

Utopian and insular spaces in Chinese literature: An island approach

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Abstract: In response to the relative lack of scholarly attention paid to the relationship between island utopia and Chinese literature, this paper studies the imagination of both island and insular geographies in Chinese ‘utopian’ literature using an island-sensitive approach. Employing an expanded and constructive conception of the island, the paper examines the heterogeneity of Chinese island and insular imaginaries in literary works from diverse historical periods, especially in relation to the dominant western model of the remote tropical oceanic island. Based on the finding that the alterity of Chinese island and insular imagination lies as much in its depiction of spatial ambiguities as in its mixing of diverse figures, I reflect further on the benefits and perils of adopting a west-inflected island approach in examining the imaginary landscapes of utopianism and insularity in Chinese literature. It is argued that *Chinese island literature* is more a reading effect enabled by an imported theoretical approach than any inherent tradition in itself. In the end, two paths for innovating island aesthetics and epistemologies in cross-cultural contexts are proposed.

Keywords: island studies, utopia, dystopia, insularity, Chinese literature

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Introduction

Utopia is one of the most enduring tropes in western culture. Despite its complex semantics, the word ‘utopia’ has often been used in the English language to refer to any wishful projects or tendencies of social amelioration or perfection (Bose, 1997, p. vii). The sheer size of the scholarly literature is colossal. For instance, a search with the keyword ‘utopia’ in the Taylor & Francis database returned thousands of results scattered across diverse fields in humanities and social sciences, including but not restricted to political science, legal studies, education studies, historical studies, and architecture studies (Conforti, 2011; Gerard & Sterling, 2005; Callejón, 2019; Nobis, 2018; Contandriopoulos, 2013).

In the field of literature studies, there has recently been a concerted effort to reframe the Morean paradigm of utopia. This has taken place at both diachronic and synchronic levels. On the one hand, pre-Morean projections of ideal spaces represented by Plato, Virgil, Saint Augustine and other founding figures of western culture have been retrieved. On the other hand, recent attempts to challenge the dominance of utopia confined to a “western Judeo-Christian tradition” have shifted attention to the best/worst possible worlds non-western cultures might produce in literature (Dutton & Sargent, 2013). For instance, Masamaka (2017)

analyzed Ayi Kwei Armah's imagination of future Africa as a "secular and egalitarian pan African commonwealth" in the figure of utopia. Leman (2014) explored the possibility of refiguring East Africa as "transnational utopias." While the figure of utopia could be employed to imagine a better Africa, it can also be used to deconstruct colonial discourses woven around Africa. In a seemingly unlikely coupling of Congo and utopia, Donovan (2016) presented a long history of the country as the object of utopian desire in the fictional representations of European writers. What was revealed was not only the unique status of Congo in the European colonialist imagination but also the ideological underpinnings of colonial literature in general. Drawing on models of utopia and dystopia, Robinson (2013) discussed literary representations of the village against the backdrop of colonization and nation-building in India and Sri Lanka. Key texts were analyzed in order to challenge the "conventional pastoralized readings of village as idyll or paradise" (Robinson, 2013). In their introduction to a special issue on 'Utopias in other cultural traditions', Dutton and Sargent (2013) presented a diverse range of articles that either reframe definitions of utopia, reinterpret indigenous and postcolonial utopias, or simply recognize utopianism from less dominant cultures. Similar efforts to incorporate non-western representations into the imaginary landscapes of fictional utopianism and insularity can also be found (Heitkemper-Yates & Schwarz, 2021; Dautel & Schödel, 2016; Dutton, 2010, pp. 223-258). In comparison, full-scale engagement with Chinese literary utopianism is relatively rare though (exceptions include Fokkema, 2011; Meisner, 1968). Such research, however, heavily concentrates on examples from the country's classical and communist periods without explicitly involving the dynamic relationship between island and utopia.

