SOFTWARE & TECH

Invisible Planets Ken Liu

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Discovering a New World: An Introduction to Invisible Planets by Ken Liu

In the vast, ever-expanding universe of science fiction, certain works act as portals, transporting readers not just to distant stars or future timelines, but into entirely different cultural and literary landscapes. Few books accomplish this feat as elegantly and profoundly as **Invisible Planets**, the acclaimed anthology edited and translated by the multiple award-winning author, **Ken Liu**. Published in 2016, this collection served as a groundbreaking introduction for English-speaking audiences to the vibrant, complex, and rapidly evolving world of contemporary Chinese science fiction.

Before **Invisible Planets**, the idea of Chinese sci-fi for most Western readers was often limited to the monumental success of Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*, which Ken Liu himself masterfully translated. While that novel shattered expectations, it was a single, towering peak. **Invisible Planets** arrived as an entire, breathtaking mountain range, showcasing the diverse voices, styles, and thematic concerns of a generation of Chinese writers. It is a curated gallery of imagination, a literary journey that proves great science fiction knows no borders. This article explores the profound significance of **Invisible Planets Ken Liu**assembled, diving into its contents, its authors, its themes, and its lasting impact on the global science fiction landscape.

The Architect of the Bridge: Who is Ken Liu?

To understand the phenomenon of **Invisible Planets**, one must first appreciate its architect, **Ken Liu**. Liu is a rare and remarkable talent in the literary world: a writer celebrated for his own award-winning fiction—most notably the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Award-winning short story "The Paper Menagerie"—and a translator who has become the definitive voice bringing Chinese speculative fiction to the West. His role in **Invisible Planets** is not merely that of a translator; he is an editor, a curator, and a cultural explainer. His introductions to each story provide invaluable context, gently guiding Western readers through nuances of Chinese history, language, and social dynamics that might otherwise be lost. Without Liu's sensitivity, skill, and deep understanding of both cultures, this anthology simply would not exist. He is the bridge, and **Invisible Planets**is the magnificent city built upon it. His translation work, much like his original writing, is characterized by a lyrical clarity that makes complex ideas feel intimately accessible, a quality that shines on every page of this collection.

A Universe of Voices: The Stories Within Invisible Planets

The true magic of **Invisible Planets**lies in its diversity. The anthology collects thirteen short stories from some of the most exciting voices in Chinese science fiction, including Hao Jingfang, Chen Qiufan, Ma Boyong, Xia Jia, and others. Each story is a world unto itself, exploring everything from near-future tech and social media dystopias to mythological retellings and philosophical meditations on identity. Let's explore a few of the standout narratives that make this collection a must-read for any fan of the genre.

Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing"

Perhaps the most famous story in the collection, Hao Jingfang's Hugo Award-winning "Folding Beijing," translated by **Ken Liu**, is a stunning allegory of economic inequality. The story envisions a future Beijing that physically folds in on itself, rotating through space and time to accommodate three distinct social classes. The wealthy elite live in

luxurious, spacious First Space, while the vast majority of the city's poor are crammed into Third Space, their existence limited to a mere two hours of the day. Through the eyes of a garbage collector named Lao Dao, the story becomes a poignant and powerful critique of systemic injustice, rendered in deeply human terms. It is a story that lingers long after the final page.

Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang"

In stark contrast, Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang" explores the collision of commerce, memory, and technology. Set in the picturesque tourist town of Lijiang, a young man uses a device that can record and transfer memories. He is hired by aging sex workers who want to preserve the painful memories of their past for a nostalgic, wealthy clientele. The story is a haunting meditation on commodification, emotional labor, and the ethics of memory, wrapped in a beautifully melancholic narrative. It is a perfect example of how Chinese sci-fi can weave social realism with speculative technology, creating a deeply affecting literary experience.

Xia Jia's "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight"

Xia Jia, one of the most innovative voices in the collection, offers a story that brilliantly blends Chinese folklore with modern technology. "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight" is set in a near-future where people can rent "ghosts"—digital projections of historical figures or personal ancestors—for festivals and ceremonies. The story is a vibrant, humorous, yet deeply touching exploration of tradition, heritage, and the human need for connection in an increasingly digital world. It demonstrates how Chinese writers are using science fiction as a tool to re-examine their own cultural past.

These three stories alone highlight the incredible range within **Invisible Planets**. From the hard-hitting social critique of "Folding Beijing" to the emotional complexity of "The Fish of Lijiang" and the folkloric innovation of "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight," the anthology refuses to be pigeonholed. It is a testament to the fact that Chinese science fiction is not a monolith but a vibrant ecosystem of distinct, brilliant voices.

Key Themes in the Invisible Planets Anthology

While each story in the collection stands on its own, several recurring themes weave through the anthology, offering a fascinating window into the concerns of contemporary Chinese society as seen through a speculative lens. Understanding these themes is key to appreciating the depth of the works curated by **Ken Liu**.

