



**Science, Fiction and Politics:  
Chinese Science Fiction and its Socio-  
Political Engagements**

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# Science, Fiction and Politics: Chinese Science Fiction and its Socio-Political Engagements\*

## Abstract

*Through the works of scholars like Donald M. Hassler, Frederik Pohl and Ursula K. LeGuin, it has been established that the genre of science fiction literature tends to be, by its very nature, political. Works of science fiction often put forward ideal models of politics, deal with the nature between citizens and state and dwell upon the use and misuse of technology.*

*It is in this context that the genre and its rise provides an interesting window to look into the politics and society of China today. Post 1989, especially, science fiction has proved to be a realm in which the notions of idealism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism have been dealt with and contested. The 'new wave of Chinese science fiction', Mingwei Song argues, has engaged with China's one-nation utopia, the often overlooked consequences of its high-speed development and the possibility of a post-human future led by technology. The authors leading this movement are Liu Cixin, Xia Jia and Wang Jinkang among others.*

*The paper will throw light on how in the presence of censorship on other forms of literature and expression, science fiction has emerged as a realm of introspection and discussion of China's past, present and future. It will analyse works such as "China 2185", "The Year of the Rat" and "The Waste Tide" which have gained immense popularity in recent years to identify their critical engagement with relation between humans and technologies in realms such as artificial intelligence, idea of development and progress, and portrayal of the Chinese nation, to give a sense of the sociological implications of the processes in motion at present.*

**Keywords:** Science fiction, literature, China, technology, science, dissent

## Introduction

China in the twenty first century has emerged as not only the fastest growing economy, but also an Asian giant asserting itself strongly on the international political scene. A rise in China's global power has come alongside an increase of concentration of power domestically. As Chinese president Xi Jinping tightens his grip over political power in the country, the modes of creative expression in the country are shrinking day by day. The Chinese government has had a long history of keeping a strict watch on both traditional and new forms of media to curb the circulation of materials that carry the potential of questioning and undermining of its authority. This has been done using various tactics, such as imposing strict

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media controls using firewall and monitoring systems, censoring publications or websites, and jailing dissident journalists, bloggers, and activists. In the realm of press freedom, in particular, China has an abysmal record. For instance, it was placed at 176th position out of 180 countries reviewed in the 2018 Press Freedom Index, prepared by the organisation Reporters without Borders. The report cited that internet censorship and surveillance had reached new heights as a Cybersecurity Law came into effect in June last year, alongside other new regulations restricting online communications.

The realm of literature too has not escaped the watchful eyes of the state. The case of Liu Xiaobo, dissident writer and human rights activist, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature while jailed in China, brought international attention to the issue. Last year in July 2017, he died less than a month after being released by prison authorities, leading to allegations of custodial torture. Pop culture, in the same vein, has seen attempts at repression. Recently, the movie 'Christopher Robin' was banned after images of Winnie the Pooh were being used online to make comparisons to the leader Xi Jinping. Similarly, content related to the cartoon 'Peppa Pig' was removed from several websites, on grounds that the proliferation of counterfeit Peppa Pig merchandise and the constant chasing of fads would have a negative influence on China's youth.

Along with these, an interesting and controversial development has been the introduction of China's social credit system, aimed at monitoring and shaping business and citizens' behaviour. The system, which has drawn comparisons to an Orwellian tool of mass surveillance, is based on a series of big data and AI-enabled processes that grant subjects a social credit score based on their social, political and economic behaviour. People with low scores can be restricted or boycotted from accessing services such as flights and train travel; while those with high scores can access benefits. By 2020, the Chinese government aims bring all 1.35 billion of its citizens within the purview of the system.

Amidst these dismal developments, a realm of expression which has only grown in popularity and reach has been the genre of science fiction literature. Several scholars such as Regina Wang Kanyu, Ji Shaoting and Mingwei Song have termed the contemporary times in China as the "golden age of science fiction". Today, Chinese works in the genre are not only winning international awards and attracting serious commercial interest from Chinese and Hollywood production companies, but are also proving to be an effective channel to engage with the political, social, technological and cultural changes in the country.

