

Ba Jin, “Offspring of May 4th”, Time Bomb and Utopian Impulse

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Abstract Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-2005) is well-known for his adherence to anarchist ideas in his youth, which actually hides a profound utopianism characterized by a social revolution without purpose and end. By a detailed examination of *A Dream on the Sea*, a novel published in the beginning of 1930's, this paper aims to rehabilitate such an utopian spirit as it formulates criticism of reality, oppressive and inegalitarian, by adopting an otherness which warns against both revanchist statism and voluntary servitude. The author's loyalty to the legacy of May 4th will be highlighted as his work embodies an ever renewed desire for the freedom of thinking and imagining, if not of acting.

Keywords Ba Jin. Anarchism. Utopianism. Cosmopolitanism. May 4th Movement.

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1 Introduction

Ba Jin 巴金 (1904-2005) declared himself a worthy heir to the May Fourth Movement (Ba [1979] 1991, 66). This assertion should be understood in a double sense, which is both historical and ethical. It first reminds us of the origin of his intellectual and literary commitment. In the winter of 1920 at the age of fifteen, he read Pëtr Alekseevič Kropotkin's *Appeal to the Young* (*Gao qingnian* 告青年), translated by Zhenmin 真民, aka Li Shizeng 李石曾 (1881-1973). The booklet persuaded Li Yaotang 李堯棠, the future Ba Jin, to take up his pen. This late declaration also resonates like his loyalty to different



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schools of thought he was inspired by at this time. Among multiple ideas that influenced his trajectory, anarchism is probably the most important and sustainable, despite the vicissitudes of his life, as well as the constraints he experienced after 1949 in modifying or reinterpreting his young productions.

Nobody forgets Ba Jin's early anarchist choice, which played a decisive role in his creative career. However the utopian dimension intrinsic to this anarchism is often ignored, even though it constitutes one of its fundamental features, and therefore of his work. Arif Dirlik, author of tremendous studies on anarchist thought and movements in modern China, recently recalled this intrinsic utopian characteristic of anarchism, claiming in an explicit way that "anarchism is an utopianism because of the critical look it takes at power and society", alongside its well-known vision about an egalitarian society without classes, state, or oppression (Dirlik 2006, 1-2). Ba Jin's numerous essays and fiction prove very convincing about such utopianism, which is somewhat overshadowed by the too radical and famous *Destruction* (*Miewang* 滅亡, 1928-9) and *Family* (*Jia* 家, 1933).

In Ba Jin's studies, there is a critical literature that integrates the utopian perspective. Peng Hsiao-yen was one of the first researchers who focused on the issue. She evokes "anarchist utopianism", as a metaphoric term, to describe author's fight, in *Torrents Trilogy*, against patriarchal authority, class discrimination, and the miserable conditions of women's life (Peng 1992). Angel Pino, perhaps one of the best specialists of our writer, explores Ba Jin's anarchism and utopian approach throughout well documented and various studies (Pino 2013a; Pino, Rabut 2007).

But until now the utopianism topic receives too few attention from scholars specialised in the Republican era. A consensus seems established about this period, which is supposed to be dominated by realism, a necessary choice for writers facing national crisis. David Wang considers the phenomenon as being at odds with the late Qing period, when utopian novels flourished (Wang 2014, 290). Ma Bing made a serious study of four specific novels, Shen Congwen's 沈從文 (1902-88) *Voyage of Alice in China* (*Ailisi Zhongguo youji* 阿麗思中國遊記, 1928), Lao She's 老舍 (1899-1966) *Cat Country* (*Maocheng ji* 貓城記, 1932), Zhang Tianyi's 張天翼 (1906-85) *Diary on a Ghost Land* (*Guitu riji* 鬼土日記, 1937), and Zhang Henshui's 張恨水 (1895-1967) *Eighty-one Dreams* (*Ba shi yi meng* 八十一夢, 1939). Nevertheless he regards them as "social satire" or "cultural criticism" (Ma 2005, 325-6), rather than utopian or dystopian fiction. Not surprisingly, other works having obvious utopian feature, such as *A Dream on the Sea* (*Hai de meng* 海的夢) of Ba Jin (1932), are absent from the list, while this novella and Lao She's *Cat Country*, were both published in *Les Contemporains*, the famous magazine created by Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003) (Ba Jin on vol. 1, nos. 1-3; Lao She on vol. 1, nos 4-6 and vol. 2, nos. 1-6).

