The proverbial interrogation technique of “good cop, bad cop” has long been a staple in police procedurals and in the detective genre in general. This strategy does not necessarily require the teamwork of two persons, since one private eye can play two roles, just as a femme fatale often comes across as a damsel in distress. The inherent tension within this duality, especially when cast within the same character, suggests the porousness of good and evil, as a figure of authority takes on lawlessness from the criminal sitting across the interrogation table. In an age of millennial terrorism rife with conspiracy and paranoia, “good cop, bad cop” is an increasingly literal term, with corruption within the institutions of law and order. Suspects of crime may be innocent, good crooks; investigators of crime may be guilty, evil in disguise. Insofar as readers and audience are concerned, both cops and crooks are imaginary projections; we identify with the former, while subconsciously drawn to the latter, whose dark perpetrations inaugurate whodunit narratives. “Good cop, bad cop” externalizes, within the detective genre, the human nature of both good and evil. “Good cop, bad cop” constitutes part of the self’s dramatis personae, or the conceptual outer reaches of possibility.

From a plot device in the detective genre, “good cop, bad cop” expands to embody the means to an end, that is, the probe into the ambivalent unknown. Accordingly, “good cop, bad cop” can be applied to a wide range of scenarios. In parenting, parents play off each other to cope with a child’s temper tantrum. In mythology, human imagination pairs good and bad Gods/Fathers (even Goddesses/Mothers), oftentimes
to accentuate the hero’s split psyche. In the fantasy, sci-fi genre examined herein, cops are cloned a billion times over to populate the West’s binarism of utopian sinophilia and dystopian sinophobia, or, more precisely, Maureen F. McHugh’s Good China and Chang-rae Lee’s Bad China. Derived from Greek, utopia means both good place and no-place, the latter’s negativity folding dystopia into the good place. Michael D. Gordin et al. define dystopia as “a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society,” a society “planned, but not planned all that well or justly” (“Introduction” to *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility* 2010, 1–2). Gordin et al. further see utopia and dystopia “as styles of imagination, as approaches to radical change, and not simply as assessments of ambitious plans for social engineering that have positive (utopic) or negative (dystopic) results” (5). Miguel Abensour echoes that observation by parsing the no-place: “the negative category of Not (*Nicht*) as in the expression ‘not Yet.’ The Not is origin. It is at the beginning, it is the beginning. A double movement is perceived in the Not. If the Not is Emptiness, it is at the same time the drive, anxious to escape from emptiness” (“Utopia: Future and/or Alterity” 24–25).

The last word of Gordin et al.’s “not planned all that well or justly” harks back to the pursuit of justice in the detective genre. The collective imaginary of utopia is an individual sleuth’s hunt for truth writ large. Cumulative social injustice propels what Fredric Jameson believes to be the “Marxist politics as a utopian project or program for transforming the world and replacing a capitalist mode of production with a radically different one. But it is also a conception of historical dynamics that posits that the whole new world is objectively in emergence all around us” (“Utopia as Method” in *Utopia/Dystopia*, 26). The Marxist Jameson’s conviction of the emergent historical dynamics is precisely what drove a socialist-leaning McHugh to present an alternative to capitalism, a Sinocentric fictitious universe in *China Mountain Zhang* (1992, henceforth *Zhang*).

Transported into the sci-fi novels of recent decades, specifically those by McHugh and Chang-rae Lee, this proverbial duality of utopian sinophilia and dystopian sinophobia is attributed to the rise of China as the world power and the scourge of the world. Projected into the future, the Chinese Other upends US supremacy since World War II. In both McHugh’s and Lee’s sci-fi novels, they trade the police badge of justice and violence for the Chinese face—a countenance of beauty and
bastardy, as in McHugh’s awesome “China Mountain” that somehow infects with the suggestive C-illness in Lee’s *On Such a Full Sea* (2014, henceforth *Full Sea*). While China Mountain looms in McHugh’s title and as the object of desire, Lee’s C-illness (seasickness from China?) lurks behind McHugh’s rollicking, topsy-turvy Sino-centrism. The cancer-style pandemic is genetically inherited by nearly every character, hence, the human fate, in *Full Sea*. Albeit not a Sontag-esque pathological metaphor, China continues to crystallize ideological interpellation and hegemonic oppression in McHugh’s work.¹ The extreme effects of utopia and dystopia, sinophilia and sinophobia in particular, are the interlocked head and tail of the sci-fi uroboros. Good and evil, ever fluid, crisscross McHugh’s and Lee’s works, despite the authors’ gravitating to either end.

Both McHugh and Lee resort to the sci-fi formula of, as David M. Higgins puts it, “the alien invasion or reverse colonization narrative,” except they proffer an Asian invasion instead, one launched from China (“American Science Fiction after 9/11” 45). Reverse colonization materializes in the socialist McHugh’s *Zhang* less as a takeover than as a makeover, a benign growth on the body of America, normalized, even hailed, as a technological utopia. McHugh’s China-dominated future is a mere screen for, in the words of Fredric Jameson, the “unmediated, unfiltered experience of the daily life of capitalism,” not so much “unmediated, unfiltered experience” as a critique thereof in the vein of a Marxist utopian impulse (*Archaeologies of the Future* 287).

