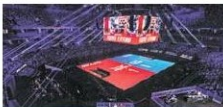




Blooming farms

Floriculture, tourism create success for Guizhou ventures [BIZ LIFE, PAGE 9](#)



New digital dawn

Gaming legends excited about esports' Asian Games debut [SPORTS, PAGE 12](#)

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FINAL FRONTIER IS NO LONGER ALIEN

Sci-fi depictions of life in space are often inspired by what is happening on our own planet

By YANG YANG
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Since its release in January, the prequel Chinese sci-fi blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* (2019) has made a huge splash with takings passing 4 billion yuan (\$580 million), according to box-office tracker Maoyan.

Adapted from sci-fi author Liu Cixin's novelette of the same title, *The Wandering Earth* tells a story about how humans build enormous engines to propel the Earth out of the solar system before the sun burns out and obliterates the planet.

The movie was released in 23 countries and regions, including the United States, Canada and Malaysia.

As one of the most complicated and demanding film genres, sci-fi, to a large extent, tests the development of the sector in a country as well as its manufacturing industries.

In *The Wandering Earth II*, for example, of the 950,000 prop and costume items, 61 sets of mechanized

equipment were created by Xuzhou Construction Machinery Group, a leading heavy machinery manufacturer.

Among the stunning machines is the ET 120 walking excavator that in reality can work in different conditions, such as on 45-degree slopes or in 2-meter-deep water.

At the film lunch ceremony, director Guo Fan said: "The 'steel mantis' (ET 120 walking excavator) that we used in the shooting is a real-life Transformer. During filmmaking, we saw many sci-fi scenes in the Xuzhou company."

Imagination, almost, can't catch up with the reality.

"Like all literary genres, sci-fi reflects reality," veteran Chinese sci-fi writer Han Song said in a previous sci-fi conference.

Chinese people were determined to make a great sci-fi movie because the country has the most complete manufacturing chain in the world, he said.

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Prop and costume items from *The Wandering Earth* are exhibited at the Hobby Expo China in Beijing on April 21. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

COVER

Major theme: Sales head for the stars

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Sci-fi, the heavy industry of the film genre, displays the development of science and technology in a country, he said.

It has been evident in history that progress in science and technology will bring about the prosperity of sci-fi, say experts and insiders of the industry in China.

In recent years, fast scientific and technological advancement in the country has inspired people's curiosity to see the possibilities in sci-fi, which explains why it has become so popular in China, they say.

English writer Mary Shelley created the world's first sci-fi novel *Frankenstein* in the early 19th century, inspired by the discovery of bioelectricity at the end of the 18th century and related experiments.

The golden age of science fiction in the US from the 1930s to '50s or the era of sci-fi in Japan after World War II were all accompanied by fast scientific and technological development, says Ji Shuangming, head of Future Affairs Administration, a company that deals with the sci-fi business, including publication, consulting and filmmaking.

Science fiction was introduced to China at the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), together with the idea that science could enlighten people for national rejuvenation.

Han has summarized that there had been three waves of sci-fi, and the publishing of Liu's Three-Body Problem trilogy in 2010 predicted the coming of the "unprecedented" fourth wave in China due to the great economic and social development in the last few decades.

In 2021, sci-fi had become one of the major five theme categories of Chinese online literature, which is one of the main content providers of cultural industries in China, according to a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

A white paper released in March at the Galaxy Award, the country's most prestigious sci-fi literature award, showed that last year, leading Chinese online literature platform qidian.com saw more than 42,000 sci-fi novels published, and new works increasing by 30 percent. Sci-fi ranked first place among the fastest growing themes of online literature on the website, and became the third-largest category after fantasy and urban stories.

The white paper found that more people born after 1995 have become online sci-fi writers. They tend to integrate elements, such as evolved superpower, future worlds, interstellar civilizations, and super science and technologies, in their works.

Half of the users on qidian.com started reading sci-fi in 2021, and last year, the number grew by nearly 40 percent, and 70 percent of sci-fi readers are below 30.

