**Pericoronial Writing from China and the Diaspora**

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**Abstract**

This article analyses what Margaret Atwood calls the literature of ‘ustopia’. The portmanteau term brings together the utopia and dystopia categories because Atwood argues that one contains the germ of the other. Ustopian writing is a body of work that is helpful when it comes to understanding current destruction to lives and livelihoods, and imagining our post-coronavirus future. The present essay thus explores four works of ustopian writing from China and the diaspora, three of them written before the current Covid-19 crisis but all shedding light on it. Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* (2020) represents the first real work of postcoronial literature in what seems likely to be an outpouring over the coming years. It is anticipated very ably by the precoronial texts also analysed here – Mo Yan’s *Frog* (2009), Ma Jian’s *China Dream* (2018) and Ling Ma’s *Severance* (2018) – which presage the post-COVID dispensation.

**Keywords**

Chinese literature, dystopian fiction, public health, Covid-19, Mo Yan, Ma Jian, Ling Ma, Fang Fang

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**Introduction: Pericoronial Ustopian Writing**

The severity, reach and duration of the coronavirus pandemic took many people in the global north by surprise. To be sure, sober warnings had come from China and other countries in East Asia. However, as Ipek Demir shows, these cautions were ‘underestimate[d]’ by a complacent and ethnocentric West, whose hubris was fuelled by ‘epidemiological neoliberalism’ (2020: n. pag.). Whatever happens with the transition to a so-called new normal, there is no doubt that the world has changed. It may well be that Ziauddin Sardar’s (2016), Peter Frankopan’s (2018) and others’ argument about the emergence of a post-West world and the increasing irrelevance of Euro-America as China’s global Belt and Road Initiative takes hold will only be strengthened by the current health crisis. More broadly, Covid’s metamorphoses are entrenching inequalities in ways that will be difficult to reverse. Far from being a leveller, the crisis is encouraging fears about the other and widening already vast social chasms. Though we are not yet in a ‘postcoronial’ age, the virus brought about dramatic mutation almost overnight. It served to push through new policies in what Naomi Klein has termed a Pandemic Shock Doctrine (2o20: n. pag.): a state of exception which without the emergency would face far greater resistance. In contrast, what is needed is radical rethinking of the status quo, stronger state and global infrastructures, and a strengthened ethics of care.

I have written elsewhere about postcoronial literature (Chambers 2020). The present article examines what I am calling ‘pericoronial’ writing. This is  literature published mostly before but also during the novel coronavirus’s emergence. Such writing resists imperialism and thinks through issues around race, class and gender, while also exploring public health crises and unequal access to medical care. The pandemic is likely to set women back by decades and calcify gender inequalities because of the emotional labour and caring burdens women tend to shoulder. The privations of pregnancy, childbirth, early years care and the education of children during this pandemic have intensified existing gender inequalities.

The virus and consequent lockdowns also lay bare the faultlines of social injustice that structure our world. In *The Burnout Society* the German-Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han writes that in the twenty-first century we have moved away from Michel Foucault’s twentieth-century vision of a disciplinary society of hospitals, prisons and asylums into an age of achievement, self-disciplining and the vapid cheerleading of social media and self-help culture. Global capitalism’s acceleration of working practice, the necessity of multitasking and attendant hyperactivity, and a loss of deep concentration are causing new societal afflictions. Whereas in the disciplinary society citizens contended with infections, Han states that our contemporary epidemics are depression, burnout and metaphorical ‘infarction’: literally, the death of tissue caused by lack of blood (2015: 1). Amongst an emptily busy populace starved of spiritual and intellectual oxygen, no cells containing ‘the emphasis and energy of rage’ (2015: 23) can be produced. In this context, revolution, as he sees it, is impossible. Yet something that Han failed to prognosticate, explicitly at least, is that infections are not to be so easily dismissed in a rapidly heating and frenziedly travelling planet. With the benefit of hindsight, in an interview about Covid-19 from May 2020 the philosopher noted:

COVID-19 is currently showing that human vulnerability or mortality is not democratic but depends on social status. Death is not democratic. COVID-19 hasn’t changed anything either. Death has never been democratic. The pandemic in particular reveals social upheaval and differences in respective societies. (qtd. in Siguenza and Rebollo 2020: n. pag.)

Even if he failed to predict the imminent urgency of infections, Han was right to draw attention to the always-on, self-exploiting working lives of the present day. Amid the scramble to move white-collar work online during this pandemic, the struggle for a just dispensation for the blue-collar precariat is being undermined now more than ever before. As economies have entered recession, zero-hour contract holders are being forced to do even more work for less, or have lost or will lose their jobs altogether. Apparently flexible gig economic arrangements have proven insecure to the point of unsustainability over the last year. Moreover, many businesses are cynically using this crisis to ‘streamline’ the already austerity-pummelled work sector and to make swingeing expenditure cuts.

In *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2016), Judith Butler gives readers a detailed understanding of precarity and the precariat. Precarity is commonly, and rightly, associated with class, being interpreted as social vulnerability, another word of which Butler is fond. She characterizes precarity and vulnerability as being at once embodied and relational:

Each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies – as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of losing those attachments, exposed to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure. (2004: 20)

Here Butler alludes to the precarity of bodies, our rupturable skin and easily failing organs in ways that find new echoes in the time of coronavirus. Humans’ sociability and sexuality connect us to other bodies within relational networks. Demonstrating the interdependence of all humans and the fallacy of individualism, Butler writes in *Frames of War* (2016: 21): ‘To say that life is precarious is to say that the possibility of being sustained relies fundamentally on social and political conditions, and not only on a postulated internal drive to live’. Always mindful of the social and the political, she shows that we experience mourning and grief in the face of the loss of that other whom we love, averring, ‘Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something’ (Butler 2004: 23). When a person you love dies – especially in a preventable death amid a pandemic – something of your identity goes with them and you won’t be the same again. And that’s normal, that’s human: to suppress it means that you open yourself up to structures of dehumanization which regard some lives as precarious and not worth as much as others are. Butler’s idea of precarity therefore takes on new resonances at this challenging time.

Precarity is a perpetual state imposed on those plagued by ‘danger, destitution, and death’ (Butler 2020: 166) in our unequal social imaginary. When the virus strikes it is people from impoverished and minoritized areas the world over who die at higher rates than those able to shelter at home in more privileged places. In particularly hard-hit Britain and the United States, non-white people are dying at exponentially higher rates due to a nexus of racism, poverty, social class, lack of access to healthcare, and occupation, among other factors (see Razaq et al., 2020; Zakaria 2020: 147–66). As Mohammed Ali puts it, ‘they said that Covid-19 does not discriminate. That was clearly not true’ (2020: n. pag.). The pandemic amplifies the unequal access to resources various groups and individuals have. It also exposes and magnifies the usually ignored fact that the elite benefit from structural inequalities on which their power rests. In countries where strongmen are in office, these populists have used the virus to shore up further authority. The human consequence has been an increased fear of the other, whereby there is a marked and widespread hostility to entire communities. In Euro-America and India, for example, the scapegoat is the Chinese or anyone who looks East Asian. Covid-19 has been used as a stick to beat East Asians with for allegedly spreading illness. Former US president Donald Trump did much to encourage this Sinophobia with his egregious ‘China virus’ slur.

