



Screen Shot

Queer Sinofuturisms

Introduction

Toward a Queer Sinofuturism

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The question of how a ‘future with Chinese characteristics’ might be imagined is particularly thorny for those with diasporic identities who find themselves caught in the middle, with an ambiguous relationship to the visions it conjures.

—Artist Gary Zhexi Zhang (2017)

Asian futurism can be trick[y] to fabulate, given science fiction’s persistent fascination with techno-Orientalist themes and landscapes. When it comes to futurity, it’s not so much that Asians have been written out of it. We’ve become the sign of it, the backdrop to it, and the style manual for it.

—Aimee Bahng (2018)

This special issue on “Queer Sinofuturisms” aims to explore how artists and writers working across various media in Sinophone contexts use science to envision—and indeed to *fabulate*—non-normative gender and erotic expressions in relation to the corporeal future of humanity. By investigating visions of the future that incorporate queerness and creative applications of computer and biotechnology, “Queer Sinofuturisms” aims to counter pervasive techno-Orientalist discourses, such as those discourses in the *Blade Runner* movies (Ridley Scott, 1982; and Denis Villeneuve, 2017) that frame “Asian” futures as strictly dystopian—and heteronormative by default.¹ What happens, this issue of *Screen Bodies* asks, if we simultaneously destabilize techno-Orientalist narratives of the future while queering assumptions about the heteronormativity so often inscribed upon that future in mainstream iterations and embodiments? What kinds of *fabulous* fabulations might emerge?

One approach to questions like these might be to engage certain aspects of North American queer theory, which over the last fifteen years has challenged

precisely the problem of heteronormativity as a hallmark of “reproductive futures.” According to one logic of reproductive futurism, for instance, the figure of the child in cultural materials often represents the future. Consequently, any representational threat to that child’s corporeal and environmental integrity—including the symbolic values associated with the failure to fulfill the reproductive imperatives of heterosexuality—becomes implicitly anathema to this future. Per this model, we might interpret certain aspects of contemporary Sinophone media, fiction, and film in light of how they ultimately treat the figure of the (frequently male) child (a figure that itself is sometimes understood as fetishized in Sinophone social conventions) in utopian and dystopian contexts. Does the child thrive or perish? Who produces and sustains the child, and who does the child eventually become?

Consider the figure of the child as it appeared across a range of media campaigns in post-millennial Taiwan in the lead-up to the referendum on same-sex marriage. During this period, media campaigns exploited the figure of the child to convey a variety of political messages. This embattled future-child was, on the one hand, portrayed as being vulnerable to the threat of losing critical access to LGBT-friendly education (including the right to legalized gay marriage, a model that extends, rather than revolutionizes, existing marriage structures), while, on the other, he was being threatened by (perceived) exposure to irradiated food from Fukushima (even as separate campaigns urged voters to embrace nuclear power as the energy of the “future”). In these imaginings of humanity’s future, the beleaguered child represents an important nexus of intra-Asian techno-Orientalist tropes and (for instance) uncritically heteronormative assumptions about how domestic relationships might be legislated by the state. A queer critical aesthetics of speculation thus offers the possibility of challenging the limits of the (heteronormative) present while anchoring a queerer theoretical unsettling of temporality, chronology, and embodiment in Sinophone settings.

Similarly, consider the videography of the artist Lawrence Lek, whose 2016 “Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)” —described as a “video essay” that combines “elements of science fiction, documentary melodrama, social realism, and Chinese cosmologies” —depicts the dystopian landscape of the subjugation of humanity and human bodies to affectless dystopian machines.² Turning a classic techno-Orientalist trope on its head, Lek’s video could be interpreted as a kind of radical satire, a “taking back” of the figure of the technologically dominant Asian new century. Yet in its pessimistic portrayal of relentless industrial self-replication, Lek’s dystopian vision does not necessarily accommodate a queer dis/refiguring of reproductive futures. As Yunying Huang emphasizes in her article for this issue, for instance, unlike Afrofuturism’s active promotion among artists and media producers in African diasporas, Sinofuturism as such has yet to mature into a discursive framework with identifiable parameters in

Western let alone Sinophone contexts. Indeed, as this issue is going to press, the editors note that a wonderful new special issue of the SFRA Review on “Alternative Sinofuturisms”—itself developing out of a 2019 workshop by the WuDaoKou Futurists’ Collective, a collective “aimed at decentering Sinofuturism [“中华未来主义”] from its Western articulations”—likewise explores the concept of Sinofuturism from multiple critical angles. As editor Virginia Conn notes in the Introduction to the volume,

