

# Human, Cyborg, and Subjectivity in *Good Hunting*: A Posthuman Deconstructive Perspective

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**Abstract:** In the era of the postmodern new technological revolution, interwoven relationships between humans and technology, humans and environment, humans and non-human beings are highly debated in academia. *Good Hunting*, a fiction written by multiple Hugo winner American Chinese Ken Liu, is a combination of postmodern steampunk and old Chinese folklore. It approaches literary sophistication by presenting binaries such as East and West, agricultural civilization and industrial civilization, misogyny and feminism, colonialism and anti-colonialism, and human beings and cyborgs. Interpreting *Good Hunting* as a posthuman literary text based on the aforementioned juxtaposed binaries, this paper probes into the relations among human beings, cyborgs, and subjectivity through a deconstructive perspective by analyzing how protagonists “Yan” and “Liang” lost and reconstructed their subjectivity through cyborgs in a posthuman context and how technology becomes the accomplice of capital in the postmodern society.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism; cyborg; *Good Hunting*; posthumanism; subjectivity

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## 1. Introduction

Topics regarding the supremacy of human subjectivity and human exceptionalism have prevailed in the literary field since the Renaissance. The humanism cognition of anthropocentrism is challenged by posthumanism in the postmodern society where man is no longer the center of all theoretical and practical concerns. Ever since the accelerated development of technology, life science, and ontological epistemology, the trend of posthumanism has emerged in the field of social science and humanities in the late twentieth century. It emphasizes “decentering/defamiliarization of human subjectivity” in literary approaches, perspectives, and methodologies.

Given the overarching posthuman claims, many posthuman theorists have made their analyses of the dissolution of “subject/subjectivity” in humanism. In her monograph *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999), Donna Haraway has elaborated the struggle of different types of “posthuman” coevolving with intelligent machines. She also illustrated how information lost its body, how technology constructs a cyborg, and the elimination of cybernetics from humanistic subjects. Later on, Cary Wolf published *What is Posthumanism?* (2010) and systematically answered the questions involved in bioethics, cog-

nitive science, and animal ethics. Dora Haraway praised Wolf's book as "an original, thoroughly argued, fundamental redefinition and refocusing of posthumanism" (upress.umn.edu). Francesca Ferrando in her essay "The Party of the Anthropocene: Post-humanism, Environmentalism, and the Post-anthropocentric Paradigm Shift" emphasizes that the Anthropocene and the actual ecological collapse are only the symptoms in a posthuman world. From an environmental point of view, in order not to compromise our future, she calls for a post-Anthropocentric turn that "the Anthropocene shall thus be addressed, together with sustainable forms of producing (less), recycling and co-existing with other species, with a socio-political and cultural shift" (Ferrando 2014: 170). From Rosi Braidotti's point of view, posthuman helps us make sense of our multiple identities in the ongoing processes of becoming-subject in our fast-changing times. She maintains that we are becoming knowing subjects in a posthuman society, and the proper study of the humanities is no longer 'man', "we need to focus our collective efforts upon the projects of defining what 'we' could become as a species and a set of technologically inter-linked material cultures" (2019: 38). In her newly published treatise *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019), she further illustrated the constitution of our subjectivity, the general production of knowledge, and the practice of the academic humanities with her post-colonial and feminist insight.

The literary creations of Chinese American writer Ken Liu (1976-) has drawn much attention since he won the Nebula (2011), Hugo (2012, 2013, and 2015), and World Fantasy Awards (2012). He has also established his literary reputation in China for translating Liu Cixin's best-selling novel *The Three-Body Problem* (2015) from Chinese to English. Most of his artistic writings were dealing with fantasy and science fiction, for instance, *The Paper Menagerie*, *Thoughts and Prayers*, *The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary*, and so on. Among all his translations and original works, *Good Hunting* is inimitable (was adapted into an episode of *Love, Death, and Robots* by the Netflix in 2019) by others in its anti-colonialism undertone and the depiction of the combination of steampunk and the oriental elements.

