1 **Multi-temporalities and Parallel Spaces:**
Utopia, Dystopia and Digital Worldbuilding in Chinese Online Alternate History Fiction

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2 **Alternate History Fiction**

◎ Alternate history fiction: "a genre of fiction in which the author speculates on how the course of history might have been altered if a particular historical event had had a different outcome" (Collins Dictionary)
◎ Fully fictional & semi-fictional
◎ Utopian and dystopian worlds
◎ Time-travel as a typical narrative strategy

3 ***Jiakong lishi xiaohuo* 架空历史小说**

- The prototype of alternate history novels existed as early as the Ming and Qing dynasties, e.g.:
  - 《封神演义》*The Investiture of the Gods*,
  - 《西游记》 *Journey to the West*, and
  - 《三国演义》*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

- Gradually developed into a distinct genre in the modern era, especially during the 20th and 21st centuries
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- The term " *jakong lishi xiaoshuo* " became widely accepted and used with the rise of online literature, in the late 20th to early 21st century

4 ***Jiakong lishi xiaohuo* 架空历史小说**

◎ 架空 jiàkōng

(1) [built on stilts]:用柱子等支撑房屋、器物离开地面

(2) [unpractical]:比喻没有根基

(3) [make sb. a mere figurehead]:比喻暗中排挤,使失去实权

鲁迅《中国小说史略》第十八篇："〔《封神传》〕较《水滸》固失之架空，方《西游》又逊其雄肆。

Lu Xun, *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Chapter 18:
"[*The Investiture of the Gods*] is more detached from reality compared to *Water Margin*, while it lacks the boldness of *Journey to the West*."

权臣架空皇帝。

The powerful ministers ousted the emperor.

5 ***Jiakong lishi xiaohuo* 架空历史小说**

"… time travel and alternate histories can be regarded as potentially chronopolitically subversive. The presence of alternate histories and counterfactuals are perhaps the most radical element. […] "alternate history narrates a contingent temporality, which presupposes the endless malleability of history, the radical distinction between the future and the past, and the unlimited human agency to effect change." (Mo, "Time Travel", 85)

→Highly political in the Chinese context
→Challenge the official version of the unilinear, teleological temporal order of History
→Would "oust-History fiction" be a better translation?
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6

Recently, some historical TV dramas have shown a disregard for basic historical facts. Certain shows contain fabricated historical events and storylines, leading to deviations in their value orientation. This phenomenon must be rectified.
Historical TV dramas are an important medium for people, especially young audiences, to learn historical knowledge and deepen their national memory. They serve as a crucial channel for promoting national spirit, building the socialist core value system, and creating a shared spiritual home for the Chinese nation. When creating historical dramas, TV producers should focus on two key principles:

1. Authenticity and Credibility:
   Artistic creation should be based on respecting fundamental historical facts, as this is the essence of historical dramas.
2. Adherence to a Materialist View of History
   Efforts should be made to promote patriotism-centered national spirit and to uphold the traditional virtues and cultural heritage of the Chinese nation.

7 ***Qing yu nian* 庆余年 (*Joy of Life*)**

- Written by Mao Ni 猫腻
- 3,960,000 Chinese characters
- Publication started in May 2007 and finished in Feb 2009 on *Qidian*
- Accumulated 20,000,000 clicks till 2011
- Successful online TV drama (1st season) broadcast on Tencent Video and iQiyi starting November 2019
- Even more successful 2nd season broadcast on CCTV-8, Tencent Video and iQiyi : cumulative views surpassed 1.2 billion within 12 days.