Amidst these broader socio-political concerns, on 10 March 2020 the Pakistani novelist Kamila Shamsie foresaw the advent of pericolonial fiction. She started a hashtag, #covid19readinglist, where people shared reading plans for any ‘lockdown/quarantine situation’. Should it surprise us or come as no surprise that many of the titles her followers recommended belong to the genre of dystopian fiction? Dystopian writing has been positioned widely as both a tonic and a guide (Waples 2021: 122) when it comes to understanding the current coronial destruction to lives and livelihoods, and to imagining postcoronial futures. In her collection of essays *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, Margaret Atwood coins the portmanteau term ‘ustopia’. This melds the utopia and dystopia categories, because she argues that, like yin and yang, one contains the germ of the other. Meanwhile, despite his championing of utopianism as a way to counter capitalism, Fredric Jameson observes that it is possible ‘to be both Utopia [*sic*] and dystopia all at once’ (2005: 21). To put it another way, no political or literary ideal exists without being shadowed by its dark side, and nor can the equivalent nightmare visions of the future exist without a commensurate dream of light.

Atwood doesn’t unpack the ‘us’ in ustopia. However, that collective pronoun – pertaining to society, its breakdown and an ineffable relationality between humans – is the focal point for many non-Western ustopian authors. The notion of Ubuntu, meaning ‘a person is a person through other people’ (see Mangharam 2017: 3), emanates from southern Africa, but has pan-African resonance. Similarly, in Islam, a hadith makes it clear that the Muslim community is interconnected like a person’s body: ‘if the head aches, the whole body aches’ (Sunnah.com n.d.: n. pag.). As this emphasis on pain makes clear, how interconnected we are is double-edged – especially at times of crisis such as the present one. Pericolonial ustopian authors expand the notion of togetherness beyond the confines of one’s continent or religious group. They examine the corporeal closeness of all human beings and the consequent need for (social) justice on a global scale. This article therefore examines some literary examples from China and the Chinese diaspora: first, two authors writing dystopian novels well before the current crisis, and then two writers who directly foreshadow or respond to SARS-CoV-2. As we will see, each writer under scrutiny has their own distinctive literary form for expressing such concerns. This ranges from Mo Yan’s formal experiment with magical realism; to Ma Jian’s admixture of past and present, folklore and futurism; to Ling Ma’s hauntology where visions of the past haunt the present in capitalism’s non-spaces; and finally Fang Fang’s diaristic pragmatism. Let us now dig more deeply into both the thematic auguries and the literariness of the chosen texts.

**Dystopian Pasts**

Published in 2009, Mo Yan’s *Wa* (*Frog*)is a dystopian novel blended with folktale and magical realism which scrutinizes rural China from the mid-twentieth to the twenty-first century. Mo Yan is particularly interested in the one-child policy of 1980 onwards (which was finally scrapped on 1 January 2016). When it comes to my pericoronial approach, this work of fiction by the Nobel Prize-winning Chinese author not only reflects on the past, but also anticipates the future. Dealing with poverty, public health and protest, the novel prefigures our current health crisis. As with the recent lockdowns around the globe, *Frog* dramatizes debates around individual freedom versus collective health and wellbeing. In his text Mo Yan makes some prophetic pronouncements, for instance writing: ‘It’s the call of the Party, a directive by Chairman Mao, national policy. Chairman Mao has said: Mankind must control itself’ (Mo 2009: 67).[[1]](#endnote-1) Replace Mao with Xi Jinping, and this reads not unlike the order for Wuhan’s strict lockdown in 2020. Indeed the author’s words proved globally visionary as debates around mask-wearing and limitations on movement spread far beyond China.

Chinese literature tends to explore ways of life in a roundabout way, in part to evade censorship. Revealing the thematic metaphors employed helps to unfurl authors’ ideas to an international readership. Mo Yan’s aesthetics of indirection is revealed in *Frog* when he writes: ‘A tortuous path leads to Nirvana’ (284). Accordingly, the novel is layered within a storied palimpsest of diegetic and extradiegetic material. *Frog* is structured within a frame, as the narrator Tadpole works within epistolary and metafictional traditions to write letters to a mysterious and revered Japanese sensei, and to pitch the play ‘Frog’ with which the novel concludes. Chengzhou He helpfully locates Tadpole’s letters to a foreigner within the context of an international interpretations of the one-child policy, ‘since China’s population is not just a domestic issue but a global one as well’ (Chengzhou 2018: 402). Moreover, this frame narrative is capacious enough to encompass Japanese occupation and issues pertaining to creative writing, among other issues.

Mo Yan looks back as far as the mid-1950s, somewhat mockingly cast in *Frog* as ‘Modern China’s golden age’ (30), with the author describing a boom in births at this time of relative affluence. The novel then evokes the swift reversals to the nation’s fortunes that took place in, first, the overambitious Great Leap Forward which led to a cataclysmic famine between 1959 and 1962. Second is the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976, which saw untold murders, rapes and public shaming, especially of teachers and party workers considered corrupt. The novel portrays public denunciation sessions during the Cultural Revolution at which students adorn their teachers with dunce caps and people considered rightists are castigated as ‘ox-ghosts and snake-demons’ (82, 83; see also Luo 2010: 146). The text also contains reflections on hunger, including stirring images of children eating grass and coal. One of these children even grows up to write a lyrical essay ‘An Ode to Coal’ (91) on the fossil fuel’s apparent gustatory pleasures. The piece is galling for Tadpole, as unlike him the writer had no need to eat the coal because he was the well-fed son of a commune cadre. Lionel Shriver rather unfairly criticizes Mo Yan for circumspection in relation to the unparalleled food shortage, writing that ‘the Party would be relieved that in *Frog* the author attributes a man-made famine that killed thirty million people during the Great Leap Forward to a mere caprice of nature: drought’ (2015: 541). This is a one-dimensional interpretation, which overlooks the novel’s ironic tonal palette and the way that it ‘operates in a “gray zone” […] to evade the PRC’s censorship mechanisms’ (Holgate 2019: 165, quoting Jeffrey Wasserstrom). As we have already seen, Mo Yan acidly condemns corruption and is not afraid to touch China’s tender spots in his portrayal of a broad sweep of recent history.

Not only is coal eaten by the starving children but they also devour the titular frogs. Yet frogs aren’t just nutritious in Mo Yan’s story universe; these animals have fertility resonances. First, as Yao Siqi explains in ‘Frog Metaphors in Mo Yan’s Novels’, the Mandarin word ‘wa’ denotes a frog, a child and the ‘wawa’ cry of a baby (Yao 2017: 127–28). Second, Ben Holgate reminds us that ‘tadpoles, or baby frogs, are said to resemble the human foetus in the first trimester’ (2019: 165). Finally, in *Frog* the sighting of these amphibians is supposed to herald the arrival of twins, children who are desired as they allow parents legitimate circumvention of the one-child policy. Also highly valued are boy babies, for engrained patriarchal and feudal reasons that are supposed to be under reconstruction in communist China. If they aren’t lucky enough to have twins, many parents choose to bring what are known as ‘bootleg kids’ (134, 199) into the world. They then pay hefty fines for exceeding the single-child maximum, or hide the very existence and therefore sacrifice the legal rights of their children.

