

Future Imperfect:

Using the Future to Critique the Present

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ABSTRACT: Beginning with a discussion of Liang Qichao's 1902 unfinished novel *A Future History of New China*, this article examines four twenty-first century science fiction works by Han Song, Liu Cixin, Chan Koonchung, and Hao Jingfang – arguing that each work uses a future-perfect narrative mode to comment on the present. In contrast to the conventional wisdom that one may learn from the past to improve conditions in the present, this article instead contends that one implication of these works is that a focus on the future can – somewhat paradoxically – *inhibit* the possibility of meaningful political reform in the present.

KEYWORDS: China, science fiction, future perfect, cruel optimism, political reform.

Introduction

There is a long tradition in China of using the past to comment on the present (a practice sometimes referred to as 以古諷今 *yigu fengjin*, using the past to satirise the present, or 以古寓今 *yigu yujin*, using the past to allegorise the present). Typically, this process involves using discussions of historical incidents to reflect on contemporary concerns. A more recent twist, however, involves using the *future* to address present-day issues – either by presenting an idealised vision of the future to offer a contrast to the imperfect present, or by presenting a radically de-idealised vision of the future to illustrate what might happen if contemporary trends continue unchecked.

In a modern context, this practice of using the future to comment on the present can be traced back to a novel Liang Qichao 梁啟超 began serialising in 1902, which used a fictional vision of China's future to reflect on the sociopolitical challenges facing the nation in what was then the present day. A prominent journalist, intellectual, and political reformer, Liang had become interested in using literature for progressive ends, and in 1902 he founded a journal titled *New Fiction* (*Xin xiaoshuo* 新小說). The inaugural issue of the journal opens with Liang's famous essay "On Literature and Its Relation to the Governance of the People" (*Lun xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhi guanxi* 論小說與群治之關係), which proposes that fiction can play a crucial role in helping shape people's attitudes and recommends that reformers use literary works to advance their political objectives (Liang 1902, 1996). It was in this same inaugural issue that Liang, writing under the penname 飲冰室 (Yinbingshi, which literally means "Ice Drinker's Studio"), began serialising *A Future History of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記), which used a futuristic setting to reflect on present concerns (1984).

A Future History of New China opens 60 years in the future, on the 50th anniversary of a reform movement that culminated in

an international peace treaty in which China is recognised as the world's most powerful nation. The narrative then quickly transitions to a series of lectures by a descendent of Confucius, who outlines the trajectory of the nation's rise to global supremacy over the preceding six decades – which is to say, the period since 1902, when Liang first began serialising the work itself. The novel, in other words, is narrated in the future perfect tense – meaning that it uses a future vantage point to look back at *earlier* future events. Although the Chinese term for the future perfect does not carry the exact same connotations as the corresponding English term (in modern Chinese, the future perfect is generally referred to as "future completed tense," *jianglai wancheng shi* 將來完成時), the English term is nevertheless quite apposite here, insofar as Liang's intention was precisely to describe a "perfect future" for China itself. At the same time, however, the utopian vision Liang presents in *A Future History of New China* is haunted by its own antithesis – a set of dystopian visions in which China fails to realise its potential in the immediate future, or at all.

A Future History of New China was originally conceived as the first work in a trilogy, with the second volume to be titled *A Future History of Old China* (*Jiu Zhongguo weilai ji* 舊中國未來記) and the third to be titled either *New Peach Blossom Spring* (*Xin taoyuan* 新桃源) or *Overseas New China* (*Haiwai xin Zhongguo* 海外新中國). As specified in a contemporary advertisement for the journal *New Fiction*, *A Future History of Old China* was projected to be a mirror image of *A Future History of New China*, describing a vision of China whose institutions and tendencies remain essentially unchanged from the past, leading the nation to suffer from internal rebellions and external exploitation by foreign powers. After 50 years, however, a large-scale revolution would liberate a couple of provinces and set the stage for the possibility of political reform. *New Peach Blossom Spring*, meanwhile, was conceived as a companion piece for *A Future History of New China* and would

have described how a group of Chinese had fled their homeland during its earlier tyrannical period and established a new society on a distant island, where they subsequently reestablished collaborative relations with China after its successful reform.¹ The implication is that from the very beginning, Liang's optimistic vision for a future "new China" was structurally linked to a pair of more pessimistic visions about the nation's future. In other words, Liang's "future perfect" vision of a new China would have been complemented with another pair of narratives that would have presented a vision of China's imperfect future – a future *imperfect* China – though those other projects were abandoned when Liang discontinued *A Future History of New China*.

It appears, accordingly, that the idealised vision Liang presents in *A Future History of New China* is haunted by an inverse concern that the nation ultimately *might not* realise its potential, and Liang equivocates over whether it is productive to write about these future scenarios at all. This equivocation, in turn, may well have contributed to Liang's ultimate decision, in 1903, to abort both *A Future History of New China* as well as its two proposed sequels, and it may have also been a factor in his subsequent decision to suspend the entire *New Fiction* journal just three years after it was launched.

