

An Analysis of the Concept of “Science Fiction in the Late Qing Dynasty”¹

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Abstract:

In the late Qing Dynasty, the respect for “science” and the emphasis on “fiction” spawned the translation and introduction of foreign science fiction works and the birth of local science fiction in China, but there was no such thing as “science fantasy” (*kexue huanxiang*) at the time. At present, there are differences regarding the appropriate terminology to refer to these works. This paper will make a brief review and analysis of the existing terminology strategies, sort out the use of labels such as “science fiction (*kexue xiaoshuo*),” “ideal fiction (*lixiang xiaoshuo*),” “philosophical fiction (*zheli xiaoshuo*),” and “political fiction (*zhengzhi xiaoshuo*)” by the intellectual elites in the late Qing Dynasty, and, lastly, analyze the channels of their mutual conversion, and the tension between “science” and “fantasy,” so as to present the historical logic of the concept of “science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty.”

Keywords: late Qing Dynasty, science fantasy, science fiction, historical logic

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1. Differences in Terminology

In the late nineteenth century, China fell into an unprecedented national crisis. To save the nation and to survive, intellectual elites made great efforts to study Western civilizations. As Western learning spread to the East, advanced Western technology penetrated people's daily lives, reshaping our thinking and our image of the cosmos. At the same time, "fiction," which had been at the bottom of the literary hierarchy for thousands of years, began to receive attention because of its broad appeal and was regarded as a sharp weapon of enlightenment by cultural pioneers. The new fantasy activated by modern intellectuals encountered fiction, giving rise to several works featuring elements of science fiction. However, there was no Chinese word for "science fantasy" at that time, only "science fiction," "ideal fiction" and other concepts with a high degree of relevance. Later researchers have adopted different strategies to define these works.

At present, the term "late Qing science-fantasy" (*wan Qing kehuan*) is popular and common. If a reasonable definition for this term can be given, works can be selected with an open attitude, without becoming entangled in the debate regarding the name and its reality. The problem is that the concept of science fantasy itself is difficult to define. Which theorist's viewpoint should researchers adopt as the standard for defining late Qing fiction? Where does its legitimacy come from? If there was science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty, would there have also been science fiction in the Ming and Song Dynasties? When faced with specific works, critics may sometimes be hesitant to say so. Taking *The Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilaiji*, 1902) as an example, the author Liang Qichao called it "political fiction" (*zhengzhi xiaoshuo*), and though there is no exploration of science and technology in the story, it was the first to introduce the notion of the future perspective as an aspect of linear temporality into Chinese fiction. It begins with a prosperous scene 60 years later, imbued with a Utopian sensibility, so can it be classified as late Qing Dynasty science fiction? In this regard, some individual theorists also have offered divergent opinions: Wu Yan called it "future fiction" in *The Outline of Science Fiction Literature* (2011), while in his *Six Lectures on Science Fiction* (2013), he recognized it as a work of "science fiction with political science as its theme, imagining China's prospective political development and political future" (158).

The second strategy is to use the existing works of science fiction to refer to the object of research. This seems to be closer to the true face of history, and *kexue xiaoshuo* can also be regarded as a literal translation of the English term "science fiction". It could therefore potentially encompass science fantasy fiction (*kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo*). But what is science fiction? Is it based on the label attached

to the work at that time? Researchers are still faced with the problem of screening. In *Study of the Forest of Fiction Society (Xiaoshuolin she yanjiu)*, Luan Weiping notes how casually people in the late Qing Dynasty labeled fiction, arguing, “The division of science fiction is even more confusing. It has been classified into many types, such as ideal fiction, adventure fiction, craft and industrial fiction, comic fiction and so on.” Her definition of science fiction must include both science and fantasy. “Popular science articles that simply propagate scientific principles or have simple dialogue are not science fiction; pure fantasy stories without any scientific elements are not science fiction either” (205-206). However, science fiction thus redefined is no longer substantially different from science fantasy fiction as understood today.

Lin Jianqun wrote a master’s thesis entitled *The Study of Science Fiction [kehuan xiaoshuo] in the Late Qing Dynasty (1904-1911)*, and his doctoral dissertation was titled *Before Mr. Science Came — The Genealogy of Science Fiction [kexue xiaoshuo] in the Late Qing Dynasty*. The title adjustment between two works reflects Lin’s attempt to respect the authors’ original intent. However, how do we explain the existence of such “political fiction” as *The Future of New China*, which appears in the appendix of “The Chronological Catalogue of Science Fiction in the Late Qing and Early Republic of China (1851-1919)” of the latter (J. Lin 16-22)?

