

## Images of Alternative Chinese Futures: Critical Reflections on the "China Dream" in Chen Qiufan's "The Flower of Shazui"



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SINCE the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Chinese science fiction (SF) literature has been a reflection of intellectuals' expectations, dreams and, lately, also fears of the Chinese future. Contemporary Chinese SF authors not only explore the complex reality of twenty-first century China, but also critically comment on official visions and policy guidelines such as the "China Dream" (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦). Consequently, they have taken the genre to the next level which is, according to Song Mingwei, "more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representations of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism" ("After 1989" 8). David Der-wei Wang describes this hybrid form of narration as "heterotopia," thus adapting Foucault's concept to Chinese SF ("Utopia"). Based on the literary quality and narrative techniques of contemporary Chinese SF authors which, in a way, resemble the Anglo-American SF tradition of the 1960s, Song has termed this new generation of SF writers the Chinese "new wave" (8).

This paper discusses the short story "The Flower of Shazui" (*Shazui zhi hua* 沙嘴之花, 2012) by Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b. 1981) which can be linked to president Xi Jinping's (习近平, b. 1953) political program and his vision of realizing the "China Dream." I argue that, in consequence of a recent increase in domestic and international readership as well as large-scale media attention, SF literature extensively circulates challenging alternative images of the Chinese future that are demystifying the state's grand narrative of a flourishing China.

Since his inauguration in 2012, president Xi Jinping has defined the "China Dream" as the generic national dream. His great vision includes every Chinese individual, since he regards it as "the shared hope and expectation of every Chinese" (Lin)<sup>1</sup>—thus making it a collective dream. Xi further emphasized that the "China Dream" is to "achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and has given assurances that a more just distribution of wealth could be achieved by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the CCP (Lin). In so doing, he has employed a powerful

political metaphor for China's future as a global superpower that had already been on people's minds since at least the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which campaigned under the slogan, "One World One Dream" (*Tong yige shijie tong yige mengxiang* 同一个世界同一个梦想) (Barmé 7–8). The nation-wide propagation of the "China Dream" has generated a controversial public dialogue among Chinese netizens calling for political reform and media freedom (Barmé 9–12; Bandurski).

Contemporary Chinese SF authors are expanding this discussion of the dream's potential risks. For example, Chen Qiufan states that "[b]etween the feeling of individual failure and the conspicuous display of national prosperity lies an unbridgeable chasm" ("The Torn" 373). Most of his narrations are set in the near future and focus on China in an era of economic and social transition. For illustrating everyday life in a realistic way and getting to the bottom of people's complex innermost being, his writing style is regarded as "Science Fiction Realism" (*Kehuan xianshi zhuyi* 科幻现实主义) (He). By criticizing global capitalism and social issues (e.g. income inequalities), Chen's images of alternative Chinese futures send out a warning to his readers. His unique and sophisticated aesthetics satirically visualize China's rapid modernization as something that is already leaving irreversible marks on the bodies and souls of the Chinese people—the metaphor of body modifications is used to address society's corruption caused by increasing commercialization. Hence, Chen's works are characteristic of the Chinese "new wave" writers.

Recent scholarship highlights the fact that contemporary Chinese SF stories reveal a hidden reality and can be interpreted in the context of the "China Dream" (Conn; Rojas, 39; Song, "Representations" 560; Schneider-Vielsäcker 59–60). In addition, scholars have emphasized the cultural and political implications of contemporary Chinese SF (Healey; Li; Luo; Song, "After 1989", "Variations"; Y. Wang). Building on this research, I seek to answer how Chen's SF writings assess the "China Dream" and what kinds of alternative images they provide. By reading his short story "The Flower of Shazui" (2012) in comparison to the state's official vision, I demonstrate the existing tensions between the grand narrative of the "China Dream" and Chen's alternative.