In this context, the questions that the paper will attempt to answer are two-fold. Firstly, what factors have allowed the genre of science fiction to flourish in China? Second, and more importantly, how does contemporary Chinese science fiction literature deal with issues of state, development and technological progress? In order to answer these questions, I will first look into the theoretical linkages

between science fiction and politics. Then I will trace the development of the genre in China from the late Qing period to contemporary times. Lastly, I will analyse some major works in the field to see how the genre has responded to the themes of nation, development and technological progress.

### **The Politics of Science Fiction**

Prominent Chinese-American sci-fi author, Ken Liu, wrote that “science fiction is the literature of dreams, and texts concerning dreams always say something about the dreamer, the dream interpreter, and the audience.” (Liu, 2018)

In this sense, the genre is closely intertwined with the ideology and politics of the author, the readers and the context in which the story is set. Not only Ken Liu, but other writers and scholars of the genre have argued that the genre of science fiction literature tends to be, by its very nature, political. Works of science fiction often put forward ideal models of politics, deal with the nature between citizens and state and dwell upon the use and misuse of technology.

Ken Macleod (2003) points out that the scholars studying “the politics of science fiction” are divided in their understandings of the relationship between politics and the genre, which can be categorised into two broad views. One understanding is that ideology exists outside genre, and the genre, which in itself is apolitical, becomes political only when an author decides to bring “politics” into the field. In this sense, a work of science fiction is “liberal” or “conservative,” it is only because the author is liberal or conservative. The main proponents of this view, adds Macleod, are Robert A. Heinlein, Robert Silverberg and Peter F. Hamilton. The other understanding stems from the belief that the genre has natural ideological leanings. As Aaron Santesso puts it, “it does not suggest that every work within the genre is ideologically predetermined but rather that certain generic frameworks and structures have ideological biases built into them”. (Santesso, 2014)

Nonetheless, scholars conforming to both the views that there's an expanding body of science fiction literature that can be been classified as “political science fiction”. Macleod defines the broad body of works on political science fiction as “stories that take into account, or have as their theme, the political process itself; and in stories in whose setting or plot the consequences of a particular political philosophy are examined.” (Macleod, 2003)

In political science fiction, elements of both utopia and dystopia have proved to be crucial to its development. Traditionally, the genre adopted a utopian outlook towards scientific, technological, and social advancement in the early days of the nineteenth century, a period shaped by the Industrial Revolution, nationalist movements and establishment of a liberal order. However, with the outbreak of world wars, rise of fascism and collapse of economies based on liberal order,

dystopian narratives emerged in science fiction questioning the modern visions of human progress, the use of science and technology and the institutionalisation of society.

Political science fiction has been influenced both by ideals of liberalism and the challenges to it. Macleod argues that “science fiction is essentially the literature of progress, and the political philosophy of science fiction is essentially liberal.” Indeed, the most popular and enduring themes within science fiction is closely associated with the Western liberal tradition, including the ability of human intelligence to power over the rest of nature through the growth of knowledge and industry, and primacy of ideals such as political liberty, individual autonomy and freedom of thought and expression. This has led to an occupation of writers of the genre with themes such as space travel, alien invasion and apocalypse, all of which show the ultimate triumph of human will.

At the same time, Marxist theory and its offshoots have also played an important role in the development of the genre. Especially since the 1960s, many of the popular works of science fiction have either been explicitly Marxist in orientation or influenced by Marxist interpretations adopted by feminists, post-colonial writers, queer and environmental activists. Although few writers in the genre have been proclaimed to be adherents of Marxism, science fiction has often deeply engaged deep with Marxist and socialist thought in general. (Csicsery-Ronay, 2003). On one hand, it has taken the shape of utopian fiction that employs critiques of contemporary conditions or possible future outcomes of current social trends, and is concerned with imagining progressive alternatives to the status quo. At the same time, the genre has also been used as a medium to criticise the socio-political repression often found in socialist countries. During the Cold War, science fiction played an extremely political role in the socialist countries of the USSR and Eastern Europe, and was often critical of the society and polity in obscure ways that bypassed censorship.