But McHugh’s techno-Orientalism from a fair—beautiful and almost good—China in 1992 lapses into Lee’s dystopia in 2014, owing in part to the evolution within sci-fi itself, as John Rieder expounds in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008):

If the Victorian vogue for adventure fiction in general seems to ride the rising tide of imperial expansion, particularly into Africa and the Pacific, the increasing popularity of journeys into outer space or under the ground in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century probably reflects the near exhaustion of the actual unexplored areas of the globe. (3–4)

Moving into “the late 20th century,” argues Gregory Claeys in *Searching for Utopia* (2011), “the spectre of ecological catastrophe came increasingly to displace totalitarianism as the dystopia of choice” (202). Indeed, McHugh’s Marxist heaven is replaced with total environmental
devastation by Chang-rae Lee. The benign growth is now indisputably malignant. Lee’s bleak dystopia manifests the doomsday scenario presaged by the ecocriticism from Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962 up to Priscilla Wald in 2015, whose description sounds like an uncanny footnote to *Full Sea*, or full of C-illness: “Permeating the fundamental substance of humanity—blood, bones, sinew—the chemicals are colonizing the future, seeping into genes and ... the circulatory systems of people and of the planet” (183). Lee insinuates that the toxic chemicals flow from China along with its massive migration, carrying contamination to America.

Despite the shared trope of “Good China, Bad China,” McHugh and Lee are two very different writers, not to mention the intervening shadows of September 11, war on terror, global economic downturn, and, of course, the ascent of China that enshrond Lee’s vision. McHugh is a practitioner of science fiction, following her debut *Zhang* with three more novels in the same vein. Asianness as a theme does diminish dramatically after her debut. Reflecting techno-Orientalism’s turn from the 1980s Japan fad to the 1990s China fad, McHugh launched her career with a heavy dose of Chineseness, but has evolved away from it. Christopher T. Fan posits that two autobiographical crises of McHugh’s life brought about *Zhang*: McHugh’s working experiences as “a precarious laborer in New York City during the 1980s”; and her witnessing of China’s “radical reorientation from Maoist to market-directed aims” in 1987–1988 when she taught English in Shijiazhuang, China (“Techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics” 2). In other words, McHugh learned firsthand how laborers fell through the cracks in the financial capital of capitalism and how a communist China gave way to a market economy in a city two hundred miles from the PRC’s capital. Yet, like fellow mainstream sci-fi writers, including cyberpunks and techno-Orientalists, such as William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984) and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) based on Philip K. Dick’s novel, Asianness is a narrative strategy they resort to as well as put behind then. Asianness is the mask of the Other that white writers, in their complacency of mainstream universalism, elect to assume or take off at will.

Published after *Zhang*, McHugh’s *Half the Day Is Night* (1994, henceforth *Half*) is futuristic, post-holocaustal, but decidedly not post-race. Rather than moving beyond the social and historical construct of race, race turns out to be even more entrenched in the future. As such, sci-fi dramatizes the racial differences and inequality of the here and
now. Consequently, *Half* features race-based characters, with bloodline in a symbolic sense dominating the characters’ physiognomy: one is blond and the other with “a broad Mayan face and hook nose; a face like the Olmec man” (30–31). The protagonists are vague shadows of their Chinese and Oriental genes: the French-speaking Jean David Dai is a “skinny little Asian” with a limp, whose “great-grandparents were from Vietnam” (31, 16); Mayla Ling professes that “My greats were Chinese. My grandfather is Chinese-American, but I’m a, I guess I’m a mongrel” (16). John Ling, Mayla’s stern grandfather in a wheelchair, strikes one as a stereotype of traditional moribund Chinese patriarchs straight out of Frank Chin’s plays.³ It is worth noting that their Asian ancestry is announced by the protagonists themselves, in addition to Dai’s Asian physiognomy or in spite of Mayla’s “mongrel,” un-Asian physiognomy. By contrast, the blond, Mayan-looking, and sundry other characters are merely described. Given that physical traits manifest the characters’ origins, more agency seems to be bestowed on the “Asiatics.” But this remains an agency bestowed by McHugh, who kneads in “now you see it now you don’t” Asian ethnicity according to her narrative needs.

*Half* also continues McHugh’s favorite sci-fi technical jargon and her fascination with machinery and virtual reality. Whereas Zhang contains whole chapters on cybernetic kite flying and Arctic exploration, *Half* imagines construction under the sea. The level of understanding of material science and laborers’ physical hardships is deep and astounding. Another stylistic characteristic of Zhang is also carried over to *Half*: multilingual hybridity. Jean David Dai is French Vietnamese, unfamiliar with English, a linguistic borderland akin to the American-born Zhang passing as Chinese. Now employed as Mayla’s bodyguard in the Carib, which is largely Spanish-speaking, *Half* has integrated multiple languages from West and East. *Mission Child* (1998) doubles back to Zhang’s theme of homosexuality, centering it on the cross-dressing, transgender protagonist Janna-Jan trying to survive genocides and atrocities in a Darwinian landscape of the future. Instructed by a Native American-style cross-dressing shaman, the transgender protagonist winds up in Hainandao, the southernmost island of China that also provides part of the setting in Zhang.