8 **Utopia and the Past**

1 • 我希望庆国之法，为生民而立，不因高贵容忍，不因贫穷剥夺，无不白之冤，无强加之罪，遵法如仗剑，破魍魉迷崇，不求神明。

• 我希望庆国之民，有真理可循，知礼义，守仁心，不以钱财论成败，不因权势而屈从，同情弱小，痛恨不平，危难时坚心志，无人处常自省。

• 我希望这世间，再无压迫束缚，凡生于世，都能有活着的权利，有自由的权利，亦有幸福的权利。

• 愿终有一日，人人生而平等，再无贵贱之分，守护生命，追求光明，此为我心所愿。虽万千曲折，

不畏前行，生而平等，人人如龙。

2
- I hope that the laws of the Qing Kingdom will be established for the people's well-being, not to excuse the noble, nor to deprive the poor. May there be no wrongful accusations, no imposed guilt. Let the law be upheld like a sword, cutting through deceit and illusion, relying on justice—not on the blessing of gods.
- I hope that the people of the Qing Kingdom will have truth to follow, know propriety, and uphold compassion. May they not measure success by wealth, nor bow to power. Let them sympathize with the weak, despise injustice, and in times of danger, stand firm in their resolve; in solitude, may they practice self-reflection.
- I hope that in this world, there will be no more oppression or bondage, and that all who are born into it will have the right to live, the right to freedom, and the right to happiness.
- May there come a day when all are born equal, without distinction of rank or status; where life is cherished and the pursuit of light is a common goal. This is my heart's desire. Though the path may be fraught with difficulties, I will move forward unafraid. Born equal, may all be as dragons.
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9 **Utopia and the Past**

Fan Xian's complicated feeling towards his mother

- ❖ admiration
- ❖ feeling emotional connections
- ❖ but constantly declaring their difference:

"After all, he was an ordinary person; he had to admit that he still enjoyed the benefits brought by vanity, power, wealth, and fame. As Fan Xian warmly greeted the officials, he walked toward the study in the governor's mansion, thinking to himself that he was different from Ye Qingmei—there was no need to cast the glow of idealism upon himself. In this world—no, in all worlds—idealists are always lonely, always fated to die early, and Fan Xian could not accept either of these fates."

10 **Utopia and the Past**

An ideal world for the younger generation:

- ✓Hierarchical society
- ✓Equal opportunities for everyone to climb up the social hierarchy
- ✓Exclude a cruel and inhumane leader
- ✓Appreciation of literature and poetry in the wide society as a timeless rule
- ✓

→ Not a Communist dream but more an idealized traditional Confucian society

11 **The Dystopian Future**

- Spatialised future: the Temple
  - ➢E.g. 五竹 Wuzhu – a robot killer/bodyguard escaped from the future together with Fan Xian's mother Ye Qingmei
- Alludes to both the Orwellian and the Huxleyan dystopian images
- Self-ruining nature of human society
- Seems to be omnipotent but in fact vulnerable
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12 **Cyclic Time**

"积善之家，必有余庆，留余庆，留余庆，忽遇恩人；幸娘亲，幸娘亲，积得阴功。劝人生，济困扶穷……而谁可知，人生于世，上承余庆，终究却是要自己做出道路抉择"

"Those who accumulate good deeds will surely have lasting blessings. Leave behind those blessings, leave behind the grace, and suddenly you may encounter a benefactor. Be thankful to your mother, be thankful to your mother, for she accumulated merits for you. I advise people to help others, to aid the poor, and to support the needy... But who can know? In life, even when born under the influence of blessings, in the end, one must still make one's own choices and decisions."

→Buddhist underpinnings of karma

→Blended with modern values that highlight individual's willpower

→ An eternal and timeless rule for the world

13 **Conclusion**

- Multi-temporal representation in alternate history fiction distorts and deconstructs the linear sequence of past, present and future, leading to other forms of temporality such as cyclic time, eternal time and timelessness while remaining rooted in traditional Chinese culture and religion.
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- Such narration subverts the official representation of History which follows a linear and teleological trajectory.
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- Alternate history fiction manifests Chinese netizens' nostalgic longings for a glorified past while contributing to digital worldbuilding, providing insights into the dreams, nightmares, self-awareness and social aspirations of China's younger generations who were born after 1980s—the children of the digital revolution.
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