Envisioning Posthuman Existence in Han Song’s Subway (2010)

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Chinese science fiction writer Han Song (韩松) is frequently compared with Can Xue, Lu Xun, and Franz Kafka in the literary style of his unnerving stories, which traverse magical realism, dystopian science fiction, and allegories of post-human existence. Focusing on Han Song’s Subway series (《地铁》, 2010), this paper takes a post-humanistic and ecocritical approach in understanding the prevalent eerie affect of ennui that is registered in the corporeality and subjectivity of the characters. The stories reflect a progress-obsessed Chinese modernisation haunted by the ghost of social Darwinism. Of particular interest is the dark affects that surround the technologised spaces, where the boundaries of the human, nonhuman, and posthuman are blurred and where corporeality is nullified by subjective numbness that mirrors the curious mixture of terror and indifference that characterises contemporary responses to environmental crises in the Anthropocene.

‘China has become more sci-fi like’, said Han Song in an interview with the Global Times, and its ‘subway binge’ in recent years is one example. When the first subway line in Chengdu was opened in September 2010, the news media all hailed the ‘subway era of this city, and over 104,000 people took the subway for the first three days. To Han Song, such a subway binge is both belated and surreal in China. While the world’s first subway started operation in London in 1863, China did not have its first subway until 1969, a subway line of 23.6 km in Beijing. It was followed by a seven-year gap until Tianjin became the second city in the Mainland with a subway. Subway lines in major cities mushroomed after 2005. According to the International Association of Public Transport (UITP), China has ‘an overwhelming domination’ in urban rail

1 This research was carried out while in receipt of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship (International). Original text in Chinese has been translated by the author unless specified.


5 The first subway line in Beijing was built from 1965 to 1969; Tianjing started building its own subway line from 1970 and the project was completed and put in use in 1976. 《城市轨道交通概论》余振, 欧志新 Yu Zhen, Ou Zhixin (ed.) Chengshi Guidao Jiaotong Gailun, Introduction to Urban Railway Transportation, Xinan Jiaotong Daxue Chubanshe, Southwest Jiaotong University Press, 2014, pp. 19–20.
development in at least the last five years. In 2018, China made up over two thirds of the world’s new metro station infrastructures. To a large extent, the subway, the high-speed train, and the other latest transportations, have not just shaped contemporary life and our concept of time, but have also become a potent symbol of techno-scientific modernisation. Therefore, as a science fiction (SF) writer, Han Song notes in the preface of *Subway*, the subway provides an excellent lens to perceive the present and history and to conceive the future in the socio-cultural context of contemporary Chinese society and to understand ‘its diversity, division and uncertainty towards the future’.¹

The series of stories in *Subway* envision how humans transform themselves into posthumans while bringing the world an anthropogenic apocalypse. In the technology-dominated society symbolised by the subway, the popular modern mode of transportation, human corporeality is nullified by psychophysical degradation. The semi-closed spatiality of the subway also makes it resemble ‘the iron house’ in Lu Xun’s poignant criticism of the Chinese people’s numbness towards people’s sufferings in the early twentieth century; here this numbness does not just belong to the Chinese people but to the majority of humanity, as a species, towards the environmental crisis. Also, the numbness here is a result of posthuman abandonment of embodiment during technology-dominated modernisation. Han Song’s *Subway* is a nihilistic, dystopian parable of our contemporary society, entrenched in the false belief of technological rationality, which is the ideological root cause of ecological degradation. The eerie *affect* and numb corporeality are striking in the stories and the central question remains as to what being human means to us. In this paper I approach the issue of posthuman subjectivity mainly with (but not restricted to) N. Katherine Hayles’ posthuman theories and *affective* ecocritical approaches. I argue that Han Song brings the early twentieth century intellectuals’ reflections about the cultural and identity crisis of the Chinese nation further to a posthuman speculation on the crisis of human existence in this era labelled as Anthropocene.² The story poses an existentialist question to its contemporaries facing the dual challenge of technological modification of living beings and the ecological degradation on this planet.

**Chinese ‘New Wave’ SF, Han Song and the Subway series**

SF, as a genre of fictional narrative, helps us conceive, perceive, and scrutinize (post-)modernity. While the burgeoning of SF in China in the late nineteenth century can be seen as a modern cultural phenomenon, the ‘insurgency’ of SF, termed Chinese ‘New Wave’, is a notable cultural phenomenon in post-1990s China. Among them, Han Song (born 1965) is one of ‘the Three Marshals’ (三巨头 san jutou), together with Wang

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² Paraphrased from Han, ‘Preface’, p. 12: ‘The deepest agony of China, the giant fissure in her heart, her struggle against absurdity, and the uncertainty of the future after she woke up and flourished, and her hidden crisis, its being sieged by the world, and the unsettling, wandering souls of her sons and daughters.’

