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Comment on "Let's Go to the Moon"

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THINGS WERE GETTING BUSY on the major flight corridors between the Earth and Mars, or so the casual observer of socialist bloc science fiction from the 1950s might come to believe. While there are no reports of intergalactic traffic jams, Mars was becoming a destination of choice in science fiction from both sides of the Iron Curtain. In her fascinating article, Dafna Zur details the exploits of an international exploratory mission to the red planet, consisting of children from a dozen nations, including North Korea, China, and the Soviet Union. It remains unknown whether the explorers from Kim Tong Sŏp's serialized novel *Youth Space Expedition Team* met any other socialist space travelers on their way to Mars. But they could have very well run into spaceship #1, commanded by Zhenzhen, the protagonist of Zheng Wenguang's (1929–2003) "Cong diqiu dao huoxing" (From the Earth to Mars) (Zheng 1954a).

"At the heart of North Korean science fiction" of the 1950s and 1960s, Dafna Zur points out, "is the implication of science, technology, and the environment in the political discourses of development shared across both sides of the Iron Curtain at the height of the Cold War." Zur demonstrates how popular genres, scientific agendas, and visions of the future were circulated across the socialist bloc, creating shared imaginaries of a new world, powered by both ideology and scientific discoveries. The agents of this thrust into the future are invariably the youth. The points raised by Zur, of course, echo far beyond North Korea; similar observations can be made for other socialist nations, such as the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is no coincidence that Chinese science fiction entered its second "golden age" in the mid- and late 1950s, just when science fiction adventures took off in the Soviet Union, in North Korea, and elsewhere.[1] Yet it is also noteworthy that the newfound interest in science fiction went hand in hand with an upsurge of transnational exchanges and translations in the hard sciences, and of concerted efforts to popularize this science. In the first half of the 1950s alone, the PRC translated over 2,000 volumes of science books from the Soviet Union, and rolled out a series of campaigns for science popularization

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[1]For a periodization of Chinese science fiction, see Yan (2013). The first "golden age" of Chinese science fiction literature was during the 1900s and 1910s (Isaacson 2013; Wang 1997, 252–312). On the translation of Soviet science fiction in the PRC, see Volland (forthcoming). Socialist Chinese science fiction is linked genealogically to these earlier works, although the links were not usually made explicit. Lao She's (1899–1966) satirical novel *Mao cheng ji* (Cat country, [1932] 2013), for instance, depicts a dystopian society on Mars. The author, still active in the 1950s, however, disowned this work, which was not reprinted until the 1980s.

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(*kexue puji*).[2] Science fiction, I argue, thus occupied just one end of a larger continuum of scientific discourses that ranged from the empirical through the popular to the imaginary. These discourses fed into each other and were intertwined with another continuum, of existing and future technologies. The temporal axis implied in this second continuum generates the emphasis on the youth observed by Zur—today's children are the scientists of tomorrow, who will turn imagination into reality. The interplay of science, science popularization, and science fiction, as well as the youth as pioneers, is illustrated by the work of Zheng Wenguang, a contemporary of the North Korean writers discussed by Zur and the author credited with launching the new wave of Chinese science fiction in the 1950s with his story "From the Earth to Mars."

In Zheng's story, one of two spaceships built by the Chinese Space Travel Association disappears from the Association's parking lot just days before its planned launch. It has been commandeered by the fourteen-year-old Zhenzhen, a self-taught space buff, her younger brother, and a classmate, who have embarked on their own voyage of discovery to the red planet. The disappearance of the spacecraft and its juvenile crew causes great anxiety at the Space Travel Association, which decides to chase the children with spaceship #2, manned by Zhenzhen's father, a rocket scientist, and two of his colleagues. The adults catch up with the young explorers just when spaceship #1 runs into a meteorite storm that cripples its propulsion system. Via radio, the adults teach Zhenzhen how to restart the spaceship's engines, and both spacecraft safely continue to Mars. They circle the planet and observe polar ice and plant life, but as both ships are running low on fuel, they have to return to Earth without landing—a new adventure left open for the future.

