Research Article

Pessoptimist About China's Future: Scientific Progress and Social Harmony in *Hospital* by Han Song and *Nova* by Cao Fei

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Abstract

This paper analyses the critical responses to the official Chinese Communist Party narratives of scientific progress and social harmony found in Han Song's 韩松 2016 novel *Hospital* (医院, *Yiyuan*) and Cao Fei's 曹斐 2019 film *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*). Both works challenge the state's vision of a technologically determined, utopian future. The study explores how these texts subvert the official discourse by critically examining four thematic areas: the relationship between past and future, China and the outside world; the personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress; the disconnect between state-level achievements and the livelihood of ordinary citizens; and the concept of personal freedom and happiness. Both works depict a relentless pursuit of progress that leads to the erosion of individual agency, transforming citizens into objects of (bio)technological experimentation. By offering counter-narratives to the state's sociotechnical imaginary, Han Song and Cao Fei provide an ambivalent vision of China's future, one rooted in the anxieties of its present.

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Introduction

Scientific advancement is one of the cornerstones of the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) identity as a state. Faith in progress and ambitious future development plans are what unite otherwise very different periods of PRC history: the Mao era, Deng Xiaoping's "reforms and opening up," and the present, Xi Jinping's "New Era."

Science is habitually defined as objective investigation of the natural world, but in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse, the term carries both technical and political weight. Since Mao's era, following Soviet models, the party has fused scientific rationality with political legitimacy, so that declaring a policy "scientific" simultaneously asserts its inevitability and correctness (Bandurski, 2023). The most recent example would include Xi Jinping's claims that "scientific socialism" – one that is proven in practice – is better than the "utopian one" (Tsang, 2023). Chinese scientism, as described in the now-classical work by Kwok (1965) and revisited by Hua Shiping (1995), has maintained its presence in CCP discourse despite mounting critiques as a pseudo-religious concept (Peels, 2023).

Putting affirmative works forming part of the official propaganda aside, Chinese visual artists and authors of literary texts have been responding to this confidence in science expressed by the communist party in various ways. Some have used irony and pastiche, for example, Yu Hua 余华 in *China in Ten Words* or Yan Lianke 阎连科 in *The Explosion Chronicles*. Others reflected on the social and environmental costs of rapid development, such as visual artist Wang Jiuliang 王久良 in his videos *Beijing Besieged by Waste*, *Plastic China* and *The Land*, Wen Fang 文芳 in her powerful installation *Terra Cotta Migrant Laborers of People's Republic*, or Liu Xiaodong 刘小东 in his paintings in the *Three Gorges Migrants* series. Others still explored how technological progress endangers personal freedom, for example, Wang Guangyi 王广义 in his installation [*Face Recognition*] *Find Descendants of Tartars* or writer Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆 in his short story *The Fish of Lijiang*.

Two recent works, a novel *Hospital* (医院, *Yiyuan*) by Han Song 韩松 from 2016 and a science fiction feature film of a celebrated visual artist Cao Fei 曹斐 entitled *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*) from 2019, offer fascinating, complex and multi-layered responses to the call for scientific supremacy of China and the promise of building a harmonious society by embracing progress.

The paper examines how these two works critically respond to the official scientific progress narrative. The discussion includes the following subtopics:

- The relationship between the past and the future, China and the outside world.
- Personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress.
- Technological successes of the state and the livelihood of the common folk.
- The view of future society: personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

In this paper, we aim to provide a glimpse of some of the critical responses of artists and intellectuals to the official party discourse. While our two chosen works by Han Song

and Cao Fei cannot be deemed representative of how the Chinese state's quest for progress and the promise of a harmonious future are viewed by the Chinese society at large, we believe that they contain a wealth of material useful in understanding complex social reactions to these core topics of PRC propaganda.

Both artists present visions of possible futures, deeply rooted in the country's present and past experiences, but alternative to the official party promise. Labelled as sinotopia (中托邦, *zhongtuobang*) by Han Song himself, and described in various ways by scholars (Sino-futurism, hallucinatory realism, and proleptic nostalgia), these artistic visions tell us perhaps more about China's present than about the unknown future.

These two visions can be considered "punk," to borrow the wording from *Hospital*, in the sense that they do not reproduce "real-life predictions" about the future but subvert it by offering alternatives that move away from the scientific-socialist vision set by mainstream discourse.

Methodological Approach

Han Song coined the very evocative term of sinotopia, which he used in one of his feature columns to describe a prediction that the entire world is moving towards becoming like China (Han, 2011). Han Song himself has not elaborated much on the notion, although he revisited it in 2022 (Han, 2022); the term was picked by Song Mingwei, a scholar who contributed probably the most in-depth scholarship on Han Song's writing. According to Song's (2023) characterisation, sinotopia presents the potential future landscapes of China; those visions, however, all show the country unable to disentangle absurdities produced by different dimensions of state control, utopian discourses, and ecological devastation brought about by the hectic development. Sinotopia forms yet another kind of "different place (topia)" – heterotopia, a term often used both to analyse Han Song's (Song, 2023) and Cao Fei's works (Berry, 2015; Larson, 2020).

In his novel *Neuromancer*, William Gibson describes cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" and "a graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system" (Gibson, 1984). The phrase has since become a key metaphor for both virtual reality (VR) and cyberspace. Similarly, Clemens observes that Cao Fei "thereby announces herself as a documenter of collective hallucinations" (Clemens, 2011: 120–121). Read together, these perspectives highlight a continuity in conceiving digital spaces as shared, hallucinatory experiences. Byzantine structures in Han Song's narratives point towards the disintegration of meaning; unfolding levels of the hospital world also seem hallucinatory beyond comprehension.

