Editorial

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The present special feature focuses on utopian/dystopian literature in contemporary China. Why publish a special feature on literary representations of the utopian/dystopian in *China Perspectives*, a journal that focuses on Chinese political analysis? In the first place, utopia has always been a political issue, according to Fredric Jameson; [1] or as Douwe Fokkema claims, "[u]topian fiction is arguably the most political of all literary genres and can be studied from a literary as well as a political point of view." [2] Utopia, named by Thomas More in the sixteenth century and repeatedly revived, reinvented, and reprogrammed by later reformers and revolutionaries, projects an ideal vision of human society that contrasts with the unsatisfying reality, and through literary imagination translates social criticism into a political and/or technological blueprint for a better world. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the popularisation of utopian thinking in a European context particularly testified to the enthusiasm of Enlightenment thinkers, revolutionaries, and social reformers toward engineering a perfect society according to scientific knowledge and reason. In a twentieth century that saw the ruin of various utopian projects, a sweeping disillusionment with utopian thinking gave rise to a dystopian literature that has evolved into a distinct genre with its own classics and conventions. Dystopia is generally considered the opposite of utopia. However, if the utopian vision of a good place and a perfect world as alternatives to social reality can be viewed "as a privileged means to convey a potentially subversive message," [3] the same can be said about the dystopian vision that should be, "in fact, a variant of the same social dreaming that gives impetus to utopian literature." [4] Both utopian and dystopian literatures are characterised by engagement with social problems, and their difference mainly lies in varying approaches to solutions: utopia presents a systematic solution to all social, political, and cultural problems, while the dystopian vision never fails to reveal the constraints imposed on humanity by any available or imaginable political systems.

In China, it was Yan Fu 嚴復 who first coined the phrase "wutuobang" 烏托邦 to translate the word Utopia, [5] and since the last decade of late Qing, utopian thinking has shaped the thoughts of many generations of Chinese reformers and revolutionaries. Political events in the late Qing might convey a gloomy picture, from China's defeat in the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese War to the failed Hundred-Day Reform of 1898; from the disastrous Boxer Rebellion to the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, fought on Chinese territory while the Qing court declared "neutrality." Yet it was also a moment of belated initiation into world affairs for many young literati activists, who were utterly captivated by the seemingly infinite potential of the future. With many varied strands, the contour of Chinese utopianism at the turn of the twentieth century was decisively optimistic, in stark contrast to the dire situation the country was in. Kang Youwei's 康有為 *Book of Great Unity* (*Da tong shu* 大同書, the composition date of which remained controversial) presented the most systematic politico-philosophical discourse on a utopian vision of the future China. Utopian novels, the very first of which was Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 *Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記, 1902), soon became an established genre. [6] Generally speaking, at the risk of oversimplification, these novels tend to depict a future China that retains a political Confucianism, whose ideal social order would have to be bound to traditional agrarian society, but the authors seldom provide any consideration of it. Sensually, they are completely urban and excitedly exhibitionist in character, informed mostly by life in Shanghai and possibly Hong Kong as well. Some of the more politically framed works were never finished, including Liang's *Future of New China*. It is as if the authors were unable to reconcile the divide between the political and the sensual, while the utopian construction is premised on both.

Within a decade, there were several dozen utopian fictional works published. [7] Late Qing utopian literature served to instigate fascination with the future rather than arousing indignation through social criticisms against the present. The task of social critique was taken up by a parallel genre, exposure literature, with greater output and huge popularity among urban readers. The utopian genre lost its appeal after May Fourth literature established realism as the main paradigm of modern Chinese literature. While utopian literature ebbed, China was to enter the age of political utopia in actual social practice in both the Nanjing years of the Republican period (1928-1937) and in the People's Republic under Mao Zedong (1949-1976). Henry Y. H. Zhao comments on the phenomena, literary and political, that "the utopian future no longer needed imagination to access it, as social reality itself was pregnant with the future: the separation between the utopia and the reality had to be scaled with power but not imagination." [8]

