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## Europe as façade

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### Abstract

In China, numerous buildings employ an overtly baroque style, alluding to a hyper-Europe. In the context of an intensification of nationalistic Chinese sentiments that help maintain the Chinese nation-state, Europe remains an important constitutive outside. What cultural translations from Europe to China are at stake here, when Europe is turned into a façade? Inspired by the work of Rey Chow and Michel Foucault, this article reads these façades as constitutive mirrors, both heterotopian and utopian, that open up possibilities to rethink the notion of culture and its geopolitical manifestations. To analyse the imagination of Europe in such models, websites of real estate developers are analysed, showing how for them, Europe is a fantasy to capitalise on, signifying craftsmanship and a pastoral and rich and full life. In contrast, the artwork *Mirage City* by Amsterdam-based artist Meiya Lin questions the presence and perpetual multiplication of a hyper-Europe in today's China. In the final part of this article the author reflects upon the ways in which the presence of Europe in China interpellates him.

### Keywords

Architecture, China, Chinese art, Europe, globalisation, translation, urbanity

When strolling through Beijing, one notices how Europe, or certain versions of Europe, continue to play an important role in reshaping the cityscape. European buildings in Beijing have always fascinated me. The golden statue of horses in front of what looked like a small European palace made me laugh years ago (see Figure 1). Feeling interpellated as a 'European', I was confronted with a hyper-Europe that is as alienating as it is exotic to me. This laughter signifies a possible moment of criticality, but also may betray a problematic sense of superiority. Beyond that laughter, there are other questions looming: watching the golden horses felt like looking into a mirror, and to be puzzled by its reflection. Is this Europe? Is this part of 'my' culture – but where am I? What triggers this

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**Figure 1.** Europe in Beijing.

reflex to think of ‘my’ culture? Furthermore, whose gaze conjures up what kind of interpretation or reflex, how come these baroque palaces are so popular here? How to make sense of these occidentalistic appropriations of Europe, of these numerous buildings that employ an overtly baroque style alluding to a hyper-Europe (Hassenpflug, 2010)? Rather than witnessing a Europe-as-power, or a Europe-as-theory, what I witness here is a Europe-as-façade, a surface that betrays any suggestion of depth and substance. To grasp this Europe-as-façade, it is crucial to engage with the emergence of a Chinese nationalism over the past decade that needs its cultural others to construct itself.

In today’s China, nationalistic sentiments are central for the management of the nation-state (Callahan, 2012; de Kloet et al., 2008). Over the past two decades the trope of ‘the people’ has been replaced by the trope of ‘the Chinese’. In his analysis of the soft power policies of the Chinese nation-state, in which the management of memory plays a pivotal role, Callahan quotes a Chinese official. While reflecting upon the importance of the Beijing Olympics, the official states that it ‘sent one clear message that the Chinese people act according to their own mode of conduct and will not succumb to any alleged superior Western values’ (Callahan, 2012: 6). A recent survey gives evidence that nationalism is gaining importance among the middle class in China, thus empirically underlining ‘that Chinese nationalism is on the rise and constitutes a populist, mass movement rather than a product of official policy’ (Hoffman, 2012). However, it seems more to the point to claim that *both* the state as well as the citizenry increasingly are committed to a revamped Chinese nationalism, one that reached its performative peak during the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai Expo. Nevertheless – or, I would rather claim, due to – this rise of nationalist sentiments, Europe remains an important constitutive outside. After all, we need others as to construct the idea of a self. Yet, nationalist ideologies tend ‘to reject the constitutive “otherness” as the source of all

culture' (Benhabib, 2002: 8), as we can read in the quote from the Chinese official. As Seyla Benhabib argues convincingly, contrary to such closed and bounded views on (national) culture, we should 'view human cultures as constant creations, recreations, and negotiations of imaginary boundaries between "we" and the "other(s)." The "other" is always also within us and is one of us' (2002: 8). In this article I will probe into this complex entanglement between self and other, and between China and Europe, through the prism of real estate development in relation to three different actors: property sellers in China, a diasporic Chinese artist and myself. These three actors are all, albeit differently, entangled with both 'China' as well as 'Europe', they all engage with a certain presence of Europe in China, and thus provide different entry points to unpack that presence, and thereby to unpack Europe-as-façade.

