

# More space for sci-fi growth

Authors and creators in the nascent Chinese industry target audiences abroad but quality must be improved

By WU YAN

The Chinese science fiction industry has just begun, but there is plenty of space for further growth and development in the future.

The total output value of China's sci-fi industry reached about 10 billion yuan (\$1.5 billion) in 2016, a year-on-year increase of 13.8 percent.

The gross output value of the sci-fi reading market was 1.32 billion yuan in 2016, an increase of about 6 percent compared with the previous year. Based on the fixed cover price, the inventory of new sci-fi books was more than 700 million yuan, and that of journals and magazines nearly 20 million yuan. Additionally, the market for various kinds of digital sci-fi reading exceeded 20 million yuan.

The development of the sci-fi reading market showed the following characteristics: Paper publications continue to dominate and are the major growth point of the sci-fi reading market.

Only a few new sci-fi releases issued digital versions at the same time as paper books. Young Chinese

readers — especially those born after 1990, who are habitual digital readers — have found it difficult to find enough digital science fiction works. Adult readers were eager to read excellent works but found there were not enough.

Although famous writers such as Han Song, Wang Jinkang and He Xi have published new titles, on the whole, outstanding stories are lacking. The quality of newly published stories does not compare with some old ones, so how to improve the quality remains a key problem.

A sci-fi book market for young people and teenagers, although neglected for many years, is gradually forming, and teenagers have become the mainstay of science fiction reading.

The business of book copyrights tends to be stable. Because of the popularity of sci-fi reading and high expectations for the nascent Chinese sci-fi film market, science fiction copyrights have risen sharply in recent years. However, such business has cooled down since 2016, since it is difficult to make some works into films or television programs, and there is also a shortage of funding.

In 2016, the total box office of sci-fi films in China was 7.64 billion yuan, an increase of 13 percent over the previous year. Of this amount, domestic sci-fi movies accounted for 3.5 billion yuan.

Imported science fiction films continued to dominate Chinese cinema screens, but domestic films began to show a strong performance, with some Chinese original sci-fi films achieving success at the box office.

Chinese micro sci-fi films, such as *Waterdrop*, began to win people's attention and trigger hot discussion and philosophical reflection. Some original fantasy films, the subject of huge investment, began to combine with sci-fi films to form a new genre — science fantasy.

A total of 235 online drama series were launched in 2016, with views reaching 500 billion, and users' online payments rose to 11.7 billion yuan. Online sci-fi dramas, especially those with big budgets and investment, were highly welcomed by new media platforms and websites. However, even though the number of new sci-fi dramas was huge, the quality of some was far from excellent.

There were no statistics available on video games in China, but global sales of video games stood at more than \$444 million in 2016.

Startup enterprises related to sci-fi production also developed well. Newly started businesses tried to find their places through competition and cooperation. For example, many enterprises were trying to recruit and attract more science fiction creators and authors through soliciting articles or hosting awards ceremonies.

Famous events such as the Galaxy Awards and the Xingyun Awards have showed strong brand effect and received much attention in the sector.

In addition, some domestic publications and organizations are dedicated to introducing excellent Chinese sci-fi to international readers, promoting international exchanges and training creators.

For example, Science Fiction World and China Educational Publications Import and Export Corp cooperated to promote Chinese sci-fi author Liu Cixin's *Three-Body* trilogy to the world. The trilogy has been published in 13 languages, with total global sales of 800,000 copies.

More Chinese works are being prepared for international readers. Future Affairs Administration, a technological and cultural company, produces original content with a futuristic vision for Chinese science fiction.

Its core business is development of science fiction writing, and it has begun cooperating with the University of Kansas in the United States to promote communication and exchanges between Chinese and US sci-fi writers.

Although China's science fiction industry has just started, the prospects for further growth are bright as training is strengthened for domestic authors and creators. The country, businesses and readers are all optimistic about the genre of literature and eager to see more impressive stories.

*The author is a professor of humanities and director of the new Research Center for Science and Human Imagination, Southern University of Science and Technology.*

*The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.*

# China can take genre to new heights

Nation's science fiction set to play bigger global role as tech advances and research drive creativity

By LI ZHAOXIN

The biggest advantage of China's science fiction industry today is a supportive environment that is increasingly conducive to the sector's development.

Cultural industries rely on the state of social development, and China has maintained an average GDP growth rate of 10 percent in the past 30 years, which is far above the world standard. This background determines the basic premise for the development of science fiction.

In the 21st century, China has invested more in basic as well as cutting-edge research, especially in the fields of space and energy.

It has devoted enormous resources to upgrading the two fields, which has also led to the development of related sectors of technology, including quantum computing, superconductivity, nuclear fusion, opticals, genetics and graphene — a material made

of single-atom-thick layers of carbon.

This technological development and research has given rise to topics for the creation of science fiction stories, providing the public with more expectations for the future and possibly enhancing the demand for sci-fi creation.

In contrast, sci-fi creation in Europe and the United States in the new century has shifted significantly to entertainment, sentiment and speculation. This undoubtedly stems from diminished expectations for the future and no longer seeking technological progress.

This trend shows the advantage of China's sci-fi creation. It gives Chinese authors a chance to be excellent international science fiction writers. Those authors who can see and grasp this advantage will succeed.

Western science fiction has developed into a highly specialized and community-based world. The values of the new generation cannot be satisfied by the focus on

technology and looking forward to the future, which was the focus of the past era.

The Apollo program, cosmic discovery and *Star Wars* can no longer inspire the new generation. Writers hope their voice can be heard by the world, but they do not write to help politicians, corporate chiefs or Wall Street elites to think about or forecast how the future world will be.

The post-Cold War West has become a multipolar world. Western countries, no matter active or passive, have to accept this change.

The export of Chinese culture is inevitable. A region that has maintained productivity growth of several times the world average for several decades will inevitably become a powerful source of cultural output.

Creative output is the foundation of the sci-fi industry, the driving force for the industry's development. The offline science fiction creation workshops and online writing camp of the Future Affairs

Administration — a company specializing in the promotion of Chinese science fiction — have attracted sci-fi creators and technology experts from all fields.

The introduction of foreign fiction and exchange programs with science fiction magazines in South Korea has further stimulated Chinese writers' interest in the genre. Compared with investments or policy support, the strength is weaker, but it can last for a longer period of time.

The value of cultural industries comes from people and from their love and investment in culture. People's power also needs time to be nurtured.

The difference in the sci-fi industry's comprehensive development capability is the major gap of the sector's development in China and the United States. Science fiction culture has the possibility of unlimited extension — a complete chain upstream and downstream.

It should be regarded as an independent industry. In addition

to exploring market demand and supply, the prosperity of an industry also requires huge investment in research. What Chinese people need to do is to collect and accumulate industrial data and build industrial standards.

We forecast that Chinese science fiction will become an important part of the global industry in the next 10 to 15 years. Chinese sci-fi works, including Chinese stories, films and games, will become a key source of cultural output content.

Chinese people should learn lessons from the US and try to build an ecological system that can provide proper development space for different kinds of sci-fi writers and creators. In addition, we should promote industrial specialization, using our patience and professions to create a better industrial future.

*The author is a partner of the company Future Affairs Administration. The views do not necessarily reflect those of China Daily.*