In contrast to McHugh’s sci-fi corpus, Chang-rae Lee is an American ethnic writer who has arrived at a dystopic *Full Sea* after four novels. Other than being influenced by the millennial sci-fi and China rage, pun intended, it seemed that Lee’s own trajectory was overdetermined that he
would have a go at a bad China, which crystallizes the “bad blood” that infects the world. The novelist’s problematic relationship with Asianness as symptomatic of Asian American identity began with his debut novel, *Native Speaker* (1995). In that breakthrough novel, Lee capitalizes on Korean American ethnicity, where the protagonist Henry Park is torn between his “lengthy Anglican Goddess” of a wife (15), his greengrocer immigrant father dying like a “gritty mule” (48), and his profession as a spy, winning the trust of his Asian subjects and then betraying them. Lee bundles together several genres (literary genes?): an ethnic bildungsroman favored by US multiculturalism; a romance and marriage on the rocks and slowly healing itself; a spy novel full of suspense and littered with film noir lingo. This generic hybridity reflects Henry Park’s torturous split between assimilation and ethnic identity, apparently irreconcilable to the extent that the novel concludes with “in every betrayal [of Asian subjects] dwells a self-betrayal [of Asianness]” (314).

This sense of guilt continues in the historical context of Japanese crimes against Korean comfort women during World War II in *A Gesture Life* (1999). The Korean adoptee and Japanese military doctor Doc Hata’s brief encounter with comfort woman K haunts him into his old age, so much so that he overcompensates by adopting the mixed-race Korean Sunny, a K substitute, in a quiet American suburban neighborhood. Lee then ventures into the heart of a white protagonist, Jerry Battle, in *Aloft* (2004), whose late wife Daisy was Korean and drowned herself in the family pool for unknown reasons. The burden of betrayal weighs on Battle, albeit subconsciously, and he takes to the air in his beloved private airplane to escape the earth, his profession as a landscaper, and Daisy’s watery grave. Even in the 2010 *The Surrendered’s* multiple perspectives, Jerry Battle lives on in the white character Hector, whose entanglement with an opium-addicted missionary’s wife Sylvie during the Korean War culminates in Lee’s obsession with ravishment, either war trauma and bonding, or Freudian eros and thanatos—the oral-prone lovemaking of the Parks, the trysts with K amid gang rapes at the comfort station, a repentant Daisy after inexplicable bouts of rage offering herself in the shower “doggie-style” (108), and Hector and Sylvie languishing in alcoholic or opiate highs. *The Surrendered’s* pathological love and dependency inch them toward a shared death wish. Hector’s ex-wife June is terminally ill with cancer, a Korean War refugee who arrived in the USA through a sham marriage with Hector. The long line of Korean (discomfort?) women from those in *Native Speaker* to K,
Sunny, Daisy, and June are mysterious and incomprehensible, in contrast to the “tangible corporeality” of Henry Park’s white wife, Jerry Battle’s Hispanic partner Rita, and Hector’s Sylvie and girlfriend Dora. There is yet another commonality among these Korean women—they are all immigrants, who, by definition, are unknowable aliens.

Herein lies the similarity between a sci-fi mainstream writer and an ethnic writer. In their search for authentic otherness, McHugh fashions Chinese-speaking protagonists who communicate in transliterated pinyin and are caught up in a web of Chinese social relationships and mannerisms. While Lee does not come close to McHugh’s multilingual repertoire, which is ironic given Lee’s ethnic moniker and niche in the literary market, Lee, a Korean American who arrived on these shores at the age of three, takes the same old, same old “immigrant license,” a repetition compulsion of ethnic and mainstream writers and readers alike, whereby they apply a strategic essentializing to immigrant characters, making them the raison d’être of ethnic difference. Indeed, these English-language writers often identify themselves as non-English-speaking immigrants to legitimize their narratives. After all, ethnicity posits immigrant ancestors, the Haley-esque roots of ethnic identity; yet they remain largely unrecognizable through the fog of time and the fading of the mother tongue and heritage. Ethnic identity hinges largely on the fabrication of the ancestral culture, if not the ancestral language.

The immigrant license is as theoretically foundational to ethnic literature as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is to postcolonialism. To talk back to colonialism, Spivak creates a fulcrum by strategically essentializing subaltern voices purportedly emanating from the voiceless and often illiterate masses in British India. The folk oral tradition, largely non-existent in print culture, is made to contest official colonial history. Ethnic and mainstream writers’ immigrant license resembles the tactical fabrication of the subaltern, both coming into being as an Other alleged to be part and parcel of the Self—Spivak merging with the subaltern or Henry Park with his mulish father. Admittedly well-intentioned and progressive, such licensing is nonetheless the doppelganger to the conservative hegemony, including traditional male discourse imposing male fantasies onto females from an allegedly female perspective, or Orientalist discourse imposing the binarism of cannibals and noble savages onto the racial other from an allegedly native perspective. Ultimately, such licensing smacks of liberal intellectuals’
self-licensing by dubbing—which entails muting in the first place—the subaltern and the immigrant.

