An Epic Poet in the Information Age:

Revisiting Haizi at the Intersection of Literature and Science in Postsocialist China

by

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to offer a new interpretation of the poet Haizi 海子 (1964-1989), with a focus on the affinity between his epic writings and the systems sciences. An iconic figure in contemporary Chinese poetry, Haizi was particularly engaged in the proliferation of epic poetry during the early postsocialist period, producing a number of ambitious works over the course of his meteoric career. Yet, despite his well-known engagement in the literary trend, Haizi's reception of the systems sciences (e.g., cybernetics, information theory, system theory) as shown in his academic, religious, and arguably literary practices as well, have regrettably incurred little attention. These theories had a prevalent influence in early postsocialist Chinese society: they initially emerged in the scientific and engineering fields and then quickly turned into a universal approach for understanding the mechanism and structure of systems, permeating into the social sciences and humanities, as well as popular culture, like *qigong* 气功 cultivation. In this context, this thesis aims to articulate, with respect to Haizi's epic writing, how technoscientific discourse and literary creation can shape each other, and what social, political, and cultural implications such interaction bears. Specifically, the first chapter examines the overall world setting of Haizi's epic poems such as the river and the land, both of which typically stand for national civilization. While revealing the self-regulating and self-organizing nature of these settings as cybernetic systems, Haizi seems to suggest that a catastrophic change from within is needed to overcome the negative stability of a system so as to reactivate it. The second chapter associates the recurring basic natural elements in Haizi's works such as water and fire, with *qi* 气, the central concept of *qigong* doctrines, which is identified as information by some of the so-called somatic scientists. The way Haizi deals with the basic elements reflects both his aspiration and worries in the face of the advent of information governmentalities. Lastly, the third chapter

homes in on the characters dwelling in the epic settings, typically depicted as being distorted, fractured, mutilated, or stretched. Casting his notion of subjectivity on these figures, Haizi contradicts the dominant humanistic discourse of his time and heralds the rise of posthumanism in the postsocialist condition. In its reconfiguration of Haizi, this thesis recharts the spiritual topology of early postsocialist China and relocates China in the global dissemination of technoscientific discourses.

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Introduction

Three decades after his tragic suicide, Haizi 海子 (Zha Haisheng 查海生, 1964-1989) remains one of the most iconic figures in contemporary Chinese poetry, a man whose extensive and enduring influence continues to reverberate through both professional circles and public spheres. Myriad discussions around Haizi, under the collaboration of mass media and academic institutions, have depicted the poet as an idealistic martyr, an isolated genius, a nostalgic bard, and an acute psychic. These impressions, so deeply entrenched in our minds as to be destabilized and challenged only with difficulty, attest to the durability of what Michelle Yeh calls the "cult of poetry," a phrase that denotes the tendency to grant poetry and poets transcendental significance and status in contemporary China.[1] The prevalence of this phenomenon, as Yeh states, can be attributed to the alienation of poets from their political, economic, and cultural conditions.[2] But once this way of understanding is established as the standard interpretative paradigm, I would add, it in turn prevents us from illustrating poetry's connection with contemporary society. In this situation, it seems misguided, if not sensational, to emphasize Haizi's relationship with his scientific and technological milieu and identify him as "an epic poet in the information age." How can Haizi's epic poetry be associated with information discourse and instantiation? How does Haizi invoke this classical form of literature to grasp a world enabled by modern science and technology, or technoscience?[3] What will the encounter between

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[1] Michelle Yeh, "The 'Cult of Poetry' in Contemporary China," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 1 (1996): 52-53.

[2] Ibid, 60.

[3] I will mainly use "technoscience" to designate "science and technology" in this thesis, not only for the sake of brevity but also to highlight the fact that Bruno Latour describes in his work with the same term: science and technology can hardly be separated from each other, and scientific and technological activities are inevitably intertwined with social factors. See Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

literature and technoscience bring to our understanding of Haizi and his time?

Divested of the mystified images woven around him, Haizi was no more than any typical young intellectual of 1980s China. Compared to the poets of the previous generation, Haizi, for most of the time, lived a rather simple and uneventful life. In the third year after the National College Entrance Examination was resumed after being interrupted for a decade by the Cultural Revolution, Haizi, then a fifteen-year-old teenager living in rural Anhui Province, was admitted to the Department of Law, Peking University (PKU). Influenced by the nationwide poetry movement, he embarked on literary writing in his junior year and quickly embraced it as a lifelong enterprise. After graduating at the young age of twenty, he was assigned to a position at the China University of Political Science and Law (CUPSL), where he continued his poetic creation while working first as an editor and later as a lecturer with a focus on legal studies. Yet, unfortunately, this rather routine and unremarkable young adult life lasted only six years. Affected by his thwarted literary career, frustrated love affair, deteriorated mental condition, among other reasons, Haizi finally committed a suicide by laying himself on the railway tracks near Shanhaiguan, right after he turned twenty-five years old and a few months before the student uprisings that led to the Tiananmen Square massacre.[4]

The period of Haizi's intellectual maturity—from his enrollment at PKU in 1979 to his suicide in Shanhaiguan in 1989—coincided with a stimulating yet painful decade of widespread, drastic reforms in China. Haizi, like many of his fellow intellectuals, contributed to this process

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[4] The narrative of Haizi's life in this thesis is mainly informed by the biographies written by Liaoyuan and Bian Jiansong; see Liaoyuan 燎原, *Haizi pingzhuan (erci xiuding ben)* 海子评传（二次修订本）[A Critical Biography of Haizi, 2nd rev. ed.] (Beijing: Zhongguo xijü chubanshe, 2011); Bian Jiansong 边建松, *Haizi zhuan: Huanxiang yu zhenli* 海子传：幻象与真理 [A Biography of Haizi: Vision and Truth]. Zhengzhou: Henan wenyi chubanshe, 2018. For a brief introduction to Haizi's biography in English, see Nick Admussen, "Haizi," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Chinese Poets Since 1949*, eds. Christopher Lupke and Thomas Moran (Farmington Hills: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 2021), 31-38.

in his own ways. Primarily known as a poet, Haizi proffered reflections on the situation in China in transition through his highly symbolic works, in particular his epic poems, which occupy a central position in his oeuvre. Apart from his poetic activities, Haizi was also active as a scholar in legal studies, whose research drew on the prevalent technoscientific discourse of his time to address the social evolution and regulation, thus providing important references for us in understanding how he conceived of his epic worlds. To decode Haizi's epic poems, critics have scrutinized almost all of his literary and philosophical resources, including but not limited to the Chinese classics, ancient Greek philosophy, Biblical allegory, Hindu mythology, German idealism, Romanticism, and Modernism. However, due to the fact that little attention has been paid to his secondary identity as a legal scholar, Haizi's appropriation of such technoscientific theories as cybernetics, systems theories, and information theory, has been virtually invisible in the past archaeologies of Haizi's intellectual genealogies. During the time in which Haizi lived, technoscience actually played a no less important role in intellectual spheres than literary and cultural discourses. This complete omission of discussion of Haizi's acceptance of technoscience, therefore, has prevented us from limning a more complete spiritual portrait of the poet.

Considering the contexts mentioned above, this thesis plans to excavate the linkage between Haizi's epic poetry and cybernetics, systems theory, and information theory, as well as other related theories. By incorporating Haizi's contemplations on technoscience into the interpretation of his poetic writings, I shed new light on Haizi's literary practice and deepen the understanding of the intellectual landscape of the China of his time. At the outset of this project, it is necessary to contextualize Haizi's intellectual endeavors, associating his epic writings with the nationwide revival of interest in poetry, illuminating his intimate familiarity with a number of prevailing technoscientific discourses, and revealing how his engagements with the literary and

scientific cultures resonated with each other and led to a concerted response to the ongoing debates at a point in Chinese history of momentous transformation.

Postsocialist Transformations and the Information Revolution

In the wake of the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in 1978, China, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, embarked on comprehensive reform, which began with a series of officially led economic reforms and then expanded to other areas and sparked a broad and strong public response. This sweeping course of transformation unfortunately came to a temporary halt, though not a termination, by the June Fourth incident, leading to the restructuring of official forces and the divergence of the public sphere.[5] Going through a drastic transition, China in the 1980s was mired in a paradoxical dichotomy: on the one hand, it set as the benchmark the modernization myth constructed by Western capitalist civilization; on the other, it could not completely break from the still backward status quo under Chinese socialist practices and needed occasionally to derive inspiration from it. Therefore, the constant debates throughout this decade—from the discussions and experiments on political and economic policies within the ruling party to the debates and explorations in literary and cultural domains—commonly unfold within a dualistic framework: tradition versus modernity, collectivism versus individualism, China versus the West, socialism versus capitalism. Both Haizi's literary work and his academic production contributed to these debates and can be associated with various movements and discussions that shared similar concerns. This tumultuous decade has various interchangeable designations: in terms of the time scope it covers, it is straightforwardly dubbed "the 1980s"; given its rupture with the past as promised by the official ideology, it acquires the name of the

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[5] For a detailed account and discussion of China's reform era, see Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution through Reform*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), chapter 5.

"New Era"; and insofar as it is intertwined with the legacy of the Maoist era, it belongs to a still-ongoing period commonly prefixed with "post," such as "post-Mao," "post-revolutionary," or "postsocialist." In her recent investigation of information imagination in 1980s China, Xiao Liu adopts Arif Dirlik's theorization of postsocialism as her analytical framework in order to underscore the negotiation of contradictory ideologies in a transition period.[6] Following Liu's methodology, I will also use the concept of postsocialism to refer to the historical conditions under which Haizi lived.

The concept of informatization can serve as an important, though not the only, thread in the transformation that took place in the first decade of postsocialist China. By informatization, I refer to the general process of a society evolving into the information age, as manifested in the popularization of scientific discourses on information, the burgeoning of information technology, the prosperity of cultural imagination of information, the implementation of the information-dependent political and economic reform strategies, etc. As China redirected its primary concern from politically oriented revolution to economy-centered development after Mao's death, the technoscientific innovation as the driving force of social progress started to assume increasing importance. Inspired by futurologist predictions of human societies, especially by Alvin Toffler's work, the Chinese government at a crossroads inaugurated a "new technological revolution" with one of its emphases placed on information technology in order to steer the lagging country onto a prosperous path. In response to this vision, China's leading scientists and engineers applied the technoscientific advancements that had been employed for developing strategic weapons and managing military systems during the Maoist era, like cybernetics, information theory, and operation research, to construct an "information society" in the postsocialist period. These

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[6] Xiao Liu, *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 27.

informatization-related theories worked not only as the support for specific technologies but also as the foundation for various discourses and practices, deeply informing an entire generation of Chinese people. While the informatization appeared to be a generalizing process spreading from the U.S.-centered developed countries to developing countries like China, decoupled from the ideology required by and the interests exclusive to any specific camp, its unfolding nevertheless attested to the fact that it would generate structural changes largely beyond purely technological domains. By highlighting the informational dimension of postsocialist China's transformation, this thesis intends to bring the particular example of China into dialogue with the global move into an imminent new era, revealing not merely its technoscientific implications, but also its political, economic, and cultural prospects and ramifications. The overarching effects of informatization impels us to incorporate an understanding of the desire for an information society in postsocialist China into the reading of Haizi's poetry.

Haizi's epic poems, set in pristine scenes and replete with primordial images, do not on the surface conjure up associations with the particular historical context in which they were written, let alone anything having to do with the scientific and technological milieu of his time. These works seem to possess a timeless quality that has led to polarized reactions. For Haizi's supporters, his epic works purify contemporary realities into universal archetypes, while, for his opponents, the works merely provide anachronistic clichés that say little of importance about the contemporary situation.[7] In contrast to these two orientations, I trace both the achievements and the dilemmas of Haizi's epic works to their references to contemporary Chinese reality. At the center of this thesis is the following claim: the significance of Haizi can be fully appreciated only

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[7] Maghiel van Crevel notices there are different attitudes towards Haizi's epic poetry and lists some representative studies; see Maghiel van Crevel, *Chinese Poetry in Times of Mind, Mayhem and Money* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 124.

by contextualizing his work within the drastic social transformations that occurred while he was living and writing, especially the trend toward informatization.

The Epic Impulse and Haizi's Writings

Credited as a golden age of Chinese literature, the early postsocialist era bore witness to the mushrooming of various literary movements, including Misty Poetry 朦胧诗, Avant-Garde Fiction 先锋小说, the Root-Seeking Movement 寻根文学, and Third-Generation Poetry 第三代诗歌. Haizi, despite his unique talent, was deeply rooted in the general literary climate of his time, and drew particular inspiration from the craze for epic literature around the mid-1980s.[8] This literary trend first appeared in the explorations of the Misty poets, the most prominent contemporary Chinese poetic group that surfaced in the early post-Mao era in response to the consequences of the Cultural Revolution. Yang Lian 杨炼 and Jiang He 江河, two representative figures of this group, were the pioneering poets who transformed a latent epic impulse during that time into specific works such as Yang Lian's "Nuorilang" 诺日朗 and Jiang He's "The Sun and His Reflections" 太阳和他的反光. Their epic ambitions encouraged the younger poets involved in the Third-Generation movement, a loosely organized yet highly influential poetic movement that, coming after the Misty Poetry, sought to break away from its paradigm by turning to more diverse intellectual resources ranging from the classical Chinese tradition to contemporary Western theory. The most notable contributions to the revival of epic poetry were made by two prominent branches of this movement: Holism 整体主义, which aims at grasping the Chinese tradition in its entirety, and Neo-traditionalism 新传统主义, which advocates a

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[8] Many scholars have connected Haizi with the craze for the "modern epic" during his lifetime. For example, in her studies of Haizi, Rui Kunze provides a detailed narrative of the development of modern and contemporary Chinese epic theory and practice, and locates Haizi's *The Sun* series in this poetic genealogy; see Rui Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis: The Canonization of the Poet Haizi and Cultural Discourses in Contemporary China* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 2012), 191-203.

critical inheritance of the Chinese tradition.[9] Poets belonging to these two schools produced a number of dazzling pieces in the ensuing years, including Ouyang Jianghe's 欧阳江河 "Hanging Coffin" 悬棺, Liao Yiwu's 廖亦武 "Great Craftsman" 巨匠, Shi Guanghua's 石光华 "The Escape from an Ending" 结束之遁 , and Song Qu 宋渠 and Song Wei's 宋炜 "Great Saying So" 大曰是. Along with these creative efforts came extensive theoretical expositions on epic poetry, featured in both official and self-published periodicals and contributed by both the poets themselves and critics of their works.

It is extremely difficult to offer a comprehensive and coherent account of the revival of epic poetry in postsocialist China, as the indiscriminate use of the term "epic" during this period greatly expanded and even obscured the original meaning of the term—a long narrative written in verse. The so-called epic poems by the poets mentioned above actually include a wide spectrum of forms: they vary in length from several pages to tens of thousands of lines; they range from poetic sequences to single uninterrupted pieces; they are lyric, narrative, dramatic, or a combination of all of these genres; they are alternately called "long poems" 长诗 or "great poems" 大诗, designations that are not necessarily equivalent to "epic poetry" by definition. However, this epic rage was still characterized by one of the central pursuits of classical epic poetry: an attempt to grasp the totality of the world. Two aspects of this yearning should be noted in particular. First, the world here refers not so much to the general conditions readily presented to us as it does the underlying structure supporting human lives, usually synonymous with classical Chinese civilization, which might seem to have faded away but, in fact, has merely been

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[9] For a detailed definition of Holism and Neo-traditionalism and some representative works of these two groups, see Shi Guanghua 石光华 et al., "Zhengti zhuyi" 整体主义 [Holism], in *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqun daguan, 1986-1988* 中國現代主义诗群大观, 1986-1988 [An Overview of Chinese Modernist Poetry Groups, 1986-1988], eds. Xu Jingya 徐敬亚 et al. (Shanghai: Tongji daxue chubanshe, 1988), 130-143; Liao Yiwu 廖亦武 and Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, "Xin chuantong zhuyi" 新传统主义 [Neo-traditionalism], in *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqun daguan, 1986-1988*, 144-151.

dissolved into or is submerged beneath current realities. Second, the totalizing will in the face of this world is not only essential but also necessary as the world in question, namely the spiritual substantiality of classical China itself, was built upon holistic thinking. By activating and revealing the world in its entirety, contemporary Chinese epic writers aimed to offer a narrative—typically an alternative, reflective narrative—of the existence of their time. The enchantment with the exemplary classical world and the belief in its contemporary relevance could be detected in various texts on poetics in the 1980s. For instance, Yang Lian appealed to poets to form a "modular pattern" of the Chinese tradition based on an absorption of its "intrinsic factors," thereby grasping the Chinese national spirit in its process of becoming.[10] Following Yang's determination to embrace and update the Chinese tradition,[11] Shi Guanghua further developed a holistic understanding of the tradition as a system in which all the components collaborate with each other and the human achieves unity with the world.[12]

In retrospect, we can see that the surge of interest in epic poetry in postsocialist China was not a random event. According to Li Zhensheng's analysis, while the epic poets mentioned above are representative figures of either Misty Poetry or Third-Generation Poetry, the epic fever should be understood as a bridging phase between the two movements.[13] By the mid-1980s, the

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[10] Yang Lian 杨炼, "Chuantong yu women" 传统与我们 [Tradition and Us], in *Guihua zhili de kongjian: Yang Lian zuopin 1982-1997* (sanwen wenlun juan) 鬼话·智力的空间：杨炼作品 1982-1997（散文·文论卷）[Ghost Speech, Intellective Space: Selected Works of Yang Lian, 1982-1997 (Creative and Critical Essays)] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 151-152.

[11] Shi Guanghua 石光华, "'Qiji cixin' daixu: Zhaizi gei youren de yifeng xin" 《企及磁心》代序：摘自给友人的一封信 [In Lieu of a Preface to *Touching the Magnetic Core*: From a Letter to Friends], in *Cichang yu mofang* 磁场与魔方 [Magnetic Field and Rubik's Cube], eds. Xie Mian 谢冕, Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, and Wu Sijing 吴思敬 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993), 128.

[12] Shi Guanghua 石光华, "Tiyao: Zhengti yuanze" 提要：整体原则 [Abstract: Holistic Principles], in *Hanshi: Ershi shiji biannian shi 1986* 汉诗：二十世纪编年史 1986 [Poetry of Han: A Chronicle of the 20th Century, 1986], eds. Wan Xia 万夏 et al. (Independent Publishing, 1986), 90.

[13] Li Zhensheng 李振声, *Jijie lunhuan: "Disan dai" shi xulun* 季节轮换："第三代"诗绪论 [Change of Seasons: An Introduction to the "Third Generation" Poetry] (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2008),

socialist revolutionary ideology had completely collapsed, but its alternative, molded by neoliberalist ideology, had not yet fully unveiled itself; in other words, the collective conscious in which Misty Poetry was rooted had dissipated, while the individualistic consciousness that characterized the Third-Generation Poets remained as yet only a promise. In these circumstances, it made sense that some poets returned to the traditional foundations of Chinese culture, to soothe the wandering spirits of the Chinese people and to ease the cultural burden impeding the development of Chinese society. In brief, the craze for epics should be treated as a symptom of the prevailing social consciousness at the time. In the literary realm, it stands as the poetic corollary to the contemporaneous Root-Seeking fiction. Contextualized within the intellectual milieu as a whole, it echoed the enthusiastic reflections on Chinese tradition vis-à-vis Western modernity during the so-called High Culture Fever 文化热. In relation to the broader social context, it contributed to the intuitive, metaphorical articulation of China's transformation concomitantly driven by economic, political, and to some extent cultural reforms.

During his ephemeral literary career, Haizi produced, with assiduous effort and unparalleled genius, about ten epic pieces, more than two hundred lyric works, and a number of critical essays. While his lyrics have been favored by both the general reader and professional critics over his epics, Haizi himself points to the latter as the main axis of his literary exploration. Genealogically speaking, Haizi can neither be categorized as a Misty Poet nor as a member of the Third-Generation Poets. Rather, he bears significant affinity with those epic writers connecting the two groups in that he also invests his energy in revitalizing the disintegrated classical civilization to address the spiritual groundlessness of the immediate postsocialist era. Peripheral to the poetry scene in Beijing during his lifetime, Haizi instead maintained a close

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relationship with the Sichuan-based young poets and published parts of his long poems in the journal sponsored by Holists.[14] The conspicuous fact that Haizi was described as the benchmark of contemporary Chinese poetry on the one hand but maintained considerable distance from the mainstream narrative of poetic history on the other, might hint at the difficulty of orienting Haizi on a historical-poetic level. To address this conundrum, I suggest that both the historical significance of the epic fever and Haizi's absorption of this literary current must be further elucidated.

Systems Approaches as a Perspective

Early postsocialist China saw an immense theoretical passion for systems, manifesting in the resurfacing and introduction of a number of theories and related applications concerning the regulation, organization, and evolution of systems. The three most prominent ones—cybernetics (Norbert Wiener), information theory (Claude Shannon), and systems theory (Ludwig von Bertalanffy)—were collectively known as the "Three Theories" 三论.[15] They originated from the natural sciences and engineering during the 1930-40s as three tightly correlated fields. In rough terms, cybernetics establishes a universal conceptual framework for analyzing any teleological system based on self-regulating behaviors; information theory and cybernetics converge in offering a mathematical approach to technological communication; and systems theory, another interdisciplinary field directed at systems, shares the theoretical concerns of cybernetics to such an extent that the two theoretical veins are used indiscriminately in most contexts. Soon after

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[14] See, for example, Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*, 187-193.

[15] Wei Hongsen was probably the first person to refer collectively to the three theories as the "Three Theories"; see Wei Hongsen 魏宏森, *Xitong lun, xinxi lun, kongzhi lun, yu xiandai kexue fangfa lun* 系统论、信息论、控制论与现代科学方法论 [Systems Theory, Information Theory, Cybernetics, and Modern Scientific Methodologies] (Beijing: Beijing ziran bianzhengfa yanjiuhui/Beijing xitong xinxi kongzhi kexue yanjiuhui, 1981).

their inception, these theories were generalized to the humanities and social sciences through interdisciplinary cooperation and interaction, most significantly through the Macy conferences, a series of gatherings focusing on cybernetic discourses that brought together leading scholars from several different fields of inquiry. With the sustained growth of systems rage, more theories continued to be introduced into China, including a trio of theories that emerged in the 1960-70s concerning nonlinear dynamics and systems: catastrophe theory (René Thom), dissipative structure (Ilya Prigogine), and synergetics (Hermann Haken).[16] All of these approaches exerted substantial influence on Chinese modernization, thanks to both their technological utility and their philosophical implications. The popularity and development of these theories in postsocialist China reflect the nation's consistent focus on systems, with an increasing consciousness of the dialectical relationship between chaos and order.

Research on this theoretical genealogy dates back to the founding period of the People's Republic of China (PRC) at the turn of 1940s and 1950s and owes its prevalence largely to the efforts of the preeminent scientist Qian Xuesen 钱学森 (1911-2009). As a graduate student and then faculty-member of MIT and Caltech, Qian worked for the United States military on the research and development of the atomic bomb and the ballistic missile during the Word War II, before being placed under surveillance in the postwar years and eventually deported to China at the height of McCarthy Era.[17] He brought operations research and engineering cybernetics back to China in the hopes of applying them to the construction of the nascent regime, but he failed to

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[16] These theories started to be collectively dubbed the "New Three Theories" 新三论 in some journals in the mid-1980s; see, for example, Jian Hong 建宏, "'Lao sanlun' yu 'xin sanlun'" "老三论"与"新三论" ["Old Three Theories" and "New Three Theories"], *Anhui shengwei dangxiao xuebao* 安徽省委党校学报, no. 2 (1986): 87-91.

[17] See Wang Shouyun 王寿云 et al., "Qian Xuesen zhuan" 钱学森传 [Biography of Qian Xuesen], in *Zhongguo xiandai kexuejia zhuanji* 中国现代科学家传记 [Biographies of Modern Chinese Scientists], vol. 1, ed. Kexuejia zhuanji da cidian bianji zu 科学家传记大辞典编辑组 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1991), 769-773.

achieve his technocratic goals during the 1950-70s due to their inherent contradictions with Maoist ideology. Then, as Deng Xiaoping implemented the socialist modernization agenda after the Cultural Revolution, Qian revivified the nation's enthusiasm for systems, reactivating theories that had previously been cast aside and introducing novel ones too, in an attempt to establish an all-encompassing engineering of social management.[18] After their ideological and scientific legitimacy had been established, the original Three Theories and New Three Theories not only stood as cutting-edge methodologies for scientists and engineers but also, by analogical extension, came to flourish in human and social sciences. Jin Guantao 金观涛, a thinker much-inspired by enlightenment ideology, greatly encouraged this course, with his own cybernetic interpretation of historical and social issues and the book series he edited, *Towards the Future* 走向未来, which includes several treatises concerning the interdisciplinary application of cybernetics and information theory. Furthermore, at the height of their popularity, these system approaches even galvanized responses from areas that later proved to be pseudo-scientific. *Qigong*, an officially endorsed and highly popular method of cultivation in the 1980s, acquired elaborate scientific legitimation from systems researchers who sought to introduce the systems

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[18] For the history of the circulation of cybernetics in China, see Peng Yongdong 彭永东, Kongzhi lun de fasheng yu chuanbo yanjiu 控制论的发生与传播研究 [A Study of the Origin and Spread of Cybernetics] (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2012), chapter 7; Wang Hongzhe 王洪喆, "Zhong su kongzhi lun geming yu shehui zhuyi xinxi chuanbo jishu zhengzhi de zhuanxing: Yixiang jiyu wenxian de lishi bijiao" 中苏控制论革命与社会主义信息传播技术政治的转型：一项基于文献的历史比较 [Cybernetic Revolutions in China and the Soviet Union and the Transformation of Socialist Technological Politics of Information and Communication: A Literature-based Historical Comparison], *Quyu* 区域 5, no.1 (2016): 293-310. Historically, cybernetic discourse and practice not only helped to shape the technocratic prospect of China but also participated in informing a wide range of political conceptions in both capitalist and socialist countries in the postwar era, such as the global surveillance and control system of the United States and the nationwide decision-making system of the Soviet Union and Salvador Allende's Chile. See, for example, Paul N. Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and the Politics of Discourse in Cold War America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996); Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Eden Medina, *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

sciences to the studies of the unexplained *qigong* phenomenon.

