

# The Development History of Chinese Science Fiction from Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

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**Abstract**—In the history of Western literature, science fiction, as an essential branch of it, has been widely loved by the masses, and a crowd of outstanding science fiction novelists has been produced. With a large number of science fiction books adapted into films, the novels are also familiar to more audiences. Science fiction has been sprouting since 1902 in China, with the efforts of the pioneers and the relay of the latecomers, there have been many excellent works. But compared with the situation of western science fiction, it is not supportive of the healthy growth of science fiction in our country, and the public has not accepted science fiction novels. This paper will focus on the development history and current situation of science fiction in China, and explore the differences between the creative environment of Chinese and western science fiction and the prospect of Chinese science fiction, to seek a better future for Chinese science fiction.

**Index Terms**—Science fiction, development, Liu Cixin.

## I. INTRODUCING

In September 1988, Deng Xiaoping proposed that "science is the first productive force" according to the requirements and current situation of the development of science and technology at that time. While appealing for and responding to this guideline, we also need to pay attention to the influence of literary works on the social masses. Therefore, it is imperative to develop science fiction vigorously. Science fiction has its scientific foresight, and it is also a good embodiment of scientific development [1]. For example, the television, airplane, and submarine described by Jules Verne in his works provided much inspiration for present-day scientists and contributed to the development of science at that time to a certain extent. The social contribution of science fiction to science communication and science enlightenment is enormous. However, in China, science fiction has not become a mainstream type of popular literature. Even if there is a science fiction writer like Liu Cixin who has become a hot topic on the Internet and has become famous, he does not have the same status as the West, and the development of science fiction novels do not as good as surrounding countries. With the rapid development of science and technology, science fiction, as the "wing" of scientific innovation and imagination, has a weak position in Chinese literature, which makes countless people misunderstanding [2]. Is it because our culture cannot accept this kind of writing, or because science fiction has its special

nature? At present, China's science fiction is facing many problems, such as the writer's fault, the decreasing number of publications, uneven works, the stagnation of theoretical and critical research work, etc. How can we stimulate the enthusiasm of the people for science fiction so that Chinese science fiction can develop continuously and healthily? It is a question worthy of further discussion.

## II. A BASIC EXPLANATION OF SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction is a literal translation of western terms. It originally meant science, which is a type of popular literature with scientific imagination and innovation. Science fiction is a new literary genre emerging in western modern times. Science fiction is a new genre of literature that has emerged in the modern West. It is based on a vision of human future technology and society, so its plot cannot develop in the existing science, technology and society. Science fiction and Western popular fantasy novels "The Lord of the Rings" are different types of novels, which have essential differences [3]. We can understand science fiction in two aspects. First, the essence of science fiction is fiction, and the various elements of novels are the basis of its creation, which determines that the writing of science fiction must conform to the laws of literature rather than science. Second, science fiction must contain many science fictions factors. To be specific, the creation of science fiction uses some scientific knowledge and content to form stories that conform to literary laws and have science fiction plots. Therefore, science fiction can have multiple literary properties as literary novels like "Pipiru and Lucie," which is not only a fairy tale but also a sci-fi novel. But the key element and the real attraction that distinguish science fiction from other types of novels lies in imagination. Imagination and creativity are the main factors that make science fiction become popular literature based on scientific cognition.

## III. THE PROCESS OF SCIENCE FICTION ENTERING CHINA

The development of Chinese science fiction can be roughly divided into two periods, and each period has a dominant writing theory. Meanwhile, many pioneers of science fiction emerged and made important contributions to the promotion of science fiction.

### A. *The Origin of Science Fiction in China*

In 1902, it was also the first period in the history of Chinese science fiction. At that time, Lu Xun showed great interest in western science and technology in "The Talk of the

Moon Boundary," hoping that it could be widely disseminated to the people and accepted by the public [4]. However, because of the fear that science as an imported product will not be widely recognized among the Chinese people, science fiction novels are used as a carrier to convey western scientific ideas to the Chinese people. In the past 90 years, the core value of Chinese science fiction is to popularize scientific knowledge among the masses. With the development of science fiction, it absorbed a large number of Soviet science fiction theories and was influenced by some social factors at that time, which became a tool to promote popular science. Therefore, from 1902 to 1979, there was an extreme utilitarian deviation in the creation of Chinese science fiction, which was mainly reflected in inappropriately exaggerating the popularization of science, making it the principal value of science fiction creation [5]. The establishment of this artistic value had an irreparable impact on the development of Chinese science fiction. It directly limited the masses' acceptance and understanding of science fiction and impeded the writers' further creation of science fiction.

