Writing Villages: Language, Objects, and Spirituality in the Discovery of Rural China, 1911-1949

by

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the explosion of writings about rural life that emerged during the Republican period (1911-1949) in China, found in the essays, short stories, long-form novels, folklore journals, and ethnographic surveys that dotted the mediascape of the time period. Situating its arguments at the cross-section of Republican era village studies, intellectual history, and literary criticism, this dissertation argues that such writings did not merely reflect an already existing social reality beyond the text, but were themselves productive of the very concepts by which such a reality was to be imagined and acted upon. As such, they produced an imaginative binary that had not, hitherto, been dominant in Chinese social and cultural life: the urban vs. the rural. While such writings evidenced a persistent fascination with the spoken languages, material objects, and spiritual ideas that defined village cultures, they were not produced from within the geographic boundaries of village life. They were created by cosmopolitan intellectuals imbedded in translingual print networks of global reach. Such writings must thus be situated within the properly global context in which they were produced- a world roiled by the unevenness of capitalism in its imperialist form. The world system produced by capitalism sought to array peoples into monolingual national units that could be arranged hierarchically across historical time. When seen from this developmental lens, the rural emerged in 20th century China as a site of “backwardness,” in need of material, linguistic, and social “reconstruction.”
I track how folklorists, fiction writers, essayists, and language reformers responded to, but also complicated, this ethnographic drive to study, classify, and transform village life. Challenging a long standing axiom in the field of modern Chinese history that Republican era intellectuals “invented” the cultural figure of the peasant as a depressed allegory of the national condition, doing so without a sustained engagement with the popular cultures that defined village spaces, I argue that the songs, objects, and votive practices of village life remained key points of inquiry for intellectuals throughout the era. In doing so, I tell a more nuanced story regarding the urban/rural binary as it emerged during this time period, one that emphasizes that the incorporation of the village into the cultural life of the new republic was not a uni-directional or conceptually closed process, with the new national project blotting out all signs of the pre-national matrix.

My first chapter examines how, in the early 1920s, a group of folklorists based at Beijing University set out to collect, annotate, and publish the songs and storytelling practices to be found across China’s diverse regions. My second chapter examines the “hometown” narratives in the vernacular literature of the day, in which intellectuals of the time sought to grapple with the non-secular cultures of the rural townships they had grown up in. The differences between old and new lifeworlds imprinted themselves on not just the content but also the form of these literary works, which were organized around moments of epistemic breakdown between intellectual narrators and rural others whose practices they struggled to understand. My third chapter examines how social scientific discourse and vernacular fiction co-produced one another in the 1930s, producing a vision of rural life defined by concepts such as class and mode of production. In chapter four I examine the emergence in the 1940s of long form novels dedicated to probing the cyclical rhythms of the village everyday, a site of interest for writers as they grappled with the twin discourses of pan-Asian fascism and wartime nationalism. Finally, in an appendix to the dissertation, I develop further a number of the questions regarding dialects and regional writing touched upon in the various chapters.
The work of the intellectuals examined here all shared an interest in the way rural people spoke, sang, prayed, and celebrated, practices which often upended clear boundaries between the human and the ecological, the sentient and the non-sentient, the living and the dead. Village writings thus explored the inherited practices that defined rural life-worlds, while also probing the contradictions within the new national project that made villages into an object of such intense ethnographic interest. All told, what emerges here is not the “invention” of a fallen civilizational other (the peasant) by modernizing reformers, but rather a negotiating with heterogeneous networks of place, practice, and language.
Acknowledgements

This study, whatever value it may have to the field of modern Chinese cultural and literary history, could not have been produced without the support of a tremendous network of people, one that has illuminated my life over the last decade. I must first thank my dissertation committee: professors Meng Yue, Janet Poole, and Tong Lam. Meng Laoshi was unstinting in her resolve to see this project make an original contribution to our understanding of Republican China, pushing me to move beyond accepted scholarship regarding xiangtu writing, rural reform, and intellectual history. She taught me to not only go beyond my own theoretical comfort zone, but to listen deeply to my sources, developing concepts from within their discursive folds and textures. Professor Poole was a generous close reader of each of my chapters. In our meetings throughout the years she pushed me to articulate why literature was a different kind of discourse than political speeches, social scientific reports, and economic statistics. Her insistence on reading literature in an intersectional, formally engaged, and historically grounded manner inspires me to this day. In our meetings across downtown Toronto’s many cultural enclaves, Tong Lam combined an historian’s rigor regarding the history of ideas with an artist’s empathy for the embodied, the sung, and the everyday. A dissertation meeting with Tong was an intellectual event that spanned questions regarding capital, epistemology, visual culture, our own built environment here in Toronto, and how we think historically about empire and nation. Without these three professors there would be no project for readers to engage with in the following pages. I would also like to thank my external readers for their incisive and generous feedback: professors Zhong Yurou, Atsuko Sakaki, and Paola Iovene.

My interest in thinking critically about China’s historical experience was cultivated during my time as an undergraduate in NYU’s East Asian Studies Department. Professor Rebecca Karl first taught me how to think systematically about the world around us, and it was in her seminars that I discovered scholarship as a form of praxis that opens up our historical imagination to futures as yet unwritten and untamed. Her personal generosity and encouragement were critical to my decision to
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Introduction
Writing the Village In the Time of Global Capitalism

In Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881-1936)’s *Picking Blossoms at Dawn* (朝花夕拾), an adult narrative voice recalls the vivid details of his childhood garden, which includes overwhelming material density: dark green vegetable beds (碧绿的菜畦), a glossy well fence (光滑的湿井栏), towering honey locust trees (高达的皂荚树), pink-red mulberry fruits (紫红的桑葚), tall shouts of the cicadas on the tree leaves (鸣蝉在树叶里长吟), portly-fat bees lying on vegetable flowers (肥胖的黄蜂伏在菜花上), muddy wall-roots (泥墙根), oil flies (油蛉), crickets (蟋蟀们), centipedes (蜈蚣), blister beetles (斑蝥), knotweed vines (何首乌藤), and red-chain snakes (赤链蛇)\(^1\).

Lu Xun’s famed 1926 memoir relays the process by which the narrator-as-child, amidst this splendor of vegetative and animal life, is introduced to two realms of textual knowledge: the world of Confucian textuality found in the village classroom, exemplified by texts such as the Analects and the Zhou Yi, and the world of imaginative historical narrative provided to him by popular novels such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記) and *Sweeping Bandits Away* (蕩寇志), whose images he surreptitiously traces in class from illustrated editions\(^2\). Yet the boy is also exposed to forms of knowledge that go beyond what he finds in his books, practices that may overlap with but are not exhausted by either high or low textual traditions, indeed that have complicated relationships with

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\(^1\) All objects cited in From “Cong Baicao Yuan Dao Sanwei Shuju” 从百草园到三味书屋 (From One Hundred Flower Garden to Three Flavor Studio), one of the most iconic essays in the memoir. See Lu Xun, *Chaohua Xishi: Lu Xun Zuopin Ji 4* 朝花夕拾: 鲁迅作品集4 (Picking Blossoms at Dawn: Lu Xun’s Works 4), Taipei: Fengyun Shidai Chubangongsi, 1988), pp. 59-65.

\(^2\) The chapter “From One Hundred Flower Garden to Three Flavor Studio” relays in detail the process by which the narrator as child moves from the vegetative splendor of the garden in his home compound to the village classroom, which is run by a “learned old scholar” (宿儒) who makes his students read aloud from Confucian texts such as *The Analects* (論語), *The Shangshu* (尚書), and the *Zhou Yi* (周易), as well as educational primers originating from the Ming period such as the *Youxue Qionglin* (幼學瓊林). As a respite from the wrote nature of the learning in class, the boy uses tracing paper to trace images from illustrated versions of popular novels such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記) and *Sweeping Bandits Away* (蕩寇志). See Ibid, pp. 59-65 for the entire chapter.
textuality itself. These include the oral stories, material objects, and votive practices passed on to the child by various domestics who labor for his family.

The most important of these figures is Mother Chang (長奶奶), the young boy’s domestic servant. The narrator claims that though “she was not a person of learning” (並非學者), she had knowledge of particular “rules (規矩),” “rites (儀式),” and “principles (道理)” that were of tremendous importance to her.\(^3\) For example, the narrator explains that on the morning of the lunar new year Mother Chang urged him to perform an important set of acts: the first word he had to say to her immediately after he woke up was “A-ma, Congratulations,” upon which time he had to eat a Fujianese “happiness” orange as quickly as possible. For Mother Chang, these acts were non-negotiable: “You must remember [to do these things]. This has to do with one’s luck for the entire year (一年運氣的事情). You are not allowed to say anything else...at the head of the year, all must be followed.”\(^4\)

The act of eating the orange on the lunar new year links, momentarily, the history of the boy-as-intellectual to-be with the history of A-Chang as village domestic, a moment of overlap staged powerfully by the text. What are the metaphysical sensibilities that animate Mother Chang’s instructions to the boy? They combine language (the specific words that must be uttered on new year’s morning), objects (the orange that must be inserted into the mouth), and a sense of life positioned in a larger temporal or spiritual order (the auspicious fate, or運氣, that will be derived from eating the orange). As a character, Mother Chang is particularly marked by her command of spoken language. As the narrator puts it, “she loved to qie-qie cha cha (喜歡切切察察), speaking little somethings to people in a low voice, extending her index finger and waving it in the air...I don’t know why but I always felt that many of the small flare ups in our home were related to her

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\(^3\) Ibid, p. 17.
\(^4\) Ibid, p. 17.
Yet Mother Chang’s stories are about more than household gossip. She uses oral narratives to tell the young boy about her own personal history, interweaved as it is with the violent military rebellions that marked late 19th century life in Zhejiang. As the narrator puts it:

She would often say to me “long-hairs.” Her so-called long hairs were not simply Hong Xiuquan’s entire army, but came to include all bandits and robbers who would come later. This excluded the Revolutionary Party, because at that time there still wasn’t one that existed. She said that the long hairs were incredibly terrifying. She did not understand their speech. Before the long-hairs entered the city my family had all fled to the coast, leaving only a porter and the cook Old-Ma behind to watch the house. Sure enough the long-hairs entered the house. Old-Ma called them “Great King”- it was said that this was how you were supposed to address them. She told them of her own hunger. The long-hair laughed: “Then we’ll give you this to eat!” A round object was thrown in front of her, still wearing a small queue: the porter’s head…. [Mother Chang] sternly said: “Did we [old female domestics] have no use? We were also captured. When the soldiers came to assault the city, the long hairs forced us to remove our pants. They lined us up in rows on top of the city walls, and the canons outside would stop firing; if they had fired on us, [it would have been] utter destruction!”

Mother Chang’s use of the term “long hair” is imbedded in an intricate history that the narrator (as New Culture intellectual recalling his boyhood) can gesture towards, but cannot lay claim to. It is Mother Chang’s own history, one that has the capacity to surprise, confound, and move the narrator. He remarks upon the tenacity she must have had to survive such a tumultuous period: “This was truly something outside of what I had expected, I could not but be surprised. I always thought that she was [someone with] nothing more than a stomach-full of annoying rituals. I had no idea that she had this kind of profound spiritual force (這樣偉大的神力). I thus came to have for her a special respect, enigmatic in its depth (深不可測).” While there have been no lack of scholars who have commented on the ironic dimensions of Lu Xun’s writings, in which rural others are seen as embodying a fallen national character, fewer have dwelled on the complicated

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5 Ibid, p. 16.
6 From the chapter “A Chang Yu Shan Haijing” 阿長與《山海經》(A Chang and the Classic of Mountains and Seas) in Ibid, p. 18-19.
7 Ibid, p.19.
empathy that courses through his works.\(^5\) Characters such as Mother Chang are presented as not only possessing their own spiritual beliefs, but the capacity to enunciate them through oral narratives and material practices.\(^9\) While the act of eating the orange, for example, may be seen as an “annoying ritual” for the narrator, he admits that it is part of the “spiritual force” that Mother Chang possesses.

The interaction staged in Lu Xun’s memoir, in which a textually empowered narrator tries to write about a village other whose stories and practices he only partially understands, is the central problematic around which this dissertation revolves. In Lu Xun’s memoir there was an obvious fascination with the culture of hometown life (in this case, his native Shaoxing), a fascination which was amply attested to in the larger print media of the time period. By the early decades of the twentieth century a new print culture had emerged in Shanghai, Beijing, and Tianjin, ranging from daily newspapers to more specialized journals dedicated to cultural, aesthetic, and educational topics.\(^10\) While this urban print culture was a forum to look outward, introducing different global spaces and new fields of knowledge to readers, it was also marked by a decided interest in looking inward towards the townships and villages that dotted the Chinese mainland. Rural people became, in a sense, media events, as stories about their lives, reports on their living conditions, and discussions of how they fit into the new Republic then under construction could routinely be found.

\(^{5}\) For how Lu Xun’s writings contributed to the production of the discourse of China’s national character, see Liu (1995), pp.45-77. For irony as an essential technique of Lu Xun’s fiction, see Hanan (1974).

\(^{9}\) Another oral narrative that Mother Chang passes down to the boy is the story of the flying centipede (⾶飛蜈蚣), a magical tale of a scholar who sees a goddess in the form of a snake with a human face. A monk provides the scholar with a flying centipede housed in a small box that will ward the goddess off. Mother Chang tells the boy the story when he is scared to go into the grassy part of the garden because of the potential existence of snakes there. See “Cong Baicao Yuan Dao Sanwei Shuju” in Ibid, p. 59-64.

\(^{10}\) This print culture emerged in the colonial treaty-ports on China’s eastern coastline from the late-Qing period onward, and from its beginning was informed by the sense of political and epistemic crisis brought on by China’s forced integration into the Euro-American imperialist order. As historian Rebecca Karl puts it, fifty years of colonial incursions propelled “a small but disproportionately influential group of Chinese educated elites to look anew at China’s problems. As this process got underway, the acquisition of knowledge about other places and the incorporation of this new knowledge into new structures of knowledge and social practice became a major pursuit of many educated elites...the emergence of journalism and the explosions of print media after 1895 was also crucial to this development...newspapers and print media could both produce and be produced by changes in what constituted proper knowledge and by new types of sociopolitical power that could derive from the mobilization of such new knowledge.”(12). For more on late-Qing intellectual discourse, urban print culture, and nationalism, see Karl (2002) pp.3-26.
As early as 1919, readers in Beijing could find intellectual leaders such as Li Dazhao 李大钊 (1889-1927) and Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967) urge young people to return to the countryside to build New Villages as the basis for national salvation. These early writings, influenced by anarchist discourses then circulating amongst progressive intellectuals, turned to the village as a protean space in which mutual-aid communes could be built.¹¹

Yet the village was not a blank space upon which modernizing intellectuals could construct social movements out of whole cloth. Examining the village meant grappling with the the life-worlds that already existed in rural societies, and intellectual groups dedicated to folklore studies (民俗學), dialect studies (方言調查), and social investigation (社會調查) emerged over the course of the 1920s.¹² The legends, jokes, and songs of rural people were turned into coveted objects of knowledge around which sophisticated ethnographic practices developed. Major civic newspapers in Beijing and Shanghai also became interested in publishing information about communities outside of their urban centers of operation. For example, in 1925 the Jingbao (京報) published a supplement entitled Commoners Literary Arts Weekly (民眾文藝週刊), which sought to collect the

¹¹ For Li Dazhao’s advocacy of intellectual reconstruction of village life, see his 1919 essay “Qingnian Yu Nongcun” 青年與農村 (Countryside and Youth), printed in the Chenbao (晨報) from February 20 to 23rd, reprinted in Li (2006), pp. 304-308. At the same time Zhou Zouren was advocating for humanist cosmopolitanism to be the guiding spirit of modern Chinese literature, he too became fascinating by China’s villages as a potential site for an associational politics to be built. From early 1919 onward, Zhou would begin introducing to Chinese readers details regarding the New Commune Movement (新村運動) that was taking place in Japan during this time, headed by the novelist, poet, and philosopher Saneatsu Mushanokoji (武者小路實篤, 1885-1976), whom Zhou had been in touch with by mail as early as 1911. In April of 1919 Zhou published in New Youth “Riben de Xincun” 日本的新村 (Japan’s New Village Community), the first of many articles he would write over the next two years detailing the philosophical ideas and operational principles of the movement. For Zhou’s article, see New Youth (新青年) 6:3, pp. 21-33. For an overview of the New Village Thought and Practice in 1920s China, an particularly Zhou Zuoren’s contributions to it, see Zhao Hong (2014), pp. 12-78. For an historical overview of this work, see Merkel-Hess (2016).

¹² For more on the emergence of folklore studies in around Beijing University in the early 1920s, see chapter one of this dissertation. In March of 1924, the Beijing University National Studies Dialect Survey Society (北大研究所國學們方言調查會) was founded, headed by Lin Yutang, and in May of that year the official journal of Beijing University’s Folklore Research Society (北大歌謠研究會) Folksong Weekly (歌謠週刊) would devote an entire special issue to the problem of China’s dialects and their scriptural notation. Over the following two decades a number of public research bodies as well as individual linguists would work extensively on the question of China’s linguistic diversity, including six dialect surveys carried out by the Institute of History and Philology at the Academia Sinica. For an historical overview of this work, see Zhong (2014), pp. 160-171. For the rise of social surveys as a form of knowledge creation in Republican China, see Lam (2011).
oral songs of the 民眾 (lit. the numerous people). The journal presented such commoners as semi-literate people who possessed a wealth of oral knowledge, much of it instantiated in spoken narrative traditions. National magazines such as *The Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌), meanwhile, repeatedly published special issues on “The Peasant Question (農民問題),” where the perceived economic struggles and cultural deficiencies of peasants were examined in full. Discussions of rural life also appeared regularly in the nationally influential *Dagong Bao* (大公報), which in 1934 began to publish a special insert section devoted exclusively to rural matters. By the late 1920s debates ranged in the periodical press amongst foreign-trained sociologists and economists regarding how to properly classify China’s largely agrarian economy. Within this mediascape, the heterogenous terms common people (民間), commoners (民眾), village (鄉村), native-place (鄉土), hometown (故鄉), peasant (農民), countryside (農村), farmer (農人), and masses (大眾) circulated widely, appearing in different contexts and possessing distinct valences and etymologies.

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13 For an analysis of the Commoners Literary Arts Weekly, and particularly how it contributed to the construction of the “common people”/“commoners” (minjian 民間/minzhong 民眾) as an object of ethnographic knowledge during the politically tumultuous period before, during, and after the May 30th Political Movement, see Yuan (2015), pp. 91-105.

14 See the special issues devoted to the rural problem in *Eastern Miscellany* (東方雜誌) Vol. 9:16 (August 25, 1922) and Vol. 24:16 (1927). The Tianjin-based Dagbong Bao reported in the early and mid 1930s most prominently on the rural reconstruction work of Liang Shuming (based in Shandong) and James Yen (based in Hebei). But the journal also included reporting about rural reconstruction work being done elsewhere, as well as debates about the meaning of such work and its future direction. For discussions of Liang Shuming’s work, see “Cun Zhi: Shandong Ye Zai Tichang Liang Shuming Deng Diji 村治：山東亦在提倡梁漱溟等抵濟 (Village Governance: Shandong is also Advocating Liang Shuming’s Beneficial Aid) March 20, 1931. For reports on the work being done at Dingxiang, see “Ding Xiang Pingjiao Cun Zhi Canguan Ji 1/2 定縣平教村治參觀記一/二 (An Overview of the Mass Education Movement’s Village Governance at Dingxiang), January 8/9, 1930. In 1934, the Dagong Bao partnered with the China Rural Reconstruction Study Society (中國鄉村建設學會) to publish what was at first a bi-weekly insert entitled Rural Reconstruction (鄉村建設) under the editorship of Yanjing University social scientist Yang Kaidao (楊開道 1899-1981). After 25 issues the insert became a weekly publication in the paper, examining the operations, methodologies, and results of rural reconstruction project throughout the country. 70 issues were published in total. For more, see Wang (2009).

15 For an overview of these debates, see Han (2005), pp. 73-116.

16 In the chapters of the dissertation that follows I will engage closely with a number of these terms, examining their use in a variety of discursive contexts. In chapter one, I examine the term 民間 in the context of the folklore movement launched at Beijing University in the early 1920s; in chapter two, I examine how leading writers of the decade theorized and practiced a hometown/village literature (鄉土文學); and in chapter three I examine how a class-based understanding of the peasant (農民) came to dominate vernacular narratives of the 1930s. In the wartime period (1937-1945), under conditions of national mobilization, the pressure to write for the ethnic-people (民族) became paramount. In chapter 4 I examine the implications of the discourses of national resistance on localist/regional fiction of the time period.
This explosion of interest in village life fueled efforts to socially transform village communities, as a variety of public and private educational organizations built programs of “rural reconstruction” (鄉村建設) throughout the 1920s and 30s. According to scholarly estimates, by 1935 there were over one thousand organizations doing rural reconstruction work of some kind in the country.\textsuperscript{17} James Yen 宴陽初 (1893-1990)’s Mass Education Movement (中華平民教育促進會), building off of Christian-missionary models of social intervention, was one of the most successful of such initiatives.\textsuperscript{18} The philosopher Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893-1988), meanwhile, had built a theory of “Chinese Culture” (中國⽂化) that was based on an understanding of China as a primordially agrarian community. He thus created the Shandong Rural Reconstruction Institute (山東鄉村建設研究院), which saw the countryside as a space of praxis for building a society that conformed neither to Western capitalist nor Soviet socialist models.\textsuperscript{19} Each reconstruction group had their own journals, including the Mass Education Movement’s \textit{The Peasant} (農民, 1925-1938) and \textit{Common People} (民間 1934-1937),\textsuperscript{20} as well as the Shandong Institute’s \textit{Rural Reconstruction}
Universities became major centers for rural investigation as well, including Beijing Normal University’s Experimental District for Rural Education as well as the Rural Studies Institute at National Sun Yatsen University (國立中山大學農學院) in Guangzhou. The latter’s chief publishing outlet, *Voice of the Countryside* (農聲), had the longest print run of any journal dedicated to rural matters of the era, being published from 1928 until 1949. Regional governments also evidenced an interest in rural reconstruction. For example, the provincial governments of Zhejiang, Shandong, Suiyuan, and the city of Qingdao all had journals during the 1930s dedicated to rural matters.

In short, fueled by the print media of the New Culture movement on the one hand and the social survey work of the rural reconstruction movements on the other, the Republican Period was defined by an explosion of interest in recording, analyzing, and transforming village life. Here, discursive medium and social reality conjoined in complex ways. As Rebecca Karl has noted in her analysis of the print media that developed after 1895 in Shanghai and elsewhere, journalistic mediums did not merely reflect an already existing social reality beyond the text, but were themselves productive of the very concepts by which such a reality was to be imagined and acted upon. As she puts it, “these texts were not merely functionally produced in the service of different types of (power-centered) ideologies or institutions; instead, powerful social ideologies and

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21 For more on the Shandong Rural Reconstruction Institute, formed in 1931 by Liang Shuming at Zouping, see Alitto (1979) and Liu (2015).

22 For more on Beijing Normal’s rural education experiment, with an analysis of the content of two issues of Village Discussion, see Lou (2015).

23 See the *Government Journal of Shandong Province* (山東省政府公報 1928-1937, with an upsurge in discussion of rural reconstruction in 1936-37), *Zhejiang Construction Monthly* (浙江省建設月刊 1930-1937), *The Newsletter of the Government Rural Reconstruction Committee of Suiyuan Province* (綏遠省政府鄉村建設委員會會刊 1936), and the *Qingdao Rural Reconstruction Monthly* (青島市鄉村建設月刊 1933-1934). Official Guomindang organs also produced journals on rural issues, such as the Guangzhou based *Peasant Movement* (農民運動 1926), published by the GMD Executive Committee’s Peasant Bureau (國民黨執委會農民部). Followers of Sun Yatsen such as Liao Zhongkai, Chen Gonbo, and Shen Dingyi wrote in the journal *The Chinese Peasant* (中國農民 1926-1927) during its brief print run.
discourses were being produced in and through the texts.”

When it came to the question of the rural, this productive capacity of print media entailed a profoundly new way of evaluating village life. Historians of Chinese history have long noted that before the 20th century the urban/rural binary was not a galvanizing force in social and cultural life in China. For example, David Faure and Tao Tao Liu have argued that “in the Ming and Qing dynasties, rural-urban distinctions were not a significant part of an individual’s identity.” Jacob Eyferth concurs with this assertion, writing that “in contrast to Europe, where for a long time the word ‘citizen’ meant ‘simply inhabitants of a town, in sharp contrast to those who were subjects under feudal princes and kings in the countryside,’ China knew few legal and administrative barriers between town and country.”

Yet judging from the print media of the first three decades of the 20th century, the “rural” (農村) was now a space apart, one that needed to be acted upon by modernizing outsiders. An imaginative binary that had not had galvanizing force in the long durée of imperial Chinese history had, in the span of a few decades, become an axis around which new structures of knowledge and new social practices were organized.

This study explores how the work of vernacular writers, essayists, translators, folklorists, and linguists responded to, but also complicated, this ethnographic impulse to know and change the rural other. I thus examine an array of texts that explored the languages, material objects, and spiritual ideas that defined village societies in the early 20th century. Such texts include the vernacular fiction of the time period, in which village life was prominently represented; experiments in writing in local languages linked to specific regions of the country; as well scholarly projects launched by intellectuals to understand the oral performance forms that existed across regionally different communities. It is my contention that examining such materials can allow us to

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26 See Eyferth (2009), p.221. In this citation, Eyferth is quoting from the work of Robert Nisbet (1994) on citizenship. For an extended discussion, see pp. 219-231.
tell a more nuanced story regarding the emergence of the urban/rural divide in modern Chinese history, a binary that was as much ideological as it was material. In order to understand how such materials can help us tell this more complex story one must place the urban/rural binary in the context of China’s forced integration into the capitalist world-system beginning in the late 19th century. For it was China’s encounter with Euro-American imperialism—understood as an interlocking series of political, economic, and epistemic dislocations—that forced intellectuals to look again, and with a different gaze, at the agrarian communities they had grown up in and emerged from. It was this drive to look anew at village life that made the “rural” an object of contested knowledge during this time period.

**Capitalist Imperialism and the Emergence of the Rural/Urban Divide in 20th Century China**

From the late 19th century onward, Chinese intellectual and political leaders negotiated with a world system that was rooted in the globally expansive drives of capitalism in its imperialist form, which came to Chinese shores through the gun-boat diplomacy and territorial occupations of Euro-American powers. Capitalism in its imperialist form was never simply a question of the restructuring of methods of production and exchange within colonial territories. It was accompanied by a particular epistemology, which understood cultures to be divided into discrete national units, possessing particular racial and ethnic characteristics as well as univocal national languages. Such “national cultures” were arrayed along a developmental axis in which peoples perceived to be more advanced in cultural, economic, and technological terms possessed the moral imperative to rule over less advanced peoples. In this way, Euro-American imperialism was justified in the name of a universal history to which non-white, non-christian peoples had only partial and belated access.  

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27 For further discussion of the epistemic configuration of this global system of culture in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015). For Lowe, this was a system whose promises of “free trade” and liberal freedoms was betrayed by its own denial of those freedoms to non Euro-American peoples. As Lowe puts it, “liberal philosophy, culture, economics, and government have been commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and empire”(2). For more on the coloniality of the modern world system, and particularly the historicism by which it denied non-Western peoples cultural co-evalness, see Chakrabarty (2008), pp. 3-27. For colonial epistemology in East Asia in the late 19th century, see Dirlin (1996) and Barlow ed. (1997).
Reeling from the imperialist impingements of the mid and late 19th centuries, Chinese intellectuals grappled with the underlying epistemology of this capitalist world system: linear time, national cultures, global marketplace.28 From late Qing reformers such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Kang Youwei (1858-1927) onward, there was a palpable desire to “catch up” with the Euro-American powers, a drive motivated first and foremost by the need to avoid being turned into a colonial possession of those powers. By the mid 1920s, intellectuals in China recognized that not only had imperialism created new social and economic relationships in their country, but that this political-economy required new forms of knowledge in order to understand and resist it. Take, for example, the young economist Qi Shufen 漆樹芬 (1892-1927)’s 1925 work *China Under Economic Invasion* (經濟侵略下之中國). Qi’s text not only sought to warn his fellow countrymen about China’s colonial condition, but to provide them with a comprehensive vocabulary to understand China’s place within capitalism as a global system. As such, Qi began his work with theoretical chapters entitled “What is Imperialism?” (什麼叫帝國主義呢), “What is Capitalism” (什麼叫資本主義呢), and “Analyzing the Contemporary Organization of Nations” (近代國家組織之解剖). He then described the complex assemblage of military, legal, and financial impingements the Euro-American powers had brought to bear on Chinese society. These included tariff controls, indemnity payments, and the establishment of foreign concessions on Chinese soil. Taken collectively, they gestured to an entire system of domination. As Qi bluntly put it, “regarding

28 My understanding of the nationalist consciousness that emerged in the late Qing period as a result of China’s forced (if partial) integration into the capitalist world-system during this time period emerges mainly from the work of Rebecca Karl (2002). Karl urges scholars “to see modernity- of which nationalism is a central (albeit far from exhaustive) expression- as a global material and representational structure, whose tendential unities are underpinned by the expansion of capitalism in its imperialist forms”(4). As Karl powerfully argues, if modernity as representational and material structure was underpinned by capitalist imperialism, knowledge of the similar colonial fate of other non Euro-American peoples led late-Qing nationalists to imagine a world of anti-colonial solidarity in a shared time of crisis: “a world of synchronic temporality emphasizing historical identification and spatial proximity”(5) between China and other colonized nations.
my country’s political economy, the force that most oppresses us is no doubt capitalist imperialism.”

Works such as Qi’s bristled with the urgency to not only understand the new world in which China found itself, but to mobilize people in order to resist it. Intellectual and political leaders from across the political spectrum embraced this mobilizational mandate, from modernizing nationalists (Sun Yatsen 孫中山) to liberal reformers (James Yen) to revolutionary socialists (Mao Zedong 毛泽东). One should not conflate the political programs presented by such intellectual leaders, as they differed considerably on how China would reconstruct itself in the face of the imperialist threat. But that China did need to reconstruct itself - that “development” in technological, material, and social terms was necessary to avoid full colonization - was a core belief shared by all intellectuals and political movements in the Republican period.

It is out of this developmental epistemology that the binary so central to 20th century Chinese history - the urban and the rural - emerged. As early as 1919 Li Dazhao, the New Culture radical and future co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, urged young readers to see the urban and the rural as two fundamentally different material and ideological spaces. In his February 1919 article Youth and the Countryside (青年与農村), published in the influential newspaper Chenbao (晨报), Li presented both spaces as in crisis. The countryside, for Li, was a space defined by “darkness” (黑暗), in which rural people untouched by “modern civilization” (現代文明) were at

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29 See Qi (1925), p.16. Qi had studied under Japanese Marxist economist Kawakami Hajime at Tokyo Imperial University during the early 1920s, and was a member of the GMD left during the United Front period in Chongqing. He published China Under Economic Invasion amidst the flurry of social activism set off by the May 30th incident. Qi was murdered by the Chiang Kaishek backed warlord Liu Xiangyu during an anti-colonial demonstration on March 31, 1927. The young scholar’s death resounded throughout China’s progressive circles, and the dubious stories that were published regarding Qi’s death were debunked by no less than Lu Xun himself in his magazine Talking Threads. See the article 某報剪注 in 第4卷第6期 of that magazine. For more on Qi’s life and work, see Zheng Hongquan’s On Qi nanxun’s Life and Work (論漆南薰其人其作), in 重慶師範大學學報 (哲學社會科學版), 2 其2012年. See also Zheng (2011).

30 Li’s essay was first published in the 晨報, 1919年2月20-23日, and is reprinted in Li (2006), pp. 304-308.
the whims of exploitative gentry and corrupt local officials. Yet China’s “youth,” by which Li meant students who had gone to Beijing, Tianjin, and Shanghai to study in the country’s newfound institutes for higher education, were equally as disempowered. Li described young people who “wandered” (漂泊) in the cities unable to find work in public or private institutions. Crushed by poverty and disappointment, they became “demons” (鬼蜮) whose belief in the democratic promise of the new republic had been smashed, their “youthful energies long ago worn down to nothing” (青年的氣質，早已消磨淨盡). For Li, alienated urban youth had only one choice: return to the countryside to save it as well as themselves. As he put it:

You constitutional youths! If you want to accomplish a constitutional form of politics, you must first have constitutional commoners (立憲的民間); if you want constitutional commoners you must first take the dark countryside and change it into a bright countryside, you must take the authoritarian countryside (專制的農村) and change it into the constitutional countryside. As long as the countryside has the footprints of modern youth, who will serve as conducting wires for modern civilization (作現代文明的導線), then those peasants will not give up their voting rights, they will not waste their voting rights...only this kind of countryside can be considered a fertile ground for nurturing democracy.

Li’s call for youthful return to the countryside was not presented as a multi-directional process. It was the youth who would enlighten the peasants, acting as the “conducting wires” through which modern civilization was to be brought to the hinterland. What, if anything, youth could learn from the peasants remained unaddressed in Li’s article. This was thus a deeply ethnographic discourse, in which the peasant was denied historical “co-evalness” with their youthful counterparts, whose interventions into the peasant’s social world were seen as crucial to bringing them into the time of modernity. While the peasants were to be sympathized with for the exploitation they endured as

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34 For the concept of historical co-evalness, that is, the perception that two social subjects share the same moment in historical time, and its denial as a foundational epistemic operation of the field of anthropology as it developed historically, see Fabian (2002).
tenant farmers, and their manual labor was seen as a morally beneficial alternative to the disembodied “wandering” of urban life, modern knowledge lay on the side of the youths, not their rural counterparts.

This denial of co-evalness coursed through much of the writings on rural reform during the two decades after Li’s initial call. Social reformers often presented rural people as textually illiterate, bewildered by the modern world outside their villages, and in desperate need of the social interventions reformers were offering. Li Jinghan 李景漢 (1895-1986), a Columbia-trained sociologist who worked at James Yen’s famed site of rural reconstruction in Dingxian county in Hebei, is a most representative example. In 1935 he described the rural people of Hebei in the following way:

When people who read books go to the countryside, they all come to understand that the majority of peasants lack the power of knowledge (知識力), they do not even understand the written language of their own country...the majority of men are illiterate, and naturally female illiterates can be found everywhere...Countryside life is monotonous, painful, and lacking in vigor. Villages appear desiccated, particularly in winter: earthen land, earthen homes, earthen walls, earthen streets, and a sky whipped with dust. There are earthen gods and goddesses everywhere, even earthen people with heads and minds made of soil. Everything is insipid, corse, extremely lacking, un-aesthetic, with very little to make people happy.35

Secondary studies of rural reconstruction, as both discourse and practice, have tended to confirm rather than complicate the ethnographic inequality imbedded in Li Dazhao and Li Jinghan’s writings. Such studies have argued that rural reconstruction (and revolution) was a process that not only sought to imbue peasants with modern knowledge, but replace (and in the process destroy) the social and epistemic structures of village life.36 Such views have been influenced heavily by the sociologist Myron Cohen’s argument that Chinese elites during the Republican Period “invented” the peasant as their civilizational other, one that they labelled as traditional, backward, and unfit for the modern national project. As Cohen put it: “For the elite, China’s rural population was now

35 Li (1935), p. 11.
“backward” and a major obstacle to national development and salvation. For them, rural China was still a “feudal society” of “peasants” who were intellectually and culturally crippled by “superstition.”

As powerful as Cohen’s argument is— for it does indeed appear to conform to the way intellectuals such as Li Dazhao and Li Jinghan wrote about village cultures— it actually obscures a far more complex historical process. For Cohen’s argument suggests that the rural other was not only a passive receptacle of elite reformation, but that their culture was one that was fundamentally legible to elite investigators, and as such easily dismissed as so much traditional nonsense. Yet, as Lu Xun’s memoir powerfully reminded its readers, rural people themselves had their own complex life-worlds, grounded in what the narrator called Mother Chang’s rules (規矩), rites (儀式), and principles (道理). She too has lessons to impart to the young boy under her charge, which the narrator relays to us in the following manner:

She taught me many lessons. For example, when a person dies you should not say “they have died,” you should say “they have fallen”; living children should not go into the rooms of the deceased; when morsels of rice fall to the ground they must be picked up and, ideally, eaten quickly; one can never pass under a bamboo pole used for drying clothes...Aside from these I forget the rest of them. It was only that odd ritual on New Year’s Day that I remember most clearly.

There is a clear tension within Lu Xun’s text, between the “odd” lessons Mother Chang insists upon and the narrator’s sympathetic if somewhat bemused attitude towards them. Importantly, Mother Chang’s life-world is not entirely divorced from the realm of textuality. In perhaps the most famous anecdote involving Mother Chang, the narrator relates to readers how, as a young boy, he became enamored by an illustrated edition of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經 Shanhai Jing) that

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one of his uncles had told him about but that he had not yet seen. The boy wanted desperately to see the illustrated renderings of the fantastical monsters, gods, and spirits that appeared in the book. As such a book was far outside the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable for a young member of the gentry to read, there was nobody in his household who was willing to buy it. The boy talks about the book to anyone who will listen, including Mother Chang, who asks him "just what exactly this Shan Haijing was all about" (山海經是怎麼一回事). He had never spoken to her about it before because, in his view, “I knew that she was not a learned person (我知道她並非學者), so to tell her about it was pointless.” Imbedded within such a statement is the belief that, as a domestic servant without formal schooling, Mother Chang could not possibly have any relationship to the realm of books and writing. Yet after returning from a trip to her home village during a holiday period, Mother Chang comes back with a book under her arm, telling the young boy: “Young man, I bought you an illustrated San Hengjing (哥兒，有畫兒的三哼經，我給你買來了)!”

The boy is amazed that she had the wherewithal to buy the book, shocked that “the thing that others would not or could not do she had done successfully.” While the fact that Mother Chang calls the book by the wrong name suggests that she may or may not be able to actually read the characters on the front of the book, her ability to buy it at a village bookstand clearly demonstrates that access to textual culture was not reserved solely for those with formal literacy. Through the boy’s oral description of the book, and possibly the vivid pictures contained in it, Mother Chang was able to acquire it for him, confounding the ingrained assumption of her total disconnection from textuality. In this way, Mother Chang actually moves through the oral/textual

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39 The Shanghai Jing is a work compiled between the Warring States period and the beginning of the Han dynasty, whose eighteen chapters describe various topographical and geographical features, as well as a variety of mythological creatures and gods. Lu Xun himself defined the work as “an ancient sorcery book” (古之巫書 in the section on legends and fair-tales in his 中国小說史略. For more, see Birrell (1999).


41 Ibid, p.20.

42 Ibid, p.20.
divide that ethnographers such as Li Jinghan imposed on rural people, complicating rather than reinforcing the archetypal view of village people as textless ignorants.

Building off this moment of overlap staged in Lu Xun’s text, in the study that follows I tell a more nuanced story regarding the emergence of rural China as a social and imaginative category. I focus on the projects through which intellectuals gave textual presence to village life. Such projects cannot be reduced to the uni-directional projection of modernizing critique onto village spaces. They present, rather, a sustained interest in exploring and understanding the oral and aesthetic cultures that marked village life worlds, including the languages rural people spoke, the votive practices they engaged in, and the songs they sang to rejoice, mourn, and joke with one another. I thus examine journals for the study of folksongs; experiments in the printing of regional dialects; and the significant production of rural life to be found in the vernacular fiction of the period, which included short stories, informal essays, and long-form episodic novels. Readers may wonder why I have turned to folklore, linguistics, and vernacular literature as a means of gaining new insights into the urban/rural divide in Republican China, as oppose to an analysis of rural reconstruction efforts themselves, whose field reports can provide us with a vivid sense of how elites tried to socialize rural people into new national projects.\footnote{Vernacular literary texts, with their elite provenance and their urban circulation, were largely cut off from the social worlds of village society, and I make no claim that such texts actively influenced, or were necessarily read by, rural people themselves.}

If literary language can be defined by its ability to speak otherwise, to mirror but also complicate dominant forms of discourse, then one finds a most positive example of this power in the rural fiction of the Republican period.\footnote{I borrow this description of literariness from Gayatri Cahkravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in Outside in the Teaching Machine, 179-200 (1993).} It is precisely the “literary” quality of these texts- that is, their use of multiple forms of language (including May Fourth Baihua, Classical Chinese, and local dialects), their shifting narrative perspectives, and the diverse temporalities their narrative forms invoke- that enable them to explore the emergence of China’s urban/rural divide in ways that differ from social scientific discourse. As Lu Xun’s memoir
displays, such texts were particularly apt at dramatizing moments of social exchange between a New Culture narrative voice and village others. It is these moments of interaction— in which narrative time becomes bewitched by the co-presence of multiple social subjects— that enabled literary works to explore the epistemic overlap that marked the Republican era. Literary works not only reflected critically on the new knowledge that intellectuals sought to bring to the countryside, but also provided sensitive explorations of the life-worlds such knowledge sought to displace. As such, these texts are particularly rich resources for understanding the fundamental unevenness that marked this historical era, in which older life-worlds were met head on by the evangelizing drives of modernizing reformers. Folklorists, writers, and language reformers also shared an interest in reckoning with the practical uses of speech and song across the linguistically diverse regions of mainland China. Their emphasis on the performance skills rural people cultivated through their different regional songs and stories directly challenged ideas of rural China as a primordial terrain lacking social learning and textual literacy of any kind. In the face of the vast richness of folkloric tales they collected, and the vibrant cacophony of sound they sought to record in print, a vision of rural China as “insipid, coarse, extremely lacking, un-aesthetic” could hardly be maintained.

**Approach and Methodology: Xiangtu Wenxue (鄉土文學) as Writing Villages**

My focus on how vernacular literature represented the countryside during the Republican era also allows me to intervene into a key body of literary historiography that has emerged in the field of Modern Chinese Literature over the last twenty-years. Scholars in Mainland China have categorized vernacular fiction that deals with the countryside in 20th century China by the term “native-place literature” (xiangtu wenxue 鄉土文學). Such scholarship has declared xiangtu to be a “literary school with distinct characteristics...[and] an acknowledged place in the history of China’s new literature.”⁴⁵ The works to be found in this “school” are defined, according to the introduction of a recently published compendium of xiangtu writing, by their “rural [narrative] materials” (鄉土文学材料).
Such narratives explore social life in specific village or townships spaces, with liberal use of dialect expressions and a focus on presenting local social practices. Interestingly, for scholars of xiangtu literature, the presentation of such disparate localisms does not sever xiangtu works from national imaginaries, but in fact reinforces them. As the same introduction puts it, xiangtu works are a “national style” (民族風格) of writing imbued with a “Chinese sensibility” (中國氣派). As a genre category, a whole range of publishing activity has been organized around the concept since the mid 1980s on the mainland, including compendiums of selected literary works, edited research volumes, writerly self-introductions, and extended genre histories.

Some of the most important literary intellectuals of the Republican Period reflected upon the term xiangtu wenxue in their writings, including Zhou Zuoren, Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896-1981), and Lu Xun. Lu Xun’s use of the term in his 1936 introductory preface to volume two of the Great Compendium of New Chinese Literature (中國新文學大溪) is often cited by scholars as the origins of the concept of xiangtu literature in Mainland China has now become an enormous body of scholarly discourse. The term received early sanction by the influential literary scholar Yan Jiayan’s in his ground breaking 1988 study The History of Modern Chinese Literary Groups (中国现代小说流派史). In that work Yan would claim that not only was the practice of xiangtu writing an important part of literary discourse in the early and mid 1920s, but in fact that there was a particular “xiangtu literary group” (乡土小说流派) that formed itself under the influence of Lu Xun and other members of the Literary Research Society. Since Yan argued for not only xiangtu as a permissible category of literary analysis, but in fact as a proper literary movement in its own right, scholarly discourse on the Mainland has seen a veritable explosion of xiangtu related scholarship. For example, in 1996 there was the publication of a two volume compendium of works which covers xiangtu prose, poetry, essays, and “theory” from both the pre and post 1949 periods (see Liu Shatong and Song Zhiming, eds. (1996)). The entire compendium totals more than 3000 pages of material, attempting to provide an exhaustive overview of this seemingly historically enduring form of writing. Close on the heels of the publication of this compendium came the first monograph on the history of xiangtu fiction, which covered its early iterations in the May Fourth period to its “maturation” during the united front days of the 1940s and on into its re-appearance in the reform period of the 1980s (see Chen (1999)).

I will more closely examine how Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren engaged with the concept in chapter two, while Mao Dun’s treatment of it will be explored in chapter three.

46 See Ibid, p.3.
47 Ibid, p.3. The concept of xiangtu literature has also played important an important role in debates about writing, language, and culture at various moments across the 20th century in Taiwan, most notably during the early 1930s and 1970s. This project does not take up the way in which xiangtu has been articulated in Taiwan, because this is a complex story that deserves (and has received) individual treatment in its own right, one that involves the intersecting of colonial (Japanese), local (Minnan), and regional (Mandarin Chinese) languages. For an introduction to discussions regarding xiangtu literature in Taiwan in the 1930s, see Hsiau (2000), pp.29-49; for debates about xiangtu literature in Taiwan in the 1970s, see Lan (1992) and Chang (1993).
48 Writings on xiangtu literature in Mainland China has now become an enormous body of scholarly discourse. The term received early sanction by the influential literary scholar Yan Jiayan’s in his ground breaking 1988 study The History of Modern Chinese Literary Groups (中国现代小说流派史). In that work Yan would claim that not only was the practice of xiangtu writing an important part of literary discourse in the early and mid 1920s, but in fact that there was a particular “xiangtu literary group” (乡土小说流派) that formed itself under the influence of Lu Xun and other members of the Literary Research Society. Since Yan argued for not only xiangtu as a permissible category of literary analysis, but in fact as a proper literary movement in its own right, scholarly discourse on the Mainland has seen a veritable explosion of xiangtu related scholarship. For example, in 1996 there was the publication of a two volume compendium of works which covers xiangtu prose, poetry, essays, and “theory” from both the pre and post 1949 periods (see Liu Shatong and Song Zhiming, eds. (1996)). The entire compendium totals more than 3000 pages of material, attempting to provide an exhaustive overview of this seemingly historically enduring form of writing. Close on the heels of the publication of this compendium came the first monograph on the history of xiangtu fiction, which covered its early iterations in the May Fourth period to its “maturation” during the united front days of the 1940s and on into its re-appearance in the reform period of the 1980s (see Chen (1999)).
49 I will more closely examine how Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren engaged with the concept in chapter two, while Mao Dun’s treatment of it will be explored in chapter three.
of xiangtu literary criticism on the mainland. Lu Xun used the term in discussing a number of young authors who were prominent in the first decade of New Literary production in the country (1917-1927). In Lu Xun’s words:

Jian Xian’ai described Guizhou, while Pei Wenzhong concerned himself with Yuguan. Whoever in Beijing uses a pen to write what is in his heart, regardless of whether this writer describes himself as objective or subjective, in actuality is writing xiangtu wenxue (鄉土文學). Where Beijing is concerned, these are writers of sojourning-literature (僑寓文學的作者). Yet this is not like what G. Brandes [English name in original] described as immigre literature (僑民文學), for what is sojourning is simply the author himself, not the works the author wrote. As such, we can only see [in these works] a faintly visible homesickness, and it is difficult to use the ambience of an alien land to open readers’ hearts, or dazzle their eyes. Xu Qinwen named his first short story collection hometown, which is to say that he unknowingly ranked himself as an author of xiangtu wenxue. Before he began writing xiangtu fiction, he was already banished from his hometown, life compelling him to go off to strange places.\(^{50}\)

Lu Xun’s gloss, as brief and elliptical as it was, sought to capture what was an emerging trend in Chinese letters of the time, one that had not yet been codified by literary histories or extended theoretical discussion: the literary work as a look back upon a hometown space that the author was already geographically and epistemically displaced from (“before he began writing xiangtu fiction, he was already banished from his hometown, life compelling him to go off to strange places”). Lu Xun’s invocation of George Brandes (1842-1927) presents a fascinating translingual encounter at the beginning of xiangtu literary criticism on the mainland. Brandes was one of the pre-eminent literary critics of late 19th and early 20th century Europe. A Danish national, his career spanned over five decades, most of which was spent at the University of Copenhagen as a professor of aesthetics. As an influential cultural arbiter in Europe, Brandes’ sought to not only track continental cultural trends, but use his criticism to modernize letters in his own home country of Denmark. He thus advocated a liberal humanism that would resist the arid conservatism and staid religiosity that had come to characterize dominant culture within the Scandinavian context. As such, he is credited by literary historians as the main architect of “The Modern Breakthrough,” which sought to

\(^{50}\) See Lu Xun (1995), p. 1140.
promote a cosmopolitan, secular Scandinavian culture, one which set itself in opposition to religious and social orthodoxies. Living in Berlin from 1877 to 1883, Brandes is also credited with projecting a confident vision of a modern Danish national culture which could stand against the colonial hegemony of Germany, whose language and letters had dominated Danish life for centuries.  

