

Reimagining Care and Empathy in Chinese Science Fiction

Today's technology boom compels us to reevaluate the ethics of care, as the proliferation of ChatGPT and generative AI transforms human society. These advancements promise to transcend geographical, biological, and linguistic barriers. However, as technology evolves and penetrates into every aspect of our life, there is an increasing need to reexamine its influence on our bodies, minds, and emotional connections with others.

This article aims to analyze how recent Chinese science fiction (SF) underscores the pervasive influence of emerging technologies in redefining care ethics within future human societies. My analysis draws on three SF texts by emerging women authors: Regina Kanyu Wang, Congyun ("Mu Ming") Gu, and Haihong Zhao. Wang's "The Language Sheath" (2020) explores the invention of a language filter capable of understanding and speaking perfect Kemorean, an endangered language. This sheath not only serves as an effective translation tool for those completely unfamiliar with Kemorean but also enhances the fluency of non-native speakers. Wang's story examines how this technological advancement challenges caring relationships on multiple levels: between a controlling mother and her son facing an identity crisis, towards the preservation of minority languages and cultures, and regarding an individual's integration into an unfamiliar community.

Gu's "Colour the World" (2021) introduces a similar concept with retinol adjustors (RAs) implanted in one's eyes, claiming to free humans from constraints and usher in an enhanced reality. With advanced RA technology, traditional human experiences are redefined so that "the filter's own language" becomes the sole means to describe human experiences and caring relationships. Gu portrays how RAs infiltrate familial and romantic bonds, fostering societal divisions through self-other binaries and positing visual communication as the primary, if not only, means of connection. The adjustors alter not just colours and lighting, but the language used to express the sense of care and empathy.

Echoing Wang and Gu, Zhao's "Baby, I Love You" (2022) presents a technology that transforms the parent-child relationship—virtual child. Through a holographic game called *Raising Baobao*, individuals can simulate all aspects of parenting, simplifying challenges while emphasizing enjoyment. This game is depicted as a "perfect" alternative to traditional child-rearing or artificial wombs, suggesting more options for those desiring a caring relationship. However, Zhao illustrates how such technology undermines real parenthood's foundation, fostering addiction and an overreliance on technology that encourages disconnection from genuine sensory and emotional experiences.

As we can see, the three stories crystallize the growing involvement of technology in examining the implications of care ethics for familial, social, and cultural dilemmas. On one hand, these emerging technologies offer fresh promise by optimizing caring connections between people—making communication faster and easier through language, more holistic and accurate in visual connection and description, and parenting less burdensome and more flexible. It introduces efficiency and versatility, providing innovative ways to foster intimate relationships, connecting us not just with family members but also with strangers. This expansion seems to broaden the spectrum of potential caring relationships, making the

definition and characterization of a caring person more open-ended. From the outlook, this evolution aligns perfectly with the development of care ethics over the past decades, which has expanded from intimate relationships like mothering and parenting to encompass care for distant and unknown individuals.

However, these stories also interrogate how technology reshapes our physical and mental landscapes, erecting barriers in our interpersonal connections and challenging the foundations of care, justice, and morality on a broader scale. They raise questions about whether and how we can reconcile the conflicts between emerging technologies and care ethics. To probe deeper into how these SF narratives critically engage with care ethics, we must first revisit the theory behind care ethics and its natural synergy with the speculative nature of SF.

The Ethics of Care, Empathy, and Technology

The ethics of care is gaining momentum as a valuable framework for engaging in discussions about society's past, present, and future. It underscores the critical role of women's perspectives and their integral involvement in all life aspects from the concept's early days. Carol Gilligan's seminal work, *In a Different Voice* (1982), highlighted the unique ethical viewpoint of women, focusing on responsibility and care over the traditionally male-centric themes of justice and rights (Diller 325). Although Gilligan's analysis may not offer a structured exploration of care ethics, it emphasizes the need to appreciate and examine women's distinctive ways of navigating moral issues and forming emotional bonds. This focus has sparked debates about whether emphasizing care as a feminine trait might inadvertently perpetuate traditional caregiving roles for women. However, it also opened up broader discussions on the application of care ethics to understanding various forms of human interaction and alienation.

Nel Noddings is often credited as the first to systematically articulate care ethics in detail. In her book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), she introduces several fundamental aspects of care ethics that have informed many later discussions. She posits that a relational ethic emphasizing reciprocity is crucial. This ethic calls for mutual dependence among individuals to establish robust caring relationships (Noddings 51). Care must be seen as incomplete unless it is acknowledged and accepted by those receiving it (95). Moreover, to establish caring relationship means to be "engrossed" in the well-being of those being cared for, allowing for the displacement of the caregiver's own self-interest (30). Noddings' idea of being engrossed in that other person are later on interpreted to be "open and receptive to the reality – the thoughts, desires, fears, etc. – of the other human being" (Slote 12), and "are absorbed" in the way the other person understands the world (12). As Noddings asserts:

I do not "put myself in the other's shoes," so to speak, by analyzing his reality as objective data and then asking, "How would I feel in such a situation?" On the contrary, I set aside my temptation to analyze and to plan. I do not project; I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel

with the other. I become a duality . . . The seeing and feeling are mine, but only partly and temporarily mine, as on loan to me. (30)

Subsequent scholars in the field of care ethics have been similarly inspired by Noddings' approach, adopting a care-oriented paradigm to redefine conventional ethical thought. Scholars such as Virginia Held and Michael Slote have similarly built their care ethics frameworks on the foundation of "the creation, building, and sustaining of caring relations and relationships" (Slote 11). For others, the act of caring can be rendered as the contributing factor to power imbalances, giving rise to the reconstruction of "mature care" with an emphasis on interaction and reciprocity (Pettersen 376). The ambivalence of care can reside in its connotation of self-sacrifice and women-nature affinity (Johns-Putra, 2014, 139). Care can be reconceptualized to develop a dialogical ethic of care that stresses the communication between humans and non-human others (Donovan 310). Care can also be seen from the perspective of relational ontology, highlighting our interconnectedness with others and the importance of corporeal bodies (Hamington 82).