In broad strokes, what these systems-based theories contribute in essence is a universal framework for all disciplines: any objects of inquiry can be analyzed with the terms they offered, such as information, feedback, homeostasis, control, and regulation. On the one hand, these theories are indeed effective in revealing the structural resemblances between different objects and then appropriating insights from one discipline to another. On the other hand, it must be admitted that the ambiguity inherent in these theories in their indiscriminate application has to be weighed along with the flexibility that they offer. In the context of the Soviet Union, Slava Gerovitch has recounted a history of the inevitable shift from the former to the latter aspect: in its pursuit of the meta-theoretical status of "newspeak"—"the blending of scientific, philosophical, and ideological concepts in political and academic discourses of the late Stalinist period," the newly emergent "cyberspeak"—the cybernetic language universally applicable to "living organisms, control and communication devices, and human society"—eventually degenerated into another discourse resembling the one it attempted to replace.[19] A similar situation developed in postsocialist China. The Three Theories did promised a more accurate, pragmatic, and progressive framework that could redeem or supersede the hollow, ossified, and conservative official ideological discourse. However, they ineluctably became, with their institutionalization and popularization, indistinguishable from their ineffective predecessors, in particular as being dogmatically employed in some non-scientific and technological fields. One has to admit that the proliferation of systems discourse typically reflects less a devoted quest for truth than it does an urgent need for alternative discursive and rhetorical resources that can be strategically applied to justify predestined conclusions. For this very reason, the theoretical marks of the systems

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[19] Slava Gerovitch, *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak*, 53, 13.

sciences in a realm perhaps provides an ideal point of departure to investigate the spiritual bent of this field.

The systems craze is crucial to the interpretation of Haizi and his poetry. As his academic writings and his friends' memorial essays show, the poet invested a great deal of passion in the Three Theories fervor. During his CUPSL years, Haizi maintained a close relationship with a group of young scholars who devoted themselves to introducing systems approaches into legal studies and earned the appreciation of leading systems theorists such as Qian and Jin. Along with his fellow colleagues, Haizi taught cybernetics and systems theory to undergraduate students, organized lectures and symposia on the frontier issues of the systems sciences, and even produced related academic articles and news reports. In addition, Haizi was active as a devoted *qigong* practitioner during this period: he concentrated intensely on *qigong* cultivation and frequently exchanged experiences with his friends who shared this interest before *qigong* partially led to his suicide. Although Haizi never explicitly mentioned specific cybernetic terms in his creative works, his academic and religious activities prompt us to trace the imprint of cybernetic theories in his epics. Unfortunately, but predictably, past studies have neglected Haizi's engagement with these theories. This ignorance obscures the figure of the poet and eclipses the broader significance of his epics as they should be.

The fact that all the theories mentioned above form a tightly correlated theoretical constellation and the understanding of their relationship may vary from person to person raises the question of how to refer to them. In this thesis, instead of using one unifying term, I will employ different designations to refer to these theories in different contexts. The term "systems sciences"—as well as "systems approaches," "systems thinking," and "systems discourses"—is valuable for referring to the group of theories as a whole. I will also list certain theories separately when their particular roles are important. In addition, while the historically

charged collective term "Three Theories" was contested even at the height of its popularity,[20] the grouping remains serviceable when considered in a historical light.

Interactions Between the "Two Cultures"

The lamentable divergence of the literary culture (the arts and humanities) and the scientific culture (science and technology) into two isolated domains in modern society—memorably described in C. P. Snow's well-known lecture "The Two Cultures," delivered in 1959—has now become a given when referring to their relationship.[21] Nevertheless, the coalescence of the two fields has actually remained a salient phenomenon in the modern era in general, though in a less announced manner. Modern China is no exception in this respect. From the May Fourth era to the early postsocialist period, neither literary nor scientific culture ever existed as a discrete, self-sufficient, value-neutral field. If literature creates narratives that convey value judgments and can thus register social consciousness and promote social transformation, so science, with its promise of objective, accurate, and consistent approaches to interpreting and influencing the world, can be strategically deployed to achieve the same ends. To the extent that literature and science are enmeshed in the same intellectual matrix and possess a similar potential to shape their times, there may be close interactions between them that have yet to generate adequate investigation.

The first decade of the postsocialist era—a phase when China sought to reconstitute the

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[20] Qian Xuesen, for example, took issue with this amalgamation because he elevated systems theory to a bridge toward metaphysical reflection, while relegating cybernetics and information theory to mere engineering technologies; see Yuan Zheng 袁正, "'Lao sanlun''xin sanlun' de tifa bu kexue" "老三论" "新三论"的提法不科学 [The "Old Three Theories" and "New Three Theories" Are Not Scientific Classifications], *Guonei zhexue dongtai* 国内哲学动态, no.12 (1986): 26.

[21] See C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1964).

void left by the disintegration of socialist ideology and institutions, rather than succumbing to the differentiation and atomization plotted by the encroaching neoliberal order—might be the last decade in which literary and scientific cultures retained their overarching influence by offering a substitute framework for comprehending the totality of China. Numerous studies have shown how literary and scientific cultures maintained an interactive relationship with the general social consciousness during this period, laying out the different ways in which they bear influence from and make contribution to the latter.[22] However, few researchers have examined how literature and science paralleled and resonated with each other, not to mention the specific interplay between epic poetry and the systems sciences, the twin concerns of this thesis. In this sense, interrogating Haizi's poetry in terms of the interaction between the two realms, far from undermining the consistency of Haizi's intellectual endeavors, instead contributes to the preservation of his stature as an intellectual deeply entrenched in his socio-cultural context. This strategy of interpretation would provide an entry point for us to understand some of the deeper motives behind the poet's epic poems and the spiritual topography of postsocialist China in general.

From the 1990s onwards, with the increasing specialization of all the fields of knowledge, both literature and science in China have gradually lost their powerful social impact and retreated inside indomitable professional barriers—although they have not totally been

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[22] For discussions on how literary theorists and writers responded to the social consciousness in early postsocialist China, see, for example, Jing Wang, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997). For discussions on how intellectuals with scientific backgrounds contributed to the social consciousness of the same period, see, for example, Hua Shiping, *Scientism and Humanism: Two Cultures in Post-Mao China (1978-1989)* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), and H. Lyman Miller, *Science and Dissents in Post-Mao China: The Politics of Knowledge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

divorced from the intellectual matrix that nurtures them but have persisted as alternative ways to intervene in society. Accordingly, many intellectuals—both literary and scientific—have also been deprived of the privilege to exert extensive social influence and eventually give up their responsibilities of responding to social issues. Given these circumstances, revisiting Haizi's works will also help us reconsider the role of literary creation in today's China, and will open up more possibilities for exploration in the realm of literary criticism.

Structure of Chapters

This thesis will look at three interconnected aspects of Haizi's epics: the overall world settings; the basic natural elements that maintain the worlds' operations; and the characters who reside in those worlds. Drawing on the interpretive framework provided by the systems sciences, I interpret the epic worlds as ultrastable systems that require a catastrophic change, the natural elements as metaphors for information or its carriers, and the epic characters as the prototype for the posthuman subject in postsocialist China. These three aspects, translated to the level of reality, illustrate Haizi's views on the status quo of the national socio-cultural system, the techno-political measures to promote the country's prosperity, and the human conditions within such a vision of the future. As its focus moves from the general picture to individual situations, the thesis seeks to grasp Haizi's figurative depiction of the emerging information society on different levels.

In addition to shifting among the central themes, the chapter arrangement also shows a shift in evidentiary presumptions. Although throughout the entire thesis I try to integrate historicist and positivist approaches with interpretative and speculative approaches, there is a gradual methodological change as the three chapters unfold: the first chapter is grounded on evidence that can be readily found in the writings of Haizi and his peers, while the latter two

chapters rely more on associations that can be established through the mediation of contemporary scholarship on systems-related issues. This shift might raise questions as to the consistency of the thesis, but it also exhibits a gradual venturing into unmasking the hidden yet stunning possibilities of Haizi's epic writings.

The first chapter outlines how Haizi constructs his epic worlds to poetically simulate Chinese civilization. In his early epics, inspired by the central ideas of cybernetics and systems theory, Haizi presented classical China as a purposeful system capable of maintaining its homeostasis through self-regulation and self-organization. However, as his writing career proceeded, he became increasingly fascinated by the catastrophic changes within these systems. Although critics have long decried these upheavals as systems pathologies, they may function— as catastrophe theory, among other theories involving nonlinear dynamics, has indicated—as an indispensable phase for evolving towards a new world order. The vision revealed by this idea comports with the positions of certain contemporary intellectuals who also pinned their hopes of the nation's revival on its catastrophic changes. Haizi's exploration of catastrophes reaches its peak in his last epics, synchronized with his personal destruction and his country's political tragedy. In retrospect, his focus on catastrophes reflects a well-ingrained radicalism present throughout twentieth-century China, the efficacy and ramifications of which are still in progress and open to discussion.

The second chapter is devoted to analyzing the basic natural elements recurring in Haizi's epic creations and in his *qigong* cultivation. The central concept of *qigong* is the *qi*, which is often translated literally as "air" but carries a wide set of onto-epistemological connotations. During the apex of the *qigong* fever, *qi* was revered by *qigong* grandmasters as the source of their extrasensory powers. This attracted the attention of the so-called somatic scientists, who hoped to unveil the scientific foundation of its supernatural effects by employing systems

approaches. Fortified by Qian Xuesen's ambitious if untested hypothesis, *qi* came to be viewed as synonymous with information. Understanding Haizi's friendship with people interested in the extrasensory realm and his devotion to *qigong* practice permits us to extend the *qi*-information alliance to the analysis of recurrent elements in his epics like water and fire, identifying them as the poetic embodiment of fundamental entities. This supposition, in turn, enables us to conceive of what seems to be Haizi's purely aestheticized pieces as works of social commitment, which should be scrutinized against the backdrop of the informatization course in China of the Deng Xiaoping years. Faced with the techno-political vision revealed by the renewed information technology and infrastructure, Haizi registers ambivalent attitudes, excited for the negentropic utopia it theoretically promised on the one hand and anxious about the totalitarian repercussions it might generate on the other.

The emphasis of the third chapter is placed on the characters who inhabit Haizi's epic worlds. The striking fact that their bodies commonly appear deformed, mutilated, or even fractured invites us to contemplate Haizi's notion of the human condition within postsocialist circumstances. The most significant reflection on the human subject in Haizi's time was that generated by humanistic discourse, which remained absent during the revolutionary period due to its close association with capitalist individualism yet resurged in the postsocialist era as a sort of the rectification of socialist collectivism. However, Haizi's conception of subjectivity, as manifested in the bizarre characters in his epics, neither surrenders to the socialist/collective schema nor allies itself with the capitalist/humanistic paradigm. Blurring the boundaries of human subjects and facilitating the conversion between the holistic and liberal selves, the poet's portrayal of subjects finds its most accurate echoes in contemporary posthuman theories, which share a theoretical affinity with the systems sciences. In this sense, this chapter attempts to establish Haizi's systems-sciences-inflected works as one of the covert origins of contemporary

Chinese posthumanism, the sociocultural implications of which would become increasingly

pronounced as information society gradually grew into an unassailable reality.

Chapter One

Repetition, Catastrophe, and Rebirth:

Chinese Civilization as a Cybernetic System

The most effective organization of a cluster of reactions motivated by an active desire for totality, and not only by a nostalgia for the latter as in the different variants of Romanticism, the cybernetic hypothesis has a kinship with the totalitarian ideologies and all the holisms—be they mystical, solidarist as in Durkheim, functionalist, or indeed Marxist.

— Tiqqun, *The Cybernetic Hypothesis*

[Catastrophe theory] provides us with an answer in the debate between stable and unstable systems, determinism and nondeterminism. Thom formulates it as a postulate: "The more or less determined character of a process is determined by the local state of the process."

— Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

The year 1984 marked a crucial phase in the fleeting life of Haizi—a time when he still used his birth name, Zha Haisheng. Aged only twenty, Zha was a freshly minted graduate from Peking University and had recently started his academic career as an editor at the official journal of the China University of Political Science and Law in Beijing. At that time, the so-called Three Theories Fever were extending its influence from engineering and the natural sciences to the humanities and social sciences. Intrigued by this new trend, the young Zha, along with a group of legal scholars at CUPSL, founded a research society in April 1984, with the intention of applying the theories to legal studies. As a member of the society's administrative committee, Zha was actively engaged, especially during the first year, in organizing lectures and conferences as well as contributing corresponding reports. Subsequently, in the fall semester of the same year, Zha transferred to a faculty position and began to teach undergraduate courses on cybernetics, systems theory, and aesthetics.[23]

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[23] For the details of Haizi's role in the research society, see Xiong Jining 熊继宁, "Haizi yu xitong

It was around this same period, circa 1983-84, that Zha started publishing literary works under the penname Haizi, which later became a far more widely known designation for him. The invention of this new identity set the tone for the fledgling poet's literary life, ushering in a period of prolific and intense writing. In 1984, Haizi produced the first string of short poems that established his fame as a talented lyricist, including one of his most representative works: "Asian Bronze" 亚洲铜. What is more important in our discussion, however, is that in this year Haizi also threw himself into the task of composing epic writing, which, in his own view, was more valuable than his lyrical work. In April—when he was busy completing a paper for the opening conference of his research society that drew on cybernetics, systems theory, and catastrophe theory to examine the role of law in the formation of the state—he also released his first epic poem, "The River" 河流. Within barely one year, this piece of work multiplied into a trilogy with the same motif and, two years later, led to the composition of "The Sun" 太阳 series, a project marking the culmination of Haizi's poetic exploration.

That Haizi simultaneously grew interested in epic poetry and the systems sciences was not a coincidence but rather an indication of a larger social consciousness at play, and it behooves us to inquire about the inextricable—yet so far underexamined—connection between the two. At the risk of oversimplification, I would argue that Haizi's double focus can be summarized as an expression of a common thirst in early postsocialist China for the "grand narrative,"[24] meaning a holistic framework for mapping and explaining China's social and

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faxue" 海子与系统法学 [Haizi and Legal Systems Science], in *Haizi yu fada* 海子与法大 [Haizi and CUPSL] (Beijing: Zhongguo zhengfa daxue chubanshe, 2015), 3-58.

[24] The discourse on systems provided by the Three Theories can be seen as a "grand narrative" in Lyotard's sense. As Lyotard points out, the idea that "society forms a functional whole," which serves a "grand narrative" pervading his time, is theoretically supported by cybernetics and systems theory. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 11.

spiritual conditions, after the collapse of the once-prevalent revolutionary narrative. This

prevalent intellectual orientation partly accounts for the popularity of epic poetry as a literary

genre at that time. It was also echoed by both the introduction of certain Western theories,

encompassing Gestalt psychology, archetypal criticism, and cultural morphology, and the ideas

of domestic scholars, such as Li Zehou's 李泽厚 theorization of Chinese cultural-psychological

formation as a sedimentary process and Jin Guantao's 金观涛 conceptualization of Chinese

history as an ultrastable system.[25] In the case of Haizi's epics, a similar concern with systems is

embodied by grand natural and mythological scenes representing Chinese or even Eastern

civilization in general: a river running through China from south to north, a land undergoing

severe drought, a sky stairway connecting heaven and earth that teeters on the verge of

breakdown. Imbued with a beauty combining literary imaginings and mathematical laws, these

settings offer intertwined perceptual observations and rational analysis. In other words, Haizi's

representation or construction of these settings demonstrates, in a figurative manner, his

understanding of Chinese civilization as a complex system.

As the first step in unpacking the connections between the systems sciences and Haizi's

epics, this chapter will focus on the systems in Haizi's epic poetry, revealing their resonance

with systems discourse and elucidating their social, political, and ideological significance. In

order to show the general features as well as the evolutionary trajectory of Haizi's epic world,

my close reading will follow a chronological sequence, starting from "The River" (1984), the

beginning of Haizi's epic practice; running through "The Sun: The Land" 太阳・土地篇 (1987),

commonly thought to be his most refined epic; and ending with "The Sun: Messiah" 太阳・弥赛

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[25] In his article on Haizi, Jia Jian astutely suggests that 1980s epic writing can be read in relation to the theoretical resources list above; see Jia Jian 贾鉴, "'Yicixing xingdong de shige': chongping haizi de shishi guannian" "一次性行动的诗歌"：重评海子的史诗观念 ["Poetry of One-off Action: Reevaluating Haizi's Notion of Epic Poetry], *Yangzijiang pinglun* 扬子江评论 75, no. 2 (2019): 60.

亚 (1988), his last epic piece. In conjunction with the interpretation of his poems, I will also refer

to his poetic criticism and academic writing as key tools for unveiling his conscious or

unconscious borrowings from various systems-based conceptual frameworks.

Dichotomy Between King and Prince

It will be beneficial to revisit Haizi's theoretical elaboration on the epic prior to

conducting a close reading of his specific works, as the former informs both the patterns and the

dilemmas of the latter. The content and form of epic poetry, according to G. W. F. Hegel's

classical theorization of this literary genre in *Aesthetics*, is "the entire world-outlook and

objective manifestation of a national spirit presented in its self-objectifying shape as an actual

event."[26] Specifically, Hegel sets out three correlated characteristics of the "epic proper": first, it

is set in, and aimed at grasping in entirety, the general world-situation of a nation and an epoch;

second, it revolves around the individual event that necessarily arises from and proceeds in such

circumstances; and third, the previous two dimensions are supposed to merge into a unified

whole.[27] Although Hegel also contends in the same book that the Chinese "have no national

epic,"[28] his general discourse on epic poetry still constitutes a fundamental reference for that

Chinese intellectuals can reflect upon with respect to the same genre. One can make the

argument that it was precisely this biased Hegelian notion that posited a "lack" in the Chinese

poetic tradition that prompted contemporary Chinese poets to create their own national epics in

the early post-socialist era. Throughout the 1980s, Haizi devoured Hegel's works and constantly

referred to his theories and concepts in essays. Given that he used to teach aesthetics at CUPSL,

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[26] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art.* Vol. 2., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 1044.
[27] Ibid, 1050-1093.
[28] Ibid, 1095.

Haizi should be particularly familiar with Hegel's *Aesthetics*, at least with its Chinese translation newly published at that time, which supposedly served as a crucial reference for his lectures. It is therefore not surprising to see that Haizi inherited Hegel's emphasis on the epic's pursuit of the objective totality of the world and identified the key to epic poetry as "wholeness" 完整性, "a totality of relations" 总体关系, "an intact picture" 完整的图像, or equivalent expressions.[29] Nevertheless, since Haizi was confronted with disparate historico-philosophical conditions from those of classical epic poets, he could not methodologically imitate their quest without any adjustment. As a Hegelian literary critic, the early György Lukács claims that classical epic writing, which gives form to the genuine totality, can only become possible in an epoch when the rupture between the subject and the object, the interior and the exterior, the individual and the collective, had not yet come into being. With these divisions having become the essential prerequisites of modern times, the epic was eventually superseded by the novel, which seeks a recuperation of the lost totality through the self-recognition and self-abolition of the problematic individual's subjectivity in its encounter with the outer world.[30] Rather than devoting himself to the novel, Haizi dreamed of reviving the epic in his era. However, as modern epics, his works have to take pains to incorporate individuality and subjectivity into the objective grasp of totality.

Haizi's 1987 essay "Poetry: An Outline" 诗学：一份提纲, a typological investigation of Western literature (mainly poetry) from Homer to modernism, epitomizes his complicated aesthetic stance. The main task of this essay is to defend his pursuit of "epic poetry," a term he uses interchangeably with "long poetry" or "great poetry." Haizi opens his argument by

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[29] Haizi 海子, *Haizi shi quanji* 海子诗全集 [The Complete Poems of Haizi], ed. Xi Chuan 西川 (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2009), 1041, 1024, 1034.

[30] György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), part 1.

distinguishing between what he calls the "paternal force" 父亲势力 and the "maternal force" 母亲势力. Crucial yet poorly defined, the two concepts refer to two dimensions of the universe, and two corresponding artistic drives to grasp the universe: the "maternal force," which he also calls the "primordial force" 原始力量, denotes the foundational and instinctive power that drives all existence, whereas the "paternal force" designates the power that endows all existence with form, structure, and order. Based on this dichotomy, Haizi establishes a somewhat hierarchical distinction between two strands of writers: those represented by "the King" (also referred to as "Apollo") and those represented by "the Prince" (or "the son of Apollo"). Exemplified by great epic writers such as Homer, Dante, and Goethe, Kings employ the paternal force to control the maternal force, installing an integrated system and creating paradigmatic figures to represent a people, nation, or civilization in its entirety. The father's mastery of the mother, Haizi claims, "generates personality, generates the poetry of one-off action, generates the church of order, the pantheon of a civilization, and the representative poetry—the great poetry."[31] In contrast, Princes, such as the paradigmatic lyric poets Shelley, Hölderlin, and Yeats, fail to fully acquire the paternal force and thus play the role of son rather than spouse to the maternal force. As the son, the Prince cannot but engage in relentless "battles, reconciliations, and constant conversations and identifications" with the maternal force.[32] Such a process is carried out not merely by individual Princes but also by "the Prince" as a whole, on a continuous basis: Haizi regards all Princes as "different incarnations, different bodies, different literal presentations, different faces of the same Prince."[33] Their works, dominated by the maternal force, "lack integrity and monumental force, but do not lack complexity and profundity, nor possibility, nor

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[31] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1044.
[32] Ibid, 1043.
[33] Ibid, 1046.

death and abyss."[34] To summarize the difference between the two types of poet: the King attempts to formalize the wholeness of a civilization, while the Prince always maintains an antagonistic relationship with the underlying drive of the civilization.

Haizi never conceals his desire to join the constellation of Kings: "[Kings] are the summit of greatness, the throne for which we, Princes of poetry, compete."[35] Yet he also emphasizes his intimacy with Princes, whom he esteems as "our blood brothers," "even my blood": [36] "what I cherish more are those Princes who fail to become Kings."[37] This paradox, while it may not allow us, as Zhangbin Li suggests, to recognize Haizi as an archetypal "Romantic Prince,"[38] at least requires us to draw from his work a new poetic approach that integrates the strategy of the King with that of the Prince—a poetic approach that matches the aspiration in Haizi's pronouncement, "I am thinking about the authentic epic."[39] How, then, does Haizi mediate the inconsistency between his veneration of the King and his affinity with the Prince, between the pursuit for a holistic understanding and the stress on momentary feelings, between the fascination with appearance and the immersion in drive?

Haizi's close friend, the poet and critic Luo Yihe 骆一禾, offers an insightful sketch of Haizi's writing pattern, which will help us to decrypt these conundrums:

> The overarching nature distinguishes him from typical European Romantic poets, whom he calls "sons of Apollo." This designation indicates that he understands Romantic poets from the perspective of *life state* rather than literary type, *synchronicity* rather than chronological order, *systems* rather than linearity. Haizi's whole literary creation, therefore, embodies such a determination: with the strong and deep passion of the son of

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[34] Ibid, 1041.

[35] Ibid, 1047.

[36] Ibid, 1042.

[37] Ibid, 1045-1046.

[38] See Zhangbin Li, "Haizi and Contemporary Chinese Romantic Poetry." *Neohelicon* 43. no.2 (2016): 621-640.

[39] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 618.

Apollo, he directly reaches a core state of being, in which, like Van Gogh and Nietzsche, he contends fiercely with his inner self and plumbs the depths of the primordial force, the visceral force, and the latent spirit, thereby, in a radical manner, maturing into an epic poet and ascending into the magnificent horizon of epic. [...] It signifies both for him and for the genealogy of poetry a way to fuse the ability to form a Gestalt and the modernist motif of inner conflicts lurking in the abyss.

