

China's Sonic Fictions: Music, Technology, and the Phantasma of a Sinicized Future



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Lost Futures

WHEN the first world fair of the post-war period took place in 1958 in the Belgian capital Brussels, it was received with hesitation. Under the motto *progress of mankind through progress of technology*, the exhibitors, seemingly in denial of the horrors of World War II, were eager to show that through the help of technology, a civilization gone astray could be reconfigured. Solely built for the occasion, Brussel's landmark, the Atomium, still reminds us today of the fatal confidence placed in future technologies such as nuclear power.

Another particularly conspicuous piece of architecture was the emphatically futurist Philips Pavilion. Conceptualized by the utopian Le Corbusier and his long-time assistant Iannis Xenakis, the multi-pointed tent made of concrete broke with all visual habits of the time. Centerpiece of the multimedia pavilion: the 8-minute composition *Poème Electronique* by experimental musician Edgar Varèse. Together with Xenakis, who would later be known as an acclaimed sound composer himself, they not only put forth one of the first ever electronically generated music pieces, but also devised an unprecedented, conceptronic *Gesamtkunstwerk* that fused architecture, film, sound, and light in an immersive spectacle. However, when Varèse' sharp, distorted sounds ran over the 425 loudspeakers, it provoked unbearable discomfort (cf. Treib & Harley).

As much as Varès and Xenakis hoped to draw on the frenzied techno-enthusiasm of bygone days, the dystopian magnitudes of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and the looming threat of a nuclear war seemed to give way to a decaying pathos of modernity. As such, the fair's general critique reads as a mourning for the grandeur of major world exhibitions of pre-war times and thus can be understood as an expression not only of a "collapsing faith in the future" (20), as Anna Greenspan detects, but also of a burgeoning scepticism in its most salient signifier: technology.¹

Following the distressing realization about the conjunction of wartime violence

and technological progress, Friedrich Kittler would have agreed that the fate of modernity is no longer decided at decadent world exhibitions, but rather on the battlefields of wars. No circumstance drives technological progress faster than warfare. As he so famously goes on to reveal, the widespread use of electronic devices in the entertainment industry is unthinkable “without the misuse of military equipment” (198). Or generalizing Hannah Arendt’s conclusion: “progress and catastrophe are two sides of the same coin” (7).

As all hopes in modernity seemed to have vaporized, technology’s brutalist heritage was now triumphantly hovering like a sword of Damocles over the aporia of *advancement through technology*. Still, science’s failed promise of technological salvation did not just vanish, but inscribed itself as a hauntological verdict in the futuristic topos of arts, especially electronic music.²

Probably the most prominent answer of a science-fictional version of futurism is Afrofuturism. Carrying the promise of an envisioned Black future through technoculture, Afrofuturism lent tremendous agency to Afro-diasporic subjects. However, rather than reproducing futurities à la Marinetti, alternating articulations of a speculative tomorrow sought to reclaim a lost faith in the future. As the concept became popular in Western philosophical discourse, it was translated into other ethnofuturisms, such as Sinofuturism: a term that was coined in the context of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU) at the University of Warwick in England. As I am going to argue, Afro- and Sinofuturism might be closely related on a conceptually historic level and share thematic interferences, but they are marked by important epistemological and political differences. These differences arise from their history of origin and become manifest in their respective relations to technology and the future. While Afrofuturism was an emancipatory diasporic project, the mere fact that Sinofuturism is a Western projection renders the term substantially misleading and useless. By discussing actual contemporary electronic music in China, I am going to look beyond the Western gaze that forged the term.

Alternative Futures

In the late 1990s, cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun became one of the leading figures in the theorization of *Afrofuturism*. Central to his argument is the observation that Afro-diasporic subjects, who for centuries have been viciously excluded from the unified

knowledge of an intrinsically Western notion of science, attempted to reinterpret or even expropriate hackneyed ideas of an imagined future. Through devoted listening voyages, or “lexical listening” (Diederichsen 1.280), and by the introduction of a new kind of language regulation, he would reveal Afro-diasporic sound mythologies that narrate notions of the future far from Euro-centric dominance (cf. Eshun).

Similar to Edward George and others, Eshun emphasizes that pan-African science fiction is not primarily to be found in art or literature, like its Italian predecessor, but most notably in music, proving that science fiction in music—or as he calls it, sonic fiction—is as potent as related forms (cf. Buchwald). Against the prevailing narrative of electronic music as a historic continuum stemming from Karlheinz von Stockhausen via Kraftwerk all the way to Detroit techno, he offers the ideal blueprint for a paradigmatic historiographic shift: a sonological turn that breaks with white supremacist interpretations of Black music tied solely to a single-sociological, geographical, and linear-historic narration of origin. His cartography of a sonic Afrofuture pinpoints to the urgency of a multidirectional schema.³ Eshun therefore specifically accuses the gatekeepers of music journalism of always having “over-aestheticised and under-politicised” (Crawford) techno music and thus robbed it of its political potential.