Chinese science fiction and speculative works of art are noted for their potential to explain some of the contradictions of the social reality in the PRC. While science fiction indicates a wide, yet rather specific genre, the category of speculative works of art requires further clarification. Following the characterisation provided by Oziewicz (2017), speculative works of fiction are narratives that deliberately depart from "consensus reality." To do so, they use non-mimetic, imaginative elements to explore alternative

worlds or futures to contemplate on philosophical, social, and cultural questions (Oziewicz, 2017).

Reading authors such as Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, Han Song, Chen Qiufan, Hao Jingfang 郝景芳, and dozens of others through the lens of the country's present and future challenges has become a well-established direction for academic research (e.g. Callahan, 2023; Schneider-Vielsäcker, 2022; Sonal, 2019). Among many possible reasons for that, let's point out just two. First, Chinese science fiction has moved "from a largely unseen genre to being a darling of state and private enterprise" (Isaacson, 2021). Sonal (2019) makes a general statement about the genre's inclination: "a central motif of Chinese science fiction in the twenty-first century has been the rejuvenation and the ultimate triumph of Chinese culture and establishment of China as the sole superpower in the world." Thus, Chinese speculative fiction, while attracting more and more readers worldwide, is also steadily assuming a more prominent position within the country's cultural mainstream. Secondly, Chinese speculative works of art, in a sense, share a common ground with the political and media apparatus of the state, since they all construct narratives of China's development. They project the so-called sociotechnical imaginary, defined as "collectively held, institutionally stabilised and publicly performed visions of desirable futures" (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015: 12). There is, however, one significant difference: there is definitely more ambivalence to the future envisaged, as compared to the specific plans set out by the Chinese state. The use of this imaginary leads to an increase in the state's powers. While in mainstream projections, such as those about the China Dream, the all-powerful state is often portrayed as benevolent, in science-fiction (sci-fi) narratives, further technological enhancements frequently lead to a China that is more self-centred and coercive (Song, 2023). Song Mingwei has popularised labelling contemporary Chinese sci-fi literature the "new wave," turning it into a commonly recognised framework (see, e.g. Judy, 2022; Swift, 2025). The new wave started in the late 1980s, and its experimentation within the genre and balancing between popular and niche encouraged Song to define it as a novel and destabilising force in China's literary world. Song also outlines the poetics of new wave, which faces the unknown and invisible (Isaacson et al., 2024). This characterisation stems from another influential work by this scholar – "The Fear of Seeing," where Song unpacks new waves' anxieties of both epistemological and political nature (Song, 2023). These tropes inform our reading of Han Song's work, where increasing control over individuals provided by technological breakthroughs makes human lives only more miserable. Similarly, in Cao Fei's works, the technological world of the future is not any happier than the present reality.

For the use of our analysis, we want to recalibrate the notion of pessoptimism in China studies first put forward by Callahan (2010):

> To put it simply, China is a pessoptimist nation. To understand China's glowing optimism, we need to understand its enduring pessimism, and vice versa. To understand China's dreams, we also need to understand its nightmares. China's national aesthetic entails the combination of a superiority complex, and an inferiority complex (Callahan, 2010: 9).

Callahan offers such a dialectical solution to look at the apparently contradictory expressions of China's identity, which quite often take their roots in the country's trauma of the "century of humiliation" (百年国耻, *bainian guochi*). While another object of Callahan's analysis through the lens of pessoptimism is the identity/security dynamics, we want to test the flexibility of the term and explore whether it could provide useful theoretical frameworks for reading the artistic imagery of China's future(s). We consider this exploration justified, given that both in *Hospital* and *Nova*, the country's past and foreign actors (US, widely defined West, USSR) "haunt" the narrative. Callahan (2023) himself provides a precedent by briefly interpreting a set of sci-fi literary works employing the notions of pessoptimism, neo-socialism, and *tianxia* (天下).

Both Han Song's prose and Cao Fei's art resist a single, ex cathedra reading; therefore, our focus on elements in these works which depict society and science by no means excludes other interpretations. We read both *Hospital* and *Nova* as counter-narratives that complicate the official discourse on the future of China. Their key feature that earns them the "counter" prefix is questioning the premise of technological determinism, which assumes that specific technological developments, provided that those are possible to achieve, will lead to desired social changes. Following Callahan's (2023) idea to examine Chinese science fiction works as a means to "think beyond the current global agenda," we analyse the two works to dissect the imagined facets of relationships between humans and technology, between science and politics, and between political communities. Science and technology are seen as drivers of national dreams: China Dream, modernisation, development, but they also help to keep people's minds contained – they can dream only the collective dream.

We deliberately include terms such as "works of art" and "art" that suggest a scope that is wider than the already vast body of literature. Juxtaposing a science fiction novel with a feature-length movie from a multimedia artist points to broader interest among Chinese cultural creators in imagining China in futuristic settings.

Our reading includes post-human dimensions of both works. We understand post-humanism here to a lesser degree as exploring the future stages of human development, but rather as presenting a dark view of "post-human" as "less-than-human." The perfect, ultra-rationality and science-oriented governance deprives humans of subjectivity and agency. Even if these two features have been conceptualised by post-human theory as not exclusive to humans, the ideological tenets envisioned in *Hospital* and *Nova* produce exploitative dystopias. In *Hospital*, the foundational premises are driven by transhumanist desires to enhance the human bodily condition. In *Nova*, a quest for digital transformation of humans leads to a personal tragedy, and the race for progress leaves common citizens stranded.

