

Ruined Futurity:

The “Dongbei Renaissance,” Literature, and Memory in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: Since the 2010s, the “Dongbei Renaissance” has emerged in China as a transmedial phenomenon driven by a cluster of cultural producers retelling the stories of their parents’ generation as laid-off workers during the tumultuous transition of Dongbei, or Northeast China, from a socialist industrial headquarter to a decadent urban ruin in the 1990s. With a focus on the translocal relevance of this cultural trend, this paper discusses the prominent role of literature and its synergy with digital media in transmitting repressed social memories across generations and shedding light on contemporary conditions of economic precarity. I propose the notion of “ruined futurity” to characterise conceptual openings offered by this digitally-mediated literary boom in three dimensions: (1) a mnemonic future that resurrects the repressed memories of the silenced through transgenerational renarration; (2) a media future that reworks literature within a digital media ecology of remediation and interrelatedness, and (3) a socioeconomic future reoriented towards disposable populations beyond narratives of progress and development.

KEYWORDS: ruined futurity, Dongbei Renaissance, transgenerational memory, urban ruins, literature, digital remediation, disposable labour, precarity, neoliberalism, socialism.

Introduction: A cultural revival from urban ruins

Since the 2010s, the “Dongbei Renaissance” (*Dongbei wenyi fuxing* 東北文藝復興) has emerged in China as a cultural boom across literature, arts, cinema, popular music, television shows, and digital media.¹ Media products from this cultural trend shared a commitment of renarrating the tumultuous socioeconomic transitions of Northeast China (*Dongbei* 東北) from a socialist industrial centre to a decadent urban ruin in the long 1990s. Termed by the Dongbei-born rapper GEM (Dong Baoshi 董寶石) as a comic hyperbole in a 2019 internet standup comedy show,² the Dongbei Renaissance went viral in Chinese popular discourse and captured a sense of anachronism as dynamic media cultures mushroomed from this site of post-industrial ruin decades after its economic downfall. For example, this cultural wave has spread from films by directors such as Diao Yinan 刁亦男 and Geng Jun 耿軍 to popular music by artists such as the rock band Second Hand Rose (*ershou meigui* 二手玫瑰), from the public’s growing interest in 1990s popular cultural symbols to new media forms such as podcasts and short videos to collectively cultivate a social consciousness about Dongbei’s postsocialist experience (Lin 2023).

The Chinese term 文藝復興 (*wenyi fuxing*) is polysemous, as it stands for both a cultural revival and the specific movement of the European Renaissance in the early modern period. In this paper, the translation of this cultural trend as Dongbei Renaissance highlights

the cognitive dissonance produced by the spatial, temporal, and linguistic gap between Dongbei and the Renaissance. The anachronism embedded in this phrase speaks to the condition of dislocation within which this cultural boom surfaced to negotiate with the transitions of postsocialist Dongbei. At the same time, the notion of cultural revival is also implicit in the historical trajectory of Dongbei, as Dongbei used to be an economic and cultural centre in socialist China³ and has reemerged today as an important site of cultural production after decades of its recession. Thinking through this phenomenon of cultural revival, this paper asks: how has Dongbei emerged as a future of arts and culture from the repressed condition of ruins? To what extent may the experience of decades-long ruination not lead to the decimation of culture and memory, but – on the contrary – generate alternative futures of remembrance and social criticism via new forms of storytelling in the new age?

1. Nie Zinan, “As China’s Economy Wobbles, Its Rust Belt Is Having a Moment,” *Sixth Tone*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1013425> (accessed on 10 August 2023).

2. Wu Haiyun, “What Exactly Is the ‘Dongbei Renaissance’?,” *Sixth Tone*, 26 August 2023, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1013594> (accessed on 28 August 2023).

3. Zhao Mengsha 趙夢莎, “對話班宇: 東北, 語言裡的縫隙” (*Duihua Ban Yu: Dongbei, yuyan li de fengxi*, A conversation with Ban Yu: Dongbei, cracks in language), *LEAP*, 6 July 2020, www.leapleap.com/2020/07/%E5%AF%B9%E8%AF%9D%E7%8F%AD%E5%AE%87%E7%BC%9A%E4%B8%9C%E5%8C%97%E7%BC%8C%E8%AF%AD%E8%A8%80%E9%87%8C%E7%9A%84%E7%BC%9D%E9%9A%99/?lang=zh-hans (accessed on 18 February 2021).

Often dubbed the “Rust Belt” of postsocialist China, Dongbei occupies the centre of this ongoing cultural boom in epitomising the regions where a generation of state-owned factory workers were dismissed and turned into disposable lives during China’s structural transition to economic marketisation.⁴ Among the 25 to 70 million factory workers who were laid off during this process, about one fourth were from Dongbei.⁵ In the 1990s, the struggles of these dismissed workers were often overshadowed by an official discourse centred around China’s meteoric economic growth (Liu 2016). As a result, numerous workers were left on their own to eke out a living in their displaced habitats and cope with a series of social problems including infrastructural breakdown, economic recession, mass emigration, spiking crime rates, and widespread mental illness (Kuruvilla, Lee, and Gallagher 2011; Xiang 2016; Solinger 2022).

