

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

The Beautiful and the Whole: Inverting Corporeal Morality in Ye Yonglie's "Corrosion"

Virginia L. Conn

Volume 6 Issue 1 - *Embodying Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-6-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE WHOLE: INVERTING CORPOREAL MORALITY IN YE YONGLIE'S "CORROSION"

Virginia L. Conn

Science Fiction produced in the years immediately following the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) was shaped not only by strict and constantly shifting literary regulations, but also the political desire to enfold numerous demographic populations into a single unified front. Far from a homogenising erasure of identity, Maoist populism recognised ethnic, racial, and religious diversity while simultaneously subordinating such heterogeneity to an ideology that invested individual bodies with national attributes endorsed by the state. In doing so, the body became a symbolic representation of the values of the nation, such that an individual's morals, physical attributes, and even willingness to work reflected on the party and state as a whole.

The imagined individual that developed out of this national investiture was a collective hero that evinced a standardised set of lauded attributes. Theodore Hsi-en Chen identifies the following seven qualities as characteristic of the Chinese communist hero: absolute selflessness, obedience to the Communist party, class consciousness, ideological study, labour and production, versatility, and being a "red expert" (92). Among these qualities, ideological and material transformation are co-constitutive, with the special recognition that, in China, "reactionary people 'shall be compelled to reform themselves through labor so as to become new men'" (92). Beyond even the psychological dimensions of this humanistic remoulding was a concerted effort to reimagine an embodied population that was fundamentally informed by communist ideology, literally becoming new humans. The collective hero was therefore the natural end point of centuries of revolutionary ideology and corporeal language in which ideal individuals were remade in the light of a new society. As the Chinese Cultural Revolution intended to make the world anew, so too did they intend to remake humanity – and it was through Science Fiction (SF) that this new, idealised new hero could be projected.

As such, SF being produced at this time was uniquely positioned to describe the ideal embodied citizen as an inevitable product of existing social and developmental policies, one in which potential future bodies developed as material products of the same communist revolution that had also created a new cultural and literary landscape. At the same time, 'the body' as it was classified by the state was very much an imaginary – particularly in the case of SF, it was a projection of a continuously redefined ideal. 'The body' became a stand-in for 'the state' precisely because it *could* be regulated and controlled in a way that the nation as a cohesive whole could not. 'Bodies' were defined, planned, projected, and controlled in ways that may have had no basis in extant

circumstances, but which nevertheless impacted the idea of what individuals *should* be – and what they should be was whole, healthy, and beautiful.

By playing off the conflation of morality and beauty, the SF short story “Corrosion” (“腐蚀”, 1981, translated 1989) by Ye Yonglie (叶永烈) grapples with the difficulty of normative national inclusion for non-ideal bodies and the challenges this posed for a literature attempting to create a model world peopled with ideal citizens, one where acknowledging bodily infirmity, the potential for illness, or even ugliness was subject to censure. In doing so, the story undercuts the idea of physical perfection and beauty as representative of moral perfection, with material embodiment and physical appearance posited as the inverse of ideological integrity: as characters appear more prosperous, successful, and physically attractive, they actually become increasingly morally degraded; as characters physically decay, their moral quality increases. In many ways a cynical story of the value placed on form over substance – though one that supports and ultimately reaffirms the nationalist commitment to future-oriented human progress – “Corrosion” forcefully grounds its final political conclusion in a revolutionary enrolment of physically degraded bodies within the sphere of national unity from which they were historically denied, while rejecting the beautiful and whole as performative superficiality.

“Corrosion” is, primarily, a story about the academic repercussions of the arrival of a strain of ultra-corrosive space bacteria on Earth. From the outset, however, an assumption of beauty as representative of morality is fundamental to what will later be its radical reconceptualization of civic participation and virtue. The handsome protagonist, Wang Chong,¹ spends the five years following the bacteria’s arrival safely ensconced in a university setting, comfortably working his way up the ranks, while both his mentor and colleague/rival quarantine themselves in the desert to study the bacteria. When they eventually make a breakthrough, Wang Chong seizes the opportunity to attach himself to their work and promote his own scientific standing. The crux of the problem is not in conquering the bacteria and the threat it represents, but rather, who gets the credit – when the unattractive Fan Shuan (Wang Chong’s rival) writes the final report, he lists not only himself, Du Wei (their mentor), and Wang Chong as the authors, but also Li Li, the scientist who initially discovered the bacteria and died in the attempt to categorise it.² Her inclusion represents a problem for Wang Chong, who has aspirations of receiving the Nobel Prize for his involvement in the project and believes (correctly) that only three laureates may share it. By becoming the public face of the project, Wang Chong has positioned himself as the arbiter of knowledge and saviour of the nation, but after seeing the sacrifices everyone except himself has made (in addition to Li Li, who died of bacterial exposure during the initial expedition, the elderly Du Wei eventually succumbs to the hardships of isolation in the desert and Fan Shuan works himself to death), Wang Chong realises that his own soul is ugly and corroded despite his outward appearance of success, and asks that the other three authors be honoured, with his own name left off the final report.³

