

Quaderni di cultura

12

Aspects of science fiction
since the 1980s:
China, Italy, Japan, Korea

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AN INTERVIEW BY G. IANNUZZI
WITH LORENZO ANDOLFATTO:
SHI KONG
AND THE TRANSLATION OF CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION IN ITALY

In 2010 you edited and translated into Italian Shi Kong, an anthology of contemporary Chinese science fiction (Andolfatto 2010): as long as you know, was it the first science fiction work translated directly from Chinese into Italian? And if it was, why do you think we had to wait 2010 for such an initiative to take place?

Shi Kong was indeed the first example of Chinese science fiction translated into Italian and, moreover, it was one of the first publications of Chinese science fiction in a European language at all. When I started to work on the short stories of *Shi Kong*, I quickly realized that I was heading toward an unexplored territory, translation-wise. Even though science fiction literature is gathering millions and millions of readers in China today, the genre has been pretty much neglected *tout court* here in Italy, as well as in many other Western countries otherwise very receptive toward Chinese culture (e.g. in France, Germany, England and Holland, where strong traditions in Chinese studies are established and create the ground for a very florid cultural production related to China). Apart from a couple of translations that I found in an academic journal (*Renditions*, if I remember correctly) of limited and

non-specialized circulation, and of an English anthology put together by Wu Dingbo around 1989, I could not find anything else in regard to Chinese science fiction, not from the point of view of translations, nor from an academic perspective: almost nothing was translated or discussed. I may be wrong, of course, and if I neglected to mention any colleague or book, I apologize, but still I am fairly sure that at that time, almost five years ago, this field of translation and research was at a very early stage of gestation.

As for the reasons why we had to wait (if anyone was waiting at all) until 2010 to read Chinese science fiction in translation, that's a tough question. Here in Italy we have many, many excellent translators, but - metaphorically speaking - these are little islands in the vast *cihai* [ocean of words] of Chinese literature. The production of science fiction in China has been growing steadily from the end of the Cultural Revolution, and its numbers are impressive, there is a lot to sift through in order to come up with some good material to present to the public. This takes a lot of time, and it is not always worth it in the end. Fortunately, when I started to work on *Shi Kong*, I had quite some time to dedicate to the project, as I was in China to study Chinese and to write my Masters thesis, so *Shi Kong* became a project that could knot together my needs to attune my Chinese, do some research, and make my way in the field of translations.

Furthermore, but here I may be stepping into unknown territories, I think that we are dealing as a "culture" with the vestiges of some sort of colonial mentality which on some unspoken level lead us to treat Chinese science fiction as some kind of exotic product, not interesting *per se* but rather as something bizarre, as an exotic food may be bizarre to our taste. This mindset has to be traced down to the issue - way too

vast to be addressed here - of modernity in a first-world/third-world relationship: science fiction has often been associated to the cultural dynamics of imperialism, especially in its early years. To put it very, *very* simply, we as supposedly first world do not think China has the “tools” (those given by the Enlightenment, the industrial revolution, and so on) to write science fiction as we expect science fiction to be. This way of reasoning is of course flawed in many ways, but it represents nonetheless a conceptual trap which is very easy to overlook.

How was Shi Kong born?

Giuseppe Lippi was very receptive toward the project of *Shi Kong* right from the beginning,¹ and I have to thank him for that, as he gave me a wonderful chance to test myself. The idea of the project came from me completely unsolicited: in 2009 I was living in Beijing; one day I happened to walk by a newspaper kiosk on my way to the university, and I stopped by it to buy a copy of *Kehuan Shijie* (Science fiction world), a science fiction magazine I used to buy now and then for language practice. *Kehua Shijie* is the biggest science fiction magazine of the country, and it sells every month something like 500,000 copies, with an estimated reader base of many millions (those who share the purchase of the magazine because of its price, not often affordable in the countryside). That month, the magazine was also selling an anthology of short stories in order to celebrate its 25th anniversary. The volume presented the best short stories and the best writers the magazine published in its many years of existence, together

¹ Giuseppe Lippi was the editor of the science fiction magazine *Urania* [Interviewer’s own footnote].

with some really interesting articles about the state of contemporary Chinese science fiction, the translation of Western science fiction in China, and in general the developments of the genre in the country. I bought the volume and started to read it, writing down notes on the Chinese used by featured writers. Slowly, the idea of pitching its translation to *Urania* started to grow, and eventually I decided to write them. I found Mr. Lippi's contact, I introduced myself to him, and told him I was a reader of *Urania* studying and working with the Chinese language, and that I had an anthology of short stories worth of consideration. After a couple of days Lippi replied: he was interested in the project, and so we started to work together on it. Eventually, Lorenzo Codelli (consultant of the *Science plus fiction* Trieste film festival) came on board, and finally we decided to publish the anthology in connection to the Chinese retrospective at the film festival.

