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BROKEN STARS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION IN TRANSLATION

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

This short study guide offers some questions to stimulate discussion for reading groups and classes.

1. In "Goodnight, Melancholy," Xia Jia deliberately weaves together real events from Alan Turing's life with fictional inventions and challenges the reader to tell them apart, essentially placing the reader in the role of a player of the imitation game. How does this breaking of the fourth wall elucidate the themes of the story? Look up some of the scientific papers cited in the footnotes and see how their ideas were woven into the story and transformed. Does knowing more about the scientific background of the speculative elements change the way you understand the tale?

"GOODNIGHT, MELANCHOLY"

2. The most interesting character in "Moonlight" is not any of the named characters, but humanity itself. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

"MOONLIGHT"

3. The girls in "Broken Stars" are friends, rivals, and frenemies, and one way to read the story is as an exploration of the psychology of these layered relationships, in which the speculative elements illuminate what otherwise cannot be seen. What are some psychological truths being revealed in this way? How does the story inform our understanding of gender roles and expectations?

"BROKEN STARS"

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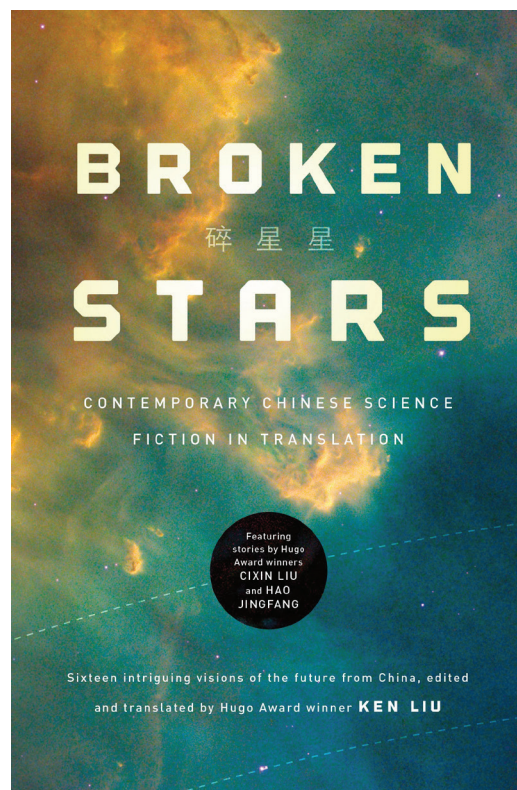
4. Do some research on your own on the plight of rural migrant workers in urban China. As unskilled, cheap laborers, they are indispensable to the prosperity of China's big cities, though they are often denied the benefits of urban residents such as education, healthcare, and basic legal protections. How does that background influence your interpretation of the surreal events in "Submarines"?

"SUBMARINES"

5. The style in which "Salinger and the Koreans" is written parodies propaganda literature. But whose propaganda is being mocked? This is not as easy to answer as it may seem at first.

"SALINGER AND THE KOREANS"

6. Is "Under a Dangling Sky" science fiction or fantasy? Is the distinction even meaningful?

"UNDER A DANGLING SKY"

7. The more you know about the history of China in the last one hundred years, the more powerful the emotional impact of the reversed timeline in "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear." Imagine if the timeline of the recent history of the United States were similarly "reversed"—not so much that time flowed backward, but that major events occurred in the reverse order (for instance, the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq occurred before the events of September 11, 2001). How does that inform or alter your view of the narrative of history? Of historical inevitability and choice?

"WHAT HAS PASSED SHALL IN KINDER LIGHT APPEAR"

8. "The New Year Train" is about chunyun, the annual peak travel time around Chinese New Year when hundreds of millions crisscross China to reunite with their families. How has technology changed our traditions and rituals for traveling to see family around Thanksgiving and the winter holidays? What has remained the same?

"THE NEW YEAR TRAIN"

9. Like "Goodnight, Melancholy," "The Robot Who Liked to Tell Tall Tales" is about machines that lie. How do these stories differ in the ways they portray lying and its significance? Consider the role of lies in identity formation, self-confidence, personhood, agency, and humanness.

"GOODNIGHT, MELANCHOLY"
"THE ROBOT WHO LIKED TO TELL TALL TALES"

10. "The Snow of Jinyang" can be classified as a chuanyue story, one in which a modern-day person time-travels to the past and uses knowledge about history or modern science to change the course of history or secure themselves a happy life. Is there a period in the past you'd like to travel to? How would you use your knowledge (of history, of science, of art, of practical skills, and so on) to make yourself successful?

"THE SNOW OF JINYANG"

11. Like all fables, "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe: Laba Porridge" has a moral. How would you articulate that moral? Does the story subvert the moral it purports to teach?

"THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE: LABA PORRIDGE"

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12. "The First Emperor's Games" uses games to play with aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Pick some historical figures you like and imagine what kind of modern-day games they'd enjoy. Who and which games did you pick? Why?

13. Like "What Has Passed in Kinder Light Shall Appear," "Reflection" plays with the flow of time. What does the story say about how we come to define who we are? Are we in fact always trying to convince ourselves that we are clairvoyants?

14. One of several stories in the anthology that focus on the importance of lying to self-identity, "The Brain Box" focuses on a technological intrusion into the inner monologue around which our sense of self is built. Do you find the speculation on the consequences of such a technology plausible? Why or why not?

15. The characters in "Coming of the Light" are obsessed with pseudo-spirituality and the business of technology—quite similar to the popular understanding of Silicon Valley, in fact. Do you think this impulse to give spiritual meaning to the pursuit of faster processors and better selfies reflects a deeper anxiety about progress? A convenient piece of late capitalist propaganda? A meaningful engagement with our increasingly abstracted and technology-mediated world? Or something else?

16. "A History of Future Illnesses" is deeply unsettling. One way to understand the extreme images is as a reflection of the alienation brought about by rapid technological change and the lack of a new consensus of morals. Can you think of other "illnesses" inspired by current trends and technologies?