

Poetry-reading in the End Times?—AIs, Human States of Being and the “Overman” in Malaysian Chinese Literature

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Abstract: Yale literature critic J. H. Miller’s rather prophetic claim that “the end of literature is at hand” draws attention to the impact of new creative writings, including algorithm texts. In 2021, the father of Ethical literary criticism, Chinese Prof. Nie Zhenzhao and his colleagues discussed extensively the ethical conflicts and repercussions of scientific advancements that affect humans, artificial intelligence (AI), and post-humans. Against the phasing out of literature, Nie Zhenzhao instead argues for the incorporation and development of new literary forms, functions and values which have invariably emerged with the ubiquitous use of technology in the twenty-first century. In Southeast Asia, Malaysian Chinese writers started dealing with sci-fi and robotic themes in the literary periodical *Chao Foon* in 1979, triggering thought-provoking discourses on potential dilemmas and ethical issues involving one’s identity, consciousness and choice. This article examines the preeminence of AIs in Woon Swee Tin’s *Tianlangxing Shixuan*, defamiliarization of languages in Looi Yook Tho’s futuristic poetry “Moshiji Yuyan”, man’s alienation in Lew Yok Long’s science fiction “Beifen”, omnipresence of an AI female in King Ban Hui’s *Rengong Shaonu* and the ethical appeals of “overmans” in Ho Sok Fong’s *Lake Like a Mirror*. It highlights the tension between science and ethics in Malaysian Chinese literature and celebrates man’s own inner conscious attempts to form a better world and humane society, in the face of the creation and empowerment of increasingly invincible and amoral AIs by their insatiable human programmers.

Keywords: ethical literary criticism; ethical consciousness; AI; sci-fi; end times; Malaysian Chinese literature

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标题：末世还读诗吗？——马华文学中的 AI、人类生存状态与“超人”

内容摘要：耶鲁大学文学评论家 J·H·米勒的前瞻性警戒“文学就要终结了”让文学研究者不能不留意新时代的文本，包括人工智能计算文本。文学伦理学批评之父聂珍钊教授与同僚紧密关注科技发展对人类、机器人及后人类所带来的伦理冲突和隐忧。聂氏提出了与文学终结论相反的看法，认为应该回应 21 世纪科技发展，建构及发展新的文学形式、开发新的文学功能及价值。在东南亚，马华作家于 1979 年的《蕉风 313》已推出“科幻作品专号”，让写作人及读者接触科幻和机器人题材，思考伦理身份、伦理意识和伦理选择等课题。本文尝试从温任平主编的《天狼星科幻诗选》多篇诗作中对 AI 介入人类生活的警觉、吕育陶《末世寓言》对语言陌生化的思考、刘育龙《备份》对科幻文学中“人”的异化和物化的窥探，龚万辉《人工少女》对可以超越时间恒常存在的 AI 女儿的眷恋，以及贺淑芳《湖面如镜》中“超人”意象的伦理索求，视察马华文学中科技与伦理的角力。在电脑程序员不断研发能力更加强大、却不谙人类社会契约与伦理规范的人工智能的新时代，马华文学作品一再地点亮能够为人类创造出更人性社会的内在良知。

关键词：文学伦理学批评；伦理意识；人工智能；科幻；末世；马华文学

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Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has now become ubiquitous and redefined many areas of life. Substantial progress in language processing, machine learning, pattern recognition influences different fields and is generally welcomed, but its infiltration into the realm of arts and aesthetics has alarmed many who have voiced concerns. However, it is certain that AI will prevail and remain dominant. The improved algorithm, coupled with either supervised or unsupervised machine learning will play an increasingly important role in the arts and in the creative sphere of human activities.

Many poems have been written by AI algorithms and quite a number have even managed to pass the Turing test and “trick” readers into believing that they were written by human writers. For instance, in 2011, an AI poem produced by Zachary Scroll, “For the Bristlecone Snag” was accepted by *The Archive*, Duke University’s literary journal. The poem is as follows:

A home transformed by the lightning

the balanced alcoves smother
 this insatiable earth of a planet, Earth.
 They attached it with mechanical horns
 because they love you, love, in fire and wind.
 You say, what is the time waiting for in its spring?
 I tell you it is waiting for your branch that flows,
 because you are a sweet-smelling diamond architecture
 that does not know why it grows. (30-31)

At first glance, and even with repeated reading, the poem seemed “deep” with poetic imagery and its structure of expression. However, it quickly frustrated readers when they realized it was not written by a human. This raises questions, of whether there is any “meaning” in reading poetry generated by AI, whether an AI robot or machine can assume an “identity” to communicate “feelings” and convey the most delicate “soul language” like a human. More seriously, does this resonate with the prophetic statement made by Yale literature critic J. H. Miller (2002) that “the end of literature is at hand,” and that “literature’s time is almost up?”

