

The Evolutionary Characteristics and Internal Tensions of Utopian Literature in Modern and Contemporary China

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Abstract: In the context of modern and contemporary Chinese culture, “utopia” constitutes a key conceptual lens through which the evolution of intellectual history can be understood. From the ideal visions embedded in traditional Chinese thought—such as the Confucian ideal of Datong (Great Unity) and the Daoist image of the Peach Blossom Spring—to the reformist imagination that emerged in response to the collapse of the imperial system in the late Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals have continuously constructed diverse utopian visions in their pursuit of an “ideal China.” Based on a systematic review of relevant literature, this article not only clarifies the conceptual connotations and textual characteristics of utopian literature, but also examines the inherent tensions and contradictions embedded in its historical evolution and cultural function. The study argues that an exploration of the transformation of utopian discourse and its literary expressions provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the intellectual trajectory of modern Chinese culture.

Keywords: Utopia; Utopian literature; Evolution of characteristics; Internal contradictions

1. The Evolution of the Concept of “Utopia”

The concept of “utopia” has undergone continuous transformation throughout history, exhibiting diverse meanings shaped by linguistic structures, cultural traditions, and historical contexts. Coined in 1516 by Thomas More in *Utopia*, the term inaugurated a distinct literary genre. Prior to this, utopian imagination existed primarily in the form of mythical golden ages or religious paradises, lacking the systematic structure characteristic of modern utopian thought.

From the sixteenth century onward, with the advancement of science and the expansion of geographical knowledge, utopian literature flourished. In the nineteenth century, utopian socialism brought the genre to its ideological peak. As Saint-Simon famously stated, “The golden age, which superstition placed in the past, lies in the future.” Paradoxically, however, the nineteenth century witnessed a decline in utopian literary production, as utopian thought shifted from literary imagination toward social theory and political practice, becoming increasingly concrete and programmatic.

A decisive theoretical turn occurred with Karl Mannheim’s *Ideology and Utopia* (1929). While earlier thinkers generally regarded utopia as an imagined ideal society, Mannheim redefined it as a form of consciousness in opposition to dominant ideology. Subsequently, the concept became deeply embedded in ideological debates: Marx labeled other socialist doctrines as “utopian socialism,” conservatives used “utopia” pejoratively to criticize totalitarian tendencies, and neo-Marxists sought to reclaim utopia as a critical and emancipatory force. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, utopia had largely shifted from a literary form to an ideological construct, with its meaning becoming increasingly contested and complex.

The catastrophic experiences of the twentieth century—totalitarianism, world wars, and political repression—led many thinkers, such as Friedrich Hayek, to proclaim the “end of utopia.” In contrast, Ernst Bloch reinterpreted utopia as an expression of humanity’s anticipatory consciousness in *The Principle of Hope*, while Fredric Jameson emphasized its critical function in exposing the deficiencies of existing reality. Ruth Levitas further argued that utopia should be understood as a mode of desire rather than a concrete social blueprint. These perspectives marked

a return to the abstract and spiritual dimensions of utopia, distancing it from practical political implementation.

Although utopia in modern theoretical discourse has increasingly diverged from literary practice, this study re-centers literary texts, seeking to recover utopia's original narrative and imaginative functions.

2. "Traditional Utopia" and "Modern Utopia"

Modern utopia is commonly regarded as a Western phenomenon that originated with Thomas More's *Utopia*. Krishan Kumar argues that while other civilizations possessed myths of paradise, only the West developed utopia as a distinct literary genre grounded in secular rationality. Although he acknowledged China as the non-Western civilization most capable of producing utopian thought, he ultimately concluded that China lacked a true utopian literary tradition.

This view has been challenged by Chinese scholars. Zhang Longxi points out that Kumar's argument is based largely on secondary Western sources and overlooks the secular nature of Confucian culture. Classical Chinese thought had already produced utopian visions such as the Great Unity and the Daoist ideal of small, self-sufficient communities. Texts such as *The Book of Rites*, *Liezi*, and Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* articulated ideal societies, though they remained literary imaginings rather than blueprints for social reform.

The key distinction lies in the concept of "modern utopia." Western modern utopias emerged from the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery, characterized by secularism, rational planning, and institutional design. In contrast, traditional utopias—both Western and Chinese—were largely mythical, nostalgic, and detached from practical implementation. Scholars such as Hertzler and Touraine have proposed various typologies, but a consensus has yet to be reached.

