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Research article

Back to "Reality": A Review of Cheng Lin's *RoboHumanities: Imaginations, Narratives, and Ethics regarding Robots*

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Abstract

Cheng Lin's *RoboHumanities: Imaginations, Narratives, and Ethics regarding Robots* is the first Chinese monograph to systematically examine the core cultural concept of the "robot" from a literary studies perspective. Accordingly, the book aims to fill a relevant research gap and to establish an interdisciplinary humanities framework. The author adopts a research methodology that combines conceptual history and interdisciplinary analysis. Through etymological examination and cultural-historical tracing of the term "robot" and related concepts (such as "automaton" and "android"), the work clarifies the conceptual evolutionary trajectory and advocates for a present-oriented, near-future thought experiment designed to guide the public in daily ethical reflection on technology. Furthermore, assuming a pragmatic "Back to Reality" stance, the author attempts to balance visions of the far future, the near-future application of technology, and current social reality, while deepening the discussion through a multi-dimensional subdivision of robots into body-simulating, intelligence-simulating, and life-simulating types. The review concludes that, although the work has limitations in covering the global diversity of robotic cultures and in the empirical grounding of certain analyses, it successfully applies literary research methods to the field of techno-humanities. It clearly demonstrates the unique pathways and the necessity for humanities scholars to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue, thereby laying a solid foundation for the positioning and international conversation of RoboHumanities research.

Keywords: RoboHumanities, Robot, Science fiction studies, Conceptual history, Interdisciplinary Research

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Научная статья

Вернемся к “реальности”: Обзор книги Чен Линя “Робогуманитаристика: воображение, нарративы и этика в отношении роботов”

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Аннотация
Книга Чен Лина “Робогуманитаристика: воображение, нарративы и этика в отношении роботов” – первая китайская монография, систематически исследующая ключевое культурное понятие “робот” с точки зрения литературоведения. Соответственно, книга призвана восполнить актуальный пробел в исследованиях и создать междисциплинарную гуманитарную основу. Автор использует исследовательскую методологию, сочетающую концептуальную историю и междисциплинарный анализ. Благодаря этимологическому анализу и культурно-историческому прослеживанию термина “робот” и связанных с ним понятий (таких как “автомат” и “андроид”), работа проясняет концептуальную эволюционную траекторию и выступает за мысленный эксперимент, ориентированный на настоящее и ближайшее будущее, призванный помочь общественности в повседневных этических размышлениях о технологиях. Более того, придерживаясь прагматичной позиции “возврата к реальности”, автор пытается сбалансировать представления о далеком будущем, применении технологий в ближайшем будущем и текущей социальной реальности, углубляя дискуссию посредством многомерного разделения роботов на типы, имитирующие тело, интеллект и жизнь. В заключение обзора отмечается, что, несмотря на ограничения в охвате глобального разнообразия роботизированных культур и в эмпирическом обосновании некоторых анализов, работа успешно применяет методы литературного исследования в области техногуманитарных наук. Это наглядно демонстрирует уникальные пути и необходимость участия ученых-гуманитариев в междисциплинарном диалоге, тем самым закладывая прочную основу для позиционирования и международного обсуждения исследований в области робогуманитаристики.

Ключевые слова: Робогуманитаристика, Робот, Исследования научной фантастики, Концептуальная история, Междисциплинарные исследования

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Cheng Lin's *RoboHumanities: Imaginations, Narratives, and Ethics regarding Robots* was published in December 2025 (Cheng, 2025). As the first Chinese academic monograph written from the perspective of literary studies, this work offers a specialized exploration of the "robot" as a key concept in literature, culture, and daily life. As noted in the foreword, the book treats the robot in analogy to a bat – a creature that simultaneously possesses both "bird-like" and "beast-like" qualities. The former serves as a metaphor for technological frontiers, while the latter alludes to the cultural traditions embedded within robotics. Indeed, the Chinese school of RoboHumanities represented by Cheng Lin consistently seeks a balance among distant-future imaginations, the near-future applications of cutting-edge inventions, and the realities of present-day social life. Methodologically, the author has developed a distinct personal style characterized by "returning to the present." Unlike the applied ethical focus found in contemporary fields such as social robotics, or the radical tendency in posthuman studies – which has gained considerable traction over the past decade – to envision robots as potentially erasing species boundaries, the author advocates for a kind of near-future thought experiment rooted in the mundane. By tracking the trajectories of emerging technologies, clarifying how contemporary ideas have evolved across civilizations and temporalities, and analyzing speculative narratives in literary and artistic works, the author guides readers towards a grounded, quotidian ethical reflection on advanced technologies.

