

China sci-fi a galaxy not far away

Chinese fiction exploring the tensions between people and technology surges in popularity as nation rises on world stage

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As recently as 2012, science fiction was a small market in China. The market was so poor that writers Liu Cixin and Han Song decided to donate 10,000 yuan (\$1,540) each of their own money just to allow the Chinese Nebula Awards to hold its annual prize presentation.

But Chinese science fiction is hot now. Liu Cixin won the international Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015 for *The Three-Body Problem*.

Comment
More space for sci-fi growth, China can take genre to new heights, page 13

Major movies are in production, based on the trilogy of which the book is a part. In addition, Hao Jingfang won the Hugo for Best Novelette for her story *Folding Beijing*

in 2016, and a movie based on it is also planned. And multibillion-yuan investments in China are creating science fiction parks and facilities for producing films, videos and games.

The 800-hectare, 10 billion yuan Oriental Sci-Fi Valley theme park opened in December in Guiyang, in Southwest China's Guizhou province. Emphasizing virtual reality, it will tie in with Guiyang's large big data industry.

Also, in November, the Sichuan Association for Science and Technology announced plans to build, in the city of Chengdu, a 12 billion yuan China Science Fiction City, which will develop and show off the role of sci-fi in China's cultural industry.

Why is Chinese science fiction surging now, and what does it tell us about China's economy and culture?

In her essay "What makes Chinese science fiction Chinese?" Xia Jia, science fiction writer and associate professor of Chinese literature at Xi'an Jiaotong University, writes that "the crises of capitalist culture accompanied by the process of globalization are manifested in the daily lives of Chinese people".

In an interview, she said: "The past 30 years were a great transformation in society and culture and economics — every aspect of China. Many different aspects of this transformation are reflected in science fiction stories. For example, in these stories you can see that Chinese people have much anxiety about the tension between the traditional China and the dream to be part of the modern world. You can feel there is an anxiety about the destiny of human beings, but also you can say this anxiety is Chinese people's anxiety about their future. How can they survive in this cruel competition?"

"You can see such anxieties in,

Hao Jingfang, science fiction writer, won the Hugo for Best Novelette for her story *Folding Beijing*.

Xia Jia, science fiction writer, says her works look at ordinary people's lives.



Liu Cixin, science fiction writer, author of the *Three-Body* trilogy.

Han Song, science fiction writer and also a senior executive at Xinhua News Agency.

for example, Liu Cixin's works and other short stories. Some people explain the main competition between human beings and Liu Cixin's aliens as like another version of competition between big nations. It's a feeling of a crisis during the process of globalization," Xia said.

However, Liu himself says his story *The Dark Forest*, part of the *Three-Body* trilogy, is not meant to reflect competition on Earth.

"The relationship between different groups of human beings on Earth is very different from that between mankind and creatures on other planets ... We are the same species on Earth and are more likely to understand each other. Civilizations are not isolated from each other. They can exchange and discuss many things that they do not understand. This opportunity does not exist between interstellar civilizations."

Han Song, a prominent science fiction writer and also a senior executive at Xinhua News Agency, said: "From the very beginning, when science fiction was introduced into China, it served as a mirror of Chinese society and the process of China's modernization. China has a very long civilization, and science fiction first played a role in the rejuvenation of that civilization in the first part of the 20th century. For example, a lot of science fiction at the very beginning just imagined how China became a very, very strong country."

Nathaniel Isaacson, associate professor of modern Chinese literature and cultural studies at North Carolina State University, in the United States, points out that Chinese science fiction first arose in the early years of the 20th century, at a time when the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) was collapsing, European countries had again invaded Beijing to end the Boxer Rebellion, and many coastal areas were under European control. Early Chinese science fiction often explored the place of China in the world and looked at ways China could overcome European colonialism.

"Fairly often, what they imagined was a future where China is politically, economically and culturally dominant," said Isaacson. "For example, the short story *New Story of the Stone* (written by Wu Jianren in the early 1900s) imagined a world where Shanghai had become a world center of trade and commerce and hosted a world expo and global political summits. But the narrative falls apart. At that time, people could not imagine such things coming to pass. But they did happen in the early 21st century," Isaacson said.

Writer Han Song said: "Science fiction has gradually become a real soft power of China. It even influenced (former US president) Barack Obama — we could not have imagined that. Its real power is because it touches

>> PAGE 9