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The Evolution of Chinese Science Fiction through the Lens of Contemporary Literary History and Technological Change—A Review of Zhan Ling’s *A Study on the Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction*

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Abstract: In her monograph *A Study on the Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction*, Zhan Ling situates the development of Chinese science fiction within a dual framework: the history of contemporary Chinese literature and the global landscape of science fiction. By systematically tracing its historical trajectory and conducting comparative studies of creative differences between Chinese and foreign works, she reconstructs a comprehensive map of the evolution of contemporary Chinese science fiction. The monograph divides science fiction production from 1949 to the early twenty-first century into four distinct periods. Drawing on close textual analyses of hundreds of works, it offers in-depth examinations of the pivotal turning points and internal logics underpinning transitions between these periods. Furthermore, it provides nuanced investigations into representative subgenres such as historical science fiction and cyberpunk narratives featuring cyborgs. Rigorously argued and informed by both literary-historical consciousness and an international perspective, this study not only furnishes scholars with a multidimensional analytical framework but also opens new avenues for science fiction enthusiasts to grasp the distinctive local characteristics and shared

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challenges inherent in Chinese science fiction.

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题目: 当代文学史与技术变革视野下的中国科幻小说流变考察——评詹玲《当代中国科幻小说转型研究》

摘要: 詹玲在《当代中国科幻小说转型研究》专著中，将中国科幻小说的发展置于当代中国文学史与世界科幻文学的双重坐标系下，通过纵向梳理其发展脉络与横向比较中外创作差异，系统重构了中国当代科幻小说的流变图谱。专著将1949年至21世纪初的科幻创作划分为四个时期，立足于数百部作品的文本批评，深入剖析了各个时期转变的关键节点与内在逻辑，并对历史科幻、赛博格等代表性类型进行了细致考察。该书论证扎实，兼具文学史意识与国际视野，不仅为学术界提供了立体的研究框架参考，也为科幻爱好者理解中国科幻的本土特质与普遍困境打开了新的入口。

关键词: 科幻小说；科幻文学史；技术变革；文类转型

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In recent years, the successive breakout successes of acclaimed science fiction works such as *The Three-Body Problem* and *The Wandering Earth*—each transcending their original niche audiences—have catalyzed a widespread surge of interest in the genre across diverse sectors. This burgeoning cultural phenomenon has inspired a growing number of scholars to engage with science fiction literature with renewed enthusiasm, seeking to interpret this emergent focal point in contemporary cultural discourse. A review of existing scholarship reveals that the majority of studies resemble scattered constellations: some concentrate on close readings of individual authors or texts, while others analyze specific, temporally bounded creative phenomena. Although a limited number of works have ventured into macro-historical examinations of the development of Chinese science fiction, their scope is often constrained by the inherent limitations of journal-article length, resulting in analyses that remain superficial or suggestive rather than comprehensive. Consequently, efforts to construct a coherent, integrated historical narrative of Chinese science fiction have frequently fallen short despite scholarly intent. It is precisely within this academic context that Zhan Ling's monograph *A Study on the Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction* (China Social Sciences Press, 2022) emerges as a pathbreaking intervention—one that decisively breaks through the prevailing methodological and historiographical impasse.

Leveraging the distinctive capacity afforded by the format of a monograph, this work transcends the limitations of prior scholarship, which often lacked historical depth and international contextualization. Zhan

Ling situates Chinese science fiction within a dual coordinate system—contemporary Chinese literary history and global science fiction—thereby significantly expanding the horizons of scholarly inquiry in the field. On the one hand, through a longitudinal analysis of the internal connections among different developmental phases of Chinese science fiction and its dynamic interactions with mainstream contemporary literature, she systematically constructs a comprehensive historical map of the genre’s evolution, thereby affirming its distinct position within the canon of contemporary Chinese literary history. On the other hand, by conducting horizontal comparisons between Chinese and global science fiction, she offers an in-depth examination of the foreign influences that have shaped Chinese science fiction and the subsequent processes of localization and transformation. This comparative approach provides valuable theoretical insights for future efforts to articulate and construct the “Chineseness” of Chinese science fiction.