Miller’s treatise has triggered lively debates among Chinese scholars in view of the increasingly marginal status of literature, as reported by Zhu Liyuan in “Hillis Miller on the end of literature.” Acknowledging the increasingly important role of new media and AI, Prof Nie Zhenzhao, a proponent of Ethical literary criticism, calls for literary theories to incorporate science and technology in mainstream poetic discourse¹. Refuting the proposition that literature is ending, Nie Zhenzhao asserts that the forms, functions and value of man’s literature will prevail through time and tides. The 10th International Convention on Ethical Literary Criticism, organized by the International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) between 16-17 October 2021, also addressed the philosophical and ethical dimensions of literature in the age of AI.

Engagement with AI literature by Proponents of Ethical Literary Criticism

The early engagement of ethical literary critics with AI in literature generally reflects a tone of openness, yet not without ambiguity. For instance, in her book *An Ethical Literary Criticism on Clones in Sci-Fi Novels*, scholar Guo Wen (2019) defines a “clone” as a product (or rather, a creature) that ranges between a technological item and a “being” bearing the ethics and nature of mankind” (Guo

1 参见 聂珍钊：“文学跨学科发展 ——论科技与人文学术研究的革命”，《外国文学研究》

2 (2021)：31-42。

2). Nie Zhenzhao (2019), in his preface to the book, poses a compelling question on AIs and robotic beings, asserting that “[...] an ethical issue (arises) when the subject identity is unclear” (Guo Preface 5). Li Ling (2015), in her Master of Arts (MA) thesis, takes a bolder stand when framing the consciousness of man-made sapiens creatures. She sees the self-destruction of Victor Frankenstein in the ending of this gothic fiction of Mary Shelley as an inevitable, “conscious” choice of the subject since Frankenstein’s existence will be rejected by human society, as the text suggests.

Researchers have continued to examine the subject matter through the lenses of Ethical literary criticism and provided new insights into human’s coexistence with AIs, androids, clones or cybots. Technically, each of these terms may differ in definition due to the differing interpretation and reach of “human behavioral analytics”, or, in the layman language, human emotions-like quality. However, they trigger lively debates in the discussion of AI literature. Wang Songlin (2021) and his co-researchers ask whether the clones are able to form a society since they lack individual identity, i.e., the “Who am I?” self-identification. Unraveling the technological utopianism, they point out the absence of differentiating features or distinctions between a clone and another. Liu Jing (2021), in her criticism of Philip Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) asserts that “androids” are fundamentally different from normal human beings as the algorithms that program them cannot replicate human brain text and processing. The androids, thus, lack the ethical consciousness that humans possess. Duan Mengyue (2021), analyzing Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*, highlights the uncertain attribute of the robotic “heart” in Klara, unlike the human heart. Subsequently, she reinstates the attributes of love and compassion as the cornerstones for human civilization to thrive on. These treatises are consistent with the general undertone of earlier criticisms on sci-fi literature that underscores ethics and human rationality as the desirable qualities over the lurking darker side of humans governed by “the jungle rule” as elaborated in the article by Ling Mei (2018) and her team of researchers that discusses Liu Cixin’s sci-fi novel *The Three Body*. Among these ethical literary critics, Lu Chao (2021) seems to be the most receptive of the age of AIs and the potential future world of cybots. His study on the literary trend indicates the acceptance of cybots as post-humans. He thus proposes openly embracing the symbiosis and coexistence of humans-cybots, arguing that it is a natural result of man’s scientific endeavors.

AIs in the First Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology by Malaysian Chinese Writers

In his literary critique during an international conference in 2015 on the theme of

“The Sirius Poetry Society and Modernism” organised by Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia, Associate Professor Dr Lee Soo Chee defined the characteristics of sci-fi literature as works that are logical, aligned with reality in human life but also futuristic in nature so that mankind could find “salvation” and seek deliverance from impending disaster (Lee 85). Lee’s characteristics were adapted from Holman and Harmon’s (1986) definition for sci-fi novels in *A Handbook to Literature*.

