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## *Solaris* and the Dao<sup>1</sup>: The Reception of Stanisław Lem's Novel in the Sinophone World

### 1. Stanisław Lem – underestimated Polish futurist and his impact on science fiction's development

Science fiction (SF hereafter for brevity<sup>2</sup>) is a particular type of prose narrative concerned principally with speculation about the impact and possibilities of actual or imagined science upon society or individuals. According to *Britannica*, the name itself was popularized in the 1920s by the American publisher Hugo Gernsback<sup>3</sup>, one of the genre's principal advocates [Sterling 2019].

- 1 Dao, translated differently depending on the context (as “way”, “road”, “path”, “speech” or “method”), is an essential, multifaceted philosophical concept present in almost every school of thought throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. Dao introduced in this article refers to the most profound, metaphysical meaning of this term – an ultimate reality, the absolute, the source and core power of all existence, the Cosmic Dao. This interpretation of Dao has been created by the early Daoist thinkers like Laozi, Zhuangzi or Liezi.
- 2 All instances of “SF” in this paper stand for “science fiction”, not “speculative fiction”.
- 3 The Hugo Awards, given annually since 1953 by the World Science Fiction Society, are named after Hugo Gernsback.

Although some works, written in ancient and early modern times, like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Aristophanes's *The Clouds*, Thomas More's *Utopia* or even Shakespeare's *The Tempest* discussed topics very similar to the themes common in today's SF (fantastical voyage, time travel, creation of a new perfect society or a prototype of mad scientist story), they never tried to achieve scientific and technological plausibility which is the crucial feature of this modern genre. The Industrial Revolution and the rapid development of technology after the eighteenth century sparked the imagination of Western intellectuals and writers, giving birth to books and novels about future science and its possible impact on human life. H.G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, and Jules Gabriel Verne are conventionally regarded as fathers and virtuosos of SF. They were the first to use an extraordinary setup of space and time travels with implemented prophetic warnings, utopian aspirations, and political agitations very often extrapolated from their contemporary reality. In the twentieth century, the genre began to take shape and entered its "golden age" in the late 1920s, especially in the United States, where SF authorship and readership were the largest at the time. After World War II, SF became more and more popular, and its fandom spread across the United States. In the present time, SF is not just a literary genre anymore but a subculture and part of a lifestyle with countless SF-related products like books, movies, television shows, computer games, magazines, websites, paintings, comic books, collectible figurines, etc. This rapid evolution and immense popularity, however, came with a high price – SF gained a bad reputation in the literary world. Today, many intellectual readers still criticize SF literature for being stylistically primitive. Lack of allegories, symbols or metaphors, with one-dimensional characters and excessive emphasis on the plot rather than the linguistic setting labeled books and novels of this genre as a "lower realm" of mainstream literature for ordinary, not demanding consumers. Fortunately, in the modern history of SF, we can still find writers who showed great virtuosity in their narrative style and whose books deal with essential issues in a valuable way. One of them is the Polish writer Stanisław Lem.

For almost every SF fan Stanisław Lem needs no introduction. Nevertheless, and because the author wants to address the broadest audience possible after all, an introduction and recognition of his influence on the modern literary world are in order. Stanisław Lem was born in Lviv in 1921 when the city was still part of the Second Polish Republic. From a very young age, Stanisław was showing an insatiable thirst for knowledge and incredible curiosity about the world. At first, following in his father's footsteps, he took up medical studies at Lviv and Jagiellonian Universities, but failed to take the final exam on purpose in order to avoid the obligatory career as a military doctor. Soon after leaving the university, Lem made his literary debut in 1946 with several works of different genres (among them was his first SF novel, *The Man from Mars*). The first book that he could publish under the Communist regime in Poland was *The Astronauts*. A few years later came the 1956 Gomulka's thaw during which the censorship policy was not so strict anymore. During this time, Lem became truly productive and published seventeen books between 1956 and 1968, among which we can find the most recognizable positions like *The Investigation* (1959), *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub* (1961), *Return from the Stars* (1961), *Solaris* (1961), *The Invincible* (1964) and *His Master's Voice* (1968). Although after the 1980s he wrote fewer and fewer science fiction novels, he remained artistically active until his death on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006. In those years, Lem concentrated mostly on non-fiction or philosophical texts and essays, which appeared in Polish magazines *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Odra*, *Przegląd*, and many others. Following their popularity in Poland, his works have been widely translated and very early (1960s) started to appear in Western Europe: Germany, France and Italy. In a short time, he became one of the few non-Anglophone, Eastern block SF authors who received such wide recognition. However, even in his heyday, he never had a cachet on the American market and could not compete with the "genre's titans" like Isaac Asimov or Robert A. Heinlein. Despite that, he was still quite influential – according to a recent estimate, his books have been translated into more than forty-five languages and sold almost 40 million copies. Stanisław Lem was also repeatedly nominated for the Nobel Prize, and it is already

common knowledge that he did not receive it only because “someone told the judges that he writes science fiction.”<sup>4</sup>

As we can see, Stanisław Lem was indeed a remarkable mind: son of a doctor with a medical studies background, scientific research assistant, polymath interested in cybernetics, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, cosmology, cosmogony, astrology, and philosophy. He was not just an excellent storyteller but also a satirist, literary theorist, futurologist, and a real philosophical gadfly. Both scientific and philosophical inquiries were constantly present in his works. As a novelist, Lem was far more interested in actual and future intellectual problems of humanity than in their literary expression in the form of fictional stories. For him, science fiction was not only a simple entertainment or a demonstration of a writer’s linguistic artistry; it needed to be driven by a real philosophical curiosity about what is unknown. And this ferociously learned novelist was a living example of such curiosity – he was writing to satisfy his insatiable inquisitiveness about the far future of humankind and the cosmos. No wonder his SF writing carries a heavy intellectual load, just as Bruce Sterling once wrote:

[...] for Lem science fiction is a documented form of thought-experiment: a spearhead of cognition. All else is secondary, and it is this singleness of aim that gives his work its driving power. This is truly a literature of ideas, dismissing the heart as trivial, but piercing the skull like an ice pick.<sup>5</sup>

Lem saw great potential in science fiction. Novels and books of this genre were not supposed to be limited to some narrative patterns of primitive adventure literature. With the help of rigorous and believable descriptions of wonders created by future science, SF literature could work as a perfect example of philosophical mind-experiment in a narrative form, showing us what it means to be “human”. Lem himself admitted that he began to write SF because “it deals with human beings as species (or rather, with all

4 Opinion expressed in 1983 by an anonymous Philadelphia Inquirer critic.

5 Bruce Sterling is a noted cyber/SF author and tech commentator.

possible species of intelligent beings, one of which happens to be the human species.)” [Lem 1984: 16]. That is why he was constantly raising philosophical issues related to our human condition, such as limits of human knowledge, the nature of consciousness and knowledge acquisition (which both address the field of epistemology), or the moral responsibility of scientists and future explorers of the universe (issues touched by moral philosophy). In Lem’s books, it is not the singular hero who is being questioned, it is humanity overall. That is why his works can serve as a survey of the whole human species – people who, after being put into extreme situations, must face the limits and possibilities of their own nature (this raises a question on the possibility of humans’ ontological transcendence). Although Lem, for most of his life, remained skeptical that miraculous possibilities of science could simply do away with certain human limitations, he still kept being optimistic about the inherent goodness of humanity. After all, he was a man who strongly believed in old-fashioned cultural and intellectual virtues and was very displeased whenever mass society or mass culture undermined those values, especially in his beloved SF field.

