

For a new era of symbiosis: The 81st World Science Fiction Convention

Cultures of Science
 2023, Vol. 6(4) 363–367
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 DOI: 10.1177/20966083231217588
journals.sagepub.com/home/cul



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I. Introduction

Founded in 1939, the World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) is an annual event that has been held 81 times to date. It is a world-famous, long-standing, large-scale and influential sci-fi cultural event organized by the World Science Fiction Society.

The 81st Worldcon was held from 18 to 22 October 2023 at the Chengdu Science Fiction Museum. With the theme of ‘The Symbiosis Era’, the convention included the announcement of the Hugo Awards, the much anticipated international awards in the field of sci-fi literature. During the Worldcon, 239 salons were held, and there were also exhibitions, a ‘Hugo Night’ lakeside party and fan parties. Those exciting activities created a unique experience for sci-fi enthusiasts from around the world. More than 20,000 sci-fi enthusiasts gathered in Chengdu, including more than 1200 guests from 35 countries and regions. Many sci-fi organizations attended the convention, such as the Korea Science Fiction Association, the Korean Creators Association, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of Japan, the Science Fiction Research Association of India, the Serbian Association of Science Fiction, the Science Fiction Museum of Turin and sci-fi organizations from the US, the UK, Germany and New Zealand. Sci-fi writers, scientists, film and TV professionals, industry researchers, investors and sci-fi enthusiasts from all over the world had an inspiring exchange of ideas and embraced the ‘Symbiosis Era’ of sci-fi

together. The Chengdu convention was the first Worldcon to be held in China. Following the Yokohama convention in 2007, it was also the second time for the event to be held in Asia. The website of *National Geographic* pointed out in its report that the Worldcon in Chengdu was the largest sci-fi cultural event in the world. Overall, the 2023 convention was unique in its focus on mass participation, cultural diversity, industrial development and future orientation.

2. Adopting the ‘fan-driven and government-guided’ model of convention organization to bring sci-fi closer to the public

The 2023 Worldcon has played an important role in stimulating sci-fi creation and developing the sci-fi fan culture and has produced a significant crossover effect. Most of the Worldcons held outside China were initiated and organized by sci-fi enthusiasts, but the Chengdu convention created a win–win situation through the ‘fan-driven and government-guided’ model. According to the ‘Report on the development of Chinese science fiction organizations, activities, awards and fan economy 2015–2020’, Chengdu is home to about 21% of the

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active sci-fi organizations in China, outranking other first-tier cities such as Beijing and Shanghai (Zhao et al., 2021). Chengdu has nurtured a number of sci-fi enterprises, including XGIMI Technology, SCIFI Fanspace and Eight Light Minutes Culture, as well as sci-fi organizations such as the Sichuan Science Fiction Society, the Chengdu Science Fiction Association and Star Raft (the first city-based sci-fi industry alliance in China's central and western regions). With the guidance and support of the government, Chengdu's unique sci-fi fan culture has evolved into a sci-fi cultural conglomerate.

A notable difference between the 2023 Worldcon and other sci-fi conferences held in China in the past is that the 2023 edition stressed the participation of sci-fi fans. The convention had a special fan exhibition area, where a total of 62 sci-fi enthusiasts from China and abroad presented their works. Sixteen Chinese and foreign sci-fi societies and colleges participated in the organization of the exhibition, including the Organization for Transformative Works of the US, the Future Science Fiction Association of Italy, the Worldcon team of Glasgow, the SciFidea team of Singapore, Tsinghua University, Sichuan University, the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China and the Sichuan Conservatory of Music. In addition, during the five-day convention, schools and parents who led the participation of primary- and secondary-school students also became a major highlight of the convention.

Government departments and public organizations (such as the Chengdu Municipal Committee and the Chengdu Municipal Association for Science and Technology) provided support for the convention and played active roles in setting directions and allocating resources. With the goal of building a 'City of Science Fiction', Chengdu has introduced a development plan for the sci-fi industry, established a robust sci-fi industrial system with an expanded presence in the culture and technology domains and cultivated the city's sci-fi brand and global reputation with domestic competitiveness. Specific initiatives included the following themes. First, capitalize on Sichuan's cultural resources and leverage Worldcon's influence to promote the innovative integration of sci-fi and Sichuan's unique cultural elements. Second, act on the principles of 'government-guided, enterprise-led and

market-determined' business operation, seize the opportunity of the convention to channel funds into the fields of sci-fi culture and science and technology innovation, use financial levers to catalyse private capital investment through markets and develop a flexible model for the supply of public cultural services in which the government channels capital investment, encourages business participation and exercises regulation and oversight.

3. Promoting the symbiosis of diverse cultures and sci-fi, and presenting the exciting features of East–West and past–present interaction

Chinese civilization has been an integrated whole of diverse cultural elements for millennia. Chengdu, as a famous Chinese city, has deep historical and cultural roots. It has inherited the splendour of Chinese civilization and nurtured the unique charm of the Tianfu culture. The 2023 convention vividly captured the charm of cultural integration between the past and the present and between the East and the West.

