

Reimagining the Future City: Utopian Ambivalence and Spatial Experiments in 新石頭記 *'The New Story of the Stone'*

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Abstract

Late Qing science fiction, exemplified by Wu Jianren's 新石頭記 [translation: '*The New Story of the Stone*'], imagines the future city as rational, ordered, and bound to national strengthening, while registering deep ambivalence about that project. This essay reads urban images from Chinese cities as a spatial utopian experiment in the 'Civilized Realm'. Drawing on Ruth Levitas's account of the 'education of desire', David Harvey's distinction between utopianism of spatial form and social process, and Ursula K. Le Guin's 'yin utopianism', it argues that Wu Jianren's fragmented real cities generate the desire for a coherent alternative, while the 'Civilized Realm' reveals the limits of resolving social contradiction through completed spatial design. Garden aesthetics and deferred 'Freedom Village' interrupt this modern blueprint from within. Rather than offering a stable synthesis of Western institutions and Chinese tradition, 'The New Story of the Stone' registers an unresolved negotiation between semi-colonial crisis, Qing imperial inheritance, and vernacular forms of ethical dwelling.

Introduction

In 1910, a young man named Lu Shi'e (陆士谔) penned the speculative novel 新中国 [translation: *New China*], imagining a World's Fair held in Shanghai's Pudong district a century hence. Reformist figures such as Liang Qichao (梁启超) also proposed hosting an exposition in Shanghai, yearning for their nation to “睡狮破浓梦，病国起沉疴” [translation: ‘*awaken the sleeping lion from its deep slumber and cure the sick country of its chronic ailments.*’] (温家宝 2009)¹. Nevertheless, with the Chinese nation beset by internal strife and external threats, its national strength waning, hosting such an exposition remained a distant dream.

城市，让生活更美好 [translation: ‘*Better City, Better Life*’] was the theme of the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. It is precisely at this juncture that late Qing science fiction has been revisited, with particular emphasis placed on how it conjured up visions of the future, such as the hosting of the World Expo in Shanghai, and how it expressed the nation's aspirations for greatness, just like Wen Jiabao, the prime minister at that time, emphasised in his speech. In contemporary China, science fiction and its utopian visions are deeply intertwined with an ever-shifting political landscape; this naturally includes the once-flourishing science fiction of the late Qing dynasty, which, from its very inception, articulated a political desire for reform and an ideal future that stood in contrast to contemporary Chinese reality, and has come to be regarded as the origin of the selective tradition of Chinese science fiction (Song 2013).

By the Republican era, late Qing science fiction had already been incorporated into a certain framework of literary criticism (吴家荣 2006); however, it was criticised for failing to conform to the aesthetic principles of realism. The academic study of Late Qing science fiction has undergone several significant transformations since the 1980s. Its foundations were laid by Japanese sinologist Masaya Takeda (武田雅哉), whose pioneering excavation of neglected texts culminated in the first systematic history of Chinese science fiction literature 中国科学幻想文学馆 [translation: ‘*The literature history of Chinese science fiction*’] (武田雅哉 & 林久之, 2017). David Der-wei Wang (王德威)'s *Fin-de-siècle Splendor* [translation: ‘*被壓抑的現代性*.’] (David Der-wei Wang, 1997) subsequently elevated the field by situating Late Qing fiction within a broader rethinking of Chinese literary modernity, arguing against the dominance of realism in the 20th century and recovering various genres' suppressed imaginative energies. More recently, American scholar Nathaniel Isaacson completed the first English-language work on systematic research into Late Qing science fiction (Isaacson 2017); Jia Liyuan (賈立元)² has provided the most comprehensive collation and analysis of Late Qing science fiction to date (贾立元 2021).

Jia Liyuan's monograph offers the most systematic study of Wu Jianren's 新石頭記 [translation: *The New Story of the Stone*] to date. It provides detailed analyses of the novel's world-building, its negotiation between Chinese and Western cultural resources, and its use of character contrasts. This paper is indebted to his foundational work, particularly his reconstruction of the novel's intertextual relationships and his identification of its central preoccupations. On the other hand, his analysis, like the broader field he surveys, remains primarily oriented toward questions of national identity and literary history.

This article, therefore, reads 'The New Story of the Stone' as a spatial experiment in utopian thinking. It first explains how Jia Baoyu's itinerary provides a method for comparing real and imagined cities. It then examines Shanghai, Wuhan, and Beijing as fragmented urban spaces that produce what Ruth Levitas calls an 'education of desire'. The essay next turns to the Civilized Realm as a utopia of spatial form, before showing how garden aesthetics and the deferred Freedom Village interrupt that modern blueprint from within. In doing so, it argues that Wu Jianren's non-Western modernity is not a stable synthesis of Western institutions and Chinese tradition, but an unresolved negotiation between semi-colonial crisis, Qing imperial inheritance, and vernacular forms of ethical dwelling.

