

关

(guān)

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

# 进关

(jìn guān) To pass a checkpoint; to enter a border

# 出关

(chū guān) To leave a checkpoint; to go abroad

# 入关

(rù guān) To enter the fortress\*

# 回观

(huí guān) To look back

\* 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. See further: “Zhengzhu Anyu “Ruguan Xue” Yu “Jiasu Zhuyi”: Zhongguo Nianqing Yidai De Huanmian He Kuangre (Chinese political codewords “ruguan xue” and “accelerationism”: the disillusionment and fanaticism of the younger generation)”, BBC News China 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-53803071>.

*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 50 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 Chinese government’s mission to portray the country as a technological powerhouse?

A new chapter has been written in the latest formulation of the Chinese Dream. Framing itself as a leader in ‘a world at the crossroads’, the state legitimises China’s shining future via a trip down memory lane, as a glorious civilisation rising from the ashes.

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? Through recounting personal stories 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.

Straddling an intermediary position between lived experiences, official representations and projections from the outside, the following pages map and suture some of the contradictory feelings and perspectives in an attempt to draw out the (mis)understandings that inform their conflicts.

CCTV 1  
综合

CCTV.com



# 金光大道



幸福大街

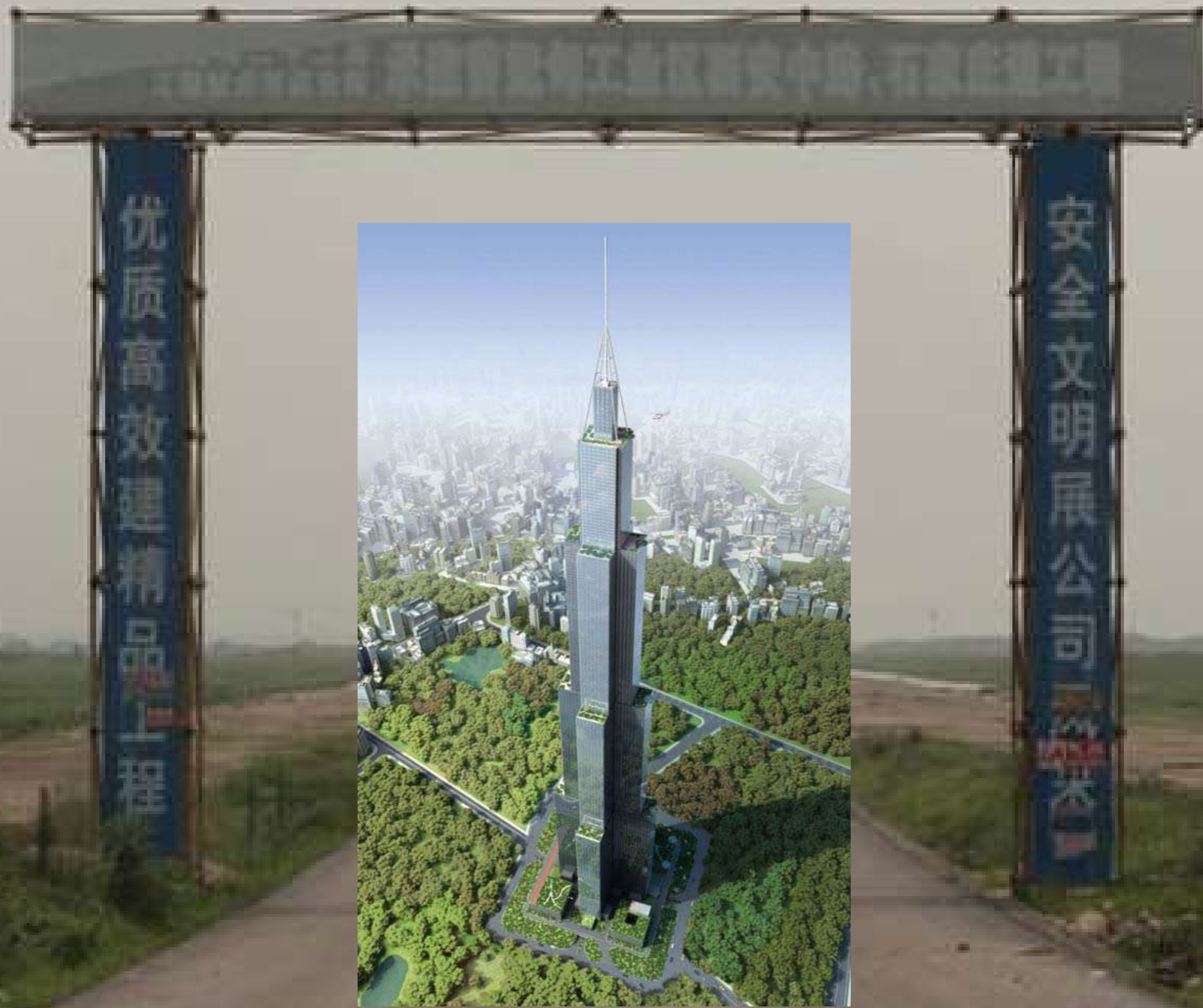
幸福大街





# 幸福家园






先賢高才  
闢土開基  
福仁善圃  
文蔚堂

安全文明  
展公司  
二〇一  
六





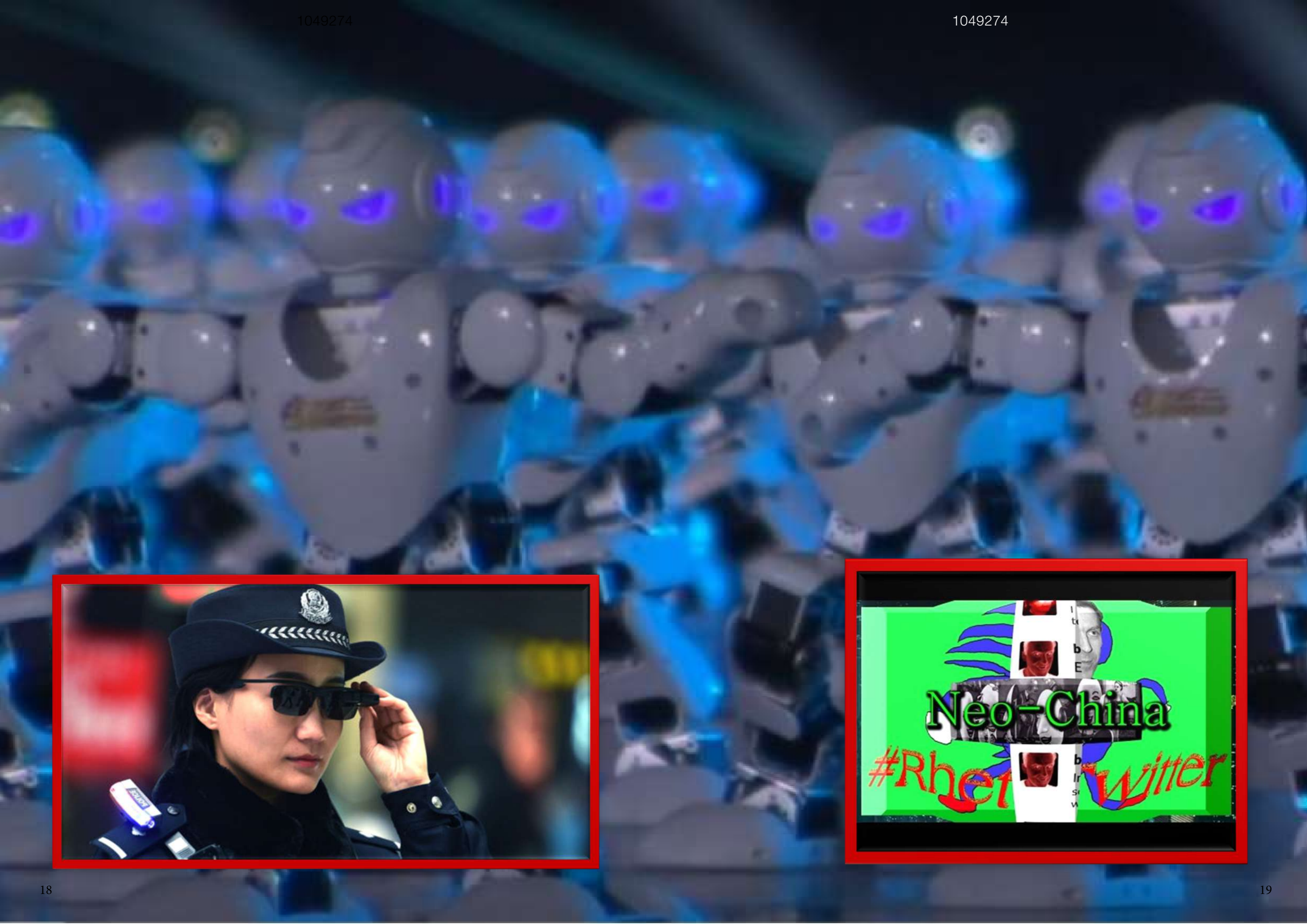


weston koury   
@Wes10 2/2



9:35 AM · 10 Feb 21 · Twitter Web App





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# 进关

Passing the Checkpoint

### *An Ex-Native's Travalogue through Memory*

It's the '80s. Picture a preppy young woman in a turquoise halter neck dress with 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 showered her with envy, imagine having a boy and a girl! For the first five years of my life, I was a *heihaizi* (black child), 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 new entrepreneurial class meant that there were little repercussions 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 jurisdictions.

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 half beaten to death 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. Through a friend that worked there, I became a registered person at a discounted rate of 75000 yuan.

