



关

曲美陶

guān

1. To close
2. To detain
3. To pass
4. A frontier (a controlled passage)
5. Relation (family/connections)

Introduction

**I**

进关 jìn guān

Passing the Checkpoint

**II**

出关 chū guān

Exiting the Border

**III**

入关 rù guān<sup>1</sup>

Entering the Fortress

**IV**

回观 huí guān

Looking Back



## Introduction

*There is something I dislike in heaven; I do not want to go there.  
There is something I dislike in Hell; I do not want to go there. There  
is something I dislike in your future golden world; I do not want to go  
there.*

*- Lu Xun, Wild Grass, 1927*

The subject of a 'China at the crossroads' has been a question posed time and time again by western media and scholarship since the turn of the 21st century. Where is China headed? Which path will the country take? Much like the early outlook regarding the internet's democratising potential, optimism has deteriorated into widespread anxiety, transforming narratives of the nation into a dystopic Sci-Fi. Between '5000' years of ancient China and less than fifty years of contemporary China (1979-), the temporality of the country has once again shifted, hurled into the future in popular cultural imaginations.

What does it mean for 'sinofuturism' to be a western-born concept that is largely unknown in the People's Republic? Are these projections part of a digitised rendition of age-old orientalist fantasies, or are they the consequence of the country's transformation into a technological powerhouse? A new chapter has been written in the latest formulation

of the Chinese Dream. As a glorious civilisation rising from the ashes, the nation's shining future is legitimised via a trip down its memory lane.

Meanwhile, as cities without skyscrapers fade into the past, how are Chinese citizens negotiating life in this new era? Who are the ones experiencing its impacts? Recounting personal stories of growing up in Shenzhen, the city is traversed not only as a physical place, but also as an institution, an imagined space, and a site of memory. By bringing together contradictory feelings and perspectives, the following pages attempt to draw out some of the misunderstandings that inform their conflict.





# 鸿福满园













## I

### Passing the Checkpoint

It's the '80s. Picture a preppy young woman in a turquoise dress wearing a matching vinyl sun visor. Now imagine a hefty man beside her with longish black hair sitting on a Kawasaki 125cc, whose smile is comprised of more gaps than teeth. Following an ordinary tale of office romance, the happy couple gives birth to not one, but two children. At nursery, all the other mums shower her with envy - 'Imagine having a boy and a girl!'

For the first five years of my life, I was a *heihaizi* - an unregistered person born outside the one-child policy. The loose enforcement of the law in Guangdong due to local customs of having large families, paired with my parents' financial success as part of the emerging entrepreneurial class, meant that there was little repercussion on their lives and mine. In preparation, they moved to the outskirts of the city, away from the prying eyes of the subdistrict offices to an intersection between Nanyou and Shekou referred to as *sanbuguan* (three regardless), a no man's land that was outside either jurisdiction.

According to my mum, I was a *louwang zhiyu*, a fish that slipped through the net, a crime that evaded the law. In the hospital I was born, my dad remembers seeing a doctor badly beaten by the family

of a woman he performed an abortion on. Back then, you needed a certificate of permission in order to conceive in the first place. After becoming 'acquainted' with the doctors who delivered my brother, my mum gave birth to me without official approval. But the next part was the hardest. How were they going to register me? Ask any Chinese person and they will tell you that household registration is no joke. The distinction between rural and urban *hukou* (individual registration) could determine your life and without one, I wouldn't have been able to go to school. However, if they went through the official route, she would have to undergo sterilisation, which would ruin their plan of a potential third child. So instead, they chose to wait. And came that fateful year, when the local administrative bureau of Luohu failed to meet their quota of fines. Through a friend that worked there, I became a registered person at a discounted rate of 75000 yuan.

With a nine-year difference between my parents, my dad was by far the oldest dad around. My mum said that the only time he came to pick me up from kindergarten the teacher called out to me, 'hey, your grandpa is here to collect you!' And he never came again. As a child I often tried to imagine him in his youthful prime, but the picture tended to evade me. All that came to mind were shrouds of smoke around the mah-jong table, the clinking noises of pieces being pushed around, and the deep booming laughter of middle-aged men. But of course, beneath the macho tough man lay a sensitive soul. Every time someone asked me which parent I preferred, he'd flinch at my assured and unhesitant 'mama!' He had wanted a daddy's girl but apparently, I turned out too much like a boy. Nonetheless, I became somewhat of a surrogate as my

brother steadily grew away from his vision of a masculine son, and all's well that ends well.

