Utopia and Modernity in China

'For a China mired in the past, even by language, to imagine a utopia of a modern future took major reinventions of thought, expression and outlook. This extremely difficult process, unappreciated in the West but probably unparalleled in modern history, is superbly charted in this important collection.'
—Stephen Chan OBE, Professor of World Politics,
SOAS University of London

'The debate about China's destination has been raging for nearly 200 years. This book makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the diverse possibilities in the evolution of China's identity.'
—Professor Hugo de Burgh, Walt Disney Chair in Global Media
and Communications, Tsinghua University

'The current Cold War climate that sees China as a threat, and little else, makes it all the more important to understand China on its own terms. The book avoids simplistic accounts and presents important insights into Chinese visions of itself.'
—Anthony Welch, Professor of Education, University of Sydney

Utopia and Modernity in China

in China

Contradictions in Transition

Edited by
David Margolies and Qing Cao

PLUTO PRESS

Cover artwork from the film *Youth* (2017), reproduced with permission of
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Preface

There are many difficulties in managing a project conducted across two countries with two very different languages and cultures, even in a world supposedly united by electronic communication. The people for whom this has been most obvious are the co-editor of the book, Dr Qing Cao, and Dr Min Zhao, our coordinator in China, who had to negotiate across the two cultures and languages. Without Dr Cao's cross-cultural knowledge and his wise judgement the project would simply not have been possible. Without Dr Zhao's understanding, persistence and sympathy, it would never have progressed beyond the 'good idea' stage.

A debt of gratitude is also owed to our translator, Charles Collins, whose long experience of both English and Chinese cultures has made him familiar with popular as well as standard, polite usage and who willingly spent hours discussing how Chinese concepts and expressions could best be rendered in English.

Finally, our authors must be thanked for their patience and for their commitment to the principle that their work should contribute to a better world.

David Margolies
June 2021

Introduction

David Margolies and Qing Cao

China today is more important to the world than ever before, and in the last decade Western interest in and media attention on China have been growing at an ever-increasing pace.* China's economic power has long been recognised, as has its technological innovation and ability to complete massive construction projects with unmatchable speed. Its global reach has become so extended as to make the West uneasy – from infrastructure loans to African and South American countries to an Antarctic base and a bid on renovating Greenland's airfields. The US is engaging in what is being called a new Cold War against China, joined (though half-heartedly) by the UK, and in both countries human rights issues have been raised to unprecedented prominence. China's management of the Covid-19 crisis has been the most successful of the larger countries, whereas governments in both the US and UK have patently failed to deal with it adequately. Their admiration for China's success in this respect, however, is tempered by prejudices regarding state control of people's lives: China's success in controlling the pandemic is often popularly attributed to repressive control, or its people's fear of it.

This interest in China is not matched by understanding. At professional levels the West may know a great deal about China but among the general population it seems that tabloid- and television-driven prejudices rule. China is the world's oldest continuous civilisation. That continuity suggests overtones of peace and tranquility, but its last century was anything but tranquil – it was a century of revolution. The Xinhai Revolution of 1911 established a republic and put an end to dynastic structures. After the defeat of the Japanese in the

Second World War, Chairman Mao Zedong led the Communist Party of China in the War of Liberation which resulted in the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Less than two decades later, in 1966, Mao launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution which produced a decade of economic and social turmoil. In 1978 Deng Xiaoping became leader and began a programme of economic modernisation which opened the country to neo-liberalism under the watchful eye of the socialist state. It is important to have some understanding of these transformations, not simply because China is a great power, but because all of us now live in the throes of equivalent transformations: fundamental conflicts of values, economic systems that are failing the general population, and social organisation that is based on inequality. Understanding something of the conflicts involved in China's process of modernisation should be instructive in our own situation. *Utopia and Modernity in China* was conceived in the hope that discussions of those value contradictions embodied in the Chinese experience can provide English-language readers with a perspective useful for making sense of their own condition.

In less than a year, three crises have entered public consciousness in the West. The most obvious, of course, is the Covid-19 pandemic. Because it threatened lives among most of the population, its importance penetrated the barrier of indifference and raised fundamental questions of priorities with regard to the well-being of the population and the economic life of the country. It also raised related questions about government responsibility in matters of health, care for the elderly, children and their education, patterns of work and employment, housing conditions, and the relation between health and the environment. Then, the police murder of George Floyd sparked the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. That raised another series of questions, some of them related to issues raised by the pandemic – issues people felt that they could do something about. The massive response led to explicit recognition among public and private institutions that structural discrimination was indeed a crisis.