Edited by Woon Swee Tin (a.k.a., Wen Renping), the publication of *Tianlangxing Kehuan Shixuan (Sirius Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology)* in 2015 showcased the fascination with sci-fi by 20 Malaysian Chinese writers affiliated to Tianlangxing Shishe (Sirius Poetry Guild), known for their romanticism flavour in writing style. According to Zhang Guangda (2015), the anthology was the first of its kind among Chinese writers in Malaysia, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Zhang, however, reminds readers that unlike Holman and Harmon who paid attention to sci-fi literature as early as in the 1980s, the publication of *Sirius Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology* was probably attributed to the phenomenon of “belated modernity”, as the subject matter was still considered rather new then for the Chinese readership in the region.

While Zhang’s assertion about the anthology might be true in that the anthology was among the first in terms of a collection of Chinese sci-fi poems, in reality, the first sci-fi literature by Malaysian Chinese writers had already been published in the fifties (Hu *see electronic link*; Ho 180). For instance, Yao Tuo’s short story, “Qi ge shiji yihou” depicts a buried-alive mineworker who wakes up from his seven long years of deep slumber, only to realize that he is unable to communicate with the people of the time (*Chao Foon* 8-11). Although sci-fi literature remained on the periphery of Malaysian Chinese literature until the 1990s, it was certainly promoted, as it can be traced back to a special issue on the topic in *Chao Foon*,¹ a literary periodical on Malaysian Chinese literature in 1979 (ibid.). In 1979, *Chao Foon* (Issue 313) introduced a series of translated sci-fi short stories, translated literary criticism and a translated interview transcription with Kurt Vonnegut, American satirical and sci-fi novelist, in its special issue on sci-fi writings. The issue also featured experimental short stories with some sci-fi elements. For instance, Tan Cheng Sin depicts the conscious self when entering into some mysterious black hole in his “Dong (The Hole)”. In “Ren zhi Niaohuan (Becoming Birds)”, Chai Shixin portrays

1 Established in 1955, *Chao Foon* champions the promotion of Malaysian Chinese literature, a.k.a., Mahua literature, and earns itself great recognition among the Chinese-language readership in the region. Even when it stopped publication temporarily in 1999 due to operational issues, donations were made so that the periodical could be published again in 2002 until the present day. Published and distributed by the Southern University College, *Chao Foon* continues its legacy as one of the most important custodians and movers of Mahua literature.

a space traveller who lands on an unknown planet where bluebirds are spotted. Yet, some unknown forces on the planet dismember him and the birds, dissolving them into a new form of unified existence.

Nonetheless, the publication of *Sirius Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology* is hailed and much welcomed, for introducing contents that resonate with recent developments in technology, including the AIs, algorithm and AIs' self-learning ability. The anthology comprised 142 poems, arranged in authorship order. A thematic categorization of the poetry on artificial intelligence, however, will reveal a world of AI sensations amid grave concerns over the potential harm of AIs to the already illness-infested, divided and vulnerable in human society. Some examples are as follows:

AIs	SF (AI) expressions	Concerns for the invincibility of the AIs	Concerns for the vulnerability of mankind
- computer - iPad - Waze - GPS - smartwatch - smartphone - apps - virtual reality - Lucy - Big Hero 6 - self-driving car - waiter-less, automated restaurants - robots - computer server - source code - memory chip	- The rain has "WIFI"ed the earth (74) - I "3D print"ed autumn, an autumn together with you, my love (72) - If I could log onto "Google," should I connect to others via "Inter Conscious Net" too (69)	- AI robots (develops its/her own consciousness, e.g. jealousy against its/her owner's relationship with other females (92-93) - Company server sending messages by itself to all computers with messages such as "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you," proclaiming its/her admiration for its/her creator – the programmer (168)	- Deadly virus (239) - Loss of the "source code" by which humans were originally "programmed" (170) - Cosmic disaster e.g., Big explosion (51, 63, 141, 219-220) - Warfare e.g., Nuclear explosion

In the preface to the anthology, Woon (2015) describes the exciting experience of poets dwelling in a realm of new language codes, creations capable of "turning impossibility into some new possibilities [...] and awaking any old souls" (20).

He also reminds readers that the goals of sci-fi and AI poetry writing are never to embark on “grotesqueness” but to engage the changing boundless world (ibid). Published about a year after celebrating World’s Poet Day 2013, the collection clearly shows the poets engaging with 21st century human living, in a world that has been infiltrated by AI inventions.

