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Author

Fan, Christopher T.

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Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics: Maureen F. McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*

CHRISTOPHER T. FAN

The cyberspace imagined in Maureen F. McHugh's 1992 novel *China Mountain Zhang*¹ offers rather less *jouissance* than the paradigmatic depiction of the trope in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. When Gibson's protagonist Case "jacks in" to his portable, virtual reality "deck," he immediately visualizes a "gray disk, the color of Chiba sky" rotating and expanding, "flow[ing], flower[ing] for him." The sensory landscape that immerses him is described as a "fluid neon origami trick, the unfolding of his distanceless home, his country, transparent 3D chessboard extending to infinity." More than just a total visual environment, *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace is a synesthetic experience of pleasure: "somewhere [Case] was laughing, in a white-painted loft, distant fingers caressing the deck, tears of release streaking his face."² In stark contrast, McHugh's protagonist, Zhang, has to haul himself over to the "systems department" to be "attuned" before he can even think about "jacking in"—and this is the most advanced cyberspace "system" in the novel's twenty-second-century, China-centric world.³ Back home in hardscrabble Brooklyn, in a US still limping from a decades-past socialist revolution, if Zhang wants to "jack in" to the net, he has to make a trip down to the public library. "It's not a very good system," he complains, "too many users" (306). The users of McHugh's cyberspace bump up against infrastructure, bureaucracy, and other people. Over the course of her novel, we encounter a kind of technology that refuses to "flower" for its users. No matter how advanced, it depends on the irreducible material relations of a social totality. It is as if McHugh anticipated James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel's slogan: "Cyberspace needs electricians!"⁴

What happens to cyberpunk aesthetics between 1984 and 1992? Lawrence Person notes that this period began to see the emergence of "post-cyberpunk"

conventions, which reverse canonical cyberpunk's thematics by privileging the social over the technological. This reversal, Person argues, manifests primarily as a shift in character: "Far from being alienated loners, post-cyberpunk characters are frequently integral members of society (i.e., they have jobs). They live in futures that are not necessarily dystopic (indeed, they are often suffused with an optimism that ranges from cautious to exuberant), but their everyday lives are still impacted by rapid technological change and an omnipresent computerized infrastructure. . . . their social landscape is often as detailed and nuanced as the technological one."⁵ Although Person doesn't mention *Zhang*, the novel confirms his observations. Its "social landscape" emerges in the interactions between these shifts in character and the social relations that attend all of the novel's depictions of technology. However, regarding the question of what provokes post-cyberpunk's shift away from cyberpunk's contrastively reified conventions, Person stops short of providing a full answer.

A clue can be found in Greta Niu's observation that, "by the mid-1990s, SF [science fiction] authors favored China over Japan as a setting for cyberpunk."⁶ If, as Fredric Jameson, David Morley, and Kevin Robins have argued, cyberpunk articulates the US–Japan rivalry of the 1970s and 1980s—by way of a cultural logic that Morley and Robins call "techno-Orientalism"—then post-cyberpunk, I would argue, articulates US perceptions of China's post-socialist rise and the beginnings of the two countries' interdependency.⁷ This interdependency and its emergent structures of feeling have required new modes of representation. The inconveniences Zhang encounters when accessing cyberspace bring more and more of his social world into view rather than less and less of it, because the waning of American exceptionalism demands the pragmatic acceptance of a world-system rebalanced by China.⁸ What makes McHugh's novel such a fully realized expression of what we might call post-cyberpunk's *aesthetic of interdependency* is that McHugh is aware of how China's rise limits cyberpunk's capacity for historical reference, and how interdependency demands renewed attention to form.

McHugh's vision of US–China interdependency is expressed primarily through Zhang's narrative of development. Specifically, the conflicts that Zhang encounters analogize US and Chinese neoliberal discourses of desire, race, and the ideological contest between authoritarianism and liberal democracy. Two aspects of McHugh's background motivate the novel's analogical form: her own personal crises as a precarious laborer in New York City during the 1980s, and the personal crises she witnessed among her students in China when she taught there from 1987 to 1988, crises provoked by the country's radical reorientation from Maoist to market-directed aims. As McHugh explains, "Zhang's tentativeness reflects not only the people I met in China, but my own tentativeness, my own sense that I've gone way out here."⁹ Through these analogies, the novel attempts to build a world and imagine characters that give expression to US–China interdependency: a conjuncture that, for the better

part of the last four decades, has sped the consolidation of neoliberalism as the predominant ideology of late capitalism.

The further distinction of McHugh's novel is that it mediates this conjuncture's subjective and objective dimensions, producing a "critical realism" of US–China interdependency. As a representational mode that "think[s] from totality's point of view (that is, to conceive ourselves as a vector in, and as subject and object of, the historical process),"¹⁰ critical realism enables my reading of *Zhang* to offer a corrective to the antinomic Orientalism that structures much of the rapidly growing body of work on "techno-Orientalist" formations.¹¹ One reason techno-Orientalist scholarship has focused so intently on what Stephen Hong Sohn calls the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril"—as opposed to emergent, or at least historically variable, articulations—is because an antinomic Orientalism can be powerfully leveraged for a critique of US neoliberal imperialism.¹² If critics of techno-Orientalism have ignored recent accounts of American Orientalism's non-antinomic formations, then it is perhaps because these accounts focus primarily on early-twentieth-century and Cold War formations.¹³ US–China interdependency, I argue, demands a critical-realist reading methodology capable of discerning a techno-Orientalism *with Chinese characteristics*.

The main advantage of studying transformations in American Orientalism through contemporary science fiction is that in no other genre has Orientalism become such an aesthetic dominant. However, my hope is that an analysis of *Zhang*'s aesthetics of interdependency will help to shed light on the rapidly expanding archive of texts from any range of genres in which the US–China relationship has a presence, including Chang-rae Lee's *On Such a Full Sea* (2014), Mike Daisey's monologue *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* (2010), television series like *Firefly* (2002–3) and *House of Cards* (2013–), films like *Pacific Rim* (2013) and *Lucy* (2014), as well as recent science fiction from China¹⁴ like Chan Koonchung's *The Fat Years* (2009) and Han Song's *2066: Red Star Over America* (2000). All of these texts are infused with worlds, characters, and dilemmas that are enriched and complicated by the presence of a US–China conjuncture, but without a framework for interdependency they are at risk of being reduced to the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril."

Zhang, McHugh's first novel, was warmly received upon its publication in 1992. In addition to being nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula—Anglophone science fiction's most prestigious awards—it received *Locus Magazine*'s award for best new novel, the Lambda Literary Foundation's award for a novel exploring LGBT themes, and the James Tiptree, Jr., award for best science fiction/fantasy novel exploring issues of gender. McHugh's subsequent work has also incorporated counter-Orientalist deployments of Asian, especially Chinese, tropes and characters, in particular her

novels *Half the Day Is Night* (1994), *Mission Child* (1998), and her novella “Protection” (1992).

What distinguishes *Zhang* from other novels about China or set in China is that its world features a contiguous, interdependent US–China space whose history—here we must distinguish the novel’s historical speculations from its technological ones—contains a number of plausible elements. Zhang explains that in the opening decades of the twenty-first century, debt and deficits force the US into a second depression. The shockwaves from the collapse have immediate ramifications in the global financial system, toppling the economies “of every first-world nation . . . except for Japan, which managed to keep from total bankruptcy but lost most of its markets.”¹⁵ Also among the survivors were the Chinese, who had managed through protectionist currency policies “to get their economic shit together” (291). With the US economy ground to a halt, its government finds itself unable to provide basic services. A radical but largely amateur Communist Party emerges to fill the gap, occupying portions of New York City. A civil war ensues, precipitating an American version of the Chinese Cultural Revolution sponsored by the Chinese called the “Great Cleansing Winds.” By Zhang’s time the US has become the SUAS (Socialist Union of American States), and China has replaced the US as global hegemon.

