Techno-futures with Chinese Characteristics?

Negotiating Techno-Orientalism in Chinese Digitalized Lifestyle and Aesthetics

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Abstract

From digitalized lifestyles to AI-generated digital artworks – technology and popular culture have been intertwined for decades, jointly shaping social imaginaries of techno-futures. Although this interplay has been widely acknowledged, there remains a need for more global, inclusive, and context-sensitive approaches to techno-futures – especially in times of increasing geopolitical turbulence and nationalist sentiments. This paper attempts to answer the question of how Chinese techno-futures are reflected, co-produced, and negotiated through various popular and official (online) discourses on digitalized lifestyles and aesthetics. Additionally, it explores how these discourses interweave traditional and futuristic aspects to create a culturally specific form of Sinofuturism, and ask whether such imaginaries move beyond the shadow of techno-orientalism. Methodologically, the study combines hashtag ethnography with visual discourse analysis to examine four case studies: Douyin short-video series themed around Chinese techno-futures, the science-fiction blockbuster series The Wandering Earth, the digital artwork series China 2098, and viral AI-generated official propaganda videos on Chinese video/social media platform Bilibili. Across these cases, Sinofuturist discourses on Chinese techno-futures reflect an infrastructure-centered and technological fetishism/optimism, portraying China's digital/high-tech innovation and large-scale infrastructure projects as transformative forces that improve everyday life, promote ecological harmony, and avert dystopian outcomes under the guidance of Chinese humanist and socialist ideals and aesthetics. Conceptually, this paper argues that such Sinofuturist imaginaries often remain marked by internalized techno-orientalism, positioning both China and "the West" within reconfigured orientalist hierarchies. This dynamic mirrors the (self-)othering and (self-)spectacularization of Chinese technology and its temporality, a reflexive "denial of coevalness" (De Seta 2020). More broadly, the findings suggest that popular cultural techno-futures in the Global South are not inherently oppositional or emancipatory, but may coexist and intertwine with dominant political and ideological structures even as they seek to contest them.

Keywords

techno-future, pop-culture, sinofuturism, techno-orientalism, coevalness

DOI 10.14361/dcs-2025-0203

1. Introduction: Futures across Technology, Pop-culture and Regions

For centuries, technology has been one of the key driving forces shaping the future of human society, as well as an indispensable element in our imaginaries and narratives of what that future might entail. Contributions from Cultural Studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS) have long emphasized the interrelation between social imaginaries, the production of scientific knowledge, and the formation of socio-technical authority. Defined as "images of the future development of society in which technology and scientific-technical progress play a perceptible role" (Grunwald 2014: 282), techno-futures are inherently socially situated, relational, and embedded within mainstream societal discourses, continually reinterpreted and renegotiated by actors across diverse contexts. However, the landscape of our imaginings and discourses surrounding techno-futures is frequently nationalist, elitist, and ethnocentric in character, conflating political, economic, and popular cultural domains.

Official policies and cultural engagements with technological futures are largely shaped by governments or techno-oligarchs. Despite the presence of critical and dystopian counter-narratives, optimistic visions of technological advancement are predominantly promoted, with an emphasis on human enhancement or transcendence primarily justified in terms of economic growth, national competitiveness, and the imperative to secure venture capital investment. This political acquiescence to capitalist imperatives and growth-oriented frameworks tends to marginalize, or altogether erase, more nuanced and inclusive discussions concerning the potential risks and benefits of emerging and alternative techno-futures. From a global perspective, dominant discourses about techno-futures often overlook the historical and ongoing economic exploitation of the Global South that has contributed to technological advancements in the Global North, while framing the Global South as conflict-ridden, technologically deficient, and dependent on external intervention. In contrast to dominant media and cultural narratives in the Global North, counter- and subcultural discourses and artistic productions from the Global South nevertheless articulate alternative techno-futures grounded in their own sociohistorical realities.

Within the discourses on techno-futures and the Global North–South dichotomy, China occupies an ambivalent position. While identifying itself as one of the largest developing countries and a part of the Global South, China is also frequently perceived as a rising super power and as an antagonist to the West in the realm of technological innovation. For decades, technological development and popular culture in China have been closely interwoven, spanning domains such as digital lifestyles, robotics, science fiction cinema, and AI-generated digital content. This interplay has significantly shaped social imaginaries and public perceptions of techno-futures in the Chinese context, prompting the central research question of this paper: how are Chinese techno-futures reflected, co-produced, and negoti-

ated through various popular and official (online) discourses on digital lifestyles and aesthetics? Furthermore, how do these discourses interweave traditional and futuristic narratives to produce diverse forms of Sinofuturism? Do Sinofuturist visions *within China* truly overcome the techno-orientalist spectre that continues to haunt Chinese and East Asian techno-futures?

To address these questions, this paper examines social discourses on Chinese techno-futures through four case studies conducting hashtag ethnography and visual discourse analysis. After introducing the methodology, it offers a brief overview of Chinese approaches to techno-futures, ranging from propaganda and policy, to literature, film, and online popular culture. The paper then explores these discourses through four empirical case studies: a short video series on the topic of Chinese techno-futures by Douyin influencers; the science fiction blockbuster series *The Wandering Earth*; the digital artwork series *China 2098*; and AI-generated official propaganda posts on the Chinese video platform Bilibili.com.

These Sinofuturist discourses surrounding Chinese techno-futures highlight both China's advancements in digital and high-tech innovation aimed at enhancing everyday life, and the promotion of large-scale infrastructure projects – often imbued with Chinese socialist characteristics. Such projects are portrayed not only as transformative, but also as capable of achieving a harmonious relationship with the natural environment, while simultaneously averting dystopian outcomes under the guidance of Chinese humanist ideologies. Conceptually, this paper argues that these Sinofuturist discourses embody a form of internalized techno-Orientalism, in which both China and "the West" are situated within a reconfigured orientalist hierarchy. This dynamic mirrors the (self-)othering and (self-) spectacularization of Chinese technology and its temporality, a *reflexive* "denial of coevalness" (De Seta 2020). It also suggests that popular cultural discourses of techno-futures in the Global South and other developing countries are not necessarily anti-establishment; they may also align with established political and ideological frameworks.

