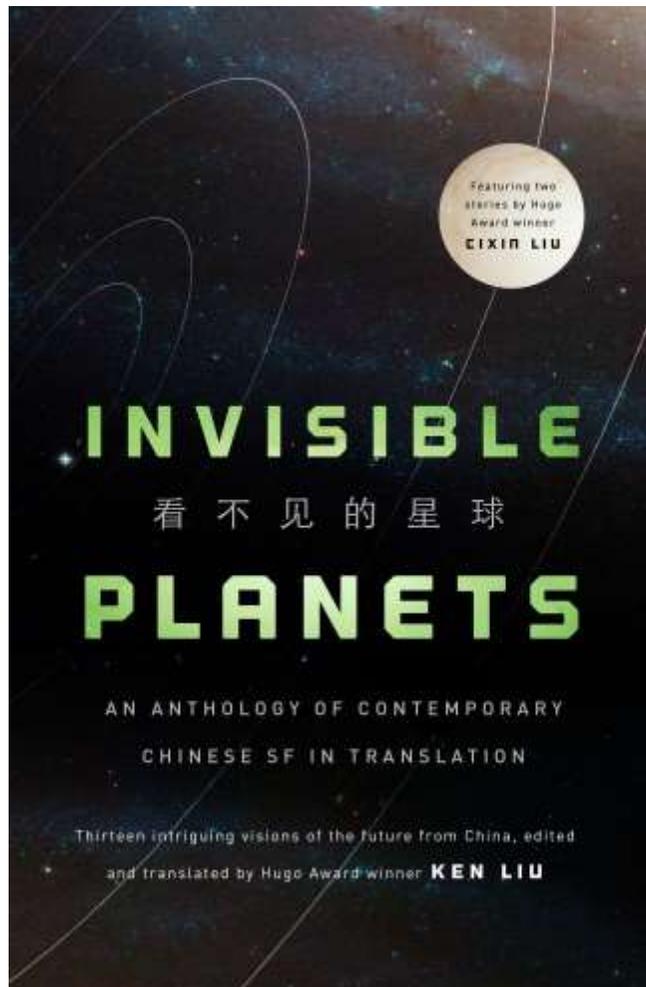


NTM Premiere: Chinese Science Fiction Translated by Ken Liu



Today's post brings another National Translation Month premiere: for the first time since we started this project, we're featuring the science fiction genre and would like to introduce our readers to the first English-language anthology of contemporary Chinese science fiction, [Invisible Planets](#) (Tor Books, 2016). The anthology is edited and translated by Ken Liu, winner of the Hugo Award in 2015. We're delighted to publish an excerpt—the story titled *The Fish of Lijiang* by Chen Qiufan, originally published in English in the August 2011 issue of *Clarkesworld*—as well as Ken Liu's introduction to the book offering insightful notes on context and process.

We'd love to hear from you! Let us know how you like our posts, or attend, share, and spread the word about our readings. Open your heart to new experiences and the beauty of the world, and celebrate its cultures and new voices using #NTM2017. Happy National Translation Month!

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

A Note From the Translator: Chinese Science Fiction in Translation *by Ken Liu*

This anthology collects a selection of short speculative fiction from China that I've translated over the years in one volume. Some have won awards in the US; some have been selected for inclusion in various "Year's Best" anthologies; some have been well reviewed by critics and readers; and some are simply my personal favorites.

China has a vibrant, diverse science fiction culture, but few stories are translated into English, making it hard for non-Chinese readers to appreciate them. I hope this anthology can serve as an introduction for the Anglophone reader.

The phrase "China Dreams" is a play on President Xi Jinping's¹ promotion of the "Chinese Dream" as a slogan for China's development. Science fiction is the literature of dreams, and texts concerning dreams always say something about the dreamer, the dream interpreter, as well as the audience.

Whenever the topic of Chinese science fiction comes up, Anglophone readers ask: "How is Chinese science fiction different from science fiction written in English?"

I usually disappoint them by replying that the question is ill-defined and...there isn't a neat sound bite for an answer. Any broad literary classification tied to a culture—especially a culture as in flux and contested as contemporary China's—encompasses all the complexities and contradictions in that culture. Attempts to provide neat answers will only result in broad generalizations that are of little value, or stereotypes that reaffirm existing prejudices.

To start with, I don't believe that "science fiction written in English" is a useful category for comparison (the fiction written in Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States are all quite different, and there are further divisions within and across such geographical boundaries), and so I wouldn't even know what baseline I'm supposed to be distinguishing "Chinese science fiction" *from*.

