

Vortrag Leon Rocha 24.5.2007

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Beautiful China: A Visit to Zhang Jingsheng's Utopia

This chapter engages primarily with Zhang Jingsheng's bestselling utopian tracts, <<An Aesthetic Outlook of Life>> (1923) and <<The Organisation of a Society of Beauty>> (1924). It will begin with a faux-naive traveller's account of Zhang Jingsheng's Beautiful China. I shall be accompanied by a beautiful, evangelistic and mysterious tour guide, with whom I have several debates on the question of the "aesthetic state". I shall also use the travelogue and the dialogues to raise points for later discussion and deeper analysis. I draw attention to, for instance: Zhang Jingsheng's appropriation of the philosophy of Schiller and Rousseau; his engagement with British aestheticism of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde; the similarity between Zhang's utopian political economy and Kim Il-Sung's ideology of "Juche"; the points of convergence between the institutions for the enhancement of the race in Beautiful China and Concentration Camps; the parallels between Zhang's mass spectacles (festivals, marches, sports games) and those we witnessed under Fascist regimes. My wish is to give a vivid and immersive portrait of Zhang Jingsheng's utopia. There will be illustrations accompanying the text, drawn by Harriet Loveday Muller, who offers her visual representation of this "paradise".

The second section of the chapter begins with the historical contextualisation and reception of Zhang's two books; I explain how they can be located within the intellectual currents of the May Fourth New Culture Movement. Zhang Jingsheng's works, like all utopian tracts, are useful lenses with which we can view the author's society. I discuss the hybridity of Zhang's texts. They are a combination of: utopian speculation; science fiction; prescriptive manual; university lectures; a catalogue of the latest fashions in thought as well as consumer products of 1920s China; political satire; personal attacks against other intellectuals; and autobiographical anecdotes including Zhang's sexual escapades in Parisian brothels.

I shall reflect thereotically on my account of the sights/sites. Here I suggest that Foucault's later work on the concept of <<la gouvernementalité>> is a particularly useful analytic tool. I also borrow insights from Nikolas Rose's seminal work, <<Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self>>. I explore the biopolitics of birth, marriage, sex and death in Zhang Jingsheng's utopia, using again Foucault's ideas from his <<Will to Knowledge>>, and in passing Giorgio Agamben's <<State of Exception>>. Another extremely useful source will be Josef Chytry's magnum opus <<The Aesthetic State>>.

The final part will be heavily self-reflexive. I explain why my chapter is structured in this fashion (ethnography or dream-like sequence first, followed by interpretation, as in a Nachträglichkeit). Naturally, one reason is that, through a travelogue, I can talk interminably and irresponsibly about my half-baked "impressions" of Zhang Jingsheng's New China. But there will be more reasons. I engage with Harriet Loveday Muller's illustrations, and attempt to develop a link between the work of a historian and that of an artist through this unusual collaboration.

I also want to think about the genre of utopian writing more generally. Here I adapt

Fredric Jameson's recent work <<Archaeologies of the Future>> for my purposes. The most important question: what is the point, in 2007, of reading the eccentric, somewhat incoherent daydreams of a Chinese oddball from the 1920s? Why is it that I am simultaneously fascinated and utterly repelled by Zhang Jingsheng's books? I take them seriously as political philosophy, and at the same time I dismiss them as rants. When I suggest that Beautiful China is a totalitarian nightmare, a rogue regime not unlike North Korea, Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, is that the result of my own myopia and ideological imprisonment? The conclusion I reach overlaps with Jameson's observation: "the best utopias are those that fail the most comprehensively".