



BOOK REVIEW:
*Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and
Histories*

Zichuan Gan

Song, Mingwei, Nathaniel Isaacson, and Hua Li, editors. *Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and Histories*. Springer International Publishing: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN: 9783031535413.

The volume *Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and Histories*, edited by Mingwei Song, Nathaniel Isaacson, and Hua Li, offers a vital and timely contribution to the field of Chinese science fiction (SF) research. It aims to provide an accessible introduction to Chinese SF while simultaneously weaving intricate theoretical inquiries with specific historical case studies. In the introduction of the book in chapter one, the editors argue that Chinese SF, despite its long historical roots tracing back to the late Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911), is characterized by discontinuities and interruptions caused by political upheavals and shifting cultural paradigms. Each revival of SF in China involved a fresh reinvention of the genre, integrating national themes with global influences from Japan, Russia, and European American traditions. The editors highlight the contemporary resurgence of Chinese SF since the early 2000s as particularly significant. They relate this revival to China's pursuit of technological advancement and the political vision encapsulated in the "Chinese dream" – a state-driven narrative of national rejuvenation, prosperity, and global prominence. The genre has since gained substantial domestic and international recognition in both the market and academia. The editors emphasize that this boom of Chinese SF necessitates a reconsideration of SF's global contours, proposing that examining Chinese SF enriches and complicates prevailing definitions of the genre.

Focusing on works in the late Qing period, the first section of the volume traces the emergence of Chinese SF at the turn of the 20th century. The

contributors in this section critique the perspective of viewing early Chinese SF as a merely imported literary creation, instead presenting it as a culturally rooted, politically engaged form of knowledge production shaped by its historical moment. In chapter two, Lorenzo Andolfatto challenges a simplistic definition of SF as fiction solely informed by science. By re-examining early Chinese SF through Kang Youwei's *Book of the Heavens*, Andolfatto contends that literary forms were not passive conduits for Western scientific thought but actively participated in shaping and expanding scientific epistemologies in late-imperial China. Further exploring the intellectual milieu, Liyuan Jia in chapter three investigates the era's fascination with pseudoscientific concepts such as hypnotism and mesmerism, demonstrating how notions of the body as a machine permeated late Qing culture. In relation to this, the fourth chapter by Guangyi Li illustrates how – although it was ostensibly intended for the popularization of scientific knowledge during the late Qing – SF in practice frequently served political objectives. Highlighting the complexities of categorization since the genre's emergence in China, in chapter five, Virginia L. Conn illuminates a notable difference between Chinese and Anglophone scholarly discourses on the contested definitions of “Chinese SF.” English-language scholarship often situates Chinese SF within global literary frameworks; in contrast, Chinese scholarship on this genre has historically engaged in broader debates concerning the “essence” of science and its intersection with literature.

The volume's second part shifts focus to the modern and contemporary periods, particularly examining the transformation of Chinese SF under the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, SF was primarily designated as children's literature or “literature and art about science (kexue wenyi)” (11), tasked with promoting scientific literacy and educating the nation's youth. The authors in this section illuminate Chinese SF's enduring value as a vital medium for navigating complex social, political, ecological, and philosophical concerns from the late Qing to the contemporary digital age. Beginning this examination in chapter six, Qiong Yang highlights the crucial role played by “writing editors” in shaping both scientific discourse and the SF genre during the late Qing period as well as the Republican era (1911 – 1949), a function that persisted in altered forms after 1949. After the near-total halt in SF production during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), Chinese SF experienced a notable revival in the post-Mao cultural thaw. Encouraged by Deng Xiaoping's focus on science and technology, SF authors began to expand their scope by incorporating themes from “scar literature” (15) and blending elements of detective and romance fiction. Melissa A. Hosek in chapter seven contends that Mao-era films with science-fictional elements typically emphasized socialist ideals of human-nature integration, whereas, in contrast, the post-Mao SF cinematic landscape embraced rapid technological development, frequently depicting it alongside dramatic ecological exploitation or destruction. Turning to the digital and internet realm in the contemporary era, Hua Li in chapter eight and Heather Inwood in chapter nine argue that the proliferation of online SF novels and SF subgenres is a manifestation of broader societal reflections and anxieties surrounding technoscientific culture. They suggest that these works reveal tensions in embracing and balancing commercialization, technological evolution, and humanistic ideals in contemporary China.

