

John Plotz: Hello and welcome to Recall This Book. Today, your hosts are me, lifelong Sci-Fi fanatic and devoted Liu Cixin fan, John Plotz and my friend, Professor Pu Wang, author of [The Translatability of Revolution](#) from Harvard University Press, and recently tenured Associate Professor of German, Russian and Asian literature here at Brandeis.

John Plotz: And we are especially honored today to be interviewing the renowned Chinese science-fiction writer, Liu Cixin, author of the bestselling and also really truly mind-bending science fiction trilogy, *The Three Body Problem*. Last year, my colleagues and I organized [a one-day conference about that work](#) and today Mr. Liu is here at Brandeis to receive an honorary degree.

John Plotz: We are so pleased that he in turn has honored us with a visit to our underground den. Mr. Liu, hello. [*Ni Hao*].

Cixin Liu: [*Ni Hao*].

John Plotz: Pu and I have written these questions together, but I'm going to ask them in English and Pu is going to translate Mr. Liu's responses. Let me begin with our first question. When you began to be a writer, what sort of things did you write and when did you begin to write science fiction?

[Pu Wang speaking for] Cixin Liu: My experience of writing, actually, was quite simple. I only wrote science fiction. I started with science fiction and I ended up being a science-fiction writer. I started as a big fan of science fiction. And in that sense, I might be the first generation of Chinese writers who engaged science fiction self-consciously, which means, we wanted to become science-fiction writers as such.

Cixin Liu: Here I wanted to further clarify the differences between the fans of science fiction and the writers of science fiction. I was a big fan of science fiction and that was a new subculture in China. And I was the first generation of self-conscious fans of science fiction, but science fiction writers of course existed much earlier than I started my work. But I think in terms of a subculture of science fiction, we were the first generation that generated that kind of self-consciousness.

John Plotz: Yeah. Actually Mr. Liu, I do have a follow-up about that. That's really interesting. Can you talk about what, how that subculture existed? Was it connected by magazines or was there an online culture or was it books that you read in translation or books by other Chinese writers? What was the material connection that you had that made you a fandom, a part of a fan group?

Cixin Liu: I started my fascination with science fiction while I was a primary-school student. That was still the final years of Cultural Revolution. There was no cultural landscape of media as we know today. There was not even the concept of science fiction yet in China. Back then, what I read was the translated Chinese science fiction from, the 50s, the periods of early People's Republic. The early socialist period.

- Cixin Liu: That was a relatively, culturally open era. In the 50s, a lot of western science-fiction works were translated into China. Those books belonged to my father and during the Cultural Revolution, those books were no longer considered Orthodox enough, politically orthodox enough. My father just put them underneath the bed. As a young boy, I just sneaked under the bed and started to read those words. Among those authors, [H.g.] George Wells, and also Soviet science fiction writers.
- John Plotz: Oh yeah. Soviets science fiction. Interesting. Yeah. And was that community, was that pretty much all boys who were part of that fandom or boys and girls together or men and young men and women? Who were the other fans of science fiction?
- Cixin Liu: This reading experience of mine was very private, very intimate. Back then I didn't even want to let others know I was reading this kind of book. Were there any other young boys, young girls doing the same thing? I don't know. Because this kind of reading just made me like an isolated island.
- John Plotz: Right. Yeah. Thank you. I think the second question is related, but it's a question of what writers had an influence on you. And you just talked about how you came to know some of them. And then the related question is other artists, whether they were poets or painters or film makers who also had that kind of impact that you're describing with Jules Verne or H.G. Wells?
- Cixin Liu: I would like to divide the writers of great influence on me into two categories. One is the mainstream, canonical writers. The other is the group of science-fiction writers. When it comes to the first category of mainstream canonical serious literature, the biggest influence was Golden Age Russian literature. Tolstoy was definitely one of the biggest influences.
- Cixin Liu: I once had a misunderstanding or misperception of my fascination with Russian literature. I attributed this fascination to the historical conditions, because in that era Russian literature was quite dominant on the Chinese cultural front. And I once believed that my love for Russian Revolution, uh, for Russian literature, was also part of this cultural moment.
- Cixin Liu: But when I think again, look back again, the most intensive literature reading of my started to take place during my middle-school and high-school years. That was already the beginning of the age of reforms, of opening up. A lot of western literary works were introduced, translated into China, including a lot of Western European and North American works in addition to Russian works. If we take this into consideration, then probably my love for Russian literature especially Tolstoy's huge influence on me is attributable simply to my personality.
- John Plotz: Yeah. That is so fascinating. I'm reading *War and Peace* right now and just remembering the capacity to build the world, like the way that Tolstoy creates the war spaces, the peace spaces, they seem to be disconnected, but then they're together. Can you talk more about how Tolstoy, how you compare your own work to Tolstoy? That makes a lot of sense to me.

