

* Peregrine

An English Companion to Chutzpah Magazine

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But Some of Us are Looking at the Stars

Kun Kun

* The wild nature of a realist

The moment that someone decides to write, if it's truly miraculous, is often likened to a "flash of inspiration". Haruki Murakami's description of such a moment is a classic example, and whether true or not, it has a certain moving patina. He said: I was watching a baseball game when I decided to start writing; the team I support hit a home run and the ball flew fast and high across the sky. I stared at it and thought: I want to be a writer!

When I told this story to Liu Cixin he immediately replied that he had had a flash of inspiration too, only not quite so romantic. "In 1989 I was a computer programmer at the Niangziguan power plant; I was in my early twenties and had just graduated from university. I lived in single dorms and didn't have a girlfriend. I had nothing to do in the evenings apart from playing cards and mahjong. In one night I lost a month's wages – 800 yuan. That was the moment I suppose. I thought – I can't go on like this. I had to find something to fill the evenings. If I couldn't make money at least I shouldn't lose any. Then I thought of writing a science-fiction novel."

He smiled. His expression was complex: a mixture of sincerity and wit, just like the man himself. Liu Cixin's thick build and perfectly round face create an impression of sincerity and honesty, while he often reveals a kind of worldly wisdom as well. It's the kind of wisdom that comes from being well-versed in the rules of the game, and becoming expert at the game without ever breaking the rules: it is the wisdom of a realist.

In 2011, Liu Cixin was praised for "single-handedly raising the standard of Chinese science fiction to a world-class level". In October 2010 he published three parts of the science fiction trilogy *Three Body in swift succession – Three Body I: Earth Past, Three Body II: Dark Forest, and Three Body III: Dead End*. The trilogy took a period of six months to prepare and three years to write, and a total of 300,000 copies were sold (before the date of completion).

Hailed from the outset by science fiction fans – who call Liu Cixin by the nickname Master Liu – the publication of the trilogy was in itself big news. Heavily influential in the the popular literature market, Liu Cixin and his works have frequently appeared in a variety of newspapers and journals and he has repeatedly topped bestseller lists. His only ever meet-and-greet event, which was held at the Chengdu Book Tower, was closed prematurely because of the excessive number of people who arrived to see him; the bookshelves were stripped bare of Liu Cixin's novels, including the *Three Body* trilogy, in a rare scene that has not been repeated in a decade.

Mainstream literature has also taken note of this "rising star". The editor-in-chief of People's Literature Li Jingze invited Liu Cixin to write a short story for the magazine, the first time in over 20 years that it published a work of science fiction. Ning Hao arranged to meet with Liu Cixin and enthusiastically discussed the universe and other grand issues, after which he bought the film rights to

Liu Cixin's short story *The Village Teacher*.

The *Three Body* trilogy's meaning has been summarised as follows: “*Three Body I*'s reflections on history and *Three Body II*'s transcendence of morality have been further developed in *Three Body III: Dead End*, which posits a comprehensive structure of cosmic sociology, psychology and ecology – is this a merely pointless exercise of technique?”; “The *Three Body* trilogy has addressed the imagination of the structure of the universe and begins to address the nature of time and the mystery of creation, but it is clear that Master Liu has intentionally maintained a distance from Western mythology, and taken a new path of Chinese mythology.” (Professor Yan Feng, Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Fudan University).

According to the “Dark Forest Theory” proposed by Liu Cixin, the universe is like a dark forest, in which civilisations are armed hunters that prowl around under cover, ready to eliminate any other parties that expose themselves. The Earth's civilisation is a foolish child. It starts a large fire in the dark forest and shouts: “I'm here! I'm here!” From this moment on, the history of the Earth's civilisation undergoes a monumental transformation and it faces catastrophes that threaten to overwhelm it. The hero of the novel tries to overcome these disasters with the power of good, but his good intentions in fact lead him only to hell. In his narration Liu Cixin treats mankind as a unified whole; the task of saving the world again falls to the Chinese people, a group of elites that do not stand against the people. The *Three Body* trilogy stands for a high level of universal values, while also satisfying China's fantasy of being a “rising power”.

But this point is a little over-interpreted. Liu Cixin is not interested in philosophy; his greatest inspiration comes from the uncertain things; do “universal values” really exist? He leaves such questions unanswered; he is not particularly concerned with issues of political or public interest. He is a computer engineering graduate, one of China's first generation of computer engineers. He respects rules and has an exceptionally strong ability to summarise systems.

In the early 1990s Liu Cixin wrote a software program in which each intelligent civilisation in the universe was simplified into a single point. At its height, he programmed 350,000 civilisations within a radius of 100,000 light years and made his 286 computer work for hours to calculate the evolution of these civilisations. Although the final conclusion of the program was somewhat naive, it formed the basis and shape of his world view. Before he began to write science fiction novels, Liu Cixin read almost all of the science fiction literature available on the market in Chinese, and summarised his reading as follows:

“Compared to world science fiction, certain themes are absent from Chinese science fiction. Key areas include:

Time travel:

Hardly any works from these two periods deal with this theme, one of the major themes of science fiction novels. Even those that do write about the past engage in “false time travel”, for example using computers or biological technology to resurrect dinosaurs or using virtual reality technology to simulate the Qing dynasty.

Alternate history:

There are also few traces of this, a theme that has long and frequently appeared in Western

science fiction, in the Chinese science fiction created during these two periods. Although there is a certain amount of historical science fiction, such as *Mist in the Ancient Gorge* and *Columbus from America*, these are not alternate history novels in the usual sense of the term.

Apocalyptic:

Works that depict disasters that endanger the whole of human civilisation are also rare among the literature of these two periods (Song Yichang's *After the Disaster* is an exception.)

Long-range space travel:

The majority of space travel that appears in the science fiction works of these two periods is set within our solar system. A small number of works portray stories of interstellar navigation, such as *Flight to Sagittarius*, but the distance and speed of travel that is described is extremely cautious and restrained.

Near-future military conflict:

Works from these two periods such as *Death Ray on a Coral Island* and *Wave* only depict small-scale incidents of the cold war and therefore cannot be categorised as military science fiction. Apart from the context of *Flight to Sagittarius*, I can only recall two works that directly depict a war in the near future that takes place under contemporary political conditions, which are the novel *Secret Signal* and the short story *Bridge* (the latter was reprinted by *Xinhua Digest*), both from the 1980s.

Ultimate thinking:

The theme that is most absent from the Chinese science fiction literature of both periods is any philosophical consideration of the ultimate mysteries of nature and the universe. At present I can barely recall any works of this kind.” (From Liu Cixin's *100 years of Western Trends*)

Liu Cixin made his first submission to *Science Fiction World* in 1999, when he submitted five short stories, including *Whale Song*, for publication. They were each written in strict accordance with the rules above in order to avoid the mistakes of his predecessors. In order to make his submission as successful as possible, Liu Cixin also analysed the basic characteristics of *Science Fiction World* and made some small adjustments to the works to accommodate the style of the magazine. In addition, he sent the five short stories to two different editing offices in order prevent any one editor's subjective tastes from influencing the objective outcome of his submission. All five pieces were published. This is the power of a system.

The popular influence of the *Three Body* trilogy made Liu Cixin famous. I asked Liu Cixin if his life has changed as a result of fame:

“Am I popular? Am I on CCTV? Am I on SINA's homepage? No. I am not popular. I am not interested in fame. Regarding the attraction of fame and wealth... It does not take any will-power to turn down fame; you could give it to many people for free and they wouldn't want it. But it is very difficult to refuse wealth; I am unable to do that, it really appeals to me. Regarding fame, I have to be particular. I wouldn't want the type of fame that many people have even if you gave it to me for free. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm famous, I'm really not. If we must talk of fame, I really was famous for a short time, but it was nothing to do with science fiction. During my first few years in

my job I was very well-known for my computer work in the Shanxi power system, in particular in the area of fuel management. At that time all of the figures of authority in the fuel system knew who I was and if there was ever an issue that could not be resolved they would ask for me. I am just a senior engineer, nothing else.”

The Niangziguan power plant lies in central Shanxi province, surrounded on all sides by mountains. Darkness falls at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Yangquan, the closest city to the power plant, is a 40 minute drive away by car, but because the roads are frequently blocked by lines of coal trucks for days at a time the best way to get to Yangquan is by train, which takes two hours. There is a small mountain and lake to the north of Niangziguan where there is a scenic spot called the Fairy Cave, which is often visited by people from Hebei province at New Year and other festivals. But the trees and rafters are covered with soot and the sky is often overcast. Liu Cixin lives at the power plant and refuses to be interviewed by reporters; a reporter once infuriated him by arriving uninvited.

If we apply a little imagination, the scene could be magical: a Chinese Kafka living in seclusion in a valley, single-handedly holding back the despair in which he is enveloped, as well as the oppressive weather; a pen in one hand, he records everything that he sees, because when he looks up at the stars in the quiet night he sees more than other people do... When the Chengdu press-conference concluded and the street lights came on one by one, Liu Cixin suddenly said to the person next to him: “I pity people who live in cities, they never experience true darkness.”

But, these are all misunderstandings.

Liu Cixin is a realist; he does not like martyrs and has no desire to be an ascetic. He likes the following quote from the American science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein: “I write science fiction to make a little money to drink beer.” In fact, he is not short of money; he has two houses, both of which are large. The reason that he is not willing to meet reporters is that a second job is not allowed in large state-owned enterprises. Although everyone finds ways to earn a little extra money outside of work they do so in a low-key way; it would not make sense to be visited constantly by reporters. He is grateful for the quiet at Niangziguan, which gives him uninterrupted peace to write, but he has not entirely rejected the idea of moving to the city, if there was a better job opportunity or it was better for his daughter's education.

“My novels do not mirror the temperament of their writer at all. If you tried to deduce what kind of man I am from my novels then you would be entirely mistaken. The characters in my novels are full of superhuman qualities and dedication; they are extreme idealists. But I am a very normal person in my own life. I have moderate political views; I do not advocate revolution but not avoid reform. I am neither left nor right; I abide by the rules of the game. I am no different to anyone else in myself and my conduct.”

But is he an absolute realist? Is he the kind of ‘everyman’ portrayed in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, who lives the most simple and ordinary, yet also the most terrible life?

Years ago another science fiction writer said that a strong “hometown complex” was present in Liu Cixin's works. Does Liu Cixin make light of such a complex? It is quite simply the most unlikely thing to appear in his novels. It is now ten years later and the Niangziguan power plant is to be relocated. Liu Cixin will leave his home of over twenty years, the place where he spent his youth as a recent graduate and where he wrote all of his science fiction novels to date, but he is not reluctant to leave. Liu Cixin feels only the solitude and apprehension of a traveller.

Perhaps this is another moment: the moment when a realist discovers the boundaries of idealism in his heart. Liu Cixin, a senior engineer and science graduate who believes in laws more than he believes in inspiration, has discovered an even more mysterious driving force that was hidden behind science fiction literature: a buzzing desire to express himself; a kind of self-inflicted shock; a kind of wild-natured reaction against the mediocre. Liu Cixin said: “The path of science fiction that I have taken is also a path that seeks home; the hometown complex was hidden so deeply that even I myself could not see, because I didn’t know where home was, so perhaps I must travel far to find it.”

* A man who carries a survival pack at all times

Han Song believes that he photographed a UFO. It was above the China World Trade Center Tower III in Beijing and it was neither a plane nor a balloon. It drifted slowly, almost as if it had stopped in midair. The UFO, set above the tallest building in Beijing to date, a building that resembles a giant caterpillar with antennae, looked like a bubble that had been spat out of the tower.

Han Song was standing on the roof of the Xinhua News Agency by Beijing’s Xuanwu Gate when he took the picture. The Xinhua News Agency is another very mystical building. A tool of public guidance, it exudes an aura of communism, majesty, patriarchy and power. When Xiao Ji, a science fiction fan who works for Xinhua, first set foot in the building an old man dressed in a Zhongshan suit and a hat, carrying a container of rice with a steamed bun on top, drifted past her. This is the science fiction of this world, she thought.