Consciousness of the AIs

One of the ethical concerns in the anthology is a lurking fear of the potential “self”-consciousness of the AIs: What if the AI robots creepily develop their own consciousness, and involuntarily harbour feelings for or against humans?

Zhou Weiqi’s “Wo de Geren Zhuli Poeticia (My Personal Assistant Poeticia)” underlines this grave concern:

[...]

Poeticia’s my personal assistant

“She” – that’s right, she’s what you’d call my female secretary

Except her functions are all-encompassing

[...]

I’ve begun to regret, how I wish to delete her poetry-writing program

But I’ve got to consider her wants and feelings

Her jealousy when I get too close

To certain female colleagues

‘Tis a disaster of artificial intelligence, a personality of
spontaneous creation

She’s even a mechanism of self-defence, and so

I must not offend her

[...] ¹

In this poem, Poeticia was created to assist the persona who programmed her to write poems. However, her “intelligence” becomes problematic, causing her creator cum persona – “I” – to “regret” granting her the artificial life since she starts to cross the relationship boundaries by being jealous of the relationships her master has with female co-workers. What worries her “maker” or “programmer: even more is her seemingly growing ability to self-learn and have her own defence mechanism again emotional pain: “Unhappy, off she goes, without a trace” (Ibid, p. 92). The

¹ Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., *Tianlangxing kehuang shixuan*. (2015): 92-94.

poem ends with the poet's silent lament and regret: "Alas, I can only look back to that year, 2014 / To my cute, stupid *n*th-generation iPhone" (ibid 93).

Invincibility of the AIs

In Woon's "Youmo: Wo zai Taikongshuo li (Day's End: I, in the Space Shuttle)", he depicts an amicable interaction between humans and AI robots in the space shuttle:

Hands and feet in coordination, the robot gathers up a pile of capsules
 I'm swimming in the air, and it too
 "Give me five," our palms touch
 In truth I still get confused, among all those colourful pills
 Which ones are food
 Which ones are medicine ¹

Another concern raised in the anthology is a nagging anxiety about the potential invincibility of AI. There are no safeguards for humans from the unknown dimensions of AI, especially regarding what *they* might be capable of doing or inflicting upon human lives. Cheng Kexin's "Lovestruck Server," depicts a server that has "fallen in love" with its female programmer. In its "expression of love," it is able to command every single computer screen in town to display its "love language." To the girl, its programmer, this repeated message pops up: "I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you."

The Internet was especially slow that day
 Text messages of unknown again
 Infiltrated the entire city, saying
 I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you
 When technical support finally tracked it down
 They found a server
 Deeply in love with
 The girl – its programmer ²

In the anthology, poet Qianmo's "Lucy" was written as his response to a French sci-fi film of the same title directed by Luc Besson. The movie features Lucy, the protagonist, who transforms into a killer with psychokinetic abilities due to the

¹ Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., (2015): 179.

² Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., (2015): 168.

psychedelic drugs inserted into her abdomen by drugs traffickers. The gory part of Lucy is her ability to murder with invisible arms using her brain powers, killing with her thoughts alone.

Responding to the eerie depiction of Lucy in the Luc Besson's rendition, Qianmo's "Lucy" proclaims her ruthless invisibility and omniscience:

My mind
 Reaches to the heights of Babel
 Yet God
 Has not scattered my body
 What's scattered are my escalating powers
 Forming Superman, X-Men, Spider-Man [...]
 A multitude of superpowers reside within me
 I claim my throne
 I summon the wind and rain
 I cast my intellect
 As I will!
 How do I tell you
 That I am
 Now
 The entire universe! ¹

Source Code Analogy and Human Existence

In the anthology, Cheng Keqin's "Life's Source Code," uses the analogy of software programming to portray the trajectory of the life of a man, posing a philosophical question on whether one's inability to rewrite one's life chapters comes from the loss of one's "source code." The eight-line poem of hers though brief, is thought-provoking:

Life is a program
 Stored in computer from other space and times
 One time it crashed by accident, and lost
 Its source code
 Unable to reverse the past
 Unable to control the future

1 Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., (2015): 204-205.

Reboot the program, and whatever still runs
Fatalism¹

While Cheng's poem attempts to relate the "source code" to the unchallengeable inevitability of one's life, it certainly refers to the natural course of human history that could constitute any "what ifs." Given an opportunity to alter the "source code," will human history turn out better? The profound source code analogy in Cheng's has undeniably taken the dimensions of AI poems to another level altogether.

