

Paola Iovene. *Tales of Futures Past: Anticipation and the Ends of Literature in Contemporary China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 240 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-8937-0.



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Speed, in its manifold forms and figurations, is one of the most widely used tropes to describe contemporary China: high-speed trains, twenty-four-hour construction sites, ticking clocks that visualize the next countdown, a people “restless” (so the title of another recent book) and always on the run—toward the future, to what lies behind the next horizon. “Anticipation,” a central concept in Paola Iovene’s *Tales of Futures Past*, has become a mode of life, a powerful yet subtle force that shapes everyday lives just as it informs literary inquiries into the state of human existence in modern China. So ubiquitous, in fact, is the obsession with temporality, with the future (but also with its twin, the past), that it seems remarkable how long it has taken to be recognized as a central category informing Chinese literary discourse.

Iovene’s book is a timely intervention, a rich and intricately composed study that weaves explorations of multiple literary genres and modes into a delicate texture, a dense fabric that ties together threads of inquiry into such topics as socialist science fiction, transnational temporalities

in translated fiction, the making of the Chinese avant-garde, intertextual dalliances across more than a thousand years, and the anxieties of living in a present that all but resembles a dystopian future. Notably, Iovene travels back and forth between the Mao and the post-Mao eras, demonstrating that modes of anticipation, although twisting and constantly changing shape, provide a vantage point from which to inspect Chinese cultural production in its *longue durée*. Yet at the same time, the future can never escape its own past; the two are intertwined in ways that provide productive insights on creative projects throughout the second half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium.

In her introduction, Iovene elaborates on the conceptual framework underlying the book. She argues that “twentieth-century Chinese literature imaginatively reconfigures and is institutionally shaped by two different though related notions of the future: the first understood as a ‘destination,’ a condition of higher perfection, a time and place that is better than the present; the second, as ‘an-

icipation,' the expectations that permeate life as it unfolds" (p. 3). Both modes, the first predominantly public, the second mostly private, are prone to clash; in literary culture, though, their tension proves productive. Iovene builds her notion of "anticipation" on concepts developed by Reinhart Koselleck (whose *Futures Past* [2004] has also inspired the title of Iovene's book). She defines anticipation, hence, as "a forward-oriented dimension of the perception of time inscribed in the present, shaped by past experiences, and encompassing such private and public affects as hope and fear" (p. 7). Anticipation is thus located at the juncture of the past and the future, at a crossroads where political and cultural practices meet subjective concerns and dispositions. Consequently, anticipation is "the perception of simultaneous uncertainty and inevitability that prompts individuals to write" (p. 9). As a state of being and a font of inspiration—that can turn into a flood just barely hemmed in by individuals, and therefore threatening their existence—anticipation is thus central to literary culture in socialist as well as post-socialist China.

Iovene's focus on the role of anticipation in the processes of cultural production in contemporary China leads her to a number of important insights. First of all, she demonstrates that realism and modernism, the dominating modes of writing in twentieth-century China and long considered antithetical, are in fact intertwined and interdependent, their clashes more often than not mediated by shared claims toward both the future and the past. Secondly, the book proposes a remarkably—and refreshingly—broad conception of "literature," rejecting high/low dichotomies in favor of a perspective that encompasses science fiction, children's stories, and film scripts, next to avant-garde novels, all of which share and reproduce notions of the future, or, what Iovene calls, the "ends of literature." Thirdly, *Tales of Futures Past* highlights the central role of editors, translators, critics, and publishers—literary professionals, that is—in the creative process, showing how

deeply ingrained notions of literary "development" in fact anticipate choices and decisions that come to constitute literary trends. Creatively embedding these insights into her eclectic model of "literary culture"—a notion she borrows from Sheldon Pollock's volume *Literary Cultures in History* (2003)—Iovene aims to offer "a 'hybrid' method combining a concern for literary institutions, writers, texts, and readers" that will guide her study of literary anticipation in its various guises across the Mao and post-Mao eras (p. 14).

