Three-Body Problem: science fiction for China’s ‘New Era’?

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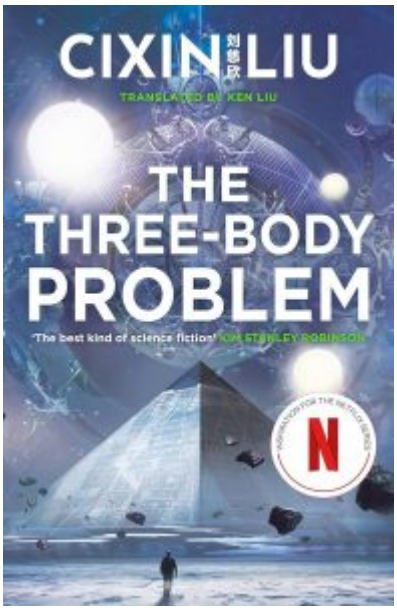

This article contains no spoilers for any of Liu Cixin’s works or their adaptations.

The *Three-Body Problem* (三体), a science fiction novel released in 2006, counts as perhaps the major cultural ‘crossover’ success of China in the last decade. This was true even before the release of the new Netflix television adaptation of the book,

released on the 21st of March 2024, and produced and written for the screen by *Game of Thrones* show creators David Benioff and D. B. Weiss alongside Alexander Woo.

That the creators of arguably the largest television 'phenomenon' of recent years saw fit to choose *Three-Body* as their next project is testament to the cultural impact of this work within China and, increasingly, in the wider world. All the more interesting since the author Liu Cixin, a cultural icon in the PRC, refuses to repudiate his country's revolutionary history, including its current governing party, the Communist Party of China. As such, he cannot easily be co-opted as a 'dissident', and those seeking to market and adapt his works in the West find themselves in the awkward position of having to promote an author who is proud of his country's achievements and is able to critically engage with the historical path of the Chinese revolution in a productive way, avoiding what Xi Jinping refers to as "historical nihilism."[1]

This article will look at the original book series, as well as a Chinese-made (Tencent) adaptation from 2023, and compare them with the recently released US-made (Netflix) adaptation. It will assess the relative merits of each version, different audience reactions to these series, as well as some wider considerations of the differences between contemporary Western and Chinese science fiction.

Three-Body Problem was published in China in 2006. The book is the first of a trilogy, with subsequent volumes titled *The Dark Forest* (黑暗森林) and *Death's End* (死神永生), with the trilogy collectively known as *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (地球往事). It achieved broad commercial and critical success domestically, with Liu's works accounting for 2/3rds of the Chinese science fiction market and abroad, with translations into more than 20 languages. In English, the first volume of the trilogy, translated by Ken Liu, received the coveted Hugo Award for 'Best Novel' in 2015, the first non-English speaking writer to do so. Liu Cixin's dominance of

modern Chinese science fiction can also be seen in the enormous domestic (and moderate international) success of film adaptations of his *Wandering Earth* novel, with China selecting the second installment in this film series as its submission for this year's Oscars.

The plot of the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* series is difficult to summarise, especially when trying not to spoil anything. In general, the action initially takes place in a near-contemporary era with the deaths by suicide of various theoretical and applied physicists around the world, many of them leaving cryptic notes suggesting something along the lines of "Physics doesn't exist." The first book also jumps back to Mao-era China and follows Ye Wenjie, herself a gifted physicist, during the Cultural Revolution and subsequent work at a radio telescope base in Inner Mongolia. In the broadest possible strokes, the series can be considered an 'alien contact' story, but it also touches on themes such as ecology and human development, 'game theory', the capacity for ideological groups to form depending on external circumstances, global cooperation to overcome multi-generational problems, and high-level physics concepts.

The books were extremely well-received, with many praising their creative and inventive use of scientific concepts, enormously ambitious 'high-concept' action sequences, and philosophical themes. Equally, however, some readers critiqued the series, suggesting that these overwhelmingly abstract 'ideas' take center stage, to the detriment of any focus on interpersonal drama and character development. As such, for years it was considered that the novels were 'unfilmable'.

There had been a few abortive attempts at adapting the book series in China, in animation, or even video game form. Eventually, the Chinese company Tencent succeeded and released a 30-episode series in January 2023. This covers the events of the first novel, Three-Body Problem, in exhaustive detail and is considered a highly faithful adaptation, often with dialogue taken straight from the novel. On

release, it was praised by fans of the book, with strong performances, excellent cinematography, and impressive special effects, especially for its budget and the fact it was a Chinese television drama. However, there were also some criticisms from both domestic and international audiences, which criticized the show's irregular pacing, poor performances by non-Chinese actors, and the 'old-fashioned' CGI of the 'video game' section of the story.

The recent Netflix adaptation of the series is admirable in many respects. Cixin Liu and his main English-language translator, Ken Liu, were producers on the Netflix version, and it clearly finds great inspiration in the wilder ideas and 'wow' moments from the series, with mixed results in carrying them over to the screen. For fans of the original series, an immediate issue is the compression of the first book, along with some elements of the second and even third, into just eight episodes. Even with that in mind, the series wastes time trying to manufacture a series of 'likeable' characters (this time with less than mixed results).

In the quest for 'relatability' (through petty squabbles and contrived romances), the writers sacrifice the authenticity of these supposedly brilliant theoretical physicists. Such poor scriptwriting and ham-fisted characterization inevitably detract from the impact of the visual spectacle. When the series spends time away from the 'contemporary' era, in Mao-era China, or in the 'video game,' the series is more engaging, but most of the time is spent with an unconvincing group of presumably committee-decided-upon personalities. This group painfully delivers Marvel Studios-style "witty dialogue," and the rushed nature of the series never allows for their relationships to develop naturally.

