

SINO(PHOBIA)(FUTURISM)

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My basic provocation is that there is a reciprocal relationship between Sinophobia and Sinofuturism. That is to say, I want to show that Sinophobia entails a kind of Sinofuturism, and that Sinofuturism entails a kind of Sinophobia. The first claim, while not quite trivially true, seems to need, at least for our purposes, less explication and so a few quick remarks will suffice.

As Conn notes early in her paper, we have seen two successive United States Secretaries of State—Pompeo and Blinken—make claims that are more or less echoes of traditional Realist positions: China is a threat to United States hegemony (and something must be done). This is, of course, a very specific kind of Sinophobia, as it is not quite a fear of the average commuter in Beijing but a fear of the Chinese State. What is more, this specific kind of Sinophobia is a fear not of China *as such*, but rather some *future China*; a China that *has* always-already been ‘on the rise.’ What I see in this fear is a similar ‘futurism’ to that which underlies Sinofuturism *as such*: China is already the site of the future...and it also happens to be reaching back to attack the West. Indeed, one merely needs to read Pompeo’s 2020 “Communist China and the Free World’s Future” speech to see this. All this is relatively straightforward and, for our purposes here, not in need of further justification—especially insofar as the latter half of my provocation is perhaps more contentious. How can Sinofuturism which is, generally speaking, a *positive* vision of China be Sinophobic? What could that mean?

I will spoil the fun and spill the beans: Sinofuturism entails not any kind of fear—not a phobia as understood when one speaks of homophobia or agoraphobia, for example—rather it entails a specific kind of ‘fear’ elaborated by Immanuel Kant over 200 years ago in his *Critique of Judgment*. The ‘fear’ one sees in Sinofuturism is an instantiation of the sublime, specifically the dynamical sublime.

In the second book of Kant's Third *Critique*—"Analytic of the Sublime"—the beautiful and the sublime are figured as aesthetic categories with the judgments thereof "lay[ing] claim to [...] merely the feeling of pleasure, and not any cognition of the object."¹ Phrased differently, we might understand this statement as such: the object of the sublime is sensuous, but the judgment of sublimity is rational.

For Kant, the sublime is distinct from the beautiful insofar as it confronts us with a temporary arrestment of our reason and, in turn, forces us to confront its "very inadequacy" when faced with "*unboundedness*."² While a longer and more thorough treatment would provide a more robust account of the sublime *as such*, such a task must be bracketed for the moment so as to gain a foothold into *our* object of inquiry.

Kant will initially note that "[w]e call *sublime* what is *absolutely (schlechthin) large*," moving on to add that while it "must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas," it is ultimately that which we "(get[])" through a certain presentation that occupies reflective judgment."³ Kant further makes a distinction between the mathematical sublime—that which is absolutely large or small—and the dynamical sublime—that which is absolutely mighty.⁴ It is this latter version of the sublime to which we must look. As Kant will note, the dynamically sublime is at once that which is absolutely mighty yet "has no dominance over us."⁵ The initial feeling of mightiness takes on an odd status, however, as it maps onto an object of which we are "*fearful* without being afraid"—it is an object which elicits an initial sensation of fear, but is something we are not "afraid *of*."⁶ This distinction is vital as we cannot make aesthetic judgments when we are, strictly speaking, afraid.⁷

1: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans., Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 97–98 (§23) [244].

2: Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 99 (§23) [245], 98 (§23) [244].

3: Ibid., 103 (§25) [248], 105 (§25) [250], 106 (§25) [250]. All German and parenthetical remarks are in the original; my interventions are in brackets.

4: See *ibid.*, 103–114 (§§25–26) [248–257] and 119–123 (§28) [260–264].

5: Ibid., 119 (§28) [260].

6: Ibid.

7: Ibid., 120 (§28) [261].

How, then, does one pass judgment upon the sublime if, by definition, it requires that we are fearful? Kant's solution—a rather elegant one, if admittedly a cop out—is to assert that we must recognize that *were we* “to put up any resistance against” the sublime object, it “would [...] be utterly futile.”⁸ Properly proposing such a counterfactual can, thus, only occur “provided we are in a safe place.”⁹ There is one more step, however. To adequately make a judgment upon that which is sublime, one must reassert one's reason and bring the object under one's cognition.¹⁰ While Kant is speaking merely of nature here, we might apply the dynamical sublime more generally when he says that a thing is “sublime (*erhaben*) merely because it elevates (*erhebt*) our imagination, (making) it exhibit those cases where the mind can come to feel its own sublimity,” its own power.¹¹

Why have I spent so long talking about Kant in a paper on Sinofuturism? It is my contention that the giddiness one finds in Nick Land's writings, for example, is subliminal fear realized as “a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger.”¹² Psychic pleasure is achieved not merely by the above, but by a *positive fear*. Far be it for me to psychoanalyze Land—although I suspect Freud's account of fetishism could be productively applied to Sinofuturistic infatuations—but it seems that when one looks at Sinofuturism as explicated by practitioners and/or believers, we find the dynamical sublime in action. To make the case, it is worth it to briefly look at some proclamations from those whom we might consider to be Sinofuturists.

As Land will tell us in “Meltdown,” “Neo-China arrives from the future,” and “[n]othing human makes it out of the near-future.”¹³ Two decades later, he will echo a similar sentiment in a 2008 travel guide to Shanghai, in an entry entitled

8: Ibid., 120 (§28) [260].

9: Ibid.

