Sinofuturism as Inverse Orientalism: China’s Future and the Denial of Coevalness

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“CHINA is the future”—this lapidary bit of knowledge, shared with confidence by some experts, pervading news media commentary, and current in everyday geopolitical chatter, shaped my choice of which Asian language to study during my first university degree. When I moved abroad to pursue a Chinese Studies master’s degree in the late 2000s, students were expected to informally decide if they wanted to focus on ancient China and traditional subjects, or on contemporary China and matters close to the present. Intuitively, this distinction made sense, and I chose the latter out of classicist fatigue. Studying contemporary China allowed me to focus on a vague timeframe beginning from the ‘reform and opening-up’ period of the late 1970s, passing through the country’s WTO accession in 2001, and largely signifying an imperfect synchronization with the pace of Western liberal modernity. It was exciting, and liberating.

During my doctoral years, I kept framing my research of Chinese digital media through the temporal framework of contemporariness, willfully oblivious to the problematic implications of this descriptor. While the term ‘contemporary’ is an established category in historical studies, often pinned to the end of the Second World War, it is hardly used in other disciplines to refer to European or North American countries. National contexts like the U.K. or Italy are commonly assumed to be contemporary unless otherwise specified, while scholarship on Asian countries often emphasizes the contemporariness of its subjects. What might seem terminological nitpicking about an unexamined disciplinary habit is, I now realize, a long-standing problem of temporal framing in the production of knowledge about China and East Asia in general.

The divide between ancient and contemporary China implied a hidden third, a temporality which remained outside of disciplinary discourses: the future. The relationship between China and the future, often tinted by geopolitical speculation and economic forecasting, seeped into my imagination of the country through news
about its national economic growth, participation in international agreements, and accelerating technological advancements. China was the emerging market to tap into, Mandarin became the internet’s second most used language and, more generally, the future appeared set to be Chinese—whatever that meant. This pervasive discourse about China’s future-oriented temporality (or about the global future’s unavoidable Chinese imprint) was encapsulated by an obscure term formulated by authors working at the fringes of philosophy and speculative fiction in the early 2000s: sinofuturism.

The earliest documented use of the term is to be found in ‘Fei ch’ien rinse out: Sino-futurist under-currency’, an essay written in 2003 by musician and cultural theorist Steve Goodman. Drawing on the tactics of Afrofuturism, Goodman combines references to Chinese philosophical traditions, organized crime syndicates, and underground trading networks with the rise of cybernetics and computing technology, outlining “a darkside cartography of the turbulent rise of East Asia”. This sinofuturist imaginary emphasizes the deleuzoguattarian “co-stratification” of East and West (Goodman), which is epitomized by the convergence of communication technologies and global capital. Goodman orbited around the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a Warwick-based collective experimenting at the nexus of underground cultures and philosophical speculation around the turn of the millennium, and inklings of sinofuturism can be found in writings by central members of this group. Most notably, Nick Land’s 1994 essay ‘Meltdown’ contains the ur-sinofuturist aphorism “Neo-China arrives from the future” (Land), and Sadie Plant’s book Zeros + Ones is steeped in Asia-futurist intuitions:

Five hundred years of modernity fades when the weaving of bamboo mats converges with the manufacture of computer games in the streets of Bangkok, Taipei, and Shanghai. The silicon links were already there. (253)

Sinofuturism is an enticing proposition. Firstly, it portends to overcome the arbitrary distinction between China’s ancient past and its contemporary modernization, promising to open up knowledge production about the People’s Republic of China towards its uncharted future. Secondly, sinofuturism seems sufficiently justified by historical trends and ongoing geopolitical developments: China’s consolidation as a superpower on the world stage, its massive process of urbanization creating hundreds of cities in a few decades, as well as its successes
in the realm of science and technology all point to the undeniable futurity of the PRC. At the same time—a chiefly Euro-American, Anglo-centric time, to be sure—sinofuturism relies on discursive tropes and explanatory models that should appear suspicious to observers familiar with the representational genealogies of expertise about East Asia and “the Orient” at large. Under its glossy veneer of science-fictional novelty and cyber-exoticism, sinofuturism partakes in the problematic heritage of an enduring techno-orientalist discourse.