Much of this scenario rings with eerie prescience to our post-2008 ears. In it we find echoes of the global financial crisis, anxieties over US vassalage to China, the gutting of the public sector, even the radical interventions of the Occupy movement. Rather than being purely estranging,¹⁶ the novel extrapolates from the geopolitics of the early-1990s, in which the US economy was in recession and the economic miracle of China’s “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was ascendant.¹⁷ It is during this period, moreover, that the US and China began laying the groundwork for interdependency: a conjuncture that economists Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick have christened “Chimerica” and describe as a “dual country” in which Chinese savings and overproduction underwrite US debt and overconsumption.¹⁸

Because the novel makes the US–China formation available as an object of realist representation, *Zhang* can be distinguished from other literary realist treatments of China in Anglophone fiction, which tend to focus on memoir (Anchee Min, Dai Sijie) or romantic representations of China and/or period detail (Pearl S. Buck, Amy Tan) rather than the geopolitics of the US–China relationship. In fact, treatments of the US–China relationship tend to appear not in literary realism but in genres like alternate history (Arthur Vinton’s *Looking Further Backward*, John Hersey’s *White Lotus*, Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Years of Rice and Salt*), crime thrillers and mysteries (Qiu Xiaolong’s Inspector Chen novels, Lisa See’s Red Princess series), and science fiction (multiple works by Paolo Bacigalupi, John Brunner, Cory Doctorow, Ken Liu, Linda Nagata, Neal Stephenson, Joss Whedon). The melodramatic conventions of these genres, however, insofar as they subordinate social forces to the dramatization of subjective experience, limit realist, much less critical-realist, representation. Even

works that contain a cognitively plausible, even presentist, depiction of US–China relations—e.g., Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*, Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar*, Doctorow’s *For the Win*, Nagata’s *The Bohr Maker*—only feature that relation peripherally.

Zhang is exemplary of post-cyberpunk, both in regard to its diegesis and what we might call its methodology. Its aesthetic of interdependency is neither romantic nor melodramatic but bounded by a naturalistic closure. This is captured aptly by the novel’s epigraph, which is drawn from Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague*: “A simple way to get to know about a town is to see how the people work, how they love and how they die.” In Camus’s novel, the totality of the town of Oran is made available through multiperspectival representations of typical subjects, whose interactions are mediated by the social institutions of work, love, and death. In the same way that *The Plague* offers a critical realism of the German occupation of France, *Zhang* offers a critical realism of post-socialist US–China interdependency through a multiperspectival “fix-up” narrative consisting of five interdependent first-person narratives. Moreover, as with Camus’s focus on “the people,” McHugh’s use of the socialist realist device of typicality is a mediator of the novel’s critical realism. According to Yoon Sun Lee, “the typical character, detail, or event stands for something larger and more real than its own particularity. The type is the opposite of a singular, isolated instance.” As opposed to the false universality of the stereotype or the adventitious details of modernist aesthetics, the type *refuses* the universal and is instead “achieved through a careful qualification, mediation, or placement that links it with other instances and gives it a social though not purely empirical generality.”¹⁹ Indeed McHugh’s analogy between emergent US and Chinese neoliberalisms is predicated not on a facile universalism of subjective experience (they’re just like us) but on a portrayal of objective, material interdependency (e.g., the “system”) as well as structures of feeling that, as Lee says, are “not purely empirical.”

I will demonstrate these claims by touching on the narratives of each main character (Zhang, Angel, Alexi, Martine, and San-Xiang), but my focus will ultimately land on Zhang’s chapters, not only because they are the most fully realized, but also because they feature the novel’s most highly developed aesthetics of interdependency. While the novel’s concerns certainly range further than the three registers I will be tracking—desire, race, ideology—these are the central concerns of Zhang’s narrative. They also reflect the different scales of social totality that the novel tries to account for, from the personal to the geopolitical. Zhang’s narrative actually consists of two intertwined narratives: one about his professional development from a construction tech to a highly sought-after “organic engineer,” and another personal narrative involving his racialization and sexual identity. Much of the analogical work that formalizes US–China interdependency in the novel is performed by the interweaving of these two narratives.

Zhang's characters feel stifled in the wake of the massive geopolitical and economic upheavals of their recent past. In spite of their technologically advanced cyberpunk world—in which everyone has wrist implants that allow direct interface with cyberspace, Mars is a new frontier, and it is possible to sync with the consciousness of another human being—they are overwhelmingly concerned with non-technological problems. In particular, each inhabits what Lauren Berlant calls an “aspirational normativity”: a mode of neoliberal survival that attempts to make continual personal and social crisis “feel ordinary.”²⁰ The inadequacy of SUAS state institutions, as well as the authoritarian proscriptions emanating from China's juridical and cultural hegemony, forces Zhang and his cohorts into this stance, which is expressed several times in the novel in what we can take as its characters' slogan: “I don't believe in socialism but I don't believe in capitalism either. We are small, governments are large, we survive in the cracks.”²¹ This rejection of political ideology represents a pragmatism that cuts both ways. Surviving in the cracks means always being in danger of falling through them, and indeed not all of Zhang's characters manage to survive.

Betsy Huang offers a markedly more optimistic reading of the novel. She argues that “it is within [the] cracks where Zhang learns to negotiate the state's reinforcement of the self-silencing of racially or sexually-different subjects and repairs his racial and queer ‘melancholia’. . . . Thus Zhang's engineering education . . . can be seen as an education in finding ways to ‘speak’ effectively and on one's own terms.”²² Similarly, Yupei Zhou argues that Zhang “transcends” ethnicity and gender by “[taking] over the means of negotiation and challeng[ing] government and ideology.”²³ However, the emphasis on development and mastery in both of these readings appears to draw from cyberpunk's triumphal individualism, not post-cyberpunk's privileging of society over the individual, or its thematization of the typical. Moreover, a narrative of overcoming and “transcendence” posits the kind of binarism that McHugh goes to great lengths to undermine. McHugh describes the novel as one “where the hero couldn't change the inequalities of the system,” and in which the “system [is] neither all bad nor all good.”²⁴ As we will see, Zhang's narrative ends not with him being emboldened by a newly found ability to “speak,” or a “transcendence” of any sort, but with the mortgaging of his identity to a social order that continues to threaten his survival. What he gains in return is the normativity of crisis-made-ordinary—not voice.

McHugh's characters are neoliberal subjects but of a different sort than cyberpunk's freewheeling “console cowboys”: ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial subjects who have mastered cyberspace, and who Wendy Chun describes as “savvy navigators who can open closed spaces.”²⁵ One aspect of neoliberal subjectivity that we see emphasized throughout the novel is that of inaction and non-movement, or, as Berlant puts it, “a life dedicated to moving toward the good life's normative/utopian zone but actually stuck in what we might call survival time, the time of struggling, drowning, holding on to the ledge, treading water, *not-stopping*.”²⁶

The narrative of Angel, a professional kite racer, dramatizes the struggling stasis of aspirational normativity through the sheer danger of the sport of kite racing, as well as the precarious relationship between kite racers and the entertainment-industrial complex that rewards and exploits them. Rather than pilot a kite from the ground, kite racers are strapped into a cybernetic glider powered by their own metabolism. Kite racers are, moreover, totally commoditized. The primary pleasure of attending kite races is “synching” with the consciousness of a racer and experiencing their sensations from a first-person perspective. A racer’s death or near-death increases his or her ratings: “people who watch us fly are waiting to see us die.”²⁷ Sponsorships and compensation are determined by ratings: the number of people synched in to a particular racer’s consciousness over a season. “If [my] numbers get high enough,” Angel hopes to herself, “Citinet will sponsor me again” (49).

