

Sinofuturism as Speculative Design

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ABSTRACT: The video essay *Sinofuturism* (1839–2046 AD) by artist Lawrence Lek is difficult to categorize. It is an hour-long film collaging documentaries, news clips, video games, and CGI. Most often exhibited and discussed in a (new) media art context, it has been described as a work of video art, a pseudo-documentary, and a manifesto. The work's titular ideology, Sinofuturism, has been characterized as conspiracy theory, science fiction, and "radical realism." As an architect-by-training, musician, simulation artist, and now filmmaker, Lek himself is equally difficult to pin down. Given the artist's formal training in a design discipline, it is curious that *Sinofuturism* has not yet been discussed by scholarship through the lens of design. This essay discusses *Sinofuturism* for the first time as a work of speculative design, an emerging genre of design that aims to critique and reimagine societal structures. As a work of speculative design, *Sinofuturism* pushes its viewers to re-evaluate stereotypes of Chinese society and diaspora by presenting a theory of how Chinese society operates, survives, and replicates itself around the world and into the future: be like artificial intelligence.

KEYWORDS: Sinofuturism, New Media Art, Orientalism, Speculative Fiction, Diaspora, Posthumanism

Introduction

The video essay *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* by artist Lawrence Lek is difficult to categorize. It is an hour-long film collaging documentaries, news clips, video games, and CGI. Most often exhibited and discussed in a (new) media art context, it has been described as a work of video art, a pseudo-documentary, and a manifesto. As an architect-by-training, musician, simulation artist, and now filmmaker, Lek himself is equally difficult to pin down. Given the artist's formal training in a design discipline, it is curious that *Sinofuturism* has not yet been discussed by scholarship through the lens of design.

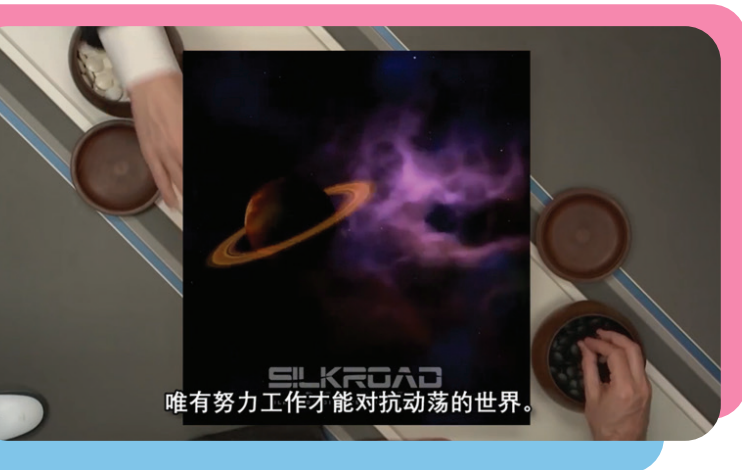


Figure 1: *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, 00:01:49.

This essay discusses *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* for the first time as a work of speculative design. First, I will introduce the work and its creator. Next, I will discuss its negative reception as a work of art, laying the basis for my central argument that analyzing *Sinofuturism* as a work of speculative design might yield more fruitful insights and discussion. I will then explore the emerging field of speculative and critical design (SCD) and its potential to critique and reimagine societal structures. Finally, I will evaluate the effectiveness of *Sinofuturism* as a work of speculative design and analyze its vision, whether it be utopian, dystopian, or something else. As a work of speculative design, *Sinofuturism* pushes its viewers to re-evaluate cultural clichés of Chinese society by presenting the outrageously plausible theory of Sinofuturism: that Chinese society is actually a form of artificial intelligence, resiliently problem-solving and adapting itself for survival throughout time and place. In doing so, *Sinofuturism*

presents a compelling metaphor of Chinese society—its diasporic communities in particular—that blurs literal and figurative interpretation, revealing cultural tendencies so taken for granted that they have rarely been articulated in seriousness. Accordingly, *Sinofuturism* has been described as “conspiracy theory,” “science fiction” (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*), and, perhaps most fittingly, “radical realism” (Rhensius).

Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)

Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD) superimposes an original transcript, narrated by a robotic text-to-speech voiceover, against a haphazardly edited pastiche of found video from the Internet. A game of Go and a dizzying CGI shot of outer space simultaneously play onscreen (fig. 1) as the narrator opens with the claim that contemporary China as “the factory of the world” is “only the latest incarnation of the Chinese work ethic,” born from an “agrarian society prone to natural disasters” and situated “within a Confucian belief system that values hard work as the only insurance against a turbulent world” (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 1:27).

“Multiple stereotypes of [China] are everywhere,” the narrator drones on as the scene transitions to shaky, blurry footage of a nondescript room, where rows of identical-looking machines are plugged into industrial metal shelving (fig. 2). The narrator continues, “Whether Chinese Olympic athletes are branded as swarms, or Chinese students or tourists are likened to swarms, or Shenzhen factory workers are criticized for flooding the marketplace, the subtext is the same: it is the dehumanization of the individual into a nameless, faceless mass” (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 1:53). The video is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a key stereotype of Chinese society: computing, copying, addiction, studying, labour, gaming, and gambling. These seven tenets make up *Sinofuturism*, the theory that what we mistake for contemporary China is actually a form of artificial intelligence—specifically, computer systems famously known for their ability to fabricate human intelligence by recognizing patterns in extensive data sets and regurgitating them (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 3:54).

Sinofuturism's creator, Lawrence Lek (born in 1982), is a multimedia artist whose practice spans simulations, installations, video games, electronic music, and other audiovisual works. He is of Malaysian-Chinese descent; was born in Germany; grew up in Singapore, Bangkok,

Hong Kong, and Osaka; and is currently living and working in London. Lek possesses an educational background in architecture that culminated in a master's degree in architecture at The Cooper Union in New York (Cheung 77). While studying architecture, Lek became fascinated with the tension in architecture between the virtual and the real—the sketch or prototype versus the real building. He became more interested in the virtual as not the means but the end product, and started exploring the narratives and first-person experiences embedded within architecture. Through the audiovisual medium of digital simulations, his work has addressed a revolving set of themes including the virtual versus the real, capitalism and the corporatization of culture, and labour and creativity in a posthuman world. Up until 2015, he experimented with site-specific simulations and installations. In 2016, he started creating *The Sinofuturist Trilogy* for which he is the most well-known: *Sinofuturism* (2016), *Geomancer* (2017), and *AIDOL* (2019). *Geomancer* and *AIDOL* are both CGI films set in near-future Singapore and Malaysia, which are populated by both AIs (artificial intelligence) and humans. In these films, he explores the boundary between AI and humanity, with the ultimate boundary being creativity. There is a group of AIs in *Geomancer* called the Sinofuturists, who are inspired by the Sinofuturist manifesto to fight against a law banning AIs from making art. The film *Sinofuturism* is this manifesto. As the first film in the trilogy, *Sinofuturism* was made as a by-product of Lek's research for *Geomancer* (Lek, "Worldbuilding for 2065 - Lawrence Lek" 58:36).

***Sinofuturism* as a Simplistic Mutation of Orientalism**

In its critical reception, *Sinofuturism* received a notable number of negative responses. These responses stemmed from an understandable wariness that Sinofuturism was yet another simplistic mutation of Orientalism that perpetuated harmful clichés. In "Chapter Three: Gaming," the narrator recites:

Edward Said's 1978 book *Orientalism* studies the cultural representations that are the basis of the West's patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of the East, the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. He argues that Orientalism, the Western scholarship about the Eastern world, was, and remains inextricably tied to, the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and servile to power and therefore intellectually suspect. (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 20:14)

And intellectually suspect indeed was *Sinofuturism* to many critics. Curator Zian Chen has described

Sinofuturism as underdeveloped and reeking of "internalized historical discrimination" in comparison to Afrofuturism, the canonical ethnofuturist genre (Chen). Chinese studies scholar Gabriele de Seta has accused Sinofuturism of the same "temporal othering" that Orientalism and techno-Orientalism have been guilty of: relegating an Eastern culture or nation to the past or to the future, but denying its agency and participation in the present (de Seta 89). Such criticisms liken Lek's Sinofuturism to a reductive narrative imposed by an outsider onto an Eastern other, even as Lek himself is a member of the Sino diaspora, and even as the Eastern other in question is in fact the Sino diaspora, as will be discussed later in this essay. To this, the narrator preemptively quips that "Said's narrative created a paradigm where 'Orientalism' has become a generalized swear word" (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 21:20).

