

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

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# The Disillusionment with the Rural Utopia in Chinese Literature

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**Abstract** The narrative of utopia in Chinese literature has been unable to break free from the literary tradition of the land of peach blossoms by Tao Yuanming. From Fei Ming's *Qiao* (1932) to Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo* (2003), there is a retrospective attribute, constructing a rural utopia with the land of peach blossoms as the basis. This paper begins by accounting for the images of the Oriental utopia with which Fei Ming's novels are imbued, then, upon close examination of Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo*, discusses the tradition of rural utopia in Chinese literature and its process towards final disillusion in the 21st century. *Shouhuo* is unique in both its narrative form and concept of utopia, especially in its description of the paradise created by the disabled; 'disability' is hence an important aspect of this utopia. Yet *Shouhuo* presents attributes of dystopia at the very end: it reveals the disillusion with various forms of utopia – Chinese tradition, communism, and consumerism – presenting the deep-seated historical crisis of Chinese rural society and the emptiness of contemporary cultural ideology, societal ideals and historical perspective. The discourse and historical practice of utopia forms an important thread in the cultural history of mankind, with utopia becoming an important motif in world literature. Chinese writers have unavoidably touched on this subject matter in various forms. This paper attempts to briefly trace the narrative of utopia in the history of Chinese literature, and then, focusing on Yan Lianke's novel, *Shouhuo*, discusses the issue of rural utopia and its eventual disillusion in Chinese literature.

**Summary** 1 Utopia in *Qiao*. – 2 *Shouhuo*: an Ideal Paradise. – 3 *Shouhuo*'s Dystopia. – 4 Return to the Land of Peach Blossoms.

**Keywords** Yan Lianke. *Shouhuo*. Utopia. Dystopia

## 1 Utopia in *Qiao*

Utopia refers to a fictitious space; the meaning of the word itself is 'nowhere'. From the source of the word, 'utopia' is a spatial concept. For instance, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1623) are both envisioned forms of utopia in a spatial sense.

Spatial isolation is an attribute of utopia in earlier Western works. In More's *Utopia*, Hythloday discovered a world of nowhere, utopia, on the American continent, while explorers today are still attempting to find Bacon's Bensalem, described in *New Atlantis*. However, utopia evolves gradu-

ally into a time-based concept over the course of Western modernization. According to Jameson, 'utopia' is no longer an arcane geographic term for a space, but has evolved into a new historical movement, hence creating a time-based mourning and not a spatial nostalgia (Yan Zhongxian 1999). American theologian Paul Tillich once distinguished two kinds of 'utopia': forward (future) looking and backward (past) looking (Tillich 1989, p. 171), a time-based differentiation. If the impulse towards utopia ultimately refers to the ideals of mankind in the dimension of time, Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms, which represents utopia in the Oriental tradition, differs considerably from that of the modern West. From *The Peach Blossom Land* to *Dream of the Red Chamber*, utopia in the Chinese tradition is void of time-based references. This is the 'meta-time' aspect of Chinese utopia. In *The Peach Blossom Land*, «they were not even aware of the Han dynasty, let alone the Wei and Jin», time is apparently still and everlasting, all that is left is space. And in *Dream of the Red Chamber*, with Buddhism's 'emptiness' as the underlying concept, there is no aspect of new historical concepts or forms of looking ahead (time-based reference to the future). Its ending can only be nirvana: «leaving a vast pallid land which is truly clean and plain». A Chinese utopia similar to its Western counterparts began in the late Qing dynasty, as represented by the narratives of Kang Youwei's *Book of Grand Harmony* and Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China*. Although Kang Youwei's idea of grand harmony took its reference mainly from traditional Chinese ideologies, the fact that *Book of Grand Harmony* was released in late Qing reflects the profound influence of Western utopianism. «From the perspective of literary works, perhaps China is not rich in its literary tradition of utopianism. However, if the essence of utopia is not in the literary imagination but in the concepts of an ideal society, the core of utopia not related to a personal pursuit of aspirations but an equal distribution of happiness and wealth of the entire society and a collective well-balanced harmony, then, needless to say, the tradition of Chinese culture bears many elements of a utopia in the context of the theories of politics and the practice of societal life» (Zhang Longxi 1999). *Book of Grand Harmony* and *The Future of New China* are such relevant examples, especially with respect to political theories and societal ideals.

