The Chinese Sci-Fi Fandom and the Making of *The Three-Body Problem* as a Cultural Icon

Shuwen Yang (Stanford University)

Abstract

Using *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy as an example, this paper provides a chronological overview of the development of Chinese sci-fi fandom and close readings of selected grassroots fan productions. The fan culture fostered by *The Three-Body Problem* fan community is already phenomenal and should not be viewed solely as a transitory byproduct of the trilogy's popularity; rather, it embodies a participatory culture intrinsic to Chinese science fiction.

It is essential to contextualize this fandom within the landscape of the rapidly expanding accessibility to the Internet and the burst of online literature, which can help explore the following questions: How might sci-fi fan fiction redefine the sci-fi genre itself? How do fans construe the themes of Liu's novels, and what do their reinventions reflect about our society? In this article, I argue that Chinese science fiction engenders a realm for grassroots reinvention and creative reinterpretation, as well as harboring the potential for content democratization in the digital age. Furthermore, I posit that examining Chinese sci-fi fandom sheds light on netizen democratization, official-grassroots cooperation, and gender dynamics, which can offer valuable insights into the future development of Chinese sci-fi.

Keywords: Chinese sci-fi, Fandom Studies, *The Three-Body Problem*, Liu Cixin, sci-fi fan

Introduction

The Three-Body Problem trilogy, written by Liu Cixin and published from 2008 to 2010, is undeniably one of the most renowned contemporary Chinese science fiction works. Its significance is evident not only in its broad concept, commer-

cial success, global readership, and numerous awards but also in the profusion of fan productions associated with it. *The Three-Body Problem* fandom has flourished across various time periods and platforms, starting from fan fiction on platforms like ShuimuTsinghua (SMTH) BBS and Baidu Tieba in 2010 to a large number of derivative videos on Bilibili in 2014. Remarkably, even before the official production of *The Three-Body Problem* television series by Tencent and Netflix, many fans had already undertaken their own creative endeavors and produced the Minecraft animation of the trilogy, *My Three Body* (*Wode santi*, 2014).

While Anglophone research already encompasses a substantial body of research on science fiction fandom, there has been relatively little and unsystematical study in the Chinese-language field. This paper argues that fan culture fostered by *The Three-Body Problem* fan community is already phenomenal and should not be viewed solely as a transitory byproduct of the trilogy's popularity; rather, it embodies a participatory culture intrinsic to Chinese science fiction (later referred to as sci-fi in this paper). It is essential to contextualize this fandom within the landscape of the rapidly expanding accessibility to the Internet and the burst of online literature. How might sci-fi fan fiction redefine the sci-fi genre itself? Is it possible that sci-fi fandom also plays a significant role in the popularization of science? How do fans construe the themes of Liu's novels, and what do their reinventions reflect about our society? This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the Chinese sci-fi fandom, taking *The Three-Body Problem* series as a case study. It argues that Chinese science fiction engenders a realm for grassroots reinvention and creative reinterpretation, as well as harboring the potential for content democratization in the digital age.

Discussions, communities, and fan productions revolving around Liu's works, especially *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy, have emerged sporadically on various online platforms, which can be roughly categorized into three distinct stages. The first stage (2000–2010) unfolded on Baidu Tieba and Shuimu Tsinghua (SMTH) BBS, where it was mainly the male intellectuals who engaged in in-depth discussions about the trilogy and produced fan fiction known for its "hard sci-fi" features. Noteworthy within this stage is the Three-Body Problem Bar, an online community where fans created a virtual "civilization" and later documented its detailed history. As early as the phase was, key topics such as copyright, censorship, and the concept of "democracy" already played central roles in the fan discourse, foreshadowing their continued relevance in present-day discussions.

The second stage (2011–present) witnessed a proliferation of fan productions in new media formats, particularly on platforms like Bilibili and Weibo. This marked a

notable shift from a small circle of fans primarily focused on literary work formats to a broader dissemination of content through mainstream media channels, thus paving the way for the eventual commercial filming of the trilogy. From this stage onward, fan productions should not be solely viewed as derivative works but instead recognized as entities that are open to appropriation and reimagining by the media industries.

During the period spanning 2015 to the present, which partially overlaps with the second stage, slash literature and comics created by female fans became more and more visible. In the early stages, the fan community was male-dominant, with an emphasis on exploring the scientific and technological aspects of the trilogy. It was not until around 2015, following the popularization of Lofter, that more female fans began posting their own fan productions on the platform, leading to the emergence of a distinct slash culture. The three stages will be discussed in detail in this paper, following a short literature review.

Following this periodization, the details of content democratization can be sorted out in three aspects. Firstly, languages from the trilogy become strategies for fans to form a community, circumvent censorship, and provide a possibility to discuss issues at the national level. Fans are able to borrow the expressions from the trilogy to testify to their actual participation in events such as "running a government" and "writing a historiography." The two examples are San Ti Bar and Tixiao Tongjian. Furthermore, fans' recreation of the original text also brings hybridity to sci-fi, moving beyond the Western "hard sci-fi" tradition to incorporate traditional Chinese cultural elements. Fan creations open up new possibilities for addressing questions of "Chineseness" and the future direction of Chinese sci-fi.

In the second stage, fan creations on newer media platforms precede business investments, with fans' ideas becoming source material for producers. This allows fans to infuse their own concepts into the works. Examples include the trilogy animation on Bilibili and role casting/role-playing events on Weibo. The third stage highlights how female fans utilize online slash literature as a kind of hidden archive to document the "queerness" not only within sci-fi texts but also in their interactions within the community. They successfully insert themselves back into the sci-fi narrative.

