

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Homeland Consciousness in Chinese Maritime Island Science Fiction

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Abstract: Chinese maritime island science fiction is an essential part of the genre, reflecting China's historical sea-land worldview, which is deeply rooted in land-based politics and cultural identity. As a subcategory of Chinese science fiction literature, it constructs a knowledge landscape centered on the dynamic interplay between the mainland, the ocean, and the islands. This landscape is fundamentally anchored in a profound homeland consciousness. This homeland consciousness in Chinese maritime island science fiction manifests in three key narrative modes: (1) Political mode. The homeland consciousness serves as the driving force behind the use of advanced technology to safeguard national security and enhance state power. (2) Cultural mode. The homeland consciousness is envisioned as both a cultural homeland and an imagined utopia, explored through the dialectical relationship among the mainland, the ocean, and the islands. (3) Cyclical mode. The homeland consciousness embodies China's deeply ingrained cosmological belief in the cyclical harmony of heaven and humanity, where the longing for and protection of homeland remains an enduring theme. The homeland consciousness in Chinese maritime island science fiction both engages with and transcends the conventional binary of islands and continents. It integrates oceanic islands into a new dialectical cultural framework, where they are not only the frontier guardians and pioneers of home, but also its philosophical embodiment. This perspective provides a fresh foundation for establishing a new island poetics.

Chinese Maritime Island Literature: A Conceptual Exploration

Throughout the history of ancient Chinese literature, island literature remains relatively scarce, while the traditional ocean-themed ode constitutes a significant literary tradition. Pan Jingru argues that ocean odes across dynasties undergo transformations in their inheritance, reflected in the evolving knowledge and conceptualization of the 'four seas' (Si Hai四海) and their directions—integral to the cultural backdrop of Chinese civilization. These odes also depict the wild, the strange, and the immortal, thereby constructing a knowledge landscape that extends beyond the 'ocean' to the "upper and lower four sides of the ocean" (Pan J., 2021).

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Islands function as a recurring motif in ancient Chinese literature. Wang Li finds the ‘island giant’ motif reveals that these narratives are often intertwined with maritime legends, emerging as a natural extension of ancient beliefs in sea-dwelling immortals. As a result, the image of the island is frequently associated with mystery, fear of the ocean, the summoning of mythical maritime beings, and its symbolic ties to foreign customs (Wang L., 1997). Ancient Chinese literature often links islands and the sea as interconnected elements of cultural geographical imagination.

By the mid-20th Century, maritime literature had become an independent genre in modern Chinese literature, with the island playing an important role in its emergence. According to Xu Yalong, *How to build naval literature* by Jian Xian'ai (1942) and *On maritime literature* by Liu Wuji (2022) marked the beginning of this literary discourse. Maritime literature reflects shifting intellectual perceptions of the relationship between land and ocean civilizations, particularly since the late Qing Dynasty. Xu emphasizes that “modern Chinese maritime literature sprouted and evolved within the context of civilizational renewal and national salvation, shaping its own literary discourse in the process” (Y. Xu, 2024, p.131). Building upon this foundation, Xu further introduces the concept of “island writing,” defining it as literary works that use the marine island environment as a foundation for lyricism and narrative, capturing the historical and cultural transformations of islands and the lived experiences of islanders (Y. Xu, 2024, p. 131). Island writing follows three main thematic directions: “towards the mainland,” “towards people,” and “towards the sea” (Y. Xu, 2024, p. 131).

This perspective establishes a layered internal relationship within Chinese island literature, forming a cultural mechanism of ‘people-ocean-island’. A similar perspective is echoed in Wang Rong’s (2018) analysis of Hainan 海南 literature. He attributes the emergence of contemporary Hainan literature to the island’s provincial status and the subsequent integration, documentation, and reinterpretation of its literary legacy. Wang argues that the island has endowed Hainan literature with a distinct character, making island writing a defining feature of its literary identity. With its multicultural influences, unique local characteristics, emphasis on nature and ecology, and specialized thematic concerns, Hainan literature has been recognized as part of the rise of China’s so-called ‘literary navy’ (R. Wang, 2018).

Considering these developments in Chinese maritime and island literature, this study proposes that contemporary Chinese island literature should be understood as part of the broader knowledge framework of Chinese maritime literature. Consequently, maritime island literature emerges as an overarching concept that integrates these literary traditions.