After discovering that the world of American SF in the second half of the twentieth century consisted mainly of fantastic adventures without a shred of scientific or philosophical seriousness, Lem assigned himself a mission of reforming the current state of the genre. He could not stand the technical ignorance, literary clumsiness, and sociological naïveté present in the novels of his contemporaries. He knew that if SF wants to be regarded as a form of higher literature and show its true potential, it needs to be criticized. That is why he decided to write a study of science fiction which was published in Poland in 1970 as *Fantastyka i futurologia* (*Science Fiction and Futurology*; some parts were translated into English in the magazine *Science Fiction Studies* in 1973–1975, selected material was translated in the single volume *Microworlds: Writings on Science Fiction and Fantasy* in 1984). Besides a rigorous investigation of the theoretical basis of SF, he introduced a detailed analysis of many of its major topics and literary themes. Lem pointed out that the vast majority of writers limited themselves to a monotonous plot and unimaginative stories, which cannot successfully

turn readers' attention towards the direction in which the world, in fact, was moving. Lem's enormous disappointment with the scientific ignorance of most American SF writers, shaped in the form of biting criticism, was the main reason for his excommunication from the Science Fiction Writers Association. Even Philip K. Dick, an object of Lem's unreserved admiration whom he called a "visionary among charlatans" wasn't fond of the Polish writer and called him a communist spy. Although even today Stanisław Lem is relatively unknown to American readers, he is still considered among the greatest SF writers of all time. He remained true to himself and his ideals and never sought compromise with the crowd or fit into the niche of "pulp for the masses" – his fiction stands out as a unique example of a conglomerate of profound science, cruel wit, philosophical perplexities, and cerebral outlook shaped in a perverse, but logically perfect structure. And the best example of his literary genius is the 1961 novel *Solaris*.

## 2. Alien being and epistemological crisis of its human knower – plot, themes, and the reception of *Solaris* in the West

Some people like to divide Lem's literary work into two categories: traditional SF and dark allegorical tales. *Solaris*,<sup>6</sup> along with *The Invincible* (1964) or *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* (1968), belongs to the first group of stories, in which the main topics like the fantastic reality, technological advancement, alien worlds and space travel are enriched with non-imposing humor and philosophical depth. All those stories are masterpieces of literature, but it was *Solaris* that gained world-wide popularity – the book was written so engrossingly that its magnetism has not been lost to this day. *Solaris* was published when Lem had already made a name for himself in Poland and the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup> Soon after, it was translated into French by Jean-Michel Jasiensko in 1964, and this version served as

6 When referring to the book *Solaris*, italics are applied. *Solaris* as a name of the planet is kept in roman.

7 Russian translation made by Dmitry Bruskin appeared soon after the publication of the book in Poland. Paradoxically, thanks to the negative opinion of the Soviet critics, the novel quickly became a cult classic in the USSR.

the basis for Joanna Kilmartin and Steve Cox's English translation in 1970. For many years it was the only English translation of *Solaris* available on the market, one that the author himself was not very fond of. Indeed, this significantly deficient sister of *Solaris* could prevent English readers from understanding Lem's vast creative force. In 2011, Bill Johnston, a professor at Indiana University, produced the first Polish–English translation of the novel, available only in a digital form as an audiobook or ebook. This version has been praised for being able to convey Lem's style, his Slavic humor, and attention to detail. It was also warmly welcomed by Lem's family: "we are very content with Professor Johnston's work, that seems to have captured the spirit of the original" [Flood 2011]. In spite of its early imperfect translation, *Solaris* was still able to become one of SF's most popular and influential novels. Some may say that it is owed to two well-known film adaptations: the first one was made in 1972 by Soviet director Andrey Tarkovsky and the second one in 2002 by American director Steven Soderbergh. Tarkovsky's movie, while often called visionary, deep, vivid, and piercing, is considered to be a rather unfaithful adaptation of the novel; Lem quarreled with the director about the script and badmouthed the movie for the rest of his life. Soderbergh's *Solaris*, produced by James Cameron with Hollywood star George Clooney acting as the protagonist, has been viewed mostly as a touching space love story. Although this widely-panned recent remake veered away from the novel's central themes, Lem did find some positive sites of this adaptation: "The film has a unique, overwhelming climate. Filled with light, colors, stunning shots, music, impressive acting, an economical use of special effects, clear narration" [Lem 2002]. But no matter how far those film adaptations departed from the original story, it is certainly not arguable that both Tarkovsky and Soderbergh helped Lem become one of the most widely read science fiction writers in the world.

What is so attractive in the story that made *Solaris* a timeless masterpiece of SF? The book's central theme circles around a distant planet surrounded by two suns and covered by a mysterious plasma-like surface which, given the lack of a more precise way to describe it, everyone in the story calls "the Ocean". Surpris-

ingly, this enormous entity is the planet's sole native inhabitant, a developed form of life dissimilar to anything seen on Earth. Finally, after many years of fruitless space discoveries, humankind found an extraterrestrial intelligence with which they may be able to initiate first contact. If only the Ocean would not behave in an unexpectable, irrational way, challenging the limits of ordinary human knowledge. Following one hundred years of careful scientific investigation, exploration and experiments, the enigmatic appearance of Solaris' Ocean – its substance, structure, intricate patterns of behavior along with its unusual metamorphic creations classified as “extensors”, “mimoids”, “symmetriads”, and “asymmetriads” – was analyzed and described in thousands of volumes of research literature. For all the massive amount of scholarly work in “Solaristic studies”, no one managed to solve the mystery of this nonhuman intelligence – the Ocean remained silent, either undesirous or incapable of contacting humans. People could only give countless interpretations of the Solaris phenomenon or derive highly subjective hypotheses and narratives, but that only led to tensions and fierce discussions between scholars, which finally resulted in the dawn of Solaristics. This is the point in the history of Solaris' exploration, where the story begins. Along with the male protagonist, psychologist Kris Kelvin, we land on a space station close to Solaris' orbit just to discover that “mission Solaris” has finally reached a breakthrough. The Ocean lifted the veil on its secrets and started to communicate with the crew. Still, this glimmer of hope came with an exceptionally high price – pushing one scientist to a mysterious suicide and bringing two others to the verge of mental breakdown. The second day after his arrival, Kelvin becomes another victim of Ocean's “friendliness” and must confront his pain, fear, and guilt in the shape of a creature that resembles his long-gone past lover, Harey. After discovering that he was not the only one visited by an unexpected “guest”, Kelvin, together with annoying cybernetic Snaut and proud physicist Sartorius, is trying to guess what exactly those “phantoms” are and what their connection with the Ocean covering Solaris is. As the novel develops, the original investigation of an alien life turns into a quest for understanding the true nature of humanity. It appears



