

The business of fantasy

Entrepreneurs bet there are many lucrative chapters still to be written in China's sci-fi sector

By DAVID BLAIR

Science fiction is not just an art form or a genre of literature. It is a business too. Chinese companies and localities are making big investments because they believe there is a huge and growing demand for stories that spark the imagination.

Growth of the mobile Internet in China is seen as key. People want to watch short science fiction videos on their phones. Plus, many games are based on science fiction stories. The market for virtual reality alone is expected to reach 55 billion yuan (\$8.5 billion) by 2020, according to Bloomberg. The Motion Picture Association of America estimates that China will surpass the United States as the world's largest movie market this year.

"China boasts abundant sci-fi intellectual property works to develop derivative products like Internet drama, TV series, films and games," Jiang Lin, Internet director of *Science Fiction World* magazine, told *National Business Daily*. "I hope the China Science Fiction City can culti-

vate fertile soil for these products to take root and grow."

Entrepreneurs and venture capitalists see vast potential.

For example, Future Affairs Administration (FAA), a startup company in Beijing that launched in 2016, has already raised 10 million yuan of angel investment. During the A round of financing, FAA raised dozens of millions of yuan, and it established Three Body Cosmos, a subcompany that focuses on developing stories related to Liu Cixin's *Three Body* trilogy.

"At the beginning, we got a percentage from selling stories," said Ji Shaoting, founder and CEO of FAA, explaining the company's business model. "But that is like crushing the aspirations of the poor writers. They are not making a lot.

"Later on, I found out that it is better if we get the good stories and also participate in the movie part," Ji said. "We can get percentages of the movie project or the TV series, so we can be kinder to our writers. We want to help our writers, to protect them. I want to help them to get more money.

"We also hire people who can help



Ji Shaoting, founder and CEO of Future Affairs Administration, says the current situation of rapid change has created China's new science fiction. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

to make movies. We don't make movies — just give them advice and ideas. The other part of the team is editors, because we have to talk to writers."

Additionally, Ji said: "In the past decades, there was no Chinese science fiction industry, only words. If we want to make it an industry, we have to do many things in the whole industrial chain.

"In America, you have thousands of science fiction writers who have been published, but in China there are fewer than 100 Chinese science fiction writers, and the fans only know the names of 20.

"So we really need more science fiction writers," Ji said.

Feng Huawei, who is founder of

Smallville Capital, a leading Chinese investment company, as well as a major investor in FAA, said: "I would define this project as part of the 'imagination industry', which is becoming more important. The development of technology that includes mobile information provides us with access to more devices that serve our needs, as well as spreading ideas. Imagination as the source of content production, diversity and innovation, is of more value now.

"We are looking for the combination of high-quality science fiction works with other industries, such as movies, animation, education, travel, real estate and other cultural business."

For 10 years, Ji was a reporter for Xinhua News Agency, where famous science fiction writer and Xinhua executive Han Song became a mentor. She said she cried when she left Xinhua, but science fiction is her passion.

"I started reading science fiction when I was 9 years old. Through high school and college, there were not a lot of people who were interested in sci-fi, so I was really lonely."

However, in 2007, she attended a science fiction conference in Chengdu, Southwest China's Sichuan province. "I felt that I was not lonely anymore. I felt that I had found the family of science fiction."

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some real problems — philosophical and spiritual things. That is soft power."

In addition, Han said: "Everybody can see it has become more and more popular. The popularity of science fiction accompanies the rise of a country. If the country continues to rise, this genre will become more popular."

According to Wu Yan, professor of humanities at Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, South China's Guangdong province, "Liu Cixin's idea is very, very Chinese. In the future, problems are solved. The Earth will be united as one. It is a kind of ancient Chinese thinking about 'under Heaven'. It's like the Chinese view of the world in imperial times that derives from Confucianism. Confucius has four stages of development — cultivate yourself, manage your family, administer your country, make all under Heaven united."

Han Song said science fiction is now leaving its roots as a way to popularize science and gives deep insights into China's culture and current life.

Similarly, Wu Yan sees science fiction as a way to explore philosophy:



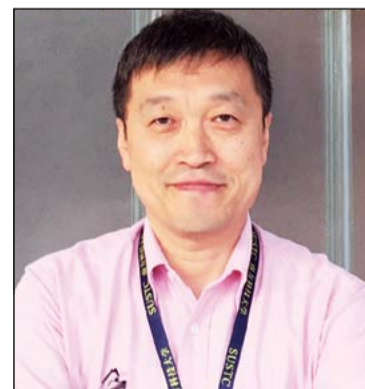
The Oriental Sci-Fi Valley theme park opened in December in Guiyang, Southwest China's Guizhou province. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

"My generation born in the 1960s paid very, very great respect to Arthur C Clarke (author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*)."

Three women in the field especially focus on how ordinary people's lives are changing in China.

Xia Jia said: "Many science fiction works focus on interplanetary relations and the science of the distant future, but my works look at ordinary people's lives. What I'm trying to do is to imagine the near future of ordi-

nary Chinese people's lives, which is also a way to reflect how we feel about the current time. So you can see that some of my stories happen in a Chinese core family with the parents, child, old people. Their relationships are changed by the technological revolution. I also want to explore the positive side of this change, not just the dark side. For example, I want to try to explore how ordinary people can use these technologies to rebuild their relationships, to keep



Wu Yan, professor of humanities and director of the new Research Center for Science and Human Imagination, Southern University of Science and Technology.

their traditional feelings and values during this process."

Hao Jingfang, who received a PhD in economics from Tsinghua University and is now deputy director of a macroeconomics research department at the China Development Research Foundation, won a 2016 Hugo Award for her novelette *Folding Beijing*, which deals with the inequality that has developed during rapid growth.

"I myself am interested in peo-

ple's hearts, what people are thinking about. What are the differences between people in everyday life. I really like to study these kinds of details of people. So I always write some scenarios not really far away from life. Perhaps in the future, I will try to write about some far away universal empire or something like that," Hao said.

Ji Shaoting, founder and CEO of the Beijing-based company Future Affairs Administration, said the current situation of rapid change has created China's new science fiction.

"The background of the golden age of science fiction in America was the fast-developing science. So, right now in China, science and technology is developing so fast that it changes people's lives every day," Ji said.

"People can feel that our country is launching into the stars and they focus on that ... Science fiction is about the relationship between people and science," she said.

"I always tell my colleagues and investors, and also science fiction fans, that if the golden age can come back, it will probably be in China."

Yan Dongjie contributed to this story.