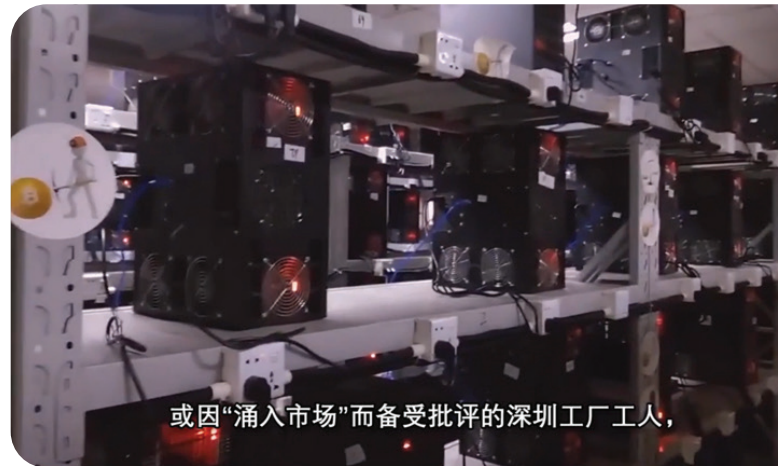


Figure 2: *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)*, 00:02:04.

The sentiments discussed in this section are best summed up by de Seta and science fiction scholar Virginia L. Conn: "Sinofuturism rehashes many established tropes of Orientalist representation," and this in itself is bad (Conn and de Seta 75). Indeed, in its ambiguity about what exactly it is trying to advocate for, *Sinofuturism* is provocative, possibly harmfully so. However, viewing *Sinofuturism* as a work of speculative design may yield a different conclusion.

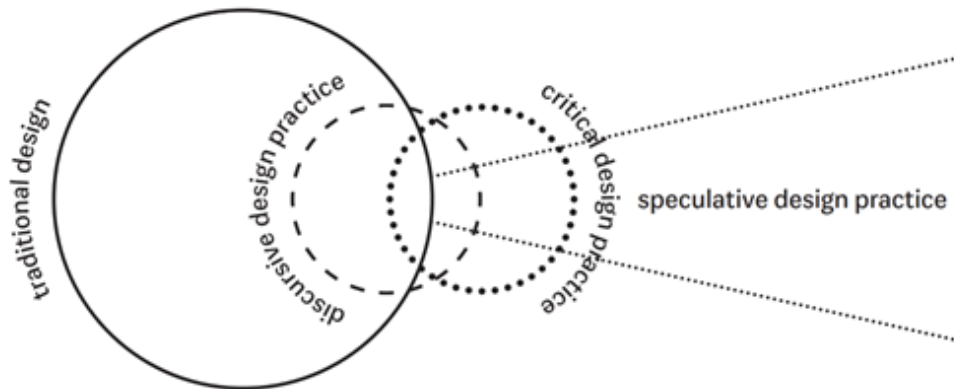


Figure 3: Relationship between traditional, critical, and speculative design. (Mitrović et al. 2021).

Speculative Design

Speculative design is part of a broader “field” of Speculative and Critical Design, or SCD. Critical design builds on traditional (i.e., commercial) design, using methods from design to critique the very systems that traditional design enables and affirms. Speculative design takes critical design one step further (fig. 3) by imagining alternative or future scenarios through the design of objects, also known as “props,” and/or narratives, which can often take similar forms as literature and film (Johannessen et al. 1628). Like the practice of storyboarding in animation, filmmaking, and product design, these objects and narratives “prototype” a scenario at a level of fidelity that makes it believable enough for an audience to engage with and debate about.

British designer Anthony Dunne coined the term “critical design” in his 1999 dissertation and the term “speculative design” along with his collaborator Fiona Raby in their seminal 2013 book *Speculative Everything* (Johannessen et al. 1625). While SCD emerges from a European context, people all over the world might be engaging in speculative design whether they know it or not (Mitrović et al. 70–71). Thus, it is entirely plausible that Lek, drawing from his designer’s toolkit and fascination with the prototype from his formal training, created *Sinofuturism* as an unintentional work of speculative design. Dunne and Raby emphasize that speculative design is not a strictly defined field or method, but an attitude or “position” a designer takes. This position is one that seeks to “emphasize ethical and societal features of design practice,” “reveal underlying agendas,” and “explore alternative values, forms, and representations” (Johannessen et al. 1624).

