

Panglossian Dream and Dark Consciousness
Modern Chinese Literature and Utopia

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

If the grand opening of *The Future of New China* feels uncanny, perhaps it is because the “future” of new China seems to have become reality in the new millennium. At a time when China is ascending to a role as a leading political and economic power worldwide, having hosted not only a World Exposition but also the Olympics, and more impressively, founded hundreds of Confucius Institutes, in places as far from China as Pakistan and Rwanda, Liang Qichao's futuristic utopia may prove to have already been realized by socialist China. Indeed, as if taking up where Liang left off more than a century earlier, President Xi Jinping gave a speech on the “Chinese Dream” in 2013, projecting the future of new China as one thriving on “the way of socialism,” “the spirit of nationalism,” and “the force of ethnic solidarity.”¹

Although “utopia” has always been a suspect term in the lexicon of socialist China,² the “Chinese Dream” partakes of a strong utopian dimension insofar as it invokes an ideal political and cultural vision. As a matter of fact, the “Chinese Dream” may represent the summation of a string of recent discourses about futuristic China. From *daguojuqi* 大國崛起 (the great nation is rising) to *tianxia* 天下 (under the heaven), from “repoliticizing” China to *tongsantong* 通三統 (unification of three orthodoxies—Confucianism, Maoism, Dengism), we are witnessing a

¹ For more interpretations of the Chinese Dream, see <http://baike.baidu.com/subview/1817221/9342599.htm>.

² See Maurice Meisner's classic *Marxism, Maoism and Utopianism: Eight Essays* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982). Chinese Communist discourse deems utopianism an illusory search for dream without historical grounding. Communist revolution, by contrast, represents a project that is to be realized in accordance with a preordained timetable. Western Marxists from Ernst Bloch to Fredric Jameson tend to ascribe a positive value to utopia and treat revolution as a project leading toward the utopian goal. Nevertheless, whereas Bloch famously expands the utopian impulse to a perennial search for a desired way of living, demanding the power to imagining the “not yet,” Jameson seeks a “cognitive mapping” of utopia as a way of flaunting the limits of the capitalist status quo. See, for example, Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. Anthony Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); for an introduction to Bloch's utopian theory, see Douglas Kellner, “Ernst Bloch, Utopia, and Ideology Critique,” <http://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/ernstblochutopiaideologycritique.pdf>. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeology of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007). Jameson laments the eclipse of the utopian vision in the leftist revolutionary vein in the contemporary world. Granting his insightful critique of the negative utopian impulses and consequences as represented by global capitalism, he appears to fall short in critically examining the utopian ruins created by leftist revolutionary undertakings. Nor could he engage with the anomalous co-existence of both socialist and capitalist utopian projects, as is the case of contemporary China, and its dystopian consequences.

cornucopia of treatises and declarations that again aspire to forge a powerful Chinese polity through their visions. While these treatises are ordinarily not treated in literary terms, they nevertheless point to the rhetorical gesture and imaginary aptitude that inform the “structure of feeling” of a time. They share the fantastic mode of a “grand narrative,” and it is this mode that brings us to rethink utopia and its literary manifestation in contemporary China.

Ironically enough, when turning to contemporary Chinese fiction per se, one finds few works that can be described as utopian in its traditional definition. Whereas Ge Fei’s 格非 (b. 1964) *Wutuobang sanbuqu* 烏托邦三部曲 (Trilogy of Utopia, 2007-2011) deals with China amid the ruins caused by preceding utopian projects, Han Song’s 韓松 (b.1965) *2066: Xixing manji* 2066 西行漫記 (2066: Red star over America, 2000) pictures a post-apocalyptic scene of China and the world; whereas Chan Koon-chung’s (b. 1952) 陳冠中 *Shengshi* 盛世 (The fat years, 2009) imagines a China immersed in the jubilant mood of amnesia, Ma Jian’s (b. 1952) *Rouzhitu* 肉之土 (Beijing coma, 2010) envisions a China as monstrous and mystical as the world of *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (classic of mountains and seas). Dystopia and heterotopia permeate contemporary Chinese narrative literature. This fact leads one to look into the spectrum of utopian imaginary of our time, and ask whether the utopian discourse as proffered by the political machine and select intellectuals, and the dystopian fiction that prevails in the literary sphere represent the dialogical potential in Chinese reality, or more polemically, its disavowal.

This essay seeks to analyze the contested conditions of modern and contemporary Chinese utopia, as a political treatise, a literary genre, and a social imaginary.³ The first part takes a historical perspective from which to describe the rise of utopia in the late Qing era, and ponders the contradictions and confluences of its narrative and intellectual paradigms. The second part introduces the two key concepts of this essay, “Panglossianism” and “dark consciousness.” By Panglossianism, I refer to the Voltairean critique of the optimism that seeks to justify the history of both the past and future in terms of “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”⁴ By “dark consciousness,” I refer to Professor Chang Hao’s 張灝 engagement with *youan yishi* 幽暗意識, an idea which deals with the polemics of crisis and contingency ingrained in Chinese thought. Neither, to be sure, should be reduced to a simple ideological stance.⁵ The third part turns to the scene of the new millennium, observing the dystopian and heterotopian inclinations in fictional practice as opposed to the utopian aspiration in political discourse.