In the meantime, studies on literary utopia using an island approach have not been in the mainstream. As far as the British literary canon is concerned, islands' spatial potential for nations to start anew and reconstruct their identities is well recognized, as was neatly summarized by Attewell (2014, pp. 35-68) as "an island solution." Dutton's (2016) paper on the utopian desire for Tasmania is also an interesting exception in this regard. In her analysis of "*le rêve tasmanien*," Tasmania was read as a symbol of radical otherness in modern and contemporary French travel literature, in no small part due to its remoteness from the European continent and its perceived peripheral status "at the end of the earth." For French travel writers, Tasmania is "an island of plenty, peopled with noble savages, where an egalitarian, environmentally sound equilibrium could be achieved" (Dutton, 2016). Interestingly, the French imagining of Tasmania was presented as a benign remedy to the darker counterpoints of English colonial settlement. This proves that islands can be reduced to sites of contestation for outside players in utopian fantasy.

Within island studies, Sreenan (2017) provided an incisive critique of the trope of utopia in the context of post-Darwinian island literature. Through close reading of four British novels set on islands, the author arrived at the inherent paradox of island utopia as both a space of transcendent autonomy and a place of contingent evolution. As we switch our attention to contemporary Chinese scholarly literature, 'utopia' is clearly also a buzzword (李, 2005). Similarly, it has often been used as a vague signifier denoting an ideal world in whatever sense. Serious engagement with the Chinese cultural symbolism of islands can be found in Luo and Grydehøj's (2017) paper. The authors not only introduced a hitherto neglected tradition of

island symbolism to the field but also called for an “explicitly non-Western and decolonial perspective” in considering the trope of islands. However, the paper exclusively dwells on examples from ancient and imperial China and presents, arguably, a rather static and simplistic view of the trope of islands in Chinese culture divorced from narrative contexts. A recent boundary-crossing example can be found in Hodges’ (2021) *Shima* paper. While not explicitly engaging with the trope of island utopia, the author explored the parallelism between the ancient search for island paradise in the fabled Penglai and the contemporary exploration of oil and gas reserves in the marginal seas of East China. Adopting a “speculative geography about what could be,” Hodges (2021) breaks the boundary between otherworldly island imagination and real-world human activities, both of which revolve around the anthropogenic quest for a faraway world that is visible yet out of reach. The ancient Chinese island imaginary has been endowed with present-day ecological significance though the validity of the speculative twist itself is debatable.

On balance, what is lacking is an island-sensitive approach to examining the imaginary landscapes of utopianism and insularity in Chinese literature.

Theoretical framework

In light of the aforementioned research tendencies, this paper examines the imagination of island and insular geographies in Chinese ‘utopian’ literature using an island-sensitive approach, which unfolds in the following strategies: 1) topographically, the figure of island will include not only physical islands but also island-like environments possessing an insular quality; 2) aesthetically, islands in literature will be treated as processes of figurative construction having a bearing on actual geographies rather than essentialized space; and 3) methodologically, efforts were made to select literary works from diverse periods in order to highlight the heterogeneity of Chinese island and insular imaginaries, especially in relation to the dominant western model of the remote tropical oceanic island. Further clarifications of the strategies can be found as follows.

At a topographical level, the paper conceptualizes the island as more than “a tract of land surrounded by water” (*Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*, 2021). Starting from this premise, spaces with an island-like quality without being geographical islands will be considered along with more prototypical islands. Such an ‘expanded’ approach to islands in literature has the benefit of enlarging the scope of island studies and guarding against a fetishizing conception of islands (Hayward, 2016). Another reason is that island literature is not an established genre in China though there is some portrayal of islands and insular spaces. For purposes of crosscultural understanding, the importation of new approaches to reading national literatures is undoubtedly worthwhile. But it should not be mistaken that there are any preordained bibliographies of *Chinese island literature*. After all, fictional literature deals in imaginary rather than actual geographies.