The climate and environment are the third crisis. Despite many writers who, since Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, have raised their voices about the destruction of the environment and the severe consequences for human life, these issues have been slow to

enter public consciousness. Greta Thunberg's high profile and the XR (Extinction Rebellion) protests, which blocked central London traffic, helped raise awareness, and the wildfires and floods of 2021 have shown the crisis to be real and to be global. However, we have yet to see any serious change in practice from governments. But the new willingness of people to question received positions and even to consider different ways of organising society is a very important change.

The questions about social values and social organisation raised by such national and international disruptions are fundamental. They have always been fundamental, but the current crises have brought into consideration across the whole society issues that a few months earlier would have been considered abstract idealism. Perhaps there are alternatives to letting our lives be dominated by the internal combustion engine and personal vehicular transport; perhaps commuting to work should not be a necessary imposition for earning a living. Should everyone have to be an earner to enjoy the benefits of society? What value are we willing to give to clear skies and the return of birdsong? Lockdown has changed our awareness of the centrality of human relationships. The self-justifications of the UK government over its failure to deal effectively with Covid-19 have thrown into question social priorities – not just health vs economy but the fundamental principles on which society should be organised. China's successful management of lockdown was not just a matter of enforcement: China, now as well as traditionally, has a more developed social consciousness – individuals willingly endure their own discomfort when it is necessary for the well-being of the wider population – whereas the UK and US have seen widespread selfish unwillingness to wear masks and observe social distancing.

The opposition of utopia and modernity may appear to have limited significance in the UK and the US, where 'utopia' is usually applied to ideal, unrealisable conditions and 'modernity' primarily refers to being up-to-date (the opposite of 'old fashioned'), the expected condition in modern society. Change and development are the mode of existence; novelty is a major aspect of a consumer society. With regard to China the opposition is more complex. This is partly because modernity was not so much a welcoming of progress

as a necessary condition for defending the integrity of the state. The Opium Wars of the nineteenth century had shown that millennia of culture were no defence against the latest military technology, and the definitive defeat of China by Japan in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) was both a shock and a humiliation. At that point, modernisation was clearly necessary and it could not simply be an 'add-on'. The 'renovation' had to include social culture – the current culture included the ancient, which placed a high value on continuity and shunned confrontation. Thus, the process of modernisation necessarily involved value conflicts at the deepest level.

The West, the obvious model of modernity, was influenced by the Platonic model of social order (but without Plato's caution against self-interest) – a class of rulers was supported by a military class who controlled the general populace. China adopted the Confucian view of social hierarchy: at the top, scholars, then farmers, artisans, and merchants. Force was not an aspect of that order; and, as much as practice may diverge from theory, harmony remains fundamental to the Chinese value system. This is the reverse of the West's view: for China, utopia (in the aspect of harmony) is the expectation, the desired normal, while modernity is the disrupter. This may help to explain the relevance of 'nostalgic utopia' which occurs in several of the chapters in this volume – a longing for a previous world of integration and harmony.

Discussion of utopia and modernity provides a broad framework for evaluating change because it brings together the perspectives of both social values and practicability. It also takes the discussion beyond the disciplinary confines of academia, which have become depressingly narrow. Higher education structures and the criteria for promotion have encouraged individual self-advancement rather than collective endeavour; one of the consequences of this is the growth of specializations so particular that potential audiences, even in what may be nominally the same discipline, are in effect excluded from the discussion.

The surge of awareness of the importance of gender and race and the recognition of the way they have become part of institutional structures has been accompanied by a rather slower growth of understanding of how gender and race become part of the emo-

tional structure of individuals, locked into the language they use and shaping their thinking. The authors of the following chapters take their arguments beyond the conventional limits of their academic disciplines. We hope their perspectives will be helpful in making sense of the perilous state of our world.

MODERNITY AS RUPTURE

China's cultural traditions developed over two thousand years, providing people with a coherent view of the world and their proper place in it. Confucianism provided a model of interpersonal relations with an emphasis on harmony; Taoism advanced respect for nature, or the cosmic 'Way', as a guide for human survival; and Buddhism stressed that the regulation of human desires was a condition of the fulfilled life. However, these perspectives were displaced by the revolutions of the twentieth century. From the 1911 Xinhai Revolution through the 1919 May Fourth Movement, and on to the 1949 Communist Revolution, they gradually lost their central position. A spiritual vacuum and a crisis of identity were produced, a counterpart of China's single-minded drive to industrialise and to achieve a national revival.

The search for values to fill the void allowed China to become a vast arena of experimentation with Western ideas and ideologies – social Darwinism, scientism and anarchism, liberalism and democracy, as well as socialism and communism. All found advocates, but socialism proved the most durable and became the official ideology of the post-1949 People's Republic of China. However, this was not without conflict. As the Tsinghua University cultural critic Gan Yang summarises the situation,[1] there exist three key strands of the value system in contemporary China: Maoist egalitarianism (orthodox socialism), post-reform market-based liberalism under the socialist state ('socialism with Chinese characteristics'), and values based on traditional culture. Despite efforts by many to reconcile them, the competing systems remain and have produced the hybrid value system that guides the current policies.