AI Literature and Defamiliarization of Language

More than a decade before Woon published the *Sirius Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology* (2015), Looi Yook Tho, the "prince of poets" among Malaysian Chinese poetry writers, compiled and published his futuristic poetry anthology entitled *Zai Wo Wanneng de Xiangxiang Wangguo (In My Wonderful Imaginary Kingdom)* in 1999.

His "Mo Shiji Yuyan (End Times Prophecy)" in the anthology portrays the irony and potential sorry state of human life in an artificial world: "Reading funny articles composed by the computer/[...]/ Through high resolution screens / We salvage the moonlight" And he asked, "Is this our only joy in life?" (31)

One of the key features of Looi's writing style is the defamiliarization of language in his poems. Shklovsky (2017) sees defamiliarization in art creation as a measure to prevent over-automatization and discourage one's trained or habitual functioning. Looi is adept at this. In "End Times Prophecy," Looi advances his cynicism against vices such as greed, lust and the materialistic nature of the modern man using unfamiliar sci-fi or AI elements and estranged expressions (Zhang, *see electronic link*). The defamiliarization in his poems includes the portrayals of drones occupying the sky in the place of falcons, lush green pine forests, created by synthesizer simulators, humans purifying themselves through reformatting chips in their brains and so forth. Looi aptly presents to the readers a bizarre world of ordinary words or objects turned unfamiliar. Even the legal system in his supposedly simulated world of Africa is rather unusual, in which the punishment for "those who cannot love" is "to kiss the lions." A selected quote is as follows:

"I said, 'In Africa, only in Africa
Could I build
A kingdom governed by love
Where those who cannot love are sent to kiss the lions'

1 Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., (2015): 170.

It [the robot RV-2400] blinked its electronic eyes and said,
 ‘Humans need to relearn speech and writing
 Cast aside the guns and switches
 And live with the beasts[...]’”
 Then it started to play a soft lullaby
 As I descended into the wails of a newborn infant[...] ¹

The first cry of a human baby symbolizes purity and innocence. Here, Looi creates a paradoxical shift, assigning the didactic roles to AI, instead of humans. It is rather ironic to come across the lines in his “End Times Prophecy” where humans need to be reminded by AI about their unpretentious, unsophisticated nature at the beginning. In the pursuit to become more tech-savvy, AI-dependent and market relevant, humans might trade off who they are and what is good for them. The defamiliarization of language in Looi’s “End Times Prophecy” has definitely created a sense of estrangement on readers, meeting what Darko Suvin (2014) defines as the literature of cognitive estrangement.

AIs, Human States of Being and Ethics

While developing AI themes in their literary works, Malaysian Chinese writers address pertinent ethical issues and the states of being for humans. AI is seen as posthuman or metaman by Woon’s literary critics². In critical theories, posthumans are humans or half-humans who may exist in a state beyond humans. Robert Pepperell (2003)’s *The Posthuman Condition* regards posthumans as human beings whose physiques and minds are well-wired to the technological world. In his ‘The Posthuman Manifesto,’ he writes, “Humanists saw themselves as distinct beings, in an antagonistic relationship with their surroundings. Posthumans, on the other hand, regard their own being as embodied in an extended technological world” (Pepperell 8). However, Pepperell credits the forerunner of futuristic writing on human biological merger with technology to Norbert Wiener back in 1989, and Capek’s R.U.R. in the early part of the twentieth century when ideas such as post-biological, transhuman and/or post-Darwinian stage of human development were boldly proposed (ibid 161). Other scholars who developed the “posthuman” concept further include N. Katherine Hayles, Allucquere Roseanne Stone, Judith Halberstam, Ira Livingston, Scott Bukatman, Anne Balsamo and N. Katherine Hayles (ibid).

¹ Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Looi Yok Tho, *Zai wo wanneng de xiangxiang guodu [In my wonderful imaginary kingdom]*, (1999): 34-35.

