Several Thousand Years in Search of Happiness:  
The Utopian Tradition in China

by Koon-ki T. Ho  
(Hong Kong)

There are two intrinsic difficulties in discussing the Chinese utopian tradition. The first is that "utopia" is not an indigenous concept of the Chinese tradition. The second is that "utopia" and its related terms are not clearly defined. To what extent can we talk about the Chinese "utopian" tradition? Is it valid to apply Western utopian terminology to describing similar phenomena in Chinese literature and philosophy? If we accept that the wish underlying utopia is to achieve social betterment from an iconoclastic approach, then we can say an utopian tradition exists in China. Here I shall attempt a survey of various kinds of utopian manifestation in Chinese history before the twentieth century.

I am using all the terms related to utopia in this article in the sense of their widely accepted thematic definition, that is, "eutopia" stands for an imaginary society which the utopist believes to be better than his contemporary world; "dystopia" refers to an imaginary society which the utopist believes to be worse than his contemporary world; "utopia" is used as a collective term for both "eutopia" and "dystopia", so that "utopian tradition" comprises both aspects. Satirical utopia is defined as an imaginary society by which the author display a satirical caricature of the present world and which is not intended as a substitution of the present world as in utopia.

Escapist utopia refers to eutopia of pure fantasy that serves the function of escape and compensation, whereas planned utopia refers to utopia achieved or intended to be achieved by plans of social or political reforms.

Many scholars deny the existence of an utopian tradition in the East and their conviction is strongly supported by the absence of a kind of state romance in which the main purpose is to portray an ideal society achieved by socio-political planning, which can be called literary planned utopia or planned utopia in fiction. To a certain extent, it is true that Chinese literature is devoid of literary planned utopia before China was bombarded by the influx of Western culture. But philosophical and even practical speculation concerning eutopia are

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3 See for example Gerard Dudok, *Sir Thomas More and His Utopia*, Firma A.H. Kruyt, Amsterdam, 1923, p. 19. Dudok points out that in oriental and Arabic tales, there exists no kind of state-romance embodying the authors' ideas on social improvement. Julia Ching also argues that "Chinese philosophy has never produced before the twentieth century, an 'utopian' treatise which can be compared to Plato's *Republic* or Thomas More's classic," in "Neo-Confucian Utopian Theories and Political Ethics," *Monumenta Serica*, vol. 30, 1972-73, p. 2.
nonetheless recurrent in Chinese history. More interesting is the phenomenon that in the absence of the literary planned utopia, Chinese developed their own literary escapist utopias and satirical utopias. My task in this article is briefly to outline these three utopian aspects, namely, escapist utopia, planned utopia, and satirical utopia, in literature, philosophical and political treatises in the history of China.

The myth of golden age plays a decisive role in the emergence of both the planned and escapist utopia. Although the ancient Chinese have left only a poor legacy of mythology, we can still find evidence to prove the existence of myths concerning an ideal past age in ancient China. The famous Confucian classic, Shang-shu, or The Book of Documents, alleged to be the oldest still extant Chinese history book, registered a primordial belief that once in the distant past heaven was accessible to human beings on earth. Huai-nan-tzu by Liu An (179-122 B.C.), a much later treasure of rich material on ancient Chinese mythology, describes an era during which men were innocent and lived in harmony with nature. But then came the era of decline, and men had to begin to work for a living and confront natural calamities. It is, therefore, not altogether presumptuous to claim that a myth of the golden age at the prehistoric time has prevailed in China. Most important is the fact that nearly all ancient Chinese philosophical schools shared a common belief that once in a distant past China was a blissful state, and that the present is only a deterioration of the ideal past. Those philosophers anxiously proposed measures to restore the corrupted present back to its primordial golden age. Their favorite resort is an imitation of the past. As Bauer puts it, "most Chinese thinkers considered their primary task to see to it that the 'new' resemble this archetypal image as closely as possible."

From another perspective, however, the cult of the past is only an excuse for ameliorating disagreeable reality. Since no one actually knows how it was in the past, the depiction of the golden age is just a camouflage for launching a utopian project to initiate social reforms. It follows that the idea of restoring the past is in reality iconoclastic in nature. Moreover, locating the ideal world in the past enhances the credibility of the utopian project. It gives the exploited and unsatisfied an assurance that happiness, even though remote from the present, is attainable and had once been attained.

The utopian theory proposed would sound more convincing as a result. The utopian golden age in this context describes in fact not what the world was but what the world should be, and implies that such a condition is not a castle in the air.

In order to show a serious attitude toward the utopian project, the Chinese utopists refrained from employing the vehicle of fiction or romance, and nearly always expressed their visions in philosophical treatises. This is because fiction or

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hsiao-shuo⁴⁴ (little talk) was considered as a medium not suitable for conveying serious thoughts,⁸ whereas to build an ideal world is a solemn business. Even though the utopists realized that the ideal worlds depicted were virtually fictional, they did not want to make it look fictional. To produce a literary planned utopia, that is, to embody a utopian blueprint in a fictional form, was logically rejected by ancient Chinese thinkers. This is a major factor to account for the absence of literary planned utopia in China.

Although ancient Chinese thinkers located the golden age in the past, they did not advocate simply waiting for the spontaneous return of happiness.⁹ Salvation does not come unconditionally, but requires the collaboration of men, especially the rulers. The ancient Chinese utopists are, therefore, pragmatic utopists more than theoretical idealists. In attempting to gain the princes’ confidence in their utopian plans, while designing their own utopian schemes, they criticized, depreciated, and even demolished, if possible, the validity of other utopian projects, claiming that their own scheme was the one and only solution to the social and political problems of the time.