With an anti-colonial narrative and overtone, *Good Hunting* (2012) sets in the late Qing dynasty in China where oriental agricultural civilization meets Western industrial civilization. The author Ken Liu (1976-), as a Chinese American writer, is an embodiment of mixed cultures and is equipped with a unique perspective on anti-colonial writings. The first half of the story revolves around a "Hulijing"<sup>1</sup> (a shape-shifting feminine fox spirit), a common element in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, while the second half of the story turns abruptly into a steampunk scene. Ken Liu's imagination of the steampunk Hong Kong is best represented in Netflix's adaption TV series *Love, Death, and Robots* in 2019. In the story, the emergence of modern industrial civilization (new magic) replaces the traditional agricultural civilization (old magic). In Ken Liu's artistic writing, it is undeniable that the British colonists during the Opium Wartime have brought advanced science and technology to modern China, nevertheless, various humiliations and disasters have impacted and insulted this ancient Oriental country as well.

By interpreting the fiction *Good Hunting* as a posthuman literary text, this paper investigates the relationships among East and West, agricultural civilization and industrial civilization, misogyny and feminism, colonialism and anti-colonialism, and human and cyborg by examining cyborg, subjectivity, and the reconstruction of subjectivity in *Good Hunting* in a posthuman deconstructive manner. Moreover, the discussion of the relationships between humans and technology calls for contemplation on human existence in a posthuman condition.

## 2. Posthuman Subjectivity Lost in *Good Hunting*

The hierarchy established by the “European white male” as the “logos”, center, and dominant position since the Renaissance is “logocentrism”. It is further developed into “anthropocentrism” that interprets the world in terms of human values and regards human supremacy and human exceptionalism are the key tenets. The notion of anthropocentrism is not rare in the western history of literature and art. Ancient Greek philosopher Protagoras claimed “Man is the measure of all things”, which denotes individual human being is in a subjective position and is the ultimate source of value. Such an anthropocentrism concept can also be found in Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing “the Vitruvian Man”. However, From Nietzsche’s declaration of “the death of God” to Foucault’s (1970) “the death of man” by boldly asserting that “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (Foucault 1970: 387). It is such lines and notions as theses that Nietzsche and Foucault came to be described as anti-humanist. Not surprisingly, the conception of anthropocentrism was constantly challenged and questioned in a postmodern society, which leads to a shift of “decentering of human subjectivity” in humanities.

In *Good Hunting*, the protagonist “Liang”, a demon hunter, who encountered a “Hulijing” named “Yan” when he was hunting demons for the first time with his father. Legend had that “Hulijing was a demon who stole hearts” (Liu 2020: 1). However, he allowed Yan to escape when Yan confronted him and explained that human could fall in love with Hulijing without being entranced by magic. Years later, Liang was maintaining a close friendship with Yan when his father died. As China was undergoing the colonized modernization, the magic was fading away and Yan was in difficulty transforming herself back to fox form.

As for a Hulijing like Yan, her magic of transformation from fox to human is threatened under such circumstances. Her fox form is her true form that represents her subjectivity as it is mentioned in the story that “hulijing remained hunters who felt most free in their fox form” (Liu 2020: 5). In the first half of the story, Yan’s subjectivity is the combination of fox and human. However, the old magic of her subjectivity has gradually disappeared due to the invading of foreigners to the ancient land. Here, the western culture represented by industrial civilization is the dominant culture when facing the old Chinese culture represented by agricultural civilization.

It is normally stereotyped that “colonized people are irrational, while Europeans are rational, and the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy; Europeans are civilized, while the orient is static, and Europeans can be seen as developing and marching ahead” (Zhang 2002: 180). In the story, one English officer has broke Buddha and said cynically to a mandarin when he insisted to build railroads on a temple:

Now we know that it is only an idol made of mud stuffed with straw and covered in cheap paint. This is why you people lost the war to Britain. You warship statues of mud when you should be thinking about building roads from iron and weapons from steel. (Liu 2020: 8)

The image of western colonists is demonstrated by Ken Liu as patronizing, arrogant, and immoral. From what the colonist officer has said in this situation, it is clear that western colonists justify the colonization as civilization evolution and view China as an inferior, exotic oriental country. In their opinion, industrial civilization is superior to agricultural civilization. Yan is losing her “old magic” (true subject) and all she needs to do is to

learn to survive. Meanwhile, Liang is also losing his job as a demon hunter since spirits are fading away in the village. Both Yan and Liang have lost their subjectivity when they are forced to live the way they used to be. They've been marginalized in a world fused with tradition and modern.

