



RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE DEVELOPMENT STATUS OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF FILM INDUSTRIALIZATION

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Submission Jul., 11, 2025</p> <p>Acceptance Jul., 11, 2025</p> <p>Keywords</p> <p>Chinese cinema; Science fiction films; Film industry; Development path</p> <p>Corresponding Author</p> <p>bingtaoxu@stu.tjnu.edu.cn</p>	<p>As an important film genre, science fiction has long generated significant economic value and social impact in developed Western countries, standing out among various film genres and moving towards industrialized development. With the ongoing deepening of China's film industry reform and the rapid development of the market economy, Chinese science fiction films have shown promising growth. The recent surge in popularity of science fiction films has provided a rare opportunity for the development of Chinese science fiction films. Today, China is calling for the emergence of domestically produced science fiction films. Market demand, social expectations, and the needs of the times have all undergone significant changes, creating real possibilities and favorable conditions for the development of this genre. However, Chinese science fiction films still faces several challenges, such as low social recognition of science fiction culture, underdeveloped creative output, and inadequate promotional efforts.</p>

1. INTRODUCTION

The term science fiction first appeared in Christian Hellmann's History of World Science Fiction Films, where Hellmann quoted and agreed with Herbert W. Frank's definition of science fiction films (Chen, 2023). According to Frank, science fiction films depict dramatic events occurring in a fictional world that, in principle, could actually exist. The Dictionary of Film Art expands and elaborates on this definition, stating that science fiction refers to science fiction films and is a film genre whose basic characteristic is that it uses scientific principles and known scientific achievements as a starting point, and imagines future worlds or distant pasts (Beaver, 2006). According to the revised edition of the Cihai, science fiction novels are based on new scientific discoveries or achievements, with a foundation in fantasy and the foresight of the future, often combining various artistic forms. When the concepts of scientific education, artistic

imagination, and cinematic techniques converge, science fiction films naturally emerge and continue to evolve.

British scholar Lister introduced the fundamental concept of technological imagination, suggesting that the use of new technologies in China has revived humanity's visions of the future in the context of rational socialist development through modern information technology (Lister et al., 2008). With the rapid development of new technologies such as 5G, VR, and AI, as well as the widespread use of mobile devices like smartphones and wearable gadgets, the channels through which people access information have expanded. This has also led to higher demands for leisure and entertainment, which to some extent has become one of the factors influencing audiences to visit cinemas.

After the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global film market, some investors and production companies have become particularly cautious when investing in new films. In the context of market-oriented and commercialized operations, the level of audience interest in a film has undoubtedly become an important factor in determining a film's success. Hollywood blockbusters often achieve both box office and critical success in China. For example, the 2021 game movie adaptation *Ready Player One* earned over 100 million USD at the Chinese box office in just one month, and was awarded the most popular American film by Chinese audiences at the 17th China-US Film Festival. The science fiction novel adaptation *Dune* was released simultaneously in China and the US, making its way into the top ten of the global box office in 2021.

In recent years, China's film box office performance has been relatively optimistic, with total box office rankings consistently being updated. This marks a key step toward China becoming a film powerhouse. However, issues such as a lack of variety in film genres and the absence of works that achieve both strong box office performance and good critical reception remain prominent challenges to be addressed. Science fiction films, which are currently one of the most popular genres attracting audiences to cinemas, are also among the least frequently produced in China. This paper focuses on Chinese science fiction films, analyzing its current development status, identifying existing problems, and exploring suitable paths for future development.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENT OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

As an important part of the cultural industry, cinema not only provides social benefits but also generates substantial economic returns, setting new box office records year after year. In 2019, *The Wandering Earth* achieved a box office of 653 million USD, topping the list of Chinese science fiction films' box office earnings and ranking sixth on the all-time box office chart in China (Ye, 2019). The success of this film marked a milestone for Chinese science fiction films, sparking new expectations for its development from national to local levels, from producers to audiences. To explore the development of Chinese science fiction films, it is crucial to first analyze its development environment and current state.

