

How Was It That Chengdu Was Selected For The 2023 Worldcon?

August 2024

The World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon) in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, in October of 2023 was admirable in many ways. There were particularly large numbers of young attendees including Chinese school groups. The impressive and permanent Science Fiction Museum building, designed by Zaha Hadid Architects, was built and used for the convention. Simultaneous translation was provided on a more thorough and professional basis than at any previous Worldcon held in a non-English speaking country including for the Business Meeting. The Site Selection for 2025 Worldcon and the WSFS Business Meeting held were administered satisfactorily. The Hugo Awards ceremony was fine but the problems with Hugo Award administration are well known at this point.

However, there have also been questions about the Site Selection at DisCon 3 in 2021 that selected the Chengdu site and committee. This document provides information and what is believed about that site selection.

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The Background and the Convention

The background of all this is somewhat murky but here is approximately what appears to have happened:

Chengdu, Sichuan, China, (成都 四川 中国) is the capital of China for science fiction, primarily because of the publication there of Science Fiction World magazine (SFW, 科幻世, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Science_Fiction_World) which had a circulation between 300,000 and 400,000 around 1999 although circulation has since declined.

SFW sponsors the Galaxy Award (银河奖) for Chinese science fiction. SFW also sponsors a convention, variously called the Chengdu International Science Fiction and Fantasy Conference or China/Chengdu International Science Fiction Convention or the like, which has recently aimed at being held every other year. The first of these conventions was held in 1991 and was confusingly called a “World Science Fiction Society” convention, even though it had nothing to do with the real World Science Fiction Society (WSFS), because it was held in conjunction with “World SF: An Organization of SF Professionals” – this “World SF” has since gone out of existence. (see

https://fancyclopedia.org/Chengdu_International_Science_Fiction_and_Fantasy_Conference, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galaxy_Award_\(China\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galaxy_Award_(China)))

Note that the Three Body Problem novel was originally serialized in SFW, won the Galaxy Award in 2006, appeared in English translation in 2014 and won the Hugo Award in 2015 which greatly increased Chinese interest in the Hugo awards and the Worldcon.

Apparently SFW and Chengdu fans decided they wanted one of these Chengdu conventions to also be designated a Worldcon. It appears that there was initially some interest in 2021. For example, the Chengdu 2021 bid pin shown above. In any case Chengdu wasn't even on the ballot in 2019 when the Site Selection run by Dublin 2019 selected the Washington, DC, DisCon 3 site and committee for 2021.



and the Worldcon was held in Chengdu in 2023, but the SFW convention effort never disappeared and, in fact, both conventions were held at the same time in Chengdu in separate facilities. They had separate opening and closing ceremonies, etc. Above is a sticker for that 2023 non-Worldcon convention.

It appears this effort was taken over by some combination of business/government interests and targeted for 2023 although this was not generally apparent until after Chengdu won. It was declared the winner by DisCon 3

Advertisements

Chengdu did a substantial recruitment effort.

The following two pages are from the www.worldconinchina.com website, the English version of two different pages as provided on the Chengdu website when English was selected rather than Chinese. They left these pages up on the web for months after they were selected. (In fact, when they later set up their actual Worldcon website, it used a completely different domain name: chengduworldcon.com.)

Notice the following: There is no mention of voting. There is no mention of ballots. There is no mention of a voting fee. There is no mention of a signature. Furthermore, volunteers to support Chengdu are specifically asked, in addition to their email, for their "Mailing address", which is presumably their postal address. But very few people had studied these web pages, so this had not been generally noticed at the time.

The material below is extracted from the Chengdu bid website worldconinchina.com on December 28, 2021. (They left such material up long after they were selected for 2023.)



Chengdu's application for Worldcon's pre-registration has started

Date: 2020/10/21 18:03:15

In order to help Chengdu apply for the 81st Worldcon in 2023, the Chengdu application committee now launches the pre-registration process.

Worldcon is a science fiction cultural event with the most attention, the longest history, the largest scale, and the most extensive influence all over the world. Since it was held in 1939, Worldcon has been in a lot of extremely important cities in varied countries, such as New York in the United States, Dublin in Ireland, Wellington in New Zealand, etc. And now, Chengdu is trying to bring Worldcon to China.

Now, we decide to invite the public who support Chengdu and hope to join this grand event to participate in the pre-registration of 2023 Worldcon.

Please send your Name, Phone number, Email, and Mailing address to the official email of Worldcon: chengdu@worldconinchina.com ;

Pre-registration members would go through the following process to help Chengdu apply for 2023 Worldcon.

1. Chengdu application committee will submit the official application materials in February 2021.
2. Chengdu application committee will conduct a half year national tour;
3. Chengdu application committee will participate in the 79th Washington Worldcon on August 29, 2021, to canvass votes and learn the results.

