

<CT>A Nostalgic Return to the Future: The Utopian Dialectic in Hao Jingfang's *Vagabonds*

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<ABT>ABSTRACT</ABT>

<ABTXT>As one of the most representative writers of contemporary Chinese science fiction, Hao Jingfang is well known for her world-building that blends the characteristics of both utopia and dystopia, especially in *Vagabonds*. In line with the classic utopian dialectic in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, Hao Jingfang has also set up two opposing worlds: the libertarian Earth that welcomes market competition and individualistic pursuit for capital and the egalitarian Martian Republic built upon scarcity and under the supervision of a central archive system that provides social welfare and protection. However, neither of the two societies is "perfect" enough to be called a true utopia. People in both societies see the other world as the negation of their own, though this, again, simply traps them in an unending cycle of "negating to negation." Through such a process of negative hermeneutic, *Vagabonds* provides a dialectical paradigm with which to interrogate China's postsocialist transition since the 1990s while invoking a utopian hope for a post-postsocialist alternative for China.</ABTXT>

<KW>KEYWORDS: CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION, HAO JINGFANG, *VAGABONDS*, UTOPIAN DIALECTIC, NEGATION

In a *Utopian Studies* article published in 2015, Roland Boer and Zhixiong Li propose an innovative investigation of China's political and economic context since the 1990s, based on Bloch's idea of the contemporaneity of noncontemporaneity and Jameson's perception of utopia as "a Marxist negative hermeneutic."¹ While introducing a dialectical process in which "dystopia may arise from utopia, and the very definition of utopia requires a dystopian

presence or at the least the threat thereof,” they connect this dialectic to “the tension between socialism and capitalism” in the postsocialist China, which resulted from “the continued presence of capitalism within socialist construction and reform.”² As a sociopolitical study, Boer and Li’s article has indeed demonstrated a certain degree of theoretical originality, to the extent that they manage to bring together the rather unusual form of market economy in China—which, in David Harvey’s words, “increasingly incorporates neoliberal elements interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control”—and Tom Moylan’s concept of “critical utopia.”³

However, Boer and Li’s approach would become less innovative in the domain of contemporary Chinese science fiction (sf). The doubleness of utopia and dystopia has been frequently adopted as a trope by a group of the “New Wave” sf writers in China, most notably in Han Song’s novels including *Red Star over America* (2000), *Red Ocean* (2004), and his “Hospital” trilogy (2016–18).⁴ Apart from Han Song, writers such as Liu Cixin, Chen Qiufan, and Hao Jingfang, among others, have configured various forms of “critical utopia” and been interrogating the utopia/dystopia dialectic in the Chinese society through their own versions of the social, political, ideological, or even ontological alternatives in sf stories. In this way, contemporary Chinese sf narratives are entangled with the cultural politics of a changing China and able to “[mix] sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China’s potential for further reform.”⁵ Among this cohort of New Wave writers, Hao Jingfang stands out, most notably because of her achievement of winning the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette with “Folding Beijing.” But beyond her Hugo Award, she is also well known for elaborating the inherent ambiguity between utopia and dystopia, and blurring the boundary between the bright and the dark side of the “social dreaming” that Sargent argued was one of the characteristics of utopianism, where fond dreams and nightmares can be easily turned into the other.⁶

The utopian visions in Hao Jingfang's own stories are corroborated by her acceptance speech during the 2016 Hugo award ceremony. She stated,

<ext>Science fiction writers like to take all possibilities into account, good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate. [. . .] In "Folding Beijing," I also gave a scenario of a possible future that tried to tackle problems brought by automation, technological progress, unemployment, inequality and economic stagnation.⁷

The "First Space" in "Folding Beijing" is portrayed with a utopian outlook, but as readers may find out, it is utopian only because it is built on the other side of the dystopian "Third Space." Under such a spatial and temporal co-existence, this compressed society provides a critical stance to tackle the problems Hao Jingfang mentioned in her Hugo speech. Apart from "Folding Beijing," she has elaborated her utopian ideas more thoroughly and comprehensively in her longer stories—most remarkably, *Vagabond (Liulang Cangqiong, 2016)*.⁸ Here, the "tension" between capitalism and socialism that Boer and Li have identified in China is embodied in a dialectic between two worlds, namely the libertarian Earth where everything is quantified by capital and sold in the market and the egalitarian Martian Republic governed through various syndicalist working units called "atelier."

