

# The Modular Fiction of Ken Liu

*By Elizabeth Lawrence*

Ken Liu is a prolific author and translator of speculative fiction. A bilingual American born in China, Liu's translations have introduced English-language readers to acclaimed works of Chinese science fiction, including Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*, the basis for a Netflix series of the same name. As an author of original fiction, Liu has written a "silkpunk" epic fantasy tetralogy, a book set in the Star Wars universe, and dozens of short stories. Sometimes, Liu's short fiction features East Asian or Asian American protagonists. Often, Chinese history and culture inform his world building and plot development. Readers have been quick to comment on the distinctly Asian American or Chinese content in Liu's fiction. In a typical example, a blurb on the inside cover of *The Grace of Kings* commends the fantasy epic as "the Wuxia version of *Game of Thrones*" (*wuxia* being a Chinese genre of fiction featuring heroic martial arts practitioners). In an article for *Comparative Literature Studies*, Yang Mu's analysis of the same book also highlights its Chinese essence; the novel's technology worldview, for instance, "is deeply rooted in the soil of classical Chinese cosmology" (746).<sup>1</sup> This focus on Liu's fiction as distinctively Chinese is limiting because it privileges Euro-American speculative fiction as a norm that gets modified by Chinese cultural difference. I argue, moreover, that a preoccupation with Chinese elements in Liu's storytelling content fails to appreciate more intriguing parallels between Liu's

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<sup>1</sup> One could read Yang Mu's article and not even realize that Liu is an American author who writes in English. Other scholars, including Patricia Chu and Erin Suzuki, have more effectively applied Asian American and Pacific studies analytical frames to discrete works of short fiction by Liu. Though I am critical of Yang Mu's characterization of Liu's fiction as expressing a Chinese essence, all of these authors have contributed valuable scholarship on an important contemporary author. I hope to see more scholarship that places Liu's work in conversation with Chinese, Asian American, and Pacific studies. I also hope to see more scholarship that examines Liu's fiction through other frames of analysis, such as climate catastrophe, as in the case of Jarrel De Matas's "Traumatic Tourism and the Tide."

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**Elizabeth Lawrence** is Assistant Professor of History at Augustana College. A specialist in Chinese and East Asian history, she has interdisciplinary interests in heritage, memory, material culture, pedagogy, and transpacific studies. Her recent publications include "Teaching the Global Cold War with Korean Adoptee Oral Histories," in *World History Connected* 19.3 (2022).

storytelling method and modular production within Chinese material and literary culture.

Though he is now a full-time writer, Liu embraces an identity as an engineer and often explores the parallels between engineering and narrative in his interviews and fiction. For Liu, a work of fiction is a narrative machine that the author builds by manipulating available components. Drawing on insights from scholars of Chinese art and literature, I will call such components modules or code, but they are essentially narrative building blocks. As this article demonstrates, the engineering metaphor for creative production resonates with models of creativity exercised by Chinese craft producers and lyricists. I thus propose a new way of conceptualizing the “Chineseness” of Liu’s fiction, one that privileges narrative process over narrative content. I take the China-inspired aspects of Liu’s world building and storytelling as so many modules or bits of code that conjoin with other components to create something new. In terms of content, Chinese-inspired modules are a part of, but not the essence of, Liu’s fiction. In terms of process, the conceptual framework of modularity, which I derive from my own field of China studies but see as universally relevant, better applies to Liu’s body of work as a whole. Because my focus is on process over content, the particular module I analyze as a case study in this article is one that is not clearly Chinese in origin but rather a thematic approach to love, which gives emotional weight to very different works of speculative fiction. But first, I further introduce Ken Liu as an engineer of literature, as opposed to a “Chinese American” author, a label he has rejected.