Text and Method: Reading 'The New Story of the Stone'

Wu Jianren's 'The New Story of the Stone'³ was first published in a Chinese literary journal in 1905 and later republished as a single volume in 1908 (贾立元 2019). Its publication coincided with the emergence of modern Chinese science fiction in the late Qing period. As the name suggests, it was characterized as a modern, continuous version of the famous Chinese classic 紅樓夢 [translation: *The Story of the Stone*] by Cao Xueqin, which has become one of the most famous novels.⁴ The new novel reintroduces characters from the original novel and follows Jia Baoyu's journey through several late Qing metropolises before his eventual arrival in a utopian urban realm. This approach to rewriting, based on classical Chinese novels, is by no means uncommon; indeed, there are two versions of 'The New Story of the Stone' alone.⁵ However, later revolutionary and realist critics were highly critical of this trend, describing it as “是当时新小说的一种反动，也是晚清谴责小说的一种没落。” [translation: *a reactionary departure from the new fiction of the time, and a sign of the decline of the Late Qing condemning novels*] (阿英 1980, 178).

In the original story, Jia Baoyu appears to remain within the Grand View Garden until he participates in the imperial examinations near the conclusion. In contrast, in the new adaptation where the temporal scope is considerably condensed, Baoyu's journey has already spanned much more

of China, especially its well-known metropolises. At the time, travel literature chronicling journeys through China was by no means uncommon, and to a considerable extent, such works served as a direct metaphor for the transformation of the ancient, conservative political centre from the south upwards, drawing on the experiences of the developed and open regions of the south (董定一 2012). The urban space to be showcased is defined through the figure of a wanderer in the cities; this is the setting for the utopia of the space that follows.

Chinese cities at that time, such as Shanghai, Beijing, and Wuhan, which 賈寶玉 [translation: *Jia Baoyu*] visited in the fiction, began to take the form of figures and stories rather than 大觀園 [translation: ‘*The Grand View Garden*’], the luxurious, closed private territory in the original work. From the moment Jia Baoyu descended to the mortal realm, he found himself almost exclusively in the major cities of China before finally entering a utopia known as the 文明境界 [translation: ‘*Civilized Realm*’]⁶(吴趸人 1986).

Wu Jianren meticulously orchestrated the narrative sequence and structure. A particularly evident indication lies in his attempt in Shanghai, Beijing, and the ‘Civilized Realm’ to depict an urban landscape that evolves from material artefacts to institutional frameworks, ultimately culminating in a grand utopian vision encompassing both spiritual civilization and material culture. When Jia Baoyu first enters the world, the commonplace items of writing brushes and matches already provide him with an immediate sense of material refinement. During his voyage to Shanghai aboard a steamship, from Western servants and cuisine to the vessel’s propulsion systems and traffic management, the very space of travel impressed upon the innocent youth an ever-deepening sense of wonder. This cramped cabin space simultaneously establishes the spatial structure of the entire novel: a confined, modern urban space that primarily serves private purposes yet seeks to expand its understanding of the vast public sphere through private connections. It is precisely through this clearly defined, finite space that the author enables the reader to follow Jia Baoyu’s movements and to observe and distinguish the urban spaces he presents, thereby consciously comparing the two types of space: the real world and the planned utopian space.

Baoyu’s itinerary, therefore, supplies the method of the essay itself. Rather than treating the ‘Civilized Realm’ as an isolated fantasy, the following sections read it backwards through the failures of the cities that precede it. Shanghai, Wuhan, and Beijing are not merely preliminary settings; they are the fragmented urban conditions that make utopia both imaginable and unstable.

Fragmented Cities for the Education of Desire: Shanghai, Wuhan, Beijing

The first stage of this spatial education and the experience of fragmented cities takes place not in the ‘Civilized Realm’, but in the ordinary urban spaces that Baoyu fails to understand or accept. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Baoyu’s response to Shanghai’s味莼園 [translation: ‘*Weichun Garden*’], one of the most significant public spaces in late Qing Shanghai. Jia Baoyu, however, dismissed it as a commercial small teahouse, rather than the “garden” for viewing described by Xue Pan: “我不信那是人家花园。要是花园时，无论如何总要有亭台楼阁，曲径回栏，也要有些山石树木，分出丘壑”“他那房子里，一行一行的摆了多少桌子，明明是为卖茶而设，花园那里有这么个样？……他卖了茶，就要算茶馆。”(吴趼人 1986, 72) [translation: “*I refuse to believe that was someone’s garden. If it were a garden, regardless of anything else, there should at least be a few pavilions, viewing platforms, and towers, as well as winding paths and curved railings. There should also be some craggy rocks and trees, and one should be able to make out hills and dells.*” “*had laid out row upon row of tables, obviously set up for selling tea to patrons. Why would a garden be laid out in this way? ... Once they start selling tea there, it should be considered a teahouse.*”] (Wu Jianren 2025, 111).

