

# The national narrative in Chinese science fiction and the innovative transformation of traditional Chinese culture

Cultures of Science  
2024, Vol. 7(1) 22–33  
© The Author(s) 2024  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/20966083241242226  
journals.sagepub.com/home/cul



**Chao Peng**

China University of Petroleum, Beijing, China

## Abstract

Chinese science fiction (sci-fi) draws nutrition from traditional Chinese culture to achieve a modern transformation and promote the development of the national narrative in Chinese sci-fi. There are three ways to realise the transformation. First, adapt and reproduce classic stories, myths, legends and history. By embracing modernity, this unlocks the connections between traditional culture and modern technology, and thus acquires supportive force for modern life. Second, reconstruct history by imagining new routes of technological evolution and thus open up new possibilities for history. By considering contemporary realities, this answers the contemporary call for a more advanced culture. Third, use the national spirit as the soul of Chinese sci-fi. When providing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global challenges, we should balance the relationship between the global vision and the national characteristics of Chinese sci-fi and develop future-oriented national characteristics.

## Keywords

Science fiction, traditional culture, adaptation of classic stories, historical setting, national spirit

## 1. The national narrative in Chinese science fiction

Science fiction (sci-fi) has a Western origin and is completely different from traditional Chinese novels, in which the depiction of science, technology and the scientific spirit is rarely seen. Sci-fi can be seen as a product of the Industrial Revolution and modern technology. When sci-fi novels were first translated and introduced to China as '*kexue xiaoshuo*', novelists tried to find comparable content in China's traditional culture and seek the Chinese origin of the Western terminology

'science'. *Kexue xiaoshuo* first appeared on 14 November 1902, when Liang Qichao published the Chinese edition of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (originally published by the French writer Jules Verne) in the inaugural issue of *New Novel*, marking it as the 'latest science novel from the West'. The use of the name '*kexue xiaoshuo*',

### Corresponding author:

Chao Peng, China University of Petroleum, Beijing, No. 18 Fuxue Road, Changping District, Beijing 102249, China.  
Email: 15120032730@163.com



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access page (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

while highlighting the content of scientific knowledge in the novels, also created hidden traps for the development of sci-fi novels in China:

Before being exposed to real scientific experiments or receiving complete and institutionalized scientific education, translators and writers in the late Qing Dynasty were unable to understand the true meaning of ‘science’, let alone readers. (Ren, 2011)

Therefore, it was not uncommon for people in the late Qing Dynasty to compare the plots of science novels to those of supernatural novels. What separates hydrogen balloons from Ne Zha’s wind fire wheels, cars and railway tracks from Dai Zong’s divine travelling method, and underwater and lunar travel from Tu Xing Sun’s under-earth travelling magic is ‘science’,<sup>1</sup> which is the focusing lens of ideas (New World Novel, 1906). Through the reformation of ‘science’, ‘false ideas may turn into useful inventions’ (Jia, 2017).

Chinese sci-fi has experienced a unique path of development, with two parallel lanes. The first can be traced back to Liang Qichao, who emphasised the function of sci-fi in reflecting social reality; the other one can be traced back to Lu Xun, who valued the role of sci-fi in the popularisation of modern technology. When sci-fi was introduced to China, the country was facing dramatic changes because of an unprecedented national crisis, and Chinese intellectuals placed high hopes on *kexue xiaoshuo*. For example, Liang Qichao launched a ‘revolution in the fiction circle’, attempting to enlighten the public with novels and stimulate their enthusiasm for science. Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, Wu Jianren and others translated and created a number of novels with a sci-fi style.

In 1902, Liang Qichao wrote what he called ‘political fiction’: *The Future of New China*. For the first time in Chinese novels, this described a future in a linear context and broke away from the traditional cyclical view of time. His novel could well be regarded as a sci-fi work. It began with an era of prosperity six decades into the future, with Shanghai playing host to the World Expo and welcoming political leaders from around the world, and China establishing itself as an important player in the international political landscape. The novel’s

imagining of the future reflected the social Darwinist outlook on the world order prevailing at the time and had a notable utopian colour. In 1903, Lu Xun retranslated Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon*, based on the translation by Inoue Tsutomu from Japan. In his review of the book, Lu Xun lamented that:

The knowledge of science is often boring, and the readers could easily fall asleep before reaching the end of the book. If you force them to read, this is the result you will get. However, by borrowing the power of novels and story-telling, even the analysis of abstract concepts can be well digested ... The learning of science for the Chinese people starts with the reading of science novels. (Lu, 2005a: 164)

With the help of the novel as a medium, Lu Xun hoped to popularise scientific knowledge and cultivate a scientific spirit among Chinese people.

When Chinese sci-fi was in its infancy, it was not possible to discuss its Chinese characteristics at the theoretical level. Despite the rich reservoir of fantasy literature in ancient China, the question of why sci-fi had not developed in ancient China captured the interest of academia only in the 1980s. Zhan (2017) pointed out that:

The lack of national and local characteristics in Chinese sci-fi has continued for more than half a century. Whether in the utopian/evil-utopian fantasy in the context of national crisis, or in the popular science works whose mission is to spread scientific knowledge, whether in sci-fi works created under the influence of British, French and other Western writers, or in those created under the influence of Soviet writers, we can hardly find any trace of Chinese cultural traditions, except for a few isolated cases, such as *The Mysterious Mist in an Ancient Gorge* (published in 1960) and *Monkey King Turns the Atomic World Upside Down* (published in 1958).