Moreover, imagine asking a hundred different American authors and critics to characterize "American science fiction"—you'd hear a hundred different answers. The same is true of Chinese authors and critics and Chinese science fiction.

Even within the limited selection of this anthology, you'll encounter the "science fiction realism" of Chen Qiufan, the "porridge SF" of Xia Jia, the overt, wry political metaphors of Ma Boyong, the

¹ All Chinese names in this anthology are given with surname first, in accordance with Chinese custom.

surreal imagery and metaphor-driven logic of Tang Fei, the dense, rich language-pictures painted by Cheng Jingbo, the fabulism and sociological speculation of Hao Jingfang, and the grand, hard science fictional imagination of Liu Cixin. This should give a hint of the broad range of the science fiction written in China. Faced with such variety, I think it is far more useful and interesting to study the authors as individuals and to treat their works on their own terms rather than to try to impose a pre-conceived set of expectations on them because they happen to be Chinese.

This is all a rather long-winded way of saying that I think anyone who confidently asserts a definitive characterization of “Chinese science fiction” is either a) an outsider who doesn’t know what they’re talking about; or b) someone who *does* know something, but is deliberately ignoring the contested nature of the subject and presenting their opinion as fact.

So, I will state right up front that I do not consider myself an expert on Chinese science fiction. I know enough to know that I don’t know much. I know enough to know that I need to study more—a lot more. And I know enough to know that there are no simple answers.²

China is going through a massive social, cultural, and technological transformation involving more than a billion people of different ethnicities, cultures, classes, and ideological sympathies, and it is impossible for anyone—even people who are living through these upheavals—to claim to know the entire picture. If one’s knowledge of China is limited to Western media reports or the experience of being a tourist or expat, claiming to “understand” China is akin to a man who has caught a glimpse of a fuzzy spot through a drinking straw claiming to know what a leopard is. The fiction produced in China reflects the complexity of the environment.

Given the realities of China’s politics and its uneasy relationship with the West, it is natural for Western readers encountering Chinese science fiction to see it through the lens of Western dreams and hopes and fairytales about Chinese politics. “Subversion” in the pro-West sense may become an interpretive crutch. It is tempting, for example, to view Ma Boyong’s “The City of Silence” as a straightforward attack on China’s censorship apparatus, or to read Chen Qiufan’s “The Year of the Rat” only as criticism of China’s education system and labor market, or even to reduce Xia Jia’s “A Hundred

² There is, in fact, a fairly vibrant body of academic scholarship about Chinese science fiction, with insightful and interesting commentary by scholars such as Mingwei Song, Nathaniel Isaacson, and others. Panels on Chinese science fiction are quite common at academic conferences on comparative literature and Asian studies. However, my impression is that many (most?) genre readers, writers, and critics in established science fiction fandom are not familiar with this body of work. The scholarly essays generally avoid the pitfalls I warn about and are nuanced and careful in their analysis. Readers seeking an informed opinion are urged to look up these works.

Ghosts Parade Tonight” to a veiled metaphor for China’s eminent domain policies in the service of state-driven development.

I would urge the reader to resist such temptation. Imagining that the political concerns of Chinese writers are the same as what the Western reader would like them to be is at best arrogant and at worst dangerous. Chinese writers are saying something about the globe, about all of humanity, not just China, and trying to understand their works through this perspective is, I think, the far more rewarding approach.

It is true that there is a long tradition in China of voicing dissent and criticism through the use of literary metaphor; however, this is but one of the purposes with which writers write and for which readers read. Like writers everywhere, today’s Chinese writers are concerned with humanism, with globalization, with technological advancement, with tradition and modernity, with disparities in wealth and privilege, with development and environmental preservation, with history, rights, freedom, and justice, with family and love, with the beauty of expressing sentiment through words, with language play, with the grandeur of science, with the thrill of discovery, with the ultimate meaning of life. We do the works a disservice when we neglect these things and focus on geopolitics alone.

Despite the diversity of approaches and subjects and styles, the authors and stories collected in this anthology represent but a narrow slice of the contemporary Chinese science fiction landscape. Though I’ve tried to balance the selection to reflect a range of viewpoints, I’m aware of the narrowness of my scope. Most of the authors collected here (with the exception of Liu Cixin) belong to the younger generation of “rising stars” rather than the generation of established, prominent figures such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, or Wang Jinkang. Most of them are graduates of China’s most elite colleges and work in highly regarded professions. Moreover, I’ve focused on award-winning authors and stories rather than popular fiction published on the Web, and I’ve prioritized works that I think are more accessible in translation than works requiring a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and history. These biases and omissions are necessary, but not ideal; the reader should thus be cautious about any conclusions they may draw from the stories here being “representative.” My fondest hope is that each story here at least adds a layer to the reader’s understanding and awareness of a literary tradition different from the one they might be used to.