The historical segment hallmarked by the flowering of utopian theories competing with each other comprises the five hundred years known as the Period of Spring and Autumn (722-481 B.C.) and the Period of Warring States (481-221 B.C.), a time when China was divided into a number of independent states. According to an official historical record, written a few hundred years later, there existed altogether nine major philosophical schools proposing their utopian policies to their contemporary rulers of different states during that particular period of time.¹⁰ Among them, the most influential in the Chinese utopian tradition are Confucianism, Taoism, and Mohism. Each school is dominated by a general ideology. Within each individual school, different opinions and interpretations in regard to the ideology exist. Since it is impossible to discuss each school in details, I shall selectively treat only significant utopian thoughts in each of the three schools.¹¹

Confucius (551-479 B.C.), the founder of the Confucian school, has only slightly touched on the utopian subject. Indubitably his highest ideal is to bring peace to the entire world, but the ideal world order he proposed is just “a uniform stabilization of inequality,”¹² which is a hierarchical social structure with everyone satisfied with his own position and role in society. This ideal world order is made possible by “governing with virtue while made equal by virtue,”¹³ and its prerequisite

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⁸ For the traditional attitude toward fiction in China before the twentieth century, see Lu Hsun, A Brief History of Chinese Fiction, tr. Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1976, pp. 1-8.
⁹ Bauer, pp. XII-XIII.
¹⁰ See Han-shu⁴⁶ (History of Han Dynasty) by Pan Ku, Chung-hua Shu-chu, Peking, 1962, vol. 6, p. 1746.
¹¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of the utopian themes in different schools in this period, see Bauer, pp. 3-66. See also A. C. Graham, ‘The Nung-Chia ‘School of the Tillers’ and the Origins of Peasant Utopianism in China,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, vol. 42, pt. 1, 1979, 66-100 for supplementary information about the Tillers’ School, which Bauer has mentioned only in passing.
¹² Bauer, p. 22.
is a virtuous ruler. When examining closely, we do not find many ideal elements to talk about. At least we do not see this world order radically different from ordinary existing societies. One "utopian" (in the sense of vain hope) element perhaps lies in his optimistic hope that when a ruler becomes virtuous, he is able to bring about a virtuous society. In this sense, Confucius is similar to Plato, putting his utopian hope on the capable ruler (virtuous man versus philosopher).

Mencius (372-289 B.C.), known as the second greatest Confucian sage, is a more important figure in the history of Chinese utopianism. He is perhaps the first Chinese thinker to advocate the concept of messianism in China, which bears a great resemblance to the myth of the eternal return. Mencius believed that a world saviour would periodically reincarnate in human form and return to this world to bring salvation to mankind (details to follow). Moreover, his famous ch'ing-t'ien chih-tu[5] or "well-field system," a utopian scheme supposed to have been practiced before but more likely another invention of Mencius, exerted a "considerable influence on the development of all conceptions of the ideal state in China after him. Briefly, the well-field system is a measure of just and equal distribution of agrarian land in a country. Every nine hundred mou of field are divided into nine equal parts according to the shape of the Chinese character which means "well." The peripheral eight parts are assigned to eight households for their own livelihood. The middle part belongs to the government, which is tilled by the collaborating efforts of the eight households as a substitution for tax payment. Living together and sharing a common duty, these eight families form a mutual aiding relationship. The well-field system can be considered as a sort of utopian community comparable on a smaller scale to Charles Fourier's phalanx.

While Mencius still kept the family as the nucleus of his utopian community, Mo Ti (c. 470-391 B.C.),[7] the legendary founder of Mohism, put forth a form of communism which has been described as "a clear early form of a Western type of socialism." Mo Ti regarded kinship love as too exclusive, leading to hatred between members of different family circles. To remedy this defect, Mo Ti advocated a sort of altruism, ch'tien'ai[6], usually translated as universal love. The underlying idea is that when A treats B with love and benefit, B will repay A reciprocally. If everybody exercises ch'tien'ai to his neighbour eventually each individual will love all others and will be loved by them in return. Mo Ti also realized the practical

15 Bauer, p. 25. The idea of the well-field system had inspired a later utopian system Chang Tsai to carry out an utopian experiment. "He planned for a long time to purchase some land for himself and his disciples, and to divide it up into well-fields in order to demonstrate the feasibility of such system;" Ching, p. 11. It was a pity that he died before he was given a chance to accomplish this project.
18 Bauer, p. 27.
difficulty in building an utopia in the mundane world surrounded by corrupted societies. While advocating the ideal of anti-invasion, he also developed a highly sophisticated machinery and strategy for the purpose of defense. He can be, therefore, compared to Arthur Vinton who discerned the necessity of a strong self-defending force in maintaining an utopia. Vinton dramatizes in *Looking Further Backward* that one of the major problems of the utopian America depicted in Edward Bellamy's famous *Looking Backward* is the lack of a competent defensive army. Had Mohism replaced Confucianism to become the dominant philosophy in the history of China, China would have evolved a few hundred years ahead of Europe as the first socialist country in the world.

Both Confucians and Mohists attempted to impose upon human society an artificial system to achieve an utopian harmony.

