

A Diagnosis of Sinofuturism from the Urban-Rural Fringe¹



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SINOFUTURISM, in its emergence as exemplified by a series of essays (Goodman, 1998; Land, 2014), books (Greenspan, 2014; Hui, 2016), and videos (Lek, 2016), is still predominantly a discourse of the Anglosphere. Through a reading of Land's past essays on the Shanghai Expo and Greenspan's perspectives on Shanghai urbanism (2014, 2020), I would argue that sinofuturism in its current English articulation is perhaps more of a reaction towards the impotence and expiry of the declinist West than an incisive provocation of Chinese futures concretely rooted in the Chinese condition. The disheartened Anglo intellectual looks beyond "the death-grip of an embittered and self-mortifying anti-modernism" (Land, 2011) of the apologetic old world and for "zones of experimentation" (Greenspan, 2020) in the new world. It starts with an astute critique and an exasperating divorce from *baizuo* or the 'White Left' but then it falls short in responding to the disparity between planned ideals of futurity and their manifestations in a (un)managed disorder in China

Shanghai is presented as the model city by the sinofuturists: a spectacular retro-futurist revival, propelled by the 2010 World Expo itself, towards the status of World Capital. The crucial argument is that this revival has its own texture of futurity: not linear, not cyclical, but a spiral temporality. "Forward to the past" of the Golden Age 1920s: "neomodernity is at once more than modernity and modernity again" (Greenspan, 2014, p.12). Unlike Land's optimism, Yuk Hui's assessment of sinofuturism is a pathological "modernisation without modernity": there is nothing new about sinofuturism as "ultimately, it is only an acceleration of the European modern project" (Hui 2016, p.297); a lack of moral cosmotechnics in contemporary China, despite the economic and sociotechnical achievements, can potentially lead to disastrous consequences. In both diagnoses, the singular sinofuture derives from the official vision of modernity, whether in Land's twist of a spiral temporality or Yuk Hui's critique of an accelerating society that lacks a moral cosmology. To various degrees, both remain ungrounded in already fermenting visions of immiscible futurities elsewhere.

While also remaining vigilant for "zones of experimentation", this essay chooses

not to focus on the first-tier cities, *Pudong* skyline, special economic zones, massive factories, drones, automation, surveillance, and techno-nationalism. I am not interested in searching for the “authentic” China as much as the immiscible condition of a sinofuture itself—I will give one example of the quarantined temporality of the *chengxiangjiehubu* (literally “urban-rural fringe”).² The urban-rural fringe is not necessarily the side of China that the official propaganda of futurity prevents one from seeing, nor should it be seen as somehow more authentic or naturalistic than the city. This is not to say that the fringe is invisible, but it is certainly undesirable, as its clear definition is often obscured. These intermediate contact zones are to be differentiated from *chenzhongcun*, or “urban villages,” which were transient, dense, urban overgrowth in/around the city centres to accommodate migrants during the early phase of (re)modernisation from 1990s onwards. They were hastily demolished as junk space in the 2010s to pave way for erections of new urban architectures.³ In contrast, the urban-rural fringe constitutes semi-permanent settlements that serve an indispensable role between cities and the countryside as “a point of transit and transformation” (Gong 2012).

The urban-rural fringe is a “filthy disorder” (Gong 2012) of various settlements: small-to-medium scale factories/workshops that are mostly outcast by the city administrators, garbage recycle stations, the bastardized residential architecture that arbitrarily and incongruously mixes influences (i.e. stereotypes) from all over the world, main roads as the large trucks pass through with (often unfinished) subsidiary roads connecting the villages, unsanitary restaurants with trashy décor, dodgy home clinics (especially those specializing in illegal abortions), pink neon light hair salons (as brothels are further purged from the cities), internet cafes filled with underage dropouts who are bored stiff, and wet markets of fresh produce and various exotic meats which are chiefly blamed as “sources of hedonistic-cum-pathogenic peril” (Lynteris 121).

The urban-rural fringe processes the trash and various material and affective excess for the cities. It also accommodates the “humiliated people, the peasants [who have] lost their land yet been rejected by the city, the trash collectors” (Gong 2012). The term *piao*, or float, was used to accentuate migrant precarity in the first-tier cities.⁴ However, people don’t “float” here at the fringe; instead, people are mostly rejects being sedimented without future hope. It is not sedentariness in the sense of full modernisation as if the society will finally be rid of its “premodern” and transitory

deformities. The fringe zone is not a temporary construct; even though some areas gentrify as the mega city expands, they will continue to exist on the new fringe as their existence is marginal but indispensable. It is not an alterity that transcends modernity nor an alienated “dead time” that was fiercely attacked by Situationism but being sedentary in the “never-ending everyday” (Thouny 114). Lawrence Lek summarizes it well in his video essay: “sinofuturism does not care about a dramatically better future as long as it survives.” Survival is the true fundamental “hard-lined principle.” People rather put faith in a tiny profit margin than uncertain futures; there is no morality or “values” where there is no time. Gong (2012) considers the stray dogs omnipresent in the fringe zone and their society formed around human waste “presents a portent of our future,” much like the “waste people” on Silicon Isle as described in Chen Qiufan’s *Waste Tide*: it is a futurity arrested in multilayered dissolution and reconfiguration of pollutants and temporality.