The third section of the book addresses the resurgence and global ascent of Chinese SF from the late 1990s. Emerging at the turn of the 21st century, key SF authors like Liu Cixin and Han Song produced works that engage with China's complex social transformations. This generation of Chinese SF writers is characterized by conceptual and aesthetic experimentation, frequently exploring themes such as terror, dark consciousness, algorithmic governance, and posthuman existence. The chapters in this part of the book offer critical readings of representative contemporary Chinese-language SF authors. In chapter ten, Jannis Jizhou Chen examines Han Song's key works, such as the hospital trilogy, proposing that illness fundamentally shapes Han Song's narrative style. Chen argues that this connection manifests through disjointed narration and delirious storytelling, compelling readers to navigate overlapping realities and illusions. In chapter eleven, Gwennaël Gaffric interprets the pastoral utopia at the end of Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* trilogy as a reconciliation with nature, yet one complicated by its artificial, technologically constructed environment. The focus on how SF works reflect contemporary challenges continues in Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker's analysis in chapter twelve. Schneider-Vielsäcker connects the portrayal of transformed or mutated bodies in the works by post-80s SF authors (Chi Hui, Chen Qiufan, Zhang Ran) to these authors' generational concerns arising from China's rapid economic reforms and social shifts since the 1980s, such as the one-child policy. Finally, the volume concludes in chapter thirteen where Mingwei Song traces the unique development of SF in Taiwan, emphasizing its persistent posthuman themes and Neo-Baroque aesthetics. Beginning with Chang Ta-chun's "Those Who Mourn," featuring "Zhilishu" – a grotesque, mutated figure symbolizing historical trauma – Song identifies this figure as central to Taiwan SF's ongoing engagement with queerness, political violence, and posthuman identity.

The volume effectively situates Chinese SF within broader transnational dialogues, underscoring its global literary significance while compellingly arguing against monolithic understandings of the SF genre. A salient highlight is the introduction penned by the editors, which offers remarkable analytical depth and breadth. Employing accessible language and a precise chronology, the editors adeptly trace the histories of Chinese SF and convincingly identify the core social conditions informing the genre across different periods. The chapters on late Qing SF are particularly notable for their firm grounding in historical sources and archival research. While some arguments could benefit from more explicit dialogue across chapters – the interconnections are occasionally more implied than articulated – the historical framing and careful bibliographic work offer a valuable foundation for future scholarship. As a researcher of contemporary Chinese SF, I found the last section of the book especially compelling. These chapters bring Chinese SF into conversation with diverse theoretical frameworks, offering rigorous textual analysis and intellectually inspiring arguments. They illustrate how Chinese SF serves as a fertile site for cultural critique, narrative innovation, and philosophical exploration. While this section introduces more specialized terminologies, such as "Anthropocene" and "posthumanism," which might seem less accessible to newcomers, this complexity reflects the growing interdisciplinarity of the field. The engagement with emerging and sometimes contested discourses, including the rethinking of "the human" within critical race theory and Asian American studies, as well as Marxist political-economy critiques of the Anthropocene,

exemplifies the field's openness to self-reflection. The diversity of perspectives in this volume affirms the genre's capacity to inspire multiple, sometimes competing, lines of inquiry.

I believe the book's consistent emphasis on non-binary thinking – both conceptually and aesthetically – is a particularly significant contribution to discussions about the future of Chinese SF. The authors demonstrate that this engagement with non-binary modes of thought is not intended to mirror neoliberal identity politics or follow trendy discourse; rather, it is deeply rooted in the complex historical entanglements, conceptual traditions, and representational practices of Chinese-speaking and Sinophone regions. One of the book's most compelling arguments, in my view, is in the final chapter by Mingwei Song. Song suggests that many Taiwanese SF writers share a distinct political and aesthetic sensibility, with their narratives often structured around queer, non-binary, and posthuman forms of life. This characteristic, I would argue, resonates in intriguing ways with the narrative and political aesthetics found in the work of SF authors in the PRC and North American SF writers with Chinese/Sinophone heritage. The volume serves as an excellent springboard for future exploration of how these different strands of Chinese and Sinophone SF have been shaped in both dialogue and divergence. It indicates the significance of exploring the institutional, market, and linguistic conditions that influence these dynamics in the contemporary moment, revealing considerable potential for comparative and transnational approaches to the genre.

Overall, *Chinese Science Fiction* provides a rich, multi-faceted account of Chinese SF. It moves beyond the focus on recent bestsellers to explore the genre's deep historical roots, diverse forms, and complex relationship with science, politics, and culture in China. It is an invaluable resource for scholars and students interested in Chinese literature, SF studies, and global cultural history.

Biography: Zichuan Gan is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature with a specialization in Women and Gender Studies at the University of Toronto. His research interests encompass speculative fiction, critical theory, queer studies, and digital media. Prior to his doctoral studies, he earned a Master of Arts in Comparative Literature from the Université de Montréal and a Bachelor of Arts in French Language and Literature from Central China Normal University.