Finding Missing Pieces of the Jigsaw Puzzle:  
A Survey of Japanese Science Fiction Studies in China

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China's first encounter with science fiction dates back to the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. At that point, science fiction, as a genre of literature, like science and technology and modern industry, was extensively influenced by Japan. A lot of western science fiction classics were translated into Chinese from the Japanese versions rather than from the originals. Many of the translators were Chinese students who were studying in Japan, among whom were Lu Xun and Liang Qichao, to name just a few. For instance, Lu Xun, who at the time was studying at Kobun Institute in Tokyo, translated Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) into Chinese from Tsutomu Inoue's Japanese translation, and renamed it *Journey to the Moon*. This book was later published in China in 1903. Meanwhile, a number of Japanese science fiction works were introduced to China, which also played an important role in the early development of Chinese science fiction. In a sense, we can regard Japanese science fiction as an early mentor of Chinese science fiction.

Academia believes that Japanese science fiction began in the second half of the 19th century. Perry's Expedition\(^1\) not only ended Japan’s 220-year-old policy of isolation, but also brought about the beginning of Japanese science fiction. Gesshu Iwagaki’s *Seisei Kaisin Hen* (1857), which was stimulated by this event, is considered to be the first work with science fiction nature in Japanese history. Forty years later, Shunro Oshikawa wrote *Undersea Warship: A Fantastic Tale of Island Adventure* (1900), which marked the real birth of Japanese science fiction. Although Japan suffered unprecedented failure in World War II, the post-World War II period witnessed a rapid recovery and development in its industry and economy. At the end of 1960s, Japan became the second largest economy in the world. In the meantime, its science fiction too experienced rapid development that later brought about the golden age of Japanese science fiction. Entering the Heisei era\(^2\), along with the Japanese economic recession, Japanese science fiction went through a long period of decline. Since then, Japanese science fiction, while extending its traditional forms of literature, film and animation, has tried to expand into new areas such as games and art, presenting a more diverse look. Today, when we look closely at Japanese science fiction, while observing its rise and fall, we can also clearly see the development of Japanese science fiction studies in China that intertwined with it.

Many years after the founding of New China, studies focused on science fiction were rare. Considering the political reasons, this scarcity of scholarship is understandable. Along with the reform and opening-up in China, Chinese scholars and critics began to pay attention to Japanese science fiction. Even before Japanese science fiction works could be extensively translated into...
Chinese, some far-sighted scholars began to make their first attempts at Japanese science fiction. In 1980, Tong Bin published *The Recent Developments of Japanese Science and Fantasy Literature*, expounding systematically on the development of science fiction in Japan, which can be regarded as the beginning of Japanese science fiction studies in China. Thereafter, large numbers of Japanese science fiction works were translated into Chinese. Translators like Li Dechun, Meng Qingshu, and Li Youkuan have made valuable contributions to the popularization of Japanese science fiction in China.

Today, science fiction has gained unparalleled development in China and has gradually become a mainstream culture. Meanwhile, scholars have published numerous articles, and Japanese science fiction scholarship is thriving. It is high time that we looked back upon the endeavors we had made to explore Japanese science fiction and, on some level, reexamined the de facto relationship between Chinese science fiction and Japanese science fiction. This article intends to outline Japanese science fiction studies in China in the past 40 years, and offer a brief account of the major studies which dominated Japanese science fiction studies in China at one time or another.

First of all, it is essential that we review the insightful opinions of some prominent Chinese scholars made to explore the nature of Japanese science fiction.

One of the most important Chinese writers of popular science and science fiction after the founding of New China, and the foremost pioneer of science fiction studies in China, Ye Yonglie was also among the first to communicate with the Japanese science fiction community. In 1982, he wrote *Japanese Science Fiction in China*, exploring the history of communication between the two nations’ science fiction by detailing the translation and appreciation of Japanese science fiction in the early period of reform and opening-up. When this article was later translated into Japanese and published in Japan, it immediately attracted wide attention of the Japanese science fiction community. According to Ye Yonglie, Japanese science fiction is a completely unique existence in that most works are not confined to a scientific framework. It emphasizes the literariness and social responsibility of its themes, while paying great attention to the fantastical nature of its works. He notes that Shinichi Hoshi’s short-short science fiction stories, being a unique Japanese literary genre, resemble the classical Chinese novel *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (1740) in both content and form. Ye Yonglie’s view provides an explicit reference to the intrinsic connection between the two nations’ science fiction.