Literature Review

The Three-Body Problem fandom has thrived over an extensive period of time. For example, the term "dimensional reduction" (*jiangwei daji*) has gained wide usage in the IT industry, resulting in the publication of several books that analyze

classic business cases. Much like cultural studies scholar Constance Penley's observations regarding *Star Trek* fandom, in China, an astonishingly complex popular discourse about civic, social, moral, and political issues is filtered through the idioms and ideas from the trilogy.

This paper situates *The Three-Body Problem* fandom in the thread of Constance Penley's study on *Star Trek* fandom back in the 1990s and Henry Jenkins's study on "convergence culture" in the twenty-first century. In the study of American sci-fi fandom, Penley argues that the *Star Trek* TV show has been borrowed by both NASA to reinforce its public standing and female slash writers who rewrite the storyline and establish their subjectivity in sci-fi. Contemporarily, Jenkins studies the convergence of old and new media, through which the fans work as collective intelligence to democratize the original works and form a participatory culture, which further complicates the forms of fandom and fan fiction. Following Jenkins's idea, in discussing the context of fandom of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*), Tian Xiaofei compares the changes brought about by the Internet and new media forms in the contemporary moment to the Tang–Song transition in Chinese history, when "new social and cultural structures, new forms of information dissemination, and new ideologies and concepts" emerged (266). The technology of the Internet is playing a crucial part in reshaping the Chinese literary and cultural landscape, where sci-fi stands out for both its literary and technological features, thus closely related to the web culture in China.

While fan fiction has been studied structurally and systematically in Anglo-American research, in the field of Chinese Studies, research to date has generally focused on Chinese online literature and slash literature as a whole body of texts; for example, Hockx's work on Chinese Internet Literature focuses on "how Chinese Internet Literature challenges literary conventions and hierarchies, and how it operates within the specific context of the PRC's publishing system" (44). Shaohua Guo's monograph *The Evolution of the Chinese Internet* focuses on the development of online platforms and the different logics people interact with them. Jin Feng's monograph *Romancing the Internet* focuses on female-written online literature where women create cultural capital for themselves. In fan fiction studies, Tian's article "Slashing the Three Kingdoms" explores the *Three Kingdoms* fan productions, specifically slash literature, while also touching upon other forms such as music videos (viddings). However, only until very recently did several panels discuss Chinese sci-fi fandom, the study of which is still an ongoing process. On Weibo and Wechat official accounts, San Feng has put together many valuable materials about fans' derivative works, and He Liu did a series of reviews on the fan communities

in Chinese universities, which are highly valuable. This paper aims to fill the gap in Chinese sci-fi fandom studies, introducing what Chinese sci-fi fandom is and how the lens of fandom can provide us with different perspectives to examine the sci-fi industry in the digital age.

Most of the fan productions are based on *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy. While fans of the trilogy or Liu Cixin's other works cannot wholly represent general fans of Chinese sci-fi, this paper chooses the trilogy and its fandom as a representative example and aims to briefly delineate an overview of domestic fan productions. The fans studied in this paper specifically refer to the people who love the trilogy and create fan works, while posts and discussions by general Internet users are also included and studied in order to explore the larger significance of this new literary, cultural, and social phenomenon.

Early Stage

SMTH BBS and The Three-Body X

The first published fan fiction of the trilogy, titled *Three-Body X: The Redemption of Time* (*Santi X: Guanxiang yuzhou*), made its initial appearance as a serialized piece on SMTH BBS and the Liu Cixin Bar in Baidu Tieba, starting from 5 December 2010. Its author, the fervent Liu Cixin's fan Bao Shu, finished the entire fan fiction within a mere seventeen days (Bao "Postscript"). *Three-Body X* swiftly gained widespread recognition and managed to capture the attention of Yao Haijun, the editor of *Science Fiction World* at that time, who played a crucial role in facilitating its eventual publication. Notably, because it emerged online shortly after the release of *Death's End*, it became one of the earliest works of fan fiction dedicated to the trilogy and the only one to be published. Bao Shu's decision to share the novel on SMTH BBS and the Liu Cixin Bar in Baidu Tieba itself offers a tantalizing clue for tracing where the earliest fandom takes shape and provides insights into the nature of these platforms and their respective user bases.

SMTH BBS is a popular bulletin board system in Chinese university circles, originating in 1995 at Tsinghua University. Renowned for its preeminence in scientific and engineering research domains, Tsinghua served as the cradle of this virtual community. Its core ethos has been encapsulated by the motto, "The intellectual enclave rooted in Tsinghua, bridging the realms of ivory towers and the tangible world of society."

In the same year that the BBS was launched, a sci-fi discussion section was es-

tablished, which became the earliest online forum for Chinese Internet users to discuss sci-fi. However, during the late 1990s, as Internet accessibility remained limited, the roster of registered users on SMTH BBS barely surpassed several dozen by the close of 1995. It was only in 1996 when the user count surpassed three digits (*Wikipedia*). The BBS experienced multiple transformations and periods of closure in its early years due to political exigencies. A significant milestone occurred on 16 March 2005 when access to SMTH BBS was restricted to on-campus IPs. Nevertheless, in early 2006, it resumed accessibility to external IPs, contingent upon users confirming their identity through a valid email account (*Wikipedia*). Numerous discussion groups on the platform remained tightly controlled, barricading themselves against external engagement, thereby constraining access to this space.

The earliest users of the BBS primarily constituted young students, educators from eminent Chinese institutions, and individuals of erudition who possessed Internet access and valid email credentials. In essence, the typical participants were academic scholars or intellectuals who had embraced emerging media technologies and honed their adeptness in engaging with these burgeoning spheres of knowledge exchange. Bao Shu, as a student at Peking University, conformed to this archetype. Although detailed user identities are unavailable, the attributes of the platform offer insights into the earliest online sci-fi enthusiast community in China.