In our reading of *Hospital*, we consider both the original published in 2016 and the English translation by Michael Berry from 2023 as a point of reference. As explained by Berry in the novel's afterword, the version of the text that eventually came to life in English is more in line with Han Song's original intention. All the quotes from *Hospital* come from this translation; whenever the number of chapters is noted, they refer to Berry's translation. Other translated parts, such as quotes from Chinese-language academic research, are by the authors of this article.

Literature Review

Even though Han Song's body of prose is not an easy read, and some of his works receive mixed reviews, in recent years, his label-defying writing has inspired diverse scholarly perspectives. *Hospital* (Han, 2016) is the "opening act" of the "hospital trilogy," which also includes *Exorcism* (驱魔, *Qumo*, Han, 2017) and *Dead Souls* (亡灵, *Wangling*, Han, 2018), and so some of the academic commentary refers to the whole series. The already-mentioned Song Mingwei offers an analysis of *Hospital* as a subversive Foucauldian heterotopia (2021) and as sinotopia (2023). David Der-wei Wang offers a similar reading of liminal and transitory spaces (2020). Aloisio (2023), despite a rather scarce focus on the *Hospital*, provides a very insightful analysis of heterotopia as Han Song's strategy to counter official modernisation discourses. Lyu (2023) frames the *Hospital* trilogy in terms of necrofuturism, which hints at death as the production of biodata rather than anything else. Chen (2024) interprets the constantly changing chaotic stream of information within the hospital world through the notion of chaosmology, which informs Han Song's creative process.

Naturally, the work has also attracted scholarly attention in Chinese-language articles. Lai Peixuan 賴佩暄 links Han's "disease discourse" with Lu Xunesque critique of China, who also framed the country's predicaments with health-related metaphors (Lai, 2021); this conceptual affinity has been noted, but perhaps less exposed by Song Mingwei (2021). Another Lu Xun's image – that of "iron house" symbolising social entrapment, is invoked by Liu Yanggang 刘阳扬. Apart from that, Liu recalls Donna Harraway's figure of cyborgs (1985) as trans-gender agents, concluding that in Han Song's novel, the redefinition of human into post-human only further enforces oppressive and hierarchical order (Liu, 2021). Liu Weiyun, on the other hand, focuses on the labyrinthine structure of the narrative, which underlies the contradictions of the novel's shifting realities (Liu, 2023).

Cao Fei, as an important figure in Chinese contemporary art, has attracted the attention of journalists, curators and researchers both from China and abroad. Early publications devoted to the analysis of her artistic activity date back almost twenty years, with an article by Maya Kovskaya (2006) and an interview by Joni Low (2006). The second decade of the century marks a significant increase in publications, with important papers devoted to Cao Fei, such as Silvia Fok (2011), Hou Hanru 侯瀚如 (2013), or Chris Berry (2015), appearing on a yearly basis. As Cao Fei's oeuvre is strongly heterogeneous, different studies focus on different stages of her activity, covering a wide array of topics. Her 2006/2007 Foshan Osram factory site-specific work, *Whose Utopia?*, which earned her international attention, forms the topic of earlier analyses. Video and VR works (especially the 2007–2011 project *RMB City* and the 2007 film *I.Mirror*) are discussed by Alice Ming Wai Jim (2012), Justin Clemens (2011), and Monica Merlin (2018). An in-depth look into her Hong Kong sight-specific work, *Same Old, Brand New*, is provided by Jori Snels (2018). Angie Chau (2017) looks at three of her works (*I.Mirror*, *Haze and Fog*, and *La Town*) through the prism of "post-human consciousness," exploring topics of emotional disengagement, trauma and surveillance.

Giorgio Strafella and Daria Berg (2023) take on the topic of ruins in Chinese literature and visual arts, analysing Cao's *Rumba II: Nomad* (2015). In their 2024 publication, the two researchers chose Cao Fei as one of three examples of female cultural entrepreneurs operating in China (Berg and Strafella, 2024). A similar, although highly critical, look at Cao Fei from the perspective of her public activity is offered by Johannes Hoerning (2022). In turn, Astrid N. Korporaal (2024) compares Cao Fei and a Colombian artist, Ana Maria Millan, in the framework of post-colonial studies.

Cao's *HX Project*, which forms the topic of this paper, has also received considerable interest from researchers. Probably the most in-depth analysis of this project is offered by Ellen Larson in her two papers from 2020 and 2024. Other, albeit much briefer studies are authored by Chris Berry (2020), Kate Wong (2020), and Chinese researchers: Yang Chenhao 杨晨颢 (2023), Li Zhuoxuan 李卓璇 (2022), and Jin Mu 今木 (2021). An interesting look at the *HX Project* from the perspective of Sino-futurism is given by Zhao Xinyang and Michael Keane (2025) in their analysis of Cao's *Blueprints* exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery in London (2020). Numerous additional perspectives on the *HX Project* are offered in Cao Fei's recent media appearances and video materials produced in conjunction with international exhibitions where works from the project are shown, such as the interview with Daven Wu for *Wallpaper* (2021).

Han Song – the Author

Han Song, after over three decades of literary presence, remains one of the most prolific Chinese sci-fi authors, even though some of his works have never been published in China. He started writing fiction in 1988 (although some pinpoint his juvenile short stories, see Chen 2024); his first story, *Tombs of the Universe* (宇宙墓碑, *Yuzhou Mubei*) was officially published in China in 1992, making it a foundational text of the new wave. Around this time, Han became a journalist at the Xinhua News Agency, which probably explains the versatility of his writing output. The formative character of his writing earned him, along with Wang Jinkang 王晋康 and the most mainstream Liu Cixin, the name of one of the Three Marshals (三巨头, *San Jutou*). Compared to Liu Cixin, often branded as a representative of "hard" sci-fi – one inspired heavily by up-to-date scientific and technological knowledge, Han Song is more interested in logical incoherences and disfamiliarities that humans experience in the future controlled by soulless rationality. The list of authors that Han Song is usually compared with includes Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, Philip K. Dick, Franz Kafka, and Lu Xun. The writing strategy of Han Song may inform the sets of dichotomies that appear in *Hospital*: "because the world that sci-fi writers show is not real, it has to be written as realistically as possible" (Xu, 2016).