However, neither of the two societies is perfect enough to be considered a true utopia that prevails upon the other. This in many ways resembles the classic interplanetary dialectic formulated by Ursula Le Guin in *The Dispossessed* (1974) between Urras and Anarres. Therefore, in this article, with certain intertextual references to Le Guin's novel, I will argue that the Earth–Mars dialectic in Hao Jingfang's *Vagabonds* forms a utopian narrative space to examine the negative hermeneutics. These lead to various forms of "doubleness" of utopia and dystopia, of the libertarian and egalitarian social discourse, which further indicates the duality of market values and state supervision during China's postsocialist transition.

<1>The Martian Republic: The Last Utopia of Humankind

The Martian Republic in *Vagabonds* initially appears with a utopian façade. It is built on a virtual central archive system, where the artistic and scientific creations of every single resident can be shared, accessed, circulated, referred, and respected without any manmade barrier in the name of marketing schemes, IP protection, competitions of profitability, and so on. “All of our incomes,” says Janet who works for the Martian Film Archive, “are set based on age, regardless of [. . .] our accomplishments. All of our films are uploaded to the central archive, and anyone is allowed to view them without paying for the privilege. *Money isn't something we worry about*” (68, emphasis added). In this way, it forms an enclave where the Martians may stay away from the commercial ecstasy on Earth, away from that dreamland of consumerism, in which “everyone sold, bought, hid their own creations, and then enticed others with revelation of these secrets for money” (71).

Unlike the pro-capitalist Earth, the Martian Republic operated in an anti-capitalist manner. “Here the land was literally a thing of the people, managed for the commonweal. There was no private ownership in real estate, no smuggling, no buying on credit, no banking” (38–39). The Martians are all affiliated to the “ateliers” that they had chosen in their youths for the rest of their lives, producing the sense of stability and certainty. With these ateliers, the Martians believe they could be free from “worrying about the basic necessities of life,” from the will of capital, and from selling one’s “creative freedom for money” (179) for a quantitative measurement. In other words, it is the ateliers that guarantee their life-long career and social protections—or even determine their very existence in the Martian Republic—since their identities cannot be recognized by the central archive without registration to one of the ateliers. Those who refused to register would always be “someone standing outside the system” (123).

These ateliers, in this way, “had multiple social, political, and economic functions and [offered] a permanent ‘membership’ of workers with lifetime employment,” resembling the “work unit” or “*danwei*” commonly adopted by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), government departments, schools, and hospitals, which had played an indispensable role in urban China during the Mao era.⁹ Along with the market-oriented reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping since the 1990s, however, the “lifetime employment,” usually referred to as “the Iron Rice Bowl,” as well as a bundle of guaranteed social livelihoods including housing, health care, childcare and education, gradually withered away, and was replaced by short-term contracts. The collectivist sense of state protection gave way to an appeal to individual responsibilities. But unlike the real day *danwei* in the postsocialist China, the ateliers of the Martian Republic in *Vagabonds* have not lost their power. Throughout the story, they have been playing an indispensable role in maintaining the stability of the central archive system, particularly because of the environmental scarcity on Mars and its efficiency in distributing limited resources (nevertheless, such a stability promised by the ateliers does not go unchallenged, as explained later in this article). Thanks to the “fair, open, transparent distribution of resources,” these Martian work units could then guarantee that “everyone receives what they should—not one penny more, not one penny less. No secrets or omissions” (128). Quite successfully, the Martian Republic manages to prevent the collectively owned wealth from being accumulated by private hands, a process of privatization deemed as the source of “corruption, hoarding, and greed” (129), as the root cause of “the terminal disease plaguing Earth” (29) to which Mars could provide an antidote.

In Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), he argues that the utopian thought experiment may provide “[non-]alienated enclaves [that] suddenly light up in our hitherto contaminated environment.”¹⁰ In *Vagabonds* Mars should be seen as such a Jamesonian “enclave” free from the “contaminated environment” of the commercial revelry

on Earth, which is made possible through Hao Jingfang's separation of the two seemingly disparate ideologies onto two planets. The Martian Republic, originally a colony of Earth, is founded with a military revolution against its Terran colonizers, some forty years before the story, launched by a group of ex-Terran scientists who grew disappointed by their market-prioritized mechanism that put corporate financial statements ahead of individuals. They wish to establish "*a completely free world* in which everyone was free to explore and discover, free to share their creations in the central archive, free to use the creations of others, supported by a stipend" (478, emphasis added). Such a historical rupture between the representation of "private property and exploitation" and that of "egalitarianism and communitarianism" refers to a form of "determinate negation of [the] past," which is the negation of the Martians' history of being colonized by the Terrans as well as their economized values of market. This form of "negation of the past" is not strange to sf studies, as it is evident in the dialectic between Anarres and Urras in Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974).¹¹

The Dispossessed is well known for its configuration of experimental sociopolitical alternatives. In contrast to the abundant, pro-capitalist and market-driven Urrasti society, Anarres (built on scarcity) appears capital-free and is thus considered "a powerful and timely rebuke to present-day attempts to parlay American abundance and consumer goods into some ultimate vision of the 'great society.'" ¹² With the "barren, arid and inchoate" scenes on Anarres in which "human solidarity is [the] only resource of [the Anarresti]," ¹³ Le Guin proposes a utopian hypothesis in response to Marx's and Trotsky's concerns: whether an egalitarian society can ever be realized without overwhelming material abundance. This "human solidarity" that Le Guin speaks of via Shevek chimes with Hao Jingfang's Martian Republic, whose revolution against Earth bursts out mainly because of the rebels' "dissatisfaction with the way various factions on Mars [under Earth's domination] had been

hoarding information, erecting walls to contain knowledge” (362). They believe that “to survive in the harsh environment of Mars required the free sharing and exchange of discoveries and inventions” (363)—a Martian solidarity of knowledge sharing. In this way, through the “surgical excision of empirical reality,” where the power of capital is taking over the world, Le Guin reveals “the inseparability of utopia and scarcity” and proposes the possibility of developing egalitarianism in a barren world not an abundant one.¹⁴ In fact, Hao Jingfang does the same with her *Vagabonds*.

In line with the radical rupture between past and future, which “separates Anarres from Urras and is supposed to have revealed the meaning of history,” the Martian revolution in *Vagabonds* also indicates a destruction of the remaining connection to the old and calls for “a completely new society” (361).¹⁵ Like the egalitarians on Anarres who claimed to have broken with the libertarian ideology from the old world and “determined to insulate [themselves] as completely as possible from Urrasti corruption and injustice,” people of the Martian Republic have also established an insular world, isolated and ruptured from the consumerist fervor of Earth.¹⁶ “The free world,” built upon the central archive and the atelier system, gradually grows out of their drastic refusal of the market power and the sense of fluidity on Earth. In this way, this free world is pictured as “the *last utopia* of humankind, a place where crude commercial interests yielded to pure intellect” (23, emphasis added), a utopia formed on central planning and the network of the communitarian ateliers. Therefore, it seems that the historical rupture of the Martian Republic from its market-driven counterpart, made possible by the central archive and the fictional version of the *danwei* system (whose power is in decline in reality), can be considered a nostalgic return to China’s past, before the arrival of its postsocialist modernity.

But again, this “nostalgic return” is by no means a simple restoration of the fading history. Interestingly, among the characters in *Vagabonds*, the person seeing the egalitarian

Martian Republic as a utopia, that is the documentary director Eko, is in fact a Terran resident. He resents his own market-driven home, acting as an embodiment of those who have been suffering from the retreat of state from welfare provision, the shift from “relying on the state” to “relying on one’s self,” the fading of the socialist sense of stability, and the emerging uncertainty and fluidity brought forth by the power of market in the postsocialist China. It is also Eko who considers Mars “the last utopia” and the “medicine” to cure the terminal disease (a disease transmitted through market) plaguing his own planet (29).

