

## The state's role in “worlding” a popular national genre: The case of China and Liu Cixin

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Emerging as a literary genre at the beginning of the 20th century, Chinese science fiction (SF) has waxed and waned in its course of development (Wu and Yao 2018). After 1989, the genre embraced a revival known as New Wave Chinese SF, with works that are “more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representations of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism” (Song 2015, 8). This new morphosis thrived with an increasing number of emerging younger writers and a fast-growing readership across the country in the 2000s. Moving into the 2010s, the genre began accelerating its outreach toward international readers. This effort culminated in 2015 when Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award for Best Novel with *Sān Tǐ* (2006; Eng. trans. *The Three-Body Problem*, 2014), the first volume of his *Three-Body* trilogy. According to the latest statistics, more than 3.3 million copies of the trilogy have been sold outside China in over 30 languages.<sup>1</sup> In 2020, Netflix announced an adaptation based on the trilogy (Friedlander 2020), and the *Wandering Earth*, a 2019 SF blockbuster adapted from Liu's novella and one of the highest-grossing films of all time in China, is also available on Netflix. In addition to the trilogy, Liu Cixin has released in the U.S. market two more novels, *Ball Lightning* (2018) and *Supernova Era* (2019), and two short story collections, *To Hold up the Sky* (2020) and *The Wandering Earth* (2022, a reprint of an earlier UK version).

Liu's elevating status among publishers and critics soon ensued with the increasing availability and popularity of his works in the English-speaking world. On the cover of his debut novel, he was introduced as “the most prolific and popular science fiction writer in the People's Republic of China” and a multiple-time winner of The Galaxy Award, known as the “Chinese Hugo”, while his work is called “the bestselling Chinese science fiction novel”, in which the recurring “Chinese” label marks his position as a master of a national genre. But soon after, he became the “New York Times Bestselling Author” on the cover of the 2015 sequel and “one of the most important voices in world SF” on the introduction page of *The Wandering Earth* collection, embodying his ascension into the rank of big names in international SF.

As another milestone for Chinese literature after Mo Yan's Nobel Prize in 2012, Liu's success soon became a trendy topic for academic study. Scholars have explored why he succeeded overseas from different angles, such as translation strategies (Aloisio 2019; Wu and He 2019), translator's agency (Gao and Chang 2017; Wu and He 2019), and transnational publication as international cultural communication (Chen 2017; Wu 2020; Wu and Chen 2020). However, the three contributing factors to his entry into the U.S. market – the author's stylistic features, the translators' competent performance, and the publication arrangement – are rarely synthesized under one framework. Besides, while Liu's success has been hailed as a benchmark within the “Chinese Culture Going Out” Initiative,<sup>2</sup> how the state facilitates the “exportation” has not been sufficiently discussed. Therefore, by concentrating on the sociological concept of “capital” in the field of cultural production, this study synthesizes the three factors and investigates how the state mobilizes various forms of capital in a transnational publishing field to pave way for Liu's consecration in the “world republic of letters”.

### CAPITAL: PASCALE CASANOVA AND PIERRE BOURDIEU

David Damrosch states that in “worlding” literature, “[w]orks rarely cross borders on a basis of full equality” (2003, 24). His concern with asymmetry is expounded by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters* ([1999] 2004). Underlying Casanova's sketch of the international literary field as a floral configuration is a center/periphery dichotomy, which she addresses as “the dominating” versus “the dominated”. The distinction is marked by their disparity in linguistic-literary capital. Situated at the center are the dominating literary fields endowed with the most capital, while the provincial or dominated ones are either deprived of such capital, lacking full-fledged autonomy, or labeled as “national”. To transgress this unequal distribution of linguistic-literary capital and move from the periphery to the center, a process called “littérisation” is necessary. Translation is a typical operation in the process and “one of the *principal* means of consecration of authors and texts” (Casanova [2002] 2010, 288; my emphasis).

