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Two sides of the mirror: Contesting social orders with Chinese art heterotopias

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an investigation into the socio-political and cultural landscape of Mainland China in the Xi Jinping era using discourse analysis and close reading of selected works of Chinese visual arts, film, literature and theatre. The authors read these works through the lenses of Michel Foucault's heterotopia. The in-depth analysis of over seventy works has generated four overlapping dimensions - heterotopias of transition, compensation and illusion, ambiguity, and heterotopia of dispersed agency. Each of the four types is substantiated in the paper through the case study of one artistic work: an exhibition by Wang Guangyi, a film by Li Ruijun, a short story by Chen Qiufan and a play by He Qi. The authors aim to prove the validity of research of literary works and cultural productions for the understanding of complex social phenomena, as expressed by artists and communicated to audiences.

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Introduction

Today's China – that of the Xi Jinping era (from 2012) – is a country of both continuity, and rapid change. The creative activity of artists and writers in the particular historical time which is the focus of this paper, is shaped by socio-political factors which are not new, but which appear with new intensity. On the one hand, the party-state expects artists to fulfil a certain public mission. In Xi Jinping's 习近平 own words, they should "tell people what should be affirmed and praised, and what needs to be opposed and condemned", as well as "wave high the banner of core socialist values" (Xi, 2014). This ideological treatment of culture as a domain, Leninist in essence, can be traced back to the famous Mao Zedong's 1942 Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art speech. On the other hand, however, artists function in a thriving sector of the economy (the cultural and creative sectors), with potentially huge financial gains (especially in film and visual arts), and high expectations of audiences. This is the heritage of the Reform and Opening-Up era (from 1979) when the Chinese Communist Party decided to gradually let the forces of free market economy reconfigure the cultural sector, among many other areas of economic and public life. All the while, artists and writers must operate within ever-changing boundaries of an intricate system of state control, with an ever-growing power of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP. Crossing the fluctuating red line of what is permitted might have devastating consequences for the artists' career, financial situation, and possibly also their personal freedom. And so, almost all artistic activity in China places itself somewhere between the officially sanctioned (and lavishly supported) ideological discourse, and more independent creation which nevertheless does not go beyond the guiderails of what is allowed.

While ideological discourse of the Xi Jinping era is easy to access and already well-researched (see esp. Rudd, 2024; Tsang & Cheung, 2024; Bachulska et al., 2024), this is not the case with artistic

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productions and literary works of the last decade or so, whose authors decide to explore contemporary social topics from viewpoints outside the boundaries of the official propaganda (see i.e. Wang, 2019 for one such study). In today's China, with all the variety and the sheer scale of artistic and literary production, identification of leading themes, frameworks and approaches to describing social reality by artists and writers is a challenge in its own right.

The research of the topic presented in this paper bases on a thorough investigation of over seventy works and projects in visuals arts, film, literature, and theatre from 2012 until today, with the aim of giving some insight on how social issues are treated and presented in most recent artworks and literary works from Mainland China. Our research results give a heterogeneous picture of ways in which these topics are treated and communicated to domestic audiences. One possible key to deciphering this heterogeneity is offered by Michel Foucault and his concept of heterotopia. Several other researchers of Chinese culture have already used Foucault's concept to analyse China's contemporary cultural productions and literary works. Larson (2020), and Berry (2020) for example, discuss the heterotopian quality of works of the visual artist Cao Fei. Cecillia Mallo in her study (Mallo 2019) on the most important film director of the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke analyses his two essential works *The World* and *Cry Me a River* from the point of view of Foucault's (1986) elaboration of gardens as typical heterotopias (especially in some cultures) representing themselves and the whole, sometimes even transcendental world (p. 25). Song (2022) centres his analysis of few prominent works of Chinese science fiction around the notions of utopia, dystopia, chronotopia, and heterotopia. Similar attempts, focused solely on heterotopia are made by Lyu (2021) and Aloisio (2023). Another example includes Rojas (2023). who views the distorted realities of often nightmarish works of fiction of Yan Lianke as heterotopias. Chirita (2022) underlines heterotopian practices employed by Tian Gebing and Paper Tiger Theater Studio collective when analysing a production from 2017, 2017, *500 Meters: Kafka, the Great Wall, or Images from the Unreal World and Daily Heroism*. The authors of this paper, similarly to these researchers, recognise that Foucault's heterotopia can be effectively employed as an investigative tool helping to understand the multi-faceted worlds created by artists and writers whose works have successfully gone through the *shenpi* process[1], and have found their way to domestic Chinese audiences.

The results presented in the paper prove, as the authors hope, the validity of research of literary works and cultural productions for the understanding of complex social phenomena, as expressed by artists and communicated to audiences (see Table 1 which graphically maps the results of the research

Table 1. Summary of the dimensions of heterotopia in the works discussed in the paper and the social issues addressed in these works.

Type of heterotopia	Transition	Compensation / illusion	Ambiguity	Dispersed agency
Artistic work chosen for analysis	solo art exhibition *[Face Recognition] Find Descendants of Tartars* (*Renlian shibie – xunzhao Dada ren houyi* 人脸识别 - 寻找鞑靼人后裔) by Wang Guangyi 王广义 (2021)	the film *Walking Past the Future* (*Luguo weilai* 路过未来) by Li Ruijun 李睿珺 (2017)	a short story *State of Trance* (*Chushen zhuangtai* 出神状态) by Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆 (2018)	theatre production *Echoing: The Seagull* (*Xiari shengxiang: Hai'ou*, 夏日声响: 海鸥) directed by He Qi何齐 (2023)
Traits of the work	exhibition viewers see themselves and their ethnicity in the mirror created by surveillance system and computer analysis	a personal story of a city migrant showing four realms of compensation/illusion: idealised Gansu Province countryside home, dream flat, chip factory, hospital where illegal drug testing is being conducted	a puzzling story of a pre-Armageddon, ultra-megacity where past and future, human and post-human, sense and nonsense coexist without resolution	an adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* - a multi-perspective jigsaw combining original protagonists and authentic biographies of He Qi and some of the actors
Social issues	• ethnicity as a construct; ethnic identity of an individual • centrality of Han Chinese national identity • surveillance and face-recognition technology • privacy of citizens	• big city migrants' economic struggles • exploitation of ordinary people by big business • young people's aspirations and dreams of happy lives	• confusion brought about by modernity • increasingly alien reality of modern mega-cities • uncertain future of the humanity • ephemeral nature of human knowledge	• exploitation of young workforce by companies • social apathy of young people; voluntary loss of agency • lack of human-to-human interaction in social media-dominated reality

presented in this paper). The authors explore the ambivalence and ambiguity of artistic expressions that can be labelled as 'heterotopian' and consider them a source of information about China's social reality (for the debate on the correlation between fiction and social reality see Longo, 2016). The primary framing of this article, which assesses periodization into the pre-Xi and Xi eras, provocatively aligns with overused and clichéd patterns in social and political studies that aim to establish a defining point of departure when characterizing Chinese society. The authors, however, situate this framework within the actual context of artistic creation. This social reality is by no means representative only of the Xi Jinping era, nor are the ways cultural creators communicate with their audiences unique to the post-2012 period. Rather than attempting to show if and how the Xi Jinping era is different from previous periods from the point of view of artistic creation, the authors use this timeframe merely to narrow-down the research material to a manageable scale, prioritising phenomena and works which can represent the China of today.