To round out the collection and provide a more comprehensive overview of Chinese science fiction, I’ve included three essays at the end of the book by Chinese authors and scholars. Liu Cixin’s essay, “The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths,” gives a historical

overview of the genre in China and situates his own rise to prominence as the premier Chinese science fiction author within that context. Chen Qiufan's "The Torn Generation" gives the view of a younger generation of authors trying to come to terms with the tumultuous transformations around them. Finally, the essay by Xia Jia, who holds the first Ph.D. degree issued for a specialization in the study of Chinese science fiction, "What Makes Chinese Science Fiction Chinese?", offers a starting point for academic analysis of this body of work.

#

Noted translator William Weaver compared translation to a performing art. I like that metaphor. When doing a translation, I'm engaging in a cultural and linguistic performance, an attempt to re-create an artifact in a new medium. It is a humbling and thrilling experience.

I feel incredibly privileged to have had the chance to work with the authors in this anthology. In many instances, what began as professional collaboration has turned into personal friendship. From them, I've learned much not just about translation, but also writing fiction and living life across the boundaries of cultures and languages. I'm grateful that they entrusted their work to me.

I hope you enjoy the result.

THE FISH OF LIJIANG

By Chen Qiufan

Translated by Ken Liu

Excerpted from *Invisible Planets: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese SF in Translation*

Published by Tor Books

Two fists are before my eyes, bright sunlight reflecting from the backs of the hands.

“Left or right?”

I see myself reaching out with a child’s finger, hesitating, and pointing to the one on the left. The fist flips, opens. Empty.

The fists disappear and reappear.

One more chance. Left or right?”

I point to the one on the right.

“You’re sure? Want to change your mind?”

My finger hesitates in the air, waving left, then right, like a swimming fish.

“Final answer? Three . . . two . . . one.”

My finger stops on the left. The fist flips, opens. Other than the bright sunlight, the hand is empty.

A dream?

I open my eyes. The sun is bright white and hurts my eyes. I’ve been dozing in this Naxi-style courtyard for who knows how long. I haven’t felt this comfortable in such a long time. *The sky is so fucking blue.* I stretch until my bones crack.

After ten years, everything here has changed. The only thing that remains the same is the color of the sky.

Lijiang, I’m back. This time, I’m a sick man.

Twenty- four hours ago, I had a multiplicity of identities: an office drone with a strict routine, the master of a gray Ford, the prospective owner of a moldy apartment tucked into a hidden fold of the city, a debt-ridden parasite, etc.

Now I'm just a patient, a patient in need of rehabilitation.

It's the fault of that damned mandatory physical exam. On the last page of the report were the words, "PNFD II (Psychogenic Neural-Functional Disorder II)." Translated into words normal people can understand, they say that I'm messed up and I must take two weeks off to rehabilitate.

My face flushed, I asked my boss whether I could be exempted. I *felt* the stares of everyone in the office burning into the back of my neck. *Schadenfreude*. They were delighted that the "boss's pet" was shown to be human after all, weak in the head, collapsing under the stress.

I shuddered. That's office politics for you.

The boss spoke slowly, methodically. "You think I want this? I have to pay for your mandatory vacation! People working at other companies can't get rehab even if they need it. But the new labor law requires it of us. Our company is a proper globalized business; we have to set an example. . . . Anyway, if you get worse, your disease will turn into neurosyphilis and infect the rest of us. Better that you leave now, yes?"

Ashamed, I left the boss's office and cleaned out my desk. I ignored *the stares*. *Keep on looking, you neurosyphilitic ass holes. I'll be back in two weeks, and we'll see who gets to be assistant manager at the end of the year.*

On the airplane, I listened to the snores around me, unable to fall asleep. I'd been dealing with insomnia for more than a month. Actually, I'd been dealing with a lot of things: upset stomach, forgetfulness, headaches, fatigue, depression, loss of libido . . . maybe it really was time for me to rest for a while.

I flipped through the in-flight magazine. The pictures of the tourist sights around Lijiang were so beautiful they almost seemed fake.

Ten years ago, I had nothing and no cares. Ten years ago, Lijiang was a paradise for those who liked

to exile themselves from civilization. (Or to put it less pretentiously, that was where young people who fancied themselves “artists” slept with one another.) Ten years ago, I carried everything I owned on my back (still had some muscles then). A map of the ancient city in my pocket, I wandered through it from morning till midnight, chatted with every woman who was alone, fell asleep to the accompaniment of song and alcohol.