这一广大统摄的特点，使他有别于典型的欧洲浪漫主义诗人，他将他们称为"太阳神之子"，表明了他是从生命形态，而不是从文学类型，从共时性而不是编年史，从系统而不是线性地看待浪漫主义诗人的。于是海子的创作总观表明为这样一个决断：他从太阳神之子的雄厚激情而直取梵高、尼采式的处于内心激烈搏战，与原始力量本能力量、潜在精神相互垂直的核心境地，并根本地，由此成长为史诗诗人，突入壮丽的史诗背景。[........] 这对他和诗歌家族意味着一条将格式塔式的完型能力与内心对抗、潜层深渊中的现代主义主题合龙的道路。[40]

According to Luo's characterization, which is elliptical though not necessarily obscure, the Prince and the King differ significantly in their approaches to the primordial or visceral force, though they coincide in their efforts to grasp the panorama of their times. Haizi's poetic formula can perhaps best be summarized as achieving the King's goal in the Prince's manner. Luo proposes several key terms for dissecting the Prince's poetic strategies: "life state," "synchronicity," and "systems." In other words, the Romantic princes, originating from and negotiating with the "primordial force," are driving forces that coexist as complementary to each other and keep the world active by functioning in a non-linear way. In several places throughout his essay, Haizi hails the King's writing as the "poetry of one-off action" or "one-off poetic actions,"[41] highlighting the kingly capability to give determinate form and structure to the "primordial force." However, while sharing the King's ambition, the Prince converts this "one-off action" into a recurrent conflict-and-reconciliation process. This kind of process provides a

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[40] Luo Yihe 骆一禾, "'Wo kaolü zhenzheng de shishi': Haizi tudi daixu""我考虑真正的史诗"：海子《土地》代序 ["I Am Thinking About the Authentic Epic": In Lieu of a Preface to Haizi's *The Earth*], in *Luo Yihe shi quanbian* 骆一禾诗全编 [The Complete Poems of Luo Yihe] (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 1997), 863. Translation and emphasis mine.

[41] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1044, 1045.

gestalten comprehension of the epic world, not by encapsulating the entire contents of the world but by presenting the world as a united whole in which various parts collaborate closely with each other. If it is not sufficiently comprehensible from Haizi's essay and Luo's commentary that in what sense and to what degree the Prince-to-King paradigm can be linked to the systems sciences, this question will find more evident expression in the poet's creative works.

Circularity and the Operation of Epic Worlds

The majority of Haizi's epics revolve around grand natural or mythological scenes that symbolize civilizational entities. How these complex systems maintain stability or restore themselves to prosperity through self-regulation, self-organization, and self-production constitutes the main concern of these pieces. From the cybernetic perspective, we can discern in them the strong presence of the idea of circularity, which, as Heinz von Foerster points out, is the central theme of cybernetics.[42] Circularity is first introduced into the systems sciences through the concept of "feedback"—the process by which the output of a system returns to the system as input, in order to regulate the system's goal-directed behaviors. This concept corresponds to early cyberneticians' focus on how a system can adapt itself to its environment and maintain its homeostasis through feedback mechanisms. By incorporating an observer into the system under observation, second-order cybernetics turns its attention from feedback to reflexivity, which signifies the operational closure and self-awareness of systems. In this paradigm, a system's autopoiesis, or self-making, rather than its interaction with the environment, becomes the focal point of research.[43] Instead of concentrating on the intricate threads in this theoretical shift, I

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[42] Heinz von Foerster, "Ethics and Second-Order Cybernetics," in *Understanding Understanding: Essays on Cybernetics and Cognition* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003), 288.

[43] For more on the development from first-order to second-order cybernetics, see N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), chapter 1.

intend to foreground the central role of circularity in sustaining a system. Predictably, a circular awareness dominates Haizi's epics. While Haizi never explicitly refers to any systems discourse in his literary writings, the King/Prince theory of poetics indicates his preoccupation with constant self-conversation, an idea almost certainly derived from systems theory. In the following section, I will demonstrate how Haizi's reflection on systems is deeply entangled with circularity by examining two representative works from his early and late career.

The period of 1984-85 witnessed the birth of Haizi's first epic project, a trilogy featuring river imagery: "River," "Legend," and "But Water, Water." These pieces set up an embryonic version of Haizi's epic world that reaches from the Yellow River basin to the Yangtze River basin, two geographical axes and cultural symbols of Chinese civilization. However they may differ in content and structure, the three epics are all based on an analogy between the fluctuation of rivers and the vicissitudes of Chinese civilization, combining representations of the natural landscape with meditations on social and cultural issues.

Despite the linear worldview that a river readily evokes, its movement, I would argue, is closely related to an awareness of circularity. In his preface to "The River," entitled "In Search of Contact with Substance" 寻找对实体的接触, Haizi defines a poet's perception of the river in which he himself is embedded as the Subject's contact with Substance. Drawing on these two philosophical terms, he reiterates Hegel's famous conception of Substance as Subject: "Substance is Subject, is the subjectivity before the appearance of its predicate, and is the silent kernel of Subject."[44] For Hegel, Substance, as Subject, constantly differentiates itself and then negates its opposition, thereby reaching "self-restoring sameness."[45] Similarly, the river in

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[44] Haizi 海子, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1017.

[45] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 10.

Haizi's texts, as both Substance and Subject, also functions through the same kind of self-movement: "you [i.e., Subject] live in Substance—you shall return to yourself." This process of becoming also leads to incessant self-renewal, or what Haizi describes as "the mutual disintegration of Subject and Substance, and the rebirth of them."[46] According to Yuk Hui's recent audacious interpretation of German Idealism, Hegel can be deemed a precursor of cybernetics in that he anticipates a teleological model of recursivity, understanding the *Begriff* (Notion or Concept) as "a recursive process that arrives at itself as a comprehension of itself and the other as a whole," "a constant process of *Aufhebung* in the sense of both preservation and cancelation."[47] From this perspective, Haizi's allusion to Hegel demonstrates that the reflexive logic championed by cybernetics had taken root in Haizi's poetics even in his early epics.

A group of lines from "The River"—specifically, from the first section, "Father" 父亲, of the second chapter, "Singing on Long Road" 长路当歌—illustrates how Haizi converts the river's unidirectional flowing into circular becoming with the purpose of revitalizing a system:

> Despite your flow, the whole of you remains asleep in the structure.
> […]
> I am so thirsty that I grab a handful of grass. I shall embed you into this moment. All
>   things come into being.
> You touch yourself and look into the spooky shadows. On your limbs, which are muddy
>   to the point of being limpid, all things come into being.
> You are your own parent, with even death merely being the background.
> […]
> You are the river.
> So am I.

> 虽然你流动，但你的一切还在结构中沉睡
> [······]
> 我渴得抓住一部分青草，我要把你嵌在这个时刻，一切开始形成
> 你抚摸着自己，望着森森的阴影，在你浑黄成清澈的肢体上，一切形成

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[46] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1017-1018.

[47] Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2019), 88.

你就是自己的父母，甚至死亡都仅仅是背景
[……]
你是河流
我也是河流 [48]

As the first stage of this crisis-ridden journey, this section lays the conceptual groundwork for the river as a self-propelled entity. The lines above are addressed to a paternal figure in the voice of a lyric bard. The relationship between the addressee and the speaker fits the dichotomy between the King and the Prince, as proposed by Haizi: the former stands for the determinate formalization of the totality of the river, while the latter introduces self-reflection into it. "The whole of you"—the entire river—keeps running, but its structure remains dormant, as its agency has not yet been awakened. It is only when the "I" dissolves the river's atemporal nature and introduces variation to it ("I want to embed you into this moment") that it becomes activated ("all things come into being"). As Ke Xiaogang notes, in this opening piece of the river series, the poet arouses the river from its slumber, bringing Substance into authentic flowing and, in turn, enabling it to be comprehended by Subject.[49] More important, this process is associated with the transformation from unidirectional causality to mutual causality: death provides a generative setting in which you reproduce yourself again. To take it a step further, "you" and "I" eventually reach a dynamic identification in the fluid progression of the river ("You are the river. / So am I"). In his comprehensive reading of Haizi's river trilogy within the context of the proliferation of river literature in the post-Mao era, Mi Jiayan demonstrates that all three epics are concerned with the resolution of the river's crisis and, as such, convey "the social-cultural

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[48] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 221-223.

[49] Ke Xiaogang 柯小刚, "Haizi de 'shiti' yu 'zhuti': Gei wutou de hanyu ren gongtongti " 海子的"实体"与"主体"：给无头的汉语人共通体 [Haizi's "Substance" and "Subject": To the Community of Headless Chinese Writers], in *Zaizi: Cuowei zhong de tianming fasheng* 在兹：错位中的天命发生 [Being Here: Taking-Place in Displacing] (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 2007), 59-60.

imaging and desire for national revival."[50] The key to this revival, I would add, lies precisely in the implicit circularity which serves as the impetus for the flowing of the river.

From 1986 onward, Haizi invested the majority of his time in "The Sun" series; its finished pieces were later dubbed collectively the "Seven Books." With these works, Haizi aims to examine civilizational systems within a wider horizon by expanding his imaginative scope from the cradle of Chinese civilization to what Luo Yihe designates as "pan-Asian territory," a territory stretching from the Pacific in the east to the Tigris and Euphrates in the west, from the Mongolian steppe in the north to the Indian subcontinent in the south.[51] In these works the cybernetic concept of circularity becomes increasingly important; indeed, it serves as the organizing and structuring principle of the poems, most explicitly in "The Sun: Beheading," "The Sun: The Land," and "The Sun: Messiah."

Extolled as "the most complete and encompassing" of his "Seven Books,"[52] "The Sun: The Land" exemplifies Haizi's cybernetics-inflected construction of epic worlds. This poem centers around a wasteland symbolizing modern civilization and consists of twelve chapters corresponding to the wasteland's changing conditions over one year. Using the central image of T. S. Eliot's masterpiece, Haizi convincingly decries the degeneration of the modern world. Yet, slightly differing from his modernist predecessor, he places more emphasis on the self-regulating potential of the land by limning the transformations that take place from month to month. "Apart from the awareness of crisis," he explains, "I also write about the cycle of seasons." The "cycle of seasons," however, does not appear as a climatic phenomenon in the poem; rather, it metaphorically refers to the process of "inner conflict, conversation, and compromise," the

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[50] Mi Jiayan, "Poetics of Navigation: River Lyricism, Epic Consciousness, and Post-Mao Sublime Poemscape." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 19, no.1 (2007): 129-130.

[51] Luo, "'Wo kaolü zhenzheng de shishi'," 863.

[52] Ibid, 864.

rhythm of "existence, breath and blood circulation, reproduction, death into ashes, as well as resurrection."[53] In this sense, Haizi suggests that the land, the true protagonist of this epic, is a grand self-adaptive system that will eventually return to a steady state through regulatory behaviors.

"The Land" begins its exploration of a system's failure and subsequent regulation with a "maiden" being intercepted by "the old man of eros, the old man of death."[54] Then a "mysterious choir" emerges, composed of such "Romantic Princes" as Percy Bysshe Shelley, Henry David Thoreau, and Arthur Rimbaud, and promising to rescue the maiden. As the regulatory mechanism of the system, the choir acts in a circular manner: when asked about their origin, the Princes reply with "the chest of the land," and later, when they receive a tempting invitation to "eternity," they decline it by claiming, "we shall plunge into the land."[55] In other words, they emerge from the system as a reaction to the shock and then bring the result of their obtrusion back into the system. In the concluding chapter, having repeated the cycle many times, the (collective) Prince sings retrospectively about his adventure:

> I spring from the primordial king, springing,
> creating great poetry in illusion and exile.
> I recall the primordial power's anxiety, conciliation, and dialogue,
> Its command, accusation, and expectation of us.
> I am held by the primordial elements.

> 我从原始的王中涌现 涌现
> 在幻象和流放中创造了伟大的诗歌
> 我回忆了原始力量的焦虑 和解 对话
> 对我们的命令 指责和期望
> 我被原始原素所持有 [56]

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[53] Haizi: *Haizi shi quanji*, 1038.

[54] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 643.

[55] Ibid, 648, 664

[56] Ibid, 725-726

At the doom of the gods, he probably dreamed of me too.
Blind Homer, are you still calling my name,
calling for a poem that eulogizes the land and buries it,
calling for a sharp horn full of poems?

For all time I fly, my concrete, dark viscera in tow,
For all time I fly, my obscure, inexpressible and unutterable elements in tow,
Until these great materials turn into poems,
Until these poems turn into my glory or crimes.

在众神的黄昏　他大概也已梦见了我
盲目的荷马　你是否仍然在呼唤着我
呼唤着一篇诗歌　歌颂并葬送土地
呼唤着一只盛满诗歌的敏锐的角

我总是拖带着具体的　黑暗的内脏飞行
我总是拖带着晦涩的　无法表白无以言说的元素飞行
直到这些伟大的材料成为诗歌
直到这些诗歌成为我的光荣或罪行 [57]

Just as in "The River," the King (the "primordial king," or its best-known embodiment Homer) stands for the system's provisional wholeness, to be constantly remapped over time, while the Prince (the first-person speaker) stands for the system's recursive operations, which ensures its real-time adjustment. The Prince's flight follows a circular trajectory: he is dispatched from the King ("I spring from the primordial king") and returns to him at his summons ("Blind Homer, are you still calling my name"). In cybernetic terms, this trajectory can be interpreted as a metaphorical depiction of an input-and-output process, through which information, as a universal entity, whether its semantic counterpart is "concrete" or "obscure," will be redirected back to the land at intervals in order to stabilize that system. Haizi's incorporation of the Norse myth of Ragnarök, "the doom of the gods," hints at the boundary between death and rebirth, which will lead to the rejuvenation of the land after its temporary and possibly strategic collapse. On a poetic level, the Prince's unceasing flight gives birth to "great poetry," the King's enterprise,

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[57] Ibid, 728-729.

which brings us back to Haizi's poetic formula, as previously mentioned. "The Land," albeit being an exemplary case, is not the only epic in "The Sun" series to be underpinned by circular operations; some of the other pieces not only look into systems at the macro level but also detail the specific communications between their subsystems, a process that I will return to in the final section of this chapter.

In revealing the circular logic embedded in Haizi's epic poems, my reading above does not specify whether these works should be understood using the interpretative framework of first-order or second-order cybernetics—nor can it do so. Indeed, Haizi's epics touch upon issues prominent in both theoretical paradigms, even though the resources to which he had access, including works by Norbert Wiener, W. Ross Ashby, and Ludwig von Bertalanffy, mainly fall into the first category. The differences between the two paradigms, however, could lead to different interpretations of the political implications of his works. From the perspective of first-order cybernetics, which accentuates the system's reaction to external shock, Haizi's epics may disclose a concern for China's situation vis-à-vis the West and modernity. From the perspective of second-order cybernetics, which focuses on the system's self-referential nature, his works may prompt a reconsideration of the role of agents within the system. Given the equivocal nature of poetry itself, I tend to preserve rather than clarify the ambiguity of Haizi's epic works, for this may be precisely the reason why he committed himself to this literary genre.

Cultural Politics of Catastrophe

As I briefly mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, around the time that his first epic, "The River," came out in 1984, Haizi also produced a paper entitled "The Modes of State Formation and the Roles of Law in Light of Catastrophe Theory" 从突变理论看国家产生形式和法的作用 for the first conference held by the research society at CUPSL. Although this paper

was not particularly persuasive or well-organized in its arguments, some of which were even strongly subjective, it did offer a refreshing perspective for understanding the mechanism of social systems in the intellectual context of mid-1980s China. More important, its discussion of social transformation provides a window into Haizi's own cultural and political awareness, which will in turn help us to decipher Haizi's literary works. The essay appears to have been completely ignored by researchers thus far, probably due to its specialized focus on legal and historical issues as well as its frequent references to mathematical models. This oversight in the scholarly literature calls for a reappraisal of the text.

The two central concerns of the paper, as its title indicates, are the "modes of state formation" and the "role of law." Based on Frederick Engels' study of the formation of states in Athens, Rome, and Germania,[58] Haizi identifies two major patterns for a state's origination out of a gentile society: "gradual evolution" and "abrupt evolution." He then examines how the law, defined by Wiener as a form of communication for system adjustment,[59] operates in these two evolutionary processes. In Haizi's view, "gradual evolution," exemplified by the emergence of the Athenian and Roman states, refers to a continuous process of social transformation in which the conflicting forces in a society gradually come to terms with each other through timely and frequent adjustments of the law. He defines such a society as a "self-organizing system," a concept that was first discussed by cyberneticians such as W. Ross Ashby, Heinz von Foerster, and Gordon Pask and quickly spread into diverse branches of the systems sciences like dissipative structure, synergertios, and chaos theory. With the term of "self-organization," Haizi

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[58] See Frederick Engels, "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. In the Light of the Researches by Lewis H. Morgan," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engel: Collected Works*, Vol. 26 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 129-276.

[59] Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1954), 105.

emphasizes the social system's ability to "adjust its structure and internal flow of information so as to adapt itself to external changes and to maintain its dynamic equilibrium and stability."[60] In other words, this type of system tends to evolve from chaos into order through constant self-regulation. In contrast to this gradual process is "abrupt evolution," exemplified by the development of states among the Germans. Although the Germans conquered the Roman empire around the fifth century CE, the German gentile constitution and the Roman state maintained a tense and antagonistic relationship, with neither being able to overpower the other. Accordingly, their legal systems, existing alongside each other, were both incapable of easing social instability. This instability eventually brought about the sudden rise of a "new form of civilization and mode of production," the result of a "real integration."[61] This integration, as Haizi maintains, came at the cost of the utter destruction of the self-organizing mechanisms on both sides, though the newly formed state in his account could also be considered the outcome of self-organization on a larger scale. To put it another way, Haizi uses the concept of self-organization only to describe those smooth evolutions within fixed boundaries, but he is already aware that the self-organizing potential of a system can function in a rather drastic manner. This awareness partly explains his interest in the New Three Theories.

To precisely describe these two evolutionary patterns, Haizi invokes René Thom's catastrophe theory, which mathematically models the abrupt transformation of systems containing no more than four control factors and proposes seven elementary catastrophes.[62] Catastrophe theory, as Erik Christopher Zeeman argued in the 1970s, serves as an efficient

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[60] Haizi 海子, "Cong tubian lilun kan guojia chansheng xingshi he fa de zuoyong" 从突变理论看国家产生形式和法的作用 [The Modes of State Formation and the Roles of Law in Light of Catastrophe Theory], in *Haizi yu fada*, 287.

[61] Ibid, 292.

[62] See Alexander Woodcock and Monte Davis, *Catastrophe Theory* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), 43.

mathematical tool for those disciplines in which "discontinuous and divergent phenomena are ubiquitous," such as the social sciences.[63] From the seven archetypes of catastrophe, Haizi mainly adopts the "cusp catastrophe," a model with only two control parameters. Reducing the formation of a state to a play between new and old factors, he maps the two evolutionary modes onto two different trajectories in the model (Figure 1). If a social system first experiences the decline of old factors and then the increase of new ones, namely, the system's evolutionary trajectory makes a detour around the cusp-shaped bifurcation set on the control surface (A→C→B), then it presents a smooth change on the behavior surface (A'→C'→B'). This is what Haizi calls "gradual evolution." By contrast, the trajectory of "abrupt evolution" directly traverses the bifurcation set on the control surface (A→B), implying a highly intense competition between the new and the old. In this case, one can observe that the trajectory on the behavior surface suddenly jumps to the bottom when it reaches the edge of the fold (A'→B').
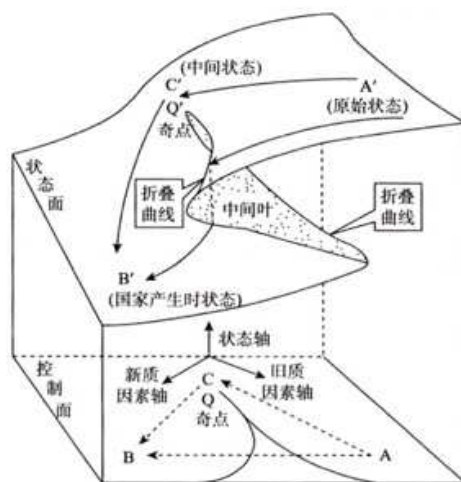

Figure 1 Diagram of the cusp model to illustrate the formation of states.[64]

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[63] Erik Christopher Zeeman, "Catastrophe Theory." *Scientific American* 234, no. 4 (1976): 65. It is worth mentioning that Haizi's understanding of cusp catastrophe is largely derived from Zeeman's article.

[64] Haizi, "Cong tubian lilun kan guojia chansheng xingshi he fa de zuoyong," 285.

While Haizi's research is Europe-centered, it provides an informative context from which to understand his reflections on Chinese civilization. His interest in the evolution of systems—either progressive or radical—would soon be echoed in his epics. Furthermore, the paper's argument suggests that a society at the intersection of fiercely oppositional forces is unpredictable and can easily slide into a catastrophic change. This was exactly the case in early postsocialist China, a period balancing on the cusp between tradition and modernity, the East and the West. It is therefore unsurprising to see Haizi's later works of literature place increasing emphasis on catastrophes, though he shows no preference for either the gradual or the abrupt mode of evolution in this early paper.

In the context of 1980s China, Haizi's systems approach was reminiscent of the theories of Jin Guantao, a celebrated intellectual known for applying systems theory to the social sciences. It was probably Jin's study of social transformation, especially his 1984 monograph *The Cycle of Growth and Decline: On the Ultrastable Structure of Chinese Society* 兴盛与危机：论中国封建社会的超稳定结构, that first inspired Haizi's interest in the emergence of states.[65] Haizi may even have learned about catastrophe theory from Jin's book-length introduction to systems approaches, *Cybernetics and Scientific Methodologies* 控制论与科学方法, in which the scholar presents Thom's theory as an extension of systems theory and analyzes its theoretical contribution to understanding systemic stability issues.[66] This speculation is supported by a recollection from Xiong Jining 熊继宁, one of Haizi's colleagues who said that the poet had considerable access to Jin's works during his CUPSL years, and that Jin, in turn, spoke highly of the aforementioned paper, even seeking to collaborate with Haizi in an academic

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[65] This study was first published as a journal article in 1980 and was turned into a book in 1984, almost the same time that Haizi was working on his paper.

[66] Jin Guantao 金观涛 and Hua Guofan 华国凡, *Kongzhi lun yu kexue fangfa* 控制论与科学方法 [Cybernetics and Scientific Methodologies] (Beijing: Kexue puji chubanshe, 1983), iv.

capacity when he served as advisor for the research society.[67]

Jin's most influential academic contribution is his cybernetic interpretation of Chinese feudal society, created in collaboration with his wife, Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰. Inspired by Ashby's *Design for a Brain*, Jin and Liu boldly assert that premodern Chinese society is an "ultrastable system" 超稳定系统. In Ashby's book, this concept refers to a system ("reacting part") that engages in more than one feedback loop with another system ("environment") in order to preserve its homeostasis.[68] By applying the idea to the functioning mechanism of feudal Chinese society, Jin and Liu develop a rather different understanding. In their conception, Chinese society can be viewed as a cybernetic system made up of economic, political, and ideological subsystems, maintaining general stability through continuous feedback among these subsystems. Once the "disorganizational factors" (e.g. bureaucratic corruption) that lurk in the system have seriously impaired these regulatory mechanisms, the system will experience a "great upheaval" (e.g. a peasant rebellion) that eliminates the factors, thereby restoring itself to its previous state.[69] In the revised edition of their monograph, Jin and Liu clarify their divergence from Ashby: the concept of "ultrastability," to Ashby's mind, refers to "a mechanism for detecting and correcting errors," while for Jin and Liu it is "a mechanism for maintaining the long-term existence of a certain stable social structure (namely ultrastability) by rebuilding the disintegrated organizing system (periodic oscillation)."[70] As Xiao Liu has detected, the positive connotation of

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[67] See Xiong Jining, "Haizi yu xitong faxue."

[68] W. Ross Ashby, *Design for a Brain: The Origin of Adaptive Behaviour*, 2nd ed. (London: Chapman & Hall, 1960), 98.

[69] Jin Guantao 金观涛 and Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰, *Xingsheng yu weiji: Lun zhengguo fengjian shehui de chao wending jiegou* 兴盛与危机：论中国封建社会的超稳定结构 [The Cycle of Growth and Decline: On the Ultrastable Structure of Chinese Society] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1984), chapter 3-5.

[70] Jin Guantao 金观涛 and Liu Qingfeng 刘青峰, *Xingsheng* yu *weiji: Lun zhengguo shehui chao wending jiegou* (1992 nian zengding ben) 兴盛与危机：论中国社会超稳定结构 (1992 年增订本) [The

"ultrastability" in Ashby's formulation is reinterpreted by Jin and Liu as a historical pessimism.[71]

Jin's and Haizi's works, dealing with two different societies, point to two opposite possibilities for a system in turbulence. Under the aegis of self-organization and catastrophe theories, Haizi reveals how early Western European societies evolved into a more advanced stage through continuous self-adjustments or radical renovation. In contrast, from the perspective of ultrastability, Jin finds in the history of feudal China an inability to generate a genuine transformation. However, both studies appear to be more historical hindsight supported by new theoretical discourses than strict inspection of historical facts. What really interests both Jin and Haizi is the mechanism of social transformation on a theoretical level. This interest demonstrates an unconscious anticipation for social transformation that was pervasive in the 1980s: the liberation of a society that has established itself as a cybernetic system, such as China, probably requires—to borrow Jing Wang's comment on Jin's historical scholarship—"a catastrophic break from the bad continuum of stability."[72] Rather than embodying the rise of a new intellectual trend, this awareness, though equipped with the popular scientific discourse of the 1980s, signaled the return of a radicalism that haunted China for the entire twentieth century. In this sense, the question of how to imagine a brand-new future was the central concern for both Haizi and Jin.

In fact, the radical awareness that Jin Guantao sparked with the systems sciences had a huge impact on the Chinese intellectual community at the time, including in poetry circles. For example, the literary school of Holism, with which Haizi maintained close ties at the outset of his poetic career, incorporated a similar discursive framework into their reflections on national

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Cycle of Growth and Decline: On the Ultrastable Structure of Chinese Society, rev. ed.] (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992), 12.

[71] Liu, *Information Fantasies*, 123.