What is considered axiomatic from the perspective of researchers positioned outside China, i.e. censorship and control, serves us merely as one of many contexts for exploring the social topics presented in the works of art and the ways these topics are expressed. Although the authors do not dismiss the inherently political or subversive artistic statements in China and, as this introduction suggests, they are fully aware of the features of the general environment in which the artists wishing to reach domestic audiences function, the authors are not primarily concerned with political issues. As tempting as such an exploration might be, it is outside the scope of this article.

Heterotopia, as described in this paper, becomes a strategic tool for unravelling and challenging Chinese realities—it serves as a decoder of social orders and, in parallel, a countermeasure to the sometimes uncertain, sometimes frightening, and sometimes painful experiences of individuals living in these realities. The authors consider works of literature, theatre, film, and visual arts, as heterotopias full of potential, capable of activating "the claims to the attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges" (Foucault and Gordon, 1980: 83). Thus, the proposed framework is twofold in its essence: it not only helps in grasping a work theoretically but also deciphers a practical strategy for shaping dynamic, self-reflexive, and networked spaces of epistemological experimentation. Along with the social change, new conceptualization of heterotopian spaces arise, moving away from "classically Foucauldian" heterotopian sites such as prisons or cemeteries. The research points out to the role of various art-related phenomena that both disrupt and preserve continuity. It stresses the capacity of Chinese artworks that trigger for actuation that might detach Chinese society from its shaping orders by rendering them visible.

Methodology

For this research, the authors have conducted a broad review of literary publications and artistic productions in the Chinese cultural field between 2012 and 2023 using topic analysis. Works were selected through previews, synopsis readings, recommendations, and mentions in secondary literature, using a 5-fold topic grid (Jacoby et al., 2025): Party – Society relations (1), Conceptions of an ideal society (2), Aspirations of youth (3), Social movements (4), and Social issues (5). The grid was borrowed from a questionnaire grid used in sociological research of Chinese youth conducted simultaneously by two groups of researchers from Sciences Po in France and Universidad Autónoma de Madrid in Spain under the same research project (see the datasets: Rocca & Salgues, 2024; Santander Oliván, 2024). In the second stage of the research involving several field trips to China, over seventy works thus selected were put through in-depth analysis, combining discourse analysis with textual analysis (see Fairclough, 2010).

Due to censorship and systemic constraints, films were mostly watched in China through Chinese streaming platforms (blocked outside the country), visual arts exhibitions were visited by researchers in person or interviews with their authors and curators were conducted, theatre performances were watched during major theatre festivals or using technical recordings of performances. The field trips were conducted in 2023. Several adjustments to the original research plan had to be made due to difficulties in accessing cultural productions for view: more time had to be allowed for viewing of recordings during field trips, at the cost of reducing researchers' time for other fieldwork activity; more weight than originally envisaged was placed on expert (Chinese festival programmers, critics and academics)

recommendations and assistance in getting access to productions to view, rather than on working with institutions and archives. This has led the authors to the conclusion that no objectivised, statistically-aided analysis of social interest topics in contemporary Chinese cultural productions is achievable in these circumstances of restricted access, and that a purely qualitative and selective research approach is the only option available.

As the outcome of the topic analysis, the authors identified three main categories of social interest topics prevalent in the corpus of literary works and cultural productions: (1) social and interpersonal dynamics (marriage, parenting, parent-child relations, relations among social peers); (2) economic and structural pressures (environmental concerns, human cost of China's economic rise, critique of neoliberalism and consumerism, corruption and abuse of power, dilemmas of technological advancement); (3) personal identity and well-being (feminist topics, disillusionment, loneliness, personal traumas). A detailed discussion on how these topics are dealt with in the works analysed, including censorship and artist-audience communication issues, is presented in Jacoby et al. (2024).

Through in-depth readings of a selected corpus of works, the authors propose four heterotopia-inspired templates for analysing how social reality is portrayed and artistic content is delivered in contemporary Chinese cultural productions. These overlapping templates are named heterotopias of (1) transition, (2) compensation and illusion, (3) ambiguity, and (4) dispersed agency. Each of the four types is illustrated in this paper through a concise case study of one artistic work: (1) an exhibition by Wang Guangyi 王广义, (2) a film by Li Ruijun 李睿珺, (3) a short story by Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆, and (4) a play by He Qi 何齐. While the first two are "originally Foucauldian", the latter two, i.e. heterotopia of ambiguity and heterotopia of dispersed agency, even if rooted in the ongoing research on the notion, are the new subcategories proposed here.

Rather than comparing the works, the authors layer them to reveal how they collectively portray shared strategies and engage with cognitive dissonances. As noted, the authors employ heterotopia as a distinctive double-reflection tool for analysing the social dimensions invoked by Chinese artistic and literary works. The authors are aware that cultural texts welcome multiple and reader-dependent reading (see, e.g. Schulzke, 2017), yet our close-reading approach tilts toward an interpretation rooted in theoretical frameworks of heterotopia.

Heterotopia – theoretical foundations

In 1967 Michel Foucault delivered a lecture on heterotopias, later published as "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias". Besides the strong introduction marrying heterotopia with mirror, Foucault listed in the essay six basic principles of the phenomenon (Foucault, 1986). Firstly, no culture in the world fails to establish heterotopia. Secondly, for each society and era, heterotopia has a different and determined function. Thirdly, it is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, incompatible by nature, and, as the fourth principle, it emerges often linked to heterochrony, either represented by the accumulation of time or volatility. Moreover, it presupposes a system of opening and closing, both isolating it and making it penetrable. Lastly, it plays a profound role in relation to all other sites.