And then, the committee will inform all pre-registration members through the Wechat group (Chengdu's Worldcon guest group), SMS, e-mail, and other forms.

If you become the pre-registration member, you will have the following benefits.

1. You will have the opportunity to participate in the national incentive meeting for free;
2. In 2021, you will have the opportunity to become a volunteer at Worldcon. This means that you can go to Washington with the presidium to apply for Worldcon and witness this historic moment. We are more willing to provide this chance to enthusiastic fans.
3. You will be informed of the local science fiction activities in Chengdu for the first time, and have the opportunity to get free tickets.
4. We will regularly present the autographed books of famous science fiction writers and translation scholars to our members.
5. You will first become a sponsor member of Chengdu 2023 Worldcon, and get a "Panda Worldcon battle shirt". After the success of the application, you can attend the 2023 Worldcon in Chengdu at a discount price.

The material below is extracted from the Chengdu bid website worldconinchina.com on December 28, 2021. (They left such material up long after they were selected for 2023.)



Science fiction fan recruitment

At 10:00 a.m. on July 28, 2020, Chengdu's Worldcon application meeting was held in the InterContinental Century City Chengdu. This conference officially announced the establishment of Chengdu's Worldcon Committee. On August 16, 2018, the Chengdu government officially proposed to host the 81st Worldcon in 2023 in San Jose, USA.

Chengdu is known as the "capital of science fiction" in China. It has cultivated many excellent sci-fi writers and founded many sci-fi culture companies. Meanwhile, it has held many important sci-fi memories, such as the 1991 World Science Fiction Society, 2007 China (Chengdu) international science fiction and fantasy conference, and 2017 and 2019 China (Chengdu) International Conference on Science Fiction. Now, Chengdu welcomes all fans who love science fiction culture to join this science fiction-family!

Mode of participation:

Please send your Name, Phone number, Email, and Mailing address to the official email of Worldcon: chengdu@worldconinchina.com. Besides, You can also learn more about Worldcon's information by visiting <http://www.worldconinchina.com/>

If you become the pre-registration member, you will have the following benefits.

1. You will have the opportunity to participate in the national incentive meeting for free;
2. In 2021, you will have the opportunity to become a volunteer at Worldcon. This means that you can go to Washington with the presidium to apply for Worldcon and witness this historic moment. We are more willing to provide this chance to enthusiastic fans.
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The Vote/Ballots

DisCon 3 posted a clear and complete summary of the ballot count as shown on the next page. Chengdu appears to be the clear winner over Winnipeg but if you have seen the ballots, it is a bit more complicated.

The 800+ Winnipeg ballots looked pretty normal. There were somewhat more at-con votes cast than usual, especially the last two days of the three days of voting, almost all for Winnipeg. As with anything done by people, there are exceptions. In a hand full of cases, even very well-known western fans cast ballots for Winnipeg but forgot to sign their ballot. These were not counted. As with any other defective or incomplete ballot, the voter gets WSFS membership (previously known as supporting membership) but their vote is not counted.

The Chengdu ballots were a different matter. They were very clearly of two types, which are below called “normal” and “incomplete” ballots. As with the Winnipeg ballots there were a few of both the normal and incomplete ballots that had a blank signature space or had no preference marked and were not counted.

The 350+ normal ballots cast for Chengdu were almost all completely filled out with full postal addresses, and almost all had what looked like handwritten signatures in Han ideograms.

The 1,591 incomplete Chengdu ballots were distinctly different from the normal ballots. They all appear to have been filled out with hand printed Roman characters.

- None of them had complete postal addresses. Most of them just said “Chengdu, Sichuan, China” for an address although there were a few “Nanjing, Jiangsu, China” (both of those being City, Province, Country) or “Beijing, China” and occasionally, but rarely, there was a street name, but never a complete enough postal address that mail would be likely to be delivered using that “address”.
- The incomplete Chengdu ballots arrived at the last minute in an avalanche of emailed PDFs.
- The email addresses for some blocks of voters appear to have been issued consecutively. That is, the left side of the email address, before the “@” had a subfield that counted up for successive email addresses in successive ballots in a PDF file. Not all ballots were like this but there were multiple blocks of typically 20 or so such successive email addresses. No similar pattern was noted in the phone numbers on these ballots.
- The “signature” on these incomplete ballots were all just hand printed Roman characters.

The legal definition of a signature is very broad, it being any mark by which the “signer” intends to be bound. So, for example, some person X can authorize another person Y to affix X’s signature with a rubber stamp. But there is no way that some mark, such as a printed name, can be a “signature” if the signer does even know it exists and never authorized it.