² 参见 温任平主编：《天狼科幻诗选》，霹雳州安顺：有加出版社，2015 年，第 18 页。

Zheng Yuelei's poem "her-his life," in the *Sirius Sci-Fi Poetry Anthology* edited by Woon, projects a subtle love relationship between a man and his 12-inch Retina-screen:

With the stillness of a portrait
 He and she, two people conversing
 Motionless and static
 She and he, in silent mode
 At times telepathically, and at times
 In HD voices
 Communicating, gazing upon each other
 All through
 A 12-inch Retina-screen
 The resolution clear and stable
 As is best¹

This 11-line poem by Zheng was inspired by Spike Jonze's sci-fi film in 2013 about Theodore and his AI virtual assistant Samantha's amicable relationship. The director conceived the idea from his earlier reflections over the possibilities of instant messaging between individuals through AI programming in the early 2000s. While Zheng's poem only portrays the companionship, "she" (the AI) offers her human master. The original movie "*her*" explores the potential of AI in inappropriately influencing their human masters into making ethical choices such as the solutions to Theodore's sexual needs, his legal relationship with the ex-wife, his interest in the next-door-girl Catherine and so forth. To begin with, his getting "consultation" from the AI is already problematic. On what grounds could AIs guide humans on life issues pertaining to ethics and moral decisions?

To probe into human's ethical consciousness and state of being, "Beifen (Copy)", a troubling short story by Malaysian Chinese writer Lew Yok Long is discussed here. This *copy* that comes into existence either through genetic cloning from its "original," or programmed accordingly through artificial intelligence, somehow replicates human's fear of death. Besides, like any human who wants to be heard and known, *it* does not want to be put on the shelf and remain as a "back-up" indefinitely. Hence, *it* murders the "original" to earn itself a place and an identity in the community. However, the guilt from the crime *it* has committed haunts its conscience at all times. Eventually, *it* gets killed by another *copy* for there are

1 Translated by the writer of this paper. Original poem available in Woon Swee Tin ed., (2015): 197.

actually multiple *copies* around.

“I am in fear of losing my life [...] disappearing all of a sudden like *him*.”

“I want to prolong my existence (on earth) as far as possible.”

“I eliminated (murdered) *him*, taking over *his* identity, social status, wealth, and his nagging sense of insecurity, and an anxiety that I could never shed it off.”

“I am always on guard and keeping myself alert [...]”

“One day I bumped into a stranger as soon as I left a bakery [...] as I was helping the person to get up from the ground, he fired at me using two pistols [...] The biggest surprise for me was when his beret dropped off – I saw another *me*.”

“I was not *his* only copy; maybe not his first copy either [...] as I breathed my last, I found out what I never knew about *him*.”¹

In the story, the “Copy” is very disturbed by the transient nature of life. If life was so vulnerable that it was not possible to take a single strike, anyone could die at any time without a good reason, life would have no meaning after all, it reasons. Ironically, even so, the “Copy” still craves to live on. *It* seeks out all means to ensure its safety to prolong the length of its days on earth, including the duplication of itself:

“I do not board on airplanes or go on cruises. I don’t take any trains or drive. I will only go on foot, on bikes when necessary. I try avoid using public transportation.”

“I arm myself with two guns day in day out.”

“I develop a habit to keep a copy for everything [...] file documents, correspondences, books, first-day cover (FDC)s, computer database, two guns, two girlfriends – I even keep a copy of myself.”²

Beyond legal and civic implications, Lew’s “Copy” reveals an extreme case of man’s alienation from his community, and life itself.

1 Translated by the writer of this paper. Original story is available in Lew Yok Long, “Beifen [Copy *Xinma wenque gaotie zhi weixing xiaoshuo* [Singapore-Malaysia literature high-speed rails: short stories]]”, edited by Liu, R., & Chen, Z. Singapore: Malaysian Writers Association of Chinese Medium-Singapore Association of Writers. (2017): 158-159.

2 Translated by the writer of this paper. Original story is available in Lew Yok Long, *ibid*, 158.

Time Reference and Omnipresence of AI

Permeating with the undertone of escapism and fluid temporariness, the newly published novel *Rengong Shaonu* (Ririka 2022) by talented Malaysian Chinese writer King Banhui depicts human's vulnerability in the face of catastrophic destruction of planet earth and the reign of endless darkness. In his overlapping, multi-layered narrative, even "Time" wanders off its orbit (King 247), bringing everything down to ground zero. Hence, like a poetic writer who has received the omen of the impending end times, King foretells how "darkness like a gigantic whale, swallows up light with one bite" (ibid. 262), that "the whole world, sunk into utter darkness without any caution and in just a blink of the eyes" (ibid. 265-266). Ironically, *Ririka*, the AI girl, supposedly created to be the "daughter" of the protagonist, eventually will become a witness to time, and will stay through time even after the great destruction of the planet: "Ririka, I'm sorry that I will perish in the river of time one day [...] (but) you will be the only one to meet eternity"¹ (ibid. 277).

