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From “Dark Forest” to “Community with a Shared Future for Mankind”: A Study of National Image Narration in the Overseas Dissemination of The Three-Body Problem

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Abstract

Since the successful overseas publication of Liu Cixin's science fiction trilogy The Three-Body Problem, it has not only become a globally popular sensation but has also provided an important and unique window for the world to understand China. This paper adopts the Cultural Discourse Studies paradigm to examine how discourse "constructs" social reality, power relations, and cultural identification. It analyzes how the internal textual narrative and external discursive dissemination of the work collectively "tell" a complex, multifaceted contemporary Chinese national image distinct from Western perspectives. The paper reveals that the enormous overseas resonance of The Three-Body Problem stems from a journey of textual negotiation and contestation involving multiple discursive actors, including the author, translator, publishers, Chinese and foreign journalists, and global readers. Regarding specific discursive content, The Three-Body Problem engages in rich imagination concerning historical reflection, technological advancement, the "whole-nation system," and, most notably, international relations modeled on the "Dark Forest" theory. It offers philosophical speculations on China's future development and ultimately concludes its "Three-Body" journey with the existential puzzle of the "Dark Forest" facing all of humanity and the grand love and warmth of building a community with a shared future. Within the unique context of China's history and culture, and through encounters with cultures that interpret things differently, these narratives either generate strong "empathy" through certain universal "human" issues, or, because of the unique imagination of "Chinese-style modernization" itself, trigger new desires to understand China, thus giving rise to many new narratives about China. This paper explores how outstanding literary works can promote national image dissemination and hopes to provide beneficial artistic methods and communication models for the construction of Chinese discourse and narrative systems.

Keywords

The Three-Body Problem; Cultural Discourse Studies; National Image;

Chinese-style Modernization; Cross-cultural Communication

1. Introduction

At the turn of the century, there existed both an urgent desire to understand China and deep cultural barriers that bred prejudice. Cultural tools became excellent vehicles for shaping national image, and Liu Cixin's The Three-Body Problem trilogy achieved remarkable success: its English translation (2014) immediately climbed to the top three of Amazon's bestseller list, and won the Hugo Award in 2015 (He, 2016; Wu & He, 2019). To date, it has been translated into 26 languages, sold over 2.6 million copies, and collected by over 1,350 overseas libraries (Wu, 2021). It sparked growing attention from elites—from Obama to Zuckerberg—and ordinary readers regarding China's social transformation. As Wu (2021) notes, we can now use this literary form as a gateway to traverse China's complex spaces and see diverse discourses.

However, this phenomenon raises questions: How does the global dissemination construct a national image of "Chinese-style modernization"? What roles do different subjects play? Which contents are highlighted, translated, and reconstructed? Current research has produced valuable results in textual, thematic, translation, and reception studies, but few have systematically integrated them. The Cultural Discourse Studies paradigm proposed by Professor Shi Xu provides a powerful theoretical tool, defining "discourse" as communicative behavior within specific historical and cultural relations, with socially constructive functions. Its "six-in-one" model offers a referable framework. This paper uses this model to explore the national image constructed in the global dissemination of The Three-Body Problem and hopes to bring reflection to "telling China's story well."

2. Discursive Subjects: The Multi-Actor Contest in National Image Construction

2.1. The Discursive Practice of Creators and Translators

Author Liu Cixin is the "primary subject" of the national image narrative. He created this work not for political propaganda or indoctrination, but as a result of imagination driven by his love for science, awe of the universe, and concern for human destiny. The grand narrative he depicts in The Three-Body Problem is precisely what he expressed upon winning the award: "I hope my work can make readers believe that humanity as a race has united to face this impending disaster together and will overcome it" (Wu, 2021, p. 179). This is a highly condensed expression of his concern for the collective destiny of all humanity, giving his discourse enormous potential to be shared and accepted by ordinary people around the world. At the same time, Liu Cixin is not born in the present; he

carries the memories, seals, or traumas of his formative years belonging to that era—for example, about the "Cultural Revolution," about great projects, about collective hopes and doubts—all of which form the Chinese cultural foundation of his discourse.