The Taoists on the other hand looked to the natural world order as the solution for all human problems. The Taoists considered civilization as the root of evil, alienating men from their natural environment. A typical Taoist utopia, therefore, locates in a remote countryside or desolate mountain. The population is small and the inhabitants work only for minimal sustenance. No actual kings, governments, or even friendship exist. Civilization is permitted only to serve the basic necessity of life. Because of this rejection of civilization in favor of a natural order, the Taoists inclined to tint their utopian visions with mythical colours, making their utopias look like the escapist utopia. The most remarkable Taoist utopian model is the so-called *hsiao-kuo kua-min* (small state with small population) recorded in *Tao-te-ching*. In fact, from the Taoist perspective, life is only a phase of a natural sequential form of existence, most probably a degrading and undesirable one. The


The last two books (Books 14 & 15) of *Mo Tzu* in facts are entirely devoted to defensive strategies and techniques. Unfortunately, some of the chapters have been lost.

Julian West observes, for example, that the civilization of the twentieth century America is vastly higher than that of the nineteenth century "with the sole exception of self-defense," Arthur Vinton, *Looking Further Backward*, The Albany Book, Albany, 1890, p. 145. The notion of the necessity of a strong self-defensive force permeates the entire novel.

See for example the description of the ideal Taoist community known as "The Small State with Small Population" in *Tao-te Ching* [59], chap. 80, in *CTCC*, vol. 3, pp. 46-7. Bauer says that this description eventually becomes "a basic element of Taoist conception of paradise," p. 430, note 69. But the Taoist classic that contains more records of utopias is *Lieh Tzu* [51]. See the examples quoted in Bauer, pp. 92-4. A discussion of the Taoist utopia can be found in V.M. Stejn, "Iz rannej istorii social 'nych utopij. Dao sskaja utopia v Kitae" (From the Early History of Social Utopies. The Taoist Utopia in China), in *Vestnik istorii mirovoj kultury*, vol. 6, 1960, pp. 130-9.

The Taoist ideas about life and death are very well exemplified by a parable in *Chuang Tzu* [52]. Once Chuang Tzu sees a skull on his way. He asks the skull if he would like to become alive again. The skeleton answers angrily "Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on a throne and take on trouble of a human being again?" *Chuang Tzu*, chap. 18, in *CTCC*, vol. 4, p. 111; c.f. Burton Watson, tr., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Columbia Univ. Press, New York & London, 1968, pp. 194-8. For a more comprehensive discussion, see Chou Shao-hsien, "Chuang Tzu Chih Sheng-shih Kuan" (The Concepts of Life and Death of Chuang Tzu), *Chien-sheh*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1959, pp. 10-13; Liu Kuang-i, "Chuang Tzu Sheng-shih Kuan-nien P'ou-hsi" (The Anatomy of Chuang Tzu's Concepts of
planned utopia aiming at attaining happiness in this life through artificial means is perforce rejected by the Taoists.

The prototype of Chinese philosophical eutopia is known as the world of ta-t'ung or Grand Union recorded in a Confucian classic, Li Chi or Book of Rites. In this society, everybody has his own place. There are no hereditary princes, but men of talent, virtue and ability are chosen to be rulers. Men love others' parents and cherish others' children as their own, to such a degree that all the aged, widows, orphans, childless men, disabled and diseased are taken care of. Although the authorship of the Grand Union is attributed to Confucius, it is agreed today that its concepts are loaded heavily with Mohist and Taoist values, and must have come from a much later time. Even the term ta-t'ung itself has more of a Taoist than Confucian origin. Thus, who should read this utopia as an amalgam of the Confucian, Taoist, and Mohist eutopian ideals. The world of Grand Union is the dream of most Chinese thinkers and politicians, the eutopian prototype for all Chinese philosophical and practical utopists.

It has been argued that the replacement of the cyclical concept of time by a linear concept is one of the major factors that explain the birth of utopianism in the West. In China, however, the cyclical concept of time gave rise to a form of messianic utopianism. The first Chinese thinker who advocated the idea of a periodic return of a world saviour was perhaps Mencius. Mencius declared that for every five hundred years there would arise a true king associated with many illustrious men. They together would bring peace and good government to the world. It is worth noticing that Mencius's messianism is more like the Judaic


26 According to the editor of the anthology, Chung-kuo Ta-t'ung Ssu-hsiang Yen-chiu Tzu-liao (Material on Chinese Utopianism (Ta-t'ung Thought)), the world ta-t'ung described in Li Chi is the prototype of Chinese utopianism, and so he entitles the book as such; ed. Chung-kuo K'o-hsueh-yuan Che-hsueh Yen-chiu-so Chung-kuo Che-hsuen-shih-tsu, Chung-hua Chu-cha, Peking, 1959, p. 2. In fact, the term ta-t'ung has all along been used to stand for an eutopian ideal for Chinese politicians and thinkers even in modern times. Even Mao Tse-tung labeled the future Communist age in China the era of ta-t'ung. See the essay, "Lun Jen-min Mi-chu Chuan-cheng" (A Discussion of People's Democratic Totalitarianism), in Mao Tse-tung Hsuan-chi (Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung), Jen-min Ch'u-pan-shu, Peking, 1960, vol. 4, p. 1974. But Mao's utopian thoughts are actually "in total opposition to the traditional Chinese intellectual heritage." See Maurice Meisner, "Harmony and Conflict in the Maoist Utopian Vision," Journal of Chinese Philosophy, vol. 4, 1977, pp. 247-59. Thus, "ta-t'ung" like "utopia," is only the common label of various kinds of utopian thoughts in China. It can be treated as the Chinese counterpart of "utopia" in term of philosophical and political search for an ideal society. In literature, there is another term tao-hua-yuan to be discussed later.

