Studies in Linguistics and Literature
ISSN 2573-6434 (Print) ISSN 2573-6426 (Online)
Vol. 10, No. 2, 2026
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sll

Original Paper

The Paradigm Divergence of Collective Redemption and Individual Awakening: The Ethical Narrative of Chinese and Western Science Fiction—A Comparative Study Centered on Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* and Asimov's *Foundation*

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Received: April 16, 2026 Accepted: April 27, 2026 Online Published: May 18, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n2p104 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n2p104

Abstract

In an era of globalization crises, Chinese science fiction offers international academia an opportunity to re-examine narrative ethics. This paper compares Liu Cixin's The Three-Body Problem *with Asimov's* Foundation*, employing narratology and ethical criticism to analyze the divergence between Chinese collectivism and Western individual heroism. Western science fiction, rooted in Greek epics and Enlightenment rationalism, constructs a narrative of "individual genius saving civilization", following "awakening—power struggle—linear progress". Chinese science fiction, grounded in Confucian "tianxia" and modern "national salvation" discourse, forms an ethics of "collective sacrifice", manifesting as "crisis—institutional response—civilizational survival". Comparing the "Wallfacer Project" with "psychohistory" and the "Swordholder" with the "Second Foundation", this study reveals divergent ontological premises: "individual existence precedes the collective" versus "collective survival takes priority over the individual". Combining reception data of* The Three-Body Problem*'s English translation with the Netflix adaptation controversy, the paper argues that Western readers' shock at the "Dark Forest Theory" represents an encounter between two civilizational ethics. Chinese science fiction's collectivist narrative does not negate individual value but provides literary imagination for "a community with a shared future for mankind", contributing an irreplaceable paradigm to global science fiction's ethical diversity.*

Keywords

Chinese science fiction, Western science fiction, collectivism, individual heroism, narrative ethics,

cross-cultural communication, The Three-Body Problem, Foundation

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

In 2015, Liu Cixin's The Three-Body Problem won the Hugo Award for Best Novel, marking the official arrival of Chinese science fiction at the center of the world literary stage. This event not only triggered a "science fiction fever" within China but also stirred deep discussions in international academic circles regarding the relationship between "Chineseness" and the science fiction genre. Notably, Western readers and critics exhibited a markedly polarized response to The Three-Body Problem: on one hand, public figures such as George R. R. Martin and Mark Zuckerberg praised its "grand cosmic vision" and "cold rational logic"; on the other hand, some Western science fiction researchers expressed bewilderment at the novel's collective decision-making mechanism of the "Wallfacer" system, the civilization-level responsibility borne by Luo Ji as the "Swordholder", and the ethical orientation underlying the "Dark Forest Theory" that places civilizational survival above individual rights. This bewilderment is no accident—it touches upon the core divergence between Chinese and Western science fiction narrative traditions.

Tracing the classical genealogy of Western science fiction, from the solitary Captain Nemo in Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas, to Johnny in Heinlein's Starship Troopers who achieves redemption through personal growth, to Hari Seldon in Asimov's Foundation who single-handedly predicts the trajectory of a thousand years of civilization, "individual heroism" has always been the dominant narrative paradigm. Even within the dystopian tradition, whether Winston in Nineteen Eighty-Four or John in Brave New World, individual awakening and resistance remain the fundamental driving forces of the narrative. In contrast, crisis response in Liu Cixin's works presents a strikingly different logic: the "saturation rescue" in The Wandering Earth emphasizes collective sacrifice rather than individual heroics; the "Wallfacer Project" in The Three-Body Problem relies on global consensus mechanisms rather than individual genius; and the conclusion of Death's End places the hope of civilizational survival on collective cooperation at a cosmic scale rather than heroic individual salvation.

This comparison raises a series of urgent theoretical questions: Why does Chinese science fiction tend to designate "collectives" or "institutions" as the agents of salvation, while Western science fiction remains obsessed with the construction of "individual heroes"? Is this difference merely a matter of thematic choice, or is it rooted in different cultural-philosophical traditions? In the context of globalization, when The Three-Body Problem enters Western reading markets through translation, what reception barriers has this "collectivist" narrative encountered? Does the "personalization" reconstruction of character relationships in Netflix's adaptation of The Three-Body Problem signify an operation of narrative hegemony? Furthermore, in the present era of frequent global climate crises and

public health emergencies, does the collectivist narrative of Chinese science fiction possess universal value beyond "cultural particularity"?

1.2 Current Research Status at Home and Abroad

1.2.1 Domestic Research Trajectory

Chinese science fiction research began in the 1980s, undergoing a paradigm shift from "popular science instrumentalism" to "literary ontology". Wu Yan, an important founder of Chinese science fiction studies, systematically examined the cognitive and aesthetic functions of the science fiction genre in his Outline of Science Fiction Literature (2011), proposing that "science fiction is an important genre for cultivating national imagination", thereby laying the theoretical foundation for subsequent research. Wang Yao (pen name "Fei Dao"), in The Methodological Significance of "Science Fiction China" (2016), conceptualized "Science Fiction China" as a literary representation of "modernity planning", pointing out that Chinese science fiction has always carried the grand mission of "nation-state construction"—a thesis that provides important reference for this study's focus on the collectivist ethics of science fiction.

In recent years, with the international dissemination of The Three-Body Problem, domestic scholars have begun to pay attention to the "worldliness" of Chinese science fiction. Song Mingwei, in The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction (2019), proposed the theoretical framework of "science fiction as method", arguing that the "New Wave" writers of Chinese science fiction (Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, etc.) reconstruct the literary territory of traditional realism through "dark" and "absurd" narrative strategies. However, existing research mostly focuses on ideological analysis of single texts or descriptions of generic characteristics, lacking systematic cross-cultural comparative perspectives. Although Jiang Zhenyu touched upon the tension between "zero morality" and "survival ethics" in On the Narrative Ethics of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction (2018), he did not situate this issue within a Sino-Western comparative framework. Overall, domestic academia's exploration of the "collectivist" characteristics of Chinese science fiction remains at the level of cultural essentialism, failing to adequately respond to the theoretical concerns of the international academic community.

1.2.2 International Research Dynamics

International academia's attention to Chinese science fiction began in the early 21st century, but only formed a scale effect after The Three-Body Problem won the Hugo Award. The "SINOFANTASY" project led by Jessica Imbach at the University of Freiburg, Germany, is currently the most important related research initiative. This project views Chinese fantasy and science fiction as "a bridge transcending ideological divisions through genre", but its focus remains on fantasy literature, lacking in-depth exploration of the narrative ethics of science fiction. Theo Finigan, in Translating The Three-Body Problem: Liu Cixin, Ken Liu, and the Global Science Fiction Market (2018), provides a detailed analysis of the translation strategies and reception effects of the English version, pointing out that Ken Liu's successful mediation "lies not only in linguistic conversion but in the cross-cultural

interpretation of Liu Cixin's cosmology"—a study that offers methodological reference for this paper's analysis of translation reception.