This multidimensional and historically grounded research framework is concretely and meticulously exemplified in the monograph’s meticulous investigation into the origins of science fiction. Although the primary focus of Zhan Ling’s study is contemporary Chinese science fiction, she devotes significant attention in the introduction to tracing the emergence and typological development of the genre from the late Qing dynasty through the modern era. This foundational historical survey provides a robust temporal and conceptual basis for her subsequent analysis of contemporary science fiction’s evolution. In the Chinese context, science fiction as a distinct literary form originated during the late Qing period—a time of profound national crisis marked by internal impoverishment, external imperialist pressures, and widespread calls for reform. Intellectuals such as Wei Yuan (1998, p. 1) articulated the prominent principle of “learning the superior techniques of the barbarians to subdue them”, advocating the adoption of Western scientific and technological advancements as a means to strengthen the nation. As the only literary genre inherently intertwined with science and technology, science fiction was consequently invested with strong Enlightenment expectations. This instrumental orientation was further reinforced by the enduring influence of traditional Chinese intellectual values—particularly the Confucian ideal of “practical learning for statecraft”, which emphasized the applicability of knowledge to real-world governance and societal improvement. Consequently, the “science popularization” function of science fiction was foregrounded from its earliest manifestations. Zhan’s deliberate return to these origins vividly demonstrates her literary-historical consciousness—her commitment to situating science fiction within the broader continuum of Chinese literary history and examining it through a longitudinal lens. Moreover, she employs the representation of technological artifacts as an analytical entry point, conducting a horizontal comparison between early Chinese science fiction and its contemporaneous foreign counterparts. Through this comparative approach, she reveals how transformations in the depiction of such artifacts encode distinct national characteristics and historical imprints specific to the Chinese context. This dual-coordinate methodology—not only diachronic but also synchronic—offers scholars an initial yet robust framework for interpreting the historical trajectory of Chinese science fiction, thereby significantly broadening the scope of inquiry in the field. Simultaneously, it equips students and science fiction enthusiasts who engage with this monograph with the conceptual tools necessary to grasp the internal logic of Chinese science fiction’s

development and to cultivate a coherent, historically informed literary-historical perspective.

The main body of *A Study on the Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction* is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the historical transformation and development of contemporary Chinese science fiction. Given its broad scope and extensive temporal span, Zhan Ling's analysis centers on three key dimensions: macro-level creative phenomena, significant literary-historical events, and major genre types. She divides the development of Chinese science fiction from 1949 to the present into four distinct phases. The First Flourishing Period (1949–1966): Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this initial phase was characterized by a strong influence from Soviet science fiction. During this time, science fiction was primarily utilized as a vehicle for disseminating scientific knowledge and revolutionary ideology. However, constrained by the era's socio-political context and the backgrounds of its authors, much of the literary imagery, humanistic reflections, and aesthetic techniques of Soviet models were either consciously or unconsciously abandoned. As a result, early works often exhibited a simplistic, didactic, and childish popular science style. Efforts toward literary depth by a few authors were largely suppressed or marginalized during this period, only gaining recognition in the 1980s. However, the revival of literariness was not an instantaneous process. The Second Flourishing Period (late 1970s–early 1980s): After the policy of “rectifying wrongs” was implemented in 1978, a new wave of science fiction emerged. This period was marked by the so-called “debate between science and literature”, which fundamentally questioned and challenged the dominance of didacticism. Many writers embraced this change, leading to a brief but significant flourishing of literary expression within science fiction. However, this momentum was quickly stifled by the mid-1980s “Campaign against Spiritual Pollution,” which plunged the genre back into decline. Despite its brief emergence, this phase represented a crucial transition from “popular science fiction” to “literary science fiction,” evidenced by evolving narrative structures and thematic cores—where scientific content and storytelling began to coexist in mutual interdependence rather than hierarchical service. The Period of Decline and Incubation (mid-1980s to late 1990s): Following the political setbacks of the mid-1980s, science fiction entered a prolonged dormancy. Nevertheless, the seeds of transformation planted earlier continued to lie dormant, awaiting more favorable intellectual, institutional, and material conditions. The Third Flourishing Period (early 21st century to present): With China's rapid socio-economic development and cultural opening-up, the long-awaited synthesis of literary artistry and scientific imagination finally materialized, epitomized by the works of Liu Cixin and other prominent authors. This era marks the genre's most vibrant and internationally recognized phase to date. During the first flourishing period, while emulating Soviet models, Chinese science fiction served primarily as a tool for spreading scientific knowledge and revolutionary ideology. However, due to various constraints imposed by the era and the limitations of the creators themselves, many literary elements, humanistic considerations, and aesthetic techniques were neglected or discarded, resulting in an overall simplistic and didactic style, often targeted at children for educational purposes. The efforts of a few authors to infuse their works with greater literary quality were largely overshadowed and remained unrecognized until the 1980s. The revival of literary qualities was not immediate; the “science versus literature” debate that emerged after the Reform