Maritime Island Writing in Chinese Science Fiction

The themes of islands and oceans have consistently appeared throughout the history of Chinese science fiction, aligning with the discourse of ‘science saving the nation’ that originated in the late Qing Dynasty. The development

of Chinese maritime island science fiction has paralleled the modernization of Chinese literature and the evolution of Chinese science fiction itself. Over the past century, Chinese science fiction has evolved through four distinct phases: the first phase (1905-1949) saw the integration of scientific romances into traditional novels; the second (1949-1978) marked a fusion of science fiction with scientific discourse; the third (1978-1999) was characterized by the incorporation of themes reflecting China's cultural context; and the fourth (2000-present) is defined by diversification and flourishing creativity of Chinese science fiction. Within this broader framework, Chinese maritime island science fiction reflects China's transition from a land-centered worldview to an active engagement with maritime exploration, but potentially intertwining modernity with a deep-rooted homeland consciousness.

Chinese maritime island science fiction—a niche but culturally significant subgenre—remains largely overlooked. While scholars like Jiang Yuqin have examined world-building in Chinese marine science fiction (Jiang, 2023), Hu Zhiping and Hu Minggui have explored ecological themes in 21st-Century Chinese marine science fiction (Hu & Hu, 2024), comprehensive academic analysis of this subgenre remains rare. Even in discussions concerning Chen Qiufa's *Waste Tide* (*Huang Chao* 荒潮) (Chen Q., 2013), focus tends to revolve around themes of alienation, ecology, class, gender, and estranging realism (Healey, 2017; Hua, 2020; Jiang, 2020; Yang, 2024), with relatively little attention paid to the symbolic role of the oceans and islands in these narratives.

Chinese maritime island science fiction constructs a knowledge landscape centered around the mainland-ocean-island dynamic connection. At the same time, it balances both an outward pursuit of modernity and an inward search for belonging. To capture this duality, this study introduces the concept of a 'sense of home' or 'homeland consciousness'. Geographically, this sense of home establishes a connection between land and islands, while spiritually, it fosters a sense of cultural belonging and emotional attachment. This notion aligns with both ancient and modern Chinese representations of oceans and islands, collectively forming a literary tradition that celebrates the idea of home-land within the vast seascape.

Theorizing Homeland Consciousness in Chinese Science Fiction

Home is, first and foremost, a physical space. In *Space and Place*, Tuan Yi-Fu emphasizes the role of experience in shaping human perception, arguing that individuals understand space through sensory engagement while simultaneously developing a cognitive relationship with their surroundings—architecture, time, and other spatial dimensions—ultimately forming a sense of place, or a feeling of familiarity with a location. This experience is further transformed into an increasingly symbolic and conceptual understanding of space. A sense of place carries interpersonal value, fostering both belonging and a sense of home. Through his study of

agrarian, nomadic and urban societies, Tuan observes that “attachment to the homeland is a common human emotion. Its strength varies among different cultures and historical periods. The more ties there are, the stronger is the emotional bond” (Tuan, 2001, p. 158). He also highlights how literature and art strengthen this sense of home by drawing attention to aspects of experience that might otherwise go unnoticed, rendering them visible. At the same time, as places are shaped by historical change and global mobility, the experience and cultivation of a sense of place often require deliberate effort. This study terms this endeavor to evoke a sense of place and the past as the cultural construction of home.

Thus, home is more than just a physical location; it is a deeply rooted cultural concept, encompassing both a specific place and a sense of social identity. It intertwines notions of home and place: home signifies belonging, family, and intimacy (Bennett et al., 2005, p. 162), while place is not only a geographic space but also a mode of belonging and connection to others (Cresswell, 1996). For diaspora communities, hometown becomes a distant, often imagined emotional geography (Rushdie, 1991, p. 9), evoking memories, nostalgia, and a longing for return. In this sense, the sense of home embodies the intricate interplay between spatial geography, cultural identity, and emotional attachment.

In Chinese literature, sense of home is often closely linked to cultural nostalgia. David Der-wei Wang (2010) argues that lyricism represents an essential dimension of modernity in Chinese literature, particularly in shaping the modern subject:

Beyond concerns for the times and the nation, great works of modern Chinese literature engage deeply with language, skillfully exploring and presenting the inner world and worldview. Through the careful construction of sound and language, the lyrical subject gives historical chaos an (imagined) form and distills aesthetic and ethical order from the contingencies of reality. (Wang D. D. W., 2010, p. 65).