In comparing the two adaptations, pacing is a key difference, with the US-made series' breakneck speed allowing little time for digestion or contemplation of the weighty, mind-bending concepts. Each episode of the Netflix series reportedly cost $20 million, so having fewer episodes is understandable, but the decision to force

more events from future books into this first series was perhaps unwise. And it is notable that while the US adaptation looks more ‘expensive’ on screen, it doesn’t necessarily translate into more impact, or better performances, or direction when compared to the Tencent version.

Politically, a difference arises in the various adaptations with regard to the character of Ye Wenjie. Her ‘pessimism’ and ‘misanthropy’ are present in all versions and drive her fateful actions, but the stress placed upon the cause is different. In each version, Ye is affected by negative experiences she and her family experienced during the time of the Cultural Revolution. The Netflix adaptation (perhaps due to time constraints, but equally, it performs a well-worn ideological function) essentially makes this experience her key motivation and draws her entire desire for ‘revenge’ from one act of violence in a ‘struggle session’—in a shocking scene that opens the series, and indeed the first book.

With more room to breathe, the novel and the Tencent series also bring out other elements, primarily witnessing ecological damage, as key motivators for her eventual ‘nihilistic’ attitude toward the human race as a whole.[2] Another big difference between the Netflix and other versions is the scope of the action and the participants. Although the Tencent drama suffered from poor acting for its international cast members, it tried to stay loyal to the novels by incorporating a wide variety of international characters and institutions such as the UN—making global-level responses and cooperation a key theme of the work, whereas the Netflix version focussed primarily on London, Oxford, and unnamed British security services.

Reactions to the Netflix adaptation have been mixed: in China, many have praised the strength of the visual effects, and in some cases admired the filmmakers’ clear admiration for the source material. However, some have argued that the series is only a superficial engagement with the books, and have questioned the switching of

the primary location from Beijing to London, and of the Chinese characters to Westerners.

Inevitably, orientalist Western reporting of Chinese netizens' responses has characterized them as reductively "nationalist" and suggested that they are purely driven by animus towards the US (inevitably whipped up by "propaganda"!). For such a cherished series, it will inevitably draw out a wide variety of responses in the enormous and diverse commentariat of online Chinese communities, and it is easy for Western newspapers to cherry-pick comments that suit their narrative. Likewise, they will ignore more nuanced comments, such as those by Zhang Yiwu, a professor at Peking University, who noted, "while there are changes influenced by Western ideology, it does not necessarily mean there's a deliberate effort to demean China or any specific arrangement of that nature."[3] Such a one-sided portrayal of negative comments among Chinese audiences also ignores that the Tencent version also received its fair share of critiques alongside positive comments at its time of release.

In the West, likewise, the series has met with both praise and criticism. While admiring the series' ambition in seeking to transform this 'difficult' story and promote it on the widest possible platform, some notable failures are pointed out. Some stunning special and visual effects and memorable set-pieces are let down by weak characterization, clunky scriptwriting, and labored exposition.

It has been noted that recent Western science fiction, particularly in cinema, is based either on simplified superhero narratives or extremely pessimistic dystopian/post-apocalypse scenarios, and this reflects a spiritual and ideological absence in late capitalist culture.[4]

Liu Cixin's works, including the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, while not blandly utopian by any stretch of the imagination, focus instead on proactive and creative responses to long-standing and seemingly intractable problems affecting

the whole of humanity (while climate crisis is a single topic within the book series, the story as a whole can also be seen as a metaphor for humanity's contradictory responses to the issue). As such, Liu Cixin's stories are fitting science fiction for China's 'New Era' period of continuing socialist construction, undertaking (and more importantly achieving) its own enormously complex and profound projects of poverty elimination, green transformation, and high-quality development.[5]

With that in mind, it's heartening to see this growing appreciation for Liu Cixin's works, and the range of adaptations of *Three-Body Problem* will hopefully encourage more people to read the original series (and spur more translations of Chinese science fiction novels). As a tool for people-to-people exchange, adapting popular stories across cultures can foster understanding. *Three-Body Problem* has the potential to be such a bridge, opening a door to the captivating world of Chinese science fiction for a global audience.

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[1] In a 2013 speech, *Uphold and Develop Socialism with Chinese Characteristics,* Xi Jinping criticised those in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union who had completely repudiated the historical path of the Stalin era: "to repudiate Lenin, to repudiate Stalin was to wreck chaos in Soviet ideology and engage in historical nihilism. It caused Party organisations at all levels to have barely any function whatsoever."

[2] Ye Wenjie, in both the book and the Netflix series, bluntly justifies her actions by stating: "Our civilisation is no longer capable of solving its own problems", which seems to repudiate Marx's claim, from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,* that "Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the

course of formation." This Marx quote was used by Xi Jinping in a speech from 1989, collected in *Up and Out of Poverty,* 2016, Foreign Languages Press.

[3] https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202403/1309480.shtml

[4] With the quip attributed to Jameson, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."

[5] Such projects are all the more impressive since they are often achieved ahead of schedule, with for example recent estimates suggesting China will reach peak CO2 emissions this year or next, with "structural decline" from then on, many years ahead of schedule. https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-chinas-emissions-set-to-fall-in-2024-after-record-growth-in-clean-energy/

Source: Friends of Socialist China