In 1982, the Chinese government put forward the theory of ‘building socialism with Chinese characteristics’. Responding to this development goal, people in the literary and art circles also highlighted national characteristics in literary and art creation, proposing that ‘socialist literature and art must also “follow their own path” and demonstrate Chinese

characteristics' (Wang, 1983a). In the early 1980s, Tong Enzheng and other sci-fi writers advocated for the establishment of national characteristics in sci-fi creation and took the initiative to write sci-fi novels that met this goal. For example, in 1984, Tong Enzheng produced the sci-fi work *New Accounts of the Journey to the West*. In the novel, the author borrowed the three mythological characters of *Journey to the West*—Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing—and imagined their experience while studying in the United States, exposing the problems of environmental pollution, racial discrimination and fraud in the Western world. The novel described how the three characters used modern technological knowledge to solve the problems plaguing Western society and achieved 15 great deeds in the process, demonstrating their noble qualities of 'integrity against the corruption of wealth and poverty, and loyalty to ideals and duties' (Tong, 2010: 274).

In the mid-1980s, searching for cultural roots became a popular theme in the literary world. Writers devoted themselves to the excavation of traditional Chinese culture and created a large volume of novels that carried the name 'root-searching literature'. After the tide of 'root-searching' receded, sci-fi literature continued to make reflections on the theme. For example, Han Song's *Beyond Reality*, published in 1988, imagined the interaction between earthlings and aliens. In the hundred years since the establishment of the relationship between the Earth and the Mi star, the earthlings, while acquiring advanced technology, had also lost their national culture and were worried that they would become a 'facsimile of the Mi people' (Han, 1988). This clearly showed China's concerns about its dealings with the Western world.

In the early 1990s, *Science Fiction World* magazine (renamed from *Kexue Wenyi*) published several sci-fi novels with mythological and historical themes, such as *The Legend of the Misty Mountain* (published by Liu Xingshi in 1991), *The Story of an Old Man in the Wuxu Era* (published by Jiang Yunsheng in 1991), *Love Story of Nüwa* (published by Jing Jing in 1991), and *Flying to the Sky with a Zither* (published by Zi Minjun in 1991). In the fifth issue of 1991, the magazine carried an article by Lu Ying-chung—'Creating science fiction with

a Chinese style'—which called for the development of sci-fi novels with a Chinese-specific style (Lu, 1991). This was one of the strategies adopted for the hosting of the 1991 annual meeting of the World Science Fiction Society in Chengdu. How to present China's national characteristics and qualities in sci-fi creation was given much thought by the magazine and writers at that time (Yang, 2009). However, this trend did not last, and, after the mid-1990s, sci-fi creation with mythological and historical themes decreased sharply, partly due to the emergence of new writers and partly due to accelerated international cooperation following the Beijing International Science Fiction Convention in 1997, which opened up a wider range of topics.

Even at the turn of this century, discussions on Chinese sci-fi could still lead to conclusions such as 'there are no glazed tiles on Mars' (Pan, 1999). Entering the twenty-first century, the works of sci-fi writers such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, Wu Yan, Yan Leisheng, Qian Lifang, Chen Qiufan, Chang Jia, Xia Jia and Liang Qingshan have provided references for the discussion of the national narrative in Chinese sci-fi. Today, 'national features' has become a high-frequency phrase. Sci-fi works carry the missions of telling China's story, strengthening China's voice in the world, presenting a real, three-dimensional and comprehensive image of China to the world, and helping to improve China's cultural soft power and the influence of Chinese culture. Chinese sci-fi faces various problems: What is the difference between Chinese sci-fi and Western sci-fi, and what makes Chinese sci-fi 'Chinese'? How can we establish sci-fi theories and discourse rooted in the Chinese soil and break the aesthetic paradigm constructed by Western modernist aesthetics? It is in this context that the analysis of the use of traditional Chinese culture in sci-fi narratives becomes particularly important.

After a brief review of the evolution of the national features of Chinese sci-fi since the 1980s, this paper focuses on analysing how sci-fi narratives acquire resources from traditional Chinese culture and shape a Chinese style through modern and innovative transformation. This paper makes a distinction between explicit and implicit transformations. Explicit transformation refers mainly to the

direct innovation of traditional cultural resources, such as the adaptation of classic stories and the creation of historical settings. In such sci-fi creations, a large number of traditional cultural symbols will appear in the text. Implicit transformation focuses more on the demonstration of national spirit and the portrayal of national characteristics, which might not include a large number of traditional cultural symbols in telling the story. By analysing the innovative transformation of traditional Chinese culture in sci-fi narratives, the intention is not to simply look back, but rather to explore the future development path of Chinese sci-fi.

## 2. Means of innovative transformation

The development of Chinese sci-fi, in its 100-plus year history, has always been closely connected with the country's modernisation process. Its function in science popularisation and the scientific culture that it advocates have played a role in scientific enlightenment for the public. Since the 1980s, or the beginning of the twenty-first century, the creation of Chinese sci-fi has experienced the second and third boom periods. There is now an urgent question about how to handle its relationship with traditional Chinese culture. The rapid advance of sci-fi that we are witnessing today is a vivid exemplar of China's rapid modernisation, and, 'if we do not approach the study of sci-fi literature from the perspective of "modernity", we cannot really touch its inner core' (Wu, 2006: 1). As sci-fi is an imported product, the development of Chinese sci-fi is based on the creative transformation and innovative development of a variety of literary traditions, including both Western and Chinese literary traditions. By analysing some representative works, it is possible to explore how Chinese sci-fi draws nutrition from traditional Chinese culture and achieve modern transformation and development.