The minute details of the internal operations of the kite-racing industry are not incidental features of Angel’s narrative. They reflect McHugh’s conviction that “everyday life is important” in fiction, which manifests in the novel as a bureaucratic trope that provides one of the registers in which the material dimension of the US–China analogy operates.²⁸ This trope aligns with what Shannon Jackson calls an “infrastructural aesthetic,” which, she explains, responds to the individuating and privatizing forces of neoliberalism that obscure lines of dependency between institutions, communities, and individuals.²⁹ The idea of an infrastructural aesthetic is helpful to the present analysis because it is very close (even orthographically) to what I mean by the objective dimension of *Zhang’s* aesthetic of interdependency. Insofar as the US–China relationship has been one of the primary drivers of global neoliberalization, it is perhaps no surprise that infrastructural detail plays an important role in the world-building of novels like Chang-rae Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea*, which projects a US–China future in which healthcare regimes structure society.³⁰ In *Zhang*, the social relations that infrastructural aesthetics bring into view are formalized in its densely imbricated passages, such as McHugh’s description of the three-dimensional spectacle of kite races:

Then they are starting to form up; eighteen kites, two abreast, I am six back, on the outside. I drop into place, and we do a slow circle of the course. . . . The course goes from Washington Square Park to Union Square and back, following The Swath. . . . We come back over Washington Square Park for the second time and the kites begin to pick up speed. We glide past the floater marking the start and already I’m climbing, trying to get altitude. Ten kites are in front of me and I sideslip slightly inside, cutting off Medicine, flying to my left. She’s forced to go underneath me, ends up flying *xialou*, my shadow underneath except that my kite is black silk and hers is a Navajo pattern in red,

black, white and blue. . . . Everyone is diving through the dark, ahead of me I sense the rookie, she is in my arc. . . . I feel her lose it for a second, brake, spill air, started and trying to avoid a collision that would have happened before she had time to react. The wind is so cold across my wings. I'm taking great gulps of air. My shoulder is aching.³¹

“The Swath” refers to “the undergrowth and debris of the 2059 riots,” which adds an important historical dimension to an otherwise ahistorical spectacle. Angel and her fellow kite fliers thus depict something like Walter Benjamin’s *Angel of History*, except that, rather than retreat in horror from the accumulating wreckage of history, they are forced to cycle back to it repeatedly.³² This image conflates the cyclicity of Angel’s “survival time” with the cul-de-sac of the “end of history” rhetoric that so often characterizes the post-socialist era. It might be more accurate then to call kite racing a four-dimensional spectacle. The play-by-play style of Angel’s narration, moreover, bespeaks a consciousness that aspires to totality. Under threat of mortal injury and death, each flier must be constantly aware of all the others’ movements, especially the cascading network of reactions instigated by each movement. In a word, they must be constantly aware of their positions as both subjects and objects in the totality of the race. Realism in a kite race is critical.

We learn a lot about the novel’s world through how its characters die. Angel’s story opens with the funeral of a legendary kite racer, Random Chavez. Among kite racers, the threat of death and its actual pervasiveness (“Fox, Malachite, Hot Rocks and Saffron were dead, and Watchmaker never flew again” [54]) have a binding effect on the community. A less dialectical treatment might have exploited the danger of kite racing as mere spectacle (the cyberpunk film *Tron*,³³ for instance, features deadly bike races in which human lives are treated like the disposable lives in a video game), but in *Zhang* it anchors the community to an ongoing historical process. This is underscored by the name of the racers’ favorite bar, “Commemorative.” Random’s name, moreover, suggests that his legendary status has something to do not only with his mastery of kite racing but with his unique ability to subvert its conventions in unexpected—indeed, random—ways. We can thus imagine his movements in a kite race as what Jackson calls the “messy and inconsistent” “movement[s] between recognition and disavowal, foreground and background” distinctive to infrastructural aesthetics, and, I would add, that attend an aesthetics of interdependency.³⁴ He is the adventitious detail that briefly rises above the kite-racing culture industry but, in the fullness of time, is tragically drawn back into it. Thus, when Angel’s narrative ends on the optimistic note of her newly found success, we know that tragedy will eventually come around for her as well.

Aspirational normativity infuses the narratives of the novel’s other main characters. Martine, who manages a homestead on the Martian frontier, arranges a marriage of convenience with Alexi, a recent arrival from Earth who is forced into

precarious employment and frequent relocation after the US's socialist revolution. While Martine gains no material benefit from the marriage, it allows Alexi to exempt himself from a compulsory work order that would relocate him to the south of the planet for a water reclamation project, and it affords Alexi's young daughter Theresa a stable home for the first time in her hitherto itinerant life. San-Xiang, the daughter of Zhang's construction foreman, suffers from a bone defect that disfigures her face. After an operation, she is normatively attractive for the first time in her life and immediately begins drawing attention from men. Soon thereafter, she is brutally raped. Rather than report the crime, she represses it for fear of offending her father's Confucian notions of propriety and of jeopardizing her newly found normativity: "If nobody knows it's as if it didn't happen."³⁵ Her only respite from the trauma, the only way she can possibly make it "feel ordinary," is the mind-numbing regularity of a job she hates: "I keep meaning to look for a new job. . . . On Friday, he calls. I am sitting there working. . . . I cut him off. Then I shunt my calls to Celia. As an excuse I go to the bathroom. I sit there and feel sick but after awhile I feel okay. . . . So I go back to work" (260-61).

Meanwhile, Zhang's greatest ambition is to make next month's rent. When we first meet him, he is a listless twenty-something who is generally without purpose. He spends his off-hours drinking beer alone at home, hanging out with friends, frequenting bars, and attending kite races. His lack of desire and motivation, McHugh explains, is a reflection of her own at the time.³⁶ After he loses his job, he lazily falls back onto the infrastructure of the SUAS welfare state:

When one has no job one cannot afford the decadent luxury of paying one's landlord, and one must accept government housing or stay with friends or family. I have been staying with Peter for almost six months. Soon I'll have to apply for government housing, I can't keep living with Peter forever. Living in Virginia won't be so bad, it is only ninety minutes to Journal Square Station in New Jersey, lots of people do it every day. If one is unemployed, the train is free at off-peak hours.

IDEX: 415-64-4557-zs816. Trade designation: Construction Tech. Job Index: Comex Constr., 65997. Comex Constr. wants administrative experience I don't have, but I have three years experience in construction. In school, I wanted to be an Engineering Tech and my math scores were good, but there were no openings that year. I have an Assoc. Certificate instead of the full Bach. Sci.

I should study on the side, teach myself, take the exam. I should. Maybe when I get a job, have a place of my own again, I'll study in the evening after I get home from

work, spend less time going out, waste less time and money.
I've said it before, every time I was without a job.³⁷

Cyberspace needs electricians, and, indeed, this employment database is likely where they find their jobs. This passage, aside from being paradigmatic of post-cyberpunk, offers a powerful depiction of the psychology of aspirational normativity. When trying to survive in the cracks and not fall completely through them, one must enter relations of dependency. One must also make demands on those relations if there is to be any hope of creating infrastructure—a friend's couch, say—where it does not exist. But this mode of survival is also a constant state of dangling from a ledge. It gets tiring, and while one tries to imagine something better, the “should” that Zhang repeats to himself exerts both an upward and a downward force.

Zhang's lack of job opportunities in New York City eventually forces his migration to Nanjing, China, where he enrolls in a university to train in the lucrative field of “organic engineering.” This plot point, McHugh explains, was inspired by her own quitting of New York City for China in order to escape a seemingly endless cycle of precarious employment³⁸ and the deep recession that hit the city in the late 1980s.³⁹ A recent graduate of New York University's master's program in English (the predecessor of its MFA program), McHugh was thrust into an uncertain and shrinking world of immaterial labor. When McHugh stumbled on the prospect of spending a year teaching in China, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to think long and hard about what she desired from life.⁴⁰

While teaching in the northern Chinese city of Shijiazhuang between 1987 and 1988, McHugh witnessed the early days of China's urban reform.⁴¹ She aptly dubs Shijiazhuang “the Toledo of China,” referring to its rapid modernization and expansion.⁴² The city's explosive growth began at the turn of the twentieth century, when it became a railroad hub key to the commerce of northern China. Although it was still somewhat of a backwater in the late 1980s, it was nonetheless in the midst of neoliberal upheavals, including the privatization of state-run enterprises and the absorption of an enormous migrant population arriving in search of jobs connected to reform-era industrialization. That influx would soon triple the city's population. Half of *Zhang* was written during McHugh's year there, and the other on her return to the US.⁴³ As an English-language teacher at Shijiazhuang Teacher's College, McHugh's professional role was emblematic of China's reform-era ethos.⁴⁴ Even if Shijiazhuang would not be designated an official development zone until 1991, the economic, emotional, and political implications of reform were a central concern of her students.⁴⁵