10: Ibid., 120 (§28) [261].

11: Ibid., 121 (§28) [262]. “Making” is in brackets in the original, but I have switched them parentheses to avoid confusion.

12: Ibid., 98 (§23) [245].

13: Nick Land, “Meltdown,” in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, ed., Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, 441–459 (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media Ltd., 2011), 442, 443.

“Cyburbia,” where he notes that that Chinese urbanization has caused “time-horizons to shrink” following the “close coincidence [...] between Cyberpunk in the West and [...] the future taking place in the East.”¹⁴

Steve Goodman will say, in his essay “Darkcore,” that Sinofuturism is “super-nova tzu electronic shaolin zinc infiltration of the new age carbon-analogue orient,” while the CCRU ‘itself’ will define Sinofuturism as “[t]echnomic-Taoist chronoplastic runaway on the Pacific Rim.”¹⁵ What will be important momentarily, however, is that ‘they’ claim the following goal: to “connect and cross-intensify with peripheral cultural processes,” including Sinofuturism.¹⁶

Lawrence Lek, in his video essay *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, positions Sinofuturism in the following manner:

Sinofuturism is, in fact, an early form of the singularity, an artificial intelligence whose origin or behavior is impossible to identify with certainty. It is a massively distributed network focused on copying rather than originality, addicted to machine learning rather than ethics or morality, with a total capacity for work and an unprecedented sense of survival.¹⁷

What seems most significant for us in the above selections are two things: first, the sense of *might* instantiated in a claim to inevitability, and second, the *position* with which such prognostications are situated.

In the first instance China is situated as an ultimately powerful force coming from without—from the future; a claim to inevitability. Under such a reading, any opposition to China has *already lost*; in fact, Land says as much in “Templexity” when he notes first that “the epoch of Occidental superciliousness [...] clos[ing] dramatically” with “the Cyberpunk

14: Nick Land, “Cyburbia: Digital City Shanghai Switches On,” in *Urbanatomy Shanghai 2008*, ed., Nick Land, Xinlei Wang, and Anna Greenspan, 437–456 (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2008), 439, 443.

15: Steve Goodman, “Darkcore,” in *Abstract Culture (Swarms 1–3) + Selections from Digital Hyperstition*, ed., Peter Heft, 163–179 (London: Miskatonic Virtual University Press, 2024), 166; CCRU, “Appendix 1: Glossary,” in *CCRU Writings: 1997–2003*, 357–370 [(:(:):(:(:))-(:(:):(:(:)))] (Falmouth: Urbanomic Media Ltd., 2017), 368 [:::((:(:)))].

16: CCRU, “Communiqué Two: Message to Maxence Grunier (2001),” in *CCRU Writings*, *op. cit.*, 9–12 [(:(:))-(:(:))], 9 [(:(:))].

17: Lawrence Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*. [<https://vimeo.com/179509486>]

question *par excellence*” being, “‘What happened to America?’”¹⁸ Any notion of resistance to the already existent ‘Neo-China’ is, in the words of Kant, “utterly futile.”¹⁹

In the second instance—and this is the vital point—despite the CCRU’s claims to “engage[] with peripheral cultures,” we might plausibly say that only Land and Anna Greenspan have *actually* done that with respect to China, living in Shanghai for over two decades.²⁰ Most CCRU and post-CCRU writings on China engage with ‘Neo-China’—and its concomitant dissolution of the human subject—from afar, from a disinterested (in the Kantian sense of the word) attitude that, despite the appeals to affective engagement, manifests in cognitive reflection upon the *mighty* object.

Both of these facts—the figuring of ‘Neo-China’ as absolutely mighty that is, in turn, experienced via the faculty of cognition and not sensation—lead me to think that the figure of ‘Neo-China’ in Sinofuturist discourse is a dynamically sublime object. To adopt the discourse momentarily: ‘we’ are *fearful* as we know we *could not* mount any resistance to ‘Neo-China’—for we will be dissolved—but we are not *afraid of it* as we have subsumed the affective elements of it under the faculty of cognition—we have thoroughly theorized it! In an odd, and perhaps perverse, inversion, the figure of ‘Neo-China’ is thus *not* treated as absolutely Other, but something that we have come to know in advance. As Land will tell us in his now disavowed juvenile polemic, “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” “we have always already torn out the tongue of alterity before entering into relation with it.”²¹

Following the above brief remarks, I thus claim that Sinofuturism entails a *fearfulness about* China. This is not fear in the traditional sense, but it is fear nonetheless, and thus I am willing to make the proclamation that Sinofuturism entails a

18: Nick Land, “Templexity: Disordered Loops through Shanghai Time,” in Nick Land, Suzanne Livingston, and Anna Greenspan, *Visions of Futures Past: Templexity and Future Mutation*, ed., Peter Heft, -57–0 (London: Miskatonic Virtual University Press, 2024), -6 (§1.2), -10 (#1.6b), -11 (§1.8).

19: Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 120 (§28) [260].

20: CCRU, “Communiqué Two,” 9 [(:)(:)].

21: Nick Land, “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest: A Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity,” in *Fanged Noumena*, *op. cit.*, 55–80, 64.

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certain kind of Sinophobia. While questions of exactness or flaws may be asked, at least right now, I see one big question that is worthy of tarrying with—a question which I see explicitly in Conn’s work: how can we engage with China—both as a State and as a body politic made up of individual citizens, *people*—in an ethical manner and *non-fearful* manner?