

Studies of Sci-Fi Film in Mainland China

Xin Wang



European and American films had long dominated the Chinese market (until the “movement to clear away Hollywood films” in the early 1950s) since their entry in the late 19th century. Like other genres, sci-fi films, born and initially developed in Europe and the United States, were at the same time shown and spread in China’s big cities. In the 1920s and 1930s, Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and *Frau im Mond*, and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* were well-received in China. According to Jia Liyuan, Chinese filmmakers produced such films as *Visiting Shanghai after Sixty Years* and *Exchanged* in 1939, modeled on European and American counterparts (Jia 32-35). The discourse around sci-fi films, however, was absent from China then in spite of the fact that several of them were already made. Phrases like “fantasy blockbusters,” “science blockbusters,” “scientization” and “idealist schools” were frequently combined with words such as “sensuality,” “sentiment,” “mystery” and “horror” in cinematic advertising in the 1930s and 1940s. In other words, “sci-fi films” saw no formalized production modes, conventions, or cultural implications. They were regarded as a genre or form only after the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese market that just banned Hollywood films greeted a number of Soviet sci-fi films including *Flight to the Moon* (Полёт на Луну), *Battle Beyond the Sun* (Небо зовет), *Roads to the Stars* (Дорога к звездам), and *I Was a Sputnik of the Sun* (Я был спутником солнца), and Czechoslovak ones including *Journey to the Beginning of Time* (Cesta do praveku) and *The Deadly Invention* (Vynález zkázy). These films were translated by Shanghai Film Dubbing Studio and Changchun Film Studio.

In 1955, the translator Yu Guantao, and Zheng Wenguang, later known as “Father of Chinese Sci-fi Literature,” presented *Journey to the Beginning of Time* and *Flight to the Moon* as “kexue huanxiang yingpian” [科学幻想影片 science fiction films] in *Dazhong dianying* (G. Yu 30; Zheng 18). The former, a combination of puppet show, animation, and live-action shots, was made by Karel Zeman, a puppeteer from Czechoslovakia. The latter, produced by Soyuzmultfilm, was the first sci-fi animation of the Soviet Union. The two films opened up the imagination about time and space and explored new techniques, which exactly characterized the genre when it was thus named and introduced to the Chinese audience. In October 1957, the Soviet Union launched its first artificial satellite. Since then, the related Soviet sci-fi films had been considered as “a solemn herald of journeys into the universe” and sort of documentaries in China (Permyak 50-53). On November 26, 1959, Xi Zezong’s article “The Great Dream - On the Soviet Science Fiction Film *Battle Beyond the Sun*” was published in *Renmin ribao*. Xi is an academician of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the pioneer in China’s history of science. He linked the Soviet Union’s achievements in space exploration in the last two years with the story in the film about a flight to Mars. To him, sci-fi films represented the technological prospect of a socialist society, the Soviet

Union in particular, and a rehearsal for a near future. He commented, “Human beings will step on the moon, Mars, and Venus within this century. (Xi 8)”

Different from Xi who saw sci-fi films as a record and prospect of science and technology in the Cold War era, Yang Xianyi, a professor in foreign literature, analyzed the Czechoslovak sci-fi films from an aesthetic stance and treated them as a medium. The article “Outstanding Achievement in Science Fiction Film – Comment on the Czechoslovak Feature Film *The Deadly Invention*”, published in *Film Art* in 1960, set a precedent for sci-fi film studies in China in its true sense. He pointed out that Karel Zeman's *Journey to the Beginning of Time* and *The Deadly Invention* are based on the novels by Jules Verne, the former adapted from *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Voyage Au Centre de La Terre), and the latter from *Facing the Flag* (Face Au Drapeau) and *Seabed 20,000 Miles* (Vingt Mille Lieues sous les Mers). In Yang's opinion, Karel Zeman endowed the works with greater relevance to reality, unlike other western directors who dealt with these novels in an excessively realistic manner or as shoddy spectacles. In Zeman's films, “Puppets worked well with real people. Scenes were inspired by the original illustrations. The fantastic air of novels was, therefore, recreated in the films” (Yang 48). Yang touched on the core issues in sci-fi film studies, namely, the difference between science fiction novels and sci-fi movies (given their limitations as different media), and how science fiction novels should be adapted and transformed into sci-fi movies.