that the replica of human beings created by the Ocean is sourced from the deepest memories, innermost thoughts, and forgotten ideas submerged in the scientists' subconsciousness and mysteriously extracted by the massive and inscrutable alien being. While encountering a different, far more advanced form of life, humans are being exposed to the most intimate and vulnerable side of their souls and must face the pain hidden inside it. Do the shadows of their past haunt Kelvin, Snaut and Sartorius? Are they able to confront the biggest unknown? Can they accept the limits of their reason and see the Ocean in a different, nonrational way? Those are the crucial questions that Lem tries to answer in his one-of-a-kind masterpiece novel, a real drama on the limits of human cognition.

Lem said, while referring to *Solaris* in his memories, that it is one of his first novels that he can still acknowledge without shame because it "incorporates cognitive problems in fiction that do not oversimplify the world" [Lem 1984]. Indeed, *Solaris* is one of the most deeply philosophical works written by Lem, a true intellectual puzzle without the usual SF crutches which dives deep into the social and ideological underpinnings of science. No wonder that many Western scholars soon tried to elaborate on its philosophical and psychological meaning in connection to the achievements of science. The first thing that comes to mind is the question of the limits of human knowledge and cognition. Can humans really understand an alien form of life? As we browse through the chronicles of *Solaris* exploration, we can see all of those highly-trained researchers continually trying and continually failing to figure out something that is beyond the reach of their knowledge. In this history of active denial, frustration, and confusion, Lem shows what is essential and also misleading about the human effort in contacting other civilizations: our hubris, limited imagination, and steadfast subjectivity. In the light of that, these one hundred years of exploration, which at first sight may appear so tedious and pedantic, are turned into a joke – we cannot escape the Kantian "bubble" of the phenomenal world in which we are living. Lem's intent here is comical – humans didn't gain any knowledge about the Ocean, but it did not stop them from creating an entire science of Solaristics. The constant metamorphosis of plasma causing

various temporary growths or distortions so carefully classified by the scientists “seems to suggest that we observe a kind of rational activity. Still, the meaning of this seemingly rational activity of the Solarian Ocean is beyond the reach of human beings” [Lem 2002]. The miracle of the Ocean’s essence escapes humans’ attempts at defining and understanding it: the researchers can only use metaphors or other standard classifications and concepts to describe the unknowable. This attempt to anthropomorphize the alien “other” can only turn the whole human endeavor into meaningless busywork, simple observation, and cataloguing species instead of gathering real, objective and true knowledge about them. In the end, the Ocean itself is molded and reduced to a misleading, overly simplistic human conception. No wonder it cannot be understood. This is exactly what the first victim of the Ocean, Gibarian, said: “we take off to the cosmos ... ready for anything: solitude, hardship, exhaustion ... death. We’re proud of ourselves. But when you think about it, our enthusiasm’s a sham. We don’t want other worlds. We only want mirrors” [Lem 2014: 72]. Lem is not only a skeptic questioning science’s ability to solve the mysteries of the universe, he is also a cynic who ridicules cosmic researchers by comparing them to medieval knights on a quest for the assertion of human domination over new galactic civilizations. They seek, yet they do not see, because their anthropocentric eyes are closed to everything which is not human, which cannot be described using human language and cannot be understood by human mind. And those are the epistemological borders which human beings in their limited condition cannot transgress.

As we can see, the real obstacle standing in the way to solving the “mystery of Solaris” is not the planet itself, but the people and their problem with self-identity. This is another philosophical topic that Lem ponders in his book. Above, we mentioned the unflinching subjectivity and lack of proper self-identity as the cause of humans’ inability to initiate contact with extraterrestrial life. Initial space exploration turns into a search for identity, where the scientific gaze must be turned inward before turning it outward [Helford 1992: 167]. We can see it in the change of Kelvin’s behavior – from a confident and objective scientist to a man with a destabilized

self-confidence, searching for a new idea of self-integrity. Solaris provides Kelvin and other researchers with mirrors through which their human mind is exposed and challenged. That is why it seems to know more about humans than they know about themselves. Snaut at some point realized it and said: "It might be worth our while to stay. We're unlikely to learn anything about it, but about ourselves [...]" [Lem 2014: 77]. As it was said before, space travelers were searching for mirrors in which they could find their own image. And it happens that Solaris gave them precisely what they needed. The Ocean makes people realize that they are fragmented, complex beings who need to first understand themselves before trying to understand alien forms of life. Some researchers see in Lem's prose traces of Hegelianism [Helford 1992: 167-177]. How the Ocean constructs the "phi-creatures" can make us wonder if the self is a socially constituted concept. If being fully aware of ourselves means that we need others to refer to ourselves through them, this implies that only social relationships can determine us. Without them, we are no one because the way in which others see us influences our self-definition. For Hegel, selfhood could not be determined in pure isolation; it cannot be reached through pure Cartesian retrospection. We mutually create each other. We need others to look at our inner selves, just like we need mirrors to see our faces. Harey is a perfect example of Hegelian self-identity problem: she is a conscious subject who struggles to know who she is and can know about herself only through memories, opinions, experiences of the real Harey derived from Kelvin's mind. Harey's idea of the self belongs to Kelvin's memory, therefore it is not her own. She can remain the way she is only while being close to him; otherwise, she starts to act unpredictably and dangerously. Even though we can see that she attempts to break free from Kelvin's conceptual scheme by distancing herself from him. Is it possible? For Hegel, the answer would be no – a quest for "being-for-itself" as an opposite to "being-for-other" is doomed to failure. We can only achieve freedom in the way of independent self-reflection or realization of the fact that there is no ultimate independence from others. This revelation may influence Harey's final decision – by destroying herself, she thinks, she can reach the ultimate sense of freedom.

Aside from those two topics, there are a few other directions of scholarly analysis of the novel. Elyce Rae Helford, for example, examines *Solaris* characters according to Jung's psychoanalysis and gender metaphorization of space travel [Helford 1992: 167–177]. Alice Jardine in *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* uses the self-created concept of gynesis<sup>8</sup> to show its implications in the behavior of *Solaris* station's crew. Others try to solve the mind–body problem raised in the novel – if Ocean's act of copying one's mind (memories, personality traits and, indeed, every psychological feature of human beings) can mean that its creation is actually a real human, same as the original? As can be shown, the popularity of *Solaris* in the Anglophone SF world sparked the interest of scholars to investigate the philosophical topics introduced in the book. Specialists in the fields of ontology, epistemology, moral philosophy, phenomenology, and historiography found many stimulating themes to elaborate on, which helped the SF genre be seen in a more serious light – as another way to spark the philosophical curiosity of the universe and human role in it. This, however, has been described by people coming from a specific cultural background, commonly known as the Western one. But, as soon as Lem's book was translated to non-Western languages, the Eurocentric reception and interpretation of the novel were put in question, especially by its Sinophone readers.

