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# Introduction

## Fantastically Real

Pingta Ku and Sharin Schroeder

*Fantasy is any departure from consensus reality.*  
--Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*

Non-consensus reality has become ever-present in our quasi-schizophrenic minds, not as a mere theoretical question regarding textual virtuality, but as a challenge confronting us directly in our most mundane moments: the polarizing aftermath of recent American and British elections, competing partisan news channels, impenetrable echo chambers, claims of fake news and “alternative facts,” fiercely contested reports of genocide, divided opinions on refugees and other forms of immigration, resurgent white supremacy looming in the distance, and China’s grotesque chimera of imperialist nationalism and nominal communism closer to home. These current events remind us how elusive consensus reality can be: the question of reality not only emerges when we critique particular literary texts but also surfaces in political speeches, family arguments, and social media posts. The dialectics between literary fantasies and consensus reality seems more relevant than ever.

As the afterlife of the Taipei Tech English Department’s eponymous international conference in 2018,<sup>1</sup> this feature issue, “Literary Fantasy and Its Discontents,” aims to respond to the paranoid state of our contemporary world. The topic, apparently enough, alludes to Sigmund Freud, whose *Civilization and*

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<sup>1</sup> The two-day conference featured fifty-three papers, two keynote speeches (by Professor Ackbar Abbas of University of California, Irvine and Professor Marysa Demoor of Ghent University), and one featured talk by Dr. Thomas Wall of Taipei Tech. The full list of papers given can be seen at the conference website: <https://literaryfantasytaipei2018.wordpress.com/>.

*Its Discontents* attempts to anatomize the unease experienced by individuals within larger civilizations—an unease that underlies so many works of fiction in the fantastic mode. Freud’s formulations of the uncanny have also been important to critical treatments of the fantastic or, occasionally, to the portioning off of the uncanny from other genres or modes, as when Tzvetan Todorov divided it from the pure fantastic and the marvelous. However, strict definitions of the fantastic have occasionally impeded critical work. Scholars’ *discontents* arise within and regarding what Todorov and Rosemary Jackson would define as marvelous, particularly because their definitions are sometimes used as an excuse not to engage critically with marvelous texts (see Jackson 9). However, as Farah Mendelsohn states in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, “It is now rare to find scholars who choose among Kathryn Hume, W. R. Irwin, Rosemary Jackson, or Tzvetan Todorov: it is much more likely they will pick and choose among these and other ‘definers’ of the field according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested” (xiii).

This feature topic, therefore, is an effort not only to reassess some of the divisions that have been made within the genre, but also to re-explore the conversations that can arise when all texts written (at least partially) in marvelous, fantastic, and uncanny modes are open for consideration. We asked for contributions that would consider fantasy in its many forms: both as a (frequently politicized) literary mode and in the word *fantasy*’s broader connotations of delusion, unconscious wish, or even falsehood. How do fantasies assist in the formation of national identities? How do they impact the narratives—be they harmful or beneficial—that imagined communities (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s coinage) tell themselves about their geneses, their capabilities, and their future? How do reader responses to *the fantastic* differ from those to *the mimetic*, and how do such differences condition reception history? How has the fantastic been used in reform movements and the rhetoric of reaction? What are the ethical limitations of literary fantasies, and how have they been applied?

While we wanted to cast a broad net, our interest gravitated toward fantasy’s dual role as identity-consolidator and as nation builder. On the one hand, nationalism’s entanglement with folklore, fairy tales, and high fantasies, particularly, forces us to dissect the latent discourse of social discontents. According to Jack Zipes, folklore and fairytales’ golden age begins in 1812—the year when the first tome of Grimms’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* was published—and extends to Andrew Lang’s death in 1912 on the eve the First World War. Zipes quotes Richard Dorson saying, “scholars in one country after another utilized folklore as a vehicle to promote a national language, literature, history, and mythology” (qtd. in Zipes xvii).

On the other hand, as Zipes notes, “the more folklorists sought to grasp the nationalist or even regional qualities of the tales, the more they had to concede that the stories were transnational and transregional” (xxiv). These scholars also contributed to the tales’ wider diffusion: while folklorists and fairytale collectors in nineteenth-century Europe may have defined and invented national cultures, such fairy tales and fantasies—far from being limited within the bounds of national territories—have been globalized and remediated in new cultures and under new historical conditions.

These preliminary questions about fantasy have been tackled in a fascinating trio of research articles, each of which offers a fresh perspective on the entangled processes of modernization, de/colonization, and the creation of fantasy within the geopolitical triad of Taiwan, Japan and Mainland China.

In “Imaginary Conquests,” Richard M. Davis scrutinizes three Japanese films that were produced during the Second World War: *Songokū* (1940), based on *Journey to the West*, and the animated *Sea Eagles* (1943) and *Divine Warriors of the Sea* (1945), based on the *Momotarō* legend. He goes beyond considering such cinematic fantasies merely as nationalist projects that distribute state ideology; instead, he addresses the trans-Pacific interaction between Japanese and American motion picture industries as competing propaganda machines. Davis examines the cinematic trio and exposes the thematic parallel between their quest narratives and Japan’s militaristic ambition to conquer mainland China, British Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies. However, resisting the temptation to reduce the three films to mere propaganda, he explores their reception history and proposes a more nuanced historicization: the release dates of the three fantastic films counterpoint the main beats of Japanese Empire’s rise, expansion and fall in reality, almost like an orchestrated sequence of metacommentaries.

German Sinologist Dirk Kuhlmann’s article demonstrates indigenous Taiwanese writers’ strategic and authoritative manipulation of Sinophone literary writings as they rework and build upon indigenous mythologies not only for themselves, but also for a broader audience. Through a meticulous historico-ethnological investigation and in line with Shu-mei Shih’s politically radical Sinophone studies, Kuhlmann explores multiple indigenous writers’ use of myths as heritage, as lived tradition, as expressions of the human experience, or as inspirational/nourishing sources. He contends that such indigenous writers as Syaman Rapongan and Neqou Soqluman have made the paradoxical choice to adopt the Chinese language as their medium of storytelling precisely because they wish to mutate the Chinese language from within and weave their tribal mythologies into mainstream Taiwanese identity.

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Last, but definitely not least, Yiran Chen’s article directs our attention to Republican-era “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly” novelist Zhang Henshui’s *A New Tale of Killing Ghosts*, an obscure *sequel* to Liu Zhang’s seventeenth-century fantastic satire *A Tale of Killing Ghosts*. While both versions feature Zhong Kui’s ghost-hunting journeys, Chen magnifies an altered detail that may hint at their different worldviews: in Liu’s original ending, a temple inscription—which reads “How can such things be true”—undermines the entire account of Zhong Kui’s marvelous journey and thus restores a sense of consensus reality, whereas Zhang’s *New Tale* overwrites the inscription with “Such things are indeed happening” and superimposes the fantastic upon the real. Capitalizing on his forged counterpart of Liu’s metacommentary and pushing *literalization* to its (almost cartoonish) extreme, Zhang’s *New Tale* blurs the boundary between fantasy and reality and exposes how susceptible our sense of reality is to semantic manipulations.

We hope these three articles will stimulate an ongoing conversation about fantasy as non-consensus reality, and, on behalf of Taipei Tech, we would like to express our gratitude to *Ex-position*’s editorial board for realizing this fantastic collaboration.

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