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A Discussion between Two French Translators of Chinese Science Fiction



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Loïc Aloisio: The English translation of *The Three-Body Problem* by Ken Liu, which has been awarded the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015, has given sudden visibility to Chinese SF. As we can see, a lot of Chinese SF authors have already been translated into English. In France, however, the situation is quite different, since it appears that only twelve authors have been translated, for a total of thirty-four translations (against more than two hundred in English). Moreover, among them are two authors (namely Lao She and Ye Yonglie) who are not part of what Song Mingwei called the “new wave” of Chinese SF (Song, 2015), and whose works have been translated a long time ago (in 1981 and 1986 respectively). If we take 2015 as a landmark year, the number of translations reduces to thirty (Aloisio, 2016). How do you explain that? As the translator of the *Three-Body* trilogy in French, do you have some understanding of the public response to Chinese SF?

Gwennaël Gaffric: This phenomenon may seem paradoxical in several respects. Liu’s *Three-Body* trilogy has been one of science fiction’s most acclaimed series in France in recent years, as it has reaped both commercial and critical success. It has reached readers well beyond the usual SF (or Chinese literature) readership and has generated many reviews and columns of literary criticism in most of the major general and specialized French media.

However, the success of a work does not always reflect on its surrounding ecosystem. I remember Liu Cixin often repeating that the success of his trilogy in China never really led to an explosion in sales of his other works. Likewise, the success of the trilogy has not resulted in an exponential number of translations of Chinese SF in France.

We can put forward several explanations: some are specific to the French publishing world, and others specific to the French sociopolitical context vis-à-vis China.

First, the situation in France can't be compared to the United States, where the impact of the publication of the translation of *The Three-Body Problem* was more important: in the US, SF literature in English translation represents a minimal portion of the total production, and it was a great event that a translated novel won the Hugo Award. There is also a great appetite for what we imagined of China—as such, in the reception of the trilogy in the US, you can note that many media try to see through Liu Cixin's works a “Chinese” way of seeing the future. As I have already discussed elsewhere (Gaffric, 2019a), there is an Orientalist confusion between the content of the work and the origin of its author—which one imagines holding a point of view essentially Chinese, that would be representative of his “culture.”

SF literature in translation is much more present in the French editorial landscape, with an overwhelming majority of translations from English (but also Russian, Italian, German works...). So, there may be less circumstantial attraction. For instance, I was able to see that many US readers had never heard of the Cultural Revolution while French readers are generally more familiar with this historic episode, with which Liu Cixin begins his novel. In general, Chinese literature is also more available on the shelves of French bookstores, and the Cultural Revolution is a fairly frequent theme (among authors of Liu's generation, such as Yu Hua, Mo Yan, Yan Lianke, Chi Li or Su Tong, are authors massively translated into French). So if you want to read about the Cultural Revolution, the choice is larger.

I also know that there is a certain number of partnerships between magazines and/or publishing houses that have been created in Italy and in the United States (like with *Clarkesworld Magazine*), maybe in other countries, to promote contemporary Chinese SF works in translation. In France, this process is slower, and sometimes comes up against reluctance from publishers and magazines who wish to maintain control and independence over the choice of the texts they want to publish.

We could also see that in the case of the translation of Liu's trilogy, many translations were made from English, and/or according to the editorial standards of the English version (with the same cover, the same paratextual elements ...). In France, editors prefer to work with translators translating directly from Chinese, but to my knowledge, there are not so many SF readers among Chinese-French

translators—you and I are exceptions—while there are more Chinese-English translators familiar with this genre—and also Chinese American translators who are themselves SF writers!

It is also important to remember that the publishing world (but it is true everywhere in the world) is in crisis, and investing in translations of long series or collections of short stories can be risky—as short stories don't sell well in France.

Finally, there are also expectations, even fantasies of publishers, who demand “Chinese” dystopias, but if there is indeed a few Chinese dystopian novels, there are not so many (both because all the Chinese SF writers don't have a permanent obsession with China and because dystopias are not the easiest subgenre for bypassing censorship in China). Actually, it is not easy to convince French publishers to translate and publish works that don't fit with their imagination of what “China” is.