³ Anthropocene refers to the geological epoch after Holocene where human activities have become such a substantial factor in the geology and atmosphere of the Earth. Popularised by the atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen in the 1970s, the Anthropocene can refer to the time since the first industrial revolution till today, though consensus has not yet been attained.
Jinkang and Hugo-award-winning writer Liu Cixin. Known as soft SF by its fans, Han Song’s works are distinct from that of Liu Cixin’s hard SF, and their disparate styles are seen as having “fundamentally shaped the new wave”. Whether soft or hard, the ‘New Wave’ observes contemporary society critically, which distinguishes it from earlier SF in China that is deeply shaped by a ‘utopian narrative’ and techno-scientific optimism to help modernise the Chinese nation, namely, the Kexue Xiaoshuo (科学小说, Science Novels) in the early modern China (late 19th century and early 20th century) and the Kexue Wenyi (科学文艺, Science Arts and literature) or Kepu Xiaoshuo (科普小说, Science Educational Novels) in the early era of PRC.

Like other Chinese modern literature, Chinese SF started with an unfailing political concern for the fate of the Chinese nation in crisis. What we now see as the first Chinese SF is an unfinished utopian political fantasy, Future of New China (1902), written by Liang Qichao (1873-1929), a renowned intellectual and political activist. The story pictures a democratic, Confucian ‘new China’ six decades later, where an internationally educated Confucian intellectual gives a speech to the international audiences about the revolution that modernised and rejuvenated China six decades ago. Situating Han Song’s work in the context of Chinese SF helps us see how Han Song responds to the prevalent modern narrative of national identity in contemporary China and reflects on the modern conditions in China. Like Liang, Han Song is also concerned about the fate of the Chinese nation that is very much seen as a political other in the international sphere. Yet distinct from Liang’s utopian proposition of techno-scientific modernisation and democracy, Han Song ‘unleashed a nightmarish unconscious of a dream’ that belongs to ‘a collective entity’ of the ‘new China’.

Han Song is a senior journalist in China’s biggest official media outlet, Xinhua News Agency, yet his unusual career as a SF writer started as early as middle school, where he won a prize for SF in his native city, Chongqing. He continued writing science fiction while at university and won the Chinese SF Silver Prize, awarded by Science Fiction World (SFW) magazine, in 1988 and 1991 respectively. The then editors from SFW recognised Han’s talent but they did not recommend Han’s typical eerie style. Fortunately, Lv Yingzhong, a writer from Taiwan, highly praised Han’s novelette Epitaph of the Cosmos (《宇宙墓碑》) and brought the manuscripts to Taiwan. In 1991, Epitaph of the Cosmos won the First Prize for Sinophone SF organized by ‘Imagery’ (《幻象》, Huanxiang) magazine. Nine years after that, Han published his first novel 2066: Red Star over America (or Mars over America《2066 西行漫记》, 2000), and his second novel Red Ocean (《红色海洋》, 2004) was also highly regarded. Subway (2010), his third work, depicts a post-apocalyptic subway space in

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11 In this book, Hayashi Hisayuki distinguishes the different Chinese terms that were used as equivalent to science fiction, the above three are the words mainly used. For Hisayuki, they are different from what is now seen as science fiction. 武田雅哉, 林久之(著), 李重民（译）.《中国科学幻想文学史》（下），浙江大学出版社 2017, pp. 4-5 [Masaya Takeda, and Lin Jiuzhi, A History of Chinese Science Fiction, vol. 2, Li Chongmin (trans.), Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2017, pp. 4-5.]; M. Song, ‘After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction’, China Perspectives, no. 1, 2013, pp. 7-13.
an unspecified future Chinese metropolis. This was followed by a sequel called *High-speed Train* (*高铁*, 2012). His other recent works include *The Rebirth Brick* (*再生砖*, 2016), *The Ghosts* (*亡灵*, 2018) and many more. He also published a book called *Manifesto of Imagination* (*想象力宣言*, 2000), a collection of short essays that promote SF writing and imagination in China.

