

Chinese utopia: Its evolution, poetic anchorage and modern transformation

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Since its coinage by Thomas More in 1516, utopia has gradually become an important concept in modern critical discourse. The idea of utopia as an “image of a future and better world” (Bauman 1976, 17) is derived from humans’ instinctual longing for a better life in a better world. Despite claims about the displacement of utopia in the age of globalization (Tally 2013, vii), the end of utopia (Marcuse 2014, 249), or the rustiness of the idea of mass utopia (Buck-Morss 2000, x), utopia as an imagined entity and a critical concept, method, perspective, or pursuit, has great value because “to be human means always and everywhere to be more than this” (Jacobsen and Tester 2012, 2), and it is an “integral element of the critical attitude” (Bauman 1976, 15). Alluding to the hopeless uncertainty of life, Bloch states: “We live without knowing what for. We die without knowing where to” (2000, 175). However, utopia provides hope and humans feel “the necessity of hope in Dystopian times” (Moylan 2020, 164). Utopia can shape a common societal, emotional, cultural, and political vision. It is indispensable for the sustenance of civilization. Much has been said about the Chinese utopian tradition, but some fundamental questions remain unanswered: How has Chinese utopia evolved? What underpins Chinese utopia and why? And how does textual experience shift transform utopia into political vision and practice? Based on a diachronic review of China’s major utopias, this paper is an attempt to answer these questions.

THE EVOLUTION OF CHINESE UTOPIA

“The idea of a perfect society is rooted deeply in Chinese history and culture” (Guo 2003, 197), and the Chinese utopian tradition still remains active. Chinese utopia has evolved from reactive poetic retreat to active political remolding, or from “escape” to “reconstruction” in Lewis Mumford’s terms (1962, 15). In terms of temporal orientation, it has developed from pastness to futurity; in terms of spatial orientation, it has moved from “nowhere” to “somewhere” and then to “hereness”.

Much of ancient Chinese literature, such as *The Book of Poetry* (诗经, *Shijing*) and *The Book of Rites* (礼记, *Liji*), contains utopian aspects, as do most of China’s major philosophies including Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The major forms of Chinese utopia include “the Land of Bliss” (乐土, *letu*) as in *The Book of Poetry*, the Taoist “small country with few inhabitants” (小国寡民, *xiaoguo guamin*),

the Confucian “Great Unity” (大同, *datong*), Tao Yuanming’s (365–427) “Peach Blossom Spring” (桃花源, *taohuayuan*), and Kang Youwei’s (1858–1927) “World of Great Unity” (大同世界, *datong shijie*). Kang’s utopia marks a series of shifts. Before Kang, the Taiping Rebellion leader Hong Xiuquan’s “Christian version” (Guo 2003, 198) of utopia named “Heavenly Kingdom” (太平天国, *taiping tianguo*) emerged and quickly perished. After Kang, there appeared the “liberal-socialist version” (Guo 2003, 201) of utopia spearheaded by the nationalist revolution leader Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) and Mao’s “communist version” (202). Guo’s view of Hong’s utopia as a “Christian version” seems to be simplistic considering that Hong’s Christian ideas were only possible on the basis of Confucianism – Hong himself being a Confucian scholar who failed the imperial examination more than ten times. “Under the influence of Confucianism, traditional Chinese society is one that is free of any religious dominance. In general, the Chinese cultural tradition is characterized by its secularism” (Zhang 2008, 9)¹. In China, no mass utopia has ever been conceived solely on the basis of religion.

In the sense of an “ideal world”, the first landmark utopia in Chinese literature was created by Lao Tzu, the originator of Taoism, who describes “a small country with few inhabitants”. He writes:

Given a small country with few inhabitants, [...] there might still be weapons of war but no one would drill with them. He could bring it about that the people should have no use for any form of writing save knotted ropes, should be contented with their food, pleased with their clothing, satisfied with their homes, should take pleasure in their rustic tasks. The next place might be so near at hand that one could hear the cocks crowing in it, the dogs barking; but the people would grow old and die without ever having been there (1997, 169).