Beginning in 1871, Brandes began a series of lectures on European literary history that garnered a significant amount of critical attention. These lectures became the basis for his most ambitious work, the six volume *Main Currents of 19th Century Literature*, which was published sequentially from 1871-90, being translated into English between 1901-1905. The first volume of *Main Currents* was entitled *The Emigrant Literature*, which studied a group of early 19th century French intellectuals and writers whose works were borne out of two historically unprecedented moments of cultural and political displacement: the tyranny of the French National Convention (1792-1795) during the French Revolution (1789-1799), which in Brandes’ words “cowed, exiled, or guillotined all whose political colouring did not accurately match the then prevailing shade of popular opinion,” and the tyranny of Napoleon I’s autocratic reign (1799-1814), which “persecuted, imprisoned, shot, or exiled all who would not submit to being silenced (a silence which might only be broken by cheers for the Emperor).”  

Brandes examined how exiles from the Napoleonic regime such as Chateaubriand, Senancour, Barante, Constant, Nodier, and Madame de Stael explored what the moral, philosophical, and political future of 19th century Europe would be after the disillusionment engendered by France’s failed attempt at republicanism. Their writings thus examined a range of issues, including monarchical and familial authority, the theocratic strictures of restoration, liberal personhood, gendered emancipation, and proto-Romanticist exaltations of

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51 For more on Brandes life and work, see Smith-Allen (2005) and Hertel and Kristensen eds. (1980).

52 See Brandes (1901), p. 1. Napoleon’s tyranny was so immense that, in Brandes’ words, “Legitimists and Republicans, Constitutionalists and Liberals, philosophers and poets were crushed under the all-levelling roller, unless they preferred, scattered in every direction, to seek a refuge beyond the boundaries of the empire.” See Brandes (1901), pp. 1-2.
nature. As Brandes evocatively puts it in discussing both the iconoclasm and disillusionment that marked this generation of writers:

The Right, the Good, the True are as such. But the enthusiastic attempts to introduce and establish a free form of government which should realise these ideals without the invocation of any authority unexplainable by reason, had resulted in the savage excess of lawlessness...as genuine and intelligent sons of the young nineteenth century, it was impossible to believe in the strength of a stem which their fathers had sawn through. Chateaubriand’s faith in legitimacy was as faint-hearted as Constant’s in religion in general. Men were uneasy in their minds. The old house was burned down. The new was not even begun. And, instead of boldly beginning to erect a new building, events led them to seek refuge among the ruins of the old, the half-burned materials of which they built up as best they could. During this performance they were perpetually tempted to try experiments not planned from the first. After some vain attempts to give solidity to the building by the addition of new material, they would in despair give a kick at the shaky, newly built walls, which brought them down again. No group of writers whose aim was to preserve society ever brought such passionate accusations against it as the authors of the Emigrant Literature.

This complex looking back upon inherited (but crumbling) life worlds amidst the stalled and uncertain emergence of the new possesses obvious echoes with the New Cultural iconoclasm that took place in China one hundred years later, with the fall of the old Qing imperial order and the emergence of a Republic that had not delivered on its democratic promise, riven as it was by warlordism, political terror, and the specter of imperial revival. It is these parallels that may have pushed Lu Xun, writing in a period of intense authoritarian reaction under the GMD regime in Shanghai, to invoke Brandes in his discussion of the first generation of xiangtu authors, whose look back upon the village spaces they had grown up in was now freighted with the dislocations and disappointments of the new Republic in which they found themselves.

53 See Brandes (1901), p. 73-74.

54 The question of the influence of Brandes’ writings on early 20th century Chinese intellectuals is a fascinating one that deserves its own article-length treatment. The work of Bonnie McDougall (1971) and Christian Herman Jensen (1980) has shown that while the first four volumes of Main Currents were not fully translated into Chinese until 1939, cultural journals from 1917 onward had discussions and/or translations of Brandes’ work. For a short introduction to Brandes’ Main Currents see “Major Trends in 19th Century Literature” (十九世纪文学之主要潮流) in the “Introducing Books and Magazines” (書報介紹) section of New Youth (新青年) 3:5, 1917. By the mid-1920s Brandes was an often cited authority on various European literatures. An article by Chen Gu entitled “Brandes” (布蘭兌司) introducing him as an important European literary appeared in Dongfang Zazhi 17:5 (March 1920), pp.75-85, while Zheng Zhenduo published “Biography of the Modern Danish Critic Brandes (現代丹麥批評家勃蘭特傳) in Short Story Monthly (小說月報) XIV: 4 (April 1923), pp.1-8. Lu Xun, for his part, had been engaging with Brandes’ work since his student days in Japan. In 1907 his brother Zhou Zuoren reportedly acquired for him German copies of Brandes’ Impressions of Poland and Impressions of Russia. Jensen points out that Lu Xun’s description of the description of Byron and Shelley’s “radical naturalism” in his famed 1907 essay “On the Power of Mara Poetry” (摩羅詩力說) was very close to Brandes’ description of them in Main Currents. For more, see Jensen (1980), pp. 228-235 and McDougal (1971), pp. 77-81.
writers, this was a generation defined by its liminality, in which an inherited social and cultural order (the Qing empire) had crumbled while a new one had yet to fully take shape, the Chinese Republic being an unfinished historical project whose social and political forms were subjects of intense debate throughout the period.

As fascinating as the evocative potentials of the term xiangtu wenxue were during the Republican period, it fell into disuse on the Mainland for much of the Maoist Period (1949-1976), where more thoroughly class-based theories of literary production and scholarship dominated. The work of establishing xiangtu as a fully formed literary genre, with a theoretical system and a historical canon all its own, began in the Reform Period (1976-present). Much scholarship since the early 1980s has sought to tie xiangtu to a deeply essentializing form of cultural nationalism, which emerged as an intellectual and state strategy at the end of the Maoist period in the face of a crisis in the legitimacy of Chinese socialism. One of the most important intellectuals in the establishment of xiangtu as a discrete literary-theoretical discourse was Liu Shaotang 劉紹棠 (1936-1997), a prolific writer of rural narratives set in his native-district of Tongzhou, once a predominantly agricultural region that has now become an administrative subdivision of Beijing. A graduate of Beijing University’s Chinese Department, Liu established a reputation in the early 1950s as an emerging young writer. Denounced in the anti-rightist campaign of 1957, Liu would spend the next twenty-years in the countryside participating in work-rehabilitation, though he also was able to continue to write fiction in his spare time. Upon his official return to the literary world in 1979, Liu not only published a bevy of short stories and novels, but set about championing the concept of xiangtu literature.

Liu was of course not the only intellectual to help contribute in the 1980s to a re-emerging sense of what xiangtu wenxue was amongst intellectual circles. The publication in of Yan Jiayan’s A History of Modern Chinese Literary Groups (中國現代小說流派史) in 1988 was also an important development. Yan’s work was one of the first scholarly monographs in the reform period to conceptualize literary production in 20th century China through the analytic of the literary group (流派), as oppose to the still dominant Maoist language of literary criticism, with its focus on the class background of authors and the political efficacy of literary works. Yan devoted an entire chapter to the group of xiangtu writers outlined by Lu Xun in his 1936 preface. For more, see Yan (2009), pp. 29-76.

For more regarding the life and literary-work of Liu Shaotang, see Dong (2012) and Shi (2008)
In a series of articles written in the early 1980s, Liu argued that xiangtu writing was not only a mode of fiction that had a proud place within China’s 20th century literary tradition, but one that could provide the basis for a renewed national literature in the reform period. He formulated xiangtu as the answer to a general sense of cultural crisis that Chinese intellectuals were grappling with at the time: the loss of faith in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) following the violence and institutional dislocations of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). That historical episode had left the intellectuals who endured it questioning the historical meaning of the CCP’s revolution and the cultural forms the party had championed. According to Liu, this loss of faith manifested itself in the tendency of young writers to idolize what he deemed to be “Western” literary styles such as modernism, stream of consciousness, magical realism, etc.\(^57\) Such literary idolization was deeply connected to interest in (and exploration of) Euro-American cultures and political institutions, thus holding dangerous political connotations for the CCP regime. An unremitting critique of party legitimacy was seen, Liu argued, in the Scar Literature (伤痕文学 Shanghen Wenxue) of the late 1970s, which for Liu emphasized the pain of the Cultural Revolutionary period without recognizing the social accomplishments the party had made since the founding of the PRC.\(^58\) Liu’s answer to the searing questions the Cultural Revolution had foisted upon Chinese intellectuals was to turn to xiangtu as an idealized space in which both social division and historical trauma could be overcome. As he put it:

During the Cultural Revolutionary period there emerged radical leftist movements to negate our motherland’s cultural tradition. These truly were attempts at cutting us off from our history and stopping up its source. After the destruction of the Gang of Four, following the deepening in the liberation of thought and the implementation of the party’s policies, there emerged a tendency towards bourgeois liberalization. These tendencies cannot but be reflected in literary creation, a most sensitive field. Here in Beijing, to say nothing of other regions, some young comrades who endured hardship during the Cultural Revolution have had their faith in the party and their confidence in socialism shaken. They have at once rejected many different things of ours, including

\(^{57}\) See Liu (1984), p.211.

\(^{58}\) For a discussion of Scar Literature in the context of the emerging literary practices in the early 1980s in China, which placed an emphasis on exposing social ills and exploring historical trauma, and thus differed considerably from the Socialist Realist dictates of preceding decades, see Siu and Stern (1985), pp.xiii-xix.
Chinese Literature’s national and revolutionary traditions. They feel that our literature is not the equal of foreign and Western literatures, indeed that it is not even the equal of Hong Kong and Taiwanese literatures...In order to counter the tendency to idolize the West I advocate xiangtu literature.\textsuperscript{59}

Liu was adamant that xiangtu was to consist of narratives produced about village societies by writers who had grown up or spent extensive amounts of time in them. The xiangtu writer was thus positioned as the raconteur-par-excellence, with an in-depth knowledge of village customs, local personalities, and regional history. For Liu it was only through such localist writing that a genuine and positive sense of national culture could be articulated. Liu spoke extensively about the “character of the Chinese people” (中国人民的性格), one imbued with fundamental “moral qualities” (美德) that included courage, diligence, and mutual-aid.\textsuperscript{60} These national qualities could be most readily glimpsed amongst China’s peasants, those most tied to the rhythms of agricultural life in the interior of the country and thus least affected by ideological winds from abroad. As Liu put it, “the peasants are the backbone of the Chinese people, the class that creates the national morals (民族道德).”\textsuperscript{61} Liu thus performed a nationalist appropriation of the local that Prasenjit Duara has argued is symptomatic of many modern discourses on local cultures, in which the local is represented as “a site of authentic values of a larger formation, such as the nation or civilization.”\textsuperscript{62} Liu’s xiangtu held out the promise that social unity based on organic moral bonds (located in the

\textsuperscript{59} Liu (1984), p.211.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid, p. 266-227.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, p.227

\textsuperscript{62} See Duara (2000), p.14. This fusing was pithily encapsulated by Liu’s short-hand definition of xiangtu: “The characteristics of xiangtu literature are, first, that you must write about your own native-place; second that you must inherit and continue national traditions (民族传统). See Liu (1984), p.222
civilizational ur-space of the village) was possible, despite the social divisions that were then actively roiling the country as it underwent capitalist reforms.63

This local-cum-nationalist literary aesthetic was championed by Liu and likeminded intellectuals in numerous publishing projects throughout the 1980s and beyond.64 By the 1990s, xiangtu had become a word that contemporary Chinese writers used to label themselves and their work, acts of ideological self-positioning that made use of the moral connotations associated with the term. No less eminent an author than Mo Yan 莫言 (1955-) described himself in the early 1990s as a xiangtu writer, a son of the Shandong soil whose literary practice would not be possible without his abiding relationship with village society. As Mo Yan put in a 1993 article entitled My Fiction and My Hometown:

When it comes to the piece of land that birthed you, raised you, and in which your ancestors’ bones are buried, you can love it, you can hate it, but you have no ability to escape it...Even though my body is in a different place, my spirit has already returned to my hometown; I physically live in Beijing, but my soul lives in the memories I have of my hometown. When it comes to the relationship between my fiction and my hometown, I feel it is a topic that [requires] tens of thousands of words.65

When Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012, various commentators in and out of China highlighted the specific genius of his xiangtu literary practice.66 By the early twenty-first

63 The literature on the economic inequalities produced by market reforms is extensive. For an overview of the transformations in Chinese socialism witnessed since 1978, see Lin (2006). For how market reforms have wildly exacerbated the material divisions between urban and rural sectors, see Chan (1994), Knight and Song (1999), Zhang (2011), and Solinger (1999). For social perceptions regarding migrant workers from the countryside, articulated particularly around the concept of suzhi/quality, see Yan (2003) and Anagnost (2004).

64 Liu himself was one of the editors of the 3000 page compendium of xiangtu literature which sought to definitively establish the term as a foundational one for understanding the history of modern Chinese literature. See Liu and Song (1996) for more.


66 As the scholar Gong Jushan wrote after the Nobel win: “Mo Yan’s early life experience, marked by poverty and hunger, but also a valuing of books like life itself, was sedimented into the structure of his creative mind through the memories of his xiangtu, forming the root of the flourishing national genealogies of his novels, as well as his intense celebration of life itself and his pioneering creative attitude.” See 龔举善的 莫言的乡⼟记忆与文学能量, first published in the 《青海社会科学》2013年第1期, reproduced online at http://www.literature.org.cn/Article.aspx?id=74608. The website, sponsored and administered by the Literature Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, is an important forum for contemporary discussions of modern Chinese literature.
century, then, xiangtu had gone global, representing Chinese literature on one of the world’s most prestigious cultural stages.

English language scholarship has also taken up xiangtu writing in Mainland China, with prominent scholars such as Tang Xiaobing and David Wang providing their own theorizations of the concept. Such scholarship has limited itself to analyzing the works of only the most representative writers of the modern Chinese canon, with Tang analyzing xiangtu through a close reading of one short story by Lu Xun (his 1921 *Hometown* 故鄉), and Wang analyzing the works of Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988). Both Wang and Tang have made authorial psychology a dominant lens through which xiangtu writings are analyzed. Tang turns to Lacanian psychoanalysis to diagnose what he calls a “homesickness complex,” which for him is nothing less than the “condensed psychobiography of a modern Chinese male consciousness.” For Tang this psychological condition has roots in the pre-modern period, pointing out that the term “hometown” (故鄉) can be found in use as early as Sima Qian’s Records of the Grand Historian (史記), which describes Emperor Gaozu of the Western Han returning to his hometown at the end of his life to live out his days with friends and family. Gaozu tells his loved ones that the “the traveler always pines for his native land (遊子悲故鄉).” For Tang, this “candid revelation by a legendary hero of his private feelings” contains “such mythopoetic power as to have shaped an emotive pattern and permeated a collective pathos,” one that has been expressed in native-place poetry throughout the imperial period. David Wang is even more direct in ascribing psycho-biographic dimensions to xiangtu writing. As he puts it:

Native-soil literature, as the term suggests, is nurtured on a writer’s deep-rooted concern with his home region, but this concern can be acutely felt only after the author is uprooted from the soil he cherishes so much and, more ironically, has been denied any possibility of savouring or

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68 The quote is found in Ibid, p.74.
understanding its actuality...a writer feels homesick not just because of his separation from his homeland but also because of his loss of the aura of his homeland he believes himself to have had...displacement points to a narrative or psychic mechanism that makes possible the (re)definition of something either irretrievable or unspeakable, and to the eternally regressive state of such a narrative and psychological quest.\textsuperscript{70}

In the study that follows, I break away from the analysis of xiangtu writing presented by both English and Chinese language scholarship. In terms of the former, I am hesitant to treat the xiangtu phenomenon as a “mythopoetic power” that has coursed across the imperial and modern periods. Without denying that poets and scholars dealt with homesickness as a theme in their writings during the imperial period, I read the explosion of interest in writing about village life in the early 20th century as a product of China’s uneven integration into global capitalism. Though poets during the imperial period could write about their hometowns as they set out on journeys to participate in civil service examinations or take up political posts, none of them employed the developmentalist rhetoric of someone like Li Dazhao, who urged young intellectuals to consider the cities and the countryside as two distinct economic and epistemological spaces. The developmentalist gaze which Li and so many other 20th century intellectuals brought to bare on village society was rooted in the globally transformative moment in which they were situated.\textsuperscript{71} I also contend that the concept of nostalgia, which both Wang and Tang use as an analytic through which to read xiangtu, is insufficient for understanding the dynamics involved in this kind of writing. Without denying that the disjunctions of the modern period generated nostalgic sentiment within the May Fourth Generation of intellectuals, I would argue that Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893-1980), Liu Bannong 劉半農 (1891-1934) and many others were interested in


\textsuperscript{71} Historians are in general agreement that before the 20th century the urban/rural binary was not a galvanizing force in social and cultural life in China. For example, David Faure and Tao Tao Liu have argued that “in the Ming and Qing dynasties, rural-urban distinctions were not a significant part of an individual’s identity. Only in the early 1900s, when political reforms separated cities and towns as agents of social change, did an ideology emerge that looked upon villages as sources of backwardness”(1). Jacob Eyferth concurs with this sentiment, writing that “In contrast to Europe, where for a long time the word “citizen” meant ‘simply inhabitants of a town, in sharp contrast to those who were subjects under feudal princes and kings in the countryside,’ China knew few legal and administrative barriers between town and country”(221). For more, see Eyferth (2009), pp. 219-231, and Faure and Liu (2002), p.1-16.
the songs and practices of their native regions as *living cultures* that still contained considerable meaning for rural people.

I thus approach xiangtu writing not as a generational *recherche du temps perdu*, but as an exploration of contemporary cultures of place and practice, defined by songs, languages, material objects, and votive practices that fascinated writers and folklorists. This process of “writing villages” took place in a variety of different discursive fields, whose particularities I remain sensitive to throughout this study. The cataloguing work of folklorists was deeply influenced by Euro-American models of ethnography and folklore study. Language reformers, meanwhile, worked in the shadow of presumably “successful” movements for the establishment of national vernaculars in Japan and Euro-America. The New Literature as an aesthetic project enabled writers to experiment with different scriptural forms (classical Chinese, baihua vernacular, and regional dialects) and narrative perspectives in their invocations of village life. I contend, however, that whether it was in the work of writers, essayists, folklorists, or language reformers, writing about the village was not an “eternally regressive” search for “something either irretrievable or unspeakable.” It was an engagement with complex cultures that existed in the here and now. By treating xiangtu writing as a search for a residual or lost way of life, secondary scholarship has actually replicated the denial of co-evalness to village cultures that social scientists of the time themselves performed. In the works examined in this dissertation we find village cultures that are, if anything, far *too present* in the historical now, their diverse songs, languages, and practices overflowing the taxonomic categories of the new fields of knowledge intellectuals sought to capture them in. To understand xiangtu, then, I contend that we must go beyond “psychobiography” and “nostalgia,”
taking seriously the contemporary cultures of place and practice that so fascinated the intellectuals of the time.72

In relation to Chinese language scholarship, my treatment of xiangtu reverses the essentialist discourse which often accompanies the concept by insisting that rural narratives of the Republican period did not speak to a fully-formed national essence that existed in morally beatific form in the countryside. Hometown texts were written by multi-lingual cosmopolitans who had left their home villages, going away to capitals of culture such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, and Paris to become educated in famed institutes of modern knowledge production. Even for those intellectuals who never left Chinese soil, their reading, translating, and scholarship wired them into transnational print networks that spanned the Pacific, North American, and European worlds. For the intellectuals working in and through these new textual networks, it was no longer easy to write about the village and township communities they had come from. Votive practices regarding birth, death, and spiritual transference between worlds resisted easy categorization into secular taxonomies. The vocal complexities of dialect speech confounded smooth transcription onto the printed page. Forms of value that were irreducible to national or market logics challenged narrators committed to visions of civic citizenship. Writing xiangtu was, from the very beginning, a negotiating with a heterogenous cultural field, not a positivist reflection of an organic unity that had remained unchanged throughout history. Any attempt at positing an always-already present national unity, located in the “concrete” space of the village as civilizational ur-ground, ignores the vexed process by which the village was written into the nation and its culture.

72 Harry Harootunian (2012) has described the modern as an historical period that is essentially haunted by residual cultures from its own past: “Historical societies always display the overlay and structural coexistence of multiple modes of production, and even when one mode dominates over the others, the process of combining residues from earlier times persists, though these are assigned a dependent status on the new. Because the vestiges remain partially unassimilated to a dominant system, often assuming the appearance of revenants capable of reminding contemporaries of what has been lost and possessing the capacity for sudden, unscheduled surfacing, they can always challenge the principle mode of production and demand a space of their own...”(28). While I concur with the idea of the “structural coexistence” of multiple modes of production in any society, I would object to Harootunian’s description of inherited life-worlds as “residues,” for as the texts examined in this study show, regional practices and ideas possessed their own potency for village people, ones that were active in the present they shared with the modernizing agents they came into contact with.
Whether it was in the work of folklorists, language reformers, or vernacular writers, the cultural projects of the day spoke to the endurance of linguistic and spiritual difference into the time of the new republic. How such difference was to be incorporated into or excluded from the emergent national community was the subject of intense debate, one that imprinted itself on the form and content of the works examined here. This project thus allows me to re-animate the very category of xiangtu itself, challenging its later-period appropriation by Liu Shaotang and others to the cause of national essentialism. Writing xiangtu meant exploring the way rural people in the early 20th century spoke, sang, worked, and prayed. Village practices often frustrated attempts to build a secular and civic national culture, making xiangtu a literary practice that explored dynamic tensions between inherited and emergent life-worlds. It was a literature of productive ambiguities, not organic moral belonging.

Chapter Outlines

My inquiry begins, as it did for the intellectuals of the time, with the songs village people sang. As the village came to be seen as a crucial space of mobilization in the national project, intellectuals set out to examine the forms of oral culture that existed in the countryside (Chapter 1). They thus attempted to record in print the songs sung by rural people, which they sought to present as the equivalent to the Euro-American concept of “folksongs.” The major scholarly journal for the collection and analysis of folksongs during the early 1920s, Beijing University’s Folksong Weekly (歌謠週刊), grappled from the beginning with the problem of how to record in one scriptural system a heterolingual social world. One of the leaders of the movement, the Beijing University undergraduate Chang Hui 常惠 (1894-1985), explained in the journal’s first issue that the study of folksongs could help in the process of devising a national language for the continent-sized empire that leaders of the new republic had inherited from the old Qing imperium. As Chang Hui put it:

Do we not say that China’s languages can never be unified? But what about looking at the power of folksongs? I believe that they can give some material to those who are researching the national language. Dozens of variations can be derived from one folksong, which can be found in eight or
nine different provinces, spreading across almost all of China. Yet every song has its own mode of speech (各有各的說法). Even areas that are quite close to one another have different modes of speech; [these songs thus] have tremendous research value.\footnote{See Chang Hui’s “Further Explanations for Contributors” (Dui Tougao Zhejun Jin Yi Jie 對投稿諸君進一解) Geyao Zhoukan 1, December 17, 1922, p.4.}

While Chang Hui could express optimism that folklore study would help in the development of a unified national language, folklorists often struggled with the linguistic diversity their work unearthed. They thus not only discussed what methods of scriptural annotation should be used for dialects that as yet had no written scripts, but what such linguistic incommensurability meant for China as a supposedly unified national culture. The oral practices they catalogued resisted easy categorization, as the various taxonomic schemas regarding the form and content of the songs they collected became subject to intense debate. All told, what emerges from the journal is not a vision of a stable national culture, but a porous linguistic field that threatened the very coherence of foundational concepts such as the common people (民間), folksongs (歌謠), and the national language (國語).

In chapter 2, I turn more directly to the production of rural life in the vernacular literature that was produced during the 1920s. It was during this decade that a new genre of writing emerged, centered around the attempts of cosmopolitan intellectuals to describe the villages they had grown up in. I argue that in the hometown works of Lu Xun, Xu Qinwen 許欽文 (1897-1984), Tai Jingnong 台靜農, Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶 (1902-1990), and Yu Dafu 郁達夫 (1896-1945) we see a keen interest in the object-world of village life: the everyday things by which rural people prepared food, decorated their homes, and communicated with the gods. In these texts temple mats, handcrafted lamps, and ancestral alters become a means of communicating with wronged spirits and powerful gods, which are seen as having the power to intervene directly into human affairs. At a time when a nascent industrial economy was flooding China’s urban spaces with commodities of all
kinds, these stories reflect on an object-world that was not yet industrialized and disenchanted. Whether presented in the guise of familial lament or social critique, these texts spoke to life-worlds whose non-secular practices fit uneasily within the project of national development emerging at the time.

Chapter 3 examines the way in which social scientific knowledge and vernacular literature co-produced one another in the early and mid 1930s. Leading literary theorists of the day such as Mao Dun urged fellow writers to become versed in social scientific methodology, including on-the-ground observation of the social subjects that were to be represented in literary works. For Mao Dun and other leftist theorists, the literary text was a means of diagnosing the social and economic ills of Chinese society, and writers had to arm themselves with concepts such as class and mode of production to do so. In this way, the literary text was seen as producing a truth claim no less authoritative, if differently presented, than sociological reports and economic statistics. I track the moments in which the social-scientific narrative confronts practices it understands to be feudal, superstitious, and backwards. Though social-scientific narratives sought to dismiss such practices as a hindrance to classed revolution, their presence in these texts suggest the non-secular concerns that continued to animate rural life-worlds, concerns which the revolution had to speak to in some way if it was to be effective. I also consider the way some writers during the time period, most notably the Sichuan native Ai Wu 艾蕪 (1904-1992), staged the relationship between narrative and place in a way that transcended the social-scientific paradigm all together, producing a narrative that took ecological presence, rather than classed revolution, as its organizing principle.

Chapter 4 focuses on eco-tableaus (the materiality of touch, sound, and body within landscape) as they were figured in long-forms works of localist fiction produced during the War of Resistance (1937-1945). During the wartime period writers were forced to flee Beijing and Shanghai, the two cities that had been centers of literary production in China for the better part of two decades. The Chinese literary world was thus dispersed across a variety of inland cities and
southern colonial entrepots. I focus on the episodic novels of rural life that were produced during this time period, examining works by Shen Congwen, Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911-1942), and Shi Tuo 師陀 (1910-1988). Each writer sought to negotiate with the monologic ideologies of ethnic nationalism and pan-Asian fascism by focusing on the cyclical, repetitious nature of the village everyday. For Xiao Hong, this entailed a re-enchantment of the rural past as a means of imagining a way out of a violent and fractured present. For Shi Tuo and Shen Congwen, it meant foregrounding the non-secular beliefs of rural people, who are seen as worshipping river gods, building up store houses of karma, and longing for the return of just monarchs to bring back order in a chaotic world. These visions of the rural everyday foregrounded utopian possibilities at a time when nationalist and imperialist rivalry had produced a present defined by unremitting violence, and where victory in the war was far from assured.

In an Appendix to the dissertation, I offer a continued discussion of the linguistic dimensions of xiangtu writing. Questions regarding regional dialects and scriptural representation were not confined to folklorists alone. Beginning in the early 1920s, intellectuals expressed intense anxiety over the limitations of inherited forms of written language to capture the oral speech of China’s linguistically diverse regional communities. Early champions of a New Literature (新文學) for China were adamant that printed scripts had to reflect the spoken languages of the common people. They thus demanded that this New Literature be written in a vernacular script (baihua 白話) based on oral speech, overthrowing a centuries old literary language (文言文) they deemed to have no relationship to the patois of everyday life. Yet no sooner had this “vernacular” been developed than it too came under critique for being a textual system disconnected from mass life, formed as it

was out of syntactical and lexical combinations of Japanese, European, and Northern Mandarin languages. Regional languages presented a major problem for language reformers: how would the northern-based vernacular script represent the oral worlds of Minnan, Yue, and Wu language zones? Critics such as Yu Pingbai 俞平伯 (1900-1990), Ye Shengtao, Mao Dun, Lu Xun, and Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899-1935) debated just how one could write local-language literature in China, given the inability of local languages to gain scriptural vehicles of their own. Such debates led to an impressive array of experiments in the use of romanized and latinized scripts to write regional languages. Ironically, the phonocentric drive for the unmediated representation of oral language in print only led to ever more intense rounds of textual mediation, as smooth transcription from voice to page (in whatever language) proved to be an illusive fantasy.

Taken together, the four chapters and appendix are an extended working out of a core proposition: that the writers, folklorists, and linguists of early 20th century China were fascinated by the languages, objects, and votive rituals of village societies, whose complex meanings their works attested to, even if at times they struggled to make them legible according to the new knowledge frameworks they operated in. This struggle for understanding is, I believe, highly instructive. For instead of the sociological “invention” of a fallen and backward social subject (the peasant), these texts evidence a dynamic negotiation with village life-worlds, whose songs, objects, and spiritual visions contained their own complex meanings. This negotiation was neither uni-directional nor conceptually enclosed, with the drive for national modernization blotting out all signs of the pre-national matrix. For to write the village was to negotiate with all that came before the republic and its national vision. It was to place the inherited and the emergent side by side in a shared narrative time, and map the complex amalgam produced therein.
Chapter 1

Printing the Voice of the People: Geyao Zhoukan (歌謠週刊) and the Heterogeneity of Minjian Culture

Within studies of how Republican-era intellectuals sought to read their own society via an engagement with transnational discourses on sociology, political economy, and history, a dominant scholarly narrative has emerged, one which argues that they produced the peasant as a social subject that needed to be transformed in order for China to modernize. This argument has been most persuasively presented by Myron Cohen’s notion of the peasant (農民) as a culturally “invented” other, seen by intellectuals and reformers through a binary of denigration and/or adoration.¹ Such a binary posited the rural other as either a conservative being burdened by local custom and thus unable to embrace new political ideas, or as an industrious being that represented the moral backbone of the Chinese nation. Both of these constructions can be found in the writings of the rural reformers of the Republican era, as they sought to respond to China’s forced integration into the modern world of capitalist imperialism. Yet seen as either object of critique or object of veneration, Cohen’s argument suggests that the rural other was not only a passive receptacle of elite reformation, but that their culture was one that was fundamentally legible and transparent to intellectuals and reformers, and as such easily dismissed as so much traditional nonsense.

In this chapter I will argue for a different understanding of the textual production of rural culture in the Republican period, examining the Folklore Movement that emerged around Beijing University in the early and mid 1920s to do so. I will argue that, in examining life-worlds outside of urban publishing centers, intellectuals did not “invent” a passive other understood to be without social skills and historical agency. Rather, they negotiated with a heterogenous field marked by diverse languages and complex oral practices. Organized around the journal Folksong Weekly

¹ See Cohen’s famed essay Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese “Peasant”, Daedalus, Vol. 122, No.2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 151-170. While Cohen places more stress on intellectuals’ rejection of rural popular culture, scholars such as Han Xiaorong have emphasized that intellectuals and reformers oscillated between cultural denigration and moral adulation. See Han (2006) for more.
(Geyao Zhoukan 歌謠週刊), the folklore movement set out to record the oral songs that could be found throughout China’s varied cities, townships, and villages. The folklorists did not use the terms “peasant” (nongmin 農民) or “countryside” (nongcun 農村) in their journal, evidencing little interest in demarcating an urban/rural split as a founding social reality of modern China. Such terms, and the imaginary they were linked to, would become politically dominant by the late 1920s, when Marxist discourses of political economy and social revolution provided a powerful episteme through which to read Chinese society. What the folklore movement reveals is an earlier moment of textual production, where the dominant concept of study was the minjian (民間), or common people, who were understood as those social subjects who did not possess formal literacy and had been, by and large, cut off from formal study of the Confucian textuality of the imperial past. Contributors to the journal such as Zhou Zuoren thus described their objects of study as the “textless commoners” (不文的民眾), who who were seen by folklorists as having been barred from full access to China’s written script due to the hierarchical nature of late-imperial society.

In engaging closely with the Geyao Zhoukan, I am not seeking to discredit in its entirety the notion that intellectuals constructed the rural other as a social type in the early part of the 20th century. For the powerful re-articulation of the peasant that Marxist and Maoist discourses provided from the late 1920s onward, see Karl (2010). Alexander Day (2013) has emphasized that the Maoist understanding of the peasant was an inherently dialectical one, in which the peasant was interpreted in his immediate social and economic context. Seen from this perspective, “Peasants could incline towards either egalitarian actions or class differentiation. They could act conservatively to protect their interests as small property owners or they could support revolutionary action, depending on circumstances”(14). It was only in the reform period that this dialectical understanding of the peasant was “replaced by a static interpretation of the peasant’s role in history” (14) that read the figure in purely economistic and individualist terms. My emphasis on the minjian as a figure of study predates the Maoist figure of the dialectical peasant, and the relationship between the two discourses deserves further study.

For an excellent recent dissertation on the historical formation of the concept of the minjian in May Fourth era China and beyond, see Yuan Xianxin (2015)’s Jiangou Minjian: 1920 Niandai de Wenhua Yundong yu Mingzhong Zhengzhi 建構民間：1920年代的文化運動與民眾政治 (Constructing the Minjian: Cultural Movements and Popular Politics in the 1920s). In Chapter Four of the dissertation, which addresses folklore work in 1920s China, Yuan echoes my own conclusion in this chapter that there was still an openness regarding what the concept of minjian could be in the early 1920s, and a debate about the methodologies and forms by which they could be understood. Of particular interest is Yuan’s discussion of how the May 30th incident in 1925 changed the political and methodological context of the work of folklorists such as Gu Jiegang, see pp. 84-111.

The term “textless commoners” (不文的民眾) is used by Zhou Zuoren in his article “The value of Chinese Folksongs” (zhonguo minge de jiazhi 中国民歌的价值), found in Geyao Zhoukan 6, January 11, 1923, p.4 (歌謠週刊第六号, 1923年1月11日). The journal Geyao Zhoukan will hereafter be cited GYZK.
century. Rather, I would like to suggest that this process of construction was always fraught with epistemic uncertainty. The desire of May Fourth intellectuals to record the oral songs of the common people was itself generated by their engagement with what can be called the global system of culture in the early 20th century, in which national cultures were understood to be unevenly plotted across the globe, each in possession of their own distinct national languages. Yet when May Fourth folklorists set out to find the oral voice of the nation itself, multiple languages spoke back at them, a diverse range of signs that were not self-evident or transparent to those who sought to interpret them. Folklorists debated at length just how they should transcribe and categorize such signs, and they remained haunted by their inability to simplify the minjian into one taxonomically clear subject. What they grappled with was a popular oral culture that was linguistically diverse, ecologically imbedded, and defined by a complex set of spiritual beliefs, ones that had little in common with the ideological program of May Fourth enlightenment and the nation-state it sought to construct. Furthermore, this was a popular culture that cut across textual, oral, and material mediums, subverting the grounding assumptions of the journal regarding the minjian’s supposed total isolation from the realm of textuality.

There was thus a profound linguistic and ideological diversity at the heart of the minjian, one that the Geyao Zhoukan negotiated with over the course of its various issues. Rather than overlaying a reductive Enlightenment critique onto the minjian- seeing within them a debilitating national essence in need of reform-the journal worked to keep this category productively open, subverting the semiotic closure that was inherent in more conventional nationalist critiques of the

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5 Arif Dirlik has defined this global system of culture as intimately bound up with the structural dynamics of capitalism in its imperialist form. The system’s understanding of culture was profoundly Eurocentric and orientalist, in which the colonization of different global spaces by Euro-America was justified in the name of civilizational underdevelopment. As Dirlik puts it, this was a vision of the world based on the “representation of societies in terms of essentialized cultural characteristics, more often than not enunciated in foundational texts. Culturalist essentialism is homogenizing both spatially and temporally. Spatially, it ignores differences within individual societies, and, in the case of orientalism, differences between Asian societies, which are endowed with common characteristics that mark them as "oriental. It is homogenizing temporally in substituting a cultural essence that defies time for culture as lived experience that is subject to temporal production and reproduction” (97). For more, see Dirlik, Chinese History and the Question of Orientialism, History and Theory 35:4, pp. 96-118. For more on the problems of national language, script reform, and empire in the early 20th century, see Lydia H. Liu, Scripts in Motion: Writing as Imperial Technology, Past and Present, in PMLA 130.2 (2015).
people during this time period. The minjian emerge within the journal’s pages as a potent cultural force, not a devalued civilizational other.

**Recording the Voice of the People in Modern Developmental Time**

The first issue of Folksong Weekly (歌謠週刊) was published on Dec. 17, 1922, an 8 page supplement to the Beijing University Daily Journal (北大大日刊). *Geyao Zhoukan* was the main organ of the Folksong Research Society (歌謠研究會), a scholarly organization established two years prior and headed by Shen Jianshi 沈兼士 (1887-1947) and Zhou Zuoren. The journal immediately generated interest around the university, and early contributors to it included Hu Shi, Gu Jiegang, Liu Bannong, Dong Zuobin 董作賓 (1895-1963), and Rong Zhaozu 容肇祖 (1897-1994). Chang Hui, a student in the French Department, exhibited immense enthusiasm for the project and would contribute numerous articles to the journal over the course of its print run, as well as serve in an important editorial capacity. *Geyao Zhoukan* became so popular that by its twenty-fifth issue it would be published as a stand-alone journal. All told, the Folklore Society would publish 92 volumes of the journal before it stopped independent publication in May of 1925. At that point it was incorporated into a larger publication for national studies, the *Beijing University National Studies Monthly* (北京大學研究所國學們月刊), though this latter journal was only published for 8 issues before it too was suspended.

The folklore society was motivated by a belief that oral performance forms were the direct expression of the hearts and minds of the “common-people (minjian)” as Zhou Zuoren put it, folksongs expressed the “sentiments that the commoners feel and the reality that they understand

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6 For more on the early institutional context of the Folksong Research Society and its journal, as well as the major personalities involved in the organization, see Hung (1985), pp. 32-58, for more.

7 The *Geyao Zhoukan* resumed publication in April of 1936 at Beijing University, though its print run would last only to June of 1937, when it was forced to stop publishing because of the outbreak of the war against Japan. In all, 150 issues of the journal were published between its two print-periods (1923-1925 and 1936-1937). For more, see Chang pp.32-57.

8 The term minjian was used by Zhou Zuoren in his explanation regarding the value of the folklore movement. See his “The value of Chinese Folksongs” (zhonguo minge de jiazhi 中国民歌的价值), in GYZK 6, January 11, 1923, p.4
(民眾所感的情緒與所知的事實).”

9 For Chinese folklorists, this oral culture had long been ignored by lettered elites of the past, and thus had developed in relative autonomy from the high Confucian culture of the imperial period. It came directly from the mouths of the common people and had to be studied through direct oral transcription, which could only be done by face to face engagement with the common people themselves. Early contributors to the journal emphasized that the content contained in folksongs could not be imagined by literate elites, whom they referred to as wenren (文人 lit. those with written language).

10 According to advocates of the movement, all forms of orality that had not been generated by wenren were acceptable for inclusion. As Chang Hui put it, “we welcome everything [for collection], as long as it is not produced by a wenren or has endured the pen of a wenren, [as long as] they are works expressing the true emotions of the common people, then they must all be collected and recorded.”

The Chinese folklorists were deeply aware that they were in a globally interconnected moment, in which the study of folk cultures was a crucial element in nationalist movements in Britain, Ireland, Germany, Japan, amongst many others. Like their counterparts in the Chinese New Literature and Social Survey movements, Chinese folklorists were challenged by the fact that it was foreign colonial elites who were first able to lay claim to representing Chinese culture and society

9 See Ibid, p.4.

10 See the letter written by Zhang Siwei 張四維 in the “Research and Discussion” (Yanjiu yu Taolun 研究與討論) column in GYZK 5, October 14, p.1. As Zhang puts it, in summarizing the songs he had collected: “The words [in the songs] are simple but their meaning is deep. It is unavoidable that there will be vulgar and base parts. However, there are many new and lively parts which literati and scholars could not themselves imagine (但有許多新穎處, 卻非文人學士所想得到).

in the global arena, in this case the oral songs of the common people.\textsuperscript{12} In the eighteenth issue of the journal Chang Hui pointed out that the earliest specialized works on folksongs in China had been produced by foreigners: Guido Vitale’s \textit{Pekinese Rhymes} (Chinese Title: 北京歌謠, 1896) and Isaac Taylor Headland’s \textit{Chinese Mother Goose Rhymes} (1900).\textsuperscript{13} Chang Hui praised the “scientific method” (科學的方法) employed by Vitale in his book, which was published in an English-Chinese bilingual edition.\textsuperscript{14} Chang Hui urged his readers to use both works as references to further the domestic study of folksongs. He provided a translation of the preface to Vitale’s work, which included the following passage:

The trouble in collecting them [folk songs] was far greater than I had thought. “Tabood” as we are in Peking, where could I go myself to hear the rhymes and note them down? Then I had recourse to my teacher, but as he thinks to be a literary man, he grew quite indignant at my proposal, and assured and pledged that no such rubbish had ever existed in China. However as I happened (of course by chance) to take out of my drawer some dollars, and place them beneath his reach, he suddenly abated his furors and mumbled that “perhaps I was not mistaken and that of course he would by every possible means try to get what I wanted.” And I shall say to his justice that he kept his word and the dollars.\textsuperscript{15}

That a foreigner had used his economic power, as a representative of a colonial government with extra-territorial privilege, to buy songs from a local scholar was a source of great shame for early contributors to \textit{Geyao Zhoukan}. In a letter to the journal published in its fifth issue, a student named

\textsuperscript{12} Lydia Liu has argued that May Fourth literary reformers had to grapple with the transnational discourse on the Chinese “national” character that had been created by missionaries such as Arthur Smith, and that in some profound way they accepted the epistemology of national subjectivity imposed upon them by colonial cultural and political authorities. For more, see Liu (1995), pp. 45-99. Tong Lam (2011), building on Gayatri Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence, has argued that early proponents of social survey work in China such as Li Jinghan were motivated by the international consensus that China lacked factually accurate data about its own society, a shameful reality which motivated them to create a domestic social science in China. As Tong Lam puts it, “even though China was not fully occupied by the colonial powers, the colonial gaze essentially broke down and remade the old Chinese epistemic order according to its own image...native intellectuals- those historically responsible for safeguarding the native systems of knowledge- were made to feel ashamed of their inability to converse based upon the new knowledge framework that was being imposed on them”(40).

\textsuperscript{13} See “Friends Who Help us Research Modern Folksongs” (Bangzhu Yanjiu Jinshi Geyao de Pengyou 幫助研究近世歌謠的朋友) in GYZK 18, May 13, 1923.

\textsuperscript{14} Vitale himself was Secretary Interpreter at the Italian Legation in Beijing. For more on Vitale, see Hung (1985), pp. 18-21.

\textsuperscript{15} See Vitale (1896), p. VIII. For Chang Hui’s translated version of this passage, see “Introduction to Pekinese Rhymes” (Beijing de Geyao Xu 北京的歌謠序), in GYZK 18, May 13, 1923, pp.7-8.
Wei Wen (蔚文) claimed that “the authors of these two books are foreigners. Beijing University is supposed to be our highest institution of learning, yet it only has four or five years of history in collecting folksongs. The lack of interest we Chinese have had in folk-literature is something that one cannot but feel extremely ashamed of (不能不揮一把愧汗).”\(^\text{16}\) When Wei Wen urged Chang Hui to translate and publish his copy of Vitale’s book, Chang Hui responded with the following sentiment: “You push me to be publish my copy of Pekinese Rhymes, I am truly ashamed! He is a foreigner, and he was able to produce such a good book twenty, thirty years ago. If we Chinese are not, twenty, thirty years later, able to better him, then this is truly something one must feel extreme shame over.”\(^\text{17}\)

Though Vitale’s book was clearly a source of great consternation for the young intellectuals, Chang Hui claimed that the Folklore Research Society would likely publish it as part of a future book series. Interested as they were in the methods of folklore collection, they had no choice but to learn the new knowledge frameworks from the colonial occupiers.\(^\text{18}\) There was thus no doubt that the foreign gaze was a definitive presence in the early work of the folklorists. Zhou Zuoren and his colleagues often quoted from foreign theoretical and historical works on folklore, turning to them in their attempts to define key concepts in the field.\(^\text{19}\) Zhou most often turned to the work of English

\(^{16}\) See GYZK 4, January 7, 1923, p.4.

\(^{17}\) Ibid, p. 5.

\(^{18}\) In issue sixteen of the journal Zhou Zuoren would comment positively on Vitale’s work, claiming that Vitale’s suggestion that the unadorned liveliness of folk songs could lead to a new national poetry for China was a notion “of tremendous insight(極有見解)...you cannot but say that he [Vitale] was first to this understanding (不可不說他是先見之明了). See Zhou’s “One’s Own Garden (Zhong Mi)” (ziji de yuandi 自己的園地), in GYZK 16, April 29 1923, p.7-8.

\(^{19}\) In that the epistemological categories of Euro-America were the explicit ground around which Chinese folklorists organized their field of knowledge, they repeated a dilemma of cultural work that faced all non-Western intellectuals interested in articulating a local or indigenous culture in the face of Euro-American economic and cultural imperialism. Rey Chow (1991) has discussed this epistemic condition- in which “the West” is an always already present ordering force- in the following terms: “The identification with an ethnic or ‘national’ history, and the pain and pleasure that this involves, cannot be understood simply in terms of ‘nativism.’ The spectator is not simply ethnic but ethnicized: the recognition of her ‘Chineseness’ is already part of the process of cross-cultural interpellation that is at work in the larger realm of modern history.” For Naoki Sakai (1997), speaking of the field of “Japanese thought,” this always already presence of the West is the epistemic condition of modernity: “Thus an epistemic condition has come into being, according to which to insist on the particularity and autonomy of Japan is paradoxically to worship the putative ubiquity of the idealized West. Not only could “Japanese thought” not overcome the framework of modernity, but it also meant to continue to think within such a framework, thanks to this arrangement”(50).
folklorist Frank Kidson (1855-1926) in his discussions regarding the “folk” cultures of various
countries. In the sixteenth issue of the journal a portion of English Folk Song and Dance (1915) by
Kidson and Mary Neal was translated, while in the eighteenth issue a translated excerpt explaining
the origin of folksongs in global history by the English folklorist Andrew Lang was provided.

