The History and Reality of Chinese Science Fiction Studies

Zhenyu Jiang

Science fiction research is becoming a multidisciplinary field with significant impacts on both the academic and social-cultural fields in China. In recent years, many researchers from disciplines like philosophy, literature, film and television, science culture, and cultural industries have participated in science fiction research and produced valuable results in their respective fields.

The history of science fiction research in China is closely related to the history of the development of Chinese science fiction literature and culture overall. During the late Qing dynasty, when Chinese science fiction was being created indiscriminately, science fiction theory was also at the earliest stage of gestation and genesis. At that time, authors Liang Qichao and Lu Xun enthusiastically advocated for science fiction literature and established many influential theories about the field, in addition to their deep involvement in its creation and translation. In particular, the young Lu Xun's theory of genre "by science, by human feelings" (经以科学, 纬以人情) and his practical theory of "guiding the Chinese people to carry out" (导中国人群以进行) laid the foundation for the development of Chinese science fiction and the exploration of science fiction theory in the following half century. Since then, within the genre, Chinese science fiction has formed a confrontation between science and human society, everyday reality, future fantasy and other human "non-scientific" elements; in terms of external genre positioning, it has always been in the midst of political grand narratives such as the "Four Modernizations". It was only after the great discussions of the early 1980s that this situation was gradually relaxed.

From the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China to the end of the 1970s, China's approach to science fiction could be regarded as being in a Period of Learning and Exploration. Under the influence of Soviet science popularization, as well as a system of science literature and art (科学文艺), Chinese science fiction was sheltered under the three-tier mechanism of "science popularization (科学普及) -- science literature and art (科学文艺) -- science fantasy (科幻小说)", but at the same time, it gradually accumulated the momentum to find its own path. In the essays and writers' notes of editors and authors such as Zheng Wenguang (郑文光), Tong Enzheng (童恩正), and Ye Yonglie (叶永烈), Chinese science fiction theory gradually took the first steps toward establishing a local pulse. On the one hand, science fiction authors enthusiastically supported the creation of science fiction as an integral part of the "task of transforming society" (Editors 1) through the popularization of science; on the other hand, they also realized that science fiction is "different from science literature and art." (Wen Guang 161) Science fiction should not be simply instrumentalized as subsidiary material for popular science, but also could not simply use a scientistic manner to confront already-known knowledge.
Developing alongside a strong national anxiety about the legitimacy of the science fiction genre, Chinese science fiction theory underwent a Period of Growth in the late 1970s. When Tong Enzheng proposed that science fiction should break away from the stereotypical popularization of knowledge and spread a “scientific view of life,” (Tong Enzheng 110) the autonomy of the science fiction genre became fully developed. In the midst of debates and criticism, Chinese science fiction writers, editors, and enthusiasts sought discursive resources from overseas science fiction, literary theory, and science communities. In the midst of eager study and debate, writers established far-reaching ties with the global science fiction community and contributed to the convergence of Chinese science fiction with the world’s science fiction literature and culture.

During this brief period of theoretical explosion, the core of the relevant discussions consisted of two primary aspects. One of these was the attempt to give a richer connotation to "science," especially the demand to understand it in the context of universal social practice as scientific culture, scientific spirit, and scientific method. Secondly, science fiction as a genre required an all-round redefinition of it in relation to the concept of "fantasy," trying to solve the closely related issues of "fantasy and reality," "fantasy and science," "fantasy and plot," and other important relationships that had defined it up until this point.