Topinka (2010) signals that scholars tend to focus primarily on spatially describable heterotopias (after "Of Other Spaces"), ignoring the concepts of "The Order of Things" (Foucault 1989), which draw our attention to heterotopias as discursive spaces, "thinkable only in language" (Dennis, 2017). This dimension greatly informs our reading of the works analysed, especially Chen Qiufan's short story. Dehaene and De Cauter (2009) describe heterotopia as a realm that is "very broad" and draw attention to the importance of determining whether heterotopia is a consistent and useful concept, or rather "its vagueness has only brought confusion and continues to do so" (p. 91). Sohn (2008) speaks similarly and points out the inherent "otherness" of heterotopia that results in a concept "essentially ambivalent and radically open" (p. 46). Heterotopia remains vague if not placed against Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, genealogy, and new historicism. It is the metaphor that turns us back from the simplified, literal treatment of heterotopia as just another *topia*, or as a counter-site of resistance to ruling powers. Instead, the paradox of heterotopia, as Hetherington (1997) strongly emphasises, rests upon the presumption that it exists only in the space-between, parallelly "revealing the process

of social ordering to be just that, a process rather than a thing" (p. IX). Saco (2002) supports Hetherington's line of argument when she calls heterotopia a kind of betwixt-and-between of "contradiction, of contestation: a space that mimics or simulates lived spaces" (p. 14). It is worth noting that even though re-ordering produced by heterotopia may pose a challenge to hegemonic structures, it is not its primary function. The act of presenting alternative orders does not inherently aim to incite resistance against the dominant structure. This nuance, noticed by Dennis (2017), feels highly relevant in discussing art works from China, a place habitually associated with censorship and political control over cultural production.

However, viewing Foucauldian heterotopia as a spatially anchored 'process' of forming historical and social *a priori*, brings it closer to 'space' in social theory. In reference to Lefebvre's (1991/1974) "conceptual triad", one could argue that the 'spatiality' of heterotopias pops up as lived, perceived, and conceived spaces that clash with each other, consequently providing glimpses of preoccupied orders. The spatial focus balances between referring to real sites, real social orders and their sometimes incompatible real (mirroring) and mythic (inverting, alternating) dimensions (Knight, 2014). The theoretical framework that employs the notion of heterotopia is somewhat similar to inception (Dennis and Tally 2017): the works analysed here are permeated by social order yet manage to "move away" from it far enough to form a space for experimentation.

A multi-layered mirror and the heterotopia of transition

Heterotopia, as mentioned, in Foucauldian epistemology operates as a mirror, by the reflection of which a sort of counteraction on the position that one occupies is forcefully initiated (Foucault, 1986, 24). The work of Wang Guangyi 王广义 (b. 1957) is herein investigated through the lens of the preliminary notes on heterotopia by Foucault and Victor Turner's 'liminoid' theory (Turner 1969, Turner, 1974, Turner 1982), further elaborated below.

Wang Guangyi is one of the most renowned contemporary visual artists in China. Principally a painter, he won international recognition and acclaim thanks to his *Da pipan* 大批判 (*Great Criticism*) series from the 1990s and 2000s. Classified as a leader of the New Art Movement and one of China's main Political Pop artists, Wang became both wealthy and famous but has struggled ever since to break away from the "Political Pop" tag that does not seem to do justice to his diversified and deeply intellectual art. In July 2021, Wang opened a solo exhibition curated by Du Xiyun 杜曦云 – a curator based in Beijing, known for his interest in social topics. Wang's installation, part of Du's series *Wo yu Boyisi* 我与博伊斯 (*Me & Beuys*) and entitled *Renlian shibie – xunzhao Dada ren houyi* 人脸识别 - 寻找鞑靼人后裔 (*[Face Recognition] Find Descendants of Tartars*), was presented at the HOW Art Museum in Shanghai between July and October 2021.

The exhibition did not include any of Wang's famous *Great Criticism* paintings. In fact, not a single painting or sculpture was visible in the gallery. Instead, the visitors entered an empty space with one wall filled with a large projection on which they could see themselves walking through the gallery. The side panel displayed the results of automatic facial recognition analyses of all the visitors. Two additional projections were placed on a smaller, opposite wall. Multiple cameras and projectors hanging from the ceiling completed the scenography. According to the curator's written introduction, visitors' faces were scanned upon entry, and the algorithms analysed their facial features to determine how far each person exhibited traits of Tartar ancestry. The claimed percentage of Tartar genes of a given person was then projected onto the wall. Most visitors would find that they are quite closely affiliated with the ancient Tartars, and that their Han genes are not as homogenous as they might have thought. The pronounced purpose of the exhibition was to challenge the notion of "race" and show the complexity of the history of the Chinese state and Chinese ethnicity. This already sparked considerable controversy, given the heightened nationalistic sentiment prevalent in China over the last years.

Yet Wang Guangyi's work hid additional layers of meaning. By confronting the audience with issues concerning personal data privacy, and incessant surveillance and profiling[2], the setup was reminiscent of installations by Marnix de Nijs', whose projects exploring surveillance technology had previously been exhibited in China[3]. As in the Duch artist's installations, Wang's *Renlian shibie*… allowed visitors to observe not only their own faces but, more importantly, the recognition system at work, literally in a

> "behind-the-scenes" mode. However, instead of scanning the crowds for crime suspects, this time, the system seemed far more malign in its purpose. Pointing out the ancestral origins of passersby, the setup served as a trigger for unexpected break-out, diverting the focus from the privacy violation to visitors' personal confrontation with the results of ethnicity analysis. In this way, the installation echoed ongoing discussion about *Han-ness* as an imposed identity integral to Chinese statehood (Joniak-Lüthi, 2015, 120). The project thus prompted a dual mode of reflection: an insight suspended somewhere between "coming-from-the-outside"

state-driven narratives and "coming-from-me" ("coming-from-the-majority") unspoken agreement on Han centrality.

