The Development of Science Fiction Studies in 21st-Century China

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Since the 21st Century, Chinese science fiction has increased notably in terms of its popularity. As a science fiction fan and academic researcher, I can still recall the excitement I felt when I first read Han Song’s 2000 novelette “The Abyss” in Science Fiction World. And now, over 20 years later, what is the current status of academic study of science fiction in China, which plays such an important role in boosting Chinese science fiction? This article explores and analyzes the research situation within contemporary Chinese academia by investigating specific data.

In February 2021, if we use the term “Science Fiction” to search in “Subject” (subject = “science fiction” or title = “science fiction”) in CNKI (https://www.cnki.net/), a comprehensive Chinese academic database, we obtain about 24,000 articles (the result slightly varies on different dates). If we search “Science Fiction” in “TKA” (Title, Keyword, Abstract) in CNKI (title = “science fiction” or keyword = “science fiction” or abstract = “science fiction”), the total number of articles obtained is around 36,000. Meanwhile, the number of articles about science fiction over the last ten years has increased very rapidly. For example, using the term “Science Fiction” to search in the “Abstract” field, we can see that in 1996 there were fewer than 100 related papers published, over 500 papers published in 2007, and in 2019, the number of published articles totalled more than 2000. It is safe to say that before Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award in 2015 and the subsequent popularizing effect that award had on the area of study within China, Chinese research aimed at science fiction had already begun to accelerate. In general, the rapid growth of the number of science fiction research articles allows us to understand the way Chinese science fiction research has developed.

If we further examine the main focuses of these articles by searching the frequency of their keywords, we can find that “Science Fiction” and “Science Fiction Film” are the two major keywords. In terms of the specific perspectives of research, “Utopia(n)”/”Dystopia(n),” “Science and Technology,” “Humanity,” and “Feminism” are the dominant perspectives of the studies. As for the popularity of individual writers and works, Liu Cixin (and his Three-Body trilogy), Doris Lessing, and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein have received much attention in Chinese academic circles. Liu is the most influential native science fiction writer, Lessing is the Nobel Prize laureate in literature (although academics usually treat her as a writer of high literature rather than a sci-fi writer), and the high degree of attention Frankenstein gets may suggest that Chinese study of Western science fiction is mainly at the stage of studying traditional classics. Regarding these research trends, the developmental curve of traditional topics such as “Utopia(n)” is very flat, while the popularity of Liu Cixin and The Three-Body Problem keeps growing.
It is very interesting that in the area of “Science Fiction Film,” the top keywords are “The Wandering Earth” (a film adapted from Liu Cixin’s novelette), “Avatar” and “Artificial Intelligence.” The topics being studied in SF films are different from what literature research focuses on - the main focus of the film study is on contemporary works and their narrative mode, and the specific techniques of science fiction films.

If we search “Science Fiction” in “Subject” in the master’s dissertations and doctoral theses of CNKI, which demonstrates the potential direction of future studies, about 990 dissertations are found. The top-publishing institutions are Shandong Normal University, Central China Normal University, East China Normal University, Shanghai Normal University, and Southwest University. The top keywords characterizing all the sci-fi study dissertations in the database are “Science Fiction,” “Liu Cixin,” “The Three-Body,” “Science Fiction Film,” and “Translation,” reflecting the fact that the young researchers, especially those who major in foreign language and literature studies, have a particular interest in the translation and dissemination of science fiction.

The central figures of science fiction studies in contemporary China mostly appear as leaders/members of important research teams. There are several core teams, including Professor Wu Yan’s team. Wu is one of the earliest researchers of science fiction in contemporary China. His teams from Southern University of Science and Technology and Beijing Normal University are the backbone of the current academic community. The team at the China Research Institute for Science Popularization is also important, represented by Wang Weiying and her longtime collaborators, Gao Yabin and Zhang Yihong, among others. The teams of Jiang Xiaoyuan from Shanghai Jiao Tong University and Huang Mingfen from Xiamen University, respectively, have published many papers on the history of science and technology and science fiction films and televisions. Scholars like Li Guangyi from Chongqing University, Jia Liyuan from Tsinghua University, and myself and Jiang Zhenyu from Sichuan University are also very active in the field. In addition, overseas scholars such as David Der-Wei Wang and Song Mingwei also pay attention to Chinese science fiction. Although they have relatively few publications in Chinese, they have played an important role in promoting Chinese science fiction in international academic circles. The members of those key teams are also responsible for various projects related to science fiction studies and have published related monographs, anthologies, and translations. In short, the number of science fiction researchers is relatively small, however, these scholars have formed a tightly connected academic community. These few scholars and their teams, in conjunction with a small number of others, are basically leading the current trend of studies in science fiction in China.

It is also noteworthy that some academic articles have been published in the most well-known journals of mainstream literature studies over the last ten years. By searching “Science Fiction” in the “Abstract” field of the following leading periodicals, we can see that there have been six papers published on the topic in Literary Review. The authors—including Jia Liyuan, Wang Yao, and Zhan Ling—are among the most prolific and influential young scholars working in China today. Literature and Art Studies has published seven articles and Modern Chinese Literature
Studies has published 18 articles. In addition, some papers have been published in other influential mainstream journals, such as Southern Cultural Forum (27 articles) and Exploration and Free Views (twelve articles), etc. Many of those papers were published in the last decade by influential academics, discussing history and theories of Chinese science fiction, as well as writers like Liu Cixin and Han Song. By and large, the authors are the scholars of the key teams mentioned above. Regarding publication within international academic circles, flagship journals like Science Fiction Studies have published special issues focused on Chinese science fiction, and many of the authors of the issue are also from the aforementioned core teams.

The problem is, the study of Western science fiction is the expected model of science fiction research because of science fiction's Western origins. However, this does not seem to be the case in China. The essential periodicals for the study of foreign literature in China, including Foreign Literature Review, Foreign Literature, Foreign Literatures, Contemporary Foreign Literature and Foreign Literature Studies, etc., represent high-level Chinese foreign literature studies. By searching “Science Fiction” in “Abstracts” in those journals, we can see that only three sci-fi research papers have been published in Foreign Literature Review, including one newsletter; Foreign Literature, Foreign Literatures, Contemporary Foreign Literature have each published ten related articles. The major subjects of the articles in question are the works of Doris Lessing, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ursula Le Guin, Philip K. Dick, etc. About 20 articles have been published in Foreign Literature Studies focusing on such diverse topics as the research of robot ethics in sci-fi, Liu Cixin’s reception of Arthur Clarke, etc. It is not difficult to see that although the total number of science fiction research articles in Chinese foreign study community is not insignificant, there have been very few related papers published in high-level journals.

Generally speaking, led by outstanding scholars and their teams as it is, the research of science fiction in contemporary China has begun to take shape. Although the field of study has great potential, its diversity and quality still needs to be improved. For example, the current direction of research interests is mainly limited to the history and development of Chinese science fiction over the last hundred-odd years, and is further limited to the works of a small number of essential Chinese and foreign writers. The introduction of mainstream literary theories and foreign academic studies is far from adequate. The popularity of the basic study of science fiction has increased significantly. However, compared with the long-term and in-depth research of science fiction by renowned Western scholars (such as the studies by Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, etc.), Chinese academia has not seen similar iconic achievements. The proportion of original articles that are published in highly influential journals is very low. Therefore, there remains much to do to improve the field of science fiction research in China – primarily the diversification and promotion of academic studies, the attraction of more resources and scholars, and the construction of key teams across related disciplines. Achieving these goals will elevate Chinese science fiction research to the next stage of development.
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