As a mode of global and temporal situatedness, Sinofuturism has largely emerged as a concept applied externally to China by Western observers. By compartmentalizing sociocultural development as a form uniquely tied to the nation-state while also seeking to maintain both distance and otherness, Sinofuturism differs from theorizations such as Afrofuturism (to which it is often compared) through its application to, not development from, the subjects it takes as object. As a result, the very label of “Sinofuturism” developed out of the same Orientalizing impulses that previously relegated China to a space of backwardness and barbarism (Niu, Huang, Roh 2015) and which now attribute to it a projected futurity. Yet this Western label is one that Chinese authors and artists have appropriated and weaponized for their own creative ends, without necessarily sharing unified goals.³

As the term takes shape, then, should it be placed primarily in dialogue with Afrofuturism, Gulf futurism, and others? Should it stake its claim primarily in a resistance to techno-Orientalist imaginings of “Asian” ascendancy? Or might we—as Gabriel Remy-Handfield’s article in this issue allows—fruitfully contrast a more nihilistic vision such as Lek’s with that of Lu Yang’s 2013 CGI animation *Uterus Man*, a work that uses techno-futurist aesthetics to imagine a superhero whose powers derive from his “uniquely female reproductive system” (a system used to alter the hereditary functions, genders, and sexes of his enemies)?⁴ Can we have our (gay wedding) cake and eat it too, avoiding the pitfalls of nonqueer/heteronormative assumptions in constructing a new radical category, while still resisting, even implicitly, techno-Orientalist imperatives?

What would it mean, in other words, to critique works of speculative fiction and art *without* inscribing the default values of heteronormativity or Western-centric engagements upon them (the “factory settings” of contemporary speculative fiction, often techno-Orientalist when associated with “Asia,” or “science fiction’s persistent fascination with techno-Orientalist themes and landscapes,” per Aimee Bahng above)? What is the aesthetics of a queer Sinophone speculative future—What does it look like, and importantly, how does it feel? More specifically, are humans the exclusive arbiters of queer affect, or is there a place for emotional attachment in the *disembodied* virtual worlds of new A.I. consciousness? And what, if any, are the genders of queer Sinofuturism? Can old

therapies be updated to address contemporary corporeality in ways that queer both the past and the future of virility and of the environment? In short, can an aesthetic critique of queer Sinofuturisms bring speculative futures in Sinophone contexts into conversation with nonreproductive and genuinely heterogeneous ways of envisioning—and creating—more equitable worlds?

In responding to these questions within a Sinophone framework, as opposed to a purely nation-state or diasporic model, the following articles stake out new conceptual analytics to unsettle categories that have been taken for granted or tend to pass as given. For instance, many of the case studies challenge binaristic models of techno-Orientalism by drawing attention to the liminal or overlapping spaces—including not just physical but also virtual—between China and the West. The performative authenticity of new media users denaturalizes interpretive links between identity formation, queer online expressions, and developmentalist logics of cultural reproduction. A Sinophonic approach to China's technological acceleration also distinguishes itself in the way artistic creativity deconstructs posthuman assemblage theory itself. At stake here is not the insistence of a singular method to image future or futurity. The heterogeneity of innovative articulations does not always need to presume a location that falls outside a social structure *in toto*. Nevertheless, their critical purchase can be gleaned from unforeseen iterations of resistance and transformation. After all, if the future—queer or Sino—is a place to be, it can only but build on the processual past, the conditional present, and their mutual production.

This special issue of *Screen Bodies* on "Queer Sinofuturisms" enlists a range of modalities to address urgent questions about whose future has been imagined or is imaginable for humanity, and how this imagination unfolds with respect to the body both corporeal and virtual. In addition to scholarly articles, it therefore includes an opinion piece, an artist's photo article (with text accompaniment), and interviews with contemporary writers. It includes work by both emerging and established scholars and writers/creators, all of whom have engaged in a round of developmental critique with all three coeditors prior to peer review. Intended as a preliminary intervention, this special issue of *Screen Bodies* asks contributors and readers alike to critique, improve upon—or abandon entirely—the "reproductive future" narratives of embodied selves associated with North American queer theory to consider not just what "Sinofuturism" might mean going forward, but also what it might mean to queer the term from the outset and develop its potential for imagining alternative futures in dialogue with Afrofuturisms, Gulf Futurisms, and beyond.