How did you work on the edition and translation of Shi Kong?

After Mr. Lippi gave me the go-ahead to work on the project, I contacted the director of *Kehuan Shijie*, Mr. Yao Haijun, to discuss its realization. Mr. Yao was really happy at the idea of having the volume translated in Italian. Even though we discussed about the possibility to include other authors and stories in the volume, we finally decided to keep the format of the original anthology. I did not take part in the selection of the short stories: we already had an extremely good selection to start with. Mr. Yao lived in Chengdu (in province of Sichuan), so I met him in person only once in Beijing: we discussed at length about the project, and he told me about the criteria behind the editing of the volume I was translating. We decided

to maintain the original historical perspective, so *Shi Kong* developed accordingly, as a selection of short stories from the most representative Chinese science fiction writers from the late 1970s to nowadays.

As a translator, how would you comment the experience of translating science fiction?

Speaking from my personal experience, science fiction did not posit a problem in itself. As with every genre, form or author, there is an initial phase of “acclimatisation” where the translator has to get accustomed to the general tenor of the translated matter. As regards science fiction, I think there are some rhetorical nuances and subtleties that characterise the genre, a general gist given by readers’ expectations and writers’ intentions (Darko Suvin’s science fiction cognitive estrangement at work in the text, one might say). In the case of *Shi Kong*, a further challenge was posed by the wide temporal span described by the anthology: even though thirty years may not appear such a relevant temporal gap from our perspective, the pace of China’s development in the last decades has been vertiginous: the country moved from the North Korea-like ideological paroxysm of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, through Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, Tienanmen’s massacre of 1989 and the frenetic growth of the last years. Although not often explicitly, the texts I translated for *Shi Kong* reflected these changes, moving from a “local” science fiction, sometimes naïve, often rhetorically heavy in declamatory statements and pompous apologies to the glories of (socialist) science and technology, to the new science fiction of writers such as Han Song and Liu Cixin, who have an extremely solid

background both as scientists and as readers of science fiction, and whose style is much more solid and updated to Western science fiction latest standards. Overall, it was a great challenge, and it helped me a lot to hone my tools as a translator.

Did the cultural differences between the production and the reception context presented peculiar problems? Did you adopt any special strategy to introduce the Italian reader to the Chinese tradition?

The reception of *Shi Kong* was interesting: the book was much more appreciated by the specialists of Chinese language and culture rather than by hardcore science fiction readers. This is understandable: science fiction does not age well, and in order to pass the test of time, it has to provide food for thought that transcends the simple musings about the wonders of technology. While I maintain that *Shi Kong* contains some little gems of science fiction writing, I realize now that some of the older stories (those from the 1970s and early 1980s) may not work with the contemporary reader as they worked with their original Chinese readership. On the contrary, the historical perspective according to which the collection was built in the first place attracted the interest of the specialists, that is to say of those who wanted to understand how the genre developed in the context of post-Mao socialist China. I think that the collection succeeds in providing a decent outline on the developments of the genre in such a peculiar context, yet in doing so it had to include pieces that from our present point of view may be seen as a little bit too naïve and derivative.

Did I adopt any “special strategy” to introduce the Italian reader to the Chinese science fiction tradition? The answer is

yes and no. Eventually, working on *Shi Kong* lead me to write a master thesis on the history of Chinese science fiction literature from its early origins (in the late XIX century) to the present, so in this sense you could say that yes, I introduce the genre to the Italian readership through my research work (you can find it easily in the database of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice). From the point of view of the translated text, my translation was not oriented to the specialists but to the “normal” readers, so I had to polish the translation and unload it of those linguistic particularities which would have needed a complex system of annotations in order to be properly conveyed to the Western reader. So in the end the answer is also no, because *Shi Kong* is not a “Chinese science fiction reader”, nor an annotated monograph; it is rather a very good selection of modern Chinese science fiction which was crafted also with an eye for the specialist.

Why, in your opinion, there are so few translations of Chinese science fiction in Italy? How much this scarcity depends upon a scarcity of professional translators, how much from a long-standing dominant position of translations from English, how much from a lack of initiative from specialized publishers, how much from other factors?

The scarcity of translated Chinese science fiction in Italy does not depend upon the scarcity of professional translators, as we do not lack of professional translator, and the level of proficiency of many of them is impressive. In general, the translation of Chinese science fiction is a recent matter: some of the most important contemporary Chinese science fiction writers (I mean the best-selling authors and the Nebula prize-

winners) are being “discovered” and translated in English right now. This is also due to the fact that in China the science fiction genre is still widely considered as children’s literature, it still has to develop its own Asimov, Heinlein, Huxley, Dick, Gibson, et alia. The genre had a controversial history of acceptance and censorship, being considered alternatively as a means to celebrate the technological progress of socialism (as between the 1950s and 1960s) or as a cause of “spiritual pollution” from the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I personally think that the “golden era” of Chinese science fiction is happening now, and that the genre is growing out of its ingenuities and toward a critical maturity that makes it a perfect format in order to question our present reality. So in this perspective, the lack of translation did not surprise me when I started to work on *Shi Kong*, in the same way the recent “discovery” of Chinese science fiction (as this interview attests too) does not surprise me now. On a more practical level, I agree in acknowledging a long-going reluctance from the part of the publishing houses (even from the specialized publishers): we still have to grow out of our automatic exoticism approach toward China, I guess.