Wu Yan, one of the most influential science fiction scholars in China, offers us insights based on his close observation of Japanese science fiction. Wu Yan emphasizes that Japanese science fiction, as a genre, is all encompassing. It includes not only adventure, detective, grotesque and political propaganda in the early period of Japanese science fiction, but also deductive, horror, myth, disaster and so on, which can be often seen in Japanese science fiction today. On the other hand, thanks to its unique geographical, historical, and cultural background, the national
character inherent in Japanese science fiction has been significant ever since its birth at the beginning of the 20th century. When Shunro Oshikawa’s *Undersea Warship: A Fantastic Tale of Island Adventure*, the pioneering work of Japanese science fiction, was published, Japanese people were greatly stimulated by its expression of nationality. Henceforth, Japanese science fiction has always embraced implicit faith in this distinctive trait. After World War II, Japanese science fiction was sent on a solitary pilgrimage, in which many familiar themes that once seemed to dominate the Japanese science fiction world were abandoned, intentionally or unintentionally. Some writers began to imitate Western science fiction works. But the nationality which is deeply rooted in writers’ belief and creativity would not easily disappear. Thus, it is quite safe for us to say it is the persistence of this tradition which has passed down from generation to generation that offers the possibility of restoration to Japanese science fiction in the 21st century.

Han Song, one of the most prominent Chinese science fiction writers, holds that Japan has brought profound inspiration and influence to Chinese science fiction. As early as the late Qing Dynasty, western science fiction was introduced to China via Japan, which literally planted and spread the seed of science fiction on the ground of China. Lately, Japanese scholars have also begun to show their interest toward Chinese science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty, which can be perceived as an intriguing response to that interactive period of time in history. Today, Japanese science fiction studies is trapped in a somewhat awkward situation. Despite the fact that Japanese science fiction is widely read and appreciated by Chinese readers, as an independent scholarly subject it has not received proper respect from the academic world.

In addition, many scholars have devoted themselves to the study of representative Japanese science fiction writers and their works. By reviewing their studies, we may have a glimpse of some evident characteristics of Japanese science fiction studies in China.

Shinichi Hoshi was the first Japanese science fiction writer that Chinese readers got to know after the reform and opening-up. His works were translated into Chinese and published in China as early as 1982. At roughly the same time, he visited China and started to correspond with Ye Yongjie, to exchange views on the actual situation and developing prospect of science fiction in both countries. It was extraordinary and inexplicable that Shinichi Hoshi’s works were the only ones to survive the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, by which almost the whole science fiction world in China got shattered. Some interesting clues might be discovered by reviewing some of the early interpretations and evaluations Chinese scholars made on his works. Han Fenghua, believed that the sole aim of Shinichi Hoshi’s works was to attack capitalist society, economy and culture; similarly, Cui Xinjing and Tao Li, regarded Shinichi Hoshi’s works as a reflection of the social evil inherent in capitalist society. Obviously these devoted scholars in the 1980s, almost without exception, strove for a definition of Shinichi Hoshi’s works in terms of the socialistic perspective peculiar to that period of time in China. However, the stories’ science fiction aspect, which is vital to the works, was relentlessly ignored.
To this day, Sakyo Komatsu has maintained a pivotal position in the history of Japanese science fiction. Accordingly, he is also regarded as one of the most popular subjects of study among Chinese scholars. As early as 1975 when the Cultural Revolution was still enthusiastically going on in China, as a target of criticism, *Japan Sinks* (1973) was translated into Chinese by Li Dechun, and thus made Sakyo Komatsu the first Japanese science fiction writer introduced to Chinese people after the founding of New China. Actually, *Japan Sinks* is so well-known that when people talk about Japanese science fiction, the first thing that pops into their head will be *Japan Sinks*. Over the years, the interpretation of the novel from the perspectives of disaster culture and crisis awareness has been particularly favorable for scholars. Wang Zhanyi, by analyzing the multiple contexts of *Japan Sinks*, defines the nature of the disaster culture implied in *Japan Sinks* as the crisis awareness peculiar to the Japanese people. Alternatively, Di Fang proposes that geographical characteristics, Buddhist thought, and the impact of foreign culture are the internal elements that cause the formation of the Japanese crisis awareness. Zhang Huishu believes the ultimate aim of the direct depiction of disaster in *Japan Sinks* is to call for an awakening and restoration of the Japanese national spirit from the 1960s to 1970s. Even today, one may still find these scholars’ understanding of crisis awareness meaningful. But the truth is, studies like these abound. According to CNKI, there are a total of 14 scholarly articles on *Japan Sinks*, among which 11 articles with the theme of disaster culture and crisis awareness are listed. Of these 11 articles, the earliest one was published in 1986, while the latest one was published in 2019. Even the newest studies are not that much different from those from decades ago.