The crisis of desire that besets McHugh and her students registers the subjective experience and material circumstances of US neoliberalism on one hand and Chinese neoliberalism on the other. McHugh explains that her students, mostly migrants from rural areas, “were desperate to make the transition to urban.” This

desperation, however, was met with uncertainty over abandoning political for economic citizenship: “They were uncomfortable with landlords, they were uncomfortable with capitalists, they were uncomfortable with factories, they were uncomfortable with rich [sic], but they were all fascinated by it. . . . I don’t think they knew how to decide what they wanted, because they had no clue what was going to be available.”⁴⁶ McHugh’s idiosyncratic use of the word “rich” hearkens back to the slogan often attributed to Deng Xiaoping: “Let some get rich first.” Neoliberal survival for McHugh’s students was a matter of translating radical uncertainty over “what they wanted” into clear expressions of desires and life plans. Anthropological studies of China’s reform era have been similarly concerned with the production of new desires: a discourse Lisa Rofel calls “desiring China.” Rofel explains that the 1990s saw the emergence of a “wide range of desires” among Chinese that were part and parcel of the national project of reorienting citizenship to global capitalism.⁴⁷ This required the transformation of political desire that, under Mao Zedong, was the sine qua non of citizenship: “In post-Mao China,” Rofel writes, “to become a ‘desiring subject’ means a rejection of those passions and the political interpretation of moving history forward that subtended them. Other material, sexual, and affective longings have replaced those sentiments, not necessarily as something Chinese people have felt for the first time but as that which is seen at the heart of creating a new kind of world.”⁴⁸ Similarly, Pun Ngai’s study of *dagongmei*—female migrant laborers from rural China whose labor in manufacturing centers like Shenzhen has been one of the primary motors of China’s economic success, and indeed of US–China interdependency—leads her to observe, “The desire to be *dagongmei*, shown by the great flux of mobility to the urban industrial zones, traces the politics of capitalist production in manipulating social lack and generating the desire of Chinese rural workers to fill the void.”⁴⁹ This is the process that McHugh’s students find themselves swept up in, and that led them to McHugh for training in English as well as a kind of cosmopolitanism.

This reorientation, moreover, has proceeded via a concerted program of ethnicization and racialization. Rofel observes that in reform-era China’s “official, intellectual, and popular discourses, [the] desiring subject is portrayed as a new human being who will help to usher in a new era in China.”⁵⁰ This discourse of universal human being is, in fact, a contemporary adaptation of China’s historical self-understanding as the “Middle Kingdom,” refracted through the post-Mao revival of Confucian humanism’s distinction between Chinese humans and nomadic, barbarian nonhumans.⁵¹ The resultant Han-centrism has produced juridical and cultural regimes of race and ethnic discipline that code certain groups (e.g., minorities like Uighurs and Tibetans) as “exceptions to neoliberalism,” to use Aihwa Ong’s phrase—that is, “citizens who are deemed too complacent or lacking in neoliberal potential [and therefore] treated as less-worthy subjects. Low-skilled citizens and migrants become exceptions to neoliberal mechanisms and are constructed as excludable populations in transit, shuttled in and out of zones of growth.”⁵² At the same time, “exceptions to

neoliberalism” also include some of the greatest beneficiaries of neoliberalism: “flexible,” “adaptable” citizens who profit from transnational and intranational mobility and thereby transcend the constraints of state and local sovereignty.⁵³

Accordingly, Zhang’s status as an exception in both senses is secured by processes of racialization that are both material and personal. In the novel, class and ethnic distinctions are literalized as racialized distinctions between Chinese citizens and non-Chinese citizens, which include peripherally Chinese characters like Zhang (who is half-Chinese), as well as *huaqiao* (“overseas Chinese”). Zhang’s construction supervisor, Qian, is a Chinese citizen who has been exiled to the SUAS most likely for political reasons: “He is a Chinese citizen,” Zhang observes, “and if the best he can do is a job as a construction foreman, he’s in disgrace.”⁵⁴ Qian’s daughter, San-Xiang, is born with a bone abnormality that Zhang cruelly describes in terms reminiscent of nineteenth-century phrenology: “She is a flat-faced southern-looking Chinese girl of twenty or twenty-two. She has a little square face like a monkey and small eyes even by Chinese standards” (12). San-Xiang later notes that her appearance could have been “fixed . . . if my father hadn’t spent my face money trying to make *quanxi*,⁵⁵ connections, so that we could get back to China” (236). Blue-collar *huaqiao*, who are inevitably political exiles, thus appear doomed to a kind of racial degeneracy. As we know, San-Xiang eventually does pay to have her face “fixed” and so rescues herself from racial abjection with the help of the market economy and biotechnology. Similarly, Zhang’s racial status is a matter of economic calculation. His Chinese father and Latina mother had his genes modified in utero so he could pass as “Chinese standard” and thus enjoy eligibility for the privileges of dominant racial identity in an uncertain, post-revolutionary future (2).

These narratives demonstrate the novel’s concern with a transnational process of what Michael Omi and Howard Winant call “racial formation,” which they define as “the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed.”⁵⁶ In *Zhang*, race is determined by the rapidly shifting dynamics of interpersonal relations and macroeconomics. To paraphrase Ong, being racially Chinese in this novel is not finally a matter of biology but to always be in danger of falling on the wrong side of the neoliberal exception.

Zhang’s narrative of professional development—his listless path from construction tech to unemployed couch-surfer to organic engineer—proceeds via a number of analogies between US and Chinese neoliberalism and thus depicts McHugh’s vision of what subject formation within the socioeconomic space of US–China interdependency might look like: namely, as a racialized mode of aspirational normativity. A conflict between Zhang’s personal and professional narratives runs throughout his chapters in the novel, but it is eventually resolved in a scene on Hainan Island, which, Zhang explains, “was one of [China’s] original special economic zones.”⁵⁷ Here Zhang refers to the first group of coastal “Special Economic Zones” defined by the Communist Party in 1980 as spaces of globalization. These zones are

the main interfaces between Western capitalism and China's control economy and have thus become the main drivers of China's economic rise.⁵⁸ The premise of the Hainan scene is that Zhang has been assigned the design of a beach house on the island for his final project at Wuxi Engineering in Nanjing, where he has taken up an internship after completing his degree in organic engineering. The scene, which takes place in the virtual reality of a "system," not only stages his mastery of organic engineering but is also the scene in which he comes to terms with a number of hitherto limiting contexts in his personal life. They include his crisis of desire, vexed racial identity, and constrained sexuality, as well as an authoritarianism that permeates all of them. Each of these contexts creates blocks and limits to the development of Zhang's consciousness as both a subject and object of the historical process.⁵⁹ The novel demonstrates that these blocks and limits—the forces that are constantly dragging him back into the "cracks"—are not simply naturalized features of society but extensions of the authoritarianism projected by China and, indeed, condoned by the survival strategies of aspirational normativity. On completing the Hainan assignment, these blocks and limits seem to disappear, but the transcendence they offer is illusory.

The denouement of Zhang's conflicting narratives plays an important role in the novel's analogizing of US and Chinese neoliberalisms, as well as its depiction of US–China interdependency. At the point in the novel when this denouement occurs, Zhang's professional development centers on his training in organic engineering systems, and his personal life centers on his romantic relationship with his tutor, Haitao. While the "system" is for the most part never much more than a passive interface between one's wrist implants and basic tools like power drills, payphones, and building security systems, it is also the conduit for various degrees of authoritarian control and surveillance. We have already seen some of this in the scene where Zhang marches down to the "systems department" to be "attuned." A more 1984-like resonance is felt when Zhang's "mood" is adjusted by the "system" during a visit to the hospital.⁶⁰ The thematics of authoritarianism extend beyond Zhang's professional utilization of the system to his personal life. He and his gay friends live under the constant threat of a hegemonic Chinese moral regime that punishes homosexuality with "Reform Through Labor" (157) or "a bullet in the back of the head" (17). The thematization of these variously "soft" and "hard" authoritarianisms appears at one level to register the contradictory promulgation of China's "market socialism,"⁶¹ as well as the neoconservative moralism motivating anti-welfare neoliberal projects during the Reagan and Bush administrations and culminating in Clinton's "workfare" programs. It also registers two post-socialist ideological contests: one between authoritarianism and liberal democracy, and the other between an ascendant "Asian model" of state capitalism and a "Washington Consensus" of anti-state, free market policies. In the post-socialist period, whenever one of these contests alights on American ears, the other sounds as well. It is thus in the thematization of authoritarianism that the US–China relationship is most concentrated in the novel.

Importantly, the novel's evocation of these two contests does not seem intended to produce a winner or loser. Rather, just as Zhang's "attunement" is primarily a practical matter, the thematization of authoritarianism indicates a note of pragmatism. The "system," far from being a mere caricature of the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarianism, is an infrastructural synecdoche for the US–China conjuncture.

