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## Utopia

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China today is defined by the rise of the so-called middle class, penetration of the market economy into all domains of life, and orientation toward practical benefit. Especially in the rash and ruthless populist undertones of online public opinion, the word ‘utopia’ is not only used to criticise the political catastrophe of the Mao era, but also to satirise and mock today’s socially unrealistic deliriums and daydreams, monstrosities and abnormalities that run counter to the mainstream. In these days, people are ashamed to earnestly discuss utopia, let alone act on utopian ideas.

Times indeed have changed. Only when danger is imminent and everything is on the verge of collapse do people begin to urgently ponder and search for an alternative plan. Utopia calls to mind a cheerful earth that is elsewhere, a negation of reality. If people find this prospect dull, it is perhaps because their lives are calm and orderly, and it quite simply does not speak to their interests. Or, because it negates reality, perhaps it touches the red line of discourse before which people suppress their voices to protect themselves. In China, discussing utopia requires bravery; putting it into practice requires power.

*The Seeds of Utopia*

After learning of the Japanese author Saneatsu Mushanokōji’s ‘new village-ism’ (*atarashiki-mura, xincunzhuyi*) through Zhou Zuoren in the early 1920s, the young Mao Zedong thought about organising a ‘work-study mutual aid group’ (*gong du huzhu tuan*) with his compatriots in order to build a new village utopia at the base of Mount Yuelu in Changsha.<sup>1</sup> Due to the constraints of that particular time in history, this process never gained traction. Instead, Mao would have to wait until the 1950s—

after he obtained the power to govern China by means of violent revolution—to act on his utopian impulse, which took the form of people's communes (*renmin gongshe*) (see Gao's essay in the present volume).

If Mao's ambition only resembled the small-scale utopian experiment pursued by intellectuals of the Shirakaba-ha (literally, 'White Birch Society') deep in the mountains of Miyazaki prefecture in Japan, the impact on society would be limited to the scale of a community.<sup>2</sup> But propelled by Mao's power, people's communes sprung up in a vast political campaign and the entire country was transformed into a utopian experimental laboratory. By concentrating the means of production, militarising management, and enforcing collective labour, people's communes thoroughly eradicated the social structure of China's clan-based villages and the tradition of small peasant production methods. The laziness of human nature was indulged by imitating the system of 'communal feeding' (*daguofan*) of Zhang Lu, a Han Dynasty warlord, with its principle of 'setting up shelters for those in need of meat and drink' (*qi yishe, zhi mirou*). Although the construction of water conservation works left a legacy for collective agriculture, by the end of the 1970s fields were no longer cultivated and lay in waste. It was peasants from Fengyang county in Anhui province, who had suffered untold miseries during the Great Leap Forward, that finally sparked the bottom-up reform of 'fixing farm output quotas for each household' (*baochandaohu*) that eventually put an end to the era of the people's communes.<sup>3</sup>

Almost all utopian experiments on earth end in failure. Although the origins of Mao's utopian thinking can be traced back to small anarchist groups from the end of the nineteenth century, Mao magnified utopia at the national scale. When Mao in practice merged the communist principle 'from each according to ability, to each according to need' (*ge jin suo neng, an xu fenpei*) with Kang Youwei's explication of the Confucian idea of 'great unity' (*datong*)—that is, a utopian vision in which everything is in its proper place and peace prevails (see Craig A. Smith's essay in the present volume)—a disaster was born.<sup>4</sup> In humanity's infancy, when population was scarce and natural resources were abundant, it was possible to form small-scale societies that practiced communist mutual aid and emphasised morality. But with the rapid increase of population, the proliferation of ethnic communities, and the growing diversification of interests, the ideal society of ancient times vanished into smoke. As early as the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), legalist thinker Han Fei wrote in the treatise *Five Venoms*: 'Men of high antiquity strove for moral virtue; men of middle times sought out wise schemes; men of today vie to be known for strength and spirit.'<sup>5</sup> To enlarge the ideals of a small society to the scale of a whole nation is like using one's childhood experience in the adult world. When such a brittle utopia collides with reality, it inevitably shatters into fragments.