Han Song’s writing shows not so much the inherent logic of technology but human fear and existential paradoxes when encountering defamiliarized everyday places in a technologized ‘Gloomy China’ (dubbed by another notable SF writer and critic, Jia Liyuan (贾立元, pseudonym: Fei Dao, 飞氘):

… haunted as it is by the modern ghosts of the age of technology rather than by the classical ghosts of traditional supernatural stories such as those of Pu Songling (1640- 1715). The paradox is that the malevolent spirits of the past have not disappeared under the democracy and science of today’s society, but have, in new forms, become wedded to modern technology and to modern techniques of domination.

The *Subway* series is typical of Han Song’s writing: a mixture of mysterious symbols, dystopian SF, and allegories of posthuman existence. It is composed of five loosely interlocking stories set in subways, followed by around 10 pages of subtexts: a list of major subway accidents around the world and a list of safety instructions for subway accidents. These journalistic and instructive texts join in dialogue with the apocalyptic fictional narratives, and they somehow bring these subway incubuses into a realistic and historical front. The characters in each of the stories are only incidentally related to those in others. Zhou, a subway passenger in the second story, is the son-in-law of Old Wang from the first story and is once briefly referred to by Xiao Wu in the third story. Apart from a few references between the stories, each of the protagonists is lonely and rootless, indicating posthuman existence as a ‘bare life’ that is drifting outside of the bio-political zone. While the first two stories are about two institutionalised humans’ unusual experience in the subway, the third story happens in a surreal city landscape where the whole city was destroyed in an ‘experiment’, leaving a few doomsday survivors to strive to return. The fourth story depicts the underground future-humans’ efforts at finding their paradise lost. The last one is about the outer-space expatriates who revisit the lost world to investigate the ‘fall of

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13 S City is an ambiguous reference to any of the big cities in China, but especially recalls Shanghai or Beijing. In the first story, Old Wang died when building the first subway in the city (and the first subway in Beijing was also constructed secretly), an allusion which makes S city a potential symbol for Beijing. See ‘北京建中国第一条地铁很神秘’, 《中国生活记忆: 建国65周年民生往事》陈煜编著, 中国轻工业出版社, 2014年8月. [Chen Yu (ed.) ‘It was a mysterious Event when Beijing Built its First Subway Line’, *Chinese Living Memories: 65-Year Anniversary Review of the People’s Lives*, Chinese Light Industry Press, Aug. 2014.]

14 Pu Songling (蒲松龄, 1640-1715), a scholar in the Qing Dynasty, is famous for *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*聊斋志异*), also known as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, a collection of ghost stories or spirit stories. The genre is typical of the Chinese classical stories called *zhiguai* (志怪) and *chuangqi* (传奇) that are highly speculative and involve ghosts and animal-transformed spirits and are critically suggestive of societal issues.

the human’. Both are set on a future post-apocalyptic planet Earth where humans perish, granting the subway as, in Pierre Nora’s term, ‘lieux de mémoire’ (sites of memory). 16 Although Subway does not provide a narrative directly focused on ecological destruction, it proceeds hand in hand with his criticism of the ‘development’ myth that has been dominating China since the late nineteenth century. China is not a special case, but it is notable for the stunning speed of economic development and environmental degradation in the last thirty years. This paper will particularly focus on the first three stories in Subway because that is where the issues of posthuman affect and the environment stand out, while the last two focus more on the human descendants’ odyssey back to the old world. In Han Song, the subway can be seen as one of the most important modern technological innovations which he utilises to imagine a dystopian, other-sided reality.

**Theoretical Framework**

As technological modernisation has come to a troubling point where both ecological destructions and hyper technology are posing major challenges to human existence in the ‘Anthropocene’ epoch, posthuman scholarship provides valuable insights for people to negotiate human existence. To begin with, it is worth clarifying that posthumanism is a portmanteau name for disparate renovations of modern humanism, against its backdrop of (the unease of) the challenge posed by technology. In 1977, Ihab Hassan wrote: ‘We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism.’ 17 To Hassan, the European, white ‘Vitruvian Man’, enshrined at the centre of the universe representing Western modernity, is facing a fundamental crisis. Since then, various scholars offer different understandings of the term ‘posthuman’.