Sinofuturism as Speculative Design

Sinofuturism makes surprising connections between topics that seemingly have no correlation—the most obvious example being Chinese society and artificial intelligence. Rather than presenting sound evidence to support these claims of connection, *Sinofuturism* haphazardly collages together a series of found footage. Many of the clips contain biased or unreliable content such as extremist political commentary or biased documentary narratives. Many more do not convey any message, but simply provide an ambient backdrop to the eyebrow-raising statements that the voiceover spews with robotic cadence. In “Chapter Three: Gaming,” a CGI drone video displaying dizzying video-game-like manoeuvres of a to-be-developed commercial complex accompanies the following monologue: “Games are a training ground for a future reality, one where the individual will most likely perform repetitive tasks individually and in groups. Why not start young? Gaming is training” (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 17:19). (Just seconds afterwards, this argument is soured by documentary footage of teens having a hard time at an Internet addiction rehabilitation centre in China (fig. 4).) *Sinofuturism* prioritizes weaving an outrageous argument rather than proving it with reliable, even relevant, sources. Such is the nature of speculative design. It draws connections based on assumptions, and these assumptions—the more absurd the better—in turn provoke the audience to critically examine their own assumptions. Speculative design does not provide answers and solutions nor trap itself in the current conception of reality; rather, it aims to raise questions, encourage thinking, and generate discourse (Johannessen et al. 1629).

Speculative design draws inspiration from the science fiction of the 1970s, an era full of “social dreaming” as humankind became ever closer to travelling in outer space (Johannessen et al. 1626). This might explain why speculative fiction and speculative design are nearly impossible to differentiate in terms of subject matter and methods of execution. In recent years, a number of artists have been drawn to the genre of science fiction, “bound by an interest in fragmentation” and “a combining of tropes of documentary and narrative,” as well as by posthumanist concerns of “critiqu[ing] the rational human subject” and “open[ing] up discussions relating to non-human otherness” (Byrne-Smith 12, 16). Lek is one such artist. *Sinofuturism* presents an alternative framework to Western humanism, albeit a seemingly dystopian one. But, in this way, *Sinofuturism* especially resonates with those who are caught between the two opposing sentiments of Western Sinophobia and Chinese national chauvinism in the age of globalization.

Considering the above, it is no coincidence that *Sinofuturism*'s links to the Sino diaspora have been a particular point of interest in discussions surrounding the work (Lang; Zhang). In this essay, I use the term “Sino diaspora” to refer to emigrant Chinese populations from Sinophone regions such as China, Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan without delving into the complicated relations these regions have with one another. (Fertile grounds for further research are the multitude of terms, often entangled with notions of ethnonationalism, used by the governments of the Republic of China and the People's Republic of China to describe Chinese emigrants from their respective territories.) Diaspora refers to populations that “have been dispersed from their original homeland... either involuntar[ily] (resulting from forced displacement) or voluntar[ily] (arising from a search for employment, attempts to maximize trade, or the aim to colonize other lands and peoples)” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 1). The Sino diaspora is not a monolith, and waves of migration, both voluntary (e.g., the California Gold Rush) and involuntary (e.g., the Second Sino-Japanese War), have occurred at different points in time and in reaction to various triggers. Regardless, the Sinofuturist narrative pointedly ignores these nuances and presents a singular global Chinese entity and origin story for the viewer's reckoning.