If this experience of individual struggle and repressed silence in the face of intense structural change is a central theme explored by various cultural products during the Dongbei Renaissance, a key feature that distinguishes this cultural boom from earlier representations of urban ruin in postsocialist China is its transgenerational aspect (Huang 2017; Jiang 2020): two to three decades after the economic downfall of Dongbei, this cultural boom is spearheaded by a rising generation of cultural producers who were born into working-class families in the late 1970s and early to mid-1980s. Growing up in an environment where mass layoffs and economic struggle were daily experiences, they are now excavating those repressed memories of urban ruin through new forms of media and inscribing their *own* family histories into Chinese social history.

Figure 1. The urban industrial landscape of Dongbei from Wang Bing’s documentary film *West of the Tracks* (2002)



Credit: screenshot by the author.

To be clear, along with mass demolitions during China’s breakneck urbanisation at the turn of the twenty-first century, the representation of urban ruins has evolved into a legible motif in Chinese cultural scenes. The question of ruins as a mode of existence and aesthetics reshaping contemporary Chinese urban life has been explored by a number of projects ranging from ethnographic accounts (Nguyen 2017; H. Evans 2020) to documentary and realist films by independent filmmakers such as Wang Bing 王兵, Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯, Zhang Meng 張猛, and Cong Feng 叢峰 (Z. Zhang 2007; Abbas 2008; Jie Li 2008, 2020; Braester 2010; Qian 2014; Edwards 2017;

Dai 2018; E. Huang 2020; Hou 2022). Whereas those previous projects have often focused on the *live scenes* in which ruins were produced, the current wave of representing postsocialist Dongbei is a form of *delayed narration*. This is always a reconstruction and resurrection of memory against the fact that many factory sites and urban landscapes have already disappeared during the region’s economic and urban restructuring. The temporal gap between the cultural producers’ efforts of renarration and their reconstructed 1990s Dongbei renders visible the transgenerational working of ruination as a condition towards new modes of life. Ruination, as the cultural theorist Ann Laura Stoler terms it, is “an ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future” and “persist[s] in material debris, in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people’s lives” (2013: 9-10). In this light, the practice of renarrating Dongbei is not just a stubborn excavation of the past but an embodiment of “ruinated futurity,” which I define as a form of nonlinear futurity that explores the constitutive and haunting presence of the past in the making of new futures.

The transgenerational production of ruinated futurity is especially notable in the literary sphere, within which key figures of this trend – novelists Shuang Xuetao 雙雪濤, Ban Yu 班宇, Zheng Zhi 鄭執, and Jia Hangjia 賈行家 – have often shared the same strategy of writing from the perspective of a *child* in order to reconstruct the disposable workers’ experience in 1990s Dongbei. This is a position of postmemory, which is defined by the memory studies scholar Marianne Hirsch as a form of inheritance when the “personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before” (2012: 5) gets passed on to the next generation. Writing from this structural position of postmemory means that the writers, as children inheriting traumatic memories from their parents and neighbourhoods, have never lived through the era as laid-off workers themselves. However, they could still perceive the trauma of their surroundings through the elder generation’s fragmented silences and resort to aesthetics to mould alternative futures through their excavation of those repressed memories.

This paper puts an emphasis on the literary realm of the Dongbei Renaissance and practices a method of reading literature as a medium, which, as Chinese cultural studies scholar Huiyu Zhang outlines, emphasises literature’s interrelatedness with other media as well as its own uniqueness in participating in social transitions as a renewable and spreadable medium (2023). In this wave of the Dongbei Renaissance, literature is significant not simply because writers have most explicitly addressed the intergenerational dynamics of Dongbei’s repressed memories, but also because literature has intervened in social discourse, intersected with other modes of media, and set off the Dongbei Renaissance as a transmedial phenomenon in the digital age. This introduces an additional dimension of ruinated futurity

4. For discussions on disposable lives being as populations in vulnerable positions that can be disposed of for extractive power structures ranging from slavery to global neoliberal capitalism, see Bales (1999), Wright (2006), Khanna (2009), B. Evans and Giroux (2015).

5. For the prominence of Dongbei being hit by this process, see statistics from National Bureau of Statistics of China and Ministry of Labour and Social Security of China 國家統計局和中華人民共和國勞動和社會保障部, 2005, 中國勞動統計年鑑 (*Zhongguo laodong tongji nianjian*, Chinese labour statistical yearbook), Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, p. 162. For discussions on the varying estimates of the dismissed workers beyond the official data, see Solinger (2022: 43).

in terms of media: against a linear logic that certain cultural forms such as literature may be deemed obsolete in the age of new media, ruined futurity emphasises how those cultural forms are constantly reworked and reintegrated in the digital media ecology to continue to matter to contemporary social life. For example, some of those Dongbei stories, such as Ban Yu's collection of short stories *Workers' Village* (*Gongren cun* 工人村, 2016) and Jia Hangjia's collection of prose pieces *Scrawls* (*Liaocao* 潦草, 2018), were directly produced and circulated via social media platforms such as Douban and NetEase microblogs (Huang 2017; Yang et al. 2020). In an ecology of transmedial adaptation, an increasing number of those works have also been adapted into films, television dramas, and web series. In addition, digital infrastructures such as WeChat, podcasts, the public video talk platform Yixi 一席, and the interactive reading platform WeRead (*weixin dushu* 微信讀書) have all played a part in spreading the voices of the writers and reshaping public consciousness. Throughout this process, what we have seen is the remediation of literature via digital media. Remediation, according to media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, describes a phenomenon in which a medium is repurposed in another one and dependent upon the other medium in order to function as a new mode of media with potential to reform reality (1999: 45, 55). Through this lens, a mediated notion of ruined futurity stresses how literature can be refashioned in the digital age and transform the postmemory of Dongbei into a *translocal* experience via digital media.

