On Sinofuturism

Resisting Techno-Orientalism in Understanding Kuaishou, Douyin, and Chinese A.I.

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Abstract: Dominant design narratives about "the future" contain many contemporary manifestations of "orientalism" and Anti-Chineseness. In US discourse, Chinese people are often characterized as a single communist mass and the primary market for which this future is designed. By investigating the construction of modern Chinese pop culture in Chinese internet and artificial intelligence, and discussing different cultural expressions across urban, rural, and queer Chinese settings, I challenge external Eurocentric and orientalist perceptions of techno-culture in China, positing instead a view of Sinofuturism centered within contemporary Chinese contexts.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, Chinese internet, Chinese pop culture, Douyin, Kuaishou, Sinofuturism, techno-orientalism, TikTok

China's rapid expansion in recent years has exacerbated the deep disconnect between Chinese discourses of the future and their Western counterparts, which are often shaped by contemporary manifestations of "orientalism" and cultural clichés in popular media. Techno-orientalism tends to illustrate Asia and Asian in hypertechnological terms in cultural production and political discourse (Roh et al. 2015). Artist Lawrence Lek's (2016b) video essay "Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)" looks at certain Western techno-orientalist stereotypes of China that characterize China as "exotic, bizarre, tacky, and cheap." Domestic Chinese media, by contrast, often figure China grandly as heroic, stable, and historic. In his video essay, Lek exposes key stereotypes of China as a site of extreme copy and counterfeit culture; as a place where students study, robot-like, without the capacity for critical thought; and as the home of intensive labor factories. According to techno-orientalist stereotypes, China is home to a generic communist horde that threatens to imitate (and potentially steal and undermine) Western techno-hegemony. Yet such characterizations are inevitably superficial

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and dehumanized. They flatten China into a country of people being robbed of technological prowess. The imagination of China's future that stems from this view is, accordingly, one-sided. China is very diverse in its language,[1] culture, lifestyle, and aesthetics. The rural–urban dichotomy of China also engenders largely different cultural expressions that are impossible to summarize neatly. Sinofuturism is not just China with technological characteristics; it is also the imagining of future worlds, worlds seen through different lenses than are typically used in orientalizing contexts. To envision equitable futures—and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes—we need more pluralistic understandings of Chinese cultures.

In this article, I consider how Chinese internet and the forms and aesthetics of contemporary artificial intelligence (A.I.) expand otherwise narrow Sinofuturist frames to imagine alternative futurities of China. In the age of quantum digital connectivity, Chinese cultural expression continues to transform. To study Chinese popular cultures is to examine the relationships among technology, Chinese cultural expression, and the patterns of everyday life. Presently, everyday life in China can feel surreal—even magical—in ways that are exacerbated by the velocity of technological change and the intensity of oppression. China has, for instance, aimed to build the world's most powerful surveillance system (You 2019), and the government has embraced technologies like facial recognition and A.I. to identify and track 1.4 billion people from criminals to jaywalkers to ordinary folk (Mozur 2018). On the internet, besides blocking many of the VPNs (virtual private networks) that citizens previously used to circumvent the Great Firewall, restrictions on publishing online information are tougher than ever. Found not to comply with content regulations or accused of challenging the authority of the Communist Party, at one point more than one hundred thousand social media accounts were shut down, and multiple individuals including online celebrities and creatives were detained (Economy 2018). The velocity of economic change of China even *feels* supernatural. According to Chinese writer Ning Ken (2016), China has changed from a country that moved too slowly into a country that moves too quickly, as if it has escaped gravity. Nearly overnight, China has become the world leader in high-speed rail, highway construction, cell phone usage, and internet usage: the so-called "rising hegemon," the next great superpower, a global economic powerhouse. Reality itself has become so unreal that people feel weightless, deprived of time to digest and properly evaluate what is happening around them.

Under this surreal reality, "China is a screen on which the West projects its fears of being colonized, mechanized, and instrumentalized in its own pursuit of technological dominance" (Roh et al. 2015). In the escalating trade war between the United States and China, which we see evidence of in the actions against Huawei and TikTok,[2] we see a shift in the imagination of China: from the inhumanity of mindless labor to the sinisterness of collusive agents. This

constructed threat conflates Chinese subjects into one vast foreign horde that is simultaneously dehumanized and exoticized. Yet the modernity, identity, and culture of China under current supernatural reality far exceeds orientalist-inflected imaginings. Modernity, identity, and culture in China are vibrant, complex, aberrant, fluid, and wild.

