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REMARKS BY IMAGINATION AWARDEE CIXIN LIU

Ladies and Gentleman,

Good evening! It's my great honor to receive the Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society. Thank you.

This award is a reward for imagination. Imagination is a capability that should have exclusively belonged to God but we, as human beings, luckily have this too. It is far beyond our imagination to grasp the meaning of the existence of imagination. A historian used to say that the main reason why human beings have been able to surpass other species on earth and to build civilizations is that we are able to create something in our heads that does not exist in reality. In the future, when artificial intelligence becomes smarter than us, imagination may be the only advantage we have over AI.

Science fiction is a literary genre based on imagination. And the first sci-fi works that impressed me were those by Arthur C. Clarke. Together with Jules Verne and George Wells, Arthur Clarke was among the first Western modern sci-fi writers to enter China. In the early 1980s, the two novels *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Rendezvous with Rama* were published in my country. At that time, the Cultural Revolution just ended. While the old life and faith had collapsed, the new ones had not yet been established. Like other young people, I felt lost during that period.

These two books, for the first time, however, brought my imagination to life. My mind opened up like it has never before. I felt like a narrow stream finally embracing the sea. At midnight when I finished reading *2001: A Space Odyssey*, I walked out of the house and stared at the starry sky. I was able to see the galaxy, thanks to the unpolluted sky of China back then. That night, I noticed that the starry sky looked nothing like before. For the first time in my life, I was awed by the magnitude and mystery of our universe, the feeling which you only get facing religion. Later on, the novel *Rendezvous with Rama* stunned me by showing how imagination could build a lifelike, fantastic world. It was Arthur Clarke who opened up this world of feelings to me, and who paved my way to become a sci-fi writer.

Today, more than 30 years later, it gradually dawns on me that people like me, who were born in the 1960s in China, are probably the luckiest people in human history. No generation is like us, no generation has been able to witness such tremendous changes in the world around us. The world we are living in today is completely different from that of our childhood. And such changes are taking place with even greater speed. China is a highly futuristic country. It is true that the future of China may be full of challenges and risks, but never has this country been so attractive like today. This reality provides fertile soil for the growth of science fiction, and it is enjoying unprecedented attention in the country. As a Chinese sci-fi author, who was born in the 1960s, I'm the luckiest from the luckiest generation.

I started writing sci-fi because I looked for a way to escape the dull life, and to reach out, with imagination, to the mysterious time and space that I could never truly reach. But then I realized that the world around me became more and more like science fiction, and this process is speeding up. Future is like pouring rain. It reaches us even before we have time to open the umbrella. Meanwhile, when sci-fi becomes reality, it loses all its magic, and that frustrates me.

Sci-fi will soon become part of our lives. The only thing I can do, is to push my imagination further to even more distant time and space to hunt for the mysteries of sci-fi. As a sci-fi author, I think my job is to write things down before they get really boring.

This being said, the world is moving in the direction opposite to Clarke's predictions. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in the year of 2001, which has already passed, human beings have built magnificent cities in space, and established permanent colonies on the moon, and huge nuclear-powered spacecraft have sailed to Saturn. However, today, in 2018, the walk on the moon has become a distant memory. And the furthest reach of our manned space flights is just as long as the two-hour mileage of a high-speed train passing through my city. At the same time, information technology is developing at an unimaginable speed. The entire world is connected via the internet and people have gradually lost their interest in space, as they find themselves increasingly comfortable in the space created by IT. Instead of an exploration of the real space, which is full of difficulties, people now just prefer to experience virtual space through VR. Just like someone said, "You promised me an ocean of stars, but you actually gave me Facebook."

This reality is also reflected in science fiction. Arthur Clarke's magnificent imagination about space has gradually faded away. People stopped looking at starry skies. In the sci-fi works today, there are more imagination about how we live in cyber utopia or dystopia. Writers focus more on various problems we encounter in reality. The imagination of science fiction is abandoning the vastness and profoundness that Arthur Clarke once opened up, instead people are now embracing the narrowness and introversion of cyberpunk.

As a sci-fi writer, I have been striving to continue Arthur Clarke's imagination. I believe that the boundless space is still the best direction and destination for human imagination. I have always written about the magnitude and mysteries of the universe, interstellar expeditions, and the lives and civilizations happening in distant worlds. This remains today, although this may seem childish or even outdated. It says on Arthur Clarke's epitaph, "He never grew up, but he never stopped growing."

Many people misunderstand sci-fi as trying to predict the future, but this is not true. It just makes a list of possibilities of what may happen in the future, like displaying a pile of cobblestones for people to see and play with. Science fiction can never tell which scenario of the future will actually become the real future. This is not its job. It's also beyond its capabilities.

But one thing is certain: in the long run, for all these countless possible futures, any future without space travel is gloomy, no matter how prosperous our own planet becomes.

Sci-fi was writing about the age of digital information and it eventually became true. I now look forward to the time when space travel finally becomes the ordinary. By then, Mars and the asteroid belts will be boring places and countless people are building a home over there. Jupiter and its many satellites will be tourist attractions. The only obstacle preventing people from going there for good, will be the crazy price.

But even at that time, the universe is still unimaginably big that even our wildest imagination fails to catch its edge. And even the closest star remains out of reach. The vast ocean of stars can always carry our infinite imagination.

Thank you all.