To understand the translocal implications of Dongbei's experience leads to another thesis about ruined futurity on the socioeconomic level: what the turmoil of Dongbei signifies is not necessarily an abandoned socialist past, but a disposable future concerning the structural crisis of the global neoliberal system itself. To this extent, I situate the rise of the Dongbei Renaissance within a context of soaring economic precarity in and beyond China, and read this post-2010 cultural wave as a symptomatic response to those unsettling realities. Insofar as disposability continues to function as an operational logic for neoliberal economic development, I contend that an excavation of Dongbei's repressed memories may serve as a translocal and transtemporal method for generating critiques against the violent production of disposable lives in contemporary times of precarity.

In sum, by teasing out the interconnections between literature, digital media, transgenerational memory, and current socioeconomic realities that have established the critical relevance of the Dongbei Renaissance, this paper foregrounds ruined futurity as a framework for conceptualising futurity as the reworking – rather than closure – of the repressed past. The term points at once to (1) a mnemonic future that resurrects the repressed memories of the silenced through transgenerational renarration, (2) a media future that reworks literature within a digital media ecology of remediation and interrelatedness, and (3) a socioeconomic future reoriented towards disposable populations beyond narratives of progress and development. Bringing together studies of literature, media, memory, and contemporary social history, this paper presents a hybrid approach of literary analysis, cultural criticism, and digital media ethnography to elaborate on the three dimensions of ruined futurity. Specifically, Part One considers central themes, aesthetic features, and narrative openings that have surfaced in core texts such as Zheng

Zhi's short story "Divine Illness" (*Xianzheng* 仙症, 2020) and Shuang Xuetao's novella "Moses on the Plain" (*Pingyuan shang de Moxi* 平原上的摩西, 2016). Part Two examines how the circulation of such texts in digital media has created new conditions for literature to relay the repressed memories of Dongbei to readers outside the region. I discuss a specific case in which a digital reading public has been cultivated in the interactive reading platform WeRead to transform the postmemory of Dongbei into a diffused form of public memory. I illustrate how the infrastructural setup of WeRead has enabled an affective mnemonic community by inviting readers to practice collaborative annotations within the platform. Part Three contextualises the Dongbei Renaissance within a global age of economic precarity to discuss the critique of disposability embedded in the making of ruined futures. Eventually, by articulating the mnemonic, media, and socioeconomic futures opened by the Dongbei Renaissance, this paper takes this wave of renarrating Dongbei as a critical entry point for envisioning conditions of life, memory, and politics that may emerge from the site of urban ruins.

Mnemonic futurity: Postmemorial constructions of history through literature

In a public video talk for the digital platform Yixi in January 2019,⁶ novelist Zheng Zhi, one of the leading writers of the Dongbei Renaissance, discussed how he picked up writing as an effort to prolong an intergenerational dialogue with his deceased father, a man who struggled to run a noodle bar and raise his family when economic recession hit Dongbei during the 1990s. At the start of the talk, Zheng Zhi shared a picture of his father on his slideshow as a gesture of commemoration. He said:

This photo was taken in December 1988. I was not yet two years old. (...) I have a selfish desire to keep this picture and this face on the screen for a few more minutes, because this is the first time that my father is able to meet with so many people in public. This would be the only way to do so, because he passed away during the same month ten years ago, when I was 21.⁷

Figure 2. Zheng Zhi with his deceased father on screen



Credit: screenshot by the author.

6. Yixi may be considered a Chinese counterpart of the TED Talks video platform.

7. Zheng Zhi 鄭執, "面與樂園" (*Mian yu leyuan*, Noodles and a paradise), Yixi (一席), 19 January 2019, <https://www.yixi.tv/h5/speech/763/> (accessed on 16 February 2021).

By establishing an explicit link between his father and his endeavour of writing, Zheng Zhi's commemoration of his father is symbolic of a shared interest in remembering their parents' generation among the contemporary writers who are retelling the stories of postsocialist Dongbei. Considered by some critics as the "New Northeast Writers Group" (*xin Dongbei zuojia qun* 新東北作家群),⁸ this cohort of writers were all children who grew up in Dongbei during the 1990s and who gave witness to a changing society of dispirited workers, broken families, and social outcasts (Huang 2017; Wang 2020). As the literary critic Huang Ping 黃平 (2020: 178-9) observes, inhabiting the narrative position of children means that they are both insiders and outsiders in regards to the stories they tell. As insiders within the families of Dongbei, they were the ones perceiving the weight of trauma and silence in a corrosive process of urban ruination even if their family members were reluctant to say much about their struggles. As outsiders who never experienced the tumultuous transitions the same way as the grown-ups, they have always had to navigate a gap of experience and subjectivity. However, it is precisely this generational gap that drives them to persistently revisit the past through their delayed narrations, and to process the legacies of those traumatic memories through a transtemporal perspective.