### 2.1 Adapting classic stories

Adapting classic stories is a method of transformation often used in Chinese sci-fi. The writers obtain materials from ancient stories, such as

myths, legends and historical facts, reinterpret these stories with contemporary thinking and expressions, and construct a fictional contemporary and future world by deconstructing the original storylines. The key to such sci-fi creation lies in integrating modern science with ancient myths and legends. Lu Xun used a similar approach in *Old Tales Retold* by 'seeking inspirations from both the past and present' (Lu, 2005b: 353). Both methods reflect on history and culture from the perspective of modernisation.

The classic story *Master Yan the Artificer*, which has been adapted in sci-fi novels many times in different periods, is frequently cited to prove the connection between traditional Chinese culture and sci-fi. *Master Yan the Artificer* is recorded in the ancient Chinese collection *Lie Zi: Tang Wen*. It tells the story of Master Yan, who presents a doll to King Mu of the Zhou Dynasty. The doll can sing and dance, and it can also use its eyes to flirt with and seduce the King's wives. This angers the King. To quell the fury of the King, Master Yan dismantles the doll to prove that it is not a real person.

The internal organs, such as liver, gall bladder, heart, lungs, spleen, kidneys, intestines and stomach, and external organs, such as sinews, bones, joints, fur, teeth and hair, are all fakes. (Jing, 2007: 163–166)

The doll made by Master Yan is now widely regarded as the first robot in China, and the principles of its making are based on ancient Chinese medical science and the doctrines of *yin* and *yang* and the five elements. For example:

When the king tries to disable her heart, then she can't speak; if the king tries to disable her liver, then she can't see; and if the king tries to disable her kidneys, then she can't walk. (Jing, 2007: 163–166)

'The doll is made of leather, wood, glue, lacquer, as well as paint of white, black, red and green colours', and is lifelike, which shows the level of scientific knowledge and technological advances at that time. Although *Master Yan the Artificer* is just a short story, it contains all the necessary elements of a sci-fi novel, including characters, plot, science and fantasy. Because of this, the story has been an

important source of inspiration for sci-fi creations in China and has directly or indirectly inspired the creation of many sci-fi works, such as *The Death of the First Robot in the World* (published by Tong Enzheng in 1982), *The Legend of Master Yan* (published by Pan Haitian in 1998), *Spring Day: Cloud Mountain: Zhong Kun* (published by La La in 2003) and *Kun Lun* (published by Chang Jia in 2006).

Take Tong Enzheng's *The Death of the First Robot in the World* as an example. There is a note at the end of the novel, saying that the story is 'a sci-fi novel inspired by *Lie Zi: Tang Wen*' (Tong, 1982). The most significant change to the original text of *Master Yan the Artificer* is the inclusion of emotional factors, designed to instigate a discussion on the emotions of robots. In the original text, the robot doll uses eye-flirting to seduce King Mu's wives. In the adapted novel, it is Sheng Ji, the favourite concubine of King Mu, who takes the initiative to provoke the robot. As a result, the 'heart' of the robot is filled with love. Driven by the power of love, the robot 'danced a few amazing steps that even Master Yan had not expected'. Issues concerning the emotions and ethics of robots are frequently discussed in sci-fi works. Tong Enzheng advanced the discussion on this topic with stories originating in ancient Chinese classics, which could be viewed as beneficial to the inheritance and development of China's traditional culture and to the creation of sci-fi novels with a unique Chinese style.

Pan Haitian's *The Legend of Master Yan* is another adaptation of *Master Yan the Artificer*. The main difference between the adaptation and the original story lies in the identity of Master Yan, and the resulting discussion of the power of nature and machinery. In the adapted story, Master Yan is a 'black-robed man', a time-traveller from the modern era. He creates a singing and dancing robot, Yu'a, who makes the king's beloved concubine smile. As a reward, he begs the king to forgive the entertainers wandering in the street, because 'I am envious of their ability to harness the power of nature, which later generations have forgotten how to approach. We can create dreams through machinery, but we have forgotten the magic we ourselves once possessed' (Pan, 1998). This so-called 'power of nature' points to the resources of fantasy

contained in ancient myths, such as beans transforming into soldiers. In contrast, Yu'a is a modern robot created by machinery. It is through the eyes of the mysterious, black-robed man that readers are able to rediscover the wonders and skills of traditional culture, which are comparable to modern technology, thus 'reopening an imaginative and narrative space in the navigation through the ancient, modern, Chinese and Western worlds' (Wang, 2016b).