Three decades after Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto, Rosi Braidotti celebrates in The Posthuman the birth of a ‘posthuman’ subject that is more-than-white/male and more-than-human. 18 With this ‘posthuman’, Braidotti seeks to reconstruct the long-enshrined ‘Vitruvian Man’, providing us a useful critique of the anthropocentrism in modern humanism. However, as far as the latest NBIC technology is concerned, we have to employ a different understanding of ‘posthuman’. 19 While N. Katherine Hayles claims the technological removal of embodiment would transform the human into the posthuman, David Roden goes further to bring out a dystopian version of the posthuman, that is: ‘technologically engendered nonhuman’. 20 According to Roden’s posthuman speculation, posthuman is a hypothetical (yet not impossible) no-longer-human human descendent as a result

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19 NBIC refers to nanotechnology, biotechnology, information technology, cognitive science.
of NBIC technological manipulation beyond the threshold of human biological substrate, or ‘technological singularity’. Roden’s assumption sounds futuristic and sci-fi like but it helps urge people to confront a gloomy version of posthuman possibilities. In 2002, political scientist Francis Fukuyama, warned people of the danger of unrestricted NBIC technology, that it could deal a fundamental blow to our ‘shared human nature’, causing humans to be enslaved by technology.\textsuperscript{21} In \textit{Subway}, while humans transform themselves into body-free posthumans, a dystopian posthuman world in Roden’s definition is coming into being.

The interrogation of humanism comes together with the questioning of its epistemological basis; for many this is Cartesian dualism. Many believe that it is dualist thinking that separates the metaphorical self from its body, the human from nature, which henceforth brings about a belief that here is a material world to be organised, manipulated and dominated by the ‘rational’ human. As Braidotti says: ‘there is a direct connection between monism, the general unity of all matter and post-anthropocentrism as a general frame of reference for contemporary subjectivity’.\textsuperscript{22} Similarly, instead of seeing the human mind as a separate transcendent entity and the human body as the vehicle to control, Hayles argues that ‘human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival’.\textsuperscript{23}

Emerging with the latest discoveries in cognitive science, \textit{affect} theory provides a useful approach to reconverge body and mind and to reflect on posthumanism. As Houser writes: ‘Affect is the fulcrum for imagining posthumanism as vulnerability rather than as a state of being “not”, “beyond” or “after” humanism.’\textsuperscript{24} Affect indicates ‘bodily capacities to affect and be affected or the augmentation or diminution of a body’s capacity to act, to engage and to connect, such that autoaffection is linked to the self-feeling of being alive—that is, aliveness or vitality.’\textsuperscript{25} While the feeling is ‘a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled’, an emotion is ‘the projection or display of a feeling’, affect is ‘a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential.’\textsuperscript{26} Both feelings and affect can be shown in the form of emotion. Affect theory traces back to Baruch Spinoza and borrows heavily from psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, such as Jacques Lacan and Gilles Deleuze. As Brain Massumi asked: ‘what new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?’\textsuperscript{27} The focus of affect not only remarries the body and emotions long separated as a binary opposition in modern times, but also disrupts the realm of causality by

\textsuperscript{22} Braidotti, \textit{The Posthuman}, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{23} Hayles, \textit{How We Became Posthuman}, p. 5.
underlining the bodily potentials that are simultaneously affected by and affecting the world around us: ‘Affect is only understood as enacted.’

Affect ‘forces us constantly to pose the problem of the relationship between mind and body with the assumption that their powers constantly correspond in some way’. While posthumanism seeks to reconfigure mind and body, human and more-than-human, the affect theory ‘expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology and matter, instigating a shift in thought in critical theory.’ The Affects lead us into a new theoretical terrain to understand the relationship between (post) human subjectivity, soma-affectivity, embodiment, technology manipulation and the environment.

With affect as a core sign of the human as a species, when consciousness and corporeality are separated and modified, posthuman (in Hayles’s definition) and even posthuman nonhuman (in Roden’s understanding) will be born. Bringing posthuman perspective into the discussion of Han Song’s Subway does not necessarily indicate anti-technology, but it does call attention to humans’ embodied subjectivity and the ecology where their bodies dwell. In the stories, as the paper will show, when technoscientific rationality governs society, not only has the ecology changed but the (post)human bodies are turned numb and their emotions are depressed, their loss of affectivity also indicates a loss of vitality and a fundamental nihilism. In this article, with a de-anthropocentric viewpoint, I would take on Kayle’s precaution towards the technological amplification of body-mind division to understand Han Song’s apocalyptic posthuman thought experiment. While recognizing that the stories revolve around the humanly posthuman characters mostly, the stories also envision the technologically engendered nonhumans as alternative human descendants, as is shown in the last story. Subway is a thought experiment to imagine what could happen if human continues using NBIC technology to manipulate the biological human body and cognition with the entrenched belief of a dualistic separation of the two.

