The Aesthetics of Information in Modern Chinese
Literary Culture, 1919-1949

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the literary and cultural history of information in modern China from 1919 to 1949. This era witnessed a communications revolution, marked by the rapid proliferation of new ways of transmitting and inscribing information, which joined other revolutions (sociopolitical, linguistic) in ushering in the modern subject. In the form of xiaoxi, xinxi, or tongji, “information” became an essential entity by which to understand and implement modern practices of the communications revolution cropping up throughout China—-from statistical knowledge to political propaganda, from stock speculation to new virtual communities. This dissertation uses four case studies to revisit familiar writers such as Mao Dun (1896-1981), Ding Ling (1904-1986), and Shen Congwen (1902-1988), while also excavating a number of innovative figures such as the avant-garde psychologist, Zhang Yaoxiang (1893-1964), and the communications critic, Xie Liuyi (1898-1945), to show how the rise of an early information era interacted with and spurred the emergence of modern literary culture, as writers, critics, and artists collectively developed new modes of representating and analyzing information.

New fiction did not simply passively reflect the spread of information into everyday life or changes in China’s information order. Rather, as writers and critics actively integrated forms of information into their work, even envisioning literature itself as a kind of medium of information, they contributed to what I call an emergent “aesthetics of information.” Why did forms like the database or the encyclopedia inspire new modes of literary composition? How could literary forms incorporate or critique forms of data organization such as account books or
statistical tables? When did information provide new ways of constructing the real—and when did literary realism seem directly opposed to the abstractive and disembodying qualities of information? The aesthetics of information directly and creatively engaged with information in a variety of ways, sometimes by way of a process of absorption and appropriation, and at other times through a more oppositional logic of resistance in the form of critique, unmasking, or satire. Ultimately the lens of “information” sheds new light on the development of modern Chinese literature, while also contributing a crucial piece to the broader mosaic of modern information’s global history. This dissertation thereby historicizes the early 20th century foundations of many of the hallmarks of postindustrial life and culture in China today: the spread of abstraction, the rise of white-collar information management, and the increasingly important role of network communications in modulating sociality and politics.
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Introduction: The Aesthetics of Information in Modern Chinese Literature, 1919-1949

In 1902, the journal *New Fiction* [新小说] began publication of the reformist intellectual Liang Qichao’s first and only novelistic work, *A Future Record of New China* [新中国未来纪].\(^1\) Although Liang abandoned the project only five chapters into the narrative, the text is arguably the first self-avowedly “modern” work of fiction in the history of Chinese literature.\(^2\) Echoing the future anterior mode of Edward Bellamy’s famous *Looking Backward* (1887), *A Future Record* purports to transcribe a lecture by one Mister Kong, a star scholar and direct descendant of Confucius, given on the occasion of a major world exposition in Shanghai in the 2513\(^{th}\) year after Confucius’s birth (thus 1962 CE). Titled “The Last Sixty Years of China’s History,” the lecture reflects upon the novel’s contemporary fin de siècle sociopolitical context by examining the path by which China will have been successfully modernized. The ensuing lecture turns out to be something of a rehearsal of the kinds of changes advocated by Liang and other proponents of political modernization who had participated in the failed Hundred Days’ Reform movement of 1898. Besides directly advocating Liang’s political platform, *A Future Record* was also to exemplify Liang’s famous manifesto on the power of literature for promoting social reform—published the same year, in 1902—titled “On the Relationship Between Fiction and the

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\(^1\) See the *Liang Qichao quanji* ed. Yang Gang and Wang Xiangyi, (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1999), 5609-11, for the preface and introductory chapter of the novel.

\(^2\) This is the conventional positioning of the text. For a review and critique of this position, see Theodore Huters, *Bringing the World Home: Appropriating the West in Late Qing and Early Republican China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), Ch. 4. Huters points out that Liang Qichao was conspicuously silent about the contest for novels dealing with reform topics sponsored by the missionary, John Fryer, in 1895 (14; 101-2).
Government of the People” [论小说与群治之关系], asserting new fiction’s power to enlighten its readership and spur the foundation of a modern politics in China.³

Given this textual fragment’s seminal influence on the subsequent literature in the final decade of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and on into the Republican era (1911-1949), A Future Record has received due critical attention in the field of modern literature studies.⁴ What has gone overlooked, however, is the fact that the novel stages perhaps the first mass audience to appear in Chinese literature. This imagined audience is in fact a dual one. The first is made up of the throngs of listeners at the stadium in Shanghai who listen to Mr. Kong’s speech in person. A second is a virtual audience in Japan, connected to Mr. Kong’s speech through a series of modern technologies: as the narrative details, the lecture is immediately transcribed in modern shorthand [速记],⁵ then hastily transmitted [交] by telegraph to Yokohama, where in turn the transcript is hastily typeset and published in the journal New Fiction, precisely the venue where the novel itself was being published (indeed, Liang had created the journal for the express purpose of serializing the novel).⁶ Here the role of the telegraph wire is particularly conspicuous—“The telegraph fee is truly not small!” observes the narrator—in effect allowing an aural address to enjoy a real-time and dispersed print audience. Holding the issue of New

³ The original is available in A Ying, ed., Wanqing wenxue congchao: xiaoshuo xiqu yanjiujuan (Compendium of late Qing Literature) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 12-15. Both this advocacy, and Future Record itself, were greatly inspired by Japanese political novels such as Illustrious Tales of Statesmanship (1883) and Plum Blossom in the Snow (1886) that had flourished in Japan during the 1870s and ’80s. On the Japanese context, see John Mertz, Novel Japan: Spaces of Nationhood in the Early Meiji (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).


⁵ A shorthand system for Chinese writing had only been invented in 1880s by Cai Xiyong [蔡锡勇], Zhang Zhidong’s financial manager, and published as [连环帐谱] by his son Cai Zhang [蔡璋] in 1905. I thank Ulug Kuzuoglu for pointing this out to me.

⁶ See Liang’s preface in LQQJ, 5609.
Fiction in his hands, the reader would have no doubt felt interpellated into the multiple audiences that scaffold across this opening scene: from the public at the exposition lecture, to the readership in Japan and their rapid access to the words of Mr. Kong’s speech, these multiple mass audiences give the knowledge production of the succeeding chapters a modern thrill of spectacle and immediacy.7

The text’s transmission through an ensemble of different media is echoed by its narrative’s hybrid rhetorical style. Though ostensibly a transcription of an oral event, Mr. Kong’s speech is rendered in a distinctive “newspaper-style” mode of writing which is distinctly less vernacular than the style of contemporary serial novels. The novel’s literary form is equally hybrid, for, as Liang admits in the story’s preface, his Record “is both like and unlike an anecdotal novel [说部], both like and unlike an unofficial history [笔记], both like and unlike a treatise [论著]—one doesn’t know what kind of form it is.”8 Collectively, the mass audiences, the journalistic style, and the generic instability all work to further highlight the “fact” that the resultant text had passed through technologies of abstraction, telecommunication, and mass communication to reach its final destination before the reader. By so reflexively weaving these communication technologies into its narrative frame A Future Record of New China thus figures the entity of information into its own ontology.

7 Notably, the portrayed media neatly model the three new “tools” of disseminating and broadcasting [传播] enlightenment that Liang advocated in an earlier essay: schooling and education, lecture or oratory, and the modern vernacular political novel, serialized in periodical journals. See Liang’s chapter in Book of Liberal Writings [自由书] (1899) titled “Three Instruments for Propagating Enlightenment” [传播文明三利器] (LQQJ, 359). Liang notes that the method of schooling is already well-known, and emphasizes instead that oratory and the newspaper (especially the serialized novel) need to be increased. In particular, the art of public speech-making: “In our country [of China] in recent years, there are many who know of the benefits of schools and newspapers, but very few who know of the benefits of oratory. . . In China this style is still in its infancy.” On the growth of various forms of political oration (including speech-making, debate, street protest, and meetings) in China during the early twentieth century, see David Strand, An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

8 LQQJ, 5609.
A Future Record belongs to one of the most popular genres of serialized novel in the late Qing, that of the “science fiction” [科学小说] novel, or what David Wang labels as “science fantasy,” narratives that took up tropes of technology to evoke an exotic and modern quality, and as grounds for comparing China’s place in the modern world and reconciling traditional knowledge with Western knowledge. The thrust of such displays was often the construction of a technologized utopia, such as in the futuristic Shanghai of Future Record, or in the case of Gao Yang’s [高阳] novel, Electric World [电世界]. Imagining a world dominated by electricity, this latter work imaginatively introduced the reader to a bevy of technologies both extant, including electric light [电灯], and fantastic, such as electrical wings [电翅] allowing human flight. Writers’ interest in these devices and technologies helped register the new mobility of bodies and information, the kind of palpable shrinking of both space and time endemic to the experience of modernity. As numerous scholars have pointed out, such time-space compression is inseparable from the rise of both capitalism and the modern nation state.

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Temporally speaking, at its extreme, such compression is dramatized by *Future record’s* imagination of its own time travel back to fin-de-siècle China. In terms of space, such compression is also constitutive of the utopian fantasy and idealism in *Future Record*, and texts like it, as authors in both China and the West imagined a new world crosshatched by networked communication and rapid transportation which would enable the unprecedented global circulation of ideas, people, and goods.\(^\text{14}\) A similar enthusiasm for networked telecommunication appeared frequently in the political treatises of the late Qing. One famous example is that of Liang’s teacher, Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who in his influential manuscript, *The Book of Great Unity* [大同书], envisioned a world crisscrossed with railways, electric lines, steamships, post, even flying ships, that together would form a dense web of communication “winding about the entire earth like a net [网] or the shuttle of a loom [梭].”\(^\text{15}\)

Chinese intellectuals’ idealist and optimistic outlook over communication extended to the end of the Great War, culminating with the publication of *An Outline of Communication Science* [交际学略论] in 1917 by one Li Baosen [李葆森] (dates unknown), an erudite scholar who, like Kang and Liang before him, came from the intellectually progressive province of Guangdong.\(^\text{16}\)

Taking a word conventionally meaning ‘social interaction,’ *jiaoji* [交际], Li set out to interrogate the meaning of interconnectivity in a modern world. For both the individual and the nation to

\(^{14}\) See, for example, the description of the emergence of communication as a utopian ideal in the works of Saint Simon, Charles Fourier, and others, in Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication*, trans. By Susan Emaneul (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).


\(^{16}\) Hong Kong: Cuiwen shufang, 1917. Despite extensive efforts, I have been unable to determine any more biographical detail about Li Baosen.
advance in the modern world, Li argued, they needed to embrace communication as a new
science of intersubjectivity grounded in a heady mix of Confucian ethics and Western
knowledge. Published at the end of the Great War and shortly before the signing of the
Versailles Treaty, Li’s optimistic outlook would fast become outdated following the May Fourth
Movement (1919), when popular outrage over the terms of the Versailles Treaty catalyzed the
popular rejection of Confucianism in favor of adopting Western values in the attempt to finally
reform China and improve her international standing.¹⁷

In the pointed rejection of traditional knowledge and the embrace of “Mr. Science” and
“Mr. Democracy” that followed, numerous authors, critics, and artists would take up questions
about communication and the role of information in a modernizing China. Taking its cue from
Liang Qichao’s Future Record, this dissertation examines key episodes in the cultural and
literary history of information in China in the subsequent period between 1919 and 1949, a
dynamic era when communication technologies and information became important facets of
everyday life in urban areas. In the following chapters, I examine how writers developed new
modes of literary representation, critical reading, and visualizing communication in their
attempts to make sense of the rush of information that was coming to increasingly define modern
knowledge production and subjectivity. By taking up aspects of information both as an urgent
subject and as grounds for formalist experimentation, writers developed what I call an “aesthetics
of information.” This aesthetics became a critical means by which to investigate the modern
entity of information and its central role in new social, cultural, and political phenomena, ranging
from stock speculation to modern propaganda. Ultimately, the history of modern Chinese

¹⁷ Chow, Tse-Tsung, The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China (Cambridge, MA:
Harvard University Press, 1960); Vera Schwarcz, The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the
literature cannot be understood without examining the topic of information. As I shall show, revisiting the literature culture of the Republican era using the lens of information fundamentally revises our understanding of familiar writers such as Mao Dun, Ding Ling, and Shen Congwen and their creative projects. At the same time, this dissertation also charts new territory by bringing to light important documents and a number of innovative figures which constitute important nodes in the social and intellectual constellation of the New Culture Movement (1915-1925) and beyond. Collectively, these works help survey the historical experience and understanding of information in modern China—indeed, this history cannot be adequately realized without turning to its literature and cultural production.

All That Is Solid Melts into Information

The concept of information provides my study its historical and methodological orientation. But what, exactly, is “information”? Before returning to the Chinese context, it is necessary to sort out the conceptual history and semantic bounds of this seemingly ordinary and indistinctive term.

In humanities scholarship today, the question of what counts as information is heavily inflected by the emergence of the term as a key scientific concept developed in Claude Shannon’s seminal 1948 work, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication,” which famously redefined information as a measurable and quantifiable entity.18 At the outset, Shannon had in mind an engineering problem regarding the informational capacity of telecommunications infrastructure: how to get the same amount of bandwidth (e.g. a telephone line) to carry more

information (i.e. transmit more messages) without compromising the fidelity of the messages themselves. Shannon’s resultant formula, however, had radically broad consequences, flattening out different modes of knowledge production by bringing logical rigor and statistical calculability to processes and phenomena previously thought to be unquantifiable. The reach of the formula’s applicability is what made it so exciting, for information theory had the capacity to make “something already quite familiar in war, bureaucracy, and everyday life into a concept of science and technology. Information was no longer raw data, military logistics, or phone numbers; it [became] the principle of the universe’s intelligibility.”

Its mathematical elegance and broad implications made Shannon’s formula inherently interdisciplinary, and the formula not only had a decisive impact on extant fields such as biology and psychology, but also helped precipitate new, hybrid fields of science such as that of artificial intelligence. The influence of Shannon’s formula has extended to the humanities, too, where it has inspired experiments ranging from William R. Paulson’s pioneering analysis of literature as a source of creative “noise,” to more recent bridging of humanities and big data in the field of digital humanities.

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Prior to Shannon’s articulation, as James Gleick points out in the preface to his history of information as a discipline-defining concept, information constituted a “soft and inclusive term.”23 In common language today, it still retains this inclusivity, referring to the abstract and ephemeral object of human (and non-human) communication.24 As a general object of communication, information is a deictic marker: it signifies something that only has meaning in context, just as words such as ‘it’ or ‘tomorrow’ are only given meaning by the discursive contexts in which they appear.25 And yet, like any other deictic marker, information is not a transparent signifier. Although its exceptional mundaneness in the English language today makes it masquerade as self-evident, the word has its own linguistic and historical valences. As the scholar of communication, John Durham Peters, eloquently puts it, information is “a word which has a history full of inversions and compromises. Information is a term that does not like history. . . [and yet it] is, after all, a word with a history: it is a cultural invention that has come to prominence at a certain point in time, in a specific constellation of interests.”26 Entering English (from Latin) in the fourteenth century by way of Aristotelian philosophy, information originally denoted the force that imbues matter with form and constitutes all physical objects. As Peters notes, in the 18th century the philosophical belief that the universe and everything in it had an underlying form was on the wane. Now,

in place of spirits or souls came minds, egos, or cogitos; in place of a divinely instituted social order came a huge but fragile Leviathan, both arbitrary and

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24 It is not, however, the exclusive object of communication: other entities can be communicated, such as affect, or disease.


inescapable; in place of “direct perception” came “perceptions” and “impressions” in all their opacity, density, and potential deception—what Francis Bacon called “the uncertain light of the senses.” (12)

With the resulting rise of empiricist philosophy and science, information thus no longer described something that inhered as an essential form-giving entity within objects themselves, but rather referred to something that arrived from without and left an impression on the mind. Subject to the sensations, information could be true or false. It is at this point that information came to connote “receive reports from.”

But this sensory-based understanding of information was to be again replaced during the period of high Enlightenment, when, following the rise of bureaucratic systems and statistics, information came to denote a bit of empirical knowledge, commensurate to the modern fact whose history has been explored so masterfully outlined by Mary Poovey.27 Now information acquired a certain thing-ness, in the process becoming “exterior, and alien to human senses . . . a thing, a noun, a reified stuff separable from the process of informing.”28 In this incarnation, information was re-placed within the bureaucratic or corporate body as a reified entity independent of subjective perception. Such abstraction and simplification made aggregates of subjects legible in new ways, now allowing the modern state to “see” its objects of governance with unprecedented precision and efficiency.29

The usage of information in a statistical sense was soon joined by a second meaning that arrived in the mid-19th century with the advent of electrical communications, particularly the


29 See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), Part 1, 9-83; as well as Foucault’s description of “governmentality” as a new mode of rendering the population legible and
telegraph. Now information also denoted that entity of discrete knowledge which traveled at the speed of electricity. Similar to how statistical information presented a transcendence of the limits of the individual body or individual knowledge, so too did electrically transmitted information expressly exceed the capabilities of the human body (though of course it was far from being materially disembodied, as attested to by the immense expense of creating and maintaining infrastructure). Like statistics, this second kind of information greatly expanded the capacity and reach of governance of nation-states and empires. It also helped break down barriers between localities and regions, in the process creating new regional markets and new ways of imagining national and international communities.

Though seemingly distinct, these two modern forms of information—the inscribed and the electrically transmitted—are mutually supplementary both in practice and conceptually. In his study of the relationship between Victorian literature and information, Richard Menke defines “information,” as a particularly “fluid version” of the modern fact, a “datum (ideally associated with a number) awarded a discursive truthfulness beyond rhetoric or contingency—which then makes it available for argument.” But as forms of writing, the fact and the statistic are already mobile and communicable. This point is redoubled in the work of the historian, James Beniger, who argues that as the Industrial Revolution vastly sped up Western society’s “material processing system,” before the telegraph there arose a “crisis of control” in which materials and energy moved around faster or at a speed equal to information itself. This crisis of

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control precipitated a “control revolution” oriented toward managing complexity and exerting control at a distance, or, as Beniger puts it, the “twin activities of information processing and reciprocal communication.” The control revolution thus emerged both through new kinds of paper instruments and over telecommunication networks of wire. And it is no coincidence that the dichotomy between the two forms closely parallels the temporal dichotomy between the terms “media” and “communication,” where the former deals with the storage and representation of knowledge, while the second with the transmission and circulation of knowledge. What Bruce Clarke says of the media/communication dichotomy applies equally to the division between these two forms of information, namely, that it is most useful “to think of them as metonymies—commonly associated concepts for mutually instrumental phenomena—rather than as rival synonyms.” As Clarke continues, “Communication factors into issues of synchronous and sequential temporality—‘real time,’ the discrete moments of the origination and reception of messages—whereas media technologies generate ‘virtual time,’ processes such as inscription, storage, and retrieval, which suspend or manipulate the time of communication.” To put it concretely, both the statistical table and the electric signal are complementary instruments of managing information, and are essential in complex systems such as bureaucracies (one can imagine how office work involves both data tables and telephones) or transportation systems (train schedules and telegraph). Such forms of mobilizing abstraction join the commodity form


34 This dichotomy also echoes Harold Innis’s articulation of the “bias” of communication, namely that media either exhibit a “temporal bias,” and emphasize storage of information over time (durable media such as clay tablets), or a “spatial bias,” in which ease of movement is the important factor (thus, light media such as paper). See The Bias of Communication (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951).


36 Ibid, 135.
as major elements in the rise of modernity throughout the world: like the commodity, these two forms of information were, as Gleick describes, “all around, glistening and buzzing in the landscape of the early twentieth century, letters and messages, sounds and images, news and instructions, figures and facts, signals and signs: a hodgepodge of related species. They were on the move, by post or wire or electromagnetic wave.”

If, as Marx’s famous aphorism points out, thanks to the reifying power of the commodity form, in the modern epoch “all that is solid melts into air,” we can add that thanks to information, all that is—whether solid or air, material or ephemeral—has come to be dynamically inscribable as information.

As a topic for historical investigation, information helps to connect various aspects of technologically mediated communication and social communication in a coherent way, which in turn can highlight aspects of social, cultural, or other history that might otherwise have remained invisible. In his examination of the communications history of colonial India, C. A. Bayly proposes to use what he calls the “information order” as a broad framework for historical inquiry, one that can accommodate knowledge production as a kind of social formation that is “not reduced to the status of contingencies of late-industrial capitalism or the modern state.”

The information order, he continues, “should not be seen as a ‘thing’, any more than a state or an economy is a thing; it is a heuristic device, or a field of investigation, which can be used to probe the organization, values, and limitations of past societies. It is not separate from the world of power or economic exploitation, but stands both prior to it and dependent on it.”

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37 Gleick, The Information, 7.
40 Ibid, 5.
of Bayly’s idea, I take a period’s information order as a framework for considering both the entity of information as a historical entity (or set of entities, as it were), as well as a heuristic device capable of highlighting the connections between histories of media technology, communication, political power, social organization, and perception. In the study that follows, I investigate how new literature co-developed with a new information order in modern China between 1919 and 1949. Before turning to the relationship between literature and information, the following two sections briefly survey the technological and discursive backdrops of information in China leading up to and during this period.

The Communications Revolution in China

In a development closely related to the emergence of information as an object of study, scholars of European and American history have recently identified a “communications revolution” that occurred in the West beginning in the 16th century.41 This revolution encompassed many smaller revolutions in media and communications technologies (starting with the post, and accelerating with telecommunications), which contributed to a trend of increased production and circulation of information. Along this line, one can argue that a similar communications revolution occurred in China during this period as first the Ming (1368-1644) and then the Qing empire became increasingly entangled into the global communications infrastructures that had arrived first with the Jesuits and then with diplomatic missions in between the 16th and 18th centuries, and which rapidly grew more tangled and connective in the

19th- and early 20th centuries. To be sure, China had its own well-developed communications systems before the arrival of western technology, from a flourishing book industry to an intricate courier system. Aside from the field of print culture studies, which is well-developed, the broader history of both the premodern situation, as well as the early modern communications revolution is only recently coming to light as scholars have begun exploring the history of media and communications infrastructures. Regarding the arrival of a new information order in China, many gaps still remain, but the extant scholarship nonetheless paints a striking picture.

 Telegraph lines were first introduced by British and Danish businessmen in Shanghai in the 1860s. In October 1880, the Imperial Telegraph Administration was set up in Tianjin, and was quickly followed by a boom in telegraphy infrastructure: by 1884 China had 5,030 kilometers of landlines, and in the following fifteen years another 27,750 kilometers of lines were erected. By the fall of the Qing in 1911, commercial and government lines amounted to over 45,000 kilometers. Telephone networks were set up in Chinese port cities in the late 1890s, and were linked up into a national long-distance infrastructure in the 1920s. The modern postal network presents a similar case: instituted with the help of the British in 1896, by the 1930s the postal service was nationalized and under the control of the Bureau of Communications.

As the former minister of the Bureau, Chu Chia-Hua, proudly


43 See Zhou, Yongming, Historicizing Online Politics: Telegraphy, the Internet, and Political Participation in China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 33. For an account of the substantial Danish efforts in promoting telegraph infrastructure in China, see Erik Baark’s Lightning Wires: The Telegraph and China’s Technological Modernization, 1860-1890 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

44 See Rememberance of Telecommunications: 138 Years of Shanghai Telecommunications [电信的记忆：上海电信138年], China Telecom Shanghai Company, ed. (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2009). As of now, the comprehensive history of telephony in China awaits further research.
observed in 1937, “Every year the service continues to expand; more and more places are brought within the postal net; speedier and more frequent deliveries are effected, and with each step forward the Post Office takes, China is knit more closely together.”45 The postal network greatly extended—and later effected control by means of censorship—the circulation of modern print outlets, particularly the newspapers and literary journals that flooded the cities with new information from afar.46 By the early 1930s, radio, film, phonography, and other new media provided new, non-textual channels for mass communication and culture, further diversifying the options for storing and sharing information.47 To this list of mass communications and

45 See Chu Chia-Hua 朱家骅, *China’s Postal and Other Communications Systems* (Shanghai: China United Press, 1937), 27. Such consolidation occurred at the expense of the popular and widespread private letter agencies [民間] when the Ministry of Communication claimed a monopoly on all postal correspondence. In 1935, the Ministry of Communication operated across China (minus Manchuria and Rehe) 12,358 post offices and agencies (which were in turn plugged into the telegraph and telephone networks); handling 822,335,500 pieces of mail that year. For an account of the relationship between the growing postal service and modern state-building, see Lane Jeremy Harris, “The Post Office and State Formation in Modern China, 1896-1949” (PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012). Also, Cheng, Ying-wan, *Postal Communication in China and Its Modernization, 1860-1896* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970).


telecommunications infrastructures we should add the rise of modern transportation infrastructures such as airplanes and the steam engine, which collectively expedited the material movement of information. For the Qing and Republican governments, these communications proved an important new arena of geopolitical struggle (particularly given that, geographically speaking, the central Chinese nodes within these global infrastructures were in many cases not under the sovereignty of the Chinese state, but rather administered by foreign merchants, missionaries, or militaries, or, as in the case of the early Republic, Chinese warlords). For would-be state-builders, these new communications technologies also ushered in an important kind of secondary form of mass communication, modern propaganda. But for a literate, middle-class urbanite living in or nearby one of China’s treaty ports, these communications added up to an exponential increase in the geographic scope and the speed of information at his or her disposal. Already by the turn of the century, such a reader, for example, could open a newspaper to find fresh news that had arrived by telegraph or ship regarding the political situation at the imperial court, the price of silver in Britain, and the revolution in the Philippines.

As China’s first scholar of modern communications, Xie Liuyi [谢六逸] (1898-1945), aptly


48 See Chu Chia-Hua, China’s Postal and Other Communications Systems.

49 See for example Roger R. Thompson’s account of the Qing government’s employment of a “hybrid network of communications” in his forthcoming article, “The Wire: Progress, Paradox, and Disaster in the Strategic Networking of China, 1881-1901.” For a systematic account of the relationship between communications and empire in East Asia from the perspective of Japan, see Yang, Daqing, Technology of Empire.

commented: by the late 19th century, the “Reuters era” had arrived in China.\textsuperscript{51} It brought with it new ways of conceiving of or experiencing national and international identity,\textsuperscript{52} new economic opportunities, as well as a dynamic public sphere with new modes of political participation.\textsuperscript{53}

Beginning in the mid-19th century, China also saw the rise of empirical information in the form of modern facts and statistics. During the period in question perhaps the most consistently used single-word counterpart of the first modern meaning of ‘information’ was tongji [\textsuperscript{51}\textsuperscript{ʤİ}], information as statistical or otherwise factual data. The name featured prominently in early missionary newspapers, such as \textit{East-West Examiners and Monthly Recorder} [东西洋考每月统计传] (1833-4), established by Karl Gützlaff (1803-1851). Illustrating the point that information formed an essential arena for geopolitical struggle, in its second coming, the \textit{East-West Examiner} (1837-8) served as the publication outlet of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, a group of western missionaries and merchants who sought to transmit “Western scientific, technological, and cultural information to the Chinese in the hope that it would impress them sufficiently with the achievements of the West to induce them to open more positive and productive exchanges with the foreign ‘barbarians.’”\textsuperscript{54} During the early 20th century, the rise of statistics was further advanced by the spread of social surveys as a technology for measuring aggregates. Such surveys, as Tong Lam argues in his monograph on the subject, constituted a

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} In \textit{Xie Liuyi wenji} [Collect works of Xie Liuyi], ed. Chen Jiang and Chen Gengchu. (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1995), pp. 370.
\item \textsuperscript{52} For one example, see Rebecca Karl, \textit{Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century} (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).
\item \textsuperscript{53} C.f. Eugenia Lean’s critical review of scholarship on the public sphere in the introduction to her \textit{Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
\end{itemize}}
veritable movement in which the “fact” (and by extension information) became a medium for understanding society and modern subjectivity.  

Collectively, these new communications technologies and the rise of statistical facts fundamentally changed China’s modern “information order.” In the readings that follow, I highlight moments where writers lingered over such media and technologies of information, reflexively contemplating subjects such as the organization and feel of an encyclopedia, the linguistic landscape of a phonebook, the experience of operating a long-distance telephone switchboard, the beauty of a graph, the mediating power of ether, or the dynamics of a stock price ticker at the Shanghai stock exchange. In doing so, this dissertation seeks to contribute a cultural dimension to the broader field of communications history by showing how writers and artists creatively engaged with aspects of the communication revolution, in the process exploring the effect that information had on the epistemology and phenomenology of the modern subject in China.

**Information as Discourse: From ‘Xiaoxi’ to ‘Xinxi’**

In her influential study of the role of translation in the history of modern literature in China, Lydia Liu has argued that translated words of this era should not be taken for granted as mere equivalents of their foreign counterparts. Instead, she highlights the fact that translations always happen within particular historical contexts, oftentimes at the bidding of authority, and frequently with unintended consequences. ‘Information,’ as we have seen above, is not a

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translucent term in the history of communication in the West. Rather, it is embedded within particular social, material, and political practices. Such local contexts help shed light on the specificity and experience of what is otherwise too often assumed to be a global phenomenon. As a malleable concept and word, information opens up a critical space within which unfolded a broader dialog about the meaning of meaning, and the meaning of communication in everyday life. In the four chapters that follow, iterations of information make frequent appearances in a variety of contexts, thereby providing an expedient means for identifying a text’s engagement with social communication, media, and knowledge production. As such, it is necessary to pause to consider the Chinese language counterparts to the two types of ‘information’ in the early 20th century. All the same, before probing the genealogy of information in China, it is important to recall the caveat that historical actors do not always have access to the terms to name their contemporary conditions; as such, my dissertation aims at providing far more than a narrow discursive study of Chinese counterparts for “information.”

As I showed in the previous section, by the mid-19th century the definition of modern information as a form of statistical fact was already associated with the Chinese term tongji [统计]. The second sense of information, as the index of communication, is harder to pinpoint, but also a more interesting case study. The word that comes closest to converging with this meaning of information is xiaoxi [消息], a word that indicates a mobile bit of knowledge that has been transmitted through communication. To be clear, xiaoxi was not a modern compound invented for the purpose of translating ‘information’ from the West. Etymologically, one of the earliest appearances of xiaoxi is in two lines of the abstruse Zhou Dynasty book of divination, the Classic of Changes [易经].57 Here the compound can be separated into its component,

57 Specifically, the 23rd and 55th hexagrams.
antonymous parts: ‘xiao’ means ‘decay,’ while ‘xi’ means ‘flourish, grow.’ The first appearance in the Classic of Changes states: “The superior man takes heed of the alternation of decrease (xiao) and increase (xi), fullness and emptiness; for it is the course of heaven” [君子尚消息盈虚，天行也]. 58 In the second instance, “When the sun stands at midday, it begins to set; when the moon is full, it begins to wane. The fullness and emptiness of heaven and earth wane (xiao) and wax (xi) in the course of time” [日中则昃，月盈则食，天地盈虚，与时消息，而况人于人乎]. 59 Thus, like another, more famous antonymous compound, that of yin-yang, xiaoxi originally referred to a cosmological principle of opposing forces which in tandem constitute a cycle of fortune that fluctuates without end. (And here it might be remarked that the binary quality of xiaoxi is reminiscent of Gregory Bateson’s famous—and equally cosmological—definition of information as the “difference which makes a difference.” 60)

Toward the end of the Han Dynasty (220 CE), xiaoxi took on the additional dimension of a bit of transmitted knowledge. 61 The first modern dictionary of Chinese, the Ciyuan [lit., ‘source of words,’ 辞源], illustrates how this second meaning developed:


60 The context of the quote was the Nineteenth Annual Korzybski Memorial Lecture (1970), where Bateson took up the topic of the difference between map and territory (i.e. the relationship between objects and their representations, or substance and mind). See Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1987 [1972]), 321. On the originary nature of difference in psychology and communication: “In the world of mind, nothing—that which is not—can be a cause. In the hard sciences, we ask for causes and we expect them to exist and be “real.” But remember that zero is different from one, and because zero is different from one, zero can be a cause in the psychological world, the world of communication” (320). Notably, the binarism of the Yijing was also a major inspiration in the binary philosophy of Liebniz. See Lydia Liu, The Freudian Robot, 68-70.

61 The Hanyu da cidian cites such a usage in a poem by the Eastern Han poetess, Cai Yan [蔡琰] (dates unknown), daughter of the Cai Yong (133-192).
**Xiaoxi**: A verbal message [音信]. The *History of the Three Kingdoms* [三国志] records that Zhuge Ke (202-253) laid siege to the city of Hefei. One of the city’s remaining soldiers, Liu Zheng, escaped through to transmit a message, but he was captured by bandits. In the *Book of Jin* [晋书], “Lu Ji mused to his dog, ‘There have been no letters from home. Is it possible for you to take a letter there, and bring some *xiaoxi* back?’” Amongst human affairs there is only auspicious or evil, good or bad, thus the oral message was called *xiaoxi*.62

Thus from the third century on, *xiaoxi* took on a communicational dimension, denoting ‘message’ or ‘news,’ particularly news of an informal or personal nature. While *xiaoxi* gets at knowledge transfer, its connotation is that the transmitted knowledge is ephemeral (useful or valuable for a limited period of time), contextual, and actionable. Its transmission is much more visible in everyday life than deeper forms of knowledge such as bodily skill, wisdom, or learning. Gossip and memes offer basic examples of *xiaoxi*: as a form of verbal message, *xiaoxi* has a distinctly social life, traveling along from individual to individual to index a network of transmission. As with information’s earlier shift in the West from a sensible to insensible entity, in the late 19th century, with the arrival of the telegraph, *xiaoxi* was given a non-verbal dimension when it came to signify the news transmitted [传] over telegraph wires. By the 1880s it began appearing column titles of modern newspapers such as *Wanguo gongbao* [万国公报] and *Yiwen bao* [益闻报] as special items of international news acquired from the news wires.

Today, *xiaoxi* still primarily denotes personal news, but its meaning as ‘information’ has largely been supplanted by the term ‘*xinxi*’—a compound indirectly deriving from *xiaoxi* which gained contemporary currency with the introduction of information science.63 A reader who is

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63 See the *Hanyu da cidian* entry under *xinxi*, which gives it as a compound of “message and news” [音信消息]. The ‘*xi*’ is also used to occasionally refer to *xiaoxi*. *Xinxi* also commonly appeared in 19th century newspaper column titles, particularly in missionary publications. Curiously, however, by the Republican period, it was far less commonly used than *xiaoxi*, but came back into vogue in the 1980s with the advance of digital technologies and cybernetic science in China. On *xinxi*’s role in the latter, see the Chinese edition of L. David Ritchie’s *Information*, which offers a useful index of Chinese translations of key terms in communication studies and information science.
literate in modern Chinese knows that xiaoxi often denotes a bit of news and that in many cases xiaoxi is nearly synonymous with xinwen [新闻], ‘news.’ Thus one may wonder how and when my study delineates ‘news’ from ‘information’ in xiaoxi—are the cases that follow in fact about ‘news’ instead of ‘information,’ per se? To delineate between ‘news’ and ‘information,’ one may again turn to the work of the communications critic, Xie Liuyi, who wrote extensively about both throughout the 1930s. Xie saw ‘news’ as a separate practice of reportage that could be traced back at least as far as the Tang and Song dynasties. In the 19th century, following the publication of Adam Morrison’s Canton Register in Guangdong in 1827, and influenced by the translation of ‘news’ as shinbun and newspaper as shinbunshi in late Tokugawa Japan (1853-1867), the Chinese word, xinwen, gradually came to correspond with the Western meaning of news. It was inseparable from the medium of the newspaper. This is the key difference: in contrast to news/xinwen, xiaoxi is not limited to that which is printed for popular consumption.

This much Xie made clear in a 1942 article on different kinds of correspondence networks in which he reflected upon the historical emergence of information as a distinctive entity. The passage is worth quoting at some length because it gives a sense of the range of historical contexts in which Xie judged xiaoxi to have obtained:

Primitive people knew to use drums, fire beacons, gestures, and paintings as methods of transmitting xiaoxi. In more recent times the consciousness of communication passed from the Orient to Europe. In 200 BCE, when the Egyptian empire was established, in the coffee shops of Cairo and the market of

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64 Xie Liuyi, “A Note about ‘Newspaper Literature’,” which appeared in bi-weekly journal Xin Daxia [新大夏], Vol. 1, no. 3 (1938). Reprinted in Xie Liuyi Collection [谢六逸集] (Liaoning: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 2009), 113.

65 Along a similar tack, xiaoxi should also be delimited from qingbao [情报], ‘intelligence,’ a mode of knowledge transfer that was meant exclusively for secret consumption (as in the case of spy work). Qingbao, as jōhō, was a standard translation of information in Japan during this period.
Baghdad there were already “couriers” that specialized in the profession of transmitting *xiaoxi*. Later, in medieval Europe there flourished a sort of “news communication,” where gentry and the rich resided at their own fiefs or villas, and hired people to [transmit] letters and reports of *xiaoxi* from the cities; afterward, because of increasing demand, an individual could hire several people, and when the master received a “communication” [通信], he had manuscript copies [传抄] made and sent out, and from this gradually developed a sort of communications industry. At this time there also steadily developed in the church such an industry for the sake of proselytizing [传教], also employing communication, whereupon priests also became involved in communications work.\(^66\)

We need not dwell on the historical accuracy of Xie’s account. Rather, what is important to recognize is his usage of *xiaoxi* as clearly contrastive with news: *xiaoxi* is that which could be transmitted via various media (as opposed to one medium, the printed newspaper), and which could at once travel through multiple channels and in multivalent ways. Crucially, Xie’s explication shows that *xiaoxi* is clearly more than simply gossip or informal, personal news, but rather carries value as a commodity or as bureaucratic lifeblood. Writing for the retrenched literary institution in the wartime hinterland of the early 1940s, Xie was particularly attuned to the cultural and strategic importance of information flows and the need for apparatuses of “mutual spiritual communication” [精神交通] between authors (and readers) who had previously worked in proximity to one another in Shanghai, but were now scattered across Guiyang, Guiling, Chongqing, and Kunming.\(^67\)

\(^66\) “Trends in the Enterprise of Modern Correspondence” [现代通讯事业之趋势], originally published in Xie’s wartime journal, *Cultural Communique Monthly* [文讯月刊] 2, no. 1 (1942). The journal was the primary publication outlet for the Guiyang branch of the Wenxie (of which Xie was the director). Reprinted in *Xie Liuyi wenji*, 327.

Like ‘information,’ *xiaoxi* is a deictic marker that deemphasizes the precise content of a message, and instead calls attention to the act of transmission between sender and receiver. This is nicely evidenced in two early images from the last decade of the Qing that depict *xiaoxi* as an object of representation in and of itself. In both cases, the representation of the entity of *xiaoxi* is key to depicting some aspect of modern subjectivity. In the first illustration (*Figure 1*), an image from the most important modern newspaper in late imperial China, the *Shenbao*, the topic is the transmission of secret *xiaoxi* [秘密消息] and the role of foreign technology in mediating news from the court palace at the top of the register, to the “the people” [民间] located below.68 The image does not depict an actual event or a specific incident. Rather, with its ethereal, non-Euclidean space, it provides a schema of a very simple network of information flow. By focusing on the movement of *xiaoxi*, it figures communication itself in order to illuminate the information order underlying the relationship between infrastructure (telegraphy), institutions (the Qing Court, foreign newspapers), and groups (rulers, the Chinese public, foreigners). In contrast to the schematic visualization of *xiaoxi* in *Figure 1*, the images of *xiaoxi* in *Figure 2* show a more concretely social dimension of information. Titled “Well-Informed” [消息灵通; literally referring to someone whose *xiaoxi* is current and abundant], the image appeared in a popular Beijing pictorial on the eve of a new political era.69 The image shows a well-to-do man speaking into a telephone. As with *Figure 1*, what the content of the conversation may be is largely irrelevant. Instead, what is important here is the man’s status as a modern information manager who harnesses technology to his communicational advantage. Notably, on the same page appears yet another image of *xiaoxi* witnessed by the same artist, namely, the inculcation of

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68 Image found in Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?*, 23.

69 *Layman’s Talk Pictorial* [浅说画报], Issue 796 (1911), p. 4.
modern newspaper reading habits in a young reader who daily reads aloud for his father’s pleasure at a Beijing teahouse. Together, these prints not only suggest the interest and stakes of xiaoxi for modern subjectivity, but also show how as a kind of abstraction of knowledge into information, xiaoxi could be concretized into a pictorial subject. Indeed, as the further analysis of a variety of other images in the main chapters demonstrates, xiaoxi was not just important to writers during the early twentieth century, but also emerged as an important object of visual fascination.

Information in/and Modern Chinese Literature: Form and Aesthetics

On the face of it, the genre of literary writing, particularly the kind of vernacular, realist fiction that emerged in the two decades following the May Fourth Movement (1919), may seem far removed from both the conventional forms of information such as train tables or telegrams, as well as the communications technologies that move information. However, a critical survey of the literature and criticism of this period shows instead that modern literature eagerly explored new concepts and practices of information—indeed, China’s modern literature “came of age” alongside information. Information featured prominently in projects exploring a host of urgent local (and global) issues: the promise of positivism, the rise of financial capital, the role of newspapers in public epistemology, the spread of propaganda, the formation of community through new kinds of communicational infrastructures, and so on. As such, it helped mediate for the modern reader the meanings of information and its import on knowledge production, politics, and social formations. Here I find poignant Marshall McLuhan’s suggestion that literature and art serve as “antennae” of the psychic and social implications of technology (and information)
and bring into view new media ecologies. One of the broader contentions of this dissertation is that new fiction did not simply passively reflect the spread of information into everyday life or changes in China’s information order. Information also helped shape new practices of literary writing and reading, as writers and critics integrated forms of information into their works, and began to envision literature itself as a kind of medium of information. Ultimately, literature directly and creatively engaged with information in a variety of ways, sometimes by way of a process of absorption and appropriation, and at other times through a more oppositional logic of resistance in the form of critique, unmasking, or satire.

In 1928 Lu Xun wrote in a letter that “It is true that all literature and art is propaganda, but definitely not all propaganda is literature and art; it’s just like saying that all flowers have color (including white as a color), but not all colors are flowers. The reason that revolutions use literature and art in addition to slogans, placards, reports, telegrams, textbooks, and so on, is because literature and art is literature and art.” Although Lu Xun was referring to an aesthetic value that stands independent from the purely utilitarian realm of propaganda (itself an important form of information management), this logic would seem to equally apply to the conventional divide between literature/art and the utilitarian entity of information: all literature is, potentially, information, but not all information is literature. Given its utilitarian nature, does information have an aesthetics? The answer is yes. Information always has a figuration, a rhetorical appeal. Put differently, like literature, information has certain formal properties, where form may be broadly defined as “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of


repetition and difference."72 The creative works that I analyze show an explicit interest in the forms of information, its patterns and structures. These attempts to foreground the beauty of various forms of information, and to integrate those forms into literary forms, underlies the symbiotic relationship between literature/art and information in Republican China. Such attempts to find beauty in information create an instability in the formal division between literature and more informatic genres (including, per Lu Xun’s quote, such informatic media as placards, reports, and telegrams). Along this line, literature also constitutes a form of information, and can be set within the broader media ecology which helps constitute a given information order. Ultimately, the resulting slippages between information and literature/art lies at the heart of what I call the “aesthetics of information” of this period, and gives these creative pieces their avant-garde and modernist edge.

In accordance with the dual-definition of information, the following chapters identify two types of formal convergences that appeared in the aesthetics of information. On the one hand, I highlight instances where writers experimented with merging forms of narrative fiction with forms of information-as-medium. How could literary forms incorporate or critique forms of data organization such as account books or statistical tables? How did forms like the database or the encyclopedia inspire new modes of literary composition? When did information provide new ways of constructing the real—and when did literary realism seem directly opposed to the abstractive and disembodying qualities of information?

On the other hand, writers also consciously experimented with information-as-communication. In prominent cases, narrative form was adapted to describe the movement of information. Such an orientation toward information as an index of communication helped make

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evident broader systems of social communication by paying special attention to the disposition of communication—the question of “Who/ Says What/ In Which Channel/ To Whom/ With What Effect,” as the communications scholar, Harold Lasswell, pithily put it. In this case, information, particularly informal exchanges as denoted by xiaoxi, indexes a synaptic connection within a broader system of social communication. In such cases, telecommunications infrastructures, including telephone and radio, provided modern writers important metaphors for thinking about social communication and for constructing and articulating their sociological visions. For example, the one-to-many broadcast form of the radio might allow one to envision society in the form of a mass. The importance of this observation is not that mass media are related to mass society—a point that has been amply made by others. Rather, what information helps illuminate about social communication is its inherently networked form in which this mass medium becomes one network form (centralized) amongst other possible dispositions.

Along this line, as we have seen above, already in the late Qing the network was an indispensible form to connect individuals across spatial boundaries and effect a cosmopolitan “great unity.” But by the early 1920s, Liang Qichao was extending this vision of a connected society to argue that society and culture were themselves networks. When it comes to the communicative dimension of information, it would not be an overstatement to say that the aesthetics of information in modern Chinese literature is at once also an aesthetics of networks.

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73 Harold D. Lasswell, “The Structure and Function of Communication in Society,” in Lyman Bryson, ed. *The Communication of Ideas: A Series of Addresses* (New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948), pp. 37-51. See also Jack Burnham, extracts from “Systems Aesthetics,” in *Artforum* (September 1968), 30-35; reprinted in Lars Bang Larsen, ed., *Networks* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 42-46. Although writing about the plastic arts, Burnham’s idea of the system as itself an object of art or artistic identity holds true for forms such as literature: “The systems approach goes beyond a concern with staged environments and happenings; it deals in a revolutionary fashion with the larger problem of boundary concepts. . . In evaluating systems the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output and related activity inside and outside the system. . . For systems, information, in whatever form conveyed, becomes a viable aesthetic consideration” (44).

As we shall see, the different kinds of networks envisioned by these works represented competing political orientations regarding the relationship of the individual and society. To this end, information as communication helps both reveal the social and political importance of network forms in modern literature, and illuminate how different networks either configure with or oppose one another within the broader information order.

Two final notes about the aesthetics of information must be made. The first regards its sensual—particularly visual—orientation. Either because it was so mundane, abstract, or instrumentalizing, one would normally see through information: despite (or because of) its ubiquity in modern life, information was as if invisible. As intellectuals sought to make sense of information in modern life, they experimented with making information something that could be (and should be) made sensible. They desired to show that information had surface and structuration. In doing so, they attempted to visualize (or occasionally auralize) or otherwise apprehend the entity of information by reifying it in some newly sensible form, whether as a narrative object or style, or as an actual schemata of communication. I have already hinted at this in the pictorial realm through the two illustrations of xiāoxì that I discuss above. In all four of my case studies I extend upon this dialectic of invisibility and visibility as it appears in graphical media that deal formally or topically with information. Such images constitute, to borrow the formulation from graphical design, a “visual presentation of invisible processes,” not just in the form of tables or diagrams, but also in attempts to visualize communication or the fourth dimension (ether) through the visual language of representational art such as woodcut print. In what follows I engage with non-textual media such as the woodcut and the data table: not only because such forms were materially entangled with Chinese literature in the pages of

journals and literary supplements, but also because such images were in thematic dialog with literature about what information meant for the modern subject. In some cases, image and text act as critical levers for each other. But at all points one of their main effects is to make information knowable, sensible, thinkable. To be certain, such media were not the only ones attempting to visualize information during this period. One could extend the study of information visualization to other media, in particular film, an important medium which critically engaged with issues of information and communication. I forego close engagement with film not because it is unimportant, but in order to delimit my study for the sake of convenience. It is my hope that this dissertation will open up new avenues for exploring the aesthetics of information in other media not just of the Republican era, but also in the preceding and subsequent periods.

Finally, examining the literary, critical, and visual engagements with information between 1919 and 1949 contributes to our understanding of the relationship between information, literary form, and political subjectivity in the culture of Republican China. At the same time, this revisionist history illuminates important parallels between the literary engagement with information in China and a broader trend of similar experiments in the West and in Japan, ranging from the influence of the telegraph on the development of literary realism in Victorian Britain, to the literary exploration of communications networks in the operation of British empire, to the role of mass media and advertising in the development of modernist

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76 Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism*.

literature in 1920s Japan. The aesthetics of information in China was, in other words, not an instance of “belated modernity,” for although in the 1920s Chinese authors may have been guilty of embracing 19th century Western literary modes such as realism as current (or at least as a necessary stage according to the logic of an evolutionary ladder of progression), by grappling with aspects of modern information they were very much joining their counterparts in other parts of the world. By placing Chinese literature in dialog with the broader global context in which it operated, this dissertation helps us appreciate the richly complex and multivalent history of information in modern literature. In a related vein, while these works are interesting “on their own terms” (though of course the act of reading is always a diachronic act of dialog between the time of the text and the time of the reader), they have also aged well, so to speak, thanks to their resonance with present concerns in China (and elsewhere), particularly regarding some of the hallmarks of postindustrial life: the spread of abstraction, the rise of white-collar information management, and the increasingly important role of network communications in modulating sociality and politics.

Chapter Map

Rather than providing an exhaustive account of the aesthetics of information in modern Chinese literature, the following four chapters examine key vectors that helped constitute (and challenge) such an aesthetics. Though these cases follow a loosely chronological order, my account is episodic instead of linear. In all four cases, I engage closely with the rich visual tradition accompanying the literature under discussion. In an appendix, I also provide my own translations of three short literary pieces which receive analysis in the chapters; these pieces, two

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by Mao Dun and one by Shen Congwen, respectively, serve as additional proof of the need to revisit these well-worn authors from the standpoint of an aesthetics of information.

Chapter One begins with an examination of information in the form of the table (biao) and the diagram (tu), both of which widely proliferated across May Fourth Chinese print culture—including journals primarily devoted to literature and cultural criticism. While these forms of information visualization have gone largely ignored in scholarship today, I argue that they constitute an important form of vernacular modernism that both familiarized the idea of statistical information and data to a broader audience, while also inspiring some intellectuals to experiment with new modes of scientific reading. In particular, I examine how critics used the biao and tu in the service of literary criticism, while also highlighting several important instances where these visualizations were engaged with as objects of beauty in their own right. In Part One, I examine how a group of young psychologists, inspired by the power of the table to organize statistical knowledge, and seeking to produce psychological knowledge about the May Fourth individual, turned to literature as a convenient database for practicing a new form of “enumerative analysis.” In doing so, they discovered the entity of information in Chinese literature both old and new. In Part Two, I explore leftist critics’ attempts to abstract literary narrative into basic formal elements and present them graphically as diagrams. These two modes of using tu and biao to effect new modes of reading also inspired their creators to consider the beauty of information itself, thus contributing to the early development of the period’s aesthetics of information.

Chapter Two turns to the aesthetics of information in relation to literary realism. Here I examine the literature of the famous realist author, Mao Dun (1896-1981), in particular the significant number of his fictional works from the 1930s that deal with financial capitalism.
What greatly interested Mao Dun about financial capitalism was its essential dependence upon the communication and abstraction of information. In describing the communication webs woven by the financial capitalists populating Shanghai’s numerous stock exchanges, Mao Dun produced a critical exploration of the role of information in the subjectivity of the modern individual more generally. Here I suggest we read this imagined individual subject as a kind of modern *homo informaticus* who, like McLuhan’s modern “information-gatherer,” must rely on his or her skills of information management to survive. In Part Two of this chapter, I explore Mao Dun’s attempt to interpellate his reader as an *h. informaticus* in order to teach her how to make sense of all the statistics and news she encountered in newspapers and daily life, particularly so that she could unmask public financial statistics—and the networks of domination that they latently represented—and thereby produce revolutionary knowledge. This didactic project, I show, revolved around Mao Dun’s formalist experimentation with the account book, where literary realism could performatively overcome the abstracting impulse of capitalist reification.

In Chapter Three, I explore the reflexive visualization of broadcast information in the leftist literature and art of the 1930s. An important backdrop to these works, I argue, is the rise of modern propaganda science during the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937). As it became an object of technical knowledge about managing information for the masses, propaganda came to be thought of as a broadcast technology itself. Divorced from any particular context or politics, the science of propaganda became a kind of abstract problem of signal engineering: how to deliver a signal (ideological message) by channeling through noise (whether in the form of counter-propaganda, atmospheric impedance, etc.). I show how the play of signal/noise undergirds both the modernist, political fiction of Ding Ling (1904-1986), and the avant-garde woodcut works by

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the young artists Luo Qingzhen, Huang Xinbo, and Zhang Hui. In total, these evocations of propaganda made sensible the relationship between broadcast media, politics, and information in unprecedented ways, while the aesthetics of information that they developed would resonate strongly with the subsequent cultural dispensation of propaganda in Maoist China after 1949.

If propaganda and the interpellation of the social masses through mass media was becoming an inevitability of politics in the 1930s, it did not go entirely uncontested. Chapter Four turns to the case of Ding Ling’s close friend, Shen Congwen (1902-1988), to examine how he developed an aesthetics of the information explicitly opposed to the rise of the modern propaganda era. I analyze a number of Shen’s avant-garde and politicized works dealing with telecommunications and propaganda, including his last major, novel-length project, Long River (1945), in order to examine Shen’s critical interest in xiaoxi and the social life of information. I show how Shen used xiaoxi to advance an informatic view of society where instead of social masses, he saw social aggregates, connected together through delicately intricate networks of communication, and miscommunication. This view problematized the propagandist’s fantasy of direct communication with the masses via mass media by instead highlighting how local networks of information exchange mediated the meaning of propaganda. Shen’s interest in information and his adoption of the network as a narrative form ultimately constitute a unique contribution to the aesthetics of information in modern China.

In the conclusions of all four chapters I gesture toward how the aesthetics of information under discussion extends beyond the bookend date of 1949, whether it be to the early socialist period or to the rise of quantitative cultural analysis in more recent years. In the dissertation’s general conclusion, I turn to the legacy of these themes in China in more recent years. Overall,
the aesthetics of information from the Republican period sets an important precedent and cultural touchstone for an evolving embrace of, and abiding fascination with, information today.
Figure 1: Image of the movement of xiaoxi as portrayed in the newspaper, Shenbao (Oct. 1907). Here the image criticizes the intervening role of foreign technologies in transmitting “secret information” [秘密消息] from the imperial court at the top, to the “public” [民间] below.
Figure 2: “Well-Informed” (1911). The caption reads for the bottom register reads: “The Youth Discusses the Newspaper: Yesterday at the Clear Sky Pavilion Tea House [in Beijing] there was a child of eight or nine years of age who took up different newspapers. While drinking tea, he discussed the newspaper with his grandfather, speaking with great gusto, and greatly attracting the interest of others. (It was boundless.)”
Chapter One: Distant Reading as a Vernacular Modern: *Tu, Biao*, and the Aesthetics of Information in China’s New Culture Movement
People who, thanks to statistics, “see” something intellectually they could not see sensually, are put in a curious position. They know something that they can never experience themselves. They have a kind of knowledge that no mortal can have. Statistics offer a kind of gnosis, a mystic transcendence of individuality, a tasting of the forbidden fruit of knowledge. But what a strange and ironically modern kind of gnosis... This new kind of knowledge—knowledge that absolves individuals from the claims of deixis, of existing at one place and at one moment—is of course none other than information.


Whatever exists, exists in some amount. To measure it is simply to know its varying amounts. Man sees no less beauty in flowers now than before the day of quantitative botany... If any virtue is worth seeking, we shall seek it more eagerly the more we know and measure it.”

Edward L. Thorndike, Speech at Columbia University, 1921

In a lecture at Southeastern University in Nanjing in November of 1922, the reformist intellectual, Liang Qichao (1873-1929), excitedly reported on a new method of historical inquiry that he and his colleagues were working to develop: “statistical historiography” [统计历史学].

As its name suggests, the method derived from the application of the principles of statistics to historical data in order to identify larger historical trends and produce new knowledge. Liang

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82 I cite from the *Liang Qichao quanji*, ed. ed. Yang Gang and Wang Xiangyi. (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1999), 4045-4050). Liang gave a similar lecture on November 10th, 1922, at the Historical Geography Association at National Southeast University [东南大学] in Nanjing. An abridged transcription and accompanying statistical table were published in the widely-circulating Chenbao literary supplement [晨报副刊], Nov. 28-30, 1922, p. 1-2. The essay was then again reprinted in *Journal of Historical Geography* [史地学报], Vol. 2, no. 2 (1923), 1-8.
demonstrates the usefulness of his method by turning to the rise and fall of population in China from dynasty to dynasty, an issue he had already taken up in 1903 in the pages of his journal, *Xinmin congbao*, while he was exiled in Japan. When Liang had originally examined the question nearly twenty years prior, his quantitative approach to population served as the basis for a dual critique of the imperial government: on the one hand, it launched a complaint about official tallies of population and their unreliability. On the other hand, it was a Malthusian critique of state population management under the Qing’s governance. But why was he returning to the question of statistics and Chinese history nearly twenty years later?

The answer lies in the direction of the relationship between historiography and statistics. Whereas earlier, Liang had sought to use history to unpack a popular statistic (China’s population as four hundred million, and its implication for China’s domestic politics and international standing\(^\text{84}\), in 1922, he was keen to reverse the relationship: statistics were now to be placed in the service of writing history. This reversal was, Liang notes, inspired in particular both by the statistical tables, *biao* [表], employed by modern social science, as well as by his forays into works of late imperial scholarship such as the monumental *Tableaux of Events in the Spring and Autumn Period* (1748), by the Qing evidentiary scholar, Gu Donggao [顾栋高] (1679-1759). In this latter volume, Gu had disintegrated [折碎] the text of the *Zuozhuan* into fragments and reconstituted it as a series of extended tables systematically organizing the events, people, and places mentioned in the text (Figure 3), thus effecting what Liang praised as “the

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spirit of statistical study” (4045). In adopting the biao, Gu (and by extension Liang himself) was of course inheriting a form that dated back to antiquity, popularized in the Han dynasty thanks to Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian* [史记]. As a tool of rigorous tabulation and organization, the biao lent itself to the kinds of quantitative analysis then being translated into Chinese from western texts. The combined rigor of the modern and traditional techniques allowed the researcher to gainfully account for aggregates of small details that would otherwise remain hidden away in plain sight. This was important, Liang argued, for

if one wants to know the true face of history [历史真相], one absolutely must not be satisfied with only examining the great figures and events of the surface level; the most important thing is to identify the active changes happening throughout an entire society. [Such trends] can only be identified in a collective and relative way. Usually very small affairs [很小的事] are totally overlooked by most scholars, but if one day one aggregated all the events of this scale, researching disparate elements in a unified way, then one can discover wondrous phenomena and invent useful theorems. . . . The usefulness of statistics lies in its ability to “observe macroscopic trends” [观其大较]. In other words, it focuses on the *average state of various matters*, distributing them evenly to calculate a comprehensive account [拉匀了算总帐]. (4045; emphasis added)

The secret of a comprehensive historiography, then, is to balance between “small affairs” (such as incidental details, e.g. a minor person’s place of birth) and “macroscopic trends” that can be mediated through numeric calculation. By way of illustrating his method, Liang mines the twenty-four dynastic histories [通史] for geographical information about people’s place of birth in order to compose a table of population trends by province from the East Han to the Ming Dynasties (Figure 4). As Liang explains, the table’s results show trends that might otherwise go

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undetected by even a careful reader of the textual tradition. Indeed, it is precisely the act of close
reading that stands in the way of tabular, macroscopic reading, for it is not the small significant
details in their own right, but rather their aggregate that renders up the macroscopic view. Ever
the visionary, Liang proposes to extensively data-mine the dynastic histories in their entirety to
produce a comprehensive macroscopic analysis of China’s history: a set of twenty-four dynastic
tableaux [通表] to accompany the twenty-four regular volumes of history.

       Unfortunately Liang did not live to conduct the initiation of such an ambitious
undertaking. But his proposed method and its preliminary application to the problem of
population distribution throughout China’s history influenced a generation of young scholars.
For example, the future renowned scholar of antiquity (and Liang’s student at Tsinghua
University), Wei Juxian [卫聚贤] (1899-1989), adopted statistical historiography in his essay,
“The Organization of National Studies Using Methods of Applied Statistics” [应用统计的方法
整理国学], which appeared in the popular journal, Eastern Miscellany [东方杂志] in 1929.87
Echoing Liang’s emphasis on the role of the biao in organizing and studying data, Wei included
a detailed discussion on the importance of visualizing the results of the statistical knowledge
production. To illustrate his point, Wei incorporated a number of impressively detailed graphs
on the distribution of events of the Warring States Period as they appeared in different classical
sources such as the Spring and Autumn Annals, the Zuozhuan commentary, and the Guoyu
(Figures 5 & 6). Furthermore, in a 1935 review and critique of the subfield that Liang’s original

87 In Dongfangzazhi, Vol. 26, no. 14, 73-84.
essay had inspired, the scholar Yang Chengbo [杨成柏] listed no less than six other research works that took their cue from Liang’s 1922 lecture.88

Liang’s fascination with the relationship between the minute and the massive resembles the interdisciplinary and quantitative style of the long durée developed by the historians of the Annales movement just then in its nascent form in France.89 More piquing, however, is the degree to which Liang’s call to observe the “macroscopic trends” of complex systems resonates with the notion of “distant reading” famously proposed by Franco Moretti (himself inspired by Braudel) in his analysis of another complex system, the global history of the novel. “Distance . . . is a condition of knowledge: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems,” Moretti writes.90 Moretti’s subsequent experimentation with a statistical approach to world literature in his influential work, Graphs, Maps, Trees, expands the argument: “a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases [i.e. through close reading of national

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88 “The Fundamental Problem of Statistical Historiography” [历史统计学底根本问题], in Research and Critique [研究与批判], Vol. 1, no. 1 (1935), 75-8. This list—by no means comprehensive—is as follows: Ding Wenjiang [丁文江], “The Relationship between Historical Personages and Geography” [历史人物与地理之关系]; Zhu Junyi [朱君毅], “The Geographical Distribution of Education and Occupation Modern China’s Personages” [现代中国人物之地理教育与职业的分布] and “The Geographical Distribution of Chinese Historical Personages” [中国历代人物之地理的分布]; Zhang Xiaoxiang [张耀祥] “Spatial Yield of Talent in China” [中国人才产生地]; Yu Tianxiu [余天文], “Analysis of Personages in China from the Last Thirty Years” [中国近三十年人物底分析]; and Chu Shaotang [褚绍唐], “Contemporary Geographical Distribution of Famous People in China” [当代我国名人之地理的分布]. To this list we should add two more articles: Liu Linsheng [刘麟生], “Space, Time, and Literati” [空间与文学家], in Jinling nüzi daxue xiaokan, No. 11 (1929), 44-53; as well as Liang’s own follow-up study, “The Geographical Distribution of Modern Academic Style” [近代学风之地理的分布], in Qinghua xuebao Vol. 1, no. 1 (1924), 2-37. Yang’s critique of such studies is their conflation of social and environmental causality in their interpretation of the historical distribution of social actors.


