

Sino-American SF: Trans-national Participatory Culture and Translation



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A certain set of clichés, especially in popular discourse, has emerged in discussions of Chinese sf--namely, the notion that China's ascendancy to global prominence in the realms of science, technology, economy and politics explains the rise of Chinese sf. To put it more simply, China has mastered science and technology, and these are the necessary conditions for the genre to flourish. This is doubtlessly true, and as the global COVID-19 pandemic progresses, this process seems to intensify the feeling that real life is stranger than fiction, and to trouble long-standing figurations of authoritarian states as irrational dystopias and western democracies as utopian bastions of freedom and reason. At its most strident, this discourse conflates national strength and literary creativity, using the vocabulary of weaponry to hail a flourishing genre. Henry Jenkins has suggested that the anxieties of media imperialism that anticipate the threat of cultural homogenization brought about by the ubiquity of American media, "[blur] the distinction between at least four forms of power: economic (the ability to produce and distribute cultural goods), cultural (the ability to produce and circulate forms and meanings), political (the ability to impose ideologies), and psychological (the ability to shape desire, fantasy, and identity)" (156). A similar blurring informs the discourse of Chinese sf as a sign of national might, eclipsing the significance of fan cultures. Behind the rise of Chinese-language sf, other critics have pointed to the complementary roles of corporate entities and the political organs of the PRC. While this too is indisputably an important aspect of the present visibility of Chinese sf, I would like to encourage consideration of how shifts in American culture and global fandom have also played a role, often at a very personal level and with rather unforeseen consequences.

As a trans-national genre in a world of instantaneous global communication, translation and global fan cultures have made important contributions to the global popularity of Chinese sf. I argue that contemporary Chinese sf and sf studies have been profoundly shaped by trans-national circulations of knowledge in the digital era. Second, I argue that the position of Chinese sf in the American cultural field differs from Chinese sf in the PRC, and that points of contention in American political and popular culture have helped shape the global reception of the genre. Henry Jenkins' discussion of "pop cosmopolitanism" is useful in understanding how Chinese sf resonates in academia and popular culture in the United States and beyond. Jenkins argues that, "global convergence is giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitans embrace cultural difference, seeking to escape the gravitational pull of their local communities in order to enter a broader sphere of cultural experience. The first cosmopolitans thought beyond the borders of their village; the modern cosmopolitans think globally" (Jenkins 155-156). Examples of this phenomenon include cultural products like Japanese anime and manga, south Asian films

and music, and Hong Kong action films. Chinese sf could well be included as a new wave in this phenomenon. This cosmopolitan media landscape is characterized by “the rapid flow of images across national borders in an age of media convergence, a flow that is facilitated by commercial strategies... and by grassroots tactics...those media flows are apt to be multidirectional, creating temporary portals or ‘contact zones’ between geographically dispersed cultures” (154). In the case of Chinese sf, personal networks of communication between authors and translators, and ease of publication online constitute one such set of “contact zones” and “grassroots tactics.” This essay offers a preliminary consideration of how academic knowledge, cultural production, and fandom are part of this trans-national cultural ecosystem.

Alongside what is to me the “new” approach of examining sf fandoms and networks of translation, this paper would not have been possible without the generous participation of a number of translators and authors, including Ken Liu, Regina Kanyu Wang, Andy Dudak, and Emily Jin. Their observations were vital to my argument, and in many cases, because I have found their observations and opinions about Chinese sf to be more novel or quite different from my own, I have included their thoughts, occasionally quoting them at great length. Outside of a few instances where I found those I interviewed had interesting critiques of the genre to share, I limit definitions and discussion of sf as a genre or form to a few comments offered by those I interviewed for insight into how Chinese sf is perceived in the US.

In an interview with author and translator Ken Liu, he suggested that grassroots efforts in promoting sf as a global genre have been more impactful than the corporate and national models alluded to above. Liu argues,

I want to draw a distinction between the effort to promote Chinese SF in the PRC by (1) various governmental entities; (2) commercial interests; and (3) fandoms. I think (1) and (2) have largely not been all that impactful, for reasons that should be obvious to anyone involved in the arts. Three is something I’m genuinely interested in and happy to see. But only time will tell if this interest is sustainable and can generate more interesting works.
(Ken Liu)

The PRC has been hard at work engineering its own version of the Korean Wave—a pop-cultural engine for exporting soft power and a sense of global cool that complement its national standing in science, technology, military and economic might. Observing that states and corporations can only do so much in terms of promoting the arts, Ken Liu argues that the more inspiring (if potentially also unsuccessful) aspect of this occurs outside of commercial or official channels. Sf seems to have more cachet than ping-pong and pandas, but it is the fans who decide if they are interested, not corporations or bureaucracies.