**Existential Crisis in the Posthuman Era**

The five remotely related stories depict some obscure characters for whom the meaning of life is fundamentally nihilistic. Not only have they lost their memories but also their passion for anything. Their common emotions of ennui also echo with the numbness of their bodies in the technologized environment. For example, in the first story, Old Wang, a middle-aged man takes, as usual, the last subway at midnight as he finishes his night shift before retirement, finding his fellow passengers all fast asleep. He is terrified to see some tiny people putting the sleeping passengers into big jars and carrying them away, but the next day when he wakes up in the subway station, he becomes ‘real’ again, and the world repeats his routine as usual. The only thing he can confirm about his experience is an ID card of a Mr. Wu on the train that night. To investigate the issue, he finds Mr. Wu according to the address on the ID card, only to find a woman who claims to be the daughter of Mr. Wu, and tells him that Wu was a worker during the construction of the city’s first subway and died thirty years ago.

29 M. Hardt, ‘What affects are Good for?’, in Clough and Halley (eds), *The Affective Turn*, p. x.
The next morning, while the accident of the last subway is exposed in Newspapers, Old Wang is found dead, appearing calm and satisfied, soaking in a jar filled with green liquid as though a baby in mother’s womb, like those other passengers he saw the previous night. Old Wang’s docility, and (even willing) acceptance of his night-after-night work shift constitute his emotionless living condition where neither his workmates nor his families show any personal feelings in their daily interactions. Old Wang’s existence as a living being is put into question, casting a sense of eeriness on the readers.

As Hayles claims, it is in the removal of human embodiment that we have already become posthuman, here with the Old Wang, at least his human subjectivity is challenged. In this story, on the late-night train, as Old Wang tries to talk with the young man beside him, he pats the man’s shoulder only to find his hand penetrating air, he tries it on himself and finds his body immaterial too:

His fingers, hand, wrist and arm go into his chest and penetrate through his back, not hurting, feeling nothing—unexpectedly, he turns out to be a mere hollow man, he is also merely a hollow man! 31

The realisation of his immateriality shocks him; he looks at the darkness out of the window and feels himself travelling in the universe. Imagining himself away from his city, continuing further and further to somewhere he does not know, suddenly he bursts into tears:

He is surprised and embarrassed… that he can cry himself! So he laughs, he laughs at himself. He has long forgotten how to cry or laugh. The cry or laugh sound like babies’ cries, so he realizes it’s not a dream. His thinly harbored hope is disillusioned. Even when his parents died, he remained nonchalant…32

However, ‘how does the useless laugh or cry burst out of the hollow, shadowy body without flesh or blood’? For a moment, he starts to doubt whether he really exists or not: ‘perhaps the sounds were just pre-recorded? … Perhaps he never really existed? But who is he?’33 For a short instant Old Wang’s autoaffection, or self-feeling of being alive, is recovered, only by the burst of tears and laughter. Inexplicable and ineffable, his sudden eruption of affect is triggered by his seeing the darkness surrounding the last subway. His vitality is transiently displayed through the recovery of his body’s affectivity. Old Wang’s life, exploited as a ‘sacrifice’ to the ‘development’ of society, is embodied in his being employed as a power station in the end. His body is used as biofuel and stored in a big jar with liquid, and will be rediscovered by the underground human descendants in the fourth story. In the way that his body is manipulated and his affective ability is lost, Old Wang is being transformed into a posthuman. The corpses of the ‘ancient’ human ancestors are treated as tools for a

31 Han, Subway, p. 17.
grand purpose of progress, the transformation of the bodies into biofuel signifies the human enslaved by technological progress.

The loss of affectivity and the numbness of body also bring about a cultural void: not just a loss of meaning but also their ability to make meaning. The last name of the young man Old Wang met on the train is Wu ‘吳’, which alludes to nothingness, pronounced in Chinese as wu (无). This is also the last name of the other four male protagonists in the other stories, namely Xiao Wu (小武), Wuwang (五妄), and Wushui (雾水). They all share a common pronunciation for wu (无): the word for ‘nothingness’, which indicates the essential nihilism of their lives. Wu Wang (a descendent of the fourth story) sounds similar with wu wang (无望), meaning ‘hopelessness’, and Wushui (Fog water) indicates a sense of bewilderment in his character. While these two characters in the post-apocalypse settings are hopeless and bewildered, Mr. Wu, the subway builder who died in an accident 30 years ago, vanishes as if he never existed; nevertheless, the subway expands inexorably.