90 “Conjectures on World Literature,” in New Left Review, 1: January-February, 2000. Online at: http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature (accessed 9/15/2014). Moretti’s provocation has been largely taken up in the nascent field of digital humanities, which has tended to overlook the article’s original point about thinking of world literature as a holistic—though uneven—system governed by “natural laws” of development (paralleling the spread of capitalism and modernity).
histories, or individual novels themselves], because . . . it’s a collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole." With its proposal to tabulate data from the large textual corpus of dynastic histories, Liang’s statistical historiography similarly sought to produce an “abstract model for literary history” (the subtitle of Moretti’s book). Beyond the rendering of text into abstracted, numeric data, the most important parallel between Liang and Moretti is their appeals to the epistemic importance of vision, seeing as a way of knowing, that is manifest in their shared enthusiasm over visualizing information in synchronic, nonlinear forms such as the table, graph, or map. Such visual forms come at the cost of the effacement of text at the conventional level of semantic reading, for between “the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears.” To both Liang and Moretti, the tradeoff is justified given that these modern visual forms represent a new, more scientific and “rational” (Moretti, 4) approach to humanistic inquiry, and in turn open up new ways for interpreting history.

Liang’s interest in statistics and tables is also symptomatic of a wider emergence in the late Qing and the early Republican of what the historian, Tong Lam, calls the “passion for facts,” a new interest in “not only the collection of empirical facts by trained experts but also the ordering, classification, calculation, preservation, and circulation of facts for governing

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92 And it should be noted both that Liang’s collaborator on the project was his student, the geologist and frequent mapmaker, Ding Wenjiang [丁文江] (1887-1936), as well as that the original audience of Liang’s lecture and publication were historical geographers.

93 *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, 4.

94 In this regard, Liang notes how scholarship is concerned with the “what” [如此如此] and “why” [为什么如此如此] of history; statistical historiography primarily expands our ability to know the “what,” but leaves open the question of interpretation.
purposes.” While Lam’s study focuses on social surveys and their role in new modes of governance, as Liang Qichao’s embrace of statistics indicates, the positivistic passion for facts and quantitative analysis also extended into previously unquantifiable humanistic subjects such as history and philology. In particular, the dynamic period of the early 1920s represents a watershed in the history of statistical analysis of cultural fields and the flourishing of new ways of visualizing information, producing new facts about the individual subject and society. What remains to be examined is the extent and contour of the impact these forms of “distant reading” had upon writing in the New Culture period. In what ways did critics seek to render information from subjective or nebulous fields? How were the tabulation of data and the visualization of information reconfiguring subjective practices of reading, writing, and interpretation of literature? These were important questions in an era that saw the so-called “science versus metaphysics” debate over the role of modern science in defining the knowability of the human subject.

This chapter takes its cue from Liang’s statistical historiography to examine parallel experiments in China’s literary criticism of the period. In Parts One and Two, I examine a number of critical works on China’s literary tradition and the Chinese language written by a collective of young psychologists in 1920s Beijing. This group was composed largely of students who had returned to China from studying abroad, in particular at Columbia University and Teachers College during the 1910s and early ‘20s. Even in the heady May Fourth atmosphere of Beijing, these scholars stand out for their energetic institution-building,


intellectual fecundity, and prolific research. Foremost amongst them was Zhang Yaoxiang (张耀翔) (1893-1964), the first president of the Chinese Psychology Society and founder of the first journal of modern psychology in China, *Psychology* [心理]. This journal proved to be the central venue not only for introducing and advancing the discipline of experimental psychology in China, but also for initiating experiments with the statistical analysis of culture, including literature and language. The intellectual interests of Liang Qichao (who was a mutual admirer of Zhang Yaoxiang’s) dovetailed with those of the modern psychologists; not only did Liang Qichao attend events organized by the Chinese Psychological Society, he also published a major article in *Xinli* introducing the Buddhist conception of psychology—perhaps the journal’s only instance of a publication in which the methodology was explicitly non-western.\(^9^7\) Likewise, following Liang’s attempt at mapping the geographical distribution of population in China’s long history, the young psychologists, too, investigated the relationship between geography and population by variously tapping different textual data sources. Zhang Yaoxiang went as far as to complete two articles on the subject, one a measure of spatial distribution of “talent” [天才] in China, and the other an analysis of the geographical distribution of advanced scholar (jinshi) degrees in the Qing.\(^9^8\) Zhang and his colleagues built upon the methods of statistical analysis of culture and history proposed by Liang Qichao, in effect creating a new practice of “enumerative analysis” which they happily extended to literary corpora. As I further explore in Part Two, the tabulative research of Zhang and his colleagues represents the first time in China’s history that literature was read from a distance, by way of a radical convergence between the semantic

\(^{97}\) *Xinli* Vol. 1, no. 4 (1922), 1-16.

\(^{98}\) See, Zhang Yaoxiang, “China’s Seedbed for Talent” [中国人才产生地], *Chenbao fukan* 1926, Nov. 24\(^{th}\) and Nov. 25\(^{th}\) issues; and Zhang Yaoxiang, “Geographic Distribution of Jinshi Degrees in the Qing” [清代进士之地理的分布], *Xinli* Vol. 4, No. 1 (1926), 1-12.
reading of the conventional critic, and the data-driven analysis of the modern scientist. Concurrently, they joined counterparts in the west who were similarly counting words to produce new linguistic and literary knowledge.\textsuperscript{99}

Ultimately the question of whether Liang was first inspired by the \textit{biao}/table or whether it merely provided him an expedient means for a self-avowedly scientific study of history is a chicken-or-egg inquiry. But there can be no doubt that the rise of modern statistics in cultural production is inseparable from the rise of new technologies of communicating the results, for as Chen Heqin [陈鹤琴], one of the modern psychologists, noted in his survey of different tabular and diagrammatic representations in 1924, such visualizations of information provided an expedient means for popularizing information and creating commensurability.\textsuperscript{100} Zhang and his colleagues primarily used \textit{biao} to frame the series of individual, discrete units that they took as objects of analysis. In contrast to such an approach, the “diagrammatic analysis” [图解] of literature promoted by several critics in the early 1930s to which I turn in Part Three sought to summarize and analyze plot structure through the graphical means of the \textit{tu}, the diagram. Such analyses present a form of abstraction in order to produce visual information out of sets of narrative relations. Though they paralleled the contemporary work of the Russian critic, Vladimir Propp (1895-1970), on Russian folktales, the diagrammatic analyses of critics such as He Yubo [贺玉波] and Wang Xipeng [汪喜鹏] were more explicitly normative, seeking to prescribe literary practice rather than describe them.


\textsuperscript{100} See his “Diagrammatic Methods of Reporting Statistics” [图表式的统计报告法], in \textit{New Education} [新教育] Vol. 8, no. 1 (1924), 46-59.
The importance of the two separate but related trends represented by such modes of distant reading—analysis via biao and analysis via tu—is twofold. First of all, such experiments arose during a dynamic period when the western scientific and cultural disciplines were just taking firm root in China—even the category of “literature” itself, as Lydia Liu has shown, was far from being stable, but rather constituted an object of contestation and redefinition.¹⁰¹ Like “literature,” literary criticism needed to be reoriented as a modern practice, and May Fourth scholars accordingly incorporated the kind of scientific methods for textual interpretation famously advocated by Hu Shi (1891-1962), who called for two-step scientific method of hypothesis formation, and verification using evidence.¹⁰² Yu Pingbo (1900-1990) and Gu Jiegang (1893-1980) explicitly adopted Hu Shi’s precepts in their reappraisal of the classic novel, Dream of the Red Chamber, in their attempt to establish a self-avowedly modern form of criticism, a “new Redology” [新红学]. However, in establishing and solely adhering to historical facts about the creation of the text, their literary analysis still largely involved the subjective interpretation of motivations of the author, and the relationship between biography and fictional narrative. By contrast, the critics I discuss below eschewed Yu’s and Gu’s Freudian readings of authors. Enumerative and diagrammatic criticism did not just follow from facts, but rather sought to render literature into information, and from this information create new facts

¹⁰¹ Translingual Practice, 235-6.

¹⁰² See Louise Edwards, “New Hongxue and the ‘Birth of the Author’: Yu Pingbo’s ‘On Qin Keqing’s Death’,” in Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR), Vol. 23 (Dec. 2001), pp. 31-54. Interestingly, like Liang Qichao’s gesture to Gu Donggao and the evidential scholarship of the Qing, Hu Shi drew inspiration from Dai Zhen [戴震] (1723-1777) and the latter’s exhortation to “Only investigate appropriately; and do not stubbornly hold onto silly ideas” [宜推求，勿为株守] (Edwards, 37). For a further discussion of Hu Shi’s scientific, author-centric approach to the Dream of the Red Chamber, as well as other contemporary attempts to render facts from the text in the early 1920s, see Haun Saussy, “The Age of Attribution: Or, How the ‘Honglou Meng’ Finally Acquired an Author;” in CLEAR, Vol. 25 (Dec. 2003), 119-132.
about literature itself. In doing so, its supporters contributed to the articulation of what modern literature could and should be.

Nothing made this information and the literary knowledge which derived from it more available than the new forms of visualizing information and organizing it for access that sprung up in modern Chinese print culture, particularly in New Culture journals, in the form of diagrams, graphs, tables, and maps. Apart from their unprecedented proliferation across print media and espousal of new graphical forms, what makes the visualizations published in twentieth century China modern is their association with modern sciences such as psychology, statistics, or economics: they both perform science and communicate its objects of knowledge. In a sense, envisioning technical knowledge was not in and of itself modern, but rather formed a longstanding and well-developed practice in China before the twentieth century. As Francesca Bray points out, already by the Song the scholar Zheng Qiao [鄭樵] (1104-1162) had elaborated the possibilities and advantages of *tu* [图] for the “spatial encoding . . . of factual information.”

Over the course of two millennia, China’s dynamic tradition of diagrams, schemata, or graphic representations was meant to reproduce technical knowhow involving diverse fields from geography and astronomy to mathematics and cosmology, and to make such knowledge actionable: *tu* were “programmes for action, process-oriented schemas, functional representations and blueprints.” As Liang Qichao alluded to in his celebration of Gu Donggao, such premodern conventions only made modern conventions such as statistical tables or plotlines that much more appealing and mobile.

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103 Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China, 3.

104 Ibid, 5.
Indeed, like the “fluidity” of information itself, these forms of information visualization were particularly mobile, moving rapidly across different disciplines, through different media, across national boundaries. The aesthetics and rhetorical appeal underlying these biao and tu visualizations provides the second reason to revisit the works of Zhang Yaoxiang and He Yubo, namely how they respectively index the rise of an important strain of “vernacular modernism” that joins other vernaculars like film in mediating both the meaning and the dispensation of modernity in China and elsewhere.105 Unlike the spectacle of cinema, the visualization of information is a particularly banal form of vernacular modernism—“both material and mundane, since they are so practical, so modest, so pervasive, so close to the hands and eyes that they escape attention,” writes Bruno Latour in building his argument that such visualization played a key role in the advancement of the scientific age in the west.106 Such banality helps in part to explain why these visualizations have largely been overlooked in scholarship on China’s modern print culture, despite their appearance in scientific and popular journals alike, including New Youth and Eastern Miscellany.107 To think of the data visualization as it was practiced in China during the 1920s and ‘30s as a form of vernacular modernism is to place these local practices in dialogue with the more global epoch, for if the period between the mid-nineteenth century and mid-twentieth century saw the rapid spread of statistical science and the rise of systematic data

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105 On this formulation, see Miriam Hansen, “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” in Film Quarterly Vol. 54, no. 1 (2000), 10-22.

106 Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands,” Knowledge and Society no. 6, p. 3.

107 The one exception being Tong Lam’s discussion of Cai Yuanpei (1868-1940) and his introduction to Chen Changheng A Treatise on Chinese Population (1918). As Lam concludes: “The social scientific style of reasoning would not have been so effective and persuasive had it not also provided the condition for a new kind of visual experience in which strategies of seeing also became those of knowing, namely, Cai Yuanpei’s ‘understanding at a glance’” (48). (It should be noted that Lam is perhaps overstating the profundity of Cai Yuanpei’s introduction, a text that is less than two small pages in length.) See A Passion for Facts, 44-49.
collection, the same period also produced a “golden age of statistical graphics” in places such as America, Britain, and the Soviet Union. Wherever this form of vernacular converged with modern practices of critical reading, it radically restructured what was known, knowable, and worthy about a text or textual corpus.

Part One: Discovering Data in Texts and the Development of Enumerative Criticism: Psychology and Poetry in 1920s Beijing

Born in Hankou in 1893 and educated at a missionary school, Zhang Yaoxiang’s career arc looks familiar to those who study the intellectual history of modern China. Zhang was inspired to pursue new knowledge after encountering the works of Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, and in 1913 he matriculated at Tsinghua University, graduating two years later in 1915, and studying in America on a Boxer fellowship. Zhang completed a year at Amherst College before transferring to Columbia University, from where he earned both his B.A. (1918) and M.A. (1919) in psychology. Originally intending to stay on and pursue a Ph.D., in 1920 Zhang was recruited by Chen Baoquan to return to Beijing and take up a position at the Beijing Advanced Normal School [北京高等师范学校; the future Beijing Normal University], of which Chen Baoquan was then president.

When he arrived at Columbia in 1916, Zhang joined a number of young Chinese students studying psychology and education there and at Teachers College, including the future president of Peking University and eminent politician, Chiang Mon-lin [蔣夢麟] (1886-1964), Chuang Chai-hsuan [莊澤宣], and the theologian and psychologist, Lew Ting-fang [刘廷芳] (1892-

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1947); the latter two, upon their return to China in the early 1920s, were active members of the Chinese Psychology Society [中华心理学会] in Beijing. In their devotion to their fields as key areas for reforming China into a modern nation, the Chinese students at Columbia and Teachers College would go on to significantly contribute to the foundation in China of psychology and education as modern scientific disciplines. Many of them specifically took up questions of the vernacularization of writing, literacy education, and literary reform.

The zeitgeist at Columbia’s Department of Psychology was dominated by the presence of Edward L. Thorndike (1874-1949), an enormously prolific behavioral psychologist who was a prominent expert in learning and cognition in animals and a leader in the so-called “testing movement.” By Thorndike’s time, the passion for precise numeric measurement and positivism had died down in the physical sciences following the adoption of probabilistic models of the universe articulated by Gibbs, Boltzmann, and Maxwell. However, in social and cognitive sciences the interest in bringing positivism and statistical rigor to bear upon subjects previously outside the realm of objective science was waxing, not waning. As this chapter’s opening epigraphy suggests, Thorndike was an unabashed proponent of objective measurement, arguing that even subjective processes such as perception and intelligence could and should be measured. At Columbia, his biographer notes, he was committed to “converting future educators


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and psychologists to numbers.”¹¹³ From its inception, Columbia’s psychology faculty, including the eminent founder of the department, James Cattell (1860-1944), were committed to psychometrics and statistical analysis across all fields of psychology.¹¹⁴ But Thorndike brought a particular zeal to the issue, seeking a convergence between the psychologist and the engineer in an attempt to rationalize the study of psychic life: “Taylorites and Thorndikeans seek precise measurements and the analytical reduction of either bricklaying or learning to spell into all its calculable atoms of behavior. The disciples of Thorndike’s Introduction to the Theory of Mental and Social Measurements are building statistical laboratories in university departments of psychology and education . . . [they] are possessed of what can be called an obsession with quantified observation.”¹¹⁵

Thorndike was particularly keen on applying psychology to the acquisition of literacy and improvement of student performance—a project that mirrored the concerns over mass literacy and pedagogy that circulated amongst intellectuals in China in the late 1910s and early ‘20s.¹¹⁶ One of his most influential studies in this area was his The Measurement of Ability in Reading (1914), which provided model methods for testing literacy. By far his most impactive work, however, was his massive undertaking in 1920 of a word frequency list for children’s education, which resulted in The Teacher’s Word Book, published in 1921.¹¹⁷ In its pedagogical

¹¹³ Joncich, The Sane Positivist, 289.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 293. In a manner not dissimilar from Liang’s and others attempts to measure talent in China, Cattell developed the quantitative measurement of the intellectual output in the field of science in early twentieth America. See Benoit Godin, “From Eugenics to Scientometrics: Galton, Cattell, and Men of Science;” in Social Studies of Science Vol. 37, no. 5 (October, 2007), 691-728.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 308.


¹¹⁷ New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1921. After further counting and the assimilation of other counts, Thorndike’s list was expanded and republished twice, first in 1931 (this time listing 20,000 words), and
aspirations, Thorndike’s project is the predecessor to the much larger program initiated around “Basic English,” the 850-word list compiled by Charles Kay Ogden and published in 1930. Ogden certainly was well aware of Thorndike’s work but critiqued the latter’s overly statistical approach to compilation as impractical for the needs of the foreign learner of English. But ultimately both projects fit within the broader intellectual trend of the early decades of the twentieth century to rationally analyze vocabularies. What made Thorndike’s work unprecedented is the immensity of the database, which he compiled, as is detailed in the very first paragraph of the book’s introduction:

_The Teacher’s Word Book_ is an alphabetical list of the 10,000 words which are found to occur most widely in a count of about 625,000 words from literature for children; about 3,000,000 words from the Bible and English classics [which were culled from concordances of the Bible, Shakespeare, Pope, etc.]; about 300,000 words from elementary-school text books; and about 50,000 words from books about cooking, sewing, farming, the trades, and the like; about 90,000 words from the daily newspapers; and about 500,000 words from correspondence. Forty-one different sources were used. (iii)

Such counting represents an immense amount of labor, a fact to which Thorndike alludes when he suggests that “tens of thousands of hours of further counting would be required” to shore up his dataset perfectly (iv). At over 4.5 million words in total, Thorndike judged this set of data again in 1944 (now with a whopping 30,000 words). The original version is available in digital copy at: [http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001183366](http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001183366) (accessed 2/12/15). An explication of the project is provided by Thorndike in the _Teachers College Record_ no. 22 (1921): “Word Knowledge in the Elementary School,” pp.334-370.

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119 See ibid, which lists other contemporary attempts to measure word statistics and the sizes of individuals’ vocabularies, not just in English but also in Spanish and Germany (24-42).

120 See Thorndike’s explanation of the list compilation in _A Teacher’s Word Book of the Twenty Thousand Words Found Most Frequently and Widely in General Reading for Children and Young People_ (New York: Teachers College, 1932), Appendix A, 165-178.

121 An extraordinarily productive scholar, Thorndike’s obsession with the word count stands out in particular. Joncich notes an anecdote from a colleague of Thorndike’s relating how the latter had skipped a post-lecture
sufficiently large enough to calculate “credit-numbers” for words measuring the overall frequency of a given word, as well as its range (i.e. the number of different texts across which it appears). The rigor of the study and its engagement with an accessible database made up of common texts had natural appeal to others looking to analyze and rationalize language pedagogy in their own contexts. As such, it comes as no surprise that Thorndike’s method was introduced into Chinese only one year after his *Word Book* was published when the psychologist Chen Heqin published a short history of enumerative lexicography centering on Thorndike’s recent achievement.122

Studying at Columbia, Zhang was similarly taking up counting and statistical analysis as an applied approach to the efficiency of written communication. However, unlike Thorndike, who focused on the acquisition of reading and writing skills, Zhang was interested in the speed of reading. This problem was urgent for coping with the modern condition, for, as Zhang explains in the introduction of his master’s thesis, “The man of to-day may be defined as a reading animal. When everybody reads, and some do scarcely anything else, and the amount to be read increases daily, it is highly desirable that reading should be made as easy and rapid as possible.”123

Increasing the speed of information acquisition would at best be a coping mechanism (for presumably humankind’s access to information would continue to outpace the average ability to read), but nonetheless an important issue to which psychological research could make a

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122 “Character Repertoires for Language Learning: A History of Repertoire Research” [应用字汇：字汇研究之历史], in *New Education* [新教育], Vol. 5, no. 5, 74.

123 Chang, Yao-Chiang [Zhang Yaoxiang], “Factors affecting the speed and clearness of reading Chinese” (Master’s thesis, Columbia University, 1919), 1. All further page citations are given in-text.
significant contribution. To Zhang, this was particularly the case for reading Chinese characters and the spatial conventions of Chinese print culture. Reforming these could promote the pillars of New Culture, Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy, and in turn improve China’s position on the modern world stage. In his thesis project he set out to quantitatively measure the difference in reading speed and information acquisition between English and Chinese. He separated the overall problem into two different frames: the subjective factors of reading speed (i.e. those variables related to individual ability), and the “external conditions” of reading, including factors such as quality and color of paper, the arrangement of print matter, and typography (5). It was in the materiality of the text that Zhang hoped to make his intervention, for unlike the individual physiology or background training of the reader, the medium was easier to control for and adjust. In a series of experiments, Zhang tested the speed of horizontal versus vertical reading of English, Chinese, and abstract symbols, and the correlation between this speed to the native language of the reader (27-43); the effect of western punctuation marks, spacing, and capital letters on the reading speed of passages and sentences (44-50); the effect of capitalization or other distinguishing markers of proper names on reading speed of Chinese text (51-54); the difference in the reading speeds of Chinese numerals, English number words, and Arabic numerals (55-57); and the impact of “side-signs” (the small circles traditionally placed alongside Chinese text to denote emphasis) on the subject’s ability to apprehend the text (58-59). Overall, these experiments contribute to the rationalization of Chinese typography and increase reading speed and comprehension: to this end, Zhang concludes by suggesting that Chinese typography work to include western punctuation, markings for proper-names, the adoption of Arabic numerals, and the elimination of emphatic “side-signs” (60-1).
Zhang’s engagement with the graphic elements of Chinese printed text anticipates the kinds of typographic and punctuational reforms that would be advocated and performed in China’s New Culture movement. More to the point, such work and his time at Columbia in general imparted in Zhang a zeal for measurement, which he brought back to China when he returned to Beijing in 1920. What interested Zhang the most was the measurement of intelligence, a field that landed at the intersection between education science and psychology, and echoed the general interest in eugenics in China at the time. Zhang would devote much of his research energy to introducing, developing, and employing intelligence testing in China during the 1920s. But his involvement in this field represented his fascination with modern positivistic science for measuring and quantitatively analyzing subjective objects previously considered immeasurable. His statement in the opening of his article, “The Origin of Testing Intelligence and Learning” from a decade later in 1932 retrospectively captures this enthusiasm, where he rhetorically asked, “Amongst the multitudinous affairs and things of the world, what can be known in its size, multiplicity, length, weight, strength, duration—in short, its ‘level of appropriateness’—without undergoing measurement?”

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124 It should also be noted that Zhang Yaoxiang was not the sole Chinese in the US researching the speed of learning and reading Chinese. This list includes such figures as Timothy Tingfang Lew’s project on the psychology of learning Chinese (Lew, 16). See also: “A Comparative Study of Reading Chinese in Vertical and Horizontal Columns,” by Li Kiang Chen (PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 1925); and “A Study of the Relative Merits of the Vertical and Horizontal Lines in Reading Chinese Print,” by Chung-yuan Chang (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 1942).

125 Frank Dikotter, Imperfect Conceptions: Medical Knowledge, Birth Defects, and Eugenics in China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), Ch. 3.

126 In Zhang Yaoxiang, ed. Selections from the Journal, Psychology [心理杂志选存] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1932), Vol. 2, 679. This two-volume publication was a republication of the most influential essays carried in Xinli during its six-year print run.
In Beijing, Zhang was a founding member of the Chinese Psychology Society [中华心理学会] in 1921, and served until 1927 as its first president, and in 1922 he inaugurated the Society’s journal, *Psychology (Xinli)*, for which he would serve as chief editor until it stopped publication in 1927. Working in tandem, the Society and its journal were the driving force in the establishment of psychology as a modern scientific discipline in China during the 1920s.

Socially, the group was composed of young professionals who had studied in America. The Society gave itself a broad mission of supporting cultural and social reform in China, and its founding manifesto declared that psychology had application not just for education and medicine, but also for fields as disparate as law, “everyday life,” and art.\(^\text{127}\)

The members of the Association were interested in institution-building, and they especially sought to create an apparatus for clinical research. Such clinical research could, they believed, help strengthen the nation, in particular through the development of intelligence testing that could be used to improve the training and performance of children and adults. This overarching project, which drew inspiration from Francis Galton (and also echoed Liang’s and others’ studies of the geographical distribution of genius in China’s history), proved to be a lasting interest throughout the following decades, and from 1920 onward resulted in a barrage of articles introducing methods and principles of testing.\(^\text{128}\) But, as young faculty located in universities across Beijing (including Yen-ching University, National University of Peking, Peking National Normal University, and Peking Women’s College), as well as in several other

\(^{127}\)“The Objectives of this Journal” [本杂志宗旨], in *Xinli* Vol. 1, no. 1 (1922), 1.

major cities such as Shanghai (Fudan University) and Tianjin (Nankai University), Zhang and his colleagues lacked resources to set up laboratories. As one contemporary observer stressed, “Although most, if not all, of [these universities] have some apparatus for demonstration and elementary laboratory courses, none has yet a regular laboratory building for research in experimental or animal work.”¹²⁹ This turned out to be a productive obstacle, for without labs to generate data, Zhang and his colleagues turned to innovative methods and sources in order to produce datasets for analysis. One important source for data turned out to be China’s textual tradition, as, in the vein of Thorndike’s work, Zhang and others counted up words in dictionaries and primers to analyze various dynamics of the Chinese writing system. Overall, China’s literary texts presented rich sources of data if one were willing to enumerate; for, as Liang Qichao had stressed in his lecture in 1922, there was information gold in those hills of paper.

One such study was produced by Tao Deyi [陶德怡], who analyzed the nearly 47,000 character entries in the Kangxi Dictionary (compiled 1710).¹³⁰ Compiling a lengthy index and twenty-six tables, Tao sought to produce a comprehensive analysis of the auspicious and pejorative single-characters in Chinese in order to understand the cultural construction of morality and its relation to the Chinese writing system. Even more ambitious was Chen Heqin’s Thorndikean enumerative analysis of word frequency in Chinese for the purpose of creating a rationalized vocabulary list for early learners of Chinese writing, which he first published as an exploratory paper in 1922.¹³¹ Chen and his two assistants (whom, unlike Thorndike, Chen


acknowledges by name) counted over 550,000 characters from sources that included the Chinese translation of the Bible, recently published children’s literature, and May Fourth periodicals such as Women’s Journal [妇女杂志], as well as literary sources such as selections from the popular Saturday [礼拜六], and significant portions of traditional vernacular masterworks Journey to the West, Dream of the Red Chamber, and Water Margin (pp. 990-993). In the manner of Thorndike, Chen produced several tables of frequency distribution (Figure 7). In 1928, after several years supervising nine assistants and expanding the database to 900,000 characters, Chen turned the study into a book, published by the Commercial press as part of its Education Reform Series. Throughout the course of the 1920s, Chen’s study was widely influential, proving instrumental to such figures as Tao Xingzhi [陶行知] (1891-1981), a prominent figure in the progressive education movement that flourished between 1919 and 1927, who used Chen’s list as the basis for his own updated Thousand Character Classic [千字经], the Thousand Characters for the Common People [平民千字课] (1923), aimed at promoting mass literacy. Building off such work, Zhang Yaoxiang also made use of Chen’s research as a baseline to measure the utility of the classical children’s primer in wide use since the Song, the Three Character Classic [三字经].

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132 The book study in particular closely parallels the structure and presentation of Thorndike’s Word List. See Chen Heqin, Character Repertoires for Language Learning (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1928).

133 Shanghai: Zhonghua pingmin jiaoyu cujin hui, 1923.

134 See Tao’s preface (dated 1925) in ibid, as well as Hubert O. Brown, “Tao Xingzhi: Progressive Educator in Republican China,” Biography Vol. 13, no. 1 (Winter 1990), 21-42.

135 Zhang found that of 537 different characters appearing in the Three Character Classic, 60% are also listed in Chen’s list. See “The Most Influential Elementary School Textbook of the Last Six Hundred Years” [六百年来最有势力的小学校教科书], in New Education Review [新教育评论], Vol. 1, no. 3 (1925), 11-15, and no. 4 (1925), 16-19.
The at-hand nature, accessibility, and convenience of textual data are epitomized by a research article by Zhang attempting to take stock of the “general psychology” of merchants in Beijing in 1924.\(^\text{136}\) Zhang begins by noting both the inconvenience of collecting the data from merchants directly and the impossibility of gathering it from published materials such as memoirs, of which there were too few pertinent texts. Equally unrealistic would be using advertisements to solicit shop owners to voluntarily send in survey data. Instead, Zhang decides to focus on shop names as a kind of representative and analyzable textual sample of business identity in contemporary Beijing. But how could one collect the data? “To send assistants into the corners of the city to walk the streets and copy down signage would not only attract suspicion from the police, but also elicit the mockery of passers-by. On top of that, it’s uneconomical, time-wise” (138). Ostensibly discussing his methodological issue, Zhang switches into a more narrative mode: “Just as I was hesitating over what to do, suddenly I saw on my desk a grey tome, about eight inches long and one inch thick: the *Beijing Telephone Bureau Customer Number Book*. I had it! Typically, amongst all books this one is the least interesting, but in front of me that day it suddenly became the most interesting of all. I saw it as a kind of precious treasure” (138).

The total number of shops listed in the 311-page directory amounts to a sample of nearly five thousand entries (made even more representative, Zhang argues, by the fact the largest shops who would be most likely to have a telephone installed also naturally paid the most attention to choosing their names). In counting the length in characters of all the shop names, Zhang notes that the data needs “smoothing,” inevitably a subjective process that requires some reflexive justification. For example, Zhang must decide whether to include or drop the common words

\(^{136}\) Zhang Yaoxiang, “Signboards of Beijing Shops” [北京商店之招牌], in Sixth Anniversary Supplement of the Chenbao [晨报六周年增刊], Dec. Issue of 1924, 137-144.
denoting “shop” or “business” (e.g. 堂, 号, 齐, 店, 阁, 莊, 局, 楼, 居, 园, 铺, 坊, 当, and so on); tabulating such data would indicate little more than the distribution of shop categories. Zhang decides to keep the “shop” character when it is integral to the meaning of the shop name, as in the case of many alcohol shops. Similar to Thorndike’s word list, Zhang tabulates the number of unique characters in the list of five thousand names as eight hundred, with frequency of appearance ranging from once to as many as four hundred times.\(^{137}\) Claiming that the number of statistical tables he has produced would “fill a newspaper,” in this preliminary (and only) article on the subject Zhang chooses to focus on only a summary of the final results, the top twenty most common entries, comprised of such auspicious characters as “Flourishing” [兴], “Peace” [和], and “Abundance” [丰]. In an attempt to preempt his reader’s question about what, after all, is surprising about such the results of such an investigation—a question that is commonly raised in response to “digital humanities” research of today—Zhang surveys a group of 61 students at a normal university, asking them to guess the twenty most common characters on Beijing shop signboards. The top answerer, as it turns out, only scores 14 out of 20, while the average result is about 8 out of 20.

What is telling about Zhang’s project is how it moves from “distant reading” back down into linguistic analysis and even close reading: in the final pages, he returns to a lexical analysis of the top twenty words, first categorizing them either as relating to an aspirational objective, or as a kind of means to an end, then further categorizing them by number of strokes and even according to classical poetic tonal categories of “flat” [平声] or “uneven” [仄声]. He also observes that only eleven of the top twenty appear in a recent Thousand Character Primer.

\(^{137}\) From what Zhang says, it seems very likely that the distribution of frequency follows that of a power law, a commonly expressed relationship, with the vast majority of the units appearing only once or a handful of times, while those that appear more than one hundred times being several powers lower than the rarer characters.
published by the Association for the Advancement of Mass Education, proving that the primer is of limited value even for gaining literacy in such a mundane landscape of text. Stringing together these observations as it does, Zhang’s article approaches pop psychology in its attempt to get at the psychological motivations based on a single word divorced from any context.

Most interesting, however, is the interpenetration between the modes of analysis of the modern psychologist and a more traditional mode of the cultured literatus or wenren [文人] that occurs in the article’s closing lines. Here, Zhang includes a playful poem supplied by his wife, Cheng Junying [程俊英] (1901-1993), a participant of the May Fourth movement and prominent advocate of women’s emancipation who would go on to become an influential scholar of Chinese literature and classical poetry. Cheng’s short poem, a four-line, penta-syllabic piece, rearranges the top twenty most frequent characters from Zhang’s analysis. Though unsophisticated, the poem is worth noting as the first partially “computationally-assisted” poem in China’s literary history.

According with rightness, a rich gathering is completed.  
With mutual cooperation, abundant glory endures.  
Following Heaven, splendid majesty arises.  
Tracing the origin of greatness, ascendant auspiciousness flourishes.  
和义成丰聚，
公同恒裕昌，
顺天兴华泰，
源大盛隆祥. (144)

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138 Cheng Junying’s close friend and classmate from Beijing Women’s Normal School in the late 1910s, the author Lu Yin (1898-1934), wrote a famous biographical novel in 1921 about their group of friends in Beijing during the early 1920s, titled Old Friends by the Seaside [海滨故人]. Nearly 70 years later, Cheng penned an autobiographical sequel, Numerous are the Fallen Flowers [落英缤纷], in Fiction World [小说界], Vol. 3 (1994), 4-63. (unavailable to me at the time of writing).

139 I thank Gregory Patterson, a specialist in Tang poetry, of the University of South Carolina, for providing this translation (personal communication, March 10th, 2015). As a game of making sense out of nonsense, I asked Greg to first translate the poem before explaining to him its provenance.
At first blush, the poem resembles a premodern panegyric extolling the fruits of good governance. And yet, the poem is literally uncanny, as its woodenness and floridly auspicious rhetoric seems to be the product of an automaton author. When Zhang reprinted the essay in his edited two-volume set, *Selections from the Journal, Psychology* (1932), he excised this attempt at recombinant poetry. In its stead, signaling an attempt to be more scientific, he included an addendum rebutting the criticism of a psychologist in Nanjing and attacking the latter’s attempt at producing a similar study.  

This bringing together of enumerative analysis and poetry was not an isolated incident, but in fact appears frequently in the pages of *Xinli*. In their eagerness to collect at-hand data for psychological and discursive measurement, the young psychologists on numerous occasions turned to classical poetry as a repository of psychological facts and textual data. One example is Zhang Yaoxiang’s attempt to quantitatively measure the cultural construction of “noise” [杂音; 噪音] by combing through China’s literary canon to examine its written manifestations.  

In the article’s opening, Zhang claims that researches in the west have identified approximately 11,000 harmonic sounds, and 550 noise sounds. However, while psychologists have traditional categorized sound according to its harmonics, the ultimate definition of what is pleasant and what is noisy is subjective (are a lion’s roar, rushing water, or cricket chirps noise or harmony?), thus the question of definition is both culturally constructed and impossible to objectively test in laboratory experiment. Instead, Zhang turns to the works of poets—“Though certainly they are not professional psychologists, they are particularly careful observers of sound and color” (1)—

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140 Vol. 2, 771-2. The Nanjing study actually sent researchers into the field to collect signboard names. The study’s results, as Zhang notes, closely overlap with those of his own work, and he thus argues that it proves the soundness of his own methodology employing a phonebook index.

chiefly the 305 poems collected in the earliest anthology of poetry, the *Book of Songs* [诗经],
while also drawing on other major sources, including Qu Yuan’s *Chuci* (3rd c. BCE), Jin poets
(Pan Yue), Tang poets (Bai Juyi, Li Bai, Du Fu, Han Yu), and Song poets (Su Shi, Lu You). His
categorization rests on the source of sound: anything produced by metal, stone, string, bamboo,
or leather (and here Zhang has in mind musical instruments), or emitted by the mouth, nose, or
tongue is a pleasurable sound; all else is “noise.” In actuality, however, Zhang only catalogs
onomatopoeic characters (merely a description of a sound, such as that of Cao Zhi cooking
beans, is not distinctive enough to include in the categorization). In this sense, Zhang does not
problematicize the relationship between sound and its textual notation. In total, his effort produces
an extended typology of 342 discrete noises.\(^{142}\) In his conclusion, he is strikingly silent about
how the article contributes to the advancement of psychological knowledge. Instead, similar to
the original version of his article on Beijing signboards, he ends with a kind of cultural
argument: “I don’t believe there is a literature from any other country in the world in which one
could identify more than 340 words specifically referring to noise. I dare anyone to challenge
this assertion!” (15), followed by a famous poem from Su Shi (1037-1101):

> If you say the zither’s notes reside in the instrument itself,  
> When it is laid in its case why doesn’t it still sound?  
> If you say the notes reside in the player’s fingertips,  
> Why can’t I hear them from your fingers themselves?\(^{143}\)

若言絃上有琴声，  
放在匣中何不鳴？  
若言声在指头上，  
何不于君指上听？

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\(^{142}\) The general categories are: human noises (child noises, adult sounds, crowd noises); bird noises; animal noises;
insect noises; water noises; wind noises; rain noises; thunder noises; various noises made by humans; and various
other noises (pp. 2-15). A classmate of Zhang’s wife, one Sun Xiangji [孙祥卿], added another 28 noise entries in
the following issue of *Xinli*. See her article, “Noise” [杂音], in *Xinli*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (1922), 1-3.

\(^{143}\) I have adopted Ronald Egan’s translation, found in Qian Zhongshu’s *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*,
Su’s poem deconstructs the relationship between subject and object, medium and effect that lays at the heart of Zhang’s conceptual pivot from a scientific measurement of noise to a literary one. This pivot to Su Shi’s piece, then, represents a kind of tautology by using poetry to justify the examination of poetry. This article further inspired two similar researches into the manifold expressions of color in Chinese poetry and literature, both published in Xinli the following year.\textsuperscript{144} And, like Zhang’s article, they both end by quoting classical poems as a show of erudition and gesture to the pleasures of so engaging the canon.\textsuperscript{145} Overall, such articles affect a cultural confidence largely lacking in much of contemporary New Culture criticism.

In the next issue of Xinli, Zhang followed up his catalog of noise with another attempt to measure sensuality through the textual trace in an article titled “The Imagination of Writers” [文学家之想象], which, with the help of three female assistants, enumeratively analyzed the poetry of Du Fu, Bai Juyi, and Qu Yuan to measure these poets’ sensual predilection.\textsuperscript{146} This article was primarily inspired by the doctoral thesis work of Wilfrid Lay at Columbia, who had worked on the subject of mental imagery.\textsuperscript{147} Besides conducting experiments on Columbia students, artists in New York, and himself, Lay also tabulated figurative language and imagery in the first 1000 lines in two texts: The Marriage of Geraint (1859), a portion of Lord Tennyson’s long narrative poem, Idylls of the King; and Robert Browning’s The Ring and the Book (1869).\textsuperscript{148} But

\textsuperscript{144} See Ouyang Xiang [欧阳湘], “Variation of Colors” [杂色], in Xinli Vol. 2, no. 3 (1923), 1-15. Ouyang identified a total of 203 colors. The next issue of Xinli (pp. 1-12) carried a supplementary second article by Cheng Junying, who, with her greater knowledge of literature, more than doubled the number of colors by adding 206 further entries.

\textsuperscript{145} Specifically, Ouyang Xiang quotes from Cao Zhi’s (192-232) “Fu on the Spirit Turtle” [神龟赋], while Cheng Junying excerpts from “Fu on Gathering Lotus” [采莲赋], by Xiao Yi (Liang Yuandi, 508-554).

\textsuperscript{146} Xinli Vol. 1, no. 3 (1922), 1-20.

\textsuperscript{147} The thesis was reprinted in James Cattell’s journal, The Psychological Review Vol. 2, no. 3 (May, 1898), i-59.

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid, 29-32.
whereas Lay did not find any appreciable difference in the sensual dispensation of these two samples, Zhang sought out differences between the poets in order to demonstrate his hypothesis that different individuals exhibited a particular bias toward different senses. (Accordingly, Du Fu was visual; Bai Juyi aural; and Qu Yuan had a propensity for the olfactory.) But Zhang also pays closer attention than Lay to the limits of representing sensuality through language, as well as to the process of interpretation and judgment underlying the act of tabulation, noting that many words such as “moon” can be linked to either sight, or to temperature (the moon being classically associated with cold, clear nights) (2-3). Nonetheless, in so using old poetry to measure the individual psyche, Zhang was professing his faith in May Fourth ideals, namely, the transparency of language in representing the inner state of the individual (and romantic) author. Notably, Zhang yet again ends his article with a literary quotation, this time several synesthetic lines from the famous Yuan drama, Romance of the Western Wing [西厢记], assigning to each line a sensual predilection.149

But the most interesting interface between the New Psychologists and poetry came in the form of two articles that engage directly with poetic criticism. The first is Cheng Junying’s “The Attention and Interests of Poets” [诗人之注意及兴趣], published across two issues of Xinli in 1923.150 Claiming poetry is a kind of voluntary and pure exercise of expression, Cheng argues that poems thus represent the poet’s spontaneous attention [自发注意], which, unlike other

149 The male lead praises recalls the beauty of the local beauty, whom he has just passed: “And the scent of orchid musk lingers still [olfactory]/ The sound of hanging pendants moves slowly away [aural]/ The eastern wind sways, then drags up, strands of weeping willows [kinetic]/ Floating threads catch and stir up petals of peach blossom [touch]/ . . . My hungry eyes have gazed until they are shot through [sight]/ My starving mouth has salivated until I swallow in vain [taste].” From Story of the Western Wing, ed. and trans. Stephen H. West and Wilt L. Idema (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 122.

forms of attention such as forced attention or voluntary attention, stands as an index of the poet’s unadulterated inner interests (1: 1). For her textual database, Cheng used poetry in the first volumes from separate multi-volume collections of the most famous poets in China: Li Bai (302 poems), Du Fu (498), Han Yu (151), Meng Jiao (214), Bai Juyi (220), Wang Wei (219), as well as an anthology of yuefu (471), adding up to 2075 poems in total. Where possible, Cheng analyzes the titles of poems, arguing that they are representative of the poem’s subject as a whole; when the poem’s topic is not clear from the title, she classifies the poem according to its contents (1: 2). More than its predecessors, Cheng’s article engages in a form of distant reading, as she divides the poems into eighteen categories, and arranges the tabulations in a series of detailed tables (Figure 8). The most frequent categories include “personages” [人物] (13.4 %), “presenting [poems] and replying [to poems]” [赠答] (12.6 %), “elements” [地形] (11.3 %), “current affairs” [时事] (9.1 %), and “separating and uniting” [离合] (7.3 %). One conclusion rendered by this rudimentary topic modeling is a kind of general psychological profile and stereotype of the Tang poet (and here she quotes Thorndike’s work on gender differences in objects of interest: females are more interested in people, while males are more interested in objects); Cheng argues that the high incidence of social topics means not so much that poets exhibited feminine qualities, but that poetry was deeply embedded in a social context (2: 31). Following Thorndike, she further identified various “instincts” endemic to Tang poetry, including the “instinct for gregariousness” and a “migratory instinct.”

The second article directly engaging with poetry comes from Zhang Yaoxiang. As we have seen, in the period between 1922 and 1923, Zhang was keen on describing the relationship between the senses and experience through an enumerative analysis of poetry. But in 1924, in a remarkable article titled “The Affect of New Poets” [新诗人之情绪], he turned his sights onto a
database that was developing in situ, that of “new poetry.” While in the case of Cheng Junying the reason to turn to premodern poetry and classical literature for the production of psychological facts was partially a matter of personal interest and training (and she would go on to become an accomplished expert on the Shijing), Zhang’s principle interest was finding expedient means for developing his enumerative criticism. Still, Zhang’s enumerative analysis of modern poetry encapsulates a convergence between the psychological and educationalist mission of Xinli, on the one hand, and May Fourth literary ideals of the individualism such as promoted by Hu Shi and Zhou Zuoren in New Youth, on the other. Before turning to Zhang’s article, I want to first step back to examine the scene of modern poetry in general and its intersection with modern psychological ideas.

**Part Two: Spring Rain and Wheat Fields: The Aesthetics of Affect at a Distance**

Psychologists and May Fourth writers shared a vision of the modern protagonist (including, in many cases, the narrator) as an individual subject. In the case of literature, as Lydia Liu has shown, such an orientation manifest itself in translations of and experimentation with new modes of psycho-narration and constructions of interiority, allowing “Chinese writers to locate the protagonist in a new symbolic context, one in which the protagonist no longer serves as a mere element within the nexus of patriarchal kinship and/or in a transcendental, divine scheme as in most premodern Chinese fiction but dominates the text, instead, as the locus of meaning and reality in possession of psychological and moral ‘truth.’” The production of

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152 Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 94. As Liu points out, the discourse of individualism was by no means monolithic or a simple matter, and was closely entangled with translingual shifts in the Chinese discourse of individuality (77-80).
psychological truth also lies at the heart of the Zhang’s and others’ enumerative readings and their generation of positivist facts. Like many authors of new literature, these psychologists tended not to overtly problematize language or vernacular writing, but rather viewed them as signifiers of individual subjectivity, cultural essence, or the nation. Yet, while literary critics of the New Culture movement called for a rejection of classical literary language because they believed it stifled individual expression, they tended to underplay the expressive and potentially individualist nature of lyrical poetry—precisely the genre that the Xinli articles championed as a historical source of psychological data. Indeed, the young psychologists had no qualms over the construction of the historical poet as an individual subject who, through the medium of poetry, transcended history to enter into the researcher’s virtual laboratory. As one adventurous study by a psychologist proffered, the classical poet could even be administered an IQ test!153 (Though, paradoxically, the Xinli psychologists’ quantitative approach to the individual also meant that his or her subjectivity was fundamentally non-unique, but rather could be set on a common, measurable plane and compared to a normative average.)

This shared project of exploring individual interiority is amplified in the overlap between modern psychology and so-called “new poetry” [新诗], the free-verse vernacular poetry introduced by such writers as Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Guo Moruo (1892-1978) that consequently flourished during the New Culture movement.154 More so than its vernacular counterparts, fiction and drama, new poetry in particular represented an exciting means of self-expression, and the dynamism of its emergence revolved around the exploration of the lyrical,

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153 See Lin Chuanding [林传澗], The Measurement of Psychological Traits of 34 Historical Personages since the Tang/Song [唐宋以来三十四个历史人物心理特质的估计] (Beijing: Furen daxue xinlix, 1939).

speaking subject. As Michelle Yeh and other critics have observed, promoters of new poetry urgently grappled with the question of defining what, after all, new poetry was: “If modern Chinese poetry has no fixed form, classical syntax, and poetic diction, how is it to be recognized as poetry? Without the time-revered literary and structural features of classical poetry, how do modern poets justify their works as poetry?” \(^{156}\) Such a lack of morphological definition mirrored the need to define self expression by such poetry, i.e. the modern subject. This resulted in critics marshalling psychological discourse for the task of defining the subject of new poetry. For a poignant example one may turn to an article titled “Various Psychological Views on New Poetry in Society Today” [社會上對於新詩的各种心理觀] (1919), by Yu Pingbo, himself a pioneer of new poetry (and, as we have seen above, a promoter of his own brand of scientific criticism). \(^{157}\) In the article, Yu bemoans the generally low quality of recent new poetry, largely ascribing its deficiency to the misconception that vernacular poetry is easy to write because one needn’t adhere to metrical rules. But what makes Yu’s article interesting is its rhetorical borrowing from psychology. The text not only repeatedly uses words such as brain power [腦力], mind [腦筋], and particularly “genius” [天才], but also makes arguments in terms of measurement and measurability (the overall number of vernacular poetry be kept lower, but their “weight” [重量] ought to be increased [169]). At the same time, Yu seemed to adopt such a language in order to disavow it, as he also emphasizes the immeasurability of genius and the machine’s inability to determine speech rhythms.

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\(^{157}\) In *New Tide* [新潮], Vol. 2, no. 1, 173-182.
It is into this tension between measurability and immeasurability (which represents a broader tension over the definition of the subject of new poetry itself), which Zhang engaged with in his “The Affect of New Poets.” In focusing on the issue of affect, Zhang’s article was contributing to an important aspect of New Culture, which valorized sentiment as a central tenet of the modern—and romantic—individual subject.\(^\text{158}\) At the same time, Zhang Yaoxiang was also picking up on a topic area opened up by Liang Qichao in 1922, in a series of lectures that Liang gave at Tsinghua on “The Expression of Emotion in Chinese Verse” \(^\text{159}\). In addition to this long exposition written in the vein of “remarks on poetry” \(^\text{诗话}\), Liang was at the time also giving various lectures on Du Fu as a kind of “sage of qing” \(^\text{情圣}\) and on qing in Qu Yuan, in passing exhorting modern poets to pay attention to such premodern literary masters of emotion.\(^\text{160}\) More generally, as Haiyan Lee’s work on the subject of affect in New Culture would suggest, both Liang’s and Zhang’s interest in qing was emblematic of the broader May Fourth valorization of the individual subject as first and foremost a “sentimental subject.”\(^\text{161}\)

“The Affect of New Poets” begins by noting that affect or emotion/mood \(^\text{情绪}\) is one of the hardest phenomena to objectively test \(^\text{测验}\), particularly because it is ephemeral and impossible to elicit in laboratory settings (1). Besides his longstanding engagement with


\(^{159}\) The essay’s parts 1 and 2 were published in the journal *Gaizao* \(^\text{改造}\), vol. 4 (1922), nos. 6 (pp. 1-28) and 8 (pp. 1-20), respectively.

\(^{160}\) See Liang Qichao, “Transcription: Lecture at the Poetry Studies Research Association,” \(^\text{最录：情圣杜甫（在诗学研究会讲演）}\), in *Shaoxing Education World* \(^\text{绍兴教育界}\), Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 1-15; the lecture was also reprinted in the *Chenbao Literary Supplement*, see issues of May 28-29\(^\text{th}\) (pp. 1-2).

\(^{161}\) See *Revolution of the Heart*, 7.
intelligence measurement, Zhang had also already espoused interest in the measurement of affect in an earlier article on emotionality in youth, but because this earlier work was based on direct observation Zhang did not consider it sufficiently objective. In contrast to observation methods, working with text provides a surer foundation for objectively measuring affect. However, Zhang notes, Cheng Junying’s method of classifying poems according to their titles could not be replicated in the case of new poetry, for in the latter, poem titles were often either very simplistic or had no obvious connection to the poem’s content, making it impossible to code them in terms of affect (2). Instead, Zhang finds an expedient means of measuring affect in a typographical marker that was ubiquitous in new poetry: the exclamation point. Along with other punctuation markers such as question marks and quotation marks, the exclamation point had been imported from western typography during the New Culture movement, and its deployment in the early 1920s accordingly marked a Chinese text as modern—so much so that Zhang felt the need to produce a lexical analysis which also doubles as his statement of method:

Amongst the new-style punctuation there is one mark, the “!” [感叹号], which is called the “exclamation mark” [感叹号], and frequently used by writers of new poetry as a symbol of affective sigh and mood [感叹情绪] . . . in English, “affection sigh” [感叹] is Exclamation; it is one noun, and [unlike the Chinese compound word] cannot be seen as two processes, and thus it is a grievous mistake to argue something like “Affect is affection, sighing is sighing, [thus] the affective sigh mark is used to signify affection, and especially used to signify a sigh.” Exclamation can also be translated as “gasp with surprise” [惊叹], “cry out with surprise” [惊呼], “sigh with regret” [慨叹], and “cry out in sorrow” [嗟叹] all sounds emitted by a person who is frustrated. They are all clichés for expressing negativity, pessimism, world-weary. They are the despairing sounds of a vanquished nation. If one wants to measure the degree to which a person is disappointed, negative, pessimistic, and world-weary, one could calculate in that person’s

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162 See “Experimenting on Affect” [情绪试验], in Xinli, Vol. 1, no. 4 (1922), 1-12.

writing the phrases that are equivalent to an affective sigh; if one wants to
calculate these, one can count up the exclamation points. This is the so-called
objective method. (2-3)
If one brackets both Zhang’s dubious assertion that the exclamation point only connotes the
negative—a claim that would be subsequently challenged by some of the poets whose work he
analyzes—as well as his phonocentric assumption that new poetry is to be read aloud and that
exclamation points actually ought to be aspirated or pronounced with an exhalation of breath,\(^{164}\)
what emerges is an interesting reflection upon the translingual and semantic nature of modern
punctuation, as well as its affective connotations, in modern China. With its suggestion that a
poet’s affect could be so measured, the passage also provides an early—perhaps first—instance
of stylistmetrical analysis in modern Chinese criticism. In particular, with the entry of western
punctuation marks into Chinese text, Zhang has an elegantly simple means for distilling the
affect of poetry out of grammatical conceits—thereby largely bypassing the much stickier realm
of semantic meaning, a realm that he had focused on in his article on “The Imagination of
Writers.”

In his study, Zhang scanned nine of anthologies of vernacular poetry published in the
previous three years; this list included the most influential collections of new poetry, including
Hu Shi’s Experiments [尝试集] (1921) and Guo Moruo’s Goddesses [女神] (1923).\(^{165}\) Zhang
proceeded to enumerate both the number of lines in each anthology, and the number of
exclamation marks in each poem. In total, he examined 1,261 poems, altogether comprising

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\(^{164}\) On this point, see John A. Crespi’s analysis of Zhang’s article within the context of recitational practice and aethetics in Republican China, *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 50-1.

\(^{165}\) The list in total is: Hu Shi’s *Experiments* [尝试集] (1921); Kang Baiqing’s *Grass* [草儿] (1921); Yu Pingbo’s *Winter Night* [冬夜] (1922); Bing Xin’s *Spring Water* [春水] (1923) and *Many Stars* [繁星] (1923); Zhang Jinfeng’s *Romantic Flowers* [浪花] (1923); Guo Moruo’s *Goddesses* [女神] (1923); *Annual Selection of New Poetry* [新诗年选] (1922); *Research Collection of Vernacular Poetry* [白话诗研究集] (1921).
11,339 lines of text. Within this dataset, Zhang found 2630 exclamation marks—averaging out to be 2.1 exclamation marks per poem, or one exclamation mark every 4.3 lines. He neatly lays out these figures in a table (Figure 9). Commenting on this frequency, Zhang humorously scolds the new poet by comparing him with the ancient counterpart: when the latter sighed, he did so only sparingly and never more than thrice in a piece, in contrast to the modern youth, who sighs upon encountering a small island, riding a rickshaw, or mounting a hill (10-11). But to give his critique the patina of objectivity, Zhang sets out to establish a normative baseline by which one can evaluate the frequency of exclamation in Chinese poems. As the exclamation point was not available to Tang poets, Zhang turns to a sample of canonical western poetry (Figure 10) that ranges from Dante’s *Paradise*, to Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis* and Sonnets, to Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (12-13). It is curious that Zhang compared Chinese new poetry to these venerable classics, and his baseline would have looked very different had he tallied the exclamation points in the works of Walt Whitman, for example. But the effect of commensurability is a function of the reduction of poetry into statistical variables.

What sets Zhang’s article apart both from Liang’s musings on affect and from other attempts by New Psychologists to bring their science to bear upon literature is the way in which Zhang stridently passes from description into prescription. As John Crespi notes in his brief treatment of Zhang’s article, the point of “The Affect of New Poetry” is driven by literary and nationalist principles.\(^{166}\) The article offers not just the engagement with text as database, but explicitly a new form of literary criticism: by highlighting the reliance of exclamation marks and interpreting it as the superficial expression of affect, Zhang is offering his own vision of what

\(^{166}\) Crespi, *Voices in Revolution*, 51. However I disagree with Crespi’s argument that Zhang was not also driven by scientific principles: although his article’s methodology is crude and extremely problematic, as I hope is clear from my survey of their work, Zhang and his cohort saw their work as an important conduit for promoting modern psychological knowledge and the experimental method in Republican China.
new poetry should be, or at least arguing for what it should not be. As with so many of the Xinli articles on poetry, “The Affect of New Poetry” concludes by quoting from the classical tradition, this time a passage from the Mao preface of the Shijing regarding the tonal patterning of affections in poetry: “The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is well managed. . . the tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty.” Despite his sharp critique of affect in new poetry, and his conclusion quoting from the Mao Preface of the Shijing, it would be a mistake to dismiss Zhang as a classicist bent on attacking the New Culture movement. He had previously written a short piece in defense of vernacular poetry as a more unmediated expression of the poet’s inner sentiment, and, rhetorically, his present critique was no more severe than the rhetoric of Yu Pingbo or other contemporary critics. As such, Zhang should here be read as acting in the role of a literary critic, putting his enumerative analysis in the service of defining or shaping the practice of new poetry.

But what is of most interest here is neither the outcome of the study (whose working assumptions are, as we have seen, dubious), nor its immediate conclusion—namely, the demonstration that vernacular poetry in China is, on average, oversaturated with exclamations. What I instead want to highlight is the creative and reflexive element in Zhang’s criticism, and the contribution it makes to the aesthetics of information in the New Culture movement. Seeking to illustrate his method of isolating the exclamation points from the text proper, Zhang

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167 This translation is Stephen Owen’s. See his Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43.

168 See his “Response to a Certain Gentleman’s Mocking of Vernacular Poetry,” in Studying Abroad in America Quarterly Report Vol. 6, No. 1 (1919), 237-8. Already in this essay Zhang claimed to represent the viewpoint of modern science in his assertion that psychologists consider internal monologue to be in vernacular.
reproduces Guo Moruo’s poem, “Morning Peace” [晨安] as a biao, placing its coordinates in the conventional manner of Chinese print (top-to-bottom and right-to-left) but completely effacing all the original text and punctuation aside from exclamations (5-8). The result (Figure 11) empties the poem of its content, foregrounding the frequency and placement of the poem’s exclamation points, thereby mapping out the affective structure undergirding the original text. More generally, the table highlights the relationship between the grid structure of biao and the implicit grid of writing (and particular the discrete units of moveable type); the vertical columns of effaced text are divided by the horizontal registers. Yet upon first reading the relationship between the biao and the rest of the article is not entirely clear: for instance, why would Zhang devote a total of three pages to illustrating the sort of strip-mining effected by his method? In contrast with the article’s other biao and despite its clear status as a biao, Zhang does not label this table as such. So what exactly does he wish to show his reader?

As Johanna Drucker points out in her study of “graphesis,” the analysis and imaginative production of information visualization that developed in western history, “the very idea of graphic-ness, attention to the surface of a visual plane on which compositional elements interacted—not merely as representations of other things, but as elements in themselves—required a conceptual leap.”169 Rather than read Zhang’s image as a mere demonstration of his method—a function for which it would largely be superfluous—I suggest that we read Zhang’s inclusion of this table as a similar conceptual leap, a creative comment that reflects upon the biao not simply as a transparent instrument of communicating data, but as a meta-picture capable of considering the nature of data visualization itself.170 Such an approach is born out by what


immediately follows the image, a short poem composed by Zhang on the subject of his visual creation. Employing a vernacular prosody, the piece is an explicit record of his own feeling or sensation [记感] upon viewing the table:

Seen from below, it resembles a spring rain,  
While seen from above, it looks like numerous wheat fields;  
Shrunk down, they’re like numerous bacteria,  
While close-up, they appear as several rows of bullets.
仰看像一阵春雨，
俯看像数亩禾田；
缩小看像许多细菌，
放大看像几排弹丸。

Here the abstract nature of the data itself is imagined as a series of metaphorical likenesses, transforming the table from an ostensibly scientific instrument of parsing and tabulation into an aesthetic object of contemplation and reflection about the eye’s search for pattern. By exploring the table through economies of scale and from different perspective, the poem recounts a kind of visual excursion. The characters for “rain” [雨] and “field” [田] even pictographically gesture to the image of the table: the small dots in the former resemble the vertical scatter of the exclamation points, while the symmetrical layout of the latter can be read as a table. Such visual play recalls the microscopic/macroscopic tension inherent in Moretti’s “distant reading,” in which conventional text disappears, replaced by attention to small formal elements or larger patterned landscapes into which these formal elements aggregate. The poem’s gesture is recursive, as the affect expressed in Guo Moruo’s poem has been turned into data, visualized, and again turned into affect in the form of a new poem. As we have seen in the other pieces published in Xinli which use poetry to reflect on data gleaned from poems, such recursion is not unique to this article alone; what is unique, however, is the direct engagement with the subject of information, as the poem/image combination both pictorially performs and poetically

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contemplates the act of data collection. More so than the actual conclusions of the article, then, this metacritical combination of image/poem opens up a new realm for creatively experimenting with information visualization, thereby giving voice to an appreciation of both a new way of designing text (by taking out the majority of the semantic content), and designing information (in the form of a table). It thus constructs an aesthetic that was commensurate to and in dialogue with the vernacular modernism of information visualization that pervaded contemporary print culture.

