Utopian Dream and Dark Consciousness
Chinese Literature at the Millennial Turn

ABSTRACT This article seeks to analyze the contested conditions of modern and contemporary Chinese utopia, as a political treatise, a literary genre, and a social imaginary. It takes a historical perspective from which to describe the rise of utopia in the late Qing era and ponders the contradictions and confluences of its narrative and intellectual paradigms. It proposes that we engage with “dark consciousness,” an idea that deals with the polemics of crisis and contingency ingrained in Chinese thought, in light of modern Chinese literary sources. The last part turns to the scene of the new millennium, observing the dystopian and heterotopian inclinations in fictional practice as opposed to the utopian aspiration in political discourse.

KEYWORDS utopia, dystopia, dark consciousness, enlightenment, science fiction

Modern Chinese literature was born with a call for utopia. In 1902, Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873−1929) published Xinzhongguo weilai ji 新中國未來記 (The Future of New China) in the newly founded fiction magazine Xin xiaoshuo 新小說 (New Fiction). The novel opens with an overview of a prosperous China in 2062, sixty years after the novel’s fictive publication date of 2002. As citizens of the Republic of Great China (Da Zhonghua minzhuguo 大中華民主國) celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of her founding, a revered scholar, Kong Hongdao 孔宏道, the seventy-second-generation descendant of Confucius 孔子 (551−479 BCE), is invited to give a lecture at the Shanghai World Exposition on the way Chinese democracy has been implemented. His lecture draws a huge enthusiastic audience, including hundreds of thousands from overseas.

If the grand opening of Xinzhongguo weilai ji feels uncanny, perhaps it is because the “future” of new China seems to have become reality in the new millennium. At a time when China is ascending to a role as a leading political and economic power worldwide, having hosted not only a World Exposition but also the Olympics and, more impressive, founded hundreds of Confucius Institutes, in places as far from China as Pakistan and Rwanda, Liang Qichao’s futuristic utopia may prove to have already been realized by socialist China. Indeed, as if taking up where Liang left off more than a century earlier, President Xi Jinping gave a
speech on the “Chinese Dream” in 2013, projecting the future of new China as one thriving on “the way of socialism,” “the spirit of nationalism,” and “the force of ethnic solidarity.”

Although utopia has always been a suspect term in the lexicon of socialist China, the Chinese Dream partakes of a strong utopian dimension insofar as it invokes an ideal political and cultural vision. As a matter of fact, the Chinese Dream may represent the summation of a string of recent discourses about futuristic China. From daguo jueqi 大國崛起 (the great nation is rising) to tianxia 天下 (under the heaven), from “repoliticizing” China to tongsantong 通三統 (unification of three orthodoxies—Confucianism, Maoism, Dengism), we are witnessing a cornucopia of treatises and declarations that again aspire to forge a powerful Chinese polity through their visions. While these treatises are ordinarily not treated in literary terms, they nevertheless point to the rhetorical gesture and imaginary aptitude that inform the structure of feeling of a time. They share the fantastic mode of a grand narrative, and it is this mode that brings us to rethink utopia and its literary manifestation in contemporary China.

Ironically enough, when turning to contemporary Chinese fiction per se, one finds few works that can be described as utopian in its traditional definition. Whereas Ge Fei’s 格非 (1964–) Wutuobang sanbuqu 烏托邦三部曲 (Trilogy of Utopia; 2007–11) deals with China amid the ruins caused by preceding utopian projects, Han Song’s 韓松 (1965–) 2066: Xixing manji 2066:西行漫記 (2066: Red Star over America; 2000) pictures a postapocalyptic scene of China and the world; whereas Chan Koon-chung’s 陳冠中 (1952–) Shengshi 盛世 (The Fat Years; 2009) imagines a China immersed in the jubilant mood of amnesia, Ma Jian’s 馬建 (1952–) Rouzhitu 肉之土 (Beijing Coma; 2010–) envisions a China as monstrous and mystical as the world of Shanhai jing 山海經 (Classic of Mountains and Seas). Dystopia and heterotopia permeate contemporary Chinese narrative literature. This fact leads one to look into the spectrum of utopian imaginary of our time and ask whether the utopian discourse as proffered by the political machine and select intellectuals, and the dystopian fiction that prevails in the literary sphere represent the dialogical potential in Chinese reality or, more polemically, its disavowal.

This article analyzes the contested conditions of modern and contemporary Chinese utopia, as a political treatise, a literary genre, and a social imaginary. The first part takes a historical perspective from which to describe the rise of utopia in the late Qing era and ponders the contradictions and confluences of its narrative and intellectual paradigms. The second part introduces the two key concepts of this article: Panglossianism and dark consciousness. By Panglossianism, I refer to the Voltairean critique of the optimism that seeks to justify the history of both the past and future in terms of “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” By dark consciousness I refer to Chang Hao’s 張灝 engagement with youǎn yìshí 幽暗意識, an idea that deals with the polemics of crisis and contingency ingrained in
Chinese thought. Neither, to be sure, should be reduced to a simple ideological stance. The third part turns to the scene of the new millennium, observing the dystopian and heterotopian inclinations in fictional practice as opposed to the utopian aspiration in political discourse.

The Republic of Great China versus the Civilized World

Utopia was introduced as a neologism, wutuobang 烏托邦, by Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) in his translation of Thomas Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics (Tianyan lun 天演論). In his annotation, Yan contemplates the relationship between rulership and national governance and concludes that education and enlightenment are keys to the prosperity of a nation. In his treatment, Yan Fu downplays the fact that utopia is a fictitious construct, the valence of which lies in its imaginary projection of what which is unavailable in reality. Rather, he considers utopia a goal to be achieved by any nation committed to the dictum of the survival of the fittest. In other words, he equates utopia to a teleological project predicated on the Darwinian ethics he yearned for.

