

Carolyn Clink

## An Interview with David Wesley Hill

CC: Could you give me some basic background on David Wesley Hill? Where did you grow up and go to school, how did you get into sf, and what otherwise led you, however circuitously, to attend the first Chinese sf conference ten years ago as an American sf writer?

DWH: I was born in Manhattan in 1956 and raised on the Upper West Side, a decaying neighborhood in the '60s but now a desirable location. My father read science fiction, and my earliest memory having to do with books is of browsing through his paperbacks, some of which I still own, drawn to the surreal Powers covers. They were mostly sf novels from the '50s, authors such as Robert Heinlein, Edmond Hamilton, Leigh Brackett, L. Sprague de Camp, Cordwainer Smith, Fred Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, Isaac Asimov, Poul Anderson, Arthur Clarke, Brian Aldiss, H. Beam Piper, and Jack Vance. To this day Vance remains my favorite writer, and I was pleased when an *SF Site* reviewer once favorably compared our styles. Sadly, in recent correspondence Mr. Vance informed me that he has retired from writing and is now "not doing much of anything."

It was while attending the Bronx High School of Science (a specialty school with which I was horribly mismatched, possessing little aptitude for either science or mathematics) that I decided to pursue writing. When I entered the City College of New York (1972), I was accepted into an accelerated creative writing program, which allowed me to take undergraduate and graduate courses simultaneously, and to graduate with both my BA and MA in four years. I also had the good fortune to study under such fine writers as Joseph Heller (who once recounted that he wouldn't have written *Catch-22* if a publisher hadn't accepted it on the basis of 50 pages and an outline, a scenario almost unknown in today's publishing environment), Irwin Stark, Earl Rovit, Madeline Pelter Cosman, and Jack Cady.

However, it was difficult being a "genre" writer in a "literary" academic environment. One professor gave me a low grade in a graduate writing workshop because I had delivered a science fiction story as my term assignment. Ironically, the same story went on to win the De Jur Award, the school's highest literary honor. I believe this was because the senior judge was Donald Barthelme, who had a wicked sense of humor. In any case, the \$3,000 grant was a lot of money back in 1976 and helped pay for my wedding.

I found employment in publishing as a copy-editor for Delacorte Press, working on books by Kurt Vonnegut, John Varley, Gregory Benford, Spider Robinson, and Edgar Pangborn. Jim Frenkel was Dell's sf editor in the late '70s, and I became friends with his assistant, Lou Stathis, God rest him, who introduced me to a loose circle of young writers and sf professionals, including Bob Mecoy, Don Maass, Dave Bischoff, Ted White, and Joan Vinge. I had stories published in literary magazines during this period and wrote a cookbook under the pseudonym "Diana Haven" for Dell. The editors figured that *Menus for Romance*, issued as part of their Candlelight series, would sell well with a woman's name on it. They were wrong.

About this time I realized that I wasn't suited to the publishing field. With a growing family, I fell back on a skill that I enjoyed and which had supported me through college: cooking. Over the next ten years I rose to the position of executive chef, working for such hotels as Hilton, Radisson, and Inter-Continental, mostly in southern cities—San Antonio and Laredo, Atlanta, and Ocala, Florida, although once I had an assignment in Abidjan, the Ivory Coast. Eventually, however, I grew disillusioned with the demands of the culinary profession, particularly the 70-hour weeks.

In 1992 I became a consultant for a major outplacement firm and was able to find time to write. My first science fiction story, "Some Fine Cuisine," was published in 1993. Over the next decade I had close to thirty stories appear in such venues as *Terminal Fright*, *Altair*, *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, *New Traditions in Terror*, *Talebones*, and *Black Gate*. In 1999 I was commissioned by the e-zine *HMS Beagle* to write a short story based on an article by the futurist Richard Coren, author of *The Evolutionary Trajectory*. Ellen Datlow has given my work several honorable mentions in her annual list, and "Burying

Marmee" was reprinted in *Best of the Rest 2*, an anthology of year's-best fiction from the small press. In 1999 I was a second-place winner in the Writers of the Future Contest, and was flown to California to participate in the awards ceremony and writing workshop. Our group that year included Ron Collins, Scott Nicholson, and Amy Sterling Casil. Algis Budrys and Dave Wolverton ran the seminar, and Tim Powers and Larry Niven also participated.

