Entrepreneurship and Innovation
2026, VOL. 10, NO. 2, 38-41
DOI: 10.47297/wspeiWSP2516-253510.20261002

Discipline and Disorder: Science Fiction and Social Reality in 1930s Japan and China

Haoyang Zhang

The University of Edinburgh, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH8 9LH, UK

ABSTRACT
Science fiction in 1930s East Asia was closely tied to social reality and shaped by different state structures and governance conditions. This study examines Unno Jūza's "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and Lao She's *Cat Country*, focusing on representations of space, discipline and social interaction. The Japanese text presents a highly regulated, technologically governed society, whereas Cat Country depicts a fragmented social order characterised by weak institutions. These differences reflect contrasting forms of governance and spatial organization, suggesting that science fiction in this period functioned as a critical response to modernization and revealed how state power shaped everyday life.

KEYWORDS
Science fiction; Comparative literature; State-society relations; 1930s East Asia

1 Introduction

During the 1930s, East Asia entered a period of accelerated change. Japan moved toward wartime mobilization and tightened central control over the economy, while the Nationalist government in China faced persistent challenges, including limited administrative capacity and difficulties in maintaining social order (Miwa 2015, 5-6; Strauss 1997, 348). In this context, science fiction began to gain traction in Chinese literary circles as a medium for social and historical critique (Isaacson 2017, 13-14). Csicsery-Ronay argues that science fiction enables readers to reflect on alternative realities or futures and to reconsider existing material and social conditions (2008, 11-13). Therefore, science fiction gradually became an important cultural arena for understanding the political structures of different countries within the context of the era in the 1930s. Existing scholarship often examines Japanese and Chinese science fiction separately. Jacobowitz argues that early Japanese science fiction grew out of forms of popular culture such as the grotesque detective story, and that these works reveal an expanding system that controls individuals during a period of national mobilization and imperial expansion. As a result, early Japanese science fiction carries a sharp critique of modernity (2016, 157-175). Isaacson highlights that early Chinese science fiction was shaped by the dual aims of scientific enlightenment and national salvation (2017, 12-34). Much of this research focuses on how science fiction engages with political culture within a single national context. However, relatively little attention has been given to how Chinese and Japanese science fiction works of the same era reflect similar dilemmas within their respective contexts and the similarities and differences presented in these works.

Building on this context, this article examines Unno Jūza's (1897-1949) short story "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" (1937) and Lao She's (1899-1966) novel *Cat Country* (1933). The analysis draws on Lefebvre's theory of space (1991), Foucault's work on discipline and institutional power (2019), and Goffman's framework of interaction order (1973) to explore how urban space, social institutions and community structures shape social reality of country in both texts respectively. Through comparative analysis, this essay argues that science fiction works produced in Japan and China during the 1930s were not detached fantasy texts, but rather reflected their respective social realities. In this period, Japan and China exhibited two contrasting social conditions, characterized by heightened discipline in Japan and governance disorder in China. Science fiction in both countries gives concrete form to these two social realities through the portrayal of alienated spaces, chaotic social systems and extreme community images.

2 Spatial Formations and the Expression of State Conditions

As Lefebvre argues, space is not a neutral or purely objective concept, it is produced through social relations and functions as one of the means through which the state governs society. By organizing and partitioning space, the makes renders social structures visible (Lefebvre 1991, 94). From this perspective, although "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and *Cat Country* present different spatial landscapes, both employ science-fictional urban landscapes to reflect the internal crises of state forms in Japan and China during the 1930s.

In "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock", the physical space of the underground state is presented as an ordered and cold structure. The characters first enter a "blue corridor," where they see "thick metallic pipes gleaming silver were spiraled to form seats that stretched far ahead", and each seat "marked their names" (Unno 1990). This description establishes a linear spatial arrangement that reflects a high degree of internal regulation and order. The presence of name-labeled seats further reinforces this sense of spatial discipline. Moreover, the underground state is described as a place where there is "neither dawn nor dusk, they live always under artificial light", while on the surface "not even a single

butterfly flew" and it is presented as "a desolate landscape devoid of living creatures, let alone a blade of grass" (Unno 1990). The disappearance of natural light and the use of artificial light as the sole source of illumination cause the space to break away from the natural rhythm, resulting in a fully artificial landscape. The contrast between the desolate surface and the organized underground space further intensifies a binary spatial division, in which the surface is rendered lifeless and the underground becomes the only inhabitable domain. As Ferreras Savoye observes, in science fiction, the city often turn into inescapable virtual survival cages, and Unno Jūza's underground state exemplifies precisely this condition (Ferreras Savoye 2011, 141-142). Besides, the underground state's highly organized spatial arrangements in "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" point to a form of governance grounded in the management of everyday physical space. When placed in the context of 1930s Japan, this fictional depiction echoes historical developments identified by Sorensen, who notes that local organizations such as the *chonaikai* were gradually extended throughout Japan at that time and came to function as effective links between central government ministries and local communities, reaching deeply into daily life (2001, 396).