The way Yan Fu broached utopia leads to a larger question regarding the instrumentality of literature at his time. That is, the fictitiousness of literature is regarded as intelligible only when it proves to be a manifestation of historical experience or expectation. As such, fiction is said to serve as both the end and the means of transforming China. Echoing Yan’s and like-minded intellectuals’ advocacy for reforming China by reforming Chinese fiction, Liang Qichao made the famous statement in 1902, “To renovate the nation, one has to first renovate fiction. . . . Fiction has the incalculable power of transforming Chinese mind[s].” At some mysterious point in time, as Liang would have it, fiction and nation or, for our concern, utopia and history become exchangeable notions.

The extant narrative of Xinzhongguo weilai ji relates, via flashback, the interaction between Huang Keqiang 黃克強 and Li Qubing 李去病, the two protagonists of the novel. Incited by the aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, both Huang and Li decide to go to England in pursuit of new thought, and they end up studying at Oxford University. When news about the aborted Hundred Day Reform reaches them, the two friends are faced with another crucial decision. Whereas Li considers the immediate and radical action of revolution, Huang cautions his friend against the consequences of futile violence and sacrifice. The two then part ways; Huang travels to Berlin to learn the latest theories in Staatswissenschaft, and Li heads for Paris to witness the outcome of the French Revolution. The two are reunited on their way back to China, and yet they still cannot solve their disagreement regarding how to renew China. Xinzhongguo weilai ji then comes to a sudden stop in chapter 5.

One has to acknowledge that many late Qing novels were aborted, a fact that epitomizes the volatile circumstances of reading and writing fiction in the
late Qing era. What makes *Xinzhongguo weilai ji* special is that its unfinished form complicates its utopian scheme. Insofar as it promises to tell how a bright future will have been reached over a span of fifty years, the unfinished project of *Xinzhongguo weilai ji* exposes a short-circuit in its narrative and historiographical mechanism. If future serves as the motivation/destination of Liang’s fiction as revolution, its realization indicates that a passage of time, along with the plot, will unfold and its implied hermeneutic goal will be revealed. As the novel stands now, China in the future has been reached in advance (through a flashback), followed nevertheless by an abortion of the history and narrative that would have filled the gap between now and then.

I have described elsewhere the narrative short-circuit of Liang Qichao’s novel in terms of the future perfect tense, which means a projection of a scene or episode expected or planned to happen before a time of reference in the future. In other words, the novel deals not with what may happen but what will have happened in the years to come. I argue that Liang projects the grand prospect of the Republic of Great China with such fervor that he preempts the future and overfamiliarizes the unknown. When the remote future turns out to be preemptively familiar, or when the mystical apocalypse proves to be yesterday’s news, Liang risks turning his futurist visions into nostalgic anticipation. His novel indicates not so much a discovery of a new temporal horizon as a wishful revival of the ancient dreams of China; his visit to the future follows a secret itinerary through the fantasies of the past.

After *Xinzhongguo weilai ji*, quite a few works of late Qing fiction feature utopia. By all standards, Wu Jianren’s *Xin Shitouji* (The New Story of the Stone; 1908) stands out as the most fascinating. As its title suggests, the novel is intended as a sequel to Cao Xueqin’s *Shitou ji* (The Story of the Stone; better known as *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢 [The Dream of the Red Chamber]; 1792). *Xin Shitouji* is divided evenly into two parts. In the first part, Baoyu or the Stone returns to mundane society after centuries of life as an otherworldly recluse. His travel takes him to a *yeman shijie* 野蠻世界 (Barbarous World), where he attempts to disseminate new thought, only to find himself hunted down as a heretic by the court. The second part begins with Baoyu barely escaping from jail and stumbling, by coincidence, into a mysterious country, the *wenming jingjie* 文明世界 (Civilized World), a nation that is strong in military power, political structure, scientific advancement, educational institutions, and moral cultivation. While Baoyu is most impressed by its scientific and technological developments, his journey culminates in his visit to its venerable ruler, Dongfang Qiang 東方強 (literally, eastern strength). Through Dongfang Qiang’s description of the political system of the Civilized World, Wu Jianren lays out his own blueprint for utopia. With *ren* 仁 (benevolence) in mind, according to Dongfang Qiang, not only is a ruler able to improve the welfare of
his own people, but he will also extend compassion to people of other countries suffering from tyranny.

Fantastic episodes aside, Wu Jianren’s Civilized World possesses an ambitious conceptual framework, and to that effect, it reminds us of Liang Qichao’s Republic of Great China. Set side by side, they bring to the fore two of the most important visions of late Qing utopia. Both project a prosperous and powerful China that surpasses its Western counterparts in the material sense and enact a dialectic between Chinese modernity and a Confucian morality encapsulated in the concept of benevolence.

However, Liang Qichao’s and Wu Jianren’s utopian plans differ from each other when it comes to their chronotopical schemes and narratological methods. Liang Qichao launched Xin xiaoshuo and engaged in creating Xinzhongguo weilai ji as a result of his deliberation of the conditions of revolution. Up to 1902, Liang had been a fervent lobbyist for a destructive action to overhaul China. But in Xinzhongguo weilai ji he clearly leans toward Huang Keqiang’s agenda, favoring a more moderate form of revolution toward a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected parliament. Since the novel remains unfinished, we will never find out how Huang and Li put their agendas into practice. However, thanks to the opening of the narrative in 2062, we do know that Huang eventually succeeded in his undertaking and became the second president of the Republic of Great China.