It is important to renew our reflections on Ba Jin in terms of utopian spirit, for it would allow us to fill a gap in literary history, by dressing key issues about the May Fourth Movement. Theoretical debates implying Ba Jin, by name or not, are worthy of attention. Qin Hui 秦暉 (1953-), a paramount historian, cites Ba Jin to support his criticism of the "imperial system" and his commentaries on limitations of the May Fourth Movement's liberalism. In his view, Ba Jin did contribute to break down the tyranny of the "small community", i.e. the family, still without having attacked the "great community" which was determined by state structure. On the contrary, Xu Jilin 許紀霖 (1957-), historian of modern intellectual life, argues that, given the cosmopolite dimension of May Fourth, it is not appropriate to confuse such open patriotism with nationalism or even statism. Such remarks raise the question of whether Ba Jin was just an individual anarchist whose fight was supposedly limited to protesting against patriarchal authority or, instead, that precisely due to his anarchist convictions, he was a cosmopolite whose patriotism had nothing to do with any nationalist and statist ideology.

The present article attempts to bring answers to these questions by drawing on an analysis of *A Dream on the Sea*, while referring to a series of Ba Jin's other fictions, essays or translations. It tries to demonstrate that Ba Jin's utopian spirit is profoundly marked by a cosmopolite and anti-statist posture, and by an unconditional quest for freedom. In this perspective, a triple investigation will be accomplished. First, it will focus on the spatial aspect of this novella, namely on its deterritorialised topography which represents an international horizon. Secondly, its temporal particularity will be emphasised, as it proves anti-teleological, so against nationalist messianism and in favour of worldly peace. Finally, the spatiotemporal characteristic reveals the way the text opens up a free space, an universe of the possible, against any kind of instituted authority and voluntary servitude.

2 Elsewhere and Cosmopolitan Vision

It is essential to examine the cosmopolitan vision of Ba Jin by textual approaches. Nevertheless, preliminary precisions seem necessary to recontextualise the author's intellectual and literary debut, since it would allow us to requestion some clichés about his anarchist beginning.

Undoubtedly, Ba Jin's interest in European anarchist thought and activism leave indelible marks on his youth. Two works held his attention when he was fifteen, as partially mentioned above: *Appeal to the Young of Kropotkin*, and *On the Eve. A Drama in Three Acts*, of Leopold Kampf (1881-1978). In Chengdu, his hometown, at the same time,

he not only read plenty of books and magazines brought from Beijing and Shanghai, but began to write immediately and to make contact with local libertarian groups. "How to Build a Genuinely Free Egalitarian Society", was published in one of these groups' reviews *Fortnight* (*Banyue* 半月, 1921). He intensified such publications when he went to France in 1927. *Anarchism and Matters Practical* (*Wuzheng-fu zhuyi yu shiji wenti* 無政府主義與實際問題, 1927) was written in collaboration with Shu Hui-lin and Jun Yi (Woo Yong-hao). He celebrates "the immense greatness of anarchist martyrs" in *Pioneers of Revolution* (*Geming de xianqu* 革命的先驅 1928). He corresponded with some of the great notables in the anti-authoritarian camp, for example, Emma Goldman (1869-1940), Alexander Berkman (1870-1936) and Max Nettlau (1865-1944). It was while in France that in 1928 he finished *Destruction*, his very first novel, published the next year in the most prestigious literary review of the day, *The Short Story Magazine* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報). It was the first time he used the *nom de plume* of Ba Jin (the first character of which was chosen as a tribute to a comrade of his who had committed suicide in Paris; the second being the Chinese transcription of the last syllable of Kropotkin's name), while the editor ignored his identity (Ji 1929, 759). Three bulky works followed: *On The Scaffold* (*Duantoutai shang* 斷頭台上, 1929), a gallery of portraits of 20th-century Russian terrorists, together with studies of the anarchist Chicago martyrs or on the life of Sofia Perovskaya (1853-81), on the history of Russian nihilism and the deeds of the French belle époque anarchists, texts devoted to the Tokyo martyrs or the Sacco-Vanzetti affair, as well as a letter on "Anarchism and Terrorism"; *Ten Russian Heroines* (*Elusosi shi nüjie* 俄羅斯十女傑, 1930), another gallery of portraits that included Vera Zasulich (1851-1919) or Vera Figner (1852-1942); and *From Capitalism to Anarchism* (*Cong zibenzhuyi dao annaqizhuyi* 從資本主義到安那其主義, 1930) (Pino 2013b).

These first essays, novellas or translations are commonly perceived as proof of Ba Jin's specific interest in terrorism, nihilism, and revolutionary martyrology. They actually conceal the great wealth of his aspiration and his ideal of an egalitarian society and world. For example, *Vengeance* (*Fuchou* 復仇, 1931) (Ba [1931] 1991a), his first collection of 14 novellas, expresses concerns about the fate of humble people and oppressed nations, beyond terrorism, acts of destruction, or revolutionary violence. *Exile* (*Wangming* 亡命, 1931) (Ba [1931] 1991b) recounts the dramatic story of a student who was expelled from fascist Italy. Despite his refugee status, at the time of the Duce's visit to France the French government enjoins him to leave the territory, making him stateless. It should be noted that the narrator is a French student, with whom the author identifies. Such narratorial identification with a foreigner was rare enough to be underlined, since it significantly reflects a tangible cosmopolitan sensitivity and approach instead of any simple exoticism.

