

Silkpunk Fiction: A Multifaceted Reimagining of Modernity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how silkpunk offers a multifaceted reimagining of modernity through its technological imagination, drawing on alternate history, contemporary interpretations of Eastern aesthetics and philosophy, and cultural resistance against Western centrism. Inspired by the historical and cultural heritage of ancient East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, silkpunk fiction creates a fantastical world rich with Eastern allure. This approach represents a departure from traditional science fiction narratives, which are predominantly rooted in Western historical and technological frameworks. More than just a literary innovation, silkpunk serves as a form of cultural practice. By reactivating Eastern cultural elements, it integrates critical reflections on technological modernity, ecological ethics, and cultural politics into imaginative storytelling. In doing so, it provides a discursive platform for non-Western perspectives to engage in global visions of the future. Research shows that silkpunk not only diversifies understandings of “modernity” but also expands the boundaries of literary creativity, opening up new imaginative spaces for reflecting on technology, ethics, and cultural identity.

Keywords: silkpunk, modernity, alternate history, eastern aesthetics, eastern philosophy.

INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SILKPUNK

Silkpunk fiction among the rich and varied realm of contemporary literature is rising as an innovative and captivating genre, which attracts the interest of many readers and academics alike. For this concept being first introduced by Chinese-American author Ken Liu during the creation of his "The Grace of Kings" series, he characterized it as a "medium that highlights a unique technological aesthetic and literary approach" [1]. From the comment of Roger Whitson, Liu's introduction of this term seeks to uncover the intricate bond between technology and culture [2]. By taking inspiration from the historical and cultural legacy of ancient East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands, silkpunk fiction aims at creating a fantastical realm steeped in Eastern allure. Within this world, ancient Eastern technological components, such as mechanical contraptions fashioned from bamboo, shells, and silk, display a distinct technological aesthetic.

With regard to the advent of silkpunk fiction, it serves as a strong rebuttal to the traditionally Western-dominated framework of science fiction from a literary history standpoint. Renowned

literary critics Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova have highlighted that English and the English-speaking sphere hold a central position in the global literary and film industry, while other languages and cultures are often sidelined [3][4]. The longstanding dominance of Western aesthetic norms in the epic fantasy genre is challenged by silkpunk fiction through its focus on Eastern cultural values and technological systems, thereby amplifying the voice of Eastern cultures on the global stage.

Silkpunk is intimately linked with the narrative style of "alternate history" on a theoretical plane. These narratives posit that history diverged at pivotal moments, so the way for an alternative trajectory of development can be paved. By inheriting the tradition of incorporating mythological elements from "historical science fiction" that emerged in the 1980s, as well as the rebellious ethos of "punk fiction", silkpunk reconstructs history through localized imagination. For instance, set against the backdrop of the Tang Dynasty, Yang Wanqing's "Golden Peaches" offers a fresh take on historical possibilities from the viewpoint of the original timeline, which employs the framework of China's historical past to articulate its narrative [5]. A Lai remarked that Yang Wanqing discovered a temporal and spatial niche capable of accommodating a series of technological concepts amidst the grandeur and complexity of history in his critique of "Golden Peaches", which adeptly merges classical Eastern aesthetics with contemporary technological ideologies.

TECHNOLOGICAL IMAGINATION AND MYTH REIMAGINING: THE NARRATIVE CORNERSTONE OF SILKPUNK

Technological Imagination and Ethical Concepts Based on "Eastern Materials"

Silkpunk works are distinguished by their unique technological imagination, in which their technological frameworks are often built from Eastern materials. In "The Grace of Kings", for example, vessels are constructed by the use of bamboo for their skeletons and oilcloth for their outer coverings to make the protection against arrows, while mechanical narwhals are repurposed as submarines for underwater combat [6][7]. For these designs, the inherent properties of Eastern materials are fully used, such as the flexibility of bamboo and the protective attributes of oilcloth. In "Golden Peaches", the central technologies attach importance to computers and artificial intelligence, where silk-woven "calculating silk" works as information storage, and "sound-discriminating porcelain" forms the foundation of computing devices. Arithmetic and weaving sciences stand in for algorithms, and the narrative even extends to the creation of artificial intelligence and embodied intelligence (automata).