Liang Qichao’s vision of utopia is the consummation of a single, linear (but not necessarily evolutionary or revolutionary) development of time. This linear model, which has been so popular with Confucians and classicist Europeans, deprives a novelist like Liang of the freedom to imagine and justify various futures and revolutions. Moreover, as discussed above, although Xinzhongguo weilai ji assumes the temporal structure of linear progression, it unfolds in the future perfect tense. As such, the future in Liang’s novel appears as the magical moment that stands at the other end of history, in the absence of progressive momentum that leads toward the happening of the moment. As the completion of the prescribed timetable, the future is not a dynamic through which historical forces clash and crystallize into an unprecedented constellation but, rather, a mythical moment that transcends time.

Wu Jianren’s Xin Shitouji presents a more complex temporal and narrative scheme with regard to the feasibility of utopia. After the model of Cao Xueqin’s Shitou ji, Wu Jianren situates his narrative in the imbricated layers of time, as a mythological cycle, a dream sequence, a realistic experience, and an historical account. Moreover, he presents the Barbarous World and the Civilized World back to back, as if they were in parallel time zones, each in its own turn generating more complications. Thus, he plays out the theme of doubling and simulacrum inherent in Cao’s original.
Between the miserable past and the fantastic future, a fold in time has occurred, and it is in that parallel time that the most exhilarating thing for China has taken place. Time has been conceived such that it alienates both history and the individual’s search for plenitude in the course of history; the temporal duration through which China’s transformation takes place remains mysteriously bracketed. Baoyu the Stone, it will be recalled, once missed the primal present when Heaven was first mended by the Goddess Nüwa; his earthly romance could be no more than a reinstatement of a debt of tears inherited from that time. And now he will have been denied a third chance to mend Heaven. Traveling between the past and the future, Wu Jianren’s Jia Baoyu remains the unhappy Stone, a lonely, puzzled adventurer through the tunnel of time, ever pondering the capricious terms of accessing utopia.

Accordingly, for Liang Qichao as for Wu Jianren, narrative fiction and political treatise function in a reciprocal manner, bringing out the paradox inherent in the utopian discourse that utopia is both a “good place” (eutopia), an ideal polity well worthy of human pursuit, and a “no place” (outopia), a fictitious locus available only in human fantasy. Whereas Liang Qichao projects the futuristic China as the teleological end in the progressive flux of time, Wu Jianren depicts the Civilized World as a mysterious state existing simultaneously with the Barbarous World. Whereas Liang Qichao launches his search for the perfect future order with the narrative device of a future perfect tense, Wu situates his ideal kingdom in the fold of multiple time zones. I argue that the two narrative strategies indicate the bifurcated developments of modern Chinese utopia and that the entangled relationship between them may well serve as an index to the debate over the future of new China in our time.

“The Best of All Best Possible Worlds”

Since the turn of the new millennium there have been waves of discourses discussing the future of new China. While the origins of the debates can be traced to the 1990s or even earlier, one discerns in the latest voices a change of tone and rhetoric. If the fin-de-siècle intellectuals engaged themselves with various malaises of China and their remedies, thus reflecting the symptoms of what C. T. Hsia has called an “obsession with China,” their counterparts in the new century have taken a far more optimistic perspective on China. Amid the calls of “a great nation is rising,” a euphoric sentiment has permeated the intellectual scene, as evinced by a series of discourses attempting to envision, if not rationalize, the future of new China.

I describe these discourses as dashuo 大說 (grand talks), as opposed to xiaoshuo 小説 (narrative fiction). These dashuo are aimed at sublime subjects—from nationalism to sovereignty, from frontier disputes to economic issues—and public contention. While these dashuo earn more intellectual and political
currency than fictional narratives due to their claims to theoretical rigor and historical relevance, what has been obscured is the fact that their rhetorical strategy and visionary bearing are no less suggestive of imaginary constructs. They constitute the latest edition of literature of persuasion.

Take a quick look at a few examples. Whereas Zhao Tingyan 趙汀陽 rediscovers the concept of tianxia, proclaiming that China should reinstate the powerful mandate as the encompassing state of “under the heaven,”13 Yan Xuetong 閻學通 and Xu Jin 徐進 seek to favorably reevaluate the thought of wangba (the kingly and the hegemonic way).14 Whereas Gan Yang 甘陽 promotes tongsantong, trying to find the coherent lineage of the orthodoxies of Confucianism, Maoism, and Dengism,15 Jiang Qing 蔣慶 argues for the renaissance of Confucian learning as the only way to rectify a polity beset by Western concepts.16 Most influential, Wang Hui 汪暉 celebrates Chinese modernity as a form of anti-(Western) modernity and proposes a new world order formed after the old tributary system (chaogong tixi 朝貢體系), a system that can be traced all the way back to the Zhou dynasty.17 Despite their divergent ideological backgrounds, these discourses share the same eagerness to seek from traditional Chinese intellectual resources a new system of thought to set against the extant Western paradigm. Their argumentsbespeaks newly gained confidence in China’s postsocialist modernity, “oriented toward salvaging and recovering positive aspects of the Chinese intellectual tradition against what [they] regard as the indiscriminate destruction from the tradition from the May Fourth [Movement] onward.”18 As Jiang Qing’s book title, Gongyangxue yinlun (An Introduction to Gongyang Learning), hints, these scholars echo in one way or another the exegetical discourse of the Gongyang school, attempting to reach the esoteric significance of history and politics through an esoteric interpretation of canonical texts (weiyan dayi 微言大義). Precisely because of such a metaphorical approach, these authors impel one to rethink the literary underpinnings of their writings.

What is striking is the uncanny parallel between these postsocialist discourses and late Qing political fiction and utopian treatises, as evinced particularly by works such as Liang Qichao’s Xinzhongguo weilai ji and Kang Youwei’s The Book of the Great Community. Both Kang and Liang were forerunners of the modern Gongyang school exegesis. Their interlocutors in the new millennium, however, are reluctant to consider the fictive or fantastic elements of their writings; they position themselves as thinkers rather than storytellers.