and Opening-up era can be seen as a reflection on and challenge to the absolute dominance of didacticism. This bold challenge gained support from many science fiction writers between 1978 and 1983, fostering a second flourishing period. However, this resurgence was soon curtailed by the “Campaign against Spiritual Pollution,” plunging the genre back into decline. Despite its short-lived nature, this period marked a critical shift from “didactic science fiction” to “literary science fiction,” particularly evident in the evolution of narrative modes and thematic cores. In numerous works, the relationship between story and scientific knowledge transformed from one of subservience to mutual dependence. Thereafter, science fiction lay dormant for over a decade, harboring the seeds of transformation. It wasn’t until the early 21st century, as China’s ideological, institutional, and material conditions matured, that literary qualities and scientific dissemination were able to converge under the right historical circumstances, notably in the hands of outstanding authors like Liu Cixin. This convergence ushered in the third and most prosperous flourishing period in the history of Chinese science fiction.

The second part of the monograph builds upon the macro-historical narrative established in the first part, offering an in-depth examination and systematic analysis of significant subgenres and phenomena within science fiction literature. Specifically, Zhan Ling selects representative subgenres for detailed exploration: historical science fiction, cyberpunk, and space opera. Among these, historical science fiction is particularly noted for its thorough localization and rich national characteristics, emerging prominently during the 1980s. In its nascent stage, writers often employed frameworks borrowed from classical Chinese literary masterpieces as narrative vessels, integrating modern scientific concepts and humanistic ideas into these traditional structures to achieve creative reinterpretations of classic texts. This form of reconstruction has been described as “imagining ‘alternative histories’ with independent, enclosed temporal-spatial dimensions that do not intersect with actual historical reality; thus, their rewriting of historical events does not alter the established course or overall contours of real history” (Zhan, 2022, p. 166). The creation of such closed aesthetic spaces somewhat diminishes the impact and imaginative scope of these works for readers. However, given the fluctuating political pressures and disruptions experienced by science fiction literature during the early reform era of the 1980s, it would be unrealistic to expect more expansive and revolutionary “alternative history” narratives to emerge quickly. Following political setbacks in the 1980s, the production of historical science fiction gradually waned. Entering the 21st century, with a more stable literary environment and the influence of parallel universe theories alongside domestic new historical novels, the concept of “parallel-universe alternative history imagination” finally found fertile ground in Chinese science fiction. Writers began to explore what might happen if pivotal points in history were altered, discussing potential future trajectories stemming from these changes (Zhan, 2022, p. 166). By constructing open-ended alternative historical spaces, authors engage in profound dialogues with personal, national, and cultural pasts while also envisioning myriad possibilities for the future. The vast spatiotemporal dimensions involved in such narratives provide ample room for reader reflection and imagination, resulting in grandiose and sweeping narrative structures. This openness facilitates the integration of such works into cultural markets and supports the international dissemination of Chinese cultural soft power. Examples include the popular

television adaptation of *A Step into the Past* and the global success of *The Three-Body Problem*. The developmental trajectory of historical science fiction not only aligns with Mao Zedong's (1984, p. 59) cultural directive of "using the past to serve the present and adopting foreign elements for China's benefit," but also represents a valuable application of Marxist literary theory within the realm of science fiction. It provides crucial models and insights for contemporary efforts to "tell China's stories well and communicate China's voice effectively" in a global context (Zhou, Wang, & Xu, 2025, p. 33).