Within this context, this section addresses how such an insider-outsider positionality of the writers, as a generation of postmemory, has conditioned the aesthetics of their stories and how their literature plays a role in shaping a ruined future towards historical justice. That is, I read "ruinated futurity" as an alternative mode of future-making that lives on and reworks the traumatic memories of the repressed past. Instead of seeking to close generational gaps, ruined futurity acknowledges those gaps as generative sources to activate new ways of narration and remembrance. Furthermore, although the Dongbei Renaissance has spread across multiple media spheres, I suggest that literature has stood out for the cultivation of ruined futures because of its medium specificity and strength in staging multilinear narratives, delineating the psychological cartographies of marginalised individuals, and crossing the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. These capacities of literature are well displayed in an aesthetic of "fantastic realism" shared by the writers of this wave (Dai 2018: 97).⁹ With close attention to local language and everyday realities lived by disposable populations, their writing tends to blend realist narrations with fantastic imageries and futuristic metaphors such as beasts, babies, prophets, and religious symbols ranging from Buddhist vernacular to the Bible, churches, and Daoist folk practices. By conjuring up imaginaries that exceed the realist everyday, their works are charged with a redemptive impulse to break a condition of aphasia and remake an alternative future oriented towards the ruined past.

Take Zheng Zhi's short fiction "Divine Illness" as an example. Narrated by a child born in 1987 (the year of Zheng's actual birth), the story opens with a surrealist scene in which the narrator's mentally ill uncle, Wang Zhantuan 王戰團, is blowing a whistle and directing a hedgehog to cross the street. Throughout his life, Wang Zhantuan went through chronic mental illness shaped by two periods of historical violence: the Cultural Revolution, which set off his mental illness while he was serving in the navy, and Dongbei's economic recession during the 1990s, which eventually ostracised

him from his family when his family members were hit by the wave of mass layoffs one after another. Beyond Wang's mental illness, there is another thread of disability guiding the storyline: no less violent, it is the narrator's struggle with aphasia throughout his childhood, a period that overlapped with the region's economic downturn. By portraying a sense of intimacy between Wang Zhantuan and the child-narrator, the story conveys how different layers of historical violence were interwoven in the everyday and how both children and the mentally ill were the ones left behind when society was weathering an economic crisis. While Wang stands for those who have been disposed of as the waste of society, the aphasia of the child-narrator represents not only a public failure to account for this history, but also the struggle endured by the generation of postmemory to speak otherwise.

In addition, as this story exemplifies, the figures of fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, neighbours, and friends in many of the literary works during this wave of renarrating Dongbei are often as vulnerable as Wang Zhantuan. Like Wang, many of these figures are disoriented, disabled, intoxicated, mentally ill, or abandoned by society. By repeatedly returning to these social outcasts and their distorted lives, the writers of Dongbei's postmemory demonstrate an effort to salvage these figures from the cannibalism of history. To this end, what they are rewriting is not simply a history of rubble and waste, but rubble and waste as the proper history.

A central question that emerges from this endeavour, then, is the possibility of justice and redemption from violence through the literary reconstruction of those repressed histories. As Ban Yu, another leading novelist during this cultural wave, reflects:

Part of my writing has to do with reentering the past era and anticipating changes and continuities from a certain historical moment. (...) This is a matter of the principles on which our lives are built. What on earth is justice? This is a question I want to explore.¹⁰

Similarly, novelist Shuang Xuetao frames the concern of his writing this way: "When justice is lost in the world, how should one continue to live in a just manner?" (Shuang and Zouzou 2015). In other words, when the world has already fallen apart into a site of ruins, how do people carry each other after the end of the world? How is it still possible to imagine a more liveable future through literature?

Shuang's novella "Moses on the Plain" offers a clue to these questions. Revolving around an unsolved murder of a police officer on Christmas Eve in 1995 in the ruined industrial district of Tiexi,

8. The "New Northeast Writers Group" is termed vis-à-vis an earlier wave of Dongbei literature initiated by left-wing writers such as Xiao Hong 蕭紅 and Xiao Jun 蕭軍 in the 1930s, during which the region was under Japanese occupation. For more discussions on Dongbei as a prominent site for transregional literary production during the Japanese colonial period, see Xie (2023).

9. Building on the Latin American literary tradition of magical realism, the cultural critic Dai Jinhua coins "fantastic realism" from her reading of Zhang Meng's film *The Piano in a Factory* (*Gang de qin* 鋼琴, 2010). As she discusses, this term captures how the wave of renarrating Dongbei crosses the line between "real" and "surreal," "true" and "fantastic" to reconstruct the historical reality of laid-off workers.

10. Dong Ziqi 董子琪, "班宇: '好像一個受傷的巨獸一點點倒下去, 因其緩慢倒掉而沒有聲音' – 專訪" (Ban Yu: "Haoliang yi ge shoushang de jushou yidiandian daoxiaqu, yin qi huanman daodiao er meiyou shengyin" – zhuanfang, Interview with Ban Yu: "It's like a wounded behemoth slowly falling down, so slowly that there is no sound"), *Sohu*, 20 June 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/403064947_99897611 (accessed on 18 February 2021).