By contrast, *Cat Country* presents an urban spatial structure marked by confusion and disorder. The buildings of the Cat Country are described as resembling "an empty open ground," with no clearly defined street system, in which "rows of houses lack color" and the cat citizens wander aimlessly (Lao 2019, 42-45). These descriptions depict a cityscape characterized by the absence of planning and blurred spatial boundaries. At the same time, the narrative devotes considerable attention to the *miyelin* which further intensifies the sense of spatial disorder in Cat Country. In the novel, the *miyelin* is deeply interwoven with urban space and becomes an inseparable part of the city itself. This spatial arrangement blurs the boundary between the urban and the natural, and the expansion of the *miyelin* signals the ongoing disintegration of urban spatial functions, rendering the city as a space under constant erosion. As Buscher argues in her study of urban governance, when the state lacks the capacity for governance and spatial organization, urban space tends to become highly fragmented, turning into a visible symbol of the absence of state power and social disorder (2012, 483-485). Cat Country exemplifies this condition: rather than being shaped by unified planning, its urban structure appears as a scene of arbitrary spatial arrangements. This spatial disorder points to a broader condition in which governmental, social, cultural, and educational institutions appear to exist in Cat Country while functioning largely as empty shells (Ke 2023, 72). Such a depiction resonates with aspects of Chinese social reality in the 1930s. In summary, "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and *Cat Country* form a sharp contrast in their urban spatial configurations. The former presents a strictly planned underground city, while the latter depicts a fragmented surface space characterized by disorder and chaos. The spatial order of the underground state is enclosed and highly visible, whereas the space of *Cat Country* is open and lacking coherence. However, both reflect a common social reality: regardless of the urban spatial form, the instability of state governance is revealed behind it. Lao She exposes Cat Country's loss of spatial control through a city marked by disorder and the absence of correct structure, while Unno Jūza portrays a state that turns inward and becomes increasingly centralized in times of crisis through a highly artificial and continuously contracting underground space. These two alienated urban spaces thus reflect the social realities of Japan and China in the 1930s. Therefore, although the two works present different urban spatial forms, such alienated spatial writing does not deviate from reality. Instead, it functions as an important dimension through which science fiction reflects social reality, pointing to the social tensions embedded in different state structures in 1930s Japan and China.

3 Institutional Practices and the Limits of Governance

If spatial form exposes the external contours of governance, institutional practice reveals its internal logic. In "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and *Cat Country*, the operation of state order depends on specific institutional mechanisms, though the two works present them in different forms. Drawing on Foucault's discussion of "the control of activity", which outlines five principles through which institutions mainly regulate individuals by managing time, behavior and the relation between them (2019, 149-156). This section examines how the functioning of state institutions in the two narratives reflects the underlying crises of state formation in Japan and China during the 1930s.

In "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock", the music bath takes place at the fixed daily time of eighteen o'clock, signaled by a mechanical bell to which all citizens must automatically respond. The music acts directly on the nervous system through sonic stimulation, producing excitement, obedience and heightened labor capacity (Unno 1990). This system aligns closely with Foucault's notion of the management of time, as authority in the underground kingdom does not rely on overt violence but instead disciplines individuals through the repeated daily practice of the music bath, pressuring both mind and body (2019, 149-150). In the narrative, the music bath not only creates a unified rhythm of labor but also naturalizes obedience by masking the irrationality and brutality of state control beneath the citizens' post-bath exhilaration. As Bourdieu argues, habitus is a durable and transferable set of dispositions formed through long-term engagement with particular social structures. These dispositions shape actions in ways that seem regulated or rule-governed, even though they do not arise from conscious obedience to rules (1977, 72). Accordingly, the institutional order depicted in "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" functions as a harsh disciplinary system sustained by technology, one constructed to serve the interests of the rulers rather than the needs of society. The music bath functions as a mechanism intended to consolidate state control. When the narrative is situated within the historical context of Japan in

the 1930s, this depiction resonates with the contemporary social and political environment. The citizens' obedience to the ruler in the story can therefore be read as a critical reflection on imperial authority, as Wang argues that the music bath represents the ultimately powerful leader of Japan, embodied by the Emperor in reality (2025, 292).

