

Sinophone Utopias: Exploring Futures Beyond the China Dream

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When 21st-century artists and writers in the Sinophone world engage with utopianism, they may at first glance seem to be making use of a delegitimized concept: the history of the 20th century (and beyond) has given ample proof of utopian visions turning into dystopian violence, while the recent official rhetoric of the utopian China dream can hardly gloss over inequalities and crises in contemporary society. And yet, as the editors of this volume, Andrea Riemenschmitter, Jessica Imbach and Justyna Jaguscik point out, there has been a remarkable surge of utopian imagination in literature, the arts and philosophy since the turn of the millennium. These cultural products critically engage with and stand in a complex and often ambivalent relationship with the residues of utopian imaginations, from Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring*, or concepts of *tianxia* (all under heaven) and *datong* (great unity) to Maoist ideology and Xi Jinping's attempts to reshape the world order. At the same time, these works, performances and representations reflect on the creative and destructive potential of rapidly developing technologies, and on the challenges of ecological deterioration and unfulfilled promises of a new socially just society.

The volume, based on a 2018 conference, offers an impressive panorama of case studies across various genres and media, including literature and visual arts, film, architecture and gardens, theatre and performance, and philosophical writing. While the majority of the chapters engage with mainland China's utopian re-imaginings, this book employs the notion of the Sinophone to explore multiple relationships between those and other texts and art products in the Chinese-speaking and -writing realm.

By including a variety of minute individual case studies, the book makes a convincing claim for "bottom-up utopianism," for the existence of a great diversity of utopian narratives that share a certain distrust in earlier grand narratives and try to employ utopianism as "method," that is, as a leeway for critical rethinking of flaws and crises of present-day Chinese society and its engagement with its own past, while imagining divergent futures. These narratives in their complex entanglement of engagement with existing worlds and imaginations of (im)possible worlds may therefore open up spaces for agency.

The volume includes an introduction by the editors which briefly maps the general trend from dystopian writing and thinking at the end of the last century to the resurgence of critical utopian thinking in the early 21st century and situates its approach within the field of Western and Chinese utopia studies.

The individual papers are then subsumed under four interrelated sections: the first section, "Technology," discusses how contemporary utopianism responds to the rapid developments in the life sciences and artificial intelligence (AI), how authors reconsider the role of traditional literary genres and of spaces of freedom in the light of technological development, how they judge the potential of AI creative writing, and how technological innovations spur imaginations of radically rethought categories such as gender. Thus, our notions of authenticity and psychological involvement in cultural production may be radically questioned, as Joanna Krenz outlines in chapter two, by poetry chatbots like Xiaobing. And yet the chatbot, whose illusory suggestion of an



'egalitarian' utopia of cultural production and consumption is welcomed by the government, does have, if manipulated in more creative ways, a potential for subversive use.

The second part, "Values and Traditions," lays open multiple and tension-loaded interactions between various traditional systems of values and rhetoric and 20th- and 21st- century imaginations of social change. It shows how different reshapings of Confucianism collide, and how Buddhist and Maoist rhetoric or Marxist, socialist and Confucian visions could and can overlap and clash. Thus, Liu Xiaobo counters the government's promotion of a "nationalist" revival of Confucianism with an approach that Ralph Weber (in chapter six) considers "realist utopian," as it draws on the critical potential of Confucian writings to combine suggestions for incremental change with utopian visions. At the same time, Chu Yunxia (chapter eight) points out that the Communist rhetoric of PRC literature until the death of Mao, e.g. *The Song of Ouyang Hai* (1965), drew heavily on Buddhist elements, such as the renunciation of the family and the overcoming of physical desires in the metamorphoses of the protagonist to a hero.

The third section, "Places and Stages," focuses on public spaces, practices and performances that both challenge official attempts of streamlining cultural memory and bring to the fore inequalities between different groups in contemporary Chinese society. Justyna Jagusik, for example, shows how independent workers' theatre projects for and by migrant workers critique inequalities, humiliation and exploitation, with larger historical perspectives or focus on very concrete individual workers' experiences. By rejecting sentimentalism, they deliberately deviate from mainstream media's representations of workers' hardships but rather make calls for alternative futures.

The last thematic focus, "Specters of the Past," traces how post-Mao arts and literature are haunted by the legacy of the ideology of the Yan'an talks (and makes deliberate use of ghost and haunting themes), but also how older utopian imaginaries, in particular Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* are explored and rewritten to imagine spaces beyond the official narratives. The old story of the idyllic community in a safe space hidden from the turmoils of political crises still prompts rewritings. Its "residual sparks of hope," claims Andrea Riemenschnitter, are transformed in contemporary commune projects, art and literature from both the mainland and the larger Sinophone sphere, that are aware of its fragility and probe the story's potential for eco-critical engagements with the planetary crisis or for pondering notions of home against experiences of migration.

The volume is highly worthwhile reading, and not only for scholars and students of literature and the arts, due to its differentiated approach to utopianisms that considers both historical lineages and the complex entanglements with official rhetoric. The case studies (glimpses were offered above which could not do justice to the panorama provided in the book) are accessible also to readers across disciplines. They situate the cultural products against the backdrop of the overall political, societal and environmental changes and challenges of China and beyond. While taking into account the specific aesthetic means of each source, and thereby ensuring that each chapter can be read independently, the chapters combined provide insights into an overarching discourse in its multiple potentialities. Together they offer a multi-faceted panorama which may prove inspiring for anybody who wants to get a glimpse into the diversity of responses to the seemingly monolithic narrative of the China dream.

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