The transformation from the traditional '*tianxia*' ('all under heaven') universalist state to a modern nation-state has entailed a fundamental shift from a cultural to a political China, where the

bond between people is defined less by shared cultural heritage than by identification with the political community of a modern republic. What it means to be Chinese is changing. As the philosopher Tu Weiming notes, 'the China that evokes historical consciousness, cultural continuity, and social harmony, not to mention centredness and rootedness, already seems a distant echo'.[2] The recent resurgence of Confucianism, with its humane values, does not fit easily with the values and lifestyles of modern China; but there are an increasing number of political scientists who believe that China's traditional values may yet lead to a 'contested modernity'[3] or 'multiple modernities'.[4] The Chinese do not accept the Hobbesian view that the state is a necessary evil. Rather, Confucian views are still current, in which the state is viewed as the extension of family and its legitimacy is seen as dependent on the state's moral authority. It is this conflict of values posed by China's transition to a modern state that the chapters of this book explore in diverse manifestations.

THE ORGANISATION OF THE BOOK

Providing a historical context, Chapter 1, Qing Cao's 'The Lure of Utopia: Reinterpreting Liang Qichao's *Xinmin Shuo*, 1902–1906', explains the social and political context of early-twentieth-century China. It discusses the shift of utopian ideals from China's own classical age to the modern West. The material is political and social, the argument focused through the figure of Liang Qichao, an exceptionally influential intellectual in the early decades of the twentieth century. Cao underlines that China's 1895 defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War had been not only a military disaster and a national humiliation; it had also exposed the clash between two knowledge systems and worldviews. What national reform should involve became a matter of intense dispute. The charismatic Liang was a major participant – his newspaper, *Xinmin Congbao*, provided a political platform and he had a large following. The obvious model for reform was the West; but whereas to many people this simply meant adopting Western technology, Liang and his followers believed that the key to successful reform was changing the character and outlook of the Chinese people. Most of the Chinese population were peasants and tradition-

ally saw the world through the perspective of their clan and their local connections, a viewpoint that Liang saw was cripplingly narrow. Cao shows Liang arguing for a wider, Western-type perspective, in which individuals saw themselves as part of a 'national' community, not just of an extended family. It was not just the 'can-do' attitude of the West but also a mentality wherein people saw themselves as citizens and had a national consciousness. Liang had a huge appeal among the literate population of China, even the young Mao Zedong was sufficiently impressed to form his own society of Liang's 'new people'. Cao argues that Liang, despite his current reputation as conservative, contributed inadvertently to intellectual radicalism that has had a deep impact on modern China.

In Chapter 2, 'Utopian Future in Chinese Poetry: Bian Zhilin in Republican China', Yang Zhou focuses on the much-admired poet Bian Zhilin, presenting a more personal and emotional picture of the changing circumstances of the early twentieth century. Bian was active a generation after Liang (their lives overlapped for little more than a decade) but many of the same issues were still present, even if their forms may have changed. Corruption was still very much a problem and the representative democracy of the West still seemed attractive; the imperialist West, however, had inflicted much pain on China and was also an object of hatred. Whereas Liang, as a politician, focused on the masses, Bian, as a poet, was concerned with feelings and an individual response. He was attracted to Western culture, the French symbolist poets in particular. It was the symbolists' precision of imagery and language that he so admired, characteristics that were associated with the traditional Chinese aesthetic. Zhou explains, through closely examining some of Bian's work, how the attractions of modernity and utopia were in conflict. The negative political reality that angered and depressed Bian is illustrated at the level of personal feeling and it is countered in part by nostalgia, a backward-looking glance at traditional Chinese art. Zhou reveals the agony of the Chinese intellectuals torn between a longing for modern changes and a nostalgic return to their spiritual homeland of a classical past.

The third chapter moves into contemporary issues. Yonit Manor-Percival, in 'The China Dream: Harmonious Dialectics and International Law', analyses the imbalance of power and justice that

has shaped international law and the contradictions that China has not managed to resolve in becoming a world power. There are fundamental contradictions between the utopian vision introduced by Xi Jinping in his 'China Dream' speech in 2012 and China's participation in international law. Manor-Percival demystifies international law and the popular assumptions that it is neutral (like logic) and an impartial, rational construction. Situating China's international position in its historical quest for modernity, Manor-Percival argues that with international law's roots in colonial encounter and its claims to civilisational universalism it may come into conflict with the Chinese non-prescriptive diversity that derives from China's ancient philosophy.