This duality built a heterotopic artistic construct in which technology played a crucial role. The exhibition space, akin to Foucauldian mirror (Foucault, 1986), induced a 'liminoid' experience (Turner, 1969, 1974, 1982)) - precarious in essence—that juxtaposed viewers with a new ethnic "allocation" conducted through omputational assessment. Foucault's words fit the reception of the work:

> From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, […] I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

Not only the marginal transition projected by Wang seemed akin to 'liminoid' phenomena described by Turner (1974)—as "parts of social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes - books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organisations" (p. 86). It extended beyond it. The injection of a "viral" Tartar identity, provoking questions of who we are, how we are perceived, and how we are classified, encouraged participants to confront truths that may have been more or less consciously suppressed. There was no commentary on what the visitors saw in the projection's "mirror"—no interpretation, no clearly voiced direction was given. While the observers were left puzzled, disappointed, or even disturbed, the momentum for suspension of their social status occurred collaterally. By and large, the exhibition reformulated the meaning of the surrounding. It operated as a profoundly heterotopic mirror - reflecting both the true and the artificially rendered present, destabilising the picture of Chinese society, and fostering a reflection of one's understanding of the centrality of Han ethnic identity. Notwithstanding, the exhibition, aligning technology and humans in short-circuit of doubled reflection, demonstrated that it is through social agreement on the one hand and collecting and manipulating data on the other, that the ethnic identity of an individual is renegotiated. This relates to yet another face recognition project, by an artist, academic and technology expert Fei Jun 费俊 (b. 1970) – *Youqu de shijie* 有趣的世界 (*Interesting World*) presented in the Chinese Pavillion at the Venice Biennale in 2019. Fei Jun's work, in which an algorithm produces an image it considers best suited to a given visitor's emotions, also bases on the concept of machines categorising humans and deciding on their relation to a given set of definitions.

Even though it is almost impossible to avoid multiple on-street cameras and the overwhelming surveillance tech infrastructure[4], self-reflexivity nurtured by art such as Wang's *[Face Recognition]* might prove subversive. Wang Guangyi's *Find Descendants of Tartars* project placed the exhibition visitors in an unfamiliar space of discomfort, heterotopic locus, where they needed to define how they view, or, after Foucault, study, analyse, describe, and "read" (Foucault, 1986, 26) the reality unveiled and occasionally manifested. The installation facilitates a moment of self-examination, an exercise of personal and collective identity. The lack of interpretative guidance could potentially intensify the renegotiation of the self-concept. This aspect of Wang's work situates it within the framework of a 'heterotopia of transition', suggesting the potential for a 'now or never' identity shift. It detaches the exhibition viewer from themselves, leaving them in a state of non-conceptual 'bareness' while critically examining ethnicity as an artificially constructed social consensus.

Walking past all the perfect futures: Heterotopia of compensation

Heterotopia of compensation points to spaces of escape from the disorderly world of the here and now; spaces that do exist in reality, but are at the same time unstable, virtually unachievable and, as such, illusionary ideal other places. Chinese films, especially in the broad category of art-house (as defined by King, (2019)) of the last decade relate to the realities they describe in a way that is very close to the

Foucauldian mirror metaphor mentioned above. As they are generally keeping to the realist tradition of Chinese cinema (see McGrath, 2022) and rarely distinctively experiment with form or cinematic language, this feature presents itself mostly on the level of the plot. And the message found in their narratives of an alternative vision of (my place in) society tends to turn into an inherent, subtle social critique. But what is more important, the artists make their characters pass from one real world to another world that is real in itself but yet somehow unstable, almost unachievable, fragile, but also very telling as concerns the reality it stems from. It might be a "heterotopia of deviation" or "heterotopias of crisis" (Foucault, 1986, p.25), as in *Baobeier* 宝贝儿 (Baby) (dir. Liu Jie 刘杰, 2018), a film describing the ill fates of a specific strata of Chinese society (foster care children and parents, the disabled etc.), or "heterotopia of illusion", which "exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26) as in *Kong shan yike* 空山异客 (*Ghost in the Mountains*) (dir. Yang Heng 杨恒, 2017), a fairly experimental story of a character on a way back to his home region[5], starting with a news report about his own death. But possibly the most important and dominant of them is "heterotopia of compensation".

Foucault (1986) defines heterotopia of compensation as "a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (p. 27). As an example, he mentions certain colonies founded by the English Puritans in America that worked according to a perfect, preestablished order, "marvellous, absolutely regulated" (p 27). What makes the difference between heterotopia of compensation and utopia is that, according to Foucault (1986), utopias are unreal in nature, "sites with no real place" (p. 24), albeit there exists a strong relation between these two and the realities or un-realities they represent. Also, in the context of this study, utopia, in its lofty, placeless, spatially and temporally almost indefinable nature, remains within the realm of ideological dreams, while heterotopias are personal or semi-personal, tangible places rooted firmly in reachable reality. Heterotopias of compensation are real in the sense of providing a functional, (almost) immediately applicable sets of rules and thus creating perfection in comparison to the disorderly world of the here and now. However, they tend to collapse into heterotopias of illusion, another dimension of Foucault's sixth principle of heterotopia, that functions as a revelation of the illusory nature of the reality we live in.

Similar spaces can be encountered in Chinese films that deal with people in the mid-to-lower financial strata of society. *Luguo weilai* 路过未来 (*Walking Past the Future*), a film directed by Li Ruijun and released in 2017 is one such example.

Li Ruijun, called "a promising newcomer" (p. 216) by Li (2018), is now a well-established art-house film director and screenwriter, "a true successor of the Chinese New Wave Cinema" (Wang, 2018). Li is a thematically consistent creator. Whether in his second film *Lao lütou* 老驴头 (*Old Donkey*) (2010) or his latest one Yinru chenyan 隐入尘烟 (*Return to Dust*), one can often find personal stories of people in conflict with authorities (not necessarily political). As this conflict imposes on them an unwelcome (dis)order, they search for a personal place of peace which might function not against but somehow aligned with these external forces.

Walking Past the Future tells the story of Yang Yaoting 杨耀婷, a young factory worker in Shenzhen 深圳, struggling in the harsh economic environment of the „new poor" (Wang, 2018, p. 79) working class. She and her family decide to move back to their ancestral home in Gansu province to make their living as farmers but encounter numerous challenges there as well. To afford a new apartment for the whole family, Yaoting returns to Shenzhen and participates in illegal drug testing trials. She develops a serious liver condition but lacks the funds for a transplant, and in the end, moves back to Gansu again.

The Gansu province in the film functions as a multi-layered heterotopia of compensation, an "absolutely perfect other place" (Foucault, 1986, p. 27), seemingly within reach, and in sharp contrast to the reality of the characters' here and now. After spending 25 years in Shenzhen, Gansu feels to Yaoting's parents as something "other", while it is almost unknown to Yaoting herself and her younger sister, and thus easily idealised. Their ancestral home represents the simplicity of agricultural life, the presumed stability against the harsh realities of Shenzhen, a "peaceful, beautiful home for its residents" as they hear on the radio before their trip there. The reality turns out differently - the land doesn't belong to the family anymore, and they discover that they are physically not able to work in the field. Yaoting feels there is no choice but to return to Shenzhen to earn money for her flat.

