

*Literature and Modern China*  
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### ***Introduction by Special Guest Editor***

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## **Visions of Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture**

This issue takes innovative approaches to the literary and cultural dynamics of utopianism in modern Chinese literature and culture. The term *utopia*, which was coined by Sir Thomas More in his 1516 pamphlet *Utopia*, refers to an imaginary spatial construct that possesses a perfectionist socio-political design for its members. Dystopia, by contrast, is plagued by totalitarian governance, corruption, violence, and cyclical regression in society. Yet while dystopia is treated as the antithesis of utopia, the relationship between the two has been fraught with tension throughout modern history. The regression of reason into insanity, the dissolution of enlightenment into barbarism, and the social and environmental devastation caused by utopian social engineering, explains the general suspicion toward any utopian theory and practice today.

The authors in this issue shift our focus on utopia from its Western coinage to the Chinese context: how did utopianism factor in the Chinese search for revolution and enlightenment in the tumultuous twentieth century? Why did modern Chinese intellectuals and writers repeatedly invoke visions of dystopia at a time when utopian passion seemed more predominant among the public? What is the theoretical potential to theorize the dialectic of utopia and dystopia in an age of mass cynicism?

The first two articles discuss the origins of modern Chinese utopianism. Based on extended archival research, Li Ailin explores late Qing and early Republican Chinese intellectuals' thinking on the "youth question" (青年問題). Surveying utopian novels and writings from the 1890s to the 1910s, Li argues that the modern Chinese youth discourse was intertwined with a utopian yearning for national rejuvenation. Youth, as such, was endowed with a messianic power to save the nation, cultivate new citizens, and restore China's rightful place in world-historical drama.

Peng Chengxin, meanwhile, directs our attention to late Qing thinkers' ambivalent imagination of *Nanyang* (南洋) in the age of imperialism and colonialism. Peng observes that although anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism were consistently held to by Liang Qichao (梁啟超, 1873-1929), Wei Yuan (魏源, 1794-1857), and others; the Chinese colonial imagination of Nanyang lingered on like a ghost, spurring new discussions about the migration of Chinese people overseas and the expansion of economic ties and political influence in Southeast Asia.

The remaining four articles turn to the literary dynamics of utopia and dystopia in Chinese and Sinophone literature. Abel Song Han examines the multivalent images of the otherworld in late Qing *zhiguai* fiction (志怪小說). Translated as “tales of the strange,” *zhiguai* is a classic literary genre that appeared in the Han dynasty and mostly dealt with supernatural imagery such as ghosts, monsters, and demons. Han argues that, among the late Qing *zhiguai* literature, a “fantastic realism” emerged the age of maritime discovery and mechanical reproduction, creating real(istic) components and metaleptic ruptures to the seamless fantastic worlds.

Turning to contemporary literature, Chen Yufan deploys the notion of “queer utopia” to interrogate the figure of the cyborg in Chi Ta-wei's much celebrated fiction *The Membranes* (1996). Chen's essay begins with a close reading of the text's hyperreal world and then moves onto a select survey of recent efforts to stabilize and radicalize *tongzhi* across theoretical, literary, and historical projects to put queer utopia's anticipation of a time to come under erasure. In connection with this, Wang Xinran redirects queer utopia toward the cultural politics of “She-SF” in contemporary China. The rise of women sci-fi authors, as Wang proposes, not only broadens traditional engagement with the “women question” in Chinese literary modernity, but also brings queerness into conversation with the posthuman condition. The final article by Tan Xiaojun elaborates upon the romantic reconstruction of Su Shi (蘇軾, 1037-1101) in Chinese mobile games. Digital games, in Tan's perspective, provide a new platform for traditional Chinese history, projecting antiquarian nostalgia for the bygone classical literary culture.

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