### **Living in an Illusion of Social Happiness**

The downsides of China's large-scale urbanization are disclosed in the short story

"The Flower of Shazui" (*Shazui zhi hua* 沙嘴之花, 2012)<sup>2</sup> by Chen Qiufan. This story critically reflects urban life in the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) of Shenzhen and the gap between rich and poor that is omnipresent in post-reform Chinese society. Focusing on low-income earners, Chen gives a voice to those unheard by the official narrative. The main characters are mostly ordinary people living in Shazui, a former village which today is part of Shenzhen's urban area. The unnamed first person narrator is a former engineer with a secret past who sells the latest technology. We become acquainted with his landlady Miss Shen (沈) who, like many people in Shazui, depends on working multiple jobs to be able to afford the basic standard of living. Finally, we are also introduced to the narrator's neighbor and love interest, Snow Lotus (*Xuelian* 雪莲), who is a sex worker.

This near-future story portrays the real development of Shenzhen since the 1980s. However, it is enriched with fictional elements to create an image showing the negative developments that reality could possibly lead to. In the wake of economic reforms and the opening up of China, the SEZ of Shenzhen was established in 1980 (Yuan et al. 55). Urbanization brought construction sites everywhere, thus the former fishing village expanded to one of the fastest growing global cities in China and functioned as its first "open door" to the international market (Morssink). Over the years, Shenzhen has developed into a hub for China's high-tech industries (Yuan et al. 62). This transformation attracted many migrant workers. In order to relieve border controls between Hong Kong and mainland China, a 2.8 meter high fence was built and divided the city into two worlds: "the inside" (*guannei* 关内, i.e. the SEZ) and "the outside" (*guanwai* 关外). The latter is described by the protagonist as "wilderness" (*manhuang* 蛮荒)—a part of Shenzhen that is not only characterized by its low-income population but also by criminals who rule the streets (Chen, "Shazui" 29). The fictional fence can be understood as a literary trope for the gap between rich and poor in Chinese society.

A negative perception of urbanization is expressed by employing the trope of cancer cells and by means of exaggeration. Living within the enclosed area himself, the narrator describes the rapid development from his point of view: "I imagine these buildings growing as fast as cancer cells into the form they have today" (25). The skyscrapers leave so little space in between that neighbors are able to shake hands (25). Moreover, the real estate market grows rapidly, leading to a daily rent increase of even small and dark apartments (26). The negative effects of urbanization

are strongly emphasized by comparing urbanization processes with invasive cancer, where the malignant tumor rapidly spreads into neighboring healthy tissues, which eventually could cause death. Since cancer is a disease (involving the abnormal growth of endogenous cells) that destroys the body from the inside, the trope implies that it is a home-grown problem that can be traced back to the period of “reform and opening-up” (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放), and that China’s continuous striving for economic development will eventually have fatal consequences.

As the location of Shenzhen is a symbol of China’s rise, the strongest trope in this story is that of the “Shenzhen Dream,” which is “high-tech, high salary, high-resolution, high life, high Shenzhen” (25). The “Shenzhen Dream” can be directly linked to the “China Dream,” providing an example where this dream is already lived. Everywhere in the city, the protagonist sees an “illusory sense of satisfaction” on people’s faces and calls it the “Shenzhen expression”—even politicians appearing on TV have it (28). In the story, society experiences the dream through everything money can buy: high-end luxury goods such as Louis Vuitton bags, sex with beautiful women, consumption of aphrodisiacs, or seeing the fortune-teller. In addition, the metaphor of body modifications is used to visualize society’s moral degeneration caused by the increasing commercialization. The residents of Shenzhen all aspire to earn a lot of money, and the display of social status has become street culture. Using the latest technology of “body films” applied to their skin, the wearers are able to show off their personality, daring, and sex appeal to others (26). The protagonist was once just like them, but the disenchantment of reality made him wake up from the dream, leaving him with a feeling of emptiness: “my heart is like a dead pool of water” (32). This metaphor suggests that Xi Jinping’s maxim is nothing but a hollow promise to legitimize the country’s communist leadership and that in the long run there will be no decisive changes towards social equality. Like the “China Dream,” the “Shenzhen Dream” is supposed to give people satisfaction, but in fact, Chen’s narrative reveals it to be a mere distraction from the dark truth. The dream—be it the “Shenzhen Dream” or the “China Dream”—turns out to be a placebo effect as both the city’s residents and Chinese politicians all live in an illusion of happiness: “In this city, everyone needs some placebo” (28).