Later, in the Civilized Realm, Baoyu encounters a classical Chinese garden that corresponds more closely to his expectations of privacy, cultivated leisure, and aesthetic coherence: “原来窗外是一所花园。这窗面对着一个亭子，亭外一株石榴，正在开花，十分红艳。”(吴趼人1986, 176) [translation: “*As it happened, there was a garden just outside. Directly opposite the window stood a small pavilion, beside which grew a pomegranate tree. The tree was all abloom with bright red blossoms.*”] (Wu Jianren 2025, 193)

The conflict Wu Jianren staged here between Western concepts of urban public space and Chinese garden aesthetics thus runs deeper than a clash of styles. This incomprehension is productive: it generates precisely the dissatisfaction that Levitas identifies as the foundation of utopian desire, training the reader's imagination through the accumulated dissatisfactions of the given world until that imagination becomes capable of receiving a totalized alternative (Levitas 2010, 121). Each encounter with a modern urban form that fails to cohere produces an affective residue, an inarticulate longing for a space where material organization and moral meaning coincide.

Utopian narrative, as Levitas argues, operates through contrast: the imaginary reconstitution of society requires a prior apprehension of the society that falls short (Levitas 2010, 131). In Tom Moylan’s terms, the

“This vertical transmission inverted the prison’s original logic: what had once been hidden below was now made visible only through machinic mediation.”

utopian text first constructs an “originary world”, a negative foil whose inadequacies render the utopian alternative both necessary and legible (Moylan 2014, 10–11). Wu Jianren’s narrative structure follows this pattern almost to perfection. In addition to the Shanghai example mentioned above, further examples can be found in his travels through other cities. In Shanghai, Jia Baoyu expressed his naive nationalist concerns about the trade deficit and his wish for Chinese industries, technologies, and products. The ‘Civilized Realm’ fulfilled his dream by offering giant factories, schools, watches, and Chinese medicine.

Moylan’s research focused on the transformation of the critical utopia after the 1970s, when “*industrial capitalism and the nation state give way to worldwide automated production maintained by structures of power*” (Moylan 2014, 10). This suggests that the utopia Wu Jianren seeks to describe will resemble those earlier utopian visions that remained mere blueprints, or were even commodified due to his lack of material production, like Moylan’s description. However, Wu Jianren naturally had his own complex reasons for creating such scenes; it was not simply a case of “suicidal” behavior (阿英 1980, 177), where he deliberately chose to emulate ancient literature despite knowing it was a poor choice.

It is precisely this historically conditioned critical impulse that the contrast between Jia Baoyu and Xue Pan allows us to map. According to many scholars, the character of 薛蟠 [translation: ‘Xue Pan’] appeared as the function of serving as a foil to Jia Baoyu. Xue Pan arrived in Shanghai several years before Jia Baoyu, having journeyed through a dreamlike passage of time aboard trains and steamships. By then, he had already established himself as a successful merchant. Many scholars have pointed out the tension of contrast. Theodore Hutters argued that Xue Pan served as a foil to Jia Baoyu, who advanced the method of critical thinking as a public intellectual and correctly recognized the environment (Hutters 2005, 158). Jia Liyuan focused on Xue Pan’s mirage, from the worship of Western goods to the Boxer Rebellion, and noted the opposing perspectives that contributed to the rejection of modernity in the real world (贾立元, 2021, 72–74). These readings are not wrong, but they risk flattening a more unsettling asymmetry that Wu Jianren’s narrative simultaneously stages. Xue Pan, despite his moral failures, has done what Baoyu cannot: he has become genuinely part of the city. The private sphere that constantly enveloped Jia Baoyu was absent in Xue Pan’s case. Xue Pan has successfully become part of the city, though its filth has tainted him; Jia Baoyu, while retaining the intellectual’s vigilance, finds his protests confined to private expression and fails to translate them into action within the city’s events.

Wu Jianren's exhaustive depiction of the utopian city in the novel's second half denies a retreat from the critical project and provides necessary completion. It is precisely this critical impulse, shaped by historical conditions, that we are able to delineate through the contrast between Jia Baoyu and Xue Pan. The protagonist seems to be calling in vain for an ideal system, whilst the supporting characters have become more complex and active political agents, albeit through misguided actions. This bears a striking resemblance to the shift described by Moylan at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s (Moylan 2014, 178): the turn towards activism has brought the novel's decentralised subjects, or so-called "supporting characters", to the fore (Moylan 2014, 78-79).

The transition to a utopian narrative here becomes an act of ideological rupture in the terms of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur 1986, 182). Where the forces of the real city work to naturalize existing conditions as inevitable, rendering both technological modernization and anti-modern violence as the only available responses to China's historical crisis, the utopian space intervenes to denaturalize them (Taylor 2006). The 'Civilized Realm' does not offer an escape from the urban question; it offers, for the first time in the novel, a position from which that question can be seen whole. This is precisely what Levitas identifies as the function of the 'education of desire': the fragmented experience of the real city trains the reader's capacity for longing, accumulating dissatisfaction until the imagination is prepared to receive a totalized alternative (Levitas 2010, 121).