Noddings' conservative view on forming caring relationships with strangers or those unlikely to be met again has faced criticism from scholars like Ann Diller, Michael Slote, and Virginia Held. Diller highlights that Noddings focuses on "special relations" such as those between mothers and children, teachers and students, spouses, and friends, which heavily rely on physical proximity (331). This approach potentially confines care ethics to personal interactions (331). In contrast, Held advocates for extending care ethics to address "political, social, and global questions" (Held, 2006, 3), thereby broadening the scope of caring relationships to include distant others and treating it as both "a cluster of values" and "a cluster of practices" (4). Slote, too, expresses a divergent view from Noddings in forming caring relationships with unfamiliar individuals or those we are unlikely to encounter again. For Slote, caring motivation transcends spatial and temporal distances and is "based in and sustained by our human capacity for empathy with others" (4).

Compared to Held's "Domain Ethics," which places care discussions within specific personal, political, or global contexts (Diller 331), Slote advocates for a more universal and inclusive approach, establishing empathy-oriented care ethics. Empathy involves, perhaps involuntarily, allowing another's feelings to affect us, to "feel other's pain" rather than "feel *for* other's pain" (13). Drawing on Martin Hoffman's research on various forms of empathy, Slote distinguishes his concept of empathy from Noddings by addressing spatial and temporal limitations and questioning the necessity of becoming deeply involved with another person to the point of losing one's identity. A more nuanced form of empathy, as Slote and Hoffman suggest, can be "(involuntarily) aroused" in response to situations and experiences not directly present, whether they are heard about, remembered, or read about (13). This type of empathetic feeling is also not simply confined to the present. It maintains one's sense of self while fostering effective long-term empathy across domains, helping manage future uncertainties. On this basis, Slote reiterates his concept of empathic care that surpasses Held's framework of developing care ethics with each specific domain. And care ethics can even become a vital tool for deconstructing and redefining various domains, as Noddings envisioned.

As we can see, existing discussions on the development of care ethics focus on how people can more effectively establish and sustain various types of relationships, and under what conditions they might face obstacles. To better address these questions, we must consider the increasing role of technology in influencing how we demonstrate care and evoke empathic feelings.

Many tech companies today assert their goal is to develop more empathetic technology to cater to a wide range of needs, specifically aiming to connect with the "distant others" highlighted by numerous care ethics scholars. They are applying principles outlined by scholars such as Noddings, Held, and Slote, seeking effective ways to ensure users can experience the feeling of caring relationship with empathetic products and tools (Banfield *usabilitygeek.com*). Some claim that immersive virtual-reality can have an effect on generating empathic feelings. Stanford University's Virtual Human Interaction Lab (VHIL), for example, initiated the experiment "Becoming Homeless," utilizing VR technology, immerses users in the harrowing journey of job loss, eviction, and street life to evoke empathy by making them experience the fear and vulnerability of homelessness. Others' observation of children's interactions has led to the creation of "virtual children" such as "Alex," an AI-driven avatar that builds social bonds with kids through natural conversation and rapport-building, showing how technology can foster empathy and connection without being explicitly programmed for it (Pozniak *eandt.theiet.org*). Increasingly, technology companies are integrating trendy phrases that in relation to peace, environmental sustainability, and health into their designs and implementations, aiming to maximize the generation of empathetic feelings (Sankaran *forbes.com*).

Indeed, technology has made communication simpler than ever before. Yet, it seems empathy has never been more challenging to achieve. An increasing number of people argue that technology has become the primary reason for our empathy deficit. Sherry Turkle, an MIT researcher, raises a compelling alarm in her work about how technology is significantly weakening our ability to truly connect with each other, calling it the new "silent spring," in reference to Rachel Carson's influential 1962 book that highlighted the effects of pesticides (Adams *theguardian.com*). Kaitlin Ugolik Phillips's best-selling book titled *The Future of Feeling: Building Empathy in a Tech-Obsessed World* discusses the evolution of technologies from the realm of SF into tangible reality. It particularly highlights the erosion of human empathy alongside the rise of machines programmed to mimic this emotion. Philip brings attention to how young students were constantly in touch with friends and even strangers through platforms like Musical.ly, Snapchat, and text messages, yet their communication lacked substance, focusing more on the frequency rather than the content, with features like Snapchat's "streak" encouraging quantity over quality and potentially leading to the deterioration of social skills (15). Dr Helen Riess also warns us about how technology is harming our ability to feel empathy in her book titled *The Empathy Effect: 7 Neuroscience-Based Keys for Transforming the Way We Live, Love, Work, and Connect Across Differences*. In a recent interview, she warns about a worrying future when technology become a complete substitute for human interaction. She points out for the mutual feelings of empathy, technology clearly has its shortcomings and might cause

detachment not only between people and machine, but also between people (Green *streetroots.org*).

Technology will become more integrated into our lives, not less. And empathy is at a curious crossroads with the technological breakthroughs and the persuasive effects of SF. The role of empathy-focused care ethics is more crucial than ever as we look to understand and redefine the diverse caring relationships in our lives, from family and friends to healthcare and education. SF possesses what Gavin Miller has termed the "didactic-futurological function"(19). This function enables disciplines such as care ethics to be integrated and expanded within SF. It can inform and educate non-specialists by extrapolating how technology interferes with our perceptions of care and empathy, and by teaching readers about the long-term consequences in the form of "futurological forecasting" (Miller 20). Empathy itself holds the power to imagine different futures for these domains. We can even go as far to claim that empathy's core is deeply intertwined with the essence of science fictional worldbuilding. As clearly pointed out by Slote, we are learning to empathize "not just with what a person is actually feeling", but also "with what they will feel and what they would feel" (Slote 15).