However, there are still many crucial problems left to be solved. In fact, ever since the success of *Japan Sinks*, the Japanese science fiction community has witnessed the publication of a large number of science fiction works about disasters. However, if we review all the relevant studies of the past 35 years, we will find there are no science fiction scholars willing to commit themselves to the comparative reading and interpretation of these works. It is desirable that we clarify the dynamic interaction between disaster culture and science fiction, and indicate the uniqueness that distinguishes Japanese disaster novels from western disaster novels. It is worth noting that some scholars consciously attempt to compare *Japan Sinks* with the works by Chinese science fiction writers on similar subjects. Tan Yanhong, by contrasting the different historical and cultural background between China and Japan, offers a penetrating analysis of the similarities and differences between *Red Ocean* (2004) by Han Song and *Japan Sinks*.

We are not surprised at all to learn that Yasutaka Tsutsui, another one of the “Big Three”, has been the center of attention, too. Lin Lan attempted to define a literary tendency established and represented by this science fiction master, namely, as she analyzed, a profound social thinking combined with serious scientific assumption and logical inference. Wang Minxi, by reviewing Yasutaka Tsutsui’s literary career and writing theory, aimed at summarizing and categorizing the surrealism expression in Yasutaka Tsutsui’s literary works chronologically. Zhao Haitao proposed an outline of Yasutaka Tsutsui’s style and the theme of works in different stages by offering a detailed analysis of Yasutaka Tsutsui’s works in terms of background, writing and
literary evaluation. Apparently such scholars were eager to establish Yasutaka Tsutsui’s position as a literary master. Yet once again, we have no choice but to be confronted with the desperate situation: the science fictional perspective is missing from their studies.

Sixty years have passed since the “Big Three” became the dominant force in the Japanese science fiction world. Today, scholars still revere their works as sacred. This, in a sense can be understood as our long-lasting fascination for these classics. However, exclusive and excessive focus on the classics will inevitably lead to the neglect of new writers and new works. Thus, we are seriously confined in a static environment, which is by no means conducive to the healthy development of Japanese science fiction studies as a whole. We need something new and original. Something just like Xu Jinghua’s attempt on *Genocidal Organ* (2007) by Project Itoh, to interpret the novel from the perspective of ecological ethics.

Concerning science fiction studies, it is important to concentrate on literature at the same time paying equal attention to visual expressions. And this seems particularly remarkable when we talk about Japanese science fiction. A retrospection of Japanese science fiction will inform us of the fact that since its babyhood, great importance has been attached to visual expressions such as film, manga, and animation. Thus, it is safe for us to say that Japanese science fiction has been endowed with a distinctive diversity, which is embodied in its indestructible and intimate kinship with various forms of visual expression.