Casanova's framework is therefore of relevance to this article since according to her, the Chinese language is “dominated” in the international literary field despite its long tradition and myriad speakers. Compared with the U.S., this imbalance in linguistic-literary capital is even compounded by the different maturity of the SF industry in the two countries. Liu's fiction being translated and sold in the U.S. thus symbolizes a movement from a less endowed national field to one arguably affluent in linguistic-literary capital. It is a process of gaining recognition in a transnational setting that resonates with Pierre Bourdieu's argument that the publishing practice “usually involves a *consecration*” ([1999] 2008, 123). It is evident that Casanova, by adopting terms like “field” and “capital”, draws her argument heavily from Bourdieu. She abstracts from the literary field an all-encompassing property called “linguistic-literary capital” to constitute the center/periphery binary, while Bourdieu identifies the various forms of “capital” by arguing that “[i]t is in fact impossible to ac-

count for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms” ([1983] 1986, 242).

Capital is “accumulated labor [...] which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (241). It bears the imprint of a Marxist view but broadens its scope to refer to “a generalized ‘resource’ that can assume monetary and nonmonetary as well as tangible and intangible forms” (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995, 862). Capital takes on three principal forms: economic, social, and cultural. Economic capital, with money being the most immediate embodiment, “is at the root of all the other types of capital” (Bourdieu 1986, 252). Social capital refers to the sum of resources one can mobilize in one’s network, which is determined by the size of the network and the volume of capital owned by each person in the network. Cultural capital can be subdivided into three states: embodied state (the fundamental one, linked to the body and accumulated by acquisition and internalization over time and with costs, e.g., strong biceps, and by extension, the ability to lift heavier things), objectified state (transmissible material objects related to embodied state, e.g., a painting, a novel, or a sculpture), and institutionalized state (academic qualifications or honorable titles bestowed upon by any agent with such power to impose recognition, e.g., a doctoral degree by a university). Moreover, these categories are not perpetual but mutually convertible. For example, paid education is a process of capital conversion from the economic to the cultural form.

### THE TRANSNATIONAL PUBLISHING FIELD: KEY AGENTS AND STRUCTURE

Before examining how capital is rendered, it is essential to identify the structure and key functioning agents of the transnational publishing field of Liu Cixin-related translation projects. In his Hugo acceptance speech, Liu shared the honor with the translator, Ken Liu, whom he accoladed with a metaphor from SF – a spaceship traveling across the vast space between the two cultural planets of China and the U.S. He also expressed gratitude to the U.S. publisher Tor and China Educational Publications Import and Export Corporation (CEPIEC), a state-owned publisher specializing in the trade of books for educational purposes, for their close collaboration. Similarly, all the subsequent novel projects and the *To Hold up the Sky* collection are published by Tor in partnership with CEPIEC, and the Chinese company is identified as the sole holder of the translation copyright.<sup>3</sup> A fact to be reckoned with is that the translation projects are designed and carried out under China’s national initiative of “Going Out”. The state, being a well-endowed and omnipotent existence due to the country’s political structure, is at the top of the ladder to mobilize various forms of capital in the transnational publishing field in its incarnated form of CEPIEC. The transnational field is thus organized in a hierarchical way, in which CEPIEC sits in a more powerful position to advance the state’s strategic goal.

There are two points to be clarified. First, while target readers could be arguably positioned inside the field, the group is left out in this case study because it has no direct interaction with the state or CEPIEC as the patron, indicating no capital mobili-

zation is enacted between them. Admittedly, the success of Liu's works is attributable to the unique features of his works (in a translated form), but whether they are identical to what Mingwei Song has highlighted as a reader of the Chinese original (see Song 2013, 2015, 2016, and 2018, for analyses of the poetics of Liu's fiction) remains questionable and needs to be explored through a reception study, which, therefore, falls out of the scope of this study.

