SINOFUTURISM: DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES IN POSTSOCIALIST CHINA

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction

For much of the 20th century, the story of China has been one of lost futures, of utopian endeavors that produced dystopian consequences. My great-grandfather, who ran an umbrella-manufacturing factory, had thirteen children. Two joined the Kuomintang during the Chinese Civil War of 1927-49 as fervent believers in the Republic. One died in jail, one disappeared, and the other eleven were mobilized by postwar economic reconstruction and scattered all across China's vast territory. My grandfather, an opera-loving journalist, was first sent to a state-owned factory in the northeasternmost point of the country that bordered the Soviet Union, and then dispatched to Sichuan, a landlocked basin bordering Tibet. He and my grandmother (an opera actress) lived through decades of revolutionary Maoist "utopia" from the 1950s to the 1970s, starving during the Great Leap Forward and renouncing their friends in the fanatic frenzy of the Cultural Revolution. My parents, who came of age in the 1980s, after Chairman Mao Zedong's death, grew up in a country undergoing radical economic reforms. After graduating from university, like millions of other hopefuls from all across the country, they headed to the coast to partake in China's grand economic experiment. In Shenzhen, a Special Economic Zone abuzz with energy, my parents built start-ups, saw them collapse, went on dates in dance halls and cabarets, and eventually got visas and one-way plane tickets to New Zealand, where I was born. When my father changed jobs, we immigrated to Singapore and became citizens. Fast-forward two decades: my father has now shifted his business back to China. His journey has come full circle.

My family's story is not unique to us—in many ways, it is the story of millions of ordinary Chinese families fighting for air under the grand utopias and dystopias of their time. Amid the upheavals of the past few decades, those in China lived through a topsy-turvy vertiginous reality:

at first, desires were repressed and strictly policed, and then, all at once, practically anything seemed possible. After Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening Up policy—launched in December of 1978, temporarily halted after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, and revived in 1992— the future of China became open to the masses for the first time in decades, their imagination no longer forcibly constrained by socialist orthodoxy and the discredited slogans of the Little Red Book. At the same time, even as the state retreated from its control of the market, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has continued to shape the fantasies of the people, instilling its vision of the future through policies and propaganda.

The first time I felt a visceral sense of the "Chinese future" was in 2008. Back then, I was ten and had just transferred from a Catholic school to Nanyang Primary School, whose origins can be traced to Sun Yat-sen's visit to Singapore in July 1910. My new school heavily emphasized bicultural education in both English and Mandarin Chinese, which vindicated the common refrain from my parents, "Learn your Mandarin well; it'll be important in the future." On a humid evening in August, my entire family gathered together to watch the Opening Ceremony of the Beijing Olympics on our television. I can still recall the breathtaking synchronicity of the spectacle: thousands of performers pounding bronze *Fou* drums to the same beat, lighting up giant digits that counted down the seconds to the Games.

At ten, I was perhaps too young to fully grasp Beijing's message: This was a new and stronger China, no longer contented with Deng Xiaoping's adage of "Hide your strength, bide your time" (*taoguang yanghui* 韬光养晦).[1] The Olympics was not only a display of strength—an

[1] Note on Transliteration: For all Chinese-language phrases and sources in the notes and bibliography, I have used the English translation with the original Mandarin Chinese characters in brackets alongside a transliteration in standard pinyin. The pinyin is rendered according to the system of romanization for the Chinese written language based on the pronunciation of Mandarin Chinese. Unless otherwise specified, all English translations of direct quotes are mine.

attempt to wash away the trauma of the "century of humiliation" at the hands of imperial powers (a period roughly from the First Opium War in 1839 to the PRC's founding in 1949), which still lingered fresh in national consciousness. The Olympics also sold a story of redemption, of triumph over serious challenges (2008 was an otherwise difficult year that saw riots in Tibet, the devastating Sichuan earthquake, a contaminated milk scandal that killed six babies, among other crises). The China on-screen was no longer the China I had experienced in summer vacations spent with my grandparents. The country I remembered as being less prosperous and seemingly more backward than Singapore was not the country on screen that day. For the first time, my parents' motherland had shed its modesty and unapologetically announced its entrance on the world's stage as a rising power. China was no longer playing catch-up—China had arrived.

For the rest of the world too, the Beijing Olympics was a watershed moment. *The Evening Standard* called the Opening Ceremony "the beginning of China's new era of greatness."[2] By topping the Olympics gold medal count for the first time ever, China confirmed its place as "leading superpower," declared *The Telegraph*.[3] One *Reuters* headline noted that the Chinese economy was roaring: "Beijing Games to be costliest, but no debt legacy."[4] The timing of the Beijing Olympics could not be more ironic. Just three weeks after the Closing Ceremony, the 150-year-old investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed and sent the global financial system spiraling into its worst recession since the Great Depression.

[2] "World joins China for Olympic launch," *The Evening Standard*, August 8, 2008, https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/sport-olympics/world-joins-china-for-olympic-launch-6876614.html.
[3] Kaz Mochlinski, "China confirm place as leading superpower after topping Olympic Games medal table," *The Telegraph*, August 25, 2008, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/2621181/China-confirm-their-place-as-worlds-leading-superpower-Olympics.html.
[4] Simon Rabinovitch, "Beijing Games to be costliest, but no debt legacy," *Reuters*, August 4, 2008, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-olympics-cost/beijing-games-to-be-costliest-but-no-debt-legacy-idUSPEK25823820080805.

While international observers were enthralled, many domestic Chinese, hardened by a difficult century, were more skeptical about whether China's Olympic high would last. The Olympic dream had embodied the sense of an immanent future, the *Fou* drums of the Opening Ceremony seemed to herald the anticipation of China's long-awaited rise.[5] What would catalyze the passions of the people if the Olympic dream expired? In the winding, beleaguered history of 19th- and 20th-century China, promised futures were always imminent but never realized, disappearing right when they seem to be just around the corner.

Yet, despite serious challenges and concerns, China has barreled forward. Few then could have predicted how rapidly China would become the 21st century's newest global superpower. The global financial crisis accelerated China's ascendancy—powered by a massive stimulus package, China weathered the economic turbulence better than most developed economies and emerged relatively unscathed. In the decade or so since the Olympics, as it became the world's primary engine for growth, China has embarked on a mission of national rejuvenation, exporting not just "Made in China" toys and gadgets but also "the China Model" along the Belt and Road. Its gross domestic product (GDP) also more than tripled from $4.6 trillion in 2008 (one-third of

[5] In the Chinese consciousness, the Olympics have long been a vehicle for imagining what it would take to become a great power, ever since their humiliating defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895. Reformists advocating for national strength formulated "Three Questions" as a litmus test for China's determination to achieve national independence and rejuvenation: When can a Chinese compete in the Olympic Games, when can a Chinese athlete win an Olympic gold medal, and when can the Chinese host an Olympic Games? For more on China's Olympic dream, see Guoqi Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports, 1895-2008* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Shiming Luo and Fuhua Huang, "China's Olympic Dream and the Legacies of the Beijing Olympics," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30, no. 4 (2013): 443–452, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2013.765722.

U.S. GDP) to $18 trillion in 2021 (three-quarters the size of the U.S. economy).[6] As *NBC News* puts it, the China that hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics "is no longer rising—China has risen."[7]

In my recent visits to China's metropolises (the last time being right before the Covid-19 pandemic hit), I have been struck by the palpable feeling that the future had already arrived in China. Beyond the most visible symbols of progress (e.g. super-apps or gravity-defying skyscrapers), I could sense an inchoate but intense, agitational desire to leapfrog into the future, often taking the form of a particularly Chinese oscillation between optimism and pessimism, ennui and longing, vitality and brutality. One can call this by many names: China's hunger for the future, an economy of anticipation, *Sinofuturism*. We can catch glimmers of this emerging "Sinofuturism" in art and literature (in particular, the new wave of Chinese science fiction); it also rears its head in expansionist foreign policies and domestic directives; it modifies the urban landscape the Chinese people inhabit, the gadgets they make. Sinofuturism is a social phenomenon that is both online and offline, whose omens can be seen in culture as well as in the materialist world of political economy.

At a juncture when the West seems to be living through a "slow cancellation of the future,"[8] an audacious futurism is increasingly generated and concentrated in China, manifesting in its relentlessly upgrading and perpetually constructing cities, its factories and street

[6] Statistics have been obtained from a variety of sources: Frank Tang and Orange Wang, "China GDP growth beats expectations, narrows gap with US, but population crisis, Covid-19 cloud outlook," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2022, https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3163720/china-gdp-growth-2021-beats-expectations-narrowing-gap-us; "Gross Domestic Product, Fourth Quarter and Year 2021 (Second Estimate)," Bureau of Economic Analysis, last modified on February 24, 2022, https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/gross-domestic-product-fourth-quarter-and-year-2021-second-estimate; "Data for United States, China," World Bank, accessed on February 22, 2022, https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=US-CN.

[7] Saphora Smith and Jennifer Jett, "Beijing Olympics then and now: Why the 2008 and 2022 Games feel worlds apart," *NBC News*, February 3, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/beijing-winter-olympics-china-changed-2008-2022-rcna12047.

[8] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 3.

workshops, and its new wave of Chinese science fiction. The subterranean sense that *China is the future* is perhaps the most straightforward definition for Sinofuturism. It is simultaneously an expression of Western anxieties about China's rise—anxieties that inevitably draw on centuries-old Orientalist fantasies—and also an emanation from within China. The sections that follow define Sinofuturism (a notoriously slippery concept) and map its roots in three distinct phases of postsocialist Chinese history. When did Sinofuturism begin emerging? How does it differ from a Eurocentric modernity? What kind of futures does it propel us towards?

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As the red letters C-O-P-Y appears on-screen, a cyborgian voice narrates, "Nothing is sacred, authorship is overrated, copyright is wrong." Rousing music plays. Snippets from a news feature superimpose over gaudy stock footage of a Chinese real estate. White journalists expose a series of fakes: fake Ray-bans, fake Louis Vuitton bag, fake Starbucks coffee shop, fake iPhone, and a fake Honda. This segues into another news investigation of seized Made-in-China counterfeit goods on U.S. shores. Interspersed in-between is footage of a Chinese factory and sweatshop workers manning machinery in rudimentary conditions. While the Western journalists who appear in the recycled clips often sound indignant or ironic, the narrator continues in clinical monotone: "Because the physical components of high technology are literally Made in China, it makes no sense to produce visions of the future. It's already here."

This is but one of seven chapters of contemporary artist Lawrence Lek's 2016 provocative video essay, *Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD).* Since its first screening at the Wysing Arts Centre in the U.K., Lek's video artwork has become a defining reference for the titular term.[9] The essay

[9] The term "Sinofuturism" was first coined by musician and cultural theorist Steve Goodman, who defined it as a "darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia" that maps "seemingly heterogeneous elements onto the topology of planetary capitalism." See Steve Goodman, "Fei ch'ien Rinse Out: Sino-futurist Under-currency," *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 7 (1998): 155–71, http://www.ccru.net/archive/rinse.htm.

embraces seven key stereotypes of Chinese society (Computing, Copying, Gaming, Studying, Addiction, Labour and Gambling), and puts forth the troubling suggestion that these stereotypes represent an enduring vision of the Chinese future, not a plan for domination as much as a blueprint for survival. In its opening images, the video artwork zooms through a tunnel, its maglev of futurity taking us not to a foreign far-off destination but to the most blatant, clichéd (even mundane) features of Chinese society, so transparent that they seem immediately intuitive. Yet, by piecing together these seven stereotypes, Lek posits a definition of "Sinofuturism" that is much more radical: "a form of AI, a massively distributed neural network focused on copying rather than originality, addicted to learning massive amounts of raw data rather than philosophical critique or morality, with a posthuman capacity for work, and an unprecedented sense of collective willpower."[10]

Futurism(s), like modernity, are notoriously hard to define. "Sinofuturism" itself is a slippery concept for Lek as well. His retroactive manifesto attempts to define Sinofuturism in the following way:

> Sinofuturism is an invisible movement. A spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives. It is a movement, not based on individuals, but on multiple overlapping flows. Flows of populations, of products, and of processes. Because Sinofuturism has arisen without conscious intention or authorship, it is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists.

The form of Lek's essay echoes this ambiguity, through its focus on autonomous and anonymous flows rather than individuals or ideas. By stitching together a motley of sources from historical fantasy to documentary melodrama, from both China and the West, the sixty-minute video artwork has the feel of something made by a machine. If the future of China is in fact a form of AI, then Lek's methodology is precisely that—the artist is the algorithm. Lek functions

[10] Lawrence Lek, "Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)," 2016, video art, https://vimeo.com/179509486.

like an internet archaeologist, trawling through vast troves of virtual detritus to source and consolidate various memes about China. Even the narrator voice is a text-to-speech software. If Sinofuturism is indeed a neural network, then it makes sense why there's no original footage used in Lek's artwork. Everything is recycled, dehumanized, aggregated, then intentionally presented in a raw form (sewn together with the sutures exposed, see Fig. 1)—Lek's editing suggests that Sinofuturism is itself a pastiche of Western modernity, Orientalist narratives, and Chinese cosmologies and realities.

Fig. 1. A still from the "Copy" chapter from Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD)

As such, Lek's film does not give us an authoritative definition of the term "Sinofuturism"; rather, it allows us to inhabit the messy feelings that the term evokes. Watching the video essay left me with a conflicting sense of dread and excitement—the "future" that Lek outlines looms like an eternal present, one that might not get better but will survive and outlive the rest of the world. Yet, as alienating and eerie the video's propositions may seem to be initially, Lek does strike me as having touched on a collective sense emerging from the unconscious of the

globalized world: China already embodies a future that has long since arrived and is everywhere around us, a thought that has been felt and sensed long before it is known and articulated.

In the wake of Lawrence Lek's video essay, a small body of scholarship has explored Sinofuturism as a theme in art[11] and urbanism,[12] as part of a larger discourse on Asian futurity,[13] as a way of understanding the Chinese diaspora,[14] or as a modern form of (techno-)Orientalism.[15] But much of the discourse has been produced from the outside in, applied to China by Western observers. A number of scholars in the field have acknowledged that Sinofuturism in its current English articulation is "more of a techno-Orientalist reaction toward the impotence and expiry of the declinist West than an incisive provocation of Chinese futures concretely rooted in the Chinese condition."[16] Even Chinese texts have primarily been studied from the perspective of how they appropriate and weaponize the West's (techno-)Orientalizing impulse towards Chinese modernity.[17]

My thesis inverts the focus of the existing literature by looking at Sinofuturism as, first and foremost, a "structure of feeling"[18] that emerges from within China. I analyze Sinofuturism

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[11] See Gary Zhexi Zhang, "Sinofuturism and Its Uses: Contemporary Art and Diasporic Desire," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (2021): 86–92, https://doi.org/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.7.2.0086; Gabriel Remy-Handfield, "Queer Sinofuturism: The Aberrant Movements and Posthumanist Mutations of Body, Identity, and Matter in Lu Yang's Uterus Man," *Screen Bodies* 5, vol. 2 (December 2020): 106-122, https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2020.050210.

[12] See Asa Roast, "Three Theses on the Sinofuturist City," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 80-86, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.7.2.0080; Ge Zhang, "Sino-no-futurism," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 92-99, https://www-jstor-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/stable/10.5749/vergstudglobasia.7.2.0092.

[13] See Aimee Bahng, *Migrant Futures : Decolonizing Speculation in Financial Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[14] See Lek, *Sinofuturism*; Zhang, "Diasporic Desire."

[15] See Virginia L. Conn and Gabriele de Seta, "Sinofuturism(s)," *Studies in Global Asias* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 74-80; Gabriele de Seta, "Sinofuturism as inverse orientalism: China's future and the denial of coevalness," *SFRA Review* 50, no. 2–3 (Spring–Summer 2020): 86–94. https://sfrareview.org/2020/09/04/50-2-a5deseta/; Yunying Huang, "On Sinofuturism: Resisting Techno-Orientalism in Understanding Kuaishou, Douyin, and Chinese A.I.," *Screen Bodies* 5, vol. 2 (December 2020): 46-62, https://doi.org/10.3167/screen.2020.050205; Lek, *Sinofuturism.*

[16] Zhang, "Sino-no-futurism," 93.

[17] Gary Zhexi Zhang, "Where Next?," *Frieze* 187, April 22, 2017, https://www.frieze.com/article/where-next.

[18] See Raymond Williams, "Structure of feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128–135. Also see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

through two simultaneous perspectives: as a collective affective orientation towards the future, as well as an atemporal eruption of the future in the ongoing Chinese present.[19] As Chinese science fiction writer Han Song puts it, "In China the future is now. A writer in present-day China does not even have to make an effort to imagine the future, as any day-to-day record of urban China's dramatic transformations is futuristic in itself."[20] To understand China's future, one only has to look at the ongoing present—the present as an emergent process, a mediated affect. While Sinofuturism (and techno-Orientalism) largely examines "China as the future" from outside in, and Sinophone studies look at notions of China's future from inside out,[21] I hope to put these two fields in dialogue by exploring "Sinofuturism" at their intersection.

My project focuses on three particular configurations of Sinofuturism, each emerging from a distinct moment in the postsocialist era: (i) from the 1990s to the early 2000s, when China was reintegrating into the neoliberal world order and was still a newly industrializing country; (ii) from the late 2000s till the present, with China becoming the world's factory on the backs of its entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001; and (iii) from the future of the ongoing Sino-U.S. strategic competition, with its Cold War overtones, trade war, and technological sanctions. I add to this emerging body of scholarship by historicizing the concept and tracking its emergence and evolution since China's reform era. The question I am posing is not just "how has and will modernization change China?", but also, "How is China changing what it means to be modern?"

Lowe, in her study of intimacy, explains structures of feeling as the dominant, residual, and emergent, by which she writes, "The emergent may only be recognized with hindsight, in retrospect, since its potential power to contest, shift, or transform the dominant is not yet disclosed within its time of emergence."

[19] As Chinese science fiction writer Han Song puts it, "In China the future is now. A writer in present-day China does not even have to make an effort to imagine the future, as any day-to-day record of urban China's dramatic transformations is futuristic in itself."

[20] Han Song, "Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization," *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (March 2013): 18, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.40.1.0015.

[21] See, for example, David Der-wei Wang, Angela Ki Che Leung, and Yinde Zhang, *Utopia and Utopianism in the Contemporary Chinese Context: Texts, Ideas, Spaces* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2020), muse.jhu.edu/book/77324.

This thesis argues that Sinofuturism is shaped through a contestation between the state's top-down visions of the future and the people's own desires, innovation, and subversions; between phantasmic utopias and dystopian realities; as well as between Western modernity and Chinese modernity. In doing so, I seek to tell a story about contemporary China that is not simply a techno-Orientalist reaction of the West to Chinese modernity, but rather one that arises from the changing realities of those living in China, simultaneously shaped by various parties, in constant temporal genesis. More than an aesthetic genre or geopolitical trajectory, this thesis explores Sinofuturism as an affective temporal mode, an inchoate trend surfacing in various cultural technologies and social phenomena, not yet fully formed, but which can be pieced together from tantalizing hints.

While Sinofuturism is a future-oriented temporality, it does not have to be a science-fictional one—except insofar as any forward-looking projection is a work of imagination. As such, this thesis examines a range of cultural objects, primarily focusing on a film in the first chapter, artistic and technological artifacts in the second chapter, and two works of science fiction in the third chapter. In addition, while the term "Sino" includes the international Chinese diaspora, I confine the scope of the thesis to the People's Republic of China. This project is thus not a comprehensive guide to Chinese visions of the future; rather, I have chosen three visions that I think are most representative of the country's ever-shifting structure of feeling, as various kinds of optimism and pessimism waxed and waned in an orbit around the different moments of its developmental trajectory.