“The Affect of New Poets” caused a minor stir in Beijing’s burgeoning literary institution. Piqued by Zhang’s microscopic imagery of the exclamation point as a pathogen, Lu Xun made reference to Zhang in a 1925 miscellaneous essay in *Threads of Talk* titled “A Reconsideration of the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda,” where he noted that China suffers from a similar disease, the “cross-shaped [十字形] pathogenic bacteria, which have already entered into people’s bloodstreams and spread to the entirety of their bodies—its force is certainly no less than the ‘!’-shaped bacteria of exclamatory sighs over the demise of the nation!” While Zhang’s imagery made an impression on Lu Xun, the latter and his colleagues viewed Zhang’s enumerative criticism with a mix of bemusement and disdain. In an interview in the early 1960s, one of the original editors of *Threads of Talk* [语丝], Zhang Tingqian [章廷谦] (1901-1981), noted that when *Threads of Talk* was founded in 1924, its organizers joked that Zhang Yaoxiang should not be allowed to read it (ostensibly for fear that he would perform his analyses upon its texts). The most direct response of the time came from Zhang Yiping [章衣萍] (no relation to

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171 See *Threads of Talk* Vol. 1, no. 15 (Feb. 23, 1925), 1-2.
172 Ibid, 1.
173 This anecdote comes from a manuscript of interviews undertaken in 1960 by a team of workers at the Shanghai film studio, Tianma, in preparation of a biopic about Lu Xun. Production on the film was canceled after interference
Zhang Tingqian, a protégé of Hu Shi’s and himself a poet, who published a swift response to Zhang Yaoxiang in one of the central venues of New Culture, the *Chenbao Supplement*. In his rambling and acerbic takedown, Zhang Yipin points out the irony in Zhang Yaoxiang’s decision to compose a poem for the sake of his criticism of poetry, and sarcastically suggests that the government ban both new poetry and exclamation points in the interests of preserving the nation. In his riposte, Zhang Yaoxiang wryly performs a kind of numeric analysis of Zhang Yiping, noting that the latter’s essay is about four thousand characters long, and yet contains no more than two hundred characters’ worth of actual engagement with the original research; as such, Zhang Yaoxiang dismisses Yiping’s criticism as a piece of bloated and prolix rhetoric, incapable of posing a serious challenge to the objectivity of Zhang Yaoxiang’s own scientific method.

The application of statistically-driven psychological science to literature rapidly waned in the late 1920s as *Xinli* stopped publication and Zhang Yaoxiang and his colleagues turned their attention elsewhere in pursuit of producing more actionable knowledge and serving their respective institutions. This brief but productive trend within the history of the New Culture movement is important not for the positivist “facts” it produced or because of any influence it may have had on the literary establishment. Rather, this period of experimentation is important

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174 September 15, 1924, p. 3-4.


176 The history of the retrenchment of the institution of psychological research awaits further research. It is here worth noting, however, that after *Xinli* stopped publication there was no central psychology journal that took its place until *Psychology Quarterly* appeared in 1936.
for its discovery of text as a site of scientific surveying in which literary corpuses were potential databases if one were willing to do the counting. In a sense, the impulse to count fits in with the broader trend toward social surveying and the foundation of knowledge in the modern “fact” that occurred during the Republican Era. But what sets the above studies apart is how Zhang, Cheng Junying, and others openly embraced the interpretive aspect of their work. In other words, they saw themselves not just as psychologists, but also as literary critics. In this light, their project of creating grounds for the comparison of Chinese literature with western literature dovetailed neatly with contemporary efforts by literary critics such as Zheng Zhenduo and Mao Dun to place China’s literature within an international frame. At the same time, for these literary-minded psychologists, the statistical table was not a purely objective frame for embedding information or producing facts; rather, it was also a form of rhetoric that could in turn be enhanced by interweaving the object of analysis, poetry, back into their own analyses. And, in the case of Zhang’s “The Affect of New Poets,” the table was even a source of aesthetic contemplation and poetic inspiration. Ultimately these works are symbolic of the parallel emergence of the psychologized and affective individual alongside the development of new literary sensibilities. At the same time, they signal the discovery of complex patterns and fields of information underlying a text.

Part Three: He Yubo’s Diagrammatic Criticism as a Vernacular Modern

As we have seen, part of what made the statistical analyses of both Liang Qichao and the young psychologists rhetorically compelling was their appeal to the nature of the biao as a method of organizing data. The visual nature of the table not only had added scientific appeal, but also strikingly stood out from the surrounding text on the page. The draw of a scientific
method of literary criticism at least partially grounded in visuality was not limited to Zhang Yaoxiang and his colleagues, but rather extended to central figures in the institution of modern literature. Besides the biao, the graphical form most common was the tu, ‘diagram’ or ‘graph,’ which was frequently deployed to illustrate sets of relations between entities and to impart the sense of scientific rigor in the critics’ definitions of literary genre, literary subjectivity, and so on. Many tu appeared in translations and introductions of foreign concepts, such as Fu Donghua’s rendition of Richard G. Moulton’s work on modern literary criticism, which carefully reproduced Moulton’s elaborate charts of literary morphology (Figure 12).\(^\text{177}\) In another example, the romanticist author, Yu Dafu (1896-1945), in a 1925 article titled “Introducing a Literary Formula” [介绍一个文学的公式],\(^\text{178}\) introduced to a broad Chinese readership Natsume Sōseki’s (1867-1916) pseudo-scientific template of literary expression, \(F + f\). In Sōseki’s formulation, ‘\(F\)’ denotes a “focalized impression” [焦点的印象], meaning sensory information. Here Yu gives the example of a bank teller, who mechanically counts money all day; while money excites an individual, the teller remains completely unaffected; in this vein, ‘\(F\)’ is made up of “the writing that we see every day, the equations of mathematics, or the definitions in science textbooks.”\(^\text{179}\) In contrast, ‘\(f\)’ designates pure affect or feeling [感觉], such as in the case of the \(ci\) poem, “Searching” [寻寻觅觅], by the Song poet Li Qingzhao. Li’s disconsolate poem,
Yu claims, is nearly pure and context-less affect, given that the reader is never informed what stimulates such unhappiness in the first place. Ultimately all literature represents $F + f$ in some proportion. Educated in Japan (where he had majored in economics) and an admirer of Sōseki, it is perhaps not surprising that it was Yu who introduced the latter’s work. What makes Yu’s piece stand out, however, is the graph he appends to illustrate ‘F’ (Figure 13), showing the waves of perception or stimulation that make up the experience of an individual subject. Notably absent are any numbers: with its curvature, the graph line is purportedly an analog measurement of perception; it is, like the formula $F + f$ itself, an attempt to represent the relations between entities, but not to give them objective measurement. Overall, such graphs as Yu’s and Moulton’s would not be out of place in the pages of Xinli, and are representative of the variety of diagrams, graphs, and other visualizations that were increasingly appearing in literary and popular journals of the period, including publications such as Fiction Monthly and New Youth.$^{180}$

When it came to using the $tu$ to think about literary form, the most prominent case is that of the leftist intellectual and editor at Guanghua Publishing House, He Yubo [贺玉波] (1897-1982). An occasional author and translator, He Yubo was far more prolific as a literary critic, not only churning out multiple author studies, but also compiling several how-to volumes for would-be authors.$^{181}$ Claiming that he had been inspired several years earlier by an analytical diagram in an essay by his friend, Zhao Jingsheng, regarding Zhang Ziping, He published an

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$^{180}$ During the late 1910s, the most iconic journal of the New Culture movement, New Youth [新青年], frequently published $tu$ on topics ranging from Romanization to hygiene to religion. In the journal’s vol. vol. 4, no. 5 (where Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” first appeared) there is also an article on social surveys [社会调查] by one Ye Yuan [叶渊].

$^{181}$ Methods of Composing the Short Familiar Essay [小品文作法] (Shanghai: Guangyi shuju, 1934); Common Sense of Literature [文学常识] (Shanghai: Lehua tushu gongsi, 1934); Modern Chinese Female Authors [中国现代女作家] (Shanghai: Fuxing shuju, 1936).
article in 1931, titled “The Diagrammatic Analysis of Fiction” [小说的图解],182 in which he sketched out the possibilities of using diagrams and schematics for making sense of literature. He Yubo saw his method as a pioneering attempt to create a scientific criticism, and thus requiring of justification and explanation for his literary audience. He begins his article by positing the scientific method as a general model for all knowledge transfer. Different systems of knowledge have vastly different objects of communication; thus science pursues objective truth, while literature pursues affective truth. Nonetheless, each discipline grows through the creation, testing, and transmission of laws [法则]. Such laws, He argues, can in turn be reinscribed graphically as diagrams. As he explains the (modern) site of the diagram: “The Diagram [original in English] is commonly encountered in mathematics; it is especially common in mathematical analysis that uses arithmetic or geometry, such as when solving the value of X or Y one can hypothesize the problem by drawing up a diagram and then solving it, thus making it instantly accessible to others [使人一目了然]. In linguistics we also frequently encounter diagrammatic analysis, particularly of English” (125). The purpose of the tu is thus to simplify and clarify an analytical principle. As such, it could be useful for researching a complex system such as a piece of fiction, “since a story is often several thousand characters, or tens of thousands of characters, or hundreds of thousands of characters in length... and even just its plot can be too complex and winding, let alone elements that are even harder to understand such as structure or its intellectual impetus” (126). Unlike the psychologists’ enumerative method, He is proposing a system of abstraction that is not necessarily based upon commensurable units of the same type. Instead, the diagram could reduce complexity into spatialized relationships between essential variables, whether social (as between characters), geographical (narrative settings), or

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182 See Reader Monthly [读书月刊], Vol. 2, no. 4-5 (1931), 127-136. Following quotations are cited in text.
temporal (as in plot progression or the passage of diegetic time). Put differently, He’s method was geometrical rather than arithmetical. As such, it participated in what Martin Jay, writing of modern art, calls a “scopic regime of modernity,” namely, the adoption of a kind of Cartesian space and two-dimensional perspectivalism in which “abstract, quantitatively conceptualized space became more interesting to the artist [or, here, critic!] than the qualitatively differentiated subjects painted within it.”

What diagrammatic literary analysis needs, He argues, is the creation of its own system of symbols, but he stops short of devising his own system and instead recommends that his readers come up with their own systems of analysis. Revealing another inspiration for his method, He notes that the end product of diagrammatic analysis should resemble the historical population tables, international statistical graphs, and meteorological tables. His own examples fall short of the mark as he illustrates the love relations in a Zhang Ziping’s short story, the tripartite plot development of Mao Dun’s novella, “Pursuit,” the temporal play in He Yubo’s own story, “Her News” [她的消息], and a map of “thought” or ideology underlying another of his works, “Escape” [逃] (Figures 14-17). In all, the variety of diagrams is meant to demonstrate the breadth of their applicability (though such a method was not universally applicable; as we shall see in Chapter Four, He found it annoyingly impossible to reduce Shen Congwen’s fragmented narrative structure into simplified schemata). While crude, it is precisely their simplicity that gives these images their rhetorical appeal. All four images display symmetry and order, as if to suggest that the elements they diagram exist together upon some idealized plane of abstract relations. These diagrams are not merely descriptive, but are instead

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normative, as instanced in their implied suggestion that a plot move “forward” in a Hegelian dialectical progression or in the manner of a Bildungsroman. To that end, He Yubo even suggests that writers diagram their narratives before actually writing them. Such formalism anticipates the conventionalized plot structuration and emplotment of class structure of the socialist realist fiction, which He supported.

It is important to note that He’s essay appeared in *Reader Monthly*, one of the most important general literature journals of the early 1930s that helped promote modern literary criticism and worked to introduce “scientific reading” to a broad audience. He Yubo himself was in charge of the journal’s regular column of criticism on contemporary Chinese writers, and used the space as a platform for further experimenting with diagrammatic criticism in the analysis of the plot structure of authors such as Mao Dun (*Figure 18*). Indeed, there was a kind of affinity between He’s emphasis on order and symmetry and Mao Dun’s careful approach to his novels’ structuration, as illustrated by the latter’s multiple detailed outlines for *Midnight*. Beyond his articles in *Reader Monthly*, He would go on to reprint these visualizations and others in a variety of venues, from single-author studies such as *On Yu Dafu* [郁达夫论], to his landmark volume of criticism, *On Modern Chinese Authors* [现代中国作家论], to articles for youth on the principles of literary writing.

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184 Interestingly, the issue in which He’s article appeared also carried an article on drama criticism which included a diagram of the typical progression of plot in plays. See Yin Zuozhen [殷作桢], “How to Read Drama” [怎样读剧], *Reader Monthly*, Vol. 2, no. 4-5 (1931), 91.


186 And Mao Dun was a proud defender of such planned writing long before he became a novelist. As he wrote in 1922, “It is too rigid a rule that fiction should be written as poetry: nowadays almost nine out of ten writers claim that if they work to construct a story, it is bound to be a failure, and only those written on momentary inspiration can be successful.” See *Wenxue xunkan*, no. 33 (1922). Found in Zhao, *The Uneasy Narrator*, 168.

Despite his reprinting of these *tu*, ultimately He did not further develop his critical language. Three years after the publication of “The Diagrammatic Analysis of Fiction,” a critic named Wang Xipeng [汪錫鵬] published an essay by the same title that built upon the ideas laid out by He.¹⁹⁰ “Diagrammatic analysis is a method of using line notation [线条的记号] to schematize [规划] the contents of fiction,” Wang opens, before going on to attempt the kind of development of a graphical system that He Yubo had stopped short of. Wang was a more articulate formalist, and argued that while the general reader typically cannot articulate why a given work is good or bad, diagrammatic analysis expands her ability to treat literature as a medium [媒介] and thus to analyze its formal aspects and its techniques [技术] (16). Thus, the scientific dimension of diagrammatic analysis helps to demystify even very profound texts, which results in a deeper recognition and appreciation on the reader’s part. Following Robert Louis Stevenson’s assertion that fiction (particularly the novel) “is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity,” Wang maintains that an author begins by encountering the complexity of the world, distilling it into his main ideas, and in turn re-complexifying them in the act of creating his literary work (18). The power of diagrammatic analysis, then, lies in its ability to allow the reader to fully reconstitute the writer’s experiences and inner state, thereby determining not only what an author means, but also why they express themselves by those terms.

In describing his system, Wang’s terminology is appropriately visual and abstract. A text can be, for example, analyzed as a work which is woven together [编织] out of a main plot

¹⁸⁸ *Xiandai Zhongguo zuojia lun* [Study of Modern Chinese Writers], Vol. 2, (Shanghai: Guanghua shuju, 1932).


¹⁹⁰ The essay appeared in *Art and Literature Monthly* [文艺月刊], Vol. 6, no. 3, 16-23.
strand [主线] or series [系列] and any number of secondary plot strands [副线], each of which is knotted with “stopping points” [停留点]. The two primary elements of a story are its ethical development and its temporal development. Locate these two elements and their interweaving, and a novel can be turned into a diagram image [图影] by connecting up the various nodes (events, climaxes, stopping points) that abstracts the plot into a set of relations. Unlike He Yubo’s generalist approach, it seems that Wang had created a coherent system for the abstraction and graphic inscription of narrative summary. However, despite their simple elegance, the organization of Wang’s own graphs was far from self-evident. In one example (Figure 19) describing a triangular love relationship in Zhang Ziping’s short story, “Taili” (1927), the inter-character relations, narrative events, and plot tension are confusingly placed in the same two-dimensional space. There is, in other words, too much of an information load for the X-Y axis to bear. The result is confusion over the relationship between the elements: the graph conceals or obscures more than it reveals.

Overall, such essentializations of a story’s text into a series of coordinates did not so much produce new knowledge out of an aggregate of elements; rather, it communicated (and disciplined) the diagrammer’s understanding of the text. What makes the diagrammatic analysis espoused by He and Wang interesting is not so much the import of the images it generated, but how this method speaks to a desire for increasing the efficiency of communication in both literary criticism and in literary works themselves. The assumptions that speed is a virtue and that abstraction is an expedient means both find resonance in the observation Zhang Yaoxiang made in the introduction to his M.A. thesis: the influx of information in modern times demanded that reading be rationalized in ways which made it easier and rapider. The process of reducing a text into a set of relations and then re-encoding it in visual form provides another mode of distant
reading not only because it abstracts a text, but also in a more literal sense as the perception of scale in which the textual object is viewed from afar (as in the case of a map, a *ditu*), a kind of compression of space into data. In their assumption that texts and experience were diagrammable with *tu*, then, He and Wang were both responding to and participating in a new mode of reading that envisioned the text as information, which in turn could be extracted and remediated according to modern needs.

**Conclusion: From Data to Database**

The set of experiments that I have outlined above finds its more recent counterpart in the kind of data-driven and computer-assisted analysis of culture being conducted by a growing body of scholars today. The so-called digital humanities field includes a number of projects which Liang Qichao, Zhang Yaoxiang, or He Yubo would have found compelling, from the relatively rudimentary projects such as the stylometric evaluation of the *Hongloumeng* and digital concordances of the *Zuozhuan*, to more ambitious engagements with big data, such as the analysis of plot form in Western novels. To be clear, the kind of enumerative and diagrammatic criticism pioneered during the Republican period is not the direct ancestor or precursor of contemporary computer-based scholarship. But by appropriating forms of information visualization as a vernacular modern, these earlier generations of Chinese critics

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191 For a concise general review of this field as it has emerged in the west, see Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 1-32.

were indirectly participating in a broader moment in the development of statistical and abstractive analysis of literature, joining such critics as Vladimir Propp in the Soviet Union and Thomas Corwin Mendenhall in the United States, in laying a conceptual framework for the further development of quantitative analysis as a grounds for producing literary knowledge. Just as the work by these Chinese critics rhymes with the present, so, too, do their justifications of their work resonate with the position-taking of distant reading today. When Wang Xipeng made his preemptive defense of diagrammatic criticism as a method that enlivens understanding rather than treating a living entity as a dead corpse by dissecting it in the laboratory and labeling its pieces (16), he was attempting to rebut the notion that information and literature were mutually exclusive.

Of more historical significance is that the works outlined above are endemic to China’s modern print culture, where information in the form of statistics, tables, diagrams, and numbers in general was increasingly ubiquitous. Rather than being separated from literature, these quasi-scientific forms of visualizing information in fact frequently sat side-by-side with it, and, in the cases I discuss, information actually converged directly with literary discourse. At its conceptual horizon, such a convergence had the potential for reconfiguring literary practice in radical ways, calling into question older ways of reading while also suggesting new modes of reading: traditional interpretation could be supplemented (or altogether replaced) with enumeration and statistical knowledge, a novel written according to a diagrammatic blueprint established at the outset rather than being serially written into creation, and so on.

But the data-driven approach of the Republican period also signifies a new concern amongst authors about the relationships between literature and data, narrative and numbers, knowledge and information, as they were changing in the modern period. In the following
chapter, I examine in detail one important response in the case of the critic and realist author Mao Dun. Mao Dun used his literature to critically engage with and unmask the financial data that proliferated in China’s newspapers of the 1930s in the form of accounting information and abstract numbers. But Mao Dun was not simply “against” information, and at times he sought to adopt its scientific potential and aesthetic idiom. This was particularly true of his monumental *One Day in China* [中国的一日] (1936),\(^{193}\) which resonates strongly with the enumerative and diagrammatic modes of criticism this chapter discusses, and also sheds light on the way writers were integrating the proliferation of information in print culture into their creative works.

Inspired by Maxim Gorky and Mikhail Koltsov’s *One Day in the World* [День Мира] project, which was proposed in 1934 but only completed in 1937, Mao Dun and his brother-in-law, Kong Lingjing [孔另境] sought to take a kind of snapshot of an unexceptional day in contemporary China.\(^{194}\) In the late spring of 1936, they posted an ad in the newspaper *Shenbao* calling for contributions to an experiment called “One Day in China.”\(^{195}\) Readers could participate by sending in short pieces recording their experiences—no matter how mundane—of the day of May 21\(^{st}\). Suggested topics spanned subjects ranging from astronomy and weather, to politics and diplomacy; from social happenings and gossip, to personal reflections and local experience. The project turned out to be a major success, as more than 3000 responses poured in

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\(^{193}\) Shanghai: Life Publishing House [生活书店].

\(^{194}\) In March of 1936, Mao Dun had translated into Chinese the announcement of the *One Day in the World* project made at the Congress for the Defense of Culture in Paris in June, 1935. While this translation subsequently inspired the undertaking of *China’s One Day*, the Chinese work cannot be called derivative of its Cominternist counterpart, particularly since Mao Dun’s project undertook a far greater mobilization and was much broader in scope.

\(^{195}\) The ad first appeared in the April 25\(^{th}\) issue of *Shenbao*, and again in the May 18\(^{th}\), 20\(^{th}\), and 21\(^{st}\) issues. For an English translation of the ad, see *One Day in China: May 21, 1936*, trans. and ed. Sherman Cochran and Andrew C.K. Hsieh, with Janis Cochran. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), Appendix A.
by mid-June, from nearly all of China’s provinces, as well as from Thailand, Southeast Asia, and Japan.

With its experimental and hybrid nature, *One Day in China* offers itself up to a variety of uses and interpretations. It established a blueprint for collective literary activity in the socialist era. And, more recently, it has provided a historical archive of everyday experience in Republican China. I would add that *One Day* also represents a significant media event: the dissemination of the ad plumbed the reach of the *Shenbao* circulation in 1936, and the range of received submissions brought into relief China’s rapidly modernizing postal system (which had only been nationalized under the Ministry of Communication in 1935). As a media event, the project also accomplished a second, related goal: it created a new network of relations between Mao Dun and the thousands of amateur correspondents who sent in submissions. Given its engagement with and reliance upon telecommunications infrastructure and its collectivist nature, perhaps it is fair to think of *One Day* as the result of a new form of “distant writing” predicated upon the receipt and collation of information from various distant sources. At any rate, the text must be read as an explicit embrace of the convergence of information/data and literary production in modern China anticipated by the forms of data collection that I have discussed above.

On the other hand, *One Day in China* is an exploration of different forms of distant reading. The volume’s individual entries are interlaced with data, as editors included statistical entries on topics such as sports (1.23), meteorological statistics (2.2-2.4), social survey results

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197 Cochran, *One Day in China*. 
(4.69-4.70), and economic accounts (8.45-8.47). More generally, the volume proliferates with information in the form of numbers and facts provided by amateur writers detailing their work routines. On their own, such individual statistics are meaningless. But, taken out of the context of the anthology as a whole, any of the single textual entries would be equally insignificant. By conspicuously incorporating these statistical numbers and tables, *One Day* mimics the newspaper—indeed, in his congratulatory preface to the book, Cai Yuanpei cheered the project as a kind of super-newspaper. While data is made out to be a form of reportage, this relationship can also be inverted: the photos, illustrations, woodcuts, newspaper clippings, reports, diary entries, “sketches” of scenes, letters, anecdotes are themselves all a kind of data, information that is transmitted from the field, and in turn organized and indexed in a massive amalgamation.  

By aiming at a wide variety of entries, the editors of *One Day in China* intended to produce a comprehensive story about life in China. This story takes on a mosaic-like quality where the individual entries/tiles add up to a geographic map of China (Kong and Mao Dun organized the entries according to Chinese provinces and areas outside of China). The text was meant to reproduce China in the form of an epitome [*suo-tu* 縮圖; lit. ‘a reduced *tu*’]. But despite this diagrammatic nature, *One Day* is exactly the opposite of a linear narrative, and its massive size calls into question in what manner the text was meant to be read—or whether it was meant to be read at all. It is instead a kind of database, a “collection of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other . . . [thus aggregating into a] structured collection of

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198 And the word *xiaoxi* appears in numerous entry titles, thus suggesting that the collection as a whole is a collation of informal news and information.

The aesthetics of data performed by the collection is further compounded by the mythopoeic rhetoric surrounding the book’s provenance, as the editors repeatedly emphasized that they had narrowed down 3000 submitted entries into 490, totaling 800,000 characters, and that the book weighed in at half a jin.201

One Day in China, then, should be taken as an experiment at combining the aesthetics of information advanced by enumerative and diagrammatic criticism together with a new form of mass politics. Surely Zhang Yaoxiang, who had seen the potential for measuring merchant psychology in the indexical data of the phonebook, would have seen even greater potential for plumbing mass psychology in the data collected within One Day. But while One Day in China is a kind of monument to historicist positivism and celebration of distant reading/writing, it paradoxically indexed the proliferation of information and the modern vernacular of statistical tables that Mao Dun took aim at with his realist writing. It is to this literature that I turn in the following chapter.

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201 “One Day in China quizzed,” 419-426.
Figure 3: Sample page from an original edition of Gu Donggao’s *Tableaux of Events in the Spring and Autumn Period* (1748), here showing an index of geographical information from the *Zuozhuan*. 
Figure 4: Liang Qichao and Ding Wenjiang, “Table of the Geographical Distribution of Historical Figures” (reproduced in the *LQQJ*, 4046).
Figure 5: Wei Juxian, graph of textual attention to different information pertaining to various states in the Zuozhuan as a whole (colored in black) and in the Zuozhuan after the capture of the Lin unicorn (i.e. in the 14th year of Duke Ai of Lu), colored in white (1929)

Figure 6: Wei Juxian, graph of ratios of textual distribution to events per every five years in the Zuozhuan and Chunqiu texts (1929)
Figure 7: Table from Chen Heqin’s “Character Repertoires for Language Learning” (1922). The columns not marked with red arrows denote the number of times a character appears in the corpus. The columns indicated by the red arrows show how many characters appear that in the corpus the number of times indicated by the column immediately to the left. For example, the upper-leftmost pairing states that the number of characters that appear only once in the corpus is 574 (characters such as: 喀, 姣, 徙, and so on); in contrast, the lower-rightmost pairing shows the most common entries: a total of ten characters appear within the corpus over 5001 times (i.e. very common characters, pronouns and particles such as: 有, 我, 不, 的, etc.).
Figure 8: Sample from Cheng Junying’s topic modeling of Tang poetry, “The Attention and Interests of Poets” (1923), showing the tabulation of meteorological and elemental topics by individual poet (2: 28)
Figure 9: Analysis of nine major anthologies of new poetry breaking down the number of poems, total number of lines, count of exclamation points, average number of exclamation points per poem and per line. From Zhang Yaoxiang, “The Affect of New Poets” (1924)

Figure 10: Zhang Yaoxiang’s tabulation of exclamation point usage in Western poetry, from “The Affect of New Poets” (1924)
Figure 11: Zhang Yaoxiang’s rendition of the transformation of Guo Moruo’s poem, “Morning Peace,” into data in “The Affect of New Poets” (1924)
Figure 12: Fu Donghua’s reproduction of Moulton’s chart of morphology of literature (1926)

Figure 13: Yu Dafu, diagram of ‘F’ in daily experience (1925)
Figure 14: He Yubo, diagram of love relations between literary protagonist and secondary characters (1928)

Figure 15: He Yubo, diagram of tripartite plot development in Mao Dun’s “Pursuit” (1928)

Figure 16: He Yubo, temporal sequencing of his own story, “Her News” (1930)
Figure 17: He Yubo, structure of “thought” or ideology in “Escape” (1931)

Figure 18: He Yubo, analysis of structure of Mao Dun’s novella, *Waverings* [动摇]; the top diagram shows chapter emphasis by character; the bottom diagram shows chapter emphasis on love and revolution (1931)
Figure 19: Wang Xipeng, diagram of narrative elements of Zhang Ziping’s “Taili” (1934). Note that, like a conventional two-dimensional graph, this diagram is supposed to be “read” from left-to-right.
Chapter Two: Communication and Fictitious Capital in Mao Dun’s “Market Literature” (1933-1938)
Shareholder: “This business of mine is a mysterious affair, and that, even as it was the most fair and noble in all of Europe, so it was also the falsest and most infamous business in the world. The truth of this paradox becomes comprehensible, when one appreciates that this business has necessarily been converted into a game, and merchants [concerned in it] have become speculators. Had the conversion of these merchants into speculators been the only change, the harm would have been bearable, but, what is worse, a portion of the stockbrokers have become cardsharpers and . . . [thus] spread poison and invisible threads.”

Joseph de la Vega, Confusión de Confusiones (1688)

The news immediately threw the Shanghai bond market [市场] into a turmoil of excitement. Rumors began to spread [传] from various sides. The speculators at the Shanghai China Merchants Stock Exchange [上海华商证券交易所] were at once eager believers of these rumors, as well as producers and broadcasters [传播者] of these rumors.

Mao Dun, Midnight (1933)

If knowledge is power. . . information is power to operate at a distance.

Alexander Welsh, George Eliot and Blackmail

The origin story regarding Mao Dun’s (1896-1981) canonical realist novel about capitalist elites in Shanghai, Midnight (1933), has become the stuff of literary legend. After returning to Shanghai from Japan in 1930, the author experienced recurrent eye trouble (cataracts in his left eye, an ulcer in his right eye), a condition deleterious enough to keep him from regular writing.


203 Mao Dun, Midnight. Trans. Hsu Meng-hsiung. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979), 251. Here and throughout I have used the Chinese original to adjust the English translation (which is often idiomatic at the cost of literal precision). For the original citation, see Ziye (Shanghai: Kaiming shuju, 1933), 287. Hereafter I cite the novel in-text putting the original Chinese edition first and the translation edition second.

204 George Eliot and Blackmail (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1985), 46.
While convalescing, Mao Dun frequented the mansion of his Second Uncle Lu, where he rubbed shoulders with the elite businessmen and bankers from his hometown, Wuzhen. This privileged social access afforded him a glimpse into the upper echelon of financial and industrial capital and would inspire the ethnographic descriptions of the stock exchange and speculation featured in *Midnight* and in later work. During the same period, Shanghai was frequently set abuzz by fragmentary reports of Peng Dehuai and the Red Army’s occupation of Changsha, as well as by descriptions of flourishing soviet communes in the countryside. Initially intending to produce a work that balanced representation of urban and rural situations, Mao Dun kept revising the novel’s blueprint to make the project more manageable, ultimately limiting the scope of its structure to the struggle between industrial capital and financial capital in Shanghai.  

Within this final, Shanghai-centered configuration of the novel, the countryside plays only an indirect role. Events occurring outside of city become primarily “known” to the reader through the eyes of stock exchange speculators and their respective sources of intelligence: newspapers, telegrams, rumors, and agents in the countryside.

Perhaps because of its well-known provenance, earlier critics have bracketed *Midnight*’s primary focus on finance—and stock speculation in particular—as incidental, a mere biographical detail that helps “illustrate” Mao Dun’s pedantry and didacticism. For example, C.T. Hsia acknowledges the text as “a work of tremendous research, impeccable in documentation, larded with allusion to topical figures, and crammed with political and economic facts,” yet finds it “often irritating and boring.” Likewise: “Page after page of unrelieved boredom when the Bulls and Bears in the novel start to talk shop, when Mao Tun the novelist is carried away by Mao Tun the amateur stock broker,” writes Joseph S. M. Lau, who ascribes

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Midnight’s excess of information to the novel’s aspirations to literary naturalism. Marston Anderson, on the other hand, merely treats the novel’s focus on stock trading as an expedient means for the author to mount an attack on Trotskyite and liberal nationalist visions of China’s future. Ultimately these critics see Mao Dun’s foray into questions of political economy as either essentially non-literary (thus spoiling the novel’s literary merit or destabilizing its realist effect), or as a pure manifestation of what C.T. Hsia has termed the modern Chinese intellectual’s “obsession with China” and his singular focus upon the fate of the nation. However, such bracketing obscures the fact that Midnight’s engagement with the stock market and economics was central to Mao Dun’s broader literary output from the period. Indeed, an examination of his literature between the publication of Midnight in 1933 and the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression in 1937 reveals that Midnight is surrounded by a veritable satellite system of writing about speculation, the stock market, and, more generally, market relations. Collectively these texts serve as testament to Mao Dun’s sustained interest in the general relationships between economy and society, between individual and market. In 1936, one Chinese critic commenting on the prevalence of economic themes in Mao Dun’s recent writing memorably summed up the composite effect of this oeuvre: “These economic


207 A representative—but not exhaustive—list of such “market literature” includes: Midnight (1933), “Spring Silkworms” (1933), “Mr. Zhao Can’t Fathom It” (1934), “The Lin Family Store” (1932), “Polygonal Relations” (1936), The Story of the First Stage (1938; 1945), Department Store (an adaptation of Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames [1883]; 1934), “Shanghai” (1935), as well as a number of essays that Mao wrote to supplement Midnight (discussed below).

208 David Wang also notes this overarching theme, but does not explicitly identify it as being “market”-based. Instead, analyzing a more limited set of fictional texts, Wang sees Mao Dun’s work from this period as representing various “techno-economical systems” of rural, urban, and metropolitan settings. See Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 49-50.
impediments and entanglements [of Mao Dun’s 1930s market literature] form an image of the backwardness of half industrialized society. . . At such a time our author resembles an illustrator drawing with charcoal, using a heavy hand to work in great scribbles and erasures, where each stroke that appears is pitch black with no gradation; there is only a complex interlacing of forceful dots and lines [只是有力的点和线的复杂交错] forming on the paper several shifting points of view.  

These lines and dots, much like the literary map drawn for readers by De la Vega’s description of Amsterdam stock speculation a quarter of a millennium earlier, form a sort of literary ethnography of market integration and the emergence of modern finance capitalism in Shanghai and China.  

Although market speculation in China was not a new phenomenon, by the modern era—characterized in Midnight as a “time of speculation” where anyone with a bit of cash would bet on the market (39; 33)—the practice of speculation had come to proliferate across a broad swathe of bourgeois society, thus signaling the arrival of a historical stage of finance capital’s domination.  

As I outlined in my Introduction, concomitant to the emergence of finance capitalism was the rise in importance of communications technologies for the speedy transfer and dissemination of information.  

In turn, new interest in communications and information helped precipitate a general reorganization of social vision where social actors were redefined as

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209 Bi Shutang [毕树棠], “An Evaluation of ‘Polygonal Relations’,” in Yuzhoufeng No. 36, 1936, pp. 74. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

210 At least in Shanghai and China’s port cities. Also, regarding the historiography of this stage of late capitalism, note that Mao had earlier set out to translate Lenin’s Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism.

211 As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note in Empire (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2000): “The development of communications networks has an organic relationship to the emergence of the new [transnational, capitalist] world order—it is, in other words, effect and cause, product and producer. Communication not only expresses but also organizes the movement of globalization” (32). Of course, Hardt and Negri have in mind not only telecommunication, but also the conditions of subject-formation under mass media. For a concrete historical exploration of communications and capitalism in American history, see The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society, by James R. Beniger. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). Beniger’s work is taken up in greater detail below.
communicative nodes within a social network. As I show below, this general trend is critically described in Mao Dun’s literature. His interest in the market is also an interest in the conditions of the social life of information. In an age where individuals were increasingly connected through media such as the telephone, telegraph, or account book, writing about the stock market also meant both to write of the formation of a public as an integrated field [场] of communications, and to portray the conditions of social influence and control that obtained within such a public. In giving literary figuration to the abstract entities of a public and the arcs of information flowing therein, Mao Dun’s ethnographic market literature thus presented its reader with a composite picture of the individual’s place within a complex network of market relations and social relations.

The present chapter takes up Mao Dun’s critical exploration of the relationship between speculation, information flow, and literary practice. In Part One, for the sake of context, I first provide a brief synopsis of modern stock/bond speculation and its treatment in Chinese literature in the decade leading up to Mao Dun’s period of production. Then I examine Mao Dun’s representation of the stock exchange and speculation in his 1930s literary output, primarily focusing on the crown jewel of his market literature, *Midnight*. Though putatively about the market, these texts are always also about the networked communication of information/news, *xiaoxi*. The abstraction and disembodiment that made *xiaoxi* flow at/around the stock market are emblematic of reification and the commodity form under modern capitalism—the conventional objects of Mao Dun’s critique. My argument is that Mao Dun’s depictions of *xiaoxi* as the primary object of competition and attention led him to redefine the modern individual (not only the speculators in the gilded world of finance) as a sort of *homo informaticus* (himself a type of
This modern figure approaches the external world as a networked field of information exchange and, in order to calculate his course of action, must tease out the value of information and useful details from a background of misinformation, rumor, or communicational breakdown. Within such an orientation, the primary obstacle to any individual or social endeavor—whether stock manipulation, labor organization, or even simply survival in uncertain times—is the problem of noise and miscommunication, whether in the form of cacophony, rumor, or some other embodied, entropic failure in communication networks. Ultimately Mao Dun’s representation of tensions between communication and noise represents the first time in modern Chinese literature that the subjects of communication and “information”—and their social, political, and economic stakes—appeared so explicitly and in such depth.

Part Two of this chapter pivots from represented communication to the issue of the medium of information—i.e. the kind of information discussed in my Chapter One, information as data—and the formal question of inscribing information within realist literature. Here I examine Mao Dun’s placement of literary realism and the novel within the broader information ecology described within his own literature. Given the great importance of the factor of speed in information’s transmission within the dynamic “mediasphere” of modern Shanghai, how was a relatively slow and immobile medium of communication such as literature able to maintain critical social value? Mao Dun envisioned realist literature making a strong intervention into society’s experience of finance capital. Through a figural reading of acts of accounting in Mao

\[\textit{homo economicus}.\] 212 This modern figure approaches the external world as a networked field of information exchange and, in order to calculate his course of action, must tease out the value of information and useful details from a background of misinformation, rumor, or communicational breakdown. Within such an orientation, the primary obstacle to any individual or social endeavor—whether stock manipulation, labor organization, or even simply survival in uncertain times—is the problem of noise and miscommunication, whether in the form of cacophony, rumor, or some other embodied, entropic failure in communication networks. Ultimately Mao Dun’s representation of tensions between communication and noise represents the first time in modern Chinese literature that the subjects of communication and “information”—and their social, political, and economic stakes—appeared so explicitly and in such depth.

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\[\textit{homo economicus}.\] 212 For a conceptual overview of \textit{homo economicus} see Susan F. Feiner’s description, “Portrait of \textit{Homo Economicus} as a Young Man,” in Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, eds. \textit{The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics} (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 193-209. As should become clear in my reading of Mao Dun’s work below, the differences between \textit{h. economicus} and \textit{h. informaticus} are fine (but historically significant). They are both calculative and pursue maximum utility. However, the former, as a hero of classical economics and early modern Western literature, primarily populated a world where the commodity form was still emergent, and thus saw money as a signifier with a material signified (whether metal or some utilizable object). In contrast, \textit{h. informaticus} lives in the world of finance capitalism and electric communication, where value seems to circulate instantaneously as abstract numbers.

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Dun’s market literature, I argue that Mao Dun took his cue from another “slow” and diachronic medium—the account ledger—as a critical model for structuring social relations within his literature. By reworking into his literary practice an information-packed form ideal for inscribing market relations and networks in linear form, Mao Dun sought to refashion his reader as an accountant of social relations, who, interpellated as a rational and savvy *h. informaticus*, would be able to herself unlock the revolutionary knowledge latent in public information.

**Stock Speculation, Information Asymmetries, and Communication Networks**

Formal stock and bond exchanges were founded in Shanghai and other port cities in the late 1910s.\(^{213}\) Literary treatment of stock speculation followed shortly thereafter, appearing as a general response to the mushrooming of small exchanges across China, and specifically targeting the bursting of a large speculation bubble in 1922. When the bubble popped, bankrupting many overeager amateur speculators, a number of prominent Shanghai literary journals such as the popular *Saturday* [礼拜六] and *Week* [星期] published short stories and serialized novels exploring the moral shortcomings of speculation and its shifty agent, the stock broker [经纪人]. For example, *Saturday* featured shady investment schemes in the short story, “The Mint” [造币厂], and unsuccessful speculators in “Regret” [悔], both published in late 1921.\(^{214}\)

\(^{213}\) For more on this seminal period of the stock exchange in Shanghai and other cities, see Bryna Goodman, “Things Unheard of East or West: Colonialism, nationalism, and cultural contamination in early Chinese Exchanges,” in Goodman and David S.G. Goodman, eds., *Twentieth Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday, and the World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and forthcoming. I thank Prof. Goodman for alerting me to a number of the texts discussed in this section. For a comprehensive, archive-based history of the largest exchange of the Republican period, the Shanghai Chinese Merchants Securities Exchange, see Liu Zhiying, *Jindai Shanghai Huashang Zhengquan Shichang Yanjiu* (Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 2004).

\(^{214}\) “The Mint” was published in *Saturday* no. 103 (1921), 31-38. “Regret” was published in *Saturday* no. 106 (1921), 18-25.
Both of these stories were written by Jiang Hongjiao (江红蕉) (1898-1972). A prolific writer who established himself as a producer of romance fiction and social novels, Jiang wrote extensively about the stock trade in this period. Besides such shorter pieces, Jiang also produced a serial novel, *A Record of the True Character of the Stock Exchange* [交易所现形记] published in *Week* across twenty-four installments in 1922.\(^\text{215}\) Jiang composed this work in the mode of the popular expository novel of Qing bureaucracy, *A Record of the True Character of Officialdom* [官场现形记], by Li Boyuan (1867-1906), which appeared in serial form beginning in 1903 until Li’s death three years later.\(^\text{216}\) Like Li Boyuan’s work, Jiang’s exposé of the stock market offers a veritable typology of wealthy, unscrupulous, and petty-minded elite. In many ways, Jiang’s work anticipates Mao Dun’s market literature a decade later. One example is its paralleling of modern stock trade with traditional practices of exchange (here Jiang likens the modern exchanges to commodities trading done in tea houses)—though Jiang is careful to note that the stock market is not entirely derivative of tradition, and constitutes a modern place with new rules and practices (which are cast in a sinister light through association with the Japanese). Like Mao Dun, Jiang, too, draws a connection between stock valuation and communication: he notes that prices only half depend on natural or social conditions [天时人事], and are equally dependent on the public feeling [人心] amongst speculators. At several points his narrative directly takes up the topic of information as a trace of social influence, such as in the description of the expansion

\[^{215}\] Notably, a second *Record of the True Character of the Stock Exchange* by Lu Shouxian [陆守险] appeared in 1922; this latter is not a “social novel” but rather belongs to the sensationalist “Black Screen” [黑幕] novelistic genre.

\[^{216}\] In turn, Li’s *Record of the True Character of Officialdom* was written in a vein of social criticism and typology established by the mid-Qing social novel, *The Scholars* [儒林外史], by Wu Jingzi (1701-1754). Besides Jiang Hongjiao’s *Record of the True Character of the Stock Exchange*, Li’s *Record* inspired a host of other social novels with similar titles in the late Qing and early Republic.
of one speculation bubble when “the information [that a foreigner is poised to purchase the stock market] spreads rapidly, from one person to ten, from ten to a hundred [信息传得很快，一传十，十传百], such that those not involved in the stock business even heard about it.” Though tantalizing, such portrayals of information’s movement are sporadic and unsustained, and get lost in the narrative’s cycles of social friction and corruption. The episodic nature of such serial fiction leads to a steady introduction of new characters, but the plot ultimately stagnates, and Jiang abandoned the story after twenty-six chapters.

After the early 1920s, as stock exchange became more regulated and professionalized it gradually receded from the public eye, despite the occasional appearance of high profile cases. At the same time, the stock exchange seems to have disappeared as a subject in popular literature. Nor did stock trading or high finance appear in May Fourth literature that was coming to flourish during the 1920s; engaged in refashioning its readership into modern, enlightened subjects, such reform-minded literature tended to focus on social problems of the lower class and intellectuals.

Ironically, after the 1920s one of the only depictions of Shanghai’s stock markets appeared not in a Chinese text but in the work of a Japanese author, Yokomitsu Riichi’s (1898-1947) modernist novel, *Shanghai* (1935). Through the flaneur-like movements of its protagonist, Kōya, this novel offered a kaleidoscopic view of cosmopolitanism, capitalism,
consumerism, and crowds of Shanghai—all neatly epitomized in the episode describing the Shanghai financial industry. Seeing currency brokers speed by him on the street, Kōya reflects on the link between Shanghai and the movement of currency markets in New York and London. This transnational (and colonialist) public of currency traders, connected through a variety of expeditious means of communication, manifests itself as a chaotic crowd when the narrative follows Kōya to the city’s gold exchange. There he witnesses on the trading floor a “throng of people, smeared in oily sweat, chests pressed together, [that] flowed back and forth between the two centers of buying and selling. The swirl continued round and round, back to front, left to right, amid a constant careening and shouting.”

Ultimately the gold exchange is for Yokomitsu just one modernist space amongst many amidst the seething social tensions of Shanghai, and it is telling that his stockbrokers so resemble factory workers with their oily and sweaty bodies.

Mao Dun’s literary treatment of stock speculation would share with its 1920s popular counterpart a stance of moral censure against stock speculation; likewise, his experimental descriptions of the exchange floor echoed Yokomitsu’s literary modernism. But Mao Dun’s fascination with the stock market went beyond an interest in exploring bourgeois social relations, and he clearly saw the complexity of stock trading as a synecdoche of the larger market, and, by extension, the modern urban public. As such, the stock exchange was for Mao Dun more than a form of gambling, or cosmopolitan space of enrichment, and instead offered a figure for representing the modern public and the modern crowd (where the latter is the physical condensation of the former). But how did he come to intellectually engage with the workings of various financial instruments such as joint stock and futures? His autobiography and collected

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220 Ibid, 35.
works offer a number of important details. His familiarity with stocks and bonds stretched back to his early career as a critic and propagandist. For example, he received and sold Commercial Press stock in 1926, and, while in Wuhan the following year, he propagandized for the sale of government bonds. However, as Mao Dun notes in his memoir’s later chapter on *Midnight* (1981), the catalyst for his interest in finance, and in particular speculation, appeared when his former colleague at the Commercial Press, the stock broker Zhang Yu’an [章郁庵], took Mao Dun to a stock exchange and explained to him its basic operations. Crucially, Mao Dun recounts that he inherently grasped the practice of stock speculation by relating it to the speculation in mulberry leaves that he witnessed growing up near the countryside. As he explains it in retrospect:

For others, perhaps [the trading in stocks or futures] would be difficult to grasp quickly. But for me it was different. This was because of the similarities between buying and selling on the stock market, and the annual mulberry leaf market in my home region. There, just as soon as the spring silkworms would begin to emerge, a few people would establish a leaf business—but in actuality they had no mulberry leaves in their possession. About three or four months before the high point of the silkworm season, those in the leaf trade made different guesses and assessments about the outcome of the silkworm crop. Those who guessed that the silkworm crop would be bad would sell [in advance] several bales of leaves to familiar townsfolk; this resembles the bears at the stock exchange. Those who guessed that the silkworms would mature well would make an

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221 When he left the editing and translation department at the Commercial Press, his colleague there, Zheng Zhenduo [郑振铎], presented Mao with a company stock as a severance payment. At one hundred yuan, the stock certificate’s face value was not insubstantial, though at the time he received it the stock was selling for two or three times as much on the stock exchange. Mao disposed of it by selling it to a delighted relative for its original price. See *Wo zouguo de daolu*, Vol. 1: 349. Christopher Reed notes that the Commercial Press was the first printing organization to capitalize as a joint-stock corporation, which occurred in 1902: *Gutenberg in Shanghai*, 195.

222 See his description of propaganda practices in *Wo zouguo de daolu*, Vol. 1, 353-381.

223 A.k.a. Zhang Qiuyang [章秋阳] (1901-1940), Mao Dun’s former colleague at the Commercial Press, and brother of Zhang Naiqi [章乃器] (1897-1977). Zhang Naiqi was a bank manager, prominent theorist of finance and credit, the founder a credit service bulletin, and counted as an influential figure in the finance world of 1930s Shanghai. It is also worth noting that Zhang served as one of the editorial board members of the China’s *One Day* project in spring of 1936 (see Chapter One), shortly before becoming one of the “Seven Gentlemen” famously jailed by the Nationalist government.
advance purchase [预购] of several bales of leaves from the landlords who owned mulberry plots but didn’t raise silkworms, located in their own village or the neighboring villages; these resembled the bulls of the stock exchange. Because they were all selling and buying in advance, the price of every bale of leaves was usually quite low, [so] during the busy part of the silkworm season, if the silkworms flourished, the leaf price rose, and those who had sold in advance [i.e. the bears] had no recourse but to buy [actual leaves] at three or four times [the earlier price] in order to fill the peasants’ orders. In this way, they not only lost their operating costs, but even faced bankruptcy. In contrast, those who had purchased in advance profited greatly. . . The leaf market would conclude after three months, but the stock exchange [runs continuously and] has a monthly reckoning [交割]; this is the only point of difference between the two. (Wo zouguo, 1:507)

Mao Dun’s reference to sericulture immediately brings to mind his short story, “Spring Silkworms” [春蚕] (1933), which he wrote concurrently alongside Midnight. Indeed, the centrality of speculation in both pieces of fiction, as well as the isomorphism between, on the one hand, the transnational, bank-backed world of high finance, and, on the other hand, rural, local financial systems, collectively suggests that Mao Dun saw in speculation a universal phenomenon of markets. Across these acts of speculation, Mao Dun found a shared temporal logic where value could be “produced” through betting on price differentials over time, creating a bidirectional potential for gain whereby bears could actually profit through a fall in stock’s price. By this logic, speculation does not require actual stock ownership for, as Mao Dun notes, speculators don’t necessarily hold any stocks or leaves, but rather speculate on the difference between opening prices and closing prices (Wo zouguo, 1:506).

Regarding such mulberry leaf speculation, Mao Dun goes on to explain that the leaf market—and by extension the stock exchange—is not simply a matter of testing an individual’s prognostication abilities against a neutral market, where the balance of supply and demand determined prices. Instead, the value of the mulberry leaves can be manipulated by competing speculators, leaving the value of leaves dependent on more than the calculated outcome of the
silkworm crop. Such manipulation operates through rumor spreading, as Mao Dun himself witnessed growing up, when leaf speculators would

frequently circulate misinformation (jia xiaoxi [哄传假消息]) to make the price of leaves rise or fall. This misinformation typically was about the great success or utter failure of the silkworm crop in such-and-such village in the neighboring region. If one said the neighboring village was enjoying a bumper crop, it meant [their] leaf supply would be insufficient, and that [buyers] would come to this village to purchase several bales, thus causing a rise in leaf prices. Conversely, if the misinformation suggested the neighboring village had a disastrous silkworm crop, then [that unfortunate] village had an excess of leaves, and would sell them to this village [cheaply], thus causing the leaf price to drop. (Wo zouguo, 507)

In such a light, successful speculation becomes as much a matter of teasing out valuable information amidst the noise produced by competing speculators or other communicational contingencies. In other words, the act of speculation—and, more broadly, the operation of futures- and stock markets of all sorts—is closely bound up with the communication of information along networks.224 This is indirectly affirmed by Mao Dun’s market literature, which often portrays the problem with the Chinese economy in the 1930s as less one of production (his farmers enjoy good crops, his factories enjoy strong output), and more one of mis-investment, where one’s livelihood is contingent upon flows of information.225

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224 As emphasized in early modern accounts such as De la Vega’s Confusión de Confusiones and Daniel Defoe’s “Anatomy of Exchange Alley” (1719), the relationship between news flow and stock value is inherent to stock speculation. Commenting on the history of the South Sea Bubble of 1720, the historian Richard Dale notes that: “We can be fairly sure that the market abuses [like the spreading of misinformation through the press or through coffee shop societies] which contemporary opinion identified were endemic to securities trading in this period. Security prices were highly sensitive to extraneous events, especially those originating from abroad; there could be a considerable lapse of time before such events were reported (or before false reports could be discredited) in the press or through the coffee shop network; and there was no regulatory oversight of market practices. In such a regime there were ample opportunities and powerful incentives to manipulate the news, and thereby market prices. It was in this unstable and rumour-filled trading environment that the extraordinary stock market events of 1720 unfolded.” The First Crash: Lessons from the South Sea Bubble (Princeton: PUP, 2004), 19.

225 C.f. the fate of the silkworm farmer, Old Tongbao, in Mao Dun’s famous short story, “Spring Silkworms” (1933). Despite his bumper crop of silkworm cocoons, Old Tongbao cannot find a buyer for his product because, as he only finds out too late, that year cocoon buyers are only purchasing Japanese-style cocoons. Commenting on the breadth of speculation in Mao’s literature from the period, David Wang asks: “If the speculator, by generating money, is a kind of producer, isn’t the producer a kind of speculator by modulating his production against the fluctuation of [the] market?” Fictional Realism, 64.
The relationship between speculation and information—and the networks that such information coursed upon—is exemplified in a fascinating—and understudied—piece of Mao Dun’s market literature published in 1936, titled “Sketch of the Stock Exchange” (for my translation of the piece, see Dissertation Appendix). The piece deserves our attention both because it serves anachronistically as a prologue to *Midnight*, and because it casts light onto Mao Dun’s broader literary and ethnographic project of the 1930s.

Written in the first person as an impressionist, subjective “sketch” [速写], the piece presents Mao Dun’s observations of the Shanghai China Merchants Stock Exchange [上海华商证券交易所], China’s largest stock exchange since the general consolidation of markets earlier in 1933. In line with its place of publication, the *Liangyou Pictorial* [良友画报], the essay worked to briefly illustrate a quintessentially modern, “everyday” space of Shanghai for the sake

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226 The piece was originally titled “Stock Exchange” [证券交易所], and first appeared in a centerfold in the February 15th issue of the *Liangyou* pictorial magazine, Number 114, pp. 24-25. In October, 1936, the essay was renamed “Sketch of the Exchange” [交易所速写] and collected in *Impressions, Associations, Remembrances* [印象，感想，回忆], published by the Wenhua shenghuo chubanshe. Because the original only appears across two pages of the *Liangyou Huabao*, I do not cite page numbers in my in-text references.

227 Founded in November of 1920, this exchange was merged with part of the Chartered Stock and Produce Exchange [上海证券交易所] in 1933 following the Nationalist “Exchange Law” promulgated in 1929, which mandated the consolidation of redundant exchanges (see line 55 of the law). By 1935 there were only five stock exchanges in Shanghai (besides the Merchants Stock Exchange, in order of size: the Chinese Cotton Goods Exchange, the Shanghai Gold Stock Exchange, the Shanghai Flour Stock Exchange, and the Shanghai Provision Exchange). For a contemporary overview of the exchanges, see “The Origin and Present Situation of Shanghai Exchanges” [上海交易所之发端与现状] from the 1935 *Shanghai Yearbook* [上海市年鉴], reprinted in *Jiu Shanghai de Zhengquan Jiaoyisuo*, Shanghai Municipal Archive ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), pp. 341-53. It should also be noted that Mao Dun’s literature primarily describes government bond speculation rather than stock speculation, most likely because, as Liu Zhiying suggests in her history of the Merchants Exchange, bond trading dwarfed stock trading during this period. One benefit to depicting bonds and not stocks was that the former allowed him to “track” public confidence in the Nationalist government, as well as to criticize the government by suggesting its own complicity in powerful speculators’ manipulations.
of urban readers, and was accompanied by several drawings produced by one Lu Zhixiang [陆志庠].

In a filmic progression, the narrative opens with a description of the Exchange’s façade (see Figure 20, below), and moves forward to penetrate into its interior space. In order to dramatize the spectacle of the hustle and bustle occurring around the floor of the Exchange, Mao Dun contrasts the proceedings before him to those of a playhouse. Instead of a proscenium, the Exchange features a prominent signboard at the center of its main room. As Mao Dun describes the audience and scene:

The hall very much resembles a beehive. Please don’t imagine that the hall is filled with row upon row of seats, like the hall of a large playhouse. One could not even squeeze in a small bench. Everyone is standing; the outer ring has come to watch the market conditions [市面], prepared to buy or sell—might as well say that the majority are the individual traders [散户] with small amounts of capital, though naturally there’s also no shortage of “inside traders” [抢帽子]. They are not the principal instigators who loudly, ear-piercingly scream out numbers. Amongst them some raise their heads, and look toward the stage, —though please don’t be mistaken, the men on the clapper-board stage who roll up their sleeves all the way to their shoulders are not at all handsome, and one can’t spot anything of guiding value. [Instead, the traders] are looking at the “background” on the stage that is exhibiting ‘XXXXX Treasury Bonds,’ ‘X period of time’... this sort of “theatre” [戏目] (if I may make such a comparison), especially this illuminated number board at the front of this “stage.” The face of the [sign] is inlayed high above the small stage in the back, with rapidly shifting red Arabic numerals which are lined up four side-by-side, where two are for the (sub-)unit of yuan [元] and lower, like the format we frequently see on a bill; under these two small numbers

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228 Despite the essay’s inclusion in the series about “everyday” urban spaces, it seems that by the 1930s Shanghai’s stock markets were relatively occluded from the general urban public, as access to the exchange floors was limited to licensed professionals. Very few photographic or pictorial images of exchanges were published. This much is suggested, for example, by the well-known woodcut artist, Liu Xian [刘岘], in the foreword to his set of illustrations of Midnight. Liu explains that he has no images or personal experience to guide an illustration. Despite the lack of direct representation, as I show below (as in Figure 24), Liu did produce several images that feature interpersonal communication and the circulation of information. See Liu Xian, Ziye zhi tu [子夜之图] (Shanghai: Weiming muke she, 1937), 1. Today a diorama of the floor of the Flour Stock Exchange is on display as part of a larger, permanent exhibit at the Oriental Pearl Tower [东方明珠塔] in Shanghai’s Pudong District.

229 I.e. those who ride the short-term fluctuations of stock prices looking to quick make profit by buying low, selling high.
there is a horizontal line of digits, also red. The board’s writing is not small, so that from anywhere in the hall one can see it clearly. These compact, crimson, electrically lit numbers are created by people, and it is people that make them change every moment, but they control people’s “fate” [命運].

This detailed description shows the dynamic screen of numbers as a sort of spectacular financial instrument that itself resembles a bond or bill, being updated in real time in response to speculators’ demand, making the stock exchange a larger symbol of the process of Marxist reification inherent to money. Mao Dun’s allusions to the theatre (rather than film) implicitly suggests to the reader that the feedback loop between the board and the brokers is akin to the relationship between actors and audience. However, the essay suggests two important and related points of difference between the theatre and the present scene. First, here the numbers’ dance controls the fate of the immediate audience, as well as an absent but far greater majority. This latter group includes even unwitting participants, who “live in different areas of Shanghai, in different areas of China; but here upon the stage, when the red light leaps, it can determine their bankruptcy or fortune.” Thus the movement of these numbers, though seemingly abstract, carries “real” consequences for those integrated into the relevant market. In this light, the crowd is only a synecdochic figure of a broader network of relations, or public, which is separated by space but connected through communication.

Second, and more prominently, amongst the members of the audience not everyone’s attention is oriented toward the “stage”: the brokers do not simply react to the change of numbers on the board as peripheral nodes interact with a central node in a centralized network. Instead, the speculators are shown in a frantic state of horizontal interactions, both with one another and even with agents not immediately present; in other words, they form a more decentralized
network of communication (see Figure 21). This is repeatedly stressed by the sketch’s foregrounding of telecommunication media, an assemblage which includes the brokers themselves, whose “hands and mouths are influencing the transformations of the red electrically lit numbers displayed on the wall. . . [these people] are just like the red lights, themselves nothing more than a sort of machine used by others.” The narrative’s distinctive emphasis on the coursing of messages and the spread of influence is furthered by the frequent arrival of instructions by phone or courier and their further proliferation amongst the participants through conversation or notes: “Here, there are two people secretly conversing into one another’s ears; over there, there are another two arguing over something in suppressed tones. . . You’ll also frequently see small, balled things; those are paper balls, about the size of a button, flying into the central throng from all sides. . . Who can predict whether the wads of paper will cause the empty-headed masses to sob, or to laugh?” The instructions and news that arrives from outside the scene then causes ripple effects amongst those present as the information courses over the distributed or decentralized network of social connections. Likewise, the attached illustrations by Lu Zhixiang capture the text’s focus on such horizontal communication by depicting colleagues conversing with one another, rather than collectively turned toward a single focal point (Figures 22 & 23). The emphasis on the networked shape is important as it not only shows the Exchange as an aggregate of smaller social and business exchanges, but also foregrounds the communicational dispensation of information, which can spread from individual to individual very rapidly. To this end, the sketch concludes with the critical observation that “a baseless rumor [无稽的谣] blown into the stock exchange can excite large waves of rise and fall.

For a discussion of centralized, decentralized, and distributed networks, see Alexander Galloway’s entry, “Networks,” in Critical Terms for Media Studies, 280-96, as well as the original description of the distributed network by Paul Baran, On Distributed Communications (Santa Monica: RAND, 1964).
in bonds and stocks. These people fantasize within the rumors, get excited by them, or are rendered spiritless by them. No one is more sensitive than these people. But, if they didn’t have such sensitivity towards rumor, the bond market wouldn’t become a market [市场]. The human heart is just this sort of weird thing."\(^{231}\)

Mao Dun’s statement constructs a protocol for viewing and analyzing the stock exchange as a mode of communication by highlighting the convergence between information and value that obtains at the exchange. In particular, the essay suggests that what makes a stock market a market is its atmosphere of dynamic uncertainty: if the value of a stock does not change, there would be no speculation or disagreement between individuals. On the one hand, the market is a zero-sum game, where the profit of the bulls roughly equals the loss of the bears and vice versa. On the other hand, the market is an arena where individuals make guesses on the direction the market will move. In such a situation, information asymmetries—which can be either acquired or manufactured—between individuals are particularly important: successful investment depends on one’s ability to distinguish the veracity of various rumors and other information at one’s disposal. This causal relationship between information asymmetry and speculative success is suggested in Mao Dun’s “Sketch” by the conspicuous absence of the investors who most impact the movements of the market.

The “information managers” who take advantage of information asymmetries to fleece lesser investors and solidify their position of dominance are collectively explored as an elite public in Mao Dun’s Midnight, and again in his unfinished novel The Story of the First Stage [第一阶段的故事], published in Hong Kong in 1938. In the latter text, the narrative describes one

\(^{231}\) Emphasis added. I take up the subject of “rumor” further in the following two chapters.
financier character, Mr. Pan, reading the newspaper not for stock market information (which, as a manipulator, he finds merely belated and therefore redundant), but for narcissistic pleasure:

He spent a good five or six minutes poring over the financial section [of the newspaper]. But this wasn’t in order to “assess the market [临市面].” The [Shanghai] papers’ financial section primarily concerned the movement of the stock exchange—could it really be that Mr. Pan needed to read the paper in order to know the trends? . . . Mr. Pan was one of the creators of such trends at the stock exchange, in particular the recent fluctuations of bond prices. As such, his lingering over this part of the paper more resembled a great author reviewing his already published “masterpiece.”

Such a creation of “trends” on the stock market and the collaboration and competition between the high-powered speculators at the “center” of the speculation public (but largely absent from the floors of the Exchange) forms the primary plotline in Mao Dun’s much more substantial earlier work, Midnight, with its circle of elite characters, including the protagonist, the industrial financier, Wu Sunfu; his brother-in-law, Du Zhuzhai; and the wealthy financier, Zhang Botao. Collectively, these men see themselves as the “heroic knights and ‘princes’ of the twentieth-century industrial age, who, unlike their predecessors who were skilled in fencing and riding horses, [now excel at] making calculations and riding cars” (91; 77-8). Around them operate a number of lesser managers of information, including Wu Sunfu’s ambitious factory agent, Du Weiyue; the sexual socialite (who represents another important mode of communication, the jiaojihua [交际花]), Liu Yuying; and a host of lesser capitalists who actively participate in stock trading all the while jockeying for insider information regarding the trendsetters.