27 See Molnar, p. 75.

than the Christian type, for the Judaists believe that redemption is "an event which takes place publicly on the stage of history and within the community, ... in the visible world," whereas the Christian messianism stresses spiritual redemption. Both Judaic and Confucian messianism are, therefore, this-worldly; eutopia is to be attained here on earth. In the Chinese tradition, the sign is the rising of a true king and a good government. Mencius's messianic belief becomes a legacy cherished by many later Confucian thinkers.\(^{30}\)

Messianic belief is seen in both Taoism and Buddhism in China. In religious Taoism, it is alleged that the universe in its constituent parts has passed through a great number of simultaneous cycle of different length. From time to time in the future, the mechanism will reach a certain \(hu\)\(^{10}\) or "nodal point." In the third century, a new idea emerged asserting that such nodal points in time will be accompanied by cosmic catalysis. The Taoist further tinted this eschatological concept with moral colour. The cosmic disasters are seen as heaven's response to human crimes and vices. It is no longer simply a mechanical happening, but a punishment from heaven for moral degeneration in human world. In certain Taoist texts, exact dates of this happening are even given. In short, when the time comes, the world will be destroyed by a series of holocausts, and then the Taoist messiah Li Hung\(^{11}\), believed to be a reincarnation of Lao Tzu,\(^{31}\) will descend to the earth. He will, with the assistance of some divine beings who have already disguised themselves as human beings on earth, give a final judgement to the people in the world at that time. Having separated the chosen people (ch'ung-min\(^{12}\) or planted people)\(^{32}\) from the doomed, and delivered the chosen to a physically safe place, he will transfer the dying universe into an ideal state—an eutopia. Thereafter, Li Hung will rule through \(wu-wel\)\(^{13}\) or non-action and the eutopia will presumably last thousands of years.\(^{33}\)

Again, this Taoist messianism is this-worldly. It is our universe converted into an ideal place. The chosen people are not souls resurrected from death but those living at that particular time, even though the decision about who is to be saved has been made long before. Worth noticing is the final phase of the eutopia. It is a semi-supernatural world strikingly similar to Charles Fourier's eutopian projection of the future. No crime and punishment, no wars, no miseries exist. Men are happy and live up to three thousand years; all become handsome and strong. They are free from avarice and lust. They do not keep chickens, pigs, dogs, mice, cows, and horses as domestic animals, but phoenixes and cranes become their poultry, and


\(^{30}\) See Ching, p. 1.


\(^{33}\) See *Tai-shang Tung-yuan Shen-chou Ching*\(^{53}\), collected in *Tao-tsung*\(^{54}\) (the Collections of Taoist Classics), Shang-wu yin-shu-chu, Shanghai, 1923, vol. 170, chap. 1, pp. 10b-11b; vol. 171, chap. 9, p. 2b. See also the summary in Zürcher, pp. 2-6.
ch’i-lin\[14\] (a sort of unicorn) and lions, their livestock. These features, of course, remind us of Fourier’s future men who will be one hundred and forty-four years old, and future sharks and lions which will become domestic animals ready to provide men with services.\[34\] It is indeed remarkable that the anonymous Taoist should have shared such analogous ideas with a Frenchman several centuries after him.

Since the Taoist messianic myth is this-worldly oriented, it was frequently adopted for subversive purpose. Historical records show that many leaders of revolution entitled themselves Li Hung, claiming to be the reincarnated Taoist messiah Lao Tzu to convert the degenerated human world into a paradise.\[35\] The founder of T’ang Dynasty received great advantages in the establishment of the Dynasty as a result of his family name Li.\[36\] This form of eutopian messianism is really extraordinary, for it has actually inspired revolutionary movements aiming at seeking social betterment, the ultimate ideal of most Western utopists in writing their literary planned utopias.

Realization of an earthly eutopia following the descent of a messiah is also a belief held by some Buddhists in China. \textit{M-i-le\[15\]} or Maitreya, originally the future Buddha to come after Buddha Sakyamuni, is portrayed as an eschatological messiah in some Buddhist apocrypha in China.\[37\] The myth of the end of the world and the bringing of salvation by Maitreya is strikingly similar to the Taoist myth recounted above.\[38\] The Maitreya’s eutopia is again not a supernatural world, a land of Cockaigne, but a reconstructed human world: “the time of Metteyya (Maitreya) is described as a Golden Age in which kings, ministers and people will vie one with another in maintaining the reign of righteousness and the victory of the truth.”\[39\]

Like the Taoist myth of Li Hung, the myth of Maitreya’s descent has inspired many rebellious movements in the history of China.\[40\] Two of them are of particular importance. Empress Wu (r. 690-704), the only Empress in Chinese history, claimed herself to be an incarnation of Maitreya, usurping the kingdom for a short


\[35\] Wang, pp. 372-6.

\[36\] Bauer, p. 126.


\[38\] See the summary in Zürcher, pp. 6-22. The story line is in fact more or less parallel to the Taoist myth; therefore, I omit a summary here. For a discussion, see Daniel L. Overmyer, “Folk-Buddhist Religion; Creation and Eschatology in Medieval China,” \textit{History of Religions}, vol. 12, 1972, pp. 42-70.


period in the Tang Dynasty. The overthrowing of the Mongol reign and the establishment of the Ming Dynasty was greatly indebted to a secret religious sect Ming-chiao or the Religion of Enlightenment, i.e., Chinese Manicheanism. In Ming-chiao, it is alleged that their god Ming-wang or Enlightened King will incarnate in the human world, preaching his doctrine and deliver his followers from miseries and pain, a messianic theme very similar to the myth of Maitreya or Li Hung. Among the revolutionary forces against the Mongols, Maitreya was even identified with Ming-wang.