In Chapter One, I explore China's postsocialist pessimism during its full-on embrace of capitalism from the 1990s to early 2000s, using the theme park as a metaphor. By first comparing China's "world parks" (a slew of amusement parks established in the nineties that

contain replicas of world monuments) to Disneyland and World Fairs, I argue that these Chinese world parks emerged as neoliberal paradises in a postsocialist state. Through an analysis of Jia Zhangke's film *The World* (2004), which is set in one such world park, I show how the illusion of shared prosperity and mobility that the park presents is ironically just a façade for those living on the margins—the rural migrant laborers who work hard to keep the park running, while being imprisoned in its spectacle and rhetoric.

Chapter Two delves into China's growing techno-optimism from the 2000s to the present. I zoom into the bottom-up techno-optimism emerging from the streets of Shenzhen, in the shadows of large multinational factories—a futurity prototyped in the phenomena of *shanzhai*, which is the Chinese word for counterfeiting but also represents a culture of extreme open-source. Through looking at a range of *shanzhai* artifacts, in particular *shanzhai* mobile phones from the *Shanzhai Archaeology* project (collected and curated by artists Nicolas Maigret, Maria Roszkowska, and Clément Renaud), I explore *shanzhai*'s ephemeral utopian possibilities and its subsequent co-option by the state as an exportable model.

Chapter Three looks at the Sino-U.S. relationship as an entwined future, encapsulated in the term "Chimerica" (coined by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick). I turn to science fiction, the "literature of cognitive estrangement,"[22] to examine how its alternative realities and temporalities subvert the hegemonic present. I interrogate visions of Chimerica in two works of science fiction, one American and one Chinese: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* (1992) and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao* 荒潮) (2013). While *China Mountain Zhang* imagines a future dominated by Chinese socialism and ruled by an authoritarian state, *Waste Tide* explores a future of incessant, neoliberal

[22] Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2016), 14.

globalization, set in a Chinese electronic-waste-processing isle that literally recycles Western trash. With their characters all trapped within the totalizing force of globalization—one ideologically dominated by the Chinese and one economically driven by the U.S.—both novels gesture towards the posthuman as a point of convergence between East and West.

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Walk into any bookstore today, and a cursory glance at the shelves would no doubt yield yet another new title on China, ranging from the provocative (*Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides' Trap?* and *Has China Won?*) to the declarative (*When China Rules The World*) and the diagnostic (*The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*). Daily headlines are not immune to this confusion either. Barely three months after the July/August 2021 issue of *Foreign Affairs* raised the question, "Can China Keep Rising?"[23], an article in the same magazine declared "The End of China's Rise."[24]

Against this congested backdrop of competing and mutually contradicting claims, why and how does Sinofuturism matter? This project goes beyond the cold rational logic of political science and places the socioeconomic trajectory of China's rise in conversation with irrational anxieties, utopian hopes, dreams and nightmares. After all, "dreams" and "spirit" (*jingshen* 精神), which encompasses social attitudes, the national psyche, individual consciousness and agency, have always been central to China's nation-building attempts since the late Qing. The emotional and spiritual language of fiction has often been used to conceptualize and popularize the CCP's political goals, ever since Mao's 1942 "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature

[23] "Can China Keep Rising?", *Foreign Affairs*, June 22, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issue-packages/2021-06-22/can-china-keep-rising.
[24] Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, "The End of China's Rise," *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-01/end-chinas-rise.

and Art."[25] National leaders since Mao have welded visions of the future using affect and emotion as tools. The latest incarnation is Xi Jinping's vision of the "Chinese dream" (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦), part of his campaign to "tell the good China story" (*jianghao zhongguo gushi* 讲好中国故事).[26] His affective arsenal includes "positive energy" (*zhengnengliang* 正能量),[27] a confidence doctrine,[28] and even happiness (*xingfu* 幸福) campaigns,[29] each of which President Xi invoked in pursuit of the ultimate Chinese dream: national rejuvenation.[30] As digital anthropologist Silvia Lindtner notes in *Prototype Nation*, these affective constructs indicate a discursive shift from locating the future outside China to seeing China itself as the future.[31]

But Sinofuturism is more than just a look at the politics of affect—it gives us glimpses of what the world may be like. By anchoring Sinofuturism in three specific moments in the recent past, the project excavates and encounters figures and objects that are suspended between past, present, and future—futures incompletely rendered, flaring up in the present as a momentary articulation of an atemporal futurism that may yet again return. In Chinese modernity, as Martin Jacques notes, the past and the future are not as "discrete" as they are in the West; instead, the

[25] Mao proclaimed that literature and the arts should serve the revolution and used to nurture a new national form.
[26] For more on the "fictional turn" of contemporary Chinese cultural politics and its genealogy to early modern times, see David Der-wei Wang, *Why Fiction Matters in Contemporary China* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2020), muse.jhu.edu/book/77921.
[27] A grassroots catchphrase turn government propaganda.
[28] The "Four Confidences" are confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics, outlined in Xi's speech to commemorate the 95th anniversary of the CCP in 2016 and included in amendments to the Party Charter at the 19th National Congress in 2017.
[29] Such campaigns often appear in public service advertisements, ranging from expensive government-commissioned films to small stickers on handgrips on public transport to messages on billboards. For more, see Gerda Wielander and Derek Hird, *Chinese Discourses on Happiness* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, HKU, 2019), muse.jhu.edu/book/67756.
[30] See "Speech by Xi Jinping at a ceremony marking the centenary of the CPC," Xinhua, July 1, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm.
[31] Silvia M. Lindtner, *Prototype Nation: China and the Contested Promise of Innovation* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 19.

past and the future tend to be squeezed and condensed into the present due to the sheer time-compression of its economic transformation.[32]

The first chapter of this thesis presents a vision from the initial stage of China's capitalism, featuring Chinese peasant-migrants who enter a rapidly urbanizing, constructed world and are the invisible laborers who keep the spectacle running. This is an era of juxtapositions. The proximity of the rural agrarian past, which is heavily imprinted on the turbocharged present, results in the impatient desire for cosmopolitanism—and disappointment when faced with its kitschy, paper-thin arrival in the form of a theme park. In *The World*, we sense the pessimism of these migrant workers bubbling under the façade of prosperity, standing in stark contrast to the infantile pleasure of the theme park's visitors. This crushing of desire amid an environment of all-encompassing artificiality may just be a prophetic future for the precariat in emerging economies around the world, and perhaps even gig workers in developed countries. *The World* also provides a lens into a pessimism that is specific to the postsocialist Chinese condition, which continues surfacing in China's present: the bankruptcy of the Maoist utopia has left its citizens struggling to find another ideology that can inspire equal fervor; yet, what has supplanted it is merely a hollow, consumer-capitalist "pleasure."

The second chapter focuses on the moment of take-off that marks China's rise, when it became the factory of the world. Zooming into *shanzhai* manufacturing in Shenzhen, we glimpse the workers producing a bottom-up techno-optimism—the belief in technology's ability to make the future better—through feats of hardware. Unlike Silicon Valley's elite culture of techno-optimism, which is tethered more to software, the workers creating and consuming shanzhai products are mostly migrant laborers. The creative, iterative, and practical designs that emerged

[32] Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: the End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 109.

in the interstices of the global economy present an optimistic vision of how manufacturing can be harnessed by anyone to create a vision of the future, rather than have it imposed on them. Despite the ephemerality of these *shanzhai* phones, the grassroots optimism, innovation, and hyperspeed of shanzhai have been mobilized and scaled by the state into a China model being exported and emulated by developing nations.

The final chapter looks at the future that is yet to come for the Sino-American superpower relationship and bipolar world. In *China Mountain Zhang* and *Waste Tide*, we see what I call the "optimistic dystopias of Chimerica", intertwined destinies and the subterranean forces that bring the two countries closer together. Both the American and Chinese novel imagine the future hegemony of their economic rival as a kind of dystopia. Yet, the figure of the posthuman, hybrid cyborg becomes a gesture towards hope in both novels. The cyborg figures of Mimi and Zhang open up an entwined future beyond the looming "end of history," allowing us to imagine the interface not just between human and machine—but also between China and America.

CHAPTER I

China as Theme Park: Postsocialist Pessimism in Jia Zhangke's *The World* (2004)

See the world without ever leaving Beijing!
-- Beijing World Park slogan

Two decades before Universal Studios entered China's capital and Disneyland became a celebrated landmark in Shanghai, the Beijing World Park introduced China to the exhilarating, make-believe environment of a modern theme park. Opened in 1993, the park is larger than eighty football fields and simulates a trip around five continents with over a hundred scaled-down renditions of world-famous monuments. Walking through the park may feel at once kitschy and surreal. 'Lower Manhattan' still has its Twin Towers intact (long after 9/11 saw the collapse of the original); the park's 'Great Wall' overlooks a curious blend of myth and miniature—the Arc de Triomphe and the Trojan Horse. These little arcadias of multiculturalism sprouted all across China's cities, suburbs, and farmlands, numbering over 2,500 between 1990 and 2005 alone.[33] If Disneyland was America's Shangri-La, born at a moment of urban renewal, then these world parks were China's oases of modernity as it began integrating into the global market.

While in the 1980s the Chinese government still had its reservations about market reform, by the 1990s (especially after Deng Xiaoping's southern tour in 1992) the country began resolutely adopting capitalism, accelerating privatization, and radially reorienting its post-Mao ethos. These reforms happened with incredible speed, at a startling velocity that compacted what other developed nations took centuries to accomplish into mere decades. One propaganda ode, "Story of Springtime," calls China's post-Mao development "a miracle":

In the spring of 1979

[33] Nic Cavell, "China's Dream Parks," *Dissent* 62, no. 1 (2015): 8. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/dss.2015.0002.

An old man drew a circle
On the southern coast of China
And city after city rose up like legends
And mountains and mountains of gold
Gathered like a miracle
[…]
Oh, China
You've unfolded a new scroll for the next century.[34]

With the forceful push of Deng's Reform and Opening Up, the buoyant optimism of neoliberal globalization permeated the air of the nineties, like the arrival of springtime. Gone were the backyard blast furnaces and village communes; in their place now stood not only malls and skyscrapers but also modernity's greatest emblem: theme parks. Places like the Beijing World Park—the most accessible and direct medium for the vast domestic population to encounter globalization—epitomize China's appetite for a cosmopolitan future and its eagerness to catch up to developed nations. Their proliferation during the reform era after decades of oppression and the policing of pleasure under Mao represent the people's unleashing of a particular type of desire: the desire to consume, to have fun, and to be "free"—though it has to be said here that the illusion of "freedom" offered by these world parks is a flimsy, diluted version of cosmopolitan travel. Such world parks offer a glimpse into the postsocialist dreams of the masses, who are in search of pleasure amid the lacuna of utopian ideals, and of freedom under the panopticon of authoritarian control.

[34] For more information about the ode, see https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%98%A5%E5%A4%A9%E7%9A%84%E6%95%85%E4%BA%8B/1247.

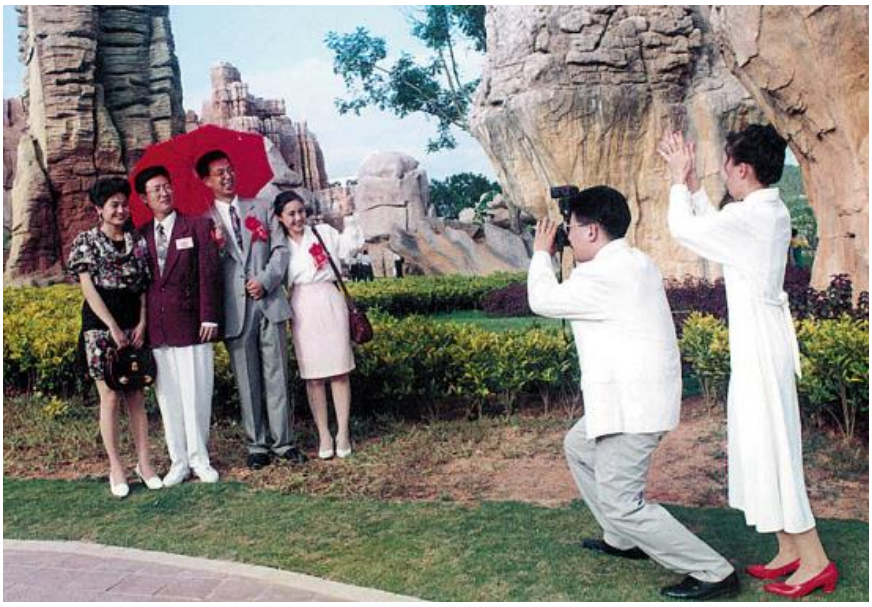

Fig. 2. Then (1990s)[35]

Fig. 3. Now (2010s)[36]

[35] Hui, Wei, The Grand World Scenic Park, 1990s, photograph, *Fenghuang Zixun*, https://news.ifeng.com/a/20151016/45221016_0.shtml.
[36] The Grand World Scenic Park, 2010s, photograph, *Huanqiu*, https://m.huanqiu.com/gallery/9CaKrnQhl9J.

China's booming skyline and cityscapes have long been seen as its most apparent symbols of the future. Many have commented on the country's massive infrastructure projects;[37] its megatropolises that have usurped Tokyo and Hong Kong as the signifier of urban futurity;[38] overbuilt "ghost cities" full of barren boulevards and vacant apartments;[39] and even the "smart cities" of the future, underpinned by 5G infrastructure, omniscient surveillance, and the infamous social credit system.[40] Yet, few have examined the unique contradictions of China's development through the lens of theme parks—in particular, the local world parks that were established during the post-Tiananmen (1989) years of the reform era, between the 1990s and early 2000s. Places like Beijing's World Park and the Shenzhen Window of the World were once sites of pilgrimage for Chinese families eager to visit the globe at their doorstep but lacking the means to truly travel beyond the border. By now, many have fallen into disrepair, run into financial troubles, become obsolete parodies of the country's former "backwardness," or sometimes further commodified as third-rate destinations or photoshoot sets for wedding pictures. Most of the Chinese urban middle-class no longer have a need for these outdated themed environments of homogenous globalization. Instead, China itself, like the rest of Asia, "has become a kind of immense theme park."[41] In a 2003 article for the *New York Review of Books*, titled "Asiaworld," Ian Buruma writes that many Asian cities "look like gigantic stage sets, filled with representations of history,

[37] Ben Jones, "Past, present and future: The evolution of China's incredible high-speed rail network," CNN, February 9, 2022, https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/china-high-speed-rail-cmd/index.html.
[38] Roast, "Three Theses on the Sinofuturist City."
[39] Bloomberg News, "China's Ghost Cities Are Finally Stirring to Life After Years of Empty Streets," *Bloomberg*, September 1, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-09-01/chinese-ghost-cities-2021-binhai-zhengdong-new-districts-fill-up.
[40] Ross Anderson, "The Panopticon Is Already Here," *The Atlantic*, September 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/; Anna Mitchell and Larry Diamond, "China's Surveillance State Should Scare Everyone," *The Atlantic*, February 2, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/china-surveillance/552203/.
[41] Rem Koolhaas et al., eds., *The Great Leap Forward* (Cologne: Taschen, 2002), 32.

foreign places, or fantastic ideas of the future."[42] This isn't a new sentiment. William Gibson once infamously dubbed Singapore "Disneyland with the death penalty,"[43] drawing a connection between the theme park's utopian connotations and soft totalitarianism—artificial, homogenous, sterile, highly controlled; yet simultaneously an enclave of order and harmony, perfection and prosperity, functioning under the rationalized pleasure principle. To understand China's world parks, we have to trace the genealogy back to their ancestors.

Fig. 4. Guangzhou downtown in the present[44]

From World Fairs to Disneyland to World Parks

Roughly a century before the first Disney theme park opened in 1955, a series of national manufacturing exhibitions on the European continent culminated in the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held in London. The year was 1851 and Great Britain sought to showcase its own empire and growing technological prowess during the industrial revolution.

[42] Ian Buruma, "Asiaworld," *New York Review of Books*, June 12, 2003, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2003/06/12/asiaworld/.
[43] William Gibson, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty," *WIRED*, April 1, 1993, https://www.wired.com/1993/04/gibson-2/.
[44] Mike Clarke, Guangzhou downtown, photograph, Getty Images, https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/china-top-megacities/index.html.

Under the enormous glass roof of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace was a menagerie of inventions, sourced from nations all over (see Fig. 5). The Palace was then the largest greenhouse ever-built, a material paradise of technology amid greenery, in an era of dark satanic mills. A giddy optimism suffused the exhibition's rhetoric. "The distances which separated the different nations and parts of the globe are rapidly vanishing before the achievements of modern invention, and we can traverse them with incredible ease," enthused Prince Albert, who inaugurated the event. "The products of all quarters of the globe are placed at our disposal."[45] For Great Britain's population, such an arcadia simulated exotic travel long before the spread of railways toward the end of the century. So did Disneyland, before the spread of air travel and augmented by America's swelling obsession with automobiles.

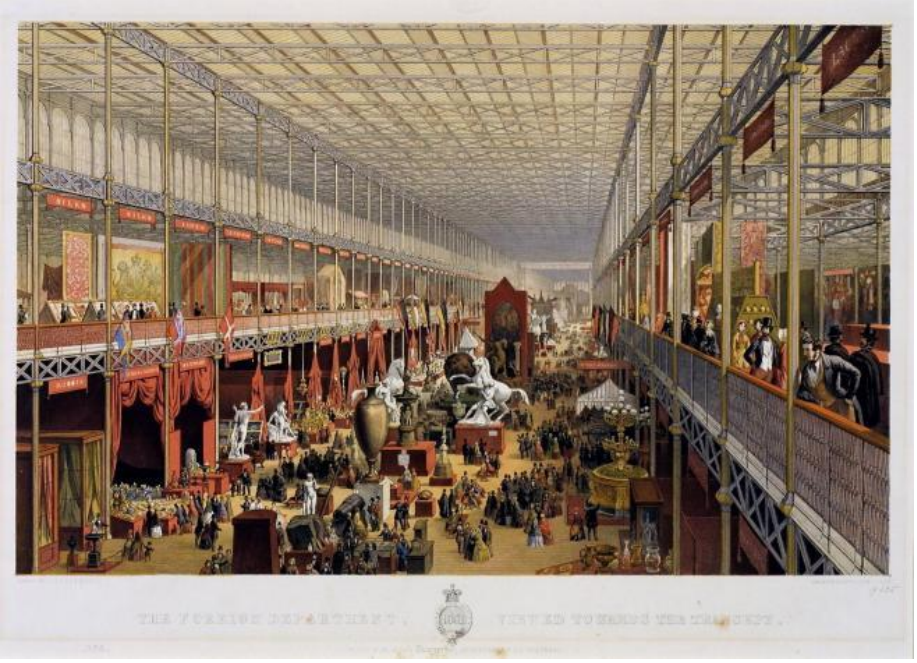

Fig. 5. An inside view of the Crystal Palace (1851)[46]

[45] "Inaugural Address of the Prince Consort Albert, May 1, 1851," quoted in Wolfgang Freibe, *Buildings of the World Exhibitions* (Leipzig: Leipzig Editions, 1985), 13.
[46] J. McNeven, *The Foreign Department, viewed towards the transept*, 1851, lithograph, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85649/the-foreign-department-viewed-towards-print-mcneven-j/.