These discussions not only go directly to the core of the science fiction genre, but also use related creations to pry open a series of ideas and logical inferences that have been considered a default part of the modernization process since the Enlightenment. Important references include "expressing a scientific view of life" (Tong Enzheng 110); "arousing readers' attention in, interest in, and love of science" (Xiao Jianheng 113); "science fiction realism" (Zheng Wenguang 6); "thrilling science fiction" and "towards popular literature" (Ye Yonglie 21); "the continuation of realistic scientific research" (Liu Xingshi 2), and so on, all of which still play a role in the creation of science fiction today in all its various forms. Many of these ideas are widely known, such as "bat theory,"2 "two kinds of conception,"3 "hard science fiction and soft science fiction," and "social science fiction." They should not only be regarded as an important supplement to the system of science fiction theories currently dominated by the English-speaking world, but also have the theoretical potential to engage in dialogue with, and even innovation of, the main wave of world science fiction theories, from Darko Suvin on down.

During this period, the most important theoretical achievements are mainly focused on combining the history of Chinese science fiction with the theoretical concerns of overseas scholars. The organization and tracing of the history of Chinese science fiction is attributed to the interaction and efforts of Ye Yonglie with overseas scholars such as Masaya Takeda.4 By discovering historical materials, they set the starting point of Chinese science fiction in 1904 (Ye Yonglie 2).

Unfortunately, although these discussions and explorations had once enjoyed widespread social attention, they did not result in a systematic and complete Chinese science fiction theory system that could be developed in a healthy manner. In the mid-to-late 1980s, the development
of Chinese science fiction theory did not break off, but it did enter a **Period of Accumulation**.\(^5\) At this time, the theoretical discourse dominated by the popular science discourse and identified as "science literature and art" regained its dominant position in a short time, but soon declined in many aspects, including in terms of literary creation, conception, and publication. In the midst of this intense confrontation, opposition, and transformation, the theory and practice of "science popularization" went deeper and a new concept of "science communication"\(^6\) began to be conceived.

At the same time, a number of theoretical articles with more rigorous forms and clear academic specifications were gradually being published in various university journals and academic periodicals. The researchers behind such works, who have turned their attention to science fiction, are generally not the front-line science fiction and science writers that were more common in the earliest days of science fiction theorization, but often have a clearer theoretical and academic background. They have grown up during the period of latent accumulation, and have intervened in the complex theory and historical context of global science fiction literature and culture in a more independent and relaxed manner than their predecessors. Among these, the most representative ones are researchers like Wu Yan, who are both familiar with various science fiction texts and create them as well, who are extensively involved in science fiction activities, and who have a clear identity as "science fiction fans."

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese science fiction theory has embarked on a journey characterized by a sudden jump from gradual recovery to overexertion. Wu Yan has written, composed, and edited a series of papers, text books, and translated works, all of which accounted for the majority of influential theoretical results and practice for a long time. In 2013, he co-edited a special issue on Chinese science fiction for the journal *Science Fiction Studies* (SFS), which became the most important collective appearance of Chinese science fiction research in the world up until that point. Around that time, Chongqing University's "Chinese Science Fiction Literature Re-start Workshop" (2013.05), Fudan University's "Science Fiction Literature" workshop (2015.06), Beijing Normal University's "Utopia and Science Fiction Literature Research" international conference (2016.12), Hainan University's "Liu Cixin's Science Fiction and the Cultural Condition of Contemporary China" (2016.03) conference, among others, were also concentrated manifestations of the increasingly important influence of Chinese science fiction research on the academic stage at home and abroad.

At present, Chinese science fiction theory is becoming more and more fruitful, and the forms of academic activities are becoming more diverse, bringing an unusual vitality to the traditional academic world. On the one hand, science fiction often appears as a separate topic or activity section in various academic conferences on literature, culture, industry, and science and technology studies; on the other hand, science fiction research is often deeply involved in various cultural activities and industrial operations that are not purely academic, thus forming a very rich and rare interaction between theory and practice.
The ranks of science fiction researchers are also growing larger by the day. In addition to the long-standing "science fiction fan" researchers at different levels, famous scholars from traditional academia, such as Dai Jinhua, Wu Fei, and Ye Shuxian are also actively involved in the field of science fiction research; more young scholars, such as Yang Qingxiang and Xu Gang, are often able to transcend various academic stereotypes and theoretical molds and to explore and enrich Chinese science fiction theory in greater depth; important science fiction writers, such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Chen Qiufan have been able to directly intervene in the field of science fiction research with explicitly theoretical approaches. In addition, there are many scholars and critics from different academic backgrounds and with theoretical approaches who have reported great interest in science fiction research and have produced many results within the field.

