

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

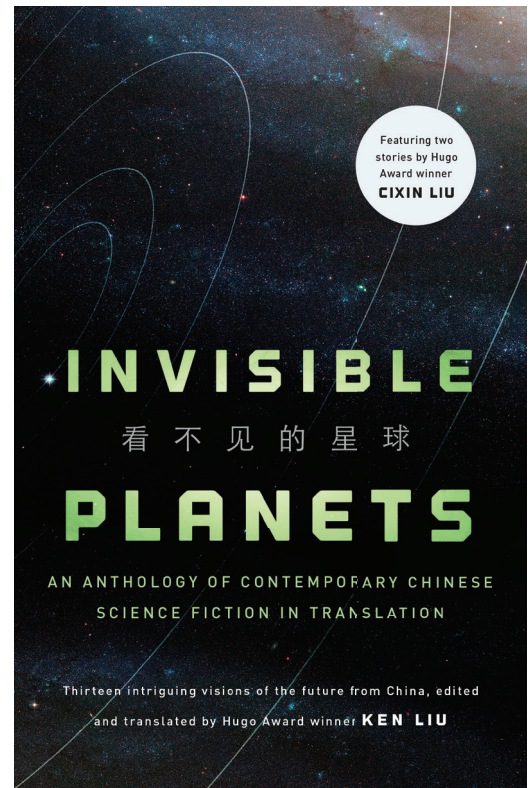
看不见的星球

INVISIBLE PLANETS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE
SCIENCE FICTION IN TRANSLATION

Thirteen intriguing visions of the future from China,
edited and translated by Hugo Award winner **KEN LIU**

This short study guide offers some questions to
start off discussions about the stories.



1. One of the characters in “The Year of the Rat” makes the following observation about China’s economic development: “We still didn’t control the key technologies. The embryos all had to be imported.... All that our country, the world’s factory, had to offer was a lot of cheap labor in the least technology-intensive phase of the operation.” How does this perception—true or not—tie into the struggles of the unemployed neo grads and the unwanted Neorats? How is it similar to or different from critiques of globalization more commonly seen in the West?
2. The town in “The Fish of Lijiang” is a lot like many other “heritage sites” around the world: a façade constructed to give the illusion of frozen time, to provide a simulacrum of authenticity and history. The dystopian vision of this story also involves the perception of time as a tool of manipulation. Why is time and how we perceive its passing so important to our sense of self? How does the story try to answer this question?
3. “The Flower of Shazui” takes place in an “urban village,” a unique feature of China’s megacities consisting of pockets of rural land enclosed by sprawling development. Try to do some research on your own to find out how urban villages came to be and what kind of urban planning challenges they present. How does this setting affect the choices and beliefs of the characters in the story?
4. Is it possible to read “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight” as a Pinocchio story?

“THE YEAR OF THE RAT”

“THE FISH OF LIJIANG”

“THE FLOWER OF SHAZUI”

“A HUNDRED GHOSTS
PARADE TONIGHT”

5. “Tongtong’s Summer” does something that’s relatively rare in contemporary SF: a generally positive outlook for the potential of technology to empower us and give us more liberty. How to provide elder care that emphasizes the agency of the elderly is a global problem, and the story seems to suggest that even a technological solution requires a collaboration between the generations, with the elderly taking the lead. Compare the vision of elderly care here with the one in “Taking Care of God”: how would you elaborate on the thematic similarities and differences?
- b. Is the dragon-horse in “Night Journey of the Dragon-Horse” Chinese or French? Is the question meaningful? Is it *ever* meaningful, when applied to other characters, ideas, designs, or objects? Why do you think the story has the bat quote from Haizi’s famous poem about the motherland?
7. “The City of Silence” pays homage to Orwell’s *1984*. But there are quite a few differences in the ways that Big Brother and the State implement surveillance and control the citizens. Beyond technological differences, do you also see a philosophical difference? Are these differences reflective of how surveillance states have evolved in the modern age? Many of the censorship-circumvention techniques employed by the characters in the story are based on real life examples of Chinese users circumventing technological censorship, but they are certainly not limited to China. Can you think of any instances where such techniques are also used in the West to get around speech restrictions or attempts at control?
8. “Invisible Planets” is a story about the power of narrative as a form of resistance. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
9. Automation poses an increasing threat to employment. “Folding Beijing” describes various strategies that different governments take to counter the threat: increased job protections, social safety net, mandatory shorter work hours (to force employer to hire more people for a decreasing pool of jobs), and so on, all with their own drawbacks. The solution implemented in the fictional future Beijing is perhaps the most drastic and dystopian of all. Can you think of a solution that does not have the drawbacks of any of the solutions discussed in the story?
10. “Call Girl” and “The Flower of Shazui” both deal with feminist themes but through very different gazes and approaches. Can you articulate the difference as well as suggest some empowering reading strategies with respect to each of them?
11. Why is “Grave of the Fireflies” considered science fiction?
12. “The Circle” and “Taking Care of God” both devote a great deal of space to technical descriptions and discussions of scientific/engineering principles. How does this focus further the humanistic theme of the stories?

“TONGTONG’S SUMMER”
“TAKING CARE OF GOD”

**“NIGHT JOURNEY OF THE
DRAGON-HORSE”**

“THE CITY OF SILENCE”

“INVISIBLE PLANETS”

“FOLDING BEIJING”

“CALL GIRL”
“THE FLOWER OF SHAZUI”

“GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES”

“THE CIRCLE”
“TAKING CARE OF GOD”