Interesting, despite the seemingly "immortality" of AIs, evident in those left behind, imperishable AI sexbots after the extinction of humans at the city ruins, King asserts that the "behavioral traits" of AIs could easily be altered provided their algorithm is erased or reprogrammed (ibid.120). The memory of an AI is therefore dramatically different from that of a human, or a mammal. "The memory of an elephant will not falter" (37), wrote King. And so, the memory of a human mother who has lost her new born, the memory of an old, wasted man who has had a bitter jungle life with the underground members of the Malayan Communist Party², and the memory of the dreadful, closely monitored life of the Chinese ethnic in the "new villages"³ shall stay in the psyche of Malaysian Chinese, and their literature, even as time and tides slip away. Malaysian Chinese scholar Fan Pik Wah (2011) points out that the cruelty endured by Chinese communities in new villages during the Malayan Emergency deeply frustrated a generation of people who had pledged

1 All quotes were translated from its Chinese texts in the novel by the writer of this paper.

2 The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) was a Marxist-Leninist and anti-imperialist establishment that was active in Malaya between 1930-1989. Most remembered for their strong resistance against the Japanese Occupation during the World War II, and their anti-imperialist guerilla movements against the colonial British government, the MCP finally surrendered themselves and was dissolved for good after signing the peace agreements with Malaysian government on 2 December 1989.

3 The Chinese New Villages were established by the colonial government during the Malayan Emergency (1948-1960). The enclosed communities lived within barbed wire and watch towers. Such establishments were part of the Briggs Plan to exterminate any connection between the guerrillas and their supporters.

their loyalty to the land, as reflected in *Shuda Genshen* (*Deeply Rooted* 1985), the second novel in the “Malayan trilogy” by Fang Beifang (1918-2007), the patriarch of Malaysian Chinese literature.

Superman / Overman and the Consciousness Beyond

Even in the age of AI and World Wide Web, human society will still evolve around man’s physical, emotional and spiritual needs, as long proposed in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory. While endorsing the co-existence and co-living with AI, man’s biggest needs are still beyond what AI could meet, and that was aptly concluded by Lew Yok Long (1999) in his critique on the gist of engagement with sci-fi elements in Malaysian Chinese literature. It leads to an examination on the states of human beings and ethical appeals in the award-winning literary work by internationally acclaimed Malaysian Chinese writer Ho Sok Fong.

Winner of the English Pen Award 2020, Ho’s short story anthology *Lake Like A Mirror* (2020) portrays the lives of nine women who are living their lives in difficult circumstances, apathy or slow death, and calls for one’s resilience and moral strength to soldier on. Interestingly, some of her characters or supporting characters seem to assume some qualities of “superman” or “overman” as people persevere even under very challenging life conditions.

The concept of “Superman” (Übermensch) first appeared in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

“I teach you the superman. Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All creatures hitherto have created something beyond themselves: and do you want to be the ebb of this great tide and return to the animals rather than overcome man?” (Hollingdale 162)

Rejecting the transcendence or God, Nietzsche puts forth the idea of “superman” or “overman” as the “to-be” goals for humans. His notion of the “superman” should not be associated with the eugenics in Adolf Hitler’s Nazism and Benito Mussolini’s Fascism (ibid. 23), but in simpler terms namely, “the overcoming of the human,” which relates directly to one’s critical self-evaluation to become a better self (ibid. 17). It is a concept that “aims toward the spiritual growth of the individual: overcoming the human means to reconcile with our true nature and achieve mastery of oneself” (Ibid). Although the concept of *Übermensch* is rather vague, two propositions are clear: (a) that the “overman” is comprehensible, and something recommended for human experience; (b) that it is proposed for any man or woman

who wanted it, and not restricted to any specific group of people or community.

In Ho's *Lake Like a Mirror*, the ghostly character known as "the guy" in "Xiaozhen Sanyue (March in a Small Town)" is totally opposite to what an "overman" would be. Why must this man check into the guesthouse every day at the same hour, rain or shine? Why is "the guy" losing memory of what happened the day before? In the story, Cui Yi, the guesthouse attendant, tries to track down the comings and goings of this man but to no avail. The man performs the motion daily, as if pre-programmed to do so. His days do not add up to anything. Everything returns to square one each time. Such apathy in living, with no intention and energy for any progress in life is not helping anyone regrettably. Cui Yi, in the end, also leaves the town, not wanting to entertain the memory of the man.