Worldcon Site Selection ballots have always required a postal address. Like other defective ballots, the inclination of the DisCon 3 Site Selection staff was not to count the votes on ballots without postal addresses. This question was brought to the WSFS Business Meeting that voted 47 to 30 in favor of this policy (see <https://www.wsfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/2021-WSFS-Minutes.docx>), that such incomplete ballots should be treated as having voted No Preference; however, the WSFS Constitution delegates the administration of Site Selection to the Worldcon so it was DisCon’s decision to make. It was claimed at the time that some Chinese voters were misled by a “Chinese translation of the

ballot” prepared by DisCon 3. But DisCon 3 did not prepare such a translated ballot, and all ballots received had the ballot form, etc., in English. DisCon 3 did, however, have Chinese, French, and Spanish translations of the ballot instructions prepared and it is possible that, if any of the incomplete ballot voters saw those instructions, they could have been misled.

Another peculiarity of the vote was that a huge number of voting tokens were purchased that were never use on a ballot. 917 of them. That’s over \$45,000, a huge amount to have been left lying on the table by voters, particularly if they were substantially from China where average income is lower than were most western site selection voters live. This, of course, leads to the suspicion that many of these were purchased by the Chengdu bid that was paying the voting fee and presumably the DisCon 3 WSFS membership fee for the incomplete ballots. But there is nothing in the current rules prohibiting paying someone else’s voting fee.

Worldcon 2023 Site Selection Results

FIRST BALLOT	Pre-Con	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	TOTAL	2006	WINNER
Chengdu in 2023	1950	7	19	30	206		
Winnipeg in '23	332	97	197	181	807		
Memphis in 2023 (withdrawn)	2	1	3	1	7		
None of the Above	2	3	1	0	6		
Free Hong Kong	0	0	3	0	3		
Taipei	0	0	2	0	2		
Anywhere	1	0	0	0	1		
Berlin	1	0	0	0	1		
Boston in 2020	1	0	0	0	1		
Fandom	0	0	0	1	1		
Free Tibet	0	0	0	1	1		
House of the Rising Sun	0	0	1	0	1		
Peggy Rae's House	1	0	0	0	1		
Schkeuditz	1	0	0	0	1		
Slapout, Oklahoma	1	0	0	0	1		
Your Mom's House	0	0	0	1	1		
Total with Preference	2292	108	226	215	2841		
Needed to Win					1421		
No Preference	60	2	4	9	75		
Total valid votes	2352	110	230	224	2916		
Invalid ballots	2	0	0	5	7		
Chengdu won on the first ballot with a total of 2915 valid votes cast, of which 2840 expressed a preference. A further 917 tokens were sold for which no matching ballots were received. Included in the Pre-Con totals were 1591 ballots from China missing a street address, but otherwise valid. These ballots consisted of 1586 for Chengdu and 5 with no preference. Thanks to the counters: Robbie Bourget, Ann Broomhead, Warren Buff, Dave Cantor, Raistlin Chen, Linda Deneroff, Gay Ellen Dennett, Carl Fink, Terry Fong, Steve Francis, Eric He, Saul Jaffe, Rober MacIntosh, Pat Molloy, Linda Ross-Mansfield, Ann Marie Rudolph, Sharon Sbarsky, Jannie Shea, Jason Song, Jennifer Steinhurst, Scott Zrubek. Many thanks for your 6-hour counting							

The Chengdu Science Fiction Society

The Chengdu bid was by the Chengdu Science Fiction Society (CSFS, 成都科幻学会). Searching the web, either from outside China or from inside China, you could find a number of press releases mentioning the CSFS. But all they say is that it was formed by the Sichuan Institute of Science and Technology, and they name CSFS's initial Officers.

You can find bid pages on the web but there never seems to have been any sort of web page for CSFS itself or anything about any meetings (except when an "annual meeting" of the CSFS appeared on the scheduled for the Chengdu Worldcon). There was the bid website for the Chengdu bid but there is no locatable web site for CSFS as an organization.

A detailed 9-page Constitution of the CSFS was included with the bidding materials filed by the Chengdu bid to get on the ballot. It is somewhat confusing – it appears that the Officers hold office for 5-year terms and there is a Board of Directors that it says is the ultimate authority, but this Board can only act if 2/3rds of the members are present and only if the action is approved by a 2/3rds vote. Although fans are mentioned, it seems to primarily be a society for professionals. To become a member, you must submit a written application and get it approved by the Board of Directors... Etc. Curiously enough, it says that CSFS is a non-profit, but everyone was told that the Chengdu Worldcon was being run by a for-profit entity. Of course, a non-profit could designate a for-profit entity as its agent.

In the Chengdu bid filing, there is a bid email and a bid website (@worldconinchina.com); however, for CSFS as a society/association there is no email address, no web address, no phone number, only this postal address: 13/F, Chengdu Media Group, 2nd Section, Hongxing Road, Jinjiang District, Chengdu, 610000.