At stake here is how one gauges the critical potential and liability of the utopian narrative in contemporary China. One cannot stress enough the precarious condition of China when Liang Qichao wrote Xinzhongguo weilai ji. When Liang set out to write his novel in 1902, he could hardly see signs that China would turn into the dominant power of the following century. He adopted the form of fiction to describe his dream scenario for a new China, thus admitting indirectly to the
desirable but inaccessible nature of utopia. *Xinzhongguo weilai ji* was never finished, a fact that leads to some of the most contentious arguments about the novel. Its incompleteness bespeaks the inherent aporia of any utopian engagement, as well as its tantalizing charm. On the other hand, however, its future perfect tense, as previously argued, mortgages the future and thus forecloses the multiple possibilities of an open ending.

Liang Qichao's respondents in the twenty-first century approach the utopian vision from the other end of the narrative spectrum. They still demonstrate the time-honored crisis consciousness (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識) or, in Gloria Davies's translation, a consciousness of “worrying about China.” But writing at a moment when China is already rising, these intellectuals appear to confront less pressing exigencies than Liang and his peers in late Qing; instead, they inject into their deliberations more assertive reasoning and (self-)righteous beliefs. Whereas Liang adopts the fictional form to utter his political agenda, they downplay the metahistorical dimension of their narratives, let alone their imaginative capacity.

Here, I call attention to the Panglossian inclination of contemporary utopian discourses in China. A character in Voltaire’s novel *Candide*, Pangloss is known for his commitment to the philosophy of Leibniz, which celebrated the unconditional permeation of divine grace. In the story, the young Candide leads a sheltered childhood, indoctrinated with Leibnizian optimism by his mentor Dr. Pangloss. The young man is nevertheless thrown into a sequence of trials. One of the highlights of Candide's journey is his visit to El Dorado, a utopia of equality and advanced science, free of greed, pretension, religious contention, and suffering. El Dorado is significant in its ability to highlight the unfortunate realities of the world beyond its borders. Nevertheless, it is too good a place to be true, and Candide has to return to the real world. His subsequent journey leads him through a series of horrible perils, transforming his sweetheart into an impossible shrew and making the utopia he is seeking unlivable.

In the end, Candide and Dr. Pangloss seem to have found a peaceful life. Looking back, Pangloss concludes that all the sufferings they have undergone make sense after all: all wrongs are inevitably righted by the universal divine design. In his words, “All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.” Candide, if not outright rejecting his mentor’s optimism, simply responds, “We must cultivate our garden.”

By invoking the Panglossian inclination of modern Chinese discourses, I also have in mind the “Panglossian paradigm” that Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin invoked in their critique of the evolutionary optimism. They take issue with biologists who view all traits of evolution as atomized things that have been naturally selected and thus leave no space for other causes or alternatives. Instead, they argue that contingencies and exaptation (the use of old features for new purposes) play an important role in the process of evolution. I argue a
similar optimism abounds among Chinese scholars’ recent endeavors to project a majestic scenario on not only China’s future but also its past. They entertain the “strong” thought of modernity, as illustrated by the mandate of nation building and the demands of voluntition, reason, collectivity, and virility. Rhetorically, it finds manifestation in macroscopic (hongguan 宏觀) imagery, the “sublime figure,” and the “epic” representational system. To be sure, these scholars are still harboring a “crisis consciousness,” which by logic should have led to anything but Panglossianism. But as if overcompensating for the complex of “worrying about China,” they play up their optimism and doggedly look for a way to explain the status quo by explaining away their worrying. They believe that the long-awaited historical turning point has come and that the legitimacy of the party-state, however disputable, has to be safeguarded. For all the ups and downs China has been through over the past decades, the current state is said to promise “the best of all best possible worlds.”

For instance, Gan Yang’s “unification of three orthodoxies” attempts to streamline Confucian and Chinese Communist traditions in a way that mimics the Gongyang rhetoric of “three times.” Equally intriguing is Wang Hui’s “Zhongguo jueqi de jingyan jiqi mianlin de tiaozhan” (The Experience of the Rise of China and the Challenges It Faces). In it Wang argues that, although China has been ruled by one party since 1949 and therefore has been deemed undemocratic, the fact is that “during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s there existed within the Party a self-correction mechanism. Theoretical debate, particularly open theoretical debate, has played an important role in the course of the Party’s and the State’s self-adjustment and self-reform” in 50年代、60年代和70年代，中國的政府與政黨不斷地調整自己的政策。這些調整不是受制於外來的指點，而主要是根據實踐中出現的問題而進行的自我調整。All wrongs are supposed to be righted by the magical “self-correction” system (zidong jiucuo jijzhi 自動糾錯機制). Finally, speaking of the Chinese Dream, what could be more blatantly Panglossian than Zhang Xudong’s interpretation of the concept? For Zhang,

[the Chinese Dream] is a discourse that links the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal, the self and the other, the individual and the collective, the practical and the theoretical, the economic and the cultural, the cultural and the political together. [The Chinese dream] expresses the universal structure both obliquely and clearly, resulting in a lively materiality.