Cixin Liu: The same here. My favorite Tolstoy is also *War and Peace*. That's the biggest influence on me. I think there are two reasons why I love *War and Peace* so much. The first one of course is the panoramic totality of historical world that Tolstoy created, that kind of grand narrative is simply powerful for me. But another reason is also the Russianness of this, work deeply rooted in its Russian spirit.

Cixin Liu: There is a sense of profundity that really, overwhelms me. In my later work, there are always echoes and shadows of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, but for me, these are simply very, very low level of parodies that cannot even begin to match Tolstoy's profundity.

John Plotz: Okay. I think that connects: the final part of that question is about philosophy or spiritual writing. And in a way, you've described Tolstoy as having a philosophical effect on you, but whether there are other writers of philosophy or...

Cixin Liu: Before going to the question of philosophy and spirituality, I want to go back to the question of film-maker. Kubrick is my favorite. of course *2001* as a classic I love. But all of his works have a lot of influence on me. Correct me if I'm wrong. I think this year is the 60th anniversary of the making of *2001*.

John Plotz: I think so, yeah. 50 years, yeah? '69?

Cixin Liu: For a fan of science fiction like me, this film has the status of the Bible. Last month in Beijing, together with many other science-fiction writers and critics, I saw the digitally repaired version of *2001*.

John Plotz: I just saw it too with my daughter.

Cixin Liu: And all of us were *pilgrims*, not just moviegoers. I have many poets and painters that I admire, but in terms of influence, they cannot compare to what I have just mentioned.

John Plotz: Okay, great.

Cixin Liu: Now, and let's turn to the question of philosophy and spirituality. In terms of religion. I'm an atheist, so I don't think any religion has a political bearing on me. Let me focus on the philosophical influence I've received. Philosophy has a profound impact on me because in my view, if we compare science and philosophy, which one is closer to science fiction? Actually philosophy is closer.

John Plotz: I'm with you.

Cixin Liu: If we take science as a world-view, that according to this world-view, there's only one single image of the world, but philosophy is entirely different. Every philosopher has his or her own world picture. And every world picture is so different from the other. If we have an alien coming from outside this universe, they're going to totally be puzzled by the debates between our philosophers.

- Cixin Liu: Because it doesn't feel like they are talking about the same world. In this regard, philosophy is closest to science fiction. Because different writers of science fiction are striving to create different world images of social formation, of history, of the universe. Of course, the way I receive influence from other philosophers might be different from other people's pursuit of philosophical insight.
- Cixin Liu: For others, they might want to find the truth in a philosophical discourse. But for me, every philosophical discourse will be judged by one standard. That is, whether it's *interesting*, whether there's a story to tell. A really curious outcome of this is that, some radically opposing philosophical schools have equal influence on me. For example, idealism of course is so vastly different from materialism but for me, they're both sources of inspiration.
- John Plotz: I think this connects actually to our next question, which is about the Chinese term, *ke huan*, which is an acronym, meaning science and fantasy. The question is about science as a concept or a discourse. It can refer to a discipline of natural sciences, but also it designates a method shared by disciplines. And Mr. Liu, I think this is what you were just talking about with positivism or empiricism in science.
- John Plotz: And it also means a worldview, a way of thinking and reasoning and of modern enlightenment. But, and this is important for science fiction, it is sometimes confused with technology which creates its own kind of world picture. As an engineer, as a science-fiction writer living in this post-Einstein technological world, what is your sense, what is your definition of science?
- Cixin Liu: This is indeed a very complicated issue, especially when it comes to science's relationship with technology. First off, technology precedes science. Way before the rise of modern science there were so many technologies, so many technological innovations. But today's technological separation is deeply embedded to the development of science. Basically, our contemporary world, science sets a glass ceiling for technology. The degree of technological development is pre-determined by the advances of science.
- Cixin Liu: What is remarkably interesting here is that, how technology becomes so interconnected with science. In ancient Greek world, science develops all of logic, all of reason. There is no reliance of science on technology. The big game changer is Galileo's methods of putting experiments into place in order to prove a theory and then put putting theory back into experimentation.
- Cixin Liu: Starting from there, science had to rely on technology. This kind of reliance becomes stronger and stronger, up to date. Today, the frontiers of physics are totally conditioned in the developments of technology. This is unprecedented. Back in China, there has been a huge debate about whether we need to build a new accelerator, but the investments on those construction has a price tag of 100 billion RMB.
- Cixin Liu: What you can get was today's technological accelerator is still far, far away from what you need for experiments in the most advanced physics. The difference is 11 zeros. There is a poetic nickname for this difference that is, *a desert of physics*. Because of this