That the Asian Other or immigrant characters remain an “essentializing strategy” in McHugh and Lee is apparent given how the writers catapulted their careers by simulating foreign tongues in *Zhang* and immigrant pidgin in *Native Speaker*, and then extricated themselves from foreign and immigrant speech patterns, even when such characters continue to grace their subsequent novels. No equivalent effort is made to approximate *Zhang*’s plethora of Mandarin, Singaporean English, and other dialects, or *Native Speaker*’s pidgin-spewing grocer father and Korean dollar store owner. The initial creative energy expended on a pseudo-bilingual style (more in the Sino-centric *Zhang* than in the English-speaking *Native Speaker*) resembles a phase of growing pains. After which McHugh simply moves into futuristic scenarios involving Asianness tangentially, and Lee flirts with whiteface protagonists and psychic extremities before returning to pan-Asian American ethnicity in a sci-fi novel.

**BABA QIAN AND GUAI KIDS IN CHINA MOUNTAIN ZHANG**

As McHugh notes in the “Afterword,” *Zhang* springs from the “conceit ... that the People’s Republic of China has become the dominant world power” (313). The novel takes place in the wake of the proletarian revolution that replaced bankrupt capitalism with socialism; the USA is now the “Socialist Union of American States” (6), a “backward” place where the ABC protagonist Zhang and others crave to travel to China as the most technologically advanced nation—the good China (17). Gravitating to this object of desire, Zhang’s Chinese father and Hispanic mother “paid to adjust [Zhang’s] genetic make up ... that I look like a slope-head like my father” (2). Even the derogatory stereotype of Asian slope-heads (as opposed to Caucasian eggheads or potato heads, one presumes) becomes an ideal, allowing Zhang to pass as Chinese. Reversing the Chinese inferiority complex from a debilitating century of being a subcolony, McHugh imagines an alternative universe where China stands truly as the “Middle Kingdom,” with America in its periphery. McHugh hereby begins to deploy sci-fi’s quintessential “cognitive estrangement,” which Darko Suvin expounds in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). In America, even shocked exclamations and invocations are no longer “Oh God!” or “Lord!” but “Lenin and Mao
Zedong!” Zhang’s schools in Brooklyn taught Chinese and apparently a lot more, as Maoist-style political slogans and Marxist theory and history are on everyone’s lips. In fact, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution repeated itself in the Great Cleansing Winds campaign, which demoted Zhang’s boss Qian and swept him and his ugly daughter San-xiang to the frontier colony of New York. McHugh’s conceit not only elevates China as the world power but grafts China’s communist past and ideology onto a future America and, in fact, galaxy, as Martian settlers are featured in several chapters, where the bad China begins to rear its ugly head, most conspicuous in the cruel and unusual punishment of a “capital offence” for “deviance,” like Zhang’s homosexuality (17). Zhang’s University of Nanjing tutor and lover, Haitao, jumps to his death, fearing exposure and worse. China’s ascendance owes as much to a superior ideology and political system as to filthy lucre, or *qian* (錢 money) in Mandarin which happens to be the surname of Zhang’s boss.

Baba Qian (literally translated as Father Money) squandered the “face money” reserved for San-xiang’s operations in a futile attempt at *quanxi*, or connections, to effect the family’s return to China. Failing on both fronts, the Qians languish in an outpost of the Chinese Empire, the ugly daughter fast becoming a spinster. Baba Qian is an allegory of the China problem: a land of advanced technology and wealth is craved by all, particularly its own children in exile, who are exploited in the Motherland’s blind, voracious expansion and who, in turn, exploit their own children. The novel opens with a bang, or a disorienting, overwhelming linguistic maze as “the foreman [Baba Qian] chatters [to San-xiang and, by Chinese ethos, to his work crew headed by the tech engineer Zhang] in Meihua, the beautiful tongue, Singapore English.” This first sentence of the novel is followed closely by minimally translated *pinyin* “xing buxing,” “waiguoren,” “putonghua,” and “Meiguo,” compounded by a host of unfamiliar expressions, such as Chinglish, ABC (American Born Chinese), and dialogue in pidgin English.

Such alienating language manages to introduce a strange world of social webs where Qian blatantly orchestrates an arranged marriage between Zhang and San-xiang. The exile China imposed on an innocent Qian, Qian now forces upon his children, with Zhang being treated as a prospective son-in-law. Zhang tries to fend off in the polite, respectful manner of a *guai* (乖 good, obedient, well-behaved) kid, but ends in succumbing to a persistent Qian. This pattern of good kids being devoured by stronger, more aggressive forces tragically reprises in San-xiang, who,
after becoming more presentable, thanks to long-overdue medical procedures, is desirable enough to be date raped by a Caucasian Bobby on drugs. Admittedly, the rape itself is typical enough: San-xiang screams in protest, but is silenced by slaps that draw blood. What leads up to the rape, however, is the scenario of a traditionally demure and sexually naive Chinese girl going on what is practically her first date, not knowing how to say no to alcohol, drugs, or sexual advances, nor how to read the signs of an imminent rape. Good China is to be consumed by bad China, which includes a Caucasian rapist and a predator lurking in China’s sphere of influence where top managerial positions belong to the Chinese. For a home-coming to the center of gravity, Qian sacrifices his daughter’s looks and happiness. For racial passing, Zhang’s parents remake him genetically in the image of Chineseness. Both Zhang and San-xiang efface themselves—his sexual orientation and her unsightly face—to please Elder Qian or Baba Qian. Looks, or face, are paramount in Chinese guanxi or social connections to the detriment of denizens of, not to mince words, this transpacific, transcontinental Greater China.