³ For a classic survey of utopia, see, Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987). For a recent discussion of utopia as a revived imaginary in relation to the concept of globalization, see Robert Tally, Jr., *Utopia in the Age of Globalization: Space, Representation, and the World-System* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

⁴ In the 1759 novel *Candide* by Voltaire, Dr. Pangloss is described as a caricature of optimism believing “all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds” despite evidence indicates otherwise. Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin invoked the term “Panglossian Paradigm” to critique the evolutionary biologists who view all traits as atomized things that had been naturally selected and thus leave no theoretical space to other causes. See “The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme,” *Proceedings in the Royal Society of London Biological Science*, 205 (1161): 581–98. I derive my understanding of Gould’s theory from “The Pattern of Life’s History,” in John Brockman, ed., *The Third Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 52–64.

⁵ Zhang Hao (Hao Chang), “Youan yishi yuminzhu chauntong” 幽暗意識與民主傳統 (Dark consciousness and the democratic tradition), in *Zhang Hao zixuanji* 張灝自選集 (Work of Zhao Hao; author’s edition) (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 1-24.

The Republic of Great China versus The Civilized World

Utopia was introduced as a neologism, *wutuobang* 烏託邦, by Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854-1921) in his translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, *Tianyan lun* 天演論.⁶ In his annotation, Yan Fu contemplates the relationship between rulership and national governance, and concludes that education and enlightenment are keys to the prosperity of a nation. In his treatment, Yan Fu downplays the fact that utopia is a fictitious construct, the valence of which lies in its imaginary projection of that which is unavailable in reality. Rather, he considers utopia a goal to be achieved by any nation committed to the dictum of the survival of the fittest. In other words, he equates utopia to a teleological project predicated on the Darwinian ethics he yearned for.⁷

The way Yan Fu broached utopia leads to a larger question regarding the instrumentality of literature at his time. That is, the “fictitiousness” of literature is regarded as intelligible only when it proves to be a manifestation of historical experience or expectation.⁸ As such, fiction is said to serve as both the end and the means of transforming China. Echoing Yan Fu's and like-minded intellectuals' advocacy for reforming China by re-forming Chinese fiction, Liang Qichao made the famous statement in 1902, “to renovate the nation, one has to first renovate fiction... Fiction has the incalculable power of transforming Chinese mind.”⁹ At some mysterious point of time, as Liang would have it, fiction and nation, or for our concern, utopia and history, become exchangeable notions.

The extant narrative of *The Future of New China* relates, via flashback, the interaction between Huang Keqiang 黃克強 and Li Qubing 李去病, the two protagonists of the novel. Incited by the aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, both Huang and Li decide to go to England in pursuit of new thought, and they end up studying at Oxford University. When

⁶ Yan Fu 嚴復, trans. *Tianyan lun* 天演論 (Evolution and ethics by Thomas Huxley) (Taiwan: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2009), 33.

凡其國之所有，皆足以養其欲而給其求，所謂天行物競之虐，於其國皆不見，而惟人治位獨尊，在在有以自恃而無畏。降以至一草木一禽獸之微，皆所以娛情適用之資，有其利而無其害。又以學校之興，刑罰之中，舉錯之公也，故其民莠者日以少，良者日以多。馴至於各知職分之所當為，性分之所固有，通功合作，互相保持，以進於治化無疆之休。夫如是之群，古今之世所未有也，故稱之曰烏託邦。

See James Paradis and George Williams, ed. *T.H. Huxley's Evolution and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Ferderico Masini, a pioneer of the study of loan words in late Qing's work, suggests that *The formation of modern Chinese lexicon and its evolution toward a national language* (Berkeley, Journal of Chinese Linguistics Monograph Series, 1997), 138. Japanese tends to use 理想鄉 or phonic translation ユートピア for utopia. The high tide of this translation is much later than the Meiji period when intellectuals associated the idea with the socialist movement. I thank Professor Uganda Kwan's assistance in identifying the source. For a recent genealogical study of the introduction of utopia to China, see Yan Jianfu 顏健富, *Cong shenti dao shijie: wanqing xiaoshuo de xingainian ditu* 從身體到世界: 晚清小說的新概念地圖 (From the body to the world: the new conceptual mapping of late Qing fiction) (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2014), chapter 4.

⁷ For a general discussion of the teleological moral agenda embedded in Yan Fu's rendition of evolution and ethics, see Benjamin Schwartz, *In search of Wealth and Power: Yan Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), chapter 4.

⁸ Such an understanding of literature, of course, has its relevance to the classical understanding of the mutual implication between literature (*wen*) and the Way (*dao*). *Wenxue* or literature is as much a form of representation as it is a vehicle through which the way of the world is manifested.

⁹ Liang Qichao 梁啟超, “Lun Xiaoshuo yu qunzhi zhiguanxi” 論小說與群治之關係 (On the relationship between fiction and ruling the people), in *Yingbingshi wenji dianjiao wenji* 飲冰室文集點校 (Ice drinker studio collection of writings, annotated edition), vol. 2 (Kunming: Yunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), 758-760

news about the aborted Hundred Day Reform reaches them, the two friends are faced with another crucial decision. Whereas Li considers the immediate and radical action of revolution, Huang cautions his friend against the consequences of futile violence and sacrifice. The two then partway with each other; Huang travels to Berlin to learn the latest theories in *Staatswissenschaft* and Li heads for Paris to witness the outcome of the French Revolution. The two are reunited on their way back to China, and yet they still cannot solve their disagreement regarding how to renew China. *The Future of New China* comes to a sudden stop in chapter 5.