### Rejecting the Hyphen, Engineering Literature

On his website, Liu describes himself as “an American author of speculative fiction.”<sup>2</sup> In a 2016 interview with Stephany Bai for NBC News, Liu spoke at length about his discomfort with labels, noting that the literary production of women and people of color can be unfairly marginalized as “a mere autobiography, a mere confession, a mere ethnic color.” He further explained that “I actually don’t like to identify as Chinese American. I don’t like the hyphenated identity at all, because I think it reinforces the ‘person divided in half’ narrative.” By rejecting a “hyphenated identity,” Liu echoed Maxine Hong Kingston, who memorably satirized the Orientalizing gaze of those who assume that Americans of Asian descent must be at war with themselves, beholden to a dual identity. Only in 2021 did the *New York Times* drop the hyphen in “Asian American,” following advocacy from journalists like Henry Fuhrmann, who argued that hyphens “connote an otherness, a sense that people of color are somehow not full citizens or fully American: part American, sure, but also something not American” (quoted in AAJA). Tellingly, in the published version of Ken Liu’s NBC News

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<sup>2</sup> This line is the beginning of his 100- and 150-word bios found in the “About” section.

interview, “Chinese American” appears unhyphenated only once, in the above-cited quotation. Elsewhere in the transcription, the hyphen is used, as in the following passage (emphasis is mine):

LIU. I’m very happy and active in integrating the so-called Chinese experience into my work, to give Chinese characters real voices, real agency, and real interpretation. But I want to do this in a way that challenges the Western gaze and ideas of what it means to be Chinese, or *Chinese-American*.

The inconsistent and inadvertently ironic use of the hyphen in the transcription underscores Liu’s predicament. Even when he explicitly rejects the hyphen and its suggestion of otherness, it haunts and sometimes entraps him. Though he is a master of his craft, it is all too easy to reduce Liu’s prodigious creativity to the formula of China + sci-fi/fantasy.

This fear of his work being interpreted as “a mere confession, a mere ethnic color,” may explain Liu’s reluctance to publicly discuss his background as an immigrant who moved from China to the United States as a child. By contrast, he has repeatedly discussed another facet of his life story: his work experience as a software engineer and lawyer. For Liu, engineering, litigation, and writing are all activities in which practitioners have manipulated “symbolic systems” to “construct ‘machines’ that achieved specific results” (in Ouellette). In the case of writing, the machine is a narrative that manufactures emotional and intellectual responses in the reader. Liu is an engineer of literature, and he uses Chinese components in his design process.

Engineering and storytelling are central motifs of Liu’s epic fantasy Dandelion Dynasty books, for which Liu coined the term *silkpunk*. In a guest post for the website FanFiAddict, Liu defines silkpunk as a fantasy aesthetic built on a “technology vocabulary” and “technology grammar,” inspired by East Asian material culture and engineering traditions but pushed in fantastical directions of technological progress and alternative modernity. In this sense silkpunk technologies are not Asian but an Asia-inspired set of code, or what I will call modules, that get combined with other modules to create imaginary machines, such as bamboo frame airships, submarines, battle kites, and “silkmotic” electromagnetic weaponry. In turn, these speculative machines help propel the narrative machine of the book series. Different storytelling and cultural traditions, from Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* to Herodotus’s *Histories*, from Confucianism and Daoism to Greco-Roman mythology, constitute other modules that Liu has assembled to draw readers into a sprawling epic that ultimately explores “the modern American national narrative” (“Guest Post”). From the beginning, Liu was intentional in his blending of epic traditions and careful about not writing “a magical China story,” which would inevitably strain under the weight of “layers of Orientalism and colonialism” (“Ken Liu silkpunk” 59–60).