Due to its semantic indeterminacy and lack of time markers, this text can be interpreted in many ways. However, it reveals a strong longing for a regressive rather than progressive society where virtues are valued over the affluence and order. It is earth-rooted, anarchist, and situated “nowhere”. It is reactive and poetic.

The Confucian Analects also presents an ideal society governed by virtues. Like the Taoist utopia, the Confucian utopia is also “nowhere” though it is not completely detached from the real world. It attempts to create out of the real world a utopia of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, loyalty, reciprocity, filial piety, and rites. The Confucian transcendental secularity has contributed to the establishment of Confucianism as a state philosophy and of Confucian utopia as the prototype for modern Chinese political ideal.

The Book of Poetry, China’s first general collection of poems arguably compiled by Confucius, presents a utopia as the flipside of the real world. Its minimalistic evocation of an “nowhere” utopia in the anonymous poem “Large Rats” (硕鼠, *Shuoshu*) is realized by the alternate mention of the “land of bliss”, “happy state” (乐国, *leguo*) and “happy borders” (乐郊, *lejiao*). The utopia of *letu*, *leguo* and *lejiao* is also reactive and poetic.

The Book of Rites, compiled by Dai Sheng of the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) describes a highly influential pre-More utopia as follows:

When the Great Way was practiced, All-under-Heaven was public-spirited (天下为公, *tian xia wei gong*). They chose men of worth and ability [for public office]; they practiced good faith and cultivated good will. Therefore, people did not single out only their parents to love, nor did they single out only their children for care. They saw to it that the aged were provided for until the end, that the able-bodied had employment, and that the young were brought up well. [...] This was known as the period of the Great Unity (Nylan 2001, 196).

This is a Confucian ideal-based meritocratic utopia of Great Unity. It is still oriented toward the past, essentially nowhere, and literally a “paradise lost”. It conveys retreat, endorsed by poetic justice, to primitive communism.

The best-known Chinese poetic utopia is *The Peach Blossom Spring* created by Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). Disappointed in his political career, Tao resigned and returned to the farming land. In his preface to the poem of *The Peach Blossom Spring*, he describes a beautiful, detached world of bliss. The narrative goes that a fisherman sailed up a river and chanced on a peach grove in full blossom. When he reached the river’s source, he found a small grotto, squeezed through the narrow entrance and finally discovered a utopia, where people lived in perfect harmony with nature. The people there told the fisherman that their ancestors escaped to this place during the chaotic Qin dynasty and they had lived there ever since with no contact with the outside. After bidding farewell, the fisherman came out and reported this to the magistrate. The magistrate and his followers tried in vain to find the way back. Later, after a noble-minded gentleman died of an illness before going to search for the apparently inaccessible utopia, no further attempt was made. This utopia is isolated, regressive, anarchist and poetic. It is the peak of Chinese poetic utopias. It marks an important shift from a “nowhere” utopia to a “somewhere” utopia and from past-orientation to temporal synchronicity with the current world. A utopia of spatial isolation and temporal synchronicity like this can be tentatively termed a “parallel utopia”.

The first mature post-More political Chinese utopia was constructed by Kang Youwei, the major voice for the 1898 “Wuxu Reform”. His prescriptions for the enfeebled China included learning from the West, the implementation of democracy, and the development of science and technology. Kang invented a theory of social evolution, advocating that human society will develop from disorder to “small tranquility” (小康, *xiaokang*) and ultimately to “Great Unity”. In his masterpiece *Book of Great Unity* (大同书, *Datong Shu*, 1956), Kang calls on people to pursue freedom, equality, and philanthropy to create an unselfish, communal society. His ten volumes, *To Dissolve Racial Boundaries to Unify Humanity* (去种界同人类, *Qu Zhongjie Tong Renlei*, 1956) and *To Abandon Private Ownership for Communism* (去产界公生业, *Qu Chanjie Gong Sheng Ye*, 1956) included, constitute Kang’s utopian design of social structure, the ways of production, living, values, institutions, etc. Kang’s utopia is a collage of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Darwinist social evolution. Kang briefly mentions his ideological indebtedness to Confucianism, and his absorption of Buddhism is clearly shown in his skillful use of Buddhist notions such as the suffering of all sentient beings and a world of supreme bliss. Kang’s Taoist ideal is reflected in his emphasis on the cultivation of the body and mind and on peace and