McHugh’s multilingual style is anti-hegemonic, unafraid of possible rejection by the monolingual mainstream readership. This is perhaps why Zhang remains an acquired taste for some critics rather than the public in general. Such an uncompromising hybridity evokes Cantonese-inflected ethnic classics such as Louis Chu’s book *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) and Wayne Wang’s film *Dim Sum* (1985). McHugh’s grasp of Mandarin comes across as somewhat shaky though, with frequent mis-spellings in *pinyin*: *jianqiu* for *jiaqiu* (pressball 156), and *hou* (good) for *hu* (tiger 213). Cantonese rather than Mandarin pronunciation surfaces in *waiguai* for *waigui* (foreign ghost or foreigner 154), and *wai* for *wei* (hello 161). But who among McHugh’s white sci-fi fans can tell what appears to a non-Chinese as hair-splitting subtleties of *pinyin*? Nonetheless, these subtle differences are tantamount to calling Doug “dog,” or sheet “shit,” in English.

Although he initiates the daunting multilingual labyrinth, Baba Qian quickly lapses into an Orientalist comics’ pidgin English and behaves so stereotypically that he resembles a racist caricature. “I have daughter … Request you to my home come”, an invitation from one’s elder and superior that is an order in clipped, unidiomatic English (3). The sentence’s unnatural tenor spells out the unfamiliar Chinese social and family relationships being forced upon an ABC. After an argument with Baba Qian, San-xiang seeks shelter for a few nights at Zhang’s
apartment, which enrages Qian to the extent that he looks like “the cli-
ché of the Chinese father” (41). Churlish beyond reason, Qian accuses
San-xiang rather than himself in “what you have done to your mother!”
(40). The bare-boned English he speaks and the childish postures he
strikes make him a clown, one extreme of McHugh’s dialectics in Zhang.
The other extreme is the high-tech firm in Wuxi, China, where Zhang
has the privilege to be an intern.

To design a perfect house on the island of Hainandao, Zhang learns
not only to work with artificial intelligence at the Wuxi engineering firm
but also to let go of his mind in the organic or Daoist engineering style.
Both the ancient philosophy of Daoism and Zen master training come
into play in Zhang’s apprenticeship to a Korean architect, Woo Eubong,
who steers him toward “enlightenment.” Woo accomplishes this by hav-
ing Zhang repeat nearly nonsensical exercises of designing only doors,
followed by floors, windows, and other parts in ways that invoke de fac-
tor Zen koan, “public cases,” or small pieces of a cosmic puzzle await-
ing resolution named *duenwu* (頓悟, sudden illumination). “Don’t plan
the building, let the system do that,” counsels Woo. “You just let go, let
your mind drift and do what it wants” (218). Woo even quotes *Dao De
Jing*, the Daoism Bible: “The way that can be spoken is not the way,”
coming after, of course, the six-character italicized, Romanized original
in an attempt at authenticity (220). McHugh’s dalliance with Daoism is
preceded within the sci-fi genre by Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High
Castle* (1962) and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971),
and soon followed by Le Guin’s *The Telling* (2000). Zhang ultimately
consummates his Daoist engineering training when he imagines a perfect
house. Contrary to Zhang’s ecstatic egolessness, McHugh’s dialectics of
good and bad China do not sprout from a vacuum, but from a formula
within American pop culture: Orientalist stereotypes and exotic idoliza-
tion with a touch of sinophobia and sinophilia. The polarization displaces
the repulsion-cum-attraction of the Western mind, albeit in the name of
the egolessness of McHugh’s Pop Dao, one spiked with Zen à la D. T.
Suzuki’s *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (1949). That Orientalist combi-
nation attracts not only erstwhile novelists but also contemporary crit-
ics, such as Eric S. Rabkin in the seminal academic journal *PMLA* who
applauds McHugh’s Daoist self-effacing within a system as “nearly uto-
pian … but in my view it is the future of criticism” (458). The Dao is the
way, according to Rabkin, for scholarly criticism.
Bad Blood and Good Girls in *On Such a Full Sea*

In her review of Chang-rae Lee’s novel, Jiayang Fan introduces Lee by way of, predictably, the “immigrant license”: “the Korean-American author of powerful immigrant protagonists such as Henry Park and Doc Hata” (“New America and Old China in Dystopia Novels” 227). Note that both Park and Hata are indiscriminately categorized as immigrants, in keeping with the “conceit” throughout Lee’s corpus that the ethnic, hyphenated identity of Korean-American is presented at the outset as the access to the immigrant condition. If a spectrum is established with Hata at one end as a naturalized immigrant American and Park at the other as a Korean-American, then Lee certainly belongs to the latter—see how adroitly he handles the English language, even Hata the non-native speaker carries on self-assured conversations with many a striking, mellifluous turn of phrase. Not to belabor the point, but this is one of countless examples of the game, the fallacy, of immigrant license that writers, publishers, critics, and readers play together to feel good, to be “in the zone” of multiculturalism and globalization, both predicated on transnational migration and diaspora. Many rehearse this pattern of an immigrant genesis. In his interview with Lee, David Naimon sets the stage by introducing Lee’s “tales of immigrants” (“A Conversation with Chang-rae Lee” 121), which leads to the question of “cultural dissonance of the immigrant experience.” This allows Lee to generalize his works as “put toward the lens of immigrancy” (122): “I kind of feel like I’ve been writing dystopian books all along. If you think of an immigrant coming to a place called New York City … it’s an alien world, right?” (123). Neither Naimon nor any other critic tries to reflect on the deceptive authenticity of “immigrant license.”