Now I’m back. I have a car, a house— everything a man should have, including erectile dysfunction and insomnia. If happiness and time are the two axes of a graph, then I’m afraid the curve of my life has already passed the apex and is on its inexorable way down to the bottom.

I stay still, thinking of nothing. Sunlight falls from the tops of the high walls into the yard, which smells of Chinese mahogany. I don’t know how much time has passed. My watch, mobile, and any other gadget capable of displaying time have been taken away by the staff of the rehabilitation center.

The ancient city has no computers and no TV. But some of the inhabitants have decided to rent out the space on their foreheads and chests. Tiny LCDs are embedded into their skin, showing all kinds of ads twenty- four hours a day. Like I said, this is no longer the Lijiang I knew.

Strangely, my desire to get better as soon as possible so that I can get back to the office is fading in the sunlight, like the fading smell of the Chinese mahogany.

My stomach growls, once. I decide to go find something to eat. My stomach seems the only way I have left to tell time—oh, also my bladder and the shifting lights in the sky.

The slate-lined street has few pedestrians—this part of the city is reserved for the use of the rehabilitating patients. There *are* many stray dogs, however: fat, thin, all kinds.

On the flight here I heard a joke. Serious economic criminals, in addition to the death penalty and life imprisonment, can now be sentenced to a third kind of punishment: becoming experimental subjects for consciousness transfer operations in Lijiang so that they can be turned into dogs. Normally, because these experiments often fail, no one volunteers. But the idea of living in Lijiang is so attractive—even as a dog— that many have jumped at the opportunity.

Seeing how these dogs are so obsequious before pretty girls and so nervous before city inspectors, I almost think the joke is reportage.

I finish a bowl of soy chicken, find a café, and sit with a cup of black coffee. I flip through a few books I've always been meaning to read (and will never finish) and think about "the meaning of life."

Is this how you get better? Without any physical therapy, medication, special diet, yoga, yin- yang dynamics, or any other kind of professional care? Is this the meaning of the slogan plastered all over the rehabilitation center: "Healthy Minds, Happy Bodies"?

I have to admit it: I have a great appetite; I'm sleeping well; I'm relaxed; I feel better even than I did ten years ago.

Even my nose, which has been stuffed up for several weeks, can now pick out the fragrance of sachets in a coffee shop. Wait. Sachets? I lift my head. A girl in a dark green dress is sitting across from me, holding a drink that smells delicious and looking at me with a big smile on her face. This is like the hook for some French film, I think, or maybe a dream, either sweet or terrifying.

"So you're in marketing?"

The woman and I are walking together in the light of the setting sun. The stone- paved street is bathed in a golden glow. Lovely smells waft from the snack bars.

"Sure. You can also say I'm in sales. How about you? Office lady? Civil service? Police? Teacher?" Then I add a bit of flattery. "Actress?"

"Ha! Keep on guessing." She seems to enjoy my attempt at humor. "I'm a special-care nurse. Surprised?"

"So even nurses can get sick and need rehab."

After dinner, we go to a bar. She's disappointed by the decline in the level of service in Lijiang. "What happened to all the fun people who used to run this place?"

From one of the waiters we find out that the place is now owned by Lijiang Industries (stock code #203845), backed by several wealthy conglomerates. The local owners the woman knew sold because they either could no longer afford to keep the place running or could not afford a new license. Everything is so much more expensive now. But the stock of Lijiang Industries is doing very well.

The ancient city at night is filled with the spirit of consumerism, but we can't find anywhere we want to go. She has no interest in hearing Naxi folk music played by a robot orchestra: "Sounds like a braying donkey with its balls cut off." I don't want to see a folk dance demonstration by a bonfire: "Like a human barbecue." In the end we decide to lie down on our bellies by the side of the street, watching the

little fish swimming in the waterway.

In the waterways of Lijiang live schools of red fish. Whether it's dawn, dusk, or midnight, you can see them hovering in the water, facing the same direction, lined up like soldiers on a parade ground, ready for inspection. But if you look closer, you'll see that they aren't really still. In fact, they're struggling against the current in order to maintain their position. Once in a while, one or two fish become tired and are pushed out of the formation by the current. But soon, tails fluttering, they fight their way back into place.

It's been ten years since I last saw them. *They*, at least, haven't changed.

"Swim, swim, swim. Before you know it, life is over." I repeat the same words I said ten years ago. "Just like us," she says.

"This is the hidden meaning of life," I say. "At least we still can choose how to live." I sound so pretentious I want to gag.

"But the reality is that I didn't choose you, and you didn't choose me."