Translator Ken Liu serves as a "cultural bridge" or "discourse translator" (Li & Liu, 2018a). He himself is a Chinese-American sci-fi writer and naturally understands the differences between East and West. In interviews, he mentioned that in the translation process, he "left minimal fingerprints on the original text," making it "fluent without any translationese" (Ken Liu interview, n.d.). However, this itself involves discursive translation, and handling a work as richly Chinese as The Three-Body Problem is even more challenging—what are the ways to present a great power image? He also put considerable thought into this, rewriting the "Cultural Revolution" segments in The Three-Body Problem and deliberately emphasizing their role. For example, in his English version, the section "Suicide Forest" concludes with a story about the protagonist returning to his ancestral home—a past event during the "Cultural Revolution." However, in "Suicide Forest," Liu Cixin only uses this past event as background atmosphere, without devoting a separate section to it. Ken Liu, however, introduces it in detail in the first chapter of his English version to satisfy English-language readers seeking knowledge about modern China (Wu, 2021; Wu & He, 2019). He extensively adds footnotes to help Western readers understand unique Chinese cultural terms and passages. These extensive "additions" not only make the text understandable but also provide readers with methods of comprehension (Fu, 2018; Wu & He, 2019). It can be said that this was not simply converting the book from one language to another, but a newly compiled work, and he put considerable effort into it, thus creating the "first impression" when this masterpiece first entered the West.

2.2. The Discursive Guidance of Official and Commercial Subjects

The success of The Three-Body Problem was quickly captured by China's official discourse system. Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, and other official media, in reporting on the work's awards and sales, all emphasized it as a successful expression of "Chinese culture going global" and "cultural confidence." This essentially integrates the individual success of The Three-Body Problem into the grand narrative of the nation, conveying to domestic and international audiences an image of China that can not only rise economically but also successfully create great literary works culturally, thereby achieving cultural confidence.

Meanwhile, overseas commercial entities—such as American publisher Tor Books and streaming platform Netflix—also began considering how to package and guide the work from a market demand perspective. The former targeted sci-fi writers familiar to Western readers for "benchmarking," recruiting famous

"endorsers" like George R.R. Martin, heavily promoting The Three-Body Problem as "a book unlike any other," hoping "it could have a unique world like those in the past and let the author create his own universe," thus quickly gaining "authoritative status" in sci-fi circles (He, 2016; Wu & He, 2019) to promote the novel's subversive qualities. Netflix, on the other hand, adopted an approach designed to be as accessible as possible to non-Chinese audiences, adapting the work for a global rather than a local Chinese market, "de-localizing" the original. Netflix transformed the story's setting into a more internationalized (even "Westernized") world, casting actors from various racial backgrounds to play the characters. This "de-Sinicized" adaptation, on one hand, opened up more potential recipients; on the other hand, it also sparked considerable controversy (Zouha et al., 2024); these commercial discourses also influence the cultural imagination of The Three-Body Problem abroad and its image as a "world-class IP."

2.3. The Discursive Interpretation of Elite and Mass Subjects

At the first level, key participants include Western mainstream media and elite critics (opinion leaders). Their reviews and reports are the most important resources and channels through which many readers understand The Three-Body Problem. A New York Times review, while highly praising its "extraordinary imagination," also focused on the "Cultural Revolution" history in the novel's opening when responding to The Three-Body Problem, using it as a key to interpret contemporary China (He, 2019). This also gave the book its most prominent label in the West—historical reflection. The narrative structure "emerging from China's history" constructs an image of China from the past, scarred and wounded.