LA: You've just mentioned the censorship issue in China. It is, indeed, a significant issue which involves not only the authors, but also the academic researchers and the translators. I remember what Han Song told me during an interview. According to him, Chinese SF authors were relatively free before 2015, since the authorities didn't read them and disregarded the genre. But since Liu Cixin has been awarded the Hugo Award, officials began to have their eyes on the genre, restricting their freedom, whether it be because of the censorship per se, or because of the self-censorship on the part of the authors themselves in fear of reprisals. Some authors even write knowing full well that their works won't be published in the near future (or ever). Here again, Han Song has on his computer a lot of unpublished stories. Thus, translation can be a way to publish these stories, or even versions of published stories that are closer to what the author originally had in mind. We can already see such examples with “The City of Silence,” of which the English version is quite different from the Chinese one, but is closer to Ma Boyong's vision. Personally, I had the chance to read (and to translate) for my PhD thesis some unpublished works that Han Song kindly sent me by email, such as the short story “My Fatherland Does Not Dream.” But, once again, it can be a problem for academic researchers to analyze “politically sensitive” texts, as I know from my own experience. My PhD thesis focuses on the study of Han Song's works, and therefore tackles some political issues, since Han Song pays strict attention to the current emerging issues of Chinese society, and even to China's

history. In short, I shed light, through the analysis of his works, on the fact that Han Song uses SF literature as a way to give a testimony of both the past and the present of China, reacting to the Chinese government's political use of historical memory and to its strict control on the official historiography. Thus, I show how Han Song includes, in his fictions, references to historical events that are considered to be politically sensitive (such as the Great Leap Forward, the Great Famine, the Cultural Revolution, the Tiananmen massacre and so on), questioning China's national narrative as well as the legitimacy of the CCP at the head of the government. So, I asked myself: What is my responsibility, as an academic that "exposes" the political (or even dissenting) message that is hidden in the texts, and as a translator that makes sensitive or "unpublishable" works visible? How about you, aren't you worried that your research or your translation may get the authors in trouble?

GG: This is a crucial question, and one that is rarely explored in literary studies. There is already a significant scientific literature about research ethics in social sciences, such as in anthropology or sociology, that tells you how not to "jeopardize" sources and informants, by anonymizing them, for example. But how do you anonymize the author of a literary work? I am currently planning to write a book on Liu Cixin, and this issue will no doubt haunt me throughout the writing process.

As you mentioned, Chinese SF has not always been the subject of very meticulous censorship. Things have unfortunately tended to change since 2015 (I think we will come back to this), but writers like Chen Qiufan, for instance, don't hesitate to deal with social and political issues, and still have a good visibility. Apart from Han Song, I am also thinking of Zhang Ran and his short story "Ether" (available in English translation), that could be linked to Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence" and has a strong political content. It has been published in 2012 in China (but I don't know if it would still be published today...).

We must then be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that every story is pro or against the Chinese political regime. Of course, censorship is present in China and certainly, the authors sometimes censor themselves (in the sense that censorship has already become an environmental factor), but it would be too restrictive to reduce Chinese science fiction literature to a simple game of cat and mouse with censorship. Perhaps more than any other genre, SF is meant to speak to the world, and sometimes even beyond. To take a very recent example of a short story that has

been translated in French and English, we can read Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" as a criticism of Chinese society, or as a denunciation of the way in which, more generally, urban architecture catalyzes social class differences. Moreover, the greatest works are always the most ambiguous ones: as scholars and translators, it is up to us to preserve this ambivalence, whether it is found in the language or in the ideas of the original text.

LA: You're right. Chinese SF is far from being a monolithic bloc, but is rather a mosaic of various subgenres and styles, from Xia Jia's "porridge-SF" to Chen Qiufan's cyberpunk and Liu Cixin's hard SF. Reducing it to a dissident or political committed genre is, indeed, a very simplistic view. Recently, a series of articles have been published alleging that SF is a tool for the Chinese soft power strategy. This is perhaps also a biased view of what Chinese SF really is, even though I can see why some people are wondering that, since every event related to SF that took place in China in the recent years was endorsed and promoted by the government. Nonetheless, every work that tackles current social issues shouldn't be considered strictly dissenting, and every work that depicts an idealized Chinese society shouldn't be regarded as a tool for soft power. It is quite interesting, though, to see that people can have various interpretations of the same literary genre, which implies that these works, as you said, are more sophisticated than they seem. Then, in a context where literature is given a role that goes beyond its literary borders, how is the translator supposed to take a position on the translation issue?

GG: As you said in using Han Song's words, the year 2015 marked a turning point: with the attribution of the Hugo Award to Liu Cixin and the official injunction made to Chinese SF writers to praise the "Chinese dream," both for China and for the outside.

This is both an opportunity for the authors to be more published and more listened to, but also a tragedy (just remember that Liu Cixin has only written one short story since 2015!), because the more you are observed, the higher is the pressure to write. And this is true in any political context, not only in China.