### **Development of Chinese Science Fiction**

The development of science fiction in China has engaged with the concepts of both utopia and dystopia, as discussed above, and has closely reflected the changes in the socio-political realities of the country.

The origin of science fiction literature in China can be traced back to the late Qing period during the 19th century. Against the backdrop of the Opium Wars and the Sino-Japanese War which brought foreign rule in several parts of the country, the socio-political legitimacy of the Qing dynasty suffered and led to a crisis of political and epistemological consciousness. As a result of their inability to drive away foreign incursion, traditional Chinese theories of political and social organization witnessed a growing challenge. Confucianism, the education system,



and the very understanding of the world order and China's position in it were shaken to the core.

It is in this context that Chinese science fiction "was instituted as mainly a utopian narrative that projected the political desire for China's reform into an idealized, technologically more advanced world." (Song, 2013) 'Tales of the Moon Colony' by Huangjiang Diasou, published between 1904 and 1905, is widely recognized as China's first native work of science fiction. Many scholars such as Tani Barlow argue that the development of the literary genre during the period was a result of the onset of "colonial modernity", brought about by two of the major transformations in Chinese intellectual tradition-the introduction of western science and the growing importance of the novel. Many leaders of the late Qing reform movement saw in this Westernized new fiction as an effective instrument of enlightenment that might "renovate the people of a nation". Lu Xun, widely regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature, asserted that "the progress of the Chinese people begins with scientific fiction." Several works of Chinese science fiction in this period, including Biheguan Zhuren's "New Era" (1908), and Lu Shi'e's "New China" (1910) adopted a utopian outlook towards reform and development of the country.

After People's Republic of China was established under the leadership of Mao Zedong in the year 1949, science fiction became increasingly popular as a vast body of Soviet science fiction works were translated into Chinese, shaping the local sense of what the genre should be and became closely associated with the Russian concept of 'calque kepu wenxue', or "literature for the popularization of science." (Song, 2013) Borrowing from the Soviets, space travel and extraterrestrial themes occupied Chinese imagination. At the forefront of science fiction writing in this period was Zheng Wenguang, who published socialist China's first science fiction short story "From Earth to Mars" in 1954, which revolved around the first Communist-led expedition to a mysterious red planet.

During the turbulent and violent Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which saw nationwide crackdown on intellectuals, Zheng and other science fiction writers were silenced as the genre was regarded as an import of Western culture that could corrupt people and lead them astray from the goals of the Communist Party. The Cultural Revolution thus marked a sudden stop for science fiction in China and publication of works of the genre came to a halt. The end of the Cultural Revolution and the reforms that followed brought a rebirth of science fiction. In March 1978, National Science Congress, convened by the Central Committee and the State Council, issued a proclamation stating that "science's spring has come" and a greater enthusiasm for popular science and science fiction followed. After the socio-political reforms and increasing openness introduced in the late 1970s, there was a renewal of respect for both intellectuals and scientists, and science fiction writers enjoyed state support in numerous ways. As a result, a dedicated

genre magazine, *Kexue Wenyi (Science Literature and Art)*, was started in 1979 and remained a state-supported publication until 1984, after which it became independent. However, this push by the state lasted only for a brief period of time. In 1983, science fiction was criticized by Party newspapers for spreading pseudoscience and promoting decadent capitalist elements. Further, in the period leading up to the movements for democracy and the repression of protestors at Tiananmen Square, the genre received criticism for promoting subversive tendencies amongst the youth.