### 3. Vicious circle of approval and censorship – turbulent history of SF in the Sinophone world<sup>9</sup>

For a long time, the Anglophone writers and readers played the main part in the historical scene of science fiction. Today the

8 A term coined by Alice Jardine as part of her attempt to bring together certain post-structuralist ideas with those of feminist criticism in her book *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985). Etymologically, it should mean “woman-process”.

9 Hereafter, for authors from People's Republic of China (China), his or her Chinese names are written in the simplified characters (last name first) and Romanized using the Pinyin transliteration. For authors from the Republic of China (Taiwan), his or her Chinese names are written in the traditional characters (last

genre is not limited to the Anglosphere anymore – it has become a genuinely cosmopolitan type, thanks to the hard work of translators around the world. Still, English remains the *lingua franca* of SF, and the writers from non-English-speaking countries need to be at least translated into English if they want to make a name for themselves in the community. In the first and second part, we already discussed the case of Lem’s popularity as dependent on good-quality English translations. Before analyzing the reception of Lem’s works in the Sinophone world, we should first gain an overall idea about SF literature absorption and development in China and Taiwan.

Western science fiction (in Chinese *kexue huanxiang* often abbreviated to *kehuan*)<sup>10</sup> appeared in China in the late years of the Qing dynasty – the first novels translated into classical Chinese were Jules Verne’s *A Two-Year Vacation* (Liang Qichao’s translation from English), *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Lu Xun’s translation from Japanese). At that time, the early Western SF works served as a tool to move the imagination of Chinese people and initiate new ideas about the technological progress of the Chinese society. After the collapse of the Qing dynasty, following the May 4th Movement in 1919, the Chinese language went through a significant transformation. Thanks to the growing popularity of written vernacular Chinese (*baihuawen*), books and periodicals became more accessible and comprehensible to common people, which tremendously influenced the genre of science fiction. China’s earliest purely literary magazine – *Story Forest* (*Xiaoshuo lin*) started translating and publishing Western SF as well as some stories written by the Chinese authors.<sup>11</sup> After

name first) and Romanized using the Wide-Giles transliteration. The same rule applies to publishing houses. Citations made by the blog authors are Romanized using the Pinyin transliteration.

10 “In Chinese, as in many other languages, «science fiction» is translated into a term more closely equivalent to «science fantasy», which seems to many of its hearers to be oxymoronic and inherently pejorative” [Stableford 1991: 47].

11 Unfortunately, the scope of this paper does not include the story of domestic Chinese or Taiwanese science fiction. The author can only refer to the few Chinese and Taiwanese SF writers most popular in the West.

the establishment of the People's Republic of China, SF literature from the Soviet block became virtually the only one available in mainland China, and it gained a huge popularity among Chinese readers. It was also the time when "the father of Chinese science-fiction" Zheng Wenguang started his literary career. During the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), literature was labeled a dangerous weapon of the bourgeois and intellectuals, hence science fiction disappeared for over ten years. In 1979, following the spirit of the "spring of science" proclaimed by the State Council, the magazine *Scientific Literature* (*Kexue Wenyi*) was founded and began to publish translated and original pieces of SF novels. Science fiction regained its popularity, and apart from the years 1983–1984, when the genre was labeled as "spiritual pollution" and prohibited for political reasons, it grew only stronger with time. In 1991 *Scientific Literature* changed its name to *Science Fiction World* (*Kehuan Shijie*), and by the mid-1990s, it reached a peak circulation of about 400,000 [Kun 2012]. At the time, China not only had a deep understanding of foreign science fiction novels but also gave rise to its own stars, like Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, Xing He, Qian Lifang and He Xi.<sup>12</sup>

In Taiwan, after the island was ceded to the Republic of China in 1945 and came under the rule of the Kuomintang party, in order to reduce the influence of Japanese culture among the masses, the government pursued a policy of sinification. This contributed to the rapid development of Chinese-language literature, among which science fiction played an important role. It is widely accepted that the first Taiwanese SF story was Chang Hsiao-Feng's 1968 novel *Pandora*. This short story influenced the works of Huang Hai or Chang Shi-Kuo, the two most recognized literary SF writers until 1979. Since the late 70s, popular science or futurology magazines (like *Tomorrow's World*, *The Cosmic Science*, *Youth Science*) were sprouting, promoting local writings and western SF introductions. At that time, translated works (mostly western SF retranslated

12 Readers especially interested in the development of contemporary Chinese science fiction can browse Ken Liu's anthology *Broken Stars: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*.

from Japanese) were far more influential than the Taiwanese SF stories due to their availability and lack of proper copyright law and despite the low quality of their translation. The most well-known Western writers were Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, and Arthur C. Clarke. Others couldn't break through the language barrier, biases or simply lack of information and poor introduction made by local promoters of the genre. The years 1980 to 1994 are generally approved to be called a "golden age of Taiwanese SF" [Wong 2001: 83], when new local writers, like Lin Yao-de gained popularity. The translation boom, on the other hand, was slowly fading – aside from the reprinted versions of the classics like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Verne's novels, only a few new authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson, H. G. Wells, and Aldous Huxley were introduced to the Taiwanese readers. In the mid-90s science fiction literature fell into decline mostly because of the lack of support from its readers. As for translated works in this period, both Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s and Michael Crichton's complete works were adapted for the Taiwanese audience, but they sold very poorly, mostly due to the lack of media exposure. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, SF development in Taiwan entered a new period, slowly reclaiming its former popularity. The Internet has become a wide scene for a boom of young, amateur authors writing new, mixed SF subgenres. Nevertheless, the tastes of the readers were and still are directed by a popular-science scholar and SF genre leader in Taiwan, Yeh Li-Hua. When it comes to Western SF selection, Yeh was a strong advocate of the work by Ray Bradbury or Robert A. Heinlein (especially his young adult science fiction novels). Other translations until this day are still very rare, usually because of financial misunderstandings between publishers and translators.

