



BOOK REVIEW:
*Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao
Cultural Thaw*

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Li, Hua. *Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw*. U of Toronto P, 2021. ISBN: 9781487508234.

In less than a decade, contemporary Chinese science fiction has caught the attention of fans, critics, journalists, and scholars around the world. As much of the buzz has focused on contemporary SF's relationship with the current society and politics of the People's Republic of China, its antecedents in the earlier eras of PRC literature have received less attention with English-language treatments of the SF boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s in particular relegated to scattered book chapters and essays. This gap is all the more striking if we consider that the temporal distance between the present and the start of Chinese SF's on-going "New Wave" in 1989 (Song 8) is now over five times as long as the one between the start of the New Wave and the end of the previous boom in 1983 when the "Campaign to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution" put a temporary halt on the development of SF in the PRC.

In light of the above, Hua Li's *Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw* is a most welcome addition to English-language critical work on Chinese SF. Focusing on the period between the death of Mao Zedong in 1978 and the anti-spiritual pollution campaign of 1983, Li presents convincing evidence that features associated with New Wave Chinese SF, such as "a somewhat sceptical or even subversive political bent, a deep familiarity and engagement with the canon of Western SF, and a wide range of themes and narrative techniques" (180), were already present in thaw-era SF works. As such, this brief period forms an important bridge between the PRC SF of the 1950s and 1960s and its on-going New Wave, and it fully deserves the in-depth treatment that Li's book offers it.

The opening chapter of the book surveys the field of Chinese SF during the thaw period and argues that at this time “Chinese SF increasingly accumulated symbolic, cultural, and economic capital” (10) as shown by the diversification of publication venues for SF stories, the increase in remuneration for authors, and the canonization of important works through awards and literary criticism. This is followed by chapters dedicated to the authors Zheng Wenguang, Ye Yonglie, Tong Enzheng, and Xiao Jianheng, putting their thaw-era works in the context of their wider careers and their views on SF as a genre. Although sometimes focusing only on a relatively small subset of works by one author, such as Zheng’s “Mars series” and Tong’s narratives of encounters with aliens, these sections manage to provide abundant, concrete examples of the complex relationship between ideological constraints and individual creativity in thaw-era SF.

Following the four chapters on individual authors, Chapter 6 adopts a more cross-sectional perspective by discussing “tech-SF,” a subgenre that “focuses on technological innovations and inventions” (115) and their importance for “the accelerated development of a modernized and powerful China” (116). According to Li, this type of SF was mostly written by novice authors of fiction and appealed to a much narrower readership than the works of the above-mentioned veterans, which helps explain why it did not flourish in the PRC after the 1980s. However, Li argues that tech-SF has nevertheless “metamorphosed into an undercurrent within the larger tide of contemporary Chinese hard SF” (133) as shown by its influence on the works of Liu Cixin in particular.

The penultimate chapter widens the scope of the book to include SF comics, radio dramas, live-action films, and animation, showing that although media convergence in thaw-era PRC did not reach levels similar to that in the United States and Japan of the time, it did bring wider popular attention to SF as a genre. A particular highlight in this section is the discussion of the PRC’s first SF film, *Death Ray on a Coral Island* (1980), whose director, Zhang Hongmei, is also one of the few female Chinese SF practitioners mentioned in the book. An even more delightful look into thaw-era SF on screen, perhaps, is Li’s analysis of the animated film *Dingding Fights the Monkey King* (1980), which she reads as affirming the government’s message that science and technology (represented by the studious Dingding) have taken the place of revolutionary fervor (represented by the Monkey King) as the key to production. That the film’s symbol for old-school Maoism would be the simian hero of *Journey to the West*, the classic 16th century tale of Buddhist pilgrimage, is perhaps less surprising if the reader is also aware that Mao Zedong tacitly encouraged comparisons between himself and the shape-shifting Monkey in the 1950s and 1960s (Chow 649). Tellingly, *Dingding Fights the Monkey King* begins with the protagonist watching the Mao-era *Journey to the West* adaptation *Uproar in Heaven* (1961/1964) on television in his well-furnished home, which Li further points to as an example of how thaw-era SF media promoted not only science, but also new modes of consumption.