Jiayang Fan also remarks that Lee’s original intention is to write about “the lives of Shenzhen factory workers” (227). A project of investigative reporting on millions of Chinese workers, it belongs to a growing genre of such documentaries as *Last Train Home* (2009) and *Up the Yangtze* (2007), or such neorealist films as *Blind Shaft* (2003) and *The World* (2004). What eventually came out, nonetheless, was a qualitatively different sci-fi dystopia where “a component of [the authorial and readerly] interest in China was an anxiety about the decline of American power and status” (227). Whereas the documentaries and feature films mentioned above were made in China, by Chinese, in Chinese and regional dialects, examining the China dilemma from inside out,
Lee peers in from the outside as a Westerner, and an ethnic American in particular. Whatever he observes and imagines is colored by the fear of being replaced by China as, in McHugh’s words, “the dominant world power.” The socialist McHugh lays out a Sino-centric future, which the liberal Lee dreads, liberal in the sense that Lee’s original intention was to uncover the misery of worker drones behind the China century. Either the mystery of creativity has alchemized a journalistic project into a fictional dystopia, or it may be a ruse to preempt a charge of xenophobia. If so, Lee has largely succeeded: no such criticism was leveled against *Full Sea* in the round of reviews that accompanied the book’s publication.

In his signature meticulous and lyrical style Lee has taken great care to divert any backlash over China-bashing. Lee’s sleight of hand begins from the first sentence that seeks to smear, pun intended, the source of the dystopia’s newest arrivals to “New China.” By calling it “New China,” Lee smudges the exact point of departure, which is the Old China of course, while demonizing it. Lee dismisses the notion of racial origin on the one hand, while, on the other, he repeats thematically what amounts to, for lack of a better term, “race keeps.” “It is known where we come from, but no one much cares about things like that anymore,” runs Lee’s first line (1). If truly past caring, then why that residual knowledge at all? Reminiscent of Freud’s repetition compulsion—repressing a trauma from consciousness yet revisiting it in subconscious nightmares or unwilled actions—the racial origin is beyond forgetting, unforgettable, inscribed on one’s face and body, one’s diet, one’s very existence. Lee resorted to this technique at the outset of his career. *Native Speaker* begins with Henry Park’s estranged wife leaving him a damning note, which he copies and secretes on his person. While destroying the original and denying its significance, Park proceeds in the same breath to describe the note’s materiality—its wrinkles, olive oil stains, smell, and more. Repression serves only to call up the memory with greater urgency.

The opening paragraph’s denial of origin is quickly complicated by a remembrance and re-envisioning of “New China,” a bleak landscape of environmental degradation, which may have been Lee’s, or anybody else’s, impression after a visit to Shenzhen’s factories. The dying of the land in Old China drove migration and colonization. The picture of the ancestral Xixu City is stark:

> [T]he water fouled beyond all known methods of treatment … the cars and trucks and scooters and buses easily numbered a million, and so along with
around-the-clock coal and rare-earth excavation, the air never had a chance to clear ... the entire valley and everything in it were slowly scorching, all the rubber and plastic and alloys ... all the rotting food and garbage, the welling pools of human and animal wastes, such that in the end it was as though the people themselves were burning, as if from the inside. (17)

A fell land from whence immigrants arrived en masse, along with an illness subliminally associated with them, namely, the C-illness that contaminates all people in the New World! Despite the historical similarity to European settlement and the decimation of Native Americans, this enacts xenophobia in the twenty-first century: the Other’s bad, tainted blood gushing from the source of a wasteland into the healthy bloodstream of America.

Indeed, the logic of contamination from New China to, by corollary, New China, has been firmly constituted in the public mind through SARS, avian flu, cyberattacks of hacking and viruses allegedly from the PRC, the destabilizing of the South China Sea and neighboring regions, and dramatized by Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) showing both a global pandemic spreading out of the filth and offal of Southern China and the filthy money of Macau casinos. Lee’s petite Chinese-looking protagonist Fan lives in a grow facility in B-Mor, or Baltimore, which once had “harbor waters ... as clean and fresh as our facility fish tanks and bristling with millions of sweet-fleshed blue crabs” (190). The only antidote for pollution by bad blood is the good, clean blood of what is authentically American, just like the old Baltimore: Soderbergh’s all-American-looking Matt Damon character has Immunity; or Fan’s boyfriend Reg, with his skin “the color of a smooth river stone, though one that’s lighter than those around it, a wheat-brown, buttery hue” and “kinky head of hair” (6), subsequently changed to “Afro-style hair” (66). This elaborate coding of race points to Reg’s African American background, a person of color deemed a useless, lackadaisical piece of rag, a happy-go-lucky grower of vegetables, until his C-free blood results in his disappearance, yet another laboratory guinea pig in the elites’ medical research to combat the “C-fated life” (111).