Midnight’s narrative follows Wu Sunfu’s attempts to retain rational control over the stock market, as well as his capital in general, his household, and even his body, in response to a string of growing crises. A modern industrial manager, Wu Sunfu embodies the late-nineteenth

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233 Without attributing much importance to the exercise, it is tempting to find Wu Sunfu’s historical counterpart in Mu Ouchu [穆藕初] (1876-1943). A patriotic capitalist, Mu was well known in Shanghai for first translating
century business leader emblematic of the “control revolution” identified by the historian James Beniger. In the wake of capitalism’s expansion following the Industrial Revolution, Beniger argues, increasingly complex bureaucratic structures developed in response to the master problem of asserting control over the market (or a governed population, army, or other aggregate body of dispersed actors or elements). Accordingly, the control revolution is simultaneously a communications revolution, where “control” itself is inseparable from the problem of “the twin activities of information processing and reciprocal communication” (in our case, the collection and assessment of xiaoxi and the sending of orders), and intimately linked to the emergence of communications modern technologies and paradigms alike, ranging from the telegraph in the 19th century to cybernetic systems in the 20th century. As an industrial and financial manager controlling his manifold operations remotely, Wu Sunfu’s power is both amplified and bound up with communications technologies such as the telephone, the telegraph, and, in a looser sense, his subalterns, who serve him as instruments of information transmission and collection. For Sunfu (as well as his primary opponents), then, the problem of self-assertion is reliant on the contours of the communications networks at his disposal. The object of his attention is primarily the information coursing along these networks.

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Taylor’s Principles of Scientific Management into Chinese (1916), and then instituting Taylorist principles in his own silk factory during the late teens. Mu was one of the founders of the Cotton Goods Exchange, and later the editor for Jiaoyisuo [Exchange], a professional journal for financiers and brokers. I hope to explore the topic of Mu’s life in a later article.

234 The Control Revolution.

235 This is, of course, also a master problem for Foucault and his famous invocation of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon in Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison as well as the post-human problem of “discourse.” But Beniger’s understanding of systems analysis and sociological orientation, coupled with his more focused historical analysis, lead him to articulate the development of networked power dynamics in a more concrete way than that of Foucault’s “discourse.”

236 Ibid, 8.
As Sunfu and the other financiers manipulate the market, these networks of communication come into view as the objects of narrative and ethnographic attention in *Midnight*. They do so primarily through two rupture points or narrative devices: the breakdown of communications infrastructures, and the appearance of cacophonous noise—or, respectively, the related problem of not enough information, and too much information. These two phenomena deserve our attention because they open a communicative reading of *Midnight* that shows the novel’s interest in information transmission and the emergence of the network as a figure for envisioning a social aggregate.

The outright breakdown of telecommunication infrastructures shows the importance of synchronicity between Sunfu and the objects of his managerial attention. Without his systems of telecommunication, Sunfu is made impotent by a fog of war. Such breakdowns appear at many pivotal points in the novel and oftentimes precipitate a tellingly reflexive moment. The most conspicuous example occurs in the first half of the novel (and is then repeated in the final chapter). Sunfu, suspecting he has been betrayed by his co-conspirators in their latest scheme, anxiously awaits the arrival of news from both his stockbroker and his factory agent. Discovering the telephone line to his house is down because of a storm, he rushes off in his car to check in on his factory. In the back of the moving vehicle, removed from the stable, wired space of control, Sunfu experiences a fleeting moment of enlightenment as they charge through the mist:

He glanced out of the windows, breathing heavily. Suddenly an unusual sensation came over him: he was one of the captains of industry, ruthless and go-ahead at every moment [时刻刻向前突进的], but half-suspended before him was nothing more than absurd and empty mirages [荒唐虚无的市场蜃楼]! And what

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237 The experience of this “fog” is the focus of Mao Dun’s short story regarding a small-time investor in “Mr. Zhao Can’t Fathom It” (1934). In the story, Mr. Zhao enjoys mild success as a bear (all of Mao Dun’s tragic investor characters bet as bears), only to have his fortunes inexplicably reversed when he the market turns bullish.
were the people around him but so many blurred, misshapen figures? His progress in industry was just like his present journey—an aimless rush through a blinding mist! (197; 166)

Through its details of embodiment (Sunfu’s breathing, and the kinesthetic sense of moving through space), this scene emphasizes both the virtuality of Sunfu’s social world, as well as the abstraction endemic to his financial endeavors. The passage represents an indictment of Sunfu’s endeavors. More interestingly, as a rupture in his routine practice, it also calls attention to the extent to which Sunfu has naturalized and mastered his regular communicational milieu.

Moreover, as a point of rupture in Sunfu’s regular dispensation of authority, the passage suggests that the networks normally at Sunfu’s disposal maintain his associates and subordinates in sharp relief, so that only now do they become “blurry, misshapen figures.”

Another kind of communications infrastructure problem appears at the novel’s climactic end, in the process fatally sinking Sunfu’s final effort to overcome his rival speculator at the exchange, Zhao Botao. Still holding out hope of a victory for the bears, Sunfu’s confidence is temporarily buoyed when he returns to his office to find awaiting him a telegram from Tang Yunshan, a collaborator in Sunfu’s clique who has gone off to solicit money for their industrial trust. The passage slips into free indirect narration to reveal Sunfu’s disdain upon reading the message:

The telegram was from Tang Yun-shan in Hong Kong and contained thirty or fifty characters, not yet decoded. Wu Sunfu opened his telegram code book and translated seven or eight characters . . . Tang Yunshan’s telegram was full of good news (xiaoxi) . . . But even if Tang Yun-shan had struck lucky this time, Wu Sunfu was still displeased with the man’s muddle-headedness. Hadn’t he sent Tang telegram after telegram urging him to wire money back the moment he laid hands on any? But this was yet another worthless telegram! And what did he mean by “coming back to Shanghai immediately”? Anyone would think Hong Kong was still living in the eighteenth century and using bulky silver ingots that could only be brought back to Shanghai by Tang Yun-shan in person! (571-2; 527-8)

Here the infrastructural shortcoming is operative rather than physical, though Tang Yunshan’s misrecognition about the function of the telegraph as a medium for sending money results in
nearly the same outcome as would an outright failure of the line. This passage not only thematically features telecommunication as an intimate object of narration, but also neatly captures the oppositions that structure the novel’s vision of communication: Tang Yunshan’s failure to cable money is (as Sunfu sees it) irrational since it betrays a mistaken attachment to materiality (money as silver), an impulse which has been outmoded in the modern convergence between money and information. What Sunfu and his allies need is an immediate infusion of money, and only the same medium that brings Tang Yunshan’s message from Hong Kong—the telegraph wire—can “put out a fire with water a league away” (571; 527). The importance of “rationality” [理性] not only symbolizes Sunfu’s status as a modern manager, but also appears as a broader theme confluent to the issue of noise, the second kind of communicational interruption recurrent in Midnight.

Indeed, environmental and manufactured noise enjoys a particularly fecund role in the development of characters’ fortunes and misfortunes. Crucially, the appearance of noise not only disrupts (highlights) conventional network infrastructure such as telephony, but also makes visible a much more fleeting medium in characters’ social networks of information exchange: conversation. Thus chaos and sound volume repeatedly interrupt characters’ exchanges (or mental dialogue in the form of rational, coherent thought), interfere with the regular transfer of

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238 I will return to the subject of conversation as communications medium in the work of Shen Congwen in Chapter Four. Literature’s capacity for exploring conversation as a medium of communication is especially potent. This stands in contrast to sociological research promoted by social surveys on “public opinion” and their production of statistical data. As Gabriel Tarde points out in an 1898 essay on publics, for sociological research on public opinion there remained “an unexplored domain, that factor of opinion that we have already recognized as the most continuous and the most universal, its invisible source, flowing everywhere and at all time in unequal waves: conversation . . . It marks the apogee of the spontaneous attention that men lend each other, by which they interpenetrate to a much greater depth than in any other social relationship. By making them confer, conversation makes them communicate via an action as irresistible as it is unconscious. It is, consequently, the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, ideas, and modes of action.” See “Opinion and Conversation,” in Gabriel Tarde on Communication & Social Influence, ed. Terry N. Clark, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 307-8.
information and xiaoxi, and impede sound decision making when noise appears in the guise of rumors and misinformation. In all, the successive appearances of noise reveal the social network through which information generally spreads, such as described in Mao Dun’s sketch of the exchange floor. In his illustrations of Midnight, Liu Xian [刘岘] captures a similarly networked scene of investors sharing xiaoxi (Figure 24). The woodcut scene shows a number of male figures, some speaking into others’ ears, others attempting to eavesdrop, thereby suggesting the discreet, multivalent flow of information (as well as the low of sound volume by which such ostensibly valuable information is shared).

Nowhere is the role of noise more prominent than in the descriptions of the Exchange floors, which loosely anticipate Mao Dun’s later, more openly ethnographic “sketch” several years later. In one extended passage, the female character Liu Yuying, a socialite speculator, visits the exchange during a period of frenzied trading as the settlement date approaches.

The floor of the Stock Exchange was even noisier [嘈杂] than a food market... Up on the platform the announcer and the telephonists were all red in the face as they gesticulated and shouted, but it was impossible to hear a word they were saying. Seventy or eighty brokers, together with their hundred-odd assistants and innumerable speculators, produced such a thunderous roar of numbers, that no ear could have made anything of it. (333; 294-5).

The “thunderous roar of numbers” serves as a kind of digital static that prevents the recognition of patterns that might tip off an observer as to the general movement of the market. In a space where communication is too condensed, information transfer breaks down and chaos ensues. In contrast, Liu Yuying is not swept up in the noise: she has obtained insider knowledge from the two speculators who generate much of the rumor. As such, market movements that appear to many brokers and small-time speculators as inscrutable, quasi-random responses to the chaos of the crowd appear to Yuying as something more calculated, driven by a larger set of networked forces:
How comical it all was, she thought: here in the Exchange was the “market” [市场], while somewhere outside away from it all [the financier] Chao Po-tao and Wu Sun-fu were lounging on their sofas with their cigars and pulling the strings that made these puppets dance! As for herself, she now held the secrets of the two string-pullers in the palm of her hand. All these men here were fighting in the dark, and she alone knew what was going on. (333; 295)

When she runs into a group of speculators urgently try to make sense of the stock price fluctuations, she, unlike them, “saw and heard clearly all that passed between them, [and] could not help smiling again” (335; 297). And when she flirts with the idea of revealing her secret to one of the speculators, the landlord-cum-speculator Feng Yunqing, the latter is so distracted by his schemes and the surrounding noise that he does not comprehend her clear suggestion that she holds vital insider information. What makes this moment in the narrative important, I submit, is not what happens but rather what doesn’t happen. Yuying is a hub in a network of information passed along between rival speculators. Given the stock market’s sensitivity to rumor and information, Yuying’s secret could result in the sort of information cascade captured earlier in Jiang Hongqiao’s phrase, “spreading rapidly, from one person to ten, from ten to a hundred,” and quickly disrupt Zhao Botao’s and Wu Sunfu’s machinations. But the failure of transmission between Liu Yuying and Feng Yunqing suggests the contingent (and ultimately irrational) nature of the communications network underlying the stock market. The point is redoubled in the narrative by the fact that the hapless Feng Yunqing has commissioned his daughter for precisely the information that Yuying has obtained. After arriving home—and with the pandemonium of the Exchange floor still ringing in his ears—Feng probes his daughter for the information about Zhao Botao’s plans. Having failed to obtain any real news, Feng’s daughter simply fabricates an answer, which he decides to believe only when he misinterprets as a good omen the sound of wind outside the window (345; 306). Noise has sealed his fate.
Nor is Feng Yunqing the only character beset by a noisy environment. Noise appears at nearly every critical juncture, jamming Wu Sunfu’s and others’ rationalized communications. In the opening of chapter seven, a pivotal section where the collaboration between industrial and finance capitalists to manipulate bond pricing begins to unravel, Wu Sunfu is shown sitting in his study, “like a commander-in-chief planning an offensive” (190-1; 160), receiving information from his agents at the Exchange, his factory, and his hometown. Just as his brother-in-law, Du Zhuzhai, arrives with news from the Exchange, a thunderstorm erupts, resulting in a disruption of communication:

Wu Sunfu and Du Zhuzhai began talking about the day’s events on the Exchange. Lightning flashes, thunderclaps, and the roar of rain filled the room so that the conversation was barely audible. But by watching Du Zhuzhai’s lip movements, Wu Sunfu managed to get the gist of what he was saying. When the lips stopped for a moment, Wu Sunfu laughed bitterly and shouted, “You say there are still new bears turning up? They must be mad!” (192; 161-2)

Sunfu and Du Zhuzhai begin to realize they have been betrayed by Zhao Botao, a turn they had not anticipated because of the “noise and stuffiness on the floor of the Exchange” (ibid). Here the transformation of speech into gesture (lip movement) not only dramatizes the sensational nature of the information being exchanged, it also further highlights the essentialized and abstract quality of information itself, which can be transmitted through different media of encoded communication, whether telegraph, telephone, conversation, or bodily gesture. Overall, the symbolism of the storm is so recurrent and closely aligned to the novel’s speculation-related scenes that one could trace the narrative’s climaxes through the weather alone.239

The arrival of storms and the frequent eruption of noise symbolize (and even signal) a sort of return of the repressed, where the information-poor crowd threatens to overwhelm the

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239 The only critic to have noticed the frequent appearance of thunderstorms in *Midnight* was a classicist literary scholar at Tsinghua, Wu Mi [吴宓] (1894-1978). Although Wu gave *Midnight* high praise (to Mao Dun’s surprise), he found the narrative’s weather “contrived,” as Mao Dun himself reminisced in his autobiography. See *Wo zouguo*, 1:523.
information-elite. In such a form, noise symbolizes a primal, bodily emanation, and ought to augment the revolutionary power of the laboring body. And yet, for Mao Dun, the crowd is a less stable social form than the networked public. This is made evident by the fact that the problem of noise not only impairs the elite speculators, but also finds its parallel amongst the silk factory workers who are trying to organize themselves into a cohesive body of opposition and link up with workers across the city to mobilize a massive strike. Like the cacophony at the Exchange, condensed noise interference erupts in the chaotic and frantic meetings that the workers host amongst their homes in the slums. And yet, these workers have their own form of networked space, namely, the warren of slums itself. In chapter thirteen the network of social relations amongst the workers—and the dangers organizers face in the form of informers, spies, or rumormongers—is mirrored by the hive-like spatial complexity of the labyrinth of slums where the factory women reside. Groups of workers move from node to node to spread news and consult one another, all the while attempting to escape the suspicion of patrolling thugs dispatched by the management team. Here information percolates amongst an extended kinship-like structure rather than broadly cascading as a rumor amongst a crowd. Through the extended passage the narrative itself follows this relay by shifting its character viewpoint from Zhu Guiying, to Chen Yue’e, and finally to the Communist intellectuals, Cai Zhen and Ma Jin.

The passage not only retraces the networked flow of information, but also illuminates how, like the speculators, the Communist organizers are themselves information managers taking in reports, brokering relations between groups from different factories, and working to propagate messages amongst the masses. The women laborers face a sly opponent in the factory headman, Du Weiyue, who is himself a capable manager of information flow. Du’s skill as an information manager is evidenced earlier in the novel, after Sunfu cuts wages at the factory, when although
The Communist ‘formulas’ [公式] risk being devoid of important content by not giving discursive space to social complexity. Such is critically shown in the ensuing debate between Ma Jin and Cai Zhen which quickly devolves into a slogan- and verbiage-filled duel. Here, despite the bitingly sarcastic portrayal of the two leftist intellectuals, Mao Dun retains optimism about the potential for communication amongst the masses, as he notes that such formulas and words are easily propagated: because they were clear and “rational”-sounding [合理], these slogans “had been firmly memorized by Chen Yue’e and through her instilled into the minds of [her coworkers] Zhang Axin and He Xiumei, whose simple minds and warm hearts were just the right sort of fertile soil for such ‘formulas’” (398; 357).

As Mao Dun’s novels *Midnight* and *The First Part of the Story* illustrate, finance capitalism and speculation are reliant on communication for their operation. As a pure form of abstraction, numbers in particular have a privileged place within the processes of communication endemic to the stock market’s operations. A similar emphasis on the importance of numbers
appears with the discrete signaling of the telegraph, which both conventionally transmitted Chinese writing in numeric form (thus we see Sunfu using a standardized code book to “translate” the numbers of Tang Yunshan’s telegram into the linguistic message), and also capititated the free and rapid flow of capital and information in the form of signals rather than the materiality of gold or paper cash. But in a world of mass media and telecommunication where abstract, rapidly circulating numbers were only one prominent form of information stream amongst many, what place remained for literary writing? This question is obliquely raised in Midnight itself by the depiction of a modern communications milieu where news and numbers flow between individuals, “deciding people’s fate.” While the narrative constructs a social world filled with information passed along by conversations, wireless, telegraph messages, telephone calls, circulating propaganda leaflets, and newspapers—but it mentions only one novel, a copy of The Sorrows of Young Werther, the object of sentimental attachment of Wu Sunfu’s wife. In my discussion of the One Day in China project in the conclusion of Chapter One, I showed how Mao Dun attempted to produce a kind of collective story out of information collected through a broader telecommunications infrastructure. Though essentially graphical, the mosaic-like structure of One Day is decidedly non-linear and unlike the Bildungsroman structure of the modern novel. It thus left open the question of how the novel might be reconciled with the modern communications milieu within which it operated. Such a reconciliation was imperative, given both the proliferation of information alongside literature that I have outlined in Chapter One, as well as, more generally, the modern urban subject’s increasing reliance upon non-linear

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240 It is worth recalling that it is an accident of history that Midnight itself was only first published as a novel, and not serialized by the Commercial Press in its journal, Wenxue [Literature]. Mao had sent the completed manuscript, which was consequently destroyed (along with the Commercial Press’s printing facilities) by Japanese bombings during the January Twenty-eight Incident in 1932. Fortunately Mao had a copy of his manuscript, which he later gave to the Kaiming Press for publication. See Wo zonguo, 481-517.
systems of communication, whether network telecommunications or statistical information, in everyday life. By taking up the shifting figure of one mode of narrative that is both pure information but also linear, the account book [账簿], as it frequently appeared in Mao Dun’s narratives, the following section explores how Mao Dun’s exploration of communication in finance led him to rethink the politics and aesthetics of his own literary practice, including its medium and technique.

**Performing a Realist Accounting of Fictitious Capital**

In Chapter Eight of *Midnight* Mao Dun begins to consider the stock exchange from the perspective of Feng Yunqing, a predator landlord who, spider-like, spins webs of debt to dispossess his peasant tenants of their land (219-220; 186-7). Having recently moved to Shanghai from the countryside to escape bandits and appease the demands of his concubine, the deliberative Feng has decided to put his un-invested capital into bond speculation. After six months’ of good fortune at the stock market, Feng’s luck has turned bad when he is victimized by the throes of the stock market that are brought about by Wu Sunfu’s and Zhao Botao’s manipulations. Chapter Eight opens with what is perhaps Mao Dun’s most cinematic passage of writing, where we find Feng sitting in his study, abacus and account book before him as he calculates his losses:

Sunlight was streaming through the bamboo blinds and throwing a criss-cross pattern of light and shade over part of the room. At the slightest breeze the blinds gently swayed, and a filigree of shadows rippled over the chairs and tables, conjuring up strange black and white patterns. Sitting at a square mahogany table under the window, Feng Yunqing was turning the pages of an account book with his right hand and holding a cigarette in his left. As the shadows danced across the pages of his book, the columns of figures seemed to dance with them, much to his annoyance. Suddenly irate, Feng Yunqing brought his palm down on the book with an impatient thwack. He left his seat and paced through into the rear part of the house, where he lay down on a mahogany couch and closed his eyes with a
sigh. Until yesterday he had been a rich man; today he was not only penniless, but tens of thousands of dollars in debt! Was it his own fault? No; that was something he would never admit. “It’s just my bad luck,” he told himself with another sigh. Yet why should his luck, which had stood him in good stead these twenty years and more, suddenly desert him now?241

The shadows and numbers dancing across the surface of the page, coupled with the mode of free indirect narration at the end of the passage, masterfully capture the tension between Feng’s present state of inner turmoil, and the externalized, objective calculation that underlies his accounting. As Feng attempts to salvage solvency out of his failed speculative endeavor, the account book before him serves as a portal between his desires and anxieties, on the one hand, and the social reality of debt and credit on the other. Feng Yunqing is a minor character in Midnight whose role is to demonstrate how feudal capital is swept aside by industrial capital, which in turn is liquefied by financial capital. Ultimately, he is just one node amongst many within the novel’s network of market and information relations. But this scene provides a moment of reflection over what so many of Midnight’s characters endlessly obsess over: profit and loss. Indeed, here the account book appears as the materialization of the activity—calculation—which serves as a leitmotif throughout the novel (and Mao Dun’s market literature as a whole): besides Feng himself, his concubine and daughter, ceaselessly reckon their underworld and shopping expenses, respectively; Wu Sunfu, who continuously works out his net worth; the board of the Yizhong Trust Company, which strategizes the annexation of Shanghai industries; the finance capitalists who compute risk on the stock market; Liu Yuying who appraises her insider information. The list goes on and on, attesting to the logic of exchange value—and its inherent calculability—that mediates between nearly all the social relations in the narrative. But is the frequent appearance of the account book in Mao Dun’s market literature

241 Midnight, 188; Ziye 221. As elsewhere, I have adjusted the translation.
merely a comment on the power of reification and the ubiquity of the commodity form in modern Shanghai, or does it have a further function within Mao Dun’s work?

In her analysis of Lao She’s novel, *Camel Xiangzi* (1936-37), Lydia Liu identifies the novel’s eponymous protagonist as a tragic and individualist *homo economicus*, the self-serving and industrious hero figure of capitalism exemplified in early British literature (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders*) and later in bourgeois French literature (Stendhal and Balzac).

Carefully delineating the tensions and contradictions that arise out of the story’s narrative voices, Liu’s reading shows that the Lao She’s text refuses any interpretative closure or ready answers to its broad questioning of the value of individualism and capitalism. Rather than stop at a Bakhtinian reading of the heteroglossic qualities of the narrative, Liu proposes that the reader recognize the interpretive ambiguities posed by the novel itself in the form of what she calls a “figural reading, a kind of coded reading bodied forth or represented within the text itself. By engaging with the conflicting figural readings provided by the narrator, by Xiangzi himself, as well as by the other characters within the textual economy of the novel, the reader necessarily inserts herself or himself—and, perhaps, can do no more—in the never-ending process of interpretation.”

In terms of the relationship between narrative and protagonist, *Midnight* is far less antagonistic than that of *Camel Xiangzi*, and overall Mao Dun is less concerned than Lao She with the problem of individualism and the *Bildungsroman*-like development of a central protagonist. However *Camel Xiangzi* and *Midnight* closely share an emphasis on calculation, profit, and bankruptcy. This is more than a superficial likeness, for both novels seek to explore

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242 Liu, *Translingual Practice*, 116 and Ch. 4, passim.

243 Ibid, 127. In *Limits of Realism* (6-7), Marston Anderson makes a similar but broader point about realist literature of the period: “Reading the oeuvre of any of the major Chinese realists of the 1920s or 1930s, one is struck by their high degree of formal self-consciousness. Again and again authors introduce frankly reflexive elements into their work, often in the form of authorial alter egos or ironical foregrounding of the very techniques that identify their works as realist.”
capitalism’s necessary abstraction of labor in its move to make the latter enumerable, transmissible, and storable. If *Camel Xiangzi*’s figurative reading emerges from the ironic conflict between narrator and protagonist, whereby “Xiangzi’s art of calculation seems no match for the calculated calamity of his fate (the narrator’s plot against him),” we might locate a similarly productive and critical figurative reading in the numerous ledgers and descriptions of accounting that litter Mao Dun’s market writing.

In this section my argument is that the constant presence of the account book and accounting in Mao Dun’s market literature engages not only with the question of capitalist reification, but also represents a nuanced reflection on the act of realist writing and the form of the novel in the age of telecommunications. Described in contemporary sources as a discreet (and discrete) record of economic transactions and exchange, the ledger book offered a standard form for inscribing and standardizing an individual’s engagement with the stock exchange (lit. ‘the place of exchange,’ 交易所). And, to turn the relationship on its head, we might think of the stock exchange’s high level of abstraction as a case of accounting gone wild. Marx made a similar case in the third volume of *Capital*, calling the great extension of credit under finance capital a form of “fictitious capital,” or capital that circulates as a form of writing rather than through monetary or commodity exchange. Exploring the history of the fiction and

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244 Translingual Practice, 114.

245 C.f. two popular textbooks on accounting reform published in the 1926 and 1930, respectively. The first is Liu Shumei [刘树梅]’s *A Study of Account Keeping* [记帐学], (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1926). Liu, who had studied at the Harvard Business School in the 1910s, attributed American business success to superior bookkeeping practices: the acme of business management rationalization. His introductory study of Western accounting techniques was reprinted by the Commercial Press in 1930 and again in 1938. The second is *Essential Knowledge of Account Keeping* [记帐须知], Ji Chuying [稽储英] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1930).

246 *Capital: Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Penguin, 1991), Chapter 25, “Credit and Fictitious Capital.” Though he doesn’t focus on stock and bond exchanges (instruments which, as Engels notes in his supplement, become more important after Vol III was written in 1865 [p. 1045]), Marx emphasizes the concurrent rise of easy credit and speculation, quoting a contemporary source to make his point: “It is the object of banking to
financial instruments in Britain, Mary Poovey has found that from their inception in the 17th century, fiction and finance were mutually constitutive in their shared pursuit of determining and sustaining value, and both belong to what she terms “genres of the credit economy.” And Mao Dun’s emphasis on accounting and rationality, as we see repeatedly in Midnight, brings to mind Weber’s linking of the two in his history of capitalism. Ultimately, Mao Dun’s interest in the convergence between accounting and literary writing was more than a casual interest or intellectual game, and instead took on a formal and political urgency. Formally, Mao Dun used the account book and the juxtaposition of individual accounts to evoke social and market networks of relations in literature’s diachronic and linear form. Politically, Mao Dun portrayed private account books as a way of figuring complex socioeconomic hierarchies that remained difficult to see in everyday life. Together, they constitute an important pillar in the broader development of an aesthetics of information in the 1930s. Before turning to Mao Dun’s literary engagement with the question of account keeping and the ledger form, it is necessary to first review his critical work regarding the formal and social relationships between the ledger and the realist novel.

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247 See *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Introduction, Ch. 2.

In 1941, in the first entry of a series titled “Small Solutions to Large Problems” [大题小解之一], Mao Dun bemoaned the dearth of novelistic works engaging with economic questions of wartime China. Of course, given Mao Dun’s own seminal association with such a theme, his essay’s point risks seeming self-promotional. Yet Mao Dun’s piece offers an important self-commentary on his market literature of the previous decade. It opens with a discussion of official economic statistics printed in newspapers, which, like the clapper-board at the front of the Exchange floor, offer a daily dance of numbers whose provenance and epistemic value require critical intervention:

Of late the newspapers have frequently spoken of the severe condition [现象] of our economy. Nearly all the discussion relating to this has appropriated the method of what literary authors call “visualization” [或figuration; 形象化], so the entire page is covered in [figures of] the circulation of material goods’ [物资], the fluctuations of finance capital, the rise and fall of commodity prices, and so on, without touching on the fundamental problem. At present there is no literary work that comprehensively or fundamentally explains and expresses these various phenomena since the beginning of the War of Resistance [1937]; if one wanted to write such [a piece], then, first and foremost, regarding the psychology of those who yesterday advocated resistance [against the Japanese] but today no longer do, or those who originally weren’t passionate about resistance but now, on the contrary, hope that the “stalemate period” doesn’t continue, if one doesn’t research their “wealth profit and loss” account books to understand how the war years have affected the vicissitudes of their wallets, or, for those who continue to resistance, and resist to the very end, what influences such [behavior], then I’m afraid it would be difficult to write an [account]. (373)

The point of the piece is not merely to chastise Chinese writers for failing to produce an updated, wartime version of Midnight (and its set of market-related literary satellites) offering a glimpse behind the scene of market movements. Here Mao Dun’s overall argument is that materialism can reveal the Truth behind ideology regarding the war: why some are mobilized and others not. If one is idealistically attached to a notion of national consciousness amongst the Chinese peasantry, or believes that atrocities committed by the Japanese are sufficient catalyst for

249 See MDQJ 16:372-4.
mobilization, then one can only produce superficial or formulaic analyses (Mao Dun labels such as “eight-legged resistance essays” [抗战八股]) which can only conclude with the superficial observation that “there are many contradictions” (373). However it is the essay’s formal argument that is more interesting. Playfully picking up on a term then gaining traction amongst critics, Mao Dun likens account figures in the newspaper to the novel because they both give “figuration” to an aggregate of individuals, society.\textsuperscript{250} Mao Dun’s advocacy for a critical novel ultimately rests on an intervention into public numbers through the inspection (or imagination) of individual accounts, a sort of penetrative social accounting that would expose economically motivated collaborationists.\textsuperscript{251} In other words, the private account, despite its epistemic limitations as a single-centered description of economic activity, could be appropriated or imitated by literature in order to expose the inadequacies, deceptions, and diffuse culpabilities underlying the public account. By suggesting that it was the critical author’s duty to thusly engage with socioeconomic issues, Mao Dun also asserts that the genre of literary realism is delimited and authorized by private accounting and public enumeration. Under such a rubric, fiction and accounting are in mutual competition for access to the Real, for, as Mao Dun concludes his essay, “regarding the economic phenomena mentioned above, the only materials you’re able to see are the fluctuations of capital, the rise and fall in prices, and that’s it. For

\textsuperscript{250}The term “figuration” or “visualization” [形象化] was first introduced as a critical word in Geng Jizhi’s translation of an essay by the Russian scholar, L. Timofeyev. See “How to Create the Figure of Literature” [怎样创造文学的形象], in Literature [文学], Vol. 7, no. 2 (1936), 406-416.

\textsuperscript{251}The attempt to root out collaborationists, or “race-traitors” [汉奸], accords with the atmosphere of social mobilization during the Resistance. Monitoring one’s acquaintances for possible signs of collaborationist activities also helped to refashion one as a \textit{homo informaticus}. And it should be noted that about the same time Mao Dun wrote his “Small Solutions to Large Problems” essay, he was also exploring intelligence-gathering and spy networks in his novella, \textit{Putrefaction} [腐蚀] (1941). The novella’s narrative frame offers up a different kind of account book, a “found” diary, to explore the relationship between private and public spheres in the paranoid atmosphere of wartime Chongqing. See David Wang’s analysis, \textit{Fictional Realism}, 95-101.
today’s ‘economic essays’ perhaps this is enough ‘figuration,’ but in the hands of authors, it is not nearly sufficient” (374).

Mao Dun took up in greater detail the image of the unmasking of public numbers using private accounts in a fictional description he published in the literary supplement of the eminent newspaper, Shenbao, in 1935. The piece, titled “Old Accounts” [旧账簿] (for my complete translation, see Dissertation Appendix), opens with a question of historical representation of local society: how to best compile a gazetteer [志] of local history? Printed compendia of local knowledge and events, gazetteers had been popularized since the Song Dynasty, and traditionally marked a locality as consequential. The first-person narrator (ostensibly Mao Dun himself) recounts how recently a wealthy old-timer in his hometown has decided to re-compile the locality’s gazetteer. Too busy to do the work himself, the elder consults friends and associates, including a fellow from the neighboring village who himself recently recompiled a native gazetteer. The latter’s recommendation that the gazetteer include a record of taxation and a price index of common goods receives universal approbation amongst those involved in the project. To produce such an index, however, the primary source material must be the old account ledgers of local merchants. In what is likely an autobiographical moment, the narrator pauses to recount his own material relationship to account books:

After that [meeting with the gazetteer compiler], I often thought of the wooden chest full of old annual account books that was stored in the attic in the back of my family home during my childhood. I don’t know for what reason, but these old account books were kept around, and as a ten-year-old I often went and flipped through them, ripping out the blank pages at the back to use as scrap paper for computation exercises. By now, I am sure, that the chest full of old annual account books no longer exists. Whether it was incinerated, or traded for sweets,


253 For a review of this form and its print history, see Joseph Dennis, Writing, Publishing, and Reading Local Gazetteers in Imperial China, 1100-1700 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), Introduction.
I don’t remember clearly. At any rate, twenty years ago, [the books’] fate had already come to an end. And I had already long ago forgotten about my family’s previous collection of these worthless “antiques” [古董].

Now, upon hearing the words of this Old Mister Jin, I recalled just how each heavy volume of old accounts had not only provided me with scrap paper for calculations, but also how I had moved them back and forth to serve as a stepping stone for when I wanted to locate some old woodblock print of literature on top of the cabinet; in those times, it never occurred to me that these old “stepping stones” were a part of my historical record of my family—no, I should say a component of the “town gazetteer.”

In truth, if we want to know how our grandfathers’ grandfathers lived, amongst the [resources] that can tell us the most authentic information (xiaoxi) [最能告诉我们真实消息的], I’m afraid nothing surpasses these old account books!

We know that our history is also but a type of “old annual account.” It is lamentable, however, that there are so many “fake” and “embellished” [“虚账”和“花帐”] accounts!255

The memory of the account books is something of a return of the repressed: their presence reminds us that, as in the movement from account book to literature represented here, before pursuing a career in literary criticism, a young Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun’s name before his adoption of a literary moniker) had been pushed by his father toward studying accounting [算学] as a field of new knowledge.256 Such information work prepared one to pursue a promising career at a bank, textile mill, maritime agency, postal service, or railway operation,257 but to an adolescent these tomes were merely a material resource for math practice or accessing classical literature. In the present of the narrative, however, their information appears far more important. So critical, in fact, that the narrator suggests that local history is best read through an aggregation of these account numbers. Indeed, history-making itself is a form of accounting—a form that,

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254 Interestingly, this is an atypical usage of xiaoxi to mean “information” in the sense of statistics, rather than as a bit of personal and ephemeral news.

255 I.e. for covering up the true profit margins, evading taxes, or keeping an entirely fake account book.


the narrator quickly claims, requires the proper “method of interpretation” [读法]. This is illustrated ironically in the second half of the essay, which describes the aged descendant of a local wealthy family who, despite his recently diminished economic state, takes his large stack of extensive ledger books as a form of social capital. In response to a grain shop clerk who frequently comes to collect on a minor payment, the old man flies into an impotent rage, brandishing the family account books as proof of his own creditability and credibility:

“I tell you, [I must] delay through the New Year’s celebration, [but] will certainly pay you back by the Lantern Festival. You don’t believe it? You don’t trust my house? Go have a look at the stack of our household’s old accounts, passed down since my forefathers: every year is full of expenses and incomes in the thousands and ten thousands! Me, disclaim your thirteen yuan, eight jiao? What a joke, what a joke!” He really did proffer forth a large pile of “old annual accounts,” telling the grain shop clerk to have a “look for himself.” It is said that this New Year’s eve he reverentially reviewed these “old annual accounts” the entire night. He began to shed grateful tears, mumbling to himself: “Our ancestors in every year really did have expenses and incomes in the thousands and tens of thousands... in our village, amongst the wealthy families, who has as large a stack of old accounts such as this! Hm! There are only three households able to bring out as big a stack as this of several decades’ worth of old accounts: Old Mister Zhao on the East Street, Second Brother Qian on South Street, and on this street there is only me!” Amidst those “old account books” passed down through generations, he was only able to find conviction [确信] in his own self-worth [自傲]. This return to the “golden era” of the past lightly kneaded away the “pain of frustration.”

Portrayed so satirically, the man’s fetishistic attitude toward his own account books is clearly the improper valuation of their information. The essay itself affirms the account book’s double value: its record of local economic history, as well as its corresponding value in affirming social hierarchies.

From the above two essays it is clear that Mao Dun saw the account as compatible with other genres of writing such as realist narrative and historiography; but what, specifically, was

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258 Ibid, 331. For a later essay making an analogy of the stock market and social memory, see “The Benefits of Recall,” [记性之益] (1941), in MDQJ, 16: 343-4. The essay stresses the importance of memory for taking stock of political leaders: if one has a short memory, then one will be gullible and have no sense of political justice. The conclusion discusses one’s “old ledger” [老账] as an externalization of memory or personal history.
the formal relationship between an account and a literary narrative? As it turns out, Mao Dun had already early on in his career as a critic raised the question in a famous May Fourth-period essay, “Naturalism and Chinese Modern Literature” (1922). Calling for the reform of traditional Chinese narrative and the adoption of Western realist and naturalist literary techniques, this essay engages closely with accounting as a metaphor, primarily to pejoratively figure the descriptive techniques of conventional serial novels as dry and rote. Mao Dun explains: not only does the author of traditional Chinese novels approach the description of a new character’s face, physique, dress, demeanor, and so on as a sort of “incidental expense account”; rather, his “entire book’s narration completely adopts the merchant’s method of ‘four column accounting’ with every stroke of the brush from beginning to end narrating in a straightforward way. What’s more, these authors find commendable the ability to clearly ‘give an accounting of’ the ‘ending’ of all the characters in the book (note: all the characters!), praising such an effort as being ‘without a careless stroke, not leaving out a single thread’.”

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259 MDQJ, 18: 220-240.

260 A traditional style of accounting, the method was widely used by both family operations and the state since at least the late Tang (c.a. 900-950) and still widely in use in the 1920s and ‘30s. As Robert Gardella notes in his thorough review of late imperial accounting history, the four column method was the basis of state accounting through the Qing dynasty, and so-called because of its four categories of noting receipts and disbursements: balance forwarded (guan), new receipts (shou), outlays (chu), and present balance (zai). See Gardella, “Squaring Accounts: Commercial Bookkeeping Methods and Capitalist Rationalism in late Qing and Republican China,” 323-4. For a diagram of the general accounting methods such as the “three-footed account” (which was a double-entry method) used in larger business entities, see Z. Jun Lin, “Chinese Double-entry Bookkeeping Before the Nineteenth Century,” The Accounting Historians Journal, vol. 19, no. 2 (December 1992), 117. Lin argues that advanced accounting technique such as the double-entry account book appeared in late fifteenth century China independently of a similar development in the Italy between the 13th and 15th centuries. Regardless of its provenance, even relatively simple accounting systems (including the four-column account) would track both short term profits and losses, as well as longer fluctuations of a business’s value based on the difference between its stocks/capital and its claims. It is only with this enlarged temporal scope that credit-debit relations and the act of speculation qua speculation (as opposed to gambling or other forms of risk-taking) become legible.

261 MDQJ, 18: 226.
momentum, Mao Dun moves to concretize it by examining contemporary serials’ detailed
description of action:

They like to narrate every action of every event in great detail; for example, in
describing an individual getting out of bed, it’s usually something like “so-and-so
opened their eyes and looked out the window, seeing that the day was well
underway, they hastily pushed aside the pillow and cast aside the quilt, sitting up,
they draped on a cotton-padded jacket, followed by white silk stockings, and then
pants, cinched the pant legs, and only then got out of bed, proceeding to the side
of the bed to put on a pair of slippers. . .” The whole paragraph directly records
continuous action, but contains no description. When we read this type of
“ledgeristic” [“记帐式”] narration, we only feel that before us is a wooden man,
not a living man, nothing but a thoughtless figure without a brain or the ability to
think; if he were a living man, then throughout the course of his actions his entire
body would express some amount of feeling, and from such expression we would
indirectly spy the actions of his inner heart. . . It is a rule that a piece of literature
should emphasize description, not recording, especially not “ledgeristic”
recording; the human brain can associate, understand suggestion, and, regarding
many aspects of daily life, it can hear A and associate it with B without waiting
for the “ledgeristic” description that misses no detail; only [literature emphasizing
description] will be felt to be intimate and interesting. Contemporary [Chinese]
serial novels fundamentally mistake the suggestible and associative human brain
as nothing more than an abacus to be moved this way and that.262

Here the image of the ledger both foregrounds the description of an event as a series of discrete
notations of separate movements and transactions, as well as suggests the longstanding metaphor
of the individual character’s moral balance (as, e.g., in the Buddhist notion of karma), thus
allowing the reader to easily calculate in advance the “ending” of every character in the
narrative. By constructing a parallel between the account book and techniques of description in
traditional literature, Mao Dun critiques the latter as being too exterior and superficial. Such
“recording” employs an excess of narrative detail at the expense of accessing another kind of
excess, a semantic abundance and figurative indirectness that ostensibly underlies the pleasures
of a more elevated mode of literary writing, Western realism, which employs “scientific”

262 Ibid, 227-8. Note that Mao Dun extends his critique of ledgeristic recording to the traditional Chinese short story,
as well.
techniques of observation and description. For Mao Dun the “literary” in literature results not from plot structure, but rather from thick description and psychological interiority (as is illustrated above by the passage in *Midnight* on Feng Yunqing’s interior state of turmoil). Ultimately the essay champions naturalism as a new literary mode that, in contradistinction to the dryly enumerative communication of the ledger, offers a more humanistic orientation ideal for “expressing human life, communicating [疏通] feeling between persons, and expanding people’s empathy.”

Chronologically these three essays bookend either side of Mao Dun’s period of writing about speculation and the stock market, and together with his fiction they suggest the longstanding nature of his critical engagement with the account book. In this trajectory, Mao Dun clearly reevaluated his initial rejection of the ledger, eventually adopting the account book as a formal and thematic description of the calculative consciousness of the *homo informaticus* and his mental accounts. Beyond the abacus elite in *Midnight*, shopkeepers such as Mr. Lin in “The Lin Family Store” (1932), housewives such as Mrs. Zhang in “Frustration” (1943), and speculators like Mr. Zhao in “Mr. Zhao Can’t Fathom It” (1934) were numerically adept and saw their world in terms of numbers. For example, Mao Dun describes the bearish speculator, Mr. Zhao, as having

eyes like a hawk. No matter how many hands were wildly signaling bids, no matter how many fingers were being held up on each hand, he could take them all in at a glance. At once he could calculate the total number of fingers; he could fill in on his mental chart how many hands were raised palm up, how many palm down. Nine cases out of ten, he could even guess the brokers to whom the hands belonged. His ears were first rate too. From the babble of numbers he could pick out a quietly mentioned figure—for instance, three dollars and sixty cents. “Ah, a new quote!” he would immediately say to himself. 

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263 Ibid, 233.

264 I have adapted this passage from *Spring Silkworms and Other Stories*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979), 183.
Mr. Zhao’s ability to lift information out from the “babble of numbers” speaks to how numbers mediate his consciousness. The story’s narrative shows Zhao’s problem is his intractable pessimism about the movement of bond prices, such that despite his sensitivity to market conditions, access to insider information, and attunement to rumors, he always looks for a fall in market [看低]. He literally cannot fathom [想不通] why and when stock prices go up: though he has a keen ear and can decipher information from noise, Mr. Zhao is poor at critical interpretation: he cannot “hear A and associate it with B.”

But accounting is more than a narrative device for portraying consciousness. Instead, the ledger also offers a crucial set of network metaphors. As the Feng Yunqing scene in Midnight with which I opened this section suggests, the account book forms a kind of interface between the individual and the broader network of market relations in which he or she operates. It is not incidental that, after he moves to Shanghai, Feng finds himself caught in a “net” of debit and credit similar to what he himself previously used to dispossess farmers of their land. The network here is something that ensnares, but also acts as a metaphor for the complexity of social relations from a macroeconomic perspective. An account book shows an individual entity’s perspective on the market by recording its array of transactions with other entities. In spatialized terms, the data in a single ledger forms a centralized network of exchange, with the ledger’s owner as the hub (see Figure 21). Crucially, much of Mao Dun’s market fiction features not the limited perspective of a single account book, but rather juxtaposes several against one another in order to form a picture of a composite, decentralized network of socioeconomic relations. While such juxtaposition gave critical force to the multiple perspectives presented in Midnight and Mao
Dun’s market literature as a whole, nowhere did it find clearer articulation than in Mao Dun’s experimental novella, “Polygonal Relations” [多角关系].

Praised by contemporary critics as the culmination of Mao Dun’s market-themed literature and as his most tightly structured piece of fiction, the piece is readable as a short sequel to Midnight (the book was even marketed by the publisher as such). “Polygonal Relations” draws its name from its exploration of the web of credit and debit of the Tang family as it dynamically unfolds during the financial crisis of 1934. This financial crisis was in large part an effect of the global depression, delayed in China because of the Nationalist adherence to a silver standard. In 1934, thanks at least in part to a new U.S. program to buy up silver at artificially high prices, as the weight of silver became worth more than the face value of Chinese coinage, the Nationalist government abandoned the silver standard in favor of a fiat

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266 See Hong Xuecun [洪雪村], “On ‘Polygonal Relations,’” in *Chuangjin Yuekan* [创进月刊], Vol. 3, no. 8 (1936), 24-7. Hong notes that since Midnight all of Mao’s works deal with the financial crisis and economic depression. Picking up on the narrative’s synchronic, networked structure, Hong likens Mao Dun’s deftness in describing the characters’ social connections to a “weaver who takes a bale of hemp floss and weaves out of it a bolt of cloth” (25).

267 Midnight closes with Wu Sunfu preparing to leave Shanghai for Guling and escape the fallout of his unsuccessful speculation gambit. In “Polygonal Relations,” the protagonist Tang Zijia has just returned to his hometown to temporarily flee his debtors in Shanghai. Like Wu, Tang Zijia is a patriotic capitalist who at once draws on hometown assets (rental income, a pawnshop, etc.) and his silk factory to speculate as a bear in Shanghai’s stock markets. The similarities between Wu and Tang, as well as the dovetailing between plots, did not escape the attention of contemporary critics. See: Yu Lie [余列], “An Evaluation of Mao Dun’s ‘Polygonal Relations’,” in *Qinghua Zhoukan* vol. 45, no. 10/11, 1937, pp. 102-5. For the marketing blurb issued by *Wenxue*, see Bi Shutang [毕树棠], “An Evaluation of ‘Polygonal Relations’,” in *Yuzhoufeng* No. 36, 1936, pp. 73-4.

268 To a much lesser extent the title also refers to the sexual relations between individuals from two families. But this dimension is only developed by the narrative to the extent that it reiterates the asymmetrical power relations between creditor and debtor that structure the story’s social relations.

(paper) standard, which in practice began in autumn of 1934, but was only publicly announced in autumn of 1935. The onset of economic depression and the problem of deflation across China provide a crucial historical backdrop for the novel. But, more specifically, these economic conditions help explain the novel’s focus on the lack of silver money in circulation, and the subsequent crisis in trust that accompanies a shift to a new money standard.

Unlike Mao Dun’s other fiction, the novella keeps a tight focus on economic relations at the narrative cost of other possibilities such as psychological nuance or plot development. Such a sociological/economical focus is sharpened by the novella’s synchronic temporality (the narrative’s overall timeframe only spans a single day) and multiple viewpoints: what emerges is the image of a network of social inequality and struggle. Nearly every character in the novella is involved in two pursuits: on the one hand, they desperately seek to collect money from debtors in order to pay their own debts. Everyone both owes and is owed, but thanks to a credit crisis and an utter lack of liquidity, no money flows through the circuitry of economic obligation, a stagnation which threatens to collapse the local economic system. On the other hand, each character attempts to manage and collect relevant information in order to sustain the validity of the assets they already possess and retain their credit status. Both the complexity and reach of this local credit web and the difficulty each character faces in determining his own position within it are encapsulated neatly when the narrative briefly reflects on the nature of the credit “relations” [关系] of a minor character, Zhu Runshen, while he awaits Tang Zijia, the Tang family patriarch, at the Tang residence.

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270 It is worth recalling at this point the old Greek adage, that arithmetic should be taught in democracies, for it teaches relations of equality, but that geometry alone should be reserved for oligarchies, as it demonstrates the proportions within inequality,” notes Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge (New York: Pantheon Press, 1972), 219. As Alexander Galloway notes, however, the logic of network and graph theory is not spatialized but topological and relational. See “Network,” 295. The same logic holds true in “Polygonal Relations,” where social relations are considered in an elastic, abstracted, and non-geometrical fashion.
[Zhu] knew that Tang’s visitor in the front room was doubtlessly here regarding a credit connection. But he wasn’t very clear on whether this “connection” [关系] was one in which Tang owed the other, or the other owed Tang. Nor did he want to know. [Zhu Runshen] had always been of a very casual temperament. In his life he had encountered countless credit disputes [lit. “entanglements” 络纷], but he had always taken care of them in an offhanded way. This was because for three generations [the men] in his family had served as “managers,” while at the same time maintaining some of their own “services,” making his positional relationships [地位关系] very complex, such that when there occurred even a slightly serious credit dispute, in his “professional” capacity he would perhaps represent the creditor, while in his “private” capacity he might directly or indirectly be a “debtor.” This gave him much difficulty, and he could never figure out his own position. After a long time, this attitude of “incomprehension” [不弄清] became his modus operandi. (48)

Zhu’s confusion is emblematic of the managerial and landlord class represented in the novella, and serves as a foil for the narrative’s own project of unpacking and grasping Tang’s financial entanglements. The trope of dispute or entanglement [纠葛] is foregrounded to such a degree that more abstract notions such as market and social “complexity” emerge as central motifs of the novel. Ultimately, as I show below, such an unpacking of complexity is performed through the figure of the account book, whose recording of debt and credit supports a sense of moral absolutism that underlies the novella’s critique of feudal and financial capital. The novella sustains a balanced focal point on the Tang family and its affiliates, producing a study more tightly organized than *Midnight*, but also greater in depth than Mao’s market-centered short stories such as “Spring Silkworms” or “The Lin Family Store.”

The patron of the family, Tang Zijia, is a wealthy landowner and would-be industrial capitalist who also dabbles in Shanghai real estate and the stock exchange—the sort of character Mao Dun would have personally observed at his uncle’s mansion in the early 1930s and who closely resembles Feng Yunqing in *Midnight*. The story opens with the Tangs’ lecherous son, Tang Shenqing, making advances on his mistress, Yue’e. But just when Shenqing promises to take Yue’e to Shanghai and Hangzhou to celebrate the upcoming New Year, he recalls his own
shortage of cash. Shenqing has no other recourse but to approach his father for the money.

Hereupon the narrative begins to pivot focus toward Tang Zijia’s own cash problem, a complication of much larger scale than that of his profligate son. Rather than embed the Tang household’s economic information within the broader narrative flow, the narrative interrupts itself to directly “reproduce” a detailed, ledger-like summary of the family account.\footnote{Unlike the reprint in the \textit{Mao Dun quanji}, the original edition of “Polygonal Relations” was published using vertical typesetting, which gives the reproduced “account” greater verisimilitude.} This is an innovative moment in Chinese narrative fiction in which literature directly appropriates the form of statistical or accounting information as a mode of narration in and of itself. To frame the appearance of this ledger, first the narrator addresses the reader directly: “Although it hasn’t undergone an accountant’s formal audit [正式核算] and been officially published, the following table can serve as a substitute for those busybodies who take pleasure in appraisals [估计].”\footnote{MDQJ 4: 9. Hereafter page numbers cited in text.}

Reading the story, one cannot avoid being such a busybody and is thus interpellated a \textit{homo informaticus} who is privy to the economic information of the Tang family. Laying the foundation for the Tang family’s unraveling, the table succinctly recounts the household’s assets and their liquidity through three sections: \textit{income} (including rice from tenant farmers, rent from Shanghai property, and uncollectable loans), \textit{debits} (security for loans, money owed on bearish speculation of futures, money owed to stock brokers, money tied up in the family’s pawn shop, in addition to the matured bonds issued by the Huaguang silk plant that belongs to the Tang family, as well as the plant’s mortgage and loan deposit money, and worker wages), and, finally, the family’s \textit{capital holdings} (farmland, local and Shanghai personal and commercial real estate, Huaguang’s machinery and raw goods, the family’s cars, antiques, and cash) (9-10). Besides offering a striking example of literary realism’s ability to assimilate a variety of textual genres
(indeed, what could be more realist than such an transparent and objective-seeming account?),
the passage both prefigures the text’s account-keeping and calculative leitmotif, while
simultaneously providing the reader with a sort of protocol for interpreting the “polygonal
relations” to be subsequently fleshed out.

Arriving at home, Shenqing finds his father and the family accountant, Old Hu, poring
over a thick ledger, examining the details of the account summary already provided to the reader.
This family ledger becomes a central point of narrative attention over the next several chapters.
For example, the narrative repeatedly cuts to Old Hu’s point of view to follow his gaze upon
Tang Zijia’s fingers as they roam across the ledger lines. Hu’s social position as a family
outsider who is nonetheless privy to the internal accounts serves as an entry point for the reader,
who is also an outsider looking in. In particular, Old Hu’s perception draws attention to the class
barrier between himself and his master: “As Second Master [Tang Zijia’s] fat finger slowly
moved across the page of the account book, a ray of sunlight shot in through the wooden X-
latticed window, giving a red gloss to the Master’s finger, making it look like an expensive
sausage. In the middle of this ‘sausage’ sat a golden ring with a dazzling gem the size of a pea,
gleaming so brightly that it set Old Hu’s eyelids aflutter” (16). Through Hu, the reader thus
voyeuristically observes Tang as he calculates his assets with the help of his accountant. It is not
a joyous exercise for Tang, however. Soon his general quandary, already suggested earlier in the
narrative by the reproduction of the estate’s accounts, comes into further detail as he comes to
realize his uncomfortable position: Tang cannot pay his debts because his own debtors are unable
to pay him. The crisis is more than one of production (e.g. a poor harvest, or labor issues at the
cotton factory), and is compounded by a widespread condition of illiquidity where “cash has
transformed into invoices” (53). It seems that no one has cash, silver, or gold. “Money? It’s all

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in this account book. I can’t collect any rent from my farmland, nor any rent from my urban property! And yet you and your mother only press me for more money; you must think it grows from my body!” Tang bitterly replies to Shenqing’s request for an allowance (13). The inability to exchange these debts and contracts for liquid assets, coupled with the lack of production, threatens to strip Tang’s land deeds, rental contracts, and stocks of their symbolic value, thereby exposing their fictitious nature and transforming them back into mere paper.

And yet Tang and the other characters remain more or less able—for a short time, at least—to operate without cash by creatively employing various sorts of promissory notes. Such financial instruments proliferate in a narrative where, despite the frequency of economic transactions, cash only appears several times, most prominently in an ostensibly uneconomic situation when the wealthy but sickly Mrs. Tang pays her Buddhist soothsayer in exchange for karmic credit—“A bit of good karma [costs] a single coin!” [一分善缘一分银] the nun says in supplication (28). On account of this conspicuous absence of cash (i.e. gold and silver promissory notes [引票] issued by the local government [30]), land deeds, restaurant bills, and even bolts of silk (58-9) variously appear as different media of exchange, thus further highlighting the complexities and contradictions of the local credit/debit web. For example, when the laborer Huang Axiang, having received his wages from the Huagang Silk Factory in silk (offered to him as a sort of “foreign money” [洋钱, 59]), offers the silk as security on his outstanding rent debt, he is told by Tang Zijia that only cash is acceptable. When Huang later finds out that “Landlord Tang” and “Factory Owner Tang” are the same person, he furiously seeks out Tang Zijia to settle accounts [算账] (78). Outside the Tang household Huang runs into a group of his fellow workers who have come to demand payment of back wages, and together they lay siege on the household in an attempt to extract what is owed them. While the violent
clash that erupts between the workers and the thugs and local police hired by the Tang residence forms the putative climax of the novella, the symbolic power of open class conflict is muted by the fact that Tang Zijia escapes and later prepares to return to Shanghai. In the meantime, the fall of the Tang household quickly sets off a chain reaction of business foreclosures and bankruptcies in the village as the news spreads.

Given the novel’s relationship to the account book, its actual plot climax and its most poignant observations arguably come in the wake of the credit network’s collapse, in several chapters narrated from the standpoint of a local shop owner, Li Huikang, and his own ledger of accounts. Li is bound to the Tangs not only financially as a minor shareholder in Tang Zijia’s local pawnshop, but also through his daughter, Li Guiying, who has been impregnated and abandoned by the licentious Tang Shenqing. Similar to Shopkeeper Lin in the “Lin Family Store,” as an honest businessman Li Huikang is more a victim of fate than immorality or foolhardiness. In fact, on paper, his shop’s income outpaces its debts—but, like nearly everyone else in the village, Li’s debtors have paid him in invoices [账单], while in turn his creditors demand payment in cash or similarly secure assets. When Tang’s pawnshop is foreclosed upon, Li Huikang is dragged asunder as one of its investors. His own situation becomes hopelessly insolvent, and his creditors converge to divvy up Li’s remaining assets (his shop) amongst themselves. Turned out onto the street, Li mechanically wanders about, slowly coming to terms with his fate, when the cognitive fog clears as the street in front of him suddenly brightened. He instinctively turned to where it was lighter and began walking. He seemed to be himself again: those shadow images were no longer before him, and instead in his mind was now spread out an enormous abacus, with an incredibly complex account above it: he owed others, others owed him, he had been forced out of business—all of it melded into a big ball. But the last “column” [of the account] transformed into an iron rod. He instinctively took another breath. He unconsciously stood on the street corner,
then laboriously opened his eyes, as if trying to calculate out what he should ultimately do. (104)

Li’s confusion about his financial state, and the diffusion of his consciousness across the account book and his physical surroundings is symptomatic of the larger panic that is sweeping across the village. Across from where Li stands there is a bar, and he suddenly hears a multitude of voices excitedly exchanging information about the chain reaction of bankruptcies. As they “correct” and “supplement” one another, the voices seem to narrate the spread of bankruptcies in real time (i.e. as they occur), and their irruption into Li’s consciousness results his enlightenment regarding the true nature of the credit crisis:

Amongst the series of shop names that flew into Li’s ears most were quite familiar. His whole body began to tremble, and in his outer pocket his hand tightly grasped upon a stack of something—a stack of paper, a stack of invoices! He felt as if he had seized in his hand the majority of small shops that had been “toppled” —those shops on this street which owed him money. He understood that the number owed to him was not insignificant. But now [these accounts] had truly become merely numbers on paper! (104)

The financial instrument of the invoice is temporarily denaturalized as its material immediacy overwhelms its function as a symbolic medium of exchange: like the last column of the abacus, it is transformed from mobile information into something more solid. Moreover, given the fact that the account slips revert not to mere paper but writing (numbers) on material surfaces, the account’s genre as writing is foregrounded, thereby calling attention to the financial instrument’s status as a form of numeric writing that shares an affinity with literary writing. Numbers are numbers, and an iron rod is an iron rod: the revolutionary character of Li’s new insight is impossible to miss.

Given this text’s mimesis of the account book, its leitmotif of accounting, and even its prominent rhetorical play using numbers,273 “Polygonal Relations” should be read as Mao Dun’s

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273 For example the frequent invocation of phrases that allude to counting, as in the nun’s exclamation of the Buddha’s “knowing the number” [有数], i.e. knowing definitely how things stand (29); Zhu Runsheng’s sharp recollection “as if enumerating” [如数回想] (61); as well as idiomatic formulations that contain numbers, such as
attempt to put into practice a formal convergence of the ledger and the realist novel. Functionally speaking, Mao Dun’s extended play with the trope of accounting testifies to realist fiction’s ability to appropriate different generic forms. More importantly, though, the slippage here between the ledger and literary writing puts these two genres into a relationship of mutual supplementation. The multiple account books in “Polygonal Relations” provide the narrative a structure for evoking a complex—and ultimately fragile—networked of exchange. Moreover, the novel’s direct adoption of the account book form to evoke economic verisimilitude in describing the Tangs’ finances represents an important shift in Mao Dun’s practice of realist writing. As Marston Anderson points out, the “real” in realist aesthetics is mostly located in narrative elements that index the unrepresentable, often in the form of bodily affect or experience: hunger, violence, disease, sexual desire, death. While the real is similarly embodied in Mao Dun’s realist literature (very often in the form of noise, as we see in Midnight), we see in his literary accounting another source of the social real, namely the emergence of rationalized, numerically based economic facts. In other words, Mao Dun’s literature borrows its realism from the realism of the ledger, a form of “realist” numeric inscription that traces the real of socioeconomic transactions. As such, Mao Dun’s play with the accounting motif both renders realist fiction itself as a sort of account keeping, and the reader as critical accounting. In

“considered as the first or second [in quality]” [数一数二], “various affairs [lit. “grasping sevens and eights”]” [夹七夹八], and “five organs and six tracts” [五脏六腑], (114-6).

274 *Limits of Realism*, 17.

275 As Rekha Rosha puts it in her reading of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*: “Because the ledger does not initiate the incomes and outgoes (paying a debt, receiving income) it records, it is a *de facto* trace of a ‘real world’ event that has already occurred. The ledger as [Jean-Joseph] Goux describes it is a social order in which traces of real action simultaneously come to be represented and stand in for economic actions.” See “Accounting Capital, Race and Benjamin Franklin’s ‘Pecuniary Habits’ of Mind in The Autobiography,” in Robert J. Balfour, ed. *Culture, Capital and Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 41.
describing social relations as a web of credit/debit relations, this hybrid literary form is oriented toward the increasingly networked perception of the *h. informaticus* reader.

In return, literature provides the account book with social dimensionality and a critical frame for interpretation. “Polygonal Relations” shows that a judicious and full clearing of accounts \[\text{清算; 算清}\] between the characters is impossible, as wealthy debtors such as Tang Zijia and his middlemen will inevitably escape their obligations, while honest business owners and laborers have no such recourse. Only a full-fledged revolution can wipe clean these ubiquitous inscriptions of fictitious capital. Thus, ultimately, Mao Dun’s fictional accounting serves as a critical conduit between the “ledgeristic” moralizing of the traditional Chinese novel (where each character’s fate is indicated in terms of moral credit or debit), and the dominant Maoist rhetoric regarding the individual’s debt to the masses, and the liquidation \[\text{清算}\] (lit. “clearing accounts”) of bad elements that emerged after 1949.