However, in Fei Ming's novel, *Qiao*, a work of the 1920s, the Oriental utopia once again exhibits retrospective inclinations. That which was constructed in *Qiao* originates from the aesthetic utopia of China's poetic culture. It continues China's poetic heritage and draws a direct link to Tao Yuanming's *The Peach Blossom Land*. Contemporary critics remarked that «this novel has no feel of modernity, no elements of realism, all that is written are idealistic characters and realms. The author shuts his eyes to reality and constructs a utopia in his imagination [...] the fields, mountains, waters, woods, villages, weather, morning and night, all are coated with a layer of hazy hue, like a dream and fairyland. This novel leads the reader

into a 'peach blossom land'» (Guan Yin 1932). Also, *Qiao* draws a direct link to a 'ladies kingdom' described in *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *The Flower Dream*. Both land of peach blossom and ladies kingdom are Oriental utopia, and in this sense, *Qiao's* outlook on life is a mere utopian symbolic matrix of Oriental idealistic worlds, much infused with poeticism. Indeed, it is from the perspective of novel categorization that *Qiao*, as a mere 'symbolic matrix', is emphasized. «Despite having a fictitious form, the more important aspects of a utopia concern with its allusions and content» (Zhao Longxi 1999). I value the 'allusions' in *Qiao*, which are exemplified in its attempt to construct a poetic land of peach blossoms with reference to the Chinese tradition, a manifestation of *Qiao's* indulgence in the past. *Qiao* is hence enveloped by an ambience of rustic charm, indicating its connection to classical literature by absorbing the underlying classic motif of 'peach blossom land', and all of this made *Qiao* a symbol of an Oriental utopia (Wu Xiaodong 2003). From Fei Ming's perspective, utopia is not a real entity that exists in modern time and space, but something that can be attained only by looking back into the traditional world – this is the 'pastness' of Fei Ming's utopia. This 'pastness' is a historical continuation of Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms. Still today, in the 21st century, as *Shouhuo* demonstrates, we are living in the shadow of Tao Yuanming.

## 2 Shouhuo: an Ideal Paradise

Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo* received attention in China's literary circles immediately after its publication. It offers a rare utopian discourse and dimension in China's contemporary novels, providing what I would regard as an important introspective perspective: the utopian narrative of *Shouhuo* in its presentation of the concepts of utopia and dystopia.

'Shouhuo' is the name of a village in the novel, which came into existence as the result of an exodus of people from the Jin area during the Ming dynasty 明 (1368-1644), in the period between Hongwu 洪武 (1368-1398) and Yongle 永樂 (1403-1424). The officer in charge of this exodus, as a gesture of gratitude towards a mute old lady, acceded to her request and left behind a blind man and his disabled son, «and also left behind much silver and riches, dispatched a hundred soldiers to build houses for them, reclaimed some good tens of acres of land for farming, diverted the rivers to the edge of the fields, and, before he left, told the mute old lady, blind father and disabled son: 'this gully between the Palou ridges has ample water and fertile soil, you have silver and food, just farm and *shouhuo* here

then'». Hence 'Shouhuo' is named.<sup>1</sup> Although Shouhuo village is the result of a forced exodus, its birth out of nothing is similar to genesis mythology. The village became a paradise for the disabled, «rumor has it that a mute woman, a blind man and a disabled boy formed a family here, lived their days as if it were heaven, and afterwards the disabled from neighboring villages and precincts flocked there». The action and result of the exodus was originally a political act of the imperial court to strengthen its control over its people, yet Shouhuo village strangely escaped the entire process, turning into a place isolated from the mundane world and a paradise for the disabled. Shouhuo's tale of genesis started with a convolution of history and mythology, blending contrasting themes – healthy and disabled, governance and exodus, constraint and freedom, nation-state and autonomy – which also reveals its intricate, entwined relationship with the authority of the nation-state as it proceeds along its future course of history.