Like the Three-Body Problem trilogy, many popular sci-fi novels have been adapted into works in other forms, such as TV series, animation, and audio plays. An audio play adapted from online sci-fi work *Ye Mei Mingminghu* (The Art to Name the Night) was played more than 1.1 billion times.

Scientific frontiers

Explaining why sci-fi has become so popular in China, director Guo writes in an article published in People's Daily: "The progress in science and technology provides reality bases for the popularization and acceptance of sci-fi literature and art."

In the past decade, China has launched manned spaceflights, rovers and probes to the moon and Mars, and also a sun observation satellite. People have been used to see Chinese astronauts working and living in the space station Tianzhou, so it is convincing to see in movies Chinese astronauts walking out of a space station and working, Guo writes.

As Liu said in a previous interview, modernization in China draws sci-fi closer to people.

However, science and technology has been developing so fast that it poses challenges to sci-fi writers, because the genre is not only about imagination, but also a deduction based on one's knowledge about science and technology. Ji says.

"We realized that science and technology has been developing too fast, and there are so many specialized directions within one academic discipline that it's more demanding for sci-fi creators to



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learn about scientific frontiers, especially transdisciplinary knowledge," Ji explains.

"If we cannot imagine the future based on the present, our imagination is unlikely to influence the future. If we cannot see the current scientific development and learn from theoreticians and engineers about the changes, it's impossible for us to estimate the possibilities in the future."

In 2019, a group of sci-fi writers paid a visit to State-owned enterprises in areas including photovoltaic power, hydropower, nuclear energy, electric power transmission, and high-end underground construction. These involved various entities, including State Power Investment Corp, China National Nuclear Corp, State Grid Corp of China, China Railway Group Ltd and China Railway Construction Corp.

In 2021, another group visited the Technology and Engineering Center for Space Utilization under the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

As one of the organizers, Ji says that through talking with engineers and scientists, writers could know about their vision of the near future, technologies possibly developed in the future and some extreme situations of scientific development, and based on that vision, sci-fi writers could then further imagine the far future.

Inspiring journey

Two books of sci-fi short stories based on the two visits — *Daguo Zhongqi* (The Pillars of a Great Power) and *Zaofeng Xingzhen* (Visits to Science and Technology) — were published in April last year and in February.

Zhou Wen, one of the participating writers, said at the book launch of *Daguo Zhongqi* that she was stunned by stellar energy, seeing in Northwest China's Qinghai province

Best-selling writers give sci-fi a growing universal appeal



Wang Jinkang



He Xi



Liu Cixin

Liu Cixin is a good star if you are interested in Chinese science fiction. His major novels have been translated into a number of languages, including *Ball Lightning*, *The Supernova Era*, and *The Three-Body Problem* trilogy.

Besides, there are also translation collections of his representative short stories: *To Hold Up the Sky* and the fable *Of Ants and Dinosaurs*. Combining science, philosophy, history and imagination, Liu uses candid language to create thought-provoking stories happening in mind-blowing universes.

Wang Jinkang is another representative sci-fi writer in contemporary China. His signature novella *Sowing on Mercury* won the Galaxy Award, the country's top sci-fi prize, in 2002. The story starts from 2032, when the protagonist receives a legacy from a distant aunt, a scientist who creates a metal life. The aunt asks the protagonist to send the metal life to Mercury, the most suitable planet for it to survive, reproduce and evolve.

After many struggles, a billionaire Mr Hong decides to support the project on

one condition that he will go to Mercury together with the metal life. On Mercury, Hong decides to stay using a freezing device and wake up every 1,000 years to check the evolution of the metal life. After 1 billion years, the intelligent life on Mercury has established their religion and worships the god living on the north pole of Mercury. Some individuals decide to save the god.

You should not miss the short stories by He Xi in books, such as *Rensheng* (Never Meet Again in Life) and *Shangzhen* (Heartbreaker). In his representative story *Yi Lu* (Alien Land), in order to deal with a food crisis in a future overcrowded world, humans build a farm in which crops grow at a speed 40,000 times that in a normal world. According to the conservation of time, to keep the balance, another farm's time almost stops. However, other creatures in the farm also evolve much more quickly and endanger the existence of humans.