Obviously, complete compliance with terminologies used at that time does not reduce the theoretical difficulties. Thus, there is a third strategy, which is to create a different name. David Der-wei Wang’s *Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* is well known for its study of science fantasy (translated as *kehuan qitan*) in the late Qing Dynasty. The Chinese translation of this book regards the concept of science fantasy differently from science fiction, thus emphasizing the mixed characteristics of types by the interweaving of traditional gods and demons with modern technology. This, of course, highlights the self-contradiction between the narrative purpose (promoting science) and the effect (talking about mystery) of the work, but is insufficient to highlight the writers’ original narrative intention (the effort to promote science). More importantly, this concept still implies a set of presuppositions regarding what science fiction is, based on the standard of science fiction that has been popular in English since the 1930s to evaluate Chinese writing practices in the 1900s. It would be a misplaced impression to conclude that science fiction is not “good enough.”²

2 Some scholars have adopted the concept of “future fiction.” The term, however, did not appear in the late Qing Dynasty either, and it was not rigorous in academic theory. See Zhao Yiheng. “Future Fiction in Twentieth-Century China.” *Twenty-First Century*, December 1999. Zhao Yiheng. “Future Fiction in China.” *Huacheng*, No.1, 2000.

In short, none of these strategies offer an infallible methodology. Therefore, in addition to analyzing the relationship between imagination and science in fiction during the late Qing Dynasty, it is necessary to sort out the specific use of several related fiction labels at that time to present the germination and generation logic of scientific fantasy fiction in modern China.

2. Association of Labels

In the turbulent times of the late Qing Dynasty, in an effort to educate the ignorant people to become qualified modern citizens, intellectual elites began to emphasize the value of fiction, believing that works of fiction were an important driving force for development of European, American, and Japanese civilization (Chen 54-70). In 1902, Liang Qichao founded *Xin Xiaoshuo* and launched a “revolution in the field of fiction,” claiming that fiction has “magic power,” and that morality, religion, politics, customs, skills, personality, and so on are all subject to its influence. Liang argued, “To renew the people of a nation, the traditional literature of that nation must first be renewed” (1902). This statement quickly aroused strong responses and was accompanied by a boom in translation and creation, as well as the birth of many fiction labels: political fiction, ideal fiction, philosophical fiction, detective fiction, historical fiction, chivalric fiction, constitutional fiction, nihilistic fiction, love fiction, and so on. Many of the titles reflect the expectation of the refinement of fiction’s social function. Hence the expression that “one kind of fiction has one purpose, which can be closely connected to the political system and people’s will” (Qiu 47-48). Among them, new types with local scarcity are especially recommended: “If you read Western political fiction, you can understand political principles; if you read science fiction, you can explore the laws of things; if you read the detective fiction, you can aim at the local customs of the Westerners and their treacherous changes of intentions, which is beyond our nation’s ability. Therefore, while reading Chinese fiction can just be a pastime; reading western fiction will be of great help to knowledge” (Sun 710).

However, a given work will often be multi-faceted, so it is difficult to limit oneself to a single label. Therefore, while the scope of works referred to by various fiction labels overlaps, they cannot completely replace each other. Some of them, such as “science fiction,” “philosophical fiction,” “political fiction” and “ideal fiction” are closely related, and the meaning of “science fantasy” is born of them.

“Political fiction” is the earliest label of new fiction in the late Qing Dynasty. After the Wuxu Coup (1898), Liang Qichao, who lived in exile in Japan, founded *Qingyi Daily* in Yokohama and wrote an article in it praising political

fiction: “at the beginning of the revolutions in European countries in the past, scholars and men of noble ideals often expressed their experiences and political opinions in their fiction...whenever a book comes out, the debate of the whole nation changes.” The same is true in Japan: “a man who writes a book is a great politician of the time. He assigned his political views to the characters in the book, so we cannot regard the book merely as fiction” (680-681, 47) .

It is apparent that those with foresight aimed to use political fiction to motivate the benighted masses. It took on the form of fiction but in fact contained great truth, so he valued it most. After the suspension of *Qingyi Daily*, Liang Qichao founded the *Xinmin Congbao* in 1902. Issue fourteen of this newspaper advertised several types of forthcoming fiction publications in *Xin Xiaoshuo*. One of them was “philosophical science fiction,” whose purpose was “to invent philosophy and study the nature of things through fiction.” This category included Plato’s *Republic*, Moore’s *Utopia*, Fumio Yano’s *New Society*, Elieue’s *The Future of the World*, and Jules Verne’s *Around the Moon, Five Weeks in a Balloon*, and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.³ Here, political utopia and science fiction are regarded as the same, foreshadowing the tangle of the labels of the subsequent fiction.