### *Utopian Traces in the World*

The Chinese word for utopia (*wutuobang*) has two synonyms: 'ideal state' (*lixiang guo*) and 'nowhere place' (*wuyou xiang*), meaning something nearly impossible to discern in the real world. For this reason utopia is in itself a discourse outside of time and space, an action that is unlikely to be realised. If utopia is put into action, it is destined to be connected with failure. Beginning with Sir Thomas Moore's sixteenth-century

treatise *Utopia*, a school of utopian thought arose in England, culminating in Robert Owen's New Lanark experiment in Scotland and his commune in New Harmony, Indiana, in the early 1800s.<sup>6</sup> Owen devoted his life to improving the environment for workers, nurturing their character, and creating a new society in which, to use once again the words of Han Fei, 'no rich rewards were doled out, no harsh punishments were administered.'<sup>7</sup> Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, which was the age in which all kinds of experimentation were possible, numerous other efforts to build utopias arose, most of which were short-lived, but which nevertheless often had significant implications for society going forward.

In the United States, the Shaker Village (1805–1910) and the Oneida Community (1848–80) were distinguished by their rejection of the nuclear family and private ownership of property. This rejection manifested itself differently in each community, as asceticism in one, and complex marital arrangements in the other.<sup>8</sup> However, these communities were unable to stave off the pressures from orthodox Christianity and the vigour of industrial capitalism. Entering the twentieth century, these formerly shocking practices were generally covered in dust and forgotten by mainstream society (despite the persistence of some like the Amish). After World War II, this kind of small-scale utopian project reappeared in two distinct responses to the crisis of Western society of that era: first in B. F. Skinner's novel *Walden Two* published in 1948, and later in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s symbolised by the hippie commune.<sup>9</sup> After Trump's rise to power in 2016, numerous books on utopian practices have been published. Even before this present crisis, globally there has been an intermittent accumulation of experimental small-scale ecological villages and intentional communities, which represent the evolution of utopia in the contemporary era. It would seem that the moment to discuss utopia is, once again, upon us.

### *Utopian Violence*

At the time when Mao turned to violent revolution, there were still several intellectuals who attempted to improve society by other means. Although intellectuals involved in the Rural Reconstruction Movement (*xiangcun jianshe yundong*) of the 1920s and 1930s seldom invoked the discourse of utopia, the desire to challenge the cruelty of that period's realities had a certain shade of utopian thinking. Activists such as Y. C. James Yen and Liang Shuming attempted to transform China through mass education and moderate social experimentation.<sup>10</sup> Although they shared the same starting point of dissatisfaction with the state of the world as Mao Zedong, they selected different paths. In response to historical conditions, Mao's belief in Marxism became an ideological pretext for revolutionary mobilisation; utopia was shelved as a remote ideal and the urgent needs of political reality became a 'you die, I live' factional struggle for power. Subsequently, the Rural Reconstruction Movement was abruptly cut short by the Japanese invasion of China. It ended in failure, whereas Mao's violent revolution succeeded.

After seizing state power, Mao had a free hand to start building his utopia. Liang Shuming remained in China only to be persecuted in ideological campaigns; Y. C. James Yen went to the Philippines where he strove to internationalise the Rural Reconstruction Movement. As described earlier, people's communes transformed China

into a place in which the people had no way to survive. After Mao's death, the adoption of the Household Responsibility System (*jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*) broke up collective agriculture and land-use rights were returned to the hands of farmers. For an ephemeral moment, there was vitality in the countryside, which was soon to be extinguished by the urbanisation movement that would swallow agricultural land and atomise the peasantry. In the new millennium, the problems of the countryside have returned, giving rise to a New Rural Reconstruction Movement (*xin xiangcun jianshe yundong*) (see Day's essay in the present volume).<sup>11</sup> This new version originated among intellectuals outside of the state system, as a continuation of the historical experiments of Yen and Liang, in an attempt to find new methods to address contemporary problems.