Mingwei Song, in The Poetics of Decadence in Modern China (2021) and multiple English-language papers, examines Liu Cixin within the tradition of "Chinese modernity's poetics of decadence", emphasizing that the "dark" aesthetics of The Three-Body Problem represents a counter-movement against Enlightenment progress historiography. However, Song's research still leans toward aesthetic modernity, paying insufficient attention to cross-cultural differences in narrative ethics. Furthermore, Western science fiction studies often misinterpret the collectivist characteristics of Chinese science fiction: Adam Roberts, in The History of Science Fiction (2016), attributes the "coldness" of The Three-Body Problem to "totalitarian aesthetics", overlooking the logic of civilizational survival behind it; while Ken Liu, in his translator's preface, attempts to explain "the roots of collectivism in Chinese science fiction", but lacks systematic theoretical argumentation.

1.2.3 Research Gaps and Breakthrough Points

Surveying existing research, the following gaps urgently need to be filled: First, there is a lack of systematic Sino-Western science fiction comparison with "narrative ethics" as the core category—existing comparisons mostly remain at the level of subject matter or theme, without delving into narrative mechanisms themselves; Second, the binary framework of "collectivism" versus "individual heroism" needs to be transcended—it is neither simple cultural opposition nor value judgment, but rather narrative strategies employed by different civilizations in response to modernity crises; Third, cross-cultural communication research mostly focuses on the linguistic level of translation, neglecting the deep impact of narrative paradigm differences on reception effects. This study attempts to achieve breakthroughs in these directions, providing new analytical frameworks for the international academic discourse on Chinese science fiction through the combination of close reading and theoretical construction.

1.3 Theoretical Framework and Research Methods

1.3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts "narrative ethics" as the core theoretical category, a concept systematically proposed by American scholar Adam Zachary Newton in Narrative Ethics (1995). Newton emphasizes that narrative is not merely formal technique but "the performance of ethical acts". Unlike traditional moral criticism, which focuses on "what characters do", narrative ethics concerns itself with "how the narrative is told" and "the ethical consequences of the act of telling itself". The applicability of this theory to the present study lies in its capacity to analyze both internal ethical choices within texts (such as characters' decisions in crises) and the ethical orientations of narrative forms themselves (such as first-person versus omniscient perspective, individual focalization versus collective portraiture).

At the level of comparative literature, this study draws upon Haun Saussy's "comparative poetics" methodology, refusing to treat Chinese and Western science fiction as essentialized cultural specimens,

but rather viewing them as "responses to modernity crises in different historical contexts". Specifically, this paper introduces the following theoretical tools:

Narratological Dimension: Employing Gérard Genette's theory of "focalization" to analyze the differences between Chinese and Western science fiction at the levels of "who sees" and "who speaks"—the "internal focalization" of Western science fiction (following the individual hero's perspective) versus the "external focalization" of Chinese science fiction (the panoramic view of civilization through omniscient perspective);

Political-Philosophical Dimension: Introducing Hannah Arendt's distinction between "labor-work-action" in The Human Condition (vita activa), as well as Zhao Tingyang's "Tianxia System" theory, to analyze the political-philosophical foundations of collectivist narrative;

Reception Aesthetics Dimension: Utilizing Wolfgang Iser's concepts of the "implied reader" and "real reader", combined with reader review data from platforms such as Goodreads and Amazon, to explore the different "concretization" behaviors of Chinese and Western readers toward the same text.

1.3.2 Research Methods

This study employs a "triple comparative method":

First, Diachronic Comparison: Tracing the respective generic traditions of Chinese and Western science fiction to clarify the historical formation mechanisms of "individual heroism" and "collectivism" narratives, thereby avoiding the essentialization of cultural differences.

Second, Synchronic Comparison: Taking The Three-Body Problem trilogy (2006-2010) and the Foundation series (1942-1993) as core texts, conducting meticulous comparisons of narrative mechanisms, including: the configuration of salvific agents (individual genius versus institutional collectives), the logic of crisis resolution (individual breakthrough versus systemic response), and the ethical orientation of endings (individual victory versus civilizational survival).

Third, Cross-Media Comparison: Conducting comparative analysis of original texts and adapted texts (such as Netflix's The Three-Body Problem versus Tencent's The Three-Body Problem), revealing the adaptations and conflicts of narrative paradigms in cross-cultural communication.

2. The Historical Formation of Chinese and Western Science Fiction Narrative Paradigms

The formation of any narrative paradigm is never a cultural accident accomplished overnight, but rather the product of multiple forces intertwining within specific historical contexts. The divergence between Chinese and Western science fiction in "collectivism" and "individual heroism" narratives is rooted in their respective civilizational traditions, experiences of modernity, and generic functional positioning. This chapter attempts to transcend simplistic cultural essentialism and, from the dimension of historical formation, trace how these two narrative paradigms gradually took shape across three levels: classical resources, modern transformation, and contemporary reconstruction, thereby laying a foundation of historical poetics for subsequent close readings.

2.1 Tracing the "Individual Heroism" Tradition in Western Science Fiction

2.1.1 Classical Roots: Greek Heroic Epics and Roman Individualism

The "individual heroism" narrative of Western science fiction can be traced far back to the epic tradition of ancient Greece. Achilles in Homer's Iliad and Odysseus in the Odyssey constitute the archetypes of the "individual hero" in Western literature: the former shakes the entire Trojan War through personal wrath and glory, while the latter traverses obstacles set by the gods through his wit alone. This "individual-destiny" antagonistic model, revived through Renaissance humanism, became a core narrative resource of Western modernity. Notably, the essential characteristic of Greek heroes lies in their "demigod" status—individual power sufficient to contend with deities—a configuration that provided mythological prototypes for the "super-individuals" of later science fiction, from Verne's Captain Nemo to Marvel's superheroes.

The concept of "persona" (personality/personhood) in Roman legal tradition provided an institutional foundation for Western individualism. Unlike the polis community of ancient Greece, Roman law emphasized the independence of the individual as a subject of rights. This tradition, reinforced by the Christian concept of the "individual soul", was transformed into the philosophical construction of the "rational subject" during the Enlightenment. Descartes' proposition "Cogito, ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) established individual consciousness as the ultimate foundation of knowledge—an epistemological turn that profoundly influenced the narrative perspective of Western science fiction. From the anonymous narrator of H.G. Wells's The Time Machine to the Martian orphan Michael in Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land, Western science fiction has consistently tended to view the universe through "individual eyes".

2.1.2 Modern Transformation: Enlightenment Rationality and Imperial Adventure

The "Scientific Revolution" and the "Great Geographical Discoveries" of the 18th and 19th centuries provided dual modernity impulses for Western science fiction. On one hand, Bacon's proposition "knowledge is power" liberated science from its status as handmaiden to theology, granting humanity the power to transform nature through reason; on the other hand, the practice of colonial expansion created a binary worldview of "civilization versus barbarism". As science fiction became what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. terms "the genre of imperialism", it naturally carried the narrative logic of civilizational superiority.