My amusement about the European façades tilts towards a closed view on culture, by reading such translations as a betrayal of what constitutes the real Europe. Following the earlier understandings of Benhabib, and inspired by Rey Chow (1995, 2002), I will argue how such a view denies the impurity of culture, and instead reifies geopolitical boundaries as East versus West. Drawing on the idea of translation, we may do better by taking the betrayals that take place in the process of cultural translation more seriously, which also implies taking my laughter seriously. I do so by reading the European façades in China, following Michel Foucault (1998[1967]), as constitutive mirrors, as places that are both real and unreal, both heterotopian and utopian. The buildings function as a mirror in which different actors see themselves reflected and refracted.

The cases selected for this study engage with real estate development: one in the form of digital representations of future homes, and one as a digital artwork that reflects upon the real estate boom in China. Real estate development constitutes one of the driving forces behind China's economic boom. In the words of Zhang and Fung, 'the development of the real estate sector has contributed considerably to the economic growth. The growth in the real estate industry accounted for 8.4 percent of the GDP growth in Shanghai, the financial capital of China' (2006: 28–29). For the up-and-coming middle class in China, the ideal and luxurious home signifies the pinnacle of successful living (Hassenpflug, 2010). It captures the utopian wish for a good life, hence utopian presentations of future homes and neighbourhoods abound in China.

Thus, it is no wonder that scale models are used abundantly. They are used in shopping malls and real estate offices as well as museums to relocate the viewers into an utopian or idealised future. Yomi Braester argues that

in post-socialist China, scale models present readymade utopia. The government seems to believe that the ideal city is made of modular pieces and that its vision is rendered incarnate in maquettes. The extensive use of scale models by Chinese developers, and especially by Chinese local government, should be understood in this light. (2013: 67)

The future is presented as a miniature fantasy, generally devoid of people, consisting of shiny sanitised surfaces. However, now, gradually, 'Plexiglas-and-Styrene models are giving way to computer-generated 3D simulations, and the digital image is fashioned as a vehicle of social transformation' (Braester, 2013: 61).

For my study on Europe-as-façade I studied websites of real estate developers in the top segment, using key terms such as ‘villa’ and ‘European living’. In total 28 sites were selected for further analysis. Some of the sites belonged to the same main site (four pages under [www.villaclub.net.cn](http://www.villaclub.net.cn), and nine pages under [www.soufun.com](http://www.soufun.com)). Both the images as well as the text on the websites were analysed. As this is exploratory research, its aim is not to analyse the workings of these websites or to engage with their medium specificity; instead, its aim is to trace what imaginations of the idea of ‘Europe’ are mobilised. What happens when Greek pillars, Roman statues and baroque decorations infiltrate the imagining of an alleged upcoming global superpower that so eagerly claims Chineseness?

In his writings on scale models, Braester analyses the artworks of different artists, Jia Zhangke, Zhong Kangjun and Cao Fei, all of whom use material or digital scale models to present a more dystopian view of the future of China. These are works that, in his view, ‘visualise the future city as a spectacle that both depends on its encapsulation in model-like form, and acknowledges its inherent inviability’ (Braester, 2013: 61). Inspired by his study, in this article I will supplement my analysis of the real estate websites with the work, *Mirage City*, by the diasporic artist Meiya Lin. She reflects in her digital artwork on the abundant use of scale models in China. Unlike the artists that Braester analyses, she also engages with the presence of Europe in urban development in China, which explains my choice for her work. Her diasporic condition complicates her cultural entanglements, which allows me in the analysis to reflect further upon the complexity of cultural translation. Like the works analysed by Braester, Lin’s work presents a quite dystopian view on urban change in China. Whereas the real estate developer is laughing *with* capitalism, mirroring a utopian Europe, I will show how Lin is laughing *at* capitalism, mirroring a dystopian and fragmented Europe. In the final part of this article I will reflect upon the ways in which the presence of Europe in China interpellates me, and try to make sense of my laughter, as well as of the mirror in which I see myself reflected.