Even as the rise of the internet has amplified surreality, however, it has also allowed a certain generativity. Though ever-stricter online censorship limits personal expression and creativity on the one hand, on the other it enables complex creative output related to Chinese pop cultures. On the internet, in the circulation of cultural production and consumption based on contemporary Chinese contexts, some users are finding ways to define their own cultural expressions. I call this group of people—the builders of contemporary Chinese popular culture, the producers—the *xin sheng dai*, or NextGen. According to techno-orientalist conventions, it is easy for the outside world to pay attention only to the so called "cyber-sovereignty" of the Chinese internet while denying agency to NextGen (*xin sheng dai*) Chinese and neglecting the vibrant energy and innovative worlds they create. But even as we turn our attention toward this kind of creativity, we cannot forget that the internet is of course driven not only by *xin sheng dai* but by advanced algorithms, by the technologies of A.I. so deeply and unconsciously embedded in people's lives that they have the power invisibly to shape individual awareness and directly impact everyday life. We must take all of these things into account if we want to consider contemporary popular culture.

In this article, I discuss representatives of Chinese popular culture that may not be familiar to outside audiences—*wanghong* style (internet celebrity style), *tu* style (rustic style), queer expression (in particular *nv zhuang da lao* / drag style and *dan mei* / slash style), and the "wild" aesthetics of their manifestations on mainstream media platforms. I use "wild" here to contrast with "domestic" or "obedient," to suggest a resistance to governance, to oppression, and other such orientalizing stereotypes projected onto the NextGen (*xin sheng dai*). This resistance challenges the default definition of technology both inside and outside of China, defying more rigid characterizations of Chinese internet denizens. By introducing a few cases and influential media representations of this variety of cultural expressions, I address the diversity and complexity of Chinese popular culture as it is emerging in a space where the internet, social media, and A.I. meet. And I then examine the importance of such diverse and complex cultural expression to the future vision and design of China. I hope to contribute to recent critical theorizations of Sinofuturism in the following ways: first, by highlighting how the *xin sheng dai* or NextGen generates various "wild" aesthetics that counter everyday surreality, thus expanding otherwise limited views of what constitutes modernity, technology, and identity in China; and second, by factoring in the impact of A.I. on everyday life to destabilize techno-orientalist

(and indeed techno-futurist) assumptions about China. Finally, I speculate on how Sinofuturistic discourse might be produced, reproduced, and circulated in light of these two analyses.

The Rise of *Xin Sheng Dai* (新生代 / NextGen) and the Chinese Internet

I use the term *xin sheng dai* to refer to the generation of Chinese people who use Chinese social media internet platforms like Douyin,[3] Kuaishou,[4] Weibo,[5] and Bilibili.[6] Even under strict censorship, *xin sheng dai* find ways to use the internet to express their social identities, to resist existing social hierarchies, and to subvert dominant ideologies. They are rapidly constructing the expression of China and its future, yet paradoxically they are not well represented in the future of China as depicted by the Western world.

By the end of 2018, the total number of internet users in China reached 829 million, or about 60 percent of the population (CIW Team 2019). This represents the single largest community of internet users in the world. In an age where network culture is ubiquitous in daily life, the deluge of content uploaded every second to the internet represents not just an aesthetic unique to the Chinese internet but also a microcosm of Chinese life and popular culture at large. For *xin sheng dai*, the internet in China is a tool with which and a space in which to express desires, values, and creativity, and it generates a vibrant vernacular of memes and punning neologisms specific to its consumers. Characteristics of the Chinese internet such as censorship, governance, and legislation do not deter the creativity of Chinese internet language. Instead, it has become a significant component, adding linguistic variety (La 2019). In a kind of tautology, the Chinese internet has merged with this new surreal reality to become not only the environment where people consume popular culture but also a platform upon which to produce culture. The surreal has become both the foundation of, and the raw material for, the creation of Chinese popular culture as a unique cultural expression of *xin sheng dai*.