In fact, such cosmopolitanism is inscribed in a general May Fourth mentality, if referring to Xu Jilin (2009). Inspired by Zhang Hao 張灝 (1937-) and bringing nuances to the notion of "patriotism" applied to the May Fourth Movement, the historian first intends to make a distinction between "Member state of the world or state as member of the World" (*shijie de guojia* 世界的國家), and "cosmopolitan state" (*shijiezhuyi de guojia* 世界主義的國家): the former is characteristic of the Late Qing, influenced by social Darwinism and the law of the jungle, sometimes turning into a "Doctrine of Gold and Iron" (*jintiezhuyi* 金鐵主義), a kind of jingoism in Yang Du's 楊度 (1875-1931) way; the latter is instead proper to May Fourth, learning from the Great War lesson, aspiring to restore humanist and universal values, and therefore, transcending interests of any specific state. This cosmopolitan vision was largely shared by anarchists like Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 (1865-1953), Li Shizeng, Liu Shipai 劉師培 (1884-1919), as well as by intellectuals from various backgrounds such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868-1940), Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942), Fu Sinian 傅斯年 (1896-1950). Xu Jilin's arguments could be summarised in three points. First there was a strong rejection of the organic state for the benefit of recognition of the autonomous "I". Fu Sinian, for example, preconises a new subjective identity divided into two parts, a "great I" or human being (*dawo* 大我) and a "small I" (*xiaowo* 小我) or individual person. Man is directly linked to humanity without any state mediation or control (Fu 1919). This theory is obviously at the origin of Zhou Zuoren's famous proposal for "humane literature" (*ren de wenxue* 人的文學) (Zhou [1920] 1995, 73). Secondly, "patriotism" was redefined, as it should transcend the narrow interests of any single country. In this regard, national salvation should take into account the "universal principles" (*gongli* 公理), i.e. justice, equality and liberty, asserting right against might (*qiangquan* 強權). The third and last key point lies in the "cosmopolitanist utopia" (*shijiezhuyi wutuobang* 世界主義烏托邦); it emanates from the idea of Great Unity (*datong* 大同), which, contrary to the law of the jungle, preaches ethic, humanist and universal values, a spirit of mutual aid, a dream of a unified world.

Ba Jin's 1932 novella *A Dream on the Sea* (Ba [1932] 1988) may be a perfect illustration of such a cosmopolitan ideal, since the narrative of patriotic resistance to a foreign invasion is backed by a utopian framework, as already evidenced by the plot. Aboard a ship, the narrator, a young Jewish man, called Schwartzbard (*Xiwacibade* 席瓦次巴德), meets a young Jewish lady, named Lina (*Lina* 里娜) who agrees to tell him the adventures she experienced. It happened on an island lost in the Pacific, christened Liboluo 利伯洛, where she initially lived as a foreign aristocrat. Nevertheless, she decided to abandon her privileges by engaging in resistance fights alongside local habitants, since the Island was invaded by a foreign army from

a neighbouring country, High Nation (*Gaoguo* 高國). She lost her two lovers and comrades in the battles, before having been put in jail herself and exiled after the revolts failed. Lina's oral narrative is extended by her diary, which the narrator has discovered. In the end, realising that she has vanished, the narrator wondered if the story was true, if the island did exist, and if he had not just had a dream.

The utopian aspects could not have been more explicit, because of the presence of Liboluo Island, a place from nowhere. However a subtle connection and tension is perceptible between the imaginary place and the historic anchorage. Such a spatial configuration of utopia signalises the cosmopolitan concerns which surpass the narrow patriot will.

The paratextual device provides clues about such cosmopolitan aspirations, which go beyond historical references, as evidenced by divergences between the "Foreword" (*xu* 序) and the "Epilogue" (*jiewei* 結尾). In the "Foreword", the author specifies the circumstances in which he composed this narrative, by mentioning the Japanese troupes putting the northern districts of Shanghai to fire and sword in the beginning of 1932. Therefore, the story stages the Chinese people's resistance against the Japanese invasion, while Lina embodies the quest of a "free nation" (*ziyou guojia* 自由國家, Ba [1932] 1988, 3-4). The subsequent auto-commentary Ba Jin wrote in 1979 (Ba [1979] 1993) confirms this preface for its contextual information. However the epilogue makes contradictory mentions by highlighting the fictional feature of the intrigue. It questions the island's existence while evoking the disappearance of the protagonist:

從此我就再沒有遇見她。我得不到一點關於她的消息。而且連一點線索也找不到。在太平洋上並沒有一個叫做利伯洛的島國。那個高國也是沒有的，雖然那裏有一個國家的名稱和高國有關係，那個國家也是以侵略出名的，但是我沒有去過那裏，而且我知道那個國家是島國，和她的故事裏所說的不同。

From now, I could not see her anymore. I did not hear from her, even without any trail that might permit me to enter in contact with her again. There is no island-state called Liboluo in the Pacific, neither High Nation, even though there is a country whose name is close to it, with an aggressor's reputation. Nevertheless I have not been there. I know that this country is a island-state, but it is different from Lina's narrative. (Ba [1932] 1988, 91)¹

To transpose what happened on the mainland on a non-existent island pertains to a classic utopian process. Ba Jin attempts to recount

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all translations are by the Author.

the nation's tragedy while surpassing it by means of an imaginary deterritorialised topography. It is a step towards cosmopolitan spatialisation, supported for instance by the narrator's status and ethos.