The next major boost for the genre came by the end of 1990s, fuelled by increasing economic opening up, onset of globalisation and expansion of the internet. Since then, many young writers have taken center stage, and the renaissance of Chinese science fiction has resulted in a global readership. A crucial factor responsible for the popularisation of the genre among the masses has been the spread of the internet. The early 2000s witnessed an explosion of dedicated online sci-fi forums that enabled writers and fans to unite virtually, in order to share stories, publish serialized works, and exchange feedback. Social media sites like Baidu Tieba, the arts and literature-focused site Douban, and college messaging boards hosted the most active online communities. One of the most famous forums for science fiction was Shuimuqinghua, literally meaning “water wood green flower,” which began through a digital bulletin board hosted by Tsinghua University, a prestigious school in Beijing. Professor Wu Yan, who is chair of the World Chinese SF Writers Association, introduced China’s first science fiction program at Beijing Normal University. The university has, since then, become a centre for the spread of science fiction across the country and a bridge to the international science fiction community. International recognition for Chinese science fiction has increased rapidly too. Liu Cixin’s “The Paper Menagerie” (2011) won the Nebula Award in 2011 and the Hugo Award in 2012 for best short story. Further, the popularity of science fiction has skyrocketed after the success of writer Liu Cixin and his book, *The Three-Body Problem*, which has so far sold over seven million copies in Chinese, and 300,000 copies in English.

### **Major Themes in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction**

In the twenty-first century, the utopian vision of China’s rise is again a prominent theme within the genre, epitomised as well as challenged in works of contemporary Chinese science fiction. This is happening when China’s expanding political, military, and monetary impact is seen as a “danger” toward the West, while Chinese authorities keep on propagating the narratives of a “Chinese Dream” and reaffirm the country’s commitment to “a peaceful rise”. At the same time, the utopian vision is being increasingly contested in the wider context, shaped both by the collapse of idealism and optimism in the aftermath of the brutal repression of the 1989 democracy movement in Tiananmen Square, and the increasing debates about the human costs of the Chinese development paradigm.

These contrasting visions have been dealt by the genre of science fiction in China effectively, which has produced utopian/dystopian variations of three major themes: the Chinese dream as a one-nation utopia; the consequences of China's economic model prioritizing rapid development; and the future of technology and its human costs. As summed up by Mingwei Song, "science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism or dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China's potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power." (Song, 2013)

### **Constructing Narratives of the Nation**

The term "Chinese dream", targeting the goal of "great renewal of the Chinese nation" and realizing a prosperous and strong country which promotes the well-being of the people has been popularised in the twenty-first century. Projects like the "One Belt One Road Initiative", which seeks to connect China to Asia, Europe and Africa, shows Chinese willingness to be increasingly assertive on the global platform and its expanding ambitions. The struggle and the means to achieve this goal of rejuvenation has provided a fertile ground for debates in the realm of Chinese science fiction.

A central motif of Chinese science fiction in the twenty-first century has been the rejuvenation and the ultimate triumph of Chinese culture and establishment of China as the sole superpower in the world. Han Song's "Mars Shines Over America: Random Sketches on a Journey to the West in 2066", a novel published in 2012 presents readers with a greatly utopian vision of China's ascent. Set in the near future of 2066, it portrays a time when China dominates the world as the sole superpower and the West is witnessing its decline. The United States is poverty-stricken, balkanised and has been compelled to embrace the approach of 'biguan suoguo' (shutting ways to the world). In contrast, China is helping to restore peace around the world and the Chinese most cutting edge innovation on the planet: a groundbreaking A.I. network called "Amanduo" that links people across the globe to a central processor that directs controls what individuals think, feel, and do.

However, not all works of Chinese fiction have been aligned to this vision. A large body of literature has in fact been critical of the visions for the future and questioned the roadmaps to reach there. Chen Qiufan, for instance, has argued that contemporary Chinese science fiction reflects the angst of the "torn generation". Contemporary China, he argues, "is a society in the transition stage when old illusions have collapsed but new illusions have not taken their place: this is the fundamental cause of the rips and divisions, the confusion and the chaos." This has been the result of two processes. Firstly, since the 1990s, the ruling elite in the country has strived to propagate an ideological fantasy which views economic development as the panacea to all problems existing in the country.

