

Science-Fiction's renewal in Contemporary China

Since its introduction in China, science-fiction has been at the service of elites and politicians, who both tried to give it an ideological purpose.

At its very beginning, during the late-Qing dynasty and following the introduction of western science and science-fiction, the emerging Chinese science-fiction was given an important role in politic areas, in order to make some government ideas popular among the people. And indeed, the various and popular themes at that time were, for example, the idea of "science saving the nation", the awakening of a national consciousness, the furtherance of political reforms, or in another area, the beginning of the feminist thought and the criticism of the old superstitions. Furthermore, the extreme optimism toward science's power, and the obsession of the « survival of the yellow race », are very common in the science-fiction writings of the late-Qing dynasty.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the genre had turned to a younger readership, having been taken in charge by writers and publishers from both science and youth literature. Between 1949 and 1966, Chinese science-fiction is full of modern factories and cities, all productive, mechanized and automated. Almost all of these modern cities are built in deserts or wide open steppes, or even on artificial islands. The boldest authors even built some on Mars. These novels describe the future of the socialist society, which, due to the popularization of industrialization, lead to the loss of the traditional countryside lifestyle, replaced by a modernized metropolis one. Comfort, abundance and yield summarize the living standards of these cities. Therefore, we can say that at that time, science-fiction transitioned from tradition to modernity, which echoed perfectly with the purposes of the Great Leap Forward led in the same period.

After the Cultural Revolution, which had silenced literature, including science-fiction, the genre is brought back and given a new mission: science-fiction is to promote the academic scientific study among the young readership. Once again, science fiction is intimately linked with the purposes of modernization and the renewal of the Chinese society – and at the very same time, the Four Modernizations were initiated. Plenty of novels tried to shape a positive and enhanced « new socialist man ». At the same time, science-fiction is similar to the other literary genres and what we call the « scar literature », reflecting the sufferings of the people during the Cultural Revolution. They insist on the popularization and teaching of scientific knowledge to the children and the young people. Science-fiction is once again trying to urge young people to love and study science, in order to build a bright future for a modern China. But since the genre was confined in the small field of youth literature, its freedom of imagination and themes have been constrained.

Nevertheless, several authors tried to explore greater depth of possibilities, something easy in a literary genre as rich as science fiction. They wanted to free themselves from the constraints dictated by the mission the government imposed to the genre. Some of them imported writing elements specific to detective novels, thrillers, spy novels, or even love stories. Some others, on the other hand, used science-fiction to explore the negative aspects of society, the dark side of humanity, or even express the negative impacts that science can have on people. Even so, these few writings explorations have been viewed as an « unhealthy tendency » or a « creativity led astray », or even as « overstepping the ideological standards ». For these critics, science-fiction should indeed express an ideal, sing the praises of the wonderful power of science, and by no means show it in a negative way. Thus, in their opinion, these « unhealthy tendencies » led to a « spiritual pollution » which had to be « eradicated ». Under such circumstances, science-fiction rapidly vanished after a short height.

In the 1990s, the pressure from the scientific field and the political interference decreased. A new group of writers integrated the ranks of the science-fiction writers. Moreover, several

publishing houses engaged themselves in the publication of science-fiction works. Computers and internet, science, environmental issues and the space exploration have all become important themes during these years. Unlike before, when science-fiction which was essentially focused on the scientific contents, this new generation doesn't neglect the social aspect underlying both society and science. The concerns and doubts raised by science and technology also seem to have deepened the dark side of human nature in science-fiction novels. Since its resurrection, science-fiction seems to be unwilling to be locked into the youth literature field, and call for the exploration of new possibilities. Their need to get out of the youth literature category is not only remarkable through the themes tackled by the writers, but also their writing, which puts an end to the endless technical descriptions taken straight out of a dictionary. By doing so, they leave more space to the social sciences and subtle technical descriptions. Therefore, this new science-fiction seems to be endeavoring to emancipate itself from the older generations and the constraints of old patterns. Contemporary Chinese science fiction leaves, indeed, the conception that put science-fiction on an equal foot with the popularization of science, which gives us more interesting works, whether from a literary point of view or because of the thoughts they awaken. During these years, a certain distance is taken from the Soviet pattern of « socialist realism ».