With his deft hand, Lee flirts with race, first dismissing and blurring racial origins in a dystopia seemingly dominated by class, reflecting the widening gap between rich and poor in China and in the USA. But race keeps like aged wine in the ethnic-oriented Lee’s new bottle of sci-fi; Lee constantly evokes race as the powerful undercurrent moving the
eponymous full sea. Blood becomes a primordial trope for racial identity as Lee privileges a biological, genetic essentialist, determinist interpretation of “[h]ow indelible, blood” (76) and “that insoluble blend of blood” (87). Blood or race is not only “indelible,” but “insoluble,” hence beyond blending, as if Fan’s Asian lineage shows through in her near-mythical will power and physical stamina popularized by kung fu chopsocky films. Lee even takes it to the extreme of attributing physical traits to people of Asian descent. B-Mor elder Uncle Gordon claims that “we were descended from Old China royals because of the rounded shape of our earlobes” (190), confirmed again by “the way their thumbs turned a little too far inward,” a sign of “true kin” (320). Such passages have the odious ring of nineteenth-century colonial physiognomy and craniometry.

Collectively, Fan’s B-Mor and all work facilities residents are presented as hard-working, Asian-inflected red blood cells in a network of blood vessels carrying oxygen and nutrients to the heart, or rather the head of the Charter villages, crisscrossing the wide expanse of wilderness of open Counties. Yet all living beings are drowning in a sea of C-illness, the long and malignant shadow cast by New China’s genetic mutations. The most the privileged Charters can manage is to keep the cancer-type cellular metastasis at bay a while longer through a cocktail of genetic engineering and medical protocol. Under the “auspices” of New China, the authority figures in the “gated communities” of affluent Charters and the Darwinian, man-eat-man Counties turn out to be white. These so-called open Counties are jungles very much caged in. In that sense, even Fan’s fishery facility at B-Mor, which provides foods to Charters, raises not just fish; B-Mor inhabitants themselves are a school of fish in an aquarium-like setting kept by the Charters. Fan is as much a keeper of fish as a kept fish owned by the Charters. In the Charter village Seneca, where Fan winds up in her search for the missing Reg, a moment of metafiction confronts Fan when she finds in her long-lost older brother Liwei’s home a gigantic aquarium called “the Full Sea” with “tropical fish. They looked so alive and real someone gasped … but these were artificial, if perfect” (289). Perfectly artificial, Liwei displaces his hometown of B-Mor into an artificial perfection.

To illustrate the white masters of Charters, one immediately thinks of Mister Leo—Master Lion, so to speak—a pedophile who has molested at least seven Asian girls, the alpha lion with his pride. Even Fan’s brother, Liwei or Oliver, is a whitened, thoroughly assimilated Charter member.
Based on eugenics, talented children like Liwei are adopted at an early age into Charters. Within the same family from China, Fan excels in physical prowess, Liwei in mental intelligence. Fan remains loyal to Reg and inspires B-Mor, yet Liwei comes to betray his own flesh and blood—a split good versus bad China. Killing two birds with one stone, Liwei’s nostalgia for his B-Mor home’s “Lion-head knocker” (297) not only opens the door to classical Chinese architecture, supposedly his past, but also renders him leonine like Leo, which is his present and future. That Liwei would turn over to a pharmaceutical conglomerate his own sister, who is pregnant with Reg’s child, another C-free candidate, suggests that he preys on his own kind, as if his namesake, Oliver Twist the orphan, had hardened into Fagin the keeper and exploiter of the orphan gang in Dickens’ 1837 novel. In addition, leading characters in the Counties, Quig and Mr. Nickelman, both white, used to be Charter stalwarts until their expulsions. A one-time Charters veteran, whose thriving practice went under in an animal epidemic threatening to jump species to humans, like SARS, Quig plies his erstwhile trade on household pets among the Counties’ human animals. Nickelman presides over a troupe of acrobats and cannibals, a patriarch of freaks and monsters. The chain of command seems to run from an absent New China and its omnipresent C-illness to white masters consuming the innocent, including their own children.

Blatant racial stereotypes against both Asians and whites, as well as potential criticism of sinophobia, are counterbalanced by Lee’s Asian American panethnicity and positive sinophilia. The novel is strewn with Asian racial and cultural markers, particularly foodstuffs, physical traits, and behavior patterns: xiāng-cháng (sausage, complete with italicization and diacritics 43); “snow-pea shoots,” “scallion fritters,” “bubble fruit teas” (50); “lychee smoothie” (62); “boiled peanuts” (68); “jajang noodles” (271); and “dduk” (Korean rice cake 232). While the last two are distinctly Korean, the array of popular foods springs from contemporary pan-Asian American culture. Characters even expectorate in public, as in China (63), while Fan exhibits Asian table manners (87). Graphically, each chapter starts with a drawing of Oriental koi or carp.