Xiao Ji had read Han Song’s science fiction novels for a decade, but she did not connect the old worker at the Xinhua News Agency with the science fiction author of the same name for a long time. Han Song wears glasses that almost obscure his entire face. He is slight of figure and walks softly, as if under a wartime curfew at night. As a new employee at Xinhua, Xiao Ji attended a staff induction class given by Han Song: the Self-Discovery of Journalists. Han Song’s entire body was hidden behind the computer on the platform and he spoke extremely quietly. His voice grew softer and softer and the people in the audience fell asleep one by one.

Han Song is well-known as a representative writer of the soft science fiction genre, in contrast to hard science fiction, for which Liu Cixin is renowned. Soft science fiction refers to literary plots and themes that focus primarily on issues of philosophy, psychology, political science, sociology, and the humanities, while only touching lightly on natural sciences and new technological developments. Conversely, works of hard science fiction stress technological themes and scientific conjectures to propel their plots.

In 1987 Han Song published his first short story *The First Sentence*, after which he published the short story collection *Gravestone of the Universe*. One of the short stories in the collection depicts the world in the distant future, when mankind has travelled far into the galaxy and archaeologists have begun to explore space in order to investigate extraterrestrial gravestones, behind which lies a conspiracy that could destroy mankind. The short story collection won the World Chinese Science Fiction Award in 1991. In 2000 he published *2066: Red Star over America*, in which he used a travelogue style of writing to describe the experiences of a child Go prodigy travelling around America in the future, throughout which he ridicules Chinese-style narcissism. In 2010, he published the short story collection *Subway*, which has been hailed as his most representative collection of short stories and “fully

displays themes such as secret chambers, survival, individual fate and ultimate concern, violence and the deconstruction and reconstruction of history”. Han Song has been unable to publish the majority of his works; only 20% have been published.

The most prominent element of Han Song’s style is not so much as question of soft or hard science fiction, but rather a sense of reality. Wu Yan, a Professor at Beijing Normal University and a tutor of graduate students majoring in science fiction said that: “His works consciously construct a set of hypothetical fictional conditions, which form a self-contained super-realist world; real science is not a prominent theme of his narrative but it is also not divorced from reality, which enables his works to enter the literary arena of science fiction with a unique ‘post modern literary style’ of their own.” Han Song himself is also willing to emphasise the power of science fiction to shine light on reality and described Chinese science fiction literature as “a piece of sponge saturated with political flavour.”

Han Song has worked at the Xinhua News Agency as a reporter for twenty years. He completes the work required of his position during the day and writes science fiction between the hours of 4 o’clock and 6 o’clock in the morning, a writing habit which has endured for many years. These two states are interpenetrated: science fiction is a husk, filled with what he cannot say in the real world. It has also permeated his work: he once travelled to a haunted location in Yunnan province to create a non-fiction documentary work *An Onsite Investigation of Ghosts*, which contains a mixture of science fiction and mysticism. A strong philosophical tone and sense of ultimate thinking can be found in Han Song’s science fiction novels, as well as a literary style inherited from the 1980s and a sense of twisted absurdity and despair.

Han Song declared the following to be the essence of science fiction literature: “Science fiction is a literature of escapism, the weak, and resistance against despair.” When I finally met Han Song after he had finished reporting day and night on the National People’s Congress and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference he was with Fei Dao, the “younger version of Han Song”.

Fei Dao, who’s original name is Jia Liyuan, is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Chinese Language and Culture at Tsinghua University. He received his M.A. degree from Beijing Normal University in science fiction literature. He is the only person to have voluntarily sat the examination for the science fiction major who is still writing science fiction. Fei Dao also writes soft science fiction, and his published works include *A Doomsday Story* and *The Longest Way to Death*. This young science fiction writer uses richly poetic language and his writing is emotionally closer to the combusive style of adolescent works. He often uses ancient Chinese figures as props and some of his works have been classified as fantasy.

Fei Dao has a very similar disposition to Han Song. He is also thin and frail; in fact he is even more so. Because he was hospitalized due to illness he appeared hastily on the day of the interview wearing a hospital gown and as he spoke blood slowly oozed out from his cracked lips. First he wanted to talk about his favourite writers, those great men of weak bodies. For example Proust, he had asthma; and Kafka, he suffered from a social phobia... They were not great because they were sick however, but because of their sensitivity and honesty, and their concern and enthusiasm for writing, because of which they opened up their insides as if they were skinning an orange...

Han Song and Fei Dao are very similar in both disposition and style of genre: they both use real life to write; neither is very optimistic about the real world and they have both tried to escape a little from the ways of the world; they are both extremely inward and both writers’ auras are so weak they

are almost non-existent, as if they themselves are their own baggage, ready to be picked up to escape the crowd. Even their family backgrounds are somewhat similar.

Han Song was born and grew up in Chongqing. His father worked in the news and his mother was a teacher. His family lived in a large staff compound. Han Song's impressions of Chongqing and his childhood there are of a marginal, remote, and closed-off place, and of the military industry there. He still remembers an earthquake that happened when he was 5 or 6 years old. He instinctively ran out into the centre of the compound to escape, carrying cookies and water with him. Fei Dao grew up in a mining region in Chifeng. His love of nature in science fiction comes from illustrations of the blue sky that came with stories of outer space. That blue was a kind of clear blue that he had never seen in the skies above the mining region where he lived.

It is a little strange that the majority of China's science fiction writers all come from remote and isolated towns, places overflowing with industrial fantasies and suburban culture. Han Song said that: "It is precisely this kind of isolation and suppression, combined with fantasies about the future and a sense of wonder that produces a chemical reaction. This produces two different kinds of people: the majority, who are envious of industrialisation, are therefore inspired with ambition to change their destinies and to go and reap its rewards, both in reality and speculatively; while a small number of people become inward and hope to use their imagination to surpass this stage and reach a distant utopia." This is the creative soil of Chinese science fiction literature: during the endless transition from an agricultural to an industrial civilisation, science fiction's imagination of industrialisation enables it to stand in a prominent position and flutter its long banner cloud.

When it was time to leave, Han Song picked up his big, bulging backpack again. What does he keep inside it? Water, compressed biscuits, a flashlight, rope, asthma medication, flu medicine, anti-inflammatory medicine, motion-sickness medication... He is a pessimistic science fiction writer who believes in doomsday rumours and is therefore prepared. He has carried a survival pack with him at all times for over ten years.

* Spiritual pollution and gathering spectators

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines science fiction as: literature that deals with science or scientific or technological fantasy, the majority of which is related to the future. Technically, it consists of two levels: scientific reasoning and literary expression. It is a form of literature that deals with alienation in order to depict the unique imagination of mankind; if such alienation can be understood, it is science fiction; if it cannot be understood, then it becomes myth or fantasy. If we look at its meaning, science fiction is a literature of escapism, scientific reasoning, and thinking about the future – this kind of explanation can be expanded endlessly. But in China from the 1950s to the 1970s science fiction literature was restricted to the following two categories: the imaginations of scientists; and the imaginations of a communist society.

China copied the Soviet Union's approach and made some adjustments in accordance with Chinese characteristics: the visions of scientific minds had to be outstanding and charismatic as representatives of the new scientists of communism; visions of communist society on the contrary had to embody the struggle between man and nature, because after the realisation of communism and the elimination of class, there no longer existed any form of struggle between people in society, who

existed in harmony and friendship. Representative works include *From Earth to Mars*, which not only rushes to communism, but also to Mars; and *Communist Capriccio*, which describes Beijing in 2001 as a garden of communism, where Chairman Mao has already turned 100 and is still hale and hearty.

During that time, Liu Cixin was a Red Guard in a primary school in Yangquan, Shanxi province. His father was a former national coal system expert, and because of this bad element in his family background Liu Cixin was sent to Shanxi from Beijing. The figure of the Red Guard later permeates his novels, but at that time, this was his only option of self-preservation. When Han Song first read *Constellations and Greek Mythology* in the staff compound in Chongqing, he was entirely absorbed into another small world, which seemed to remain innately unchanged regardless of fluctuations in the real world.

Wu Yan is a high profile figure. He grew up in the Cultural Troupe compound of the Air Force Political Department in Beijing, in an environment that strongly resembled the movie *In the Heat of the Sun*. His childhood was tinged with blue: the courtyard, painted blue and divided into two front and rear sections, was once the private residence of a warlord; the children of the troupe chased each other around the brook and rockery in the yard; they could watch films reserved exclusively for the leaders and read secret materials and foreign novels. They were a group of privileged children who had a natural sense of superiority; it was very similar to the scenes described in Wang Shuo's writing. Cui Jian was one of Wu Yan's playmates in the courtyard.

Wu Yan's father was a member of the propaganda team of the cultural troupe; his mother was a dancer. A sense of the destructive power of the arts in his family led to his love of technology. Wu Yan cried when he read Guo Yishi's *In the World of Science* published in *Science Fiction World*, in which a child explores the scientific world and sees an artificial man-made sun, an atomic power plant and radioactive farming; when the child returns home he finds a gift: a cabinet of test tubes, microscopes and telescopes. Wu Yan's love of science is not based on his own personal experience, but is on the contrary observational and descriptive.

In 1978, Wu Yan, who was in junior middle school at the Dengshikou Middle School in Beijing, wrote a book review of science fiction writer Ye Yonglie's *Xiao Lingtong's Travels in the Future*, and submitted it to the *Guangming Daily*. An editor then arrived to meet Wu Yan in person and find out if he was a qualified successor in pursuing the socialist cause. In 1978, to celebrate the downfall of the Gang of Four and welcome the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee, culture, children's literature and popular science were encouraged to flourish and Wu Yan received an important recommendation. The *Guangming Daily* published his book review and also wrote a special feature in praise of his work. He became nationally famous as a 'young writer' and was able to meet Ye Yonglie in person. He had stepped into the limelight.

After the Cultural Revolution, science fiction literature focused primarily on reflection. It also contained characteristics of "scar literature". In Zheng Wenguang's *Descendants of the God of War* he depicts the development of communism on Mars before bringing the story to a tragic conclusion. In *Three Whips*, another story by Zheng Wenguang, three whips talk and discuss who they lashed during the Cultural Revolution. In Jin Tao's *Moonlight Island*, a group of people who have fled from the Cultural Revolution arrive at the island; in the end they do not go back to the mainland, but follow aliens to another world.

The period from 1978 to 1983 is still viewed as the Golden Age of Chinese science fiction.

All provincial science associations established science fiction magazines to promote popular science; Sichuan's Association for Science and Technology established the magazine *Scientific Art and Literature* (the predecessor of *Science Fiction World*). Its first issue consisted of a total of 150,000 copies, which increased to 200,000 in the following year. Tong Enzheng's *Death Ray on Coral Island*, which was published in *People's Literature*, won the First People's Literature Short Story Prize. The novel was also turned into a film, which left an enduring impression, on those who saw it as children, of the incredible power of a laser to cut anything in half in a flash.

In 1983, Liu Cixin was a student at the Institute of Electric Power, by which time he was already a seasoned science fiction fan. He lay in his dormitory listening to the radio: the *People's Daily* announced in an editorial that science fiction was typical of "bourgeois liberalization" and was classed as "spiritual pollution". Criticism of science fiction developed across the country, in a campaign which became known as the "small Cultural Revolution of 100 days". Science fiction magazines were forbidden from publishing science fiction literature, and the majority of magazines went out of business. Science fiction writers such as Zheng Wenguang, Ye Yonglie and Tong Enzheng were subject to accusations, as a result of which Zheng Wenguang fell ill and did not recover. Wu Yan was again pushed into the limelight as he was criticized as a child of Ye Yonglie, and his honorific title of "young writer" was forcibly removed.

Looking back, Wu Yan recalls that there were a number of vague reasons that science fiction became a target of the ant-spiritual pollution movement. The attack on science fiction writers first began because their works lacked "scientific character" and popular science writers wrote articles that analysed the "hard errors" of science fiction novels, which promoted "incorrect scientific views". This subsequently became ideological criticism: science fiction writers were pessimistic and world-weary; they hated humanity and believed in unhealthy values. Finally it became a personal attack. Contemporary political factors and personal grievances were also evident during this process. Wu Yan is a tutor of doctoral students majoring in science fiction at Beijing Normal University, and leads China's only science fiction literature major. He stopped writing fiction long ago, but continues to contribute to the genre as a scholar and science fiction observer. If Chinese science fiction was an individual, it would be one that had no control over its own fate, someone that was subject to dramatic fluctuations; it is constantly being pulled up, cut off, and forgotten.