Addressing the development of an idealised embodied figure during China’s mid-twentieth century, Hung-Yok Ip notes the “historical backdrop of a culture known for its critical stance toward the individual pursuit of self-beautification” while simultaneously recognising the mobilisation of

“self-beautification practices and images [...] for political purposes” as part of the broader conflation of beauty and morality (330). Individual beauty is thereby mobilised as a marker of personal morality in Mao- and immediate post-Mao-era literature at the same time as depictions of the individual came to represent collective traits. Given the conflation of beauty and morality and of the individual and the nation – or as Eva Kit-wah Man claims, the integration of “the imagination of [ideal bodies] with the imaginary future of the state” (140) – the kinds of science fictional depictions of beauty shown in “Corrosion” became the ideal medium for imagining a collective corporeal morality.

Masking and Performativity

I argue in this essay that, rather than simply depicting visibly imperfect bodies or an attempt by the state to incorporate such individuals into an acceptable narrative of national progress, the representation of the human body as a combination of interior and exterior are troubled in “Corrosion.” A shared point of reference for the unification of beauty and morality is necessary to understand the depiction of Wang Chong: by having other characters comment on his goodness while the author describes his idealised physical characteristics, it is trivially easy to eisegetically combine the two characteristics. By aligning the text itself with a performative visibility that self-consciously promotes physical beauty as an outgrowth of internal goodness only to invert that conclusion at the end, the story sets up the expectation of physical perfection as a prerequisite for moral goodness only to knock it down. This is most apparent in the early descriptions of Wang Chong and his rival, Fan Shuan. The two are described in-text using oppositional physical terms that, for much of the story, seem to be reflective of their actual roles: Wang Chong, the handsome, intellectual protagonist, is well-liked and held in high regard by everyone from his mentor to his mentor’s wife to Li Li, the heroic scientist who perished in the opening scene. Fan Shuan, on the other hand, is consistently described as second-best, a swarthy and rough pretender to Wang Chong’s inevitable and well-deserved place in the spotlight.

Wang Chong is described in Ye Yonglie’s text, translated by Pei Minxin, as:

[...] a youth of about thirty. His figure was like a bean sprout, tall and thin. His face was white, and his cheeks hollow. His eyeballs were like the black pieces [of Go] they were playing, big and sparkling. A mere glance at the young man and one would say, “he must be extremely intelligent.” Dressed in his pants and shirt, he slowly waved the foldable fan in his hand. He was Wang Chong, nicknamed “Small White Face.” He was one of Professor Du Wei’s best students. (138)

Even without his exceptional studiousness being explicated, each of these characteristics marks Wang Chong as a well-groomed intellectual, from his wiry frame that has never laboured to the gauntness of his cheeks bespeaking a life of asceticism. His sharpness of dress and fan usage while playing one of the traditional cultivated arts of the Chinese scholar-gentleman frames him as both

cultured and rarefied, while even his nickname refers to traditional operatic practices. Small and white with large black eyes, he cuts a striking figure that enfolds an awareness of class situatedness. At the intersection of class as it is encoded in representation embodiment, Louisa Schein describes an ongoing national rejection of the politics of white skin in post-Mao China that posited a “masculinized and unitary Chinese national subject” (142). Though she, like most scholars of Chinese bodily aesthetics, theorises a specifically female-gendered body, Wang Chong’s pale beauty accords him the corporeal characterisation typically reserved for female characters. Characteristics of beauty such as big eyes, frailty, and pale skin were associated not with women as a biological class, but rather, as Eddy U notes in his analysis of the development of the intellectual as a distinct class under Chinese communism (*Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification* 2019), with intellectuals as a socioeconomic class removed from physical labour.