Wang takes a broad perspective, positioning the Chinese lyrical tradition in dialogue with modern Western literary theory. This study builds on Wang’s insights, framing the sense of home as a defining emotional structure of Chinese cultural identity. Cultural nostalgia is not only embedded in the evocations of home in Tang poetry and Song Ci, but also in the expressions of longing for home in both Chinese mainland and oversea literature.

In contemporary Chinese science fiction, sense of home has become a powerful cultural undercurrent. Themes of exploration and return are central to many narratives, culminating in Liu Cixin’s (2008) *The wandering Earth*, where a yearning for home is interwoven with humanity’s fate in an uncertain universe. These narratives reflect a paradox deeply rooted in Chinese literary history: the tension between national ambition and an enduring cultural yearning for home.

Until now, studies of island literature have offered valuable insights into the relationship between spaces, reading, and imagination, exploring themes such as genre (Crane & Fletcher, 2017), methodology (Fletcher, 2016), symbolism (Pugh & Chandler, 2021), and metaphor (King, 2014). The spatial and material aesthetics of Riquet (2019) further contribute to understanding how textual space intersects with material production. This study argues a distinctive feature of Chinese maritime island science fiction is its construction of a sense of home that extends the political, cultural and historical dimension of land-ocean duality inherent in Chinese tradition.

1. Homeland Consciousness as the Political Mode for Protecting and Strengthening National Power

Similar to Western tradition, islands in Chinese maritime science fiction are frequently depicted as experimental frontiers, often remote and disconnected from the mainland. Scientists on these islands work independently, grappling with the intricate challenges posed by science and society. However, unlike the ‘mad scientist’ figures such as Dr Moreau in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, trope in Western science fiction, where isolated island research often serves more selfish or reckless ambitions, scientific endeavors in Chinese maritime island science fiction are driven by a cultural political motivation: to strengthen and support national power, reinforcing both physical and cultural belonging.

In Chinese maritime science fiction, islands often serve as technological frontiers for strengthening and protecting national power. A prime example of this theme is Tong Enzheng’s *The death light on Coral Island*, where an island serves as both a research site and a battleground for the ethical dilemmas in human nature (Tong, 1978). The protagonist, Chen Tianhong, is a Chinese scientist who possesses top-secret technology capable of advancing his homeland. After being hunted for his discoveries, Chen crashes on a remote Pacific island and is rescued by Dr. Hu Mingli, another scientist engaged in cutting-edge research. Unlike Chen, Dr. Hu works under military sponsorship and operates a technologically advanced research center on the island, focusing on developing new laser technologies. Dr. Hu isolates himself from society to concentrate on his work, unaware that his inventions are being exploited for military purposes. Deceived by Brian, he finds himself complicit in actions he strongly opposes. Upon discovering the truth, he decides to destroy his experiments.

In this story, author Tong Enzheng portrays two distinct types of Chinese scientists. The first is devoted to scientific research and the betterment of humanity but lacks the ability to discern the true role and purpose of capital. Ultimately, Dr Hu falls victim to capitalists, as their detachment from their homeland and overly utopian, abstract view of humanity leave him vulnerable. There is a second type, represented by Chen, who dedicates his scientific pursuits to serving his country. The island symbolizes both the pursuit of scientific knowledge and the dangers of isolation of scientists

from national protection. Ultimately, the scientist's commitment to his motherland serves as a guiding force that determines the ethical outcomes of scientific work. While there is no fundamental difference between these two types of scientists, their contrasting fates underscore a central political concern in Chinese maritime island science fiction. The island's position at the frontier dictates that scientific research conducted there must also be committed to defending and protecting the motherland.

Such themes resonate with the broader historical context of Chinese science fiction, particularly the influence of thinkers like Liang Qichao. In the early 20th Century, Liang argued for using science and democracy to strengthen the nation. During the late Qing Dynasty, intellectuals and social elites shared the belief that technological advancements were key to national strength and prosperity. This consensus, formed during a period of national decline, inspired efforts to save the country from extinction and led to a merging of the concept of home with the dream of a powerful nation. As a result, sense of home, combined with nationalistic aspiration, became central to modern Chinese literature and a core theme in contemporary science fiction. Despite evolving ideologies over time, the prioritization of national interests has remained a constant theme in Chinese science fiction (Zhan, 2019). Islands, viewed as technological frontiers, represent opportunities for national growth and empowerment while prompting a re-evaluation of tradition, modernity, locality, and globality.