Afrofuturism’s technological epiphanies and its narrations of extraterrestrial life play with the idea that, once displaced from their alien origins, Black bodies now live in an involuntary exile, often referred to as the Black Atlantic. This is, for instance, reflected in the progressive sound of tracks such as *Cyberwolf*, *Death Star*, or *Punisher* by Detroit techno label Underground Resistance. In the whirl of cyber utopia, they not only point to the post-industrial void of the *Motocity*, but are also carried by a last desperate attempt to unfold a Black future “without anthropocentrism,” without a history of repression, and “after humanism” (Diederichsen 1.277). Perhaps it is the syncretism in John Akomfrah’s film essay, *The Last Angel of History*, that best illustrates how Black technologies like blues or hiphop are key to overwriting prevailing techno-narratives and unlocking new spheres of existence, namely the Afro-future.

Warwick’s Sinofuturism

On the initiative of the Warwick-based Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU),

Kodwo Eshun was invited to attend the annual Virtual Realities (VR96) conference and the complimentary seminar *Afro-Futures* at the University of Warwick in 1996. His lectures on Afro-diasporic futurisms were met with great enthusiasm and triggered the CCRU's close engagement with ethnofuturist tropes. Eshun soon became a close ally of this highly mythologized group of researchers, who, to this day, are important authorities in the field of cyber-theory (cf. Reynolds).

Initiated in 1995 by Sadie Plant and Nick Land, the CCRU was an interdisciplinary group of cultural theorists associated with the local philosophy department. Electrified by the ongoing rise of rave culture, the CCRU was obsessed with speculative futures and fully enthused by the idea of cyberspace and electronic music's usurpation. However, the CCRU did not ascribe to the optimism of the Californian dotcom ideology, where technologies were regarded as de-hierarchizing network machines in a Brechtian sense. This hippie hilarity of the 60s was fundamentally at odds with the cyberpunkian *modus vivendi* of the CCRU. In this sense, the vision of the techno-future of these self-ascribed cyborgs remained gloomy. Influenced by theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari, members of the CCRU "opposed the rationalist tradition of a history of philosophy" (Deleuze 14). Captivated by the a-conventional language in *Anti-Oedipus* and Deleuze's outright rejection of a potential myth of origin (cf. Deleuze & Guattari) only further endorsed their antithetical posture. In an act of countercultural response to the 1990s' prevailing narratives of *unity*, *peace*, and *the end of history* (perhaps post-modernists' most obscure and ignorant brainchild?!), the CCRU was fully committed to cyberpunk (cf. Reynolds & Beckett).

Aside from being deeply invested in Afrofuturism, another often-overlooked motif plays a central role in the technophile's edifice of ideas: China. In reference to a global New Age fever and surely also inspired by Deleuze, transfigurations of pre-modern China on the one hand or a sinicized future on the other are frequently to be found in the texts, art, and music of individual members. It must be read as a kind of Afrofuturist extension that is biased by chronic sinophilia, when time and again elements of the I Ching, Sunzi, but also Xi Jinping ideology are points of reference.

Of exceptional quality are the sinophilic tendencies of the CCRU's most controversial member: Nick Land, who believes that China is, "to a massive degree" (Beckett) already an accelerationist milieu. His accelerationist delusions are further stressed in the assertion that the fusion of sinicized Marxism and capitalism is "the greatest political engine of social and economic development the world has ever

known” (Beckett). Having chosen Shanghai as his permanent residency, Land won’t cease to declare that “Neo-China arrives from the future” (Land, *Meltdown*). In view of his anti-democracy, neo-reactionism, and cosmic conspiracy theories, I often wonder how his version of the future differs from that of its fascist Italian originators. Is this not simply reproducing a Western-induced longing for a modernity of days gone by? Land’s romanticised Sinofuturism often remains hermetically sealed, evading an elaborate explanation as to what degree China actually **is** the future.