“Survival of the fittest” is the motto of the modern world. For the sake of survival, Yan falls into prostitution in Hong Kong. She is trapped in a human form and cannot transform herself into a fox form to hunt. She complains of bitterness, “in this form, what can I do? I don't have claws. I don't have sharp teeth. I can't even run very fast” (Liu 2020: 11). The changing environment drained “old magic” from Yan:

I dream of hunting in this jungle of metal and asphalt, I dream of my true form leaping from beam to ledge to terrace to roof, until I am at the top of this land, until I can growl in the faces of all the men who believe they can own me. (Liu 2020: 12)

This feminist aspirations of Yan dimmed as she was even unable to make ends meet in Hong Kong. Liang is also trying his best to survive in a world of iron roads and steam whistles. Though he turns out to be a skilled mechanic, his life in Hong Kong is filled with discrimination. As a machine designer of a British owned railroad company, he was insulted by the colonizer from time to time. When a colonist officer asked to meet an engineer who repaired the broken governor, he satirized with disdain, “You did not steal the idea from an Englishman? It will certainly be cheaper than hiring a real engineer from England” (Liu 2020: 13). The ridicule undertone of the colonizer damaged Liang's pride. However, Liang submitted to humiliation to survive. In short, once a technology becomes the accomplice of capital, it may cause the alienation of human beings, the “disenchantment” (Max Weber) of culture, and the loss of human subjectivity. The “old magic” leaving Yan and Liang as Hong Kong was colonized, meanwhile, Yan and Liang lost their power of discourse. Therefore, both of them are urged to rethink their subjectivity constructiveness and means of survival in a new world were all powered by steam and technology.

### 3. Cyborg and Subjectivity Reconstruction in *Good Hunting*

It is Dora Haraway's article “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985) that introduced the concept of cyborg by maintaining that “by the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism — in short, cyborgs” (Haraway 1985: 121). she rejects the rigid boundaries that separating “human” from “animal” and “human” from “machine”. Just as what Haraway mentioned, “contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted” (Haraway 1985: 122) In *Good Hunting*, Yan is the perfect embodiment of a cyborg when she is transformed by a British businessman into half human and half machine in Hong Kong. In the power mechanism constructed by the colonists, Yan was deprived of its status as a subject and became an object.

The beauty of technology is real, though this kind of romance has an insulting undertone. The cyborg becomes Yan's ontology. As the last section mentioned, Liang is leaving his hometown to Hong Kong to make his living, while Yan has difficulty in transforming back to her fox form and hunt. “In this new age of steam and e-

lectricity, in this great metropolis, except for those who live on the Peak, is anyone still in their true form?" Yan's philosophical question suggested that a hierarchical society where everyone is forced to alter their true subjectivity to conform to people in the highest hierarchy. Yan was once been taught by her mom to like human things, food, clothes, folk opera, old stories. Yet her mom never depended on those human things and always turned into her true fox form and hunt. Time has changed as technology (the new magic) developed rapidly. Yan was drugged and forcibly subjected to a surgery that transformed her organic body into a machine by an English Governor for his twisted perversion. "I had a choice; let him keep on changing me to suit him, or he could remove the legs and throw me out on the street. Who would believe a legless Chinese whore? I wanted to survive. So I swallowed the pain and let him continue" (Ken Liu, 15). At this point, she could not bear the hurt and humiliation anymore, she killed the governor and returns to Liang asking for help.