Broadly speaking, a defining feature of this monograph lies in its rigorous argumentation grounded in extensive and meticulous textual criticism. Zhan Ling draws upon several hundred science fiction works produced from the founding of the People's Republic of China to the early twenty-first century, integrating close literary analysis into her reconstruction of the historical trajectory of contemporary Chinese science fiction. This methodological approach ensures that her literary-historical narrative transcends mere accumulation of archival data or schematic periodization; instead, it becomes substantive, nuanced, and dynamically articulated. Her precise and insightful textual readings also serve as an accessible gateway for students new to the field, enabling them to grasp more intuitively and effectively the distinctive literary phenomena and creative shifts characteristic of specific historical moments. For instance, in her discussion of the "science versus literature" debate, in the first Part, Zhan examines how emerging discourses on "the human" and "humanity" are concretely manifested in works such as *Deadly Light on Coral Island*, *Nightclub of Fate*, and "*White Ants*" and *The Perpetual Motion Machine*. Through this analysis, she delineates the nascent stirrings of literary sensibility in early 1980s science fiction. More significantly, she innovatively situates this internal discursive shift within science fiction alongside the contemporaneous mainstream trend of "scar literature," linking the two through shared historical contexts and underlying spiritual dispositions. This comparative framing demonstrates her ambitious vision of integrating science fiction history into the broader tapestry of contemporary Chinese literary history. In the next Part, particularly in her analysis of cyborg narratives, Zhan adopts a cross-cultural perspective, systematically juxtaposing indigenous Chinese works with their foreign counterparts from the same period. By surveying a wide array of early twenty-first-century Chinese cyborg-themed texts, she offers a detailed examination of their narrative structures and humanistic orientations. She argues that due to underdeveloped technological infrastructure, the absence of indigenous theoretical frameworks or textual traditions exploring analogies between humans and machines, and the persistent entanglement of linear historicism, Enlightenment humanism, and instrumentalist views of technology, Chinese science fiction writers have struggled to transcend utilitarian paradigms. Consequently, they have not yet achieved—unlike canonical Western works such as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*—a comparable aesthetic sophistication in reconfiguring human-object relations, depicting post-human social formations, or exploring new possibilities for humanism. This self-conscious international perspective ensures that Zhan's scholarship remains firmly rooted in local experience while simultaneously engaging in sustained dialogue with global science fiction discourse. As such, her work provides readers with an indispensable analytical framework for understanding both the distinctive trajectory and the shared predicaments of Chinese science fiction within a transnational

context.

While engaging with the monograph, this reviewer has also identified certain points warranting further reflection. The 1990s—positioned as a crucial transitional bridge between the didactic, child-oriented science fiction of the 1980s and the technologically and humanistically sophisticated works that emerged in the twenty-first century—deserve recognition as a pivotal period of transformation. However, the monograph’s treatment of the 1990s remains largely confined to fragmented accounts of isolated events and summary-level interpretations, without yet weaving these elements into a coherent, systematic narrative of historical evolution. Moreover, the study cites certain socio-cultural episodes as significant turning points—most notably the widely publicized 1999 incident in which *Science Fiction World* magazine was perceived to have “predicted” the national college entrance examination essay prompt. Yet the demographic reach and temporal duration of this event’s influence appear relatively limited. While the Gaokao undoubtedly generated a wave of utilitarian interest in science fiction among specific student cohorts, such externally driven attention is inherently ephemeral; it tends to dissipate rapidly once the examination cycle concludes and pedagogical priorities shift. Consequently, whether the 1999 essay topic can be legitimately regarded as one of the most decisive catalysts shaping the trajectory of twenty-first-century Chinese science fiction remains open to scholarly debate and requires more nuanced contextualization.

In conclusion, through a comprehensive reading of the monograph—and with reference to the dual coordinate system constituted by the history of contemporary Chinese literature and global science fiction currents—this reviewer has gained a significantly clearer understanding of both the historical trajectory of Chinese science fiction and its position within contemporary literary history, yielding substantial intellectual rewards. *A Study on the Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction* is a scholarly monograph of notable orienting significance. At the theoretical level, it constructs a historically deep and multidimensional framework for the study of contemporary Chinese science fiction, offering scholars innovative analytical entry points into literary phenomena and texts. This contribution promises to advance both archival research and critical scholarship in the field. At the practical level, the monograph engages with a range of cutting-edge issues, including the burgeoning science fiction cultural industry. It provides valuable theoretical reference points for rapidly evolving sectors such as online literature and sci-fi media production. Such insights not only support science fiction’s ongoing “breakout” beyond niche audiences and its potential for economic valorization but also hold promise for enhancing the global reach and influence of contemporary Chinese culture—leveraging science fiction as a dynamic transnational medium within the broader landscape of world culture. At the pedagogical level, the work employs lucid, precise language and compelling case studies to offer students and science fiction enthusiasts an accessible yet intellectually rigorous pathway toward grasping the internal logic of Chinese science fiction’s historical evolution. For readers invested in Chinese science fiction, this monograph stands out as an exemplary scholarly work—one that simultaneously lays a solid foundation in literary-historical knowledge and opens expansive horizons for critical inquiry.

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