Today, due to the rising popularity of local authors, foreign science fiction in China and Taiwan is experiencing a small setback. Translated science fiction books do not sell very well, not only because of their limited quantity, but also because of low marketing attention and questionable translation quality. Nevertheless, there are still various editions of earlier classics available in Chinese, including books by Jules Gabriel Verne, H.G. Wells, Edwin Abbott, Neal Stephenson, Cordwainer Smith, Isaac Asimov, A. Heinlein,

Philip K. Dick, George R.R. Martin, Ursula K. Le Guin or Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Recent science fiction bestsellers such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, Richard K. Morgan's *Altered Carbon*, Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, Andy Weir's *The Martian*, Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*, etc. are also present and selling quite well, probably because people connect them with their popular Hollywood movie adaptations. Young adult science fiction adventure novels gained quite an audience – in the bookstores, we can find works written by Veronica Roth, Patrick Ness, Alexandra Bracken, Neal Shusterman or William Gibson [Bokelai 2020]. Generally, the most popular and often-read authors in China and Taiwan are Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ted Chiang, David Mitchell, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Anthony Burgess, Hugh Howey, Dan Simmons and Paolo Bacigalupi [Danjialin 2010].

As we can see, all the mentioned authors are American. There are only a few British writers like Neil Gaiman, James P. Hogan or Mark Hodder who are recognizable among Sinophone readers. Still, science fiction from non-English-speaking countries is a real rarity on the Chinese-speaking market – we can find only single, selectively translated books by German Frank Schätzing (*The Swarm*), Canadian Matthew Mather (*Cyberstorm*), Russian Sergey Lukyanenko (*The Genome*) or French Yannick Monget (*Gaïa*). Luckily, Stanisław Lem has not been left behind, and two titles from his oeuvre: *Solaris* and *A Perfect Vacuum*, are available in the Chinese language.

#### 4. The Ocean as an ultimate reality – Chinese translations and the reception of *Solaris* in the Sinophone world

Stanisław Lem, known as *Sitanisiwafu Laimu* (mainland China) or *Shitannisilao Laimu* (Taiwan), was introduced to the Chinese readers in 2003 when the first translation of *Solaris* (*Suolalisi Xing*) appeared in the bookstores. It was published by Sichuan Science Technology Publishing House (*Sichuan Keji Chubanshe*) together with Gene Brewer's novel *K-Pax* (*K xingyike*) as part of the series dedicated to "World Science Fiction Masters" (*Shijie Kehuan*



*Dashi Congshu*). Although Lem's debut in the People's Republic of China was the Chinese version of the infamous English translation, not long after, in 2005, the prestigious Commercial Press (*Shangwu Yinshuguan*) published a competitive translation, from the German edition of *Solaris* (*Suolalisi Xing*). We can easily guess that the first version appeared just after Soderbergh's movie release, using its popularity. But the emergence of the other translation of the not so famous non-English novel, made in such a short time and by a major publishing company, is quite astonishing. As if that wasn't enough, five years later, a third version, in traditional Chinese characters, appeared under the name *Suolalisi Xing* published by the Taiwanese Muses Publishing House (*Miusi Chubanshe*). This time, the book was translated from the original by the renowned professor from Beijing Foreign Studies University (*Beijing Waiguoyu Daxue*) Zhao Gang. In 2014, Zhao Gang's translation was republished in simplified Chinese by China's mainland Huacheng Publishing House (*Huacheng Chubanshe*), under the same title. Perplexed by this situation, one of Chinese readers recently made a profound comparative analysis of those three versions and posted it on *Douban Dushu* (Douban reading books), one of the leading book markets on the Chinese Internet [Wei 2018]. In his opinion, the reason that the second version appeared is that the first edition was pirated. But still, the second translation was commissioned by a publishing house which only very rarely releases science fiction books – sadly, this question remains unsolved. Later on, the author tries to compare all three editions in different categories: book cover project, printing style, readability, and finally, the quality of translation. In his ultimate verdict, the newest version translated directly from Polish is the best one, although the translator sometimes could not avoid falling into the trap of being too precise, giving up the rich literary flavor which the Chinese language has to offer. In some parts, the first edition, written in accordance with the English translation of the book, can be much more appealing to the reader, even if it is not a direct match with Lem's original novel.

Chinese readers have been exposed to the most famous novel written by the “Polish science fiction king” through two important

channels: cinema and literature. In most cases, it was either Tarkovsky's or Soderbergh's adaptation that made SF fans in mainland China and Taiwan familiar with *Solaris*. Even if both pictures failed to reflect the deep philosophical meaning of the book or didn't show all the examples of the confrontation between science and human nature wrapped in Lem's unique cynical sense of humor, they were an important window to Lem's popularity in the Sino-phone world. They helped a new group of readers acknowledge that Lem was, at some point, the most popular SF writer outside the Anglophone world and his impact on the development of the genre was of great importance. In a short article included in the 2010 and 2014 versions of the book, an established scholar from National Tsinghua University Liu Ruey-Hua agreed that a film adaptation of a novel is always a two-edged sword: "without the [Soderbergh's] movie, maybe only a few people would know about Lem's novel; having seen the movie, it is possibly even harder to have a complete picture of the book."<sup>13</sup> This view is especially important when we think about the ending of the novel: "Lem's book offers us a conclusion without a climax, and both adaptations by abandoning this idea lose the reflective value which was present in the original work."<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Liu still tries to find a space in which the two movies and the novel can interact and complement each other to help the readers understand the essential parts of the whole story. For example, the movies can offer us a more developed picture of the characters and solve the riddle behind their way of thinking and behavior, which is the key to Chinese readers' understanding of the typical Western style of thinking about subjectivity.

On the Chinese and Taiwanese Internet, we can find several opinions on Lem's novel and its adaptations written by SF fans in the form of a blog post. The majority of them first saw one of two movies (like *coolchet* [Coolchet 2006], *Imagination Abyss*

13 Translated from the original statement: "Meiyou dianying de paishe, Lem de xiaoshuokeneng hen shao ren hui zhidao, you le dianying, que keneng geng nan zhidao xiaoshuo de quan mao" [Liu 2010: 330].

14 Translated from the original statement: "Lem de xiaoshuo zhong de feichang chaoshi de jieju – keneng gaibian que sangshi le yuanzuo de liu gei duzhe sikao de yuwei." [Liu 2010: 330].

[2010]), but there were at least two (Yang Yu-Chi [Yang 2014] and Elish [2012]) who started with the novel. All of them agree that the movies do not give truth to the real story created by Lem, but they can assist in understanding some of the complexities present in the book. Coolchet and Elish appreciated the artistic value of Tarkovsky's picture (seeing it as a response to Kubrick's *Space Odyssey 2001*) and Yau, being himself a fan of *Avatar*, respected Cameron's creative oversight in the production of *Solaris*. But even if both films are quite impressive by themselves, in comparison to the book they look very poor. Imagination Abyss says that Soderbergh's movie gives a "shallow outcome" and Yang Yu-Chi vents his frustration more directly by saying that "after watching this movie I just wanted to roll over on the ground: this is not *Solaris!* ... Once again I witnessed the irreplaceability of novels" [Yang 2014].