Chapter 2 illustrates the collusion between spatial enlargements and narratorial cosmopolitan posture, for it is fully dedicated to Samuel (Sholem) Schwarzbard's (1886-1938) trial and his family destiny (Johnson 2012). There is no fascination for the sensational act of assassination by the Russian-born anarchist, but appropriation and identification of an universal suffering history. The narrator recalls his Schwarzbard's origin, explicitly as a foreigner. Such an approach, similar to *Exile*, reveals the significant auto-alterisation process, which proves the author's will to transcend the single national concern and to achieve an authentic cosmopolitan sense of caring.

Ba Jin retraces Schwarzbard's lineage not from an individual but from a collective perspective, as the chapter is entitled "Great Tragedy of a Nation" (*Yi ge minzu de da beiju* 一個民族的大悲劇). The descriptions are focused on Symon Petliura's (1879-1926) alleged pogrom crimes, committed at the service of the White Army. The use of numerous witnesses and communist media, for instance, *L'Humanité*, cited in footnotes, aims to reiterate the Ukrainian Jewish misfortune (Ba [1932] 1988, 15-18). The collective issue possibly hints at Chinese people's tragedy through the superposition and mirror effect. However, it is intended less to bring the foreign example back to narcissistic complaints than to suggest the similarities between different national disasters. This analogical approach in fact enables Ba Jin to stress universal suffering, threatening the whole of humanity, beyond a single country's crisis. He even makes this trial (Torres [1927] 2010; Czerny 2001; Hunczak 1987) an international paradigm of people's pain and revolt. That is why the narrative tends to reduce the 'assassin' image of Sholem Schwarzbard by highlighting, instead, the heroic actions performed by other members of his family. They are all committed to struggles inside the vast Russian empire, sometimes for other nations' interests: one was a poet fighting for the independence of Poland, another has been hanged because of her commitment to the Russian revolutionary Party, yet another died trying to save a child from a fire in St. Petersburg.

This cosmopolitan writing strategy is confirmed paradoxically also through negative criticism released about both *A Dream on the Sea* and *Vengeance* (Ba [1931] 1991a, 5-15). Given chapter 2 of the former is a rewriting of the latter, the reviewer criticises Ba Jin not for his propensity for terrorism, but for his negligence to the fate of his compatriots in favour of "humankind sadness" (*renlei de beitung* 人類共有的悲哀):

巴金先生要寫人類的痛苦，卻放過了自己（自己國人）切身所感到的痛苦，而祇搬演了和國人痛癢不相關的故事，其動人的力量自然要蒙著一種阻礙。

Mr. Ba Jin seeks to write about humankind suffering, without taking care of his own compatriots' feeling. He merely transposes stories that leave them indifferent, limiting emotive strength of his work. (*Shuping Fuchou* 1932, 728)

Hu Feng 胡風 (1902-85), more directly, reproaches *A Dream on the Sea* for mixing anarchism and humanism, while totally dismissing realism (Gu 1932). To these comments Ba Jin brings a clear response, which reformulates his open mind:

人類所追求的都是同樣的東西 — 青春, 生命, 活動, 愛情, 不僅為他們自己而且也為別人... 失去了這一切以後所發生的悲哀乃是人類共有的悲哀。

What human being looks for is based on common subjects such as youth, life, freedom, love. It may be a personal quest, or a search for others [...]. Tragedies provoked by their loss are common to all humanity, and could not be specific to Chinese people. (Ba 1932, 863-4)

Similar examples abound, in essays as well as in narratives, when, again in *Exile*, Professor Bronski talks about "the future of humanity" (*renlei de weilai* 人類的未來). Ba Jin's approach, in fact, is little different from the cosmopolitan mentalities that characterise the May Fourth intelligentsia, if one refers to the special issue of *Short Story Magazine* (vol. 12, October 1921), dedicated to "Oppressed Nations" (*bei sunhai minzu* 被損害民族) literatures, including Polish, Czech, Finnish, Yugoslav, Bulgarian, and New Jewish or Yiddish one.

3 Time to Come (à venir) and anti-Statism

In addition to this spatial configuration built on deterritorialised cartography and cosmopolitan narrative, specific social conception and temporal structure come to reinforce Ba Jin's utopianism, which is linked to an anti-Statist and anti-teleological posture.