In her last chapter, Li re-examines Rudolph Wagner’s hypothesis that thaw-era SF was a form of “lobby literature” aimed at presenting the scientific community’s demands and offers of compromise to officialdom. Li characterises Wagner’s hypothesis as “overblown” and comes instead to the conclusion that “thaw-era PRC SF actually functioned as a type of government-

backed literature, whose writers were working more as in-house advocates of a key component of the central government's Four Modernizations agenda than as lobbyists or a group attempting to extract concessions from the government" (173). At the same time, debates in the press over the role of science fiction show that "Thaw-era SF nonetheless had its share of contentiousness" (178). This, along with the literary experimentation and cautionary notes that became more prevalent in SF during this period, leads Li to describe thaw-era science fiction as not only "blooming," but also as "contending" and "boundary-breaking" (177). In comparison to Wagner's rather simplistic reading of SF literature as akin to a coded list of policy recommendations presented to a readership of officials, Li's more nuanced analysis explicates what made post-Mao SF appealing to wider audiences and thus also helps explain both its popularity and its lasting influence on the Chinese New Wave.

A major strength of *Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw* is the way that it situates thaw-era SF in multiple and often intersecting contexts, which are not limited to the prevailing ideological winds of the post-Mao thaw and the Four Modernizations. For example, Li notes that the growing interest in genetic engineering among PRC scientists in the late 1970s was reflected in stories about "the enemy within – cancer, bio-weaponry, and genetic manipulation" (119), while the humanistic trends and romantic elements of mainstream literature also manifested in SF as the prominent inclusion of love interests (43, 88). Li's in-depth approach here is made all the more impressive by the aforementioned examination of SF works from several different media, which allows the reader to gain a thorough sense of both the SF field and the broader zeitgeist in the PRC at the time.

Nevertheless, there are also points that could have been elaborated further. While arguing that inexpensive *lianhuanhua* comics (which combined pictures with short, caption-like texts) helped spread SF to rural areas where television and films were not yet available (144–145), Li cites Marshall McLuhan's comparison of TV and cartoon images in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. This includes McLuhan's claims that TV "was a real rival" of the comic book in the twentieth-century West and that "since the advent of TV, the comic book has gone into decline" (qtd. in Li 145). Although this may have seemed like a reasonable supposition when *Understanding Media* was originally published in 1964, it raises the question of how this supposed rivalry fits in with the Japanese "media mix" strategy of texts circulating across multiple media forms (including both comics and television), which Li references several times. As Li does not directly discuss the fate of *lianhuanhua* after the early 1980s, it is unclear whether she would actually attribute their decline to the spread of television or not; in either case, the topic would have been worth a few extra paragraphs or a reference towards some further reading.

Two other gaps are both related to the influence of foreign SF media in China. First, although Li does examine the impact of translated SF fiction and foreign SF films on PRC SF at several points, the presumably complex (not to mention potentially politically fraught) process of translating these texts into Chinese is not touched upon. Second, there is no mention of *lianhuanhua* adaptations of foreign SF films and their role (if any) in introducing themes from Western SF or spreading SF to new audiences in China. The latter omission is especially puzzling if we consider the unusually widespread

attention that the *Star Wars lianhuanhua* of the early 1980s have received in recent years, which would seem to make the topic an obvious choice for inclusion when discussing SF comics during the thaw era.

However, such minor omissions weigh little when contrasted with Li's insightful analysis and her obviously strong grasp of her material. Weaving together multiple threads within thaw-era SF and expertly contextualizing its major developments, *Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw* offers a fascinating perspective into an overlooked subject and lays a solid groundwork for the further study of this brief yet significant period in Chinese SF history as well as its connections with the New Wave of PRC SF. Although perhaps slightly too specialized to be used as a textbook on a general course on Chinese SF, the book would make for excellent background or supplemental reading for students intending to pursue the topic further in addition to its usefulness for research purposes. I can therefore heartily recommend this work to anyone looking to fully understand the past and present of Chinese science fiction.

Biography: Eero Suoranta is a doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki where his work focuses on alienation in contemporary Chinese science fiction. He has also translated Chinese SF into Finnish, worked as a freelance journalist and literary critic, and been featured as an expert on Chinese literature and philosophy by the Finnish public broadcasting company YLE.

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