The main themes of "From the Earth to Mars" echo those of Kim's *Youth Space Exploration Team*: space travel, advanced technologies, observation of scientific phenomena such as gravity, youthful protagonists, and some degree of adult guidance that qualifies the agency of the children. Zheng's story, published in *Zhongguo shaonian bao* (Chinese teenagers news) in 1954, is considered the first Chinese science fiction story published after the founding of the PRC in 1949. The story was met with an enthusiastic popular response that underlined the potential for socialist science fiction. Zheng returned to the exploration of the solar system in a short story called "Huoxing jianshezhe" (The Mars pioneers) that was serialized in *Zhongguo qingnian* (Chinese youth), the official organ of the Chinese Communist Youth League, in late 1957, just weeks after the Sputnik launch (Zheng 1957a).[3]

"The Mars pioneers" unfolds a vision that is much more ambitious and detailed than Zheng's first foray into science fiction. Set in the near future—"the first mid-autumn festival of the twenty-first century"—the story recounts the exploration and settling of the red planet. After three failed attempts, the first human mission has reached Mars in

[2]This estimate follows the list in Wenhuabu (1955, 75–181), a comprehensive but still incomplete catalogue of translations from the Soviet Union. Note that this source does not include shorter translations published in scientific journals. On science popularization in the PRC, see Schmalzer (2008, 115–88). For the link between science fiction and science popularization in China, see Wagner (1985, 19–26).

[3]*Zhongguo qingnian* targets a slightly older and more mature audience than *Zhongguo shaonian bao*, which is run by the Chinese Young Pioneers.

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1988. Upon demonstrating the feasibility of landing and settling on the planet, an international consortium of fifty-one nations (apart from the Chinese, the story names Italian, Brazilian, Soviet, and Hungarian pioneers) sends a robust mission of 4,000 veteran pioneers (who have previously spearheaded the conquest and cultivation of such wastelands as the Tibetan plateau, the Sahara, and the South Pole) to set up a permanent settlement on Mars. They build a new town on the edge of "sun valley," complete with power stations, factories, farms, and of course research laboratories. Overcoming all sorts of obstacles, the mission is a success, and after little more than a decade—by the mid-autumn festival of the year 2000—the colony has grown to 600,000 inhabitants, while more pioneering young people from all across the Earth sign up every day to join the greatest adventure of mankind.

The thematic and ideological concerns of "The Mars pioneers" situate the story within the mainstream of science fiction from the socialist bloc. This is not surprising, given the background of its author. Zheng Wenguang's work put him at the strategic junction of science and popularization, as well as foreign and domestic discourses of existing and future technologies. After obtaining a degree in astronomy from Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, Zheng worked as an editor for *Kexue dazhong* (Popular science), the leading Chinese journal for science popularization in the 1950s. Zheng established himself as a prolific writer with an output that spanned the entire continuum from science through popularization to science fiction. In 1954, the China National Association for the Popularization of Science and Technology (Zhonghua quanguo kexue jishu puji xiehui) published a slim volume written by Zheng called *Diqiu* (The Earth), which was reprinted repeatedly due to popular demand (Zheng 1954b). In 1957, New Knowledge Publishers (Xin zhishi chubanshe) issued an even shorter volume on a similar topic, *Stories of the Earth* (Diqiu de gushi) (Zheng 1957b). Zheng also addressed the issue of spaceflight in a public lecture with the title "Is space travel possible?" (Yuzhou lüxing keneng shixing ma?); a transcript of the lecture was consequently published by the Beijing Library (Zheng 1955a).