This study adopts a flexible definition: traditional utopias are marked by religious or mythological elements, vague structures, and an orientation toward an imagined past or alternative space, whereas modern utopias emphasize rational design, social organization, and historical progress. While modern utopia emerged in the West, China gradually developed its own variant through the hybridization of indigenous traditions and imported ideas.

3. The Localization of Utopian Thought in China

3.1 The Introduction and Translation of "Utopia"

The term "utopia" was first introduced into Chinese discourse by Yan Fu in 1895 during his translation of *Evolution and Ethics*. He rendered the concept as "乌托邦," combining phonetic approximation with the classical notion of "乌有之乡" (a non-existent land). Although the original English text did not explicitly use "utopia," Yan's translation creatively synthesized Western concepts with Chinese philosophical traditions.

Yan Fu further elaborated on the term in his translation of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, defining utopia as an imagined society pursuing prosperity and equality. Meanwhile, Liang Qichao experimented with alternative translations based on Buddhist concepts such as "Huayan Realm," though these failed to gain widespread acceptance. By the 1930s, "乌托邦" had become the standardized term in Chinese discourse.

The transmission of utopian ideas was further facilitated by translations of Western and Japanese political novels. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, translated by Timothy Richard as *A Dream of One Hundred Years*, exerted significant influence by blending socialist ideals with Confucian moral philosophy. This work directly inspired Kang Youwei's *Book of Great Unity* and Liang Qichao's *Future of New China*.

3.2 Formation of Modern Chinese Utopian Literature

Scholars generally regard Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* (1902) as the starting point of modern Chinese utopian literature. The period from 1902 to 1911 marked its peak, coinciding with national crises following the Sino-Japanese War and the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform. Utopian writing became a vehicle for national salvation and ideological experimentation.

Unlike Western utopias, which often depict isolated communities, Chinese utopian narratives centered on the nation-state. They emphasized political reform, social transformation, and collective destiny. These works can be categorized into several types: constitutional monarchist utopias, republican utopias, moral utopias grounded in Confucian ethics, and cosmopolitan visions influenced by socialism and universalism.

Chinese utopian literature also differed in narrative structure. Rather than imagining distant islands, authors projected visions into the future, constructing temporal utopias that reflected aspirations for national rejuvenation. This temporal orientation transformed utopia into a tool of political critique and ideological mobilization.

4. Characteristics and Internal Contradictions of Chinese Utopian Literature

Chinese utopian literature exhibits strong political consciousness and pronounced ideological hybridity. Its internal contradictions manifest in several dimensions.

First, ideological eclecticism led to textual inconsistency. Conflicting doctrines—constitutionalism, socialism, Confucianism—often coexisted within a single work, producing conceptual tension.

Second, narrative incompleteness was common. Many works were left unfinished or employed open endings, reflecting both the urgency of historical circumstances and the difficulty of reconciling idealism with reality.

Third, logical paradoxes emerged from attempts to reconcile technological modernity with traditional moral order. Some texts envisioned authoritarian governance in the name of moral perfection, inadvertently anticipating dystopian outcomes. For example, Kang Youwei's *Book of Great Unity* proposed extensive social control in pursuit of equality, echoing themes later explored in Western dystopian literature.

Finally, Chinese utopian literature often reproduced imperial or colonial logic in reverse. Works such as *New Era* imagined China as a future global hegemon, reflecting a psychological response to national humiliation. This duality—resistance to imperialism coupled with internalized imperial logic—constitutes a central paradox of Chinese utopian imagination.

5. Conclusion

Modern and contemporary Chinese utopian literature represents a complex and dynamic intellectual tradition shaped by cultural inheritance, historical crisis, and ideological negotiation. From the pastoral idealism of *Peach Blossom Spring* to the politically charged visions of late Qing reformers, utopia functioned as a symbolic space for articulating national aspiration, cultural identity, and historical anxiety.

Although often criticized for its idealism and internal contradictions, Chinese utopian literature reveals the deep entanglement between literary imagination and socio-political transformation. Its hybridity—blending Confucian ethics, Western modernity, and nationalist discourse—constitutes a distinctive form of utopian expression. As such, it offers invaluable insight into China's modern intellectual trajectory and continues to provide a critical framework for reflecting on the relationship between idealism and reality.

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