Second, the impact of CEPIEC's habitus is considered minimal in this case. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 126) state that practices are "the double and obscure relation" between the habitus of agents and the field where they interact with other capital possessors. Habitus, understood as a set of dispositions that are structured in one's previous experiences, can generate present and future perceptions and practices (Bourdieu [1980] 1992). CEPIEC, on the one hand, must make decisions and act in the interest of the state due to the nature of the enterprise. On the other hand, the trilogy is the company's first copyright trade project, so no dispositions developed from previous experience or good practices can be referenced.

In the following analysis, I will explore how CEPIEC mobilizes its own various forms of capital as well as those possessed by other individual agents in the transnational publishing field, which eventually facilitates Liu Cixin's consecration in the American SF field. *The Three-Body Problem*, as the first and the most exemplary project with the most documented sources available for analysis, will be used as the central pivot for the discussion. Other later projects will provide additional details based on their availability to mitigate the risk of overgeneralization.

#### ECONOMIC CAPITAL: FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM THE STATE

To publish a book calls for, among many other things, an investment of financial and human capital. The task becomes more demanding for a transnational project as large and crucial as the *Three-Body* trilogy, the first and the shortest of which amounts to around 300 pages in the Chinese original. Besides, CEPIEC's plan was to get the three books translated all at once, so even if excluding logistic spending, high-quality translation alone would cost a great deal of money. The publishing process, therefore, entails reproducing economic capital into market profits and subsequently adding symbolic capital to the author and the publishers.

On the back cover of *The Three-Body Problem*, the label "China Classics International (CCI)" with a white background stands out against the black backdrop. The initiative, whose full name is the "China Classics International Publication Project", was launched in 2009 by the National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA). According to the latest call for applications, CCI aims to "tell the good China stories [...], enhance the global influence of the Chinese culture" (NPPA 2022; my translation) by translating excellent Chinese books of various kinds into foreign languages and circulating them overseas. It has been stipulated clearly since the 2013 call for applications that the funding targets two domains: academic books and literature, the latter including poetry, novel, drama, and prose.<sup>4</sup> The English translation of the *Three-Body* trilogy was on the 2013 CCI's funding list.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the English version of *Ball Lightning* was on the 2015 list, and *Supernova Era* was listed in 2017.

Besides, the English translation projects of both *Ball Lightning* and *Supernova Era* were also subsidized by the Beijing municipal government.<sup>6</sup>

When working on the trilogy, CEPIEC, apart from gaining the translation copyright and commissioning the translation, engages in marketing as well – setting up a specialized website, running overseas social media accounts, making promotional videos and theme songs, and attending international book fairs, all requiring considerable monetary investment.<sup>7</sup> CEPIEC's in-depth involvement, while showing its commitment to the state's strategic goals, attested to the difficulty of capital conversion, especially in the initial stage when CEPIEC was still exploring better practices in collaboration (O'Neil 2015), in the hope of mobilizing more social capital from its connection with Tor for future cooperation.

Before the trilogy project, authors, translators, editors, and U.S. magazine publishers had made sporadic or individual attempts to publish Liu and other Chinese SF authors' short stories, thus putting in place a transnational publishing field. CEPIEC "entered" the field with considerable economic capital and interacted with a selected group of agents to institute a sub-section within this transnational field. Thus the state's will was embodied, on the one hand, in the way CEPIEC appropriated the economic capital directly for the translation projects, and on the other, in its decision-making as to who would constitute this selected group of agents in the sub-field that would maximize the chance of success. More specifically, the decision would be made by evaluating the cultural and social capital owned by other agents in the larger field.

### CULTURAL CAPITAL: IDENTIFYING OTHER KEY AGENTS IN THE SUB-FIELD

Structurally speaking, economic capital builds up the foundation of a field. But in practice, the funding application of the trilogy project required a well-designed plan and a sample translation, which means, temporally speaking, the upper structure composed of all the key agents in the field had been sorted out prior to the funding approval (H. Liu 2018). To secure a position for funding, choosing the right author and translator(s) became a critical issue to CEPIEC as the translation commissioner.