Western modern technological perspectives are profoundly shaped by Heidegger's concept of "enframing" from the viewpoint of the philosophy of technology, suggesting that technology is a means of ordering and challenging nature [8]. In stark contrast, the technological imagination found in silkpunk novels offers a fundamentally different technological ethic. In "The Grace of Kings", Ken Liu likens engineering to poetry, who makes the proposal that engineers piece together basic elements like nails, boards, ropes, and gears into components, components into complex devices, several devices into machines, and machines into systems, akin to how words form phrases, phrases form lines, lines form stanzas, and stanzas form a complete poem [1]. By marrying the humanities with science, and overcoming the Western technological rationality's split between instrumental and value rationality, this aesthetic idea realizes a harmonious integration of technology and the humanities. While acknowledging the benefits of technological advancement, Ken Liu focuses on the establishment of a technological ethic that

is in tune with nature, respectful of history, and recognizes diversity in his depiction of the Chinese identity [9]. The novels encompass technological devices that follow scientific principles, which also preserve elements of the mysterious and the supernatural, recognizing the limits of human understanding and the presence of the unknowable.

Integration of Mythological Elements and Technological Innovation

Being integral to the technological imagination of silkpunk, mythological elements serve as a catalyst for technological innovation. In the fictional world of the Dara Islands, as depicted in "The Grace of Kings", numerous deities presiding over various domains exist, including Russo, Tututika, and Feisuowei. Beyond enriching the narrative backdrop, these mythological components are also deeply interwoven with the evolution of technology. For example, a colossal warship emerges during the decisive confrontation between the kingdoms of Larkin and Ryukyu, which amalgamates diverse mythological forces with technological superiority. Ji'en employs six narwhal warships for the creation of a hexagonal fortress formation, harnessing the essence of the Miracle God's soul, the heart of Tututika, the determination of Feisuowei, and the vitality of the Twin Gods to form a floating bastion that encircles from all directions.

A re-encoding and reactivation of the nation's cultural DNA is signified by this inventive incorporation of mythological elements from the viewpoint of cultural studies. Silkpunk fiction merges traditional myths with a modern technological framework through the reimagining of these mythological elements, which craft new stories that revitalize ancient myths in a contemporary setting, thus offering readers with a distinctive literary experience. In "Good Hunting", the story unfolds in late Qing dynasty China, a time when the ancient civilization was in decline due to colonial invasions. For the economic exploitation and cultural dominance imposed by the colonizers, it not only resulted in the gradual supplanting of traditional Eastern artifacts by modern entities like railways, skyscrapers, and neon lights, encroaching upon people's living spaces, but more fundamentally, it disrupted the harmonious balance between humans and nature. In the novel, the railways traversing the land sever the qi meridians of this spiritually charged territory. As a result, the "essence" and "spiritual energy" that once permeated the heavens and the earth was caused to disperse, and the energy capable of nurturing life wisdom is entirely eradicated with it. Being unable to draw sustenance from this land any more, Xiao Liang, the son of a demon hunter, and Yan'er, a fox spirit, are compelled to leave the impoverished rural regions of South China for the more economically advanced and heavily colonized new world of Hong Kong. However, Yan'er, possessing Eastern arcane skills (the shape-shifting ability of a fox spirit), does not succumb to despondency despite the severe "obsolescence" of her abilities. Instead, she perceives herself as a hunter in the new world and remains steadfast in her ambition to conquer this "world dominated by iron roads and steam whistles" in spite of enduring repeated humiliations, who boldly requests Xiao Liang having become a mechanical engineer to transform her completely into "a beautiful and deadly chrome-plated fox" when her original form can no longer absorb energy from the land. With this cyborg body powered by steam, Yan'er astonishingly regains the life energy she could not draw in the old land and once again becomes a formidable avenger [10]. Under the fusion of the fox demon with steam technology, the "myth-science" dichotomy is deconstructed. The "animism" of Eastern mythology and the "awakening of consciousness" in Western machinery are united in the cyborg fox demon, suggesting a technological trajectory distinct from Western rationalism.

CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATION OF EASTERN AESTHETICS: THE VISUAL AND ARTISTIC LANGUAGE OF SILKPUNK

Dynamic and Subtle Visual Aesthetics

In addition to showcasing quintessential Eastern qualities in its visual style, silkpunk highlights the importance of fluidity and subtlety. Eastern aesthetics are centered around the creation of "artistic conception", striving for an artistic impact that merges emotions with scenery and intertwines the real with the imaginary, which sets it apart from the Western emphasis on formal beauty and realism [11].

The works of Ken Liu enable people to frequently encounter meticulous portrayals of Eastern architecture and attire. For instance, the worlds he crafts often feature airships constructed entirely from bamboo, with silk sails billowing in the breeze, reminiscent of Liezi soaring through the skies. Under this fusion of technologically advanced airships with distinctly Eastern materials like bamboo and silk, a distinctive visual allure is generated, embodying the Eastern aesthetic ideal of "harmony between man and nature". For the depiction of characters' clothing, traditional styles such as quju and ruqun are highlighted, exuding the elegance and refinement characteristic of Eastern attire. Their graceful lines and harmonious color schemes align with the Eastern aesthetic principle of "beauty of neutrality".

In the aspect of the settings, through the incorporation of classic Eastern landscape elements like small bridges arching over flowing water, pavilions, and terraces, the fictional worlds with a sense of poetry and beauty are infused. For example, the protagonist finds themselves in a bamboo-enclosed courtyard featuring a beautifully crafted octagonal pavilion at its center in certain scenes, complete with antique tea sets. Nearby, a gentle stream murmurs, and distant mountains are shrouded in mist, barely visible. Such vivid scene descriptions vividly capture the allure of Eastern aesthetics on a visual level, achieving the artistic ideal of "a picture within a poem".

The Pinnacle of Craftsmanship Lies in the Embodiment and Expression of the Way

In silkpunk novels, the presentation of the aesthetics of Eastern craftsmanship is focused on. From the standpoint of craftsmanship philosophy, the principle that "skill evolves towards the Way" is upheld by traditional Eastern craftsmanship, indicating that the pinnacle of craftsmanship lies in the embodiment and expression of the Way. This is in contrast to Western craftsmanship, frequently underscoring utilitarian and instrumental aspects [12].

In Mu Ming's "The Serpentine Band and Other Stories", the narrative commences with a girl named Chen'er being given a mysterious twisted jade ring by a stranger during the Lantern Festival. The novel subtly introduces readers to various traditional crafts through the perspective of Chen'er's father, in which the jade-carving technique of hollowing, the artistic use of negative space in ink wash painting, and the centripetal approach in garden design are encompassed. The novel encapsulates the aesthetic of color and emptiness by portraying these traditional crafts, where color emerges from emptiness and emptiness encompasses color, ultimately reflecting the philosophical notion of "skill evolving towards the Way" and the seamless integration of color and emptiness. From this exploration and depiction of traditional Eastern craftsmanship aesthetics, readers are able to recognize that Eastern craftsmanship is not merely a collection of techniques but a cultural expression rich with profound philosophical insights and aesthetic values. By adeptly merging the theories of traditional Chinese landscape

painting with topological concepts like the Möbius strip and Klein bottle, Mu Ming guides the characters, scholars, and Youwen of the Jiangnan region to meticulously plan and construct a twisted garden amidst the political turmoil, upheaval, and civil unrest of the late Ming dynasty. This garden possesses the ability to transcend into higher dimensions, so a vantage point can be offered to observe their spacetime from different perspectives.

From the portrayal of traditional embroidery techniques in various other novels, artisans employing delicate stitches to fashion intricate patterns on silk are illustrated, with each stitch and thread embodying their devotion and expertise. From the choice of silk threads to the application of stitching techniques, all of these highlight the exquisite and unique allure of Eastern craftsmanship, which reflects the pursuit of the "ingenuity" spirit in Eastern aesthetics, enriching the novel's cultural depth and allowing Eastern aesthetics to be deeply embedded within the narrative.

EXPRESSION OF EASTERN PHILOSOPHY: THE CONCEPTUAL CORE OF SILKPUNK

Ecological worldview of "Unity of Man and Nature" and "the Way Emulating Nature"

The Eastern philosophical ideals of "unity of man and nature" and "the Way emulating nature" are profoundly ingrained in certain silkpunk novels. These principles align closely with modern environmental thinking from an ecological philosophy standpoint, as both advocate for a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world and reject the notion of human supremacy.