On the other hand, Wang Chong’s competition, Fan Shuan, against whom most of his efforts are expended, is described in this way:

The man was of medium stature, about thirty years old. He had a big square face, thick eyebrows and big eyes. His lips were rather full. He was wearing a shirt and shorts, his muscles looking strong and well-developed. He was Fan Shuan, another of Professor Du Wei’s assistants. As he would smile before speaking and would unwittingly show his white teeth, which looked like the white pieces the other two were playing, people had nicknamed him “Blacks’ toothpaste.” (138)

It is important to note that the description of Fan Shuan’s teeth and their relevance to his nickname is actually not in the original text; it was added after the fact by the translator. “Blacks’ toothpaste” refers to Darlie toothpaste (黑人牙膏: lit. “black person toothpaste,” originally called Darkie toothpaste), a brand inspired by Al Jolson’s blackface act that showed off his white teeth and immediately conjured an image of buffoonishness. As a result, in addition to the thickness ascribed to his physique in the original text – thick jaw, thick eyebrows, full lips, bulging muscles – his association with stupidity is compounded by the translator, who draws a connection between Fan Shuan’s appearance and minstrelsy. Much like the overlaid identity of blackface, Fan Shuan’s interiority is obscured by descriptions of his body that frame him as crude and simple: the body as a symbolic representation of his second-class intellect and social position.

The characters in “Corrosion” are thus initially introduced as if both their moral character and social standing are reflected in their external, physical appearances. The dichotomy set up here is between, on one hand, an intelligent, sensitive, well-bred, and well-educated young Wang Chong; one whose intelligence and grace is immediately apparent in his outward appearance, and on the other hand, the rough-hewn, coarse, ungainly Fan Shuan, who is so ill-bred that he cannot even control his facial expressions enough to refrain from unconscious displays of emotion. Fan Shuan’s physical description is carefully constructed so as to bring to mind the uncivilised peasantry upon whose broad shoulders the country could be built and rarefied by intelligentsia such as Wang Chong

but who would, unfortunately, always be second-rate to him. Their initial introduction is designed so as to mobilise existing literary assumptions predicated on the association of aesthetics with ethics that was so central to Chinese socialist realism. By having other characters – Du Wei’s wife, Wang Chong’s colleagues, and visiting scholars, among others – comment on both Wang Chong’s and Fan Shuan’s character and physical attributes as they are perceived in-text, the audience is invited to appreciate those qualities and imbue them with moral attributes.

Here at the outset of the story, however, there is already a hint of subversion. Just as Fan Shuan’s association with blackface obscures his interiority, implying that there is more to him than the surface-level descriptions of his physique, so too does Wang Chong’s nickname, “Small White Face,” reduce him to the synecdoche of a face alone. Similar to the ways in which blackface symbolised a certain image of behaviour associated with an established style of performance, in Chinese traditional opera, different character types wear different colours of mask in order to broadly indicate what “type” they are: red for bravery and loyalty, yellow for ambition, green for impulsivity and violence, and white for treachery and subversion.⁴ To wear a white mask is to immediately identify oneself as the villain. Here, then, though having a pale complexion and hollow cheeks initially suggests a life of ascetic commitment to knowledge and pursuit of rarefied intellectual care, Wang Chong being reducible to a white face also identifies him as a source of treachery and a focal point for suspicion, no matter how many characters like and look up to him.

Fan Shuan, on the other hand, is described using terms that clearly paint him as a peasant labourer, from his body to his dress. Tina Mai Chen writes that “in Mao’s China, dress and body discourses constituted fundamental components of a political-aesthetic ideal in which proletarian subjectivity became aestheticised, and identificatory signifiers were internalized, desired, and displayed” (363). The complex intersection of political practices and sartorial messaging resulted in a socially embedded concept of beauty that was central to the ability to contribute to society. It was also in line with the aesthetic prescriptions of proletarian realism that turned bodies into symbols for national progress.

Scientism, Socialism, Aestheticism

Just as the allusion to masks serves to describe Fan Shuan and Wang Chong’s supposed inner characteristics, the impression of scientific progress was more important to projecting national progress during the immediate post-Mao years in which this story was written than any achievement itself. Recognition of this projection is paramount for characters such as Wang Chong, resulting in the inextricable intertwining of appearance and achievement. As Ban Wang notes, socialist realism (or what would be identified as the “combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism”⁵ in China) is more expansive than simply a style of fiction or art. Rather, “the term marks the fundamental principle of the aesthetic conception of revolutionary politics” (101). Not limited to prescriptions on how individuals were portrayed, the visual rhetoric of embodiment was charged with proletarian discourse related to scientific progress. Unlike during the later years of the Cultural Revolution, when scientists as a class were reviled as the “stinking old ninth” (臭老九)

within the black category of social dysphemisms, a peasant such as Fan Shuan filling the role of an intellectual would not necessarily at this point have been coded as class betrayal. In fact, with the Deng era's repudiation of the worst excesses of the Gang of Four and the preceding Cultural Revolution, the People's Republic of China (PRC) was, in the late 1970s/early 1980s, once again opening up towards an internationalist version of science and, to some degree, abandoning the idea of science as an inherently ideological apparatus, instead shifting towards a paradigm of widescale proletarian scientific participation as a nation-building process.⁶