It would be worthwhile to recall Qin Hui's reflections on Ba Jin, in order to get a better understanding of the writer's position and approach, if only in an opposite way. In an article published two years ago (Qin 2018), Qin Hui acknowledges Ba Jin's merit in terms of fighting for freedom, while pointing out what he calls "problems" (*wenti* 問題) with Ba Jin. He argues that Ba Jin combatted the despotism of the "small community" (*xiao gongtongti* 小共同體) that was the family clan, without paying enough attention to the necessity of fighting against constraints imposed by the "greater community" (*da gongtongti* 大共同體), namely state structure and ideology. Qin Hui, in referring to the novel *Family*, questions Juehui's destiny after leaving

the family straitjacket, as he risks remaining a prisoner of an unchanged institutional background, dominated by a mandarin-layered structure and "country gentlemen" (*xiangshen* 鄉紳).

Qin Hui's reflections are inscribed in a broader study on May Fourth and the New Culture. He begins rejecting Li Zehou's 李澤厚 (1930-) viewpoint about the New Culture Movement, which Li summarises in the following formula: "National salvation outweighs enlightenment" (*jiuwang yadao qimeng* 救亡压倒启蒙, Li 1999, 842), in other words, national crisis and the collective cause end up submerging the values of individual freedom advocated by the protagonists of Enlightenment. Qin Hui, instead, underscores the deeply contradictory elements in the relations between the individual and the state for this period. He mainly argues that May Fourth criticises only Confucianism (*piru* 批儒), not legalism (*pifa* 批法), neglecting the durability of the Qin system (*qinzhì* 秦制) or imperial system (*dizhi* 帝制). According to Qin Hui, such a weakness stems from the Japanese prism that influenced the Western liberalism introduced in China. Liberalism in the Meiji version urges individuals to emancipate themselves from patriarchal or *daimyos'* control. However, the freed individuals must swear their loyalty to the emperor and the state, generating the complicity of "pseudo-individualism and militarism" (*wei geren zhuyi he junguo zhuyi* 偽個人主義和軍國主義). This Japanese liberalism has a profound impact on the Chinese intelligentsia, so that the Enlightenment embodied by Lu Xun and Ba Jin in their fight against the family pressure and against ritualism, under the influence of Japanese liberalism, were not overwhelmed or crushed by the missions of national salvation, on the contrary, they complement and stimulate each other:

出現“啟蒙呼喚個性，個性背叛家庭，背家投入救國，國家吞噬個性”的悖反現象，而這又與一戰後西方社會主義經俄國中轉的變異版本一拍即合。

Provoking a paradoxical phenomenon: "The Enlightenment appeals for the individual, the individual rebels against the family and engages in the salvation of the state, which devours the individual". And all this coincides with Soviet-style socialism in the post-war period. (Qin 2015, 80)

Despite its strong criticism of the imperial system, Qin Hui's viewpoint seems to be worthy of further discussion as Ba Jin's utopian anarchist position may constitute even a counter-example, at multiple levels, whether militant, ideological or creative.

Ba Jin maintained a distance from any governmental commitment, unlike some former anarchist activists who became officials or politicians. In parallel he remained still attached to his initial ideals by choosing the pen, without adhering to the League of the Left-Wing

Writers (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 中國左翼作家聯盟), most likely in order to preserve his independence. In any case, his narrative discourses and metadiscourses demonstrate his permanent opposition against instituted authority, starting with state power and nationalist ideology.

At a textual and intertextual level, Ba Jin's anti-state posture is not subjected to any doubt. *A Dream on the Sea* stages a double struggle against both foreign invaders and domestic 'aristocrats', because the sufferings people endure are attributable to the former as well as to the latter, who reveal themselves as their collaborators. In this respect, the island is divided into two distinct districts, the wealthy one occupied by splendid palaces and houses, and the shantytowns where misery piles up. Border crossing, as does Lina, a noble lady going to frequent the untouchable slaves, is seen as a sign of transgression that justifies prison.

