

INVISIBLE PLANETS: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation

Author: Cristina García Arranz

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Ken Liu is an American author, translator, and programmer. He was born in 1976 in Lanzhou, China. Throughout his career, he has received numerous awards, most recently the 2017 Locus Award for Best Collection for *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, or the 2016 Locus Award for Best Novel for *The Grace of Kings*.

Invisible Planets, translated by Ken Liu, is a collection of thirteen different stories and several essays of Chinese science fiction. Ken Liu starts by mentioning that there isn't a single "Chinese science fiction" category, there are many. China englobes over a billion people that belong to different social classes and ethnic groups, with a wide variety of ideologies and cultural traits. Likewise, Chinese science fiction cannot be englobed within a single category just because its authors are Chinese.

"...You'll encounter the "science fiction realism" of Chen Qiufan, the "porridge SF" of Xia Jia, the overt, wry political metaphors of Ma Boyong, the surreal imagery and metaphor-driven logic of Tang Fei, the dense, rich language-pictures painted by Cheng Jingbo, the fabulism and sociological speculation of Hao Jingfang, and the grand, hard-science-fictional imagination of Liu Cixin."

Chen Qiufan

The Year of the Rat, *The Fist of Lijian* and *The Flower of Shazui* are three stories written by the Chinese fiction writer, screenwriter, and columnist Chen Qiufan. Born in Shiantou, Guangdong Province, Chen Qiufan graduated from Pekin University in 2004.

"We are just like the rats, all of us only pawns, stones, worthless counters in the Great Game. (...) All we can do is just follow the gridlines in accordance with the rules of the game."

The Year of the Rat is a quite challenging story as it makes the reader reflect upon the nature of humanity. We like to think of ourselves as individuals who are free but to what extent are we free when taking decisions?

Xia Jia

A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight, *Tongtong's Summer* and *Night Journey of the Dragon-Horse* are three stories written by the Chinese science fiction writer, filmmaker, actress, singer, and painter Xia Jia. Born in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, Xia Jia graduated from Peking University in 2002 and in 2014 she became the first Ph.D. in China who had specialized in science fiction.

"Every ghost is full of stories from when they were alive. Their bodies have been cremated and the ashes mixed into the earth, but their stories still live on. During the day, when all Ghost Street is asleep, the stories become dreams and circle under the shadows of the eaves like swallows without nests. During those hours, only I'm around, walking in the street, and only I can see them and hear their buzzing song."

In *A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight*, Ning, the main character, tells his story growing up in Ghost Street, not knowing who his parents are, and being surrounded by ghosts, demons, and spirits. A beautiful and touching story that will leave the reader with many questions.

Ma Boyong

The City of Silence is a story written by the Chinese fiction writer and lecturer Ma Boyong. Born in Chifeng, Inner Mongolia Province, Ma Boyong graduated from the University of Waikato (New Zealand) in 2004.

"Technology is neutral. But the progress of technology will cause a free world to become ever freer, and a totalitarian world to become ever more repressive."

A dystopian fiction depicting an oppressive state in which technology plays a key role. To how extent can we express our thoughts without having unwanted external interference?

Hao Jingfang

Invisible Planets and *Folding Beijing* are two short stories written by the Chinese science fiction writer Hao Jingfang. Born in Tianjin, Hao Jingfang obtained a doctoral degree in 2013 from Tsinghua University. In 2016, she became the first Chinese woman to win a Hugo Award for Best Novelette for her work *Folding Beijing*.

"He was a waste worker; he had processed trash for twenty-eight years and would do so for the foreseeable future. He had not found the meaning of his existence or the ultimate refuge of cynicism; instead, he continued to hold on to the humble place assigned to him in life."

Folding Beijing depicts a futuristic Beijing consisting of a folding city divided into three spaces: First Space (home to the wealthiest privileged people), Second Space (home to workers, college students and specialists), and Third Space (home to the lower classes such as waste workers

who face the worst living conditions). An economic-based dystopia in which inequalities and class segregation are the norm.

Tang Fei

Call Girl is a short story written by the Chinese fiction writer, documentary photographer and dancer Tang Fei. Born in Shanghai, Tang Fei's work has been published in Chinese magazines such as *Science Fiction World* or *Jiuzhou Fantasy*, as well as the Chinese newspaper *The Economic Observer*. Since 2013, her work has been translated and published in other countries such as the US or Australia. *Call Girl* was selected in *Rich Horton's Year's Best Science Fiction & Fantasy, 2014 Edition*.

"The dog is only a shape to make them easier to call and to be accepted. But here, you see them in their native state. No, that's not exactly right, either. Fundamental nature consists of zeros and ones, part of the ultimate database. This sea is an illusion, a projection of that fundamental nature. The sea of data is too big to be compressed into the shape of a dog. Of course, you may still call it a dog. From the perspective of the story, nothing is impossible."

In *Call Girl*, the reader will be immersed in a story about stories told by Tang Xiaoyi, the main character. The stories that this girl sells in exchange for money serve as a metaphor to reflect on today's culture of consumption and immediate gratification. How hard to satisfy can someone be?

Cheng Jingbo

Grave of the Fireflies is a short story written by the Chinese fiction and fantasy author Cheng Jingbo. Born in 1983, Cheng Jingbo currently lives in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and works as a children's book editor. In 2002, her story *Western Paradise* was nominated for the Galaxy Award. In 2010, her story *Lost in Yoyang* won the Special Award for Youth Literature and the Best Short Story Award in the First Nebula Awards for Global Chinese Language Science Fiction.

"I saw all the flowers blooming, the rain falling, a bright red lantern shining in the forest. I saw legends that flared up and dimmed, the face of a youth, fragile but stubborn grass. I saw the Magician of Weightless City: his silver armor had been burnished by the ice and snow at the peak of the world's tallest mountain, had been washed by the water in the deepest ocean, had protected him through desert, swamp, the ruins of mankind's cities, and the Eden of fierce beasts..."

Grave of the Fireflies is a science fiction story that resembles a fairy tale with surreal experiences that invite the reader to travel between dreamlike images.

Liu Cixin

The Circle and *Taking Care of God* is a story written by the Chinese fiction author and engineer Liu Cixin. Born in Pekin, Liu Cixin graduated from North China University of Water Conservancy and Electric Power in 1988. He has won the Galaxy Award for eight consecutive years (1999-2006) and later in 2010. In 2010 and 2011, he won the Nebula Award.

“Across the great cities of the world, wandering old people had begun to appear. All of them had the same features: extreme old age, long white hair and beards, long white robes. (...) The wanderers did not appear to belong to any particular race, as though all ethnicities were mixed in them. They had no documents to prove their citizenship or identity and could not explain their own history.

All they could do was to gently repeat, in heavily accented versions of various local languages, the same words to all passersby: ‘We are God. Please, considering that we created this world, would you give us a bit of food?’”

Taking Care of God depicts a story in which “Gods” come to Earth claiming they created humanity. Rather than being traditional omnipotent “Gods”, they are quite humble and modest. Being accepted at first, they are later seen as burden and are abandoned and mistreated by humans. A story about humanistic values that resembles the way elders are viewed in today’s society.