[72] Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 59.

culture and poetic creation. Shi Guanghua, a leading figure of this group, states:

> […] our national cultural-psychological formation is an *ultrastable closed equilibrium system*. For young people of our generation, who are dedicated to the revival of Eastern culture, it is at once a glory and a burden. History has proved that this suffocating closeness cannot be broken by transplanting, learning, and absorbing something from the outside; instead, it can only regain great creativity by being driven from the inside, with its fundamental formation remolded and its harmony destroyed.

> ［……］我们的民族文化心理结构是一个超稳定的平衡式封闭系统，对于我们这一代有志于振兴东方文化的青年，是一种辉煌，也是一种沉重。历史证明：仅仅依靠移植，向外借鉴和吸取，是无法打破这种令人窒息的封闭的，它必须靠从内部的推进，改造其中的基本构成，破坏它的和谐状态，才能重新获得巨大的创造力。[73]

The concept of "cultural-psychological formation" 文化—心理结构—coined by the leading Chinese thinker Li Zehou—refers to the cultural sediment that shapes the psychological structure of a nation.[74] Epic poets such Yang Lian, Jianghe, and Shi Guanghua, frequently employed this term in their essays to designate the national spiritual totality, which constitutes the subject matter of epic poetry.[75] The Chinese "cultural-psychological formation," according to Li, is characterized by, among other things, its emphasis on "self-regulation as a means of maintaining an organic unity and dynamic equilibrium and stability."[76] In identifying such a system as "ultrastable," Shi, like Jin, alerts us to the twofold effect of its self-regulatory behaviors: they may result in both the achievement and the stagnation of the system. On this basis, Shi yearns for a catastrophic change that can disrupt the harmonious state of China. It is important to note that, for Shi, the key to this change resides not simply in the absorption of external—mainly Western

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[73] Shi Guanghua 石光华, "'Qiji cixin' daixu," 132-133. Translation and emphasis mine.

[74] Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun* 中国古代思想史论 [A History of Classical Chinese Thought] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1985), 297.

[75] Rui Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis*, 197.

[76] Li Zehou, *Zhongguo gudai sixiang shilun*, 33. English translation by Andrew Lambert, with slight revision; see Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*, trans. Andrew Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

in this context—culture but in the radical reconfiguration of internal elements and structures. Haizi expresses a similar orientation in response to harsh criticism of Chinese culture by a writer also under the influence of the systems sciences. While acknowledging the author's notion that Chinese culture functions as a cybernetic system, Haizi dismisses his proposal to completely westernize it and expects it to revive itself through its own dialectical movement.[77] In this sense, Haizi may agree with Shi's claim that the exemplary cultural system is supposed to be what the chemist Ilya Prigogine defines as "dissipative structure," namely, an open system far from equilibrium that would spontaneously jump to an orderly state by fluctuations. [78]

Not surprisingly, the desire for a catastrophic change within Chinese culture is visible in Haizi's epics. As many critics have observed, around the year 1986 there was a focal shift in his epics from self-stabilization to catastrophic change.[79] With scenes that typically serve as national symbols, his earlier pieces are generally preoccupied with how different systems maintain their homeostasis through constant regulation. Accompanied by a root-seeking drive, these epics reflect an optimistic expectation that the post-revolutionary era will see the recovery of a temporarily impaired cultural foundation. As his literary career proceeded, however, Haizi became increasingly fascinated with catastrophic transitions within systems. His later works, especially the three epic poems from 1988—"The Sun: Regicide," "The Sun: Poetic Drama," and "The Sun: Messiah"—all revolve around apocalyptic scenes heralding a totally new future.

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[77] Haizi 海子, "Guanyu Li Ming zhi 'lun dong xi wenhua lishi luoji jiegou de chayi'" 关于黎明之<论东西文化历史逻辑结构的差异> [About Li Ming's "On the Differences Between the Historical-logical Structure of Eastern and Western Cultures"], *Women* 我们 1, no.1 (1986): 3-6.

[78] Shi Guanghua, "Tiyao: zhengti yuanze," 88-89.

[79] Luo Yihe, for example, argues that Haizi had been developing his epic project in an orderly way before finishing "The Land," but after it was completed, his works were haunted by unresolvable contradictions, which not only lent them a particular quality but also foretold his death. See Luo Yihe 骆一禾, "Haizi shengya (1964-1989)" 海子生涯 （1964-1989） [Haizi's Career (1964-1989)], in *Luo Yihe shi quanbian*, 871-872.

While his previous efforts strongly defended the heritage of Chinese civilization, his later works are infused with an original political and cultural imaginative force bent on reconstruction. Unfortunately, Haizi's untimely suicide terminated the further unfolding of these imaginative endeavors, but from the few extant works of that period we can get a glimpse of his general vision.

Chinese Civilization Reborn

The poetic transformation in Haizi's epics, probably informed by his studies of the systems sciences, has long been regarded as an epistemological rupture or a pathological turn. However, Haizi's earlier and later epics might not be as greatly different as they seem, just as cybernetics and catastrophe theory actually have significant common ground. In an article involving how catastrophe theory inspired cybernetic discourse, David W. Bates argues that catastrophe theory mathematically proves that an organismic system, as "a set of parameters with an internal organizational relationship," necessarily experiences discontinuous changes, even if the variables are continuous. Yet, far from being an indication of crisis, these discontinuities testify to the system's organismic plasticity and unity. The key concern of cybernetics, in its attempt to mechanize the organism, is precisely to endow a system with plasticity and unity, which requires a capability to overcome a catastrophic reaction by radically reorganizing itself.[80] Here, both catastrophe theory and cybernetics point to a dialectic of stability and catastrophe: catastrophe is not only inherent to stability but at times serves as a bridge to stability at a higher level. Bates summarizes this idea in another article addressing the significance of catastrophe for human society: "To be a self-stabilizing system, in the cybernetic sense of the term, would entail

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[80] David W. Bates, "Unity, Plasticity, Catastrophe: Order and Pathology in the Cybernetic Era," in *Catastrophe: A History and Theory of an Operative Concept*, eds. Nitzan Lebovic and Andreas Killen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2014), 32-54.

the inevitable appearance of catastrophes, sites of genuine rupture, because new organization had

to be discontinuous with the prior state of being."[81] From this point of view, it can be averred

that later Haizi's epics, though concentrated on drastic changes that usually provoke negative

associations, actually form a positive continuation of his earlier projects of reviving Chinese

civilization. What these poems set out to accomplish is a dual goal: freeing China from its

suffocating historical cycle on the one hand, and avoiding complete disintegration on the other.[82]

In this context, "The Sun: Messiah," Haizi's last epic (from both an empirical and a

symbolic perspective),[83] is arguably the most noticeable work among his later pieces. While my

intention is not to propose a strict connection between Haizi's poetry and catastrophe theory and

cybernetics, it cannot be denied that the cultural awareness arising from these two theoretical

sources took firm root in Haizi's later works. Written in multiple styles and organized in a

haphazard fashion, "Messiah" is an inscrutable and intriguing work. It consists of four parts: two

hymns (a very brief one and a longer one with the same title, "Hymn" 献诗), a poetic drama

("The Sun" 太阳), and a collection of poetic fragments ("Fragments of Primitive Epic" 原始史

诗片段). The drama occupies the central position, with the other parts serving as prologues or

supplements to it. It begins with a sacred statement that encapsulates the motif of the entire

work: "the world originated from a secret conversation."[84] Immediately after this first verse

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[81] David W. Bates, "Catastrophe and Human Order: From Political Theology to Political," in *The Time of Catastrophe: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the Age of Catastrophe*, eds. Christopher Dole et al. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2015), 122.

[82] Rui Kunze's observation of Haizi's transition partly supports my argument. Taking 1986 as the watershed year, Kunze divides Haizi's literary career into two dramatically different phases. While emphasizing their differences, Kunze also points out the common pursuits of the two, including "creating [a] Chinese national canon" and "the anti-modern sentiment." These continuous objectives seem to suggest that Haizi's epics are still grounded in a recognition of the nation as a unity. See Rui Kunze, *Struggle and Symbiosis*, 115.

[83] See Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*, 249-250.

[84] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 943.

comes an illustration of "the world" (Figure 2), consisting of the sky, the earth, and a stairway connecting the two. If, in "The River" and "The Sun: The Land," Haizi sees the entire Chinese civilization as a black box, never digging into its internal mechanism, in "Messiah" he does the opposite, delving into the relationships connecting the subsystems of Chinese civilization in a manner reminiscent of Jin's systemic analysis of Chinese society.
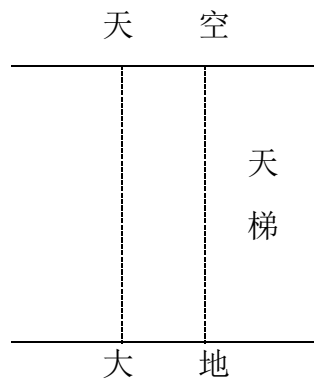
天　空

天
梯

大　地

Figure 2 Illustration of the epic world in "The Sun: Messiah"[85]

Within this mythological framework, several characters are constantly ascending and descending on the stairway, maintaining the operations of the world: a fire, a woodcutter, a stonemason, a blacksmith, and a hunter. Later in the poem, we will learn that these allegorical characters perform different functions. Three of them are in particular pertinent to our discussion here: the fire can be seen as the message that ought to circulate between the sky and the earth; the woodcutter, conceived as a message deliverer or even an alter ego of the fire, is responsible for transmitting the fire through his movement; and the stonemason endeavors to adjust the arrangement of the rocks that he quarries and transports from the earth. The "secret conversation" that brought forth the world, I would argue, refers not only to specific dialogues among these characters but also to the interaction between the earth and the sky, made possible

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[85] Ibid, 943.

by the characters' activities.

The title "Messiah" implies that this epic bears a strong Christian influence. It is thus fair to associate the image of the stairway with two biblical allusions. The first is the ladder in Jacob's dream (Genesis 28:12), which provides a bidirectional path for angels moving between the sky and the earth. Like the angels, the characters on Haizi's stairway deliver messages between two otherwise isolated domains.[86] The second image, the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1), might be less conspicuous yet equally important. Just as the tower can be built only when people throughout the world adopt a uniform speech, so the construction and functioning of Haizi's stairway relies on a conversation, entailing a *lingua franca*. These clues allow us to continue our interpretation of this epic in relation to a systems-theoretical awareness. The sky, the earth, and the bidirectional stairway form a typical cybernetic feedback loop based on circular causality. The fire, flowing freely between different "material substrates," reflects the cybernetic conceptualization of information as an entity that can be "calculated as the same value regardless of the contexts in which it was embedded."[87]

Unlike Haizi's earlier long poems, "The Sun: Messiah" does not intend to portray a system that eventually restores itself to a previous steady state through self-regulation; rather, what is at stake now is the system's pathological state and the radical change it triggers. The drama section starts with a retrospective conversation between the fire (the message) and the woodcutter (the message-deliverer) on how the circulation of fire gives birth to the world. With

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[86] Marián Gálik has also noted Haizi's allusion to Jacob's ladder in "The Sun: Messiah." See Marián Gálik, "'Shengjing' dui zhongguo xiandai shige de yingxiang: Cong Zhou Zuoren dao Haizi"《圣经》对中国现代诗歌的影响：从周作人到海子 [The Influence of the Bible on Modern Chinese Poetry: From Zhou Zuoren to Haizi], trans. Li Yan 李燕, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue luncong* 中国现代文学论丛 1, no. 2 (2007): 123.

[87] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 54. In Chapter Two of my thesis, associating Haizi's literary works with his *qigong* practice, I will elaborate on what sense and by which means basic elements such as fire and water constitute carriers of or symbols for information.

this short dialogue, the poet affirms the importance of information flow for a system's existence and continued operation. The reader's attention is then quickly directed to the stonemason, who recounts in monologue form the process of the sky's catastrophic change. At first the sky, for certain unknown reasons, blows up and catches fire. Faced with this crisis, the stonemason starts to block the sky's edges in order to prevent it from further disturbing the earth. However, this regulatory mechanism itself also goes awry: the continuous accumulation of stones gradually blocks the sky's gates ("The doors of the sky / Tightly closed") and therefore halts its communication with the earth ("No one comes in or goes out / No one comes up or goes down"). Its worst consequence, as the poet points out, is that "the sky and the earth will soon / cease to exist."[88] In this state of isolation, the stonemason feels increasingly anxious about the severance of communicative channels and repeatedly calls out for a response:

> I stand in the depth of the sky,
>   asking aloud:
>   Anyone there?
> [...]
> The earth in extinction.
> Four seasons grow.
> No one replies.
> I am a parent without descendant.
> A sea of void.
>   Is anyone there?

> 我在天空深处
>   高声询问
>   谁在
> ……
> 灭绝的大地
> 四季生长
> 无人回答
> 我是父母，但没有子孙
> 一片空虚

[88] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 948-949.

又有谁在？[89]

"A void" is the only answer. In contrast to the statement of circular causality in "The River"—"you are your own parent"—here Haizi introduces a "parent without descendants," signifying a breakdown in the previous circuit: the sky is no longer capable of feeding the earth, and the earth stops feeding the sky back as well.

The systemic dysregulation that Haizi has presented so far does not lead him toward Jin's historiography, according to which the current system would be first overturned and then replaced by a basically identical system. Instead, Haizi continues his description of the crisis by showing a radical reorganization of the system per se. Based on the remainder of the drama section, as well as details scattered throughout the other parts, we can plot out the world's structural transformation and its ensuing state. As a result of the sky's continuous deterioration, its central area eventually collapses, leading to the fall and breakup of the sun. This breakdown, however, rather than exacerbating the rift between the sky and the earth, produces flames that permeate the space between them, thereby reconnecting the two domains: "The earth is full of the joy of children, which in turn spreads back to the sky."[90] After showing the recovery of communication, Haizi devotes a considerable portion of the text to a chorus in celebration of this joyful outcome. In the voice of the woodcutter, the message transmitter, the poet rejoices in this new vision of the world:

> This fire hangs from the heavens
> Down to the earth and sea.
> Fire,
> Youth,
> Throughout
> Me.

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[89] Ibid, 947.
[90] Ibid, 954.

这火一直从天堂
挂到大地和海水
火
青春
贯穿了
我 [91]

The sprawling fire indicates to us that the system is now functioning with a higher level of
complexity. Unlike its previous state, in which the system was mainly sustained by the sky
stairway, the new system uses the ubiquitous fire to connect far-flung parts of itself, enabling
them to work together and thus creating a vibrant and ecstatic state.

Such a spectacle, as the beginning of the aforementioned chorus demonstrates, means at
once the dismantling of the old world ("The world is doomed to shatter") and the birth of the
new world ("The sky and the earth are created"). It constitutes neither an ordinary transitional
phase of nor a threat to the system. According to the first "Hymn," this epic is dedicated to
"youth," "dawn," "truth," a "new era," and a "new god of poetry"; in other words, it is Haizi's
blueprint for the upcoming future. However, as tempting as Haizi's vision of the future (a
dialectic of order and disorder) might be, its applicability is extremely ambiguous. How does
Haizi's ultimate solution engage with social reality? How can the established sky-stairway-earth
structure be overturned and replaced? When will this catastrophic change occur? Because it
remained in rough draft until Haizi's death, "Messiah" ultimately fails to offer a coherent literary
narrative, let alone provide a clear plan of social transformation. Yet, as a poetic creation, its
apocalyptic vision gains its power not from its ability to function as a means of social
mobilization, but from the fact that it reveals complex sensibilities extending beyond specific
social initiatives. Looking back at 1980s China, we can view this epic as an effort to articulate
the political passion rising among the young generation of intellectuals, which would tragically

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[91] Ibid, 960-961.

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culminate in the Tiananmen Square protests just a few months after Haizi's death.

My reading in this chapter may risk overinterpreting Haizi's epics as well as oversimplifying the principles of cybernetics and catastrophe theory in a strict sense. Nevertheless, the influence of systems thinking on Haizi, as manifested in his emphasis on self-regulation through circularity and self-organization through catastrophe, is undeniable and provides an important perspective from which to understand his poetry. In turn, it also attests to the fact that epic writing functioned as an integral part of the overriding social agenda in postsocialist China. Moreover, given the transnational and transdisciplinary spread of these scientific and technological discourses, Haizi's epics vividly show how Chinese intellectuals in the postsocialist era envisioned the fate of Chinese civilization within a global theoretical horizon.

Chapter Two

Information Dream and its Disillusionment:

An Informatic Interpretation of the Basic Natural Elements

What the genealogies of cybernetics, information theory, and systems theory show, however, is that "information," and an informatic worldview, display an ambivalent relation to the material world. On the one hand, information is seen as being abstract, quantitative, reducible to a calculus of management and regulation—this is the disembodied, immaterial notion of "information" referred to earlier. On the other hand, cybernetics, information theory, and systems theory all show how information is immanently material, configured into military technology, communications media, and even biological systems.
— Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit*

The relations of the human being with the world, and along with these, the entire social existence of humanity, are enclosed within the domain of the absolute sovereignty of cybernetic science. […] This same enclosure, that is to say, the same captivity, is manifested in futurology. […] The future studied by futurology is nothing but an extended present. Humanity remains enclosed in the circle of possibilities calculated by and for it.
— Martin Heidegger, "The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thought"

As the passion for the systems sciences and the boom of epic writing were sweeping postsocialist China, *qigong* fever, another social trend, reached its heyday as well. Although many of its branches may strategically trace their origins to ancient times, *qigong* as a general designation for an assortment of cultivation methods is a modern invention. According to David A. Palmer, *qigong* was initially institutionalized as a medical treatment around the foundation of the PRC in 1949, gradually incorporated into China's health system from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, endowed an important status especially during the Great Leap Forward, yet officially suspended during the Cultural Revolution, only to be reinstated in the post-Mao reform period, eventually turning into a profound mass movement.[92] In the 1980s, *qigong* gained its widespread

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[92] For the history of modern *qigong*, see David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia*

influence by associating itself with two intellectual threads. It was, on the one hand, tightly intertwined with a variety of traditional cultural resources, including mainstream religions, oriental occultism, and classical Chinese philosophy. On the other, it was also interwoven with scientific and technological discourses through the efforts of scientists like Qian Xuesen, who not only advocated scientific experiments on *qigong*, but also called for his peers to apply the systems sciences to this emerging field. Bringing together the nostalgia for national culture and the cultism of technoscience, the *qigong* movement eventually blossomed into a mythic status in postsocialist China, a time of spiritual vacuum.

This is the backdrop against which Haizi, an epic poet concerned with the (re)construction of Chinese civilization and a systems scholar captivated by holistic thinking, developed a keen interest in *qigong*.[93] As many of his friends recall, Haizi was highly interested in supernatural beliefs and practices in a wide range of Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, Daoism, Hinduism, and *qigong*, a new form of religion that derives theoretical inspirations from these doctrines but offers a more expeditious and practical means of acquiring supernatural force. When he worked at CUPSL, Haizi maintained a close relationship with several colleagues of similar interest, including Chang Yuan 常远 (1964-) and Sun Ge 孙舸 (1968-), who were reputed to possess extraordinary powers. During this period, he even traveled to Tibet twice in pursuit of supernatural revelation, and once he stole a stone and brought it back from Tibet since he believed its magic power could assist his cultivation. His last words, written one day before his suicide, show that the hallucination caused by *qigong* cultivation had a great deal to do with

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in China (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

[93] In addition to the influence from the general intellectual atmosphere of his time, Haizi's obsession with *qigong* can also be attributed to some practical considerations, such his need for *qigong* therapy; see Si Li, *The Poetic Development of The Chinese Poet Haizi (1964-1989): A Case Study of Changing Aesthetic Sensibilities in Modern China* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2016), 149.

his death.[94]

Given the intricate relationship between *qigong* fever and the fascination with the systems sciences, it is fair to consider Haizi's *qigong* practice as the religious extension of his intellectual orientation, thereby incorporating it into our interpretation of his epic poems. A critical connection between Haizi's literary and religious practice is the obsession with basic natural "elements" 元素, with their essence and movement. As we know, the fundamental concept of *qigong* is *qi* 气, a pervasive and indiscernible entity that sustains and connects all existence in the universe. Likewise, a remarkable feature of Haizi's epics is the ubiquitous presence of basic elements such as water and fire, which permeate his epic worlds and drive their operation. It is true that these elements might have multiple symbolic meanings, but in this chapter I want to emphasize their potential relationship with information, which, though neither spelled out in Haizi's writings nor self-evident in its own right, can be made visible through an examination of a common thirst for communication projected in the mindset of the society. Following the previous chapter's identification of Haizi's epic worlds as cybernetic systems, reading Haizi's epics in terms of basic elements as information can turn out to be productive, as it provides a necessary account of the mechanics that sustain these systems and the consequences they generate.

This chapter concentrates on three kinds of elements involved in Haizi's literary and religious practice: *qi*, water, and fire. It attempts to reveal how *qi* was possible and perhaps also necessary to be associated with information in the context of early postsocialist China, how the dominant elements in Haizi's epics served as information-related entities flowing within the epic worlds as cybernetic systems, and how Haizi's deployment and arrangement of basic elements

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[94] For details on Haizi's *qigong* practice, see Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*; Bian, *Haizi zhuan*.

conveyed an ambivalent attitude towards China's prospects as it stood on the threshold of becoming an information society. Rather than examining the evolution of Haizi's elements in chronological order, my discussion will draw on fragments from various periods to illustrate his notion of "element," with the premise that he held an enduring and consistent view of what this concept meant in its essence. Moreover, since Haizi remained silent in terms of direct reference to *qigong* in his writings, I will rely upon the elaboration by Qian Xuesen and the scholarship of Haizi's friends to offer an interpretation of his reflections on this mysterious cultivation.

Qigong Doctrines and the Informatic Worldview

By the early postsocialist era, *qigong* had evolved from what it used to be considered as a healing measure at the beginning of the establishment of the PRC to a seemingly omnipotent and mysterious force, which was notably marked by its association with so-called "extraordinary powers" 特异功能. First germinated by the case of Tang Yu 唐雨, a twelve-year-old boy claiming his ability to read Chinese characters with his ears, the craze for extraordinary power soon gave rise to a myriad of *qigong* grandmasters in the 1980s, including Yan Xin 严新, Zhang Baosheng 张宝胜, and Zhang Xiangyu 张香玉, all of whom were celebrated for their abilities to perceive and affect remote or invisible objects in ways that contradict existing scientific beliefs.[95] To justify the miracles, *qigong* grandmasters typically attribute their powers to the most critical yet obscure concept in *qigong* discourse: *qi*. In traditional Chinese culture, *qi* designates a set of correlated but not completely consistent ideas, including the ultimate cause of all things, the material substance of the world, the ever-changing nature of the universe, the universal medium throughout nature, a vital force, and even a moral realm.[96] Although this semantic multiplicity

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[95] For more information on the specific stories of these people with extraordinary powers, see Palmer, *Qigong Fever.*

[96] Cai Fanglu 蔡方鹿 et al, *Qi* 气 [*Qi*] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 1990), 4-5.

can accommodate a wealth of philosophical thinking and artistic associations, to endow *qigong* with supernatural powers has ultimately been proved to be scientifically impractical. But ironically, back in 1980s China, it was the scientific exploration of *qigong* that contributed most to the consolidation of *qi* as a perceived supernatural force.

After the appearance of Tang Yu, a quick proliferation of reports on people with extraordinary powers attracted the attention of many scientists, which resulted in a boom of academic research on *qigong*. Qian Xuesen was the leading figure in this trend. He proposed that the studies of *qigong*, extraordinary powers, and Chinese medicine be classified into a new discipline that he termed as "somatic science" 人体科学. Similar to "systems science," somatic science constitutes an emerging discipline that promises to expand the established body of knowledge.[97] Despite his high opinion of *qigong*-centered practices and phenomena, Qian acknowledged that studies of them remained on the order of "pre-science" 前科学. In order to transform *qigong* into an authentic science, the first step would be to conduct the so-called "phenomenological study of *qigong*" 唯象气功学, meaning to objectively observe and describe *qigong*-related phenomenon while temporarily bracketing the underlying principles. Based on observations and generalizations of different phenomena, one could further reach a theoretical understanding of *qigong*. In this regard, the emergent systems sciences served as a critical reference since *qigong* had gone beyond the framework of traditional western science, which was dominated by mechanism and reductionism.[98] On various occasions, Qian exhibited a stunning diagram of the human: the human body system, in terms of its internal mechanism, is a self-

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[97] See Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Xitong kexue, siwei kexue, yu renti kexue" 系统科学、思维科学与人体科学 [Systems Science, Noetic Science, and Somatic Science], in Qian Xuesen 钱学森 et al., *Chuangjian renti kexue* 创建人体科学 [The Foundations of Somatic Science] (Chengdu: Sichuan jiaoyu chubanshe, 1989), 20-40.