Seeking opportunities for secondary rights sales, I started sending my work abroad to foreign sf magazines. Stories of mine have been published in Canada, England, Australia, Germany, Russia, and China. In China I have had almost a dozen stories printed in their preeminent sf magazine, *Science Fiction World*—which now has a circulation of over 300,000.

One story of mine, published in *SF World*, particularly resonated with the Chinese. "The Curtain Falls" is a dire environmental parable about global warming. It was originally published in the States in the chapbook *Green Echo* (Obelesk Books 1995) and was immediately forgotten. However, when I returned to China in 2007 to present a paper to the Second International Conference on Science Fiction and Fantasy, young people in their twenties came up and told me how much the story meant to them. Most had read it a decade earlier.

I have often wondered as to the basis of the story's popularity in China and suspect that what appeals to the Chinese is its theme of self-sacrifice. I also suspect that I have an excellent translator.

CC: Did you have a connection to China before you started sending your stories there?

DWH: The only connection I had with China prior to 1994 was my love of Chinese cuisine. Although trained professionally in the European culinary tradition, what I enjoyed cooking at home was Sichuan food, and I have prepared Ma Pa Do Fu ("Old Mother Pockmark's Bean Curd") that even Chengdu natives find palatable.

All this changed, however, after I sold first "Some Fine Cuisine" and then "The Curtain Falls" to *Science Fiction World*.

As I've mentioned, in the attempt to maximize my stories' audience, I was submitting them to magazines in other countries. "Cuisine" was eventually translated into German, Portuguese, and Chinese, and "Curtain" into Russian and Chinese. *Science Fiction World* was one of the magazines I approached, having found its address in a *Locus* article. At the time *SF World* couldn't pay in dollars for the reprint rights—some issue with access to foreign currency, I believe—so instead they sent me traditional Chinese artwork and handcrafts. Over the years I acquired a small collection of lovely watercolors and pen-and-ink illustrations, and I somewhat regret that international conditions have improved to the point that *SF World* now pays by check, since I enjoyed opening the packages that arrived postmarked China to discover what new art they contained.

It was in 1996 that I received a visit from Ms. Yang Xiao, editor-in-chief of *SF World*, who was in the States to attend an sf convention—the Chinese take seriously the concept that science fiction is an international genre and work at keeping current with what is going on in the field. She was an intense woman in her forties and spoke English clearly, if haltingly. As I would learn, she was the driving force behind the magazine, having grown the circulation from scratch to 150,000.

Sitting in my living room, she opened her carry-on and took out small gifts for my family and told me quite seriously that I had achieved celebrity status in China. "Cuisine" had been well received, but "The Curtain Falls" had created a sensation.

Generally I write "soft" sf with a sociological basis somewhat in the manner of Jack Vance. "Curtain" focused on the effects of global warming on a family living marginally in a future New York City. Eventually there is an environmental collapse, which renders the world uninhabitable. Half-suspecting the inevitable, the father sells his living body to an organ bank in order to purchase space in an underground bunker for his children. As I've mentioned, the story was immediately hugely popular in China.

As I said earlier, I think that the father's sacrifice resonates with the Chinese respect for age. In fact, during my 2007 visit, several fans independently referred to their admiration of the story's "great father." In any case, after its initial publication in *SF World*, "Curtain" was reprinted in *Readers* magazine, with a circulation of 8 million. The Chinese government, which was sponsoring an international conference on the ozone layer, printed hundreds of thousands of copies of the story and distributed them free to the people of Beijing. I've been told, but cannot entirely credit, that readers broke down crying in the streets at the story's epiphany. Then again, Chinese fans are quite passionate.

Although Ms. Yang Xiao was not to return to the U.S. again, over the next decade I was visited every couple of years by delegations of *SF World* staffers, in the States to attend the Worldcon. On several occasions they bravely accepted my hospitality and bivouacked in my apartment. My visitors included Ms. Qin Li, who was my translator during my 1997 visit to China; Yao Haijun, former editor and now the current vice president of *SF World*; and A Lai, at the time editor-in-chief of the magazine. A. Lai is a Tibetan writer whose novel *Red Poppies* (Houghton Mifflin 2002) was awarded the Mao Dun Prize, China's top literary award. In my opinion the book compares favorably with *I, Claudius*, and I recommend it. At one point they offered me an editorial position on the magazine, but there was a problem with acquiring a visa, and the idea had to be shelved.

