

Science Fiction Education in China: Then and Now



Wei Guo

Even before the coinage of the term “Scientifiction” (1915) or “Science Fiction” (1927) by Hugo Gernsback (Langford and Nicholls; Westfahl), there had already been radical promoters of this genre for the education of people towards modernity in China. Liang Qichao (梁启超) proposed the reforming of the culture through sf as a profound philosophical genre (1902) whereas, Zhou Shuren (周树人 i.e. Lu Xun 鲁迅) urged the transformation of the people through sf as the interweaving of both science and sensibility (1903). These might be the first declarations of sf as a possible means of education, on this traditional though modernizing land. However, the advocacy at the beginning of a new century from both the two great minds was not fruitful. Sf as a literary genre did not soon develop into a robust existence, let alone sf as education or education of sf.

The establishment of new China witnessed the prosperity, during the following seventeen years or so, of a distinctive sf style that emphasized the function of science education. Practical or not, this science-education-oriented sf stopped its prosperity at the year 1966, due to the Cultural Revolution.

Ten years later, sf embraced a short rejuvenation from 1976 to 1983, during which some attempts of “sf teaching” appeared in China. In the year 1979, Philip Smith from University of Pittsburgh taught sf by using English when visiting Shanghai Foreign Language Institute (Shanghai International Studies University, currently). Brief though it was, it did arouse theoretical and pedagogical interest.

Since the 1990s, sf began to thrive, as a self-sustained literary genre, in a more amicable age for sf writers and writings. Under such encouraging circumstances, sf education finally found its way in China. The actual starting point of sf education was the year 1991, when Wu Yan (吴岩) began to provide an undergraduate course named “Science Fiction Review and Research” at Beijing Normal University. Twelve years later (2003), he became the supervisor of sf-study Master students; and another twelve years later (2015), the supervisor of sf-study doctoral students.

In the new millennium, along with Wu Yan’s continuous educational endeavour (who is now the initiator and director of Research Center for Science and Human Imagination at the Southern University of Science and Technology), and the booming of sf as an enterprise, sf education in China gradually attained maturity and keeps developing towards diversification.

At the present stage, scores of sf courses are being provided in different universities to students of various majors, at both the undergraduate level and postgraduate level.

Most of these courses are on the general curriculum, for broader majors, such as Wu Yan’s “Sf Movies Appreciation and Criticism,” Zhang Feng’s (张峰 i.e. San Feng 三丰) “Sf Appreciation,”

and Liu Yang's (刘洋) "Sf Writing" (all three courses available for postgraduate as well as undergraduate students) at the Southern University of Science and Technology; Li Guangyi's (李广益) "Sf Novels and Movies" at Chongqing University; Xiao Han's (肖汉) "Sf Movies Appreciation" at Beijing Normal University; Fu Changyi's (付昌义) "Sf Appreciation: Philosophy of Science" at Nanjing Tech University; Su Zhan's (苏湛) "Sf and Science" and "Theories and Practices of Sf Writing and Popular Science Writing" (both for postgraduate students) at the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences; Guo Qi's (郭琦) "Sf Appreciation and Creative Writing" at Huaqiao University; Wang Yao's (王瑶 i.e. Xia Jia 夏笳) "History of Chinese Science Fiction" (as a section of "Classics and Topical Issues of Literature") in Xi'an Jiaotong University; Mu Yunqiu's (穆蕴秋) "Sf and Contemporary Scientific Controversy" at Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Wang Yiping's (王一平) "Western Sf Appreciation", Li Chan (黎婵) and Tang Li's (汤黎) sf section of "Fantasy, Literature and Movie" (MOOC), Li Yi (李怡), Hu Yirong (胡易容) and Jiang Zhenyu's (姜振宇) "Research of Chinese Science Fiction" (for postgraduate students), at Sichuan University; Liu Yuan's (刘媛) "Sf Appreciation" at Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology; Liu Wen's (刘雯) "Ethics in Sf" at Harbin Engineering University.