tranquility. His idea of social development resonates with Darwin's theory of evolution. The discursive and ideological hybridity in Kang's utopia indicates that China was reshaped by traditional culture and Western thought. Kang's utopia is China's first forward-looking political utopia, marking a fundamental shift from pastness to futurity, from reactive poetic retreat to active political remolding. From 1900 to 1919, Chinese utopian literature greatly flourished "not only as a response to the severe setbacks encountered by China in modern times, but also, to an even greater extent, out of the desire of the Chinese to pass beyond tradition and search for a 'new continent' of human civilization" (Geng 2008, 176). This utopian upsurge has shown a strong tendency of active political remolding in a literary way, while Sun Yat-sen's and Mao's utopias are aimed at directly remolding the country politically.

In modern China, the Chinese utopian tradition has merged somewhat with Western traditions and thus Chinese utopia ever since has become a "glocalized utopia" (Kumar 2010, 561). This synthesis has laid a solid foundation for China's reinvention of a modern national political ideal in the post-Mao era.

THE POETIC ANCHORAGE OF CHINESE UTOPIA

Chinese utopia has strong poetic anchorage. To a large degree, utopia is poetry, and vice versa, which is shaped by the philosophy of the Heaven-Earth-man unity.

In the Chinese tradition, utopia was conceived in the same way as poetic realms are. For the Chinese, poetry and utopia are essentially the same functionally. Each poem creates its own textual experience in the form of textual reality. Due to its imagism, suggestiveness, and transcendence over the actual reality, each textual reality can be a personal utopia, but only the most appealing personal utopia can become a mass utopia.

The poetic anchorage of Chinese utopia is determined by the Chinese perception of the Heaven-Earth-man unity which is at the core of traditional Chinese thought. The unity contains at least three inter-connected dimensions, namely, space, man's relationship with Heaven and Earth, and man's self-perception.

Heaven (*tian*) was viewed as the infinite space and the highest divine force with the power to punish and reward, and it was the personification of justice and reason. For the Chinese, if Heaven is awe-inspiring, Earth is lovable. The cult of Earth, which started in the Neolithic era, was associated with fertility and earth itself. The Chinese reverence for Heaven and Earth developed along a naturalistic path and ultimately led to a half-instinctual and half-acquired love of earth. "For we are of the earth, earth-born and earthbound. [...] [A] sentiment for this Mother Earth, the feeling of true affection and attachment, one must have for this temporary abode of body and spirit, if we are to have a sense of spiritual harmony" (Lin 1998, 24). The farming society is the prototype of all Chinese utopias even in the industrial or post-industrial era. Neither in More's *Utopia* nor Plato's *Republic* can we find as strong an attachment to Earth. As the most intelligent of creatures, man is still subject to the grace and wrath of Heaven and Earth. In traditional Chinese thought, man is "small" in big nature as shown in Chinese landscape paintings where man is either non-existent or as a mere decoration to the landscape. The idea of a smaller self or no self at all

makes it possible for man to view things through the lens of things, thus blurring the boundary between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object. This blurred boundary and strong earth attachment combined promote the idealization and poeticization of nature. Such nature attachment explains why urban utopias hardly exist in Chinese literature and why *shanshui* (山水, mountains and rivers) and *tianyuan* (田园, fields and homesteads) were so significant that they became distinct poetic genres. The notion of the Heaven-Earth-man unity has taken roots in the Chinese consciousness with a meaning exemplifying harmony, beauty, and poetic dwelling. This unity creates greater “meaning potential” and therefore tends to generate the poetic. For Chinese, the poetic is the aesthetic basis of the utopian, and the utopian is the transformation of the poetic.