However, Japanese science fiction film studies are not comparable to American science fiction film studies in terms of both quantity and quality. In the past few decades, the Chinese film market has been flooded with dazzling American science fiction films. Meanwhile, studies of American science fiction films are booming. If we search CNKI with American science fiction films as keywords, we will find more than 300 scholarly articles on American science fiction films, covering a variety of themes such as science fiction film industry, textual analysis of science fiction films, and science fiction film theories. Clearly, these scholars strive to grasp the current situation of American science fiction films in a comprehensive and dynamic way. On the contrary, Japanese science fiction film studies show a relatively static state. According to the statistics of CNKI, there are only about 20 scholarly articles with Japanese science fiction films as keywords. Moreover, these studies are often relatively isolated and unconnected to each other, which makes Japanese science fiction film studies severely deficient of a comprehensive system. Obviously, Japanese science fiction films have not received the due scholarly attention.

As a major feature, Japanese science fiction films often treasure the individual feelings of ordinary man when being confronted with sudden and desperate disasters. Here we have to mention *Japan Sinks* (1973) again. Like its literary original, the film adaptation is regarded as the distinguished representative of Japanese science fiction films, that even in recent years, scholars are still reluctant to give up the subject, and thus makes *Japan Sinks* long-drawn-out studies for devoted Chinese scholars. According to CNKI, there are a total of 26 scholarly articles on *Japan
Sinks, of which as many as 22 scholarly articles take disaster culture and crisis awareness as their subject of study. For a long time, most Chinese scholars have repeatedly interpreted Japan Sinks solely from the perspective of either disaster film or crisis awareness, which makes our subject inevitably monotonous, stale and outdated.

Nevertheless, some scholars are able to propose new perspectives. Xi Xia, by clarifying the subtle relationship between science fiction film and disaster film, states that Japan Sinks has completely abandoned the cliché happy ending in most western disaster films. The real disaster in the film is by no means the disaster of nature but the deprivation of nationality and self-identity in the face of great disaster. He believes that the real intention of the film is to achieve a spiritual sublimation by means of material destruction. It is the disaster poetics and Japanese spirit that the film endeavored to express. In a sense, the film is more than a science fiction entertainment film. Consequently, the nature of this masterpiece is not a disaster film, but on the contrary, an inspirational one.

In contrast to the studies of Japanese science fiction film, studies of Japanese science fiction animation show a comparatively colorful picture. Being an important part of Japanese culture, animation has always been loved and appreciated by Chinese audiences. Studies of Japanese science fiction animation started relatively late in China. According to CNKI, the earliest scholarly article was published in 2002. In recent years, studies of Japanese science fiction animation show a comparatively colorful picture.

The studies revolving around Hayao Miyazaki and his works are among the most notable and enduring. In particular, Hayao Miyazaki’s Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind (1984), a product of Japanese thinking during the Cold War, carries in its genes the flavor of western literature and science fiction classics such as The Odyssey (720 BCE) and Dune (1964). Xi Xia sees this masterpiece as a spiritual support for the Japanese people during the economic recession of the 1990s. On the one hand, the work depicts the survival of the people of Earth after the nuclear disaster, and its imagination of the post-apocalyptic world is directly derived from the collective memory of the Japanese people brought by the nuclear explosion. On the other hand, the work has a political subtext that clearly distinguishes it from other works of its time: how should a small, peaceful country without a formal army survive in the midst of the struggle between the two hegemonic powers? This strongly hints at the difficult position Japan found itself in during the Cold War. While expressing pacifism, Hayao Miyazaki strives to manifest a spirit of Yamato, that is, the courage to die with enemies and to be proud of it. This all shows that Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind has gone beyond the general sense of the theme of peace and embodies a philosophy thinking of harmony between man and nature similar to the advent of Jesus Christ in Occidental culture. Qin Gang holds a similar opinion. By giving a thorough interpretation of wind, which has been generally recognized as the theme throughout Hayao Miyazaki’s works, he endeavors to find the hidden clue in Hayao Miyazaki’s whole career as a great animation master, that is, the harmony between man and nature. Actually, the simple but unique motif of man and nature in Hayao Miyazaki’s works echoes a great deal with the early theme of Japanese science
fiction. It is perhaps fair for us to say that it is the persistent pursuit of this motif that leads to Hayao Miyazaki’s success both as a well-known animator as well as an outstanding science fiction storyteller.