In chapter 1, Iovene addresses the most self-consciously futurist of genres, science fiction and its cousin, science popularization—the borderline between them was often fluid. Deftly moving back and forth between the 1950s and the 1980s, the chapter illuminates the "unresolved tension between the exaltation of manual labor and the anticipatory imagination of a laborless world" of the near future (p. 20). The Great Leap Forward (1958-60) in particular, with its frenzied rhetoric of leapfrogging stages of historical development, embodies the logic of a "forward-inflected temporality" (p. 30), an attempt to achieve the future in an instant, through the massive deployment (and celebration—Iovene quotes the documentary film *Rhapsody of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* [1958]) of human labor. Yet in portrayals of the future, be it in science fantasy or popular handbooks, it is depicted as a place of affluence and leisure, where hard labor has been outsourced to robots, raising questions about the meaning and value of labor itself. Behind this conflict Iovene sees, ultimately, a clash between different meanings of the future.

Chapter 2 positions the problem of anticipation in an explicitly transnational context, asking how the translation and consumption of foreign literature in the People's Republic of China (PRC) helps to define notions of China's temporality. Most important, in this context, figure translations of Soviet literature, which were understood as "anticipat[ing] the experience of transformations to be realized at home" (p. 51). Even after

the end of the Sino-Soviet alliance around 1960, though, foreign literature provided an important point of reference, most notably so in journals with restricted or internal circulation (*neibu*) that proliferated after the late 1950s and helped to keep a professional audience up to date about literary developments abroad. Translation thus became “an anticipatory practice, an active reconfiguration of global spatiotemporal hierarchies that went beyond a mere perception of Chinese belatedness” (p. 79). These efforts eventually laid the ground for the reemergence of the Chinese avant-garde in the 1980s.

The third chapter dives into the world literary journals, a crucial part of the state literary system of the 1980s, and tracks the rise of successive waves of new writing styles. The literary professionals in charge of these journals, Iovene argues, had a crucial hand in speeding up or slowing literary time, manipulating the developmental path of Chinese literature along lines of understanding that were borrowed from foreign literature that had reemerged on the literary marketplace of the reform era PRC. Especially insightful is Iovene’s discussion of these deliberations, drawing partly on her own interviews and partly on the editors’ recollections; her account convincingly shows how editorial decisions were often “the result of feelings of anticipation rooted in shared experiences of reading” (p. 92). The avant-garde (*xian-feng pai*) in particular thus emerges as a joint effort of writers and editors, a common vision of literary culture.

Writing across time, however, can occasionally cover much vaster distances. In chapter 4, Iovene addresses intertextuality and appropriation of the celebrated Tang poet Li Shangyin by Chinese authors in the 1980s and 1990s. Searching for a future back in the past, authors such as Wang Meng and Ge Fei projected poetic concerns of their famous predecessor into their own advocacy of interiority and literary subjectivity. Li’s poetry not only helped to legitimate *menglong*

(misty) poetry in the early 1980s but also allowed later writers to propose alternative models of literary history, models “at odds with ideas of linear development and selective recuperation” (p. 134); rather, the reference to the distant past aims to suggest open-ended and achronic views of literary creativity.

Ge’s recurrent deliberations on time and its futures—utopian or dystopian—feature again in chapter 5. By the time Iovene reaches Ge’s 2011 novel *Chunjin Jiangnan* (*The End of Spring in Jiangnan*), the celebratory anticipation of the future prevailing in the socialist era has given way to “a nearly total erosion of expectations of a better future life” (p. 140). In present-day China, existential anxieties—embodied by the dense, depressing fog/smog hovering over the cities in Ge’s novel—have claimed the betters of people’s expectations; toxic excess, sacrifice, and shame have clouded earlier notions of foresight or insight. Ultimately, however, so Iovene points out, the inability to see clearly produces only more desire to see, to envision, to anticipate the future. Standing in lieu of a conclusion, we have to read this intriguing observation as a reminder that the preoccupation with both future and past as modes of imagination remains a central paradigm of Chinese literary culture today.

It is tempting to read Iovene’s book in the context of an earlier wave of insightful studies attempting to unravel the modalities of temporality in modern China, but oriented toward the past, rather than the future. Just as such books as David Der-wei Wang’s *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (2004) and Ban Wang’s *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (2004) have provided us with new vantage points to consider the rich and diverse archive of literary creativity in modern China, Iovene’s insightful and inspiring study is certain to provoke future efforts to dissect the complex and multivariate temporalities of modern lit-

erature in China and beyond. Carefully researched and compellingly written, *Tales of Futures Past* is highly recommended to scholars and students of modern Chinese literature and culture, but also to anyone interested in contemporary China, and to all those seeking to understand the ways modern Asia imagines its past, present, and future.

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