The Heaven-Earth-man unity tends to generate the poetic because the blurred boundaries tend to generate *yijing* (意境, mood-idea-image). *Yijing* is the artistically or aesthetically evoked or generated realm or textual aesthetic experience of mood-idea-image. In the Chinese tradition, *yijing* constitutes the supposedly most fundamental basis for poetry. It is about the scene beyond the scene and the image beyond the image; it is in the mind’s eye, not in sight. Its generation looks simple: the text creates some texperience, and then this texperience is transformed into *yijing* by subjective agency under the influence of the Heaven-Earth-man unity. However, its mechanism is complex: the creation of *yijing* depends on the trinity of the heart (emotion), the mind (idea, thought), and the scene (things out there). This trinity is again, determined by the Heaven-Earth-man unity because factors that generate this trinity, such as the interaction between the real and the unreal, the space of semantic indeterminacy, imagistic thinking, the highly poetic tenor of traditional Chinese culture, and the highly evocative, suggestive, pictograph-based Chinese characters, are unexceptionally shaped by that unity. *Yijing* is both a means and a result of aesthetic perception. As a means, it makes poetry possible, and therefore makes utopia possible; as a result, it is texperience, an evoked or constructed mental realm. Therefore, our view of “poetry as utopia” can be further refined as “*yijing* as utopia”.

Tao Yuanming’s utopia fully exemplifies the poetic anchorage of the Chinese utopian tradition. His utopia possesses almost all the elements that generate *yijing* and therefore enchant the Chinese mind. It has beautiful landscape, political detachment, idealized *tianyuan*, equality, undisturbed tranquility, peace, naturalness, timelessness, anarchism, freedom, and more fundamentally, the Heaven-Earth-man unity. Tao’s writing has greatly fortified the poetic anchorage of Chinese utopia. Regarding Tao’s cultural significance, Lu Shuyuan states that “[a]s Tao lived to the rhythm of Nature, he was bestowed with maximum freedom, thus becoming a fundamentally beautiful though simple epitome of human existence, and of dwelling poetically on the earth” (2017, 2). Due to the strong “Peach Blossom Complex” (Meng 2005, 44), almost all the following Chinese utopias before Kang Youwei are either variations of or footnotes to Tao’s utopia.

In short, without poetic anchorage, Chinese utopia can hardly be possible. Poetic anchorage functions as the aesthetic underpinning for Chinese utopia. Chinese utopia

pia is not only the aesthetic object, but also the result of aesthetic perception. Even political utopias in China are poetic. This tendency of aestheticization makes political utopias not only more acceptable, but also more appreciable.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHINESE UTOPIA

Utopia is not something fixed; it is “a process of becoming that is constantly reformulated” (Boer and Li 2015, 320). In the modern context, Chinese utopia is often absorbed into political discourse and transformed into national political vision, policies and practice, all through the mechanism of what we term *texperience* shift.

Texperience shift, or the transfer and transformation of a textual experience, occurs in many forms. One’s *texperience* in appreciating, say, an original Chinese poem, tends to be carried over to one’s subsequent reading of its translation. However, this type of *texperience* shift is not the focus here. Our focus is how *texperience* helps to reconstruct reality. Derived from the actual reality, the textual reality, which is essentially *texperience*, can conversely reshape the perceived actual reality. In other words, *texperience* and reality can be mutually transformative. The primary form of *texperience* shift is that pre-understanding or preconception influences subsequent perception. For instance, ordinary apricot blossoms are no longer ordinary because of their generous idealization and poeticization in previous writings. In this case, *texperience* affects the perception of the reality. Another form is the elevation of some “lower” reality into “higher” *texperience*, as can be seen from the Chinese tendency to idealize nature. The third and most important form is the “realization” of *texperience* in the real world. Accordingly, Chinese utopia, built on utopian *texperience*, is often transformed into a cultural or spiritual icon; it helps to transform the mundane world into a utopia, and is often converted into or realized as real-world political vision, guidelines, policies, and social practice.