Together with the above, some sf courses are on the professional curriculum aiming at literature majoring students, such as Zhan Ling's (詹玲) "Contemporary Sf Studies" at Hangzhou Normal University; Jia Liyuan's (贾立元 i.e. Fei Dao 飞氖) "Sf Writing" at Tsinghua University; Jiang Zhenyu's "Literary Creation and Sf Writing" at Sichuan University; Ding Zhuo's (丁卓) "From Mythology to Sf" at Changchun University; Liu Yuan's "Popular Science and Sf Reading and Writing" in Nanjing University of Information Science & Technology; Song Hongmei's (宋红梅) "Science Fiction" at Shandong Normal University; Dai Congrong's (戴从容) "History of Sf in Foreign Countries" (for postgraduate students) at Fudan University; Guo Wei's (郭伟) "Sf Appreciation", "Sf Movies Appreciation" and "Sf Studies" (the former two for undergraduate and the latter one for postgraduate students) at Beihua University.

Taiwan area and Hong Kong area also achieve prosperity along the traditions initiated by Lv Yingzhong (吕应钟), Jiang Shuzhen (蒋淑贞), Ye Lihua (叶李华), Huang Binghuang (黄炳煌 i.e. Huang Hai 黄海), Zheng Yunhong (郑运鸿) in Taiwan area, and Li Weicai (李伟才), Wang Jianyuan (王建元), Chen Jieshi (陈洁诗) in Hong Kong area.

The entrance of sf courses into universities signifies an academic attention to this genre not only as an inseparable constituent of literature but also as an influencing cultural propellant deserving pedagogical practices and theoretical scholarship. These sf courses cover a broad range of diverse topics and aspects, such as the basic theories and controversies of sf, the schools and subgenres of sf, the history of sf either concerning genre or nationality-related, the creation careers and features of representative sf writers, the appreciation and analysis of sf works as well as sf movies, the research methodology and academic writings of sf studies, and even the creative writings of sf works and popular-science works. Meanwhile, the interweaving of sf and other issues also presents a stereoscopic and kaleidoscopic picture, for example, sf and science, sf and

philosophy, sf and ethics, sf and society, sf and ideology, sf and mythology, sf and literature, sf and fantasy. All of the characteristic sf courses together compose a starry constellation.

Besides various sf courses in many universities, another sign for the maturity of sf education is the emergence of specialized textbooks. An early attempt was *References Collection for Science Fiction Pedagogy and Research* (unpublished, printed in 1991), compiled by Wu Yan, as a product of his course at Beijing Normal University. Other products of this course were Lv Yingzhong and Wu Yan's *A Survey of Science Fiction* (published by Wu-Nan Book Inc. in 2001) and its later extended edition, Wu Yan and Lv Yingzhong's *An Introduction to Science Fiction* (published by Fujian Children's Press in 2006). In 2012, Nankai University Press published *A Survey of British and American Science Fiction*, written in English by Wang Yan (王艳), Liu Xiaojuan (刘晓娟) and Xu Yang (许洋), which gave a rather detailed account of the title subject, and thus quite suitable as an sf textbook for English majors. In 2021, *A Chinese Science Fiction Studies Reader* was just published by Peking University Press. The compilers Wu Yan and Jiang Zhenyu invited several sf scholars to write introductory essays for each piece of work selected in the book, and thus made this Reader an indispensable reference book for sf courses in universities.

A recent series of sf textbooks "Science Fiction," launched by the Research Center for Science and Human Imagination at Southern University of Science and Technology, is prominent and promising. This ambitious series (published by Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House since 2019) aims at an integral pedagogical system for students of primary and high schools. *Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Kids*, *Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Teenagers* and the forthcoming *Science Fiction: Imagination and Scientific Innovation Training Course for Young Adults* are the first three textbooks for students of primary schools, junior high schools and senior high schools respectively. *Science Fiction: How to Teach* is a considerate reference book for teachers, providing instructions and instances. Also included are textbooks for technique training of creative writing via inspirations from sf works. This series keeps going on with more planned and forthcoming textbooks in the well-designed framework, and will doubtlessly give fresh impetus to sf education in primary and high schools.

