

The path to success in modern sci-fi literature

EDITOR'S NOTE

The Wandering Earth is a 2019 sci-fi movie based on the novella by Chinese writer Liu Cixin. It has grossed 4.6 billion yuan at the Chinese box office. Meanwhile, another successful sci-fi movie *Crazy Alien* was adapted from Liu's work "The Rural Teacher." Liu Cixin solicited enormous attention again after he received the Hugo Award in 2015. His fiction is filled with particle physics and future worlds, but what does his life look like? How did Liu become a sci-fi author? What's his understanding of sci-fi literature? This page will answer these questions.

By CHEN XIN

In April 1994, a tall man was programming in the computer room of the Niangziguan Power Plant situated on the border of Shanxi and Hebei provinces. The telephone in front of him rang.

"Hello, is that this Liu Cixin?"

"Yes, this is Liu Cixin. Who is speaking?"

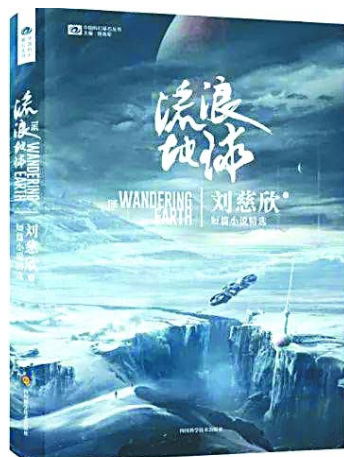
"This is Tang Feng, an editor of 'Science Fiction World' based in Chengdu."

"Science Fiction World?"

"The stories you sent us are well conceived and with enormous scope and vision. We have decided to publish them."

Early development

In 1963, Liu Cixin was born in Beijing. Liu Bin, his father and a former soldier, worked for Yangquan Coal Mine Group in Shanxi Province. His mother was a primary school teacher. Liu grew up in a coal mine zone. Liu Bin loved to read, and two-thirds of his books were classic literature. After attending school, Liu found these books and read them with the help of a dictionary. Though reading was a struggle for him at that time, Liu was happy to learn more Chinese characters.



The Wandering Earth by Liu Cixin
Photo: FILE

He kept reading these books, until one day he encountered the wonderful invention and rich detail of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. Ever since then, he has preferred science fiction such as English novelist H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, *The Invisible Man* and *The War of the Worlds*. Reading, however, wasn't enough. Liu started to write science fiction when he was only a high school student.

In 1988, Liu graduated from the Department of Hydropower Engineering at North China University of Water Resources and Electric Power. He was dispatched to work at the Niangziguan Power Plant in Yangquan. Niangziguan is a mountain pass along the Great Wall. In those mountains that had witnessed countless battles in history, Liu became more and more obsessed with sci-fi literature and continued to write.

In the spring of 1999, Liu selected five short stories from his works and carefully printed and mailed them to "Science Fiction World" magazine. Authors across the country contributed numerous articles to the press, but an editor, Tang Feng, picked out the five stories. After the first reading, Tang felt great admiration and immediately called the author. Liu was overjoyed by the good news. He wondered which one of the five novels the editor would choose.

"No, not one, we want all five stories you sent us. We will get them published as soon as possible. We want you to be our key author," Tang said.

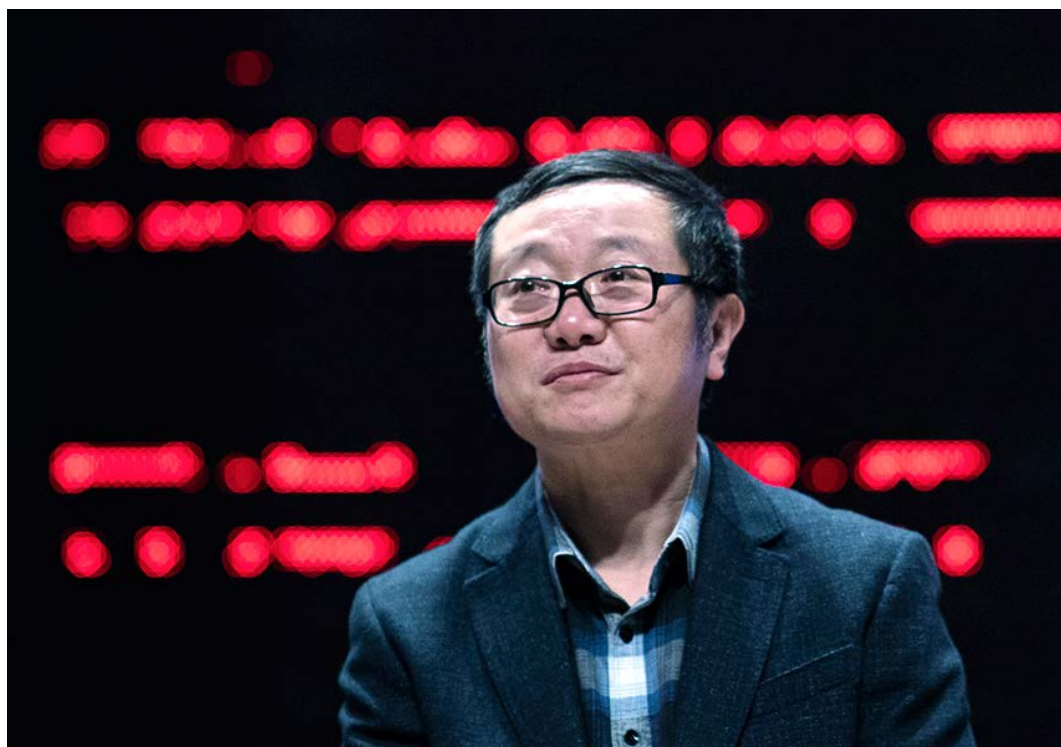
What luck! Suddenly, Liu had tears in his eyes, because his novels had been repeatedly rejected by publishers since his school days. The five sci-fi stories were published successively from the second half of 1999 into early 2000: "The Whale's Song," "Microscopic End," "Cosmic Contracture," "With Her Eyes" and "Inferno." The editors hardly changed a word. "With Her Eyes" also won the first prize of the Galaxy Award, China's most prestigious sci-fi honor.

