REVIEW OF *AI 2041*

> …if we stop helping people—stop loving people—because of fear, then what makes us different from machines?[1]

Great idea, mostly great execution. I picked this up because I enjoyed Chen Qiufan's novel *Waste Tide* (review) and wanted to read more of his work; this collection confirms my high opinion of him. Each story is followed by commentary by Kai-Fu Lee discussing the real-world basis for the technologies and social challenges described in the story; these commentaries won't contain too many surprises for tech-savvy readers, but could be very helpful for people who are out of the loop.

Some of the ideas explored in the book:

- In "The Golden Elephant", an insurance company uses AI to continuously nudge its customers away from risky behavior, lowering or raising their premiums based on whether they comply. This is already *prima facie* dystopian to me, but the story considers a particularly alarming consequence: the algorithm may implicitly learn that some groups of people are often targets of harmful discrimination, and try to dissuade the insurance customers from forming attachments to those people, lest the damage from such discrimination spill over into the customers' lives too.
- In "Twin Sparrows", two brothers who have grown apart later try to reconnect by merging their two personal AIs—systems which had been deeply intertwined with their lives since childhood.
- In "My Haunting Idol", a superfan is able to converse with an AI replica of her favorite pop star, and comes to understand the pain that fame has put him through.
- In "The Holy Driver", human drivers in VR rigs step in to remotely control cars whenever they encounter an emergency the self-driving systems can't handle.
- In "The Job Savior", a company specializes in retraining workers who have been made obsolete by AI. I was disappointed in this story. It views universal basic income as an inadequate solution to economic insecurity, stressing the need for work as a source of dignity. But how do we ensure there is always a role for humans as technology becomes more and more powerful? This is the crucial question of the story, and no answer is given, only a blank space for which an answer is implied to have been figured out off-screen.

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[1] Kai-Fu Lee and Qiufan Chen, *AI 2041*, First edition (New York: Currency, 2021), 140.

Near the end, Kai-Fu Lee makes a terminological suggestion I like:

> "Plenitude" is the word I have chosen to denote a new phase of human life, in which all people are entitled to a comfortable life, as goods prices approach free, and work becomes optional.[2]

> Because the timetable will vary for different countries, I prefer the term "plenitude" rather than "post-scarcity." Also, strict post-scarcity will never be achieved.[3]

I like that the audiobook has several narrators; some of them sound a bit robotic, but others are excellent.

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[2]Ibid., 423.
[3]Ibid., 428.