huge gap, the most advanced theory of modern physics cannot be verified or dis-verified. Therefore, this is a major symptom of science's reliance on technology.

John Plotz: I know we have so much to talk about, but it would be really interesting to think about mathematics in this respect too. Whether you think of mathematics as among the sciences or in a perpendicular relationship because mathematics doesn't need that kind of empiricism. People do math by computers, but mathematics, it's interesting to think about, do you think of math as among the sciences or next to the sciences?

Cixin Liu: It's curious to see which side we want to be, because some people will say mathematics does not belong to a science. But even if we say mathematics is part of science, mathematics is an exceptional case because it does not rely on technology. Following up on the sciences' reliance on technology, I would like to point to a very paradoxical phenomenon.

Cixin Liu: Right now we can see technology is based on the advances of science and science has to rely on technology for self-verification. If there has ever been a really good circularity here, I would like to say that's the golden age of modern physics in the early 20th century. But we have today, what we have today might be a *vicious* circle. That is, actually the science and technology are mutually limited by each other.

Cixin Liu: And I would like to even put it this way: They are mutually locked by each other in their own development. If we compare a science to a fruit tree, those fruits that are within our reach are already picked. The most important, the most pioneering part, is totally beyond our reach. What can we do? We then turn to information and communication. Beyond information and communication, it seems to me there's no breakthrough in our near sight.

John Plotz: Is there a way to think about that vicious circle from the outside? Can science fiction itself have a role to play in changing that locked relationship? Just like a different way of thinking about it?

Cixin Liu: You've assigned a mission of science fiction that is too sublime--

John Plotz: Superman.

Cixin Liu: I continue to see science fiction as part of a popular culture. If it can help the humans, if it can help the readers, open up their horizon, inspire them to explore even more, that will that will be a huge success already.

John Plotz: Okay. Yes. I think this relates to our next question, which is the second element of the term *ke huan*, that is *fantasy*. The question would be about the relationship between fantasy and the real, or the word realism, which is obviously a key part of modern fiction. And so, the question would be about realism and your--Does realism have a role in your literary formation? Do you think of science fiction as a form of realism?