Aesthetically, islands in literature are examined as processes of figurative construction rather than essentialized space. Their “mobile spatial” nature raises the question of “what an island is” rather than simply pinpoints a place on a map (Graziadei et al., 2017a; Graziadei et al., 2017b). Therefore, a symptomatic reading of seminal western utopia texts with an attention to its spatial description can often lay bare its assumed context-less, insular, static and stable geographies as actually contingent, porous, dynamic and insecure. Take Thomas

More's Island of Utopia as an example: Close reading reveals its insularity as illusory and its boundedness as porous. The polity's proclamation of Erasmus-style humanist autonomy is in contradiction with the state's centralist and panoptic totalitarianism (Yoran, 2010, pp. 165–171; More, 1997, p. 60, pp. 74–75, pp. 63–64). In his introduction to a recent English-language edition of *Utopia*, Miéville (2016, pp. 2–27) found that Utopia starts out as a part of the continent rather than an island and it is only after Utopus' attempt at colonization that Utopia is forcibly detached from the continent through a dug channel and thus turned into a polity unto itself. It is worth noting that a foregrounded issue in contemporary scholarship on literary utopianism is the tenuous relationship between utopia and dystopia. Utopia and dystopia in literature and other imaginary discourses are interpenetrating and mutually containing spaces rather than distinctly antithetical places. For example, Labuschagne (2011) deconstructed the trope of utopia by demonstrating the inherent irony of the genre in both preserving the “utopian fixation with ends” and “abolishing it” in the context of Anglo-American science fiction literature. In a study focusing on Russo-American travel literature produced in the relatively neglected interwar years, Hudson (2015) presented the ambiguity of identity dynamics which later manifested themselves in the Cold War and the tension between American travelogues' imagination of Russia as a Socialist utopia and that of it as a dystopian nightmare. Examining Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a discursive center was also constructed between the “external space” as a dystopia and the “inner space” as a utopia (Softiag, 2013). By a similar token, in the context of Acadia and Aztlán's struggle to exercise Latin independence in the midst of an Anglophone-dominated world, Spires (2008) examined how both cultures rewrite the pre-colonial past as “*eutopian*” and their post-colonial future as “*dystopian*” in face of a shared Latin identity crisis. My own exploration of the heterogeneity of island and insular representations in Chinese ‘utopian’ literature aligns itself with the de-essentializing and decolonial trajectory of other studies of literary islands in international scholarly communities. Specifically, one significant focus of analysis in this paper will be the insular trope of enclave space sheltering outcast populations, which is often portrayed as a seemingly distinct but ultimately volatile territorial, cultural, or social unit enclosed within.

Lastly, to serve the purpose of presenting the heterogeneity of island and insular geographies in Chinese literature, I intentionally selected a wide range of literary texts dubbed as ‘utopian’ in domestic scholarly literature. They include: *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海经 (3rd-century BC to 2nd-century AD); *Ten Islands in the Inner Seas* 海内十洲记 (3rd-century BC to 1st-century AD); *The Peach Colony* 桃花源记 (421 AD); *Outlaws of the Marsh* 水浒传 (14th century); *Journey to the West* 西游记 (16th century); *Accounts of Sea Travel* 海游记 (between 18th century and 19th century); *Lunatic Ravings* 痴人说梦记 (1904); *Lion's Roar* 狮子吼 (1905); *Paradise* 极乐地 (1912); and *The Roaming of a Beggar* 乞儿流浪记 (2009). The selection was informed by both my personal knowledge of primary texts of Chinese literature and secondary scholarly literature on Chinese fiction. While I wished to cover a relatively wide spectrum of Chinese island tropes instead of dwelling on specific models that may be of interest only to a niche readership, these texts are by no means exhaustive.

Island utopias/dystopias are represented diversely in western literature. Many of them are oceanic, but none of them are truly isolated under closer scrutiny. Remote as the majority of them are often assumed to be, arrivals and departures take place through them constantly.

The exemplary ones are usually tropical, such as Aldous Huxley's Pacific Pala and William Golding's unpopulated island in the same region, whereas others are not, such as Thomas More's Island of Utopia. Notwithstanding these nuances, the prototype of tropical oceanic island characterized by remoteness and isolation has exerted a lasting influence on contemporary culture.

Against this background, this paper endeavors to answer the following questions: To what extent does the Chinese literary imagination of island and insular geographies coincide with the aforementioned prototype of island utopia/dystopia? In what respects does it challenge the prototype? Based on the findings, I will critically reflect on the benefits and perils of adopting a west-inflected island approach in examining the imaginary geographies of utopianism and insularity in Chinese literature.