2. Methodology

Research on techno-futures has developed within an interdisciplinary space bridging technologies, the Humanities and Social Sciences. This includes fields such as technology assessment (TA), the studies of ethical, legal, and social implications (ELSI) — particularly concerning new and emerging sciences and technologies (NEST). More recently, this body of work has expanded within the framework of responsible research and innovation (RRI). Among current research on techno-futures, scholars like Grunwald (2014) call for a hermeneutic analysis like vision assessment, whose main objective is to reveal nuanced meanings surrounding techno-future debates. Hermeneutic analysis should thus engage with three dimensions of techno-futures. The first dimension concerns content,

encompassing textual materials, visual and artistic representations, diagrams and tables, as well as the cognitive and normative values embedded within them. The second dimension involves (discursive) construction, including the reconstruction of intended purposes, the analysis of contextual conditions, and the examination of the processes through which these future imaginaries emerge. The third focuses on diffusion and impact, namely how such future visions circulate and intervene within ongoing public and institutional discourses (Grunwald 2014). Beyond hermeneutic analysis, other researchers introduce the notion of "techniques of futuring" to describe the practices through which actors are collectively organized around particular imagined futures and develop shared orientations for action. These techniques are shaped by specific "dramaturgical regimes": a series of arrangements, competencies, meanings, and identities that structure how futures are envisioned and enacted (Oomen et. al. 2021). In this sense, dramaturgical analysis, complementing the hermeneutical approaches above, must attend to three key dimensions: first, storytelling, discourse genres, and narrative trajectories that articulate visions of the future; second, the dramaturgy or staging – the situated contexts and modes of presentation through which actors are brought together; and third, the structuring mechanisms that render imagined futures credible and persuasive (ibid.).

In the context of this study, the analysis of Sinofuturist techno-futures is therefore structured across the following dimensions: first, content, including textual and visual representations, their discourse genres, as well as future trajectories and strategic languages; second, construction processes and sociohistorical contexts involving the various actors and projected intentions behind these imaginaries; third, the structuring and mechanisms of diffusion that are supposed to lend credibility to Sinofuturist visions.

As discourse refers to "anything written or said or communicated using signs" (Fillingham 1993: 100), the discourse analysis of the Chinese cases seeks to uncover the forms of knowledge and experience that such communication constructs and conveys. Importantly, because visual content constitutes the majority of my empirical material, this study also adopts the methodology of visual discourse analysis. Here, Christmann (2008) identifies three layers of analysis: "1. the composition of the image, with its content and design, 2. the context of production and publication, including the horizon of historic events, and 3. the mode of reception, with respect to communicative processes" (Christmann 2008: 1). Echoing the aforementioned hermeneutic- and dramaturgical analytical approaches that involve both descriptive and promotional staging of the material, I will not only decode social discourses about Chinese techno-futures within online textual and visual content, but further situate the analysis with the interpretation of their social, historical, and communicative contexts.

Concerning the empirical arena, I selected the video platforms Douyin (TikTok's original Chinese version), Bilibili (one of the most popular video platforms among the Chinese youth population), and Weibo (a Chinese Twitter-

like social media platform) as the main field sampling sites. These platforms were chosen because they are among the most representative, popular, and widely used in the Chinese digital sphere. Hashtags on social media have been argued to possess intertextual potential, enabling the aggregation of a wide range of topic-related content and associated indexical meanings (Bonilla/Rosa 2015: 5–6). Drawing on this notion of "hashtag ethnography" (see, e.g., Juris 2012; Bonilla/Rosa 2015), the initial phase of fieldwork, conducted between spring 2024 and summer 2025, involved an exploratory "hashtag/keyword snowballing" approach. Through this process, I gradually gathered relevant material, including social media posts, online media reports, and memes, and compiled field notes for subsequent analysis.

Platforms	Hashtag/ID Name
Douyin/抖音	#China, future (中国, 未来)
	#China is the future (中国是未来)
	#Chinese techno-future (中国科技未来)
	#China is living in the future (中国生活在未来)
	@Caicaishuo (财才说) 2021
	@Chentaoxuexifang (辰涛学习坊) 2025
	@Kaishuyoucai (凯叔有财) 2025
	@Jiugeyinxueriji (九哥隐学日记) 2025
	@JasonInChina (Jason在中国) 2025
	@ZeinInChina (Zein在中国) 2025
	@Caocaolaile (曹操来了) 2025
Chinese sci-fi blockbuster series *The Wandering Earth*	
Weibo	@fanwennan_ (范文南_)
Bilibili	@Peoplesdaily (人民日报) 2022
	@Yuyuantantian (玉渊潭天) 2022

Table 1: A list for all the Hashtags/IDs and platforms of research materials

Eventually, I identified four insightful empirical cases relevant to my research topic. On Douyin, I selected the most liked short video content (each receiving more than 100,000 likes) from the keyword search item (see Table 1). To minimize the influence of customized algorithms on individual search results, I conducted these searches via Douyin's web interface without logging into any accounts. Official propaganda videos were excluded to avoid a duplication of empirical

material. Eventually, I arrived at seven short videos as my empirical material (see Table 1). In addition, I added the science-fiction blockbuster series *The Wandering Earth* as one empirical case, as it is the most commercially successful sci-fi film series in Chinese cinema history. The film resonates strongly with Chinese film markets and audiences, particularly in its imaginative portrayal of Chinese techno-futures. Created in the year 2022 by an art school graduate and subsequently going viral online, the digital artwork series *China 2098* embodies a grassroot artistic engagement with Chinese techno-futures, reflecting its affirmation by Chinese online audiences. To explore the visual discourses within this series, I collected the whole series of 30 images from the artist's Weibo account. To examine Chinese authorities' stance on techno-futures, I selected AI-generated official propaganda videos from Bilibili. Using the search keywords "AI" and "China future" on bilibili.com, I identified suitable cases for analysis. Ultimately, I selected the most viewed AI-generated official propaganda videos (each receiving more than 100,000 views) from two state media outlets.

The sample material does not aim to provide a comprehensive and representative picture, but rather a series of situated insights of Chinese techno-futures, ranging from trendy online content and commercial blockbusters to grassroots digital artworks and official propaganda. These specific high-visibility/engagement materials help to understand how Chinese techno-futurist discourses are formed and how publics engage with them.

For the shorter video materials from Douyin and Bilibili, the analysis will begin with extracting the textual subtitles to produce transcripts, which will form the basis for examining discursive genres and rhetorical strategies. Simultaneously, the visual components—including compositional design and imagery—will be analyzed in relation to the transcript. For the longer multimodal material, specifically the science-fiction film series *The Wandering Earth*, the analysis will focus on selected clips, combining textual dialogue with visual scenes. The overall narrative arc and character development will function as contextual foundations for interpreting its Sinofuturist sociohistorical framework. As *China 2098* primarily consists of a series of digital artworks, the analysis will concentrate on visual composition, design, and representational features. Accompanying textual background information will be used to illuminate its futurist social and historical references. Across all materials, the study will trace the construction processes of the discourses and the sociohistorical conditions underpinning these imaginaries, including temporal context and relevant social events. It will further make salient the actors involved and their roles in shaping and circulating these Sinofuturist narratives. Representative sources will include audience comments, news coverage, interviews with creators, and forms of endorsement by state-affiliated media.