By contrast, the system depicted in *Cat Country* functions in a different manner. Although it does not impose the harsh and explicit temporal regulations found in the underground state, it nonetheless reveals a form of governance that has become entirely ineffective. Cat Country possesses an army assigned to guard the *miye* , a ruling hierarchy headed by *daxie* and a set of fixed rules of punishment and reward (Lao 2019, 19-20). While this system appears coherent on the surface, numerous details in the narrative show that this system lacks real disciplinary force: the cat soldiers are unresponsive to commands and difficult to organize; *daxie* , despite his position, is unable to mobilize labor or assert authority; and as *miye* serves both as food and as wealth it allows the desires and indolence of the cat people to override institutional rules (Lao 2019, 36-41). As Pye notes in his analysis of state-society relations in modern China, when the state lacks effective governing capacity, institutional procedures become increasingly hollow as a result of the inertia of people and passive collective participation (1991, 451-453). In Cat Country, institutions exist but lack any operative power. This depiction can be read as a reflection on the dysfunction of institutional governance in Republican China. As Remick points out that during the Nanjing decade from 1927 to 1937, significant variations and structural ruptures existed in state institutions and governance practices across different regions of China, resulting in uneven implementation and fragmented authority (2002, 402-406).

A comparison of the two works shows that "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" depicts a highly disciplinary state that relies on harsh technical control over the body, whereas *Cat Country* presents a symbolic mode of rule that emerges from institutional failure. Viewed together, the two narratives point from opposite directions to the governance vacuum and structural contradictions revealed in East Asian states during the modernization of the 1930s, making science fiction a symbolic space through which contemporary political crises are reflected.

4 Behavioral Patterns and the Experience of State Power

While institutional arrangements reveal how state power is structured, the everyday actions of ordinary people show how that power is experienced in practice. Goffman argues that individual action does not occur in isolation or arise from personal intention. Rather, it unfolds within the presence of others and under the constraints of institutional expectations. Its significance lies in continuously influencing and affirming the social order itself (1959, 26). This perspective offers an important way to understand the collective actions depicted in these two science fictions. Although the characters operate differently within their respective social settings, the variations in their behavior reveal how state structures extend into and shape everyday life.

In "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock", citizens of the underground state enter the daily music bath routine at the prescribed time and in the prescribed space. Once the bell sounds, everyone takes their seats as required and endures the waves of sound and vibration together (Unno 1990). Although the narrative repeatedly describes their groans and discomfort, they do not attempt to avoid the process, instead, they display a high degree of compliance and habituation. After the music bath ends, they quickly recovered with an overwhelming energy and return to work. This pattern of action reveals a strongly programmed form of behavior in which individuals neither seek to understand nor to alter the system but simply complete the required procedure in a state of numb acceptance. Lenoir notes that repeated social practices can gradually be internalized as a kind of inertia (2006, 26-28). In this sense, the citizens' acceptance of the music bath reflects a discipline that has been repeatedly enacted and ultimately internalized. They becomes absorbed into the system itself and is transformed into a component of state order. This concentration of power, justified in the name of collective welfare, suppresses individual choice and autonomy, satirically reveals the uncritical valorization of obedience, devotion and self-sacrifice in 1930s Japanese society (Wang 2025, 293).

In contrast, *Cat Country* depicts a condition of incapacity in the actions of its inhabitants. Both ordinary cat citizens and soldiers lack stable patterns of behavior. They stands with closed eyes in the *miyelin* , following the scent of the leaves with their nose, while the cat soldiers appear exhausted, sluggish and disorganized, requiring the symbolic authority of an outsider to maintain order even temporarily (Lao 2019, 32). The scene in which the citizens "*huanying daxie*" further reveals the dysfunction and emptiness of the Cat Country's governance. The gratitude slogans written along the road and even the pre-written "Welcome" words above the people's heads are all prearranged symbolic performances rather than spontaneous expressions of their approval. Ironically, the actual situation contradicts the slogans: the village is dilapidated, and the people are "thin, dirty and without spirit" (Lao 2019, 38). As Harrison notes, in the early years of the Republic of China, people relied on ritualized symbolic practices such as ceremonies and slogans to demonstrate allegiance to the state, and these forms of visible order served to sustain the operation of state authority (2013, 20-23). The villagers' "closed eyes" indicate that authority no longer requires real engagement but only the fulfillment of the performance itself, further highlighting the disorder and hollowness of governance in Cat Country. Moreover, the cat citizens' addictive behaviour of *miye* is not only a form of physical dependence but also also symbolizes individual' reliance on alternative consolation in social disorder. This depiction can also be read as reflecting the condition of Chinese people in the 1930s. Strauss observes that most Chinese at the time were physically weak, passive, lacking in spiritual

vigour, with non-orderly habits and lax collective organization (1997, 347).

