

# An Introduction to Tibetan Science-Fiction Literature

BY GOYÖN



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# AN INTRODUCTION TO TIBETAN SCIENCE-FICTION LITERATURE

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According to the *Zermik*,<sup>1</sup> an ancient Tibetan scripture composed a thousand years ago, “the number of universes as well is unimaginably innumerable.” Since ancient times, the Tibetan scientific tradition has held that this realm of existence is beyond the human experiential domain. It was also believed that the universe contains an immeasurable number of worlds. Further to this, they not only acknowledged the existence of life on other planets but it was even said that some of these worlds harbored civilizations more advanced than ours. The Tibetan people have a deep-seated aspiration to explore these worlds and seek a fundamental understanding of this *saṃsāric* realm.

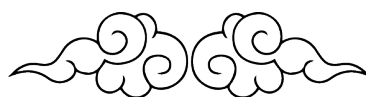
The Tibetan writing system has endured at least for more than one thousand four hundred years, and approximately one thousand three hundred years ago, even the first bilingual Tibetan dictionary and grammar book were composed. As such, the Tibetan language has a long history and a robust grammatical system, making it one of the world's oldest and most complete languages. There is an abundant array of both ancient and modern literature in Tibetan, among which science fiction (ཚན་རྟོག་ རྒྱུ་མཉམ་) is well represented.

In this article, I will outline four distinct categories of Tibetan science-fiction literature: first, traditional science fiction; second, contemporary science fiction; third, translated science fiction; and fourth, Tibetan-related science fiction.

## SECTION ONE: THE CONQUEROR OF THE THREE WORLDS: TRADITIONAL SCIENCE FICTION

Traditional Tibetan treatises and literary compositions provide extensive explanations concerning planets of other galaxies, as well as scientific technology. For example, *The Pema Katang*, authored by the renowned Orgyen Lingpa (1323–?), proclaimed that the universe is replete with numerous planets (“purelands”) that are inhabited by living beings. He introduced [individual planets with] advanced civilizations one by one.

Also, since the introduction of the *Glorious Kālacakra* tradition to Tibet with texts like the *Kālacakramūlatantra*, *Abbreviated Kālacakratantra*, and the *Great Commentary of The Stainless Light*, Tibetan scholars and writers have argued for the existence of another world called *Śambhala*. Following [the emergence of this idea], Jetsun Drölwe Gönpö (1575–1635) wrote *Entering Kalāpa: Ārya Dönyö Chakyu's Travel Guide to the Supreme Place of*



*Śambhala*, which was followed by *The Source of a Million Wonders: The Elucidation of Śambhala and Tales of the Noble Land* by the Sixth Pañchen Lama, Palden Yeshe (1738–1780), *The History of the Glorious Kālachakra of the First Buddha and Its Various Names* by the supreme Longdöl Ngawang Lobzang (1719–1794), and *The Illuminations of the Vajra Sun That Completely Elucidate the Words and Meanings of the Glorious Kālacakratantra* by Mipham Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso (1846–1912). According to these many treatises, *Śambhala* boasts wondrous landscapes, with inhabitants who live splendidly. Furthermore, these texts predict that strong individuals from *Śambhala* will one day come to Earth and conquer humans. Additionally, the dates of this conquest have also been determined through astrological calculations.

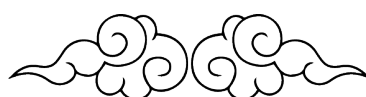
Most importantly, before the widespread popularization of scientific technology, the Tibetan literary tradition had extensively recorded a variety of scientific apparatuses. For example, a book composed around the seventeenth century, entitled *The Glass Fortress on a Snow Mountain*, discusses soldiers flying in a helicopter (ཐད་འཕུར་གནམ་གྲུ) to remote areas for reconnaissance missions. Similarly, *The Tale of a Playful Corpse* depicts carpenters, blacksmiths, and religious sculptors constructing an airplane and flying to the top of a king’s palace.

Similarly, *Drugu’s Fortified Armory* and *Khache’s Turquoise Fortress* [from the Gesar Epic], along with numerous other ancient manuscripts, contained many scientific and technological inventions, including but not limited to airplanes, rockets, artillery, ships, and various electronic devices, which only became popular later [with scientific development].