## Betrayal and heterotopia

A façade is a surface, it defies the idea of depth. It often has negative connotations, as if it is not real, fake or superficial. The European façades we come across in Beijing do something more paradoxical: although they are merely façades, they do hint at a sense of depth, an idea of culture and history. To critique this as a superficial appropriation and copy of Europe, and thereby suggesting that a deep cultural understanding of Europe is required, is highly problematic. Such a position, which may well have instigated my initial laughter, harks back to claims on cultural knowledge, depth and uniqueness. This sounds a bit too familiar to my ears: it is what I heard from Dutch audiences when working on Chinese rock music: this is not Chinese! We all know this already! This is *only* a copy (de Kloet, 2010).

It is this spectre of cultural authenticity, linked to a denial of coevalness (Fabian, 1983) that continues to haunt cultural production in China, as well as the non-West in general, and that sets the stage for this article. A spectre that is equally present in China itself, until today, many Chinese artists are accused by their fellow Chinese of betraying Chinese culture, for selling out by producing imageries that are only meant to appeal to

the West. Imageries that, so it is claimed, either employ cheap Orientalistic kitsch aesthetics (for example, the cinema of Zhang Yimou, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Hero*) or deliberately capitalise on sensitive topics such as gay rights and political protest (think of Zhang Yuan's *Beijing Bastards* and *East Palace West Palace*, and Lou Ye's *Summer Palace*) (Barmé, 1999) – since that is what sells to the West. The violence inherent in such a critique – a violence towards the artists who are accused of insincerity and betrayal, as well as towards the works themselves, whose complexity is reduced to a singular message – too often remains unquestioned.

This is a cultural impasse: when Chinese use western styles, they are bound to be critiqued for lacking the required cultural knowledge, both by western as well as by Chinese academics, critics and artists. When they employ Chinese characteristics, or refer to politically sensitive themes, then – themes, they are often labelled by the same people as a cheap sell-out to the West and a betrayal of alleged Chinese values. This discourse of betrayal is amazingly persistent. Back in 1995, Rey Chow, in *Primitive Passions*, argued against the critique among Chinese on cultural betrayal:

What such zealous charges accomplish is not exactly the preservation of the ethnic culture as such but often an unwitting complicity in perpetuating the deadlock of the anthropological situation. The Euro-American homogenization of the world is then steadily polarized against an equally overwhelming attempt on the part of some 'natives' and nativists to hold on to 'tradition' even as tradition is disintegrating. Instead of enabling alternatives to the deadlock, nativist demands of cultural 'fidelity' have great potential of becoming prohibitive deterrents against cultural translation altogether. (Chow, 1995: 178–179)

In the end, such narratives of cultural authenticity and betrayal that underpin the cultural impasse serve mainly to keep dichotomies stable and fixed. The West remains the West, just as the East remains the East – and with them the implied cultural and geopolitical hierarchies are reified once again. People will remain fixed in their place. In the context of ethnic studies, Rey Chow refers to this as coercive mimeticism that works as 'an institutionalized mechanism of knowledge production and dissemination, the point of which is to manage a non-Western ethnicity through the disciplinary promulgation of the supposed difference' (2002: 124).

In the nearly two decades that have passed since Chow's text was published, the geopolitical conjuncture has changed dramatically. Now China is on the rise in terms of economy, while less so in terms of culture, whereas the West may well be in its demise. The roles seem to be reversed. Did my laughter mirror the nativist critique, claiming that 'they' do not understand the 'real Europe', that 'they' betray 'my culture'? Did my laughter express a discomfort, if not anxiety, about this reversal of roles, as it is the West that is now anthropologised, exoticised and occidentalised – reflecting global geopolitical shifts in power? In this article I will argue differently, and point at the possibilities that such grotesque cultural translations offer, in order to rethink the notion of culture and its geopolitical manifestations.

Witnessing European façades in China, I start to understand that I feel like looking into a mirror; I see a culture that is supposed to be mine, yet it is not. I find the metaphor of the mirror an important one, as it helps to probe further into the façade of Europe in

China. This brings me not, as may be expected, to Jacques Lacan, but rather to Michel Foucault's text *Different Spaces* (1998[1967]) on heterotopia of 1967. There, he refers to the mirror as both a utopian as well as a heterotopian space. This combination of the unreal or utopian, and the real and actual or heterotopian, neatly reflects the viewing experience, as what we see in Beijing are leftovers of Europe, but of a Europe that has never been. Foucault writes:

The mirror is a utopia after all, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent – a mirror utopia. But it is also a heterotopia in that the mirror really exists, in that it has a sort of return effect on the place that I occupy. (Foucault, 1998[1967]: 179)

The European façades mirror a Europe that is both utopian as well as heterotopian, both real and unreal. Heterotopian are the places which are a kind of:

actually realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable. (Foucault, 1998[1967]: 178)

Rather than dismissing these buildings as bad copies of the real, it makes more sense to try to understand what imaginations are at work here, and how these may be translated back to Europe itself. Moreover, rather than critiquing my laughter as silly or condescending, it may make more sense to take it seriously.