With a 9-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 big 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 that's well ended 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 back for primary 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 6 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; as if happiness leaked from the walls of the theme 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>1</sup> Like the gold rush, the dream was not just an empty rhetoric, but one that could genuinely be lived.



# The Generic City



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出关

*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 inflexible. 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.

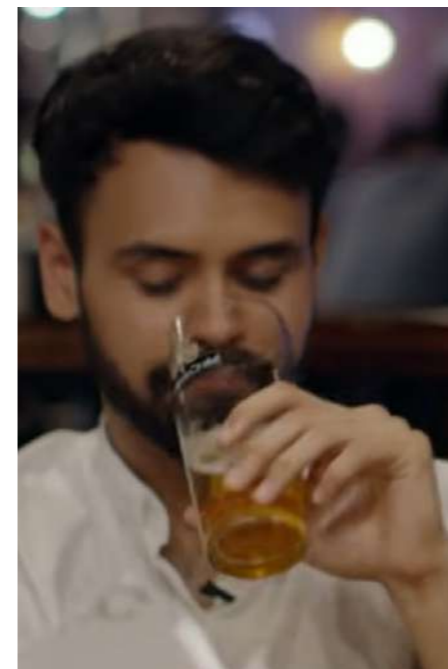
Then in 2006, my life changed. And it was goodbye China and hello boarding school. I was willing to do anything to get out of ballet, so going halfway across the world didn't seem like too terrible of a deal, so long as I could snack. Little did I know that sweets were banned in that school, but I was determined. I would wake up at 6am for swimming practice just to get that extra cereal bar at break.

My parents hoped by sending us so young that we would have the chance to integrate. They were half right. With 3 girls and 50 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. However, 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 spoiled 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.