在這些辯證的辨析過程中，「中國夢」話語可以把具體和抽象、特殊與普遍、自我與他人、個人與集體、實踐和理論、經濟與文化、文化與政治打通勾連在一起，把一個總體性的結構曲折地然而清晰地敘述和表現出來，使之獲得一種生動的實質性。
I hasten to stress that I am not denigrating the value of these intellectuals’ utopian imaginary. Quite the contrary, precisely because they set out with a critical energy to rethink modern Chinese history, they deserve a serious dialogue. In view of the optimistic bearing of these discourses, I call for what Chang Hao describes as “dark consciousness.” For Chang, *dark consciousness* refers to “an attention to and critical reflection on the inherent dark side of humanity as well as the dark forces deeply rooted in the human society.”²⁶ Chang points out the interrelation between dark consciousness and crisis consciousness but argues that the latter serves only as a pretext for the former. That is, if crisis consciousness points to the human awareness of historical contingencies and circumstantial perils, dark consciousness reminds us that there is something more ominous lurking behind intelligible historical experience, something that is “born with human nature and has ever loomed in human civilization.”²⁷ Trained in the tradition of liberalism and Weberian thought, Chang derives his dark consciousness from his understanding of the original sin in the Calvinist vein of Christianity. He contends that such an awareness of human fallibility propelled the communal effort to curb individual vice so as to facilitate the general good, thus giving rise to liberal democracy.²⁸

As Chang argues, although short of the notion of the original sin, the Chinese intellectual tradition has its own legacy of dark consciousness, as represented by the Han epistemology of the fusion between heaven and the human, Confucian ruminations on humanity (Mencius’s belief in human perfectibility versus Xunzi’s [ca. 313–238 BCE] notion of human susceptibility to evil), and the Mahayama Buddhist doctrine of *fuxing* (restoring essence/nature), among other traditions of thought. The neo-Confucian engagement with the fault line between humanity and its bestial nature, in an almost existential manner, is an especially striking case.²⁹ Looking back at the political turmoil of modern China, which culminated in the Maoist regime, Chang cautions against the optimistic tenor of Chinese political thought, urging a critical reappraisal of not merely the crisis consciousness but the dark consciousness so as to anticipate a more nuanced analysis of Chinese modernity.

Critics have pointed out the shortcomings of Chang Hao’s theory. The renowned Kantian/Confucian scholar Lee Ming-hui 李明輝, for instance, questions the applicability of Chang’s Weberian model to the Chinese context; Hu Ping 胡平 takes issue with his overarching critique of Confucianism and autocracy at the cost of historical specificity. One may even argue that Chang’s understanding of dark consciousness is not dark enough, as it is still limited to the (modern) humanistic mode of thinking: dark consciousness seems to arise merely from a short-circuit of a very loosely defined human nature.³⁰ Still, Chang’s critique offers a valuable perspective from which to engage the Panglossian tendency of contemporary Chinese discourses. Chang suggests that Chinese (political)
thought has yet to make a break with the sage-king paradigm. This paradigm is said to have fostered what Chang calls an “ultimately optimistic” (zhongji leguan 終極樂觀) mode of thinking, which favors the ideas of human perfectibility and the communicability between the human and the heavenly. It also provides the rationale for the system of theocracy (zhengjiao heyi 政教合一), which conflates human rulership with theological or ideological legitimacy. Most important, these factors help produce a strong inclination to utopianism—often in the form of anticipatory nostalgia for the return of a bygone paradisal state.

No one can deny the fact that modern political culture has been underlain by the tendencies of political authoritarianism, utopian mentality, and the concept of theocracy. And no one can deny the fact that these tendencies are rooted in the concept of sage-kingship, a residue of Chinese tradition.

Chang Hao’s critique of the dark consciousness in Chinese thought, or the lack thereof, rings uncannily true to the contemporary scene. Nevertheless, his proposed remedy may appear less effective. To rectify the optimistic mode of thinking of modern China, Chang has urged us to look into the premodern intellectual tradition for a diacritical perspective. But to do so may repeat the cultural-intellectualistic approach Chang and Yü-sheng Lin set out to critique. Nor does his proposed abstention from utopianism bring about a more procreative way to understand history.

This is where utopian literature and its dialectic other, dystopian literature, can help further this inquiry. I argue that where “grand talks” demonstrate their limitations in addressing historical and political issues at their most intricate, fiction, or “small talk,” appears to be more viable in penetrating opaque reality and making poignant diagnoses—and (de)constructive in offering solutions. But insofar as it is by definition an amorphous, “rootless” representation of human experience, can fiction transcribe and impeach evil and violence without betraying its own suspect nature? Has it not already intimated the subversion of civilization by its inborn discontents?

In my definition, dark consciousness does not merely point to the degeneracy of moral, religious, or ideological schemata (as conceived of by Chang or, by extension, Terry Eagleton). Rather, it is a fictional power that facilitates the diacritical thrust of aporia from within, and beyond, the establishments of human values and beliefs where disturbance is least expected. Dark consciousness may register the frustrated yearning, forbidden desire, or elated sensation resulting
from the obsession with China, but precisely because it prompts an inquiry into
the other side of consciousness, it cannot be gauged in terms of simple moral
or political reasoning. Indeed, it manifests its radical agency by unveiling what
Emmanuel Levinas calls “otherwise than being” and putting any optimistic reso-
lutions in infinite contestation. At its most polemical, it exerts the abysmal force
that voids established values as much as it begets anticipation, which, in Paola
Iovene’s words, “involves the fears and aspirations that shape lives and narratives
in their very unfolding, and the perception of the possibilities and limits that
inform human actions and are often mediated by literary texts.”

Accordingly, in the literary domain of utopia, dark consciousness ushers one
into the terra incognita where Panglossianism is identified, only to be overwritten
by the latitude of the unknown, and as a result the boundaries of utopia and
dystopia become blurry. Coming to mind are examples such as Wu Jianren’s Xin
Shitouji, in which the Barbarous World and the Civilized World exist as each oth-
er’s (negative) reflections.

But Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) must be the one who depicts the most precarious terms between Panglossianism and dark consciousness. Lu Xun’s most engaging works deal with not the modernity projects as such but their setbacks, not coherent social and epistemological systems but the ruptures of those systems. In his words, he discovers “the abyss in the heaven, the void in the all-encompassing, and salvation in despair” 誠上天，誠望中所得。於一切眼中誠無所有。於無所希望中得救。 Thus, in his seminal treatment of Lu Xun, T. A. Hsia describes the master as caught at the “gate of darkness” which presumably divides despair and hope, dream and insomnia, and life and afterlife, among other thematic antinomies. Most alarming, beneath the surface of Lu Xun’s campaign against cannibalism something self-cannibalistic has ever loomed, hence the living dead’s confession in “Mujiewen” 墓碣文 (Epitaph; 1925), “I tore out my heart to eat it, wanting to know the true taste. But the pain was so agonizing, how could I tell its taste?”

If Lu Xun were to live in the postsocialist era, one wonders how he would respond to the contemporary calls for “under the heaven,” “three orthodoxies,” or “ politicization of politics.” Literature, as Lu Xun would have it, engages one not only with social and political virtues versus evils, or utopia versus dystopia, but also with the “stratagem of unnamable entities” (wuwu zhizhen 無物之陣)—the amorphous existence of nothingness. For Lu Xun, revolutionary zeal generates as much iconoclastic momentum as “involutionary” desire, and enlightenment generates entropic desire and self-reflexive ambivalence; the dream threatens to become the nightmare at any moment. Lu Xun describes himself as “lover of night” 愛夜的人 and suggests that if he is seized by the light bestowed by night, that is because he “has ears to hear the night and eyes to see the night” 有聽夜的耳朵和看夜的眼睛 and, more suggestive, he is capable of “situating himself in the darkness, and seeing all the darkness” 自在暗中，看一切暗.
Utopia, Dystopia, Heterotopia

The fin-de-siècle boom of science fiction appeared as an uncanny recapitulation of the science fiction fever at the beginning of the modern century. In the postsocialist context, however, the phenomenon tells us something more. Insofar as Chinese socialist literature has been prescribed in terms of realism, be it called revolutionary realism, humanist realism, magic realism, romantic realism, or new realism, that science fiction writers since the 1990s have ventured to imagine and write the incredible and the impractical bespeaks a paradigmatic intervention with the canon. Indeed, at its most controversial, they set forth the terms of China’s entry into the new millennial age, both as a new political agenda and as a new national myth. More pertinent to our concerns is the way these works inaugurated the dystopian turn of contemporary China and, as such, serve as a dialogical force vis-à-vis the Panglossian trend that dominates the political and intellectual discourse.

Dystopia became an even more noticeable genre in the new century. The renowned avant-garde writer Ge Fei’s trilogy Wutuobang sanbuqu 人面桃花 (A Peach Blossom Romance; 2005); part 2, Shanhe rumeng 山河入夢 (Into the Dreamscape of China; 2007); part 3, Chunjin jiangnan 春盡江南 (Spring Ends in the South of the Yangtze River; 2011) relates in a lyrical, nostalgic style how Chinese projects of modernity—from the republican revolution to the communist revolution, from urban planning to rural reconstruction, from free love to literary creativity—have turned into one nightmare after another. When the dreamland proves to be a facade for the wasteland, utopia betrays its dystopian nature.

Ge Fei packages his trilogy in a circuitous symbolism, such that it appears less provocative when compared with the works of two exiled writers, Cao Guanlong 曹冠龍 (1945–) in the United States and Ma Jian in England. In Chen 沉 (Sinking; 2009), Cao focuses on a most atrocious incident from the Cultural Revolution: an alleged episode of cannibalism in Guangxi Province. He describes how “eating man” becomes a gastronomic and political festivity in a society immersed in fanaticism and how, at its most outrageous, Lu Xun’s “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記 (The Diary of a Madman) has a twenty-first-century revision. In Ma Jian’s Rouzhitu, a young June Fourth protestor is gunned down in the Tiananmen massacre and has since been in a state of coma. Although his body is withering away, the young man’s subconsciousness remains vibrant. In dreams, his protagonist wanders into the world of the classic Shanhai jing, where immortals and monstrous creatures, bizarre vegetation and astonishing landscapes interact and form a robust, ever-changing world.

Combining eschatological prophecy and political satire, these novels cast bleak visions of China’s future and, as such, pit themselves against the sublime, euphoric writings mastered by political campaigners and wishful intellectuals. However, one discerns no less the limitations of these works. In a haste to set up
the conflict between dystopia and utopia, the writers tend to risk the pitfall of an easy dialectic, making their narratives a mere negative of that which is upheld by the mainstream discourse. It is in another group of fictional writings that we come across a more ambiguous, and therefore more ambitious, attempt to engage both utopian and dystopian genres.

In Han Song’s 2066: *Xixing manji*, the year 2066 marks a turning point in the Sino-American relationship. By then, America has suffered from a series economic and political disasters, while China has become a “gardenlike” superpower. A prodigy of the game go is sent to a competition in the United States, only to be caught up in a second Civil War. As such, Han seems to relate a revanchist fantasy of the type that has obsessed many writers since the late Qing. But Han has more to tell us. China is said to have achieved its superpower status by succumbing to “Amando” 阿曼多, an intelligence wisdom that preprograms everyone’s life and oversees its happiness in every possible way. However, Amando collapses when mysterious Martians descend on Earth, turning China into the Land of Promise （fudi 福地). Incidentally, the Chinese expression fudi is also a euphemism for cemetery—a land for the dead.

Recall that the novel’s title is inspired by *Red Star over China* (1937), a reportage by Edgar Snow (1905–72) and arguably the first account in the English-speaking world unveiling life in Yan’an, the wartime Chinese Communist mecca. By playing with Snow’s title, Han Song prompts one to rethink the geopolitics of utopia in terms of socialist (China), capitalist (the United States), and extraterrestrial space. His conclusion could not be more ambiguous. Above all, the novel is a flashback set in 2126, the future of future, when all earth civilization, be it socialist or capitalist, has been terminated.