In the story "Spring Dew, Cloud Dream Mountain, Zhong Kun", the craftsman Yan Shi focuses on the construction of a "bronze man 'Zhong Kun'" that is powered by rabbits in a bid to win the heart of the adored Princess Liushu, with sinews made from rhinoceros hide and a heart crafted from a small oriole. As a complex assembly of mechanisms, this bronze figure is propelled by eleven squirrels, and directed by a solitary oriole. For the creation of this bronze man, the notion of unity and harmonious coexistence with nature is embodied. Its energy source and the materials used are all derived from nature, adhering to natural principles, without engaging in excessive alteration or harm to the environment, but rather aiming for a balanced and symbiotic relationship between humans and nature.

This forms a sharp contrast with the Western modern notion of "human domination over nature", which perceives nature as an entity to be subjugated by humans under the influence of Descartes' "mind-body dualism" philosophy, resulting in significant ecological crises [13]. For instance, a depiction of a mechanical apparatus powered by natural energy exists in some novels, which functions by harnessing wind energy, water energy, and other natural forces. Being in harmony with the surrounding natural environment, The design of this device poses no detrimental effects to nature; rather, it seems to be an integral part of it. A fresh perspective for contemplating the strained relationship between humans and nature in contemporary society is offered by this articulation of the ideas of "unity of man and nature" and "the Way emulating nature".

The Concept of "Great Unity"

For certain silkpunk novels also incorporating the concept of "Great Unity", it underscores the importance of global wholeness and harmony from the viewpoint of political philosophy, setting it apart from Western modern political thought, which often prioritizes national

sovereignty and interests. Given this, a rich cultural basis can be offered for fostering a global community with a shared future.

For example, there are also instances of dialogue and cooperation in spite of the tensions and conflicts among various nations and ethnic groups in some novels that depict ancient Eastern settings. In specific plot developments, different countries and peoples can overcome their past grievances and unite to tackle the challenges together when confronted with shared threats such as natural calamities or the encroachment of formidable external powers. Although the seven states of the Derawan archipelago are perpetually embroiled in conflict throughout their history in Ken Liu's "The Grace of Kings", moments of collaboration during pivotal times also appear.

For this portrayal of the "Great Unity" concept, the Eastern philosophical quest for harmony and unity is mirrored, imparting positive values within the narratives and presenting an idealistic vision for the establishment of a world order grounded in coexistence and diversity, enabling readers to feel a sense of universal love and solidarity that transcends national and ethnic boundaries, and encouraging them to reflect on how to foster harmonious relationships and mutual development among different cultures and groups in the real world. This holds significant implications for addressing the global challenges that the world currently faces.

EASTERN PUNK SPIRIT: RESISTANCE AGAINST WESTERN-CENTRIC AND MONOLITHIC MODERNITY

Counter to the Western-centric Paradigm

For the emergence of silkpunk novels, it serves as a significant counter to the Western-centric paradigm. Postcolonial theorist Edward Wadie Said eloquently revealed the mechanisms by which the West established its dominance through the construction of the East in his foundational text "Orientalism" [14]. Ken Liu, who introduced the concept of Silkpunk, found inspiration for his "The Grace of Kings" series by drawing equally from American history and the historical events of the Chu-Han Contention and the Hundred Schools of Thought. A reinterpretation of American national myths was offered through an Asian cultural lens, contending that epics and fantasies should not be the exclusive domain of white and European cultures.

A platform for Eastern cultures to narrate their own stories within the mainstream narrative has been created by the burgeoning of the silkpunk concept, driven by Asian authors, rather than being relegated to the role of Orientalist caricatures or exotic curiosities. For example, the values and technological systems of Eastern cultures take center stage in certain silkpunk novels, no longer subordinate to Western culture. Disrupting the entrenched dominance of Western aesthetic norms in the epic fantasy genre, these novels grant Eastern cultures greater discursive power on the global cultural scene and highlighting their unique allure and worth to the world. This represents a cultural "decolonization" effort.

Silkpunk novels forge a cultural realm that is neither wholly Eastern nor entirely Western from the standpoint of literary criticism, which resonate with the "third space" theory posited by postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha. In this space, Eastern culture is no longer merely the object of the gaze but actively engages in the construction of global science fiction narratives

[15]. Silkpunk novels enrich the cultural depth of literary works and broaden the horizons of literary creation Through the deep exploration and reinterpretation of Eastern culture.