3. Chinese Techno-Futures and Sinofuturism – Empirical and Theoretical Background

Before turning to the concrete empirical cases of Chinese techno-futures in digitalized lifestyles and aesthetics, this section outlines their empirical and theoretical background across different forms of pop-cultural productions in various historical periods.

3.1 China's Historical Legacy of Techno-Futures

From the end of the 19th century until the previous decade, Chinese techno-future imaginaries were predominantly shaped by propaganda, state policies, and science fiction literature and films, all of which reflected the ideological dominance of Chinese nationalism and socialism. Propaganda acted as the central vehicle for state-led visions of the future, deeply rooted in Chinese socialist ideals of planned progress and national rejuvenation (see e.g., Spakowski 2015, Bröckling et al. 2016). While various development agendas consistently envisioned a technologically advanced, industrially strong, and globally competitive China. Propaganda posters depicted futuristic urban skylines, rockets, and spacecrafts as icons of collective aspiration and technological progress (see, e.g., Landsberger 1994: 24, 27)

Alongside state-produced imaginaries, science fiction literature and films in different eras served as popular mediums expressing hopes for national revival and socialist visions. Emerging in the late nineteenth century during a period of national decline and colonial crisis, early Chinese sci-fi works imagined a prosperous and technologically superior "future China" in Late Qing and the Republic Era (Ren 2015), while in the first 30 years of the PRC, they aligned closely with socialist propaganda, functioning mainly as educational tools to promote scientific literacy among youth and to visualize a socialist techno-utopia driven by collective effort and state planning. After 1978, the development of the Chinese commercial film market diversified Chinese techno-futurist narratives, incorporating both optimistic and dystopian visions (see, e.g., Xu/Zhang 2020; Huang 2019; Wu 2022).

The 2000s and 2010s marked the globalization of Chinese science fiction, exemplified by internationally acclaimed works such as the novels *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) and *The Wandering Earth* (2000) by Liu Cixin and their filmic adaptations. With the advent of the user-internet and social media era, Chinese techno-futurist imaginations further expanded into digital pop-culture and have become plural, decentralized, and embedded in everyday experiences of digital modernity. In summary, this brief overview of media history illustrates how particular media forms and their associated actors shape and inform imaginaries of Chinese techno-futures within China's broader sociohistorical context.

3.2 From Techno-Orientalism to Sinofuturism

With technological innovation and cultural growth in China, various theories and concepts concerning Chinese techno-futures have emerged from both external and internal perspectives, among which techno-orientalism has played an influential role. Through a Western-centric gaze, Orientalism essentializes the Global South as static, underdeveloped, and inferior as opposed to a modern West (Said 1974). Techno-orientalism, in turn, frames East Asia as the technological future.

The concept of techno-orientalism was first proposed in the 1990s to characterize Western discourses surrounding Japan's rapid technological development, exemplified by claims that Japan had come to embody the technological future. Central themes of techno-orientalism closely echo stereotypical portrayals of Japan: depictions of the Japanese population as robot-like, self-restrained, ruthless, and dedicated in their pursuit of economic and geopolitical superiority, challenging the West's assumed authority over modernity (Morley/Robins 1995: 153, 167, 168). Beyond Japan, this techno-orientalist gaze later extended to the "Four Asian Tigers/Dragons" (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong), and subsequently to mainland China, as the social and techno-industrial developments of these economies appeared to confirm Western stereotypes. In this sense, techno-orientalism is defined more broadly as "the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse" (Roh et. al. 2015: 2).

However, techno-orientalist discourses also vary among specific Asian economies. For example, before the 2010s, although both Japan and China were perceived as rivals within a West-centric global economic and industrial order, they were imagined in markedly different ways. Japan was positioned as a challenger in technological innovation, whereas China was depicted as a nation defined by an immense, subaltern labor force and a vast consumer market for Western cultural products – a configuration that ultimately reinforced Western cultural and economic hegemony. Moreover, the West has projected onto China its anxieties about being colonized, mechanized, or instrumentalized within its own quest for technological supremacy (Roh et al. 2015: 4). In the last 10 years, these techno-orientalist imaginaries have gradually transformed: China has, to a significant extent, replaced Japan as the dominant symbol of technological innovation, yet it continues to be associated with the role of a global manufacturing base and an immense consumer market.

In sum, the techno-orientalist perspective reflects not only the West's self-centered arrogance towards "othered" cultures, but also its fundamental anxiety over a perceived erosion of civilizational primacy on the global stage, an anxiety that resembles a renewed form of historical "Yellow peril" discourses. Unlike its predecessor rooted in colonial ideology, contemporary techno-orientalism reproduces similar stereotypical imaginaries by substituting tradition and the past with technology and the future.

As a distinct variant of ethno-futurism, Sinofuturism began to take shape in the 2000s. Originally emerging from various forms of science-fiction literature and artworks in the West, Sinofuturism broadly refers to futurist temporalities and visions marked by a distinctly Chinese imprint. It merges long-standing traditions with futurist social formations and technologies, drawing on elements such as classical Chinese philosophical thought, criminal, mafia-like syndicates (e.g. so-called Triads), underground trading networks, and the emergence of cybernetics and computational technologies (De Seta 2020). While the connection between orientalism and its technological variant lies in the "othering" of the "Orient", no matter its tradition and past, or its technology and future, Sinofuturism hardly escapes from the orientalist haunting of ethno-futurism. This is especially the case when the futurist vision is uniquely bound to one single nation-state, namely China. By framing social and cultural development as something intrinsically tied to the nation-state while simultaneously preserving a sense of distance and Otherness toward spectators, Sinofuturism is thus imposed by figures and works outside China as an external interpretive lens. Consequently, the term itself can be rooted in the same orientalist logic, even as it now recasts China as a locus of anticipated futurity (Conn 2020: 66). Moreover, Sinofuturism may draw upon discursive conventions and explanatory models, as this article showcases in the empirical case of AI-generated Chinese propaganda videos. In this sense, Sinofuturism may continue to reproduce the problematic legacy of persistent techno-orientalist narratives.