The story collection by Han Song titled *Yuzhou Mubei* (The Tombs in

Universes) contains excellent short stories that display this avant-garde sci-fi writer's profound reflection on science and humanity. In the short story of the same title, the meaning of human existence is condensed in the black tombs of early astronauts ubiquitous in the universe, solemn, weird but insignificant. Built with a material that can last billions of years, the tombs symbolize the roots of human civilization. However, one day all the tombs disappear mysteriously.

First published in 1998, the book fully displays Han's style — the absurd and really mirror each other, nihilism and violence coexist, and it is highly symbolic which defies interpretation. In addition to these veteran sci-fi writers, you can also try works by authors of younger generations, such as *Shijian Zhui* (Ruins of Time) by Bao Shi, the short story collection by Zhang Fan, titled *Qifeng Zhicheng* (Where the Wind Starts), and the short story collection by Tang Fei, titled *Aode Saibo* (Odysseyber).

YANG YANG

the largest photovoltaic power station in the world.

The endless sea of solar panels looked like deep blue silent sunflowers, from which the world's first ultrahigh voltage electricity of 100 percent clean energy would travel more than 1,650 kilometers before illuminating thousands of homes in central China, she says.

Ji says: "We were all amazed by the sea of solar panels, and underneath were sheep grazing. It's a very futuristic scene. A scene that is very hard to imagine when you sit at home."

Liu writes in a recommendation of *Daguo Zhongqi*: "The power of human science and technology has created many wonders that cannot be seen or imagined by many people throughout their life. The stunning feelings that many sci-fi works have brought to us are actually the representation and extension of the mental experience when the writers are confronted with those wonders."

"These stories are created by the writers after they visit and experience the most advanced and magnificent technological projects in China. They bring the views that have existed but are not common before us."

Zhou created a highly sensitive photoelectric material in her short story *Zaofeng* (The Baiting Light) which can facilitate spaceships to travel far distances with electricity generated from weak starlight. The idea was praised by Zhang Zhi, deputy general manager of SPIC Integrated Smart Energy Science and Technology, as promising since photoelectric devices were first used in space technology.

Original stories

Commenting on Liang Ling's *Keli Zhizhong* (Inside the Particle), Han says that the description of the electricity technology is detailed and convincing.

The story is about a doctor who meets an engineer from the State Grid during a flight he takes to save a patient and enters a world that is created by the electricity of megavolts.

"Without the visit, it's impossible to create such a unique plot, and what is more fantastic about the work is that the writer is not confined by reality. She talks about the doubts of the truth about existence and universe," Han says.

He's team also organized sci-fi writers to see the launch of Chang'e-series probes and the dark matter particle explorer Wukong, and also the installation of the last part of the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Telescope, the world's largest single dish telescope.

"During the visits, sci-fi writers all said that the reality develops faster than imagined," Ji says.

In essence, sci-fi is a way of thinking, she says.

The fast development of science and technology in China urges people to think about their relationship with science and technology, so sci-fi, in whichever forms, literature, painting, animation, film or TV series, naturally becomes more popular in today's China, she says.

Although many people read classic sci-fi imported from the US or Japan, readers need to read original Chinese sci-fi works because the world has changed tremendously, she says.

One particular interesting thing is Chinese people's idea about cyberpunk.

The earliest cyberpunk is a reflection of a kind of highly mechanistic civilization, a combination of high-end technology and low-end life. However, in China, people's recognition of cyberpunk is relatively positive.

"They will say this city, this street or this shopping mall looks very cyberpunk," she says.

"This kind of change shows how Chinese people's life has been changed or improved by internet in the past 10 years."

Another trendy change lies in the sci-fi works of artists or writers, whose ideas of the space used to be deeply influenced by English works, but now since Chinese spacecraft have traveled to the moon, Mars, or even more distant places, artists or writers started to portray different contents in their works.

For example, Japanese writer Taiyo Fujii wrote in his sci-fi story about Chinese people working in space and returning to the Earth for Spring Festival, which readers now regard as normal.