



Future Archaeology and Temporal Reassembly — A New Analysis of Han Song’s Cosmic Tombstone

Siqi Yu¹, Zhongling Deng^{2,*}

¹ Digital Humanities Institute, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China

² School of Literature, Wuhan University, Wuhan 430072, Hubei, China

* Corresponding author: 2018201110063@whu.edu.cn

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Abstract: Han Song’s early work, *Cosmic Tombstone*, narrates a future archaeological endeavor, where the temporal relationships within this future setting reconfigure our “present” understanding of time, spurring discussions on temporality. The novel frames our “history” in a future context, reflecting on themes of history and archaeology within that framework. With the appearance of “history” from a future perspective, the novel achieves both an aesthetic resonance and historical authenticity, merging a social experiment with fictitious “historical value”. The novel presents our present reality as history in the eyes of future beings, granting our “reality” a dual existence of presence and absence. However, this vast temporal and spatial scope also serves to obscure individual life, and in this sense, both the tombstone and the science fiction novel can be seen as mutually intertextual forms of resistance.

Keywords: Cosmic Tombstone; Han Song; future archaeology; temporality

1. Introduction

Han Song’s *Cosmic Tombstone* (1991) explores a futuristic scenario where humanity engages in archaeological pursuits. The act of archaeology inherently involves a temporal structure, clearly demarcating a “present - past” relationship between the archaeologist and the subject of study. The time perception of these future archaeologists diverges notably from that of the author or reader, albeit with certain overlaps and intersections. Therefore, the portrayal of futuristic archaeology also restructures conventional temporal relations, thereby inviting a range of discussions centered on temporality, contemplation, and interpretation. This paper delves into the restructured temporal dynamics in *Cosmic Tombstone*, examining the multifaceted layers of “history,” “reality,” and “future” in an effort to discern the “three-dimensional”[1] nature of Han Song’s integration of “science fiction” and “reality.”

2. The History as Future

Cosmic Tombstone is divided into two parts, each narrated in the first person by protagonists from different eras. The protagonist of the first part, referred to as “No. 1,” is a historian specializing in the study of *Cosmic Tombstone*. This section recounts the efforts of several generations, including No. 1’s own, to investigate the mysteries surrounding the tombstone. It concludes with the decision by extraterrestrial humans to unearth the tombstone. The second part presents the narrative of “No. 2,” the creator of *Cosmic Tombstone*, offering a first-person account of its construction. Both protagonists engage in archaeological inquiries into *Cosmic Tombstone*, each attempting to unravel its enigma as a historical puzzle.

The archaeological subject in *Cosmic Tombstone* mirrors real-world archaeology but is transposed into interstellar space. Methods like “digging through old records,” No. 1’s fieldwork, or extraterrestrial tomb excavations parallel actual techniques. In the “technological determinism era,” where burial customs have faded, tombstone research is seen as eccentric. Against this backdrop, No. 1 attempts to trace the origins of tombstone customs. However, No. 2’s account reveals that the *Cosmic Tombstone* custom did not originate from a clear or logical beginning but was instead an absurd construct. The burial ceremony without any physical remains[2] underscores the irrelevance of the deceased themselves. Instead, it reflects a grotesque response to an era overwhelmed by death—a fabricated resolution meant to sustain the momentum of cosmic expansion. Over time, the tombstone’s commemorative function was mystified and transformed into faith, only to be ultimately repurposed as a mechanism for oblivion. Thus, the reliability of historical narratives and the historical values upheld by Professor Ji are thoroughly deconstructed. This deconstruction aligns Han Song with the rebellious tendencies of his contemporaneous “avant-garde” writers, echoing their challenges to established norms and ideologies.

Skepticism toward historical narratives and their significance does not imply that Han Song endorses a wholly nihilistic attitude toward history. The tone of *Cosmic Tombstone*, the protagonists’ persistent obsession with the tombstone, and

Han's later critique of "pragmatism" in *Manifesto of Imagination* [3] all indicate his dissatisfaction with living solely in the present while disregarding history. Suspicious of historical narratives and their meanings yet unwilling to condone historical indifference, the question arises: how should we approach history? No. 1's fixation on the Cosmic Tombstone suggests an aesthetic view of history. As a historical relic, the tombstone embodies a "diachronic synchronicity," belonging to history while possessing an independent aesthetic value. Through the perspective of the future archaeologist, historicity is imbued with a hollow temporality, granting the tombstone an "absolute allure" [4].