Throwing Jia Baoyu, Xue Pan, and other noble characters in 'The Story of the Stone' into the modern or contemporary cities instead of the continuous imagination of the pastoral and classical Chinese gardens should not be easily criticized as a dismissal of the rural population (阿英 1980, 178) or as some form of intellectual arrogance on his part. Wu Jianren viewed the urban space as a suitable medium for presenting his utopian vision.

Wu Jianren deliberately constructs a fragmented urban space. He imbues Jia Baoyu's movements with a sense of chance, limiting his social interactions to a select few close associates. Consequently, what is presented through the eyes of Jia Baoyu as both traveller and observer are discontinuous fragments of the urban landscape. This is precisely what Wu Jianren excels at. This highly fragmented treatment of the modern city can still be observed in Wu Jianren's other works, such as the fragmented urban spaces depicted in 二十年目睹之怪現狀 [translation: 'Strange Events Witnessed Over Twenty Years'], one of the most accomplished works of the late Qing 譴責 [translation: 'Condemning'] tradition, a genre defined

precisely by its ability to render social pathology through the accumulation of observed scenes (Milena 1980). Wu Jianren was by no means a mediocre writer; on the contrary, the endless stream of corrupt bureaucrats and decadent literati, the chaotic Western artefacts, and the Boxer Rebellion all form part of his carefully crafted fragmentary technique, which serves as a cumulative critical strategy. Here, the presence of utopia further enhances this function: readers must first fully appreciate real fragmentation and shortcomings before they can develop a genuine desire for utopian wholeness. The 'Civilized Realm' described later is, surprisingly, systematic and complete, even featuring a vast, scientifically categorised museum complex of considerable scale. The fragmented city creates the very desire that the utopian city will be constructed to satisfy.

The Civilized Realm: The Spatial-Form Utopia

Wu Jianren's utopian project is structurally committed to the utopianism of spatial form: the 'Civilized Realm' is presented as already complete, already coherent, a finished blueprint rather than an ongoing social process. This formal commitment to a completed blueprint does not make the utopia simply conservative.

Its conservatism becomes most visible in the political order that the novel imagines as complete: 老少年⁷道：“是‘德育普及，宪政可废’。

(.....) 于是各议员都把政权纳还皇帝，仍旧是复了专制政体。”“所以要讲德育普及呀！哪一个官不是百姓做的？他做百姓的时候，已经饱受了德育，做了官，哪里有什么不好之理。(.....) 也就乐得安居乐业。”(吴趼人 1986, 199–201)[translation: ‘*The Lao Shaonian said, “The last words were: ‘If moral education is widespread, then the constitution can be dissolved.’ (...)* And so all members of parliament relinquished to the emperor the power to govern, and we returned once again to having an authoritarian government.” “That is why it is necessary to speak of widespread moral education! What official doesn’t emerge from among the common people? If he received moral education while he was still a commoner, then when he becomes an official, how could he govern with poor principles? When the commoners have such a good government, they are peaceful in their lives and content in their work, (...) and everyone is free to pursue his own specialized field of learning.”’] (Wu Jianren 2025, 319–320)

The passage translates political conflict into moral completion. Once virtue is assumed to have been universally internalised, constitutional checks, political disagreement, and institutional accountability appear unnecessary. Although Wu Jianren's historical situation differs sharply from the post-1970s context analysed by Moylan, both moments involve a crisis in which

“It is
spectacle
engineered
through
abundance.”

existing social forms appear inadequate, and the utopian imagination is pressed toward alternatives it cannot fully stabilise. Wu Jianren's utopia is the product of precisely such a moment, and its contradictions are a historically specific critical impulse that has not yet found its adequate form.

The Marxist geographer David Harvey distinguishes between a utopianism of spatial form and a utopianism of social process (Gueri 2021, 346–347). The former seeks to fix a just social order through the permanent arrangement of rational, planned space; the latter keeps the ideal open as an ongoing, process-oriented project (Harvey 2000, 173–196). The utopia Wu Jianren constructs here is precisely a utopianism of spatial form: it seeks to resolve social contradictions through the permanent arrangement of a rationally governed, institutionally complete space, rather than through ongoing social process (Harvey 2000, 173). The 'Civilized Realm' is presented as already finished, already coherent, already legible as a whole. This is the formal register of the blueprint utopia, and it stands in direct contrast to the fragmentary, process-bound experience of the real cities that precede it. The fragmented city creates the very desire that the utopian city is constructed to satisfy.

It is at this point, however, that the critical limits of Wu Jianren's spatial imagination become visible. The utopianism of spatial form, as Harvey himself warns, carries a structural tendency toward closure: by fixing the ideal in a completed spatial blueprint, it forecloses the open-ended social processes through which genuine transformation might occur (Harvey 2000, 195–196). The 'Civilized Realm' resolves the contradictions of Shanghai and Beijing by eliminating them from the frame rather than by working through them. This is not a failure of literary imagination alone. It is symptomatic of a deeper structural predicament: Wu Jianren's utopian project both depends upon and is constrained by the institutional grammar of Western modernity, a grammar that arrives in China already freighted with the hierarchical assumptions of colonial progress. The critical utopian impulse that drives his narrative, the accumulated dissatisfaction with existing conditions, and the desire for a totalized alternative, produce a spatial form that cannot fully escape the colonial modernity it seeks to surpass.