Aside from a comparison with film adaptations, what do the blog writers discuss in their book reviews? Let's start with their first impression while reading the book. Here, many readers share the view expressed by Shane, in which he is surprised by the thriller-like character of the book, where: "you are not prepared to be scared out of your wits, but the tense atmosphere soaks gradually into your consciousness, making you feel insecure or even nauseous."<sup>15</sup> The overall lack of optimism about humans' future in a scientifically advanced world so visible in Lem's narrative can add to the frightening experience, which normally does not happen in books of this genre. That brings us to another topic discussed by Sinophone readers – the contrast between the limitless universe and the limited power of human cognition. Even though we know that complete knowledge of the cosmos will always and forever be beyond our reach, we still strive to push the limits of our cognition. This is the complicated human nature represented by Lem's characters and recognized by Chinese and Taiwanese readers. That is why Danjialin, for example, agrees with Lem that it would be too optimistic to believe that within our limited power, we can

15 Translated from the original statement: "Bu shi suishi zhunbei rang ren he podan de yunniang, er shi zhijie yi lu qianfu zai yishi li, rang ren da cong xindi gandao bu shufu, shenzhi zuo ou." [Shane 2015].

communicate with alien beings, even in the future, even with the support of highly advanced technology [Danjialin 2010]. Coolchat believes that as long as we are using our perspective only, we won't be able to explore other worlds [Coolchet 2006].

Human nature is a topic very familiar to Chinese literature and philosophy, which is why so many bloggers were interested in the concept of "phantoms" as humans-not-humans. Danjialin observes that the beings created by the Ocean are just like originals and can do nothing more than act as the originals [Danjialin 2010]. He wonders if the Phi-creatures are personifications of thoughts, memories, and feelings; of everything which makes us the way we are, yet still they cannot be called "humans", then what does it mean to be "human"? Coolchat tries to find an answer to this question by saying that maybe Harey has become a real human when, out of love, she decided to sacrifice herself for Kelvin's sake?

Although the mystery of the Phi-creatures is what sparks the interests of and opens debates between reviewers online, many see the real beauty of the book in another original idea – the study of Solaristics. Elish admits that readers used to adventurous SF novels and focused mostly on the plot of the story would be disappointed with long and monotonous descriptions of historical explorations. This part can be "dry" in his opinion, but "this dryness comes not from the bad style of writing, but it serves as a smokescreen, to lead to an epiphany about the main theme of the book, and in this, the interminable beauty of [Lem's] work can be captured."<sup>16</sup> For Danjialin, Lem is a true erudite: the parts describing the history of Solaris mission can speak to the hearts of hard SF fans, but his mastermind shows in the ostracised element of the scholarship – the Apocrypha [Danjialin 2010]. Those unofficial, underexplained, and overlooked phenomena described by the researchers are the most valuable, the most important discovery in the whole study because they present a challenge to human reason and show why the entire exploration went in the wrong direction. As Jacky puts it,

16 Translated from the original statement: "Zhe zhong gan bing bu shi yinwei xie de buhao, er gai shuo jiu shi yao zhe yang cai neng duiqi chu xiaoshuo zuihou de poti yu wujin de mei." [Elish 2012].

“Facing this planet, facing this mystery, facing those «fake» loved ones, facing all this science in decline, we can only feel heavy, we can only feel empty.”<sup>17</sup>

Overall, the bloggers summarize their reading experience as positive, although it came with a sad and heavy load (Danjialin). Some admit that the whole book presents a challenge to SF readers, spoiled by the light, adventurous space novels, where science and technology are just a colorful addition (Coolchat). But even if not built for the philosophical depths of this work, they still enjoyed reading it and wanted to share their opinion. Shane [2015] calls Lem the most significant SF author in history. Imagination Abyss says that “*Solaris* gave her an intense reading experience which lead to a shocking journey into the deepest part of her soul”<sup>18</sup> and for that, Lem should be awarded a Nobel Prize.

Aside from personal blogs, there is a top-rated channel on YouTube called *Huanhai Hangxing*<sup>19</sup> (loosely translated as *Journey Through the Fantasy Sea*), which has been, since the beginning of 2019, providing its viewers with analysis and interpretation of different SF works. Two ten-minute episodes published on January 18<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019 are dedicated to Lem’s *Solaris*, and both are titled *Another way to interpret life in the Universe (Dui Yuzhou Shengming de Ling Yi Zhong Jiedu)*. The first video has reached a high viewing figure of 184,184; more than 112,000 users have viewed the second one<sup>20</sup>. In both parts, the narrator tells the story in line with the book but from the third-person perspective, adding a personal interpretation of the plot. In the background, there are scenes from the 2002 movie and some random cuts from other SF films. Each episode ends with a friendly suggestion that it will be more entertaining if the viewers read the book rather than just watch the explanation

- 17 Translated from the original statement: “Miandui zhe zhe ge xingqiu, miandui zhe zhe ge mituan, miandui zhe zhe ge jiaqinren, miandui zhe moluo de kexue, zhide chenzhong, zhide kongxu.” [Jacky 2012].
- 18 Translated from the original statement: “Suolali xing wei wo dailai le yi ci hen shenke de yuedu tiyan, yi ci feichang zhenhan de zixing zhilü.” [Imagination Abyss 2010].
- 19 *Huanhai Hangxin – science fiction* (n.d.) Home [YouTube Channel] <https://tinyurl.com/4m6hr27y>
- 20 Retrieved on 18.08.2020.

given in this short video. Browsing through the comments section below each episode, we can discover many different opinions about Lem's novel. Some may find the plot boring and won't recommend it for future reading. Others admit that Lem was a genius who went further than just scratching the surface of the genre. Hence they believe that *Solaris* is a must-read classic. We can also find several people discussing differences between the book and two film adaptations. Still, the most interesting comments are those in which the viewers reveal their reflections on the message conveyed by the story. The user Distant Moon (*Yue Zai Yuan*) is convinced that the "original spirit" or soul must be eternal [Distant 2019]. Ameizi from Hot Springs Village (*Wenquancun Ameizi*) believes that the future direction of science is mysticism [Hot Springs Village 2019]. After seeing both parts, the user goahis points out that when we encounter a question to which science cannot find any answers, we need to turn our faces to philosophy [Goahis 2019]. He is fascinated by the Ocean, this god-like, powerful, and silent creature, whose knowledge cannot be measured by any human standards. It does not want to establish any contact with humans because it already knows everything about them. Goahis sees in the Ocean a perfect state of cosmic harmony, something which in Chinese philosophy has been called a "unity between Heaven and Man" (*tian ren heyi*), a state in which any words, descriptions, and concepts are futile, a condition in which one can only remain silent. Haifeng Liu agrees with this opinion and makes another reference to the traditional Chinese way of thinking – the concept of the "Dao of Heaven" (*Tiandao*) introduced in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*).<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to see how Sinophone SF fans approach Lem's Ocean: from their perspective, it is no different than the idea of the Cosmic Dao, coming from their original philosophical line of thought – Daoism. While being ultimate and absolute, Dao can never be experienced by our senses and can never be expressed in our language. Its description can only be used as a metaphor for what is forever unknowable and ineffable. Dao giving birth to all things under Heaven is pure creation itself, it constitutes one

21 One of the oldest Chinese classics, a mystical divination text, believed to have the answers to every question in the universe.

flow of continuity that will never cease to exist. It exceeds our imagination, seems to be unreachable, yet it is fundamental to our existence. It is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. Given the description above, no wonder that the main object of scientific investigation in the novel appears to be another metaphor of the ancient Chinese idea of the ultimate reality.