One has to acknowledge that many late Qing novels were aborted, a fact which epitomizes the volatile circumstances of reading and writing fiction in late Qing era.¹⁰ What makes *The Future of New China* special is that its unfinished form complicates its utopian scheme. Insofar as it promises to tell *how* the bright future will have been reached over a span of fifty years, the unfinished project of *The Future of New China* exposes a short-circuit in its narrative and historiographical mechanism. If “future” serves as the motivation/destination of Liang’s fiction as revolution, its realization indicates that a passage of time, along with the plot, will unfold and its implied hermeneutic goal will be revealed. As the novel stands now, China in the future has been reached in advance (through a flashback), followed nevertheless by an abortion of the history and narrative that would have filled the gap between now and then.

I have described elsewhere the narrative short-circuit of Liang Qichao’s novel in terms of the “future perfect” mood, which means a projection of a scene or episode expected or planned to happen before a time of reference in the future. In other words, the novel deals not with what *may* happen but what *will have* happened in the years to come.¹¹ I argue that Liang projects the grand prospect of the Republic of Great China with such fervor that he preempts the future and overfamiliarizes the unknown. When the remote future turns out to be preemptively familiar, or when the mystical apocalypse proves to be yesterday’s news, Liang risks turning his futurist visions into “nostalgic” anticipation. His novel indicates not so much a discovery of a new temporal horizon as a wishful revival of the ancient dreams of China; his visit to the future follows a secret itinerary through the fantasies of the past.

After *The Future of New China*, quite a few works of late Qing fiction feature utopia. By all standards, Wu Jianren’s 吳趸人 (1865-1910) *Xin Shitouji* 新石頭記 (The new *Story of the Stone*, 1908) stands out as the most fascinating. As its title suggests, the novel is intended as a sequel to Cao Xueqin’s 曹雪芹 (1715-1763) *magnum opus Shitouji* 石頭記 (The story of the stone; better known as *Hongloumeng*, The dream of the red chamber, 1792). *The New Story of the Stone* is divided evenly into two parts. In the first part, Baoyu or the Stone returns to mundane society after centuries of life as an otherworldly recluse. His travel takes him to a *yeman shijie* 野蠻世界 (Barbarous World), where he attempts to disseminate new thought, only to find himself hunted down as a heretic by the court. The second part begins with Baoyu barely escaping from jail and stumbling, by coincidence, into a mysterious country, the *wenming jingjie* 文明世界 (Civilized World), a nation that is strong in military power, political structure, scientific advancement, educational institutions, and moral cultivation. While Baoyu is most impressed by its scientific and technological developments, his journey culminates in his visit to its venerable ruler, Dongfang Qiang 東方強 (literally, Eastern strength). Through Dongfang Qiang’s description of the political system of the Civilized World, Wu Jianren lays out his own

¹⁰ Many things forced Liang to abandon the writing of the novel, including his changing political agenda. See Xia Xiaohong, 71-72.

¹¹ Wang, *Fin-de-siècle Splendor*, 301-309.

blueprint for utopia. With *ren* 仁 (benevolence) in mind, according to Dongfang Qiang, not only is a ruler able to improve the welfare of his own people, he will also extend compassion to people of other countries suffering from tyranny.

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

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

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

Wu Jianren's *The New Story of Stone* presents a more complex temporal and narrative scheme with regard to the feasibility of utopia. After the model Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone*, Wu Jianren situates his narrative in the imbricated layers of time, as a mythological cycle, a dream sequence, a realistic experience, and an historical account. Moreover, he presents the Barbarous World and the Civilized World back to back, as if they were in parallel time zones, each in its own turn generating more complications. As such he plays out the theme of doubling and simulacrum inherent in Cao's original.

Between the miserable past and the fantastic future, a fold in time has occurred, and it is in that parallel time that the most exhilarating thing for China has taken place. Time has been conceived such that it alienates both History and the individual's search for plenitude in the course of history; the temporal duration through which China's transformation takes place remains mysteriously bracketed. Baoyu the Stone, it will be recalled, once missed the primal present when Heaven was first mended by the Goddess Nüwa; his earthly romance could be no more than a reinstatement of a debt of tears inherited from that time. And now he "will have been" denied a third chance to mend Heaven. Traveling between the past and the future, Wu Jianren's Jia Baoyu remains the unhappy Stone, a lonely, puzzled adventurer through the tunnel of time, ever pondering the capricious terms of accessing utopia.

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

“The Best of All Best Possible Worlds”

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

I describe these discourses as grand talks, or *dashuo* 大說, as opposed to narrative fiction or *xiaoshuo*. These *dashuo* are aimed at sublime subjects—from nationalism to sovereignty, from frontier disputes to economic issues—and public contention.¹² While these grand talks earn more intellectual and political currency than fictional narratives due to their claims to theoretical rigor and historical relevance, what has been obscured is the fact that their rhetorical strategy and visionary bearing are no less suggestive of imaginary constructs. They constitute the latest edition of literature of persuasion.

Take a quick look at a few examples. Whereas Zhao Tingyan 趙汀陽 rediscovers the concept of *tianxia* 天下 (under the heaven), proclaiming that China should reinstate the powerful mandate as the encompassing state of “under the heaven,”¹³ Yan Xuetong 閻學通 and Xu Jin 徐進 seek to favorably reevaluate the thought of *wangba* 王霸 (the kingly and the hegemonic way).¹⁴ Whereas Gan Yang 甘陽 promotes *tongsantong* 通三統 (unification of three orthodoxies), trying to find the coherent lineage of the orthodoxies of Confucianism, Maoism,

¹² For a general description of the rise of intellectual discourses on Chinese politics and society, see Ma Licheng 馬立誠, *Dangdai Zhongguo bazhong shehui sichao* 當代中國八種社會思潮 (Eight social thoughts in contemporary China) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2012). Also see, Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, “Cong wenhuashi, xueshushi, dao sixiangshi: jin sanshinian Zhongguo xuejie zhuanbian de yige cemian,” 從文化史, 學術史到思想史: 近三十年中國學界轉變的一個側面 (From cultural history to academic history and intellectual history: a slice of the development of Chinese academia during the past three decades), in Part III of Ma’s book, 259-289.