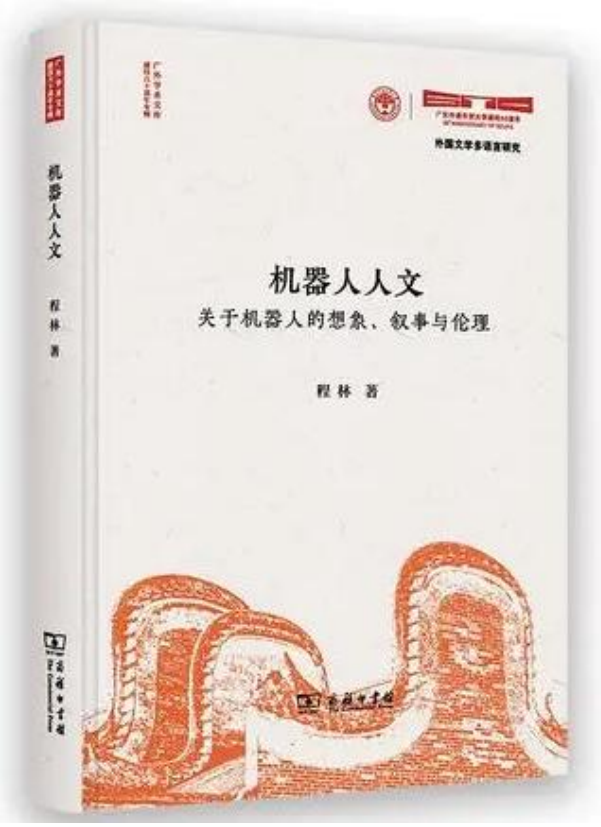

Figure 1. Book Cover of "Robot Humanities: Imagination, Narrative and Ethics of Robots" by Cheng Lin

The field of RoboHumanities research is often misconceived as the domain of philosophers of technology, sociologists, and economists, with literary scholars playing a limited role. In this work, Cheng Lin meticulously traces the conceptual history of the “robot” through the methods of literary studies, thereby filling a notable gap in traditional scholarship. Conceptual history is, in essence, cultural history. This foundational work serves as crucial prehistory and a frame of reference for contemporary RoboHumanities research, yet it has long remained underexplored. Building upon his background in philology, the author consistently maintains that different concepts or formulations open up distinct interpretive spaces. He conducts a cross-temporal excavation of key concepts related to robotics, examining varied conceptions of the “robot” and notions such as the “uncanny valley.” Furthermore, the book concludes with a glossary that concisely defines over forty techno-humanistic concepts associated with robotics. The term “robot” has become significantly worn through daily usage; this study serves to dispel the fog arising from improper linguistic appropriation and restore historical clarity – a particularly necessary endeavor in a contemporary world where misconceptions about the “robot” have long been perpetuated.

Taking the widely used Western concept “robot” as an example, Cheng excavates the discrepancy between its Czech etymological origins and the contemporary understanding of “robot.” Using the capabilities commonly associated with robots today as a guiding thread, he examines within cultural history older, yet underexplored terms such as “automaton,” “android,” and “Maschinenmensch,” as well as more recent terms like “hubot,” “gynoid,” “humanoid,” and the Chinese concept “芯机人” (xinji ren) – none of which can be adequately encompassed by the outdated notion of “robot.” The author separately analyzes the native Chinese concepts related to robotics and the process of situating imported terms, disentangling and clarifying their origins with meticulous care. Through such observations, the connection between the Chinese concept of “机器人” (jiqiren) and the European tradition of “automaton” becomes apparent. The author reveals that the term “机器人,” commonly used in Chinese, did not emerge as a translation of “robot” (in fact, it appeared earlier than “robot”), but was originally used to describe humanoid automata exhibited in Berlin around 1911.