Islands in Chinese maritime science fiction can also be fortresses against global capitalism and ecological oppression. The rapid development of technology has turned islands into sites for rethinking ecological issues and the concept of homeland. In *Waste Tide* (2013), Chen Qiufan emphasizes the need for social and ecological equity by critiquing the environmental devastation caused by digital waste. The story features characters who return to their hometowns in search of refuge and restoration. The protagonist, Chen Kaizong, a young Chinese-American man, returns to his father's hometown on Silicon Isle to seek clarity, while his uncle, facing bankruptcy abroad, hopes to regain his lost fortune. Thus, *Waste Tide* serves as a metaphor for defending one's homeland.

Meanwhile, the island, positioned as a marginal space within the global capitalist system, becomes a dumping ground for electronic waste, highlighting the environmental consequences of globalization. As Silicon Isle turns into a battleground for both virological and technological experimentation, it underscores the tension between national interests and global capitalism. The global green organization, which represents global capital, becomes the antagonist to Chen Kaizong and Xiao Mi's resistance. Chen and Xiao Mi work together to protect the security of their island and homeland. They collaborate to uncover the conspiracy of Global Green Organization and protect the island from the viral threats. Through this patriotic effort, Chen Qiufan calls for a balance between technological progress and human existence to ensure human integrity.

Chen's portrayal of island society reflects Carl Schmitt's concept of 'island consciousness' (Schmitt, 1981), in which islands metaphorically represent isolated pockets of human existence amidst global uncertainty. By bringing together characters from different social strata—grassroots workers, overseas Chinese, and investors—*Waste Tide* critiques the precarity of modernity while positioning the island as a symbol of resistance and cultural survival. The narrative transcends the simplistic Enlightenment notion of science leading humanity to happiness, placing sense of home at the heart of island consciousness.

Moreover, the narrative reflects a deep national consciousness—an ethical certainty and collective value among Chinese people regarding their nation and security. This consciousness arises from an integrated centrism and reflects a historical dream that is often present in the unconscious themes of Chinese science fiction.

Chinese maritime science fiction frequently presents islands as places of symbiosis between humanity and non-humanity. While people yearn for the security of home, Wang Jinkang envisions a future where islands and the ocean, rather than continents, become humanity's ultimate home. In his novel *Dolphin People*, Wang imagines humans as integral members of an ancient civilization, returning to the vast oceans and merging with marine life to create a harmonious civilization in balance with nature (Wang J., 2003). In this post-apocalyptic world, future humans, known as 'Sea People' and 'Dolphin People', inhabit islands and oceans. These beings emerge from genetic modification initiated by two scientists, Qin Liangdi and Lei Qi'ayue, who work to ensure humanity's survival.

The Sea People are evolved versions of bipedal humans, equipped with webbed feet adapted for life in the sea, and they inherit the written language of bipedal ancestors. Meanwhile, the Dolphin People, based on dolphin physiology, inherit the culture of their human predecessors. After being frozen for 300 years by Qin Liangdi, Lei Qi'ayue is revived and meets his descendants. Upon awakening, he initially struggles to adapt to and trust the Dolphin People of the future. His early attempts to establish dominion over the ocean results in conflict and death. However, Lei Qi'ayue eventually comes to understand the ocean and the Dolphin People, regains his faith in this future civilization, and embraces cooperation for mutual development.

Dolphin People not only explores human survival in a future oceanic world but also contemplates the nature of human civilization. Wang breaks away from anthropocentric perspectives, offering an optimistic view of humanity's potential. When the land is no longer suitable for human life, humanity's transition to the sea and its evolution into oceanic beings represents the continuity of human civilization. The Dolphin People introduce a new understanding of how humanity might coexist harmoniously with marine ecosystems, broadening the concept of homeland consciousness to encompass all aspects of human life.

The above discussed themes—leveraging advanced technology to strengthen the motherland, resisting the environmental degradation and exploitation hidden behind green initiatives, and advocating for harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans—all underscore the persistent theme of home in Chinese maritime island science fiction. In this context, home symbolizes national resilience, the well-being of Chiba's people, and a vision of prosperity. This aligns with the enduring spirit of the traditional Chinese scholar-official class, which emphasizes serving the greater good when in positions of influence. Furthermore, it highlights the interdependent relationship between the individual, the nation, and the state, where personal and collective fates are deeply intertwined.