What strikes me in this quote from Foucault is his linking of real, actual places – which, after all, is what the European buildings in China are – to utopian, unreal spaces, which is what they also are. Appropriating Foucault, while we watch Europe in China, we see ourselves reflected and refracted in a place where we are not, we face a shadow of ourselves. It forces us to reconstitute ourselves, it makes our place in front of the mirror absolutely real. This begs the question: who is looking in the mirror? Whose gaze are we discussing? What does he/she see in its reflection? What kind of laughter is prompted here, if any at all? In this article I will scrutinise three subject positions: the real estate developer, the 'diasporic Chinese' artist and the European author of this article.<sup>1</sup>

## Imagining Venice in Beijing

To grasp the real estate developer's imagination of Europe, I analysed a total of 28 websites that try to sell European-style buildings. These are usually located at the fringes of the city. These European buildings, or better, villas, are scattered all over Beijing as well as China. They are not plain and inconspicuous buildings; on the contrary, they reinvent what may be termed a hyper-Europe, a Europe that is more European than Europe itself. To paraphrase Eco, the Chinese imagination demands the real Europe and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake (see Kooijman, 2008). This absolute fake version of

Europe is saturated with romance, leisure and luxury. It is quintessentially exotic: Europe serves as the Other that promises leisure and offers an escape from everyday China. Some of these buildings 'are so "exotic" that they do not belong to any single American, French or Dutch style, but rather display a melange of Western architectural motifs. They bear fantasy Western place names such as Orange County and Venice garden, but in fact they are imagined forms of the West' (Wu, 2006: 6). The pictures as well as the descriptions conjure up a dream-like occident, saturated with luxury, slowness and natural surroundings. All this is built according to strict rules with authentic materials. As we can read on the website that promotes a western-style villa:

The villa buildings have a Tuscany handmade artistic character. The Italian stucco wall is made in 13 working procedures. The handmade European ironwork and the tiles of purple Stoneware show the Mediterranean style. There is a 5-level view, private garden, the corridor protects against rain and wind, and there are the living room and one-step belvedere in the villa. You can enjoy a rich, full life here, for example, tasting mild wine and bread with olive oil, seeing a butterfly standing on the desk covered by linen and beautiful flowers and trees, while enjoying the bright sunshine. (The Villa Club, 2011)

Here we see articulations of three different discourses. First, a discourse of craftsmanship, which stresses the handmade, complex ways in which all materials are made. Second, a pastoral discourse, conjuring up images of an idyllic countryside with lavish natural scenes. Third, a discourse of a rich and full life, where 'rich' refers to both its literal as well as metaphoric meanings. In the description of the Bamolouso villa we see how the discourse of craftsmanship is connected to that of the pastoral discourse:

Bamoluosuo villa is developed following a group form style. And every group has its own underground garage. The villa buildings combine Spanish and Tuscan style, they try to create the comfortable and romantic room with double-colour brick and cultured stone. Natural lines are abundantly used ... No matter where you have a seat, on the broad platform that is made of logs, or on the bridge and the stone, you will be touched by the romantic and gorgeous view in front of you. (*The Soufun*, nd, b)

The accompanying images represent similar grandiose fantasies: we see luxurious villas surrounded by nature, all signifying a lifestyle that takes place outside the city and work (Figure 2).