*I know you're dying to ask, what is it like to live in Shenzhen, the crazy miracle of a city that sprouted from nothingness to a booming economic wonderland? First, let me introduce to you to my team of extraordinary foreigners, who are risking everything to tell you about their daily struggles living and working in the high-tech dystopia. We met at McCawley's, a discreet Irish pub in COCO park (always buy local), to dig deeper into the insidiousness of the Chinese deep state over some good old pints and finger lickin' wings.<sup>2</sup>*

**One sip:** when I first thought about moving to China I had this friend who told me Shenzhen was really boring because there aren't as many expats as there is in Shanghai or Beijing but you know the money is good and like everything is so cheap so here I am



**Two sips:** it's great because you get to do things you don't really do at home like I just feel so uninhibited when I am here you know don't have a care in the world I can do whatever I want like the world is my oyster



**Three sips:** but you know they have facial recognition here and they have all our faces saved in the system so they can constantly track us like that is terrifying when you cross the borders and stuff they just go snap snap without even you realising it!





**Four sips:** bro don't get me started the other day I met this girl and not only did we have like some gnarly food served by a robot machine but like she told me they have their own social media and streaming sites here how crazy is that they don't use what we use but instead they have this alternate mirror universe on the internet is like they live in a heterotopia is just so unreal, straight outta black mirror bro



**Five sips:** bro I mean this place is totally cool for some beers with the boys but OMG totally not cool the other day I went into not one, but multiple shops including McDonalds and they wouldn't accept my AMEX card!



**Six sips:** Man it's 1984 big brother up in here bro they are watching us!!!! but you know if it ever gets too much I'll just hop on a plane and go back home but still like even being here it's tough on your soul you know this whole experience has really just made me grow as a human being I think I've really been able to find myself in this concrete jungle bro



Excuse me I am getting a little bit emotional hey *fuwuyuan* get us five more beers please

After the great success of our first series *Kim Jon Il Looking at things*,<sup>3</sup> we've decided to pursue a different perspective. Here is our latest collection:

*American Journalist Looking for things*



Scanning for spydrones



Looking for the exit



Watching out for surveillance



Infiltrating the factory



Looking for propaganda



Gazing back at Big Brother

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 6. 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 I was both head dancer and lead MC for our graduation ceremony. 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. It 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 Three 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.<sup>4</sup> 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>5</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 6-foot 15 stone diabetic, a heavy drinker, a heavy smoker and a heavy gambler. With glasses that would turn black in the sun, he had a longish goatee with no moustache 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 just like Confucius.

杀敌 入关 入关 入关 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 卷 入关 入关  
 入关!!! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关? 嵩  
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 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 美  
 入关! 入关! 入关! 看三遍 入关祖师 入关! 玉音放送  
 嵩子复活了 入关!!! 入关 嵩子复活了  
 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关 一入关  
 我爱你 入关!!! 卧槽? 入关 入关 与牛逼  
 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关! 入关!  
 前方高能预警 早就脱脱钩了 入关!  
 闪电般归来 666 入关  
 老龙头 面壁当时说了三体里的一个故事  
 入关!!! 入关! 入关! 入关! 谨听圣祖教诲! 入关!!! 再  
 入关! wocao 入关, ?????? 你已如



# 入关

Entering the Fortress

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' - such is the tagline of *Wolf Warrior II*, the highest grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema, of which the new style of confrontational rhetoric has been named. Evidently, the warriors have captured a core aspect of social media engagement: controversy = viral content = a bigger following.

While Chen's humorous trash-talking against racist homophobes has rendered his combative attitude more palatable for the general audience, others have chosen a strictly offensive route. Zhao Lijian, as one of the first Chinese envoys to get on twitter, rose to prominence for his slew of provocations that have since earned him a promotion and position as the leader of the pack.\* From conspiracy theories to unadulterated jingoism, Zhao's track record of bullshit is comparable to that of Trump, giving diplomacy a whole new language and meaning.<sup>6</sup> And much like the ex-President, he is supported by an unwavering fanbase, but this time comprised of *xiaofenhong* (little pinks), a self-identifying term for cyber-nationalist trolls with elite educations. Loud and proud, they are one of the most vocal members of Chinese social media, amalgamating 'Gen-Z digital creativity with east Asia's fangirl aesthetics' into their political expressions.<sup>7</sup> With 'if you don't repost this, you're not really Chinese' as their rallying cry, little pinks prowl the internet, weeding out all sympathisers and safeguarding the motherland from any slight that comes her way.