Also residing in Shanghai is former CCRU member Anna Greenspan, who holds the chair of Assistant Professor of Contemporary Global Media at the local branch of New York University, making it a hub for old and updated CCRU networks, such as that which grew up around Steve Goodman, better known as dubstep producer *Kode9* and founder of the infamous music label *Hyperdub*. Back at Warwick, he would, in the interdisciplinary spirit of the CCRU, often accompany academic events with his music. Having visited Shanghai multiple times in the past years, he was also invited to attend NYU for a lecture. Goodman’s ardent engagement with China insinuated a deeper affection for China, which can be traced back to the late 1990s. Published in the *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* from 1997, for instance, Goodman already speculates about a vaguely dark prospect of China: “Sinofuturism is a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia. It connects seemingly heterogeneous elements onto the topology of planetary capitalism” (Goodman, Fei Ch’ien 155). In his dissertation from 1999, he repeatedly draws on Sunzi’s *The Art Of War* or fantasizes about a “Tao of Turbulence” (Goodman, *Turbulence* 274). And when he identifies China as the “kingdom of heaven” the “direct counterpart of Europe” (Avanessian 23), one cannot help but draw a link to French sinologist François Jullien, whose similarly essentialist, supratemporal fixations of China play directly into the hands of the simplifying narrative of politics of difference. However, in contrast to Land, Goodman’s interest in China has led to an incessant creative exchange, which was also expressed through his relentless support for local artists.

Before his first trip to China in 2005, Goodman put up the emphatically culturalist music mix *Sinogrime* (Kode9). What is intended to make visible the matrix of stereotypes often strikes me as a lived-out China fever. Produced by a number of London’s underground musicians, the mix brings together Grime tracks created between 2002-2003. Incorporating a decidedly *Chinese* clang, the sound elements oscillate between traditional Chinese instruments or sound samples from old Kung

Fu movies. For a short time, *Sinogrime* even became an independent sub-genre of Grime music.⁴ Originating from London, *Sinogrime* is a subtilized projection of an English Sinofuture.

China's Sonic Fictions

When it comes to the popularization of the term Sinofuturism in China, it is crucial to look at the creative relationship Goodman holds with the English artist of Malaysian-Chinese descent, Lawrence Lek. In an interview, Lek explains how he has drawn inspiration for Sinofuturism through conversations with Goodman (Shen). In 2016, the artist's eponymous film essay *Sinofuturism (1839-2046AD)* hit a nerve in both Western and Chinese art discourses. Aside from portraying a speculative Chinese future, his widely acclaimed movie seems to unmask the unintentional difference between the reception of Afrofuturism and Sinofuturism: While Afrofuturism was a crucial enabler for superceding racialized differences, Sinofuturism was intended to undergird a general sentiment of *China being the Future*, thus reinforcing *difference*. Regardless, the term was quickly popularized and manifested in an array of cultural fields, namely music, and often ascribed to the artists of Shanghai music label *Svbkvl* among others, further blurring its definition while at the same time being increasingly degraded to a sentiment.

Therefore, I doubt that the terminology borrowed from the CCRU complies with its matter. As so often with genre terminology, Sinofuturism seems to be atrophying into a default template. Irrespective of whether genre essentialism is conceivable and desirable at all, since their subject matter is so vital, Sinofuturism does not offer an alternate epistemological surrogate. This is to say nothing of its potential sonic-, semiotic- and techno-orientalist pitfalls.

And yet, in the haze of the new techno-cities Shanghai, Shenzhen, or Hangzhou, the new breeding grounds for technological innovation, a unique sci-fi sound has unfolded that accompanies the rapid urban transformations. Despite what is aesthetically forced upon this (non)-genre, it has already gained cultural momentum while simultaneously comprising an unforeseen socio-political potential. Due to the often non-lyrical, sample- and remix-based formalism of electronic music, it is an ideal canvas with which to envision a critical stance of a sinicized, science-fictional condition, as it is not easy prey for censorship.⁵ And here I specifically insist on

science-fictional as a modifier, because the music is a realistic yet non-naturalistic, imaginative counter-narrative to the dominance of techno-science and post-socialist ideology, while at the same time I specifically avoid futurism, as the ‘future’ is not a thematic framework and in some cases is even rejected as such.

This is best exemplified by the Shanghai-based artist *Osheyack*, who has released multiple times on the earlier mentioned label *Svbkvlt*. In contrast to Afrofuturism’s take on technology, which made use of its imaginative potential, the sound on *Osheyack*’s album *Memory Hierarchy* is a response to an already converted information-technological environment. While today the brutal motifs of capital-accumulating profiteers are codified into software and increasingly disappearing behind smooth, aestheticized facades, *Osheyack*’s murky sonic fiction reveals this “omnipresence of surveillance” (*Osheyack*), as he states on his EP. Once a cipher for the undetected, Kittler’s proclaimed *truth of the technological world* is now fully translated into *Osheyack*’s quivering, stentorian beats. In his stance, the urban, networked subject is under permanent scrutiny. Conversely, the CCRU’s techno-fanaticism formed under antithetical conditions: the efficacious spell of the rave fever stimulated technophilic tendencies, rather than mass-digitization (cf. O’Hara).