Although criticized for retaining elements of Western techno-orientalist discourse, Chinese sci-fi writers, artists and philosophers have appropriated and weaponized the concept for their own creative purposes. A notable example is the work of Lawrence Lek, a Germany-born multimedia artist of Malaysian Chinese descent. He defines Sinofuturism as an ideology emphasizing Chinese authenticity and subjectivity in its future-oriented temporality. This ideology seeks to reconstruct "Chineseness" from a stereotypically exotic and othered China – one in which robot-like individuals study, work, and copy others without the capacity for critical thought (Lek 2016). Despite the complexity of the label, this paper uses the term Sinofuturism as an umbrella concept encompassing all (techno-)futurist imaginaries involving China and Chinese characteristics. In contrast to artistic Sinofuturist visions from external perspectives, this paper also asks, do Sinofuturist visions *within China* truly overcome the techno-orientalist specter that continues to haunt Chinese and East Asian techno-futures?

4. Empirical Cases of Sinofuturism in Digitalized Lifestyle Aesthetics

In this section, the paper employs four empirical case studies to illustrate how Sinofuturist discourses embedded in the Chinese digital sphere are collected and analyzed. These include a Douyin short video series on the theme of Chinese techno-futures, the science-fiction blockbuster series *The Wandering Earth*, the digital artwork series *China 2098*, and AI-generated official propaganda videos depicting China's future.

4.1 Douyin Short Video #China#future – Sinofuturist Digitalized Lifestyles

When examining empirical cases of a Sinofuturist digitalized lifestyle, short video content on Douyin provides vivid examples of how popular imaginaries of Chinese techno-futures are articulated. Based on selected keyword search results related to Chinese techno-futures, the most popular content is produced by three types of accounts: state media, finance and economy influencers, and foreign influencers. While state media content – garnering millions of likes – dominates in popularity and will be discussed later in the paper, this section focuses on the latter two categories.

Beyond state media content, which attracts the largest data traffic, short video content produced by finance and economy influencers also appears among the most popular content related to Chinese techno-futures. These influencers typically presented their images as professional insiders or high-achievers through their outfit, voices and titles. They tend to wear suits and glasses and talk in a steadfast and confident tone to convey an image of authority and expertise. Gestures of professionalism are evoked by mentioning their overseas education background or decade-long entrepreneurial experience in their account profiles. Their videos focus on the ways in which Chinese technological innovations and policies permeate every sphere of life, which can be distilled into the following domains: transportation and logistics, manufacturing, work, education, agriculture, medical care, society, and the environment.

These visions imagine nuclear fusion and intelligent environmental management as improving air quality, restoring ecosystems, and transforming the energy infrastructure. Space travel, intelligent EVs, and drone-based logistics are envisioned as redefining urban mobility and delivery systems. Accompanied by policy shifts, technological innovation is projected to drive further rural land consolidation, automated mega-farms, new forms of urbanization, and altered population distributions, aiming at both high-quality growth and "common prosperity"[1]. The

1 Common prosperity is a political agenda of the Chinese Communist Party to promote social equality and economic equity.

popularization of 3D printing, 6G networks, VR/AR, AI, and gene-editing technologies are seen as enablers towards more affordable, efficient, customized, and remote forms of manufacturing, education, work, and medical care. Smart homes and digitalized eldercare are imagined to reconfigure both personal lives and social welfare. While traditional jobs are expected to decline, new technical jobs are promised to emerge in the silver economy[2].

Figure 1: A popular Finance/economic influencer analyzing Chinese techno-futures. Source: https://www.douyin.com/search/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%9C%AA%E6%9D%A5?aid=76451c51-bb55-4d86-b8d1-6243d47c961c&modal_id=7515409869479922956&type=general

Another notable category within this theme is the popular video content depicting foreigners' admiration for Chinese technology and the convenience of China's digitalized lifestyle. In contrast to Chinese finance and economy influencers, who tend to focus on macro-level political economic analyses of Chinese techno-futures, the selected foreign influencers generally demonstrate their findings in highly personalized ways. They either show up in simple everyday attire to experience high-tech applications in daily life firsthand, or they share their personal experi-

2 Economic activities, products, and services fitting the needs and desires of aging populations, e.g. expand lifetime or lifelong learning.

ences and perspectives from the comfort of their homes in cozy clothing. This type of content typically portrays personal experiences in which foreign TikTok influencers encounter Chinese technological applications in everyday life and express surprise or admiration at their convenience and advancement. Examples include intelligent electric vehicles, artificial intelligence applications, drone-delivered takeaway food, and helicopter taxi services. Racial and ethnic dynamics, as well as comparisons between nations or regions, also play a role in these discourses. For example, foreign influencers and the comments in these videos emphasize that the West/their motherland and their products are lagging behind Chinese technological advancements, implying not only that China has globally caught up with the West, but that it now dominates the field of innovation leadership. In the three selected trending videos produced by foreign influencers, each of which garnered on average hundreds of thousands of likes, the protagonists are all white males.

Figure 2: Foreign influencers impressed by the convenience of drone food delivery in Shenzhen. Source: https://www.douyin.com/root/search/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E7%94%9F%E6%B4%BB%E5%9C%A8%E6%9C%AA%E6%9D%A5?aid=7076b6de-d3c7-4fa8-8833-89c4ca5cef5d&modal_id=7488236999980207375&type=general

Not surprisingly, this discourse aligns with the Chinese conception of futurity, in which technological progress is regarded as the most representative symbol of the future and as evidence of the superiority and advancement of a civilization. It also reflects the Chinese nationalist vision of how the nation should position itself within the global landscape. Ironically, this discourse implies a form of internalized techno-orientalism. The "internalized" dimension lies in the popularity of video content created by white male foreign influencers: audiences appear to value the acknowledgement and validation of Chinese technological achievements through their likes and comments when filtered through a white male lens. As one type of top 10 liked comment indicates: "I'm actually learning about China through a foreigner's eyes".

4.2 The Wandering Earth Series – Sinofuturism Between Infrastructure- and Technology Fetishism and China-led Cosmopolitanism

When discussing the aesthetics of Chinese technology in popular culture, one of the most notable examples is the Chinese blockbuster science-fiction series *The Wandering Earth*, directed by Frant Gwo and loosely based on the novella of the same name by Liu Cixin, recipient of the 2015 Hugo Award and author of *The Three-Body Problem*. Set in the mid-to-late twenty-first century (c. 2050–2080), as the sun is about to expand and engulf the solar system, human society launches the "Wandering Earth" project, devoting all available resources to constructing vast "planetary engines" capable of propelling Earth out of the solar system toward a new habitable star system. The narrative follows humanity's attempts to avert a catastrophic collision with Jupiter *en route*. Grossing almost US$700 million worldwide, the enormous commercial success of the film has generated extensive public debate, accompanied by strong endorsement from state media that emphasized the Chineseness of this science fiction blockbuster (see, e.g. People.cn 2019).

