

# APOCALYPSE AND UTOPIA IN CHINA

Spring 2024

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## **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

Representations of a perfect society and imagined scenarios of a dystopian or apocalyptic future are a common features of all human societies. Philosophical, religious, and literary attempts to imagine alternative futures and critique present conditions enjoyed wide popularity and considerable influence throughout Chinese history. The goal of this course will be to introduce students to the major themes and trends in utopian and apocalyptic thought in China, from the pre-modern age to our times.

In the first part of the semester, we will learn about the utopian and apocalyptic narratives that emerged in early and medieval China. We will begin by discussing the two archetypical models of a utopian society in early China: the Confucian harmonious moral society and its Daoist counterpart of an idyllic secluded community located in faraway lands. We will then turn our attention to the emergence of organized religion and the utopian and apocalyptic scenarios promoted by Daoist and Buddhist writers and religious innovators. In the second part of the semester, we will focus on the modern and contemporary periods and the study the impact of the introduction of Western utopian and millenarian narratives on the Chinese imagination. In addition to surveying some real-world attempts to establish a utopian society, such as the 19<sup>th</sup> century Taiping Rebellion, Mao Zedong's attempts to re-fashion China into a Community Utopia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the 21<sup>st</sup> century eco-village green movement, students will be introduced to a wide variety of literary and cinematic texts that try to imagine a possible future – from the utopian sci-fi nationalism of *The Wandering Earth* to the dystopian fiction of leading writers such as Han Song, Chen Qiufan, and Han Jingfang. Using these works as case studies, we will strive to ascertain the role of utopianism as a tool of political, social, and environmental criticism and as a way to construct a better and more just society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. No knowledge of Chinese is necessary – all readings will be in English.

As a split-level seminar, the course will be discussion-based. Students will be asked to post weekly 500-word response papers in which they will analyze and critique the readings. The goal of this task is to help students familiarize themselves with the assigned sources before the in-class discussion thus facilitating a meaningful and productive discussion. For their final project, students will conduct their own research on a topic of their choice and present it during the last meeting. Undergraduate paper will be limited to 10-pages; graduate papers should be around 20-25 pages, including original-language research.

## **REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING:**

Participation: 20%

Weekly Quizzes: 30%

Final Paper: 50% (10% in-class presentation, 40% written paper)

## COURSE SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNED READINGS

### **Week One (1/23): *Course Introduction***

Utopia and Dystopia in Social Theory and Literature  
Millenarian and Apocalyptic Thought

### **Week Two (1/30): *Perfect Harmony: The Confucian Utopian Society***

Ritual, Morality, and Social Hierarchy in Classical Confucianism  
The Great Unity and Modest Prosperity  
Mencius and the Well-Field System

### **Week Three (2/6): *In Faraway Lands: Peach Blossom Spring and the Daoist Idyllic Utopian***

The Ideal Society in Laozi's *Daodejing*  
Tao Yuanming's *Peach Blossom Spring* and its Legacy

### **Week Four (2/13): *After the Flood: Apocalyptic Visions in Religious Daoism***

Millenarian Rebellions and the Fall of the Han Dynasty  
The Emergence of Celestial Masters Daoism  
Demons, Plagues, and Daoist Eschatology

### **Week Five (2/20): *Between Purgatory and Paradise: Buddhist Narratives of Heaven and Hell***

The Spread of Buddhism from India to China  
Reincarnation and the Rearticulation of the Chinese Netherworld  
The Rise of Pure Land Buddhism

### **Week Six (2/27): *Utopias of One: Asceticism and Hermit Culture***

The Search for Immortality  
Buddhism, Daoism, and the Ascetic Ideal

### **Week Seven (3/5): NO CLASS (Spring Break)**

### **Week Eight (3/12): *Modern Utopianism***

Kang Youwei and the Society of Great Unity

### **Week Nine (3/19): *A Great Leap Forward: Mao Zedong's Utopian Dream and its Break***

The Rise of the Modern Chinese Nation-State  
Communism and Utopianism  
Mao's Attempts to Build the Perfect Society

### **Week Ten (3/26): *Dystopia as Social Criticism in Contemporary China***

Class and Disparity in Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing*  
Migration and Displacement in Han Song's *Submarines*

**Week Eleven (4/2): *Big Brother is Watching: Technological Dystopias***

The Rise of Chinese Sci-fi

The Danger and Promise of Technology in the Works of Chen Qiufan

**Week Twelve (4/9): NO CLASS**

**Week Thirteen (4/16): *Resistance and Salvation: Apocalyptic Cults in the Post-Mao Era***

The Post-Mao Religious Renaissance

Millenarian and Apocalyptic Visions in *Falun Gong* and *Eastern Lightning* Theology

**Week Fourteen (4/23): *Only China Can Save the World: Post-Apocalyptic Nationalism***

Xi Jinping and the Chinese Dream

Nationalism and Salvation in Liu Cixin's *Wandering Earth* and its Cinematic Adaptation

**Week Fifteen (4/30): *Alternative Futures: Eco-Villages and Green Utopias***

Millennials and The Search for a Sustainable Future

Tang Guanhua's Intentional Community in Fujian