For a long time, China and the Chinese people have been framed as culturally inferior, as other. Compared to the popularity of K-pop and Japanese manga in the United States, Chinese culture is placed in a quaint and fictive past. The aesthetics of these stereotypical impressions include dragons, Kung Fu, exotic wild meat, the color red, communists, and President Mao (as a Chinese person, these are some of my personal experiences when interacting with Western foreigners, especially White people). In addition, characterizations from the outside "tend . . . to focus on the issues of censorship and government control, painting a joyless place straight out of George Orwell's 1984" (Robson 2017). Outside characterizations pay excessive attention to the sovereignty of China, and assume young Chinese are "too preoccupied with the internet playing games, ordering food, writing or reading, conducting business, etc., to worry about politics or free speech" (Herold 2018), flattening and simplifying them as a mass living a

vacuous life, neglecting the rich creativity to be found on the Chinese internet. It is easy for outsiders to assume that the Chinese internet is a drab and constraining place (Robson 2017), and similarly that Chinese popular cultures are boring and insignificant. So much writing about China and its culture focuses on questions of economic growth, political oppression, technological development, and the lifestyles of the metropolitan elites, all at the expense of attention to the lives of ordinary people—the great creativity, diversity, and complexity to be found there. This creativity is full of resistance and fluidity, which is a radical form of queer Sinofuturism that techno-orientalists tend to neglect or disavow.

Chinese Social Media and Popular Cultural Production

Applications like Douyin (known as TikTok outside of China) and Kuaishou (known as Kwai outside of China) are short video platforms presently experiencing a surge in popularity both in China and internationally (Pham 2018). Douyin and Kuaishou expect users to generate a new form of social life online: the production and browsability of easily imitated short video clips are integrated with editing functions keyed to Chinese youngsters' preferences through a host of add-ons, music themes, animations, and the like. Though Douyin's and Kuaishou's user bases increasingly overlap, they still exhibit some differences in their user demographics and evolution (Bruni 2019). While Douyin is mainly popular in the first- and second-tier cities (urban China), for instance, Kuaishou is considered to represent rural China. This urban–rural regime is one of the reasons that Chinese popular culture is so diverse and complex: The urban–rural dichotomy creates a dramatically different experience for people and thus for cultural expression (which diverges from Western media characterizations of Chinese people as a monolithic, undifferentiated mass). The cultural dynamic within this dichotomy is the historical, economic, and political backdrop of the construction of Douyin's and Kuaishou's representations of urban and rural cultures (Liu 2019).

First-tier cities in contemporary China are established as the economic and political centers and include Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Guangzhou. As the tiers progress, the cities decrease in affluence, and move further away from prime locations (Wong 2019). Apart from the tier city system, China's household registration system (*hukou*) explicitly distinguishes people as urban or rural residents (Liu 2019). The resource allocation based on the tier-city system and household system constituted a cultural dynamic in China, where the rural are at a lower position compared to the urban. This cultural hierarchy is reproduced in the two video platforms: while major media discourses consider urban culture as mainstream, defined by white-collar, middle-class, and intellectual populations living in first- and second-tier cities, rural culture by contrast is assigned to a contrastive position—that is, as the alienation of urban culture (Liu 2019).

Douyin (*Wanghong* Style), Kuaishou (*Tu* Style), and Queer Space in Chinese Social Media

Chinese dictionary definitions of wild (野*/ye)* include: the rural; impolite; ambition; lack of constraint; and the not domestic. "Wild," in the context of Chinese social media under this surreal reality, perfectly captures the aesthetic of *xin sheng dai*, which is unconstrained, disobedient, and uncontrollable. The wildness of *xin sheng dai* manifests itself in how they deconstruct the surreal reality of hypertechnological, economic pressure and political oppression, and then integrate or transform it into their own expressions on social media. These expressions in turn range from the bizarre and extreme to the aberrant, and thus diverge from orientalist imaginations of China as inhuman, heteronormative, conservative, or even premodern. *Xin sheng dai* futurity is both heterogeneous and uncategorizable. Below, I investigate media representations of the wild aesthetic of *xin sheng dai*, starting with the difference between Douyin and Kuaishou.