While at first glance World Fairs may seem to have little in common with our modern-day utopias of leisure, Disneyland's most iconic ride (and anthem) "It's a small world" was originally created for the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair. Iconic sights and sounds from seven continents are combined into one vivid, fantastical boat ride—a ride that displays both Walt Disney's liberal globalism and, as some allege, America's cultural imperialism.[47] When Disneyland emerged in the fifties amid America's urban sprawl, Walt Disney intended for it to be more than just an amusement park. In the original pitch to bankers before Disneyland was built, he outlined his vision: "Here the older generation can recapture the nostalgia of days gone by, and the younger generation can savor the challenge of the future […] it will be uniquely equipped to dramatize these dreams and facts and send them forth as a source of courage and inspiration to all the world."[48] Disneyland was intended to condense both the nostalgic past and anticipatory future into the built space of the present. It looked forward to the futures encompassed in Tomorrowland as much as it reached back towards a sanitized American past in Frontierland.

Unraveling what Disneyland signifies for America may allow us to better understand the similar function that world parks fulfill for Chinese society. Theorists like Louis Marin have called it a "degenerate utopia," that is, a spatial regime that reproduces the dominant ideology of American capitalism without allowing any critical distance.[49] Disneyland had become "an immense and displaced metaphor of the system of representations and values unique to

[47] See, for example, Stephanie Malia Hom, "Simulated Imperialism," *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, vol. 25, no. 1, International Association for the Study of Traditional Environments (IASTE), 2013, pp. 25–44, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23612199; Laudan Nooshin, "Circumnavigation with a difference? music, representation and the disney experience: *It's a small, small world*," Ethnomusicology Forum, 13:2: 236-251, DOI: 10.1080/1741191042000286239.
[48] Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: an American Original* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 246-247.
[49] See Louis Marin, "Utopic Degeneration: Disneyland," in *Utopics: Spatial Play* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), 23-257, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-07329-0_12.

American society," wrote Marin in the seventies. Others like Jean Baudrillard have read Disneyland as a stand-in for America, as a clear example of postmodern "hyperreality," that is, a condition marked by absolute self-referentiality.[50] According to Baudrillard, the simulacrum of postmodern America needs an explicit "fantasy" in order to re-assert its pseudo-reality. Or as Guy Debord explains, the rest of American society is haunted by "appearances" due to the economy's domination of social life, which has rendered the real world a spectacle.[51]

For post-Mao China, in the throes of a structural overhaul of its ideological and material topography in the nineties, the world parks were physical sites showing the schizophrenic structure of feeling emerging from this era of transition: a neoliberal, infantile paradise in a postsocialist state. As a structure of feeling, postsocialism refers in large part to "a negative, dystopian cultural condition that prevails in late socialist societies," including the Soviet Union and its former republics and satellite states.[52] However, China is idiosyncratic for its coexistence of capitalism in the economic arena alongside continued authoritarianism (in the name of socialism) in the political arena. The destruction of history during the Cultural Revolution, the failure of Maoism, and the retreat of socialist belief all left postsocialist China a tabula rasa, an ideological vacuum, in a condition of becoming. New capitalist desires and values awakened at the same breakneck speed as the building of the new economy, ballooning to fill the political, social and ideological vacuity in the wake of Maoist thought. Fragmented socialist ideals were superseded by notions of the affluent, happy life promised by modernization and globalization. As the country underwent an unprecedented wave of massive urbanization in the 1990s and

[50] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12.
[51] See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983).
[52] Paul Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism," in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*, eds. Nick Browne, Paul Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack, and Esther Yau (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 61.

2000s, the Chinese world parks emblematized the neoliberal ideas of consumption and cosmopolitanism espoused by market logic. While London's Great Exhibition was a display of might and reach, and American theme parks have long been viewed as degenerate utopias, what postsocialist dream are Chinese world parks propelling their visitors towards? And what do these world parks tell us about the future of the world?

Behind Facades in The World

The fraught turmoil of China's transition from socialism to capitalism is best captured by what is known as the country's "Sixth Generation" filmmakers, many of whom grew up during this radical shift. Unlike their predecessors (i.e. fifth-generation directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige), who tend to use Chinese history and culture as a parable or metaphor,[53] the sixth generation focused on capturing the impact of wrenching economic and social transformations on the individual—in particular the *diceng*, lower-class communities produced by social stratification and class restructuring under the state's post-market turn.[54] The films of the sixth generation embody a bold new style of urban realism, initiate a return to private and everyday life, and cast as their subject the rapid transmutations experienced by contemporary Chinese society. The leading figure in this new wave is Jia Zhangke, who began as an independent director and garnered international fame and critical acclaim with his "Hometown Trilogy"—*Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002). What I am most interested in, however, is his first "aboveground" film: *The World* (2004), his first to win approval from the Chinese government and allowed to be screened domestically. Set in the Beijing World Park,

[53] Cecilia Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 35.
[54] Wang Xiaoping, *China in the Age of Global Capitalism: Jia Zhangke's Filmic World* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 3.

The World forcefully juxtaposes the idyllic on-display vision of the theme park with the disenfranchised lives of the migrant workers offstage. The film arrives at a particular moment in China's transition: three years after joining the World Trade Organization, signifying its true integration into the global economy, and four years before the 2008 Beijing Olympics would herald with aplomb the coming of the "Chinese Century." By capturing this particular moment through the lens of *nongmingong* (literally, "peasant laborers"), the millions of migrants who have powered the country's boom but remain trapped on its margins, *The World* takes us behind the facades of the theme park to the lives torn asunder by the prosperity these workers toil to sustain.

Here's how *The World* begins: Backstage, through a dark underground corridor with crude pipes snaking over concrete walls, a young Chinese woman in a green Indian *lehenga* stalks down crowded, claustrophobic hallways and repeatedly yells, "Who has a band-aid?" A group of male performers in gaudy European costumes huddle in a circle playing cards. When she asks, "Who's losing?" the reply is, "We all are." After this long take on hand-held camera, the next scene takes on a surreal sheen: onstage before a crowded auditorium of tourists, female bodies parade in exotic, diverse costumes. The neon shimmer on an expansive stage stands in stark contrast to the dim, confined space backstage.

The film thus immediately catapults the audience into a narrative of juxtapositions, where the glittering spectacle of cosmopolitanism constantly chafes against grittier realities. We learn that the female protagonist Tao is a performer at the World Park in suburban Beijing, one among thousands of migrant laborers—dancers, security guards, cosplayers, cleaners—propping up the pageantry of happy cosmopolitanism in the theme park. While the location might be ersatz, Tao's emotional journey and the problems the characters face are very real. She loses her

virginity to her boyfriend Taisheng, a security guard at the park, under pressure to cling onto some semblance of comfort and stability in a precarious life. Yet, Taisheng soon ends up betraying her for a married woman, Qun, who longs after a vanished husband. The film dips in and out of the lives of migrant workers on the periphery of Tao and Taisheng: Russian girl Anna, who at one point seemed to possess more mobility than the others, but still ends up prostituting her body in order to earn enough money to reunite with her sister in Ulan Bator; Erguniang, a young boy from Taisheng's village who dies in a construction accident due to overwork and compromised safety standards; Qun, who runs a garment workshop replicating counterfeit fashion and eagerly awaits her visa to France in order to find the husband she has not heard from in years. Each character is part of Beijing's "floating population," precarious migrants from distant provinces. Each character we catch a glimpse of has wounds that can't be patched up by a single band-aid.

Facades are constantly interrupted by the appearance of the unexpected, juxtaposed with what's underneath in cross-cutting scenes, or often revealed to be a counterfeit. As one film review aptly puts it, while Jia's previous films peered behind the facade of the Chinese economic miracle, *The World* "makes that facade its subject."[55] A scene on the Eiffel Tower replica is immediately followed by a conversation revealing that it's one-third the height of the original. A Louis Vuitton bag that the camera pans to is but one of many *shanzhai* (counterfeit) products copied off Western fashion catalogs in Qun's garment workshop. After the park closes, the dancers shed their exotic costumes and return to their dingy, cramped dorms that overlook the park's neon signages. As title credits roll, the park's panoramic array of monuments in the

[55] J. Hoberman, "WORLD APART," *Artforum International* 43, no. 10 (Summer 2005): 12. ProQuest, http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/world-apart/docview/214348295/se-2?accountid=11311.

background is interrupted by an aged trash-collector, who walks across the screen and then looks directly into the camera. His lone figure cuts a rough silhouette against the "Eiffel Tower" in the distance. The words "A film by Jia Zhangke" superimposed onto the scene evoke lines from Charles Baudelaire's famous essay, "Scavenger": "[The ragpicker] is responsible for gathering up the daily debris of the capital. All that the city has rejected, all it has lost, shunned, disdained, broken, this man catalogs and stores."[56] Jia, as the director, assumes the same function as the trash-collector (ragpicker), sifting through the debris of economic growth and the detritus under the façade of glamor and kitsch, reorganizing these fragments to reveal truths about the hefty transformations of his age.

Fig. 6.

The most jarring scenes in *The World* are the glossy animated sequences that pop up at moments of peak sentimentalism. Such intrusive moments of obvious artificiality puncture the mood of realism and underscore the disparity and irreconcilability between desire and reality—the cheap consumerist versions of mobility and freedom in the park are laughably immobile and unfree. The innermost desires of the characters can find no anchor in reality, only allowed to temporarily take flight in a completely dream-like fantastical realm. In one, Tao imagines herself

[56] Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises*, trans. Stacy Diamond (New Jersey: Carol Pub. Group, 1996), 7.

defying gravity by simply soaring with her arms and legs outstretched over the Forbidden City and the Eiffel Tower, against a saturated palette of sunset hues—unlike the drab colors of reality in the park (perhaps evidence of Beijing's smog). But when her fantasy is over, she is back on the bus driving past Tiananmen Square, staring out of the window from her seat. The closest she ever comes to "taking flight" in reality is a simulated magic carpet ride against a green screen, where the digitally altered photographs make it seem like she is truly flying. The park's photo gimmick presents a kind of cheap, innocent adventure, and a souvenir to commemorate a day of fun for tourists. Yet, the sequence made me feel a sudden wave of empathy for Tao and other park workers, who don't ever get to experience real adventure, only an underwhelming, spurious, mass-manufactured magic. Their grounded reality is a constant parody of the rest of society's desires for travel and real adventure to distant lands, and the park's commodification of such desires.

Film critics have often drawn attention to the film's motif of mobility and the centrality of transportation to Jia's oeuvre.[57] In particular, cellphones supplant physical transport as the main vehicle for the characters' fantasies of mobility and freedom—unattainable in the real world and only accessible in the virtual space. Though the surreal landscape of the World Park is suffused with the rhetoric of mobility, their lived experiences are insular and without any real prospect of escape. "I see the world without ever leaving Beijing" is both the park slogan and a sentiment vocalized by Tao and the others, like a repetitive mantra to convince themselves of their newly gained cosmopolitan sensibilities—and of the soundness of China's new neoliberal ethos. However, again and again, we see Tao riding the close-circuit monorail that circles the park in

[57] See James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Yingjin Zhang, "Jia Zhangke's cinematic vision of urban dystopia in contemporary China," in *The Routledge companion to urban imaginaries*, ed. Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (New York: Routledge, 2019), 332-344; Wang, *China in the Age of Global Capitalism*;

fifteen minutes but leads to nowhere. To the visitors, the park promises a globe-trotting adventure: "Give us a day, we'll show you the world." Yet, Tao and Taisheng's reality is a looping reel of repetition. The concealed entrapment that the characters face is underscored in a scene happening on a stationary airplane in the park. Tao is in costume as an air stewardess, simulating a flight for visitors and reminding them of the plane's authenticity (it previously flew international routes before retirement). In the cockpit, Tao and Taisheng have their little rendezvous while the engine hums, though the scenery outside the windows remains static. "If I stay here any longer, I'm going to become a ghost," confesses Tao. She is unable to articulate the exploitation she experiences, sensing claustrophobia and her own spectral existence—the ghostliness of "the migrant's experience of liminality"[58]—but not knowing its cause. Other characters too do not possess the vocabulary for their suffering, resorting to violent or restrained expressions of their blistering emotions. Tao's colleague Niu, in a desperate attempt to hold on to his girlfriend, sets his jacket on fire; Anna, the Russian dancer, can only sing a song about Ulan Bator on the night before she joins prostitution. Others in the park often appear unaware of their losses, entrapped and devoured by the pageantry they strenuously help produce.

Later in the film, Taisheng brings Tao to visit Erguniang at his construction site. When a plane roars overhead, Erguniang looks up and asks, "Who do you think flies on the plane?" Tao replies, "Who knows? I don't know anybody who has been on a plane." She doesn't even own a passport. While the airplane symbolizes freedom, prosperity, and the future, Tao can only take flight in animated interludes—a leap into the future that cannot be realized in the present. In the final scene of the film, Tao and Taisheng remain suspended in a liminal state full of anomie and moral ambivalence. It is unclear whether they are truly dead, and whether Tao chose to kill them

[58] Philippa Lovatt, "The Spectral Soundscapes of Postsocialist China in the Films of Jia Zhangke," *Screen* 53, no. 4 (2012): 423. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjs034.

both by carbon monoxide poisoning after discovering Taisheng's affair or merely by accident. The screen fades to black. "Are we dead?" Taisheng's disembodied voice asks. "No," replies Tao, "this is only the beginning." One wonders if this is a metaphor for China's years of transition. The death of Mao signified the end of his ultra-radical leftism. Yet, as long as socialism lives on (at least in name), Mao's death is never truly complete—it continues to haunt China's "rebirth" since Deng's reforms, just as the film ends in a mood of questioning rather than any kind of definitive conclusion.

Multiple temporalities jostle in *The World*, with its filmic logic of juxtapositions and slowness challenging the progressive linearity of modernization. By 2004, China's economic miracle had launched the nation into a forward-looking grand narrative driven by capitalist objectives. Yet, despite this shift, Jia's migrant protagonists remain "passengers" of China's postsocialist project, often still onlookers on the roadside, watching as it at best passes them by or at worst runs them over.[59] Tao, for instance, is often shot in long takes, looking out of the bus window at a road that recedes and a future that she has no reins over. The marginalized characters experience time as fragmented, discordant, and nonsynchronous, shown powerfully by Jia's use of empty long shots, tracking shots and close-ups of the characters in contemplation, and silence. In those moments, the migrant workers' silent gaze punctures the homogenizing rhetoric of the state and the loud rhythm of industry and "progress," creating a temporal pause and inserting the "nowness" of this moment into the grand postsocialist narrative.[60] In fact, the promotional poster for *The World* in China reads: "We have become too fast. We have lost the

[59] Chris Berry, "Xiao Wu: watching time go by," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, ed. Berry (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 255.
[60] For more on sound, see Lovatt, "The Spectral Soundscapes."

art of being slow."[61] Jia's slow cinema[62] thus counters the vertiginous speed of China's transformations which he, in an interview, describes as "a form of violence" imbued with "a destructive nature."[63] *The World* resists the violence of hyperspeed with its slowness in observation of the obscured, discarded, peripheral existences of migrant laborers like Tao.

The film's understated melancholia perhaps stems from Jia's own visceral response to visiting the real-life World Park and its sister attraction in Shenzhen, where the actress who portrays Tao once worked at. There, Jia saw families from small towns having fun and enjoying themselves but felt instead "a deep sorrow."[64] The deep sorrow comes perhaps from knowing that the paper-thin, artificial gratification offered by the World Park is what constitutes "fun" and "pleasure" for most of these less-affluent families. The World Park thus functions as the neoliberal paradise of fun for the masses that is unreal but within reach. In contrast, for park visitors and employees alike, though the world outside park gates is real, that reality is full of false, unattainable hopes. While *The World* focuses on the park employees, the visitors in the background also grapple with the schizophrenia of living in a postsocialist state, where their desires for either the egalitarianism of socialism nor the mobility of globalization can never find true fulfillment. As such, in search of temporary satisfaction, park-goers willingly revert to a passive, infantilized condition to roleplay and receive the park's promised pleasures. Like Disneyland, the performative labor[65] of the World Park extends to its visitors, who must

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[61] Jia Zhangke, "Illusory Worlds: An Interview with Jia Zhangke," interview by Richard J. Havis, *Cineaste* 30, no. 4 (Fall, 2005): 58-59, ProQuest, http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/illusory-worlds-interview-with-jia-zhangke/docview/1662224/se-2?accountid=11311.
[62] Cecilia Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 5.
[63] Jia Zhangke, "Interview with Jia Zhangke," interview by Cecilia Mello, *Aniki* 1, no. 1 (2014): 353, doi:10.14591/aniki.v1n2.92.
[64] Jia Zhangke, "INTERVIEW: Jia Zhangke," interview by Alice Shih, *Cineaction* 68 (2006): 53-58. *ProQuest*, http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/magazines/interview-jia-zhangke/docview/216881487/se-2?accountid=11311.
[65] Simona Sangiorgi, "The Disney Parlance: An On-Stage Utopia Out Of Backstage Dystopia," in *Trans/Forming Utopia*, ed. Elizabeth Russell (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 41-53.

willingly surrender themselves to a transitory experience of happiness as actors. No spontaneity or creativity is asked of the visitor; all he or she must do is to participate in the theme park's vision and design. In a scene before a replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, visitors joyfully (though a tad outlandishly) pose for pictures, raising their arms as if holding up the tower. Visitors and cast members alike enthusiastically assume their own roles, their behaviors conditioned by the park's theatrical environment—one which is virtually self-policing in enforcing optimistic cosmopolitanism. Umberto Eco calls Disneyland "a place of total passivity" where its visitors must agree to "behave like its robots," with every move regulated by "officials of the dream."[66] Although the World Park isn't as draconian as Eco's version of Disneyland, workers like Tao and Taisheng possess no true agency in this fiction they help create, required to project optimism despite any inner anxieties. The visitors too eagerly comply with and consume the dream that is maintained within the confines of the park, from its architecture to its schedule to its more subtle regulations. But, unlike the visitors who leave after the gates close, Tao and the rest are trapped in the park's illusion, in a virtual fantasy that has no emergency exit.

Fig. 7

[66] Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyper Reality*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt, 1986), 48.

All The World's A Stage Set

While *The World* zooms in on the lives of those in one theme park, the World Park is a metonym for the dominant cultural, socioeconomic, and political logic of its time, a microcosm of the broader conditions of contemporary China. The transient nature of theme parks, as "a kind of aura-stripped hypercity, a city with billions of citizens (all who consume) but no residents," is a fitting metaphor for China's coastal cities where migrant laborers toil without ever having any claim of belonging or ownership due to the strict *hukou* (household registration) system.[67] A theme park stages its regulated dream of infantile pleasure—cosmopolitanism in the case of the World Park—scrubbed clean of the inequalities, deprivation, despair, violence, and crime that plague the world outside its gates. However, the theme park of modern China cannot simply surgically neuter the unsavory—the anxieties, alienation and moral confusion triggered by massive urbanization, the growing rifts between its rural poor and urban elites, and the unevenness of globalization on its shores. A film like *The World* exposes the dream of "seeing the world without ever leaving Beijing" as just that, a dream, an illusion, a lie constructed by the neoliberal gospel of market reform.

The subtle apparatus of surveillance that hovers above the characters in the World Park echoes that of the real world, from the digital trail of messages on cellphones to Mao's portrait that overlooks Tiananmen Square to the ever-watchful eyes of colleagues and those around you (Taisheng charts Tao's movements through walkie-talkies). Within the gates of the park, Tao and others surrender their bodies to a regulatory regime that's transactional—surveillance in exchange for a constructed illusion that ameliorates any conflict or disobedience, at least on the

[67] Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: the New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), xv.

surface. Implicit in the theme park are rituals of self-regulation and normalizing value structures that maintain conformity. Outside of the gates, we don't see any bodies in revolt in everyday society either, as captured in the film. Tao's body is governed by the same invisible apparatus, ordered by urban spaces, transport routes, and often captivated by the magic of the virtual world in her phone. Never does she venture out of line despite the vacuousness and stasis of her everyday existence, in hopes that modernity's promises will actualize; but when she finds herself in "affective ruins,"[68] her only retaliation is death without a bang.