However, this has failed to address many of the socio-political cleavages in the country and has hindered the younger generation's ability to imagine the possibilities of life and the future. Secondly, the state-dominated media, through its propaganda machinery, has projected the vision of national revival and rejuvenation through the use of phrases like "the Chinese Dream" "revival of the Chinese people" "the rise of a great nation". This, Chen argues, has resulted in a division of the population into two extremes: one side rebels against the government reflexively and is skeptical of everything it says; the other side retreats into nationalism to give themselves the sense of mastering their own fate. (Chen, 2018)

Chen expands on this dystopian vision of China in his novel "The Waste Tide". The story is set in Silicon Isle (a spin on the famous Silicon Valley based in California), which is located off China's southeastern coast and is the global capital for electronic waste recycling. On the isle, a large number of 'waste workers' work day and night, trusting that one day they too will get the chance to appreciate the riches they've made for their bosses. Everything changes when a ship bearing an unsafe load touches base at Silicon Isle, contaminated by an infection. In a game changing mischance, Mimi, the protagonist of the story, is contaminated by the infection and sets her mind to correcting every one of the wrongs that have been done to her kin, sparking off a class war. The novel, although set in a fictional isle, shows the societal crevices and the cleavages dividing different regions, age groups, tribal affiliations and professions in China.

The issue of dissent and censorship is dealt with in Ma Boyong's story "The City of Silence" (2018), which presents the vision of an Orwellian future, where all forms of communication are strictly controlled by a totalitarian regime. Set in the year 2046, the story unfolds in a context where almost all social interaction takes place online using a rapidly shrinking "list of healthy words" decided by the "Department of Propaganda". In this dystopian setup too, the inevitability of dissent is portrayed, when a technician with the pseudonym 'Wang Er' comes across an illegal "Talking Club" shielded from the repressive reach of the regime.

### **A response to the development paradigm**

China's path of rapid modernization and progress has fuelled the rise of the science fiction genre, just as economic growth in U.S. during 1930s-60s helped the popularisation of American science fiction. Chinese science fiction has responded to the acceleration of economic growth by channelising aspirations and hope for the future brought by it. At the same time, it has also attempted to highlight the social and human costs that have accompanied it and portrayed an ambivalent picture for the future. The ominous consequences of Mao's experiment with the Great Leap Forward have deeply influenced debates on development in contemporary Chinese science fiction which thrives on, yet is also deeply apprehensive of, China's prolonged dream of development. On the whole,

contemporary science fiction is more divided about China's prospects for 2050, the date by which President Xi Jinping wants it to become a "great modern socialist country". In any event, this new age of Chinese science fiction writers questions whether development alone, without an altruistic culture and concern for those whose rights have been trampled over for the sake of that progress, is sufficient for the fate of the new China.

One good example that showcases the subversive nature of the new wave of Chinese science fiction is Han Song's short story "Regenerated Bricks" (2010). The inspiration for this story was the catastrophic 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which led to the loss of nearly 70,000 lives, apart from uprooting of several. In a scathing critique, the event is portrayed as an opportunity for the success of a so-called "China Model", as a new type of architecture is adopted which constructs buildings through recycling the ruins of the earthquake. The mixing of human remains with construction materials leads to the invention of "regenerated bricks" having in-built artificial intelligence. New civilisations emerge when the A.I. bricks are sent to outer space as construction materials for human colonies on other planets. While human progress, not just China's, is spurred on by this landmark invention, it is forever haunted by the whispers and weeping of the dead.

Another story which deals with the Chinese obsession with development, as well as its ethical and technological effects, is "The Reincarnated Giant". Written in 2006 by Wang Jinkang, a veteran science fiction writer, the story analyses the motif of development in the context of China's recent economic reforms. The protagonist of the story is an industrial tycoon who personally owns more than one sixth of the land in the country, throwing light on the growing inequality in Chinese economy. He is portrayed using the figure of a reincarnated giant, representing the utopian desire for unlimited progress but also revealing the overwhelming human costs and dangers that accompany the pursuit of this utopia.