Resistance to the Notion of a Single, Uniform Modernity

Silkpunk novels also serve as a form of resistance to the notion of a single, uniform modernity. In line with modernity theory, the worldwide spread of Western modernity has resulted in a homogenized version of modernity, marked by rationalism, industrialization, and urbanization. However, the varied interpretations and applications of modernity within different cultural contexts are disregarded. Silkpunk novels present a multi-dimensional view of modernity through their portrayal of Eastern cultural values and technological trajectories.

According to the concept of "multiple modernities", introduced by German sociologist Ulrich Beck, modernity is not solely a Western phenomenon; instead, different cultures can make the cultivation of distinct forms of modernity [16]. The technological advancements of the Tang Dynasty diverge significantly from those of Western modernity in Yang Wanqing's "Golden Peaches". Grounded in traditional materials like silk and ceramics, the novel's technological framework has evolved unique systems of computing and artificial intelligence. Under this technological progress, the integration with traditional culture and the maintenance of a harmonious balance with nature is emphasized.

The technological development in "Golden Peaches" puts an emphasis on sustainability and harmony in contrast to Western modernity that often prioritizes efficiency and rapid development at the cost of environmental degradation. Being distinct from Western modernity, this alternative model of development serves as a reminder that modernity is not restricted to a single form. Being able to nurture diverse modernities, different cultural settings expand our understanding of the potential paths for modern societal development and encouraging a critical reflection on the limitations of the Western model of singular modernity. Thus, a wider array of options can be offered for the future trajectory of society.

CONCLUSION

With unique technological imagination, presentation of Eastern aesthetics, integration of Eastern philosophy, and strong punk spirit, silkpunk fiction has embarked on a multifaceted reimagining of modernity, breaking free from the constraints of Western-centric science fiction narratives and the narrow confines of a singular modernity, as well as daring to envision alternative histories and building technological frameworks rooted in Eastern materials and cultural traditions. Under this genre, an aesthetic that is both dynamic and nuanced is presented, harmoniously blending minimalism with maximalism, and it is infused with Eastern philosophical ideas such as "the unity of man and nature" and "universal harmony", thus enriching modernity with fresh cultural meanings and new avenues for thought.

Silkpunk fiction acts as a powerful vehicle for the propagation of Eastern culture from the standpoint of cultural dissemination, which amplifies the global impact of Eastern cultural elements, with a diverse array of Eastern cultural symbols being skillfully woven into the narrative in these novels. These cultural components are no longer mere abstractions but are brought to life through engaging characters and complex storylines from the Confucian and Taoist philosophies of China to the Bushido spirit of Japan, and the distinctive folk customs of Southeast Asia. With the rise of silkpunk fiction, the previous dominance of Western culture in

the science fiction and fantasy genres has been disrupted, bringing Eastern perspectives and voices to the forefront of the science fiction world.

In terms of social commentary, some valuable insights are offered by silkpunk fiction based on its exploration of contemporary issues such as technological advancement and cultural preservation. In certain novels, authors portray future societies where technology is highly advanced, and people benefit from the conveniences it offers, yet they also grapple with challenges like the dehumanization caused by technology and the degradation of the natural environment. Under this reflection, readers are encouraged to reassess the development models of modern society and consider how to pursue technological progress while safeguarding human dignity and cultural diversity.

In the sphere of literary innovation, distinctive advancements in both narrative techniques and thematic exploration are demonstrated by silkpunk fiction. Narratively, it departs from conventional linear storytelling, which employs nonlinear methods that allow the narrative to leap across different time periods and spatial dimensions. Thematically, the boundaries of traditional science fiction and fantasy are transcended, which seamlessly merges Eastern cultural elements with modern technology and social issues, thereby uncovering a unique thematic richness.

With the evolution of silkpunk, we are offered a crucial lens through which to re-examine the interplay between technology, culture, and society against the backdrop of globalization and cultural fusion. In the future, it is poised to play an even more pivotal role in cultural innovation, cross-cultural dialogue, and the reflection on contemporary societal challenges, deserving of further scholarly and creative exploration.

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