

John Plotz: Hello and welcome to *Recall This Book*. This is an additional podcast, not exactly a supplement, but a kind of add-on after the Cixin Liu interview that ideally you've just listened to. If you haven't listened to it yet, there's probably going to be lots of spoilers in this conversation, so go back so you get the soap-opera plot in the correct order.

John Plotz: We just had such a good time with this interview and we've sort of heard so much from people about it that we decided the two of us who interviewed him, Pu Wang and myself, would sit down and talk about what went well in the interview, what went badly, and other things that have come up in terms of how we think about him as a writer. Once again, it's co-hosted today by Pu Wang from the German, Russian and Asian Language and Literature department and me, John Plotz from the Brandeis English department. Hello Pu.

Pu Wang: Hi, how are you?

John Plotz: Hey, great. It's awesome to be here. I should give you a little bit of technical background. We're sitting in the studio after Pu just created the Chinese language version of the podcast.

Pu Wang: Yes, that's very exciting.

John Plotz: It was exciting. How did it feel?

Pu Wang: I just feel there are there are too many tracks in my mind.

John Plotz: I know it's true cause we basically, in the interview you listened to the voice of Mr Liu was given to you in English by Pu. But of course now we created a track in which he's talking.

Pu Wang: Yes, now you can listen to Liu himself. In his true voice.

John Plotz: Yeah. Then I was lucky enough to hear him give a little speech at Brandeis where I heard Mr. Liu speak English, which was awesome. He was great.

Pu Wang: Exactly.

John Plotz: Yeah. It was a very grim speech. He talked about he compared to living on Earth, to living in the basement of a tiny apartment house and being locked in a cabinet inside the basement. He said that's what it means to live on the Planet Earth.

Pu Wang: That block is our universe, I guess.

John Plotz: Yeah, exactly. The block is our universe. Yeah. We could talk about Liu and optimism and pessimism. That might be a good topic.

Pu Wang: Yes.

John Plotz: But Pu I talked a little bit in advance. This comes right on the heels of an interesting *New Yorker* profile, which we will link to. I don't know how many folks here have had a chance to listen to it, but it's a profile that really attacks, well attacks maybe is the wrong word, but approaches Mr Liu and his work, from a more political standpoint than our interview did.

John Plotz: It's interesting to think about the space that opens up between how Liu presents himself in that interview versus what you just heard these discussions about Tolstoy and about aesthetics, about science fiction as a genre. So that that may be one thing we want to talk about. So Pooh the question I asked you in advance was, what surprised you most in the interview? Do you want to go from there?

Pu Wang: Sure. Yeah. I think the first surprise actually came before the interview, that was Liu's original reaction to the list of our questions. He seemed to be extremely enthusiastic about a more theory or philosophy-oriented kind of perspective. I guess we tried to host our interview as kind of, not only as professors, but also as big fans of sci-fi. But still he found our questions philosophical, for good or bad reasons.

John Plotz: For me, number one, most surprising was his discussion of Tolstoy, which I hope we'll get to. Number two was the point about science fiction being closer to philosophy than science. Yeah. Tell me your thoughts about that.

Pu Wang: That is really striking both the comments on Tolstoy's huge influence on him. He wants to emphasize that, it's not only because a socialist China had a big fascination and connection with Russian literature. He thought it was also because of his own personality. There is just that affinity with a realist, historical novelist, who is also very philosophical, morally philosophical in many ways.

John Plotz: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, I totally agree with that point. I really liked the distinction he made. It's interesting, I've been reading this book by [Slezkine, \*House of Revolution\*](#). Do you know this book?

Pu Wang: No.

John Plotz: It's essentially a history of the early years of the Soviet Union, the revolution right up through the purges. It talks a lot about the canonical authors who were popular in the early years of the revolution and Slezkine can actually makes a point very much like Liu made, which was sure you could align if you want, you could align writers like Tolstoy and Dostoyévskiy with a socialist past, you could try to make them line up, but fundamentally that wasn't what was going on. There was that level of attachment to them that was not explicable, just ideologically, and that really came through.

