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FROM THE PAGE TO THE COSMOS: CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION, SOFT POWER, AND THE GLOBAL REACH OF LIU CIXIN'S THREE-BODY TRILOGY

A Literary Genre, A Tool of Scientific Imagination, or a Vector of Cultural Diplomacy?

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Abstract: The unprecedented international success of Liu Cixin's 《三体》 *Three-Body* trilogy — culminating in the 2015 Hugo Award and subsequent global translations, screen adaptations, and the viral Netflix series of 2024 — has repositioned Chinese science fiction (Chinese SF) as a significant cultural and geopolitical phenomenon. This paper examines three interlocking dimensions of that phenomenon: the historical trajectory of Chinese SF as a literary genre shaped by recurring cycles of promotion and suppression; its persistent instrumentalisation as a pedagogical tool for the dissemination of scientific values and creative thinking; and its increasingly explicit function as a vehicle of state-endorsed cultural soft power in China's engagement with the world. Drawing on the Callahan (2023) framework of "pessoptimism," neo-socialism, and tianxia, as well as on You Wu's (2020) analysis of translation and global mediation, and on the critical reception of Liu Cixin's work in both Chinese and international scholarship, this paper argues that the relationship between Chinese SF and Chinese power is neither simple nor singular. Chinese SF simultaneously registers anxieties and aspirations that the state cannot fully control, transmits a cosmological imagination that transcends national borders, and serves as a vehicle through which the Chinese state projects its vision of technological modernity. The paradox, this paper contends, is precisely the source of Chinese SF's global resonance.

Keywords: Chinese Science Fiction; Liu Cixin; Three-Body Problem; Soft Power; Cultural Diplomacy; Hugo Award; Translation; Global Reception; Chinese Dream; Tianxia

I. INTRODUCTION

When Liu Cixin's 《三体》 (*The Three-Body Problem*) was awarded the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015 — the first time the prize had gone to a translated work, and the first time it had been won by an Asian author — it signaled something beyond the recognition of a single novelist. It announced the arrival of Chinese science fiction on the world stage. A genre that had been twice banned in China within living memory, that had languished under state suspicion as ideologically contaminated, and that had survived

for decades in the specialist pages of 《科幻世界》 (*Science Fiction World*) magazine, had produced a work that competed with and defeated the best of Western SF on the West's own terms.

The decade since that award has confirmed and amplified what it portended. The three novels of the Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy — *The Three-Body Problem* (2014), *The Dark Forest* (2015), and *Death's End* (2016), translated by Ken Liu and Joel Martinsen — have collectively sold millions of copies worldwide, been translated into over thirty languages, and achieved canonical status in the global SF canon (Wu 2020, 57). The 2024 Netflix adaptation, co-created by *the Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, generated a Weibo hashtag that had been read 2.23 billion times within twenty-four hours of the series's release, even though Netflix is inaccessible within China's own digital infrastructure (Davidson 2024). The Three-Body universe has spawned an immersive experience centre in Shanghai, video games, a Chinese domestic streaming adaptation by Tencent, and a sustained international debate about what Liu Cixin's fiction tells us not only about Chinese culture, but about China's global ambitions.

This paper argues that Chinese SF, and Liu Cixin's trilogy in particular, cannot be adequately understood through any single analytical frame. To read it exclusively as literary achievement is to miss the political and institutional forces that shaped its production, suppression, revival, and global promotion. To read it exclusively as state propaganda is to miss the genuinely unsettling philosophical imagination at its core — an imagination that has resonated with readers in more than thirty countries regardless of their knowledge of, or sympathy for, Chinese government policy. And to read it exclusively through the lens of soft power is to flatten the complex, contested, and often contradictory relationship between Chinese SF writers, the state that periodically bans and promotes them, and the global audiences that have received their work. What is needed, this paper suggests, is a reading that holds these three dimensions simultaneously.

II. THE HISTORICAL FORMATION OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION: FROM ENLIGHTENMENT TO BAN AND REVIVAL

Chinese SF's relationship with state power is as old as the genre itself in China. Its origins lie not in literary tradition but in ideological necessity. Following the humiliations of the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860), Chinese intellectuals of the late Qing dynasty confronted a crisis that was simultaneously political, military, and epistemological: how had China fallen so far behind the industrialised nations? Two of the most consequential intellectual figures of the era, Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and Lu Xun (1881–1936), independently reached a similar conclusion — that the deficit was not merely economic or military, but scientific and imaginative.