The heroes of the Dandelion Dynasty series are engineers who innovate new technologies with world-transforming results. At the end of the second book, *The Wall of Storms*, an important narrative twist also affords the author an opportunity to express his own perspective on parallels between engineering and literary innovation. The character Zomi rereads a poem that was written by her teacher on his deathbed and realizes it does not follow “the fixed pattern dictating the number of logograms per line” (846). Puzzling this out, Zomi reflects: “Her teacher had always instructed her on the importance of engineering as the art of assembling existing machinery to achieve a new purpose. Was he using the form of the poem to send her a message?” (846). Indeed, he was, and upon deciphering the code, Zomi makes an important discovery that will have repercussions throughout the rest of the series. It is both the tradition of “fixed pattern” poetry and the willingness of the teacher to break the pattern that leads to new knowledge. Furthermore, the coded message is useless until Zomi receives the message and acts on it. The novel dramatizes an analogy Liu has made explicitly in interviews: “Engineers are a lot like poets: You acquire the tropes and techniques of your literary or engineering tradition, and then you innovate and combine them into new poems or machines” (interview by Mary Wang). Note the agency granted to engineer-poets and their end users or readers. They are not constrained by convention but empowered to manipulate “existing machinery” and “tropes and techniques,” or what I am calling modules, to make new things and discern new meaning.

I take the language of modularity from Lothar Ledderose’s *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Culture in Chinese Art*, read in conversation with two other China studies scholars, Shengqing Wu and Jonathan Hay. Ledderose’s book examines a wide array of Chinese material culture products and practices, from the Chinese written language itself to the Terracotta Army and moveable type printing, and he identifies in them a common pattern of mass production facilitated by combining and recombining modular components. In the case of the Terracotta Army, for instance, each unique warrior figure was created by conjoining standardized parts: different torsos, faces, hairstyles, limbs, hands, and so on. Although Ledderose is primarily concerned with art, he argues that “module systems” also shaped China’s “language, literature, philosophy, and social organizations” (2). Indeed, the concept of modularity can easily be applied to Chinese lyric poetry (a corollary to Liu’s fictional fixed-pattern poetry), which imposes a set of rules onto the poet, who nevertheless produces original verse. Because of the strict conventions governing, for instance, the number of characters per line, some have seen Chinese lyric poetry as stultifying and incompatible with modern subjectivity. But in *Modern Archaics: Continuity and Innovation in the Chinese Lyric Tradition, 1900–1937*, Wu explores the dynamism of this mode of poetic expression, which remained vital in the context of Chinese modernity. The conventions had not changed, but the poets and their social world had.

Wu's insights complement critiques made by art historian of China Jonathan Hay in his review of *Ten Thousand Things*. Hay questions Ledderose's presentation of modular systems as essentialistically Chinese and static over time. For Hay, Ledderose overemphasizes the coherence and stability of modules as "code" at the expense of a nuanced consideration of how socially situated practitioners, or "programmers," manipulate the code to achieve certain ends. "Whereas the code is stable," writes Hay, "the programming is subject to change" (383).

Ken Liu is a storytelling programmer who manipulates narrative modules, drawn from diverse cultural sources and personal experiences, to create something new. Some of these modules are "Chinese," but that does not make the adjective applicable to the new product. Some of the modules express Liu's own values, but that does not make the storytelling machine autobiographical. Below, I briefly introduce one module, or narrative building block, that repeatedly appears in Liu's fiction: the love module.

### The Love Module

In addition to his work experience as an engineer and lawyer, Ken Liu references another autobiographical vignette in multiple interviews: love. For instance, for a *Guernica* interviewer, he explains:

We all have a prototype story in our heads that defines what particular values mean. For me, if we're talking about love, the story that always comes to mind is of my grandmother when I was a very small child. In the winters, she would try to knit sweaters for me, even though she had arthritis. Her fingers were not as nimble as they used to be, and she had rough, cracked skin. It was clear that it was very painful for her to be doing this kind of work, so I asked why she did it. She said she did it to make sure I wasn't cold. That, to me, is the core defining story of what love means.

Liu's "prototype" or "core defining story of what love means" may be partly based on Liu's memories of his grandmother and partly grounded in a literary tradition, as his image of (grand)parental love strongly recalls the mother who sews clothing for a soon-to-be-traveling son in a famous Tang Dynasty poem by Meng Jiao.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of its origin, a conception of love-as-self-sacrifice functions as a module or bit of code that the author has adapted and combined with other narrative elements in the process of writing original creative works. I will discuss two examples that capture the author's range.

