

Interrogating Futurity in Contemporary China:

Towards Plural Horizons of Political Imagination

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Futurity saturates global imaginations of China as well as Chinese imaginations of the world. This concept captures not only ongoing speculations about what “the future” holds in terms of social, cultural, and political developments, but links together representations of futuristic temporality with affective attachments, political imaginations, and practices of world-making in contemporary China. “Futurity” thus names a multiplicity of envisioned horizons that contour the present. Rather than presenting a linear relationship between the present and what is “not-yet,” futurity signals the continuous work of producing and navigating futures in the plural. This concept has been ever more relevant to China, not only because various Chinese industries today – such as science fiction, artificial intelligence, and agricultural economies – are actively invested in inventing futures, but also because practices of future-making in China have become part of a global future boom. Instead of treating “the future” as a static object of speculation, this issue examines futurity as a critical method, practice, process, and cultural strategy that makes legible Chinese and global politics of the present.

The articles in this special feature examine futurity through a spectrum of social practices and cultural works. Working across fields including literature, anthropology, urban studies, digital media, environmental humanities, and science and technology studies, the authors interrogate the forms that futurist imaginations take and the social conditions that give rise to them in contemporary China. The multidisciplinary confluence in this special feature reveals some of the disparate but interconnected ways scholars of Chinese studies invoke futurity more broadly, often countering the homogeneous representations of China that circulate in geopolitical speculation and economic forecasting. If oft-repeated banalities such as “China is the future” (in reference to the economic rise of the People’s Republic of China in the heyday of neoliberal globalisation) inadequately capture the complexity of possible futures, the articles in this collection analyse “Chinese futurity” not as a site of

prognostication but as a vital resource for political imaginations and critiques.

Attending to the close relationship between futurity and political imagination, this special feature joins a larger conversation about the use of temporality to mediate sociopolitical realities. In and beyond China, historians have observed the use of the past to critique or constitute the present (Barmé 1996; Hartog 2016). In memory studies, the rise of digital technologies at the new millennial turn has also disturbed a linear imagination of time by putting social memories in contact with the future of technology (Huyssen 2003; van Dijck 2007). By putting an emphasis on the conceptual axis of futurity, this special feature highlights the interplay between futures and other temporalities (Rosenberg and Harding 2005), while interrogating how the invocation of futurity may enact social agendas. If we have witnessed a teleological vision of inventing radically new futures from the Mao era (Cheng 2008; Qian 2020), the articles in this special feature complicate this imaginary by considering how the future mobilises sources of the past and present while being conditioned by them. We look at the ways in which cultural producers and ordinary practitioners deploy imaginations of the future towards specific ends: to critique or satirise the present, contour affects of anticipation, offer alternative social models to existing ones, or engage in political strategising (Harvey 2000; Jameson 2005; Iovene 2014).

While existing studies of Chinese futurity have tracked social practice, cultural discourse, and aesthetic production, rarely have approaches from the social sciences and humanities been put side by side. In part, this is due to the fact that “the future” appears through distinct registers of analysis in these literatures. Responding to shifts of economic globalisation and neoliberal restructuring, social sciences engagements with Chinese futurity have frequently highlighted “life-making” practices in the wake of rapid economic transition, understood as people’s investments in optimising themselves for the sake of future viability as embodied human capital

(Anagnost, Arai, and Ren 2013: 2). The self-cultivation of individuals, communities, and institutions towards new horizons of labour and consumption can be seen, for instance, in the epistemic labour of migrant workers in producing moral narratives that make radically uncertain futures seem liveable (Zhan 2023). Studies have also tracked the emergence of new practices of community organising, such as the daydreaming nurtured by radical lesbian activists who strive to imagine beyond pragmatic political struggles into a utopian queer futurity (A. Huang 2017). Such works attend to future-making as a strategic mode of “worlding” new collectivities at the grassroots level. From hackerspaces in Chinese manufacturing (Lindtner 2015) to religious groups that battle climate apocalypse (see Galipeau in this special feature), local communities in China test and craft their futures in everyday forms of life-making to navigate potentiality, risk, and hope. Urbanisation is another commonly cited terrain for future-making, as designers, architects, and planners in Chinese cities forge constantly shifting relations between the past, present, and future (Wu 2015; Neves 2020; L. Lee 2023; see Nguyen in this special feature). As the urban-rural divide has intensified in scale, with global cities such as Shenzhen and Shanghai spectacularised as “cities of the future” (Greenspan 2014; Yang 2017), scholars have further examined crises of inequality, displacement, and the uneven distribution of aspirational futures for migrant labourers, ethnic minorities, and other marginalised populations (Chen 2001; Visser 2010; Evans 2020). However, as Joshua Neves and Jenny Chio put it in a cross-disciplinary conversation, the common paradigm distinguishing urbanisation as “futuristic” and rural or peri-urban conditions as “primitive, a raw materiality, or a space of tourist wonder” is also ripe to be challenged by China scholars (Chio and Neves 2023: 196).