\* In March 2020, Zhao tweeted in support of the conspiracy theory that coronavirus originated in the US, and later in December, he shared a computer-generated image of an Australian soldier holding a bloodied knife to an Afghan child, accusing the country of war crimes.

Posted by u/Ragstorichards **LARPer** 2 months ago 🤖 🌐

### A Weihua tweet a day keeps the imperialists at bay

[i.imgur.com/rDpDod...](https://i.imgur.com/rDpDod...)

**Sen. Marsha Blackburn** @MarshaBlackburn · Dec 3, 2020  
China has a 5,000 year history of cheating and stealing. Some things will never change...

**Chen Weihua (陈卫华)** @chenweihua  
China state-affiliated media  
Bitch  
6:12 PM · Dec 3, 2020  
79.6K

**Chen Weihua (陈卫华...)** · 5h  
China state-affiliated media  
Replying to @MarshaBlackburn  
This is the most racist and ignorant US Senator I have seen. A lifetime bitch.

**Marco Rubio** @marcorubio · 4d  
Meet the #China Daily EU Bureau chief  
15.5K

**Chen Weihua (陈卫华)** @chenweihua  
Replying to @marcorubio  
Hi, Marco, this is an understatement. She is much worse than that.  
3:54 PM · 12/3/20 · Twitter for iPhone

**Nigel Farage** @Nigel\_Farage · 1d  
Christmas cancelled. Thank you, China.  
18.2K 40.3K 126K

**Chen Weihua (陈卫华)** ... · 18h  
China state-affiliated media  
Replying to @Nigel\_Farage  
Wear a mask and stop talking shit.  
3,879 11.5K 48.1K

**Les Floyd** @Lesism  
If it were a choice between Nigel Farage or Chen Weihua, who would you vote for as your leader?

**paul malone \*19 champions** @redinoopdogg · 21 Dec 2020  
Replying to @Lesism  
Chen 🤡

**Andrew Katz** @andrewjakatz · 21 Dec 2020  
Replying to @Lesism and @PeterDilworth1  
Added to which, if there's any legitimacy in calling it the China virus (there isn't), then it's equally legitimate to call the one which locked down Christmas the Kent virus.

**Les Floyd** @Lesism · 21 Dec 2020  
And Farage was born in Bromley, which is just inside Kent.  
This should be called the #FarageStrain.

**David Gatson** @dkgatson · 21 Dec 2020  
Replying to @Lesism  
🤡🤡🤡🤡🤡🤡🤡🤡

**Les Floyd** @Lesism · 21 Dec 2020  
I'm guessing you'd vote for the Chinese guy. :D

**Hollow Ormate** @hollowormate · 21 Dec 2020  
Replying to @Lesism and @PeterDilworth1  
I'll go with Weihua.

Happy Valentine'sday honey!  
Sticker/emoji/hearts

Do you even consider yourself Chinese?

Huh what do you mean?

Valentine's day  
That's a western holiday  
You American pig



Those who celebrate Valentine's  
Get the fuck out of China

linda has enabled Friend Confirmation. [Send a friend request] to chat.

! Hello? Honey?