2. A Cultural Mode: Homeland and Imaginary Utopia from the Perspective of Mainland and Maritime-Island Dialectic Framework

The ancient Chinese mythological worldview envisioned a land surrounded by four seas and four desolate regions, with the seas positioned at the cardinal directions and four desolate areas aligning with the points of the compass. Scholars Ye Shuxian, Xiao Bing, and Zheng Zaishu traced the origins of this imaginary geography in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shan Hai Jing* 山海经) and discovered that it was rooted in a conceptual framework of concentric squares, reflecting the political ideal of great unification (Ye et al., 2004). More precisely, this imagined geography intertwines the real world with mythical time and space, presenting itself as a geographical record of mountains and rivers, while in essence constructing a religious and political imaginary landscape serving utilitarian ends (Ye et al., 2004). Anthropologist Wang Mingming echoes this perspective. He reexamined the genealogy of 'Western studies' in ancient China's geographical tradition and found that the imagined geography of the West encompassed not only Kunlun Mountain 昆仑山—the mythical realm of the Queen Mother of the West, located in China's western regions—but also extended to Central Asia (Xi Yu 西域), India, and, following the expansion of maritime routes, to distant lands in the East, West, and islands beyond. Essentially, this imagined geography framed the other as external to China, constructing a center-periphery binary world with the Chinese mainland at its core (Wang M., 2007).

Building upon these narratives of imagined geography in China's long history, this study argues that the Chinese imagination of islands inherits the religious and transcendental connotations associated with Kunlun and the Queen Mother of the West—chiefly, the pursuit of immortality. Ancient legends and travel narratives, such as the fairyland of the Penglai 蓬莱 island and exotic chronicles, constructed an enduring cultural perception: the mainland as the realm of reality and the islands as a utopian fairyland (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017). This dichotomy shaped a deep-rooted cultural mechanism in Chinese thought, wherein islands become vessels for utopian

longing and the imagination of an idealized, otherworldly paradise. In this, Chinese culture resembles Western culture in its construction of islands as sacred sites (Hayward, 2024; Johnson, 2024a, 2024b).

Many maritime island narratives in contemporary Chinese science fiction are deeply rooted in China's historical and cultural context, reflecting a longing for a spiritual utopia. Works like Pan Haitian's *Islands of Eternity* (1999) and Yin Guang's *Heavenly Sea Scrolls* (2021) embody this tradition, drawing from Chinese mythology and imagination to create otherworldly islands and utopian ideals.

In traditional Chinese culture, the perception of islands changes based on their distance from the mainland, with far-flung islands often depicted as immortal paradises, while islands closer to shore are viewed more realistically, often serving as critical reflections of mainland society. Pan Haitian's *Islands of Eternity* leans toward fantasy, depicting Penglai, an island floating on the ocean, carried by seven giant turtles (Pan H., 1999). The monotonous life of its feathered inhabitants is disrupted when they discover a colossal shipwreck filled with the remains of people lost at sea and ancient warrior armor. The protagonist learns from a dying figure in black that Emperor Qin 秦始皇 once sought this land of immortality. By using the warrior's equipment to kill this figure, the protagonist causes the legendary Isles of Eternity to disappear, shattering the myth of an immortal paradise. This story critiques humanity's absurd pursuit of utopia, rooted in geopolitical and maritime space, while revealing the harsh reality behind such idealized dreams.

Similarly, Yin Guang's *Heavenly Sea Scrolls* draws inspiration from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, featuring three distinct tribes—aquatic merfolk 水族, airborne feathered creatures 羽族, and terrestrial humans 人族. These tribes inhabit a fantastical world where they live in harmony, sharing the land, sea, and sky. The aquatic merfolk lives in the underwater Dragon Palace, worshipping sea deities and cherishing music and beauty, but their core motivation is the pursuit of love. Yin Guang's mythical tale constructs a superhuman civilization, in which love and cooperation, rather than conquest, drive progress. Through this mythical narrative, Yin unites the oceans, land, and skies, creating a spiritual utopia where different beings cohabit peacefully.