The organizers of the convention introduced the elements of the Tianfu culture and the Bronze Age Sanxingdui civilization in various aspects, such as the designs of the venue and the mascot, the inclusion of Chinese culture in artistic performances and the selection of the Hugo Awards winners.

First, the designs of the venue and the mascot trophy perfectly combined Chinese cultural elements. The abstract bronze statues and mysterious symbols of Sanxingdui reflected the distinctive regional characteristics of the ancient Ba–Shu culture and demonstrated the diversity and richness of Chinese culture. The highlight of the Chengdu Science Fiction Museum—the 'Eye of Science Fiction'—was inspired by the golden mask of Sanxingdui. The mascot of the convention was a panda, 'Kormo', which combined science fiction with elements of Chengdu culture. Kormo was dressed in 'cruising' gear, the colour of which was derived from the silver-blue nebula of the venue of the convention; the design of its ears was derived from the Golden Sun Bird of the Jinsha archaeological site; the core controller of the mecha (robot)

in its head was guided by a ‘gingko leaf’; and the ‘Staff of Creation’ in its hand was inspired by the golden staff artefacts of Sanxingdui. It also had a sidekick—the ‘Stellar Messenger’—which is a bronze bird from Sanxingdui. The core element of the emblem of the convention is a star-pointing panda. The panda symbolizes peace and friendship, and is also the most representative and popular mark of Chengdu culture. It was surrounded by blue and green rings and planets representing science and technology and the future, and sharing and harmony, respectively. The design of the 2023 Hugo Awards trophy was also unveiled at the opening ceremony: a panda poking its head out of a time tunnel and waving to the future with its eyes on a rocket, in tribute to sci-fi. This was the first time that an element of Chinese culture appeared on a Hugo Awards trophy.

Second, sci-fi shows, stage shows and other performances were integrated with Chinese cultural elements. The opening ceremony included elements such as the panda, Sichuan opera, Sanxingdui, Optimus Prime and Iron Man. In the sci-fi show ‘Reach for the Stars’, with the use of high technology, traditional cultural elements such as the ‘bronze man’ from Sanxingdui, the face-changing art of Sichuan opera, the ‘water sleeve’ dancing technique and the Flying Apsaras image were presented in new ways. Dancers wearing Sanxingdui bronze masks and dressed in garments painted with Sanxingdui motifs staged a stunning performance for the audience. This type of performance, combining well-known sci-fi elements with the ancients’ fantasy about the unknown world, has become a major highlight of the convention. Although coming from different ages and different countries, they each represent a particular side of science fiction in the minds of sci-fi enthusiasts.

Finally, the Hugo Awards winners have captured the essence of multicultural integration. During the 2023 Hugo Awards ceremony on 21 October, the winners of the 17 Hugo Awards, the Astounding Award and the Lodestar Award were announced. Sci-fi writer Hai Ya’s *The Space-Time Painter* won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette. After Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang, Hai Ya became the third Chinese sci-fi writer to win the Hugo Award. Published in 2022, *The Space-Time Painter* is

inspired by the life of Wang Ximeng, a talented ancient Chinese painter and the author of *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains*. The novel traces the creation of a fictional painting and the power struggle within the imperial court at the time, combining the topic of ‘repairing cultural relics in the Forbidden City’, which has been trending in recent years, with traditional Chinese culture, history, detective stories and sci-fi. Chinese sci-fi illustrator Zhao Enzhe won the Hugo Award for Best Professional Artist for his hardcore sci-fi illustrations of futuristic cityscapes and giant starships. The Chinese fan magazine *Zero Gravity Newspaper* won the best fanzine award.

In addition to the launching of culturally integrated products, the convention included a forum on ‘How Chinese Mythology Influences Science Fiction Storytelling’. The Chengdu Government has been actively exploring innovative programmes for the integration of literature and the sci-fi industry based on Ba-Shu culture and history. To promote the innovative integration of sci-fi and the cultural icons of Ba-Shu, it has launched a number of sci-fi attractions on popular themes such as ‘Panda’, ‘Sanxingdui’ and ‘Wandering Earth’. Currently, Chengdu is making big strides towards the ambitious goal of building a world-famous cultural city showcasing the beauty of Tianfu and Ba-Shu culture.

4. Harnessing the power of culture and science and technology to add new impetus to the development of the sci-fi industry

The development of China’s sci-fi industry is gaining strong momentum. Quantum technology, cloud computing, blockchain, the metaverse and other new technologies are emerging, producing new business forms in the industry, more resilient industrial chains and the rapid integration of industrial drivers. The empowering effect of ‘sci-fi+’ is increasingly visible, and the sci-fi industry, represented by future industries, has become an important growth pole of the economy. Through Worldcon, Chengdu has harnessed its resource endowment and seized the strategic opportunity to build itself into China’s capital of science fiction. In that

effort, it has focused on constructing a modernized industrial system, strengthening the industrial chains, building the vehicles and platform for the development of the sci-fi industry and promoting the high-quality development of the industry. During the convention, the first Industrial Development Summit of Worldcon was held, with the theme of ‘Science Fiction Builds Dreams, Symbiosis and Coexistence’. The summit released a series of industrial research results, published a list of opportunities, and included the signing of a number of agreements on industrialization projects. This was the first time that Worldcon organized an event on industrial development, which was also a major innovation in Chengdu.