It was this conviction that drove them to translate and promote Western science fiction in China, through the intermediary of Japanese translations, during the final Qing years and the early Republic. Their purpose was explicitly instrumental: Lu Xun, in his preface to his 1903 translation of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, articulated what would become a recurring Chinese argument for the genre — that SF was "a very efficient means to enlighten the people" by popularizing scientific knowledge and cultivating what he called 科学精神 (scientific spirit) (Song 2012, 10). Science fiction was thus born in China not as a form of entertainment or escapism, but as a tool of national strengthening.

The instrumentalization of the genre deepened after the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Under Mao Zedong, SF was mobilized in the service of socialist industrialization: stories of technological achievement and scientific progress were a literary expression of the era's obsession with modernization and catching up with the industrial West (Li Guangyi 2016, 64). The genre enjoyed a brief golden period in the 1950s, drawing heavily on Soviet models, before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (文化大革命, 1966–1976) effectively destroyed it. Everything associated with "western capitalism" — which

included imaginative speculation, scientific autonomy, and the literary tradition to which science fiction belonged — was condemned as bourgeois, and writers were silenced or persecuted (Wang 2016).

The post-Mao Reform and Opening Up era (改革开放, from 1978) brought a second flourishing: the Four Modernizations policy created an urgent cultural appetite for science and technology, and SF became a vehicle for that appetite. Writers like Ye Yonglie and Tong Enzheng reached adult audiences for the first time (Wu Yan and Mallan 2006, 2). But this revival was short-lived. The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign of 1983 — a political campaign driven by conservative factions within the Communist Party, targeting Western cultural influences — effectively banned SF for a second time, denouncing it for "spreading pseudoscience and promoting immoral western capitalist elements" (Kun Kun 2011, 10).

It was only from 1991 onwards, as China's market economy expanded and cultural expression was cautiously liberalised, that Chinese SF found the conditions for sustained development. This is the period in which the so-called "Three Generals" — Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Wang Jingkang — emerged, and in which 《科幻世界》 became the institutional home of a new generation of SF writers. The trajectory of Chinese SF from the late Qing to the present is thus not a simple story of literary evolution, but a history of repeated political intervention — of a genre shaped, suppressed, released, and re-shaped by the imperatives of Chinese state power.

III. SCIENCE FICTION AS PEDAGOGY: THE CHINESE STATE AND THE CULTIVATION OF SCIENTIFIC IMAGINATION

Despite its contested and interrupted history, Chinese SF has consistently been understood in China primarily as a pedagogical instrument rather than a literary art form. This is both a feature of its historical formation and a live policy position in the present. In China, SF has long been seen as literature aimed primarily at the young, valued for its capacity to inspire scientific curiosity and cultivate creative thinking in the next generation of innovators.

This pedagogical understanding of the genre has been given renewed urgency by China's strategic competition with the United States in technology and innovation. The story Neil Gaiman tells of a conversation at China's first officially approved SF and fantasy convention in 2007 has become something of a parable for this moment. A Chinese official explained that China had sent delegations to Apple, Microsoft, and Google to understand what drove American innovation, and had found that all the innovators had one thing in common: they had read science fiction as children (Gaiman 2013). Whether apocryphal or not, the story captures a genuine policy shift: the Chinese government has increasingly come to see SF as a catalyst for the kind of imaginative, non-linear thinking that economic and technological competition requires.

This orientation is reflected in concrete policy. In April 2020, the Chinese government released guidelines on the development of a domestic SF film industry, articulating a vision of "science fiction films with Chinese characteristics" that would "disseminate scientific thought," "raise the spirit of scientists," and cultivate "contemporary Chinese innovation" (Davis 2020). Elementary and middle school students were to be encouraged to watch "excellent sci-fi movies," and universities were urged to "strengthen the training of sci-fi related talent." The guidelines represent the most explicit statement yet of the state's ambition to harness SF as a tool not merely of ideological propagation, but of scientific imagination and human capital development.