Four island and insular imaginaries

In this section, several prominent figures of island and insular geographies in Chinese literature will be considered, including: 1) islands as a projection of inland geography, 2) islands as insecure ethical fortresses, 3) islands as new polities across the seas, and 4) islands as outcasts' enclaves between closure and connection. With the exception of the third category, these figures are framed so as to foreground their respective differences from the western prototype of a good/bad island society perching proud and alone in the middle of a vast open ocean.

Islands as a projection of inland geography

Compared with the western maritime model, one striking feature of the imaginary insular geographies in ancient Chinese mythology is that they are often perceived as mountains (Luo & Grydehøj, 2017). In both *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海经 and *Ten Islands in the Inner Seas* 海内十洲记, two of the best-known geographical accounts, one can see a series of such figures existing in the ambivalent area between mythology and geography (王, 2005). To some extent, these half-mythical-half-real places resemble western utopias in literature in the sense that they are largely represented as insular spaces. But there are both overlaps and gaps: 1) ancient China's mythical imagination of insular spaces is so intrinsically founded on the archetype of mountain that even islands are widely regarded as mountains in the sea; and 2) ideal insular spaces in Chinese mythology tend to be either places dwelled on by gods or liminal portals through which mortals can reach the heavenly palace teeming with pastoral luxury and ease. This pastoral imaginary is similar to the western paradisiacal island and the imaginary land of Cockaigne (Dutton, 2002). Furthermore, 3) accounts of the insular geographies in Chinese mythology are usually brief, and because of this, their insularity can remain relatively intact. Moreover, mountains in the sea (islands) usually present themselves in discrete forms; archipelagic totality can be hard to find (王, 2005).

This mythological imagination has exerted enormous influence on later literature. One of the best known is *Journey to the West* 西游记, a representative of a tradition sometimes labelled as 'Fiction of Gods and Demons' 神魔小说 in Chinese literary history (胡, 2001). The rebel-hero Monkey King's Mountain of Flower and Fruit 花果山, situated somewhere in the East Sea, is represented as a "famous mountain in the sea" (吴, 2012, p. 1). Monkey

King and his followers live in the Water Curtain Cave 水帘洞. The cave is a space aloof from the worries of the earthly world and the authority of Jade Emperor in heaven. “Neither the jurisdiction of kirin nor the reign of phoenix” 不伏麒麟辖，不伏凤凰管，and it is no less than a “blessed place in a saintly mountain, a sacred island through an ancient cave” 仙山福地，古洞神洲 (吴, 2012, pp. 3-4). The figure of a liminal cave within a mountain in the sea represents a further secluded space on an already secluded island. A similar western counterpart might be the Cave of the Nymphs in *The Odyssey*.

Another quintessential Chinese insular trope of mythologized geography is founded on inland imagination rather than offshore projection. *The Peach Colony* 桃花源记 is a fine example of what is labelled as the ‘Sacred Colony’ 仙乡叙事 tradition in Chinese literary history (陶, 2021). It tells the story of a fisherman floating haphazardly into a carefree agrarian county through a magic cave at the end of a peach grove and returning to the real world after a hallucinatory sojourn. The insular geography of the peach colony is indeed littoral and liminal; it can only be reached by boat and through a magic cave. But it is an inward-probing inland imagination rather than an outward-expanding oceanic one. The vision of the Sacred Colony tradition is agrarian and obviously influenced by the Taoist ideal of a self-sufficient enclave characterized by spontaneity, simplicity and detachment (张, 2008; 吴, 2006). The nostalgic agrarian imagination it embodies has continually influenced contemporary avant-garde fictions (龙 & 张, 2020).

Islands as insecure ethical fortresses

The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) produced a great number of lengthy fictional narratives in Chinese literature. The western idea of utopia is applied domestically to interpret the period’s literary quest after a perfect world. For example, 胡 (2005) considered *Outlaws of the Marsh* 水浒传 and *Jou Pu Tuan* 肉蒲团 as having portrayed “two utopias of Chinese culture” in the sense that the former constructs an enclave of Confucian ethics, rejecting erotic pleasure, while the latter fantasizes an amoral enclave in which erotic indulgence is shamelessly celebrated (胡, 2005).