¹³ Zhao Tingyang 趙汀陽, *Tianxia tixi: shijie zhidu zhexue daolun* 天下體系: 世界制度哲學導論 (The framework of Under the Heaven: a philosophical introduction to world systems) (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe 2011).

¹⁴ Yan Xuetong 閻學通 and Xu Jin 徐進, *Wangba tianxia sixiang ji qidi* 王霸天下思想及啓迪 (The thoughts of kingly hegemony and under the heaven and their illuminating lessons) (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 2009).

Dengism,¹⁵ Jiang Qing 蔣慶 argues for the renaissance of Confucian learning as the only way to rectify a polity beset by Western concepts.¹⁶ Most influentially, Wang Hui 汪暉 celebrates Chinese modernity as a form of anti-(Western) modernity, and proposes a new world order formed after the old tributary system (*chaogong tixi* 朝貢體系), a system that can be traced all the way back to the Zhou Dynasty.¹⁷ Despite their divergent ideological backgrounds, these discourses share the same eagerness to seek from traditional Chinese intellectual resources a new system of thought to set against the extant Western paradigm. Their arguments bespeak newly gained confidence in China's post-socialist modernity, “oriented toward salvaging and recovering positive aspects of the Chinese intellectual tradition against what [they] regard as the indiscriminate destruction from the tradition from the May Fourth onward.”¹⁸ As Jiang Qing's book title, *Gongyangxue yinlun* 公羊學引論 (An introduction to Gongyang learning, 1995), hints, these scholars echo in one way or another the exegetical discourse of Gongyang school, attempting to reach the esoteric significance of history and politics through a “esoteric” interpretation of canonical texts (*weiyán dàyì* 微言大義). Precisely because of such a metaphorical approach, these authors impel one to rethink the literary underpinnings of their writings

What is striking is the uncanny parallel between these post-socialist discourses and late Qing political fiction and utopian treatises, as evinced particularly by works such as Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* and Kang Youwei's *The Book of the Great Community*. As discussed above, both Kang and Liang were forerunners of modern Gongyang School exegesis. Their interlocutors in the new millennium, however, are reluctant to consider the fictive or fantastic elements of their writings; they position themselves as thinkers rather than storytellers.

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

Liang Qichao's respondents in the twenty first century approach the utopian vision from the other end of the narrative spectrum. They still demonstrate the time honored “crisis consciousness” (*youhuan yishi* 憂患意識), or in Gloria Davies's translation, a consciousness of “worrying about China.”¹⁹ But writing at a moment when China is “already” rising, these

¹⁵ Gan Yang 甘陽, *Tong santong* 通三統 (Unifying three orthodoxies) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007).

¹⁶ David Elstein, *Democracy and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), chapter 7. Jiang Qing 蔣慶, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future*, eds. Daniel A. Bell & Ruiping Fan, eds., Edmund Ryden, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Wang Hui, *Xiandai zhongguo sixiang de xingqi* 現代中國思想的興起 (The rise of modern Chinese thought) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2004), vol. 1, 643 – 707.

¹⁸ Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 198.

¹⁹ Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chapter 1.

intellectuals appear to confront less pressing exigencies than Liang and his peers in late Qing; instead, they inject into their deliberations more assertive reasoning and (self-) righteous beliefs. Whereas Liang adopts the fictional form to utter his political agenda, they downplay the meta-historical dimension of their narratives, let alone their imaginative capacity.

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

In the end, Candide and Dr. Pangloss seem to have found a peaceful life. Looking back, Pangloss concludes that all the sufferings they have undergone make sense after all: all wrongs are inevitably righted by the universal Divine Design. In his words, "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds." Candide, if not outright rejecting his mentor's optimism, simply responds, "We must cultivate our garden."²⁰

By invoking the Panglossian inclination of modern Chinese discourses, I also have in mind the "Panglossian Paradigm" that Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin invoked in their critique of the evolutionary optimism. They take issue with biologists who view all traits of evolution as atomized things that had been naturally selected and thus leave no space to other causes or alternatives.²¹ Instead, they argue that contingencies and exaptation (the use of old features for new purposes) play an important role in the process of evolution. I argue a similar optimism abounds among Chinese scholars' recent endeavors to project a majestic scenario on not only the future but the past of China. They entertain the "strong" thought of modernity,²² as illustrated by the mandate of nation building and the demands of volition, reason, collectivity, and virility. Rhetorically, it finds manifestation in macroscopic (*hongguan* 宏觀) imagery, the "sublime figure,"²³ and the "epic" representational system. To be sure, these scholars are still harboring a "crisis consciousness," which by logic should have led to anything but Panglossianism. But as if over-compensating for the complex of "worrying about China," they play up their optimism and doggedly look for a way to explain the status quo by explaining away. They believe that the long-awaited historical turning point has come, and the legitimacy of the party-state, however disputable, has to be safeguarded. For all the ups and downs China has been

²⁰ Voltaire, *Candide*, trans. and ed., Robert Adams (New York: Norton, 1991), 224.

²¹ Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin, "The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme," *Proceedings in the Royal Society of London*, Series B, 205 (1161): 581–98. For an online reference, see <http://faculty.washington.edu/lynnhank/GouldLewontin.pdf>.