It was also during this period that calls for making China's own “science fiction films” were heard. In 1961, *Film Art* published “Talking about ‘Science Fiction Films,’” a short review by a worker named Lan Wei. Revolving around the Soviet films *I Was a Sputnik of the Sun* and *Battle Beyond the Sun*, the author stated that sci-fi movies evinced the desire to conquer nature, depicted a communist future, and helped young boys and girls to nurture a thirst for knowledge, and thus encouraged Chinese film artists to start trying (Lan 42-43). As a response, Shanghai Scientific and Educational Film Studio made *Little Sun*, with Wang Minsheng as the scriptwriter and director.

Literary and artistic studies in China were suspended during the Cultural Revolution. Only after its end were sci-fi film studies revived. Capitalist sci-fi films (from the US, Europe, and Japan), especially those made by Hollywood, aroused the interest of Chinese scholars and researchers. Stills from *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, along with the article “Western Sci-fi Movies and Prevailing Craze for the Galaxy,” came out in the first issue of *A Collection of Translations about Film Art* (later renamed as *World Cinema*). It is worth noting that despite the term “Meiguo kexue huanxiangpian” [美国科学幻想片 US science fiction movie] was still seen beside the stills, the abbreviation “kehuanpian” [科幻片 sci-fi] already used in the article, which indicated the recognition of “sci-fi movie” as a general concept and a specialized research field in Chinese society. The article made the first systematic review for sci-fi movies and discussed the historical connection between sci-fi movies and science fiction stories, and between sci-fi comics and cartoons, the impact of the Cold War and nuclear threats on sci-fi movies, the fusion of disaster movies and sci-fi movies, and the “craze for the galaxy” that *Star Wars* produced in the past year (Hanbo 273-287). George Lucas's *Star Wars* caused an unprecedented sensation in the

United States and Europe (which changed the film industry on the whole, and even marked a "big event" in the western world), and forced a demand for sci-fi movies in China that just launched the reform and opening-up policy and became curious about the Western popular culture. It was against such a background that Shanghai Film Studio made *Death Ray on a Coral Island* in 1980.

From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, *Movie Review* and other publications introduced to readers various domestic and foreign sci-fi movies such as *Star Wars*, *Futureworld*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Death Ray on a Coral Island*. Xiao Mei held in "Fantasy - Soul of Sci-fi Movies," published in *Film Art* in 1980, that fantasy is the core of sci-fi movies and should be free of political, artistic, or technological censorship. The fantasy in sci-fi movies should not only be about natural science, but refer to the influence of technology on human thinking, psychology, and ethics. It should also serve to expose defects in reality and explore the future (Xiao 34-36). Unlike previous ones, the article no longer focused on how sci-fi movies functioned as the mouthpiece for bourgeois ideology. Liu Lizhong divided the popular science films into several types in "A Preliminary Study on the Style of Popular Science Films" in 1981. He proposed that the sci-fi film is a kind of popular science film in a fictional form. He opined that *Little Sun* produced in 1963 is a sci-fi film, and that popular science films (including the science fiction form) prospered during 1958 and 1963 (Liu 59-61). This view laid a foundation for later writings in the academic circles of China on the history of sci-fi movies. Although David Lynch's *Dune* was premiered in Beijing on November 9, 1984 (Chen 35), the "movement to clear away mental pollution" that began in 1983 dealt a heavy blow to sci-fi creators and sci-fi film studies in China, which were restored in the late 1980s. Luo Huisheng's "A New Synthesis of Science and Art" that was published in *Film Art* in two issues deserves a mention. By analyzing the synthesis commonly seen in film giants including the Soviet Union, Japan, the United States, and Europe, it proposed a theory and possibility of integrating art films, documentaries, and popular science films into a whole. Susceptible to the prevailing "system theory, cybernetics, and information theory," Luo emphasized the synthesis and integration of "scientific aesthetics" and "artistic aesthetics," for which *Nine Days in One Year* (Девять дней одного года), *Taming of the Fire* (Укрощение огня) and *Poem of Wings* (Поэма о крыльях) directed by Soviet filmmaker Daniil Khrabrovitsky, *Kaikyô* by Japanese director Shirô Moritani, *The China Syndrome* and *Silkwood* made in the United States, and even sci-fi movies by George Lucas, Steven Spielberg and Peter Bogdanovich were shoveled under the same analytical umbrella (*Kexue shang* 28-28; *kexue xia* 54-62). The paper presented a large picture of worldwide cinemas and was an unprecedentedly ambitious theoretical gem, (although it aimed to structure a "science-art film" as different from the commercially valuable feature film and did not deal with existing sci-fi movies.)