Many other traditional Chinese stories have also become resources for sci-fi creation. For example, Chang Jia's *Kun Lun* is based on the ancient classic *Biography of Emperor Mu*. It tells the story of the westward journey of King Mu and presents a different Western Zhou Dynasty powered by magical technologies. Another signature piece is *Chinese Science Fiction Blockbusters* (published by Fei Dao in 2013), which is a collection of sci-fi novellas adapted from mythological and historical stories. With strong Chinese aesthetic values, the book can be regarded as 'old stories retold' in the 'era of singularity'. The collection consists of six stories based on ancient Chinese myths: *The Sky is Above* incorporates classic Chinese stories, such as 'The man who fears the sky might fall', 'Gong Gong ramming into Mount Buzhou', 'Nü Wa mending the sky' and 'Pan Gu separating heaven and Earth', and resets the mythological history. *Glorious Age* takes its inspiration from 'Hou Yi the archer shooting the Sun' and tells a story in which the Earth is transformed into a spaceship. *The Way to Heaven* places the story of 'Kua Fu chasing the sun' in the background of the universe, taking myth as a mirror of reality. *A Glance at the Mountains* reinterprets the story of 'Confucius ascending to the top of Mount Tai', with emphasis on his pursuit of 'Dao' (the great way). *The Butterfly Effect*, which blends ancient Chinese myths such as the ascension of Emperor Wu with Hollywood blockbusters, is a pioneering literary experiment. *The Castle* seeks to rekindle the discussion on the 'iron cage' started by Lu Xu and presents Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman* by way of sci-fi. Although Fei Dao (2013: 229) modestly admits that 'this small book is too light', it has opened up a new environment and space for sci-fi creation, establishing a link between ancient myths and

reality, and, ‘like a mirror, reflects the existential dilemma we all face’ (Han, 2013: 227).

When traditional stories are introduced into sci-fi creation, the writers face a double challenge: how to find the intersection point of traditional culture and modern science, and how to use retold stories to effectively convey reflections on modern society. Traditional culture cannot be revitalised and accepted by today’s sci-fi readers simply by adapting or retelling stories. When ancient Chinese myths, legends and historical facts are reshaped in new forms, they have to overcome the problem of establishing connections with modernity. How sci-fi can integrate traditional culture with modern science, give new meaning and function to traditional culture, and create a sci-fi world with unique and distinctive national features remain unsolved tasks in the adaptation of classic stories.

## 2.2 Creating historical settings

Adapting classic stories is based on the reinterpretation of the original story, but creating historical settings for sci-fi works focuses more on the temporal and spatial background in which the story takes place, and that shapes the world view of the fiction. This type of fiction describes an ‘alternative history’, which imagines the consequences of certain hypothetical adjustments in history. Alternative-history fiction examines key turning points in history and presents a different version of the story by imagining what might happen if the historical process deviated from its original trajectory (Li, 2014). In sci-fi, these assumptions are mostly based on technological predictions. Some sci-fi novels also use the concept of a parallel universe in which multiple histories coexist and sometimes interact with each other. In alternative-history fiction, the plots and characters are mostly fictional, and the protagonists may be able to travel through time and navigate into a parallel universe, watching different histories being played out in different worlds, just as one would imagine in a legend. When technological prediction is combined with the reconstruction of history in a creative transformation of traditional culture, it often brings readers an innovative reading experience.

*The Apocalypse* by Yan Leisheng (in 2022) and *The Immovable Skyfall Mountain* by Liang Qingsan (in 2022), which won the Silver Award for Best Novels at the 14th Chinese Science Fiction Nebula Awards in 2023, are two examples of alternative history. Both of them imagine the creation of new technologies in very different Ming and Tang dynasties, respectively.

*The Apocalypse* takes the *Wu Gong Yuan* novella series as its basis (Yan, 2022). *Wu Gong Yuan* is set up as a branch of Jin Yi Wei (the secret service of the Ming imperial court) and a high-tech research institute, the daily work of which is the development of new weapons, espionage and assassination missions. Jin Yi Wei was originally a military and government intelligence agency established in the early Ming Dynasty, but, in the novel, it is given the additional function of high-tech research. The protagonist is the illegitimate son of a missionary, which also echoes the activities of Ming-era missionaries in China. The *Wu Gong Yuan* series, which includes *The Wrath of Heavenly Thunder*, *Sky and Fire* and the extra chapters *Rootless Grass* and *Floating Flowers*, are all set in the Ming Dynasty. In 2007, *The Wrath of Heavenly Thunder* was published in *Science Fiction World* and immediately triggered heated discussions among sci-fi fans. The writer, with his solid scientific knowledge, rich historical knowledge and bold imagination, provided the readers with a detailed account of the Wanggongchang Explosion during the reign of the Tianqi Emperor of the Ming Dynasty.

Compared with the *Wu Gong Yuan* series, *The Apocalypse* constructed a more complete world and imagined the existence of new technological paths and new historical processes. In the technological setting of the novel, Master Yi Xing of the Tang Dynasty designs a machine called ‘Light Engine’—a propellant device powered by photosynthesis, which triggers rapid development in technology and leads to a technological boom and cultural prosperity in the Ming Dynasty. As the story goes to the second year of the Tianqi reign, the parasitic plant ‘letter vine’, which functions as a means of communication, is destroyed, and the protagonist, Fang Ziye, becomes the target of suspicion. To prove his innocence, he accidentally enters a parallel universe and arrives in a relatively backward Ming Dynasty.

The encounter of the two Fang Ziyes from different times and spaces gives the story drama. What is exciting about *The Apocalypse* is not just its intriguing story, its smooth reading experience and its design of chapters, but also the new perspective that it has opened for understanding Chinese civilization, which enables the reader to imagine the various possibilities of history and to appreciate the inclusiveness, enterprising spirit and cultural confidence of the Chinese people.