3. The Future as History

In *Cosmic Tombstone*, the "history" studied by the future archaeologists—the rise and fall of the Cosmic Tombstone custom—is, for the reader, still "the future." In other words, the novel depicts events that have yet to occur in reality as if they were already completed history. Narrating the "future" under the guise of "history" is a classic mode of science fiction storytelling. The history of science fiction refers to the use of this technique in works such as *A Martian Odyssey* as the "future perfect tense" narrative device [5]. However, scholars have largely overlooked the use of this technique in Han Song's earlier novel *Cosmic Tombstone*, thereby neglecting the experimental nature of this compact text and its potential for multiple interpretations afforded by this narrative mode.

Narrating the "future" in the form of "history" inherently involves the depiction of the "next moment," meaning that the text contains at least two distinct layers of "future." One is the downstream moment of investigation and narration, while the other is the upstream "history" being investigated and narrated. These two layers form what Fredric Jameson refers to as "dual narrative structuration," a narrative structure akin to that of detective fiction [6]. In *Cosmic Tombstone*, the two parts of the novel correspond to these two layers of the future, connected through the act of archaeology. The questioning by the archaeologist in the first part and the answering by the entombed individual in the second part mirror the investigative structure of detective fiction, where the process of uncovering the past drives the narrative forward. The resemblance between this narrative structure and detective fiction underscores the concept of "clues." Both archaeology and detective work interpret "traces" as a form of "writing" [7]. In *Cosmic Tombstone*, the tombstone itself embodies these traces, akin to clues in detective stories, summoning future observers to pay attention and seek understanding.

Moreover, the borrowing of the "historical" form not only grants the novel its historical aesthetics but, more importantly, endows it with a degree of historiographical value. This value manifests not only in the novel's textual existence as part of a literary sequence and its contribution to literary history but also extends beyond the text to engage with the "real world." Events that have yet to occur in reality "happen" within the text and are narrated as visible "historical" accounts, structurally indistinguishable from traditional histories or historical novels. By fabricating "history" and using it as a starting point for future speculation, such science fiction novels can be classified as part of the "future historiography." Given the novel's textual completion at the time of its reading, it may depict a world called "the future," but for the moment of reading, the novel itself becomes "history," offering experiences and insights that precede the reader's present. These insights often profoundly influence subsequent reality.

4. The Reality as History

Although *Cosmic Tombstone* lacks an absolute temporal anchor, its recollections of Earthly customs subtly situate it in the future relative to the author's own time, aligning with the conventional interpretive framework of space narratives. Within the novel's temporally-defined "future," the author, writing from "reality," transforms this "reality" into "history." For future archaeologists, everything associated with us has undergone profound and sweeping changes, and all life forms of the present, including humanity itself, no longer exist. The novel metaphorically erects a tombstone in the cosmos for our nameless descendants, while our own graves have long since vanished into the depths of countless ages. Han Song describes this act of "imagining the extinction of being while still in the midst of being" as quintessentially "science fictional."

From Asimov's *Foundation* to Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* series, these sweeping cosmic epics obscure the differences between "us" and future "others" under the banner of "humanity." This romantic notion of a "human community" leads readers to believe that those who conquer the galaxy or reach the universe's edge are, in fact, "us." In *Cosmic Tombstone*, the rupture with history is paralleled by the deeply personal first-person narration. This historical discontinuity renders collective memory under the banner of "us" impossible, while the rich personal memories and agency conveyed through the individual perspective constitute a rebellion against the notion of a once-existent "us". In this dynamic, the construction of responsibility under the framework of human collectivity, and the resultant affirmation of heroism and sacrifice, lose their foundation in Han Song's narrative.

Beyond the narrative, science fiction itself functions as a form of resistance to the vastness of time and space—engaging

in efforts to grasp and transcend these dimensions in various ways. The entombed narrator in *Cosmic Tombstone* opens their memory-laden testament with: “If fate had not made me a cosmic tomb builder, I would most likely have become a science fiction writer”[8]. Though hypothetical, this statement grants the narrator dual identities—as a tomb builder and, hypothetically, as a science fiction writer, albeit an unrealized one. The tomb builder’s narrative, in effect, constitutes the science fiction story we are reading, making them, in a way, a “science fiction author.” Conversely, what is a science fiction writer if not a tomb builder? The myriad works of science fiction are humanity’s traces and tombstones left behind in the vast expanse of time and space. In this sense, the tombstones in the cosmos bear a resemblance to science fiction itself.

References

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