In the upcoming sections, this article will examine how three Chinese SF stories engage with the heated discussions on care ethics, particularly how it intersects with empathy and emerging technologies. These stories, set in the near future, interrogate technology's promises, limitations, and long-term impacts, unfolding a world hovering between utopian aspirations and dystopian fears.

The Language Sheath

Regina Kanyu Wang's "The Language Sheath" provides a fascinating exploration of how technology promises to break down language and cultural barriers, facilitating unprecedented ease in communication between people. The narrative begins with the protagonist, Ilsa, expressing her excitement at being the sole subject for the experimental Kemorean language sheath developed by the tech company Babel. This technology works by meticulously tracking a model Kemorean speaker like Ilsa over time, capturing their linguistic habits and patterns through a neural translation engine fed a wide array of linguistic examples, aiming for seamless translation.

This ideal solution, seemingly capable of eradicating the need for traditional translation tools and simplifying all forms of communication, quickly reveals its limitations. Through the narration of Ilsa's son, Yakk, the author Wang presents a deeper conflict rooted in the diminishing use of the Kemorean language among the country's youth. Ilsa sees the language's decline as a result of the government's push for English to spur economic development and attract foreign investment, leading to a cultural and linguistic shift. This change is most evident among the younger generation of Komereans, who, educated in English, now find it more natural than their mother tongue.

However valid these concerns may be, from Yakk's perspective, his mother is controlling, imposing her binary views on language and identity onto him and refusing to recognize his evolving ideas about language, culture, and hybrid identity. Ilsa insists that "A true

Kemorean should speak nothing but the Kemorean language" (Wang, "Clarkesworld"). In contrast, Yakk, after being insulted and harshly criticized by his mother for his awkward Kemorean, views English as his first language and becomes reluctant to learn Kemorean further. Wang vividly describes Yakk's struggle stemming from the absence of an empathetic caring relationship between mother and son:

He reminded himself again that Mother was not talking about him. She was only firing insults at an imagined enemy who had abducted her son in her own muddled mind. But he couldn't help thinking, *Is this really how she feels while listening to me speak Kemorean? Is it really that disgusting?* Afraid of her judgment, he had been talking less and less in front of her. He felt like a perpetual child whenever he spoke Kemorean: belittled, powerless, misbehaving, always mending some mistake that he had made. Only when speaking English did he feel like himself, but Mother never let him speak English in front of her. (Wang, "Clarkesworld")

The conflict between Ilsa and Yakk extends beyond just language and cultural clashes or their socio-political layers; it fundamentally stems from an emotional rift due to the lack of "the caring motivation", which, as Slote notes, is "based in and sustained by our human capacity for empathy with others" (Slote 4). Yakk's struggle is less with the language itself and more with the way Ilsa's approach to language affects his self-esteem and their bond. Before they can fully address the intertwined issues of language, identity, and technology's role, rebuilding a caring, respectful, and close relationship between Ilsa and Yakk is essential. The author Wang highlights how empathy plays a critical role in nurturing our ability to care for others and engage with their problems (Slote 14).

The story also skilfully shows that Ilsa's failure to recognize Yakk's evolving attitude towards her parallels his natural maturation—from reacting instantly to her emotions to forming his own assessments as he grows. This includes understanding Ilsa's resentment over his father's betrayal and her unrealistic expectations for Yakk's future, a process care ethics scholar like Slote identifies as a typical indicative of maturation and the development of empathetic distinctions:

[T]he early tendency simply to emphasize with another person's occurrent feelings eventually gives way, in the light of greater knowledge of the factors that affect human wellbeing, to empathic dispositions that take account of aspects of another person's situation that *transcend* the person's immediately occurrent feelings. (Slote 35)

This explains why, as a child, Yakk could immediately empathize with Ilsa's pain. From Ilsa's perspective, Yakk's instant response and obedience were seen as the appropriate ways to express love, empathy, and care:

I was about to try again [commit suicide] when Yakk came home. He rushed over and snatched the shard out of my hand. He grabbed onto it so tight that the glass cut into his palm, oozing blood. But instead of crying, he hugged me tight and whispered, *Don't cry, Mom.*

He said it in English. I stared at him, as though I didn't know him.

He switched to Kemorean, *Don't cry*, Mom.

I hugged him back, tighter. (Wang, "Clarkesworld")

As Yakk grows older, when faced with similar situations involving a crying, heartbroken, and controlling mother, he finds himself withdrawing to avoid directly confronting Ilsa and hurting her feelings. He develops a distinct understanding of the situation and struggles to demonstrate care and empathy in a manner acceptable to Ilsa:

Just a single spark, and the whole house would blow up into dust. English and Kemorean intertwined in his [Yakk's] body. Rebuttals and curses roiled in confusing tides at the tip of his tongue. He clamped his lips tightly and ran away. He had to get out, had to leave this place, before the words imprisoned behind his lips could break out in an uncontrollable flood. (Wang, "Clarkesworld")

Without recognizing Yakk's growing autonomy and maturity in assessing both his conflicts with Ilsa and her situations, Ilsa turns to technology for a quick solution. In such cases, projects like the language sheath enable individuals like Ilsa, overwhelmed by insecurity and therefore controlling, to use technology in a way that undermines the basis of all caring relationships, substituting empathy with technological solutions. The deterioration of the mother-son relationship becomes nearly inevitable, given Ilsa's determination to use the language sheath as both a weapon and a life raft for her own pain caused by her husband's betrayal:

I'll dedicate myself to the language sheath: to build an invisible wall that could protect Yakk from English. Babel's translation service would separate him from those foreign friends and make him realize that they are fundamentally different from him. He is Kemorean. A true Kemorean should speak nothing but the Kemorean language. This is the indelible mark of our cultural heritage. No change. No abandonment. The present confusion and chaos is only temporary. When the language sheath is ready and Babel publicly releases the Kemorean translation service, order will be restored. (Wang, "Clarkesworld")

Such This individual shortfall in empathy-based care can ripple out to affect the community, fostering a societal ethos where divisions between self and others are deepened, thereby inhibiting communal care. Technological interventions like the language sheath not only allow Ilsa to dissociate from her maternal emotions, treating the language sheath as a substitute for her estrangement from Yakk, but also "deprived everyone else of their voice" (Wang, "Clarkesworld"), generating even more stereotypes and harsh control over one's own communities. She involuntarily participates in the process of creating further stereotypes of their own culture (Ooi 171). After being polished by a unified standard –the imitation of Ilsa's choice of words and tone - the language sheath is less an automatic

translation machine than a powerful medium to reinforce greater control, binaries, and conflicts in a cross-cultural context.

Ilsa's insistence on preserving Kemorean and her concern over its role in her relationship with her son reveal how she lets cultural homogeneity skew her understanding of empathy and care. By fixating on her son's struggle with Kemorean and the language's overall decline, she sidesteps the hurt from her husband's infidelity, redirecting her grief towards her son's perceived failure in the future. Ilsa derogatorily refers to her ex-husband's mistress as "a foreigner who spoke no Kemorean" (Wang, "Clarkesworld"), an act that conflates broad social and cultural experiences with her personal predicament. This approach leads to actions that might mistakenly be interpreted as caring for an endangered language. In her case, Ilsa masks her emotional wounds under the guise of promoting Kemorean, exerting control over her son Yakk and expecting him to immediately respond to her with empathy and care. Disguised as acts of caring for her son and Kemorean, Ilsa's actions reveal a preference for defensiveness and avoidance, mistaking these for genuine connection and support, thus allowing her to evade confronting painful realities (Herzfeld 4).

Wang's story ends on an ambiguous note regarding the resolution of Ilsa and Yakk's conflicts, underscoring that technology isn't the fix for their issues. Instead, Wang proposes that through the medium of intertwined dreams, Ilsa and Yakk could find a way to reconnect, fostering a deep empathy for each other's situations. Wang portrays Ilsa's enduring psychological stress and fatigue, unveiling her dire need for empathic care. While the language sheath project initially seems to offer Ilsa a way to navigate through linguistic and cultural barriers confidently, it ultimately exacerbates her sense of vulnerability, making her feel invaded and fragmented in her attempts to communicate with everyone around her including her students and colleagues, particularly with Yakk.

Wang's characterisation of Ilsa's broken mental state also echoes with recent new materialist reading of care ethics, which underlines that the "carer", the "caring" and the "cared-about" as well as "care" itself are all incomplete and active units involved in what Karen Barad termed as "intra-action" (Barad 815). Barad's conceptualization of such "intra-action", as Adeline Johns-Putra analyses, is to emphasize how our understanding and identification of others always occurs in a "dynamic coming together and enactment of separability" rather than in a "static opposition" (Johns-Putra, 2013, 127).

This explains why Yakk, in his recurring dreams, feels an inseparable connection with his mother and the world around him. His desire to reconnect with Ilsa is based on recognizing a simultaneity in their relationship. He once saw his mother as a mentally unstable perfectionist who sought control over every aspect of his life. However, Wang illustrates that in Yakk's recurring dreams, it becomes evident that their existences and emotional changes are co-constitutive.

In real life, Yakk attributes the pressures from international school and other life challenges solely to his mother. As depicted in his dreams, when stressed, he tends to believe he is "standing in the centre of a circle of people" and "each of them spoke in the voice of Mother, speaking Mother's tongue, besieging him from all directions" (Wang,

“Clarkesworld”). This reflects his fear of confronting his vulnerability and identity crisis, caught between not fully identifying as either Kemorean or English. By casting himself as the victim in their relationship, Yakk mentally distances himself from both his mother and the external world, seeking control through isolation. In this way, Yakk is simultaneously crafting his own “output filter”, akin to his mother’s language sheath.

Wang indicates through Yakk's recurring dream that he comes to realize both he and Ilsa are flawed and incomplete, deeply intertwined with the world around them. This acknowledgment of their shared vulnerability and interconnectedness enables him to transcend simplistic dichotomies in seeking for possible means to restore a caring relationship. Spurred by this insight from their entangled dreams, Yakk develops a profound empathy for his mother, motivating him to express his care and understanding for Ilsa in real life.

The story of “The Language Sheath” succeeds in characterising a mother-son relationship marred by a lack of empathy and growing emotional distance, however does not end there. It critically examines technology's role in exacerbating disconnection within the family, highlighting how reliance on technological fixes not only fails to resolve issues but also escalates the familial and personal conflict to a societal level. This results in adverse effects on broader concerns like the instrumentalization of language and identity crisis, ultimately reinforcing divisions between self and others. The story epitomizes the significance of empathic care as a fundamental moral principle across diverse individual, social, and cultural contexts.

The Retinol Adjustor Implant

Gu’s “Color the World” imagines a future society where Retinol Adjustors (RA) become popular, highlighting the ethical concerns arising from its widespread efficiency and convenience. Similar to the language sheath, RA promises a world where communication is made more efficient through a unified enhanced reality created by the implant. The RA implant can significantly improve vision by placing a biological chip in the retina to enhance light reception and signal conversion. It acts like a digital camera's upgraded sensor, offering detailed visuals and automatic lighting and colour adjustments. Although most people begin receiving the RA implant in childhood, a small group without RA finds it increasingly difficult to survive in a high-tech society.