Although the specific vision of China's future that Liang Qichao presented in *A Future History of New China* turned out to be somewhat off the mark,² his underlying emphasis on literature's political utility accurately anticipated a perspective that would remain influential throughout much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. That is to say, although *A Future History of New China* was aborted in 1903 and the journal *New Fiction* discontinued in 1905, the works' premise that popular literature could be used to reshape readers' views and to advance a desired sociopolitical agenda is reflected in the New Culture Movement and the May Fourth Movement of the late 1910s and 1920s, which contended that literature could be used to advance a reformist agenda. Similarly, in his influential 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" (*Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua* 延安文藝座談會上的講話), Mao Zedong called for art and literature to be made into "a powerful weapon for uniting and educating the people, for attacking and annihilating the enemy, and to help the people to fight the enemy with a united heart and mind."³ After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong's view of literature and art as political tools became the basis of the state's promotion of socialist realism, which sought to use literature and art to promote an ideology aligned with socialist ideals and the government's political objectives. More recently, in 2013, President Xi Jinping began urging Chinese citizens to "tell the good China story" (*jiang hao Zhongguo gushi* 講好中國故事) – which has subsequently developed into an influential slogan emphasising the ability of fiction and narrative (which is to say, storytelling) to help shape the nation's present and future.⁴

Among the various ways that literature can be used to promote a certain political vision, the specific use of the future to comment on the present is particularly common in science fiction (SF). Although the futuristic premise of Liang Qichao's *A Future History of New China* is not grounded on a SF-style scientific explanation, the work's serialisation coincided with modern China's first wave

of science fiction writing, and in addition to original works such as the 1904 novel *Moon Colony* (*Yueqiu zhimindi* 月球殖民地) by an author publishing under the penname Huangjiang Diaosou 荒江釣叟, Xu Nianci's 徐念慈 1905 short story "A Tale of New Mr Braggadocio" (*Xin Faluo xiansheng tan* 新法螺先生譚), and Lu Shi'e 陸士諤 1910 short story "New China" (*Xin Zhongguo* 新中國). China's interest in science fiction can also be observed in a surge of translations of Western-language science fiction works that began to appear during this same period, such as Lu Xun's 魯迅 1903 Chinese translations of Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (*De la Terre à la lune*, *Cong diqiu dao yueliang* 從地球到月球) and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (*Voyage au centre de la Terre*, *Didi lüxing* 地底旅行).⁵ Each of these works is set in the future (either explicitly or implicitly), and while they do not necessarily use a future perfect narrative structure, they nevertheless clearly offer an instructive contrast between current conditions and future possibilities.⁶

In the following discussion, however, I take inspiration from an inadvertent anachronism that appears on the first page of Liang's novel – in which Liang correctly uses a dating system based on the year of Confucius' birth to specify the years when the novel was written and is set (years that correspond to 1902 and 1962 in the Gregorian calendar), but miscalculates when he repeats these same two dates using the Gregorian calendar, accidentally rendering them not as 1902 and 1962 but rather as 2002 and 2062. Just as the early twentieth century period when Liang Qichao began writing his novel coincided with the first wave of modern Chinese SF, the early twenty-first century period when Liang erroneously claimed his novel was written coincided with what Mingwei Song has called a "new wave" of Chinese SF that began in the late 1980s (2023), many of which reflect a logic that Virginia Conn and others call Sinofuturism (Conn 2020).

Some studies have attempted to divide these works into utopias and dystopias,⁷ while others complicate this binary by taking inspiration from Michel Foucault's concept of a heterotopia. In contrast to utopias and dystopias, which Foucault argues "present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down" (Foucault 1986: 24), heterotopias instead are disturbing and disruptive because they contain a combination of idealised and counter-idealised elements, and invite the possibility of imagining

1. The advertisement was titled "China's only literary newspaper *New Fiction*" (*Zhongguo weiyi zhi wenxuebao* "Xin xiaoshuo," 中國唯一之文學報"新小說"). It was first published in the periodical *The New People's Gazette* (*Xinmin congkao* 新民叢報), No. 14 (1902), and was reprinted in Chen and Xia (1989: 43-5). Cited and discussed in Andolfatto (2019).
2. In 1962, the year when Liang's novel is set, China was hardly celebrating its ascendancy as the world's most powerful nation, and instead found itself in the throes of a devastating famine in which tens of millions of Chinese would lose their lives as a result of government policies implemented during the Great Leap Forward.
3. Quoted in McDougall (1980: 58). Translation revised.
4. For a discussion of Xi Jinping's "tell the good China story" slogan and its implications for Chinese literature, see Wang (2020a).
5. In 1903, Lu Xun published only two chapters of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, but he published a more complete version of the work three years later. For both translations, Lu Xun relied on Japanese translations of English translations of the original French novels.
6. For useful discussions of late Qing and early Republican Chinese SF literature, see Wang (1997) and Isaacson (2017).
7. See, for instance, Song (2013) and the special feature of *China Perspectives*, "Utopian/Dystopian Fiction in Contemporary China" (Wang and Song 2015).

the world otherwise (Foucault 1970: xvii).⁸ Some recent studies build on this concept of heterotopia to disrupt boundaries between utopian and dystopian SF visions (Wang 2014), sometimes explicitly suggesting that the objective is to “suggest alternatives to both the utopia/dystopian dualism” (Song 2021: 112).