[98] See Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Jianli weixiang qigong xue" 建立唯象气功学 [Establishing A Phenomenological Study of *Qigong*], in *Chuangjian renti kexue*, 246-255.

regulated "grand system" 巨系统, with its organs cooperating with each other, and when examined from a broader perspective, it is nested within the nature/universe/environment as an "ultra-grand system" 超巨系统, where all the subsystems are closely correlated and interact with one another.[99]

On the methodological level, Qian's conception of somatic science is not at odds with the modern scientific paradigm. However, frequently misled by flawed experimental data and unconscious theoretical preconceptions, somatic-scientific investigations in reality lead to many senseless conclusions, thereby promoting rather than debunking the impression that it is a pseudo-science. Inspired by the systems sciences, Qian argues that the human body perhaps has multiple steady states rather than a solely regular one, and the exceptional states achieved by *qigong* practitioners, which he dubbed as the "functional state of *qigong*" 气功功能态, can be understood in such a way. Whether and to what degree one is able to enter the "functional state" depends on her or his mastery of *qi*. To reach the primary stage of *qigong* requires that practitioners perform the "internal *qi*" 内气, and to reach the advanced stage, in which human bodies can interact with their environment in unknown ways, they need to acquire the ability to release and receive the "external *qi*" 外气. Based on the materials he gathered, Qian creatively associated *qi* with information: *qi* carries information, circulating between all entities, either living or nonliving things. In the case of Tang Yu, for example, the boy can probably exchange *qi,* loaded with information, with inanimate objects through certain organs of his body.[100]

In retrospect, the history of somatic science might be caricatured as a scandal or farce, in which blindly passionate scientists, opportunist *qigong* frauds, and trend-chasing cultural

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[99] See, for example, Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Rentian guan, renti kexue yu renti xue" 人天观,人体科学与人体学 [Anthropic Principle, Somatic Science, and Somatology], in *Chuangjian renti kexue*,112-127.

[100] See Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Kaizhan renti kexue de jichu yanjiu." 开展人体科学的基础研究 [Conducting Basic Research in Somatic Science], in *Chuangjian renti kexue*, 41-57.

workers all played their roles. Nevertheless, it is still important to recognize, through these apparently ridiculous facts, a hidden informatic worldview, which would progressively come to prominence in the 1980s. Qian's scientific speculations of *qigong* might be dubious, but they remain meaningful as a symptom of the desire to connect individuals within a large information network. In her wide-ranging investigation into the 1980s imaginations of "waves," Xiao Liu persuasively shows that the fantasies around *qigong* and extraordinary powers, as manifested in various kinds of religious and cultural practices, should be construed in relation to the development of the broadcast media of the same time, such as television and radio.[101] What is more important for our purposes is that Liu also notices that the desire engendered by the development of analog media actually points to a vision that can be better matched by the imminent digital era, when massless information can be freely transmitted between different media. It is in this metaphorical sense that Liu, by referring to Friedrich Kittler's review of media history, especially his vision of digitization, identifies the "extrasensory information" carried by *qi* as being "digital."[102] It is well known that the digitalization of information, to which we have been quite accustomed by today, is the legacy of cybernetics and information theory. In their seminal works both published in 1948, Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon counterintuitively separate information from materiality and semantics: information is neither the meaning it bears in its senders and receivers, nor is it its material carrier during the process of transmission. Rather, information is, in essence, a choice between alternative possibilities; it can be reduced to, as what we typically do today, a series of binary decisions with alternatives represented by two binary digits 0 and 1 and transmitted in the form of electronic signals.[103] Although the

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[101] Liu, *Information Fantasies*, 51.

[102] Ibid, 67.

[103] For a brief account of the theory of information as presented in 1948 in Wiener's *Cybernetics* and Shannon's "A Mathematical Theory of Information," see Ronald R. Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment: Or*

hypotheses for the *qigong* theories of Qian and his contemporaries remain on shaky ground, the features of *qi* make it a perfect match for illustrating the nature of information and the operation of the informatized world. I will describe how this works later.

As mentioned earlier, the craze for the extraordinary powers of *qigong* was not unfamiliar to Haizi, who actually belonged to a small circle of people who had a particular interest in this area, including the couple who was allegedly related to his death, Chang Yuan and Sun Ge.[104] As a young faculty member at CUPSL, Chang worked with and lived close to Haizi from 1985 until the poet's death, during which time they frequently exchanged views on *qigong*. Chang not merely enjoyed the fame of a *qigong* grandmaster, but also worked for the Project PI, a somatic science project initiated by Qian Xuesen to explore the supernatural potentials of the human body. Sun Ge, even more strikingly, was identified as having extraordinary powers as early as in 1980, when she was only twelve years old. She actively participated in a series of extraordinary-powers-guided mineral explorations from 1987 to 1988 and, for this reason, she was admitted to China University of Geosciences (CUG) without examination, where she continued to conduct related research. In collaboration with two geologists, Sun published a paper on the application of extraordinary powers in mineral prospecting based on her practice. Similar to Qian's elaboration on Tang's reading-by-ear, Sun notes that through the *qi* evoked in the "functional state," she could either generally locate minerals on a map indoors or specify the occurrence and formation of minerals in the field.[105] In comparison, Haizi's *qigong* enterprise did not proceed as

Why We Call Our Age the Information Age (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 11-18.

[104] The biographical information about Chang and Sun can be readily found in entries in online encyclopedias, documents on file-sharing platform, and articles by We-media writers. Many of these texts take reference or were directly copied or downloaded from the Social Systems Engineering web (http://www.SSEweb.net), which is no longer maintained and appears abandoned. Since this website was co-founded by Chang Yuan, it ought to be a credible source of information. Several biographies of Haizi also include information about Chang and Sun; see Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*; Bian, *Haizi zhuan*.

[105] Zheng Jincheng 郑锦城, Lin Xinduo 林新多, and Sun Ge 孙舸, "Lüe tan teyi gongneng zhao

smoothly as theirs did. By the time of his death, Haizi had been struggling with extending the "microcosmic orbit" 小周天 (the circulation of *qi* within *ren* 任 and *du* 督 meridians) to the "macrocosmic orbit" 大周天 (the circulation on a larger scale), and started to suffer visual and audio hallucinations.[106] In several suicide notes he left for the university directors, Haizi accused Chang and Sun of torturing him with *qigong*: it is reputed that Chang sought to provoke Haizi's powers of "clairaudience" 天耳通 (the Chinese translation of the Buddhist term *dibba-sota*) and "clairvoyance" 心眼通 (*dibba-cakkhu*) in a callous manner; and Sun, based in Wuhan back then, repeatedly provoked him into experiencing hallucinations.[107] Their scientific authenticity aside, these instances reflect an overriding consciousness of unobstructed information transmission though invisible and massless media like *qi*. This is a typical symptom in the face of the arrival of information society.

It should not be surprising that the desire to communicate with all things, leaving aside its consequences for the moment, is also evident in Haizi's epic poetry. In a section of "The Sun: Poetic Drama" 太阳·诗剧, subtitled "Kings and Language" 诸王、语言, Haizi revisits the relationship between information (metaphorized as "language") and the systems (represented by "Kings"). Through a series of questions concerning "all things," Haizi attempts to understand the

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kuang" 略谈特异功能找矿 [A Brief Discussion on Mineral Prospecting with Extraordinary Powers], *Geological Science and Technology Information* 地质科技情报 10, no.2 (1991): 63-66. Sun's further research on mineral prospecting with extraordinary powers can be found in her undergraduate and sub-undergraduate degree theses, which are now still widely circulated in electronic files online; see Sun Ge 孙舸, "Renti qianneng tankuang fangfa chutan" 人体潜能探矿方法初探 [A Methodological Research on the Applications of Human Potentialities in Mineral Prospecting], Undergraduate thesis at China University of Geosciences, 1993; "Renti qianneng tankuang shiyan jieduan baogao" 人体潜能探矿实验阶段报告 [A Mid-term Experimental Report upon the Application of Extrasensory Perception in Mineral Prospecting], Sub-undergraduate thesis at China University of Geosciences, 1991.

[106] See Xi Chuan 西川, "Siwang houji" 死亡后记 [Afterword to the Death], in *Haizi shi quanbian*, 1163.

[107] See Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*, 282-283.

world from the perspective of Kings and underscore the role that language plays in maintaining

the operation of the world. Consider an excerpt from this section:

> Who is the owner of deserts and camels?
> Who is the habitant in the center of language?
> Who can give orders?
> To whose call do the twelve executioners listen? They come for the call.
> […]
> Who is the music of all things? Who is the mother of all things?
> Who is the father of the mother of all things?
> Whose life is the life into which I have fallen?
> Who is the harmony? Who is the shadowy mirror that reflects all things?
> Who is the measure of the right and wrong of all things?
> […]
> > Who is that tongue filled with the spirit?
> > Who is the fire of sufferings in the desert filled with the spirit?
> Who is the spirit already denied by the pilgrims and ascetics?

> 谁是沙漠和骆驼的主人？
> 谁是语言中心的居住人？
> 谁能发号施令？
> 十二位刽子手倾听谁的召唤？应声而来
> [……]
> 谁是万物的音乐？谁是万物之母
> 谁是万物之母的父亲？
> 我所陷入的生活是谁的生活？
> 谁是和谐？谁是映照万物的阴暗的镜子？
> 谁是衡量万物是非的准绳？
> [……]
> ——谁是那一个已经被灵充满的舌头
> > 谁是被灵充满的沙漠上生长的苦难之火
> 谁是那一个已经被漂泊者和苦行者否定的灵？[108]

The "language" invoked in the above passage refers not to specific speeches among different

actors in this world, but to information in general; the "Kings," as discussed in the first chapter,

are those who grasp a system in its entirety, and therefore stand for the wholeness of the same

system. In this case, what matters the most for Haizi is not the answers to this barrage of

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[108] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 918-919.

questions—they are either self-evident or open-ended—but the speaker's concerns revealed by the questions. By asking how language serves as the dwelling, order, parent, music, mirror, and measure of all things, Haizi implies the very fact that information constitutes the fundamental condition of all things; it accommodates them, instructs their behaviors, gives them shape, offers them feedback, and sets the norm for them. As Haizi summarizes this section, to be a King means to be "the tongue filled with the spirit," i.e., to acquire the ability of communicating all subsystems through a universal language. Only by doing so, can one have the privilege to perform all the functions above. In this regard, the ideal of Haizi coincides with the informatic imagination of the *qigong* grandmaster Zhang Xiangyu, who claimed that her power stemmed from what she called "cosmic language" 宇宙语, a common language connecting all beings.[109] In this religious fantasy, the cybernetic conception of information, as the twentieth century inheritor of Leibniz's schemata of *characteristica universalis* and *calculus ratiocinator*,[110] finds a more accessible and radical articulation. Given Haizi's ties with the systems sciences and *qigong* doctrines, we can fairly expect his search for a universal language and the effects such a search brings to his works in a pronounced manner and on a broader scale. But how do *qi* and information, the "soul" of a religious world and a world dominated by technology, respectively, reveal themselves in Haizi's epic settings through literary transcoding? This question impels us to examine the inner motivation of Haizi's epic worlds: elements.

Characterizing Basic Natural Elements

"Element" 元素 is one of the most ambiguous concepts in Haizi's poetic writings. To reveal its multiple implications, critics and scholars have tried hard to locate it in a variety of

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[109] Palmer, *Qigong Fever*, 151-153.
[110] See Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 19.

intellectual veins. Luo Yihe associates Haizi's elements with Leibniz's monad and Plotinus'

matter, highlighting its spiritual and ephemeral properties.[111] Zhao Hui compares the same term

to what Aristotle defines as the "unmoved mover" in his substance theory, in order to reveal its

imperceptible nature and its role as the cause of motion.[112] Xiaoli Yang brings the concept into

dialogue with its pre-Socratic counterparts—in particular, Heraclitus's fire, Empedocles' Four

Elements, and Democritus' atoms—thereby foregrounding the poet's focus on change.[113]

However, simply ascribing Haizi's affinity for elements to a certain philosophical inclination,

these interpretations have yet to exhaust its heuristic possibilities, though they do partially

capture the gist of these images. To add to them, it is crucial to revisit the social contexts from

which Haizi derived his interest in elements so as to offer an alternative explanation. Considering

the curious fact that Haizi, while he was obsessed with *qigong*, made little reference to *qi* in his

writings, it is not groundless to assume what he regards as elements constitutes the poetic

equivalent of *qi.* This speculation is supported by, among a few other critics, Liaoyuan, who

recognizes the presence of the signs of *qigong* cultivation in Haizi's epic poems and even

directly identifies the fire as *yang qi* 阳气, or positive *qi*.[114]

The element serves as the poetic engine for Haizi's epic worlds as much as *qi* is the

guiding force in the cosmology of the *qigong* grandmasters. "I always feel compelled to write

long poems," the poet confesses, "out of some grand elements calling on me and also because of

the myriad things I have to say—these elements and great materials will always break through

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[111] Luo, "Haizi shengya (1964-1989)," 872.

[112] Zhao Hui 赵晖, *Haizi, yige "80 niandai" wenxue jingxiang de shengcheng* 海子，一个"80年代"文学镜像的生成 [Haizi, the Making of a Literary Mirror of the 1980s] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2011), 30.

[113] Xiaoli Yang, *A Dialogue Between Haizi's Poetry and the Gospel of Luke: Chinese Homecoming and the Relationship with Jesus Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 173-178.

[114] Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*, 289-290.

the shell of my poetry."[115] Both in his critical and creative works, he repeatedly and explicitly claims the onto-epistemological priority of elements. In an essay on Friedrich Hölderlin, for example, he distinguishes between two sorts of poets—those who harbor a solipsistic passion for the world and those who cherish the world due to its very soul rather than their own ones. While the solipsists reduce all phenomena to the activities of the mind of the self, their opposites, whom Haizi favors, endeavor to situate themselves in dialogue with their environments. In this second case, the poets manage to rescale their understanding of the external world on the level of "elements":

> These are the poets who treat the universe as a temple. By moving from "loving the self" to "loving the scenery," as well as loving the scenery as part of the "the grand mystery of the universe," they go beyond the first group of poets, those narrow-minded lyric poets. [...] However, the scenery is not enough either. [...] You should perceive the river as elements, like fire. He is flowing; he has birth and death, his own birth and death. It is necessary to move from the scenery to the elements, to love the breath and speech of the elements in the scenery, to respect the elements and their secrets.

> 这是一些把宇宙当庙堂的诗人。从"热爱自我"进入"热爱景色"，把景色当成"大宇宙神秘"的一部分来热爱，就超出了第一类狭窄的抒情诗人的队伍。［……］景色也是不够的。［……］你应该体会到河流是元素，像火一样，他在流逝，他有生死，有他的诞生和死亡。必须从景色进入元素，在景色中热爱元素的呼吸和言语，要尊重元素和他的秘密。[116]

Thinking the river as the "elements" 元素—Haizi's teaching to us—illustrates his yearning for perceiving the embodied and extensive world on an abstract and reducible level and communicating with it in an imperceptible and unhindered manner. In particular, by putting specific emphasis on the "breath and speech" of the elements, Haizi prioritizes the elements' role as a means of communication rather than the content of communication. In the last section, we analyzed how *qi* can be considered as a perfect illustration of information. Here, Haizi's

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[115] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1038.
[116] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanbian*, 1070.

characterization of the "elements" undoubtedly offers another figure for us to capture the essence of information. An association drawn between the elements and information is made more clear if we take a further look at the similarities between *qi* and the specific elements.

In addition to the element as a general concept, Haizi's epic poems particularly highlight the presence of two kinds of elements that drive the plots forward: water and fire. In the River trilogy, the water stretching across China serves as a curative with the power to restore the decadent national civilization. Similarly, in several poems from the Sun series, the omnipresent fire stands for a force in which deconstruction and reconstruction are unified. On the one hand, the two elements are identified with each other in the onto-epistemological sense; in early works, Haizi occasionally equates water with fire. On the other, Haizi also signifies a shifted interest from water to fire, which he views as the most ideal element. Apart from centralizing these two elements, Haizi constantly puts them alongside other elements. He writes about how water nourishes the exuberant woods that make up the shell of the river (see "The River of Roots," Chapter Two, Section Two of "River"), how fire burns up yet then rearranges the stacked stones of which heaven is constructed (see "The Sun," Part Three of "The Sun: Messiah"), and also, how water and fire shake the solidity of earth either by dissolving or incinerating it (see, for example, "But Water, Water" and "The Sun: The Earth"). In essence, for Haizi, water and fire constitute the exemplary elements, or rather what he truly refers to when speaking of "element." These two elements are properly understood in relation to each other, bound together, and both of them share common ground with *qi*, the religious substitution for information.

Water and fire, as well as *qi*, have a number of properties that can evoke literary associations allowing them to be interpreted either technically as material carriers of information or by metaphorical extension as symbolic representations of bits of information. It is difficult to offer a systematic account of them, but a few observations can be readily made. First, as

shapeless and fluid entities, these elements exemplify the material intangibility and flexibility of information circulating in contemporary technological milieu, or rather the disembodied nature of information as understood in the technological context. Second, insofar as they are conceived of as being basic units, these elements function as universal, discrete, and quantifiable entities in the same way as the information is encoded in bits and transmitted through signals. Third, the fact that these elements with abstract nature tend to be infused into specific substrates grants them certain qualities of the soul, namely qualities that would give shape to the substrate where they are configured. Fourth, the spatial extensivity of these elements also encourages us to consider them as literary substitutions for information and its instantiations, which have pervaded and penetrated everywhere to the degree that they occupy the constitutive dimension of the world. Needless to say, in a metaphor, the vehicle is never identical to the tenor, yet the vehicle can sometimes be more instructive than the tenor in underlining the author's concerns.

References to the elements in Haizi's poetry are profuse in number. For the sake of focus and clarity, however, I will home in on such references in his final epic piece "The Sun: Messiah," where he makes the most direct and comprehensive formulation of the element of fire, thus systematically exhibiting his understanding of information. In an explanatory supplement to the main plot, he arrays a sequence of "statements on fire":

1. Of no form yet the form of everything.
2. Of no dwelling yet the dwelling of everything.
3. Of no attribute yet the attribute of everything.
4. Of no content yet the content of everything.
5. Arising from each other.
6. Substituting for each other.
7. Fire is always the same fire.
8. From good to good.
9. Even better than good.
10. Being bad is also being good.
11. Facing fire one can only endure.

1. 没有形式又是一切的形式。
2. 没有居所又是一切的居所。
3. 没有属性又是一切的属性。
4. 没有内容又是一切的内容。
5. 互相产生。
6. 互相替代。
7. 火总是同样的火。
8. 从好到好。
9. 好上加好。
10. 不好也好。
11. 对于火只能忍受。[117]

The first four statements disclose the paradoxical aspects of fire by pointing out its disembodied

nature, on the one hand, yet acknowledging its extensive influence on the material instantiation,

on the other. The dichotomies between "form" and "dwelling," "attribute" and "content," as

implied in these statements, indicate that Haizi's contemplation of fire is premised on

hylomorphism, a metaphysical account of an individual being as the compound of *hyle* (matter)

and *morphe* (form). Haizi seems to be intrigued by fire's association with form-giving and regard

it as the source of form. Right after the quoted chain of statements, he devotes a section to fire

and thinkers in history who have reflected on fire, in which he further consolidates the fire/form

connection, explicitly identifying fire as the form of all existence.[118] In statements five to seven,

Haizi shifts his attention to the transmission of fire. While examining the elements in a network

of exchange where mutual stimulation and conversion occur continuously, he accentuates the

equivalence between different fire elements: all the elements are identical to each other.

Apparently stirred by atomism in ancient Greek philosophy and classical Chinese thought, these

statements recapitulate the nature of the element as an atomic entity. With an absurd sense of

humor, the four concluding statements direct the readers' attention to the wide-reaching

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[117] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1006.

[118] Ibid, 1007-1010.

influence of fire. In short, be it good or bad, human beings are now all subject to the conditions created by fire.

The intended parody of the propositional statement invites us to read these sentences perhaps not with rhetorical precision or logical rigor, but rather with conjectures about their technoscientific implications. These statements on the fire element naturally lend themselves to information, in particular the conception of information in cybernetics or information theory. According to Grant D. Bollmer's summary, "information" has its roots in the doctrines of hylomorphism: it is etymologically related to the action of *in-forming*, through which form shapes matter so as to generate an object. In this sense, information originally refers to the internal ordering of things. Later, with the rise of empiricist philosophy, "information" came to point to something no longer independent from sensation but as the fragmentary component of it. Yet, as empiricism started to dominate state governance and academic research, the meaning of information was further drawn towards a more objective direction, being equated to quantitative data without association with sensation.[119] The cybernetic approach of information, which distils information from its material foundation and prioritizes information in modeling and regulating systems, undoubtedly inherits the etymological reference of information to hylomorphism. At the same time, this approach also incorporates the meaning that information has come to bear in its subsequent usage, by processing information as quantitative and discrete units. Therefore, Grant D. Bollmer maintains that information in cybernetics and information theory combines different definitions of this ever-changing concept.[120] Simon Mills makes a similar generalization about the cybernetic notion of information in his discussion of Gilbert Simondon, who mediates on

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[119] Grant D. Bollmer, *Inhuman Networks: Social Media and the Archaeology of Connection* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 102-103.
[120] Ibid, 103.

cybernetics in relation to the philosophical traditions of hylomorphism and atomism. Miller argues that cybernetics falls into both atomistic and hylomorphic schemes: it is atomistic in its conversion of information into "discrete quanta transmitted between relata," while it is hylomorphic in its abstraction of information as "a source of form separate from the matter being formed."[121] Haizi's statements, as we have commented, derive poetic inspiration from both hylomorphism and atomism. In this regard, they can be considered as presenting a rather comprehensive understanding of the cybernetic conception of information.

To reiterate, Haizi is not so much a self-conscious information theorist as an unconscious witness to the emerging realities anchored in information, which he dimly perceived as an invisible force flowing underneath the material world and determining its unfolding. Indeed, the elements appearing throughout Haizi's works, either in their original or symbolic sense, can also be interpreted as representation of matter or energy. However, Haizi's major interest resides not in the material composition or the energic flowing of his epic worlds; rather, he is more concerned with the pattern, organization, and mechanism of these worlds, all of which pertain to the question of information. By linking the elements to the conception of information, we can unlock a door to the understanding of the social significance of those elements, which largely has remained elusive in the readings of Haizi's epic poetry.

Many literary critics have detected a sense of temporal rupture concealed in Haizi's epic poems—a farewell to the old world and a beckoning to the new one. But they find it somewhat difficult to associate the radical changes of the world in Haizi's epics with the ongoing course of transformation in the postsocialist era. Zhang Qinghua, for example, labels Haizi as the last poet of the agricultural civilization and the first poet of the industrial age in China. In support of the

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[121] Simon Mills, *Gilbert Simondon: Information, Technology and Media* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International), 23-24.

first assertion, he argues that Haizi captures, for the last time, the total experience of the Chinese

agricultural world, which at the time was in the process of disintegration. But for the second

point, Zhang admits that it can only be understood in relation to the former statement: as much as

it announces the end of an era, it also heralds the arrival of a new one.[122] On the surface, Haizi's

epic poems never explicitly portray the kind of shock resulting from technoscientific thinking

and artifacts; instead, they continuously take pains to retrieve purely natural settings and serve

them up to the reader. It is thus difficult to relate his poems to the human condition of the

industrial age, not to mention that of the post-industrial age. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied

that the aging worlds in these works are undergoing an inherent structural transformation,

through which they come to function in ways closer to those of the technoscience-enabled world.

Essential to these processes is the accelerated circulation of elements as the carrier or metaphor

of information. We can also say that it is in this sense that Haizi's works tell a national fable with

regard to the progress of China from an underdeveloped state to an advanced one. Without

noticing the informatic reference of elements, the socio-political dimension of Haizi's poetic

project would continue to be underestimated.

Negentropic Utopia, or Dystopia

The modern conceptualization of information provides an important perspective for

evaluating the significance of information by connecting it with entropy, which is originally a

thermodynamic concept to measure the randomness of a system. This connection was first

established through James Clerk Maxwell's Demon, a creature the physicist designed in his

famous thought experiment: as a challenge to the second law of thermodynamics, the demon is

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[122] Zhang Qinghua 张清华, "Yici xing xiezuo, huo weida shige de bugui lu: Jiedu Haizi de qianti" 一次性写作，或伟大诗歌的不归路：解读海子的前提 ["One-off Writing, or the Great Poetry's Road of No Return: Prerequisites for Interpreting Haizi"], *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣, no.3 (2019): 7.

able to sort swifter molecules and slower molecules freely and effortlessly into two portions of

the same vessel, thereby reversing the entropic tendency of this closed system. Later, scientists

showed Maxwell's idea to be problematic by pointing out the fact that the demon's sorting per se

entails the cost of work and therefore counteracts the tendency of entropy decrease.

Nevertheless, Maxwell's experiment, through the interpretation of its opponents from Leo

Szilard to Léon Brillouin to still others, unexpectedly connects entropy with information as it

suggests that the demon's categorization, which determinates the status of the system, is based

on information gathering. Since the theory of entropy anticipates that any closed system will

eventually reach thermal equilibrium, the most chaotic state, information as negentropy can

accordingly be deemed an orderly force against the universal tendency towards disorder.[123] The

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[123] On how information has come to be linked with entropy, and the cultural implications of this linkage, see N. Katherine Hayles, "Self-reflexive Metaphors in Maxwell's Demon and Shannon's Choice: Finding the Passages," in *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 31-60. It should be noted that the relationship between information and entropy is conventional, and the notion that information is negentropy is not the only way to understand this relationship. In this chapter, Hayles also discusses Shannon's notion equating information to the growth of entropy. In reviewing the debate over the information-entropy connection, she attributes this divergence to "where the commentator positions himself with respect to the transmission process": the notion that information is entropy concerns "the uncertainty present before the message is sent," while the notion that information is negentropy concerns "the uncertainty that remains after the message has been received." (See Hayles, "Self-reflexive Metaphors in Maxwell's Demon and Shannon's Choice," 58.) This divergence makes no difference on the physical and mathematical level, but it brings out different perspectives for interpreting the cultural implications of information and entropy. As Hayles analyzes elsewhere, whereas the interpretation of Brillouin and his followers such as Wiener suggests that information constitutes an orderly force against the chaotic tendency of our universe, Shannon's interpretation, in retrospect, foreshows the notion that entropy is not necessarily antithetical to order but may lead a system towards self-organization and increasing complexity. (See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 102-103.) In this chapter of my thesis, my argument mainly revolves around Brillouin's heuristic, with a focus on how information shapes our environments and what impact it has made. But as I showed in the Chapter One, in his later epics like "The Sun: Messiah," Haizi is aware of the dialectics between chaos and order, which had been anticipated by Shannon's heuristic and would manifest themselves more clearly in those theories of non-linear systems: chaos may also serve as the source of order.

idea that information stands for negentropy and therefore for order, greatly influences the understanding of information. The same idea also permeates the spectrum of the systems sciences, most paradigmatically in cybernetics, a discipline which aims at maintaining the order of systems through information-oriented control and communication.