John Plotz: I agree with what you're saying about Tolstoy and realism, but I think the other thing that came through was the point about world-building, which I think is a really important way to think about science fiction's relationship to realism. Because obviously you could say, "Oh, well, in a realist novel, like say *War and Peace*, you don't have to build a world because it's our real world." But, but we all know that that isn't how novel

writing actually works. The constituting of the reality, the atomic piling-up of the details is a huge part of even realist fiction.

Pu Wang: Right. That's a kind of reconstruction of the whole historical world.

John Plotz: Yeah, exactly. What did you think about his story about his own relationship to science fiction growing up? I found that incredibly moving actually.

Pu Wang: Exactly, yes. I mean, I'm not super-surprised by that, but thinking of a young boy getting books from underneath his father's bed, reading the socialists, the translations of the sci-fi classics against the twilight of the Cultural Revolution.

John Plotz: Cultural Revolution. Right? Yeah.

Pu Wang: Yeah, that was really interesting.

John Plotz: Yeah. Then if I understood his point, the point was that there was then a kind of coming-out into sunlight, right?

Pu Wang: Exactly yeah.

John Plotz: The first generation of readers who could actually celebrate.

Pu Wang: Yeah. I think his point is that if you look at certain kind of science fiction, yes, there has been a kind of a continuous tradition in modern Chinese literature of writing. I'm reading science fiction, but people didn't see science fiction as an independent, autonomous genre. They just considered it in a less self-conscious way, but he considered himself as belonging to the first generation of self-conscious fans of sci-fi. That's really interesting.

John Plotz: Yeah, totally interesting. It does go to something that Pu, you and I talked a little bit about, but I think it is being explored nowadays, which is to think about how strong an analogy you would make between the current generation of Chinese science fiction and the Golden Age of American sci-fi. Right?

Pu Wang: Right. Exactly yes.

John Plotz: Like that way in which cause as we all know, like Asimov was part of those early fan communities and then turned into, well here in Boston he became a novelist. But you know, that way in which there's so many things that you could look at as analogies, technological optimism, a moment of world, also in terms of the standing on the world stage being very high.

Pu Wang: Global rise.

John Plotz: Exactly. Yeah. What do you think about that?

Pu Wang: I think, Liu Cixin, as a fan of sci-fi, never enjoying that kind of subculture, but he himself created a following of that subculture right now, Liu fans of course, back in China have become a community. They use the up-to-date social media tools to communicate with each other, exchanging their ideas about how to prompt Liu Cixin to write the next masterpiece.

John Plotz: Yeah. We have to assume, presumably there's going to be, as with people like Asimov, there's going to be a whole new generation of writers coming up who were not going to be imitators of him, but were basically formed by the possibilities that he made visible. Right?

Pu Wang: Yes. Yes. I think a lot of younger generations, writers, see him as someone who opened the door for even younger writers of Chinese sci-fi.

John Plotz: Yeah. That's really interesting. Can we actually use that? I spoke really quickly about the talk that I heard Mr. Liu give. It was incredibly interesting to me because it was characteristic of him. I think that he has a very broad ranging vision of humanity in an enormous universe, which is filled with possibilities, but he's also pretty grim about the dangers that are out there too. Like in other words, when I think of the Golden Age, when I think of people like Asimov, there's something permanently upbeat. It's always in a major key, you know?

John Plotz: When I, when I hear Liu talk, I hear both incredible, wide-ranging vision and also a kind of minor key, uncertainty and ...

Pu Wang: Darker vision.

John Plotz: Darker vision. Yeah.

Pu Wang: True. Remember in the interview he also mentioned this internet dystopia.

John Plotz: Yes. Totally.

Pu Wang: So if every desire offline can be fulfilled so easily with a smart phone, why do I need to move beyond this basement apartment?

John Plotz: Right. In fact, if I understood what he was saying, wasn't he saying that the people would actually be living literally on mainframes? Isn't that what he meant that they were living on ... In other words, they would be computed beings.

Pu Wang: Exactly. Yeah. Basically the ecology of this earth will be back to pre-human conditions. We don't need to pollute anything anymore.