Interest in the dialectic of utopian and dystopian discourse in contemporary China is not limited to the field of SF, with particular emphasis being given to the political ramifications of these discourses. One recent volume notes that despite the “growing body of dystopian literature and arts published recently in mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the rest of the Sinophone world,” there is nevertheless also a significant interest in utopianism, and its attendant “irreducible socially critical and politically imaginative function” (Wang 2020b: vii-viii). Another volume on utopian discourses in China and “its various peripheries” similarly observes that:

It will not go unnoticed (...) that the utopian impulses of globalising China’s futurology stand in stark contrast to a broad range of dystopian realities in present China. [Xi Jinping’s] dream machinery has also ushered in a new era of authoritarianism, censorship, and media control, while environmental degradation and social inequality are still worsening. (Riemenschnitter, Imbach, and Jaguścik 2022: 3)

Literary scholar Hua Li, meanwhile, uses what she calls “the critical utopia in China” to look more specifically at contemporary Chinese SF, arguing that “while pointing towards the future, these SF narratives also provide a fresh look at the present” (Li 2015: 519).

My approach in this article builds on these earlier studies, but with a twist. Rather than focusing on heterotopias per se, I instead examine some of the ambiguities and tensions inherent in what might otherwise appear to be utopias and dystopias. In particular, I take inspiration from what American studies scholar Lauren Berlant famously calls cruel optimism, which Berlant uses to describe a condition under contemporary neoliberalism wherein one’s “fantasy of the good life” in the future ironically becomes “an obstacle to [one’s] flourishing” in the present (Berlant 2011: 1). For Berlant, in other words, the pursuit of a utopian “good life” in the future may actively undermine the possibility improving one’s situation in the present. Berlant’s object of analysis is contemporary North American and European culture, and particularly the ideology of the American dream – which, she argues in another context, “fuses private fortune with that of the nation [and] promises that if you invest your energies in work and in family, the nation will secure the broader social and economic conditions in which your labor can gain value and your life can be lived with dignity” (Berlant 1997: 4). Her approach, however, is also very relevant to many dimensions of contemporary China – including, but not limited to, the Xi Jinping-inspired discourse of the “Chinese Dream.”

Here, I look at four recent Chinese SF works, all of which were completed between 2000 and 2012, and which are set years, decades, or even centuries in the future. None of these works is manifestly dystopian, but neither are they straightforwardly utopian. Instead, each work depicts a future society where radical decisions have been made in response to past or future crises, and each work

gestures at potential tensions between putative societal objectives on one hand, and the ability of individuals to flourish in the present on the other. All four works are by Chinese authors who currently live and work in the PRC: Liu Cixin 劉慈欣, Han Song 韓松, Hao Jingfang 郝景芳, and Chan Koonchung 陳冠中. All but one of these authors publish openly in China (the exception is Chan Koonchung, whose works are perceived as too politically sensitive), and they have all been translated into English and other foreign languages.

Of the four works I examine here, however, two were formally published in China only after a years-long delay, and a third has never been published in China at all. Although there may well be significant differences in how each of the four authors understands and publicly articulates their relationship to the current political establishment, each of these fictional works shares an interest in overlapping private and societal goals, together with the potential consequences that may result when those objectives diverge or come into tension with one another. They each, in other words, use a future-perfect setting to reflect on different permutations of a decidedly imperfect condition that Berlant would call cruel optimism.

New world orders

Two of contemporary China’s most influential science fiction authors, Liu Cixin and Han Song, both began publishing fiction in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with early works including Liu Cixin’s novel *China 2185* (*Zhongguo 2185* 中國2185), first published in 1989, and Han Song’s short story “Gravestone of the Universe” (*Yuzhou mubei* 宇宙墓碑), first published in Taiwan in 1991 but not anthologised in China until ten years later. Liu and Han are both currently best known for a series of works that use a dark vision of the future to comment obliquely on contemporary issues, such as Liu Cixin’s best-selling *Remembrance of Earth’s Past* (*Diqiu wangshi* 地球往事) trilogy – including *The Three Body Problem* (*Santi* 三體, 2008), *The Dark Forest* (*Hei’an senlin* 黑暗森林, 2008), and *Death’s End* (*Sishen yongsheng* 死神永生, 2010) –, and Han Song’s volumes of interlinked novellas *Subway* (*Ditie* 地鐵, 2010) and *High-speed Rail* (*Gaotie* 高鐵, 2012), as well as his *Hospital* trilogy (composed of the novels *Hospital* (*Yiyuan* 醫院, 2016), *Exorcism* (*Qumo* 驅魔, 2017), and *Phantasm* (*Wangling* 亡靈, 2018)).