I derive my understanding of Gould's theory from "The Pattern of Life's History," in John Brockman, ed., *The Third Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 52–64.

²² I am inspired by the "weak thought" Gianni Vattimo develops in *The End of Modernity*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

²³ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1997).

through over the past decades, the current state is said to promise “the best of all best possible worlds.”

For instance, Gan Yang’s “unification of three orthodoxies” attempts to streamline Confucian and Chinese Communist traditions in a way that mimics the Gongyang rhetoric of “three times.” Equally intriguing is Wang Hui’s “Zhongguo jueqi de jingyan jiqi mianlin de tiaozhan” 中國崛起的經驗及其面臨的挑戰 (The experience of the rise of China and the challenges it is faces, 2010). In it Wang argues that, although China has been ruled by one party since 1949 and therefore has been deemed undemocratic, the fact is that “during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s there existed within the Party a self-correction mechanism. Theoretical debate, particularly open theoretical debate, has played an important role in the course of the Party’s and the State’s self-adjustment and self-reform”.²⁴ All wrongs are supposed to be righted by the magical “self-correction” system (*zidong jiucuo jijzhi* 自動糾錯機制). Finally, speaking of “Chinese Dream,” what could be more blatantly Panglossian than Zhang Xudong’s 張旭東 interpretation of the concept? For Zhang, “[Chinese Dream] is a discourse that links the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal, the self and the other, the individual and the collective, the practical and the theoretical, the economic and the cultural, the cultural and the political together. [Chinese dream] expresses the universal structure both obliquely and clearly, resulting in a lively materiality.”²⁵

I hasten to stress that I am not denigrating the value of these intellectuals’ utopian imaginary. Quite contrary, precisely because they set out with a critical energy to rethink modern Chinese history, they deserve a serious dialogue. In view of the optimistic bearing of these discourses, I call for what Chang Hao describes as “dark consciousness.” For Chang, “dark consciousness” refers to “an attention to and critical reflection on the inherent dark side of humanity as well as the dark forces deeply rooted in the human society.”²⁶ Chang points out the interrelation between “dark consciousness” and “crisis consciousness,” but argues that the latter serves only as a pretext for the former. That is, if “crisis consciousness” points to the human awareness of historical contingencies and circumstantial perils, “dark consciousness” reminds us that there is something more ominous lurking behind intelligible historical experience, something that is “born with human nature and has ever loomed in human civilization.”²⁷ Trained in the tradition of liberalism and Weberian thought, Chang derives his “dark consciousness” from his understanding of the “original sin” in the Calvinist vein of Christianity. He contends that such an awareness of human fallibility propelled the communal effort to curb individual vice so as to facilitate the general good, thus giving rise to liberal democracy.²⁸

²⁴ Wang Hui, “Zhongguo jueqi de jingyan jiqi mianlin de tiaozhan” 中國崛起的經驗及其面臨的挑戰 (The experience of the rise of China and the challenges it is faces), *Wenhua zongheng* 文化縱橫 (Cultural vista, 2, 2010). <http://www.wyxsx.com/Article/Class17/201004/144507.html>.

²⁵ 在這些辯證的辨析過程中,“中國夢”話語可以把具體和抽象、特殊與普遍、自我與他人、個人與集體、實踐和理論、經濟與文化、文化與政治打通勾連在一起,把一個總體性的結構曲折地然而清晰地敘述和表現出來,使之獲得一種生動的實質性。Zhang Xudong, “Zhongyu daole keyi tanmeng de shihou” 終於到了可以談夢的時候 (A moment to speak of dream at long last), http://big5.qsttheory.cn/gate/big5/www.qsttheory.cn/wh/sxdl/201307/t20130726_253157.htm.

²⁶ Zhang Hao (Hao Chang), “Chaoyue yishi yu youhuan yishi: rujia neisheng waiwang sixiang zhizairen yu fanxing” 儒家內聖外王思想之再認與反省 (Transcendental consciousness and dark consciousness: rethinking of and reflection on the Confucian concept of inside the saint and outside the king), in *Zhanghao zixuanji*, 37.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Zhang Hao, “Youan yishi yu minzhu chuantong,” 2-14.

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

Critics have pointed out the shortcomings of Chang Hao’s theory. The renowned Kantian/Confucian scholar Lee Ming-hui 李明輝, for instance, questions the applicability of Chang’s Weberian model to the Chinese context;³⁰ Hu Ping 胡平 takes issue with his overarching critique of Confucianism and autocracy at the cost of historical specificity. One may even argue that Chang’s understanding of “dark consciousness” is not “dark” enough, as it is still limited to the (modern) humanistic mode of thinking: “dark consciousness” seems to arise merely from a short circuit of a very loosely defined “human nature.” Still, Chang’s critique offers a valuable perspective from which to engage the Panglossian tendency of contemporary Chinese discourses. Chang suggests that Chinese (political) thought has yet to make a break with the sage-king paradigm. This sage-king paradigm is said to have fostered what Chang calls an “ultimately optimistic” (*zhongji leguan* 終極樂觀) mode of thinking, which favors the ideas of human perfectibility and the communicability between the human and the heaven. It also provides the rationale for the system of theocracy (*zhengjiao heyi* 政教合一), which conflates human rulership with theological or ideological legitimacy. Most importantly, these factors help produce a strong inclination to utopianism—often in the form of anticipatory nostalgia for the return of a bygone paradisaic state. “No one can deny the fact that modern political culture has been underlain by the tendencies of political authoritarianism, utopian mentality, and the concept of theocracy. And no one can deny the fact that these tendencies are rooted in the concept of sage-kingship, a residue of Chinese tradition.”³¹

²⁹ Zhang Hao, “Chaoyue yishi yu youhuan yishi,” 42-43.