From the day that science fiction entered China, it has born the great responsibility of a literary form that conveys a moral message, and it has been burdened with too great a number of social functions. In 1902, Liang Qichao established *New Fiction* and published the scientific novel *A Future Record of New China*; he used science fiction novels as a tool to promote new fiction. In the following year Lu Xun translated Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth* into Chinese, which he considered primarily as tools of popular science education, which could "guide the Chinese people forwards". This is considered as the moment that science fiction entered China, and also as the beginning of a debate as to whether science fiction should be classified as an art or a science. Any gain for either viewpoint was a loss for the other; but regardless which one prevailed, science fiction was used as a tool, an instrument of either ideological means or the advancement of popular science.

Wu Yan said to me: "Science fiction literature should return to the literary form itself." He had just finished teaching an elective class in science education. The science fiction major that he

runs began to take applications from students in 2003; it has produced a total of 15 graduates, the majority of which first applied to other majors and then transferred to this one. Only Fei Dao chose himself to apply to take the entrance examination, and he is the only graduate to still be writing science fiction novels.

I was able to sense Wu Yan's disparagement and humility. The science fiction major is run very well; at least it is better than nothing. But I could also sense his excitement and a kind of hidden arrogance. He started telling me about the different types of science fiction writers: first, women, who in the technological age are subject to the dual forces of both technological and patriarchal oppression; second, the immature men who stop developing and live eternally as 17 year olds; third, people of lower social standing and marginal groups in society; and fourth, the members of underdeveloped countries and regions.

The one common characteristic of all of these groups is that they are a little nerdy – they were all the observers at parties that never danced, 'the people who watch the dark side of the moon'. They know how to use their imagination to resist repression and mediocrity; they are sincerely proud, ambitious and progressive; they believe that they are the gods of the imaginative realm, so much so that they have carved their names on the medals of the intelligence hierarchy.

* A watertight industrial chain

Yang Xiao travelled by train for eight days and eight nights to Amsterdam to win the right for China to hold the World Science Fiction Convention in Chengdu. An exciting legend, this story is as mystical as science fiction itself.

Especially when you imagine Yang Xiao: a small, thin woman with a few strands of grey in her hair, who on top of being travel weary also wore a mysterious air of injury specific to her own country. At that time, China was not popular internationally. It was 1991, and the international world had imposed sanctions on China because of the incident at the square. Permission to hold the World Science Fiction Convention, which had been previously granted, had been withdrawn. Yang Xiao moved people with her passion and overcame Poland, China's rival, to win permission to hold the event. Seventeen internationally renowned individuals from the science fiction world were invited to the convention, which was the first international event to be held by China since 1989. Sichuan's Association for Science and Technology attached great importance to the event, which it supported using its official clout. Science fiction fans were also excited and flocked to Sichuan. This marked the end of the campaign against science fiction as "spiritual pollution" that had begun in 1983 and a "lifting of the ban" on science fiction literature.

At that time Yang Xiao was the director of *Scientific Art and Literature*, the first director to be chosen democratically. After 1983, it was impossible to publish any works of science fiction literature and there was also a lack of materials from authors, both of which caused *Scientific Art and Literature's* subscriptions to drop to 30,000. At one time the financial accounts of the magazine were as low as 60,000 yuan. The majority of science fiction magazines run by other provincial science and technology associations went out of business, but Sichuan's Association for Science and Technology decided to keep themselves to themselves with regard to the future of *Scientific Art and Literature*. The magazine was entirely responsible for its own profits or losses and held democratic elections, through which

34-year-old editor Yang Xiao was elected. For a time *Science Art and Literature* changed its name to *Strange Tales*, and published non-fiction works in order to try and attract more readers with incredible anecdotes. In 1989, it wanted to use the opportunity created by the entrance of *Transformers* to China to inspire a revival of science fiction, but the students took to the streets soon after. The attempt to hold the annual World Science Fiction Convention in China was a gamble. After that the magazine changed its name to *Science Fiction World*.

Science Fiction World is China's most widely circulated and influential science fiction magazine; at its height circulation was roughly 400,000 copies per issue. It is the Bible of science fiction fans. *Science Fiction World* is at the centre of a number of stories, both related to science fiction and not. In 1997 the magazine once again hosted the annual World Science Fiction Conference and invited several American and Russian astronauts to attend. This attracted CCTV to report on the event, while the American magazine *Newsweek* also took notice of Chinese science fiction writers for the first time, and was particularly interested in the division between Han Song's job as a Xinhua News Agency reporter by day and science fiction writer at dawn. A small craze for science fiction literature subsequently appeared in the popular realm for a time. The writer A Lai took up the post of editor-in-chief of *Science Fiction World* after he finished writing *Red Poppies*. He brought about a dialogue between mainstream literature and science fiction and also inherited Yang Xiao's idealism and indoctrinated his editors with an ambition to be a great world periodical. In 1999, the magazine published popular science articles and literary works about memory transplantation just before the university entrance examinations and guessed correctly the Chinese language composition topic in that year's examinations, as a result of which subscriptions rose rapidly to 380,000 copies. In 2009 the magazine issued an open letter which instigated a campaign to get rid of its editor-in-chief, who had been appointed by Sichuan's Science and Technology Association; he was driven out by the magazine's editors because of activities such as dealing in ISBNs and investing public funds.

Science Fiction World's offices are located on the 6th floor of Sichuan's Association for Science and Technology's building in a new district in the south of Chengdu. As well as *Science Fiction World*, the office also publishes three other magazines: *Science Fiction World Translations*, *Fantasy World*, and *Newton*. It is still managed by the Association for Science and Technology and at present it has a circulation of roughly 150,000 copies per issue. An inscription by Yang Zhenning hangs on the office wall: "Fantasy and dreams are not the same". If you look closely there is also evidence of support from fans from around the time that the editor-in-chief was driven out, in the form of sweets, plaques and notes saying things like: "On the other side of darkness is sunlight".

Editor-in-chief Yao Haijun does not only regard *Science Fiction World* as a magazine, but also as a body that functions as an industrial chain and a platform. Inspired by changes in American science fiction literature, rising stars first publish works in science fiction periodicals and then collate a number of these works to publish as a collection, after which they then publish a full-length novel which can enter bookstores alongside other popular literature. This is followed by TV adaptations and the development of affiliated products, and a famous writer is born. Writers are then able receive the money and attention that they deserve, which is enough to offset mainstream literature's low regard for the science fiction genre. Each stage of the process is connected, but there is little entanglement within itself, so it forms a healthy and complete industrial chain.

Science Fiction World has launched a Nova Program, in which new authors can publish their works

in the Nebula Series; while the Galaxy Awards promote established authors (Wang Jinkang has won the award nine times; Liu Cixin eight times), who are then published in the *Cornerstone Series* collection. Recommended foreign science fiction works are also published in the *Science Fiction Masters* books as a supplement; and finally *Science Fiction World* also publishes individual works by star authors that are discovered during this process, such as Liu Cixin's *Supernova Era* and the *Three Body* trilogy, and develops further associated products. *Science Fiction World* is Liu Cixin's talent scout and Yao Haijun is his literary agent.

The moment that Yao Haijun's ambition was unleashed can perhaps be dated back to 1997. It was then that Yao Haijun, who worked at a forestry centre, first took part in the annual World Science Fiction Convention. His monthly salary of 140 yuan was not even enough for the train ticket from his home, Yichun, to Beijing. He stayed in a basement quite far away from the event itself; it was full of science fiction fans who were not officially invited to the event and everyone staying there felt that it was quite an achievement to have got there. They talked all night, and the place became known as the "underground convention".

Yao Haijun saw Charles Brown, the founder of the American science fiction publication *Locus Magazine*, for the first time. The elderly American had a suite at a hotel near to the venue and held an after party there in the evening, to which many big names were invited; it was an exciting party overflowing with wine and guests. To attend the main event of the convention was not as important as an invitation to Charles Brown's party, which was seen as the real honour. He himself was also a science fiction fan, who used his own money to start a magazine in 1968, which he has edited for 40 years. *Locus Magazine* is America's most important science fiction periodical, and a platform for science fiction news and information. The Locus Awards have also become an authoritative science fiction award. Charles Brown's salon-style of hosting in Beijing left an unforgettable impression on Yao Haijun.

At that time Yao Haijun was also running a magazine for science fiction fans: *the Science Fiction Fan Association*. It was founded in 1986, based on the principle of publishing science fiction news and advancing exchange between science fiction fans. The magazine is issued through a membership system and the annual membership fee is 15 yuan. Only one person works at the magazine: Yao Haijun is responsible for compilation, editing, printing and distribution. Because the magazine is run and published privately, it is an "illegal publication"; it has run for 12 years.

Yao Haijun was born in Yichun, Heilongjiang Province, to a family of forestry workers. In junior middle school he suffered from a strange illness. His doctors gave up treatment and he had to leave school. His family sent him to his uncle's home on the outskirts of Yichun to be looked after. The house was in a village 7.5 km from the nearby town of Hongqi (the village is named as such). In the day his uncle would go out to work in the forestry centre, and Yao Haijun would either go fishing on the riverside or read *Scientific Art and Literature*. He was left to fend for himself and in fact he relaxed. He still remembers the first time that he was shocked and absorbed by those words about the universe and the future. It was as if his entire self had become smaller; curled up on a heated Kang bed, the wider world opened up in his mind, while in the real world, the trees outside of his window were heavy with hazelnuts, and who knew when a small creature might fly over to lick the window paper.

In 1997, Yao Haijun, who had magically recovered from his childhood illness and studied at a technical school, had a job at the forestry centre. In another space, he was also somewhat famous as a

seasoned science fiction fan. He received an invitation from the magazine *Science Fiction King* to enter the science fiction publishing industry and in 1998 he transferred to *Science Fiction World*. The world of science fiction that he sees today is already very different to that of the past: new star writers such as Liu Cixin and Han Song have already appeared and the construction of a solid platform centred on the core of *Science Fiction World* has been completed. Science fiction literature, which in the past has been used as an instrument and suffered many setbacks, has gradually returned to the realm of literature itself; it seems that all it needs now is time...

Science fiction fans are also looking excitedly toward the future. Seasoned science fiction fan Xiao Ji, who works at the Xinhua News Agency, excitedly described her thoughts: this is an era when geeks are very popular and “intelligent is the new sexy”; the internet and mobile media are also stimulating youths in all cities; and the number of youths that will radiate to science fiction literature can be developed through children’s literature. Xiao Ji used to think that Jia Zhangke had a very cosmological view on the world (a flying saucer appears in *Still Life*), but he later explained that this had nothing to do with science fiction, which was very disappointing. Now Ning Hao has bought the film production rights to Liu Cixin’s works and will shoot a science fiction movie, which is very good news...

In August 2010, the first Nebula Awards organised by the World Chinese Science Fiction Association gave the best science fiction/fantasy prize to both Liu Cixin and Han Song.

Han Song gave a humble acceptance speech on Weibo: “I don’t entirely agree with the decision to give the outstanding author award to myself and Liu Cixin. One person is enough, and Liu is the great writer of Chinese science fiction; he is the best representative. I wrote to ask to decline the award, but they believed that they should promote the achievements of Chinese science fiction, and that I must accept the situation.”

Liu Cixin did not say much. He has barely any contact with other people in science fiction circles. The claim that has “single-handedly raised the standard of Chinese science fiction to a world class level” perhaps refers both to the standard and popular influence of his writing, and also to his manner of doing things alone. Liu Cixin once again spoke on the topic of “science fiction literature as a genre of literature”: “The format has changed now; the main body of literature now is in fact genre literature, so that even mainstream literature has now become a genre.” An engineer, Liu Cixin has a great ability to systematically summarise laws and he has also studied the creative methods of other literature genres, such as sitting down to write tens of thousands of words per day. But this made him anxious; he could not follow the set pattern.