Ultimately, the story gives an example of what might happen when Chinese people wake from the “China Dream” and, upon realizing that the leadership only uses empty rhetoric, feel a sense of deep sadness. Death is presented as the only

option to escape “reality’s battlefield,” since the ostensible joy of living the dream actually fades after a short while (26). This manifests in Snow Lotus’ bitter fate. The protagonist’s neighbor is afraid to tell her husband that she is pregnant because he might beat her like he did in the past. However, after being encouraged by both Miss Shen and the narrator, she tells him anyway (32). Not believing that the child is his, he threatens her with a knife. As a result of lifelong unhappiness, Snow Lotus eventually kills her furious husband in an act of despair and attempts suicide. According to Luo Xiaoming, descriptions of the city in contemporary Chinese SF, in this case Shenzhen, “bring to light harbored feelings of helplessness, cynicism and even self-justification upon realization that their ideas and/or opinions cannot be realized and that, ultimately, they cannot change the status-quo” (595). “Death is the best placebo,” the narrator concludes sarcastically, while the police are arresting Snow Lotus, regretting that he was not able to help her (35). By associating the “China Dream” with death—as “China Dream” equals placebo and placebo equals death—the text highlights the potential risks of the CCP’s political tool.

In summary, this story depicts the losers of China’s rapid development and the alternative image shows how these individuals struggle at the margins of society in Shenzhen. In contrast to the state’s grand narratives, “The Flower of Shazui” does not present a typical success story as dreams turn out to be dangerous illusions.

### **Coda: From State Utopia to Nightmarish Alternatives**

Contrary to the determined future that is controlled by the government, “The Flower of Shazui” provides an alternative look into a possible Chinese future. The story points out the negative consequences of China’s rapid urbanization on society and highlights the helplessness of ordinary Chinese individuals as the main characters are permeated with unhappiness. The central motifs of the story are the gap between rich and poor and death as a consequence of China’s rapid urbanization or as an escape out of reality’s misery. According to an interview, Chen draws his inspiration from his own experiences and environment (Liu). When observing the people from his generation, he senses “a feeling of exhaustion about life and anxiety for success” (“The Torn” 373). Instead of a “shared hope” for the future propagated by the “China Dream,” Chen perceives that “the burdens on their shoulders grow heavier year after year and their dreams and hopes are fading” (373).

My analysis suggests that, in the shadow of the optimistic “China Dream” narrative, a social discourse nurtured by critical voices, one that includes Chen Qiufan, exists. “The Flower of Shazui” challenges the state’s grand narrative by deconstructing the collective dreamscape. The story further dismantles the myth around economic growth which is, according to Song (“Variations” 91), a characteristic of contemporary Chinese SF. Through Chen’s narrative, representations of Chinese dreams are transformed from official utopian visions to nightmarish alternatives. The alerting message is further highlighted by employing a cynical language, giving his narrator an angry voice, and by using powerful literary tropes that convey its political implications—the located dream as Shenzhen, the trope of death, and the dream as a placebo for social happiness. The story can therefore be read as a satire of Xi Jinping’s maxim. Positive notions of the official “China Dream” narrative such as the hope of an ever-bright Chinese future are clearly undermined by the alternative images Chen creates. Like malignant cancer cells, China’s unbalanced model of economic growth equals a death sentence for many people. In the meantime, they are sedated with a placebo to sustain the harmonious society.

## Notes

1. All translations of Chinese primary texts are my own. When translating the cited passages from “The Flower of Shazui,” the English translation of Ken Liu has been considered. I honor his literary translations; however, I decided to do my own translation. Please note that my aim is rather to analyze the original texts and therefore to provide a literal translation instead of a literary translation.

2. Ken Liu’s English translation first appeared in *Interzone* in 2012 and was later included in his anthology *Invisible Planets* (2016), see Chen (“The Flower”). A bilingual reprint was issued online in *Strange Horizons* (2017).

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