The Cultural and Historical Sections share a consistent methodological approach, situating the concept and even the technology of the robot within the broader contexts of literary history, intellectual history, and indeed cultural and civilizational history. The Historical Section, in particular, most vividly demonstrates the dual-faceted interdisciplinary endeavor undertaken in this work. On the one hand, the author possesses a deep understanding of the cultural history of robotics; on the other, fully elucidating the development of this specialized technological history and its complex position within the technological artifacts of each era remains somewhat challenging. This may well be an inherent difficulty in research characterized by high precision, narrow focus, and vast temporal-spatial scope. Users of robots need not master the technology of robot manufacture, which means their judgments about robotic technology can easily fall into purely humanistic perspectives, neglecting the internal logic of technological development itself. The author has consistently sought to liberate science fiction imagination from being a mere synonym for futuristic prophecy. However, the author's

understanding of the actual developmental levels of various robotic technologies remains to be deepened. A clear distinction is not made between what has already occurred, what is achievable in the near future, and what remains technically improbable. Relying solely on media studies, cultural studies, literary studies, and conceptual history can only partially accomplish this objective. This is precisely the enduring challenge of dialogue between the two cultures – a concern since the time of C.P. Snow – that remains imperfectly resolved today. The notion of a polymathic administrator, as envisioned by Joe Moran in *Interdisciplinarity*, appears the fear that cultural studies may ultimately turn out to be animated by Kantian nostalgia for an all-inclusive, humane education, a desire that has characterized the human sciences since their inception (Moran, 2002, pp. 80-81). We can hardly expect every researcher to be a generalist. In this light, Cheng Lin's attempt to employ expressive logic acceptable to other disciplines in analyzing issues and articulating viewpoints represents a noteworthy and innovative effort.

Many passages in this book display recognizable stylistic influences from other disciplines, such as philosophy of technology and media studies. This allows the author to proceed with ease from textual origins, ranging widely yet deftly. For instance, the "Mechanical Turk" can be approached as a technological artifact and cultural phenomenon that fascinated Europe; as a literary motif that attracted writers such as Hoffmann, Bierce, and Edgar Allan Poe; and as a scientific subject of interest to foundational figures in computing and artificial intelligence research, including Alan Turing, Arthur Samuel, John von Neumann, John McCarthy, Claude Shannon, and Herbert Simon. If the section titled "Artificial Intelligence: The Chess-Playing Machine of 1770" were placed alongside papers by historians of science and technology, readers might well struggle to distinguish which was written by a literary scholar and which by a historian of technology. Similarly, the chapter on "Robotics Culture and Cross-Cultural Robotics" would fit seamlessly into a collection of essays by sociologists or philosophers of technology. This blending of research perspectives and even linguistic style offers a rather clear answer to a question that is particularly pressing today: how can humanities scholars participate in interdisciplinary discussions – especially since the necessity of their involvement in such debates is now self-evident. At its core, this book is about putting cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary dialogue into practice, precisely as Cheng Lin defines the concept of "RoboHumanities":

> The author defines RoboHumanities as a field of humanistic inquiry related to and intersecting with robotics [...] In a broad sense, RoboHumanities encompasses both phenomena centered on humans and those centered on robots. It includes research that observes robots as objects of study, while also examining the potential impact of the existence of robots and AI on humanity and the humanities. It scrutinizes both the phenomenon of machines imitating humans and the phenomenon of human mechanization. At the same time, RoboHumanities should not be confined to academic questions alone; it must also engage with reality. At a time when contemplating human-machine relations has become a defining issue of our age, research in RoboHumanities should prepare people for the arrival of a human-machine coexistence society. The robot itself is an interdisciplinary

> phenomenon; imagination and narrative are its fundamental components, integral to its entire technological lifecycle, not merely optional appendages. (Cheng Lin, 2025, p. 17)

Cheng points out that research in RoboHumanities should also address the issue of human mechanization, as well as the question of whether robots or AI may in the future become a form of subjectivity capable of “creating” cultural phenomena. He further hopes that existing RoboHumanities research can extend into the broader field of AI-humanities research, with which it shares significant overlap. In the author’s view, phenomena within RoboHumanities – or robotic culture – can be divided into two categories: “first, humanistic and cultural phenomena centered on humans yet related to robots; second, cultural phenomena centered on robots themselves.” This book focuses primarily on the former. As for the content of RoboHumanities research, the author maintains that it “includes both studies based on existing cultural phenomena, texts, and works, as well as theoretical research derived therefrom, or guiding research oriented toward present and future concerns, such as setting objectives and directions for the evolution of human-machine relations” (Cheng, 2025, p. 19).

