Supernova Era, by Liu Cixin

Russell Alexander Stapp


Liu Cixin, already a well-known author of hard science fiction in his native China, exploded onto the scene in the Anglophone world in 2014 following the publication his well-regarded novel, The Three-Body Problem (as the novel’s title has been rendered in English translation). The Three-Body Problem received nominations for both the Hugo and Nebula awards for best science fiction novel, winning the former in 2015, and was the first Asian novel to receive the prestigious award. The critical and commercial success of The Three-Body Problem, and its sequels, The Dark Forest and Death’s End, (the series was given the title Remembrance of Earth’s Past in translation) led to an interest in exploring the whole of Liu’s fiction, and the intervening years have seen the translation and publication of more of the author’s works. Supernova Era is the result of this continuing project.

Supernova Era was originally published in Chinese in 2003, three years prior to the Chinese release of The Three-Body Problem. Joel Martinsen, who also translated Liu’s novel The Dark Forest into English, was the translator of Supernova Era. The novel shows clear signs of belonging to an earlier stage of the author’s development, and a reader who picks up Supernova Era expecting the same brilliance that Liu displays in the Remembrance of Earth’s Past series will come away disappointed. The earlier novel does not quite rise to the same standard as the series that launched Liu to international fame. The characters in Supernova Era are somewhat two-dimensional and lack any significant development, and at times the plot feels almost episodic with sudden transitions between major sections within the novel. The prose is also occasionally a bit flat, lacking some of the power of Liu’s later novels.

While Supernova Era may not live up to the excellent standard that Liu set for himself throughout the Remembrance of Earth’s Past series, the novel stands on its own and demonstrates one of Liu’s most salient qualities as an author: the ability to propose a simple question and explore how one single change can alter the course of human history or perception. The central conceit of Supernova Era is that a nearby star goes supernova, bombarding Earth with high doses of radiation. In a departure from Liu’s love for hard science fiction and scientific accuracy, he does not dwell much on the biological effects of this radiation other than to say that it only affects older individuals whose DNA is less resilient to change. The result is that, shortly after the supernova
is observed, humanity realizes that within a year all those above the age of thirteen will be dead, which naturally has significant ramifications for both the future trajectory of the human species and the civilizations we have spent thousands of years constructing.

The novel unfolds in three main phases, and in each, Liu demonstrates his ability to posit thought-provoking questions about the nature of technology and the human condition. In the first phase, humanity discovers, and must come to grips with the staggering conclusion that the destiny of the world will soon pass to children. This section explores the nature of education and the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next as each nation is forced evaluate and asses each child and train them for a future career in the limited span of one year. In a particularly powerful episode, the Chinese government teaches the children selected to fill future roles as political leaders a powerful lesson in the logistical complexities of running a nation by showing them all the salt that the country consumes in a day – loaded into a series of transport trains. In the second phase, the adults have all perished and the children are forced to grapple with the new order where even small children are thrust into the world of adults, hastily educated and emotionally ill-prepared. This phase of the novel is best highlighted by a heartbreaking episode in which one of the main characters, trained as a pediatric nurse, struggles to care for the last surge of children born before the world’s adults perished. This, and other similar episodes push the novel into the final phase: children rejecting the old world and beginning to imagine what the new world would be. This reimagination is far from utopian and the world’s great powers agree to engage in a gamified version of warfare – potentially deadly but similarly governed by strict rules.

Each section raises poignant questions about education, diplomacy, politics, technology, and the artificial world humanity has constructed for itself. The novel’s consideration of these questions alone makes it worthy of investigation by any serious student of speculative fiction. It is made even more interesting to frequent readers of the genre as it presents a distinctly Chinese perspective on global politics and international relations. In particular, Liu’s depiction of the United States and its cultural values diverges from those found in Western speculative fiction and may be of interest to a new audience now that this novel has been made available in English.

While Supernova Era falls short of the excellent standard set by Liu himself in the Remembrance of Earth’s Past series, the novel warrants study and contemplation beyond its value as a window into Liu Cixin’s development as a writer. Supernova Era posits a remarkably simple change to our current world – with a reasonable scientific explanation – and allows the reader to observe how human nature plays out in the world that is science fiction. Ultimately, Supernova Era asks significant questions about some of the core constructs of modern society, government, economics, education, and the role of the family, all while providing an engaging work of speculative fiction.