Both stories create fictional spiritual utopias that, while distinct from the Western concept of utopia, align with traditional Chinese literature's utopian ideals (Hong, 2022). The Peach Blossom Valley (*Tao Hua Yuan* 桃花源), for instance, represents an idyllic, timeless, and pastoral world. Combined with legends of the distant immortal island of Penglai and the unreachable Heavenly Palace, these narratives reflect a distinctly Chinese vision of an otherworldly paradise, where eternal life and happiness coexist.

This also reflects that the cultural utopia presented in the above Chinese maritime island science fiction is based on an imagination of real life, rather than a religious afterlife or otherworld. This is the reason behind the Chinese term 仙 *xian*, which refers to individuals who attain immortality. Unlike the

Western notion of an immortal soul, *xian* implies both bodily and spiritual transcendence, attained through physical cultivation practices like alchemy or breath control. In contrast to Western beliefs that immortality of the soul is natural, *xian* reflects the ideal that through cultivation, both the body and the soul can achieve eternal life. For ancient people, the immortality of the soul after death was a natural occurrence (Zheng, 2016, p. 7). Through cultivation, individuals aim to become *xian* and to achieve immortality of the physical body. “*Xian* individuals are not souls that have ascended to heaven but rather a product of the idealizing of the notion of the simultaneous immortality of both soul and body, the notion that immortality of the soul alone cannot produce *xian* individuals” (Zheng, 2016, p. 10). Zheng’s ideas expose the possible ways of realization through ritual and self-principle to become *xian*. This is why Yin Guang describes the tribes in the ocean, land, and sky, who live separately and yet remain integrated.

Xian stories in contemporary Chinese maritime island science fiction depict heavenly palaces and Penglai Island as symbols of a cultural transcendence that surpass temporal boundaries. Pan Haitian’s *Island of Eternity* offers a dystopian vision of the *xian* world, while Yin Guang portrays the fall of the *xian* paradise. The island fantasy in Chinese science fiction not only illustrates and reinforces this spiritual utopia, but also deconstructs the illusions of utopia, grounding them in reality and prompting a reevaluation of harsh truths and self-awareness. The traditional pursuit of immortality is supplanted by the pursuit of love, emphasizing human connection. This shift reflects the legacy of Chinese philosophy, which stresses the importance of the physical world and deep insight into it.

3. A Historical Cyclical Mode: Paradox of Homeland Consciousness with Historical Cycles

The theory of historical cycles is not merely a historical perspective but also a philosophical framework. It embodies the belief that the cyclical nature of the Dao implies an inherent foresight—when things reach their extreme, they must inevitably reverse. Long Yonglin (2023) argues that the ‘end and beginning’ concept in Chinese Daoist philosophy is more than a simple cyclical view of history. Rather, it originates from the Zhou Dynasty’s governance philosophy of “being cautious at the beginning and respectful at the end” 慎始敬终 and manifests in three key characteristic with corresponding political implications: first, cyclicity, which anticipates political trends; second, moderation, which aims to optimize political investment; and third, permanence, which ensures political stability (Long, 2023, pp. 93–101).

In traditional Chinese society, the theory of historical cycles served as a guiding principle for political governance. It was rooted in the long-term stability of central authority in China and reinforced by the agricultural civilization that shaped the nation’s political and cultural homeland. Consequently, in Chinese maritime island science fiction, setting sail is not

merely an act of departure but also a journey toward a higher form of return. The concept of 'home' is consistently framed within a dualistic epistemology of mainland and ocean/island. Thus, despite the outward expansion of maritime navigation and civilization, its ultimate endpoint remains the mainland—an enduring anchor of cultural and historical continuity. The agricultural experience on land fosters a deep sense of place and belonging, making departure a painful ordeal and return a joyful fulfilment.

This is based on Chinese culture and agrarian civilization. Homeland consciousness arises from life experience in mainland and agricultural society. Traditional Chinese maritime consciousness was constrained by traditional notions of territoriality, in which the central plain was at the center, surrounded by peripheral regions. Mainland defense was prioritized over maritime defense, leading to a maritime consciousness that still favored the land and its agricultural civilization and downplayed the sea, with the result that “the formation and development of China’s maritime outlook bore the characteristics of defensive territoriality” (Huang, 1999, p. 56). In the late-19th century, as China weakened and faced foreign invasion, intellectuals like Wei Yuan sought national rejuvenation by advocating for learning from the West. His *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* led the way in inspiring a movement to learn from the West as a means of overcoming it. Western powers were referred to as advanced overseas nations, especially the formidable technological prowess of states such as the United Kingdom, which triggered the gradual transformation of traditional China.