Had Wu followed the classical Chinese utopian tradition more strictly, he would have found it difficult to use urban space to represent a life of natural spontaneity, peace, contentment, and

relative detachment from material production. (孟二冬 2005, 50). Intellectuals in the late Qing dynasty viewed the city instead of the countryside as the essential space in which “national consciousness” could take shape. The countryside was equated with pre-modern ignorance and political passivity, whilst the city was seen as the potential breeding ground for national agency. This directly underpinned Wu Jianren’s rejection of the Boxer Rebellion and his limited identification with urban modernity after witnessing it (Cohen 1997, 223–224)⁸. Wu Jianren was therefore compelled to choose the urban space; though imperfect, it was the only resource available to him for responding to what he perceived as the political passivity and anti-modern violence of the rural order. The modern urban space had already proven incompatible with traditional morality. This contradiction can be understood through Jameson’s account of the historical limits expressed by utopian form (Jameson 2005). In the eyes of later generations, Wu Jianren’s detachment from and rejection of peasants and their social movements constituted a limitation on his work. Yet the contradictions of the era he sought to portray did not allow him to reserve a place for peasants in his utopia, even though his novels depicted the conflict between the city and the countryside as a distinct spatial dimension.

Gardened Modernity: Classical Aesthetics and the Missing Village

Wu Jianren seems determined to portray his Utopia, the Civilized Realm, as a perfect metropolis. Upon entering the city, Jia Baoyu is introduced to an immensely vast nation comprising two million districts, each spanning one hundred square li. Every 500,000 districts form a province, with four provinces in total: East, South, West, and North. Clearly, the author deliberately exaggerates (or fails to calculate precisely) the number of administrative units here. This utopia, occupying an implausibly vast administrative territory, scarcely seems sustainable for either a future China or even a modest province like Shandong, where Jia Baoyu entered it. There are factories, schools, a vast museum with well-organised exhibits, and well-maintained roads. Nevertheless, even amidst such a grand, rational journey through a fallen realm, Jia Baoyu appears as contented as he was in the ‘Grand View Garden’, a state of mind likely sustained by the exquisite surroundings of his “realm”. The guest quarters where Jia Baoyu resides are depicted as embodying the classical Chinese garden style. Even the imposing buildings of the schools and hospitals he visits are consistently described amidst their flowers, trees, pavilions, and terraces, ‘as if they were gardens’. Moreover, Baoyu can readily access writing implements and savour tea and fruit, truly feeling as though he has returned to the Grand View Garden.

Wu Jianren's urban vision unexpectedly converged with the utopian ideals of the Garden City movement: an emphasis on greenery, restraint in urban industrial production, and the preservation of cultural heritage within the city. Wu deliberately highlighted these elements as the core imagery of his constructed utopia, seeking to persuade readers, weary of the chaos and materialism of Beijing and Shanghai, to embrace his vision of the ideal. Providing the framework of a modern nation for the realm of civilisation, Wu Jianren, however, imbued it with the substance of classical utopianism. The concept of the garden city can be understood, in part, as a response to Edward Bellamy's 'Looking Backward: 2000-1887'⁹. The novel was first translated into Chinese by the missionary Timothy Richard in 1891 and soon exerted its influence on Liang Qichao and Wu Jianren (姚达兑 2023). Wu Jianren's writing clearly attempted to follow the visitor-narrative model of 'Looking Backward', presenting similar socialist and idealistic traces in his envisioned utopian society (Huters 2005, 151). Howard's Garden City model, however, developed partly in response to the centralised and potentially authoritarian social order imagined by Bellamy (Batchelor 1969). William Morris's 'News from Nowhere' likewise offered a direct literary critique of Bellamy (Oppenheim 1996), but it was not translated into Chinese until the 1920s (郑立君 2016, 74-75). Direct borrowing from Morris is therefore unlikely, suggesting that Wu's gardenised urbanism emerged from a different literary and historical configuration.

Certain evidence also suggests that Wu Jianren likely did not draw upon Howard's theoretical model. Reports introducing the 'Garden City' theory first appeared in China and Japan as early as 1908, with actual construction in Japan commencing around 1910 (Oshima 1996). In China, 'Garden City' concepts within urban planning predominantly emerged during the Republican era after the 1920s (Chu & Liang 2019). Although Wu Jianren had visited Japan and maintained close ties with his friend Liang Qichao, both of whom had opportunities to engage with the latest Western ideas introduced in Japan, Wu's novelistic output predated these translations and introductory articles. This suggests his 'Garden City' concept is not a product of borrowing from Howard's ideas, despite the emergence of numerous highly similar images in both.