Of course, as the science fiction research boom continues to surge, a series of problems have emerged, such as the issue of overwhelmingly borrowed theories, the relative waste of research resources, and the lack of a general research consensus. Sometimes, even though different academic discourses are discussing the same work, the same event, and the same issue, they often find it difficult to communicate effectively. There are three prominent dilemmas central to this difficulty: first, the historical development of science fiction in China has not been effectively sorted out, and the important theoretical resources and profound thoughts of our predecessors have not been fully explored; second, issues such as the "Chineseness" of science fiction, what is meant by "Chinese science fiction aesthetics," and "the Chinese context of science fiction theory" have not been effectively developed and discussed, making Chinese science fiction theory unable to function as a powerful discourse within a global field; third, Chinese science fiction culture itself is undergoing rapid development and change, its textual forms are rapidly evolving under the influence of the Internet and new media, and its industrial practices of film, television, and games have also not received sufficient theoretical attention, all of which makes the science fiction theory that is gradually taking shape run the risk of being confined to the shackles of a narrow discourse.

Today, Chinese science fiction research and Chinese science fiction itself cannot be ignored by the academic and cultural communities. Perhaps what we need is exactly what generations of science fiction scholars have long been insisting on, which is a return to the text, to return to the historical scene, to care about technology, modernity, and wisdom, to discover the grand universe and real life that generations of science fiction authors have touched upon, and to discover those important issues that are often neglected, in order to truly let the potential and prospects of science fiction research be fully developed.

Notes
1. Since the 1950s, the Chinese science popularization community has focused on introducing the Soviet Union's management experience and theoretical references, including the term "science fiction" (科学幻想小说). After local adaptation, the broadest sector of management was called "science popularisation", and the category of knowledge dissemination in the form of
literature and art was called "science literature and art". The "science fantasy fiction" is a type of "science literature and art", along with "science poetry", "science reportage" and "science prose".

2. Zheng lamented, "...the scientific community considers it (science fiction) a work of literature; those who engage in literature and art consider it science, and as a result, it has become a bat in a fairy tale: birds say it resembles a rat and is a beast; beasts say it has wings and is a bird". This formulation was later simplified as the "bat theory", which gradually became a trigger for the debate on science fiction "surname 'science' or 'literature'".

3. The "two conceptions" means the existence of both "scientific ideas" and "literary ideas" in a science fiction novel. This formulation was intended to reconcile the positioning of science fiction in the regulatory system, but later developed into a widely accepted criterion for evaluating the genre, with a preference for one idea over another becoming the hallmarks of "hard science fiction" and "soft science fiction".

4. With the help of Ye Yonglie, the "China Science Fiction Study Group" was established in Japan in 1980.

5. Starting from the end of 1982, various debates within science fiction and science popularization gradually rose to political criticism. From the end of 1983, Chinese newspapers, magazines and publishers gradually stopped publishing science fiction works. Theoretical thinking was also interrupted.

6. Science communication is an emerging concept from the philosophy and history of science, and scholars believe that "science popularization" overemphasizes the authority of science and the sense of superiority of scientific and technological intellectuals. In the modern media environment, the emphasis should be on the means of communication of scientific knowledge.

Works Cited


Ye, Yonglie, "Xu Nianci, the Pioneer of Chinese Science Fiction", The Shanghai Mercury, Dec. 21, 1921.


**Zhenyu Jiang** is Assistant Professor at the Academy of Chinese Science Fiction, School of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, focusing on science fiction and culture, internet literature, and cultural industry.