These dispositions towards the future are broadly aligned with Arjun Appadurai’s formative work on “future-makers,” or cultural actors that engage in the “ethics of possibility” – “those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizons of hope, that expand the field of the imagination” (2013: 295). For Appadurai, the capacity to aspire is not an individual orientation but a “cultural fact.” Described in terms of social practice, Chinese grassroots future-making is counterposed to teleological theories of progress often espoused in state discourses, inflected through Marxist-Leninist-Maoist visions of revolutionary development, and more recently echoed in President Xi Jinping’s call to reanimate the rise of Chinese civilisation (*Zhongguo wenming jueqi* 中國文明崛起). Indeed, in Chinese contexts, future-making practices often exist in the wake of the delegitimisation of the state’s utopian visions (Riemenschnitter, Imbach, and Jaguścik 2023), and as a contestation of national narratives of progress, modernisation, and global dominance (Anagnost 1997). Such scholarship asks: How, and for whom, are futures created and contested? What kinds of social practice give rise to liveable or unliveable futures?

In recent works from cultural studies, comparative literature, and film and media studies, we find another set of foci, which centre the aesthetics of futurity and the audiovisual materialities that mediate futurist imaginations. From the rise of genres such as science fiction and horror to a fascination with Sinofuturism in contemporary art scenes, Chinese media cultures today are marked by a “future boom,” whether utopian or dystopian (Riemenschnitter, Imbach,

and Jaguścik 2023). As cultural discourse, futurity encompasses the Chinese media ecology, producing various tropes representational of a time in which the rise of China is coupled with the structural crises of globalised neoliberalism. For example, despite nationalistic and Orientalist framings of China as the new future of the world, dystopia and monstrosity have become visible motifs in the futures imagined by Sinophone filmmakers, artists, and writers today, urging us to examine the rise of crisis narratives with a more critical lens (E. Huang 2020; Pang 2023). As a response to the alarming present, an equally strong manifestation of futurity is seen in a growing interest of Sinophone cultural products in excavating alternative futures in ruins and memories, disrupting a linear historical telos of progress and modernity (Wang 2022; see Lin in this special feature). Sinofuturism – a term coined by cultural theorist Steve Goodman (1998) and recycled by philosopher Yuk Hui (2016) and video artist Lawrence Lek¹ – crafts an aesthetic repertoire that connects traditional Chinese philosophies with organised crime, cybernetics, and simulations. Critics have rightly pointed to this term’s techno-Orientalist underpinnings and oversimplification of Chinese modernisation as a counterweight to an imagined Western style of futurity (de Seta 2020; Conn and de Seta 2021). Such work asks about the representational economies of Sinophone futurities: What work is done by temporal imaginations in heightening the contradictions of China, read as both “future of the world” and crippled by its past? How do the aesthetic products of the Sinophone “future boom” delineate and intervene in the structural crises of the present global order?

In juxtaposing works that attend to both the granular practices of life-making and the aesthetic qualities of futurism(s), this special feature pushes back against the assumption of practice and discourse as dichotomous lines of inquiry. Conceptualising futurity as a dynamic process co-constituted by practice and discourse, we emphasise how futuristic visions coordinate practices of aspiration and life-making, while asking how practices of future-making shape cultural imaginaries. In this special feature, putting together these distinct methodological approaches – from empirical ethnographic research to literary/cultural analysis – reaffirms their mutual indispensability in painting a holistic picture of *how* futures are invoked and strategically mobilised.