As a translator, I think you need to be aware that you are a cog in these mechanisms (Gaffric, 2019b), but also to remember that you are not selling your soul either. Just like Chinese SF writers are not going to write propaganda just because they were

asked to write some...

LA: Speaking of complexity, there is a frequently asked question regarding translation: What are the challenges of translating SF, especially "Chinese" SF? Personally, I really enjoy translating neologisms and coined words, even though it's sometimes a real brainteaser, since the Chinese ideographic language and Western alphabetical languages are very different from one another (Aloisio, 2019). What about you? I guess that the translation of the Three-Body trilogy brings its own set of challenges.

GG: There are several challenges that arise when translating Sinophone SF. Some are specific to the translation of Chinese language (tense, gender, linguistic structure, cultural references issues...) and some to the translation of SF (neologisms, scientific coherence...). Both are exciting and I find that the Chinese language, because of its plasticity, lends itself well to the creation of neologisms, and to the deconstruction of language from an imaginary perspective.

As for the scientific aspects, I was lucky during the translation of Liu's trilogy and his other novels and short stories, to call upon astrophysicist and informatician friends, who helped me a lot. Likewise, I believe that it is important when translating SF to be an SF reader (as it is unthinkable to translate poetry if you are not a reader of poetry), I drew a lot of inspirations in the French SF mega-text (SF written in French, or SF translated into French) for the creation of neologisms, for atmospheres... In each of my translations (be they SF or not), I always have what I call "companion books," that help me immerse myself in an imagination world and build my language. For Liu Cixin, I have of course read a lot of Jules Verne and Arthur C. Clarke, but also Russian authors, like Tolstoy.

But translating Liu's trilogy was not that difficult, beyond the scientific aspect, because the language he used is quite functional (despite very lyrical passages).

This has been more complicated for other authors, particularly Taiwanese and Hong Kongese, such as Dung Kai-cheung, Kao Yi-feng or Lo Yi-chin, who write SF stories, but with a more tortured and sophisticated language.

LA: Speaking of which, as a specialist in Taiwanese literature, and as a translator of both Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF, what differences do you see between them and PRC SF?

GG: Just like Chinese SF, it's not easy to define what Taiwanese or Hong Kong SF would be, but there are some trends and themes that are indeed specific.

First, one must know that the spheres of influence are not necessarily the same: authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Philip K. Dick or Samuel R. Delany have had more impact in Taiwan than they have had in China around the same time. Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF in the 1990s was for example very marked by queer and post-human themes (with writers like Chi Ta-wei, Lucifer Hung or Dung Kai-cheung). Even today, the question of gender and sexuality is much more prominent in Taiwanese and Hong Kongese SF than in China. In recent years, the anxiety resulting from the uncertain future of the two entities has also nourished Taiwanese and Hong Kong SF, with dystopias which also showcase the relationship of the two regions with the Chinese mainland.

Strictly speaking there are no big SF fandoms in Taiwan or Hong Kong (with the exception of Ni Kuang's fans in Hong Kong, perhaps), even if there are also SF authors who are quite active, like Yeh Yen-tu in Taiwan, or Albert Tam, in Hong Kong.

Compared to China, where SF writers are quite naturally associated with this genre, several Taiwanese and Hong Kong writers more associated with "mainstream" literature are interested in SF, especially in the last decade: Lo Yi -chin, Kao Yi-feng, Egoyan Zheng, Huang Chong-kai or Wu Ming-yi in Taiwan; Dung Kai-cheung, Dorothy Tse, Hon Lai-chu in Hong Kong... who write SF not only for thematic and narrative reasons, but also as a method of literary experimentation. The result is a rather singular relationship to language, both specific to the linguistic variations that exist in Taiwan and Hong Kong, but also to the language proper to each writer, whose territories of literary exploration don't necessarily derive from SF.

LA: Thank you for these clarifications. To conclude, can you recommend some authors or trends to follow in the Sinophone SF literature?

GG: I think some writers from Hong Kong and Taiwan deserve to be better known outside their borders, like Kao Yi-feng, Dung Kai-cheung or Egoyan Zheng.

As for China, there are more and more translations into English, but too few in French. I think the "short story form," which is not very popular in the editorial

world, is very well mastered by young Chinese SF authors like Chen Qiufan and Xia Jia, whom I particularly like.

Finally, there is one aspect that we have not discussed but which is essential to understand is the production of cyber SF in China. This represents several tens of thousands of works and several hundred million readers.

Literary production on the Web is generally too despised by classic editorial and translation circuits, but there are some very interesting works (even if it is true that they are drowned in a massive industrial-like overproduction).

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