- Cixin Liu: My personal view is that, there should not be just one single paradigm for science fiction. There should be various kinds of science fiction. Of course, some writers will use science fiction, will use the elements of fantasy, to allegorize reality. To be critical of reality and to represent and reflect upon reality.
- Cixin Liu: This kind of science fiction gained a particular term in Chinese. Chinese critics like to call this kind of science fiction as *science-fantasy realism*. But for me, I'm not interested in this approach, in this tradition, in this tendency. I'm not interested in allegorizing, criticizing and representing reality. For me, the most valuable, the most precious part of science fiction is that we can build a world entirely based on imagination.
- Cixin Liu: That pure---everything is purely up in the air. That kind of fantastic imagination is why I love science fiction. I remember one historian said this, so what is the difference between human species from other species? That is, we have the capability of using our imagination to build something.
- John Plotz: And yet you love Tolstoy also and Tolstoy, he builds, but he builds inside...he builds inside the Napoleonic war. Do you see what you're doing as Tolstoy? Do you know what I mean? The realism in Tolstoy is that he's committed to the facts that we already know happened. And then the imagination is inside that.
- Cixin Liu: Then let me tell you what role of realism plays in my work. For me, realism is the platform, is the takeoff ground for my imagination. But I started with realism, but my goal is to reach the pure imaginary. Going back to the role of imagination, the role imagination played in our evolution as human species, looking at this imagination, this creation of *non-actual* might be the only capability in which we can surpass artificial intelligence.
- Cixin Liu: I think we should not drag science fiction down from the level of fantasy down to the level of realism. Rather, we would like to, I would like to have science fiction up in the air creating something that is totally non-actual. But there is also a question of practical consideration. For Chinese readers, they like to start with a representation of reality.
- Cixin Liu: This is vastly different from the tradition of Western science fiction. Western science fiction sometimes drags the hair of the reader and then lifts everyone off the ground and throws everyone into the thin air. But for Chinese reader, you need to have a slow build-up of this fantasy, so you still need realism.
- Cixin Liu: To further explain the role of realism in my work, we can use the metaphor of kite. My imagination can be high in the air, but we still have a thin line linking it back to reality. That seems to be a stabilizing force in my work.
- John Plotz: And so that would be a distinction from fantasy, is that right?
- Cixin Liu: Yes, I do feel that's what distinguishes my work from fantasy. The genre of fantasy in my view is different from the genre of science fiction. Even though in Chinese science fiction can mean *science fantasy*. Science fiction is *surreal* but never *supernatural*. But in the

general fantasy, you can go supernatural. This leads me back to my interpretation of mythology.

Cixin Liu: We have a misunderstanding of mythology today. We believe that mythology is fiction, but think of the primitives who are the recipients of mythology. For them, mythology is reality. In our contemporary culture, I think science fiction is the only literary genre that can replace the role of mythology, because in science fiction, even though it's pure fantasy, there is a sense of truthfulness. Whereas the genre of fantasy will never be able to provide that sense of truthfulness.

John Plotz: I think this last, your last answer connects with our question about virtual reality. And so you know, in the first volume of your wonderful *Three Body Problem* trilogy, it begins both with real history and of course with the idea of virtual reality, the online game of the three body problem. And we're very interested in that idea of the setting of the VR game, which is a narrative strategy that enables a representation of something that is by nature unrepresentable.

John Plotz: The question is about how you think about *virtual reality*, and the new frontier of the *virtual universe*, which is created both in the inward-looking individual and the community by all kinds of innovative new media, by social media, video games, online communication. And so, one simple form of the question: are you a big fan of video games or virtual reality devices or apps or platforms of social media? Have you been really interested in and immersed in that kind of subculture? That would maybe be a beginning way of that question.

Cixin Liu: I'm totally open to the media inversion, the age of media related innovations. I'm not in resistance against this trend. Although I have to admit, my screen time has limited my hands, and it's reserved in general to work-related matters. I'm actually quite interested in spending more time in this way but it's just because I'm too busy.

Cixin Liu: For a short period of time, I was really passionate about video games, but that was the video game before Internet. That was the time when Windows was not yet out there. How did that fascination disappear? Looking back, I would say that's because I got super busy with my work, with my family. The love for video game started to take the backseat.

Cixin Liu: For me, I think today we need to pay attention to one important tendency, a trend of information technology. The advance of information technologies creates a new situation, in which many of our desires and needs can be met in virtuality or in the world of internet. As of now, as we're talking, I think the desire, the human desires, that can be for fields in virtuality, in internet, only account for a small fraction of human desires.

Cixin Liu: But I have no doubts that in the future, maybe in near future, almost all human desires or let's say all human desires, can be fulfilled in the world's created by VR, AI and the Internet. For me, the immediate outcome of this is a change of humanity. The human civilization will be changed from an out-looking civilization into an inward-looking civilization. How do I differentiate these two types of human civilization?