The *novum*⁶² of organic engineering brings these thematics to bear through the aspiration towards totality expressed in the novel's epigraph.⁶³ Organic engineers are highly trained and remunerated specialists who practice a mental and technical discipline in which a virtual reality "system" augments its user's visualization and memory capabilities. The style of architectural design made possible by this interface seeks to coordinate the minute aspects of subjective experience with the total design of a building:

Normally because of air-flow, room size, room adjacency, exposure and window size, different rooms have different temperatures. The system for Wuxi Complex monitors temperature and humidity. But for an organic system, temperature is relative. My hands and feet are cooler than my head and chest. If I am sitting, I will find the room colder than if I am up and moving around. . . . Many buildings adjust room temperatures. The Wuxi Complex system also monitors the people jacked into it. . . . People, in fact, become nerve endings for the system. And the rooms are ingeniously structured so as to transfer heat from windows to darker areas, to increase the amount of outside light that comes in. It is part of the reason that the place is such a maze.⁶⁴

This is a kind of design in which "everything depends on everything else."⁶⁵ A crucial feature of organic engineering is that even the largest and most intricate buildings are produced by individuals. "Wuxi Engineering Complex wasn't detailed by a team," Zhang's trainer explains to him, "it was detailed by one woman, using, of course, feedback from the departments that would be using the building. . . . A team would not have constructed the building as a unit, but as a series of connected, but compromised and adjusted, ideas."⁶⁶ The total reach of authoritarianism is evidenced by an uncompromised form. Read as a metaphor for writing fiction and world-building, organic engineering not only suggests continuities between authorship, authority, and authoritarianism, it also suggests a theory of characterization. As "nerve endings for the system," characters are both subjects and objects of the organically engineered (or authored) totality. The Hainan scene, as we will see in a moment, suggests that a character is fully realized once s/he becomes conscious of his/her function in the system; accordingly, the scene offers a representation of this elevation of

consciousness. The ending of the novel, however, leaves open the question of whether this consciousness in Zhang is permanent, or whether it ever happened at all.

Along these lines, organic engineering is depicted as a quasi-spiritual endeavor that requires capitulation to the system's all-pervasive authority. At one point, Zhang's supervisor chides him, "You aren't using the system," meaning that Zhang's mistakes are the result of his refusal to abandon himself to the system. "You're staying in your own head. . . . Words don't really explain what you should be doing, you just have to do it, then you'll know. *Dao keda, feichang dao*. . . . The way that can be spoken is not the way" (220). When Zhang finally learns to cooperate with the system, he does so by reconciling his egoic "Western mindset" with an anti-egoic Daoist mindset. While the novel certainly draws from Orientalist stereotypes of the East as a space of spiritual transcendence, these tropes also resonate strongly with the thematics of "soft" authoritarianism.⁶⁷ Daoism can thus be read as a figure for indifferent authoritarianism that represents the softest possible version of Chinese hegemony.

There is something rather misleading, then, about Zhang's feeling of "wholeness" after he has finally managed to work with the organic engineering system:

I tap in. . . . I do not think of anything for a moment, I have to think of something to scribble. The beach house is as good as anything else. . . . It's not very Chinese, more like the glass and steel tradition of New York. Something long and low, and I know how it should flow. A great room, a kitchen divided by very little wall, slightly higher than the long great room with its window looking over the ocean—

And I reach. . . . I let myself be swallowed by the emptiness and instead I expand, the system becomes my own memory. . . . I am myself, myself, but able to think and have the thing I think in my mind without holding it, without concentrating, because I am using the system to concentrate for me. . . . To modify the house I only have to think it and it is so, it hangs there. I am outside it, seeing the long portion of the house that is the kitchen and great room, off the kitchen the steps down to the beach. . . . The bedrooms are beyond the kitchen, higher to take advantage of the uneven terrain (also in memory) and I think that this Western building needs a tile roof. Blue Chinese tile. Soften the variation in the roof height and the roof becomes a wave.

I stop, and look around the room. . . . And even sitting there, the shell of my beach house just hanging there, I can feel that I am crying. Because I have done it, I have done it.

I feel whole, and now it is time to go home.⁶⁸

Zhang's urgent desire to surmount the blocks and limits to his self-realization is sublimated into an aesthetic integration of the landscape surrounding the beach house ("the uneven terrain") with the design's interior open floor-plan, which features yet another integration of the private domestic space of the kitchen and the public space of the great room, the two "divided by very little wall." In this scene, Zhang finally constructs an organic totality through an active passivity and in the same gesture appears to fulfill the principle of characterization entailed by the aesthetics of interdependency: consciousness of himself within the broader totality of US-China space, for which Hainan serves as a metonymy.

Zhang's capitulation to the cognitive demands of the organic engineering system is at the same time a capitulation to the authoritarian directives guiding his identity. It is thus the culmination of a process of what we might call "attunement" that began with his romantic relationship with his tutor Haitao. The two meet shortly after Zhang begins classes at Nanjing University, and their mutual attraction is immediate. During their first tutoring session, their coded interactions indicate a symmetrical continuity between Chinese and American gay identities. After Haitao offers Zhang "a little left-handed help," Zhang's "heart starts to hammer. It is all code. . . . Or perhaps it's an accident, he just used the phrase, unaware that it can have any other meaning. Back home [in Brooklyn], straights are right-handed, we are left. Not really, of course, just slang" (141). In addition to being physically attracted to Haitao, Zhang is also impressed by the general ease with which he comports himself, an ease indicated primarily through Haitao's attire: "He is polished, his clothes casual and, to my eye, expensive. I think to myself I will remember that open shirt, the brushed gray tights, the calf-high boots. Look for something like that. I wonder what he thinks of me in my American clothes, looking *huaqiao*" (137). Immediately after this first meeting, Zhang goes out to purchase a stack of men's fashion magazines. When he flirts with Haitao, he is strikingly materialistic: "Go shopping with me. Show this poor confused foreigner what clothes to buy that will make him look less like he comes from a second-rate country" (162). While they are dating, Zhang's grades improve and Haitao introduces him to a cosmopolitan set of friends and a vibrant underground gay scene.

Zhang's nervousness over appearing parochial—"looking *huaqiao*"—reveals how his attraction to Haitao is overdetermined by the forces of authoritarianism that compel him to camouflage himself in the first place, as well as the consumerist desires that have begun emerging because of his gainful employment. If Haitao enables Zhang to imagine, for the first time, a future beyond normativity, then this ideation is facilitated by an embrace of consumerism promulgated by discourses of "desiring China." Zhang's strategy of transcending his class and racial identity as *huaqiao* by purchasing new clothes reflects McHugh's view of the roles that consumerist fashion and sexuality played in her students' turn away from Maoism: "I was there the day that

Chinese girls started wearing lipstick. Things would sweep and I would never get the memo. . . . When I first got there [to China], middle-aged people and older wore Mao suits. By the time I left, it was very rare. I was there a year. Like I say, one day, girls wore lipstick. In the year I was there, I saw so much change that it must have been like the sixties. . . . I don't think they knew how far they were going to go."⁶⁹ For McHugh, the suddenness of her students' adoption of Western fashions was an indication of their uncertainty as well as their excitement over newly available and condoned commodities like lipstick. Moreover, the connection between sexual desire and neoliberal desire is found in the sexual connotations of the phrase "how far they were going to go." If a romantic future with Haitao is both a sexual and neoliberal fulfillment, then Haitao in fact enables what Berlant calls a "cruel optimism": "A relation [that] exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."⁷⁰ The way out of the cracks sometimes leads one deeper into them.

Haitao himself confirms the cruelty of this illusory future. After escaping a police raid on an underground gay club, Zhang and Haitao spend a night cowering on the catwalk of an abandoned factory. The experience proves so traumatic for Haitao, who earlier discovers that he is under official investigation for homosexuality, that he jumps from his high-rise apartment the next day. Despite the relative racial and social safety that Haitao enjoys, his homosexuality means that he is never exempt from aspirational normativity. His literal fall through the cracks suggests a conflation of gay and neoliberal subjectivity that Zhang never directly confronts. Instead Zhang represses Haitao's death and, indeed, his own sexuality. For a year after Haitao's death, Zhang is completely celibate and chooses to immerse himself in his studies. As a result, he becomes "this amazing creature, the envy of my classmates," but his feelings, indeed love, for Haitao have disappeared entirely.⁷¹ Zhang's only mention of Haitao after his suicide suggests the impersonal form of traumatic detachment: "Once I had a tutor, and that helped my grades. Then my tutor died and, oddly enough, that helped my grades. I worked very hard" (220).