My heart skips a beat. I look at her. I really haven't thought about inviting her to come back to my hotel; I still don't feel the return of my libido. This is a misunderstanding.

She begins to laugh.

"I was quoting a song. You don't know it? Well, I'm pretty beat. Why don't we meet up again tomorrow? You're fun."

"But how do I find you . . ." I suddenly realize that I don't have my mobile.

"I'm staying here." She hands me the card from a hotel. "If you're too lazy to walk there, just get a dog."

"A dog?"

"You really don't know? Any stray dog would do. Take a piece of paper, write down the time and place you want to meet at, and stick it in the dog's collar. Then swipe the hotel card through the collar."

"You're not kidding?"

"You need to read your Lijiang guidebook."

I don't know how long I slept.

I think it's the afternoon of the second day, but the position of the sun tells me it's morning. Except I have no way of ascertaining that it's not the morning of the third day, the fourth day, or a morning that comes after a dream that lasts a lifetime.

Maybe that's the trick to full rehab: just don't dream about business reports and my boss's fat face.

I look for a dog. But the dogs here have sharp noses. They can smell the failure on me and run away. I'm forced to buy a packet of yak jerky. I feed a dog— a real son of a bitch— until it's stuffed. Finally I get it to carry my message.

In case she forgets who I am, I sign the note, "Last Night's Fish."

I wander the streets. I enjoy the sun and the idleness. No one here has any sense of time anyway, so she can come whenever she wants to.

I see an old man sitting in a corner with a falcon. The falcon and the man are both full of energy. I go up to them with my camera.

"No pictures!" the old man shouts.

"Five yuan! One dollar!" the falcon shouts in a mixture of Sichuan- accented Mandarin and English.

Fuck! They're both robots. The city has nothing authentic anymore. I turn around angrily.

"Do you want to know why the sky in Lijiang is so blue? Do you want to hear the legend of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain?" Seeing that I'm about to go away, the old man changes his pitch and even his accent. Now he sounds like a man from urbane Suzhou. "I know everything there is to know about Lijiang. One yuan only for each piece of information."

Why not? I just want to kill some time. Might as well hear his lies. I take out a coin and stick it into the falcon's beak. Clink! A panel opens in the falcon's chest, revealing a pink- glowing keypad.

"To hear why the sky of Lijiang is so blue, press one. To hear the Legend of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, press two. . . ."

Enough. I press "1."

"Modern Lijiang relies on condensation control and scatter index standardization. The technology is able to maintain sunny days with probability above ninety- five- point- four- two- six percent. Through microadjustments to the atmospheric particle content, it is able to maintain the hue of the sky between

Pantone2975c and 3035c. The system is designed by . . .”

Damn it. I feel sad. Even the sky, so beautiful it’s like the pristine sky present at Creation, is fake.

“Looking for UFOs?” the woman asks as she puts her hands on my shoulders from behind.

“Can you tell me if anything here is real?” I mutter.

“Sure. There’s you. There’s me. We’re real.”

“Real sick,” I correct her.

“Tell me about yourself. I love getting to know someone.”

We’re now back in the bar. Through the window we can see the fish in the waterway below, swimming, swimming, going nowhere.

“Let’s play a game,” she says. “We take turns guessing facts about the other person. If the guess is right, the other person drinks. If the guess is wrong, the guesser drinks.”

“Sure. We’ll see who gets drunk first.”

“I’ll go first. You work for a big company, right?”

“Ha. My boss’s favorite saying is, ‘We’re a proper, global, modern, big’ ”— I lower my voice— “‘factory.’ ”

She giggles.

I can’t remember if I told her anything about my company in the past. But I take a drink anyway.

“Your patients,” I ask, “are all important people, right?” She drinks.

“You’re an important man at your company,” she says. I drink.

“I’ll ask something more interesting,” I say. “You’ve had patients who made passes at you, haven’t you?”

She blushes and drains her glass.

“You must have many girlfriends,” she says. I hesitate for a second, and drink. “*Had*” is a form of “*have*,” I tell myself.

“You are not married,” I say.

She smiles, not answering.

I shrug, taking a drink.

Only after I’m done does she lift her glass and drink.

“Not fair! You tricked me,” I say. But I’m happy.

“It’s your own fault for being impatient.”

“Fine, then I’m going to guess that you have insomnia, anxiety, arrhythmia, irregular periods . . .” I know I’ve been drinking too fast. I know I’m going to regret this, but I can’t stop talking.

She glares at me and drinks. Then she adds, “Whatever symptoms you have, I don’t. Whatever symptoms I have, you don’t.”

“We’re both here, aren’t we?”

She shakes her head. “You think nothing has meaning.”