In China, however, Maitreya has never been really taken seriously by the orthodox Buddhist fold. The cult of Maitreya as a saviour was eventually superceded by the cult of Amida-Buddha and his Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (kuan-yin). Maitreya by then reappeared in a brand new image, a "jovial figure, with heavy jowls and a very pronounced paunch."

The messianic myth in the three Chinese schools of thought, Confucian, Taoist, and the Buddhist, shares a few common themes. The first is that in some definite time in future there will arise a messiah. The second is that he is to be accompanied by a group of helpers. The third is that the final phase of the world is eutopian and this worldly. The eutopian elements consist in a good government, peace, and perfect social order, typical features of a planned utopia. This explains perhaps why the myths have been used by many leaders of revolutionary movements.

A very interesting eutopian record is found in an official Chinese history book Hou-Han Shu (The History of Later Han Dynasty) by Fan Yeh (398-446). We find an idealized picture of Ta Ch'in, or the historical Roman Empire, described in eutopian terms. There are altogether ten significant eutopian features about this idealized Roman Empire:

1. The people are of exceptional honesty.
2. In the market, no two different prices of the same merchandise exist.
3. Grains and other food are always cheap.

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41 Ch'en, p. 428.
43 For the metamorphosis of Maitreya, see Ch'en, pp. 405-8.
44 Ta Ch'in is the name the ancient Chinese gave to the Roman Empire. The historian Fa Yeh recorded that in 166 A.D., the emperor of Rome An-tun (Marcus Antonius) sent an embassy to China, Hou-han Shu (History of Later Han Dynasty), Chung-hua Shu-chu, Peking, 1965, vol. 5, p. 2920. J.F. Davis, however, cited the year 161 A.D. as the date when the first Roman embassy was sent by Marcus Antonius, The Chinese, Harper & Brothers, Publishers, New York, 1840, vol. 1, p. 19. It is very likely that both writers refer to the same incident which is the earliest record of the contact between China and the Roman Empire. For early relations between China and the Roman Empire, see Friedrich Hirth, China and the Roman Orient: Researches into Their Ancient and Medieval Relations as Represented in Old Chinese Records, rpt. Paragon Book Reprint Corp., New York, 1966, Frederick J. Teggart, Rome and China: A Study of Correlations in Historical Events, Univ. of Calif. Press, Berkeley, 1939.
4. All kinds of valuable goods are in abundance.

5. Neither robbers nor police ever exist.

6. Communication system is sophisticated. "Flying bridges" of several hundred miles long are built.

7. The state is governed by a council composed of generals.

8. The king travels around the empire to collect information about his country.

9. The country is surrounded by "light water" and quicksand.

10. The empire is close to the abode of "Queen Mother of the West," a famous mythical figure in ancient Chinese mythology.

The first eight features constitute an outline of a planned utopia, and the last two add an escapist utopian touch to it. The state is ruled by a military government, headed by a king who is eager to learn what is happening in his country (7-8). To actualize the first six features would entail a well thought and planned social and educational system. The last two features tint the picture with a mythical colour, making it resemble a fairyland. The Roman Empire depicted is of course not an image of the actual situation, but as a critic comments, the Chinese historian did "much as the Jesuits and later the philosophers of the Enlightenment did with the idealized image of China in the eighteenth century Europe." His purpose is to provoke a dissatisfaction of the readers with their contemporary social environment and to erect a model for emulation. The intention is embedded in the historian's explanation of Ta-Ch’in or Great Ch’in the name for the Roman Empire in China. He argued that "the people [of the Roman Empire] are tall and strong [physically] while just and honest [morally], which resemble [the people of] China, and so it [the Roman Empire] is called Ta Ch’in." Ch’in is the name by which China became renowned in Central and Western Asia, and probably from which "China" is derived; adding the word "great" before "Ch’in" serves the purpose of idealization, implying that the picture represents a better China, the paradigm to emulate.

The idealized picture of the Roman Empire is supposed to be related to a rebel movement known as the Yellow Turban Religion. The rebellious army established a small state in the present Shensi Province, modeled upon the Great Ch’in recounted above. The state lastet for thirty years (186-216). The Yellow Turban’s endeavor marks one of the earliest attempts in actualizing a planned utopia in the history of China.

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45 According to legends, "light water" (item no. 9) is a kind of water whose density is so low that it cannot float even a piece of feather.

46 See Fa Yeh, pp. 2919-20.

47 Bauer, p. 112.

48 Fa Yeh, p. 2920.

49 It is observed that in early translations of the Buddhist texts, the term Ch’in is regularly used for China without any special reference to the Ch’in Dynasty, see Zürcher, p. 24, note 42.