It is recorded that Verne's "Fifteen Heroes", translated by Liang Qichao, was the first Chinese science fiction. In October 1902, Liang Qichao founded the magazine "New Novel" at that time, advocating the "Novel Revolution." There was a piece of science fiction named "Submarine Travel" in the magazine, which was divided into the category of science fiction, and began serialization [6]. At that time, Lu Xun was studying in Japan, and he believed that science could save the country like most young people. After subscribing to the "New novel," he found that most of the strict scientific theories are too tricky and empty to promote to the Chinese people. However, with the help of the novel, it is much conducive to popularize science by integrating scientific theories and common sense into the story. In the autumn of 1903, Lu Xun began to translate "The Journey of the Moon." At that time, the Japanese translation indicated that the author was Charles Peron, but the actual author was Verne, which Lu Xun did not know. In 1990, Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zuoren translated "The Collection of Foreign Novels" and finally published it. Among them, they included "The journey of the moon" and the science fiction "The Journey Under the Earth" written by Verne. Then, 1500 copies were printed, and less than 100 copies were sold. Although it has little influence, the most prominent role of the publication is to open a window to the world for Chinese novels. Its historical significance greatly exceeds its literary value.

#### *B. The Early Development of Chinese Science Fiction*

In 1979, Chinese science fiction ushered in the second period in the history of development. At that time, Tong En's article "My Views on Science Fiction Literature and Art" published in "People's Literature" brought dramatic changes to the science fiction world and opened the second period of science fiction development [6]. In this period, it was proposed that science fiction should uphold more fundamental creative values than science. At that time, Tong En was hesitating in the "Science View" and attempted to put forward a new theoretical. However, it was not expected that

the argument would be widely concerned with science fiction literature. He has been praised as "a literary theory of the soul." Later, while being influenced by the innovative significance emphasized by Tong's theory, they systematically summarized the approach with their creative works. It was proposed that science fiction should be a kind based on modern and current reality. The literary works of truth should be closely integrated with the current social reality in China. Under the guidance of the new theory, science fiction writers have shifted their focus from social science to humanities and reality. Somebody even suggested that science does not have a dominant position in science fiction, and the main direction of the development of Chinese science fiction is to face the reality of life, pay attention to the current society, and advance to the world ahead of mainstream literature. Under the guidance of this theory, Chinese science fiction was expanded in the masses' cognition, but the unique context of words about scientific exploration and science has gradually been lost in the process of novel creation.

#### *C. The Early Development Stages of Chinese Science Fiction*

Before 1949, Lao She had written the science fiction novel "Cat City," but because of its unique age, science fiction could not develop under the attack of various local literature, political stories, and urban novels.

The springtime in the history of Chinese science fiction was in 1949 after the founding of the country. Both Deng Wenguang, who returned from Vietnam and known as "the father of Chinese science fiction" and Ye Yonglie, who has long occupied the first place in the sales of Chinese science fiction, made significant contributions to Sci-Fi's development. In 1954, Zheng Wenguang created the first science fiction novel "From Earth to Mars" in China, which was published in the "China Youth Daily" and then caused a wave of Mars observation in Beijing. At that time, the crowd lining up to watch Mars at the Ancient Observatory greatly exceeded Zheng's expectations. Simultaneously, he further strengthened his determination to continue to create science fiction while ignoring the criticism about science fiction as idealism. Zheng's science fiction novels opened up a new generation of science fiction with literary and imaginative power. His works are in the form of prose and are full of fantastic ideas. As early as 1980, he created "Prehistoric World" about the resurrection of paleontology. In the article "God of Dolphins," the protagonist visited the underwater world. His first Chinese science fiction novel, "Flying to Sagittarius", mentioned three teenagers who were thrown out of the solar system at a constant speed. In 1998, Zheng won the China Science Fiction Lifetime Achievement Award, and he guided the re-development of Chinese science fiction.

Ye Yonglie, with his more than 3 million copies of "PHS Wandering the Future," has announced that he is China's best-selling science-fiction novelist. This best-selling book is a variant of children's literature. Zheng's novel mainly emphasizes thinking about the future of society and human beings, while Ye Yonglie's story focuses on comprehensive and detailed imagination and innovation of human future life and work. Many of the future technologies appearing in the

article, such as artificial organs, ticket vehicles, ring-shaped stereo movies, home robots, etc. have become a reality now, and they also reflect the specific prediction and guidance of science fiction for science. And he is also one of the authors of the most popular science book, "100,000 Whys" by Chinese children.