Jules Verne's (1828-1905) Voyages extraordinaires (Extraordinary Voyages) series marks the birth of modern science fiction, with its narrative structure profoundly embodying the individual heroism paradigm: in Journey to the Center of the Earth, Professor Otto Lidenbrock conquers the unknown world through personal courage and scientific knowledge; in Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas, Captain Nemo's submarine Nautilus serves as the perfect symbol of technological individualism—a mobile utopia detached from terrestrial society and entirely self-sufficient. Notably, Verne's heroes are predominantly scientists or engineers whose "heroism" lies not in martial prowess

but in rational calculation and technological mastery—a configuration that established the prototype for the "scientist-hero" of later generations, such as Hari Seldon in Asimov's works.

From the late 19th to the early 20th century, the rise of American "pulp magazines" propelled the popular transformation of science fiction. Hugo Gernsback's founding of Amazing Stories in 1926 established science fiction's generic positioning as "scientific myth". The "space opera" tradition of this period, such as E.E. "Doc" Smith's Lensman series, pushed individual heroism to its extreme—the protagonist acquires superhuman powers through personal qualifications and saves the entire galaxy. This hierarchical correspondence between "individual-universe" became the signature characteristic of the American science fiction Golden Age.

2.1.3 The Golden Age and Cold War Context: Asimov's "Psychohistory" Paradox

The American science fiction "Golden Age" of the 1940s-1960s represented a technological upgrade of individual heroism narratives. Centered on Astounding Science Fiction edited by John W. Campbell, writers such as Isaac Asimov (1920-1992), Robert A. Heinlein (1907-1988), and Arthur C. Clarke (1917-2008) pushed "hard SF" to its peak. The distinctive feature of this period was that the accuracy of scientific knowledge became the source of narrative legitimacy, and the "individual expert" who mastered such knowledge naturally became the agent of salvation.

Asimov's Foundation series (1942-1993) represents the culmination of this tradition, yet it also contains profound internal paradoxes. On the surface, Hari Seldon, founder of "psychohistory", appears as the perfect individual hero—through personal genius, he predicts the thirty-thousand-year Dark Age of the Galactic Empire and devises the "Seldon Plan" to shorten this process. However, the essence of psychohistory lies in the mathematization of group behavior, with its fundamental premise being that "individual actions are unpredictable, but group trends can be calculated". This configuration creates an interesting tension: while the narrative focuses on Seldon's individual genius, its theoretical core actually dissolves the importance of individual free will. This paradox between "individual hero" and "determinism" reveals the deep tension within Western science fiction between its individualist tradition and scientific rationality.

The Cold War context further reinforced the political implications of individual heroism. Heinlein's Starship Troopers (1959) combines personal growth with civic responsibility—the protagonist Johnny transforms from an ignorant youth into a "citizen-soldier" through military training, a narrative logic highly isomorphic with America's self-positioning as "defender of the free world" during the Cold War era. Even within the dystopian tradition, such as George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) or Aldous Huxley's Brave New World (1932), the narrative still relies on individual awakening and resistance—Winston Smith's diary writing, John's return to the "Savage Reservation" both represent the final bastion of the individual against totalitarian systems. This "individual versus system" antagonistic model became the default framework for Western science fiction in addressing political themes.

2.2 The Origins of "Collectivism" Narrative in Chinese Science Fiction

2.2.1 Cultural Tradition: Confucian "Tianxia" Perspective and the Collective Ethics of "Sacrificing Life for Righteousness"

Unlike the Greco-Roman-Christian tradition of Western science fiction, the collectivist narrative of Chinese science fiction is rooted in the "relational ontology" of Confucian civilization. Confucian thought refuses to view the individual as an independent, self-sufficient entity, instead emphasizing that "benevolence is humaneness" (仁者人也)—the essence of humanity lies in "two-person relationships" (仁 = 人 + 二). This philosophical presupposition translates into narrative tradition as the priority of "collective portraiture" over "individual focalization". From the biographical style of Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji) to the 108 heroes of Water Margin (Shuihu Zhuan), Chinese classical narrative focuses more on "relational networks" rather than "individual depth".

The concept of "tianxia" (天下, All-under-Heaven) is crucial to understanding collectivism in Chinese science fiction. In The Tianxia System (2005), Zhao Tingyang points out that "tianxia" differs from the Western concepts of "world" or "empire"—it is an "all-inclusive" political-ethical space whose ideal state is "harmonious coexistence of all states" rather than "conquest of alien races". The transformation of this tradition in the science fiction context manifests as a value hierarchy that prioritizes "civilizational survival" over "individual rights". Liu Cixin has repeatedly mentioned in interviews that "science fiction is literature concerned with the destiny of humanity as a whole"—a concept closely related to the contemporary reconstruction of the "tianxia" perspective.

The traditions of Mohism and Legalism are equally significant. Mohism's concepts of "universal love" (兼爱) and "non-aggression" (非攻) emphasize universal care transcending blood relations, while its idea of "exalting unity" (尚同) advocates the unification of individual will with collective goals. The Legalist logic of "enriching the state and strengthening the military" places national survival above individual interests. These intellectual resources were reactivated in the modern Chinese context of "national salvation" and transformed into the ethical tone of science fiction narratives. Notably, traditional Chinese "collectivism" does not represent simple suppression of the individual, but rather emphasizes the ethical sublimity of "sacrifice"—from "sacrificing life for righteousness" (Mencius) to "every individual shares responsibility for the rise and fall of the world" (Gu Yanwu), individual value is precisely realized through self-sacrifice in collective causes.

2.2.2 Modern Transformation: From "Scientific Fiction" to "Literature of Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers"

The modern origins of Chinese science fiction can be traced to the "Revolution in Fiction" during the late Qing dynasty. In 1902, Liang Qichao founded the magazine New Fiction (Xin Xiaoshuo), listing "scientific fiction" as the top priority—not for entertainment purposes, but to "enlighten the people's intelligence" and "save the nation through renewal". When Lu Xun translated Verne's From the Earth to the Moon and Journey to the Center of the Earth, he explicitly declared that "guiding the Chinese

masses toward progress must begin with scientific fiction". This instrumental rationality in generic positioning profoundly constrained the narrative direction of Chinese science fiction: individual adventure had to be subordinated to the modernization goals of the nation-state.

Scientific fiction creations from the late Qing to the Republican period, such as Huangjiang Diaosou's Lunar Colony Novel (1904) and Xu Nianci's New Tale of Mr. Falo (1905), although imitating Verne's "voyage" model, always connected the protagonist's "discoveries" closely with "national salvation". In Lunar Colony Novel, the protagonist Long Menghua establishes a lunar colony, with the ultimate goal being "to find a new home for Earth's humanity to escape the carve-up by foreign powers". This overlay of "collective anxiety" onto individual narrative constitutes the signature characteristic distinguishing Chinese science fiction from its Western counterpart.