Shenyang, this crime fiction is told from the first-person point of view by seven narrators including (1) Jiang Bufan 蔣不凡 (the deceased police officer); (2) Zhuang Shu 莊樹 (a newly trained police officer in 2007 who picked up the 1995 case); (3) Zhuang Dezeng 莊德增 (Zhuang Shu's father, who resigned from a state tobacco factory to start his own tobacco business during the 1990s economic restructuring); (4) Fu Dongxin 傅東心 (Zhuang Shu's mother, who has remained an outsider to her family and society, as she has never let go of the fact that her husband was the Red Guard who beat her father to death during the Cultural Revolution, and her passion for arts and literature seemed out of place in both socialist and postsocialist times); (5) Li Fei 李斐 (Zhuang Shu's childhood neighbour, who was raised by a widowed laid-off father and briefly taught by Fu Dongxin, but who mysteriously disappeared with her father after a car accident on Christmas Eve in 1995); (6) Sun Tianbo 孫天博 (Li Fei's family friend who has taken care of her since she became crippled after the car accident); and (7) Zhao Xiaodong 趙小東 (a police officer working on the 1995 crime case together with Zhuang Shu).

Through this multinarrative structure of suspense spanning memories of the Cultural Revolution, experiences of the 1990s economic recession, and realities of new urban landscapes in the 2000s, the story shares a thematic interest as Zheng Zhi's "Divine Illness" in situating the repressed memories of 1990s Dongbei within a transgenerational context of multilayered historical violence. Echoing the same narrative strategy as in William Faulkner's Gothic novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Ryûnosuke Akutagawa's crime story "In a Grove" (1922), the multiple narrative voices in this story reveal that no one can ever grasp the entire image of a repressed history. Always multifaceted and polyrhythmic, history can only enter one's sense as fragments and guesswork. When those fragments of narrative are pieced together, furthermore, it is noticeable that the voice of Li Fei's father, Li Shoulian 李守廉, the widowed laid-off worker who is a crime suspect for the 1995 case together with his disabled daughter, is entirely absent. As the life traces of Li Shoulian are always told through other people but never by himself, the absence of his own narration symbolises precisely the myriad laid-off workers and disposed individuals whose voices have been lost and overwritten by others in history.

If the multilinear structure of this complex story is a literary device that allows the violent history of postsocialist Dongbei to reemerge, the story also goes beyond violence to inscribe Shuang Xuetao's concern of how one may "continue to live in a just manner" through its narrative openings towards redemptive futures of faith and promise. In the novella, the main protagonists Zhuang Shu, Fu Dongxin, and Li Fei are all living with the burdens of their personal histories, but it is an ethical promise to others that has sustained each of them. For Zhuang Shu, who used to be a troublemaker frequenting the jailhouse in high school, it was the death of a socially-committed young auxiliary officer that shook him up and motivated him to join the police force to protect other people. It can be said that the entire decision of his career was driven by a sense of obligation towards the deceased young officer in order to continue his unfulfilled cause. For Fu Dongxin, who never made peace with her unhappy marriage, the only source of light in her life was the short-lived teaching-learning relationship between her and the young Li Fei when Li Fei's love for

literature and their transgenerational female bond gave Fu a sense of solace to work through the violence of her own family history. As for Li Fei, who lost her ability to walk as a twelve-year-old in the 1995 car accident, she was caught in that accident because, in the first place, she had promised Zhuang Shu that she would show up in a sorghum field on Christmas Eve and set it alight with kerosene as a spectacular firework for him. Because of the car accident, this promise was never realised, but it is the haunting presence of this unfulfilled childhood promise that, at the end of the story, reconnects her with Zhuang Shu 12 years later.

Throughout this novella, the theme of faith and promise towards a more liveable future is represented by two fantastic symbols embedded within the story's title: Moses and the plain. The prophet who led the Israelites out of Egypt and across the Red Sea, Moses symbolises the power of faith that can pull someone through an impasse. As a lesson given by Fu Dongxin to the young Li Fei, the fable of Moses served as a source of energy that kept Li Fei's life going after she was crippled. Highly spiritual and prophetic, it indicates the extraordinary level of determination and self-reliance possessed by real people in 1990s Dongbei in order to cope with the larger structural changes beyond their own control. In parallel, the plain stands at once for (1) a miracle in the story of Moses that even seawater can be transformed into a plain when one's faith is strong enough, (2) the sorghum field that has always stayed in Li Fei's mind, and (3) a cigarette pack logo designed by Fu Dongxin that features the young Li Fei playing with fireworks. By encrypting such metaphorical symbols into the storyline, the novella serves as an indirect annotation of people's troubled lives after the economic downfall of Dongbei: within an environment of adversity and ruin, they had to hold fast to their faith in life as firmly as Moses so that an alternative future might emerge from the horizon. When the larger socioeconomic structure is too violent to be transformed, it is those tiny yet stubborn acts of remembrance and renarration that can at least provide some glimmers of hope to reconceive dignity and justice oriented towards ordinary people during turbulent times.

Media futurity: Digital remediation of literature

One significant feature about this cultural boom of the Dongbei Renaissance, as shown by the literary texts discussed above, is its deep attentiveness to *localised* stories and historical conditions oftentimes rooted in family settings. Despite this distinctly localised feature, however, it is notable that the stories of postsocialist Dongbei have travelled way beyond the region itself and the private family settings. Moving away from the question of literary representation, this section examines how digital media have disseminated those stories in the process of bringing literature in contact with a new media ecology. In particular, this section focuses on the reception and transmission of the Dongbei stories through the reading platform WeRead (since 2015), whose unique feature of interactive commentary highlights reading as a communicable act towards collective memory-making. Contrary to a point of view that sees digital media as a new medium replacing older forms of print-based literature, the case of WeRead epitomises a medial notion of ruined futurity pointing to the remediation of literary practices in digital contexts.

