

From “New Worlds” to “Science Fiction World”: Exploring the Chinese Inspiration of the New Wave of Science Fiction

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Abstract: *New Worlds* has had a huge impact on Western science fiction literature and propelled the development of British "New Wave" science fiction novels. Editor in chief Michael Moorcock dedicated to developing new literary styles and cultivating a large number of excellent science fiction writers. Before the 1990s, Chinese science fiction novels had always been a supplement to popular science and children's literature. It was *Science Fiction World* that cultivated a "new generation" of science fiction writers for Chinese science fiction literature and brought a vigorous development momentum to the Chinese science fiction industry. Although Chinese science fiction in the 21st century is generally showing a steady development trend, it has not yet entered the "golden age" of Chinese science fiction. The experience gained from the development of *New Worlds* and *Science Fiction World* provides valuable reference for the development of science fiction magazines in China today.

Keywords: New Worlds; Science Fiction World; Chinese Science Fiction Magazine

1. Introduction

The 21st-century Chinese science fiction publishing market remains relatively small in scale, offering a vast expanse of untapped potential. Chinese readers, in contrast to their domestic science fiction literature, exhibit a greater inclination towards Western classic science fiction works. Looking back to the 1960s, an influential movement known as the “New Wave” emerged in Europe, subsequently permeating American science fiction. Initially derived from the French film movement, the term “New Wave” was employed to denote the literary output of a loosely affiliated group of science fiction authors in the 1960s and 1970s.

This collective sought to imbue their works with heightened societal and political relevance, more sophisticated themes, and elevated literary merit. The genesis of the “New Wave” movement can be directly traced to the London-based magazine, *New Worlds*, which served as a conduit for transformative literary advancements rather than adhering to traditional science fiction conventions. The visionary editor, Michael Moorcock, held his editorial tenure from 1964 to 1971, aspiring to bridge the expanding chasm between avant-garde artistic experimentation and broader public appeal. Through a meticulous examination of Moorcock’s paradigm-shifting innovations and revolutionary contributions to *New Worlds*, valuable insights can be gleaned to inform the substantial growth and amplification of Chinese science fiction publications.

2. New Worlds and Michael Moorcock

The publication of *New Worlds* significantly propelled the development of the “New Wave” science fiction movement, fulfilling the aspirations of its authors. Founded in 1946 by British science fiction enthusiasts, *New Worlds* stands as a venerable British science fiction magazine, publishing a total of 141 issues in its first eighteen years. This publication became the vanguard of the “New Wave” movement. Prior to assuming the role of editor-in-chief for *New Worlds*, Michael Moorcock penned a guest editorial in the magazine, advocating for a more passionate, subtle, ironic, and original form of science fiction. In his article, he identified J.G. Ballard, Brian W. Aldiss, and John Brunner as potential trailblazers of this new style. In the words of Edward James, “Moorcock gathered around him a talented group of British writers” while also drawing in “a new generation of American writers, such as Samuel R. Delany, Thomas M. Disch, and John Sladek, who resided in the United

Kingdom, sharing in those tumultuous times”[1].

In 1964, Michael Moorcock assumed the role of editor-in-chief for *New Worlds*, bringing with him his unique editorial approach and vision. His works were exactly what readers yearned for in science fiction: engaging, combining satire and imagination in a masterful way. The philosophical insights on science discussed by the authors in *New Worlds* and the profound human experiences they depicted showcased a solid literary foundation. The proponents of the *New Worlds* movement firmly believed that forms were deteriorating, and energy was dissipating—an extraordinary conviction expressed with remarkable ingenuity and persuasive force. It could be aptly described as a revelatory fervor [2].

Moorcock was a remarkable figure - great, vibrant, tolerant, and generous - as well as a revered creator. Unlike many science fiction writers of his time who prioritized financial gains, Moorcock’s intentions did not lie in monetary profit. He dedicated himself to exploring new literary styles, using them to convey modern themes that could not be achieved within the confines of traditional modernism. Science fiction, rooted in popular styles yet embracing ideas rich in intellectual wisdom, can be seen as the harbinger of postmodernism, with *New Worlds* perhaps being the first postmodern magazine. The impact of *New Worlds* reverberated profoundly in Britain, not only stirring the science fiction realm but also extending its influence into the broader cultural sphere. Moorcock’s novels garnered several prestigious awards in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, he relinquished his editorial duties to devote himself entirely to novel writing, emphasizing the literary value of his works over genre conventions.