John Plotz: Right, yeah. It's totally fascinating. There's an Asimov novel, which I want to say is called *Gateway to Eternity*. We'll put the correct title up on the website, but it involves living in a world where time travel is possible. The result is that people have become completely

inward looking. The hero, spoiler alert, the hero of the book basically breaks the time travel's loop so that humanity can go outward to the stars.

John Plotz: That's the same spirit as Liu as was saying, which is like, we need to explore, we need to leave this planet. But with Asimov it's just like, "Hurrah." Whereas with Liu, I thought, "Oh no, he doesn't think we're going to manage it actually."

Pu Wang: Right. I think if we take a *The Three Body Problem* trilogy into account, then it's great to have interstellar travels. But it doesn't lead us to any better place. Actually it comes with huge risk.

John Plotz: Right. Yeah. For those of you who haven't read, we'll try not to give away the vital details of the novel, but there is a reason like the title of the second volume, *The Dark Forest*, is that the same in Chinese?

Pu Wang: Yeah. Yeah.

John Plotz: The implications of *The Dark Forest* are very dire in terms of that notion of like, "Hurrah, hurrah. Hey everybody, we're here. Wait a second, we just told everybody we're here."

Pu Wang: Yeah, we can be, we can be even a reduced in our dimensionality, if a kind of higher civilization eventually figured out how to deal with it. I think that's also the power of fiction of novelistic scale. There's no finite solutions or answers to questions raised.

John Plotz: Yeah, totally. I'm really glad you mentioned the word *scale* here because one of the connections I was thinking about is I often think about science fiction is relationship to naturalism. If you read only one page of, of Liu's *Three Body Problem*, I recommend the introduction, or maybe it's the afterward, where he talks about scale, how he's fascinated by scale that he said even as a kid he realized he could conceive of things on a vaster scale than other people could.

Pu Wang: Exactly. Yes.

John Plotz: One of the ways I try to describe *Three Body Problem*, the trilogy to colleagues or friends I'm trying to persuade to read it, is to say that whenever you think you've mastered the plane of the novel, it turns out it's rotated, that there's another dimension you haven't seen. The novel itself performs that act of kind of rotation.

Pu Wang: Yeah. Yeah. Also for me the really exciting part, even though I sometimes find disagreements was Liu's approach or Liu's "predictions", is that whenever there is this new unfolding of a different level, that comes with new civilization options. That's really cool. That's really kind of a humanizing, but at the same time, entirely beyond any human reality as we know it today.

John Plotz: That's really interesting. Maybe that connects to a question that we ... Here's another thing I was kind of surprised by, and this, you could tell me that this is just me. I'll just put it out there. I don't see what all the fuss is about *2001*. When he talks about how

Kubrick was this genius who had transformed the way that he and so many other people saw the world. And I said, "Oh yeah, well I just watched it too." But actually I watched it and I was like, "You know, I dunno."

Pu Wang: Yeah. I mean, I think Liu made a big deal of it. He said it, it was just like a kind of clan. It's like a tribe. You need to have initiation into that.

John Plotz: I take that point.

Pu Wang: I totally, I understand, the film is just a film.

John Plotz: Yeah. Yeah. I was thinking about what he said. How would you unpack what he was saying about the different genres? First of all, I think it's clear that he wasn't saying he himself would prefer to be a filmmaker. I mean, he's happy as a novelist. Science fiction is one of those genres, or maybe we want to call it one of those *modes*, that what's going on in the visual sphere is often as interesting as what's going on on the page. I mean, there's been some very important sci-fi movies. Was he saying that the film is the science fiction of the future?

Pu Wang: I think what he said really goes against my instinct as a literary scholar.

John Plotz: Yeah, me too.

Pu Wang: We have this deep faith in the medium of language, not to say that the ontology of language. I think he wants to be a writer. He wants to work with language and words, but he doesn't see any problem of having a future of sci-fi in cinema theaters.

John Plotz: Also to be fair, sci-fi has a past in cinema as well. Like in other words, *Voyage to the Moon*, *Metropolis*. I mean, in other words, it's like as old as the film, like sci-fi has been there for a long time.

Pu Wang: It seems to me he believes that if the money's there, if the financial conditions are favorable, if the technological industrial conditions are there, we can make really great sci-fi blockbusters, even though he doesn't want to be part of it.

