

# Believe in the Future

## Xia Jia

Hello everyone, my name is Xia Jia. I'm an academic, and I'm also a science-fiction and fantasy writer. What I'd like to share with you today is a story that has to do with science fiction and reality, a story that is both about the present and the future.

In 2007, I was doing my master's degree at the School of Television and Film Art at Communication University of China. That Summer, I was invited to join a team from Tsinghua University to teach in rural China for ten days. We were assigned to Baizhu Village Primary School in Nanjian County of Dali Prefecture in Yunnan Province. The team was made up of seven people, four males and three females, all young students in their early 20s.

Back in 2007, it took us three whole days to travel from Beijing to Baizhu Primary School. As you can see on this map, we first took a 33-hour train ride from Beijing to Kunming. We then travelled for 4 hours by road to go from Kunming to Dali. There, we hopped onto another bus and travelled for another 3 hours to the regional centre of Nanjian County. From there, it was another one hour by car to get to Baohua township, yet another hour travelling on rugged roads in the mountains, finally pulling to the side of a road to walk for two hours on muddy paths into the mountains.

I was assigned the job of being the team's photographer and videographer. In those days, smart phones hadn't become as common as they are today. I had a Sony portable DV Recorder and a point-and-shoot camera for the job. Besides photographing and filming, I also taught the kids there mathematics games, singing and dancing. If memory serves me right, it was my first time teaching in front of a classroom, and it was my first time being called "Ms. Wang" by pupils.

My last session for the kids before we left was about "Travelling in Science Fiction". I began with novels by Jules Verne, including *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and *From the Earth to the Moon*. I also talked about two fictions that described journeying further afield than the Moon, namely *From the Earth to Mars* and *Flying to Sagittarius*, both were written by Mr. Zheng Wenguang, who is famed for being known as the "Father of Chinese Science Fictions".

Here is a picture of me teaching the kids. When this picture was taken, I was telling them about *Around the World in Eighty Days*. The protagonist had travelled eastward passing the International Date Line, which meant he'd gained an extra day for his globetrotting adventure. I didn't have a globe with me there, all I could do was to draw on the blackboard to try to help those kids understand the relationship between the Earth's rotation and international time zones. For those kids, the farthest place imaginable was Beijing, or perhaps even just Kunming; globetrotting was simply too surreal and too abstract a concept for them.

Ever since I left Baizhu Primary School, I'd been wanting to write a science fiction for the children there, but that thought just sat on the back-burner for 7 years. In that 7 years, technological advancements and my own readings gave me a lot more ideas and inspirations. Yet one thing that

continued to perplex me was this: The stories that I told those children, how distant and remote were the stories to those children's day to day reality? Is there destined to be a chasm or an unbridgeable gap between science fiction and reality? Besides this, there was something else that had been unsettling and puzzling to me: If the gravitational force of reality was so strong that it made it impossible for the children to take off and fly off, would that make the unreachable and exceedingly fantastic world of my depiction too cruel an experience for them?

The famous American science fiction writer William Gibson once said "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed." Not only do I want to write about this unevenly distributed future in my fantasy writings, I also want to explore alternative futures.

In 2014, I came across a 2013 TED talk given by an Indian educator named Sugata Mitra. His talk was entitled *Build a School in the Cloud*. Mitra conducted a series of education experiments in New Delhi and other parts of the world where he'd bring a computer to children living in slums who didn't speak English and who'd never heard of the Internet. He'd leave the computer there and come back in a few months' time. When he came back, he learned that the children, out of overwhelming curiosity, had learned to use the English language and had developed computing skills to the level of an office clerk! Based on these experiments, he put forward a revolutionary educational idea: Schools in the cloud.

Towards the end of the talk Mitra related an experience where he had a conversation with a young girl in a village at the foot of the Himalayas. He said to her, "You know what? I'd like to give every child a computer, so they could all have the opportunity to learn."

The girl, smiling and extending her hand, said to him, "Go for it!"

It was this talk and the picture of this little girl that gave me the impetus to complete the story that had been staying at the back of my mind for years. The name of the story is *Waiting for the Cloud*. The story has in it a new technology called LINGcloud, which is made up of components made from nano carbon and water molecules, allowing LINGcloud to float in the air like real clouds. This technology could store and transmit data, and it could change its shape, colour and texture at will to create a fantasy-like simulation by emulating all sorts of three-dimensional visual, auditory, olfactory and even tactile or sensory signals.