Therefore, while the market ecstasy on the fictional Earth can be read as a literary representation—one of the competitive and calculative logic of capital that is penetrating into various social and cultural domains in the post-socialist China—the “medicine” that Eko looks for is not the socialist past, but a post-postsocialist future, an alternative to the “capitalist realism” that finds itself increasingly dynamic in contemporary China.

From the Blochian perspective where the utopian impulse is to invoke the hope for the “not-yet,” Mars can indeed serve as a place of hope in Hao Jingfang’s novel. It is an experiment to conceptualize a certain vision of utopia out of the wasteland contaminated by competitive market principles. This “utopian” vision anchored in people’s disenchantment with this postsocialist condition that allows for large-scale privatization and is governed by the all-encompassing rules of market competition, appealing to an alternative to this pro-capitalist “paradise.” Therefore, such a critique against China’s increasing engagement with market principles stands for a Hegelian process of “[negating] the negation of utopia by the forces of twentieth century history.”¹⁷ This is a statement that Tom Moylan originally made to interpret *The Dispossessed* but can also be applied to *Vagabonds* in the context of twenty-first-century history. Here, Hao Jingfang endeavors to formulate an enclave of hope accommodating what can be called the post-postsocialist possibilities. This synchronic dialectic between Earth and Mars, each representing a different period on the spectrum of the

Chinese history (either as an “already” or a “not-yet”) embedded in different places/planets, reconfirms Jameson’s proposition of sf as “a spatial genre” where “we can observe a significant displacement in our reading interest from narrative in that sense, with its linear causality, toward spatial experience as such.”¹⁸ Sf will find expression as a genre of “utopian hermeneutics,” as with Hao Jingfang and her *Vagabonds*, in the Chinese sf New Wave.

<1>Negating the Negation: A Nostalgic Return to the Future

This process of “negating the negation,” this “spatial” extrapolation conceptualizing various historical alternatives, which relates *Vagabonds* to *The Dispossessed*, will never be conclusive. Since neither Urras or Anarres is flawless, the protagonist Shevek in *The Dispossessed* eventually comes to understand that “utopia is not about achieving perfection but about the quest for an egalitarian, communal society—a quest whose value lies in *working for* the goals of equality, liberty, and communalism, rather than in achieving them.”¹⁹ Through his tentative movements back and forth between the two worlds, Shevek perceives this dialect as a utopia of *process*, an unending process. Such a hesitation between two different (even opposite) possibilities can also be identified in Luoying, Shevek’s counterpart in *Vagabonds*, who was born in the Martian Republic, is sent to Earth at the age of thirteen and returns to Mars five years later. Witnessing both worlds like Shevek, Luoying develops troubling doubts over the seemingly utopian society that Eko sees as the last hope for humanity. Hao Jingfang borrowed a quote from Saint-Exupéry’s *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939): “A simple village in our homeland would hide itself from us in the same manner. If we do not renounce the rest of the world for its sake [. . .] we cannot understand why it is someone’s homeland” (262). She seals Luoying’s fate “to be *vagabond*.” Mars, from Luoying’s distant point of view, becomes problematic, turning into an illusionary homeland to which she can no longer truly return.

In this way, along with the utopia formulated through the Mars–Earth dialectic, there also emerged a paradise-lost, especially for Luoying. She has seen the alternative, and thus her original hometown, the one regarded as a utopia in her memories, ceases to be. In the prologue, Hao Jingfang writes:

<ext>Once, a group of children was born on one world and grew up on another.

The world they were born into was a tower of rigid rules; the world they grew up on was a garden of rambling disorder. One was a magnificent, austere blueprint; the other was a wild bacchanalia. [. . .]

What had been put together in the tower was smashed to bits in the garden, what had been forgotten in drunken revelry was still memorialized in the blueprint. Those who lived only in the tower never suffered the loss of faith; those who lived only for the pursuit of pleasure had no vision to strive for. Only those who had wandered through both worlds could experience that particular stormy night in which distant mirages faded away and countless strange flowers blossomed in the wasteland. (3)