What is your opinion about the practice of translating East-Asian science fiction from English translations?

This unhappy habit is rather common nowadays, and not only in the realm of science fiction. I am not really an expert on the dynamics behind the production of a translated book from an editorial point of view, but what surprises me the most is the fact that this habit is transversal, and even big publishing houses often set down for second-hand translations watered

down from English (see for example Feltrinelli's Ma Jian or Longanesi's Chen Koonchung), instead of relying on the expertise of the specialists of the original language. This is a practice that I find rather disappointing, not only from a professional point of view, but also as a reader: the quality of these translations is often poor, not targeted to its readership but rather put together in an Italian which, by being the third wheel of a process of adaptation, ends up both losing its own grace and missing out on the subtleties and nuances of the original text. It is a vicious cycle: fast food translations are done to save time and money, but they end up producing bad books that are left on the shelves of the book stores. I suppose that the reader who is looking for, say, Chinese science fiction, is not a casual reader, and probably he or she will recognize the quality of a good translation, and is not going to spend its money on a translation byproduct. I know I would not. On the contrary, when I know I can rely on the work of a good translator (think about what Rita Desti did for José Saramago, Nicoletta Pesaro for the early Ma Jian, Martina Testa for David Foster Wallace) I often buy the book without even having a second thought.

Do you think that in the Anglo-American world, there are signals of an increasing interest for Chinese science fiction (cf. Iannuzzi 2015)? Are there any significant new initiatives that you would highlight toward science fiction seen in a global perspective?

Absolutely. In the last few years a growing interest toward Chinese science fiction has been developing both in the academic world (with communities of researchers, panels and

conferences, papers and books) and in the publishing world (with major publishing houses translating almost instantly China's best-selling authors). It seems to me - this is a personal impression though - that in the restrictive political climate of contemporary China, the distorted lens of science fiction has become a reliable instrument for the understanding of the current situation. In the climate of constraint under which Chinese writers of the mainland operate, the science fiction genre may have a wider, although more de-familiarized, space of manoeuvre than other forms of fiction. An allegory is way more difficult to pin down and censor, I suppose.

Regarding the understanding of Chinese science fiction in a global perspective, my suggestion would be to follow journals such as *Science Fiction Studies* and *Renditions*: both the journals have been talking a lot recently about science fiction from Asia, and while the former can provide a good critical framework for the understanding of the genre, the latter often offers interesting translation "trailers". I would also suggest to keep an eye on the Nebula Awards of China: that's where the Chinese writers set sail for Europe and the United States.

Do you have any other science fiction project you are working on? Is there any Chinese author or magazine that you read with special interest?

Recently I have been reading a lot Liu Cixin, whom I consider one of the most interesting voices of the Chinese science fiction literary scene. His novels and short stories are wildly imaginative and rich in philosophical insights, yet Liu's writing remains anchored in a strong scientific background: it is hardcore science fiction the way it should be. I am also

trying to find a Chinese edition of *The Waste Tide*, a cyberpunk-ish novel by Chen Qiufan (aka Stanley Chan), which has been translated recently by Ken Liu, a Sino-american science fiction writer and translator. It seems a really interesting piece of science fiction, a dystopian take on the question of the wealth gap in a future China where workers have been transformed into working cyborgs and a small elite of extremely rich people rule the country. Moreover, I am working hard to get something out of my PhD dissertation on the utopian novel at the end of the Chinese empire, something like a “Utopian reader for *fin-de-siècle* China”...we’ll see about that!

Is there any other translation of Chinese science fiction, apart from Shi Kong, that you would recommend to an Italian reader?

As you can imagine, there is not much to read in Italian. Recently, there has been a lot of fuss made about Chen Koonchung as the modern Chinese George Orwell. This is – no doubt – a long shot, but it is true that his last novel, *The Fat Years* (published in Italy with the title *Il demone della prosperità* by Longanesi), has a clear 1984-ish dystopian vibe, a really enthralling plot, and a very interesting use of language and political speech.

Please, feel free to add any other comment.

I would just like to thank Giulia Iannuzzi and *Quaderni* for this interview. I have never had the chance to talk about the genesis of *Shi Kong*, a book I feared had been dismissed too

quickly by some readers, but that was really important to start my career as a researcher and a translator.

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