It's tempting to read *The World* as an allegory for postsocialist China. On one hand, China's modernity appears to be a Potemkin village, a theatrical environment of bogus newness. Nothing exemplifies this better than the capital city of Beijing, where the film is set. It's an imperial city framed as a museum for the nation's monumental past, but newness is chased at all costs. Its *hutongs* (traditional alleys that are a crucial part of the city's heritage) have been torn down and then in some places rebuilt to simulate the feel of old Beijing. The displaced histories are re-enacted to simulate authenticity and sanitized modernity. Four years after the film's release, Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics, during which skies were made blue,[69] grand stadiums built from scratch, streets bulldozed or repainted as part of a beautification campaign,[70] 'undesirable' populations expelled,[71] and spectators hired to fill the auditoriums and bolster the atmosphere during the Games.[72] One is almost compelled to read China's modernity as a mere

[68] Sijia Yao, "Pessimistic Chinese Cosmopolitanism and Jia Zhangke's The World," *The Comparatist* 43, no. 1 (2019): 147–58, https://doi.org/10.1353/com.2019.0008.
[69] Elizabeth Stewart and agencies, "IOC praises efforts to reduce air pollution in Beijing," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/07/china.olympics2008.
[70] Jake Hooker, "Before Guests Arrive, Beijing Hides Some Messes," *New York Times*, July 29, 2008, https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/29/sports/olympics/29beijing.html.
[71] Sky Canaves, "Beijing's Olympic Cleanup Sends Migrants and Homeless Packing," *Wall Street Journal*, August 5, 2008, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121788405566611245.
[72] Paul Kelso, "Olympics: Empty seats a concern for Games," *The Guardian*, August 12, 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2008/aug/12/emptyseats.

copy of the West, a mimicry that is kitsch and fundamentally inauthentic. Orchestrating this Potemkin village is a "warmhearted, futuristic authoritarianism" of the likes of Disney, one which wraps its policing and control with shiny facades.[73]

However, more than just an allegory, *The World*—and other works of postsocialist realist cinema—takes us backstage and underground, to interrogate the dreams of mobility, spectacle of optimism, and nexuses of pleasure awakening from China's pro-capitalist turn. Built environments like the World Park sell the neoliberal fantasy as a commodity. Yet, the invisible laborers who keep the spectacle running are ironically the ones who can never fully access the fantasy they help sustain. Their malaise, pessimism, and despair find no articulation or outlet, subsumed under the park's potent illusion that they desperately want to believe is already theirs. But the postsocialist condition rings hollow despite China's spectacular market reforms. The disintegration of socialism from the Maoist period has set society adrift, searching for new values but finding instead infantile, kitschy paradises that provide fleeting, artificial gratification.

The film leaves us with these questions: Is the World Park a façade, a phantasmic projection of a consumer-capital sense of shared prosperity that doesn't exist? Is it a theme-park ruse that leaves people dreaming for the Chinese dream as Americans wait for the American dream? And what does it tell us about the future of the world?

The World offers us a disturbing possibility of the future as deracinated life in a permanent Potemkin village, in theme park cities that are all spectacle but no substance. If China is indeed the space where the future is being forged, the migrant laborers in *The World*, like Tao and Taisheng, are perhaps prophetic figures for the precariat in emerging economies around the world, and even gig workers in developed countries. The theme park of modernity brings them

[73] Michael Harrington, "To the Disney Station," *Harper's*, January, 1979, https://harpers.org/archive/1979/01/to-the-disney-station/.

out from the village and the heartlands, but they don't arrive in the cities of the globalized world as full citizens. Instead, the only semblance of "citizenship" comes from commodified fantasies of belonging that drive them to continuously labor to keep the illusion alive, while imprisoning them in its hope and rhetoric. The exploitation and deprivation that buttress the spectacle don't even need to be swept under the carpet—like Tao, the global precariat might not even possess the vocabulary to articulate the schizophrenia of such a phantasmagoric existence. And like her, their subliminal and subterranean voices of anguish might find neither visibility nor audience. *The World* ultimately is but one of many stories we can tell about migration and urbanization in contemporary China—and one among many possible futures.

Chapter II

Techno-Optimism: Prototyping the Future in *Shanzhai*

Learn the best technologies from the barbarians to dominate the barbarians.
-- Wei Yuan, *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* (1843)[74]

Welcome to Huaqiangbei Electronics Market, a cluster of multi-story malls and open-air streets home to every imaginable smartphone part. Crammed within the labyrinth of stalls are about 38,000 businesses that sell consumer electronic devices of every stripe and size—ready-made knock-offs, parts sold in bulk, or a device assembled from scratch to fit your taste. Personal drones, 3D printers, laser cutters, holograph generators debut here first, at a fraction of the price, before being exported to Western markets. A frenetic energy suffuses the air, thrumming in the incessant cracking of packing tape, the staccato chatter of bargaining voices, the whir of machines that are constantly making something. This is no cyberpunk fantasy or Silicon Valley Maker Faire—it's Shenzhen.

The 2016 *Wired* documentary "Shenzhen: The Silicon Valley of Hardware," part of the magazine's Future Cities series, portrays a city that's a living, breathing open-source ecosystem of manufacturing.[75] Shattering the stereotypes of Chinese copying as being unoriginal, immoral and uncreative, the documentary presents a new kind of 'copying' that's innovative, bottom-up, iterative at hyperspeed, and an open model that challenges Western notions of intellectual property. China's technology is no longer copy-and-paste, it's now copy-and-mutate—faster, cheaper and better. Latent in the *Wired* series title 'Future Cities' is also the premise, unsettling for some and invigorating for others: This is what the future may look like.

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[74] Wei Yuan, *Haiguo Tuzhi* 海国图志 [Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms], https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=7&remap=gb.
[75] "Shenzhen: The Silicon Valley of Hardware (Full Documentary) | Future Cities," directed by Jim Demuth, *Wired UK*, July 5, 2016, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGJ5cZnoodY&t=566s.

When did this change arrive? If China's cosmopolitan aspirations were still not fully in reach in the early 2000s, its future rendered in kitsch in world parks, at some point in the late 2000s and 2010s, the dawning sense that the future had arrived in China was inexorable. China had gone from wanting to grasp the globality of capitalism to becoming its new nexus. Cities like Shenzhen, Shanghai and Hangzhou increasingly seem futuristic, with their eager embrace of cutting-edge infrastructure and marvels of modernity, ubiquitous presence of facial recognition and QR codes (and now blockchain!) and, most crucially, an overflowing abundance of optimism about technology's eschatological potential.

It's no surprise that adulation and anxiety about China began rising at the very moment of the West's own crisis. With the 2007-2008 financial recession came a growing public suspicion of neoliberal capitalism and the complicity of technology in exploiting the masses while enriching an elite minority. As the techno-optimism of the 1990s and early 2000s waned in the U.S., an audacious futurism—belief in the techno-utopian promise of control and agency over one's future—began surging across the Pacific, in China. The declaration of the "Chinese Century" at the 2008 Beijing Olympics rested on the backs of the country's expanding manufacturing power, on "Made in China," on its newly acquired status as the world's factory. When China overtook the U.S. as the world's largest manufacturer in 2011,[76] the "Made in China" brand had already become associated in the West with its own precarity and economic downturn—a massive shift in production and employment opportunities to China; growing trade deficits with China; and the fact that those who lost their jobs to Chinese competition could ironically only afford to buy cheap China-made goods.[77] Such reverse flows of capital and goods

[76] Mark J. Perry, "Chart of the day: China is now world's No. 1 manufacturer," American Enterprise Institute, December 12, 2012, https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/chart-of-the-day-china-is-now-worlds-no-1-manufacturer/.
[77] Fan Yang, *Faked in China* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015).

signify an invisible shift in optimism as well. More than just a redistribution of production, these changing tides signified a "redistribution of hope":[78] the palpable sense that the future will get better has found its new locus in China, in particular in Shenzhen.

While many scholars have focused on Shanghai as China's future city,[79] I zoom into Shenzhen as the laboratory for China's "urban science fiction."[80] Over the past decade, against the backdrop of a radically shifting landscape of global production, the stories about Shenzhen have evolved from headlines on Foxconn worker suicides, industrial excess, and low-quality production to praises of Shenzhen as the ultimate Maker City, the "city-size hackerspace," the authentic smart city, the archetype of the circular economy—a new prototype city, to use the phrase coined by digital anthropologist Silvia Lindtner.[81] Official rhetoric and Western media alike have propelled this discursive shift. In a speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, Xi Jinping called on the city to continue building itself as a pilot zone for and "model city" for the rest of the country.[82]

Beyond top-down prescriptions by the state and external commentary by Western media, however, I am more interested in the bottom-up techno-optimism emerging from the streets of Shenzhen, the workshops on its fringe, in the shadows of large multinational factories—a futurity arrested in multilayered disassembling and reconfiguration of labor, access, and temporality. Through looking at shanzhai artifacts from the *Shanzhai Archaeology* project, I

[78] "The redistribution of hope," *The Economist*, December 16, 2010, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2010/12/16/the-redistribution-of-hope.
[79] See, for example, Anna Greenspan, *Shanghai Future*: *Modernity Remade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daniel Brook, *A History of Future Cities* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013).
[80] Here I adapt Koolhaas' comments for Manhattan. See Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli, 1994), 33.
[81] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*, 76.
[82] "Xi Jinping: speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone 习近平：在深圳经济特区建立 40 周年庆祝大会上的讲话," *Xinhua*, October 14, 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/14/c_1126611290.htm.

explore shanzhai's ephemeral utopian possibilities and its subsequent co-option by the state as an exportable model.

Shanzhai in Shenzhen

Copycat, imitation, fakes, knock-offs—the Chinese have their own word for it, *shanzhai* (山寨), which traces its contemporary meaning to Cantonese slang. *Shan* literally translates to mountain, while *zhai* means "village," "fortress," or "stronghold." The word easily conjures plotlines from the Ming dynasty classic *Water Margin* (*Shuihu Zhuan* 水浒传), where a tribe of outlaws made the mountains their home, far from the rule of the emperor. As a name once given to "the lairs of outlaws and bandits," writes renowned novelist Yu Hua, who chose *shanzhai* as one of ten words that best characterize contemporary China, the term "has continued to have connotations of freedom from official control."[83] Though *shanzhai* now refers to counterfeit goods, the idea of resistance, of illicitness, of Robinhood-esque grassroots populism remain deeply embedded in these two characters. But, how did mountain fortress come to connote knock-offs? The answer lies in Shenzhen.

No other city apart from Shenzhen—perched on the tip of the Guangdong peninsula, at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, right across the harbor from Hong Kong—can better exemplify China's so-called "economic miracle" since Deng's reforms. Anointed as one of China's first Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in 1979 (alongside Zhuhai, Shantou, and Xiamen), Shenzhen became a laboratory for economic experimentation and a window opened to the world. China had its feelers out, wanting to test the extent to which it can embrace capitalism and dismantle

[83] See Yu Hua, *China in Ten Words*, trans. Allan Hepburn Barr (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 181.

socialist structures, without compromising the credibility of the communist party.[84] Cities like Shanghai and Beijing were judged too important to be at the forefront of experimentation.[85] Shenzhen, thus, became the incubator for a fetal, postsocialist China.

When Deng famously proclaimed, "Let some people get rich first," he intended for the SEZs to chart the way. And Shenzhen did not let him down: Over the past four decades, its GDP has grown 20.7% on average annually, surpassing Hong Kong and Singapore; its GDP per capita has soared from less than 1,000 U.S. dollars in 1980 to 30,000 dollars today; the sleepy fishing village has become a megatropolis.[86] Shenzhen's engine of growth has been oiled by the millions of migrants from all across China,[87] who have powered its factory floors and set up world-famous technology companies like Tencent and Huawei; copious flows of foreign direct investment that take advantage of the city's tax incentives, cheap pool of labor, and looser regulation; and a cutthroat market where products and start-ups battle like gladiators "in the coliseum."[88]

That *shanzhai* in its current incarnation originates in Shenzhen should be no surprise. The hybridity of *shanzhai* is reflected in the cultural space of this megacity. As Ien Ang notes, hybridity is a product of "the frontier, the border, the contact zone."[89] For the first decades of the reform era, Shenzhen was the "front, while the purity of the state was maintained," where the

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[84] See Lindtner, "Inventing Shenzhen: How the Copy Became the Prototype, or: How China Out-Wested the West and Saved Modernity," in *Prototype Nation*, 74-117.
[85] Greenspan, *Shanghai Future*, xxiii.
[86] Andy Mok, "The real secret of Shenzhen's 40-year economic miracle," *CGTN*, October 16, 2020, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-10-16/The-real-secret-of-Shenzhen-s-40-year-economic-miracle-UCUhXDlMiY/index.html.
[87] By 1994, Shenzhen's population had jumped to 3.3 million from 30,000 in 1978 (See Liang Zai, "Foreign Investment, Economic Growth and Temporary Migration: the Case of Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, China," *Development and Society* 28, no. 1 (1999): 115–137). Today, its population hovers around 13 million.
[88] See Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the New World Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).
[89] The idea of "hybridity" comes from Homi K. Bhabha. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Ien Ang, *Alter/Asians: Asian-Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (Annandale: Pluto Press, 2000).

global markets of capitalism first came into contact with socialist China and, as global supply chains, mass production, international borders and ports of trade shifted their gravity to Shenzhen, a "frontier"[90] where the future was being built. The SEZ, which has been used by many developing countries as a technopolitical instrument to mobilize imagination and induce "contagious capitalism"[91] via exceptions, is in itself a "deeply affective [space] in which the future is felt, encountered, and inhabited."[92] *Shanzhai*'s mode of experimentation draws precisely from Shenzhen's frontier space and its deep embeddedness in global connectivity.

As Shenzhen's population swelled more than hundred-fold from 1978 to 1994, millions of migrants (most of them female and hailing from rural inland provinces) came to fill the city's new export sector jobs.[93] Yet, while these migrant workers manufactured products for global brands, few could afford the very logoed items they assembled. Local entrepreneurs soon generated cheap alternatives to meet the rising demand of those eager to consume a slice of the global: Adidos, Nokla, Sqny, KFG. The turning point came in 2006 when a relaxation of regulations allowed Taiwanese company MediaTek to sell all-in-one mobile phone chipsets to the mainland. All of a sudden any person could "start a production line of cell phone by assembling three components: MediaTek's chips, cell phone cases and batteries." Thus began the wave of *shanzhai* electronics, in particular, *shanzhai* phones (also known as "bandit cell phones," according to CNN) that has come to define Shenzhen—where over 90% of the world's mobile phones and computers are manufactured, as of 2018.[94]

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[90] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*, 17.
[91] See Mary E. Gallagher, *Contagious Capitalism: Globalization and the Politics of Labor in China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[92] Jamie Cross, *Dream Zones: Anticipating Capitalism and Development in India* (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 9.
[93] See Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
[94] People's Daily Online, "China remains world's largest producer, consumer, exporter of consumer electronics," April 9, 2019, http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0409/c90000-9564908.html.

A simple ad for a BlockBerry phone illustrates the typical *shanzhai* phone from that era (see Fig. 8). An incredible combination of elements are cobbled together from everywhere in a collage that appears unexpectedly standard at first glance. Under its respectable veneer and muted palette of serious colors, however, are various startling incongruities once the viewer carefully inspects. The one-letter difference is a sleight of hand: Our eyes may easily glaze over the word "BlockBerry" to automatically apprehend it as "BlackBerry." The ad brazenly features then-President Barack Obama as brand ambassador, as a figure of reliability, authority and conveying a direct Western stamp of approval. His picture takes up a significant portion of ad space, towering over the actual features that the phone has (printed in tiny white font)—his reputational signaling matters more than the capabilities of the phone. Another innocuous brand name the ad pirates is the telecommunications company name in the top-left corner, which reads "Harvard Communications" in Chinese, tapping on the prestige of Harvard University in popular consciousness. With the tagline roughly translating to "Obama has BlackBerry, I have BlockBerry," the aspiration is a little tongue-in-cheek, inviting the consumer to see the humor of the situation: be more audacious than Obama by carrying the BlockBerry instead of the BlackBerry.

Fig. 8.[95]

In the early 2000s, small-scale manufacturers in the city set up micro-factories and design houses—many of which were largely undetectable and thus able to avoid the regulatory burdens of mandatory testing cycles, intellectual property laws, China's 17% consumption tax and requirements for aftersales service, as well as company taxes and labor laws.[96] A flexibly organized network of software engineers, designers, and suppliers formed *shanzhai*'s "modularized" model of production, churning out a large quantity of phones at as little as one-third of the cost of "legitimate" brands.[97] A fully integrated, large-scale *shanzhai* phone industrial chain was born. By 2009, a year in which the country's total number of mobile phone

[95] "Keepin' it real fake, part CCXVII: Not even Obama can sell us on BlockBerry," *Engadget*, June 18, 2009, image, https://www.engadget.com/2009-06-18-keepin-it-real-fake-part-ccxvii-not-even-obama-can-sell-us-on.html.
[96] Andrew Chubb, "China's Shanzhai Culture: 'Grabism' and the Politics of Hybridity," *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 92 (2015): 264.
[97] See Fan Yang, "From Bandit Cell Phones to Branding the Nation: Three Moments of *Shanzhai* in WTO-era China," *positions: asia critique* 24, no. 3 (2016): 589-619, muse.jhu.edu/article/628324.

users increased by more than 100 million, *shanzhai* mobile phones had an estimated 20% to 30% share of the Chinese market.[98] *Shanzhai* workshops were estimated to have employed more than 200,000 people in the city of Shenzhen alone.[99]

Since then, *shanzhai* has taken off, upholding Shenzhen's reputation as the "city of fakes"[100] in consumer electronics, spreading to other industries at breakneck speed, and metastasizing to China's interior heartlands. In Dafen, one can get any painting copied down to the signature; in Shekou, cars are sold with duplicated vehicle identification numbers; in Luohu are malls filled with perfectly replicated designer handbags and clothes.[101] For a long time, these products were perceived as testament to the fact that China could not innovate. International media decried the blatant copyright infringement, quality and safety issues, labor exploitation, and sometimes even Chinese state malfeasance. Domestically, the neologism "shanzhai" began to dominate vernacular Chinese in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, reported for the first time by the China Central Television (CCTV) in June,[102] appearing on prime-time *Network News Broadcast* (usually reserved for state affairs and appearances by foreign dignitaries) in December,[103] and becoming one of the most-searched words in the country.[104] With the emergence of the digital class of netizens and the popularization of social media platforms like

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[98] David Barboza, "Where false rings true," *New York Times*, April 28, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/28/technology/28cell.html.
[99] Xi Wen, "The recurring shanzhai: a phenomenon," *China Today*, March 12, 2009, http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/ctenglish/se/txt/2009-03/12/content_184541.htm.
[100] Ackbar Abbas, "Faking globalization," in *Other cities, other worlds*, ed. Andreas Huyssen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 243–266.
[101] See Winnie Won Yin Wong, "Speculative Authorship in the City of Fakes," *Current Anthropology* 58, no. 15 (February 2017): 103-112.
[102] Renjie Zhou, Xiaolin Zeng, and Tianzeng Jing, "Half-Hour Economy: Disclosing the Cell Phone Shanzhaiji Market 经济半小时：揭秘手机山寨机市场," *CCTV*, June 10, 2008, http://www.cntv.cn/program/jjbxs/20080610/101183.shtml.
[103] "Shanzhai Cell Phones Is In Network News Broadcast 山寨手机进新闻联播了," Network News Broadcast, December 2, 2008, http://tech.sina.com.cn/t/2008-12-03/09522621155.shtml.
[104] For more, see Cara Wallis and Jack Linchuan Qiu, "Shanzhaiji and the transformation of local mediascape in Shenzhen," in *Mapping Media in China*, ed. Wanning Sun and Jenny Chio (London: Routledge, 2012), 109-125.