#### *D. The Ebb Period of Chinese Science Fiction*

However, with the ebb of Chinese science fiction fever, Ye Yonglie's creation has also changed afterward, which reflects the development dilemma of Chinese science fiction. Science fiction has always been on the edge of Chinese literature, and even today, Liu Cixin, who created "The Three Body Problem," has nothing to do with it. Liu believes that the vital factor leading to the current situation of science fiction in China is the multiple development fractures in history. He told reporters that "the development of science fiction in China has been broken many times between the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, the upsurge of science fiction was interrupted and stopped developing and spreading by the Anti-Japanese War. After the founding of the people's Republic of China, there was a stable development environment, and the upsurge appeared again, but then it was interrupted by a special period. The upsurge of science fiction after the 1980s was interrupted by some political factors, and it began to recover gradually in the 1990s. Each interruption and start are devastating to the development of science fiction. The author and the work at each stage have no inheritance and connection. From the creative idea to the author, it starts from scratch. At every stage, the author and the work are not inherited; there is no connection. From the creative concept to the author, they all start from scratch. Thus, the market for science fiction is not mature naturally. Some books can sell 340,000 copies in the 1980s when science fiction is in a boom period. If this boom can continue, it will be much better in terms of market acceptance, completion of works, and maturity of readers. However, each interruption is ten years, which will inevitably have a great impact on its influence and market sales." Even so, new China still provides a more stable stage for young writers. Under the influence of Deng and Ye, Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, Tang Feng, Yao Haijun, and other new generation of young science fiction creators began to write science fiction and stuck to it until now.

#### *E. Breakthrough Period of Chinese Science Fiction*

Talking about the current situation of the development of science fiction in China, we can't get away from the name of Liu Cixin. Liu graduated from the Engineering Department of North China Institute of Water Resources and Hydropower in 1985 and then worked as a design engineer in Niangziguan Power Plant in Shanxi Province. In 1989, he wrote the first edition of science fiction "Supernova Era" and "China 2185," which was not published at that time. In the 1990s, he began to contribute to "Science Fiction World" magazine. From then on, he continued to write science fiction novels. So far, he has created such well-known and excellent works as "Wandering the earth," "Supernova Era," and "The Three Body Problem." He is the main representative of the new generation writer of science fiction in China and a

member of the China Association for science popularization writers. He has won the galaxy Award for science fiction for five consecutive years from 1999 to 2003 since he published science fiction works in the 1990s. With the series of "The Three Body Problem," he was nominated for the Hugo Award, which is the highest honor of science fiction in the world. On August 22, 2015, he won the Hugo Award for Best Novel, and on November 8, 2018, he won the Clark Science Fiction Award, the highest award for science fiction in the UK. His works break away from the extreme paranoia of the traditional science fiction to the technical school and the social school, perfectly combine the imagination with reality. His novels are majestic and magnificent, and has been widely concerned and praised. His science fiction works create a unique paradigm of Chinese characteristics and put Chinese science fiction into the world.

The novel "The Three Body Problem: Death and Immortality" is a masterpiece in China. It is not only a part of the series, but also the final work. It explores and ponders the social composition and corresponding relationship in the universe with the construction of traditional science fiction. Its imagination and innovation are amazing. As a sci-fi writer who has been adored by a number of fans in the past decade, Liu's overall creative keynote is summed up as "cold". Whether the widespread "The Three Body Problem" or the unpopular "Micro End" are all created in a world's perspective, and the individual roles are based on the social aspect of conflicts and desalinate individual's emotions, let readers feel the impact of character shaping while understanding the mainline of the full text. In his works, he often designs a world setting first and then deduces social contradictions and conflicts according to this setting, which is embodied by the disputes between roles, and finally gets its conclusion.

Many readers have mentioned that Liu's works are usually despairing, but he insists on this way of creation. He firmly believes that the end deduced according to the world outlook is such a conclusion, which can't be modified by human factors, and it should be written like this. Such a writing style is also the reason why many readers like to read his works. At the beginning of 1990, Liu wrote software and used the 100,000 light-years universe radius to represent 300,000 points of intelligent civilization, then calculated the evolution path of these light points through 286 computers. The degree of strangeness represented by the evolution map made him unimaginable. This point was applied when he wrote "The Three Body Problem" ten years later. He first set an alien civilization that completely different from the lifestyle, social structure, and technology level of the earth civilization in his novel and then reflected the game among different cultures in the universe deduced through the survival conflict between the earth civilization and the alien civilization. There are three parts in "The Three Body Problem." The plots' beginning is based on the known history, and the end is 10 billion years later. Such sci-fi works not only convey to readers the exploration of science, but also let people get rid of the hatching world and reflect on society. When the time reaches ten billion years later, the impact of them is the most exceptional charm of "The Three Body Problem."