Because an island dimension is absent in *Jou Pu Tuan*, only *Outlaws of the Marsh* will be considered for the purpose of this paper. Liangshanpo 梁山泊, the main environment in which the story takes place, is located in a littoral environment in today’s Shandong province, though its exact location is subject to disagreement. The literal meaning of the toponym (“mountain of Liang by the lake”) indicates a marsh island in inland area, which diverges from the dominant western oceanic model in the following three respects:

- 1) The place’s land-water interfaces change frequently. During the former part of the story, Liangshan, surrounded by water on four sides, can only be reached by boat. As the plot moves forward, the southern part of it seems to have merged with land (施 & 罗, 2012, pp. 137-143). From the perspective of island studies, Liangshan’s geographical identity shifts between an island and a *presqu’île* (Hayward, 2016).

- 2) A clear contour of an autonomous island is difficult to recognize. One can catch a glimpse of the archetype of mountain in the sea again from the name ‘Liangshanpo’. Liangshanpo is an ethicized space of fortification combining mountains and water. In

Confucian ethics, water is associated with wisdom and mountains with virtue (Confucius, 2016, p. 57). In the story, the fluidity of water serves as a symbol of the wisdom of Liangshan good men/outlaws whereas the solidity of mountain is an emblem of their moral trustworthiness. The mountain in water constitutes an insular space in which water performs double functions: outwardly it defends the enclave against corrupting forces whereas inwardly it reinforces its moral supremacy.

3) In contrast to the island polity frequently seen in western literature, Liangshanpo exists primarily as an oppositional enclave in both ethical and military terms. However, no enclave can be totally immune from outside influences. The ethical fortress of Liangshan crumbles at the end of the story as most of the outlaws are offered amnesty by the imperial court and thereby assimilated into the establishment (施 & 罗, 2012, p. 882). Insular alterity is finally co-opted.

By a similar token, the Mountain of Flower and Fruit in *Journey to the West* constitutes a rebels' paradise that is assumed by its dwellers to "belong to no secular law and fear no beasts or authority" 不归入王法, 不惧禽兽威严 (吴, 2012, p. 4). Nonetheless, Monkey King's challenge against the heavenly court is driven by the gnawing fear that no paradise can last forever, and death will ultimately dissolve everything as sooner or later everyone, including himself, will be judged by the King of *yin* realm (the underworld in traditional Chinese cosmology). The Buddhist idea of *anitya* (the absence of continuity and permanence) looms large as the underlying ethical foundation of the monkey's volatile enclave.

Nonetheless, more stable fictional enclaves exist. The trope of the oceanic island is overtly employed in *Accounts of Sea Travel* 海游记, a novel written in the late-Qing period (1644-1912). The Kingdom of Wulei 无雷国 is made up of several oceanic islands. This is one of the rare cases in which a group of islands rather than a single island form the imaginary geographies in ancient and classical Chinese literature, though they do not exactly constitute an archipelago in organic-relational terms (Glissant, 1997, p. 144). In addition, the island kingdom in the novel is anything but a Platonic polity; serving as a satirical mirror of the real world at the time of writing, it is a space of moral degradation, with perhaps the only saving grace embodied by the character Gentleman Xu (张 & 曹, 2012).

Islands as new polities across the seas

Political novels produced between the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of China's Republican Era (1912-1949) are overtly predicated on the trope of the island polity. Though evidence of causality can be hard to find, it is conjectured that some works from the period come closest to the western maritime model of the island utopia. For one thing, these works are evidently based on the trope of island. For another, there is full-fledged imagination of an ideal polity. Three notable examples are *Lunatic Ravings* 痴人说梦 (1904), *Lion's Roar* 狮子吼 (1905), and *Paradise* 极乐地 (1912).