Sina Weibo, *shanzhai* was embraced as an all-encompassing grassroots phenomenon, for the people and by the people.[105] Stories about *shanzhai*'s ruthless copycatting and IP violations gave way to stories about its unique grassroots ingenuity.

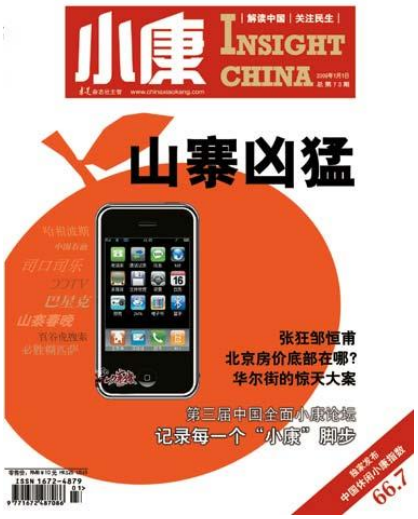

Fig. 9. Insight China's January 2009 cover title is "Fierce Shanzhai."[106]

Those who analyze *shanzhai* have attributed to it different meanings: a developmental force that can be channeled towards building the nation's own brands,[107] an instance of China's emerging creative economy,[108] a model for iterative innovation,[109] a subversive counterculture,[110] an alternative to Western-centric notions of intellectual property.[111] I propose

[105] See, for example, "Netizens Designate Year 08 as 'the Year of Shanzhai,' Top Ten Shanzhai Events Revealed 网友评 08 为"山寨年"十大山寨事件出炉," *China Daily*, December 16, 2008, http://covid-19.chinadaily.com.cn/hqss/2008-12/16/content_7310348.htm.
[106] "2008 Hottest Buzzword is Fierce Shanzhai 2008 年最热门语言之一：山寨凶猛," *Sina*, January 5, 2009, image, http://style.sina.com.cn/news/2009-01-05/104430535.shtml.
[107] Fan, *Faked in China*.
[108] Michael Keane and Elaine Jing Zhao. "Renegades on the Frontier of Innovation: The Shanzhai Grassroots Communities of Shenzhen in China's Creative Economy," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 53, no. 2 (2012): 216-230.
[109] Silvia Lindtner, Anna Greenspan, and David Li, "Designed in Shenzhen: Shanzhai Manufacturing and Maker Entrepreneurs," *Aarhus Series on Human Centered Computing* 1 (2015): 85–96.
[110] Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2017).
[111] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*.

we see *shanzhai* as techno-optimism with Chinese characteristics.[112] Techno-optimism, which is broadly defined as a manner of embracing technology developments as essentially progressive and used for the betterment of the human condition, takes on different temporalities within Shenzhen's *shanzhai* manufacturing.

What is unique about *shanzhai*'s techno-optimism? After all, piracy in itself is not unique to China. Counterfeiting is rampant in most developing nations and emerging economies, less because of a lack of a copyright culture but because the prices of legal products are simply too high.[113] Although many have essentialized copycatting as a uniquely Chinese invention (a legacy of Confucian ritualistic imitation and centuries of rote memorization in imperial bureaucratic examinations), it's in fact deeply entwined with FDI and outsourcing and born out of global consumer demand. *Shanzhai* activities only started to surface after China was integrated into the global political economy during the reform era, soaring with the advent of the WTO era.

However, *shanzhai*'s practices of imitation and iteration harbor the same optimistic nation-building aspirations of its predecessors, of technology being used towards progress. Imitation is deeply ingrained in China's nation-building movements of the past two centuries, with even earlier roots in Chinese aesthetics.[114] During China's century of humiliation, the notion of borrowing technology from the West, adapting it to local circumstances, and using it to strengthen the Chinese populace formed a central tenet of the Qing Dynasty's "Self-

[112] This is a play on the popular phrase "socialism with Chinese characteristics," a post-Mao rhetorical formulation used by the CCP to align modernization strategies with core cultural values.
[113] Ravi Sundaram argues for a similar phenomenon in India, termed *jugaad*, but such piracy is less about manufacturing and more focused on media and re-engineering existing products. See *Pirate Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2010), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203875421; Cory Doctorow, "Why poor countries lead the world in piracy," *The Guardian*, May 3, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/may/03/why-poor-countries-lead-world-piracy.
[114] In Chinese painting and calligraphy, for example, learning takes place specifically through copying. Moreover, copying is considered a sign of respect toward the master and forgery a testament to skill. For more, Han also writes about this in *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*.

Strengthening Movement." The idiom "Learn the best technologies from the barbarians to dominate the barbarians" (*shiyi changji yi zhiyi* 师夷长技以制夷) became a key slogan of the movement, which advocated for "Chinese as essence, Western for use" (*zhongti-xiyong* 中体西用). In recent years, political theorists like Zhou Zhiqiang and Andrew Chubb have drawn a connection between *shanzhai* and Grabism (*nalai zhuyi* 拿来主义) proposed by Lu Xun in 1934.[115] Lu Xun urged for a pragmatic and judicious 'grabbing' of foreign things for Chinese purposes, emphasizing that origins matter less than their utility. Any useful thing, foreign or indigenous, can be taken as long as they work for China's modernization. After independence, under Mao Zedong,[116] China also focused on foreign import followed by domestic assimilation as a progressive sequence, articulated in the slogan "learn, utilize, modify, and innovate" (*yixue, eryong, sangai, sichuang* 一学，二用，三改，四创).[117] Just as China's post-Mao reforms took what it needed from global capitalism and modified it in the SEZs to suit its own needs, so did *shanzhai*. Thus, in the bottom-up flourishing of *shanzhai* are the refraction of last century's utopian dreams of imitating technology and applying it to forge a strong Chinese future.

Shanzhai as an Ephemeral Utopia

The colorful array of phones on display under the *Shanzhai Archaeology* project may look just like an orientalist cabinet of curiosities. While a 19th-century cabinet about the Far East may

[115] See Chubb, "Grabism"; Zhou Zhiqiang, "The consumer imagination within 'shanzhai culture' 山寨文化中的消费想象," *People's Tribune* no. 22 (2008), http://news.sohu.com/20081218/n261293363.shtml.
[116] In fact, Byung-Chul Han proposes Maoism as a kind of shanzhai Marxism. See *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, 78.
[117] Xiao Yuefan explores Shanzhai's roots in Maoism. See "Maoism and Disruptive Creativity Shanzhai – an Alternative Perspective," in *Boredom, Shanzhai, and Digitisation in the Time of Creative China*, eds. Jeroen de Kloet, Chow Yiu Fai, and Lena Scheen, 186-210 (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqr1bnw.

have contained precious blue-and-white china (which originated in Jingdezhen, China's porcelain capital, and ironically was later copied by Europe en masse), this 21st-century cabinet displays *shanzhai* phones: one phone is shaped like a strawberry, another has its own gas lighter (see Fig. 10). But for a brief moment in the folds of global technological progress, before the iPhone's black-square-with-rounded-corners became the de facto design of our generation, the motley of *shanzhai* phones represented a creative flowering. More than just crude forgeries or direct copies, these phones were all multifunctional, with technological or aesthetic modifications that might strike the Western viewer as surprisingly innovative or mind-bendingly extravagant, completely unlike what a phone 'ought' to look like.

The exhibited phones are a mix of cheap flimsiness, cheerful weirdness, and durability as associated with the brands they appropriated. Instead of small modifications, these phones go all-out, delighting in the sheer outrageousness of their form. It's as though their creators thought "What is the unlikeliest object that could actually be a phone?" and manufactured it into existence. The brand-ception and ironic use of brands is thus rather avant-garde, unconfined to any preconceived notions of what a phone means—a phone can be a Ferrari car, or even a Marlboro pack! The cigarette pack phone, for instance, looks pretty realistic and can actually be used to hold cigarettes; in fact, it was most likely created in all seriousness for a smoker who would like his or her cigarettes handy, and not consciously intended as a work of art nor satire nor critique. In its inherent duplicity, it's not a phone, but a "phone," to invoke Susan Sontag's idea of Camp. The unintentional playfulness of these *shanzhai* phones lie in their straddling of seriousness and frivolousness: their additional technological capacities (e.g. multiple SIM cards) are paired not only with marginal but practical functions (e.g. shaving) but also caricatural sculpture-like exteriors. As Sontag puts it, "Behind the straight 'public' sense in which

something can be taken, one has found a private zany experience of the thing."[118] The experience of using such a phone must feel just like that, like a constant act of double interpretation, of artifice. With their weird, unabashed expressiveness, these shanzhai phones are simultaneously retro and futuristic; retro because of their reversion to the non-technological or even archaic (e.g. walkie-talkie) and futuristic in their actualization of the idea that *anything* can be a phone—a prescient anticipation of the Internet of Things, in which any physical object can be used to communicate. In their Camp quality, these exhibited phones are not meant to persuade viewers that these are the future, but to immerse them in enjoying the possibility itself.

This bubble of possibility of techno-utopia surfaced not among Silicon Valley's moneyed enthusiasts, but among the *diceng*, China's lower-class laborers; the artifacts materializing the futuristic cyberpunk aesthetic are not exclusive, expensive gadgets from the West, but instead cheap products sold to the poor in many developing countries like India and Ghana. The apparition and disapparition of these phones is an utopian interlude of technology's promise—fleetingly recuperated in Shenzhen's *shanzhai* communities—that may yet again return.

[118] Susan Sontag, *Notes on Camp* (1964), https://interglacial.com/~sburke/pub/prose/Susan_Sontag_-_Notes_on_Camp.html.

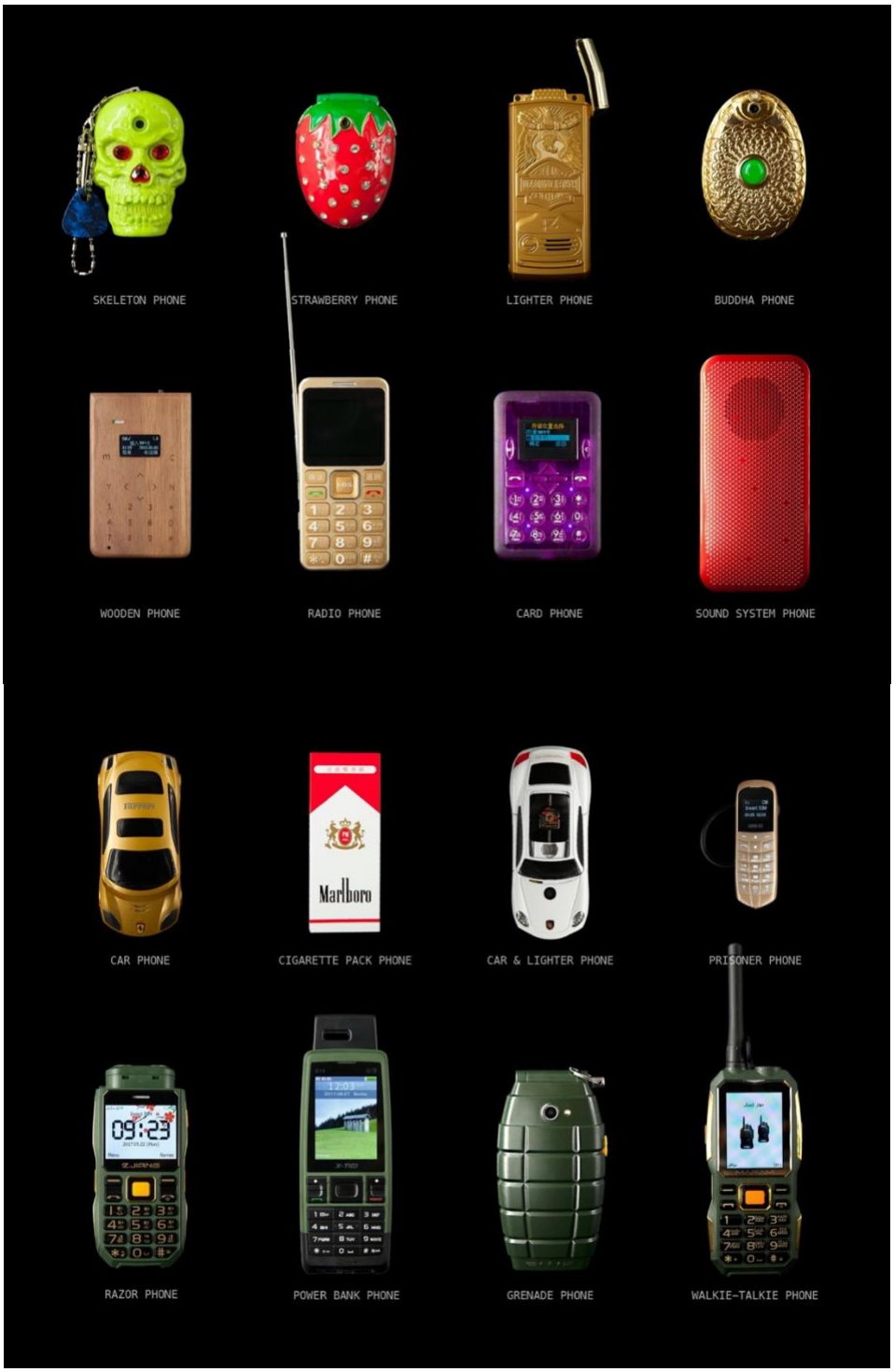

Fig. 10. Shanzhai Archaeology's exhibited phones[119]

[119] Nicolas Maigret, Maria Roszkowska, and Clément Renaud. *Shanzhai Archaeology*. 2017-2020. Collection of original phones, courtesy of Disnovation.org. Accessed February 2, 2022. https://disnovation.org/shanzhai.php.

The ephemeral bandit phone designs of *shanzai* were introduced to the Western art world through an exhibition of phones collected and curated by artists Nicolas Maigret, Maria Roszkowska and Clément Renaud. Between 2017 and 2020, *Shanzhai Archaeology* was exhibited in various European countries, debuting first at the Internationale Design Biennale in France. Their field research in Huaqiangbei Electronic Markets spanned several years, alongside the sourcing of around a hundred phones from various stalls and street vendors around China and from online retailing websites from other countries. In an attempt to simulate the intense and sensorially overwhelming environment of Huaqiangbei, the exhibition recreates the typical market kiosk, retrofitted with large flashy LED panels and a glass display enclosing the phones with colorful sticker labels.

An essay by Renaud introducing the project spotlights a few phone models that have found particular success abroad. These include a cell phone with a compass that points to Mecca (popular in Islamic countries) and phones that have modular, replaceable parts which need little equipment to open or repair—in direct contrast to the black box of most contemporary devices. A notable example is the Power Bank Phone (released in 2014 and sold at around $25-38 USD) that was created for and exported primarily to Accra, Ghana, where frequent power outages and fragmented mobile operator coverage have made battery power and multiple SIM cards top priorities. The Power Bank Phone was thus created to combat these local issues, with a three-card SIM reader, USB port to charge other devices, and with a USB bulb that can illuminate any room. Other Shenzhen-based phone manufacturers like Transsion have since iterated based on African consumer needs to become indisputable market leaders (48.2% of smartphone sales[120])

[120] Eric Olander, "China's Transsion dominates smartphone market in Africa," *The Africa Report*, March 19, 2021, https://www.theafricareport.com/73472/chinas-transsion-dominates-smartphone-market-in-africa/.

on the continent and in low-income entry-level smartphone markets in other emerging economies worldwide.

Lindtner in *Prototype Nation* also describes collecting these *shanzhai* phones during her ethnographic research: "phones in the shape of Hello Kitty figurines, car keys, Chinese alcohol bottles, and cigarette boxes; pink and golden phones the size of a 5mm thick pocket calculator to fit the tiniest purse, phones the size of a brick with golden casings, phones that came with a solar panel on their back for mobile charging."[121] The highlight of her collection was the Buddha phone (which is also featured in *Shanzhai Archaeology*):

> It came in a wooden box whose insides were lined with a golden silk fabric. Each accessory, from the charger to the software installation CD to the headphones and stylus, appears carefully designed to match the design of the phone. The software interface, too, reflects this style, featuring a modest and subdued green-yellowish graphic design and various chimes for meditation. The phone was Buddhism packaged as an "out of the box experience."[122]

While reading Lindtner's account, I was surprised by the level of detail of these phones. Neither careless nor vulgar copies, they are tailored down to the smallest detail inside-out, from the hardware to the software. They show the potential of manufacturing to be intimate, human and democratized, to be harnessed by anyone to create a vision of the future, rather than have it imposed on them. For Lindtner, the object "made Shenzhen's speed and economies of scale graspable"[123] and "made the scale and speed of *shanzhai* itself felt."[124]

While not all of these phones were fully functional or durable, there is something miraculous about the fact that they were made into reality in a ruthless age of market economics that render devices constantly obsolete. These *shanzhai* phones embody a myriad of purposes

[121] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*, 178.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*, 94.
[124] Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*, 178.

and designs, “ferrari blue, strawberry red, skeleton green, spinner gold, prisoner black,” used to “shave, pray, dance, defend yourself, open a car, light a cigarette, provide electricity.”[125] Despite their dizzying variety, many of these *shanzhai* phones are bound by one commonality: to offer practical solutions to very real problems (including the seemingly marginal needs of fringe third-world consumers and niche markets, e.g. construction workers). Their features do not offer to “change the world” by fabricating new needs. Instead, through the sheer velocity and micro-experimentation of *shanzhai* manufacturing, phones were often created through “trial-and-error, with small incremental iterations of products, possibly leading in some cases to innovations with long-lasting consequences.”[126] Unlike the years-long development of an iPhone, the weeks-long production cycle of *shanzhai* phones use the market itself as a product testing ground, to constantly mutate based on changing consumer feedback. Models are as quickly created as they are sent out of production. The national strategy of “going out/global” (*zou chu qu* 走出去) under Jiang Zemin, Deng’s successor, was ironically achieved first by *shanzhai* phones instead of any other national brand.

Just as archaeologists reconstruct past cultures from broken artifacts, *shanzhai* phones invite us to consider an alternative technological trajectory: What happens when phones can be customized to daily on-the-ground needs, instead of being dictated by the canonical uniformity from up above? What happens when high-tech devices are created without venture capital funding, sold without extensive marketing campaigns, unaccompanied by big data analytics and end-user license agreements? That’s what characterizes *shanzhai* technology: the cheap,

[125] Nicolas Maigret, Maria Roszkowska, and Clément Renaud, “Shanzhai Archaeology,” *Inmaterial* 04 (2017): 117-134, http://disnovation.org/doc/Shanzhai_Archeology_in_Inmaterial%2004_2018.pdf.
[126] Clément Renaud et al., eds. *Realtime: Making Digital China* (Lausanne: EPFL Press, 2020), 93.

multifaceted, and niche technology of a vast population that lives predominantly outside the cherished high-end markets of the West.[127] Technology made for the people, by the people.