50 Bauer, pp. 112-3.

51 Bauer, p. 114. For details about the Yellow Turbans Rebellion, see Howard S. Levy, "The Bifurcation of the Yellow Turbans in Later Han," *Oriens*, vols. 13-4, 1960-61, pp. 251-5; the same author, "Yellow Turban Religion and Rebellion at the End of the Han," *Journal of the American Oriental*
Although fiction was considered as an inferior vehicle for conveying serious discourse, it has been adopted by many writers to express their visions of escapist utopia, partly because the escapist utopia is usually mythical and not intended to be taken seriously. The description of the other world in a short tale or anecdote constitutes an important genre of fiction during the span from the third to the tenth century, especially within the period of Six Dynasties (315-588). It was a time hallmarked by vicissitudes of dynasties, frequent wars, famine and other natural and man-made calamities which created a very unfavourable environment for the philosophy of Confucian humanism to grow. In fact, Taoist religion and philosophy as well as Buddhism dominated the intellectual sphere of the time. These schools of thought advocated a renunciation of this life and an aspiration after a blissful afterlife. Tales containing a glimpse of the happy and luxurious life of the immortals or their dwellings proliferated as a result of this social and philosophical climate.

In a typical formula of this genre of utopian tale, a male protagonist, because of losing his way, accidentally enters the immortal’s realm and enjoys a pleasurable, mostly sensuous, experience there. Upon returning to the human world, he realizes that a few hundred years have passed. He either goes back to the immortal world if it is possible, or becomes a hermit retiring to a desolate mountain. Although the eutopia is primarily a spatial one, to reach and leave it also involves a time travel. The immortal world is usually full of sensuous, especially sexual, pleasures. The escapist utopia, like many Western counterparts, can only be reached by accident, and only on rare occasions is a visitor able to return to it. These tales are always short and sketchy, reflecting the author’s uncertainty about intangible paradises.  

Among these tales stands out a piece which eventually became the prototype for both Chinese and in a sense Japanese literary utopia (c.f. ta-t’ung in the philosophical scene). What I mean is "T’ao-hua-yuan Ch’i"[22] or "The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring" by Tao Ch’ien (365 or 372 or 376-427). The term t’ao-hua-yuan in Chinese and tógenkyō[23] in Japanese, derived from the same Chinese source, enjoys the same position as "utopia" in the West to become the label for eutopia in the Chinese and Japanese traditions. This tale is so important that one scholar even claimed it to be the only example of utopian writing in medieval China.  

The tale narrates a fisherman’s unintentional discovery of a eutopian community hidden in a mountain. How he discovers the access to this community, his observation there, and how he leaves and fails to return are briefly recounted. The utopians are supposed to be the descendents of a tribe who have been dwelling there for five hundred years isolated from the outside world. The inhabitants, as

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53 According to Hu Shih, "The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring" is probably the only example of utopian writing in medieval China; quoted in Arthur Morgan, Nowhere Was Somewhere, The Univ. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1946, p. 104.
reported, are living in harmony with nature with man-made artifices reduced to the minimum. The entire description reminds us of a typical Taoist utopia. Although the plot is still much indebted to the typical escapist utopian tales of the time, Tao's innovation consists in placing mortals in the utopia. Moreover, since the retirement of the tribe is a deliberate action, it can be argued that it is a conscious attempt to build an ideal society through human efforts. The fact that the society remained as it was established five hundred years previously also coincides with the static feature of a Western planned utopia. All these elements tempt us to identify this Chinese tale with the Western planned utopia. We must be aware, however, that the utopia depicted is an anarchical society. Instead of functioning according to a rigid utopian blueprint, the Chinese utopia is marked by its harmony with nature. If we follow the Taoist belief that the wisest way of ruling is *wu-wei* or non-action,\(^{54}\) we can call this a planned utopia of the Taoist kind, which is a hybrid of the Western escapist and planned utopia. The tale of "The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring" is so influential in the history of Chinese literature that it becomes a recurrent motif adopted by many later writers to express their utopian yearning in nearly all literary genres.

A Chinese escapist utopia comparable to the European land of Cockaigne is found in a book published a few centuries later than "The Story of the Peach Blossom Spring." In the chapter "Ku-yuan-chi"\(^{24}\) of *Hsuan-kuai Lü\(^{25}\) (Records of Mystery and Wonder), an ideal country called *He-sh(97,277),(783,369)

Inhabitants of this country are free from the major problems and miseries of life: a certain gourd stuffed with the five major kinds of crops (*wu-ku\(^{27}\)*, i.e., rice, two kinds of millet, wheat and beans) grows by itself in the fields; silk of five colours can be gathered on the trees; people are not attacked by wild animals and harmful insects as well as immune from all kinds of disease so that everyone enjoys longevity.\(^{55}\) In a loose sense, abundant examples of escapist utopia can also be found in *Shan-hai-ching\(^{28}\)* (Classics of Seas and Mountains). The main concerns of its author, however, is to depict the extraordinary fauna and flora and other geographical aspects of those exotic lands but not their ideal living conditions or social systems.

The Chinese satirical utopia incidentally is manifested in the form of account of fictional journeys from China to some exotic lands comparable to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Like the Western counterpart, the Chinese satirical utopia also presents a distorted mirror image of China in the disguise of an exotic country, a utopia. This utopia does not serve as model or paradigm to emulate but target for satire. All in all, among the various utopian sub-genres, the Chinese and Western satirical utopia are perhaps most similar to each other.

The typical features of the Chinese satirical utopia can readily be seen in a concrete example. One of the most eminent Chinese satirical utopian novels is *Ching-hua Yuan\(^{29}\)* or *Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ju-chen\(^{30}\) (1763-c. 1830).\(^{56}\)

\(^{54}\) For the concept of *wu-wei* see J. L. Duyvendak, "The Philosophy of *Wu-wei*," *Asiatische Studien*, vol. 1, 1947, pp. 81-102.