The narrator, Tadpole, becomes entangled in these strictures. He had himself had an unusual birth feet first – such a breech delivery being widely attributed to the family ‘ow[ing] a ghost’. This means that an ancestor is believed to have died in debt to someone, and that aggrieved creditor ‘return[s] as a newborn baby intent on making things difficult for the woman in labour’ (28). As an adult, Tadpole ominously gets married in 1979 at the start of the one-child policy. Later his first wife dies while having a termination at the hands of his aunt Gugu, a prolific IUD-fitting and abortion-giving nurse whose motto is ‘Family planning is Party work’ (168). Gugu’s zeal is unswerving, with her at one point declaring: ‘my heart is as red as ever, and will never change. Alive I’m a Party member, dead I’ll be a Party ghost. I’ll go where the Party sends me’ (99). The ironic undertow of the narrative is divulged when Party ghost Gugu herself comes to be haunted by the thousands of abortions she has performed over her career. In one hallucinatory scene, she is set upon by an army of frogs who douse her in a semen-like fluid.

Just as the state deploys science to interfere in ordinary people’s private affairs, the novel thus veers into magical realist territory. Elizabeth Cullingford acknowledges the hybrid nature of Mo Yan’s stylistic experimentation when she writes: ‘Although he draws on local folklore and dabbles in magical realism, his novel is based upon personal experience and fact’ (2019: 79). In relation to *Frog*’s folkloric strand, readers see the arrival of ‘sweet potato kids’ (61, 65, 229, 325), a glut of children born after a bumper harvest of the root vegetable. Also shading into magic and folklore is the craze for clay dolls or figurines that couples buy in the hope that they will conceive the same sex of babies. In this ‘world populated by errant knights, psychics, and some who conceal their faces’ (266), readers encounter miraculous, dream-like events, including late-life pregnancies and lactating non-mothers, as folkloric and supernatural elements cohere. In *Frog* Mo Yan depicts how subjectivity, desire and love are sacrificed to great personal cost under the successive regimes of Zhao Ziyang, Li Peng, Zhu Rongji and Wen Jiabao. Much of this inglorious repression was carried out in the name of family planning and public health.

Published nine years after *Frog*, the dissident author Ma Jian is preoccupied in my second primary text, *China Dream* (2018),[[2]](#endnote-2)with what Michael Rothberg calls multidirectional memory, in the context of the Cultural Revolution and its post-traumatic afterlife. As Rothberg shows, rather than being linear, memory is ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’ (2009: 3). Comparably, as Ma Jian puts it in a vivid image of defacement, present-day Chinese politicians are busily at work repurposing old Cultural Revolution slogans to ‘daub […] the past onto the present’ (Ma 2018: 38).[[3]](#endnote-3) The novel opens in dystopic mode, with loathsome protagonist Director Ma Daode heading up the China Dream Bureau. There he works to develop a neural implant to delete people’s memories, including his own painful recollections of his culpability in the Cultural Revolution’s violence. The populace’s hopes and dreams alike will be expelled by this silicon chip. For instance, Ma Daode’s old adversary from his schooldays, Song Bin, now complains to the Director that a dream he had has recently been ‘encrypted’ by Ma’s team at the China Dream Bureau, on the grounds that it is ‘a Cultural Revolution dream’ (105). Such nightmares about the past will supposedly be replaced by the China Dream of Xi Jinping, a future-facing, past-erasing form of rampant consumerism. As part of his programme, Ma Daode organizes a mass golden wedding celebration for couples who have been married fifty years. Yet he himself is an unrepentant womanizer, married but with at least twelve mistresses at any one time.

To correspondingly biting effect, the local mayor claims that the China Dream, with its attempt to meld socialism with Chinese traditions, ‘is very different from the kind of brainwashing that took place during the Cultural Revolution’ (24). Yet the political differences are shown to be superficial. Strong continuities remain between the two eras, not the least of which is ‘the linguistic acrobatics performed by the People’s Republic of China’ over more than half a century (Dimock 2020, 844). In 1966 ‘bourgeois elements’ had been purged by teenage zealots including Ma Daode himself in ‘public struggle sessions’ (14) and ‘denunciation meeting[s]’ (50). Nowadays the preferred terms include ‘re-education’ and ‘retirement’ (23–26). However, this euphemistic diction cannot hide the fact that the re-education camps and retirement homes are prisons.

Such prisons sinisterly resemble concentration camps in the case of the Uighurs of Xinjiang region. Importantly, experts on Xinjiang like Sean R. Roberts regularly draw attention to the virological language deployed by Chinese government officials amid their negative depictions of the Uighurs. Roberts writes: ‘They are portrayed almost as a biological threat to the civilized world, which must be either eradicated or indefinitely quarantined by any means necessary before their ideology spreads to others like a disease’ (2020: 16). In parallel but more briefly, Peter Frankopan quotes a Communist Party Youth League leader who speaks of the detained Uighurs as suffering from an ‘ideological illness’ that needs to be purged in order to ‘cleanse the virus from their brain and restore their normal mind’ (2018: n.pag.). And, as Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb argues from a global perspective, Muslims from many parts of the world and not just China have long been ‘wrapped in both Islamophobia and the figural vocabulary of contagious disease: the so-called epidemic of radical Islam and terrorism’ (Kolb 2021: xi). In the light of the current pandemic and a concomitant anti-Chinese hatred that has been a lamentable scourge, it is also important to point out that something similar has been perpetrated by Han Chinese leaders on the Uighurs.

Clearly Mao’s nationalization programme, state purchasing and price controls of the mid-twentieth century are vastly different from the Xi regime’s late-stage capitalism with Chinese characteristics. However, turning to politics rather than economics, a certain uninterruptedness is signalled by the fact that *China Dream* explores the contemporary Chinese revival of interest in red songs and revolutionary operas and ballets. Ma Jian persistently demonstrates that Xi’s repressive anti-corruption impetus and Mao’s persecution of rightists and reformists run on parallel tracks.

Ma Jian’s hallucinatory novel is punctuated by Ma Daode’s conversations with his various lovers by SMS and WeChat (global social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are unavailable behind the Great Firewall of China). Readers are also made privy to the forwarding of the maxims and aphorisms of which he is extremely fond of inventing or plagiarizing from the internet. Ma Daode’s own ‘mantra’ becomes ‘*You’re not me*’ (74, 80; emphasis in original) apropos of his younger self, as the Director regularly experiences flashbacks to his past in the 1960s. His intrusive memories consume him, despite his best efforts, to the extent that he loses his job and comes to be regarded as a madman.

