

Ideology and the Reconfiguration of Science Fiction Translation in 1950s China: A Paratextual Approach

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Abstract:

Science fiction (sci-fi) translation in 1950s China received significant state support as part of broader efforts to promote scientific development. This resurgence was not merely driven by the diversity of literary forms but also by alignment with a state-led scientific agenda, which increasingly infused sci-fi with a distinct political dimension shaped by Cold War conditions. To examine how ideological and institutional forces shaped the process of sci-fi translation, this study adopts a paratextual approach, drawing on Gérard Genette's concept of paratexts to analyse genre labels, prefaces, and editorially produced content summaries. The findings show that paratexts functioned as key sites where sci-fi was redefined, positioning the genre in relation to scientific development, social values, and ideological priorities. Through this analysis, the study shows how ideological priorities, enacted through the regulation of translated sci-fi in 1950s China, actively reconfigured the genre's function.

Keywords: paratexts; genre labels; content summaries; scientific development

1. Introduction

The translation of science fiction (sci-fi) is often understood as a process of introducing literary products across linguistic and cultural boundaries. However, in specific historical contexts, sci-fi translation can also function as a site where the genre is reshaped under broader ideological and political conditions. This is particularly evident in 1950s China, where the development of sci-fi translation was closely intertwined with state-led scientific and cultural agendas.

Sci-fi translation in China experienced a short resurgence in the mid-1950s. Literary motivations did not drive this resurgence, but were closely aligned with state policy. At the Conference on Intellectuals held by the Chinese Communist Party in January 1956, Zhou Enlai emphasised the urgent need for scientific development, declaring that China was “on the eve of a new scientific and technological and industrial revolution” and calling for a nationwide programme of “marching towards science” (Xu, 2016, para. 6).

This orientation did not emerge in isolation. When sci-fi was first introduced into China through translation at the turn of the twentieth century, it was already associated with promoting scientific knowledge and cultivating public interest in science (Jiang, 2013, p. 119). This early pedagogical orientation, rooted in reformist and enlightenment discourses, was not only retained but was rearticulated and institutionalised to serve a collective, state-led vision of scientific development.

This study examines the reconfiguration of sci-fi translation through several interconnected dimensions. It begins by tracing the relocation of publishing centres, which reshaped the institutional foundations of translation. It then turns to paratextual elements, highlighting their role as key sites in defining and interpreting the genre. Building on this, the study argues that these paratextual spaces were increasingly shaped by institutional forces, contributing to the redefinition of sci-fi through the

introduction of new genre labels, as discussed in Section 3. Building on the discussion of genre label transformation in Section 3, Section 4 further examines, through paratextual analysis, how sci-fi in 1950s China was increasingly infused with broader socio-political contexts.

2. Reconfiguration of Publishing Institutions

The reconfiguration of sci-fi translation in the 1950s was institutional, particularly in the restructuring of publishing authority and geographical organisation. Publishing practices were progressively centralised, as the state increasingly assumed a coordinating and guiding role over national publishing activities (Zhongguo Chuban Kexue Yanjiusuo and Zhongyang Dang'anguan [China Publishing Science Research Institute and Central Archives], 1996, pp. 90-92). This shift significantly reduced the editorial autonomy of local presses in terms of topic selection and textual content. At the same time, journals and books were expected to align closely with broader social and economic priorities, which functioned as a key evaluative criterion. From 1950 onwards, the coordinated introduction of Soviet publications further contributed to a more curated reading environment (Zhongguo Chuban Kexue Yanjiusuo and Zhongyang Dang'anguan, 1996, p. 68).

A geographical relocation of publishing activity accompanied this institutional shift. Before 1949, Shanghai served as the primary centre for sci-fi translation. Prior to 1912 (the establishment of the Republic of China), approximately 80–90% of translated sci-fi (single-volume editions) published in Shanghai, and the city continued to account for over half of such publications before 1949 (the establishment of the People's Republic of China), based on a corpus compiled for this study from the Chinese Science Fiction Database (Chinese Science Fiction Database, n.d.), supplemented by bibliographical sources including Takeda and Lin (2017) and Chen (2013-2014).