Beyond the question of multidisciplinary, another thread that runs through this special feature has to do with the dynamic tension between the local and the global. To what extent is the futuristic impulse in China not merely a local or national symptom, but also a manifestation of a worldwide future boom? What local specificities are embedded in the futuristic imaginations in China? How may locally-grounded theoretical insights about futurity from China generate transregional relevance in this global age of radical geopolitical and psychosocial configurations, especially in the (post)pandemic age? Situating Chinese conditions of future-making within the broader global context opens a comparative reading of contemporary Chinese futuristic imaginations vis-à-vis other global genres of futurity on the rise (Bridges 2021). For

1. Lawrence Lek, “Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD),” <https://lawrencelek.com/Sinofuturism-1839-2046-AD> (accessed on 14 December 2023).

example, in comparison with the rise of Chinese science fiction as a genre indexing desires and nightmares along with the rise of China in present day, a simultaneous boom in science fiction, with a strong feminist tendency, is taking place in South Korea to invoke a radical future against the patriarchal and authoritarian histories of the nation (J. Lee 2023). In the United States and the world, articulations of Black futures and Afrofuturism have emerged in recent years as a robust cultural movement against the continued operation of racial injustice (Butler 2021). In indigenous contexts across North and South Americas, similarly, indigenous futurity has been explored in art and cultural practices as a survival strategy in pursuit of decolonial justice (Taylor et al. 2023). Conditions that gave rise to each of these futurisms radically differ; so do the expressions and motifs of these site-specific futurisms. However, as the science fiction scholar Taryne Jade Taylor (2023) reminds us, it is not coincidental that these various modes of futurism are taking place at the same time across the world. As a way to describe how various regional futurisms coexist and carry a shared goal of building just futures, Taylor's concept of "CoFuturisms" may help us conceptualise how visions of Chinese/Sinophone futurity are situated within a contemporaneous global future boom while retaining their own specificities. On the one hand, articulations of futurity in contemporary China join their cultural counterparts in addressing global conditions of crisis and inequality, which was especially prominent during the Covid-19 outbreak when both Chinese and global populations turned to science fiction to search for a way out of the plague. On the other hand, to talk about future-making in China already entails an attentiveness to its specific sociopolitical situations and uneven social trajectories. To this end, instead of replicating images of a monolithic China, all the articles in this collection practice engaged and situated storytelling in a way that releases plural imaginations about futures and futurity mediating the local and the global.

In the first article, "Making the Future with the Nonhuman: Shenzhen, the Greater Bay, and 'Made in China Intelligently,'" Fan Yang opens the special feature by considering how the urban futures of Shenzhen, China's first special economic zone, are being constituted by nonhuman technological agents including robots, drones, and artificial intelligence. Disrupting a black-and-white reading of an artificial intelligence (AI) future as either utopian or dystopian, Yang delves into the meaning-making practices between humans and nonhuman technologies to consider the contested social imaginations and uneven power relations embedded in a campaign called "made in China intelligently" (*Zhongguo zhi zao* 中國智造). Drawing on a diverse range of sources ranging from science fiction, working-class literature, popular cultures, social media postings, and onsite ethnographies, Yang provides an interdisciplinary analysis across urban sociology, science and technology studies, literary studies, and media studies. As Yang argues, Shenzhen serves as a meaningful site for interrogating the Chinese dream of technological futurity, given the city's transformation from "the global distribution centre for electronic accessories" (p. 14) to the epicentre of an AI revolution. However, much of what remains as a tension, as Yang highlights, is the significant amount of human labour that has been turned invisible in the invention of those nonhuman futures. Attending to the geopolitical significance of Shenzhen, this article

also considers how the making of such technological futures is itself connected with the making of China's Greater Bay visions.

Turning from social practices to cultural narratives, Carlos Rojas examines the use of the future to critique the present in Chinese science fiction. In his article titled "Future Imperfect: Using the Future to Critique the Present," he opens with a reading of Liang Qichao's *A Future History of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記), a foundational text in the history of Chinese science fiction, to introduce how a future perfect tense may be constructed to comment on the present. Building on this literary tradition, he focuses a closer analysis on four twenty-first century science fiction works by Han Song 韓松, Liu Cixin 劉慈欣, Chan Koonchung 陳冠中, and Hao Jingfang 郝景芳 that have all made use of future-oriented settings to address contemporary society and politics. Beyond a conventional dichotomy between utopia and dystopia, this article draws on the concept of "cruel optimism" from the literary theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) to discuss the "limits of narrative as a vehicle for sociopolitical transformation" (p. 26). Despite the incisive ways in which futuristic settings have been constructed to critique present-day crises in those science fiction works, Rojas argues that those futuristic visions have nonetheless registered dystopian resonances by perpetuating dark power structures and the people's own complicity. To this end, this article concludes that a focus on the future can paradoxically inhibit the possibility of progressive political action in the present.