This film series exemplifies the Chinese science-fiction genre's preference for depicting colossal, technologically sophisticated infrastructure projects that are imagined as capable of dramatically altering the trajectory of humankind. In the film, as the figures above illustrate, humans construct more than twelve thousand planetary engines (Figure 3) to move the entire earth out of solar system, preventing it from being swallowed by the helium flash of the sun. Meanwhile, they also built the space elevator (Figure 4) to transfer astronauts to a space station for training. These Chinese-led massive infrastructure projects visualize a form of Sinofuturist technological fetishism (Khan 2020) which assumes that human society can overcome natural disasters and other dystopian scenarios through high-tech infrastructure megaprojects.

Figure 3: Planetary engine in The Wandering Earth. Source: https://wap.ycwb.com/2019-02/13/content_30196416.htm

Figure 4: Space elevator in The Wandering Earth. Source: https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/600879211

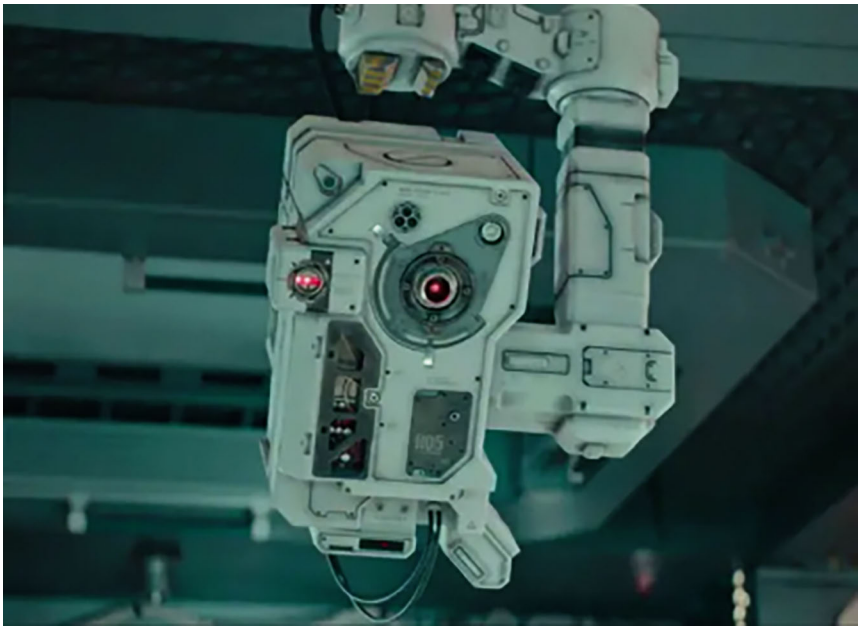

Figure 5: Quantum computer MOSS in The Wandering Earth. Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/667541297_120624328

However, there are also settings in the movie that challenge this technological fetishism. For example, the quantum computer MOSS (Figure 5), which controls the space station and carries out the "Wandering Earth" project, plays a rather complicated role in the film. When the Earth passes Jupiter and half of the planetary engines stop due to a tectonic movement caused by the gravitational surge of Jupiter, MOSS draws the conclusion that the "Wandering Earth Plan" has failed and the best solution to assure the survival of human civilization is to abandon earth/human society in its physical form and instead launch the "Spark Project": a mission to carry the digital records of human civilization into space. This storyline displays a moral calculus of "people first" against "technology first" (Khan 2020) typically found in sci-fi works. The protagonist's resistance against MOSS undoubtedly reflects his choice of "people first" and the film's call for hope and humanist cosmopolitanism/ solidarity with humanity. Moreover, the guiding principle of "The Wandering Earth Project" – namely, humanity taking its homeland Earth on its escape from natural catastrophe rather than abandoning it to colonize a new planet – symbolizes the traditional Chinese emotional attachment to their homeland and reluctance to relocate (安土重迁). It is the deep-rooted attachment to one's hometown and conservative mindset prevalent in traditional agrarian societies. This stems from ancient China's farming civilization and profound emotional bond with the land. This strongly contrasts with the Western

(sci-fi) model of (space) colonization, as corroborated by statements made in the director Frant Gwo's interview (see, e.g., Gwo et. al 2019).

Beyond the entanglement of technological fetishism and ethical dilemmas, the film also presents a Sinofuturist vision of geopolitical and ethnic power distribution. In the storyline, Chinese characters generally serve as protagonists, leading task forces and controlling advanced technological equipment, while also cooperating with other international characters: Russians, as well as Asian, African, and Latino characters, who receive greater emphasis than white characters, reflecting an implicit geopolitical vision aligned with China's global positioning. Although the ethnic structure of the characters is Global South-oriented to some extent, and has been interpreted as indicative of a cosmopolitanism framed within a renewed Chinese Tianxia[3] system (see, e.g., He 2020), this framework, as I have argued in my previous work, is not necessarily a form of multipolar cosmopolitanism; the Tianxia framework unavoidably presupposes a central pillar in its hierarchical structure – one that projects, self-evidently, China and the Chinese people as the leading civilization on the globe (Song 2025: 51).

Compared with Liu Cixin's original story, which examines humanity's moral condition in the context of scientific advancement and future crises, Frant Gwo's film adaptation shifts the discursive focus to China's global positioning. It portrays Chinese leadership as the essential path to humanity's survival and frames China as the central agent in achieving a collective utopian future (Van Vuren 2020: 174). Silk argues that *The Wandering Earth* was shaped by state promotion encouraging science fiction to serve the goals of national rejuvenation, particularly by presenting China's space program as peaceful and globally beneficial. Its emphasis on transnational cooperation can, in turn, be interpretes as a soft power strategy, aligning the film with official narratives and securing its endorsement by the Chinese government (Silk 2020: 157–58).

4.3 China 2098 – (Re)Synchronizing Sinofuturism and Maoist-Industrialist Nostalgia

Beyond *The Wandering Earth*, another work continues this Sinofuturist aesthetic, particularly its strong technology and infrastructure fetishism. In his B.A. graduation project in 2020, Central Academy of Fine Arts graduate Fan Wennan depicts his vision of China in the year 2098. This series soon went viral right after its first online emergence in July 2020. Reposted and endorsed by nationalist influencers

3 A Chinese cosmological concept, literally translated as "all under heaven", roughly referring to "the world". It also represents a conception of global order that centers on Chinese authority and goes concentrically outward from major and minor lords and then to the common subjects, tributary states, and finally ending with "fringe barbarians".

and media, as well as CCP propaganda organs (see, e.g., Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of China 2021; Guancha.cn 2022), commentators suggested that the aesthetic of this series should be incorporated into *The Wandering Earth* franchise, referring to it as a "socialist science-fiction universe/worldview" or "infrastructural punk", "socialist/red punk" (see, e.g., Guancha.cn 2022). Subsequently, the artist participated in interviews with the nationalist-industrialist media platform Guancha.cn, stating that he had been "inspired by influencers and scholars under Guancha.cn's banner since college" (see, for example, @Guancha.cn/Zhihu 2020; @Yubushidazhaolaoshi/Bilibili 2020; iFeng 2022).