This nationalist mobilisation of science and scientific literature is apparent in the broader aggregate of texts being translated into Chinese during the later years of the Cultural Revolution and leading up to the publication of "Corrosion." Nicolai Volland notes, for example, that "an approximate break-down of translated titles [of Soviet literature into Chinese] between 1949 and 1954 finds about 40 percent total in the category 'sciences and technology,' 25 percent in the humanities and social sciences, and about 30 percent in literature and arts" (61). Yet by the 1960s:

the CCP [Chinese Communist Party of China] defined a set of theories in literature and art that challenged those imported from the Soviet Union and rejected Moscow's claim to the central position. In the process, however, the inequality involved in the original Sino-Soviet relationship was not so much disbanded as redefined: when the PRC tried to reinvent itself as the new centre of Third World cultural diplomacy, it built ties with the recently de-colonised nations of Africa and Asia that closely resembled the framework in which the PRC had found itself only a decade earlier. (72).

This shift towards reconceptualising scientific progress as a barometer of international influence with China and Chinese people at the centre is echoed in Wang Chong's singular goal of being recognised with the Nobel Prize and achieving international acclaim. He wants to be at the centre of the scientific world, and the Chinese scientific community, at this time, wanted to be at the centre of international glory. The desire for international recognition is also evident in Du Wei and Fan Shuan's description of the bacteria's potentially useful applications for their own nation alone. Where these two nationalist goals differ, however, is in their emphasis on substance versus appearance: Wang Chong wants to appear intelligent and successful on the international stage, while Du Wei and Fan Shuan care nothing for personal appearance and seek only to strengthen their national infrastructure for its own benefit, not for acclaim.

The desire for a beautiful physical standard is a reproductive mode common to socialist realist art and depictions of beauty, with the beautiful as something to be emulated and replicated – an aspirational state of being that inspires reverence for physical perfection as a mode of self-modelling. Wang Chong's performance of a national commitment to the pursuit of science is predicated on an attenuation to appearance. In the pursuit of international scientific and political

recognition, Wang Chong allows the actual work being done by his less-attractive counterpart to continue invisibly, while he presents himself as the visible face of progress. His beauty emerges as a result of Fan Shuan's, Du Wei's, and Li Li's erasure from the public eye, such that the more his appearance is foregrounded, the more those around him are dismissed as unimportant to the cause. The aspirational reproductivity of physical beauty as a marker of moral goodness becomes coterminous with the performativity of scientific recognition as a marker of nationalist dedication. That is, a complicated line of conflation emerges between beauty and nationalist ideals, where beauty leads to goodness and goodness is the primary definition of a national hero. As previously noted, Theodore Hsi-en Chen has identified this with his ideological and physical descriptions of China's 'new socialist men,' and in "Corrosion" the trope of an ideal physical exterior representing an ideal ideological interior is masterfully subverted in a way that actually better upholds the Maoist emphasis on total social participation in the political process.

While explicating the national emphasis on beauty and its implications for the state, Mao Zedong himself stated that what the Chinese Communist Party wanted was the unity of political thought and artistic vision. As Mao asserts in the *Yan'an Talks*, which established the foundations for aesthetic modes in the country, art and culture served as tools for shaping the country politically and socially, and were, in turn, shaped by politics and ideology: "In literary and art criticism there are two criteria, the political and the artistic. [...] What we demand is the unity of politics and art, the unity of content and form, the unity of revolutionary political content and the highest possible perfection of artistic form" (Mao, *Yan'an Talks*, n.p.). Cultural processes of artistic assimilation meant that scientific theories and scenarios were transformed into influential cultural resources, which were then appropriated by authors working under the dominant literary regime to disseminate acceptable forms of and approaches to knowledge. Ye Yonglie, a stalwart biographer of party leaders in his later years, masterfully managed in "Corrosion" to undercut the socialist realist aesthetics that had calcified over the course of the Cultural Revolution with a more expansive understanding of national inclusion. Without directly rejecting party aesthetics, he engaged the 'struggle on two fronts' to demonstrate that beauty results from a core of nationalist commitment that bypasses the physical form, rather than vice versa. The beautiful and the whole, in Ye's expanded vision, do not represent ideological perfectibility through their beauty, but rather ideological uprightness is beautiful enough to transform even the ugliest and most degraded bodies.