The most original scene in *Shouhuo* is its description of a world inhabited by disabled people. A world made up entirely of disabled people and where almost every villager has a unique characteristic, though these characteristics are absent in enabled people, termed 'full people' (*yuanquan* 圆全人) in the novel. In other words, it is because of their being disabled that Shouhuo villagers are equipped with special, often shocking talents that the enabled do not possess, and this alone is an alarming concept. The dialectic of the disabled and enabled is an important component of *Shouhuo's* utopia. As Shouhuo villagers are all disabled, in order for any enabled person to enter this utopia they should first have to disable themselves, which is the condition for entering this world. The county magistrates in the novel disabled themselves in exchange for the right to live in Shouhuo. The magistrate in the recounted legend would rather amputate one of his arms than leave Shouhuo, which he compared to the heavens; furthermore, he is worried that his children might be born without disabilities, commenting that «if they are 'full people', they would not understand the days here, as such they would throw away the chance of living heavenly days and roam aimlessly in the outside world, then they would suffer». Perhaps this is a continuation of the thinking we find in *Zhuangzi*, that only the disabled would be able to enjoy the natural span of their lives. Here, disability is the prerequisite to entering an ideal society. Disability is by itself an original sin, but it is also the key to salvation. Simply by being disabled would one be able to pass through the gates of utopia and, in doing so, have the chance for salvation. The 'full people' in the novel are deprived of this salvation, as they are unable to enter the world of Shouhuo; in other words, because of their 'normality',

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1 In a dialect unique to the Palou ridges, 'Shouhuo' has the meaning of enjoyment and carefreeness.

they are destined to have no affinity with utopia. The novel painstakingly depicts the inferiority and unscrupulousness of the world of 'full people', while bringing out the utopian qualities of Shouhuo. The dialectics of the disabled and the enabled is hence allegorical. The subject of 'deformity' becomes an important aspect in the novel's consideration of a utopia: it is deformity that constitutes an inherent form of 'fullness', the utopia of Shouhuo is established on the fundamentals of deformity, it is incomplete from the very beginning; it is incomplete, hence it is heaven on earth. This is the paradox of *Shouhuo*: as a world for deformities, it cannot be a real utopia, but only a deformed utopia. Hence, Yan Lianke's utopia is naturally linked with imperfections and defects. This makes a mockery of the motif of utopia, and it is precisely this that differentiates Yan Lianke's concept of utopia from that of the classics.

The histories and legends of the Shouhuo paradise are mainly recounted through a unique form of garrulous narrative. This 'garrulousness' (fanyan 絮言) in *Shouhuo* is provided by annotations applied to ongoing present tense narration. The author uses 'garrulousness' to present the origins of Shouhuo village and its myths and legends, as well as to explain dialectal terminologies and the historical accounts of the village and people. These annotations in garrulous form constitute the main subject of the novel, hence many parts of the garrulosity are individual chapters. Further garrulous annotations branch out from these, forming a profound matrix of historical time and space. Indeed, such annotations are written by a novelist, unlike rigorous academic writings. Perhaps to emphasize the difference between novel and thesis, the author terms these additional annotations as 'garrulousness'. At the same time, the term garrulousness emphasizes its nature as a fragment of history. History is narrated in fragments, the author has no intention of presenting a full chronological account of history, despite readers being able to arrange a relatively complete historical sequence from the fragments of garrulousness. Garrulousness allowed the novel to avoid being an official account of history, and so kept its distance from the grand scope of historical narrative. It uses legends, local chronicles and allegories, in which truth is mingled with falsehood, as a different narrative of Chinese rural societies and histories, while at the same time providing a new possibility to the narrative of the novel. Local chronicles, rural folklore, character sketches, allegories and historical accounts are combined in this integrated form of narrative, while providing a historical background and pre-understanding to the main thread of the narrative. It also forms a parallel world to the main narrative of the novel, perhaps also a more important world. Without this world, the meaning of *Shouhuo* is greatly diminished. One possible way of reading *Shouhuo* would be first to read its garrulousness. I find that this might even be a better way of reading *Shouhuo*. Yan Lianke has apparently found a unique way to speak of the world of legends and myths, through the form of garrulous-

ness, as *Shouhuo* paints a self sufficient and complete legendary world. Legends and myths are the rural ideologies; they are the manifestation of the imagination of the rural and might just be one of the ingredients of rural existence.