Cixin Liu: For me, outward-looking civilization is defined by the age of great ocean navigations, the discovery of new continents. That's a desire of discovering new grounds of human development. Whereas in the probable future inward-looking civilization, this desire seems to be nonfunctional. In the short term, an inward-looking civilization is a civilization of happiness. Everyone is happy.

Cixin Liu: But in the long term, there's no future prospects for an inward-looking civilization. I have a solid belief, this might just be me, but this is my solid belief, we might have a really prosperous future in store for us. But if in that future, there's no interstellar travel for me this is not a good future for humans.

Cixin Liu: So, I have a horrible dystopia in my mind. In that future of inward-looking civilization, the earth, the ecology of the earth will be restored. You will have a reforestation, and you will have the best ecological surface of the world. And then in this world, you cannot see any single human individual. You only have a huge cave in which you have a super-computer. In that super computer, there's 10 billion human beings. And these 10 billion human beings are happy.

Cixin Liu: And for me, this happiness is *horrible*. We already have some signs of that kind of life. Let's take any big metropolitan cities. If you live in Beijing or New York, from your birth certificates to your death certificate, you do not need to leave a room that has WiFi. You can spend all your life in a internet environment.

John Plotz: Yeah. Wow. That is a dark vision for technology and for science. Like "The Machine Stops" by E.M Forster. Do you know the story? E.M Forster?

Cixin Liu: Oh yeah, I see.

John Plotz: Everyone lives underground inside a honeycomb. It's like bees in a honeycomb.

Cixin Liu: Thinking about it, E.M Forster, his work I think is from early 20th century.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Cixin Liu: It's already predicted.

John Plotz: Yeah. Can we ask you a question about translation? Your masterpieces are read and interpreted all over the world. Non-Chinese speakers like me come to this work through translation. And I've met your translator actually, Ken Liu, here in Boston. During your early years, you read science fiction classics like Verne and Wells in Chinese translation. The question is, how do you feel about being translated? Are you worried about things being lost in translation or are you excited about translation as a second life, as something that would be gained in transcultural rewriting?

Cixin Liu: Conventionally speaking, we believe there has to be a certain loss between two languages when we do translingual translation. The more the writer's roots work deeply

into their national cultures, the more loss they face in translation. My example is Mo Yan who received a Nobel prize less than a decade ago.

Cixin Liu: I think to translate Mo Yan means you have to lose something that is truly Chinese. But in this regard, science fiction is a happy exception. Because in China, science fiction is 100% a foreign importation. For example, many concepts we use in Chinese science fiction are originally western concepts, western words, western terms, and therefore it's a little bit easier for our translators to bring them back to Western languages.

Cixin Liu: More important is the nature of science fiction as a form of fictional storytelling. In the history of science fiction, humanity always appears in its totality rather than in different nations. Therefore in light of this, we can follow, can also say, science fiction poses the questions that are shared by the whole human community.

Cixin Liu: Science fiction does not simply pose questions that are unique to a single ethnic group, one single community or one single nation-state. Since science-fiction responds to the crises confronting humanity as a whole, science-fiction becomes a genre that is particularly suitable for transnational, transcultural communication.

Cixin Liu: When it comes to my own work, I'm particularly lucky, and I'm luckier than most science-fiction writers. I have two really wonderful translators. And so, when my work is in their hands, I can assure you my work is not lost in translation. My work gains a lot in translation. It's no exaggeration on my part to say that the literary quality of my English translation is better than my original.

John Plotz: I don't believe that.

Cixin Liu: If you can read in English, then just buy my English, buy the English translation of my work.

John Plotz: We actually have a related question, which is not about translation but about adaptation. The next question is, specifically your *Wandering Earth* was just turned into a film, but I was wondering about the question of adaptation of science fiction that is originally written gets turned into films. You talked about Kubrick before and what an impact he had on you. Clearly, science fiction can live as film or it can live as words on the page. What is your thought about that kind of translation? The adaptation from the page onto the screen?

Cixin Liu: This is yet another firm belief of mine: that is, science fiction is particularly suitable to visual representation. Even more suitable than the literary form. For traditional science fiction writers, they seem to have a kind of obsession with the power of language, of the magical literary power of language. But even if we acknowledge that kind of literary power, we have to say in face of science-fiction imagination, that power is still weak.