Here, I examine a pair of works that each author published relatively early in their respective literary careers: Han Song’s 2000 novel *Mars over America: Random Sketches on a Journey to the West in 2066* (*Huoxing zhaoyao Meiguo: 2066 nian zhi xixing manji* 火星照耀美國: 2066年之西行漫記) and Liu Cixin’s 2001 novella *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang diqiu* 流浪地球). I consider how each work uses a future setting to reflect on a set of contemporary geopolitical challenges, and specifically how both works deploy a *double* future perfect narrative structure consisting of an outer narrative frame featuring an elderly narrator recalling events of his youth 50 to 60 years earlier, together with an inner narrative frame that describes the corresponding period of the

8. For a more detailed discussion of Foucault’s concept of heterotopia in relation to contemporary Chinese literature and culture, see Rojas (2022, 2023).

narrator's youth while simultaneously looking back at the preceding historical developments that led up to that moment. Given that Chinese verbs are unconjugated, the two novels' inner narratives mostly read as though they are written in the past or present tense, and it is only with the occasional references to the future-future period – when the narrator is already an old man – that the reader is reminded that the works are narrated in a double future perfect tense.

Published in 2000 and with a plotline that begins in the year 2066, Han Song's *Mars over America* is bookended by a pair of dates that coincide almost perfectly with the Gregorian calendar dates (2002 and 2062) that Liang Qichao mistakenly provided in the opening lines of his own novel a century earlier.⁹ Like Liang's *A Future History of New China*, Han Song's *Mars over America* is set in a future when China has displaced the United States as the world's preeminent global superpower. However, unlike Liang's novel, which is set in China, Han Song's work is instead set almost entirely in the United States, though China remains a prominent presence given that the Chinese narrator repeatedly contrasts his view of China with the chaotic situation he observes in the US.

Mars over America is narrated by a young man named Tang Long – a champion Chinese Go player who travels to the United States in 2066 at the age of sixteen to compete in a tournament while also serving as a cultural ambassador for his country. Shortly after Tang Long arrives in New York, however, local terrorists destroy the sea walls that had been protecting the city from rising ocean levels, thereby unleashing disastrous floods. In the chaos, Tang Long is separated from the rest of his delegation and is ultimately rescued by a band of children and young adults. All of Tang's rescuers are of Asian descent and have been living on the outer margins of a US society that they perceive to be irremediably racist. One result of the group's marginalised status is that they are partially disconnected from an artificial intelligence computer system known as Amanduo, which by that point has global reach but is particularly influential in China. Before coming to the US, Tang Long would frequently use the Amanduo network to access necessary information and obtain a general feeling of well-being, but when the local Amanduo system goes offline following the New York terrorist attack, Tang Long finds himself disconnected from the network for the first time in his life. His young rescuers, however, find themselves at an advantage given that they had already been maintaining a greater distance from the system even before the attacks, and therefore are better prepared to survive without it.

Written near the beginning of China's internet era, Han Song's novel was oddly prescient in anticipating the way the Chinese government has come to use the Internet to promote a sense of internal harmony while buttressing the state's political objectives. In ways Han Song could hardly have anticipated at the time, the Internet has become a key portal through which Chinese citizens access information, while also being an important tool the government uses to shape popular sentiment. Moreover, just as Tang Long's trip to the US marks the first time he finds himself delinked from the global network, many contemporary Chinese similarly find that it is only upon traveling abroad that they can easily access an Internet independent of Chinese state oversight.

Even as the main plotline of *Mars over America* unfolds in

the year 2066 and periodically looks back at the historical developments that led up to that future moment, it eventually becomes evident that this plotline is being narrated retrospectively from a moment 60 years even further in the future – as the protagonist, now a septuagenarian, recalls his trip to the US as a young man. We are not given much information about what transpires between 2066 and 2126, apart from the fact that the Earth was invaded by extraterrestrials who established a 福地 *fudi*, which literally means “happy land” but which in a Chinese context can also be used to refer to a land of the dead.¹⁰

If the inner narrative frame of *Mars Over America* (which implicitly looks back from 2066 to the year 2000, the year the novel was written) reflects on the implications of Chinese society's growing reliance on the Internet, the work's outer narrative frame (which looks back from 2126 to the year 2066, when the novel's primary plotline unfolds) instead offers an oblique commentary on issues of governmentality and biopolitics. The twenty-second century setting of the novel's “future-future” present appears to be characterised by a general sense of calm that stands in stark contrast to the general chaos of the work's primary mid-twenty-first century setting – though this sense of calm, the novel implies, is the result not of a more effective local governance but rather of a takeover by extraterrestrials. The implication is that the considerations of stability, justice, and well-being that animate the inner plotline are radically reframed in the outer plotline, bringing into question whether the sociopolitical ideals that are implicitly invoked in the inner plotline are even relevant to the outer one.

