a renewal of the people through art, especially literature, and giving the people a vision of the future, a project to be carried out.

7 Other Cuban writers of this new Latin American novel are Alejo Carpentier and Virgilio Piñera.

8 According to Par Kumaraswami about this period in Cuba: 'It was perhaps only the recognition of underdevelopment and a desire to contribute to the creation of an authentic Cuban cultural identity that provided some common ground in a context of polarization and conflict' (Kumaraswami 2016: 65).

9 The precursor of this style is Phillip K. Dick, especially his short story 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,' published in 1968. Thematically, Cyberpunk describes futuristic scenarios without utopian elements and evokes the independent, contesting, democratic and anti-authoritarian attitude characteristic of the 1970s Punk movement.

10 In the original: 'En América Latina, contamos con condiciones políticas, económicas y sociales tan disfuncionales, y al mismo tiempo tan surrealistas, que no es difícil concebir escenarios extremos como los que plantea la ciencia ficción.'

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O desenvolvimento da ficção científica chinesa e cubana em perspectiva comparativa: do colonialismo à revolução e além

Resumo: Este ensaio explora o gênero literário de ficção científica como uma ferramenta de análise histórica e política. Nossa ênfase é o desenvolvimento e transformação do gênero na China e em Cuba. Por meio de um exame dos usos e temas da literatura de ficção científica nesses países, podemos obter uma compreensão mais profunda de como as ideias do Iluminismo e os ideais socialistas se fundiram com as aspirações nacionalistas por independência e desenvolvimento. Dadas as grandes revoluções socialistas que ocorreram tanto na China quanto em Cuba, nosso ensaio compara o desenvolvimento da ficção científica nesses países, explorando como a ficção científica foi empregada para promover projetos sociais, e os desafios enfrentados nas suas implementações. Na última parte do ensaio, analisamos dois romances contemporâneos que refletem sobre essas revoluções — 'The Fat Years', de Chan Koonchung, e 'Habana Underguater', de Eric Mota — examinando os valores de independência, revolução e progresso que os inspiraram. Nosso foco será em como essas histórias articulam as promessas e decepções de suas respectivas revoluções, o impacto do conceito de 'novo homem' na busca por individualidade e a memória coletiva das experiências revolucionárias.

Palavras-chave: ficção científica; China; Cuba; Sul Global; revolução; socialismo; política internacional.

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