2.1. Government Policies Supporting Development

In recent years, the Chinese government has introduced various new policies to support and protect the growth of Chinese science fiction films. In August 2020, the China Film Bureau and

the China Association for Science and Technology jointly issued the Opinions on Further Promoting the Development of China's Science Fiction Film Industry. The document focused on areas such as innovation at the source of science fiction film creation, sustainable supply, establishing screening mechanisms, improving special effects technology, and supporting finance, taxation, and talent development. These efforts are laying the foundation for a favorable environment for the growth of Chinese science fiction films. In November 2021, the China Film Bureau released the 14th Five-Year Plan for China's Film Development, which strongly supports the creation and production of science fiction films, further encouraging the development of the genre (Parc et al., 2022).

2.2. Rising Consumer Spending and Expanding Market

As the consumption level of residents continues to rise, the Chinese film market continues to expand. In 2019, China's annual box office revenue reached 11.38 billion USD, making it the largest market globally (Costantino, 2024). By 2024, the number of cinema screens in China is expected to remain the largest in the world, with the country having 90,968 screens. This significant growth in the scale of cinema screens also contributes to the dominant position of China in the global film industry.

2.3. High Level of Domestic Film Production Technology Supporting Science Fiction Films

The level of domestic technology in film production has also reached a high standard, empowering the production of science fiction films. While *The Wandering Earth* borrowed from Hollywood's techniques, it also successfully adapted them to Chinese contexts. Film studios like Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis and domestic visual effects companies such as MORE played pivotal roles in achieving the high production standards of *The Wandering Earth*, driving the formation of a local film industry system, talent cultivation, and industrial upgrading.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT STATE OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

The Wandering Earth in 2019 was a monstrous success, and it changed the morale of Chinese science fiction films, as it evoked a new feeling of national pride and optimism. Some are even claiming 2019 as the Year of Chinese Science Fiction. This movie did not only demonstrated that China was able to create mass-market sci-fi blockbusters but also stimulated the whole nation to learn more about this genre. But the attendance of later science fiction movies like *Shanghai Fortress* did not perform well, even after the initial hype. Nobody has turned out to be as acclaimed as well as commercially successful as *The Wandering Earth* in Chinese sci-fi films since the release of the latter. It raises a very topical question in the industry: the possibility of Chinese sci-fiction film-making is evident, but maintaining the popularity of the genre and making it evolve is very difficult (Hartley, 2022).

Within the wider community of science fiction writers, works are usually divided into two subgenres of hard sci-fi and soft sci-fi. Hard sci-fi concentrates on the technological and scientific realistic nature of the story and the story activities are based on probable scientific theories. Soft sci-fi, in contrast, has a tendency to cover humanistic issues, and it often does so by touching on the emotional, social, and moral consequences of futuristic situations. In order to comprehend the situation in Chinese science fiction film, one should both analyze the field through the sources of hard and soft sci-fi.

3.1. The Rise of Hard Science Fiction Films

China's journey in sci-fi filmmaking has been deeply influenced by technological constraints. Historically, one of the main reasons for the delayed development of sci-fi films in China has been the slow progress in key technological areas. For many years, the country lacked the necessary infrastructure and expertise in advanced special effects, visual technology, and scientific authenticity to produce high-quality sci-fi films. Consequently, hard sci-fi films—those that hinge on a strong, scientifically plausible foundation (Westfahl, 2005)—were scarce in China's film market. This trend persisted until *The Wandering Earth* broke new ground, demonstrating that China could create a successful sci-fi epic on a global scale.

The idea of historical materialism, which posits that social existence shapes social consciousness, is particularly relevant here. As China's national power has grown, particularly in the field of space exploration, the country has seen notable advancements in areas such as space science and technology. Initiatives like the Chang'e Moon Mission, the Tiangong Space Station, and the Chinese Mars Exploration Program have not only demonstrated China's capability in these fields but have also provided a wealth of theoretical and practical support for sci-fi film production. These projects have also generated a wealth of public interest and scientific discourse, creating a fertile ground for future sci-fi film content.