Analogously unorthodox are the eclectic beat patterns in the DJ sets of Shenzhen local, Guo Jingxin aka *Warmchainss*. Situated somewhere between jungle, hip hop or happy hardcore, she, like many Chinese DJs, deliberately breaks with the dictates of genre and historic boundaries.⁶ As a resident of Shenzhen club Oil, her sets are a science-fictional echo of the insecurities caused by global capitalism and techno-autocracy. She tells me, ever since Shenzhen had the identity of a 高科技城市 high-tech city imposed upon it, she has fully discarded any conceptualization of a futurism. Coupled with the city’s growing atmosphere of tech euphoria, was also a growing formalism of its landscape. As a result, the cityscape increasingly reflects a commodity character and, she says, this inevitably leads to her and her surroundings falling victim to urban ennui and, what Deleuze and Guattari so famously called, deterritorialization. The music, the sonic fictions, may figure as a last reserve of a counter-culture.

While *Warmchainss*’ persona already hints at the dissolution of gender or human, Wu Shanmin alias 33EMYBW radicalizes this idea through her increasingly identifiable approach with the character of the arthropod. As an insectoid alien, she superimposes the producing human subject in favor of a post-human vision that

sounds like “music from a different universe” and overlays rhythms, “that would be impossible for a human to play” (Ryce). The pulsating, epileptic beats on 33’s (pronounced San San) track *Tentacle Centre* attack the nervous system like razor-sharp pincers. The audited *Arthropods Continent* is at the same time organic without being material and mechanical without being purely functionalan Artificial Life (AL). It is precisely these intersections between the organic and the technological that interest 33EMYBW.

There is no doubt that finding an essentialist unity in the acoustical concerns of *Osheyack*, *Warmchainss* or 33EMYBW is a question too narrowly considered. Though, together with their aesthetic adherents, such as Chengdu’s newest nightclub *Axis*, *Shanghai Community Radio*, or the Beijing based label *Do Hits*, they embody a hyper-conscious response to the draconian flipside of China’s techno-tropes. Under the aspect of Foucault’s distribution of power, their science-fictional soundscapes reveal technology’s dispositive character. The envisioned sonic counter-reality further expresses the opposition to all formalisms and suggests an affirmation of a counter-culture in a non-normative fashion. Their explicit engagement with contemporary, present phenomenon, hence implicit and explicit rejection of futurisms, signal the fundamental misplacement of the term *Sinofuturism*.

Further, the firmly rooted term Sinofuturism reifies the dominant role of a Western gaze, which is seemingly more invested in the either—that is, observer-dependent—idealization or demonization of a purportedly sinicized future. In other words: Sinofuturism does not offer an epistemological alternative. Rather, I suggest, the concept *sonic fiction* will extrapolate its full potential if extracted from its theoretic milieu and if subjected to an emancipatory act of self-description. Then, in lieu of the techno-optimist faith of Edgar Varèse or Afro-diasporic surrogate-futures of Underground Resistance, China’s sonic fictions become ways to channel reality. Evading an escapist notion of fiction, while criticizing Chinese techno-tropes, but also circumventing a Western techno-orientalist speculation about a sinicized future. Who knows, maybe Howie Lee’s track 中非友谊大桥 “Sino-African Friendship Bridge” on his most recent EP 天地不仁 *Tian Di Bu Ren*, proclaims the dissolution of ethnocentrist soundscapes in favor of transcultural sonic fictions.

Notes

1. Of all people, it is Pierre Schaeffer, founder of *musique concrète*, member of the French resistance, and, incidentally, yet another collaborateur of Iannis Xenakis, who would, in his *Studio d'Essai*, experiment with technologies invented in Nazi Germany (Stubbs, Kindle Location 1271-1276).

2. Echoes of this dire certitude ring when Maggie Roberts notes, that “the violence of the sounds in techno, is like being turned inside out, smeared, penetrated” (Reynolds).

3. Writer Kalí Tal further insists that the interconnection of Afro-American theory and cyberculture must be subject to a different interpretation and thus notions of a speculative, technologized Afrofuture require a corresponding reading.

4. This hardcore oeuvre with Chinese characteristics is only surpassed by the sonic orientalism of *Fatima Al-Quadiri*: in 2014 she releases her album *Asiatisch* on Goodman's label *Hyperdub*.

5. This very condition suggests that the cultural importance of electronic music in China will be intensified. That some of China's most notorious young artists often choose or are closely related to club cultural contexts is a strong indicator (e.g. Asia Dope Boys, Chen Wei 陈维, Cheng Ran 程然, Ren Hang 任航, et al.). Shanghai-based writer Xi Shaonan 郗少男 has explored this more closely in his article on the intersection of club culture and art for Leap Magazine 艺术界.

6. An expression of the absence of (popcultural) historicity or resistance to the West's obsession with it?

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