His downward mobility is reflected in a formalist backward trajectory, as the novel transmogrifies from the dystopian, technologized future into a sort of past-oriented magical realism replete with apparitions and strange happenings. Instead of making a device or chip, Ma Daode changes tack, trying to create a China Dream broth to wipe these traumatic recollections from his mind. Though it derives from an ancient prescription steeped in traditional Chinese medicine and folklore, the soup is also resolutely modern, making ‘your past […] vanish as swiftly and permanently as a text you delete from your phone’ (110). The broth, Ma Daode is told, should be made from mysterious and hard-to-gather ingredients like one drop of his mother’s menstrual blood and two of his father’s tears, as well as two ghost souls. But his parents are long dead by suicide, having imbibed pesticide to escape the physical abuse and social shaming of the Cultural Revolution. Their own son Ma Daode played a central role in his parents’ humiliation and physical abuse since he had to show his strength as a leader of the communist faction East Is Red. The group consists of bullies little better than gangland thugs, intent on avenging themselves against their equally egregious foe the Million Bold Warriors. Now Mao Daode is haunted by a boy with facial injuries and his mother with long white hair, both of whom he had terrorized during his violent past. As Vala Carston puts it, ‘Violence and memories of violence crouch at every corner’ of Ma Jian’s *China Dream* (2018: 192). In this context, Ma Daode longs for amnesia, an escape from the breakdown he has had following the re-emergence of thoughts about heading up his teenage Red Guard group in the 1960s. Despite his desire to put this past behind him, he does worry about losing his last happy memories of his parents. This seems hypocritical given that he had earlier been sanguine about recommending a deep cleansing of others’ brains. The novel is framed by a razor-sharp foreword in which Ma Jian writes of having been exiled from China for six years, and observes that ‘utopias always lead to dystopias’ (5). This reflection is a disillusioned version of Atwood’s ustopian idea, whereby political idealism and the hope of creating a just society tumble in inevitable katabasis into a dystopian underworld.

It is noteworthy that the Chinese dystopian novel, which in the Western mode tends to be associated with futuristic, speculative fiction, here brings together both the present and the recent past. It also concerns itself with the wiping of unhappy memories and an expungement of history, just as Mao Zedong through the Cultural Revolution sought to destroy the four olds: ‘old thoughts, old culture, old habits, old customs’ (102; see also Kraus 2012: 44–49). Such an amnesia is also relevant to the relentlessly forward-moving China of today because, as Ma Jian writes evocatively in his foreword, ‘The China Dream is another beautiful lie concocted by the state to remove dark memories from Chinese brains and replace them with happy thoughts’ (4). Although it was written before the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, Ma Jian’s satire in this novel of Xi Jinping’s hi-tech coverup of the Cultural Revolution is of a piece with his excoriation in an op-ed for the *Guardian* of Xi’s massaging of the truth about coronavirus:

Xi Jinping’s mishandling of the coronavirus epidemic must now be added to the party’s shameful list of crimes. With serious outbreaks occurring in Japan, South Korea, Iran and Italy, it is clear that the virus of Xi’s totalitarian rule threatens the health and freedoms not only of the Chinese people, but of all of us everywhere. (Ma 2020: n. pag.)

When the news reported in November 2020 that the Chinese government planned to teach propaganda conveying ‘the country’s narrative of success against the virus’ (Davidson and Kuo 2020: n. pag.), it chimed with Ma Jian’s vision of a relentlessly Pollyannaish China Dream wiping people’s brains of the root causes of problems. As Federico Picerni argues (2020), China’s master narrative after it became clear the coronavirus pandemic could not be contained or concealed has been of a people’s war, with warriors in white coats mobilized to fight this natural calamity (and bureaucratic negligence covered up). Picerni speaks of a Chinese literary project, entitled ‘Combat the Epidemic with Poetry!’ and held when Wuhan was still under lockdown, which encapsulated this saccharinely sanguine approach to the pandemic. However, he also shows that some writers have been able to counter the dominant discourse of positive energy even from within official channels. We will return to the intertwined issues of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) and some Chinese-resident authors pushing up against the party line in the next section, as we explore Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary.*

**Ghostly Present**

‘The ghost was me. […] I was just a specter haunting the scene’.

(Ling Ma, *Severance*, p. 37)

The Chinese-American writer Ling Ma published her debut *Severance* in 2018, setting the novel seven years earlier. She paints a picture of a parallel New York in 2011 where Barack Obama is in power and the Occupy Wall Street movement is in full swing. Despite the verisimilitude of some of her reflections on the very recent past, the text is also fabular, veering into the terrain of dystopian and postapocalyptic fiction, ghost stories and even the zombie film (Saraf 2019). What is more, Ling Ma’s novel is farsighted in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. She imagines a disease known as Shen Fever which starts in China and brings the world to its knees through quarantines, travel bans and mass deaths.

At its opening *Severance*’s millennial protagonist, Candace Chen, struggles to pay her extortionate New York rent by working long hours in the Bibles department of a publishing consultancy firm. Publishing might seem to belong to a cultured and relatively humane arm of capitalism. However, through first-person accounts Candace attests that her employer Spectra is now experiencing repercussions from its coldly acquisitive book production tactics in the global south. An early harbinger of the chaos that is to befall the company and the wider world comes when Candace receives some bad news. From a Guangdong supplier that sells Spectra semi-precious stones for a Bible they market at preteens, someone emails to say that workers there have developed lung disease from breathing in the gemstones’ dust. A lawsuit is under way that has halted production. However, the publisher for whom Candace is working as an intermediary displays little sympathy as the workers’ ill health gets in the way of her bottom line. Responding specifically to the Covid-19 pandemic, Achille Mbembe (2020: n. pag.) recently expanded his theory of necropolitics to write with heavy satire about the denial of a ‘universal right to breathe’ in the neocolonial capitalist system. Ling Ma’s depiction of labourers’ pneumoconiosis in *Severance* is an important contribution to this discussion, prefiguring the present precarity of many frontline workers as it does so presciently.

Candace had been born in Fuzhou, moving from China at the age of six to join her migrant parents in the US. This means that she understands Mandarin and gains greater insight into Spectra’s ruthless corporate practices than her colleagues can (or care to try) when they go on their regular work trips to Shenzhen and Hong Kong.In mainland China, Candace and her co-workers always stay in the aptly named Grand Shenzhen Moon Palace Hotel. Not only is the hotel palatial but it is as removed from its surroundings as though it were in space. Candace muses: ‘It didn’t feel like I was in China. It didn’t feel like I was anywhere’ (Ling 2018: 71).[[4]](#endnote-4) Marc Augé includes chain hotels alongside retail outlets, airports and trunk roads in his list of supermodern ‘non-places’. He defines the non-place as the anonymous antithesis of the place: at once everywhere and nowhere. Indebted as she is to Augé, in *Flâneuse* Lauren Elkin describes the hotel as ‘the home of the foreigner, the misfit, the impossible-to-assimilate […] a trap, to keep you from walking and exploring’ (2017: 163, 177). Not so easily entrapped, during her first stay at the deracinated hotel, Candace manages to get out. She is taken on a tour of one of the outsourced printers her company works with by an operations director. This man, whose Chinese name Candace does not find out but whose ‘business name’ (80) is Balthasar, mentions Spectra’s Bibles sarcastically. Candace is able to interpret his tone:

The subtext […] could only mean: We manufacture the emblematic text to propagate your country’s Christian Euro-American ideologies, and *for this*, *for this important task*, you and your clients negotiate aggressively over pennies per unit cost, demand that we deliver early with every printing, and undercut the value of our labor year after year. (75, emphasis added)

As when Bibles circulate on the banks of the Ganges (Bhabha 2004: 145–74), the holy text’s meaning is hybridized. Ling Ma shows that its meaning is especially baffling amid the rapacious ‘world-system’ (Wallerstein 2004), where quantity and quality of work are consistently undervalued. From her own labour, Candace knows that as a material object the scripture is easily torn and vulnerable to warping: ‘especially in the humidity of South Asian monsoon season’ (20). The Bible’s spirituality has been hollowed out as it has become the world’s best-selling book. In like manner, the more Candace works in these books’ production the more she mentally strips them of their covers and disembowels the texts to examine their entrails of ‘paper stock, ribbon marker, endsheets, mull lining, and cover’ (20). In the block quotation, Balthasar’s imagined repetition is a rhetorical contrivance whereby the noun phrase is immediately reiterated in apposition, the second instance repeating and expanding the syntax of the first. However, his almost nonsensical echo also gives the impression of stuttering, apoplectic rage.