Shanzhai, therefore, exemplifies a kind of globalization from below, a "dark flow" that "appropriates globalization, repetitively reduplicating and deconstructing it."[128] Their evolved iteration caters to the needs of those at the *diceng*, working in the interstices of global capitalism and appropriating the networks of globalization to disseminate themselves. When the 'fake' is produced out of no originals, or is in fact more innovative than the 'original,' how do we understand *shanzhai*? When does imitation end and innovation begin? In some ways what we are grappling with is a return to the colonial paradigm of mimicry. Homi Bhabha identified how simply being "almost the same but not quite" is inherently disruptive of systems of domination, since it creates gaps in the systems of knowledge through which authority is exercised.[129] As such, writes Bhabha, "mimicry is at once resemblance and menace." *Shanzhai*'s essential ambiguity—almost the same but not quite—endows it with disruptive power. Even while enthusiastically participating in free-market fundamentals, *shanzhai* has grown to be a manifestation of "Chinese character," with a simultaneously parasitic and symbiotic relationship with the state and the structures of globalization.[130]

In its heyday, some scholars like Lindtner and David Li saw *shanzhai* as the Western maker movement's future, one of extreme open-source, an alternative to the increasingly

[127] Anna Greenspan, Silvia Lindtner and David Li, "Silicon Markets: Smart Hardware from the Streets," in *The Good Life in Asia's Digital 21st Century*, ed. Vint Cerf (Hong Kong: Digital Asia Hub, 2016), 106-109, https://www.digitalasiahub.org/thegoodlife/.
[128] Hsiao-hung Chang, "Fake logos, fake theory, fake globalization," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 5 no. 2 (2004): 233.
[129] Homi K. Bhabha, "Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse," *October* 28 (Spring 1984): 125-133, https://doi.org/10.2307/778467.
[130] See Chubb, "Grabism"; Lin Zhang and Anthony Fung, "The myth of "shanzhai" culture and the paradox of digital democracy in China," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2013): 401-416.

proprietary nature of American technology.[131] With increasing IP regulation from the state and the ascendancy of high-tech brands (that evolved out from *shanzhai* manufacturing) like Huawei and Xiaomi, however, the open-source future once glimpsed in Shenzhen now appears ephemeral, like utopian glimmers. But the ephemerality of this open-source, copyright-free era of manufacturing does not bode an end to techno-optimism in China. These uncanny and unexpected sociotechnical assemblages represent more than just an elapsed global possibility. *Shanzhai* signifies the first wave in China's groundswell of techno-optimism—one that has continued in subsequent tides, even after the waning of these phones.

"It's Time to Copy China!"

Shanzhai may appear to have met its end with the *Shanzhai Archaeology* phones becoming relics of the past—but look again.

In 2016, *Wired* magazine ran a cover story with the headline asserting, "It's Time to Copy China." The story featured Lei Jun, the CEO of the mobile phone company Xiaomi, which grew out of Shenzhen's *shanzhai* industry. The benevolent-looking Lei that gazes from the *Wired* cover is reminiscent of some sort of cyberpunk Maoist propaganda (see Fig. 11). There's the ebullient red sun in the backdrop, signifying a rising east, with drones flying across instead of birds. Copies of Lei's face appear in the matrix-like fan of screens at the bottom. Like the spread of Maoism invoked in propaganda posters, the *Wired* cover invites us to consider what model is being promulgated here by someone like Lei. And, indubitably, *shanzhai* is part of the model—the story's second paragraph begins as such:

[131] See Lindtner, *Prototype Nation*; Xiaowei Wang, *Blockchain Chicken Farm: and Other Stories of Tech in China's Countryside* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

> The pink/green/yellow/blue/white Mi Pad options -- not to be confused with the iPhone 5c's pink/green/yellow/blue/white varieties -- all offer 7.9" display at 2,048 x 1,536 resolution, giving 326 pixels per inch, which by coincidence exactly matches the iPad Mini 4's 7.9" display.[132]

The vestiges of *shanzhai* reverberate in the opening lines. But a plot twist comes immediately on the heels of this paragraph. The reporter turns the notion of Xiaomi imitating Apple on its head. No doubt, Xiaomi's has its roots in the shanzhai products emulating global smartphone brands like Apple (Jony Ive, Apple's chief design officer, once accused Xiaomi of downright "theft" at a summit), but the *Wired* story focuses instead on how the company has evolved beyond the smartphone business into one of the world's most innovative (and briefly the most valuable) tech start-ups:

> [Lei Jun has built] a new kind of internet-enabled ecosystem: one that turns customers into 'fans' who co-design and then evangelise products; that transfers market-demand risk to small hardware startups in which it tactically invests; that slashes costs by minimising inventory and optimising supply chains in fresh ways; and that, by selling high-quality devices at prices so low as to obliterate margins while profiting from services, content and accessories, is innovating at the top of its market.

The idea of customers as co-designers are core to *shanzhai*; the speed and agility of *shanzhai* factories are preserved through Xiaomi's model of investing in small start-ups and selling their products on the company's platform; the adherence to low cost retains the roots of *shanzhai*'s grassroots spirit, of empowering the widest swathe of consumers to enjoy the latest advancements in technology. Xiaomi may no longer be a *shanzhai* brand, but its ecosystem thrives on the entrepreneurial drive and characteristics of *shanzhai*. Ironically, then, it's now the West's turn to imitate and to learn from these evolved Chinese businesses that had their roots in copying the West.

[132] David Rowan, "Xiaomi's $45bn formula for success (and no, it's not 'copy Apple')," *Wired*, March 3, 2016, https://www.wired.co.uk/article/xiaomi-lei-jun-internet-thinking.

Fig. 11. Wired *cover of Lei Jun (left);*[133] *propaganda poster of Mao printed with the slogan, "Chairman Mao is the red sun in our hearts" (right)*[134]

Xiaomi is but one example of the evolution of *shanzhai* manufacturing from low-market phones to high-tech devices to ecosystems of smart devices. As shanzhai sheds its grassroots associations, the mythology of *shanzhai* has gone on to power the ethos and practices of China's most successful high-tech start-ups. Surprisingly, however, much of it is driven by the state, with *shanzhai* culture subsumed under the CCP's rhetoric of the future.

During a 2015 visit to a Shenzhen makerspace, Prime Minister Li Keqiang declared, "Makers show the vitality of entrepreneurship and innovation among the people, and such creativity will serve as a lasting engine of China's economic growth in the future."[135] The trip served as a prelude to a new national policy that elevated this mode of open-source, iterative,

[133] "It's Time to Copy China." *Wired UK*, cover, April 16, 2016. https://www.wired.co.uk/article/xiaomi-lei-jun-internet-thinking.
[134] "Chairman Mao as the Great Red Sun," Chinese Art Poster Collection, 1960s, Whitworth University Library, wood block print, https://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/chinese_art_posters/65/.
[135] The State Council. "Premier Li Keqiang Visits Makerspace in Shenzhen." The People's Republic of China, January 4, 2015, http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/photos/2015/01/04/content_281475034064167.htm.

hyperspeed *shanzhai* making into a nationwide project. The policy was written around three key terms: "mass makerspace" (*zhongchuang kongjian* 众创空间), "mass entrepreneurship" (*dazhong chuangye* 大众创业), and "mass innovation" (*wanzhong chuangxin* 万众创新).[136] While avoiding the use of the term "shanzhai," the CCP harnessed its utopian grassroots energy towards narratives of national progress, framing its official policy language through various dimensions of meaning that arise from the term. The ephemeral utopian possibilities of *shanzhai* are now marshaled towards mobilizing optimism on a mass scale for nation-building.

On the backs of these entrepreneurship and making slogans have come broader manufacturing-focused national strategies. For instance, the shift from "Made in China" to "Created in China" represent the CCP's desire to upgrade the nation from producing the world's branded products toward creating the nation's own intellectual-property-eligible brands;[137] the "Made in China 2025" initiative plans to further develop the manufacturing sector towards ten high-tech industries[138] core to the so-called fourth industrial revolution; the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) directs China's surplus industrial capacity towards transnational infrastructure projects in Asia, Europe and Africa. Following the Chinese state's growing investments and political expansion into overseas markets, especially with the BRI, the circulation of *shanzhai* commodities have become as functional and political as they are utopian or optimistic. The CCP's industrial policies and national strategic plans attempt to scale up the *shanzhai*

[136] The State Council. "Full Transcript of the State Council policy briefing on Feb 5, 2016." The People's Republic of China, February 5, 2016, http://english.www.gov.cn/news/policy_briefings/2016/02/05/content_281475284749774.htm.
[137] Michael Keane, *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 85.
[138] Electric cars and other new energy vehicles; next-generation information technology (IT) and telecommunications; advanced robotics and artificial intelligence; agricultural technology; aerospace engineering; new synthetic materials; advanced electrical equipment; emerging bio-medicine; high-end rail infrastructure; and high-tech maritime engineering.

phenomena from fringe to center, dispersed to centralized, individuals to a citizen collective, micro-workshops to the nation-as-a-factory.

China's contemporary techno-optimism is the latest iteration of last century's utopian dreams, where reformists and revolutionaries extolled imitation as one of the building blocks of the modern Chinese nation-state. Its particular manifestation in the phenomena of *shanzhai* arises from the sheer concentration and acceleration of manufacturing power in Shenzhen; from the desires of migrant laborers to not just possess the branded products made by their hands, but also access and appropriate the flows of globalization for their own ends. As Lawrence Lek's video essay puts it, "Sinofuturism shares a critical optimism about technology [...] optimism about speed, velocity, and the future as a means to subvert the institutions of the present [...] Futurism uses technology as the basis of freedom." Such optimism is not absolute, however. Technology can and certainly has wreaked nightmarish consequences in Shenzhen, most visibly in the Foxconn worker suicides and the sweatshop conditions of numerous factories, as well as in the labor processes of *shanzhai*. Yet, these have not emptied *shanzhai* of its utopian glimmers nor its optimistic energy. The growing techno-pessimism, skepticism, and fatalism in most of the developed world—that the future can only likely get worse, not better—has not yet afflicted China.

The ephemeral utopia of *shanzhai* phones may yet return in the open-source futures envisioned by the maker movement. The future that these campy yet pragmatic phones portend is one of bottom-up, democratized making by those at the *diceng*, where the harnessing of technology by sweatshop workers, migrant laborers, the poor and marginalized in globalization represents their ability to create a future to their taste. Such optimism coexists with the pessimism outlined in Chapter One—reality for these migrant laborers is an oscillation between

postsocialist pessimism in most cities and the techno-optimism found most potently in Shenzhen. But although such utopian glimmers have faded, *shanzhai* survives in its subsequent iterations. While China once exported *shanzhai* phones to the rest of the world, it now exports *shanzhai*'s manufacturing-driven optimism, a grassroots energy that has now been co-opted by the state to sustain this velocity, kinetic vitality, innovativeness, and iterative potential on a grand national (and international) scale. Techno-optimism with Chinese characteristics has become China's strongest export, or what underlies and threads through most of its products abroad—from Huawei's 5G network equipment to Transsion's mobile phones for low-income markets to the BRI's infrastructural projects. While other emerging economies like India and Southeast Asia are clamoring to recreate China's economic miracle, here comes the increasingly pointed question posed to Western viewers of the *Wired* cover: Will China be like us or will we be like them?

Chapter III

Entwined Futures: Chimerica in *China Mountain Zhang* and *Waste Tide*

What will visitors from the West discover in the unfamiliar sky of Planet China?
-- Wu Yan[139]

In 2030 A.D., a Chinese man in a Zhongshan suit speaks before an auditorium of young Asian faces lit by gleaming tablets. The scene is happening in Beijing, China. "Why do great nations fail?" asks the economics professor, as images of the Parthenon, the Colosseum, the British flag, and the U.S. Capitol flash across the screen. He pinpoints the root cause to how America tried to spend and tax itself out of a great recession and ended in crushing debt. As the professor gloats with a rather malevolent chortle, "Of course, we owned most of their debt, so now they work for us," the students titter. In the backdrop, Communist propaganda-style banners are draped over the banisters and Mao gazes benignly upon the auditorium from his blown-up portrait.

This video could be right out of any sci-fi movie, but it's actually an advertisement paid for by the Citizens Against Government Waste and Americans for Prosperity Foundation.[140] The ad went viral during the 2010 U.S. midterm season and was re-aired during Mitt Romney's 2012 Presidential campaign—one among a slew of China-centric ads during those two campaign seasons.[141] Undergirding these ads has been a growing "China panic" that some have likened to the "Japan panic" of the 1970s and 1980s. Increasingly, the communist country's fiscal spending power is as integral to visions of rising China as traditional representations of a vast labor pool,

[139] Wu Yan, "'Great Wall Planet': Introducing Chinese Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (2013): 7.
[140] Citizens Against Government Waste, "Chinese Professor," YouTube (2010), uploaded on October 20, 2010, https://youtu.be/OTSQozWP-rM.
[141] Fan Yang, "Fiscal Orientalism: China Panic, the Indebted Citizen, and the Spectacle of National Debt," *Journal of Asian American Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (2016): 375–96, doi:10.1353/jaas.2016.0032.

which can be traced back to deep-rooted yellow peril discourse revolving around coolies in the latter half of the 19th century. With China's growing fiscal muscle, the "dual image of China as both developing-world producers and first-world consumers" has come to define it in the 21st century.[142]

Alongside the prospect of the U.S. following in the footsteps of declining empires (Greece, Rome, and Great Britain), the ad throws in another specter designed to unsettle the median American voter: the fear of 'Red China'. Maoist-era propaganda in a sleek, futuristic auditorium invokes anxieties about communism—drawing not just on its denotations of an authoritarian regime and ideologically antithetical other, but also on domestic fears of encroaching socialism in the U.S. On the professor's slides, the central placement of the words "Healthcare Debacle," which alludes to Obamacare, taps on the long-running Cold War patterns of thought in the U.S. It draws on the popular notions of socialism as bleak, dystopian, and a sign of a nation's decline, while allowing China to step in to fill the Soviet's shoes as the predominant post-Cold War threat.

Watching it now, there's almost something nostalgic about the ad's worldview of Sino-American relations: one that harkens back to binaristic Cold War thinking, civilizational differences, and ideological fault-lines. But there's also a distinct undercurrent of economic interdependency that the Soviet-American relationship, given its "iron curtain," just never had. China is America's biggest foreign debtor, its bank vaults have accumulated vast amounts of American currency reserves, and its massive labor pool assembles most iconic American products—anything from Ray Bans to Barbie dolls to iPhones embossed with the telling line: "Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China." Millions of Chinese immigrants have

[142] David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. 2015. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media.* New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

come to the U.S. in pursuit of the American Dream, surging with the 1979 normalization of relations, and growing nearly seven-fold from 1980 to 2020;[143] today, China remains the top sender of international students to American universities.[144] The Sino-U.S. relationship is no mere Manichean antagonism. The creditor-debtor, exporter-importer, manufacturer-consumer, developer-producer, self-other relationship spills over boundaries and preordained roles. And encrypted in these various positionalities is the rising power and incumbent power dynamic that now defines the superpower competition of the 21st century.

Ironically, in the ad's vision of the future, China beats America at its own game. Despite being a communist state, China thrives within the neoliberal financial system that the U.S. helped build post-Bretton Woods, while the U.S. sees a collapse of its economy. Yet, this also underscores the interwovenness of their futures: one cannot fathom a future of either without it being in relation to the other—a sentiment best encapsulated in the term "Chimerica" (2007), coined by historian Niall Ferguson and economist Moritz Schularick. The foreign menace really isn't so foreign, after all.

Chimerica occupies a curious position between the optimism of American triumph in the nineties, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's dissolution, and the grim paranoia of the Thucydides' trap in the 2010s—the conviction that war is inevitable when a rising power rivals a ruling power.[145] Coined during a global asset boom and on the eve of the 2007-2008 Global Financial Crisis, Chimerica is a unique geo-economic constellation, a financial marriage between

[143] Carlos Echeverria-Estrada and Jeanne Batalova, "Chinese Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, January 15, 2020, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states-2018#:~:text=The%20population%20of%20Chinese%20immigrants,the%20overall%20foreign%2Dborn%20population.

[144] "All Places of Origin," Open Doors, accessed on January 8, 2022, https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/all-places-of-origin/.

[145] Graham T. Allison, "Thucydides's trap has been sprung in the Pacific," *Financial Times,* August 21, 2012, https://www.ft.com/content/5d695b5a-ead3-11e1-984b-00144feab49a. See also: Graham T. Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

the number one superpower and its likeliest future rival, and a world economic order unlike any that came before it. Ferguson and Shularick call it a "symbiosis" that pairs Chinese export-led development with U.S. over-consumption.[146] While many have portended the end of Chimerica as soon as it began (including the authors of the pithy portmanteau themselves)[147]—especially in the throes of Trump's trade war against China—the U.S. goods trade deficit has in fact increased since 2016[148] and China remains the largest supplier of goods to the U.S. Even amid growing discourse on a new Cold War,[149] Chimerica has persisted. It's no chimera.

As tempting as it would be to see the Sino-American relationship as a repeat of the Cold War, it's also reductive. For one, Cold War metaphors incline us toward a core assumption: that the U.S. will emerge triumphant this time round, just as it did in the original. Against the backdrop of a "Chimerican" world order that's vastly different from the segregated economies and containment policy during the Cold War era, envisioning the future is no longer a zero-sum prediction. How does China's rise to world power and desire for national rejuvenation jostle against America's fears of decline and long-held beliefs of exceptionalism? Are Sinofutures utopian or dystopian, optimistic or pessimistic? And, more crucially, when it comes to imagining a shared Chimerican future, how can two nationalisms reconcile when one side's utopia is the other's dystopia?

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[146] Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, "'Chimerica' and the Global Asset Market Boom," *International Finance* 10, no. 3 (2007): 228. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2362.2007.00210.x.

[147] See Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, "The End of Chimerica," *International Finance* 14, no. 1 (2011): 1–26.

[148] "How China Won Trump's Trade War and Got Americans to Foot the Bill," *Bloomberg*, January 11, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-11/how-china-won-trump-s-good-and-easy-to-win-trade-war.

[149] See, for example: David E. Sanger, "Washington Hears Echoes of the '50s and Worries: Is This a Cold War With China?," *New York Times*, October 17, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/17/us/politics/china-new-cold-war.html; Hal Brands and John Lewis Gaddis, "The New Cold War: America, China, and the Echoes of History," *Foreign Affairs*, October 19, 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-10-19/new-cold-war; Charles Edel and Hal Brands, "The Real Origins Of The U.S.-China Cold War," *Foreign Policy*, June 2, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/02/the-real-origins-of-the-u-s-china-cold-war-big-think-communism/.

Why Sf

I turn here to science fiction (henceforth "sf"[150]) which Darko Suvin, arguably the genre's most important theorist, defines as a literature of "cognitive estrangement."[151] Cognitively, sf imagines the future as an extension of the norms of the empirical present. Simultaneously, sf estranges through an imaginative framework which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time renders it unfamiliar. Sf's ability to displace the reader to a different space and time—like a distorting lens or distancing mirror—and function as a critique of the present has made it a unique vehicle for Chinese and Western sf writers on a quest to imagine China's future.