Hospital – the Synopsis

Han narrates his trilogy as a teleological schema of civilisational progress, moving from the "medicine era" (药时代, *yaoshidai*) through the "medicine war" (药战争,

yaozhanzheng) towards a "medicine empire" (药帝国, *yaodiguo*). In the trilogy's first volume, which is the focus of our analysis, the medical facility is not merely a setting, but an extrapolated feature of the grotesque world governed by medical ideology supported by astonishingly advanced big-data analysis. Medical ideology is the dominant dimension of narrating human and social life along the lines that every single life is merely a container of diseases that require treatment and administration. All ideological tenets are non-sensical, contradictory, and their punchy dialectics are somewhat similar to quotations from the Little Red Book: "to be without illness is to be ill," "everyone is sick," or "all illnesses are untreatable" (chapter 27).

Yang Wei 杨伟 – a government worker, an everyman kind of a protagonist – arrives in C City to compose a corporate song. The location remains partly undefined, although "C" may stand both for China and "Cosmos" – a simulacrum of the universe. In Han's other novel – *Subway*, the first letters used in the same manner have darker implications (Ni, 2020). During the first evening of his stay, Yang Wei drinks a bottle of water, which causes unbearable stomach pain. Surprisingly, the hotel staff knew of the situation beforehand and transported him to a hospital. Yang is being endlessly subjected to various medical procedures, with complete disregard for the costs and for his own feelings. On a different level, another journey is happening – Yang Wei learns that the world has entered the Age of Medicine. In this new ideological era, everyone is being constantly diagnosed and, at the same time, everyone wishes to be taken care of by hospitals. Yang investigates the system's modus operandi. Females that Yang happens to meet on his path discreetly contest the unchecked power of the institution and doctors. Those encounters slowly take root. He starts to hear a voice that calls itself a "possessor" (附体, *futi*), who (or which) convinces Yang to run away. He finally manages to get free and finds himself on a boat, only to discover that it is the Hospital Boat.

The novel, due to some scenes, may be considered disturbing: it includes depictions of murder, incest, rape, and repugnant descriptions of body fluids, all wrapped in a multi-layered blend of satire, horror, and speculative futurism heavily influenced by Buddhist thought. The Buddhist framework present throughout the whole trilogy underlines the elusive nature of all perceivable reality. Han Song's strong preoccupation with Buddhism extends beyond *Hospital,* but its key points – depiction of endless wandering, or *samsara* (Lien, 2024), and conviction that "all is emptiness" (Jia, 2013) – feel almost palpable in the novel analysed here.

Cao Fei – the Artist

Cao Fei (b. 1978 in Guangzhou) is one of the most internationally recognised and highly acclaimed Chinese female artists. She graduated from the Guangzhou Fine Arts Academy in 2001, and the first public presentations of her video art took place while she was still a student in 1998 and 1999. She works in mixed media (video, installations, VR, performance, and photography), and her most well-known earlier works include *Cosplay* (video, 2004), *Whose Utopia?* (video, 2006–2007), *RMB City* (Second Life virtual world art project and machinima *I. Mirror* video, 2007–2011), *Haze and Fog* (video, 2013), and

La Town (diorama animation video, 2014). Her artworks have been presented widely in China and abroad, including the Venice Biennale (2007, 2015), Tate Modern in London (2013), Centre Pompidou in Paris (2014, 2019), MoMA PS1 in New York (2016), Guggenheim Museum in New York (2018), Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney (2024/2025), and dozens of other galleries, museums and biennales from New Zealand to Brazil, from Spain to Ukraine, and from India to South Korea.

Cao Fei's oeuvre shows the artist's keen interest in social topics, such as the consequences of China's economic transformation and urbanisation, the rapid social changes and social inequalities, or the mass consumption. She has been one of the earliest experimenters with new technology, especially virtual and augmented reality (*RMB City* project). In 2015, Cao Fei started her major *HX Project,* which engaged her for a full ten years, until 2024 (Larson, 2020, 2024; Wong, 2020). Named after a deserted cinema Hongxia (红霞) destined for demolition in the Jiuxianqiao district in Beijing where she moved her studio, the project comprised a wide array of actions and outcomes: research into the 1950s Chinese scientific and industrialisation policies (especially the history of the electronic industry), research into the history of the 738 and 774 factory units where Hongxia Theatre was located, city archaeology and artefact collection, site-specific artworks, installations, video art, finally the documentation of the Hongxia Theatre premises and their demolition by the city authorities in 2024. The full-feature sci-fi film *Nova* (新星, *Xin xing*), completed in 2019, comprises *HX Project*'s most important outcome (Li, 2022: 122).

Nova – the Film

Nova, in the words of Daven Wu, can be aptly summarised as a "retro-futurist tale of a failed secret science project that attempts to turn humans into digital mediums" (Wu, 2021). It is a heterotopian sci-fi film with action set somewhere between the 1950s and 1960s and the future, which explores the history of the Unit 738 area, the history of China's technological development and scientific cooperation with the USSR, as well as issues of China's present social and technological development. Mao-era associations and hints of Mao-era trauma form an important inner layer of the story (Berry, 2020: 42).

