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## BOOK REVIEW

# *Sinophone Utopias: Exploring Futures Beyond the China Dream*

Andrea Riemenschmitter, Jessica Imbach, and Justyna Jaguscik, eds.

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What can we expect of China? And can we talk about the global future without taking China into account? Indeed, China and the future have become inseparable terms. Western discourse is fixated on Xi Jinping's China Dream, in particular his aspirations for China to become a global leader, and the concrete manifestation of this dream, the New Silk Road project. *Sinophone Utopias*, by contrast, investigates future visions in contemporary literary narratives and visual representations "beyond the China Dream". Still, the past weighs heavily, due to China's rich tradition of utopian texts and experiments, from Tao Yuanming's 陶淵明 fifth-century "Peach blossom spring" (桃花源 *Taohua yuan*) through Kang Youwei's 康有為 *Book of Great Unity* (大同書 *Datong shu*, posthumously published in 1935) to the socialist campaigns of Maoism. The volume's geographical focus is the "Sinosphere", defined in Appadurai's sense of an "ethnoscape" and concretely referring to "the sum of real or imagined locations where members of the Sino-Tibetan language family, or sinophone speakers, may dwell together" (p. 16). The three editors are interested in the recent "resurging interest in broader, more complex, and less negative approaches to the future and utopian imagination" (p. 1) — as compared to twentieth-century fin-de-siècle nostalgic or dystopian trends. The collection of eighteen texts is based on a workshop held in October 2018 and structured along four broad themes.

Authors in Part I ("Technology") explore how technological innovations are used and reflected upon in literary texts and works of art. Science fiction is an obvious object of study and Liu Cixin 劉慈欣 arguably the most acclaimed and internationally acknowledged science fiction writer in contemporary China. Wendy Larson (Ch. 1) takes Liu's novella "Poetry Cloud" (詩雲 *Shiyun*, written in 1997, published in 2003) as a case-study for investigating the utopian potential of literature and poetry as its purest form. In "Poetry Cloud", technology allows people to store all past, present, and future poetry, but not to value its imaginative and affective dimensions. Larson finds in the story "the possibility of valuing a sphere of intellectual and emotional experience outside the scientific paradigm" (p. 36). Joanna Krenz (Ch. 2) introduces three projects of Chinese artificial intelligence poetry and characterises each of them as a distinctive utopian model: nostalgic, egalitarian, and universalist. She connects AI poetry to the Chinese tradition of treasuring poetry and the current regime's attempts at capitalising on China's tradition. Krenz' answer to the question "Do China's Robots Dream the China Dream?" — the chapter's title — is split. On the one hand, she sees Chinese AI poetry as yet another field for the state to play "in a calculating way with people's longings and desires"; on the other hand, AI provides "potentially interesting material for avant-garde experiments that try to polyphonize and sometimes indeed deliberately cacophonize the dominant cultural discourse to lay bare its absurdities" (p. 43). Shuang Xu (Ch. 3) studies matriarchal fiction in Chinese internet literature and the ways in which it subverts gender stereotypes. And Kiu-wai Chu (Ch. 4) investigates "Life in Surveillance Dystopia". The author wants to understand filmmakers' responses to the expanding surveillance culture in contemporary China, which combines aspects of watching, recognising, tracing, and rating. Chu compares the work of an older (TV) generation, represented by Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 and Xu Bing 徐冰, to that of the younger (smartphone or digital) generation, represented by Lu Yang's 陸楊 video installations, and contrasts the critical attitude of the former with the playful approach of the latter.

Contributors to Part II (“Values and Traditions”) investigate the relation of utopian texts to China’s literary tradition, socialist utopian experiments and recent political debates and experience. Nele Noessel (Ch. 5) examines Liu Cixin’s “Wandering Earth Project” (流浪地球 *Liulang diqiu*, 2000) and its movie adaptation by Frant Gwo (2019). She identifies reflections of current intellectual discourse and official ideology in the blockbuster, in particular the question of China’s role as a great power. Ralph Weber (Ch. 6) analyses the relation between Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波, political Confucians, and the CCP. Referring to Liu’s call for incremental change, he defines him as a “realist utopian”. Qian Cui (Ch. 7) traces different forms of utopia in Ge Fei’s 格非 “Peach Blossom Paradise” (人面桃花 *Renmian taohua*, 2004). Qian distinguishes the “island world” of Datong brought about by revolution from the “garden world” in which the protagonists “rehabilitate personal feelings, interpersonal relationships, and local communities damaged in modernization” (p. 161). This garden, in Qian’s interpretation, is an “existential utopia” – a concept developed by Michael Marder and Patricia Vieira – in the sense of a zero point where new possibilities unfold after old structures and meanings have collapsed. Yunxia Chu in “The Road to Revolutionary Utopia” (Ch. 8) identifies “Buddhist rhetoric in the red narrative”, i.e. literary works of the “twenty-seven years” (1949-1976). As she demonstrates, Buddhist and revolutionary rhetoric converge in the motifs of leaving home and the temple as sacred space. Kun Zhao (Ch. 9) looks into Ban Yu’s 班宇 stories of laid-off workers in China’s northeastern provinces, the region where, in the socialist period, workers were given a progressive identity, as the backbone of realising “the dream of modern industry” (p. 186). In the 1980s, by contrast, the revolutionary world view dissolved and economic reforms turned them into “backward” elements of society and “superfluous men”. Ban Yu’s protagonists are encouraged to “start over” but are left to their own devices and fail.

