

Between Science and Fiction: The Transmission of the Film *Frau Im Mond* (1929) in Chinese Periodicals, 1929–1933

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on canonical late Qing and early Republican science fiction has accentuated the role of translation as a channel of import that contributed to the birth of the genre in China. The paper proceeds from this view of translation, but contends that the current historiography does not confront the complexity of the emergence of the genre, which took place in the vast textual landscape of the periodical press through the appropriation of foreign verbal and visual sources. This mode of emergence is described in the paper with a case study of the transmission of the images of the German science fiction film *Frau Im Mond* in Chinese periodicals during the period 1929–1933.

The case study, inspired by keyword searches in the National Periodical Index and *Shenbao* databases, explores how the film was reported, synopsisized and advertised in the film magazine *Silverland* and the newspaper *Shenbao* in the years preceding its first screening in Shanghai in 1933. In the next decade, the media coverage was followed by a surge of interest in space missions to the Moon in a wide range of periodicals. Tracking the transmission of the cinematic images and examining later periodical publications about lunar exploration, the paper observes that the borderline between scientific writing and science fiction in this period was not only indistinct, but that indistinctiveness was also self-strengthening, as it became a source of wonder in the Chinese periodical press that motivated the continuous inflow of visual and verbal sources of science and science fiction from abroad. With its method and observations, the paper hopes to open up

new materials and analytical paths for the study of the role of translation in the emergence of science fiction in China.

Keywords

science fiction film, translation, periodicals, early Republican China

1. Introduction

The main interest of this study is the emergence of the genre of science fiction through periodical translation in early twentieth-century China, with a focus on the relationship between scientific writing and science fiction. The materials central to the paper are the early media coverage of the German science fiction film classic *Frau Im Mond* in Shanghai during the period 1929–1933, which was a discovery in a small dataset retrieved from the National Periodical Index (*Quanguo baokan suoyin* 全國報刊索引, hereafter NPI) using a keyword search for periodical items about lunar exploration.¹

In particular, the paper examines the images and paratexts of the film in the magazine *Silverland* (*Xin yinxing* 新銀星) and the newspaper *Shenbao* 申報 during the said period. The analysis also brings in later periodical publications that were inspired by the film, or shared the same interest in the theme of Moon exploration. What these materials have in common is that they circulated as representations of prior foreign sources, and thus are considered as products of the “translational practice” (Lefevere 1998, 13) surrounding and following the import of the German film; they also fall into the loose category of translation, which consists of various modes of interpreting verbal signs (Jakobson 1959, 114) and which is “assumed” (Toury 1995, 31–32) and “inclusive” (Pym 1998, 58–61). Under this conceptual framework, the paper aims to use the materials to begin to understand the complex role of translation in the emergence of science fiction in China.

In what follows, I shall first explain the historiographical concerns that motivated this study, and the methodological path through which I found the materials about *Frau Im Mond*. Reading closely the captioned images and synopsis in *Silverland* and the advertisements in *Shenbao*, I shall demonstrate that the film was framed in the early coverage as both a