By the 17th issue of *Xinmin Congbao*, philosophical fiction and science fiction were listed independently, respectively corresponding to the French astronomer Nicolas Camille Flammarion’s work of science fiction, *The End of the World* and Jules Verne’s *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*.⁴ As far as I can see, this is the first time that the word “science fiction” appears independently in Chinese. However, at the time, because readers would not have seen the original text of the work, it would have been difficult for them to know exactly what science fiction was. The first issue of *Xin Xiaoshuo*, published soon after, maintained this correspondence. With Jules Verne, science fiction was officially introduced to Chinese readers, appearing at the same time with *The Future of New China*, a political work of fiction created by Liang Qichao to express his political opinions. In 1903, in the twenty-seventh issue of *Xinmin Congbao*, *The New Society*, which had been classified as a work of philosophical science fiction in the fourteenth issue, was relabeled as a work of ideal fiction named *Elysium*. This is probably the earliest appearance of ideal fiction. At this point, several major labels associated with science fiction have all appeared.

It seems that in the minds of Liang Qichao as well as others, “philosophy,” “science,” “politics” and “ideal” did not have strict functional distinctions as labels

3 “The Only Literary Newspaper in China *Xin Xiaoshuo*.” *Xinmin Series*, No.14, 1902.

4 “The Only Literary Newspaper in China *Xin Xiaoshuo* The Forecast of the No.1 Principal Point.” *Xinmin Series*, No. 17, 1902.

for fiction. Instead, they were interlinked with each other and served the project of renewing the people. In other words, it is this ultimate purpose that made the quiet exchange of labels possible.

Firstly, both political fiction and ideal fiction are derived from dissatisfaction with reality. The former inevitably contains ideal color and future orientation (such as *The Future of New China*), while the latter often contains political content as well, such as the ideal fiction of *Elysium*. It can also be regarded as an expression of political opinions that “The intention to break down all systems in the old society, and to adopt the law of pantisocracy [equal government by all] with magnificent and well-organized ideas.”⁵ Another example is Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, which was labeled as a work of “political fiction” when it was published in *Illustrated Fiction (Xiuxiang Xiaoshuo)* while also labeled as “ideal fiction” when published by the Commercial Press.

Secondly, ideal fiction is closely related to science fiction. It should be noted that ideal fiction does not necessarily depict an ideal world. Both H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* and Shunrō Oshikawa’s *The World After a Thousand Years* translated by Bao Tianxiao have been described as ideal fiction,” with the former describing an alien invasion, and the latter “using noble ideals to describe the degradation of a miserable society, so as to see the theme of a bright world...It contains all the profoundness of physics, psychology and ethics, as well as the concepts of the religious social world” (Chen 775,1305).⁶ Neither set of circumstances would be described as ideal. Therefore, the ideal fiction of that time had roughly two meanings: writing motivated by a noble ideal or a method of writing based theories and the derivation of imagination. The second meaning hews very close to today’s science fantasy, because at that time, a variety of principles and theories began to undergo the baptism of science. Meanwhile, future ideal worlds without science are not convincing. Ideal fiction was therefore often confused with science fiction. The science fiction work *Sleepwalking in the 21st Century* (Pieter Harting’s, *AD 2070*) was recommended on the following basis:

In China, what we call the golden age is in the past, while in the West, the most prosperous world is in the future. Because the past is no longer visible, so ambition is weak; the future is keenly awaited, so hope is

5 “The Ideal Fiction *Elysium*.” *Xinmin Series*, No. 27.

6 In 1904, the second issue of *The Twentieth Century Stage* made an advertisement for *The World After the Millennium*, as well as the *Shenzhou Daily* on August 11, 1907.

stronger. This is the judgment of the strength of China and the West.⁷

However, by examining the past and looking at the present, what can we know about the future? Though there are things unknowable, there are theories knowable. To predict what we don't know, based on what we know, is not to rely on illusion and fantasy (Chen 582, 619).

When evolutionary theory became axiomatic, the expectation of the ideal world shifted from a fascination with the past to a vision of the future, and books like *The Future of New China* appeared. As for the method of speculating about the future, of course, we can only depend on "science." It can be said that had Liang Qichao completed *The Story of the Future*, the book would not eventually become science fiction. As the "Master of the Bihe House" said in *The New Era* (1908):

The purpose of writing fiction is to write an ideal work of fiction for the sake of the future world, instead of the past and the present. Because in the future world, it is science that must be developed to the extreme. Thus, the material of this fiction is based on science. As a reader, you should know that the writer of this fiction is not a science expert, and this fiction is not a scientific handout. Although on the surface, it is a work of science fiction. In the purpose of expounding the author's ideas, you read this book and will naturally understand (Bihe 438).