In *Lunatic Ravings*, the hero Jia Xixian visits the Island of Immortals twice. By the second time he lands on it, the island presents itself as a secular utopia mixing traditional Chinese agrarian yearnings and aspirations about modern technology, industry and politics. Traditional Chinese agrarian ideals in the transition period are embodied in modern reforms of agriculture and fishery. There are also signs of a western techno-industrial dream embodied

in the mining industry, textile industry, and metallurgy. Signs of western constitutional politics can also be found. Surprisingly, there is even the notion of empowering China through colonial expansion. Western influences such as Messianism at the turn of the century are evident as the traditional figure of island paradise gives way to a construction of secular utopias. But domestic scholars point out that behind this western façade, the inner core of this novel is still a conservative one, the central tenet of which involves saving the crumbling empire through Confucian virtues (朱, 2013).

By contrast, *Lion's Roar*, an unfinished novel by Chen Tianhua, who committed suicide in Japan in protest against the unfair treatment of overseas Chinese students at the time, is a more radical political fantasy set on a small island in Zhoushan, Zhejiang. Civil Rights Village is imagined as an autonomous island community open to western civilization though it is ruled by the Qing power. Clearly influenced by evolutionary theory, the novel displays recognizably ethnocentric elements. The author laments at the beginning of the novel that all the tragedies of the crumbling old China result from 300 years' enslavement of the Han people at the hands of the Manchurian state. Inspired by ideas of natural selection and the survival of the fittest, it is proclaimed that the only way to "awaken the sleeping lion" is to banish the northern barbarians and establish western republicanism. A complete modern society can be found in the island village. Therefore, domestic scholars call the village a "rational utopia" and a "solemn fable" as it resorts to the secular realities of China at that time (陈, 1995).

It is my view that the placement of an oppositional ethnic community in Zhoushan Archipelago is meaningful as this region is located on the margins of the Qing empire. Facing the ocean and marginalized by the continent, it makes perfect setting for imaginary geographies as it contests within and opens itself to the wider world, symbolizing the hope of establishing a new ethnic space from the margins of a decadent and corrupted empire. Moreover, at a personal level, Chen Tianhua was born in inland Hunan and pursued further studies in Japan as a teenager before eventually committing suicide in Tokyo. His choice of Zhoushan could also have been induced by the fact that Zhoushan is relatively close to the Japanese seas. Moreover, like many of his contemporary intellectuals, Chen Tianhua was influenced by the radical French Revolution idea of creating a new society by toppling older regimes (耿, 2008). In this regard, his projection of political fantasy onto a peripheral island should be understood as coming from a mainland subject. It should be further noted that, the archipelagic nature of the actual geographies of Zhoushan notwithstanding, the novel imagines islands as discrete entities existing singularly against the mainland.

If *Lion's Roar* represents a radical island imagination of ethnocentric, oppositional politics, *Paradise* is an escapist-anarchist one against the backdrop of the thwarted Xinhai Revolution in 1911. The isolated island in the story is a typical 'place from nowhere', suiting the anarchist gist of the story. After an aborted attempt to subvert the new state of the Republic of China, the communism-inspired hero drifts with his wife to a remote oceanic island called the Island of Pleasure. Residents of the island hail from exiled descendants of Chen Yu near the end of Qin dynasty. They establish an anarchist island without armies, religions, family and private property (耿, 2008). Similar to both Thomas More's and Aldous Huxley's utopian islands, money is worthless here. 耿 (2008) holds that this novel represents

a new type of “spatial utopia” in the wake of a failed “historical utopia” possibly against the backdrop of the thwarted civil aspirations emblemized by the Xinhai Revolution.

In short, political fiction in the early-20th century is obviously forward looking. Arguably for the first time in Chinese literary history, the island has become a salient trope. A few explanations could be made, as follows: 1) For many new intellectuals influenced by evolutionary theory and ideas of the Enlightenment, utopia is perceived as a constructable secular heaven. 2) Influenced by the overall intellectual climate during the times in which literature primarily served political purposes, these new intellectuals saw a “nation-saving instrument” in literary utopianism (张 & 刘, 2019). 3) While traditional Confucian culture is an inland-based one, islands located on the fringe of continental civilizing processes are projected as good places/non-places in which to start anew through either reforms or revolutions.