I had a great life in Shenzhen. The city's subtropical climate and my sheltered upbringing gave me a childhood full of warmth and greenery. Rather than being made fun of as a mistake, I held my head high because I was a rarity. I was carefully planned and had to be paid for, which clearly meant that they wanted me more. Being both a girl and the younger sibling, my brother dreamt for the bin man to take me away forever.

Before my parents moved to hide the growing bump that was me, they lived in an area called 'Overseas Chinese town' (OCT), where we went to school. Bordering a country park, the school was like a massive jungle. Trees and plants sprawled across the buildings and shaded the pavements from the mid-summer sun. I would look up but see no sky, just densely covered leaves and the rhythmic hum of cicadas. As one of the earliest tourist development sites in the city, OCT was built from the ground up. Now classified as an AAAAA scenic area, the subdistrict is home to four adjacent theme parks, in the middle of which my parents lived. It used to be on the beach, my mum told me recently. Now Google tells me it's six kilometres from the sea. With Happy Valley across the road, Window of the World to the left, Splendid China and Folk Culture Village to the right, growing up in OCT was every kid's dream. There was entertainment everywhere you went, with a raised monorail that ran through the attractions, across the main intersection, and over on top of the shops. Maya beach on hot summer days, dim sum brunches at Portofino and glimmering

fireworks over Mt Fuji; it is as if happiness leaked from the walls of the parks, my memories are tinted with a ubiquitous joy.

‘The early bird gets the worm’ is one of my dad’s favourite sayings, I never realised how apt this phrase was for his own life story. The economic experiments of the Pearl River Delta were seismic projects which birthed the ‘miracles’ that facilitated the country’s extraordinary progress. From a sleepy village to China’s model city, Shenzhen represents the epitome of rags to riches and a testament to the limitless potential of the free market. Without a doubt, market economy has changed many lives for the better. Migrants could become millionaires, making ‘citizens’ out of ‘peasants.’<sup>2</sup> Like the gold rush, the dream was not just an empty rhetoric, but one that could genuinely be lived.



*Give Happiness*





Fast Mart



Fast Mart

Fast Food Restaurant



Pizaz Restaurants





A400

KADIWEI



## II

### Exiting the Border

Sadly, rosy Shenzhen didn't last forever. The city couldn't contain the great plans my parents had in store for us. While my brother was jet-setting from Paris to Singapore for his flourishing chess career, my stint in professional ballet was eclipsed by my mediocre natural talent. Too fat, too unflexible. I used to mentally replay Pizza Hut adverts as I daydreamed during morning practice, recalling how ironic it was that I was eating McDonalds on the day of the auditions. My one saving grace was that I could *chiku* (eat bitterness), which meant that all I was good at was enduring the pain. I was proud, but pride didn't fill my stomach. I still remember the intense adrenaline rush of sneaking to 7/11 with one-yuan bills from my dad's wallet.

Then in 2006, my life changed. And it was goodbye China and hello boarding school. I was willing to do anything to get out of ballet, so going halfway across the world didn't seem like too terrible of a deal, so long as I could snack. My parents hoped that by sending us so young, we would have the chance to integrate. They were half right. With three girls and fifty boys in my year, I was received with open arms though I could only say hello and yes. On the other hand, the shaved-head chess-playing chubby Chinese boy that was my brother didn't have it so easy. But after pushing a bully over and breaking his two front teeth,



they mostly left him alone. Despite three years of childish racism, I left that school with fond memories and countless versions of my name. But I had no idea what awaited me at an all-girls secondary school. All I will say is that it has instilled in me an irrational contempt for spoilt white girls. Trust me, it's ruined lots of things. I never even got to finish *Game of Thrones* because I still can't bring myself to watch Daenerys Targaryen without a profound urge to punch her in the face.

My resentful bitterness laid down an ongoing project of separating myself from *them*. I began periodically going through old family albums every time I was home. I'd sit for hours on the floor, flipping through pages after pages of miniature me as the memories of Shenzhen became my untainted haven. Kodak Gold gave me the warmth and saturation that cold grey England could not compete with. Through the pictures I narrated a blissful childhood, a period in which I was full, full of myself.

Essentially, I had peaked at age six. Due to a sudden policy change in primary school enrolment age, I became kindergarten famous after repeating the last year. The teachers liked me so much that I was both head dancer and lead MC for our graduation ceremony. And like my solo performance, I was the centre of my world and everything else faded into the background. I clutched onto these pictures as if they were a testament to something, and soon I came to remember Shenzhen as a time before everything went awry. Before I went to the UK and before I became Chinese; before they pulled their eyes at me and I learned to dislike my own image; before I heard my boyfriend say in the playground that he didn't want to kiss a Chinese girl; before

I was taught that our bodies are worth less because Chinese labour is cheap; before I became angry and started to fight back; before the hormones kicked in and I became a teenager.