RA technology rapidly gains favour, particularly among the youth, including the story's protagonist, Amy. It soon evolves into a pivotal gauge of one's societal stance, marking individuals as either conservative or liberal, and distinguishing the “abnormal” from the “normal”. This problematic categorization causes immense emotional stress to those hesitant about the technology, like Amy’s parents, and on individuals whose health conditions deem them less suitable for the RA implant. This technology-driven divide leads to familial estrangement for many adolescents who share Amy's situation. Initially lacking the RA implant, Amy faces bullying at school, and paradoxically, even after acquiring the implant, she remains as an outcast because her parents are without implants. The author Gu reveals that the RA implant transcends its role as a mere visual aid, becoming the

primary medium through which individuals perceive the world and connect with one another:

When technological advances alter the language we use to describe this world, it changes the way we perceive the world itself. Language alone is powerful enough to mold the human mind... RA technology has become entrenched in every aspect of our lives. From cinema screens to mobile apps, from commercial slogans to internet media, everywhere people are bending over themselves to match their language to what they see through the filters... It won't be long before—actually it's already started. People can't communicate, can't think, without RA. But...but what about the people who don't have it? (Gu 269-70)

The story shows that once RA technology becomes the predominant mode of communication, it drastically undermines the basis for forming empathetic, caring relationships, not only in the "special relations" defined by Diller and Noddings (Diller 331), such as family and intimate partnerships, but also extending to society at large. This technological paradigm shift impedes people's capacity for mutual dependence and reciprocal communication, core tenets emphasized by care ethics. This goes against the principles of being "absorbed" in how others see the world or being "engrossed" in their emotional pain, which Noddings and Slote identify as essential for building caring relationships (Slote 12). Without an RA implant, one might be derogatorily called an "ugly frog" (Gu 258) or considered outdated like "ancient glasses" incompatible with the current reality (Gu 258). There is clearly a collective push towards a singular reality enabled by RA technology and visual enhancement, which estranges people from showing care and empathy towards the life challenges and sufferings of others.

For example, through Amy's father's death in car accident, the author brings awareness of the deadly implications of upgrading traffic lights with RA technology, which proved fatal for those not equipped with RA implants or unable to synchronize with the majority's perception due to health reasons. People who couldn't distinguish the colors of traffic lights met tragic ends in accidents similar to Amy's father. Amy's father's funeral, through the lens of an enhanced reality by RA technology, has become another outlet to judge people like Amy's mother who appears outmoded and disconnected. Amy fails to see that her mother, feeling isolated and unable to connect with the pastor's sermon, is effectively shut out from their community and engulfed in loneliness. It doesn't occur to Amy that her mother might need her compassion and a sense of connection, especially in these moments. Following the funeral, their mother-daughter conversations also come to a halt.

Meanwhile, the whispers and awkward smiles at the funeral reveal the attendees' true feelings toward Amy's family and the tragic accident, revealing a lack of genuine empathy for their loss. Their concern seems to center around why Amy's family has not adopted RA technology as they have. The author Gu underlines the irony in this scenario: the fundamental human quality of empathy, especially vital during times of sorrow, has faded, contradicting the funeral's intent to grieve and reflect. This collective response to such

events further marginalizes those without RA like Amy's mother, excluding them from community groups.

Gu depicts the deterioration of authentic caring relationships among individuals and communities, addressing the conflict between care ethics and the liberal individualist view of society. The story critiques the rise of liberal individualism and its role in fostering belief in technological liberalism—the idea that technology enables individuals to autonomously pursue their interests and define their notions of good. RA technology, in this narrative, shifts people's focus solely to their relationship with technology itself. While there's a widespread belief that RA technology is the key to enhancing the human body and mind, offering access to a detailed, enhanced reality, the reality is that it shackles both body and mind to a distorted and impoverished view of society, as described by Held (2006, 14). Held further explains the collision of liberalism and a sense of care:

The liberal portrayal of the self-sufficient individual enables the privileged to falsely imagine that dependencies hardly exist, and when they are obvious, to suppose they can be dealt with as private preferences...The illusion that society is composed of free, equal, independent individuals who can choose to be associated with one another or not obscures the reality that social cooperation is required as a precondition of autonomy. (Held, 2006, 86)

In a society missing Held's advocated social cooperation, comprised entirely of independent individuals, the line between reality and illusion has become increasingly blurred. This blur is exacerbated by hyper-realistic images generated by RA algorithms, to the point where, absent a monitor's frame, distinguishing between the digital and the real world is a challenge (Gu 265-67). Despite the gravity of this shift, it has yet to capture the attention of authority figures, including medical professionals, who either willingly or involuntarily further the drift from a caring society. An example of this is seen in Amy's situation, where, instead of addressing her mother's concerns, medical professionals reinforce the inevitability of embracing RA technology, arguing that since other children have received RA implant surgery from an early age, Amy's mother should too discard her doubts:

In fact, most children receive RA implants at an even younger age. They're like the hottest mobile phone model, the hottest social network app, and the hottest fashion trends all rolled into one. There is no fighting it. Of course, it's not a purely business decision, but RA technology is the future..... The adjustors can, through programmable interfaces, program the electronic signals in real time," the doctor nodded, "In a way, you might say that they open up an infinite number of worlds for you—and you can share them with everyone else. (Gu 261-62)

In addition to the above, Gu's story extends beyond a critique of technology and a superficial plea for care ethics, illustrating instead how empathy-based care ethics can steer individuals through conflicts with an empathetic approach, softening technology's dominating impact. Through depicting Amy's changing attitude toward RA technology, Gu

articulates how we can better guide the younger generation to rethink the tension between technology and care ethics. Unlike Ilsa's controlling approach in the previous story, Amy's mother provides Amy with space while continually affirming her uniqueness. She respects Amy's desire to embrace RA technology but also cautions her that RA involves more than just visual enhancement or a new form of communication, warning that one might forget or not wish to remove the implant ever again. Different from Ilsa, Amy's mother, in Gu's characterisation, is always emotionally available and present, supporting Amy's struggles with empathy. At the same time, by journaling, she confronts her emotions and the intertwined realities between her and Amy—both independent and interconnected. She believes that experiences and emotions are shared, albeit temporarily (Noddings 30). Her diary reveals this nuanced relationship:

Amy will graduate soon. She's a healthy, intelligent, and confident young woman. Just about perfect in every way. She also knows how to take care of herself. With the adjustors in place, her color perception has been normalized...Do people with normal vision really see them in the exact same way? Nobody really knows. Each of us is like an isolated mining cave within the dark...Our perception re-molds the world for us, even though it's the only world we can ever know. What connects the cold, isolated caves isn't what we see but what we say to each other. We can't define our individual experiences, but we can give them a standard name. It's with the help of these names that we fall in love with each other in such a mad, chaotic world... we can still share a trace of common feeling. (Gu 285-86)

This understanding allows her to support Amy's decision for the RA implant despite her own concerns. She is open to new perspectives for the benefits of others. Her decision to potentially undergo the RA implant herself, despite physical constraints, to better understand Amy's world showcases a commitment to Noddings' idea of "being engrossed in the well-being of those being cared for" (30), prioritizing connection over coercion. Aligning with Held's view, Amy's mother values the interconnectedness inherent in care ethics, recognizing that many of our responsibilities are "not freely entered into but presented to us by the accidents of our embeddedness in familial and social and historical contexts" (Held, 2006, 14).

As Amy matures, she begins to understand her mother's skepticism towards the RA implant, transitioning from initial feelings of anger and frustration to contemplating the wider ramifications of RA technology. This development mirrors the shift from reacting based on immediate emotions to adopting "empathic dispositions" (Slote 35). This change in viewpoint enables Amy to not only align with her mother's perspectives on technology but also to proactively take steps and go the extra mile in challenging the implementation of RA technology.

Amy and her mother's reconciliation leads to the establishment of a community care center aimed at assisting individuals without RA implants. At this center, they leverage RA technology to encourage participants to explore diverse methods of interpreting and

engaging with the world, moving beyond an exclusive reliance on RA technology. Visitors without the RA implant are guided by Amy and her mother to view the RA-enhanced reality from an outsider's perspective. They are encouraged to interpret this enhanced reality through their own languages and engage in active discussions with others. In doing so, the singular reality dominated by RA technology is disrupted from within by those who were labelled as "abnormal". This caring environment fosters a reciprocal sense of care and empathy, effectively challenging the divisive self-other dichotomy often exacerbated by RA technology's unification of vocabularies.

This proves Held's assertion that a "meshing of care and justice" can combat the omnipresent force of technology by creating a caring society (2006, 68). As Sara Ruddick similarly puts it, "justice is always seen in tandem with care" (217). It showcases that a society rooted in care ethics—expanding from intimate and family relationships to broader societal interactions—is superior to one solely focused on liberal conception of autonomy and justice, which prioritizes individual rights but often end up producing abstract principles that turn relationships into mere competitions without achieving true justice or care.

The ending of the story reflects the author's heartfelt belief: in an era where our lives are intricately woven with technology, people should harness their fascination with technology to explore beyond it, guided by empathy-based care ethics. Every member of the society should discover the rich languages crafted from nature, personal journeys, and embracing profound experiences of connecting with others. These authentic expressions can stand alongside the new ways of expression birthed by technology, bringing attention to the uniqueness of spontaneous emotions and irrepressible yearning for caring relationships. It paves the way for a truly diverse and caring society. The novel's closing thought, "In this moment, our worlds contain the same colors" (Gu 288), embodies the aspiration for a caring society that celebrates both our differences and our commonalities.

The Virtual Child

Compared to Wang's "The Language Sheath" and Gu's "Color the World," Zhao's "Baby, I Love You" presents a future scenario that poses even greater challenges to the ethics of care and the development of reciprocity in empathetic relationships. Unlike the wearable language sheath or the RA implant for human eyes, where humans remain the primary agents of empathy and relationship-building, Zhao's story introduces the concept of artificial empathy through a virtual child. This virtual being is designed to enter into empathetic, caring relationships with human parents in a controlled manner.

The story clearly points out the creation of the online game "Raising Baobao" is driven by profit, aimed at fostering an artificial sense of empathy and caring relationships for those who deeply crave them. As the chief designer of the game, Mr. Hu is informed by his boss about the target demographic from the outset: "wealthy, educated elites" unable or unwilling to have children themselves and opposed to the concept of artificial wombs, "empty nesters" and other parents feeling disconnected from their adult children yet seeking emotional solace through the game to "recapture the joys and comforts of yesteryear," and individuals grappling with existential questions or feeling adrift in real life,

seeking comfort and meaning via this online platform (Zhao 103-4). Mr. Hu admires his boss's keen market insight and is persuaded to have a child with his wife, Lanzi, in exchange for "10 percent of the tech shares" and a promotion to "department head" (Zhao 104-5).

The above clearly shows that the urgent need to establish limits and boundaries on markets and the capitalist mode of production. As noted earlier, tech companies frequently rebrand their products with trendy concepts, claiming to serve diverse groups of people. However, under the guise of promoting diversity and liberal individualism, these products often lead to further detachment from fostering a caring community and society. Markets, as incisively highlighted by care ethics scholars like Held, are "unable to express and promote many values important to these[care] practices, such as mutually shared caring concern" (2016, 120).