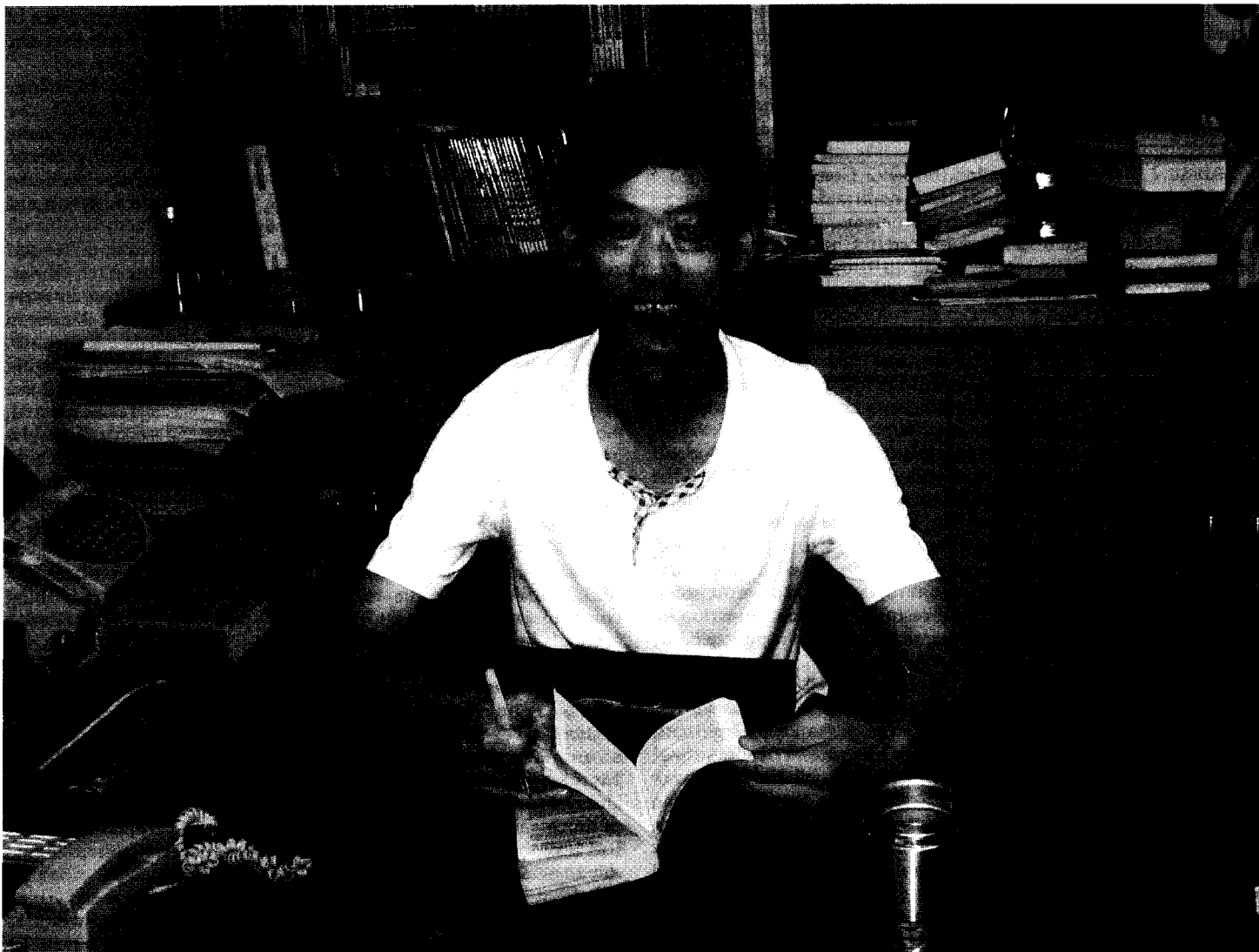
Another reason behind Yang Xiao's 1996 visit was to invite my participation in the First International Conference on Science Fiction, to be held the following August, which she was organizing. This was an opportunity not to be missed, particularly since the magazine

would underwrite the trip—and I couldn't wait for my first taste of a pot-sticker hot from the wok of a Beijing street vendor. Little did I suspect how weird and wonderful the visit would be.