Of the first case, the “Peach Blossom Spring” is a good example. The *texperience* of *The Peach Blossom Spring* is unavoidably carried over to the reading of subsequent utopias. More importantly, due to its multiple significances and societal relevance, the “Peach Blossom Spring” is repeatedly resurrected as something of immediate hereness and nowness and serves both commercial and ecological purposes. Commercially, it is converted into an enchanting, marketable icon. Many neighborhoods in China are named “Peach Blossom Spring” because the name itself can evoke utopian *texperience* and that *texperience* will reshape people’s perception of the neighborhood. *The Peach Blossom Spring* and its later variations also serve ecological purposes. Their related utopian *texperience*, when transferred to the perception of the real world, helps to curb the impulse to pursue development in mere economic terms by making the real world dystopian.

In the second case, the mundane world is often elevated into a utopia. Due to the Heaven-Earth-man unity again, Chinese men of letters, especially ancient poets, are obsessed with the expression or representation of nature. In their writings, nature is refined, poeticized, idealized, and idolized. For instance, Jiangnan, a region in the south of the Yangtze River, is elevated in Chinese literature into a land of poetic enchantment, and Suzhou and Hangzhou into paradises on earth as they are popu-

larly called. The utopian conversion of a countryside hometown is another example. Given China's cultural and emotional roots in rural areas, homesickness for many with an acquired identity of "urban dwellers" is a kind of poeticized sentiment that evokes two hometowns: the utopianized hometown where they spiritually dwell and the real hometown where they physically inhabited. A reading of Xu Qinggen's two collections of poetry, *Voice from a Utopian Village* (2016) and *Sonnets of a Utopian Village* (2020) would reveal this. In an even more interesting case, a single poetic line can help to transform an ordinary place into an extraordinary utopia. The Chinese poet Hai Zi (1964–1989) wrote a poem containing this line: "I want to have a house by the sea, with myriad spring blossoms in glee" (2007, 45). Herein, the earth, the sea, the dwelling, vernal verdure, seclusion, peace, rejoicing and heavenly bliss, where all perfect beings exist in a perfect state of being, speak so effectively to the Chinese consciousness that it immediately creates an ethereal utopia out of a tangible, mundane place due to the reciprocal empathetic unity between the self and the elements.

In terms of the conversion of utopia into real-world political vision and social practice, China may be the keenest practitioner. At the personal level, utopia is usually achieved as utopian substitutes. This type of transformation means the "privatization of hope" (Thompson 2013, 1). The Chinese are so capable of utopian texperience shift that they have acquired numerous utopian substitutes such as *shanshui*, *tianyuan* and classical gardens. *Shanshui* is nature per se, *tianyuan* is about homestead and farming in nature, and classical gardens are nature reproduced and refined (Wang 2012, 105). Paintings and poetry of *shanshui* and *tianyuan*, which artistically and poetically recaptures *shanshui* and *tianyuan* per se, are also a kind of utopia realized. At the national level, traditional utopian discourse such as "Great Unity" and "harmony" is absorbed in modern political discourse. Utopia, ideology and national political vision in China are usually interwoven. In a sense, modern China's political discourse is politicized poetics, and its practice is poeticized or utopianized politics. What's more, Chinese literature has the rare quality of transcendence, which endows it with a vital force that never fades away despite dynastic shifts. "Such personality of transcendence must be ascribable to the utopian spirit of the class of scholars [...] and it is a driver of ancient Chinese scholarship and the living soul of ancient literary thought" (Li 2018, 2). This spirit of transcendence has greatly facilitated the conversion of mere texperience into the will of all. Howard P. Segal argues that "[g]enuine utopias frequently seek not to escape from the real world but to make the real world better" (2012, 7). What the Chinese choose to do is to make a utopia out of this world by realizing their utopian texperience. In addition, Confucian "Great Unity" has gained sufficient relevance in modern China because, for one thing, it has inspired modern China's blueprint utopias like Kang Youwei's *World of Great Unity*, and, for another, it transcends both the reality of its own time and that of the modern era. "Memory and utopia represent two different positions of the subject, one oriented towards the past, the other towards the future, both converging in their strong grounding in the present" (Passerini 2014, 8). Transcendental as it is, a utopia can have synchronicity with and relevance to reality if it engages with the present, and therefore can be "realized" some way.