Speaking of sf in primary and high school pedagogy, a complex picture and potential prosperity deserve description. As early as 1991, Tong Huachi (童华池) introduced sf into his composition class in Sichuan Jintang High School and successfully cultivated the sf writing capability of high school students. The following decade, however, did not witness a boom in this field until the new millennium. A remarkable example early in the new millennium was "Sf Physics" developed by Mi Qi (宓奇), Li Zhigang (李志刚) and Wang Qi (王琦) in The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China since 2008. This elective course employed clips of sf movies as teaching materials, to impart knowledge of physics in a more relaxed and intriguing way, as well as to foster students' critical thinking, creative thinking, and practical-problem-solving ability.

In recent years especially, more and more practices have been carried out in primary and high schools trying to combine sf elements with classes of various subjects such as Chinese, Physics, Chemistry, and Art. These trials are diversified in forms and rich in innovations; but meanwhile, how to make sf elements merge well into classes and shape organic courses, still requires further exploration.

The following are two positive examples exhibiting inspirational curriculum design. At the Beijing Jingshan School, Zhou Qun (周群) leads an sf pedagogical team composed of teachers specialized in Chinese, Biology, Geography, Chemistry, CG Art, and Maker Education. This interdisciplinary team provides, for Grade-Seven students, an elective course of sf that is project-based and STEAM-oriented. The one-semester course covers two projects “Designing Future Robots” and “Constructing Future Cities.” Based on students’ massive reading of sf-related texts at the initial stage and their creative brainstorming with inspiration from the pedagogical team at the following stage, each project finally produces, under both peer cooperation and teacher instruction, integrated works in diverse forms, like fiction writing, webpage designing, CG drawing, or 3D printing. With equal inspiration but different orientation, Wei Ran (魏然) at The Affiliated High School of Peking University, provides a series of sf courses for senior high school students of all grades. This series of sf courses are on the regular curriculum, and thus able to assume an sf-for-sf’s-sake position. Taking “Survey of Science Fiction” for example, the course covers an overall knowledge system of sf as a literary genre, including sf history, sf theory, sf writers and works, sf creative writing, and sf critical writing, noticeably modeling itself on sf courses of higher education in universities. Via different approaches, both Zhou Qun’s and Wei Ran’s practices avoid utilitarian attitude in this field, and achieve high-quality sf education.

Also worth mentioning is Chongqing Fishing Castle Center for Science Fiction, initiated and directed by Zhang Fan (张凡) at the College of Mobile Telecommunications, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications. One of the Center’s missions is sf education, focusing both on campus curriculum and on sf writers training. As for the campus part, the Center plans to develop a series of elective sf courses for general students in the university, and meanwhile to establish an sf major. As for the writer-training part, the Center is launching the ambitious Future Fiction Workshop, an international-cooperative program for the pedagogy of sf creative writing, with international student-writers talented for sf creation in Chinese language and international tutors renowned in the sf world.

At the beginning of the 2020s, with wide utilization of online interactive meeting-room, classroom or real-time-telecast software, live lectures on sf are booming. These lectures are often flexible, topic-centered and can “conjure” different attendees according to their topic-related interest. Many of such episodic lectures may collectively reach a multitude of possibilities, nurturing both the sf fans and the sf researchers.

All these comprise the ecosystem of sf education in China today. The number of courses in diversified patterns, as well as the robustness of the polyphony, is increasing. Through ups and downs for over a hundred years, sf and sf education in China are marching forward, towards a fruitful future.

Works Cited

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Wei Guo (郭伟), Ph.D, is an associate professor at the College of Foreign Languages, Beihua University, Jilin, China. His research is focused on Science Fiction and Western literary theories. He recently published academic book *Probing into Deconstructive Mystery* (China Social Sciences Press, 2019), and also published a series of academic articles concerning sf Poetry, Extro-Science Fiction, various styles and sub-genres of sf, philosophy of language in sf, social problems in sf, and many other aspects of sf studies. He is now a supervisor of sf-study master students, and provides several sf courses for both postgraduate and undergraduate students.