**Conclusion: Revisiting *H. Informaticus***

In revisiting Mao Dun’s market literature of the 1930s and reading its communicational valences, I have suggested that Mao Dun endeavored to portray the capitalist figure as a kind of *homo informaticus* oriented toward the management of both kinds of information: on the one hand, *h. informaticus* must develop and maintain critical networks of communication in order to ensure that he can see changes in the field around him and react in a timely manner. On the other hand, *h. informaticus* is adept at dealing with abstracted data in the form of statistics, financial information, factory reports, and so on. But Mao Dun was not just performing an ethnographic description of the communicational mores and exigencies of this emergent, white-collar group of managers, speculators, industrial spies, and compradors. Rather, his construction
of *h. informaticus* surpasses description and enters a mode of prescription, urging his reader to not just learn about Wu Sunfu, Tang Zijia, and their ilk, but to learn from them. Mao Dun saw it as his mission to both teach about and interpellate his readers as *homo informaticus*. As his “sketch” of the stock market emphasized, the information games played by the group of Shanghai elites had ramifications for a far greater sphere of society. Only by embracing and understanding one’s subjectivity as a modern *h. informaticus* could a reader outside of this elite orbit hope to make sense of the complex landscape of information, power plays, and economic exchange.

Mao Dun’s composite construction of an *h. informaticus* and the latter’s politics of communication provides a lens for the further investigation of literature’s formal and topical engagement with the politics of information in my two subsequent chapters. In Chapter Four I will return to the figure of the *homo informaticus* as he appears in the late 1930s and early ’40s work of Shen Congwen. Unlike Mao Dun’s white-collar characters, Shen’s rural information seekers don’t enjoy direct access to communications technologies and fast flows of information. However, they nonetheless participate in a dynamic field of exchanging and withholding of xiaoxi. Shen’s work will allow us to broaden the typology of the *h. informaticus* established by Mao Dun by further examining the role of information in everyday subjectivity in Republican China. Before turning to Shen Congwen, however, in Chapter Three I address another phenomenon that has already appeared in the present chapter: the issue of noise. We have seen above how noise—as misinformation, the irrational roar of the masses, even the weather—continually plagues the *h. informaticus’s* ability to navigate the information landscape in a rational manner. In a sense, the emergence of the *h. informaticus* is both the cause and the effect of the coeval emergence of noise as an important epistemological problem.
Figure 20 Shanghai China Merchants Stock Exchange, Ltd. (date unknown)

Figure 21: Network forms. Note that the number and positions of nodes remains the same in all three schemas.
Figure 22: Shanghai Huashang Stock Exchange, by Lu Zhixiang (1936)

Figure 23: Shanghai Huashang Stock Exchange, by Lu Zhixiang (1936)
Figure 24: Liu Xian, illustration of networked conversation in Ziye (1936)
Chapter Three:
Ripple Effects: Visualizing the Propagation of Information in Leftist Literature and Art in the 1930s
The study of propaganda must be conducted within the context of the technological society. Propaganda is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world. Propaganda is a good deal less the political weapon of a regime (it is that also) than the effect of a technological society that embraces the entire man and tends to be a completely integrated society.

Jacques Ellul, Propagandes (1973)\textsuperscript{276}

By \textit{noise} is meant not loud or obnoxious sounds but anything that gets mixed up with the messages as they are sent. Noise causes a loss of information in transmitted messages, but in organized systems in which message transmissions is but a component function, the variety introduced by noise can come to be informative and meaningful in another, emergent context.

William R. Paulson, The Noise of Culture (1988)\textsuperscript{277}

In the Dissertation Introduction I discussed Liang Qichao’s \textit{A Future Record of New China} and its critical awareness of the media ecology within which it circulated. As the first portrayal of a modern mass oral address,\textsuperscript{278} the text’s opening also enjoys the distinction of being Chinese literature’s first depiction of modern propagation. Given the speed at which Mr. Kong’s speech is putatively transmitted from Shanghai to Yokohama and there published, Liang’s contemporary readers in Japan might have found themselves interpellated into the narrative as a near-“real-time” audience. However, a reader today might pause over a small but puzzling detail regarding the realism of this modern public address. As the text notes, the immediate audience for Mr. Kong’s lecture is a large gathering of exposition goers: 20,000 Chinese, along with another 1200


\textsuperscript{278} On speech-giving as a modern form of political participation, see David Strand, An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
foreigners who have learned Chinese. But the conditions of Mr. Kong’s speech at the stadium beg the question: since electrical amplification had not yet been invented, and, given the enormous size of the audience, how can the majority of the listeners at the exposition even hear Mr. Kong’s speech? The (retrospectively) conspicuous absence of public address technologies such as microphone and speakers suggests a lack of concern regarding sound’s amplitude: whether the signal of the source was strong enough to reach its intended receivers. For all his attention to the speed of transmission and reproduction evinced by his attention to communications technologies of writing such as the telegraph and shorthand, Liang was unconcerned with how the human voice might be broadcast in a manner that made it audible from a distance. Instead, he prioritized literacy over orality in imagining the transmission and dissemination of Mr. Kong’s speech in the form of information.

By the wartime years of the late 1930s, when radiowaves filled the air and propaganda proliferated across all forms of media, Liang’s early staging of propagation and its inadvertent problematization of broadcast sound signal were relics of the past. But the episode offers a cue for exploring the historical boundaries of an awareness regarding amplitude, signal, and the exigencies of propaganda that arose in the subsequent decades. The reflection of and on such a critical awareness in Leftist literature and art of the 1930s is the subject of this chapter. Following in the footsteps of late Qing political novels such as Liang’s *Future Record*, the New Culture movement of the 1910s and early ‘20s sought to reform Chinese society by

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279 The electrical public address system was invented by Edwin Jensen and Peter Pridham of Magnavox in the 1910s. As Paul Virilio notes, in the West, as late as this decade “public rallies were frequently held, but they too had a restricted impact since political leaders could only address the crowd through short-range megaphones.” In *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London and New York: Verso, 1989), p. 36.

280 The problem of mass address is dealt with a notably different way in *Electric World*, the science fantasy text which I mention in my introduction. When this story’s god-like inventor, the Electricity King, addresses a gathering of several tens of thousands of his subjects, he uses an (electric) amplification tube [传音筒] (55). In separate episode, for the sake of implementing mass education, he invents a two-way, radial telephone network that allows an instructor to remotely interact with hundreds of students in a kind of virtual classroom (24).
disseminating new ideas through literature, art, and performance. But it was not until the Nanjing Decade (1927-1937), when propaganda had been formalized as a modern technique of ideological influence, that modern culture saw a flourishing of writing and art about propaganda in a vein reminiscent of the opening of Liang’s *Record*. Propaganda as a modern phenomenon is inseparable from the rise of new flows of information—indeed, modern propaganda both reacts to such flows and helps accelerate them. As I shall show below, given how ubiquitous it was in everyday life, propaganda played a central role in the formation of modern urban subjectivity explored under my formulation of the *homo informaticus* in Chapter Two. The aesthetic reflection of propaganda during the Nanjing Decade both helped to popularly define and delimit the relationships between art and propaganda, while also exploring propaganda’s role in shaping modern subjectivity and the experience of the everyday. As such, reflexive literature and art works about propaganda also proved to be grounds for developing an important vector in the aesthetics of information.

In order to understand the general dispensation of propaganda in Republican China, Part One of this chapter offers a condensed history of propaganda in modern China by examining the changing meaning of propaganda against the historical background of the turbulent 1920s and ‘30s. Prior to this period, in both the late Qing and May Fourth period, propaganda had existed largely as a form of mass moral education that largely inherited the ages-old Confucian concept of *jiaohua* [*教化*], the transmission of ethical and civilizing influence via modeling. During the 1920s, both the KMT and the nascent CCP embraced the model of a one-party, Leninist state, and in so doing they assimilated ideas about the role of modern propaganda in domestic governance and international war that had been developed abroad (primarily by Britain) around the time of the Great War (1914-18). But when the KMT violently purged the Communist
faction in 1927, in the process radically retrenching the struggle for the ideological underpinnings of the modern state, the development and practice of propaganda expanded greatly. Both the Nationalists and Communists continued to fervently embrace propaganda as a facet of modern governance. The difference in dispensation between the two sides lay in the simple fact that the Nationalist party was in power, and thus in a position to openly deploy its apparatus to use mass media, censorship, and other methods to manage information for the masses. By contrast, outside the soviets under its control, the left was largely driven underground, and thus forced to resort to a more targeted set of techniques as a means of counteracting Nationalist efforts of ideological dominance. To borrow the terms from the prominent theorist of propaganda, Jacques Ellul, the KMT practiced “integration” propaganda, which the left worked to pierce with its agitation or “crisis” propaganda. Nonetheless, these two forms of propaganda share the same communicational “space.” This space enabled a feedback loop that accelerated the development of methods and need to counteract enemy propaganda.

What is crucial, I argue, to understanding the modern rise of propaganda is the recognition of how propaganda was envisioned as a modern technology of information management. This was particularly evident in the structural analogy (and technological cooperation) between propaganda and recently imported broadcast media, particularly broadcast radio, which spread alongside the emergence of the propaganda era. Such mass media helped define what modern propaganda should be or do, and they are inseparable from the general history of propaganda. In particular, I argue, the radio and the idea of electrically amplified broadcast led propagandists, artists, and authors to conceive of propagation as a problem of

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signal: in this paradigm, propaganda was *like* an electrical impulse or radio wave that was continuously or intermittently transmitted from a communications center to a broader audience. In turn, this framing of propaganda as a broadcast technology had two important consequences for defining propaganda. First, the Manichean struggle between oppositional ideological apparatuses made propaganda into a new problem of social communication: how to engineer and send a simple and effective signal while preventing the opposition from doing so. Such a paradigm made enemy *counter*-propaganda [反宣传] a form of intentional signal impedance or *noise*. In turn, such a recasting of propaganda in terms of signal and noise inspired attention to the invisible and pervasive space of “ether” [以太] as a crucial medium and grounds of communicational contestation. While radio literally made the ether a space filled with information in the form of sound waves or signals, propaganda-as-broadcast-signal also borrowed from this ether space to show propaganda as a struggle that played out over the bandwidth of public opinion and individual cognition.

During the 1930s, then, both Nationalists and Leftists thought of the ether as a space of ideological contestation filled with signals and noise. Unlike their KMT counterparts, however, Leftist artists and authors urgently engaged with this space as grounds for an aesthetic of information in the form of an iconography of propagated signal/noise. In Parts Two and Three of this chapter, I turn to this iconography in the literature and art of the propaganda boom. To be clear, my focus is on the representation of propaganda in the works themselves, rather than on the contemporary debates about the dividing line between propaganda and art.\footnote{For a good review of this debate, see Kirk Denton’s introduction to Denton, ed. *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893-1945* (Stanford: SUP, 1996), esp. 44-59.} In particular, I
focus upon urban and modernist forms of Leftist propaganda.\textsuperscript{283} Part Two turns to the
representation of propaganda and mobilization in the “New Literature” [新文学] developed by
one of the vanguards of the leftist literary movement, Ding Ling (1904-1986). As a canonical
author, Ding has received ample critical attention for her engagement with gender and leftist
politics. By examining a number of her neglected works from the early 1930s, which are not
only quasi-propagandistic in their intent to incite readers to a new kind of politics and action, but
also take as their subject propaganda itself, I show Ding’s exploration of the connection between
mass politics and information management. Like the contemporary propaganda discourse that I
retrace in Part One, the evocation of propaganda in Ding’s work operates according to an
economy of signal and noise that runs parallel to broadcast radio. In other words, mass media,
signal and noise are formative in the attempts to give a literary representation of mass politics.
The noise that permeates Ding Ling’s early revolutionary literature is best understood as an
attempt to jam the signal of KMT propaganda (information that she and her colleagues
considered as anaesthetizing). But the noise of Ding Ling’s narratives is not simply a negation
of KMT ideology: this counter-signal also announces the emergence of a new context in which
this revolutionary roar is not noise at all, but rather indicates the arrival of a new harmony, the
self-realization of the masses as a new, autonomous subject.

Part Three turns to another form of leftist cultural production that sprung up during the
propaganda boom of the 1930s: avant-garde woodcut art. Like new literature, the woodcut prints

\textsuperscript{283} These were certainly not the only type of cultural experimentation enacted on behalf of Communist
propagandists. For other forms of leftist propaganda such as the Communist Party’s cooptation of traditional popular
art forms, see David Holm’s \textit{Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China} (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1991). Another
integral resource is Chang-tai Hung’s \textit{War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945}
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), which examines how both Nationalists and Communists in non-
occupied China used traditional and popular art forms including folk songs, drum singing, and storytelling, in order
to “create new channels for the dissemination of information. . . [and] activate an unprecedented, ambitious
propaganda campaign aimed at mobilizing every citizen and utilizing every resource in the country” (3).
of this period sought out new ways of expressing propaganda as a form of ideological signal warfare played out in the space of the ether. In the case of influential young woodcut artists such as Huang Xinbo (1915-1980), Luo Qingzhen (1905-1942), or Zhang Hui (1909-1900), the medium of the woodcut offered an expedient means for demonstrating the centrality of communication, particularly one-to-many broadcast, to the spread of class-consciousness and mass mobilization. To that end, their works repurpose elements of western woodcut art to examine the politics of broadcast signal. The visual idiom of propagation that emerged in this period set a foundation for propagandistic art of the Maoist period in the following decades.

Collectively, in envisioning propaganda vis-à-vis dynamics of signal and noise, these avant-garde and modernist texts and woodcuts imagined the transformation of social and physical space as ether-filled spaces of transmission or soundscapes.

Similar to Mao Dun’s attention to sound in his novel, Midnight, the construction of these soundscapes also imagines the perceptual field of the homo informaticus. In particular, through foregrounding or making visible the transmission of soundwaves, these soundscapes represent a form of what Linda Henderson terms “vibratory modernism”: modern art’s engagement with the role of “vibration” in disparate fields of modern knowledge, from physics to spiritualism, in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries.

In the case of China, to these scientific or pseudo-scientific fields must be added the science of propaganda. The metaphorical linkage between propaganda and sound is not just fortuitous: if propaganda is, as Ellul argues, ultimately directed at producing an effect or

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inducing some action, then its extension as a soundwave is appropriate, for sound is a kind of pure motion or pure energy that permeates all space and literally mobilizes the hearer. Exploring propaganda in terms of signal over ether thus reveals the visible “ripple effects” of new forms of mass communication, and their attendant political, informational, and social dimensions in 1930s China.

**Part I: Propaganda as a Problem of Communication**

Both in the West and in China, the early twentieth century marks the emergence of the propaganda apparatus, characterized on the one hand by an organized, institutional practice, and, on the other hand, a discourse of propaganda defining it as a modern technology of mass social communication. Scholars agree that “propaganda” entered into widespread usage in the West around the time of the Great War. In America and Britain during WWI, propaganda was envisioned specifically as a form of information management, where an institution’s messaging campaign sought to simplify its message in order to make it more effectively stand out against a background of other information. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, based on Lenin’s

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What Is to Be Done? (1902), propaganda was twinned with agitation: the former directed at the intellectual class, the latter at the proletariat.

Its relatively recent institutionalization aside, the act of propagation was not new to the twentieth century: the Chinese state had for millennia reflexively engaged in promulgation of laws, dissemination of information, and popularization of customs. The term [宣传] itself dates back to around the first century BC. But the word takes on a translingual dimension when the modern western concept of “propaganda” was imported through Christian missionaries (who were, after all, the original “propagandists”), particularly in the early 19th century with

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291 Lenin himself borrowed the formulation from his political opponent, Plekhanov, who wrote: “A propagandist presents many ideas to one or a few persons; the agitator presents only one or a few ideas, but he presents them to a mass of people.” Found in Peter Kenez’s study of Soviet propaganda institutions, The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 6. As Kenez points out in his introduction, however, the distinction between propaganda and agitation was in practice rarely clear, and both were completely subsumed by the greater mission of educating the populace about the Bolshevik platform (8).

292 For a review of “propaganda” in pre-imperial and imperial China, see Shao Peiren, ed. Xuanchuanxue he yuluxue (Shanghai: Fudan daxue chubanshe, 2002), pp. 30-87.

293 For the etymology of both of the two character components of xuanchuan, see ibid, 30-31, as well as Sun Xupei, Huaxia chuanboshi (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1997), 23. Xuan 宣 originally was a room [宣室] at the imperial palace, and appears already in Shang texts. This room was a place where sunlight and air could circulate, and its reference to circulation metaphorically came to denote the expansion from something small into something large [由小变大]. By the Han, xuan became a metonym for the Son of Heaven’s proclamations, which naturally were to be disseminated. The etymology of chuan 传 is equally old, and, given its relation to the discursive history of communication in China, deserves some attention here. The Shuowen jiezi (2nd c.) glosses it as ren [人] and zhuan [专], where zhuan denotes a spinner’s spool, and refers to turning or spinning (thus it is related to the verb, zhuan [转]). The Shigongshi [释宫室] section of the Shiming [释名] dictionary (circa 200 CE) glosses chuan as “Where people rest and then depart, and afterward arrive again, [thus the place] passes through many hands and lacks a constant master” [人所止息而去，后人复来，辗转相传无常主也]. While the Shishuqi [释书契] section of the Shiming provides a second gloss: “That with which something is transmitted, and held as proof/evidence [of such transmission]” [转移所在执以为信也]. However, as Shao argues, chuan appeared most often in the compound chuanche [传车], a chariot/vehicle used to travel between relay stations [驿站]. Finally, it is important to note chuan’s second ancient meaning, where the character is pronounced zhuan, meaning transmission, or, by extension, an individual’s “biography” or “records.” Collectively the etymology of xuan and chuan not only illuminates the interesting history of communication in China, but also helps show the statist origins of xuanchuan.

294 In 1622 Pope Gregory XV founded the Congregation of the Propaganda, a committee of Cardinals responsible for evangelizing to foreign populations. Five years later, Gregory XV’s successor, Urban VIII, established in Rome the College of the Propaganda for the purpose of training missionaries. See Mattelart, The Invention of Communication, 179-80.
the arrival of Protestant missionaries such as Robert Morrison and Peter Parker, who sought to use mass media such as print to proselytize to larger, popular audiences of Chinese. During the 1800s, the object of propaganda quickly transcended religious ends, as missionaries were joined by merchants and other representatives of British Empire in the pursuit of propaganda in China. The latter group, in particular, saw propaganda as joining war and diplomacy as a “third form of British engagement” with the Chinese.

With the founding of the Republic in 1912, new forms of mass politics and a growing impetus to enlighten the general populace led reform-oriented political leaders and intellectuals to pursue Western practices of mass mobilization. The historian John Fitzgerald has shown how in the 1910s and ‘20s China saw the institutionalization of propaganda practice and the rise of the Leninist party state. During this early period modern reformers largely took their cue from Soviet practices, as Soviet advisers such as Borodin gave input to the Nationalist Party on how to organize its apparatus. While Lenin and the recently established Soviet Union

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provided an institutional model for the Nationalist Party, it must be emphasized that the assumption that propaganda was an integral practice of a modern state or party was shared both by the “father” of the Republic, Sun Yat-sen, and his Nationalist Party, as well as by the early proponents of socialism such as Chen Duxiu, and the nascent Chinese Communist Party. \(^{300}\)

Indeed, established in 1922 and reorganized in 1925, the KMT’s Central Propaganda Bureau employed both rightists and leftists, including, briefly, Mao Zedong in 1925-1926. Notably, discursively speaking, Chinese intellectuals and politicians often took their cue from English-language sources. One prominent example comes from the Chinese Communist Party’s 1923 outline for the organization of the Party’s Education and Propaganda Committee, which includes a call for, in English, an “information bureau” (meant as a kind of news service [通讯部]). \(^{301}\)

Such a translation clearly shows the influence of British and American institutions of propaganda, which were euphemistically titled “Information Bureaus.”

Propaganda began appearing in popular journals and publications, too, as after the zenith of the May Fourth (and particularly around the time of the May Thirtieth Incident) proponents of new culture began publishing articles explicating the meaning and use of propaganda. This is typified by one early essay by Sa Mengwu and Liu Yimin, titled “Propaganda in theory and actuality” (1926) and published in Independent Youth, which puts it:

People are scattered across different places, so if they lack a thing that targets their spirit in order to integrate their psychology, then, just like a plate of loose sand, how can they group together through mere coincidence? What unites

\(^{300}\) David Holm’s review of propaganda policies of this period agrees with Fitzgerald’s. See ibid, 15.

\(^{301}\) The document is reprinted in Zhongguo Gongchandang xinwen gongzuo wenjian huibian Vol. 1, ed. Zhongguo Shehui kexueyuan xinwen yanjiusuo (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1980), 6-7. Another useful resource is Xu Dongping ed., Encyclopedia of Applied Propaganda Studies (Anhui: Anhui remin chubanshe, 1989). See also Tao Menghe’s 1925 article on xuanchuan which advocates for the establishment of a national news wire akin to Reuters so that China can more effectively manage the production and circulation of information on an international stage. Writing in the wake of the May Thirtieth Incident, Tao was particularly sensitive toward negative representations of China by the West and Japan.
peoples’ spirits is the intellectual tide of a given epoch, and what spreads this present tide of thought is Propaganda.302

As was quite common in 1920s articles on the subject, the text cites “propaganda” in English, placing it alongside the Chinese term, xuanchuan, to construct an equivalency between the two, thereby adding a translingual dimension to propaganda.303 Here the overdetermined quality of xuanchuan makes the word exciting as a kind of modern activity or mode of communication. At the same time, drawing xuanchuan and “propaganda” together creates a hierarchy where the latter is the “truer” and more scientific or rationalized practice: this helps explain why subsequent tracts of propaganda theory frequently begin by attempting to nativize the term. In its imperative of bringing the nation together into a modern present, Sa and Liu’s article reveals propaganda as an augment to the broader May Fourth mission of enlightening society, where it is the didactic handmaiden to Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy. Indeed, in 1922, the CCP’s earliest articulation of its propaganda policy dealt with propaganda as a matter of education [教育]. While related to a set of institutional practices such as party and popular publications, or the establishment of party training schools, “propaganda” for the CCP was more of a reminder that the cadre was at all times a potential propagandist, that he should always mind his manner and speech so that he might enlighten the masses.304 As such, propaganda was heavily reliant on offering people a model to emulate, and thus offered a sort of protocol in personal communications, a code of conduct that disseminates one’s belief and conviction in the

302 Sa Mengwu and Lin Yimin, “Xuanchuan zhi lilun ji qi shiji,” in Independent Youth [Duli qingnian], Vol. 1, no. 3 (March, 1926), p. 8. Sa was a rightist who was opposed to the increasing influence of the Communist faction within the KMT, and in 1927 he joined the KMT’s Ministry of Politics [政治部] propaganda department.


principles of the party. As one prominent figure in the early Communist Party, Yun Daiying [恽代英] (1895-1931), wrote in a landmark essay, “How to be a Propagandist?” [怎么做一个宣传家?] (1925), “You should pay attention when speaking that every sentence is clear, every word is clear; don’t speak too quickly, and don’t swallow the final words of your sentence.” Yun’s exhortation is symptomatic of the general approach to propaganda: send a clear, unwavering signal, and results would follow.

The year 1927 marks a historical split and the beginning of a new epoch in the history of propaganda, as the concept of propagation as a relatively benign form of mass education changed substantially in the wake of the KMT’s violent purge of its leftist elements. In the radical reformation of politics in China, the political schism between the KMT and the CCP caused both sides to reorient their propaganda efforts toward a more competitive communicative model, while also causing propaganda to be formalized as a specific field of modern knowledge. This technologization of propaganda is characterized as much by the struggle to overcome noise—i.e. enemy information—as by the need to manage one’s own lines of communication. Particularly in cosmopolitan urban areas like Shanghai or Tianjin, this opposition opened up dynamic propaganda fronts that had to be maintained and managed in an organized fashion in order to win hearts and minds. For example, in Wuhan in 1927, on the eve of KMT’s violent suppression of the Left, the KMT’s right- and left wings engaged in open clash propaganda and counterpropaganda, later characterized by one prominent participant, Mao Dun, as China’s first “information war” or “news war” [消息战]. The broader propaganda war would spread to various fronts in the 1930s: while the content, context, and media of the messages to be

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305 See Yun Daiying, “How to be a Propagandist?” in Zhongguo Qingnian no. 84 (July 25, 1925). Found in Shao, 6.

306 In Wo zouguo de daolu, Vol. 1, p. 359-381.
propagated would vary widely, both the KMT and the CCP (and in the late 1930s Japanese propaganda would join as a third major element), via their respective propaganda apparatuses, competed for ideological primacy amongst various groups, including students, readers, peasants, soldiers, intellectuals, women, and international audiences. Along this ideological front, propaganda was mutually oppositional but also mutually constitutive.

What must be emphasized here is how this oppositional logic of propaganda rested upon a new conception of propaganda expressed in terms of competing channels of communication. This resulted in three interrelated developments which constitute propaganda practice and discourse going forward. The first of these is a new concern over counter-propaganda (fanxuanchuan [反宣传]), along with its counterparts such as rumor (either as a natural or managed process) and bias. That is, no longer was propaganda merely a matter of delivering a message to an audience imagined as, if not entirely tabula rasa, at worst benightedly clinging to “traditional” knowledge. Now propaganda needed to outmaneuver hostile sources of propaganda. For example, Mao Zedong, in his famous “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan” (1927), discusses the efficacy of Communist propaganda and messaging as a problem of outdoing counter-revolutionary propaganda.\(^{307}\) While it is logical that the propaganda/counter-propaganda dyad would reproduce the logic of class struggle, a mandate that was increasingly issued in the CCP’s policy statements between 1927 and 1935,\(^{308}\) the background presence of KMT and other enemy propaganda serves as a major impetus for CCP


\(^{308}\) C.f. the “Fourth Declaration of the CCP Central Committee: On Propaganda and Agitation” [中共中央通告第四号——关于宣传鼓动工作] (August, 1927). The attitude that propaganda could and needed to do more in organizing labor, maintaining party discipline, and spreading ideology was similarly repeated in the documents between 1927 and 1935 (see Shao, 6-9).
propaganda efforts. In a major resolution on propaganda policy issued by the Party in 1929, viewed by scholars as the CCP’s first relatively comprehensive document on propagation, there is expressed a new anxiety about reactionary propaganda and its influence on the masses. Now Communist propaganda attempts must strive to issue fast responses to KMT propagation of Sun Yat-sen’s Three Principles of the People [三民主义] and reformism [改良主义]. As these quotes make clear, propaganda was increasingly a problem of managing information in such a way as to out-communicate the competition. Metaphorically, as the rest of this chapter shows, this concern played out in terms of signal management against a background of noise (white or otherwise).

The KMT, too, turned its attention to the problem of counter-propaganda. As it settled in to govern a more or less unified China beginning in 1927, it developed its forms of mass politics in search of building its ideological apparatus and creating a “highly disciplined, pedagogical state.” This new pursuit of propagation was, of course, coupled with a new attempt to censor voices critical of or even ambivalent toward KMT policy. But it also helped bring about the

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309 See Shao’s recapitulation of the document, in Shao, 7. See also Fitzgerald’s recapitulation of the KMT Central Propaganda Bureau’s internecine struggles in 1925-6, which, under the leadership of Mao Zedong, increasingly engaged in attacks with “counter-revolutionary” factions (252-3).

310 On the conceptualization of propagation as a communication problem, see also Fitzgerald, 21. In turn, Fitzgerald gestures to Carol Gluck’s similar formulation of the issue in her study of nationalist ideology in Meiji Japan. See her discussion in Japan’s Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period (Princeton: PUP, 1985), 10-12. In both cases, these scholars deploy the notion of noise to remind readers that the propaganda apparatus of the Chinese or Japanese state was never unified and totalized, but instead comprised of competing voices. But, of course, this diversity of channels extends beyond intraparty or intra-insitutional propaganda competition.

311 Fitzgerald, 3.

312 On KMT censorship, particularly relating to literary production, see: Michel Hockx, Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911-1937 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), Ch. 7; Lee-hsia Hsu Ting, Government control of the press in modern China, 1900-1949 (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1974); and Hearing a Sudden Clap of Thunder in a Place of Silence: Lu Xun and the Literary Net [于无声处听惊雷:鲁迅与文网], by San Mu [散木] (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2002).
scientization of propaganda as a form of modern warfare. In the succeeding decade, a nascent field of propaganda studies began to form as a number of social critics, operatives, and other intellectuals published articles and books on the subject of propaganda.\(^{313}\) A hallmark of these works is to note that propaganda (again, frequently written in English alongside the Chinese *xuanchuan*) has not only become part of every day life, but can—and should—be developed according to scientific principles.\(^{314}\) In this regard, Chinese scholars and government operatives joined their counterparts in the West, where, during the interwar period much resources and funding were directed toward scientizing propaganda.\(^{315}\) Alongside this scientization of propaganda was a newly scientized attention to propaganda’s “other,” the noisy threat of “rumor.”

In line with propaganda’s redefinition as a form of ideological warfare, the most developed and influential amongst this bourgeoning body of texts was Chen Yuxin’s [陈裕新]

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\(^{313}\) This body of works includes: Li Da, *Xuanchuanxue yu xinwenjizhe* (Jinan: Jinan daxue wenhuabu, 1932); Zhang Zhizhong, “Xinwen zhanzheng yu Propaganda,” in *Lindong Xuebao* Vol. 2, no. 2 (1936); Mu Chao, *Feichang shiqi de xuanchuan zhengce* (Unknown location: Zhengzhong shuju, 1938); Ren Baitao, *Riben duihua de xuanchuan zhengce* (Changsha: Shangwu yinshuguan 1940); Huabei Zhengwu Weiyuanhui, *Xuanchuan jishu* (Unknown location: Huabi zhengwu weiyuanhui zongwu ting qingbao ju, 1944); Wang Yizhi, *Zonghe xuanchuanxue* (Unknown location: Huabi zhengwu weiyuanhui zongwu ting qingbao ju, 1944); and Sa Kongliao, *Xuanchuan xinli yanjiu* (Shanghai: Gengyun chubanshe, 1948).

\(^{314}\) One relatively early example by a left-leaning intellectual, Xu Yi [徐怡] (dates unknown), who, in his *Propaganda Technique and Mass Movements* [宣传术与群众运动] (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1931), argues that propaganda science is cobbled together out of subfields from “social science” (including psychology, sociology, economics, and political science) and “expressive science” [发表科学] (including rhetoric, logic, dialectics, writing, art, and music). While the former category provides the *content* of propaganda, Xu emphasizes that the expressive sciences are equally important because they deal with the *form* and media of propaganda (4-11).

\(^{315}\) See, for example, the work of an early communications expert, Harold D. Lasswell: *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (New York: Peter Smith, 1927). In the 1930s, Lasswell directed the Social Science Research Council’s module on “Pressure Groups and Propaganda,” which resulted in a voluminous and translingual bibliography of contemporary propaganda studies. See Lasswell, ed. *Propaganda and Promotional Activities, an Annotated Bibliography* (Minneapolis: UMN Press, 1935).
monumental Propaganda War (1931).316 A high-level adviser to the Nationalist army, and Chen wrote his study for use by both the Nationalist military and government. Surveying the present epoch, Chen argues that modern propaganda and the war over people’s spirits is a zero-sum struggle without end: competition between individuals, institutions, and states meant that propaganda is key to maintaining both influence in the world, as well as domestic unity. This text deserves our attention not only because it is the earliest extended Chinese articulation of propaganda science during the budding propaganda era, but also because it is largely representative of the large body of treatises of propaganda subsequently produced in the 1930s and ‘40s. Although a comprehensive survey of these treatises lies outside the scope of this chapter, it should be noted that Propaganda War is by no means solely representative of KMT theories of propaganda, and instead resonates with much of the discourse and theory of propaganda embraced by the CCP both during this period and later in the PRC.

Like many of its later counterparts, Propaganda War begins by nativizing propaganda through locating it in China’s long military, diplomatic, and statecraft traditions, including the Sunzi, the Lunyu, and later accounts of the Warring States period.317 These classical examples are followed by illustrations from twentieth century European history: Chen, like his counterparts elsewhere in the world, exalted the British model and took particular interest in the activities and

316 Chen Yuxin [陳裕新], Xuanchuan zhan (Guomindang lujun daxuexiao, 1931), hereafter cited in text. Recently the book has been reprinted, see Xuanchuan zhan (Beijing: Beijing guotu shudian, 2010). In his survey of propaganda scholarship from the 1930s and ‘40s, Liu Zixiong ranks Propaganda War as the highest in quality, calling it the most systematic and substantive text of the period. “Lun woguo xiandai xuanchuan yanjiu de diyibo gaochao,” in Sichuan University Journal of Science and Engineering (Vol. 23, no. 4) Aug. 2008, pp. 7-10.

317 On the indigenization of modern propaganda as a longstanding Chinese practice, c.f. Dai Jingsu ed., Zhongguo xuanchuan wenxuan yice [Selected documents of Chinese propaganda] (Chongqing, etc.: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1939). In selecting classic and seminal propaganda documents from China’s tradition, Dai begins with famous “Tang Proclamation” [湯誓], Shang Tang’s exhortation to overthrow the Xia ruler, Xia Jie [夏桀], c.a. 1600 BCE, and chronologically moves forward from antiquity to early imperial China and into the Republican period, reproducing a total of twenty-nine texts.
biography of Lord Northcliffe, the British Director for Propaganda during the Great War and, as one historian puts it, the advocate of constructing “an empire of information at least as extensive as the British Empire itself.”

In his preface, Chen observes how in the course of recent Western history, particularly in the wake of the Great War, propaganda had become scientized, professionalized, systematized, and made transmissible as a standardized set of techniques. As such, China could and should adopt this technology in order to advance its position in the international community, as well as to consolidate its internal unity as a nation. Chen sets out to redefine and theorize the modern form of propaganda for his Chinese readership. Playing out in an abstract and invisible field as it does, Chen argues that the general import and function of propaganda must themselves be defined abstractly and broadly. His formulation of propaganda is, simply, “to advance [something] and cause it to be known” (31).

Echoing Mao Zedong’s earlier suggestion—which itself draws from Mencius—that the CCP’s propaganda policy should be one of “Drawing the bow without shooting, [instead] just indicate the motions” (i.e. to lead the masses but not directly mandate their actions), Chen elaborates upon his pithy definition with his own arrow metaphor to describe the process. Here I quote at some length to give a sense of Chen’s semiclassical literary rhetoric. Such a style is appropriate

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319 Here Chen echoes Foucault by describing the systematization of an authority structure as a move from monarchism to the rule of law or other system. Chen takes as his central example the reorganization of the KMT from a political party dominated by Sun Zhongshan and several individuals into a set of institutions which will come to supersede particular individuals (22).

320 This definition Chen sets in opposition to contemporary Soviet practices of agitprop, which he sees as limited to extraordinary circumstances (such as incitation) rather than being a more totalizing experience of all the senses/faculty.

321 Quoted in Holm, 16. From Mao, SW i. 46.
for educated officers or bureaucrats, and produces a schematic of propaganda that is rhetorically in line with a scientific treatise:

The matter of propaganda is arduous and complex. If one wishes to sum it up simply without leaving anything out, it is naturally quite difficult; but if we see its methods, observe its cause, check its whereabouts, comprehend its general nature, then certainly it’s not impossible. I think if one wants to give propaganda a clear and appropriate definition, then we ought to first know the various aspects which constitute propaganda; for example it is like shooting an arrow: there must be a target, there must be an arrow, there must be a cause for shooting the arrow, and there must be something lasting sought after in hitting the target with the arrow. [These are the various elements of archery.] What about the various elements that constitute propaganda? I say: propaganda’s audience is like the [archer’s] target; propaganda’s material is like the arrow; propaganda’s motive is like the cause for shooting the arrow; and propaganda’s objective is like seeking a lasting effect in hitting the target with the arrow. If these four elements are present, then propaganda is accomplished. (33)

Regarding propaganda’s “arrows,” Chen’s list includes the usual mass media such as newspapers or lectures, but also the telegraph, telephone, news agencies [通信社], slogans, literature, as well as several unconventional forms of propagation, such as hot air balloons, carrier pigeons, and even dogs.322

These media must be collectively marshaled into producing a steady stream of what Ellul calls “integration propaganda,” aimed at maintaining the ideology of the dominant party.323 This concerted propaganda apparatus pursues an ambitious vision of a mode of social existence where the state produces propaganda ceaselessly. Unlike the enlightenment project of the previous decade, propaganda is now quite a cynical venture that seeks to naturalize itself as a ubiquitous mechanism for manufacturing consensus. Thus Chen cautions that: “Because the mindset of the

322 Notably, Chen excludes from the list film, which is curious given how important film was as a propagation tool in Britain, America, and, increasingly, in China. See Matthew David Johnson, “International and Wartime Origins of the Propaganda State: The Motion Picture in China, 1897-1955,” PhD dissertation (University of California-San Diego, 2008). See also Weihong Bao’s discussion of propaganda film theory in the late 1930s in her article, “‘A Vibrating Art in the Air’: Cinema, Ether, and Propaganda Film Theory in Wartime Chongqing,” in New German Critique Vol. 41, no. 2 (Summer, 2014).

323 Ellul, Propagandas, 74 and passim.
propaganda business is propaganda for the sake of propagation . . . all institutions or personnel involved in propagation, and even all media for communicating propaganda, should be kept as veiled [隱晦] as possible” (43). This cynical proposition that propaganda provides the impetus for itself transforms the science of propaganda from one of significance to one of signaling—an inversion that structurally parallels the approach to communications as an engineering problem that scientists in the west were proposing in the 1920s and ‘30s.\(^{(324)}\) In line with this communication-as-signaling parallel, Chen offers up a series of acoustic metaphors that liken propaganda to soundwaves and help naturalize its presence in everyday life: “[If it is thus hidden,] people will see propaganda as regular as a mountain call’s valley echo [山鳴谷應], or as regular as the movement of the wind and sounds of waves [風動波響]. Propaganda should thus hide its profession” (43). If messaging is properly blended into the environment: then “even the smart will fall unawares under the spell of propaganda, and there be hope of winning the propaganda war” (43).

Here Chen’s poetic language describing propaganda as waves and as having an atmospheric quality suggests the third, most important, major characteristic of modern propaganda: the “ether” as the general space or grounds of propaganda’s signal. While for some contemporary theorists of propaganda such as Peng Leshan, ether was an actual, physical space of broadcast signals, filling the air with information, music, and lectures,\(^{(325)}\) here ether acts as a conceptual medium. Ether appeared in China at the end of the Qing dynasty in the writings of Confucian intellectuals such as Tan Sitong (1865-1898) who sought to articulate a new era of

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\(^{(325)}\) Peng Leshan [彭乐善], *Broadcast War* [广播战] (Chongqing: Zhongguo bianyi chubanshe, 1943), 1. A KMT operative, Peng’s and biographical information await further research, but it is clear from his reliance on a wide range of American and British source materials that he could read in English.
benevolence based upon an interconnectedness between peoples that was enabled by the conductive power of this invisible substance.\textsuperscript{326} While by the 1920s the notion of ether had been scientifically invalidated in the West (as well as in China), it still carried popular purchase as a medium or space through which passed waves from broadcaster to receiver. As Weihong Bao points out in her fascinating examination of links between cinema and propaganda film theory in wartime Chongqing, by the 1930s the concept of ether had been repurposed for new theories and practices of propaganda to serve as a general theory of media. This “ether medium” or “affective medium,” as Bao defines it, is marked by a paradoxical immateriality (where ether is invisible and everywhere) and materiality (the media technologies that make use of the ether). It departs from conventional media in significant ways: “In contrast to a linear model of the medium as a directional transmission of message, the affective [or ether] medium is encompassing and pervasive and resists the clear division between sender, receiver, and conduit; nor does the affective medium fit neatly either with a model of an immersive environment or with a mediating intermediary. Instead, the affective medium conjoins both models as a mediating environment.”\textsuperscript{327} As a kind of ur-medium that integrates a broad range of other media (including all sound and light media), ether thus transcends its own ontology as a medium and becomes environmental. As a mediating environment, it is a kind of conceptual and imaginative “para-space” through which signals pass (or fail to pass), giving full play to political power. Although Bao focuses on affect, she rightly points out that ether is also a space for the transmission of information. It is the grounds, in other words, for the struggle between signal and noise.


\textsuperscript{327} “‘A Vibrating Art in the Air’: Cinema, Ether, and Propaganda Film Theory in Wartime Chongqing,” 186. Emphasis in the original.
(Another obvious link between ether and propaganda is the former’s spiritualist aspect; propaganda being, as was repeatedly emphasized in texts such as Chen’s, a struggle over spirit.)

While it is the abstract nature of the “ether medium” which makes it ideally suited as a way of figuring ideas about propaganda given that the latter is not a theory of media but of communication (thus Chen collapses different media into a single analogy of arrow shooting), it is also the case that the ether is most often invoked in engagement with the technology of radio, a new mass medium which by the 1930s was, along with film, a mass medium *par excellence*. This is evident in the KMT’s interest in developing radio as a major communications technology integral to maintaining China’s “communications sovereignty” in the transnational ether space.  

328 For domestic entertainment, too, the radio had a bright future alongside its counterpart, film.  

But the KMT’s fascination with the ether is perhaps best illustrated in the Party’s propagation of the so-called New Life Movement (hereafter, NLM) in 1934—a propaganda initiative which takes center stage in Shen Congwen’s *Long River*, as we will see in the next

328 See Yun Yintang [恽荫棠] and Wang Chongzhi [王崇植]’s comprehensive study of China’s place in world wireless communications [通讯主权], *Zhongguo yu wuxiandian* [English title: *An Economic Study of International & Domestic Radio Communications in China*] (Shanghai: Wenduan yinshuguan, 1931). Yun and Wang argue that the era of wired communication (and dominated by British Empire and its “imperial chain” [帝国网; original in English, as well]) is coming to an end, as the telegraph’s potentiality is outpaced by wireless communications (and American liberalism)—particularly radiotelegraphy. Their emphasis on the latter leads Yun and Wang to also discuss the “world wireless telegraphy network” [世界无线电通信网] (42), though they ultimately see radio as primarily a broadcast medium of dissemination amongst the world’s “ether” (52). Yun and Wang’s summary list of radio’s uses includes: broadcasting information, international communication, land-to-sea and land-to-air communication, domestic industry, and colonization (79). On the issue of modern communications sovereignty and empire from the Japanese perspective, see Daqing Yang, *Technology of Empire: Telecommunications and Japanese Expansion in Asia, 1883-1945* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 2010). From a Korean perspective, see Michael Robinson, “Broadcasting, Cultural Hegemony, and Colonial Modernity in Korea, 1924-1945,” in Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson, ed. *Colonial Modernity in Korea* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1999).

329 Film trumped radio in one important way: the latter relied on spoken language, and thus ran up against linguistic barriers, particularly amongst the listenership of the Chinese hinterlands. This problem emerged in cinema too with the rise of talkies in the mid-1930s. On the universal visual language of film and the search to redeem the language of talkies, see Weihong Bao, “In Search of a ‘Cinematic Esperanto’: Exhibiting Wartime Chongqing Cinema in a Global Context,” in *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* Vol. 3, no. 2, (2009) 135-147.
chapter. This movement was a pivotal event in the social and political history of 1930s China, as it signaled a major amplification of the state’s program to mobilize—and keep permanently mobilized—the populace. Defining the movement in terms that resonated with Chen’s articulation of a contemporary “spirit war” (while also betraying the Christian and Confucian influences on the movement\textsuperscript{330}), Chiang Kai-shek announced the movement as a total invigoration and mobilization of a people that had become “spiritless” [沒有精神].\textsuperscript{331} The ether—an inherently spiritualist medium—was an important space for this propaganda campaign, especially given the fact that though China was ostensibly unified during this period, the Nationalists had limited influence in much of the country, particularly peripheral regions.\textsuperscript{332} As such, the radio’s center-to-periphery model of mass communication and mobilization offered a particularly potent site for fantasies about the power of propagation. Though it should be remembered that in practice the NLM meant radically different things in different parts of the country, as a propaganda campaign it brought to the public’s attention new ways of visualizing the ether.\textsuperscript{333}

We can see the matrix between the NLM, propaganda, and ether as it was neatly illustrated by the publication of \textit{Broadcast Weekly} [廣播週報] (1934-49), an essential channel of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Radio was also an attractive medium because of the decrepit and incomplete state of China’s other communications media, including roads and telegraph wires. See Yun and Wang, \textit{Zhongguo yu wuxiandian}, 81.
\item The standardized and centralized mode of disciplining bodies remained a fantasy of mass media advocates, and that in reality the engendering of new modes of “cultural citizenship” varied widely between regions and institutions, and a plurality of political views amongst citizen groups (e.g. school teachers) even in places under heavy influence of the Nationalists (such as in Zhejiang, near Nanjing). See Robert Culp, “Rethinking Governmentality: Training, Cultivation, and Cultural Citizenship in Nationalist China.” In \textit{Journal of Asian Studies}, vol. 65, No. 3 (2006), 529-554. Of course, that remote social control through propaganda and broadcast media is an illusion is precisely Shen Congwen’s point in \textit{Long River}.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
NLM propaganda. Established almost simultaneously with the initiation of the NLM, Broadcast Weekly was to be the central (and long-lasting) print supplement to the KMT’s radio programming.334 The journal reprinted radio lectures, articles on NLM priority reforms such as ethics and hygiene, photos of the KMT’s radio facilities, and the weekly program for the KMT’s central broadcast station, XGOA. It also envisioned itself as an important venue for the promotion of amateur science, regularly including articles on the inner mechanics of the transistor radio, batteries, and electrical engineering. Besides propagating the central tenets of the NLM, then, the journal also propagated the radio itself as the apex of modern technology, entertainment-based consumerism, and cultural citizenship. The journal’s prominent iconography of the radio’s role in Chinese nationalism is particularly striking (see Figures 25-26). In the first image, the standard cover for the journal, radio’s reach is shown linking China to the globe.335 In this style of visual representation of the globe, termed azimuthal equidistant projection (a common mode for the geography of radio signal, where all points on the map are at proportionally correct distance from the center of the map), the flattening of a three-dimensional space into a two dimensional-space heavily distorts the size of space near the poles. Here, Nanjing occupies the primary pole, while on the other side of the world sits South America, impossibly stretched over the entire horizon. Such a staging of the world as an abstracted space

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334 Note that Broadcast Weekly was by no means the only radio-related publication produced by the KMT. It was preceded by Radio Monthly [无线电月报] (1928), and Radio Bi-Monthly [无线电新报] (1929), and later joined by a host of other official publications, including: Wireless [无线电] (1934-1937); Receiver Periodical [收音期刊] (1935); The Radio Wave [无线电波] (1935-1936); Radio Broadcast Weekly [电音播音周刊] (1935-1936); as well as by a host of private or commercial journals. In contrast to its relatively short-lived counterparts, Broadcast Weekly’s long print run suggests it was the preeminent official journal.

335 As Peng Leshan mentions, by the early 1940s the KMT radio station’s signal was strong enough to clearly reach the occupied areas of Northeastern China, as well as Taiwan, Korea, and even Japan itself, and the signal even extended to the Dutch East Indies, New Zealand, Hawai’i, and, on certain days, North America (25).
of signal flows, coupled with the lines showing the reach of KMT radio broadcast, gives visualization to an ether space that is cross-hatched with broadcast energy waves.

While the journal’s cover image demonstrates the cosmopolitan nature and transnational reach of radio, Figure 26 shows another kind of integrated space of flows. The image, which appeared as an inset in the sixth issue of Broadcast Weekly, shows radio waves emanating from the central station in Nanjing to fill up a national space (while also aiming outward beyond the territorial boundary into international space). Written in a distinctively modernist typography, the caption above reads: “The Central Broadcasting Station is a mouthpiece for international propaganda, and an artery of domestic propaganda!” What is particularly interesting about Figure 26 is how it visibilizes radio signal, whereby a broadcast array, figured in jagged lines indicating electric energy, stretches across an ether-space coterminous with national territory to thereby reach receivers in regional capitals. The outward-facing transmitters, meanwhile, emit signals labeled as XGOA and “Central Broadcasting Station” [中央广播电台], whose concentrated energy is depicted by dark lines. Ultimately both these images are idealized depictions of signal (noise is absent); together, they illustrate how propaganda was conceived of in terms of signal broadcast across an ether medium. In the following sections, I turn to the leftist literature and woodcut art to show how the play of signal/noise across ether-space features prominently in works about propaganda. In attempting to develop an iconography of ether, these works sought to both challenge the dominance of KMT propaganda, as well as promote propaganda as an exciting, modern practice befitting of a politically aware individual.

Part II. Contesting the Ether: Ding Ling’s Propaganda Literature, 1930-32
Similar to how British authors such as Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad participated in British propaganda activities during the Great War, many of China’s better-known authors or future luminaries participated in institutional propaganda during the 1920s. This list includes the likes of Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu (who both worked for the KMT propaganda service in Guangzhou in 1926), as well as Mao Dun (who, also in 1926, served as deputy director of the Guangzhou bureau under the direction of Mao Zedong). Following the institutionalization of propaganda and the intensification of mobilization campaigns during the mid-20s and through the 1930s, leftist authors increasingly explored the emergence of propaganda as an existential condition of modern life and politics. Just as KMT propagandists such as Chen Yuxin were working to update propaganda as a modern techne of communication, leftists, too, were fast becoming enamored with propaganda as an expeditious form of ideological awakening. Accordingly they pursued the reorganization of cultural production around the logic of propagation. At the same time, artists and writers began to explore modern propaganda struggle as a communications warfare played out over the ether. In reflecting upon propagation itself, these politicized pieces also critically explored the relationship between mass media, information, and a new political subject, the masses.

In the wake of Liang Qichao’s unfinished *Future Record of the New China*, literature explicitly about propaganda only began regularly appearing in 1927 with Jiang Guangci’s amateurish novella, *Sans-culottes* [短裤党], which describes the agitation and propaganda activities of a group of underground communist organizers in Shanghai. The first literary

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337 Fitzgerald, 95-97.

work to be commonly banned by the Nanjing government, the novella was quickly celebrated by the leftist critic, Qian Xiangcun (A-ying), as China’s first work of “propaganda” (original in English). Sans-culottes was soon joined by other major literary works dealing with the subject of propagation, including Mao Dun’s Vacillation (1928), and Ye Shengtao’s influential novel Ni Huanzhi (1928). The latter, as Mao Dun notes in his famous criticism of the piece, explores the eponymous character, Ni Huanzhi, as he gyrates “from education to mass movement, and from liberalism to collectivism.” Ni’s transformation reflects the 1927 shift of propaganda to a more active form of mobilization and ideological inculcation. At the same time, the novel’s negative portrayal of crowds, particularly the ease with which they could be manipulated and its implications for the efficacy of counter-propaganda, led Mao Dun and others to call for a new, celebratory form of mass literature. In the ensuing decade, writers took up this call to produce a veritable sea change in the realist subject of literature. Historically, the production of fiction about propaganda saw a great uptick between 1930 and 1932, a period which saw the formation of the League of Leftwing Writers in 1930 and ended with the aftermath of the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in early 1932. Overall, Marston Anderson characterizes the literature of

339 See Qian’s contemporary polemic, “On Sans-culottes,” in Taiyang Yuekan, no. 2, 1928,


341 “It will not do to write fiction in the enthusiastic style of mass meeting agitation. One who prepares to devote himself to the new art and literature must first have a head for organization, judgment, observation, and analysis; it is not enough to be equipped with a trumpet that will serve to transmit one’s voice. One must first be able to analyze by oneself the mixed noises of the masses and quietly listen to the dripping of the underground spring, and then structure these into the consciousness of fictional characters.” Mao Dun, “On Reading Ni Huanzhi,” 301.

342 As with the development of propaganda discourse more generally, a Manichean logic is at work here: only three months after the League formed and announced its agenda of promoting social change and leading the way for the development of proletarian literature [普罗文学], the KMT formed a literary countermovement promoting “nationalist literature” [民族主义文学]. The feedback loop between these ideologically opposed institutions/schools helped precipitate a very active (and acerbic) publication atmosphere, characterized particularly by the zawen form.
this period as undergoing a shift toward the social collective: whereas May Fourth literature featured the individuated modern subject, by the 1930s, the literary “protagonist . . . [was] no longer the individual struggling to achieve a critical perspective on a chaotic social environment. . . [but now] a special kind of crowd, *abstractly conceived yet possessed of an overwhelming physical immediacy.*”\(^3\)

As we shall see both in the literature and in the art of this period, this tension between abstraction and physical immediacy is very much an effect of the use of ether-space as authors and artists sought out new ways of visualizing propaganda and mass mobilization as a kind of ripple effect of broadcast signals.

Amongst the authors who took up the subject, perhaps the most prominent was the urban writer, Ding Ling. Both Ding Ling and her husband, Hu Yepin, were early members of the League of Leftwing Writers, which ended tragically for Hu when he was captured by the KMT and executed in spring of 1931.\(^4\) This tragedy helped push Ding to an increasingly active role in the League. By 1931 she had abandoned the romantic explorations of individual interiority and urban ennui and alienation in such works as *Miss Sophia’s Diary* which had originally brought her literary fame.\(^5\) Now fully committed to its mission of realizing mass revolution, Ding Ling led the way in clearing out literature as a propaganda tool for the left through her budding style of proletarian literature.

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\(^3\) *The Limits of Realism*, 182; emphasis added. Besides Anderson, see also Tie Xiao, “In the Name of the Masses: Conceptualizations and Representations of the Crowd in Early Twentieth-Century China,” PhD dissertation (University of Chicago, 2011).

\(^4\) On this episode, see Wang-chi Wong’s *Politics and Literature in Shanghai* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 100-112.

While Ding Ling’s conversion to leftist politics and adoption of literary propaganda has subsequently received ample attention from critics, it remains to be noted how frequently Ding’s literature narrates the emergent propaganda era itself. Indeed, Ding’s fiction from this period regularly features characters who either take up propaganda as their vocation or as their life’s calling. This is the case in Ding’s two-part novella, *Shanghai, Spring 1930* (1930). The novella’s first part tracks the development of a young man, Ruoquan, who has transformed from an author into a propagandist engaged in speech-making at factories and other sorts of underground organizational work. The story’s central female character, the impressionable Meilin, abandons her long-term relationship with an established but bourgeois author so that she can join Ruoquan. Significantly, the established author, named Zibin, is repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to communicate with others. Unable to connect with Meilin and suffering a serious case of writer’s block, Zibin’s preferred medium of communication is the letter. In one representative episode, after quarreling with Meilin, Zibin spitefully refuses to join her in bed, and instead pens “two long letters to two far-away readers whom he didn’t even really know. At this moment, there was no one else he could feel close to. The letters were pretty much the same. As he wrote them his mind relaxed” (128). Realizing Zibin’s inability to communicate in person, Meilin eventually dumps Zibin via letter (138).

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346 On this transition, see Barlow, 29-34, as well as Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000), ch. 3. Tang ascribes Ding Ling’s turn toward propaganda to the general politicization of writing in Shanghai during the period. While I agree with Tang’s perceptive analysis of the reworking of the corporeal body in Ding’s fiction, I would argue that the sort of mobilization that Tang discusses is just as much about the ethereal and immaterial (and the informatic) as it is about the body. In other words, mobilization is an act of communication (on this point, see my analysis of the *China’s One Day* project in Chapter One). On Ding’s transformation, see also: Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, *Fuchu lishi dibiao: xiandai fumì wenxue yanjiu* (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1993), 126; Tsi-an Hsia, *Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Literary Movement in China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968); Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling’s Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, MA: HUP, 1982).
Similarly, part two of *Shanghai, Spring 1930* also features a converted writer and student, Wangwei, who, as a propagandist, now busies himself with information work such as translating newspapers from Chinese into English and vice-versa, delivering documents, and discussing the business of underground organization (141). A budding professional, he maintains a daily regimen of newspaper reading, such that “quite a bit of information [*xiaoxi*] would accumulate in his brain” (151). In turn, in a rationalized manner, he “sought to summarize these materials relating to the world economy. Moreover, he would gather [*搜罗*] reports on the development of revolution in China and collect images of the daily weakening of the ruling class” (151) so that he might pass it on to his fellow organizers and propagandists. With his passion for revolution, Wangwei’s commitment to propagandizing ultimately replaces his sexual desire for his beautiful but apolitical girlfriend, Mary. Mary disdains his work and his politics—“You don’t need to use your propaganda on me,” she at one point rebukes him (156)—and ultimately separates from him, leaving only a letter asking him to reconsider. The letter’s return address is a PO box number, and despite his best efforts, Wangwei cannot glean any information [*xiaoxi*] from the post office staff about the owner of the box (167). Thus impotent, he is forced to reply with a letter of his own, but receives nothing in return: writing is an ineffective vehicle for his otherwise persuasive power, and Mary has disappeared from his life.

As the narrative remarks at the close of this penultimate episode, “no one could devise an alternative ending for this sad story” (168). But Ding Ling is determined to pivot from the subject of unrequited love and instead show the propagandist in his glory, thus suggesting he

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347 Here I have significantly altered the extant translations. Both the original English translation and Tang’s adjustment fail to capture the original construction, where the subject of the final clause is information itself: “这里有许多消息都搜集到他脑中了” (267). Interestingly, the narrative embeds a judgment on news sources in contemporary Shanghai: Wangwei was “most interested in *Western Newsworld* [《字林西报》], because its information [*xiaoxi*] was more accurate than the major Chinese newspapers’, and faster and more detailed [灵通迅速] than that of the small papers, with quite a bit of touching news [*xiaoxi*].
finds a libidinal outlet in the very work of propagation. As such, in the final chapter, as Wangwei prepares to give a public speech: “He felt an excitement that he couldn’t suppress, as if he were seeing a surge of roaring waves toppling the mountains and churning up the seas . . . It was possible that this might happen immediately, since so many people were ready for it! And he, he would accelerate the great storm” (169). Once the demonstration gets underway, the chaos of the masses erupts and bodies of protestors surge forth, as “many clamorous shouts filled (lit. ‘occupied’) the space” [许多嘈杂的人声占领了这空气] (169). The confident roar of the masses is quickly supplanted by a trembling sound [抖颤的音波在空中响着] when police violently disperse the crowd (170); Wangwei himself is captured as an instigator, and hauled off to face punishment.

Here the convergence of sublimated sexual energy and political revolution is enhanced by Ding Ling’s careful attention to the dynamic of contestation of communication in the form of noise filling the air. The novel’s closing image of mass action anticipates her more experimental work in the following two years between 1931 and the end of 1932. During this period China was wracked with several catastrophes: in summer of 1931, deadly flooding in the Central Plain left millions displaced. Then, following the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in 1931, between January 28th and March 3rd of the following year, Japan bombed the Zhabei district of Shanghai. It is difficult to overestimate the impact of these major events on leftist cultural production. Leftist writers, dramatists, artists, and filmmakers found their brand of politicized art given a fresh injection of urgent subject matter (the atrocities of war and scope of social suffering). They also developed a new popular audience, as the national outrage spread over Chiang Kai-shek’s and the KMT’s perceived inability to deal with catastrophe.  

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348 See Tang, Ch. 4, 113-162.
Writers’ Central Committee invited Ding Ling to become chief editor of its new flagship journal of revolutionary fiction and criticism, *Big Dipper* [北斗]. Ding Ling’s reputation as a relatively apolitical writer was to help the journal get through the censorship net. Across the issues of this leading avant-garde leftist journal of the day Ding Ling serialized her two most prominent propaganda-themed literary works, “Water” [水] (1932) and *Eventful Autumn* [多事之秋] (1932). On account of their formal innovation, these pieces were famously taken as an epitome of “new fiction” [新的小说]; as one leading leftist critic, Feng Xuefeng, noted in a seminal critical essay titled “Concerning the Birth of New Fiction” [关于新的小说的诞生] (1932), Ding Ling’s early 1930s work was pivotal both on account of its orthodox display of class struggle, but also, and even more importantly, because of its radical attempt to rework the masses into a coherent literary protagonist. As Feng explains it: Ding Ling’s new fiction “does not have only one or two protagonists, but rather a grouped mass; it does not analyze individual psychology, but rather collective action and expansion [开展]; its characters are not individuated and stable, but rather, part of the whole, mutually influencing and developing.” Ultimately Ding’s new fiction effected an entirely new portrayal of the masses that was dependent upon a kinetics of communication and propagation.

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349 For a biographical treatment of Ding Ling during this period, see Charles J. Alber, *Enduring the Revolution: Ding Ling and the Politics of Literature in Guomindang China* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

350 Danren [Feng Xuefeng], *Beidou*, Vol. 2, no. 1, 285. Of course, Feng’s comments also fit within the larger contemporary debate on the formation of “mass literature” [大众文学] or proletarian literature which took as its subject subjects of the proletariat, rather than the petit-bourgeois. It should also be noted that new literature’s attempt to portray the masses as a literary protagonist by no means stands as the first attempt in Chinese literature at dispersing narrative focalization across a wide variety of characters. As Henry Zhao points out, such scattered focalization was common in the traditional vernacular novels, and even definitive of more modern stories such as Lu Xun’s “A Public Example” [示众]. See Zhao Yiheng, *The Uneasy Narrator: Chinese Fiction from the Traditional to the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 98-9.
Ding’s “Water” appeared in serialized form across the first three issues of *Big Dipper* in 1932. The novella showcases the critical turn toward a new impetus for literature to propagate social organization and expose the plight of the lower classes. In the story Chinese peasants struggle to survive in the face of massive flooding in their region. Working in the dark of night, the peasants are acutely attuned to changes in their sonic environment as they frantically listen for news of success or failure at the front of the struggle, the bulging dikes. As they realize the inevitability of the destruction of their farmland, the peasants spontaneously develop a collective consciousness through their inclusion in a kind of aural community. In the story’s climax, the farmer women, the elderly, and refugees are huddled together exchanging talk in the ominously quiet dark, when all of a sudden the sound of the dikes’ collapse signals the impending deluge:

The *dong, dong*, rolled across the fields from the direction of the dikes, a confused and clamorous note shaking people out of their houses, rousing all the animals and fowls, and even startling roosting birds. The whole village burst into life. The universe itself seemed to have been strung on a line, ready to break at this touch of sound. . . . [Soon] the dogs yelped maddeningly, cocks crowed, and the wind rushing through the crowd twisted the mingled sounds with the voices it carried of the excited men and the rising waters they fought. The flood imagery of water dispossessing the peasants of their land is soon inverted to describe the flood of peasant refugees as they march on the walled city to demand relief from the wealthy city folk (amongst whom hide the absentee landlords from the countryside). After much stalling on the part of the city’s representatives, who refuse to open the granaries and instead only promise to send out a call for donations, the hungry peasants rally around a particular loud speaker. Having climbed a tree to speak from a height, the agitator in question is able to drown

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351 The story is commonly known in English as “The Flood,” thanks to Agnes Smedley’s adapted translation in 1932 as part of a broader campaign to mobilize Western readers to put pressure on the KMT for jailing Ding Ling. On Smedley et al’s campaign, see Richard Jean So, “Coolie Democracy: U.S.-China Political and Literary Exchange, 1925-1955” (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 2010), Ch. 1: “Fragments of the Pacific Cultural Front: Agnes Smedley and Synthetic Realism.”

out other voices and becomes the de facto leader of the masses, who exhort him to continue speaking. The story’s final lines celebrate the power of propaganda as a mode of broadcast communication: “Carrying within it an abundant force, this hoarse and bitter sound radiated from near to far, in the process stirring quite a few hungry hearts. His every sentence awoke them, for it provided the words for what they had already intuited but for which they had not yet found appropriate language. In this moment, they willingly listened to his directions, they were of one mind to pass on this command to the greater group, and their hearts were filled with a limitless light.”