While the original website is no longer accessible, the content of *Three-Body X* and the recognition it gained provide valuable insights into its audience persona. The first segment of *Three-Body X*, recounted from the perspective of Yun Tianming, delves into how the Trisolarans meticulously analyze Yun Tianming's cognitive processes and study his strategies to combat Earth during and after the Deterrence Era. The latter portion, from a third-person narrative, progressively unveils the cosmological history of the Universe, portraying the transition from a state with ten dimensions to a singular one-dimensional existence. This narrative mirrors the philosophical underpinnings of Lao Tzu's aphorisms, such as "Tao begat one; One begat two; Two begat three; Three begat all things," and the idea that "everything converges into unity." This can be seen as an exemplar of how Chinese sci-fi adeptly weaves traditional Chinese cultural elements into its fabric.

In a deft manner, Yun Tianming endeavors to restore the Universe to its original ten-dimensional state, often referred to as the "Edenic Age." In contrast, the original work leaves unexplored how the Trisolarans capture Yun's brain, as well as the future of Universe 647, where Cheng Xin leaves behind five kilograms of Ecosphere. Bao Shu's complementary work attests to the role of fan fiction in providing comprehensive supplements to the original narrative, in line with Pen-

ley's observation that "some fans feel compelled to elaborate on the rudimentary aspects of science and technology in the canon, and these enthusiasts have predominantly been male" (117). In the new version of SMTH BBS today, the sci-fi section continues to be dominated by discussions centered on the intricacies of the scientific and technological dimensions of the trilogy. This underscores the enduring fascination of its user base with the scientific and technical facets of these literary works.

Aside from technological details, it is also worth noting that, as Bao Shu says in his postscript, one of his intentions is also to compensate for Yun Tianming's unfulfilled love for Cheng Xin (Bao "Postscript"). In the first part, the only listener of Yun Tianming's experience is AA, who in the original work is the assistant of Cheng Xin and meets Yun on DX3906 and later lives a happy life with him. The fan fiction is faithful to the original work as Yun Tianming and AA are the only human beings left on DX3906, but throughout the story, AA is erotically portrayed as a "naked" and "beautiful white body." Because Yun Tianming is emotionally unstable when recounting his sufferings in the Trisolar world, AA has sexual intercourse several times with him to express her love for him and calm him down. Sophon, the manager of Universe 647, also appears naked when Yun Tianming first meets her because, as the owner of the universe, Yun does not "set her to wear clothes" (Bao *The Three-Body X*). The readers of the work also focus much on sex; according to Bao Shu's postscript, although his original intention of using the "X" in the title was to refer to "uncertain and infinite possibilities," "since everyone says it is related to sex … Well, all right" (Bao "Postscript"). The popularity of *The Three-Body X* and its male fantasies might, to some extent, indicate the gender ratio of its readers and how in 2011, sci-fi, its fan fiction, and the fan platforms were male-dominated.

Liu Cixin himself was also an active user of SMTH BBS, interacting a lot with fans and answering their questions on the platform. While Liu Cixin has agreed to the publication of *The Three-Body X*, he does not hold a highly positive attitude toward fan fiction as a phenomenon. In a 2013 interview with *South Daily*, Liu argues that fan fiction negatively influences the original author. For example, according to Liu, the most significant unfinished plot line is Yun Tianming's story, about which he plans to write another novel, but "the road is blocked so I cannot go further" (Ye). Although he allows the publication of fan fiction, Liu also raises concerns about copyright issues but does not go further into the issue. The tension between the author of the canon and the fan writer, and the issue of copyright emerged very early in this stage but was not systematically dealt with, which requires further explora-

tion in the field of legal studies.

Baidu Tieba (San Ti Bar) and Alternative Historiography

Baidu Tieba, established on 3 December 2003, is one of the most-used Chinese communication platforms during the early twenty-first century. Users may search for a topic-of-interest forum known as a "bar." Liu Cixin Bar is a community where fans of Liu Cixin gathered even before the trilogy was published. While the establishing time of Liu Cixin Bar cannot be traced accurately as Tieba does not allow the function, the earliest post is dated April 2004 and invites the readers to share their general impressions and thoughts on Liu's sci-fi works. Liu has appealed to a number of fans since he published his works in the magazine, and these fans formed the earliest group of trilogy fans. Under the "Digest section" of the Liu Cixin Bar, half of the posts are under the section on Liu Cixin and his works, while the other three sections are on fan productions, the front line of science, and general discussion on sci-fi. The 754 digest posts in these three sections show the users' inventiveness, their passion for sci-fi, and other discoveries in science and technology.