In fact Lina calls to mind Maria Spiridonova (1884-1941), a Russian revolutionary, victim both of the tsarist tyranny and of soviet repression, as anti-imperialist resistance in Ba Jin's novella constitutes a narrative displacement suggesting a double struggle against capitalism and dictatorship. Ba Jin constantly links up anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and anti-dictatorial battles. This permanent tentative is correlated to continuous intellectual debates on these issues, as demonstrated by the opposition between Chen Duxiu and Ou Shengbai 區聲白 (1892-1945), since the very beginning of the 1920's, about the legitimacy of Marxism being leninised (Ou 1921, 573, 576). In one of his earliest essays, "Patriotism and the Way towards Happiness for Chinese People", Ba Jin makes a plea for the abolition of the state, private property and religion (Ba 1921). This early-formulated opinion is found enhanced under Alexander Berkman's influence. In 1930, in *From Capitalism to Anarchism*, which is an adaptation of the French philosopher's treatise *What is Communist Anarchism?*, Ba Jin denounces capitalism and dictatorship by paralleling the Great War and the Russian Revolution, militarism and Leninism (Feigan 1930). It is not surprising that he also calls Maria Spiridonova "spiritual mother" (*jingshen shang de muqin* 精神上的母親), after Emma Goldman, in the biography he dedicated to the former, among ten Russian heroines (Ba [1929] 1993). It is neither unexpected that, later, during the Sino-Japanese war, in an article written in 1938, *Guojiazhuyizhe* 國家主義者 (Statists), Ba Jin decries both defeatists and warmongers by considering them as equally dangerous and harmful. He specially warns against "extreme statists" (*jiduan guojia zhuyizhe* 極端國家主義者), those who urge the conquering of Tokyo, the extermination of the Japanese People, and the recovery of Korea. Rather, the patriotism that Ba Jin advocates results in the obligation of defending national territory, while requiring solidarity between Chinese fighters and Japanese workers (Ba [1938] 1990).

This anti-statist position is basked up by an efficient temporal frame, which is anti-teleological. It is reflected in his interest in social revolution, as suggested by his viewpoint on Kronstadt, a major unsuccessful uprising against the Bolsheviks in March 1921. For Zhou Limin citing Bajin's essays written in 1925-1926,

暴動“顯示民眾的巨大覺醒和力量”[...] 暴動的失敗緣於“專政的罪惡”，暴動的意義是“為無產階級揭示了社會革命的新道路”。

This rebellion “reveals a tremendous awakening among the people and its extraordinary force” [...] its failure is attributed to “criminal dictatorship”, while “indicating to the proletariat a new way for social revolution”. (Zhou 2017, 132)

Such a revolution that acts against the narrow vision of nation involves a continuous process, moving away from historic determination, evolutionist linearity and teleological scheme. In this connection, *A Dream on the Sea*, in terms of temporality, is marked by a form of messianism, which has nothing to do with any projection on the future, but with action on the present, that is yet to come (à venir).

The subtitle of the novella “Tale for Children written for a Young Girl” (*Gei yige nühai de tonghua* 給一個女孩的童話) is not a trivial generic game, but rather a temporal signal Ba Jin explains by the censorship to be circumvented (Ba [1979] 1993, 606). It may be also an allusion to *Terre libre* (The Free Land), also a utopian story published in a series for children by Jean Grave (1854-1939), a French anarchist writer Ba Jin knew (Grave [1908] 2015). But this generic specification should be perceived above all as a way Ba Jin seeks to pull himself away from historic determination, and to propose a temporality emancipated from the concerns of the single nation's destiny. In this respect, Ba Jin turns away from late Qing utopian fictions, dominated by the “future perfect mood” (*jianglai wancheng shi* 將來完成時), in the words of David Wang (1998, 309), namely by the projection of China on a realised splendid future, as illustrated by Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873-1929) *The Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilai ji* 新中國未來記, 1902), Lu Shi'e's 陸士諤 (1878-1944) *New China* (*Xin Zhongguo* 新中國, 1905), or Wu Jianren's 吳趸人 (1866-1910) *New Memory of a Stone* (*Xin shitou ji* 新石頭記, 1906), to name only a few of the best-known of them.

Ba Jin takes the opposite way. *A Dream on the Sea* is guided by another temporal conception focused on “à-venir”, the yet to come, which is radically distanced from the future, and inclined towards the non-actualised, the unfinished, and the returning.

In the spirit of such a non-prophetic utopia (Chalier 2006), the plot consists of continuous actions. The abuses perpetrated by the invaders and the oppressors as well as the sufferings experienced by the

people are accurately described. It justifies a persevering struggle through permanent commitment. Therefore the narrative is built on the rhetoric of repetition and return. Repeated failures stimulate renewed revolts. The heroine herself incarnates the figure of return, by coming back to the island three times in a row, alternating between prison and exile. The cyclic nature of action is a sign of an uninterrupted process, which proscribes any prospect of definitive victory. In this respect, the sole triumphant scene is significantly an oneiric one, where Lina dreams of the advent of a free country. This deceptive narrative mode compromises any realised future.