Balthasar is evidently enraged by that spectre which is haunting Spectra and, by extension, the West: the spectre of capitalism (see Marx and Engels 1964: 55; Keegan 1993; Amin 1998). With genuine bemusement, he asks Candace why another of the anglophone books his web press prints, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, is so popular in the US. Noting the caterpillar’s greed and his unwillingness to share food, Balthasar asks: ‘What lesson does that teach children? To eat with no […] conscience?’ (76). One might ask something similar of the golf-playing, air-conditioned car-riding, squid ink spaghetti-slurping Westerners who stay in the hotel. All of them are there for manufacturing business, they stay at the most rarefied non-places removed from Chinese realities, and pay local people the lowest possible prices to produce the tchotchkes they can then sell for inflated prices back home in Euro-America.

Although acknowledging her own complicity with the words ‘I was a part of this’ (76), Candace again briefly escapes the bubble to venture out on her own to a night market. There she feels a rush of excitement to see once more a place where trinkets, goods, services and foodstuffs jostle for Chinese people’s attention under the glow of neon lights. She buys some spirit money, and later burns it to appease the spectres of her ancestors. Candace is especially doing this for her dead parents, whom she imagines as ‘unhoused and hungry’ in the next world (93).[[5]](#endnote-5) Clearly, cash, consumables and designer items still have currency with what are known as hungry ghosts (Heng 2014; Kochhar-Lindgren 2017). Even in the afterlife, there is no escaping the spook of global capital.

Before taking up her publishing position, a jobless and directionless Candace had stalked the roads and alleyways of New York, taking pictures for her photoblog NY Ghost. To use Virginia Woolf’s (1927) term, she is ‘street haunting’, though without really knowing why. It is not by coincidence that for some of the novel she is reading Jane Jacobs’ classic book about resistant walking in the metropolis, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Candace describes the volume as ‘kind of amazing. […] [K]ind of timely, considering we’re getting priced out’ (118). On this issue of gentrification, Jacobs herself had written fifty years earlier of ‘differently price-tagged populations’ being sectioned off from each other by city planners (Jacobs [1961] 2020: 58). The American theorist and activist also spoke out in defence of pedestrians against the incursions of those who ‘take refuge in vehicles’ (Jacobs 2020: 56). From a feminist perspective, as pleasurable as it is, walking in the city is made difficult for women. As Elkin shows, flâneurie, or the act of aimlessly walking, is encoded as a male pursuit, for as they move about women regularly encounter ‘invivsible boundaries’ (2017: 286, 288). This is true even at the level of language, given that in French there is no female equivalent of the flâneur (2017: 14). From the vantage point of Mumbai, India’s second largest megacity, Shilpa Phadke, Khan and Shilpa Ranade show that haunting the streets, so-called loitering, is frowned upon and legislated against, particularly when it comes to women. Loitering, they argue, is a risky pleasure worth taking, and the activity poses ‘a threat to the global order of production in that people are visibly doing nothing’ (2011: 186). Aware of such attitudes, a newly unemployed Candace photographs ‘neon-tinged diners, gas-slicked streets, subway train cars packed with tired commuters’ in a manner that is wistfully consumerist and work-oriented (12). However, after the apocalypse of the Shen Fever pandemic, Candace revives the NY Ghost blog with a more radical edge. She starts documenting the spectral destruction the disease wreaks – of which destruction more will be said shortly.

Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, describes capitalism as a liminal ghost that haunts and unsettles conceptual borderlines, including between the living and the inanimate. Moreover, in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, Arundhati Roy writes that if you are an elite member of the world-system, ‘the more you have, the more you can have’. Yet for most people, apart from the one percent, what this system largely means is ‘war, displacement, and ecological devastation’ (Roy 2014: 9, 11) in ways that are racially uneven. The city, then, is a haunted space populated by ghostly reminders of the structural inequality and systemic racism of the world-system. It is not for nothing that Ling Ma limns the United States’ excesses as being borne out of the cheap labour and poor health of Chinese workers half a world away.

Unlike Covid-19, the imaginary Shen Fever is not a virus but a fungal infection transmitted through breathing in spores. It originated in and is named after Shenzhen, but Chinese state media conceals the true extent of the outbreak (181). The Fever gives sufferers cold symptoms, memory problems, brain fog and tiredness. This usually progresses to extreme weight loss, haematoma, muscle weakness and ultimately death. Differently than West Nile Fever, which this disease is sometimes confused with, the vector is not symptomatic animals (mosquitoes), and nor is it fellow humans as with coronavirus and flu. Instead, transmission is by inhalation of airborne conidia coming off spore-imbued objects. This is significant because it is poor ventilation in overcrowded factories that caused the outbreak, and the frenetic circulation of goods and commodities around the globe that led to this becoming a pandemic. Though transmission is not the same as with SARS-CoV-2 and furthermore Shen Fever belongs to a different family of illnesses, it has even more devastating impact than the current pandemic. Indeed, the novel’s opening line is postapocalyptic and suitably biblical: ‘After the End came the Beginning’ (2). The imagined contagion stretches medical credulity, for in reality fungal infections are only serious for the immunocompromised. Requiring a susceptibility in the host, opportunistic infections like aspergillosis and cryptosporidium have famously been devastating for people with AIDS whose immune systems cannot cope. Because healthy people easily fight off such infections, there could be an outbreak of Shen Fever but not a global pandemic.

Yet readers benefit from suspending their disbelief to consider another suggestive and disturbing feature of this disease: the way that it triggers the infected to enter an ‘infinite loop’ or ‘a fever of repetition’ (56). As their brains shut down, the afflicted can be seen repeating their usual domestic chores, beauty work and employment tasks like robots. They do this unthinkingly, unflappably, even as around them their possessions break, food items rot and workplaces or houses are ransacked. As Emily Waples puts it, ‘The repetition of routine is the novel’s dominant motif, as Ma skewers the automation of late capitalism broadly, and the ritualized procedures of urban corporate culture in particular’ (2021: 125). The ultimate zombie consumers, these fever victims – like their Chinese labourer counterparts – spiral from one mindless ‘new day of work’ (23) to another without any respite. Although mysteriously immune from the disease, Candace too is prevented by ‘impossible systems’ (260) from escaping the Sisyphean cycle of labour interspersed with brief moments of consumer-driven downtime.