Ordinary readers around the world, expressing their opinions on various platforms, become the ultimate recipients and re-disseminators. Their feedback is highly complex. Many readers expressed admiration for the novel's grand conception and scientific-philosophical speculation, saying it "elevated Chinese science fiction literature to a world-class level." However, some readers expressed differing views, even criticism, regarding certain values in the book (such as collectivism) (Zhang, 2019). They constitute a bottom-up public discourse, discussing the stories, characters, and images of China in The Three-Body Problem in different contexts. They test, supplement, and even deconstruct the subject discourses constructed at the previous levels, making the imagination of China conveyed by The Three-Body Problem an open text that is constantly changing and being enriched and revised by various discourses.

3. Discursive Content: Multiple Narratives of Imagining Chinese-style Modernization

What makes The Three-Body Problem so shocking to the world is fundamentally

that its discursive content transcends the level of entertaining sci-fi reading we are accustomed to, constructing a grand narrative involving civilization, history, and future. The meaning orientation constructed by this entire discourse forms a complex intertextual relationship with China's modern history, embodying and constructing what might be called a grand imagination of "Chinese-style modernization." This grand imagination is not single-layered; it is the product of multiple intertwined factors including historical reflection, technological development, security philosophy, and global governance:

3.1. Historical Reflection and Political Narrative: The Trauma and Mobilization of the "Cultural Revolution"

The first book of The Three-Body Problem begins with the bloody scene of the "Cultural Revolution": physicist Ye Zhetai is beaten to death at a struggle session by Red Guards, and his daughter Ye Wenjie, losing faith in humanity, sends a message to another civilization. This not only sets the tragic tone for the entire novel but also presents China's unique historical circumstances to world readers—"our past history does leave a shadow on readers, if I'm not mistaken." Liu Cixin explains his choice of the Cultural Revolution as the starting time of the story: "Because that era was truly dark and absurd... this is the only reasonable reason that could drive a woman who has lost trust in humanity to madness and do anything for other interests" (Nature magazine interview, n.d.).

In The Great Failure, this historical narrative has multiple meanings. For Western readers, the "Cultural Revolution," a familiar yet captivatingly distant "other," "immediately captures their attention" and becomes the "key" for interpreting the novel's political allegory (Wu, 2021). This narrative constructs an image of China emerging from painful memories, explains why several "radical" characters in the story are "radical," and opens a window into contemporary Chinese social memory. The story of Ye Wenjie's unconventional actions after her "ideal disillusionment" during the Cultural Revolution also becomes a political narrative—a closed, irrational civilization can easily produce external threats that destroy the entire civilized world from within.

3.2. Technological Development and Whole-Nation System Narrative: Imagining Grand Projects

On the other hand, The Three-Body Problem is so magnificent and unrestrained, filled with future wonders and grand blueprints. From the "Guzheng Operation" that uses nano "flying blades" to cut through the "Judgment Day" giant ship, to the "Wallfacer Project" that intimidates the Trisolarans, to the "Staircase Project" that builds a light-speed spaceship for human escape, each features stunning engineering scale and technological conceptions. Liu Cixin himself is an engineer, and to him, China's massive technological projects are particularly moving (Liu

Cixin, 2016): this also constitutes an important realistic foundation for this narrative. To many overseas readers, this appears as an allegory or metaphor in a sci-fi story: it seems the Chinese people can "concentrate efforts on major undertakings" in times of crisis—the so-called whole-nation system. In the novel, after humanity discovers existential risks, the Planetary Defense Council (PDC) is established to mobilize the world's resources in the most centralized and unified way to address the crisis. In contrast, Western sci-fi more often features a "superhero" or a few small heroes completing the salvation (Zhao, 2025), while The Three-Body Problem suggests a very powerful and efficient state, indicating that when an entire civilization faces existential threats, strong organizational capability and effective unified leadership may be a more effective path.