Designer Yunying Huang thus opens the issue with a critique of techno-Orientalist representations of Chinese futurity in her article "On Sinofuturism: Resisting Techno-Orientalism in Understanding Kuaishou, Douyin, and Chinese A.I." She aims to reinforce the radical potential of Sinofuturism as a concept by focusing on the creative expression of young people on the internet. Dissatisfied

with the flattened depiction of Chinese surveillance in contemporary Western Orientalist discourses, Huang refuses to go along with characterizations of Chinese netizens as passively subject to “suppression,” instead arguing for a better understanding of the cultural diversity both imagined, and occasioned, by the current generation of Chinese netizens. In particular, she contrasts Chinese internet users of Douyin and Kuaishou, apps that allow their users to create a social life online through posting images that capture widely circulating ideas about lifestyle, social norms, and cultural engagements (e.g., food, travel, outfits). Although the two apps tend to diverge in terms of the kind of population they draw (*Douyin* more urban and *Kuaishou* more rural, for example), over time their user bases have begun to overlap, and, as Huang outlines, an innovative consequence here has been netizens’ use of drag and cross-dressing to project alternative gender modalities and personas. Such subtle articulations of originality and resistance, according to Huang, are something that merit further investigation. Queering Sinofuturism if anything here offers the potential to build a platform for *counterbalancing* Chinese state censorship as well as its perception globally.

A pair of interviews with contemporary queer Taiwan authors, meanwhile—one fiction writer and one playwright—next takes this interest in A.I., identity, and futurity to the content creators themselves, to find out how they conceive of both the future and of queerness in creating their works of speculative fiction. In “Banal Apocalypse,” Jane Chi Hyun Park interviews Ta-wei Chi about his classic 1990s novella *The Membranes* (forthcoming in English translation by Ari Heinrich with Columbia University Press in 2021). *The Membranes* tells the story of an elite “dermal care technician” who repairs her clients’ damaged skin in the early twenty-first century after climate change has forced most of the population to live in a dome under the ocean. Later revealed to be a disembodied cyborg brain that’s being used to repair weapons of war, the protagonist of *The Membranes* nonetheless represents what may be one of the first transgender women main characters in Sinophone fiction history, a sympathetic figure in a novel that offers a chillingly prescient critique of late capitalism. In this interview, the author discusses both the time frame and cultural environment of the book’s conceptualization and critical reception. In “Voicing Pride and Futurity,” meanwhile, Jing Chen interviews the playwright Pao-Chang Tsai about his one-man play *Solo Date*, a work in which a gay man, mourning the death of a lover by interacting with the dead man’s digitally reconstructed avatar, gradually discovers that he is himself an experimental A.I. consciousness.

Carlos Rojas further explores the queer potential of virtual identity in the disembodied world of online platforms in his article on queer dating games. Rojas analyzes the way gamers come to embody queerness through their engagement with such online simulation programs. In one example, Rojas investigates *A Gay’s Life*, a visual novel released by the Beijing-based game developer

Harry Huang in May 2018. *A Gay's Life* features a Chinese gay protagonist who, controlled by the gamer, accrues or loses “self-acceptance” points based on a series of decisions that anchor the unfolding of the central plot. Another example is *Nekoishi*, a Sinophone visual novel developed in Taiwan in 2016. The protagonist in *Nekoishi* is a gay college student in Taiwan who finds himself attracted to three humanoid felines. Due to the allegorical homoeroticism featured in its plotline, *Nekoishi* has crossover with two fandoms: the “furry” community (which comprises predominantly gay or bisexual men) and the “Boys Love” community (which comprises mostly straight women interested in gay male homoromance). Rojas links the queer potentials of *A Gay's Life* and *Nekoishi* to the question of whether gender difference can be simulated as first raised by the British computer scientist Alan Turing in the 1950s. Complementing Yuning Huang’s interest in online personas in Kuaishou and Douyin, Rojas here uses the Turing Test’s interrogation of human vs. nonhuman intelligence as a vector for investigating online simulations / visual novels in which the gamer is expected to experiment with the fluidity of their own gender and sexual attributes.