In both Kidson and Lang’s work, folklore as a field of study was presented as a means of
tracking civilization and savagery across historical time. They posited that, in early history, every
society across the globe possessed a shared human nature, despite differences of language, race, and
geographical location. From that shared historical origin societies then developed differently: some
moved towards civilization while some remained in a relatively primitive state. The study of
folklore provided a means of establishing a canon of songs in one national language, which
belonged to a community understood in discrete racial and ethnic terms. Of course these racial-
national units were arrayed hierarchically on a temporal scale of development. As such, songs that
seemed to be only residual vestiges in a developed society such as Britain could be seen to
dominate the cultural life of primitive regions such as Africa or Australia. As Lang put it, in
describing his methodology:

The myths and customs of various peoples will be compared, even when these people talk
languages of alien families, and have never (so far as history shows us) been in actual contact. Our
method throughout will be to place the usage, or myth, which is unintelligible when found among a
civilized race, beside the similar myth which is intelligible enough when it is found among
savages...this folklore represents, in the midst of a civilized race, the savage ideas out of which
civilisation has been evolved.20

It was the potential for folksongs to reveal the dormant savagery in a now progressive people that
was of interest. As Lang put it in the section of his work on ballads that was translated in the
eighteenth and nineteenth issues of Geyao Zhoukan, folksongs had captured the imagination of
intellectuals across European nations, including the Grimm Brothers, Montaigne, Goethe,
Coleridge, and Wordsworth precisely because they represented the preservations of “customs that

had been destroyed by reform, by doctrine, by so-called modern civilization” (被各種改革，被請教主義，被近代所謂文明所破壞的風俗). They were popular vestiges of a pre-civilized past, with “mysterious ancient origins” (古代的神秘的起源).21

This was the form of historical thinking- profoundly nationalist, racialized, and developmentalist- that folklore work in May Fourth China grappled with. For theorists like Kidson and Lang, national-cultural difference could be marked across global space via linguistic utterances, in this case the folk songs that could be collected in different geographic spaces. Naoki Sakai has called such an understanding of world culture the schema of co-figuration, in which discrete and internally consistent languages are posited as existing across global space, each indexed to ethnically defined national communities. Within this schema, translation is understood to be an act of establishing equivalencies between ethnic or national groups on the basis of their supposedly discrete languages. As Sakai describes it:

In this regime of translation, it is required that one language be clearly and without ambiguity distinguished from the other and that, in principle, two languages never overlap or mix like Siamese twins. It is through this regime that, in the eighteenth century, the idea of the original Japanese language was introduced in the multi-lingual social environment of the Japanese archipelago, where heterogeneous and creole languages were accepted.22

Chinese folklorists grappled with their own multi-lingual social environment, as they were faced with the daunting task of collecting songs across a continent defined by an effusive array of topolects. As we shall see, the absence of a national spoken language and a script able to express it engendered tremendous epistemic uncertainty for their project. Because voice and script, song and

21 For the former quote, see Andrew Lang, “Minge” 民歌 (Ballad), trans. by Jia Bin 家斌, GYZK 19, May 20 1923, p.3. For the later quote, see Ibid, p.2. Kidson and Neal were even more blunt in describing the origin of folksongs: “Every nation, both savage and civilized, has its folk-song, and this folk-song is a reflection of the current thought of the class among which it is popular...This type is more observable among savage tribes than among civilized nations.” See Kidson and Neal, English Folk Song and Dance (1915), p. 11-15, for more. Pages 40-47 of this work, detailing the rise in the mid-and-late 19th century of the English folklore movement, were translated in GYZK 16, April 29 1923, pp.1-3.

text, did not seamlessly match up across Mainland China, Chinese folklorists found it very difficult to fit their project into the schema of co-figuration that undergirded the modern world system.

**Making The Local Legible: Adornment, Dialect, Taxonomy**

The published form of *Geyao Zhoukan seemed* to attest to a vision of the world in which national-cultural difference could be marked via linguistic notation. Every issue contained columns of songs from different provinces across the new republic, and the vertical co-existence of, for example, songs from Hunan, Hubei, and Shanxi offered a profound sense of national simultaneity: each region of the new republic speaking songs of the people, doing so at the same time in the here and now (Figure 1.1). Ongoing references to foreign works of folklore provided readers with the sense of the simultaneous existence of folk cultures across the globe, each expressing their own national sensibility in a shared global time. That this new time was fraught with racial and cultural difference- riven by the divisions between primitive and civilized peoples- was an epistemic assumption that lay at the very heart of this discourse.
Yet it was when folklorists moved away from broad theorizations regarding the nature of folksongs as a globally shared practice, and moved to the intricate work of transcribing and cataloguing the songs sung in different locations across Mainland China, that interpretive difficulties quickly arose. Such difficulties arrayed themselves around three key areas: Adornment, Dialect, and Taxonomy.

From the beginning of the movement leading members of the group such as Chang Hui and Zhou Zuoren were absolutely clear that folksongs were to come directly from the mouths of the common people. If Confucianism was seen as a hermetic, stifling culture bound to certain ritually-venerated books, the folksong was its exact opposite: lively, expressive, and emerging directly from the bodies of illiterate people. The folklorists did not believe that poems (詩) already written down...
by literati, or the songs sung from popular operas (彈詞, 唱本), were true folksongs. Simply put, if it was to be found in textual form than it had already been compromised by transcription from lettered elites. True folksongs were to come directly from the mouths of the common people, whose vitality had to be preserved by a form of direct transcription onto the physical page.

There was thus much discussion concerning how a folklorist was to physically go about transcribing the songs he heard from the people. The folklorists were adamant that transcribers could, in no way whatsoever, add their own voices to the songs, either by censoring any passages they deemed to be obscene or by changing any aspect of the rhyme schemes or narrative structure of individual songs. Such interventions was a form of 潤色色 (runse)- polish or adornment- and the folklorists warned against it time and again. For example, in the guidelines published in the journal’s first issue regarding how to collect folksongs, clause four stipulated: “Lyrics and common language (歌辭⽂俗) must remain truthful (一仍其真), no polish or adornment (潤飾) can be added to it. Common characters and language also cannot be changed into official language (俗字俗語, 亦不可改為官話).” Concerns over the threat that the “heavy movement of the intellectual’s pen” could have on “the true people’s art” were so common that in early issues of the journal you could find large-font announcements urging contributors to “pay attention...regardless of what kind of language is found within a folksong, you cannot polish it (不可潤⾊色).”

23 See “This Society’s Guidelines for Collecting Contemporary Folksongs Across the Nation” (Benhui Zhengji QuanGuo Jinshi Geyao de Jianzhang 本會徵集全國近世歌謠的簡章) in GYZK 1, December 17, 1922, p.8.

24 For the warning to contributors regarding polish, see GYZK 2, December 24, 1922, p.4. The concern over the “heavy movement of the intellectual’s pen” (⽂人動筆太過了) can be found in the article “Women Weishenme Yanjiu Geyao 我們為什麼研究歌謠 (Why We Study Folk Songs (part 1)) by Chang Hui in the same issue. Other articles that expressed concern over the impact that textual recording would have on the songs, including whether general advances in culture (including the spread of textuality) would atrophy the liveliness of folksong culture, see “Why We Study Folk Songs (part 2)” (Women Weishenme Yanjiu Geyao 我們為什麼研究歌謠) by Chang Hui in GYZK 3, December 31, 1922; the letters contained in “Discussion: A Few Folksongs One Can Do Comparative Research With” (Taolun. Jishou Ke Zuo Bijiao Yanjiu de Geyao 論 庫 可作比較研究的歌謠) in GYZK 4, January 7, 1923, pp.1-5; the letters printed under “Research and Discussion” (Yanjiu yu Taolun 研究與討論) in GYZK 5, January 14, 1923, pp.1-2.
Folklorists also urged their readers to be vigilant against “faked” (假作) folksongs. These were songs that seemed too sophisticated, in vocabulary or sentence structure, to have come from the mouths of common people. Articles were thus constantly on the lookout for “faked” works, and such concern even led to an extended discussion of whether the songs to be found in early texts of the Confucian canon such as the “Book of Poetry” (詩經) could be considered to have been generated by the brushes of elites or by the mouths of the masses. These injunctions against runse ensured that the movement was shot through, from its very beginning, with a profound contradiction: for it was dedicated to transcribing, in textual form, a culture that folklorists believed to be removed from textuality all-together. There was thus a risk that it could be altered or deformed by its very transcription onto the printed page. Could one avoid runse in the process of transcription? Could the intellectual truly remove him/herself entirely from the production of the folksong? Such questions haunted much of the journal’s early discussions. Zhou Zuoren, for example, was not hesitant to critique Chinese books on folklore when they contained what he saw as the too-heavy traces of the intellectual upon them. Indeed, Zhou even went so far as to claim that some well known songs in China had lost their “scientific” value as pure expressions of the people, for they had already been adapted into operas and literary works, and were thus touched by

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25 This concern over 假作 in the process of folksong transcription permeated the early issues of the journal. It can be found, amongst other articles, in: “A Number of Incomplete Folksongs” (Jishou Bu Wanquan de Geyao 幾首不完全的歌謠), GYZK 6, January 21, 1923, pp.1-2; “Discussing Folksongs” (Geyao Taolun 歌謠討論) in the Zhuanlu 轉錄 (Transcription) section of GYZK 7, January 28, 1923, p.8.


27 In the article “Reading An Overview on Children’s Songs” (Du [Tongyao Daguan] 讀 [童謠大觀]), Zhou critiques the compilers of a book of children’s songs (童謠) for misinterpreting the nature of such oral forms, as well as for poor methods of compilation and analysis. Zhou explained that the book repeated views on children’s songs to be found in the Confucian past, including that such songs were omens that could predict the future. For Zhou, such a superstitious understanding of children’s songs should have no place in a modern and critical study of folklore, and for that reason the book had little value to young folklorists in the here and now. For more, see GYZK 10, March 18, 1923, pp.1-2. Zhou’s interest during this time period in tongyao is dealt with extensively in Jones (2011), pp.147-160. Zhou joined colleagues such as Zhao Jingshen in understanding tongyao to be popular narratives that were originally collective and primitive in nature, but that could be adapted in the present moment to create pedagogic tales for imbuing children with modern ideas.
the修飾(adornment) of the wenren. Such songs were no longer really of the people, but instead existed in what Zhou called a “semi-deformed” (半變形) state, half-minjian and half-wenren.  

While leaders of the movement could urge their followers to avoid runse at all costs, folklore collectors soon discovered that transcribing songs directly from voice to page was not a simple process, nor was it one that they could remove themselves from even partially. In linguistic terms, the folklorists immediately ran up against the problem of the profusion of topolects to be found across the old Qing-imperium that was actively being transformed into the new Chinese Republic. They discussed at length the question of how one was to go about annotating songs sung in dialects for which there was no agreed upon notational system, where you were faced with the reality of “having sounds with no corresponding characters” (有音無字).  

Writing near the end of the first year of the journal’s print run, Dong Zuobin powerfully summarized the challenge dialect presented to the work of the folklorists. In his article Folksongs and the Dialect Question (歌謠與方言問題), Dong pointed out that while it was impressive that students across the country were collecting folksongs to be published in the journal, one had to admit that such songs were in fact being sung in completely different languages. As such, while folklorists could create some degree of textual comprehension regarding the songs, their oral existence could simply not be gestured to using printed characters. As Dong put it:

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28 For more of Zhou’s discussion of these semi-minjian, semi-wenren songs, see Zhou’s “The Value of Chinese Folksongs” (Zhonguo Mingge de Jiazhi 中国民歌的價值) in GYZK 6, January 21, 1923, p.4.

29 See, for example, Zhou Zuoren’s “Dialect Investigation and Folksongs” (Geyao yu Fangyan Diaocha 歌謠與方言調查), GYZK 31, November 4, 1923, pp.1-3. For an extended discussion of the difficulties of folksong collecting, including the problem of dialect notation and performative annotation, see He Zhisan 何植三, “The Difficulties of Collecting Folksongs” (Souji Geyao de Kunnan 搜集歌謠的困難), in GYZK 29, May 20 1923 p.1-2. For further discussion of the problem of dialect, including the use of 注音符号to mark down sounds with no known referent, as well as the difference between “vulgar characters” (俗字) whose sounds are clear but whose meanings the folklorist may not know and “old characters” (古字) whose meanings are clear but whose sounds do not accord with the rhyme schemes of given songs, see the letters published in the “Discussing Folksongs” (Geyao Taolun 歌謠討論) column in GYZK 7, January 8, 1923; GYZK 8, March 4, 1923; GYZK 9, March 11, 1923. For an even more in-depth discussion of the dialect problem, see Dong Zuobin’s “Folksongs and the Dialect Question” (Geyao Yu Fangyan Wenti 歌謠與方言問題) in GYZK 32, November 11, 1923, pp. 1-4.
I have already had a kind of a fantasy: imagine if you took all of the ten or more collectors of the folksong “Seeing her From Across the Bamboo Screen” (隔著⽵竹簾看⾒見她), the [different versions of which] Mr. Chang Hui has collected, and you invited them all to meet at the same time at a given place in a kind of “Folksong Club” (歌謠俱樂會). If you asked someone who spoke the national language well to consecutively sing each of the [versions of the] songs, I’m afraid the listeners could not but shake their heads and laugh profusely. Now, if you reversed this, and invited the original collectors of the songs to each use his own dialect- Beijing, Jingzhao, Hebei, Jixi, Jingde, Fengcheng, Dianjiang, Nanyang, Xiakou, Shanxi, etc.- to concurrently sing the songs, then at that moment the “Folksong Club” will have been transformed into a Southern-Northern “Dialectic Comparison Club.” You could not prevent the whole room of listeners from laughing riotously.30

This vision of a national community in-miniature that could not orally understand one another, and in fact could only descend into raucous laughter when they tried to appreciate one another’s oral cultures, was clearly a challenging one for young intellectuals such as Dong Zuobing. While other folklorists such as Chang Hui had on occasions expressed the tempered hope that folksong collection could help in the construction of a national language, the “laughter” outlined here seemed to gesture towards the impossibility of devising a singular, systematic tone for the entire country, for it would only sound ridiculous in the face of the linguistic heterogeneity of folk culture.31

According to Dong, the work of the Folksong Society had done little to overcome this condition of oral incommensurability: many songs read in the nascent national language (國語) did not rhyme, and unless there was a system in which a reader of a song could ascertain its oral sounds and tones, then the linguistic power of the song would be lost. As Dong put it, “In general, I feel that the folksongs we have printed on paper (在紙⽚片面的歌謠) can only have an awkward and arid meaning, you simply cannot sense any of their lively and dynamic sounds.”32 While the folklorists

30 GYZK 32, November 11, 1923, p. 1.
31 For Chang Hui’s hope that folksong research can aid in developing a national language, see his “Further Explanations for Contributors” (Dui Tougao Zhejun Jin Yi Jie 對投稿諸君進⼀一解) in GYZK 1, December 17, 1922, p.4. Chang Hui wrote: “Do we not say that China’s languages can never be unified? But what about looking at the power of folksongs? I believe that they can give some material to those who are researching the national language. Dozens of variations can be derived from one folksong, which can be found in eight or nine [different] provinces, spreading across almost all of China. Yet every song has its own mode of speech (各有各的說法). Even areas that are quite close to one another have different modes of speech; [these songs thus] have tremendous research value.”
32 GYZK 32, November 11, 1923, p. 1.
were creating textual compilation, they were not producing any kind of oral comprehension: the world of local sound remained largely cut off from the weekly archive of printed visual signs the journal was producing. Dong’s intervention thus raised the possibility that, in the face of this oral diversity, the promulgation of a single national language was an arduous (and potentially impossible) task, for it was premised on reducing a sonic field that was multiple into one that was singular.

Dong made the important point that while the founders of the journal had, in their guidelines on collection, urged folklorists to use the zhuyin fuhao (注音符號) system to annotate sound, none of the folksongs that had been sent in so far (after 32 issues) had done so. To address the dialect question, folklorists typically relied upon footnotes indicating a homophonic reading of a particular character by reference to a second character that possessed the correct sound. This method actually called back to the older Fan-Qie system of denoting sounds through the use of sonically corresponding characters, a strategy that had long been used during the imperial period.33 Dong’s article drew a plethora of responses, each of them discussing what new textual systems could be used to denote the “scriptless sounds” (有音無字) the people sang. Clearly, contributors to the journal felt that whatever virtues existed regarding the phonetic strategies of the past, new means of mediating between voice and print were needed.

Zhou Zuoren presented his own attempts at annotating a Shaoxing folksong, following a suggestion by Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 (1887-1939) to use 羅馬字 (romanized letters) to do so. Zhou was clear that there was a limit to how useful characters were to recording regionally distinct folksongs: “There are many common words in folksongs for which there are sounds but no characters. Aside from the North of China as well as Guangdong, where some common characters (俗字) have been specially made, to use characters (漢字) to record popular songs (俗歌) is

33 For more on pre-20th century strategies for phonetic inscription of the Chinese language, see Zhong (2014), pp. 12-14.
impossible. Even if you force yourself to write them down it will not be correct and will lead easily to error.”

If Zhou’s answer to the problem was to turn to romanized letters, Dong Zuobin preferred an elaborate working out of the zhuyin fuhao system. Another folklorist, Rong Zhaozu, would soon add another layer of complexity to the discussion by putting on the agenda the problem of tonal intonation. He claimed that alongside a system of annotating dialect, which he felt should be done using romanized letters, there was also the need to visually mark the placement of the tongue while songs were being sung, so as to allow readers the ability to know how to make the proper tones that marked the song’s language.

Another contributor to the journal, Liu Ceqi, echoed Rong’s concern regarding tonal indication, but disagreed with his suggestion to use romanized letters to do so. Liu argued that dialects not only contained sounds that romanized letters could not phoneticize, but also that such letters did nothing to indicate tonal patterns.

Liu would argue that there was not a single notational system currently in use that could capture the full range of oral utterance found in folksongs. As Liu put it:

[Romnized letters] are seemingly insufficient for spelling my country’s dialects. Take the亡音 sound in the national pronunciation, it doesn’t exist within romanized letters. When it comes to the languages spoken in my county by Yao people (猺人), Zhuang people (獞人), and Magai People (麻蓋人), I have tried to phoneticize them using English script (adding various symbols from Webster’s dictionary), the Esperanto alphabet, the International Phonetic Alphabet, and the National Phonetic Alphabet, [all have] difficulties in corresponding completely [with these spoken languages]. For in a single sentence every character is differentiated by five tones, as well as [differences] in emphasis, lightness, relaxation, and urgency, as well the relations between rising and falling tones. When you force yourself to use an alphabet and record them letter by letter, when you yourself look over it it seems to make some sense, but if you give it to another person to read it doesn’t form any kind of [intelligible] speech [就不成話]. As for the 26 romanized letters, you can record the general sound of every single character, but you cannot indicate the fifth tone, you cannot...

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34 See Zhou Zuoren, “Dialect Investigation and Folksongs” (Geyao Yu Fangyan Diaocha 歌謠與方言調查), GYZK 31, November 4, 1823, pp.1-3.
36 See Liu Ceqi, “Explaining How I Collect and Record Folksongs” (Wo Cailu Geyao de Shuoming 我採錄歌謠的說明), in GYZK 39, December 30, p.9.
indicates tones, and if you read it is still unpleasant sounding, [so much that] you have already lost the basic meaning of the folksong (失去了該歌謠的本意).37

As indicated by Liu’s impassioned argument, it seemed as if none of the scriptural vehicles available to folklorists- from zhuyin fuhao to Esperanto to romanized letters- were up to the task of capturing the sonic complexity of the songs they heard. His article went to the heart of the problem facing geyao collection: how did one use abstract textual symbols to record the fluid complexity of sounds emitted from the human body in song? And how did one do this when such songs were being sung in different languages over a continent-sized land mass?

Responding to this outpouring of discussion, in March of 1924 the Beijing University National Studies Dialect Survey Society (北大大研究所國學們方言調查會) was established, headed by Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895-1976).38 By May of that year the Geyao Zhoukan would devote an entire special issue to outlining the complex notational system that the Dialect Society had devised (Figure 1.2). The system that Lin and his colleagues presented was based on the principle of separating the task of spelling out a dialect’s sounds (方言之拼音) from explaining its pronunciation (發音的說明).39 They used romanized letters for the former task, while adding symbols above and next to those romanized letters to accomplish the latter. This led to each dialect presented- a total of twelve ranging from Bejinghua (Beijing Speech) to Xiamenhua (Xiamen Speech, a variant of the Southern Min dialect)- having its own variation of a romanized system, complete with diacritic symbols to indicate different tones.


38 For an announcement regarding the founding of the group, see “Declaration of the Beijing University National Studies Dialect Survey Society” (Beida Yanjiu Suo Guoxue Men Fangyan Diaocha Hui Xuan Yan Shu 北大大研究所國學們方言調查會宣言書), in GYZK 47, March 26, 1924, pp. 1-3.

39 See “Special Edition On Dialect Phonetic Transcription” (Fangyan Biaoyin Zhuanhao 方言標音專號), GYZK 55, May 18, 1924, p.2
Figure 1.2: Lin and his colleagues used a combination of Romanized Letters and Diacritic Markings to scripturally represent different regional languages. Fangyan Biaoyin Zhuanhao 方言標音專號 (Special Edition On Dialect Phonetic Transcription), GYZK 55, May 18, 1924, p.8-9.

While the system of dialect notation presented by Lin and his colleagues provided a roadmap for folklorists to follow, contributors to the journal would continue to mix and match notational methods throughout its print run. For example, in his study of the variations to be found in one particular folksong across the Mainland, Dong Zuobin would use romanized words to note different sounds.40 On the other hand, in Gu Jiegang’s collection of songs from the Wu region, he would use zhuyin fuhao to note sounds.41 Meanwhile, some songs in the journal would continue to be presented in characters only, even if they were from parts of China in which the national language

40 See the articles dedicated to the folksong in GYZK 62, 63, and 64.
41 See the various songs collected by Gu printed in each issue of GYZK from issue 64 to 72.
was not spoken in daily use. In such instances, homophonic character readings were often provided in footnotes for readers.42

Finally, there was also a vigorous debate in the *Geyao Zhoukan* regarding the “classification problem” (分類問題), for there was no consensus on just what constituted a folk-song, which itself was a translated term the journal had borrowed from Frank Kidson’s writings. There was thus much discussion regarding how one could produce a taxonomy that would give some clarity to the common people’s overwhelming variety of songs. Such songs were numerous indeed, ranging from nursery rhymes sung to children to the songs boatmen sang as they pulled cargo, from laments of courtship sung by women in the inner chambers to merchant-hawking songs sung outside the temples of the old imperial capital. In numerous issues of the magazine one finds a variety of folklorists producing taxonomic charts, complete with branches and subbranches of categories. Some sought to categorize songs by the emotions they expressed, while others sought to do so by the subjects who sang them or the themes they invoked. And of course there was always the possibility of organizing songs purely by region. Yet each method of classification had its own drawbacks. For example, if one chose to organize songs by emotion, how was one to identify what the precise emotion expressed by an individual song was aside from the purely subjective reaction to it of individual listeners? If one organized songs by the subjects who sang them, what where you to do with songs that were shared by various groups of people? For example, a boatsman could also sing a tune popular amongst mountain dwellers or herdsmen of a given region. And if one chose to classify songs purely by regional distinction- i.e. Beijing songs, Shanxi songs, etc.- this ignored the

42 For an example of the use of homophonic character readings to denote the sound of certain words in a folksong, see the songs from the Zhejiang region gathered by Mao Chang in GYZK 1, p.5. The first song, a fourteen line work entitled “The Down and Out Girl” (落拓姑娘), was accompanied by 19 footnotes. The second line was printed with the following characters: 梳頭洗面面下來嬉. Three footnotes alone accompanied the line: 1) 梳音如沙, 2) 下音如戶, 3)來音離. Clearly, reading the song in standard Mandarin would not have brought listeners anywhere near the original sounds of the song itself.
reality that songs circulated across geographic spaces, producing various permutations on single themes across the Mainland.\footnote{For a classificatory schema based on the emotions expressed in a song, see Shao Shengxi 邵繩熙’s “Expressing Some Views on Researching Folksongs” (Wo Duiyu Yanjiu Geyao Fabiao Yidian Yijian 我對於研究歌謠發表一點意見) in GYZK 13, April 8, 1923, p.1-2. For a critique of Shao’s classifying methods, see Bai Qiming 白啟明’s “Discussing ‘Expressing Some Views on Researching Folksongs’” (Dui [Wo Duiyu Yanjiu Geyao Fabiao Yidian Yijian] de Shangque 對「我對於研究歌謠發表一點意見」的商榷) in GYZK, April 14, 1923, pp.3-4. For Shao’s response to Bai’s article, see “The Problem of Classifying Geyao” (Geyao Fenlei Wenti 歌謠分類問題) in GYZK 15, April 22, pp.1-2. For further discussion over the issue, including an alternative classificatory schema based on defining the social actors who sing folk songs in situated contexts, see Liu Wenlin 劉文林’s contribution to the discussion in GYZK 16, April 29, 1924, pp.3-4. Even more discussion of the issue can be found in the series of letters published in GYZK 17, May 16, 1924, pp.1-2, including another classificatory schema offered by Chang Hui. This schema involved dividing folksongs by the social spaces in which they were sung, the genders of the people who sung them, as well as their age (creating a division between children and adult songs). Taken together, the classification debate raised issues of whether folksong collecting was a science, whether any one folksong could be abstracted out of its social context and raised to the level of a general form, and how a purportedly objective, non-individual understanding of a folk song’s meanings could be gained by researchers.} This need to create some kind of taxonomic coherence by which folksongs could be mapped spoke to the profound anxiety that undergirded the entire folklore project. For if intellectuals could not somehow classify the oral culture of the common people, if they couldn’t give textual shape to something that was by its very definition thought to be outside of the realm of textuality all together, would the minjian as object of knowledge not remain in some way profoundly illegible? And in so much as the minjian were the basis of the national subject itself (minzu 民族), what would this epistemic uncertainty mean for the construction of a coherent national culture?

**Flowers, Porridge, and the Lunar Calendar: The Lifeworld of Folksongs**

About half-way into the journal’s initial print run, the editors published a chart detailing how many songs they had received and from which provinces (see Figure 1.3). The results of their collection work were impressive. In a little more than a year and a half the research society had collected a total of 7667 songs from 20 provinces. The provinces from which the most songs had been collected were Zhili in the northeast, with over nineteen hundred songs, as well as Yunnan in the southwest, with over seventeen hundred songs. The geographical distance between the two provinces suggested the degree of regional diversity the folklorist’s project encompassed. The extent of the collection work was, of course, highly uneven. A little over five hundred songs had
comes from provinces such as Guangdong, Henan, and Shandong, while Shanxi, Guizhou, Fujian, and Jiangxi had only provided a couple dozen each. Not surprisingly, the folklorists had yet to acquire songs from the provinces at the most remote fringes of the old Qing imperium, including Heilongjiang, Raohe, Gansu, and Xinjiang, while Tibet and Taiwan were not included as potential sites for collection on the 1924 chart.

What such figures indicate is that the folklorists were able to publish only a small fraction of the songs they had actually acquired. The folksongs that did appear in print evidenced a tremendous heterogeneity in both form and content. Songs could include invocations of regionally specific topography such as rivers, mountains, and city walls; musings on locally specific practices of marriage, harvest, and handicraft production; invocations of familial dynamics within kinship life, including Confucian notions of propriety; as well as invocations of courtship and love. All such

Figure 1.3 Chart Detailing the Geographical Extent of Collection Work, GYZK 61, June 29, 1924 p.8.
themes were present in a “Twelve Month Song” (十二月歌) published in the 73rd issue of the journal, which presented the famed legend of Lady Mengjiang, who searches for her husband after he has been forced into corvee labor on the Great Wall by the first emperor of Qin. The song presented this narrative through twelve four-line stanzas of seven characters each:

正月梅花是新春 The first month sees the plumb blossoms of spring
家家户户点红灯 Red lamps are lit in every family’s house
“别家丈夫团圆聚 “In other houses husbands are together with their families
我家的丈夫造长城！My husband is off constructing the Great Wall!”

二月杏花暖洋洋 In the second month the apricot blossoms warm brightly
双双燕子到南墙 A pair of swallows head for the south wall
燕窝修的端端正 The swallows build their nest neat and tidy
对对双歇画梁 The pair rest on the painted roofbeam

三月桃花是清明 The third month sees the peach blossoms of Clear and Bright
桃红柳绿正当景 A landscape of pink flowers and green willows
家家坟上烧白纸 At the graves every family burns paper money
孟姜女坟上冷清清！Yet at Lady Mengjiang’s grave it is sharply cold!

四月蔷薇养蚕忙 In the fourth month roses nurture the busy silkworms
姑嫂双双去採桑 Sister go in pairs to pluck the mulberries
桑篮挂拉桑树上 The mulberry basket hangs on the mulberry tree
揩揩眼淚勤把桑 Wiping one’s tears, one grabs the mulberries

五月石榴是黄美 Pomegranates in the fifth month bring the rainy season
黄梅发水落下来 The water of the plum rains fall downward
家家田中黄秧栽 In every family’s fields they plant the yellow seedlings
孟姜女田中草成堆！In Lady Mengjiang’s fields the grass piles up!

六月荷花热难当 The sixth month lotus flowers bring an unbearable heat
蚊虫飞来叮胸膛 The mosquitoes fly around biting one’s chest
“宁可吃奴千口血，“You suck my blood a thousand times,
莫叮奴夫喜良！“Yet you don’t bite my husband Wan Xiliang!”

七月凤仙七秋凉 In the seventh month the balsams bring a cold autumn
家家门前裁衣裳 At the windows of every home clothes are being made
青红蓝绿都做到 Black, red, blue, green, all kinds are made
孟姜女家中是空箱! Yet the chests in Lady Mengjiang’s house are empty!
The title of the song provides readers with a first clue as to its performative effects:

“Naming Twelve Months of Flowers with Lady Mengjiang” (孟姜女十二月花名). The song is a celebration of botanical life, which uses the Mengjiang myth as a vehicle to explore the flowers that define each of the twelve months of the old lunar calendar. Every stanza thus begins with the invocation of a seasonally specific flower, ranging from Plumb, Apricot, and Peach Blossoms in the early months to Mulberries, Pomegranates, and Lotus Flowers in the middle months to the “Frozen Flowers of Snow” (冰凍雪花) at the end of the year. The song invokes an entire world of physical

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44 See “Naming Twelve Months of Flowers with Lady Mengjiang. Spring Tune” (Mengjiang Nv Shi Er Yue Hua Ming 孟姜女十二月花名. 唱春調), in GYZK 73, December 21, 1924, P.6-8.
sensation that define such flora and the seasons they are linked to. There is the “bright warmth” (暖洋洋) of the second month, a time when birds make nests in the rafters of homes and apricot blossoms can be seen on the land. There is the “rainy season” (黄梅) of the fifth month, in which water falls down upon the fields, providing fertile ground for rice seedlings. The sixth month brings an “unbearable heat” (热难当), in which mosquitoes swarm in the air biting one’s skin. Finally, there is the frigidity of the last months of the year, when all has turned into frost and only crows can be glimpsed in the sky.

Specific human practices are also highlighted in the song, most notably acts of prayer and votive sacrifice that were associated with specific months on the old lunar calendar. The third month sees the Clear and Bright Festival (Qingming 清明), when families “burn paper money (烧白纸)” at the tombstones of their ancestors. The ninth month sees the “Double Ninth Festival (重阳),” in which wine imbued with the fragrance of chrysanthemum is to be shared among relatives. The end of the year embodies a “raucous gaiety” (闹洋洋) in which pigs and sheep are set out as offerings to both gods and deceased ancestors: “every family has pigs and sheep to sacrifice (家家都有猪羊杀).” The song is also shaped by the work of planting, harvest, and husbandry that defined the Jiangsu region from where the song was collected, which the editors note came from a “song book” (唱本) that was popular in the region. Amid the warm rains of the fifth month the rice saplings are planted. Four months later harvest takes place, each family yielding the implements needed for husking the rice gathered in their fields. Between the spring planting and the autumn harvest clothes must be made for winter, and thus in the seventh month one can see through the windows of every home knitting work of all kinds (家家窗前裁衣裳). Regional specificity is further attested to by the presence of silkworm harvesting. During the fifth month “sisters go in pairs to pluck mulberries” from trees, so as to feed the silkworms that will spin cotton. Silkworm
harvesting was an important side-line handicraft throughout the Jiangsu region, with the cotton that was spun sold to clothing manufacturers in the urban centers of Hangzhou, Yangzhou, and Shanghai. 45

All told, the song can be seen as a celebration of the annual life-cycle of the Jiangsu region, in ecological, human, and spiritual terms. Its temporality is grounded in the older rhythms of the lunar calendar, making no mention of either the units of time of the Gregorian calendar or those of the new Republic of China. If the Gregorian calendar was globalized by European powers in their bid to synchronize colonial possessions within the folds of an expanding world-market, with the Republic of China being a national unit moving forward through this new synchronized time, “Naming Twelve Months of Flowers” spoke to an older order of time, one grounded in harvest, seasonal regularity, and communal festivals. 46

Many of the songs published in the journal are grounded in this older order of time, which the editors themselves were keenly aware of. For example, in the seventy-fifth issue of the journal the editors devoted an entire special issue to the topic of Laba Porridge (臘八粥), a rice and bean porridge that was eaten on the eighth day of the twelve lunar month. Contributors examined sources, both textual and oral, in a bid to understand the history of the porridge, its relationship to Buddhist votive practice, and the different variations of ingredients that went into it across different regions. Research articles examined the practice as it was found in Beijing, Nanyang, Shanxi,

45 The process of silk-worm harvest would become a major element in Mao Dun’s 1932 novella Spring Silkworms, whose original print-publication is analyzed in chapter three of this study.

46 For the globalization of the Gregorian calendar through European colonial expansion, particularly as it relates to the modern Japanese experience, see Tanaka (2009), pp. 1-27. Speaking of modern Japan, Tanaka claims that the Meiji Ishiin was marked by “the time of the newly adopted Gregorian calendar...the synchronization of the archipelago into the same temporal system as Europe and the United States facilitated interaction of the new nation-state into the international (and imperialistic) arena. This reconfiguration of modern society, the “rise of modern Japan,” was driven by the desire to synchronize the archipelago with the liberal-capitalist codes of the burgeoning international system”(2-3). For attempts by the Nationalist regime to install a new national calendar, which produced a new sense of time that was to be experience through a variety of quotidian activities, see Nedostup (2009), pp. 227-40; for more on the calendar of the new Republic, see Harrison (2000), p.93-97. For more on the the homogenous, fungible units of time that mark modern temporality globally, see Koselleck (1985), pp.231-266 and Anderson (2006), pp.9-37, particular p. 24.
Hebei, and Jiangsu, while readers from Zhili, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Henan, and Anhui wrote individual letters discussing their own experiences of the custom.

In an article discussing practices around the porridge in Beijing, contributor Yue Junshi 樂均士 cited a number of different historical sources to argue that after Buddhism was introduced to China, the eighth day of the twelve lunar month became a time of expiation, where one prayed to Buddhist deities to expunge impurities from one’s body. On this day commoners would spray water on Buddhist icons, a practice which eventually led to the preparation of a porridge that would be offered to the deities in place of water. Yao described a number of carefully delineated steps that made up the custom as it was practiced in contemporary Beijing, including buying the ingredients to prepare the porridge and stewing the porridge in the early hours of the eighth. The moment of votive offering was presented in the following terms:

At around seven or eight in the morning [on the eighth day of the twelfth lunar month], the most important guest is of course the Buddha. One also uses this opportunity to provide offerings to ancestors, former kings, and various miscellaneous spirits. When the incense is lit, you can see many bowls of porridge arranged at various votive tables, which are set out for a good bit of time...once these tasks have been done your goals can be considered accomplished. I have seen those who love the porridge eat eight or nine bowls! (regular bowls). At eight or nine on that morning, no other desserts are eaten (though [the porridge] is difficult to digest). After it has been eaten, if one’s home has fruit trees, you must smear the porridge on the skin of the trees. It is said this is done in order to ensure that many fruit will come in the following year.47

When it came to the actual ingredients that went into the porridge, the contributors provided many different variations. For example, in Yao’s article he described the Beijing version as being made up of yellow rice (黃米), millet (小米), white rice (白米), red dates (紅棗), chestnuts (栗子), glutinous rice (糯米), cowpeas (豇豆), and green beans (綠豆).48 Many of the articles cited oral songs that had emerged in various regions to celebrate the Laba Porridge day, from simple rhymes to more complicated offerings. The following folksong invoked not just the porridge itself but the debts that

47 See Yue Junshi, “Beijing’s Laba Porridge” (Beijing de Laba Zhou 北京的臘八粥), in GYZK 75, January 4, 1925, p. 3.
48 Ibid, p.2.
needed to be paid at the end of the year. Its dark imagery suggested that all was not necessarily calm
during this final month of the year, as it was the time when debts came due:

臘七臘八兒,凍死寒鴉兒！The seventh and eight days, the jackdaw dies by freezing!
臘八兒臘久⽽,凍死小狗兒The eight and ninth days, the small dog dies by freezing!
送信兒臘八兒,要命糖瓜！救命的煮餑餑The Laba porridge comes with letters, the Guangdong
sweets want your life, the steamed cakes save your life!
吃了臘八兒粥，往家溜Eat Laba porridge, go back home49

All told, the Laba issue attested powerfully to the way in which the folksongs that interested these
intellectuals were imbedded in a different order of time, in which units on the lunar calendar were
marked by rituals that used the most basic of foodstuffs (rice, beans, water) to communicate with
spiritual beings (Buddhas, ancestors, and a variety of popular deities).

Songs in the journal did not hesitate to link what was most immediately present for human
beings in their lived environments- wind, water, mountains- to powerful spiritual beings. For
example, in the twenty-fourth issue of the journal, linguist and folklore enthusiast Liu Bannong
published a series of twenty folksongs from Jiangsu province under the title “The Boat Songs of
Jiangyin” (江陰船歌).50 The songs included descriptions of the natural features of the regions
waterways, the jokes boatmen would tell one another, riddles that referenced legendary gods, and
tales of courtship between young people. Take, for example, the eighth song in the series:

舍人數得清天上星︖Who counts the stars in heaven?
舍人數得清底下人︖Who counts the persons below ground?
舍人數得清長江裡浪︖Who counts the waves in the Yangtze?
舍人數得清鯽⿂魚鱗︖Who counts the scales on the carp?

太白金星數得清天上星Taibai Jinxing counts the stars in heaven.
閻頭王數得清底下人The King Yatou counts the persons below ground.
海龍王數得清長江裡浪The Sea Dragon counts the caves in the Yangtze

49 Ibid, p. 2.
50 See GYZK 24, June 24, 1923, p.2-6.
The Grand Duke of Jiang counts the scales on the carp. The first stanza invokes the ecological features of the region which could be physically experienced by boatmen there, including the stars in the sky, the waves of the river, the carp who inhabit the water, and the earthen terrain that buffeted the waterways. The second stanza then links these ecological features to historical and mythological figures from a long popular narrative tradition, including Taibai Jinxing, the servant of the Jade Emperor, Yama King of the Underworld, the Dragon King, and the Grand Duke of Jiang, otherwise known as Jiang Ziya, the legendary military strategist who helped King Wu of Zhou overthrow the Shang dynasty. The boat song thus effectively linked the most sensuously present aspects of a region’s topography—water, earth, and sky—to legendary figures, themselves deemed to not simply have spiritual powers, but to provide pathways to other worlds (as in the case of Yama, king of the underworld). Ecological detail and cosmic interconnection were intimately sutured in these stanzas, as these spiritual beings were presented as the guardians of land, air, and water.

Water, earth, and trees could also become the sites for romantic and erotic desire. For example, the first boat song features a young woman who climbs a willow tree to look at a young man she is attracted to. When her mother asks her what she is doing, she claims she is look at the chuantiao in a nearby stream, which Liu Bannong tells readers in a footnote is a local word for small fish. The song presents the river as a space of play, where walking along its banks or climbing nearby trees can offer a glimpse of the object of one’s desires. The second song in the series is sung in the voice of a young woman, who remarks that her loved one did not take wooden shoes or an umbrella out with him when he left home. It has now begun to rain, which she observes will harm “his delicate skin and white flesh” (細皮白肉). Here, the predominant image is that of water suffused across young flesh, with clear erotic undertones. Sexual desire is also presented via

51 See “Boatsongs of Jiangyin Song 8” (江陰船歌 八), GYZK 24, June 24, 1923, p.3.
invocation of historical and mythological forebears. Song number thirteen presents four stanzas about a young student who has sexual relations with his master’s wife, turning them into a later day version of Lü Dongbing (呂洞賓) and Bai Mudan (白牡丹):

姐兒生生得面面皮皮黃
She has a golden face
徒弟結識師父娘
The disciple got to know his master’s wife
師父娘好比三喜白牡丹
The master’s wife is just like Bai Mudan
徒弟好比呂純陽
The disciple is just like Lü Chunyang

Lü Chunyang was the Daoist name for Lü Dongbing, a Tang dynasty poet who is presented in popular narrative of the imperial period as one of the eight Daoist immortals (八仙). The folksong here references one of the most famous tales regarding Lü, involving his relationship with the prostitute Bai Mudan. As seen in the Ming novel Journey to the East (東遊記), the story involves Bai’s attempts at getting Lü’s yang (阳) vital force through sexual intercourse, and his resistance to ejaculation for fear of losing this force. Yang’s fellow immortal friends, Iron-Crutch Liu and He Xiangnu, tell Bai the secret to making Lü ejaculate, and in the next encounter between the pair she succeeds in doing so. She gains his yang essence, which allows her too to become an immortal. Clearly, the song references the legendary tale to hint at the sexual dynamics between the young disciple and his master’s wife.

Popular mythology appears once again in the sixteenth song, in which a boat race is turned into a later day version of the Lady Mengjiang myth:

摇一橹，拉一繩
Shake the oars, pull the rope
追著你前船一同行
Pursuing your boat in the row in front
你前船装载是孟姜女
Your front boat will play Lady Mengjiang
我後船就是范杞良
My boat behind is Fan Qiliang

52 See “Boatsongs of Jiangyin Song 13” (江陰船歌 十三), GYZK 24, June 24, 1923, p.4.
53 See Wu Yuantai’s Journey to the East, which is also known as the 八仙出處東遊記 or the 上洞八仙傳, reprinted in Wu, et. all (1998). The Bai Mudan tale can be found on pp. 34-37. For more on the eight immortals, see Lai (1972).
54 See “Boatsongs of Jiangyin Song 16” (江陰船歌 十六), GYZK 24, June 24, 1923, p.4.
If the singers of such songs, as well as their listeners, were to understand the full range of historical, sexual, and spiritual meanings imbedded in them, they would have to understand the casual references to figures such as Taibai Jinxing, the King Yatou, the Dragon King, Jiang Ziya, Lü Dongbing, Bai Mudan, Fan Qiliang, and Lady Mengjiang. In this way, an entire world of cultural reference coursed through the rivers, mountains, and trees of these songs. To master the art of singing them would have meant an education not just in rhyme patterns and vocal dexterity, but in the stories that were associated with each of these legendary figures. This in itself was a particular form of *cultural literacy*, one that may or may not have entailed the ability to read textually inscribed signs on printed pages, but that certainly required an understanding of a broad popular narrative tradition.

**Tracking the Mengjiang Myth Across Media Forms**

The outlines of what this broad form of cultural literacy entailed would continue to be sketched by contributors to the journal. One topic through which it was sketched most effectively was in the concentrated interest contributors had regarding the myth of Lady Mengjiang (孟姜女). The Lady Mengjiang myth appeared repeatedly in the pages of *Geyao Zhoukan*, becoming a topic of tremendous interest amongst folklorists during the latter part of the journal’s print run. From December of 1923 to June of 1924, the journal would publish a total of nine special issues devoted to the myth, which included analysis regarding the origins and development of its narrative, as well as the presentation of a variety of different song forms in which the myth was featured.55 The special issues were edited by Gu Jiegang, who exhibited a tremendous zeal for studying how the myth had apparently become so widespread across the popular culture of the Chinese Mainland.

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55 For a discussion of intellectual interest in the Lady Mengjiang myth during the early and mid 1920s, and in particular how this interest related to the cult of 情/emotion that emerged during the May Fourth Period, see Lee (2005). While Lee’s point of entry into the Lady Mengjiang myth is how it was used to articulate a romantic sense of unrestrained emotion during this time period, my interest in the folklorists interest in this myth is how such collection work complicated the binarial schema of literacy upon which the folklore project itself had been grounded.
Gu’s attempts at producing a historiography regarding the Mengjiang myth are revealing, for they suggest how sustained collection work could actually problematize some of the folklorists’ most deeply felt assumptions regarding language, literacy, and the common people. As we have seen, from the earliest issues of the journal the folklorists operated with an understanding of literacy that was essentially dualistic: the people from whom they recorded these songs were the “textless commoners,” defined by a supposed lack of access to written culture of all kinds. Their songs were thus understood to have been sung directly from the heart, pure well-springs of emotion that needed to be recorded by textually empowered ethnographers. While this emphasis on the non-textual nature of folksongs pushed folklorists into productive debates about how to mediate between voice and print in the process of textual transcription, it also left them doubting the veracity of any folksong that had appeared before in printed form. In the earliest days of the journal there was an emphasis on finding folksongs that had not yet been touched by the pen of a gentry, with direct transcription from the mouths of common people being seen as the only means of capturing a genuine folksong.

Yet Gu’s inquiries into the Lady Mengjiang myth challenged this binarial schema, opening up the possibility that literacy for the common people could mean more than just the ability to read textually inscribed signs on printed pages. Gu’s first and longest article regarding the Lady Mengjiang story was printed in the 69th issue of the journal. He began by arguing that it was possible to make a systematic analysis of the way the Mengjiang myth had circulated amongst the minjian over the course of the imperial period. As Gu put it:

The Lady Mengjiang story has already circulated for 2500 years, and in terms of its geography has already covered all of China proper. It truly is a story of great power. It is a pity that most scholars only focus on materials relating to dynasties and the national heritage, and do not focus on the legends of the minjian (不注意于民間的專說). As such, we have lost many materials. However, despite the paucity of materials, the system of legends handed down to today from ancient times has
not yet entirely died out (至于古今專說的系統卻尚未泯滅), and within ruptured textual fragments we can still search this system out (我們還可以在斷編殘簡之中把牠的系統尋找出來).\textsuperscript{56}

Gu’s belief that there was a “system of legends” amongst the common people, one whose history and development could be painstakingly assembled by searching amongst its “ruptured textual fragments” (斷編殘簡), already set his work apart from the earliest scholarship of the folklorists.

For Gu, understanding how a story like the Mengjiang myth could become such a popular oral form could only be done by diving deep into what little textual evidence existed regarding the story from previous dynasties. Instead of erecting a firm barrier between text and speech, believing that only direct oral transcription could capture the heartfelt utterances of minjian culture, Gu paid close attention to how the sung voice was documented in the textual forms of the past.