The quotes smack of occidental exoticism, with references to olive oil, bread and wine – not regular items in a Chinese diet. The discourse of craftsmanship, stressing the materials used and their complex working procedures, is mobilised to safeguard the authenticity of the buildings and thus claim that it concerns a highly approximate translation from Europe to China here. The pastoral discourse, articulated through gardens, magnificent views and clean air, further strengthens this occidental imagination, bringing nature to one's lifestyle and making one forget the city:

The garden in Moorish style has the simple European characteristic, absorbing the core designing idea of the royal European garden. Various surrounding elements add radiance and





**Figure 2.** The Bamolouso villa.

Source: <http://zt.soufun.com/zt/201012/yuanyangaobei.html>, The Soufun (nd, b).

beauty to each other, being both exquisite and harmonious. When you stand on your balcony, you can enjoy all the beautiful and lifelike view around the building. (*The Shdyfctgw*, nd)

It is all about having a ‘graceful, human and peaceful’ life. ‘The aim of the whole design tries to blend the buildings’ environment with life perfectly, and shows that the buildings will change with life’ (see Haozhai, 2009). In the end, all these sites promote a lifestyle of abundance and luxury, where one owns two cars and has servants that have their own designated rooms in the villa. It is a lifestyle targeted at the new rich, or better, the aristocrats of China:

The villa is designed in classicism style, which is classic, plain and in the heritage of classic soul. In addition, the buildings mix the modern elements with the Victorian and European style. That makes the whole building more perfect ... The buildings’ structure and function reflect the Humanistic Spirit. There are separate rooms, separate drawing rooms, separate Chinese and western kitchen, the special passway for servants, the big garage space for two cars, doubled-stairs designed for 400-square meter houses, the two principal bedrooms, making the hosts feel more comfortable and convenient. (House.focus, 2013)

The European-style shopping arcades and western restaurants form a stylish international social circle. Elite international schools and international exhibition centres cultivate a strong sense of international culture and humanity. The golf club and the horse-riding club here reflect the natural noble life-style ... The buildings are designed following the French, Italian and Spanish architectural styles. You will feel the exotic culture. (*The Soufun*, ‘akdyyxbs’, nd, a)

This imagination of Europe in China comes from a real estate developer who anticipates the fantasies of the rising upper class. Europe serves as a pastoral utopia, one that is clearly fenced off from a reality in China in which migrant workers, pollution and abuse of labour are all rendered invisible. What is rendered visible is the luxury of Europe in

China. This is, of course, a marketing trick, it helps to set these buildings apart from other projects. It is interesting to note that the middle class compounds in the city that make use of modern high-rise building are alluding to the USA rather than Europe, with names such as MOMA and SOHO. '[T]he façade play of old European cities is viewed as exotic by the Chinese and therefore as a possible means for producing social distinction' (Hassenpflug, 2010: 85). Europe seems reserved for the upper class, the potential buyers for whom these villas are built, one which has apparently aristocratic traits that help distinguish them from the up-and-coming middle classes. It is this class that plays golf, owns two cars and has servants.

Europe stands for craftsmanship, a pastoral utopia and a rich and full life. For the real estate developer, these imaginations are translated into a marketing tool, a grotesque fantasy about abundant luxury for the new aristocrats of China. The real estate developer laughs with the façade of Europe. It is, above all, a capitalistic laughter. In this case the mirror is coloured by China's hyper-capitalist economy. The real estate sector is quite possibly China's most capitalist sector, driven by speculation and limitless growth (Zhang and Fung, 2006); it is also the sector that is haunted by corruption scandals continuously. In particular, villas reflect the need to buy property and consume. The villa conjures up fantasies of a suburban lifestyle, as King and Kusno write, with 'a form of (sub)urbanism that, in its characteristic American or Australian version, is intimately tied to individualized patterns of property ownership and consumption' (2000: 55). It is a mirror that reflects a utopia of consumption, speculation and limitless growth, one that is materialised in absolute fake images of the real Europe – that space outside reality, of tranquillity, nature and peace. However, as testified by the popularity of European imageries, not just in the suburbs but also in the city, more is at stake here. It also mirrors the ideal home in the eyes of many Chinese, tapping into a desire and imagination in which Europe enables a space that is part and parcel of global capitalism, yet presents the illusion that it is located outside of it by referencing a pastoral royal lifestyle. How to dislodge such fantasies of Europe from the real estate workings of capitalism?