There is, however, a deep tension at the heart of this pedagogical project. Science fiction, as a literary form, thrives on precisely the qualities — scepticism, counterfactual thinking, the willingness to imagine systems different from those that exist — that political control tends to suppress. The history of Chinese SF is, in part, a history of the state attempting to use the genre while constraining the conditions of its creation. As Liu Cixin himself observed, SF is valuable precisely because "it requires you to creatively

imagine and practically create new worlds" (Callahan 2023, 4). But the state's vision of SF creativity is one bounded by the imperative to portray China as a "technologically advanced nation" in a positive light — a constraint that many SF writers have navigated with varying degrees of compliance and resistance.

IV. THE GLOBAL TURN: TRANSLATION, MEDIATION, AND THE GOING-GLOBAL OF CHINESE SF

The story of how Liu Cixin's trilogy reached a global audience is as important as the content of the novels themselves. You Wu's (2020) analysis of the translation, dissemination, and reception of Liu's work across the globe provides the most comprehensive account of the multiple actors and forces that produced what Wu calls "the going-global of Chinese SF." Three elements of that process are particularly significant.

The first is the role of the translator as promoter. Ken Liu, the Chinese-American author who translated *The Three-Body Problem* and *Death's End*, was not merely a linguistic intermediary but an active cultural mediator whose own reputation in the English-language SF world — he had himself won the Hugo Award twice — gave the translated texts a consecrating authority they would otherwise have lacked. As Wu (2020, 60) notes, Ken Liu adopted a predominantly foreignising translation strategy, preserving Chinese cultural elements and terminology while providing paratextual notes to contextualise them for non-Chinese readers. He also acted as a "matchmaker," soliciting endorsements from prominent Western SF writers and connecting Liu Cixin's work with publishers capable of giving it the sustained promotional support it required.

The second is the role of institutional mediation. The China Educational Publications Import and Export Corporation (CEPIEC), a state-affiliated body, sponsored the translation before any international publisher had committed to the project — an investment in Chinese cultural export that reflects the Chinese state's understanding of literary translation as an instrument of cultural diplomacy (Wu 2020, 62). The publisher Tor Books, for its part, began marketing the first volume in 2013, a full year before its publication, using excerpts, author introductions, and commissioned reviews in major American media to create the conditions for a successful launch.

The third is the role of digital globalisation. The rise of social media, online reading platforms, and audiobook formats transformed the conditions of literary circulation, making Liu's work accessible to readers who would never have encountered it through traditional bookselling channels. A fan community at the University of Southern California created a Three-Body themed song and posted it on YouTube; Goodreads reviews generated organic critical mass; and the announcement that Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg had read and recommended the novel accelerated its passage from SF enthusiasm to mainstream cultural event.

The result is a genuinely complex and multi-layered form of cultural globalisation. *The Three-Body trilogy* is simultaneously a work produced in China, shaped by Chinese history and state policy; a work transformed in translation by the creative interventions of its translators; a work consecrated by the institutional authority of the Hugo Award; and a work received by global audiences whose engagement with it is mediated by digital platforms, social networks, and the recommendations of celebrities. To call it simply Chinese soft power is to underestimate the complexity of the process that produced its global reach.

V. SOFT POWER, PESSOPTIMISM, AND TIANXIA: READING CHINESE SF AS GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

William A. Callahan's (2023) analytical framework — which reads Liu Cixin's fiction through the three dynamics of "pessoptimism," neo-socialism, and tianxia — offers perhaps the most politically

sophisticated account of what Chinese SF reveals about China's global strategy. Callahan argues that to understand China's strategic direction, one must go beyond authoritative official sources — leaders' speeches, policy documents, statistical reports — and read fiction, particularly science fiction. Fiction, he suggests, reveals the anxieties, aspirations, and conceptual frameworks that govern strategic imagination in ways that official discourse cannot.