Another interpretation suggests that, at this stage, urbanisation in China was not sufficiently advanced, as in Europe and America, to generate a pastoral idealism opposed to industrialisation. Chinese urban studies scholar Luo Xiaoming's analysis contends that as a late-developing nation, China had not yet experienced the urban-rural tensions common in industrialised societies. Consequently, embracing the idealised country-

side from traditional culture was both natural and more persuasive (Luo 2023, 89). This explains Wu Jianren's reliance on traditional consciousness, compounded by the profound influence of 'The Story of the Stone' on textual narrative. The fusion of rural and urban elements can be interpreted through the lens of classical literary tradition. However, in the novel's first-half depictions of metropolises like Shanghai, one can already glimpse the force of urbanisation clashing violently with China's traditions, a conflict that, at the very least, unsettles Jia Baoyu, the idealised figure drawn from classical literature. Moreover, if the classical tradition were capable of seamlessly uniting urban and rural elements within a utopian vision, it ought to have correspondingly depicted rural decay during the earlier realistic journey. The countryside never appears as a site of suffering or dislocation; it simply does not appear at all. Thus, the absence is telling.

This creative endeavor, which sought to embrace Western modernity while ingeniously shaping gardens and green urban landscapes, resonated precisely with that unspoken "village". Rather than emphasizing Wu Jianren's absorption of some unrecognized Western ideology, it is more pertinent to reconsider whether he sought to achieve a balance. Having embraced this contradiction, Wu endeavoured to create a utopia blending classical romanticism with modern rationality. Only by embracing these vestiges of tradition, like the narrative techniques of classical Chinese literature that permeate the story, could Jia Baoyu truly transcend the chaotic, disordered modern Chinese city and pursue an idealised Chinese urban aesthetic.

What Wu Jianren constructs in the 'Civilized Realm' is therefore not a reconciliation of city and countryside but something more precise and revealing: a countryside rationally planned like a city. The garden aesthetics, the carefully zoned districts, the tree-lined grids, and so on do not represent a retreat from urban modernity but its displacement onto a different spatial register. The village that Jia Baoyu never reaches has not been abandoned; it has been absorbed into the realm, stripped of its Daoist smallness and rehoused within a framework of institutional rationality. This is Wu Jianren's most distinctive spatial invention, and his most telling contradiction: in attempting to preserve the classical garden within the modern state, he produces a garden that administers itself, a state that dreams it is a village. It is a space that is neither fully one nor the other.

Village and Realm: Vernacular Counter-Logics of Modernity

The spatial contradiction encoded in Wu Jianren's utopian city finds its most condensed expression in the novel's nomenclature. The space Jia Baoyu travels toward is named as 自由村 [translation: 'Freedom Village'],

a designation that invokes the Daoist ideal of the 小國寡民 [translation: ‘*small state with few people*’], and continues the classical Chinese literary tradition of utopian communities deliberately insulated from the corruptions of large-scale political organisation. However, the space the narrative actually delivers is ‘the Civilized Realm’: a designation that implies vast territorial extent, institutional complexity, and the rational governance demanded by modern nation-building discourse. Wu Jianren introduces both concepts but cannot sustain their distinction. As the narrative elaborates on the Civilized Realm’s administrative divisions, academies, hospitals, and rational urban grids, Freedom Village quietly disappears from the text. Jia Baoyu never reaches it. The village survives only as a moral counterpoint: the space into which Xue Pan strays, whose “barbaric freedom” defines the value system of the Civilized Realm through negation rather than affirmation (Wu Jianren 2025, 273–275). This narrative foreclosure is not incidental. The village represents what Wu Jianren’s Daoist and classical literary inheritance told him the ideal community should look like: intimate, ethically coherent, insulated from the corruptions of scale. The realm represents what his encounter with Western modernity, mediated through Bellamy’s institutional grammar, led him to believe China needed. Wu Jianren cannot choose between them, and so the narrative does something more telling than choosing: it names the destination as a village, then delivers something that functions as a state. Moylan’s framework, rooted in the political culture of 1970s North America, does not directly address the specific risk that utopian imagination faces in colonial and semi-colonial contexts. This risk is not absent from ‘The New Story of the Stone’. It reflects a structural predicament that recent scholarship on utopianism under colonial and semi-colonial conditions has begun to theorise.

Ursula K. Le Guin’s “yin utopianism” (Le Guin 1989, 90) is useful here. Han Chinese or classical Chinese culture should not be equated with indigenous knowledge. In Wu Jianren’s novel, garden aesthetics and the deferred Freedom Village perform a comparable, though historically distinct, function: they interrupt the expansive grammar of modern nation-building with smallness, withdrawal, ethical intimacy, and non-teleological dwelling (Davis 2021). Wu Jianren undoubtedly wrote from within an imperial culture and from the position of a Han Chinese intellectual. The point, therefore, is not that Wu offers an indigenous utopia, but that his novel tests whether a vernacular spatial repertoire can limit the colonial and totalising tendencies embedded in the modern utopian blueprint.