Previously, Liu's efforts to publish his sci-fi stories were almost useless. "Science Fiction World" was Liu's angel. Since then, all the articles that he submitted to the press were published.

Birth of The Three-Body Problem

Liu's sci-fi career started with short stories, then he wrote novellas and novels at the same time. However, since 2006, he has been devoted to novel writing. Liu holds that good ideas for science fiction writing are really precious. It is difficult to fully display an idea in a novella, so it may be a waste of that idea.

His endeavors paid off. Liu completed the novel *The Three-Body*



In the *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, Liu created a world with an alien civilization that plans to take over Earth using magical technologies to block scientific progress on Earth. Humans on Earth fight back against the invasion. Photo: CFP



Since 2016, Liu has been devoted to novel writing. He holds that good ideas for science fiction writing are really precious. It is difficult to fully display an idea in a novella, so it may be a waste of that idea.

Problem, and it sold well instantly. After that, he published *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*. In this *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, Liu created a world with an alien civilization that plans to take over Earth using magical technologies to block scientific progress on Earth. Humans on Earth fight back against the invasion.

In the trilogy, Liu holds that human beings should not expose the existence of Earth to the universe without caution, because they have no idea what sort of values and moral principles alien civilizations may have. Even if an alien civilization were kind, any contact would still be very dangerous and Earth could suffer unpredictable disasters. People can also infer from the situation on Earth. For example, the relationship between humans and ants may give us a clue. It is terrifying to have a naive attitude toward aliens and provoke them.

Liu's opinion coincided with the idea of renowned British physicist Stephen Hawking. After Liu,

Hawking, in 2010, also warned people to stop trying to contact aliens at all.

In fact, Liu's "dark forest" theory stemmed from a burst of fear. One time, he saw experts talking about aliens on TV. They encouraged humans to respond immediately if they received signals from aliens. They believed morality advanced with civilization, such that humans would have friends in the universe. Liu found this perspective so silly and naive that he decided to write a sci-fi novel to refute it. This was the origin of the trilogy.

The Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy was a landmark publication for domestic sci-fi. It has sold more than 1 million copies, the best-selling science fiction over China's past two decades. Its magnificent imagination has won a crowd of sci-fi fans. Liu became the leading sci-fi author in the country.

Despite Liu's huge fame, many writers categorize his fiction into the literary genre, instead of mainstream literature. Constant criticism has inevitably made Liu feel awkward and disappointed. Surprisingly, "People's Literature," a leading magazine of Chinese literary fiction, vindicated his work. In 2012, they published four novellas that Liu wrote in his early career, "The Micro-Age," "The Poetry Cloud," "Sea of Dreams" and "Taking Care of God." It had been over 30 years since science fiction last appeared in this literary magazine. In 1978, "People's Literature" published "Dead Light on Coral Island" by Tong Enzheng.

Li Jingze, then editor-in-chief, said, "now our best science fiction can compete with the best science fiction in the world." Tor Books,

the world's most successful sci-fi publisher, introduced Liu's trilogy to the US market. This is the first Chinese science fiction to be translated into English by an overseas mainstream publishing house.

Daily life

Liu has persisted with his sci-fi writing for years and won many awards. He is famous out in the world, but remains obscure at his workplace.

Of course, there is occasional curiosity about him. People in the power plant sometimes ask him, "Liu, I saw a person on the internet who writes really popular science fiction. His name happens to be the same as yours." His colleagues just say what they have seen or heard, but never probe deeper. In some cases, their children, when they go to universities, find that the famous sci-fi writer on the internet is just that man in the power plant, so the young men ask Liu to sign his books.

Liu's science fiction is pioneering, but he is humble in daily life. He even doesn't use chat apps. The phenomenal success of *The Wandering Earth* has put Liu in the spotlight again, but he remains steady.

Liu considers himself a huge fan of science and fantasy. That's why he wrote science fiction. No matter what people say about his books, his heart is always in Niangziguan's mountains, vigorously constructing his realm of sci-fi literature. That's why, He Xi, another sci-fi author, describes Liu as "an indifferent cosmic observer, a cold moral judge and a calm thinker."

This article was edited and translated from Guangming Daily.