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SCIENCE FICTION LITERATURE AND ITS ROLE IN SOCIETY, RESEARCH, AND ACADEMIA

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. WU YAN

LITERATURA DE FICÇÃO CIENTÍFICA E SEU PAPEL NA SOCIEDADE, PESQUISA E ACADEMIA

Entrevista com prof. Wu Yan

LA LITERATURA DE FICCIÓN CIENTÍFICA Y SU PAPEL EN LA SOCIEDAD, LA INVESTIGACIÓN Y LA ACADEMIA

Entrevista con el prof. Wu Yan

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Wu Yan is a science fiction writer and professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Southern University of Science and Technology. He serves as the Director of Science and Human Imagination Research Center under the university since 2017. He has written many fictions including Spiritual Quest (Xinling tanxian), Life and Death of the Sixth Day (Shengsi di liutian) and China Orbit (Zhongguo Guidao Hao). His short stories such as Mouse Pad have been translated into many languages. He has received many awards including the National Outstanding Children's Literature Award, The Five Best Cultural Works Project Prize, Bing Xin Literature Award, the Chinese Nebula, the Galaxy Award for Science Fiction, and the Thomas D. Clareson Award 2020. He has also been engaged in academic writing such as Outline of Science Fiction Literature (Kehuan wenxue lungang). He is editor of numerous scholarly works and has co-edited in English with Kerry Mallan and Roderick McGillis on (Re)imagining the world: Children's Literatures Response to Changing Times. Wu Yan is the ancestor of science fiction education and create sf curriculum in 1991 in Beijing Normal University. He is both the Vice-Chair of China Science Fiction Professional Committee of China Writers' Association and Science Writers' Association (CSWA) and was the President of World Chinese Science Fiction Association (WCSFA) during 2010-2017.

Thank you very much for accepting the interview on such an important topic as the role of science fiction in our era. As you know, my research is on the effects of digital technologies, and I think science fiction is a valuable source to explore the implementations of new digital technologies in our society (Liberati 2022; Bonfiglioli 2021; Mykhailov and Liberati 2022).

Thanks to the conference LINE2021 organized at *Shanghai Jiao Tong University*,[1] we followed the presentation by many researchers working on science fiction and new digital technologies in China and Italy. You were one of the two novelists invited as keynote speakers. Your presentation was about the interactions we can have between science-fiction, academia, and society. Primarily, you showed how science-fiction grew in China in the last decade.

In line with the theme of your presentation, I would like to ask you three main questions covering the role of science fiction in our world at different levels. The three questions cover the relations science-fiction has with our society in general, the research on the social impact of technologies, and the research and education within academia. There will also be other questions stemming from our discussion, but the main topics will be related to these three main elements.

1. Nicola Liberati: How do you think science fiction contributed and is contributing to the development of China?

Wu Yan: Theoretically, this genre should be very helpful for developing a country. Especially in the specific period related to the modernization of a country and the post-modernized society, science fiction should be taken seriously into account. However, most of the time, this happens only in theory.

I think we can clearly understand the influence of science fiction if we look at its history in China compared to what happened in the USA.

In the USA, science fiction has a long tradition rooted in the 1920s, a period before its golden age. The main idea of the science fiction designed by the authors of this period was to ground this genre as a "real science" by using the method of science fiction to have an impact on society. This aim is clear if you read authors like John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction. However, this project failed in some degree.

China is trying to develop a different way of writing science fiction that is not related too much to the idea of building a new science. Moreover, in China, the government did not look at science fiction as a valuable asset for the country's development. This genre was considered popular science. However, especially after 1980, some authors did not agree with this position. At this time, there was a boom in Chinese science fiction, but the government did not follow the development of this genre and its growth since it looked at it as a way of spreading pseudoscience.

Only recently, in the last couple of years, especially after *The three-body problem [三体]* got the *Hugo award*, the government changed its perspective, and it started to support this genre as a kind of good literature and a stimulus for imagination.

2. Nicola Liberati: Are there any images and ideas driving China's development?

Wu Yan: Between 1990 and 2010, the idea of sci-fi changed in society. People started to think of science fiction as something new and good literature and not as popular science or dissemination of science. Thus, our idea and our work have been received by society, and this change means we can generate new ideas to affect society.

During this period, we conducted the project *The Relationship between Science Fiction and National Independent Innovation,* and we introduced some of the information from different parts of the world,

[1] LINE2021 - Living in the New Era (时代・新生): Technologies, Creativity, and Science-Fiction https://shss.sjtu.edu.cn/En/List/345

like NASA and DARPA from the United States, to show the essential effects science fiction can have. This approach is the theoretical way of further separating science fiction from science communication.