For the better part of the twentieth century, China was embroiled in wars and revolutions – civil wars and anti-imperialist wars; Republican Revolution and Communist Revolution; the Cold War externally, and the turmoil of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution internally. Most of the historical dramas involved mass mobilisation with utopian visions, at least aspiration to national liberation to make China strong and wealthy. This historical condition, atypical for a Western country, was common to most Third World nations. The experience, in addition to adapting to a dominant view of history in linear and progressive terms, entailed a general disregard for dystopian thinking, emerging strongly in the West in the first half of the century. In the West, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949) represent the two major fronts of dystopian critique against, respectively, capitalist reification of labouring

1. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, London, Verso, 2007, xi.
2. Douwe Fokkema, *Perfect Worlds*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2011, p. 5.
3. Fátima Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia," in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 8.
4. Fátima Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia," *art. cit.*, p. 17.
5. This translation appeared in Yan Fu's 1898 *Tianyanlun*, a translated text based on Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Yan Fu, *Tianyanlun*, Taipei, Shangwu yinshuguan, 2009, pp. 31-34.
6. For a discussion of utopian fiction in China, see Wang Dewei, "Wutuobang, etuobang, yituobang: cong Lu Xun dao Liu Cixin" (Utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia: From Lu Xun to Liu Cixin), *Xiandangdai wenxue xinlun*, Beijing, Sanlian shudian, 2013, pp. 279-307.
7. Teruo Tarumoto (ed.), *Shinmatsu Minsho shôsetsu nenpyô* (Catalogue of Chinese fiction from late Qing to early Republic), Shinmatsu Shôsetsu Kenkyûkai, Japan, 1999, pp. 8a-60a.
8. Henry Y. H. Zhao, "A Fearful Symmetry: The Novel of the Future in Twentieth-Century China," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 66, No. 3 (2003), p. 459. The 1930s did produce a major dystopian fiction in Lao She's *The City of Cats* (*Mao cheng ji*, 1932), which is a negative mirror image of the Nanjing government's ambitious modernisation projects.

citizens and Stalinist tyranny under Communist rule. They were not available to readers inside the PRC, where Maoist utopianism did not decline until the Reform Era. [9] This was after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when the ruling party announced that "class struggle" would no longer be the focal task. The new imperative was economic development aimed at raising living standards to "relatively well-off" (*xiaokang* 小康) by the end of the twentieth century. Intellectually, the Reform Era was advanced by a short-lived "thought liberation" campaign in 1978. In this period, political idealism combined with the pursuit of greater freedom in literature and arts, and reflections on the historical experiences of the PRC's first 30 years enabled both hope for change and precaution against radicalism.

Literature flourished in the thaw. New topics, styles, or genres emerged almost every year. But utopian/dystopian literature was very much absent for almost the entire decade of the 1980s, China's "New Era." Accordingly, our special feature on utopian/dystopian fiction falls within the time frame of the late 1980s up to the present. In the past ten years or so, this period has been referred to as the era of Chinese "post-socialism." Our contributors use this term in their papers as well. A brief survey of recent scholarship shows that the label, though convenient, leads to varied interpretations.

Since the end of the Cold War, scholarly reference to countries of the former East Bloc has generally used the term "post-communism," accepted in various academic disciplines. The label "post-socialism" thus stands for China alone, tailor-made for the contemporary period since the 1990s. In this way, it is ten years shorter than the denominator of the "Reform Era." Two books that came out in 2008 bear the term in their titles, with different theoretical references. They are Xudong Zhang's *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics* and Jason McGrath's *Postsocialist Modernity*. [10] Zhang's book is partly based on his collaboration with Arif Dirlik on postmodernism in China for a special issue of *boundary 2* in 1997. In turn, Dirlik had critiqued the phrase "Asia-Pacific" and has looked for postmodern alternative spaces in that region since the early 1990s. [11] For Zhang, postmodernity was the key word that led to introducing "postsocialism" into his discussion. McGrath, on the other hand, makes postsocialist modernity a central thesis of his book and does not trust a postmodern perspective for the 1990s. Their differences notwithstanding, the two authors share some basic views on what is "post" and what is "socialism" in the term when they apply it to China's reality. For them, the "post" in this case indicates the pervasive presence of global capitalism in China, or China's integration into the global order, which was not there in the Mao years or the post-Mao 1980s. Meanwhile, "socialism" for the two authors is represented primarily by a Communist Party staying in power, overseeing a spectacular economic growth propelling China into a new superpower.

