

The Future

This volume ends just as it started, with a glimpse into the imaginaries of future labour envisioned by Chinese science fiction writers. If the twentieth century opened with utopian hopes about mechanical humanoids emancipating workers from their plight and allowing them to enjoy universal leisure, today, the mood is much darker. The loss of horizon that followed the unfolding of the socialist experiment in China and elsewhere, along with technological advances that instead of liberating workers simply offer employers new ways to control and prod them to work harder and harder, has created fears about a future that appears ever more dystopian. With workers increasingly reduced to atomised units working from their cubicles or their rooms or rushing around in their vehicles to complete the latest delivery, it is not only their class identity that is at stake, but also their very humanity. Although the Chinese Communist Party at 100 still purports to represent the vanguard of the working class and unceasingly boasts of the economic prosperity its rule has brought to the country, Chinese workers today face the same challenges as their counterparts elsewhere, if not worse. As the Party-State continues to claim a monopoly over the representation of Chinese workers and viciously cracks down on organisations or individuals who attempt to do what early communist militants did a century ago—raise workers’ consciousness and instil in them pride and solidarity—there is every reason to despair. And yet, if there is one lesson to learn from this odyssey through one century of Chinese labour history, it is that no matter how dire the circumstances, how hopeless the political situation might appear, Chinese workers and activists have ‘boundless creative power’. A certain figure of the proletariat in China might be obscured, yes, but its future forms are only starting to emerge.

Folding Time: Futuristic Reflections on Class Divisions in Contemporary China

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Following the explosive popularity of the 2011 television miniseries *Palace* (宫), the story of a contemporary woman who travels back in time and becomes entangled in a love triangle with two Qing Dynasty princes, China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a directive stipulating that time-travel works like *Palace* 'casually make up myths, have monstrous and weird plots, use absurd tactics, and even promote feudalism, superstition, fatalism, and reincarnation' and therefore 'should no longer be encouraged'.¹ Many Western media outlets reported with amusement that China had banned time-travel works outright, though in reality the SARFT directive was merely offering a 'recommendation' that addressed a more specific subgenre of time-travel works known as *chuanyue* (穿越, literally, 'crossing over').² In these works, contemporary characters travel back to China's dynastic past, and the recommendation reflected a concern that these sorts of works might invite alternative perspectives on China's past, which are anathema to the Party-State.³

It has frequently been observed that, unlike time-travel works in Western science fiction, which often feature contemporary characters travelling into the future, Chinese time-travel works instead tend to feature contemporary characters travelling into the past. There is, however, a prominent tradition in China of future-oriented speculative fiction (see also Craig A. Smith's essay in the present volume). In 1902, for instance, the political reformer Liang Qichao began serialising his novel *The Future of New China* (新中国未来记), which is set in the year 1962 and describes a world in which China has become a constitutional monarchy and has just been recognised as the preeminent global superpower.⁴ Liang's novel was never completed and the initial chapters focus not so much on the condition of China in 1962 as on the developments the nation has undergone over the fifty years since the beginning of its reform movement in 1912. Although, as luck would have it, 1912 did in fact turn out to be the first year of China's post-dynastic Republican regime, the fiftieth anniversary of the founding

of the republic did not prove to be a particularly celebratory moment, given that 1962 coincided with the final year of the ‘three years of natural disaster’—the devastating famine that resulted from the disastrous Great Leap Forward (1958–62), which had sought to jump-start the nation’s economy and quickly catapult it ahead of world powers like the United Kingdom and the United States.

Folding Beijing

Meanwhile, it was during a frenzied three-day period in December 2012—precisely ninety years after Liang Qichao began serialising his futuristic novel and just months after SARFT issued its 2011 time-travel directive—that Tsinghua University economics doctoral student Hao Jingfang wrote a futuristic novella titled *Folding Beijing* (北京折叠).⁵ Although not a conventional time-travel work, this book does feature an innovative premise that radically reimagines the spatiotemporal structure of Chinese urban society.⁶

In particular, Hao Jingfang’s novella is set in a future China that is significantly more prosperous than today, and it describes how, fifty years before the work’s future setting, Beijing was subdivided into three separate ‘spaces’, each of which was assigned to a different class of residents. As the novella explains:

The folding city was divided into three spaces. One side of the earth was First Space, population five million. Their allotted time lasted from six o’clock in the morning to six o’clock the next morning. Then the space went to sleep, and the earth flipped.