Thus the story ends on a threatening note: like the waters of the flooding river, this revolutionary sentiment will rush over amongst the peasants.

But by far the most interesting of Ding’s propaganda-oriented work during this period is the second of her two experimental Big Dipper works, Eventful Autumn, published between late January and July of 1932 (overlapping the Japanese bombing of Shanghai the same spring). The text has gone relatively unstudied despite its status as Ding’s first attempted novel (she originally planned it to be about 10,000 characters long) and its role as the culmination of Ding’s experimentation with new fiction. Like “Water,” Eventful Autumn was serialized in the pages of Big Dipper, and features a narrative voice that is dispersed across utterances of the anonymous masses. Similarly, both texts offer a mythopoeia about the formation of the masses, and the stories share the motif of waves of energy and action that sweep across crowds. Unlike “Water,”

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354 See Ding Ling’s contribution to the edited volume, Experiences of Creation (1933), reprinted in Ding Ling lun chuangzuo, ed. Zhang Liaomin (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 99-102. Ding characterizes the fragment as the “failure of a great dream” [宏愿的失败].

355 Specifically, in Beidou, Vol. 2, nos. 1 (published January 20th, 1932) and in issue 3/4 (a combined issue published July 20th, 1932). The journal was discontinued after issue 3/4 due to the increase in KMT suppression. Ding Ling published the story under the pseudonym Binzhi [彬芷]. Subsequent citations are given in text, with issue number followed by page number.
however, *Eventful Autumn* is set in an urban landscape and deals explicitly with propaganda and social communication, particularly the ways in which the rapid spread of critical information forcefully catalyze revolutionary sentiment amongst the urban masses. In the only critical treatment of the text in English, Charles Laughlin analyzes *Eventful Autumn* as an early example of the genre of “reportage literature” [报告文学] developed by leftist writers in the wake of the Manchurian Incident (1931).\(^{356}\) However, while the text shares many of the concerns of reportage literature, particularly in its pursuit of a leftist proletarian epistemology that runs counter to the bourgeois biases of contemporary newspaper reporting, when placed in context of her literary experimentation with new literature, Ding’s story is arguably better read as a piece of fiction. Rather than offer a “report” of an actual event and assert the superiority of its veracity, *Eventful Autumn* is ultimately closer to the celebrations of urban subjectivity by authors of the so-called Neo-Perceptionist school [新感觉派] such as Mu Shiyong and Liu Na’ou. If anything, in its dizzying pace and ecstasy of mediated communication, the narrative of *Eventful Autumn* even outdoes the modernism of the Neo-Perceptionists. More than any other text of the propaganda era, *Eventful Autumn* explores the meaning and import of propaganda, in the process performing intimate relationship between conceptions of signal and noise, and the importance of a general “ether medium” in the formation of mass consciousness.

Building on Ding’s earlier experimentation with panoramic description in works such as “Daylight” [日] (1929), *Eventful Autumn* takes place in the streets of Shanghai. Rather than focus on individual characters, the narrative weaves together a large social amalgamation out of largely anonymous voices, in effect exploring the topic of social communication between various

social groups, including students, workers, and government representatives, and the resultant cataclysm of mass consciousness and action amongst the urban poor. Across six sections, the story depicts first the spread of news/information [新闻/消息] regarding the Mukden Incident [九一八] (1931), outrage over the KMT response, and, finally, the police state’s brutal suppression of mass demonstration. Similar to the politics of sound in “Water,” Eventful Autumn depicts the force of the masses sonically as waves of noise that overcome the much weaker sound signal of the KMT propaganda. The narrative’s constitutive relationship with sound is established in the very first lines of the text, which sets the scene of public outrage over Japan’s invasion of northeast China:

The rumble and roll [轰隆轰隆] of the tramcar, the screeching sounds [吱呀吱呀] of steel wheels running over steel tracks, as well as the ceaseless peeling of bells, amidst the clamoring city [喧闹的市] sounds drive from Jing’an Temple to Ka’de Road, to the racetrack, and settle in an even noisier [嘈杂] spot, where a million kinds of noises converge together in one place [百万种闹声汇合在一处]: the broad road in front of the gates of the Shi Company... Here the flapping of countless flags accompanies the ear-splitting sounds of the automobiles, and the various cacophonies [嚣闹] of all the people, machines, iron, and wood both distant and near makes up one giant, taught tide of sound [凑成一个巨大的紧张的声音的浪潮]. (1: 25)

Reminiscent of how a parabolic reflector of a radio dish collects atmospheric sound waves to focus it on a single receiver, this depiction of sound on top of sound creates a sensation of searing energy. This passage anticipates the subsequent narrative both thematically (a similar emphasis on sound is maintained throughout), as well as in its attempt to serve as a kind of microphone for the sound of urban and social space. This vibratory modernism provides the following narrative a way of expressing public sentiment and the effect of propaganda as a form of channeling sound, either as a harnessing of the noise of the city to heighten excitement of political resistance, or by way of transmitting signals through this backdrop of noise. Shanghai
is transformed into a kind of ether-scape filled by waves of propaganda and counter-propaganda, signal and noise.

As the protesters gather, the tide of communication in the opening scene is quickly reversed into an outflow of communication when special edition newspapers and other pamphlets get passed out. These “fly into the hands of some standing people, and then again fly off into other places. . . In thousands and tens of thousands, the papers are opened in countless hands” (1: 25-6) thus disseminating the news of imperialist planes and bombs in Shenyang. The effect is, again, aural: “amidst all the cacophony, the information [xiaoxi] drums up an even larger sound wave, this shocking news [xinwen] spreads in all four directions as well as the reactions [反响 lit. ‘repercussions’] to this news” (1: 26). This tidal wave of information, sentiment, and sound is personified as a string of anonymous exchanges which stand in for the vectors of exchange in the thronging mass of people. As the narrative makes clear, this series of exchanges is but one ripple effect amongst countless others, a synecdoche for the much larger tide of communication: first “this information [xiaoxi] was transmitted from street to adjoining street, transmitted to all of the indigent areas, the working class areas,” and then beyond the confines of Shanghai to the neighboring cities (1: 26-7). Although here the medium of communication is the conversation, lecture, or the pamphlet, through a kind of chain reaction their individual transmission forms a center-to-periphery radial structure of communication that echoes the general broadcast model of communication, particularly the radio. Later the narrative itself makes such a comparison when, at the beginning of Chapter Six, it exclaims that news about the killing of several protestors “was immediately transmitted across all of Shanghai even faster than a radio broadcast” [立即比无线电播音还快的传遍上海了] (3/4: 527). Although the government and elite institutions may control the communications infrastructure like the radio, it
does not have a monopoly on speed of transmission or on broadcast capabilities; grassroots communication, too, can fill the ether with signal.

The visualization of propaganda’s ripple effects again gestures to the ether-space as a stand-in for the general space of communication in the opening of Chapter Three, which begins with a description of the ecstasy of communication that happens alongside (and in reaction to) student-organized propagandizing:

The staff at the telegraph office added extra hours, but were still unable to keep up. Several dozen provinces, several thousands of counties, several tens of thousands of groups all seemed to compete in sending telegrams and declarations which were unsparing in length. Electric currents filled the air. The wireless communications of various consulates and dignitaries were left no time to rest. Then there were the newspapers and their reporters, who blindly rushed off in all directions. The typesetters had even less time to sleep. The price of paper suddenly spiked, half on account of the great increase in newspapers, journals, manifestos, and pamphlets, and half on account of the boycotts. All of the students in China came out to give lectures, and across the country the calls to boycott Japanese goods arose like a tidal wave. (1: 30-1; emphasis added)

The attention to the materiality and labor of communication (paper, type-setting, etc.) enhances the description of the city’s atmosphere as a frenzy of information collection, transmission, and consumption. The state of exception brought about by the national crisis offers a rupture point into the ether-space, as urbanites and workers suddenly find themselves as active participants in shaping public opinion.

But this signal of current news and patriotic sentiment is not uncontested, as the KMT attempts to issue counter-propaganda. In contrast to the explosion of popular communication, the government’s responses are clipped and ineffectual. The weakness of the KMT’s propaganda signal is quite literal, as we see in a key scene where officials have organized a mass rally in support of the KMT’s position. Hungry for an explanation, an unprecedented crowd of three-hundred thousand gathers: “Filling the entirety of the public grounds, as well as the
surrounding streets, even the nearby walls and rooftops were filled with people. More people squeezed in amongst the sea of people, banners and flags flew amongst the flagpoles, and voices shouted out amongst the tide of sound” (1: 31). Unlike the absence of concern about sound amplitude in the opening of Liang Qichao’s *Future Record*, Ding’s description of the event emphasizes the physical limitations of the broadcast signal:

The sounds [of the crowd’s impatience] carried off, and from afar shouts arose: “Begin the meeting! Begin the meeting!”

A fat man with a yellow face, wearing a Sun Zhongshan jacket, grabbed a megaphone [传音筒], and walked to the front edge of the platform. He loudly proclaimed:

“Please quiet down everyone, we are beginning the meeting! Would the chairman please step forward...”

But people on all four sides couldn’t hear clearly, and asked those in their vicinity:

“What’s he saying?”

“Don’t make any sound, listen to them!” (1: 32)

The shortfall of sound augurs an inauspicious beginning to the gathering. Expecting an agitational meeting in the vein of the student propagandists’, the common people can’t make sense of the format of the ensuing officious speeches. The government’s failure to communicate continues to be illustrated as a weakness of signal, for when the chairperson does begin speaking, his voice is unable to reach the listeners:

The wind scattered [吹断 lit. ‘blew apart’] his words, sending discontinuous words in all directions:

“Japan...”

“Fellow countrymen...”

“Great meeting of citizens...”

“Government...”

“League of Nations...”

“Request that you express your opinions...”

Thereupon he retreated, and another tall, thin man stepped forward.

“What’s he said? I still can’t hear!”

“These officials, what are they showing to us? What have they come to do, that they’re so fancily dressed?”

“We will organize!”

“We don’t trust the League of Nations!...”

“We want the government to immediate dispatch troops!...” (1: 32-3)
The narrative “ear” that here shuttles from stage to audience performs two functions: in the first half, by palpably breaking up the speechifying of the government agent into a string of decontextualized utterances, the narrative literalizes the ineffectuality of the KMT propaganda signal. By contrast—and typical of Ding’s “new literature” experiment—the narrative spontaneously strings together anonymous utterances of the masses. These collectively form a kind of relay system that adds up to a unified stream of consciousness. Juxtaposed in this way, this stream of mass consciousness is literally a counter-signal, and quickly aggregates into an abundant sound equal to the roaring riptide of the Qiantang River (1: 33). Soon student activists displace the officials and begin their propaganda; unlike the government’s, their slogans are clearly received and rapidly totalize the listenership into a unified body [大家一致] (1: 35).

The symbolism of this demonstration is replayed elsewhere in the narrative as the KMT’s attempts to placate the public are continuously rebuffed by the agitation of public sentiment brought about by students’ and other leftists’ counter-propaganda (3/4: 520, 527-8).

In its vibratory description of propaganda in early ‘30s Shanghai, Eventful Autumn echoes Chen Yuxin’s Manichean formulation of the propaganda/counter-propaganda feedback loop, thereby positing that propaganda is a kind of pharmakon: both a poison (government information), and a cure (student propaganda). In the narrative such a politics of channeling

357 A clear allusion to a famous scene in Chapter Twenty-Four of Ye Shengtao’s Ni Huanzhi, which likens mass politics to the roar of the tide: “the thunderous roar that jarred the eardrums and made the heart quiver... is just what the state of mind of people in Shanghai is like at this present moment. No matter who he may be, provided only that he is in Shanghai at the present moment, he must already have heard that thunderous roar and in consequence harbouring a mysterious feeling of extreme tension.” From Yeh Sheng-tao, Schoolmaster Ni Huan-chih, trans. by A.C. Barnes (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1978), 281.

358 Or, as Ellul puts it, “information not only provides the basis for propaganda but gives propaganda the means to operate; for information actually generates the problems that propaganda exploits and for which it pretends to offer solutions” (63).
neatly mimics radio frequency, and creates an analogy between ideological space and the bandwidth space amongst the ether.

Ultimately unfinished, the story ends at its sixth chapter, the aftermath of the tragic martyrdom of student and worker protestors at the hands of police. Either because the Nationalist government shuttered the offices of Big Dipper or because Ding found it too difficult to further sustain the narrative’s initial energy, Ding Ling abandoned Eventful Autumn after two installments. Nonetheless, more than any of Ding’s prior or subsequent works, Eventful Autumn fulfills the impetus of new fiction then prevalent in the leftist literary scene. Surely part of Ding Ling’s point in writing the story was to encourage the propagandist’s fantasy about a captive and engaged audience hungry for propaganda. Whereas Feng Xuefeng had criticized “Water” for portraying the masses as essentially self-organizing, in Eventful Autumn the organizing force is provided by students, who in alternating chapters are shown working together to produce mobile propaganda units, as well as commandeering a train headed toward Nanjing in order to present the Chiang government with a petition to actively intervene in Japanese aggression.

Overall, Ding Ling’s focus on processes of social communication as an ethereal, temporary, and invisible—but also revolutionary—phenomenon requires us to reconsider the subject of her literary representation, the masses, as an unbound subject that can only cohere through communication in which the kinetics of communication play out as the movement of streams of information and sentiment across the abstract space of communication, the ether. While Eventful Autumn offers its reader a study in macroscopic overview of such kinetics and the role played by propagandists, another of her contemporary stories examines the movement of information from an entirely different angle. Titled simply “Xiaoxi,”359 the short story offers a

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359 See Wenxue yuebao Vol. 1, no. 2 (1932), 33-8. Because the story is short, I do not give precise citations.
more focused, microscopic view of the role of information in social mobilization, and as such deserves to be read as a companion piece to *Eventful Autumn*. Written in the summer of 1932, just as *Eventful Autumn* was approaching its second installment, this short story inverts *Eventful Autumn*’s explosive bursts of information by instead depicting the information flow in a single of Shanghai’s lower-class households also adds a gendered perspective largely absent in Ding’s more grandiose new literature. The story’s central character is an aging woman who lives with her working-class son, his wife, and their small child. The adult son frequently invites his friends over for secretive meetings about organizing labor at the factory where they work. During these gatherings, the old woman is banished to a tiny side room. From here, despite noise from the street and incomprehension of certain terms, she overhears enough of the workers’ conversation to catch the gist of their activities. Inspired by their actions, she wants to join in their plotting but is unable to find a productive outlet for her revolutionary spirit. Finally, she goes to the neighboring household to talk idly with Old Woman Wang, and their gossip attracts other neighbors. As they become conscious of a larger organization that stands behind the recent workers’ strikes (i.e. the Communist Party), the women wish to send the organizers a telegram hinting at their plight and urging them good will. The women organize an informal collection drive and end up producing a cloth embroidered with red flowers. The next time her son gathers with his associates, the old woman shyly presents the embroidered cloth on behalf of the fourteen women, saying that she knows what he’s up to and stating that she and her friends want to present a small gift to them. She bashfully asks her son’s friend if “that association” needs old women like her; amused, the young man says they do. The story ends with her earnestly telling him that she and twenty or thirty of her friends are at the service of the association. The story thus suggests that information both moves of its own accord (the
woman’s eavesdropping), while also promoting the idea that even a lowly figure such as the old woman can become an organizer or de facto propagandist on behalf of the revolution. The story shows the importance of communication-related issues (eavesdropping, gossip, sending messages) to the rise of class consciousness, while also showing how the communicative space of the ether extends into the very corners of the city to peripheralized groups not engaged in conventional modes of mass communication or telecommunication.

Part III. Lines of Force: Signal and Ether in Leftist Woodcut Art

Just as Ding Ling was developing a new way of making visible the space of communication in her new literature, the nascent field of modern woodcut art was also engaging with the propaganda era by exploring new ways of visualizing signal and noise. The histories of these two leftist forms are closely related: woodcut art appeared in nearly all the literary journals of the period,\(^{360}\) and woodcut artists consorted with some of the best known leftist authors of their time. In their survey of the Chinese woodcut, the art historians Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen observe that the history of woodcut art in China can be roughly split into two periods: the first spans between 1928 and the outbreak of the War of Resistance in 1937, while the second covers the years between 1937 and the establishment of the PRC in 1949.\(^ {361}\) In the second phase, woodcut art was a widespread tool of political mobilization oriented toward national salvation, and constituted the “de facto ‘official art’ of the Communist Party” in Yan’an and Northwest China.

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By contrast, during the first phase, woodcut art’s political objective was social change and the promotion of class consciousness. During this gestational phase, the most visible promoter of leftist woodcut art in China (and a significant arbiter of the art form) was Lu Xun (1881-1936), who began publishing foreign woodcut art from his own collection in a series of compilations as early as 1929, and until his death in 1936 served as a kind of financial patron and artistic muse for a coterie of young woodcut artists.\textsuperscript{362} In contrast to the traditional Chinese woodcut which was produced anonymously, the woodblock art that emerged in Shanghai and Guangzhou in the 1930s was produced by youths who saw themselves as artists; they not only carved their own blocks, but also printed their own works. These artists counted themselves part of a broader internationalist art movement, and during the 1930s they worked to develop their own modernist, cosmopolitan aesthetic variously influenced by cubism, expressionism, and realism of Soviet and western artists such as Kathe Kollwitz, Lynd Hunt, and Frans Masereel.\textsuperscript{363}

Although it was by no means the earliest modern form of visual propaganda,\textsuperscript{364} because the woodcut evolved alongside the propaganda era itself, it is perhaps the latter’s ablest visual medium. Indeed, departing from earlier forms such as traditional woodblock printing or the modern lithographic pictorials such as the \textit{Dianshizhai huabao}, woodcut art of the 1930s took agitation and propagation as its basic mission: only a few months after the League of Leftwing Writers formed in March of 1930, the smaller League of Leftwing Artists (Meilian) was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{362} On Lu Xun’s early promotion of woodcut in his four-volume series, \textit{Selections of Modern Woodcuts}, see Tang, Xiaobing, \textit{The Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde}, Ch 3. On Lu Xun’s patronage of the artists, see ibid, Ch. 4.
\bibitem{363} Andrews and Shen, 213. See also Xiao, “In the Name of the Masses,” ch. 4.
\bibitem{364} See Ellen Johnston Laing, “Reform, Revolutionary, Political, and Resistance Themes in Chinese Popular Prints, 1900-1940,” in \textit{Modern Chinese Literature and Culture}, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall, 2000), 123-175. Laing largely synthesizes recent Chinese research to examine how traditional (and popular) imagery, via media of woodblock prints and modern lithography, was put into the service of spreading political messages first in the late Qing and again in the early years of the Republic. For an abbreviated survey of visual forms of propaganda in premodern China, see the introductory chapter to Landsberger, Stefan. \textit{Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization} (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 18-24.
\end{thebibliography}
organized under the auspices of the Communist Party’s Central Bureau of Propaganda. Like the Writers’ League, the League of Leftwing Artists took as its general mission the organization and promotion of communist revolution.\(^{365}\) Just as Japan’s annexation of Manchuria in 1931 and bombing of Shanghai in early 1932 precipitated the development of new literature and the evolution of reportage literature, so too did these events spur a rapid reorientation of woodcut art toward propagation as woodcut artists abandoned a liberal humanist approach to their subject matter to instead pursue more politically inflected subjects resonant with popular outrage over Japanese war atrocities. Visually, this compulsion to propagandize is epitomized by an early piece by Hu Yichuan, “To the Front!” (Figure 27), an image first displayed at an exhibition in 1932 and which rapidly became iconic of the burgeoning woodcut art movement. The same month of the exhibit, Hu Yichuan’s leftist association, the Spring Earth Society, issued its manifesto: “Modern art must follow a new road, must serve a new society, must become a powerful tool for educating the masses, informing the masses, and organizing the masses. The new art must accept this mission as it moves forward.”\(^{366}\) Similar to how Ding Ling’s literature (as well as reportage literature and leftist film) sought to intervene in public understanding of contemporary events, woodcut artists also sought to “establish an interpretive frame on [the] overwhelming crisis . . [and offer] impassioned visual commentary on contemporary history.”\(^{367}\)

What is most striking about Hu Yichuan’s “To the Front!” is the powerful aural quality exuded by its subject: a yelling man exhorting his fellows to join him forward. Reading this image and others like it, Xiaobing Tang has remarked an “aural turn” in woodcut art beginning

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\(^{365}\) See Tang, 102-3 for the formation of the Meilian and its connection to the League of Leftwing Writers and Shanghai artist collectives.


\(^{367}\) Tang, 120-1.
in 1932, when avant-garde woodcut artists increasingly began to evoke a “new phase in an acoustic reality, namely the experience of overwhelming and unnatural sounds and noises . . . [and] a search for or recognition of the human voice.”

Reading the leitmotif of visibly shouting figures, Tang argues that this aural turn represents a common “wish to project a resonating voice, whether it was the voice of a larger-than-life individual or that of a unified collective. The consequent aspiration to picture an invisible object so as to inspire passion and action was a challenge that would ultimately entail an imaginative transgression of the boundary between the visual and the aural” (218).

Such an aural turn is generally consonant with May Fourth orality. At the same time, Tang’s focus on voice risks overlooking the broader tendency of woodcuts to take up issues of communication as a way of reflecting upon the propaganda era within which they participated. This interest is manifest in the proliferation of images that focus on information exchange in innovative ways, particularly by remediating other media, whether oral exchange or mass media such as the newspaper or radio. For example, we may observe two images, Figures 28 and 29, both titled “Xiaoxi,” that come from before and after the outbreak of the war in 1937. The first, from 1935, is by Tang Yingwei [唐英伟], while the second, made in 1948, is by Ge Yuan [葛原]

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368 Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-garde*, 194. Tang suggests this “aural turn” was “compelled by contemporary events,” but does not elucidate why the voice and the depiction of sound were foregrounded during the period.... At the “Multimedia Lu Xun” workshop held at Columbia University in February, 2009, Tang suggested that the rise of woodcuts was in part fueled by leftist artists’ frustrations with the dry objectivism of documentary photography in its depiction of the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1932. In this sense, like the contemporary rise of reportage literature [报告文学], woodcuts would offer a subjective account of events containing a social truth inaccessible to the perspective of the photographer.

369 On the subject of orality and May Fourth spoken drama, see Colin MacKerras, *The Chinese Theatre in Modern Times* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975). Perhaps most prominent was the attempt to bring writing closer to speech during the vernacularization movement.
The earlier “Xiaoxi” depicts three urban workers reading the news against a factory backdrop. Rendered in the style of social realism, the figures are crudely carved and disproportionate. But what is interesting here is how the woodblock medium depicts another print medium, the newspaper, in order to give comment on the latter’s place amongst the proletariat, thereby suggesting that even the poorer classes are made up of *homo informaticus*. In contrast to the textual thrust of Tang’s “Xiaoxi,” the later piece, whose original English title is “A Bit of News,” foregrounds an intimate oral exchange between two workers. Given that this print was produced in the final years of the civil war, it is likely that the “bit of news” or *xiaoxi* being transmitted regards an impending Communist victory. While neither piece exactly qualifies as the search for a voice that Tang dubs characteristic of modern woodcut art, both images nonetheless exude a strongly aural quality: the hubbub of the street, the whisper of news—one hears these scenes upon seeing them. At the same time, these images suggest a particular interest in (leftist) politics and the formation of mass consciousness. In doing so, each piece both acts as a propaganda vehicle that interpolates the viewer to share in the spread of revolutionary consciousness amongst the working class, while also reflecting on the act of propagation itself: this is how this kind of information spreads in this vector of society. While nearly all modernist art seeks “to explore and present the essential nature of its own medium,” these woodcuts raise questions beyond their own status as visual media. The self-referential gestures of these works and many others from the 1930s and ‘40s extends to acts of propagation.

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and broadcast signal in general. Here, too, woodcut art’s interest in propaganda—as well as its “aural turn”—manifests itself through a vibratory modernism, a visual idiom of signals which sought to visualize ether-spaces in unprecedented ways.

In the following I explore the formal and stylistic qualities of sound that imbue the woodcut art’s aural turn. Such an analysis reveals how the medium of woodcut remediates the ether as a medium of sound (and light372) in order to illuminate the urgent contestation of signals in the propaganda era. The formal and thematic relationship between ether, sound/noise, and propaganda ties the woodcut to the emergence of the radio as the most powerful metaphor for thinking about the casting of sound waves and broadcast communication. In line with this vibratory modernism, even the names of the early artist associations—which tended to form and dissolve quickly in the highly censored and suppressive environment of Shanghai—bear out a filiation with energy waves: “Empty Wave Painting Society” (1933); “Wild Wind Painting Association” [野风画会] (1932); “Wooden Bell Society” [木铃木刻研究会] (1932); “Rapid Torrent Woodcut Research Society” [激流木刻研究会]. I focus on the propagandistic works of several of the leaders of avant-garde woodcut art first Guangzhou/Shanghai before the outbreak of war in 1937: Luo Qingzhen [罗清桢], an influential Cantonese artist and one of Lu Xun’s favorite artists373; Huang Xinbo [黄新波], an artist at the Shanghai Meizhuan who was the co-founder of the influential Unnamed Woodcut Society [未名社] in 1933; and Zhang Hui [张慧], another Cantonese leader of the movement in the 1930s. These three artists moved in the same

372 Indeed, it is the synaesthetic quality of ether (which reduces both light and sound to waves through a medium) that augments the relationship between vision and sound worked out in 1930s woodcut art. On this relationship, see Gillian Beer, “‘Authentic Tidings of Invisible Things’: Vision and the Invisible in the Later Nineteenth Century,” in Vision in Context: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Sight, ed. by Teresa Brennan and Martin Jay (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 85-98.

373 On this point, see Tang, 168, 197.
circles and their works frequently appeared in the same journals, collections, and exhibition venues. Their modernist depictions of propaganda and mass politics clearly show the interplay between ether and broadcast signal in three interconnected ways: the foregrounding of air or ether as a medium for sound and light, the representation of sound waves as an electrified (and electrifying!) extension of the human voice, and a centralized focal point and with an attendant “array” layout that suggests a one-to-many broadcast.

Several propaganda-themed pieces by Luo Qingzhen exemplify woodcut art’s early mission to portray mass politics. In a piece titled “Labor Day” [劳动节] (1933), a supernaturally large figure is shown standing on a street corner giving an impassioned speech to a crowd of listeners (Figure 30). The image’s distinctly oral/aural subject is augmented formally by its representation of constructed urban space: the windows of the background buildings seem to echo the speaker’s slogans in their repetition. In a piece from 1936 (Figure 31), alternately titled “The Masses Rise Up” [大众起来] and the “The Voice of the Masses” [大众呼声], Luo similarly places a man in the foreground, who is joined by a crowd behind him in a roar of protest. Another representative piece (Figure 32), by Zhang Hui, titled “Propaganda Lecture” [讲演宣传] (undated, but pre-1936), shows two figures raised above a crowd of listeners waving pamphlets. All three of these images feature the urban masses, a subject matter that, as we have seen, was more or less unprecedented in Chinese art and literature prior to the 1930s.

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374 The image is in the reprint of Lu Xun’s woodcut collection, Banhua jicheng, Vol. 3, 883.
375 Ibid, Vol. 4, 1372. Lu Xun had multiple versions of this image, c.f. Vol. 5, 1717; this second version (which appears in an undated collection of Luo’s works, most likely from 1936), carries the alternate title, “The Voice of the Masses.”
and all three scenes might as well serve as illustrations for Ding Ling’s *Eventful Autumn*. But what I want to call particular attention to is the representation of the urban horizons in these images: in all three pieces, the sense of sound emitted by the human figures in the foreground is augmented by stylized and dynamic lines that fill up the background spaces above the crowd. This is particularly prominent in the two images by Luo, where the horizon is filled with diagonal lines suggesting the immense dynamism of a violent storm—though clearly this is no rainfall or abstracted cityscape. Reminiscent of the “force lines” of futurist painters such as Umberto Boccioni,\(^\text{377}\) these lines similarly evoke a feeling of dynamism, speed, and amplification, where the sound is shown extending beyond the visual frame of the print, thus suggesting the tele-casting of the masses’ collective voice.

Such horizons became endemic in the propaganda-related images from the 1930s. These rays fill the horizon make a striking appearance in China’s history of visual art, where, despite its long tradition of relief printing, the representation of such waves is unprecedented. The practice of using such dynamic lines to fill up the horizon is clearly an influence of western woodcuts, particularly the modernist style of Frans Masereel, whose visual idiom inspired Zhang Hui and Luo Qingzhen. Certainly the impulse to fill the horizon is not limited to propagandistic scenes, as evidenced by landscape studies such as Luo Qingzhen’s “Returning Herd” [放牧归来] (1935),\(^\text{378}\) and Zhang Hui’s “Glow of the Evening Sun in the Countryside” [农村夕照] (1935),\(^\text{379}\) in Figures 33 and 34, respectively. In both these two country scenes, the rays of the sun occupy

\(^{377}\) On such lines, see Henderson, “Vibratory Modernism,” 135.

\(^{378}\) See *Selected Woodcut Works of Luo Qingzhen* [罗清桢木刻作品选集] (Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1958), 14.

\(^{379}\) From the *Second Collection of Zhang Hui’s Woodcut Art* [张慧木刻画第二集] (distributed by Shanghai: Kaiming shudian; Beiping: Lijian shuju, 1935), 7.
major registers and serve as the images’ focal points. The impulse to show the rays of light cutting through air is even more prominent in Figure 35, Zhang Hui’s grander landscape, “Dusk over the Forested Hills” (山林晩照) (1935). This image in particular appears to draw from pastoral gaze of nineteenth century oil paintings in America and Europe. In all three of these works the air becomes a representational space that captures sun, a space for the artist to exhibit his craft at carving out the block in order to deftly capture the quality of light. Such lines depicting light were a conventional practice in western woodcut art and not specific to Chinese practice. But in the urban images of propagandizing these lines are repurposed to visualize the air as a critically political space of signal and noise. Such repurposing is on display in a fourth example (Figure 36), Luo Qingzhen’s “Roar” (咆哮, onomatopoeic for the sound of crashing waves) (1937), which shows a throng of urbanite protestors, and combines the woodcutter’s study in light with the subject of propaganda and mobilization. In this new representational practice, the air is not just a negative space or vacuum, but rather it is an ether-medium that carries energy in the form of light waves or sound vibration. Similar to the KMT’s imagery of radio propagation, the horizon becomes a space of ideological contestation.

Woodcut artists’ repurposing of light waves to show the ether is joined by another unprecedented experimentation with depicting sound signal, this time in the form of sound waves. Viewing Huang Xinbo’s commemorative portrait of the famous leftist composer, Nie Er (1912-1935) (Figure 37), one is struck by the variety of techniques used to ring the foregrounded figure with an aural register: the wave motifs above Nie Er’s shoulders, the sonar-

381 Selected Woodcut Works of Luo Qingzhen, 25.
like lines that bring into relief the distant bodies of soldiers and laborers, and even the scribbles-
like line in the upper left denotes the repetition of a sound wave in space. This piece is particu-
larly poignant because Huang produced it the same year that Nie Er made his biggest con-
tribution to China’s modern sonic history when he composed the score for “March of the
Volunteer Army” (by Tian Han), the future national anthem of the People’s Republic which
appeared that year in one of the earliest sound films of leftist cinema, *Young People of a Stormy
Age* [风云儿女] (dir. Xu Xingzhi, 1935).\(^{383}\) In a similar example, this time from Luo Qingzhen,
titled “Wild Singer” [狂歌者] (undated, but before 1936)\(^{384}\) (Figure 38), the viewer is again
given a strong sense of sound filling the air. In this image a muscular and tense guitarist looks
outward mid-song, while an audience of fellow-workers floats indistinctly behind him. The lines
of energy rising forth above the singer’s head parallel the lines of sound from his violent
strumming. But the composition of “Wild Singer,” where the violent sound reaches the audience
in the background, coupled together with the jaggedness of the sound lines, suggests a radical
amplification of the depicted sound instrument itself. In Figure 39, Huang Xinbo’s collage of
images, titled “Attack the Invaders!” [打击侵略者] (1935),\(^{385}\) is hung together through the noise
of explosions, violence, and nationalistic passion.

The aural quality foregrounded in many of these images (as well as many of those noted
by Tang) is not just that of sound waves filling the ether, but sound waves that are amplified—
particularly via electricity, another form of energy wave that stands alongside that of light and
sound. Yet another striking example of woodcut art’s direct representation of amplified sound

\(^{383}\) On the advent of sound films and the rise of leftist ideology around 1934 and ’35, see Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese

\(^{384}\) *Banhua jicheng*, Vol. 5, 1712.

\(^{385}\) From *Collection of Xinbo’s Woodcuts*, 11.
comes from Huang Xinbo’s “Bellow” [怒吼], published in 1934 (Figure 40). In this image an urban man is shown letting out a roar while shaking his fist at the sky. The register on the left shows a pastiche of miniature scenes of disasters besetting China: droughts, floods, and aerial bombing. A jagged line suggests the electification of the man’s roar, while the man’s looming shadow—whose source of light is the radial sun in the scene of drought—suggests the extension of the man’s sentiment. Notably, both the foreground figure and the miniatures gaze upward, calling attention to the sky as a menacing space: perhaps the man’s defiant roar will fill the ether and call the nation to action, or perhaps it can supplant the parching sun or shatter the enemy planes. At any rate, all four prints (Figures 37-40) dramatize the amplitude of a signal while also suggesting that these signals will mobilize allies and frighten foes.

The radio-like sense of amplification, as well as the centeredness of the human figure in “Bellow” also calls attention to a third characteristic of many of the propaganda woodcuts of the period: their highly centralized and arrayed composition, which, coupled with the theme of propagation and communication in many of these pieces, forms a structural analogy to a one-to-many broadcast form of dissemination. This type of focalization is exemplified in Figure 41, “News” [新闻], by Zhang Hui (1935), an image that evokes a broadcast aesthetic of another mass medium: the newspaper. In the foreground a newsboy hawks a paper whose sensationalist contents are showcased in a surrounding collage of subjects: a suicidal leap from a skyscraper, a marching infantryman, a naked woman, a prostrate body, and refugees fleeing disaster. The space above the newspaper is conspicuously filled by sun and its rays of light. These radial rays

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not only illuminate the national space-time of the newspaper itself, but also forcefully suggest the newspaper’s broadcast communication from one source to many receivers. Such centered composition is a kind of hallmark of Zhang Hui’s style, as the subsequent examples of “Street” [街头] and “The City’s Night” [都市之夜] (Figures 42 and 43) show. Composed in the same year as “News,” these images form a kind of series of collages of urban experience, and would not be out of place as illustrations of the New Perceptionist literature of Mu Shiyi or Liu Na’ou. But just as each image is refractory, showing disparate experience within the same frame, each is also tightly bound up with a central focal point, which, not coincidentally, is a source of light and energy. While “Street” and “The City’s Night” are not intended as propagandistic or reflective of propaganda, they nonetheless suggest the sensory overload as experienced by the modern urban subject, the complexity and dangers of city life; as a result, they offer an examination of the very conditions which make propaganda itself necessary, namely the cacophony of information and sensation to which propaganda offers its tonic of simplification. And in “News,” this focalization is repurposed to show the broadcast of information inherent to mass media.

These three visual elements—ether at the horizon, depictions of sound waves, and centralized composition—form a common idiom of the propaganda woodcuts from the period. And, just as ideas about propaganda as a techne of signal management largely exceed political affiliation, so too does the woodcut iconography of propaganda that appears in contemporary non-leftist publications exhibit similar characteristics as the leftist works I have surveyed here.

388 On the notion of national space-time during this period see my discussion of the China’s One Day project in Chapter One.

389 These images also further show the influence of Frans Masereel. Interestingly, Masereel’s work had earlier been used as illustrations to a Mu Shiyi story, “The Young Lady in the Dark Green Shirt” [墨绿衫的小姐], in the inaugural issue of Literary and Artistic Pictorial [文艺画报], 1934. On Masereel in China, see also Tang, 168-9.
For example, one recognizes similar elements in the KMT iconography of radio as a national and international propaganda medium (Figure 26). Or, regarding the topic of rural mobilization in the wartime hinterland, one may consider the inset image in a KMT-sponsored study on propaganda (Figure 44), *On Comprehensive Spiritual Mobilization* [论精神总动员] (1939). 390 Though its maker, the artist Sha Qingchuan [沙清泉], was left-leaning, the fact that this image appeared in a KMT publication suggests that the formal and technical properties of propaganda could transcend party lines. The image shows a farmer exhorting his fellows to increase output, for “production saves the country!” The man’s clenched fist, haloed by a jagged line of energy, forms a central point of lighting with the lamp above it, together casting rays of light out onto the upturned faces.

In closing, I want to consider one more woodcut that takes communication as its subject: Zhang Hui’s masterful piece, “Xiaoxi” (1935) (Figure 45). 391 The image is particularly notable for how it both affirms and challenges the conventions of the broadcast aesthetic endemic to woodcut propaganda art. “Xiaoxi” depicts a number of figures leisurely sitting about a bridge, with an urban landscape replete with factories, smokestacks, and a water tower stretches out in the background. One figure appears to be reading a newspaper, while two others sit, involved in a casual exchange. In contrast to how many contemporary works that suggest an amplification and amplitude of sound, in Zhang’s “Xiaoxi” the viewer’s position relative to the scene is one of distance rather than proximity, thus giving an effect of silence or finitude of signal. The four figures do not constitute a social mass, and their conversation should be inaudible from this distance (and surely Tang would not include this image as evidence of woodcut’s aural turn).

390 Gonglunshe, ed. (Yibao tushu bu: Shanghai, 1939).

The muted sensation is further enhanced by the depiction of the airspace above the city occupying fully half of the overall image, an aerial register that is filled both with diagonal and horizontal lines suggesting ominous weather, as well as with amorphous black spaces suggesting heavy industrial pollution. This juxtaposition inverts the conventional proportions of figure and ground, thus emphasizing the smallness of the human figures in contrast to the expansiveness of the sky above. In doing so, this picture exudes a distinctive feeling of the sublime. But, similar to Ding Ling’s short story, “Xiaoxi,” there is a productive gap between title and content: Where, or what, is the xiaoxi suggested by the title? What is the “point” of the image? Clearly it partially rises out of the four figures who, in their repose, exchange some bit of news. But I argue that the broadcast aesthetics that we have identified above also lead us to see a second dimension of xiaoxi in the image, namely in the peculiar atmospherics and their reflection or extension of the figures below. Neither unidirectional nor arrayed, the lines above the horizon do not show a singular broadcast or a unified source of wave. Instead, their angular incidence echoes the human figures’ multivalent postures, suggesting a multitude of waves filling the air. The fullness and dynamism of this sky-scape thus serves as a visual metaphor for the transmission of information both across the ether and amongst the group of humans. As the other woodcut images show, the techne of propaganda is the expansion, extension, or other amplification of a communication signal to broaden its social impact. But by focusing on the subject of information itself, rather than on propaganda or broadcast per se, Zhang’s “Xiaoxi” is markedly non-propagandistic. As a result, its political message is also ambiguous: What xiaoxi does the image impart to the viewer? Instead of bearing direct content, the image foregrounds

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392 On the issue of multivalence of postures as a formalization of a social network, see my analysis of Liu Xian’s Midnight illustrations in Chapter Two. Such multivalence stands in direct opposition to the figuration of the masses, which constitute an organic and univocal body. I will return to the issue of multivalence and the masses in this chapter’s conclusion.
and reflects upon the existence of information/xiaoxi itself, thus visibilizing the invisible and foregrounding the aesthetics of information that underlies propaganda-related woodcut art of the period more generally.

Conclusion: Mao as Signal

As has been well documented by various scholars within and without China, when the PRC gained full control of the mainland in 1949 and began expanding its governance, its propaganda apparatus burgeoned greatly as well: the propaganda era gained full bloom after two decades of development.393 Given the Party’s philosophy on the essential malleability of man,394 propaganda joined education and training as a pillar in the project to build socialism. The promulgation of “mass art” largely took its direction from Mao’s cultural policies in Yan’an in the early 1940s, and mass governance in general was founded upon a dialectical relationship between party and the people, where the former collected information from the latter and re-disseminated it to them via propagation: the mass line as a kind of propaganda feedback loop maintained by the Party.395

393 See, e.g., Barbara Mittler’s comprehensive account, A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of the Cultural Revolution Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012). Another useful resource is Hung, Chang-tai, Mao’s New World: Political Culture in the Early People’s Republic (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). Both Mittler and Hung argue for Cultural Revolution propaganda forms as a continuity of forms that had already developed in the Republican period such as commercial calendar posters [月份牌] of 1930s Shanghai.


395 “Take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.” Mao Zedong, “Some Questions Concerning Methods of Leadership,” in Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung, Vol. III, p. 119. Found in Stefan Landsberger’s Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), 27-8.
However, one ironic consequence of the Communist victory and the establishment of this feedback loop was the relatively rapid demise of the woodcut as a critical art form: now that the KMT was out of power, an art form that was predicated on its power of protest was no longer the “de facto” instrument that it had once been. Nonetheless, the cultural production of the 1950s and ‘60s that reflected upon the act of propaganda strongly inherited the symbols of broadcast aesthetics, signal, and noise that had emerged during the woodcut and literature of the 1930s. This is particularly evident in the propaganda produced during the early stages of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when ideological fervor reached unanticipated heights as the country paused nearly everything in order to feverishly reestablish Mao Zedong thought and perform again the ecstasy of revolution. The propaganda images of this period are rife with iconographic images of Mao, who became a stand-in for both the Party and the masses themselves.

The experiments with visualizing the ether set the tone for some of the most widespread and fundamental stylistic features of the visual idiom of propaganda during the 1950s and ‘60s. In this sense, woodcut art from the 1930s, as the “foundation of political art in China,” served as an important touchstone for the forms of the propaganda poster that flourished during the era of high socialism after 1949. To give but one example of how this ethereal quality of propaganda is echoed during the Cultural Revolution, one need only recall one of the most iconic propaganda poster images of the period, a “Long Live Mao Zedong Thought!” poster from the Kaifeng Red Guard (Figure 46). The poster promotes the so-called Little


397 On this legacy, see Kuiyi Shen’s “Publishing Posters Before the Cultural Revolution,” in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Fall 200), pp. 177-202.

398 The image is from a recent poster reproduction. For a survey of Mao imagery during the Cultural Revolution, see Mittler, A Continuous Revolution, 270-280. Mittler notes how frequently Mao appeared as a metaphorical or actual sun in not only paintings and posters, but comics as well (see 337-338). For an elaboration of how Mao was
Red Book, a collection of Mao’s quotations edited by Lin Biao. In his study of the history and form of the “quotation songs” [语录歌] that gave the Little Red Book a sonic presence, Andrew Jones highlights the propagandistic rhetoric placing the Little Red Book in an ether-space. In September of 1966 at the climax of the Red Guard Movement, the Renmin Ribao stated “We believe that with the hard work of musical workers, the sound of songs of Chairman Mao’s quotations will resonate across the entire country. This will make the thought of Chairman Mao penetrate ever deeper into people’s hearts, so as to forever radiate its brilliance” (45). Of this telling quote and “its emphasis on the ability of these songs to record, broadcast, and enable Mao Zedong thought to saturate social, somatic, and psychological space,” Jones writes, “reads almost uncannily like an account of the ethereal yet ubiquitous powers of mass media itself” (ibid). In the image in question, Mao Zedong appears as a kind of sunburst whose rays illuminate and mobilize the masses. The ripple effect signified by the stylized broadcast aesthetic suggests that through the Little Red Book (on conspicuous display in the workers’ hands), Mao Zedong “speaks” directly to every individual in the mass: the book of quotations is a kind of radio receiver that can pick up the signal of Mao’s spirit. This poster thus represents a late moment in the longer tradition of the vibratory modernism of the ethereal history of propaganda that I have shown above. But the resplendent image is an unmistaken echo of the propaganda woodcuts of the previous generation, and it even echoes the image of the KMT radio station, AOGX, and its broadcast reach across China. Like the KMT’s image, the Cultural Revolution-era poster shows


400 Andrew F. Jones, “Quotation Songs: Portable media and the Maoist pop song,” in ibid, 43-60. Subsequent quotations cited in-text.
an unimpeded signal, signifying a general confidence in the reach and scope of propaganda. Whereas in the 1930s, however, propaganda was marked with an anxiety about noise, counter-propaganda, and signal impedance, by the 1960s the propaganda era had fully blossomed
Figure 25: Cover image of the *Broadcast Weekly* (1934)
Figure 26: *Broadcast Weekly’s* image of radio’s reach, 1934.

Figure 27: Hu Yichuan, “To the Front” (1932)
Figure 28: “Xiaoxi” [消息] (1935), by Tang Yingwei
Figure 29: “A Bit of News” [消息] (1948), by Ge Yuan
Figure 30: “Labor Day,” by Luo Qingzhen (1933)
Figure 31: “The Masses Rise Up” [大众起来], Luo Qingzhen (1936)
Figure 32: “Propaganda Lecture” [讲演宣传] (undated), by Zhang Hui
Figure 33: “Returning Herd,” by Luo Qingzhen (1935)

Figure 34: Zhang Hui, “Glow of the Setting Sun in the Countryside” (1935)
Figure 35: “Dusk over the Forested Hills,” by Zhang Hui (1935)
Figure 36: Luo Qingzhen, “Crashing Waves” (1937)
Figure 37: Huang Xinbo, Portrait of Nie Er (1935)

Figure 38: Luo Qingzhen, “Wild Singer” (undated)
Figure 39: Huang Xinbo, “Attack the Invaders!” (1935)
Figure 40: Xinbo, “Angry Roar” (1935)
Figure 41: Zhang Hui, “News” (1935)
Figure 42: Zhang Hui, “Street” (1935)

Figure 43: Zhang Hui, “The City’s Night” (1935)
Figure 44: Sha Qingquan, inset to *On Comprehensive Spiritual Mobilization* (1939)
Figure 45: Zhang Hui, “Xiaoxi” (1935)
Figure 46: “Long Live Mao Zedong Thought” propaganda poster image (1967)
Chapter Four:
Narrating Networks: On Literary Craft and the Social Life of Information in the Work of Shen Congwen, 1932-1945
Communication as a person-to-person activity became thinkable only in the shadow of mediated communication. Mass communication came first.  

*John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air* (1999)*401

The concept of information applies not to the individual messages (as the concept of meaning would), but rather to the situation as a whole.  

*Warren Weaver (1949)*402

In 1935, the prolific regionalist and avant-garde author, Shen Congwen (1902-1988), published a short story about the telephone.403 Titled “Unemployed” [失业] (I provide a translation in the Dissertation Appendix), the piece has been curiously overlooked in scholarship on Shen Congwen.404 The story deserves attention not only on account of its status as the first piece in Chinese literature to so prominently feature the telephone network as a narrative device, but also because it captures Shen’s longstanding interest in the role of information exchange in social relations. “Unemployed” portrays a youth named Daren who has taken up a post as a telephone interchange operator at the recently-completed local office of the growing long-distance telephone network. An inexperienced and somewhat naïve high-school graduate, Daren is a quintessentially May Fourth idealist, and he dreams of becoming a writer to reform society

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404 Perhaps this is due to the story’s provenance: when it was later republished, Shen playfully appended an endnote disavowing his authorship of the story, explaining that he had merely “revised” the work of a “friend [he] didn’t know personally,” and that Shen “didn’t dare take undue credit” [coln美] (318). Regardless of what prompted Shen to write the story, he is without doubt the story’s author, which explains its inclusion in his collected works. I have also consulted with a specialist of Shen Congwen, Wu Shiyong [吴世勇], who has no doubt that Shen authored the piece (personal correspondence, Dec. 13, 2014).
through modern literature. To this end, his current employment seemingly offers Daren an incomparable opportunity, for, “When you think about it, what person has more experience than the long-distance telephone operator with his ears? This is a comprehensive exchange station for the corrupt souls of the region. What vulgar language would fool the operator? What novel and strange affairs does he not know?” (313). Instead of launching his career, however, Daren’s post increasingly bewilders and disillusiones him when the telephone network exposes to him a complex and deep-seated web of corruption between local social elite and the regional military. Privy to this network of profiteering and mutual back scratching, Daren comes to feel increasingly paralyzed, inadequate to the task of reforming China. Daren’s position within the telephone network as both an insider and outsider is mirrored by his position in the village, where he is effectively a witness to corruption and abuse, but not in a position to do anything about it. Unable to cope with this daily barrage of corruption and his role as its passive enabler, Daren decides to pursue a different career, only to rejoin the ranks of the unemployed.

Beyond its use of the telephone as a narrative device to investigate the subject of local corruption, the narrative of “Unemployed” also engages with a critical formal problem that Shen Congwen was himself grappling with during the period. Besides the infrastructural and social networks, the story examines a third, interrelated network: the network of writing. Daren diligently keeps notes on the fragments of conversation that he overhears throughout the day. Though these voices provide access to insider knowledge, they also impart in him a profound feeling of confusion, as is reflected in the scattered nature of his diary, a record that the narrative describes as being “filled with fragments of confused language”: “After writing a bit, he’d read it over himself and get really angry, abandoning the unfinished writing, and smoothly flipping back to and reading over previous days’ entries” (311). Like the
telephone network itself, this diary lacks depth or linear development, instead providing a kind of stream-of-consciousness record of Daren’s associations and the litany of commands and curses that a telephone operator regularly hears. Thus in Daren’s hands the ideal material for a would-be author becomes tangled into an incoherent and recriminating fulmination as he struggles with the question of how to represent a network of social corruption: Where does one begin the story? Or end it? His self-conscious inability to get to the bottom of things or think about causality stands in contrast to the abusive soldiers and their frequent extortion of locals with the excuse of “getting to the bottom of things.” Simply put, Daren is unable to make a narrative map of the labyrinth of voices in which he finds himself.

The story’s narrator and Daren echo each other in emphasizing the importance of voice and experience to literary writing. Given the dialogical and oral style of his longer, better-known pieces such as Border Town [邊城] (1934) and Random Sketches on a Trip to Hunan [湘行散记] (1936), it is no stretch to attribute this view to Shen Congwen himself. In turn, Shen’s literary style resonates with what the literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, by a coincidence of history was contemporaneously developing as “heteroglossia” in his work, Discourse in the Novel (1934). Under this rubric, Bakhtin sought to give proper place to the “multiplicity of social voices and the wide variety of their links and interrelationships” (263) that constitute the prose narrative as different voice components (the narrator, the characters, etc.), in order to give a novel internal tension. Moreover, the political implications of a heteroglossic style also complement the regionalist position of Shen Congwen’s literature, as Bakhtin emphasizes how heteroglossia “gives expression to forces working [against] concrete verbal and ideological unification and

centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (271).

But the observation that Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia obtains in the style and politics of Shen’s work is a relatively basic one. What calls for further investigation is not so much the language of the particular utterances in Shen’s work (interesting as they may be406), but rather the specific form that such heteroglossia takes in Shen’s literature during the 1930s and ‘40s: In what manner does Shen weave together the “thousands of living dialogic threads” in order to produce a heteroglossic effect (276-7)? And how do the variety of voices in his works allow Shen to evoke a social vision that sees society as a networked aggregate of individuals, dynamically connected through communication? While the protagonist of “Unemployed” ultimately abandons the network of telephony, thus leaving his career as a writer in doubt, by the mid-1930s Shen Congwen himself was only just getting started with networks. Below, I show how networks reappear in different aspects of Shen’s work between 1930 and 1945, including in his distinctive brand of literary formalism, the materiality of his writing, and, most urgently, in the sociopolitics and media critique that underlie his literary production during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

The cultural and political backdrop to this period was, as I described in the previous chapter, largely defined by the emergence of a new era of propaganda, counter-propaganda, and broadcast aesthetics. While Shen had sympathy for Leftism at the outset, unlike his close friend, Ding Ling, he shied away from Party politics and the activities of the League of Leftwing

406 On Shen’s usage of dialect, see Kinkley, The Odyssey of Shen Congwen (Stanford: SUP, 1987). Kinkley notes that by the 1930s, perhaps because he was writing with a national audience in mind, Shen had largely shifted away from emphasizing dialect in his work. Certainly his mature 1930s works have their share of dialect words: Shen even wrote a short vocabulary list that was to accompany his masterwork, Long River—but the list is not necessary, as one can quite easily guess the words’ meaning by way of their context.
Writers, and became even more reticent after several of his friends in the CCP were executed in the KMT purge of 1927. In exploring Shen’s work on his home region of western Hunan [湘西] and his seminal contribution to the genre of modern “native soil” literature, critics have tended to place Shen outside this political milieu, or to interpret his works as only obliquely engaging with the questions that raged within the contemporary literary institute. While Shen’s work spans across many genres, styles, and themes and thus defies easy categorization, a story such as “Unemployed” reveals important questions that Shen was raising about information, mediation, and literary practice during the period: What was the relationship between information and social relations, or social reform? And, besides expediting and amplifying the dissemination of information, how did different textual media, including the telephone, the report, and the newspaper also create new opportunities for manipulating information? What was the actual social dispensation of such media? In addition to exploring such questions, Shen also sought to develop a corresponding literary form that could accommodate the complexity of representing social networks of information exchange in a way that his character, Daren, found inaccessible.

The present chapter constructs a new genealogy of Shen Congwen’s oeuvre by taking up the network form as a lens for exploring what I call the “social life of information” in Shen’s literature and criticism between 1930 and the mid-1940s, when his literary career tapered off. By the “social life of information” I mean Shen’s interest in how information moves through society by way of different media, including conversation, and how such networked passages

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407 This is particularly the case with C.T. Hsia’s treatment in his seminal A History of Modern Chinese Fiction (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 189-211.

408 C.f. Kinkley’s somewhat comprehensive attempt to place Shen within Republican China’s tradition of literary modernism: “Shen Congwen among the Modernists,” in Monumenta Serica, vol. 56 (2006), 311-341. In his typology of modernisms (including the best known, such as Western- and Japanese modernism and Shanghai modernism), Kinkley draws up a new category for Shen: “academic modernism,” i.e. the modernist writers who at least partially were supported by educational institutions and pursued modernist subjects and technique in ways different from their Shanghai counterparts (see particularly 327-9).
affect both the information itself as well as the social relations that enable it. Shen’s interest in
the social dispensation of information and the sociopolitics of communication culminated in his
last novel-length literary project, *Long River* [长河] (1945). The first and only sustained work
in modern Chinese literature written in explicit opposition against the propaganda era, *Long
River* focuses on local communications networks and their role in diffusing information amongst
the countryside of western Hunan. In doing so, the novel presents the reader with a unique view
both of the social life of information, as well as the informatic life of society.

It is the particularly social quality of information in works such as “Unemployed” and
*Long River* that results in Shen’s unique contribution to the development of the aesthetics of
information in modern Chinese writing. While, as I showed in Chapter Two in my discussion of
Mao Dun, in modern Chinese writing *xiaoxi* [消息] often denotes an abstraction of knowledge
that closely approximates the contemporary meaning of “information” in English, in *Long River*,
where the word appears as a kind of master term, *xiaoxi* is almost exclusively an oral exchange
of information, gossip, or news. Such person-to-person oral exchange highlights *xiaoxi*’s
function as a token of social exchange, while also effectively deemphasizing the actual content
of any particular exchange. In his consideration of the social dimension of meaning-making in
language, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski might as well have been glossing Shen’s
version of *xiaoxi* when he coined the term “phatic communion,” the gossip and everyday

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409 For an alternative definition and deployment of “social life of information,” see John Seely Brown and Paul
Duguid’s contemporary business study, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School,
2002).

410 I thank Prof. Wu Xiaodong at Beijing University for originally calling my attention to this work’s extensive
exploration of communication, as well as for sharing his seminal essay on the subject. I discuss the work further
below.

411 Here I am paraphrasing the formulation of Richard Menke, who notes in his study of the telegraph’s impact on
literature in Victorian-era Britain that “an informatic history of literature also offers a literary history of
exchanges (‘How are you?’) whose function is first and foremost to tie social actors together.\textsuperscript{412} Xiaoxi thus calls attention to the channels of communication; taken in a composite way in a novel such as \textit{Long River}, over time and space, the collective \textit{xiaoxi} adds up to a complex image of a social network. Through this network of voices and \textit{xiaoxi} exchange, Shen sought to intervene into the entire propaganda apparatus, particularly its idealized conception of propaganda’s impact on social change. Put differently, the network for Shen offered an alternative vision of social communication that could expose both the limitations of mass media on the production of mass politics, and give lie to the fantastic nature of “hypodermic needle” models of mass social communication.\textsuperscript{413}

Before turning to \textit{Long River} and its exploration of social networks, I first give crucial context by exploring the issues of information and network as they earlier appear in Shen’s literature and criticism leading up to \textit{Long River}. This includes Shen’s own forays into propaganda literature during the early 1930s, when he produced avant-garde pieces that are strikingly reminiscent of the contemporary portrayals of propaganda in Ding Ling’s literature and in woodcut art discussed in my previous chapter. While such experimentation was to prove short-lived (and markedly pessimistic), I argue that it signals the beginning of Shen’s budding interest in information/network as a critical lever for reassessing the legacy of the May Fourth and its ideals about modernizing society through modern literature. Observing the increasingly dominant place of propaganda in cultural production in the 1930s, Shen consequently developed

\textsuperscript{412} If one brackets the primitivist elements of classical anthropology pervading Malinowski’s essay, what remains is an articulation of the dialogistic dimension of a living language that is strikingly similar to Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia. See the former’s essay, “The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages,” supplement to I. A. Richards and Charles Kay Ogden’s \textit{The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism} (London: Kegan Paul; New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1923), 296-336.

\textsuperscript{413} On the origins of this latter formulation, see the diachronic study of mass media’s impact on public opinion in Ohio during the 1940 presidential election: Lazarsfeld et al, \textit{The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).
an oppositional aesthetics around the idea of “technique,” an approach to literary production that emphasizes arrangement and placement as a kind of craft. It is this formalist aesthetics, particularly its emphasis on the arrangement of plotting, that comes to inspire the subject and media critique of Long River. Indeed, one major current of my reading of Shen Congwen is how the structural coupling that emerges in his work between his aesthetics of “technique” and his social vision: both ultimately evince a kind of networked gathering-together or assemblage.

In the chapter’s conclusion, I briefly show how this coupling between the formal and social aspects of the network in Long River and his other works reappears in Shen’s post-1949 career. Though he found himself unable to write literature again in the new era, Shen subtly turned his energy toward the realm of China’s history of material culture. I argue that in doing so, he sublimated his interest in the handicraft of literature while also carving out an alternative space of creativity that was set apart from the logic of propaganda and ideological reformation characteristic of cultural production in the early PRC.

**The Craft of Writing: Small Narratives in a Grand Age**

The late 1920s were a time of transition for Shen Congwen: he was gaining prominence as a writer and editor, in 1929 he relocated to Shanghai from Beijing, where he cofounded with Ding Ling a new journal, Red and Black [红黑]. At the same time, Shen also began experimenting with what would eventually be termed as “new literature,” leftist-themed short stories exploring the subjectivity of the masses. While critics have overlooked these pieces in Shen’s oeuvre (perhaps because these works exceed the conventional understanding of Shen as a regionalist author or staunch liberal), these stories are worth examining because they suggest Shen’s attunement to the developing relationship between mass media, information, and leftist art that I
discuss in the previous chapter. More importantly, by exploring important urban themes of the
day such as factory labor and mass organization, these pieces participate in the contemporary
wave of explorations into the processes of social change and revolution building. They thus
signal willingness to experiment with adapting his literary orientation to advance the significant
“grand narrative” of leftism.414

One such story, “A Trifling Incident in a Big City” [大城中的小事情] (1929),415 features
naturalistic depictions of laborers at a small steel mill along the Yangzi River. The story
describes how a rumor arises amongst the laborers about the Communist Party organizing a local
revolution. The mill’s boss, whose means are not significantly elevated above that those of his
workers, becomes increasingly suspicious of the laborers thanks in part to his daily reading of
sensationalist newspaper reports. When the city’s workers do unionize, however, the boss co-
opts a seat on the labor representative committee, from where he is able to comfortably maintain
the status quo by misrepresenting his workers’ interests, a fact of which the workers themselves
remain ignorant. The story places emphasis on this latter point, showing that truly actionable
revolutionary information either fails to reach the workers, or is misinterpreted by them entirely.
Notably, the story features propaganda in the form of airdropped leaflets and newspaper
headlines—which produce a curious spectacle but little else. Thus the story’s pessimistic
ending: despite his laborers’ penchant for modish revolutionary terms such as “down with … !” [414 See Lyotard’s much-debated articulation of the “grand narrative” in his The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). My
analysis of Shen Congwen’s eclecticism and adoption of a “small narrative” form has parallels with Lyotard’s
notion of “small narrative,” but it is not my intention that we read any sort of postmodern element into Shen’s work.
415 SCQJ 5: 425-30. The story originally appeared in the journal that Shen Congwen cofounded with Ding Ling,
Red and Black [红黑], no. 8.
Another, similar contribution to the “new literature” is Shen’s “After the War Reached a Certain City” ([战争到某市以后]) (1932).\footnote{This story has been ignored in subsequent criticism. It originally appeared in the short-lived *Small Sounds Monthly* [微音月刊], Vol. 2, no. 7-8, 171-183.} Shen wrote the piece during a period of social and cultural uproar over the KMT’s tepid response to the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in January of 1932. Set in an unnamed city upstream from Shanghai along the middle Yangzi River, the story describes the social turbulence produced in the wake of news of Japanese incursions into China, in particular focusing on information’s dissemination across urban space and its manipulation by authorities. Both in its seething rhetoric, as well as in its construction of the masses as a literary subject, “After the War” reads as if it were written by the author of *Eventful Autumn*. The narrative opens with a sort of information-scape that emphasizes sound and broadcast communication to evoke the tense atmosphere of the local city:

> Just as thunder shakes the human body, war shakes the human soul . . . In XX City, electric news dispatches [电讯] of the sounds of steel and flight, the sounds of cries and massacre, the scenes of utter destruction by fire, were [all] put into a type of unregulated, unrhymed, unordered account, then printed into innumerable special editions, whereby they were disseminated at various points along the city streets; the people at XX’s main street all gathered along the street corners, all harboring feelings of anxiety mixed with a little feeling of unexpected luck, hoping for some bit of unexpected news [小息]. (476)

Devoid of the character development for which Shen was well known, the first half of the story continues in a panoramic vein, exploring the public discourse through the lens of news stories’ transformations as they travel across the city’s public spaces. Crucially—and here once again the narrative echoes Ding Ling—the information garnered from domestic and foreign newspapers takes on a social life, as “these good city folk [市民], walking off in different
directions, gathered together with strangers and acquaintances in threes and fives, and, with a sense of extreme interest, with one another talk everything over [互相讨论到一切]” (477).