Much of Zheng Wenguang's work in the 1950s, however, focused on translation, attesting to the importance of knowledge circulation in the socialist world. The issue of spaceflight, for instance, was the subject of an eponymous booklet by A. G. Karpenko that Zheng Wenguang translated (Karpenko 1954). In his elaborations of the Earth, too, Zheng relied on foreign sources, in this case on the entry of the same name in the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (Bol'shaia Sovetskaia entsiklopedia), which he translated into Chinese and which was published as a thirty-page booklet (Magnitskii 1954). In 1957, the year of the Sputnik launch, China Youth Press (Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe) published a small volume called *Satellites and space flight* (Renzao weixing yu yuzhou feixing), translated by Zheng from a Soviet source (Staniukovich 1957). And a year later, the same publisher presented young readers across China with a much more detailed exposition of outer space, *The universe* (Yuzhou), written by the prominent Soviet astrophysicist Boris Vorontsov-Velyaminov (1958) and translated by Zheng.

Zheng Wenguang incorporated ideas from his translations and his work on science popularization into his fictional writings. In 1955, the Children's Press (Shaonian ertong chubanshe) published a first collection of his science fiction, called *The exploration of the Sun* (Taiyang tanxian ji) (Zheng 1955b). The collection was reissued in 1958 by the Writers Press (Zuojia chubanshe) as part of the second installment of the

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publisher's *Popular countryside library* (Nongcun tongsu wenku), a series targeting readers in China's rural areas that included both fictional and nonfictional titles (Zheng 1958). To reach an even broader audience, *The exploration of the Sun* was translated into Mongolian and distributed to ethnic minority readers (Zheng 1956).[4]

Zheng Wenguang's work in the 1950s, traceable through his publications, shows how ideas were recycled and repackaged across different genres along the science–popularization–science fiction continuum. Trained as a scientist and fluent in Russian, Zheng had access to the latest research in his field, which he helped to translate—into Chinese, and into the language of science popularization, which aimed to liberate science from the ivory tower of the universities and research institutes and make it accessible to broader audiences, and first of all to the youth. The borders between these genres were necessarily permeable and allowed for the easy movement of ideas and technologies. The rockets in "From the Earth to Mars" are thus fantastic elaborations of technologies covered in Zheng's popular science writings. And the bits and pieces of factual knowledge interspersed with the narrative of "The Mars pioneers"—a practice that Zur notes in North Korean science fiction as well—are often taken verbatim from Zheng's translations of Soviet literature.

Science fiction as an extrapolation of popular science and, in turn, science, implies a linear narrative of technological development. On the one hand, this narrative justifies "learning from the Soviet Union" (*xuexi Sulian*), the advanced "elder brother" (*Sulian dage*), where much of what appears utopian to readers in China or North Korea has already become reality. Soviet figures of authority consequently appear in the literature discussed by Zur and in Zheng Wenguang's stories. On the other hand, this narrative prioritizes the youth as, in the words of a North Korean literary magazine cited by Zur, "our heirs and the protagonists of the future." It is the task of the young to become the pioneers of the future, the scientists that figure so prominently in both the Chinese and the North Korean science fiction discussed here. Both science fiction and the science popularization literature—much of it published by presses aiming at young readers—are designed to kindle their interest and enthusiasm about the technologies that will open up the future. It is therefore no coincidence that science fiction reemerged in China and emerged in North Korea around the same time as essentially a genre for children and youth.[5] Accordingly, the narrator of "From the Earth to Mars" ends the story with the words: "Dear readers, maybe some of you will be among the first people to reach Mars in the future." Half a century onwards, Zheng's Mars colony has yet to materialize, and a North Korean space program remains elusive. Yet with the launch of an unmanned Indian Mars mission in November 2013 and an ambitious Chinese space program, the expansion of geopolitics into outer space (and maybe also intergalactic traffic jams) remains a topic of intense interest.[6]

[4]It is unclear if this translation was also circulated in the Mongolian People's Republic.

[5]Science fiction in the PRC is still being associated with children's literature today, a label that frustrates contemporary authors and fans of "hard" science fiction (see Qian 2013, 125).

[6]This interest is reflected in a burgeoning new science fiction literature in China. Science fiction experienced an initial comeback in the late 1970s (see Wagner 1985) and has been thriving since the 1990s. See the special issues of *Science Fiction Studies* 119 (vol. 40, no. 1, March 2013) and *Renditions* 77 and 78 (Spring and Autumn 2012), which present recent Chinese science fiction

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