Moreover, the advent of new technologies—such as 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), and virtual reality (VR)—has further empowered film production (Du & Han, 2021). These innovations have enabled filmmakers to create more immersive and visually striking sci-fi narratives. At the same time, the rise of domestic visual effects companies, such as Qingdao Oriental Movie Metropolis and MORE VFX, has allowed Chinese filmmakers to access cutting-edge technological resources, enabling them to produce sci-fi blockbusters that can rival their Western counterparts.

3.2. Emphasize content and narrative

It is important, however, to note that not the technological improvement can be the key behind the successful Chinese sci-fi films. Although novel tools and techniques provide filmmakers with much greater freedom and expression, one persistent problem with Chinese science fiction films is that, in the forms used, the stress is increasingly being laid on form to the exclusion of content. Numerous Chinese sci-fi movies, especially those with a softer tone, often struggle to develop an engaging plot or effectively address the philosophical and emotional layers of their main narratives. The effect is a crisp packaging that can only be entertaining with special effects and visual display of the content but cannot provide depth and serious matter-of-fact theme development.

More specifically, soft sci-fi films in China have not been able to satisfy critical reception and triumph at the box office. Such movies usually deal with humanistic issues, but unless these issues are really looked into and examined closely, then the movies are typically shallow. Failure to invest in creating a complex character, intricate plotlines, and coherent dialogue also means that a significant portion of these films cannot satisfy the viewer at all, especially when viewers are expecting a more in-depth experience with the genre (Hu et al., 2024).

3.3. Science fiction literature has developed

The recent Chinese sci-fi literature has encountered an incredible increase over the last years with such successes as *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin being recognized with honors such as Hugo Award. Through success, there has been an increasing number of people interested in the genre and that has extended not only to China but also abroad. In numerous ways, the literary world was ahead of the cinema because there is a great variety of good sci-fi novels, with a position of bestsellers (Yan et al., 2018).

Such a literacy boom is an opportunity to Chinese science-fiction films. It does not lack effective source material; there are numerous masterpieces based on Chinese sci-fi literature. But still, it is hard to translate them into successful movies. The novels provide a lot of food, but it has been difficult to create riveting cinema through the novels which both honor and reach a wide audience. The screenwriters tend to confront problems of the script, rhythm, and visual style to find the right balance between the intellectual content and the effect of the visual film communication.

To conclude, the volume of Chinese sci-fi films is still low, and after *The Wandering Earth* there is no movie that managed to achieve the same success in both box-office performance and reception of Chinese critics. Although technological limitations are minor issues now, narrative construction and storytelling need to be improved. The movies that are primarily oriented on technological spectacle, flagrantly ignoring the story structure, character development, and thematic profundity will not go far, as they have little chance of attracting large proportions of the audience and critics. To succeed, the Chinese sci-fi movies cannot afford to be limited by the use of special effects and should resort to deeper and more holistic storytelling that appeals to local and international markets. The most important question posed on the newer waves of advertising technology will be making sure that the sci-fi films that exist in China are not just visually appealing but also appealing in their intellectual and emotional appeal. Chinese sci-fi film also has the possibility to make history and rival other sci-fi in the world with an appropriate combination of technical knowledge, fictional narrative, and cultural authenticity (Jiang & Yin, 2024).

4. PROBLEMS AND SHORTCOMINGS OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

In recent years, with the widespread use of smartphones, smart TVs, and home theater systems, and particularly due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, online streaming has become a popular trend for watching films (Agnihotri et al., 2022). This has increased the factors influencing audiences' decisions to visit cinemas. Sci-fi films, due to their grand narrative scenes and excellent post-production, have become one of the genres that attract audiences to theaters. The success of *The Wandering Earth* has made it clear that technological issues are no longer a valid excuse for the public's tolerance of Chinese sci-fi films. Audiences' demands and standards for sci-fi films are rising, and it is therefore crucial to critically examine the issues and shortcomings that currently exist in Chinese sci-fi films. These problems stem from various aspects, primarily reflecting the low social recognition of sci-fi culture, outdated creative capacity in the sci-fi film industry, and inadequate promotional efforts.