3.3. Security Concept and International Relations Narrative: The Cruel Allegory of the "Dark Forest"

The "Dark Forest" premise proposed in The Three-Body Problem II: Dark Forest—the "cosmic sociology" that forms the core of the series—its two axioms (survival is the primary need of civilization; civilizations continuously grow and expand, but the total matter in the universe remains constant) and two concepts (the chain of suspicion, technological explosion) together deduce the "Dark Forest Law," namely: the universe is a dark forest; any civilization that exposes its position will quickly be destroyed by other civilizations. This law is considered an extremely cruel portrayal of international relations in the real world, shaping a very realistic and vigilant image of China's security concept. It shatters the Western fantasy of China's "alien contact" in the universe (such as "we come in peace"), replacing it with a colder, more ruthless sense of reality. In the plot, humanity's naive broadcast into the vast universe brings about catastrophe. This plot makes many foreign readers realize the devastating power of "kindly naivety" in international politics. Liu Cixin states that the "Dark Forest" theory is a choice for his novel's plot, not a scientific conclusion, and it profoundly reflects a sense of crisis and bottom-line thinking (Liu Cixin, 2011c). This also constitutes a new national image—a cautious, pragmatic, and unillusioned one, showing world readers a facet of our strategic thinking to some extent.

3.4. Global Governance and Human Destiny Narrative: Transcending National Boundaries with Ultimate Care

Although the "Dark Forest" is filled with barbarism and cruelty of mutual annihilation among civilizations, we see that against the backdrop of the "Great Filter," The Three-Body Problem ultimately settles on the "Community with a Shared Future for Mankind," rising to an ultimate concern for humanity. The

Three-Body Problem III: Death's End eventually expands humanity to the entire Milky Way and, in the ultimate event of the universe's great collapse, issues a "return to zero" declaration, returning the mass occupied by Earth and many other planets to the universe, allowing a new universe the time and ability to be born (Liu Cixin, 2011c). Liu Cixin believes this is "a very optimistic outcome" on this timescale (Liu Cixin, 2011c). This reflects a consciousness that transcends narrow national-state concepts, encompassing a vision of global governance, long-term future goals, and the future of all humanity—a behavioral pattern that transcends individual-level egoism with "big-picture thinking" and altruistic awareness. In the novel, whether Luo Ji who chooses to be the "Swordholder" or Cheng Xin who ultimately chooses "love," both face moral choices concerning the survival of all humanity. Although the story's narrative object is humanity as a whole, the challenges it faces are deadly dangers, which also aligns with the real-world discourse in China calling for "building a community with a shared future for mankind." The world in The Three-Body Problem is responsible, and its national representatives are far-sighted great powers with global vision (Wu, 2021). This may be why The Three-Body Problem can win widespread attention and deep resonance from readers.

4. Cultural and Historical Relations: The Deep Logic of Image Construction

The "Chinese image" in The Three-Body Problem is not an isolated cultural imagination but exists within the interaction of Chinese and other cultures and historical relationships. According to Cultural Discourse Theory, any discourse exists within its specific historical and cultural relations. Only by understanding these complex relationships can we grasp why the national image narrative of The Three-Body Problem can be constructed, transmitted, and viewed in the way it is today.

4.1. Dialogue and Collision of Cultural Relations

The overseas journey of The Three-Body Problem is a great collision, and through this collision and dialogue, the construction of China's image in The Three-Body Problem gradually becomes clear. Is it collectivism or individual heroism? Western sci-fi, including Western popular culture as a whole, has individual heroism as its motif, but The Three-Body Problem tells us something completely different—a story of collectivism (Zhao, 2025). To defeat the greatest enemy in the universe, the Trisolaran invasion, it is not one person but "people" who save the world, through the immense "Wallfacer Plan" and "Starship Earth"—it is the effort of a nation, a collective. This cultural gap gives readers a sense of "defamiliarization" (Wu, 2021), both fascinating and troubling: why should individuals in the human world freely living give up their freedom to protect the freedom of others? This collision and

dialogue also show that the China created in The Three-Body Problem is no longer simply the "Other."

