**INTRODUCTION TO POHLSTARS**

Frederik Pohl

If you find an unexpectedly Oriental flavor to this collection (and to one particular story in it), it is because a couple of months ago, for the first time in my life, I was in China. What brought me there was simple curiosity, and I sated it. I did all the things tourists are supposed to do. I climbed the Great Wall and gaped at the terracotta warriors of Hsian; I cruised on the Whangpoo River and even walked the old Silk Trail at the tag end of the Gobi Desert. But that wasn't all I was curious about, so in between the bouts of tourism, I spent a lot of time with writers. Chinese writers. Chinese science-fiction writers in particular.., and I tell you true, if I had read that sentence a few years ago I would have assumed it must be the beginning of a science-fiction story, and not a very plausible one, at that. But it isn't fiction. It's real. Science fiction is being read, written, and published in the People's Republic of China.

The more I talked with the people involved in science fiction there, the more I felt that curious nibble at the fringes of the memory that is called Deja vu. I had been there before! For what the Chinese science-fiction scene reminded me of more than anything else was the way it had been in the United States when, five decades ago, I was beginning to try to be a writer of science fiction. The Chinese science-fiction people I met seemed young, energetic, idealistic, not very sophisticated—very like the young, unsophisticated Isaac Asimov, Donald Wollheim, Cyril Kornbluth, and other teenage members of the 1930s fan group, the Futurians, which launched so many of us into careers as writers and editors. The social standing of science fiction in China is very low. The literary mandarins don't think it's literature at all-any more than America's literary mandarins did in the 1930s. (It didn't become respectable in the United States until some of those bright, unsophisticated kid fans grew up to become college professors and deans.) The economic situation of science fiction in China today maps almost exactly with that of the United States in the 1930s. An average price for a science-fiction story is about a third of a cent a word (in 1939 I was lucky enough to average almost half a cent); a Chinese editor I met confided that his salary was about eleven dollars a week (my first editorial job paid ten). And almost all the science fiction being written by Chinese authors is in the form of short stories; the few novels published are importations from abroad. That, too, was true of America then. Almost the only science-fiction books that one could find were written by people on the other side of the ocean, such as S. Fowler Wright, Aldous Huxley, and W. Olaf Stapledon. The book publishers in America disdained science fiction-at least when it was by American writers. It was not until around 1950-and then, again, only because some fans grew up to start or join publishing companies-that American science-fiction writers could have their novels published in hard covers.

To find out that science fiction existed outside the United States was not a surprise to me-after all, I spent a couple of years as president of the international association of science-fiction professionals, World SF, with members in several dozen countries from Singapore to the U.S.S.R. and most nations in between. But it was surely a delight!

Of course, it would take a braver man than I to predict how widespread science fiction will become in China. China is an intensely politicized country. Nearly every aspect of its life has to conform with the decisions of the high Party apparatus-whatever those decisions may be at any particular moment-and so it is impossible to guess what its future will be. China is also a country that for just about a solid century has been wracked by a series of violent convulsions, almost nonstop, revolutions, wars, and internal turmoil. From the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty-through the war with Japan; the battle against Chiang Kai-shek, the “Great Leap Forward”, the “Cultural Revolution,” the “Rule of the Gang of Four” and their overthrow-there has hardly been a period of more than a year without devastating upheaval. The achievements of the current regime are immense in fundamental ways: They manage to feed and educate their billion people, an accomplishment no previous rulers even tried. But they are also, by Western standards, complex, unpredictable, and frequently weird. Walking the streets of Beijing or Shanghai today, it is difficult to believe that this largest nation the world has ever seen was, just a few years ago, tearing itself to shreds in the violence of the Cultural Revolution, with factions shelling each other's campuses and factories at will-and even more difficult to understand how they managed to pull themselves together afterward. So I don't know how things are going to work out for the billion Chinese people, much less for that tiny fraction of them who read and write science fiction ... but I wish them well!

This is almost my first short-story collection in a decade. It isn't that I've given up writing; it's that I've been writing novels rather than short stories most of the time.

I must confess that I find this a little nettling. I don't like to think of myself as a statistic manipulated by large economic forces.., but that's the way it looks, even to me. The field that used to be dominated by the magazines, and thus by short stories, is now overwhelmingly represented by novels and films. I suppose the average readership of the science-fiction magazines of my youth was somewhere around forty thousand copies. Now 40 million people flock to see a new Star Wars movie in the first weekend of its release. As to books, the New York Times best-seller list has been heavily populated with science fiction for this whole year: Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Joan Vinge, Anne McCaffrey, and a dozen others have reached the heights of bookstore sales previously scaled only rarely by a Frank Herbert or a Robert A. Heinlein. When Cyril Kornbluth and I wrote The Space Merchants thirty years ago, we were in science-fiction's transitional period from magazines to books; we expected to earn a couple of thousand dollars from having it run as a serial in Galaxy magazine, and it did-but it has earned more than that every year since as a book.

So there is an economic incentive to write longer pieces. But it isn't all economic. It's where the audiences are.., and no writer likes to be talking to himself.

I hope you'll enjoy the stories.., and that it won't be so long before I have another collection of new short stories to offer!