Taking different approaches to the question, Robin Visser and Shu-mei Shih stretch the postsocialist period to the beginning of the Reform Era. Similar to Zhang and McGrath, they recognise the relative autonomy cultural production gained in those years. But Visser and Shih do not provide theoretical elaboration on the label (or lay claims over certain values by appropriating it). Instead, they focus more on the formation of individual subjectivity in the more than three decades of drastic social change. [12] Shih argues that the most valuable contribution of the Chinese postsocialist experience is the intellectual turn in the initial years of the Reform Era toward Marxist humanism, which echoed similar turns among international Marxists in the 1960s, such as the Senegalese leader Léopold Sédar Senghor's essay entitled "Socialism Is a Humanism." Shih imagines that Marxist humanism should provide much needed stimulus to our contemporary discussions on "post-humanism" and other issues.

In this special issue, our contributors apply the term "postsocialism" in a spirit closer to Visser and Shih. We do not imply fixed value judgment on qualities of Chinese socialist modernity or postmodernity. For us, the term itself is conveniently useful to convey the recognition that, from the 1980s to the 1990s, China crossed a decisive turning point. We acknowledge the historical complexity of that moment. From our point of view, we would like to emphasise the importance of utopian thinking in socialist and communist movements. There is no question that it weighed heavily in the Chinese socialist experiment, as it did in Chinese people's lives for several generations. Against this backdrop, when utopian/dystopian literature reappeared – with great energy and vitality, after half a century of near silence – by the end of the 1980s, the fact itself is far richer in meaning than the plots of the specific literary texts themselves. Utopia has always been a political issue, and contemporary Chinese utopian/dystopian fiction speaks directly to the political nature of the country's public life.

Before sketching out a chronological chart of the fictional works discussed in our papers, it is important to remember that utopian/dystopian fiction has not been the only form within which related issues have drawn public attention, especially intellectual attention, in contemporary China. As Shu-mei Shih tells us, in the "thought liberation" movement of 1978-1983, Marxist humanism was a prominent strand, explored purposefully in search of a sound moral premise for China's socialist project in reflecting on the Cultural Revolution. [13] The debate was abruptly stopped by the Party's functionary ideologues, but intellectuals continued their effort. Serious examination of the dark side of the Party's utopian myth, such as Su Xiaokang's reportage *Memorial to Utopia* (1988), on the Party's internal struggle in 1959 over the Great Leap Forward, presented challenging views with respect to idealistic spirit. [14] As late as the late 1990s, well after the end of the Cold War, thoughtful intellectuals were defending utopian thinking. For example, Qin Hui argued in 1998 that in the wave of former communist countries rushing to embrace capitalism, be it democratic or authoritarian, it is necessary to retain utopian values for the sake of a social consensus on justice. Even followers of the liberal economic thinker Hayek, when reflecting on the wrongs of the socialist experiment, should repudiate conceit but not

9. For Mao's Utopian thought, see Fokkema, *The Perfect Worlds*, pp. 321-330.
10. Xudong Zhang, *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: The Last Decade of China's Twentieth Century*, Duke University Press, 2008; and Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, Stanford University Press, 2008.
11. Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong (eds), *Postmodernism and China, boundary 2: An International Journal of Literature and Culture* (special issue), Vol. 24, No. 3, 1997. Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (eds), *Postmodernism and China*, Duke University Press, 2000. Dirlik worked on "The Asia-Pacific Idea" in 1992 and then in 1994 proposed a postmodern projection to the region as an alternative to Western-centred power structure after the end of the Cold War, three years before his collaboration with Zhang. See, Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, "Introduction: Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production," *boundary 2* (special issue), Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1994), pp. 1-14. Dirlik now is radically critical of the Chinese Party-state. See his contribution "June Fourth at 25: Forget Tiananmen, You Don't Want to Hurt the Chinese People's Feelings – and Miss Out on the Business of the New 'New China'!", *International Journal of China Studies* (special issue), Vol. 5, No. 2, August 2014, pp. 295-329.
12. Robin Visser, *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*, Duke University Press, 2010. Shu-mei Shih, "Is the *Post-* in Postsocialism the *Post-* in Posthumanism?", *Social Text*, 110, Vol. 30, No. 1, Spring 2012, pp. 27-50. Without resorting to the "postsocialism" label, Yunxiang Yan studies the same phenomena. Yan, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology, Bloomsbury Academic, 2009.
13. Shu-mei Shih, "Is the Post- in Postsocialism the Post- in Posthumanism?" *art. cit.*, pp. 38-40. Wang Ruoshui, *Hu Yaobang xiatai de beijing: rendao zhuyi zai Zhongguo de mingyun* (Behind Hu Yaobang's Resignation), Hong Kong, Mirror Books, 1997, pp. 329-368.
14. Su Xiaokang, *Wutuobang ji: 1959 nian Lushan zhi xia* (Memorial to Utopia: Summer in Lu Mountain, 1959), Shanghai shuju youxian gongsi, 1989.