“First I must shock myself in order to be able to write. If I don’t shock myself, then I can’t write anything. I am not a qualified writer of “genre literature”; I can’t produce work as if I am on a production line. My limitations are obvious to me. If all of the hopes of Chinese science fiction literature are placed on my shoulders alone, then its future is also obvious? Liu Cixin has not written another word since the publication of the *Three Body* trilogy. He has re-read his previous works and feels that the young man who wrote them was incredible: he had a writer’s arrogance about his own achievements and was excited; but praise and expectations have reminded him that the holiday is over. He must start his next work. These tangled thoughts alone have consumed too much of his efforts.

Translated by Lucy Johnston

The Thinker

Liu Cixin

* The Sun

He could still recall his feelings the first time he saw the Siyun Mountain Observatory thirty-four years ago, when the ambulance crossed the mountain ridge and the main peak appeared in the distance, its domed telescope roofs reflecting the golden light of the setting sun like pearls inset into the peak.

Back then he had just graduated from medical school and was a trainee brain surgeon. He had come to the Observatory as a physician's assistant to rescue a patient too critically injured to be transported. A visiting scholar from England had accidentally fallen off a cliff while out for a walk and had severely injured his head. When they arrived, they performed a cranial perforation to drain excess blood and relieve pressure on the brain, and once the patient's condition had improved to the point he was able to be moved, the ambulance took him to a hospital in the provincial capital for additional surgery.

It was quite late when they left the Observatory. While the others were maneuvering the patient into the ambulance, he turned a curious eye toward the surrounding telescope domes, arranged as if according to some obscure plan, like a moonlit Stonehenge. Compelled by a force he was never afterwards able to explain, he walked over to the closest telescope, pushed open the door, and entered.

The inside was unlit except for countless small signal lights. He felt as if he had passed into a moonless outer space. Only one slender moonbeam penetrated the slit at the top of the dome, and where it struck the tall telescope its silver thread described a partial outline, resembling a piece of abstract art occupying the center of an urban plaza at midnight.

He tentatively approached the base of the telescope. In the dim light he saw a mass of equipment of bewildering complexity, and as he searched for a lens that would accommodate his eye, a soft female voice called from the doorway:

"That's a solar telescope. There is no eyepiece."

A slender figure dressed in a white uniform entered gracefully, a feather drifting on the moonlight. As she approached him, he felt the gentle breeze she brought with her.

"Traditional sun telescopes project an image on a backing curtain, but most of them are viewed on a display screen these days....Doctor, you seem to have quite an interest in this place."

He nodded. "An observatory is a place of freedom and detachment. I like that feeling."

"So what are you doing in medicine? Oops, that's a rude question."

"Medicine is not just frivolous technology. It can be freeing too, for instance my studies on the brain."

"Oh? When you open up a brain with your scalpel, can you see thoughts?" she said, her smile

visible in the dim light. It reminded him of something he had never seen before, the projection of the sun on a curtain – its threatening flames eliminated, leaving behind only a warm brilliance. His heart warmed involuntarily. He smiled, and he hoped that she saw his smile.

“As best I can. But think about it: that mushroom-shaped object that fits in your hand is an elaborate universe, a universe that from a philosophical viewpoint is far grander than the one you are observing here, because while your universe may span millions of light years, I believe it’s been shown to be bounded. But my universe is unbounded, because thoughts are infinite.”

“Ah, it’s not everyone whose thoughts are infinite. But you seem to be someone of limitless imagination, doctor. As for astronomy, it is not as freeing as you imagine. Thousands of years ago on the banks of the Nile, and on sailing ships a few centuries ago, it was a highly practical technology. Astronomers in those days were forever recording the positions of thousands upon thousands of stars in their charts. Entire lives were spent on a census of the stars. Even today, most specialized astronomical research is dull and empty of poetry. For example, the project I’m working on is stellar scintillation, and it’s basically endless observation and recording and more observation and more recording. Hardly transcendent or freeing.”

He raised an eyebrow in disbelief: “Stellar scintillation? What we see as twinkling?” When she smiled without speaking, he shook his head with a self-mocking grin. “I know that’s just atmospheric refraction, of course.”

She nodded. “Still, it’s a visually striking metaphor. Take away the base constant and display only the difference in output energy fluctuation, and a scintillating star looks a lot like it’s twinkling.”

“Is it because of sunspots or solar flares or something like that?”

She stopped smiling and shook her head solemnly. “No, these are fluctuations in the overall energy output of the star, and their causes go deeper than that. The brightness of an electric lamp, for example, does not depend on the moths surrounding it but upon voltage fluctuations. Of course the fluctuations and scintillations of a star are far more miniscule and require extremely precise instruments to detect. Otherwise we’d be burnt to a crisp by solar scintillation. This research is one way to understand the deep structure of a star.”

“So what have you discovered?”

“We’re a long way from actually discovering anything. To date, we have only been observing the scintillations of the most easily observable star, the sun. Our observations may continue for many years, and we may find farther targets as we expand our range to other stars. You know, we could spend a decade or more collecting samples from the cosmos before we are able to talk about conclusions or discoveries. This is the subject of my dissertation, but I suspect that I’ll keep on working at it, maybe for the rest of my life.”

“If that’s the case, you must not think that astronomy is dull at all.”

“I feel like I’m working on a beautiful endeavor. Entering the world of stars means entering a vast garden where every flower is unique...you’ll probably find that metaphor peculiar, but that’s really the way I feel.”

As she spoke, she gestured almost unconsciously toward the wall. Following her finger, he noticed a painting hanging there. It was abstract, just one continuous, thick, rising and falling line. When she saw what he was looking at, she headed over to the wall, took down the painting, and

handed it to him. He saw that the line was inlaid with yuhua stones, the “rain flower” pebbles of Siyun Mountain.

“It’s pretty, but what does it mean? Is it a range of neighboring mountains?”

“We recently observed a solar scintillation with a very rare intensity and fluctuation type, according to our past few years of observations. This picture is the radiation fluctuation curve of that scintillation. I, uh, like to pick up yuhua stones during my walks on the mountain, so...”

But it was a different curve that attracted him. The dim light of the signal lamps limned the contour of her body, while the rest of her melded with the surrounding shadows. It was as if the confident hand of a master of traditional painting had laid out a flowing line of ink on a blank sheet of xuan paper, and the grace of that single line instantly imbued the rest of the spotless white paper with life and meaning...down the mountain, in the metropolis where he lived, millions of pretty young women chased incessantly after glitz and vanity. A great cluster of particles in Brownian motion, none of them setting aside even the slightest moment of silence for thought. Away from all of that on Siyun Mountain, who would have thought that a quiet young woman would have her gazed fixed upon the heavens...

“Being able to find such beauty in the universe is a rare thing, and a fortunate one.” He stopped staring, conscious of his lapse. He handed the picture back to her, but she declined with a gesture.

“Keep it as a memento, doctor. Professor Wilson is my advisor. Thank you all for saving him.”

Ten minutes later, the ambulance departed the Observatory under the moonlight. Later, he came to realize that he had left something of himself behind on Siyun Mountain.

* Time I

It was only when he married that he finally stopped trying to fight time. He moved everything from his bachelor dorm to his newlywed apartment, except for a few things that were inappropriate for sharing between a couple. Those things he took to his office in the hospital. Flipping casually through them, he noticed the picture inlaid with yuhua stones. Examining its colorful line, he was struck by the realization that his trip to Siyun Mountain had taken place ten years ago.

* Alpha Centauri

It was a spring outing organized by the young staff at the hospital, an opportunity he treasured because in the future he would be invited to participate in such activities less and less frequently. The organizers were deliberately mysterious about the trip and kept the curtains tightly closed the entire way until they reached their destination and disembarked. They had to guess their location, and a decent prize was offered for the first correct guess. He knew the answer as soon as he got out, but he kept silent.

The main peak of Siyun Mountain was directly ahead, and the pearls of the telescope roofs gleamed in the sunlight.

Once someone had guessed correctly, he informed the group leader that he was going up to the Observatory to visit an acquaintance, and then without telling anyone else he went off on foot along the winding road to the peak.

He did not lie, but he knew in his heart that the woman whose name he did not even know, and who was not an Observatory employee, wasn't likely to be there ten years on. He did not even intend to go inside. He just wanted to look at the place from a distance, the place where ten years ago his sun-baked soul had bathed in its first moonbeam.

One hour later he reached the mountaintop. Beside the fence, whose white paint was mottled and faded, he gazed in silence at the telescope buildings. Little had changed. He quickly recognized the domed structure he had once entered. He sat down upon a rock slab, lit a cigarette, and stared at the time-scarred iron door, his mind replaying over and over the scene he cherished deep within his memory: the iron door ajar, a liquid moonbeam, a feather drifting gently in....his was so totally immersed in that dream that he felt no shock at all when the miraculous occurred in the real world. The iron door actually opened, and the feather that had once appeared in the moonlight emerged into the sunshine. Her lithe figure hurried past and entered a neighboring telescope building. The whole process may have lasted ten seconds, but he knew he was not mistaken.

Five minutes later, they met again.

This was his first time seeing her in adequate light. She was entirely as he had imagined, which did not surprise him in the least, but then, considering that after ten years her appearance ought to have changed from that first meeting in the dim light of the signal lamps and the moon, he felt puzzled.

She was pleasantly surprised to see him, but pleasant surprise was the extent of it. "You know doctor, I travel a circuit of various observatories in the course of my projects, and I'm only here for two weeks each year. Yet we meet again. It must be fate!" This last sentence she tossed off casually, lending further evidence to his feeling that she felt nothing special toward him. Still, that she recognized him after a decade was a sliver of comfort.

They exchanged a few words about the condition of the English academic with the head injury, and then he asked, "Are you still studying stellar scintillation?"

"I am. We observed solar scintillation for two years and then turned to other stars. You can understand that we had to employ observation methods completely different from those we'd used for the sun. Then the project couldn't find new funding, so it was suspended for several years. We resurrected it just three years ago, and now we're observing twenty-five stars. We're still expanding in number and scope."

"You must have created quite a few more pictures from yuhua stones."

The moonlit smile which had surfaced from the depths of his memory countless times over the past decade now emerged in the sunlight: "Oh, you still remember that! Yes, every time I come to Siyun Mountain I still like to collect yuhua stones. Come, have a look."

She took him to the telescope building where they had met ten years ago. He looked up at what may or may not have been the same solar telescope; the computer equipment surrounding it was brand new and certainly not a relic of that time. She led him to a tall curved wall hung with some familiar things: pictures of various sizes inlaid with yuhua stones. Each picture contained a single curve. Lengths varied. Some were gentle, like ocean waves, while others were steep, like a line of irregular Himalayan cedars.

One by one she told him which waveforms came from which stars. "These we call Type-A stellar scintillations. They appear relatively less frequently than other types. The difference between

Type-A scintillations and more common stellar scintillations is that their energy level is several orders of magnitude more intense, and on a mathematical level, their waveforms are more aesthetically pleasing.”

He shook his head in confusion. “You fundamental-theory scientists always talk about the beauty of mathematics, as if you have a patent on it. Those Maxwell Equations you find so beautiful – I was able to grasp them but I found nothing of beauty in them...”

Just as she had ten years before, she abruptly turned serious: “This sort of beauty is like a crystal. It’s hard, pure, and transparent.”

One picture in particular caught his attention: “Hey, did you remake this one?” Noticing her puzzled expression, he added, “It’s the waveform of the solar scintillation you gave me ten years ago.”

“But...this is the waveform of the first Type-A scintillation from Alpha Centauri. It was observed, oh, last October.”

He was sure the confusion on her face was sincere, but he was even surer of his own judgment. He was all too familiar with that waveform. He was even able to recall, in order, the color and shape of every stone that made up the line. He did not want her to know that for ten years, apart from this past year following his wedding, that painting had hung on the wall of his dorm. Every month there would be a few days in which, once the lights were out, the moonlight outside the window was sufficient for him to see the picture clearly from where he lay on the bed. Then he would begin silently to count the stones that made up the line, his eyes crawling along the line like a beetle. Most of the time, he would be asleep when he had completed one length and was halfway back, and he would continue striding across the solar line in his dreams, stepping from one colored stone to another across a river whose opposite shore was forever unseen...