Urban-rural fringe produces a no-futurity that symbolizes the “quotidianized apocalypse” (Thouny): “there is no departure, no aim to reach or home to return to” (Thouny 116). As a contemporary example, my current self-quarantine eerily resonates with the idea of a quotidianized apocalypse of the fringe. Wuhan, the original epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, was often disparagingly given the nickname *chaoji da xiancheng* or “supersized county town” for the city’s infamous image of being “unhygienic, disorderly, and dreadful” (*zhang luan cha*).⁵ Wuhan’s spatial texture, unlike the fulfilling aspirations of Shanghai, was accelerating and decelerating at an entirely different pace. To a large degree, despite being an immense city in size, Wuhan glorified the aesthetics of the urban-rural fringe as captured in the recent crime thriller *Wild Goose Lake* (2019). In an attempt to elevate itself from the stigma of “supersized county town,” the city hosted international events like the World Military Games 2019, through which the city centre was “rejuvenated” and its colonial past (the European concessions much like Shanghai) was refurbished and modernized. The expectation was high, much like Shanghai’s World Expo. However, the city only succeeded in garnering international attention due to the current pandemic situation.

During the lockdown, time itself is quarantined in a state of continuous waiting. Cai Bo (2020) writes on his experience during the lockdown, “time itself is a burning anxiety; my mum used to tell me, days seem to be long but short when they are lived; she complains recently, whatever is plenty, nothing is more plentiful than days.”⁶

Linear time, or calendar time, becomes irrelevant, and cyclical time also malfunctions as I sleep and wake up during arbitrary hours. A week in, time was spent in between spasms of violent emotions provoked by the videos circulated on WeChat: terror, anxiety, and fury. The quarantine time is “severed forwards” (Cai 2020) as it is torn between stacks of temporalities: the viral acceleration choked, quite literally, the health care system; desperate and panic-stricken patients waiting eight hours in long queues outside the hospital and risking another round of nosocomial infection; waking up day after day filtering fake news and dubious WeChat screenshots only to find out the official Hope is plastic and melts instantly with the flaming anxiety; staying up until midnight to order groceries online before they’re instantly sold out; even the most politically unmotivated realize that poetics of heroism and stories of machinic efficiency (of tracking the infected) merely covers the unknown number of bodies that went into the furnace without any rituals and countless others who live in unresolved temporal anxiety. The imagery of the pandemic is thus “a cyclical plot of meaningless endlessness... [it is] a poetics not of death and resurrection but hollowed out of hope and inhabited by omens and signs of an ‘end indefinitely postponed’” (Gomen cited in Lynteris 127).

The “viral alarm” caused by the untimely death of Dr Li Wen-Liang did not last long as rage was quickly soaked and dissipated in idleness and lethargy. Žižek (2020) had hoped for the “unintended consequence” of “dead time” self-reflection: being stuck in quarantine at home briefly forced people to realize the sedentariness and precarity in “look toward money” that replaced the official slogan “look to the future” (Cockain 2). However, the miserable populace never cared about progress nor regression, as it had been already waiting for an “apocalypse that never ceases to come, and pass” (Thouny 2009, p.126). The urban-rural fringe should not be seen as the disintegration behind the glorious façade of Shanghai but rather one of the sinofuturisms we can all, but are too reluctant to, viscerally experience. My hope is that the already fermenting immiscible condition of sinofuturity won’t be entirely eclipsed by ungrounded theoretical speculation.

Notes

1. This essay is written on the quarantined grounds of Wuhan amidst a provincial lockdown.

2. It would be naïve to juxtapose the urban and rural but it's largely true that until quite recently, rural villages were largely left alone in the developmental discourse as the major cities absorbed the most capable—village life was sapped of its vitality; migration to the city via cheap labour or university entrance exam was the only upward mobility possible. Gong Jian and Li Jinghu's art project *Urban Rural Fringe Group* (2012) is a great source of inspiration for this essay. For another example, the animation film *Have a Nice Day* (2017) by Liu Jia also captures the aesthetics of the urban-rural fringe very well (Da).

3. In some recent cases, Chinese city planning has learnt to build upon and gentrify these sites that are supposed to be outmoded by continuous modernisation itself instead of outright demolition.

4. Anna Greenspan has described Cara Wallis's *Technomobility* as a relevant ethnographic account of this sociotechnical precariousness of "the floating population."

5. *Xiancheng* is a different geographical concept from urban-rural fringe but the two concepts are almost identical in their imageries of aesthetics and sociality.

6. Chinese translation is my own.

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