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Review of *Invisible Planets: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*  
(trans. Ken Liu)

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*Invisible Planets: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*.  
Translated by Ken Liu. New York: Tor Books, 2016.

The introduction to Ken Liu's translated volume, *Invisible Planets* (2016) is titled "China Dreams". Here, Liu indicates that "the phrase 'China Dreams' is in fact a play on President Xi Jinping's promotion of the 'Chinese Dream' as a slogan for China's development", used here because "science fiction is the literature of dreams". As in any literary culture, the imaginative possibilities of science are given a voice in science fiction. This is not the first such anthology of Chinese science fiction to be translated into English; *Science Fiction from China* (Murphy xxxiv) first appeared in 1989 (Praeger Press), edited by Patrick D. Murphy. It featured translations of well-known stories such as Tong Enzheng's "Death Ray on Coral Island" and Ye Yonglie's "Reap as You Have Sown"; these authors were, at the time, two of the most eminent science fiction writers in China. In the introduction of Murphy's volume, Wu Dingbo (Shanghai International Studies University) painted a rather bleak picture of the cultural position in which science fiction had found itself by the end of the 1980s in China. Writers complained that readers were not "scientifically literate" enough to appreciate their works, while readers blamed authors for their poor writing abilities and critics blamed writers for favouring scientific content over literary craft.

Today, however, there is a renewed, popular interest in Chinese-language science fiction in China, and the genre is attracting increased attention from abroad. Thus, the publication of Ken Liu's *Invisible Planets* could hardly have come at a better time. Liu is responsible for all of the translations presented in the work. A science fiction writer himself (in English), Liu is a native of China's Lanzhou province, but a long-time resident of Boston. He has contributed significantly to the popularization of Chinese-language science fiction in the West over the last fifteen years; his most famous work is a translation of Liu Cixin's trilogy *Diqui Wangshi*, translated as *The Remembrance of Earth's Past* (Liu, 2008, 2015, 2016). The first volume, *The Three-Body Problem*, won a Hugo award, which is the first such international accolade for a piece of Chinese science fiction.

Most striking is Ken Liu's summation of science fiction as a literary genre in the Chinese context. In the introduction to *Invisible Planets*, Liu suggests that attempting to define Chinese science fiction is as absurd as trying to find an essential definition for Anglophone science fiction. He points out, moreover, that the diversity of themes in Chinese-language science fiction works is equal to that of the English genre: if we cannot pin down what makes Anglophone science fiction inherently "English" or "American" etc., how can one neatly distinguish it from Chinese science fiction? It is from this premise that Liu seeks to display the thematic and stylistic variety of the genre by presenting an array of short stories and essays from some of the major contributors to the current Chinese science fiction scene.

Crucially, the volume features two short stories and an essay from Liu Cixin. In addition to earning high praise from many western critics, Liu Cixin is responsible for exposing science fiction to a more mainstream Chinese audience. In his essay, he discusses the effect of *The Remembrance of Earth's Past* on Chinese culture, particularly young readers, mainstream literary critics and science popularizers. Interestingly, he seems to dismiss the interpretation of

his work as reflecting a particularly Chinese view of the world, adding that “the China of the present is a bit like America during science fiction’s Golden Age”. His first piece, *The Circle*, is a historical allegory of scientific progress and politics, which describes how the latter can bring the former to a halt. His second piece, *Taking Care of God*, could be described as a critique of filial piety, played out on a more cosmic scale.