Chinese sf since the late Qing—beginning with Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* (featured in the Conclusion)—have sought to imagine a different political reality by projecting desires of China's rise and reforms onto an idealized future. Faced with the absurdity of contemporary China (what novelist Ning Ken calls the "ultra-unreal"),[152] the "new wave" of Chinese sf since the 1990s have turned towards dystopian elements to expose the problems of the present regime and to subvert dominant narratives (e.g. Xi's Chinese Dream, the myth of development, techno-optimism).[153]

Meanwhile, the West has long grappled with the modernization and rapid industrialization of East Asian economies by using sf. Techno-Orientalism, a term coined by cultural studies

[150] Most writers of the field science/speculative fiction eschew the label "sci-fi" (likely due to the fact that it is reminiscent of low-budget movies) and prefer instead "SF" or "sf". More recently, the lowercase abbreviation "sf" has been preferred since *Science Fiction Studies* pioneered the change in the mid-1990s. This essay will use "sf" as an abbreviation for science fiction.
[151] Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 14.
[152] Ning Ken, "Modern China is So Crazy It Needs a New Literary Genre," *Literary Hub*, June 23, 2016, trans. Thomas Moran, https://lithub.com/modern-china-is-so-crazy-it-needs-a-new-literary-genre/.
[153] See Mingwei Song, "Introduction: Does Science Fiction Dream of a Chinese New Wave?" in *The Reincarnated Giant: An Anthology of Twenty-First-Century Chinese Science Fiction*, ed. Theodore Huters and Mingwei Song (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), xi-xxi; "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (2013): 86–102.

scholars David Morley and Kevin Robins, describes the West's imagination of Asian subjects and cultures in hypertechnological terms—exemplified by one of sf's most enduring and significant movements in the late-20th century, the "cyberpunk." Writing in 1995, Morley and Robins were mainly focused on Japan as "a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity."[154] Yet, both acknowledged in the book that at their time of writing the Japan Panic had already seemed to be subsiding as attention shifted to the "Tiger" economies—Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore—while Japan entered its own "Lost Decade" of economic stagnation.[155] By the last decade of the 20th century, China began superseding Japan as the canvas on which sf writers projected their technological fantasies and fears of Western obsolescence.[156]

Sf, which tends to emerge and take root in highly industrialized societies from the point of developmental "maturity," reflects the changing positions of different national audiences as they imagine themselves in a world-system under a global technoscientific regime.[157] If the (Sino)future will be Chimerican, then it's necessary to look at how Chinese and American sf have navigated the reshuffling of world power. In particular, I choose to interrogate visions of Chimerica in two works of sf, one American and one Chinese: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* (1992) and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao* 荒潮) (2013).

A weird inversion of futures occurs in these two novels. While the American text envisions a world when Chinese socialism dominates, the Chinese text pictures a future of hyper-globalization and late capitalism. In both futures, the *other* nation is a visceral, potent presence,

[154] David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 168.
[155] Morley and Robins, *Spaces of Identity*, 170.
[156] Greta Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction," MELUS 33, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 76.
[157] See Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Science Fiction and Empire," *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 2 (2003): 231–45.

as enemy, competitor, partner, or even as a developmental future to be followed. At this moment of growing geopolitical tensions, our present appears to be a pastiche of the two texts; the novels reflect the ideological impasse and anxieties that suffuse our time. Yet, both have received limited critical attention in the West, and fewer have looked at them in relation to texts from the other hemisphere.[158]

Through sf's cognitive estrangement, Sinofuturism offers multiple temporalities as an alternative to the present and subverts both American and Chinese narratives of progress towards utopian goals. *China Mountain Zhang* inverts Western developmental progression by presenting socialist China as the future and situating America in China's past; yet the cruel optimism of a Chinese-dominated future undercuts its seeming utopia. Meanwhile, *Waste Tide* challenges the myth of neoliberal globalization and of imitating Western development, exposing the schism between aspiration (modernity via economic growth) and reality (exploitation, inequality, and pollution). Though the two novels show their characters as trapped within the obliterating force of globalization, one ideologically dominated by the Chinese and one economically driven by the

[158] For *China Mountain Zhang*, see: Christopher T. Fan, "Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's China Mountain Zhang," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2015), https://doi.org/10.5070/T861019585.; Betsy Huang, "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions," *Melus* 33, no. 4 (2008): 23–43, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.4.23; Yupei Zhou, "Beyond Ethnicity and Gender: China Mountain Zhang's Transcendent Techniques," *Extrapolation* 42, no. 4 (2001): 374–83, https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2001.42.4.374; Sheng-mei Ma, *Sinophone-Anglophone Cultural Duet* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 137–55, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-58033-3_9.
For *Waste Tide*, see: Cara Healey, "Estranging Realism in Chinese Science Fiction: Hybridity and Environmentalism in Chen Qiufan's 'The Waste Tide,'" *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 1-33, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26427438; Christine Xiong, "Rethinking the Cyborg in Chen Qiufan's Waste Tide," Foundation (Dagenham) 50, no. 139 (2021): 75–89; Mengtian Sun, "Imagining Globalization in Paolo Bacigalupi's The Windup Girl and Chen Qiufan's The Waste Tide," *Science-Fiction Studies* 46, no. 2 (2019): 289–306, https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.46.2.0289; Yuanyuan Hua, "The Dual Alienation in Waste Tide," *Comparative Literature Studies* (Urbana) 57, no. 4 (2020): 670–85, https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.57.4.0670; Yuqin Jiang, "Ecotech, Alienation, and Science Realism in the Chinese Cyborg Novel Waste Tide," *Comparative Literature Studies* (Urbana) 57, no. 4 (2020): 655–69, https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.57.4.0655.

U.S., both gesture towards a way of contesting that seemingly inevitable and hegemonic future: the hybrid, Chimerican posthuman.

Cruel Optimism and Chinese Socialism

Nominated for the Hugo and Nebula Awards, McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* was born at a rather particular moment in history: In 1992, the Soviet Union had just collapsed; the Cold War ended with a whimper instead of a bang; China was in its tumultuous postsocialist era of radical economic reforms; the aftershocks of the Tiananmen Protests had barely smoothed over in the international arena (trade sanctions began lifting). And it's at this very moment of American triumph, with the death knell for communism reverberating in the air, that McHugh presents a pessimistic vision of American defeat and an alternative "end of history": socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The novel opens in a world where China is the dominant global empire with an indisputable edge in technology. As the eponymous protagonist Zhang Zhongshan (a literal translation of his name is China Mountain Zhang) explains, "national debt and trade deficit of the old United States precipitated the second depression" in the early 21st century. After the U.S. economy ground to a halt, an incipient Communist Party takes over parts of New York City, which leads to "the Second Civil War" that the Chinese help support. In the wake of a Cultural Revolution-esque "Great Cleansing Winds," America emerges from the proletariat revolution as the Socialist Union of American States. In contrast, China "managed to get their economic shit together" due to protectionist currency policies and emerge as the sole superpower—not just economically but also ideologically.

What does a China-dominated future look like? Zhang's trajectory from America, a "second-rate country" (2), to eventually China, "where everyone wants to go […] where there is possibility" (86) is a startling inversion of well-worn tropes: the xenophobic cry "Go back to China!" is now a privilege to be earned through talent, labor, or marriage to a Chinese citizen, the yellow peril trope is turned on its head since purity of Chinese ethnicity is now the most desirable, and China is the promised land and mecca for education. Chinese language is taught in American middle schools, permeates slang (people even curse with "Lenin and Mao Zedong!"—Marxist figures now a stand-in for God) and mixes with English to form a hybrid patois—Chinglish, peppered with Chinese phrases.

Zhang passes for an "ABC," American-born Chinese, despite being half-Hispanic due to his parents paying to adjust his genetic make-up so that he can look more like his Chinese father. He exemplifies this "Chimerica" hybridity: he is half-Chinese, half-Hispanic, but in the eyes of the Chinese state "impure," "a mongrel" and "an imposter" (4); he is also queer, chafing against the strict heteronormative standards of the state where "deviance is a capital offence" (12); he has two names, Rafael Luis and Zhang Zhong Shan; ideologically, he believes in neither socialism nor capitalism (6). Several times in the novel, Zhang expresses that governments are large while individuals are small—they can only "survive in the cracks" (6), or can only be "free" when they "slip through the cracks" (44). He is suspended between two realities, in the cracks beneath the mammoth state machinery and its bureaucratic processes that erase individuality and stifle any space for self-expression.

Yet, this China-centric future McHugh paints does not fit neatly in a Marxist linear progression from primitive society to feudalism to industrial revolution to capitalism to the proletariat revolution to socialism to communism. As the narrator Zhang tells a college class he

teaches towards the end of the novel, history is "non-linear" (295). Though technology has progressed, with settlements on Mars and a more rudimentary but still Gibson-esque cyberspace, the future seems familiar, under the specter of the past. Herein lies the novel's locus of cognitive estrangement: China's communist past is grafted onto America's future. In an inversion of the developmental teleology of Western neoliberal progress, the novel uses the revolutionary temporality of Communism to subvert "developmental time." At the time McHugh wrote the novel, the U.S. has long placed China in a time that's "behind" or "more backward" than America's present, in a "denial of coevalness."[159] The novel's Sinofuture reverses the temporal othering, rendering America trapped in China's pastness and condemned to eventually synchronize with China's advanced socialist modernity.

Despite its estrangement, the nuanced social fabric of *China Mountain Zhang* and Zhang's journey will resonate as an uncannily familiar reality to the American reader. Zhang spends much of the novel looking for stable, fulfilling employment amid administrative struggles, ennui, and repetitive labor. His belated bildungsroman boils down to a job search across continents, echoing McHugh's own post-college experiences. As an English graduate in the 1980s, McHugh was thrust into a world of shrinking job opportunities, declining print culture, and growing financialization. To escape a seemingly endless cycle of job insecurity, she decided to go all the way from New York to Shijiazhuang, China to teach English.[160] As McHugh puts it, "Zhang's tentativeness reflects not only the people I met in China, but my own tentativeness, my own sense that I've gone way out here."[161]

[159] This is a term from anthropology, defined by Johannes Fabian as "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse." See *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 31.
[160] Fan, "Techno-Orientalism."
[161] Ibid.

This tentativeness is a "cruel optimism,"[162] as coined by Lauren Berlant, of surviving amidst the ordinariness of life-in-perpetual-crisis. The precarity of Berlant's neoliberal capitalism has been substituted by that of Chinese socialism. The tentativeness is also reflected in the stop-start nature of Zhang's life. Although at the beginning of the novel Zhang aspires to getting ahead, of being able to *be somewhere*, to a "condition of stasis,"[163] he finds himself often regressing, both in terms of the sterile or far-flung localities that stable employment requires (including the Arctic) as well as the nostalgia he has for a retrograde part of himself, that is, his Spanish side—"whatever I have lost was gone before I was born" (38). When he finally earns his right to enter China, he strays from "aspirational normativity"[164] in his dalliances with his gay lover-cum-tutor Haitao and incursions into illegal gambling. When Haitao commits suicide after being investigated for homosexuality, Zhang reverts to the constant stop-start struggle toward an unknown destination, in a hurtle forward that oscillates between the state-prescribed fantasy of upward mobility and achieving an occasional standstill—he does this by pouring himself into his studies. He has to keep striving despite knowing that arriving at an end-destination—a true terminus or resting place instead of a temporary "impasse"[165]—is a fantasy; if he stops moving forward, he may fall between the cracks to death like Haitao. Socialism's promised normativity—that all are "equitable"—is but a "soothing bustle" which drowns out the dread of the looming present and smothers any impulse to imagine revolution.

Authoritarianism weighs like a heavy cloak over the individuals of the novel, like a banal condition of life that's hard to cast aside under the omniscient state in China—though in the

[162] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[163] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 179.
[164] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 164.
[165] See Berlant, especially chapter 6, "After the Good Life," for an elaboration of this concept.

U.S., which is on the fringe of the Chinese global empire and more peripheral in the technological apparatus, more freedom and experimentation with one's sexuality seems to be allowed in gray spaces that escape state detection. But, in Nanjing, China, Zhang's lover Haitao commits suicide after being "morally" investigated for homosexuality. The night before he takes his life, when the two of them escape from a police raid of a gay gambling den, Zhang notices that Haitao is paralyzed by a sense of apathy and despair similar to that which Zhang experienced in the Arctic—*perlerorneq*, dubbed by the Inuits as "winter depression" when it "gets dark" and people become "sick of life" (89). The motifs of light and darkness map onto Haitao's growing "awareness of the futility of it all" (176). Fearing that he'll be sent to Reform Through Labor, Haitao's inner light extinguishes under the invisible darkness of the state, and he falls through the cracks to his death. Haitao's death therefore shows the triviality of human life and insignificance of individual autonomy within the seeming "utopia" of Chinese ascendancy. The state is a merciless force that barrels towards the future, leaving in its wake the lives of those stray from its brand of aspirational normativity.

Not all is pessimism, however. *China Mountain Zhang* offers some semblance of hope with Daoist engineering, or organic engineering—a revolutionary technique that can design buildings as "complex as bodies, with systems for nervous systems and circulation and musculature" using the mind alone, with the help of "the system" (the novel's cyberspace, a vast Internet-like network, which has access to the individual's psyche). Zhang's Chimerican hybridity is a potential tool for liberation. He initially struggles with Daoist engineering, unable to sustain his imagination in the system past seconds, his mind often drifting to the imagery of "light through ice" (224, 230). Each time, he struggles to penetrate a competing image, namely Haitao's "white clothes" folded by the broken window where he had committed suicide—a

reminder of the slow violence of the state (222, 232). For Zhang, China falls into "two neat halves" in his memory: the half that is Haitao and the time after Haitao commits suicide, what Zhang calls "white time" (275). The color white can mean either death or life, depending on "whether you're Eastern or Western" (284). White, which Zhang associated with Haitao's death (also the color of funerals in China), becomes his way to unlocking his mind, "[expanding]" (234), becoming at one with himself—"I am myself, myself" (235)—and producing a design with Daoist engineering. It's telling that the first design he produces is a mix of architectural styles, a Western building with Chinese tile roofs, just like how Zhang is "a little of both" cultures (284). In a world where people become "nerve endings for the system" (217) and it's "impossible to tell where human ends and machines begin" (215), Daoist engineering allows Zhang to reconcile the two halves of his time in China—superimposing upon the white of Haitao's death, the creative expanse of Daoist engineering; it allows Zhang to reconcile the two halves of his identity, Eastern and Western, Chinese and American/Hispanic, and become "whole." And instead of feeling controlled or dictated by the system, Zhang feels "limited" without it once he has tasted the expanse that Daoist engineering offers (235). The system allows Zhang to truly embrace his Chimerican hybridity as a source of his personal liberation and fulfillment.

Though it's tempting to read "the system" as an Orwellian surveillance structure,[166] attuned to one's inner mental states and able to "control your moments of consciousness, as well as your moods" in hospital settings (133), Zhang ironically regains agency over the system by letting it be "there for [him], a part of [him]" (235)—a lesson of inaction (*wuwei*) that is at the heart of Daoism. Betsy Huang argues that Daoist engineering is "the innovative instrument with which

[166] See Huang, "Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions."

our American engineer will build a new American future" and "an elegant metaphor for systemic reform," reading the novel as a warning against a repressive state.[167] But is it an "American future" as Huang's repetition suggests? A larger story is at work: Zhang's own self-reconciliation with the two halves of him, two halves of his time in China, and how to be at one with "the system." The future McHugh paints is Chimerican.

Hyper-globalization and Chinese Discontents

If Chimerica wasn't yet obvious at the time of McHugh's writing, by the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis, it was evident that globalization was hurtling forward with the U.S.-China relationship at its fore. The Chimerican marriage exemplifies the forces of globalization that have swept across the globe since the late 1990s, in production, trade, and capital—as Ferguson and Xiang Xu put it, the history of Chimerica is also the history of the international economy.[168] While McHugh envisioned a future where socialism and statist mercantilism wins in the early 1990s, the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way in this century: not toward liberal democracy, but rather toward unfettered capitalism and globalization. This future isn't rosy either.

The future that emerges in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*[169] (2013) shows the gritty underbelly and mercenary logic of Chimerica. Hailed as one of China's foremost "new wave" sf writers (often dubbed "China's William Gibson" by Western media outlets[170]), Chen is known for his

[167] Huang, "Pre-modern," 35-37.
[168] Niall Ferguson and Xiang Xu, "Making Chimerica Great Again," *International Finance* (Oxford, England) 21 (3) (2018): 250, https://doi.org/10.1111/infi.12335.
[169] Qiufan Chen 陈楸帆, *Huangchao* 荒潮 [*Waste Tide*] (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2013). All subsequent citations will reference the *Waste Tide*, trans. Ken Liu (New York: Tor, 2019), unless otherwise specified.
[170] Zheping Huang, "China's William Gibson is a sci-fi writer wrestling with problems from pollution to patriarchy," *Quartz*, March 27, 2018, https://qz.com/quartzy/1237167/chinas-william-gibson-is-a-sci-fi-writer-wrestling-with-problems-from-pollution-to-patriarchy/.

"science fiction realism."[171] While most see sf as the opposite of realism, sf often operates as a representation of reality with high-intensity "mimesis."[172] Through the representation of objects which are nonimaginary, sf portrays the metaphorical, the figurative and the poetic as the literal. Much of the setting of *Waste Tide* is drawn from the real Guiyu, once the world's largest electronic waste (e-waste) dumping ground and only a few miles away from Chen's hometown. Before China banned foreign trash imports in 2018, 70% of e-waste generated globally ended up within its borders, smuggled in through illegal channels, contravening United Nations conventions.[173]

Set in the near-future, *Waste Tide* almost reads like a realist eco-thriller instead of sf. Scott Brandle, a representative of a multinational conglomerate TerraGreen Recycling, who pays a visit to Silicon Isle (a homophone of Guiyu)—the world's e-waste graveyard—in order to persuade the local government to let his company take over the town's lucrative e-waste recycling business. Though TerraGreen pledges to fix the town's pollution with its environmentally friendly technology, local resistance is strong, in particular from the three clans who control the isle's recycling industry and the migrant laborers known as "waste people." When Chen Kaizong, Brandle's translator and a Chinese American immigrant originally from the isle, meets one of the waste girls Mimi, through her he begins to uncover the full extent of the inequalities and grotesque violence the waste people experience at the hands of isle natives. The real protagonist is revealed: Mimi, who finds herself becoming more than just human due to

[171] Ken Liu, "Introduction: China Dreams," in *Invisible Planets: Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction in Translation*, ed. Liu (New York: Tor, 2016), 14.
[172] See Seo-young Chu, *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep? A Science-Fictional Theory of Representation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).
[173] David Stanway, "China trash town's cleanup bolstered by import ban," *Reuters*, January 23, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-environment-waste-insight/china-trash-towns-cleanup-bolstered-by-import-ban-idUSKBN1FD043.

a virus infection, ignites change in the isle while global forces—corporations, the military, a non-profit international institution—jostle to exploit her.

The near-future world of *Waste Tide* defamiliarizes and restructures our experience of China's present. It deliberately performs estranging critical interrogations of current socio-political concerns about economic growth at all cost—an obsession best encapsulated by Deng Xiaoping's slogan: "Development is the only hard imperative." Through violence, the dystopian rendering of Silicon Isle, and the "weirdly weird"[174] turn of events, the novel is symptomatic of a particular structure of feeling—a deep skepticism of blind faith in globalization, a profound anxiety about China's "ultra-unreal" breakneck development, and dissatisfaction with the limitations of realism as a mode for representing the absurd realities in contemporary China.

Waste Tide is unabashed in its dissection of globalization's failings and China's complicity in the neoliberal order. The world order is no doubt still Chimerican, with China as the nexus of globalized production. However, by taking on the perspective of the locals and the vulnerable low-income workers who keep the wheels running, globalization's promises of prosperity and trickle-down economics are shown to be a sham. On the toxin-soaked island, "there are two Silicon Isles" (29). One is the affluent Silicon Isle Town full of luxury brands and mansions, where the clan leaders and natives live; the other is where the waste people live and toil, in tightly packed workshops and shoddy village shacks, steeped in trash and abandoned fields of e-waste. Each day, in open-air informal workshops, the waste people dismantle gadgets by hand, apply acids and melt casings with lighters, smell the plastic with their noses. Their bodies are dispensable, "cheaper than machines" as they can simply be fired if they fall sick, never needing "repairs" (70); "contaminated" with the dark stains of toxic dust and fumes from incinerating

[174] Timothy Morton, "What is dark ecology?" Changing Weathers, 2015, http://www.changingweathers.net/en/episodes/48/what-is-dark-ecology.

plastic and acid-washing metal, the waste people are used to being "treated as trash" by the natives, "discarded after they're done with [them]" (161); they have become synonymous with "slaves, bugs, disposable trash" (212). The isle is a theatre of cruel inequalities.