The first key agent identified by CEPIEC was the author. Since no prior experience could be referenced, the best selection principle in the state's interest would be picking the author who possesses the highest volume of cultural capital. Liu Cixin stands out among his peers for that. In the objectified state, his *Three-Body* trilogy has remained among the top bestsellers ever since its standalone version first came out in 2008. All the philosophical, scientific, and literary tropes in the trilogy have kept inspiring widespread discussions across different walks of life since the release of the last book and the popularization of social networking sites around 2010. Heavily invested in the grandeur of the universe, the romantic encounter or thrilling confrontation with alien civilizations, and the interrogation of humanity in times of apocalypse, his writings appeal to both young and old. All of these testify to his possession of embodied capital. He read Western SF extensively when he was young, from which he drew a reverence for the universe and an inspiration for starting SF writing, mainly from

Arthur C. Clarke. Later, an engineer by trade, his solid mastery of physics knowledge enables him to unleash his imagination and create a sublime SF world of his personal style with a vivid description of “macro-details” (Liu 2015, 109). Besides, he claims to be among “the luckiest people in human history” (Liu 2018, n.p.) because of having been born in the 1960s and witnessed tremendous changes, from which he has obtained insights into Chinese and global history and politics, as well as the gradual realization of what he claims an “increasingly science fictional society” (Liu 2018, n.p.). As for his institutionalized capital, his stories have earned him multiple awards in both SF and mainstream literary fields before the translation project – making him a nine-time winner of China’s Galaxy Award (eight years in a row from 1999–2006), a record that was conveniently added to the author’s profile on the book cover to assure U.S. readers of the content of the translated story.

The search for the translator(s) started soon after the copyright deal was settled.<sup>8</sup> According to Li Yun, director of the Export Department of CEPIEC, their recruitment standard stipulated that translators should have a broad horizon of knowledge, especially in science, and a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Chinese history and culture.<sup>9</sup> The final lineup of the team was Ken Liu (Book I, *The Three-Body Problem*, and Book III, *Death’s End*) and Joel Martinsen (Book II, *The Dark Forest*). One essential similarity between them is that they are well-versed in both Chinese and English languages and conscious of both cultures (embodied capital), as Ken Liu is a Chinese immigrant to the U.S. and received most of his language and educational training there, while Joel Martinsen is a U.S. citizen working and living in Beijing for a number of years. Before the trilogy project, they both had the experience of translating short SF stories, though Ken Liu later often said he was not formally trained in translation and that his first contact with translation was “purely by accident” (Cordasco 2016).

At the same time, the translators show distinctive features due to their different backgrounds. Ken Liu is an award-winning SF writer who writes in English. This identity places him in close proximity to the American SF market, such that he conveniently obtains insights into the target readership and knows what approach better appeals to readers, which explains why he could propose a radical change in the chapter sequence to the author when translating the first book.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Ken Liu’s record of SF awards as his institutionalized capital, together with the symbolic significance it bestows upon him, is another and a presumably more convincing guarantee of the translations’ quality to U.S. readers who have never read any Chinese SF. In contrast, Joel Martinsen is not a writer but a devoted reader of Chinese SF. Before the trilogy project, he had translated excerpts of Liu Cixin’s *Ball Lightning* and published them in the international literary magazine, *Words without Borders*. During his doctoral study in modern Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University, he was supervised by Wu Yan, the most senior and prolific SF researcher in China (Gu 2017), from whom he gained in-depth observations into Chinese SF that added to his translation expertise as embodied capital. The institutional certification – a doctoral degree in Chinese literature – also qualified him as a competent undertaker of the project.

There exists a clear distinction between the ways CEPIEC mobilizes cultural capital and economic capital. The instantaneity of the transmission of economic capital (i.e., CCI funding and other subsidies from the government) enables CEPIEC to exploit it directly in various stages of the projects. But cultural capital is highly linked to its individual possessor, thus discouraging easy transmission to other agents (including patrons) for direct usage. For example, the ability to employ scientific knowledge in imaginative writing is exclusive to Liu Cixin, and the interlingual competence is exclusive to the designated translators in this sub-field. They cannot be easily transmitted to CEPIEC even if such transmission is assumed possible. However, it is through CEPIEC's enrollment of these individual agents into the sub-field that their process of appropriating cultural capital is activated. Therefore, CEPIEC as the patron mobilizes individual agents' cultural capital symbolically by legal contracting, a form of authorization for the individual agents to render their cultural capital in the sub-field, but also a legitimation for itself to access such rendering to further the state's cause.