Another important function of the garrulousness in *Shouhuo* is its introspective perspective, rare in contemporary novels: the dimension of utopian discourse and practice. The historical meaning this dimension bestows upon contemporary novels must be assessed sufficiently. As Yan Lianke found his ideal method to speak of history and the legendary world, he also discovered a new and plausible way of speaking about utopia. This way of speech entangles utopian elements and historical prospects, thus enriching utopian discourse. And behind all that, it is an idea about history and utopia that belongs solely to Yan Lianke. The author's narrative prospects are determined by his idea of history, and that idea finds its means of expression in the narrative. The idea of history and narrative achieves an ideal union in garrulousness.

In its garrulousness, *Shouhuo* depicts an authentic rural paradise, a utopia of traditional agrarian society: in the words of the novel, 'heavenly ground'. 'Heavenly ground' is a keyword to the world of *Shouhuo*; it is another way of saying utopia: be well-fed and well-clothed, free and at ease as one might be, no burden of tax, no governmental constraints - very similar to Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms. The imagined utopia of Chinese tradition often has the attributes of an agricultural society, going back to Tao Yuanming. Zhang Longxi 张隆溪 notes that, «in *The Peach Blossom Land*, Yuanming paints an imaginative utopian way of life, one in which everyone works hard in the fields, starts work when the sun comes up and rests when the sun goes down: an agrarian society, very different from the utopias based on modern cities». «That which is worth noticing is 'in autumn all is ripe but they do not pay taxes', as Tao writes. There are no governmental constraints or taxes in the land of the peach blossoms, hence 'the children walked and sang, the white-haired were joyous, at their leisure.' The reason we state that Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms bears utopian characteristics is mainly that he envisioned an idealistic, harmonious society, not an otherworldly and spiritual realm». This is the ideal paradise of traditional Chinese agrarian societies and of the literati; it is also a common utopia, not just the discourse of one man. For the world of *Shouhuo*, it matches the idea of a utopia because it represents a societal practice that bears traditional Chinese characteristics, from those of the first old lady of *Shouhuo* village to those of Maozhi granny of the 20th century: all of them are utopian inhabitants pursuing the common happiness and interest of all *Shouhuo* villagers.

However, such an idea of community-based society is in actual fact retrospective; it is a return to the tradition of Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms. If human society follows the historical logic of evolution upon

entering the modern world, the imagination of utopia in Chinese literature has traces of retrogression. «The paradox of retrogression in Chinese literature and evolution in civilization – this mode of writing unique to the history of thoughts in classical Chinese literature – exhibits the overwhelming retrospective utopian inclination in traditional Chinese culture and literature concepts» (Xia Jing 2004). The utopian allegory in *Shouhuo* is strongly manifested in its ‘pastness’, which is a historical continuation of Tao Yuanming’s tradition of peach blossom land. This means that the idea of Yan Lianke’s utopian narrative is close to Tao Yuanming’s ideal, which implies that *Shouhuo*’s novelty is somewhat limited. The real ingenuity of *Shouhuo* is in its account of the disappointment with this rural utopia. The value of *Shouhuo* is that Yan Lianke also narrates a story of a dystopia.

### 3 Shouhuo’s Dystopia

Shouhuo villagers have vocabulary that belongs only to their community, like ‘inverted days’ and the above-mentioned ‘heavenly grounds’. The latter «is not referring to the grounds of heaven, but the much desired fields that are heavenly». The former ‘inverted days’ is closely connected to heavenly grounds, as both are forlorn longings for bygone days, and only the Shouhuo villagers would understand a way of life that only they have experienced. Its characteristics are substantial, harmonious freedom and relaxation. Shouhuo villagers see these lost beautiful days as inverted days. They also use the expressions ‘discarded days’, ‘dropped days’, and this is obviously an expression that concerns a dystopia unique to Shouhuo.