Haizi's era was significantly marked by a global enthusiasm for information. In the United States at the time, what Ronald R. Kline calls the "cybernetics moment"—the transdisciplinary flourishing of cybernetics and information theory from the 1940s to the 1970s—already came to an end after facilitating a wide range of scientific ideas and technological inventions. It is an end not in the sense of vanishing from the horizon but in the sense of completely dissolving into it. Afterwards a utopian information narrative aroused as its simplified, even blind version, which we can observe in the popular discourse of "information age."[124] In line with the arrival of the information age, early postsocialist China, which had just elevated science and technology to the core of national construction, also paid particular attention to informatization. Although China was far less developed than the United States with respect to the degree of informatization, it probably provides a more paradigmatic manifestation of the relationship between information and order, from an historical view: after decades of social and political turmoil, the chaotic country was in dire need of information in order to embark on a path toward a negentropic utopia.

China's thirst for joining the course of informatization is epitomized by the nationwide popularity of futurology as articulated, in particular, by Alvin Toffler in his best-selling book *The Third Wave*. This provocative and visionary analysis provides a novel account of human history and future in terms of three waves of transformation: the arrival of agricultural civilization as the

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[124] See Ronald R. Kline, *The Cybernetics Moment*.

First Wave, the impact of the industrial revolution as the Second Wave, and the profound change since the mid-twentieth century as the Third Wave. Specific to Toffler's characterization of the Third Wave, a fundamental—though not exclusive—clue to understanding this process is the development of communication means and the consequences it has produced: with the multiplication of technological media and the acceleration of information transmission, the Third Wave has been creating an instant, flexible, dynamic model of communication and hence subverting the established structures and organizations of family, industry, and national state. In discussing the philosophical foundation of the Third Wave, Toffler notes that, as much as the mechanical worldview supported by Newtonian dynamics dominated the Second Wave period, the Third Wave was built upon holistic thinking and the idea of feedback, a central concept of cybernetics and systems theory.[125] Right after the release of Toffler's work in 1980, Third Wave theory started to circulate in China, first through translation serialized in a journal and later published in its entire book, with even a documentary adaption. Toffler's bold yet promising prospects for future society—especially his advice for China to promote the Third Wave mode[126]—not only caused a huge sensation among the public readers, but also received attention from reformist political leaders, which directly led to the futurologist's visit to China. Toffler's theories exerted profound influence on China's reform: it inspired the Chinese government to launch the "New Technological Revolution" 新技术革命 and even contributed to the birth of the "863 Program" 863 计划—a state-led plan for the research and development of information

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[125] Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), especially chapters 1, 13, and 21.

[126] Ibid, chapter 23. Of particular relevance to China is that Toffler argues that the Third Wave, though distinct from the Second Wave, shares common ground with the First Wave, thus First Wave countries like China are encouraged to detour around the industrialization mode, which is prevalent in advanced Second Wave countries but incompatible with their situations, and instead directly evolve into the Third Wave era.

technology among other forms of high technology.[127]

Another indication of the appeal of the information age at that time was the revitalization of the systems sciences in China after about three decades of suppression and neglect, which specifically reflects an attempt to establish an information utopia by offering methodological and institutional support. In response to the national reform agenda, Qian Xuesen, as China's foremost scientist and engineer, first called for drawing on certain applied fields of the systems sciences (e.g., early cybernetics and operation research) to develop "systems engineering" 系统工程, and on this basis he later endeavored to found a unified and universal "systems science" 系统科学 by incorporating and integrating more theoretical branches of the systems sciences (e.g., systems theory, dissipative system, synergetics).[128] In terms of its practical dimension, Qian's ambition resided in transforming all sectors involved in the national development into highly organized and efficient systems, and to this end, he paid particular attention to the role of information. For example, "social (systems) engineering" 社会（系统）工程, a pivotal component of his "system engineering," is expected to achieve the optimal organization and regulation of Chinese societies, which entails the support of different instruments and facilities of

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[127] For details about how Toffler's work was introduced into China and how it informed China's policymaking in post-Mao era, see Julian Gewirtz, "The Futurists of Beijing: Alvin Toffler, Zhao Ziyang, and China's 'New Technological Revolution', 1979-1991," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 1 (2019): 115-140.

[128] Qian Xusen's notion of "systems engineering," "systems science," and their relationship can be widely found in articles included in Qian Xuesen 钱学森 et al., *Lun xitong gongcheng* 论系统工程（增订本） [On Systems Engineering, rev. ed.] (Changsha: Hunan kexue jieshu chubanshe, 1988). See, for example, Qian Xuesen 钱学森, Xu Guozhi 许国志, and Wang Shouyun 王寿云, "Zuzhi guanli de jishu—xitong gongcheng" 组织管理的技术——系统工程 [The Technology for Organization and Management], in *Lun xitong gongcheng*, 7-27; Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Dali fazhan xitong gongcheng jinzao jianli xitong kexue de tixi" 大力发展系统工程 尽早建立系统科学的体系 [Strengthening the Development of Systems Engineering, Establishing Systems Science as Early as Possible], in *Lun xitong gongcheng*, 173-188; Qian Xuesen 钱学森, "Xitong gongcheng yu xitong kexue de tixi"系统工程与系统科学的体系 [The System of Systems Engineering and Systems Science], in *Lun xitong gongcheng*, 532-553.

information collection, transmission, and computation, such as computer and network.[129] These projects suggest that access to information and employment of information developed in tandem in Haizi's era, together ushering China into a new technopolitical horizon. The futurological and systems discourses and practices around the 1980s, as Xudong Zhang states, popularized among the Chinese masses "notions of the information boom and the 'postindustrial turn'," and conveyed to them "a strong sense of a historical break and a historical opportunity."[130]

There is no doubt that Haizi was acquainted with futurology, systems engineering and science, among other intellectual and practical efforts to guide China into the information age. Around the mid-1980s, futurological writings and related video, due to the endorsement of Chinese government, ranked among the recommended materials of study in official institutions. In response to this call, the research society of the legal systems theory with which Haizi affiliated acquired *The Third Wave* for research reference, and CUPSL organized screenings of the documentary based on the book for some of its cadres and faculty.[131] Haizi not merely read Toffler's works and attended the screening event, but also wrote a review for the university newspaper. In summarizing Toffler's theory, Haizi particularly identifies the "information revolution" as the hallmark of the Third Wave. While refusing to recognize the Third Wave as a "scientific concept"—this is more like an expedient wording since only orthodox Marxism enjoyed the status of "scientific" ideology at that time—he calls attention to Toffler's advocacy that China should concentrate its industrialization process on information industries rather than retracing the Western path of industrialization.[132] Furthermore, Haizi and some of his colleagues

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[129] See Qian Xuesen 钱学森 and Wu Jiapei 乌家培, "Zuzhi guanli shehui zhuyi jianshe de jishu shehui gongcheng" 组织管理社会主义建设的技术——社会工程 [Technology for Organizing and Managing Socialist Construction: Social Engineering], in *Lun xitong gongcheng*, 28-39.

[130] Xudong Zhang, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms*, 39.

[131] Xiong Jining, "Haizi yu xitong faxue," 22-23.

[132] Haizi 海子, "'Disan ci langchao' bushi yige kexue gainian" "第三次浪潮"不是一个科学概念

at CUPSL, such as Xiong Jining and Chang Yuan, also participated in the current of applying the Three Theories among other systems sciences to legal studies. As Xiong points out, this academic current first emerged as a response to Qian's call for conducting "legal systems engineering" 法治系统工程 and later, under the efforts of legal scholars, evolved into the a broader discipline named "legal systems science" 系统法学. Drawing on the approaches and technologies generated by the systems sciences—which concern the use of information feedback mechanism and the way to facilitate information transmission, respectively—legal systems science attempts to develop a holistic, dynamic, quantifiable approach to analyzing and predicting legal systems.[133] Haizi used to contribute a few essays of legal studies before shifting his primary focus to poetry writing, and certain of his colleagues continued to be active as experts in this field. Therefore, the poet should not be a stranger to an information-facilitated technopolitical vision.

Although Haizi's academic activities testify to his long-standing interest in the relationship between information and the order of systems, his epics, set in a primordial venue and untethered from modern imagery, may seem to be incompatible with Toffler's futurological projection or Qian's technocratic aspirations at first glance. However, a similar techno-political vista can be readily discerned in these poems in light of the informatic interpretation of the elements they provide. One of the motifs of Haizi's epics, as has been demonstrated in Chapter One, is how the epic worlds as cybernetic systems can restore themselves to homeostasis, either through gradual adjustment or an abrupt change. What is at stake in these processes is the flow of

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["The Third Wave" is not a Scientific Concept], in *Haizi yu fada*, 257.

    [133] See Xiong Jining 熊继宁 et al., "Xin de tansuo: Xitong faxue pai de jueqi" 新的探索——系统法学派的崛起 [New Exploration: The Rise of the School of Legal Systems Science], *Zhengfa luntan* 政法论坛,1985 (03): 62-68. For more systematic and detailed introduction to legal systems science, see Xiong Jining 熊继宁, *Xitong faxue daolun* 系统法学导论 [Introduction to Legal Systems Science] (Beijing: Zhishi chanquan chubanshe, 2006).

elements or information, which can either guarantee the operation of the feedback mechanism or trigger the emergence of a new order. In the three river epics, clearly, it is the water flowing into the channels that rescues the fluvial ecosystem from degradation and steers it towards a dynamic state. In the same vein, the role of fire in the sun series is perhaps less conspicuous but equally important: on the one hand, the fire destroys the solid structure of the established world; yet on the other, from the ruins of the old world the fire also gives form to a new world as substitution. No lengthy textual analysis is needed here since the last chapter has detailed the cybernetic operation of Haizi's epic worlds, from which one can sufficiently observe the role of elements/information. Just consider the climax when the overflow of elements in the decaying world eventually brings about the rebirth and flourishing of all things, creating a negentropic utopia against the entropic tendency:

> …Water, O blue water.
> Henceforth I rebuild my mysterious heart, a mysterious life of the north, using the turtle
>   and the snake.
> Henceforth I rebuild my destiny, my rustic existence, using the graceless eyes of the
>   frog
> […]
> This is water, water.
> It raises its head and looks at me…I will let you flow through my body,
> Let humans on the riverbank die and resurrect in their own hearts, times and times
>
> ……水噢蓝的水
> 从此我用龟与蛇重建我神秘的内心，神秘的北方的生命
> 从此我用青蛙愚鲁的双目来重建我的命运，质朴的生存
> ［……］
> 便是水、水
> 抬起头来，看着我……我要让你流过我的身体
> 让河岸上人类在自己心上死去多少回又重新诞生 [134]
>
> The viscera used to be hollow. The viscera of the rock
> Suddenly burst into flames.

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[134] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 293-294.

The viscera caught fire. The viscera have been borrowed by the sun's hunger.
The viscera are burning, being consumed by the sun. It is what belongs to the fire that
Makes everything grow.

内脏本来是空洞的　岩石的内脏
忽然燃烧起来
内脏起火　内脏已被太阳的饥饿借走
内脏燃烧　被太阳使用　是火的
使万物生长 [135]

It should be noted that although the order generated by elements/information counteracts the tendency of entropy, the ramifications of the order are not self-evidently beneficial or detrimental. Even a cursory historical review of some early branches of the systems sciences is sufficient to ascertain that they have a sizable foundation in military practices and have been continuously shaped by wartime ideology. In this view, from the beginning, the very order that the systems sciences try to construct through the use of information may be different from what we envision it to be today. In examining what he calls "Manichean sciences" (e.g., cybernetics, operation research, and game theory), Peter Galison argues that these theories, paradigmatically cybernetics, are built upon an ontology that originated from wartime research and development, an ontology that treats the object in question as a mechanized enemy without human attributes but possessing intelligence and brought it into a battlefield riddled with continuous calculation.[136] In a similar vein, Andy Pickering depicts the so-called "cyborg sciences" (which also includes the triad Galison mentions) and "cyborg objects" (items involved in preceding theories like the computer and the antiaircraft predictor) as the product of the "World War II regime," which established a scientific-military-industrial complex and destabilized the

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[135] Ibid, 957.

[136] Peter Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 228-266.

human/nonhuman division.[137] Across the Pacific, systems engineering and science also had a close relationship with the wartime legacy. According to Wang Hongzhe's historical review, it was strategic weapon scientists and engineers who initially imported the systems sciences from the United States into China and promoted their development under the Mao regime. As the central government shifted its technoscientific focus from the military industry to the economic reform in the post-Mao period, these strategic weaponeers started to pursue civilian applications of these theories in the service of the socialist modernization. The military origin and essence of the systems sciences led to the fact that the process of informatization in early postsocialist China, no matter how it claims itself to be economically oriented, fundamentally unfold under the political shadow, though in a different way from that in the West.[138] History shows that the aspiration of training Maxwell's demon to be a generous regulator eventuates in many cases with the begetting of a cunning dictator in whose hands information readily becomes an invisible and efficient measure to manipulate society.

Haizi should not be construed simply as an information optimist or pessimist. In reading the elements in his epic poems, it is important to be simultaneously alert to their potential of becoming a means of control and attentive to their capacity to generate order. What the flow of elements induces in his epics is, most of the time, a hybrid experience of ecstasy and distress, liberation and helplessness. On many occasions, Haizi reveals his apprehensions about the elements as well as his vigilance against their dangerous tendencies. The following three excerpts from three different epic poems of Haizi can well testify to my claim:

I am held by the primal elements.

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[137] Andy Pickering, "Cyborg History and the World War II Regime," *Perspectives on Science* 3, no. 1 (1995): 1-48.

[138] Wang, "Zhong su kongzhi lun geming yu shehui zhuyi xinxi chuanbo jishu zhengzhi de zhuanxing," 280-310.

His imprisonment and disintegration of me, his gloom.
A flock of sheep, hay wagons, horses, and autumn,
All jolted together in his prison cart

我被原始元素所持有
他对我的囚禁、瓦解　他的阴郁
羊群　干草车　马　秋天
都在他的囚车上颠簸[139]

Genghis Khan, we,
Genghis Khan, you and me,
Bound to the same chain of fire,
    Around the empty,
    peaceful sky of the North,
Spin like mad.

成吉思汗　我们
成吉思汗　我与你
锁在同一条火链子上
    绕着空荡荡的
    北方的　和平的天空
疯狂地旋转[140]

But water, water,
The love of the beloved,
As for an axe is the bleeding of both the forest and my knee,
As for a fish is the bleeding of both the fish itself and my harpoon,
As for a birth is the bleeding of both you and me.

但是水、水
心上人的爱情
像斧头是森林流血也是我的膝盖流血
像鱼儿是自己流血也是我的鱼叉流血
像生育是你流血也是我流血[141]

These grotesque scenes are where elements, or information, expose their Janus face: as a form-

determining force, it is utterly free to tear individuals apart and simultaneously confine them to a

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[139] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 726.
[140] Ibid, 963.
[141] Ibid, 296.

specific pattern, secretly enslaving them for the sake of the systems optimization that might stand fundamentally against individual wills. As shown in the first excerpt, under these circumstances, all things, from an individual animal to the general climate, are loaded into the "prison cart," a metaphor that illustrates at once the assignment to a particular position and the involvement in the systemic functioning. Similarly, in the second stanza, the fire not merely sweeps different individuals that it strings together into an ecstatic state at the verge of losing control; it also appears as a chain *per se*, where everyone is bound to their designated positions. By substituting blood for water, the third fragment associates the element with both parturition and slaughter, and hence invests it with both generative and lethal connotations. All things involved in blood/water are gradually dissolved into the flow of elements, elements that bring them to life yet also deprive them of freedom. To some degree, the scenes above are perhaps even more appalling than pure chaos, as Galison concludes his article with a foreboding tone: "But perhaps disorganization, noise, and uncontrollability are not the greatest disasters to befall us. Perhaps our calamities are built largely from our efforts at superorganization, silence, and control."[142]

Around the same time when Haizi was working on his final poetic reflection on the emergent information age, Gilles Deleuze noted that we had headed from the Foucauldian "disciplinary societies" into what he defines as "societies of control," which turns out to be a prescient diagnosis of the information age. This transformation is characterized by the fact that the segmented, enclosed, stringent regulation has given way to the pervasive, dynamic, automatic regulation. The former social formation bases its governance on "signature" and "number," which shape one's existence at the individual and collective levels, respectively. The latter, by contrast, avails itself of all kinds of "codes," which determine "access to information, or reject it"

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[142] Galison, "The Ontology of the Enemy," 266.

and turn individuals into "'*dividuals*,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or '*banks*.'"[143] If disciplinary institutions structure the societies of Maoist China, then the information-centered technocratic ideology and technoscientific facilities instead wrap post-Maoist China's societies in an ineluctable web of control. This prospect is at the same time a utopian vision and a dystopian one, both a guarantee of efficiency and a source of bondage. Its dual nature holds sway across Haizi's lifelong exploration of information/elements, throughout his academic inquiry, religious cultivation, and poetic creation that can be united by a series of associations and substitutions. Isn't the supernatural interaction desired by *qigong* techniques the culmination of the remote communication that information technology pursues? Isn't the bumping-in-a-prison-cart depicted in the poem quoted above the prediction of the optimal regulation that systems engineering aims for? Haizi's aspiration and trepidation about information/elements might have remained a vague perception thirty years ago, but it constitutes a strong articulation of the condition in today's China.

Notoriously vexing, Haizi's concept of the element resists any singular interpretation. To understand it from an informatic view is, at best, one of the possible ways to unpack its multiple meanings. However, by associating the elements with information, we are also able to illuminate the enigmatic quality of the elements and the crucial role they play in re-organizing the decaying worlds in need of renewal. As the "soul" of Haizi's epic worlds, the element, if not a poetic equivalent of the cybernetic concept of information, at least partially derives inspiration from it. No less important, this approach also proves to be rewarding in that, using the concept of information as intermediary, we have brought Haizi's literary imagination into dialogue with his

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[143] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (Winter, 1992): 5.

religious belief, social concerns, and academic interests. It shows how a concept, in its cross-regional and cross-cultural journey, can mutate into different variants and thrive in different domains.

Chapter Three

Bodies Dissolved, Bodies Confined:

Posthuman Subjectivity under the Postsocialist Condition

> At present, posthumanism may appear variously as a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man's recurrent self-hate. Yet posthumanism may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend.
> — Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?"

> There is a myth system waiting to become a political language to ground one way of looking at science and technology and challenging the informatics of domination—in order to act potently.
> — Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"

In the late afternoon of 26 March 1989, after lingering somewhere around Shanhaiguan station for hours, Haizi eventually committed suicide by laying himself on a set of railroad tracks. With his body being crushed by the train's wheels, the poet terminated his life at the age of twenty-five with many literary projects left unfinished. During the last three days of his life, Haizi wrote a number of death notes mentioning the bizarre and terrifying hallucinations that had haunted him, in which he saw his academic and religious fellows remotely controlling and torturing his mind.[144] While Haizi's infirm mental condition was unknown and his premature death unexpected by his friends and colleagues, his activities and works might be said, from a retrospective view, to have presaged this miserable ending. His epics, especially the later ones, exhibited an obsession with distorted, fractured, mutilated, and stretched bodies. At the same time, he was engaged in *qigong* cultivation, which, according to the general impression, aims at blurring the fixed demarcation between the self and the world, the spirituality and reality. All

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[144] For the details about Haizi's suicide and last words, see Liaoyuan, *Haizi pingzhuan*, 280-292.

these imaginings or representations of bodies are closely related to his long-term reflections on human subjectivity—whether consciously or unconsciously. Clearly, before his death, Haizi had been exploring a novel understanding of the subject that he envisioned could take the place of established notions of the subject.

One of the most important contributions of the systems sciences is its repudiation of the entrenched notion of the human as being grounded in Cartesian subjectivity. By the 1980s, when Haizi was proceeding with his writing projects, cybernetics, informatics, and related disciplines had nourished, in the West, a myriad of new figures of human bodies, particularly in popular culture such as science fiction, which would later be incorporated into the theoretical discourses of posthumanism. By contrast, at the same time in China, it is generally agreed that humanism took the center stage of the intellectual landscape, calling for the creation of a new subject in accordance with the transcendental conditions of the New Era. But given that also during this time we see the rise in systems sciences, along with the techno-scientific advances and their attendant philosophical implications as well as the political prospects they entail, there is the possibility to direct the understanding of the human towards the posthuman. In other words, it is not implausible to postulate that early postsocialist China, profoundly influenced by cybernetic discourse, may actually conceal the overlooked origin of posthumanism, an origin that even Haizi himself was not aware of but can be constructed with the benefit of hindsight.

The unconventional consideration of a possibly repressed history of posthumanism rooted in 1980s China may be attributed to several factors. First, the presumption that China had largely lagged behind the West in terms of scientific discovery and technological innovation by the 1980s, obscures the country's significant involvement in technoscience-related cultural issues, which constitute an indispensable part of posthuman discourses. Second, Chinese Enlightenment discourse revolving around humanism has been ascribed a central role in shaping the intellectual

liberation of the New Era. Yet for the same reason, it also overshadows the equally important roles that scientific and technological discourses and traditional Chinese culture—both of which intersect with the central concerns of posthumanism—play in fostering a new culture against the legacy of the Mao period. Third, the priority of high culture like poetry over popular culture like science fiction has hindered for a long time a serious academic investigation of the latter, which is often considered as a foremost literary genre offering prescient insights into the posthuman predicament we are now trapped in. While nowadays we are witnessing changes in the phenomena mentioned above, there still has been no scholarship so far that locates Haizi in the discussion on posthumanism. As such, the potential for a reexamination of the work of Haizi—a third-world scholar who echoes the cybernetic attraction in the West, an intellectual in the Enlightenment era who derives inspiration from traditional culture, and a poet who engages himself with the popular cultural trends such as the *qigong* fashion—to dismantle the current literary inquiry is still to be explored.

This chapter sets out to comprehend Haizi's notion of the subject by examining the emergence, metamorphosis, destruction, and resurrection of the various characters in his epic worlds within the posthuman framework. I plan to reveal how Haizi's depiction of these characters diverges dramatically from the popular humanistic conception of subjectivity in his time, in what sense the characters align with notions of the posthuman subject, though defined by different scholars in different ways, and finally, how they contribute to our reflection on postsocialist posthumanism, which can be considered as a pertinent term to describe the human condition in contemporary Chinese society. While the crisis of the classical subject and the formulation of a new subject existed as an enduring motif throughout Haizi's corpus, my analysis of his works will mainly follow a linear thread in order to illustrate the evolution of his musings on human subjectivity.

Humanistic Discourse and Its Dissent

Humanistic formulation reflected in the discussions on "humanity," "human," "subject," and "subjectivity," as He Guimei contends, is "the most striking, long-lasting set of discursive formation" of China's Reform Era.[145] Shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese intellectuals started to reckon with the intellectual lessons of the revolutionary era with recourse to humanism, which was previously dismissed by the official regime as inherently antithetical to Marxism. Drawing on Marxist humanism—in particular early Marx's theory of alienation— ranking official ideologists of the Chinese Communist Party like Zhou Yang 周扬 and Wang Ruoshui 王若水 started to reflect on "socialist alienation" and endeavored to bring humanistic concerns back into official Marxist discourse.[146] This political and ideological thawing rightly found its vivid articulation in the so-called "scar literature" 伤痕文学, which gave vent to the distortions and mutilations of "humanity" during the revolutionary era. The theoretical concerns with human conditions went beyond the battlefield of political ideology, moving towards the philosophical and literary fields through the conjunction between humanity and subjectivity. In favor of the philosophy of Kant rather than that of Hegel, Li Zehou 李泽厚, a leading Chinese thinker at the time, developed his subjectivity-centered aesthetics. While considering the subject at the intersection between the techno-social and cultural-psychological formations, collective and individual nature, Li highlighted the internal and individual dimensions of the subject,

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[145] He Guimei 贺桂梅, *Xin qimeng zhishi dang'an: 80 niandai zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 新启蒙知识档案：80 年代中国文化研究 [The Archive of New Enlightenment Knowledge: A Study of Chinese Culture in the 1980s] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010), 51. The following summary of the humanistic discourse in the 1980s China is primarily informed by the chapter 1 of He's work.