Following the nihilistic tone in Old Wang’s encounter with Mr Wu’s phantom, the second story causes an even stronger sense of eeriness: meanwhile the train keeps rushing on towards a sea of stars, people shut in the cabins underwent despair, cannibalism, and metamorphosis. The utopian project turns out to be most disastrous, causing too much depression and the competitive nature of contemporary society. When the passenger named Zhou Xing is trapped in the ceaseless subway with others, the indifference and coldness of the train, together with the darkness out of the window, strikes Zhou as what he realises as ‘the reality’:

All in all, for the iron-shelled subway train that lost its feelings yet can still run on and on in time’s long course, it doesn’t care about a purpose, but for an individual passenger whose age is limited, fate can be immensely changed. This, perhaps, is what life means when it goes from one point to the darkness. After all those years Zhou Xing took the subway, perhaps finally the ending is revealing itself to him? He is just an ordinary member of this crowd that, as a community, is grappled by something incorrigible, curling in a pile like trembling rats, heading forward forever in a uniform speed, without a moment for a short rest.34

Among the desperate passengers, a young man named Xiao Ji proposes to go to the front of the train for a check, but nobody responds to him. Finally, as Xiao Ji reaches the front, he sees a splendid picture of twinkling stars, while inside the cabins, people are eating each other and later turn into deformed beings similar to amphibians or fish. The small societies collapse and retrogress into primitive societies. The subway heading forth resembles the linear temporality and high speed of modernisation, with a utopian illusion displayed in the front. The cabins resemble different human societies or communities, reminding one of the morally decadent societies built by children in Lord of the Flies (1954) by William Golding, a dystopian story that reflects a pessimistic view of humanity. Like Golding, Han Song pictures the cruelty of modernisation by making it contingent on human nature in its worst state, and thus imagines a dystopian alternative from the technology-optimistic grand narrative. The subway

34 Han, Subway, pp. 63-64..
also represents the ‘developmental modernity’ myth that both capitalistic and communist societies chase. Most often, the somatic and mental sufferings of the humans were concealed and overlooked in both economic modes of societies. The people undergoing the fast-aging process also alludes to the growing aging population that turns old before becoming well-off (未富先老, wei fu xian lao) in current Chinese society.

In the third story, a timid young man named Xiao Wu wanders in the city; he remembers nothing about his life, his name, or where he is from. In the city, he meets a vigorous girl named Kaka. Unlike the aimless Xiao Wu, Kaka has a strong sense of purpose, that is, to find out more about her last life. Kaka was a flight attendant whose defunct consciousness is resurrected with the latest biotechnology owned by C Company; therefore, she is a real ‘new human’. Rumour has it that a disaster is falling upon S city; the rich can buy tickets from NASA to fly to outer space to escape while the poor have to hide themselves underground in the rock formations, so Kaka invites Wu for an exploration in the subway. They go through the underground tunnels and finally reach the surface of the moon through the underground. It seems to be the biggest secret, that the subway dug underground is actually leading towards the sky, thus the above and the below are the same, indicating that ‘progress’ is actually a disaster. In the end, Wu is killed in a huge explosion, yet he knows that he will be resurrected, and he decides to find out about the source of his name ‘Xiao Wu’. There is a strong Nihilism in the tropes of apocalypses and the characters’ ‘reincarnation’ via technological means. A lack of memory is common among the characters in these stories, and when the human body and mind are separated, their subjectivity is also disrupted and doubted. If Xiao Wu’s loss of identity results from his alienation in the city, Kaka’s determination is more ironic because it is based on her obliviousness of real life. Both of their memory losses echo their affective void (nonchalance and numbness) which cast them in an existential predicament. Where technological ways manipulate the natural processes (corporeal properties and the mortal human life), the (post) human subjectivity is disrupted and their existence also fundamentally challenged.