## Façades and mirages

The fantastical Europe as presented by real estate developers – the Europe of abundance – is replaced by a viral Europe by Amsterdam-based artist Meiya Lin. While living abroad, she faces a sense of alienation when she returns to China and witnesses the urban changes taking place. The miraculous speed of these changes, coupled with their spectacular aesthetics, turn China more into an architectural playground or theme park rather than an actual, real place. The mirror she sees is one not only of speculation and growth, but also of alienation, distress and despair combined with bewilderment and amusement. Indeed, the pot-pourri of styles that she encounters makes her laugh too, not *with* but rather *at* capitalism.

In her video work *Mirage City*, Lin questions the presence and perpetual multiplication of hyper-Europe in today's China.<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, the word 'mirage' can be traced back to 'mirror' as well as 'to admire' – a double meaning that resonates with the heterotopian and the utopian, respectively. What is mirrored exactly, when we observe the



**Figure 3.** The Europe-style buildings that inspired Mirage City.  
Source: [www.meiyalin.com](http://www.meiyalin.com), reproduced with permission from Meiya Lin.

façade of Europe that infiltrates the Chinese cityscape? What is admired? What is envied? In the text accompanying her work, Lin states:

The powerful images of the new cities caught my attention. It is stimulating to see the buildings that consisted of western, eastern, ancient and modern elements. The designs are reckless. It seems that the oriental and occidental ideas were shallowly mixed together without sophisticated plans. It could either be the propaganda behaviour of the real estate agent or a crackpot thought from a peasant after he got rich. However, these buildings seem to represent a certain level of aesthetic agreement that urban dwellers enjoy. As a sign of modernization, this particular art form has been widely adapted and massively spread. Like a fierce beast, it effectively devours other existent old architectures. (*Meiyalin.com*)

Her reference to shallowness runs the danger of a nativist critique that insists on cultural purity, as discussed earlier. But there is much more to her work than a mere accusation, as she also recognises that the buildings do serve a purpose, that urban dwellers do appreciate their design. She refers not so much to the extravagant villas as analysed earlier, but more to the pastiche buildings that pop up all over China, in particular in the second and third tier cities (Figure 3).

She continues to explain:

In the research on people's ideal homes, it appears that this specific phenomenon of modernization is related to time. Under the rapid speed of development, most people don't have



**Figure 4.** Still from *Mirage City*.  
Reproduced with permission from Meiya Lin.



**Figure 5.** Still from *Mirage City*.  
Reproduced with permission from Meiya Lin.

time to visualize even the near future, they live in the present tense. If they could own a house located in a community like Venice and then walk ten minutes away to Beijing Hutong for shops and food. Then it won't bother them whether it obeys the culture rules or whatsoever. (*Meiyalin.com*)

In this alleged disobedience towards what Lin terms 'cultural rules', we can read a rather fixed and essentialist idea of culture, as if either Venice or Beijing operates by univocal cultural rules. Instead, I like to point at the subversive power that these building potentially have: they ignore origins and traditions, they simply cut and paste together what are believed to be intrinsic cultural styles, not to create a postmodern pastiche, but rather to betray the notion of culture itself. They are material manifestations of Benhabib's claim that the other is already within us.

In her work, Lin recreates European-style urban environments in a virtual reality. The work consists of three chapters and lasts in total 7.33 minutes. The first chapter starts with old factory buildings that are eaten away by numerous more 'modern' buildings, all-white villas in a similar style (Figures 4 and 5). The villas move and shake, as if they have a life of their own, eagerly procreating. The music score is a mix between relaxing



**Figure 6.** Still from *Mirage City*.  
Reproduced with permission from Meiya Lin.



**Figure 7.** Still from *Mirage City*.  
Reproduced with permission from Meiya Lin.

lounge music and, when the buildings start to multiply, more frantic electronic sounds and noises. At the end of this chapter, fences are erected around the villas to ward them off from the outside world.

The second chapter shows how in this newly-erected villa suburb, a high structure is built that looks like a hybrid between a temple and a high-rise building. Here the music is more lounge-like, evoking a serene atmosphere. It seems as if the high-rise temple serves as the new object of worship in a time of real estate capitalism (see Figure 6). In the third and final chapter the factories return, this time to be snatched away by different types of building, all of which consist of a bizarre pot-pourri of architectures styles in which Chinese pagodas and Greek pillars are cheerfully mixed together. At a certain moment, the movement stops, floors are frozen into the air, as are roofs and empty rooms. The music turns more chilling at this point; it is as if the viral spread of urbanity is