In the Deng Xiaoping era, the tanks that rolled into Tiananmen Square cleared a path for neoliberal economics to enter China. After Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour in 1992, China was transformed from a political society into a consumer society. The trauma of 1989 was forgotten as people threw themselves into the business of making money. The reform of state-owned enterprises plunged millions of workers into unemployment; due to the opening and expansion of real estate markets, farmers lost their land; economic construction consumed natural resources and intensified ecological destruction; and social wealth was redistributed resulting in a staggering gap between rich and poor. The concentration of China's population in megacities has hollowed out its villages. But China's growing urban middle class is filled with discontent over the struggle to find work, traffic congestion, air pollution, and competition over limited educational resources. In response, a trend of counterurbanisation (*ni chengshihua*) has begun.

### *The Danger of Utopia*

The New Rural Reconstruction Movement was initiated by Wen Tiejun, a well-known professor at Renmin University, as an attempt to reverse the dire realities of China's urban-rural situation. It proposes to reconstruct a positive and mutually interactive relationship between the rural and urban, motivate young people to return to the countryside, establish 'mutual aid societies' (*huzhushe*) in different village areas, develop ecological agriculture, and form community colleges that follow in the tradition of Yen's practice of mass education.<sup>12</sup> In addition to taking care of people left behind in the villages, it also attaches importance to communities of migrant workers struggling to survive in the city. Aspects of this project have been extremely successful, while others have failed and been shut down. Although he does not define his efforts as utopian, and views himself as pragmatically working at the frontlines of rural communities, Wen Tiejun is associated with contemporary China's leftist intellectual pedigree because of his opposition to neoliberalism and pursuit of social fairness. For this reason, some of his 'failed' projects have dismissively been labelled as 'utopian.'

Whether in China or abroad, utopian experiments often take place in the countryside. The reason for this perhaps comes from the distance of rural life from the imagination of the urban mainstream: it is either wilderness or a place that has preserved the traces of humanity's infancy. In reality, an untouched 'place beyond civilisation' (*huawai zhi di*) already ceased to exist in ancient times, let alone in post-Mao China. Rural areas do

not have fewer problems than cities, and are fully intertwined in the contradictions of Chinese society. For this reason, most efforts to improve rural areas in isolation from the city have been derided as ‘utopian.’

Among the numerous approaches to practicing the New Rural Reconstruction Movement, the Bishan Project is perhaps the only one not to be ashamed to admit its utopian orientation.<sup>13</sup> In 2010, this project took root in Bishan village, Yi county, Anhui province, beginning with the renovation of tattered old houses and their conversion into living and work spaces, as well as a newly established bookstore, library, and art centre. The project also conducted research on village history and traditional handicrafts, organised large-scale cultural and art activities, provided work opportunities for volunteers returning to the countryside, and helped villagers increase their incomes by using Taobao and Airbnb—until Beijing shut it down in 2016.

The Bishan Project was not the same as the Mao era’s state-led mobilisation of youth and intellectuals to go ‘down to the countryside’ (*xiaxiang*) to work and reform themselves through labour. And its utopian direction was also distinct from the large-scale people’s communes of the Mao era. Rather, it was founded voluntarily after much consideration and reflection on the urbanisation crisis and agricultural situation. Moreover, it was based on a survey of the explorations of individuals and small groups in different historical periods from all over the world. That being said, Bishan was unable to incorporate some of the historical experiences and experiments in horizontal living arrangements from other places, which would be non-starters in China’s atmosphere of political control.

In contemporary China there can be no genuine utopian practices, only utopian discourses. But sometimes even words themselves can disappear.

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