In contrast to SMTH BBS and the Liu Cixin Bar, which are rather loose communities where fans gather and discuss related topics and Liu's works generally, The Three-Body Problem Bar (San Ti Bar) has a more complicated history, as written by a user named 250 yihao zailushang on Bilibili. The fans established a "civilization" in the bar and wrote a detailed historiography about its development. One of the famous pieces is called *Ti Xiao Tongjian*, imitating Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government (*Zizhi tongjian*), a pioneering reference work in Chinese historiography from 1084 AD (Song dynasty) in the form of a chronicle recording Chinese history from 403 BC to 959 AD. The table of contents of *Ti Xiao Tongjian* is still available, but the full text on Tieba has been deleted. Parts of the texts are preserved by fans in an Android app titled Tixiao Tongjian. Below are screenshots of the app and part of the content list (Figures 1–4).
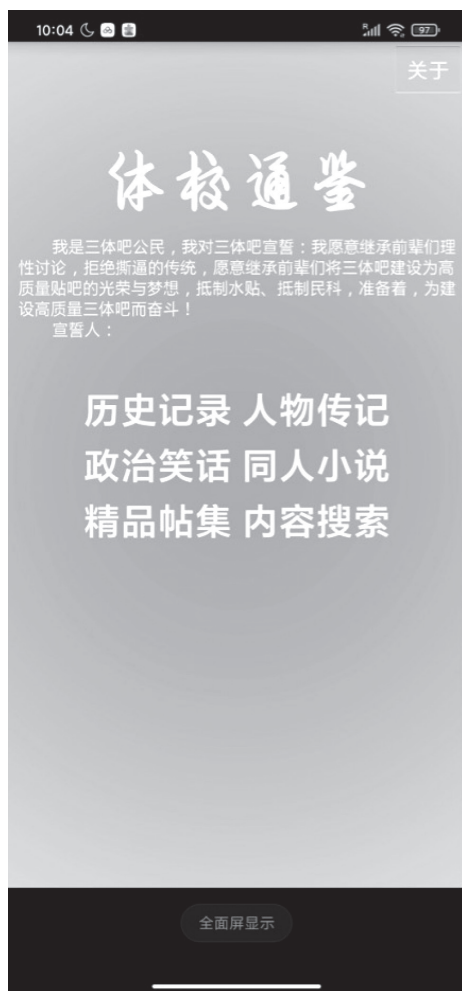
三、政治史

（一）体校时代

（二）圣战

（三）中世纪

（四）第一共和国（田园时代）

（五）番外篇：三体吧远征军

（六）第一共和国（三权分立）

（七）第二共和国（图腾改革）

（八）　番外篇：自爆自吧

（九）第三共和国

四、后记

五、参考资料

Chapter 3	Political History
(1)	The Athletic School Era
(2)	Holly War
(3)	Middle Ages
(4)	First Republic (Edenic Age)
(5)	Extra chapter: The Expedition of San Ti Bar
(6)	First Republic (Separation of Powers)
(7)	Second Republic (Totem Reform)
(8)	Extra chapter: How We Our Own Bar
(9)	Third Republic
Chapter 4	Postscript
Chapter 5	References

Figures 1-4 A screenshot of part of the table of contents of Tixiao Tongjian;
author's English translation.
(Source: 250 一号在路上, https:///www.bilibili.com/read/cv3691789, accessed Aug, 2021)

Several other posts also document the history of the San Ti Bar from 2006 to 2012 and are preserved in San Ti Bar. One of them starts with "Ancient War," an event that happened during the establishment of San Ti Bar. The cause of the "Ancient War" might sound a little bit absurd, as the Chinese characters of *The Three-Body Problem* (三体) are also the abbreviation of Beijing No. 3 Athletic School; thus, the San Ti Bar was initially established by the athletic school students. In June 2006, the fans of Liu Cixin approached to the San Ti Bar and started a quarrel with the students because the fans wanted to use the bar title. The "war" gradually intensified and was even raised into a national issue, with its core debating question being "Which benefits China more? Science and Technology or athletics?" (250 yihao zai lu shang). Despite its "nonsensical" immediate cause, the war, to some extent, demonstrates how Tieba provides Internet users with a possible democratic debating space. More interestingly, the argument that "science and technology" can "benefit China" more indeed defines "sci-fi" from the perspective of the fans. In fans' perception, sci-fi is a genre that promotes science and technology across the nation and enhances China's military power, which might lead us to examine the overlap between military fans and triology fans in the future.

After the four-month "Ancient War," the original manager of the San Ti Bar stepped down. The new manager, Dulander, deleted all the "Ancient War" posts and established the rules of the San Ti Bar. "Congratulations! Science Fiction has

conquered the San Ti Bar" is the post bears witness to the "historic moment" until August 2021. The post cannot be found later.

One of the legacies of the war is that the abbreviation for the athletic school, Ti Xiao, was kept and became the title of a later historiography but also became a way to circumvent censorship on literature bars that happened in June 2016. The author of *TiXiao Tongjian* highly praised the development of the bar. In the preface, he writes,

> Because the majority of its users are highly educated, the bar has a tradition of 'always discussing with rationality instead of getting into catfights.' It has its bar charter, electoral system, and the form of the management team is also based on separation of power. (…) The bar is the first bar ever in Baidu Tieba that retains its democratic system after the user number reaches ten thousand, which is very similar to the Western democratic system ("Tixiao Tongjian", quoted by 250 yihao zailushang).

"TiXiao Tongjian" provides detailed documents of and comments on past bar managers, praising or criticizing their management, and emphasizes the tradition of the bar having "no fear of power." To conclude with these materials, the bar has almost established a democratic civilization that fans take pride in.

Languages and terms from *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy are constantly referred to in the "historical writing." Apart from some of the managers' irresponsibility, censorship also negatively influenced the Bar. Several important events, for example, the one in June 2016 when all the literature bars were censored on Tieba, were also documented in *The History of the San Ti Bar* as a "chaotic time" (*luan jiyuan*), a term from the trilogy. Also, in this period, a large number of posts were deleted, and users stopped posting, so the bar was referred to as the "storyless world" (*wu gushi wangguo*), which is also a quotation from the trilogy, emphasizing the importance of individual storytelling in this democratic system. When there are struggles or revolts in the bar because the users are not satisfied with the bar management, it is recorded as "the gluten sea is back" (*taotiehai huilai le*), in order to portray the chaos, but also, to demonstrate the power of the fans' protest in the bar. Borrowing language from the trilogy, the fans encode their information, imitating the character Yun Tianming, who has to deliver messages to the Earth under surveillance from the Trisolarans. The original work provides a highly metaphorical language that allows users to talk about politics and democracy. Experiences in sci-fi work are "lived" vividly in fan communities in real life. Fans' passionate docu-

mentation also provides an alternative history of the censorship events that were not publicly recorded online and becomes the shared memory of the trilogy fans.