“That was before I met you,” I say in what I think is a seductive tone. Now I’m just shameless.

She ignores me. “You’re often anxious because you hate the feeling of the seconds slipping away from you. The world is changing every day. And every day you’re getting older. But there are still so many things you haven’t done. You want to hold on to the sand. But the harder you squeeze, the quicker the sand slips from the cracks between your fingers, until nothing is left . . .”

Coming from anyone else, the words would just be pop psychology, pseudo intellectualism, cheap spirituality. But somehow, coming from her, they sound like the truth. Every word strikes against my heart, making me wince.

I drink by myself in silence. Her smile begins to multiply: two, three, four of her . . . I want to ask her something, but my tongue is no longer obeying.

She looks embarrassed. She whispers to me, “You’re drunk. I’ll take you back.”

So I’ve failed again.

It takes a long time for me to remember where I am.

During the time I'm thinking, the sun shifts through six window squares. It marches across three more window squares before I've washed away the smell of alcohol on my body and the vomit in the bathroom.

I guess Miss Nurse hasn't taken good care of this patient. I have a splitting headache.

I don't want to send a dog after her. Indeed, I'm a bit scared to meet her. Maybe she's a telepath? It makes sense to have a telepath as a special-care nurse, right? Especially if the patient can no longer speak. The biggest fear is for someone else to understand what you really fear.

A shar-pei enters my room and barks at me. I take out the slip of paper tucked into its collar.

She wants me to go with her to listen to robots playing Naxi folk music, which she'd described to me as a donkey braying with its balls cut off. She signed her note, "I'm No Telepath."

Screw you! You bourgeois bitch! I kick the shar-pei. It whimpers.

In the end, curiosity overcomes fear. I wash, get dressed, go to the concert hall. She's dressed all in yellow. I nod at her.

But she ignores my attempt to remain distant. She walks right up to me, takes my hand in hers, and drags me inside.

"Stop pretending," she whispers in my ear. I have to struggle to keep from her how aroused I am.

They begin to play. It does sound like a donkey braying. It's an insult to real Naxi music, the sort I heard ten years ago.

The robots swing back and forth, pretending to play all sorts of Naxi instruments, and recorded music streams from speakers embedded into the seats. The robots are clearly made in China: stiff, ridiculous movements; limited repertoire of gestures; monotonous expressions. Only robot Xuan Ke is made with any kind of care for detail. Once in a while he even acts as though he's completely absorbed by his performance. I worry that he'll swing so hard his head falls off.

"I thought you didn't like donkey-braying," I whisper into her ear. The fragrance of sachets surrounds me.

"This is one part of our rehabilitation."

"Yeah, right."

I try to kiss her. But she dodges out of the way, and my lips meet her fingers.

“Back in your office, on your desk, there’s a tiny gray alarm clock. It’s shaped like a mushroom, and it often runs fast.”

Her tone is calm, but I’m stupefied. That clock was a gift from the company when I won Employee of the Month. How does she know about it?

I lost the drinking game— maybe that was an accident. But this . . .

I continue to stare at her profile. The donkey- braying music washes over me like a tidal wave. I seem to have also become a robot musician. I strain to play my foolish song of seduction, but she sees through me with no effort. I have nothing in my chest but a mechanical heart made of iron.

We end up in bed together.

She acts as though this is nothing special. But not me. A man is such a strange animal: fear and desire are expressed by the same organ. For the former, he loses control of the organ and it lets out urine; for the latter, he loses control of the organ and it fills with blood.

Is this part of our rehab, too? I can imagine myself mocking her. But I don’t, because I fear how she’ll answer.

“Who are you really?” I can’t help myself.

Her voice is muffled, indistinct. “I’m a nurse. My patient is time.”

In the end she does tell me her story.

She works for a place called “Time Care Unit.” Only the most important men of the business world get to go there.

The old men are like mummies, their bodies plugged full of tubes and wires. Twenty- four hours a day they must be watched and cared for. Every day, all kinds of people come to visit. They dress in sterile biosuits and stand around the beds, communing with the old men, reporting and receiving instructions in silence.

The old men never move. Each of their breaths takes hours. Once in a while, one of them moans like a baby, and someone makes a record of it. Looking at all the biological signs, they should all be considered dead. The numbers shown on their machines never change. But they remain in that place for

years, decades.

She tells me that they are receiving “time sense dilation therapy.” She calls them “the living dead.”

The therapy began some twenty years ago. Back then, scientists discovered that by controlling the biological clock of an organism, it was possible to reduce the production of free radicals and slow down aging. But the decay of the mind and its eventual death could not be reversed or halted.