4.1. Low Social Recognition of Sci-Fi Culture

If we were to categorize the issues facing Chinese sci-fi films into internal and external causes,

the low social recognition of sci-fi culture would be the primary external factor. When discussing Chinese sci-fi films, many people attribute its underdevelopment to problems such as a lack of imagination and creativity. However, Chinese cinema, literature, and art are not devoid of imagination. In fact, the fantasy genre—also based on imaginative concepts—has flourished in China, as it is more easily accepted and appreciated by the public. This genre, while rooted in the inheritance and promotion of China's 5,000-year-old traditional culture, is more easily understood and embraced by a wider audience. The development of literature has provided fertile soil for film content creation, and recently, the trend of adapting intellectual property (IP) into films has gained significant momentum (Han, 2022). Sci-fi films are no exception—The Wandering Earth, for instance, was adapted from the sci-fi novel of author Liu Cixin, and another popular film, Crazy Alien, was also adapted from his works.

In 2015, Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award for Best Novel with *The Three-Body Problem*, which sparked a surge in interest in Chinese sci-fi literature. This led to the rapid development of the genre, and an increasing number of high-quality works have been embraced by the public. However, the real question is: why did the Chinese public begin to accept sci-fi literature only after it won international awards? The reason lies in the historically low social recognition of sci-fi culture in China. The same holds true for sci-fi films. Prior to *The Wandering Earth*, Chinese audiences were overly enamored with Hollywood blockbusters. While there were some excellent domestic soft sci-fi films, audiences were clearly more interested in hard sci-fi films. In hindsight, *The Wandering Earth* is regarded as a success, often hailed as China's first true hard sci-fi film. However, at the time of its release, it garnered little attention. Audiences subconsciously believed that Chinese sci-fi films were not worth watching, which was one of the main reasons for the film's underappreciation at first. Thus, it is evident that improving the social recognition of sci-fi culture and increasing the public's acceptance of sci-fi films are key issues that need to be addressed.

4.2. Outdated Creative Capacity in Sci-Fi Film Production

In the context of the industrialization of cinema, sci-fi films have become an important genre in developed Western countries, generating immense economic and cultural value and establishing a complete sci-fi film industry chain. In contrast, the Chinese sci-fi film industry is still in its infancy, lacking the scale of an established industry. The concept of a Chinese sci-fi film industry is still unrealistic. However, the success of *The Wandering Earth* has demonstrated the potential for the formation of a domestic sci-fi film industry. Given this potential, we must address the long-standing key issue that has restricted the development of Chinese sci-fi films: outdated creative capacity.

The narrative techniques in Chinese sci-fi films need further development. As Chinese commercial cinema increasingly follows the trends of Hollywood films, the use of "spectacle" has been employed to satisfy viewers' evolving curiosity. However, this emphasis on spectacle often leads to the use of traditional Hollywood narrative structures, and the global influence of American blockbusters has shaped filmmaking practices worldwide, resulting in what has been termed "spectacle cinema." The primary logical flaw in this trend is that it prioritizes visuals at the expense of narrative—form dictates content. Characters become more superficial, and the storylines lose their depth and logic. The focus shifts toward visual impact and emotional music,

with grand scenes and high-budget productions becoming the main visual expressions, while storytelling becomes the weakest link.

The creative output in sci-fi film production is directly reflected in the number and quality of sci-fi filmmakers. Currently, most film directors in China come from professional film academies, and their education, which tends to prioritize the humanities, does not always meet the specific needs of sci-fi film content creation. Many directors lack a deep understanding of the scientific world, and sci-fi films require a solid foundation in scientific knowledge. In terms of scriptwriting, most Chinese sci-fi films are adaptations of sci-fi novels. While Chinese sci-fi literature has reached new heights, the process of adapting novels into films often encounters setbacks. Many sci-fi novel IPs are bought for adaptation but then remain in development limbo, reflecting the shortage of qualified scriptwriters.

In post-production, although some domestic visual effects companies have become integral to film production, the reality is that post-production technology still has considerable room for improvement. The training of post-production talent must keep pace with technological advancements. While the success of *The Wandering Earth* showed hope for Chinese sci-fi films, the subsequent release of *Shanghai Fortress* did not build on that hope but instead dealt a blow to the Chinese sci-fi film industry. Since then, sci-fi films have rarely appeared in theaters. Overall, talent remains the most crucial factor affecting sci-fi film creation. Only by improving both the quantity and quality of talent will China's sci-fi film industry rekindle its hope.