In the title story of his collection *The Paper Menagerie and Other Stories*, the love of a mother for her son takes on a tangible form, but instead of a hand-knitted sweater, Liu introduces magical folded paper animals that

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<sup>3</sup> Thank you to Rachel Pang for sharing this insight.

come to life. Like Liu's grandmother, the immigrant mother of "The Paper Menagerie" quietly sacrifices herself for the child she loves. She voices no complaint when her son rejects her paper animals, the Chinese language, and in many ways the mother herself, to embrace the "normal" American boyhood of suburban Connecticut. Her maternal love is unconditional and even on her deathbed she expresses her love to her preoccupied and ungrateful son (187). It is only when the son's old paper tiger reanimates two years later, conveying a letter from the mother, that the son learns of her story as a mail order bride and comes to understand the depth of her love and her loss.

This emotionally impactful story marked Liu's ascendance as an author of original fiction; it won three important awards: the Hugo, the Nebula, and the World Fantasy Award. Though infused with magic, it may be especially tempting to read as "a mere confession, a mere ethnic color." After all, its protagonist is a boy of Chinese descent who has to reckon with racist attitudes toward immigrants and people of color, as Liu surely did as a child; like the narrator of "The Paper Menagerie," Liu grew up in Connecticut ("Ken Liu silkpunk" 59). Liu's grandmother, in addition to knitting sweaters, practiced *zhezhi*, the Chinese art of paper folding (Alter). Nevertheless, the America-born narrator of "The Paper Menagerie" is obviously not Ken Liu, and the module of love-as-sacrifice is plugged into stories that would not be mistaken as autobiographical. One such story, examined below, takes place in the digestive system of a space worm inhabiting an asteroid in the Star Wars universe.

When readers exclusively emphasize the "Chinese" elements in Liu's fiction, they forget that we live in a globalized world. By his own account, the first book-length work of science fiction Liu ever read was a novelization of *The Empire Strikes Back* in Chinese translation, a detail that puts the bamboo frame "imperial airships" of Liu's silkpunk epic fantasy world in new light ("Ken Liu on Writing a Star Wars Book"). Because of his early Star Wars fandom, Liu jumped at the chance to work with the publishing arm of the Star Wars corporate behemoth to write *The Legends of Luke Skywalker*, a book that plays with multiple other modules that recur in Liu's fiction, including multi-perspectival narratives, myth-making, the resonances between science and magic, and the tension between a Daoist-inflected nonaction and the assertion of one's agency in the pursuit of change and an interesting life.

In the final story of the book, "Big Inside," Luke Skywalker and the narrator, a space biologist, are trapped inside an exogorth, a gigantic wormlike creature that rarely eats and takes decades to digest its food.<sup>4</sup> Sickened and weak after many days on the inside, Luke and his companion come upon other beings swallowed ages ago: ancient "master weavers of the luminous mist" (399). The three weavers survived by ensconcing

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<sup>4</sup> The immediate inspiration for this story is a scene in *The Empire Strikes Back* wherein Han Solo, piloting the *Millennium Falcon*, flies into an exogorth, thinking it a cave.

themselves in cocoons. After observing Luke, they split their cocoons just enough to communicate a message to him: sacrifice us by releasing the energy stored in the cocoons and you will be able to escape and live on (403–5). But Luke hesitates. “It was one thing to sacrifice yourself for something you believe in, but how much heavier was the burden of accepting someone else’s sacrifice” (406). Finally, Luke accepts this burden of survival, but only after agonized reflection through which he comes to terms with the earlier sacrifice of his teacher and stand-in parental figure, Obi-Wan Kenobi, who also died so Luke could live. The face of Obi-Wan as he let go of his life, Luke realizes, is identical to the expression worn by the cocooned weaver, “a look of pure peace and contentment. No fear, no anger, no regret, no sorrow” (408). This is a face of love.