“Can you look up a solar scintillation line from ten years ago? The date was April twenty-third.”

“Of course I can,” she said, giving him a curious glance, apparently surprised at his clear recall of the date. She went over to the computer and quickly called up the solar scintillation waveform, and then pulled up the waveform for the Alpha Centauri scintillation. Then she stood mute before the screen.

The two waveforms overlapped perfectly.

When the silence became unendurable, he ventured, “Perhaps the two stars share an identical structure, so their waveforms are identical. You did say that the Type-A scintillation is a reflection of a star’s deep structure.”

“They may both be main sequence stars, class G2, but their structure is entirely different. But the point is that this would never occur even in two stars with identical structure. Have you ever seen two completely identical banyan trees? A perfect overlap in such a complex waveform is like two banyan trees that are identical down to the last twig.”

“Maybe there really are two identical banyan trees,” he said by way of consolation, even though he knew it was meaningless.

She shook her head gently, but then a thought struck her and she jumped up. In her eyes there was fear in addition to shock.

“My god,” she said.

“What?” he asked in concern.

“Have...have you thought about time?”

His mind was nimble, and he quickly latched onto her idea: “As far as I am aware, Alpha Centauri is the closest star to our own, at a distance of...about four light years.”

“1.3 parsecs. 4.25 light years.” She was still in the grip of shock, and the words seemed to be spoken by a different person.

Things were clear now: two identical scintillations had appeared eight years and six months apart, the time it would take for light to make a round-trip between the stars. The light from the solar scintillation reached Alpha Centauri, which experienced an identical scintillation, and after the same length of time, the light from that scintillation returned and was observed.

She bent over the computer and performed a series of calculations while talking to herself: “Accounting for recessional motion, the results match precisely.”

“I apologize for making you uncomfortable. But since there’s no way to verify this, it’s not worth getting so worked up about.” Once again he wanted to console her.

“No way to verify it? Not necessarily. The light from that solar scintillation is still spreading through space. It might still cause another star to produce an identical scintillation.”

“And next further star after Alpha Centauri is...”

“Barnard’s Star. 1.81 parsecs. But it’s too dim, there’s no way to detect its scintillation. The next star is Wolf 359, at 2.35 parsecs. Also too dim. Undetectable. Then there’s Lalande 21185, at 2.52 parsecs. Also too dim. The light has to reach Sirius.”

“And that’s the brightest visible star. How far away is it?”

“2.65 parsecs. 8.6 years.”

“The light from that solar scintillation has been travelling through space for ten years now and has reached Sirius. Maybe there’s already been a scintillation.”

“But we have to wait another seven years before it reaches us.”

Abruptly she seemed to awaken from a dream. She shook her head and laughed. “My god. What am I doing? This is ridiculous!”

“You mean that it’s a ridiculous idea for an astronomer to have?”

She looked at him intently: “You don’t think so? As a brain surgeon, how would you like to have a discussion with someone about whether thoughts are located in the brain or in the heart?”

There was nothing for him to say. She looked at her watch, so he got up and said goodbye. She made no move to stay him, but she did walk with him a ways down the mountain road. He restrained the impulse to ask her for her telephone number, because he knew that in her eyes he was just a stranger whose path had happened to cross hers for the second time in ten years.

After saying goodbye, she turned and headed back to the Observatory, and the mountain wind flicking her white work uniform recalled in a rush the feeling he’d had when they parted a decade ago. The sunlight seemed to be transformed into moonlight, and a graceful feather drifted away from him....Like a drowning person grasping with all his might at a piece of straw, he resolved to preserve the slender thread of their relationship. Almost instinctively he called after her retreating form: “What if, in seven years, you find out that Sirius really did scintillate?”

She stopped, turned back toward him, and replied with a slight smile, “Then we’ll meet back here.”

* Time II

Marriage may have introduced him to a completely new way of life, but what truly and utterly changed his life was the child. After the birth, the local train of his life suddenly became an express, speeding past one station after another without halting its forward motion. The dullness of the journey numbed him, so he shut his eyes against the monotonous scenery and let his fatigue carry him off to sleep. But like many sleeping passengers on the train, deep within his heart a small clock continued to tick, ready to wake him up a minute before arriving at his destination.

Late one night, when his wife and son were sleeping soundly but he was still wide awake, a strange impulse drove him out onto the balcony. He looked up at the smog-dimmed starry sky as if searching for something, but what? It was a long while before his heart answered: Sirius. He shivered involuntarily.

Seven years had passed. Only two days remained until the date the two of them had set.

* Sirius

The day after the first snowfall of the year the road was slick, so the taxi could not travel the last stretch. Once again he had to climb the peak of Siyun Mountain on foot.

Along the road, he questioned more than once whether he was in a normal state of mind. Realistically, the probability that she would show up was zero, for one simple reason: Sirius could not possibly scintillate as the sun had seventeen years ago. For seven years he had dabbled a great deal in astronomy and astrophysics, and had grown sheepish about his ludicrous “discovery” of seven years before. She had not mocked him to his face, and for this he was eternally grateful. Looking back on it now, her seriousness was merely good manners, and in his many recollections of the promise she had given him at their parting, he was increasingly able to identify a mocking tone....Astronomical observation had gradually migrated into outer-space orbits, and the Siyun Mountain Observatory had ceased to exist four years ago. The buildings had been converted into vacation villas, now vacant for the season. What was he doing here? The thought brought him to a halt. Time demonstrated its power: he was no longer that young man who could climb a mountain with ease. He paused for a moment, but eventually rejected the thought of going back. He pressed onward.

At the midpoint of life, why not chase one final dream?

So when he saw that white silhouette, he genuinely thought it was an illusion. Dressed in a white windbreaker, the figure at the old Observatory blended into the snow-covered mountain and was initially hard to make out. When she saw him she headed over at a run, and at a distance he watched that feather fly across the snowy ground. He stood still until she reached him. She was out of breath and unable to speak, and he saw that apart from cutting her hair, she had not changed much. Seven years was not a long time – barely a snap of the fingers in the lifetime of a star. And she was a student of the stars.

She looked into his eyes. “Doctor, I didn’t have much hope of seeing you. I came just to fulfill a promise. Or maybe to satisfy a wish.”

“Me too.” He nodded.

“I nearly...I nearly missed the observation time. I didn’t really forget. I just buried it somewhere

deep within my memory, and a few nights ago it suddenly came back to me....”

“Me too.” He nodded again.

They were silent. The only sound was the wind in the pines, which echoed across the mountain.

“Did Sirius scintillate?” he asked at last in a soft and trembling voice.

She nodded. “The scintillation waveform was an exact overlap of the sun’s seventeen years ago, and of Alpha Centauri’s seven years ago. Identical, and occurring precisely at the expected moment. These are the results from the Confucius III space telescope. There was no mistake.”

They lapsed into another extended silence. The wind whipped through the trees, and he felt as if the sound was spiraling upward from the mountains, filling the space between heaven and earth, as if some power in the cosmos was engaged in a deep, mysterious chorus....he shivered involuntarily. She evidently had the same feeling and seemed to break the silence only as a way to banish the terror.

“But this thing is an oddity that is beyond our current theories. If the scientific community is to treat it seriously, more evidence and observations are required.”

He said, “I know. The next observable star is...”

“Procyon in Canus Minor would have been observable, but five years ago its luminosity decreased dramatically, dropping below observable values, perhaps because it drifted into a nearby interstellar dust cloud. The next observable star is Altair, in the constellation Aquila.”

“How far is that?”

“5.1 parsecs. 16.6 light years. The light from the solar scintillation seventeen years ago has only just reached it.”

“Which means we have to wait for nearly seventeen more years?”

She gave a slow nod. “Life is too short.”

This touched him somewhere deep within his heart, and his wind-dried eyes felt moist all of a sudden: “Yes, life is too short.”

She said, “But at least we will be able to meet like this one more time.”

He stared at her. Would they be separated for another seventeen years?

“Please forgive me. My mind is a mess, and I need some time to think.” She brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, and then read his thoughts. She laughed: “Of course. I’ll give you my phone number and email address, and if you want, we can get in touch later.”

He let out a long breath. His ship adrift at sea had at long last sighted a lighthouse on the shore, and his mind was full of an indescribable happiness. “Then....I’ll walk you down the mountain.”

She shook her head with a smile, and then pointed at the domed holiday villa behind her. “I’d like to stay here for a while. Don’t worry, there’s electricity, and a nice family that keeps a permanent ranger post. I really need some quiet time. A long quiet time.”

After that they parted. He took the snow-covered road down the mountain, leaving her standing on the peak where she watched him for a long while. Both of them were prepared for a seventeen year wait.

* Time III

Returning from Siyun Mountain for a third time, he suddenly saw the far end of life. They did not have many more seventeen year periods left. Light traveled at a snail’s pace across the cosmic

expanse, turning life into an insignificant speck of dust.

The first five of those seventeen years he kept in touch with her. They exchanged emails, and even phone calls at times, but they never met in person. She lived in a distant city. As time went on, they both reached the pinnacles of their respective lives. He became a renowned brain specialist and the director of his hospital, and she became a member of the national academy of sciences. They had an increasing number of things to worry about, and he also realized that it was inappropriate to discuss with a leader in the field the mysterious thing that had brought them together. So their interactions tapered off, and by the halfway mark of those seventeen years, they had stopped communicating entirely.

But he was unperturbed. He knew that they shared an unbreakable bond. As the light from Altair traveled night and day across the vastness of outer space toward Earth, they both awaited its arrival in silence.

* Altair

It was late at night when they met on the main peak of Siyun Mountain. They had both arrived early so as not to keep the other waiting, so they climbed the mountain at a little past three in the morning. Their flying cars could easily have ascended the peak, but they decided independently to park at the foot of the mountain and make the ascent on foot in an obvious attempt to recover a sensation of the past.

Ever since its designation as a nature preserve a decade ago, Siyun Mountain had become one of the increasingly rare wilderness areas on Earth. The Observatory and holiday homes of yesteryear were now overgrown ruins, and the two of them met amid the ruins under the starlight. He had seen her on TV recently, so he knew that the years had left their mark, but on this moonless night, by whatever trick of the imagination, he felt that she was the same young woman from the moonlight thirty-four years ago. Her eyes reflected the starlight and melted his heart with past feelings.

She said, "Let's not talk about Altair at first, okay? The past few years I've been directing a research project to observe the transmission of Type-A stellar scintillations."

"Oh, I'd have thought you wouldn't have anything to do with this discovery. Or that you'd have totally forgotten it."

"How could I do that? Something that actually exists should be tackled head on. The universe described by the classic theory of relativity and quantum mechanics is actually unimaginably weird and strange....observations over the past few years have revealed that Type-A scintillations transmitted between stars are a common phenomenon. Innumerable stars are generating Type-A scintillations every second, to be retransmitted by the stars that surround them. Any star can be an originator or transmitter, turning intergalactic space itself into pond rippling under the raindrops....what, you're not surprised?"

"There's one thing I don't understand. If observing just four scintillation transmissions took more than three decades, how did you..."

"You're an intelligent man. You ought to be able to come up with a way."

"Maybe. Did it go something like this? First, you chose to observe stars that are relatively close to each other – a star A and B. Perhaps they're ten thousand light years away from Earth, but they

are just five light years apart from each other. Then, in the space of five years, you could observe a scintillation transmission that took place ten thousand years ago.”

“Clever! There are more than a hundred billion stars in the galaxy, so you can imagine there is a fair number of this type of star pair.”

He smiled, and as he had thirty-four years ago, he hoped she would see his smile in the darkness.

“I brought you a gift.” As he spoke, he opened up the backpack he had carried up the mountain and took out a strange object about the size of a football. At first glance it resembled a balled up bunch of fishnet, and when he held it up to the sky, fragmented starlight could be seen through its holes. He turned on a flashlight, and she saw that the object was made up of countless small balls the size of rice grains. Extending from each ball were various numbers of fibers so thin as to be practically invisible, connecting them all in an incredibly complex grid system. He turned off the flashlight, and in the darkness he flicked a switch at the base of the grid. All of a sudden it was filled with swiftly moving points of light that dazzled the eye. She seemed to be viewing a hollow glass orb filled with tens of thousands of fireflies. Taking a closer look, she discovered that the points of light emanated from certain balls and then transmitted to the surrounding balls. At every moment a proportion of the balls was originating or transmitting points of light. She seemed to be watching her own metaphor: a pool in the rain.