4.3. Outdated Creative Capacity in Sci-Fi Film Production

According to Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding theory, information dissemination involves production, circulation, consumption, and reproduction. These stages involve various meanings and information organized in a specific way and presented in symbolic forms. However, the ability to transmit and interpret these symbols is not fully symmetrical—misunderstandings and misinterpretations often arise. The longstanding dismissal of Chinese sci-fi films is a result of ineffective decoding by the media and audiences. To some extent, this stems from a lack of proper promotion by the sci-fi film creation teams.

For Chinese sci-fi films, the focus should not solely be on promoting individual films, but rather on promoting the overall image of Chinese sci-fi films. The target audience for promotion should not only include the media and the public but also investors and producers, who must be convinced of the potential of Chinese sci-fi films. With the increasing recognition of sci-fi culture and the gradual improvement of creative capacity in sci-fi film production, the immediate challenge is securing the approval of investors, media, and the audience. In the internet age, online marketing plays a significant role in influencing film reputation and box office performance. Sci-fi film teams often neglect the distribution process, failing to create a positive environment for the film's reputation. This has led to a decline in audience interest, causing investors to further question the return on investment in sci-fi films.

5. DEVELOPMENT PATH OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

5.1. Actively Creating a Social Atmosphere That Respects Sci-Fi Culture

Creating a social atmosphere that respects sci-fi culture means fostering a positive creative

environment for sci-fi films from the very beginning, allowing more people to correctly understand sci-fi films and appreciate the significance of sci-fi filmmakers' work. Such a culture of respect can greatly inspire the enthusiasm for sci-fi film creation, leading to a greater number of sci-fi films. The rise of the Chinese sci-fi film industry, in particular, requires the efforts of both the artistic and scientific communities to create an atmosphere that respects sci-fi culture and films. We must emphasize the importance of sci-fi films in enhancing both people's humanistic and scientific literacy and encourage the development of sci-fi cultural forms that merge science and humanities.

A good story cannot be told without a script, and without narrative, it is also impossible. Perhaps we should focus on how to break through the Hollywood blockbuster production model and consider what topics could balance cultural distinctiveness and story depth. How can we use layered storytelling to reflect changes in Chinese society and the essence of Chinese culture? How can we address potential logical gaps and flaws in the storytelling process? Chinese sci-fi films should be grounded in Marxist historical materialism, national perspectives, and cultural viewpoints, using Xi Jinping's thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics as the guiding coordinate. By using the rich 5,000-year history of Chinese culture as a link, we can construct the logical core of sci-fi stories, offering profound reflections on the future, reality, and history. Indeed, telling Chinese stories well is just the beginning; more importantly, we need a narrative core that resonates emotionally, showing global audiences the current social realities, the pulse of the times, and the spiritual state of China.

5.2. Focusing on Enhancing the Creative Capacity of the Sci-Fi Film Industry

Some Chinese sci-fi films have exposed deficiencies in areas such as industrial design and special effects creativity. The Chinese sci-fi film industry still lacks a sense of branding and serial production, and it needs the support of industrialization and related industry upgrades. The productivity of sci-fi films is directly reflected in the number and quality of sci-fi creators. To enhance creative productivity, we must fundamentally change the current talent training model for sci-fi filmmakers in China and innovate the development of talent tiers. It is also essential to pay attention to the development of creative teams in sci-fi film literature.

Given the severe shortage of creative talent in sci-fi content, we must place more emphasis on fostering children's interest in sci-fi from primary and secondary school education. Additionally, it is vital to promote the collaborative development model between sci-fi and science. To drive the sci-fi film industry forward, it is essential to strengthen the communication and collaboration between the sci-fi film industry and the scientific community. The development of the Chinese sci-fi film industry must rely on the power of the scientific community, fully leveraging their expertise. China should further draw on the commercial experience of mature global film industries and build a cinematic universe, integrating resources across the entire industry chain. By enhancing genre-focused, branded, and serialized content and fostering collaboration and communication, we can expand the global market for Chinese sci-fi films.