Mamoru Oshii’s *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) is recognized as the most important Japanese animation since *Akira* (1988) as well as a monumental science fiction masterpiece in the 1990s. Most of the studies revolving around the film focus on cyborgs. Xi Xia indicates that the phenomenon that Japanese animation is replete with robots and cyborgs, in essence, originated from the national acceptance and tolerance of robots in Japanese culture. On the other hand, he holds his own interpretation of the pornographic and violent depictions that pervade the film. He believes that it is the ambitious yet serious philosophical exploration hidden behind the seemingly complex plot, interspersed with violence and eroticism, which enables *Ghost in the Shell* to establish an oriental aesthetic paradigm completely different from that of occidental science fiction animation. Deng Yachuan and Cai Song, by analyzing the identity changes of cyborgs in science fiction film, pose the ultimate question that if the distinction between man and cyborg is an ambiguous and obscure one, in which ways could the right to life be defined?

Regrettably, the studies revolving around great animators such as Osamu Tezuka, Fujiko F. Fujio, Katsuhiro Otomo, and Satoshi Kon failed to be put in the context of science fiction. Either focusing on the techniques and artistry or on the aesthetics, current discussions have, almost with no exception, completely ignored the valuable science fiction aspect of the works. For instance, Satoshi Kon, being regarded as a genius of visual narratives skilled in obscuring the boundaries between fantasy and reality as well as technology and humanity, undoubtedly deserves scholarly examination from the perspective of science fiction. Unfortunately, his works never won the favor of our conservative scholars. Indeed, this situation is both embarrassing and frustrating.

We are placing *mecha anime* (robot anime) and *tokusatsu* (special filming) at the bottom of our article not because they are the least in importance. It is because these two genres stand alone, representing very distinctive categories in Japanese science fiction. Fortunately, scholars have started to take hints of the importance of *mecha anime* and *tokusatsu*. Being the expression of the Japanese dream for space exploration, *mecha anime* stages a space opera in its own unique Japanese way. Liu Jian perceives *mecha anime* as a product that integrates traditional Japanese culture into modern science and technology in that on one hand, *mecha anime* is inherited from the Japanese mask culture, and on the other, it embodies Japanese enthusiasm for future science and technology. While *tokusatsu*, represented by *Godzilla* (1954) and *The Ultra Series* (1966), the long-lasting genre is so well-known that some of its most popular series have been remade in other countries. Huang Tao and Liu Jian have done relevant studies respectively. The former focuses on the interpretation of the monster image in Japanese science fiction film, and the latter proposes that by showing the process of Japanese re-modernization during the post-war period, the *Godzilla* series reflects the anxiety of contemporary Japanese people in urban life.
In fact, Japanese science fiction encompasses not only the above fields of literature, film, and animation, but also science fiction comics, science fiction art, and science fiction games. However, in our careful examination of the papers and dissertations on Japanese science fiction studies on CNKI, we find no research in these related fields. It is these gaps that make it difficult for us to grasp Japanese science fiction as a whole.

We are now looking at an interesting jigsaw picture, in which Japanese science fiction studies is gradually moving from the edge to the center of scholarly attention. Over the past 40 years, its reputation has been continuously enhanced. It is indisputable that Japanese science fiction studies has gained its solid position as a flourishing subject of studies. Thoughts both insightful and penetrating have been expressed in the form of well-written academic articles, which endeavor to offer a comprehensive, profound, and science fictional interpretation of Japanese science fiction in the presence of a Chinese sociocultural context.

Each year various institutions and universities hold academic conferences and colloquia aimed at providing a platform for scholars to exchange views on Japanese science fiction. Besides, there are a number of academic projects. For instance, *Contemporary Japanese Science Fiction Studies* (2019), a project led by Meng Qingshu, which is sponsored by the National Social Science Fund of China, focuses on the connotations and characteristics of Japanese contemporary science fiction works; while *Studies of Translation and Influence of Science Fiction in Mainland China* (2017), another project led by Yao Lifen, endeavors to offer an overview of the translation of Japanese science fiction in China from 1975 to 2016.