Douyin and Kuaishou have different usage strategies based on the above-mentioned urban–rural divide. Kuaishou is targeted at the dominant urban-elite bubble, aiming to bring the "unseen" population to screens and give everyone the opportunity to record their ordinary lives (Pandaily 2018). To differentiate from Kuaishou, Douyin focuses on young adults in first- and second-tier cities, promoting a *jingzhi* ("polished") lifestyle. According to major media discourses, reflecting the influence of consumerist and capitalized popularized beauty standards in China Douyin users tend to show off bourgeois and "elegant" (*jingzhi*) lifestyles and are made up of *wanghong* (internet celebrities) who use filters to create a thinner body, a smaller face, bigger eyes, smoother skin, and longer legs, and who show off their pretty outfits, world travel adventures, cute pets, and delicious meals. As these images become popular on social media, more and more people imitate *wanghong* aesthetics and go after a *jingzhi* lifestyle to get more social recognition. They must constantly show more variety, more polish, and more beauty to attract viewers. As a result, applications like Douyin offer countless filters with different beautification levels, with the highest level even more magical than plastic surgery (Figure 1).

Instead of a genuine expression of independence, this fanatical pursuit of beauty is a reaction to social and economic pressures (Wen 2013). China's rapid economic development generates financial anxiety for young people, while social media present a quick and easy way to capitalize on self-presentation. As more people seem to succeed (become famous and rich), the *wanghong* effect and associated aesthetic gains momentum, gradually impacting beauty standards among young Chinese. "*Wanghong* face" is now ubiquitous on Chinese social media, with ever more extreme expressions. For instance, the extremely big eyes, pointy nose, sharp chin, and pale skin shown in Figure 2 are an

Figure 1. Before Douyin filter and after Douyin filter (Miao Ge 2020).

example of a bizarre *wanghong* face. This kind of extreme could be said to be a derivation of consumerist-inflected aesthetics. While challenging the perception of a unified and dull image of the Chinese, what will China look like when the future is full of *wanghong* faces?

By contrast, Kuaishou users tend to aim for a more original and authentic life aesthetic, which major media discourses dub "Kuaishou style" or *tu* ("rustic") style. In his book *From the Soil*, Fei Xiaotong (1992) mentions that the word *tu* means "earth," "soil," or "countryside" in Chinese, while also connoting authenticity and rustic outdatedness. Kuaishou videos are usually shot in third- or fourth-tier cities and rural areas in China, and they are usually unfiltered to offer an authentic view of scenes and people. Here, while the environment is *tu* (meaning "authentic"), people also dress *tu* (in a "countrified" fashion) and even act or "perform" *tu* (in an "outdated" way). According to Fei (1992), *tu* is a critical part of the life and livelihood of these subjects, not only showing an authentic view of their lives, but also demonstrating a resistance to more mainstream style from urban China, a kind of reaction to the unfair reality they are facing. Simultaneously, the word *tu* as "earth" here also reflects the sheer variety and diversity of Chinese cultural life. China's complex geography and environment provide a home to a vast variety of popular cultures and

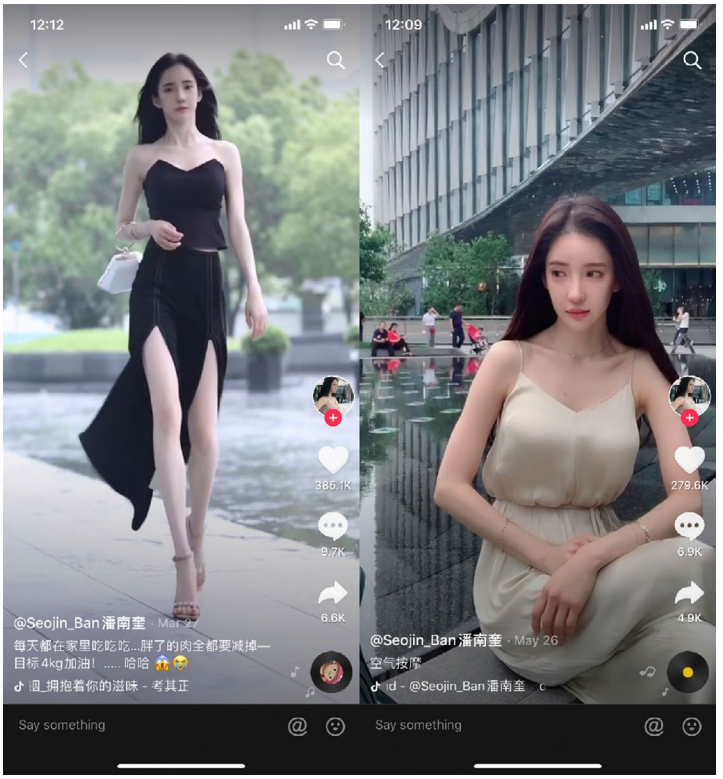

Figure 2a. Seojin Ban. Douyin feed screenshots from 27 May 2019.