The prospect of an annual CSFS meeting at the Chengdu Worldcon seemed very interesting. Perhaps there would be a table set up for people to join CSFS. Maybe there would be elections; even if it was permanently run by a board where the board elected new members to fill vacancies in the board, something like that might happen. Or the Officers might get confirmed for another year or something. But no. A few people went up to the front of the room crowded with, probably, over 200 people, made speeches and that was it.

From a western point of view, while CSFS probably has legal existence, it is pretty much a shell organization. But perhaps its organization is more normal for Chinese "Societies". It is clear that it is nothing like any western SF or Fantasy society, association, club, bidding committee, or the like.

The Decisive Meeting and Announcement

The DisCon 3 site selection administration was headed by Tim Szczesuil, an experience Site Selection administrator that had run three previous Worldcon Site Selections. He was inclined to not count the votes on the 1,550+ incomplete ballots, which would make Winnipeg the winner. However, very late Friday evening of DisCon 3, a meeting was held with site selection administrator Tim Szczesuil, Sharon Sbarsky, the Chengdu bid minders, and the inexperienced DisCon Chair Mary Robinette Kowal. No representative of the Winnipeg bid was present. Any criticism of the 1,550+ incomplete Chengdu ballots was met by cries of racism by the Chengdu bid minders. ("Bid minders" is meant to refer to the two older men who were part of the Chengdu bidding delegation but normally did not put in any appearance or say anything. At this meeting they were the only Chengdu representatives – none of the younger more fannish Chengdu people were present.)

The DisCon Chair ordered the Site Selection administrator to include the 1,550+ incomplete ballots in the count. As a result of this order, Chengdu was declared the winner and was so announced the next day, Saturday, at the Business Meeting. Winnipeg conceded and, as soon as that happened, there was no realistic hope of appealing the site selection decision.

Victory Propaganda

The selection of Chengdu for the 2023 Worldcon was used as a propaganda victory amplified by false statements. See, for example, the article headlined “Chengdu wins bid to host world's top sci-fi event” at www.china.org.cn/arts/2021-12/20/content_77942029.htm?f=pad&a=true



This article includes statements like “It is not only a victory for Chengdu but also a victory for Chinese culture.” and “It is quite significant as there are anti-China sentiments in many areas in recent years. But this time many foreign voters were fair with China.” and “the world is eager to learn about China and its sci-fi culture, ”. The article very strongly implies that the victory was due to foreign voters who were persuaded to vote for Chengdu. Of course, there were some non-Chinese votes for Chengdu, but Chengdu won only due to the 1,550+ incomplete Chinese ballots that were counted at the order of the DisCon 3 Chair.

This article also featured the picture above whose caption states that it was a photograph of the Chengdu Science Fiction Society secretary-general making a final sales pitch for Chengdu. In fact, it was taken after Chengdu was declared the winner with the Chengdu representative making a brief statement to the Business Meeting and answering questions.

Summary

A reasonable person considering all this would think it is more likely than not that some business/government decided they wanted a Worldcon in Chengdu by whatever means necessary and then achieved that as below. However, this is with the benefit of hindsight as few, if any, people were aware of all this at the time.

More likely than not, they solicited identification information and then submitted ballots using that information with fake signatures and without the required full postal address information or the knowledge of those on whose behalf they were submitting ballots. Why was the postal address information missing when they seem to explicitly request it? Possibly because they just didn't have enough person hours to copy it over. A western Worldcon normally has a huge staff, around 10% of attendance and, while many of them may only work for a few hours, there are also lots that put in many, many hours of work. It appears that Chengdu had only a very small number of actual convention fans working on it. While they worked very hard, it seems reasonable that they would have been tempted to take short cuts they thought would work in producing the ballots with which Chengdu flooded the system. And the ballots with what appear to be sequentially assigned email addresses could perhaps just be names grabbed from a phone listing when there were not enough people volunteering their information.

It also seems more likely than not that the Chengdu bid paid the DisCon 3 membership and the Site Selection voting fee for all or almost all of the 1,550+ incomplete ballots. There are currently no rules on this, so that did not violate any rules. That would be \$100 each (\$50 + \$50) or \$165,000+ but note that they got the voting fees paid back to them. Counting the additional 917 unused voting tokens (probably a few were genuinely confused people), that's another \$45,000+ but they would get all of the money for any unused voting tokens they bought back. These add up to \$210,000. Adding in a generous allowance for travel expenses to show up at Worldcon and the like, and it would seem more likely than not that for less than \$300,000, Chengdu purchased a Worldcon. That is not a lot of money for a real business/government effort.

None of this is to deny that there are many science fiction fans in China/Chengdu that got to experience something similar to the usual Worldcon. Nor to deny that someone willing to expend enough resources, say tens of millions of dollars and lots of effort, could probably get a Worldcon no matter what. But it seems bad that a Worldcon could be purchased for such a relatively modest amount of money and effort.