With such a Dickensian (as in *A Tale of Two Cities*) opening, Hao Jingfang directs us to the point she is trying to make in her own tale—“the tale of the fall of the last utopia” (4). She implies a sense of disenchantment of the seemingly utopian Martian Republic that Luoying has gradually developed during her visit on Earth. This “disenchantment” is marked by Luoying’s dialectical perception of the contradictory ideologies on the two planets. In response to Eko’s anti-capitalist resentment of the “religion of consumerism” on Earth (175), Luoying retorts from a different perspective. She believes the so-called desire to consume that Eko blames for creating commodity fetishism is in fact the pursuit of individual uniqueness, a pursuit that would be otherwise overwhelmed by a sense of centrality and

arrangement enshrined by the Martian Republic. She proceeds to justify her Terran friends' consumerist behaviors as a way of determining their own identity as differentiated from others: "Even though they were shaped by their surroundings, they want to be unique. [. . .] They can't choose the world they live in, or how that world operates, but they want to live their own lives, to find out who they are" (175).

I wish to clarify that Luoying's rebuttal does not reglorify the libertarian and market-based Earth itself. As indicated later in *Vagabonds*, Hao Jingfang is very much aware that the ostensible consumerist freedom and individual "uniqueness" the Terrans strive for are still confined within the domain of the market. The seemingly kaleidoscopic reality on Earth enriched by the countless choices promised by various forms of commodities (including artistic creations) follows a "big supermarket" logic, where "everything had the same content, the same packaging, the same themes and subjects that had been done a million times" (reminding us of the Jamesonian "pastiche" in postmodern and postindustrial society). Only in this way, as Hao Jingfang configures for the Terran society, can a film, or any other product created for consumption, become a "blockbuster" (223) and be considered successful. Even though Eko has launched a left-winged countermovement against these "big supermarkets," rejecting market preferences and producing the works favored by "minorities" and for the "artisanal market," he eventually realizes that in so doing he is not at all resisting the process of commodification but only "strengthen[ing] it" (224).

Luoying is also aware of the hypocrisy of the market in its claim for the individual uniqueness, because the repetitive, noncreative nature of cultural and artistic production that Eko has identified on Earth is exactly what she also feels is flawed. No matter how dynamic she might find her life on Earth could be, Luoying could not forget "the sense of sacredness in the act of *creation*, planted deep in her heart by her homeland" (151, emphasis added). It is, after all, such a treasured "act of creation" protected by the central archive that forms the

core of the egalitarian Martian Republic, through which the true, unalienated freedom can be realized.

But Luoying does not find it truly free. Having seen the diversity of people's livelihood colored by the numerous options of commodities, she is not able anymore "to imagine [herself] living the life [she] was *assigned* to" (177, emphasis added). Instead, Luoying proposes to challenge the rigidity of the Republic's atelier system—a system of state arrangement and assignment that would, both in theory and in practice, guarantee their social stability. She says to Eko, in a regretful tone:

<ext>You don't know that an atelier is for life. Though switching isn't forbidden, it's extremely rare for anyone on Mars to change ateliers. Everyone climbs the career ladder rung by rung, spending a whole life within the confines of two parallel lines. If I had never been to Earth, I suppose it wouldn't bother me. But I have been there. You know the lifestyle of everyone on Earth: free to come and go, free to hop from profession to profession. I've grown used to that kind of life, filled with fluidity and experiments. I don't want to live in a pyramid. (177)

With a sense of disenchantment over the utopian Martian Republic, Luoying appeals to "shatter what has ossified," (387) to "untether people from their ateliers so that they can move about freely" (389) and to "advocate for the free transfer of housing" (456) that used to be dependent on people's marital status and their atelier affiliations. She begins to question whether Mars and Earth, in essence, are truly different beneath the surface elements such as the political and economic structures, people's lifestyles, the dominant ideologies, and so on. Despite all these superficial differences, Luoying realizes that the underpinning philosophy that has been implicitly guiding the two societies is, rather surprisingly, the same—that of competition and calculation.