The QiDian (Starting Point): Chinese Online Literature Website

QiDian Chinese Net is a literature website founded in 2003. The website was initially established for the Chinese Magic Fantasy Union but later also became famous for its other genres, such as martial arts, military and war stories, and science fiction. Apart from its genre sections, it also has two large sections for male and female readers. By the end of August 2021, the website had 53,729 pieces of works under the keyword "Three Body (Santi)," with 14,038 of them under "female" and 36,566 under "male."

Another famous fan fiction, *The Three-Body Problem: A Tale of the Post-Milky-Way Era* (*Santi zhi houyinhe jiyuan chuanshuo*), was first serialized on QiDian Chinese Net from January 2015 to March 2015 (San Feng) but was not finished because the author's account was blocked by the online censorship. The complete text is not available today, but according to a summary of the plot (reinforce), the author imagines the development of the starship civilization, which in the original work is only shortly introduced when Zhang Beihai chooses to fly to the planet NH558J2 and thinks that "the new human civilization would forever voyage on a starship" (Liu, *Dark Forest* 648). The unfinished novel spends a large portion on the technology tree, string theory, and quantum mechanics. Therefore, the readers consider it to be "hard sci-fi," which is similar to *Three-Body X: The Redemption of Time* (2011).

Although Qidian is a literature website, and it is hard to trace interactive communities and a whole picture of fandom on it, I still include it because the characteristics of the website can give us some clues about the audience's definition of the genre. Much of the trilogy fan fiction posted on this website combines features of both science fiction and traditional Chinese fantasy, posing questions for the definition of the genre in a Chinese context. More broadly, when we look at online sci-fi nowadays, the popularity of genres like "fantasy," "magic," "martial arts," and "cultivation" (*xiuxian*) in online literature has, to some extent, become elements that Chinese science fiction writers experiment with in their creative process. Online sci-fi literature and fan fiction have gradually gained mainstream recognitions in recent years. In the latest list of "Chinese Science Fiction Galaxy Awards," *We Live in Nanjing* (2021), an online sci-fi novel written by Tianrui Shuofu, won the first prize. Meanwhile, the highly acclaimed film *A Journey to the West* (*Yuzhou tansuo bianjibu*) (2022) brought a sci-fi narrative to rural Sichuan, intertwining with superstitions related to lion statues, donkey-powered mills, and local folklore. This represents

another path in the development of Chinese sci-fi, one that is rooted in folklore, legends, online literature, and grassroots culture.

In the analysis of "Cultivation through C programming language" (*C yuyan xiuxian*), a famous piece that combines cultivation novel (*xiuxian xiaoshuo*) and sci-fi, Jin compares the combination to late Qing translation strategies, when science and technology were introduced to China through building a corresponding relationship between Western scientific terminologies and language in traditional Chinese fantasy (Wang). For example, "chemistry" (*huaxue*) is translated as *jinshi*, referring to the process of turning stone into gold. The website and the tradition of Chinese online literature can be an example of how Chinese fantasy inspires the sci-fi genre and how fan fiction actively influences the mainstream understanding of what sci-fi is.

Summary

While I argue that the early-stage period ends in 2010, fan works created on these platforms and other literature sites continue to exist. In "A List of Works Derived from *The Three-Body* Trilogy," San Feng summarizes forty-one works, ranging from novels to songs, games, cosplays, and even theme restaurants. Among them, there are several unfinished fan fiction and word games posted on Tieba even after 2015. Nonetheless, the periodization makes sense because of the apparent shifts in the medium in the following years, but each website, although more or less experiencing a decline in usage in the change of medium, still sustains its activity and discussions on sci-fi.

In summary, fan fiction and communities centered around Liu Cixin and his trilogy began taking shape in the Liu Cixin Bar while he was still working on the second and third volumes. Initially, discussions about the original work were limited to intellectuals and long-time fans. After the trilogy's publication, fans primarily congregated on SMTH BBS and Baidu Tieba, with SMTH BBS mainly attracting science and technology intellectuals and Tieba having a more diverse user base. Early fandom discussions included topics like democracy, censorship resistance, and more. The Qidian Chinese Literature Website emphasized the importance of discussing science fiction and fantasy in a Chinese context. Overall, the early trilogy fandom was characterized by a male-dominated group focused on "hard-sci-fi," providing a platform for political and resistance discussions and genre definitions.

The Shift to Video Platforms

Fans have always been early adopters of new media technologies; their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production. Fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants. None of this is new. What has shifted is the visibility of fan culture. The Web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production. (Jenkins 131)

These observations by Jenkins apply equally to the Chinese context. While the earlier discussion focused on a limited number of fans celebrating the trilogy, shifts in the media landscape have made fan culture more prominent. When discussing the "unexpected" popularity of the trilogy, Xia Jia also emphasizes its circulation through mass media and the World Wide Web. The trilogy was recommended by a large number of Weibo Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and has generated a series of fan productions such as original theme songs, music videos, cosplay, fan comics, and fan groups adopting the name "ETO," all of which mainly circulate on Weibo (Xia).

Adding to Xia's summary of trilogy fandom, Bilibili should also be included in the discussion, as the theme songs and music videos she mentions mainly originated here. In this section, I analyze Bilibili and Weibo, the two platforms that have hosted numerous fan productions. The argument here is that grassroots convergence of the canon plays a pivotal role in propelling the commercialization of *The Three-Body* trilogy. This fan-driven momentum serves as a cornerstone for the trilogy's transformation into a transmedia franchise. Two key points will be addressed in this section: first, how the current state of media evolution reinforces the right of ordinary individuals to actively contribute to their culture; and second, the need to challenge and redefine the concept of "fan works" as "derivative work."