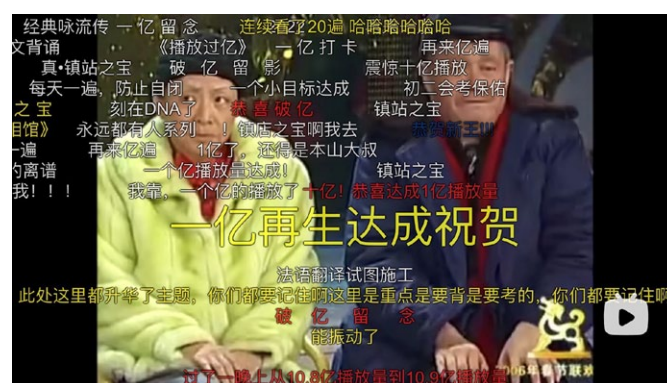
To date, the digital production, circulation, and archiving of literature has become a legible phenomenon in contemporary China (Inwood 2014; Hockx 2015; Admussen 2019; Chiu 2021; H. Zhang 2023). To practice reading and writing in digital form, especially in the context of the Dongbei Renaissance, is already a diffused *mediatised* experience spanning direct production of literary texts via platforms such as Douban; digital reading via reading apps such as WeRead and QQ Reader; promotion and discussion via microblogs, online forums, video talks, and podcast interviews; and adaptation of literary texts into new forms such as audiobooks and web series. As one of the major Chinese reading platforms, with more than 200 million users by 2020,¹¹ WeRead stands out for providing an immersive experience of intersubjective reading, which allows us to see how remediation works when a literary text goes digital.

Like many other reading apps such as Kindle, WeRead stores a repertoire of e-books for full-text reading designed for mobile devices. Compared to its counterparts, WeRead distinguishes itself by its strong orientation towards connectivity and interactivity in two aspects. For one, although WeRead is a stand-alone reading app, it allows its users to transport their social networks from the super app WeChat (Chen, Mao, and Qiu 2018), frequent their friends' profiles, and like each other's reading statuses. In the meantime, the app is also set up as a public community for users to add new friends, view book rankings, and post public comments across the entire platform. In striking a balance between intimacy and publicness, this infrastructural setup provides conditions for users to develop a sense of trust among their own social/reading circle while being accessible to a larger community of readers.

Second, while many reading apps allow their readers to leave private annotations in the text, WeRead has made a radical move by giving its users the option to make their annotations public in the platform and, in this way, to communicate their own thoughts and feelings with others while reading a text.¹² Therefore, when a user reads a text in WeRead, the process is always interactive and manifold: in addition to engaging with the original text, the user may choose to view what others have commented, respond to others, or leave their own annotations to the text. While the reading practice of leaving interlinked annotations has a rich tradition in classical Chinese literature (Wei 2022), this digital form of literary annotations in WeRead has also been influenced by a participatory culture of bullet-commenting (*danmu* 彈幕) from new millennial Chinese video cultures (Yao et al. 2019). Characterised by an aesthetic feature of a digital screen filled with running streams of commentaries from users, the bullet-comment culture spread from video platforms to experimental television and cinema by the mid-2010s (Jinying Li 2017). In more recent years, furthermore, bullet-commenting has been dispersed and applied widely in various digital media platforms spanning video sharing, live-streaming, and podcast streaming as an interactive feature for users to put down their instantaneous reactions to the content and to respond to each other. As part of this interactive digital media turn, literary annotations in WeRead function as a type of bullet-commenting not upon videos but upon texts (Yao et al. 2019). In this setup, it should be noted that several levels of digital remediation are taking place and opening up a layered reading of media futurity, not in terms of a linear progression of new media forms, but in terms of the constant reworking and refashioning of

established cultural forms within new environments. These layers of digital remediation include: (1) digital revitalisation of the classical print-based practice of literary annotations, (2) remediation of digital screens via textual bullet-comments, and (3) reworking of the bullet-comment culture from video-based commenting (back) to literature/text-based commenting in the wider digital media ecology.

Figure 3. An example of bullet-comments flying across the screen from Bilibili, one of the video platforms where bullet commenting first gained prominence in new millennial Chinese media cultures



Source: screenshot by the author.

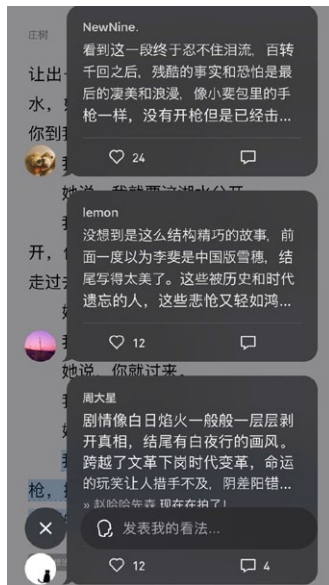
Note: the screenshot displayed here derives from Xiao Ke Er's 小可兒 "Zhao Benshan: I Am the King of Poetry" (*Zhao Benshan: Wo jiu shi nianshi zhi wang* 趙本山：我就是念詩之王, 2018), a two-minute video mashup based on various sources of 1990s-2000s television footage associated with the Dongbei comedian and television icon Zhao Benshan. With more than 100 million views by January 2023, this video is one of the most popular video products during the ongoing wave of the Dongbei Renaissance.