But my trips down memory lane didn't end with my own stories. They went beyond me, through my parents, into pure imagination. My parents often spoke about the changes that were happening around them. The constant building, filling in of the sea, accelerated inflation and the deterioration of the environment. Most of all, they loved comparing their childhood to ours. Every year on my birthday my mum would always say, 'can you imagine we only got an extra egg on our noodles?' To which my dad would retort, 'you had it good, we only ate meat once a year!' And together they would reminisce at lengths about the old days, trying to one up each other's tales of hardship. But of course, my dad would always win, no way a Beijing princess could beat a peasant boy from the freezing borders of the North-East. I listened to these stories the same way I enjoyed cassette tapes of the Warring Kingdoms or picture books of lavish Greek myths. In retrospect, they probably should have waited a few years before giving me a book titled '101 classic fairy tales that will affect your child's life'. It wasn't a lie. The image of Karen's amputated dancing feet stayed with me for a long time. Also, it would have saved me from some playground awkwardness when I adamantly declared to my new British friends that the Little Mermaid dies with a broken heart.

Compared to the stacks on stacks of albums of my brother and I, there was only a thin blue photobook of my mum and a single image of my dad that recorded their lives before they became parents. I don't really

know what my dad looked like when he was young. The one lonely picture was taken at 16 before he went ‘down to the countryside,’<sup>3</sup> although he was already in the countryside. He describes himself as a timid and lanky child but by the time I knew him, he was a six-foot fifteen stone diabetic, a heavy drinker, a heavy smoker and a heavy gambler. With glasses that would turn black in the sun, he had a long goatee with no beard and big hands that were permanently bent from his time on the farm. He always blamed his diabetes on the farm; he said it was the grain that had stretched his stomach. As a teen, I obsessively searched for Quda Wopengtun, but only ever got as far as a pin on Baidu Maps that offered no street view. This ‘big shack’ of people who shared my surname became my land of peach blossoms, promising roots and belonging that I could fantasise about. But every time I looked upon an engraved plaque of a man who’s supposed to be our ancestor, all I could think was how he looked so much like Confucius.











### III

#### Entering the Fortress

At the turn of the twentieth century, intellectuals fervently condemned traditional culture as the cause of China's decay. At the turn of the twenty-first century, with Confucius resurrected as the heart and soul of the nation, most if not all political jargon derives its roots from some aspect of the great Chinese past. While the Dream and its plasticity defies any singular characterisation, the consistent reference to historical memory establishes nostalgia at the centre of structures of feeling. However, what is truly being yearned? A return to the dynastic era, or simply its mythologised tales of glory? As lost futures reverberated throughout the globe after 'the end of history', Svetlana Boym surmises that it was not necessarily the *ancien regime* that was being mourned, but the unrealised dreams of a now obsolete tomorrow.<sup>4</sup> The explosive boom of Cultural Revolution memorabilia in the 1990s is an example of such longing.<sup>5</sup>

However, in the wake of the new millennium, the future does not seem at all lost in China. With eyes set on reclaiming *tianxia* (all-under-heaven), pride has succeeded temperance as the national sentiment. Whether it be calling American senator Marsha Blackburn 'a lifetime bitch' or telling former UKIP leader Nigel Farage to 'wear a mask and stop talking shit', the chief Washington correspondent of China Daily

has kept the internet visibly entertained through his 'savage' responses to problematic tweets. Chen Weihua's seemingly whimsical comments belie a burgeoning shift in Chinese diplomacy, now with an added dash of belligerence. Gone are the days of the panda-gifting Confucianist, chat shit get banged has become the new Dao. 'Anyone who desecrates China has it coming, no matter how far away they may be' - this was the tagline of *Wolf Warrior II*, the highest grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema.

As such, it has become a truth universally acknowledged that the country's destiny is to become great, just as it was in the past. No longer strummed to the soundtrack of disco-style model operas, nostalgia for the future has transformed the Century of Humiliation to a mere dissonance in China's millennia-old song of harmony. In a world steeped in revival, neo-China arrives from the future perfect present. Nonetheless, China is not alone in the call to arms for revival. From Trump's 'Make America Great Again' and Vote Leave's 'Let's Take Back Control' to Erdogan's evocations of the Ottoman Empire and Abe's historical revisionism, 'never the twain shall meet'<sup>6</sup> rings hollow as East and West coalesces in search of lost time, yearning for the return to glory, or a fantasy age that never existed.