As part of her recordings of New York’s end times for NY Ghost, Candace takes a short video of a fevered shop attendant she sees folding cheerful rainbow-coloured clothing in the Juicy Couture store. Though ‘half her jaw was missing’, this woman’s movements are fluid and efficient, encouraging an incongruous ‘sense of calm and ease’ amid the cataclysmic scene (232). At Bill Brown’s prompt as he establishes thing theory as a subdiscipline, it is as though she is ‘peculiarly possessed. The tale of that possession – of being possessed by possessions – is something stranger than the history of a culture of consumption’ (2003: 5). In *Severance* it is capitalist business as usual as Ling Ma eviscerates the dead-eyed rote of fast fashion and the ‘non-stop inertia’ of consumerism more broadly (Southwood 2011: 7, 11). Also implicitly critiqued is China’s staggering economic transformation at the expense of worker rights. Derrida’s analysis of Marx’s description of a wooden table as a commodity-made-sentient applies equally well to Ling Ma’s saleslady:

Here then is the apparition of a strange creature: at the same time Life, Thing, Beast, Object, Commodity, Automaton – in a word, specter. This Thing, which is no longer altogether a thing, here it goes and unfolds (*entwickelt*), it unfolds itself, it [is] […] the animal Thing, the animated-inanimated Thing, the dead-living Thing […]. (Derrida 2006: 191)

Slouching towards sales racks before folding and unfolding t-shirts, Ling Ma’s feverish automaton sheds light on the ‘thingification’ of workers (Césaire 2000: 42).[[6]](#endnote-6) These workers’ efforts are ‘harnessed in the service of […] death’ (Cheah 2003: 311); their labour value is constantly cut back and their humanity undermined. Rarely has Fredric Jameson’s aphorism that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’ (2003: 76) been more apposite. By this stage of Ling Ma’s novel the world has all but ended, and yet the band of commerce plays on.

Hardly anyone has survived the Shen Fever plague, but Candace eventually joins a rag-tag and miniscule group of young people who have remained symptom-free. The group’s increasingly messianic leader Bob, who had previously worked in IT, thinks that they, as survivors, have been divinely selected. His narcissism and cruelty is signalled when he gives Candace a hollowed-out trick Bible containing her iPhone. She is delighted to be reunited with this portal to emails, photography and the internet. Yet Bob swiftly dashes a pregnant Candace’s hopes, telling her he has broken the phone to teach her it is ‘just an object. [...] A symbol of how far you have come’ (101).[[7]](#endnote-7) To replace their former worldly lives, he believes that God has put them in dominion over the dying Shen Fever sufferers. He and his band of immune followers mercy-kill some of the fevered because ‘they aren’t really alive’ (24), and then loot their houses for essential (and less than essential) supplies.

The group take up residence in an abandoned shopping centre, with Candace choosing the French cosmetics boutique L’Occitane to sleep in for its cosy homeliness. Meanwhile, her new companions plump for flashier shops like J Crew, the Apple Store and Hot Topic. Though I have not found in Ling Ma’s interviews evidence of an acknowledged influence, her depiction of the spectral mall immediately brings to mind filmmaker Dan Bell’s ‘Dead Mall Series’. Since 2014, Bell has been making short documentaries for YouTube about America’s decaying rust belt, its ‘ghost towns’ in the deep south, and the faded grandeur of its shopping malls. From September 2020 onwards, his work took on a chilling new aspect as he uploaded some ‘pandemic edition’ videos of ‘Covid closeouts’ (Bell 2021: n. pag.). These films showed, for example, empty food courts and a mid-renovation branch of J. C. Penney’s. Bell arranges his eerily deserted shots against a soundtrack of distorted or nostalgic music from the 1960s to the 1980s. The result in both Ling Ma’s and Bell’s work is the creation of an unheimlich sense of disaster amid the ersatz and antiseptic desolation of the lonely shopping centre. Candace finds herself locked up in l’Occitane, as Bob distrusts her and wants her baby, when it is born, to become a symbol of the triumph of his ‘shoddy ideology’ (205). Candace then has some visitations from the ghost of her mother, who exhorts her daughter to protect the unborn child by escaping from her prison in the desolate mall.

Reading *Severance*’s depictions of hauntology through a pandemic lens reveals the world’s interconnectedness even amid capitalism’s envisaged death throes. Demonstrating how ludicrous it is in many ways to view China as separate from the rest of the world, Ling Ma sketches the butterfly effect of fungal spores from Shenzhen (or, by extension, a mysterious viral host in Wuhan) creating chaos in the West and elsewhere. As Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret write in *COVID-19: The Great Reset*,

When considered in isolation, individual risks – whether economic, geopolitical, societal or environmental in character – give the false impression that they can be contained or mitigated; in real life, systemic connectivity shows this to be an artificial construct. In an interdependent world, risks amplify each other and, in so doing, have cascading effects. (2020: 17)

In both the current pandemic and the novel that presages it, there is a strikingly relational bent to the way businesses across the globe simultaneously grind to a halt. Even so, some indomitable drones like the Juicy Couture woman and Candace herself keep on working like somnambulists.

In an interview from May 2020, Ling Ma reflected on the similarities and differences between the imaginative universe portrayed in *Severance* and the Covid-19 lockdowns then happening around the globe. Evincing her usual interest in employment (note that the novel’s title refers, in part,[[8]](#endnote-8) to layoffs), she remarked:

Most apocalyptic movies or TV shows have not captured the unique nature of this particular catastrophe. The surprise is that, for many of us, our day-to-day lives have become more banal, more boring. There seem to be two extremes. On the one hand, there are the high death tolls and the overtaxed hospitals. On the other hand, there is the benign insularity of working from home. It is difficult to calibrate between such extremes. (Ling Ma, qtd. in Scarano 2020: n. pag.)

While the banality of evil has long been acknowledged (Arendt 1963), Ling Ma here draws attention to the tedium of home-working, which functions to keep the wheels of commerce moving even as it co-exists with the horror of ruination. This notion of ennui amid disaster comes up again in the next author under discussion, the only one writing postcoronial nonfiction: Fang Fang, in her *Wuhan Diary.* After the initial panic and confusion when Covid-19 hit Wuhan like a tsunami in January 2020, by a month later ‘most people [we]re more bored than scared’ (Fang 2020: 65).[[9]](#endnote-9) The torpor of the Hubei city’s quarantined denizens, like that of Ling Ma’s characters, co-existed with a feeling of being haunted by the novel coronavirus, as we will now see.

‘The specter of death continues to haunt the city of Wuhan.’