Subsequently, Ballard published his autobiographical novel, *The Sun Empire*, in *New Worlds*, establishing himself as one of the most successful bestselling authors. Brian W. Aldiss also garnered widespread acclaim for his autobiographical novels and scholarly work, especially *Billion Year Spree*. In his *Hothouse* series, he returned to the realm of traditional science fiction, exploring the impact of the environment and the efforts humans make to understand and address the challenges they face.

During the nascent stage of science fiction, the genre was represented by two distinct styles of writing: hard science fiction, exemplified by Jules Verne, and soft science fiction, represented by H.G. Wells. In the “Golden Age” of the first wave of science fiction, writers largely followed the tradition of hard science fiction. Their works were filled with emotion, individuality, a strong spirit of exploration, and a critical attitude towards reality, with the primary focus being the pursuit of scientific progress. However, in the second wave of science fiction known as the “New Wave”, the writing style underwent a complete transformation. Science fiction literature of the “New Wave” became more aligned with soft science, and these works can be seen as both the refinement and reflection of the “Golden Age” science fiction. Although Michael Moorcock made every effort to bring science fiction closer to mainstream literature during the “New Wave” movement, the success was short-lived. In the mid-1970s, the “New Wave” lost its revolutionary and experimental characteristics, leading to the loss of many novels from that era.

3. Science Fiction World in China

Prior to the 1990s, science fiction literature in China had been largely regarded as ancillary to popular science works and children’s literature. However, it was the literary exploration activities of *Science Fiction World* in the 1990s that gave birth to a distinct literary style, marking a departure from early Chinese science fiction writing. Through its “mountain-building movement” and award activities, *Science Fiction World* cultivated a new generation of science fiction writers, accumulated creative experiences, expanded the space for science fiction writing, and propelled the vigorous development of Chinese science fiction. In the 1990s, *Science Fiction World* not only affirmed the value of science fiction literature but also influenced the writing of the “post-new generation” of science fiction writers. During this period, Chinese science fiction works, conceptual understanding of science fiction, and the evaluation system for science fiction literature all experienced significant improvement. *Science Fiction World* in the 1990s explored new paths for the development of Chinese science fiction, accumulating strength, and paving the way for

the flourishing of science fiction literature in the new century.

The predecessor of *Science Fiction World* was the popular science magazine called *Scientific Literature and Art*, which was established by the Sichuan Science and Technology Association in 1979. After 1978, *Scientific Literature and Art* along with *Science Fiction Ocean* in Beijing, *Tree of Wisdom* in Tianjin, *Scientific Era* in Heilongjiang, and *Science Fiction Novel* were collectively known as the “Four Magazines and One Newspaper”. During this period, *Scientific Literature and Art* experienced a small boom, with its highest circulation reaching 200,000 copies in 1980. However, as the works published in *Scientific Literature and Art* were primarily seen as popular science tools, it gradually became the last bastion of Chinese science fiction after 1983, with the mission of developing Chinese science fiction literature. With an editorial team consisting of less than ten people, led by Yang Xiao, and a decision-making body composed of Tan Kai, Xiang Jichun, and Mo Shuqing, *Science Fiction World* was revitalized and led Chinese science fiction out of a period of creative stagnation. The works of the “new generation” and “post-new generation” of science fiction writers that emerged since the 1990s exhibited significant differences in terms of writing style and creative concepts compared to Chinese science fiction before the 1990s [3]. The public’s attitude and perception towards science fiction literature also underwent a corresponding shift, drawing attention from many scholars to the rapid development of science fiction literature and the rapid rise of “new generation” writers in the historical stage.