Wu Jianren’s selective appropriation of Bellamy, retaining the narrative structure and institutional ambition while replacing the spatial

and political content, is precisely this double-constrained move. The Civilized Realm does not offer an escape from colonial modernity; it offers what Nandy would call a form of critical traditionalism: the assertion of a non-Western cultural inheritance as the limiting condition of Western institutional forms (Nandy 2009). In this reading, the garden aesthetics that pervade the utopian city are not decorative but structural. They mark the boundary of what Wu Jianren is willing to borrow from Bellamy, and they define the cultural ground on which his alternative modernity will stand.

However, as mentioned earlier, Wu Jianren did indeed remain within this space shaped by colonial modernity, and this gave rise to a contradiction. No sooner had Jia Baoyu set foot in this utopia known as the “Civilized Realm” than he sought out his friend Xue Pan, who was said to reside in the 自由村 [translation: ‘*Freedom Village*’]. However, the inhabitants soon informed him that Xue Pan had strayed to a place bearing the same name but being mistakenly so called. Though outwardly appearing Civilized and free, this place in truth pursued barbarism, where a “domestic revolution” threatened to cast aside the ethical principles upheld by ancient philosophers.

Conversely, “realm” in classical literature signifies, at a minimum, boundless expanse; further elaboration in the text implies vast territories, institutional complexity, and rational governance, precisely the spatial form demanded by modern nation-building discourse. However, it would be inappropriate to regard the village as merely a lost classical Chinese utopia: Wu Jianren depicts Xue Pan’s “Freedom Village” as overwhelmed by Western notions of democracy and the family, losing its traditional morality and becoming “barbaric”.

The “Freedom Village” that the narrative promises but never delivers belongs to a different utopian register entirely: it is intimate, bounded, and process-oriented, defined by the quality of ethical life it sustains rather than by the institutional apparatus it erects. Wu Jianren cannot integrate these two registers because they are rooted in incommensurable political logics. The macro-scale realm speaks the language of modern nation-building; the micro-scale village speaks the language of classical communal ethics. The garden aesthetics that pervade the Civilized Realm are the textual trace of this failed integration: they are the village reasserting itself within the realm, the small-scale and the intimate persisting within the institutional and the vast.

That this integration fails is not a consequence of Wu Jianren’s personal limitations. It is a structural consequence of the historical position from which he writes. Davis, drawing on Moylan’s return to Ernst Bloch, has argued that the utopian imagination is from its inception bound to a colonial conception of progress: the very grammar of utopian thinking,

with its emphasis on rational planning, institutional completeness, and the production of a legible social order, carries within it the civilisational assumptions of Western modernity (Davis 2021, 554). Wu Jianren both needs and cannot fully trust this grammar. He needs it because the modern institutional forms it makes available are the only resources capable of enabling the imagining of a China strong enough to resist colonial subordination. He cannot fully trust it because those same institutional forms carry within them the hierarchical logic that subordinated China in the first place. The result is the spatial contradiction the novel encodes at every level: a utopia that speaks modernity in its administrative structure and refuses it in its sensory and aesthetic experience.

In Ricoeur's terms, what Freedom Village accomplishes by remaining permanently deferred is itself a utopian act. It functions not as a destination but as a critical position: the name that the novel gives to the desire that the Civilized Realm cannot satisfy (Ricoeur 1986, 182). The realm denaturalises the real cities of Shanghai and Beijing by demonstrating that an alternative is conceivable; the village, in turn, denaturalises the realm by marking the limit of what the institutional imagination can achieve. This double movement of denaturalisation is Wu Jianren's most significant contribution to the tradition of utopian thinking that Davis calls grounded: rather than projecting a final resolution, the novel's non-Western modernity therefore keeps a distance from the successful synthesis of Western institutions and Chinese tradition, and continues a structurally unresolved negotiation between a Levitasian desire for social totality and a Le Guinian suspicion of totalising, progressive, and colonising forms of utopia.

Conclusion: Back to the Futures in Expo 2010

Returning to Expo 2010 does not mean treating late Qing science fiction as a prophecy fulfilled by contemporary Shanghai. Rather, it allows us to see how persistent the problem of urban futurity has been in modern Chinese cultural imagination. From Lu Shi'e's imagined exposition to Wu Jianren's Civilized Realm and the final slogan 'Better City, Better Life', the future city repeatedly appears as a space where national strength, moral order, technological modernity, and public life are expected to converge. The New Story of the Stone is valuable precisely because it shows how difficult it was to imagine that convergence from the beginning.

Luo Xiaoming's 'Unlocking the Future: The Urban Imagination in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction' is a recent, seminal work that explores urban imagery in contemporary Chinese science fiction. However, the cities depicted in late Qing science fiction, exemplified by 'The New Story of the

Stone', are often simplistically dismissed as merely objectified and static prehistory (Luo 2023, 89). Naturally, this work centres on 'contemporary' texts completed after 1949 and better known to contemporary Chinese and overseas readers. Nevertheless, confronting the widely acknowledged predicament within contemporary Chinese science fiction as an imagination seemingly constrained by the modernity of reality, particularly the absence of heterogeneous urban spaces, these imperfect late Qing attempts could offer renewed insight. The courage displayed in transcending either simplistic aversion or unquestioning submission to industrial society proves especially valuable.