(Fang Fang, *Wuhan Diary*, p. 122)

Renowned novelist Fang Fang was confined in Wuhan during the city’s stringent two-month lockdown. She produced an online diary out of this experience, which was published in daily instalments disseminated on (and regularly removed by the authorities from) the social media platforms Weibo and WeChat. *Wuhan* *Diary* generated controversy because of Fang Fang’s critique of the slow response from political leaders in Hubei province to this strange new infection. She called for accountability from those in power, writing: ‘The Chinese people have always had trouble bringing themselves to repent; but when so many lives are dangling before you, we need people to stand up and take responsibility: You people, that’s right, you! Stand up and repent!’ (202). Similar indictments of unremorseful officials recur at intervals throughout *Wuhan Diary.*

Such accusatory apostrophizing and cultural generalizations raised hackles, with some of Fang Fang’s compatriots also looking askance at the text’s swift translation into English by the American translator and academic Michael Berry that came in November 2020. Fang Fang found herself trolled by legions of regime supporters and what she calls ‘ultra-leftists’ (see 118 and 369, en. 27) as a supposed reactionary or even a stooge and ‘running dog’ of the West (34). In an academic article ‘Fang Fang’s Diary: An Indefensible Mistake’, Pinyue Lu fulminates against the work and its translation, arguing that the book ‘contains a political “virus”’ (Pinyue 2020: 485) though without engaging in any substantive textual analysis. A more careful reading would see that *Wuhan Diary* is for the most part quite even-handed, with Fang Fang at times expressing sympathy for beleaguered local officials (15, 22). In his home city of Los Angeles at the other side of the globe, Berry was also smeared as a CIA operative for translating the book.

Like Ling Ma, Fang Fang presents readers with a dystopian present day, full of wraiths and apparitions. The presence of death hovers over almost every page of *Wuhan Diary*. One only needs to think of Fang’s descriptions of those afflicted by the virus desperately seeking scant hospital beds, or of an especially affecting image of a pile of phones whose owners ‘had already been reduced to ash’ (88). Concretizing such spectrality, Fang personifies Covid-19 as an amoral rogue (in a play on the term ‘rogue virus’; 98, 212) and an odd eccentric who ‘works in strange ways; it is crafty, it is elusive’ (317). In a now-familiar trope that blends the martial with the supernatural, the infection features as an invisible enemy to be fought. Since viruses such as Covid-19 effortlessly cross national borders, so too must the world’s response. In her 22 March 2020 entry, Fang Fang sounded a humanistic note when she wrote: ‘This virus is humankind’s common enemy; we have no choice but to stand side-by-side to get through this difficult time together’ (327). Worse than an embodied enemy, though, elsewhere in the text she indicates that the foe is suprahuman. Its otherworldliness means the coronavirus has complete freedom of movement while Wuhan residents are strictly confined to their apartments. Fang observes, ‘this virus continues to roam the city like an evil spirit, appearing whenever and wherever it pleases, terrorizing the people’ (60). As my epigraph intimates, this evil spirit is a personification of death which stalks Wuhan city. More potent even than a spectre, Fang goes on to deify it as the ‘god of death’ (78, 134, 229) leading followers in an irresistible ‘death fugue’ (161) to the underworld. From a deity, it is an easy hop to God’s nemesis: the devil who is ‘always on our heels’ (51) or who enters our bodies to live inside us (162). Clearly, this virus–spectre is horrifying not for its malevolence, but its indefatigable parasitism.

At this juncture I think of Terry Castle’s notion of the apparitional lesbian, that other who can pass before an observer’s eyes and yet not be seen. From her early 1990s pre-internet dating standpoint, Castle is ahead of her time for using the word ‘ghost’ as a verb when she describes ‘the ghosting of the lesbian’ (1993: 5). Whereas gay men have long been subjected to scrutiny because of moral panics around ‘sodomy’, the lesbian can hide in open view while passing as straight. Yet the consequence of this evasion of the heteronormative gaze is that lesbian voices are not heard. This is because there is ‘a kind of “ghost effect” in the […] world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot – even when she is there, in plain view, mortal and magnificent’ (1993: 2). Castle’s important analysis to some extent maps onto class when it comes to *Wuhan Diary*. Fang regularly draws attention to the ‘mortal and magnificent’ sanitation workers labouring tirelessly and at great personal risk to keep the streets clean even when no one is there to see them or their efforts. When she is feeling anxious, these ‘ghosts – or the (nearly) invisible’ (Fleischhack and Schenkel 2016: 11) help to calm Fang Fang’s nerves and give her a sense of stability and purpose in abnormal times. She affirms: ‘They are the group that always gets overlooked as they quietly carry out their jobs, but somehow they are always there to set the heart of this city at ease’ (65). Though open to the public gaze, these working-class people are not usually seen. Now, however, they become hypervisible as they appear as virtually the only citizens on Wuhan’s crisis-stricken streets.

The affirmative aspect of (in)visibility in the form of public service is shadowed by its photographic negative: concealment, supposedly for the public good (5, 236–37, 284–86). Building to a crescendo as the diary progresses and the attacks on her grow in number and viciousness, Fang raises her voice to make declarations the powers-that-be wish to drown out. ‘Who would dare attempt to conceal the truth?’ she asks, with barely obscured contempt (285). Moving on to identify concealment as a touchstone word in China’s dealings with coronavirus, she questions whether the authorities put so much effort into hiding the facts out of oversight, malice or some other motive. Whatever the case, she is certain that ‘here in China, concealment is the brother of censorship’ (285). Small wonder that her trenchant critic Pinyue Lu is offended by this. His sole block quote from *Wuhan Diary* centres on Fang Fang’s discussion of concealment via that of another Chinese woman writer Geling Yan. He takes issue with these novelists ‘draw[ing] conclusions in the manner of a fiction writer’ (Pinyue 2020: 488) – even though that is exactly what they are. Meanwhile, he entirely sidesteps Fang Fang’s exploration of censorship, a live issue in contemporary China. Against that, Jana Fedtke, Mohammed Ibahrine and Yuting Wang rightly situate *Wuhan Diary* within a landscape of ‘digitalized sub-narratives [which] can build an assemblage of discrete flows of sousveillance that watch the watchers and thus circumvent any strict forms of censorship’ (2021: 3). Faced with a repressive government and hordes of internet trolls, Fang wields her computer keyboard fearlessly and without let-up.

In relation to the ghost in the machine of technology, despite being in her sixties Fang is impressively agile with various online platforms. Kevin Robins notes the interactive panoply of her online literary form, observing that *Wuhan Diary* ‘was a vast exercise in writing, cutting, pasting, forwarding, and circulating of texts, messages, photos, and video clips, and increasingly included feedback and participation from millions’ (2021: 2). Indeed, Fang Fang finds ways to get around the ‘Dear internet censors’ she flays elsewhere in imaginary epistles addressed to them which she posts online rather than sending (70, 254). Fang also exposes the disgraceful practice of outside aid workers coming to Wuhan to pose for social media pictures outside funeral homes with the Chinese flag prominently displayed. During the dark early days of the outbreak, these outsiders are more concerned with showing off than showing compassion. In some ways, the digital (and its concomitant dose of rumours and fake news) is portrayed by Fang as a viral infection that enables what she calls ‘boneheads’ to garner a ‘million followers’ (105, 96–97), thus giving them plenty of power to do harm. ‘It is actually quite similar’, writes Fang, ‘to investigating the origin of a virus; you start with where the outbreak began; when did they all begin to post their attacks’ (281). Here she makes a clear link between online toxicity and viral infection.