Second is the communion and fusion of universal care and local experience. Although The Three-Body Problem is full of Chinese elements and local experiences, such as the "Cultural Revolution" and Eastern philosophical thinking, its appeal to global readers lies in Liu Cixin's writing about the highly universal topic of human survival—how small the entire solar system is before the universe (Wu, 2021). Curiosity, fear of the unknown, awe of strange things and supernatural forces, the psychology of fearing the unknown—these are common human emotional experiences, perhaps an ultimate mystery for intelligent beings (Yan and Zhu, 2021). Liu Cixin grasps this universal primal emotion and presents Earth civilization—humanity's expansion and self-optimization in space and the universe—placing our own historical experience and thinking into this grand human narrative (He, 2016; Zhao, 2025). This ingenious blend of the "national" and the "worldly" allows The Three-Body Problem to cross national boundaries.

4.2. Inheritance and Transcendence of Historical Relations

The national image narrative of The Three-Body Problem is closely connected to the situation and historical background of its dissemination. Its success is a product of China's own developmental history, but it also becomes a new footnote to that history. First, The Three-Body Problem depicts a living history of contemporary Chinese development. The birth and global popularity of The Three-Body Problem coincided with the post-reform and opening-up China, where national comprehensive strength rapidly increased and technological power gradually strengthened. The wonderful imagination of future technology in the novel—giant space elevators, curvature spaceships traveling at light speed without interference—corresponds to real-world China's rapid progress in aerospace, quantum communication, and other technological fields. This also makes The Three-Body Problem "in the eyes of overseas readers, a novel about China's rise," with the strong organizational capability and optimistic visions of the future shown in the novel corresponding to real-world evaluations of China—miracles of speed, innovation of models.

Second, it creates a new era in the history of Chinese cultural dissemination. The Three-Body Problem sets a new record for Chinese literature, and its literary status and value in China can reach that of any literary genre in any country in the world (He, 2019); previously, Chinese literature accessible to foreign markets was mostly serious, highbrow, and Nobel-winning works—Mo Yan's success being a perfect example of this understanding. But this time, Chinese genre literature not only entered the international mass market but also achieved great success. This is not only a change for contemporary novel studies: "The story of The Three-Body Problem is a Chinese event of international significance. Before this, Chinese

literature overseas was mainly represented solely by Nobel laureates. But today, this event proves that popular stories can also convey profound ideas and achieve great success in the world market" (He, 2016). In other words, The Three-Body Problem creates a new cultural image of China, one full of imagination and creativity. "This is an important era for Chinese novelists," an era begun by a translated work that shows the outside world a new cultural image of China—neither the past nor familiar to America, but a future-oriented image of cultural innovation and creativity, rather than adherence to traditional culture or historical heritage.

5. Inheritance and Transcendence of Historical Relations

Using the Cultural Discourse Studies paradigm, this paper examines the national image narrative in the global dissemination of The Three-Body Problem. It reveals that its overseas success is a discursive contestation involving different subjects—author Liu Cixin's universal concern and local memories, translator Ken Liu's interpretive transformation, official political framing, commercial packaging, elite deconstruction, and ordinary readers' feedback—all negotiating a constantly changing Chinese image, co-created by multiple forces.

In terms of narrative content, the four images of "Chinese-style modernization" constitute a three-dimensional "contemporary China": through reflection on the Cultural Revolution, it constructs an image unafraid of scars; through grand technological projects, it creates an image of high efficiency and strong organization; through the "Dark Forest" law, it shapes a cautious, far-sighted diplomat; through concern for humanity's future, it presents a great power with self-sacrificial spirit, transcending nationalism to become a member of the community with a shared future.

At a deeper level, the success lies in the novel's skillful handling of the relationship between unique Chinese experience and universal human destiny, while maintaining independence in contestation with Western discourses. Both are corroborated by China's rapid rise over the past decade, lending realistic persuasiveness.

This study offers practical implications for "telling China's story well": (1) encourage cultural products that combine profound content with global issues; (2) face historical complexity and use it to enhance narrative depth; (3) value intermediaries like translators and overseas publishers, actively participating in discursive construction; (4) set globally resonant agendas such as shared human destiny and technological ethics, transcending ideological disputes to win broader understanding.

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