### **SOCIAL CAPITAL: OPENING THE GATEWAY TO THE U.S. MARKET**

Social capital is accumulated by an agent establishing and maintaining social relations in a field by way of material and symbolic exchanges, which, in today's highly networked world, not only presupposes an agent's possession of a certain volume of such capital at a given moment but also understates its endless accumulation, especially when new relations are established. In the case of Liu Cixin-related translation projects, agents like CEPIEC and Ken Liu have their respective networks to draw on social capital before the transnational publishing sub-field is instituted. Later, as they enter into the partnership, their networks begin to interweave. For CEPIEC, Ken Liu thus becomes an important intermediary in connecting with the American SF field, a gateway to the U.S. market.

Individual social capital was first exploited by CEPIEC to find translators. Li Yun said that he was introduced to the translators through the friend of a friend (Lu 2015). Ken Liu also said he was contacted by CEPIEC after being recommended by two China-based translators, Eric Abrahamsen and Joel Martinsen (Tsu 2019). Later, when the translation of the first book was completed, the search for a foreign publisher became the next big agenda. CEPIEC, after seeking the help of U.S. literary agencies in vain, was directed to Liz Gorinsky, editor of Tor, through a cohort of proactive SF authors and translators in Ken Liu's social network. At WorldCon in Chicago, Emily Jiang (a U.S. SF writer) introduced Gorinsky to Chen Qiufan (a Chinese SF writer/translator) and Wang Meizi (a translator), who told her that Ken Liu was working on the translation of *The Three-Body Problem* (Gorinsky 2018). After returning to China, Wang introduced Liz Gorinsky to Song Yajuan in CEPIEC, and the formal contact between the two publishers soon began. Meanwhile, CEPIEC managed to find the renowned scientist and SF author David Brin via Ken Liu to write a recommendation for the book. The company then used it to help convince interested U.S. publishers (including Tor) and later quoted it on the book cover for marketing purposes.

Rooted in one's personal social connection, social capital can be exploited by its possessor. Ken Liu writes in the postscript of *The Three-Body Problem* that he feels indebted to a long list of individuals (SF authors and bilingual translators) for their feedback on the translation drafts to improve the overall quality (Liu 2014, 398). For example, one of the beta-readers, John Chu commented "that experience was invaluable" and he "recreate[d] some of Ken's research" while being astounded by Ken's work (Chu 2015). It is likely that Ken Liu mobilizes his professional social network more out of working ethics than to intentionally serve the patron's objective, and CEPIEC does not involve itself directly in this beta-reading process because the final product is the primary concern of the company as a commissioner. But akin to the case with cultural capital, the translator's responsible acts are preconditioned by CEPIEC's legal formalities that grant the selected right of entry into the sub-field to the translator. The outcome of such acts is, at the same time, legitimately exploited to serve the patron's goal, which constitutes a similar symbolic mobilization of individual agents' capital by CEPIEC.

## CONCLUSION

Based on Bourdieu's ([1999] 2008) observations on the French publishing market and incorporating Casanova's dominating/dominated opposition, Gisèle Sapiro (2008) discovered that, in the international book market, "the pole of large-scale circulation is characterized by linguistic concentration on the hyper-central English language, there is a high degree of linguistic diversity at the pole of small-scale circulation" (161). However, the translations of Liu Cixin's works seeking access to the U.S. market somehow defy the rule – a highly commercial genre from a marginal origin has achieved market success and continues to succeed. At the end of 2021, CEPIEC announced that Tor paid a renewal fee of 1.25 million dollars to continue collaborating over the *Three-Body* trilogy.<sup>11</sup>