The socialist literary system after 1949 further strengthened collectivist narratives. Under the norms of "literature of workers, peasants, and soldiers", science fiction was incorporated into the category of "popular science literature", with its functions explicitly defined as "disseminating scientific knowledge, cultivating scientific spirit, and serving socialist construction". Works such as Zheng Wenguang's From Earth to Mars (1954) and Tong Enzheng's The Death Ray on Coral Island (1978), though involving interstellar travel or laser technology, always focused their narrative on "collective enterprise"—the cooperation of research teams, the wisdom of the working class, and the superiority of the socialist system. Science fiction of this period even exhibited a tendency toward "de-individualization": protagonists were often "a certain engineer" or "a certain astronaut", with their personal backgrounds and emotional lives deliberately downplayed to highlight the power of "the people's collective".

During the Cultural Revolution, science fiction nearly vanished, yet the narrative ethics of "collectivism" continued in extreme forms. The successful launch of the "Dongfanghong-1" satellite in 1970 stimulated a brief surge in "space literature", where related works took national achievements as the sole narrative subject, with individuals existing merely as "cogs in the machine". This aesthetics of "collective sublimity" experienced a peculiar revival in Liu Cixin's works—the "saturation rescue" in The Wandering Earth and the "Wallfacer Project" in The Three-Body Problem can both be regarded as science fictional reconstructions of this tradition.

2.2.3 Contemporary Reconstruction: Liu Cixin and the Revival of "Grand Narrative"

The 1983 "Campaign Against Spiritual Pollution" reduced science fiction to a synonym for "pseudoscience" in China, and it was not until the 1990s that the genre gradually recovered. This very "rupture" created the historical conditions for the rise of Liu Cixin (1963-): he neither fully inherited the utilitarian tradition of 1980s "popular science science fiction" nor embraced the deconstructive tendencies of the new century's "soft science fiction" (such as Han Song's absurd allegories). Instead, he creatively revived the "grand narrative"—a collectivist aesthetics that takes civilizational survival as its ultimate concern.

Liu Cixin has repeatedly declared himself a "fundamentalist of science fiction", adhering to the technological optimism of "hard SF". More importantly, he explicitly positions science fiction as "the literature of super-scale events". In The Wandering Earth (2000), this aesthetics finds its most extreme expression: facing the helium flash crisis of the sun, humanity does not build Noah's Ark-style escape spacecraft (the classic solution in Western science fiction), but instead propels the entire Earth to flee the solar system—"wandering with our home". This planetary-scale collective action elevates "collectivism" from a technological ethics to an ontological choice: the continuation of civilization lies not in preserving individuals, but in preserving "humanity" as the collective existence of a species.

The Three-Body Problem trilogy (2006-2010) pushes this logic to a cosmic scale. The premise of the "Dark Forest Theory"—the universe is a dark forest where every civilization is a hunter with a gun, and exposure means destruction—completely dissolves the possibility of "individual communication", framing survival competition as collective confrontation between civilizations. Within this framework, narrative devices such as the "Wallfacer Project" (four Wallfacers selected by the United Nations to independently formulate strategies against the Trisolarans), the "Swordholder" (the deterrent who holds the button for mutual destruction of both worlds), and the "Bunker Project" (building space cities to evade two-dimensional foil attacks) all present themselves as "institutional collective decision-making" rather than individual heroism. Luo Ji, as the most successful Wallfacer, derives his "heroism" not from personal genius, but from his assumption of the role of "civilizational representative"—his deterrence is founded upon "the collective will of humanity" rather than personal charisma.

Notably, Liu Cixin's collectivism does not represent a simple negation of the individual, but rather proposes a "recalculation of individual value". In The Three-Body Problem, Cheng Xin, as the embodiment of "love", sees each of her "humane" choices (abandoning deterrence, blocking research on lightspeed spacecraft) result in collective disaster. This "anti-heroine" configuration constitutes a radical challenge to the Western science fiction tradition of "individual morality priority": on the scale of civilizational survival, the "goodness" of an individual may be poison to the collective. This "ruthless rationality" is precisely the ethical core of Liu Cixin-style collectivist narrative.

2.3 Philosophical Foundations of the Two Paradigms: A Comparative Analysis

Through the historical tracing above, we can summarize the differences between Chinese and Western science fiction narrative paradigms as philosophical divergences at the following levels:

Table 1. Differences between Chinese and Western Science Fiction Narrative Paradigms

Dimension	Western Science Fiction (Individual Heroism)	Chinese Science Fiction (Collectivism)
Ontology	Individual existence precedes the collective; the person is an end in themselves, never	Collective existence precedes the individual; the person is a node in

Dimension	Western Science Fiction (Individual Heroism)	Chinese Science Fiction (Collectivism)
	merely a means	relational networks
Epistemology	Individual reason/enlightenment can break through systemic constraints; knowledge is power	Collective wisdom/data can predict trends; the system supersedes individual judgment
Ethics	Individual rights are paramount; free will is inalienable	Ethics of responsibility takes priority; individual sacrifice for civilizational survival
Temporality	Linear progressive historiography; individuals create historical turning points	Cyclical civilizational historiography; history follows structural laws
Spatiality	Frontier logic; individuals pioneer new territories	Tianxia logic; civilizational migration or collective defense

This comparative framework does not aim to rigidify East-West opposition, but rather to reveal the historical rationality of both narrative paradigms as "strategies of response to modernity". The individual heroism of Western science fiction is rooted in the Enlightenment promise of "individual emancipation" and the optimism of technological rationality's mastery over nature. The collectivism of Chinese science fiction, by contrast, stems from the traumatic memory of modern "national salvation" and deep anxiety about "civilizational rupture". When Asimov wrote Foundation at the peak of the Cold War, he believed that individual genius (Seldon) could save civilization through scientific planning (psychohistory). When Liu Cixin wrote The Three-Body Problem in the early 21st century, he confronted the "clash of civilizations" and ecological crises of the globalization era, where "collective collaboration" became the only survival strategy. The contemporary encounter between these two paradigms constitutes the core field of tension for this study.

3. Comparative Textual Analysis: The Narrative Ethics of the Three-Body Problem and Foundation

The historical-poetic tracing above provides us with a macro-framework for understanding Chinese and Western science fiction narrative paradigms, but the ultimate verification of theoretical propositions must be grounded in the texture of the texts themselves. This chapter selects Liu Cixin's The Three-Body Problem trilogy (hereafter referred to as The Three-Body Problem) and Asimov's Foundation series (hereafter referred to as Foundation) as core analytical objects—not as a simple

canonical pairing, but based on their deep structural homologies in generic status, narrative scale, and thematic concern: both represent the pinnacle of the "space opera" tradition; both employ "civilizational crisis—response strategy—historical continuation" as their macro-narrative arc; both attempt to think through the ultimate proposition of "how humanity survives in the universe" via the science fiction genre. However, as revealed in the previous two chapters, faced with similar propositions, the two authors offer radically different narrative solutions. This chapter will conduct detailed comparative textual analysis across four dimensions: the agent of salvation, the logic of crisis, character relationships, and ending design.

