



WOAH Book Club Reviews *Waste Tide*



***Waste Tide* by Chen Qiufan**, translated by Ken Liu, is a futuristic science-fiction novel. It is set in Silicon Isle, an imaginary island in China that recycles the world's plastic and high-tech components. In this not-so-distant future, the rich wear and swap prostheses, i.e. fake limbs, to improve their strength, beauty, eyesight and all sorts of physiological functions. The world is *supra-connected* through virtual enhancements and networks. An epidemic of electronic drug addiction is widespread, especially amongst the poor who use and abuse black market digital mushrooms and other e-drugs. On Silicon Isle, the immigrant waste workers, aka 'waste people', are exploited by the local population, which is divided into three powerful and competing clans. The plot of the story centres around a shady corporate effort to set up a supposedly 'cleaner' recycling factory, and a nascent love interest between Silicon Isle-American returnee Chaizong and Mimi, a 'waste girl' who finds herself infected with a new and virulent virus intended as a weapon. Mimi becomes the centre of intrigue as opposing factions all want to control the altered form of human that she has become.

Our reflections: Sci-Fi or conceivable future?

Although the ambiance and gore may feel estranged from our reality, the technology and societal inequalities described do not seem so far from the present. This is especially notable in the descriptions of e-waste and how it affects the health of the impoverished 'waste people'— a reference to the current inequalities in 'green' technology and pollution in society (sometimes referred to as the 'environmental justice' movement). Moreover, with the recent debates about artificial intelligence as a threat to humanity, the book is especially timely, showing us what augmented reality, e-drug addiction and over-reliance on digital experience could look like.

High-tech prostheses aside, the moral inner battles of this book's characters remain the same as our own. The transformation of Mimi also raises some questions around mental health by exploring our fragility, our ability to contend with multiple worldviews and technologies at once, what it would feel



like to have multiple personalities, and which moral codes may function as an anchor to safeguard our sanity.

Whilst the story does not provide solutions, it does emphasise the role that human empathy and compassion can play in helping society re-consider what is important and make better choices.

It left us with a thought-provoking premonition of what our data-driven future could look like.

'This is an age that has little need for historians. Social networking, streaming media and real-time computing provide more in-depth data-driven analytical reports that are easy to understand. In some sense, history has ended, at least as a narrative imbued with uncertainty'.

The Book Club's 8th book will most likely be a biography and will be announced on [the In-house Yammer Community](#).

Contact Sonia (s.fevre@woah.org) if you would like to be added to the Book Club's mailing list.

We sincerely thank Sonia Fèvre, Kelsey Galantich and Ingrid Contreras Arias for submitting this article to *In-house Times*.

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