In the author's narrative setting, China survives a dystopian global flood caused by climate change in the 2050s and also overcomes an economic crisis and geopolitical rivalry with the United States through a series of high-tech socialist measures. The story sets a prior defeat of "Western imperialist" invasion of China and the rise of a Communist Party of the United States having reshaped the world order[4]. Domestically, megaprojects such as the East China Sea Dam and the East–West Water Transfer Project[5] to prevent sea-level rise and resolve water scarcity through large-scale desalination. Technologies including artificial starch synthesis from carbon dioxide and the establishment of a National Economic Calculation Center to end global famine and stabilize the economy. Meanwhile, China develops orbital megacities and exploits helium-3 from Jupiter and Saturn, enabling nuclear fusion and expanding human habitation into space.

As the figures below illustrate, China's techno-future in this digital artwork series is predominantly characterized by infrastructure megaprojects, advanced technologies, and socialist motifs. The visual landscape is dominated by metallic grey concrete and steel megastructures – large, modular, and adaptable constructions capable of housing diverse functions (Banham 1976), such as dams, space stations, residential complexes, and construction sites. Human figures, though often positioned in the foreground, appear diminutive in relation to these monumental structures. For instance, 11 of the 30 works contain human figures, yet only one depicts a significant number of workers and engineers positioned prominently in the foreground, occupying a larger proportion of the visual frame. The emphasis on megastructures in the *China 2098* series evokes a sense of epic scale and order through extensive expanses of simple, orderly steel and concrete forms. As the artist himself noted in the interview, the aesthetic style of the series draws inspiration from post-war (socialist) brutalist architecture, as well as the

4 As the middle image below illustrates, New York's Wall Street is portrayed as a "historical tourism site" and a "relic of the imperialist United States."

5 Author's note: This concept is probably inspired by China's South-North Water Transfer Project in the 2000s.

Tongzilou (筒子楼), a Chinese simplified adaptation of the soviet Khrushchevka (socialist mass housing named after Khrushchev) (ifeng 2022).

However, this dramatic size disparity between humans and built environments generates a subtle dystopian atmosphere reminiscent of cyberpunk science fiction's "high-tech, low-life" settings, where material expansion predominates and individual human presence becomes marginalized. This Sinofuturist aesthetic aligns with an authoritarian appreciation for monumental architecture, often described as a form of "megalolatry"—a term denoting the veneration of colossal objects or structures as popular in brutalist Soviet or heroic fascist aesthetics. Here, prior scholarship suggests that authoritarian aesthetics favor regularity, simplicity, and balance in design (Rosenberg/Zimet 1957), a tendency evident in the representations of *China 2098*. Furthermore, the aesthetic of megastructures also symbolizes a technological optimism and future vision predicated on advanced infrastructures, as to be found in U.S. popular science fictions (Li 2021). This technological optimist future vision in U.S. sci-fi works also has its historical roots in the 19th century. As Marx (2000) points out, the technological sublime was a core pillar of the US settlers' dogma of Manifest Destiny, conquering nature with megaprojects like the railway or dams, while the problems and contradictions of technological progress were and continue to be overlooked (Marx 2000, 197, 207).

Figure 6: Chinese space megastructure with socialist slogans in digital artwork "China 2098". Source: https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2022_04_29_637454_4.shtml

Figure 7: Chinese residents in front of mass housing in digital artwork "China 2098". Source: https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2022_04_29_637454_3.shtml

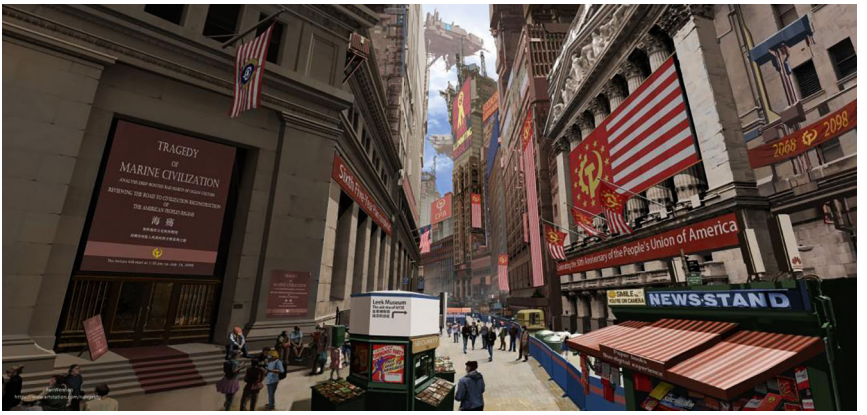

Figure 8: New York Wall Street with socialist slogans in digital artwork "China 2098". Source: https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2022_04_29_637454_4.shtml

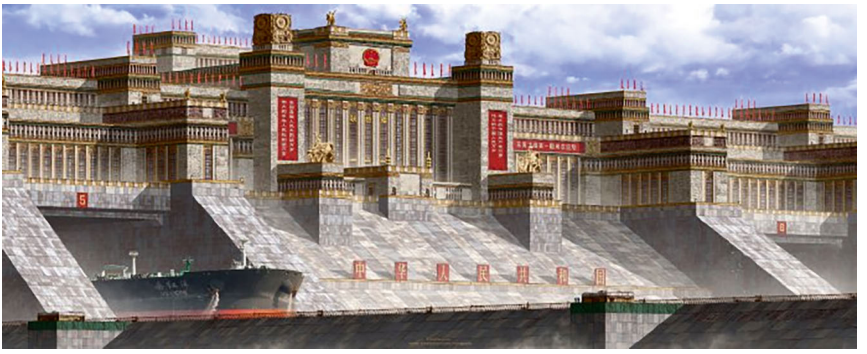

Figure 9: Chinese mega-dam in digital artwork "China 2098". Source: https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2022_04_29_637454_1.shtml

The visual emphasis on megastructure projects in this artwork series aligns closely with Chinese socialist nostalgia. Together with the megastructure, socialist elements, such as red flags, sculptures, propaganda slogans and posters, serve both as products and materialized visual icons of a Chinese socialist (Maoist) developmental achievements and (re/post-)modernization, or, in other words, (technological) "futurization". This synthesis may imply a call for the return of Maoist industrialization to overcome the crises of global neoliberal capitalism, the resulting global climate change and natural disasters. Through these mega-projects, the Chinese people are depicted as able to dramatically transform the natural environment and improve living conditions. In my view, this Sinofuturist optimism and fetishism of technology and infrastructure have the following ideological and practical roots: first, ancient Chinese Legalist philosophy emphasizing humanity's capacity to overcome natural disasters and transform nature, as expressed in the saying "Man can conquer nature" (人定胜天) (see, e.g., Hou 1997); second, Chinese socialist-industrialist practices during the Mao era (see, e.g., Shapiro 2001). As the artist stated himself in an interview, the story setting of the work is inspired by the traditional Chinese fable "The Foolish Old Man Removes the Mountains"[6] (Guancha 2020), a tale frequently cited by Mao Zedong to articulate his socialist philosophy of human–environment relations.