Thirdly, science fiction and philosophical fiction were originally differentiated from philosophical science fiction (*zheli kehuan xiaoshuo*). Thus, naturally, they are closely related. In his work of philosophical fiction *Diary at the End of the World*, Liang Qichao found the connection between "the most accurate theory in science and the noblest thought in philosophy, that is the connection between science (evolutionary theory) and philosophy (Mahayana Buddhism) (Jia 50-53). Ding Yi also believes that "philosophical fiction and science fiction commune and relate to each other: if science is clear, philosophy will be clear; if there is much science fiction, there is more philosophical fiction" (170).

Fourthly, science fiction and political fiction are also related. Deng Yuyi believes that political fiction is a subcategory of science fiction: "In science fiction, science covers a wide range of subjects, but topics such as politics become their own category. The rest is more science to explore the truths and principles" (1903).

7 "New Translations of Various Books" advertisement in *Sleepwalking in the 21st Century*. *Xinmin Series*, No. 30, 1903.

Others hoped that Verne's work of science fiction *Iron World* (*Les Cinq Cents Millions de la Bégum*) could function as a direct call to political mobilization: "As the kind of person who tortures me and kills me without feeling pain, what is the purpose of imitating false foreigners who help evil? Are we Chinese not yet dead at heart? We should read more urgently and diligently to motivate ourselves to fight for the future" (Chen 620, 639).⁸

What's more, science is the way to dispel superstition and reshape national ideals, which should be part of the political agenda. According to an advertisement for *A Trip to the Moon*, "those Chinese people who refuse to develop and fantasize about new ideas have no sense of science in their minds. This book is a work of science fiction, dedicated to stimulating the innovative ideals of people" (Chen 670). In 1906, the article "On [how] the Advancement of Science Can Eliminate the Absurdity of Old Fiction" made it clearer:

Thought is like light. Countless rays of light regulated by a condenser, will converge at one point; if it is carried by poor quality, it will be scattered and have no destination. Science is the condenser of thoughts, following common laws and clearing definitions and boundaries. With sincerity, profound knowledge can be opened. Otherwise, irregular fallacies will grow rampant, based on the curiosity of the heart, as described in the old fiction of our country, it is not enough to be a loud laugh for those truth explorers...

...Therefore, if science is not developed, we are finished. And if it is developed, won't all groundless thoughts be easily removed, just like the wind sweeping away bamboo leaves or hot water poured on the snow?

...Now and then, with great advances in science, freedom of thought, and the improvement of fiction writers and their customs, 400 million of our citizens will rejoice in the new China of the 20th century.⁹

In the era of natural selection, the kind of ideals people should embrace became

8 In 1903, Bao Tianxiao, at the beginning of the book *The Iron World* by Shanghai Civilization Publishing House, wrote "the wordiness after translation." Advertisement of "Civilization Book Company's Special New Book Publication" in *The Home and Abroad Daily*, October 10, 1903.

9 "On the Advancement of Science Can Eliminate the Absurdity of Old Fiction." *The New World Fiction Society*, No. 2, 1906.

a crucial political issue. Traditional Chinese fiction also had ideals, but they were often absurd, telling stories of ghosts and gods to poison people's minds. Now, they needed to be improved by science to turn harmful delusions into useful inventions, to turn Ne Zha's *Wind Fire Wheel* into a light balloon in the real world. This argument not only resonated at that time,¹⁰ but also received constant responses in later generations. In fact, the entanglement and conflict between science and fantasy in fiction constitutes the core issue of the development of Chinese science fiction in the 20th century. It is not necessary to expand on this, but take the definition appearing in the *Encyclopedia of China* (1986) as an example: "Science fiction...What it describes is fantasy, not reality; the fantasy is scientific, not woolgathering."¹¹

It is the recurrence of this core issue that enables us to identify the actual germination of Chinese science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty, when the concept of science fiction had not yet appeared: at that time, the cultural elite, whose actions were political and directed to the future of the nation, began to ask for science/philosophy (*kexue/zheli*) to rearrange ideals/fantasy/dreams (*lixiang/huanxiang/mengxiang*). This is a new phenomenon in the history of Chinese fiction. As a result, the categories of philosophical fiction, science fiction, ideal fiction and political fiction all overlap, and there are channels of communication between them. Among them, the political fiction advocated by Liang Qichao has not received much response in fact (Chen 97), while the first three can be traced back to the earliest philosophical science fiction, and to a certain extent actually share the function of political fiction. Of course, political fiction does not necessarily describe the future, ideal fiction does not necessarily involve science, and science fiction does not necessarily have fantasy elements. None of them is completely equivalent to today's science fiction, but in their intersection and interaction, the local science fiction narrative has broken ground.