After the apocalypse in the third story, descendants of the poor struggle from the dark underground world back to the ‘paradise lost’, and the descendants of the rich build an authoritarian government ruled by elders in outer space. In the last story, the elders dispatch a boy named Wushui and a cyborg girl called Luzhu to investigate the explosion that destroyed their ancestors’ world. In the last two stories, these human descendants only find a world of ruins on the ground, with the rats and technologically engendered nonhumans (as in Roden’s posthuman speculation) who claim to be descendants of humans and the dominators of the Galaxy. While Luzhu sacrifices herself to protect him, Wushui finally finds the statue of the god, in which the ancestors preserve their collective memories. As he connects himself with it, as the memories and affects burst into his mind, he suddenly ‘reinstall[s]’ his lost humanity and is ‘reborn’:

... He saw a blurry, light green halo, crystallized with collective memories, like the placenta in the womb, collecting the bits and pieces from the void. On the fluffy surface there came five basic feelings: a sense of grandeur, pride, desolation, anxiety and suffering, while the
normal absurd, ridiculous, farcical, contradictory, and helpless feelings are gone. The halo congregates into a fetus-like thing, primordial and blurry, yet it makes Wushui solemn and determined to inherit these feelings. After all, the ancestors have preserved the biggest secret weapon of their race—perhaps it is the same thing that has been driving the trains forward!\textsuperscript{35}

For the posthuman descendants, the recovery of their ancestors’ collective memories and affects helps him to become alive and regain the meaning of life. With this epiphany, Wushui realizes how precious Luzhu is, for she is willing to sacrifice herself out of love for another: ‘He believed that Luzhu was not a replacement or a thinking machine, whether in the past, present or future, she would always be the real living being that can be felt by a body with flesh and blood.’\textsuperscript{36} It turns out that the human meta-consciousness is an urgent need for the dominators of the Galaxy (the technologically engendered nonhumans), who are now facing a major crisis. These nonhuman posthumans, better, faster and stronger than humans could ever become, snatch the meta-consciousness from Wushui, leaving him an immortal body oblivious of the collective memories or emotions. Unable to feel pain or excitement, Wushui is sent to live in the posthuman cities floating on the ocean. In the end, it turns out that these cities are actually all ruins. On the ‘blood-coloured surface of the water’, nothing is left but ‘millions of human corpses’.\textsuperscript{37} When Wushui turns around, nothing is left. The story concludes with this nihilistic, apocalyptic picture, which expresses an anxiety of existential crisis. This nonhuman posthuman world, like its predecessors’, is heading forth along the linear route of ‘progress’ till history repeats itself in an apocalypse. Till this point, Han Song’s eerie posthuman speculation can be disturbing for the readers like ‘a ghost story in the technologized era’, and the dystopian narrative of apocalypse highlights an existential crisis in the world all set on technological competition.\textsuperscript{38}

**Technological Manipulation, Ecosickness, and Landscape without Nature**

Another important aspect of the posthuman existence depicted in *Subway* is the negligence of corporeality, which is represented by ecosickness through trans-corporeal pollution. Ecosickness refers to diseases of the body resulting from the degraded environment, and it pervades the contemporary world with industrial wastes. Materials, such as toxic chemicals, radiation and micro-plastics, can enter into the soil, water and air, and finally damage the health of the land, the ocean, marine life, flora and fauna, as well as the human body. The sick body intoxicated with pollution is also shown in the characters’ psychological states, which we would discuss in this section. Among the five stories, it is the third story that has undergone a complete process of doomsday collapse. It brings us to Xiao Wu’s S city, a historical city that abandoned its original name. S is for ‘submit, sustain, survive, and succumb’ in

\textsuperscript{35} Han, *Subway*, p. 280.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 287.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, p. 293.
\textsuperscript{38} As was mentioned earlier, Han Song’s stories are compared as Chinese classical ghost tales in a technologized space. For details, see note 14.
English, and people believe it sounds more decent as the English name. S city is undergoing a huge modern experiment and has turned into a very hostile place. As Xiao Wu walks on the street:

Electronic waves also jump at him like tuna fish. The visible light is black, which is the basic color of the city. The day looks like night. All the lights in the city are manmade, including the invisible synthesized lights—UV and Alpha-Gamma Rays—which frequencies are owned by the medical insurance companies to treat the sexual impotence of the residents.

The dark red rain, which is colored by industrial poisons, also pours down on him. The rain never stops, which is the mainstream art form of the city. Under the rain that corrupts everything, strange flowers and weird grass flourish vibrantly on the streets covered by spit, waste paper, and semen. Those are genetically reengineered tropical plants.