Bilibili: "When Piracy Becomes Promotion"

Before delving into the platforms, it is worth noting that Chinese fan fiction draws from various cultural traditions, including Western sci-fi fandom (e.g., Star Trek) and Japanese fan fiction subculture. This influence is exemplified by the adoption of the Japanese term *doujin* (*tongren* in Chinese) for fan fiction in China. In her discussion of the *Three Kingdoms* fandom, Tian also highlights that "the more direct influence on Chinese Internet fan fiction came from Japanese fan fiction sub-

culture" (Tian 225).

The Japanese influences do explain why it is Bilibili that cultivates such a variety of trilogy fan productions, as well as why the earliest fan productions of the trilogy in new media mainly take certain forms. Launched in January 2010, Bilibili was originally a video website themed around animation, comics, and games (ACG), renowned as a platform for "two-dimensional space" lovers (*erciyuan aihaozhe*). It has become one of the largest video-sharing platforms where uploaders can post their original or derivative works, with an average of 336 million monthly active users in the fourth quarter of 2023 (Thomala). For the purpose of user expansion, the website has gradually become a comprehensive platform where there are different sections of topics of interest, including science and technology, military, fashion and beauty, music, dance, etc. Despite all these shifts and expansion it experienced, the forms of posted works mainly keep the conventions from the ACG subculture. The earliest fan productions of the trilogy include fan-made "character songs," "vidding music videos," and animation.

One of the representative fan productions on Bilibili is *My Three Body* (*Wode santi*, 2014), made by Shen You Ba Fang and his team. It follows the patterns of ACG culture, using Minecraft as the method to create an animated world to narrate the story of the first volume. The whole crew functions as a virtual community, and after the first episode was launched, more and more fans volunteered to join the team and contributed their professional skills. Shen You Ba Fang talks about his intention to create the work, "as a fan of the trilogy, a lot of people ask me 'what is *The Three-Body Problem*?' I just want to let them know" (Qiu). It is another example of how the fan community works as a collective intelligence with inventiveness and determination.

Other fan productions posted on Bilibili include music videos written and edited for specific characters from the trilogy, which draw out aspects of the characters' emotional lives or otherwise get inside their heads. There are also many explanatory videos of the trilogy, where uploaders summarize the plot into ten-minute videos so that the viewers can be quickly familiarized with the content of the books. These types of videos are causing great debate as the copyright issue is difficult to deal with, but at the same time, these works are rather effective promotion strategies, with some reaching high-quality standards. For instance, a video called "Reading *The Three-Body Trilogy* in 84 Minutes," uploaded by Wen Yue Xiao Qiang, received 111,280,000 views in total. This video features off-screen narration summarizing the plot, accompanied by excerpts from various films and TV shows to visualize the narration's content. Viewers lauded the video as "the actual first *San Ti*

movie" while criticizing the unsuccessful commercial attempts to film the trilogy.

These fan productions primarily stem from affective investments, driven by the passion to promote the work and provide emotional compensation for specific characters. A significant catalyst for this surge of fan content on Bilibili was the failed attempt at visualizing the trilogy. A 2019 news report titled "The Visualization of *The Three-Body* Trilogy in 10 Years: Why It So Hard?" traces the unsuccessful journey of the trilogy's film adaptation (Tang). The initial adaptation efforts began in 2009 when the CEO of YooZoo Interactive discussed the first volume's copyright with Liu Cixin. In 2013, YooZoo Interactive acquired the novel's copyright and officially initiated the film adaptation. However, the project collapsed after just two months of shooting due to the producer's resignation, with no clear explanation for the next steps. Unconfirmed reports attribute the failure to censorship issues, while other sources suggest that the absence of a sci-fi filmmaking tradition in the Chinese-language film industry and difficulties with special effects contributed to the project's demise because the production team "refused to contact a Hollywood special effects team" (Tang).

Against this backdrop, fan-made visual adaptations of the trilogy gained popularity. In stark contrast to the troubled and unsuccessful official visualization process, the first season of *My Three Body* was released in 2014. Furthermore, in 2015, *Waterdrop*, a tribute to the book *Dark Forest* depicting the traumatic Doomsday Battle, was released and garnered several international awards in subsequent years. A viral comment encapsulated the sentiment, stating, "Fandom overrides the official/commercial productions" (*tongren bisi guanfang*), mocking the failures of official commercial attempts.

When examining companies' attitudes toward fan productions of a particular work, Jenkins categorizes them as "prohibitionist" or "collaborationist." In the case of Chinese sci-fi, corporations in China have found it necessary to collaborate with, and sometimes heavily rely on, fans to aid in the commercialization of the trilogy. Following the success of *My Three Body* season 1 in 2014, it attracted capital investment and further funding. The second and third seasons of *My Three Body* received investments from the San Ti Universe company, with the fan crew becoming an integral part of the corporation. In June 2019, Bilibili, in conjunction with San Ti Universe and YHKT Entertainment, launched *The Three-Body Problem* animation project. It can be argued that fan-created works actually helped Bilibili establish its reputation and culture in animation adaptation, making it a recognized platform for cultivating successful fan animations. In this context, the term "derivative" should be reconsidered, as fan works can no longer be seen solely as derivatives of main-

stream materials but must be acknowledged as open to appropriation and reworking by the media industries themselves.

Weibo, Virtual Communities, and Role-Play

At a similar time as the rise of Bilibili, Weibo was also becoming influential in China, and a large number of trilogy fans started to gather on it. This section takes a fan group called "The Three-Body Problem Weibo Group" (*Santi Weibo hui*) as an example to show how the commercialization of the trilogy attracted fans, and how the fans started to form their own culture against the background of the failed film adaptation.