3. Internal Contradictions

The innovation of literary concepts can promote the appearance of creative work, but this does not mean the immediate appearance of the actual achievement

10 "Only the fiction of our people, whenever it goes to the exhausted state of thinking, it will bring in the gods and monsters as a turning point. While Westerners are good at using the truth of science to explain...without the illusory and unconvincing words, that's why it is valuable." Sun Baoxuan. *Forgetting Shanlu Dairy* (vol. 2), Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2015, 950. Print.

11 Editorial Board of Encyclopedia of China. *Chinese Literature*. Beijing: China Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1986, 353. Print.

of creation. The same is true of science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty.

On the one hand, supporters of science fiction praise it as an ideal vehicle for popularizing science. This view was particularly common at the beginning of the “revolution in fiction.” Take several translations published in 1903 as examples. Bao Tianxiao, the translator of *The Iron World*, believed that “science fiction is the forerunner of the civilized world. There are people who don’t like science books, but no one who doesn’t like science fiction, which is the quickest way to introduce civilized thoughts” (Chen 620). The translator of *Airship in the Sky*, Hai Tian Du Xiao Zi, declared, “It’s unnecessary to force people to study a scientific book. This is what fiction is good at. Today, with the trend of importing Western European knowledge, there are a great number of new books, translations, and printings. If you want to get twice the result with half the effort and popularize it all over the country, please start with science fiction” (Chen 642). Lu Xun in his youth, after translating Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, said, “Countless fictional works of our country were talking about love and the past, satirizing the time or describing ghostly phenomena, only science fiction is very rare. Making up for the lack of wisdom and knowledge, is really a focus...Therefore, to overcome the shortcomings of today’s translation and to guide the Chinese people, we must start with science fiction” (163-164). As a result, science fiction not only appeared in various kinds of books and journals but also in scientific journals such as *Science World* and *A Spot of Science (Ke Xue Yi Ban)* from time to time, bringing readers new aesthetic experiences and reading interests: “When I read *A Journey Under the Sea* and *The Iron World* with worship, I realized that they have endowed our people with dreams of science and art, from which the great power of Chinese people can be imagined” (Song 1903).

On the other hand, despite the expectation of readers and the example of foreign works, local attempts at science fiction writing were not ideal, leaving few masterpieces. Part of the reason is the literary environment. As Chen Dakang observed, the social function of modern fiction has been overstated, bearing the burden of “improving mass governance.” At the same time, the form of newspaper serialization and the considerable reward made the author write in haste, leaving no time for him to think deeply, and calmly deal with the dramatic changes and colorful social life. As a result, although modern fictional works “are quite numerous, it is difficult to find one or two masterpieces among them” (145).

In addition to these general problems, the development of science fiction faced some challenges.

Firstly, due to historical limitations, many writers of fiction in the late Qing

Dynasty were born in a traditional culture and did not receive a systematic and complete modern scientific education. For example, Liang Qichao was a “recommended man” (*juren*) in the Chinese examination system. Xu Nianci and Bao Tianxiao had both attained the rank of “distinguished talent” (*xiucai*) and later learned foreign languages. So, they could both write and translate works. Xu Zhiyan was born in a family of officials and was immersed in family learning when he was young. They have many experiences in education, teaching new theories, and compiling encyclopedias, compendia, and newspapers, which proves that they can have a good understanding of Western learning through individual efforts. However, scientific knowledge was not their area of specialization. Take Wu Jianren, the author of *New Story of the Stone* (1908), as an example. He studied and worked in the Jiangnan Arsenal for fourteen years, engaging in copying, drawing, and dealing with Western knowledge day and night. “In learning and method, it could be said that there was nothing that he did not look through”; however, after reading the Western books translated by the Jiangnan Arsenal, he felt troubled by the incoherency of order, the indeterminacy of definition, and the unclear meaning, “eighty to ninety percent of people are at a loss when opening those books” (Li 12). Although he gained some scientific knowledge, he often knew it without understanding the underlying principles. The rest was left to guesswork: “I wish I could meet a knowledge explorer and keep him around” (Wu 259-260). Under such unfavorable conditions, it is indeed not easy to write works comparable to foreign science fiction.