Liu Cixin, Wang Jinkang, and Han Song are the three science fiction giants discovered and nurtured by *Science Fiction World*. They have all stood at heights that transcend reality and humanity, confronting the crises of human civilization and pondering metaphysical ultimate questions. Each of them has their unique characteristics: Liu Cixin emphasizes technological thinking and grand spatial depictions, Wang Jinkang focuses on scientific speculation and philosophical interpretations, while Han Song excels in allegorical cultural criticism. Their works published in *Science Fiction World* epitomize the diversity of science fiction imagination, endowing it with

even more possibilities worth exploring. It is not only a valuable achievement in the development of Chinese science fiction literature but also sets a benchmark for the new generation of science fiction stars. With a history of forty years, *Science Fiction World* has been a witness to the development of Chinese science fiction literature and plays an irreplaceable and significant role. Faced with the initial stagnation of Chinese science fiction literature, *Science Fiction World* chose to hold its ground. More importantly, it made keen and accurate judgments on the positioning and development direction of science fiction literature. In the early 1990s, it defined “science”, “fantasy” and “discovery” as the key keywords for its publication. By providing clear positioning and comprehensive interpretations of science fiction, it not only established the legitimacy of “science fiction” but also used the magazine as a cultural compass to guide the development of Chinese science fiction literature towards the right and diverse direction.

Science Fiction World has always maintained a global perspective and an open attitude, taking the lead in introducing excellent science fiction resources from around the world to the field of Chinese science fiction literature. On one hand, it continues the tradition of importing works from the golden age of science fiction in Europe and America that was established in the 1980s. On the other hand, it expands the scope of imports to include contemporary masterpieces by renowned science fiction authors from around the world, providing a more comprehensive showcase of the development of global science fiction literature. Whether it’s science fiction novels, artwork, or film and television adaptations, *Science Fiction World* timely and comprehensively introduces outstanding foreign science fiction resources. This not only maximizes the exposure of Chinese readers to the world of science fiction but also expands the thematic space for Chinese science fiction creations, transforming China’s science fiction from imitation to independent innovation.

Alai once said, “The success of *Science Fiction World* is definitely a subject worthy of in-depth research” [4]. Its historical significance and value lie not only in its accurate judgments and global perspective but also in its construction of a benign feedback

loop for Chinese science fiction literature from input to output. Compared to science fiction magazines in the West, *Science Fiction World* has learned from their success and has formed a relatively stable community of science fiction enthusiasts centered around the magazine. More importantly, *Science Fiction World* has adopted a uniquely Chinese approach based on the national context. It has created a diverse mode of dialogue among editors, readers, and authors, allowing readers to transition from receiving knowledge to participating in cultural construction, from individual interpretations to collective wisdom sharing within the community, through a low-barrier communication platform. Moreover, *Science Fiction World* focuses on cultivating readers' imagination and sci-fi thinking. Using the magazine as a platform, it systematically trains and nurtures sci-fi creators. Gradually, a cultural ecosystem has been established from fostering readers to discovering writers. The annual Galaxy Awards, hosted by *Science Fiction World*, has become a prestigious prize representing the level of Chinese science fiction. The outstanding sci-fi authors emerging from it possess diverse styles and broad perspectives, not only showcasing the reputation of *Science Fiction World* but also serving as a driving force behind the diversified development of Chinese science fiction literature.

It is a fact that *Science Fiction World* is a microcosm of the development of Chinese science fiction literature and has made significant contributions to societal progress and national advancement. Within the cultural ecosystem constructed by *Science Fiction World*, the composition and level of the writer community, the characteristics of the reader base, the development of the industry chain, and the existing challenges all serve as important foundations for studying the current status of Chinese science fiction literature. They possess crucial research value in understanding the development of Chinese science fiction literature.

4. The Experience and Lessons from New Worlds

After the 21st century, the publication of science fiction magazines in China has shown an overall positive development trend. For example, from January to October 2023, there

were 6,559 varieties of Chinese science fiction novels sold, compared to 2,667 varieties of foreign science fiction novels. Currently, Chinese science fiction publications encompass a variety of themes and styles, while also embracing the accessibility, readability, and sense of novelty of science fiction novels. Taking *Science Fiction World* as an example, it provides a relaxed creative environment for science fiction authors, encouraging them to challenge new modes of storytelling. However, China still lacks a sufficient number of classic science fiction writers and representative works. As stated, "If there were three to five dozen writers like Liu Cixin, along with two to three hundred truly classic works, then Chinese science fiction literature could be considered to have entered its golden age" [5]. In the era where content is king, it is crucial to attract professional talent and enhance the enthusiasm for original science fiction publishing. More opportunities should be provided for talented science fiction writers to create and publish their works. Additionally, publishing houses should strengthen their professional capabilities, "refine" their categorization, and improve their publishing services.