For Yaoting, a sort of compensation is not restricted to her Gansu home. There are three other heterotopia-like places in the film which offer her such idealised spaces. One is her dream flat - perfect in the sense of being modern, well-equipped, and just within reach with one simple money transfer, yet so far away exactly because of the same thing. The other is the chip factory she works in - a place so perfectly organised and requiring such purity that it stands in sharp contrast to the messiness of the reality behind the production lines. Thus, it corresponds well to Foucault's (1986) fifth principle of heterotopia - it is open and closed at the same time and requires a certain kind of purification to enter.[6] The third one is the hospital where the drug testing takes place. The rules are clear - you take the drug, you rest for the night, you sign, you get your money. But what the medical procedure promises, disappears into the blue due to the harmful consequences on Yaoting's body. Her perfect world becomes unattainable. As she is riding a train towards the end of the film, Gansu comes back to her in a dream, as a pure place of inner peace, a hope of a healthy and orderly life away from Shenzhen. Although the dreamy sequence does not show a real space *per se*, we can read this on a symbolic level. Her dream during a very real train journey shows two, interconnected types of heterotopias - illusion and compensation. And the train itself is something that for Foucault represents heterotopia *par excellence*, a place without a place.

The characters of *Walking Past the Future* long to find peace and stability in some idealised 'other place,' leaving behind the harsh reality that they know all too well. Sometimes, sacrificing one's health or engaging in crime seems to them as the only way to reach another "other" that is not a utopian, lofty, cosmos-wide space, but a personal heterotopia of peace, harmony and order.[7]

Out of a skinner box: Chen Qiufan's State of Trance as a heterotopia of ambiguity

Heterotopia of ambiguity is not a term proposed by Foucault. The sense of ambiguity is, however, an inherent part of Foucault's concept. Heterotopia of ambiguity renders uncertainty as constitutive of viewed and experienced reality, with destabilized logic as its part, which is not always soothingly explained in an artwork.

Chen Qiufan (b. 1981), also known as Stanley Chen, is considered one of the most prominent representatives of the Chinese sci-fi new wave. Chen's writings quite often revolve around the protagonists' internal struggles to assimilate in the futuristic settings of the Great Acceleration. When discussing his creative objectives, he draws a parallel of a "fun-house mirror reflecting real light in a way that is more dazzling to the eyes" (Liu, 2021).

Chen's short story "Chushen zhuangtai" 出神状态 ("State of Trance"), published in 2018, was co-authored by an AI algorithm trained on Chen's writing. Not long after its publication, "State of Trance" earned a literary prize in a competition conducted by an AI judge, winning over a piece written by the lionised Nobel Prize literature winner, Mo Yan. Chen's readiness to embrace technological novelty and the sensational victory brought him and the story much publicity and success. Both Chen Qiufan and his work analysed here are present in China's debate on AI and its participance in artistic practices (Strafella & Berg, 2023). Generative art and "delegated artistic creativity" (ibid.) constitute a cutting-edge field for experiments that nonetheless remain rooted in social contexts and art traditions.

State of Trance protagonist - "you" (the work is written in the second person) - on the final night before the demise of the human race, sets out on a mission that seems quite trivial: "you" leaves the apartment to return a book to the Shanghai Library, as the author comments, "in a final bid to uphold the tattered social contract" (Chen, 2020). Libraries represent semiotically loaded spaces, much bigger on the inside than they appear on the outside since they accumulate "all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes" (Foucault, 1986, p. 26; Radford et al., 2015, p. 739). The narrative of *State of Trance* takes note of the heterotopic characteristics of the Shanghai Library, calling it a "shrine of knowledge" and "heritage of human knowledge" (Chen 2020, p. 158); and the protagonist ascends its stairs "like a monarch" (p. 158). Yet the resolution to return the book seems pointless not only because the world is collapsing. Also, humans are no longer intellectually capable of reading books - their attention has become like "the filling of a custard bun" (p. 149), and turning savage, they "literally eat" (p. 147) books in the library, rather than read them. The protagonist can barely read the very telling title of the book they carry: *Brain Entropy: A Theory of Neurocognition*. This combination of motifs: the library as the final destination of the

protagonist, and inability to read books (and, effectively, process information within them) brings associations with Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Library of Babel", in which the whole universe is confined to a vast library, where all the stored works are nonsensical.[8]

We do not know much about the cause or the nature of the epistemic catastrophe that struck human civilization in the story. We only learn that this transition toward the post-Anthropocene seems justified, as, in the words of the narrator, "the guardians of order have all disappeared, or you could say that they have deconstructed themselves" (Chen, 2020, p. 148). The heterotopic, mirror-like quality of the situation is veiled in an ambiguous warning:

> That's because the threat hasn't come from the outside, like in the science-fiction movies […]. The most lethal threats often come from the self, something that constitutes you, something you were once very proud of, rationality, emotion, love, humanity, or whatever. (pp. 148-149)

Disposition (dispose to transpose)[9] and dislocation (dislocate to transit) constitute two out of three processes that Higgins and Leps (2022) identified as means to, paraphrasing Foucault, "shake the familiarities of thought" (p. 18). The situation imagined by Chen Qiufan disposes well-known orders to transpose readers onto new epistemological grounds. Dislocation (or even dispersing) of all the established truths in this world makes the transition toward the post-Anthropocene era imaginable; in fact, this is where the story leads.

Creative experimentation with AI in the "State of Trance" forms another dimension of heterotopia. Siebers (1994) emphasises the multiplicity of truths as characteristic of heterotopian texts, but in this instance, the focus shifts to the ambivalence of meaning or even defiance of habitual reading and writing practices. The algorithm's contribution in "State of Trance", even though it was trained on Chen Qiufan's writings, does not comply with any commonly accepted logic. Chen did not edit the AI-generated output and had to work out a plot in a way that could make use of the often-nonsensical phrases (Grogan, 2020). The outcome of his work, nevertheless, still poses a challenge to our ordinary reading practice.

In the text, the symbols "appear randomly" and "cannot provoke any meaningful reaction" in the protagonist's brain (Chen, 2020c, p. 150). Any dialogue that the protagonist's consciousness "on the cusp of disintegration" initiates is "profoundly meaningful, brilliantly insightful" and yet "totally incomprehensible". "You" is struck with the beauty of the expressway, calling it "a long fuse lacerating the night" (p. 155), while they wander through the metropolitan "museum of pain" (p. 156). Even if "all the plans to restart the [human] mind have failed" (p. 153) in the final hours of the Anthropocene, the protagonist still clings to learned and habitual behaviours, which in this story is metaphorically named a "Skinner box" (p. 153) – a conditioning chamber for laboratory tests, synonymous with "an internalized heritage of civilization" (p. 153).