faith in knowledge and reason. Similarly, Xiao Xuehui urged policy makers to rethink the education privatisation measures of 1997, citing Thomas More's *Utopia* and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602) to argue for the necessity of utopian guidance in educational planning. (15)

Unfortunately, these were lone voices in a sea of dismissive commentaries. As Jameson laments, utopia became a synonym for Stalinism in the West during the Cold War and in Eastern European countries immediately after its end; (16) the same can be said of contemporary China, where the utopian nowadays indicates for many intellectuals the "mere 'impracticality' of Maoism." (17) What has conditioned the decline of utopianism in China over the past 25 years is not only the end of the Cold War, shifts in international politics, and the inward march of global capitalism, but also the collapse of political idealism after the brutal crackdown of the 1989 student movement. But what comes after utopia is not necessarily dystopia; it can be instead a pervasive cynicism and political apathy, as happened in China's post-1989 years, an era marked by rapid economic development, high-level marketisation in all social domains, and devaluation of intellectual interventions in social reality.

Strikingly, and perhaps not entirely unlike the late Qing period, utopian/dystopian fiction writing of this period did not lock steps with either immediate socio-political events or mainstream opinions. The autonomous space in cultural production gained from loosened political control, the weak interest in imaginative vision among intellectuals, and the lack of substance in official propaganda, have all contributed to the fact that, even if their work might be banned at one time or another, writers could have considerable freedom to confront the immensely uncertain future, brutally torn wide open by a society almost constantly transformed and/or reconfigured. Being conditioned in this way, fictional imaginary in the works considered by our papers shares certain inclinations. They tend to be socially bleak, politically ambiguous, and culturally wanting while technologically fascinating. In short, dystopian leaning commands the upper hand. What counts for potent utopian imagination, as Adrian Thieret explains in his paper, may come in a postmodern fragmented fashion. The late Qing style of confidently announcing a bright future arriving from temporal distance has completely vanished.

Readers will notice that this special issue is not an exhaustive examination of the subject. Still, in a limited space we have tried to cover some major works in the field. The earliest one, *China 2185*, discussed in Mingwei Song's paper, was written in February 1989 by China's leading SF writer of today, Liu Cixin. The timing is important. People often forget the restless sensation of the social atmosphere in the year leading up to the Tiananmen protests. After ten years of "reform and opening," spreading corruption was damaging the general confidence of society. To people's questioning, the government excused itself by claiming that it could not offer a plan in advance but was "feeling the stones to cross the river" (*mozhe shitou guohe* 摸著石頭過河). At the time that Liu Cixin created his first scientific fantasy, other artists gave similarly perceptive performances as well. One day before the Chinese New Year in 1989, a woman artist, unexpectedly to the viewing public, opened fire with a pistol on her installation art work at the Exhibition of China's Modern Arts in the National Gallery, causing an instant shut-down. That evening, at the Chinese New Year gala, an annual event televised nationwide by the central television station (CCTV), a famous crosstalk actor made a joke about the marketisation of social life, alleging that Tiananmen Square had been turned into a gigantic farmer's market. The gasping astonishment at early marketisation, ordered and pushed bureaucratically, was best conveyed in Wang Shuo's 王朔 novel of absurdity, *Please Don't Call Me Human* (*Qianwan bie ba wo dang ren* 千萬別把我當人), serialised in a literary magazine beginning in summer 1989. At the beginning of that year, student activists were already counting the anniversary dates to organise public rallies: the 70-year anniversary of the May Fourth Movement, the 200-year anniversary of the French Revolution in July, and the 40-year anniversary of the PRC in October. It was also ahead of the student protests when Wu Wenguang, a leading independent documentary maker, started shooting his signature work, *Bumming in Beijing*, in 1988. To Wu and his artist friends, these were the last days of their youthful idealism. Yet, the style of their spirit, voluntary marginalisation and conscious resistance against establishment, was already distinctively different from the mid-80s, when "cultural fever" was running high and Zhang Yimou made his flamboyantly colourful entry into filmmaking. Wu's style was to be typical of the independent cinema of the 1990s.