*Oh our great motherland  
Prosperity, wealth and strength  
I strive to live up to the honour of being your descendent  
After getting my MBA from Harvard*







***'Joyously celebrating the pandemic in America; wishing Covid a long lasting life in Japan'***

***A new hero's 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's 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 in pain 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**

**is it 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**

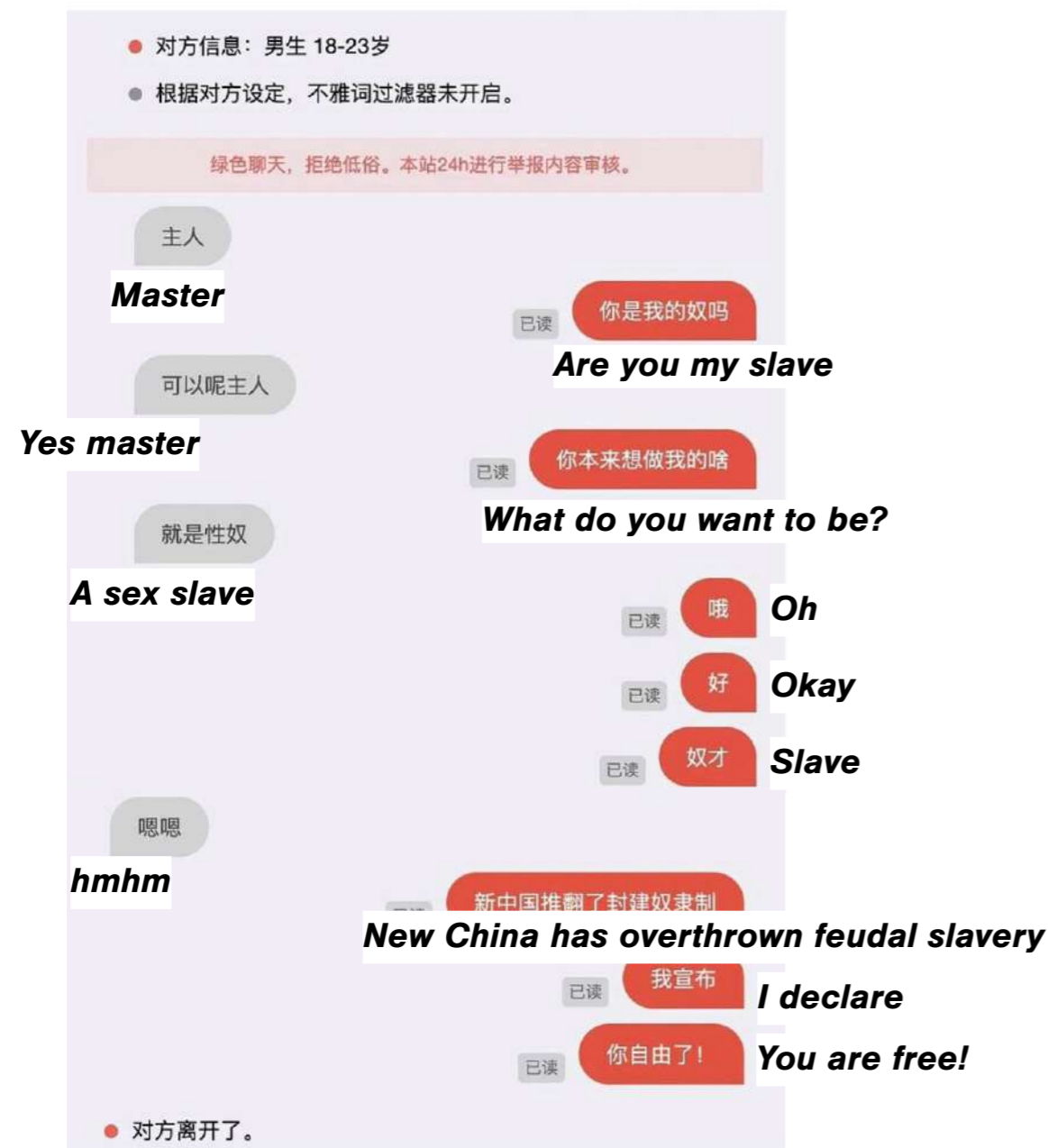
**comedy**

**it's just so meta that it got lost in  
translation**



But a storm is blowing from paradise, Benjamin said.  
'Tis favourable winds from the gods, Shunfeng'er replied.<sup>8</sup>

Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves! With our flesh and blood let us  
build a new Great Wall!<sup>9</sup>



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 the structure of feeling. However, what is truly being yearned? Is it the 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>10</sup> The explosive boom of Cultural Revolution memorabilia in the 1990s is an example of such longing.<sup>11</sup>

However, in the wake of the new millennium, the future does not seem at all lost in China. With plans of surpassing the US as the world's largest economy, the government has set its eyes on reclaiming tianxia (all-under-heaven), beginning with the Belt and Road initiative. From 'hide one's ability to bide one's time' to 'the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation', pride has succeeded temperance as the national sentiment. 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 rings hollow as East and West coalesce in search of lost time, yearning for the return to glory, or a fantasy age that never existed.

However, there remains an elephant in the room. As the nation soars to greater heights, the everyday life of the average citizen remains plagued by spiralling house prices, a dismal job market and stiffening social stratification. While firmly believing in the future of their nation, 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,<sup>12</sup> and *sang* subculture, a thriving community built on shared feelings of apathy and self-worthlessness.<sup>13</sup>

In a now deleted Wechat essay, writer Wei Zhou examines the paradox between macro-optimism and micro-pessimism through what he terms as 'the two selves of the Chinese'.\* According to Wei, there exists two opposing desires that push and pull between the two selves: on the one hand, to fiercely defend one's individual rights, and on the other, to find solace in the power of the collective entity.<sup>14</sup> 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>15</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.

\* From Liang Qichao's dichotomy of the *xiaowo* (small self) and *dawo* (big self) to the double bind engendered by China's postsocialist conditions, the notion of the two selves or a split consciousness bears symbolic importance in the Chinese imagination. Overturning the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation which presented the self as an open and ongoing entity, Liang's concept drew a hard boundary between the individual and society, relegating the small self in subservience to the big self. See further: Zhang Huajun, "Individuality Beyond The Dichotomy Of 'Small Self And Big Self' In Contemporary Chinese Education: Lessons From Hu Shi And Liang Shuming", *Frontiers Of Education In China* 8, no. 4 (2013): 540-558, doi:<https://doi.org/10.3868/s110-002-013-0036-1>.

A page from Fei Liu's *Pepe the Sad Frog Coloring Book and Chinese Learning Guide*:

so sad  
 伤心到  
 shāng xīn dào  
 i mutated species  
 变种  
 biàn zhǒng



***“I wanted to fight for socialism today but the weather is so freaking cold that I’m only able to lay on the bed to play on my mobile phone”***

***- Zhao Zengliang, author of Meiyou banfa yizhi nuli de rensheng  
(A Life Where You Can’t Strive for Success All The Time)***





世上有两种最耀眼的光芒



一种是太阳



一种是打工人努力的模样

*“There are two exceptionally dazzling lights in the world. One is sunshine, and the other is the face of a diligent laborer!”<sup>16</sup>*



敬祝毛主席万寿无疆



革命和生产的新胜利迎接七十年代!



***"You work so hard, soon your boss will be able to lead the life he wants! Keep it up, dagong ren (labourer)!"***





# 回观

Looking back

*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 gates  
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!  
Hello!*

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



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



*He wore a light blue  
tracksuit uniform*

*She hid behind her  
jeans and T-shirt*

*He had grown*

*She had changed*

*She was surprised*

*He was  
disappointed*

禁嬉水  
意安全

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

*She was encircled  
He was secluded*

*The distance between  
them stayed the same*

*On their way to the  
restaurant  
Sitting 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*