Narrative description is punctuated with anonymous pronouncements and utterances—the murmurs of public sentiment. As information spreads outward from the main street, public discontent with the government grows, causing people to take to the streets. Crowds form, and several speakers step forward to agitate. The narrative rhetorically marks the transition from a (news) public into a mass of people by shifting from the word “urbanites” [市民] to “masses” [大众] to describe the groups (479; 482). Indignant over the KMT’s paralysis, the masses self-organize to call a general strike, as well as collect relief resources and send them off to the front.

Initially, the political threat posed to the local government by the masses is met with force as police officers violently disperse the crowds and haul off several of the speech-giving instigators. The bold, even melodramatic, contrast drawn between the masses and the authorities reflects literary conventions of socialist realism: on one side stands the local government, joined by those elites whose fate is most closely tied to that of the state such as the local merchants and bankers. On the other side mill the urbanites, united through the shared experience of oppression (479). It seems the story’s conclusion is steered toward either the inevitable victory of the masses, or their moral affirmation through some form of tragic martyrdom. But whereas Ding’s madding crowds erupt into pure revolutionary force, Shen’s crowds are susceptible to mollification and manipulation: after the authorities release all but one of the “instigators” of the unrest, the people lift the strike: “Only a river with water can flow, only a mind with understanding [智慧] can think deeply [思索]; the people of XX city were so frighteningly sincere that they were beguiled and fooled, and ended up resuming work. Thus the disturbance [literally, ‘wind-wave,’ 风波] passed” (481). In order to further advance its pessimistic comment
on the masses’ political will and their limited capacity to “think deeply,” the narrative goes on to spell out in detail the ways in which the government manages information:

A few days following [the disturbance], in the special edition of XX’s newspapers, the official information [xiaoxi] about victories in battles outpaced the information [xiaoxi] obtainable from other sources; at the same time, more information [xiaoxi] appeared regarding some city’s volunteer army setting off, or the central government’s transfer of forces to the front. Every day were published various kinds of news (xiaoxi) that appeared to be produced specially on behalf of the people of XX, shamelessly exaggerating their significance, deceiving the city populace and easing their cold enmity toward the authorities. (479-80)

Thus alongside the cycle of popular disruption and direct state suppression, the government uses information as a means of keeping the citizens docile, uncomprehending, and “asleep” (482), even while the national government prepares for a civil war that will place XX City along the front line.

The narrative here elliptically pivots to the second half of the story, which focuses on a particularly disturbing episode of information management. While his car is stuck in traffic along the main street, XX’s mayor is set upon by an assassin. The mayor’s bodyguards open fire and immediately kill the attacker. The government puts the city under martial law, causing rumors about the mayor’s death to circulate. Meanwhile, the police’s secret investigation internally reveals that the assassin was nothing more than a local medicine shop owner patriotically seeking to petition the mayor to issue a circular telegram aimed at encouraging the central government to mobilize its armed forces and save the nation. Publicly, however, the government insists that the shop owner had a weapon, and the mayor’s lackeys duly produce a gun that accords with his description. This affirmative “evidence” is then passed to the press, making the government’s version of the event uncontestable. As the narrative’s conclusion describes the newspaper headlines and their effect on the readership:

“A plot! An obvious assassination attempt! If the guards aboard the mayor’s car hadn’t acted first to bravely kill the bandit, then XX city would have been thrown
into unimaginable chaos!” That very night, the city’s people silently read such news reports in the papers. After three or four days, papers in Tianjin and Shanghai carried similar reports, this time also publishing photographs of the assassin’s dead body and his weapon; when they read such news, far off friends of XX’s mayor invariably shed sweat. But did the people of XX city bear any suspicion toward the truth of the situation? They did not. (485)

Thus, similar to “A Trifling Incident in a Big City,” “After the War” also ends pessimistically.

Whereas propaganda in Ding’s narrative is central to the self-realization of the masses, in Shen’s version, propaganda is a tool of social manipulation cynically employed by those in power. (Though in this case both authors would agree that, whether for good or bad, propaganda and mass media have a powerful social dispensation.)

Shen’s literary experimentations in exploring the masses were short-lived, as “After the War” counts as his final piece of leftist “new” literature, and the story’s negative conclusion dramatizes Shen’s contemporary split with Ding Ling as the latter took a leading role in the leftist literary institution’s propaganda boom.417 The pessimism on display in these stories show that Shen chafed against the (perhaps inevitable) shift from May Fourth literature of social reform into a more propaganda-driven and politicized form of literary production. The period of the early 1930s was in fact a period of personal crisis for Shen as Ding Ling was captured and put under house arrest by KMT operatives in 1933.418 Shortly afterward, in 1934, Shen’s first trip home in well over a decade left him with unsettling impressions of conditions in the countryside, as well as a new cynicism over New Culture’s ability to change China in a meaningful way. It might then be expected that between 1934 and 1935 Shen’s work would

417 For a full account of Shen’s fraught relationship with Ding Ling during Ding’s embracement of the CCP, and her consequent capture by the KMT in 1933, see Jeffrey C. Kinkley’s exhaustive intellectual biography of Shen, The Odyssey of Shen Congwen, 76, 202-207 (as well as Kinkley’s extensive endnotes where Kinkley speculates on the reason for the falling out between the two friends).

418 See Kinkley, ibid. On the international propaganda campaign orchestrated by Agnes Smedley to save Ding Ling, see Richard Jean So, “Coolie Democracy: U.S.-China Political and Literary Exchange, 1925-1955” (PhD dissertation thesis, Columbia University, 2010), Ch. 1. Shen also wrote several texts in his effort to “save” Ding Ling (or preserve her memory).
espouse skepticism over grand narratives either of a socialist stripe or in a more general May Fourth vein.\textsuperscript{419} Notably, during this period he also produced some of the melancholic—but explicitly apolitical—works such as \textit{Border Town} that would bring him fame as a regionalist author.

What is important to note about Shen’s engagement with the May Fourth legacy is how frequently he used the lens of media, particularly the newspaper, to depict the relationship between New Culture and a modernizing China. Indeed, “After the War” signals Shen’s developing interest in the issue of information and the penetration of mass media into society. But despite its leeriness over mass media’s role in manipulating mass opinion and maintaining false consciousness, “After the War” should not be taken as evidence that Shen was categorically “against” the newspaper or mass media. Since his career in the army, Shen had himself worked various positions in newspaper production, from printing to editing, and he recognized the close relationship between the newspaper and the literary supplement in the growth of May Fourth culture.\textsuperscript{420} And throughout the 1930s, despite (or because of) the perceived encroachment of state manipulation, propaganda, and crass commercialism into newspaper publishing, he maintained an idealism about the newspaper’s social function, believing it had the duty of inspiring its readers to “love themselves, love those beside them, love justice, love truth, love

\textsuperscript{419} Besides the example of “Unemployed,” another fascinating story is “Knowledge” [知识], published in \textit{Mercury} in 1934, in which a foreign-educated youth’s trip to his home region results in him disavowing modern knowledge in favor of the locals’ Buddhist insight that all is pain and suffering. Both in its repetition of Buddhist wisdom and representation of enlightenment, as well as in its plot of a May Fourth youth’s return to the countryside, “Knowledge” strongly resembles Lu Xun’s masterful story “Prayers for a New Year’s Blessing.” Lydia Liu has pointed out the latter’s Buddhist overtones in her article, “Life as Form: How Biomimesis Encountered Buddhism in Lu Xun,” in \textit{Journal of Asian Studies} Vol. 68, No. 1 (2009), 21-54.

\textsuperscript{420} On the relationship between the newspaper and the literary supplement, see Shen’s wartime exhortation for newspapers to foster more May Fourth-style social debate and literary production in “Transform the Way it’s Done” [ 变变作风], originally published in the \textit{Dagongbao} literary supplement, \textit{Art} [大公报－文艺], no. 1051, March 15\textsuperscript{th}, 1941; republished in \textit{SCQJ} 14: 158-61. Also, see Shen’s postwar article on newspaper publishing in Kunming, “How to Manage a Good Newspaper” [怎样办一份好报纸], \textit{SCQJ} 14: 239-44. The original appeared in \textit{Shanghai Culture} [上海文化], no. 8 (September, 1946).
enterprise, love society, love the nation.”⁴²¹ All the same, Shen argued that newspapers should not blindly dictate to the public, but should instead work to connect the public to itself, advocating that the newspaper should be “published on our behalf, and to speak for us [替我们说话的].”⁴²² The gap between the public/masses and what appears in the newspapers, then, was to Shen a central problem, and, as we shall see below, in his later literature he continued to consider the role of the newspaper in Chinese society. Whereas in “After the War” Shen centered on the production of information and the veracity of newspapers’ representations of events, in subsequent works he would shift his focus to the consumption of information, readers’ identification with it, and its circulation and dissemination within broader society.

This shift is clear in Shen’s story of his own decision to become an author, which famously relates his budding awareness of New Culture and modernity to his exposure to the newspaper, the Shenbao. The passage appears in his experimental autobiography, titled simply Congwen’s Autobiography (published 1934), which he wrote in 1932 at the wizened age of 30.⁴²³ Composed of eighteen chapters largely centering on his youth in Western Hunan, the short book reflects many of the regionalist themes that Shen was concurrently developing in his fiction. While scholars have used this text to draw connections between Shen’s life and his fiction, the “primal scene” describing Shen’s first exposure to modern knowledge deserves further attention in light of Shen’s broader interest in the social life of information. In Chapter Eleven, “The

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⁴²¹ Shen Congwen, “A newspaper reader’s hope towards the newspaper” [一个读者对报纸的希望], SCQJ 14: 91-2. This short zawen originally appeared in the July 7th, 1935 issue of the Shibao. Shen ostensibly wrote this piece after seeing an article in a Shanghai newspaper containing statistics on Chinese newspaper circulation and sales.

⁴²² Ibid, 91.

⁴²³ In a 1980 postscript, Shen notes how he wrote the book in merely three weeks while working as a teacher in Qingdao. SCQJ 16: 366-8. Here, I rely on the original 1934 edition, which in places differs from later editions. See Congwen zizhuan [从文自传] (Shanghai: Diyiban chubanshe, 1934). Subsequent page numbers are given parenthetically in text.

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Secretary Named Mr. Wen,” during the late 1910s Shen is stationed in the Hunanese city of Huaihua, where he is engaged as a secretary copying papers and keeping accounts. His daily routine changes one day with the arrival of another clerical worker, surnamed Wen, who, in contrast to the rough-hewn manners and salty talk of the other secretaries, exudes an air of quiet propriety. In the course of his interactions with Shen, Secretary Wen cannot help but interject in Shen’s habitual usage of the swaggering term, laozi 老子, to refer to himself. “Don’t trifle with such talk. You’re bright, you should study good things instead. There are many good works in the world worth studying!” (94). Shen is intrigued, and the two become fast friends, particularly drawn to the exoticism of each other’s background knowledge: Shen teaches Wen about the howl of a wolf and the roar of a tiger, how to differentiate between the tracks of wild boars and mountain goats, and the heft of disembodied human heads. From Wen, Shen learns the sights and sounds of modern technology, particularly the wonders of modern communication: the sounds of train whistles and steamships horns, the appearance of hydrogen balloons, the types of electric bulbs and telephones. Ultimately, Secretary Wen convinces Shen to jointly subscribe to the Shanghai-published newspaper, the Shenbao. Shen pools his meager funds with Secretary Wen and another officemate to afford a subscription. “After mailing the subscription off to Shanghai, without having yet received a single paper, I [felt] as if I had already been reading it, and I believed what it said, and that the newspaper was an outstanding thing. And indeed I came to learn quite a few things from the paper. In total, our subscription lasted two months; from the paper I learned to recognize quite a few [new] words” (97). Thus is Shen drawn into the discourse of New Culture by the paper. The autobiography’s reader would have had no trouble inferring the outcome: Shen’s fate was to use take up and employ these new words as a modern author.
An autobiography is a mode of narrative that is as factually reliable—or unreliable—as any other, so we should be careful not to take Shen at his word. What I wish to point out about this narrative is how it places the character Shen’s interest in the *Shenbao* as a belated discovery, one that follows an earlier seminal discovery of a different kind of modern text: the *Ciyuan* [lit. ‘origin/source of words,’ 辞源], the modern Chinese encyclopedia. The course of his edifying exchanges [交换] with Wen takes on a new dimension when one day Wen produces from his luggage two books. Shen carefully narrates the unfolding scene:

When I saw that he had two such thick tomes, which despite their minute text were extremely sturdy, I was actually startled. Seeing me so stunned, he said: “Young master, these are a treasure, everything in the world [天下] is contained therein: any knowledge which you might want to know all written out clearly and in order, so that you will understand thoroughly!”

Such words made me even more reverential. Stroking the books with my hand, I only then spotted the two golden characters imprinted on the books’ spines:

“*Ciyuan*, ciyuan,” I murmured.

“It truly is the ‘source of words.’ Go ahead and ask me anything, no matter how odd, and I’ll immediately find it for you.”

While thinking on it, my gaze happened across the relief carving in front of the play hall depicting Zhuge Liang’s “Three Frustrations of Zhou Yu,” and immediately said: “How about Mr. Zhuge Liang?” He immediately lowered his head, flipped to the front of the book, then again to the back, and after a moment he located the entry. A moment later, he again looked up something else and located it. I was elated. (95-6)

To a young Shen, the *Ciyuan* really does seem to have everything—even the first person personal pronoun that he is in the habit of using. Upon looking up the entry for *laozi*, Shen discovered that it refers to a historical personage, Lao Zi, the putative author of the *Daodejing*. Humbled by this discovery, Shen becomes more receptive to the authority of textual knowledge.

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424 Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan bianshenbu, 1915.

425 Referring to the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* chapters 51, 55, and 56, where Zhuge Liang outmatches the Wu general, Zhou Yu.
As the historian Meng Yue has detailed, the *Ciyuan* was a translingual monument that, when it was published in 1915, was meant to bridge the gap between new knowledge and the wealth of knowledge in traditional Chinese sources.\(^{426}\) And indeed to Shen the *Ciyuan* represents a wealth of both new knowledge and old. But its pleasures are also material: with its handsome gilding and palpable solidity, the *Ciyuan* (*Figure 47*) becomes an object of desire, to be absorbed as greedily as he earlier took in the sounds and sights of the telephone and railway as narrated to him by Wen. To Shen, this text does indeed seem to “contain everything.” Wen makes Shen wash his hands every time before touching the books; and Shen dreams of the tomes when he can’t borrow them. The narrative conspicuously repeats the verb *fan* [翻], ‘to flip through,’ thus highlighting the book’s materiality and its nonlinear nature whereby the reader meanders from one entry to another.\(^{427}\) In turn, the material solidity and self-sufficiency of the two *Ciyuan* volumes stand in contrast to the newspaper, *Shenbao*, which arrives from afar first in Shen’s own imagination, and only afterward as a real object, from whose surface [上面] Shen further expands his modern vocabulary.

\(^{426}\) See Meng’s *Shanghai and the Edges of Empires* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 52-54. Meng emphasizes that Lu Erkui and the other compilers meant for the *Ciyuan* to bridge a gap between Chinese terms for modern knowledge, and the neologisms or “loanwords” that were flooding in from Meiji Japan (52).

\(^{427}\) This verb is again conspicuously present in the autobiography’s later chapter, “A Place for Studying History” [*学会历史的地方*] (149-150), where, stationed in Hunan and working again as a secretary for a commanding officer, Shen has the opportunity to explore a trove of ancient cultural artifacts that are stored in the building where he works: a hundred scroll paintings dating as early as the Song, multiple bronzes and porcelains, more than ten boxes of old books, and a set of the anthology, *Siku congkan* [*四库丛刊*]. “When I didn’t know what era the author of one of the books came from, I would flip through [翻] the *Siku*’s [提要]” (150). Shen concludes: “From this [experience], through a slice of color, a certain line, a piece of greenened bronze or a pile [堆] of clay, and a set of characters [一组文字], I gained an elementary and general recognition of the various arts produced in this nation’s long, long history” (150). The quantifier words that Shen uses (片, 把, 块, 堆, and 组) help to highlight the materiality of the art media. This materiality would later permeate his conception of art—including literature, whose essential medium is language. C.f. his statement on art in a 1941 lecture in Kunming: “In even a very small work, if the author pours all of his highest ideals, his richest sentiments, arranges everything in the proper manner, then a single rock, a single thread, a dab of plain ink, a few splinters of bamboo assembled together, can all be overflowing with vitality.” See *SCQJ* 16: 504.
This extended episode from the autobiography thus stages a quintessential New Culture event,\footnote{Which of course has pre-Republican roots: the Shenbao having been published since 1872, and the Ciyuan being a project conceived and initiated in 1908. The episode with Mr. Wen paves the way for the final chapter, titled “A Turning Point” [一个转机] (156-163), which details how, while working alongside a progressive printer, Shen was exposed to May Fourth publications like The Renaissance [新潮] and Reconstruction [改造]. This experience ultimately inspired Shen to leave Hunan and head to Beijing to study in 1922.} in which modern enlightenment spreads via mass media beyond China’s urban centers to reach the less rarified environs of western Hunan. While I do not wish to make too much of the episode, it is here worth reflecting on the privileged place that the dictionary takes over the newspaper, and how the differences between these two modern textual forms may have shaped or inspired Shen’s writing practices going forward from the time he wrote the autobiography, if not earlier. As Shen narrates it, the newspaper instilled in him knowledge of the outside, modern world. While the newspaper essentially refers to the occurrence of historical events (though it also has a self-referential quality, as current news very frequently refers to other news, as anyone who picks up a local paper for the first time senses), a dictionary like the Ciyuan, is a totalized collection of knowledge that is self-referential in a more bounded and labyrinthine manner.\footnote{On the labyrinthine and rhizomatic qualities of the encyclopedia, see Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 80-82.}

With its transhistorical mix of modern terminology and scientific facts, as well as its manifold knowledge about the Chinese lexicological and literary history, the Ciyuan blends the distant past with the dynamic present. But there is also an important formal difference between these two textual media: whereas the Shenbao produces a kind of grand narrative by telling the present story of the nation in a serial and linear stream, the Ciyuan is composed of small narratives in the form of lexical entries, that are in turn loosely conjoined in a cross-referential manner. As such, the encyclopedia formally resists a singular and linear reading: as Umberto Eco writes, the
encyclopedia is without beginning or end, rhizomatic, and networked.\textsuperscript{430} I submit that what ultimately interested Shen about the \textit{Ciyuan} was not only its wealth of content, but its particular form.

The subject of literary form was becoming an increasingly important topic in Shen’s writing during the mid-1930s. During this period, Shen’s reassessment of the May Fourth legacy, coupled with his sporadic teaching duties, led him to articulate his own literary aesthetics for the first time in his career. What is important is the great degree to which these aesthetics resonate with the idea of a “small narrative,” and how much they borrow metaphorically from the networked form of the \textit{Ciyuan}. Between 1934 and 1935, Shen was arranging his collection of travelogue essays into what would be published in 1936 as \textit{Random Sketches of Western Hunan}. In discussing the text’s experimental mode of “transparent” realism, David Wang has pointed out in passing this work’s encyclopedic quality, as the text combines various narrative forms (including gazetteers, biographies, anecdotes, myths, legends, etc.) to ultimately provide the reader with “an accumulation of data—natural and human scenery, detailed biographical information.”\textsuperscript{431} Just as he was compiling together this text, Shen produced a number of short articles developing his notion of “craftsmanship” or “craft” [技巧, also translatable as ‘technique,’ ‘skill’] in relation to the literature. The foundational essay in this series of articles is titled “On Craft” [论技巧] (1935).\textsuperscript{432} Interestingly, the piece opens in a lexical vein and goes on to critically reflect upon the connotations of “craft”:

\textsuperscript{430} See the eponymous first chapter of \textit{From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation}, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 3-94.


\textsuperscript{432} The essay was first published in the \textit{Little Park} [小公園] supplement in the August 31\textsuperscript{st}, 1935 issue of the Tianjin newspaper, \textit{Dagongbao}. It is reprinted in \textit{SCQJ} 16: 470-3. For a similar statement on technique, see also Shen’s
In recent years, there has been a noun in literature dictionaries that has suffered particular misfortune: “craft.” When most people speak of technique, one gets the feeling of a certain kind of disdain. Then again there are those who, being extremely bashful, are deeply afraid to bring up this word in front of others. The two characters that make up “craft” seem to connote the fine [or, ‘minute’: 纤细], the fragmentary and trivial [琐碎], the empty and vacuous [空洞], and so on; at times the term even carries the implication of the salacious [猥亵]. When commending or praising a small toy or some small furnishing, inevitably we deploy “craft” … Ultimately, “craft” has been limited and restrained by the popular view [流行观念], thus becoming an unwanted thing. The establishment of a popular view is worth heeding, the right and wrong of a popular view is worth discussing. (16: 470)

In Shen’s defensive stance and his association of technique with mundane objects such as handicraft objects (a point to which I will return in this chapter’s conclusion) can be detected the highly politicized atmosphere of the times in which he wrote the piece. He here seeks to salvage the notion of technique as a way of questioning the contemporary “popular view” that literature must either be simply about ideas [思想] (and that artistry is of no event), or that literature should remain “pure” and not engage with current events.433 In doing so, Shen here is taking on two contemporary schools of thought: on the one hand, he is criticizing baldly political works that flatter either the masses or the bosses. On the other hand, he is criticizing the “Shanghai school” of writers such as Lin Yutang and Zhang Ziping and their focus on humorous minutiae at the expense of dealing with larger historical questions.434 “Craft” is to open a middle ground, then, between the grand narratives of revolution and the de-contextualized miniatures of the apolitical author.


433 See Shen’s “Elegance and Inelegance” [风雅与俗气] (also 1935) for the expansion of this notion (SCQJ 17: 211-5). In this essay, Shen’s primary target seems to be the work of humorists [幽默小品] such as Lin Yutang.

434 Shen clarified this much when he brought up the issue of technique in a 1941 lecture at the National Southwestern Associated University in Kunming. See his “On the Short Story,” republished in SCQJ 16: 492-507, particularly p. 502. See also Kinkley, 194-5.
But what, after all, does Shen actually mean by craft? In “On Craft,” Shen avoids directly defining the term, and instead offers a string of connotations, suggesting that “its true implication is something like ‘choice’ [选择], a ‘careful disposal’ [谨慎处置], a ‘pursuit of the proper arrangement’ [求妥贴], a ‘pursuit of the appropriate’ [求恰当]” (471). In a separate essay on the function and social use-value of literature that he wrote several years later, Shen expanded upon his point:

Simply put, literature is just a bunch of words and phrases strung together [拼拼凑凑产生的一种东西]... One needs patience and relentlessness, a willingness to “to twist and wrench language to learn its malleability, to smash language down hard to test the limits of its brittleness.” One has to thoroughly understand the medium’s properties... The more a writer understands the properties of written language, the more “proper” [恰当] is it when he uses it as a tool. I say “proper,” not “beautiful” [美丽], because “appropriateness” is precisely what it is in great works of literature that so astonishes us about their use of language. The aspiration of every writer is to get across his precise meaning when expressing himself or society and to be able to see the kind of impression it will make on certain types of readers, and how they will react. Hence, understanding of the nature [性能] of written language can itself be called a kind of “knowledge” [知识], indeed an indispensable knowledge—it is, to put it a little differently, craft [技巧], the craft of ordering writing [调排文字的技巧].

In talking about “twisting” writing and testing “the limits of its brittleness,” Shen evokes a sort of materiality of language that is endemic to modernist aesthetics in general in which “media were no longer serving as a vehicle or instrument of communication or representation of meaning, but as the very site of meaning and experience.” If writing is an entity with physical properties, then literary form approximates that of the plastic arts: the “knowledge” that Shen here advocates is none other than a knowledge of craft, the skilled manipulation of the stuff of

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literary language. To be a good writer, Shen suggests, is to know how to manipulate the network of writing just as handily as one might weave a basket or craft a child’s toy. And the emphasis on the proper order and the appropriate word choice returns us to the form of the encyclopedia—a text where everything is defined and in its proper place.

Arrangement separates literary writing from non-literary writing. Shen illustrates this in “On Craft” by distinguishing how a newspaper or a piece of fiction would approach a simple love story in which a woman stabs her former lover to death after he abandons her for another lover. While a newspaper will use a particular formula for narrating the event in a straightforward (but sensational) manner, in the skillful hands of an author, the plot is reworked into something subtler, thereby transforming the story in a way that “resembles a Daoist talismanic character and emits a magic power” over the reader (473). The basic story stays the same, only the form changes. Along this line, Shen acknowledges that a literary piece cannot abandon the story itself, and that literature must coalesce around some organizing principle or idea. Without such motivation, literature risks devolving into pure formalism, becoming “digressive and trifling,” [枝枝节节], an evocative phrase which literally means all “branches and knots [with no trunk]” (472). The horizontality of this growth is the equivalent of a rhizome. What we can deduce, then, is that “craft” and its attention to arrangement is the knowledge of putting together the branches and knots of writing, of managing the network of a plot. Shen stresses this elsewhere when notes that only literature is suitable for representing

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437 This formulation was used as early as the mid-Qing to describe the networked shape of the vernacular novel The Scholars [儒林外史]. See Shuen-fu Lin’s “Ritual and Narrative Structure in Ju-lin wai-shi,” in Andrew H. Plaks, ed., Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 244-265. We may place this “all branch” conception against the traditional Chinese concept of “root and branch tip” [本末] which expresses relations between origin and effect, and places things into hierarchical value relations. On this concept and its illustration as a principle of literary creation, see Stephen Owen’s translation and explication of “The Poetic Exposition of Literature” [文賦] by Lu Ji [陸機] (261-303): Readings in Chinese Literary Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992): 107, 113-5.
human experience, for “fiction uses human affairs as its warp and weft [经纬]; because they are able to comprehensively organize [these affairs] into the development of a narrative, even a quick-witted sermon or a dreamful lyric can illustrate abstract principles of humanity’s progress.”\textsuperscript{438} It is just precisely this quality that comes together in Shen’s story, “Unemployed”: Daren manages two networks, the telephone one of human affairs, but, in his own writing, he lacks the literary technique to make proper sense of either.

But for Shen the handicraft of writing implied by craft was not simply an expedient metaphor for the importance of editing work or plotting literary structure. Instead, the notion of craft directly informed his literary practice. This is beautifully evidenced by Shen’s literary disciple, the author Wang Zengqi [汪曾祺] (1920-1997), in a short commemorative essay he wrote after Shen passed away in 1988. In the piece, Wang reflects on his firsthand observation of Shen’s handicraft of composition:

When Mr. Shen spoke of writing, he rarely used the term “structure” [结构], and instead used the word “organization” [组织]. I also rather prefer the latter term. “Structure” is overly rational, while “organization” connotes feeling and the subjectivity of most writers. He would take his story, and cut it up line by line [一条一条地裁开], and then rearrange it in different manners to see which way was most suitable [合适]. Mr. Shen loved to revise [修改] his own work. He would edit and reedit his manuscripts until the pages’ headers, footers, and margins were covered in handwriting. [His page] resembled a spider’s web, with lines leading out of here and there [这里牵出一条，那里牵出一条] on the page.\textsuperscript{439}

At the level of Shen’s actual practice, then, does his idea of literature as craft come into full focus. Shen’s interest in literary craft—literally a craftsmanship of writing—thus playfully adopts the network form and the encyclopedic in order to stand against the propagandistic, grand

\textsuperscript{438}“On the Short Story,” \textit{SCQJ} 16: 494.

\textsuperscript{439} Wang Zengqi, “Stars, his works; newborn, his person” [星斗其文，赤子其人]. At the time of writing, I have not had the chance to personally inspect and document Shen’s manuscripts to see in what ways and how often Shen physically manipulated the page.
narrative literature of the day. To say that Shen Congwen advocated an opposing notion of the "small narrative" is not to say that he only wrote short, decontextualized anecdotes and avoided larger works; instead, the craft of writing ultimately emphasizes how small narratives hang together, and how the nature of these interconnections infuses the meaning and beauty of the larger literary text.

While in its final published form, the "spider’s web" of Shen’s literary craftsmanship might be largely invisible to the reader’s eye, no shortage of critics have grasped at the presence or logic of network forms in Shen’s work. A networked reading of Shen’s work may have been inadvertently performed as early as 1932 by the critic He Yubo in his major work, On Modern Chinese Authors [现代中国作家论]. Clearly frustrated with Shen’s style, He attacked the plots in Shen’s fiction as being recursive and fragmentary, declaring Shen’s early avant-garde works such as Letters of a Genius [一个天才的通信] (1930) as being a mere “jumble, with unordered paragraphs and an unstructured storyline, it is like a painting with no lines and no coloration—just a bunch of dots.” He builds on his visual metaphor to describe the “unstructured” nature of Shen’s narrative. Regarding Shen’s short story, “Lord Pine Nut” [松子君] (1926): “It has no central characters, it has no central story, the author’s pen just writes at random, and, like a child’s drawing upon a wall, [the story] has no meaning” (122). Or, in a summary dismissal of Shen’s oeuvre: “It is too mundane and cannot attract our interest. As such, we can only see these pieces as fragmentary impressions, such as when we watch a newsreel. To put it more severely, the author is nothing more than a photographer who takes some


441 Vol. 2 (Shanghai: Guanghua shuju), 139.
fragmentary landscape shots” (124). In retrospect, despite its acerbic edge, He Yubo’s visual emphasis is ironically apt because Shen actually did come to supplement his work with sketches and photographs.

As I investigated in Chapter One, He was at that time developing his mode of diagrammatic criticism, which he in turn applied to the highly structured plots of Mao Dun’s early literature. Here the He’s contrast between Mao Dun and Shen Congwen is particularly instructive. Whereas his map of the plot for Mao Dun’s novella, Disillusionment (Figure 48) shows the novel as a linear progression, in contrast, Shen’s approach to his longer form literature is more organic or bottom-up. As Wang Zengqi notes, Shen was interested not in structure but in arrangement. But the encyclopedic and woven quality of Shen’s notion of craft, from its careful organization and juxtaposition of fragmentary anecdotes, to its web of intertextuality, starkly resists the kind of linearization favored by He Yubo and his contemporaries. And surely He

442 In a similar manner, the Taiwanese critic Su Xuelin [苏雪林] would later opine: “Though in choice of diction and in the arrangement of his sentences he tries to achieve terseness, his descriptions are still verbose and cumbersome. Sometimes, several hundred words fail to yield the ‘central idea’… We can abbreviate a thousand-word passage into a hundred words without losing the original import. For this reason his language cannot pierce a reader’s heart like a rapier, however pathetic or tragic his stories are, they cannot stay in the reader’s mind as an ineradicable memory” (Found in Chu, “The Long River by Shen Ts‘ung-wen,” 11). Su’s critique seems to rest on a comparison between Shen’s literary aesthetic and an aesthetic of propaganda, where the latter is: piercing, tragic/pathetic, ineradicable, abbreviated, and communicates one central idea.

443 The place of Shen’s drawings, doodling, and photography in his literary practice (as well as in his literary representation in such stories as “Chuanshibing” [传事兵, 1927]) falls outside the scope of this chapter; I hope to address it in a future piece, especially in conjunction with the Shen Congwen’s archivists. For an analysis of Shen’s later drawings, see Zhang Xinying’s masterful biography, Shen Congwen houban sheng [The Latter Half of Shen Congwen’s Life], () See also Wang Dewei [Wang, David], “Shen Congwen’s Three Revelations” [沈从文的三次启悟], in his Lyrical Expression and Chinese Modernity: Eight Lectures at Peking University [抒情传统与中国现代性——在北大的八堂课] (Beijing: Sanlian, 2010).

444 In this regard, He Yubo’s frustration with Shen Congwen’s work is anticipated in criticism of Rulin waishi by a slightly earlier generation of May Fourth critics, including Hu Shi, “who often described the eighteenth-century satirical work as a series of loosely connected short stories without a grand integrative design. This general criticism has derived… from a predilection for centralized and monolithic plot structure, which is more typical of the Western novel.” See Lin, “Ritual and Narrative Structure in Ju-lin wai-shi,” 244-5. Building off of Lin’s suggestive essay, I intend to address the issues of networked organization/causality and literary structure in the Chinese tradition (particularly as it pertains to Li Boyuan’s masterpiece from the late Qing, Bureaucracy Exposed) in a future piece.
would have found such emplotment inadequate for the fragmentary and scattered nature of much of Shen’s later work, which, as Jeffrey Kinkley reads it, manifest Shen’s “inattention to larger literary structures” and an “unfinished” state of his major novels.445

More recently, in his seminal study of Shen’s mode of fictional realism and what he calls its “iterative lyricism,” David Wang invokes a rich array of network metaphors to describe how the narrative “condenses recurrent events over a period of time into a single narrative and thus renders a synchronic overlay of the diachronicity of events.”446 Wang variously likens aspects of Shen’s prose to “an intricate web” (202), “a constellation of sensuous pictures and musical patterns” (203), an “intertextual network” (206), and a tapestry “weaving varied sensory images from natural and human environments into a fabric and giving them correspondences to one another” (217). Reading these formal elements through Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, Wang argues that they constitute a “topographical system of coordinates . . . which lends itself to anyone wanting to locate the origins of a text. Sites, like texts, are essential loci of remembrance, bounded spaces in which the complexity of human nature and experience are concentrated. More than just his birthplace, Shen Congwen’s West Hunan is a textual locus where his discourse about the homeland has germinated, and through which he transports his social/political ideas” (252). Thus Wang reminds us that, in Shen’s homeland works, we are not dealing with measurable, geographical space but the spaces of memory: writing is in this case a special kind of map. But besides topographically analyzing the production of space and time in Shen’s work as a kind of map-like representation, Shen’s own aesthetics and interest in networks calls for an explicitly topological approach to his work, one that accommodates his careful attention to the interrelations and arrangements of the constituent parts of his narratives. Put

445 Kinkley, The Odyssey of Shen Congwen, 3.
446 David Der-wei Wang, Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China, 230.
differently, such a reading would ask how Shen’s smaller narratives are linked together to produce larger network structures, and what such structures mean in the historical, literary, and personal contexts in which they appear. At the same time, the topological stands at the nexus between Shen’s aesthetics (“craft” and the arrangement of writing) and the politics of his literature, particularly his increasing interest in giving voice to small narratives located outside the center.

This productive nexus is epitomized in a short—but key—passage in Random Sketches on a Trip to Hunan (the same text upon which David Wang advances his own reading) which is representative of the text’s anecdotal style and Shen’s celebration of local Hunanese culture. Describing an old friend of his who has now become an innkeeper in Changde, Shen pays homage to the man’s rich craft of utterance by again recalling the dictionary:

Everything he said was alive, and even casual remarks and swearwords would have their proper sources and fit the context perfectly [言之成章] . . . His speech displayed a rich flow of similes which seemed as truly inexhaustible as the waters of a great river . . . Listening to him curse the servants, it made me think of all those gentlemen cooped up in Beijing compiling big dictionaries of the national language [编国语大辞典], and of how many books they had cut apart [剪破] for the usage of a phrase or a word, leafing backward and forward through [翻来翻去] the Water Margin, Plum in the Golden Vase, Dream of the Red Chamber, and other novels and dramas of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing. If only they could come to this inn . . . and hear that proprietor give vent to some choice and rare expressions, so that they might feel that a living dictionary [活生生大辞典] has actually been placed there!\(^{447}\)

Here Shen’s suggestion that the innkeeper stands as a vital alternative to the scholar’s material—and eminently canonical—labor of dictionary compilation once again recalls Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia with its emphasis on the utterance as a living and social phenomenon. Like the modern dictionary of national language (and Shen doubtless has in mind the Ciyuan), the novel

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\(^{447}\) I have adapted this translation from Prince’s translation, “The Life and Works of Shen Ts’ung-wen,” Ph.D. dissertation (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1968), 49. The original passage is located in SCQJ 11: 230.
is composed of “thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; [The living utterance] cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. After all, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the objects from the sidelines.”

(And here Bakhtin might as well have written that the living utterance does not approach its object from above, or from the center.) In contrast to the dictionaries composed of the textual life of classical literature, the innkeeper embodies the social life of language, and suggests a new way of writing literature from the margin. On the face of it, with its iconoclastic rejection of older forms of vernacular writing, this passage seems like a simple reiteration of May Fourth idealism. But, having identified Shen’s aesthetic of craft and its structural and technical relation to the dictionary or encyclopedia, the trace of the network again comes into view: not only in its affirmation of culture away from the China’s cultural center, but also in its espousal of a literary practice that formally borrows from the internally networked structure of the dictionary—a structure which ultimately authorizes the feeling and merit of appropriate language usage that Shen so pursues in his own writing. Underneath the surface layer of Shen’s native-soil literature, then, lies the rhizome, a formation that in one stroke serves as a means for an aesthetics, but also, as I show in the following section, for both Shen’s distinctive vision of society and his politicized antipathy toward the one-way and centralized communication characteristic of the propaganda era.

**Social Networks of Information Exchange in Long River**

In late 1937, Shen returned home for the second time in the decade. His earlier trip to western Hunan had been marred by skirmishes between Nationalist troops and local forces over sovereignty of the region. This time around, Shen found even the initial stages of his trip thrown into uncertainty as he and several colleagues escaped the impending Japanese occupation of Beijing, fleeing first south toward Nanjing and then up the Yangzi toward the interior. In the early spring of 1938 Shen reached western Hunan, where he stayed for several months with his brother in Fenghuang before moving on to Kunming in April. This journey resulted in his second travelogue, *West Hunan* (1938), a local ethnography written with the objective of dispelling national misconceptions about western Hunan: that the region was, contrary to popular opinion, not an area infested with banditry and turmoil, but rather a place rich in tradition and populated by a people willing to help out in the national war effort. At the outset, *Long River*, which Shen began working on in 1938, was to play a similar role. As Shen offered in his preface:

> Just at that time [winter of 1937], the Hunanese provincial government was preparing to send into the countryside several thousand students tasked with educating the common folk [民训工作], an [initiative that was] technically rather bothersome [技术上相当麻烦]. The situation in Wuhan was taking a turn for the worse, and both public and private institutions as well as refugees from various provinces were daily pouring into western Hunan. Most people lacked any knowledge of the true character of the region, often stereotyping it as a “bandit area.” As a result, I produced two small books, one named *West Hunan*, the second, *Long River* . . . [Through these I] hoped to give outsiders an impression relatively closer to the truth, and, more importantly, to impart to the students traveling there with an impression relatively closer to the truth. Even more importantly, [I hoped] to ignite in them the courage and confidence to overcome these difficulties. (101-2)

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449 In a 1982 preface to a partial English translation of his Xiangxi works, Shen explains that he wrote *West Hunan* after a meeting with local power-holders (many of whom had historical ties with Shen’s family), including the “Miao King,” Long Yunfei. These local power brokers were eager to hear Shen’s appraisal of the national situation. They collectively resolved that the countryside had an important role to play in relocating refugees and organizations into the interior by offering them space and local resources. See his “Preface to *Random Sketches of Western Hunan*,” in *SCQJ* 16: 387-394.
Thus both *West Hunan* and *Long River* were to be didactic in nature in order to serve some purpose in the broader context of wartime China. Similar to Shen’s earlier travelogue, *Random Sketches on a Trip to Hunan*, *West Hunan* borrows formal aspects of the encyclopedia, and it latter again manifests Shen’s aesthetics of craft as a kind of ordering of small narratives: the text, as David Wang argues, creates “a sense of accuracy and immediacy by providing us with an excess of information. Names, dates, historical events, anecdotes, personal comments, are poured out without any obvious link with each other. They are not meant to make any specific point but just to exist and state in a mute way that they are there—one of the most powerful ways to achieve the effect of the real” (260). In contrast, *Long River* is a novelistic narrative, but one that reflects Shen’s aesthetics of craft to an equally high degree, while also directly and reflexively applying this aesthetics to the subject of propaganda itself.

Despite the novel’s putatively intended audience, it seems doubtful that the students traveling to Shen’s homeland would have had much opportunity to read *Long River*, which was originally serialized between early August and mid November in 1938 in the pages of *Constellation* [星座], a literary supplement (then under the editorship of the modernist poet, Dai Wangshu) of the Hong Kong newspaper, the *Sing Tao Daily*. But shortly after he began writing it, Shen came to envision a much broader audience: *Long River* was to be his career masterpiece, a novel that would be as ambitious in its scope as was Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, and that could attract upwards of a million readers.\(^450\) The first volume of the broader work was scheduled to be published as a single text in Guilin in 1942, but, even after heavy redaction, it failed to pass

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\(^450\) Zhang Xinying argues that Shen first conceived of the novel as an elaboration of the themes of change and constancy in *Bordertown*. See his essay, “*Long River*: ‘Constancy’ and ‘Transformation’” [《长河》：“常”与“变”] in *Long River*, ed. Zhang Xinying (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2010), 286. On Shen’s million readers comment, see his personal letter to his wife, Zhang Zhaohe, cited in ibid, 287-8. My citations of the novel itself also come from this version of the text.
the censor’s approval. Only in 1945, following another round of paring down, did a Kunming imprint publish the novel in its final form; this final version was reduced over twenty percent from the original manuscript. Though Shen intended the novel to span three volumes, perhaps on account of his frustrations with such heavy censorship, or a sense of depression regarding its subject, he laid the work aside after the first part and never returned to it.\footnote{In speculating why Shen never finished the work, David Wang suggests “the ominous vision of West Hunan’s future may have proved an unbearable strain for Shen Congwen at the time and disabled him from writing and personally fulfilling its doom. Leaving Long River unfinished, therefore, might have meant for Shen Congwen both a political gesture, ‘saying’ in silence what was unsayable in a policed literature, and a psychological self-censorship, blocking the textual manifestation of an unbearable trauma.” Fictional Realism, 276.}

It is crucial to understand the cultural context of *Long River* in order to appreciate its positioning vis-à-vis the broader institution of modern literature in the late 1930s. While the novel was ostensibly directed at the stereotypes held by would-be propagandists and reformers headed to western Hunan, the novel’s preface poses a more general challenge to the meaning and significance of propaganda in the Chinese countryside. The four years of the novel’s gestation and reformation between 1938 and 1942 was a particularly dynamic period for the broader institution of literature and criticism in China as leftist, centrist, and rightist authors alike joined the *All-China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists* (hereafter, *Wenxie*) that formed in 1938. This era represents the culmination of the propaganda boom that had begun earlier in the decade (see Chapter 3), as literary writing became the handmaiden to politics and the task of all-out mobilization [总动员]. Living in Kunming for the duration of the war, Shen observed the intensification of propaganda from the sidelines, choosing to not join the *Wenxie*.\footnote{Regarding Shen’s early distaste for the pomp and display of a united front, see his essay “The Literary Institution’s ‘Solidarity’ and ‘Uniting’” [文坛的“团结”与“联合”], in *Guowen zhoubao* [国闻周报], Vol. 13, no. 45 (1936), reprinted in SCQJ 17: 114-118. In keeping with Shen’s avoidance of formal politics, the essay depicts the literary institution as self-obsessed with a series of discursive civil wars in which ultimately the loser is the reader.} He observed that the Chinese literary institution had entered an era when both Nationalist- and
Communist writers rushed to embrace the maxim “all writing is propaganda” [一切文字都是宣传]. And during this period, he persistently dismissed the literary institution’s propaganda pursuits as superficial attempts to stir up renao, “noise and excitement” [热闹], a term which quickly became for Shen a blanket condemnation of all propaganda-oriented activities.\footnote{Shen, “Universal or Restricted?” 452.}

In trying to find room left over for a subtler form of writing that would place emphasis on literary craft, Shen reaffirmed his advocacy of a blend of formalism, local description, and small narrative. In “Universal or Restricted” (1939), an essay that arguably should be read as the primary preface to Long River (the actual preface was only written in 1945), Shen calls on authors to return to the problem of craft, and takes the chance to reiterate his earlier definition of the term as the art of ordering writing [调排文字的技巧].\footnote{Shen, “Universal or Restricted, 451-2.} Whereas earlier in the decade Shen had indicated the target of his criticism only indirectly, by the late 1930s he had become more strident and explicit in his critique. Here he peremptorily disavows the subject position of “art for art’s sake,” instead arguing that formalism does not equal an escape from the social use-value of literature: good literature produces important knowledge for society, and can thus play an important role in reshaping reality. But Shen argues that unlike propaganda, which seeks to dominate modern channels of broadcast communication such as newspapers, journals, and radio

\footnote{Of course, the characterization of propaganda as “causing a stir” resonates with the reflections of propaganda in contemporary leftist art and literature that I discussed in Chapter 4. For an important cultural and literary history of renao, see Paize Keulemans, Sound Rising from the Paper: Nineteenth-Century Martial Arts Fiction and the Chinese Acoustic Imagination (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2014).}

\footnote{Arguably the degree to which this subject position was apolitical is something of a straw man, constructed and targeted by advocates of May Fourth realism in the 1920s seeking to promote a socially engaged alternative of “art for life’s sake.” See Marston Anderson, Limits of Realism, Introduction. See also Guo Moruo’s revival of this position as an object of attack in his influential manifesto on the politicization of literature, Art and Propaganda [文艺与宣传], (Guangzhou: Shenghuo shudian, 1938).}
through a steady stream of amplified and simplified messaging, literature is founded upon an aesthetics of complexity, heteroglossia, and contingency that deliver its moral message in a way antithetical to that of propaganda. Shen is describing *Long River* when he concludes that, in contrast to the propagandists’ competing broadcasts, “perhaps some other person [other than the propagandists] should write a little something. His or her work might be a mere novel . . . [that] seems to have no connection with the war, or with politics, and even less connection with propaganda . . . it may educate only a small number of the educated, those who truly love and honor this nation, who have already been awakened, and thus very modestly seek such education. Not only might the content of this work enlighten them, the written language in it can enlighten them too.” Shen envisions a work that is enlightening but not propagandistic—the paradox that lies at the heart of his decade-long attempt to make sense of and redeem the May Fourth literary legacy.

Thus the political and aesthetic backdrop for the *Long River* project is Shen’s questioning of the relationship between writing and social change, literature and propaganda. But Shen’s attempt to problematize propaganda and the grand narratives it embodies also lies at the heart of the novel’s subject. By emphasizing the complexity of the meaning of mass media (and modernity in general) through examining its multivalent social dispensation in the Hunanese countryside, Shen hoped to intervene in popular belief amongst intellectuals and cultural figures

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457 For an expansion of this view, see Shen’s 1938 essay, “On Progress” [*SCQJ* 16: 479-88], in which he discusses at length the place of writing in igniting political passion, and literature’s role in neutralizing this sort of passion while promoting social change in its own manner. Together with “Universal or Restricted,” “On Progress” leaves little doubt that *Long River* is Shen’s attempt to directly oppose literature to propaganda. On Shen’s reaffirmation of May Fourth mission, but a critique of the “misuse” of the tool of writing, see also “‘May Fourth’ at Twenty-One” [*SCQJ* 14: 133-5].

458 “Universal or Restricted,” 453.
regarding the efficacy of propaganda. That is, instead of depicting social change as an immediate effect of mass-oriented propaganda, Shen instead seeks to explore the question of sociohistorical change as an architectonic process, one that is fundamentally beholden to acts of communication and social reproduction. As he explains in his preface:

Just as described in the beginning of the novel, all existence is defined by habit and all affairs are shaped by habit. So when currency and goods and local behaviors circulate, the various modes of life and ideals that they form all seem to be developing in a deterministic way. People’s oppositional affairs and their conflicts all seem to have a fated end. This work is designed to emphasize the synthesis of constancy and change, writing out the “past,” the “present,” and the developing “future.” . . . [In] taking this bit of social landscape [社会风景] that so resembles a historical relic, preserving it through writing, and contrasting it with the brand-new conditions [of the present], [the novel] might help us develop a new recognition of society. That is, in the midst of the war, how the process of development in a certain place inevitably includes some conflicts in human sensibilities, and how it entails the refashioning of interpersonal relations [人和人关系的重造]. (102-3)

Shen’s approach to the subject of history is here notable not just for its Buddhist tone (where past, present, and future are bracketed in quotation marks), but also because this vision of historical change sees history as a cycle that is in turn composed of smaller cycles and habits [习惯]. These smaller cycles of history are manifest in small narratives, connected together through

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459 Interestingly, Shen took up the topic directly in a short story named “Country Village” [乡城] (1940), reprinted in SCQJ 10: 287-94. From the point of view of locals, the story narrates the arrival of a unit of student propagandists and their eager pursuit of “stirring up” [热闹] the locals. The village head treats the students as a kind of occupying force that must be properly received [招待] with a banquet. This puts a strain on village resources. The actual students’ various activities, including writing slogans and acting out a patriotic play, are described only in passing, thus suggesting that they leave little mark on the bemused villagers. The theme of miscommunication is exemplified by the letters written by student volunteers on behalf of villagers; intended for villagers’ relatives fighting in the war, the letters are full of empty slogans. Worse yet, the villagers do not know the exact address to which they should be sent. The story ends ironically, noting that after the event, local newspapers reported the all-around success of the propaganda units activities. Shen also appends an admonition telling his readers that, in going to the countryside to propagate, “enthusiasm” [热情] is not enough—students need to be sensitive to the kind of local conditions that are portrayed in the story.

460 As Kinkley explains, Shen dabbled with Buddhism during the 1930s, and as evident in stories such as “Knowledge” (1934), where he seems to “have borrowed Buddhist plots, symbols, and perhaps the pantheistic idea of Indira’s web . . . [to] focus on higher ideals [and] describe Life as a pantheistic spirit: a flame, radiating into the lives of others,” The Odyssey of Shen Congwen, 222-3.
social communication, and, as we shall see in the novel, particularly through the movement of xiaoxi that circulates like currency and goods. Crucially, this system of cycles is not a closed system, but complexly interfaced with outside forces, including both national news and nationwide initiatives such as the New Life Movement. Through a description of the local percolation of news about the impending arrival of the New Life Movement, the text obliquely offers a worm’s eye view of the Nationalists’ attempt to change society through mass media. If the meaning of propaganda had become, as Shen contends, unclear even to propagandists themselves,\textsuperscript{461} then Long River stands as an attempt to define the meaning and import of propaganda, at least in a local context.\textsuperscript{462} The historiographic question of Long River is how broader changes unfold through small cycles of “human sensibilities” while at the same time refashioning these sensibilities and the attendant human relations.

The novel’s opening chapter, titled “People and Land” [人与地], provides the kind of ethnographic and naturalistic literary description for which Shen is famous. Set in the year 1936, the narrative focuses on two conjoined places in the mountainous region of western Hunan. The first is Lüjiaping [吕家坪], a small but lively stopping point along the middle section of the Yuan [沅] River. In the narrator’s words: “Since Lüjiaping is a port, there are the usual groups of loafers, supernumerary government clerks, widows who make their living by making small loans, local prostitutes with large breasts and buttocks, and professional fortunetellers and chess

\textsuperscript{461} “Universal or Restricted?” \textsuperscript{452}.

\textsuperscript{462} Despite its restricted local scope, Shen argues in the preface that the novel offers a sort of case study whose lessons would be applicable to rural China elsewhere (102-3).
players. Besides serving as a port town, Lüjiaping is the site of the local market (which convenes every five days), giving the city the status of a regional commercial, military, and social hub.

The second place of narrative focus is Turnip Village [萝卜村], a nearby farming area along a small tributary of the Yuan. Despite its name, Turnip Village is not a village but a collection of farm manors, including the estate of the local well-to-do Teng family. Although the area is only several miles inland from that lies directly inland from Lüjiaping, it is a far more idealized place, where “the situation is quite different, for the rural traditions are faithfully preserved, not in the least affected by Lüjiaping. For instance, when a traveler passes through the orange groves during the harvest period, he is never charged for the oranges he eats when he is thirsty. But as soon as he gets to Lüjiaping, even the extremely sour tangerines which are completely worthless are sold by the old ladies at the ford” (Chu, 51; Changhe, 138). Directly across the stream from the Teng family’s orange groves is Maple Hill, where lies the Teng ancestral temple.

Though the narrative entirely cleaves to these two zones—the timeless and rather idyllic countryside, and the market-by-the-riverside—the novel’s setting contrasts starkly with that of Chadong in Border Town, a place that seemed hermetically sealed off from modernity. In Long River both Lüjiaping and Turnip Village are clearly marked by the arrival of modernity in the form of new knowledge, foreign ideologies, and a variety of material goods. In turn, these imports index what might be thought of as the novel’s third significant area: the “rest of China,” in particular the large urban centers downriver from Lüjiaping. It is through the lens of the social

life of information that the novel will explore the deepening relationship between this national center and its relative periphery.

While locally produced oranges and tong oil go downstream, what the local boatmen bring back when returning upstream is news and newspapers from as far as the eastern seaboard. The newspapers include major publications like the Shenbao (based in Shanghai) and the Dagongbao (Tianjin), with their plethora of national and international news items. The scope of such news is markedly disconnected from the daily happenings of the western Hunan; making matters worse is the fact that, because the newspapers only travel upstream as fast as the boats themselves, the information they bring is stale upon their arrival, delivered two weeks after the newspapers’ publication date. But it is precisely in this peripheral area, where the national newspapers have a relatively weak material presence, that the social life of information relies on personal contacts rather than mass media for circulation. The setting of Long River thus represents the horizon of mass media’s primary orbit, Lüjiaping presents a circuit of local networks of oral exchanges formed by the various forms of social and commercial transactions between locals, merchants, officials, and travelers.\(^{464}\) This second circuit of information occupies the majority of the novel’s attention, as in all but the first and last chapters the narrative patiently follows characters as they engage in gossip, trade opinions about local politics, share news about market prices, and discuss the broader state of the nation.

The novel loosely focuses on the Teng family. Although the narrative suggests that this prosperous family—and, by extension, the healthy and idyllic country life around them—will be

\(^{464}\) This distinction is Wu Xiaodong’s. Wu further notes that the Shenbao appears sixteen times in the text, and enjoys both direct readers (such as Teng Changchun and other well-to-do merchants, and petty officials), and “indirect readers” such as the old boatman (1-2). The NLM [新生活] appears in the text over fifty times (ibid, 3). Wu’s argument is that ultimately the mass media in the narrative connect the periphery to the national center (7) and enable a sort of national imaginary under print capitalism (or, more accurately, “mass media capitalism”). I would argue, however, that the text also stresses the additional mode of interconnection of interpersonal exchange.
severely shaken by the events of history, in the novel there is very conventional little plot
development. Instead, the novel focuses on contextualizing the Tengs within the social relations
of local society, in the process illuminating the social networks in which they are embedded.
The character who most clearly indexes the local social networks is “Manman” (an affectionate
local term for “Uncle”), a distant relative of the Teng family who, after an unlucky life which has
left him bereft of family and livelihood, has retired from a career as a boatman and now serves as
the steward of the Teng family temple at Maple Hill. This position is leisurely and solitary, so
Manman frequently crosses the river to chat with the amiable head of the Teng family, Teng
Changshun, and the family’s young daughters, particularly the beautiful and precocious
youngest, Yaoyao. When he is not offering Teng advice or avuncularly playing with the girls,
Manman chats with passers-by, or meanders about Lüjiaping, collecting, exchanging, and
disseminating gossip and minor news. As the narrative describes him, he resides

on a mound nearby the highway and overlooking the banks of the river where
travelers and boatmen passed back and forth. Many of them would come to the
mound to lift the loads from their backs, rest, and smoke. . . Manman would [also]
frequently cross the river at his leisure to pay a visit to Teng Changshun’s family.
There he would sit awhile and chat about the local gossip. . . Or, carrying a small
bamboo basket, he would go to the market . . . [where] he would listen to the
merchants discuss the market conditions, the boatmen talking sales of agricultural
goods shipped down the river, and the ups and downs of the boat families of the
Yuan River Valley. If he met a Yamen runner [i.e. a government messenger], he
could learn about the regulations and orders being carried out in the county and
hear news [xiaoxi] of the whereabouts of the militia. (146)
Thus, despite his topographically peripheral position outside both Lüjiaping and Turnip Village,
Manman occupies a topologically central node by acting as a veritable hub of communications
connecting together the two places and further triangulating them with the social space of the
docks, where he often visits his former colleague boatmen. Although Teng Changshun is usually
teasing when he asks Manman if he has any news, because “as the old boatman was the only one
in the village who loved asking about xiaoxi, he always had an exceptional quantity of news, but
in actuality this news was usually not worth making a big fuss over.” (184) Teng and his local ally, the well-meaning commerce head [商会会长], do find value in Manman’s ferrying messages [口信] back and forth between Turnip Village and Lüjiaping. And they also value Manman’s “reports” of local opinion, local security force operations, and other news. As we shall see, in this capacity the old man both closely resembles and exceeds the typical homo informaticus constructed by Mao Dun in his 1930s market literature.

Manman’s position within the system of social exchange is established early on, as Chapter Two transitions from the panoramic and ethnographic detailing of the introductory chapter to an extended description of the social life of information in front of the Teng family temple where passers-by variously pause atop Maple Hill to chat with Manman. Barely describing the passer-by characters or Manman’s own impression of them, the narrative directly records their minutiae-filled conversation as it ranges over topics such as this year’s crop of oranges, bragging over extraordinary garden yields such as a bucket-sized winter melon, and the legend of a thirty-two pound radish. Such extensive use of reported speech, coupled with the way in which the speakers themselves reflect upon the sources of local knowledge and question each other’s hearsay and tease one another’s ignorance, gives the chapter a manifestly heteroglossic quality that will be sustained throughout the rest of the novel. The sense of multi-voiced orality is further highlighted by the frequency of words and phrases relating to oral communication, such as “I heard people say” [我听人说] (120), “ancient proverbs say” [古话说] (120), “in through the mouth, out through the ears” [口里来, 耳边去] (128), “gossip” [谣言] (131), xiaoxi (126), and so on. And, in typical Shen Congwen fashion, the narrative also records local dialect and different sorts of speech genres, including folksong lyrics. Throughout these utterances, Manman listens carefully, only occasionally interrupting, instead observing so that he
can later relate any valuable information to Teng Changshun or his fellow boatmen. Collectively, Manman’s access to this stream of voices gives him—and, by extension, the reader herself—privileged access to the opinions and goings-on of local society: as one local describes him in a later chapter, Manman “knows everything under heaven and above earth, and has a mental record of all of Lüjiaping’s affairs” [天上地下什么都知道。吕家坪的事情，心中一本册] (199).

Though he takes distinctive pleasure in maintaining this broad spectrum of social contact, Manman is no idle gossip. Similar to the many homo informaticus characters that populate Mao Dun’s literature, Manman collects information as a survival strategy against events whose scope and complexity surpass cognitive horizon of the individual in the modern ecology of information. This is not to argue that there is a high level of narrative tension in the text; unlike in Mao Dun’s Midnight, there is here no climactic exchange of information upon which directly hinges the fate of any characters. What specifically motivates Manman is the impending arrival of the New Life Movement (hereafter, NLM). Like the looming industrialization of tong oil pressing or the issue of war with Japan, the NLM symbolizes a form of modernity that hangs forebodingly over the future of western Hunan. But the NLM is far and away the most prominent symbol, in no small part thanks to its historical status as the elevated object of KMT propagation. As I discuss in Chapter Four, in the mid-1930s the NLM was not only the KMT’s flagship effort to refashion Chinese society, but also a major hallmark of advancement of propaganda and mobilization that characterize the propaganda boom of the 1930s. With his leisurely life and wealth of experience, Manman is particularly sensitive to historical change. Moreover, as the narrative explains, he is on the lookout for great social change because of his superstitious belief in an oral text called the “Shaobing song” [烧饼歌]. This song (a historical
document that circulated both orally and textually in the late Qing and Republican periods) supposedly dates back to the mid-Ming, and uses a kind of cipher to foretell the coming of a great change [大变]. Under its influence, Manman believes that

Regardless of whether things changed for the better or worse, they would never be ‘as usual.’ He got this idea four years previously with the successive arrival of the Communist and KMT troops. He believed that other events would occur in the future and that ‘tomorrow’ would be quite different from ‘today.’ Therefore when he heard that the ‘New Life’ was soon to appear, he was quite excited. He was really the first in the area to cherish some illusion about this New Life, though in fact even though everything else in the world was different, the life of this sailor had long ago become fixed. (Chu, 68; Long River, 147)

Manman’s knowledge and expectations of the New Life Movement are already mediated by an alternative, regional mass medium in the form of a popularly circulating oral text, thus priming him for the impending arrival of the Movement. Thanks to this belief, Manman asks nearly everyone he comes across whether they’ve heard news of the Movement; moreover, he suspiciously reads for signs of its arrival, even suspecting a traveling monkey trainer as being a vanguard of the Movement (125), and obscurely pumping locals for information about irregularities at the market (152-3).