Another key question raised by Zhao's story is whether, even with ethical oversight of new artificial empathy products, they can truly mimic the intuitive and dynamic nature of human empathic responses. Technically, Mr. Hu's primary task involves using algorithms to generate responses based on data and predictive modelling to simulate empathetic interactions. In order to make the game "more realistic" (Zhao 105), he also convinces his wife Lanzi to conceive a child for the purpose of gaining some first-hand experience. Zhao clearly points out that Lanzi is not treated equally in terms of their roles and responsibilities in looking after Beibei. Mr Hu is depicted to be an atypical "absent father". In the eyes of the nurse, Mr Hu has been very attentive to Beibei's needs ever since she was born. However, Mr. Hu's involvement is primarily motivated by his ambition in transferring all these parenting experiences, particularly the positive parts, to the online players of the Raising *Babao* game. Indulging himself in the fantasies of creating the perfect virtual baby by himself, he locks himself into his own office without acknowledging Lanzi's efforts and sacrifices throughout the process. As Zhao depicts:

These days, I was so busy that I was barely holding it together. I wanted *Baobao* to age gradually, like a real infant. I wanted him to have the same look, feel, and smell. It was like I was giving birth to a baby, wasn't it? I was creating a real, live, virtual baby. I was its father and its mother. (Zhao 109-10)

Through Mr Hu's narration, we can clearly see his ambition in moulding the virtual child *Baobao* into an imitation of a human child as much as possible, not only in terms of its static appearance, but also its capacity to trigger sensory and emotional responses from both himself and the other game players. Initially, Mr Hu thinks the parent-child caring relationship is premised on a sense of command. As a result, in adding realistic details to stimulate the feeling of care in the game, his efforts revolve around the goal of emphasizing the "cuteness" and "innocence" of *Baobao*'s appearance, and making sure *Baobao* can strictly follow instructions from the "parents" while giving an immediate response.

In Hu's understanding, a sense of care and emotional attachment can be created through the repetition of such patterns of interaction. Similar to Ilsa from Wang's "The Language Sheath," Hu also produces a rather biased version of the parent-child relationship based on

his own model and his objectification of Beibei. This explains why he encounters repeated failures in trying to convey his own emotional experience in the setting of the game. Without establishing a real emotional connection with his daughter Beibei, the imitation of parenthood becomes superficial:

I rarely felt so inept at my job. Knowing exactly how something should be, but unable to make it so. It was a very frustrating feeling.

The mouth, a baby's mouth. I wanted Baobao to have delicate lips like Huani: thin, soft, warm. Sticky lips, like Huani.

The Holonet's high-energy particles could transmit a whole range of signals. So it was only a matter of translating what I felt into usable code—but did it have to be this hard! I had to acknowledge the greatness of creation. (Zhao 111)

Hu's frustration over his incapability of translating his feelings into useful code also suggests the lack of another important premise for care and empathy – the blurring of self and the other that is generated by the bodily touch-based experience. Hu is aware that physical touch and connection play a vital role in creating intimate feelings between parents and children. Apart from emphasizing the cute appearance of *Baobao*, he places equal importance on using haptic technologies, such as applying force, vibration, or motion to the user, to facilitate an experience of the human sense of physical touch. *Baobao* is designed to be able to follow the relevant commands from Hu, such as “Good Baobao. Give Daddy a kiss” (Zhao 107). When the virtual baby puckers its lips and leans forward, Hu feels a tickling sensation on his cheek that makes him laugh, like “a warm little worm wriggling” around in his heart (Zhao 107).

However, in such a process, *Baobao* is perpetually put in a passive position, without being invited into a dynamic and unpredictable process of interacting with Hu. Such a pattern forms a clear contrast with Hu's interaction with his daughter Beibei. Beibei can clearly sense the love and affection her mother gives her, and her father Hu's sense of distraction and detachment from their in-the-moment interactions. As Zhao vividly captured:

Maybe babies possess powers of discrimination that we adults have lost, and she could sense that the love and affection her mother gave her was far more genuine than anything her chipper, jokey father had to offer. But every time I picked her up and rocked her with a mind toward investigation, every time I tentatively observed her reaction to various body language cues, her round dark eyes would suddenly go still, wariness shooting from her brown pupils.

Maybe I was being paranoid, but I'm convinced it was wariness. (Zhao 118-19).

Different from the virtual baby *Baobao*, Beibei's body is both “being-touched” and participating in “the affective sense of being-touched” (Al-Saji 23). In other words, unlike *Baobao*, Beibei is both subject and object in her engagement with the surrounding others,

constantly involving a mutual activity of responding and being affected by the other (Ley M et al. 71). The dynamic and mutually-affected relationship between Beibei and Hu allows them to be simultaneously in active and passive states, losing the previous differentiation between self and other, which is essential for building empathic caring relationship as suggested by care ethics scholars like Noddings, Slote, and Held. It is for such a reason that although Hu develops some fondness for the virtual baby *Baobao*, he never feels the same level of anxiety, grief, and despair for his virtual baby.

Hu's realization of the sharp distinction between Beibei and *Baobao* intensifies after Beibei falls ill and is taken to hospital. He understands that his interaction with Beibei cannot be replicated because there is only one Beibei. Their interaction itself is fluid and unpredictable, changing as their states change. It is also at this moment that he becomes certain that the Raising *Baobao* game is doomed to failure due to the infeasibility of replicating his "love and care for this living child," which is unique, tender, and fragile (Zhao 118).

Mr Hu's growing awareness of his distinct emotional response toward Beibei and *Baobao* underlines the paradox of creating artificial empathy. While designed to mimic the outward manifestations of empathy for practical purposes, artificial empathy does not possess the inherent emotional and cognitive complexities that define human empathy. Despite its effectiveness in certain contexts, artificial empathy serves as a functional tool within AI's capabilities rather than a genuine emotional response. In the real-life context, some designers of artificial empathy product like John Nosta admits that AI is a "tenant, not a proprietor" in the "grand architecture of empathy" (Nosta *psychologytoday.com*), suggesting that AI's capacity for empathy is secondary and derivative, not original or foundational (Nosta *psychologytoday.com*). Although he is positive that despite being a constructed reality, the artificial empathy exhibited by AI can have tangible effects. But what needs to be taken into consideration is that one of the foreseeable tangible impacts is its long-term influence on social dynamics and particularly its implications on the destructions of social bonds and interfere with the way how people connect with each other. All of these needs to be carefully monitored by care ethics.