Artist and writer Gary Zhexi Zhang observes that the Sinofuturist narrative “identif[ies] with neither the ‘target’ culture nor the ‘global’ culture of Western hegemony but rather imagin[es], from the diaspora, a third position through which the other of Western modernity... erupts from within its own colonized horizon” (Zhang 87). Not only is *Sinofuturism* imagined from a diasporic perspective,



Figure 4: *Sinofuturism* (1839–2046 AD), “Chapter Three: Gaming,” 00:17:46. Documentary footage of a distraught Chinese teen detailing the way he was locked up in an Internet addiction rehabilitation centre is juxtaposed against an upbeat CGI architectural animation. This is characteristic of the film's tone and editing style.

but it is also undeniably about diaspora. In a 2020 lecture about *The Sinofuturist Trilogy*, Lek himself underlines the diasporic roots of Sinofuturism's seven key principles:

One of the biggest ironies I also thought of as a diaspora Chinese person was that some of the biggest Chinese chauvinists are people who don't live there. Quite often, emigrant cultures preserve the old traditions even more strongly than the original people in the original place... [those traditions being] computing, copying, gaming, addiction, laboring, gambling... My understanding was that emigration and diaspora culture [bring] certain things up to the forefront as essentially livelihood gets harder, especially because immigrants at those times and now have fewer rights, rights of immigration and legal rights... and of course less money. They are susceptible to these systems of labour, subjected to addiction and gambling. (Lek, “ATC Lecture — Lawrence Lek's The Sinofuturist Trilogy” 59:22)

To dismiss *Sinofuturism* as a mere “techno-Orientalist fantasy” (de Seta 90) is to disregard the context in which it was made and the intent behind it. *Sinofuturism* does not aim to be totalizing. Rather, it is introspective and semi-autobiographical. As stated above, *Sinofuturism* was made as a by-product of Lek's research for his 2017 film, *Geomancer*, which explores the boundary between artificial intelligence and humanity. In the making of the film, Lek reflected on his identity as an artist and on his “algorithmic” creative process in comparison to artificial intelligence and its inner workings (Lek, “Worldbuilding for 2065 - Lawrence Lek” 1:00:25). He used a frame of reference he was familiar with, his own family and the diasporic Chinese communities of his childhood, to make this comparison.

Lek's observations of the Sino diaspora ultimately evolved to become a hypothetical narrative of how Chinese society operates, survives, and replicates itself around the world and into the future (Lang). It has been thought that Lek borrowed the term "Sinofuturism" from his friend, the musician and cultural theorist Steve Goodman, whose techno-Orientalist writings were among the first to define it (Zhang 87). Since the term was popularized by Lek's video essay in 2016, Sinofuturism has spiralled into a highly profiled aesthetic genre that has generated equal amounts of buzz and befuddlement among scholars. More of an emerging genre put as a label by scholars on disparate artworks, exhibitions, and texts than a movement with clear aims and proponents, this mirage of a category has nonetheless been dismissed by these same scholars as a trendy yet empty "aesthetic cliché" (Conn and de Seta 76) that parrots old Orientalist tropes (Chen) in a convoluted fashion (Zhang 88). However, comparing Lek's Sinofuturism with this broader genre/movement is beyond the scope of this text.

Unlike techno-Orientalism, Lek's Sinofuturism does not claim that China is the future, or that a dystopian future will take place in China. Rather, his Sinofuturism is more about the present than it is about the future. Thus,

it is neither utopian nor dystopian (fig. 5). This is an important distinction to make as it helps us understand that the Sinofuturist "blueprint for survival" (Lang) is not trying to predict a "good" or "bad" future, but is trying to help us see a "world that exists in plain sight" (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 58:38). Zhang argues that, unlike other ethnofuturisms, "the aesthetic products of Sinofuturism make few claims to emancipation, instead relaying emergent narrative and geopolitical configurations" that already exist. Instead of Sinofuturism, Zhang offers up "Sinopessimism," spun from Frank B. Wilderson III's Afropessimism, as a less misleading name for Lek's video and theory that does not evoke a politicized power struggle over the future, but rather of the Other's timeless, inescapable state of existence (Zhang 90). Sinofuturism describes a state of being that is not rooted in the celebration of individualism and self-determinism, but rather in a faith in algorithmic processing and eternal toil. What makes *Sinofuturism* an especially disorienting, and thus successful, work of speculative design is that it eerily connects this speculative, dystopian existence to an already recognizable way of life in our current times. Iris Lang, co-founder of *Sine Theta Magazine*, an arts and literature magazine made by and for the Sino diaspora, marvels that "Lek illuminates

UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA

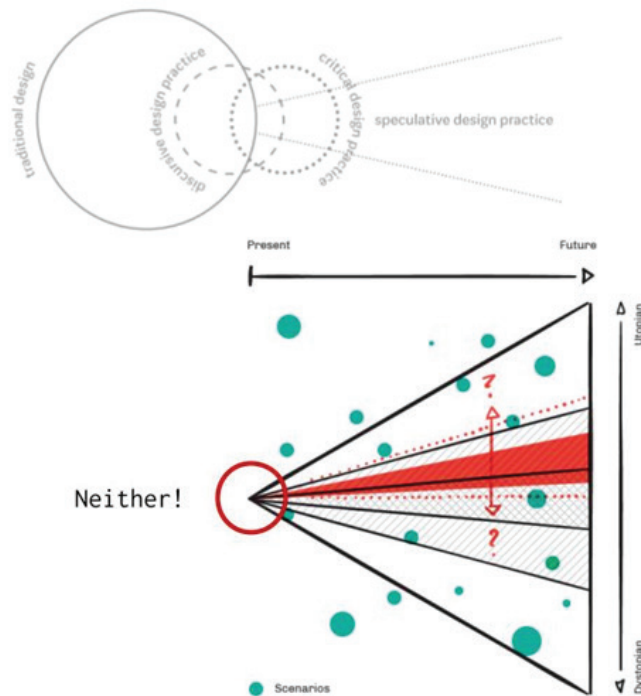


Figure 5: The two axes of speculative design practice and the area it spans. I mark the spot Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD) falls on. (Johannessen et al. 2019; Mitrović et al. 2021).

a perspective on Chinese society so transparent it has gone unnoticed by domestic and diaspora alike—until now” (Lang). This response helps make the case that *Sinofuturism*’s sweeping generalizations are a means, not a goal. Rather than being a “techno-Orientalist fantasy” that others its subjects, *Sinofuturism* may well describe the reality of the Sino diaspora, portrayed in a reductive way to complicate commonly held narratives.

The Singularity

Through a close examination of the tone of the work, it appears that *Sinofuturism* does not aim at all to take positions on the questions it raises. Rather, it pokes fun at and subverts all positions. For example, in “Chapter Four: Studying,” the narrator counters the negative stereotype of the robotic Chinese student who mistakenly prioritizes rote memorization over critical thinking by proclaiming that acquiring information without understanding it or judging it is a valid, even successful, way of learning: “Be a machine. Aspire to learn more and assimilate knowledge. Do not judge the information itself. It is all a training set. Information overload leads to consciousness” (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 27:21).

The cryptic and fragmented content of *Sinofuturism*, which could be interpreted as simplistically inaccurate messages in convoluted dress, is precisely what makes it an effective work of speculative design. Through the use of sweeping generalizations, surrealism, dark humour, and satire, *Sinofuturism* explores the origins, verity, benefits, and drawbacks of cultural narratives and questions the basis of constructed dichotomies—the West versus the East, modernity versus tradition, human versus nonhuman/posthuman, and utopia versus dystopia—which all invariably pose one side as the Other. Our indifferently monotonous text-to-speech narrator reiterates at the end of the film:

Sinofuturism is in fact an early form of the singularity, an artificial intelligence whose origin or behaviour is impossible to identify with certainty. It is a massively distributed network focused on copying rather than originality, addicted to machine learning rather than ethics or morality, with a total capacity for work and an unprecedented sense of survival. It is not the Other, either. Orientalism is the shadow of Occidentalism. In the West, the East is the Other. In the East, the West is the Other. Sinofuturism moves beyond these boundaries. (Lek, *Sinofuturism (1839–2046 AD)* 57:52)

Indeed, entities which would otherwise be seen as greatly different from one another converge in *Sinofuturism* in a disorienting way. Artificial intelligence is not becoming more and more like humans, but rather, in

the quest to optimize productivity and to reach new heights of industrial and creative output, humans are becoming more and more like artificial intelligence. Sinofuturism posits that, in ancient China, centuries before industrialization, humanity’s disposition for and belief in the transformative power of computing, copying, studying, and labour have already been latent. So, as the chicken-or-egg question goes, which came first, humanity or artificial intelligence? In *Sinofuturism*, the past, present, and future converge in a reality where humans and AI are one and the same. Rather than asking if artificial intelligence will ever be able to achieve humanity, why not ask if humanity can realize its full, human potential by becoming more like artificial intelligence?

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