Figure 2b. Liu Zichen. Wanghong Liu Zichen and his friends at a party. Weibo, 13 May 2016.[7]

Figure 3. Guoji Deng, Miao Li, and Yuing Yang. Screenshot of Kuaishou-shehuiren poses (The Paper, 26 May 2019).[8]

values. That means that China and Chinese people do not have one massive unified experience, and this also accounts for some of the incredible creative energy happening in China—there's no single mainstream for people to conform to.

Through recording and generating short video content on Kuaishou, this traditionally marginalized group of people is able to articulate a variety of cultural trends exclusive to them. *Shehui ren*, for instance, is an identity close to the *tu* subculture. *Shehui ren* refers to someone who takes care of his own through

force or violence; only tough guys who have ample social experience and who can use brute force to solve problems have the honor to be considered *shehui ren* (Li et al. 2019). To demonstrate how *she hui* they are, people dress and pose to achieve a *she hui ren* look, or use the *shehui ren* filter Kuaishou offers, which gives the picture a murkier and grittier feel (Figure 3).

Tu style is a different reaction to the velocity of China's economic changes. When the speed of development is too fast to catch up, *shehui ren*, unlike urban youth, choose to stick to their authenticity instead of going along with consumerist and capitalized standards. Their self-identification as *shehui ren* to some extent reflects the social injustice that they face. Kuaishou users tend to reflect a demographic that has perhaps come to know the dark side of society earlier and more viscerally than their more enfranchised urban counterparts. Therefore, they have to stand up and be "tough" enough to gain social respect from their peers. In line with Dick Hebdige's (2012) theory of style, the *shehui ren* image, performance, and dramatic acting are all parts of a signature style, a style that derives social meaning and value in its willful demonstration of resistance to the pretentious, doctored styles prized by China's urban denizens. *Tu* represents noise, and thus becomes (as Hebdige comments) the representation of the decentralization of a culture. To them, technology is not just the phone or fast-speed internet they use to publish content, but the techniques and skills with which they edit their videos, compose a narrative, and apply certain color filters to express their identity, eventually forming an individual style. This style has nothing to do with conventional high-tech or cyber-aesthetics shown in sci-fi movies, but it is still futuristic.

For LGBTQ people, complex and ambiguous attitudes toward homosexuality in Chinese media can lead to restrictions on freedom of direct expression online. For instance, as Hongwei Bao (2018) points out: "LGBTQ themed content still cannot be openly represented because of the ban on broadly-defined and often misused categories of 'violence' and 'pornography'"; homosexual love stories, for example, can easily be banned under the rubric of "explicit depiction of sex." Yet other widely accepted subcultures on Chinese social media such as the ACGN (Anime, Comic, Games, and Novel) community do offer space for expression and development of queer identities and affiliations. According to Sina,[9] for instance, by 2017, more than 40 percent of Chinese internet users consume ACGN cultures, and of these, 78 percent are Generation Z, or the majority of Chinese internet users (Wang 2019). While audiences of ACGN cultures overlap broadly with general Chinese netizens, media products of these cultures are widely accepted and omnipresent on all sorts of media channels. As ACGN cultures encourage some queer qualities, this community can function as a kind of "haven" for LGBTQ self-expression. The category of "女装大佬 / *nv zhuang da lao*" (or "big boss in drag"), for instance, has been popular since 2016 and took root in the Chinese ACGN community. While people who are experienced and

Figure 4. Xinyang. Han meijuan. Nestia, 12 September 2019.[12]