The concept of techno-orientalism was originally proposed to account for the emergence of a Western discourse about Japan’s technological development during the late 1980s and early 1990s, typified by the assertion that “Japan has become synonymous with the technologies of the future” (Morley and Robins 168). Techno-orientalist themes resonate strikingly with stereotyped depictions of many East Asian countries: the Japanese’s “robot-like dedication” to both work and world domination, their inscrutable culture of self-censorship, as well as their remorseless practices of copycatting all present a threat to the Western grip on modernity (150-158). Morley and Robins prophetically recognize that after Japan, other East Asian locales—first the “Four Asian Tigers” of Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, then China—will likely become the subject of techno-orientalist representations (173), and recent history has proven their intuition to be correct. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun notes, a generalized “high tech orientalism” has come to pervade most depictions of East Asia in popular culture, offering the modern Western subject “a way to steer through the future, or more properly represent the future as something that can be negotiated” (178).

When compared with Edward Said’s foundational critique of orientalism, it is clear that techno-orientalism propagates similar imaginaries by foregrounding technology over tradition and substituting the past with the future. Said’s central contention is that Western accounts of the Orient consistently denied it the possibility and legitimacy of representing itself. Orientalists worked in parallel with colonial enterprises by envisioning themselves on a mission to recover the Orient’s lost past in order to improve its present—and extractive or subjugated—condition (Said 78). Techno-orientalist imaginaries similarly encroach upon the articulation of situated temporalities and impose their own correlations between technology and the future; and yet, in contrast to its colonial antecedent, high-tech orientalism responds to a fundamental Western anxiety about a perceived loss of civilizational
primacy on the global stage (Ang). The commonalities between sinofuturism and techno-orientalism begin to shine through metropolitan skylines and neon-tinged haze, betraying a common mechanism underlying their operations.

In his discipline-rattling book *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian ruthlessly dismantles anthropology’s “schizogenic use of time” (Bunzl xi) by demonstrating how the production of ethnographic knowledge is predicated upon a temporal distancing of its Other. Anthropologists in the field regularly inhabit and embody different temporalities than their informants (Fabian 21) and, even more crucially, their writing relies on a distancing device that Fabian terms “denial of coevalness”, which is “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31, italics in original). The denial of coevalness allows anthropology to approach its Other as if it inhabited a temporally bounded culture functioning as “a kind of time-machine” (39) for comparative and evolutionary inquiry. All kinds of orientalism presuppose this denial of coevalness, and supporting a re-entrenchment of the Western present—irrespective of the orientation of the temporal representation employed—is the primary purpose of this mechanism.

This genealogy of temporal othering evidences how both sinofuturism and techno-orientalism are not merely culpable of propagating exoticizing fantasies about the future in China or other Asian contexts, but also responsible for perpetuating a more generalized denial of coevalness. In contrast with established orientalist tropes and with more recent liberal-democratic varieties of “sinological orientalism” (Vukovich), China is no longer deemed to be trapped in its atemporal pastness or condemned to eventually synchronize with modernity: instead, it already inhabits the future, arrives from it, or beckons a Chinese mode of futurity with global implications. In all these variants, sinofuturist imaginations deny China the possibility of challenging and negotiating representation in the coeval present staked out by Western knowledge production. The future is for sinofuturists what the past was for orientalists: a foil for steering representation by denying coevalness.

The legitimacy of sinofuturism is premised on a parallelism with other emerging articulations of futurity: the comparative approach proposed by Armen Avanesian and Mahan Moalemi, for example, juxtaposes it with Afrofuturism, gulf futurism and other ‘ethnofuturisms’, highlighting the novel emergence of future-oriented imaginaries from non-Western contexts. While this approach cautions
that futuristic articulations “outside of the west and across the Global South and other former peripheries can also evolve into neo-colonial tendencies” (Avanessian et al. 9), it also glosses over a more fundamental problem of serializing ethnic or national futurisms: their reference to the future might be the only contact point between otherwise radically different aesthetic and ethical programs—something that the history of Italian futurism glaringly evidences. Even Lawrence Lek’s artwork *Sinofuturism (1839-2046 AD)*, which has become a defining reference for this term, repeatedly reaches for a common tactical repertoire among “minority movements which share an optimism about speed, velocity, and the future as a means to subvert the institutions of the present” (Lek).