In the Hainan scene, Zhang's capitulation to the system forces him to come to terms not only with Haitao's death but also what Haitao's life meant to him: that is, the overdetermined array of desires constituting his mounting normativity. Giving in to the system, allowing it to "become" his mental space, initiates a process that resolves Zhang's aspirational normativity as an actual normativity, grounded in his professional/economic status as an organic engineer. As the site of the denouement of the conflict between Zhang's personal and professional narratives, this scene also stages the analogy of the novel's aesthetics of interdependency and McHugh's vision of US-China interdependency. All of this is made even more resonant by setting this scene in a Special Economic Zone. The scene's analogical tangle, and its function of coordinating subject and object, is reflected in Hainan's characterization as a kind of subduction zone of various modes of production. Hainan, Zhang explains, "is still a free-market zone, a place of virulent capitalism, meant to fuel the socialist system. The

beach house is for one of the old mercantile families of Hainandao, built by the clan corporation” (231). This is a cul-de-sac of history in which feudalism swirls about with neoliberal globalization. And yet what we feel in Zhang’s capitulation to the system is a sign of his Americanness. The degree to which his capitulation is actually an accommodation—“I let myself be swallowed by the emptiness”—takes the measure of his self-conception as a liberal democratic citizen who is free to make such a choice. He relinquishes these rights so that he might have a new subjectivity returned to him, this time as a “whole” person whose wholeness is depicted by an aesthetic fusion. Zhang combines the “glass and steel tradition of New York” with the blue Chinese roof tile, thus forging a Chinese-American form that is the emblem of his new subjectivity. Haitao, whose name (海濤) translates to “ocean wave,” is resurrected as the “wave” of the roof. If Zhang cannot be with Haitao in life, then they can be together in form—a gesture that, while perhaps romantic, still suffers from abstraction. This is underscored by the fact that this scene is not in fact set on Hainan but a *virtual* Hainan projected by Zhang in conjunction with the organic engineering system. Moreover, Zhang’s wholeness is registered as a “feeling” that descends after an outpouring of tears. If his elevated consciousness emerges at the intersection of “attunement” and an act of will, it is never clear which vector has prevailed.

Despite his overwhelming aesthetic achievement, the material outcome of this scene is markedly underwhelming. Even as a certified organic engineer, Zhang’s material circumstances back home in Brooklyn are barely an improvement over his previous life there as a slacker. The lucrative positions, it seems, are all in far-flung locations. The only jobs available to him locally are project-based, so he takes up precarious labor as a freelancer. On top of all this, he still has to conceal his sexuality from authorities. His newly achieved normativity therefore appears to be what Berlant describes as a “normativity where there is no foundation for the expectation of it beyond a lasting fantasy [and that can] be read as a form of bargaining with what is overwhelming about the present, a bargaining against the fall between the cracks, the living death of repetition that’s just one step above the fall into death.”⁷²

A crucial difference from his previous life, however, is that Zhang actively chooses this holding pattern. When his friend Peter pesters him for not taking one of several attractive job offers, Zhang responds by articulating his desires clearly for the first time: “I’m sick of starting over again, even in this country. . . . I want friends, I want some sort of community!”⁷³ Zhang’s choice of the stability of community over the riskiness of individual remuneration should not, however, strike us as a pat ending in which Zhang somehow realizes what’s really important in life. The novel’s final sentence—“The sun comes back every morning” (311)—possesses all the right content for a happy ending but lands flat on the ear. As opposed to a more optimistic verb like “rises,” the phrase “comes back” colors the word “every” with a “living death of repetition.” The novel ends where it began.

Zhang's embrace of normativity, we encounter the pragmatism of McHugh's vision of US–China interdependency. Why McHugh offers this ending rather than something more uplifting, or at least in line with a satisfying ending to Zhang's story of neoliberal subject formation, may only be adequately explained if we accept that the novel's predominant interest is, indeed, the imagining of US–China interdependency. Rather than allow ourselves to be depressed by Zhang's stasis, it would be more instructive to read the novel as a robust model of the present, and its aesthetics of interdependency as offering a model of fictional character adequate to post-socialist neoliberalism.

Zhang's revisions of key cyberpunk tropes (cyberspace, console cowboys, globalization, etc.) are emblematic of post-cyberpunk's central focus on what Raymond Williams calls technology's "already existing social relations": its "particular social uses" rather than its reified features.⁷⁴ As a critical realism of the post-socialist world-system's most important bilateral relationship, Zhang necessarily makes recourse to a broader range of aesthetic and representational tools than are made available by the "re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril." Its post-cyberpunk techno-Orientalism with Chinese characteristics thus offers a form that might help us to describe a twenty-first-century world-system anchored by the US–China relationship. In the midst of our continuing neoliberal upheavals, the hopes of any political project that wants to nurture something better than normativity will depend on the adequacy of such a description.

Notes

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¹ Hereafter, Zhang. Maureen F. McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang* (New York: Doherty, 1992).

² William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984; repr., New York: Ace Books, 2000), 52.

³ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 208.

⁴ James Patrick Kelly and John Kessel, eds., *Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology* (San Francisco: Tachyon, 2007), xi.

⁵ Lawrence Person, "Notes toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto," *Nova Express*, Winter/Spring 1998, available online at Slashdot,

<http://news.slashdot.org/story/99/10/08/2123255/notes-toward-a-postcyberpunk-manifesto>. Post-cyberpunk works that Person mentions include Bruce Sterling's *Islands in the Net* (which he considers paradigmatic) and *Holy Fire*, Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*, Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* and *The Stone Canal*, and Walter Jon Williams's *Aristoi*. To this list we can add more recent examples like Linda Nagata's *The Bohr Maker*, Pat Cadigan's *Dervish Is Digital*, China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, Cory Doctorow's *For the Win*, as well as films like Kenji Kamiyama's *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*, Neill Blomkamp's *Elysium*, and Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. Not incidentally, post-cyberpunk's thematics of interdependency tend to center on female characters, which reveals the fraught gender politics of the genre (and cyberpunk before it). Karen Cadora has written a trenchant critique of cyberpunk's heterosexual "hypermasculinity" in her essay "Feminist Cyberpunk," *Science Fiction Studies* 22, no. 3 (1995): 357–72. On cyberpunk's debt to feminist SF of the 1970s, see Nicola Nixon, "Cyberpunk: Preparing the Ground for Revolution or Keeping the Boys Satisfied?" *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 2 (1992): 219–35. On the history of Anglophone SF, few better resources exist than Roger Luckhurst's "cultural history" of the genre, *Science Fiction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005).

⁶ Greta Aiyu Niu, "Techno-Orientalism, Nanotechnology, Posthumans, and Post-Posthumans in Neal Stephenson's and Linda Nagata's Science Fiction," in "Alien/Asian," ed. Stephen Hong Sohn, special issue, *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 76. An obvious counterexample to US–China interdependency would be the US–Japan economic relationship that preceded it. Both have been represented in terms of rivalry, antagonism, and invasion (yellow peril). Despite these superficial similarities, however, the cultural logics, aesthetics, and indeed economics of each relationship are quite different. The US and Japanese economies were never interdependent in the way that the US and Chinese currently are. Much of the difficulty in distinguishing an aesthetic of US–China interdependency without the aid of the kind of historical formalism that I am developing in this article is that there is considerable overlap between the techno-Orientalist forms that grew out of "Japan Panic" (e.g., cyberpunk) and those that have emerged during China's post-socialist rise (e.g., post-cyberpunk). This is partly due to the predictable operation of an Orientalism that conflates all Asians into one monolithic group. But it also has a great deal to do with technology's role in the expansion of global capitalism, and the role that China currently plays in the material production of that technology. The slogan on the back of all current Apple products—"Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China"—offers an unusually apt description for dynamics of the US–China relationship, but the global division of labor and interdependency it conveys has no analogy in the history of the US–Japan relationship.

⁷ In his book on postmodernism, Jameson's first footnote states, "This is the place to regret the absence from this book of a chapter on cyberpunk, henceforth, for many of us, the supreme *literary* expression if not of postmodernism, then of late capitalism itself." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 419n1. Later in that essay, he describes cyberpunk as a "degraded attempt—through the figuration of advanced technology—to

think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system” (38). For a fuller discussion of cyberpunk as keyed to Japan’s economic miracle and postmodern space, see Fredric Jameson, “The Constraints of Postmodernism,” in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 129–205. The “techno-Orientalism” that Morley and Robins describe is closely aligned with a historicization of Japan’s post–World War II “economic miracle” and the “Japan Panic” experienced by Americans—especially those involved with the auto industry—in the 1970s and 1980s: “If the future is technological, and if technology has become ‘Japanised,’ then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. The postmodern era will be the Pacific era. Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity.” David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 168.