Figure 5. Douyin ranking. Abbily. 4 July 2019.[13]

good at cosplay (costume play) can be honored as "*da lao* ("big boss")" within the community (Su 2019), "*nv zhuang* ("female drag")" refers to drag performance. Han Meijuan (who has more than 13.5 million followers), and Abbily (who has 12.1 million followers) are two famous *nv zhuang da lao* on Douyin (Figures 4 and 5). The category "耽美 / *dan mei* or "slash" (romantic or sexual relationships between two male protagonists), meanwhile, is another category known for being especially popular among female consumers. Gay couples, espcially good-looking ones on social media, are popular among slash fans; Chinese sexologist Li Yinhe (as cited in Tang 2016), suggests that authors and followers are drawn to *dan mei* not for the homosexuality so much as for the purity of depiction of true love between attractive young men. Nevertheless, though ACGN is not a specifically LGBTQ community in China, the popularity and acceptance of some queer subcultures creates at least one kind of outlet.[10] In other words, we could say that where—according to Bao (2018)—only certain gay identities are typically welcomed—namely, middle-class, cosmopolitan, discreet, well-educated, and well-paid—on Chinese social media, *nv zhuang da lao* and *dan mei* are potentially transgressive forms of identity expression that are not only accepted but actively encouraged. Queer expressions in Chinese social media are thus unique: they are "aberrant" and unwelcome in some contexts,[11] ostensibly excluded from discussion of the future both in China and beyond; and yet aesthetically "wild" (野) in the sense of the term I described above, persisting in creating space for self-expression.

Just as physical and online environments are constantly in flux, the expression of *xin sheng dai* is fluid. Emerging social platforms enable communication between and among different cultural trends, which in turn generates even more diverse expressions. Many Douyin users, for instance, are beginning to emulate *tu* style, while Kuaishou users are adopting the beauty standards and video-making trends from Douyin. *Tu* style, the aesthetic of authenticity, turns out to provide a much-welcomed outlet for Chinese netizens of all kinds—including urban residents—to let off steam and, as it happens, to express subtle resistance to the pain of the "unreal" reality of everyday life.

Wanghong, *tu*, and queer expressions thus illustrate a part of Sinitic modernity that denaturalizes the uncritical, rigid, and binaristic views associated with techno-orientalism. These vibrant, unconstrained, and resistant aesthetics challenge established imaginaries of Sinitic futurity, opening up possibilities for the emergence of a queer Sinofuturism.

A.I. Algorithms and Everyday Life

The surreal reality and urban–rural dichotomy influence all aspects of cultural expression in China. Similarly, A.I. also plays an important role in influencing and even manipulating popular cultures and everyday life.

On social platforms, everything is about automatic recommendation: when you open Douyin, even without registering an account, you are exposed to tons of videos, and all you need to do is swipe up and down to move among them; the algorithms are constantly pushing feeds that align with your taste based on your behavior. A.I. algorithms like these are deeply embedded in all sorts of social media platforms. These algorithms may seem to provide a kind of convenience, when in fact we are being guided, defined, and predicted incorrectly by them. We live in a bubble created for us by A.I., and it is trapping our imaginations, eliminating creativity and diversity of thought, our values, and our self-expression. The opacity of A.I. and its application leave us little room to think, interpret, and digest. Users have no choice but to accept what has been offered. For instance, on Douyin—which has more than ten million uploads a day—if you are new to the platform and have not followed any people or hashtags yet, the content you see appears to be random. But it is carefully curated by a combination of algorithm and staff. Douyin has over two hundred operation editors whose job it is to find, set, and guide the varieties of unique users of Douyin, using the A.I. algorithm to input and predict the next trending topic (Who Knows China n.d.). As the bubble becomes smaller and more specific, the result becomes more uniform and harder to break down.

As we know, algorithms do not understand users as human; they only understand patterns. Even as we are aware that we are being hyper-targeted by algorithms, we do not have control or agency over the system. What is more, besides discouraging diversity and creativity through structure alone, you could argue that the "genetic makeup" of A.I. is somehow not "authentically" Chinese: by learning the trends that are both powered and curated by A.I., not only are our values homogenized, but we also inherit the received values of the people who designed these algorithms and those who contribute to its foundational data frameworks.

Currently, A.I. technology in China is controlled primarily by the government and big corporations. The design of A.I. reflects its use in capital accumulation, promotion, control, and management, which in turn reflects government and corporate motives. The advance of A.I. algorithms has enabled the strictest and most accurate surveillance and censorship ever. "Sensitive" content disappears on the internet in seconds. Tattoos, colored hair, too much skin exposure, and "explicit" depiction of the body or sexual activity are all considered sensitive content and thereby targeted by A.I. to either be banned or obscured. Completely unaware, we are living at a time when everything is "sensitive." A.I., as a new technology and medium that is ubiquitous in the lives of Chinese people, enables new forms of control unsurpassed in invisibility, obscurity, and unidirectional transmission. It limits creativity, expression, and access to information, unconsciously turning people into a uniform mass and eliminating the possibility of imagining alternative worlds.