A comparison of the two works shows that "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and *Cat Country* present contrasting forms of collective behavior: one characterized by compliance and the other by disorder, revealing how different states structures produce distinct logics of action. In the former, a highly disciplinary system repeatedly shapes individual conduct into a stable and predictable component of state order. In the latter, the failure of governance leaves individuals can only muddle through in a disordered society. Although these modes of behavior appear opposite, both expose a similar condition: the characters in each narrative struggle to form genuine autonomy under their respective state structures. Viewed from this perspective, the depictions of everyday behavior in these two science fiction works render the divergent political circumstances of 1930s Japan and China concrete, bringing into view the tensions and crises embedded within their different institutional systems.

5 Conclusion

Through a comparative analysis of Unno Jūza's "The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock" and Lao She's *Cat Country*, this essay argues that although Japan and China in the 1930s operated under different state structures, the science fiction of both countries were not fantasy texts divorced from reality, but rather reflections of their respective social realities. The patterns of social behavior characterized by conformity or apathy in both works do not arise from individual choice but emerge as outcomes shaped by political and institutional conditions operating within different national structures.

Although oriented toward imagined futures, the science fiction of the 1930s provides a striking record of the pressures that shaped everyday life in this historical context, making these works an important resource for understanding the political culture of the era. The comparative perspective presented in this essay offers a novel viewpoint for comprehending the formation process of modern East Asian states in the 1930s. At the same time, several limitations remain. The analysis focuses on only two works, which cannot fully capture the diversity of 1930s science fiction across the region. In addition, the essay does not address with other social factors, such as class, gender or the role of emerging media, which may also have shaped how individuals acted and experienced their circumstances during this period. Future research may broaden the comparative scope by incorporating a wider range of science fictions and by drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from political history and cultural studies to deepen the exploration of the relationship between social structures and the expressions of science fiction literature in the contexts of different countries.

References

[1] Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. "STRUCTURES AND THE HABITUS." Chapter. In Outline of a Theory of Practice, translated by Richard Nice, 72-95. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Buscher, Karen. 2012. "Urban Governance Beyond the State: Practices of Informal Urban Regulation in the City of Goma, Eastern D.R. Congo." Urban Forum (Johannesburg) 23, no. 4: 483-99.

[3] Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. 2008. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. 1st ed. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

[4] Ferreras Savoye, Daniel. 2011."Urban Spaces in Dystopian Science Fiction." *Ángulo Recto* 3, no. 2: 133-49.

[5] Foucault, Michel. 2019. *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books. https://www.vlebooks.com/product/openreader?id=Edinburgh&accId=9137656&isbn=9780141991337.

[6] Goffman, Erving. 1973. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Woodstock, N.Y: Overlook Press.

[7] Harrison, Henrietta. 2023. The Making of the Republican Citizen : Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911-1929. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[8] Isaacson, Nathaniel. 2017. Celestial Empire : *The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction*. First edition. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

[9] Jacobowitz, Seth. 2016. "Unno Jūza and the Uses of Science in Prewar Japanese Popular Fiction." In New Directions in Popular Fiction, edited by Ken Gelder, 157-75. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

[10] Ke Ying. 2023. "'Maochengji': ruankehuan etuobangde xianshi tuiyan yu renwen fansi" (Cat Country: Realistic Projection and Humanistic Reflection in a Soft Science Fiction Dystopia). *Suzhou keji daxue xuebao* 40, no. 4: 69-74, 108.

[11] Lao she. 2019. *Maochengji* (Cat Country). Beijing United Publishing Company.

[12] Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.

[13] Lenoir, Remi. 2006. "Scientific Habitus: Pierre Bourdieu and the Collective Intellectual." *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 6: 25-43.

[14] Miwa, Yoshiro. 2015. "Introduction." Chapter. In Japan's Economic Planning and Mobilization in Wartime, 1930s-1940s: The Competence of the State, 1-26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[15] Pye, Lucian W. 1991. "The State and the Individual: An Overview Interpretation." The China Quarterly, no. 127: 443-66. http://www.jstor.org/stable/654673.

[16] Remick, Elizabeth J. 2002. "The Significance of Variation in Local States: The Case of Twentieth Century China." *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 4: 399-418.

[17] Sorensen, André. 2001. "Urban Planning and Civil Society in Japan: Japanese Urban Planning Development during the 'Taisho Democracy' Period (1905-31)." Planning Perspectives 16 (4): 383-406.

[18] Strauss, Julia C. 1997. "The Evolution of Republican Government." The China Quarterly 150: 329-51.

[19] Unno Jūza. 1990. *Jūhachiji no Ongaku-yoku* The Music Bath at Eighteen O'clock). Tokyo: Hayakawa Publishing. https://english.bunko.jp/books/865.

[20] Wang Yue. 2025. "Time for a Music Bath: Body, Sex, Control, and Subversion in Unno Jūza's Literary Dystopia." *Japanese Language and Literature* 59, no. 2.