The significance of Wu Jianren's novel lies not in the success of its utopian design. On the contrary, it registers the contradictions of such a design. Its fragmented cities educate desire; its 'Civilized Realm' satisfies that desire through spatial order; its gardens and deferred village then expose the limits of that satisfaction. For contemporary discussions of Chinese urban futures, this late Qing text therefore offers more than prehistory. It reminds us that the future city has always been imagined through conflict: between public space and private retreat, national strength and ethical life, institutional modernity and alternative forms of dwelling.

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Endnotes

- 1 Wen Jiabao quoted the phrase in a 2009 speech, “维新变法的代表人物梁启超等也曾提出在上海举办世博会，渴望自己的祖国‘睡狮破浓梦，病国起沉疴’。” [translation: ‘*Liang Qichao and other leading figures of the Reform Movement also proposed holding a World Expo in Shanghai, in the hope that their motherland might “awaken the sleeping lion from its deep slumber and cure the sick country of its chronic ailments.”*’] (温家宝 2009). The webpage is not paginated. The phrase “睡狮破浓梦，病国起沉疴” is also drawn from a chapter heading in Lu Shi’e’s 新中国 [translation: *New China*], and the original title is “催醒术睡狮破浓梦 医心药病国起沉疴” [translation: “*The revival technique awakens the sleeping lion from its deep slumber; the medicine heals the heart and rises the nation rises from its long-standing ailments.*”] (陆士谔 2010, 28)
- 2 贾立元 [translation: ‘*Jia Liyuan*’] is a science fiction writer and Chinese literature scholar. He is an associate professor at the Department of Chinese, Tsinghua University. Jia is also a renowned science fiction writer, penning works under the pseudonym 飞气 [Translation: ‘*Fei Dao*’, meaning “flying Deuterium”], and has won the 全球华语科幻星云奖 [Translation: ‘*Chinese Nebula Awards*’]. However, in his academic publications, he generally uses the name Jia Liyuan.
- 3 Synopsis of ‘The New Story of the Stone’: Jia Baoyu, the protagonist of ‘The Story of the Stone’, is resurrected in 1901. He travels to Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, Wuhan and other places, witnessing events such as the Boxer Rebellion, the Eight-Nation Alliance invasion of China and the Reform Movement. By chance, he arrives at the ‘Civilized Realm’, where he encounters all manner of modern inventions and cultural achievements. He ultimately spends the rest of his life there.
- 4 石头记 [translation: ‘*The Story of the Stone*’], also named as 红楼梦 [translation: ‘*A Dream of Red Mansions*’], apparently ‘The Story of the Stone’ is a more suitable translation here to explain ‘The Story of the New Stone’, written by 曹雪芹 [translation: ‘*Cao Xueqin*’] during the mid of the Qing Dynasty, is one of the most well-known Chinese classic novels. From Jia Baoyu’s perspective, the main male character in the story, the tragic love stories and the rise and fall of Chinese aristocratic families are depicted. It is clear that Cao Xueqin completed the first eighty chapters; the work exists in numerous versions, including the final forty chapters, published by Cheng Weiyuan and Gao E and traditionally attributed to Gao E.
- For English translation, ‘A Dream of Red Mansions’ translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang is recommended.
- 5 The first “The New Story of Stone” was written by Wu Jianren; the second one was written by 南武野蛮 [translation: ‘*Nanwu Yeman*’, meaning ‘*Southern Warrior and Barbarian*’], and was published in 1909. However, both were criticized as failures by A Ying (阿英 1980, 177).
- 6 文明境界 (Wenming Jingjie) has different English translations in different scholars’ works. David Der-wei Wang used “Civilized World”; Theodore Hutters used “civilized realm”; and Lorenzo Andolfatto used “boundaries of civilization”.
- 7 There is currently a new English full translation of ‘The New Story of the Stone’ by Liz Evans Weber, published in 2025. The English translation in the essay is taken from this book. However, the English full-text translation uses the title ‘New Story of the Stone’, which differs slightly from the previous titles used by many scholars, such as Theodore Hutters and David Der-wei Wang.
- 8 According to the end of the story, 老少年 [translation: ‘*Lao Shaonian*’, meaning “The Old Youth”], who appeared in the ‘Civilized Realm’, is Wu Jianren himself. ‘The Old Youth’ witnessed Jia Baoyu’s experiences and decided to complete the story of ‘The New Story of the Stone’, and promote it to the public.
- 9 Edward Bellamy’s ‘Looking Backward: 2000–1887’ is a utopian novel first published in 1888. In the novel, a young American man named Julian West fell into a deep sleep in 1887 and awoke in Boston, USA, in the year 2000, where he witnessed the tremendous achievements of a United States that had become a socialist utopia in areas such as urban development, economic systems, workers’ rights, and socialist politics. The book became a huge hit in Europe and the United States, and was quickly translated into Chinese and published in China in 1891 by the famous missionary Timothy Richard (刘树森 1999, 123).