Someone made another discovery: the aging of the mind was intimately connected with the sense of the passage of time. By manipulating certain receptors in the pineal gland, it was possible to slow down one’s sense of time, to dilate it. The body of a person receiving time sense dilation therapy remains in the normal stream of time, but his mind experiences time a hundred, a thousand times slower than the rest of us.

“But what does this have to do with you?” I ask.

“You know that women who live together synchronize their biological rhythms, like menstrual cycles?”

I nod.

“It’s the same thing with us nurses who care for these living dead, day in, day out. Once a year, I have to come to Lijiang to rehabilitate, to remove the effects time dilation has on my body.”

I feel dizzy. Time sense dilation is used on those old men because of the need to maintain stock prices or to delay power struggles among successors. But what if the dilation is applied to a normal person? I try to imagine experiencing a hundred years within a second. But my imagination is not up to the task. To extend time to near infinity is to slow it down until it’s almost still. Then isn’t the mind under such dilation immortal? What’s the need for a body made of flesh?

“Remember what I told you? I didn’t choose you, and you didn’t choose me,” she says, smiling almost apologetically.

I begin to feel anxiety again, as though my fingers are wrapped around a handful of sand, leaking grains.

“You’re the other half of me, cloven by Zeus’s thunderbolt.”

The words sound to me like a curse.

She's leaving.

She tells me that her rehabilitation period is up.

We sit in the dark. In front of us is the imposing mass of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, its snowy peaks reflecting the silver moonlight. Neither of us speaks.

The donkey-braying music loops again and again in my head.

"Remember that alarm clock on your desk?" she asks.

Although time sense dilation therapy is very expensive, the opposite procedure—time sense compression—is not. The procedure is cheap enough to be commercialized. Several large conglomerates have invested in it, and taking advantage of certain loopholes in China's labor laws (and the complicity of the government), they've been conducting secret trials on Chinese employees of international companies.

That alarm clock is a prototype time sense compressor.

"So we are all lab mice," I remember mocking myself at her revelation. Even my boss is a mouse—he also has one of those clocks on his desk.

"It doesn't matter if you know the truth," she says. "The theoretical basis for time sense compression does not exist."

"Does not exist?"

"Theoretical physics says it's impossible, so they had to base it on the philosophy of Henri Bergson. It's all about intuition."

"What are you talking about?"

"I don't know." She laughs. "Maybe it's all nonsense."

"You're telling me that my disease, this PNFD II or whatever it's called, is the result of time sense compression?"

She doesn't say anything.

But it makes sense. Time passes quicker in my mind than it does in the real world. Every day I'm exhausted. I'm always working over-time. I accomplish so much more in twenty-four hours than others.

No wonder the company thinks I'm a model employee.

Clouds drift over and hide the moon, eliminating the reflected light on the snowy peaks. Everything grows darker like after they lower the lights in a theatre.

A bright red laser beam lands on the snowy cliffs—5,600 meters above the sea— now acting as a giant screen. The laser creates shifting patterns, telling an animated tale, the creation of the world. A myth has been bowdlerized to mass entertainment. I'm not in the mood to appreciate it. The dancing lights only make my heart beat irregularly.

Time sense compression is wonderful for improving productivity and GDP. But there are many side effects. The mismatch between subjective time and physical time causes metabolic problems that accumulate into severe symptoms.

The conglomerates that invested in the technology created the re- habilitation centers in China and lobbied to change the labor laws to institutionalize the idea of “rehabilitation”— and so hide the truth.

They discovered that those suffering from the side effects of time sense dilation and those suffering from the side effects of time sense compression can help one another, be one another's cure.

“I'm the yang to your yin, is that it?” So her interest in me is limited to my value as a medical device. My middle-aged male ego is hurt.

“Sure, if you insist on thinking about it that way.” Her tone, at least, is compassionate.

“What about the donkey- braying music?”

“It's a way to harmonize our biorhythms.”

I wait for her to stroke my ego by telling me that compared to her previous rehabilitation biorhythm partners, I'm better looking, more interesting, more special, etc. But she says nothing of the kind.

“What about the dogs?” I'm running out of things to say before she leaves.

“They started out as regular dogs. But because they're exposed to so many patients with out-of-sync senses of time, the structures in their brains have changed.”

“I have only one last wish.” I stare at her bright eyes, like a pair of fireflies, in the darkness. “Come and look at the fish in the waterways with me. Maybe they're the only creatures in this world who live real lives.”

The fireflies brighten. She touches my face lightly. “Actually . . .”

I silence her lips with my fingers. I shake my head. I've succeeded. There's no need for her to tell me what she's going to tell me, the three heaviest words in the world.