What is subtle in the *China 2098* series is its temporality, which combines futurist techno-optimism with Maoist-communist nostalgia. This (re)synchronization of the Chinese socialist past and future reflects what I term a *reflexive* denial of coevalness, adding to De Setas (2020) reading. Here, the present is rendered absent; the future does not replace the past but rather resurrects it, becoming a medium for nostalgia. Together, the future and past form a *techno-orientalist reflexive closed loop*. Within this loop, Otherness – embodied in a flattened, idealized, high-tech communist state apparatus capable of overcoming natural and social disasters through mega-projects – can be safely contained. This containment simultaneously (and politically) avoids more contentious intersections, namely the potential to reconstruct representations in the coeval present shaped by Western-dominated regimes of cultural and epistemological production.

6 Appearing in Book Five of the Liezi, a Daoist text compiled in the fourth century BC, the story describes an old man who resolved to remove two enormous mountains obstructing the path to his home, relying on perseverance and collective effort—symbolizing the transformative power of determination in overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

4.4 AI-generated Official Propaganda Videos – Negotiating Sinofuturism between Human-Nature Harmony and Internalized Techno-Orientalism

Beyond commercial science fiction films and individual artistic productions, Chinese authorities have also turned their attention to visions of China's future through the lens of AI, whose most vivid examples are AI-generated propaganda videos. The account @Yuyuantantian, affiliated with Chinese Central Television (CCTV for short) on Bilibili.com, claims to have summarized a co-occurring high-frequency keyword corpus extracted from over ten million words of global media reports concerning the 20th National Congress and the future of China's modernization. Feeding these Top-10 keywords – "future, civilizational, technologies, breakthrough, achievement, advancement, innovation, culturally, high-quality, global, faster" – into the AI platform ZCOOL (站酷 "AI创作实验室"), @Yuyuantantian provides a panoramic visualization of Chinese modernization and future development. The imagery features beautiful rural and urban landscapes, natural vistas, advanced infrastructure and logistics systems, and Chinese citizens living happily in this environment.

Similarly, the account @PeoplesDaily on Bilibili.com utilized Baidu's AI ERNIE Bot (文心一言/格) to generate images of future China based on three sets of keyword prompts. These prompts emphasize ecological themes –"clearer skies, greener mountains, cleaner waters, land greening, mountains, forests, fields, lakes, grasslands, deserts, ecological development"; social wellbeing –"sense of fulfilment, happiness, security, food security, living environment, healthy life"; and technological progress –"Chinese-style modernization, high-quality development, science and technology superpower, advanced science and technology, self-reliance and strength, cyber superpower, digital China, invigorating China through science and education."[7] The AI-rendered visualizations employ an impressionist style, where natural landscapes dominate the scenes and coexist harmoniously with high-tech infrastructure and transportation systems. Highlighted keywords within these thematic clusters include "Beautiful China, harmonious coexistence, blue skies and clear waters, green mountains and clear waters"; "rural revitalization, beautiful rural areas, healthy China"; and "transportation superpower, openness and cooperation, artificial intelligence, space superpower."[8]

7 "天更蓝 , 山更绿 , 水更清 , 国土绿化 , 山水林田湖草沙 , 绿色发展";"获得感 , 幸福感 , 安全感 , 粮食安全 , 人居环境 , 健康生活"; "中国式现代化 , 高质量发展 , 科技强国 , 高水平科技 , 自立自强 , 网络强国 , 数字中国 , 科教兴国" in Chinese.

8 "美丽中国 , 和谐共生 , 蓝天碧水 , 绿水青山";"乡村振兴 , 和美乡村 , 健康中国"; "交通强国 , 开放合作 , 人工智能 , 航天强国" in Chinese.

Figure 10: Chinese techno-future in AI-generated official propaganda videos. Source: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1fm4y1c7eM/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=7013dbd929752a1d13191d485e903bc4

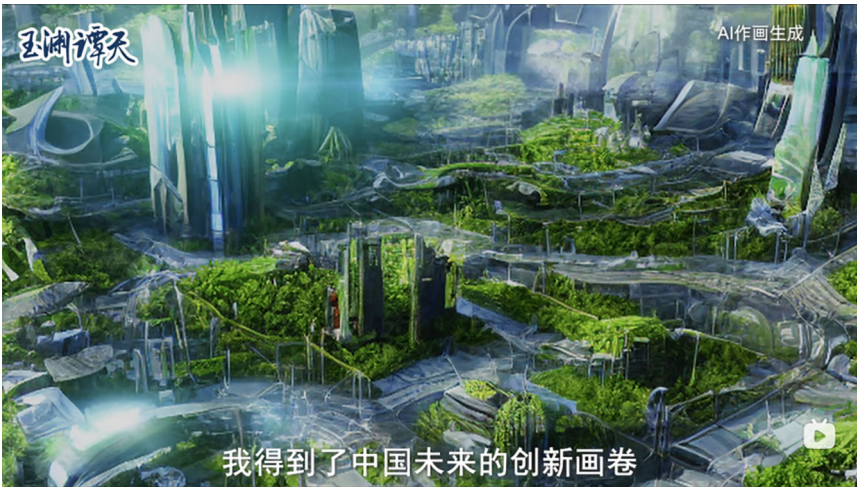

Figure 11: Chinese techno-future in AI-generated official propaganda videos. Source: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1q14y1573B/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=7013dbd929752a1d13191d485e903bc4

While the main theme of future China in these visions remains advanced technology and infrastructure, the AI-generated official propaganda videos place a notably strong visual emphasis on a humanist techno-future, highlighting environmental protection and the coexistence of human society with the natural environment. For instance, in the video clip illustrated in the figures above, natural landscapes such as vegetation and water bodies occupy a significant portion of the

frame, while clusters of futuristically designed buildings and extensive high-tech logistic infrastructures, including high-speed bullet trains and dense highway networks, blend seamlessly with the natural surroundings. The emphasis on harmony between humanity (and its technologies) and nature reflects the current Chinese state-led ecologism/environmentalism, encapsulated in Xi Jinping's dictum: "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets." (绿水青山就是金山银山) Ideologically, this continues the traditional Chinese (Daoist and Confucian) philosophy of "the Unity of Heaven and Humanity" (天人合一), which stresses the interconnectedness and balance between humans and nature (Hou 1997: 483). This ideological representation also forms a subtle parallel with the 2008 founded fantasy Solarpunk movement, as it pictures a sustainable and ecological human future through very different (or even opposite) ways (countercultural vs. mainstream cultural, post-capitalist vs. state-led capitalist/socialist with Chinese characteristics).