CC: What were that first trip to China and the conference like?

DWH: I arrived in Beijing via Anchorage and Seoul and was met at the airport by two *SF World* staffers, who drove me to the China Association for Science & Technology convention center and hotel complex, where the conference was held and where I and the other western guests would be staying. The sky was gray with pollution and with dust blown in from Mongolia. Construction cranes rose in all directions. The streets were jammed with cars, bicycles, tricycles, trucks, taxis, and scooters, and I quickly learned a fact that seemed to hold true wherever I went in China: Traffic regulations are more in the way of suggestions than fixed rules. It also appeared true that pedestrians must be both brave and quick.

Over the next day or two the other Western invitees flew in. Charles Brown, editor of *Locus*. The noted collector and literary agent, Forrest Ackerman. Elizabeth Hull, sf scholar and wife of Fred Pohl. James Gunn, author of such classics as *The Immortals* and *The Joy Makers*. Two astronauts were also with us: Shannon Lucid, who had spent seven months in Mir, and Jerry Ross, who was working on building the new international space station. I remember Jerry telling me what he enjoyed most during a mission was floating by the port while the other crew slept, watching the earth go by below and listening to country & western music. The last members of our group were three cosmonauts, including Alexei Leonov, the first man to walk in space—and almost the first man to die there. The story is that during an EVA his suit expanded from pressure to the



Yao Haijun, current editor of Science Fiction World, in his office; photo by Nancy Kress

point that he couldn't re-enter the airlock, and had to manually vent atmosphere, a dangerous operation. I believe it was James Gunn who remarked to the cosmonauts, "You're the people who actually do what we write about."

Before the conference began, we were taken to see the sights. The Forbidden City was a labyrinth of exquisite gardens, vast plazas, and buildings that were now museums, housing displays of precious stones and jewelry, ceremonial artifacts, gifts to various emperors from foreign heads of state, elephant tusks, and Buddhist pagodas of solid gold. Tiananmen Square, overseen by a portrait of Mao, was an immense sun-baked expanse, crowded with tourists from other parts of China. Then we were bussed an hour outside the city to the Great Wall, where a section a kilometer long was open to the public. Both the astronauts Jerry Ross and Shannon Lucid made it to the end and almost back before the rest of us had made it halfway. At a performance of Beijing opera, an energetic mixture of mime, slapstick, and acrobatics, punctuated by explosions of cymbals and drums—thankfully only two hours long—we were served tea, sugared peanuts, watermelon, and sweet cakes. There was a banquet every night, including such delicacies as braised eel, stewed sea slugs, sautéed bitter melon, jellyfish salad, poached chicken with black skin (rumored to keep your hair from turning gray) and julienned tripe, as well as dishes more familiar to the western palate.

Forrest Ackerman, at 81, was still well over 6 feet tall. To the Chinese he was "the Ackman," and he was admired for his age and vigor wherever we went. Several times shop girls followed him onto the sidewalk, unwilling to say good-bye. Ackerman enjoyed reminiscing, and noted that Harlan Ellison still held it against him that he had coined the term "sci fi." When I asked Ackerman if he bore any resemblance to the "Forrie Ackerman" in Phillip Jose Farmer's notorious pornographic "Image of the Beast" novels, he replied slyly: "Your mother let you read that?" I also asked about the significance of the intricate rings he wore. One contained a bit of Lon Chaney's make-up, another was a scarab from the set of *The Mummy*, and a third was Bela Lugosi's ring from *Dracula*. Everyone insisted on trying them on.

About 2,000 people attended the 1997 Conference on Science Fiction, which ran August 28–31. On the first day I was presented with the "Golden Bridge Award" to commemorate my work (at the time I'd had a half dozen stories published in China). The astronauts and cosmonauts gave presentations about their experiences. James Gunn's lecture was on "The Road to Science Fiction." Elizabeth Hull spoke about women and sf, Charles Brown about editing *Lozus*, and Forrest Ackerman had a slide show of artwork and memorabilia from his legendary collection. My own talk was on "The Future and Science Fiction" and was translated by Ms. Qin Li, who is now the president of *SF World*. By the quality of the audience's questions afterwards, it was clear that Qin Li had done an excellent job getting my ideas past the language barrier. Chinese science fiction writers and professionals also gave presentations, including: Wang Jinkang, then and now the preeminent sf author in China; Wu Yan, a noted academic who taught a course in science fiction at Beijing Normal University; and Yang Xiao, editor-in-chief of *SF World* and organizer of the conference, who noted that my story "The Curtain Falls" "aroused an immediate sensation among millions of Chinese readers. Shocked by the story, many wrote to our magazine, expressing their determination to prevent, by protecting the ozone layer, the tragedy experienced by the hero and his family from becoming a reality."