Those ultimately lauded as heroes all find the apotheosis of their valour at the moment of their ugliest and least idealised embodiment. Retroactively, the aged and exhausted Du Wei, desiccated to the point of having a stroke⁷ is recognised as beautiful in his death alongside the overworked Fan Shuan, his hair long and unkempt and his eyes sunken into his face.⁸ With even more intervening years between his death and eventual national recognition is the original astronaut who first brought the bacteria back to Earth, whose body breaks apart and crumbles at the touch of a hand, his suit and command chair "loose like tofu and cracked into many pieces."⁹ As for Li Li, whose memory has haunted Wang Chong's entire rise to power, her death—curled up "like a shrimp"¹⁰ and shaking—is inextricable from the service she has rendered the nation. Recognising their contribution to scientific and national progress necessitates a disavowal of embodied beauty and a dispersal of the physical-moral correlation that Wang Chong has so long exploited.

As the only character to be consistently described as handsome and superficially successful, Wang Chong ultimately takes on the role of the subversive element in an otherwise 'pure' system of scientific nationalism, wherein Du Wei, Fan Shuan, and the unfortunate Li Li typify correct ethical behaviour through their dreadful sacrifice. While Wang Chong refrains from volunteering to put himself on the front lines and, in doing so, only grows in stature and beauty, Du Wei and Fan Shuan spend five years together in the desert working on the ultra-corrosive bacteria, becoming increasingly haggard and worn. The research that takes such a toll on their bodies is fruitful and leads them to wonder if they can utilise the bacteria in the interests of the nation, instead of treating it only as a danger. They are able to isolate the corrosive fluid (which harms only objects) from the bacteria (which harms biological life), with the intention of using it to dispose of urban garbage,¹¹ simplify mining, and contribute to national development. In building the nation, they are sacrificing themselves, while in preserving his own person, Wang Chong has put the good of the national collective second to his own self-interests.

An excerpt that is not included in the English translation is also important to a more situated reading of this story within the ongoing ideological development of a utopian socialism still proceeding from Maoist rhetoric, even if the moment of Mao himself was over. In the original text, but not, notably, in the 1981 English translation, the description of Du Wei and Fan Shuan's vision of future development is immediately followed by the lines "地球不断地打滚，日子一天天有一天，我站在了科学与幻想的分界线上，突然一阵颤动，分界线消失了，科学与幻合为一体....." ("The earth is constantly rolling, and day by day, I stand on the dividing line between science and fantasy. Suddenly there is a tremor, the dividing line disappears, and the division is united with the illusion..."). As a science fictional text that is simultaneously committed to the tenets of socialist realism, "Corrosion" has already imagined the future as a *fait accompli*, positing the arrival of a deadly space bacteria as best addressed through an ideological commitment to the nation. By emphasising that the universe is open and that history is unending, Mao himself, in his lecture on dialectical materialism (Mao, *Dialectical Materialism*, 109), conceptualised revolution as an ongoing process that shaped a future characterised by unending choices to recommit to communist practices (Mao, "Work Methods," 349). The above quote from the text highlights the apocalyptic vision of a past that is superseded by a future that is continually being revised while already being assured. In "Corrosion," the inevitability of a future in which China has already gone to space many times¹² is merged with the present – an active recognition within the text of the way scientific and ideological practices worked together to create a vision of the future predicated on work in the present.

Physical Patriotism

By remaining focused on the illusion of achievement—both personal and national—the major point of contention in the story is the question of who would be doing the work to bring about the aforementioned beautiful national future, and who would be getting the credit for it. "Corrosion" actually undercuts the earlier socialist realist vision of the ideal human by evacuating the physical body of any underlying moral structure. In doing so, it dismisses the idea of a standard form symbolising an ideological tenet by recognising that devotion to revolutionary and state-building

ideals was – or could be – divorced from embodiment. Pang Laikwan notes that in justifying socialist revolution aimed towards a communist utopia, “Mao stresses the revolutionary subject, evading incapable people and marginal events. Along with his emphasis on the ‘mass line,’ he also tends to treat the masses as a single hero, not a plurality of differences” (120). We see this in the final recognition of heroism being given to the collective group of three and Wang Chong refusing the mantle of individual heroism, his only nationalist choice in the story and one that is cast as being, ultimately, the only correct option for his homeland.