"Pessoptimism" — a term Callahan borrows from the Palestinian novelist Emile Habiby — captures the simultaneous optimism and pessimism that characterises Chinese political consciousness: the co-existence of national pride in achievement and deep anxiety about civilisational vulnerability. This dual sensibility is powerfully present in Liu Cixin's fiction, where visions of technological triumph are inseparable from visions of existential catastrophe. The "*Dark Forest*" hypothesis — the proposition that all advanced civilisations in the cosmos are locked in a zero-sum struggle for survival in which mutual predation is the rational equilibrium — is the most extreme expression of this pessoptimism at the cosmic scale (Callahan 2023, 11).

The concept of neo-socialism illuminates the distinctive way in which Liu's fiction combines Marxist materialism, technological utopianism, and Chinese civilisational identity into an assemblage that cannot be mapped onto either conventional socialism or liberal capitalism. Liu's novels embody what Callahan calls the "worship of science and technology" that is common to Marxism, Chinese communism, and hard SF: a deep conviction that scientific rationality can and should govern not only the physical world but the political and social worlds as well. This orientation, Callahan notes, produces fictional scenarios in which democracy and political pluralism are treated as obstacles to rational problem-solving rather than as values in themselves (Callahan 2023, 7).

Tianxia — the ancient Chinese concept of "All-under-Heaven" — frames Liu's planetary imagination. In *The Wandering Earth*, the response to the Sun's impending expansion is not the evacuation of individuals or nations but the conversion of the entire Earth into a single spacecraft, carrying all of humanity on a multi-generational journey to a new solar system. This planetary, collectivist solution resonates with Xi Jinping's rhetoric of a "community with a shared future for mankind," and reflects a vision of global governance in which the framework is universal but the leadership is Chinese (Callahan 2023, 9).

Yet Callahan is careful not to reduce Liu's fiction to ideological prescription. The novels are complex enough to sustain multiple readings, and their global appeal is partly a function of the universality of the questions they raise: Are we doomed to existential struggle, or can we engage with difference in creative and productive ways? These are questions that resonate far beyond China's borders, and their resonance is what gives Chinese SF its genuinely global reach — a reach that no amount of state sponsorship alone could produce.

VI. THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM ON SCREEN: ADAPTATION, RECEPTION, AND THE LIMITS OF SOFT POWER

The 2024 Netflix adaptation of *The Three-Body Problem* brought the debates around Chinese SF's global function into unusually sharp focus. The series — co-created by David Benioff, D.B. Weiss, and Alexander Woo, directed by Derek Tsang — generated an immediate and divided response in China, even though Netflix is inaccessible there. By the morning after its release, the hashtag had been read 2.23 billion times on Weibo and discussed more than 1.4 million times (Davidson 2024).

The criticism from some Chinese viewers was instructive. Some accused the adaptation of "Americanisation" — of taking a Chinese story, moving its action to London, casting an international ensemble, and transforming what was a Chinese civilisational drama into a Western heroic narrative. "Flat and shallow," wrote one Weibo commenter, accusing the creators of "orientalising" the Chinese

background story and producing "a Hollywood story of western heroism instead" (Davidson 2024). Others compared the Netflix version unfavourably with Tencent's thirty-episode domestic adaptation, describing Netflix's work as "General Tso's chicken" — a Chinese dish adapted for Western palates — as opposed to Tencent's "banquet."

Yet not all Chinese responses were negative. Some viewers welcomed the fact that the story was being shared with a broader global audience. The Chinese film review site Mtszimu described the adaptation as "not only a new interpretation of Liu Cixin's original work but also an important contribution to global science fiction literature." And one Weibo commenter observed that "everyone has a version of this interpretation in their own imagination" — an acknowledgement that the original text is rich and complex enough to sustain multiple creative readings (Davidson 2024).

What the Netflix controversy reveals is the inherent tension in the soft power model as applied to Chinese SF. Soft power, as Nye (2004, 8) defined it, depends on attraction rather than coercion: it works when others find a nation's cultural products genuinely compelling, not when they are instructed to do so. But when a work of Chinese SF reaches the scale of global cultural event that Liu Cixin's trilogy has achieved, it escapes the control of the state that promoted it and becomes the subject of competing interpretations, creative adaptations, and critical appropriations. The Netflix series is not soft power in the Chinese state's terms; it is the work of American showrunners using Chinese source material to tell a story for a global streaming audience. The fact that it generated intense engagement in China — even behind the firewall — suggests that the cultural dynamics at work are more complex than any state strategic framework can capture.