In their final change of heart, they drop the book to the floor and walk out "into the ancient, into the new world. Into me." (p. 159). Is the story told from the perspective of some post-human being or even a sentient entity? Perhaps the "you-me" dynamic of narrating and reading the text pushes the reader into imagining what the "new world/me" that comes at the end might look like. The shift of perspectives (the "you" protagonist) may also hint at futuristic, yet already present patterns of culture consumption among young, tech-savy Chinese. The "state of trance" and the route taken by the protagonist may dramatize reading into an act more similar to experiencing virtual reality. Another reading could hint towards Chen's awareness of dilemmas felt by authors born after 1978, once called by another giant of Chinese Sci-Fi Han Song 韩松, a "Torn Generation" (Chen, 2014). Han notes in an essay: "China is being ripped apart at an accelerated pace. […] Everything, from spiritual dreams to the reality of life, is torn" (as cited in Chen, 2014). The main elements of the story, despite its avant-gardist flavour, can be transposed into the reality described by Han. The protagonist seems utterly fascinated by the modern metropolis, even if they cannot fully grasp its functioning, neither can they connect with the crowds in any meaningful manner. The AI-input is spoken by a monument, which could represent tradition, at this point – incomprehensible. Despite the cutting-edge nature of artificial intelligence, it is trained by huge volumes of data which exclusively come from our past; using a symbol of historical heritage to convey the AI-produced message poignantly depicts that paradox.

Chen Qiufan's engagement with technology and refraining from dystopian tones in his description of human demise, create an atmosphere of ambiguity. A catastrophe is approaching, but the protagonist is far from despair. They keenly observe the increasingly alien reality with his diminishing intellectual abilities and stubbornly pursues their ludicrous mission of returning the book to the library, which itself becomes a monument to the world and the social order on the verge of extinction. The ultra-modern megacity does not provide logic and rationality that lay the foundation of orders – be they labelled "Chinese", "modern", "social" or "universal". This detachment constitutes the heterotopian reading of *State of Trance*.

Chen's work depicts a space of cognitive dissonance, where past and future, human and post-human, sense and nonsense, coexist without resolution. This indeterminacy is precisely its function: to provoke reflection on the instability of knowledge, the fluidity of meaning, and the ways in which humanity negotiates its place in an increasingly alien reality. The authors refer to Chen's piece of experimental fiction as a heterotopia of ambiguity to emphasize the destabilization of meaning that permeates all layers of the text. Chen embraces randomized uncertainty as a literary device, thus juxtaposing two kinds of creativity – human and machine-generated with intentions and effect that resist fixed interpretation. The former (AI-produced "uncertainty") constitutes epistemological and aesthetical heterotopian practice, while the latter (lack of fixed interpretation) moves the practice toward the ambiguous.

Echoing: The seagull: a heterotopia of dispersed agency

Heterotopia of dispersed agency in terms of theatrical space foregrounds the shifting nature of responsibility, intention, and effect across multiple agents: performers and audiences, human and nonhuman, individual and collective (including socio-political forces).

In the first paragraph of *Of Other Spaces* Foucault (1986) writes:

> "We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein"

(p. 22). In the same text, theatre emerges as an explicit heterotopia, profoundly agential "in the epoch of simultaneity, (…) juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (p. 22). Thus, it is the theatre that "brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another" (p. 25). Joanne Tompkins (2014), the author of *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* advocates for the usefulness of heterotopia as a tool for "rendering more palpable both the spatial and the socio-political possibilities that theatre presents" (p. 15). The connection suggested by Tompkins between the "palpability" of the theatre and an abstractly existing "possibility" of its phantasmagoria, then amplified by concrete and potential socio-political environs, emphasises the heterotopic quality inherent to all theatre genres - a clash of the requisite physical participation and theatre's alternative worldmaking. Similarly, *Xiari shengxiang: Hai'ou* 夏日声响: 海鸥 (*Echoing: The Seagull*) written by Hu Xuanyi 胡璇艺 (b. 1994), directed by He Qi (b. 1992), and staged by Shuibuhao de gongzuoshi 睡不好的工作室 (The Sleepy-less Ensemble) provides the physical stage arrangements, props and characters, and casts a net of heterotopia onto foreign spatialities, zooming in on the agency of the 'other spaces'.

Echoing: The Seagull is a youthful interplay with Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Both scenarios carry the hope of renewal. Chekhov's drama is deeply entrenched in the sentiments of pre-revolutionary Russia, emphasising the audacity and indolence of the affluent, their bigotry and arrogance, contrasting these with the destitution and ignorance of the rest of the 'abandoned' society (Mann, 1977 p. 34). The adaptation by Hu Xuanyi presents a similar, geographically and politically rendered realm of a Chinese small town, where the dreams of young and creative graduates are juxtaposed with the harsh reality where everything deemed superfluous, incongruent, or financially incalculable gets systematically eliminated. Hu's rendition is a composite of loosely interwoven narrative threads, protagonists' characteristics, and excerpts from *The Seagull* dialogues, integrated with personal biographies of the actors, and then recounted as a story revolving around the revisional journey of Konstantin's spectre haunting the old neighbourhood. The 174 candidates for the roles in Hu's play were required to first complete comprehensive questionnaires detailing their lives[10]. This uncommon auditioning pattern, practised by the Sleepy-less Ensemble since the production of

Wo he wo siren de Xinhua zidian 我和我私人的新华字典 (Me and My Private Xinhua Dictionary) of 2022, shows affinity to documentary theatre and goes hand in hand with an increasingly visible approach among Chinese directors towards 'demystifying' the stage and bringing 'mediocre' social voices onto it. *Meihao yi tian* 美好的一天 (*One Fine Day*) series by Li Jianjun 李建军 (b. 1974) might serve as another example of this trend. In the production, first staged in 2013 and produced until 2022 in five site-specific versions in five Chinese cities, Li uses Brechtian-like radio to give voice to the amateurs and ordinary people talking about their stories on stage onto individual microphones set at different channels. The audience is then free to change the channels and listen to the stories they themselves chose. As the actors are ordinary city inhabitants from all walks of life, the stories are unique for each city in which the production is staged.

Echoing… is, similarly, a multiperspective jigsaw. It combines the authentic biographies of He Qi (the director; Konstantin), Hou Ying (Nina), Wang Yimeng (Xiaoming), Zhang Chengzi (Chengzi) and Xu Jie (Xuxu), with Chekhov's archetypes.