…

The poisonous air, manmade light, and all sorts of rays are the byproducts of the secret experiment carried on in this city, but Xiao Wu is cognitively unconscious and physically numb throughout his wandering. Also, M Country (the thinly disguised US) is a powerful presence in S city, their brand of C drinks, a type of synthesised food containing high proteins with meat flavour, has become the major food source for the young people in C city for a century, and advertisements for it are everywhere. Overtaken by capital from China, C drinks adjusted its meaning to ‘control, contain, calculate, circle’ for S city. C Company has monopoly cooperation with the airline company as the food provider and is the investor in the new subway in S city. Apart from that, C Company started its business with the latest ‘Holographic Quantum Resurrection’ technology to bring dying people alive. The C Company represents the ubiquitous capitalism, which becomes so pervasive in people’s lives. The relationship between S city and C Company is highly allegoric of the neo-liberal capitalistic circulation in the post-colonial world order.

This landscape without nature is also a landscape that has lost its memory or identity. With the fetishizing of technology, S city and its whole country are following the steps of M Nation by turning itself into ‘a country with no depth of history’ (‘没有历史的技术型国家’). 40 Han once expressed his worries about this technology-optimism and the quick destruction of the past during China’s modernisation, of which Han Song is sceptical. For him, ‘science, technology, and modernization are not characteristic of Chinese culture. They are like alien entities. If we buy into them, we transform ourselves into monsters.’ 41 Here the loss of cultural tradition is also related to the environmental destruction during modernisation. The one-directional understanding of ‘development’ almost unsurprisingly brings about technological

39 This excerpt sourced from: Song, ‘Representing the Invisible’, p. 555. For the original Chinese text, see Han, Subway, p. 93–94.
40 Han, Subway, p. 107.
manipulation of the nonhuman beings as resources to fuel the progress of human society, just like how Old Wang’s body is mummified as biofuel.

Here the ‘secret experiment’ in S city symbolises the techno-scientific modernisation project, which takes nature under manipulation and control, which can cause what Merchant called ‘the death of nature’:

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature […] Because nature was now viewed as a system of the dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature.42

As a result, in Xiao Wu’s city, humans live in thick air, neon lights, and X rays, the rich grow ‘fake fish gills on their faces, which make them look like they have contracted measles but actually protect them from the poisonous air.’43 With the death of nature, human lives are impacted physically, mentally, and spiritually.

In reality, China’s stunning fast economic growth in the last four decades has been followed by serious ecological impoverishment, and the poisonous, lasting smog has indeed become a more common and serious problem in recent years. In 2015, Chai Jing (柴静), a senior journalist, made a documentary called Under the Dome (《穹顶之下》) where she revealed the urgency of the smog problem and the health damage posed by smog.44 The video was banned in three days, but its ephemeral life also mirrors the numbness of Xiao Wu in his wandering, perhaps a collective submission to the ecological destruction. Han Song wrote the book in 2010, and what is portrayed in Subway is more realistic than fictional, notably the smog problem, except that the rich cannot yet breathe with bionic fish gills to purify the air. The air pollution, like all other ecosickness that is shaping the planet’s future, is a ‘slow violence’ harming humans and nonhumans in the Global South the earliest.45

Like the S city entrenched in a polluted environment, the subway also features a central image of a cybernetic house evoking Lu Xun’s ‘iron house’ where the ‘silent majority’ lives in an unconscious, numb, and drowsy darkness. Either they can be awakened and destroy the ‘iron house’ or they die in a pure lethargy. The ‘iron house’ is equally analogous to most people and governments’ responses to the changes that are shaping the future of all the species on this planet. If the affect is key to indicate vitality, then Xiao Wu, without awareness, memory, or physical affectivity, is confronted with an existential predicament, which invites us to think about the psychophysical challenges of (post) human existence.

43 Song, ‘Representing the Invisible’, p. 555.
44 The video was viewed 150 million times on Tencent (https://v.qq.com) in three days and stimulated the once-numbed environmental nerves in China. Not only has it preluded the proposal of the New Environmental Law in 2012, but it has also increased public awareness of air pollution.
Conclusion

To conclude, *Subway* is a dystopian parable of our contemporary society entrenched in hyper-modernization, worsening ecological degradation and species extinction. The central question remains as what being human means to us and how we should live meaningfully and sustainably. Han Song’s posthuman imagination can be seen as deeply rooted in contemporary issues, and it is through the lens of trans-corporeality that we can see the inseparability between the material world and posthuman existence. To imagine posthuman survival is to rethink human existence, and question where we are heading. In *Subway*, Han Song shows a sceptical attitude towards the grand narratives of extreme techno-optimism. The stories picture a world in which humanity is substantially altered in the affect and corporality along with the destruction of planet Earth. Both these crises remind people of the inseparability of the human mind and corporeality, of the human and nonhuman, of living beings and the biosphere.