It is perhaps precisely due to his philological background and his call for interdisciplinary engagement that, despite the inclusion of a Theory Section, the author adopts a stance that verges on de-theorization. His language is plain, clear, and descriptive, with restrained and even deliberately distanced use of terminology and metaphor. This posture aligns with the book’s overall style of staying close to lived reality, yet the inductive reasoning and precise expression grounded in concrete phenomena may, in certain contexts, be perceived by readers as lacking theoretical depth. Nevertheless, although the sections in this part are not tightly interwoven by strict logical connections, each addresses one of five key issues in robotics research: i) the imitation of humans by robots and the uncanny valley effect arising from boundary-crossing; ii) the imitation of intelligence by robots and how to comprehend such intelligence distinct from human wisdom; iii) the imitation of life by robots (i.e., the simulation of human life forms) and its impact on human-machine interaction/integration models; iv) the legislative challenges concerning robots, including their utility, limits, and self-negating tendencies; and v) the possible future of robots, along with the thought-experimental potential of everyday robotic science fiction. the section v) essentially summarizes internationally influential viewpoints in RoboHumanities research and offers a critical analysis of their current relevance. The perspectives drawn upon come from psychologists such as Ernst Jentsch, engineers like Masahiro Mori and Hiroshi Ishiguro, scientists including Alan Turing, and writers such as Isaac Asimov. “Bio-simulative machines” and “eveyday science fiction” are the author’s original formulations: “bio-simulative machines” encompass both non-embodied machines like DeepSeek and embodied machines as seen in works such as the movie *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982). He observes how technological realities, once mere futuristic imaginings, now most powerfully challenge long-held human conceptions. Meanwhile, “everyday science fiction” serves as a thought-experimental space for considering the problems that such imminent or already-arriving technologies may provoke. The author defines it as “the world-building and thought

experiments that focus, within near-future daily spaces, on the relationship between humans and various human-simulating machines or intelligent technologies" (Cheng, 2025, p. 114).

This *return-to-reality* approach resonates with another era of unprecedented convergence between science and the humanities. In the late nineteenth century, H.G. Wells (1934/2017) – one of the two widely recognized fathers of science fiction – proposed that the best way to create was to introduce elements beyond daily experience into real life while perfecting their logical details, an idea later summarized by Darko Suvin as the "gradually introduced new reality" (Suvin, 1979, p. 208). Hugo Gernsback intentionally revisited Wells's concept in the inaugural editorial of *Amazing Stories*, the manifesto of science fiction's golden age, treating it as a precursor to the notion of science fiction itself (Gernsback, 1926, p. 3). Wells, who saw himself primarily as a scientist, regarded this kind of gradual future imagination as part of "popular science," a means to make new scientific ideas more accessible to his readers and to explore possible futures shaped by technocracy. In our current moment of renewed calls for interdisciplinary integration, humanists' approach to technology through "everyday science fiction" likewise carries transformative significance. This genre allows them to navigate between language and concepts, grasp technological frontiers more swiftly, engage more readily in international dialogue, and participate more deeply in the transformation of humanities education for the technoscientific age.

The Theory Section also attempts to correct a common tendency in RoboHumanities research – namely, the unreflective conflation of humans and robots within "robot"-related humanistic inquiry. Fundamentally, this section interprets the relationship between humanoid robots and humans as one of similarity in appearance and function, yet difference in nature and principle. Regardless of what human traits – such as emotion, gender, or cognitive abilities – a humanoid machine may acquire, researchers must maintain the capacity to discern: these are not merely upgraded versions of existing human attributes, but novel creations that require fresh analysis, induction, definition, and development. In the short term, forcing new entities into outdated frameworks may reduce the time cost for public understanding. In the long run, however, it risks leading RoboHumanities research into error. Such an undesirable tendency ought to be checked before it becomes entrenched and difficult to reverse.