The contradictions that arise in regard to China's role in international law are not theoretical, they are material, and as such they should provide a context that helps make clear the contradictions of values and attitudes that are displayed in the imaginative works discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

In Chapter 4, 'Nostalgic Utopia in Chinese Aesthetic Modernity: The Case of the Film *Fang Hua* (Youth)', Jie Wang discusses Feng Xiaogang's important 2017 film. The story is taken from a novel by Yan Geling, a Chinese American novelist. It concerns the experience of two people in a military arts troupe (they are part of the military – soldiers – but they are a dance and opera company). The male dancer is a heroic communist whose intense commitment and limited awareness of other people's feelings somewhat alienate him from the rest of the troupe; the female dancer has outstanding talent but is marginalised by the other women, who come from more affluent backgrounds. The dismissive class attitudes toward the protagonists, little more than unpleasant at the time, are developed into a part of the social critique later in the film. Both the protagonists are shown to have behaved with outstanding heroism in the Sino-Vietnamese War (February–March 1979), but on their return to post-war society they find only callous indifference and vicious self-interest in what has become a consumer society.

The context of song and dance allows the director to make exceptional use of music to express the attitudes attached to different periods. Wang describes how this technique functions and explains

the associated aesthetic style of 'nostalgic utopia' – the yearning for the idyllic rural life of the past. This was a trope of classical Chinese culture and became a dominant aesthetic in the 1919 May Fourth Movement, continuing in contemporary Chinese films and art. This aesthetic approach facilitates Wang's argument that modernisation has driven out not only traditional but also socialist values.

In Chapter 5, 'American Dreams in China: The Case of *Zhongguo Hehuoren*', Qinghong Yin deals with a 2013 Chinese film that explores how three young men, friends from university, pursue ambitions that bring them into conflict with traditional values. The Chinese title of the film translates as 'The Chinese Partners', but the English title, *American Dreams in China*, is more suggestive of the area of conflict. The film was exceptionally popular but provoked controversy among critics and viewers over its values. Some people welcomed the narrative of a 'loser' making good, especially a Chinese success at the expense of the Americans, but others saw the film as a critique of the individualistic pursuit of financial success, demonstrating a conflict between personal and commercial values. Yin argues the film can be read as the 'national fable' of modern China's gradual rise to prosperity, rather than the story of the success of countless small businesses.

Chapter 6, Jiaona Xu's 'Between Reality and Utopia: Chinese Underclass Literature since the 1990s', examines how several novels treat the motives that drive people from the villages to the cities and how they depict the reality that the migrants encounter. Migration became a massive problem in the period of economic liberation, a very material manifestation of the contradictions between real life and social values. Xu writes about conflicts that are not a matter of value choices; migration comes about because of lack of opportunity – not the kind of opportunity in *American Dreams in China* – but simply the opportunity to make a decent life and escape from the narrow existence of the village. Migration seems the only way out, but migrants are marginalised in the city, without the simple opportunities they imagined, with terrible employment that is insecure, often dangerous, and inadequately remunerated. They have no validity in the social structure. Xu deals with authors who present vividly, at the level of individual experience, the problems faced by the migrants. Xu raises the question of the society's responsibility and suggests that

the authors, able to movingly depict the problems of migrants in their novels, have a responsibility also to act on their understanding.

The final chapter, Xiangzhan Cheng's 'Eco-humanism and the Construction of Eco-aesthetics in China', looks at the development of environmental understanding in China. Most of the world recognises that there are dangerous consequences of treating the world around us as simply a source of material to use as we please, but there is still a practice and habit of mind that judges everything in nature in terms of its immediate benefit to humans – nature as a material utopia, a wealth of resources. Traditional Marxism has been guilty of this, emphasising the increase of production without regard to the environment or to Marx's own views against the exploitation of nature as well as humans. Cheng takes what is very much a Chinese perspective on this matter, drawing on ancient Chinese wisdom and a Confucian view of the proper relation of humans to nature. He has put forward the concept of the '*sheng sheng* aesthetic'. *Sheng sheng*, which literally means 'birth and rebirth', has associations which suggest not only sustainability but also inclusiveness – 'all under heaven'. It rejects anthropocentrism – seeing everything in relation to humans – and insists on also understanding things in terms of themselves, and humanity is welcomed as part of this greater harmony. Eco-humanism, more than a passive philosophy, has a practical potential in preserving the life of the planet.

NOTES

1. Gan Yang, *Tong Santong* [Integrating three traditions] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007).
2. Tu Weiming, preface to *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today*, ed. Tu Weiming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), vii.
3. Martin Jaques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 2012).
4. Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).