The other side was shared by Second Space and Third Space. Twenty-five million people lived in Second Space, and their allotted time lasted from six o’clock on that second day to ten o’clock at night. Fifty million people lived in Third Space, allotted the time from ten o’clock at night to six o’clock in the morning, at which point First Space returned. Time had been carefully divided and parcelled out to separate the populations: Five million enjoyed the use of twenty-four hours, and seventy-five million enjoyed the next twenty-four hours.

During the period when each cohort is granted access to the city, the other two cohorts are hidden out of sight and placed in a hibernetic state. The result is an arrangement in which a small minority of Beijing's population is able to exert a disproportionate control not only over the city's wealth and resources, but also over the fabric of time and space itself.

The plot of *Folding Beijing* revolves around a resident of Beijing's Third Space, Lao Dao, a single father who works in Third Space as a trash collector and who, at the beginning of the novella, accepts an assignment to (illegally) deliver a message to a recipient in First Space and then bring the response back to Third Space. To carry out this task, Lao Dao arranges to squeeze through a small gap that opens up when the city shifts from one configuration to another, and then to use the same method to return to Third Space after completing his job.

After arriving in First Space and delivering his message, Lao Dao is detained by a couple of robot patrols, after which it is determined that there is no record of him in the First Space residency database. Lao Dao is then taken away for interrogation and is ultimately handed over to a slightly older man named Lao Ge. It turns out that, like Lao Dao, Lao Ge is also originally from Third Space, but not long after the folding-city system was established he had an opportunity to cross over to First Space, where he ultimately attained a position of considerable authority. Lao Ge befriends Lao Dao and proceeds to explain to him the logic on which the city's economic system is predicated. In particular, he explains that technological developments had made it possible to automate many sectors of the economy, leading to significant increases in productivity. This, however, created the problem of what to do with all of the people who were previously part of this vast low-wage workforce. Lao Ge then explains that Europe and China adopted two different approaches: in Europe, the authorities 'went with the path of forcefully reducing everyone's working hours and thus increasing employment opportunities', while in China the corresponding authorities adopted an approach that sought 'to reduce the time a certain portion of the population spends living, and then find ways to keep them busy'. The result is the 'folding-Beijing' arrangement, wherein fifty million of Beijing's eighty million residents are effectively 'alive' for only ten hours of every forty-eight-hour period, with three-fifths of them assigned to work as trash collectors—performing menial jobs that could easily be automated, but which are needed to 'keep them [the city's lower-class residents] busy'.

A Critique of Contemporary Society

In this way, Hao Jingfang uses her novella to comment on a set of contemporary phenomena relating to China's explosive growth and urbanisation. As the nation's productivity and gross domestic product have increased rapidly during the post-Mao period, the result has been a comparable rise in the nation's Gini coefficient, as much of the nation's new wealth has gone to a relatively small fraction of the population.⁷ Like many contemporary Chinese cities, Beijing currently has a vast underclass of migrant labourers drawn to it because it offers employment opportunities that far exceed those they would be able to find in the countryside. For instance, the 2010 census reports that, around the time Hao Jingfang composed her novella, Beijing had a floating population of nearly nine million migrant labourers, or almost half of the city's total population of just under twenty million.⁸ Because China's Mao-era household registration (户 口) system remains in place, however, the majority of these migrant laborers are forced to live in precarious conditions largely outside China's social safety net. At the same time, Beijing (like most of China's large cities) is heavily reliant on cheap migrant labour, even as the city systematically positions these same migrant workers as illegitimate interlopers.

In the years since Hao wrote her novella, the Beijing authorities have made concerted attempts to limit both the city's overall population growth and its relative percentage of migrant labourers. For instance, in late 2013, Beijing announced that, in 2014, it would begin taking actions to 'resolutely' curb its population growth, and in 2015 the city raised its population target for the year 2020 from eighteen million to twenty-three million.⁹ In late 2017, Beijing initiated a campaign to destroy many of the shantytowns where migrant workers live, ostensibly in the name of improving public safety (in November that year a fire in an area of southern Beijing inhabited by migrant workers had resulted in nearly twenty deaths).¹⁰

One apparent result of these policies systematically targeting migrant workers, meanwhile, is that the average happiness index of China's rural-to-urban migrant workers, according to a recent United Nations-affiliated report, is lower not only than that of urban-born residents, but also than that of the rural residents who remained in the countryside.¹¹ Why are Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers less happy than both their urban and their rural peers? The authors of the report consider various potential explanations and conclude that each of the three most likely 'involves false expectations, of three different types: prospective

migrants may have false expectations about their urban conditions, or about their urban aspirations, or about themselves.' In short, they conclude that these migrants were likely 'too optimistic about life in the city'.¹²

The condition described here is similar to what Lauren Berlant calls 'cruel optimism', wherein 'something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing'.¹³ Precisely because these migrants have inflated expectations about what the future might bring, they are therefore stymied in their attempts to improve their situation (and specifically their general happiness) in the present.