John Plotz: Speaking of which, have you seen *Wandering Earth*?

Pu Wang: Yeah, I saw it. I contributed to, it's a box office by going to the only cinema theater that's aired it.

John Plotz: Fenway right?

Pu Wang: Yeah. In Boston.

John Plotz: Yeah, me too. Yeah, I know. It was a lonely voyage.

Pu Wang: Exactly. Yeah.

John Plotz: Let's talk about it. What did you think, and have you read the story too?

Pu Wang: Yeah. I read the story in a really kind of fast, kind of cursory fashion.

John Plotz: Me too.

Pu Wang: I think still, he said so many great things about the power of visuality. I see a lot totally missing in the cinematic representation.

John Plotz: The nature of the political struggle in the story, which you briefly alluded to, between the people who want essentially to take the whole Earth out of orbit and sail away from the sun versus the people who just want to abandon Earth.

Pu Wang: Right.

John Plotz: That's really interesting. There's all of this kind of mass suicides.

Pu Wang: That's actually pretty Tolstoyan in many ways. It's historical novelistic kind of stuff.

John Plotz: What I wanted to do as a way of kind of getting at the politics, I wanted to ask if you shared my feeling that the movie was much more nationalistic than the story?

Pu Wang: I think so. Of course, I did not see it entirely from the ideological perspective. I think this movie was the first attempt of making a Chinese blockbuster. They wanted to really pitch it towards Chinese audience in mainland China. It was for me much ...

John Plotz: It was released on Chinese New Year, wasn't it?

Pu Wang: Yes.

John Plotz: There were like lines about a New Year or in the film?

Pu Wang: Yeah, exactly. Basically, for me, it's market strategy. But it definitely speaks to this kind of nationalist sentiment, nationalist pride, that is currently shared by so many mainland Chinese citizens in the age of so called China's global rise.

John Plotz: I mean I might be completely off base here, but I thought in some ways it was a response to *Independence Day*, The American, you know, blockbuster fighting off the alien invasion. That's like a July 4th movie and all the heroes are American. I did think there was a kind of tit-for-tat quality.

Pu Wang: Yeah, exactly. Eventually that becomes a kind ... On the one hand, some people would say, "Oh, this US/China competition of sci-fi blockbusters." But on the other hand that you see this mirror image that is basically, they have the same structure. The only difference is that that's US nationalism, and here we have Chinese nationalism.

John Plotz: Yeah. Speaking of which maybe that's a good time to talk briefly about the *New Yorker* profile.

Pu Wang: Sure. Yeah.

John Plotz: Will you like tell our readers about it or tell us your thoughts about it? Listeners, not readers, sorry.

Pu Wang: This profile actually got a wide distribution, not only here--it's from *New Yorker*, so it's pretty big--but it was also widely read back in China, mostly in China, both in English, and in the translated form online. I think in, in, in this kind of conversation between a staff writer of New Yorker and Liu. The whole conversation about sci-fi turns into the realm of politics, and especially today's Chinese politics. Of course this is not only Chinese domestic politics, but about China's role on the global scale, especially as China, being a kind of non-democratic regime, but a very important player of the international community and global markets. I think my reaction to this profile is that Liu seems to be far less prepared for those questions.

John Plotz: She didn't write the philosophical questions in advance.

Pu Wang: Yeah. It's a little bit amusing to me because he seems to be so eager to talk about philosophy and physics with us. That's something really interesting. My second point is that I just feel it is totally, absolutely feasible to raise a lot of political questions by reading Liu's work, by interviewing Liu in person. But the whole [New Yorker] piece for me, seems to take a relatively reductionist approach to what is political. It is a framework of inevitable competition between the United States and China, as to different social structures, and then project this kind of prediction of a conflict, into a sci-fi scale. I think people like to talk that way, but I don't want to read the rise of Chinese science fiction literature as the next arena of US/Chinese trade war, I guess.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's a great way of thinking about it. Let's hope not. Can I ask like on a kind of practical level, presumably Chinese public intellectuals, including writers, who face conversations in the West or have interviews in the West--and you can think about lots of people who've made a name for themselves--hey have to know that this sort of question is coming. The man we met didn't seem like somebody who ... He's not a diplomat, he didn't see like Richard Holbrook or Metternich or something.