On 16 October 2014, after the launch of *The Three Body Problem* film project, the representative of YooZoo, the company in charge of the adaptation, established an account called Three Body Problem Film and actively interacted with Weibo fans, inviting users to suggest possible casting, a singer of the theme song, and design logos for the series. On 26 December 2014, a WeChat group was established so that the producer of *The Three Body* film could talk to fans face-to-face and ask their opinions on the adaptation of the work. On 4 May 2015, the Weibo fan group was established, the group limit of which was five hundred people; on 11 June 2015, there were 496 fans in the group. Until today, 3 August 2021, 393 people remain in the group.

Figure 5   A Screenshot of Santi Dianying's Weibo, author's own source.

As Weibo also allows the posts and reposts of different types of fan productions, many fan productions are simultaneously posted on Bilibili and Weibo. However, the feature that allows Weibo users to interact with each other under both real and fake identities also cultivates a series of unique phenomena, especially cosplay. Early in 2011, a Weibo account named San Ti—Ye Wenjie appeared online, imitating the character Ye Wenjie by quoting her lines and imitating her tones to talk to Weibo users. "San Ti—Ye Wenjie is also an active user in the Weibo Fan Group." Following her "lead," a number of people changed their nicknames to characters from the trilogy. I was in charge of two Weibo accounts in the fan group, "San Ti—Cheng Xin" and "ETO-Hong Kong." Until today, the account I once used as "ETO-Hong Kong" still has several fans with an "ETO-" prefix.
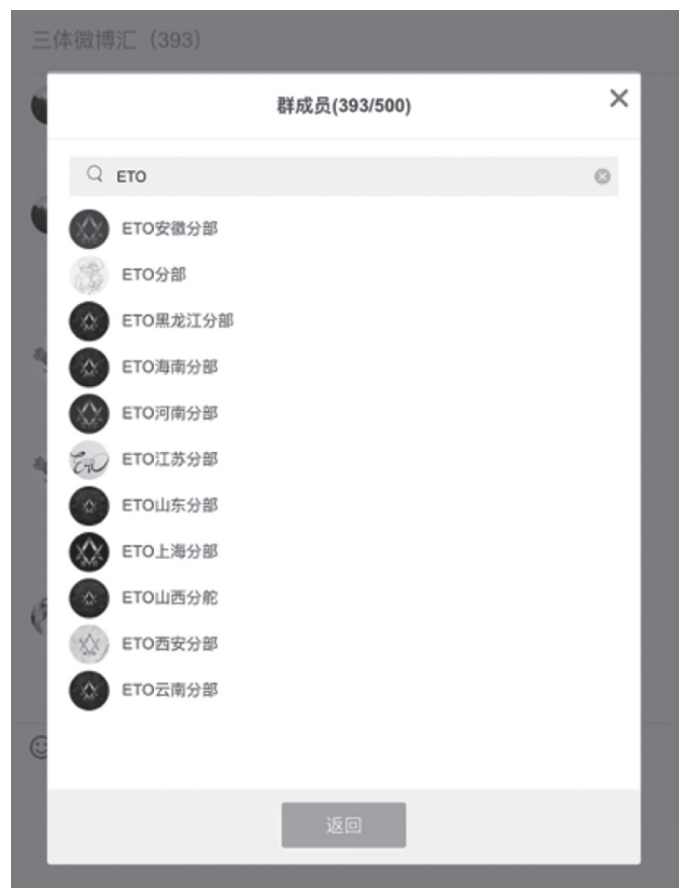
Figure 6 A list of "ETO-" plus "City Name" users, author's own source

The online role-play provides a sense of belonging to a virtual community for the fans of the marginalized sci-fi genre and allows them to live a second life in the sci-fi world. Users with a prefix relate to each other through adopted personas and avatars, tending to view one another as extrapolations of these highly performa-

tive roles. Most of the interactions are in "quoting style" or "dialogue style." Facing COVID-19 in 2020, San Ti—Ye Wenjie still talked the way the character talks. In a post, she quoted, "In nature, nothing exists alone. —Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*," the book that Bai Mulin gave to Ye Wenjie. Several users interacted with "San Ti—Ye Wenjie"; one asked, "Leader, what should we do?" Ye replies, "Prepare the vaccinations." The second user complains about the difficulty of conducting biodemography research, and Ye encourages them by saying, "Comrade, we should be fearless when doing research."

Figure 7   Ye Wenjie's interactions with Weibo users, author's own source

The voices of these fans are indeed widely heard and can also be seen as both affective investments and promotion strategies. In a book titled *I am Liu Cixin*, a collection of interviews and essays on Liu, the preface is a letter to him from "the young woman holding the nuclear bomb" (*hedan nühai*) expressing her love for Liu and his works. In her self-introduction, she identifies herself as the character who briefly appeared on pages 189–212 in the 2008 version of *The Three Body Problem*. Regrettably, her character met its demise at the hands of Da Shi in the book. She explains that her book character has become her identity on Weibo and a part of her life. She goes on to introduce other users adopting characters from the trilogy, including "San Ti—Ye Wenjie," "San Ti—Cheng Xin," "Listening Post 1379," and

even unique usernames like "Ant on the Tomb" and "Luo Ji's Bulletin." These fans meticulously capture minute details from the story, immersing themselves in role-playing, mimicking character voices, and "recreating the joys and sorrows in real life while crafting new plots and sharing their thoughts." The nuclear-bomb girl articulates their motivation as follows: "All of this arises from our humble desire to keep your characters alive because you've said that science fiction is a way of life" (Hedan nühai).

Fan communities emerged on both Bilibili and Weibo for the same reason: initial expectations for, and later disappointment with, the film adaptation of the trilogy. In 2016, members of the Weibo group were among the first to learn that the film might not see the light of day. Consequently, they began discussing what collaborative creative projects they could undertake. One idea was the creation of a radio drama, and several group members volunteered to participate. Although the video drama was ultimately produced by the San Ti Universe Corporation, the discussions in the group and, more broadly, the formation of fan communities on Bilibili and Weibo indicate and contribute to the active involvement of fans in the commercialization of the trilogy from its inception. In essence, sci-fi fans began to take ownership of the trilogy at a relatively early stage.