The story is divided into two parts, the first of which starts in 2023 during the Chinese New Year's Eve and lasts up to the seventh day of the lunar year, while the second is set two years later, altogether closing in the three-year chronotope (2023–2025). Before the beginning of the first part, five schoolmates rehearse Chekhov's *The Seagull* during the summer break after completing their second grade at school. This short scene is followed by documentary footage displayed on the back screen, providing additional context to the period of 2016–2022. The roughly cut video presents clips with the flickering pictures of the beginning of the Donald Trump presidency, the #MeToo movement, the "yellow vests" protests in Paris, Mark Zuckerberg's hearings at the US Congress, the Taobao Single's Day new record of 10 billion RMB in 96 seconds, the outbreak of COVID-19, the George Floyd protests, and the concealment of the youth unemployment statistics by the Chinese Ministry of Information. The audience is bombarded with the crude and brutal information stream, provoking a nearly 'palpable' conclusion that the entire world is losing its clarity and that everyone is accountable for its failures. The rapid succession of real-life events produces a daunting simultaneity of past, present, and future. This is just the opening phase, where ethereality of the stage interweaves with the tangibility of real life, and dramatically fixed threads dissolve into fluid, precarious, and open-to-change narratives, embodying the characteristics of the 'liquid modernity'—a condition in which, to use Zygmunt Bauman's term (Bauman & Leoncini 2018), we live. The inclusion of the cast's personal experiences, radical-in-tone and emotionally gripping news, as well as the direct references to the living conditions of young Chinese in this semi-fictional world, allows the director and playwright to set up a game with the networked architecture of social assemblages which break through categories of truth, materiality, and independency, instead focusing on an environmentally 'diffused' agency. This very beginning already triggers a state of heterotopia, as it is from now on that the 'echo' of Konstantin's suicide vibrates through the characters and the audience, its weight of responsibility constantly relocating between individual agency and collectively determined yet hardly avoidable causality. The main performance unfolds against the backdrop of the film and the rehearsal of *The Seagull*.

The spirit of Konstantin returns to town to reproachfully pinpoint his/her colleagues' conformist attitudes, accusing them of being personal sell-outs and acutely indicating the reason why their lives became pointless. As a counterpoint, the biographies of the four actors emerge, written as a streak of compromises. Nina, who was brought up within the confines of systemic dance education sponsored by her father, dreams of getting rid of financial dependency, and finally decides to work in a local McDonald's. Xiao Ming, once a student at a prestigious university in Beijing, becomes an intern at a new media publishing house. He first writes poetry and opens an account on Xiaohongshu[11], but ultimately gives it all up, and makes popular, Internet, collage-style poems. Xuxu wants to be an actress, but she is only able to work as an extra in low-quality productions; family debts force her to earn a living by doing e-commerce livestreams. Chengzi works as a mathematics teacher at a primary school. It isn't until after her grandmother's death that she finally gets a room in an apartment, where she lives with her family of six.

It turns out that all the ambitions and lofty plans of the young inhabitants of this small town get digested and utilised by the phantom of a large metropolis which in its rapid growth finally breaks into the town and swallows it - as is highlighted by the symbol of the construction of a new metro line.

Hu's play, much like Chekhov's original work, remains incomplete. "The Seagull" comically denounces the characters' lust for fame and riches as they struggle with modernity, but it also hints at an alternative. It is Nina in whom both Chekhov and Hu place their hope for a possible way out: her ability to subdue poetical but unrealistic desires, while simultaneously not succumbing to the pure pursuit of financial gains and consumption. Nina, who ultimately rejects her father's financial assistance and gets a job at a hotel, remains socially active. When Chengzi hosts a wedding party in their hometown, Nina is the only one who decides to attend it in person, while the others only make an effort of a single phone call. Nina makes the heterotopic 'jump out' of the overwhelming economic, political, and social order. In other words, she wrestles accountability back to herself. In this way she, rather than Konstantin is the true winner in the game, she is the true seagull.

The specificity of heterotopia in *Echoing: The Seagull* lies in the self-reflective call made by a young generation to thrive in society on their own terms, rather than try to escape from it; to show responsibility for creating it as a meaningful place of existence. One might ask after Bruno Latour (2005): "What happens when we practise the two gestures - localising the global and distributing the local - together?" (p. 219). The answer is as follows:

> Sites, now transformed into actor-networks for good, are moved to the background; connections, vehicles, and attachments are brought into the foreground. As soon as we do this, we end up with a superposition of various canals as entangled and varied as those that an anatomist would see if she could simultaneously colour all the nerve, blood, lymph, and hormone pathways that keep organisms in existence. (Latour, 2005, p. 220)

This also resembles John Law's (1994) discussion on 'the networks of agency', strongly inspired by Goffman's symbolic interactionism:

> Each one of us is an arrangement. That arrangement is more or less fragile. There are ordering processes which keep (or fail to keep) that arrangement on the road. And some of those processes, though precious few, are partially under our control some of the time. (p. 33)

The proposed framing of heterotopia in *Echoing: the Seagull* assumes the networked agency, entangling individual struggles with global forces. Such reconceptualization points out to theatre's long-established socio-political engagement. Rather than focusing solely on state-induced social drawbacks, the heterotopic lens highlights the pervasive apathy among young Chinese audiences—trapped in online echo chambers that obscure their own inertia and confusion.

The creators, through devices like a theatrical program styled as a McDonald's leaflet featuring cast bios, urge engagement and action. Theatrical heterotopia of dispersed agency thus becomes a fresh continuation of *Zeittheater* in the tradition of Schiller and Piscator, its edge directed at the Chinese youth and their post-pandemic lethargy. In Latourian spirit, *Echoing: the Seagull* seeks to bring the dormant actors to the foreground once again.

Conclusion

The title of this paper is inspired by a quote from Chen Qiufan's *State of Trance* (Chen 2020b, 154/5): "Resistance and obedience are two sides of the mirror – you require this kind of illusion." Strafella and Berg (2023) see it as an "allusion to navigating the pitfalls of writing, publishing, censorship, and the government's demands" (p. 482). The three poles: resistance–obedience–illusion, may also sum up the heterotopian reading of the Chinese texts analysed here. They offer a challenge without posing a threat against socio-political system, and they point towards the illusionary nature of our paradigms and constructs.

In this paper, the authors have argued that using Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia can serve as an interpretative tool for understanding different facets of modern Chinese society as portrayed in cultural productions and artistic works of the Xi Jinping era. Many of these works are purposefully ambiguous, either in the way their authors construct reality, shape the actions and behaviour of the protagonists, or communicate the message of their narratives. In these multiple worlds created on stage, in a gallery, film or literature, parallel and yet somewhat detached from our everyday experiences, one can see a sharp and fresh reflection of today's China.