³⁰ Lee Ming-hui 李明輝, *Rujia shiye xia de zhengzhi sixiang* 儒家視野下的政治思想 (Political Thought in Confucian perspective), chapter 3, particularly 38-43, 51-53. Hu Ping 胡平 “Rujia renxinglun yu minzhu xianzheng: yu Zhang Hao jiaoshou shangque” 儒家人性論與民主憲政: 與張灝教授商榷 (Confucian humanism and democratic constitution: a dialogue with Professor Zhang Hao), in *Zhongguo luntan* 中國論壇 (Chinese tribune) 347 (1991): 111-117. Also see, David Elstein, *Democracy and Contemporary Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 102-104.

³¹ “誰也不能否認: 政治權威主義, 烏托邦心態和政教合一的觀念曾經是近代政治文化的一些主導傾向。同時, 誰也不能否認這些傾向多少以中國傳統遺留下來的聖王觀念為其淵源。” Zhang Hao, “Chaoyue yishi yu youan yishi: Rujia neisheng waiwang sixiang zhizairen yu fanxing” 超越意識與幽暗意識: 儒家內聖外王思想之再認與反省 (transcendental consciousness and dark consciousness: a reappraisal of and reflection on the Confucian thought and inner sagehood and outer kingship) *Zhang Hao zixuanji*, 48. For instance, when Jiang Qing talks about a Confucian democracy centered on a prescient leader, the ideal of sage-king rule looms large; when Wang Hui proposes “party-state” as a desirable mode of polity, his proposal flirts with socialist theocracy. More intriguing is the fact that they all envision future China, a post-socialist El Dorado, by harking back to the world of ancient China.

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

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

In my definition, "dark consciousness" does not merely point to the degeneracy of moral, religious or ideological schemata (as conceived of by Chang or, by extension, Eagleton). Rather it is a fictional power that facilitates the diacritical thrust of *aporia* from within, and beyond, the establishments of human values and beliefs where disturbance is least expected. "Dark consciousness" may register the frustrated yearning, forbidden desire, or elated sensation resulting from the "obsession with China," but precisely because it prompts an inquiry into the other side of consciousness, it cannot be gauged in terms of simple moral or political reasoning. Indeed, it manifests its radical agency by unveiling what Levinas calls "otherwise than being," and putting any optimistic resolutions in infinite contestation.³² At its most polemical, it exerts the abysmal force that voids established values as much as it begets "anticipation," which, in Paula Iovene words, "involves the fears and aspirations that shape lives and narratives in their very unfolding, and the perception of the possibilities and limits that inform human actions and are often mediated by literary texts."³³

Accordingly, in the literary domain of utopia, "dark consciousness" ushers one into the *terra incognita* where Panglossianism is identified only to be overwritten by the latitude of the unknown, and as a result the boundaries of utopia and dystopia become blurry. Coming to mind are examples such as Wu Jianren's *New Story of Stone*, in which the Barbarous World and the Civilized World exist as each other's (negative) reflections. But Lu Xun must be the one who depicts the most precarious terms between Panglossianism and dark consciousness.

Lu Xun's most engaging works deal with not the modernity projects as such but their setbacks,³⁴ not coherent social and epistemological systems but the ruptures of those systems. In his words, he discovers "the abyss in the heaven, the void in the all-encompassing, and salvation

³² See Emmanuel Levinas' argument of the narrative as a process of opening to the other—that which is yet to be uttered—vis à vis that which is already being said, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 5-9.

³³ Paola Iovene, *Tale of Future Past: Anticipation and The End of Literature in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 3-4.

³⁴ T. A. Hsia, "Aspects of the Power of Darkness in Lu Hsun," *The Gate of Darkness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 146-162.

in despair.”³⁵ Thus in his seminal treatment of Lu Xun, T. A. Hsia describes the master as caught at the “gate of darkness”³⁶ which presumably divides despair and hope, dream and insomnia, life and afterlife, among other thematic antinomies. Most alarmingly, beneath the surface of Lu Xun’s campaign against cannibalism, something self-cannibalistic has ever loomed. Hence the living dead’s confession in “Mujiewen” 墓碣文 (Epitaph, 1925) “I tore out my heart to eat it, wanting to know the true taste. But the pain was so agonizing, how could I tell its taste? ...”³⁷

If Lu Xun were to live in the post-socialist era, one wonders how he would respond to the contemporary calls for “under the heaven,” “three orthodoxies,” or “politicization of politics.” Literature, as Lu Xun would have it, engages one not only with social and political virtues versus evils, or utopia versus dystopia, but also with the “stratagem of unnamable entities” (*wuwu zhizhen* 無物之陣)—the amorphous existence of nothingness. For Lu Xun, revolutionary zeal generates as much iconoclastic momentum as “involutionary” desire; and enlightenment generates entropic desire and self-reflexive ambivalence; the dream threatens to become the nightmare at any moment. Speaking of dreams of the Chinese brand, Lu Xun had his own “interpretation of dreams” as early as 1933:³⁸

To dream means freedom
To talk about dream means no freedom
To dream is to dream of something real,
To talk about dream is inevitably to lie.³⁹

Utopia, Dystopia, Heterotopia

The fin-de-siècle boom of science fiction appeared as an uncanny recapitulation of the science fiction fever at the beginning of the modern century.⁴⁰ In the post-socialist context, however, the phenomenon tells us something more. Insofar as Chinese socialist literature has been prescribed in terms of realism, be it called revolutionary realism, humanist realism, magic realism, romantic realism, or new realism, that science fiction writers since the 1990s have ventured to imagine and write the *incredible* and the *impractical* bespeaks a paradigmatic intervention with the canon. Indeed, at its most controversial, they set forth the terms of China’s entry into the new millennial age, both as a new political agenda and as a new national myth. More pertinent to our concerns is the way these works inaugurated the dystopian turn of

³⁵ “於天上看見深淵。於一切眼中看見無所有；於無所希望中得救。” *Lu Xun quanji* (Complete works of Lu Xun) (Beijing: Remin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 2, 207; Lu Xun (Lu Hsun), *Wild Grass*, trans. Gladys and Xianyi Yang (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1974), 44.