Throughout the conference we were besieged by fans wanting autographs, pushing scraps of paper into our faces, as well as address books, copies of *SF World*, conference programs, and souvenir hats. Some had us sign the T-shirt they had on. Most seemed quite young, in their teens or twenties. Time after time I was told that I was "very famous in China," and after signing hundreds of autographs, I began to believe it. I also discovered that my son was equally well-known, due to an article Ms. Yang Xiao had published about her visit to New York, where she had met him. On several occasions I was asked how Austin was doing.

In China, I learned, science fiction is considered a branch of children's literature, which is not all that different from our own classification of the genre as a romance. It is also believed that reading

sf encourages an interest in science and technology, which does much to explain what is an apparently close relationship between the sf publishing industry and the government. In 1997 the Chinese were already well aware of their nation's developmental needs and were exploring all avenues that might encourage the creation of an educated and technologically-sophisticated workforce. The 1997 conference, in fact, was partly sponsored by the Association for Science and Technology as well as by the Sichuan Province People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries.

After the close of the conference our group flew to Chengdu, in Sichuan, the home of *SF World* magazine. At the time Chengdu had a population of close to 6 million (it's now over 10 million), and like Beijing, it was under construction. We had been well taken care of up north, but now we were VIPs. Several dozen young children met us at the airport with bouquets of roses. We were housed in a resort just outside the city, and an escort of motorcycle police cleared the streets ahead of our van wherever we went. There was a half-day of autograph signing for thousands of fans, and several days of sight-seeing and nights of banqueting with local dignitaries. Chengdu is famous for its cuisine, and I particularly remember the roast duck and the steamed dumplings and the eggplant with hot sauce. We went on an overnight visit to Emei mountain, where Chang Kai-shek headquartered, passing through the city of Leshan at the immense confluence of three rivers. With each ten miles that we traveled from town, it seemed that we slipped fifty years into the past, until we were in a medieval landscape of peasant villages and fields being tilled by buffalo.

We went our separate ways after returning to Chengdu on the morning of September 4. At the airport Yang Xiao handed me my plane ticket and pointed to the calligraphy printed on its face, explaining that her father, a renowned artist as well as the former governor of Sichuan Province, had personally drawn the letters. I still have the ticket in a file drawer somewhere.

CC: When you returned to China in August 2007, how had China changed, and how had the conference changed?

DWH: As I've mentioned, I remained in contact with the Chinese and had another half dozen stories appear in *Science Fiction World*. In January, 2007, Qin Li, my former translator and now president of *SF World*, invited me to participate in the second international conference, this one to be held in Chengdu.

The city had grown by 4 million people over the past decade—and was still growing. In 1997 few buildings had surpassed ten stories. Now residential and commercial skyscrapers far higher rose in every direction. Department stores advertised European and American brands, and both McDonald's and Starbucks had opened franchises. Where before Chengdu's famous pandas had been in cages in an aging zoo, now the animals had a world-class open-air facility in which five cubs had been born recently. The air, however, was as I remembered, close and tropical, heavy with moisture. So were the crowds of bicycles and scooters, fighting for elbow room with the traffic. And behind the main thoroughfares something of old Chengdu lingered in the back alleys, where street sweepers with straw brooms still cleaned the sidewalks by hand and small vendors sold cheap necessities and fresh vegetables from trucks and makeshift stalls.

*Science Fiction World*, too, had grown, to a circulation of 300,000. And now the magazine was the hub of a publishing conglomerate, which included a fantasy magazine (*Fantasy World*), a popular-science magazine for children (*Newton Kid*), a magazine of translations (*SF World Translations*), and a magazine called *Heart to Heart*, whose audience I've been unable to identify. The company was also aggressively publishing science fiction novels by both Chinese authors and by western authors in translation. Its offices now occupied an entire floor rather than the few rooms I had visited in 1997, and I was introduced to about thirty staff members. Conspicuous by her absence was Yang Xiao. Although now officially retired, she had been as much the tireless organizer behind the second conference as she had been behind the first. Unfortunately, she was unable to attend due to an accident.