Published in 2001, meanwhile, Liu Cixin's novella *The Wandering Earth* features a narrative line that is set during an unspecified period more than four centuries in the future, as the narrator periodically gestures back to the extraordinary developments that had led up to this future moment (Liu 2017, 2018). In particular, the narrator describes how, long before his birth, scientists calculated that in another 480 years a solar explosion would destroy the Earth – and while some commentators advocated using an armada of spaceships to save as many people as possible, others proposed a more radical solution that would involve dislodging the Earth from its current orbit and launching it on a 2,500-year journey to the Alpha Centauri star system. The faction arguing for moving the entire planet to a new star system ultimately won the debate, whereupon the world undertook the Archimedean task of lifting the planet out of its orbit to propel it into interstellar space.

The narrator begins by noting that he was born shortly after an array of thrusters positioned around the Earth's equator succeeded in halting the planet's rotation – which was a necessary first step before the thrusters could then be used to redirect the planet out of its original orbit, but one that had devastating effects on the Earth itself, rendering most of the planet's surface uninhabitable. The main body of the work describes the multiyear process whereby the Earth embarked on its interstellar journey, as the planet's

9. Han Song subsequently published several new editions of his novel containing revised versions of the text, but as he explains in the preface to one of the more recent editions, the revisions in each case were minor and did not significantly affect the overall structure of the work. The version of the novel used in the following discussion is Han Song (2018).

10. For a discussion of this point, see Song (2013: 90).

entire population had to relocate to a network of underground cities in preparation for the interstellar journey that would render the planet's surface uninhabitable. The narrative culminates with a description of how, after the Earth passes the orbit of Jupiter, the sun finally explodes. Just before the explosion, however, a faction of the Earth's surviving population has grown increasingly sceptical of the scientific rationale behind the decision to move the Earth from its original orbit, and decides to scapegoat a cohort of scientists involved in the research into the sun's fate – forcing the scientists to go up to the Earth's surface without protection, where they would immediately freeze to death. As a result, at almost the precise instant that the sun's explosion confirms the scientists' original predictions, the scientists themselves were simultaneously being executed by an antisience mob that refused to accept the scientists' warnings.

Although the backdrop of Liu Cixin's novella is decidedly apocalyptic, the work's futuristic premise also has a utopian dimension – as we are told that, in response to the news of the imminent threat of the Earth's survival, the world's nations have come together to establish a global government to oversee the process of redirecting the Earth towards its new destination. Read allegorically, the novella could be viewed as an optimistic reflection on a response to a contemporary threat like global warming, in that we see humanity collaboratively taking decisive action in response to the threat that would otherwise transform the planet into an uninhabitable husk. In this respect, the novella's future perfect narrative frame functions as a vehicle for a vision of global solidarity. On the other hand, even if the solution that is ultimately adopted is the only one that technically offers the possibility of saving the planet from destruction, it would nevertheless appear to be something of a Pyrrhic victory – insofar as the act of pushing the Earth out of its orbit inevitably triggers devastating earthquakes and tsunamis, while vast amounts of the Earth's crust need to be consumed for the thrusters that propel the Earth on its new journey, and during the planet's subsequent two and a half millennia journey to Alpha Centauri its surface is plunged into a deep freeze that renders it completely uninhabitable. If the wandering earth project is an allegory for a coordinated response to global warming, accordingly, the solution proves to be almost as destructive as the original threat (Rojas 2021).

Like Han Song's *Mars Over China*, Liu Cixin's novella similarly features an outer narrative frame in which the elderly narrator in his seventies or eighties recalls the pivotal events of his youth recounted in the novel's main narrative. In *The Wandering Earth*, this outer frame is set in a period when the Earth has already exited the solar system and entered interstellar space. With the resolution of the novel's earlier conflicts (including the challenge of how to respond to the imminent solar explosion, the debate between those who advocate leaving the Earth and those who instead argue for moving the entire planet out of its current orbit, the subsequent conflict between the scientists who continue to insist that the sun will explode and the sceptics who begin to question the decision to move the Earth), the work's outer frame is instead characterised by a general sense of calm and stability, as the Earth's remaining inhabitants settle in for their two-and-a-half-millennium journey to Alpha Centauri. Beneath the apocalyptic premise of the novel's

futuristic setting, accordingly, there is an almost utopian subtext, wherein all the world's nations come together to address the crisis, resulting in a situation where the Earth enters a period of long-term sociopolitical stability. At the same time, however, beneath this utopian subtext there lies another, even darker, dystopian reality, in that the process of "saving" the Earth will simultaneously require sacrificing virtually everything the Earth represents in the first place. The planet's surface is rendered completely uninhabitable, vast amounts of the planet's crust are consumed for fuel, while the relatively small number of humans who survive the global cataclysm are confined to a network of underground caverns.