For Chinese people to envision equitable futures and to re/claim Sinofuturism, they must recognize and reveal the use of A.I. algorithms in their everyday lives, resist the default definition of technology, and develop alternative relationships with algorithms in such a way that autonomy and agency become possible.

Conclusion

Seen through the lens of the Chinese internet, the points of convergence and divergence between Douyin and Kuaishou prove that China is too big and too diverse to discuss in generalized terms. The various aesthetics of *xin sheng dai* can potentially lead to the emergence of heterogeneous forms of Sinofuturism that are not derived from techno-orientalist convention. Yet in talking about the future and how design imagines that future, mainstream Western discourses often depict China to be futuristic in ways that are surprisingly dated, focusing almost exclusively on topics like economic growth, the future of democracy, and technological development. The futurity depicted in artist Lawrence Lek's (2016b) video essay "Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)" responds to this kind of single-minded attention. In the video, Lek imagines a kind of technocratic robot future where China is in control, in contrast to Western techno-orientalist understandings of what might count as "Sinofuturism." Hong Kong philosopher Hui Yuk (2017) describes how in Western contexts Sinofuturism is a form of accelerationism where China is unstoppable in its technological development. These futures are imagined only in hypertechnological terms, which is uncritical and uninspiring. From the perspective of contemporary China, the most glaring gap in these imaginations of future China is China itself, which on the whole is absent from the picture—including popular cultural manifestations. In this way, not only are actual Chinese people missing, but also cultural diversity in general (which in turn only lends to the perception of homogeneity).

At the time of writing, Sinofuturism is searchable in English, while discussion of this term or its equivalent in China is very limited. Apart from Lek's video essay about Sinofuturism (the work was exhibited in China), for instance, a search in January 2020 revealed only two other relevant Chinese results: a panel discussion (Conversazione 2020) among artists aaajiao, scholar Gabriele deSeta, and curator Xuefei Cao, where they mention the lack of awareness of Sinofuturism (or even imagination of future) in mainland China; and a workshop on "Wudaokou Futurism" (Space 2019) which convened a discussion of Sinofuturism in the geo-physical location of the Beijing region.[14] As a designer from China, I was not surprised to find limited results; there are many political reasons for people to be circumspect in our expression. But in some ways these kinds of constraint also drive the emergence of unique and creative neologisms in language, art, and even design. As Lek emphasizes, too few discursive frameworks (satirical, critical, or otherwise) exist to describe China and technology

(Lek 2016a); though Chinese artists and designers are creating works about science and technology, there is a dearth of theoretical scaffolding to accommodate subjects other than the "big topics" of labor, economics, and so on. Given these circumstances, then, an even more urgent need exists to address the creative energy/energies of Chinese people, to break through Western stereotypes, to carve out a more deliberate and historically situated sensibility both inside and outside of China, to address real Chinese value, and to show it in our work. The time is right to reclaim the future, to take back Sinofuturism before it solidifies into something heteronormative, rigid, restrictive, and reflective only of the increasingly generic mainstream of society and the future that A.I. seems to be pushing us toward.

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Notes

[1] There are eight official dialects in China, each of which contains its own subdialects and regional variations. The grammar and pronunciation could be so different that each of these dialects can be considered a distinct language.

[2] The United States is preventing Huawei from getting critical components for manufacture, and is pressuring its allies not to use Huawei's products; under the intense pressure from Trump, TikTok at the time of writing is negotiating a potential sale to Microsoft.

[3] One of the most popular social video platforms in China; it mainly targets urban China.

[4] One of the most popular social video social platforms in China; it mainly targets rural China.

[5] A Chinese microblogging website and application.

[6] A Chinese video-sharing website centered on animation, comics, and games.

[7] weibo.com/p/1005055905469507/photos?from=page_100505#wbphoto_nav.

[8] www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3523927.

[9] Chinese technology company.

[10] For a more detailed case study, see Carlos Rojas's discussion of gaming in his article in this this issue.

[11] In Gabriel Remy-Handfield's sense of the term. See his article in this issue.

[12] www.news.nestia.com/detail/-/2233428.

[13] www.kanqq.com/douyin/1907.html.

[14] See https://freewechat.com/a/MzU4NDU4NDEwMA==/2247496554/2.

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