Part III is titled “Places and Stages”, and gathers texts on performative practices and concrete sites of utopian visions. Carlos Rojas (Ch. 10) looks into the fictional village of Liven in Yan Lianke’s 閻連科 novel “Lenin’s Kisses” (受活 *Shou huo*, 2004) and the real village of Bishan in Anhui province where author and activist Ou Ning 歐寧 established the Bishan Commune (2011-2016). Using David Harvey’s concept of “dialectical utopianism”, Rojas examines the dialectical relations in both projects – “between the utopian aspirations of 1950s socialist China, and the very different utopian aspirations of 1990s market-driven China” (p. 211) in the case of Liven; between abstract model and concrete implementation in the case of Bishan. The aesthetic representation of workers’ experience is a topic well-reflected in various forms of literary and artistic works. Can labour represent itself, and do these representations constitute a form of resistance? Justyna Jagusik (Ch. 11) explores the critical and utopian potential of workers’ theatre, using as examples the two plays “World Factory” (世界工廠 *Shijie gongchang*, 2014) and “The Xiaoping Incident” (小平事件 *Xiaoping shijian*, 2017-2019) by Shanghai-based Grass Stage theatre troupe. She shows that “(i)nstead of grieving the past and the already lost future, the utopian horizon delineated in workers’ theater gives space to rehearsing alternatives to the system of circulation and accumulation of capital that currently circumscribes life chances, body politics, and socio-ecological futures” (p. 237). Paola Iovene’s “Utopias of Unalienated Labor” (Ch. 12), too, deals with social theatre. Her text provides insights into the broader discussion on the

representation of workers' struggles as well as an analysis of a concrete example, "We2s. Labor Exchange Market" (我們 2s 勞動交流市場 *Women2s. laodong jiaoliu shichang*, 2017/18) performed by the Beijing-based New Worker Theatre Troupe. The piece, in her view, expresses a "desire for unalienated living" (p. 259). William A Callahan (Ch. 13) understands gardens as heterotopian sites and interprets the aesthetics of the Nanjing Massacre Memorial in Nanjing and the Yasukuni Shrine in Tokyo, and the ways in which visitors experience the two memorials as examples of specific and dynamic civil/military relations.

Contributions to Part IV turn to "Specters of the Past". For Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg (Ch. 14) ruin imagery in visual art and poetry "shines a light on futures dreamt and feared – on imaginations of the future emerging at the margins of mainstream utopian and dystopian narratives" (p. 288). The two authors provide a historical overview and a typology of ruins in Chinese literature and arts, and pick out two contemporary examples of anti-utopia for detailed analysis, Cao Fei's 曹斐 short film "Rumba II: Nomad" (2015) and Yaming's 亞明 poem "Ruins" (廢墟 *Feixu*, 2018). Jessica Imbach (Ch. 15) relates Yu Hua's 余華 novel "The Seventh day" (第七天 *Di qi tian*, 2013) to the tradition of leftist literature of the 1930s and 40s and contemporary discussions of "subaltern" (底層 *diceng*) literature. Playfully adapting the Genesis narrative, "The Seventh Day" depicts the journey of a deceased office worker through the afterworld. Imbach demonstrates how the text "mediates the tension between the materialistic, consumer culture driven, environmentally destroyed world of the living and the spectral, paradisiacal, utopian society of the dead" (p. 311). Helena Wu (Ch. 16) turns to the rifts in narratives about Hong Kong and in particular to "utopian and dystopian forces in the (new) Lion Rock spirit" – the subtitle of the chapter. She demonstrates how, since the 1970s, Hong Kong's strikingly formed rock formation became an icon for quite diverging cultural representations of Hong Kong's future, including the official myth of economic success and the alternative futures envisioned by democratic forces. Alvin K Wong (Ch. 17) interprets the three novels which form mainland-born Hong Kong writer Chan Koonchung's 陳冠中 "China Trilogy" (2009–2015). He traces the dystopian energy present in the texts and shows how they debunk the official discourse of China's rise, the "age of prosperity" and the China Dream. Last but not least, Andrea Riemenschmitter (Ch. 18) returns to "Peach Blossom Spring" and investigates the legend's "inexhaustible variations" (p. 384) in contemporary literature and landscape art. Indeed, Riemenschmitter offers a *tour d'horizon* of utopianism in the Sinophone world, from past to present. The recent refigurations of "Peach Blossom Spring", in her view, "harness the trope's iconic value to the eco-aesthetic defense of natural landscapes against national and global, capitalist and socialist appropriations" (p. 385).

Needless to say, with eighteen contributions covering a wide range of progressive, utopian, and dystopian imagery and including various forms and genres of art, this is an extremely rich volume. It is a fascinating read that shows the myriad ways in which writers, artists, and activists complicate, undermine, or reject the China Dream and its promises of development, prosperity, and national greatness. Bringing together "Sinophone Utopias" is an important project, not only because of the prominence of the dream motif in state ideology, but also because Chinese Studies have too long privileged the

past over the future in investigating concepts of cultural identity and contestations over political legitimacy. Returning to the question of what we can expect of China, “Sinophone Utopias” casts doubt on the persuasive power of the China Dream and challenges projections of China’s success or failure which are exclusively centred on the state. It is true, none of the contributions claims to know better, but all testify to society as a force to be taken into account.