Liu Cixin was born in 1963. His world outlook on science

fiction is very different from that of his predecessors and the writers born in the 1970s. He is in the middle stage of China's dramatic transformation. Relying on the upsurge of science fiction launched by Zheng and Ye, Liu started his creation of Science fiction. His theory of production is based on his own practical experience, and all his works have been established a perfect and self-consistent free development society that have a profound impact on readers.

Liu is helpless about the modern development of science fiction in China. He once told reporters: "now all kinds of fantasy novels in China are more concerned, while traditional science fiction works are almost ignored." In his memory, the golden age of science fiction is full of vitality. The readers are all young people in their twenties, and the writers are also very young. "Now look at the fans at the science fiction conference are all in the middle age. When a kind of literature attracts elderly readers, there is no hope for this kind of literature." Liu also mentioned that more science fiction began to care about reality. Based on maintaining the nature of science fiction, the social relations constructed more care for racial discrimination, gender discrimination, social ethics, and other aspects. Around these critical points, different narrative structures and writing styles are used, which may extend the revolution of science fiction.

The problems mentioned by Liu Cixin have been obviously reflected in our life. In all kinds of bookstores, science fiction books are on the edge place, and few people pay attention to them. The difficulty in the development of Chinese science fiction is that they often stagnate for various reasons when they began to sprout. This situation once occurred in the process of western science fiction, but they overcame it through the film adaptation of science fiction. This method not only promoted the type of science fiction, expand the science fiction content, but also benefit the spread of science fiction. At present, the adaptation of all kinds of science fiction has also begun in China, but due to various problems, there are many difficulties. The same challenges also happen in the creators. Mature writers are unwilling to enter the sci-fi market because the market is not profitable. Some science fiction writers do not have enough scientific and literary knowledge. Their works are full of holes and lack of logical thinking, which significantly affects the status of science fiction in the hearts of the masses. Such a vicious circle, the development of science fiction, faces excellent difficulties.

#### IV. THE FUTURE AND PROSPECT OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION

##### *A. We Need to Pay Attention to the Cultivation of the Young Generation's Humanistic Quality*

Liu Cixin's existence proves that China's science fiction works keep a deep concern and thinking about the whole fate of human society, the imagination of science remains flexible, and the construction of society is also magnificent. But only relying on Liu and his books "The Three Body Problem" which only proves that few of the Chinese sci-fi writers can be successful. Compared with foreign countries, Chinese sci-fi still has a considerable gap. Except for some excellent

writers, the number of writers is few, and society pays less attention to sci-fi. In this case, the public often pays little attention to this kind of books, and teenagers do not have enough such books to read. At the same time, there are almost no children's literature on that theme. The level of science fiction writers is uneven, and they cannot compete with other types of novel writers. Science fiction is based on scientific imagination and literary creativity, which can't be restrained too much. Nowadays, society has less and less prejudice on science fiction and do not always criticize it anymore. But new problems are that people tend to limit sci-fi books to science popularization function. A considerable part of readers read sci-fi books aim to learn scientific knowledge other than their literariness and imagination. These thoughts need to be eradicated, otherwise, there will always be hidden dangers.

At one time, China's education has always been characterized by strong utilitarianism and target for examination, neglecting the cultivation of children's curiosity, imagination, creativity, and humanistic quality. Students often lack deep insight into society, which makes people unable to read science fiction better, let alone cultivate a large number of excellent science fiction writers. Of course, the new curriculum reform in China now emphasizes the importance of imagination, innovation, and overall core quality, which coincides with the conditions for the development of Chinese science fiction. Rescue students from the sameness, expand their vision and innovation to the pursuit and development of science and literature, then more Chinese science fiction writers such as Liu Cixin will appear, they will create more sci-fi novels which belonging to China and representing China, they are the future of Chinese science fiction.

On the other hand, the market potential of science fiction in China is also huge. Take "Science Fiction World" for example, and it has a circulation of 400,000, 70% of the readers are college students. The students always read and discuss together, and they are also the backbone of future science fiction fans. "Science fiction world" has been established for more than 20 years and accumulated a large number of readers, which has more enormous development potential. In recent years, the popularity of "The Three Body Problem" and the author Liu Cixin on the Internet has proved that the demand for Chinese science fiction is vast, but due to the lack of excellent quality of original science fiction supply, the requirement for Chinese science fiction cannot be met. Now, science fiction books have not formed a model. In 2002, China published a total of 227 science fiction works, about 60% of which were from abroad, with the rest 40% were from adaptations. The originals written by Chinese people were few, and the major publisher is strict with the promotion and publicity of sci-fi books. That has resulted in the current difficult situation in China. That is, there is a great demand for readers and a huge market, but sci-fi novels are not systematic, and the capital is not willing to invest too much. As a result, the authors of science fiction novels have a small income, and it is difficult to survive by the books, so the quality of stories is declining.