Gu began with the Zuo Zhuan, which he claimed was the first written articulation of what would become the Mengjiang story. He pointed to the passage in which Qishi (杞殖), a subject of the state of Qi (齊), dies during a military expedition to the the state of Ju (莒). When the Duke of Qi returns home he encounters Qishi’s wife waiting on the outskirts (郊) of the city in which she lives. When he performs a ceremonial act of condolence (弔) towards her, she famously replies: “If Shi has committed an offense, then what shame upon his name! If he has not committed an offense, then he still has the stove of his ancestors, his loved ones should not mourn for him on the outskirts of the city!” (殖之有罪,何辱命焉!若免于罪,猶有先人之敝盧下,下親不得輿郊弔).\textsuperscript{57} The Duke of Qi then proceeds to go to her house to conduct the mourning ceremony inside the walls of her home.


\textsuperscript{57} See Ibid, p. 1.
How did this small anecdote, which itself was set during the Warring States period and made no mention of a Lady Mengjiang, the body of her husband, or corvee labor on the Great Wall, morph over time into something like “Naming Twelve Months of Flowers with Lady Mengjiang,” with its interweaving of botanical life and votive practice amidst the narrative of the Great Wall’s collapse? This was the historical transformation that Gu set out to explain, a process that involved close-reading a variety of historical sources laid out across imperial time. Gu was struck by the fact that the original version of the story says nothing about the emotion Qi’s wife feels upon the news of the death of her husband. The tale instead turns on the question of in which location, and under which circumstances, it is proper to mourn one’s husband. In its original instantiation, then, it was an anecdote about the question of propriety (禮), with Qi’s wife refusing to forget proper mourning etiquette even when faced with the death of her husband. To ascertain how the question of “emotion” (感情) was added to the story, Gu close-read a passage from the Tangong (檀弓) section of the Book of Rites (禮記), in which Qi’s wife expresses deep sorrow at the site of her husband’s casket. Gu then turned to a passage in the Mencius which stated that Qi’s wife has sung a song of sorrow, and that such songs had became a custom (國俗) of the state of Qi, with people emulating Qi’s wife when they were faced with the death of their loved ones. It was from the Mencius, Gu argued, that “we can glimpse the reason for this story’s wide circulation,” as people began to emulate the “tearful melodies” (哭調) sung by Qi’s wife.58

Gu then cited a number of texts from the Warring States and Western Han Period to argue that singing in the style of Qi’s wife became a cultural practice amongst performers and audiences during those time periods. Gu compared the description of mournful singing found in such collections to his own experience of listening to Shaanxi Opera (秦腔) in the present day. As he put it:

Ten years ago, I once saw the Shaanxi actress Xiao Xiangshui’s opera. She was extremely good at singing mournful parts. Once, when she was acting in the Shao Guji (燒骨記), she extended a mournful song for four or five minutes, with a crescendo like a roaring tide, and the diminuendo like dripping water from a spring. Anger and regret poured out of her. The longer it lasted the more tense it became, the more tense the more sorrowful. It is not just the singer that needs to be excellent at holding their breath, the audience’s breathing also follows the sound of her song, expanding and circling between the chest and the diaphragm, unable to gain release. I use this to imagine the song of sorrow of Qiliang’s wife...I feel it must be very close to this.59

In this way, Gu sutured his close-reading of printed sources from the imperial past to his own sonic experiences of the operatic forms of Northern China, creating a means of imagining what the sounds of those earlier sources may have been. He would go on in his article to pinpoint the moment the song became about the power of Qi’s wife’s to destroy the city wall of the Qi capital. He pointed to the Eastern Han writer Liu Xiang 劉向, who in his Biographies of Exemplary Women (烈女轉) described her tears as destroying the wall at whose base she mourned for her husband. Gu argued that the transportation of the story from the Warring States period to the Qin dynasty was not accomplished until the Tang. Gu examined the poems contained in the Yuefu Shiji (樂府詩集, compiled by the Southern Song scholar Guo Maoqian), arguing that the tale of Qi’s wife destroying the Great Wall was actually a combination of two distinct narrative forms: the poems grouped under the genre “Feeding One’s Horse From a Water Hole at the Great Wall” (飲馬長城窟行行) and the mourning songs of Qiliang’s wife (杞粱妻歌). The former were songs that had begun being produced in the Han dynasty and that discussed the brutality of corvee labor in building the Great Wall. The syncretic product that emerged in the Tang period came to have tremendous emotive power, at a time when familial displacement due to military campaigns on the empire’s margins occurred frequently. As Gu put it, “everyone sought to borrow the story of Qiliang’s wife to dispel

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59 See Ibid, p.3.
their own gloom, and as such they took Qiliang’s wife as the very epitome of the ‘sorrow of one’s husband not returning from a remote expedition.’”

All told, Gu’s article presented a vision of folklore that saw it rooted in a combination of textual and oral forms, from the earliest narrative fragments of the Zuo Zhuan and the Mencius to the lyric poems of the Han and Tang periods to his own listening habits in the present. Folklore work for Gu was not the privileging of the sonic over the textual, as if the voice of the minjian emerged ex-nihilo, totally cut off from the texts of earlier times. Rather, Gu painted a vision of minjian culture in which voice and text, practices of singing and systems of textual notation, were in constant mélange. As Gu put it, “the lyric poems (樂府) of the past were like the operas (歌劇) of today, they circulated widely and naturally were easily modified.” Only by wading through the intersections of song-in-print, and tracking their changes across imperial time, could folksongs be treated as historically legible objects, with genealogies stretching back thousands of years.

Gu’s article would set the stage for eight more special issues devoted to the Mengjiang myth, which were published at various intervals over the first half of 1924. In each special issue, Gu thanked contributors for sending in different versions of the tale in a variety of different forms, from riddles (歇後語), spring songs (唱春), poetry rubbings (詩拓本), steels (碑文), operas (戲劇), song-books (唱本), illustrations (圖畫), and drum songs (鼓詞) to “novels of sorrow and passion” (哀情小說) and baojuan (寶卷) narratives. The aesthetic forms in which the myth was found became ever more varied as the special issues continued, with each form presenting a different version of the myth, complete with its own interpretive possibilities. These different versions of the myth did not remain within the boundaries of Confucian moralism alone. Some

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60 Ibid, P.7. It was left only to explain how Qi’s wife got the name Mengjiang, a development which Gu tracked back to the Song dynasty text Mengjiang Shu (孟姜疏) by Shao Wu 邵武, which he claimed was the earliest one in which the Mengjiang name appeared.

61 Ibid, P.7.
versions of the story presented a world riven with powerful spiritual forces, mixing Daoist and Buddhist elements to produce decidedly eclectic narrative visions.

The most fantastical rendering of the story could be found in the Celestial Mengjiang Baojuan (孟姜仙女寶卷), a popular religious text from Guangdong featuring over one thousand seven character lines of sung prose, which were published serially starting from the 76th issue of the journal onward. In this version Lady Mengjiang and her husband Xiliang (喜良) are actually celestial beings- the Seventh Immortal (七姑仙) of the Female Immortals Palace (仙姬宮) and the Mangtong Immortal (芒童仙官) from the Chicken Kitchen Temple (廚雞宮). They begin the story in the heavenly realms. On the Winter Holiday (冬至佳節) the Jade Emperor (玉帝) gives all celestial beings the freedom to travel around the three realms (遊行三界). The two main characters thus go to the Southern Gate of Heaven (南天門), where they look upon a violent human world:

“Within the walls [of the human world], the vapors of death filled the air, as the people suffered tremendously (室壁之間, 殺氣沖天, 民受大害).”\(^\text{62}\) The Seventh Female and Mangtong decide to descend to earth to rescue the people. The Seventh Female descends to Huating County in the Songjiang region of China, where she finds the Meng family farm. She ensconces herself inside the body of a winter melon so that she can be reborn as a child. The Meng family eventually finds her in the melon and raise her as their daughter.

Thus begins an elaborate working out of the Lady Mengjiang myth that is as eclectic as it is fantastical. While the tale touches on question of piety towards ones parents, as Lady Mengjiang accepts the will of her parents as they arrange her marriage to Wan Xiliang (who is a reborn version of the Mangtong immortal), it is set in a decidedly Daoist cosmos. The Jade Emperor works with his fellow gods the City God (Chenghuang 城隍), the Earth God (Tudi 土地), the Kitchen God 

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(Zaoshen 灶神), and the God of the Great White Star (Taibai Jinxing 太白金星) to set the events of the narrative in motion. He sends Taibai Jinxing down to earth to spread a rumor that Wan Xiliang must contribute to building the Great Wall, as only then will it endure for thousands of years. The rumor reaches the ear of Qin Shihuang, who orders men to kidnap Wan Xiliang and bring him to labor on the wall, thus setting the stage for Lady Mengjiang’s eventual journey. At the end of the story, after Lady Mengjiang’s cries bring down the Great Wall, Qin Shihuang discovers that she and her deceased husband are actually immortal spirits, with heaven’s anger over his political regime clear for all to see. Their is also a decidedly Buddhist dimension to the story. The parents of both Mengjiang and Wan Xiliang, reeling at the loss of their children, turn to Buddhism as a way out of their suffering. The Guanyin Bodhisattva (南海觀世音) watches upon the human drama unfolding and can’t help herself from “stepping into the full light of day” (立在光天化日之下) to save her disciples from suffering. She thus appears in front of the parents to instruct them on the steps to take to salvation. The human world that she and her fellow celestial beings descend to is described in archetypically fallen terms:

離別天門到凡間 Leaving the Southern Gate [of Heaven] to go to the common world
頃刻來到松江域 Instantly arriving in the Songjiang region
前面就是華亭縣 In front of her was Huating county
一派惡氣不堪聞 An air of evil was unbearable to endure
怨氣騰騰沖零漢 Raging enmity shooting up into the sky
紅塵滾滾浪層層 The red dust rolling, the waves crashing
苦海無邊何日了 The sea of sorrow without limit- what times were these!

In the 86th issue of the journal the editors published an illustration from the baojuan in which Lady Mengjiang and Wan Xiliang were depicted as Daoist immortals (see Figure 1.4). The

63 See “Celestial Mengjiang Baojuan” (Mengjiang Xian Nv Baokuan 孟姜仙女寶卷) in Second Special Edition- On Lady Mengjiang No. 7 (Zhuanhao Er “Mengjiang nv 7” 專號二 “孟姜女”7) GYZK 90, May 11, 1925, p.16.
two central figures stand on billowy clouds holding scepters; draped in finely embroidered clothes, they are the very definition of majesty and power. When combined with the serialized printing of the Baojuan, the image presented readers a vision of Lady Mengjiang and Wan Xiliang as forces for cosmic justice, capable of intervening into human society at will.65

65 Interestingly, the visual captions were accompanied by a long explanatory note from Gu Jiegang in which he described the process by which he sought to kaozheng (考證, textually verify) the geographical origins of the baojuan text the journal had published. He claimed that he was troubled by the fact that, while the text had been found circulating in Guangxi and had been printed in Guangdong, contributors in those regions had never heard of a Daoist rendering of the story the likes of which were found in the baojuan, nor were there any dialect terms from those regions found in the baojuan. Gu had the baojuan compared with another juan found in the catalogue of the Benevolent Printshop of the Zhongyi Hua Hall of the City Temple of Shanghai (上海城隍廟中翼化堂善書坊), claiming that the two works were the same, the shanghai version having been printed in 1912, the Guangdong version in 1915. On this basis he concluded that the Guangdong baojuan was based on the Shanghai version, and that the story was a product of the Zhejiang region rather than Guangdong. He called works “Sutras of Repentance and Virtue” (經懺善書). As to whether the 1912 version of the story was based on earlier texts Gu claimed such a question awaited future research. He ended his footnote by remarking that what this process showed was “the complexity of this story and the difficulty of textually verifying it” (故事的錯雜和考證的困難). See “Celestial Mengjiang Baokuan” (Mengjiang Xian Nv Baokuan 孟姜仙女寶卷) in Second Special Edition- On Lady Mengjiang No. 6 (Zhuanhao Er Mengjiang nv 6 專號二 “孟姜女”6) GYZK 86, April 21, 1925, p.8.
Each Mengjiang special issue featured sections devoted to correspondence (通訊) between Gu Jiegang and his readers, and it was in these individual letters that one glimpsed how extensively the Mengjiang myth had penetrated across textual, sonic, and material realms. For example, in issue number 79, a Hunan-based reader, Wu Jiayou 伍家宥, wrote to Gu to tell him that in a county next to his own there was a place called Mengnu Yi (孟女議) through which flowed the Lishui River (澧水河). At the top of a small mountain bordering one of the banks of the river was the Mengjiang Temple (孟姜廟), an old place of worship made of peeling bricks. About forty miles to the east of the river was an entire mountain named after Lady Mengjiang, complete with another temple devoted to her. Wu claimed that every time he rides a boat on the Lishui river he asks the boatmen
about the Lady Mengjiang story. The boatmen reply that she was a woman who crossed thousands
miles to find her husband, though they could not explain why there were temples devoted to her
here in Hunan. Wu finished his letter by suggesting that in the gazetteers of the region’s counties
one may be able to find information regarding when the Mengjiang temples were built and what
role they played in local society.

Another letter in the same issue, by He Zhisan 何植三, told Gu of a barber who lived in a
temple near his home in the eastern part of Zhejiang, who would sing the Mengjiang story from a
songbook (唱本), which itself contained numerous visual depictions of the tale. In the barber’s
version of the story, Mengjiang commits suicide by throwing herself off the city wall into a nearby
fire, rather than throwing herself into the coastal waters next to the terminus of the Great Wall as
was the more commonly accepted ending of the story. Another reader from Zhejiang, Xu Guangxi,
writes that in his home county of Pinghu (平湖) there were three different forms in which the story
could be found: spoken tales (口傳), paintings (繪圖), and spring songs (春調). He tells Gu that the
children in Pinghu love spring tunes, and on warm evening nights one can hear young people’s
voices filling the villages with songs, many of which followed a twelve month, four stanza pattern.

One of the most extensive letters Gu received was from Qian Zhaoji 錢肇基, who
referenced over a dozen different cultural forms in which the Lady Mengjiang narrative could be
found. For example, across Zhejiang and Jiangsu he was able to find numerous baojuan and drum-
songs (⿎詞) that touched on the tale. In Beijing, he claimed that he was able to find a number of
“Four Season Songs” (四季歌) which told the Lady Mengjiang tale through seasonal changes. He
claimed that the “Four-Season Songs” were not products indigenous to Beijing, but were imported
there from Suzhou and Shanghai. They came to Beijing from four different sources: the sung-
performances of prostitutes (妓女), actors in spoken dramas (白話劇), gramophone recordings (留

66 The letter is found in the “Correspondence” (Tongxun 通訊) section of GYZK 90, May 11, 1925, p.5-8.
and the everyday language of Jiangsu people living in Beijing. He also claimed that in Beijing, Zhejiang, and elsewhere one could find “Shadow-Puppet Plays from Hebei” (灤州影戲) that deal with the Mengjiang myth. He claimed that in Zhejiang one could find a domino game (骨牌遊戲) called “Lady Mengjiang Searches for Her Husband” (孟姜女尋夫) which involved arranging dominoes in a certain fashion to test the memory of the players. Qian even provided diagrams for how the game was supposed to be played (see Figure 1.5). Finally, fortune tellers (星相家) in the region used bamboo slips (竹籤) and cards (牌) with Mengjiang’s image on them to divine the future.67

67 In his reply to Qian’s letter, Gu agreed with Qian that the Four-Season Songs (四季歌) had indeed been transported to Beijing from the south. He could claim this, he wrote, because he had listened to the songs on a gramophone (留声片) at a friends house, and from this recording could state definitively that they were not indigenous to Beijing. The inclusion of the gramophone adds one more communicative medium to the Lady Mengjiang story, the new machine serving as an electrical mechanism to map what was clearly an older oral order grounded in popular practices across diverse regional sites. For more, see GYZK 90, May 11, 1925 p.8.
The letters of He Zhisan, Xu Guangxi, and Qian Zhaoji provided readers with a truly comprehensive sense of not just how extensively the Lady Mengjiang myth had proliferated across late-imperial China, but the diversity of forms in which it could be found. Barbers sang from songbooks, children sang poems, and boatsmen exchanged stories as they sailed past temples. Literacy in this cultural order meant much more than just the ability to read printed characters on a page. It indicated, rather, immersion in a narrative order that crossed written, sonic, and material planes, ranging from hallowed cultural texts (the Zuo Zhuan) to objects of everyday leisure (the dominoes played in games in the streets). Such letters thus stood as a most eloquent rebuke to one...
of the grounding assumptions of the folklore movement itself: that text and speech could be starkly divided from one another, and that the voice of the minjian emerged ex-nihilo, as an illiterate call from the depths of their souls, without any relationship to inherited textual forms of any kind. Instead of clear binarial distinctions between text and speech, literacy and illiteracy, what such letters presented was a porous cultural world in which text, sound, and materiality were constantly intermixed.

**Finding the Voice of the Minjian in Paris: Liu Bannong and the Pelliot Collection**

Versions of the Lady Mengjiang myth could be found not only in the mountainous temples of Hunan, the waterways of Zhejiang, or the gramophone recordings of Beijing, but outside of the geo-political boundaries of China all-together. In a letter to Gu Jiegang published in the 83rd issue of the journal, Liu Bannong wrote to him from France, where he was studying for a doctorate in linguistics at the University of Paris. Liu praised Gu’s work on the Lady Mengjiang myth, claiming that Gu was “the first to use the methods and perspectives of a historian to research this story” (68) Liu then went on to claim that during the previous year he had found, in the Dunghuang Manuscript collection stored in the Pelliot Collection at the National Library of France, a number of “small songs” (小唱) from the Tang and Song periods which touched on the Lady Mengjiang myth. Liu Bannong provided his own hand-written copies of one of the Mengjiang songs in the Pelliot collection, which was reprinted in the journal. There were a number of non-standardized characters contained in the manuscript, forcing Liu to add diacritic markings to his note in order to make his own interpretations of their meanings clear. Despite the difficulty he had in reading the manuscript, it was a crucial discovery, as it allowed Liu to revise Gu’s thesis regarding when “Lady Mengjiang” as a common name for Qi’s wife emerged.

68 See “Correspondence” (Tongxun 通訊), GYZK 83, March 22, 1925, p.2.

69 For a more extended treatment of Liu Bannong’s contribution to folklore study in China, see Wang and Liu (2014).
The manuscript allowed him to place the emergence of the Lady Mengjiang name as early as the Tang Dynasty, as oppose to the Northern Song period as Gu had first postulated.

How had this textual incarnation of the Lady Mengjiang story ended up in the National Library of France? The Pelliot Collection was formed from over ten thousand pre-11th century texts written in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit gathered from 1906-1908 on a mission to Qing Central Asia headed by sinologist Paul Pelliot (1878-1945). Pelliot was on the staff of the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient (EFEO) in Vietnam, an institution of colonial education established in 1901. Pelliot was chosen by the French government to lead an expedition to Kashgar, Dunhuang, and the Kucha Oasis in search of archeological and historical materials, sites that were being actively visited by other foreign sinologists at the time, including German, Japanese, British and Russian scholars. Support for the expedition had been offered by the French Ministere de l’Instruction Publique, along with a variety of museums and geographical societies. Pelliot was seconded on the mission by Dr. Louis Vaillant, an assistant major in France’s colonial army. The expedition would last over two years and include comprehensive photographic and written documentation of the Magao caves at Dunhuang, which Pelliot and his team spent over three weeks working in. The thousands of written materials gathered would form the backbone of the Collections Orientales of the French National Library, while paintings, objects, banners, and statues gathered on the expedition were sent to the L’oeuvre and later to the Musée Guimet. An initial inventory of

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70 See J.J.L. Duvynedak’s 1947 article on Pelliot’s life and work for more information on the expedition, republished in Walravens (2001), pp. xix-xxiv. Duvynedak, a dutch Sinologist who worked at Leiden University, joined Pelliot in 1932 in co-editing the journal scholarly journal T’oung Pao. His description of Pelliot’s work in the caves is downright euphoric: “Those three weeks, on his haunches in the badly lit cave, surrounded by Mss. “dans un hachis de langues” as he once said, examining with lightning rapidity every single one of 15,000 scrolss in order to decide what to take and what to leave, must have been the happiest of his life and with justifiable pride i have heard him say, many years later, that there was only one text which he regretted to have overlooked”(xx).

71 Biological specimens gathered during the expedition, including over 800 plants, 200 birds, insects, and geological objects were sent to the French Museum of Natural History.
Chinese language materials was published in 1923, but catalogue work would continue well on into the 20th century and, indeed, remains unfinished.\(^{72}\)

Pelliot described the materials discovered in the Dunhuang caves as nothing short of a revolutionary breakthrough for sinology, allowing foreign scholars for the first time access to a new archive of historical materials that were not even present in Chinese libraries. Such materials provided unparalleled insight into religious and lay life in Central Asia and Western China before the 11th century. As Pelliot put it:

A mon sens, ces manuscrits apportent en Sinologie deux nouveautés. D’abord, le manuscrit chinois était une catégorie à peu près inconnue dans nos bibliothèques. Sans doute, il exist des manuscrits en Chine, et d’importants; mais les bibliophiles indigènes les recherchent, et nous-mêmes étions trop peu au courant de l’imprimé pour nous mettre en quête de l’inédit...Mais aujourd’hui nous nous apercevons que la tradition manuscrite ou imprimée n’a pas été impeccable, et qu’il faut faire, en chinois comme ailleurs, de la critique de textes...pour la première fois en sinologie, nous pourrons travailler en quelque sorte sur pièces d’archives. Je veux dire par là que la science indigène nous a toujours mis en face de résultats. Ces résultats, nous pouvons les admettre ou les rejeter en opposant les livres les uns aux autres, mais toujours des livre, écrits après coup; nous ne disposions jamais de documents originaux, indépendants, et qui n’eussent pas été destinés à la publicité.\(^{73}\)

For Pelliot, the discoveries would enable foreign sinologists to make claims about the Chinese past that were novel, for they were to be based on materials that the Chinese themselves had not only not

\(^{72}\) For the Bibliothèque national de France’s own brief history regarding the Pelliot mission and the subsequent collection it produced, see International Dunhuang Project, [http://idp.bl.uk/pages/collections_fr.a4d](http://idp.bl.uk/pages/collections_fr.a4d). The entire Pelliot Collection is housed in the original building of the national library, the Richelieu Building near the L’oeuvre in Paris. Upon returning to Paris in 1909, Pelliot spent the remaining years of his life publishing extensively on what he had uncovered on the expedition. For Pelliot’s own letters written during the expedition between 1906-1908, see Pelliot (2008). For more on Pelliot’s life and scholarship, see Walravens (2001). For an international scholarly symposium on the importance of Pelliot’s work to global sinology, see Drege and Zink (2013). For an English language treatment of foreign scholarly expeditions in China in the early 20th century see Hopkirk (1980), particularly his chapter on Pelliot, pp. 177-189. Hopkirk describes the thirty years beginning with Sven Hedin’s 1895 exploration of Central Asia as an “archaeological free-for-all...[in which] access to the lost cities and ruined monasteries of the Silk Road had been virtually unrestricted”(223). The foreign powers used their colonial leverage over the Chinese government to gain access for their scholars to important Silk Road sites, bringing tens of thousands of valuable manuscripts, paintings, and art objects back to Europe with them. Hopkirk credits nationalist anger among both urban and rural populations over the May 30th Incident with changing government policy towards the expeditionary missions.

\(^{73}\) Quote reprinted in Walravens (2001), p. xxi. An English rendering: “For me, these manuscripts brings two innovations to Sinology. First, Chinese manuscripts was a category that was basically unknown in our libraries. No doubt, there exists manuscripts in China, and important ones; however indigenous bibliophiles researched them, and we were too out of touch regarding what was being printed to make inquiries about unpublished materials...But today we perceive that the tradition of manuscripts and printings was not impeccable, and that the critique of texts needs to be done, in Chinese as in other [languages]...for the first time in Sinology, we can work in a variety of ways on archival pieces. What I mean by this is that the indigenous science always put results in front of us. We could reject or admit these results as we compared one book with another, but it was always with books, written after the fact; we never disposed ourselves of original, independent documents, which were never destined for public examination.”
catalogued, but indeed were wholly unaware of. It is difficult not to sense in Pelliot’s words an anxiety of emplacement, as the foreign scholar must justify his claim of knowledge regarding the Chinese Other by reference to the failure of “indigenous” scholarship to properly catalogue its own past.

In his response to Liu’s letter from Paris, Gu expressed both surprise and delight that it took a manuscript located “overseas” (海外) to give them an even greater understanding of the origins of the Lady Mengjiang name. As he put it, “this small song allows us to know that the Lady Mengjiang name already has a very long history... this is truly very valuable, imbuing us with a happiness that cannot be put into words.”\(^74\) Gu would go on to debate the meaning of a variety of the non-standardized characters contained in the manuscript, using Zhuyin Fuhao symbols to indicate what he believed their sounds were. He guessed that one of the problematic characters that appeared in the phrase “x 酪山下” was in fact the name of the mountain that Lady Mengjiang crossed.\(^75\) He posited that if they could determine the meaning of those characters then one could locate the itinerary of Meng’s journey and, perhaps, the geographic origins of the myth itself.

While such textual analysis clearly fascinated both Gu and Liu, it is noteworthy that no sustained discussion of how the Dunhuang manuscript was transmitted outside China, or a reflection on what it meant to do Chinese folklore work in Paris, was offered to readers. While they were both convinced that the Pelliot manuscript represented, in Liu’s words, an “ancestor” (祖宗) to the “small Minjian songs” (民間小唱) of contemporary China, neither of them sought to reflect upon the colonial dynamics that mediated their work.\(^76\) The textual antecedents of the minjian had been found not in the mountains, fields, and villages across the old Qing imperium, but in the

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74 See “Correspondence” (Tongxun 通訊), GYZK 83, March 22, 1925, p.3.

75 X here is a stand-in for the non-standardized character that Liu was examining, which cannot be reproduced through a digital typing interface. For the original character, see “Correspondence” (Tongxun 通訊), GYZK 83, March 22, 1925, p.3.

capital of a European power, nestled in the collections of their highest institution of knowledge production. It is unlikely that Gu and Liu were unaware of nationalist outrage around these thefts. Pelliot’s removal of the Dunhuang manuscripts had engendered widespread indignation amongst Chinese scholars and officials at the time of their original displacement.77 Historian Peter Hopkirk describes the thirty years of foreign archeology in China that begun with Sven Hedin’s 1895 exploration of Qing Central Asia as an “archaeological free-for-all...[in which] access to the lost cities and ruined monasteries of the Silk Road had been virtually unrestricted.”78 The foreign powers used their colonial leverage over the Chinese government to gain access to important Silk Road sites, bringing tens of thousands of valuable manuscripts, paintings, and art objects back to Europe with them. Yet Gu and Liu did not choose to reflect on this colonial deterritorialization of objects from the Chinese past in their writings in the journal.

What was clear, however, was that the colonial anxieties that had first launched Geyao Zhoukan- the outrage that Chang Hui and others felt over the fact that it was Guido Vitale who had first recorded Beijing’s folksongs and presented them on the world stage- was no less present eighty three issues later, in which a crucial turn in the Mengjiang story had been discovered on a stolen scrap of paper in Paris. No more poignant a reminder could be offered for the way in which folklore work in China was mediated, from the beginning, by the globally hierarchical moment in which China found itself. Given the circumstances in which such a valuable document had left China, were Gu and Liu to feel pride or outrage that the legend of Lady Mengjiang had reached the heart of Europe? When one remembers that at the time France had an expanding military empire in South-East Asia, one which was justified in the name of uplifting (by studying, cataloguing ,and eventually reforming) other civilizations, one can hardly consider the Pelliot manuscript a case of benign cosmopolitanism.

77 For a brief discussion of this indignation, see Hopkirk pp. 183-185 and pp. 222-241.
78 See Hopkirk (1980), p.223,
From Songs to Networks: The End of Geyao Zhoukan’s Initial Print-Run

In the final issue regarding Lady Mengjiang, Gu reflected on the over 80 pages and 20,000 characters the journal had spent discussing the tale. He recognized that, despite dozens of articles and letters discussing the myth, researchers were farther away than ever of coming up with a comprehensive understanding of all of its various forms. Instead of historiographic and thematic clarity, only new questions had emerged. Gu expressed interest in knowing more about the historical origins of the baojuan and drum songs they had collected (寶卷與大鼓的起源); the different groups of drum singers that existed (大鼓的派別); books pertaining to the “art forms of the commoners” (載民眾藝術的書籍); the relationship between local customs and local languages (風俗與方言的演變); and the authentication of the works of various visual artists (書畫家的墨跡的真偽) they had printed in the journal. Gu was also interested in collecting more items associated with the myth, including theater scripts, wood-block prints, riddles, the song-books of prostitutes, dominos, clothes with images of Lady Mengjiang on them, pictures of Daoist flower ceremonies, as well as images of Mengjiang that could be found abroad (the editors had heard reports that a museum in Warsaw contained paintings that depicted the myth). Gu also wanted reader to sends in heretical songs (邪歌), the existence of which pushed Gu to wonder whether Lady Mengjiang was actually considered by the minjian to be a disloyal woman of poor morals, rather than the image of filiality that certain texts portrayed her as.79

What was clear was that what had begun as an inquiry into the origins of one geyao had transformed into a project of mapping an entire popular cultural world, studying all of the texts, temples, paintings, songs, clothes, bamboo slips, and dominoes that the story had proliferated across. The presence of a Lady Mengjiang story in Paris only reinforced how complex folklore

work had become. It was no longer a question of merely printing the words of the people on paper. It was, rather, a process of reckoning with cultural networks whose texts, songs, and objects spanned backwards in historical time and outward across geographic space. Such times and spaces were mediated by different imperial regimes, regional languages, and media forms.

It is no coincidence then that in the issue immediately following the final Mengjiang edition the editors made an important announcement: they were closing *Geyao Zhoukan* down and replacing it with a journal whose mandate would be broader. The editors announced the founding of the *The Beijing University National Studies Research Weekly* (北京大學研究所國學們週刊), which would research the following topics: folksongs, dialect, customs, textual materials from the Ming and Qing periods, and archaeology. What had begun, in December of 1922, as an attempt to record the songs of the people directly from voice to page had, by June of 1925, morphed into an ethnographic project that cut across sonic, textual, and visual realms, as well as historical times and geographic spaces.

Given how wide-ranging the discussions in *Geyao Zhoukan* had become, it would not have surprised readers that editors wanted to re-launch the journal within a broader analytic framework. Yet close-readers of the journal would have remarked how unstable the very categories of knowledge that the editors used had become. If the editors had originally understood a geyao to be the unmediated oral utterance of the common people, what did the plethora of texts, objects, and images that emerged from their research mean for how the concept was to be thought and studied? Clearly, the notion of such songs emerging exclusively form the hearts of the common people, with no prior textual mediation whatsoever, was unsustainable. Yet where did oral songs end and textual materials begin, and what role did transcription, dialect, adaptation, and performance play in the relationship between them? The accomplishment of the Geyao group was to open up such questions to research, while making any claim to knowledge regarding them seem premature in the face of the overwhelming diversity of materials they had accumulated.
If the question of modernity in the context of 20th century China is often thought of as the imposition, by multi-lingual and cosmopolitan intellectuals, of an objectifying discourse onto domestic agricultural communities, seeing them as the source of national backwardness, what the folklore movement reveals is the semiotic complexity that defined those communities’ cultures. The journal’s collection efforts enabled such complexity to proliferate across its pages. The folksongs of the minjian spoke of shipping laneways on great rivers, mountain ranges connecting villages across great expanses, powerful beings with access to far-off spiritual realms, as well as locally rooted practices of marriage, neighborliness, and play. These songs were connected to the most revered of textual sources, but could be found in everyday objects such as dominoes, bamboo slips, and divination cards; they were uttered in a variety of different languages, for which notational methods were as of yet still being devised.\(^80\)

To unravel the historical strands of one song meant opening a web of sonic, textual, and visual media, one that stretched from temples in rural Sichuan to fortune-tellers in Zhejiang to the L’ouevre in Paris and back again. Building the resources and methodologies to analyze these networks was a project that the journal had only scratched the surface of. Yet what was clear was that the assumed hierarchy between literate ethnographers and their illiterate others broke down in the face of the diverse connections collection work had uncovered. In this way, the journal productively destabilized the very object of knowledge it set out to clarify, painting a picture of minjian life as marked not by guileless illiteracy, but by a complex amalgam of songs, texts, images, seasons, work, play, and prayer.

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\(^{80}\) The world of the folksong could even include the English language, as was evidenced by an article in the journal that provided an extensive analysis of the pigeon songs sung in the treaty port of Shanghai. Such songs mixed local Shanghainese dialect with terms from the foreign communities in the colonial enclave, a turbid orality that circulated powerfully in the shops, tea houses, trams, and street corners of the colonial metropolis. For more, see Liu Fu 劉復, “Chinese Folksongs Abroad” (Hai Wai de Zhongguo Mingge 海外的中國民歌), GYZK 25, September 23, 1923, pp. 1-4.
Chapter 2
Objects and Spirits: Figuring Materiality in the Regional Writing of the New Republic

As folklorists grappled with how to annotate and analyze the songs that made up minjian culture, creative writers of the day would launch their own forms of negotiation with the sonic, visual, and material networks that the Geyao Zhoukan had begun to unravel. The vernacular short-stories that dotted the cultural journals of the 1920s present to the reader a crucial mode of cultural encounter: student-intellectual narrators shuttling back and forth between coastal metropolises and village hometowns, with the narrators having to reckon with what was left behind in their old homes. Within hometown encounters narrators are faced with a complex network of material life, from objects of temple worship to ancestral alters placed prominently in courtyard homes to the use of floating river lamps on festival days. These writings thus staged an encounter with the object world of village life, whose affective and spiritual dimensions were provocatively explored.

This literary focus on regional object life emerged at a moment of tremendous material upheaval in Mainland China, particularly in its urban treaty ports. By the early 1920s, industrial capitalism had become a fully instantiated part of social life in Shanghai, which drew men and women from across the countryside to labor in factories manufacturing everything from textiles, cigarettes, and soap to steel beams and heavy armaments.\(^1\) Indeed, from the 1860s onward, a thriving marketplace developed in manufacturing, real estate, and finance in Shanghai, overseen by the imperialist powers whose military incursions had gained them lucrative extra-territorial privileges and market access. With industrial and commercial development came infrastructural innovations. In 1886 Shanghai gained its first gas light, in 1882 electric power, and by 1900 its first tram line had been built. Other treaty ports and urban centers- Tianjin and Beijing being the most

\(^1\) The literature on Shanghai’s pre-1949 social and economic history is immense. For an economic history of Shanghai as the crucial commercial gateway to the Lower Yangtzi River region, see Ma (2008). For the emergence of industrial capitalism in the city by the 1920s, see Dirlik (1989) and Honig (1986). For a study of foreign financial institutions in Shanghai, with a particular focus on monetary policy, see Horesh (2009). For an examination of the affective dimensions of commercial life in Shanghai from the late 19th century onward, see Yeh (2007). For a multi-volume history of the city examined from a variety of different socio-economic perspectives, see Xiong ed. (1999).
prominent among them—soon followed with their own technical innovations, from tram lines to new underground systems of waste management.²

While imperialist divisions and warlord rivalries meant that capitalist development in China did not occur under one political regime, scholars agree that a distinctly new commercial culture developed during this time period, one which articulated new understandings of citizenship, femininity, hygiene, visuality, public space, fashion, and taste.³ There is a general consensus that, both on the macro-scale of regional life, as well as the micro-scale of the embodied everyday, the increasing commodification of all aspects of social life signaled China’s uneven integration into the global capitalist market place. The bourgeoning periodical press of the period reflected the increasing dominance of commodities in daily life, as advertisements could be found in major newspapers from the late Qing onward offering products such as hand creams, fountain pens, Western-style clothing, cigarettes, and much more.⁴

Scholars have struggled, however, to probe the relationship between this new commercial culture and the complex forms of material culture that existed on the Mainland long before the 20th century. Before the introduction of the steam engine, the industrial factory, and railroad networks, ²

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² For discourses and practices around the concept of hygiene (weisheng 衛生) in early 20th century Tianjin, see Rogaski (2004). For early 20th century Beijing as a layered city, with new and old infrastructural, economic, and political forms overlapped on top of one another, crating a dynamic tumult nurtured by the very unevenness of its social transformations, see Strand (1989). For the problem of hygiene and modernity in Shanghai, see Macpherson (1987).

³ Karl Gerth has described the intimate link between modern Chinese nationalism and this new consumer culture in the following terms: by the early 20th century “China had begun to import and to manufacture thousands of new consumer goods. These commodities changed the everyday life of millions of Chinese who used, discussed, and dreamed about them. At the same time, the influx of imports and the desires they created threatened many in China. Politicians worried about trade deficits and the new consumer lifestyle exemplified by opium dens and addicts. Intellectuals, who had begun to read works on Western political economy, feared the loss of sovereignty implicit in the growing foreign dominance of the commercial economy. And manufacturers, faced with inexpensive and superior imports, wondered how they would preserve or increase market share”(3). See Gerth (2003) for more. Scholars such as Madeline Yue Dong has argued that print-advertising associated with the new commercial culture was a crucial arena in which not just understandings of, but the anxieties around, the cultural figure of the “Modern Girl” were elaborated. As Dong puts it, “While the Modern Girl was represented in advertisements as a beguiling icon of the glamour of modern life and happiness ostensibly achievable through consumption of industrial commodities, she also often appeared as a mystery and was seen as a threatening figure...the Modern Girl upset social conventions in her relations with her male counterpart, the modern man”(194-195). See Dong (2008) for more. For more on the economic nationalism during the Republican Period, see Zanasi (2006).

⁴ For the gendered dimensions of the late-Qing periodical press, see Judge (2015). For advertising in the noted late Qing and Republican era newspaper the Shenbao, see Tsai (2010). For the way in which cigarette advertising became textual spaces for the representation of modern national subjectivity in the Shenbao newspaper, see Tsai (2006). For the significance of dress and fashion in the transition from the late-Qing the Republican period, see Carroll (2003).
objects had been produced for trade, consumption, and aesthetic appreciation for centuries, circulating over land, river, and ocean networks. If the early 20th century does indeed represent a transformation in the status of objects in China—defined, in the words of prominent historian of Chinese consumer culture Karl Gerth, by “thousands of new consumer goods...[that] changed the everyday life of millions of Chinese who used, discussed, and dreamed about them”—then the question emerges: what older orders of object-based practice and knowledge were displaced within this transformation?6

The regional writing produced from the 1920s onward can serve as an important entryway into such an inquiry. For these are texts that are strewn with the materiality of village life, which could be staged in a diverse number of ways. In the works of Lu Xun and Xu Qinwen, joss sticks and temple mats act as a means of communicating with different spiritual realms and heavenly forces. In the works of Yu Dafu and Ye Shengtao, ancestral alters are melancholic media, forcing intellectual narrators into a perpetual reckoning with life-worlds now lost. And in the Anhui native Tai Jingnong’s works, river lamps are a means of collapsing the division between the human and the non-human, the organic and the inanimate, life and death. Collectively, these works can be read as reflections upon how objects were used to make meanings that were not reducible to urban commodity fetishism.

Methodologically, this chapter builds off of the work of the American literary scholar Bill Brown, who has studied the object-worlds of literary works of another period of profound transformation in material life, the late 19th century in the United States. What is notable about Brown’s work is his refusal to reduce the relationship between things and humans to the problem of

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5 For an introduction to the ten commercial and economic “macrorregions” that existed during the Qing dynasty, see Naquin and Rawski (1987), pp.138-216. For a discussion of the Ming-Qing economy as a formative regional and global force, see Gunder Frank (1998), pp.52-131 and Pomeranz (2000), pp. 69-109. For a groundbreaking text in the study of material culture during the Ming dynasty, see Clunas (1991). For an innovative approach to studying the surfaces of decorative objects and their associated meanings in the Ming and Qing periods, see Hay (2010). For the late Ming as a period defined by a culture of material consumption that was seen as socially destabilizing by the Confucian political elite, see Brook (1998).

commodity fetishism. Working through a time period when the commodity form was not yet completely subsumed into the social fabric, Brown sees in the works of Mark Twain, Frank Norris McTeague, and Sarah Orne Jewett “a kind of possession [of things] that is irreducible to ownership.” Analyzing how objects-in-text invoke the affective registers of mourning, the fantastical, and the un-homely, Brown insists that “the human interaction with the nonhuman world of objects, however mediated by the advance of consumer culture, must be recognized as irreducible to that culture.”

Building off of Brown’s insights, I argue that the objects presented in 1920s hometown writing cannot be understood merely in terms of exchange value. Contrary to the material cultures studied by historians of Chinese consumerism such as Gerth and others, the objects figured in these texts are not grounded in an urban exchange economy. They are confounding to narrators precisely because they are not commodities, with clear ontological labelling as commercial products of the nation (國貨) or its foreign competitors (洋貨). Grounded in social worlds far removed from the centers of mass-industrial production, these objects invoke longer-standing historical imaginaries and spiritual practices. They are thus, in some sense, out of historical place: invoking older models of human community at a time when the mainland was actively being re-ordered according to the logic of a national marketplace in a capitalist world system.

**Anchoring Writing in the Soil: Zhou Zuoren and the Rise of Xiangtu Literature in 1920s China**

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In the literary supplements and cultural magazines of the 1920s, the literary figuration of the village hometown could be found at fairly regular intervals. In his March 1935 preface to volume two of The Great Compendium of New Chinese Literature (中國新文學大系), Lu Xun argued that it was out of the heady mix of May Fourth culture that a new object of representation emerged in the vernacular literature of the age: the world of the hometown or native place (故鄉). Lu Xun described the proliferation of localist writing in the following terms:

Jian Xian’ai described Guizhou, while Pei WenZhong concerned himself with Yuzhou. Whoever in Beijing uses a pen to write what is in his heart, regardless of whether this writer describes himself as objective or subjective, in actuality is writing xiangtu wenxue (鄉土文學). Where Beijing is concerned, these are writers of sojourning-literature. Yet this is not like what Brandes described as immigré literature, for what is sojourning is simply the author himself, not the works the author wrote. As such, we can only see [in these works] a faintly visible homesickness, and it is difficult to use the ambience of an alien land to open readers’ hearts, or dazzle their eyes. Xu Qinwen named his first short story collection hometown, which is to say that he unknowingly ranked himself as an author of xiangtu wenxue. Before he began writing xiangtu fiction, he was already banished from his hometown, life compelling him to go off to strange places.

As Lu Xun’s evocative paragraph suggests, writers of the era filled the literary journals of the time with formally complex narratives regarding their sense of estrangement from village life. The authors of these works did not write from within the linguistic and epistemic structures of the village. Instead, such a literary practice was made possible by a form of geographic displacement that was a central feature of modern experience for the members of the May Fourth generation. Young students left their village hometowns and imbedded themselves in the cosmopolitan cultural

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centers of Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, and (for some) London, Paris, and New York City.\textsuperscript{11} Even for those youth who never left Mainland soil, this was no mere “domestic” form of sojourning, for their presence in these urban centers wired them into translingual networks of print culture which introduced new fields of knowledge to them. It is within this context that we must read Lu Xun’s invocation of displacement as the historical condition of possibility for xiangtu fiction. As he put in describing Xu Qinwen’s fiction, “before he began writing xiangtu fiction he was already banished from his hometown, life compelling him to go off to strange places.”

Like the work of the folklorists who were their contemporaries, vernacular writers sought to grapple with the oral and material dimensions of the village cultures they were physically separated from. Perhaps the most evocative theorist of localist fiction during this time period was Zhou Zuoren, who as we have seen also played an important role in Geyao Zhoukan’s efforts to collect and publish folksongs from across the Mainland. From the May Fourth period onward, Zhou would build a well-known literary self through elegantly constructed prose pieces in which he would reflect on the intricate materialities that defined life in a variety of locales. For Zhou, the writerly self was sensitive to place, in so much as it could not be articulated outside of the material cultures that surrounded it. Yet it was not rooted to any particular place, embodying instead a cosmopolitan wanderlust, both physically (through sojourning between regions and countries) and textually (through acts of reading works from different times and spaces). Zhou’s most famous essay from

\textsuperscript{11} Leo Ou-fan Lee (1973) has described this form of geographic, linguistic, and epistemic displacement as a “common pattern of life experience” (248) for early 20th century intellectuals in China. Coming of age in the first decades of the twentieth century, the route to social and professional advancement that had historically been available to the educated class—service to the state via attainment in the civil service examination—was abolished in 1905. The destruction of one institutional system forced experimentation with new professional and commercial roles, such as public school teacher, university professor, writer for hire, translator, civil servant in the Republican bureaucracy, advertising illustrator, among many others. Such experimentation occurred across linguistic and geographic spaces. All of the writers examined in this study experienced such trajectories. Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Zhou Zuoren, and Guo Moruo all spent numerous years as students and scholars in Japan, before and after the fall of the Qing dynasty. Qu Qiubai and Wu Zuxiang learned Russian and studied Marxism in the Soviet Union. Hu Shi composed his famous call for literary form while a student at Cornell University, while Lin Yutang’s studies took him to Harvard, the Chinese Labor Corps in France, and eventually to the University of Leipzig. Shen Congwen, Xiao Hong, Ai Wu, and Tai Jingnong all left their village hometowns to embark on literary careers that saw them sojourn across China, from Beijing, Shanghai, and Harbin to Hong Kong, Kunming, and Taipei.
the period remains his 1918 *Humane Literature* (人的文学), a work that has often been understood as a stirring articulation of the humanist spirit which animated so much of the literary and cultural output of the time. Zhou was explicit about the fact that his call for a literature based on humanist principles of individual emancipation was a product of a particular understanding of the age in which the new Republic found itself. As Zhou put it in his essay, “if we establish our theory, it shall incorporate only this one viewpoint: the viewpoint of the age.”\(^\text{12}\) This temporal viewpoint was one in which the subject of literature became an abstract universal: the human subject him/herself, constituent of features that all people share and transcendent of any particularistic markers of local culture or historical inheritance. Thus the ethos that the New Literature would embody was, for Zhou, nothing less than the progress of mankind as a conceivable whole, which overcame the concrete particularities of local culture to embrace a cosmopolitan world of shared human principles. As Zhou put it:

Regarding the question of Chinese versus foreign, we should also firmly embrace the viewpoint of our time and age, and not stake out other boundaries. Geographically and historically, there are indeed many differences, but communications have improved and the intellectual atmosphere spreads fast. Mankind can hope to move gradually closer together. The unit is I, the individual, the sum total is all humanity. One should not think of oneself as different from the mass of mankind, or as superior in morality, and draw up borders and spheres, because man is alway related to man and vice-versa.\(^\text{13}\)

One can understand how this vision of a modern subject rooted in a new cosmopolitan culture was incredibly enabling for Zhou and his iconoclastic counterparts. For this is a vision in which questions of the value of indigenous cultural systems are vacated all together, and in a very fundamental sense there is no longer any distinction between what is foreign and what is Chinese. Time itself- the new linear time of national development, spurned on by powerful commitments to the universals of science, democracy, and individual sovereignty- is the cardinal feature that sanctions Zhou’s downplaying of the value of native cultural systems. Indeed, it is almost as if in

\(^{12}\) See Zhou (1918), p.35.