Certainly, there is an expectation, an aspiration, even hope, since the very word "messiah" is pronounced: "the slaves are waiting for their messiah" (*meige nuli... qiancheng de qidao yige jiushizhu jianglin lai jiejiu tamen* 每個奴隸...虔誠地祈禱一個救世主降臨來解救他們。). However it is by definition the non-advent that is predictable, all the more so as the recurring question characters ask is "when the final settlement intervenes" (*zong jiesuan* 總結算). It reminds of the similar question Zhang Weiqun asks Du Daxin in *Destruction*, "when does the Revolution come?", or "when will the light triumph?" (*geming shenme shihou caineng daolai* 革命什麼時候才能到來; *guangming shenme shihou caihui shengli* 光明什麼時候才會勝利, Ba [1929] 1988, 99). The actual change will not take place, in the suspension of ending (*jieju* 結局) as both end and outcome. This messianism proves to be a promise that defies the *chronos*, a linear, homogeneous and ascending time, in favour of a form of *kairos*, an agitated, shaky and discontinuous one. At the end of the novella, the watch stops, breaking definitively this teleological linearity. Still, hope remains against fatality, as shown by the juxtaposition and variation of the same plot: in the oral account assumed by Lina in the first part, her lover and fellow soldier she calls "child" (*haizi* 孩子) dies due to illness, while in her diary, which spreads over the second part, she was expecting him to come and free her from prison.

4 Dream of Freedom and World of Possibility

In substance, the generic device of "Tales for Children" (*tonghua* 童話) defuses historic and teleological determinism. By transforming the 'will be' into 'could be', in other words, by transforming the future tense into the conditional, therefore, effectiveness into potentiality, Ba Jin shows doubts about the legitimacy of the pervading realism, and prefers to explore the eventualities. When he ceaselessly claimed that he was not a writer or a novelist *stricto sensu* and he was writing just for what he believed in, it was less a sign of false modesty than a profession of faith, a declaration of principle, as he listened to 'faith', the religion of the human being, which moves him away from

immediate realities and political emergency and makes him prefer to build a possible world. This imagined and potential space, which is favourable to the dream of freedom or the desire for freedom, implies the annihilation of any instituted authority as well as any self-generated one. Therefore, it is invested with as many desires as uncertainties, so that the narrative is constructed on the interrogative mode and on a huge ambivalence, which can be observed at the symbolic, ethical and textual level.

The night and the sea are two emblematic elements, which request a nuanced reading, regarding the overlapping connotation between domination and revolt, or between darkness and light.

The night may reflect the gloomy reality of occupied territory, the persecution of its inhabitants, and the despair gnawing at them. It may also hint at clandestine resistance. In this respect, it already partially joins the symbolism of the sea, since the roar and the storm accompany the thundering anger and the outbreak of revolt. Like the tide and the surf, there is an irrepressible and always reborn aspiration to freedom, in the heart of darkness. Redundant passages on this subject confirm Kafka's negative utopia and Adorno's critical theory, which suggest that the dim present is illuminated by a glow coming from a spatiotemporal otherness (Löwy 1992, 71-94). It enables the opening of breaches and seeing the possibilities of a "free country" (*ziyou guojia* 自由國家), which should be read in the double meaning of 'sovereign country' and 'country inhabited by free men'

Nevertheless the sea conceals its deadly teeth. It is synonymous not only with misleading promises by raising the swell without the unleashed storm, but also with the graveyard, since it becomes the sepulchre for Yang, a revolutionary and Lina's first lover, while threatening to swallow up the slaves' district and thus to bury the resistance forces. No doubt that is the reason why the sea is associated with Lina's torment as well as her impenetrable mysteries. For her, freedom is an object of quest, as well as a source of unanswerable questions. Liboluo (利伯洛), a mutinous island is represented as a mirage oscillating between Atlantis and Hope, between dream and action. For this purpose, it is not useless to remember the project Ba Jin had in 1947 of writing a fiction entitled *Dawn* (*Liming* 黎明), which would take place in 2000. It could have been a sequel of *Destruction* and *Renaissance* (*Xinsheng* 新生, 1934). But it never came about (Zhou 2016, 31).

Lina's distress transfigured by the ambivalent force of the sea, in fact, is intimately connected to her ethical questioning. The dilemma between revenge and forgiveness in *Vengeance*, or between love and sacrifice in *Destruction*, is found extended to *A Dream on the Sea*, which raises additional issues concerning the relationship between individual freedom and social responsibility.

The question arises from the sense of guilt, which strikes Ba Jin's characters. Lina feels sinful for her 'aristocratic' origin and her self-

ish love. "We were guilty of loving each other" (*Women ai women jiu you zui le* 我們愛我們就有罪了), this sentence that Souvarine addresses to Etienne in Zola's *Germinal* (Zola [1885] 1968, 438) resonates like an obsessive refrain. Taking as a model Helena, a young bourgeois woman who abandoned everything to follow her lover, a Bulgarian revolutionary student, in Turgenev's *On the Eve* (1860) (Turgenev [1860] 1950), Lina considers her own commitment as a necessary act sacrificing privileges and personal freedom. The fight in which Lina engages is as much against the external enemy as her inner demons. It consists of transcending the feeling of sacrifice, so as to put individual freedom in connection with social responsibility. From today's point of view, democracy is at stake, as pointed out by Arif Dirlik:

At a time of social breakdown and individual alienation, anarchists imagined a society where individual freedom could be fulfilled only through social responsibility, but without being sacrificed to it, which is the essence of socialist democracy and may be central to any conception of democracy (Dirlik 1991, 4).