We have already seen that for a book written by a non-Anglophone writer, *Solaris*, to some extent, became a trendy novel among science fiction fans in China and Taiwan. Even if the novel stands out from the majority of works typical of the genre, and even if it was written by an author coming from a different cultural background, this highly scientific story with its psychological and philosophical depths did win the hearts of Sinophone readers. This positive reception given by the SF community sparked interest of many scholars dealing mostly with world literature studies and inspired them to write articles about Lem's insightful narrative style. One of them – a short review by Liu Ruey-Hua included in the recent translation of the book was already mentioned at the beginning of this section. Together with a brief comparison between the original story and its adaptation, Liu shares his reflections on the nature of communication and mutual understanding coming with it. For him, the main characters in the book are not trying to communicate with an alien being from another planet but with the “unfamiliar” hidden in their subconsciousness. This makes us ponder: what does it actually mean for us to be human? For Liu, *Solaris* can help us understand the nature of this question and show a direction of our search for an answer:

What is Solaris? Maybe it is something that you had lost a long time ago. Maybe it is something you have been longing for for a long time. Maybe you have no idea what it is that you desire, and Solaris is the place in which you can find it. Everyone should have their own Solaris. We also want to know where exactly this Solaris is, but the biggest question is, if one day you find it, what will you do next?<sup>22</sup>

22 Translated from the original statement: “*Solaris shi shenme? Keneng ni cengjing shiqu de. Keneng ni bing bu zhidao ziji xiangwang shenme, que zai Solaris shang keyi*”

The first edition of the book, translated from English, has been reviewed by another notable expert – Yan Wu, a Chinese science fiction scholar and professor at Beijing Normal University. Yan believes that the primary purpose of science fiction literature is not to show us the infinite possibilities of science or predict our future but to bring us into a state of wonder, to help us create a philosophical sphere in our lives, where we can think from different perspectives about our life just right now.<sup>23</sup> And this is precisely the purpose that *Solaris* fulfills. Yan Wu appreciates Lem's profound thinking and his characteristic Eastern European humor with satirical content. He finds it impressive how, by combining different literary forms (scientific treatise, medical research report, folk story, myth or fairy tale), the Polish author can not only vividly describe humorous and sometimes absurd situations but also deeply reflect on the meaning of our lives. No wonder that Stanisław Lem has been called Borges of the Space Age.<sup>24</sup>

Following so many positive opinions on Lem's masterpiece, several academics from mainland China wrote articles in which they analyze the main themes of *Solaris* against theories and concepts popular in literature and philosophy. Wang Ruirui, for example, believes that *Solaris* introduces an important posthumanist aspect [Wang 2019: 175]. In light of this revelation, we need to criticize human nature and redefine it so that we can finally let go of our anthropocentric worldview. He argues that Lem is humorously blaming a one-sided human perspective, our urge to create definitions and norms applicable to everything under the sun. The belief in causality, in binary distinctions in ethics, falls apart when

*zhaodao. Mei ge ren yinggai dou you ziji de Solaris, women ye xu hen xiang zhidao zhe ge Solaris zai nali, zhenzheng de nanti shi, ruguo you yi tian ni nadao le Solaris, ni zenme ban?*" [Liu 2010: 330].

- 23 Translated from the original statement: "Zhuyao gongneng shi ta de xiangxing, shi ta tigong gei renmen dui xianshi jinxing duo jiaodu fansi de zhexue kongjian.", published as an opinion attached to Stanisław Lem's [2014: 332] *Solaris* (*Suolali xing*).
- 24 The so-called "Space Age" is generally considered to have begun in 1957, with the launch of the first satellite *Sputnik 1* into space, and continues till the present day. It is an era that encompasses out-of-Earth exploration, space technology, the space race, and any cultural development influenced by these events.



humans encounter a being which is thinking and acting following different, if any, criteria. This makes the Ocean and the “guests” something which can be called “Totally Other” (*wanquan tazhe*), a posthumanist object that exceeds our belief in humanism and escapes the familiar dichotomy of good and evil, right and wrong [Wang 2019: 176]. By encountering a different form of life, to which none of the norms created by humans can apply, we can finally reflect on the nature of morality. This reflection can lead to a real “ethical turn” (*lunli zhuanxing*), making space for a new, nonhuman-centered, code of conduct where the agent is no longer only a human being. This “ethical turn” is a change that the protagonist of the novel experiences himself. After a futile attempt to understand the nature of Solaris with the use of the “knowledge” gathered in Solaristic archives or by various experiments made on its creations, Kelvin changes his subjective mode of cognition into a nonhuman form of understanding. For Wang Ruirui, Lem’s example of a new cognitive state is very similar to Rosi Braidotti’s idea of “nomadic subjectivity”.<sup>25</sup>

Another scholar, Chen Dan, tried to prove that Lem’s skepticism towards the anthropocentric nature of human cognition can deconstruct a utopian imagination typical of the science fiction genre. Employing a literary strategy called by Chen “double inscription”, Lem turns the limitations of the utopian ideal into an allegory and criticizes its merits. According to Chen, different lines of the narrative – one describing the one hundred years of Solaristic exploration, one building an atmosphere of an action thriller, and one telling a romantic love story – which are frequently interchangeable in the book, create an overall satirical effect in which the human concept of utopia becomes a laughable fantasy. Everything can be brought down to a binary opposition between the human “self” (subject) and alien “other” (object). This antagonism is the cause of all the paradoxes present in the book: rational science versus irrational object of science, imperfect human beings versus phantoms created from cherished human memories, our

25 Readers interested in this topic can check Braidotti’s *Nomadic Theory. The Portable Rosi Braidotti* [Braidotti 2012].

need to express everything through language versus phenomena always escaping our cognition, thus naming, abilities, etc. [Chen 2016: 113]. Knowledge, language, reason, imagination, ethical norms – everything that humans see as universal becomes empty concepts when exposed to an object which itself is something above our idea of objectivity. Chen believes that Lem could agree with Jacques Lacan's theory of a split subject [Chen 2016: 115]. In this case, the only possible way for humans to initiate real communication with the alien "other" is to abandon the subject-object dichotomy. But whether it can be done, and how, is a different question.