To the extent that the mood in the outer frame of Liu Cixin's novel is generally calm, this is because by this point the Earth's remaining inhabitants have already accepted a set of almost impossibly austere conditions while clinging to the hope of a substantially better life in the far distant future that is still thousands of years away (it is hoped that the Earth's surface would be revived once the planet reaches Alpha Centauri and is warmed by the star's heat). The work's true dystopia, accordingly, is arguably not the disruption precipitated by the discovery of the sun's impending explosion, but rather the resulting situation where the Earth's remaining inhabitants use the hope of a return to normality in the far distant future to accept the loss of all they had previously treasured.

Rethinking governance

While *Mars over America* and *The Wandering Earth* outline radical reconfigurations of the geopolitical world order, two other recent works focus instead on issues of local governance. In 2009, the Beijing-based Chinese Canadian author Chan Koonchung published his novel *The Fat Years* (*Shengshi: Zhongguo 2013 nian* 盛世: 中國2013年) in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and in 2012 the Tsinghua University economics doctoral student Hao Jingfang released the novella *Folding Beijing* (*Beijing zhedi* 北京折疊) on her university's student computer bulletin board system. It is significant that these works were initially released either at the margins of China's official publishing industry (on a student computer bulletin board) or outside China altogether (in Hong Kong and Taiwan), given that both works speak directly to issues of China's political governance. While Hao Jingfang's novella was later published in China in print form, Chan Koonchung's novel has never been officially released in the PRC.¹¹

Whereas the narrative frame of *The Wandering Earth* spans four centuries and that of *Mars Over America* spans several decades, the corresponding narrative frame of Chan's *The Fat Years* covers only a few years. Published in 2009, the novel is set four years in the future, in 2013, and the work begins with the protagonist, Lao Chen, suddenly realising that he has no recollection of the second month of the year 2011, whereupon he and some friends attempt to uncover the mystery of the missing month. Eventually, the group's investigation leads them to kidnap a government official,

11. In 2014 Hao Jingfang's novella was published in the literary journals 文藝風賞 (*Wenyi feng shang*, Literature and art appreciation) and 小說月報 (*Xiaoshuo yuebao*, Fiction monthly). In 2016 it was republished in a book-length collection of Hao's shorter fiction (Hao 2016). Ken Liu's 2015 English translation of the work was awarded the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette.

He Dongsheng, who offers a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the month in question. He Dongsheng explains that the world suffered a devastating financial collapse in early 2011 due to a precipitous drop in the value of the US dollar. At this point China's own economy was plunged into chaos, leading the government to impose a three-week period of martial law during which numerous people were killed. By 2013, however, the trauma of the financial collapse and subsequent imposition of martial law have been almost completely wiped from collective memory, thereby allowing the public to enjoy the peace and stability that had been made possible by the 2011 government crackdown. Although the allegorical significance of this process of collective amnesia will undoubtedly be familiar to many readers, the novel also details some of the real-world parallels that are invoked by the futuristic scenario described in the fictional text. He Dongsheng compares the government's (fictional) crackdown following the financial crisis of 2011 to the government's (real) crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protesters in June of 1989, suggesting that in both cases the government used violence to restore public order and then made a considerable effort to erase its own violent intervention from the people's collective memory.

In addition to this information about the financial crisis, He Dongsheng also reveals that, on the final day of the three-week period of martial law, the government secretly began seeding the country's water supply with the drug MDMA – also known as ecstasy – which “makes the Chinese people happy and full of love and compassion” (Chan 2013: 277). When Lao Chen learns this, he immediately compares the practice to the government's distribution of the happiness-inducing drug soma described in Aldous Huxley's famous 1932 dystopian novel *Brave New World*. In Chan's own novel, however, it is revealed that although the government had been remarkably efficient in introducing MDMA into municipal water supplies as well as a wide array of packaged beverages, including “cow's milk, soya milk, fizzy drinks, fruit juice, bottled water, beer, and rice wine” (Chan 2013: 279), the amount of the drug to which any single individual was exposed was nevertheless so minute that it would not even register in a urine test, and at most would produce only a “mild euphoria.” Unlike the powerful narcotic featured in *Brave New World*, MDMA in Chan's novel is presented as being merely a “small supplementary program” to the government's broader reform efforts. The implication is that the function of the drug is not to make people forget the trauma of the financial crisis and the government's repressive response, but rather to merely facilitate the public's inherent desire to look away from these earlier disruptions and focus instead on society's “harmonious” status in the present. He Dongsheng concludes that:

the Central Propaganda organs did do their work, but they were only pushing along a boat that was already on the move. If the Chinese people themselves had not already wanted to forget, we could not have forced them to do so. The Chinese people voluntarily gave themselves a large dose of amnesia medicine [*jianwang yao* 健忘藥]. (ibid.: 287)

Flabbergasted, Lao Chen releases He Dongsheng and allows him to leave. The novel concludes a couple of pages later, with Lao

Chen and his companions speculating that there is a 50-50 chance that they will get into trouble for their actions, whereupon Lao Chen suggests that they might go visit some friends who live in Yunnan on China's southwest border – and who, he claims, have never ingested MDMA.