[146] See, for example, Wang Ruoshui 王若水, "Wei rendao zhuyi bianhu," 为人道主义辩护 [In Defense of Humanism], in *Wei rendao zhuyi bianhu* 为人道主义辩护 [In Defense of Humanism] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1986), 217-233.

thereby promoting humanity to a privileged position.[147] Li's aesthetics greatly inspired his contemporaries, among whom the most representative figure in literary criticism might be Liu Zaifu 刘再复. Liu elevated subjectivity to the status of guiding principle and central theme of literary creation. On the basis of proposing a dichotomy between practical and spiritual subjectivity, he laid emphasis both on the human's role as the practitioner of history and his spiritual potency.[148]

These intricate threads encompass fields including political ideology, philosophical aesthetics, and literary criticism, with their focuses ranging widely from resuscitating the repressed humanity to establishing a new form of subjectivity. Yet, beneath these debates and explorations rests a shared demand for a rational, conscious, autonomous, enabling subject—to put it simply, a quintessentially modern subject envisioned by Descartes, "one of the principal architects of humanism."[149] China, a country burdened with Confucian and socialist legacies, as Jing Wang points out, was a belated advocate of such form of subjectivity in contrast to their Western counterparts, who were already pushing beyond the primacy of the human subject to pursue a non-Cartesian subjectivity heralded by the holistic self in oriental aesthetics.[150] The importance of this pursuit was manifested in two aspects. First, however immature or futile their

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[147] See Li Zehou 李泽厚, "Kangde zhexue yu jianli zhuti xing lungang," 康德哲学与主体性论纲 [Theses on Kantian Philosophy and the Construction of Subjectivity], in *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan* 李泽厚哲学美学文选 [Selected Essays on Philosophy and Aesthetics of Li Zehou] (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1985), 148-163; Li Zehou 李泽厚, "Guanyu zhuti xing de buchong shuoming" 关于主体性的补充说明 [Additional Notes on Subjectivity], in *Li Zehou zhexue meixue wenxuan*, 164-178.

[148] See Liu Zaifu 刘再复, "Lun wenxue de zhuti xing" 论文学的主体性 [On the Subjectivity of Literature], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论, no.6 (1985)：11-26; Liu Zaifu 刘再复, "Lun wenxue de zhuti xing (xu)" 论文学的主体性(续) [On the Subjectivity of Literature (Continued)], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论, no.1 (1986): 3-19.

[149] Neil Badmington, "Introduction: Approaching Posthumanism," in *Posthumanism*, ed. Neil Badmington (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 3

[150] Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 195-196.

proposals may sound, Chinese intellectuals addressed these issues with philosophical seriousness, expecting to remedy the absence of the individual's onto-epistemological basis in Chinese tradition. Second, they invested immense political passion in championing the humanistic discourse, hoping to incorporate it into the agenda of political reform.

Haizi initiated his writing career during the heyday of this renewed interest in humanism in China, when Li Zehou's and Liu Zaifu's theories of subjectivity were sweeping China. Yet, he never participated directly in the debates over subjectivity in the philosophical, theoretical, and literary milieus, still less identifying himself as a defender of humanism. Haizi's literary theory, with which his theoretical writings are mainly concerned, is actually at odds with the dominant humanistic notion of literature, and in these writings of his we can glimpse his views on subjectivity. As discussed in the first chapter, Haizi's poetic exploration starts from the individual subjective expression and aims at the objective manifestation of the whole, thereby reaching a dynamic synthesis of lyric and epic. His poetic formula, to recapitulate, is to ascend the King's throne through the Prince's struggle and compromise. However, it is dangerous to hastily equate the two ends of his poetic project. While an individual subject has the potential to capture the world in its entirety or become the symbol of the whole world, this hardly means that he naturally has a seamless identification with the world in his quest. Instead, his conflict and reconciliation with the world function as the driving force for the majority of Haizi's epics, thereby shaping the subjects as relational, metastable entities embedded within larger systems.

In an essay in commemoration of Haizi, Luo Yihe reasserts the poet's Prince-to-King poetic formula by comparing his conception of the subject with a figure from the Hindu tradition:

> There is a terrifying (and perhaps glorious) figure in the ancient Indian canon: the Vedic deity. Being simultaneously plural and singular, he has one body as all things and thus

has all bodies, all equated to and mixed with each other. This may be at the same time a solution and probably also a disintegration. In fulfilling his conception of the epic—the conception of "I am considering the authentic epic"—Haizi embarks on the road of the "equator": with the biographical and emotional elements of romantic poets, he goes straight to the realm of Van Gogh, Nietzsche, and Hölderlin, and then bursts into foundational poetry—epic poetry.

印度古书里存在着一个可怕的（也可能是美好的）形象：吠陀神。他杂而一，以一个身子为一切又有一切身，互相混同又混乱。这可能是一种解决之道又可能是一种瓦解。——海子的诗歌道路在完成史诗构想——"我考虑真正的史诗"的情况下，决然走上了一条"赤道"：从浪漫主义诗人自传和激情的因素直取梵高、尼采、荷尔德林的境地而突入背景诗歌——史诗。[151]

Luo seems to make reference to—though he does not make it explicitly—the concept of *bráhman* in Hinduism. Central to the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, *bráhman* is "the ultimate unifying and integrating principle of the universe," which has "two inseparable aspects or modes of existence: *nirguṇa* [without attributes] and *saguṇa* [with qualities], impersonal and personal, indeterminable and self-determining."[152] The idea that *bráhman* exists as simultaneously the One and the various manifestations provides Luo with a quintessential image of the subject of compound identities. Drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic terms, Luo claims elsewhere that a psychic apparatus should be grasped within the dynamic structures of "id—ego—superego" and "unconscious—preconscious—conscious." The failure of this dynamic usually intensifies the egocentric tendency and, as such, facilitates the binary differentiation between "the great self" 大我 and "the small self" 小我, a differentiation that strives to remedy the isolated tendency of the self by diversifying its orientation but ironically ends up perpetuating it since the insurmountable discrepancy between two ends of this differentiation frustrates any regulating mechanism.[153] Luo's homage to Haizi demonstrates his admiration of Haizi's poetics as a measure to transcend

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[151] Luo Yihe, "Haizi shengya," 871-872.

[152] Haridas Chaudhuri, "The Concept of Brahman in Hindu Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 4, no. 1 (1954): 47-48.

[153] Luo Yihe 骆一禾, "Meishen" 美神 [God of Beauty], in *Luo Yihe shi quanbian*, 839.

the narcissistic hallucination of the liberal subject. Although Luo's analogy is merely a rudimentary adumbration of subjectivity in Haizi's works, yet to be substantiated by supplying textual analyses, one can still get a glimpse of Haizi's deviation from the prevailing call for the unitary liberal subject at that time.[154]

We can easily trace Haizi's notion of subjectivity to a wealth of intellectual resources well known to literary scholars and critics, such as traditional culture, religious doctrine, romantic poetics, and revolutionary legacy. Yet, few previous scholars have thus far touched upon the role that the systems sciences may play in encouraging Haizi's reconceptualization of subjectivity, primarily because Haizi, despite his acquaintance with systems discourses, never explicitly invokes them in his discussion or depiction of human subjects. However, it is not unwarranted to assume this theoretical linkage as the systems sciences in the 1980s actually participated in shaping the conception of subjectivity in many fields that Haizi maintained a keen interest in, such as *qigong* doctrines. Through the mediation of the systems sciences, we can further associate Haizi's notion of subjectivity to more recent theoretical responses to humanism that can be broadly defined as posthumanism, which, in its multiple origins, is inextricably entangled with the systems sciences.

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[154] It must be acknowledged that, rather than being completely ignorant or antagonistic to the "great self," those cherishing humanistic subjectivity in postsocialist China sometimes also sought to reconcile the split between this conceptual opposition. In discussing the ultimate goal of literary writers, Liu Zaifu, for instance, contends that their subjectivities are supposed to follow the progressive path from "self-assertion" 自我 via "self-transcendence" 超我 towards "self-dissolution" 无我 (translation from Jing Wang), where the subject erases its boundaries with the object and dissolves into infinity. But Liu's utopian vision of the "threefold evolution of the subject," Jing Wang states, reveals nothing more than a reverie insomuch as it never explicates "how it overcomes the contradictions inherent in its three subject-positions and inaugurates the perfect subject who already knows the end of its own evolution." In contrast to Liu Zaifu, Haizi, who consistently works to construct a pluralistic single self or monistic multiple self, furnishes us with more solid accounts of the free shifting and transformation of the subject, which we will cover in detail later. See Liu, "Lun wenxue de zhuti xing," 24; Wang, *High Culture Fever*, 204.

Notoriously thorny, posthumanism encompasses a diverse terrain of intellectual currents. It ranges from the antihumanism bred by structuralism and poststructuralism in the mid-twentieth century to the critical and cultural posthumanism in response to the techno-scientific advances reshaping the notion of the human and its techno-idealist variant also known as transhumanism, both of which reached a pinnacle in the late twentieth century, to the philosophical posthumanism that has flourished since the twenty-first century in onto-epistemological alliance with New Materialism. In addition to this historic-typological classification, this research field can also be divided, by different criteria, into different branches, such as popular versus critical posthumanism, affirmative versus skeptical posthumanism, analytical versus synthetic posthumanisms, theoretical versus practical posthumanism, and so on.[155] But whether in terms of the historical establishment of posthumanism or the wide spectrum its covers, to quote Sherryl Vint's words, "scholarship referred to collectively as science and technology studies (STS) is as important to the emergence of posthumanism as are philosophical critiques of humanism."[156] On this point, the systems sciences undoubtedly make important contributions to the development of posthumanism. As many scholars have observed in either their historiography-centered or theory-based studies, cybernetics, informatics, systems theory and related theories strongly

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[155] There is no unified history and classification of posthumanism. For specific account, see, for example, Andy Miah, "A Critical History of Posthumanism," in *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, eds. Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 71-94; Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), chapter 1; Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), chapter 2; Francesca Ferrando, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and relations," in *Existenz* 8, no. 2 (2013): 26-32; Matthew E. Gladden, *Sapient Circuits and Digitalized Flesh: The Organization as Locus of Technological Posthumanization* (Indianapolis: Defragmenter Media, 2016), Part 1; and Veronica Hollinger, "Historicizing Posthumanism," in *After the Human: Culture, Theory and Criticism in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 15-30.

[156] Sherryl Vint, "Introduction," in *After the Human: Culture, Theory and Criticism in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3.

resonated with and even directly informed post-WWII French theories, which laid the foundation for antihumanism.[157] Donna Haraway employs the figure of cyborg—or cybernetic organism—as a central metaphor to illustrate a promising form of posthuman subjectivity, which destabilizes the boundaries between human and animal, organism and machine, physical and non-physical, thus promoting new political possibilities for current social systems.[158] In her mapping of the three waves of cybernetics, N. Katherine Hayles reveals how the cybernetic reconceptualization of the subject, with a theoretical focus gradually moving from feedback to reflexivity to virtuality, eventually brought about the emergence of a menacing form of posthumanism—or more appropriately, transhumanism, which means that the human can exist as an information pattern without being necessarily connected to a material body.[159] Rosi Braidotti's philosophical approach to posthumanism, though not relying primarily on the systems sciences, also takes the technological condition it engenders as a key prerequisite for devising a new subjectivity.[160] While it is impossible to exhaust all the theoretical resources of posthumanism, these oft-cited references in posthuman studies already demonstrate the close link between posthumanism and the systems sciences.

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[157] See, for example, Céline Lafontaine, "The Cybernetic Matrix of French Theory," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 5 (2007): 27-46; Lydia Liu, "The Cybernetic Unconscious: Rethinking Lacan, Poe, and French Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (Winter 2010), 288-320; Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, "From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi- Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 2011): 96-126; Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Cybernetics is an Antihumanism: Advanced Technologies and the Rebellion Against the Human Condition," *Metanexus*, September 1, 2011, https://metanexus.net/h-cybernetics-antihumanism-advanced-technologies-and-rebellion-against-human-condition/; Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), chapter 1.

[158] See Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

[159] See Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*.

[160] See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

Given the multiplicity of posthumanism, it is difficult to formulate a definition that is generic enough to accommodate the various narratives and theorizations while at the same time precise enough to grasp some specific features of the field. Francesca Ferrando's recent efforts to provide an umbrella categorization of posthumanism, however, could be helpful to our discussion. According to her summary, posthumanism encompasses three correlated postures: post-humanism, which deconstructs the universal understanding of the perfect Man; post-anthropocentrism, which decentralizes the human from its privileged position over other species; and post-dualism, the subversion of the engrained dualistic thinking to consider identity.[161] Ferrando's intention is to delineate an exclusive form of posthumanism that distinguishes itself from antihumanism or transhumanism, two intellectual movements which are closely associated with posthumanism yet sometimes shadow the foundational concerns of the latter. For Ferrando, antihumanism deconstructs humanism by revealing the nature of the human as a sociocultural construct, which nonetheless still reflects an entrenched binary framework it carries per se. In the case of transhumanism, its focus on human enhancement through scientific and technological measures intensifies rather than contradicts the humanistic outlook. By comparison, the posthuman vision is not only to displace the humanistic subjectivity favored by transhumanism but also to transcend the dualistic paradigm implicit in antihumanism.[162] In this case, the three dimensions that Ferrando has proposed offers a conceptual framework for us to bring the major concerns of posthuman discourse into dialogue with Haizi and his epic poetry. I hold that the same concerns implicated in the three dimensions also haunted Haizi and thus constitute promising perspectives to reinterpret his works, without precluding either Haizi's predictable embrace of antihumanism or his potential subordination to transhumanism, or simply

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[161] Francesca Ferrando, *Philosophical Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 54.
[162] Ibid, 27-53.

establishing an unreflective identification between Haizi's notion of subjectivity and an idealized posthuman subject, which conceives of "a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity."[163] In other words, conducting a posthuman interpretation of Haizi requires on the one hand taking into account the multiple intellectual tendencies cross-pollinated with posthumanism in order to comprehend the existential or even pathological conditions shown in his works, and on the other setting the idealized posthuman vision as a reference to awaken the positive potential of his works.

In short, Haizi's poetics, which centers on the unity of the Prince and the King, diverges from the humanism pervading early postsocialist China and, particularly through the latent mediation of the systems sciences, resonates with the emerging posthumanism in the West. Whereas Haizi remained rather reticent towards either humanism or posthuman issues on the theoretical level, his creative works, mediated by technoscientific discourse, vividly manifest his awareness of the limitations of humanism, and his careful attention to posthumanism.

Genealogy of Posthuman Figures

Haizi's long-standing concerns with posthuman issues is largely projected onto his extensive representation of subjects, especially their bodies. In the humanistic paradigm, a human subject, contingent on a rational, conscious, autonomous, enabling mind, is commonly in charge of a bounded and solid body, a body which, though not necessarily the prerequisite for subjectivity, serves as its perfect illustration. Throughout his epic poems, Haizi, however, shows particular interest in the abnormal state of human bodies and consistently emphasizes the fluidity and metastability of the body, thereby questioning the humanistic notion of Man and advancing towards posthuman subjectivity. Indeed, Haizi had little knowledge of posthumanism as a

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[163] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

theoretical discourse. Although Haizi's time had already seen the emergence of cultural images and philosophical reflections on the posthuman, they had yet to be retrospectively investigated within the posthuman framework. However, Haizi's works contain certain figures that can illustrate the posthuman subjectivity as appropriately as "queer, cyborg, metametazoan, hybrid, PWA; bodies-without-organs, bodies-in-process, virtual bodies,"[164] among other pervasive figures.

Haizi's conception of the posthuman dates back to as early as his river trilogy. Instead of creating concrete, identifiable characters, the three works employ personal pronouns or general categories to refer to the individual figures dwelling in the epic worlds. In "Silence" 寂静, the afterword to the series' final work, "But Water, Water," Haizi sketches an image of the human that not only pervades the work's characterization of human figures but encapsulates the features of similar figures in the entire series:

> As humans breathe in nature, they also receive mysterious echoes in themselves. The truth of Eastern Buddhism lies not in a fresh or painful conquest, but in a dialogue, an eternal inclusion and communication between humans and all things. Humans are limbs of nature. Perhaps, perhaps I occasionally comprehend something under the Bodhi tree. But water, water, fills the whole valley and cleansing it.

> 人的呼吸在自然中，也就在自己身上得到神秘的回声。东方佛的真理不是新鲜而痛苦的征服，而是一种对话，一种人与万物的永恒的包容与交流。人是自然的肢体。或许，或许菩提树下我偶有所得。但是水、水，整座山谷被它充满、洗涤。[165]

By introducing "communication," celebrated as the "truth," into the consideration of subjectivity, Haizi converts the subject from an enclosed, sovereign figure into a "limb of nature"—more precisely, into a nexus within a large network sustained by the overflowing water. In this case,

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[164] Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston, "Introduction: Posthuman Bodies," in *Posthuman Bodies*, eds. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 19.

[165] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1025.

water becomes a rejuvenating ("cleansing") force that enacts a relational rather than self-sufficient subjectivity, undermines the primacy of humans over non-human entities, and situates agents in a nature-culture continuum. The ambiguity of the characters in this trilogy can therefore be attributed more to the fluid configuration of their subjectivity than to their unspecified designation. This figure of a body of water provided a prototype of Haizi's conception of subjectivity, an original dream to which he will constantly try to refer back.

Despite the significance of the river trilogy to the genesis of Haizi's conceptualization of subjectivity, his intervention into posthumanism does not fully unfold until the sun series. In the river trilogy, water serves as the sole and central natural element to represent the world, in which both physical existence and spiritual communication are monolithically attributed to the water flow. However, the harmonic picture shown in the poems is not so much the result of careful reflection as an unreflective dream, which eclipsed the difficulties in the formation of posthuman subjectivity. By comparison, when it comes to the sun series, in which the dominant element changes to fire, a posthuman vision of the subject begins to reveal itself in a more dramatic way through the constant conflicts between fire and other more solid entities, with the body as its main battleground.

The first piece of the sun series is an unfinished poetic drama, "The Sun: Beheading," in which Haizi composes a detailed discussion on subjectivity. Its prologue, entitled "The Sky" 天, is an adaption of the famous parable of *Kun* 鲲 and *Peng* 鵬 from the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (Chuang Tzu), entitled "Xiaoyao you" 逍遙遊 ("Wandering Where You Will"): faced with the vagaries of nature, the gigantic fish *Kun* transforms itself into the gigantic bird *Peng* leaving the North Darkness for the South Darkness in pursuit of the realm of *xiaoyao* 逍遙,

namely, the realm of absolute freedom.[166] In his recapitulation of the classic narrative, Haizi creates a human figure as the original point of transformation, from which the two huge creatures take pains to break free and to which they will also return. The original duo thus expand into a somewhat curious triad, respectively named "Avian-Body-with-Human-Head" 鸟身人首, "Ordinary Human" 普通人类, and "Piscine-Head-with-Human-Body" 鱼首人身. The theatrical focus lies precisely in the transitional moments between the man and the fantastic animals. In the characters' lines, we can observe how Haizi's notion of subjectivity begins to take form. For example, Avian-Body-with-Human-Head, as an intermediate creature between human and bird, sings in its appearance:

> Suddenly, a giant bird erupts out of your body.
> Giant fire wheels roll, I cast my blaze upon you:
> Masses of flesh in sleep, celestial bodies in motion.
> My giant body wipes out part of the distance.
> The universe tears at my body and the flames,
> Flying, writing in the sky unidentifiable, unspecified,
> Fleeing constellations.

> 猛地，一只巨鸟轰然离你身体而去
> 巨形火轮滚动，我的火光覆盖着你们：
> 一些熟睡的肉团，一些行动的天体
> 我巨形身子消灭了一些路程
> 宇宙拉扯着我的肉体和火光
> 在飞在天空上写下不可辨认的、不详的
> 匆匆逃离的星宿[167]

The bird's abrupt evacuation from the human body, in this case, gives birth to not so much plural separate bodies as a single body in transition, a subjectivity in the midst of becoming. With his subjectivity enlarged and distributed through fire, Avian-Body-with-Human-Head finds his

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[166] Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu), *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Martin Palmer (London: Arkana, Penguin Books, 1996), 1.

[167] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 557.

embodiment in an assemblage consisting of both human bodies and non-human entities including animals and stars. Subsequently, the poem presents a dual process in which, on the one hand, the subject eliminates its distance with others embedded in the same system, and on the other, the system modifies the existence of the subject in a violent and extreme way. Haizi stresses several times that the formulation of a new subjectivity changes radically the subject's relation with its environment, as reflected in such lines as "a giant bird comes in the arms of all things" and "a giant fish invites me to rebuild heaven and earth."[168]

Returning to the original context of the *Kun-Peng* parable, it was initially intended to illustrate an ideal subject. Based on this fable as well as several other ones with similar themes, Zhuangzi concludes that those who truly had achieved the state of *xiaoyao* are those who "had risen through the naturalness of Heaven and Earth, travelled on the six elemental forces and voyaged into the unknown and unlimited," who have "no self," "no merit," and "no fame."[169] To put it another way, an ideal subject is capable of transcending the fixed identity, specific direction, and hierarchical framework. Zhuangzi's projection of ideal subjectivity onto animals like *Kun-Peng*, according to Irving Goh's interpretation, can be associated with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, which signifies "a desire for thought to pass through the animal" against constraints exerted on humans by "anthropomorphic or anthropocentric ideas" and "structures like institutions and the State."[170] Being a critical reference for posthuman theorists, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy largely influenced, among others, Rosi Braidotti's theorization of posthumanism. The quest for a "radical posthuman subjectivity," for a kind of "nomadic subjectivity," as Braidotti phrases it, rests precisely on the "ethics of becoming."[171] In

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[168] Ibid, 556, 562.

[169] Zhuangzi, *The Book of Chuang Tzu*, 3-4.

[170] Irving Goh, "Chuang Tzu's Becoming-Animal," *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 1 (2011): 111.

[171] Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49.

this regard, the presence of "Avian-Body-with-Human-Head" and "Piscine-Head-with-Human-Body" as becoming-animals delineates a strong posthuman image in Haizi's poetry.

As provocative as this conception of the subject can be, the unfolding of the drama in Haizi's epic demonstrates nothing but its impracticality. Following the Prologue is the first act, entitled "The Land" 地, which recounts humanity's witnessing of the decapitation of *Śiva*, the Indian goddess of destruction. Haizi's use of the divine figure, as he himself explains, is not intended to reiterate the orthodox Indian myth but merely to draw on the deity's destructive nature to articulate his own idea.[172] By invoking the scene of *Śiva's* execution, Haizi seems to suggest that the bodies in a continuous process of becoming can only remain an unrealistic prospect. Later in Act Three, "The Head"头, the central role becomes a heroic character derived from *Xingtian* 刑天, a beheaded fighter in Chinese mythology. As Haizi notes, *Xingtian*, in the context of the drama, serves as a derivative of *Śiva*,[173] whose presence thus further stresses the doomed failure of the vision of becoming-animal. In this case, the urge to transcend an individual's established form in order to circulate in the sustaining framework and the pessimistic attitude towards such an attempt are mingled with each other, producing a poetic ambivalence, which, again, exposes Haizi's longstanding skepticism of the formal certainty and stability of human subjects.

The issue of subject continues to haunt Haizi's later works, even in those epics where the poet seems to be more attentive to the description of the environment rather than specific characters. A stanza from the middle of "The Sun: The Land" illustrates this point:

> From the wounds of the earth first grew fragmented limbs and torsos,
> Scattered one by one, tragically immersed in blood.
> From the earth grow our horses, our women,

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[172] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 566.
[173] Ibid, 566.

As if the earth's miserable viscera
Suddenly sprout from the land.

大地的伤口先是长出了断肢残体
一截一截　悲惨红透
大地长出了我们的马　我们的女人
像是大地悲惨的五脏
突然破土而出[174]

Here, an interpenetration between the epic characters and the scene of nature hosting them reappears, as previously envisioned in the river trilogy. Considering the central humanistic imagination of a liberal subject in the dominance of the world, the growing bodies ("limbs," "torsos," and "viscera") filling in the ruptures ("wounded") of the land contribute a two-fold radicality: activation of the land previously deemed inert, and amplification of the subject long considered sovereign. The subjects are thus drawn into a network woven by multiple relations and composed of various agents. But the mostly negative connotations carried by these bodies, depicted as "broken," "scattered," and "miserable," seem to indicate that the mutual assimilation between nature and humans in this work does not proceed as swimmingly as that in the river trilogy.

Similar scenes of ruptured bodies as well as concerns with subjectivity can also be found in Haizi's last epic poem, "The Sun: Messiah," which one could view as offering a conclusion to his life-long exploration. As we have partly examined in the first chapter, the work begins by showing a crisis of the general system along with the disintegration of specific characters; later, as the system revitalizes itself through a catastrophic change, the characters also acquire new forms correspondingly. In relation to the questions discussed here, I will return to this poem and examine more closely its last section. In this section, Haizi attempts to ascertain a middle ground between a fixed and a broken subjectivity, locating the subject in a mutual process of becoming.

[174] Ibid, 698-699.

For example:

囚 (Fire imprisoned in a stone
Becomes a human)
囚囚(Human beings)
□ and □ are connected.
Something passing through □□,
Transforming the two stones,
Making him a human.