Slash Literature

A literature platform left out in the discussion of the first stage is Jinjiang Literature City, which, like Baidu Tieba, was also established in 2003. The website is famous for romance novels written by women, as stated in its own slogan, "the largest Chinese-language women's literature website in the world." The earliest fan fiction on this website can be dated back to March 2012, written by user Jiang around one year later than *The Three-Body X*. The piece, titled "*Three-Body Problem* Fan Storiette," is not a complete story but consists of short, scattered pieces on how the characters in the trilogy can be paired as couples. The author imagines that after the "dimensional collapse," the earth's civilization is preserved, and the genes of the dead are kept and cloned in the far future so that all the characters can live at the same time and be paired (Jiang). The couples include Shi Qiang and Luo Ji, Zhang Beihai and Dongfang Yanxu, etc. It has gained an average of 4,874 hits per chapter. Apart from this earliest piece, there are around thirty other pieces of fan fiction of the trilogy on Jinjiang Literature City posted between 2012 and 2021, with around five hundred hits per piece. Compared to the numerous posts in Liu Cixin Bar, San Ti Bar, and SMTH BBS, which reach dozens of thousands, it can be seen that the major users of Jinjiang do not belong to the fan group of the trilogy. To conclude

again, the earliest forms of sci-fi fan fiction of the trilogy were not slash literature written by females, but Baoshu and other fans' fiction, commonly considered hard sci-fi, containing a male fantasy.

Lofter was established in 2011, with its initial marketing positioning it as a community for "artistic" people, namely the ones interested in photography, drawing, fashion, and so on. In 2016, Lofter officially launched its "fan fiction trending list," categorized into place-based sections, including domestic, European and American, Japanese, and other regions.

Figure 8 "Fan Fiction Trending List" on Lofter under different categories, author's own source

The trending hashtags are generated by an algorithm, calculated through four indicators: the number of subscribers, the number of articles published, the number of views, and the amount of interaction (the sum of recommendations, likes, comments, and reposts). As demonstrated in the three images, none of the CPs (couples) are BG (boy and girl), but all BL (boys' love). The trending list proves that Lofter had become the dominant place where female writers post their slash literature works, and the list also attracted more and more fans to the platform. Until today, it is still the most significant fan fiction group specifically for slash literature, opening up a space for the slash subculture. The trilogy also has its hashtags on Lofter. Under the hashtag "The Three-Body Problem," there are 13,262 pieces with 29,050,000 views of the hashtag in total in August 2021. In April 2024, the number has increased to 44,405 pieces. The establishment of the platform and the emergence of slash literature might indeed reciprocally enhance each other, as there is no clear evidence about which one appears first. The female fans' participation might

have started even earlier but only became visible after the platform was established.

The fan fiction and fan community are forming their own culture on Lofter. It is very common for authors to write fiction or draw paintings to express their love for each other. The language used is also unique on this platform. For example, the users refer to the authors they like as "wives/madams" (*taitai*) to show their admiration for them. As Busse argues, the interactions between slash writers are in many cases also sexualized, like the characters in their writings (159). While the users' real identities are hidden, Lofter itself can be considered a platform that welcomes queer performances and fans' own voices, as illustrated in the slash literature that pairs Shi Qiang and Luo Ji together.

To provide a brief overview of what slash production looks like, one example is the fan comics of Shi Qiang and Luo Ji under the "Shi/Luo" tag. These artworks attempt to explore the possible homosexual relationship between two straight male characters, incorporating elements of subculture and expressing subtle erotic feelings that were lacking in the portrayal of the characters in the original works. These fan-produced texts also demonstrate influences from Japan, the Western sci-fi tradition, as well as the pre-modern Chinese literary tradition, as argued in Tian Xiaofei's work. While some of the works are still subject to gender stereotypes, they can nonetheless be interpreted as a resistance to gender discrimination in the trilogy and in the real world. As argued by Hemmann in her analysis of Japanese "media mix" and BL in *doujinshi*, the female gaze has created its own overtly homoerotic readings and interpretations that creatively subvert phallocentrism implicit in many mainstream narratives (Hemmann "*TWC*"). It is not common to see such gender relationships on Chinese official media, and works like this also risk being reported and deleted online. Although authors of such slash works do not often explicitly express their intention of creating such work, and it might be just for fun, the existence of these works still provides a space for the resistance from gender minorities.

Conclusion

The overview of the development of fandom attempts to briefly picture what the sci-fi fandom looks like throughout the past two decades. During this process, issues such as the conflict between authors and fans, fandom's function as a place for democracy, the shift from marginalized culture to mass circulation, and gender issues all become important topics nowadays. It is fair to say that fandom is indispensable to the development of Chinese sci-fi, from the first volume of *Nebula* to the cooperation between the San Ti Universe Corporation and fan communities. Through a study of *The Three-Body Problem* Fandom, we see how the grassroots

fan base forms a foundation for the commercialization of Chinese sci-fi while providing a source of creativity for writers and readers alike.

The 2023 Chengdu Science Fiction World Conference and the release of the Tencent and Netflix adaptation of The Three-Body Problem highlight the ongoing formation of Chinese science fiction fandom. However, many online fandom materials are also transient. More documentation and research of these materials are certainly required in order to further explore the nuances of this evolving fandom and its potential implications.

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Author Profile:

Shuwen Yang is a PhD student in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Stanford University. She is interested in science fiction, online literature, and fandom studies. Email: yangsw@stanford.edu