⁸ If the key to techno-Orientalism’s Japan-inflected forms (emblemized by *Neuromancer*) is the conversion of East Asian totalities into reified particulars (e.g., the reduction of Chiba’s sky to the portable enclosure of a “deck”), then such a conversion seems aptly designed for managing anxieties over a perceived invasion of Japanese capitalism through an operation of absolute Othering. If its China-inflected forms, in contrast, tend to convert particulars into totalities, then it is because the bright line between self and Other is either no longer so bright or no longer useful to understanding interdependence.

⁹ Maureen F. McHugh, interview by Christopher T. Fan, September 30, 2012, Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, quoted in Yoon Sun Lee, “Type, Totality, and the Realism of Asian American Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2012): 417. The definitive text on critical realism is Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* (1937). For an evaluation of the use of critical realism in science fiction criticism, see Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000). For two recent efforts at recuperating Lukács for the twenty-first century, see Michael J. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011); and Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds., *Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

¹¹ Since Morley and Robins, a great deal of scholarship has developed their model of techno-Orientalism, including that of Wendy Chun, Lisa Nakamura, and Toshiya Ueno, as well as the dozens of contributors to special issues of *MELUS*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Amerasia*, and a forthcoming anthology edited by Betsy Huang, David Roh, and Greta Niu. Most of these writers conduct their analyses through the lens of an antinomic Orientalism that takes as its premise the irreconcilability of East and West. In this regard, they are simply reproducing what Anne Cheng calls “the fundamental paradox at the heart of minority discourse,” which is “how to proceed once we acknowledge, as we must, that ‘identity’ is the very ground upon which both progress and discrimination are made.” Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press,

2000), 24. On techno-Orientalist topoi, see Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006); Betsy Huang, *Contesting Genres in Contemporary Asian American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Toshiya Ueno, "Techno-Orientalism and Media-Tribalism: On Japanese Animation and Rave Culture," *Third Text* 13, no. 47 (1999): 95–106; R. John Williams, "Technê-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (2011): 17–70; Stephen Hong Sohn, ed., "Alien/Asian," special issue, *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008); Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Lynne Joyrich, eds., "Race and/as Technology," special issue, *Camera Obscura*, no. 70 (2009); Victor Bascara and Lisa Nakamura, eds., "Asian American Cultural Politics Across Platforms," special issue, *Amerasia* 40, no. 2 (forthcoming, 2014); and Betsy Huang, Greta Niu, and David Roh, eds., *Techno-Orientalism: Science Fiction History, Literature, Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, forthcoming, 2014).

¹² Stephen Hong Sohn, "Introduction: Alien/Asian: Imagining the Racialized Future," in "Alien/Asian," ed. Stephen Hong Sohn, special issue, *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 10, emphasis mine.

¹³ The persistence of antinomic Orientalism extends far beyond techno-Orientalist scholarship and in many ways continues to structure fields like Asian American Studies, in which scholars like Viet Nguyen and erin Khuê Ninh have been arguing for counter-Orientalist readings. See Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); and erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York: NYU Press, 2011). In regard to writers like Pearl S. Buck, Richard Jean So situates his work in a US–China intellectual formation as a corrective to "several recent studies [that] still situate Buck within the tradition of U.S. Orientalism, and thus as enabling a Euro-American vision of the Pacific, rather than generating a more complex vision of this region and how it operates." Richard Jean So, "Fictions of Natural Democracy: Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*, and the Asian American Subject," *Representations* 112, no. 1 (2010): 88. Recent counter-Orientalist studies include Colleen Lye, *America's Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893–1945* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

¹⁴ For a recent overview of Chinese science fiction, see Yan Wu and Veronica Hollinger, eds., special issue, *Science Fiction Studies*, no. 119 (2013).

¹⁵ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 290.

¹⁶ Here I refer to Darko Suvin's influential Brechtian definition of science fiction as a literature of "cognitive estrangement." Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction:*

On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 13. Rather than distance its readers from reality, my argument is that *Zhang* enables its readers to understand themselves as subjects and objects of US–China history.

¹⁷ While “socialism with Chinese characteristics” was only intended to name the Chinese Communist Party’s official economic policies, and thus a specifically Chinese set of circumstances, the prepositional phrase, “with Chinese characteristics,” has been taken up by commentators to identify various ways in which Deng’s policies, or more often its effects, have traveled both inside and outside of China’s borders. As in recent discussions over “capitalism with Chinese characteristics,” I adapt Deng’s phrase to signal *conflicts* between the CCP’s ostensible socialist ideology and its expansion of free market policies. Additionally, my use of the phrase is intended to signal a particular set of anxieties experienced by non-Chinese—Americans in particular, although by no means exclusively—over China’s increasing geopolitical influence. These anxieties are shaped in part by a post–Cold War Manicheism imagined as a contest over the future of global capitalism waged between liberal democracy and Chinese authoritarianism. See Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Verso, 2007); Joel Andreas, *Rise of the Red Engineers: The Cultural Revolution and the Origins of China’s New Class* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Yasheng Huang, *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Joel Andreas’s response to Yasheng Huang, “A Shanghai Model? On Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics,” *New Left Review*, no. 65 (2010): 63–85; Yasheng Huang’s response to Joel Andreas in the same issue, “The Politics of China’s Path,” *New Left Review*, no. 65 (2010): 87–91; Kellee S. Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.* (London: Routledge, 2011). Slavoj Žižek has critiqued “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” in a number of venues, pitting it against liberal democratic forms. See Hamid Dabashi’s critique of Žižek’s Orientalism in “Slavoj Žižek and Harum Scarum,” *Al Jazeera*, November 11, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/11/2011111011283172950.html>.

¹⁸ The term was coined by Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick in their article “‘Chimerica’ and the Global Asset Market Boom,” *International Finance* 10, no. 3 (2007): 215–39. Ferguson later expands its historicization in Niall Ferguson, “From Empire to Chimerica,” in *The Ascent of Money: A Financial History of the World* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 283–340. Although Ferguson and Schularick began casting doubt on the sustainability of Chimerica almost as soon as they named it, the feeling that China’s rise will come at the expense of US hegemony has been persistent and widespread since the opening years of the post-socialist period. See Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, “The End of Chimerica,” *International Finance* 14, no. 1 (2011): 1–26.

¹⁹ Lee, "Type, Totality, and the Realism," 420. On the modernist "detail" as a site for resistance to totalizing ideologies, see Erich Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking," in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953).

²⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 285.

²¹ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 6.

²² Betsy Pei Chih Huang, "The Language of Citizenship: The Future of the Minority Voice in Contemporary American Fiction" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 2004), 233. Huang reads *Zhang* as a conventional bildungsroman in which its characters develop the ability to "speak out" against proscriptions on their sexual and racial identities in a bid for social integration.

²³ Yupei Zhou, "Beyond Ethnicity and Gender: *China Mountain Zhang*'s Transcendent Techniques," *Extrapolation* 42, no. 4 (2001): 383.

²⁴ Maureen F. McHugh, "The Anti-SF Novel" (lecture, Philadelphia Science Fiction Society, Philadelphia, PA, September 12, 1997), <http://my.en.com/~mcq/antisf.html>.

²⁵ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 178n16.

²⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 279.

²⁷ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 53.

²⁸ Pat Stansberry, "Interview: Maureen F. McHugh," *Strange Horizons*, September 9, 2002, <http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020909/mchugh.shtml>.

²⁹ See Shannon Jackson, preface to *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1–10.

³⁰ See my review of Lee's novel, Christopher T. Fan, "Future Islands," *New Inquiry*, May 19, 2014, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/future-islands/>. Lee spends a significant amount of space in his novel on what have come to be called "healthcare narratives" about the difficult trade-offs between cost and care. These narratives often explain in great detail the terms of healthcare policies but also have the effect of demystifying the opacity of institutions by revealing how institutions operate via individual choices. The infrastructural trope therefore reveals institutions as horizontal nodes in two-way vectors of interdependency, rather than as vertical structures in which the vector of dependency is one-way. The infrastructural trope also plays an important role in the texts that Berlant uses to elaborate her description of "cruel optimism," such as Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's films *La Promesse* (1996) and *Rosetta* (1999), and William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003).