This competitive and calculative logic is clearly apparent in the market-empowered society on Earth. The new technologies introduced from Mars would be first tested out not in scientific labs, but in the stock market, rendered as the futures and options for selling and buying based on self-centric calculations of financial games. Each artistic creation had an extremely limited turnover period, competing for market acceptance and profit. As Eko finds out, everything, when entering the market, “was like a bottle of milk with an expiration date. Unless it found a buyer, it would be mercilessly removed from the shelves and thrown away. Three days, or maybe thirty days; commerce or death” (100). This, once again, echoes Wendy Brown’s summary of the expansion of market values, that is “the financialization of everything and the increasing dominance of finance capital over productive capital in the dynamics of the economy and everyday life,” and the normative socioeconomic structure where “competition replaces exchange as the market’s root principle and basic good.”²⁰

As mentioned earlier, the Martian Republic was founded in the hope of building “a completely new society” (361), a hope to break with all market competitions and financial calculations. However, even though they have established the central archive and the atelier system to avoid the privatization of the public/collective capital and the means of production (129), the Martians are never far away from the same logic on Earth, which is rendered in a different manner. The competition is not directly among the individual-enterprises as in market-based societies, but initially between different ateliers, namely the *danwei* that is supposed to protect them. Since their annual budgets are centrally allocated and supervised based on the degree of success of the project each atelier has proposed, “the competition for the next year’s budget is a critical moment for each atelier” (289) and would influence the fate of everyone in the group. Therefore, the Martian Republic can be seen as “a carefully managed enterprise in which the return on every investment and the potential for loss in every eventuality are calculated to three decimal places” (289).

In this way, the entrepreneurial impulse on Earth is also evident in the competition of budget-bidding among the Martian ateliers, which themselves can be considered independent “enterprises” clinging to a calculative balance between cost and profit. During this process, unfortunately but inevitably, forgery and bluffing appear, because to win a share of the budget, “[an atelier] must make bold pronouncements and airy promises [. . .] the higher the costs of production for a project, the higher the allocated share of the budget” (370). The individuals affiliated to these ateliers are coerced in such an environment. They also compete in their own game of gaining a higher citation rate in the central archive for their own works and are not encouraged by their sheer interests in scientific exploration, artistic creation, or “creative expression and wisdom” (388). Instead, for most people involved in this competition, if not all, the citation rate they attempt to boost could lead the way toward a greater reputation and a higher rank within their atelier hierarchy. They would then be entitled to more resources and public acknowledgment. In other words, the citation rate is the Martian capital although the reward of competition on Mars, whether among the ateliers or individuals, is not necessarily in a monetary form like that on Earth. The motivation in this process of self-recognition and self-promotion still reminds us of Michel Feher’s perception of “self-appreciation” as a fundamental feature of “human capital” in a fully economized social structure.²¹

Underneath the utopian vision of the Martian Republic seemingly built upon equality, stability, and even distribution, “the only thing that matters is [still] selfish gain” (388). The egalitarian garden that Luoying used to be proud of appears to be compromised at its very root. But even so, even with such rather painful revelations, Luoying does not ask for a regime change through a full-scale adoption of the libertarian values stimulating the commercial dynamism on Earth. Nor does she promote overturning the Republic once and for all to establish anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism to free up the ateliers from the rigid

constraint of the budget allocation. Instead, she proposes moderate reforms, increasing the “fluidity” for people to transfer from one atelier to another, to exchange their house with others, and, in general, to detach the responsibilities of welfare provision and social protection from the ateliers and introduce individual incentives.

Such a scheme that Luoying fights for does not sound strange to Chinese readers. It reflects, in a realistic way, on China’s postsocialist transformation in terms of housing and the *danwei* compounds. For housing, according to John Gittings, it has indeed “encouraged social mobility” in the post-Deng era, when “millions of [urban residents], obliged to leave public housing due for redevelopment, bought apartments of their own [. . . whereas] those who already owned their own homes in the cities were able to sell without incurring official disapproval.”²² In a similar vein, the “organized dependency” of the *danwei*-affiliated workers, who “relied on their respective work unit so much that they even developed a work-unit identity and a culture of personal dependence on their work unit and their leaders,” has also dissolved during China’s historical transition.²³ Along with the systematic denationalization targeted at the *danwei* compounds, what was also challenged in this era was a special socialist concept “*bianzhi*,” referring to the *authorized* number of *established* working posts in Party and government administrative apparatus, public institutions (*shiye danwei*) such as public hospitals, schools, universities, research institutes, state-run media, and SOEs. In recent decades, the *bianzhi* system has become increasingly “redundant” during the ongoing marketisation and decentralization.²⁴ The fixed, presettled working posts supervised directly by the state were gradually replaced with conditionally renewable contracts, first among the SOEs, and then in the domain of education and health care.