The next article moves to a radically different landscape of viticulture and winemaking in Tibetan Southwest China. In "Resisting Modernity and Indigenising the Future: Living with Pollution and Climate Change in a Sacred Landscape in Southwest China," anthropologist Brendan A. Galipeau engages with the nonhuman agency of sacred landscapes and mountain gods in the Tibetan spiritual worldviews of local villagers. At the intersection of cultural anthropology, religious studies, indigenous studies, and environmental humanities, Galipeau's analysis sheds light on the villagers' efforts to resist chemical pollution and build an ecologically-sound future beyond pursuits of economic prosperity. Through detailed ethnographic accounts, he shows two paradigms of how some villagers have pursued ecologically friendly agendas: while a Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and activist has firmly turned away from the market and modernity out of his reverence for all the natural elements and sentient life, another villager has embraced her identity as an "ecological entrepreneur" and sought means to collaborate with the state-run market while paying respect to the sacred landscape through organic viticulture. By engaging with these divergent ways of interacting with spirituality, nature, and economies, this article presents a vision of indigenous futurity that is actively negotiating with climate change, chemical pollution, and state-led market development.

In the fourth article, "Bricks of the Future: The Making and Unmaking of a New Beijing," anthropologist Victoria Nguyen shares the interest in the making of localised futures through nonhuman fabric and places her analytical emphasis on mundane materiality. She turns to the *hutong* alleyways in Beijing to consider how the future of the city may be imagined through bricks, "a single ubiquitous, yet often invisible, building material" (p. 39). Attending to how both the construction and destruction of the city has revolved

around bricks, Nguyen examines the brick as a symbolic site of political contention mobilised by municipal planners, developers, artists, and residents to advance their respective visions of futurity. Although bricks have often been perceived as an antiquated building material associated with an “Old Beijing,” the use of bricks for blocking local residents, rebuilding “fake old” (*fāngǔ* 仿古) alleyways, and staging performance art, as Nguyen points out, indexes the porous ways in which the city’s future is entangled with its own past and present. By highlighting the various urban strategies that have been exerted around the brick on both official and grassroots levels, this article suggests a method of envisioning contestable urban futures through tracing the mutable meanings of a single material.

If Rojas is cautious about the stakes of using the future to address the present, the fifth article from Shiqi Lin makes a different temporal twist by discussing how the future is shaped by the “constitutive and haunting presence of the past.” Titled “Ruined Futurity: The ‘Dongbei Renaissance,’ Literature, and Memory in the Digital Age,” this article brings together studies of literature, digital media, transgenerational memory, and contemporary urban history to examine the making of alternative futures from ruined social memories. Lin discusses how new strategies of literary storytelling from a generation of postmemory have worked together with digital media practices of remediation during the “Dongbei Renaissance” (*Dongbei wenyi fuxing* 東北文藝復興), a post-2010 cultural boom, to excavate and transmit the repressed memories of disposable workers during China’s radical market transitions in the 1990s. Building a framework of ruined futurity, Lin reconceptualises futurity as “the reworking – rather than closure – of the repressed past” (p. 53). Specifically, she considers how the notion of ruined futurity points at once to a mnemonic future oriented towards remembrance and renarration; a media future that reworks literature within a new

media ecology; and a socioeconomic future against the continuous production of disposable lives. Rethinking the postsocialist/post-Cold War social trajectory from the locale of Dongbei (Northeast China), she offers a fresh conclusion that the intervention of rewriting Dongbei lies not so much in expressing nostalgia for a socialist past as in reactivating that past to critique a neoliberal future of precarity encapsulating China and the world.

By telling stories of these multifaceted futures and the social realities problematised by them, the five articles in this special feature constellation a dynamic conversation on how to understand contemporary China and its mutating relationship with the world through the lens of futurity. Disaggregating unitary visions about the future of the Chinese worlds, these articles demonstrate how the “future” itself is a remoldable concept negotiated by multiple agents and intertwined with the past and present to intervene in current social trajectories. In the post-Covid-19 world where alternative visions of futurity are being invoked more than ever to speak to global conditions of uncertainty and restructuring, this special feature provides a critical step forward in pluralising political imaginations from the locales of China.

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