Resignation

In Hao Jingfang's novella, meanwhile, Lao Dao and his fellow Third Spacers, although technically not migrant labourers, are nevertheless structurally relegated to menial, low-paying jobs like many rural-to-urban migrants in contemporary China. A key difference, however, is that Lao Dao does not appear to be particularly unhappy, and instead appears resigned to his fate:

He was a waste worker; he had processed trash for twenty-eight years, and would do so for the foreseeable future. He had not found the meaning of his existence or the ultimate refuge of cynicism; instead, he continued to hold on to the humble place assigned to him in life.

Indeed, even Lao Dao's repeated trips to First Space do not appear to inspire in him any desire to fundamentally change his situation, but rather he merely accepts these assignments to earn some extra money to help pay for his foster daughter's kindergarten tuition.

In an interview conducted after *Folding Beijing* was nominated for the Hugo Award, Hao Jingfang notes that she chose not to describe a community driven by anger and insurrectionist tendencies on the grounds that 'political rebellion is such a clichéd theme in SF [science fiction]'.¹⁴ Instead, she sought to write a story in which economic inequality is simply one of the realities of life:

In my story, the unjustness of the world is a part of the background, not a characteristic of some group. The world of the story is unjust, but no individual is the source of the injustice; everyone is simply

playing a role. Like a group of actors enacting some drama on a tilted stage, they suffer, celebrate, rage, jubilate, but don't resist the tilted nature of the stage, which is perceptible only to the audience. The unfairness of the world is revealed for readers, who exist independent of the story, not for the characters. The characters themselves care more about things that touch their daily lives: family, love, power, and wealth, but a reader can see the fundamental inequity of their world.

I chose to write this way because I wanted to reflect on our reality. The lives of the vast majority of people play out like stories full of ups and downs, but few ask how these stories reveal the structure of the world. Most people care only about the details of their individual lives: family, love, power, and wealth, and few examine the framework of the world as a whole. The structure of the real world, of course, is also unfair and unjust, like the world in the story, and in fact the real social pyramid may be even more extreme than the one portrayed in my tale. Only someone who can take the perspective of a reader of the world, standing apart from the emotional experience of individuals, can perceive this structural framework. I wanted to reveal this perspective.¹⁵

Even as Hao Jingfang suggests that 'the real social pyramid may be even more extreme than the one portrayed' in her story, the futuristic vision she offers is, in a sense, much darker than anything we see in contemporary China—precisely because it is happier and less anger-driven.

That is, one curious result cited in the happiness study discussed above is that while rural-to-urban migrants are marginally less happy than their urban counterparts, they are significantly less happy than the rural residents who chose to remain in the countryside. Why is this latter cohort, which has a much lower per capita income than the other two cohorts, the happiest? Part of the answer apparently lies in the fact that happiness is often contextual and, because rural residents are physically separated from their counterparts in urban areas, it is easier for them to be satisfied with what they have, even if it is significantly less than what their counterparts in the cities have. In *Folding Beijing*, meanwhile, Hao describes a situation in which low-class labourers physically live in the city yet are nearly as isolated from their wealthier counterparts as they would have been had they been based in the countryside. In this way, the

city's constantly shifting physical topography yields an increasingly stable social configuration among the city's residents, which is almost an exact inversion of Maoism's rejection of being resigned to one's fate and one's place as an ideological mechanism of the old society.

Folding Dreams

Coincidentally, it was in a speech on 29 November 2012, and just weeks before Hao Jingfang composed *Folding Beijing*, that Xi Jinping—freshly appointed General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and about to be appointed President of China—first proposed his concept of the Chinese Dream (中国梦). A twist on the concept of the American Dream, Xi's vision of the Chinese Dream yokes individual aspirations to national objectives, suggesting that by pursuing their dreams young people could simultaneously help strengthen the nation. The dark implication of Hao's *Folding Beijing*, meanwhile, is that Beijing's 'folded' urban structure would have the effect of recalibrating the relationship between individual dreams and national aspirations, thereby blunting the likelihood not only of the 'cruel optimism' phenomenon that Berlant describes, but also of the sorts of organised protests (or what Hao calls 'insurrections') that might challenge society's highly stratified structure.