SYMPOSIUM: SINOFUTURISMS

The Possibilities and “Impossibilities” of Studying Chinese and Latin American Science Fiction

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In 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping proposed the “Belt and Road” initiative (BRI). While seeking economic and strategic opportunities for domestic development, this initiative also aims to connect China to the development of other countries. As of 2020, the BRI has been extended to 19 Latin American countries, accounting for 56% of the 34 total Latin American countries. Besides trade and issues of strategic cooperation, cultural exchange between China and Latin America is also an important component that cannot be ignored in this “largest infrastructure and investment project in history” (Campbell).

As China’s most successful cultural export in recent years, science fiction might have the potential to bridge the mental distance between the two areas. Historically, the literary exchange between these two regions has been asymmetrical. China has gone through three waves of “Latin American literature mania,” while in Latin America, the number and variety of introduced Chinese literature has been much more limited. The first large-scale translation of Latin American literature in China began in the 1950s, followed by two successive waves in the 80s and the 90s. In terms of Latin American science fiction, the most well-known novel among Chinese readers is Adolfo Bioy Casares’ The Invention of Morel. A few translated short stories can also be found in collections such as The Road to Science Fiction (2009), The Big Book of Science Fiction (2018), and Science Fiction World magazine. In 2016, The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction was introduced to China with the book name changed to “History of Latin American Science Fiction.” While the original book is regarded as the foundation work of Latin American science fiction studies, the misleading Chinese title failed to meet readers’ expectations and therefore has not attracted much attention in Chinese science fiction scholarship.

On the other hand, the translation of Chinese science fiction in Latin America is a brand-new business. In 2016, the Spanish version of Liu Cixin’s The Three Body Problem was released, which later won the Premio Ignotus for Foreign Novel, the Spanish counterpart of Hugo Award. The market of Latin America reacted to it positively. Recently, Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide, Bao Shu’s The Redemption of Time, and two anthologies of Chinese short science fiction stories edited by Ken Liu (Invisible Planets and Broken Stars) reached the far coast of Latin America. One thing worth paying attention to is that all of these Spanish versions have been preceded by the English version, a common process for Chinese literature to enter the Spanish-speaking market.

When reading The Emergence of Latin American Science Fiction, I am surprised by the parallels between early Chinese and Latin American science fiction. The genre appeared in China and Latin America under similar socio-political situations of anti-colonialism and was appropriated as a pedagogic tool of science popularization to enlighten the public through active participation in
the process of modernization. Not surprisingly, both Chinese and Latin American science fiction are deeply influenced by mainstream science fiction from Europe and North America. People used to believe that science fiction literature is a genre that originated from the West but was widely distributed in various cultural systems around the world. Yet with more and more evidence being discovered, science fiction turns out to be an intrinsic global genre that embraces multiple origins. What can we learn from this phenomenon? Is there a universal template for the prosperity of local science fiction literature? Or rather, how do we balance universal standards and local aesthetics when evaluating these works? Such problems still haunt scholars from both the West and the East. Though their modern metamorphoses are vastly different, the commonalities Chinese and Latin American science fiction shared upon their birth still anchor their genes. The solutions to these questions will shed new light on our understanding of literature and nationality, of globality and locality.

Therefore, the comparative study of Chinese and Latin American science fiction is a promising research field that deserves further investigation. Based on my preliminary research, there are several issues or topics that I would highly suggest for further inquiry: first, the shared mechanism that leads to the emergence of science fiction; second, the relationship between science fiction and local genres such as fantasy and popular science; and third, the mutual imagination of China and Latin America through the mirror of science fiction. Latin America has always been the exotic “other” in the eyes of many Chinese writers and readers. No matter whether they are older or younger generations of science fiction writers, they all tend to conjure Latin America as a beautiful, mysterious, and traumatic land with the power of rebellion and the great potential of thriving, as seen in examples such as Liu Xingshin’s “Columbus from America” (1979), Han Song’s In the Days of the Future World (1998) and Bao Shu’s “The Celestial Priestess” (2018). But how do people in Latin America imagine China and Chinese people in science fiction? Scattered pictures can be found in the work of masters such as Jorge Luis Borges’ “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941), which features a Chinese spy’s search for the mysterious garden of his great grandfather when performs his mission in World War I. But the overall image seems to be lacking profundity and diversity, and is much more fragmentary, which in turn proves the lagging reception of Chinese culture in Latin America.

Nevertheless, the comparative study of Chinese and Latin American science fiction is a relatively tough task. The first problem is language. It is nearly impossible to find an early Spanish science fiction text in a Chinese library and vice versa. Besides, the number of works translated from Chinese to Spanish and from Spanish to Chinese are equally small, so small that it is difficult to come up with a sufficient pool of samples. For Chinese researchers without Spanish reading proficiency, they would have to resort to English as an intermediary language, but in that case, the scope of what they can reach will shrink even further. Second, researchers should not ignore the internal structural, historical, and institutional differences among different Latin American countries, even when they speak the same language. In dealing with diversity and differences, they must gain a thorough understanding of their political, historical, and cultural contexts. This is also
a big challenge for Chinese researchers if they are not well-versed in Latin American regional studies.

Studies in global science fiction have been on the rise over the last decade, and dialogues between different regions will lead us to a better understanding of science fiction as a genre of multiple origins. With the increasing cultural exchanges between China and Latin America, I believe those “impossibilities” will eventually be transferred into, and open up possibilities.

Works Cited


Yilun Fan is a Ph.D. student in comparative literature at the University of California, Riverside. Her research interests include Chinese and Latin American speculative fiction, history and philosophy of science, cultural industry, and creative writing. She is also an award-winning science fiction writer and editor. Her articles and creative works can be found in *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China, Science Fiction World, Locus*, and *Galaxy’s Edge* Chinese edition, among others. She used to serve as the Brand PR Director for Chengdu Eight Light Minutes Culture, and as a jury committee member for the Xingyun Awards for Global Chinese Science Fiction.