因（火囚在石中
就是人）
囚囚（人类）
口与口联系
中间经过口口
改造两块石头
使他成为人 175

To define what is human, Haizi employs a rarely used Chinese character—or, given the rarity of this character, he might have mistakenly thought of it as his own invention—"囚." He maintains that "囚," whose pictograph shows a fire imprisoned within fixed boundaries, is a synonym with an individual human being, and "囚囚," which is the seamless fusion of two single "囚" into a whole, equals the entire human race. According to Haizi's further elaboration, individuation is a process of infusing fire into stone. Consider the argument advanced in the last chapter that fire stands for information and stone for substantial entities in Haizi's context, individuation is arguably contingent on the act of *in-form*. Haizi's illustration of "individuality" thus strikingly coincides with Norbert Wiener's formulation of the same concept, also developed through the metaphor of fire and stone: "the individuality of the body is that of a flame rather than that of a stone, of a form rather than of a bit of substance. This form can be transmitted or modified and duplicated."[176] In other words, a person's individuality, for Wiener and Haizi alike, can be

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[175] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 995-996.
[176] Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, 102.

abstracted as a transmittable and modifiable informational pattern not necessarily bound by the material instantiation. This bold notion is central to a popular prospect of the posthuman, which N. Katherine Hayles summarizes in a descriptive rather than affirmative way as possessing four deciding features: the privilege of "information pattern" over "material instantiation"; the relegation of "body" into the "original prothesis"; the reduction of "consciousness" as "an epiphenomenon"; and the equation of "human being" with "intelligent machines."[177]

If the main thread of "The Sun: Messiah" can be interpreted as revolving around the conflict between fire (information, spirituality) and stone (materiality, corporeality), then it culminates in the former's triumph over the latter. In a subsection entitled "Individuation into Human Existence" 化身为人 close to the end of the poem, Haizi discusses four types of "forms" involved in a person's "individuation," named as Form A, B, C, and D. Form A, which is in effect "non-form," refers to "truth and religion." It implies that the ultimate knowledge resides in the dissolution of forms, in non-form as form. While Haizi's elucidation of this form was either lost or left unfinished, his surviving manuscript includes some statements for the other three. Allow me to quote them at length:

> III. Form B as the pure form
> 1. Form B can only be experienced through form D.
> 2. This is individuation into a human being.
> 3. The pure form of we human being is the direction of the sky.
> 4. It is the sky's direction that we perceive on the earth.
> 5. This direction is time.
> 6. It is the access to elements through circulation.
> 7. It is rhythm.
> 8. Rhythm.
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> IV. Form C as the giant form
> 1. It is nature.
> 2. It is the elements behind nature.
> 3. Humans cannot choose form C.

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[177] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 2-3.

4. Humans are contingent.

5. Humans come from the interior of the globe.

6. And they also go to the interior of the globe.

7. Passing through nature.

8. Light shed on the stone.

9. Individuation into a human being.

10. Nature and humans flow into each other.

11. Nature has no inside or outside with human beings.

V. Form D as human

1. Truth is fleeing from Form D to other forms (Form A, B, and C).

（三）形式 B 是纯粹形式

1. 形式 B 只能通过形式 D 才能经历。

2. 这就是化身为人。

3. 我们人类的纯粹形式是天空的方向。

4. 是在大地上感受到的天空的方向。

5. 这种方向就是时间。

6. 是通过轮回进入元素。

7. 是节奏。

8. 节奏。

（四）形式 C 是巨大的形式

1. 这就是大自然。

2. 是他背后的元素。

3. 人类不能选择形式 C。

4. 人类是偶然的。

5. 人类来自球的内部。

6. 也去往球的内部。

7. 经过大自然。

8. 光明照在石头上。

9. 化身为人。

10. 大自然与人类互相流动。

11. 大自然与人类没有内外。

（五）形式 D 是人

1. 真理是从形式 D 逃向其他形式（形式 ABC）。[178]

It is indeed a tall order to translate Haizi's poetic expressions into logical statements, but

however preposterous they may sound on a first reading, these statements conjure fundamental

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[178] Haizi, *Haizi shi quanji*, 1009-1010.

issues related to subjectivity. According to Haizi, Form B exists as the "pure form" insofar as it can only be perceived in one's individuation (III 1-2); in other words, what Form B signifies is the process of acquiring a form rather than a specific established form. Individuation, Haizi further elaborates, implies a transcendence over the environment in which one was embedded (III 3-4), through time as an infinitely cyclical process (III 5-6), towards a mode of existence as natural elements (III 6). In light of our informational interpretation of the elements in the last chapter, this mode can be interpreted as an informational pattern, which resembles a rhythm (III 7-8) in the sense that both refer to the way a system is arranged. Form C, the "giant form," identified as Nature (IV 1-2), is the system imposed to an individual (IV 3), the system upon which an individual is contingent (IV 4), and also the system from which one first emerges and to which he will eventually return (V 5-9). Within this framework, there is no longer a demarcation between human and nature, between interiority and exteriority (IV 10-11). Finally, the first three forms are coalesced into Form D, or the human subject. Attributing the truth to the flight into these forms (V 1), Haizi reveals the multifaceted nature of his ideal subject: it is predicated on the dialectics of form and non-form, which shall be realized through the subject's interaction with its environment.

Compared with the river trilogy, in which both the physical presence of all things and the spiritual communication among them are indiscriminately represented as water flow, the sun series is characterized by constant interplay between the two, typically taking the form of the conflict between the fire and the bodies. By extending a body through fire or searching a bodily carrier for the fire, Haizi takes great pains to reconcile such conflicts. However, each time he attempts to do so, it results in either a broken body that can hardly conform with the flow of the fire, or a dissolved body that lends itself to becoming a perfect fluid subjectivity. Haizi's representation of the subject reflects his chronic anxiety about the mind-body relationship, a

central issue of the humanistic tradition, which has preoccupied cybernetic sciences with new problematics.

Haizi's solutions seem to suggest that a posthuman subject can never truly come into being without abandoning its material instantiation. Contemporary debates over posthumanism, however, generally favor a renewed posthuman subjectivity that goes beyond this hierarchical duality. While revealing the disembodied tendency in the popular imagination of the posthuman as mentioned above, Hayles also rejects this orientation because it actually intensifies the mind-body division thereby solidifying the humanist conception of subjectivity. Instead, she calls for "a version of the posthuman […] that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival."[179] Similarly, Haraway treats cyborg, an exemplary posthuman subject, as a myth in contemporary society that can inspire us to overcome, among other dichotomies, the binary between "physical and non-physical" and to bring about "an imagined organic body."[180] In the case of Braidotti, a new materialist ontology becomes the departing point for her to theorize the posthuman subject: instead of being discrete and inert, all matter is "one and immanent to itself," "vital, intelligent and self-organizing." On this basis, she contradicts the dichotomies between human and nonhuman, mind and body, identifying the posthuman subject as "an ensemble composed by *zoe*-logical, geological and technological organisms," as "embedded, embodied and yet flowing in a web of relations with human and non-human others."[181] In light of these posthuman propositions, we can say that it is almost impossible to draw a clear line between the fire and the bodies in Haizi's works, and even less meaningful to elevate the fire over the bodies, as they are

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[179] Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 5.
[180] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 153-154.
[181] Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 47.

in fact situated in a *zoe*-geo-techno continuum, interconnected with each other, and unified on the ontological level. From this perspective, Haizi's solution to the subject's crisis can be understood more as an embracing of an affirmative posthumanism than a submission to an impotent posthumanism still in the shadow of the humanistic paradigm. In this sense, the development from the river trilogy to the sun series forms a spiral trajectory that eventually refers back to the poet's initial conception but with a multi-layered proposal.

Posthumanism, in its affirmative form as defined by Ferrando, should overcome at once three correlated "isms" that loom large on the horizon of our thinking: humanism, anthropocentrism, and dualism. As discussed before, reflections on these intellectual traditions and views that resonate with various contemporary posthuman discourses can be found in Haizi's epic works, particularly through the way he constructs and develops the human subject. Drawing on such figures as a watery body, a becoming-animal, and a disembodied form, he undoubtedly contradicts the rational, conscious, autonomous, enabling subject, as well as encompasses nonhuman agents on the planetary and even cosmic dimension into the composition of subjectivity. Yet, his posthuman project has left room for maneuver, because, although his grappling with binary thinking overcomes such dichotomies as human-nonhuman, culture-nature, it remains undecided in questions like the mind-body dualism. It is indeed difficult to tell if Haizi has an explicit orientation with regards to all these issues based on his poetic representation of the subject, which usually carries a mixed sensibility of misery and bliss, despair and hope. His works, however, have already established themselves as a critical barometer in contemporary Chinese literature by which we may proceed with a posthuman agenda. In the next section, we will continue this line of discussion and further explore the implications of Haizi's alignment with affirmative posthumanism that encourages a promising future by associating his works with the Chinese postsocialist context.

Entangling Postsocialism and Posthumanism

As we move from the analysis of the philosophical implications of Haizi's epic poems to a meditation on their social and political significance, it becomes necessary to draw a theoretical connection between posthumanism and postsocialism, which, however, are not only rarely linked to each other but are even considered by some as incompatible in the Chinese context. In her essay "Is the *Post-* in Postsocialism the *Post-* in Posthumanism?," Shu-mei Shih takes issues with the juxtaposition of postsocialism, which she considers a global situation spanning both capitalist and socialist, both developed and developing countries, and posthumanism, by which she broadly refers to the intellectual currents from the antihumanism of orthodox Marxism to the cybernetic reconceptualization of the human. To repudiate this alliance, Shih critically reviews its suppressed predecessor—the one between socialism and humanism—within the context of the Global Sixties. Back then, Marxist humanism with its different variations elicited heated discussion worldwide, ranging from Eastern Europe to France, from China to the United States. However, socialist humanism failed to thrive due to, among other reasons, military invasion (such as the Soviet colonization of Eastern European countries), ideological pressure (Mao's critique of humanism in China), and intellectual transformation (the linguistic turn in France). As a result, in comparison with the flourishing of posthumanism, the theoretical potential of humanism has yet to be fully unfolded. Specific to the case of China, Shih demonstrates how Marxist-humanism, as seen in Marx's 1844 Manuscripts and Jean-Paul Sartre's essays, were inhibited in the socialist period and how, as we have discussed earlier, they reemerged in the postsocialist milieu as a rejoinder to the previous ideology through humanistic theorists like Wang Ruoshui. What Shih finds particularly pressing in postsocialist China is not the need to advocate posthumanism, which she argues might prove counterproductive by exacerbating the

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oppression of certain groups of people before their status as human is fully recognized, but rather

to insist on humanism, which can function as a remedy for the escalating human rights issues in

China, especially those of the ethnic minorities. In a word, the conclusion Shih draws from this

history is that postsocialist China today ought to pursue the Marxist/socialist humanism that it

had sought in a previous era.[182]

As compelling as Shih's recounting and plea appear to be, they immediately raise an

array of questions when we take into account the drastically changing reality of China in recent

decades. What if postsocialism is so structurally distinct from socialism that it renders any

socialist ideal, whether dogmatic or humanistic, a mirage to postsocialist societies? What if

posthumanism reveals the conditions that humanistic perspective overlooks while maintaining

the affirmative force it advocates? What if the marginalization of socialist humanism is nothing

but a testimony to its inefficacy and problematics compared with more intellectually appealing

and realistically relevant theoretical genealogies? What if postsocialist posthumanism, as we see

in Haizi's epics, had come into being even before the Tiananmen Square Incident? In any case,

the trajectory of humanism in China, like the histories of many movements, has unfolded in

ironic reversals. As we know, in the ensuing decades, when the individualization and

introversion of subject formation had taken firm root, the passion for the ontological premise and

pragmatic concerns of humanism, once floating above the residual enthusiasm for

collectivization, quickly retreated from the intellectual sphere. In its place, a counterforce to

humanism began to emerge as translations of and scholarship on the theories attributed to

posthumanism in a broad sense became increasingly available. Given this situation, it is justified

to reformulate Shih's question proposed in the title of her article in the following way: can the

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[182] Shu-mei Shi, "Is the *Post-* in Postsocialism the *Post-* in Posthumanism?," *Social Text* 30, no. 1 (2012): 27-50.

Post- in Postsocialism be the *Post-* in Posthumanism, and if so, how?

Bringing together postsocialism and posthumanism, I have no intention to use one line of thinking to modify the other, such as what is implied in the expression "socialist humanism," by which theorists mean to underline either the humanistic revision of socialism or the socialist intervention into humanism. Rather, I argue that postsocialism and posthumanism share an affinity with each other, though with their emphases placed on political-economic and onto-epistemological aspects respectively. Arif Dirlik is one of the first scholars to use the term postsocialism, which he defines as a transitional historical situation that claims to be socialism but works in conjunction with capitalism, when developing his observations on the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics."[183] When a de facto capitalist system is introduced into the socialist regime, an ambiguity will arise, pointing to two distinct outcomes: in the better case, it can establish a penetrating system that sustains the efficient functioning of the entire society yet without reifying all the entities and relations; but in the counter-example, which is more in line with the reality of today's China, it will result in an odd and terrifying mélange of neoliberal capitalist economy and authoritarian socialist politics, say, an even more efficient authoritarian socialism or a more authoritative neoliberal capitalism. Regardless of its specific orientation, such a socio-political and economic concoction is structurally consistent with the conceptual and realistic conditions that give rise to posthumanity. It is in the sense that the posthuman resonates with different totalizing regimes yet transcends their presumed visions, that Haraway identifies cyborg, the quintessential posthuman figure, as such: "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention

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[183] Arif Dirlik, "Postsocialism? Reflections on 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics'," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 21, no.1 (1989): 34.

state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."[184]

In China, the postsocialist posthumanism is of course not confined to a theoretical invention, but stands as a conceptual fact and is embedded in socio-historical reality. Just as the image of the cyborg demonstrates the posthuman condition of the West in the late twentieth century, namely the era of advanced capitalism, the *qigong* fantasy epitomizes China's emerging posthuman condition, which coincides with a period when the country recently proceeded into the postsocialist era. The ultimate objective of *qigong* practice and somatic science, as far as the scientists, engineers, and technocrats-led approaches in these fields are concerned, is to incorporate all individuals as nodes into an overriding technological, sociopolitical, and economic system in the service of the forging of a new society in contemporary China. Although the research and application of extraordinary powers proves to be ridiculous, the past few decades have witnessed the gradual realization of the vision the *qigong* worldview suggests, in an even more comprehensive and profound way. The increasing acceleration and proliferation of technoscience in China—especially information science and technology, including but not limited to 5G, Big Data, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Internet of Things (IoT)—has dramatically reshaped the ways in which political, economic, and ideological systems operate, notably integrating them into an overriding regime. Today's China is a monstrous machine characterized by ubiquitous and unfettered production, consumption, regulation, and control. In brief, to the extent that, for better or worse, the boundary between all kinds of life-forms is already so blurred and the communication among them so unconstrained, we may declare, in line with Haraway's identification of us as cyborgs,[185] that we are all *qigong* practitioners in contemporary China.

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[184] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 151.
[185] Ibid,150.

Haizi is surely not the only intellectual active in the early years of postsocialist China, a golden age that witnessed the rise of many influential thinkers, critics, writers, and poets, who reshaped the cultural landscape of contemporary China. Nor does he speak of theorists attached to posthumanism in the broad sense—neither its forerunners that started the redefinition of the human subject, such as Althusser, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida, and Deleuze, whose works mostly did not enjoy the spotlight in China until the 1990s, nor its widely recognized representatives like Haraway, Hayles, and Braidotti, whose theoretical explorations were still in gestation or simply had not been conceived of in his time. However, Haizi is arguably among the ones who most accurately grasped the postsocialist transformation of China through poetic means and who most presciently touched upon exigent concerns of posthumanism through the medium of systems discourse and *qigong* practice. What we see in the case of Haizi is a struggling formation of a liberal subject demanded by the capitalist system in a recently transformed socialist society, which is accompanied by a constant friction between the subject in the making and the system in which the subject is embedded. In the subsequent years, this interaction, with the danger and hope it carries, did not fade away but rather morphed into a hauntological framework, which would be married with various forms of technoscientific mediation. Given these facts, we can reach the conclusion that Haizi and the poetic efforts he stands for constitutes one of the origins of Chinese postsocialist posthumanism, long before its political, economic, philosophical, and technoscientific prerequisites reached full maturation.

Thus far we have argued that postsocialist China has long been in a posthuman state and Haizi was clairvoyant enough to grasp it in its early stages. How then do we comprehend our own situation today through an appeal to Haizi's literary and religious explorations, whether as inspiration or warning? Haizi's imagination and representation of the posthuman condition, which revolves around a seemingly purely poetic conflict between fluid, immaterial elements

and solid, bounded bodies, actually offers a metaphorical rehearsal of our current situation of being trapped in a political, economic, and ideological network facilitated by information technology. In this way, Haizi's treatment of this conflict, namely, plunging his characters into the flow of elements in a dissolution of their bodies, can be translated into a multiplicity of stances: it implies both an impotence to fight against the tyranny mediated by information and an active employment of information to wrestle with this regime. Despite the social-political significance of Haizi's posthuman bodies remaining obscure in the 1980s, it becomes more and more apparent, if not imperative, in the next decades, as the ongoing intensification of network surveillance gradually stifles virtual channels of voice while practical actions become increasingly ineffective and impossible. To put it simply, reality has tipped the interpretive scale towards the negative side.

In light of this situation, while acknowledging the possibly skeptical and pessimistic orientation of Haizi's posthuman conception, I also find it necessary, as I have repeated above, to introduce an affirmative version of posthumanism into the reading of Haizi's works. Considering the three defining aspects of posthumanism Ferrando defines, I take Braidotti's theorization of posthuman subjectivity as a paradigmatic model to modify Haizi's notion so as to fully empower it. Posthuman subjects, as Braidotti recapitulates many times in her works, are "posthumanist, post-anthropocentric, embedded, embodied, relational, affective and ethically accountable."[186] If a major "flaw" of Haizi's posthuman project is that, while diversifying and decentering the human, it does not completely overcome the dualistic thinking that lies behind the traditional Western concept of the human and thus easily falls into the misconception of disembodiment, then Braidotti carries her posthuman project forward to the ontological level, proposing a new

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[186] Braidotti, *The Posthuman Knowledge*, 153.

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materialism, which underscores the presence and agency of the subject. The ethical corollary of Braidotti's posthumanism is to follow the ontological desire and leap into the constantly becoming, out of the belief that "virtual possibilities need to be actualized, by a missing 'we', that is to say a transversal subject that will be composed in concrete historical circumstances, in the open structure of time, with the virtual potentials at its core."[187] This is what Braidotti calls in different places "affirmative ethics," an ethics that can cope with "the state of exhaustion, anxiety and fear that characterizes the posthuman convergence" and "the nihilistic and accelerationist tendencies as well as profit-minded knowledge practices of cognitive capitalism."[188] Resisting the dematerialized tendency may thus become a means, in the context of postsocialist China, to inspire meaningful actions thereby enacting an affirmative future. Though this is unlikely to be Haizi's original meaning, it may contain the answer that Haizi desires yet ultimately fails to reach.

The association between Haizi and posthumanism may appear to be unusual and startling, particularly in view of the numerous studies that are well-established yet suggest otherwise. Nevertheless, my thesis has demonstrated that such an association is not a tangential assumption nor a conflation, but a solid claim supported by both textual analysis and theoretical rumination. The failure to recognize Haizi's engagement with the posthuman agenda indicates a lack of readiness to face, or even too much arrogance to accept, the new discursive and social realities that are redefining our literary sphere. In contrast to those interpretations, which, in their ostensible glorification of Haizi as a tragic figure signaling the end of the 1980s, hastily erased the possibility of fully comprehending his historical legacy, to rediscover the connections between Haizi and posthumanism is to disclose the deep-rooted significance and the long-lasting

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[187] Ibid, 155.
[188] Ibid, 154.

influence of Haizi's works for us and for the upcoming generations, for whom posthuman issues are becoming and will become increasingly urgent. In this sense, Haizi personifies the advent of a new epoch.

Conclusion

On multiple occasions, the philosopher Martin Heidegger expressed his concern that cybernetics—and, one could add, other fields within the systems sciences in this context—had brought us to an urgent and dangerous moment in history.[189] For Heidegger, modern science and technology, paradigmatically shown in the development of cybernetics, shared a common foundation not in the essence of science but in that of technology, specifically in what he terms *ge-stell* (enframing), a mode of revealing that represents things in their objectness and orders things as standing-reserve. At the same time, Heidegger was convinced that art in its broad sense, of which poetry is a quintessential form, can offer an alternative mode of revealing, one that echoes the original yet forgotten nature of science and technology as contained in the etymons of *techne* and *physis* and coincides with a bringing-forth as *poiesis*, an unconcealment as *aletheia*.[190] In a lecture about the situation of art in a cybernetic society, Heidegger contended that art was in danger of being relegated to "a feedback loop of information in the feedback control circle of industrial society and of the technical-scientific world," though it could still derive strength from its origin, trying to utter "the secret of the still unthought *aletheia*", "the

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[189] Heidegger's discussion on cybernetics can be found in Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 58; Martin Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us: The *Spiegel* Interview (1966)," in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1981), 59; Martin Heidegger, "The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thought," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 44, no. 2 (2013): 123; Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar, 1966/67*, trans. Charles H. Seibert (University of Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), 12-14.

[190] Heidegger's discussion on science and technology can be found in, for instance, Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3-35; Martin Heidegger, "Science and Reflection," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 155-182. For a more detailed discussion of Heidegger's understanding of science and technology, see Trish Glazebrook, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Science* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), chapter 5.

voice of concealed unconcealment."[191]

  In contrast to Heidegger's view, the present investigation of the poet Haizi, with its focus on the interaction between epic poetry and the systems sciences, demonstrates an intricate symbiosis rather than an irreconcilable contradiction between the "two cultures," as seen in early postsocialist China, an emerging information society. The contemporaneous flourishing of epic poetry and the systems sciences during the 1980s attested to neither the unshakeable dominance of the scientific culture, which brings about a merely mechanical production of literary works, nor the authoritative status of the literary culture, which promotes the spread of scientific discourses only by romanticizing them. Instead, the two cultures proceeded each in their own manners, while simultaneously intersecting with each other. Belying Heidegger's prediction, the deteriorating characteristics of science and technology to enframe the world and the redemptive potentials of art to reveal the truth unexpectedly find resonance with each other in Haizi's works. Drawing on systems thinking, which fundamentally defined his time on a technoscientific level, Haizi explored the meanings of existence for his people and his nation through epic poetry.

  This thesis has examined three indispensable dimensions of Haizi's poems by linking the epic imagination with systems discourses, thereby revealing their social, political, and cultural implications that have not yet received sufficient attention from critics and scholars. The major questions explored in this thesis have been how Haizi imagines Chinese civilization as a cybernetic system that requires catastrophic change to reach a higher level of organization, how he represents the circulation of information as that of basic natural elements to illustrate the regulation of this system, and how he shapes his epic characters as posthuman figures as a way to address the crisis of subjectivity under postsocialist condition. Throughout Haizi's epic poems,

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[191] Heidegger, "The Provenance of Art and the Destination of Thought," 126, 128.

there persists an ambiguous attitude toward the prospect that the poet himself is sketching out: he both looks forward to the vitality brought by increasingly close connections among all things and, simultaneously, fears the oppression of a ubiquitous network imposed on everything. It is therefore extremely tricky to draw a definite conclusion about Haizi's stance on the questions mentioned above, let alone his specific schemes to achieve particular ends. However, it is conceivable that the future Haizi dreamed of is one in which technoscientific innovation, working on both intellectual and instrumental levels, facilitates the free and efficient operation of the system rather than obstructing it. Primarily a poet, Haizi was neither obligated nor able to figure out a realistic path toward this future; instead, he tragically died at a young age, in a way anticipated by the most terrible variant of his envisioned future.

Through its deviation from the already established approaches, this thesis is not intended to subvert the previous investigations of Haizi but rather to enrich them, hopefully having contributed to the following aspects. Above all, by offering a belated yet crucial perspective for interpreting Haizi, this thesis strives to rescue the poet's image from an anachronistic figure and to show him as a socially engaged intellectual. In this way, this thesis—far from undermining his importance—confirms Haizi's unparalleled status in the postsocialist Chinese literary landscape and his prophetic role for the coming ages. In addition, through the case of Haizi, who was deeply involved in the epic-poetry boom, the systems-science craze, *qigong* fever, and other cultural currents, this thesis also takes as its goal to chart the general intellectual atmosphere of China's early postsocialist era. Only when these previously separated fields, especially the long-repressed ones, are woven together can the zeitgeist reveal itself more clearly. Finally, from a broader perspective, this thesis integrates Haizi, a third-world poet inspired by the systems sciences and searching for national rejuvenation, into the narrative of the global circulation of technoscientific discourses. It thus helps to reverse the current Western-centric tendencies in

debates on such topics as cybernetics/systems theory, information culture, and posthumanism by taking China's unique engagement with these agendas into account.

More than forty years have passed since Haizi's suicide at the end of the 1980s. Alongside continuous social transformation, the Chinese poetic landscape has been reconfigured so radically as to render Haizi's epic poems seemingly obsolete for many poets of the later generations, who are attempting to renovate their own poetic techniques to cope with an ever-changing reality. However, by bringing a technoscientific dimension into the interpretation of Haizi's poetic works, this thesis evokes the social, political, and cultural connotations that are attached to the two different, yet intertwined, perspectives of understanding the world—literature and science—thus shedding new light on his special intervention into his epoch. The thesis demonstrates that the conditions confronting Haizi, a representative figure of Chinese poetry in early postsocialist China, still haunt today's China, and are becoming ever more pressing. Before we move forward in our poetic quest, therefore, it is both important and illuminating to revisit Haizi's legacy.

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