Michael Moorcock's preface in *New Worlds: An Anthology* eloquently expresses the significance of British science fiction during the "New Wave" era. Moorcock fairly pointed out that it was his predecessor, E.J. Carnell, who "desired a magazine that could publish unique British science fiction" [6]. This uniqueness, however, presented itself in a somewhat contradictory manner: the choice of illustrations and accompanying text in *New Worlds* distinguished it from its American counterparts, while the story content became more provocative, contrasting with the cautious and serious nature of American popular fiction. According to Moorcock, in the 1950s, *New Worlds* began publishing the early works of writers who, under Carnell's encouragement, broke away from the American science fiction model and rediscovered their own traditions: merging naturalistic narratives and characters with romantic imagery and idealism. These writers included Brian W. Aldiss, John Brunner, Arthur C. Clarke, and others, all of whom believed in the importance of quality in popular writing and pursued ambitious themes.

In fact, Chinese science fiction still has a long way to go, from the initial stages of importing and imitating works from world science fiction literature to developing its own distinctive literary genre with its own national thoughts. Chinese science fiction writers need to further explore, develop, and progress. Similarly, Chinese science fiction publishers should keep up with these writers, working together to advance Chinese science fiction literature even further.

Chinese science fiction literature still has a wealth of creative styles waiting to be developed. While balancing scientific logic and artistic imagination, it should emphasize the interesting aspects of storytelling. In terms of character development, apart from serving the plot and thematic purposes, it should incorporate distinct emotional characteristics or the complexity of human nature to enhance the audience's memory. Regarding the description of technological wonders, it should be supported by sufficient imagination to evoke awe and wonder while maintaining a foundation of scientific logic, allowing readers to marvel at the spectacle. In terms of extending the ideological connotations, it should aim to transcend cultural barriers and explore universal themes that provoke discussions on human society, the state of civilization, and the vastness of the cosmos, thereby fostering a sense of shared destiny among humanity. Additionally, it is encouraged to promote cross-genre integration between science fiction and other forms of literature. Different types of writers should be encouraged to explore science fiction writing, paving the way for new approaches and feasible paths in the creation of science fiction literature.

Brian W. Aldiss pointed out that under Moorcock's guidance in *New Worlds*, there was a constant cry of "The war is over; the war is over!" Experimentation with prose style became a common practice, while the malevolent influence of William S. Burroughs often threatened to prevail [7]. However, the new readership and the new writers anticipated by Brian W. Aldiss lasted only for a few years. Traditional readers did not embrace the attempts of the new literary type, nor did they appreciate corrupt and failed character portrayals. This reminds us that Chinese science fiction publications need not only to

lead readers but also to align with the aesthetic tastes of the contemporary public. Only then can they gain visibility and attract a larger readership at a faster pace. It is only through a certain level of ecological balance between science fiction creators and readers that the community of science fiction writers, editors, and scholars can gain new vitality and experience substantial growth.

5. Conclusions

The experience learned by the contemporary Chinese science fiction publishing industry from *New Worlds* is to strengthen the cultivation of science fiction writers and attempt new styles. For a work, it should not only be innovative, but also conform to the aesthetic taste of the public. Only with a larger readership can science fiction works have more new energy and achieve significant development. Since the early 1990s, China's *Science Fiction World* has identified "science", "fantasy", and "discovery" as the keywords for its publication. It can be said that the development of this magazine is a microcosm of the development of Chinese science fiction literature, making important contributions to social development and national progress. In the 21st century, by studying the writer team and level, reader characteristics, industry chain development, and existing problems constructed by *New Worlds* and *Science Fiction World*, we can provide important reference value for the significant development of Chinese science fiction literature today.

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