The film's main character is a talented Chinese scientist leading a team of researchers taught by Soviet comrades to construct a time/space relocation machine in a secret lab. Coincidentally, his primary USSR counterpart responsible for the knowledge transfer is an attractive, young woman, and the two fall in love. With the Sino–Soviet split of 1959/1960, the Soviet delegation leaves the lab abruptly, and the Chinese scientist is left to complete the task by himself. He raises his son Li Xia (the plot leaves it unsaid whether the Soviet scientist is the mother, Kate Wong believes she is; see Wong, 2020: 45), and devotes everything to science, so much so that, at one point, when Li Xia is around ten years old, he is put in the time/space machine and "digitalised." The experiment fails, and the father loses his son forever, but Li Xia is not dead. He is suspended in between times and spaces, able to observe his father at different stages of his life, meeting various "ghosts" of the past and the future, constantly attempting to

return to reality but failing to do so. Li Xia's futile struggle to reconnect with his father and utter loneliness form significant emotional tropes of the film (Yang, 2023: 162).

Nova was filmed mostly in the Hongxia Theater building and its proximity (Larson, 2024: 71). Some of the objects present in the film are exhibited in the gallery space where the film is typically shown, exhibition staff wear branded, blue laboratory working clothes from the film, and some of the film's characters are also present in other Cao Fei works exhibited together with *Nova* (e.g. the *Matryoshka* series photographs and video). This creates an interesting intertextual effect, which only broadens the feeling of heterotopia and the immersion of the film's viewers in *HX Project*'s constructed universe.

Nova's debut was in 2019 at Cao Fei's *HX* Exhibition at Centre Pompidou in Paris, and the film has been screened since then at numerous solo exhibitions of the artist in China and around the world, most recently as part of the *Cao Fei: Tidal Flux* Exhibition at the Museum of Art Pudong in Shanghai, and the *Cao Fei: My City is Yours* Exhibition at Sydney's Art Gallery of North South Wales, both exhibitions in 2024/2025.

Thematic Analysis

The above theoretical framework and introductory remarks of the authors and their works inform our thematic analysis of *Hospital* and *Nova* that revolves around four topics that link the two works, and that may be read as an expression of anxieties over China's future:

- The relationship between the past and the future, China and the outside world.
- Personal dimension of the quest for scientific progress.
- Technological successes of the state and the livelihood of the common folk.
- The view of future society: personal freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

The Relationship Between the Past and the Future, China and the Outside World

The visions of the future presented in *Hospital* and *Nova* are firmly rooted in China's past. Both Han Song and Cao Fei choose to include in their constructs two elements of modern history of the country which blur the clarity of China's modern success story: traumas of tragic events of the Mao era, and the connection of China's progress with the outside world – the collective West (*Hospital*), and the USSR (*Nova*).

No matter "how far" or even "how likely" the future is depicted in Han Song's *Hospital*, it is certainly an era in which the spectres of contemporary Chinese politics are very much present. When decoding the continuity of time in *Hospital*, one could recall the notion of "ruinated futurity" proposed by Lin Shiqi (2023). Lin used the term to shed light on repressed memory revealed in the works of contemporary Dongbei writers, Shuang Xuetao and Ban Yu. According to Lin, "ruinated futurity

serves as a framework for conceptualising futurity as the reworking – rather than closure – of the repressed past" (Lin, 2023). The language of Mao-era voluntarism, that is, "we conquer disease and serve the people," intertwines with Xi Jinping's teleology – the Age of Medicine is taking place as "a great change not seen in a million years." Treating patients is a "protracted war" – a term known in China as Mao's dictum of how to fight the war of resistance against Japan. Yang Wei receives an "endless series of treatments," which puts him in a position of being constantly suspected of being sick. The everyman protagonist requires a continued correction by the state. Han Song's hospital world brings back to life the spectre of totalitarianism and shows a circular rather than linear rhythm of history; the mechanics of politics remain the same despite the ultra-rationalised, hyper-scientific setting of the future.

Much of the futuristic world created by Cao Fei in *Nova* is reminiscent of Maoist China. As Chris Berry rightly observes:

> The setting of *Nova* itself mixes futuristic and nostalgic registers. The buildings and street scenes are those associated with Chinese towns of fifty or more years ago. People cycle between the five-story walk-up apartment blocks typical of the Mao era rather than driving cars by the glass-and-steel skyscrapers of contemporary Chinese cities. However, other elements seem to come from an imagined future (Berry, 2020: 42).

This mixture of past and future in *Nova* is both unsettling in its nightmarish, dystopian character and nostalgic at the same time. Ellen Larson, writing about Cao Fei's earlier *HX Project* video *Asia One*, calls it "proleptic nostalgia" and explains the term as: "a nostalgia for the past, though from the viewer's contemporary position, a future utopian nostalgia for the present" (Larson, 2020: 274). However, Cao Fei does not idealise the past. Li Xia, in his travels through time and space, meets a very unlikely companion, like him, locked in the dimension of the constant "in-between." It is a teenage girl, scarred and half-blinded, with a shaved head and wearing a dirty, Mao-era padded jacket. She "plays" a capitalist during the Cultural Revolution struggle sessions, where she is regularly berated and beaten up. Lonely and fatalistic as Li Xia, she is almost the only person (or rather ghost) that the digitalised son of the scientist can meet and converse with during his unending odyssey. She seems to represent China's troubled past, which is still very much present somewhere in the background of the optimistic, futuristic visions of progress and happiness.