Territories such as islands and oceanic regions, previously marginalized and overlooked by mainstream culture, began to come to the fore of scholarship. In this context, the illustrious history of Zheng He’s oceanic voyages during the Ming Dynasty was increasingly celebrated. Xu Xiaowang has argued that Zheng He’s oceanic voyages expressed the Ming Dynasty court’s intention to expand overseas and establish a utopian world centered on values of benevolence and justice: The tribute system established during Zheng He’s reign, stretching from the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean, was designed to achieve this goal (X. Xu, 1999, pp. 94–99). Influenced by such thinking, contemporary Chinese science fiction writers, with geopolitical considerations in mind, have imagined the alternative history of Chinese maritime influence as a result of Zheng He’s voyages and their role in connecting different parts of the globe. But the historical cycle theory controls writers’ ocean imagination.

This is clearly reflected in Han Song’s *Red Ocean* (*Hong Se Hai Yang* 红色海洋) (Han, 2018), and Liu Cixin’s *The Western Oceans* (*Xi Yang* 西洋). These are very different works, but they are thematically linked. Han Song describes the ocean from which humanity originated long ago, and where Zheng He’s ocean journey creates a dialogue between the people of the mainland and the mysterious ocean people. Li Cixin’s *The Western Oceans*

describes how Chinese people control the world as the United Kingdom's empire did earlier in history because Zheng He rounded the Cape of Good Hope and ushered in a new era for the world.

This study finds that Han Song's *Red Ocean* vividly embodies the aforementioned historical cycle theory. The novel traces human origins back to an Age of the Sea, when primitive humans lived in the ocean, experiencing the brutal laws of survival—where the strong preyed upon the weak, and only the fittest could lead their people from sea to land and eventually rule. Scholar Zhan Ling (2019) describes *Red Ocean* as a meditation on civilization, offering insights into the recurring cycle of cannibalism—both literal and metaphorical—within human history. In her analysis, she argues that human evolution does not lead to progress but instead perpetuates an unending historical cycle of dominance and subjugation. Moreover, she points out that *Red Ocean*, alongside *2066* (Han, 2000), marks a critical shift in Han Song's creative trajectory, from utopian visions to stark realism. These works, through the demystification of technology, expose how China's modern enlightenment, which began in response to national crises in the early 20th Century, has remained incomplete, overshadowed by the grand narratives of national and technological modernity (Zhan, 2019). In the fourth chapter of *Red Ocean*, entitled 'Our future', humanity—long removed from its oceanic origins—embarks on an ambitious maritime expedition led by Zheng He. From the perspective of Lin Guan, the novel captures the dramatic moment of reaching the Cape of Good Hope:

Lin Guan saw a massive headland appear on the right side of the fleet, like a planet breaking away from a galactic spiral arm. The coastline did not extend farther south but instead veered sharply westward before curving back north. (Han, 2018)

At this turning point, Zheng He faces a critical choice: turning back would mean reentering the cycle of history, while pressing forward would lead to a genuine rebirth of human consciousness. Interestingly, while Han Song portrays Zheng He's bold decision to expand from land to sea as an act of pioneering exploration, the novel ultimately examines human civilization from a higher perspective. In the end, Zheng He's maritime odyssey appears to be a return to humanity's primordial origins—a reversion to an existence toward the sea, coming from the ocean and returning to it. This represents a spiral historical cycle theory, in which history does not simply repeat but ascends in a recursive pattern. The seafarers of this sea, unlike their ancient predecessors, now possess the wisdom of land-based civilization. Their deep-rooted sense of home—derived from agrarian life—allow Zheng He to transcend the simplistic land-ocean dichotomy, connecting human civilization to a broader, even cosmic, perspective. This, in turn, drives humanity's endless outward exploration.

Han Song consistently reminds us that beneath the stability of land-based civilization and the familial-national order lies the untamed, primordial force of maritime civilization. The vast unknown world demands humility and reverse thinking. And yet, it is the land—our true homeland—that remains the wellspring of both courage and wisdom.