Secondly, when science fiction is regarded as a tool for the popularization of science, its inherent contradictions will be highlighted. “Ideals” should be recast by science,” but can “fiction” be competent for this task? Doubts have been expressed. A chivalrous person thinks, “the nature of literature is suitable for virtuality, not for reality, therefore, science fiction should not occupy the first place in the field of fiction.”¹² Lin Chuanjia also asks, “If we study science fiction instead of science, can we benefit the wisdom of the people? Or is it just a matter of ignoring the essence” (148)? The tension between science and fantasy has indeed troubled readers. *The New World Fiction Society* reminds readers that reading new fiction requires certain new knowledge, otherwise readers will mistakenly regard Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth* as a story of “underground traveling magic” as seen in the legend *Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen Yanyi*) or mistakenly regard the story of *The Airship* as the magic of flying through the clouds in *Journey*

12 Chivalrous Person. “Series Talk of Fictions.” *Xin Xiaoshuo*, No. 1 in its second year.

to the West. Seen through the eyes of old fiction, readers fail to understand many ideas in new fiction. Thus, it becomes a question of whether to acquire knowledge through fiction or to appreciate fiction through knowledge. In fact, when facing the science fiction story *Black Planet*, some readers were at a loss: “the whole story describes a black planet’s collision with the sun, which breaks through the outer shell of the sun, with its elements scattering to the earth and burning up. Aside from this, there are no other facts. Scientists may have something to look for, but fiction readers will not understand” (Chen 992). Readers who enjoyed studying mechanical manufacturing, especially aeronautical technology, encountered other problems when faced with Verne’s plot to land a man on the moon in a giant shell like a cannonball: “How can people not be suffocated inside those cannonballs? Won’t they be killed by heat when shot out of the cannon? Or be killed by the shaking as they travel through space? Because those who are happy to read are really into innovative stories, but it does not promote ideals” (Hong 318).¹³

Verne has been widely praised but is still subject to criticism. Native science fiction is naturally harder to admire. *The New Era (Xin jiyuan)* criticizes fiction writers in the past who could only use historical books or events like a blueprint but never wrote about the future. However, the author could only think of two positive examples in translation, making no mention of the works of their own kind in our country (Bihe 1989). When collecting fiction, *Xin Xiaoshuo* Series Press requested national fiction and ideal fiction in both categories of “original works and translations, writing or translating,” while its standard for science fiction (*kexue xiaoshuo*) required “exclusively translated foreign works” (Chen 1057).

Readers with insufficient scientific literacy may find it difficult to appreciate, and those with sufficient scientific literacy may find it absurd. The dilemma of science fiction” coupled with its poor performance, makes it hard to convince the public of the genre’s popular science function. As a matter of fact, after the literary revolution, doubts regarding the utilitarian view of fiction soon emerged. In 1907, *The Forest of Fiction (Xiaoshuolin)*, which focused on the aesthetic orientation of fiction, commenced publication. Huang Ren, the chief editor, believed that China’s national autonomy, educational reform, scientific research, and industrial development were all in a superficial stage, while the output of fiction was

13 However, in his own science fiction drama “Journey of the Electric Ball,” Hong Bingwen doesn’t talk about the issues either, because if this fiction discusses the method of ball manufacturing and manipulating instead of ball riding, it can be called the study of the electric ball, which is not allowed in the field of fiction. Therefore, to correspond to the purpose of fiction, it is necessary to describe it as ball riding.

expanding rapidly, which would inevitably result in shoddy work. In fact, many works in the name of “improving society” were actually “expressing the pursuit of lovers with music and dance; dressing up demons and ghosts in the masks of magnetoelectric sound and light” (Huang 1907). Later, Zhou Zuoren, who along with his brother, Lu Xun, was obsessed with science fiction, expressed a similar sentiment: the real power of fiction lies in “shifting human feelings.” It is wrong to popularize historical knowledge with historical fiction and scientific knowledge with science fiction (113).

However, it is precisely this kind of strange image of the times “dressing up the of demons and ghosts in masks of magnetoelectric sound and light” (Huang 1907) that proves the prestige of science at that time while helping us to see the incipient period of Chinese science fiction.