Despite firmly believing in the future of their nation, it is apparent that Chinese youths maintain a far more pessimistic outlook towards their own lives. In the last decade, the internet has witnessed the emergence of *diaosi* (dick hair), an initially derogatory epithet that has since turned into a self-ascribed identity, as well as *sang* subculture, an online community built on a shared sense of apathy and self-worthlessness.

In other words, to enshroud individual insecurities in the presumed certainty of the nation produces powerful feelings of mastery over our own unstable lives. If the destiny of China is to become great, then it is our destiny to become happy. The willingness to live in a dream state recalls Lu Xun's enduring paradigm of the Iron House, but this time from the perspective of the sleeping.<sup>7</sup> In an iron house without windows, many are asleep. Do you awaken them to their certain death, or do you let them die peacefully in their sleep? Presented with the dire situation, many might choose to go back to bed, and continue to dream more pleasant dreams.





A new hero is in town!  
fighting machete-wielding  
pirates under water  
click bam headshot  
and they all fall down

He laughs he cries  
he loves he hates  
he outdrinks the locals and  
beats them at football  
he pounds his chest like King  
Kong  
but is all a big act because  
really he is a sensitive man  
shedding a tear over his  
missing-presumed-dead lover

he'll protect you and never let  
you drive  
come on ladies get yourself a  
man that can do both

Die scum!  
Hail the Revolution!  
rebels without a cause mass  
shooting in peaceful streets  
black bodies falling serving  
cannon fodder

the lone wolf emerges  
saving nameless Africans from  
black-on-black violence

Incoming mixed-race Lara  
Croft  
she's brave she's hot she's a  
terrible driver  
crashes into a pile of disease-  
ridden corpses  
silent creatures closing in  
like an episode of the walking  
dead

you want food? Oh we have  
food  
zombie-party turned charity  
event

The US marine base is the  
safest place in the world  
Welcome to the American  
Consulate. Sorry we are  
closed

Channel switch to National  
Geographic  
three lions devour a zebra  
look your GIs are here to save  
you

Polystyrene dust bursting  
from foam bricks  
Retreat! Retreat!  
but not before she gives him a  
proper goodbye kiss  
and not before Aretha sings  
Amazing Grace  
damn swerve that tank like  
Mario kart  
you cheeky bastard  
short interlude  
we are now watching the 71st  
military parade

A European mercenary called  
Big Daddy  
is that not blasphemy  
People like you are always going  
to be inferior to me  
That's fucking history  
and we have arrived  
at the one liner that birthed this  
epic fantasy  
the Sick Man of Asia has stood up  
pounding the white man's temple  
with his own bullet

Is that an arm or a flag?  
a flag made out of an arm  
or an arm made for a flag  
announcing China's arrival  
through the language of  
Hollywood  
is this what red films would look  
like if they had budget and CGI  
maybe it's actually a satirical  
comedy  
it's just so meta that it got lost in  
translation











#### IV

#### Looking Back

‘Where does the city without gates begin?’<sup>8</sup> In 2016, the last checkpoint along the once militarised border that encircled the Shenzhen ‘Special Economic Zone’ (SEZ) came down, with the exception of Tongle which is being turned into a museum. Known as *erxianguan* (second-line frontier), the border enclosed the city like a quarantine zone, as if to barricade capitalist ideology within its walls. At the same time, the demolition of Baishizhou, the city’s largest urban village, was set in motion.<sup>9</sup> As a child, I knew neither of the checkpoints nor of the village that was less than a ten-minute drive from my school, hidden by a tall concrete wall next to Portofino and concealed by lushly landscaped hills behind Window of the World. Rem Koolhaas paradoxically declares that ‘the Generic City...is big enough for everybody...if it gets old it just self-destructs and renews.’<sup>10</sup> Of the 150,000 residents of Baishizhou, only the 2000 registered villagers will receive compensation for the redevelopment.

Excavating Shenzhen from my memories has been a process of deconstructive reconstruction. As I reassemble the images in the present and piece them into narratives, the bodily transforms into the spectral and nostalgia turns to revelation. The myth of the city unraveled as I learned what I did not see. Between utopia and dystopia,

dreams and nightmares, Shenzhen contains a plurality of perspectives that resists any singular characterisation. My parents' stories form the brick and mortar that make up the touted success of the 'Shenzhen Dream'. However, with the last of affordable housing ripped down by redevelopment, the Dream appears ever more out of reach.