\(^{13}\) Ibid, p. 35.
the face of the power of this new developmental exigency, to even ask the question of identity in indigenous terms- to produce such artificial divisions as what is Chinese versus what is foreign- is an affront to the new (temporal) sense of things. As Zhou bluntly put it, “we can only speak of the times, we cannot distinguish between Chinese and foreign” (我們只能說時代，不能分中外).

Yet by the early 1920s Zhou would complicate this evacuation of local cultures and spaces within his literary project. In March of 1923 Zhou wrote an essay for one of the major papers of the Zhejiang region, the Zhejiang Herald (浙江日報), entitled “Place and Literary Arts” (地方與文藝), in which he would theorize a literary practice in which the human was not a disembodied figure of temporal development, but a being rooted in materially and historically specific spaces. Zhou began by telling his readers that “local conditions and the local people” (風土與住民) of a given area have an intimate set of relations between them. Thus, literatures derived from different places were going to have their own local determinations. Zhou presented as an example of this the different regional variations to be found within the purportedly national literature of France. Zhou pointed out that regional writing from Provence is very different than the literature from the north of France, producing textual heterogeneity within the national body of writing. In a country as vast as China, Zhou argued, how much greater would the local variants in literary representation be.

Zhou went on to single out what he believed to be a cardinal problem facing the New Literature that had been produced since 1917:

In the last couple of year the rising new Literature has steadily developed, and various creations have all had their corresponding successes. Yet we feel this is still insufficient. Why? Because it is too abstract: in upholding the general demand to diligently write according to a predetermined conceptualization (寫出預訂的概念), there is no truthful, forceful expression of individual personality (沒有真實的強烈地表現出自己的個性). The result, of course, is monotonous. Our hope is to release ourselves from these self-imposed shackles, and freely write the individual personality that arises from the soil itself (那從土裡滋長出來的個性).

14 Ibid, p.35.
What was striking here was Zhou’s insistence that it was only by re-integrating literature back into a space of embodied experience - the local soil (⼟土) from which the writerly self emerges (滋长出来的個性) - that the vivid particularity of both authorial voice and literary experience could be maintained. As he put it elsewhere in the essay:

Men today are too fond of living in the air, of living on beautiful and empty theories, just as in the past they lived on the classical prose of orthodox Confucianism. This is extremely regrettable. What is needed is to throw oneself down onto the soil (須得跳到地面上來), to breathe the soil and let the flavor of the mud seep through one’s pulse, and to express this in written language (表現在文字上). This, finally, is true thought and art. This is not merely a “xiangtu art” that describes regional life (這不限於描寫地方生活的 “鄉土藝術”), in fact all of literary art is like this.17

If in 1918 Zhou had attempted to produce a vision of literature rooted in the abstractions of developmental time, here Zhou overturned such a vision by seeking to anchor literature in the concrete density of local space. The intimate relationship writing had to have to locality was not, for Zhou, the production of a sub-genre of fictional letters that could be termed “xiangtu art.” For Zhou, all literature should be thought of along these lines, whether a text was describing rural localities, regional towns, or bustling cosmopolitan centers. Simply put, writing that was worthy of the name literature had to express “the impressions of local conditions (風土的影響)”: the distinct forms of human experience nurtured by particular social and ecological spaces.

As he staged the concepts here, 個性 (gexing individualism) in literature emerged precisely from 風土 (fengtu local conditions). In conjunction with this semiotic combination, Zhou would employ a critical third term to define what literature along localist lines strove to capture: flavor (quwei 趣味). This term emerged when Zhou tried to defend his views from the charge that to advocate localist writing amounted to nothing more than a kind of cultural nativism that privileged nationalist values over cosmopolitan ones. Zhou unceremoniously declared that “if there are people

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17 See Ibid, p.103.
who suspect that what I am advocating approximates traditionalism, or that term which Chinese people love to say “national essentialism” (國粹主義), I answer: absolutely not.”

For literature to engage in the intimate representation of the local was not, for Zhou, to ask it to adopt a nativist program, or for it to betray New Literature’s stated goal of smashing Confucian orthodoxy. Rather, literature’s relationship to locality would force a complete rethinking of the entire problematic of “national essence” all together:

I believe the so-called National Essence can be divided into two parts. The living part that mixes within our blood and veins—these are the inheritances of flavor (趣味的遺傳). There is no way we can abolish these elements, and they of course will be expressed in our language and behavior, so that there is no need to wait for people to preserve them. The dead parts are those past moral customs (道德習俗) that do not fit into the present. So to advocate a National Essence is in fact to speak empty and useless talk, possessing not an element of value.

Zhou’s biologically-tinged language here opened itself up to conceptual uncertainty. How exactly did the “flavor” of the past dwell within the body (“within our blood and veins”)? How could this embodied dwelling be represented textually? In the many localist essays Zhou would write over the course of his life, he would explore this notion of “flavor” time and again. Take, for example, “Records of the Auspicious Qing Dynasty” (清嘉錄), Zhou’s 1934 analysis of a series of textual ruminations in the biji (笔记) style compiled between roughly 1818 and 1822 by Gu Lu 顧祿, a...

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18 Ibid, p.103.
19 Ibid, p.103.
20 Zhou’s essays that touched on local cultures and inherited sensibilities can be divided into three very loosely defined groups. First, he produced essays such as his 1934 “Records of the Worthy Qing” (清嘉錄), in which he examined old prose and poetry from the Ming and Qing dynasties which recorded aspects of life in his native Zhejiang province. Zhou had an unending fascination for such old books, which for him offered a vital window into the quotidian practices of local life from the past, producing a vital textual legacy that connected modern readers to historical life-worlds they were far removed from. Second, Zhou produced at various point in his life essays such as 1924’s “Wild Herbs from my Hometown” (故鄉的野菜), in which he would detail the unique practices of communal life that he still remembered from his own youth in Zhejiang. As late as 1963, a culturally introverted Zhou, living under a CCP regime that had denounced him as a political traitor for the work he did for the Japanese colonial government in the early 1940s, would publish essays such as “Remembering Old Country Waterways” (水鄉懷舊), in which he would nostalgically recall the pre-industrial transportive networks of Shaoxing as a crucial marker of social life in the region. Third, Zhou produced essays such as “Missing Tokyo” (懷東京 1936), in which he would articulate his profound love for the details of quotidian life in places that were far removed from his native-place all together.
Zhejiang literati who lived in the early 19th century. Gu Lu’s most famous work was The Auspicious Qing (清嘉), which provided a vivid sense of the seasonal customs and geographical particularities of the Wu (吳) region, the historic name for the area comprising southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang. “The Auspicious Qing” depicted the social rituals to be found in the Wu region over the course of twelve months of the year. The work was divided into twelve chapters, each one representing one month of regional detail. All together, the work featured 242 different descriptions of regional life, complete with citations from oral and textual sources from the past.

In Zhou’s understanding of Gu’s work, the fengtu of Zhejiang emerged from a variety of elements: physical landscape (jingwu 景物), climate (wuhou 物候), geography (dili 地理), as well as the cosmological understandings that defined the region (its tianwen 天文). Fengtu also included the social practices that marked the region, whose meanings took on site-specific dimensions that textuality could strive to express, capturing the particular sense of flavor (quwei) of the place. Zhou found particularly fascinating in “The Auspicious Qing” the quotidian practices surrounding Plum-Rain (meiyu 梅雨), the drizzling rainy season that occurred every year in the region. Zhou described how Zhejiang people would capture rainwater in pots during this time period and boil it for use in tea-steeping. The people did this, Zhou explained, because they felt that rain water from the sky was sweeter than any other kind of water they could find in the ground. As such, the tea made from the sky became a kind of local delicacy. Reading of such practices in “The Auspicious Qing” encouraged Zhou to remember the “roads of great stones” and “round-hold bridges” of the Zhejiang of his youth, a built environment he claimed “all had to do with [the] rain” that dominated the climate there. While “it rained a lot in the south,” Zhou claimed, “we seemingly never thought

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21 Relatively little is known about the life of Gu Lu. He is considered to have lived from the late Qianlong period (approx. 1794) to no later then the end of the Daoguang reign (1850). There have been numerous attempts at reading historical and literary sources of the time to build some sense of his personal biography. For an overview of such attempts, see Inabata (2006).

22 See Zhou (2009), volume 6, p. 249.
it to be a difficulty (南方多雨，但我們似乎不大以為苦).”  

At the very least, you could channel the rain off of the tiled roofs of local homes and direct it into pots, providing the base for tremendous tea. The houses in Beijing, Zhou admonished, have different systems of tile, so that even when it does rain you can’t capture the water and turn it into tea. There was thus no plum rain in the North of China.

In the plum-water’s combination of material practice (the capturing of rain for tea), built human environment (the tiles of the roofs, the system of bamboo channels for capturing rain into buckets), ecological regularity (the rainy seasons of the south of China), and embodied sensation (the sweet taste of rain on the mouth), it evocatively captured the complex matrix of elements that went into Zhou’s understanding of the flavor (quwei) of a given place. It was precisely this embodied sensibility that, for Zhou, literature should strive to express if it was to adequately capture local emplacement.

Zhou was clear, however, that not all elements of the flavor of a region should be inherited by modern people. As Zhou stressed in his 1923 article, there were elements of the past that represented “the dead parts [of our national essence]... those past morals and customs that do not fit into the present.” Yet who had the authority to declare which elements conformed to the demands of the modern moment, and upon what basis was such a determination to be made? As we shall see, for the regional writers of the 1920s, writing the fengtu of their home regions was a process of grappling with practices that were materially specific but decidedly non-secular, which often clashed with their commitments to secular nationalism and scientific rationality.

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23 Ibid, p.249.

24 Noted Zhou Zuoren biographer Susan Daruvala has echoed the importance the concepts fengtu and quwei played in Zhou’s understanding of literary aesthetics as an expression of localist difference. Daruvala’s work has also illuminated another critical category Zhou turned to in his understanding of literary expression: the problem of the “genuine color” (本⾊色 bense) of a work, which Zhou linked to the expression of a kind of Daoist ineffability to be found in the realm of the everyday. All such aesthetic categories were part and parcel of Zhou’s rejection of political utilitarianism in literary production. According to Daruvala, “Zhou’s usage of quwei and bense...[was] crucial to his attempt to distance literature from politics, which meant, in effect, from the domain of the nation-state, either as primordial imagined community or as political imperative”(114). For a book-length treatment of Zhou’s aesthetics, see Daruvala (2000).
Interestingly, while Zhou was developing his own ideas regarding how writing could capture the embodied flavors of local life, he was also fascinated by villages as potential sites for the construction of new, egalitarian communities in China. From early 1919 onward, Zhou would begin introducing to Chinese readers details regarding the New Community Movement (新村運動) that was taking place in Japan during this time, headed by the novelist, poet, and philosopher Saneatsu Mushanokoji (武者小路実篤, 1885-1976), whom Zhou had been in touch with by mail as early as 1911.\(^{25}\) In 1918 Saneatsu had put his theories regarding associational anarchism into practice by founding a model New Village Community in the mountainous Miyazaku region of Kyushu. Zhou tracked the building of the experimental commune in the movement’s official journal, entitled *New Village Community* (新村). He was so taken by the experiment that in July of 1919 he himself went to visit Japan to see for himself the new form of collective life being built in Miyazaku.

In April of 1919 Zhou published in New Youth “Japan’s New Community” (日本的新村), the first of many articles he would write over the next two years detailing the philosophical ideas and operational principles of the movement. In addition to his articles, Zhou would lecture on the principles of the movement at various colleges and literary societies in and around Beijing. By February of 1920 Zhou became the founder and head of the New Village movement’s Beijing branch (新村北京支部), an institutional title that only further confirmed that he was the movement’s chief philosophical proponent in China. Zhou’s advocacy was so strong that it was said to have created a “New Community Fever” (新村热) amongst May Fourth youth. Indeed, it was even reported that a young Mao Zedong, who at the time was informally attending classes at Beijing University, called on Zhou at his Beijing home to discuss the principles of the movement.

Zhou’s writings on the New Community Movement made use of the cosmopolitan liberalism that he had employed in his “Humane Literature” article a year prior. Referencing the

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25 For more on Zhou’s relationship to the New Community Movement in Japan during this time period, and the anarchist ideas that motivated New Community discourse and practice in China, see Zhao Hong (2014), pp. 12-78.
ideas of Coleridge, Tolstoy, Bacon, and Saneatsu, Zhou presented the movement as a peaceful way to achieve both the progressive betterment of society as a whole while nurturing the individual sovereignty over every single individual. The elimination of material inequality between humans could not be achieved by eliminating the creative and intellectual differences amongst them. Thus, Zhou explained, the “New Village’s ideal human life is a world of great unities amidst small differences (大同小异的世界). Material life is equal, while spiritual life is free.”

Despite the ambitious vision Zhou had for the New Village movement, his theorizing of its potential ran into the same challenge that his essay on “Humane Literature” had: while his vision of a progressive mankind allowed Zhou to castigate the stultifying effects of native cultural systems, the question of what to do with those systems loomed as an unresolved problem. In July of 1920, in the midst of the New Village craze, Zhou published an article entitled “Villages and Daoist Thought” (鄉村與道教思想). The essay is notable as one of the few instances in which Zhou moved beyond a philosophical discussion of the New Village concept and actually discussed social life as he saw it in China’s village societies. In doing so, he confronted the same epistemic gap that May Fourth hometown writers would in their prose fiction: the gulf that separated the cosmopolitan intellectual and the non-secular villager.

Zhou bluntly began the essay with the claim that “the greatest obstacle to reforming villages is the old-thought (旧思想) that village people (鄉人們) possess. The principle force behind the old-thought is Daoism.” Zhou would argue that, contrary to the understanding of many intellectuals in the country, it was Daoism rather than Confucianism that defined the way village

26 This is from the article “xin cun de lixiang yu shijia” 新村的理想与实际 (The Realities and Ideals of the New Village), first printed on June 23-24, 1920 in the Chenbao (晨報), reprinted in Zhou (2009), volume 2, pp. 237-243. The quote is from P.240.

27 The article was first published in the journal New Life (新生活)第39期, 1927年7月18日. Reprinted in Zhou (2009), volume 2, pp. 244-246.

28 See Ibid, p. 244.
people imagined life, death, and their place within their social order. Zhou claimed that the ontology of rural people was defined by an interest in the workings of fate (命), a concern over one’s own auspiciousness (運氣), and the omens (預言) that could be read in the passing of stars and the workings of Daoist immortals. Zhou pointed out that while families were often failures when it came to living according to Confucian principles, rural parents still supported their children no matter how unfilial they became. They did so not out of commitment to abstract Confucian ideals, but to ensure that when they died they would have someone to burn paper money for them. Zhou argued that, for rural people, death amounted to a spiritual journey across worlds, one that could only be secured by the proper execution of votive duties. As Zhou put it, “the question of village descent is completely wrapped up in the matter of life after death; it has absolutely nothing to do with grand [Confucian] principles regarding kinship and blood-lineage (族姓血统).”

The seeping of Daoism into the life-world of the village had, Zhou argued, “nightmarish consequences” for village society, resulting in such social ills as “resistance to missionaries, the worshipping of false gods, the burning of schools of Western learning, resistance to vaccination and social surveys, inter-village skirmishes, and [an interest in] pills of immortality, legendary venomous insects, and charms and amulets to cure diseases.” Worst of all was the debilitating fatalism which Daoism imbued in rural people, which ensured they existed in a pre-national state of ignorance:

Given that they [rural people] believe that the five pearl-string stars are omens of peace, and that the violet star has already descended to the world, if you try to tell them about democracy, about the government’s public responsibility towards its people, how do you expect them to understand? This is just like the way they believe that the fortunes of capitalists are all bestowed by the god of wealth, while their own poverty is because their fate (命) is lacking in fortune (缺金)...The people’s belief in fate allows them to live in a natural, peaceful way, they certainly won’t cause any disorder, nor will they progress in any way. The “ruling society” can rest on their pillows without worry. Yet

29 Ibid, p.245.
30 Ibid, p.245.
for those people who actually want to change society partially or totally, all of their efforts will be futile, they simply will have no success.\footnote{Ibid, pp. 245-246.}

What “Villages and Daoist Thought” demonstrated was that when it came to the metaphysical belief-systems of the village other, Zhou’s sensitive respect for localist particularity ran aground. Regarding rural people, with their interests in falling stars and spiritual omens, there could be only one path forward: Zhou proposed that Daoism “be crushed by scientific thought and, in the end, eliminated all-together.”\footnote{Ibid, p.246.} The contradiction in Zhou’s own literary project was clear: how could he balance the subtle appreciation of the embodied flavors of local life (fēngtu) with his desire to see villages transformed into modern communities based on secular rationalism? As we shall see, Zhou Zuoren was hardly alone in finding it difficult to balance his interest in the inherited cultures of regional life with his commitment to a modernizing project of secular development. This tension would imprint itself on both the form and content of some of the era’s most important works of regional fiction.

**Joss Sticks, Candles, and the Temple Menkan: Village Materials in the Hometown Fiction of Xu Qinwen and Lu Xun**

The first short story that Lu Xun’s literary pupil and fellow Shaoxing provincial Xu Qinwen ever published, his 1923 “This Time Leaving my Hometown” (這一次的離故鄉), dramatizes the loss of access that a May Fourth youth has to the system of signification of his aged mother in her old village home. It is his fractured understanding of such a system that produces the central point of tension around which the narrative operates:

“To gain the world outside cannot equal to simply being home” (出門权利，不入家里).

“The gold and silver nests of others are no better than your own straw one.” (人家的金窠銀窠，不如自家的草窠).

My mother would often say things like this. In the past her father would go to Beijing twice every year. At that time there were no cars, and to travel by steamship was still quite dangerous.
Transport was simply not as safe as it is now. When you saw people you had to greet them with hands clasped together, and when you toasted people you had to make a circle with your arms. Social manners were not as natural as they are today. When I was very young, on stormy evenings, when lightning criss-crossed the sky, my siblings and I would all get together in one room to watch the storm. During these times my mother would say: “You are truly lucky, your parents are together. When I was small if your grandfather was out on the road and we had this kind of weather, it didn’t matter if it was the middle of the night, your grandmother had to get up and pray towards the heavens (朝天祝禱). I would help her prepare the joss sticks and candles (我帮她料理香烛). This was summertime, her two legs would even tremble!”

The grandmother’s story is dotted with the material markers of a world that is almost lost to the narrator: when being “out on the road” (在路上) meant the movement of the human body without the aid of industrialized technologies like the steamship or railroad, relying completely for travel on the pulled barge, the horse, or the movement of one’s body. The sensibilities of this world can only be relayed to the narrator via the memories of his own mother, which are stirred up by the presence of an ecological event: the lashing rainstorm. As it appears in the text, then, this world is subject to a double form of mediation: the grandmother’s practices are reconstructed in the memories of the mother, which themselves are presented to us through the narrator’s words. As such, the meanings surrounding these practices are only partially available to the reader, who must see them through the narrator’s doubly-removed perspective.

The grandmother’s ability to communicate with spiritual realms beyond her own, her act of propitiation “towards the heavens” (朝天), cannot be performed without key objects: joss sticks and candles. The storm presents a moment of urgency- her husband might be out on the road exposed to the elements- but her response to it cannot be consummated without these votive items. The narrator does not try to analyze what the material details of the ritual means, nor does he give us a sense of the language the grandmother uses in her “prayer” (祝禱) to the heavens. He says nothing

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33 Page numbers for citations of “This Time Leaving My Hometown” are given from the 1926 anthology in which Xu’s short story appears. See Xu (1926), pp. 1-18.
about these practices other than to persuade his mother of their anachronistic nature. When faced with his mother’s account the narrator tells her: “Things aren’t like that now.”

“This Time Leaving My Hometown” thus writes the temporal transition from the mid-19th century (the grandmother’s time) to the 1920s (the narrator’s time) as one that was marked, to borrow the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, by “a functional change in sign-systems,” a move away from the joss stick, candles, and heavenly prostrations of the grandmother to the “natural” social manners, industrialized transportive mechanisms, and urban print culture of the narrator, who is a schoolteacher in Beijing trying to eek out a living for himself as a harbinger of the New Culture. Yet, as Spivak reminds us, “a functional change in a sign-system is a violent event,” one that is brought on by social or political crisis. Violence is a powerful concern in Xu’s text, operating in at least two ways. There is the violence of the modern Republic which the narrator-as-schoolteacher must navigate, a Republic whose militarism, political disunity, and economic inequality are lived by him as daily experiences. Yet there is also the semiotic displacement that the narrator’s removal from village life has engendered: the narrator’s inability to partake in the prayer ritual of his grandmother, a displacement which takes the form of a dismissal (“Things aren’t like that now.”).

The hometown narratives of the 1920s would dramatize this loss of access to the life-world of the hometown time and again, its articulation invariably bound up with the physical objects of village life. For example, Lu Xun’s own 1924 “New Year’s Sacrifice” (祝福) dramatizes the

34 Ibid, p.1
36 Ibid, p. 197.
37 The text provides a powerful articulation of the violence of the modern moment that the narrator must negotiate, and the apathy and despair it can generate in the engaged individual, when he contrasts his current impoverished state as a schoolteacher to the grand ideas of cultural change and political reform that motivated him in his school days: During the summer holidays my cousin told me the following: “With my own hands I have wielded a pen that has sentenced over three thousand bandits and robbers to death, if you want to eat in this society there really is no other way!” I saw a terrible unhappiness on his face while he spoke, so I tried to comfort him: “What’s there to get stressed about, as long as you don’t go to see the executions for yourself you’ll be fine. When I see a dog get beat by a human I feel a profound sense of sympathy, yet when I see in the newspaper that some war somewhere has killed tens of thousands, I have absolutely no reaction. In fact, you can take the thousand you just claimed and replace that with tens or hundreds of thousands and I would feel it’s all the same.” See Xu (1926), p.15, for more.
inability of an intellectual to understand the spiritual concerns and material practices of Sister Xianglin, a twice-widowed woman who used to work as a domestic in his family’s home.\textsuperscript{38}

Returning to his hometown, the narrator chances upon the ragged looking Sister Xianglin as he walks near the town’s river bank. He is immediately shocked at the change in her physical appearance since he saw her last: her grey hair has become completely white, her face gaunt and weathered, a numbed look of resignation in her eyes. Sister Xianglin recognizes the narrator immediately, identifying him as a privileged youth who had left the village and gone away to become educated. As she puts it, “So, you’ve come back...[you’re] just the man I’ve been lookin’ for. You know how to read books. You’ve been out there in the world and must’ve seen a thing or two.”\textsuperscript{39} Placing the narrator in the position of someone who is supposed to know, someone who can enlighten, she asks him three questions: Is there a soul after a body dies? Is there a hell? Are dead family members going to meet again at some point?

The narrator is immediately taken back by these questions, uncertain as to how to respond to them. His problem is not one of deciding his own opinion regarding the existence of souls- he states to the reader that he believes they are superstitious nonsense. The problem is how to determine what relationship Sister Xianglin has to these concepts, and how any answer he might provide her will effect her actions in relation to them. A chasm of communication is opened up, on the other side of which lies Sister Xianglin’s own spiritual world. Her desire to know whether there are souls after a person dies relates directly to the question of how much suffering she will have to endure upon her death, suffering which she has tried to mitigate through a crucial act: temple donation. Earlier in the story another temporary servant at the wealthy household she worked at, Mother Liu, criticized Sister Xianglin for the immorality of her second marriage. A pious Buddhist, Mother Liu admonished Sister Xianglin for accepting the sexual advances of her second husband:

\textsuperscript{38} The short story was first published in Dongfang Zazhi 東方雑誌 (Eastern Miscellany) 21: 6, March 25, 1924, pp. 97-108. Cited page numbers are from the original journal print.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 98.
Without even gettin’ to spend two years with that second man, you’ve ended up committin’ a big sin. Just think, later on when you die and go to the underworld, the ghosts of those two men are gonna fight over you. Which one will you give yourself to then? Yama, Great King of the Underworld, will have only one choice- saw you in half and give each of ‘em his piece...I think you’ve gotta find some way of guardin’ against that as soon as you can. Why not go to the village temple and donate money for a doorsill (你到土地庙里去捐一条门槛). Then that doorsill will be your body. Thousands’ll step on it and tens of thousands’ll walk over it. That way you’ll make up for all of your sins and you wont have to suffer after you die.”

In performing the temple donation the doorsill (menkan 門槛) is charged with the task of standing in for Sister Xianglin’s body, to be trampled on again and again as a sign of her willingness to suffer in this life so as to avoid suffering in the next. Donating the menkan becomes the goal of Sister Xianglin’s labor, something that first must be acquired through the wages she accumulates as a household servant. Once acquired it must go through two other steps before it can operate- first it must be donated to the votive space of the temple, and then it must be trampled on by the villagers who worship there. Only then can it have its effect- as a material stand in for her body, a site of corporeal punishment with profound spiritual implications.

The object itself signifies a non-secular way of being in the world, in which objects used in this world (the daily tramping) have effects on one’s spiritual journey (in this case, the suffering in hell that Sister Xianglin seeks to avoid). As object-in-practice, the menkan contains an entire system of spiritual reference, one whose logic is imminently clear to Sister Xianglin, if not for the narrator who fails at communicating with her. Indeed, the narrator is finally forced to concede that he cannot answer Sister Xianglin’s questions regarding the afterlife, that his vaunted project of Enlightenment has nothing to offer her in such domains: “at this point I began to see that, for all the good it did me, I might just as well have remained uneducated, for despite all of my stalling, despite all my brainwracking, I had been unable to stand up to three questions posed by this simple woman.” The narrator can do nothing but run away from Sister Xianglin, unable to speak her spiritual language.

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41 Ibid, p.98.
Coal Deposits as Spiritual Traps: The Hanging Woman in Modern Media Forms

While the short stories of Xu Qinwen and Lu Xun explored the spiritual implications of minjian objects, the very publication of these fictional texts involved the use of some of the most sophisticated material technologies available in China at the time. Like the upsurge in regional writing in late 19th century America examined by Bill Brown, whose “scenes of operation” were the literary journals of Boston and New York, these texts first appeared in the urban journals of Beijing and Shanghai. For example, “This Time Leaving My Hometown” was first published in the Beijing-based Chenbao Fukan (晨報副刊, 第22期) on January 26 1923. It was reissued as part of Xu Qinwen’s first short-story anthology, entitled Hometown (故鄉), published in April 1926 as part of the Wuhe Book Series (烏合叢書). Other books in the series included Lu Xun’s two short story anthologies, Crying Out (吶喊) and Wondering Where to Turn (徬徨), as well as short story collections by Chang Hong (長虹, pen name of Gao Changhong 1898-1954) and Xiang Peiliang (向培良,1905-1959). Lu Xun himself edited the anthologies of Xu, Chang, and Xiang, helping to bring these young writers to the attention of urban readers in Beijing.\(^\text{42}\) The cover of Xu’s 1926 anthology (figure 2.1) featured a female figure drawn in boldly curved lines, wearing a loose-fitting red gown and holding a sword in her hand. Staring directly at the viewer, she stands in mid-performance.

\(^{42}\) Xu grew up in Shaoxing, and the provincial connection helped him develop a personal relationship with Lu Xun as he attended the famed writer’s lectures as a student at Beijing University. For more on the relationship between Lu Xun and Xu Qinwen, see the many essays found in Xu (2006).
The cover was designed by fellow Shaoxing provincial Tao Yuanqing 陶元庆 (1893-1929), a young artist who in the early 1920s lived in Beijing with Xu at the Shaoxing Provincial Hostel (紹興會館). Through Xu’s recommendation, Tao began designing bold, impressionistic book covers for Lu Xun’s works, earning the latter’s patronage throughout the decade. The cover eschewed two different visual vocabularies: the mountains and rivers (山水) aesthetic so common to the imperial tradition of landscape representation, as well as visions of the gendered urban subject who used commodities to fashion a cosmopolitan and refined modern self. Instead, the cover of

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43 For more on Tao’s artistic relationship with Lu Xun, see Xu (2007), pp. 147-170. For more on Lu Xun’s commitment to innovative cover art for the literary anthologies he published, edited, or wrote in the 1920s and 30s, see Zhang (2011).

44 Other covers that Tao designed for Lu Xun included the volumes Wondering Where to Turn (彷徨), Picking Blossoms at Dawn (朝花夕拾), Graves (坟), Collected Zhuangqi From the Tang and Song (唐宋传奇集), and his translation of the Japanese literary critic Kuriyagawa Haksuon (1880-1923)’s work Symbols of Dejection (苦闷的象征). For more, see Xu (2006), p.149.

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hometown presented an impressionistic body in full motion, its bold red dress offset by the dark tangle of black hair sweeping across the shoulders, a being that not only upset simple boundaries between male and female, but also between the human and the ghostly. The cover was in fact a reprint of an earlier water-color work that Tao had made entitled *The Red Gown* (大红袍).

According to Xu, the image was inspired by Tao’s fascination with a Shaoxing opera entitled *The Hanging Woman* (女吊) and was meant to express the “beautiful sense of terror” the opera invoked in its viewers.\(^45\)

In 1936, in the last year of his life, Lu Xun would write an essay entitled “The Hanging Woman” (女吊), in which he would provide his own reflections on the operatic figure that had so fascinated Tao and Xu. While by this time in his life Lu Xun had embraced the proletarian literature movement, advocating since the late 1920s for literary works as vehicles for the production of revolutionary imaginaries, in his own essay writing he continued to explore the non-secular dimensions of Shaoxing life. Like the essays found in his 1926 *Picking Blossoms at Dawn* (朝花夕拾), “The Hanging Woman” explored the “rites” (儀式) that were central to minjian life in his hometown, many of which blurred the boundaries between the human and the spiritual. The forum for such a blurring is the village opera, which is staged and performed for the benefit of spirits themselves. As Lu Xun put it, “all plays always carry with them a sense of sociability (社會性) about them. They are offered to spirit tablets, who are the main audience for the opera...of course one invites spirits, ghosts, and especially ghosts who have been wronged.”\(^46\)

What followed was a detailed discussion of just how spirits are summoned on stage, which involved a complex set of objects in performative use. Take, for example, Lu Xun’s description of his own childhood participation in these performances:


During the fall of the Ming, there were many Zhejiang People who rose up in revolt and were killed. During the Qing dynasty they were called traitors. This is the way we called to their courageous souls: at dusk ten or so horses stood at the base of the stage; one of the actors was dressed as the King of Souls (鬼王), his blue face speckled with scales, his hand gripping a pitchfork. There had to also be roughly ten Ghost Soldiers (鬼卒), regular kids could volunteer to be them. When I was ten or so I served as one of those courageous ghosts, climbing the stage and announcing my desire to volunteer. They daubed a bit of color onto my face and handed me a pitchfork. When ten kids were finally assembled we mounted the horses, riding swiftly towards an open field in which there were many nameless, solitary graves. We made three turns, got off our horses and yelled out loudly, slamming our pitchforks on top of the graves. Picking up our pitchforks we rode back to the front of the stage. We yelled together in one loud voice, hurling our pitchforks onto the stage planks. Our task was thus considered complete. We washed our face and got off the stage, returning back home. However, if our parents found out [that we had participated in the ritual] we would have unavoidably been beaten by the bamboo switch...it was to punish us for bringing along ghostly vapors (一以罰其帶著鬼気), as well as to congratulate us for not falling to our deaths. I was lucky for I was never found out- maybe I had the protection of an evil spirit on me.

The rite’s vivid material details- the blue speckled face of the King of Souls, the pitchforks in the hands of the children, the furious shouts at the gravesite- testify to the intense spectacle produced by these celebrations. While the performance encodes within it a sense of historical memory- invoking Zhejiang’s role as one of the final bastions of Ming opposition to the invading Manchu forces- it also insists that through such actions the spirits of fallen soldiers can be communicated with, that this opera is for and about them. As Lu Xun put it, the rite was to encourage “various lonely souls and wandering ghosts (種種孤魂歷鬼)…to follow the ghost king and his soldiers” to the stage area so they could watch the ensuing performances. What emerges is a scene in which the boundaries between performer and audience, child and spirit, summoner and summoned, are evocatively blurred. As Lu Xun describe sit, “as the plays were performed one by one, ghosts intermixed within human affairs: burned ghosts, drowned ghosts, incinerated ghosts, ghosts injured by tigers, all of these would be played by children [in the village].”

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48 Ibid, p.1255.
49 Ibid, p. 1255.
While the performances could be seen as a valiant salute to the “courageous souls” of the Ming loyalists, it could also be understood as a dangerous meddling with spiritual forces beyond human control. The most powerful testament to the pathos and danger of communicating with spirits is the “hung woman” (女吊), the incarnation of a wronged soul who appears on stage at the culmination of the evening’s performances. Lu Xun calls her “a soul more beautiful and forceful than all the others,” one who brims with a “sense of revenge.”

When the hung woman appears on stage, it is as a spectral sight of awesome power:

First there are the mournful sounds of the Laba. In a moment the curtain opens and she appears wearing a large red garment and a black outer coat, with long and protruding hair, two paper ingots hanging from her neck. She lowers her face and hands, making a slow circle across the entire stage. Those who understand [the play] say: she makes a “heart” character [with her movements on the stage]. Why does she have to walk in the shape of a heart? I do not know...she raises her two shoulders up, looks around in four directions, listens, and finally emits a voice that is part dread, part happiness, part fear, singing out: “I was originally a daughter of the Yang family, oh heaven what pain!”

Lu Xun makes it clear that, in Shaoxing, the hung woman’s “sense of revenge” can exceed far beyond the physical space of the stage itself. For she will sometimes turn to living women in the village in order to “find a replacement” (討替代)- i.e. to lure a woman into killing herself so that she can stand in her place. The potential danger the hung woman represents have concrete effects on social practices in the region. As Lu Xun describes it:

When food is roasted in Shaoxing, most of the time steel cooking pots are used, and what is burnt is either firewood or grass. Once the coal deposits become too thick the fire will lose its power, and as such one will often see coal deposits scrapped onto the crowd. However, they must be sprinkled [on the ground] when deposited. There is not a single village woman who is willing to save some energy and tip the cooking pot on to the ground so that the coal will fall to the ground in one black circle. This is because the hung spirit uses a circular trap made of smelted coal. To sprinkle the coal deposits in a haphazard manner is a form of passive resistance against being made “into a replacement.”

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51 Ibid, p.1255-56.
52 Ibid, p. 1256.
Here something as immediate as the daily cooking pot, the site of preparation for all meals, can have profound spiritual implications, for if cleaned improperly its deposits can be made into an object of spiritual entrapment, and perhaps even prompt the hung woman to emerge in search of her replacement.

Lu Xun’s elliptical essay foregrounds its narrator’s sense of both fascination with and distance from a material world that is so thoroughly intertwined with spiritual beings.\(^{53}\) When describing the women of the village who respect and fear the hung woman, Lu Xun wryly tells his readers: “Naturally, to kill oneself is shameful behavior, and the vengeance of souls is even less compatible with science. But these are foolish women, they cannot even read characters, so I ask all of the ‘forward marching’ writers and ‘courageous’ comrades to not be terribly angry. I’m afraid you’ll all be turned into mute birds” (我真怕你們要變呆鳥). One recalls the narrator in “New Year’s Sacrifice” who was rendered mute in the face of Sister Xianglin’s spiritual questions. Lu Xun’s 1924 short story and his 1936 essay stand as testaments to the fact that, regardless of how thoroughly the famed author advocated publicly for a proletarian literary aesthetic, his own essay writing continued to be marked by the spiritual intensities of the Shaoxing of his youth. He presented the minjian of Shaoxing not as Ah-Q like figures of selfishness and lethargy, but as beings whose lives were marked by specific metaphysical concerns, seen in everything from their vivid operas to the way they dumped the coal deposits from their cooking pots.

Returning to the cover of Xu Qinwen’s short story collection, one cannot but remark on the technological challenge presented by capturing the material intensities of Shaoxing performance arts in the form of a book-cover. According to Xu, the cover was made at the printing house of the Beijing government’s Ministry of Finance (财政部), for they possessed the most skilled printers in

\(^{53}\) For example, when discussing a battle on stage between two different ghosts, he claims that he does not understand why they generate one another’s presence: “I don’t understand this, I asked the old people, they told me they also did not know.” In these moments of authorial uncertainty we sense the gap between Lu Xun as intellectual committed to national secular enlightenment and the xiangtu culture whose sounds, objects, and colors so clearly fascinated him. See Ibid, p. 1257.
the city. The image’s combination of three different colors at different levels of intensity was a challenge for the treasury’s lithographic printing plates, which had to process the cover three times to achieve the desired color scheme: the bright red dress of the Hanging Woman interlaced with blue and yellow pastels, which invoked the vibrant colors of the costumes found on stage. The cover was thus the product of the most sophisticated ink printing techniques then available to publishers in Beijing, employed to invoke the sensorial power of village spirits. Its very materiality reinforced the irony that marked xiangtu writing in the new republic: tales of the loss of access to one material idiom (village objects and their spiritual meanings) could be produced only via the use of the most modern of media technologies. Old objects appeared in new modes of print, the dissonance between form and content itself echoing to the theme of epistemic displacement these writings explored.

**Carrying Ancestors on Your Back: Spirit-Objects in the Hometown Writing of Yu Dafu**

Like Xu Qinwen and Lu Xun, the Zhejiang native Yu Dafu also dwelled on the epistemic dissonances that marked the journey from the modern metropolis back to the village home. Yu Dafu’s 1929 “In Cold Wind” (在寒風裡), first published in the fourth volume of the journal *Mass Literature* (大眾文藝), begins with the scriptural invocation of regional speech. The story presents a letter from Chang Sheng, the long-standing domestic servant of the narrator’s family. The narrator is a wandering writer-intellectual who has sworn off the responsibilities of lineage life in pursuit of a writing career in Shanghai, leaving his wife (from an arranged marriage) and children behind in the village. Chang Sheng has spoken to a local “fortune teller” (測字先生) who has written his words down in scriptural form, which he has sent on to the narrator in a letter. Using regional

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54 Lithographic printing was a stone, ink, and water based printing method first created in 1796 in Germany by the actor Alois Senefelder (1771-1834), who used it to print theatrical works. First introduced to China in the mid-19th century by missionaries, it did not become a prominent mode of printing until the late-Qing and early Republican period. For more on the history of lithographic printing and the development of modern print capitalism in China, see Brokaw and Reed (2010) and Reed (2004), particularly pp. 107-146.

terminology such as yinshou (陰壽), a term local to the Zhejiang region denoting the anniversary of the death of a family elder, Chang Sheng explains to the narrator that the other members of his lineage are dividing up the last remaining vestiges of ancestral lands. Chang Sheng speaks in a halting rhythm:

Old Master- your Mother- is aging, on the seventh month of this year, on the yinshou (陰壽) for the 70th anniversary of your departed father, they want to write up a sheet that divides the property between all of your brothers. The invitations have already been sent out, your older uncle, second uncle, your grandfather from Chen family bridge, the master from Fan family village, old A-Si, they are all helping various family members, they are all scheming to support those they are close to. Your fourth brother is also drinking wine every day with relatives, sending gifts, calling on people...I know you are not willing to participate in these matters, but Fifth Sister and her children, what are they going to have to eat in the future? She has no family on her mother’s side, and the leaders of the various families within our clan are not happy with you...regardless of whatever else, after you receive this letter you must come back immediately to participate in the yinshou that will take place on the twelve day of the seventh month.56

The narrator’s own language, a looping baihua that often uses multiple adjectival clauses to modify single nouns, ranging from internal sensorial impressions to external descriptions in the span of single sentence, differs greatly from Chang Sheng’s clipped patois. Like the narrators in Lu Xun and Xu Qinwen’s texts, there exists a linguistic gulf between the narrator and his village other, one thrown into relief by the presence of Chang Sheng’s voice in epistolary form:

The letter from the pitiable, loyal Chang Sheng seemed to contain in itself a living, courageous spirit. In order to pursue me- this good for nothing petty-landlord- the letter went from south to north, from north to south, traveling across I don’t know how many miles, this time following the train north from Shanghai, until it arrived in my hand, a full two months after the date it had been sent. The stamps and markings built up on the envelope’s cover, the various wrinkles that accumulated from having been transferred so many times, all seemed to echo the throaty, unclear babbling of the old man, a language that was half love and half reproach.57

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Haunted by the voice figured on the surface of the crinkled letter, the narrator eventually does decide to return to his hometown to face the internecine family battles there.\(^58\) The return is staged, first and foremost, as a scene of material loss, for in the place of an object world that had once been defined by such ornate gentry items as folding screens, couplets above doors, and landscaped water vats, his family’s compound has become a place of material detritus, in which dust-encased objects are stacked on top of one another: “All that was left in the empty hall was a couple of large pillars and pile after piles of stools and small wooden chests, which at first glance could not be seen clearly, piled up as they were in the western corner of the hall.”\(^59\) From out of the morass, one particular object captures the narrator’s attention:

A case made of red wood, like a small cabinet, caught my eye from out of the piled mess of wooden furniture. Taking one look at the weathered ornamental forms engraved on the back of the case I knew that it was the ancestral alter (祖宗堂) that had once been affixed on the upper floor of the hall. I could still remember when I was small how, when school had been let out for the holidays and I was able to return home, I would sneak up to that upper floor to look at the alter, with its exquisite carvings. I also thought of how when I was small I wanted to take the alter for myself, placing my beloved clay figurines of auspicious historical figures and place them in the alters. Now, to see the alter thrown hastily aside in a corner like that, my inclination to take the alter for myself re-emerged, however this was different than the feelings of my youth. At that time I thought it was simply a toy, but what I was feeling now I couldn’t explain in any simple way. I just sensed that it would be better for me to take the alter then it would be for it to sit laying there amidst the mess.\(^60\)

From this point onward, the story revolves around the evocative power the alter has on both the narrator and Chang Sheng, who eventually comes out of the recesses of the house to greet him.

The narrator also re-encounters various member of his family, including his bed-ridden mother, who

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\(^58\) The narrator’s re-encounter with the family compound is relayed in materially sensitive terms: “I strode in front of the bamboo gate that ringed the outside of the buildings, the entire scene was still as it was ten years ago. The large trees fronting the courtyard, the tall bamboos behind the buildings, the dark and broad enclosing wall meant to keep out wind and fire, the blue stone menkan in front of the central gate...these were all as they were ten years before, without exception. It was when I strode further into the open space in the outer laneway, entering the main gate, that my gait unconsciously stopped....I did not know where the couplet that had hung on the outside of the great hall had gone. I also could not find a single trace of objects that were once placed in the hall, such as many red wood utensils (紅木器具), the marble folding screen that was as tall as two fans (兩扇高大的大理石圍屏), as well as the alter made of tin upon which candles and lanterns would be placed (錫制的燭台掛燈). I even did not know where the large vat full of goldfish went that had once stood in the corner by the well.” Ibid, p. 677-678.

\(^59\) Ibid, p. 678.

\(^60\) Ibid, p. 678-679.
hurls invective at him for his wasteful squandering of the family money and his lack of care for her. Finding no comfort in a lineage beset by vicious in-fighting, the narrator plans to return to Shanghai promptly. Before he leaves, however, he asks Chang Sheng to help him carry the ancestral alter back to the city with him. Chang Sheng agrees, happy that the young master wants to save such an important object from the pile of detritus in which it sits. He hauls the alter on his back on the journey to Shanghai, treating it with great reverence:

When the Hangzhou-Shanghai train arrived into north station that evening, me and him, two lonely shadows, were jostled about until we were the last ones to exit through the metal grating. Walking along the streets was difficult, for he was carrying on his back the red alter. He carried it as if there were living people on his back, afraid that any jostling would wrong the ancestral spirits.61

If for the narrator the alter is a curious antique, invoking a melancholic nostalgia for a hometown life-world that he can no longer politically, socially, and geographically participate in, for Chang Sheng it is still an active votive object, suffused with the the spirits of the family's ancestors. It is not, as it is for the narrator, the sign of a lost epistemological order, out of place in the secular time of the new republic. Rather it is an object of active force, to be treated with respect for its spiritual potency. The division between how the two men understand the object is seen most acutely the night of their arrival in the city. The two men settle in a small shack on the outskirts of the city, the only place the impoverished narrator can find to stay. It is nothing more than a few abandoned rooms, fit more for an itinerant beggar than the son of a wealthy gentry family. As the narrator cooks a modest dinner for Chang Sheng, the latter can’t help but gravitate towards the alter:

Just as I was warming a tin of meat and a tin of bamboo shoots, picking up a knife to cut the bread, from out of the darkened, south facing living room came sounds of crying. As I grabbed a candle and the bread and entered the living room, who would have thought that Chang Sheng, who I had presumed was sitting under the eaves in a rattan chair smoking a cigarette, was in fact kneeling on the ground in front of the alter. He held his head in his hands, sobbing while he moved his lips softly in prayer. I watched in silence, deeply moved by such pure superstition. Placing the candle and the bread on the table, I knelt beside him and tried to help him up, saying: “Chang Sheng, stand up and eat!”62

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For Chang Sheng, the alter demands not just nostalgic reflection but _active_ prayer. Like the devotional candles and joss sticks in “This Time Leaving My Hometown”, and the menkan that would transfigure Sister Xianglin’s body in “New Year’s Sacrifice,” the alter is a spiritually active object, enabling communication with ancestors who are present in the sentient now. In his staccato, accented patois, Chang Sheng’s bewilderment over all that has been lost takes the form of an unrelenting apologia:

I must apologize to you, master. I....I must apologize to you master...to make you...to make you prepare food like this...your brothers...they have darkened hearts...fields...fields and mountains they all steal and thieve and scheme...only...only the graveyard remains...and this alter to give you...up to now...you live alone in such a small...small grass hut...and you...you make your own food...I...I am sorry master.⁶³

Chang Sheng’s scatter-shot language invokes the cultural shattering thematized in the text as a whole. Between the servant’s “throaty, unclear babbling” and the narrator’s own melancholic displacement lays the loss of a once active life-world. The context in which readers would have first come across Yu Dafu’s text added further layering to the epistemic dissonance the story traffics in. The tale was first published in the fourth issue of the progressive Shanghai literary magazine Mass Literary Arts (大众文艺), edited by Yu Dafu himself (Figure 2.2):

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Yu’s text stood alongside an impressively cosmopolitan array of literary offerings: translations of works by the French novelist and communist party member Henry Barbusse (1873-1935), the French poet and novelist Alfred de Musset, the Russian writers Konstantin Fedin (1892-1977) and Vladimir Korolenko (1853-1921), an excerpt from Boccacio’s The Decameron, alongside of an original creative work by Rou Shi (柔石 1902-1931) and Yi Lin (一林). Chang Sheng’s halting village dialect, as well as his prostrations in front of the alter, were nestled within a literary landscape of cosmopolitan breadth. The cubist designed of the fourth issue’s front cover (figure 2.2) also spoke to a world in which neat boundaries were disintegrating, with objects simultaneously breaking up and reforming before the viewers eyes. Amidst the deformed objects, a kneeling figure raises his arms. Does he prostrate himself towards ancestral spirits or does he cry out for a new revolutionary life?