The course of Shouhuo’s dystopia is concurrent with its entering the pages of modern history. The novel emphasizes the course of Shouhuo as it enters the modern institutions of the 20th century, how it joined the cooperatives under the leadership of Maozhi 茅枝 granny, how the rural utopia was hence incorporated into communism, itself a new utopian practice. However, history proves that this is the path to a dystopia. The sorrows of a dystopia are presented mainly in the changes that Shouhuo village undergoes as it goes through the Great Leap Forward, the Natural Calamity of Three Years and the Cultural Revolution, during which Shouhuo village finds itself in a mismatch with modern politics and societal institutions. The heavenly days are but a bygone past, «all owned land and houses, the freedom of being never constrained by others, the days of being well-fed and well-clothed, have become a way of life lost by the Shouhuo villagers. A beautiful dream, or imagination, in the days that have passed and the days to come, has also become Maozhi granny’s motivation to strive, a common hopeful future that all villagers look forward to». Hence, following Maozhi granny, Shouhuo struggled



yet again, not to be incorporated into but to be detached from the cooperatives and return to the 'prehistoric' autonomist ages - a process of paradise regained.

An important plot in the novel is Shouhuo's incorporation into the course of revolutionary history and the practice of socialism. Maozhi granny is no doubt a crucial character in this plot, connecting the sequence of events. She was the youngest soldier in the Red Army Fourth Front, seriously injured while climbing the snowy mountains in the 1930s and left disabled. After losing touch with her organization, she settled in Shouhuo village and spread the seeds of revolution and collective struggle, eventually leading the Shouhuo villagers into a modern world represented by Mutual-aid Teams, Co-operatives and People's Communes. Shouhuo village was incorporated by the precinct of Shuangkui after much effort by Maozhi granny, and Shouhuo village went from an untraceable isolated village to just another village under a modern jurisdiction. After the village suffered a series of historical calamities, it was this Maozhi granny once again who led the Shouhuo villagers on a movement away from the modern world.

The disenchantment of the Shouhuo utopia seems to imply that the traditional Chinese utopia hardly stands a chance of being a universal ideology. Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossoms is a by-product of people escaping the Qin dynasty. It proves that from the time of the first emperor of the Qin dynasty, the nation-state and political authority has sought to rule citizens by incorporating them into their scope of governance. In modern history it is almost impossible to keep an area or a space entirely isolated. Shouhuo is fated to be incorporated into modern institutions. *Shouhuo* presents readers a utopia with prehistoric characteristics, and shows how it is incorporated into institutions and becomes part of them. It is 20th century communism, a more powerful utopian force, which absorbed the traditional utopia into its historical discourse; the course of Maozhi granny's efforts to organize the Party's mirrors the disintegration of the traditional utopia. Shouhuo enters modernity henceforth. Yan Lianke ultimately remarks that it would be impossible to return to the traditional utopia, which is destined to be a dystopia. The fact that the tales of the peach blossom land are perpetually narrated by the Chinese literati and commoners is simply because it could never materialize. That's why the anxiety of narrate appears.

This highlights the dystopian theme of *Shouhuo*, first presenting itself in the disillusionment of the communist utopia in its ideology and societal systems. After the reform and opening-up policy, Shouhuo village suffered from disenchantment with the second utopia, the utopia of capitalist consumerism. The county magistrate, Liu Yingque 柳鹰雀, intends to bring the Shouhuo villagers onto the path to wealth by building a mausoleum for Lenin on a local mountain and, after the purchase of Lenin's remains from faraway Russia, turning it into a tourist attraction. In order to accumulate



the huge sum of money for the purchase of Lenin's remains, the magistrate put together a special performing troupe from a group of disabled villagers who, making use of their strength derived from their living with disabilities became a popular attraction in their countrywide public performances. Shouhuo villagers hence dreamed of getting rich overnight, and indeed did earn huge sums of money, yet they were robbed and detained by the 'full people', resulting in their eventual defeat. This is the greatest blow dealt to the Shouhuo villagers. Commercial activities first promised Shouhuo villagers a chance to go from rags to riches, a utopia of desires that is stirred by the merchandized era and its opportunity for material gain. This allure is greater and more irresistible than that of any other age, as the utopia of consumerism awakens an instinctive desire in human nature. Yet, and coincidentally, in this instance as well, the Shouhuo villagers' prospect of utopia suffered an unprecedented disintegration: the tradition of rural utopia that bound generations is replaced, alienated and corrupted by new material desires and commercial activities.