There are countless images which evidence the city's unrivalled speed of development. There are also endless narratives which document the sacrificial labour that form the conditions of possibility for its prosperity. For the state, Shenzhen is the poster child of its SEZ model and the symbol of the nation's metamorphosis. For the critics, it's a dystopic amalgamation of global capitalism and authoritarian politics that exhibits some of the worst forms of exploitation. While social polarisation in capitalist economies is far from a unique Chinese phenomenon, the accelerated pace and the extent of uneven distribution render these tensions more jagged in the dealings of the day to day.

I called my mum recently and she told me my cousin's got a new girlfriend. I know, because I had met her 3 years ago when they actually started dating. He had wanted to keep it on the down low for fear of his parents getting involved. My aunt and uncle run a local canteen serving no-frill North-Eastern cuisine. Gentle and down-to-earth, they were my favourite relatives as a child.

"Does *dagu* and *dagufu* like her?" I asked knowing the response.

"No, they are against it. Her family is from a rural background."

I rolled my eyes.

"I wish they would just be happy for him."

"She has a *rural* hukou."

"So? If he loves her then what's the problem?"

"You have no idea."

"I wish you would stop being so judgmental!"

Then she told me that people with old rural hukou were not entitled to medical insurance.

"Your aunt was planning to retire until one of her in-laws needed an operation, and without insurance she's had to continue working to afford the bills. She told me at New Years that her hands were in so much pain from marinating pig trotters that she can't even hold her fingers straight. She showed me. Her hands are so discoloured they

won't wash off anymore, so don't talk to me about love.”

And this image of my aunt's hands, next to marinated pig trotters, stayed in my mind for a long time.



*They reconnected on Renren after 5  
years*

*He had added her after stumbling on  
her profile*

*She had accepted him without much  
thought*

*How's school? What is your QQ?*

*Messages turned into conversations  
they promised to meet up when she  
came back*

*She waited with anticipation  
outside the school gate  
wondering if she could still  
recognise his face*

*he ran out of the classroom as  
the bell rang  
wondering if she still looked the  
same*

*Hello!*

*She recognised him but god  
was she wrong  
his name was one character  
off from who she thought he  
was*

*He had grown  
She had changed*

*Hello!*

*He recognised her but didn't  
like what he saw  
her black hair veiled most of  
her face*

*She was surprised  
He was disappointed*

*Others ran up behind  
Laughing and waving  
Pushed between them*

*She was encircled  
He was secluded*

*The distance between them stayed the same*

*On the way to the restaurant  
at the table*

*She glanced at him  
Thinking of what to say*

*He stared at his plate  
Trying to remember her face*

*Then it was all over  
The mountain of sushi plates still between them*

*At the door  
She said goodbye to him*

*He looked at her  
And said goodbye to his memory*

## Endnotes

- 1 The term ruguan xue (ruguanism) is used on the Chinese internet to describe a patriotic movement which employs the Manchu invasion of Han ruled Ming as a metaphor for China-US relations in the 21st century.
- 2 Jonathan Bach, “They Come In Peasants And Leave Citizens”: Urban Villages And The Making Of Shenzhen, China”, *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 3 (2010): 421-458, doi:10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01066.x.
- 3 ‘Shangshan xiexiang yundong’ (Up to the Mountain and Down to the Countryside movement) was a policy instituted in the 1960s and ‘70s in which high school students were sent to ‘learn’ from workers and farmers. Although the movement was supposedly aimed at privileged urban youths. However, in the case of my father, due to the lack of employment opportunities and the eradication of higher education, there was nowhere else to go after school but the farms.
- 4 Svetlana Boym, *The Future Of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.xvi
- 5 Yue Ming Bao, “Nostalgia For The Future: Cultural Revolution Memory In Two Transnational Chinese Narratives”, *China Review* 5, no. 2 (2005): 43-63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23462030>.
- 6 Rudyard Kipling, *The Ballad of East and West*, 1889.
- 7 Lu Xun, “Translation: Preface To “Call To Arms” (1922)”, *Marxists.Org*, 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1922/12/03.htm>.
- 8 Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 2012), p.19
- 9 ‘Urban village’ in the Chinese context refers specifically to villages which were once on the outskirts of cities, but have since been engulfed as the cities expanded. Densely populated, they offer affordable housing to migrant workers.
- 10 Rem Koolhaas, “Generic City” in *S, M, L, XL*, 2nd ed. (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), p.1250

Meitao Qu

Image credit: Oliver Mounir

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kāi

1. To open
2. To start
3. To bloom
4. To remove (a ban/restriction)
5. To hold (meeting/exhibition)