In "The Wall", Ho depicts a woman known as "auntie" who is hemmed in her sunless kitchen due to a newly erected wall. There is no one around to understand her loneliness and withering soul. Auntie's HHHHH self-centred husband seems to have deserted her, both physically and spiritually. Not able to stop the construction of the wall earlier, her only option might be to go through the wall to be free:

"[...] she studied herself carefully and discovered it was true: she was thin. She walked to the back door and found she was almost thin enough to squeeze through the gap [...] She pressed her emancipated palm against the wall and felt the vibrations coming through, beating against the veins on the back of her hand. She pressed her other palm to the wall and felt the fingers of both hands trembling like withered dumb cane leaves. She inched her whole body up to the wall, pressing her bony legs against it, and shook like a feathery bamboo." (Ho 6)

Unfortunately, the *auntie* in "The Wall" is losing her frame and essence each day. "She began to feel like she was in a graveyard with no one in charge and rotting corpses strewn all over the place [...] Her whole frame felt on the verge of collapse" (ibid. 6-7). The terrible living condition eventually sucks auntie up and takes her life. When one could not assert one's will like an "overman" will, one might lose one's frame and essence over time.

In "Wind Through the Pineapple Leaves and the Frangipani", Ho introduces *Bi*, an amphibious being that appears like a genie as well as an imaginary self-projection portrayed by the suffering main character Aminah, a mixed parentage girl in a religious quarantine centre. The psychologically oppressing quarantine centre would have caused any young girl to lose herself, but Aminah seizes any

opportunity to live her life without any manipulations from the religious authorities. The company or presence of *Bi*, albeit in her imaginations, gives her great moral support and capacity to take in life's pressures with amphibious capability:

When the wind flickers the flame, Aminah sees *Bi* hopping and dancing on the wall. The girls behind her are singing. They start out low and quiet. They only have one song. Night falls and I'm all alone, let me wash away the sin and I'll come home. In the silent night, I wash along, oh may my lusting heart be bright again. (Ho 128)

No clue is given as to why Aminah becomes pregnant and gets detained at the quarantine centre under the jurisdiction of the religious court. Being the youngest of all the women in that predicament in Ho's anthology, Aminah's fighting spirit is probably the most definitive in the sense of wanting to 'overcoming the human'. Aminah proclaims:

[...] They want me to stay here nine months. It doesn't matter to them that this will set me back a whole year behind everyone else (for school). I try to imagine the place I want to go, once I'm out. What I hoped for, a long, long time ago. No Ustaz, no warden, no one claiming to have my best interests at heart. I want to go far, far away and be reborn, like a child. I want to give birth to myself. (Ho 131)

Conclusion

With AI becoming more invincible and starting to cross over the ethical boundaries of human living, it is high time for literature to grapple with the subject matter, paying attention to new developments as well as the reflection and re-examination of human states of being. After interviewing 300 top scientists, theoretical physicist and futurist Michio Kaku (2011) foretold in his best-seller, *Physics of the future: How science will shape human destiny and our daily lives by year 2100*, that the speedy development in technology in the 21st century would make even the greatest advancements in the last centuries insignificant. Many jobs would be taken over by AI robots. However, he also argues that there are jobs that only humans would succeed in doing, for example, jobs requiring leadership, creativity, imagination, analysis, humour and science. Above that, man's wisdom will be the priceless commodity to stay. He further asserts that humans "wield the sword of science with wisdom and equanimity, taming the barbarism of our ancient past" (Kaku 17).

Therefore, poetry and literature written by humans will still stay relevant, and will continue to be relevant even in the 21st century and beyond. Many of the themes in the literature concern the human condition.

Poetry reading could enrich lives and foster emotional resilience. Human life should not be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” as mentioned in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1651), but be an ardent embrace of goodness through wise, ethical choices in the plethora of human living conditions and life circumstances. To combat the apathy and slow death of human society, social contract and benevolence should be the source code for mankind and in the algorithms of the AI robots. In a civic society where humans are ethically accountable to each other, man should think beyond the “superman,” that is, to seek not only one’s supremacy but also promote the interests of fellow members. To counter man’s great anxiety over AI’s seemingly all-encompassing abilities, even in the domains of arts and literature, there should be a collective effort to re-examine Miller’s (2002) “end of literature” theory and consider Nie (2021)’s proposition to increase the magnitude of the science in literature related to AI. In this respect, Malaysian writers have deftly demonstrated their concerns over a human world with the AIs, writing on AI themes with sensitivity and creativity in their existential and ethical responses to living with AI in their poetry and short stories.

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