In my story, a young female volunteer teacher, "Ms. Wang", brings a small piece of LINGcloud with her and travels all the way to Baizhu Village to conduct a pedagogical experiment. One of her students is a little girl named Qianqian. The story is told through the eyes of Qianqian, and the prototype for Qianqian is in fact a student that I'd taught, the girl that you now see in this picture here.

Towards the end of the novel, on the eve before Ms. Wang was leaving Baizhu Village, she used LINGcloud to create an immersive virtual-reality theatre similar to the Holodeck from *Star Trek* to take the children on a journey in virtual reality. They went from Baizhu Village to Baohua Township to Nanjian County, then to Kunming, Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, San Francisco, New York, and from Earth to the Moon, then to Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and then flying out of the Solar System to galaxies far far away...

While on the journey, Ms. Wang says to the children, “The world is a big place, and there is a long way ahead of you. You must take the first step with boldness, be it a small step of a large stride.”

People often ask me, “What sort of science fictions do you write?”

I’d answer by saying, “I’m writing a series of stories called *The Chinese Encyclopedia*, which talks about how technology transforms the lives of ordinary people in China in the not-too-distant future. This series of stories are like the Chinese version of *The Black Mirror*, only that they are not as dark.”

*Waiting for the Cloud* forms part of *The Chinese Encyclopedia* series. It has direct relevance to many of the topics that are in discussion here, which is why I decided to share the story behind *Waiting for the Cloud* with you today.

Finally, I’d like to conclude my talk with a picture that I painted, as well as the last few lines from the poem *Believe in the Future* written by Chinese poet Shi Zhi in 1968:

朋友，坚定地相信未来吧 ·

(Friends, please let us believe in the future)

相信不屈不挠的努力 ·

(Believe in our perseverance)

相信战胜死亡的年轻 ·

(Believe in the death-conquering youth that can conquer death)

相信未来，热爱生命 ·

(Believe in the Future, believe in Life.)

# 相信未来

## 夏笳

大家好，我是夏笳。我是一个大学老师，同时也是一个科幻作家。今天，我想在这里与你们分享一个关于科幻也关于现实、关于当下更关于未来的小故事。

2007年，我在中国传媒大学影视艺术学院读硕士研究生。那年夏天，我受邀加入清华大学的一个暑期支教队伍，前往云南省大理州南涧县白竹村小学支教十天。整支队伍加我在内，有四男三女共七个人，都是二十岁上下的年轻学生。

2007年的时候，从北京到白竹村小学，我们的整个行程足足花了三天时间。大家可以看这张地图：首先我们要坐三十三个小时火车从北京到昆明，再从昆明坐四个多小时汽车到大理，从大理坐三个小时车到南涧县城，从南涧坐一个小时车到宝华镇，到了宝华镇再找一辆车，沿着山路开一个小时，到公路旁边下车，换双拖鞋，沿着泥泞的山路走两个小时上山。

我在队里的任务，主要是拍摄照片和视频。那时候大家都没用上智能手机，我用一台索尼便携式DV和一个傻瓜相机完成了拍摄工作。除此之外，我还教孩子们趣味数学、唱歌和跳舞。记忆中，那应该是我第一次登上讲台，也是第一次被叫“王老师”。

离开之前，我给孩子们讲了最后一节课，题目是“科幻中的旅行”。先从凡尔纳的小说讲起，讲《海底两万里》《气球上的五星期》和《八十天环游世界》，继而又讲《从地球到月球》。比月球更远的，则有“中国科幻之父”郑文光的《从地球到火星》和《飞向人马座》。最后还讲了威尔斯的《时间机器》，讲前往过去和未来的旅行。

这里有一张我讲课时的照片。当时我正讲到《八十天环游世界》中，主人公因为自西向东穿过国际日期变更线，从而多赢得了一天的旅行时间。因为没有地球仪，我只能在黑板上画图，想尝试给孩子们讲明白地球自转与时差之间的关系。对这些孩子来说，他们所能梦想抵达的最远的地方，就是昆明或者北京。环球旅行对于他们而言，实在是太过抽象了一些。