The transformations of Chinese utopia contribute to a better way of existence. “The ultimate goal of human life is Utopia” (Jameson 1971, 173). For some, “utopianism is evoked today like an amputee reaching for a phantom limb: there is no ‘there’ there” (Flaxman 2006, 209). For the Chinese, however, utopia is there and can be here and now as our discussion has demonstrated. The Chinese anthropologist Xiaotong Fei believes that “[o]nly with the relentless pursuit and exploration of the living now, can this ultimate ‘beautiful society’ (美好社会, *meihao shehui*) emerge on this earth” (2014, 266). For him, a possible way is this: “Appreciate your own beauty and that of others’. If beauty is held in common, there will ultimately be Great Unity under Heaven” (美美与共, 天下大同, *Meimei yugong, tianxia datong*, 297).

CONCLUSION

Utopia is both a choice and a necessity for human civilization because it brings hope and vision that generate both the will and the way. China has a strong and active utopian tradition. The major Chinese utopias include, chronologically, “the Land of Bliss” evoked in *The Book of Poetry*, the “small country with few inhabitants” presented by the Taoist founder Lao Tzu in his *Tao Te Ching*, the Confucian “Great Unity”, the “Peach Blossom Spring” constructed by Tao Yuanming of the Eastern Jin dynasty, which serves as the quintessential epitome of poetic dwelling, Kang Youwei’s “World of Great Unity” collectively shaped by a collage of thoughts. Chinese utopia has evolved from reactive poetic retreat to active political remolding, from pastness to futurity, and from “nowhere” to “somewhere” and then to hereness. It has strong poetic anchorage because the poetic is the basis for the utopian and the philosophy of the Heaven-Earth-man unity heavily defines the Chinese mind. For the Chinese, to a large extent, utopia is poetry, and vice versa. Chinese utopia is half about poetics and half about politics. Through the mechanism of experience shift, Chinese utopia helps to transform the mundane world into a utopia of sorts. It is often transformed into a useable cultural or spiritual icon, or national political vision, policies, blueprints and concrete social practice. A good knowledge of Chinese utopia, especially its evolution, poetic underpinning, and modern transformation, can lead to a better understanding of China’s utopian tradition, the entanglement between poetics and politics with utopia as the link, and China’s poetic-utopian-political vision and practice.

NOTES

¹ All translations from the Chinese are by the present authors unless otherwise noted.

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Chinese Utopia. Evolution. Poetic anchorage. Texperience shift. Transformation.

The major forms of Chinese utopia include “the Land of Bliss”, the Taoist “small country with few inhabitants”, the Confucian “Great Unity”, Tao Yuanming’s “Peach Blossom Spring”, Kang Youwei’s “World of Great Unity” and its modern variations. Chinese utopia has evolved from reactive poetic retreat to active political remolding. It has developed from pastness to nowness in terms of temporal orientation, and from “nowhere” to “somewhere” and then to hereness in terms of spatial orientation. Chinese utopia has strong poetic anchorage, which is determined by the Heaven-Earth-man unity. Through the mechanism of texperience shift, Chinese utopia in the modern context is often transformed into a usable cultural or spiritual icon, or national political vision, policies, blueprints and concrete social practice. A comprehensive insight into the Chinese utopian tradition helps to understand the utopian-poetic-political entanglement in China.

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