Jenkins argues that “grass roots intermediaries” profoundly influence the ways in which Asian cultural goods are transplanted and translated into Western markets (162). Jenkins names “the role of the South Asian diasporic community (the “desi”) in preparing the way for Bollywood films and Bhangra music, and the role of western fans (or the “otaku”) in insuring the translation and

circulation of Japanese anime and manga” as examples of such intermediaries. In the case of both, Jenkins argues that informal networks of translation brought these cultural products to American audiences before they were seized upon as potential sources of profit by any corporate entity. Initially through diasporic fans, and later pop-cosmopolitan cultural outsiders served as conduits through which new cultural forms and linguistic competencies took hold in US consumer culture (Jenkins 162-166). A similar process has taken place with the rise of Korean popular culture in the form of serial television dramas and popular music. This could also be identified in the “kung-fu craze” with the popularity of Hong Kong martial arts cinema in the 1970s, and is well underway in the introduction of Chinese sf to American audiences.

In the case of Chinese sf, one of the most important relationships, and clearest examples of a grass roots intermediary would be Chen Qiufan’s relationship with translator and author Ken Liu. I quote him at length here, because his reflections on how his original work came to be published in Chinese, and how he began to translate contemporary sf into English speak to the deeply personal nature of the global circulation of Chinese-language sf:

Chen Qiufan reached out to me because I was gaining some international attention for my fiction, and he had read some of my stories on the web. He liked them and wondered if I might be interested in having them translated into Chinese and published in China in the world’s biggest sf magazine, *Science Fiction World*.... He put in so much effort just to help another writer reach a new audience. I was deeply moved. It was, I think, not just a demonstration of his selfless character, but also an act that encapsulated the warmth, generosity, and dedication of sf writers and fans across the world in helping one another to gain access to more literature of the fantastic.

When I found out that he was a writer, I asked to read some of his stories.

I was immediately struck by Chen’s unique voice and powerful imagery, and how he was making Modern Standard Written Chinese do things that I hadn’t thought was possible. This impression would later be further enhanced as I read his other stories that sought to stretch and redefine the potential of writing, including a story written in Classical Chinese and stories that showed the full polyphonic range of contemporary Chinese vernaculars. Moreover, he was making so many keen observations about futurism, about our uneasy relationship with technology, about our struggles as actors of conscience against impersonal authority... I felt like I had found a kindred soul, a writer who was passionate about the same things I was, but was doing so from a different perspective.

I wanted to help Chen find readers outside of China, and especially wanted to introduce his work to my fellow Anglophone readers. Such beauty must be shared! So I offered to help translate his story into English and find a market. Since I had no prior interest or experience with literary translation, I had to cram translation theory and apprentice myself to skilled experts to learn the craft until I learned enough to do his story justice. (Ken Liu)

Two of the most important voices in contemporary Chinese sf found a connection over the world wide web, and resonances in one another's fiction. Other academics and fans-myself included- were working on translation at roughly the same time, but Ken Liu's translation is acknowledged as some of the most capable, and he has been by far the most prolific and popular translator of the genre into English.

In his request for financial backing from fans, editor Neil Clarke's Kickstarter campaign for the Clarkesworld Chinese science fiction translation project stated, "*Clarkesworld Magazine* has always aspired to publish stories from a global pool. It's our opinion that different perspectives make the genre stronger" (Neil Clarke, Kickstarter). Clarke notes on the Clarkesworld editor's notes page, "In August 2011, we published our first translation, 'The Fish of Lijiang' by Chen Qiufan, translated by Ken Liu. Over the next few years, we published a few more, thanks to Ken and John Chu. Unknown to us, those translations were generating some attention in China and one day, I woke to find an email from StoryCom in my inbox...with StoryCom and our Kickstarter supporters, we launched our translation project exactly five years ago this month. Since then we have featured nearly fifty works of Chinese science fiction" (Clarke, Editor's Desk: A Bucket...). Once the deal with StoryCom was reached, the team of consultants was broadened to include Liu Cixin, *SF World* editor Yao Haijun, educator and author Wu Yan, and China Film Group scriptwriter Zhang Zhilu.

Among these many translations, the most significant is doubtlessly Liu Cixin's *Three Body*, which won the 2015 Hugo Award for Best Novel. Liu Cixin winning the Hugo Award represents a seismic shift in American sf fan culture at a moment of profound contention about access and inclusion in genre fiction and fandom. This was the first time a Hugo Award was given to an author from outside of the US, Canada, or Great Britain. The Hugo Awards, hosted by the World Science Fiction Society Convention, have selected the "best" in sf since 1953, but these awards have been by default Anglophone, American, white and male (Aidan Walsh, "Whose Rocket"). A statistical analysis by James Nicoll in 2015 found that Hugo Award finalists and winners are predominantly male, and American (Nicoll).