Out of national pride, some critics in the late Qing Dynasty tried to explain that fictional works such as *Flowers in the Mirror* (*Jinghua yuan*) and *Quell the Bandits* (*Dangkou zhi*) fall under the category of science fiction or somewhere close to it.¹⁴ Indeed, in ancient China, there are magnificent myths and legends as well as technical fantasy stories such as Yanshi’s creation of human beings, Lu Ban’s creation of wooden kites, and Qi Gongguo’s flying car. During the Ming Dynasty, Li Yu wrote *Twelve Towers* (*Shi’erlou*), a story about a talented scholar and a beautiful woman with a plot driven by Western telescopes. Later, in modern times, there was a story named *Quell the Bandits* (1853), which implanted white inventors into Shuibo Liangshan of the Song Dynasty, melding military technology fanaticism with battles between gods and demons. However, while these works reveal the development of local fantasy, it was only after the *Jiawu* year (1894), when modern ideas such as the scientific spirit, empiricism, rationalism, and evolutionary theory began to shock people’s minds, that the moment of disciplining and compiling the uninhibited fantasy of the pre-scientific era arrived.

This discipline is based on critiques of old fiction and aims at shaping new fiction. After the Taiping Rebellion in the late 19th century, many people blamed the old fiction for the evil monsters that made people stupid. Qiu Weixuan said that “the theory of gods and monsters is fragmented, especially in *Journey to the West* and *Investiture of the Gods* which feature vast invisible powers” (47-48). The Fiction Reform Society also believed:

14 Chivalrous Person’s “Series Talk of Fictions” in *Xin Xiaoshuo*, No. 1 in its second year, Ding Yi’s “Series Talk of Fictions,” No. 3 in its second year, and Wu Jianren’s “Miscellaneous Remarks” on *Xin Yue Xiaoshuo* both have the same arguments.

Fiction revels in talk of gods and monsters; ascents to heaven to become Buddhas; blessings offered and evils repented; learning miraculous skills from immortals; and fights with secret treasures. With all the dazzling strange things, fiction is devoted to the depiction of magical stories. The Bandits of Bai Lian and The Eight Trigrams were so perplexed by fiction that they tried to make a riot. In the Gengzi year's Boxer Rebellion (1900), their ideas put China in trouble several times. Their talk of spirit possession or the inheritance of magical treasures, we can realize that all of them come from fiction. (He 1902)

By the logic of such a condemnation, if the fiction writer wants to write fantastical stories and show off their secret and powerful strength, he must rely on the prestige of science. *The New Era* (1908) describes a world war in 1999. Although it obviously narrates in the fighting modes depicted in traditional magic fiction, portraying both sides of the war constantly produce mysterious magic weapons such as an "abyssal lens" (*dong jiu yuan*) and "soul stealing sand," (*zhui hun sha*) the author explains each artifact one by one, describing each has having been invented by a Western scientist in a certain year. In advertisements, publisher Forest of Fiction Society (*Xiaoshuolin she*) reminds readers that "imagined scientific discoveries propel a war between white and yellow. When seen by the uninitiated, the implements they use are mistaken for the magic weapons of the Sages of Ghost Valley and the Old Lady of Mt. Lishan, so the people and the time of their inventions are explained. Those endowed with good memory will know that these descriptions are not mere imagination."¹⁵ Therefore, readers will never see the magic of the immortals in the book. It must be balloons and submarines that lead scientists into the sky and underwater instead. As for the swordsman stories like *The New Seven Warriors and Five Legacies* (*Xin Qi Xia Wu Yi*) (1909), the swordsmen are also equipped with advanced equipment such as "steamboats," "electric lightsabers," and "electric light stones." Perhaps it was not enough for the heroes in the new era to punish evil and establish a reputation, and all these "are invented based upon biology, optics, chemistry, and electricity. One day when China makes scientific progress in the future and invents various kinds of instruments, how can we know whether they will match this book or not" (Chen 1821)?

15 "Introducing New Books." *The Forest of Fiction*, No. 10, 1908. For English translation and more on *The New Era*, see Jia Liyuan, "'Soul-Stealing Sand': War and Time in Xin Jiyuan [The New Era]." Ed. Tr. Nathaniel Isaacson. *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2018): 1-23. Print.