\(^{56}\) For a study of the novel in satirical utopian terms, see Hsin-shen Chang Kao, "Allegory and Satire in Li Ju-chen's *Ching-hua Yuan* (Flowers in the Mirror)," Diss. Univ. of Southern California, 1977; esp. the chapter "On the Parody of Utopia: Satire on Mankind," pp. 128-44. See also, Pi-twan H. Wang,
Although in a superficial way, this novel has frequently been compared to Gulliver's Travels, and been called "The Chinese Gulliver." Flowers in the Mirror contains an inventory of Chinese utopian genres: eutopia, satirical utopia, and dystopia. Since the entire novel is permeated with a not so seriously satirical and playful tone, it is best described as satirical utopian than either eutopian or dystopian. We may even maintain that Flowers in the Mirror represents a milestone in the transition from the ancient eutopian to the modern dystopian tradition in China.

The novel can be conveniently divided into two parts. The first part consists of a record of a long sea voyage undertaken by the three protagonists, T'ang Ao, To Chiu-kung, and Lin Chih-yang. They have visited more than thirty exotic and imaginary countries, some of which possess certain eutopian attributes, whereas others are tinted with dystopian colour. This is also the only part that has something to do with utopia, and the only part I shall discuss. As argued before, the satirical overtones of the novel are so strong that even the eutopias and dystopias can be easily seen as satirical utopia.

The generally endorsed eutopia, namely Chun-tzu Kuo or Country of Gentlemen, for example, can be read as a satirical utopia without difficulty. The description of the Country of Gentlemen is divided into two parts. The first part recounts how the three protagonists witness three unusual business transactions in which the roles of the purchasers and sellers are reversed: the buyers insist on raising the prices while praising the quality of the merchandise, whereas the sellers, reduce the prices and complain of the poor quality of their merchandise. The picture is, of course, the inverted, perhaps also idealized, mirror-image of reality. The transactions, however, are not smoothly carried out because of the shift of roles between purchasers and sellers, but are accomplished only through both negotiations and quarrels. Although the three Chinese observers praise these transactions as a picture reflecting the virtue of hao-jang pu-cheng or "inclined to be considerate [of others] and never compete [with each other]", the scenes show us just another form of competition-competing to give way and to put oneself in a disadvantageous position. Moreover, the motive behind this "virtue" is explained


58 Pi-twan Wang's discussion of Flowers in the Mirror is especially from the perspective of satirical utopia, or in Wang's words, utopian satire, pp. 114-50.

59 Chun-tzu Kuo or Country of Gentlemen is one of the archetypal gratuitous utopias in China. See for example the records of this country in Shan-hai-ching (Classic of Seas and Mountains), I-wen Yin-shu-chu, Taipei, 1967, pp. 324-5, 398; Chang Hua (232-300), Po-wu Chil (Encyclopedia of All Kinds of Strange Things), ed. Fan Lin, Chung-hua Shu-chu, Peking, 1980, p. 21; Huai-nat-tzu, in CTCC, pp. 56, 163. Both Kao and Wang read the Country of Gentlemen in Flowers in the Mirror as a eutopian paradigm. Kao calls it "a reflection of Li's secular utopia," p. 132 Pi-twan Wang, "exemplary utopia," p. 122. Wang even asserts that the author is "seriously presenting his conception of an optional society which is to serve both as a model for emulation and as a mirror to reveal the faults of the Chinese society of Li's time," p. 124. Yang Hsiao-ting comments specifically, "the novelist pictures an utopian society in which people are so virtuous as to reveal their professional secrets for other's benefits," in "Utopian Tradition in Chinese Literature: A Sampling Study," Diss. National Taiwan Univ., 1980, p. 200.

60 In the records of Shan-hai-ching, the only ideal element mentioned of the Country of Gentlemen is hao-jang pu-cheng. This is obvious Li Ju-chen's satirical interpretation of hao-jang pu-cheng.
at the end of the last transaction in which the purchaser leaves more than enough money to the seller. That seller immediately gives all his extra benefits to a beggar happening to pass by, commenting that the beggar has become so miserable in this life as retribution for his bad karma or action of taking advantage of others in a former life. This episode exposes the author's satirical intention. First, the Country is far from perfect, for beggars still exist. Second, the virtue highlighted is not cultivated by a salutary social system or education but merely a product of fear based upon a superstitious belief in retribution. By juxtaposing an utopian picture with an ironic comment, Li undermines greatly the utopian impression of this country. His satirical aim is even more obvious in the second part of the story which consists of harsh and profound criticisms of the Chinese customs prevailing in Li's time by means of a dialogue between two ministers of the Country and the three Chinese visitors.

Another country, Ta-jen Kud or Country of Great Men, usually regarded as utopia, should also appropriately be read as satirical utopia. Li Ju-chen gives only a brief account of this country. The citizens are all born with a piece of cloud under their feet, the colour of which reflects an individual's moral behavior. If he has done something immoral, the cloud will turn grey. If he still indulges himself, it will turn dark. On the other hand, a man of morals would have a piece of colourful cloud under his feet. This cloud, therefore, externalizes an individual's conscience.