The disruptive impacts of globalization play out on the bodies of the waste people. Such shocking sequences tear apart the optimism of neoliberal globalization and its rhetoric of hope and progress. Just as the innards of electronic gadgets are ripped out, the waste people's bodies too are constantly subject to violence. The grotesque is glibly doled out: an orphan fries in a malfunctioning armor like "an overcooked piece of shriveled bacon" (126), a rickshaw driver is smashed against the bridge like a "limp…dish of meat displayed for sale" (110), the head of a waste person "crushed" between the pincers of a robot arm (38). Even the stone-hearted Brandle is reminded of Dante's *Inferno*, viewing the conditions of the workshops as a living hell. Human lives are swept up by unknowable tides, by a literal typhoon, and by the superstitious centuries-old tradition of palirromancy—clan leaders seek to predict the future by observing the struggles of tied and drowning animals; occasionally, human beings have been sacrificed as well, namely "babies born out of wedlock and unchaste women" (142). Most of all, the violence is literalized upon the body of Mimi, who is abducted, tortured, raped, fed hallucinogenic drugs, and buried alive. Hers is a familiar story in China's economic miracle: young village girls who migrate to coastal towns to seek a better life, toiling in workshops with low wages and abysmal conditions, erased of their individuality and subsumed under the category of 'migrant laborers.'[175] In the future painted in *Waste Tide*, the waste people's humanity is further extinguished by the unceasing cycles of globalization that keep "the machines roaring and the workers busy" (72).

[175] Leslie T. Chang, *Factory Girls: from Village to City in a Changing China* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2008).

The hypocrisy of globalization's rhetoric is further underlined through the character of Brandle. He is revealed to be an economic hit man, working on behalf of multinational conglomerates to prowl third-world countries "like a hungry hunter" and paint "lovely futures" and toss out "sweet lures" to local governments in the name of "progress" (171). Yet, one character sums up the falseness of such deals: "Americans will dump all their trash on another's doorstep and then, a few moments later, show up and say they're here to help. You clean up and that it's all for your own good" (25). Brandle himself is painfully aware that he works to advance the interests of corporations—the rich and powerful—at the expense of everyone else. By enticing local governments to sign agreements that required them to construct massive engineering projects, the developing countries take up "heavy debt" and have to offer up valuable resources such as oil fields and rare earths, and the locals are left with the job of paying off the debt ("[slaving] away like robots stuck with repetitive, mechanical tasks, toiling long hours in exchange for wages lower than what their parents had been able to earn") as well as a polluted and ruined homeland (171). So-called sustainable development is, in Brandle's eyes, "just another name for legalized looting" (105). Brandle's true mission, in the latter half of the novel, is to obtain the virus-infected prosthesis waste that can be traced back to Project Waste Tide, a top-secret U.S. biowarfare project that has the potential to transform the human brain. After discovering that waste girl Mimi has become cyborgized by the virus, Brandle kidnaps her in order to make her an experimentation subject, seeing in her the key to greater profits. Ultimately, the antagonism between China and the U.S. does not define the novel as much as the antagonism between the working-class and global corporate interests. As Joseph Stiglitz puts it, "The conflict, in our present age of globalization, is not so much between workers in developing

countries and those in developed countries, but between workers around the world and corporate interests."[176]

Waste Tide does not represent China as a mere victim exploited in cycles of globalization, at the mercy of predatory global capital. Chen Qiufan's subtler critique is of the hypocrisy of China's socialist regime and its wholehearted embrace of capitalism, which has come at the expense of the working-class. China is simultaneously a developing-world producer and first-world consumer, both the world's waste basket and its exporter of essential goods. The pulverized plastic the waste people processed are melted into pellets, sold to coastal factories and turned into cheap plastic products, exported to countries around the world under "Made in China," before they turned into trash to be shipped back to China once more (72). The capital flows both ways too: "In China, the dollars were converted into yuan and filled the pockets of the nouveaux riches, the factory owners, channel distributors, technicians, and low-level bureaucrats who disdained the Chinese imitations and dedicated themselves to the pursuit of replicating the lifestyle of Manhattan's Lower East Side or the San Francisco Bay Area, including their *rapid upgrade cycles*. And so, *the yuan were converted back into dollars*" (99; emphases mine). These various cycles—of currency, of capital, of consumption, and of materiality—underpin the Chimerican relationship: not a mere parasitic linear flow, but rather a mutual symbiosis (and complicity). *Waste Tide* is as much a condemnation of America's ecological imperialism as it is a blistering critique of China's own environmental mismanagement and deepening inequalities as it blindly pursues economic development and GDP growth.

The most Chimerican character in the novel, Chen Kaizong, is forced to reconcile his Western education with the isle's harsh realities and myriad of local viewpoints. He goes from an

[176] Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited: Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

idealistic employee of TerraGreen Recycling to disillusionment and despair, experiences the loss of one eye and a burgeoning but ill-fated romance with Mimi, before finally coming to realize the farce of globalization, "the euphemism of economic progress" (80), and his own "laughable sense of superiority" (183). He "imagined himself as a kind of emissary returning home, bearing treasures from a distant land" that would solve all the problems of Silicon Isle—these treasures being technology, Western notions of progress, and the rule of law (183). Yet, by the novel's end, Chen Kaizong comes to understand what the head of the Chen clan says, "People always think of themselves as playing with the tides, but in the end, they find out that the tides play with them" (346). Caught up in the tides of globalization, individual sovereignty is a "cruel optimism." We think our agency is propelling us toward a certain utopia but we are actually, in the words of Lauren Berlant, "stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding onto the ledge, treading water—the time of not-stopping" (169). Like Zhang from *China Mountain Zhang* who is swept up by the force of ideology, Chen Kaizong is set in motion by the kinetic energy of globalization—simultaneously overwhelming yet underwhelming, volatile yet mundane, continuous yet punctured by the local, impersonal yet incredibly personal in its assault.

Chimerica at the End of History

In sf's Chimerican visions of the future, human society has arrived at alternative ends of history: late capitalism in *Waste Tide*; Chinese socialism in *China Mountain Zhang*; and both gesture toward the totalizing force of globalization, one which steamrolls over the world, whether authoritarian or neoliberal. In 1989, during the very summer when student protestors occupied Tiananmen Square, and mere months before the Berlin Wall fell, political scientist

Francis Fukuyama declared "the end of history," buoyed by the seemingly ineluctable strength of democracy and Western liberalism around the globe. "In the post-historical period," Fukuyama wrote then, "there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history. I can feel in myself, and see in others around me, a powerful nostalgia for the time when history existed."[177] Instead of new, existential ideological struggles, he beheld the prospect of "centuries of boredom."[178]

Despite the vast differences in outlook, both novels share Fukuyama's sense of terminal boredom and quiet despair. The cruel optimism that suffuses *China Mountain Zhang* gives its socialist future an ennui like that of late capitalism. Similarly, in *Waste Tide,* there is a moment before the waste people's revolution when Mimi infiltrates the Shantou city surveillance system and the point-of-view zooms out, displaying a diorama of modern life. Millions of residents, though "pursuing stimuli and information loads unprecedented in the history of the human race," were "not happy" (290). Their looks were "empty but deep"—and it seemed that "the capacity for joy had degenerated" (290). Such despair is neither existential nor heroic, but a perpetual, ordinary condition. On Silicon Isle itself, the pessimism is even more palpable. Often, the locals refer to Silicon Isle as a place with "no hope" or "no future" due to environmental pollution and its restricted bitrate—reduced data access and turtle-like networks speeds that cut off augmented reality, enterprise-level cloud services, and government benefits designed for Special Data Zones (223). Sino-futures that emerge in both novels are tinged with finality and a sense of resignation with the infinite present. Even as time leaps forward in both, with the characters in perpetual

[177] Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 18, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184.
[178] Ibid.

motion, the characters are overwhelmed by a collapse of progression and progress and their own diminished agency.

In Fredric Jameson's gloomy view, "This is the future prepared by the elimination of historicity, its neutralization by way of progress and technological evolution: it is the future of globalization."[179] For Jameson, the failure of the utopian imagination results from globalization's systemic, cultural and ideological closure, in which we are all prisoners.[180] This "closure" recalls Lu Xun's famous metaphor of the "iron house." In 1922, Lu Xun, a reformist intellectual and modern China's most celebrated writer, compared the Chinese political situation to an iron house without windows that was slowly suffocating those who were sleeping inside of it. Should one shout to arouse the asleep and alert them to their inescapable death, or to remain silent and watch in despair? Sf's answer is always the former: Both novels awake those unaware of the "iron house" of China's obsession with economic development and growing authoritarianism or the "closure" of hyperglobalization.

And yet, this "iron house" is not completely closed—both novels hold on to a chastened hope for the future by invoking the Chimerican, the hybrid, and the posthuman. By the end of McHugh's novel, Zhang is on the cusp of using Daoist engineering as a tool for personal fulfillment and potential liberation, at last feeling whole by reconciling the two halves of his Chimerican identity, achieving a state of seamless hybridity, and penetrating the heavy blanket of authoritarianism. In *Waste Tide*, cyborgized Mimi marks the birth of a new species that blurs the line between human and machine, becoming a hybrid that owns a double consciousness: she terms them Mimi 1 (her new consciousness post-virus) and Mimi 0 (her original self). Mimi 1 is

[179] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 228.
[180] See Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?" *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982): 147–58, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239476.

able to infiltrate the cybernetic networks that once were inaccessible to the waste people, leading them to a successful revolution. She kills Brandle, in a scene that seems representative of the marginalized Davids of the developing world retaliating against the Goliath of globalization and its institutions. Yet, this possibility comes to an abrupt halt when Mimi 0, in a moment of regained consciousness, implores Kaizong to kill her to save her from the fate of becoming a monster and a laboratory specimen. The utopia of the posthuman—perhaps the real end of history—is not yet in reach but may well be as globalization careens forward.

What Sinofutures lay in store? The answer offered by *China Mountain Zhang* and *Waste Tide* is neither protectionist de-globalization nor a postnational future where corporations replace nation-states. Chimerica persists despite the cruel optimism of globalization, geopolitical and ideological rivalries, and local animosities. Neither a "Beijing consensus"[181] of socialism with Chinese characteristics (i.e. authoritarian, control capitalism) nor a "Washington consensus"[182] of decentralized, free-market capitalism can claim universalism—the future is a Siamese twin of both.

The simultaneous presence of crisis and prosperity in *China Mountain Zhang* and *Waste Tide* endow both novels with a structure of feeling that's unique to visions of Chimerica. For McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang* may have been a cognitive mapping of the socialist utopia as a way of flouting the limits to the capitalist status quo, whose cruel optimism she experienced first-hand in the American recession of the late eighties. For Chen, *Waste Tide* presents the heavy price that China has had to pay for economic development in order to resurge globally and lift itself out of the stagnation and traumas under Maoism. Latent in both novels are the failures of

[181] Stefan A. Halper, *The Beijing Consensus: How China's Authoritarian Model Will Dominate the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
[182] Yasheng Huang, "Debating China's Economic Growth: The Beijing Consensus or The Washington Consensus," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (2010): 31–47, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25682397.

the capitalist and socialist utopias. Neither utopian projects are truly palatable, even as they coexist currently in present-day China, and can beget dystopian consequences. Both works of sf take a critical stance towards the dominant myths and utopian impulses of the present (e.g. American exceptionalism, globalization, the rise of China, developmental progress) while revealing the implied dystopia that comes along with every utopia—both the dystopia of the present, which the utopia is created to indict (such as in *Waste Tide*), or a dystopia arising from a utopia gone wrong (such as in *China Mountain Zhang*).[183]

However, "dystopian" is not a mere synonym of "pessimism." I read both Chimerican novels as optimistic dystopias which boldly imagine the hegemony of the other in the Sino-U.S. relationship. By using such alternative realities to illuminate the perceived crisis and inadequacies of the present moment, such works further flesh out plural developmental aspirations in a globalized world that has long equated "modernity" to the singular notion of becoming more like the West. As the two sf novels powerfully demonstrate, Chimerica is ushering in an era of contested modernity, where utopias clash on one shared arena, and where Sinofutures are wrought in a crucible of optimism and pessimism, vitality and brutality, ennui and longing.

[183] For more on the dialectics of utopia/dystopia, see Gyan Prakash, Helen Tilley, and Michael D. Gordin, *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

Epilogue: Sinofuturism, Afrofuturism, and Other Histories of the Present

Imagine this: The year is 2062 and the Republic of Great China is celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of its founding. The Queen of England, the Emperor of Japan, the President of Russia, among other foreign dignitaries, have arrived in the capital city of Nanjing to witness the celebrations. Meanwhile, Kong Hongdao, a revered scholar who happens to be the 72nd-generation descendant of Confucius, has been invited to give a lecture at the Shanghai World Expo on how Chinese democracy has been implemented over the past few decades and brought the country its present prosperity and superpower status. Tens of thousands have poured in from around the world to hear him speak in Chinese which they, naturally, all understand.

Sounds uncannily familiar? That may be because much of what this scenario envisioned has already happened, several decades before 2062. Does it also seem laughably off the mark in other ways? Perhaps because this fantasy was penned in 1902, at a time when China was still an absolute imperial monarchy under the Qing dynasty and the only political reforms at hand were republicanism and democracy (after all, the Bolshevik Revolution was still fifteen years away). This scenario is from what is arguably China's first (but unfinished) science fiction novel: Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* (*Xinzhongguo weilaiji* 新中国未来记).[184] Exiled in Yokohama in 1902 after his role in the aborted Hundred Day Reform of 1898 during the Qing dynasty, Liang sought to use his visions of China-as-superpower to "renovate the people of a nation."[185]

[184] Liang Qichao 梁启超, *Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中国未来记 [The Future of New China] (1902; reis., Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2008).
[185] David Der-wei Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997), 24.

Since then, the national genealogy of futurisms in China has cycled through multiple anticipatory utopias and their collapse. In just the first two decades of the 20th century, China witnessed the fall of the Qing dynasty, the 1911-1912 founding of the Republic of China, the short-lived Empire of China under "emperor" Yuan Shikai, and the flowering of intellectual thought during the 1919 May Fourth movement (that led to the birth of modern Chinese nationalism). The future then must have seemed incredibly uncertain, just as it is now.

If the first two decades of the 21st century have been less tumultuous for China than the 20th, the Covid-19 pandemic that appeared in the final months of 2019 has thrown a wrench into its trajectory—and its lasting consequences still remain hard to ascertain. The pandemic has left many wondering if China will keep rising, or if the pandemic has derailed the Chinese dream and damaged the attractiveness of the China model. Though the country successfully pulled off the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and kept cases low in strict adherence to a Covid-zero strategy, the pandemic is still far from over and a smooth landing is far from guaranteed. China's economy could run out of steam if domestic growth-enhancing reforms (for instance, to tackle low fertility and increase total-factor productivity) fail, or if it experiences increasing international isolation or a financial crisis. That could leave China following the footsteps of Japan, touted as a potential challenger to the U.S. before it crashed three decades ago. As a *Bloomberg* article sums up, "When Will China Rule the World? Maybe Never."[186]

At the same time, China's control of the pandemic (despite its blunders at the beginning of the outbreak) has become the target of isomorphic mimicry by other, nominally more advanced, states. Countries have attempted to emulate its lockdowns, comprehensive nationwide contact

[186] Eric Zhu and Tom Orlik, "When Will China Rule the World? Maybe Never," *Bloomberg*, July 5, 2021, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-07-05/when-will-china-s-economy-beat-the-u-s-to-become-no-1-why-it-may-never-happen.

tracing, and strict quarantine procedures, yielding wildly disparate results due to the differences in state capacity. China's biosurveillance apparatus, public health model, and technology and internet regulation might become the future of post-pandemic world. With Xi's increasingly totalitarian campaign to purge China of its capitalist excesses through growing crackdowns on all aspects of life, "China's new reality is rife with danger," writes *The Economist*.[187]

However, even if China's growth trajectory falters and keeps China indefinitely in second place, Sinofuturism still matters. As my chapters have shown, Sinofuturism is not simply about China's ascent—it is key to understanding postsocialist China and the larger post-Cold War moment. Our imaginations of the future are also imaginations of the present. By imagining the future, we historicize the present; by historicizing the present, we begin to conceive of new possibilities for the future. The future, thus, is a history of the present. The theme park city and its prophetic peasant-migrants on a counterfeit adventure, the ephemeral utopias of *shanzhai*, and the intertwined posthuman destinies of China and America provide a looking glass for multiple sinofuturities beyond the singular narrative of China's rise. By concretely rooting these visions of the futures in the Chinese condition, we can also better grasp the temporalities and affect enswathing postsocialist China.

Compared to the buoyant hunger for other ethnofuturisms, however, Sinofuturism stands out for the affective spectrum it conjures up—ambiguous feelings of dread and excitement, desire and revulsion. Afrofuturism, which arose from centuries of slavery and subjugation, seems to stand in particular contrast to Sinofuturism. By looking at Blackness through sci-fi, Afrofuturism presents a total reenvisioning of the past and rewrites black lives into a future that they were once excluded from—it draws parallels between the transatlantic slave trade and the

[187] China's new reality is rife with danger, *The Economist*, October 2, 2021, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/10/02/chinas-new-reality-is-rife-with-danger.

metaphor of alien abduction, and unlocks the imaginative power of a posthuman, black future. In this vein, Afrofuturism largely eschews negative stereotypes, a sense of powerlessness, or dystopian views of the future. As Ytasha Womack writes in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy*, "Imagination, hope, and the expectation for transformative change […] is the collective weighted belief that anchors the aesthetic."[188]

Meanwhile, Sinofuturism appears to be infused with pessimism and revels in disturbing possibilities. Unlike Afrofuturism, Sinofuturism is not the futuristic imagination of an ethnic minority but of a "foreign" nation and civilization. In that, some part of it remains irrefutably alien—it can never be wholly integrated into American science fiction or into an imagination of an American-dominated future. In addition, Sinofuturism struggles with the continued presence of the "visible hand" of the one-party state, which has towered over individual lives and thought in China since 1949, and which continues to produce its own official visions of Chinese futurity. Unlike Afrofuturism's edict to activate liberation, pragmatism tends to taint and limit Sinofuturism. Perhaps the apocalyptic implementation of Maoism and the disintegration of socialism-in-practice have bankrupted "utopia" and drained any messianic hope from imaginations of China's future. These failures loom like specters over postsocialist China, a constant reminder that revolution can be fatal. As such, the arc of history weighs on the Chinese present—throughout the past century, promised futures had constantly faltered, and utopias were constantly undermined by reality. Instead of consistently imagining liberating alternatives, Sinofuturism remains steeped in half-realized dreams and incomplete dystopias.

The enduring significance of Sinofuturism might well be its very existence as a viable alternative to liberal democracy; in this formulation, Sinofuturism is the dream/nightmare that

[188] Ytasha, Womack. *Afrofuturism: the World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 11.

has disturbed the placid sleep of Fukuyama's last man and reignited the momentum of modernity. "Many people think the modernist laboratory is now over," wrote Robert Hughes in 1980. "It has become less an arena for significant experiment and more like a period room in a museum, a historical space that we can enter, look at, but no longer be a part of."[189] Sinofuturism, then, has returned modernity to the bustling, affective, emerging present.

More than a nationalist project, Sinofuturism with its embeddedness in global flows has become a synecdoche for the world-to-come. In imagining China's future, in understanding its groundswells of optimism and disillusionment, its cocktail of desires and fantasies, its quest without a destination, we see proleptic visions of futures that may or may not come to pass.

[189] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1980), 10.

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