First, the *Science Fiction Industry Chengdu Consensus*, the *2023 Chengdu Science Fiction Industry Report* and other reports on the achievements of the industry were released. The *Consensus* covers eight areas of the sci-fi industry: cultural leadership, technological empowerment, copyright protection, IP creation, talent cultivation, international exchange, industrial upgrading and brand promotion. At the summit, Chen Ling, Executive Deputy Director of the China Science Fiction Research Center and Secretary General of the China Science Writers Association, released the *2023 Chengdu Science Fiction Industry Report*. The report shows that, in recent years, Chengdu has actively worked for the construction of a sci-fi creative ecosystem, achieved leapfrog progress in sci-fi empowerment and innovation-driven development, and delivered notable performance in the six key areas of literature, games, film and TV, derivatives, culture and tourism, and equipment manufacturing. From 2018 to 2022, Chengdu’s sci-fi industry recorded a total revenue of ¥127.632 billion, growing by an average of 19.11% per annum. In 2022, the annual revenue of Chengdu’s sci-fi industry (excluding sci-fi equipment manufacturing) reached ¥20.018 billion, accounting for 22.81% of the national total (with a year-on-year growth rate of 13.32%, which is much higher than the national average of 5.77%), further securing Chengdu’s place in the leading group of Chinese cities in sci-fi industry development. Chen Ling noted the strong momentum of Chengdu’s science fiction industry and the parallel development of the

six key areas. She also pointed out that Chengdu leads the country in sci-fi literature creation, has obvious strengths in sci-fi games, is rapidly developing in sci-fi equipment manufacturing, and keeps its industrial actors fully motivated. All these show the benefits of blending creative culture with cutting-edge science and technology.

Second, 21 agreements on sci-fi industry projects were signed at the conference. New forms of business are being actively explored in the industry. The deals signed involve top companies that produce sci-fi movies, sci-fi parks, immersive sci-fi experiences and other mature forms, and new players that are active in sitcoms, games and the metaverse. There were also service platforms, such as sci-fi franchise incubation projects and sci-fi cultural and creative funds. The ‘Chinese Stories: Sci-fi Sitcoms Incubation Base Project’, with a ¥2-billion investment, aims to establish a platform using a ‘program–park–base–academy’ model, consolidating top resources in the sci-fi industry chain. The ‘Three-Body Universe Global Headquarters’, a ¥1-billion investment project, plans to develop a top Chinese sci-fi brand with global influence. It will focus on developing games, films, TV shows, brand derivatives and other businesses to present a more three-dimensional three-body world.

Third, through building platforms, attracting talented people and pooling resources, Chengdu has brought together a large number of sci-fi industry projects, elements and platforms and further stimulated the energy and vitality of innovation in the sci-fi industry. In future, Chengdu will focus on three directions. First, it will optimize the layout of industrial development. It will build a sci-fi industry with the structure of ‘one nucleus, two interlinked districts and multiple supporting nodes’ by following the principles of highlighting the strengths of the main business, the efficient concentration of resources and the coordinated development of industries. Second, it will cultivate its comparative advantages for industrial development. It will land high-quality projects with expanded high-quality space, fully leverage Chengdu’s strengths in talent, finance and science and technology, and construct a ‘4 + 6’ industrial platform system for the sci-fi industry consistent with the ‘sci-fi+’ development strategy. Third, it will expand its presence in new directions at a faster pace. It will

plan for the development of future industries represented by the core industry of the metaverse, the future space industry, the quantum internet industry and the brain science and brain-machine industry, and organize and implement an incubation and acceleration plan for future industries, so as to firmly maintain future development.

5. Overview: Looking to the future with the sci-fi engine

In addition to the highlights mentioned above, the 2023 Worldcon also demonstrated significant futuristic and visionary features. For example, among the more than 200 activities, more than 10 were on the theme of artificial-intelligence-generated content. The participation of high-school students demonstrated another kind of ‘futuristic’ character: during the convention, a group of high-school students took the centre stage by hosting and participating in two sci-fi salons. The 37th issue of the sci-fi magazine *Future Dream*, which was edited by a group of students, was published, and four educational games developed by another group of high-school students were also roadshowed. The exhibition demonstrated young people’s understanding of new technologies and their conception of a new world, which in itself is shaping the future.

The 2023 Worldcon came to a successful conclusion when Chen Shi, co-chairman of the convention, handed the gavel over to Vincent Docherty, the representative of Glasgow, which will be the host city for the 2024 Worldcon. Like a small stone stirring

up ripples, the Chengdu Worldcon has been instrumental in driving the development of the sci-fi undertaking and industry. It was the harbinger of a future of scientific prosperity and cultural confidence, and forged creativity and cohesion by inspiring limitless imagination. The Vulcan greeting that we heard among sci-fi fans is also our wish for Chinese science fiction: ‘Live long and prosper’.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Reference

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