‘Where does the city without gates begin?’<sup>17</sup> In 2016, the last checkpoint along the once militarised border that circumscribed 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. As a child, I knew neither of the checkpoints nor of the village that was less than a 10-minute drive from my school. Demarcated by a tall concrete wall, Baishizhou was hidden behind lushly landscaped hills in Window of the World, topped with a 5-meter reproduction of Christ the Redeemer, with his back turned against the village.<sup>18</sup> Rem Koolhaas paradoxically declares that ‘the Generic City... is big enough for everybody...if it gets old it just self-destructs and renews.’<sup>19</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 unravelled 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 gentrification, 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 and ongoing suffering 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 in Nanshan serving no-frill North-Eastern cuisine. Gentle and down-to-earth, they were my favourite relatives as a child. I’ll never forget the time they woke me up at 2am to take me to a restaurant for *yexiao* (midnight meal).

“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 everything’s fine no?”

“You have no idea.”

“I wish you would stop being so judgemental!”

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, remained in my mind for a long time.

## Endnotes

- 1 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.
- 2 Ashlee Vance, *Inside China's High-Tech Dystopia*, video, 2019, <https://youtu.be/ydPqKhgh9Mg>.
- 3 João Rocha and Marco Bohr, *Kim Jong Il Looking At Things* ([Paris]: John Boîte Éditions, 2013).
- 4 *The Red Shoes* (1845) by Hans Christian Andersen
- 5 '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, according to my dad, due to the lack of employment opportunities and the eradication of higher education (during the Culture Revolution), there was no where else to go but to the farms.
- 6 Christian Shepherd, "The Provocateur Driving China'S 'Wolf Warrior' Pack", *Financial Times*, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/a1356c94-3c57-46b0-9d49-aa4b2e465287>.
- 7 Zeng Jing, "Twitter Has Become A New Battleground For China's Wolf-Warrior Diplomats", *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/02/twitter-has-become-a-new-battleground-for-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomats>.
- 8 The Chinese god of sea and wind, *Shunfeng'er* translates as 'ears that hear with the wind'. In folklore, his sharp hearing is used to help sailors distinguish favourable winds from coming storms.
- 9 The first line of "March of the Volunteers" by Ni Er, the Chinese national anthem
- 10 Svetlana Boym, *The Future Of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p.
- 11 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>.
- 12 Claire Zhang and David M. Barreda, "Hip, Young, And Wired: China's 'Diaosi', In Charts", *The Atlantic*, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/06/hip-young-and-wired-chinas-diaosi-in-charts/277359/>.
- 13 K Cohen Tan and Shuxin Cheng, "Sang Subculture In Post-Reform China", *Global Media And China* 5, no. 1 (2020): 86-99, doi:10.1177/2059436420904459.
- 14 Josh Rudolph, "Translation: Wei Zhou On National Optimism Vs Personal Pessimism", *China Digital Times*, 2020, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/12/translation-wei-zhou-on-national-optimism-vs-personal-pessimism/>.
- 15 Lu Xun, "Translation: Preface To "Call To Arms" (1922)", *Marxists.Org*, 2005, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1922/12/03.htm>.
- 16 *Lao Hu and Da Cong, Jiayou! Dagong Ren! (Keep It Up, Labourer!)*, video, 2020, <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1jK4y1h7uA>.
- 17 Paul Virilio, *Lost Dimension* (New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 2012), p.19
- 18 Rem Koolhaas, "Generic City" in *S, M, L, XL*, 2nd ed. (New York: Monacelli Press, 1998), p.1250
- 19 Juan Du, *The Shenzhen Experiment: The Story Of China'S Instant City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p.286

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I would like to thank Dr Stephen Wilson for his invaluable guidance and feedback throughout the writing process, and Dr Joseph Noonan-Ganley for his attentive comments.

I would also like to thank Ghislaine Leung for her encouraging support.

I am very grateful to my parents who have been an essential part of this project, and their willingness to share with me their feelings, experiences and memories.

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