The Three-Body Problem helped. For example, high-tech companies and CEOs got in contact with this new genre thanks to *The Three-Body Problem*. Thus, thanks to our success, in 2017, the government started to support science fiction directly by using their way, and it began to help it with activities like organizing the annual science fiction meeting. Now science fiction is taken as good literature, so it can be a way to develop novel ideas for society.

3. ***Nicola Liberati: Do you think science fiction can be used to explore the potentialities and the effects of new technologies?***

Wu Yan: Science fiction literature and our future generally have significant overlaps. This afternoon, I will give a lecture on science fiction to students in engineering. It will be the first time to present science fiction to engineers at my university, and I will present science fiction as a kind of "design" process to show the ability of human beings. I want to show them how science fiction can answer questions like: What are the capabilities we can have? What did we create and build in our world, and how can we mix these elements to create something new?

I see science fiction as a prototype, a scenario, a design fiction, knowledge, and a source for ideas to study our world. Science provides us with a transparent methodology for reasoning how to approach and explore a theme through passages. Science fiction gives us "narratives" as layers that develop through time. Thus, through narratives, science fiction examines the world and human beings not through reasoning but by using time as the main force of the analysis.

Reasoning and narrative results are two different ways to tackle questions and topics. Both of them are needed to deal with the issue of the future.

4. ***Nicola Liberati: How do you think the aim is different between reasoning and narrative results?***

Wu Yan: I think that, in science, researchers use abstractions to study a topic. Objects are idealized, isolated, and structured clearly. However, this is just an abstraction of things. In the "real" world, everything is intertwined, it happens in time, and it relies on each character's personality.

Each element develops its narrative by intertwining with others. They are related to the life of each specific people, and each setting provides different solutions and results. Thus, we can have millions of stories that are all valuable and aimed at studying a possible configuration of events. We can have multiple futures in front of us simultaneously, and they can be studied through the narratives provided by science fiction, which focuses on the different configuration of elements and it works on how time make these elements develop by themselves.

While sciences are about knowledge, narratives are about time. While sciences follow rationality to reach a conclusion, narratives follow time and people's choices. A story develops like the life of people who pass through different events one after the other.

Science is a web of logical lines based on knowledge. Humanities are scattered collages. Narratives are meshes that are generated through interpersonal communication and individual development. The difference between the two objects is noticeable. From the scientific point of view, the narrative web has many apparent inadequacies. From the narrative point of view, what scientists think is inappropriate is precisely the result of human behavior. Thus, science and narrative lead to different futures. In other words, the narrative is also one of the ways to reach the future.

5. *Nicola Liberati: How are you embedding science fiction within the University as a field of research?*

Wu Yan: This question directly relates to our trajectories in how to build projects and what kind of projects we want. Unfortunately, science fiction in research has not a great resonance yet. If you look at my past, it is clear it is not an easy task to get into academia by working on science fiction. I am a psychologist who taught organizational psychology at *Beijing Normal University*. In 1991, I started to teach a cross-disciplinary course on science fiction in my spare time as a hobby. Many came to attend my classes, so I began writing articles even if it was tough to get publications on science fiction accepted in prestigious academic journals.

In 2003, after more than ten years, a Professor of children's literature became the Vice-Chair of the Chinese Language and Literature Department. He asked me to join him in building a center for children's literature inside his department. I happily joined his center once I realized science fiction could be developed in this program. At that time, science fiction studies and children's literature were parallel. "Children's literature" began to grow, and science fiction had the opportunity to grow with it. I did not care much if I was developing science fiction in children's literature or other fields. I got my first master's degree students in science fiction in 2003. This position helped immensely develop the idea of science fiction within academia with students working on this specific topic.

In 2007, I left Beijing to move to this University (*Southern University of Science and Technology*) which is a science and technology-oriented university, and the humanities are new.

The novelty of working in such a scientific context has pros and cons. At first, the work we do at our new center for humanities was perceived as a "side dish" to the main courses on science and technology. This approach also reflects the problems of finding funding to support our research.

However, there are also valuable pros to being a new center for humanities within a science and technology university. Our center is unique, which means we have complete freedom in developing our research in the direction we prefer. At Beijing University, some literature, science, and philosophy professors are interested in studying science fiction. I know in *Shanghai Jiao Tong University* science fiction is related to the history of science and technology, so it is natural that the research is grounded on such a background and is always related to that context. Since we are not building our research on top of other disciplines, we are free to experiment and try different approaches and ideas.

The idea guiding us is to follow the development of New Humanities, which is also the theme of your conference *LINE2021* and the focus of your research in philosophy and technology at SJTU. Instead of looking at science fiction as something on top of a rigid discipline, science fiction can be the idea fueling the research in the new humanities at its core.

This approach has already achieved results since I won US and Chinese awards. These achievements, and the achievements of my colleagues, show the University our value and the role we can play in the development of our future. More and more journals are starting to accept submissions in science fiction. So, it is clear that science fiction can play an essential role in defining what new humanities are and their effects on society.

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