China Film Press translated and published *Der Science Fiction Film* by East German scholar Christian Hellmann in 1988, following which child-oriented sci-fi movies such as *Wonder Boy*, *The Ozone Layer Vanishes*, and *Magic Watch* came out. The World Science Fiction Convention was held in Chengdu in 1991, where the academic circles expressed their desire for sci-fi movies (Zhu 63). In 1992, Shen Dong at China Film Art Research Center wrote a master's thesis, the

first of its kind on sci-fi films in China, entitled "On Sci-Fi Film Writing Patterns," in which sci-fi stories unfold following four modes - robot/Frankenstein, utopia/anti-utopia, interstellar war/extraterrestrial, and space exploration/time machine. Each movie has a motif, that is, the conflict between individuals and groups, or personal desires and social regulations (Shen 25). Sci-fi film studies has since become an academic subject.¹ Chinese versions of contemporaneous theses on sci-fi films were published such as *Postmodernism as Folklore in Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema* (Landy 57-62). For a long time afterwards, domestic academia vigorously advocated for the production of Chinese sci-fi films, and at the same time followed up on those made in the United States and Europe.. Among them, the exposition of movies inherently as spectacles based on sci-fi films by Georges Méliès and the United States (J. Yu 66-68), the study of the relationship between sci-fi films and teenagers (Zeng 40), and the analysis of the skeleton of Hong Kong sci-fi movies stand out (Xu 51). Some scholars argued that Hong Kong sci-fi movies should be part of its greater Chinese family before Stephen Chow's *CJ7* was released in 2008, because Hong Kong had been handed over to China for many years by then. Those ranging from *The Super Inframan* produced by Shaw Brothers in 1975 to current sci-fi movies should all be included in the Chinese list (Jin 58). Wang Zhimin, Jiang Xiaoyuan, Wu Yan and other scholars wrote about sci-fi movies from the 1990s to the 2000s. The 2009 blockbuster *Avatar* triggered another round of sci-fi movie fervor and broad discussions in China's academic circles.

The amount of articles and dissertations on sci-fi movies has increased dramatically since 2010. The phenomenal success of the *Three-Body* trilogy by Liu Cixin and the exponential growth of the Chinese film industry have further stimulated the demand for China's own sci-fi movies. Chinese sci-fi film industry and its possibilities has become a hot topic in film research. Renowned film scholars such as Dai Jinhua and Chen Xuguang published wide ranges of papers on sci-fi movies. According to incomplete statistics, there were only 11 theses and dissertations on sci-fi movies in Mainland China from 1992 to 2009, but the number rocketed to over 170 from 2010 to 2019. Upwards of 1,500 articles were released in the past decade (far more than the sum of previous numbers), including both theoretical and historical studies of sci-fi movies, as well as critical practice on both classic and new films. *The Wandering Earth* and *Crazy Alien*, both on during the Spring Festival holiday in 2019 and based upon novels by Liu Cixin, scored a hit in China, for which the year of 2019 was reputed to be "the start of the Chinese sci-fi movie era." For *The Wandering Earth* alone, hundreds of papers were produced. The sci-fi film studies in China has since shifted to thorough analysis on local sci-fi movie practice and further exploration into its history.

Notes

1. Mainland China has provided postgraduate education in film studies from the 1980s, and the first Masters of film studies graduated in 1985.

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Xin Wang is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Arts & Communication, Beijing Normal University. He holds an M.A. in Arts from China Film Art Research Center and a Ph.D. in Literature from Peking University. His main research interests include film studies, cultural studies and science fiction literature. He has published over a dozen articles and essays in core film and literature journals in mainland China, and has served as a jury member for several film festivals including the Beijing International Film Festival, FIRST Youth Film Festival, and the Chinese Film Media Awards.