

Translator's Post Script from *The Three-Body Problem*

When I was asked to translate *The Three-Body Problem*, I was incredibly honored, but also full of trepidation: Translating another writer's work is a heavy responsibility. It's almost like being asked to care for someone's child.

The act of translation involves breaking down one piece of work in one language and ferrying the pieces across a gulf to reconstitute them into a new work in another language. When the gulf separating the two is as wide as the Pacific Ocean that separates China from America, the task can be daunting.

The obvious difficulties, such as differences in linguistic structure and the cultural references, are actually relatively easy to resolve. *The Three-Body Problem* begins with the Cultural Revolution, and there are numerous allusions to Chinese history. I've tried to keep the number of explanatory footnotes to a bare minimum by, wherever possible, filling in the necessary knowledge for non-Chinese readers by the judicious addition of a few informational phrases in the text (all approved by the author).

But there are more subtle issues involving literary devices and narrative techniques. The Chinese literary tradition shaped and was shaped by its readers, giving rise to different emphases and preferences in fiction compared to what American readers expect. In some cases, I tried to adjust the narrative techniques to ones that American readers are more familiar with. In other cases, I've left them alone, believing that it's better to retain the flavor of the original.

I've also tried, wherever possible, to avoid sharing Western interpretations into those passages dealing with Chinese history and politics.

Overly literal translations, far from being faithful, actually distort meaning by obscuring sense. But translations can also pay so little attention to the integrity of the source that almost nothing of the original's flavor or voice survives. Neither of these approaches is a responsible fulfillment of the translator's duty. In a sense, translating may be harder than writing original fiction because a translator must strive to satisfy the same aesthetic demands while being subjected to much more restrictive creative constraints.

In translating, my goal is to act as a faithful interpreter, preserving as much of the original's nuances of meaning as possible without embellishment or omission. Yet a translator must also balance fidelity to the source, aptness of expression, and beauty

of style. The best translations into English do not, in fact, read as if they were originally written in English. The English words are arranged in such a way that the reader sees a glimpse of another culture's patterns of thinking, hears an echo of another language's rhythms and cadences, and feels a tremor of another people's gestures and movements.

I may not have succeeded, but these were the standards I had in mind as I set about my task.

In moving from one language, culture, and reading community to another language, culture, and reading community, some aspects of the original are inevitably lost. But if there translation is done well, some things are also gained – not the least of which is a bridge between the two readerships. I hope my fellow American readers enjoy this novel.

- Ken Liu