The starting point of China's modernity and progress is inseparable from the country's relations with the outside world – the collective West and the USSR. The world in *Hospital* is in a state of constant conflict – ideological confrontation replaces economic cooperation, and the network of hospitals is the effect of germ warfare and tit-for-tat deliberate worsening of environmental conditions. There is a historical narrative of Westerners laying the foundation for medicine as it is performed in the hospitals, yet it is China that made the "glorious strides" in the field. Also, any good intentions on either side are portrayed as insincere: Westerners could not have possibly built hospitals in China out of kindness, while the Chinese keep the portraits of Western doctors on the

walls just to feign friendship, so that they can further exploit foreign technology and know-how.

The USSR and the nostalgic story of Sino–Soviet brotherhood are very much present in *Nova* and in Cao Fei's other works related to the *HX Project*. *Nova* portrays the period of technological and scientific transfer from the USSR to China in the 1950s almost as a beautiful fairytale. In the film, the Soviets arrive as near-saviours, bringing with them all the modern equipment. They patiently teach their Chinese counterparts everything they know, spend time together dancing and drinking, and eventually, true love appears between the two main characters. It is clear that without the USSR, there would be no scientific and technological progress in China. And yet Cao Fei's film is, at the same time, sarcastic in this portrayal. The two Soviet gentlemen accompanying the female scientist seem to parody stereotypical Russians in their vodka drinking, dance and nostalgic campfire singing. The progress that the Soviets bring to China benefits only the secret lab program – there is a clear goal set – constructing a digitalising machine, the HX103, which could transfer humans to another dimension, most probably with a military purpose in mind, as part of the Cold War rivalry. Cao Fei adds a clear, humorous element to this plot – the Chinese scientists constructing the machine experiment on turtles (turning to humans only later), and in the "future" part of the film, we learn that the turtles were eventually successfully sent to Mars, strolling on the planet's surface. In a dusty, dilapidated interior, a television set shows a national television station news program describing the achievement with a characteristic, over-enthusiastic commentary of the anchorman, well-known to all viewers of Chinese television. This is a clear ironic take on the Chinese space program, so much a part of the China Dream and the shared national vision of the Chinese future.

In Cao Fei's *Nova*, Chinese scientists successfully build on the initial Soviet assistance, quickly gaining self-sufficiency, ultimately outperforming other leading nations with their grand achievement of the turtle Mars-walk. Cao Fei offers us a vision of China's future, which in a way seems to be a reiteration of the Mao era past, with mass mobilisation and personal sacrifices for the national struggle to catch up and overtake the capitalist West. The ideological connection between the Mao era and the present-day Chinese progress is well reflected in the contemporary culture of the PRC. As Jessica Imbach rightly points out: "Maoist visions of fast-paced economic development, the automation of labour and the complete industrialisation of the globe resonate with current articulations of Chinese futurism" (Imbach, 2021: 127).

The narrative of *Hospital* shies away from directly mentioning China, instead locating the developments in "our country" or "home country." However, the novel's discourses on the realm of science and technology and, by extension, "our country's place in the world" echo the party-state's political speech. The hospitals "have their own characteristics," which recalls the formula of "socialism with Chinese characteristics." In the novel, such wording serves to justify some of the institutional dysfunction while insisting on the system's uniqueness. The others follow the example of China, as "the latest trend in globalism." Han Song projects the impulses of the Mao era mobilisation into the futuristic technoscientific order. Drawing on the dynamic of "ruinated futurity" outlined by Lin Shiqi, one could say that the future is where the past returns.

Personal Dimension of the Quest for Scientific Progress

Both *Hospital* and *Nova* show the national quest for scientific progress in a distorted mirror of absurdities in the personal lives of the characters. Han Song and Cao Fei use different strategies, but both authors choose a somewhat fractious way of portraying the results of a nationwide fanatic drive towards making advances in science and technology.

Hospital is built upon contradictory dichotomies. Science is celebrated as the victory of the rational, yet it is fetishised to the point of the irrational. The ideological tenets of the Age of Medicine are contradictory, on the verge of sounding non-sensical: "to be without illness is to be ill" or "serious ailments are […] like no ailments at all."

The self-serving nature of the system becomes obvious when Yang Wei discovers that the hospital keeps genetic material, which enables cloning in case of patient shortages (chapter 39). The hyper-rationalised scientific discourse justifies population control, while the so-called medical punks work underground on even more advanced scientific breakthroughs – they logically assume that since life and the hospital are sources of all maladies, the strains of bacteria they are about to produce are going to end human life altogether. They continue destructive intellectual work while claiming their love for science along the way. The hospital workers offer lengthy elaborations of marriages, monogamy, and other social bonds being redundant remnants of a petty-bourgeois mindset. Leaving all those behind leads to carving a new human – one that is genetically rebooted and unattached. As a result, Yang Wei, lacking any moral compass, fantasises about incest, and later considers that "a part of a treatment" (chapter 48).

In the case of Yang Wei 杨伟, the pursuit of progress absorbs his health autonomy. As noted by David Der-wei Wang (2020), the protagonist's name is a homonym for impotence (阳痿, *yang wei*). If we consider Yang Wei as a kind of an everyman protagonist, his inability to act points towards the wider scope of population disempowerment. In Han's dystopia, the individual body is the space where the scientific drive for progress unfolds. Fixation with disease is extrapolated to the whole universe: "In order to stave off its pain, the universe has evolved into a hospital" (chapter 71). Therefore, treatment becomes the most fundamental dynamic of all beings. This monstrous ontological image brings to mind not only explorations of outer space – one of the areas China aspires to lead in – but also Mao's vision of permanent revolution taking place also in space and in post-human phases of history (Rogacz, 2024).