##### 5. A far ahead mind in a far away world – summary and conclusions

Stanisław Lem, an astonishingly well-read physician with a curious mind naturally drawn to science and philosophy, was and still is the only internationally acclaimed Polish-language science fiction novelist. At the peak of his popularity (end of the 1970s and early 1980s), Lem was the most widely read non-English-language SF writer, and until today, fifteen years after his death, he is still considered a true master of the genre. This Polish SF king remains an author who can, in an interesting way and by the use of an original literary form, transmit to us an essential message about life, humankind, and the world we create. Rather than storyline fireworks, he put his trust into the reflective ability of the reader. The topics that he was raising more than forty years ago in his books have become increasingly current today, not only because many of his visions of the future, like scientific development or our addiction to technology, became real in the present time. Lem's books are realistic also because they touch on the ontological, epistemological, phenomenological, and ethical problems that we need to face here and now in this highly-advanced, globalized, and complicated world. And when it comes to the deep, insightful, philosophical, and still up-to-date novel, there is no better example than Lem's best and most important work – *Solaris*.

We have already seen that this short story about seeking contact with the massive and inscrutable alien being has captivated the

hearts and minds of science fiction fans around the world. Andrey Tarkovsky's and Steven Soderbergh's film adaptations certainly contributed to *Solaris*' global success and popularized this story among readers of different ages, genders, cultures, and beliefs. The book's reputation grew even stronger with the support of Western scholars of literature and philosophy, who tried to elaborate on *Solaris*' philosophical and psychological meaning in connection to the achievements of future science. Academics have analyzed the book in the spirit of a number of theories and conceptions like limits of human knowledge; questions about human nature and ability of our cognition, the connection between mind and body; search for self-identity; roles implied by the society and norms which we agreed to follow and universalize, etc. Some attempted to involve comparative studies by recalling arguments and concepts defined by famous philosophers and thinkers like Descartes, Hegel, Foucault, or Freud. *Solaris* definitely was and still is a story worth reading, reflecting, discussing, and sharing.

In the West, Lem's fame spread very fast, especially given the time of geopolitical tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. In the East, however, the Polish writer was unknown for a long time. When we look at the history of science fiction in China and later in Taiwan, we can better understand why it was so. Political nuances and rivalry, censorship, different cultural background, and the language barrier were important causes of selective accessibility of Western SF works in the Sinophone world. In the beginning, only the "cream" of Anglophone writers received the honor of having their works materialized in the Chinese language. Later, with the end of the twentieth century, this group was joined by new authors, less and more popular, usually following the tastes of renowned science fiction scholars or political leaders. Still, books written by non-English-speakers were a rarity. No wonder that after 2002, the appearance of three different translations of *Solaris* evoked curiosity among Chinese readers. Many started to ponder why a non-Anglophone author received such a huge attention from various publishing houses, why three different translators were striving to capture the spirit of this novel and present it to the Chinese audience. Due to this phenomenon, the interest in Lem's

book increased, bookworms from China and Taiwan, after reading the story, started to write opinions on their blogs, create videos on YouTube channels or even publish serious articles in academic journals. Most of them wanted to share their reading experience or re-tell the story, some started to ask philosophical questions and analyze the hidden meanings of the book. All those authors became, in a way, Solarists – they were exposed to something that they didn't encounter before, a new version of an SF novel so different from the pulp escapism entertainment assigned to this genre without mentioning the foreign philosophical depth of the story written from a Western mind's perspective. Many found it hard to read, more could not bring together the indescribable mystery hidden between the lines. Still, they tried to understand it the best way they could by recalling topics present in the Western studies on literature and philosophy – the problem of cognition, the value of the human soul, anthropocentrism, and the search for a utopian society.

Examples of reflections and investigations by Sinophone readers used in this paper are just the beginning. Browsing through all those sincere opinions and insightful studies, it is easy to notice that the story of the human encounter with a mysterious Ocean and its creations strikes a chord with some ideas coming from traditional Chinese philosophy, especially works written by Laozi and Zhuangzi in the spirit of the Daoist philosophy. It would be more than interesting to witness a comparative study between Lem's philosophical insight presented in *Solaris* and Laozi's teaching without words (*bu yan zhi dao*) or Zhuangzi's "usefulness of the useless" (*wu yong zhi yong*); "spontaneous change" (*zi fa zhi bianyi*) as a Way in which the universe and myriad things exist; the "ethics of attunement" with the natural course of things (*shun qi ziran zhi lunlixue*); the idea of "effortless action" (*wuwei*); the equality of all forms of life (*tianli zhi pingdeng*), etc. Because ... weren't the human conventions and methods of linguistic communication unable to grasp, describe, and understand the existence of the Ocean? Isn't it true that, while facing the unknown, indescribable and unexplainable, one must simply surrender to it, accept it and enjoy what follows without interfering with it, without trying to

force it to make sense? Doesn't the encounter with *Solaris* guide us on how to be humble, compassionate, understanding, tolerant, and flexible in our perspectives, beliefs and convictions? Doesn't it teach us how to be good in our unique, differentiated world? Insight from the Chinese philosophy can expand our Western ideas of "knowledge" and "human limits" and possibly give answers to questions which we couldn't reach with our one-sided Western perspective.

These and many other comparative approaches can become a new way to appreciate well-written works of science fiction, like *Solaris*. The author hopes that in the future, there will be more people eager to familiarize themselves with Lem's literary work, which would meet with a demand for more first-hand translations. Stanisław Lem was popular, is popular and will be popular. His books are timeless masterpieces of science fiction literature and deserve to be discovered by everyone who likes to read and ponder the nature of our humanness put to the test in the age of scientific wonders. This year, we celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lem's birth. This would be an excellent opportunity to see some of those wishes become a reality.

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***Solaris* and the Dao: The Reception of Stanislaw Lem's Novel in the Sinophone World**

The most popular science fiction novel written by the Polish author Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, was published in 1961. Although it was translated into English as early as 1970, the book was unknown to the Sinophone readers until 2003, when the first translation from English into Chinese was published, most probably following the popularity of the resounding Hollywood film adaptation from 2002. Still, *Suolalisi Xing* (which can be translated as 'Solaris Star') did not attract broader audiences in China or Taiwan, at least not until the third version of the novel, translated directly from Polish into Chinese, saw the light of day in 2010. The appearance of this translation coincided with the beginning of a New Golden Era of Chinese and Taiwanese science fiction, which undoubtedly had a significant influence on the positive re-reception of *Solaris*. In the paper, the author focuses on the philosophical aspect of Lem's work and investigates which themes and concepts present in *Solaris* caught the imagination of Chinese-speaking readers. The author wants to show how this reception, while coming from a different historical, cultural, and linguistic background, can enrich our understanding of the novel and introduce a new way of looking at the important existential questions stated by the writer.

**Keywords:** Stanislaw Lem; science fiction; Sinophone world; anthropocentrism.

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