Although Chan's novel does not feature the same double future perfect narrative structure that we find in the novels by Han Song and Liu Cixin discussed above, the narrative does feature a double reversal that resembles what we find in those earlier works. On the surface, the novel's premise that China's near-future period of economic growth and social stability is reliant on the government's practice of secretly pacifying its citizenry with a mind-altering drug explicitly invites comparisons with dystopian works such as *Brave New World*. On the other hand, the subsequent revelation that the drug in Chan's novel functions more as a placebo than an active narcotic turns the initial dystopian premise upside down, suggesting that the story is not about authoritarian governmental control but rather a citizenry who have managed to achieve social harmony on their own terms. Beneath this utopian subtext, however, there is a darker sub-subtext. In contrast to a Huxley-style dystopian narrative, where power is centred in an authoritarian government, the premise of Chan's work is that the government does not need to exercise much actual power, given that the nation's citizenry can help advance the government's objectives by voluntarily forgetting the earlier crises that helped lay the foundation for their current prosperity. Rather than presenting a vision of a peaceful society anchored by an authoritarian government, the novel instead presents a truly dystopian premise in which the people actively contribute to the conditions of their own pacification.

Meanwhile, in December of 2012 – coincidentally falling precisely during the four-year period between the original publication of *The Fat Years* and the near-future moment in which the novel is set – Hao Jingfang wrote and published a novella titled *Folding Beijing* (Hao 2015, 2016). Hao's work is set in a future moment after which socioeconomic exigencies have forced Beijing to implement extraordinary measures to ensure social order. More specifically, 50 years before the novel's contemporary present, Beijing completed a monumental engineering project that divided up the megalopolis into three discrete “spaces.” Three times every 48 hours, one of these spaces would be mechanically folded away and another would be unveiled, such that only one of the three spaces would ever be visible at one time. At the same time, the city's population was also divided into three cohorts, with the five million inhabitants in the First Space cohort consisting of the city's wealthiest and most powerful residents, who enjoy the use of the city for 24 out of every 48 hours. The 25 million residents of the Second Space cohort consist mostly of the city's middle class, and their cohort is allotted 16 daylight hours out of every 48. Finally, the 50 million residents of Third Space consist of the city's poorest residents, who are allotted only eight nighttime hours out of every 48. This arrangement permits the city's 80 million residents to inhabit a region that is only large enough to accommodate a fraction of the total population, while at the same time offering the additional benefit of minimising contact between residents of different social classes.

The main plotline of the novella involves a 48-year-old waste collector named Lao Dao, who is a resident of Third Space but accepts a lucrative assignment to sneak into First Space to deliver a message for an acquaintance. While Lao Dao is carrying out his assignment, however, he is apprehended by a First Space official named Ge Daping. It turns out that Ge Daping, like Lao Dao, was originally from Third Space, but subsequently managed to secure a blue-collar job in First Space, where he rose through the ranks and ultimately became the director of a government agency. Like He Dongsheng in *The Fat Years*, Ge Daping offers a detailed explanation of the socioeconomic considerations that led to Chinese society's present reality. He describes how, as China's economy underwent a large-scale automation process that allowed the nation to overtake Europe and America, it was confronted with the problem of what to do with all the displaced low-wage workers. The eventual solution, Ge Daping explains, was to "reduce the time a certain portion of the population spends living, and then find ways to keep them busy (...). Shove them into the night" (Hao 2016).

This objective of shoving the lower classes into the night was accomplished by dividing the city of Beijing into three discrete sections, such that the city's upper, middle, and lower classes are not only physically segregated but furthermore their respective economic spheres are kept largely separate. This way, the residents of First and Second Space could continue to enjoy financial security and robust economic growth, while the residents of Third Space would be kept busy during the short period every two days when it is their turn to emerge. Because the residents of Third Space have almost no opportunity to interact with the city's more affluent residents, they have little sense of the vast disparities of wealth that separate them from the rest of the city. The implication is that the metropolis's class segregation has a function resembling that of MDMA in Chan's novel, providing the populace with a sense of general contentment despite a set of underlying socioeconomic rifts.

Folding Beijing concludes with Lao Dao returning safely to Third Space. However, despite Lao Dao's experience in First Space, he does not appear to be motivated to pursue any sort of systemic reform after returning home. Instead, he simply continues working at his original job, hoping to save up enough money to send his daughter to kindergarten so that she might eventually be able to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. The implication is not so much that Lao Dao and his fellow residents are content because they lack knowledge about how the upper classes are faring, but rather that they desire the separation from the upper classes precisely so that they can thereby be relatively satisfied. Moreover, it is notable that even in this radically reengineered society, traditional gender roles remain relatively unchanged. As Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker observes, Hao's novel reflects her view that China's paternalistic style of government will be difficult to change (2017).