Figure 2.2: Front Cover of the Fourth Issue of Mass Literary Arts (大眾文藝), December 20, 1928.
Sweeping Empty Graves: Hollowed Rituals in Ye Shengtao’s Autumn

Ye Shengtao’s 1932 short story “Autumn” (秋) also dramatized the loss of the hometown life-world through the disintegration of material practices. Adding an important gendered dimension to the hometown trope, it told the story of a Shanghai-based midwife, educated in modern medicine and intent on embodying the May Fourth New Woman ideal, who returns to her hometown in rural Zhejiang to participate in the annual “sweeping of the graves” (上墳) ritual with her once grand, now economically depressed, land-owning lineage. The work made notable use of free indirect discourse to bring the reader into the consciousness of the main character, who encounters her childhood home as a space of material decay: “Opening the lock, pushing the door open, a moulded air greeted her. It was a gloomy autumn night, and the rough outlines of furniture stood hazy in the darkness, barely recognizable. Opening up two windows, she saw that every object was covered with a layer of dust.” On a counter in front of her are withered tea leaves and flowers, “strewn like corpses in a desert,” the only remaining objects from last year’s sweeping of the tombs ritual.

On her first night back in her old home, the main character is depicted as bone tired, not just physically exhausted by the journey home, but by the personal strength it requires to live out the May Fourth New Woman ideal in Shanghai. As a mid-wife she is keenly aware of the physical toll required to bring life into the world, her own body taxed every time she struggles to help pregnant woman through labor. When she imagines her work, she sees the traumas that are inflected on the most immediate and fragile of material systems, the body itself: “a surge of blood, the tearing of flesh, shaking and shouting as if you were being invaded, [labor] was truly an incomparable

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64 The short story was first published in the journal Les Contemporains (現代,2卷一期) in November of 1932 (Volume 2, Issue 1).
66 Ibid, p.2
67 For more on the New Woman ideal, see Barlow (2004), pp. 37-127. For the literary production of the New Woman ideal, see Dooling and Torgeson (1998), pp. 1-39.
sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{68} Shanghai is figured as a zone of unremitting commodification, a space where even the medical services for women’s reproductive health are subject to market competition. As she puts it, “Almost every street had signs for obstetrics doctors, and on the walls next to roadways there could be found rows of pasted adds promising cheaper prices- “No matter day or not, medicine included, five yuan,” “fifty percent off regular prescriptions, all together four yuan.”\textsuperscript{69} The new urban economy commodifies even the most intimate of bodily processes, reduced to an exchange value like any other good.

Yet the old village home is no respite from commercial self-interest, as multiple branches of the main character’s lineage are currently battling for control of what is left of the family’s land. Her brothers want to sell off the remaining land the family owns in the village in order to invest in textile factories in Shanghai. Worse yet, her sister-in-law wants her to agree to an arranged marriage with an elderly member of the gentry, so that her own husband can take the main character’s shares of lineage land. The annual sweeping of the graves festival is thus shrouded in vicious in-fighting, hollowed out of any communal or spiritual meanings it once possessed. The main character can only contrast the now degraded ritual with what had come before it:

In comparison to ten years before, the current sweeping of the tombs (上墳) was a far more desolate event. In the past every household in the family lived together in the same compound. On the day they were to sweep the graves, every member of the family would gather early in the morning in the great hall. It was indeed a most delightful scene. The wives and young women of each household would appear, wearing new clothes that beamed with a sense of originality. On this outfit there was sown a butterfly, on that a peony, every different kind of flower and design. The air of cosmetics wafted off of every cheek and torso, dazzling people so much you’d have thought they had drunk alcohol. This was an inexplicable happiness. Children ran to and fro pushing people to get on the boats, pulling their uncles, leading their fathers. Only after everyone had assembled would they exit the gate and board the boats...Fruit and tea was laid out on tables, the sounds of flutes responded to one another, laughter bounding from ship to ship\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{68} Ye (1932), p. 5.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid, p.5.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 6-7.
Here it is remembered material details- the designs on the freshly sewn clothes, the heady smell of cosmetics, the fruit and tea laid out for all- that reinforce the sense of joy associated with the ritual. When the narrator sets out to perform the ritual in the here and now, all her relatives can do while they ride in the boats is talk of the impending sale of lineage land. Gone is the fruit, tea, music, and raucous laughter. When the narrator does eventually come before the tombs of her ancestors, she can only weep over all that has been lost. At this moment, the story’s free indirect discourse pushes us directly into the character’s consciousness, in which objects of the past and present blend feverishly together:

When she arrived in front of the graves, she kowtowed, tears streaming tremulously downward....In the middle of the night, on the train returning to Shanghai, she leant hazily against the stiff back of a chair. A swirl of materials invaded her consciousness: twenty mu of land...withered wild roses...fifty years old...a surge of blood, the tearing of flesh...a large-bellied woman knocking on her apartment door...71

The last two paragraphs of the story were printed in the cultural journal Les Contemporains on the same page as an advertisement for a scholarly work by Guo Moruo entitled *Research on Ancient Chinese Society* (中國古代社會研究, fig. 3.3). The short advertisement declared that “accounting for (清算) premodern Chinese society was something that was impossible to do for people in the past.”72 However, “society’s future development” demanded that such a settling of accounts be made, one that Guo’s work on the Oracle Bones (甲骨文) would enable. The add declared that this scholarly work possessed a modern sense of vision- what the advertisement championed as a “dialectical material viewpoint”- that was necessary to truly see the past for what it was. As such, Guo’s scientific work would pave the way for the emergence of “an enlightened, healthy path for China’s future.”73

72 Les Contemporains 2:1, p. 8.
The juxtaposition of Ye’s sensitive exploration of the hollowing out of kinship ritual with the advertisement’s promise of an authoritative “settling of accounts” with China’s past is a striking one. The add could promise that within Guo’s work readers would find a clear demarcation of what was past and present, the epistemology of the modern day being used to explain the meaning of the antiquity out of which the modern moment evolved. Yet “Autumn”’s free-indirect narration upends any easy separation of the past and the present. Here multiple times are layered together across psychic life, as modernity is presented as both ancestral deracination and capitalist
commodification. For the main character such layering of objects, sensations, and memories is experienced as a traumatic surge of psychic feeling: “twenty mu of land...withered wild roses...fifty years old...a surge of blood, the tearing of flesh...” Caught between a disintegrated hometown and an atomized urban experience, the narrator gropes for some future possibility of renewal: “When she thought [of past sweepings of the tombs], she felt terribly desolate. Even though what had come before was a dream, could that dream be realized once again?”

Neither Residues nor Commodities: Figuring Spiritual Tools in 1920s Regional Fiction

The authors examined in this chapter all followed Zhou Zuoren’s call to anchor literature in the embodied space of local experience, writing texts that explored the fengtu of the Zhejiang villages they had emerged from before becoming multi-lingual writers, translators, and teachers in Beijing and Shanghai. For the narrators in these works the hometown is read as a world of anachronistic objects. For example, the narrator in “In Cold Wind” is drawn to the ancestral alter not because he believes he can commune with the lineage spirits of the past, but precisely because he cannot do so, the alter becoming the marker of a spiritual order now lost to him. As he puts it in describing Chang Sheng, “I watched in silence, deeply moved by such pure superstition.” But for the village domestics glimpsed in these pages, these objects are active materials in a still-lived epistemological system, in which ancestors dwell through the woodwork of alters, in which the heavens can be propitiated through incense, in which one’s body can be transfused into a doorsill for the purposes of karmic mitigation. Rather than the object as residue, this is the object as spiritual instrument, enabling transactions that confuse strict boundaries between past and present, living and the dead, the organic and the inanimate.

These narratives are thus bewitched by the overlapping presence of different life-worlds: the non-secular episteme of Chang Sheng and Xianglin Sao juxtaposed with the abstract, secular time of the intellectual narrators, who struggle to embody the civic and national values of the new

74 Ye (1932), p.7
republic they stand as harbingers of. If the secularism of the new republic found “superstition” in the notion that objects contained spirits, or were powerful enough to mitigate karmic cycles of suffering, it offered people a new ideology for the consumption of material objects: the nation itself. As Gerth and other have argued, commercial and political leaders in the republic sought “to convince Chinese to embrace product-nationality as the primary basis for desiring and consuming things.” Using commodity exhibits, advertisements, and other specular technologies, the national products movement committed “to training the eye to identify visual clues and to distinguish between the foreign and domestic across social life...consumers learned that they could lead a life that was materially pure Chinese.” Yet the object-practices presented in these texts do not posit the nation as their highest term of reference, nor indeed as a term of reference at all. Chang Sheng prays not to the founders of the nation, but to gentry ancestors imbedded in a specific locality. The horizon of meaning associated with Sister Xianglin’s menkan is karmic renewal in other worlds, not national belonging in a modernizing political order.

In this sense, these regional texts challenge long-standing assertions regarding the organic link between regional fiction and nationalist imaginaries, made with reference to regional writing in Japan, the United States, Canada, Ireland, and many other geographic spaces. Bill Brown has echoed such assertions by emphasizing that American regionalist fiction produced national consolidation even as (or precisely because) it emphasized local differentiation. As Brown puts it, within such writing “most every region of the nation was reproduced as knowledge that could be incorporated, no matter how eccentric, into the nation’s knowledge of itself- the eccentricity being

75 For more on the secular citizenship around which the new republic was designed, see Nedostup (2009).
76 Gerth (2003), 204.
77 Ibid, p. 10.
78 For regional fiction and the nation in modern Japanese literature, see Dodd (2004). Regionalism has long been seen as a dynamic internal engine of Can-Lit as a national literary project. See, for example, Atwood (1972), Woodcock (1981), and Calder and Wardaugh (2006). For regionalism and the novel form in Ireland and Britain, see Snell (1998).
an effect of the knowledge itself”(86). Yet Sister Xianglin’s menkan and Chang Sheng’s alter are objects whose logics predate modern nationalism, speaking to visions of history (karmic cycles of spiritual birth) and collectivity (lineage belonging) that are distinct from the linear time and abstract citizenship of the new republic. While they could be incorporated into the nation as the ethnographic other, the anachronistic periphery that needed “reconstruction,” in these texts they are not presented in such residual terms. Chang Sheng’s alter and Sister Xianglin’s menkan still speak to them, if not to the narrators who strive to represent them.

As a final example of how regional literature foregrounded life-worlds whose logics differed from those of the nation and its market, I would present the Anhui born writer Tai Jingnong’s 1927 short story “The Red Lamp” (紅燈). The story, narrated in the third person but defined by liberal use of free indirect discourse, centers around Widow Wang, who has raised her only son Deying alone since the age of three. When Deying gets involved in activities with a local bandit, he dies an early death by decapitation, leaving his mother in bewildered grief. After seeing her son’s naked, bloodied body in a dream, Widow Wang becomes convinced that her son has died a wrongful death. Her immediate thought is to how she can properly mourn him in the face of this tragic end. She decides to burn paper clothes for him so that he can use them in the afterlife. She also wants to burn gold and silver ingots for him to use as currency there. To finalize her mourning, she wants to employ a Daoist priest to perform spiritual rites so that Deying can “cross-over” (chaodu 超度)

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79 Brown seeks to tease out the tensions that existed between nationalism, ethnographic thought, and regional fiction of the late-19th century in America, while recognizing the interlocking nature of these powerful discourses. Working with Sarah Orne Jewett’s novel The County of the Pointed Firs, Brown points out that “Jewett’s original work in the 1870s, like a great deal of the local-color writing that commanded the U.S. literary market after the Civil War, can be said to anticipate the ethnographic narrative we’ve become familiar with. During the months when The Country of the Pointed Firs was being serialized, the Atlantic also published articles on “The Spirit of a Illinois Town,” Japanese folk songs, “Some Yorkshire Good Cheer,” “A Night and a Day in Spain,” “The German and the German-American, among many other accounts of local cultures. A wave of globalization in the U.S. (a result of immigration, middle-class travel, and international trade) provoked a romance of the local and an insatiable desire to know about innumerable locales”(86).

80 Tai’s work can be found in his first short story anthology, entitled Sons of the Earth (地之子), published in November of 1928 by the Beijing branch of the Weiming Literary Society. According to an author’s note in the text, the story was actually finished in December of 1926. Citation page numbers are taken from a reprint of the anthology, see Tai (2000), pp.20-27.
safely into the spirit world, preventing his wronged soul from staying on earth to haunt the people in his village.\textsuperscript{81}

These events take place in the days leading up to the ghost festival (鬼節), which the story tells us begins on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month each year.\textsuperscript{82} In the nights leading up to the festival, townspeople and villagers ask Daoist priests to perform all kinds of chaodu rites for wandering spirits, filling the night with raucous rituals of mourning. Mother Wang can only participate in these rituals in an ancillary manner, as she does not have the money to ask a Daoist priest to perform them for her own case. Every night she walks down to the ritual grounds and, watching the festivities, prays under her breath for the ghost of Deying to receive the spirit money that is being burned around her. As she listens to the incantations, she intuitively feels Deying near her. As the narrator puts it, “even though her son did not die in this exact location, she believed that Deying’s ghost could return to this his native place and soil (回到本鄉本土的).”\textsuperscript{83}

Returning home from one of the spirit rites, she happens to find a small piece of red paper stuck in the slit of a wall. This paper belonged to Deying, which he bought at the previous year’s New Year’s festivities but never used. Moved by the lucky happenstance, Mother Wang sets out to create a lamp with the cloth that she can set out onto the river during the final night of the festival. It is on this night where villagers will place lamps on the river to “send off” the spirits from this world to the next. Mother Wang works feverishly to gather materials for the lamp, wanting to make sure she will be able to participate in this final rite. Her hands shake as she slowly constructs the tiny lamp with the weathered cloth and a few scraps of bamboo. When the lamp is complete “she


\textsuperscript{82} Tai is here providing a literary representation of the Ghost Festival, traditionally known as the “Yulan Assembly” (Yulan Penhui 孟蘭盆會), one of the major spiritual events on the Chinese lunar calendar. For a detailed history of the Ghost Festival, as well as an ethnographic description of its contemporary practice in Fujian province, see Heise (2012).

\textsuperscript{83} See Tai (2000), p.22.
looked at what was a very small, very beautiful red lamp. Her excited, anguished heart was
overcome with surprise that she managed to complete this very great task.\textsuperscript{84}

The story ends with the townspeople gathering along the river for the final night of the
festival. When the lamps set out across the water, they are surprised to see that leading out in front
is a small, wavering red one, tremulously pushing forward across the darkened landscape:

The large lamps floated slow and heavy. Yet the small red lamp flowed smoothly along the
water’s course, moving out in front of all the onlookers. The red lamp seemed to carry with it a
dazzlingly mysterious power which swept over the onlookers, who all of a sudden became silent
and solemn. When the larger lamps passed by, the small red lamp had already flowed steadily away
on its lonesome course.

At this moment, Deying’s mother saw in her blurred vision her son cross-over (得了超度).
He was wearing a great garment, he was beautiful, and he was led along by the red lamp, following
it far away!\textsuperscript{85}

What the reader witnesses in this story is a series conscious actions in order to obtain the money
and cloth needed for a proper crossing, which includes the mother’s assemblage of the lamp with
her bare hands. These actions cannot be understood via the logics of the nation or the market.
Mother Wang has certainly not produced her red lamp to sell in a marketplace. And her actions are
not motivated by desire for the nation, which remains absent as a motivating impetus of any kind.
Mother Wang’s actions can only be understood when explained via the properly spiritual meanings
they holds for her. As a mother she must communicate with her son’s wandering soul, providing
him with the clothes, money, and light he will need in the afterlife. The reader of Tai’s text thus
experiences chaodu from Mother Wang’s perspective- as an intuitive moral obligation which
motivates action. In doing so, the story resists flattening chaodu into superstitious anachronism.
Rather, it is conceived as an experiential necessity, a feeling that dictates action. The lamp on the
river bed becomes a spiritual guide, leading Deying on towards other worlds.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, p.27.
In 1936 the Shanghai Life Bookstore Publishing House released noted writer and literary
theorist Mao Dun’s *To Prepare to Create* (創作的準備). The manual presented a comprehensive
overview of Mao Dun’s most important literary precepts, formulated in the guise of advice for
young writers to follow in order to develop their talents and produce modern works of genuine
meaning for contemporary China. In the manual Mao Dun emphasized that it was “social scientific
knowledge” (社會科學知識) which writers had to acquire as a pre-requisite for analyzing the
society around them.\(^1\) Only on the basis of this knowledge could they produce works that could
answer China’s most pressing questions. As Mao Dun put it, in addressing what books young
writers should read: “If they are works which help guide us to an understanding of the economic
structure of Chinese society, help us understand the comprehensive face of Chinese society...then
we absolutely need them. We must first take the correct knowledge found within these books and
arm our minds. This will allow us to determine in which corner of the social will be found the
materials we need and how we can go about investigating and “gathering” them (如何去觀察，
去“搜集”).\(^2\)

Mao Dun’s manual was a particularly acute distillation of a new literary paradigm that had
taken hold amongst progressive writers of the time: a Marxist understanding of literary practice, one
rooted deeply in discourses of class analysis and socialist revolution that circulated in China from
the early 1920s onward. It did not achieve organizational and institutional dominance until the
League of Left-Wing Writers (1931-1936) made it a mantra of literary activity amongst progressive
writers in Shanghai. The League was one of the few organized literary groups operating in China in

\(^1\) Mao Dun (1936a), p.5.

\(^2\) Ibid, p. 18.
the early 1930s, and as a cultural movement gained influence due to the sheer number of prominent intellectuals who participated in it. Contributors to the revolutionary-literary cause included veteran writers such as Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978), Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904-1986), and Cheng Fangwu 成仿吾 (1897-1984) as well as newcomers to the literary scene such as Ai Wu, Sha Ting 沙汀 (1904-1992), Ye Zi 葉紫 (1910-1939), and Wu Zuxiang 吳組緘 (1908-1994). Each of these figures subscribed, to varying degrees, to the class-based definition of literary practice promoted by the league and the Communist Party it was aligned with.

This chapter will examine the rise of this understanding of literature and its impact on representations of rural and local life in the early 1930s. This new paradigm for literary work built on the interest in the objects and practices of village life that writers such as Lu Xun, Tai Jingnong, and Xu Qinwen evidenced in the 1920s, but added a critical dimension to it: the language of Marxist political economy. This class-based understanding of rural life possessed its own totalizing tendencies, which imprinted themselves deeply on both the form and content of the literary texts of this period. I will end the chapter by considering the work of one author associated with the League- Ai Wu and his 1935 *Records of a Journey South* (南行記)- whose work successfully transgressed the boundaries of the revolutionary literary paradigm. Ai Wu wrote about the border lands on the southern margins of the old Qing imperium, putting an ecologically animistic sense of place- soaring mountain ranges, deep-seated gorges, powerful river waters- at the center of his work. By close reading Ai Wu’s 1935 collection of picaresque fables, I suggest that one means of contending with the Marxist demand to read the world exclusively in class-terms was to foreground the longer-standing geologic rhythms of the earth, against which human life itself appeared trifling and deeply relativized. These ecological dimensions to Ai Wu’s writing complicated the predominantly anthropocentric orientation of the leftist literary output of the time.

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3 For an insightful history into the league and its literary-political activities, see Wong (1991).
Marxist Social Critique and Its Literary Production

A Marxist discourse on labor, class, and the capitalist mode of production began to have explanatory power for Chinese intellectuals as early as the late teens. For young intellectuals seeking to characterize the inequality they witnessed in their own society- whose urban areas were undergoing incipient industrial transformation along capitalist lines, and whose rural areas were dominated by unequal distributions of land and local political power- the concept of class provided a powerful mechanism for charting social relations. Indeed, the cultural iconoclasm that coursed through the intellectual landscape in the period leading up to the founding of the CCP in July of 1921 was defined by a wide array of socialist, anarchist, and Marxist discourses. While these various strands of thinking intermingled eclectically in progressive journals of the time, the founding of the CCP brought a new emphasis on organizational and ideological unity amongst leftists. Globally circulating Marxist economic, social, and historical materials were translated into Chinese, in both party journals and beyond, a process that had significant impact upon the way intellectuals produced knowledge about their own society.

No doubt, Marxist interpretations of Chinese society were challenged by nationalist intellectuals who rejected socialism as a political alternative. The debate that ensued made new arenas of knowledge such as economics and sociology the discursive spaces in which competing definitions of the nature of Chinese society (and by extension, its future transformation) vied for

4 For more on the rise of Marxist thought and Communist political practice in Republican China, see Dirlik (1989).

5 For more on the complex intermixing of anarchist and socialist strains within New Culture and May Fourth thought, see Dirlik (1991).

6 For more on the translation of works of Marxist political-economy, history, and philosophy into China, see Pickowicz (1981). For an extended institutional history of the CCP’s torturous rise to political power in China, see Harrison 1972, particular pp. 18-91.

7 Chinese intellectuals who were trained abroad in Anglo-American traditions of social science- which trumpeted liberal democracy and capitalist development as progressive paths which all countries should follow- had much less sympathy for Marxist figurations regarding Chinese society than their Chinese counterparts trained in Russia. Social scientists and reformers trained in the Anglo-America tradition include James Yen, Li Jinghan, Ma Yangchu, etc. For more on this Anglo-American tradition in Chinese intellectual circles, see the chapter Chinas as a Social Laboratory in Tong Lam (2011), particular pp. 144-161. See also Hayford (1990), particular pp.3-111.
ideological hegemony. Thus, for example, China’s first generation of foreign trained sociologist and economists such as Chen Hansheng 陳翰笙, Li Jinghan, and Gu Mengyu 顧孟餘 debated how to precisely define the nature of Chinese rural society, a debate that began in the late 1920s and would course through China’s intellectual scene throughout the 1930s. Within this debate concepts of class, mode of production, and the economic system itself were consistently foregrounded, as intellectuals from each end of the political spectrum struggled to produce a conceptual language by which to define China as a comprehensive whole.

Over the course of the 1920s, as writers sought to mould New Literature into a powerful discourse that could shape the values of the nascent Republic, they increasingly came to conceptualize the society around them with concepts that were inherited from, and in deep conversation with, this larger body of social scientific discourse. Mao Dun was one of the first prominent intellectuals in China to formulate literary practice in direct relation to Marxist understandings of class history. Mao Dun proudly proclaimed in his 1925 On Proletarian Art (論物產階級藝術) that all art and literature was a reflection of the interests and concerns of a particular class. What China needed now, Mao Dun argued, was a literary art that could reflect the

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8 For an overview of the major participants of this debate, its various phases, and the ideological stakes involved within it, see Han (2005), pp. 73-117. The debate was based on, and itself productive of, a massive amount of rural survey work meant to provide concrete evidence within Chinese society of the ideas various participants in the debate promoted. For an example of such survey work, see Materials on the Economy of the Chinese Countryside (中國農村經濟資料), edited by noted social scientist Feng Hefa and published in 1933. See also Additional Materials on the Economy of the Chinese Countryside (中國農村經濟資料續編), also edited by Feng and published in 1935. For a collection of articles published in the debate from one of the most influential journals of the time, Rural Weekly (農村週刊) see Collected Theories Regarding the Chinese Rural Economy (中國農村經濟論文集), edited by Qian Jiaju and published in 1935.

9 The diversity of sociological visions regarding the nature of Chinese society was largely a result of the politically fractured nature of Republican Chinese society. For even at the height of the GMD’s decade of national construction during the 1930s, there was still a distinct lack of political and ideological hegemony across the entire country. Such hegemony could have monopolized knowledge-production and promoted one perspective on Chinese society over another. It’s non-existence enabled diversity of social opinion to thrive. As historian Tong Lam has put it, “early twentieth-century China can be regarded as a social laboratory of modernity, an epistemological and geographic site that encouraged and allowed for experiments and innovations”(143).

10 The wedding of Marxism and literary practice together in early 20th century China was itself one part of a larger global problematic, one that saw progressive intellectuals across a variety of colonial situations turn to aesthetic production as a key component of national and social revolutionary praxis. For more on this, see Jusdanis (1991).
interests of the class that would drive the nation forward towards revolutionary transformation: its proletariat. Yet Mao Dun emphasized that a literary work could not simply be a patronizing record of subaltern suffering, nor could it be the simple moral denunciations of individually corrupt capitalists. It had to take as its primary target the economic system itself, whose material exigencies pushed individuals into exploitative social relations. As Mao Dun put it:

There are many poems and fictional works that are brimming with the spirit of critique, and they often write capitalists or bourgeois intellectuals as if they are innately bad people, cruel and disloyal. This is a mistake. The sharp blade of class struggle does not point to individual members of the capitalist class, but the social system that has been created by the capitalist class itself. It does not point to problems in the moral character of an individual [個人品性], but to his class stance. What the proletariat wants to desperately eradicate is the social system of the capitalist class.

This was a literature that had to locate the cause of exploitation in the very operations of the economic and social system itself- a literature that revealed the larger structural logic by which China as a material whole operated. Writers should not focus on the individual moral constitutions of people who lived within the system, as if moralistic denunciations alone could change it. What was needed was a focus on the structural dynamics that pushed people into exploitative social relations in the first place.

It was in his 1936 writers manual that Mao Dun provided perhaps his clearest summation of the material ground that proletarian literature had to track. In his discussion of the way writers needed to approach the problem of the setting or “environment” in their works (what Mao Dun

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11 In Mao Dun’s 1925 essay his understanding of the proletariat confined itself largely to members of the urban and industrial working classes. Though he recognized that peasants were apart of the proletariat, in that their labor was exploited, he decried their ideological shortcomings. As Mao Dun put it, “in reality peasant thought tends to incline towards individualism, clanism (家族主义), and superstition (宗教迷信). They do not have class consciousness, partially because their laboring conditions are different than those of workers, and partially because their backward production methods make them ignorant of cooperation”(507-508). As the peasant movements gained organizational prominence around 1927, and as the major focus of Marxist revolution in China shifted to the countryside following the GMD-CCP during that year, Mao Dun’s understanding of the peasant’s ideological capacities would change dramatically. See his xxx for a more positive evaluation of the political capacities of the peasantry.

12 See Mao Dun (1925), p.512.
called the huanjing 環境 a literary work depicted), he made it clear that they needed to understand literature as a means of decoding a social system in class terms. As Mao Dun put it:

What is referred to here [by environment] is the production relations of a particular region (地区), its social system, the privileged classes that are in dominant positions and the subordinated classes that are not. What is also referred to here is the organization of cultural education, which is both a weapon and a fetter, as well as current customs, etc. Within the pages of one literary work, one should and must write according to this broad understanding of environment (huanjing).13

For Mao Dun, subjects existed in a dynamic relationship with this “environment”- they could be determined by it but they also had the agency to resist it. Literature was the record of that systemic determination and resistance, which Mao Dun understood to be dialectically intertwined. Mao Dun would even go on to distinguish in his manual between the “environment” of a work and the “ambient description”(氛圍的描寫) which was used to describe that environment. This latter term included descriptions of the natural setting of a work- i.e. a particular place’s landscapes, architectural elements, weather patterns, etc. But Mao Dun made sure to point out that all of this description had to be in the service of furthering the work’s analysis of the “environment”- that is, the class based social system in which those material details were found. Ambient description disconnected from this larger systemic understanding was, for Mao Dun, counterproductive. As such, a writer “could not confuse environment with ambient description,” but had to always see the latter as in service of analyzing the former.14

While Mao Dun’s literary criticism emphasized these systemic concerns from the mid-1920s onward, it was not until the last two years of that decade that the notion of proletarian literature began to exude ideological force in Chinese literary circles. This development was largely the result of the conversion to Marxism, and the subsequent strident advocacy of radical literary practice, of

the young intellectuals associated with the Creation Society (創造社). Originally formed in Japan by a group of overseas Chinese students, including Guo Moruo, Cheng Fangwu, Qian Xingcun 錢杏村, and Yu Dafu, the Creation Society quickly established itself as an important literary force upon their return to China in 1921. Through the journals Creation Quarterly (創造季刊) and Creation Weekly (創造週報), these young writers published a variety of poetry and prose, much of it espousing humanist values of individual emancipation commingled with a nationalist concern over the fate of the Chinese nation. By the mid 1920s members of the group began to publicly assert their allegiance to Marxism, leading them to not only disavow their earlier individualistic and romantic writings, but to attack leading Chinese writers for their insufficient commitment to the revolutionary cause.

The most heated of these attacks, and the one that drew the most strident rebuttals, was a series of articles written in 1927-28 critiquing Lu Xun for his inability to understand the kind of literature China needed in its contemporary age. Reacting to the deeply introspective melancholy of Lu Xun’s second collections of short stories, Wandering (徬徨, 1926), as well as his collection of enigmatic prose poems Wild Grass (野草, 1927), Cheng Fangwu and Qian Xingcun accused Lu Xun of retreating into an introverted poetics of individual lament. They hurled the same damning denunciations at Lu Xun’s brother Zhou Zuoren, whose carefully constructed small-essays (小品文)

15 For a concise history of the creation society, see The Creation Society (1921-1930) by Xiaobing Tang, with Michel Hocks, in Denton and Hockx, eds. (2008), pp.103-137.

16 See Cheng Fangwu’s “Completing Our Literary Revolution” (完成我们的文学革命), published in Flood (洪水) magazine in January of 1927 and Qian Xingcun’s “The Bygone Age of Ah-Q” (死去了的阿Q时代), published in march 1928 in Sun Monthly (太阳月刊). For other examples of attacks on Lu Xun by leftist writers of the time see, amongst many examples, Li Chuli’s “Please Look At Our Chinese Dong Quixote Dance-Responding to Lu Xun’s The Haziness of Drunken Eyes” (请看我们中国的Don Quixote的乱舞－答鲁迅《醉眼中的朦胧》), published in March 1928 in Cultural Critique (文化批判); Peng Kang’s “Negating” Lu Xun’s “Negation” (“除掉”鲁迅的“除掉”), published in March of 1928 in Cultural Critique (文化批判); and Shi Housheng’s “After All It's "A Carefree Drunkenness"” (毕竟是“醉眼陶然”罢了), published in April of 1928 in Creation Monthly (创造月刊). All these articles can be found reprinted in reprinted in Chinese Academy of Social Science’s Institute for Literary Research ed. (1981) Selected Materials Relating to the “Revolutionary Literature” Debates (“革命文学”论证资料选编).
were understood as embodying a bourgeois aesthetics of flavor (趣味) in which nothing more was at stake than the writer’s own individuals sensations and memories. Many of the articles dismissively referred to the literary magazine Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren edited together, the eclectic Talking Thread (語絲), as a publication that exuded this despised aesthetics of bourgeois self-cultivation. For the creationists, Talking Threads was a cultural organ that utterly abandoned the need to write on behalf of and for the proletarian subjects who currently suffered in every corner of the Chinese continent. While a plethora of veteran May Fourth writers leapt to Lu Xun’s defense, arguing for the socially engaged nature of his hometown fiction of the late teens and early 1920s, the attacks had an important effect on the Chinese literary scene. After the Creationists (following Mao Dun’s lead) had placed the problem of revolutionary literature so forcefully on the cultural

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17 See, for example, Cheng Fangwu’s “Literary Revolution and Flavor” (文學革命與趣味), published in May of 1927 in Flood (洪水) magazine. See also Cheng’s “From Literary Revolution to Revolutionary Literature” (从文学革命到革命文学), published in February of 1928 in Creation Monthly (创造月刊). Cheng singled out Talking Threads as the “plaything” (玩意) of the literary group that surrounded itself around Zhou Zuoren. Cheng bitingly declared that “their slogan is flavor (趣味)...their so-called reserve (矜持) is simply “leisure, leisure, and more leisure”. They represent the leisurely bourgeois, or the petit-bourgeois who are off asleep in their own drum. They certainly have “transcended” their age and have being doing so for many years”(135). All materials reprinted in Chinese Academy of Social Science’s Institute for Literary Research ed. (1981) Selected Materials Relating to the “Revolutionary Literature” Debates (“革命文学”论证资料选编).

18 For an example of a defense of the relevance of Lu Xun’s writing during the debate, see “The Era of Ah-Q is Not Dead” (阿Q时代没有死) by Qing Jian, published in Talking Threads in June of 1928. Perhaps the most astute take on the formal problems facing a “revolutionary literature” in China came from Mao Dun himself. He was in favor of the leftist literary movement but urged it to be more than simple sloganeering. See Mao Dun’s article “From Guling to Tokyo” (从牯岭到东京) for an implicit defense of Lu Xun’s works, published in October 1928 in Short Story Monthly. Lu Xun of course was an apt-defender of his own literary work and career. He used pointed sarcasm to defuse the attacks against him, pointing out time and again the superficial understanding that the Creationists had of the Marxist doctrines they espoused, the cheaply radical sloganeering they indulged in, and the paucity of actual high-quality literary output that emerged from their ranks. For examples of Lu Xu’s own self-defense, see “Revolutionary Literature” (革命文学), published in Masses Periodical (民众旬刊) in November of 1927; “The Haziness of Drunken Eyes” (醉眼中的朦胧), published in Talking Threads (语丝) in March of 1928; and “Literary Arts and Revolution” (文艺与革命), published in Talking Threads in April of 1928. All materials reprinted in Chinese Academy of Social Science’s Institute for Literary Research ed. (1981) Selected Materials Relating to the “Revolutionary Literature” Debates (“革命文学”论证资料选编).
agenda, no progressive literary figure could avoid the question of the social relevance of their work, particularly as it related to the laboring experience of China’s subaltern classes.\footnote{Certainly, political events of the mid-1920s played a role in this radicalization of literary and artistic work. The May 30th movement brought an anti-colonial critique out of the realm of intellectual and journalistic discourse and onto the streets, in the form of protests, marches, public gatherings, and economic boycotts of the colonial powers. At the same time the Northern Expedition held out the hope that both urban and rural masses could be aroused to join a national revolution to unify the country under joint GMD-CCP rule. For more on the political events of this time period, see Chen (1986).}

Whether one dismissed the problem of revolutionary literature as a betrayal of the humanism that some intellectuals argued should lay at the heart of literary practice,\footnote{Intellectuals and writers who objected to the need to directly politicize literature, and who challenged the idea that it could serve the revolution in a direct and mechanical way, included Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang, Liang Shiqiu, amongst other notables. For examples of their writings, see Zhou’s “Dead Literature and Living Literature” (死文学与活文学), published in April 1927 in the Dagong Bao. In that article Zhou insisted that literature was ultimately not an expression of nation or class, but of the individual self of the author, and it could only exist on the basis that freedom of expression for writers was guaranteed. If literature was produced in accordance with abstract dogmas it became a dead literature, robbed of emotional impact and creative spirit. As Zhou put it, “Regardless of what kind of literature you produce, as long as it is created and written from your heart it will have life. If not, if you simply seek to copy other people, you will produce a lifeless object...it is not clear that if you simply create literature you can save the nation. Simply put, literature is a medium that enables one person to communicate with many others.” Article reprinted in Zhou (2009), Volume 5, pp.102-105 (quote from p.105). For an example of Liang Shiqiu’s humanist literary criticism, see his “Literature and Revolution” (文学与革命), published in Xinyue in June of 1928 and translated in Denton (1996).} or whether one embraced whole-heartedly the notion that literature should play a directly agitational role in the Chinese revolutionary process, the terms by which literary work could be justified had been profoundly altered.\footnote{Cheng Fangwu perhaps best captured the new burden placed on literature when, in his “From Literary Revolution to Revolutionary Literature”, he declared that literature in China had to be analyzed from the perspective of the social whole which it stood as an elite textual expression of. Literature as an aesthetic and textual act could only be justified as useful if it served the society from which it sprang- a largely illiterate and suffering one, the majority of whose members as of yet had little to no relationship with the new literature itself. As Cheng put it, “Literature stands at the highest level of social organization. You cannot understand any one [social] element if you abandon the complex whole. We must research literature from the perspective of the entire social structure itself, only then can we come to a correct understanding of it. If we are to research the future develop of literature, we must understand the current stage of development our society finds itself in. If we want to understand our society’s current state of development, we must conduct rational criticism of contemporary capitalist society (including criticism of its economic, political, and ideological processes)...we must work to acquire class consciousness, we must make our medium get closer to the practical language of the peasant and working masses, we must take the peasants and working masses as our object [对象]” (135-136).} Lu Xun himself was forced into an extended two-year period of study where he published little, dedicating himself to reading as much Marxist literary and historical scholarship as he could to decide his own position regarding the relationship between literature and politics.\footnote{For more on this period in Lu Xun’s life, see Lee (1995), pp.181-237 and Davies (2013), pp. 66-119 and 170-228.}
Marxism’s Global Vision: The Village as Systemic Node

The leftist demand to write Chinese society as a social system whose material determinants could be grasped by Marxist concepts such as class and mode of production entailed the projection over village society of a distinctly new paradigm. This perspective was not merely a nationalist vision that saw in village spaces the underdeveloped cultural, educational, and linguistic periphery of the new republic. The village was now linked to the national and the global as one individual node within a particular mode of economic-production (capitalism in its imperialist form). This conceptual reformulation had profound implications for how both urban and rural spaces were produced within intellectual, sociological, and literary discourses of the day. In relation to urban space, sociologists and writers came to see the city as the space of foreign colonial penetration par excellence, particularly Shanghai and the other Euro-American dominated treaty ports. One of the first comprehensive presentations of China’s treaty ports as intimately related to processes of colonial domination was economist Qi Shufen’s 1925 China Under Economic Invasion, an exhaustive work which argued that China’s domestic economy had been destroyed by Western capitalist intrusion.23 Qi’s work was just one of hundreds of new handbooks, textbooks, and

23 Qi Shufen, born Qi Nanxun (漆南薰) in 1892 in Sichuan, was a member of the GMD left during the United Front period in Chongqing, where he engaged in a variety of pedagogical and political activities. He had studied under Japanese Marxist economist Kawakami Hajime at Tokyo Imperial University during the early 1920s. He published China Under Economic Invasion amidst the flurry of social activism set off by the May 30th incident. His text was an impassioned plea to his fellow-countrymen to wake up and realize the robbery of national wealth that had been undertaken by the colonial powers through all of the legal, military, and financial forces they had brought to bear on Chinese society: tariff controls, indemnity payments, exacting investment loans for industrial projects, the monopolization of the country’s transport network, the existence of treaty ports, extra-territoriality, etc. Qi’s text not only sought to warn his fellow countrymen about China’s colonial condition, but to provide them with a comprehensive vocabulary to understand China’s place within the global economic system as a whole. As such, Qi began his work with theoretical chapters entitled What is Imperialism? (什麼叫帝國主義呢), What is Capitalism (什麼叫資本主義呢), and Analyzing the Contemporary Organization of Nations (近代國家組織之解剖). In the preface to his work, he made his Marxist theoretical commitment clear: “Regarding my country’s political economy, the force that most oppresses us is no doubt capitalist imperialism. And yet our economists have so far had nothing but praise and support for it. If we truly want to struggle against this system we of course cannot adopt their doctrines. The theory that we need to employ is from the Marxist camp. Because out of all the world’s theories, only Marxism can reveal imperialism’s true face” (Qi, 16). Qi was murdered by the Chiang Kaishek backed warlord Liu Xiangyu during an anti-colonial demonstration on March 31, 1927. The young scholar’s death resounded throughout China’s progressive circles, and the dubious stories that were published regarding Qi’s death were debunked by no less than Lu Xun himself in his magazine Talking Threads. See the article “Clipped From Some Journal” (某報剪注) in Talking Threads 4:6, pp.45-47. For more on Qi’s life and work, see Zheng (2011) and Zheng (2012).
introductory guides to the new fields of sociology, economics, statistics, etc. Such textbooks presented the social sciences as capable of explaining with empirical rigor a capitalist world divided by national and racial difference (see figures 3.1 and 3.2). As historian Tong Lam has noted, such discourse did not merely reflect an already existing social reality beyond the text, but was itself productive of the very concepts by which such a reality was to be imagined and studied.24

Figure 3.1: “Comparing Number of Literate People in Relation to Population Totals of Various Nations,” from Cai Yucong, ed. The Principles and Methods of Social Surveys (社會調查之原理及方法), Beixin Shuju, 1928, p.156.
Figure 3:2: “Population Analysis of Los Angeles 1924: Example of a Level Bar Diagram,” in Yan Xinzhe, Social Surveys: An Outline (社會調查大綱), Zhonghua Shuju, 1933, p.93.

Leading Creation Society member Guo Moruo wrote an ebullient preface to Qi Shufen’s *China Under Economic Invasion*. The fact that one of the country’s best known literary intellectuals would write an impassioned preface to a work of economic analysis suggests the epistemic convergence shared by progressive writers and social scientists of the day. In his preface, Guo urged students in China to read Qi’s text, for it confirmed with strong scientific evidence what many

intellectuals intuitively felt: that the foreign colonial presence was working to undermine China’s domestic business interests and impoverish the country as a whole. As Guo put it:

China has no chance of developing a sophisticated [domestic] capitalism. Because, first, our own capital cannot withstand [the onslaught] of large international capitalist entities, we cannot freely compete with them. Secondly, the most important element needed to develop capital—a free market—has already been entirely occupied by foreign capital...[foreign capital] is able to restrict our tariffs, enforce extraterritoriality, freely invest in our country, and freely trade in imports and exports. In doing so, it has come to totally occupy our market place without us even noticing. Given these conditions, we have only one recourse open to us: to kick foreign capital out of our domestic marketplace...This perspective of mine, which comes from nothing but my own direct observations, has been entirely confirmed by Mr. Qi, who has proven it with reliable and true evidence (真憑實據).25

If a work of social analysis like Qi Shufen’s could claim to represent China’s social system in a truthful way, this was a form of knowledge that literary discourse of the age could utilize in its own representative mechanisms as well. Writers such as Mao Dun, Ding Ling, Wu Zuxiang,26 and many others would consistently represent urban treaty ports in much the same way as leftist economists such as Qi: as vicious entrepots where Chinese bourgeois compradors collaborated with foreign

26 For Mao Dun’s treatment of Shanghai, see his 1932 Midnight (子夜) discussed below. For Ding Ling’s treatment of Shanghai as colonial metropolis, see her 1929 “Day” (日) and “Shanghai, Spring, 1930” (1930春上海). For Wu Zuxiang’s depiction of Shanghai as a space where rural people are hoodwinked and exploited, see his 1932 “Young Master Get’s His Tonic” (官官的補品).
capitalists to exploit Chinese workers and flood the domestic marketplace with cheap foreign goods.\textsuperscript{27}

The most famous of these urban literary sociologies was Mao Dun’s 1932 \textit{Midnight}, which utilized the social scientist’s panoramic gaze to provide an overview of the dense network of class exploitation which thrived in Shanghai. In a 1936 article entitled \textit{How Midnight Was Written}, Mao Dun confirmed that he wrote the novel to engage in conversation with the vision of Chinese society that social scientific discourse of the time was producing:

I read some scholarly treatises regarding the nature of Chinese society, comparing what I myself had witnessed with their theories, [a process] which increased my interest in writing a novel...that moment [1930] saw the Chinese revolution enter into a new period. \textit{The debate regarding the nature of Chinese society} was raging...[using this novel] I wanted to answer the Trotskyites: China had not yet gone down the road of capitalist development. In fact, under the oppression of foreign imperialism, China was becoming even more colonized (更加殖民地化了).\textsuperscript{28}

The “Trotskyites” Mao Dun referred to were a group of intellectuals, headed by Chen Duxiu and Yan Lingfeng, who claimed that Chinese society was commercial capitalist rather than semi-feudal and semi-colonial.\textsuperscript{29} The latter label was trumpeted by the political leaders of the CCP, who were following a train of thought prominent amongst intellectuals in Stalinist Russia. The difference in

\textsuperscript{27} For Qi’s treatment of the problem of the colonial treaty port, see the myriad sub-sections he includes in his \textit{Theory of the Treaty Port} in \textit{China Under Economic Invasion}, pp.81-252. Qi understood the treaty port and the colonial economic and political relations it represented as a necessary outgrowth of capitalism’s own structural operations. Building off of Marx’s own analysis of capital, Qi mapped out how the need to keep a rising rate of surplus-value within capitalism’s own operations forced capitalists to look outside the system itself- at pre-capitalist social formations which they could turn to for cheaper access to variable capital (labor power), fixed capital (material resources), or as markets in which they could capitalize the excess goods they had produced. Qi thus understood the treaty-port in the colonial world as a crucial space of mediation between what he understood to be the interior of the capitalist system and its “periphery” (what Qi referred to as the \textit{外圍} of capital, lit. “outside the limits” (Qi, 106)). Qi argued that as long as the capitalist world had spaces that were exterior to it and towards which it could expand, it could delay the moment at which the system’s structural contradictions would topple in upon themselves. What allowed capital to survive was thus the colonial system itself. As Qi put it, “The more capitalism develops and expands, the greater its need becomes for outsiders to the system [即需要範圍外之顧客甚大]. At the same time, in direct proportion to capitalism’s demands, the peripheries become ever more forcibly pressed. The world’s area is limited and yet capitalism expands ceaselessly. As it does so it cannot but express its internal contradictions, even as spaces outside the system become ever fewer. As such, the system’s capacity to cover up [its own contradictions] becomes less and less, until it reaches its moment of collapse”(107).

\textsuperscript{28} Mao Dun (1936b), p. 293-294.

\textsuperscript{29} For a strong scholarly overview of this debate, see Han (2005), pp. 73-117.
 terminology harbored profound cleavages in revolutionary strategy: if China already had its own sophisticated domestic capitalism, as the Trotskyites declared, than what was needed was a proletarian socialist, rather than a bourgeois-democratic, revolution. On the other hand, if the CCP’s position was accurate and China lacked a developed capitalist industry of its own, then what the country needed was a bourgeois-democratic revolution that would lay the groundwork for capitalist accumulation.

It is telling that Mao Dun turned to vernacular literature as a means of inserting his own voice into this debate. Vernacular fiction was a space in which one vision of China as material-system (the CCP’s understanding of semi-colonial/semi-feudalism) could be exemplified, while another version (the Trotskyite notion of a fully developed domestic capitalism) could be rebutted. The kind of social truth that economic tracts sought to produce could also be attested to via a literary text, itself one more form of diagnosing the class-nature of Chinese society. As Mao Dun had long advocated, the truth-claims that literature could produce were no less accurate, if differently presented, than other forms of social analysis. As Mao Dun put it in his 1936 manual, “[the literary works] of a great author do not simply reflect reality (反映了現實), they focus on their era’s human and ideological problems and provide answers to them.”

A plethora of vernacular fiction from the late 1920s onward would take the class-based perspective of the Marxist social sciences and use it as a means of representing social life in China’s villages. The Marxist literary approach to village life was signaled by leading creationist Qian Xingcun in his 1928 critique of Lu Xun’s work. At issue was the latter’s portrayal of China’s rural subjects as a series of spiritually numb, ideologically duped beings. As Qian famously declared in his essay The Bygone Age of Ah-Q (死去了的阿Q时代), the time for such debilitating portraits of village society was over:

30 Mao Dun (1936a), p.5.
The Chinese peasants of the past ten years have long since lost their resemblance to the naive peasant masses of Ah Q’s time. As such, according to the changes in literary thought, Ah Q cannot be placed in the May Fourth period. Nor can he be placed in the May Thirtieth period, not to mention the great revolutionary period of the present. First, Chinese peasants of today are not as naive as in Ah Q’s era. Most of them belong to tightly knit organizations and are quite knowledgeable about politics. Second, the revolutionary nature of Chinese peasants has already been fully expressed...they don’t create disturbances for no reason in the manner of Ah Q. Their struggle is political, for it is significant and purposeful, not just an outpouring of anger. 31

Rural society was no longer to be represented as the isolated hometown whose votive practices and metaphysical imaginings were marks of its underdeveloped status. For rural society itself had a sophisticated economic foundation, one which unevenly distributed land, resources, and social power across geographic space. Literary texts needed to engage with these political-economic dimensions of the rural problem. Likewise, rural social figures were no longer to be foreclosed by the spiritual ideas that animated the life-worlds of Sister Xianglin, Mother Wang, and other village figures that defined the hometown writing of the early 1920s. Qian and his leftist allies argued that rural subjects were capable, at least in incipient terms, of understanding the class hegemonies that defined their lives, and in time could embrace a systemic understanding of the village, nation, and world around them.