*The Immovable Skyfall Mountain* is the latest history-based sci-fi work by Liang Qingsan (2022). The writer often sets his sci-fi novels against the background of ancient dynasties. For example, the *Xinxin Daily News* series (first published in 2016), *Kites in Jinan* (2018) and *Silence of the Eternal Harmony* (2021) are all set in the late Qing Dynasty, and *The Immovable Skyfall Mountain* takes the Tang Dynasty as its background. For this work, the writer developed his storyline from the mathematical concept of the fixed point theorem. The novel is set in the Tang Dynasty before Wu Zetian ascended to the throne. A space-time anomaly occurs in the country and a mountain city breaks into 10 identical mountain cities, with the immovable mountain at the centre of the 10. Gu Ran, the protagonist of the novel, uses the 'Immovable Luo' to calculate the contact point between each mountain city and the immovable mountain and travels freely between the 10 cities. The novel is a blend of sci-fi, martial arts and suspense. Gu Ran is portrayed as a chivalrous character but he is caught up in a bizarre murder case. When he enters Mount Luo from the Immovable Mountain, he arrives at the scene as the High Priest is killed, so he has to uncover the real culprit in order to be cleared of any suspicion. The truth of the case also has implications for the safety and security of the whole world. 'Skyfall' and 'immovable mountain' are important settings of the novel, and its title encourages readers to harness their imagination and logical ability to analyse and deduce the scenarios in the plot, discovering a different Tang Dynasty in the treacherous and perplexing Tang universe.

These history-based sci-fi works with Chinese characteristics create a unique aesthetic style through the collision of nostalgia and advanced technology. They have been compared by readers to

'steampunk' or 'silkpunk'. Silkpunk is a concept coined by the Chinese-American sci-fi writer Ken Liu when creating the *Dandelion Dynasty* series. It involves the deconstruction and re-imagination of Chinese culture and introduces traditional cultural elements into the modern literary genre of sci-fi. For example, bamboo, shells and silk constitute the core elements of the technological conception in such sci-fi works, and the use of such traditional elements reawakens people's aesthetic cognition of traditional Chinese imagery, such as Kongming lanterns and compasses. While reflecting on the core of ancient Chinese culture, such sci-fi works also inspire reflections on modernity, thus promoting the 'rebalance between the aesthetic tradition of serenity and constancy and the aesthetics of speed brought by the technological revolution' (Wang, 2019). History-based sci-fi novels are based on China's own history and national conditions, and, by imagining a new route of technological evolution, they reconstruct the process of China's historical development. This presents a modern, more advanced and culturally confident China.

This type of sci-fi creation based on the innovative transformation of traditional culture often contains the writer's reflections on culture and even ideology. For example, in *Western Seas* (published in 2001), Liu Cixin imagines how history would have changed if Zheng He had discovered the Americas. This is by no means an unthinking fabrication by the writer but reveals the implicit political unconscious with a somewhat utopian colour, which 'makes it possible to create a lively world that is essentially different from our world' (Jameson, 1997: 92). This type of novel stresses the importance of the reader's interpretation of the text and the production of meaning, but it also poses a risk—the artificial construction of history and its unreliability.

'All history is contemporary history.' Therefore, in literary creation, we need to think about the following questions: How do we reflect on the nature of history while using rich imagination and fantastic plots to ensure the entertainment value and readability of the work? How do we mirror the present through the lens of history and reflect people's concerns and contemplation about current issues in society? How can we ensure an effective dialogue

between the China in the story setting and the reality of China to answer the questions of the times and create the image of a vibrant China? If the historical imagination in sci-fi novels lacks in-depth real-life connections, it is easy to slip into superficial descriptions. Therefore, it is necessary to consider contemporary realities in the creation of sci-fi novels. What is needed is not only self-confidence in China's history, but also self-reflection on that history so that sci-fi works truly showcase the charm and elegance of Chinese culture through the transformation of traditional culture.

### 2.3 Inspiring national spirit

Compared with the explicit transformation of traditional Chinese culture by adapting classic stories and creating historical settings, the depiction of national spirit and characteristics is more implicit. When Chinese sci-fi stories are being told, they also display Chinese features and style to the world. When sci-fi works aim to address the crisis faced by humanity as a community with a shared future, it is necessary to approach the issue from the perspective of the whole of humankind. At such a critical moment, writers have to consider how Chinese sci-fi can provide Chinese wisdom and solutions to global challenges and demonstrate China's national spirit and character, because 'the real vitality of Chinese culture lies not in the deliberate maintenance of certain ancient rituals, but in people's attempts to find and solve problems in contemporary society, thus demonstrating China's national spirit and wisdom by intervening and responding to great historical changes' (Nan, 2016: 24).

National spirit is the spiritual support on which a nation relies for its survival and development. In more than 5000 years, the Chinese nation has formed a national spirit of unity and solidarity, love of peace, industriousness, courage and self-improvement, with patriotism at its core. How can this national spirit be reflected in sci-fi works?