VII. THE PARADOX OF CHINESE SF'S GLOBAL APPEAL

The central paradox of Chinese SF's global appeal is that it has been most successful precisely where it is least amenable to state instrumentalisation. *The Three-Body* trilogy's worldwide resonance is not a product of the Chinese government's soft power strategy, however much the state has sought to capitalise on it retrospectively. It is a product of Liu Cixin's genuinely original cosmological imagination, of Ken Liu's creative translation, of the Hugo Award's institutional consecration, and of the organic enthusiasm of an international readership that found in the novels a philosophical engagement with questions — about civilisational survival, the ethics of knowledge, the relationship between science and politics — that transcend any national frame.

The opening of the immersive Three-Body experience centre in Shanghai, which Callahan might describe as a neo-socialist cultural enterprise — combining AR, VR, AI, and dramatic performance in a 3,400-square-metre space inspired by the Stellar-class warship Gravity from *Death's End* — illustrates the state's efforts to domesticate and institutionalise the trilogy's success (Global Times 2023). Yet the centre's existence is also evidence that something has been generated by Chinese SF that exceeds the state's original investment in it: a genuine cultural phenomenon with a life of its own.

China Daily's description of SF as "China's next big export after martial arts" (Liu Cecily 2018) points toward the commercial logic underlying the state's promotion of the genre. Just as kung fu films and martial arts literature served as vehicles for Chinese cultural projection in the 1970s and 1980s — reaching global audiences who had little knowledge of or sympathy for the Chinese government — so SF has the potential to project Chinese cultural values and technological ambitions through a genre that is globally legible and commercially viable. But the analogy also points to the limits of state control: martial arts cinema became globally popular because it was genuinely entertaining and artistically inventive, not because the Chinese government promoted it.

The same logic applies to Chinese SF. As Cecily Liu (2018) observed, the rising generation of Chinese SF writers are "internationally-minded, highly intelligent young men and women in white collar jobs"

whose imaginative engagement with the future is not reducible to any government brief. The state can create the institutional conditions for their work, provide platforms and prizes, and seek to orient their output toward approved narratives of Chinese technological modernity. But it cannot produce the genuine creativity that makes the work resonate — and when it tries too hard to do so, it risks producing exactly the kind of state-endorsed mediocrity that would undermine the genre's global appeal.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Chinese science fiction is simultaneously a literary genre, a pedagogical instrument, and a vehicle of cultural soft power — but it cannot be reduced to any one of these functions without distorting what makes it significant. Its history is the history of a genre that has survived two state bans and multiple attempts at instrumentalization to produce, in Liu Cixin's trilogy, a work of genuinely global literary and philosophical importance. That importance is not despite its Chinese origin but because of it: the specific historical experiences that shaped Liu Cixin — the Cultural Revolution, the reform era, the rapid technological transformation of China, the specific cosmological anxieties of a civilization that has experienced a century of national humiliation — are encoded in the fabric of his fiction, and they give it a density and seriousness that resonates with readers who know nothing of Chinese history.

The Chinese state's attempt to harness this resonance for strategic purposes — through translation subsidies, film guidelines, experience centers, and the incorporation of SF into educational curricula — is understandable given the genre's demonstrated capacity to project Chinese culture in compelling ways. But as Callahan (2023) reminds us, Liu's deterministic vision is only one possible future for China and the world. When science fiction employs "estrangement" to imagine futures different from the present, it opens possibilities of critique as well as affirmation. The same texts that can be read as parables of Chinese civilizational ambition can also be read as warnings about the consequences of zero-sum thinking, unchecked technological power, and the sacrifice of political pluralism to scientific efficiency.

What Chinese SF ultimately demonstrates is that cultural power — genuine cultural power, as distinct from state-managed image projection — cannot be manufactured. It arises from the intersection of genuine artistic creativity, historical depth, and the capacity to articulate universal concerns through particular experiences. Liu Cixin's trilogy has achieved this, and in doing so has given Chinese SF a global standing that no government programme could have produced. The challenge for both the Chinese state and for international scholars is to engage with the complexity of that achievement rather than reducing it to a single strategic frame.

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