Bravely filling in for Yang Xiao, the person who made everything happen with a cheerful smile, was "Jenny" Bai Junxia, editor of *SF World*. She was assisted by a half dozen young volunteer translators who called themselves "Babel fish" after the creatures in Douglas

Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Their energy and fluency contributed greatly to the success of the conference.

The very title of the second conference illustrated another difference from 1997. It was now the "International Conference on Science Fiction and Fantasy," rather than the "Conference on Science Fiction." In 1997 the Chinese had shown no interest in fantasy, explaining that there wasn't a market for the genre in China. Two events changed that—the publication of the Harry Potter novels and the release of the *Lord of the Rings* movies. Now fantasy was so popular that there was serious discussion among Chinese writers and academics about whether science fiction was a dying literature. On the second day of the conference Yao Haijun moderated a panel discussion comparing the two fields. I have also begun placing stories regularly in *Fantasy World*, most recently "Orpheus on the BMT," which appeared originally in *Terminal Flight* magazine.

Elizabeth Hull was the only member of the 1997 delegation besides me to attend the second conference. Our new contingent included Neil Gaiman, Nancy Kress, Robert J. Sawyer and his wife Carolyn Clink, Michael Swanwick, and David Brin, with his wife Cheryl Brigham and their three kids. Our complement of spacefarers was reduced to one cosmonaut, V. U. Bugrov. However, the Russian delegation now included Larisa Mikhailova, editor of the Russian magazine *Supernova*, who had recently published "The Curtain Falls." Several western fans also attended the conference, another difference from 1997. Most were then heading to Japan for Worldcon.

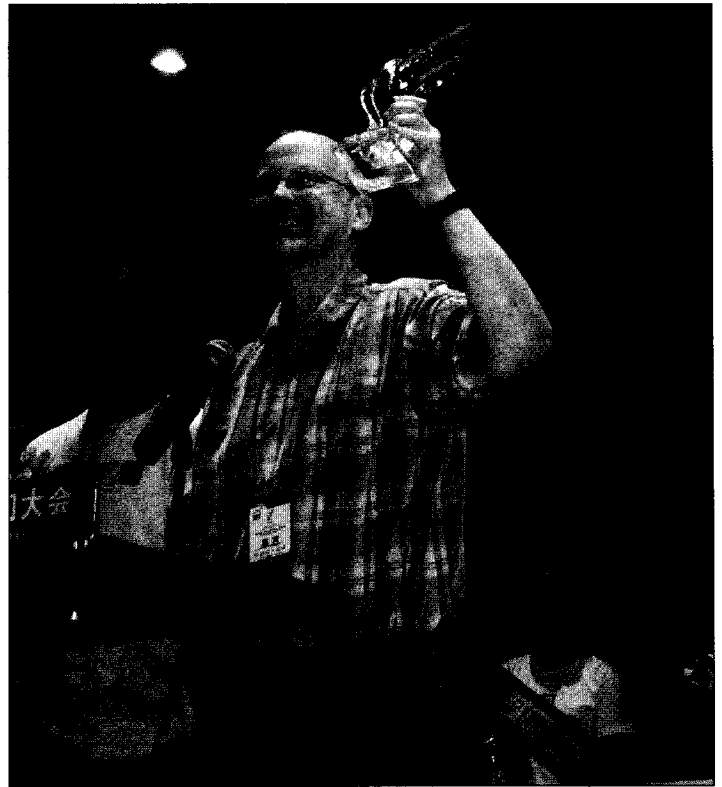
The conference kicked off with a screening of the movie *Transformers* at a local Cineplex. Several of the western writers gave brief impromptu welcoming speeches, as did V.U. Bugrov. Our dinner was a banquet of more than a dozen courses. Then our group walked to a nearby bookstore for an evening of meeting and greeting fans. It was standing room only inside.

The opening ceremony was held the next morning in the square before the colonnaded entrance of the Sichuan Science and Technology Museum, in which the capsule from China's first successful space flight was on display. More than a thousand people attended—official estimates are that 6,000 people participated overall, triple the number that came to the 1997 conference. Once again we were surrounded by hordes of autograph seekers, the crowds far thicker than before. Then there was an explosion of confetti, and the conference officially began.