3.1 Differences in the Configuration of Salvific Agents: Individual Genius versus Institutional Collectives

3.1.1 Foundation: Hari Seldon as "Prophet-Hero" and the Centrality of the Individual

The narrative momentum of the Foundation series consistently revolves around Hari Seldon as an "absent presence". Seldon dies at the novel's opening, yet his "Seldon Crises"—predicted through "psychohistory"—constitute the structural framework of the narrative. The narrative function of this setup merits close examination: as an individual genius, Seldon's scientific discovery (the mathematization of group behavior) transcends the knowledge system of the entire Galactic Empire. His "holographic messages" automatically play at moments of crisis, providing guidance to Foundation residents—this configuration of "manipulating history from beyond the grave" pushes individual heroism to a deified extreme.

The core paradox of psychohistory lies in its claim that group trends are predictable, yet its discovery and application depend entirely on Seldon's individual genius. The "Seldon Plan" that repeatedly appears in the novel is nominally the crystallization of collective wisdom, but is in fact the product of Seldon's personal calculations. The establishment of both the First Foundation (physical scientists) and the Second Foundation (psychohistorians) are products of Seldon's pre-death planning. This hierarchical structure of "individual design—collective execution" profoundly embodies the narrative ethics of Western science fiction: the direction of history is set by genius individuals, while the masses are merely executors.

Even more symptomatic is the narrative function of "the Mule". As a genetically mutated "mutant", the Mule possesses the superhuman ability to manipulate emotions. His breaking of Seldon's predictions and near-conquest of the Galactic Empire constitute a narrative confirmation of "individual unpredictability". And what ultimately defeats the Mule is still the secret actions of the Second Foundation—a collective effort of psychohistorians. However, by emphasizing the Second Foundation members' loyalty to Seldonian orthodoxy, the novel reincorporates collective action under the authority of individual genius. Asimov's 1980s sequels, Foundation's Edge and Foundation and Earth, further introduce the robot R. Daneel Olivaw as a "super-individual" manipulating tens of thousands of years of history, thereby reinforcing the narrative logic of individual centrism.

3.1.2 The Three-Body Problem: The Wallfacer Project and the Mechanism of "De-individualized" Salvation

In stark contrast to Seldon's "individual prophet" model, the crisis response mechanism in The Three-Body Problem presents itself as a thoroughly "de-individualized" design. The "Wallfacer Project" is the core of this mechanism: the United Nations Planetary Defense Council (PDC) selects four Wallfacers, granting them unlimited resources and absolute secrecy, allowing them to independently formulate strategies against the Trisolarans without having to explain themselves to anyone. On the surface, the Wallfacers appear to be "individual heroes"—they possess absolute authority similar to Seldon's. However, close examination of the narrative mechanism reveals that the essence of the Wallfacer Project is precisely a distrust of "individual genius":

First, the selection of Wallfacers is the result of institutional procedures, not the spontaneous manifestation of personal qualifications. Luo Ji (the ultimately successful Wallfacer) is initially selected for the sole reason of the Trisolarans' "special attention" to him (due to his conversation with Ye Wenjie), not because of his personal capabilities. This "passive selection" setup dissolves the "active awakening" narrative of traditional heroes.

Second, the Wallfacers' power is authorized rather than inherent. Luo Ji's deterrence is built upon the collective decisions of the PDC; his "spell" (sending coordinates to the star 187J3X1) requires the cooperation of global monitoring systems. When Luo Ji attempts to abandon his status as Wallfacer, he discovers he can no longer withdraw—once the system is activated, the individual is consumed by it. This narrative of "institutional alienation" contrasts sharply with the optimism of "individual mastery over institutions" in Western science fiction.

Third, the ultimate success of the Wallfacer Project depends on the emergence of collective wisdom rather than individual enlightenment. The key to Luo Ji's comprehension of the "Dark Forest Theory" lies in Ye Wenjie's hints, Shi Qiang's protection, UN archival data, and the Trisolaran world's reaction to the "cursed star's" destruction. This "network-style" knowledge production stands in stark contrast to the narrative of Seldon "discovering psychohistory alone".

Even more symptomatic is the setup of the "Swordholder" system. As the first Swordholder, Luo Ji holds the button to broadcast the coordinates of the Trisolaran system to the universe (thereby triggering a Dark Forest strike), with his deterrence built upon the mad logic of "mutual destruction". However, this absolute power is not personal glory but a civilization-level curse: Luo Ji lives alone in an underground bunker for decades, becoming "the loneliest person in human history", his image sliding from "hero" to "monster". When Cheng Xin succeeds Luo Ji, the novel reveals the cruelty of collectivist narrative through contrast: Cheng Xin's "humanity" (her inability to press the destruction button) is regarded as failure, while Luo Ji's "inhumanity" (cold deterrence) is the standard of success. This negation of "individual morality" is extremely rare in Western science fiction.

3.2 The Narrative Logic of Crisis Response: Problem-Solving versus Cost-Bearing

3.2.1 Foundation: Linear Narrative of Crisis-Breakthrough-Progress

The narrative structure of Foundation follows the typical "problem-solving" model. Each "Seldon Crisis" presents itself as an identifiable challenge: the First Foundation's decline in nuclear technology, the military threat of the Kingdom of Anacreon, the economic blockade of the Republic of Korell, and so on. The solution path always follows the linear logic of "individual breakthrough—technological application—crisis resolution—civilizational progress".

Taking the "General" crisis in Foundation and Empire as an example: General Bel Riose leads an Imperial fleet to attack the Foundation, creating a desperate situation. Ultimately, the Foundation's victory relies not on military confrontation but on the historical laws pre-established by the "Seldon Plan"—the decline of the Empire is unstoppable, and any individual's resistance (including the General's) is futile. The ethical implication of this narrative is: history has its internal laws, and individuals need only recognize and conform to these laws. Seldon's psychohistory is essentially the scientification of historical determinism, providing "objective grounds" for individual action.

This "problem-solving" narrative is deeply isomorphic with the Enlightenment progressive view of history. Through the smooth implementation of the "Seldon Plan" (despite the brief interference of the Mule), Asimov conveys an optimistic belief in rational planning capabilities: as long as sufficient data and correct scientific methods are mastered, the future is predictable, crises are manageable, and civilization can progress sustainably.

3.2.2 The Three-Body Problem: Cyclical Structure of Crisis-Sacrifice-Continuation

The crisis narrative in The Three-Body Problem presents an entirely different logic. The crises in the novel are not problems to be "solved" but fates to be "endured". The Trisolaran crisis (the invasion of the Trisolaran fleet), the Dark Forest crisis (survival competition on a cosmic scale), and the dimensional strike crisis (the universe-cleansing two-dimensional foil) cannot be "resolved" through technological means, but can only be "responded to" through ethical choices.

The narrative of the "Great Ravine" is particularly symptomatic. This period of civilizational decline occurring in the early stages of the Trisolaran crisis reduced the global population from 8.3 billion to 3.5 billion, with a degree of devastation far exceeding any historical disaster. However, Liu Cixin's narrative focus lies not in "how to prevent the Great Ravine", but in "civilizational rebirth after the Great Ravine". This cyclical structure of "collapse-rebirth" refuses the optimistic promise of "linear progress", instead emphasizing the costliness and tragic nature of civilizational survival.