Zhao's depiction of the intense conflict between the virtual baby *Baobao* and the human child Beibei underscores the urgent ethical considerations surrounding technology's role in redefining our perceptions of care and empathy. When Beibei accidentally walks into Hu's office and finds out the existence of *Baobao*, who looks almost identical to her, she runs straight into the virtual baby, and they start to fight with each other. Zhao's characterization of the confrontation between Beibei and *Baobao* clearly points out the challenges in developing an engaged ethical response to the human-machine conflicts:

I [Hu] then witnessed a most startling scene unfold: the two babies—one flesh and blood, one a character in a game, formed from streams of information—began to swat at each other. And in my shock and vexation, I didn't know which side I should help!

Beibei wouldn't suffer any harm because she was real. Baobao's physical presence was simulated. Even if he hit Beibei, it would cause her no more pain than an itch. And no matter how hard Beibei hit Baobao, it wouldn't have any real effect on him, because all that he felt and experienced was a setting. His pain, his cries, were only the responses the game had determined he should display.

But in the moment, I was stupefied. I didn't know what to do, or who to help. (Zhao 121)

The above scene underlines the dilemma of channelling human emotion, which is subjective, interactive and unpredictable in nature, with the sentiment detection system that is enabled and controlled by machines and technology. Even though *Baobao* is able to detect Beibei's anger and frustration, his reaction is driven by "an entire infrastructure constructing the design and distribution of digital touch" (Ley M et al. 75). In a typical fight between two humans, both of them need to constantly adjust their postures to adapt to each other's bodily situations. The immediate bodily feedback, representing the underlying emotional experience, can quickly detect any possibility of continuing or terminating the fight even before they realize it (Niedenthal 1004). The virtual baby *Baobao* is unable to provide such immediate bodily feedback or engage in a shared emotional experience with Beibei. He is unable to imitate a real human child's emotional expression, and thus cannot engage in the "bodily reenactment of the experience of the other's state", which is crucial in building a foundation for empathy and care (Niedenthal 1004). But in the meantime, his reactions, which are carefully designed by the computer system, give both Beibei and Hu "full immersion with sounds, images, odors, and tactile signals" (Zhao 107).

It is such a contradiction that confuses Beibei and causes a feeling of shock and fear in Hu. In the end, Hu has to turn off the holographic computer to stop *Baobao* and Beibei's continuous fight with each other. The moment when *Baobao* vanishes, Hu understands that all these sensory, motor, or emotional experiences he has been trying to create for the game players, have been "stripped of their perceptual and experiential basis" from the very beginning (Niedenthal 1003), and thus never really existed, but are "all fake" (Zhao 123).

The story of "Baby, I Love You" unpacks the complexity surrounding how and why technology can thoroughly challenge our current definition of parenthood and family, causing enormous ethical concerns. Zhao critically delineates a future in which the implementation of holographic technology can subvert our understanding of establishing emotional connections and showing empathy and care to ourselves and others. From various angles, the story inspires us to re-examine what is the premise of a caring relationship in a technologically-saturated society. The simple imitation that is facilitated by technology can never replace the natural entanglement of our bodily reaction and emotional empathy. It is a fear of loss—of the uniqueness and spontaneity of life itself—that drives us to care for and connect with others, bridging past, present, and future.

Conclusion

As I try to articulate in the previous sections, Chinese SF authors like Wang, Gu, and Zhao consistently emphasize the urgency to adopt care ethics in reevaluating the profound ways technology reshapes our identities and relationships with others. Technology introduces both utopian and dystopian realities. Rather than merely depicting a pessimistic view of technology's negative effects, these stories highlight the true challenge: to unravel how emerging technologies, coupled with a lack of regulatory oversight, can exacerbate humanity's and society's worst traits, driving individuals away from forming caring relationships within families and broader social contexts.

A seemingly all-powerful instant translator like the language sheath can exacerbate the disconnect between a controlling mother and her son, further intensifying issues around cultural identity and the division between self and other. Similarly, retinol adjustor implants, marketed for visual enhancement, effectively ostracize those who cannot or have not yet received the implant, casting them as perpetual 'others'. The new vocabulary and language brought by technology could entirely replace traditional human communication methods, erasing established emotional connections. Moreover, the growing belief in the possibility of creating artificial intelligences capable of mimicking empathy, designed to serve those feeling emotionally void in a profit-driven society, only leads them to deeper isolation and alienation from the sense of care and empathy.

Starting with intimate family dynamics and personal emotional ties, all three authors expand their narratives to societal scales. They offer optimistic strategies for invoking care ethics to awaken our innate sense of being connected. Through mechanisms like entangled dreams, embracing duality or temporary self-displacement, they remind us that the essence of empathy—a uniquely human trait—carries responsibilities that technology can never fulfil, highlighting the critical role of care ethics in building a sustainable future.

Although in the form of SF, these stories are deeply anchored in the contemporary interplay between technology and care, interrogating the discourse of liberalist conception of society. Technologies like instant translation tools such as ChatGPT are already realities. With the popularity of visual enhancements in devices like the Apple Vision Pro, the introduction of RA implants feels like a logical next step, underscored by Elon Musk's foray into brain chips. People are already using AI to recreate deceased family members, making the idea of virtual children who can store and recall human memories feel less like a future concept and more like an impending reality. All these narratives push us to reevaluate our concepts of the body, empathy, and care in light of technological advancements, in face of a future where the lines between these fictional tales and our reality become increasingly blurred.

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