- Rapid Urbanization and Inequality: Stories like "Folding Beijing" and "The City of Silence" (by Ma Boyong) grapple directly with the dizzying speed of China's urban development and the stark economic divides it creates. These are not abstract dystopias; they are speculative reflections of a reality many Chinese people experience.
- Technology and the Human Soul: Many stories explore how technology—from memory recording devices to AI-driven town squares—affects personal identity, memory, and emotional connection. There is a deep sense of humanism in how these authors explore tech, often asking not "what can we build?" but "what will we lose?"
- The Weight of History and Tradition: Unlike some Western sci-fi that looks solely to the future, many stories in Invisible Planets are deeply engaged with the past. Whether it's through the use of ghost folklore in Xia Jia's story or the reimagining of ancient legends in others, there is a constant dialogue between China's long history and its uncertain future.
- Environmental Anxiety and Climate Change: The natural world, often under immense pressure, plays a significant role. Chen Qiufan's "The Death of a Flower" is a beautiful, tragic story about the extinction of a single, unique species, serving as a powerful metaphor for larger environmental collapse.

The Literary Significance of Invisible Planets

The publication of **Invisible Planets**was more than just a successful book launch; it was a cultural event in the world of genre fiction. It arrived at a moment of intense curiosity about China and its global role, offering a form of "soft power" that is deeply human. The anthology did several crucial things for the literary world.

First, it shattered the misconception that Chinese science fiction is merely an imitation of Western tropes. Readers discovered that Chinese writers were tackling complex, globally relevant issues like artificial intelligence, climate change, and social justice, but from a distinctly Chinese perspective, informed by their own cultural history and social pressures.

Second, it helped to establish a canon of contemporary Chinese sci-fi writers for an international audience. Before **Invisible Planets**, names like Hao Jingfang and Chen Qiufan were largely unknown outside of specialized circles. Now, they are recognized as major international talents, with their own novels and short story collections being translated and widely read. The anthology served as a launchpad for many of these careers.

Third, it demonstrated the power of the translator as an artistic collaborator. **Ken Liu**'s contributions are not invisible; they are an integral part of the book's success. His thoughtful introductions, his clear and flowing prose, and his careful selection of the stories created a cohesive and powerful reading experience. The success of **Invisible Planets**has opened doors for more translation projects and has elevated the discussion around the art of translation in genre fiction.

How Invisible Planets Compares to Other Chinese Sci-Fi Anthologies

For readers new to the field, **Invisible Planets Ken Liu** is often compared to **Broken Stars**, the sequel anthology he also edited and translated (published in 2019). While both are essential reading, there is a notable difference in tone and focus. **Invisible Planets**tends to feel more focused on the social and literary aspects of the genre, with a strong emphasis on character-driven stories that often blend realism with speculative elements. It is a slightly more accessible entry point for a general fiction reader.

Broken Stars, on the other hand, feels more expansive and, at times, more experimental. It includes longer works, more overtly science-fictional concepts (including a section with stories by Liu Cixin), and a broader range of genres, from space opera to surrealism. Together, they form a complete picture, but **Invisible Planets**remains the foundational text, the one that first opened the door. It is the perfect starting point for anyone curious about Chinese science fiction because it was designed to be exactly that: an introduction.

Why You Should Read Invisible Planets Today

If you haven't yet picked up a copy of **Invisible Planets**, you might wonder why it remains so relevant, years after its initial publication. The answer is simple: the stories are timeless. The social inequalities explored in "Folding Beijing" have only become more pronounced globally. The questions about technology and memory in "The Fish of Lijiang" are more pressing than ever in an age of deepfakes and digital consciousness. The environmental anxieties are no longer speculative; they are our daily reality.

Furthermore, reading **Invisible Planets**is an act of literary cultural exchange. In a world that often feels increasingly divided, fiction has the unique power to build empathy. To read these stories is to see the world—cities, families, the future—through a different set of eyes. It is to understand that the hopes, fears, and dreams of people in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen are not so different from our own. The anthology is a testament to the universality of human experience, filtered through the brilliant, unique lens of Chinese imagination. It is a book that does not just entertain; it expands the reader's universe.

Conclusion: A Lasting Legacy of Imagination

Invisible Planets, expertly curated and translated by **Ken Liu**, is far more than a simple collection of short stories. It is a landmark achievement in literary translation, a vibrant showcase of a new generation of global talent, and a profound exploration of the human condition through the lens of Chinese speculative fiction. From the class-divided, folding metropolis of Hao Jingfang to the soulful, memory-soaked rivers of Chen Qiufan, every page offers a new discovery, a new perspective, and a new invitation to imagine the world differently.

For anyone seeking to understand the direction of contemporary science fiction, or simply looking for a reading experience that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant, **Invisible Planets** is

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