³⁶ T. A. Hsia, “Aspects of the Power of Darkness in Lu Hsun,” *The Gate of Darkness* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 146-162.

³⁷ Lu Xun, *Wild Grass*, 45.

³⁸ For our concern, it is particularly interesting to observe how Zhu Guangqian’s and Lu Xun’s engagement with a modern lyrical subjectivity help open up Chinese “lyrical tradition.” The case in point is Tao Qian. For Zhu Guangqian, Tao Qian is the paragon of serenity, as he is able to transcend worldly attachment and attain a self-contained, lyrical plenitude. Quite to the contrary, for Lu Xun, it is Tao Qian’s indignation and melancholia when brought to face the mystery and challenge of life that informs his poetic world. In any event, the debate drives home the polemic nature of the lyrical discourse in the 1930s.

³⁹ “做夢，是自由的，說夢，就不自由。做夢，是做真夢的，說夢，就難免說謊。”

魯迅，“Tingshuomeng” 聽說夢 (On dream interpretation), *Luxun quanji*, vol. 4, 281.

⁴⁰ See my discussion in *Fin-de-siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), chapter 5.

contemporary China, and as such serve as a dialogical force vis à vis the Panglossian trend that dominates the political and intellectual discourse.

Dystopia became an even more noticeable genre in the new century.⁴¹ The renowned avant-garde writer Ge Fei's 格非 (b. 1964) trilogy *Wutuobang sanbuqu* 烏托邦三部曲 (Trilogy of utopia, part 1 *Renmian taohua* 人面桃花 [A peach blossom romance, 2005]; part 2, *Shanhe rumeng* 山河入夢 [Into the dreamscape of China, 2007]; Chunjin jiangnan 春盡江南 [Spring ends in the south of the Yangtze River, 2011]), relates in a lyrical, nostalgic style how Chinese projects of modernity—from the Republican Revolution to the Communist Revolution; from urban planning to rural reconstruction; from “free love” to “literary creativity”—have turned into one nightmare after another. When the dreamland proves to be a facade for the wasteland, utopia betrays its dystopian nature.

Ge Fei packages his trilogy in a circuitous symbolism, such that it appears less provocative when compared with the works of two exiled writers, Cao Guanlong 曹冠龍 (b. 1945) in the United States and Ma Jian 馬建 (b. 1952) in England. In *Chen* 沉 (Sinking, 2009), Cao focuses on a most atrocious incident from the Cultural Revolution: an alleged episode of cannibalism in Guangxi Province. He describes how “eating man” becomes a gastronomic and political festivity in a society immersed in fanaticism, and how, at its most outrageous, Lu Xun's “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記 (The diary of a madman) has a 21st century revision. In Ma Jian's *Rouzhitu* 肉之土 (Beijing coma, 2010), a young June Fourth protestor is gunned down in the Tian'anmen massacre and has since been in a state of coma. Although his body is weathering away, the young man's sub-consciousness remains vibrant. In dreams, his protagonist wanders into the world of the classic *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (Classic of mountains and seas) where immortalities and monstrous creatures, bizarre vegetation and astonishing landscape interact and form a robust, ever-changing world.

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

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

It will be recalled that part of his novel's title is inspired by *Red Star over China* (1937), a reportage by Edgar Snow (1905-1972) and arguably the first account in the English-speaking

⁴¹ For a comprehensive discussion of the dystopian theme in contemporary Chinese novels, see Jeffrey Kinkley, *Visions of Dystopia in China's New Historical Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

world unveiling life in Yan'an, wartime Chinese Communist mecca. By playing with Snow's title, Han Song prompts one to rethink the geopolitics of utopia in terms of Socialist (China), Capitalist (the United States) and extraterrestrial space. His conclusion could not be more ambiguous. Above all, the novel is a flashback set in 2126, the future of future, when all earth civilization, be it socialist or capitalist, has been terminated.

Liu Cixin's 劉慈欣 (b. 1963) *Santi* 三體 (Three body problem, 2007),⁴² *Heian senli* 黑暗森林 (Dark jungle, 2008) and *Sishen yongsheng* 死神永生 (God of death lives forever, 2010) constitute his trilogy *Diqiu wangshi* 地球往事 (Chronicles of the earth). It assumes an epic scope that spans over millions of years, and ought to be regarded as one of the most ambitious works in contemporary Chinese fiction. Mixing the Cultural Revolution and star wars, historical pathos and outer space marvels, Liu has created a chronotope his peers can hardly emulate. But Liu's works are not only a fantastic spectacle but also an inquiry into the ethical terms of such a spectacle.

The Three Body Question relates a woman scientist's revenge of her father's purge and death in the Cultural Revolution by inviting the extraterrestrial creatures Three Body to invade earth. A group of Chinese citizens are drafted to help prevent the impending global holocaust. These heroes travel through the tunnel of time, engaging in ingenious tactics, and fighting cosmic battles. Meanwhile, it turns out that Chairman Mao has long foreseen the futuristic star wars and implemented a preemptive plan.