We were kept busy the next two days. At any given time several presentations were being delivered in different lecture halls and conference rooms. Robert J. Sawyer spoke about "Science Fiction as a Mirror for Reality." Nancy Kress's topic was "Women in SF." David Brin spoke about "How to Build a Wonderful Future." And Liu Cixin talked about "Occidental SF's Impact on Chinese SF." My own presentation was titled "Revisiting the Future: Science Fiction and the Shape of Things to Come," which concerned the possibility of a technological singularity. Awards were presented the second day. Robert J. Sawyer was named Most Popular Foreign SF Author. *Green Field* (Sichuan Science and Technology Press) won for Best SF Book, and "Ultimate Explosion" (by Wang Jinkang) and "Kunlun" (by Chang Jia) shared the award for Best SF Short Story. Both Zhang Chenggang and Liu Weijia were named the year's Best SF Editor, while Yang Xiao, Tan Kai, and A Lai were presented with lifetime achievement awards.

Similar to 1997, the majority of attendees appeared to be in their teens and twenties. This made me wonder what had happened to the fans who had participated in the first conference. I would have expected to encounter a fair number of people in their thirties or early forties, but there were relatively few attendees in that age bracket. My hosts explained that interest in science fiction dwindled in China with age—it was, after all, considered a branch of children's literature—and most readers put aside the genre when they graduated college and pursued a career.

With this changing of the generations I would have expected my earlier work to be unknown. This, however, proved not to be the case. "The Curtain Falls" was as popular as it had been in 1997, being kept alive through reprints in *SF World* and through unauthorized Chinese versions on the Internet. Many remembered the story from originally reading it when they were "very young." During one session



Robert J. Sawyer brandishing his SF World/Galaxy Award for Most Popular Foreign Writer of 2006, to great applause; photo by Carolyn Clink

a fan passed me a note, asking, "I wonder whether you are the David Hill—one of the earliest writers who sent their great stories to China?" When I replied in the affirmative, he wrote, "I love your story 'The Curtain Falls.' I love the great father. It's moving. It made me cry when I read it the first time."

All too soon it was time for the closing ceremonies. But this did not mean the fun was over! During the next several days our group was escorted around Chengdu. Each evening there was another fabulous meal, my favorite being a traditional Sichuan hotpot. We toured the Wenshu Buddhist Temple, and then there was a trip to the Jinsha archeological excavation and museum. On August 28 we were invited to a forum on "Future and Leisure" with demonstrations of traditional Chinese dance. I missed this presentation, however. Our hosts, remembering the meals I'd cooked for them in New York, had asked me to prepare a real American meal for our group of 50 people. I was downstairs in the kitchen cooking up a pot of New Orleans jambalaya. As Neil Gaiman observed, preparing a Creole menu using Chinese ingredients yields interesting results, and the dish was tasty if not absolutely authentic.

Later our group was taken to the Chengdu Xichuan Middle School, where cosmonaut Bugrov and I were asked to give brief speeches to an audience of 500 children. I was amazed to learn that all the students present had read "The Curtain Falls"—perhaps the story had been a class assignment. My talk touched on my belief in the probability of intelligent life existing on other planets. This idea made the local paper the next day.

On August 30th it was time to leave Chengdu. Neil Gaiman was heading for Beijing to attend an international publishing conference. Robert J. Sawyer and his wife, Carolyn, were also visiting Beijing for a couple of days before returning to Canada, while Nancy Kress, Michael Swanwick, and I were going home to the States. We had a last cocktail together in the hotel lounge and then went to our separate rooms. It was difficult saying good-bye to all the friends we had made in China.

CC: What are you working on now?

DWH: Recently I finished the manuscript of a science fiction novel, *Castaway on Temurlone*, which Shawna McCarthy is representing, and I'm working on its sequel, *Escape from Temurlone*.