Islands as outcasts’ enclaves between closure and connection

As post-revolutionary China has undergone a societal sea change, its contemporary secular culture and social sentiments have shifted from utopian ideals toward dystopian visions (Kumar, 1991, p. 381). Plenty of anti-utopian and dystopian examples depicting insular spaces have emerged in contemporary Chinese literature (e. g. labor camp, subway, and segregated spaces of the underclass) (郁, 2019). However, the portrayal of island environments is sparse. The avant-garde writer Xia Shang’s 夏商 *The Roaming of a Beggar* 乞儿流浪记 (2009) is an exception. The entire story takes place on a river island on the rural-urban fringe of an imaginary city. I will analyze its imaginary island geographies in order to show how spatial insularity is enabled and disrupted.

The island in *The Roaming of a Beggar* is an imaginary insular space sheltering all sorts of “underclass laborers” including orphans, uncontracted construction workers, local thugs, impoverished fishermen, pimps and prostitutes. These outcasts form a dystopian space at the dubious interstices between urban and rural regions of China. The text is characterized by an exuberant depiction of the harsh realities of social outcasts and a mild metafictional strategy with minimal humanistic compassion. In the words of 陈 (2018), the writer is “representing the underprivileged voluptuously.” In the latter section of the novel, Xia Shang uses a brothel to contain and epitomize all the evils taking place on the island, only to annihilate it with syphilis. Near the end of the story, with the symbolic cross-river bridge finally completed, the island is connected to the continent on the other side of the river. A grand festival takes place like a cleansing ceremony, relentlessly severing the island from its premodern past of barbarism and cruelty. But the ending is an open one, as the author writes: “a survivor of syphilis was hidden amid the crowd [...] Our heroine stepped her feet onto the bridge [...] looking ahead, walking towards the other end of it [...] and stepped onto a strange land on the other side until who knows how long” (夏, 2009, pp. 247-248). The dystopian island may crystalize evil, but the real evil lies on the other side of the river. Allegorical as the novel’s theme may be, its spatial depiction of the island is by no means generic: First, the island is never as insular as it seems. The cross-river bridge is present throughout the story, coinciding with one of island studies’ main concerns: the impact of fixed links on islandness (Grydehøj & Casagrande, 2020; Baldacchino, 2007). We can also see in the story that before the building of a bridge, the island is difficult to reach due to its remoteness and the risky waters of the

river (夏, 2018, pp. 21-22). Water separates the desolate island from the city on the other side of the river, but its vulgarity and cruelty are also represented as an amoral force of vitality. From the second chapter on, with the construction of the bridge, the island begins to expose itself to outside influences. It becomes a magnet attracting all sorts of agents of urban civilization such as workers, engineers, officials and the police. In the words of 郜 (2018), the island's original residents are "irreversibly and blindly sucked into the urbanizing process without being informed and consulted in advance"; as they were reconstructed into the "underclass" and the "disenfranchised," their former "insular and backward misery" is turned into "a misery of opening and progress."

Second, without suggesting any causality between the two, I find an explicit connection between the aesthetic construction of the island in the novel and the place-specific geographies of river islands in urbanized areas. The island in the story is a riverine one rather than a typical oceanic one. In this regard, 陈 (2018) made a mistake in calling the bridge a "sea-crossing" one, betraying the sway of the stereotypical marine imaginary of islands. Further evidence can be found in Chapter Two, where there is some very subtle depiction of the riverine geographies of and around the island:

Before Limp Rat knew it, he had reached an intersection between two rivers. A not-so-wide river channel insinuates itself westward into the hinterland of the island, intertwining with other channels and splitting into several trajectories before constituting complex networks of river channels. There is a saying on the island that although the river channels cross over into each other and differ in width, they are after all bound together in belonging to the same river. This is a transfusion of the river into the island and the consumption and masturbation of its robust stamina. (夏, 2018, p. 115)

Instead of an aerial view, we see in the above quote an aesthetic construction of the relational geographies between the artery and tributaries of the river and the island itself.