In terms of sinophilia, Lee attributes B-Mor’s “work- and family-centric culture intact” to New China’s legacy (19). Asian workers are conscientious, good with their hands, like the proverbial East Asian worker drones from postwar Japan’s economic miracle, to the cold war’s four mini-dragons, to the new millennium’s China. The heroine of near
kung fu mystique, Fan combines the Asian stereotype of being petite yet with superhuman prowess and endurance: “At sixteen she had the stature of a girl of eleven or twelve … possess a special perspective that one might automatically call ‘wisdom’ but is perhaps more a kind of timelessness of view” (3). Neither “wisdom” nor “timelessness of view” is concrete and tangible, which contributes to Fan’s charisma. In Mister Leo’s clutches, Fan encounters his seven victims, manga- and anime-style kept girls with eyes surgically “shaped the same way, half-moons set on the straight side, like band shells but darkened … They were all giggling now, shoulders scrunched, their high pitch cutesy and saccharine … They smelled laundered and dryer-fresh” (209). An embodiment of Japanese-inflected kawaii (cute), a girly ideal, these seven “fairies” manifest the human impulse for festive (“band shells”) happiness, even at the expense of regression and infantilization. What these girls have done to themselves—cosmetic surgery; complicit self-ghettoization; girlish, babyish even, posturing (“giggling” and “laundered”)—is, in effect, a means of self-preservation in the hope of absorbing the tremendous violence in their lives. In contrast to the youth-oriented global anime and cosplay culture, the white masters turn back time through coercion, including Mister Leo’s pedophilia and Liwei’s “deepening glow of nostalgia” while selling out Fan (317). A pushback against the inevitability of time and, specifically, the “C-fated life,” anime and manga culture helps to keep alive images of innocent childhood and prepubescence. A dying, decaying culture and a body fraught with the C-illness escape into fantasies of child-like freshness via the keepsakes of childhood.

Seemingly useless, the seven girls depict their traumatized lives in a series of murals in an enclosed attic “nursery.” Their art prompts action to help Fan break out and continue her search for Reg. Infantilization in manga launches metanarrative and self-reflection:

The mural was begun [that] showed One and Two [all seven girls are numbered and not named] in their much younger days, the very first scene being a pair of nightshirted girls crouched down in the corner of a room with markers in hand, dabbing at the wall, the skin of the bottoms of their feet crinkled as they knelt, the picture they were working on being the very picture of their kneeling selves but in the appropriate miniscule dimension. (215)

“Crinkled” soles and damaged souls, these violated, “nightshirted” Asian girls document their trauma through manga, exposing a part of the body
that is often veiled, like the bottom of the feet. Instead of taut, wrinkle-less skin of the young, their soles/souls bear the scars of aging, from sexual assaults and, in particular, dislocation. The murals also record “how they were separated from or lost their original families, how they came to Seneca to work in this house” (215), an allegory of Asian America having lost its ancestral land and being abused by its adoptive master in a Roman-sounding foreign land.

Blood, after all, is the inner sea, mirroring the roiling sea of humanity. Likewise, sci-fi is a mental screen, reflecting the novelist’s and the reader’s feelings. That an argument on Good China, Bad China in American fiction tilts toward the latter bodes ill for contemporary Sino-US relationships. Christopher T. Fan, in the footsteps of Stephen Hong Sohn, tries to see the positive side to “techno-Orientalism” rather than just what Sohn calls the “re-articulation and re-emergence of the yellow peril” (qtd. 3). Fan advances the notion of “US-China interdependence” by recasting McHugh’s “post-cyberpunk” as “techno-Orientalism with Chinese Characteristics” (2, 3 italics in the original). Fan sees in McHugh “emergent structures of feeling” and “new modes of representation” for “the two countries’ interdependence” (2), highlighting McHugh’s “‘soft’ authoritarianism. Daoism … indifferent authoritarianism that represents the softest possible version of Chinese hegemony” (15). Yet the suicide of Zhang’s Chinese gay partner gainsays Fan’s sanguine hypothesis. The preponderance of evidence for McHugh’s and Lee’s Bad China foreshadows a hard road ahead between the world’s two superpowers.

One way to reset for a more equitable literary and cultural relationship is to balance Western sci-fi with its Eastern counterpart, which falls outside the purview of this investigation. There is no reason why what Takayuki Tatsumi urges in “Japanese and Asian Science Fiction” should be the exclusive approach: “While Anglo-American writers undertake to create a totally different picture of the world from their Orientalist perspective, Japanese and Asian science fiction learns much from western modernization and recreates the tradition of science fiction from their Occidentalist viewpoint” (325). With his head thrust in the sci-fi cloud, Tatsumi seems impervious to the Saidian, neoimperial association of terms such as the Orient and the Occident. Rather, the sci-fi characteristic of “cognitive estrangement” conceivably expands from the self’s manipulation of the Other to how the Other actually uses sci-fi. Truly radical defamiliarization consists of seeing with the Other’s eyes, identifying with the Other, rather than, in Betsy Huang’s words, employing “the
Orient” as “the cognitive estrangement device of choice” (39). Jeffrey C. Kinkley’s *Visions of Dystopia in China’s New Historical Novels* (2015), for instance, contends that contemporary Chinese novels often meld “historical fables” with “dystopian vision,” a combination that “may seem improbable to Western readers” more accustomed to a futuristic frame (Preface ix). Fact is indeed stranger than fiction; the fact of the Other’s historical-cum-dystopic imaginary immediately calls into question the West’s imaginary of a polarized Good China, Bad China in the future. The comparative approach not only destabilizes existing, outdated paradigms but it may lead to an understanding of the confluence and overlap between the two, as it were, mutually exclusive systems.