Yan reconstructed her subjectivity by reconstructing her Cyborg fox form and hunting the oppressor in Hong Kong. Liang replaced and upgraded Yan's mechanical body with a flexible chrome fox body that most resembled her true form. She could be transformed and upgraded like any other cyborgforms, however, she stuck to her fox form, which she deemed as her true subject form and true identity. With Ling's skill, she completely transformed her half cyborg body into a robotic Hulijing. In terms of Yan's subject body, from a Hulijing (half-fox and half-human) to human and finally, to a robotic Hulijing (half-fox and half-machine), she was sent free and found her "old magic" with a hybrid cyborg body. It is a cross-cultural and cross-identity experience. As it is delivered in the story, "the old magic was back but changed; not fur and flesh, but metal and fire" (Liu 2020; 16). Here, the metal and fire are empowering Yan as a cyborg.

Liang reconstructed his subjectivity by making good use of his mechanic skills and became the guardian of Hong Kong. Just like Yan, he lost his true identity as a demon hunter and was forced to adapt to an industrial world as an engineer to survive. When Yan asked for his help, he hesitated at first and replied "I have a good job I want to keep" (Liu 2020; 13). He experienced modernization, but only technical modernization. It is until Yan had revealed her cyborg body to him, did he realize how they were decentered and marginalized on their land. The alliance of Liang and Yan makes them both into forces whose oppressors should fear. What worth noting is that Liang seemed to be in control of technology, but in fact, the technology was in control of him because a solid Colonial Empire is the backstop of that technology.

Apart from Yan and Liang's subjectivity, Ken Liu's narration of the story is also worth noting. For instance, he maintains the Chinese pinyin narrative of "hulijing" instead of the English narration of "fox spirit". Traditional Chinese pinyin narrations such as "Fengshui", "Qingming", "Qi", "Li", and "Yulan", which defamiliarize and estrange western narrations to a certain extent. This designed nostalgic narration have deliberately challenged the western narration.

Yan, to some extent, symbolizes China during the Opium War. Before the late Qing dynasty, Yan had always owned "old magic", which resembles the rich and fascinating culture of ancient China. Whereas, in modern times, "She" (here represents both China and Yan) was transformed by the advanced technology of the British colonists, who praised their behavior as "progress". "She" was under the colonizer's gaze and was forced to adapt and survive in an industrialization world. As "old magic" gradually disappeared, "She" was abused, transformed, and lost her voices. Learned from the mistreatment, "She" finally made good use of modern technology ("new magic") to transform herself and regain her strength and discourse power.

Admittedly, technology is related to alienation in the capitalist environment, but it needs to be emphasized that the root of technological alienation is not the technology itself. Technology is merely a tool and means to meet human beings' needs and liberate human beings, and it is the capitalist mode of production that makes technology become the "accomplice of capital". In other words, technology can be a tool for the oppressed to break their chains, if it is used well. It is exactly what the two protagonists of *Good Hunting* are trying to do when they facing the alienated world.

## 4. Conclusion

*Good Hunting* as a combination of traditional Chinese folklore and scientific fiction extends into the imagined future and seamlessly connects with "Cyborg" and "steampunk", constituting a new myth in the posthuman context. It merges tradition and future, East and West, agricultural civilization and industrial civilization, misogyny and feminism, colonialism and anti-colonialism, and human and cyborg, narrating the modernization process of eastern civilization in the form of science fiction fable. Under the impact of the western modernization tide, the eastern world, which was originally full of mysticism, was forced to start modernization. The demon hunter Liang and Hulijing Yan in *Good Hunting* have never forgotten their pursuit of freedom and their subjectivity, so they did not get completely lost in the trend of alienated posthuman society, and finally stood up to fight against the oppressors.

In postmodern society, the posthumanism trend has become one of the academic discourses, displaying its rich ideological connotation and interpretations in the fields of literature, sociology, history, philosophy, and ethics. Interpreting Ken Liu's *Good Hunting* in the context of posthumanism and postcolonialism, it not only reveals the anxiety and existential crisis of human beings on their status in a posthuman condition, but also provides us with a new way of contemplation on the relationships among technology, environment, and human beings.

### Note:

1 "Hulijing" in Chinese folklore represents an evil feminine spirit that haunting males with its magic tricks. It often appears in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, and it is usually depicted as an antagonist who is good at bewitching men by transforming from a fox into a beautiful lady.

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