“Is this a model of stellar scintillation transmission? It’s stunning. Did you....did you predict all of this?”

“I did guess that stellar scintillation transmission is a common phenomenon in the universe. Based on nothing but intuition, of course. But this object is not a model of that. A research project at our institute uses molecular microscopy and three-dimensional holographic positioning technology to study neural signaling in the brain. This is a model of signal transmission in a small part of the right cerebral cortex. Naturally it’s just a very, very small part.”

She watched rapt as the stars traversed the globe: “Is this consciousness?”

“That’s right. Just like computing power is produced from a massive grouping of zeroes and ones, consciousness is formed out of a massive number of simple linkages. The simple links between neurons gathered together in massive numbers produce consciousness. In other words, consciousness is the transmission of signals among an ultra-massive number of nodes.”

They looked the glittering starry model of the brain in silence, while the galaxy’s billions of stars, and the billions upon billions of stars outside the galaxy, drifted through the far reaches of the universe. And between these uncountably many stars, countless Type-A scintillations were being transmitted.

She said softly, “It’s almost dawn. Let’s wait and watch the sunrise.”

So they sat down against a low wall and watched the brain model in front of them. Its flashing phosphorescence was hypnotic, and she drifted off to sleep.

✧ The Thinker

She flew upstream along a vast gray river, the river of time, in the direction of its source, as the stars drifted through space like frozen glacial debris. She flew fast. One flap of her wings sent

her across a hundred million years. The universe was contracting, stars were converging, background radiation was intensifying. Ten billion years passed. The moraine of stars began to melt into a sea of energy, dissipating quickly into free particles, and those particles in turn transformed into pure energy. Space began to glow, dark red at first, and she seemed to be creeping through an energy bloodbath. Then the light intensified and turned from red to orange, and then to a blinding blue, as if she were flying inside an immense neon lamp tube. Matter had now totally dissolved into the sea of energy. Across this dazzling space she saw the spherical boundary of the universe closing inward like an immense palm. Suspended at the center of a universe that had shrunk to a size no larger than a living room, she waited for the arrival of the singularity. At last, all was plunged into darkness, and she knew that she was at the singularity.

A chill assaulted her. She discovered she was standing on an expansive white plain with the unbounded black void above her. Beneath her feet, the ground was pure white and covered with a layer of slippery transparent glue. She walked forward until she arrived at a crimson river covered with a layer of transparent film through which she could see the red water surging below. She took to the air and saw that not far off there were forks in the blood river, its many branches forming a complex network. From higher up, the rivers narrowed down to blood threads upon the white ground, which remained unbounded. She flew onward. A black ocean appeared up ahead, but when she flew over it she discovered that it was not black. Its blackness was due to its total transparency, through which she could see vividly the mountain ranges on the ocean floor. The crystalline ranges radiated from the center of the ocean and extended to its shores....she flew desperately upward for ages, and then looked down again upon the entire universe.

The universe was a giant eye watching her in silence.

...

She awoke with a start, her forehead damp with sweat, or dew. He had not slept, but had been watching her quietly all this time. In front of them on the grass, the brain model had exhausted its batteries, and the starlight passing through it had been extinguished.

Above them the stars remained as before.

“What is ‘he’ thinking?” she asked abruptly.

“Right now?”

“For the past thirty-four years.”

“The scintillation that originated in the sun was just a primitive neural impulse. These impulses occur all the time. Most of them are like the tiny ripples left by mosquitoes on the surface of a pond, and they dissipate immediately. Only when an impulse is transmitted throughout the universe does it become a complete sensation.”

“We’ve used up our entire lives and have only seen one impulse, which he may not even have felt?” she said as if dreaming.

“You could spend the entirety of human civilization without seeing even one complete sensation.”

“Life is too short.”

“Yes, life is too short....”

“A loner in the truest sense of the word,” she said.

“What?” He looked at her in confusion.

“I mean, apart from ‘him’, the rest is nothingness. He is everything, and he is thinking. Or maybe dreaming. Dreaming of what...”

“Let’s not try to be philosophers,” he said with a wave of his hand.

A thought occurred to her, and she straightened away from the wall she’d been leaning against. “According to modern cosmic inflation theory, in an expanding universe, light emitted at one point will never spread throughout the entire universe.”

“Which means that he will never have a complete sensation.”

She leveled her gaze into the infinite and was silent for a long time. Then she asked suddenly, “And us?”

Her question pitched him into a memory of yesterday. Then the first cry of a bird sounded from the forest of Siyun Mountain, and a ray of dawn appeared on the eastern horizon.

“I have,” he said with confidence. Yes, he had, once. Thirty-four years ago, a still night on this very peak, a feather-light figure in the moonlight, and a young woman’s eyes gazing at the heavens...a scintillation had been generated in his mind and had swiftly spread throughout his entire mental universe, never to disappear in the years that followed. The process was grander still: his mind contained a universe far more magnificent than the glittering universe outside, which had been expanding for fifteen billion years. Although the outside universe was vast, it had been proven to be bounded. But thoughts were infinite.

As the eastern sky grew brighter, the stars began to vanish, and a silhouette of Siyun Mountain began to emerge. Atop its high main peak, amid the vine-covered ruins of the Observatory, two people nearing sixty years of age watched the east in anticipation, waiting for a dazzling brain cell to rise above the horizon.

Translated by Joel Martinsen

All the Water in the World

Han Song

* 1. Lonely wanderer of the waterways

“That which is abundant in this world is water.”

Thus the northerner Li Daoyuan¹ sighed to himself one day.

In his day, the north was wetter and richer in vegetation than it is now. Yet it took another thousand years after Li's death before humanity came to understand the immensity of the world's water. Scientific research has shown that seventy percent of the earth's surface is covered in water, mainly seas and oceans; this just happens to be the same proportion of the human body that is made up of water.

Can we deduce from this that the world is itself a kind of organism? This is an interesting question, one that demands protracted investigation.

Whatever the case, as China has long been a country that turns its back to the sea and looks to the land, for someone in those days to say “that which is abundant in this world is water” would be as outlandish as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns.

Furthermore, Li Daoyuan's “Commentary on the Classic of the Waterways” made very little reference to the sea. Almost without fail, when the subject of the oceans is mentioned the commentary comes to an abrupt halt, or else Li passes over the subject with a stroke of the brush; for example, “The Great Liao River runs into the sea at the city of An”, or “The east of Zhejiang pours into the sea”.

This was because in those days the sea was considered the edge of the world.

The Northern and Southern Dynasties (420 - 589), when Li Daoyuan lived, were ravaged by war and fragmentation. But the water that flowed from his pen, the rivers, lakes, streams, waterfalls, wells, and springs, surged unchecked, bursting through the borders set by fighting men.

In that war-torn landscape, Li Daoyuan used the maps and registries of the united Western Han imperial court (206 BCE - 8 CE) to paint his world of water, but not even he knew why. He was only ever dimly aware that he might be doing so as a sort of remedy, but that this remedy would perhaps, in the end, prove futile.

Let's say that it was futile; that he was determined to do something patently impossible. Was he not, in so doing, merely striving to play out his destiny?

And so he hoped to clarify the meaning of a man's actions, because he was acutely aware that

¹ Famous Chinese geographer and writer (470 - 527 CE), whose best known work is his “Commentary on the Classic of the Waterways”.

his obsession with water was a mystery that most men could not fathom. He knew so much of water, but what of his own soul?

Accompanying Emperor Xiaowei on his tours of inspection, when he wanted to rest he would steal off to one side, slowly smooth down his gown, and stare fixedly at the pulsing of the metalled veins on his bronzed arms; excitement would surge up inside him.

He had seen many civilians destroyed by war, he had seen the spiderweb tracery of their veins through their skin, still throbbing as they took their last breaths, the blood seething, never again to nourish their bodies. Is there really any difference between the balance of water in the world, and water in the body? Can they attain a state of perfect symbiosis? All these thoughts confused him.

But the obstinate Emperor does not see the world thus, nor do the generals preparing for war or the ministers busy with court intrigues. So Li Daoyuan became a lonely wanderer of the waterways.

It was around this time that, one night, he dreamt of red water.

At first he thought it was the blood that flowed everywhere in rivers - the rivers that often foiled his attempts to draw a pure and perfect map of the waterways. But he discovered that this was not so.

It was so dazzling in colour that it lost nearly all resemblance to water, and just like morning mist or lightning, it lingered only an instant before he awoke with a shout and sat up, dumbstruck.

The cold light from the stars poured like water down his broad, soft collar, and streamed down the hard line of his spine. After waking he recalled the image of the red water, the limitless expanse of deep red, creeping, decorous and silent. It was oppressive.

But was it a true memory? There was most likely no such body of water on earth, so perhaps the dream was an augury of something that Li Daoyuan had not yet encountered?

Over the following days the image reappeared several times in his dreams. The red water was expanding, until one day all the water in the world had turned red.

It was as if one type of water had come to rule over all other waters.

The water in the dream had become a sexual fantasy.

Suddenly, Li Daoyuan was gripped by the desire to see the waterfalls at Mengmen on the Yellow River; only their crashing waves and breathtaking heights could stir within him the doubts that no still heart should possess, and satisfy the excitement, the hunger, long stored inside him.

But as he made his way there, he became aware of a worry growing in his subconscious, that it was from the Mengmen falls that the red water spewed forth. But why did this worry him? Why the Mengmen falls on the Yellow River? Yellow and red were not complementary colours, after all.

Whatever the case, overflowing with love for, and fear of, this river of red, Li Daoyuan arrived at Mengmen. This was around the twenty-first year of the reign of Emperor Xiaowen (497 ACE), when Li Daoyuan was thirty-two years of age.

* 2. 'Mirror Tao'

Li Daoyuan was disappointed to find that the waterfall at Mengmen was not red as he'd anticipated. But the sight of the Yellow River, a witch flying wildly with tangled hair, seemed to suggest the possibility of many different types of water, including those of which Li Daoyuan as yet knew nothing.

Li Daoyuan's spirit was moved. He turned, and saw a verdant bamboo grove some hundred metres beyond the waterfall, an odd sight. As far as he was aware, bamboo grew only further south, so this must be an unusual species.

The delicacy of the bamboo contrasted intensely with the violence of the Yellow River.

This swathe of emerald green was the colour of clear, fast-moving water, and provoked an intense sense of pleasure in Li Daoyuan. A path wound its way deep into the grove, around rocks of varying sizes, over ground daubed with light and shadow. After a short while he heard the gentle sound of running water; it had none of the ferocity of the Yellow River but sounded rather like a young woman singing under her breath. Li Daoyuan was even more overjoyed.

The sound of the water rose and fell, advancing and receding, like a crystal clear stream speeding and jumping through the glossy black mountain cliffs. Li Daoyuan stilled his emotions, and began to grope his way towards the sound in a game of hide-and-seek. Left then right, forwards then backwards, his joy knew no bounds.

Suddenly the sound erupted, and it became clear he was close. He walked slowly towards it but the sound grew quieter again. Then, in an instant, it was there before him, not a galloping stream but a deep pool the size of a human face, a deep reddish brown. Long, slender bamboo encircled it on all sides, and despite the stillness of the air the surface of the pool rose and fell, as if there were fish churning the water from below.

Perplexed, he glimpsed a thatched hut through the flickering bamboo, its door, made from branches, was open. On entering he saw an old man sound asleep on a bamboo mat. At that very moment the sound of water exploded outside.

Li Daoyuan stood respectfully, with his hands by his side, waiting. Presently, the sleeping man awoke, and on seeing his guest, offered him a seat and some tea. Li Daoyuan examined the old man carefully, taking in the eyebrows that fell to his shoulders, and the arms that hung below his knees; Li Daoyuan knew that he was a hermit and he was filled with veneration.

The tea was a cool, green colour, with no trace of red in it, and therefore couldn't have been made with the water from the pool outside. Just then, the water in the pool exploded again.