As proven by Afrofuturism, movements that upend hegemonic and colonial temporal frameworks are fundamental to reclaiming representational agency against the denial of coevalness. But in order to do so, they have to organically emerge from the periphery of Western time, rather than be conjured as part of techno-orientalist fantasies. Instead, while the post-digital exotic pastiches of sinofuturism have circulated enough to consolidate into a recognizable aesthetic appropriated and subverted by local electronic musicians and new media artists, it is their less self-aware and more sensational variety that continues to find currency in popular representations of China. The introductory chapter of William A. Callahan’s *China Dreams: 20 Visions of the future*, aptly titled “China is the future,” offers a striking example of this banal brand of sinofuturism:

> It’s an exciting time to be Chinese. While in the West the first decade of the 21st century was defined by pessimism due to 9/11, the Iraq War, and the Great Recession, Chinese people are very optimistic that the 21st century will be the “Chinese century.” The fruits of China’s three decades of rapid economic growth are there for all to see: by 2010, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) had the fastest computer in the world and the smartest students in the world, and it was enthusiastically entering the space age—just as the United States was retiring its fleet of Space Shuttles. (Callahan 1)

This book’s first paragraph strings together many of the tropes highlighted above: national identity, the idea of a Chinese century, the PRC’s economic growth, and the post-reform developmental leapfrogging indexed by the trifecta of computational primacy, academic talent and space exploration, all measured against rusty yardsticks left over from the Cold War era.
To sum up: sinofuturism responds to a lack of engagement with China’s future in both academic expertise and popular discussions of the country. It does so provocatively, by speculating on possible future configurations of wildly different aspects of Chinese history, culture and society, juxtaposing technological developments and traditional customs, global trends and local phenomena, political systems and material forces. At the same time, sinofuturism draws on—and at times directly reproduces—the tropes and narratives of techno-orientalism, reducing China to the last in a series of East Asian countries investing resources to accelerate industrialization and informatization and thus threatening the Western grip on technological innovation and transnational supply chains. The historical superimposition of techno-orientalism with popular culture genres like cyberpunk offers a convenient route for sinofuturism to find success as an aesthetic repertoire that is legible across contexts: outside China, it reacts with the mixture of fascination and anxiety for the illegibility and scale of China’s rise; inside China, it lends itself to the self-orientalizing celebration of national success. But this should not obfuscate its main operation.

Sinofuturism, like techno-orientalism, operates as a denial of coevalness. In being largely articulated from the outside as an interpretive discourse, it posits some sort of equivalence between China and the future: China is the future, China comes from the future, the future will come from China, and so on. These proclamations are as enticing as they are suspect, for they deploy the future as a way of deferring participation in contemporariness. The future functions exactly as the past does in orientalist arguments: as a temporality through which otherness can be safely managed and problematic interactions steered away from. If the locus of Said’s orientalism was the Hejaz region, “a locale about which one can make statements regarding the past in exactly the same form (and with the same content) that one makes them regarding the present” (Said 235), the loci of sinofuturism are the skylines of Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Chongqing, ready to be inscribed with claims about the future. Sinofuturism is a reverse orientalism—an orientalism operating its denial of coevalness through the attribution of futurity.

In conclusion, I believe that my drastic evaluation should be a warning rather than a veto. While dealing with the present is unavoidable, the future is arguably the temporal domain most relevant for the construction of more livable (or even just survivable) shared worlds (Powers). There is nothing wrong with envisioning China’s
future, tracing its future-oriented discourses, and speculating about its impact on regional and global futures, as long as one keeps in mind the implications of any sort of temporal othering. Fabian’s ideal of coevalness, the intersubjective engagement that demands the Other’s inclusion in a shared present, cannot be achieved by simply referring to a country as ‘contemporary’: what is demanded is instead the extension of a co-presence in which the Other’s time can be allowed its own situatedness and contingency. Imagining the rise of a modernizing China through the mediation of Western media, the waning echoes of Japan panic and an established cyberpunk canon during the 1990s resulted in the provocative speculations of sinofuturism—today, one can take some steps forward, or perhaps sideways, towards coevalness.

Luckily, there is no shortage of articulations of the future in China, all waiting to be encountered in their own terms. Chinese philosophical traditions have argued around different conceptions of time over centuries, utopian futurity has driven numerous upheavals, and revolutionary temporality has been a key ideological battleground around the founding of the People’s Republic of China (Qian). The history of the Chinese Communist Party’s economic development is written in official plans spanning years or entire decades, and yet its technological policy has also been influenced by unlikely conversations with Western futurists (Gewirtz). Even more prominently, a century of Chinese science fiction has eventually found international success through translations and has been crowned by the Hugo Award conferred to Liu Cixin in 2015 (Song). There are countless futures to be found in the work of Chinese thinkers, academics, directors, writers and politicians, and these should not just be earmarked as a term of comparison for (or an alternative to) Western modernity (Greenspan et al.), but as coeval articulations of time. It is time to think, plurally, in terms of sinofuturisms, and to encounter Chinese futures that have always been already there.

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