Scientific advancement in *Nova* is a tale of personal sacrifice, embodied principally by the main character – the Chinese scientist. His sacrifices start with parting with his loved one, as the Soviet team packs their bags and heads back to the USSR, leaving him with the unfinished secret project. As expected of a communist patriot, his priorities are set correctly: he chooses science over personal happiness and stays in the lab to complete the assignment of high national importance. His second sacrifice comes when he decides to lock his only son in the relocation machine to achieve his grand oeuvre. He spends the rest of his life alone. The state recognises him with medals, which he proudly sports on his chest in old age. But his loneliness and remorse over giving his son to science haunt him until the last minutes of his life.

And then comes the sacrifice of the son, Li Xia. He seems to be accepting his fate, and rather than having a grudge against the cruel father, shows all signs of understanding his choices – national goals are so much more important than the lives of individuals. Both father and son lead destitute lives and long for personal contact, yet both know that their longing is of secondary importance; it is a personal price that they must pay in the name of progress and fulfilment of national goals. As Yang Chenhao (2023: 163) writes: "In these Cao Fei's works, there is a strong future orientation, yet the reality that follows tears people away from their yearning for an unstrained and happy life."

Technological Successes of the State and the Livelihood of the Common Folk

The promise of the state to bring about common prosperity and class equality through technological and scientific progress does not seem to materialise in *Hospital* and *Nova*. The vision of the future in both works is one where the ordinary citizens face unrelenting hardships, inequality, and social isolation, while the state celebrates its technological breakthroughs.

Han Song's novel paints an unsettling picture of individuals losing their agency within an overpowering system. The disintegration of the most basic social bonds – those based on love, family kinship, and a sense of community – is replaced by the relationship between patients and their doctors, and hospitals as a whole. This obedience is internalised by Yang Wei, who understands that "the fate of hospital and patients is connected" (chapter 14), and he's being taken care of "for the long-term peace and prosperity of my country" (chapter 29). Such a degree of ideological engineering echoes the most fervent times of the Mao era; also, the economic gaps between rich and poor have been apparently (and officially) bridged. The discursive power and institutional grip do not necessarily lead to common prosperity, since people flock to hospitals, pushing them to their limits. Yang Wei, in the most chaotic developments of the novel, moves through rooms filled with body fluids and horrible stench. Technological superiority is not enough to eradicate the symptoms that would occur in a mismanaged high-socialist state: common bribery and people being unable to afford the treatment, even though it is mandatory. One could probably accept the explanation: "This is what happens when you have a large population that wants to live a good life but has a relatively low average income" (chapter 10), if not for the fact that the scope of advancement expands the conventional understanding of medicine, since some of the ailments are treated in outer space (chapter 26). The two dimensions – the hardships of *laobaixing* (老百姓, Chinese term for "the people" or "common people") and the stunning capacities of hospitals – alternate throughout the novel, yet they seem to exist without influencing each other. That intuition is, however, false. In Han Song's futuristic dystopia, exploitation is like old wine in new bottles. The inequalities of redistribution (or lack thereof) are being reproduced, coated with a different ideological vocabulary. This probably explains why the fringe intellectuals of the hospital world – medical punks (医药朋克,

yiyao pengke) "believe that the best hospital is no hospital" (chapter 42); it is a dream of health (and wealth) without institutional governance.

The world created by Cao Fei in *Nova* is built on the paradox of scientific advancement and backwardness. As already mentioned, the visual language of the film consistently mixes 1950s to 1980s imagery with that of a sci-fi movie. Children sing in a 1950s-style school choir, but their mouths are lit from the inside by blue light-emitting diode (LED) light. People on the street dress in shabby clothes but wear futuristic, LED-lit sunglasses. They buy futuristic food from old-style street vendors' stalls, etc. Li Xia wanders around the Hongxia Theatre building's dilapidated interior, sifting through old paper files but also checking information on hologram displays projected on a mirror or in mid-air.

Future technology is everywhere, but it doesn't seem to make lives any better. People shown on the streets of Nova town are poor and don't look any happier than the poverty-stricken inhabitants of China in the pre-Deng era. The *Nova* world is polluted – there is dust everywhere, and Li Xia walks around the Hongxia Theatre interior in a facemask. Everything is dark and empty – the film-noir atmosphere and a theatre-like build-up of the film set create a feeling of hopelessness and desolation. Progress brings benefit to an abstract "state," which achieves its consecutive, national successes, but the city folk are stuck in a reality of hardship, selling junk on the street or engaging in prostitution. There is no progress for Nova's inhabitants, or rather, they do not benefit from it, neither in material nor in emotional aspects. Zhao and Keane write: "The celebration of technology is enfolded into the Chinese Dream. The techno-cultural imaginary thus evokes aspirations of national power and global influence" (Zhao and Keane, 2025: 225). The Chinese Dream in Cao Fei's *Nova* remains in the realm of Li Xia's father's past scientific achievements and in newsreels seen on television. It is passively observed, but not shared by the common people.

The View of Future Society: Personal Freedom and the Pursuit of Happiness

Han Song and Cao Fei create visions of ambiguous futures which lack social cohesion – their works can be understood as proposing a critical response to the party's efforts to build a harmonious society, in which citizens can pursue their personal fulfilment and happiness.

The society of the Medicine Era is absolutely atomised. It plays on the basic human instinct – everyone is a patient; therefore, everyone focuses on their own condition and, in a way, feels threatened. Families do not visit patients, since the very institution of family has been discarded; the only meaningful relationship now is between the patient and the doctor. More rebellious patients investigate whether doctors ever die, so a sectarian view of doctors persists, despite a policy that all doctors must undergo patient experience. Also, patients get the opportunity to become interns and, eventually, doctors – such is the promise, at least. That shows that the doctor's role is political, and so

medical knowledge is of lesser importance, just like in Mao times, potentially anyone could become empowered within the system.