Taking questions of queer masculinity, virility, and biology to the realm of experimental art, the Taiwanese bio-artist Kuang-yi Ku next presents an illustrated article on his sculptural work entitled “Tiger Penis Project,” an installation piece that features a laboratory-synthesized tiger penis. In Ku’s work, the tiger penis simultaneously continues and disrupts a popular assumption of traditional Chinese medicine culture: that people lacking confidence in their own various bodily functions can enhance their organs by consuming the corresponding organs of animals, and by extension (so to speak) that someone with erectile dysfunction can strengthen the penis by consuming the corresponding organ of a tiger. Rather than 3D-bioprinting the synthetic tiger penis or aiming to make an exact reproduction of the original material, however, Ku’s laboratory instead deliberately hybridizes the penis using octopus and oyster. Partly this hybridization ensures that the product is both conceptually and materially distinct from the original, since an identical product would otherwise be expected to supply market demand for wild animal organs, which could in turn risk reinforcing demand and creating a cover for ongoing illegal trade. The resulting hybridized tiger penis from Ku’s laboratory—perhaps resembling a sleek erotic toy more than an actual organ, and viewable in color on the cover of this issue of *Screen Bodies*—therefore offers consumers the form and essential nutritive value of tiger penis while enhancing ostensible efficacy for the sexual confidence of its consumers through the addition of octopus and oyster, which are also believed to boost sexual function in Japanese and other cultures. In this way, the project responds not only to the entrenched anxiety of certain Sinophone masculinities and the insistence on penetrative sex, but to the crisis of those endangered species killed to address this anxiety.

Finally, Gabriel Remy-Handfield's article "Queer Sinofuturism: The Aberrant Movements and Posthumanist Mutations of Body, Identity, and Matter in Lu Yang's *Uterus Man*" focuses on the sensorially disorienting *Uterus Man*, a 2013 animation that portrays a Chinese-cum-Japanese near-future dreamland in a state of gay abandon, a kind of antidote to more masculinist interpretations of Sinofuturism. A representative work by Lu Yang—a celebrated avant-garde artist in China—*Uterus Man* has an adrenaline-spiked aesthetic that is reminiscent of the Japanese tradition known for the legendary animation *Akira*. The central figure is an apparently nonbinary superhero armed with weapons like a skateboard fashioned from a sanitary napkin; a chariot made from a female pelvis; and a meteor-hammer in the form of a blood-soaked baby. Traditionally ridiculed as unclean—the abject liabilities of women—in *Uterus Man* the sanitary napkin, pelvis, baby with afterbirth, and other symbols are reversed and reinterpreted as corporeal assets. Remy-Handfield considers the *Uterus Man* a potentially queer, aberrant, and even gleefully non-normative posthumanist figure poised to defy systems of normalization that include heteronormativity, or, in the Deleuzian tradition, to destabilize any assumption of linear historiography and imagine the human not as some unified entity but as a conjunction of rhizomatic networks. In all, with this special issue of *Screen Bodies* our hope is not to define the terms of a queer Sinofuturism, but to contribute critically and fabulously, in all senses of the word, to emerging conversations about the future of queer, and the queerly Sinophonic, in transformative times.

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Notes

¹ For the definitive critique of *Blade Runner* in the context of techno-Orientalisms, see Park (2010).

² <https://vimeo.com/179509486> with accompanying text: “Sinofuturism is an invisible movement. A spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives. It is a movement, not based on individuals, but on multiple overlapping flows. Flows of populations, of products, and of processes. Because Sinofuturism has arisen without conscious intention or authorship, it is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists./Sinofuturism is a video essay combining elements of science fiction, documentary melodrama, social realism, and Chinese cosmologies, in order to critique the present-day dilemmas of China and the people of its diaspora./With reference to Afrofuturism and Gulf Futurism, Sinofuturism presents a critical and playful approach to subverting cultural clichés./In Western media and Orientalist perceptions, China is exotic, strange, bizarre, kitsch, tacky, or cheap. In its domestic media, China portrayed as heroic, stable, historic, grand, and unified. Rather than counteract these skewed narratives, Sinofuturism proposes to push them much further./By embracing seven key stereotypes of Chinese society (Computing, Copying, Gaming, Studying, Addiction, Labour and Gambling), it shows how China’s technological development can be seen as a form of Artificial Intelligence.”

³ Conn (2020): 66. A bilingual description of the 2019 workshop at WuDaoKao can be found here: <https://freewechat.com/a/MzU4NDU4NDEwMA==/2247496554/2>. The organizers write that “[t]he English term ‘sinofuturism’ was originally coined by Steve Goodman in 1998, maintained by various proponents of accelerationists in the 2000s, re-introduced via Lawrence Lek’s video essay under the same name in 2016, now gradually surfacing to the mainstream as we approach the second decade of this century.” Dino Ge Zhang elaborates on the definition of “Sinofuturism” further in the contribution to the SFRA Review entitled “A Diagnosis of Sinofuturism from the Urban-Rural Fringe”; aside from (or in addition to) the coincidence of their overlapping publication timelines, “Alternative Sinofuturisms” and “Queer Sinofuturisms” could be read together, complementarily.

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/82164043>.

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