Such self-aggrandising individualism is notable particularly because it has a long history of association with the corrupting influence of Western ideals in Chinese literature, including SF. There is a curious level of deferment that occurs outside of the national borders wherein the impetus for Wang Chong to begin seriously considering the Nobel Prize and its ramifications comes from, first, a tour of visiting American scientists, and, later, a direct comment from an American at a dinner party, both of which serve to drive home his sense of nationalism. This is a trope typical of socialist SF, which tended to focus closely on home and the negative influence of capitalist societies on good socialist citizens. Alexander Beliaev’s famous novelette, *Professor Dowell’s Head* (1925), for example, is well-known for displacing the setting to America and making the greedy, immoral antagonist primarily motivated by capitalist and international scientific approval. This trend continues through the present, with contemporary Chinese authors in ostensibly ‘communist’ literary milieus setting stories with potentially-objectionable characters or plots – such as the amoral narrator of Wang Jinkang’s “The Reincarnated Giant” (2005, translated 2012) who helps the world’s richest industrialist circumvent inheritance laws through the transplantation of a brain into a grossly-deformed body – in countries that have historically been at odds with China. The implication of such types of nationalist orientations is that the West is still portrayed as explicitly aligned with an ideological form of imperialist science with which even brief contact could be as corrosive to the national character as “Corrosion’s” interstellar bacteria on individual characters.

While the deferment of both social and physical degradation to a location outside the boundaries of the socialist state is a common trope of those socialist literatures¹³ that attempt to shore up the boundaries of their own sociopolitical identity within a normalising framework for embodiment, it uniquely takes a back seat here to texts that are attempting to grapple with the notion of belonging within their own physical borders. To ask ‘what is outside as a foil to the national and physical standards of those inside’ allows for a deferment of criticism that can be valuable for the author writing literature that is potentially interpretable as a problematic critique of state policies and values. “Corrosion,” however, primarily emphasises the internal moral corrosion that has already gripped Wang Chong and threatens the cohesive nation project as a whole. His interest in *appearing* good to an international scientific audience, as opposed to *doing* good for his country is his ultimate downfall.

At the end, the rejection of physical appearance as a marker of internal goodness (and, as such, appropriate national zeal) comes together with an unqualified acceptance of the state as the highest ideal in Wang Chong’s final words. On the same day that he learns that he and ‘his’ team

have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology,¹⁴ he also learns that both Du Wei and Fan Shuan have died in their pursuit of the actual scientific ideals this prize purports to honour. He is so moved by their dedication to improving the lives of their national comrades, as opposed to his own selfish self-promotion, that he isolates himself in their old desert laboratory, writing:

Though I'm physically strong and healthy, my soul has already been corroded by a kind of invisible ultra-bacteria, which cannot be seen even by an electron microscope! I've long been contaminated, but I didn't feel it. Though Li Li, Du Wei, and Fan Shuan have all passed away, their souls remain uncontaminated and pure. Their scientific ethics are the noblest. They are the people made of special material – the metal titanium. They are really the "Titans," the true heroes. (585)

With Wang Chong's ultimate abdication of his personal goals in the form of decrying any special international recognition for work he did not perform, both he as a character and the text as a meta-critical comment on personal ethics recognise the subjugation of the individual to the national good. He must commit the ultimate in self-effacement: not only has he eliminated his name from any form of recognition, he has also committed his body and his life to inevitable destruction. The text recognizes this as a titanic move of nobility, a sacrifice that is not only indifferent to physical perfection but actually demands its destruction. We find the text exulting in the corroded bodies and decayed forms of its most heroic characters, their wizened corpses and destroyed visages representing the ultimate in national devotion.

Far from shying away from deformity and physical deviation, "Corrosion" lauds the most grotesque bodily choice as those that are most worthy of honour. The ill, the ugly, the deformed, and even the dead are held up above the handsome and healthy Wang Chong, who rehabilitates himself only through a recognition of their ethical superiority and by subsequently consigning himself to the same fate. This represents a radical reconceptualisation of the body politic. By stripping the image of the ideal socialist citizen from its reliance on individual physical perfection, "Corrosion" creates the potential for a more egalitarian social participation only possible in the estranging boundaries of SF.