In the tumultuous early decades of the United States' 21st century, fan communities have become a site for political struggle resulting in, for example, "a strong connection between the men's rights movement and fan communities" (Wilson 431). Originally conceived as a fan site, platforms like 4chan grew into internet subcultures, and influential in the spread of political movements like the alt-right and Anonymous. Fan consumption and criticism of popular culture is imbricated in the United States' contemporary contestation of the legacies of social inequality. In the wake of *Three Body* being named Best Novel, African American author N. K. Jemisin won the award three years in a row, in 2016, '17, and '18. Jemisin, whose works deal directly with themes of cultural conflict and oppression, was notably the first African American woman to win the award (she is also the first author to win three years in a row). Her successes seem to represent the end of a backlash among aggrieved Hugo Award voting fans anticipating the loss of what they perceived as the exclusive provenance of a de-facto white male space that decried multiculturalism and

politically critical writing beginning in 2013.

I contend that the rise of Chinese sf outside of East Asia can be understood in part as the product of a serendipitous development (and minor victory) from within the confines of the ideological contradictions of the United States. Acknowledging that this argument is highly problematic, potentially conflating fiction written originally in Asian languages with English-language fiction by American authors of Asian descent, I would like to suggest that the success of Chinese sf and recent successes of minority-written genre fiction in the US are part of an overlapping cultural shift. This shift has taken place in the context of a fierce debate in fan culture regarding the value of diversity in representation and political messaging in popular culture. This is visible in the Sad Puppies—a contingent of Hugo voters emerging in 2013 and led initially by Larry Correia, an author who opposed the political content of what he saw as “heavy-handed message fic” (quoted in Wilson 441). The Sad Puppies were soon joined by the more strident Rabid Puppies who made no bones about their racism, misogyny, and homophobia. Another debate along similar cultural lines was Gamergate, a term of “used as a rallying point for a few different movements,” accusing game developer Zoe Quinn of trading sexual favors for positive reviews, and attacking blogger and gamer Anita Sarkeesian for her vlog “Feminist Frequency,” which criticized misogynistic representations of women in video games from a number of different perspectives (Wilson 439–440). It is in large part because of an American fan backlash against perceived favoritism for diversity and political correctness that Liu Cixin’s novel was even able to win the award. The entire slate of nominees the year prior was notable for its unprecedented diversity,

In 2014, more women were nominated than men than ever before. Among the winners were Ann Leckie’s novel experimenting with an alien race that does not distinguish between males and females (*Ancillary Justice*), John Chu’s short story celebrating homosexuality (“The Water That Falls on You from Nowhere”) and Kameron Hurley’s essay on women in science fiction (“We Have Always Fought”). More than in any previous year, the 2014 Hugos honored people of color, LGBTQ people, and women. (Schneiderman)

Distancing himself from the politics of the moment, and wanting to be judged purely on the merits of his novel, Kloos wrote, “the presence of *Lines of Departure* on the shortlist is almost certainly due to my inclusion on the “Rabid Puppies” slate. For that reason, I had no choice but to withdraw my acceptance of the nomination. I cannot in good conscience accept an award nomination that I feel I may not have earned solely with the quality of the nominated work” (Kloos). Wanting to avoid association with the affair entirely, author Marko Kloos withdrew his novel *Lines of Departure* from the best novel category, allowing Liu Cixin’s *Three Body* to replace it. Deirdre Saoirse Moen’s “puppy-free Hugo Award voter’s guide” helped those opposed to the puppy agenda overcome the attempted manipulations of the Sad Puppies voting bloc. At the same time, vote manipulation and voters electing to vote for no winner meant that “many of the Hugo Award categories for 2015 did not name a winner and the awards went unclaimed” (Wilson 441). This

is not to detract from the quality of Liu Cixin's work, but to contextualize the political climate in which it was assessed in the United States.

The affirmation of the Hugo Award led to increased sales of Liu Cixin's work in the PRC, such that his novel was one of the top sellers in hard copy and e-books for 2013-2018, a full decade beyond its original publication. The success of Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang in the Anglophone market in turn led to increased interest in Chinese sf, part of a circulation of cultural capital by which China's national literature operates in the context of national language, but is often concerned with its validation as world literature. Private investment has led to further efforts to promote Chinese sf in translation and to capitalize on the push for multiculturalism in publishing in the US. Regina Kanyu Wang states that, "foreign magazines/publishers are in need of stories, led by the 'diversity' needs of the US market, followed by other language markets" (Wang). Wang adds that later media coverage identifying Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg as fans also played a role in helping recirculate the image of Chinese sf as a member of the clique of global cool.