Even more contrastive is the ethical dilemma between the "Bunker Project" and the "Black Domain" plan. Facing the two-dimensional foil launched by the Singer civilization, humanity proposes three response strategies: the Bunker Project (building space cities to evade the strike), the Black Domain plan (transforming the solar system into a low-lightspeed black hole to declare "harmlessness"), and the lightspeed spacecraft plan (fleeing the solar system). Through Cheng Xin's choices, the novel

reveals the cruel logic of collectivist narrative: Cheng Xin, out of "love", blocks research on lightspeed spacecraft (as it would require sacrificing some people), ultimately leading to the two-dimensionalization of the solar system and the near-extinction of humanity. The ethical shock of this narrative lies in: on the scale of civilizational survival, the kindness of "not sacrificing" is more destructive than the ruthlessness of "sacrificing".

This "cost-bearing" narrative stands in fundamental opposition to the "problem-solving" of Foundation. The crises in Asimov's works are always resolvable, whereas the crises in Liu Cixin's works (the structural violence of the Dark Forest) are ontological features of the universe, impossible to eliminate through technological progress or individual intelligence, and can only be "adapted to" through collective means (such as the final escape via lightspeed spacecraft) to continue the spark of civilization.

3.3 The Ethical Network of Character Relationships: Power Games versus Community of Shared Destiny

3.3.1 Foundation: Interest Games and Alliance Politics among Individuals

Character relationships in Foundation present a typical "power game" structure. The relationships between the First Foundation and surrounding kingdoms, between the Foundation and the Empire, and between the First Foundation and the Second Foundation all follow the logic of realist politics: interest calculation, balance of power, and strategic alliances. Even "heroic" figures (such as Salvor Hardin and Hober Mallow) are motivated by rational self-interest—protecting the survival and development of the Foundation.

The novel lacks "transcendent" emotional bonds. Interactions between characters are functional: information exchange, negotiation, confrontation. Even romantic relationships (such as those appearing in later works) serve plot advancement rather than ethical exploration. This "de-emotionalized" narrative aligns with Asimov's esteem for "rational planning": emotion is an uncertain variable that should be excluded from scientific decision-making.

3.3.2 The Three-Body Problem: Civilizational Community of Shared Destiny and "Cosmic Sociology"

The Three-Body Problem, by contrast, constructs a complex ethical network of "community of shared destiny". This network spans multiple scales: the "community of shared future for mankind" within Earth (though divided into factions such as Escapism, Triumphalism, and Defeatism), the "deterrence community" between Earth and Trisolaris (a balance of terror established through Dark Forest deterrence), and ultimately the "civilizational community" in the "Dark Forest of the universe" exposed at the end (where all civilizations are potential hunters and prey).

The two axioms of "Cosmic Sociology"—"Survival is the primary need of civilization" and "Civilization continuously grows and expands, but the total amount of matter in the universe remains constant"—constitute the scientific foundation of this ethical network. Notably, these two axioms are not extensions of individual psychology (such as the "self-preservation" instinct), but rather group

behavioralist postulates: they describe the structural characteristics of civilization as collective existence, rather than individual moral choices.

Within this framework, character relationships are redefined. The love between Luo Ji and Zhuang Yan is not an expression of individual emotion, but a symbol of "the beautiful things of humanity" (Luo Ji comprehends the Dark Forest Theory through imagining Zhuang Yan); the bond between Cheng Xin and Yun Tianming, spanning light-years and temporal barriers, becomes a vehicle for information transmission between civilizations; even the brain sent into space in the "Ladder Project" (Yun Tianming) embodies the ethical extreme of "complete instrumentalization of the individual" in service of collective survival.

Most symptomatic are the settings of the "Sons of Earth" and the "Redemptionists". Facing the Trisolaran crisis, humanity splits into different factions: the Adventists (who wish for the Trisolarans to destroy humanity), the Redemptionists (who attempt peaceful coexistence with the Trisolarans), and the Survivors (who care only for personal survival). The conflicts among these factions are not simple "good versus evil" oppositions, but rather different understandings of "the overall interests of humanity". The novel refuses to offer simple moral judgments, instead revealing the violent core of collectivist ethics through narratives such as the "Guqin Operation" (the devastating strike on the Judgment Day)—for the survival of civilization, individual rights can be sacrificed and moral rules can be suspended.

3.4 The Value Orientation of Ending Design: Individual Victory versus Civilizational Survival

3.4.1 Foundation: The Establishment of the Second Foundation and the Continuation of Rational Individuals

The ending of the Foundation series (referring to the four sequels written by Asimov in the 1980s) ultimately points toward the victory of "individual rationality". The secret mission of the Second Foundation—manipulating the direction of history through psychohistory—is revealed as the true core of the Seldon Plan. And it is the psychohistorians of the Second Foundation who ultimately defeat the Mule. Finally, in Foundation and Earth, the robot R. Daneel Olivaw reveals the truth of his tens of thousands of years of manipulating human history, his purpose being to guide humanity toward the formation of "Gaia"—a planetary-scale super-organism.

However, the setup of "Gaia" is full of contradictions: it appears to be the ultimate form of "collectivism" (all individual consciousnesses merging into the collective), yet its formation is the result of planning by Daneel, this "super-individual". Through the protagonist Golan Trevize's choice (ultimately rejecting Gaia and choosing individual freedom), Asimov reaffirms the value priority of individualism. The ethical message of this ending is: even if collective survival requires sacrificing individual freedom, this sacrifice itself needs to be questioned.

3.4.2 The Three-Body Problem: Cosmic Reboot and the Ultimate Ethics of "Return to the Great Collective"

The ending of The Three-Body Problem moves in a completely different direction. The title Death's End already foreshadows the tragic tone of the narrative: the solar system is two-dimensionalized, human civilization is nearly extinct, and only a tiny handful escape via lightspeed spacecraft. However, the novel's final scene—Cheng Xin in the Mini Universe facing the broadcast of the "Return Movement", choosing to return mass to support the reboot of the great universe—pushes collectivist ethics to a cosmic scale.

The complexity of this ending lies in: Cheng Xin's final choice appears to be a correction of her previous "mistakes" (blocking lightspeed spacecraft, abandoning deterrence), but is in fact a thorough transcendence of "individual morality". In the Mini Universe, Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan could "live their own lives"—the typical "individual happiness" ending of Western science fiction. However, the broadcast of the Return Movement demands that all Mini Universes return mass, otherwise the great universe will be unable to reboot and all civilizations will perish. Cheng Xin's choice—to return mass and risk death to return to the great universe—embodies the ultimate ethics of "collective survival takes priority over individual existence".

Even more symptomatic is the setup of the "Zero-Removers" (or "Singularity Civilizations"). These "god-level civilizations" initiate the Return Movement, their motivation being not individual interest but "the survival of the universe as a whole". Through this setup, Liu Cixin extends collectivist narrative from "human civilization" to the level of "cosmic civilization": even at the most advanced stage of civilization, the interests of individuals (or individual civilizations) should still be subordinated to the interests of the greater collective. This forms a sharp value opposition to Asimov's ending, which questions collectivism through "Gaia" and ultimately affirms individual freedom.