After 1949, however, the centre of publishing gradually moved from Shanghai to Beijing, marking a transition towards a more centralised system. Major presses that had previously played key roles in SCI-FI translation and dissemination, including the Commercial Press, Zhonghua Book Company, World Book Company, and Qiming Book Company, underwent relocation, mergers, nationalisation, or functional redefinition. The Commercial Press and Zhonghua Book Company, for instance, relocated their headquarters to Beijing around 1954 and were reoriented toward specialised publishing, including reference works and classical texts (Zhongguo Chuban Kexue Yanjiusuo and Zhongyang Dang'anguan, 1996, pp. 61-63). Meanwhile, Shanghai retained only selected specialised branches, while other presses were absorbed into new state publishing structures or gradually ceased operation due to financial constraints (Zhongguo Chuban Kexue Yanjiusuo and Zhongyang Dang'anguan, 1996, pp. 39-40).

These changes show that the transformation of sci-fi translation in the 1950s was embedded in a broader reorganisation of publishing institutions and geographical centres. The shift from Shanghai to Beijing, alongside the consolidation of publishing practices, reshaped the conditions under which sci-fi translation was produced and circulated.



3. Reinterpreting Science Fiction through Genre Relabels

Following the geographical relocation of publishing houses, one of the most significant changes observed in paratexts is the transformation of genre labels. This change was not merely terminological but reflected a redefinition and re-interpretation of the genre's function. During this period, the Soviet term *nauchnaia fantastika* was increasingly translated as *kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* (scientific fantasy fiction), gradually replacing the earlier label *kexue xiaoshuo* (scientific fiction). In Gérard Genette's terms, such genre labels function as paratextual indicators that shape readers' expectations and position a work within broader literary and cultural frameworks (Genette, 1997). In the Chinese context, these functions were frequently adapted to legitimise sci-fi and articulate its educational and social value.

This shift in genre labelling was closely connected to broader changes in paratextual practices, particularly in the use of prefaces and postscripts. Before 1949, translators frequently contributed prefaces in which they explained their motivations, interpreted the text, and articulated expectations for readers. For example, in the preface of his 1903 translation of *From the Earth to the Moon*, Lu Xun (1903/1973, pp. 9-11) highlighted the pedagogical potential of sci-fi. Lu (1903/1973, pp. 10-11) argued that fictional narratives could facilitate the communication of scientific knowledge, challenge superstition, and make complex ideas more accessible to a general readership. Such interpretations were not confined to this case, but were echoed in the prefaces of other translators, indicating that sci-fi translation before 1949 was widely associated with an educational function, as also noted in the Introduction of this study.

By contrast, in the 1950s, translator-centred commentary became less prominent. Prefaces and postscripts were fewer in number and more standardised in form, leaving limited room for extended personal interpretation. Paratexts, in contrast, tended to convey more unified and institutionally aligned interpretations of the genre, reflecting their role as framing devices that shape readers' expectations. Nevertheless, the limited number of traceable prefaces and postscripts still provides valuable insight into how genre labels were being reinterpreted. A representative example is the afterword to Okhotnikov's *Exploring the New World* (1955), the first volume in a Soviet sci-fi series published by Chao Feng Publishing House. As one of the few sustained book series of translated sci-fi from the 1950s to the 1970s, this collection offers a particularly important case for observing shifts in genre labelling. In this afterword, the translator of the book, Wang Shian, explicitly contrasted earlier works labelled *kexue xiaoshuo* with the newly introduced Soviet sci-fi under *kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* (Wang, 1955, pp. 337-338). He argued that pre-1949 sci-fi, whether translated or locally produced, was shaped by bourgeois perspectives, often driven by individual interests rather than collective concerns. On this basis, he called for replacing these earlier forms with Soviet sci-fi, which was considered more consistent with the developmental priorities of the new state.

At the same time, this comparison indicates how sci-fi began to participate in a broader political narrative, in which texts were evaluated in relation to competing ideological positions under Cold War conditions. Through such paratextual framing, the genre was reinterpreted as one grounded in scientific principles, with its educational orientation increasingly aligned with collective and ideological goals. The shift from *kexue xiaoshuo* (the earlier genre label) to *kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* (new genre label) thus signals not only a change in terminology, but a rearticulation of the genre's role within a new cultural and publishing context. This growing entanglement with political dimensions will be explored further in the following section.