"It is my observation that there is no fresh water spring nearby, only that stagnant pool. It should be still, but why does it froth and roar so?" Li Daoyuan asked.

"There is much my guest does not understand," the old man replied sternly. "This is no ordinary water, but a living creature."

Li Daoyuan was astonished. The old man invited him to go down to the pool. The water was still, and only made faint mumbling sounds as if it was talking quietly with the old man. Li Daoyuan clapped his hands together and declared it a marvel.

"Creatures such as this are no different in substance to water," the old man said. "Their shape changes according to their substance. This one's name is 'Mirror Tao'."

"Why is he here?"

"Three years ago, one night at the end of the lunar cycle, a thunderstorm gathered over the Mengmen falls. Early the next morning this pool had appeared. At first it did not appear strange, it was only afterwards that I realised it was no ordinary water."

After he finished speaking the old man called out a few times and again the water began to churn, emitting a noise like a brave lion or a strong man, before reverting to the voice of a young

woman, or a cicada. Li Daoyuan tried calling out to the water but it ignored him, seeming rather displeased and embarrassed, like a young girl laying eyes on a young man for the first time.

Li Daoyuan told the old man that he had dreamt many times of this red water, and had journeyed here to investigate. The old man could not help but sigh.

Li Daoyuan reexamined the water and observed that it was clear and transparent, with no impurities, and the glossy appearance of lacquer. It was as if he was still dreaming. He reached out and brushed the surface of the water; it felt as if he had been ambushed by the warm, tender skin of a young woman. He reached further into the water, but it felt sticky, holding him. He wrenched his hand out. The water sounded as if was sneering at him, guffawing.

He returned to the hut with the old man. The old man told him that over the course of time he had learned to distinguish between the different sounds the water made, and in this way he had conversed with 'Mirror Tao', and had come to understand his life story.

'Mirror Tao' had told the old man that he had already forgotten which dynasty he came from, and did not even know if he was from the past or the future. All he remembered was that his forefathers were creatures not unlike humans, and they lived on the land. Then there had been a war, which destroyed their habitat, and they had no choice but to take refuge in the water, to which they soon adapted.

At first, they still looked much like human beings, but over the course of some ten thousand years they evolved to take on new forms, giving themselves over to a life in water - 'I am the world, the world is me', and that way, they could live forever.

Then, one day, a new calamity befell them, and they had no choice but to leave the water and migrate to an unknown space.

More misfortune followed. It was not clear what exactly had gone wrong, but during the journey obstacles were hurled down in their path, and they never reached their destination.

"Where was this world in which they lived, where they formed a perfect union with the water?"

"The sea."

"So the whole sea migrated!" Li Daoyuan looked at the tiny pool, terrified.

"Indeed, 'Mirror Tao' is the sea, and the sea is 'Mirror Tao'," the old man said sadly. "All his efforts to escape ultimately failed."

Li Daoyuan didn't know much about the sea, but on hearing this a tidal wave of emotion crashed over him. It was impossible for him to imagine that such a vast expanse of ocean and this meagre pool were one and the same thing. And when did the blue of the sea become red? Just as 'Mirror Tao' had wondered himself, did this happen in the past or in the future? He was deeply confused. The one thing he could be certain of was that the sea was, at that moment, still rising and falling, far away and indifferent to their concerns. Just as Li Daoyuan had never set foot in the south, when on earth would the ocean have come here?

"It's such a pitiful creature. How long can he possibly survive here?"

"I fear time is running out."

"What if we return him to running water?" As he suggested this, an image of the Yellow River at Mengmen appeared before his eyes, the waters surging with an energy he had never seen before. He thought of all his previous experiences with water, and dearly hoped that he could help save 'Mirror Tao'.

“If we do that, this creature will rapidly disperse and become a new ocean. It will be a way for him to be born again and grow. All the world’s water will turn red. ‘He is the one, the one is many.’” The old man frowned slightly.

“Then...”

“Then, our world will become a world of water, and it will no longer contain the water we know.”

Li Daoyuan didn’t know how to respond.

Night had fallen, and Li Daoyuan stayed with the old man in his thatched hut. During the third night watch he awoke to the sound of whimpering from outside. It was hard to imagine that there was a life form, a world, which was formed out of water. He couldn’t help wondering whether the members of this strange species hadn’t destroyed themselves through some imprudence?

The sobbing grew louder. Was ‘Mirror Tao’ crying?

Maybe he was calling out to other creatures – all the world’s water? But Li Daoyuan already knew that those bodies of water had no souls.

Li Daoyuan was curious about where the creature had originally planned to seek refuge. Where was it? A new place of escape beyond the sea, was, unfortunately, hard to imagine.

The old man must have been used to it, as the sound did not wake him, and instead he snored loudly, seemingly caught up in a sweet dream. Li Daoyuan was disturbed and upset, so he threw on his clothes and went out.

The darkness was permeated with a fearful atmosphere; this was the time of night when even monsters did not dare venture abroad. It reached into even the densest corners, and up in the sky a ferocious, dark red nebula loomed above him. This mysterious wreath, far, far away, had never before hung so low. It felt as if it were about to drop onto his head. Li Daoyuan thought it looked like a bloodstain splashed on the sky. His whole body shook. After that, a thought that had never really occurred to him before appeared dimly in his mind. He had difficulty describing what exactly it was, it exceeded his powers of comprehension, nothing could induce greater despair than this.

‘Mirror Tao’s sobs became even more mournful. The surface of the water began leaping and jumping energetically, and then formed a column one metre high, as if reaching out to that other world, but the distance was still too great. Finally, the column of water gave up, and fell back, dejected, to perfect stillness.

Li Daoyuan sensed... we might call it space, but actually it was something that exists outside of space, with a strength that exceeds all else, and the most elementary of structures; something which can neither be seen nor comprehended, but makes a prisoner of your imagination. Was it water? Or not water? It was the first time that such an awkward experience had intruded upon his otherwise perfectly planned life, introducing the possibility of change. When faced with this sort of being, one so impossible to describe in words, he thought, it didn’t matter if he were water or a person, the question remained, how could ‘Mirror Tao’ hope to rescue himself so easily?

A sourceless, lancinating pain made him want to wail and cry out. At that moment, he felt that the pool of water was watching him like a surprised and timid eye. Ashamed, he controlled his feelings.

But for the ocean, what did it actually mean to transcend the ‘space’ of space? And how did ‘Mirror Tao’ discover this strange existence in the form of a water creature? If he really found his place of refuge, what form would he have to take in order to survive? One fears it would not be water.

Nothing in this world has an innate form.

At that moment, Li Daoyuan became conscious of his connection to the water, and a feeling of terror surged inside of him. He felt that his thoughts and body were about to become one with the water.

He stood, frozen to the spot, helpless, while the roseate dawn spread across the sky, and everything seemed to slip into the past like a nightmare.

The water did not stir, but in its redness appeared a layer of ash. Flustered, he used his hand to stir the water, and could feel it beginning to coagulate, freeze, and recede.

“He’s dead.” Surprised, he turned back to look at the thatched hut only to see it too receding in a dense, grey fog.

He threw himself forward, using both hands to try to push the greyness back in through the flimsy bamboo door, but he was pushing a void. The void leapt into Li Daoyuan’s chest, causing him severe pain as if a screwdriver was boring through his heart. He looked up and saw that there was nothing before him but blue mountains and crags.

He turned to look behind him and saw a silver dot quivering in the sky, too high to reach, flickering close to the swollen, pallid sun before vanishing

For one moment he experienced the existence of many worlds. And the one in which he lived wasn’t necessarily the most real.

After some time he left, feeling weary. Only once he saw that the Yellow River was still flowing did he let out a sigh of relief. The water resonated deeply with his soul.

* 3. No way to escape

On his return to Luoyang, Li Daoyuan wrote about this experience in his “Commentary on the Classic of the Waterways”.

From then on, he worked even more diligently at recording all the different bodies of water in the world as if afraid that they might, one day in the future, all vanish.

Yet for a long time he refused to go to the seaside, making only the sloppiest references to the sea in a work which later scholars deemed not to be in accordance with his usually rigorous academic standards.

In the third year of the reign of Xiaochang (527 CE), after the treachery of the provincial governor of Yongzhou, Xiao Baoyin, was revealed, the court ordered Li Daoyuan to act as an ambassador beyond the Tongguan Pass, where he would negotiate with the traitor. This was, in fact, a plan to place him in danger, a plan concocted by Li Daoyuan’s political opponents, who wished to use the traitor Xiao as a means to finish Li Daoyuan off.

Li Daoyuan was, in fact, well aware of this fact, yet he went with an open heart, thinking of the pool of red water, which had witnessed the turning of time, yet had no means of escape.

A place from which even water has no escape; what manner of realm could that be?

Water, you fundamental element, you conquer all through your ability to yield, and yet you found yourself in such a predicament. Surely, this is the deeper meaning of “that which is abundant in the world is water”. It is impossible to put into words the feelings of the geographers of that age.

In the end, Li Daoyuan met his end at the Yinpan Station (close to what is now Lintong in

Shaanxi Province). His blood gushed from his body, seeped into the mud, forming myriad rivulets that eventually reached the seashore upon which he had never set foot.

As if in some fateful response, not long afterwards the manuscript of Li Daoyuan's "Commentary on the Classic of the Waterways" was destroyed in the flames of the war in Luoyang. Future generations never learned what Li Daoyuan had recorded in it.

Now, all we can do is piece together the surviving scraps that make up his description of the Mengmen falls, which amounts to one hundred and thirty-one characters. His landscape of surging waters and floating clouds has been considered a poetic masterpiece, inducing anguished sighs in subsequent generations of readers.

The Mengmen falls are today's Hukou waterfalls. Research indicates that these waterfalls have moved more than five thousand metres to the north of their position when they were visited by Li Daoyuan.

In early summer, during the last year before the beginning of the third millenium of the Christian era, the muddy waters of the Hukou waterfalls suddenly turned a clear emerald colour. According to the people who have lived the best part of their lives on the banks of the Yellow River, such a thing had never happened before. What colour the river might turn in the future is anyone's guess. Yet our most authoratative news agency has recently reported that the Hukou waterfalls will, in a hundred years' time, disappear completely.

Translated by Anna Holmwood

The Butterfly Effect

Fei Dao

* 1. “Inception”¹

The great educator Kong Zhongni (Confucius), after a lifetime of frustrations and peregrinations, determined to ascend Mt. Taishan to look at the heavens. As he stood on the peak gazing at the azure sky, he saw two frolicking fishes, Yin and Yang. But when he touched them, heaven and earth collapsed.

When he awoke, Zhongni heard thunderous shouts of “Kill! Kill!” and “remembered” that he was the leader of a peasant uprising. The King of Chu had used the dream-machine invented by the scientist Gong Shuban² in an attempt to transplant into his head the notion that: “Compassion is the true way to rescue the world from chaos”. Yet the evil characters in his dream, who forced him on his peregrinations, were actually his own subconscious.

General Kong, seeing through this trickery, gave a contemptuous smile.

* 2. Terminator

The First Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di was a brutal tyrant. The anti-government rebel, Chen Sheng³ ordered man-made terminators to assassinate the Emperor Qin.

The first Terminator he sent, Jing Ke⁴ experienced sudden programming faults because he was running pirated software. He failed in his assassination attempt and was put to death.

The second Terminator, Gao Jianli⁵, struck the Qin Emperor with his *zhu* but failed to kill him because he used a village-made/knock-off⁶ *zhu*. He was put to death.

¹ The title for the film in Chinese is “Dream Robbing” [Trans]

² More commonly known as Lu Ban (507 - 440 BC), Gong was a Chinese carpenter, engineer and thinker

³ Peasant leader of a rebellion in 209BCE which ultimately caused the demise of the Qin Dynasty.

⁴ Jing Ke, celebrated for his failed attempt to assassinate the First Emperor Qin Shi Huang Di in 227BCE.

⁵ Musician and expert in performing on a hammered-string instrument called the “*zhu*”. After the death of Jing Ke, Gao Jianli was invited to perform at the Imperial Palace and attacked the Emperor with his instrument.