Ken Liu’s love module is not a fully standardized part, of course. Far from the “pure peace” that marks the passing of Obi-Wan and the weavers, the mother of “The Paper Menagerie” dies full of regret. “*Why won’t you talk to me, son? The pain makes it hard to write,*” concludes her letter (192). But such differences are to be expected. While the love module has at its core a “prototype story” of love (I will knit this sweater, even though it hurts me), Liu has manipulated the module to better conjoin it with the highly disparate components of “The Paper Menagerie” and “Big Inside.” Liu is an engineer of literature and not, himself, a machine after all. Machines do write stories, even novels, these days, but they are not yet very good. In “Another Word: Let’s Write a Story Together, Macbook,” Liu identifies as the weakness of algorithmically generated fiction its failure to anticipate and cater to the expectations of readers. Catering to the reader is something Liu does deftly, and it is with the reader, this reader specifically, that my article concludes.

### **Conclusion: The Reader Unpacks**

Thematic motifs, literary styles, source material, technology grammars, and other building blocks of narrative may not be as standardized as the clay-fired torsos, heads, hairstyles, limbs, and hands that were manipulated to make thousands of terracotta warriors, but they are all bits of a “symbolic system,” and an “existing machinery” that Ken Liu, the engineer-author, configures and reconfigures throughout his creative oeuvre. When an overriding value is placed on authenticity in the literary production of a labeled ethnic group, the conscious programming of authors is disregarded and they become conduits for the reiteration of a fixed pattern.

Liu’s writing is not essentialistically “Chinese.” So why does this article apply a conceptual framework in conversation with China studies scholars to an analysis of his fiction? By way of conclusion, let me explain. In his enthusiasm for metaphors, Liu has also compared a story to a house. The storyteller, now a builder, creates a structure, but then a reader moves in, adapts the house to her needs, and unpacks her belongings. Before that

moment, any story is incomplete.<sup>5</sup> The author of this article is a historian of China, so many of Liu's Chinese history-inspired modules are recognizable and enjoyable to me in particular ways, resulting in a reading experience that may significantly diverge from that of an engineer, steampunk aficionado, or Star Wars mega fan. Because of my background in Chinese history, I also easily bristle when I see "Chinese" or a Chinese-marked signifier modifying some Euro-American exemplar, as when *The Grace of Kings* is heralded as "the Wuxia *Game of Thrones*."

When modernity itself is coded Euro-American, Chinese history can only ever provide a local variation on an external model. Building on decades of scholarship in postcolonial studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* has powerfully critiqued this kind of Eurocentrism, contending that academic histories of the non-West tend to be about the "master narrative" of Europe (27); "'only 'Europe,' the argument would appear to be, is theoretically (that is, at the level of the fundamental categories that shape historical thinking) knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially 'Europe'" (29). A similar dynamic is at play when *Game of Thrones*, or perhaps *The Lord of the Rings*, or more broadly medieval Europe, is presumed to be the speculative fiction skeleton that Chinese cultural elements flesh out. This article, by contrast, refuses to consign China to a role as a storehouse for literary source material available for "ethnic color." Instead, it has read Liu's literary production through the conceptual framework of modularity. Ledderose may have found in modular systems something peculiar "to a distinctly Chinese pattern of thought" (2), but as Liu has said, "You think an idea is Chinese, but it's not, it's universal" (interview by Stephany Bai). This article departs from a reading of Liu's fiction as distinctly "Chinese," while simultaneously universalizing a Chinese mode of creative expression. The modular systems found in Chinese material culture and lyric poetry provide a generalizable conceptual framework through which we can better understand the literary machines of Ken Liu and other diversely situated storyteller engineers.

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<sup>5</sup> This metaphor is most fully developed in the preface to Liu's second short story collection, *The Hidden Girl*. See also the interview by Mary Wang for *Guernica*.



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