As shown in Liu Cixin's case, the Chinese state, in its incarnated form of CEPIEC, has facilitated the author's consecration in the American SF literary field by effectively mobilizing various forms of capital possessed by key agents in the transnational publishing field. Owing to its hierarchical position in the field, the company's capital mobilization is enacted in two ways. On the one hand, it directly and materially appropriates ample economic power from the state for project execution, and its own social capital to find competent translators and the interested U.S. publisher. On the other hand, it selects individual agents to legally engage with based on an acknowledgment of their cultural and social capital and grants them rights to render their own capital in the field for the state's goal, which signifies an indirect and symbolic mobilization. In whichever sense, the state's will to maximize global cultural clout is exercised in various stages of decision-making and execution.

Liu Cixin's case testifies to the state's potential to propel the internationalization of a popular and commercial genre. Its significance is twofold. On a national level, it blazes a new and inspiring trail for decision-makers and practitioners to consider popular genres in state-patronized translation initiatives, as previous projects focused on Chinese classics and mainstream literature to generate an image of a his-



torically profound and highbrow culture. On an international level, in today's world republic of letters dominated by the English language, the state, as the most powerful and resourceful organ in any dominated market, is in a good position to challenge the current constellation of the book market once it takes the initiative.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See CEPIEC news (January 14, 2022) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/702.cshtml>.
- <sup>2</sup> “Zhonghua wenhua zou chuqu” [Chinese Culture Going Out] initiative, or “Going Out”, was proposed soon after China's entry into WTO. In 2006, a clear strategic plan was announced. By implementing major cultural projects and expanding communication channels, the initiative aims to promote China's outward cultural exchanges and trade. In 2012, the advance of the initiative was linked to stronger soft power. See Yang 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> The translation copyright of *The Wandering Earth* collection is held by the author himself, indicating that no state agency was involved in its international publication. Therefore, the “translation projects” and “Liu Cixin-related translation projects” in the subsequent discussion exclude this collection.
- <sup>4</sup> See the news at <https://www.zjcb.com/index.php?process=news&newsID=6128>.
- <sup>5</sup> All the CCI lists are retrieved from the China Publication Yearbook, which can be accessed at <https://www.yearbookchina.com/index.aspx>.
- <sup>6</sup> For *Supernova Era*, see CEPIEC news (October 7, 2020) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/677.cshtml>; for *Ball Lightning*, see CEPIEC news (November 14, 2017) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/641.cshtml>.
- <sup>7</sup> For a detailed account, see CEPIEC news (August 25, 2015) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/634.cshtml>. Although the exact number of budgets is unavailable, the government subsidies are presupposed to be used for all related processes, including copyright deals, translation fees, and marketing activities, as stipulated in the call for applications.
- <sup>8</sup> According to the news of CEPIEC, the copyright deal was settled on July 20, 2012, and by the time of signing contracts with the translators on November 7, 2012, Ken Liu had already started the translation of the first book.
- <sup>9</sup> See CEPIEC news (November 8, 2012) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/620.cshtml>.
- <sup>10</sup> For more details on this episode, see Pandell (2016).
- <sup>11</sup> See CEPIEC news (January 14, 2022) at <https://www.cepiec.com.cn/news/702.cshtml>.

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## The state's role in "worlding" a popular national genre: The case of China and Liu Cixin

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Capital. Translation. State. Liu Cixin. Transnational publishing field.

This article investigates the transnational publishing field of Liu Cixin's science fiction and his road to consecration in the U.S. literary market. By adopting Pascale Casanova's mapping of the international literary field and Pierre Bourdieu's categorization of capital, this study analyzes how the state, in its incarnated form of a state-owned publisher, has mobilized the economic, cultural, and social capital of the agents in the field, which eventually helps the author cross over the linguistic-literary gap. In the process, the state shows its potential as a propellant for "worlding" a popular literary genre.

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