4. Science Fiction Translation Embedded in Cold War Political Narratives

The influence of Cold War dynamics becomes particularly visible in paratexts, especially in content summaries, which began to incorporate evaluative elements aligned with bloc affiliations. The sci-fi translation in the 1950s was shaped not only by domestic institutional restructuring but also by a broader Cold War context that influenced how the genre was introduced and interpreted. In this setting, translated sci-fi became embedded in competing global narratives, mediated through paratextual framing. This dynamic can first be observed in how genre labels were applied differently across geopolitical blocs. Sci-fi translations during this period can be broadly grouped according to the geopolitical origin of their source texts, distinguishing between works from the socialist bloc and those from the capitalist bloc. While the overall amount of translations from these two groups is relatively comparable, a notable difference emerges in their paratextual presentation. Works translated from the Soviet Union were more consistently and explicitly labelled as *kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo*, whereas texts from the capitalist bloc were less systematically categorised, with some lacking explicit genre labels.

Paratexts played a central role in shaping how these works were positioned for readers. Translator-authored prefaces became less prominent, often replaced by concise content summaries produced by publishers. These summaries not only introduced the narrative but also provided interpretive guidance. In many cases, they adopted an evaluative tone that highlighted the social and educational value of the text, while situating it within broader moral or ideological frameworks. This paratextual pattern did not operate uniformly but varied according to the geopolitical origins of the texts. Translations from the socialist bloc, such as the Soviet science fiction series published by Chao Feng Publishing House mentioned above, were framed in terms of their ideological and geopolitical positioning. The publisher explicitly presented this genre as a means of cultivating youth in line with socialist values, presenting the Soviet Union's scientific ideals and contributions to peaceful national development (Chaofeng Chubanshe, 1955). This ideological framing became even more explicit in works such as Gurevich's *Frost on Palms* (1955), where Cold War tensions were directly incorporated into the content summaries. These summaries contrasted Soviet and American scientists, portraying the former as working for the benefit of the people, while the latter were depicted as exploited by capitalist interests. The work was further characterised as a satirical critique of imperialism, exposing the moral failings of the American bourgeoisie and depicting the hardships of ordinary people under capitalist conditions.

By comparison, works from the capitalist bloc were often framed through a more critical or cautionary lens. For example, translations of Jules Verne such as *In Search of the Castaways* (1956a) and *The Begum's Fortune* (1956b) were accompanied by summaries that emphasised themes of social inequality, colonialism, and moral critique. This critical framing was further reinforced by paratexts that drew attention to perceived limitations within the original texts, including problematic representations of race, such as discriminatory portrayals of Black characters, and depictions of indigenous peoples in New Zealand as cannibalistic in *In Search of the Castaways* (1956a). *The Begum's Fortune* (1956b) was further characterised as a work of social fiction that exposed the contradictions of capitalist society. Its paratextual framing interpreted Verne's narrative as presenting two opposing paths: one oriented towards serving the people and contributing to the construction of an



ideal society, and the other towards the production of destructive technologies, ultimately leading to self-destruction.

5. Conclusion

Through these paratextual strategies, particularly the shift in genre label, sci-fi was not simply introduced as a literary genre, but reinterpreted in ways that aligned with discursive priorities of the 1950s. Genre labels, prefaces (or postscripts), content summaries, and editorial framing collectively contributed to embedding sci-fi within a broader narrative that emphasised scientific progress and social values. In this sense, paratexts functioned as key mediating devices through which sci-fi was positioned and understood within the cultural and geopolitical context of the 1950s.

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that sci-fi in the 1950s was increasingly framed through its association with scientific knowledge and broader social functions. However, this alignment also entailed a gradual shift in the genre's positioning, as sci-fi became infused with a more explicit political dimension. Rather than functioning primarily as entertainment, it was reconfigured as a medium serving educational and ideological purposes. This transformation, shaped through paratextual mediation, not only reflects the interaction between Cold War dynamics and domestic policy but also foreshadows the more complex and uneven development of sci-fi translation in the following decades.

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