Chen Qiufan has also submitted an essay and short stories to the volume. Born in the 1980s, Chen is primarily concerned with the many social contradictions faced by his generation, and his essay aims to situate contemporary science fiction within this context. In the introduction he provides, he writes as a representative for a generation of young science-fiction-reading Chinese, first attracted to the genre because of the rapid economic changes brought about by Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s. Science fiction, for him, has an important role to play in providing an imaginative language through which the current generation can express this sense of social, spatial and economic change. I particularly enjoyed the variety of Chen’s work; he is, in translation, one of the most promising current Chinese science fiction authors. One of his three stories, “The Year of the Rat”, features a platoon of soldiers who live in a dystopian future where they are at war with “Neorats” or *xinshu*, a play on the Chinese term for mice, *laoshu*, which translates literally as “old mice”. This reveals one of the difficulties of translating science fiction ideas from Chinese, where it is not always clear whether to embellish the foreignness of made-up terms, or to localize them, as wordplay often depends on the semantic idiosyncrasies of the characters rather than cultural difference. In Liu Cixin’s *Taking Care of God*, the Chinese source text includes the term *shangdi*, which is often translated as “God”. But this traditional term means, more specifically, a “higher deity”; an idea now often conflated with the Christian “God”. The employment of this term in the target text is slightly different; the deities are referred to as *zhe shangdi, you banye kesou* (this god was coughing all night...), *women shi shangdi* (We are gods), or *tamen queshi shangdi* (they really were gods) and so on. Given the vagaries of singularization and pluralization in Chinese, Ken Liu uniformly translates the term using the capitalized singular “God”, with the above-mentioned phrases translated respectively as “God was coughing all night”, “We are God” and “the Gods really were God”. The nominalized, monotheistic form, makes the existence of a higher alien being living in human surroundings seem as odd and inexpressible as it should be.

Another story worth mentioning is Ma Boyong’s *The City of Silence*, an explicitly Orwellian tale about freedom of expression. The piece is set in contemporary New York, where physical interactions and emotions, even the utterance of curse words, can cause one to be immediately locked away by the state. The title references American folk duo Simon and Garfunkel’s *The Sound of Silence* (1964), and the Chinese original opens with the English lyrics, left untranslated for the Chinese reader (In Chinese, the *Sound of Silence* and *City of Silence*, *jijing zhi sheng* and *jijing zhi cheng*, rhyme with each other). However, Ken Liu’s translation leaves this allusion up to the reader. Rather than translating this familiar song and setting for the English reader, he makes the story’s setting more ambivalent, adding a brief paragraph about its timing, the year 2046, and “the State” which “needed no name” in which it is set, rather than New York. For Liu, the issue appears to be the preservation of foreignness in the translation where it is necessary for literary effect. In the source text, for example, one character elaborates on the censorship of the English term “politics” in all its forms, which includes the Chinese equivalent *zheng*. In the English translation, however, Ken Liu retains this Chinese character *zheng* (for politics), rendered as “政-itics”, making the cultural and historical context of this story even less anglicized and less certain. It achieves something equivalent to the estrangement of an English language song in the Chinese source text.

The volume also features translations of Xia Jia’s work (science fiction author and scholar at Xi’an Jiaotong University, in Shaanxi province), ending with her essay “What makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?”, a question which Ken Liu cites, in the introduction, as

somewhat problematic. Her preoccupation with Chinese-ness reveals itself in her three stories, particularly the emphasis on Chinese folklore or mythical imagery, which do not in and of themselves relate to science fiction themes. As the final piece to be featured in this book, the essay feels somewhat out of place, particularly given Xia Jia's view that Western science fiction draws from the West's historical experience, while arguing that Chinese science fiction "can be read as a national allegory in the age of globalization". This description somewhat misrepresents science fiction's place in China's modern literary history by essentializing its Chinese-ness, rather than recognising it as a tradition inspired by, and consistently drawing from, the translations of original works by foreign authors. She describes science fiction in China as a consistent teleological enterprise across a century of historical change, rather than one which waned and flourished alongside other genres of modern Chinese literature.

Across the anthology, Ken Liu's lucid and unassuming translation style allows the reader to observe the thematic diversity within this genre of Chinese writing. The anthology, above all, shows that the emergence of science fiction in China should be acknowledged as a growing literary and cross-cultural phenomenon.