Third, the island is "a desolate small islet beside a modern city" (郜, 2018). In terms of island studies, it is a near-shore island on the rural-urban fringe. The selection of a near-shore island can inject the dynamism of urbanization into the imaginary geographies of insular spaces. As both a narrative device and a spatial trope, the bridge represents and facilitates primarily the literary engagement with the tension between island/mainland dichotomies and their ambivalence/interconnection. Without necessarily incurring authorial intention, the underlying urban-rural contradiction in China's urbanization can be identified.

In summary, by constructing the riverine geographies of an urbanizing island in inland China, *The Roaming of a Beggar* transforms the trope of the insular dystopia into a quasi-allegorical space caught between fiction and reality, and closure and connection. Therefore, the island in this novel can be seen as challenging the classical model of the island utopia/dystopia represented by Aldous Huxley's *Island* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* at several levels: 1) The island's riverine nature challenges the maritime model of the classical island trope. 2) The island's near-shore status challenges the remoteness of the classical island

trope. 3) The island's embeddedness in the urban/rural environment and its essential porousness challenge the insularity of the classical island trope.

Concluding remarks

The paper uses an island-sensitive approach to examine the aesthetic construction of island and insular spaces in Chinese literary works scattered across diverse periods. Four salient figures are identified, including: 1) islands as a projection of inland geography, 2) islands as insecure ethical fortresses, 3) islands as new polities across the seas, and 4) islands as outcasts' enclaves between closure and connection. Analysis shows that while the third category resembles the western prototype of an ideal society perching proud and alone in the middle of a vast open ocean, the rest of the figures diverge significantly from the western utopian model with their concentration on inland environments, their volatile enclave status, and their usually amorphous riverine geographies. In short, the alterity of Chinese island and insular imagination lies as much in its depiction of spatial ambiguities as in its mixing of diverse figures.

To an extent, the deployment of 'utopia' as a metaphor across cultures could foster dialogue and awareness of difference. But if difference is only understood as variations along the line of a dominant model that started out as a culture-and-place-specific trope, difference can only be an excuse for discursive and epistemological hegemony. The crux of the matter is, why are we always consciously or unconsciously seeking replicas of the western island stereotype? Why are we always looking for "non-western Huxleys, Shakespeares, and Defoes" (A. Grydehøj, personal communication, August 24, 2021)? Speculative as the question may sound, the assumed impossibility of bypassing canonical names and their stock island figures is real as engagement with western literature is itself an imperative in most, if not all, English-language international academic journals.

However, terms are not neutral vehicles that facilitate communication without also leaving their marks; they frame, they shape and covertly they influence. A significant risk of adopting uncritically a west-inflected island approach in examining the imaginary geographies of utopianism and insularity in non-western literatures is to succumb to the pull of dominant figures and imagine every instance of literary expression as a variation along the main line. For Chinese island studies scholars in particular, it must be presupposed that *Chinese island literature* is more a reading effect enabled by a west-inflected theoretical approach than any inherent tradition in itself. While new reading strategies can certainly refresh our knowledge concerning both islands and literature, aesthetics and epistemologies cannot stand in for ontologies.

In conclusion, I propose two paths for innovating island epistemologies in cross-cultural contexts insofar as island literature studies is concerned. At an individual level, once necessary compromise has been made, non-western scholars writing into island studies are also provided with an opportunity to reclaim their own cultural experiences by disrupting hegemonic island discourses. In the case of island literature of utopianism, more effort should be made to examine the construction and negotiation of both island and insular spaces rather than merely look for non-western tokens of the western type. Moreover, more attention should be paid to the contemporary representations of island and insular spaces in non-western literatures instead of fossilized spatial figures from the forgotten past. On the other hand, scholars already involved in the field may need to resist the temptation to defend their own taken-for-granted

epistemologies stipulating that this work is island literature and that work is not island literature. Insofar as island literature studies is concerned, the most productive area perhaps lies in that amorphous intersection between a fidelity to the physical figuration of islands and an enlarged interrogation of spatial insularity in general. This is fair to non-western literatures, and good for enriching the cultural fabric of island studies.

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