As shown in the analysis, heterotopia of transition, by mirroring certain aspects of social existence, enables the audience to develop a new understanding of reality and simplifies identity constructs. Heterotopia of compensation can be employed to express the urge to escape the here and now, but the idealised worlds thus created require a wrong path of purification upon entry and, in the end, usually fail to materialise, becoming heterotopias of illusion instead. Heterotopia of ambiguity shows the fragility of the power-knowledge relations and the illusory nature of the social contract. And finally, the heterotopia of dispersed agency provides possible alternatives for young Chinese struggling in the era of informational chaos, atomized social relations, and overwhelming commodification.

The four works analysed in this paper, using the framework of Foucault's heterotopia, provide glimpses of the Chinese society of today and its challenges, such as party-state surveillance, economic pressure, urbanisation and health issues, but also young people's dreams and aspirations. Although the method used in the research presented in this paper does not provide objectivised conclusions that might be representative of Chinese society as a whole, it nevertheless offers, as the authors believe, a new perspective on how the current, many-faceted and complex social reality is presented by Chinese artists and communicated to their audiences.

Notes

1. *Shenpi* (examination and approval) is an obligatory process of securing acceptance by relative authorities for any artistic production or content made available to the public, including music, film, stage productions, art exhibitions, or literary publications. General guidelines are provided in laws (e.g. the 2002 Regulations on the Administration of Movies, the 1997 Regulations on Administration of Commercial Performances, or the 2002 Regulations on the Administration of Audiovisual Products), but specific interpretations of what is allowed and what is to be censored lie with the *shenpi* granting authorities, for example the Municipal/Provincial Bureaus of Culture (artistic events), or the National Radio and Television Bureau (film distribution).
2. As confirmed in a private talk with the curator (personal communication, 26th October 2023).
3. De Nijs presented three such exhibitions in China at least on four occasions, between 2011 and 2019 in Beijing, Songzhuang and Shenzhen.
4. Various Chinese artists address the subject of surveillance and personal data protection. Suffice to say, *Yi chang xiaoshi de yundong* 一场消失的运动 (A Disappeared Movement) by Deng Yufeng (邓玉峰) from May 2020, in which ten performers attempted to evade the street surveillance system along the Xingfu Street in Beijing's Chaoyang District, or his 2018 project *34.6 wan Wuhan gongmin de mimi* 34.6 万武汉公民的秘密 (346,000 Wuhan Citizens' Secret) in which he first legally purchased and then publicly exhibited personal information of thousands of inhabitants of the city of Wuhan.
5. The motif of returning home (to a birthplace, ancestral home etc.) is, generally, quite often present in Chinese cinema of the last decade, besides Ghost in the Mountains we can mention, for example, Sun Mao 榫卯, (Country Far Away) (dir. Gan Xiao'er 甘小二, 2017), Shan he diren 山河故人 (Mountains May Depart) (dir. Jia Zhangke, 2015) or Li Ruijun's film analysed later in this article. In each of these films, this motif can represent and be interpreted as a (functionally) different type of heterotopia, but in the end, as shown in the analysis below, they tend to merge, mix and intermingle.
6. Another dimension of heterotopias of compensation present in Chinese art-house cinema of the last ten years is the 'purification by crime' - a way to temporarily distance oneself from reality through criminal activity. In Kun Zhao's (2022) words, when he writes about the fiction of Ban Yu 班宇: "[It] reveals an ethical predicament: In this place, illegal actions that break social rules have become the only sustainable way of life" (p. 195). Such are the attempts of smugglers of iPhones from Hong Kong in *Guo chuntian* 过春天 (*The Crossing*) (dir. Bai Xue 白雪, 2019), a petty criminal in *Yema fen zong* 野马分鬃 (*Striding into Wind*) (dir. Wei Shujun 魏书钧, 2021), a mother and a daughter who become kidnappers in *Tuzi baoli* 兔子暴力 (*Old Town Girls*) (dir. Shen Yu 申瑜, 2020) or a couple of serial murderers of rural origin in A Yi's (阿乙) 2018 novel *Zaoshang jiudian jiaoxing wo* 早上九点叫醒我 (*Wake me up at 9:00 in the morning*).
7. Creating spaces of compensation can be observed across a wide spectrum of Chinese cultural and artistic productions. Liang Hong 梁鸿, a writer and academic, portrays the vanishing Chinese countryside through a romanticised vision of *human stories* both in her non-fiction writing (*Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang (Liang* 2021, 2023*)* 中国在梁庄 *China in One Village: The Story of One Town and a Changing World*), as well as her works of fiction (*Shensheng jiazu* 神圣家族 *The Sacred Clan*). In visual arts, a well-known painter Zhao Bandi 赵半狄 creates spaces of compensation in his installation *Zhaobandi de xiaowo* 赵半狄的小窝 (*Zhao Bandi's* Hut), which began in November 2020 in Shanghai. The project, curated by Du Xiyun (similar to Wang Guangyi's exhibition on the Tartars), was initially Zhao's reaction to the depressive reality of the pandemic

lockdowns. A cosy, safe 'ark' created in a gallery space became a safe and welcome space for ordinary visitors to talk about traumas, well-hidden family tragedies or loneliness. The hut travelled to multiple cities, and the stories were recorded, building an expanding archive available on the curator Du's personal WeChat Channel. The heterotopia of compensation in theatre can be seen in a 2023 play *Rujin wo yansu de zai xueyuan shang fenbu ai yu mengjing——zhe ju bu shi zhende* 如今我严肃地在雪原上缝补爱与梦境——这句不是真的 (*Now I am seriously mending love and dreams on the snowy plains - this sentence is not true*; staged also under the title *El fondo un campo de nieve*) by Zhou Zhongyu 周仲玉. In the play, alienation and psychological weakness that hinders action lead to the state where the process of redesigning society can only happen in the realm of imagination. Only there can feminism, equality and social activism flourish in action, and achieve their goals.

8. Drawing this similarity creates another layer of conceptual connection with the notion of heterotopia. It was, after all, another work of Borges, "Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge" that partly inspired Foucault's elaboration of heterotopia.
9. In the use presented by Higgins and Leps, "disposition" points toward making a situation understandable in the context of power-knowledge relation, part of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge.
10. Based on private correspondence with Hu Xuanyi.
11. Xiaohongshu 小红书 (Little Red Book) is a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform, similar to Instagram.

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