However, we should be aware of the fact that there are still some pieces missing from our jigsaw picture.

First, many studies appear monotonous and repetitious. This feature is particularly striking in science fiction literature studies. Scholarly focus was, is and probably will be firmly placed on the science fiction masters in the golden age, to be precise, on the “Big Three.” Valuable studies of influential rising stars are scarce and unattainable. Some articles offer only superficial analyses of the works and are short of meaningful views; others are devoted to the repetition of former articles, in both subject and method, and in some cases even in opinion. For instance, according to CNKI, 40 scholarly articles and theses focused on Japan Sinks were published from 1986 to 2019. The most favored perspective are, as we may imagine, about disaster culture and crisis awareness, with a total of 33. It is difficult for us to imagine when a number of similar studies have already piled up, how to submit a truly innovative article. Excellent articles are few and far between. The situation is both discouraging and alarming.

In addition, not realizing the fact that Japanese science fiction is an inseparable unity consisting of literature, film, animation and many other forms of popular culture, some scholars fail to perceive Japanese science fiction as a whole and exhibit its distinctiveness in their studies,
and thus fail to master the core of Japanese science fiction. In fact, a large number of scholars do not have adequate Japanese language skills, and some of them do not even know Japanese at all, so they are not able to read works in the original. As a result, they have to rely on the Chinese translation, which is sometimes, if not always, obscure and misleading. Ultimately, their field of vision is confined to the Chinese translation.

Moreover, instead of speaking in the context of science fiction, many scholars tend to restrict their topics to form, technique, artistry and aesthetics. Necessary academic knowledge is missing in the essential prerequisite as a qualified science fiction scholar. On the other hand, blind to the fact that science fiction is related to humanities such as philosophy, art, anthropology and so forth, many scholars focus so exclusively on their own professional fields, that they are reluctant to cultivate the above knowledge. Admittedly, owing to the fact that effective interpretations of Japanese science fiction are greatly limited by the lack of knowledge of the humanities, we are unable to bring Japanese science fiction studies to a theoretical level.

In spite of all these problems, we should not be pessimistic about the future of Japanese science fiction studies in China. Undeniably, China still needs more time to develop a deeper understanding of Japanese science fiction. However, it is about time that we asked ourselves the simple but vital question: what academic attitude should we adopt to deepen and broaden our study field? Obviously, by answering it, we will be able to find the missing pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, which hint at a possibility for the future of Japanese science fiction studies in China.

Notes
1. The Perry Expedition was a diplomatic and military expedition to the Tokugawa Shogunate, involving two separate voyages by warships of the United States Navy which took place during 1853-1854. The expedition was commanded by Commodore Matthew Calbraith Perry, under orders from President Millard Fillmore. The Perry Expedition led directly to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and the western Great Powers, and eventually to the collapse of the ruling Tokugawa shogunate and the restoration of the Emperor.

2. The Heisei era is the period of Japanese history corresponding to the reign of Emperor Akihito from 8 January 1989 until his abdication on 30 April 2019.

3. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign was a political campaign spearheaded by left-wing conservative factions within the Communist Party of China which lasted from October 1983 to December 1983. During the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, science fiction was administratively characterized as "spiritual pollution" and was criticized. The publication of science fiction was banned, and related magazines were suspended for rectification.

4. CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) is a key national research and information publishing institution in China, led by Tsinghua University, and supported by PRC Ministry
of Education, PRC Ministry of Science, Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China and PRC General Administration of Press and Publication. Today, CNKI has become the largest and most accessed academic online library in China. The data and scholarly articles used in this paper were obtained from databases of CNKI, including academic journals and dissertations.

5. The “Big Three” refers to three of the most influential science fiction writers of the golden age of Japanese science fiction in the 1960s, namely, Sakyo Komatsu, Shinichi Hoshi, and Yasutaka Tsutsui.

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