Yet, far from being a luddite who dismisses the internet out of hand, Fang also recognizes its enabling potential. She speaks admiringly, for example, of the internet’s ‘boundless resources’ and the ‘ever-expansive network’ to which it gives access (62, 352). She is alert to its potential for creating communities, so she uses the diction of ‘netizens’ (88, 174, 254) to figure forth how citizens can act as individual whistleblowers or band together online to effect change. The author indicates how practical and enabling technology can prove to be in health crises, in that she makes approving reference to electronic track and trace and ‘Health QR codes’ (154, 296 and on). These systems, in tandem with an extremely strict lockdown, helped to bring the disease under control relatively quickly in Hubei province. Perhaps this should not be naively celebrated, though, as Byung-Chul Han warns that ‘China will now also sell its autocratic surveillance state as a successful model against the epidemic. China will demonstrate the superiority of its system to the world with even more pride’ (qtd. in Siguenza and Rebollo 2020: n. pag.). Returning to Fang Fang, she views the internet as additionally having cathartic properties. Riffing off the idea of a wailing wall, she coins the term ‘wailing web’ (267). Here in cyberspace, self-isolating individuals who are unable to meet up in person can mourn lost family members and pay condolences. Those who have died alone and been cremated without mourners are through technology made grievable, in Butler’s (2004, 2016) sense. It is clear that Fang is a techno-realist, who prizes the internet’s value but also recognizes its pitfalls.

Feminist scholars have long taught us that the personal is political. Although Fang does not identify as feminist but ‘super-womanist’ (qtd. in Hui 2010: 412), she draws readers into a web of personal and political strands. We learn about her need to get hold of diabetes medication, the fact that her ex-husband falls ill early on in the crisis but soon recovers, her daughter’s struggles to cook for herself during lockdown given that the young woman usually eats takeaway, and a niece’s travails in getting evacuated back to her home in Singapore once quarantine is imposed on Wuhan. More positively, readers attest to Fang Fang’s search for any glimmer of ‘good news’ (2020: 6, 13, 14 and on) even in the darkest days of the pandemic. She finds this in other provinces’ support for Hubei, her own family remaining in good health, and the arrival of spring after the terrible death-laden days of winter.

When it comes to the political, Fang is acerbic about the authorities’ propaganda, repeatedly condemning as lax and dangerous the following eight-word slogan which caused untold delay and harm early on: ‘Not Contagious Between People; It’s Controllable and Preventable’ (36, 69, 175). This misleading fallacy via Panglossian optimism is different from her own search for good news. Fang Fang’s notes of hope signal her resilience and determination to find crumbs of comfort amid what she unswervingly characterizes as a ‘catastrophe’ and a ‘disaster’. (Indeed, a basic data-mining analysis of *Wuhan Diary* suggests that there are twenty instances of the first term and fourteen of the second.) By contrast, politicians spin their good news stories like plates, only for Fang to smash them down with her caustic wit. For instance, Fang lambasts the visit of a politician to a Hubei hospital full of coronavirus patients. On this photo opportunity the statesman and his entourage go about the wards singing to the sick and dying the patriotic song ‘There Would Be No New China Without the Communist Party’ (84). Their excessive sanguinity about the sunlit uplands of reform-era communism is nullified by the Wuhan people’s suffering, to which Fang bears witness. Nor does the diarist shrink from discussing the previous governmental cover-up of the SARS epidemic in 2003 (5, 35, 51). Bewailing that the lessons of nearly twenty years before have not been learned, Fang accounts for this with a withering twofold explanation: ‘[W]e had been too careless, and […] we have placed too much faith in our government’ (5). Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* serves as a clarion call for greater care of public health and an appropriate dose of scepticism as regards governmental pieties.

To conclude, we have seen that the Covid-19 pandemic, far from an equalizer, is shoring up inequality and instability around the world. As Janet Wilson, Om Prakash Dwivedi and Cristina Gámez-Fernández put it in their editorial for a special issue on precarity, postcoloniality and coronavirus:

Among the perplexed – some even denying – and slow-moving governmental machineries, COVID-19 heightens new and unprecedented forms of precarity – in terms of the medical and human resources urgently needed to fight it and the anticipated economic recession which will follow, amplifying the already existing ‘great divide’ […] between rich and poor, global south and global north, haves and have-nots. (Wilson, Dwivedi and Gámez-Fernández 2020: 439)

Unless such precarity is tackled, the pericoronial writers under discussion indicate that (as in the past) any future crisis will make them worse. With varying degrees of formal experimentation Mo Yan, Ma Jian, Ma Ling and Fang Fang use composite, collage techniques to remake established genres such as magical realism, fable, speculative fiction, dystopia/ustopia and the diary or blog as antidotes for our diseased twenty-first century.

1. . Subsequent references are to this ([2014] 2009) edition of Mo Yan’s *Frog* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . The more obvious novel by Ma Jian to read alongside Mo Yan’s *Frog* is *The Dark Road* (Ma 2014). This is because both novels put the one-child policy on blast and discuss the black market or bootleg trade that surrounds the births of illegal children. Admittedly, Ma Jian goes further than Mo Yan with his visceral descriptions of rape, forced abortions, ‘family planning fugitives’ (2014: 34, 55, 80, 84, 242), and women’s bodies as fields of operation on which the forces of patriarchy and communism do battle. However, there are many points of productive overlap between the two novels, as with Ma Jian’s intertextual references to frogs as a source of sustenance (2014: 21, 22, 216) and to wawa fish (2014: 39–40; recall the baby’s ‘wawa’ cry evoked by Mo Yan’s title). The resonances in content between the two novels have already been brought together ably by Elizabeth Cullingford (2019). Since my focus in this section is on form, especially magical realism, and given that *The Dark Road* is closer to realism, it seems more appropriate to evaluate the stylistically innovative *China Dream* (2018)*.* Interestingly, Ma Jian sows the seeds for his later novel with brief allusions in *The Dark Road* to folk beliefs in a ‘Broth of Amnesia’ (2014: 211, 222). This idea is developed and made manifest in the exuberantly experimental *China Dream*, as I will discuss in the main body text. Finally, in *The Dark Road* he also mentions a SARS outbreak being covered up (2014: 311–312), with people being forbidden to wear face masks for fear of foreigners seeing in the lead-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Subsequent references are to this (2018) edition of Ma Jian’s *China Dream* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Subsequent references are to this (2018) edition of Ling Ma’s *Severance* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Candace’s mother had been suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, another form of memory loop whose effects are not unlike Shen Fever. Spirit money is also known as ghost or hell money and, just as Candace does, many Chinese people burn it as an offering to hungry ghosts. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . Aimé Césaire presents this in algebraic terms as ‘an equation: colonization = “thingification”’, arguing that the colonizer turns the colonized into ‘an instrument of production’ (2000: 42). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . On the distinction between things and objects, see also Brown 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . In her feminist epidemiological reading of Candace’s lack of reproductive autonomy, Waples opens up another interpretation of the book’s title, writing that Ling Ma’s ‘pregnant Asian American narrator offers a survival narrative that interrogates the possibility of severance from unlivable structures, both pre- and post-apocalyptic’ (Waples 2021: 121). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Subsequent references are to this (2020) edition of Fang Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

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