Just as Han Song's and Liu Cixin's novels centre around apocalyptic global crises that are nominally resolved only by *even greater* crises (with the Earth being plunged into a frigid interstellar void or being colonised by extraterrestrials), Chan Koonchung's and Hao Jingfang's works feature socioeconomic crises that are addressed by vast infrastructural projects with distinctly dystopian

resonances (the government spiking the nation's water supply or restructuring the entire city of Beijing). In Chan's and Hao's works, however, it eventually becomes apparent that the true driver of the new sociopolitical order is not a top-down exercise of governmental power, but rather the people's own complicity in helping advance the government's objectives. The fact that the latter works both shift the focus from governmental power to the people's own complicity in maintaining the objectives of that power, however, does not necessarily make these works less dystopian than classics such as *Brave New World*, but arguably makes them *even more* dystopian. This is because when the power nexus responsible for creating and perpetuating a dystopian social structure is located externally, in the government, it is easier to challenge that power than if the corresponding dystopian drive originates from within the people themselves.

Cruel optimism

An interviewer once asked Hao Jingfang why she decided not to present her work as a "grand, sweeping story of rebellion," focusing instead on "a man's simple quest to provide a better life for his daughter" (Stanish 2015). In response, Hao observed that "political rebellion is such a clichéd theme in SF," and added that this was why she decided to write a story in which "the unfairness of the world is revealed for readers, who exist independent of the story, not for the characters. The characters themselves care more about things that touch their daily lives: family, love, power, and wealth, but a reader can see the fundamental inequity of their world" (ibid.).

Hao Jingfang is alluding here to a version of Berlant's logic of cruel optimism. In *Folding Beijing*, it is implied that Lao Dao's investment in trying to provide a better future for his daughter precludes him from taking action that might address the more fundamental inequity of his immediate circumstances (including the possibility of acting on the knowledge of the underlying logic of Beijing's social engineering, which he gains from his discussion with Ge Daping). A similar point could be made with respect to Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years*, which concludes with the revelation that it was the Chinese people's own desire for a better future that led them to forget the trauma of the recent economic crisis and the governmental crackdown that followed it, which in turn prevented them from using the memory of that crisis to address the power inequities that characterise contemporary China in the novel. Furthermore, even when He Dongsheng explains the situation to Lao Chen and his friends, the latter simply release him and promise not to speak about what they have just learned – so that they can "continue living [their] ordinary lives" even as He Dongsheng "continue[s] living [his] official-promotion and money-spinning life" (Chan 2009: 287-8). The same logic can be observed in Liu Cixin's and Han Song's works, though over a much longer time span. In *The Wandering Earth*, the future in which humanity's optimistic hopes have been placed is countless generations away, while in *Mars Over America* there is no concrete future in sight, only a general hope for continued stability. While the inner narratives of the latter two works focus on a set of crises that threaten to upend life as we know it, both works are framed by a future-future setting in which the very conditions of existence have

changed so dramatically that earlier struggles for survival appear almost trivial in comparison.

If the practice of using the past to comment on the present is predicated on the notion that it is possible to apply lessons from the past to address conditions in the present, and the corresponding practice of using the *future* to comment on the present is premised on the idea that a reflection on possible trajectories that society might take in the future can help guide decisions of how to act in the present, then the condition that Berlant calls cruel optimism instead describes the precise inverse of the latter position – suggesting that an uncritical focus on potential future developments can inhibit individuals from taking proactive measures to improve their conditions in the present. Although it is impossible to say, based solely on the sort of textual analysis that drives the preceding analyses, whether these sorts of fictional works have any impact on changing readers' sociopolitical beliefs (as Liang Qichao hoped in his 1902 manifesto), it is significant that the fictional plotlines of each of these four contemporary works suggest the limits of narrative as a vehicle for sociopolitical transformation. In two works, the protagonists are provided detailed information about the structural inequities on which their contemporary society is predicated, but this knowledge does not appear to significantly change their outlook. In the other two works, meanwhile, a radically de-idealised future-future outer frame implicitly brings into question the ultimate significance of the desperate struggles for survival that animate each work's futuristic inner frame.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Liang Qichao set out to write three futuristic novels with the objective of using different visions of China's future – spanning the spectrum from utopian to dystopian – to help galvanise contemporary readers and orient them in a politically progressive direction. Liang ultimately abandoned this three-volume project after completing only five chapters of the first volume – apparently deciding that his energies could be better directed to more explicitly political endeavours. At the turn of the twenty-first century, meanwhile, a new wave of Chinese authors has produced numerous future-oriented works that theoretically could have a similar function. Like Liang Qichao's novel, each of the works discussed above features a future-perfect narrative structure, and while it is possible that none of these contemporary authors views their writing as politically as Liang did, it is nevertheless clear that all four works have complex implications for our understanding of contemporary reality. In a curious twist, however, one lesson one might take away from the futuristic vision of these contemporary works is precisely that a focus on the future may, under some conditions, actively impede the possibility of progressive intervention in the present. Indeed, it is possible that Liang himself came to a similar realisation over a century ago, when he decided to abort his futuristic novel to focus on contemporary activism.

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