Susan Sontag mentioned in an interview that:

The practice of socialism did not bring about the greatest change in the lives of people, it was the spirit of capitalism and commercialization... Traditional authoritarianism does not interfere in the cultural structures and value systems of the majority. Fascism ruled Italy for over twenty years, but it did not change the country's daily life, habits, attitudes and environment in the slightest. However, postwar capitalism changed Italy; it defaced the country. Under Soviet communism, even at the extreme of totalitarian governance, the basic lives of the majority were still rooted in the value system of the past. Hence from a cultural perspective, the consumer societies of capitalism are more destructive than totalitarian rule. Capitalism changed the thoughts and behaviors of people at a very profound level. It destroyed the past. It has impactful influences of existentialism. There is a slight irony here, as people under totalitarian rule welcome capitalism. This is understandable. They assume they would be wealthier; they would have a higher standard of living. This is better executed in China than in the former Soviet Union. However, along with the chance for prosperity, it is the most drastic change to culture. People are willing to destroy entirely their lives and value systems. This commercialization culture of capitalism is indeed astonishing. It might be the most intensive ideological trend ever, even more so than communism. (Sontag, Bei Ling, Yang Xiaobin 1998)

English theorist Terry Eagleton, in his «The Crisis of Contemporary Culture» also noted that «Bertolt Brecht once remarked that it was capitalism, not communism, which was radical, and his colleague Walter Benjamin added wisely that revolution was not a runaway train but the application

of the emergency brake. It is capitalism which pitches every value into question, dissolves familiar life forms, melts all that is solid into air or soap opera». The course of collision and destruction of Yan Lianke's *Shouhuo* world with the consumerist utopia seemingly justifies the perspectives of Sontag and Eagleton. The consumerist utopia of capitalism destroys traditional ways of living and value systems. Traditional Chinese utopia is in an utter mismatch with the modernity of capitalism. Once Yan Lianke's rural utopia enters history, institutions or the era of merchandizing, it loses its vibrancy and is quickly alienated by revolution, politics, systems and consumerist desires. The most important meaning of *Shouhuo* is its depiction of the collision, growth and decline, the clash of various ideas and the practice of utopianism, one being the traditional utopia from the time of Tao Yuanming's land of peach blossom, the second being China's communist utopia. Yet, both disintegrated in the face of capitalism and its consumerist utopia. Following the setback to communist utopian ideology and practice, and with Francis Fukuyama's «end of history», the collapse in utopian narrative is universal. As Susan Sontag said in 1996, «instead of the utopian moment, we live in a time which is experienced as the end – more exactly, just past the end – of every ideal» (Sontag 2003, p. 357). Yan Lianke's achievement is in his most incisive accounts of the impossibilities of a utopia, and in this sense, *Shouhuo* comprises a model of dystopia, elsewhere represented by George Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World*.

The point that Yan Lianke attempts to drive home is the impossibility of a Chinese utopia. Two utopian elements – utopia and dystopia – are entwined in the novel; furthermore, the traditional utopia is eroded by the modern utopia, displaying the course whereby rural utopia gradually loses its legitimacy in the light of modern history and institutions. In other words, while the author expresses his profound doubts on communist and consumerist utopias, he also traces the displacement of traditional rural utopia. In this sense, the author is actually presenting the deep-seated historical crisis of Chinese rural societies. Painting the existence of *Shouhuo* villagers using the discourse of utopia and dystopia, the discussions described in *Shouhuo* are elevated to a level of existentialism and anthropology. *Shouhuo*, as such, is a eulogy to the self-sufficient Chinese agrarian utopia and the land of the peach blossoms.