Pu Wang: Right. That's true. He's not equipped with good answers for [Xinjiang](#) questions.

John Plotz: Yeah exactly what that was where it came to talking about the Uighur stuff.

Pu Wang: The democracy questions and so on and so forth. I think for a lot of Chinese intellectuals and writers from the humanistic backgrounds, it doesn't matter what kind of ideological leanings they have, they seem to have a kind of very ready-made ideological response to those kind of questions. But Liu doesn't belong to that community--and that's really *interesting* to watch.

John Plotz: To me, it may be that he produced something that was like what he thought would be the politically expedient response, but it didn't feel *managed* in a way, what he had to say.

Pu Wang: I think it's also because he's not in much interested in his public image. He's not ready for that. It's the same back in China. He sees his own fame as something really unexpected. That's why he refuses to have an agent, he refuses to move to a bigger cities, he refuses to really be actively participating in the making of film adaptations and so on and so forth. It's just -he's just a different kind of writer. For me, I don't know whether he wants to transform into a kind of more sophisticated, intellectual voice or he would just shy off from this kind of interactions in the future.

John Plotz: To me, like one of the most fascinating things he's ever said remains like somebody asked him apropos of how much Obama liked his novels. If you had a chance to speak to a series of world leaders, what would you say to them? I won't get the quote exactly right. He's like, "I would say not to underestimate the fear ... Not to underestimate the possibility of alien invasion." By which he obviously means space-invader invasion. He's not talking about international aliens.

Pu Wang: Right. Exactly.

John Plotz: I think that was completely sincere. Like that's like at the heart of his politics.

Pu Wang: His thinking is just in a different mode.

John Plotz: Yeah. Well, so final question Pu, what do you think we missed? Like when you look back at that interview, we got him to talk about a lot of things, but what should we have talked about that we didn't?

Pu Wang: Yeah, actually, I've given some thought to it after ever since I read *the New Yorker* piece. Yeah. I think if I were a *New Yorker* staff writer, not only a Brandeis professor, then I would really want to ask more questions about Liu's social imagination, to really follow up all his kind of brighter or darker visions of civilization. That is, how does this Chinese sci-fi writer imagine social relations?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Pu Wang: That will absolutely give us a much liberating discussion of the political, actually. I think that that is a little bit missing in our conversation.

John Plotz: Yeah, I agree. I hear what saying. I was thinking about that with that image of 10 billion humans on computers. I was thinking that would have been a good place for us to say more about the virtual and like life online and yeah, exactly. The social imaginary in terms of like practical affordances of different technologies, but also, the larger political implications of living together and living apart.

Pu Wang: Right. Exactly.

John Plotz: Well it was a fascinating conversation nonetheless.

Pu Wang: Yeah, I like it very much. I think we're digging a lot out of this writer. I don't want to do too much self-congratulation but I think our kind of interview with Liu is pretty valuable, because we definitely made him talk a lot about philosophical issues.

John Plotz: I know. Next time we're going to have an all Tolstoy podcast. We're gonna break down the Tolstoy versus Dostoyévskiy. Maybe we'll talk about Goncharov and see if he likes *Oblomov*. I was going to say Pu, you should come back sometime. You should ...

Pu Wang: Yeah, totally thank you for having me.

John Plotz: Totally. We should do it again. If you want to pick a different writer for us to interview. I liked this dual-language format so we should think about that too.

Pu Wang: Right, as long as we can endure the labor.

John Plotz: I know. All credit to you. Okay. I think from both of us here, your co-hosts, I will say thank you for listening to *Recall this Book*. My co-host today was Pu Wang, recently tenured professor here at Brandeis. I'm John Plotz. As always our thanks. Go to Claire Ogden who does the technical and audio editing and Matthew Schratz who manages our website and social media and to Brandeis University for the support.

John Plotz: Please to listeners like you, please do forward this to other people that you think might be interested in listening. Do rate or review us on iTunes or Stitcher or our website or wherever you listen to podcasts. From all of us here at *Recall This Book*, thank you.

Pu Wang: Thank you. Bye-bye.