### **Addressing the Future of Technology**

China has emerged in the twenty-first century as the global leader in science and technology, establishing itself as a powerhouse of innovation. The focus on science and technology in Chinese vision for the future can be understood from the fact that one of the fourteen pillars of the "Xi Jinping Thought" on "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" is "adopting new science-based ideas for "innovative, coordinated, green, open and shared development".

The technological innovations and scientific advancements have provided fodder for science fiction writers, and also helped to generate growing interest in the genre. A writer in present-day China has to only look for inspiration at the realities of urban China's dynamic transformations, which is futuristic in itself. This has led to a growing engagement with the visions of artificial intelligence, surveillance and alternate cyber universes in the body of contemporary science fiction.

A number of writers are not so optimistic, however, about the future of technology and their imaginative visions are far from utopian. In Chen Qiufan's "Year of the Rat" (2018), for instance, China begins to export gene-modified rats to maintain its economic growth. However, unintended consequences occur as the rats eventually evolve into an intelligent species with their own culture and religion. As a result, the Chinese society is thus under great threat. The government decides to organize college students to attack the rat empire and the country turns itself into a terrible war zone where young people's lives are sacrificed meaninglessly.

In He's famous story titled "Foreign Land" (1999), a group of Chinese scientists discover a method to speed up time. They build a time farm where crops can grow very quickly, but unfortunately insects on the farm also grow quickly and turn into monsters, leading to the collapse of the farm. The story in the end warns readers that there is no guarantee that technological innovations will make people happy. If China moves too fast, the outcomes could be disastrous and the country itself might become a monster.

Combining political fantasy with science fiction, Liu Cixin's novel "China 2185" deals with the impact of digital information resources and the Internet on China's political system. It describes the resurrection of Mao's consciousness in cyberspace, where it sparks off a cybernetic uprising that challenges the authorities in the real world. The government then is left with no choice but to shut down the entire Internet, leading to the demise of the cyber-republic, called "Huaxia Gongheguo". The novel reflects on democracy, governance, and revolution in new terms informed by cybernetic technology and ultimately questions what humanity in a world driven by technology is. In this novel, Liu Cixin does not seem to either glorify the cybernetic uprising or discredit Mao's political legacy, but instead he concentrates on the future of humanity, which is not only "post-Mao" but also "post-human."

### **Response of the State**

As seen under the development of science fiction in China, the genre from the very start was seen by the political establishment as a potential tool for bringing in modernisation and reform. Science fiction literature, reformers believed, would help inspire Chinese readers to take more of an interest in science and technology. Further, the genre, grounded in facts and empiricism, would help to provide a push of Chinese intellectual traditions into the future.

As China advanced into the twentieth century, science fiction authors had to tread carefully with their content, for fear of retribution, or of being silenced altogether. Expressing any deviation from party lines was punished harshly: one author, Hu Feng, was sentenced to a quarter century in prison for a letter he published, in which he criticized Mao Zedong's policies on the arts; which he

viewed as mere propaganda: work that only emphasized and supported Mao's government and politics.

After economic reforms and greater opening up of China to the outside world, science fiction stories became a platform to grapple with the modern existence in the country. The expansion of the middle class with a newfound ability to spend on leisure such as books expanded the demand for science fiction literature. In this regard, the growth in Chinese science fiction mirrored that of popularisation of science fiction culture in the United States between the 1920s and the 1970s. With the expansion of the internet, the genre has flourished as the authors can serialize their stories online and publish their work more freely than before.

Many scholars today point out the irony that the genre so often used to criticize authoritarian political regimes, in fact, has been flourishing under the watch of just such a regime. This expansion of science fiction in the country has mostly been seen in a positive light by the Chinese state due to a number of factors.