⁶ Pun intended: the author uses 山寨[mountain-village] which looks very like the characters 山寨[fake/counterfeit designer goods]

The third Terminator, Zhang Liang ⁷, was betrayed and beat his hammer against an empty chariot. He was put to death.

The fourth Terminator, No Name ⁸, lacked determination and was talked around by the Emperor of Qin. Abandoning his mission, he took his own life.

* * *

Realizing the situation was hopeless, Chen Sheng staked all in one final attempt: he created the Nth Terminator, the woman Meng Jiangnü ⁹. If the Emperor of Qin could not be killed, then she would use ultrasonic waves as a weapon which would shatter his lifetime's achievements.

* 3. 2001: *A Space Odyssey*

Once peace was established, Liu Che ¹⁰ surveyed his unaccustomed expanse of territory and felt uneasy.

When Zhang Qian ¹¹ sent word to the Emperor that a square, jet-black stele had been discovered in the desert, the Emperor Wu seemed to hear it as a call from Heaven. He had craftsmen create a great dragon of bronze, inspired by the stele. The Emperor mounted it and flew off to the depths of the universe, turning his back on earthly wealth and honours.

He did not return to this dark world again. Once he had gone through the starry gate, he could see the past and the future. Amid the oceans of Time, once he had understood the truth, he became a star child, and turned his profound gaze on the speck of dust that was the homeland from which he had come.

Only Zhang Heng ¹², who spent his nights star-gazing, sometimes heard him give a faint far-away sigh.

⁷ A politician of the Warring States Period state of Han, Zhang Liang did much to help found the Han Dynasty. He attempted to assassinate the Emperor Qin using an enormous hammer, but failed because he was directed not to the Emperor's carriage but to an empty one.

⁸ The assassin known as No Name in the 21st century Chinese film, *Hero*, finally submits to the notion of centralized power and relinquishes a golden opportunity to assassinate the Emperor Qin.

⁹ The heroine of a Qin Dynasty folk tale. Meng Jiangnü's husband died building the Great Wall. Meng Jiangnü went in search of her husband and when she heard of his death, she wept so loudly that she "cried the Wall down".

¹⁰ Liu Che was the personal name of Emperor Wu, seventh Han dynasty emperor and a Chinese "King Solomon". He reigned for 54 years (141 BCE – 87 BCE) and expanded the frontiers of Han China to their greatest extent.

¹¹ An explorer and diplomat under Emperor Wu, Zhang Qian was posted twice to the Western regions and established the Silk Road.

¹² A great astronomer of the first and second centuries CE.

* 4. Avatar

When “Mr. Five Willows”¹³ was a young man, he was boundlessly ambitious. Later, disillusioned, he happened upon the Peach Blossom Utopia. It was inhabited by hermits from other planets, who lived off wild fruits and the water from mountain streams, reciting poetry and practicing calligraphy.

Time went by and he began to yearn for worldly pleasures. He secretly returned home in the hopes of taking his lady wife, Zhai, with him to live as an Immortal. However, he was apprehended by the secret police who had had him under surveillance.

The country was in turmoil and the people longed for peace. The Emperor heard that the “heart of the universe”¹⁴ was to be found in this Peach Blossom Utopia and if he could get hold of it, he could subdue the entire kingdom. He therefore led his army to invade it and did not return for a decade. According to posthumous records left by the inventor Ma Deheng¹⁵, he created an avatar, and used it as a Trojan horse to penetrate Utopia. But although he wreaked havoc, he found no “heart of the universe” and the Utopia could not be restored.

* 5. S1m0ne

As a lover of aesthetic art, Li Longji¹⁶ organized a solar system beauty contest in the hopes of finding the most beautiful woman in the universe. But no one met his expectations. Then he badgered the famous monk Yi Xing until he created the most perfectly beautiful woman. Li Longji’s heart broke as soon as he set eyes on her.

After this, Li Longji turned his back on the human world to satiate himself with this ineffable beauty of the virtual games world. Ministers and commoners alike complained that the Son of Heaven had been seduced by fantasy, plunging the prosperous world which his ancestors had carved out for him into crisis. The Emperor felt occasional pangs of guilt and uninstalled the game. However he secretly kept one file and would soon succumb to temptation and re-install it.

At Ma Wei Po, where Yang Guifei was killed, the troops treated His Majesty with ECT. The Emperor Li Longji, weeping, finally permanently reformatted his lady. Many years later when he was old and grey and alone in his dreary Immortality Palace, he still yearned for his Yang Guifei and remembered how beautiful and tragic she had looked when he first saw her that evening.

¹³ Tao Yuanming, named Mr. Five Willows from the trees which surrounded his cottage, was a reclusive poet of the fourth and fifth centuries CE. In his essay *Peach Blossom Spring*, he describes a Utopia of peace and tranquility, cut off from the rest of the world.

¹⁴ The Buddhist notion of the ultimate truth. [Trans.]

¹⁵ One of the most celebrated mechanical inventors in the history of ancient science and technology. Lived about second century CE.

¹⁶ Personal name of Xuanzong, the Tang Dynasty Emperor under whom the country was plunged into turbulent times. His ministers were of the opinion the roots of the troubles lay in his infatuation with his beloved concubine Yang Guifei, and forced him to issue an order to have her killed.

* 6. The Matrix ¹⁷

“Old man Yue!”

General Yue Fei ¹⁸ recalled how his teacher once warned him: “If people hail you as the saviour of the world, be careful.”

The fierce soldiers of the Kingdom of Jin fell back in disarray when they met him, yet the great Song Dynasty which General Yue Fei was protecting always ordered him to halt at the crucial moment. Every time he was enjoying his wine at a banquet, Yue Fei came to the realization that he did not know if he was a slave in revolt against the matrix or an anti-virus software embedded in the matrix itself. How was he to make use of the powerful body which fate had bestowed on him in this virtual environment?

On his death-bed, General Yue wanted to tell Zhang Xian and Yue Yun that this was just a dream. But having spent half a century in glorious battle, he had forgotten the truth which had come to him so long ago when he swallowed the red pills. That’s destiny! You may think that “Heaven shines bright” ¹⁹, but if you are a protagonist in a game, who bestows the setting “absolute loyalty to his country” on you?

* 7. Iron man

When Temuchin ²⁰ was born, a ray of scarlet light shone from his chest. Later, he waged war all over the Galaxy, relying on the “heart of the universe” which Heaven had bestowed on him.

His gigantic body was like a dark comet whistling through the planetary system. The Great Khan’s god-like will was more invincible than the densest neutron armour. Spiderman, Batman and green giants and supermen from distant planets quailed before him, and the constellations dimmed. Only the invisible black hole was totally indifferent to him.

The Great Khan feared that his heart might leave him one day and his corruptible flesh might become the burden he had dreamed of. He took a nap, then upon awakening flew to a black hole, in the belief that in this underworld of unfathomable darkness, he might metamorphose into King Kong and lord it over the entire universe.

¹⁷ The title of the film in Chinese is “Empire of Hackers” [Trans]

¹⁸ Yue Fei was a famous general of the Southern Song Dynasty who opposed the invasion of barbarian forces. Later he was the victim of trumped-up charges by a treacherous minister, and was killed together with his son, Yue Yun, and the general Zhang Xian who was under his command. It is alleged that the sobriquet “absolute loyalty to his country” was scratched on his back by his mother.

¹⁹ Yue Fei believed that “Heaven[’s light] shines bright” and the truth would finally be revealed, thus exonerating him.[Trans.]

²⁰ The Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan. [Trans.]

✧ 8. Star Trek

During a very long journey through space, Zheng He ²¹, the captain of the *Da Ming*, killed time with the aid of *The Records of the Grand Historian* and chess games with Einstein.

For many years he had been able to find spiritual comfort in that brilliant book. That most manly of men ²² who lived more than one thousand years before him helped him to understand that, no matter how great the humiliation inflicted on you, great thinking can annihilate evildoers. Thus, when he received the Emperor's orders, he resolved to employ his fleet to complete the task which the Grand Scribe had only begun with his pen.

On its voyage, the *Da Ming* spread Imperial Chinese military might and culture through the world, Zheng He formed many alliances and exchanged gifts of great value. Poets on board wrote unfinished epics, while scientists made discoveries without end.

As Zheng He got older, he grew melancholy. Einstein said that the earth has been in existence for billions of years, thus everything he thought had long since turned to dust and ashes. This shows the inevitability of the theory of relativity.

“Go faster,” cried the captain, gesticulating, hoping that that he could catch up with time and recall his original name.

✧ 9. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy ²³

Hong-Li Aisin-Gioro ²⁴ had a dream about the extermination of humanity while in a West Lake brothel.

When he awoke, the Emperor called all the world's scholars together and spent ten years assembling all humankind's learning together in the *Complete Library of the Four Treasures of Knowledge*. When the end of the world approached, his descendants used this learning as a guide as they roamed the Galaxy.

One September morning sixty years after the death of the Emperor Qianlong, the Englishmen Carrington and Hodgson both separately observed a bright solar flare ²⁵. Brilliant polar auroras have for many years caused a plethora of doomsday myths. The next year, English and French forces attacked Beijing and seized the *Complete Library of the Four Treasures of Knowledge*.

Guided by the Library, the white men boarded spaceships and set off for the Galaxy in search

²¹ Admiral and navigator of the Ming Dynasty who sailed seven times to the Western Oceans at the head of a great fleet.

²² The Grand Scribe Sima Qian, a great historian who was castrated for offending a Han Dynasty Emperor, and later wrote *The Records of the Grand Historian* as an angry riposte.

²³ The title of the film in Chinese is “Hitchhikers Guide to the Milky Way” [Trans]

²⁴ Personal name of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Qianlong. He compiled the *Complete Library of the Four Treasures of Knowledge*, the biggest encyclopedia in Chinese history, which preserved large quantities of documents. Equally, he used this as an opportunity to requisition books from all over China, destroying and falsifying much material.

²⁵ Carrington-Hodgson white light solar flare on 1 September 1859. [Trans]

of pastures new, leaving earthly disasters behind them. But until the day they died they never knew that the Emperor Qianlong foresaw in his dream not only doomsday but also the great fire which consumed the Summer Palace ²⁶. When the Library was compiled, much key knowledge was excised or repudiated, and the result was a maze which entrapped poor white men forever within the brains of the dead. Guided by the soul of the late Emperor Qianlong, the Empire of the Great Qing slowly ascended and flew off in quite another direction.

✧ 10. Back to the Future

Ladies and gentlemen of the future:

Tonight a shadow of a young woman suddenly leapt out of the moonlight and said:

“I am your descendant, sir!”

A radiant girl, she began to talk as if in her sleep. When I heard about the unprecedented prosperity and true perfection which was to come, I felt moved, and was almost prepared to go with her to be a history exhibit. Although I was only invited as a living corpse to be admired by my descendants, it was worth dying for the privilege of seeing the long-vanished Peach Blossom Utopia with my own eyes, even if I turned to dust on my journey through time. But then doubts set in as I heard that some things were not right, and when she asked me to lecture to the people of the future, I took this as an opportunity to pull out. However, the look of disappointment on this young woman’s face obliged me to attempt to comfort her:

“If the future is as splendid as you say it is, it requires redoubled efforts from me today. If not, then I will not need to go further,” I told her.

She departed, still disappointed. Although I was put to shame by the adoration of my descendant, I had no alternative.

There is something which does not give me pleasure in heaven, so I do not want to go there. There is something which does not give me pleasure in hell, so I do not want to go there. And there is something which does not give me pleasure in the golden world of your future, so I do not want to go there. ²⁷

But it reminds me of a dream I had when I was young. I had translated some science fiction, made some rambling utterances and had ambitions to write myself. Later, this dream disappeared along with everything else. If it comes to mind now as I write this trifling piece, please take it as an expression of appreciation to you all for your goodwill towards me!

Translated by Nicky Harman

²⁶ The Yuan Ming Yuan (Summer Palace) was razed to the ground by British and French forces in 1860. [Trans]

²⁷ I quote here from the twentieth century writer Lu Xun, who translated the science fiction of Jules Verne. Lu Xun was a great admirer of this literary genre, which he believed could promote progress in China.

Peregrine

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