³¹ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 48–50.

³² Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

³³ *Tron*, dir. Steven Lisberger (1982).

³⁴ Jackson, *Social Works*, 6.

³⁵ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 261.

³⁶ McHugh, interview by Fan.

³⁷ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 62.

³⁸ McHugh, interview by Fan.

³⁹ David Brauer and Mark Flaherty, "The New York City Recession," *Federal Reserve Bank of New York Quarterly Review* 17, no. 1 (1992): 66–71.

⁴⁰ McHugh, interview by Fan.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Maureen F. McHugh, "China," <http://my.en.com/~mcq/china.html>.

⁴³ McHugh, interview by Fan.

⁴⁴ For an early assessment on the connection between English-language training and China's open door policies, see Wang Keqiang, "Teaching English as a Foreign Language in China," special issue, *TESL Canada Journal* 3 (1986): 153–60. Wang writes, "Owing to the change in the fundamental policies, English has never been so important as it is today. The government's 'Four modernizations program' and 'open-door policy' have made the Chinese people, of all ages and occupations, cognizant of the importance of learning English. Currently, the desire to learn English is at a fever-pitch throughout China" (155). A more recent assessment is offered by Evan Osnos's profile of celebrity teacher Li Yang and his "Crazy English" lessons, which are given to sold-out stadiums full of students: Evan Osnos, "Crazy English," *New Yorker*, April 28, 2008, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/04/28/crazy-english>.

⁴⁵ McHugh, interview by Fan.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 118.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 22. Rofel's model of desire is inspired by two influential frameworks: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's model that conflates "flows" of desire with capital "flows," and Michel Foucault's reading of desire as a formation of power/knowledge. While her model retains much from Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring-machines"—subjects through which desire operates via its own essential properties and is unleashed by the "capitalist

machine”—she argues that an examination of the Chinese Communist Party’s “historically and culturally specific *assignment*” of desire to create “a new cosmopolitan human nature” requires Foucault’s anti-essentialist, genealogical methodology (212–14n43).

⁴⁹ Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 14.

⁵⁰ Rofel, *Desiring China*, 3. As David Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen are quick to remind us in the introduction to their *Social Text* special issue on “China and the Human,” “neither the human nor China is as self-evident a concept as it might initially seem. . . . In the project of universalizing European liberal humanism—whether in the form of political rights and citizenship, capitalism and the free market, or individual reason and subjectivity—China constitutes one important limit.” David L. Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen, “Introduction: China and the Human,” in “China and the Human: Part 1,” ed. David L. Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen, special issue, *Social Text*, no. 109 (2012): 4. The essays in *Social Text*’s two special issues on “China and the Human” explore the connections and conflicts between Chinese and Enlightenment doctrines and enforcements of humanism over a broad range of history. See also Eric Hayot, *The Hypothetical Mandarin: Sympathy, Modernity, and Chinese Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Maoism violently overturned Confucian humanism in favor of the communist category of “the people.”

⁵² Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 16.

⁵³ For a full account of “flexible” citizenship and neoliberalism in the Chinese context, see Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 4.

⁵⁵ McHugh here means *guanxi*, which translates literally to “relationship,” but in common usage means something closer to “influence,” implying quid pro quo.

⁵⁶ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

⁵⁷ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 231. To be sure, neither Hong Kong nor Taiwan was ever designated as a SEZ.

⁵⁸ Introducing the function of SEZs in China’s reforms, Premier Zhao Ziyang wrote in 1981, “by linking our country with the world market, expanding foreign trade, importing advanced technology, utilizing foreign capital and entering into different forms of international economic and technological cooperation, we can use our strong points to

make up for our weak points through international exchange on the basis of equality and mutual benefit. Far from impairing our capacity for self-reliant action, this will only serve to enhance it.” Zhao Ziyang, “The Present Economic Situation and the Principles for Future Economic Construction: Report on the Work of the Government Delivered at the Fourth Session of the Fifth National People’s Congress on November 30 and December 1, 1981,” *Beijing Review*, December 21, 1981, 23. Ong theorizes SEZs as paradigmatic spaces of neoliberal governmentality because their openness to global market forces necessitates a “graduated sovereignty” in which market forces determine features of institutions like citizenship and the law, which are typically the sole domain of the state. In the case of US–China relations within SEZs like Hainan, this happens not so much between the two states as between US multinational corporations and Chinese state institutions. Ong writes, “I thus use the term *graduated sovereignty* to refer to the effects of a flexible management of sovereignty, as governments adjust political space to the dictates of global capital, giving corporations an indirect power over the political conditions of citizens in zones that are differently articulated to global production and financial circuits” (Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception*, 78).

⁵⁹ The phrase “blocks and limits” is used by Fredric Jameson in a defense of Lukács’s notion of totality: “The conception of ‘conditions of possibility’ then has the advantage of stressing, not the content of scientific thought, but its prerequisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it cannot properly develop. It is a conception which includes the diagnosis of blocks and limits to knowledge (reification as what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities) as well as the enumeration of positive new features (the capacity to think in terms of process).” Fredric Jameson, “‘History and Class Consciousness’ as an Unfinished Project,” in *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 213.

⁶⁰ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 132.

⁶¹ Francis Fukuyama offers the most influential recent consideration of “soft” authoritarianism as an alternative to Western liberal democracy in Francis Fukuyama, “Asia’s Soft-Authoritarian Alternative,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1992): 60–61. In recent political science discourse, the paradigmatic example of “soft” authoritarianism is Singapore. Moisés Naím writes, “Under [former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s] leadership, an ever watchful state also regimented almost every aspect of Singaporean life and snuffed out sparks of political dissent, making Singapore the poster child for ‘soft’ authoritarianism. The rewards: a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and living standards with few rivals in Asia, let alone the rest of the world, and a shimmering reputation for efficiency, enterprise, and economic openness.” Lee Hsien Loong and Moisés Naím, “The FP Interview: Singapore’s Big Gamble,” *Foreign Policy*, May–June 2002, 32.

⁶² Darko Suvin uses this term to refer to the element of the new distinctive to science fiction (Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 61).

⁶³ “The plenitude of the totality,” Lukács writes, “does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration towards totality.” Georg Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 198.

⁶⁴ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 217.

⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, “The Case for Georg Lukács,” in *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 188. Martin Jay offers an indispensable intellectual history of the concept of totality in Western Marxism in Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁶⁶ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 218.

⁶⁷ For a critique of McHugh’s Orientalist deployment of Daoist tropes, see Betsy Huang, “Premodern Orientalist Science Fictions,” in “Alien/Asian,” ed. Stephen Hong Sohn, special issue, *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 23–43. While Huang’s point that “McHugh instrumentalizes Daoist thought as a means of spiritual readjustment or revitalization for the West” is certainly fair (37), it does assume a far more stable East–West binary than actually appears in the novel. Thinking the East–West relation as one of interdependency rather than rivalry, as I am proposing in this article, allows us to read McHugh’s treatment of Daoism here as an attempt at using Daoism as a mode rather than an object of analysis. Mei Zhan argues that an overconcern with Daoism’s reification has the effect of reproducing “precisely [Daoism’s] exclusion from European intellectual genealogy that has turned Daoist thinking into an object of analysis rather than analysis in its own right.” Mei Zhan, “Worlding Oneness: Daoism, Heidegger, and Possibilities for Treating the Human,” in “China and the Human: Part 1,” ed. David L. Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen, special issue, *Social Text*, no. 109 (2012): 110.

⁶⁸ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 234–35.

⁶⁹ McHugh, interview by Fan.

⁷⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

⁷¹ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 275.

⁷² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 180.

⁷³ McHugh, *China Mountain Zhang*, 309.

⁷⁴ Raymond Williams, “Culture and Technology,” in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 2007), 120. Williams writes, “virtually all technical study and experiment are undertaken within already existing social relations and cultural forms, typically for purposes that are already in general foreseen. Moreover, a technical invention as such has comparatively little social significance. It is only when it is selected

for investment towards production, and when it is consciously developed for particular social uses—that is when it moves from being a technical invention to what can properly be called an available *technology*—that the general significance begins. These processes of selection, investment and development are obviously of a general social and economic kind, within existing social and economic relations, and in a specific social order are designed for particular uses and advantages” (120).

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