If the concept of 'utopia' according to Jameson is «a depiction and longing for a more reasonable societal system» (Hu Yamin 2001), in the historical context of Yan Lianke it is, on the other hand, a gradual displacement of the utopian concept and its eventual erosion by elements of dystopia. In other words, the practice of utopia itself contains elements of a counter-current which is the alienation of utopia in the grand course of history. Utopia is first and foremost an idealized existence: when it is historicized and practiced, it differs gradually from its original meaning. Yet mankind

has little resistance to the temptation of putting the ideas of utopia into practice. *Shouhuo* presents this as the villagers' seduction by the prospects of utopia. At the same time, the irony and richness of the novel is also expressed in the congregation of elements of utopia and dystopia, both unified paradoxically in the discourse of *Shouhuo*.

#### 4 Return to the Land of Peach Blossoms

In the process of his reflection on utopia, Yan Lianke also exposed his lack of a sense of history, as evidenced in his simplified account of the practice of communism. He wrote about the sufferings that this historical practice brought about, but ignored the historical reason for and necessity of China choosing communism. The idea of history behind its narrative has an inclination to abstractions, as Li Tuo points out, a lack of empathy towards the establishment of Chinese revolution and socialism (Yan Lianke, Li Tuo 2004). This has somewhat limited the novel's depth in expounding on the dimension of utopia.

That which is more worthy of discussion are Yan Lianke's Chinese characteristics. His utopia is retrospective, a result of his sources from and basis in traditional culture, consciously or unconsciously. However, it is his very practice of literature that reveals the difficulty of both Chinese tradition and contemporary culture to become the cultural ideal of the future, hence revealing the impossibility of a utopia in the future. In facing the future, Yan Lianke expresses a sense of loss and helplessness, as *Shouhuo* sighs in its last chapter, «matters of the future, are just matters of the future». At the end of the novel, *Shouhuo* villagers miraculously regain their freedom, no longer under the jurisdiction of governmental institutions. Putting aside the impossibility of this scenario in the reality of China, even if the villagers have returned to their land of peach blossom, is it a genuine reclamation of freedom? After some toil and tussle in the mundane world, despite being rejected by capitalism and the so-called 'full people' of the cities, with the Pandora's box of desire and consumerism already opened to them, would the villagers stay put in the traditional world of peach blossoms, as before? If Fei Ming's retrospection is an act of bidding farewell to a poetic tradition, then Yan Lianke's purpose is his rejection of the two Western utopias - communist utopia and consumerist utopia - and eventual rejection of the traditional rural utopia. The dystopian elements in *Shouhuo* hint at the impossibility of establishing a form of utopia in today's China. The author actually faces the predicament of an absence of the ideals of contemporary culture and society, and hence could only refer to the traditional rural utopia for ideal ways and forms of survival. This act of retrospection reflects the weakness of contemporary Chinese culture in terms of self-creation and rejuvenation. Chinese novels

are often lacking in their perspective of historical viewpoints; authors lack ideas and intellectual inquiry, are helpless in providing any form of perspective on history. This ability is not acquired simply by chatting about philosophy or philosophical ideas in the novel, but is based on introspective historical prospects. Those novels that insist on speaking about philosophy, on the other hand, due to a lack of genuine introspective prospects, appear even paler. The introspective prospect is not a philosophical matrix, but a sincere reflection on history and transcendental vision, a complicated narrative having its roots in the irony of history and reality. Modernity is a worldly practice on the level of societies and systems. Not only did it not stir imaginative prospects of utopia in Chinese authors, but it incorporates everything, expending the imaginative ability of authors; in other words, it merges imaginative ability into the structure and course of a worldwide integration into capitalism. Hence, the 20th century only brought about dystopian narratives such as *1984* and *Brave New World*. As noted by a critic, «the issue of utopia seems to be a crucial test of how much ability we have left to imagine change» (Yang Zhongxian 1999). Utopia in literature hence concerns the political and cultural imagination of a particular age; it does not come into place through pure fictitious imagination alone; it is, in actual fact, a test of authors' creativity in terms of ideas and their ability to reflect upon history in their literary imagination. Nobel Prize Laureate Ivo Andrić once said, «In the future, only those capable of depicting their own age, their contemporaries and their perspectives in the most beautiful prospects, can become real authors». And it is precisely on this point that the majority of Chinese authors are below the mark.

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