### *B. Hope That Practitioners Have a Long-Term Perspective*

At present, there is a phenomenon in China. There are many kinds of "Science Fiction Awards," more and more science fiction movies, and more and more funds. Indeed, this has a positive significance, which is conducive to the development of science fiction. With the funds, it is beneficial to cultivate new science fiction writers. Now it's a commercial society, science fiction should also be industrialized, but investors pay more attention to the economic benefits. The investors invest much money in science fiction or movies but do not pay attention to dig off the connotation of works, so they often suffer a lot. Like the movie "Shanghai Fortress" released in 2019, because the producers don't concentrate on the content and special effect of the works, the film is a romance but in the sci-fi costume and the box office turns out to be terrible. To cultivate a young generation of science fiction authors and scriptwriters requires patience, eager for quick success and instant profit are not conducive to the growth of writers. We can take a long-term perspective. For example, the independent enrollment of Chinese universities and the winner of science fiction competition of high school students can be taken as the admission target for liberal arts. At present, in science fiction competition of middle school students, the influential one is "National Science Composition Competition of Middle School Students" sponsored by China Science Writers Association. We can entirely rely on the enrollments to discover and train more young people to participate in the creation of science popularization and science fiction works.

Children's literature is most likely to change one's life. Therefore, we still need to pay attention to the development of children's science fiction. Although there are many children's science fiction works in China, many writers use fairy tale to write science fiction. It's rare to see pure science fiction. Children's science fiction is of considerable significance to the whole of China's science fiction, because it enables many people to enter the world of science fiction in their youth, and enables our young generation to build up science fiction dream cabins in their childhood. These cabins, even when they reach adulthood or even old age, are also spiritual homes that we will never forget.

### *C. Lay a Solid Foundation and Face the Future*

In the past, our science fiction creation concept was single, following the Soviet popular science theory, and most of our works mainly serve for the country. In the early 1980s, with the opening of China's door, various literary types and schools swarmed into China. Creative ideas that had not had the opportunity to practice before were practiced in a relatively short period. Various science fiction schools also entered China. Cyberpunk, Taikong opera, new wave, etc. were all in bloom. Our science-fiction writers also made many attempts in that time. But we do not have the time to do comprehensive development before we fully digest the new knowledge. The reality will show that the foundation is not stable, so we need time to consolidate it.

After Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award in 2015, Li Yuanchao, vice president of the people's Republic of China, met with Liu Cixin, Wu Yan, and a group of science fiction

professionals. At the China science fiction conference held in Beijing in September 2016, Li Yuanchao delivered a speech again, which showed that the leaders of the country attach great importance to science fiction. Science fiction deserves some strategic planning at the national level. As science fiction creators, we should think about, for example, whether there is any possibility of mutual transformation between cutting-edge science fantasy and science. What is the relationship between science fiction and the development of science and technology in a country?

### *D. Science Fiction Film Helps the Development of the Science Fiction Industry*

In the United States and other developed countries, the film has become an essential pillar of the science fiction industry. Science fiction film is different from other films, it is the most apparent type of industrialization, and its shooting is a complicated system process. China's accumulation of science fiction films over the years is also limited. Although we filmed science fiction films such as "Deadlight on A Coral Island" and "Thunderbolt Beibei" in the 1980s, compared with the current background of the great development of Chinese film art, these accumulations are too limited. Whether the script adaptation, props, sceneries, actor selection, or special effects in the later stage, every step is a weak point compared with the advanced countries. Although the capital investment is substantial, it is relatively slow to become a real movie product. China's science fiction films have a long way to go. We need our filmmakers to calm down and be less impetuous. Even if they fail, dedicated losers may win respect.

## V. CONCLUSION

In recent years, with the popularity of Liu Cixin's, a large number of young people and science fiction fans who have left before have picked up science fiction again. The average age of science fiction readers is getting younger and younger, just like the existence history of Chinese science fiction. The younger readers can produce the more budding author who will have infinite possibilities and creations. With the expansion of creative groups and reading groups, the capital will naturally invest. The movie "Wandering the Earth" released in 2018, with a box office of 4.656 billion, is a good example. Through various means and promotion, I believe that the acceptance of science fiction in China will be higher, and the foundation will be stronger, which is the hope and future of Chinese science fiction.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I confirm that all ideas and innovations in this article are from the author himself, and all data searching and article writing are completed by the author himself.

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