The Chinese publishing industry is definitely happy to see Chinese sf being translated into other languages. In one aspect, if it's a state-owned publisher, it's a way to do cultural exportation, which is usually occupied by non-fiction books. In another aspect, if the book is translated into other languages and even win some awards, it will bring more attention to the book and the author domestically, like the saying: "出口转内销 *chukou zhuan neixiao*" – exportation turns into domestic sales. (Wang)

Paradoxically, Chinese literature and cinema have long sought the affirmation of the international market but these same works may be accused of pandering to foreign audiences. Ken Liu states that this, "to me is emblematic of the problematic ways in which aspects of contemporary China's self-narrative is enmeshed in and codependent on external validation" (Ken Liu). It would seem that even as American diplomatic, military and economic influence wane, American consecration of popular culture continues for the moment.

Chinese sf in translation is a very different entity occupying a very different cultural field than its original ecosystem. Translations made for Anglophone audiences occasionally alter the stories to reflect contemporary American sensibilities regarding gender and political correctness, and some of these edits have made their way back into the Chinese-market versions of the books. In my communications with translators, many questioned the coherence of Chinese sf as a genre, and noting that beyond sharing a common source language, they represent a highly diverse category of fiction. Ken Liu interrogated the value of the label Chinese sf, pointing out differences between authors, arguing that their works "have different political, social, and aesthetic stances and engage with Power and Privilege from different vantage points. I don't see any value in trying to lump them in together and make claims about them collectively" (Ken Liu). Andy Dudak likewise noted, "the Chinese view of their own sci-fi must be way more nuanced and complex than the American view seeking common defining Chinese sci-fi characteristics" (Dudak).

Although I personally have chosen to avoid a lengthy genre definition in this essay, I find Ken Liu's thoughts on the question of Chinese sf and its popularity among American audiences refreshing and challenging:

I'm not convinced that "Chinese sf" is a coherent category (analytical, marketing, or otherwise), and neither am I convinced that there's a coherent, sustained interest among Anglophone readers for the category. I tend to resist all generalizations and categories, and this ideological commitment drives my analysis.

I don't think "Chinese SF" is as useful a description of a marketable category of literature the way a genre label is (though as I've often said, I don't even think genre labels are helpful and use them only reluctantly and under protest). "Chinese sf" basically seems to mean speculative fiction written in China by Chinese writers. But just as no one can coherently claim that all speculative fiction written in the US by American writers all adhere to some model, no one can claim such a thing for "Chinese sf" either.

Rather, I've always approached Chinese sf as a diverse collection of individual works by individual authors, with no interest in pushing some collective label or uniform analytic framework on them. (Ken Liu)

Liu goes on to enumerate a number of authors he has translated, noting that despite their vastly different literary styles and thematic content, many have moved him to tears. Which is to say, regardless of the specific nature of the genre, he translates what resonates with him.

Nevertheless, Chinese sf has resonated with American fans. This is perhaps because sf is an inherently global genre, born in an era of intense economic and technological globalization; one that speaks even more strongly to a set of struggles shared globally in the present moment. Regina Kanyu Wang, author and Market Director and StoryCom-a startup that helps sell Chinese sf to foreign publishers- posits that this global appeal is based in globalized interests and concerns, pointing to "artificial intelligence, psychological diseases, climate change, electronic wastes, alien invasion" as themes that resonate beyond national borders (Wang). Like literature more broadly, good sf will presumably transcend the ideological confines of the nation state, speaking to a universal human condition.

French translator, editor and professor of Chinese studies Gwennael Gaffric has explained how Liu Cixin's *Three Body* series "has now been translated [either in whole or in part] into some fifteen languages. The vast majority of them-with the exception of the Korean translation-were done after the English release of the first volume" and that the novel being awarded the Hugo Award had "undoubtedly contributed to a massive editorial impulse [...]" In addition, the English-language version of the novel (or novels) continues to serve as a reference for literary agencies that hold the translation rights of Liu's trilogy, whether in terms of the content of the translated version or the paratextual architecture [...] The Italian translation was thus made from the English version. [It is] notable that in several translated versions, (French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese

and Turkish), the name of the extraterrestrial planet located on Alpha Centauri and which is at the core of the trilogy has been translated as “Trisolaris,” as in the English version.” Gaffric goes on to note other instance of paratextual standardization included reusing the English-language cover design, and transcribing Liu Cixin’s name surname last, contravening editorial policy for translated work in German, Italian, and Spanish that preserves author’s names like Yan Lianke as they appear in Chinese (Gaffric 118-119).

This activity takes place in the context of a vibrant atmosphere of translation and scholarship that I am ill-equipped to address in any comprehensive form. To my knowledge, this includes PhD students, scholars, and research groups funded by national programs in the UK, France, Belgium, and Switzerland. This also includes numerous conferences, fan magazines, podcasts and blogs in Germany, Italy, the UK, and the Czech Republic. Finally, this also includes concerted efforts in translation by publishers in many of the above countries. As the field of Chinese sf studies grows in global prominence, further consideration of the role of fan communities will play a vital role in understanding its global significance.

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