The Chinese visitors meet a begger and a government official on their way. The begger stands on a piece of colourful cloud; whereas the government official, a grey one. This particular juxtaposition of a morally good begger and a corrupted government official obviously intends to serve a satirical purpose rather than to set up an utopian paradigm. Li wants to point out that one's ability does not necessarily correspond with his moral sense so that a government official could be morally worse than a begger. Moreover, the existence of a morally good begger undermines the utopian atmosphere of this country as in the case of the Country of Gentlemen.

Perhaps, Li means to emphasize that nothing is perfect, even in a utopia.

The most successful satirical utopia in the novel is Nu-erh Kud or Country of Women. It bears this name not because only females live there, but because male and female have their social roles in reverse: while women actively run the government and take part in all other business, men remain at home busy in preparing dinners and adorning themselves with cosmetics or ornaments. The aim of the author is not to build a utopia for women, but to satirize the unfair treatment of the two sexes by society. In order to fulfill this satirical purpose, Li puts the practice of footbinding in the middle of Tang Dynasty, a number of years

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62 CHY, pp. 72-81; c.f. Lin, pp. 60-1.

prior to its practice in history. In the story, Lin Chih-yang, one of the three visitors, undergoes himself the painful experience of footbinding, which he had forcefully practiced on his young daughter as every parent does to his daughters. The scenes expose in a humorous way the ridiculous and inhuman aspects of the burden that the Chinese relentlessly imposed on their women at that time. It is not surprising to find Li Ju-chen often called by critics one of the pioneer advocates in the woman’s rights movement in China. But to see the Country of Women as an eutopia for women per se is dangerous, for the narrator elsewhere expresses the view that women assuming the position of rulers and ministers is against heaven’s decree.

As compared to Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels or Samuel Butler’s Erewhon, Li’s Flowers in the Mirror looks like a mere draft of a full-scale satirical utopian project. Since the description of individual utopia is quite short, the satirical force lacks focus and consistency. Perhaps the author’s attitude in writing the novel explains its deficiencies. As one critic aptly observes, the novel starts off with a serious satirical outlook, but “before the novel is half over, Li Ju-chen has long abandoned his role as satirist to engage in full-scale celebration of the ideals and delights of Chinese culture.”

Except a report on the condition of hell, we cannot find any genuine dystopia in the history of Chinese literature. It is only after the turn of the twentieth century that dystopia came on to the stage of the Chinese literary scene. The utopian tradition in China is hallmarked by the distinct bifurcation between philosophical and literary eutopias. That expressed in the medium of philosophical treatise is the blueprint of a kind of the planned utopia, aiming at improving society by reorganizing the existing social and political structures made possible by the guidance of a virtuous ruler. The prototype of the philosophical eutopia is the world of Grand Union. That manifested in literature is mostly a kind of the escapist utopia, or sometimes, as its most important example “The Story of Peach Blossom

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64 Although there are many versions about the date of the first practice of footbinding, it is now agreed that it originated toward the end of the T’ang Dynasty or in the decades which immediately followed, i.e., around the early tenth century. See Howard S. Levy, Chinese Footbinding, The History of a Curious Erotic Custom, Neville Spearman, London, 1966, pp. 37-64.


67 See Kao, p. 109-64.


Spring," a reorganized society created by conscious efforts with a minimum of social constraints.

In the twentieth century, a form of planned utopia came on the literary stage. Famous examples are the unfinished segment of *Hsin Chung-kuo Wai-lai Chi*[^38] (The Future of New China) (1902) by Liang Chi-chiao[^39] (1873-1929), another unfinished work *Shih-tzu Hou*[^40] (The Lion Roars) (1905-06) by Ch'en T'ien-hua[^41]; and *Hsien Chih Huri*[^42] (The Soul of Constitution) (1907) by an anonymous writer. All portray the future China guided by a well conceived constitution.[^70] These modern eutopias, however, do not fall within the province of this study.

| 1 | 尚書 | | 35 | 好讓不爭 |
| 2 | 淮南子 | | 36 | 大人國 |
| 3 | 劉安 | | 37 | 女兒國 |
| 4 | 小說 | | 38 | 新中國未來記 |
| 5 | 井田制度 | | 39 | 梁啓昭 |
| 6 | 兼愛 | | 40 | 獅子孝 |
| 7 | 小國寡民 | | 41 | 陳天華 |
| 8 | 大同 | | 42 | 憲之魂 |
| 9 | 禮記 | | 43 | 尚書正義 |
| 10 | 會 | | 44 | 十三經注疏 |
| 11 | 李弘 | | 45 | 諸子集成 |
| 12 | 種民 | | 46 | 漢書 |
| 13 | 無為 | | 47 | 論語 |
| 14 | 鱒麟 | | 48 | 孟子 |
| 15 | 彌勒 | | 49 | 墨子 |
| 16 | 明教 | | 50 | 道德經 |
| 17 | 明王 | | 51 | 列子 |
| 18 | 観音 | | 52 | 莊子 |
| 19 | 後漢書 | | 53 | 太上洞淵神咒經 |
| 20 | 范囂 | | 54 | 道藏 |
| 21 | 大秦 | | 55 | 安頓 |
| 22 | 桃花源記 | | 56 | 太平廣記 |
| 23 | 桃源鏡 | | 57 | 博物誌 |
| 24 | 古元之 | |  | |
| 25 | 玄怪錄 | |  | |
| 26 | 和神國 | |  | |
| 27 | 五榖 | |  | |
| 28 | 山海經 | |  | |
| 29 | 長花緣 | |  | |