But, despite (or because) of his efforts to synthesize the meaning of the NLM, Manman is unsure what to make of it: is it a Communist takeover? Will it mean conscription or new taxes? Manman and the other villagers’ ignorance of a national movement as prevalent as the NLM thus stands as Shen’s wry comment on the differences in knowledge between the country and the city (where, the narrative suggests, people are equally ignorant, needing written instructions for something as simple as eating an orange). The widespread ignorance would appear humorous to the novel’s reader, as the narrative portrays the locals’ struggle to make heads or tails of what the New Life Movement actually is, and their speculation that the NLM might even be the name of a cruel general who will order many beheadings. The locals’ incomplete grasp of the national
political scene results in a parodic effect that, in turn, highlights the dialogic nature of heteroglossia, and lays bare the dialectical struggle between local and central discourses and epistemes. Bakhtin notes the “alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (272). Thus Long River shows that when slogans such as “New Life Movement” reach the countryside they literally take on a discursive life of its own.

This is process detailed in Manman’s relationship to the Shenbao. Illiterate, Manman does not have direct access to the newspaper’s contents. But thanks to his frequent discussion of current events with Teng Changshun and the head of the commerce association (158-60), Manman is called a “secondary” reader [间接读者] of the Shenbao (198). Although there is no evidence that Shen had the image in mind, the oral afterlife of the newspaper is poignantly pictured in a near-contemporary woodcut print by Huang Pouli titled “Reading the Newspaper” [读报] (1935). This illustration (Figure 49) expediently illustrates the social life of information; in turn, it can also help illustrate the place of Manman in Long River. Careful attention to the image reveals that beyond the inner ring of readers stands a discrete outer ring of “secondary” readers who absorb or ponder the news as it travels orally: we quite literally see the transformation of “news” [新闻] of the newspaper into socially exchanged xiaoxi. While the image’s presumptive focal point is the man who smokes and the newspaper itself, I submit that Shen’s own eye would have been drawn to the figure in the upper left corner, who appears to be narrating the news orally to two or three of the other men. Manman is just such a disseminator, as, inspired by his indirect knowledge of the Shenbao reports about the advance of the NLM, he spreads his thoughts and opinions amongst those he meets. At the same time, despite the
apparent information asymmetry between primary and secondary readers of the newspaper, Manman can offer useful knowledge to Teng Changshun and others because the oral news he has access to frequently travels the same speed as the newspapers themselves.\textsuperscript{465}

Similar to how “Reading the Newspaper” constructs an schematic of the social life of information through depicting a network of gazes, so too does \textit{Long River} produce a kind of social network along which \textit{xiaoxi} passes. In shuttling between different social strata and forwarding information, Manman ultimately serves as a kind of information \textit{router} in the larger social network of western Hunan. With such a modus operandi, Manman echoes a plethora of similar “router” characters in Shen Congwen’s other work from the period, not least of all Daren in “Unemployed.”\textsuperscript{466} Manman’s role is shown in detail in Chapter Six, which features him wandering about the docks exchanging words with various boatmen. As the chapter opens:

When the old boatman arrived in the village, he conveyed [转达] [Teng Changshun’s] words to the head of the commerce association, and in turn received some \textit{xiaoxi} at the latter’s home regarding the dispatch of armed forces. These \textit{xiaoxi} became mixed up with his earlier eccentric conjectures, whereupon, like a “scholar,” these purely abstract musings disrupted his vital energy, the questions bent his back, and he prepared to return home along the riverside. Along the road he spotted quite a few boatmen carrying canopy rolls, indicating that two groups of shipping boats must have banked, and that he could definitely get some news from the boatmen and masters of those boats. He hoped that he’d

\textsuperscript{465} This is not to say, however, that the \textit{xiaoxi} and the \textit{Shenbao} are perceived as having the same level of veracity or social status. The disjunct between the two sources affirms the elite status of the newspaper readers. Interestingly, the narrative mentions an even more elite group of news consumers: the local missionaries, who have access to the wireless (161).

\textsuperscript{466} To Daren and Manman, we can add the grandfather in \textit{Border Town}, who, as a ferryman, serves as an intermediary of information between passers-by (which in turn make him a rich source of local hearsay and knowledge) but who fails in his role as a go-between for the marriage between Cuicui and the handsome son of a local well-to-do family; the old military messenger in Shen’s short story, “Mountain Passer” \textit{(过峰者)} (1934), whose job is to exchange messages and serve as a kind of information hub between spies; and the eponymous protagonist of “Staff Adviser” \textit{(顾问官)}. Alongside these fictional characters we might also include Shen himself (or, as he imagined himself) and his own background as an army clerk for a regional troop, where, at the age of 16 (in 1918), he was responsible for copying reports. The position allowed Shen to fraternize with a much wider slice of army society than he would have had access to as a regular soldier, and many of his stories are built out of this experience. See his \textit{Congwen Zizhuan}, 62-63.
hear some news, [which he could] then cross over the river and report to Teng Changshun the following day. (193)
The chapter unfolds with Manman visiting no fewer than four different boats, pausing at each to chat with the men at length in hopes of gathering information on conditions downstream.467

Crucially, unlike the patent self-interest of the *homos informaticus* that populate Mao Dun’s market literature, Manman derives a particular pleasure from his peripatetic gathering of information. In this sense, the transmission of *xiaoxi* serves a particular phatic function that helps maintain the social conventions that Shen Congwen aimed to illustrate in *Long River*.

Despite its prominence in the narrative, and its outsized presence in Manman’s cognitive world, the novel ends without the NLM ever arriving. The novel’s last chapter is bookended by a description of the year-end local drama performance that echoes the ethnographic and panoramic quality of the novel’s first chapter. When the events foreshadowed by the narrative and anticipated by its characters ultimately fail to materialize, the reader is left with a strong impression of circulation and recursion: instead of the kind of linearly arcing plot development that He Yubo found so lacking in Shen’s literature, then, one finds a richly described web of social communication. In its critical measurement of propaganda’s reach through mass media, *Long River* describes this local network of exchange to illustrate how information percolates socially in complex and meandering ways, thereby continuously overwhelming and subverting the central government’s ability to speak directly to society. In contradistinction to the rapid and

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467 That Shen Congwen intended to use this string of interrogations as a frame for communicating information to his reader is particularly spotlighted in this chapter. This is made obvious in Manman’s conversation with the last boatman, who reveals in passing that he formerly worked as a teacher and witnessed the white terror in Changsha in the late 1920s. His tongue loosened by wine, the boatman begins to speak about the corruption he has seen and read about, but is interrupted by an ellipsis, followed by a parenthetical statement merely stating that “large paragraph has [here] been excised by the Central Propaganda Bureau” (201). Such an interpolation reopens the gap between the narrative itself and Manman’s information gathering, thus calling the reader’s attention to the multiple levels of communication performed by Manman’s wanderings.
seamless spread of information amongst the masses in Ding’s literature, Shen envisions the flow of information in the fashion of a network, its movements complex, multivalent, contingent. As such, I argue that both formally and thematically, the novel espouses a form of social communication diametrically opposed to the fantasy of propaganda and radio modernity evident in Ding Ling’s fiction. With its emphasis on the processes of social communication, Long River paints a picture of “an active audience purposefully using communication to meet its own needs; [thus moving] from communication as a threat to society, to communication as the fundamental process of society” and historical change. Such communication, as Manman’s meandering demonstrates, is necessarily reciprocal.

This latter issue of reciprocity proves to be an important point of tension in the novel as Manman and others remark on the unreciprocal nature of mass media and propaganda. Indeed, as several poignant episodes show, local society also demands to speak back to the Nationalist center. In one scene, Manman and Teng Changshun discuss the impending mechanization of local tong oil production and the crisis it will pose to the regional producers. Manman wonders how to send a message to President Chiang Kai-shek in order to “warn” him of dangers of modernization in Lüjiaping. Thinking aloud, Manman ponders: “That old leader of ours, does he know about our local situation with the oil presses? Why don’t we set up a newspaper so that he can read about it? He certainly reads the Shenbao. And moreover he had his people set up The Central Daily [中央日报], so he should [be able to] find out [from our paper]!” Teng Changshun rebuts: “He sits in Nanjing, and can’t hear voices a long way off [顺风耳] or see a

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468 “The effects of mass media, as described in the preceding pages, have moved from the concept of the magic bullets of mass media persuasion to the concept of the obstinate audience; from a picture of a passive, defenseless audience acted upon by mass media to a picture of an active audience purposefully using communication to meet its own needs; from communication as a threat to society, to communication as the fundamental process of society.” (Schramm, “Mass Media in an Information Age,” 316).
thousand miles [千里眼], how would he know about our affairs in the countryside!” (189). A similar scene occurs in the following chapter when asks a well-informed boatman why news of recent decomposition of relations between locals and the occupying forces has not been transmitted [传] to Nanjing. The boatman replies: “My old comrade, [the President] is busy the whole day long, his hair has gone completely white, in the course of a day he has so many documents to take care of and so many visitors to see, how could he possibly take heed of this sesame seed-sized [local] affair?” (201). The lesson, plainly, is that centralized mass media only broadcasts information out (for Chiang’s voice does reach the countryside, either in print or through the ether by radio waves), but such media cannot dynamically collect information from the periphery and send it back to the center.

As the novel’s preface(s) suggest, Long River itself might be taken as an attempt to “speak back” to the discursive and broadcast centers of the nation. In doing so, the text proposes a powerful alternative vision of the novel form itself in an age of propaganda writing: rather than an essentialized, monoglossic grand narrative, Shen advocates a composition of small narratives representing individual voices. “[The] distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel,” writes Bakhtin (263). These heteroglossic exchanges—the xiaoxi that passes from individual to individual in a kind of phatic series of

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469 I have translated these terms quite literally, but, alternatively, the term “eyes that see a thousand miles” [千里眼] can be read as an old-fashioned term that dates back to the late Ming; in this case, it would mean “telescope.”

470 This is of course an oversimplification on Shen’s part, as Mao Dun’s contemporaneous China’s One Day project (1936) proves. See chapter 3. However, it is important to recognize that Mao Dun’s project, as a communicative event, also contains a strong element of radio modernity, and its vision of the Chinese nation accords with the propaganda images published in Broadcast Weekly.
exchanges—collectively leave their mark on social consciousness of a signal event, the New Life Movement. At the same time, such “rivulets and droplets” give an ironic dimension to the novel’s grandiose title: instead of a unified and linear narrative of history, a “Long River” of time, the novel presents a complex and vibrant labyrinth of diverse utterances and local impressions. If read carefully, this tension is subtly illustrated in a passage taking stock of the view from Maple Hill, where Manman takes care of the Teng family shrine. In so aural a narrative, this scene stands out for its distinctive visual description\(^\text{471}\) in which the narrative gaze shifts from looking downward to looking outward:

Surrounding the ancestral temple were several mature maple trees whose leaves had already touched with yellow, red, and purple by several morning frosts. Everywhere beneath the trees lay beautiful leaves spotted with various colors. . .

The orange groves bordering the river offered an outstanding spectacle with their leaves of jade-green stretching long and unbroken along both banks of the small river. The trees were adorned [缀] with fruits hanging from their branches, all vermilion and bright yellow, the oranges were complexly packed [繁密] together like stars in the sky. From a distance they look like a plane [一片] of brilliant light, whose magnificence cannot be described. (118)

The scene gives the reader the sense of the local topography and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. From far off, the individual leaves and oranges (one is here reminded of He Yubo’s “scattered dots”) become an undifferentiated plane of light. The effect is purely sublime, as it can only be described in the negative. But such brilliance at a distance comes at the price of seeing the individual tiles of the mosaic. When transposed to Shen’s social vision, this equates to the collapse of individual difference, individual voices, and the network of branches that connects them.

\(^{471}\) Notably, the exercise of looking off into the distance is repeated in several of the panoramic establishment shots that begin the chapters.
Conclusion: Social Fabrics in a New Era

If we trace Shen’s career past the 1949 divide, we see that his opposition toward grand narratives (including that embraced by the Communists) and his suspicion of propaganda led him to set aside fiction early on in the new era. Sensing that his attitude greatly compromised him in the eyes of the Party, on the eve of the Communist takeover of Beijing in the spring of 1949, Shen attempted suicide.\(^{472}\) In the period of convalescence after his attempt, he wrote in his diary: “It’s evident that literature will inevitably become one with propaganda in order to have significance and effect as [a tool] of mass education. . .  [This trend] will completely destroy opinions of literature like those I previously held, leaving nothing left over.  It is inevitable and necessary to put aside my pen.”\(^{473}\) Briefly, however, in late 1951, while traveling in rural Sichuan with a land reform brigade [土改团], Shen found a glimmer of literary inspiration in the countryside. Here he might be able to contribute to the political imperatives of socialist literature while remaining true to his own authorial eye. He composed poetry and even a short story, with telling titles: “The Land Reform Brigade Arrives in Chongqing” [土改团来到重庆] and “Old Comrade” [老同志], and he wrote a letter to his youngest son, promising to create a model of land reform fiction [土改小说] that would outdo Zhao Shuli and his popular peasant hero, Li Youcai [李有才] (whom Shen viewed as simplistic and one-dimensional).\(^{474}\) More than anything, it was being back in the countryside that inspired him and gave him the opportunity to “study.” He planned an ethnographically oriented travelogue similar to Random Sketches on a Trip to Hunan that

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\(^{472}\) On the possibility that Shen was struggling with schizophrenia, see Xiaojue Wang, “From Asylum to Museum: The Discourse of Insanity and Schizophrenia in Shen Congwen’s 1949 Transition,” in Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring, 2011), 133-168.

\(^{473}\) Quoted in Zhang Xinying’s recent biography, The Latter Half of Shen Congwen’s Life [沈从文的后半生] (Guangxi: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014), 24. The original diary entry is in SCQJ 19:22.

\(^{474}\) Zhang, 69, 74.
would build on his fiction of the 1940s. “If I go on studying here, after three months, I could produce a thick volume of probably fifty episodes, and produce *Random Jottings of Sichuan* [ 川行散记]. I already have many outlines amongst my impressions. Especially the [local] language: I understand its meaning, and I also understand the emotions within its tones [语气中的感情]. This is an extraordinary advantage.”

And, in moments of loneliness, he rediscovered his passion for reading ancient texts, particularly Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, a text that provided solace for Shen’s increasing feeling of isolation from the uproarious contemporary era.

But the rekindled hope that writing might regain for him some of its previous significance, and joy along the same trip Shen came to realize that it was no longer a viable option. Despite multiple revisions to the manuscript of “Old Comrade,” he couldn’t get the necessary political tone right: he found it impossible to put his literary craft to the purposes of the revolution. Feeling the avenue of literature was permanently closed, since the late 1940s Shen increasingly absorbed himself in a new vocation: the historical study of Chinese material culture [物质文化史] and handicraft art, including media like jade, porcelain, lacquerware, clothing, fabric, embroidery, paper cutting, woodcut art, bronze mirrors, fans, and so on. Since 1949, Shen was formally employed by the National Museum of History [历史博物馆]. And he dreamed of establishing a national crafts school that would help preserve Chinese knowledge silk works and embroidery, and engage in tracing the evolution of the craft from the Tang/Song

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475 Zhang, 69.

476 Zhang, 83.
through the Qing. As Shen described the roots of his interest in craftsmanship, he discussed how it created a bond between his urban life and his countryside past. As an artist (retired or not), he closely identified his own literary sensibilities with the wandering mind and attentive eyes of the craftsman at work. As he wrote in an unpublished memoir that he wrote shortly before attempting suicide in 1949:

[Af]ter I came to the city, craft art [工艺美术] expanded my horizon [lit. ‘field of vision,’ 眼界], and my fondness and familiarity [of it] were both based in a comprehensive comparison [between the object and its maker]. What entirely flooded my mind was not simply the [worker’s] zest for process of production, but also the way in which the producer’s mind fused [融合] with his work, his industry, desires, passion, even some of his unrealistic calculations. All works of art contain the forms of their producers’ struggles with life, as well as their measured intelligence—this I understood in depth and detail. Handicrafts constituted another form of “small narrative” that, like literature, was under siege in the new socialist era as Mao’s promotion of industrialization resulted in a general demotion and “deskilling” of local handicraft knowledge across China. Ever prolific, through the next two decades Shen quietly produced a number of fine studies on China’s premodern material culture [see his Quanji vols. 28-32]. These studies should not be taken as transparent researches into history, but as creative forays into living history.

While comprehensive analysis of this corpus of Shen’s awaits further research, it is here convenient to consider the close resonance between Shen’s passion for crafts and his earlier craft

477 Zhang, 70. Shen’s interest in arts education in fact extends back to the 1930s. See his treatment of contemporary art and art training in “The Birth of Art Monthly” [《艺术周刊》的诞生] (SCQJ 16: 464-9), and “Arts Education” [艺术教育] (SCQJ 16: 474-8), published in 1934 and 1937, respectively.

478 Reprinted in Zhang, 38. The full text is from SCQJ 27: 23. Strikingly, in the text Shen traces craft beyond the human: in the same text, he says that he learned about himself through music, but that he learned about others through art. The first “art” that he remembers impacting him was the sight of bees building nests and spiders weaving webs: “Their painstaking work and their integrated structures led me to realize the honesty and cleverness [巧] of these small lives” (22).

of writing. The relationship between writing and craftsmanship is ages old in traditional Chinese aesthetics, having been extensively explicated as early as the turn of the sixth century, in the *Wenxin diaolong* [文心雕龙] by Liu Xie [刘勰] (ca. 465-522). But Shen’s identification with the craftsman and his second career begs the questions: What does Shen’s interest in handicrafts tell us about his earlier writing? And, conversely, what does Shen’s approach toward the craft of writing suggest about his interest in handicrafts? Given the number of times that he was called upon to pick up writing in the service of the new state (once even Mao Zedong personally suggested Shen go back to literature), and the number of times he disavowed writing in favor of his research, we might identify this new career path as a kind of sublimation of Shen’s earlier impulse toward self-expression through writing. In the passage above, we hear echoes of Shen’s promotion of “craft,” and we see a reflection of a scene in *Long River* where Manman deftly weaves a basket for Yaoyao while they chat (245).

Shen’s juxtaposition between craft and text is expediently illustrated in the design he consigned his cousin, the artist Huang Yongyu [黄永玉], to produce for a collection of his essays on material history, *Longfeng Art* [龙凤艺术], published in 1960. This image (Figure 50) shows an ethnic minority girl sitting alongside a handwoven basket, upon which she props an

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481 Xiaojue Wang gestures toward continuity across the 1949 gap, as well. While I agree with her that Shen’s museological turn represents a kind of tacit resistance to the monumentality of the new socialist revolutionary regime that arose in the late 1940s, I submit that she misinterprets both Shen’s labor at the museum as a form of engagement with “dead” objects (whereas in fact Shen saw craft as a living form of tradition), as well as her interpretation that Shen’s engagement with museology does not also stand as a genuine attempt on Shen’s part to contribute to the socialist state. See Wang, “From Asylum to Museum”; as well as the second chapter to her study on cultural continuity across the 1949 divide, *Modernity with a Cold War Face: Reimagining the Nation in Chinese Literature Across the 1949 Divide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 57-8 and passim. On Shen’s survival strategies during this period, see also Jenny Huangfu, “Roads to Salvation: Shen Congwen, Xiao Qian, and the Problem of Non-Communist Celebrity Writers, 1948-1957,” in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Fall, 2010), 39-87.

open book. Unconnected to the actual contents of _Longfeng Art_, the cover image is instead a
telling icon of the handicraft as a living tradition. Or perhaps the book in the girl’s hands is the
text itself, in which case the image suggests the masses’ interest and participation in scholarship
on their own material history. Regardless, the proximity between the book and the basket draws
them together into a metaphorical similitude—a likeness that is compounded by the linear
qualities of the basket and the text on the open page—in which each network might stand in for
the other, a visual literalization of Shen’s notion of the handicraft of writing.

Indeed, the craft form that most interested Shen was fabrics and weaving. Through his
tenure a historian of material culture, he would indulge this fascination by extensively
documenting the textual and material histories of fabric-making and decoration. He repeatedly
stressed that fabric craft art, despite its importance in popular rural and traditional culture, had
been relatively ignored by specialists, institutions, and collectors; perhaps he also identified with
the neglected status into which the handicraft of weaving, a distinctively feminine mode of
labor, had fallen the new era. He also emphasized that it was also very hard to preserve, but
that in many places, particularly in the southwest, it still served as a living tradition. As a living
tradition, fabric handicraft offered an important link to the social past—here traditional modes of
sociality still existed alongside traditional modes of production. Local products came together
with local narratives, as Shen wrote in an article discussing the tradition of cross-stitching: “It is primarily produced by women in their spare time, they don’t use a set plan for the image, but generally recreate situations close at hand. . . but as the subject of the images reflects social customs and habits, the images don’t deviate from auspicious hopes [such as] the production of offspring, good marital relations, copious harvests, and partially integrate popular plays and

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483 On the longer history of weaving and female labor, see Francesca Bray, _Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China_ (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
Observing the images that Shen included with this article (Figures 51 & 52), one is tempted to see them as belated illustrations of Shen’s own literary creations. Certainly the small-narrative quality of these “scenes” complements Shen’s heteroglossic literary style (and it is worth recalling that Bakhtin’s favorite metaphor for heteroglossia was weaving).

In this chapter I have attempted to show the mutually constitutive relationship between Shen’s aesthetics of “craft,” with its emphasis on assemblage and network, and, on the other hand, Shen’s social vision, with its suspicion of mass politics and propaganda. As I have argued, the evidence for the formal relationship between these ways of seeing is substantial, though it is also subtle. By way of conclusion, I want to turn to one final image from Shen’s 1950s scholarship on fabrics (Figure 53). It appears as a plate in Shen’s unprecedented research on fabric design (and his first full-length study of Chinese handicrafts), Chinese Silk Design [中国丝绸图案] (1957). Across twenty-seven images, Chinese Silk Design offers not just a survey of different designs in the history of China’s silk production, but also a kind of study in the technique of arrangement: how images emerge from the warp and the weft, and how patterns emerge from visual repetition. But only in this plate does Shen reveal his own technique for producing the designs. In the top register of the frame is a reconstructed pattern, while the bottom register is a photographic reproduction of the actual piece of fabric. Thus the bottom portion authorizes the above, and shows how Shen recreated the designs through a synecdochic process of extension or scaffolding. In turn, the top register contextualizes the bottom by showing the larger design in which the fragment would have been nested. To a degree, this image exemplifies what Xiaojue Wang identifies as Shen Congwen’s aesthetics of fragments, the

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484 SCQJ 30: 124. The original essay was printed in Zhuangshi [装饰], No. 3 (1959).

485 Beijing: Zhongguo gudian yishu chubanshe, 1957. Shen produced the study in collaboration with a recent graduate of the Central Academy of Art named Wang Jiashu [王家树] (b. 1929).
cultural details that constitute an alternative focus and mode of narration to that of the grand narratives of socialist revolutionary ideology. But the picture is more interesting does more than foreground the fragment, and instead offers itself up to an important reading of materiality and representation. In its mutually supplementary fashion, each register offers a key for critically reflecting upon or understanding the other: this plate is a kind of metapicture.

Focusing on the ontology of the two registers, we might read this image as a symbolic analog of Shen’s two careers, as author and historian, and the dialectic between them. The photograph below indexes the material piece of fabric, preserving it “in” history by making it part of an archive. In contrast, the design above is an artistic image, a fanciful representation, with no historical referent per se. Overall, given its quiet arrival in a roaring age of high socialism, perhaps we might see this metapicture as a fleeting revival of Shen’s earlier literary project and his critique of mass politics via the figure of the network: as the eye shuttles between the two registers, it moves from fragment, to an emergent pattern, from an individual node, to a constellated aggregate.

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Figure 47: Binding of an original edition of the *Ciyuan*, vol. 1 (1915)

Figure 48: He Yubo, narrative plotlines in Mao Dun’s early novels (1932)
Figure 50: Cover design by Shen’s cousin, Huang Yongyu [黄永玉] for Shen’s 1960 first published collection of writings on material culture, *Longfeng Art* [龙凤艺术] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1960)
Figure 51: Close-up for a cross-stitch [挑花] scene of a boat race; image from *SCQJ*, 30: 125.

Figure 52: Qiandongnan [黔东南] Miao cross-stitched and back-embroidered child’s handkerchief. In *SCQJ* 30: 123.
Figure 53: Fragment of flower embroidery (Tang era) and extrapolated design, in Shen Congwen’s *Chinese Silk Design* (1957). Reprinted in *SCQJ* 30: 17.
The aesthetics of information that emerged during the Republican period served as a foundation for the artistic exploration of the information order both during the years of socialist state-building under Mao Zedong (1949-1976), and again in the Reform Era (1978-) with the decline of socialism following Mao’s death and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. As with the cultural production of the Republican period, the two kinds of information were variously made visible in reflective moments of rupture in which information was reified into an independent entity. Since the foundation of the CCP, the general information order has been reoriented to fit the needs of a powerful apparatus of ideological manufacture and control through institutions of propaganda and censorship. In the conclusions to Chapters Three and Four I touched upon this expansion of propaganda and the resultant aesthetics of information in the form of “Mao as signal” in the case of the iconography of the Great Leader, and in the form of Shen Congwen’s sublimation of his networked sociological vision into his study of the history of material culture.

Perhaps the most palpable aspect of cultural production under Mao was the state’s control over artistic production and public debate through censorship. Yomi Braester notes that the foundation for this regime of control was laid by Mao Zedong in his famous “Talks on Literature and Art” at Yan’an in 1942, in which Mao argued for the elimination of any space of ambiguity
in art, literature, or public debate in general, along with the total delegitimation of dissent. In the following decades, information was often made visible as a sign of the Party’s exclusive authority. In literature, for example, the aesthetics of information were most prominent in the pulp novellas of “adventure fiction” and “anti-spy fiction” that were widely read during the 1950s. These stories were frequently narratives of detection: members of the working class in some locality would first discover the machinations of KMT- or pro-American spies to disseminate antisocialist messages or collect intelligence to send overseas. Then, some brave representative of the masses would heroically step forward to assist the military in capturing and delivering the enemy to the state. The book titles alone give a sense of the centrality of information in this genre: *The Signal Gun* (1954); *The Record of the Airborne Spy’s Capture* (空降特务潜网记) (1955); *The Secret Documents* (秘密文件) (1955); *The Secret of the Table* (表的秘密) (1957); *The Strange Musical Note* [奇奇怪的音符] (1957). Such literature found parallel on the silver screen in films such as *The Red Lantern* [红灯记] (1963). Set in occupied Manchuria, this film features a railroad switchman who has been tasked by a communist operative with delivering a telegraph code to a group of guerrillas hiding out in the mountains. As Braester analyzes it, the film’s focus upon and reification of the telegraph code itself is meant to suggest the Party’s totalitarian power over

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490 See the lengthy table of publications in this genre provided in ibid, 142-50.
information flow and interpretation of signs in the early 1960s. Overall, these literary and filmic narratives helped reproduce the general atmosphere of Cold War paranoia and mutual surveillance. In doing so, they directly interpellated their readers into a kind of mass-based *h. informaticus* who, like the character Manman in Shen Congwen’s *Long River*, was to be constantly on alert for aberrant social and natural signals, and, like the financiers in Mao Dun’s 1930s market literature, would inherently recognize the power structures embedded in informational asymmetries.

In the “Reform and Opening Up” [改革开放] policies of the Reform Period (1978-) that followed Mao’s death and the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, China underwent yet another transformation following the government’s embrace of developmentalism, with its attendant promotion of economic privatization, liberalism, and a new openness toward western technology and science. The rapid growth of the economy in this period has been accompanied by the return of older, capitalist forms of knowledge labor and information labor such as corporate management, and even stockbroking following the reestablishment of the Shanghai Stock Exchange in 1990. In the 1980s, certain of Fifth Generation directors explored the terrain of the new information order in film, such as in Mi Jiashan in his satirical treatment of “consulting” in *The Trouble-shooters* [顽主] (1989), or Huang Jianxin in his fascinating examination of corporate espionage, *The Black Cannon Incident* [黑炮事件] (1986).

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492 For a further review of Cold War competition between Mainland China and Taiwan (Republic of China), see Xiaojue Wang, *Modernity With a Cold War Face*, 3-4.

Also during this period, a new discourse of information emerged, this time clustering around the term *xinxi* [信息]. This discourse was developed in literature to constitute a new form of information aesthetics, in this iteration orienting fantasies (and anxieties) about computers and information science, and, more generally, post-industrial labor and the cyborg body.\(^{494}\) A propaganda poster from the late 1980s that promotes information (*xinxi*) captures the general zeitgeist of this new era of information. In this poster (Figure 54), titled “Information, a Turning Point in the Development of Human Intelligence” [信息，开发人类智力的契机] (1989),\(^{495}\) the image shows the inscription of the human mind as an electrical circuit and the intellect as a form of digital computing: abstraction at work. With its colorful palate and avant-garde font, the poster exudes a strong optimism about the “turning point” in the history of knowledge labor. It thus offers a kind of literalization of the cybernetic mind/machine metaphor whose history is explored by Lydia Liu in her book, *The Freudian Robot*.\(^{496}\) Overall, the aesthetics of information on display here converge with those of explorations of the virtual and the “post-human” in the west;\(^{497}\) indeed, aside from the Chinese characters, this poster would not be out of place in the contemporary fantasies of any post-industrial culture.

The aesthetics of information that emerged in the Republican period thus set a foundation for a number of iterations after 1949. While the political context and the information order differ drastically between these eras, the cultural production of today continues to return to the


\(^{495}\) I took a photo of this poster while it was on display in an exhibition of China’s socialist art at the National Museum of Art [中国美术馆] in 2012.


information order that emerged in Republican China as a source of nostalgic fascination, historical revisionism, and reflection upon contemporary conditions. Nowhere is this clearer than the hit television drama series, *Lurk* (2009; dir. by Jiang Wei and Fu Wei). Lauded widely for its realism and dramatic tension, *Lurk* was even christened as China’s version of the American show, *The Wire* (2002-2008), the vast difference of the shows’ settings notwithstanding. Based on a short story of the same title by a minor author named Long Yi, the T.V. series expands the narrative to cover thirty episodes. The narrative is set between 1945 and 1949 in the period of civil war between the KMT and the CCP over control over the mainland, and features a Nationalist spy, Yu Zecheng (played by Sun Honglei), who decides to defect to the Communist side after the one-two punch of first discovering that his fiancé is an underground Communist operative, and then witnessing with disgust the corrupt schemes for personal enrichment pursued by his superiors at the Nationalists’ Intelligence Agency in the social turmoil following China’s victory over Japan. After his conversion to the CCP, Yu Zecheng becomes an effective double agent in the Tianjin office of the KMT Intelligence Agency. The narrative highlights Yu Zecheng’s resourcefulness as he collects intelligence upon KMT operations and subtly sabotages their anti-CCP operations from within. At the same time, the narrative also focuses on Yu Zecheng’s budding romance with a CCP operative, Cui Ping (Yao Chen), who has been assigned to act as Yu Zecheng’s wife in Tianjin. A rough-hewn peasant, Cui Ping has been chosen by the Party because her illiteracy makes her an ideal conduit for delivering messages between Yu Zecheng and his Communist handlers: even if she is caught and tortured, she will still be unable to reveal the textual information to which she has been privy.

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498 *Qianfu* (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2009), 1-20.
The consummation of Yu’s relationship with Cui symbolizes the harmonious alliance between intellectual and working classes, but it is not its allegorical structure that made *Lurk* so popular. Rather, what makes Yu Zecheng so appealing a character in the 21st century is his familiarity as an *h. informaticus*, particularly for an increasingly white-collar viewership steeped in post-industrial culture. Lest its viewers mistakenly assume that a spy’s life is primarily filled with dramatic maneuvering and near-escapes, *Lurk* gives ample time to more mundane tasks such as social networking, or domestic chores. Most prominent is how Yu Zecheng’s position within the government bureaucracy is essentially that of a paper-pusher (he keeps track of the production of the translation bureau and signs off on reports) and information seeker (*Figure 55*). The function of this “day job” is not to set in relief his spy work, but rather to effect a formal merger between the two. That is, what makes *Lurk*’s aesthetics of information important is the way the show imagines a spy operating in 1949 through the lens of information labor and white-collar office work common to the year of the series’ production, 2009: office work and espionage are mirrors for each other.

Indeed, a merger between the two is literally enacted in a popular book published on the heels of the T.V. show, titled *Lurking in the Office* [潜伏在办公室], which draws lessons from the show in order to illustrate the cutthroat bearing essential to climbing the corporate ladder. The book’s author, Lu Qi [陆琪], argues that the competitive atmosphere of the office requires one to discard outdated ideas about ethical behavior, and instead adopt a kind of realpolitik approach to the dynamic network of office politics. By this analogy, both the office

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499 To that end, as a TV series, *Lurk* is particularly well-suited for the media of its era, namely, the small screens of the computers and cellphones, the platforms for the work and leisure of the commuter, office-worker class.

500 Lu Qi, *Qianfu zai bangongshi* (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2009). Interestingly, the book’s cover design skeuomorphically mimics that of a manila office envelope, thereby interpellating its reader as a kind of *h. informaticus* office worker from the outset.
worker and the spy must “lurk,” which entails the maintenance and manipulation of both one’s self-identity and one’s communication networks. The kind of aspiring office manager Lu Qi describes comes full circle to the most prominent *h. informaticus* in modern Chinese literature, *Midnight*’s Wu Sunfu, who surely would have applauded Lu Qi’s tactics (“socializing is a kind of weapon,” “retreat is the best kind of attack”), and paranoiac corporate aphorisms (“those who are half a rank above you are the most dangerous; those who are the same rank as you are your natural enemies”). Overall, *Lurking in the Office* exemplifies the kind of managerial rhetoric and disposition of the contemporary office worker that Alan Liu describes as the “cool,” “the technoinformatic vanishing point of contemporary aesthetics, psychology, morality, politics, spirituality, and everything. No more beauty, sublimity, tragedy, grace, or evil: only cool or not cool.”

In this merger of popular culture with white-collar culture, then, we see a kind of degree zero of the aesthetics of information in which it becomes hard to distinguish any grounds for aesthetics outside of the all-encompassing information order of late stage capitalism in China today.

It is this zero-degree of information’s expansion into everyday subjectivity that “The Aesthetics of Information in Modern Chinese Literature” has attempted to historicize. Marshall McLuhan famously asserted that people cling to a “rearview-mirror view” of the world, meaning that they are not directly aware or conscious of the media effects in their present environment because such effects saturated the field of attention so overwhelmingly, thus numbing the viewer. One outcome of my dissertation, I hope, is that it helps us reflect upon our present

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day, the mid-morning of a so-called “information age” in China and elsewhere, by way of detour to the early twentieth century and the emergence of an earlier, more sporadic “information age.”
Figure 54: Guo Xianlu [郭线卢], “Information, a Turning Point in the Development of Human Intelligence” (1989)
Figure 55: Screenshot from *Lurk* (2009): Yu Zecheng in the office, speaking about the reckoning of company stock


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Mao Dun, “Sketch of the Stock Exchange”

[交易所速写]

1936

The street in front of the gate is not broad—only with some effort would it be possible for two cars to pass through side-by-side. Nor is the gate anything grand. Compared to the large doors of the Textile Exchange on Edward Avenue [today’s Yan’an Road] with its twenty steps in front, this stock exchange is lacking in majesty. And in this area, it’s the only large building. What I’m describing of course is the new building of the Shanghai Stock Exchange.

Looking in directly through the front doors, one sees a corridor of considerable length, with two rows of four great stone columns blocking the line of sight. Advance just one more step, and one is [already] at the “market” itself. The scene is similar to the main hall of a large theater. Above, in the rear section, there is a “clapper-board stage” [拍板台] that makes many laugh, and many cry.

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503 The essay’s original title was simply “Stock Exchange” [证券交易所]. It was first published in the spring of 1936 in an issue of the widely read Liangyou pictorial magazine, number 114. Later that decade, Mao Dun renamed the essay “Sketch of the Stock Exchange” and republished it in a collection of his essays, Impressions, Associations, Memories [印象，感想，回忆] (Shanghai: Wenhua shenghuo chubanshe, 1939).

504 This is the Shanghai Huashang ( Merchants’) Stock and Bond Market [上海华商证券交易所]. It was chartered in 1919 and began operation in 1920. In 1933, following a general consolidation of stock exchanges in Shanghai, the Huashang Exchange became much more powerful. The Exchange closed between during the Japanese occupation from 1937-1946, but quickly re-opened after the war with one billion yuan’s worth of capital in the postwar period, only to close permanently on the eve of the Communist takeover.
At exactly 11:00 in the morning a critical moment has arrived, and the trading is pitched. The hall very much resembles a beehive. Please don’t imagine that the hall is filled with row upon row of seats, like the hall of a large playhouse. One could not even squeeze in a small bench. Everyone is standing: the outer ring has come to watch the market conditions [市面], prepared to buy or sell—might as well say that the majority are the individual traders with small amounts of capital, though naturally there’s also no shortage of “inside traders” [抷帽子].

They are not the principal instigators who loudly, ear-piercingly scream out numbers. Amongst them some raise their heads, and look toward the stage, —though please don’t be mistaken, the men on the clapper-board stage who roll up their sleeves all the way to their shoulders are not at all handsome, and one can’t spot anything of guiding value. [Instead, the traders] are looking at the “background” on the stage that is exhibiting ‘XXXX Treasury Bonds,’ ‘X period of time’ . . . this sort of “theatre” (if I may make such a comparison), especially this illuminated number board at the front of this “stage.” The face of the [sign] is inlaid high above the small stage in the back, with rapidly shifting red Arabic numerals which are lined up four side-by-side, where two are for the (sub-)unit of yuan and lower, like the format we frequently see on a bill; under these two small numbers there is a horizontal line of digits, also red. The board’s writing is not small, so that from anywhere in the hall one can see it clearly. These compact, crimson, electrically lit numbers are created by people, and it is people that make them change every moment, but they controls people’s “fate.”

No—we should instead say that it is a minority of people that creates this red, electrically lit record, causing it to change every moment, thus making any estimation of the majority’s

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505 I.e. those who ride the short-term fluctuations of stock prices looking to quick make profit by buying low, selling high.
“fate” impossible. Who is the majority, then? Naturally, the people on the outer ring within the hall, who, haunted with fear, gaze at these numbers. But, at the same time, these traders are enablers—blind though they are—of the magical, red, electrically lit record. Outside of the hall there are an even greater number of people who have not personally seen their “fate” rising and sinking, who live in different areas of Shanghai, in different areas of China. But here upon the stage, when the red lights leap, the numbers determine these masses’ bankruptcy or fortune.

At the center of the ring mills a group of traders, an ear-piercingly loud motor that yells out a tide of numbers. A circular, dirty railing, like the edge of an enormously round table, forms the boundary between this group and the outside ring. This inside group represents a number of big timers: these are the brokers. Their hands and mouths are influencing the transformations of the red electrically lit numbers displayed on the wall. But they are just like the red lightning, themselves nothing more than a sort of machine, used by others. Some also stand to the side, arms folded, yelling over the noise into one another’s ears. Suddenly an assistant excitedly comes running into the fray, or a broker anxiously runs off to a small side room to speak over the telephone, only to hang up the receiver and again race back to the hall. Perhaps the red electrically lit numbers will take another jump. All the people in the hall on the outside circle experience a new wave of anxiety. They can’t help but grimly smile, grinding their teeth and swallowing their tears. Who knows which direction the numbers will move? Even the broker himself didn’t know before he took the phone call. It is thus no stretch to say he himself is nothing more than a machine.

On either side of the hall there are rooms that look like the spectator boxes at a theater. There one sees small chairs that look as if they are rarely occupied by the same backside for more than fifteen or twenty minutes. These are the back seats. Here sit two people secretively
conversing into one another’s ears; over there, another two argue over something in suppressed tones. In a chair against one of the side columns, a person with bowed back holds his head in his hands, as if ruminating: Should he escape the city? Or commit suicide by taking a dose of opium? Over there is yet another, sitting in view of the magical, red, electrically lit placard, he holds a small notebook and pencil, mindfully recording the changes. It looks like he’s drawing a treasure map—he probably believes that the fluctuation of government bonds follows a certain “path.”

There are also women about. Hanging on the shoulders of their men, these ladies are youthful and fashionable, and appear as if they’re just tagging along for a look about. Over there is a middle-aged one in first-rate clothing, but in a style that is not the most fashionable, standing together with a middle-aged man, faces upturned. When the electrically lit red characters jump up slightly, she pushes the man’s shoulder; when the red numbers jump again, she agitatedly pulls the man closer and in low tones twitters at length.

A man, completely clean-shaven, wearing only an embroidered short robe and pants, paces back and forth as throngs of people come and go around him. While pacing, he also repeatedly smacks his forehead with his palm. At this moment, the cries of trading and exchange within the hall resemble a cyclone, or a tidal wave.

If you go up to one of the upper floors and stand at the iron railing and look downward, you might suddenly think of the supernatural spirits described in old tales: “Hearing the roar of killing rushing up from below, they parted the clouds to peer downward.” From here one can clearly make out the actions of the central group, how they extend and withdraw their palms, and how the people of the outer group make their way in and out, moving like ants do just before a great rainfall. Also frequently seen are small, balled things flying through the air. These are
paper wads, about the size of a button, thrown from all sides toward the central throng. How can’t we think of supernatural beings casting their magic spells!

Even now such a wad of paper is tossed down from the “theatre box.” Your attention alights on the half-circular platform, which looks like the border of a cloud. Within this semicircle sit several people recording something; their desolation is soundless. On the wall behind them hang several number placards of broker agents. Who can predict whether the wads of paper that they throw will cause the empty-headed masses to sob, or to laugh?

A wild rumor blown through the stock exchange can excite large waves of fluctuation in bonds and stocks. These people fantasize within the rumors, get excited by them, or are rendered spiritless by them. No one is more sensitive than these people. But, if they didn’t have such sensitivity towards rumor, the bond market wouldn’t become a market. The human heart is just this sort of weird thing.
Last year a member of the older generation in my village expressed a wish to compile a local gazetteer [志]. Originally our area did have an old gazetteer, compiled by a fellow who served as a local official during the Qianlong period [1735-1799]. He was an outsider, and he only compiled materials during his time off, and thus he did not concentrate his abilities on the project. As a result, some oversights were inevitable. But this stands as our locality’s first “gazetteer.”

This time around, the old fellow vowed to improve upon the earlier version. As for the budget, it goes without saying that he himself would cover it. But this old man was busy with numerous affairs, and in truth he was only nominally involved in the compilation. Aside from passing judgment on the final version of the manuscript, he just entrusted the work of surveying and collection to several friends.

It was when the style sheet [for publication; 体例] was being put together that the old man got really involved. He pored over a number of recently compiled county- and village gazetteers, and inspected their formats. In addition, he invited over as many compilers of gazetteers as he could locate. To that end, he played host more than ten times.

Once his guest, a real big timer, was a dignified and sanctimonious man: the long-bearded Old Mister Jin. He is of the older generation from the neighboring town, and was involved in compiling a “gazetteer” of his native place. Amongst recently compiled gazetteers, his was considered the most comprehensive. He had quite a few good opinions. I recall one was that a “town gazetteer” could contain a section on “taxation” [赋税] as a way of recording the rise or drop in onerousness of the taxes in past years. He said one could also add an index of the past prices of goods [物价], which, though it could not constitute its own section, should be paid special attention to in the related sections. For example, in the “agricultural production” [农产] section, it would be ideal if the compiler could check the historical rise and fall in agricultural prices and organize them into a detailed table. The same went for the “industry” section.

There was none who did not approve of the old man’s opinion. But how could we come up with these materials? The old man twisted his beard and said, smiling, “In this matter the old account books of previous decades have a use.”

After that dinner, I often thought of the wooden chest full of old annual account books that was stored in the attic in the back of my family home during my childhood. I don’t know for what reason, but these old account books were kept around, and as a ten-year-old I often went and flipped through them, ripping out the blank pages at the back to use as scrap paper for computation exercises. By now, I am sure, that the chest full of old annual account books no longer exists. Whether it was incinerated, or traded for sweets, I don’t remember clearly. At any rate, twenty years ago, [the books’] fate had already come to an end. And I had already long ago forgotten about my family’s previous collection of these worthless “antiques” [古董].

Now, upon hearing the words of this Old Mister Jin, I recalled just how each heavy volume of old accounts had not only provided me with scrap paper for calculations, but also how
I had moved them back and forth to serve as a stepping stone for when I wanted to locate some old woodblock print of literature on top of the cabinet; in those times, it never occurred to me that these old “stepping stones” were a part of my historical record of my family—no, I should say a component of the “town gazetteer.”

In truth, if we want to know how our grandfathers’ grandfathers lived, amongst the [resources] that can tell us the most authentic information (xiaoxi) [最能告诉我们真实消息的], I’m afraid nothing surpasses these old account books!

We know that our history is also but a type of “old annual account.” It is lamentable, however, that there are so many “fake” and “embellished” [“虚账”和“花帐”] accounts! We also know that when we need “discernment” [眼光] when reading the so-called “history” of these old annual account books. Besides “discernment,” we also need a correct “method of interpretation” [“读法”]. It’s just like how that Old Mr. Jin has his own proper “viewpoint” [看法] regarding these “old annual accounts.”

Here I thought of a fellow villager that I knew, and his attitude toward the “old annual accounts” that were piled up in his house.

These days this man is very badly off. But in the past his family really got by—the several decades’ worth of “old annual accounts,” stacked as high as a person, are proof of this. When his father placed the last account book, filled out in his own hand, on top of the stack, the volume joined a collection that had accumulated over generations. This happened over thirty years ago. As for the son, after his old man’s “treasure” fell into his own hands, year after year he also added to the to the stack a new, thick volume. In those times life was comfortable. But

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507 Interestingly, this is an atypical usage of xiaoxi to mean “information” in the sense of statistics, rather than as a bit of personal and ephemeral news.
the recent couple of years have been different. The evidence is that, of late, his account books are getting thinner and thinner. Last year, heaving a sigh, he proclaimed: “This one is only fifty pages!” Who knows, perhaps this year his account will only fill twenty pages.

However, regarding the value of these “old annual accounts,” his attitude has all along remained unchanged. No—I should say, as his circumstances become meaner, the attitude toward the “old annual accounts” passed down from his forefathers becomes in him ever more resolute and intransigent. For instance: three or five years prior, before he had fallen into complete ruin, hearing people discussing how much the Zhang family were demanding for a daughter-in-law, how much the Li family had to spend to marry off their daughter, he would simply chuckle and remark: “Previously when the elder of the handled the wedding of fifth paternal aunt, he spent the same amount as the Li family; during the big ceremony for my father, our family also asked for a bit more than the Zhang family. You can check the old accounts about all of this! But don’t you forget: in those times, a cruller sold for three wen!” Since year before last, he hasn’t been able to laugh lightly at any affairs. The day before yesterday, on new year’s eve, when the clerk from the grain shop sat in his home, demanding he clear his account of the thirteen yuan and eight jiao that he owes, blue veins popping out over the old man’s entire face, and he leapt back and forth as if crazy, making an uproar. He yelled: “I tell you, [I must] delay through the New Year’s celebration, [but] will certainly pay you back by the Lantern Festival. You don’t believe it? You don’t trust my house? Go have a look at the stack of our household’s old accounts, passed down since my forefathers: every year is full of expenses and incomes in the thousands and ten thousands! Me, disclaim your thirteen yuan, eight jiao? What a joke, what a joke!” He really did proffer forth a large pile of “old annual accounts,” telling the grain shop clerk to have a “look for himself.” It is said that this New Year’s eve he reverentially
reviewed these “old annual accounts” the entire night. He began to shed grateful tears, mumbling to himself: “Our ancestors in every year really did have expenses and incomes in the thousands and tens of thousands. . . in our village, amongst the wealthy families, who has as large a stack of old accounts such as this! Hm! There are only three households able to bring out as big a stack as this of several decades’ worth of old accounts: Old Mister Zhao on the East Street, Second Brother Qian on South Street, and on this street there is only me!” Amidst those “old account books” passed down through generations, he was only able to find conviction [确信] in his own self-worth [自傲]. This return to the “golden era” of the past lightly kneaded away the “pain of frustration.”
The busy period having not yet arrived, the department is strangely peaceful and the employees rather idle. There in a corner sat a long-distance telephone operator, Daren, who had only recently taken up the post. He was inspecting that odd machine used for transmitting civilization, its porcelain body, its copper ribbons, its staples and dots, its wires and threads, and its string of small lights. He felt bewildered. He was a bit short on sleep, his digestion wasn’t too good, and right then he looked like he was working up a temper. Right, he was a little angry. A new life was pressing hard down upon him, constricting him, making him mad. He had been writing in his diary, recording an incident he overheard yesterday afternoon, a call from a soldier to a tobacco merchant to press the latter for payment for a load of tobacco where the two had quarreled. The soldier and the merchant worked together distributing that poisonous substance to the county, and the merchant as a rule received a sixteen percent commission. But when it came time for the merchant to deliver the money, he didn’t have it. On the one hand, the soldier was anxious to get back his capital, but on the other hand there wasn’t much he could do about it. The matter couldn’t be cleared up over the phone, leaving no alternative but a round of severe verbal abuse. That’s just how things were! Every day there’d be one or two incidents resembling this one.
After jotting down in the diary more fragments of confused language, he stopped to read it over to himself and got really angry. Abandoning the unfinished entry, he unconsiously flipped back to previous days’ entries and began reading them.

... What inexplicable fate made it possible for me to come to this small county and serve as a telephone operator? For such a job, one needs a gigantic belly in order to swallow up all its depression and boredom. Is this a job for humans? [Engineers] crisscrossed the area within several hundreds of li with lines containing copper wiring from abroad and in various strategic places installed these complex connectors [接线机] and transmitter machines [传话机]: “Hello,” “Hello,” “OK,” “OK,” once the they have installed this “implement of civilization,” connected the line and troubleshooted it, they return to the provincial capital to collect their commission with the “Wawa” foreign company. Thereupon in this place an auspicious day is chosen for the opening [of the telephone bureau], attracting the county’s head commissioner, the government messengers [传达], the shopkeepers, as well as the common families, on down to the cripples and old ladies, aunties, temple nuns, and whomever can scrounge up two coins. “Sir, recite for me the regulations, I demand to answer [the call]...” “I have here only 84 coppers, I’m short four cents, but at any rate please [do me the favor of accepting them], take the call, I’ll speak a little less [over the line]!” If you try to make the person read the regulations herself, well, no go! Education hasn’t not been universalized, so Mrs. Wang doesn’t recognize the characters. They need to scrape together the correct amount, but the pitiful thing is that the 84 coppers were already scraped together from various places. Yamen affairs are even harder to deal with: if one is slow in connecting the line, then the county government’s office messenger assumes the airs of a functionary and accuses you of “holding up public affairs.” Hah! Even usury counts as public affairs! Then there are the conversations between military showoffs. Their first words are always something like: “Connector, damn you, are your ears stuffed with cock?” Replying that your ears are only filled with their words—now that would be a good reply. It would be good to tell him that, for these are exactly the people who are always seeking “to get to the bottom of things.” These guys, who receive endless scolding and countless beatings, they constantly drill and stand guard, suppress bandits and abuse young women. For this, they get a monthly payment of three kuai and four mao, though they are completely unengaged in anything productive, these odd ducks known as “deputy gentlemen” [副爷]! Between northern and southern provinces of China, there are over a million of these types. Who knows where they come from, or of what use they are to the country.

This is the true university for training people to understand what it means to be Chinese. I should keep studying, I should continue enduring this hardship and tolerating this suffering. This career will tell me what China is, what it has. For one who wants to live on in China, [he] must understand how the majority there live...
Only twenty-one years old and having recently graduated from a high school established by the province, Daren is still a youth. After graduating he didn’t move to the next level of schooling. At that time, his mind was full of idealism about a career, about work, and about scholarship. By lucky coincidence, the province was investing in new construction projects and had just completed a long-distance telephone network. An advertisement for operators was published in the paper announcing that, out of six hundred people, only thirty outstanding and excellent fellows would be chosen for the job of operator. Only after he was chosen was he dispatched to work in this county town. How many people coveted such a stable and profitable job! How many hoped for such a position but couldn’t attain it!

But in truth, this job really was worthy of others’ envy and admiration. For the kind of person who was willing to learn a bit from society, who had the courage to prepare to recognize “life” [人生], and moreover hoped to in the future use his brains and his hand pursue a career as an author, for such a person, there really wasn’t a better opportunity. When you think about it, could it be that anyone had more experience than the ears of this long-distance telephone operator? This was a comprehensive exchange station for the corrupt souls of the region. What vulgar language would fool one such as he? What novel and strange affairs did he not know?

Especially those of the yamen. All the games of the office, from fraud to bribery, repaying small deeds with great favors, flouting the law, filing lawsuits over asking prices or remuneration . . . all the disreputable affairs that are at present widely recognized as entirely natural in China, [these] must all be discussed, set up, and negotiated over the phone. Everyone knows that regarding these affairs, one can fool heaven and earth, but there’s no fooling the telephone operator.
And precisely for this reason, all the institutions in the county are completely willing to be on good terms with the telephone operator, taking the one who works at the telephone department as a reliable confidant or intimate other [心服知己], they are at once unreservedly burdensome toward the operator, while also being absolutely polite with him.

As for the common folk, it’s because these people are completely ignorant and are unsuited for using this tool of civilization, they are always up for troubling the operator. And yet they harbor a certain fear of him, just like how they see the employees at the post and telegraph offices: don’t worry about the officials, worry about the gatekeepers. Although the telephone office opens a connection for as little as two mao, it also controls their talk by making use of “There is no free line,” and “Time’s up” to resist these burdensome people. Regardless whether you’re a country bumpkin or a city dweller, there’s no way to negotiate with the operator. Those that actually bind the hands of the operator are soldiers, but then again the affairs of soldiers are also completely in the hands of the telephone operator.

This operator recalled yesterday’s report on the military’s bandit suppression initiative, which made him very uneasy. Looking at the time, it was still at least three hours before it would become busy, so he walked out of the office and onto the street to have a look about. Across from the telephone office was a noodle shop, where a fat shopkeeper was standing atop a wooden stool, while his small assistant supported the legs of the stool as the master worked to post a banner announcing the shop’s anniversary celebration and the discount of noodles. Several unemployed idlers stood along the street with their hands in their sleeves, watching the action. To the east of the street was a pool of water, and a woman was just then leading her ducks across the street, as if to take them to the water. A grey uniformed “deputy gentleman” suddenly ran out of the alley, putting on an air of astonishment, while eyeing up the three ducks.
After settling on one, he looked at the woman while hatching his strategy. With great big steps, he immediately set upon the duck, saying “Hey! As if I couldn’t find you, you feathered, flying beast, you went so far as to fly all the way over here!”

The woman, sensing danger, pursued the soldier, saying “What? What? Sir, you’ve snatched my duck! That won’t do, it’s mine!”

The soldier had sharp eyes and quick hands, and by now he had already gotten hold of the duck’s white-feathered neck, “This is mine! You’re stealing my duck! Did you buy it or steal it? . . .” The woman blurted out in a sharp voice: “That won’t do, that won’t do, sir, you can’t take it away, it’s mine, I raised it!”

The soldier replied in an equally loud voice, “You raised it? You hussy, you stole my duck and now you’re even lying! Off we go to the East Yue Palace!”

With its ten halls, the East Yue Palace had been a yamen fit for the king of hell, but nowadays was the camp for the Forty-fifth Army brigade from Sichuan. The woman momentarily took on a blank expression. Took advantage of her lapse, the soldier grasped the duck and walked off. In response, the woman sat down at the side of the pool and quietly began crying. The loafers watching the action approached the woman, they understood what had happened, and some even laughed. The woman wiped her tears, and began narrating the event to one she recognized amongst them. This acquaintance was afraid of getting involved, and, looking in all four directions, said, “Sister, forget it. The duck can’t speak, so even if you go to the yamen and find Judge Bao it won’t matter! On his lofty stage, Judge Bao doesn’t care about our village’s small affairs!”

The telephone office operator also approached the woman, but she had already stopped crying. Someone else asked her, “Was that duck yours?”
The woman replied, “How could it belong to anyone else?”

“If it’s yours, then go ask for it back!”

“I’m afraid they’ll beat me. Forget it, it’s like seeing an evil spirit in broad daylight.”

The woman seemed to be resorting to predestination to comfort herself, while at the same time lightly cursing, “On top of our grain they snatch away everything else, robbing us—begging for a beheading or shooting.” So saying, she raised her pole, and, clucking at the two remaining ducks, led them down to the water.

Originally the telephone operator was preparing to ask some questions of the woman, but, seeing her circumstance, he kept his mouth shut and promptly returned to the office.

Just when he returned to the switchboard, he thought, “This woman is definitely a local prostitute, last night the soldier brought his duck when he came to sleep with her, then she took advantage of the situation, and in the middle of the day he came back for his duck. Otherwise how could he steal the duck in broad daylight?”

Glancing at the clock, he saw it was still early. On account of the event he had just witnessed, he was very unhappy, and finally he decided to go back and ask the woman whether ultimately the soldier stole the duck, or whether she had first stolen the duck from him and the soldier had used force to get it back. Just as he came out of the office, he ran into the village head from Xinyiji Village, sitting astride a healthy black and white mule. The two recognized each other, and before Daren had opened his mouth, the village head half rose out of the saddle and bowed with clasped hands, saying “Sir, good morning, good morning, good morning!”

“Village head, good morning!”

The village head dismounted and said, “Troublesome, but please connect me to our village.”
After the line was connected, the village head asked to speak with the other village elders, whereupon the operator knew this village head yesterday had gone to the city to report to a young brigand named Li and to request that troops be dispatched to capture him. At the break of dawn, the troops had issued forth, including a captain, two assistant captains, and a further 120 “gentlemen.” This village head managed affairs earnestly, and even exhorted the village elders that the expenses of hosting the brigade leader and the troops were to be paid by him personally. This wasn’t a trifling expense—food for 120 people is a significant matter!

After concluding the phone call, the village head chatted about the weather and some social gossip, then busily mounted the mule and headed back toward Xinyiji. Daren, the telephone operator, spotted two villagers trailing after the village head’s mule; they were proffering two large loads of noodles and meat and vegetables, while seemingly thinking out loud, “Let’s accumulate some virtue and let this fellow Li escape, wouldn’t that be far less work?” [The operator] knew that once the troops came out, it wasn’t simply a matter of the village head hosting them, and the costs also fell upon the village commoners. Daren also knew that afterward there would come an official report, the kind submitted by telephone to one’s superiors all the way up to the highest ranks. As a rule, such reports extolled the troops’ incredible battle accomplishments, and always concluded with the same old stuff: a triumphant return and the presentation of prisoners-of-war. All of this was like a formula, unavoidable, because it, too, was a “custom,” and so very few people harbored doubts about it.

In the afternoon, as expected, a telephone call came from Xinyiji. It was the voice of the major captain, asking to be connected to the public office. Even though the line was transferred to the county government office, the Daren could still hear the conversation very clearly. The captain’s report was also to be copied by the office for the sake of record-keeping.
“... This guy Li was in charge of a bandit mob, he was tenaciously resistant, but through the courage and determination of [our] soldiers we advanced upon him and captured him. An additional five bandits, seeing how things were unfolding, scattered off... in all directions. Through the course of the campaign, approximately 600 bullets were expended, one rifle was ruined, but luckily no one in our unit was injured...” A bit later, the county government office called the assistant commissioner office, and the county head made a similar report to the commissioner: “... the minute I heard from the village head, I personally led the troops into the countryside... in total about 1000 bullets were expended.”

What a business! After copying down three similar reports, the unvisited became visited, the undone done, and, as for the “battle,” it became ever more impressive, and the bullet expenditure ever higher. No wonder the newspapers always reported the thoroughness with which the anti-bandit campaigns were undertaken, and the diligence with which the troops entered the countryside!

On the following day, the major captain, his ears tufted with hair, was the first to visit the phone office.

“Thanks for your trouble, thanks for your trouble! Thanks, captain, for going into the countryside!”

“Say nothing of it, it’s our duty. If there’s something about here that needs doing, we can’t just ignore it, now can we? In fact you’re the ones with the hard work! This office does business, [but] the troublesome affairs of the country folk are many! And you also take care of army affairs...” After finishing up this official-speak, he continued on in a more private vein.

The phone operator Daren asked: “Captain, what was up with that bandit? I heard it said the guy could leap onto roofs and vault over walls!”
“Erm, I wouldn’t put it that way! He was a regular nobody, with no superpowers. A deserter, a shriveled up youngster. A wasted youth like that, I don’t know where he was stationed, but he had an opportunity and was brave enough to make off with a few rifles, and then he returned to his home area to hide out. He had never committed a crime in the area, so he never reckoned someone would sell him out. When the troops surrounded his farmstead, the kid was just sunning himself atop some millet stalks. If the locals didn’t make it into a case, there’d be no reason for a guilty conscience. Heh! Once the fellow realized someone ratted on him and that the army had come out, he scurried into his stockade, right, hid away in a trough and popped off a couple of shots. The situation wasn’t hard to handle. 120 versus one, catching a guy alive, it’s as easy as plucking a mollusk out of a water can. ‘Good brother, don’t fire, the stockade is surrounded. Throw over the weapons, and we can talk things over.’ The youth looked about, and [saw] he really was surrounded, he realized the situation, and he threw us the rifles. Afterward we tied him up, fastened him to the trough, and gave him a thrashing. . . . The village chief Zhou said to me: ‘Captain, captain, thanks for your trouble, leave the rifles with us, on another day I’ll send a separate report to the county. Here’s 120 foreign dollars for you brothers to drink a little tea. You’re my good elder brother,’ that kind of thing. And that’s how things ended.”

“How old?”

“Twenty-two, a stripling!”

“Did you transport him to the city?”

“Hai, what’s the use of transporting him to the city? I ask you: if we tie him up and bring him in, what good is that 120 dollars?”

“Then did you submit for reimbursement for the bullets?”
“In total we used five and a half clips.”

“Hai, and that was it for him?”

“Didn’t we just give him a single pop. What use would it be for us to leave him alive? Come on,” said the captain, getting annoyed.

Telephone operator Daren wrote a letter to his brother, saying: “Brother, help me switch jobs. I can’t do this! I can’t do this! I can’t do this!” His brother wrote back, “You can’t? OK, if you can’t do this job then let someone else do it. We’ll figure out a way for you to continue studying in Beijing.” But in response to Daren’s second letter of supplication, his brother instead wrote: “Wherever you go, isn’t it still the same? If you don’t continue [working there] you’ll be unemployed!” After finding himself unable to advance in his studies, this young man really did join the ranks of the unemployed!