5.3. Effectively Strengthening the Promotion and Marketing of Sci-Fi Films

Strengthening the promotion and marketing of sci-fi films plays a critical role not only in boosting the economic output of the sci-fi film industry but also in shaping the social sci-fi culture.

Online reviews are particularly important in increasing the promotional effectiveness of sci-fi films. With the rise of the internet era, interactive marketing has become more valued and widely applied. Within the film value chain, marketing methods such as integrated and derivative marketing can fully leverage a film's value, allowing more people to learn about and choose to watch the film.

It is essential to expand the promotion of sci-fi films, with emerging media platforms continuously reporting on them, sparking sustained public attention and discussion. Chinese cinemas and film circuits need to innovate and develop new marketing strategies for Chinese sci-fi films. Marketing efforts need to be improved, and cinema chains should increase their investment in promoting sci-fi films. Film distribution companies must also make their marketing efforts more refined and innovative. In China's film investment sector, sci-fi films have always been at the periphery, primarily due to the high investment and risk characteristics of the entire sci-fi film industry chain. Industry professionals must seize the opportunities of the times, actively attract investment, and build financing platforms to provide solid financial support for the growth of the Chinese sci-fi film industry.

5.4. Creating Localized Sci-Fi Films with Chinese Characteristics

In the future, for Chinese sci-fi films to secure a place in the global sci-fi film industry, they must innovate based on their own characteristics and incorporate uniquely Chinese elements from a richer and more diverse perspective. Initially, Chinese sci-fi films were criticized for having weak stories, poor logic, and being overly simplistic. However, this does not mean that sci-fi films must always involve spaceships or aliens. If a story is based on a scientific theory or phenomenon, it can still be considered a sci-fi film. Therefore, sci-fi films can be closer to real life, making them more grounded and relatable.

Moreover, when facing the high thresholds of hard sci-fi, China could take a step back and focus on creating a compelling story, using science to build the narrative, and adding visual elements to present it to audiences. The visual shock and spectacle generated by images may temporarily grab the audience's attention, but this is merely a superficial technique. Whether a film can move the audience depends on whether the theme includes humanistic sentiment, the correct values, and a high-quality storyline.

The Wandering Earth broke free from the Western civilization-centric narrative of early Chinese sci-fi works, creating a new recognition of Chinese sci-fi films. The film evokes a sense of national pride and hope, using themes that resonate with Chinese audiences. To emphasize its local nature, the director favored using elements rich in traditional Chinese cultural symbols—such as the Chinese New Year setting, the dancing red lion, the large red lanterns, and the auspicious red fu character stickers. These elements highlight traditional Chinese imagery. However, once the film reaches the surface, the camera shows frozen skyscrapers, dark skies, powerful transport trucks, and massive propulsion engines—sci-fi elements reminiscent of Hollywood blockbusters. While The Wandering Earth draws heavily on Hollywood filmmaking in terms of form, audiovisual effects, and narrative development, it also showcases Chinese values and cultural sentiment in its deeper story content.

6. CONCLUSION

In the context of the industrialization of cinema, science fiction films in developed Western countries have long been a significant film genre, generating enormous economic and cultural value, as well as broad social benefits (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2021). These films have followed a path of industrial development and now boast a complete sci-fi film industry chain. In contrast, China's sci-fi films started relatively late and faces several challenges, including low social recognition of sci-fi culture, outdated creative capacity, and insufficient promotion and marketing of sci-fi films. However, with the widespread application of new technologies such as 5G, VR, and artificial intelligence, along with empowering policies like the "Several Opinions on Promoting the Development of Sci-Fi Films" and the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Chinese Cinema", China's sci-fi film industry is now facing new opportunities for industrialization and growth.

Amid both new opportunities and challenges, in order for Chinese sci-fi films to tell compelling Chinese stories, they must focus on integrating technological innovation with popular culture. These films should tell their stories in a way that resonates with current trends and fashions while also embedding the poetry and subtle elegance of traditional Chinese culture, showcasing the delicate emotional depth of the Eastern worldview.

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CONFLICT STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

COOPERATION STATEMENT

All authors contributed equally to this work and approved the final manuscript.

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