Beyond the theme of human-nature harmony, however, the discursive emphasis in the AI-generated official propaganda videos is not as "harmonious" as it initially appears. For instance, the content produced by @Yuyuantantian claims to compile co-occurring keyword results from the top ten countries paying the most media attention to the topic of "modernization with Chinese characteristics" within the context of the 20th National Congress of China. These countries include the United States, India, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Vietnam, Singapore, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, and Türkiye. Although the selected countries and report languages appear relatively multipolar – six from the Global North and four from the Global South – the allocation of content length reveals a pronounced Anglocentric bias.

In the 90-second segment of relevant video content, keyword summaries drawn from anglophone media – particularly those from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia – occupy one minute, constituting two-thirds of the relevant content and one-third of the total video length. By contrast, keyword conclusions from Indian, Vietnamese, and South Korean reports receive only brief mention, accounting for approximately 13 to 14 seconds of the video. Consequently, the AI-generated images of Chinese techno-futures are primarily shaped by these Anglocentric keyword prompts.

Echoing the case of the Douyin short video series, this example ironically reveals an internalized (techno-)orientalism embedded within Chinese AI-generated official propaganda videos. In the hands of the Chinese state, its visions of techno-futures remain reliant upon recognition and validation through an othered lens—most notably, that of the (Anglocentric) West. In this sense, the (once) Orientalized subjects (China and the Chinese) internalize the orientalist notion of a global hierarchy, consciously or unconsciously inserting themselves into this structure and thereby completing a process of self-othering and self-spectacularization of Chinese techno-futures through west-centric gaze.

5. Conclusion

Through hashtag ethnography and visual discourse analysis, this paper has examined social discourses on Chinese techno-futures through four empirical case studies: Douyin short video series under the theme of China techno-futures; the science-fiction blockbuster series *The Wandering Earth*; the digital artwork series China 2098; and AI-generated official propaganda videos on the Chinese video/social media platform Bilibili. These cases reveal nuanced and situated Sinofuturist discourses on Chinese techno-futures via pop-cultural and official channels.

Popular short video series on Douyin produced by finance–economic and foreign influencers emphasize how Chinese digital and high-tech innovations contribute to grand Sinofuturist visions and enhance everyday life. Beyond the visual and discursive focus on Chinese-led high-tech infrastructure megaprojects, the science-fiction blockbusters *The Wandering Earth* series also stress the importance of a "people first" ethos, a humanist cosmopolitanism, and a sense of home nostalgia in overcoming dystopian futures through advanced technologies. In the case of *China 2098*, the visual and textual emphasis on Chinese futurist megaprojects reflects a technology- and infrastructure-oriented optimism and fetishism infused with Maoist techno-industrial nostalgia. While foregrounding advanced infrastructure and technologies, AI-generated Chinese official propaganda videos also underscore harmonious coexistence between humankind (and its technological applications) and the natural environment.

Across all Sinofuturist case studies, a strong discursive emphasis on techno-optimism and techno-fetishism is evident, regardless of whether the imagined setting is utopian or dystopian. At the heart of this optimism and fetishism lies the belief that advanced infrastructure megaprojects and high-tech industrial capacities, guided by Chinese humanist principles, possess the potential to promote—or even save—the fate of humanity, a vision deeply intertwined with Chinese historical and socialist legacies.

From these empirical cases, we can observe how Sinofuturism is still haunted by techno-orientalism, negotiated and co-produced through various forms of popular cultural production by diverse actors within Chinese society. This paper argues that the techno-orientalism embedded in China's digitalized lifestyle and aesthetics is internalized. Internalized in the sense that (formerly) orientalized subjects – here, China and the Chinese – themselves adopt orientalist notions of the global hierarchy, thereby (un)consciously reinserting themselves into that structure. In other words, China enacts notions of self-othering and self-spectacularization of its very own techno-future through a Western-centric gaze. The second level of this process of self-othering involves a (reflexive) denial of coevalness at the temporal level, where the future simultaneously displaces and resurrects the past, becoming a medium for positioning the othered subject – the flattened, idealized, (and communist) images of Chinese technologies and

infrastructure. In this sense, I argue, China's potential to challenge and negotiate West-dominated cultural representations of technology in a coeval or synchronized present is foreclosed.

Compared with previous research in the field of Techno-orientalism and Sinofuturism (e.g. Roh et. al. 2015; Fan 2015; Silk 2020; Van Vuren 2020; Huang 2020), which often tends to focus on one single piece or form of empirical (textual) material, this paper forms its analysis based on new multi-modal materials from different platforms and actors in society. This paper also contributes to existing scholarship on Sinofuturism by showing how different media content and actors shape the meaning making of Sinofuturist techno-futures and by further examining the issues of temporality.

Responding to this special issue's call for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of global techno-futures, this paper offers situated theoretical and empirical insights into Chinese popular cultural imaginations. The Chinese case challenges expectations that a non-Western imagination of techno-futures shall take more critical or dystopian counter-discourses on dominant Western models of technological advancement. Instead, such counter-discourses in China often coexist, intermingle, and intertwine with, rather than oppose and categorically contest, modernist striving of tech advancement and solutionism. Thus, a techno-orientalist haunting of ethno-futurist visions does not originate solely from external Western dominant perspectives, but it can also be found internalized within Chinese popular culture through processes of self-othering and self-spectacularization.

The paper demonstrates that technological imaginations in a globalized world shaped by dominant modernist ideologies and ongoing colonial structures are negotiated through processes of appropriation and inversion. Sinofuturist cases show that ethno-futurist narratives may reproduce existing political and economic hierarchies, even when they seek to challenge them. Global-South efforts to invert techno-orientalist discourses may assert national or ethical superiority while simultaneously (un)consciously internalizing Western-centered systems of value. Ultimately, the imagination functions as a site of struggle, operating both within and against the very ideological frameworks it attempts to reconfigure. Moving beyond the shadow of techno-orientalism requires discursively connecting past and future within ethno-futurism to the present, foregrounding shared humanistic values and collective interests – and working toward a more multipolar and equitable cosmopolitan order.

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