As the growth of WeRead has coincided with the dissemination of the Dongbei Renaissance since the mid- and late 2010s, we can take a closer look at the reading public fostered by this process of digital remediation. Take "Moses on the Plain," for example. As soon as readers get to the cover of this novella, they are invited to check out the annotations left by others by clicking the prompt on the bottom left corner, which reads "6 thoughts" (*6 ge xiangfa* 6個想法). These annotations for the novella cover are usually general impressions written by those who have finished reading the story, but for new readers starting the read, the short comments serve as gestures for what to expect from the story. Among the three annotations screenshot in Figure 5, for example, each adds a different focus spanning the genre, theme, and narrative of the story: annotation 1 relates the novella to a film on the similar topic of crime and ordinary individuals, annotation 2 discusses the user's own impulse to understand the life of their parents and grandparents after reading this story, and annotation 3 gives a closer reading on the story plot. Diverse as these annotations stand, it is their digital convergence that makes up an interlinked archive of plural affects and interpretations in response to the original text. If the original text has focused on the local settings of Dongbei for repressed memories to reemerge,

11. Everyone is a product manager 人人都是產品經理, "微信讀書產品分析報告" (Weixin dushu chanpin fenxi baogao, Product analysis report on WeRead), Tencent, 26 August 2022, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220826A05L0G00> (accessed on 10 August 2023).

12. In the Anglophone context, the closest app that resembles WeRead might be Perusall, an educational reading app that allows for collaborative in-line annotations but so far has only been targeted at schools and universities.

Figure 4. A screenshot of interactive annotations for Shuang Xuetao's "Moses on the Plain" (2016) in the interface of WeRead



Source: screenshot by the author.
Note: annotations are laid on top of the literary text as a layer of remediation.

Figure 5. Interactive annotations laid on top of the cover of "Moses on the Plain" (2016) in WeRead



Source: screenshot by the author.
Note: annotations are made available by clicking a prompt on the bottom left corner.

the interactive and diffusive practice of digital annotations offers a condition for readers from different backgrounds to establish an intersubjective dialogue with the stories of Dongbei. Just as annotation 2 points out, the experience of Dongbei is only a starting point that invites the excavation of memories in other families. Throughout this process, what digital media have remediated is not merely a mode of reading and interlinked storytelling but also a larger public of remembrance across locales and generations.

Disposable futures: Rethinking social trajectories from Dongbei

When the term "Dongbei Renaissance" first appeared in the Chinese internet in 2019, the gloomy realities of Dongbei's 1990s renarrated by this cultural boom served as a mirror of an economic crisis looming large in China: since the 2010s, the country's economic growth has been slowing down, while a culture of overwork has been spreading in exploitative labour systems. The gig economy has been rapidly expanding and replacing traditional structures of work, while mass layoffs have been taking place in industries such as technology and retailing (Chan, Florence, and Qiu 2021; Sun and Chen 2021; Lin 2023). These realities of growing precarity in China reflect the way in which the country has been part of a larger structural crisis of the global neoliberal system, when the neoliberal model of economic growth could no longer sustain itself other than by producing a massive number of disposable labourers and wasted lives (Standing 2011; B. Evans and Giroux 2015; Tadiar 2022; Hillenbrand 2023). Attending to this socioeconomic context within which the Dongbei Renaissance has gained prominence in China, I here consider how this digitally-remediated cultural trend

is not merely an excavation of a ruined past, but an activation of that past to rethink the present and grapple with a gloomy future of disposability.

Above all, one thing to make clear about the Dongbei Renaissance as a form of socioeconomic critique is that its reconstruction of 1990s Dongbei cannot be simply understood as a nostalgia for the past. Rather, by revisiting and renarrating a specific historical moment, it offers a broader approach for understanding human agency during radical times of displacement and uncertainty. This condition of human existence indexed by the stories of Dongbei is reflected by the writer Ban Yu, as he shares in an interview in 2020 that his novels about 1990s Dongbei are not about a nostalgic past, but about an uncertain future lived by people in a particular moment of history:

Everyone was in the mist of dust and could not see the direction of the future, but everyone was compelled to forge ahead. My novels are not talking about nostalgia, but a condition in which you had to walk into the dust. There was no way other than moving ahead.¹³

These remarks allude to a time in which people during China's postsocialist market transition were pushed to look ahead and embrace a neoliberal vision of economic development with no capacity to process the trauma of mass layoffs around them. Invoking an image of the angel of history that has been cited by Walter Benjamin as the critique of linear progress, Ban Yu's words capture a situation in which individuals are dislocated from their own habitats when a sweeping force of structural change comes into place (Benjamin 2007: 257-8). By delineating how individuals may be forced to move ahead and leave societal traumas behind, Ban Yu raises a possibility of reading the Dongbei Renaissance not simply as a reconstruction of a bygone period, but as a critical entry point for conceiving the relationship between individuals and their era during precarious times.