*The Wandering Earth* (Liu, 2000) provides a good example. In the story, astrophysicists discover that there will be a helium flash in the Sun in 400 years, which will make the entire solar system unsuitable for life. Humankind decides to take the Earth with it on a wandering journey. The Earth is

the home that all human beings depend on for survival, and it is the sense of family deeply rooted in the blood of Chinese people that makes the people of the novel come up with the solution of wandering with the Earth in the face of an existential crisis. This solution also shows a great difference between Chinese and Western sci-fi, which is depicted in the novel as the dispute between the 'wandering Earth' faction and the 'escape spaceship' faction. A sophisticated ecosystem sealed in a glass sphere, as advocated by the spaceship faction, can never ensure true survival, and the only home for humankind is Earth. As Zhang et al. (2020: 20) noted:

The creations of writers from different countries are naturally influenced by their own history and culture, and sci-fi in each country is shaped by its unique cultural genes. Chinese and Western sci-fi writers focus on different problems, approach the problems from different angles, and propose different solutions.

When thinking about the major crises facing humanity in the future or the social effects of scientific and technological advances, different nations will come up with different answers.

Another two representative works are Liu Cixin's *Supernova Era* and Han Song's *Mars Shining on America*. The former, considered to be Liu Cixin's masterpiece, explores the future society of humankind. The book was first drafted in 1989 and was re-edited five times before publication (Liu, 2003). The novel envisions a supernova eruption in the constellation Auriga, bringing near-destruction to the Earth. Only those under the age of 13 can survive, and humanity enters the supernova era. Selected children carry the responsibility of leading China on their shoulders. They go through the Age of Suspension, the Age of Sugar Town, the War of Games and the Age of Territorial Exchange, where play becomes the only motivation in the world of children. The Chinese children in the novel 'inherit the mission of modern Chinese patriots to save the nation from destruction and the internationalist spirit that enlightened the "Third World" during the revolutionary years' (Li, 2017), which shows humanistic care in a true sense.

Han Song's *Mars Shining on America* has a subtitle—*Westward Journey 2066*—which corresponds

to Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* (the name of the book's Chinese translation is *Westward Journey*). The difference between the two books is that Snow recounts history, while Han Song imagines a future in which, by the middle of the twenty-first century, the United States has declined, and China has become the most advanced country in the world. Tang Long, a Chinese *go* prodigy, travels to the United States to participate in a tournament. During the trip, a massive upheaval happens in the United States, and the world run by the super artificial intelligence, Armando, begins to collapse. As a result, Tang Long is forced to wander around the United States, where he encounters a variety of strange and bizarre events, and ultimately returns to his homeland when the United States has regained peace and tranquillity. In the novel, the United States has experienced all kinds of natural and man-made disasters that had already happened in China. This design is quite revealing. If we consider the novel only as a national fable, that reduces the value of the work. On the contrary, if we can think about the deeper meaning of the image of China portrayed in the work, we will understand that there may be challenges for every nation in the future world, and therefore we must be well prepared. Giving early warning to future civilisations is a function of sci-fi, so the fantasy about a powerful China in the novel 'does not mean returning to the Chinese empire, but rather takes it as a resource of critical thinking to reconstruct China's identity in the global landscape' (He, 2017). This is an important part of the effort of Chinese sci-fi to move beyond its own national perspective and reflect on the whole of human society.

It seems that it is not so difficult to put a national imprint on sci-fi works. For example, Wang Jinkang set God as an old Chinese farmer in his novel *Acting on Behalf of Heaven*:

He suddenly realizes that God is not a high-nosed, deep-eyed Jew, Aryan or Caucasian ... His gray hair has traces of black, and his skin is of the colour of loess, rough like the bark of an old tree. His facial expression is unsophisticated, his waist and back hunched, and his face wrinkled, like a wind-dried walnut ... He is clearly the old farmer from the Central Plains that I met back home not so long ago,

that old man who was as stubborn as a stone. (Wang, 2016a: 381).

The sorceress who wards off evil spirits and exorcises demons and the bustling and noisy traditional rituals in Chen Qiufan's *Deserted Tide* (published in 2012) are another example. However, to properly deal with the relationship between global vision and national characteristics in sci-fi, which is a global genre, remains a difficult task. 'National characteristics should be the "echo wall" of the times, and the refracted light of people's thoughts, feelings and aspirations' (Wang, 1983b). However, there is a long way to go in the exploration of how sci-fi contributes Chinese wisdom and solutions to the major global challenges facing humanity, such as the climate crisis, pandemics, cybersecurity and poverty, and how sci-fi demonstrates its distinctive Chinese characteristics.

### 3. National characteristics oriented towards the future

To develop the national characteristics of Chinese sci-fi requires paying attention to the unique discourse about China's social development and the literary expression formed in this context. This also relies on the innovative transformation of traditional Chinese culture, which includes but is not limited to the three ways mentioned above. The adaptation of classic stories is not only about the adaptation and reproduction of myths, legends and historical facts but, more importantly, about unlocking the connection between traditional culture and modern technology and acquiring supportive force for modern life. The creation of historical settings reconstructs history by imagining new routes of technological evolution and attempts to open up new possibilities for history. That said, we must also consider contemporary realities and answer the call for a more advanced culture. The national spirit gives Chinese sci-fi its soul. When providing Chinese wisdom and solutions to global challenges, it is important to properly handle the relationship between the global vision and national characteristics in sci-fi works and to develop national characteristics oriented towards the future.