Xia Jia in his essay "What Makes the Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?", noted that science fiction, as a distinct literary movement, had some appeal to the China's political parties: "The realism of science fiction is different from the realism of other genres; it is a realism infused with revolutionary idealism because its intended reader is the youth." In some ways, genre fiction functioned in two roles: continuing the idea of national self-improvement, while also instilling a political and patriotic narrative within China's youth. (Jia, 2014)

Today, politicians in China often emphasise on the importance of innovation and applaud the genre's ability to promote the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines. As Jean-Louis Troudel (2018) argues, "the recent prominence of science fiction in China seems closely tied to the country's concern with its own innovation performance, which has already led to the government's increasing support for science literacy." He adds, "science fiction is seen as a potential key to the same desired outcomes." Most importantly, science fiction is seen as a potential tool of Chinese soft power, as the genre has a global appeal, and provides opportunities for the entertainment industry to produce Hollywood-like content. At the eighth Chinese Nebula Awards in 2017, the writer Chen Quifan pointed out that the government saw the genre as a tool to "grasp what General Secretary Xi has put forward, and advance the establishment of the power of the international spread of the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics, in order to tell the China story." It serves as a medium for cross-cultural exchanges, either through translated editions of Chinese or English works of science fiction, or simply through expanded access. This has also affected the very nature of the genre itself, which is increasingly being written through a very different cultural lens, and incorporating more diverse collection of ideas, political viewpoints and values. Chinese science fiction is rapidly internationalizing and narrating the modern twenty-first century experience, while continuing to throw light on

Chinese perspectives and visions. The investors are happy too as movies based on science fiction novels, such as “The Wandering Earth” have grossed immense profits and been acquired for viewing by global audience by Netflix. It is no surprise then that China is actively promoting the genre on a global scale. In 2017, the city of Chengdu hosted its fourth international science fiction convention, while Beijing’s Museum of Science and Technology held the first Asia Pacific SF Convention the next year. China is now in the race to host the 2023 World Science Fiction Convention in Chengdu.

As the themes of critiques in Chinese science fiction increase, some attempts have been made to censor certain elements of the genre. For instance, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television banned themes of time travel in radio, film and television content on the grounds that “the producers and writers are treating the serious history in a frivolous way, which should by no means be encouraged anymore.” The move came as time-travel plots were being used as avenues of dreams of freedom from present-day strictures, and questioning many aspects of China’s past and the future. Previously discussed works Hang Song’s ‘2066: Mars Over America’ and Liu Cixin’s “China 2185” are examples of how time-travel has been a central element in Chinese works on the genre.

On the whole, the future of science fiction literature in China seems bright, and a stringent control over its publication or content has not been established yet. However, as the reality of Chinese society moves closer to the fictional worlds imagined by the authors, the themes too are likely to become more critical. For instance, claims of having created genetically modified babies by Chinese researcher He-Jiankui has been met with as much caution as celebration. It mirrors the fears about the far-reaching and unintended consequences of technology portrayed in Chen’s ‘Year of the Rat’.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, in conclusion, it can be argued that the evolution of Chinese science fiction since the late Qing period till present times has occurred in close association with the changing political, economic and social contexts. Contemporary Chinese science fiction is arguably in a “golden age” today, enjoying both wider readership at home and growing international attention. The genre engages deeply with the issues facing China in the twenty first century, including nationalism and the Chinese dream, rapid economic development and its consequences, and technology and its changing relations with humankind. Despite its obscure critical engagements, the genre is seen by the Chinese state as a potent tool for modernisation in science and technology and putting forward visions for China’s future. Moreover, due to the global appeal of science fiction themes, works of Chinese science fiction today has emerged as a potential instrument of propagating China’s soft power. In the coming years, the genre is likely to flourish. However, as the Chinese society explores more aspects of its identity, technology and



paradigms, the themes too are likely to become more critical. In such a scenario, it remains to be seen how Xi's present-day China will respond to narratives of the future.

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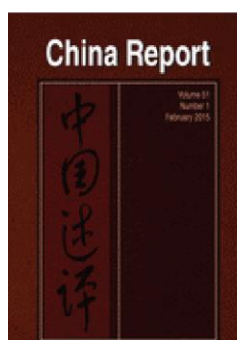


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