Therefore, the reform advocated by Luoying is more like an appeal for a movement of “individualization” based on the central archive and the atelier system that already exist in the Martian Republic. It calls, in fact, for an internal change. This would increase social

mobility and fluidity, while maintaining the Republic's efficiency in allocating resources and its roles in preventing Mars from the "contamination" of the market (in the Jamesonian sense), which Hao Jingfang mentioned in her Hugo award ceremony—"the disparities of wealth that are growing wider and faster." With *Vagabonds* and the dialectic between Earth and Mars, Hao Jingfang reveals the significance of individualization which, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, "carries the emancipation of the individual from the ascribed, inherited and inborn determination of his or her social character [. . . and] consists in transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task.'"²⁵ But meanwhile, the Martian Republic, as the consequence of its de facto historical rupture with the former libertarian regime from Earth, would never travel backwards. A utopia itself, it has indeed invoked the hope for an alternative and a supposedly better world for the left-wingers on Earth. But it is also an ambiguous utopia open for challenge and introspection. Thus it invokes its own hope for the Blochian sense of "not-yet."

<1>Conclusion: A Mobius Loop

A utopia upon another utopia; a negation to another negation. Luoying does not realize this point until she learns that what she is opposing is exactly what her late parents supported at the cost of life, that is "the fairness of absolute equal distribution" (532). What she proposes is what her grandfather rebelled at the start of everything. She comes to understand that "there are only two systems in the world: the solid and the liquid" (472), each at the opposite ends of the same spectrum and neither flawless. The process of "negating the negation" is endless, reminding us of Shevek's never-complete journey in *The Dispossessed* and leading herself to the permanent residence on neither of the planets but on the spaceship drifting in between. In so doing, with the ability of comprehending both worlds, Luoying has become a forever vagabond by the end of *Vagabonds*, forever trying to formulate a "truer" sense of

freedom and forever envisioning a new utopia upon the fall of old ones. The dialect between the libertarian Earth and the egalitarian Martian Republic, between “the garden of rambling order” and “the tower of rigid rules,” and between the liquid system and the solid system, will never be truly completed. There would always be someone living in one world while thinking of the other. Through their longings for change, the two sides of the dialect will then become an unending process of negation to negation, like a Mobius loop for which one side is at the same time the other and through which the other can be traveled to. The doubleness of utopia and dystopia that Boer and Li identified in contemporary China is therefore not only a representation of the tension between socialism and capitalism but it can, more importantly, invoke a utopian hope for a post-socialist alternative that may solve the problems Hao Jingfang mentioned during her Hugo Award acceptance speech.

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1 Roland Boer and Zhixiong Li, “Interpreting Socialism and Capitalism in China: A Dialectic of Utopia and Dystopia,” *Utopian Studies* 26, no. 2 (2015): 310–23; Fredric

Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 296.

2 Boer and Li, “Interpreting Socialism and Capitalism in China,” 310.

3 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 120; Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. Raffaella Baccolini (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 10.

4 The Chinese SF New Wave is the most recent sf renaissance in China, usually dated back to Liu Cixin’s 1989 short story “China 2185.” For New Wave, see Song Mingwei, “After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction,” *China Perspectives* 101, no. 1 (2015): 7–13. Utopian/dystopian narratives are not unique to contemporary Chinese sf. The motifs of utopianism and dystopianism, and their influences on China’s cultural dynamism, emerged as early as the late-Qing period. For early Chinese sf, see Nathaniel Isaacson, *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017); Song Mingwei, “Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese SF,” *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (2013): 86–102. Before the most recent sf renaissance since the 1990s, utopianism and dystopianism have always played an indispensable role in Chinese sf throughout its history. For Chinese sf from 1945 to 1965, see Nicolai Volland, *Socialist Cosmopolitanism: The Chinese Literary Universe, 1945–1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 96–123. For Chinese sf during the 1980s, see Li Hua, *Chinese Science Fiction during the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

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