It cannot be ignored that for a long time, traditional culture, especially Confucianism, has been regarded as an impediment to the development of Chinese sci-fi. Wang (2011: 73) summarised two reasons why sci-fi did not develop into an independent literary genre in ancient China. One is that 'Confucianism's denial of fantasy took away the imaginative power of Chinese intellectuals', and the other is that 'scientific research received little attention from society in ancient China, and the scientific spirit of reasoning failed to marry the spirit of fantasy'. Similarly, Guo (2011: 292) pointed out that 'primarily, it is the traditional Chinese culture that is at work'. He argued that, despite the richly imagined myths and legends in traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese had a tradition of revering reality, and that the principles of Confucius and Mencius focused on utility, so fantasy was frowned upon by the Confucians. In 'A brief history of Chinese novels', Lu Xun (2005c: 24) suggested that there were only a few Chinese myths known to the present generation because our ancestors 'valued practical work and dismissed fantasy ... Confucius called on people to seek self-perfection, care for their family, and do practical work for their country and the world, and refrain from discussing ghosts and gods, as these were just words of absurdity that Confucians despised'.

As a product of modern science and technology, sci-fi developed along with science, technology, culture and education. Starting from the late Qing Dynasty, the path of sci-fi has reflected the path of the Chinese nation. In an era that lacked scientific spirit, sci-fi progressed in slow and small steps; in an era in which science and technology were growing by leaps and bounds, sci-fi was also given the opportunity to develop. Now, by transforming and promoting traditional culture, establishing a connection between traditional culture and modern science and technology and promoting the rebirth of the national spirit and the reconstruction of national characteristics, sci-fi is embracing a new boom.

Working in an imported literary genre, however, Chinese sci-fi writers subconsciously see Western sci-fi as a subject for comparison and dialogue and take Western civilization as the paradigm. With the acceleration of China's modernisation, Chinese sci-fi is trying to transcend this model, construct a

means of expression with national characteristics, and produce sci-fi novels with Chinese features and style. This is an important reason why Chinese sci-fi writers have been trying to obtain creative resources from traditional Chinese culture in recent years.

Take Liu Cixin's *The Poetry Cloud* (published in 2003) as an example. In the novel, the representative of an advanced alien civilization is presented in the image of Li Bai, a poet of the Tang Dynasty. Liu uses the figure of Li Bai to express his tribute to the art of Tang poetry, and also because 'the cultural symbol of the poet alone can already expand into a large volume of historical details' (Chen, 2023). Several Tang poems were used in the novel, including Wang Zhihuan's *Ascending the Stork Tower*: 'The sun beyond the mountains glows, the Yellow River flows seawards. You can enjoy a grander sight, by climbing up to a greater height.' By blending philosophy with natural scenery, the poem promotes a positive and enterprising attitude towards life and has been highly regarded through generations. However, in the novel, Daya, the dinosaur emissary of the Devouring Empire, interprets the poem as:

The stars have set behind the mountains of the planet, and a river called the Yellow River flows in the direction of the sea (oh, both this river and the sea are made up of the compound consisting of one atom of oxygen and two atoms of hydrogen). To see farther, one should climb higher on the building. (Liu, 2015: 48).

The above example shows that humans understand the poem from the perspective of art, while people from the alien civilization understand it from the perspective of technology. They believe that technology can transcend everything, but art refuses to be absorbed by technology. They have advanced technologies that can turn the Sun into a green star, yet they still cannot understand human feelings; nor can they appreciate the art of China's Tang poetry, which 'contains so many layers of sensation and branches of meaning in such a small matrix, and in the meantime is subject to strict poetic and phonetic constraints ... this is, indeed, what I have seen for the first time' (Liu, 2015: 50). Liu uses Tang poetry to discuss technology and

poetry, which makes the story richer, and Tang poetry, as a representative of human civilization, has thus acquired a layer of meaning more important than its Chinese characteristics.

This reminds us of the transcendence of sci-fi creation. The works of Chinese sci-fi writers will always carry a visible national imprint and a large volume of Chinese elements, but this does not mean that they should confine themselves to the depiction of national characteristics while ignoring the transcendent aspect of sci-fi and giving up the broadest of imaginings about the future and the universe. Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* is representative of Chinese sci-fi, but many of the questions it raises transcend Chinese society and ideas. This is why it has gained international influence. The novel's success also shows that, while carrying out the creative transformation and innovative development of China's traditional culture, Chinese sci-fi is free to boldly draw on and absorb the experience of other cultures in the world.

#### 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 disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This paper is an outcome of the youth programme of the National Social Science Foundation of China, 'Research on the Imagination of Chinese Contemporary Science Fiction Literature' (grant no. 22CZW057).

#### Note

1. Ne Zha is a child-god in Chinese mythology. The wind fire wheels are one of his weapons. Dai Zong is a heroic figure in the classical Chinese novel *Shuihu Zhuan*. It is told that he masters a divine travelling method that allows him to travel 400 kilometres in one day. Tu Xing Sun is a Chinese deity who has the magic power of travelling underground.

#### References

- Chen SJ (2023) The mechanism of national imagination in Chinese science fiction since the 1980s. *Southern Cultural Forum* 2: 22–28 (in Chinese).