Of course, the discipline of science is often superficial. *Two Souls* (*Shuang Linghun*, 1907), for example, tells the story of an Indian's dead soul entering a Chinese brain, giving one person two souls. It is a fable. However, the author, Peng Yu, has devised a set of electrical theories. Besides electricity with positive and negative charges, there is "nourishing electricity," which can connect all things, but "two-hearted people" have "magic particles" in their hearts, turning their souls into "blocking material," for instance. At the end of the story, the author attached an argumentative essay, "Cultivating the Soul," which discussed the relationship between "electricity," "qi," "power," "soul and spirit" as well as "yin and yang" and claims that electricity proves that good people could go to heaven after death and evil people will go to Hell after death (Ya 406-407). The phenomenon of interpreting ghosts and gods with electricity was not unique to the late Qing Dynasty. In his *Handout on Monsters*, Inoue Enryō commented, "Since the advent of electrical theory, all things have been explained by the influence of electricity for a while. If we can't explain an inexplicable monster, the electrical effect may answer, just as the unknown was attributed to God in the Middle Ages" (278-279). The fact that the monsters in the world want to shelter themselves under science shows not only the tenacity of monsters, but also the rising prestige of science. As the legitimate source of fantasy elements in fiction, science has also been borrowed, imitated, and appropriated by various fiction writers. Before and after the Sino-Japanese War in 1894-1895, the important division of local scientific imagination came into being, which led to the first wave of Chinese science fiction.

Unfinished Comments

"Science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty" is a retrospective invention of genealogy, seeking the origins of Chinese science fiction after its development and maturity. In fact, it is only the consciousness of creating a genealogy for Chinese science fiction that can guide researchers to identify the counterpart of science fiction in China at the beginning of the twentieth century. Otherwise, we will refocus on historical materials, which will give rise to another academic issue. Therefore, we don't have to carefully avoid referring to the works of the late Qing Dynasty as science fiction (*kehuan*). Instead, we should set aside our opinions and let these works help us to understand the meaning of science fiction. In terms of word formation, the prepositive attribute "late Qing Dynasty" already contains the specificity of early Chinese science fiction, so there is no need to use the term "science fantasy" or other words to specify.

This kind of specificity derives from the fiction writers' new knowledge learned

from broken chapters and newspapers at the beginning of the twentieth century. They got inspiration from it and led the readers to fly into the sky or sea, dream of a great harmonious world, or express their anguish in difficult times. In this process, the encounter between “science” pursuing reality and “fiction” featuring imagination raises the question of how to categorize fantasy. This problem has driven several related labels to undergo historical tests. Through elimination, variation and combination, the concept of “science fiction” finally emerged.¹⁶ Of course, it is difficult to study the evolutionary process of the concept of science fiction in Chinese because it involves the long-lasting “translingual practice”¹⁷ between French, English, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and other languages, as well as the complex meaning of important concepts such as science and literature in different periods of history. This paper engages in only a preliminary discussion. More in-depth work remains for the future.

As for “science fiction in the late Qing Dynasty,” please consider Yasushi Nagayama’s comments on the origin of science fiction in Japan:

Ideas and the birth of the genre of certain works are not unrelated, but they are not necessarily at the same time...It requires us to be deeply moved to recognize the fact that works of science fiction were born before the concept of science fiction.

Through future fiction, the future is presented as the definite past. This

16 Previously, researchers such as Ye Yonglie and Guo Jianzhong had argued that the Chinese term “fantasy” in “Science Fantasy Fiction” originated from the translation of Russian concepts (Ye Yonglie. *On Literature about Science*. Beijing: Science Popularization Press, 1980, pp.93-94.). Guo Jianzhong further pointed out that “Science Fiction” in Chinese does not conform to the original meaning of Science Fiction, and its substitution of the term “Science Fiction” before 1949 “has greatly hindered the development of the literary style of this scientific age in China,” and further advocated that the “correct translation” of “Science Fiction” should be reused today (Guo Jianzhong. “Translation of Science Fiction.” *Shanghai Journal of Translators for Science and Technology*. No. 2 (2004),p52.). However, according to the author, this is not the case. As early as December 25, 1930, Chen Jun used the term “scientific fantasy” in his article “Can We Communicate with the Planets” published in *Oriental Magazine*, Vol. 27, No. 24. 17 February 17, 1936. Tianjin Ta Kung Pao published an advertisement for a scientific fantasy film, *A New World Fifty Years Later*; On August 15, 1946, the Shen Bao reported “the death of the famous British writer Wells,” which quoted “Reuters London’s telegram on 13th,” saying that Wells’ works included “science fiction.” Obviously, the formation process of “science fantasy” in Chinese is much more complicated, and the author is conducting a further investigation on this issue.

17 Regarding the concept of “interlingual practice”, see Liu, He. *Translingual Practice* (Revised Version), Tr. Song Weijie et al. Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House, 2014. Print.

is the expression of the will of people to survive by steering the present with a firm belief. For the people of the era associated with classical science fiction, what they acquired was an idea and a way of living: the possibility of the future is in their own hands (3).

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