But she gently moves my hand away, and says three words, three different words.

“Don't be stupid.”

I'm alone by the waterway, staring at the fish.

She's gone, leaving behind no way to contact her. Sand pricks my palms. No matter how hard I squeeze, it slips away.

Fish, oh, fish, you're the only ones left to keep me company.

Suddenly I feel an intense jealousy of these fish. Their lives are so simple, so pure. There's only one direction— against the current. They do not have to hesitate, overwhelmed by an endless array of choices. But if I really lived a life like that, maybe I'd still complain. A man is never content with what he has.

Suddenly I want to spit at myself for my self- love, self- pity, self- obsession, self- self. But in the end I do nothing.

I look at one single fish: it's pushed away from its school by the current. Once, twice, thrice. It falls behind, waves its tail madly, and returns to its position.

Fuck. It's tough.

But wait.

Why is it always this one fish? Why are its trajectory and movement always exactly the same?

I wait, unblinking.

Two minutes later, that same little fish again drifts away from the school, again waves its tail madly, again returns to its position.

I lift the stone in my hand.

The stone falls through the holographic fish and sinks to the bottom of the waterway.

I have nothing left in my hand, not even a single grain of sand.

My rehabilitation over, I'm on my return flight with my not-so-healthy mind and not-so-happy body. The airplane hasn't taken off yet, but the cabin is already filled with snores.

I guess some people at least have been fully rehabilitated. Suddenly the idea of returning to that concrete jungle to struggle against my fellow time-compressors disgusts me.

The plane takes off. Cities, roads, mountains, rivers—everything recedes into a small chessboard composed of parti-colored squares. In every square, time flows faster or slower. The people below throng like a nest of ants controlled by an invisible hand, divide into a few groups, are stuffed into the different squares: time flies past the laborer, the poor, the “third world”; time crawls for the rich, the idle, the “developed world”; time stays still for those in charge, the idols, the gods . . .

Without warning, two fat hands belonging to a child appear before me, balled into fists side by side, holding the entire world.

“Left or right?”

I look to the left and then to the right. I'm frightened. I have no way to pick.

Mocking laughter.

I lunge and grab both fists and force the fingers open. Both are empty, both are lies.

“Sir, sir!”

The pretty flight attendant wakes me. Now I finally remember the origin of that dream. It was my cousin who tormented me as a child. His favorite game was to force me to guess in which hand he had hidden the candy he took away from me. He loved to tease me because I was always hesitant, always had trouble deciding.

“Sir, would you like soda, coffee, tea, or something else?”

“. . . you.”

She blushes.

I smile at her. “I just want coffee, black.”

This is the only truly free choice I have left.

About the author:



A native of Shantou, Guangdong Province, **Chen Qiufan (a.k.a. Stanley Chan)** is a fiction writer, screenwriter, columnist, and product marketing manager for Baidu. He has published fiction in venues such as *Science Fiction World*, *Esquire*, *Chutzpah!*, and *ZUI Found*, and many of these stories are collected in *Thin Code* (2012). His debut novel, *The Waste Tide* (2013), was praised by Liu Cixin as “the pinnacle of near-future SF writing.” The English edition of the novel, translated by Ken Liu, has been acquired by Tor Books.

Chen is the most widely translated young writer of science fiction in China, with his short works translated into English, Japanese, Italian, Swedish, and Polish. In English translation, he has been featured in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, and *F&SF*, among other places. He has won Taiwan’s Dragon Fantasy Award, China’s Galaxy (Yinhe) and Nebula (Xingyun) Awards, and a Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Award. http://www.sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/chen_qiufan

About the translator:



Ken Liu (<http://kenliu.name>) is an author and translator of speculative fiction, as well as a lawyer and programmer. A winner of the Nebula, Hugo, and World Fantasy awards, he has been published in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, and *Strange Horizons*, among other places.

Ken's debut novel, *The Grace of Kings* (2015), is the first volume in a silkpunk epic fantasy series, *The Dandelion Dynasty*. It won the Locus Best First Novel Award and was a Nebula finalist. He subsequently published the second volume in the series, *The Wall of Storms* (2016) as well as a collection of short stories, *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories* (2016).

In addition to his original fiction, Ken is also the translator of numerous literary and genre works from Chinese to English. His translation of *The Three-Body Problem*, by Liu Cixin, won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015, the first translated novel ever to receive that honor. He also translated the third volume in Liu Cixin's series, *Death's End* (2016) and edited the first English-language anthology of contemporary Chinese science fiction, *Invisible Planets* (2016). He lives with his family near Boston, Massachusetts.