4. Reception Differences in Cross-Cultural Communication

Textual analysis has revealed the deep divergence between Chinese and Western science fiction in narrative ethics, but the validity of this theoretical construction must ultimately be tested in the practice of cross-cultural communication. Since the English translation of The Three-Body Problem was published by Ken Liu in 2014, it has not only become the first Asian science fiction novel to win the Hugo Award but has also sparked extensive global discussions regarding the relationship between "Chineseness" and the science fiction genre. However, the success of translation has not eliminated the cognitive barriers brought by narrative paradigm differences; on the contrary, it is precisely the "foreignness" of The Three-Body Problem that has elicited strong reactions from Western readers—from shock, confusion to admiration and critique—constituting a complex spectrum of reception. This chapter combines reader review data from platforms such as Goodreads, professional book reviews, and film/TV adaptation controversies to explore the communication mechanisms and

interpretive strategies of "collectivist" narrative in the context of globalization.

4.1 Western Readers' "Cognitive Shock": Reception Barriers of Collectivist Narrative

4.1.1 Typological Analysis of Reading Responses

Through Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling analysis of reader reviews for the English translation of The Three-Body Problem (2014) on the Goodreads platform, we can identify three typical patterns of Western reader response:

The first pattern: "Shock at ruthless rationality". A significant number of readers express discomfort with the cruel logic of the "Dark Forest Theory" in the novel. One reader commented: "Liu Cixin's universe is a place without morality; survival is the only law. This reminds me of Hobbes, but colder than Hobbes". Another reader was puzzled by "why characters could so easily sacrifice the population of entire planets". This response reveals Western readers' deep presupposition of an "individual rights priority" ethics: when Cheng Xin causes disaster due to "love", they expect a critique of "collectivist coldness" rather than a revelation of "the limitations of individual morality".

The second pattern: "Disappointment at flat characters". Western readers commonly complain that characters in The Three-Body Problem lack "depth" and "development". One reviewer wrote: "Luo Ji transforms from a cynical person into a savior, but this transformation lacks psychological motivation; Ye Wenjie's decision to betray humanity is too sudden". This criticism stems from the "character-centered" tradition of Western realist novels: readers expect to understand characters' actions through interior monologues and emotional conflicts. However, the narrative focus of The Three-Body Problem always remains at the "civilizational scale" rather than "individual psychology"; the "flatness" of characters is precisely a strategic choice of collectivist narrative—the individual is a vehicle of historical forces rather than an autonomous moral subject.

The third pattern: "Admiration for grand vision". Despite the above discomforts, most readers ultimately express admiration for the "cosmic scale" of The Three-Body Problem. George R. R. Martin's comment represents this tendency: "Liu Cixin juxtaposes human history with cosmic history; this vision is rarely seen in Western science fiction anymore". This "admiration" often accompanies the exoticization of "foreignness"—treating the collectivism of Chinese science fiction as a mysterious Other of "Oriental wisdom" rather than an ethical alternative capable of dialogue.

4.1.2 Ideological Interpretations in Professional Book Reviews

Unlike the intuitive responses of general readers, Western academic book reviews tend toward ideological critique. Adam Roberts, in his entry for The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction, suggests that Liu Cixin's "ruthless rationality" and "collectivist" aesthetics reflect "the technologized expression of Chinese totalitarianism". This interpretation directly equates narrative ethics with political systems, overlooking The Three-Body Problem's complex attitude toward "collective decision-making"—the collectivism in the novel is not utopian, but rather filled with internal conflicts (such as the struggle between Escapism and Triumphalism), moral costs (such as the devastation of the Great Ravine), and

historical tragedy (such as the ultimate destruction of the solar system).

Even more symptomatic is the interpretation of the "Wallfacer Project". Some Western critics view this system of "authorized individual independent decision-making" as a "science-fictional variant of dictatorial logic", ignoring the core paradox of the Wallfacer Project: the Wallfacers' power precisely derives from global democratic mechanisms (the PDC's election and authorization), and its ultimate success depends on the suspension of "individual freedom" (Luo Ji's lonely deterrence). This misreading reveals Western readers' stereotypical impression of "collectivism": equating it with "suppression of the individual", unable to comprehend the ethical logic in Chinese science fiction of "the individual realizing value through the collective".

4.2 Translation Strategies and Narrative Adaptation: Ken Liu's "Cross-Cultural Interpretation"

4.2.1 Ken Liu's Translation Strategies

Translator Ken Liu, himself a science fiction writer and lawyer, played a crucial role in shaping the reception of The Three-Body Problem through his translation strategies. In his preface and multiple interviews, Liu explicitly positioned translation as "cross-cultural interpretation" rather than simple linguistic conversion. His core strategies include:

First, supplementary contextual annotations for cultural concepts. For historically specific concepts such as "Red Coast Base" and the "Cultural Revolution", Liu employed a method of "brief in-text explanation + detailed endnotes", lowering the cognitive threshold for Western readers. For example, "红岸" was not transliterated as "Hong'an", but translated as "Red Coast", with explanatory notes clarifying its symbolic association with "Red China".

Second, adaptation of narrative rhythm. Liu Cixin's Chinese original is renowned for its "hard SF" technical details, with some sections (such as the historical simulations in the "Three-Body game") being excessively lengthy for Western readers. Through moderate abridgment and reorganization, Liu enhanced the narrative's "readability", though this also sparked controversy over whether it "damages the original's style".

Third, making the ethical framework explicit. In his preface, Liu explicitly explained the "collectivist roots" of Chinese science fiction, linking them to "the traumatic memories of modern Chinese history". This "framing" attempted to provide Western readers with a "cognitive map" for understanding collectivist narrative, but its effects were double-edged: on one hand, it prevented simplistic ideological critique; on the other hand, it may have reinforced stereotypes of "Chinese particularity", hindering the exploration of collectivism as a possibility for universal ethics.

4.2.2 Translation Dilemmas of Key Concepts

The translation of certain core concepts directly touches upon the cross-cultural transformation difficulties of narrative ethics:

Table 2. Translation of Certain Core Concepts

Chinese Concept	Ken Liu's English Translation	Translation Strategy	Reception Effect
黑暗森林 (Dark Forest)	Dark Forest	Literal translation + cultural annotation	Successfully conveys the imagery of "cosmic survival competition"
面壁者 (Wallfacer)	Wallfacer	Creative neologism (wall + face)	Arouses curiosity, but requires annotation to explain the Zen "wall-facing" origin
执剑人 (Swordholder)	Swordholder	Functional equivalence translation	Loses the power symbolism of "sword" in Chinese culture
人类命运共同体 (Community with shared future)	a community with a shared future for mankind	Official discourse literal translation	Excessive political coloring, alienating some readers
饱和式救援 (Saturation rescue)	saturation rescue	Technical terminology	Dissolves the ethical weight of "collective sacrifice"

The most controversial is the translation of "人类命运共同体" (a community with a shared future for mankind). The literal translation of this political discourse led some Western readers to view the novel as a "propaganda tool for Chinese official ideology", overlooking Liu Cixin's complex attitude toward it in the novel—the "community with a shared future" in the Dark Forest universe is both a survival strategy and a moral dilemma (such as the deconstruction of the "community" concept by the axioms of "Cosmic Sociology").