In assuming that a revolutionary subjectivity already existed in village societies, one that writers needed to simply give voice to in their works, literary leftists were reacting to the social transformations within rural society that had occurred over the last decade. For communist activists had taken the class-diagnosis that was at the core of Marxist thought and made it the basis for political agitation within various village societies across China. 32 With the collapse of the United Front in July of 1927, and the disastrous failure of the series of urban-based uprisings the CCP conducted in the fall of that year, the major pre-occupation of the Communist movement became

31 Qian Xingcun (1928), p.286-287.
32 As early as 1922 Peng Pai had formed peasant associations in two counties of rural Guangdong. While Peng Pai’s attempts at instantiating soviet rule were short lived, his early experiments would lay the organizational model for much of the political mobilization that would follow in other parts of the country. For more on Peng Pai and the importance of his early rural movement to subsequent developments in Communist organizational politics in China, see Galbiati (1985).
the creation of rural soviets where the CCP could continue the revolution. There was no other choice in the matter: the party had become outlawed in Shanghai and other urban areas under GMD rule. As such, an urban based revolutionary strategy became impossible and a whole series of rural soviets emerged in remote places throughout Southern and Western China.33

It is not surprising then that leftist writers of the time increasingly turned their attention to the countryside as a setting for their narrative works. Many of these intellectuals remained in Shanghai, which was still the center of the Chinese publishing world despite increasing GMD repression in the areas of the city under the regime’s control. Such leftist intellectuals had a heady mix of discursive elements out of which to craft their narratives: the sociological analyses of rural society being conducted by social scientists of the time, many of whom were quite sympathetic to the Marxist assertion that rural China had been bankrupted by foreign colonial penetration; the reports of peasant agitation that appeared regularly in the Shanghai press; and a literary-political discourse on proletarian literature, developed first by Mao Dun and later by the intellectuals associated with the League, which explicitly stated that literature had to be a vehicle for class struggle.34 The convergence of these social scientific, political, and aesthetic forces pushed writers to turn to village life with a renewed vigor, understood now not as the historical periphery, but as the stage upon which the most valiant forms of class struggle were being waged.

The Romantic Revolutionary Countryside: Jiang Guangci’s The Roaring Land

From the years 1927-1932, a series of works dedicated to depicting the countryside as the platform for elite-led revolutionary transformation emerged in publishing circles. Such works

33 By the end of 1930, there were approximately thirteen communist base areas in operation throughout the country. For an overview of the political history of the CCP during this period see Ch’en (1986). Peasant agitation against excessive taxation and rent was read by leftist intellectuals of the time as evidence of incipient revolutionary desires within rural people. The most notable of such readings was, of course, Mao Zedong’s 1927 “Report on the peasant movement in Hunan” (湖南农民运动调查报告), a zealous celebration of rural revolutionary potentiality made after Mao conducted on the ground inquiries in his native province.

34 For an example of the Shanghai press’s interest in the problem of rural reform and revolution see, for example, the August 1927 issue of Eastern Miscellany (東方雜誌 24:16), a special issue of the magazine devoted entirely to the rural question. For articles detailing the necessity of peasant mobilization in journals more specifically focused on rural issues, see “The Problem of the Peasant Movement” (農民運動問題) by Liao Diyong, in Nongsheng Huikan (農声汇刊), 第66期, 1925, pp. 267-269.
include Li Jingming 黎錦明 (1905-1999)’s *The Dusty Shadow* (塵影 1927), which was based on the story of the revolutionary intellectual Zhou Shuiping, who led an unsuccessful peasant movement in Jiangsu province during the Northern Expedition; Yang Hansheng 陽翰笙 (1902-1993)’s *The Underground Spring* (地泉1930), Hong Shen 洪深 (1894-1955)’s dramatic work *The Bridge of Five Degree Holders* (五奎橋 1930), and Jiang Guangci 蔣光慈 (1901-1933)’s *The Roaring Land* (咆哮了的土地, 1930). In order to unpack what the formal limitations were of the Marxist approach to village life which these works employed, I will provide a close textual analysis of the last of these works. I have chosen to analyze Jiang’s novel because it is a particularly acute distillation of many of the formal features of revolutionary-literary production.

By 1930 Jiang Guangci was, despite being only twenty nine years of age, a veteran communist cultural worker and a leading member of the literary left in China. He had, from 1921-1924, studied in Moscow at the Eastern Communist Labor University, where he read deeply in Marxist political economy and history. Upon his return to Shanghai he took up a post in the social sciences department of Shanghai University, the noted hotbed for Marxist pedagogy and activism headed by Qu Qiubai. As early as 1924 Jiang argued for a revolutionary literature that would bring proletarian consciousness to Chinese readers. Throughout the mid and late 1920s he published a series of poems, short stories, and reportage literature with revolutionary themes, as well as a steady array of Marxist literary criticism and translations of Russian literature. Given his stature in progressive publishing circles, it is not surprising that Jiang would provide his own

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35 For an overview of Jiang’s life, see Fang Ming ed. (1983), pp.3-9.

36 For more on the history of Shanghai University as a breeding ground for radical activism and critique, see Chiang(2001), pp. 136-148.

37 For one of Jiang's most cogent expressions of his commitment to and understanding of revolutionary literature, see his “Regarding Revolutionary Literature” (关于革命文学), published in February of 1928 in the Sun Monthly (太阳月刊). Reprinted in Chinese Academy of Social Science's Institute for Literary Research ed. (1981) *Selected Materials Relating to the “Revolutionary Literature” Debates* (“革命文学”争论资料选编).
rendition of a theme that was, by 1930, quickly becoming dominant in leftist fiction of the time period: the revolutionary countryside.

*The Roaring Land* was completed in 1930, though it was not published until two years later, after Jiang’s death of tuberculosis. A sprawling, multi-character novel that tells the story of revolutionary transformation in a single, unnamed village, the work fully lives up to the revolutionary mandate that Qian Xingcun urged writers to follow two years prior. One cannot find in Jiang’s text peasants turned into satirical archetypes on the order of Ah-Q, whose self-delusions and political illiteracy render him into a farcical vision of self-empowerment. Rather, present here are socially conscious beings struggling to find a language by which to name the exploitation they experience at the hands of the landlords in their village. This language is provided to them by one of the main characters in the novel, Li Jie, the son of the village’s largest landlord. After cutting all ties with his father and joining the revolutionary army outside his village, Li returns home to enact social revolution in the space of his birth.³⁸ Li teams up with Zhang Jinde, a laborer who left the village to work in coal mines and who gained Marxist political consciousness by joining a workers union. He too has returned to the village to overthrow it’s unequal land-owning order. Li and Zhang thus work to galvanize the village’s tenant farmers into forming a peasant association (農民會), with the majority of Jiang’s narrative dedicated to examining their ensuing struggle against the village’s land-owning elite.

There are two major formal features of the novel that deserve close analysis, for they represent points of aesthetic and political limitation that leftist writers had to grapple with as they operated within the revolutionary literary paradigm. The first of these characteristics is the problem

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³⁸ We thus see in this novel the motif of the student-intellectual’s return to his hometown. This is a vision of the hometown that sees it as a space which can be brought into the modern time of revolutionary progress-by imparting a new political and epistemic order upon it: “In possession of a resolute heart he [Li Jie] resigned from the revolutionary army and set out to return to the countryside to conduct a peasant movement...he still had a love for his hometown (愛鄉的觀念), still wanted to make a contribution to it (想對於自己的故鄉多有一點貢獻). Perhaps he returned because he had a deep longing for revenge: he wanted to stand in the ranks of the peasants and show his father their true might...the most important thing now was whether he could take some ignorant peasants and awaken them.” See Jiang (1932), p.189.
of narrative surfacing, an aspect of literary form which can be seen in work after work from this era. Jiang’s novel is intensely literal, imbued with a directness of characterization that is notable for its unflagging consistency. The work employs a comprehensively omniscient third-person narrator to present its plot in as unambiguous a manner as possible. This is a narrative voice that does not hesitate to directly address the audience so as to explain the political meanings of the events on display. In terms of characterization, a strictly binarial episteme is operative: characters are either for or against the revolution, in possession of Marxist political consciousness or regressive ideas which support the old order, and little ambiguity is possible across the political divide. Thus landlords such as Li Jie’s father are opium smoking conservatives who have no respect for the peasants who labor in their fields. Peasants, on the other hand, are presented as fundamentally noble beings whose path to revolutionary commitment is secured the moment they are able to name their oppression via the language of class struggle.

In this way, the work evidences a very non-modernist faith in the capacity of language to name social reality faithfully. In Jiang’s text, there is little slippage between sign and signified, text and world, word and deed: the text names the object of its desire (revolution) and finds its quest inexorably rewarded amidst its narrative machinations. If the folklorists of the May Fourth period grappled with a minjian culture in which script and orality did not seamlessly conjoin, and in which the taxonomies of village forms were open to vexing question, the exact opposite is present here: language and reality are in-complete sync, the peasants gaining a new proletarian identity the

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39 Jiang’s text is replete with stories and memories of the heartlessness of the land-owning class. As an example of just one of these narratives, when the conservative older peasant Wang Songfa (王宋發) sees one of the village’s worst landlords (Master Zhang) tied up (having been arrested by the peasant association), he is jarred into a memory of the arbitrary and cruel manner Zhang treated him in year past: “It occurred during winter one year. The new year’s was approaching. Master Zhang sent someone to Wang Songfa’s house to buy a pig. They agreed that the pig would cost fifteen strings of cash. Half would be exchanged before the year was out, the other half after the new year. Wang Songfa firmly believed that Master Zhang would pay him the money. Little did he suspect that by the second month into the new year Master Zhang would not have sent someone to give him the rest of the money. He had no choice but to go to Master Zhang’s house to ask for the money. Master Zhang looked squarely at him, snorted, and swore: “Disgraceful! Who owes you money for your pig? At the time we agreed to may seven strings of cash, all of which have been given to you. You now come here to complain? Get out! If you don’t leave I’ll have someone beat you.” Ibid, p.327.
moment they are able to name their oppression though the new vocabulary given to them. In doing so, they become born anew not just as proletarian fighters, but as being whose identities are fully identical to themselves, in which language, self, and world align.

To claim that the entire novel operates on a kind of rhetorical surface, in which meanings are didactically established and reinforced, is to stress the lack of ambiguity, in terms of both characterization and plot arrangement, that defines the novel. My use of the term *surfacing* here, however, should not be taken to mean that Jiang’s novel is uninterested in psychological interiority. To the contrary, the novel is replete with psychological description, particularly in its elaboration of its characters’ dreams of past oppression or future equality. In some chapters the novel even switches to a direct epistolary form, in which the diaries of the story’s literate characters are placed directly on the page for the reader to examine. While psychological transformation is a key theme in the novel, it too is *surfaced* in as direct a manner as possible: to dream of revolution is to commit to enacting it in the objective world around one.

In this way, psychological commitment and social world align, a connection reinforced through the novel’s handling of landscape, which becomes a background tableau whose physical features are wholly mediated by the revolutionary situation. Thus at the beginning of the narrative the land is presented as stifled and unchanging, as if cut off from the modern tides of historical transformation sweeping the Republic elsewhere. From the novel’s first page:

This countryside was as old as it ever was. Amidst the glow of the setting sun sat small huts scattered like stars, while larger hamlets abutted against hills and winding rivers. Nothing had changed from one year previously. Smoke followed the herder’s song and slowly rose in the air, like anger rising from the earth itself. That anger soundlessly dispersed in the sky year after year, day after day…it was all the same as before, nothing had changed in the slightest.40

But when Jiang’s revolutionary drama begins to stir, the landscape is imbued with a reborn vitality, the mountains and rivers emitting a renewed sense of bounty. Take, for example, the landscape that

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surrounds Second Pock-Marked Liu, a landless laborer, immediately after Zhang Jinde has explained to him that revolutionary forces have arrived in the village:

The beads on the surface of the youthful rice shoots glistened radiantly. The atmosphere within the fields was abnormally fresh and still, though a red sun was already hanging high over the eastern mountains. It was as if the entire scene before him was expressing joyfulness, as if even the sun was beaming a delighted smile filled with hope...[Second Pock-Marked Liu] gazed at the moist, glistening fields and the high-hanging sun. He didn’t know why but he felt that he had been transformed into an entirely different person.41

Liu’s coming to Marxist political consciousness is mirrored directly in the vividness of the landscape around him, as if the land itself was beaming revolutionary desire towards him. This link between landscape and revolutionary emotion is a consistent descriptive technique throughout the novel, so much so that landscape becomes oddly vacant within the text itself, a geographic placeholder for political sentiment.

It is not just landscape, but the entire realm of quotidian practice, that is enfolded within and made strangely absent by this preponderance of revolutionary desire. Jiang’s narrator consistently urges the reader to confront the exploited position the peasants occupy in relation to the landlord forces in the village. Yet the novel is curiously uninterested in the quotidian practices of rural people themselves. There are little details regarding planting, land-use, food consumption, clothing, domestic chores, household rituals- indeed, little quotidian specificity at all. Instead, the narrative simply repeats time and again that the peasants must give the majority of their grain over to the landlords and, as such, are forced to survive on material scraps year after year. Amidst the peasant’s subjective transformations into emboldened revolutionaries, the rhythms of everyday life in the village, the complex intersections of labor, skill, and social obligation that define their lives, are absent. In place of these elements is a singular narrative interest in showing either the total exploitation of rural subjects or their impassioned resistance.

41 Ibid, p.205.
If xiangtu fiction of the early 1920s foregrounded the unevenness of local communities— the way their material practices, votive rituals, and spoken languages were not yet integrated into a secular and civic nation-state— in Jiang’s text the village has become a smoothly integrated component of the revolutionary process. In place of seasonal and daily rhythms, practices of harvest or handicrafts, or an interest in votive practice, Jiang’s text provides a single minded commitment to revolutionary conversion and sentiment, which suffuses ecology and community. The novel’s language, composed of a generalized baihua shorn of overtly regional speech markers, reinforces its estranging sense of dis-placement. This de-localized linguistic strategy is linked, no doubt, to the symbolic role the village is meant to embody. It is imagined as simply one node in a larger systemic perspective, one that linked villages in China’s interior to the country’s national situation understood in a global context of revolutionary upheaval. It could be any village in China, and for that reason, it is no village:

Today Li Jie decided to write a report to his comrades in the city. He wanted to let them know the things he had been doing since he arrived back home in his village. He wanted them to know that he was in the middle of tense work and had certainly not come home in search of leisure. He also wanted to get some newspapers and books from them so he could read what was going on with the national movement. He knew that if he simply put his head down and didn’t pay attention to what was happening outside of the village there was the possibility that he would make mistakes in his work. This small village movement was connected to the county, the province, the country, indeed it was even connected to the entire world!42

Translating Village Heteroglossia: Mao Dun’s Spring Silkworms

“It is generally acknowledged that the works produced from the period between 1928 and 1930 were all failures.”43 So Mao Dun bluntly stated in an afterword he wrote for Yang Hansheng’s The Undeground Spring published in April of 1932. Mao Dun was one of the first in the leftist literary camp to critique the writings of his contemporaries such as Yang and Jiang Guangci, having

43 Mao Dun (1932a), p.160.
Mao Dun was not hesitant to recognize that the didactic plots and
romantic characterization of much of rural revolutionary fiction resulted in an inferior literary
product. Indeed, Mao Dun’s preface to Yang’s work is notable in providing one long extended
critique of the revolutionary model represented by both Jiang and Yang’s writings. For Mao Dun,
the fundamental problem for literary production in China in the early 1930s was how to artistically
express a social scientific perspective on contemporary society. A writer had to possess a Marxist
understanding of that society, but he or she also had to have the capacity to express this
understanding in an artistically skilled manner. For literature was not, Mao Dun argued, the same
kind of discourse than the social sciences, despite the fact that writers used social scientific theory
as a basis for understanding the world around them. Literature could only function if the author paid
attention to certain aesthetic criteria that social scientists did not need to concern themselves with.

As Mao Dun put it, in summing up his fundamental critique of revolutionary romanticism:

[A writer] must understand and use the life-giving essence of the social sciences- dialectical
materialism. He must use the dialectic as a tool to grasp and understand the laws and rhythms of the
social from out of all of its varied phenomenon. And yet, in the final analysis, the author must also
use formal language (形象的语⾔言) and artistic technique (艺术的⼿手腕) to express all these aspects
of social phenomenon. Indeed, from out of these phenomenon he must be able to indicate the
direction of future development. Thus when a work is being produced it must have the following
two conditions: Comprehensive (not partial) social recognition and artistic techniques that can
emotionally affect readers.\footnote{Mao Dun (1932a), p.168.}

Mao Dun blamed Yang and Jiang’s writing for lacking both of these necessary elements. Discussing
The Roaring Land, Mao Dun damningly claimed that the novel simply could not take social life in
all of its complexity and provide it to readers- it was a romantic fantasy regarding rural
revolutionary transformation rather than a sociologically nuanced analysis. Mao Dun thus referred
to Jiang’s writing as an excellent example of “Makeup-ism” (臉譜主義): the superficial branding of
fictional characters as class types without any nuance in characterization. As Mao Dun put it, in

\footnote{See, for example, Mao Dun’s “On Reading Ni Huanzhi” (讀《倪煥之》), published in May of 1929 in
Literature Monthly (文學週報).}
Jiang’s work “many revolutionaries simply have one face- the revolutionary mask (革命者的“臉譜”); the anti-revolutionaries also only have one face- the anti-revolution mask (反革命者的“臉譜”).” They thus felt as if they had all been cut from the same printing plate, so that what was present on the page “were not “living” revolutionaries but mechanical figures who had accepted revolutionary orders.”

Mao Dun’s essay was a challenge to all leftist writers to produce a literature that was at once more sociologically nuanced and artistically skilled, absent the overt didacticism that had plagued their writing until that point. The question facing the leftist literary scene in 1932 was clear: could a work avoid the mechanic didacticism that writers like Jiang Guangci had resorted to yet not abandon the systemic perspective that leftist theorists declare works had to possess?

It was in Mao Dun’s own fictional works that a writer came closest to the combination of formal depth and systemic analysis that his own literary criticism had called for. His Village Trilogy (農村三部曲, 1932-1933) touched on many of the same themes that Jiang’s novel had- the bankruptcy of rural tenant farmers, the revolutionary consciousness that potentially existed within rural people, and the complex process by which the subaltern classes came to break free from fixed understandings of social and spiritual order. Unlike Jiang’s novel, however, Mao Dun’s writing evinced a keen interest in the forms of knowledge that defined pre-industrial village life, linked to specific object practices, regional terminology, and local rhythms of work.

His most accomplished story from the trilogy, Spring Silkworms (春蠶), provides a step-by-step depiction of the process by which raw silk is raised in a Jiangsu village from batches of living

48 Mao Dun’s trilogy was first published a variety of journals in late 1932 and early 1933. Spring Silkworms (春蠶) was published in Les Contemporains (現代) 第1卷第2期, p.9-26; Autumn Harvest (秋收) appeared in the two editions of the Shenbao Monthly (申報月刊) in April and May of 1933, 第2卷4期 (p.109-119) and 第2卷5期 (p.119-125); Winter Ruin (殘冬) appeared in the founding issue of Literature (文學) magazine, July 1 1933. pp. 17-33.
cocoons. This was an agricultural feat that involved a whole array of skilled choices about how to raise, feed, and maintain the living organisms so they would hatch successfully. The level of material detail the text provides regarding the physical processes behind silkworm farming, and the oral knowledge that informs the practice, provides the novel with a sense of texture that Jiang’s abstract visions of the countryside simply do not possess. The text opens with a vision of ecological embodiment, as the aged peasant Old Tongbao reacts to the shifting seasons around him:

Old Tong Bao sat on a rock beside the road that skirted the canal, his long-stemmed pipe lying on the ground next to him. Though it was only a few days after the Qingming (清明) festival the sun was already very strong. It scorched Old Tong Bao’s spine like a basin of fire. Straining down the road, the men towing the fast junk wore only thin tunics, open in front...He was still wearing the tattered padded jacket in which he had passed the winter. His unlined jacket had not yet been redeemed from the pawn shop. Who would have believed it could get so hot right after “Clear and Bright”?\(^{49}\)

Old Tongbao’s sense of time is grounded in the physical sensations of his body, which is indexed to temporal markers that are both ecological (the scorching sun) and cultural (the Qingming festival that marks the annual passage into spring). This sense of time is not indexed to the Gregorian calendar of the new Republic, a political abstraction that Old Tongbao shows little understanding of throughout the story. Indeed, he calls the new GMD government “the new dynasty” (新朝代), failing to recognize the civic (rather than monarchical) nature of the new Republic.\(^{50}\) The story is instead studded with temporal markers from before the time of the Republic, not just annual celebrations such as Qingming and the Dragon Boat Festival (端午節) but also the rhythms of agricultural harvest grounded in the old lunar calendar. For example, the family judges the health of their cocoons by how they look before and after the day of the “grain rain” (穀雨), the sixth day of an individual solar term (a unit of time in the old lunar calendar made up approximately of 15

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\(^{49}\) Mao Dun (1932b), p. 9.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, p. 12.
days). The date of repayment for all loans, meanwhile, is tracked according to the rhythms of the harvest, in this case designated as “after the silkworms have been gathered” (春蠶收成).

Like the village narratives of the 1920s by Xu Qinwen, Tai Jingnong, and others, *Spring Silkworms* presents a spiritually full social world, in which the handling of material objects becomes a means of communicating with powerful heavenly forces who can intercede directly into human life. For example, on the day of cocoon hatching a specific series of votive materials must be mobilized:

At last the hatching day arrived. A Si’s wife set a pot of rice on to boil and nervously watched for the time when the steam would rise straight up. Old Tong Bao lit the incense and candles (⾹香燭) he had bought in anticipation of this event. He carefully and respectfully placed them before the figure of the Kitchen God (恭恭敬敬放在灶君神位前). Ah-Si and Ah-Duo [Old Tongbao’s sons] went into the fields to pick wild flowers (野花). Little Bao chopped a lamp-wick into fine pieces and crushed the wild flowers the men brought back (把燈芯草剪成細末⼦子). Everything was ready. The sun was entering its zenith; steam from the rice pot puffed straight upwards. Ah-Si’s wife immediately leaped to her feet. She stuck a “silkworm harvest” paper (蠶花) and a pair of goose feathers (鵝⽑毛) into the knot of hair at the back of her head and went to the shed. Old Tong Bao carried a wooden scale-pole; A Si followed with the chopped lamp wick and the crushed wild flowers.

Old Tong Bao’s daughter in law will sprinkle the chopped lamp-wick and crushed flowers over the cocoons while they hatch, while the paper flower and goose feathers will be affixed to the trays on which the cocoons rest. Such actions can occur only after the incense has been burned for the kitchen god and the steaming water has indicated the proper time to check the cocoons. Like Xianglin Sao’s menkan and Mother Wang’s lamp, these object practices are studded with cosmological significance, as the text’s narrative voice makes clear: “This was a solemn rite that had been handed down through the ages! Like warriors taking an oath before going into battle. After

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51 Ibid, p. 16.
52 Ibid, p. 21.
this lay ahead of them a month of fierce combat, with no rest day or night, against terrible weather
(惡劣的天氣), terrible fortune (噩運), and whatever else might come there way!”

The use of objects as a means of gaining divine protection against misfortune is a consistent
feature of *Spring Silkworms*’ narrative. For example, when Old Tong Bao’s daughter in law is
preparing the trays the cocoons will hatch in, she must affix pieces of illustrated paper to them to
ensure their auspicious fate. One one paper is etched “a militant figure on horseback, flag in hand”
who is known as the “Prince of Silkworm Hatching” (手執尖角的人兒騎在馬上，據說是「蠶花太子). On another can be found a “‘tray of jewels the color of flowers” (花色的「聚寶盆). While the family throws all the labor power they can muster into nursing the cocoons so they will
spin voluminous silk, they understand such labor in spiritually imbedded terms: the success or
failure of the cocoon hatching ultimately resides in the will of a panoply of celestial beings. When
the family and their neighbors find that the silkworms have spun a large amount of silk, they
variously exclaim: “The Old Lord of the Sky has eyes!” (天老爺有眼睛), “The Silkworm Goddess
had protected this little village” (蠶花娘娘保佑這小小的村子), “Guanyin has protected us” (菩薩
保佑), and “The Ancestors have Souls” (祖宗有靈).

*Spring Silkworms* has long been understood as a work operating in an elegiac idiom,
detailing the loss of this spiritually intertwined world of object practices in the face of an
industrialized and nationalized modernity that is fundamentally alien to village life. In this reading,
Old Tongbao is ultimately a pathetic character, whose knowledge practices, with their combination
of handicraft production and spiritual divination, have no place in the new revolutionary world of
industrial nationhood. Yet the specificity of the novel’s language, presented in free-indirect prose

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54 Ibid, p.18.
55 Ibid, p.15.
which often short-circuits the distance between the reader and Old Tongbao’s thoughts, powerfully foregrounds an epistemology that both precedes and survives into the new time of the revolutionary nation. This sense of survival is powerfully figured in diverse signifiers that stud the text: lamp wicks and wildflowers (燈芯草), trays of jewels the color of flowers (花色的「聚寶盆」), goose feathers (鵝毛), the kitchen god (灶君神位), the Old Lord of the Sky (天老爺), Guanyin (菩薩), the Silkworm Goddess (蠶花娘娘), the Ancestors (祖宗), Qingming (清明), Dragonboat (端午), and the Grain Rain (穀雨). The text is a palimpsest of such markers, a heteroglossic matrix that is seen as defining life in the village.\textsuperscript{57}

Such markers presented such a diverse array of meanings that in the original print run of the story in \textit{Les Contemporains}, Mao Dun included on nearly two third of the pages of the story footnotes to explain terms that he used. Some of these had been written in what he called “Dialect Sound” (方音) and would be illegible for readers accustomed only to baihua prose. For example, on the page with the extended passage detailing the “solemn ritual” on the day of the silkworm harvest, Mao Dun included no less than three footnotes for his readers (see Figure 3.3). He explained that the term 烏娘 (lit. Dark Ladies) was a Wu dialect expression for silkworms. In relation to the term 穀⾬雨 (Grain Rain), Mao Dun explained that the peasants in the village believed that one had to harvest silkworms one day before or after the day, but not on the day itself. Mao Dun added that “regarding the reasons [behind this preference], I don’t know them.”\textsuperscript{58} Finally, he explained that the term 蠶花 (lit. Silkworm Flower) is a paper flower that is bought locally in the Zhejiang region. In relation to the entire votive offering that Old Tongbao’s family preforms, Mao Dun explains that “these superstitious rites differs slightly from region to region.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{57} The second work in the trilogy, \textit{Autumn Harvest} (秋收), also evinces a keen interest in the material and spiritual processes that surround the annual rice harvest in the village.

\textsuperscript{58} P.18.

\textsuperscript{59} P.18.

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cultural interpreter within the extra-diegetic space of the footnote, Mao Dun can’t help consign such village practices to the dismissive realm of “superstition.”

Ultimately, the trilogy insists on translating such heterogenous materials into the developmental language of Marxist critique. *Winter Ruin* (殘冬), the third offering in the trilogy, focuses on the difficult attempts the people of the village make at forging new social understandings amidst the complete bankruptcy of their world - not simply their economic poverty but also the hollowing out of all the ideas of moral reciprocity that once bound them to the landowning classes. Old Tongbao’s youngest son, Ah-Duo, is able to formulate a critique of gentry injustice in a systemic language that his father does not possess. Ah-Duo thus leaves the village to join the ranks of underground peasant revolutionaries intent on overthrowing the old landed order. The trilogy

Figure 3.3, Page 18 of Les Contemporains (現代):1:2, with Mao Dun’s in-text footnotes to *Spring Silkworms.*
ends with the young peasant violently rising up against GMD military officers stationed in the space that once served as the social and spiritual center of village life— the temple:

Suddenly there were wild yells outside the temple. The two men wheeled around to see their sentry, shielding his head with his arms, coming flying in the doorway. He was closely pursued by the dark figures of several men. The day officer dropped his stick and fled through the little door beside the throne of the earth god. No coward, the captain dashed for his rifle hanging off the clay Gongcao (功曹) idol. But by the time he got his hands on the gun, he was seized around the waist. A crushing blow from the handle of a hoe felled him dead to the ground.60

While the scene suggests that Ah-Duo rejects both the GMD regime whose foot-soldiers he violently knocks down as well as the world of local ritual symbolized by the earth god, the text may not be as foreclosed as its final image suggests. For whatever new social order that emerges after the peasant uprising will face the question of how to deal with the words, objects, and votive practices so powerfully foregrounded in the first half of the story. Old Tongbao himself refuses to give up his votive practices, even amidst his own economic bankruptcy. The socialist narrative machinery has an answer to Old Tongbao’s recalcitrance— the future belongs to Ah-Duo, who understands the systemic determinations that his “backward” father cannot. The text suggests that, in time, Old Tongbao, his generation, and their spiritual ideas will fade away, replaced by the Marxist consciousness represented in the figure of Ah-Duo.

Yet the work’s prose complicates its own teleological aspirations. For the studded material detail of the trilogy’s first section, in which the organic matter of silkworm cocoons must be watched over by paper figurines representing powerful gods, foregrounds a lifeworld that may not be so easily dismissed by Ah-Duo’s revolutionary certainties. Instead of an elegy for a dying village, could the text be read instead as a statement of potency— of the spiritually suffused local enduring into the time of the secular and revolutionary nation-state? Old Tongbao refuses to give his ideas up, even as his knowledge and experience are devalued by the revolutionary state of things.

60 See Mao Dun (1933b), p.27.
A Land Language Cannot Hold: Ai Wu’s *Records of Southern Travels*

Mao Dun was not the only leftist writer of the early 1930s to develop a more materially grounded and artistically skilled portrait of rural society during these years. For example, Ding Ling’s 1931 “Flood” (水), a tale of peasant survival set amidst the devastating flood that roiled 16 provinces in the country that year, also evidenced important formal ambition. The work withheld dense spatial and narrative description in favor of a tight focus on the intersecting rounds of dialogue of almost a dozen peasant characters, creating an oral cacophony of sound and voice across the text. Wu Zuxiang’s rural writing from this time period, most notably his “Eighteen Hundred Piculs” (一千八百担 1933), used an equally sophisticated approach to dialogue and characterization. In that work Wu limits his narrative gaze to the events of one afternoon, describing the meeting of members of a large landowning clan in their ancestral temple during a time of drought. Discussions, arguments, jokes, and long-winded digressions abound amongst the story’s over dozen characters as they discuss what to do with the remaining grain the clan has in its reserves. Each of the clan’s members scheme for their own private gain while, outside the temple, peasant members of the village starve. In presenting the reader with this tight slice of gentry life, what emerges is a pointed vision of social and moral decay amongst the rural landowning elite. Like the ending of Mao Dun’s own work, looming agitation of peasant violence outside the temple forecasts a revolutionary future to come.

Mao Dun, Ding Ling, and Wu Zuxiang certainly pushed revolutionary literature towards a more technically proficient representation of village life. In this sense, they avoided the direct didacticism of some of the cruder visions of rural revolution presented by their counterparts such as Jiang Guangci. Yet what none of these authors did was break out of the revolutionary literary paradigm all together. Ultimately, no matter how skillfully these texts dealt with formal problems such as characterization, plot arrangement, and narrative perspective, they were bound by a political unity that linked them coherently together. These stories took the class-based categorizations of
Chinese society provided by social scientific discourse of the time and translated them into a literary idiom. The texts thus arrayed themselves around the problems that social scientists made explicit in their own work: the social exploitation which defined rural Chinese society, understood as one part of a larger systemic whole. The literary representation of village life in the early 1930s was thus placed in a difficult position. Even the most sophisticated of writers who operated within the revolutionary paradigm were still bound by its thematic conventions: rural subjects were revolutionary agents to be; the experience of subalternity would eventually be translated into political solidarity; and votive offerings to spirits were figured as part of a dying life-world that was out of place in the new time of the revolutionary nation.

The most formally engaging acts of literary place-making from this time period were the ones which crossed, muddied, and confused the representational boundaries created by the dominant leftist paradigm. Such works possessed concern over subaltern suffering at the same time as they opened themselves up to localist detail, eclectic temporal rhythms, and forms of desire that were largely disconnected from socialist mobilization. I would like to end this chapter by highlighting one particular instance of eclectic localism that emerged from within the camp of the League of Left-Wing Writers during the early 1930s, representing something of a formal outlier for leftist writers during this time: Ai Wu’s *Records of a Southern Journey* (南行記). This work did not seek to technically perfect the revolutionary paradigm. Instead it went beyond that paradigm’s formal limitations while retaining its anti-colonial sympathies.

In the early 1930s Ai Wu was a full-fledged member of the league working for its literary journals and publishing outlets in Shanghai. Along with his fellow Sichuan born provincial and friend Sha Ding, he was interested in contributing to the progressive revolutionary cause via literary production. In 1932 the two young writers wrote to Lu Xun to ask him for advice on precisely what kind of literature was necessary to further the contemporary social struggle. As they explained to Lu Xun:
We have already written a number of short stories using the following materials: one of us is adept at using satire to depict the overt and unconscious weaknesses of the petit-bourgeois class with which he is familiar with; the other takes the subaltern people (下層人物) he is familiar with, those people who are outside the great assaulting waves of the modern, and writes about the intense desire for life they have as well as the muddled resistance they emit as they labor under oppression. We don’t know if works with this kind of content can make any contribution to the current age...Thus we must ask you for advice, for we don’t want our efforts in literature to be a waste.  

By 1932 Lu Xun had become a staunch advocate of proletarian literature, and in his reply to the young writers he re-stated many of the literary dogmas of leftist criticism: because the two young writers were from the bourgeois class they had to strip themselves of their individual vanity and throw themselves into the life of the masses. Only in that way could they gain the proletarian consciousness necessary to produce the revolutionary works that were suitable for the age. Given Lu Xun’s advice to the young writers, as well as their affiliation with the league and their clear admiration for its most important theorists, one would have expected their works to reproduce in fairly uniform terms the revolutionary paradigm that was the backbone of leftist literary work during this time period.

Yet, in Ai Wu’s work, an eclectic and very different literary practice emerged. *Records of a Southern Journey* was a collected anthology of short stories that Ai Wu had written in the early 1930s and published in a variety of league journals. Taken together, the stories present a loosely organized first-person narrative depicting the wandering adventures that an observant youth has while roaming about the borderlands between Southwest China and British-controlled Myanmar. In the collection’s preface Ai Wu placed the short stories in the context of his own floating, itinerant life. Born in Sichuan to a local school teacher, as an adolescent Ai Wu was inspired by the national

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62 In his advice to the young writers, Lu Xun made the class-identity of the author one of the major criteria of literary value. As Lu Xun put it, “the [letter’s] authors have a petit-bourgeois [class] stance. If they were militant proletarians, as long as what they wrote could be considered art, regardless of what matters they wrote on or what materials they used, their works would all have value for the present and the future. Why? Because the author’s own self would be that of a fighter (作者本身便是一個戰鬥者).” For Lu Xun, this subjective baptism away from their own class-position and its ideological limitations was the most important element necessary to ensure these two young writers produced socially valuable work. See Lu Xun (1932), p. 227.
cultural movements occurring in the country’s large east coast cities. Yet without the funds to attend any of the country’s prestigious urban universities, he decided instead to embrace a wandering life. Ai Wu claims that the works contained in his collection are a product of this unique personal background, which found him wandering through China’s southern borderlands. Along his journey he worked a series of odd jobs for menial wages, living in hostels and itinerant inns. During moments when he was healthy and not working, Ai Wu tells us that he would write a little something, jotting down notes regarding his travels and the people he met along the way. He did this for simply his own pleasure and did not manage to keep the jottings he made. When he was kicked out of Myanmar in 1931 for subversive activities against the colonial regime he went to Shanghai and dedicated himself to literary work. It was at this time that he set out to revisit the experience of his southern journeys, working them creatively into the stories collected in the anthology. Ai Wu’s preface thus emphasized that the tales which appear in his anthology were all made possible by the “floating road” (漂泊的旅途) he had followed.

The difficulty of a floating, restless poverty, an unmooring both physical and spiritual, pervades Ai Wu’s narrative, though it is offset at times by an almost picaresque sense of adventure. In the collection’s first story, “A Course in the Philosophy of Life” (人生哲学的一課), Ai Wu’s narrator roves about the city of Kunming in search of work. In wry tones the narrator details the cutthroat commodification that defines life in the inhospitable city, as everything from land, labor power, scraps of food, and spaces of rest are bartered over. At stake in the narrative is the question of what happens to the floating body who has no material support anywhere: who will take in and empathize with this impoverished sufferer?

While this concern for subaltern penury certainly seems to fit the class-based paradigm which leftist writers operated in, Tales quickly develops in more surprising narrative directions. For

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63 For a short biographical sketch of Ai Wu’s life, see Ai Wu (2009), p.1. For a more extended autobiographical offering, see Ai Wu’s own 1948 The Times of My Youth (我的青年时代).

his narrator does not rally Kunming’s subaltern people to demand labor security or social justice from state authorities. Nor does he directly address the audience to explain the class relations that are at work in the city and which produce the poverty that exists there. Indeed, there is no social revolutionary arc to the narrative material whatsoever. Instead, the narrator leaves Kunming and goes to the mountainous border regions on the southern edge of the old Qing imperium.

In the ensuing chapters the reader is thrust into a lush and dynamic natural world. The writing lingers on images of powerful rivers, soaring gorges, and fog-shrouded forests. This is a natural world in which revolutionary peasants in waiting or enlightened intellectuals committed to political mobilization are not to be found. Instead, the narrator meets vagabond warrior-thieves, drunken merchants, spritely mountain youths, doddering inn-keepers, catholic nuns in far-off monasteries, Burmese soldiers, Indian servants of British colonists, and other multi-ethnic and multi-lingual border characters. The stories “In The Gorge” (山峡中) and “On the Pine Ridge” (松岭上) present the natural world as a major element of the narrative material. Both of these stories take place within a mountainous river gorge in which individuals stand as mere specks against a soaring but brutal ecological tableau. In the former story, Ai Wu’s narrator has joined a gang of roving bandits, taking shelter with them in a temple in the gorge. The temple, however, is barely enough to shield its inhabitants from the physical ferocity outside:

At this moment, the river’s waves, which continuously hurled themselves against the top of the bridge, seemed as if they wanted to smash into the temple itself, sweeping everything away with them. The river’s wind was also greater than in past days, holding within it specks of dust and sand. Wave after wave rolled forth, as if they wanted to take people, cooking pots, and fire along with them. As the wind rushed forward, the quivering candles and the piles of fire were snuffed out, the light of the entire world extinguished. Everything went back to a limitless darkness.65

Here, the landscape is possessed with a kind of sublime power, at once beautiful and terrifying, whose ferocious winds are capable of snuffing out all source of human-crafted illumination. The narrator will go on to witness the bandits execute Little Black Cow, a young member of the group

65 Ibid, p.41.
considered too weak to go on with them. The narrator is shocked by not only the callousness of the bandits, but the utter apathy the natural world around them has to the violent death:

I cautiously lifted my head and looked through a crack in the worn out wall: outside there was a bright moon that had already thrown into relief, both softly and sharply, the shadows of the mountain peaks, the faces of the rocks, and the ridges of the forest’s trees. This only made the gloom and stillness of the gorge even more terrifying than at dusk. At the base of the mountain a swirling blue current smashed itself against the rocky crags in the river. In the moonlight it leapt continuously, spitting out silver-white spray...some shadows who seemed to be carrying an object arrived at the middle of the bridge. Suddenly, a shape that looked like a human body was cast into the river. The howling waves did not make any kind of special noise: at the place of impact there jumped up, momentarily, a bright splash about a meter high. It was quickly extinguished.

Little Black Cow’s body is swallowed up by the rushing waves, who are barely disturbed by the impact of his fall. A moment prior Little Black Cow was still a member of the bandit community, a young person full of youthful vigor, yet in a single instance his life is revoked with nothing but a soundless splash to mark the place of his death. The river’s waves go on rushing as before, completely undisturbed by the body they have just consumed, human life a seemingly trivial factor in the face of their callous power. Landscape here possesses a permanence that will endure regardless of individual human suffering, an epic space with its own geologic rhythms, against which human lives seem like a trifling phenomenon.

In “On the Pine Ridge,” the narrator has taken up work for an old mountain trader who enjoys drinking wine and smoking opium at night, sending him into inebriated reveries. The narrator learns from a fellow mountain resident that the old man drinks so much because of the shocking melancholy he carries with him: years ago his wife was violated by a landlord out of punishment for a theft he committed to stave off his family’s hunger. Seething with rage, the old man murdered his wife, children, and the landlord, fleeing his hometown and heading to these far away southern mountains in a kind of permanent exile. The narrator is not sure if he should believe the story about the old man, but he insists on breaking ties with him none the less, the potential

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66 Ibid, p.45.
tragedy of his uncertain past too much for the narrator to confront. As the narrator prepares to part, the old man is wracked with a kind of graceful sorrow:

I climbed up a mountain slope and turned back to look. The old man was still weakly leaning on the fence, watching the shadow of my back as I departed.

The quiet of the four mountains, the stillness of the pines. In a distant place misty with morning fog, the livestock’s bell rang softly.67

The final sentence aptly captures both the ephemerality of human life and its contrast against the permanence of the land. The livestock’s bell- the mark of human shepherding in these border regions- exists as a minute element within the the fog-enshrouded landscape, which swallows human sound easily. The violence that may or may not have been committed in the old man’s past, the mystery of what his life represents, fades all-together, swallowed up by the lush stillness around them. Indeed, it seems that the only peace that can be gained- in relation to the old man’s potentially violent past as well as the narrator’s own impoverished present- is offered by the land itself, which possess a geologic solidity that mocks the fleeting confusions of human affairs.

The social world in Ai Wu’s prose is not an extension of revolutionary desire, a kind of receptacle for political sentiment (as in Jiang Guangci’s fiction). Nor is it a social system whose particularities are mapped by the ethnographically precise language of the social sciences, and whose social contradictions are leading it inexorably towards popular revolution (as in Mao Dun’s prose). Ai Wu’s work thus possesses a kind of categorical ambiguity. While displaying a keen critique of British colonial violence in Burma, it avoids mechanically playing out a revolutionary drama that promises language and world can seamlessly conjoin, that diagnosis and remedy are but the provenance of the social scientist turned fiction writer. It’s sense of place is not national but ecologic, pressing against the boundaries of its own elliptical prose to express a sense of the border region’s gigantic and enduring presence. Land-masses speak of physical accumulations that make human affairs appear transient in their wasteful brutality. Human subjects emerge as specks on the

horizon, walking in a border zone between empires, languages, and social institutions. This is a world which possess its own geologic time that lies outside of, or at least on the border of, the political time of the nation and the categories of identity that are inherent to it.

“The quiet of the four mountains, the stillness of the pines. In a distant place misty with morning fog, the livestock’s bell rang softly.” Voice becomes enshrouded in fog, to the point of silence, as language fails to map the land around the narrator in ethnographically precise terms. The representational machinery that enables the system as ethnographic whole to emerge- the “life-giving” essence of the social sciences, in Mao Dun’s words- is momentarily forestalled. Instead, the land itself speaks in its own powerful cadences: water, wind, fog, and rain. Out of a leftist literary project, an ecological literature emerges.
Writers are the soul of the nation (民族的靈魂), the eyes and voices of the nation. There is not a single great writer who does not labor for the health and prosperity of his nation, just as there is not a single advancing nation (向上的民族) that does not love its writers. China’s New Literature Movement was produced out of the struggle of the great masses of the people for liberation, and as such from the beginning took upon itself this great mission of struggle...there is not a single successful [literary] work that is not a cry from the nation’s soul (民族的心靈的吶喊), revealing without any reservation the reality of the nation (民族的現實), sensitively pointing out the national crisis that has developed day after day, and encouraging countless numbers of youth to throw themselves onto the battlefields of the national struggle, enduring oppression without any fear.

It was with these words that the All-China Literary Circles Resistance Federation (全國文藝界抗敵協會) published news of the organization’s establishment in the New China Daily (新華日報) on March 27, 1938.¹ In the following day’s newspaper, further details were provided regarding the meeting that was held in Hankou to found the organization. At the meeting a political figure no less eminent than Zhou Enlai gave a rousing speech about the need to utilize the literary arts to strengthen nationalist consciousness amongst the masses.² Forty five writers were nominated to be executives of the organization, and the names were published in the newspaper the following day. The list is notable for the diverse array of writers that had been brought under the organization’s banner: leftist stalwarts such as Guo Moruo, Ding Ling, Mao Dun, Wu Zuxiang, and Hu Feng 胡风 (1902-1985) were joined by modernists such as Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905-2003), famed Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers such as Zhang Henshui 張恨水 (1895-1967), and non-aligned humanists such as Lao She 老舍 (1899-1966) and Shen Congwen. For the first time in the history of the

¹ For the original printed edition of the article, see 新華日報 (New China Daily), March 27 1938. For a re-printed version of the article, see Lou Shangyi, ed. (1989) Regarding Rear-Area Literature During the War of Resistance Against the Japanese. vol. 1, Literary Movements (中國抗日戰爭時期大後方文學書系, 第一編: 文學運動) pp. 3-6.

² For the original printed edition of the article, see 新華日報 (New China Daily), March 27 1938. A reprint of the article is available in Lou (1989), pp. 7-10.
vernacular literary movement in China, writers had seemingly put aside political differences to unite around one common cause: to use literature to help the people of the nation resist Japanese invasion and colonial occupation.

When the founders of the Resistance Federation claimed that writers were to use their pens to “sweep out the filth, selfishness, and greed that is buried deep within the nation,” they were harkening back to a vision of New Literature popularized in the early 1920s: the literary text as an ethnographic revelation of a people understood in ethnic-national terms, which could be compared to other ethnic peoples in a world of unevenly arrayed nation-states. The concept of 民族 was the overarching category for and by which writers were to imagine the literary project they were apart of. While the minzu no doubt had social and cultural deficiencies (“filth, selfishness, and greed”), its unity in this time of national crisis was understood to be of paramount concern, and was thus held out as the goal towards which all writers were to work.

This did not mean, however, that leftist writers who were members of the federation abandoned entirely the sociological paradigm of writing that they had developed since the late 1920s. While the announcement did not contain strident calls for class-analysis to be the foundational task of wartime literature, as Mao Dun and Qian Xingcun had argued only a couple of years prior, it still emphasized the cardinal role that the masses were to play in the creative process. As such, it urged writers to “encounter the blood soaked reality of life” by engaging deeply with mass struggles. When the announcement talked about the “education” the masses could provide to writers, a knowledge of real social struggle that could not be found in the realms of scholarly life, it was echoing a desire for cross-class engagement that was the core of leftist literary thought since at least the late 1920s.

What was clear was that the war only exacerbated the pressure placed on writers to construct localist narratives according to the logic of nationalism (國家 / 民族) and revolution (階級 / 革命). These tropes circulated incessantly in the wartime press and political discourse of the time.
period, with nationalism and socialism in coiled partnership. In short, both concepts continued to
make powerful claims on how local life was to be imagined and represented during the war
(1937-1945).