However, in the novella the question remains unanswered, obliging Lina to persevere in her efforts.

The unresolved issue about democratic behaviour is transposed to a textual level with particular narrative echoes. The dialectic of individual freedom and social responsibility, in connection with the refusal of any normativity, leads Ba Jin to defy the writer's own authority. Like Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936), who makes *The True Story of Ah Q* (*Ah Q zhengzhuān* 阿Q正傳, 1921) a democratic fiction, as clearly pointed out by Veg (2011), Ba Jin also opens a space for debate, where the writer's authority is submitted to the test of dialogism.

In appearance the authorship is settled and assumed, even with emphasis. A double signature, of the narrator and the author, enhances this impression, insofar as they converge in the preface and in the epilogue, by repeating "such a woman must exist; I have to go looking for her" (*wo xiangxin ta yiding cunzai, wo yao jixu zhuixun ta* 我相信她一定存在, 我要繼續追尋她). The redundancy seems to act as a reassertion of the author's legitimacy and command, while, in addition to it, the narrator completes the maieutic gesture in provoking and commenting on Lina's tale. However, this apparent assurance masks doubts and questions. The discourse loses its coherence since the author's statements contradict the narratorial account over the dream effect: "I woke up from the dream when I finished writing this novella"; "I do not think it's a dream that I lived". (*Xie wan le zhe xiaoshuo, wo de meng xing le* 寫完了者小說, 我的夢醒了; *Wo jue bu xiangxin wo de zaoyu hui shi yichang mengjing* 我絕不相信我的遭遇會是一場夢景, Ba [1932] 1988, 4, 93). The cleavage is accentuated when the narrator seriously calls into question the existence of the island

as described by Lina. Doubting Lina's story is tantamount to disbelieving the narrator since the very story results in the author-narrator's transcription and re-appropriation.

Such a weakening attempt of authorship gives way to a form of dialogism that integrates the readership. The epilogue, as such, constitutes a privileged place and moment of debate. The pragmatic shape allows the author-narrator to engage in a jousting with friends around the story's authenticity, the value of dreams, and the meaning of life. The polyphony creates a public space, which conjures up the spectre of 'thesis novel', *roman à thèse*, removing the didacticism which characterises Jean Grave's *The Free Land*. As a result, the author has his certainties shaken.

Probably, that is the way Ba Jin pursues the quest for freedom, which finds a tremendous parable in *A Dream on the Sea*. The island utopianises freedom in the sense that it creates a desired space for freedom, since, for La Boétie, freedom and the desire for freedom are one, and to want to be free is already to be free. This is the reason why this utopia is built on a negative, if not agonistic mode, the fight against oppressors requiring that against the voluntary servitude, again in the words of La Boétie (1576). *In fine*, Qin Hui is perhaps not so wrong to put side by side Lu Xun and Ba Jin, two "slave heart" slayers (Qin 2018). Lu Xun's 1925 reflections may serve as ultimate exegesis of Ba Jin's narrative:

But however fine the phrases of those splendor-loving scholars, or however grand the expressions they use in their chronicles, such as "the rise of the Hans", "the age of Han expansion", or "the age of Han resurgence", while appreciating that their motives are of the best, we cannot but feel their wording is too ambiguous. A much more straightforward mode of expression would be:

- 1 The periods when we longed in vain to be slaves,
- 2 The periods when we succeeded in becoming slaves for a time.

These periods form a cycle of what earlier scholars call "times of good rule" and "times of confusion". From the viewpoint of later subjects, the rebels were simply paving the way for their "masters". This is why it was said, "They cleared the path for the sacacious sovereign".

I am not quite sure what period we are in now. But if we consider our classicists' veneration of national characteristics, our writers' praise of Chinese civilisation and our philosophers' eagerness to return to the ancient ways, we can see that they are all dissatisfied with the present. But which way are we going? Whenever the people are confronted by a war they cannot understand, the richer among them move into the foreign concessions while women and children take refuge in the churches, for such places are relatively safe. For the time being they are not reduced to long-

ing in vain to be slaves. In short, whether classicists or refugees, wise men or fools, worthy men or rascals, all seem to be longing for the peaceful days of three centuries ago when the Chinese had succeeded in becoming slaves for a time.

But are we all like the men of old, to be content forever with "the good old ways"? Are we all like those classicists who, dissatisfied with the present, long for the peaceful days of three centuries ago?

Of course, we are not satisfied with the present either, but that does not mean we have to look backwards, for there is still a way forward. And to create a third type of period, hitherto unknown in Chinese history, is the task of our young people today. (Lu Xun 1925, 152)²

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² This passage is translated by Yang X. ang G. Yang.

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