The depiction of ugly, ill, deformed, or non-idealized figures was risky in that it allowed for the insinuation that deviation from the collective norm was possible at all, even if not desirable. That Ye Yonglie was willing to grapple with such possibilities at all highlights the importance of SF as a literary genre for explicitly defining the boundaries and future developmental possibilities of social progress. In its patriotic reassessment of bodies outside of an imaginary standard of beauty, "Corrosion" foregrounded some of the concerns surrounding the development of national physical standards that were effectively invisible, if not actively erased, under most forms of socialist realist art and literature. To be legible to the state and understood as a body capable of incorporation into the body politic necessitated being visible within literary and political forms in the first place. By

projecting a quotidian vision of Chinese futurity in which appearances – both individual and on the international stage – are rejected in favour of a nationalist reaffirmation, the patriotic body is freed from expectations of performative perfectibility. Just as the ultra-corrosive bacteria is divided into a harmful and a helpful substance, the beautiful are condemned, the ugly are lauded, and the state is strengthened through its citizens' lowliest contributions.

NOTES

1. All names and excerpts, except where otherwise noted, are drawn from the 1981 English translation by Pei Minxin.

2. 总指挥部，请立即转告杜微老师，我在“银星”号内查出来自太空的烈性腐蚀菌，鲜黄色，X形，从未见过。全队受感染，无法返回。请不要组织营救，以防烈性腐蚀菌扩散。[...] 李丽写毕，像虾似的蜷曲着身体，即使用双手紧抱脑袋，依然冷得全身直打寒颤。

(translation mine) "Headquarters, from the sample I collected from the 'Silver Star,' I've discovered a hitherto unknown ultra-corrosive bacteria from outer space. Its color is bright yellow, and it's shaped like an X. Everyone on our team has been contaminated and cannot return. In order to prevent further contamination, please do not organize a rescue mission." [...] Li Li finished writing and curled her body up like a shrimp, holding her head tightly in both her hands. She was so cold that she shivered." 叶永烈。“腐蚀。”人民文学。北京中国，11月1981。

3. Ironically, though Wang Chong is obsessed throughout the text with the rule stating that only three laureates may be recognized, Nobel regulations also prohibit posthumous awards, meaning that at the end of the story Wang Chong would have actually been the only member of the team eligible for recognition after all.

4. Chinese traditional opera has a several-thousand-year history, with its contemporary form established around roughly 1000 CE. Character types are fixed and established by visual markers largely associated with coloured masks. The meaning of these masks is invariable; a performer wearing a white mask to symbolise villainy will never be the hero or subvert expectations, resulting in an immutable conflation of symbol and behaviour. Additionally, colour symbolism is integrated into common sayings and phrases that enforce the association of behaviour and colour. Authors Yang Nan, Wang Xiaoling, Li Haili give the following example: "In China people call the people of low intelligence “白痴” [moron]. Therefore, “low intelligence” is the associative meaning of white. White also can symbolise a corrupted and evil person, because in Chinese traditional opera, people call the performer who performs the bad man “唱白脸,” [lit. “sing the white face;” figuratively “play the villain”].” See: 杨楠, 王晓玲, 李海丽. “Associative Meanings of Colors in Chinese and English Cultures.” *海外英语(中旬刊)*, no. 3, 2011, pp. 165. The word “moron” is composed of two characters: 白 (which means white) and 痴 (which means foolish), thereby utilizing “white” to reinforce “foolishness.” Similarly, in their other example of “singing the white face” meaning to “play the villain,” whiteness of the face represents evil in the heart. Despite white skin being a marker of beauty, it also implies such beauty being only skin-deep, masking villainous or stupid intentions.

5. A discussion of the debates that contributed to this term is most extensively addressed in Fudan daxue zhongwenxi ziliao shi. *Xin shiqi wenyi xuelunzheng ziliao 1976-1985 [Materials on Debates in Literary History During the New Period 1976-1985]*. Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1988 (in Chinese).

6. See further discussion in Baum, Richard, ed. *China's Four Modernizations: The New Technological Revolution*. Routledge, 2019.

7. “我从记录本上获知，杜微教授一年多以前——去年夏天，因年老体衰，在天气奇热的一天里突然中暑而死。” (translation mine)

8. “他是谁呢？我几乎不认识他了。他的头发又乱又长，已经夹杂着许多白发。他的脸像紫铜般颜色，满腮胡子。如果不是前额左上方有一块明显的疤，我几乎无法相信他就是方爽同志！在我的印象中，他如犍牛般壮实，一副运动员的派头，眼下竟皮包骨头，双眼深凹！” (translation mine)

9. “舱里零乱不堪。队长随手拿起宇航椅的座垫，谁知就像豆腐似的松散，裂成许多碎屑从手中掉了下去。队长走向宇航员，他的手一碰宇航服，竟然马上碰破一个大洞。要知道，宇航服是用十多层坚牢的合成纤维做成的，如今却变得像草纸做成似的！” (translation mine)

10. “李丽写毕，像虾似的蜷曲着身体，即使用双手紧抱脑袋，依然冷得全身直打寒颤” (translation mine)

11. Echoing more contemporary Chinese Science Fiction, from Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" to Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* to Han Song's "Regenerated Bricks," all of which deal explicitly with other attempts to dispose of China's urban garbage problem utilising human labor (and even incorporate Chinese bodies as building materials).