Cixin Liu: As science fiction deals with non-actual worlds that have never existed in reality, the mere medium of language is sometimes not sufficient. I try really hard to use language to match the immense images in my mind. Eventually, I have to say I failed. For

example, the long passage of my description of the travel of the Earth through the solar system it's a long passage, but I don't think it's successful. But in the film, it's just one second and it's very effective.

John Plotz: Were you involved? Did you speak with the director or the screenwriters as the film was being made? Was that vision of the film? Was it your vision?

Cixin Liu: My view is that literature and film are two entirely different forms of art. I would like to leave a great deal of creative freedom for the filmmakers. I participated in it, but my participation was very limited. Judging from the history of cinema, when original author was involved in film adaptation, it always meant catastrophe. It will always mean trouble. Because the original author will very easily be trapped in a self-centered, persistent narcissism and that will never help the film adaptation at all.

John Plotz: Yeah. This is a very open ended question, but do you think of yourself as having a message or messages for your audiences?

Cixin Liu: 90% of my efforts are about telling a creative, compelling story. The focus is always for my striving as a writer. The focus is always the compelling storytelling. If there's some message in my work, that's either an afterthought when the work is finished or the interpretation of my beloved critics. Going back to your question, is there a thematic allegorical drive? Is there an allegorical message I want to convey? I don't think so.

Cixin Liu: In particular, I'm always fascinated and surprised by how rich the interpretation of my work has become. So many rich implications of my work are never in my mind, but they have been produced by the interpreters.

John Plotz: I think we have a final pair of questions and the question is, what do you think the future of science fiction is, and I think we could think about, is this future in writing? Is it in film? Maybe is it in virtual reality or in AI? And then more specifically, a question about the future of your own writing. Where do you think you are heading next? What projects are you working on?

Cixin Liu: First off, I think the future of science fiction is very uncertain. And in this regard, it's very similar to any literary form. It doesn't matter. It's in this country that is United States, or elsewhere, the Golden Age of science fiction is gone. We are already in the age of decline. I once said, we're trying to sail the boat while the boat is sinking.

Cixin Liu: China, might be an exception, because of the rapid modernization, because of the futurity of contemporary Chinese life. There's still rich soil for science fiction to grow. There is a bright prospects of science fiction in China. But not for science fiction literature. It's for science fiction cinema and TV shows. Both the size of the community of science-fiction writers and the size of the reader population are pretty, are relatively small in China even today.

Cixin Liu: For science fiction as a literary genre, the future is definitely not bright. As a writer, of course I will continue to write and my goal is to try something that I haven't touched

upon. But in the meanwhile, I would like to devote a certain amount of my energy to the adaptation of science fiction in film and TV.

John Plotz: Oh, interesting.

Cixin Liu: I think for Chinese science-fiction blockbusters, the prospect is really bright. And I even believe in near future, a Chinese scienc- fiction cinema may be on the equal footing with Hollywood. China will be an alternative to Hollywood in terms of producing science-fiction blockbusters.

John Plotz: Can I ask you more? When you say adaptation, do you mean, will you write original things for film and TV or will you take your own work and turned it into film and television?

Cixin Liu: I don't believe I will try my hand on the writing of screenplays. I don't think an original literary writer will be a good screen playwright. I think the best way for me to move forward is to create original literary works of science fiction and then let the industry of cinema do the adaptation.

Cixin Liu: A screenplay writer has no freedom. His or her freedom is limited by the producing company, by the censorship, and by the market. But as a literary writer, I have the freedom. That's what I enjoy and that's what I can ... I really detest that situation that every screenplay writer finds him or herself in.. Whenever you write line, you need to think about whether my audience will like it or dislike it, I hate that.

Cixin Liu: For science fiction movie or screen playwright, this is inevitable imprisonment of all these calculations. Because science fiction blockbuster has a really high budget. You have to think, take that into consideration, and think of the audience. As a writer, I don't want to do that.

John Plotz: Pu, do you have any final questions?

Pu Wang [speaking for himself] Actually, I think I'm fine.

John Plotz: Mr. Liu, thank you. This has been an amazing conversation. It's a huge pleasure. Thank you.