Two novels covered by our papers are products of the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown. Wang Lixiong's *Yellow Peril* (1991), examined in Chaohua Wang's paper, remains an outstanding political fantasy of his generation. Though it may not result from authorial intention, his work demonstrates most clearly how the ruling power in China might have been run without any visible constraints from socialist ideology. Jia Pingwa's *The Decadent Capital* (1993), on the other hand, goes along the same direction as Wang Shuo's novel mentioned above. In fact, there was a wave of similarly-themed novels in those years. A better known example would be Mo Yan's 莫言 *Republic of Wine* (*Jiu guo* 酒國 1992), which carries some direct references to Wang Shuo's work. Each of these novels plays on the decadent absurdity of the commercialisation of social life, with the implied absence of popular political intervention. They may not be utopian/dystopian fiction in a strict sense, but their bleak depiction presents a dystopian-style rejection of the perceived new order of the post-Tiananmen years. They best support our assumption that a better approach to postsocialist China is to temporarily suspend our fixation on the Party and the state. In his paper on Jia's novel, Thomas Chen chooses to focus on one of the key literary devices Jia deploys in *The Decadent Capital* in great quantity – the little blank squares presumably representing words removed by censorship. With careful textual analysis, Chen teases out the hidden significance of the "publicness" in collective life, which was aggressively suppressed from public consciousness.

It was not our initial design, but by coincidence, the three papers by Mingwei Song, Chaohua Wang, and Thomas Chen each cover two major periods in Chinese utopian/dystopian fiction writing: 1989-1993 and 2007-2010. Indeed, there was a detectable decade-long gap in the genre's publication record from the mid 1990s onwards, although science fiction was still being published during that time. Liu Cixin, author of *China 2185*, started regular production in 1999. Mingwei Song's discussion includes a short story Liu wrote in 1999. Still, the gap requires attention. For one thing, intellectual defence of utopian ideas, mentioned above, occurred when fictional utopia was weak. A possible explanation could be this. Sarcastically expressed indignation towards rampant commercialisation in the early 1990s could only watch from the sidelines as waves of marketisation swept away guaranteed

15. Qin Hui, "Wutuobang yu qiangzhi" (Utopia and coercion), *Twenty-first Century* (Hong Kong), October 1998. Xiao Xuehui, *Jiaoyu biyao de wutuobang* (Education: A necessary Utopia), Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001.
16. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, London, Verso, 2007, p. xi.
17. Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 5.

public services, the legacy of China's socialist past: education, healthcare, housing, and government-sponsored land sales were all targeted for marketisation in 1997-98. The utopian impulse needs space to breath, and it needs stimuli as well. These came in the first years of the twenty-first century primarily from the pervasive impact of capitalist globalisation, following China's WTO membership at the end of 2001.

For this recent period, Mingwei Song introduces Liu Cixin's "Three Body" trilogy, Chaohua Wang considers Chan Koonchung's political dystopia, *The Fat Years*, and Thomas Chen compares the reissue of Jia Pingwa's *The Decadent Capital* in 2009, after a 14-year ban by the authorities, to its original edition. It is in this period that our fourth contributor, Adrian Thieret, focuses his attention on utopian impulse, not dystopian presentations, in Liu Cixin's science fiction short stories. The theoretical implication of Thieret's reading in terms of utopian impulse as an agency of social reform brings our special issue into direct dialogue with contemporary critique of capitalist globalisation. The field we are engaging in with this special issue is extremely rich. Our work presented here is but a small effort to understand, by way of reading utopian/dystopian fiction, the profound changes China has been wading through, in connection with their worldwide implications.