12. “是啊，自从一九五七年十月四日人类第一次征服太空以来，从未发生过这样的事情！是啊，中国的宇宙飞船曾多次访问各个星球，也从未发生过这样的事情。” “Yes, since the first time humans conquered space on October 4, 1957, nothing like this had ever happened! Indeed, China's spaceships had visited various planets many times, and this was completely unprecedented.” (translation mine)

13. Zhao Suisheng argues specifically that shoring up national borders is an ideological practice for establishing moral and national purity in socialist China, noting that “Socialist patriotism has three levels. At the first level, individuals should subordinate their personal interests to the interests of the state. At the second level, individuals should subordinate their personal destiny to the destiny of our socialist system. At the third level, individuals should subordinate their personal future to the future of our communist cause.” See: Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 28.

14. A feat that China wouldn't achieve outside of Science Fiction until Tu Youyou's 2005 win for the discovery of artemisinin/青蒿素, work that grew out of her appointment by Mao to head of the secret drug discovery project, Project 523 (523 项目).

WORKS CITED

Baum, Richard, editor. *China's Four Modernizations: The New Technological Revolution*. Routledge, 2019.

Chen, Tina Mai. "Proletarian White and Working Bodies in Mao's China." *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 11 no. 2, 2003.

Chen, Theodore Hsi-en. "The New Socialist Man." *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, Feb. 1969.

Fudan daxue zhongwenxi ziliao shi (ed.) *Xin shiqi wenyi xuelunzheng ziliao 1976-1985 [Materials on Debates in Literary History During the New Period 1976-1985]*. Shanghai: Fudan daxuechubanshe, 1988.

Ip, Hung-Yok. "Fashioning Appearances: Feminine Beauty in Chinese Communist Revolutionary Culture." *Modern China*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2003, pp. 329–361.

Man, Eva Kit-wah. *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*. The Chinese University Press, 2016.

Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art." *Selected Works*, vol. III, May 1942, p. 88-90.

---. *Mao Zedong on Dialectical Materialism: Writings on Philosophy*. Edited by N. Knight, 1937. M E Sharpe, 1990a.

---. "Gongzuo fangfa liushitiao (cao'an)" ["Sixty Articles of Work Methods (Draft)"]. *Mao Zedong wenji [Mao Zedong collections]*. Edited by CCP Central Archival Research Centre. Beijing: Reminchubanshe, no. 7, 1999, pp. 344–64.

Pang, Laikwan. "Mao's Dialectical Materialism: Possibilities for the Future." *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 28, no. 1, Routledge, pp. 108–23.

Schein, Louisa. "The Consumption of Color and the Politics of White Skin in Post-Mao China." *Social Text*, no. 41, 1994, pp. 141–164.

U, Eddy. *Creating the Intellectual: Chinese Communism and the Rise of a Classification*. University of California Press, 2019.

Volland, Nicolai. "Translating the Socialist State: Cultural Exchange, National Identity, and the Socialist World in the Early PRC." *Twentieth-Century China*, vol. 33, no. 2, April 2008.

Wang, Ban. "Socialist Realism." *Words and Their Stories*. Brill, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004188600.i-342.24>

Wang Jinkang. "The Reincarnated Giant." Translated by Carlos Rojas. *Renditions: A Chinese-English Translation Magazine*, vol. 77/78, Spring & Autumn 2012.

Yang Nan, Wang Xiaoling, Li Haili (杨楠, 王晓玲, 李海丽). "Associative Meanings of Colors in Chinese and English Cultures." *海外英语 (中旬刊)*, no. 3, 2011.

Ye Yonglie. "Corrosion." 1981. Translated by Pei Minxin. *Science Fiction from China*, edited by Wu Dingbo and Patrick D. Murphy. Praeger, 1989.

叶永烈。"腐蚀。" *人民文学*。北京中国，11月1981。

Zhao, Suisheng. *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism*. Stanford University Press, 2004.

BIONOTE

Virginia L. Conn is a lecturer at Stevens Institute of Technology, USA. She studies visions of the future in socialist Science Fiction, with a particular focus on the development of the "new socialist human" and associated population planning policies.