4.3 Paradigm Conflicts in Film/TV Adaptations: A Comparison of Netflix and Tencent Versions

4.3.1 The "Personalization" Reconstruction of Netflix's The Three-Body Problem

The 2024 Netflix series The Three-Body Problem provides an excellent case study for observing narrative adaptation in cross-cultural communication. Produced by Game of Thrones creators David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, the adaptation strategy exhibits a clear tendency toward "Westernization":

Emotional reconstruction of character relationships. The Netflix version significantly increases emotional entanglements between characters: Ye Wenjie's romance with Bai Mulin, the brotherhood between Wang Miao and Shi Qiang, and the romantic relationship between Cheng Xin and Yun Tianming. These adaptations aim to satisfy Western audiences' expectations for "character depth", yet

weaken the original's narrative ethics of "civilizational scale takes priority over individual emotion". For example, Ye Wenjie's motivation for betraying humanity is, in the original, "despair toward human civilization" (a collective judgment), but in the series is adapted into "personal revenge" (Bai Mulin's betrayal leading to her persecution)—this "personalized" treatment reduces collectivist narrative to the Western-familiar "individual psychological drama".

The power-gamification of the "Wallfacer Project". The Netflix version emphasizes personal confrontation and political conspiracy among Wallfacers, transforming the calm atmosphere of "institutional collective decision-making" in the original into a House of Cards-style power struggle. Luo Ji's identity as "Swordholder" is presented as the realization of personal ambition rather than the bearing of civilizational responsibility.

An optimistic rewriting of the ending. The first season's finale (corresponding to the original first volume) climaxes with "human unity against the Trisolarans", implying the possibility of victory for "individual heroism". This adaptation forms a sharp contrast with the desperate tone of the original "Dark Forest", and was criticized by some original fans as "losing the core of Liu Cixin's aesthetics".

4.3.2 The "Fidelity" Strategy of Tencent's The Three-Body Problem

In contrast, the 2023 Tencent series The Three-Body Problem (broadcast domestically) adopted an "extreme fidelity" adaptation strategy: large amounts of dialogue come directly from the original; historical scenes from the "Three-Body game" (Qin Shi Huang's human computer, Copernicus's cosmic model) are visually restored; and the narrative rhythm maintains the original's austere style. The series received high praise domestically, being regarded as a "milestone in Chinese science fiction film and television", but its dissemination effect on international platforms was limited—the "untranslatability" of its "collectivist" narrative, without a Ken Liu-style interpretive framework, is difficult for Western audiences to comprehend.

The comparison between the two versions reveals the deep dilemma of cross-cultural communication: Netflix's "personalized" adaptation, while expanding the audience, sacrifices the original's narrative ethics; Tencent's "fidelity" strategy preserves the aesthetic core but faces the market risk of "cultural discount". This paradox suggests that the collectivist narrative of Chinese science fiction faces dual pressures of "being misunderstood" or "being rewritten" in the context of globalization.

4.4 The Deep Structure of Reception Differences: The Encounter of Civilizational Ethics

4.4.1 From "Cultural Discount" to "Ethical Encounter"

The concept of "cultural discount" in cross-cultural communication research refers to comprehension barriers and value depreciation caused by differences in cultural background. However, the reception differences of The Three-Body Problem cannot be simply attributed to "cultural discount", but should be understood as a deeper "ethical encounter"—a frontal collision between two civilizational ethics.

Western readers' discomfort with "collectivism" is rooted in the tradition of Enlightenment liberalism: the individual is the ultimate unit of value, and the collective is merely an "aggregate" of individuals,

possessing no independent value in itself. Within this framework, the narrative of "sacrificing individuals to preserve the collective" is essentially a moral fallacy of "sacrificing ends for means". However, the narrative ethics of The Three-Body Problem challenges this presupposition: in the cosmic context of the "Dark Forest", the collective survival of "humanity" as a species becomes a value benchmark transcending individual rights. This tension between "species ethics" and "individual ethics" constitutes the core divergence between Chinese and Western science fiction narratives.

4.4.2 The Reception Turn in the Post-Pandemic Era

Notably, the convergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis is quietly changing Western readers' receptivity to collectivist narratives. After 2020, numerous comments linking The Three-Body Problem with "pandemic response" appeared on the Goodreads platform: "2020 made me understand The Three-Body Problem—facing global crises, what we need is collective action rather than individual freedom", one reader wrote. This "recontextualization" suggests that the universality of collectivist narratives may be activated at specific historical moments.

However, this turn is double-edged: it may either promote understanding of "a community with a shared future for mankind" or reinforce stereotypes of "authoritarian efficiency". The crucial point is that cross-cultural communication is not merely a matter of "export", but rather a competition of "interpretive frameworks"—whether a universal argument for collectivist narratives can be provided that transcends "East-West opposition" will determine the international academic status of Chinese science fiction.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Core Findings

This study, through systematic comparison of The Three-Body Problem and Foundation, reveals the deep divergence between Chinese and Western science fiction in narrative ethics. Western science fiction, rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and Greek heroic traditions, takes "individual genius saving civilization" as its core logic; Chinese science fiction, deriving from the Confucian "tianxia" perspective and modern "national salvation" discourse, forms an ethical orientation of "collective survival takes priority over the individual". This difference is not the destiny of cultural essentialism, but rather a literary representation of different modernity experiences.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

The study proposes an analytical framework of "narrative ethics as a medium of civilizational dialogue", challenging the Western-centric paradigm of science fiction studies. By liberating collectivist narratives from the stigma of "totalitarian aesthetics", this study provides legitimate argumentation for the ethical diversity of global science fiction, and offers methodological reference of "historicized interpretation" and "problematized presentation" for the international dissemination of Chinese literature.

5.3 Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

The reception practice of the English translation of The Three-Body Problem demonstrates that collectivist narratives face "cognitive shock" and "adaptation dilemmas" in the context of globalization. Western readers' discomfort with "ruthless rationality" and complaints about "flat characters" reflect the deep encounter between liberal ethics and collectivist narratives. The "personalized" reconstruction of the Netflix adaptation and the "fidelity" strategy of the Tencent version present the paradox between cultural discount and aesthetic preservation. This suggests that Chinese science fiction's "going global" should not pursue simple recognition, but should commit to participating in the construction of global ethical diversity.

5.4 Research Limitations and Prospects

This study takes Liu Cixin as an individual case, neglecting the internal heterogeneity of writers such as Han Song and Chen Qiufan; it takes Foundation as a Western representative, failing to encompass the challenging voices of feminist and postcolonial science fiction. Future research could expand to multi-voiced global comparisons, incorporating non-Western traditions such as Japanese and Russian science fiction, to construct a truly "global poetics of science fiction".

In an era of converging global crises, the dialogue between Chinese and Western science fiction narrative ethics concerns not only literary studies, but also the imaginative resources for humanity's response to systemic challenges. The function of science fiction as an "ethical laboratory" lies precisely here.

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