temporarily put on hold, that we witness a moment of awareness of its frantic speed and destructive implications – but then the process moves on, even more rapidly than before. From that moment on, the rebuilding goes truly viral, with the music becoming increasingly edgy; we witness how the buildings multiply endlessly, as if they have a life on their own. At amazing speed the city expands until we are witnessing an endless sea of multiplied buildings that have spread like a virus over the cityscape. Europe has turned viral in this work (Figure 7), but it is a Europe devoid of people: all that lives, moves and procreates are buildings, there are no people to be seen. This eerie emptiness strengthens the impression that these buildings are like a façade, that what lurks behind them is a void, a dystopia, that these are the contemporary ruins of global capitalism.

The work of Meiya Lin serves as a critical intervention in the architectural policies that underpin the rise of mega-cities in China. China is experiencing a fully-fledged urban revolution (Braester, 2010; Ren, 2011; Visser, 2010). Her utopia is a dystopia, the heterotopian place is a viral place that multiplies itself endlessly and, above all, relentlessly destroys everything that is in its way. The mirror interpellates the overseas artist who returns to her home country and is confronted with her own sense of alienation. The grotesque processes of urbanisation, further amplified by a climate of speculation and rapid accumulation of wealth, propels a work that critiques the present yet refuses to romanticise the past. It questions the unprecedented growth of urban areas in China and critiques its aesthetics, but the critique is at the same time lighthearted: the buildings move and shake cheerfully along with the music, the work also bespeaks bewilderment and amusement. As mentioned previously, Lin's laughter is related to that amusement, and through it she laughs at capitalism rather than with it, as did the real estate developer.

Lin's critique is urgent and valid, yet does not quite correspond to the reflection of the mirror that I encounter when strolling through the streets of Beijing. This difference testifies to the multiplicity of the translation of Europe into China; for the real-estate developer, it presents a space of speculation and romance, a signifier to market and capitalise on difference and prosperity. For the diasporic artist, it is a site of alienation and amazement, a mirage city: the mirror folds back into itself, reproducing thousands of lookalikes all over China, places, districts and buildings that spread like a virus. Utopian spaces perhaps for those who want to live there, but dystopian places for those who remember a different China, not more beautiful – they are not nostalgic old *hutongs* (the neighbourhoods in Beijing that are facing constant danger of demolition), but grey factories that are disappearing in the work after all – but seemingly less bizarre, less strange and more familiar.

## Occidentalism and its discontents

My laughter may have been triggered by a dubious sense of cultural superiority, based on a nativist stance. However, the laughter does more: it points at the urgency to develop a critique of occidentalism – not to arrive at a true representation of Europe, but rather to explore other and more productive translations and betrayals of Europe. Europe in China presents a heterotopian place, these are actual places in which the contradictions in a society come together. For the real estate developer it helps

to produce a perfect home for the privileged few in this capitalistic world, the true aristocrats of our time, an imaginary place carved out exclusively and luxuriously in China by mobilising Europe. The European façades in Meiya Lin's animated works are colourful, lively and multiplying, but flat and superficial, constantly mutating and replicating themselves. Meiya Lin's mirage city is peopleless, and Europe goes viral in China, which is observed as worrisome and apocalyptic, thus offering a fearful critique of capitalism. My own position is more ambivalent. I wonder: how to put the occidentalist imageries to productive use?

Whereas the imagination of the real estate developer resembles the ideological workings of scale models – that is, presenting a sanitised utopian future for the Chinese in which Europe is appropriated as an upper-class lifestyle – the work of Meiya Lin inverts this into a lighthearted dystopia. The rise of China becomes dangerous in her work, a viral process that relentlessly sweeps away the building blocks of China, the factories that are subsequently replaced by a bizarre mix of architectural styles that live a life on their own, pushing away any signs of human life. The viral mutations of the façade of Europe contest a celebrated Chinese nationalism.

A commodified occidentalism drives the construction and building of Europe in China. The geopolitical changes taking place in the world today do not render Said's critique of orientalism less urgent – on the contrary; but this critique increasingly needs to be complemented by a critique of occidentalism (Buruma and Margalit, 2004; Chen, 2002). The power differences inscribed in East/West binaries may be less stable or fixed than we thought: the presence of Europe in China exemplifies the global commodification of culture, it shows how real estate developers and city planners in China literally capitalise on cultural difference; how culture and, in particular, specific imaginations of culture, are transformed into *renminbi* – the people's money – even though, as the work of Meiya Lin has shown, the people by and large are missing in this project.