The tendency to centralise all social structures in *Hospital* is similar to the urge to "securitise" all spheres of governance in China (see, e.g. Drinhausen and Legarda, 2022). In C City, all facilities, such as hotels, are required by law to be directly connected to hospitals – everything for people's health. It is not a police state per se, yet there is no running away from becoming an object of biopower and medicalisation, which the novel's finale pointedly underlines.

Even in the midst of absurd and grotesque daily-life experiences, the hospital is consistently praised as a collective triumph, and the institutional pride is just another side of national glory. Medicine, as performed in *Hospital*, becomes elevated as the ultimate rationality, but it is simultaneously a self-referential system, fetishised and emptied of meaning. As noted by David Der-wei Wang, Han Song follows Lu Xun's steps in his reflections over "the illusory line between disease and medicine" (2020).

Economical structures of the country depicted by Han Song are "same but not one" – impossible and entirely shifted towards medical services, yet still unable to provide healthcare for everyone in need. One of the often-quoted paragraphs from the novel lists all the medical facilities that are the afterlives of transnational corporations, such as "SONY TREATMENT CENTER, MICROSOFT EMERGENCY CENTER, GOOGLE COMMUNITY HOSPITAL, HUAWEI SPECIAL TREATMENT WARD" (chapter 26), etc. There is something deeply pessimistic about this trope: private capital of unmeasurable size joins forces with (seemingly) unlimited political power to work on the same goal, only to reproduce the same disparities that we witness in late capitalism.

The imagined society – if we can even speak of one – of *Hospital* replaces the pursuit of happiness with a never-ending chase for health. That frenzied race towards constant, data-based optimisation organises all other social structures, including transnational big-tech and economic entities. Reasoning disguised as rationality that serves to explain discarding all social bonds meets a completely irrational redistribution of all resources into healthcare-cum-surveillance.

The *universum* of the Nova city created by Cao Fei is no freer than C City in *Hospital*. Quite contrary to the harsh evaluation of the *HX Project* by Johannes Hoerning (see especially, Hoerning, 2022: 68), Cao Fei in her film does not avoid pointed critique of the state's "monopoly on symbolic violence" (Hoerning, 2022: 71). There are several, very explicit flashes of the power of the police state in Nova city. A long-haired vagabond with whom Li Xia manages to converse, sitting on a street curb, is chased and captured by some security personnel. There is a blurred shot of "dissidents" led in a line by the same security personnel in a tunnel, with each supposed criminal wearing a band on his arm with an English label "BUG" on it. Li Xia's father also progresses in his experiments from turtles to humans, putting "BUGS" in his relocation machine before he places his own son in it, too. Clearly, Nova City does have some undesired inhabitants who are being captured, led somewhere and eliminated or used as guinea pigs in Nova's labs.

Nova City is empty, reminding one of an abandoned theatre setting. There is hardly anyone on the streets, and if people meet, they talk little. There doesn't seem to be

much optimism and faith in a happy future among the city folk. With everything dark, deserted and covered in dust, it is evident that apart from some hi-tech gadgets, the China Dream in *Nova* has brought neither happiness nor direct benefit to these people.

Li Xia wanders the streets and the empty interiors almost like a diver exploring a shipwreck, or an archaeologist trying to find traces of the past. Although he can travel between times and dimensions, Li Xia is clearly focused on the past: his own childhood and the life of his father. He desperately hopes to reunite with his father and come back to his original here and now. This is his private pursuit of happiness, which seems very much anti-scientific and anti-progress. As Jin Mu (2021: 95) writes: "Time travellers in literary and artistic works seemingly seek out unknown worlds, but their true driving force is often emotions lost in the past."

Nova City is not a place of happiness and personal achievement. It is a sad and history-scarred surrounding in which common people lead their impoverished and quiet existence under the control of the state. The future and the past mingle, progress and backwardness co-exist side by side. The state boasts of its technological successes and keeps order using its instruments of coercion. Li Xia is locked in his digital dimension, but others are not free either. Cao Fei in *Nova* creates a dystopian view of the future in which personal achievement is impossible, and in which the society is broken and atomised.

Conclusion

We analyse the two works across four dimensions of the relationship between past and future, and that of China and the outside world; the personal consequences of the quest for scientific progress; the disconnect between state-level technological success and the livelihood of ordinary citizens; and the concept of personal freedom and happiness in the societies of the future.

The analysis reveals that both authors identify numerous dangers associated with the bright visions of the future of scientific and technological advancement, as envisaged in the official party discourse. These dangers include the loss of individual agency, the necessity for personal sacrifices, the loss of personal space, and the atomisation of society. State-led progress leaves common citizens impoverished, without addressing their problems and needs. By offering counter-narratives to the state's "sociotechnical imaginary," Han Song and Cao Fei provide a more nuanced and ambivalent vision of China's future, one rooted in the contradictions and anxieties of its present.

While Cao Fei's depiction of the Nova city is firmly rooted in China's contemporary history and the present, for Han Song, however, China is merely one of the settings, one that he never mentions directly. The writer follows the threads that he unfolded in his previous works. Just like in *Subway*, "Han Song shows a sceptical attitude towards the grand narratives of extreme techno-optimism" (Ni, 2020). His biopolitical vision can be read as a speculation on the "fixation of future," that is, what story is going to justify our enslavement on a global scale. That resonates with the writer's intuition that the world might be, slowly but surely, turning into a sinotopia.

Both *Hospital* and *Nova* are open to many interpretations. In our reading, they show the double-edged potential of a progress-driven political power: that of bringing scientific and technological advancement, and that of unsettling social bonds and eroding what's human to sustain the continuity of authority.

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