In another interview in 2020, Ban Yu puts forward an even more striking thesis that the historical experience of Dongbei should be recognised not as an abandoned past of the socialist trajectory, but as a possible dystopian future for the neoliberalised world. This thesis further makes it clear that the invocation of Dongbei's ruined past is closely related to the contemporary moment and its gloomy future. As Ban Yu puts it:

In simple terms, the fact that Dongbei is having a bad economy is not because it has fallen behind, but because it's leading the wave. Don't worry everyone, the whole nation could be "Dongbei-ised" (*Dongbei hua* 东北化) right away.¹⁴

When Ban Yu accepted this interview during Covid-19, both China and the world were going through an economic crisis worsened by the pandemic, and Ban expressed his concern about how to capture pandemic social changes through writing. By coining the term "Dongbei-isation," he visualises that what has been lived through as an economic downturn in postsocialist Dongbei is by no means a parochial or obsolete experience, but a signifier of a

13. Dong Ziqi 董子琪, "班宇: (...)" (Ban Yu: (...)), Interview with Ban Yu: (...), op. cit.

14. Zhao Mengsha 趙夢莎, "對話班宇: (...)" (Duihua Ban Yu: (...)), A conversation with Ban Yu: (...), op. cit.

precarious future foreshadowing China and the broader world: in an age of widespread economic precarity, Dongbei-isation speaks to not only a disposable future of mass unemployment and unstable work conditions, but also a condition of ordinary lives navigating such a time of volatile social change with dignity, agency, and new means of telling their stories. To this end, what the Dongbei Renaissance conjures up may be well understood as a *translocal* method of responding to a dystopian future through the remediation of past memories: from the literary reconstruction of redemptive futures to the creation of a digital reading community, this cultural trend shows how a strong orientation towards local stories and sensibilities does not foreclose the translatability of local experience, but rather foregrounds a condition for those stories to travel afar in the new media ecology.

Furthermore, insofar as the situation of soaring precarity persists as a symptom of the larger crisis of the global neoliberal system, what is exposed by the Dongbei-isation of the world is also a possibility to critically rethink a triumphant narrative of neoliberal capitalism that has dominated the post-Cold War global social trajectory. As the Chinese cultural studies scholar Margaret Hillenbrand (2023) points out, although discussions of precarity have not made their way into studies of China until recent years, precarity has constituted a core experience throughout China's postsocialist/post-Cold War transitions. Thinking about precarity through postsocialist China, as Hillenbrand argues, effectively moves beyond a post-Fordist paradigm based on the experience of Western capitalist societies. Following this analytical move, I would further suggest that the idea of rewriting Dongbei as a ruined future of the world directly challenges a linear, conventional narrative of post-Cold War global history as neoliberal capitalism defeating socialism. Instead, by bringing back the suffering of postsocialist Dongbei as an allegory of a disposable future, the Dongbei Renaissance forcefully disrupts this linear narrative by showing how the socialist past is haunting the neoliberalised present. In so doing, it renders visible the concrete harm that has occurred to ordinary individuals during the radical emplacement of neoliberal ideologies in China. From this perspective, what is offered by the localised stories of Dongbei is a conception that radically undoes an ideological binarism shaped by the Cold War: if the collapse of socialist planned economies in China from 30 years ago has only reinforced – rather than dismantled – a binary view of neoliberalism as a superior choice over socialism in most parts of the world, it is at the current moment when neoliberalism itself has run into a structural crisis that the road to regional and global economic justice has to be reconsidered. Beyond the ideological binary between neoliberalism and socialism, repressed memories of the socialist past and its traumatic downfall are coming back at this precise moment as a sign to critique the entrenched violence of neoliberalism that has systemically erased the subjectivity of disposable populations. By invoking an alternative notion of ruined futurity, then, acts of renarration and remembrance starting from the locale of Dongbei suggest an attentiveness to the disposable populations themselves as a central concern for the design of a more just socioeconomic future.

Conclusion

Thinking through the translocal and transgenerational implications of the Dongbei Renaissance in China's literary and media scenes in recent years, this paper has mapped out a framework of ruined futurity for understanding the productive tension between ruined social memories and alternative futures in the making. Disrupting a linear understanding of the future as a forward-looking temporal coordinate that can cast off repressed memories of disposable lives and "old" cultural forms, ruined futurity emphasises that the ruined past itself is what lingers across temporal gaps and conditions new forms of imagining the future. Specifically, this paper has drawn upon literary analysis, digital media ethnography, and social criticism to consider the working of ruined futurity in multiple realms. First of all, through the lens of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memories, literary narratives that have surfaced in the Dongbei Renaissance suggest a mnemonic future that persistently excavates its inheritance from those multiple layers of historical violence in order to create alternative openings of justice and redemption. Secondly, digital transmission of those literary texts via interactive reading practices provides an additional layer of remediation for conceptualising a media future that constantly refashions existing cultural forms within a digital media ecology of interrelatedness. By putting literature in touch with a broader media public, this process of digital remediation has helped to translocalise the historical experience of postsocialist Dongbei. On the third level, while the repressed memories of Dongbei have gradually grown into a public consciousness in contemporary China, this cultural wave of renarrating Dongbei carries a dimension of socioeconomic criticism in the making of ruined futurity. By resurrecting the experience of Dongbei as an implicit critique of a disposable future in the age of economic precarity, the Dongbei Renaissance opens up a broader horizon for critically reexamining the triumphant narrative of neoliberal economic development that has enchanted China and the world in the post-Cold War era. At this critical moment of global history, the ruined futures activated by the memoryscapes of postsocialist Dongbei tell us where our future has come from and where it is heading, and give us a critical reminder that even in the most repressed conditions of precarity and uncertainty, life persists and gives birth to new modes of storytelling.

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