Liu Cixin’s 刘慈欣 (1963--) *Santi* 三體 (Three Body Problem; 2007),41 *Heian senli* 黑暗森林 (Dark Jungle; 2008), and *Sishen yongsheng* 死神永生 (God of Death Lives Forever; 2010) constitute his trilogy *Diqiu wangshi* 地球往事 (Chronicles of the Earth). It assumes an epic scope that spans over millions of years and ought to be regarded as one of the most ambitious works in contemporary Chinese fiction. Mixing the Cultural Revolution and Star Wars, historical pathos and outer space marvels, Liu has created a chronotope his peers can hardly emulate. But Liu’s works are not only a fantastic spectacle but also an inquiry into the ethical terms of such a spectacle.

*Santi* relates a woman scientist’s revenge of her father’s purge and death in the Cultural Revolution by inviting the extraterrestrial creatures Three Body to invade Earth. A group of Chinese citizens are drafted to help prevent the impending global holocaust. These heroes travel through a time tunnel, engaging in ingenious tactics, and fighting cosmic battles. Meanwhile, it turns out that Chairman Mao has long foreseen the futuristic war and implemented a preemptive plan.
Because of its grand scope and majestic style, critics have called Liu’s fiction a sublime work.42 True, Liu’s works induce awe by introducing an apocalyptic view of world civilization in crisis. He asks if human rationality can generate a (political) science that is anything but rational, if history presented in the future perfect tense can redeem bygone or ongoing mishaps, if a filial daughter’s vengeful wrath can override her professional commitment to social well-being, if a national leader can be both a savior of humanity and a perpetrator of crimes against humanity. Liu refuses to give easy answers to his questions; instead he plays them out against the gigantic cosmic backdrop, thereby soliciting an effect that sustains as much as it subverts the “Maoist sublime” his fictional vision originates with.

Finally, we come to Shengshi by Chan Koon-chueng, a Hong Kong writer currently based in Beijing. The novel starts with a global economic crash in 2011 that paralyzes all leading countries except China. Thanks to shrewd national leadership, we are told, China is able to take advantage of the crisis and further its economic development and sociopolitical solidarity. As a result, China can already boast as early as 2013 the arrival of shengshi, a historical epoch of peace and prosperity. While most Chinese citizens welcome the golden time, there are signs, such as a prevailing mood of jubilation called “high lite lite” and massive amnesia, that arouse suspicion among a few nonconformists. To find out the truth, they kidnap a national leader, only to learn something that they never could have imagined.

Published in 2009, the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic of China, Shengshi reminds one of Liang Qichao’s Xinzhongguo weilai ji, the arch-modern Chinese novel that imagines the prosperity fifty years after the founding the Republic of Great China. A reader familiar with Xinzhongguo weilai ji would be surprised by the chiasmatic paradoxes permeating Shengshi. Sixty years after the Chinese Communist Revolution, China has accomplished what Liang could only have dreamed of at the turn of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens appear to have succumbed to the benevolent hegemony of the party-state. That Chan Koon-chueng marks 2013 as the year when the Chinese leader came to declare Chinese supremacy over the world uncannily anticipates Xi Jinping’s announcement of the “Chinese Dream.”

Compared with the two works discussed above, Shengshi may fall short in presenting either an epic vision or a sinister prophecy. It nevertheless creates a style of its own by linking futuristic fantasy with contemporary issues of journalistic relevance. Contrary to fiction in the vein of Brave New World or Nineteen Eighty-Four, Shengshi does not aim merely to expose the evil scheme of a seemingly benign rule; it seeks instead to tell the other side of the story, thus making the captive national leader its hero. Suave, cool, and a little jaded, the national leader surprises everyone with a Nightlong tell-all confession. According to him,
the primary goal of the government is to make people happy; to that end, making use of any means necessary for the maintenance of social order should be deemed justified. Marketization is said to be only one of the measures adopted to enhance socialist life; liberalism and neoleftism are treated as chips in an ideological game. We are also told that the people are dosed with MDMA, the “ecstasy” drug, through their drinking water, which helps them forget anything that hampers a healthy revolutionary memory.

The national leader’s talent lies nowhere but in his skill at rhetoric. He eloquently describes the past and future of China as well as the challenges China faces, concluding that the current government represents the best possible regime one can ever think of. His confession—nay, storytelling—is so moving that he manages in the end to persuade his kidnappers to release him so that he can better serve the people. Thus, Chan tells a story in which the national leader turns out to be not only a competent administrator but also the most mesmerizing storyteller—in the genre of utopia. Through his projection of the golden future of China, a sublime effect is achieved; in the sense of not the Maoist sublime but the “most sublime hysterical” as defined by Slavoj Žižek.43

Shengshi is predictably censored in China. But the lesson one draws from Chan’s novel should not be limited to political allegory or censorship. Rather, the fact that, among all media and discursive genres, Chan has invested his political agenda in the form of narrative fiction must lead one to rethink Liang Qichao’s fictional engagement more than a century ago. Nevertheless, whereas Liang launched the polemics of fiction as utopia, Chan (and like-minded fellow writers such as Han Song and Liu Cixin) makes fiction into a cartography of the dark consciousness that haunts the human struggle for self-betterment. How to come to terms with such a consciousness by teasing out its dialogical potential remains a task as urgent in our time as ever. With the anomalous and polymorphous mediation of fiction, we find ourselves imagining dystopia and heterotopia in the hope of a future in which such an imagination would scarcely be needed. And yet at any fold of time we may come to realize that, without the imagination of darkness at even the brightest moment of history, we are unprepared to recognize it in its future incarnations. For this reason, all modernities bear the imprint of primitive savagery, and all utopian projects presuppose their own negations.