This occidentalism is linked to temporality: what we see are images of the old, an old that is firmly located in the here and now. This, in turn, also opens up the possibility to give a more positive, utopian twist to the presence of Europe in China. The relation to the mirror is foremost a relation of temporality with 'Europe being experienced not exactly spatially (as a chartable geographical location) but much more as a memory, a cluster of lingering ideological and emotional effects whose force takes the form of a lived historical violation' (Chow, 2006: 89). However, here it is not so much a violation but a memory of a Europe that has never been. Instead, Europe operates as a possibility, a site, a space and a moment both inside as well as outside of the city. The buildings play havoc with the hegemony of Eurochronology, to use Appadurai: what we have is a 'nostalgia without memory ... The past is now not a land to return to in a simple politics of memory. It has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios' (Appadurai, 1996: 30).

Indeed, when all the façades serve to mirror a Europe that has never been – in other words, a Europe that is as absolutely real as it is absolutely fake – what we may see is the possibility not of the old, be it Chinese or European, but of a new and better world. For example, the temporality proposed here is not just hinting at the past, but also at a reduction of speed (see Parkins and Craig, 2006). Thus the mirror offers the hope of a slowing

down, a reduction of speed in a context in which speed is of paramount importance. Speed may well be considered one of the defining characteristics of Beijing: the speed of economic change, the speed with which the cityscape changes (Wu, 2006) and the new trends that make people run from party to bar and festival. This culture of haste, competition and excess proves in particular exhaustive and demanding for the 1980s generation in China (the *balinghou*) (see de Kloet, 2010). What Europe offers, then, in a baroque and cheerfully superficial way, is the hope for slowness, a reduction of speed. This hope is now mapped onto the lifestyle of the upper class, of the new aristocracy; it comes with clear and explicit exclusionary tactics. Thus the critical question becomes how this hope for slowness, this halt to the culture of speed that drives China today, can be democratised; how Europe can serve as the utopian space to mobilise a culture of slowness.

Furthermore, in terms of space we see a return to the idyllic, the pastoral, rather than the hyper-urban. Europe becomes a site not just to articulate slowness, but also to express a desire for a 'natural' lifestyle. Again, as it is framed now, this is an upper-class, highly exclusive idyll: one that, as Meiya Lin's work shows, is endlessly replicated and as such, quickly morphs into a concrete rather than pastoral jungle. However, what if we take the utopian desire for nature, clean air, a more ecological and sustainable mode of living a bit more seriously? What if we take them as actual possibilities of living, as ways of organising life and the urban environment differently? One that is articulated not by global star architects for whom China is just another postmodern playground (Ren, 2011), but instead envisioned by a specific imagining of Europe, a superficial translation of Europe, a translation that does not point at the violence that made Europe what it is, but more as a site to hope for a different style of living?

My gaze was deeply cynical at first, then hesitant and finally engaging with the mirror/façades, by seeing Europe, perhaps like some Chinese – that is, the real estate developers and their potential customers – as the idealised version, the Europe that has never been. Instead of witnessing how the real estate developers, the market economy, appropriate such an idealised Europe to their advantage, I also try to insist that such façades do have depths, to insist that the longings mounting up these façades are possible for the construction of a new and better world that is neither China or Europe. Or, to use the metaphor of mirror, I see the mirrors as surfaces of tension between the actual and the virtual, thus as surfaces of possibilities. I share Meiya Lin's critique of ruthless, dehumanising capitalism, but instead of my incipient cynicism and hesitation, I remind myself to take such façades of perfect homes, such mirrors of longing, seriously. I end up looking after not only a Europe, but a possible world that has never been. This is to recuperate the politics from the economics of these real estate projects.

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## Notes

1. The reason to put ‘diasporic Chinese’ in quotation marks reflects my unease with this label. Whereas artists such as Marlene Dumas or Lucian Freud generally would be taken as individuals, artists from the non-West are haunted by a specific (national) culture.
2. For the work of Meiya Lin, including her video *Mirage City*, see [www.meiyalin.com](http://www.meiyalin.com).

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