

The Multiple Bodies of *The Three-Body Problem*

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Unbeknownst to most anglophone readers, Cixin Liu's acclaimed *Santi* trilogy has been published in three discrete versions, each one with unique features. In its earliest incarnation, the first novel of the *Santi* trilogy was published serially in a Chinese sf magazine before appearing in novel form in Chinese. The third iteration, an English translation titled *The Three-Body Problem*, was primarily based on the initial serialized version. In each version, the title is reimagined, pages are shuffled around, and the narrative rhythm is modified. Taking *The Three-Body Problem* as its key example, this paper provides perspectives on how to approach a fiction that has not one but multiple "bodies."

Introduction

In his *Santi* trilogy¹—comprising the novels *The Three-Body Problem* (2007, English 2014), *The Dark Forest* (2008, English 2015), and *Death's End* (2010, English 2016)—Cixin Liu, China's most significant writer of sf, describes the human world over a vast timespan, from the critical years of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution to a distant future when aliens have colonized Earth. The plot of the trilogy hinges on a social Darwinist conceit: the so-called "dark forest," a theory developed in the trilogy's fictional field of "cosmic sociology." The theory postulates that the universe is like a dark forest, with every civilization constantly hunting or being hunted, or both. This means that peace among planets with intelligent life is best maintained by virtue of their remaining unknown to each other. A civilization that reveals itself will perish because distant and heretofore undetected cultures will attack it to eliminate a potential future threat.

In the first novel of the *Santi* trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem*, a Chinese woman named Ye Wenjie witnesses the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution persecuting her scientist father. Thus disillusioned, she becomes desperate to change human civilization by inviting alien aid. She reveals the location of Earth to hostile aliens from Alpha Centauri, knowing that in a dark forest, these aliens would likely try to annihilate Earth, causing humans to perfect

themselves in response or else go extinct. From this point on, the *Santi* trilogy immerses readers in an Earth continually on the brink of destruction. Besides the diegetic possibility of Armageddon, the trilogy's fast-paced, episodic stories and unfamiliar era and landscapes challenge readers to keep up. The dramatic plot twists are definitely attractions of this trilogy, even if, by the end, it is so full of apocalyptic scenarios that in a way the end of the world no longer feels threatening.

It is crucial to note that what is often presumed to be one novel, *The Three-Body Problem*, is actually only one of multiple versions. Initially, the book was published serially in a Chinese sf periodical. It was later compiled into book form by a Chinese publisher. The English-language translation—the third version of this novel—was based on the original serial iteration. In order to demonstrate how the multiple versions illustrate the cultural politics behind the trilogy's appeal, both in China and globally, this paper proposes a two-fold argument. First, I claim that in the serial and the English version of the first novel, the history of China is presented like an sf story itself. These versions' orientalist highlightings of the Cultural Revolution presents China's cultural past as in itself a kind of dystopian novel; this political emphasis is aesthetically appealing to Westerners because it generates a kind of “diversity” in the globalized genre of sf. I call the prominent—but problematic—framing of Chinese history as an sf plot *history as dystopia*. This sort of narrative device reduces Liu's contribution to the Anglophone sf scene, rendering it a mere marketing technique based on the attraction of a Chinese national label among “global science fictions” (Csicsery-Ronay 478).

Second, I contend that when China becomes intelligible as an sf story, the story's *narrative structure*, as opposed to the story itself, serves as an important device to overcome a longstanding binary between China and the world, a binary that is at the bottom of the pigeonholing of Liu's sf as a Chinese ethnic version of a globalized genre. The structure takes on an epistemological task that is much more far-reaching than showcasing the history of China: It attempts to contain the unlimited possibilities of death and survival in the limited form of sf. I use the term *encyclopedism* to designate this epistemological task. What is most special about Liu's narrative is his emphasis on the techniques of survival through encyclopedic narratives about destructions.

A note on terminology: I refer to the multiple versions of the trilogy as *multiple bodies*, deliberately conflating the “bodies” of the three versions with Liu's use of *ti* (body) in the Chinese title of the trilogy *Santi* (“Three-Body”). In physics, the three-body presents a problem of calculating the forces and positions of each object for future times; in the sense that the relationship