Compared with Han Song's deep-rooted homeland consciousness and historical cycle in his *Red Ocean*, Liu Cixin shows a different understanding of historical cycle theory in his *The Western Oceans*. In this novel, Zheng He ventures as far as Somalia in Africa, leading a fleet of over 200 ships and a core crew of over 20,000 in search of the missing Emperor Jianwen. The historic mission is largely accomplished. But here Zheng He embodies an unprecedented spirit of modern exploration: "If the world is round, there must be an edge to the sea, and the fleet of the Ming Dynasty should sail there" (Liu, 2014, p. 14). On 10 June 1420, before Columbus's voyage in 1497, Zheng He had taken a step toward circumnavigating the globe and establishing an unprecedented Middle Kingdom. History is rewritten. China's island borders extend to Ireland, leading to the dramatic scenario of Hong Kong's return to China being replaced by Ireland's return to Britain, and New York becoming one city in the Chinese empire. However, there are concerns about this extension of maritime borders, because the strength of any geopolitical power is determined by its political and economic capacity. A vast frontier without a strong political and cultural core cannot prevent the reversal of fortunes by other nations, and the fate of a vast Chinese empire could still be one of decline, echoing the tragedy of the late Ming Dynasty:

After the collapse of the Ming dynasty five centuries ago, the New World began a new cultural movement. In the centuries that followed, we have led the way in Chinese culture, while the Old World has lagged behind. Almost half a century later, they still see themselves as the cultural masters. In fact, the New World has become an entirely new culture. Its roots may be in the Old World, but it's a new culture! (Liu, 2014, p. 20)

On the surface, the novel presents an alternate history, reimagining Zheng He's expeditions as continuing beyond the Cape of Good Hope. In this scenario, Zheng He leads his grand fleet across the South China Sea, reaches Europe, conquers the British Isles, and even establishes a global empire in North America. This narrative seemingly mirrors the rise of the British Empire during the colonial era. However, this is merely a façade. Beneath the depiction of world domination and prosperity lies a deeper engagement with China's historical cycle theory. Even though China, historically defeated and weakened by Western powers, emerges in the novel as a world ruler, the crises faces by modern civilization are reproduced in a cyclical fashion—an echo of the cycle of heaven. The novel also highlights the sorrow and anxiety of the ambassador (a father and the novel's protagonist) concerning their physical and emotional distance from China, reinforcing the center-periphery

dynamic between Greater China and its diaspora. Ultimately, this tension leads to the collapse of political order: rebellion from the periphery causes a severing of ties with the center, leading to the downfall of the homeland and a return to historical decline. Thus, *The Western Oceans* uses alternate history to reveal China's deeply ingrained historical cycle theory, where the longing for and safeguarding of home remains an unchanging theme.

The island and maritime imagination of contemporary Chinese science fiction actively mixes traditional and modern maritime consciousness. It simultaneously maintains, dissolves, and reconstructs existing understandings. Sense of home forms the basis for understanding the ocean in Chinese island and maritime science fiction. All outward exploration is ultimately in pursuit of a better return to and construction of the homeland.

Conclusion: Will homeland consciousness lead to new routes in island poetics?

The homeland consciousness in Chinese maritime island science fiction involves but transcends the binary model of island and mainland, integrating the maritime island into a new dialectical cultural framework. In this model, the island is not only the guardian and pioneer of the homeland but also a philosophical manifestation of homeland consciousness. It becomes a mental habitat, merging the island's spatial existence, material production, and social relationships within the larger map of national cultural development. Therefore, Chinese maritime island science fiction rejects the surface dichotomies of mainland-island, mind-matter, and center-periphery, instead promoting the inner formation of a circular system of sustainable development.

Building on this integration of island and mainland, Chinese maritime island science fiction contrasts sharply with the conquest and domestication of islands seen in Western literature. In the Chinese context, islands are spaces for interaction and cultural construction, rather than domination. Whether the focus is on frontier of science and technology, ecological struggles, human evolution, or utopian metaphors of the mind, Chinese maritime island science fiction emphasizes a re-examination of Chinese culture and its continuous evolution. Chinese maritime island science fiction prioritizes a holistic view of culture, facing outward to the world and the sea, while proposing new paths for Chinese cultural development.

Unlike other island poetics that focus on spatial or material production, Chinese maritime island science fiction emphasizes the intrinsic kinship between island and continental culture. This allows island space and literary production to be incorporated into a broader cultural and national ideology. As a result, the island serves as both a representation of national ideology and a manifestation of a shared destiny for all humanity. It embodies a true poetics of land and sea—a cultural integration of land and sea constructed by the consciousness of home, and represents a cultural poetic integration at the level of geo-poetics.

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