Last September I was awarded a residency at the Blue Mountain Center, an artists' and writers' retreat in the Adirondacks, where I completed several sf short stories, one of which will be appearing in *Black Gate* magazine. For the past several years I have been researching and writing a historical novel about Sir Francis Drake and his piratical global circumnavigation, *To Sail the Southern Ocean*, of which I have

about 40 thousand words finished and much more still to write. ►

*Some of David Wesley Hill's short fiction can be found on his website <[www.davidwhill.org](http://www.davidwhill.org)>. Carolyn Clink is a poet who's lucky enough to be married to sf writer Robert J. Sawyer, so she got to go to the Chengdu conference, too.*



*East eats West: Nancy Kress is introduced to the infamous vampire pandas of Chengdu; photo by Nancy Kress*

## Carolyn Clink West Eats East

China invited guests from the West to try Hotpot, the local Sichuan specialty. Ingredients Encompassed all tastes, some spicy, some not. Neil dined on duck intestines and Nancy nibbled Greens and bamboo shoots like a panda bear. David Hill, a famous sf writer, cooked up an Unusual jambalaya at the Leisure Forum. Sawyer, Swanwick, Kress, and Clink sang For their meal, slaughtering "Oh! Susanna." Neil, Who filmed the dirge, tried blackmail: "One hundred dollars apiece or it goes up on YouTube." Roots, meats, tofu, there's enough for a thousand Lunches. But for Worldcon-bound Betty Hull and David Brin, Chengdu was just the appetizer. ►

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## Territory by Emma Bull

New York: Tor Books, 2007; \$24.95 hc; 320 pages

reviewed by Greg L. Johnson

From the dime novels of the nineteenth century, to countless Hollywood movies and contemporary television shows like *Deadwood*, no era of American history has been as mythologized as the frontier years of the Wild West. Because of this, there is no era of American history where it is harder to separate fact from fiction and to distinguish the events of the popular imagination from what really happened. For that reason, the Old West remains fertile ground for the speculations of writers and readers. Emma Bull's latest novel tackles the setting and characters who came together to form one of the most famous confrontations in western history.

As her story begins, a horse walks into town, carrying a wounded man. The horse is stolen; the man is dying. The whole thing is a nuisance to a gambler playing cards in the saloon, where the wounded man is quickly brought and laid on a table to die. The town is Tombstone, Arizona, the inconvenienced gambler is Doc Holliday, and the year is 1881.

There's bigger news in town than the arrival of a dying horse thief, however. The local stagecoach has been held up, its cargo of silver coins stolen. and one of the drivers, Bud Philpot, shot and killed. Shortly after the card game ends in the saloon, a posse, including Doc Holliday, sets out after the robbers. Into this situation Bull introduces two characters new to the story—Jesse Fox, the owner of the stolen horse, and Mildred Benjamin, a widow who works as a typesetter for *The Nugget*, one of Tombstone's two daily newspapers. In many ways, *Territory* is Jesse and Mildred's story.

Jesse is a wanderer, on his way to Mexico, and, as a loner, very much a mythical kind of western figure from the start, the kind of character made legend in history and mythologized in many a John Wayne movie. He quickly meets up with an old friend, Chow Lung,

who has established himself as a doctor in Tombstone's Chinatown. Lung informs Jesse that Jesse is there because Lung has called to him, and berates Jesse for refusing to acknowledge the power that he knows Jesse possesses. It's the first clue that underneath the exterior of a western mining town there are sinister forces at work, forces that are powerful, dangerous, and outside the scope of everyday reality.

Mildred Benjamin is in many ways a typical resident of Tombstone. After the death of her husband, she has stayed in town, supporting herself with her job at *The Nugget*, and otherwise leading the life of a proper young widow. She also has a secret. Mildred has been writing stories with titles like "Stampede at Midnight" and submitting them to magazines for publication, an endeavor that is just a bit outside the conventions of the time.

When a young Chinese girl is murdered in the area, Lung persuades Jesse to help him investigate the crime. Lung is convinced that the girl's murder served the needs of some local, powerful man, a person who might as well be described as a sorcerer. It is Lung's opinion that Jesse has the ability to oppose this man. It's really not something Jesse wants to do. But strange things occur as the two men pursue their investigation. At the same time, Jesse begins to form relationships with other townsfolk, Mildred in particular. It becomes apparent that Jesse has no choice but to stay and oppose whoever it is that is benefiting from murder and death.

That's the set-up, and Bull takes her time filling in the details. In the meantime, we are treated to a fascinating look at life in one of the most famous frontier communities in America. Jesse earns a living as a horse tamer, one with new, unusual ways of handling a horse. His skills are on display when he is hired to break a skittish colt to pulling a buggy. Horse lovers will recognize that Jesse's methods, while a bit