- Fei Dao (2013) Afterword. In: Fei Dao (ed) *Chinese Science Fiction Blockbusters*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, p.229 (in Chinese).
- Guo JZ (2011) Exploring the source of prosperity and decline of Chinese science fiction. In: Wang QG (ed) *The Main Trends of Modern Chinese Science Fiction Literature*. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, p.292 (in Chinese).
- Han S (1988) *Beyond Reality*. *Kexue Wenyi* 1: 39–41 (in Chinese).
- Han S (2013) A different China in the eyes of newer generation writers. In: Fei Dao (ed) *Chinese Science Fiction Blockbusters*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, p.227 (in Chinese).
- He GM (2017) The theory of 'civilization' and 21st-century China. *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art* 5: 31–44 (in Chinese).
- Jameson F (1997) *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Translated by Li ZX. Nanchang: Baihuazhou Literary Publishing House (in Chinese).
- Jia LY (2017) Analysis of the concept of 'late Qing science fiction novels'. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies* 8: 62–77 (in Chinese).
- Jing Z (trans.) (2007) *Lie Zi*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company (in Chinese).
- Li F (2014) On the historical concept and narrative features of alternative-history fiction. *Fudan University Journal of Social Sciences* 2: 75–82 (in Chinese).
- Li GY (2017) China turns to the outside: On the literary and historical significance of Liu Cixin's science fiction. *Modern Chinese Literature Studies* 8: 48–61 (in Chinese).
- Liang QS (2022) *The Immovable Skyfall Mountain*. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House (in Chinese).
- Liu CX (2000) *The Wandering Earth*. *Science Fiction World* 7: 12 (in Chinese).
- Liu CX (2003) *Supernova Era*. Beijing: Writers Publishing House (in Chinese).
- Liu CX (2015) *The Poetry Cloud*. In: Liu CX (ed) *Sea of Dreams: Collection of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction Short Stories*, Vol. 2. Chengdu: Sichuan Publishing House of Science and Technology, p.48 (in Chinese).
- Lu X (2005a) Review of *From the Earth to the Moon*. In: Lu X (ed) *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Vol. 10. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p.164 (in Chinese).
- Lu X (2005b) Preface. In: Lu X (ed) *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Vol. 2. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p.353 (in Chinese).

- Lu X (2005c) A brief history of Chinese novels. In: Lu X (ed) *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*, Vol. 9. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, p.24 (in Chinese).
- Lu Y-C (1991) Creating science fiction with a Chinese style. *Science Fiction World* 5: 31 (in Chinese).
- Nan F (2016) The vitality of Chinese culture. *People's Daily*, 13 October, 24 (in Chinese).
- New World Novel (1906) On the function of science in dispelling the absurd ideas of old novels. *New World Novel* 2: 6–13 (in Chinese).
- Pan HT (1998) *The Legend of Master Yan*. *Science Fiction World* 2: 58 (in Chinese).
- Pan HT (1999) Glazed tiles and Mars: Reflections on the path of localization. *Nebula* 2: 10–11 (in Chinese).
- Ren DM (2011) On the naming and influence of scientific romance in the late Qing Dynasty. *Studies on Science Popularization* 6(3): 73–79 (in Chinese).
- Tong EZ (1982) *The Death of the First Robot in the World*. *Kexue Wenyi* 3: 40 (in Chinese).
- Tong EZ (2010) *New Accounts of the Journey to the West*. Guiyang: Guizhou People's Publishing House (in Chinese).
- Wang FR (2011) On science fiction. In: Wang QG (ed) *The Main Trends of Modern Chinese Science Fiction Literature*. Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, p.73 (in Chinese).
- Wang FS (1983a) Several issues concerning establishing the national characteristics of literature and art in the new era. *Dongyue Tribune* 5: 104–108 (in Chinese).
- Wang JK (2016a) *Acting on Behalf of Heaven*. In: Wang WY (ed) *The Thinker of Chinese Science Fiction: Collection of Studies on Wang Jinkang's Science Fiction*. Beijing: Popular Science Press, p.381 (in Chinese).
- Wang Y (2016b) Are there no glazed tiles on Mars? Contemporary Chinese science fiction and the issue of 'nationalization'. *Exploration and Free Views* 9: 119–123 (in Chinese).
- Wang YT (2019) The future that has not yet 'fallen': An introduction to Ken Liu's science fiction narrative ethics. *Commentaries on Literature and Art* 5: 73–79 (in Chinese).
- Wang ZW (1983b) A brief discussion on the national characteristics of literature and art. *Seeker* 6: 23–29 (in Chinese).
- Wu Y (2006) Preface. In: Zhang Z, Hu J and Feng Z (eds) *Modernity and Chinese Science Fiction Literature*. Fuzhou: Fujian Children's Publishing House, p.1 (in Chinese).
- Yan LS (2022) *The Apocalypse*. Beijing: New Star Press (in Chinese).
- Yang X (2009) The 1990 WSF annual meeting in The Hague. *Science Fiction World* 243: 17 (in Chinese).
- Zhan L (2017) The fusion of national tradition and scientific modernity: On the creation of Chinese mythological and historical science fiction in the final two decades of the 20th century. *Southern Cultural Forum* 4: 71–75 (in Chinese).
- Zhang SS, Liu CX, Wu Y, et al. (2020) The style and characteristics of Chinese science fiction creation. *People's Daily*, 29 May, 20 (in Chinese).

### Author biography

Chao Peng is a lecturer at the College of Physical Education and Arts Humanities of China University of Petroleum (Beijing), a postdoctoral fellow jointly trained by China Science and Technology Press Ltd and Tsinghua University, and a Sailing Scholar of the China Science Fiction Research Center. She is engaged in research on science fiction literature and contemporary Chinese literature.