Because of its grand scope and majestic style, critics have called Liu's fiction a sublime work.⁴³ True, Liu's works induce awe by introducing an apocalyptic view of world civilization in crisis. He asks if human rationality can generate a (political) science that is anything but rational; if history presented in the "future perfect" mood can redeem bygone or ongoing mishaps; if a filial daughter's vengeful wrath can override her professional commitment to social well-being; if a national leader can be both a savior of humanity and a perpetrator of crimes against humanity. Liu refuses to give easy answers to his questions; instead he plays them out against the gigantic cosmic backdrop, thereby soliciting an effect that sustains as much as it subverts the "Maoist sublime" his fictional vision originates with.

Finally, we come to *Shengshi* 盛世 (The fat years, 2009) by Chan Koon-chueng 陳冠中 (b. 1952), a Hong Kong writer currently based in Beijing. The novel starts with a global economic crash in 2011 which paralyzes all leading countries except China. Thanks to shrewd national leadership, we are told, China is able to take advantage of the crisis and further her economic development and socio-political solidarity. As a result, China can already boast as early as 2013 the arrival of *shengshi*, a historical epoch of peace and prosperity. While majority Chinese citizens welcome the golden time, there are signs, such as a prevailing mood of jubilation called "high lite lite" and massive amnesia, that arouse suspicion among a few nonconformists. In order to find out the truth, they kidnap a "national leader," only to learn something that they never could have imagined.

Published in 2009, the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, *The Fat Years* reminds one of Liang Qichao's *Future of New China*, the arch-modern Chinese novel that

⁴² *Santi* or "Three-body" refers to a specific mathematic term, a theoretical problem that scientists have been trying to solve over the past two centuries. Basic information can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three-body_problem.

⁴³ Jia Liyuan 賈立元, *Zhujiu women de weilai: jiushi niandai zhijin Zhongguo kehuan xiaoshuo zhongde zhongguo xiangxiang yanjiu* 築就我們的未來: 九十年代至今中國科幻小說中的中國形象研究 (Achieving our future: study on China's image in Chinese science fiction since 1990s), Master thesis, Beijing Normal University (2010): 30-46.

imagines the prosperity fifty years after the founding the Republic of Great China. A reader familiar with *The Future of New China* would be surprised by the chiasmatic paradoxes permeating *The Fat Years*. Sixty years after the Chinese Communist Revolution, China has accomplished what Liang Qichao could only have dreamed of at the turn of the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Chinese citizens appear to have succumbed to the benevolent hegemony of the party-state. That Chan marks 2013 as the year when the Chinese leader came to declare the Chinese supremacy over the world uncannily anticipates Xi Jinping's announcement of "Chinese Dream".

Compared with the two works discussed above, *The Fat Years* may fall short in presenting either an epic vision or a sinister prophecy. It nevertheless creates a style of its own by linking futuristic fantasy with contemporary issues of journalistic relevance. Contrary to fiction in the vein of *A Brave New World* or *1984*, *The Fat Years* does not aim merely to expose the evil scheme of a seemingly benign rule; it seeks instead to tell the other side of the story, thus making the captive national leader its hero. Suave, cool, and a little jaded, the national leader surprises everyone with a nightlong, tell-all confession. According to him, the primary goal of the government is to make people happy; to that end, making use of means necessary for the maintenance of social order should be deemed justified. Marketization is said to be only one of the measures adopted to enhance socialist life; liberalism and neo-Leftism are treated as chips of an ideological game. We are also told that the people are dosed with MDMA, the "ecstasy" drug, through their drinking water, which helps them forget anything that hampers a healthy revolutionary memory.

To return to our argument, however: the national leader's talent lies nowhere but in his skill at rhetoric. He eloquently describes the past and future of China as well as the challenges she is faced with, concluding that the current government represents the best possible regime one can ever think of. His confession—nay, storytelling—is so moving that he manages in the end to persuade his kidnappers to release him so that he can better serve the people. Thus Chan tells a story in which the national leader turns out to be not only a competent administrator but also the most mesmerizing "storyteller"—in the genre of utopia. Through his projection of the golden future of China, a sublime effect is achieved; in the sense of not the "Maoist sublime" but the "most sublime hysteric" as defined by Slavoj Žižek.⁴⁴

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

⁴⁴ Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), chapter 1; Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989). Also see, *The Most Sublime Hysteric: Hegel with Lacan* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

it in its future incarnations. For this reason all modernities bear the imprint of primitive savagery, and all utopian projects presuppose their own negations.

To conclude my survey of modern Chinese utopia in terms of Panglossian dream versus “dark consciousness,” I refer to the ending of *The Fat Years*. At the end of the novel, Chan’s characters turn their back on the golden space they are supposed to inhabit, and decide to pursue their own dreams elsewhere. Chan thus asks a difficult question as to individual choice when membership in a utopia has become available—or even mandatory. In these characters’ adventure into the domain of “dark consciousness,” Lu Xun’s words resound:

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

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

There is something I dislike in your future golden world; I do not want to go there.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ 魯迅，〈影的告別〉，“有所不樂意的在天堂裡，我不願去；有所不樂意的在地獄裡，我不願去；有所不樂意的在你們將來的黃金世界裡，我不願去。” Lu Xun, “The Shadow’s Leaving-Taking,” *Wild Grass*, trans. Feng Yu-sheng (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1974), 8.