To conclude my survey of modern Chinese utopia in terms of Panglossian dream versus dark consciousness, I refer to the ending of Shengshi. At the end of the novel, Chan’s characters turn their back on the golden space they are supposed to inhabit and decide to pursue their own dreams elsewhere. Chan thus asks a difficult question regarding individual choice when membership in a utopia becomes available—or even mandatory. In these characters’ adventure into the domain of dark consciousness, Lu Xun’s words resound:
There is something I dislike in heaven; I do not want to go there.

There is something I dislike in hell; I do not want to go there.

There is something I dislike in your future golden world; I do not want to go there.

DAVID DER-WEI WANG
Harvard University

Notes

1 For more interpretations of the Chinese Dream, see Baidu baike, s.v. “Zhongguo meng.”

2 See Maurice Meisner’s classic Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism. Chinese Communist discourse deems utopianism an illusory search for a dream without historical grounding. Communist revolution, by contrast, represents a project that is to be realized in accordance with a preordained timetable. Western Marxists from Ernst Bloch to Fredric Jameson tend to ascribe a positive value to utopia and treat revolution as a project leading toward the utopian goal. Nevertheless, whereas Bloch famously expands the utopian impulse to a perennial search for a desired way of living, demanding the power to imagine the “not yet,” Jameson seeks a “cognitive mapping” of utopia as a way of flaunting the limits of the capitalist status quo. See, e.g., Bloch, Spirit of Utopia; for an introduction to Bloch’s utopian theory, see Kellner, “Ernst Bloch, Utopia, and Ideology Critique.” In Archaeologies of the Future, Jameson laments the eclipse of the utopian vision in the leftist revolutionary vein in the contemporary world. Granting his insightful critique of the negative utopian impulses and consequences as represented by global capitalism, he appears to fall short in critically examining the utopian ruins created by leftist revolutionary undertakings. Nor could he engage with the anomalous coexistence of both socialist and capitalist utopian projects, as is the case of contemporary China, and its dystopian consequences.

3 For a classic survey of utopia, see Kumar, Utopia and Anti-utopia in Modern Times. For a recent discussion of utopia as a revived imaginary in relation to the concept of globalization, see Tally, Utopia in the Age of Globalization.

4 In Voltaire’s 1759 novel Candide, Dr. Pangloss is described as a caricature of optimism, believing “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds” despite evidence otherwise. Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin invoked the term Panglossian paradigm to critique the evolutionary biologists who view all traits as atomized things that have been naturally selected and thus leave no theoretical space to other causes. See Gould and Lewontin, “Spandrels of San Marco,” 581–98. I derive my understanding of Gould’s theory from his “Pattern of Life’s History,” 52–64.


6 Yan, Tianyan lun, 33. See Paradis and Williams, T. H. Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics. Federico Masini, a pioneer of the study of loan words in late Qing works, also suggests this: Masini, Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon, 138. Japanese tends to use 理想郷 or the
The high tide of this translation is much later than the Meiji period, when intellectuals associated the idea with the socialist movement. I thank Uganda Kwan for assistance in identifying the source. For a recent genealogical study of the introduction of *utopia* to China, see Yan, *Cong shenti dao shijie*, chap. 4.

For a general discussion of the teleological moral agenda embedded in Yan Fun’s rendition of evolution and ethics, see Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*, chap. 4.

Such an understanding of literature, of course, has its relevance to the classical understanding of the mutual implication between literature (wen 文) and the Way (dao 道). Wenxue 文學 or literature is as much a form of representation as it is a vehicle through which the world manifests.

Many things forced Liang to abandon the writing of the novel, including his changing political agenda. See Xia, *Jueshi yu chuanshi*, 71–72.

D. Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, 301–9.

For a general description of the rise of intellectual discourses on Chinese politics and society, see Ma, *Dangdai Zhongguo bazhong shehui sichaoc*. Also see Ge, “Cong wenhuashi, xueshushi, dao sixaingshi.”

Zhao, *Tianxia tixi*.

Yan and Xu, *Wangba tianxia sixiang ji qidi*.

Gan, *Tong santong*.

Elstein, *Democracy and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy*, chap. 7; Jiang, *Confucian Constitutional Order*.


Ibid., chap. 1.

Voltaire, *Candide*, 224.


I am inspired by the “weak thought” that Gianni Vattimo develops in *End of Modernity*.

B. Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*.


Zhang X., “Zhongyu daole keyi tan mengxiang de shike.”


Ibid.


Zhang H., “Chaoyue yishi yu youhuan yishi,” 48. For instance, when Jiang Qing talks about a Confucian democracy centered on a prescient leader, the ideal of sage-king rule looms large; when Wang Hui proposes “party-state” as a desirable mode of polity, his proposal flirts with socialist theocracy. More intriguing is the fact that they all envision future China, a postsocialist El Dorado, by harking back to the world of ancient China.

See Levinas’s argument of the narrative as a process of opening to the other—that which is yet to be uttered—vis-à-vis that which is already being said. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5–9.
34 Hsia, “Aspects of the Power of Darkness in Lu Hsun.”
39 See D. Wang, *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor*, chap. 5.
40 For a comprehensive discussion of the dystopian theme in contemporary Chinese novels, see Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia*.
41 *Santi* or “three body” refers to a specific mathematics term, a theoretical problem that scientists have been trying to solve over the past two centuries. Basic information can be found at *Wikipedia*, s.v. “Three-Body Problem.”
43 B. Wang, *Sublime Figure of History*, chap. 1; Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*. Also see Žižek, *Most Sublime Hysteric*.

References