While posthumanist scholars, driven by political agendas or certain transcendental pursuits, regard robots as independent subjects and symbols of erasing species boundaries, the author adopts a notably pragmatic and restrained approach. He focuses instead on the existing and potential future relationships between robot designers/manufacturers and user expectations, as well as the past patterns, present conditions, and near-future projections of human-robot interaction. This inclination influences his selection of cultural and artistic materials, manifesting in his emphasis on and advocacy for "everyday science fiction." The sections on gender, emotion, and ethics represent both the cutting edge of current RoboHumanities research and points to the keen public interest in the daily application of robots. Nevertheless, the author's temporal focus remains firmly on the present and the real. Questions of how to design robots involve their fundamental settings, which are closely tied to evolving social perceptions of gender and changes in

the context of the social division of labor. This can be seen as the ethical identity preparation before robots enter society. Questions of how to interact pertain to the ethical dilemmas already arising in the present and near future as robots take on social roles – whether in the form of sex robots, virtual companions, griefbots, or elderly-care robots. New issues continuously emerge precisely through their sustained interaction with humans. These areas represent the "blue ocean" [1] depicted in robotics/artificial intelligence industry reports across various countries, and a surge in related technologies driven by market demand is foreseeable. This, however, reflects the inherent complexity of the robot topic itself and that it is not a purely cultural construct. In daily life, the instrumental nature of robots is more conspicuous than in the philosophical reflections they inspire. Their development is factually influenced by political-economic factors such as manufacturing costs, sales data, and national policy directions. The author's attempt here is admittedly limited: his analysis of consumer demand remains somewhat idealized and philosophical, and lacks sufficient attention to economic factors. Yet he still observes these consumption phenomena and attempts to outline, analyze, and project their broader landscape.

Foundational to Lin Cheng's recent perspective on RoboHumanities is the author's earlier work on classical Western robot imagery as "servants, mirrors, and others." He maintains that current developments in the field, despite their rapidly evolving forms, do not involve a qualitative transformation of this foundational imagery. Nevertheless, on the one hand, the author continually refines his observations and categorizations. For instance, he offers a decomposition of the "mirror" function by dividing robots into body-simulating, intelligence-simulating, and life-simulating types. The virtual companion hybridizes these three functions and further branches into variants such as "active human-machine romance," "passive human-machine romance," and "mixed active-passive human-machine romance." On the other hand, the author consistently attends to the daily application prospects of robots and their variations across national contexts, ensuring that each subdivided variant remains open to further variation. For example, regarding the classic motif of the "machine wife," he not only examines its differing portrayals in American, Japanese, and Chinese cultural works but also traces its evolving image within the same cultural milieu. In the discussion of griefbots, the author focuses on the impact of robots on the deceased and their families in post-mortem scenarios, as well as the connection between such technologies and recent transcendent and seductive imaginings of digital immortality.

Upon its publication, Lin's book promptly attracted attention from scholars and writers in such fields as science fiction studies, philosophy of science, and cultural studies. Philosopher of technology Liu Yongmou remarked it regarding Robots conceptualizes "RoboHumanities" as a field of problematology rather than a mere sub-discipline of

[1] The term was coined by W. Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne in their 2005 landmark book, *Blue Ocean Strategy*. They use the metaphor of "oceans" to describe the entire market universe. "Blue oceans ... are defined by untapped market space, demand creation, and the opportunity for highly profitable growth. In blue oceans, competition is irrelevant because the rules of the game are waiting to be set." (Kim & Mauborgne, 2005, p. 4)

literary and artistic theory. Even strictly from the perspective of science fiction criticism, RoboHumanities engenders numerous novel inquiries and theoretical insights that merit significant scholarly attention (Liu, 2025). Renowned science fiction scholar Wu Yan commented that the book "fills a gap in the study of AI narratives" and represents "a comprehensive integration of science fiction into a humanities monograph on intelligence" (Wu, 2025). Although in the Chinese-speaking world such evaluations often praise the work generously as being the first of its kind, they do highlight some commendable fundamental qualities of the book – such as its unpretentious language, its commitment to clarifying historical contexts, its concern with current points of keen public interest, its apprehension about near-future changes, and its appeal both to specialized researchers and an educated public After all, this is, indeed, a first-of-its-kind work, and we can look forward to further exploration and development.

For the time being, one can note with relative certainty that amidst all the technological euphoria, Lin Cheng calmly grounds the discourse in reality, unveiling the humanistic dimension of robotics research.

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