## SECTION TWO: AS PRECIOUS AS THE WORLD: CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE FICTION

Since the introduction of modern literature in Tibet, numerous new literary forms have flourished, primarily poetry and stories. In particular, fantasy (མཚར་རྟོག་ཚུམ་རིག) and science-fiction literature have gained considerable popularity. Notably, science-fiction stories (ཚན་རྟོག་བརྩམས་སྒྲུང་) and science-fiction poetry (ཚན་རྟོག་སྒྲུབ་པ) are becoming increasingly popular.

For instance, “Tale of the Moon” from *The Collection of Tsering Döndrub’s Short Stories* and science-fiction narratives like “Directionless Universe,” which was published in *Light Rain*, a renowned Tibetan language literary journal, are gaining prominence. Also, science-fiction poems such as “Equal” and “Home” have been published in a poetry book titled *Equal Taste of Feeling and Appearance*. Several other Tibetan literary journals, including *The Art of Tibetan Literature* and *a White Snow Mountain*, have published science-fiction literature as well. Today, more and more writers are exploring science-fiction literature in the Tibetan language.



SECTION THREE: A COLLECTION OF UNIVERSAL VIRTUE:  
TRANSLATION OF SCIENCE FICTION

Since the Tibetan imperial period, Tibet has produced nearly a thousand translators, both significant and lesser-known. They have translated a myriad of impressive texts from a variety of foreign languages of their time into Tibetan. These include textbooks that present the theories of great scientists, such as Albert Einstein (ཨིན་སི་ཐེན།, 1879–1955) and Stephen Hawking (སྔོ་ཀིང།, 1942–2018), who are the backbones of science-fiction concepts.

Recently, a number of works from fantasy and science-fiction [genres] have been and are being translated. For instance, there are science-fiction works, such as a collection of twenty books titled *Excellent Science Fiction of the Central Country*, and also another [fantasy] collection of twenty books titled *Excellent Fantasy Stories of the Central Country*. Similarly, several movies, including *Interstellar* (སྐར་མའི་བར།), *Alita: Battle Angel* (ཨ་ལི་མ་ཐ།), *Ready Player One* (རྩོད་མོ་མཁན་ཨང་དང་པོ།), *The Wandering Earth* (ཡུལ་གྲུང་ས་གླང།), and *Lucy* (ལོ་ས་སི།), have been dubbed in Tibetan.

SECTION FOUR: A PERVASION OF THE SIX REALMS:  
TIBETAN-RELATED SCIENCE FICTION

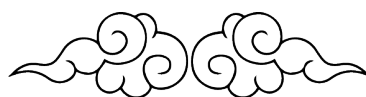
Academic articles, literature, films, and plays from various regions around the world frequently feature references to Tibet and related subjects. Particularly, numerous exceptional science-fiction stories and movies have drawn on Tibetan culture and tradition. Prolific English author Arthur Charles Clarke (ཨར་ཟེར་ཆལ་ཟེ་ཁི་ལ་ལི།, 1917–2008), often hailed as the pioneer of science fiction, penned *The Nine Billion Names of God* (ལྔ་ལྔ་མཚན་གྱི་རྣམ་གྲངས་ཐེར་འབྲུམ་དགུ།), a [riveting narrative partly] set [within the confines of] Tibetan monastics and their monasteries. Similarly, renowned American writer Kim Stanley Robinson (ཁེ་མ་སྤེན་ལེ་རོ་ལྷན་སུ།, b. 1952) has authored *The Years of Rice and Salt* (འབྲས་དང་ལན་རྒྱའི་དུས་རབས།), a fiction piece inspired by a Tibetan text known as *The Great Liberation Through Hearing in the Intermediate State*. Also, the famous film *Farewell Atlantis* (འཇིག་རྟེན་འཇིག་པའི་ཉིན་མོ།), which gave people chills around the world, utilized Tibetan language.

Moreover, topics concerning Tibet and Tibetan culture are becoming increasingly prevalent in Chinese science fiction. For example, Liu Cixin, the acclaimed author of *The Three Body Problem*, [composed] the story *Mountain*, and Renxing Chengzi [wrote] *Wrathful House*.

In sum, Tibet holds a long history of science fiction and has been a subject of numerous science-fiction literature across the globe; moreover, the Tibetan language,



with its faith, sacred visions, and astonishing manifestations, is a lavish treasure trove of science fiction.



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