自离开白竹那一天起，我就一直想为那里的孩子写一篇科幻小说，却把这个想法放了七年都未能动笔。七年之间，技术的发展和读书的积累带给我很多新的灵感。但我始终困惑于这个问题：我讲给孩子们的那些故事，与他们真实的生活状况究竟有多远，科幻与现实之间，是否注定存在断裂与鸿沟？除此之外，还有另一重不安总是在困扰我：如果现实的引力太沉重，让孩子们注定飞不起来，那么我所描绘的那些太过遥远太过美好的世界，对他们来说，是否反而显得残忍？

美国著名科幻作家威廉·吉布森（William Gibson）曾说过一句话：“未来已至，只是分布不均。（The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed.）”我不仅仅想在自己的科幻小说中展现这种分布不均的未来（this unevenly distributed future），也想去探索其他可能的未来（alternative futures）。

2014年，我在网上看到印度裔教育学者苏加特·米特拉（Sugata Mitra）在2013年TED大会上的一次演讲，“Build a School in the Cloud”。从新德里到全世界各地，米特拉进行了一系列教学实验：他将电脑带去那些不懂英文、也不知互联网为何物的贫民窟孩子们中间，然后离开，几

个月后回来时，他发现这些孩子们因为太过好奇，已经通过自主学习而具有了办公室文员的英语与计算机水平。从这些实验中，他提出了一种革命性的教育理念：云端学校（school in the cloud）。

在演讲结尾处，米特拉讲到他在喜马拉雅山下一座小村庄中与一个小女孩的谈话。他说：“你知道吗，我希望给每一个孩子一台电脑，让他们都能有机会学习。”

女孩笑着向他伸出手，说：“加油呀！（Go for it）”

正是这次演讲和这张女孩的照片给了我灵感，让我完成了一直未能完成的故事。故事的名字叫做《等云来》（Waiting for the Cloud），其中设想了一种名为LINGcloud的新技术，由碳纳米元件和水分子结合而成，能够像真正的云朵一样漂浮在空中，能够存储和传递信息，还能够任意变化形状、颜色和质感，模拟各种立体影像、声音、气味甚至触感，带来梦幻般的交互体验。在我的故事中，一位被称为“王老师”的青年女性志愿者，携带小小的一朵LINGcloud，翻山越岭来到白竹村，在这里展开一场教学实验。她的学生中，有一个叫做“倩倩”的小女孩。整个故事就是从倩倩的视角展开的。而倩倩的原型，就是我当年教过的一个学生，也就是照片中这个小女孩。

小说结尾，在王老师离开白竹村的前一晚，她用LINGcloud创造出一个类似于《星际迷航》中“全息甲板（holodeck）”一样的沉浸式VR小剧场，并带领孩子们在其中展开一场虚拟旅行：从白竹村，到宝华镇，到南涧县城，到昆明市，到北京，上海，东京，旧金山，纽约，从地球到月球，到火星，到木星，到土星，到飞出太阳系，飞向遥远的群星……

旅途中，王老师告诉这些孩子：“世界很大，路还很长。要勇敢地迈出第一步，不管是一小步还是一大步。”

经常会有人问我：“你写的是什么样的科幻小说？”

我会回答：“我正在写的是一个叫做《中国百科全书》（Chinese Encyclopedia）的系列故事，讲述近未来中国，技术如何改变普通人的命运。像中国版《黑镜》（Black Mirror），但没有那么黑暗（but not that dark）。”

《等云来》正是《中国百科全书》系列中的一篇。它与我们今天在这里讨论的几个话题都密切相关，因此我将它带来与你们分享。

最后，我想用我自己画的一幅画，以及中国诗人食指（Shi Zhi）创作于1968年的诗《相信未来》（Believe in the Future）中的最后几句诗，来结束我的演讲：

朋友，坚定地相信未来吧，

（Friends, please let us believe in the future）

相信不屈不挠的努力，

（Believe in our unbending striving）

相信战胜死亡的年轻，

（Believe in our youth that can conquer death）

相信未来，热爱生命。

（Believe in the Future: believe in Life.）