There were, however, a number of writers during this time period that resisted the urge to
wed literature and locality exclusively to the ethnic-nation and its classed revolution. This chapter
will examine three long-form works created during this time period: Xiao Hong’s Tales of Hulan
River (呼蘭河傳 1940), Shi Tuo’s Orchard Town (果園城記 1938-1945), and Shen Congwen’s
Long River (長河 1938). A large body of critical writing, both from the time period as well as from
subsequent generations of scholars, have interpreted these three works through the same nationalist
lens that the Resistance Federation used to formulate the meaning of literary work during wartime.
These works were thus seen as either presenting nostalgic invocations of the pastoral greatness of
the nation’s rural 民族 (Shen Congwen)3, or providing critiques of the fallen and backwards
culture (Xiao Hong4 and Shi Tuo).5

3 Critics- both then and now- have often touched on both the pastoral intensity of Shen’s writing, as well as the larger
overall concerns it invoked regarding notions of the people/nation (民族) and its development through time. For a
fascinating denunciation of Shen’s work from the literary left, one that claimed his writing was a reactionary form of
“pink literature” (桃红色) that trafficked in human nakedness and thus “softened the fighting spirit of the people,” see
153-158. Shen Congwen himself was not adverse, when presenting his work, to strategically engage with the tropes of
developmental nationalism. At times he claimed that his writing could help readers recognize the Chinese people’s “past
greatness and present backwardness (民族的过去伟⼤处与⽬目前坠落处)”. See, for example, Shen’s 1934 preface to his

4 The most notable treatment of Xiao Hong’s Tales of Hulan River from the period is the preface Mao Dun wrote to the
novel in August of 1946, which was first published in the magazine Literary Life (文艺生活) in December of that year,
and was later included in a 1947 monograph edition of the novel. In the preface, Mao Dun critiqued Xiao Hong for
writing a nostalgic work based on her childhood memories. She did so, Mao Dun argued, at a time of national crisis,
when writers should have been focusing on the themes of ethnic-national unity and mass revolution. For Mao Dun, this
revealed Xiao Hong’s own lack of revolutionary commitment. For the entire article, see Mao Dun (1946). For a
contemporary treatment of Hulan that frames the work completely within a nationalist-diagnostic paradigm, seeing it as
an extended critique of the Chinese “national character”(国民性) as localized in Xiao Hong’s own hometown, see

5 Like Shen Congwen, Shi Tuo was no stranger to employing the language of nationalist developmentalism in his own
authorial self-presentation. In his 1946 preface to the first published collection of the Orchard Town stories, he firmly
placed his work in a national-diagnostic frame: “I had the idea of using this small town to represent every small town in
China”(85). I will grapple with Shi Tuo’s own nationalistic framing of his work in the sections below. For a
contemporary treatment of Orchard Town that sees it as primarily concerned with national cultural decline, see Gunn
(1980), who argues that the collection “raises disturbing questions about the relationship of anyone in China to any
portion of that society...in story after story, reassuring notions of small-town China as stable, familiar, and restoring are
demolished”(82).
I would like to present a different reading of the works of these three authors. I will argue that their novels foreground eco-tableaus, exploring human practice within and amidst the sounds, colors, and textures of specific landscapes. In doing so, these works present a porous interfacing between the human and the natural world, in which the latter is as much alive and productive as are the human characters that interact with it. These works thus challenge the strict binarism between the human subject and their environment that has marked the history of philosophical inquiry in the Euro-American world. As environmental scientist Neil Evernden puts it:

Since Descartes, westerners have been content to...[posit that] not only are we not a part of an environment, we are not even part of a body. We, the “real” us, is concentrated in some disputed recess of the body, a precious cocoon, separate from the world of matter. Far from extending our “self” into the environment as the territorial fish does, we hoard our ego as tightly as we can.⁶

These texts challenged such fixed binarism, presenting aesthetic visions in which human practice and environmental phenomenon are intertwined, and in which rivers, gardens, trees, and fruits take on their own animate dimensions. These texts thus deepened the ecological dynamics that Ai Wu had begun exploring in his mid-1930s fiction. In doing so, they resisted flattening place into being nothing but a stand in for “national territory,” the backdrop of a drama between warring ethnicities who made abstract claims of ownership on it. Instead, place is seen here as an animate biosphere, whose water, land, fauna, and fruits offer both opportunities for, and impose responsibilities on, the human communities formed in their midst.

This chapter intervenes into two different fields of knowledge. First, taking the ecological dimensions of Xiao Hong, Shi Tuo, and Shen Congwen’s fiction seriously allows me to contribute to the “de-provincializing” of the field of eco-criticism, which despite its impressive output over the last two decades has struggled to integrate non-Western literary practices into its scholarly

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A recent critical reader on *East Asian Ecocriticisms* has begun to address what it terms as “the one-sidedness of information flows” that define eco-critical studies, a “one-sidedness that predictably and dangerously reiterates colonialist dynamics and structures.” As welcome as this intervention is, much of the work examined in the field of East Asian eco-criticism focuses on how contemporary authors throughout East Asia have responded to the environmental crises inherent to capitalist development since the post-war period. This chapter attempts to extend eco-critical inquiry backward into the pre-1945 period in East Asia, demonstrating that writers were sensitive to the continuum between humans and the environment at the very moment that “national development,” imperialist rivalry, and industrialization were irrevocably altering their physical worlds.

The second major intervention this chapter makes is in the field of modern Chinese cultural history, and in particular the question of how the War of Resistance (1937-1945) is narrated as an historical period. I write in solidarity with recent scholarly attempts at re-thinking the history of wartime cultural production by moving away from the entrenched binaries of nation vs. enemy, resistance vs. collaboration, trying instead to unearth the heterogeneity that marked the cultural

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7 For an introduction to the field of eco-criticism, see *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty and Fromm, eds. (1996). This volume is symptomatic of how certain fields of knowledge can be legitimately anti-hegemonic in their most immediate of contexts, but can also continue to reinforce long-standing colonial myopias regarding the non-Western world. The volume provides a much needed challenge to the field of “contemporary literary studies” for their exclusion of environmental perspectives, quite correctly pointing out that as late as the 1990s eco-criticism was not “a presence in the major institutions of power in the profession, such as the Modern Language Association (MLA)” (xvii). Eco-critical scholars “felt like misfits [in the academy], having no community of scholars to join and finding no job announcements in their area of expertise” (xvii). The volume acts as a corrective to this marginality, presenting a history of ecocritical thought from the 1970s onward and bringing together the most important texts of the movement. It is telling, however, that there is no discussion in the introduction or elsewhere of non Euro-American writers, languages, and historical experiences. What emerges is a vision of eco-criticism as a decidedly monolingual and American enterprise. The field has diversified considerably since then, in both scholarly and institutional terms. For more on this process of diversification, see Estok and Kim (2013).


9 For example, many of the works examined *East Asian Ecocriticisms: A Critical Reader* were published in the post-1945 period. This is not to detract from the important project the reader has launched, but only to suggest that the eco-critical dimensions of the works of writers in Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Mainland China who experienced the first waves of economic and political modernization (from the mid 19th century onward) remains an important field for exploration.
Nicole Huang, in particular, has examined how women’s print culture in occupied Shanghai (1941-1945) made a discourse of domesticity into the very center of cultural life in the metropolis. For Huang, “domesticity” was a mode of narrating self, war, and history that did not reify nationalist or fascist abstractions, but focused instead on the intimate materialities of the embodied everyday. Huang has thus challenged scholars to think about whether it is “possible to address the cultural significance of wartime occupation by considering how it might open up a previously unexplored spatial/temporal dimension in which a different kind of cultural landscape and way of life took shape?”

Huang’s notion of domesticity is one means of narrating community within the interstices of nation, class, and imperialism. I believe that the xiangtu fiction examined here, with its foregrounding of the sites, sounds, and textures of ecological emplacement, is another.

**Geographic and Literary Trajectories: The Material Context of Wartime Fiction**

Alongside military violence, territorial loss, and economic dislocation, the eruption of all-out war with Japan in July of 1937 also produced a tremendous geographical fracturing of the sites of literary production in Mainland China. In the 1930s Beijing and Shanghai had been the undisputed centers of literary life in the country. The former had its noted academic and journalistic

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10 During the war, the notion of collaborating with the Japanese authorities was anathema to the intellectuals who had fled Beijing and Shanghai and headed inland. As such, any writer perceived to have collaborated with the colonial authorities was subject to banishment from the literary world. One of the most infamous of such examples was Zhou Zuoren, who refused to leave Beijing in 1937 and in subsequent years held a variety of educational and administrative posts in the puppet government established by the Japanese, eventually becoming Minister of Education in 1941. An article in May 1938 published in the weekly supplement to the *Citizens Bulletin* (國民公報) reported on a cable sent from the Wuhan Cultural Circles Resistance Association denouncing Zhou as a “traitor” (漢奸) who was to be “banished from our cultural circles” (驅逐出我文化界之外). The cable was signed by some of the most prominent intellectuals of the day, including Mao Dun, Hu Feng, Feng Naichao, Lao She, Yu Dafu, Hu Qiuian, Xia Yan, Zheng Baiqi, Ding Ling, Zhang Tianyi, among others. After the war Zhou would be convicted of treason by the GMD government and spend time in prison, his written works subject to suppression. Literary historiography after 1949 reified the dichotomy of resistance and collaboration during wartime, becoming the dominant lens through which to understand the era. For an example of such historiography, see Wang Yao (1954). For the Wuhan cable to Zhou, see “Wuhan Cultural Circles Resistance Association’ Telegram Accuses Zhou Zuoren of Treason” (武漢文協會嚴電申討周做人附逆), first published in 公民公報. 星期增刊, reprinted in Lou (1989), pp. 599-600. For further discussion of Zhou’s actions during the war period and their subsequent interpretation by intellectuals and government authorities after the war, see Lu Yan (1998). For a full-length study examining Zhou’s cultural relationship with Japan throughout his life, see Chapman (1990).


12 For more on domesticity in wartime Shanghai, see Huang (2005).
institutions, while the latter’s concession-riven urban landscape provided jurisdictional cover for radical intellectuals and their publishing activities. The Japanese occupation of both cities in the fall of 1937 produced a massive migration of people towards the interior of the country, a steady stream of refugees that included writers, editors, professors, and translators. As a result of this migratory process, literary work was reformulated around a number of publishing centers: the Nationalist interior, where both leftist and non-leftists operated (first in Wuhan, later in the GMD wartime capital at Chongqing); the CCP revolutionary base camps, most notably in the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region and its capital Yan’an; and the British colony of Hong Kong, where writers fleeing the war were able to find editing and publishing opportunities in the city’s popular presses. In Shanghai, members of the literary community who stayed behind were forced to work in the interstices of Japanese censorship and ideological coercion. Despite the difficult conditions, a politically resonant literary culture did emerge in the occupied city.

This was the decidedly fractured social context in which Xiao Hong, Shi Tuo, and Shen Congwen published their fiction. Each responded to the cultural projects of the wartime period, and the nationalist and revolutionary ideologies that dominated the time, by developing works of long-form fiction dedicated to probing everyday rhythms in village and township life. Each of them produced their writing in distinct geographical spaces mediated by transnational and colonial dynamics of a variety of kinds.

13 For the creation of migrating refugees amongst academic communities from Beijing based universities, see Israel (1998), pp. 7-79. For a general overview of the social dislocation caused in various regions of China because of the Japanese invasion, see Eastman (1986) and Mackinnon, Lary, and Vogel (2007).

14 This period in Shanghai’s literary history is typically divided between an Orphan Island (孤岛) moment (1937-1941) and the Occupation Period (1941-1945). During the former, due to Japan’s mutual non-aggression treaties with Britain and the US, the foreign concessions continued to exist as legal entities. Concession authorities allowed Chinese writers to operate and publish resistance materials within their jurisdictions. In December of 1941, however, the concessions themselves were wiped out by Japanese invasion following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the entire city itself was folded into the Japanese political regime. Scholars have typically seen the Orphan Island period as a period where legitimate nationalist resistance was possible, often presenting the Occupation Period as one where only de-politicized, often feminine and domestic forms of popular publishing could exist. But as scholars such as Nicole Huang (2005) suggest, print culture during the Occupation Period was a rich space for cultural resistance on the terrain of the material everyday. For the distinction between Orphan Island and Occupation periods as a historiographical conceit that needs to be challenged, see Huang (2005), pp. 1-49.
After the outbreak of war in July of 1937, Shen Congwen along with other literary colleagues left Beijing, making his way to Nanjing by September.\(^{15}\) Realizing that the GMD were soon to abandon their capital, he quickly made his way by boat to Wuhan. While there, representatives of the CCP made Shen an offer to go to Yan’an, where they promised him stable publishing conditions away from the tumultuous Japanese advance. According to Shen, the CCP wanted to attract to their base camp China’s most important writers, who would provide ideological support for their cause. Shen was high on their list of desired writers, along with such noted cultural luminaries as Ba Jin, Mao Dun, Cao Yu, Lao She, and Xiao Qian. In keeping with his longstanding position of political non-alignment, and in accordance with his concern over creative freedom for writers, Shen refused the CCP’s offer. Instead, in May of that year, he made his way to Kunming, where he taught in the Chinese Department at Southwest Associated University (西南聯合大學).\(^{16}\) He would remain in the relatively stable confines of Lianda for the remainder of the war, returning to the coast to teach at Beijing University in the summer of 1946.

If Shen was able to remain geographically stable for most of the wartime period, Xiao Hong’s tumultuous personal trajectory made her an almost unceasing sojourner during this time.\(^{17}\) When the war broke out in September of 1937, Xiao Hong was in Shanghai, still reeling from the loss of her literary mentor and friend Lu Xun the year prior. Along with her longtime partner Xiao Jun she headed first to Wuhan, and before long left to teach at the People’s Revolutionary University (民族⾰命⼤大学) in Shanxi province. Personal complications ensued, as her already strained relationship with Xiao Jun dissolved. During this time she became involved with another

\(^{15}\) The biographical information recounted here is based largely on the information found in Shao, ed. (2011), pp. 685-761. Shen Congwen also addresses his wartime experience in the preface he wrote to an English-language translation of his West Hunan related essays of the mid and late 1930s entitled *Recollections of West Hunan*, translated by Gladys Yang. See Shen (1982), pp. 5-15, for more.

\(^{16}\) Lianda was an amalgamation of Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Nankai University, which upon the outbreak of war with Japan merged temporarily and moved to the country’s southwest, first to Changsha then to Kunming, away from the Japanese advance. The university operated for the eight years of the wartime period (1937-1945). For more on the history of Lianda, see Israel (1999).

\(^{17}\) Much of the biographical information included below is based upon Wang Yun (2003), reprinted in materials found in Shao Chuan and Peng Fang, eds. (2011), pp. 349-358
writer from the country’s Northeast: Duanmu Hongliang. In April of 1938 leading socialist writer Ding Ling tried to convince Xiao Hong to stay in Xi’an to participate in her Battlefield Service Corps (战地服务团), a group designed to do cultural popularization work amongst the rural people of the Shaanxi countryside. Xiao Hong rebuffed the offer, and also refused to go to Yan’an to work for CCP backed cultural organizations there.¹⁸

Instead, she headed back to Wuhan, where she married Duanmu in May of 1938.¹⁹ By January of 1940, Xiao Hong and Duanmu headed for the British colony of Hong Kong, where the Mainland literary-refugee community provided them with publishing opportunities and editorial work. Xiao Hong lived in Kowloon (九龙), where she kept in contact with fellow members of the literary scene and worked to finish her two major late-period novels: Tales of Hulan River and the wartime satire Mabole (⾺馬伯樂).

If Shen Congwen and Xiao Hong tried their best to avoid living under Japanese colonial occupation during the war, Shi Tuo decided to stay in Shanghai throughout the period, accepting the challenge of publishing in a city occupied by a wartime invader.²⁰ In his 1946 introduction to the first monograph publication of Orchard Town, Shi Tuo described the war years in the following terms: “I lived for eight years wandering in the infested city (流落洋场), like a dream and a nightmare, a soul at the bottom of a cauldron.”²¹ Despite this dark characterization of the time, it

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¹⁸ According to Qiu Shi’s article “The True Reasons Xiao Hong Did Not Go To Yan’an” (萧红不去延安的真实原因), Xiao Hong’s refusal to go to Yan’an was not motivated by her desire to avoid seeing Xiao Jun (who had gone to Yan’an in March of 1938), as many scholars have speculated, but rather by her concerns over the freedom of expression for writers at Yan’an and her refusal to attach herself to the CCP’s highly politicized vision of literary work. Qiu Shi’s article is based on interviews and information collected from two of Xiao Hong’s friends, Gao Yuan 高原 and Shu Qun 舒群, who saw her in Wuhan during the war. See Qiu Shi (2010) for more.

¹⁹ Following Japanese bombardment of the city, she headed for Chongqing in September of that year. More personal difficulty awaited, however, for while in the city she experienced a miscarried pregnancy.

²⁰ By the time the war broke out with Japan, Shi Tuo had carved out for himself an emerging role in the city’s publishing world. His first collection of short stories, Valley (⾕谷), was published in May of 1936 by the Cultural Life Publishing House (⽂化生活出版社) under the editorship of famed writer Ba Jin. In May of the following year the collection would win the Dagong Bao’s literary prize for short fiction. For an overview of Shi Tuo’s biography, see Liu, ed.(2009), pp. 7-25.

²¹ For a reprint of the preface, see Liu, ed. (2009), pp. 83-85. Quote taken from P.84.
proved to be the most creatively productive of his writerly career. Shi Tuo published in resistance journals that operated in the city’s concessions, and he was able to produce a highly regarded collection of reportage essays on life in the occupied city (上海手札, 1941). In July of 1941, he began working for the Soviet Broadcasting Station in Shanghai (苏联上海广播电台), serving as their literary editor until 1947. Because of the Soviet Union’s mutual non-aggression agreement with Japan, the station was able to operate throughout the wartime period, providing an economic base for Shi Tuo to survive. Throughout the war years he continued to publish the stories that would make up Orchard Town in a variety of literary journals, not just in Shanghai but in Guilin and Hong Kong as well.\(^\text{22}\)

All three of these authors were, then, in different geographical spaces during the war, ruled by three distinct political regimes: the British colonial authorities (Hong Kong), the Wang Jingwei puppet government backed by Japanese military power (Shanghai), and the GMD’s wartime political apparatus (Kunming). Their commitment to producing long-form works of localist fiction entailed their participation in a publishing network that spanned thousands of miles and cut across multiple zones of military authority. Despite being in the Nationalist interior at the time, in August of 1938 Shen Congwen would begin to publish Long River serially in some of the earliest editions of Constellation (星座), the literary supplement to Hong Kong’s popular Xingdao Daily (星島日報).\(^\text{23}\) Constellation was edited by famed Shanghai modernist poet Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905-1950), who had arrived in Hong Kong as a refugee from the war in May of 1938.\(^\text{24}\) In September of 1940, Xiao Hong began publishing Tales of Hulan River in Constellation as well, a

\(^{22}\) Shi Tuo would also produce during this time the long form works Ma Lan (馬蘭 completed in 1942), Wilderness (荒野 serialized in 1944-45 but left unfinished), and Divorce (结婚 first serialized in the Shanghai 文汇报 from September 1946 to April 1947). For more on these works, see Gunn (1980), pp. 77-107.

\(^{23}\) Long River’s print run began in August of 1938 and would finish in November of that year. See 星座第7期 (8月7日1938年) to 第111期 (11月19日1938年).

\(^{24}\) For more on Dai Wangshu’s publishing and editorial work during the war years in Hong Kong, see Lü Weiyuan (1985).
serial publication that would run until late December of that year. Shi Tuo would also first publish in *Constellation* a number of short stories that would be included in *Orchard Town*. Other stories in his collection found an initial home in the popular Shanghai-based Mandarin Duck and Butterfly journal *Phenomenon Monthly* (万象月刊), whose thirty-thousand a month print run made it the most widely circulated Shanghai literary periodical of the wartime period. Shi Tuo also found welcome publishing outlets in literary journals in the Nationalist interior, such as the Guilin based *Literary Forest* (文學集林) and *Literary Arts Magazine* (文藝雜誌).

In this way, the localist works of all three of these authors were first encountered by readers as discrete narrative excerpts in the wartime popular press, fictional fragments which built upon one another, day by day, as they appeared sequentially over the course of set print runs. These offerings were themselves but small elements within the complex ideological assemblages that constituted wartime print journals. While ethnic-nationalist resistance was never far off as a dominant theme in these journals, they were flexible enough to accommodate a wide variety of literary forms and social visions. *Constellation* framed its editorial mission in the following terms:

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25 Two important stories in the collection—“Orchard Town” (果園城) and “Ge Tianming” (葛天民)—were published in *Constellation*. For the former, see *Constellation* No. 81-83, October 1938, 20-22 (星座81-83期, 1938年10月, 20-22日). For the latter, see *Constellation*, No. 344-345, July 18-19, 1939 (星座344-345期, 1939年7月, 18-19日).

26 For more on the history of *Phenomenon Monthly*, see Huang (2005), pp. 58-64 for more. Huang calls the periodical “the most long-lasting literary journal of the war years” (58).

27 It was only in the later stages of the war and after, from the mid 1940s onward, that monograph versions of these three works began to be released to reading publics in publishing centers throughout the country. The first monograph of Long River was published by Kunming Wenju Publishing House (昆明文聚出版社) in January of 1945. Shi Tuo’s *Orchard Town* was published in May 1946 in the first volume of the Shanghai Publishing Company (上海出版公司)’s Literary Revival Series (文艺复兴叢書). Xiao Hong’s novel was published in monograph form in 1947 by the Huanxing Bookstore in Shanghai, an edition to which Mao Dun provided his famous introduction.

28 No doubt there were politically dogmatic newspapers in the Nationalist interior, both from the left (CCP) and the right (GMD), that produced textual sites where a fervent revolutionary or ethnic nationalist line dominated. Journals whose epistemological basis was the revolutionary nationalism of the CCP during this time period included the Yan’an based Liberation Daily (解放日报, 1941-1947), which served as a forum for policy announcements, base-area news, as well as literary works and cultural reportage of a variety of kinds. The New China Daily (新华日报, 1937-1947) was the official CCP organ in the Nationalist capitals of Wuhan and later Chongqing. Other base-camp journals were intended for a semi-literate, mass rural audience, such as the Yan’an based Border Region Mass Newspaper (边区群众报, 1940-1948). Major GMD journals who took up the mantle of the party’s ethnic-nationalism during wartime included the Central Daily News (中央日报). Founded in 1928 in Nanjing, the paper was a pre-eminent party organ for the dissemination of policy, social commentary, and party movements. It was based in Chongqing during the war years.
Recently our days have been hazy (陰霾). At night you cannot see a single star in the sky, and yet the lights around Hong Kong harbor are countless, seemingly stretching out like riotous stars. If you really want to see stars, in this present moment, in this hazy atmosphere of ours, you can only take these harbor lights as replacements for them... _Constellation_ has now been released onto the island of Hong Kong. The journal’s editors and readers of course wish that these hazy days will soon come to an end. Clear weather would be good, and a storm would not be bad as well, either would be happier than our present state. However, if we are forced to have the misfortune of having to continue to struggle in this haze, then the editors only small hope is that _Constellation_ can faithfully replace for our readers the stars in the sky, working with the harbor lights to take on the responsibility of providing illumination.29

The dominant image in this editorial self presentation- the task of providing some illumination (照明) in a moment defined by intense haze (陰霾)- is an important one for understanding how a journal such as _Constellation_ operated. Dai Wangshu did not seek to bound his journal to previously theorized ideologies of representation such as Revolutionary Literature (⾝命文學) or Nationalist Literature (國民文學). Instead, Dai chose the porous metaphors of haze, darkness, and dimly lit stars to frame the meaning of his journal’s mission. While war had produced displacement and rupture for the lives of many, it also produced a state of perpetual tension, a non-clarity (陰霾) regarding how the conflict was going to end and which force would ultimately succeed. In social spaces such as the “lonely island” of Shanghai and the southern port of Hong Kong, such a sense of uncertainty was reinforced by the overlapping and mutually antagonistic foreign forces (British, Japanese) that occupied them and set their political limits.

Yet commerce, labor, and quotidian habits of consumption (including the reading of texts) did go on as before. To that end, readers could find in these literary journals a cosmopolitanism of surprising reach. For example, in the space of one week, _Constellation_ could combine martial resistance literature about the greatness of the ethnic-nation with middle brow love stories, criticism of contemporary social mores, erudite philosophical musings, humorous personal essays, and

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29 See Xingdao Daily 1, August 1st, 1938.
translations of foreign literary works of a variety of genres. This cosmopolitanism included an expansive sense of global space and historical time, mixing not just reports concerning contemporary international events, but articles on the cultural history of various parts of the world as well.

A compelling expression of this global sensibility can be found in the August 5, 1938 edition of *Constellation*, which featured a translated article entitled “Russia’s First Newspaper” (俄國第一種報紙). The article detailed how, in the early 18th century, Peter the Great sponsored the Russian Empire’s first public news journal. The article then went on to provide a brief but compelling narrative concerning the newspaper’s social impact, including information on its annual print runs, the prices it sold at, and the languages it was printed in. Though the article admitted that from today’s standards the paper would be considered extremely “childish and base” (幼稚濺陋的), possessing neither headings (標題) nor editorial commentary (評論), it argued that on every page you could sense the traces of Peter the Great’s desire to improve his country’s economy, train its army, and strengthen its education.

What is fascinating about the inclusion of such an article in *Constellation* is not only Dai Wangshu’s editorial decision to inform his readers about 18th century Russian print culture, but also the physical context in which the article is found: placed next to a woodcut by Qian Gechuan 錢歌.

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30 For example, in *Constellation*’s first nine days of publication (beginning August 1, 1938), one could find an article by pre-eminent literary critic Mao Dun regarding the problems of censorship, democracy, and freedom of speech in the Nationalist interior; writer Yu Dafu’s critique of the international community’s inability to help Asian nations who had been the victims of Japanese aggression; an article by Luo Niansheng on the complex cultural exchange in the realm of words and everyday objects that occurred between ancient Greece and early imperial China; an article on the refusal of Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini to participate in the 1938 addition of the annual Salzburg music festival in Nazi-occupied Austria, precisely because he did not want to be seen as supporting the fascist regime there; an article by veteran May Fourth writer Xu Qinwen on the desolate condition that the war had left Hangzhou and its famed West Lake in; a theoretical discussion of New Literature and Old Forms by noted modernist Shi Zhecun; a humorous article on the pitfalls of being a theater critic by noted dramatist Li Jianwu; and a translated extract from a literary work by Maxim Gorky. For publication dates of such articles, see the bibliography.

31 Very little is known about the translator, Tang Xiru (唐錫如), nor about the original source material of the article, which is credited to 史脫备也夫 (a Russian name whose origin is unknown). What is known is that Tang did translation work for the Shanghai-based Liangyou Printing Company in the mid-1930s. He is credited with the translation of the book Byron’s Childhood (拜倫的童年) by Andre Maurois, published in 1936 by Liangyou. He is also credited with the translation of the work Journal of Summer Travels (夏游記趣) by Edwin Way Teale, published in Hong Kong in 1973.
that depicted a Chinese peasant carrying a shoulder pole with two baskets on either end, a child seated in one of them (Fig. 5.1). The peasant is framed within a village setting, with thatched roofed houses in the background and looming trees in the foreground. The shoulder pole cuts across the center of the image’s frame, anchoring the viewer’s eyes and forcing them to focus on the peasant’s stoic but resolute face, which stares directly at the viewer. The image is provided with an evocative title: “Towards which direction? (往何处去).

Figure 4.1- Towards Which Direction (往何处去)? by Qian Gechuan

A woodcut about the violent displacement of rural refugees in wartime China stood side by side with a translated article about print media in 18th century Tsarist Russia. The juxtaposition is
indicative of the plural nature of these wartime journals: concern over the displacement of rural Chinese subjects could be juxtaposed with articles invoking a longer international history of public culture and popular enlightenment. Time-spaces beyond China’s borders stood side by side with locally rooted figures and pressing contemporary realities, the different registers of meaning intermingling daily within the journal’s pages.

It was within this cosmopolitan print culture, which could move from immediate wartime realities to foreign pasts in the physical space of a single page, that Shen Congwen, Xiao Hong, and Shi Tuo published their narrative works. Their village stories contributed to this cosmopolitanism by, in a sense, stepping into the narrative gap left open by the evocative woodcut of the village other. By using the literary vernacular to creatively figure river towns and agricultural villages located far off in the country’s southwest and northeast, they placed readerly focus on time-spaces deep within the Chinese continent itself. Amidst a world in military turmoil, in which national armies carved up the continent in competing political jurisdictions, these texts emphasized village spaces in which botanical, human, and spiritual life intertwined. Returning readerly gaze to rural spaces did not mean, however, a valorization of a putatively pre-existing social and national unity. In fact, just the opposite: the people as ethnic-national whole could not be found in Hulan, Orchard Town, or West Hunan. Different structures of life were at stake in these literary works, whose ecologies and practices had not yet been integrated into a centralized, secular, and ethnically bound state.

**Gardens of Play: Fanhua (繁華) as Sensuous Refuge in Xiao Hong’s *Tales of Hulan River*\(^\text{32}\)**

Xiao Hong’s *Tales of Hulan River* presents a first-person narrative voice recounting parts of a childhood spent in Hulan county, a rural community roughly twenty five miles north of Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang province.\(^\text{32}\) Ever since Mao Dun’s preface to the 1947 monograph

\(^{32}\) For more information on Hulan’s social history and contemporary state, see the *Hulan Gazeteer* (呼兰县志), Hulan Gazeteer Committee (呼兰县志编目委员会), ed. (1994).
edition of the novel, critics have read the work through an all-encompassing hermeneutic of
diagnostic nationalism. According to such a reading, the work’s first-person narrator configures her
hometown as a zone of persistent historical backwardness, where fatalism, poverty, and superstition
reign. Though such readings often recognize the sensuous lyricism of the novel’s prose, they still
emphasize that the work is an exploration of the town’s self-deluding belief in familial authority and
ritual propriety. For example, Mao Dun praised the work as “a lyrical narrative poem (叙事诗), a
multi-colored painting brimming with local conditions (一副多彩的风土画), and a plaintive but
lovely folk song (一串凄婉的歌谣)” And yet, for him, the work was ultimately a searing
revelation of the historical backwardness of an entire community:

[The characters in the novel] are all slaves who willingly engage in traditional thinking, pitiful
insects full of complaint and self-remorse. But the author does not have an innocent attitude
towards them. She mercilessly critiques them, yet also empathizes with them. She allows us to see
how ignorant (愚蠢) and stubborn (顽固) these people who submit to tradition are, sometimes to
the point of being cruel...they all seem like the basest of plants (最低级的植物似的), as long as
they have a little bit of water, some soil, and some light- indeed, even if they don’t get any light,
they can still survive.

This reading of the novel was a convenient way of providing it political purchase in the period
during and immediately after the anti-Japanese war. While Xiao Hong had not written directly
about the wartime struggle, it could be argued that she did her part by painting a bleak portrait of
the bad, feudal society to be found in China’s countryside. In this way, Xiao Hong’s pastoral
lyricism was retrofitted into being a searing screed against national-cultural deficiency.

35 This national-diagnostic reading of Hulan River has, if anything, become more prevalent amongst scholarly
treatments of the novel in recent years. See, for example, Huang Xiaojuan (2003)’s “Tales of Hulan River’s Critique of
National Character” (《呼兰河传》对“国民性”的批判), in which Huang ruthlessly conflates the localist detail found
in the novel with national culture/essence as a whole (国民性). The article is reprinted in Xiao Chuan and Peng Fang
36 For a compelling analysis of how Xiao Hong’s first novel, The Field of Life and Death (生死場), was also
appropriated into nationalist categories of literature by critics such as Lu Xun, and the way the text’s gendered narrative
perspective subverts this attempt at nationalist categorization, see Liu (1995), pp. 183-213.
Yet such a reading of the novel is only partial at best, for it relies on an excision of an important amount of narrative material which powerfully complicates any attempts at confining the novel within a paradigm of national allegorical representation. Certainly, there is a bevy of narrative material that stages Hulan as a violent space defined by patriarchal social practices. The work can be divided into three major sections. The first finds the narrative voice moving through the social space of Hulan itself, taking the reader into the few thoroughfares and laneways that the town possesses. The town is described as ashen grey, remote, and sparsely populated: “Not a very flourishing place at all” (並不怎麼繁華). 37 We are given vivid descriptions of the pre-industrial modes of transportation (large carts pushed by horses) used to haul in foodstuffs during the harsh winter; the protuding bellies of under-fed children who live in small houses in darkened laneways; and the few businesses that dot the town’s streets. 38 The narrator repeatedly tells us at the beginning of many chapter headings that “my home was a desolate one (我家是荒涼的),” and it is this sense of desolation that hangs about much of this section of the work. 40 At certain moments, the people of Hulan are presented as in possession of a kind of primitive untimeliness, spectral presences locked in an unchanging form of social life:

37 See Xiao Hong (2009), p. 186.

38 The narrator’s haunting portrait of one of the children who live in these laneways: “There is no way of telling if this is a boy or a girl- no hair on the head, an earring hanging from one ear, skinny as a dry willow branch, but with a large, protruding belly, it looks to be about five years old. The child sticks out its hands, which are far blacker than any of the other four children’s- the hands of the other four are filthy black, all right, but at least they still look like human hands and not some other strange objects.” See Ibid, p. 204.

39 In this first section, the narrator provides a physicalized symbol of Hulan in the guise of a large quagmire of mud that dominates one of the town’s streets. When it rains the quagmire becomes slick and un-passable, threatening to bog down any animal or person that gets caught in it. “East Second Street had a big muddy pit, five or six chi deep. When it didn’t rain the mud was like congee. When it did rain, the mud would become slick like a river, and everyone in the vicinity had to endure its bitterness. The houses alongside of it would be filled with water. Once the water receded, if it was a clear day the sun would shine down, with many flies appearing around the houses. As the sun burned brighter the mud would become ever purer, as if it was being refined and you could extract something from within it. If it hasn’t rained for over a month, then the mud will become even more pure, as the water evaporates completely. The mud will be black and sticky, pastier than even the congee from a pot, stickier then glue... when it rained the pit became like a small river, very dangerous, one zhang deep, and if a person fell in they would drown.” All told, the image is a ruthlessly effective one for symbolizing the town in negative and dangerous terms- as a seething pit that can drown anything that happens to fall into it, despite their best efforts to struggle against it. See Ibid, p. 188-189.

40 Ibid, p. 259.
When they [the people of Hulan] return to their homes in the town they must carry on life as before; all year round there is firewood, rice, oil, and salt to worry about, and there is clothing to starch and mend. From morning till evening they are busy without respite. Nighttime finds them exhausted, and they are asleep as soon as they lie down on the k’ang. They dream neither of mournful nor of happy events as they sleep, but merely grind their teeth and snore, passing the night like every other night. If someone were to ask them what man lives for, they would not be confounded by the question, but would state unhesitatingly, directly, and unequivocally: “Man lives to eat food and wear clothes.” If they were then asked about death, they would say: “When a man dies that’s the end of it.”

In the third major section of the novel the narrator focuses on the grotesque occurrences that take place in the space of her large, rambling family compound. Her own family shares the compound with a number of laboring families whom they rent houses and workspaces to. Here, the majority of the narrative material surrounds the Hu family, who bring a child bride into the space of their home. Convinced that she is infected with the spirit of a wicked demon, the family proceeds to physically beat the young girl, thinking this will “discipline” (管教) her into being an acceptable daughter-in-law. What evidence does the Hu family have that the young girl is unfit to be a daughter-in-law? On the first day she was brought to the family the townspeople gossiped that she had a haughty-air (太大大放了) and “knew not one little bit of shame”(一一点也不知道羞). Eventually, Daoist priests are brought in to “cure” the girl of her demonhood, which only results in more rounds of physical torture. The narrator’s decision to linger on the physical details of the immense suffering of the child-bride, which eventually results in an agonizing death under the guise of her “exorcism,” seems evidence enough that the novel as a whole is largely concerned with the inhuman culture to be found amongst the people of the narrator’s compound (and by extension the town as a whole).

If there is a sliver of salvation offered by the text it is in its second major section, which focuses on the narrator’s relationship with her grandfather, whom she is often seen to be at play with in the garden behind her home. The narrative material these passages offer are entirely unlike

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the grey immiseration of the novel’s first and third sections. Here, the garden behind the house is presented as an ecologically abundant space of refuge, with myriad foliage, plants, fruits, vegetables, and a dazzling array of insect, bird, and animal life. The narrator uses the term fanhua (繁华) to describe the garden, denoting a kind of sensuous richness:

I pulled grandfather into the back garden. Once there, we were in an entirely different world. It wasn’t like the confined, narrow inside of our house, but was expansive, where people and the world were together (人和天地在一起), the universe seeming so vast, stretching so far, your hand unable to reach out and touch the sky. And what grew from the ground was so rich (那么繁华), you simply couldn’t take it all in in one glance, but instead simply felt slices of bright green in front of your eyes...Once I was in the garden I rushed forward without direction, rushing towards anything that caught my eye, as if something was there waiting for me. In fact, I did not have a goal at all. I just felt that within this garden there was not a single object that was not alive, it was as if my legs simply could not but run about.  

If the town is defined by a macabre mix of familial hierarchy and social isolation, the garden is its exact opposite: pulsating with life, vibrant to the point of sheer exhilaration, where “people and the world were together.” This solidarity is seen not only in the warm relationship that defines the narrator’s bond with her grandfather, but her unceasing fascination with the physical world around her. The garden is an eco-tableau that activates all of her senses, from the field of vision (“slices of bright green in front of your eyes”), to the realms of touch, smell, hearing, and taste as well. On touch and sound: “Everything that was touched by the sunlight was healthy and beautiful, and when I smacked the trunk of the big elm tree with my hands, it resounded; when I shouted it seemed as though even the earthen wall standing opposite me was answering my shouts.”

“On taste and smell: “I spotted a ripe cucumber and ran over, picked it, and began to eat. But before I had even finished, a large dragonfly darting past me caught my eye, so I threw down the cucumber and started chasing after it...There was a rosebush in our rear garden that bloomed every June and stayed in bloom until July. Each blossom was as big as a soysauce plate, and they were in such great profusion that the entire bush was covered with them. The fragrance of the flowers attracted tremendous numbers of bees to the rosebush, around which they swarmed with a great buzzing noise.”

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44 Ibid, p. 238.
46 Ibid, p. 234-239.
This is an ecological explosion, a cornucopia of light, touch, smell, and taste. The garden becomes a refuge from the socialized world within the house, allowing the young girl to remain distanced from the historical and social mores around her. For example, during the winter months the young girl discovers that her house has two attic-like rooms where the material detritus of the family’s history is kept, objects accumulated from past generations of family life. Within these rooms she finds elegant clothing accessories (strips of silk, pouches, sleeves, embroidered collars, etc.), mechanisms of commercial transaction (currency printing blocks), and odd and unexplainable curios (copper rings, Guanyin powder packages, etc.). These objects become thoroughly de-contextualized in the girl’s hands: she does not understand what currency certificates are, nor does she relate the elegant fashion accessories to the practice of marriage dowries, which was how the pieces of clothing were originally brought to the house. When she finds “a tassled hat worn during the Qing dynasty,” she tries it on and playfully tosses it aside, treating it not as a symbolic vestment from a lost political order, but simply as a material object whose rounded shape interests her for a moment or two before its physicalized contours no longer hold sway.47 This sensorially motivated scavenging becomes an enchanting game:

Everyday I moved objects out of that dark room, and every day there was something new. I would carry out a load of things and play with them till I broke them or grew tired of them, then go and get some more. All of this caused a lot of sighing on the part of my grandparents. They told me how old a certain thing was, that it had been in our home before my third aunt was even born. Then they told me how old something else was, that it had been brought to our home when my great-grandfather’s inheritance was divided up....as a result, these things in our house that had not seen the light of day for the longest time reappeared only because I had brought them out. Afterwards they either wound up broken or discarded, until they finally ceased to exist.48

For the elder generation, the objects are connected to a dense network of familial and social relations, each one imbued with a specific and lived history. But for the girl, they are odd material fragments, to be picked up at leisure and discarded when their novelty wears off. The difference

48 Ibid, p. 245-246.
between these two distinct modes of relating to the objects in the attic is perhaps best exemplified when the girl finds a wicker bracelet there. As she brings the bracelet our her Grandmother tells her that she was wearing that bracelet one summer when she encountered bandits on the road, as she was going home to see her own mother. The bandits took her Grandmother’s gold earrings but not the bracelet, for they thought it wasn’t made of expensive enough material. In response to this story, the young girl is unmoved, impressed not by the social historical meaning the bracelet has for her Grandmother, but simply the novelty of its physical appearance: “So this incident had happened some forty year earlier; no wonder I wasn’t aware of it! Yet here I was, wearing that very same wicker bracelet, so I raised my arm and twirled it in the air, which made it look like some kind of windmill as it slithered up my arm- you see, the bracelet was too big and my arm too thin.” In response, her Grandmother can only remark: “There’s nothing you won’t play with, child! You little good for nothing.”

If for the narrators in Yu Dafu’s “In Cold Wind” and Ye Shengtao’s “Autumn” the material detritus of the old gentry village home was a cause of psychic pain, here it has been turned into the playground for a subject not yet marked by the traumas of the social order itself. The capacity for the young girl to de-contextualize objects and turn them into sources, not of historically encrusted meaning, but playthings for the curious scavenger, extends even to the realm language and its textual transmission. At night time, the young girl’s grandfather recites to her poems from the *Thousand Poetry Classic* (千家诗), which she recites back to him with great delight. Yet, crucially, she does not understand the meaning of any of the characters that make up the recited poems, but instead judges them solely on the basis of the sounds they make:

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49 Ibid, p. 246.

50 The thousand poetry classic was a popular anthology of poems mainly from the Tang and Song periods, whose compilers remain a subject of academic debate. The editorial work is often linked to the Song Dynasty poet and government minister Xie Fangde as well as the editor Ming-Qing editor Wang Xiang. The collection’s 223 poems are in regulated verse (律詩) and quatrains (絕句), and were widely circulated for childhood reading in the Qing and post imperial periods. For more on the historical progeny and difficulty of ascertaining editorship of the compilation, see Chen (1987).
Grandfather set out to teach me the Thousand Poetry Classic. He had no text but instead relied completely on oral recitation. He would recite one line, I would recite one line...what the characters were, what their meanings were, I had no idea. I just felt that when I recited them they made wonderful sounds (只覺得念起來那聲音很好聽), so I happily shouted them (所以很高興的跟著喊)...grandfather would say, “that’s not a way to recite poetry, what you are doing is not called reciting (念詩) but simply shouting wildly (亂叫).”

The girl’s shouts produce a ruthless deformation of the signifying capacity of poetic language itself, where individual sounds lose their referents and poetic meter collapses all together. Social and pedagogical functionality fail to register in any significant way, stopped up in favor of sheer oral delight.

If the young girl cannot read the marks of socialization that exist in old objects and poems, she is equally as uninterested in the social rituals that define the space of her home, rituals that provide her family historical continuity with the past. For example, when her grandmother dies, she fails to understand the complex mourning rituals that occur in her home, with many generations of relatives arriving to participate in them. The girl is only interested in continuing to play in the space of the garden, and sees the mourning rituals as a potential disruption to that:

The more people who came to our house, the lonelier I got. I would walk into a room to ask about this or that, but it was all beyond my comprehension. Even Granddad seemed to have forgotten me. Once, after catching an especially large grasshopper in the rear garden, which I took to show him, he said without even looking: “That’s fine, that’s just fine. Now you go out and play in the garden, all right?”...Grandmother was now dead, and everyone else had already been to the services at the Dragon King Temple and returned; as for me, I was still playing in the garden.

Ultimately, the young girl’s riotous communion with the garden is figured not as a gradual socialization into a hierarchical gentry order, but an inability to read that order’s linguistic and materials signs. At least as far as such signs are imbedded in poems, old objects, and social ceremonies, the young girl seems blissfully unable to read them as anything but sources of material play. Far from being fully integrated into family, social, or national life, her mode of reading the

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51 Xiao Hong (2009), p.252.
52 Ibid, p.248.
world exists only at the level of sensuous impression, in which what is foregrounded is the 繁華 (riot) of rosebushes, bees, dragonflies, and cucumbers.

Published in *Constellation* in the fall of 1940, Xiao Hong’s text found solidarity not in classed revolution nor in the grandeur of ethnic-national history, but rather in the fanhua of the botanically immersed senses. This fanhua spurious deformed all socialized modes of hierarchy, refusing to recognize the marks of language and the narratives of history, replacing both with a direct engagement with the sights, sounds, and smells of things planted in the ground and flying through the air. Fanhua acts as a destabilizing presence in the text, interrupting the national-allegorical narration that cuts across the text’s vision of village patriarchy. As the narrative moves into the various rounds of torture that the childbride endures, it never returns to the vision of enchanted sensuousness that marks the second section. Nor, indeed, does it relay to us the story of the gradual maturing of the narrator into being a national writer or a public icon of progressive femininity.

If the text could only imagine its pre-socialized eco-tableau as possible within the space of the child’s garden, it begged the question: how could such a mode of being be embodied in the other spaces of Hulan, the ones already marked by the socialized orders of language, ritual, nation, and empire? The text is silent on that question. It provides the reader only the solace of the garden as an answer: “I pulled Grandfather into the back garden. Once there, we were in an entirely different world. It wasn’t like the confined, narrow inside of our house, but was expansive, where people and the world were together.”

**Village Ruptures: On River Monsters, Temple Storytellers, and Oil Merchant Songs in Shi Tuo’s Orchard Town**

*Orchard Town* presents eighteen tales set in a fictitious town whose most notable local feature is the dazzling orchard grove it possesses. The tales are narrated by the loquacious Ma Shuao (馬叔傲), who returns to his hometown to tell us about the varied people that reside there.
and the notable events that have occurred in the place, both past and present. Ma remains a curiously minor narrator throughout the stories. The narrative is not generally concerned with his own history, nor does he evidence much involvement with the narrative action that he relays to us. Rather, he stops in on old acquaintances in the town, walks amongst its rivers, laneways, and orchard groves, and describes to readers the ironic, tragic, and comedic fates of the people who live there.

Like the works of Lu Xun, Xu Qinwen, and Yu Dafu in the 1920s, Orchard Town stages moments of non-commensurability between its roving intellectual narrator and local life practices. The work thus dwells on a particular sense of animism that defines cultural life in Orchard Town, in which the physical and spiritual worlds are intertwined. As such, stories focus on the spiritual reverence the living owe to the rivers that dot the areas, where demons are said to live in the here and now; the power of oral performance to produce a legacy of ideas across cosmic borders; and the principles of reciprocity that should guide social relations, particularly between neighbors who exist in quotidian proximity towards one another.

Take, for example, the chapter “Ah-Ti” (阿嚏), which presents the narrator’s interaction with a boatman he has hired to punt him down the river that runs through the town. The narrator is at first entirely taken by the dense foliage, bold colors, and raucous sounds that define the eco-scape around the river, which is so beguiling that he feels as if he has left the modern moment all together: “In this space time did not exist, just like it did not exist in the forests of bracken and ferns in remote antiquity. You could imagine that you were tracing backward five hundreds years, one thousand years, even three sound years into the past...this of course was a thought that you could only have in Orchard Town!”53 When the narrator looks at the boatman who labors for him, he too reads him as a figure emerging out of antiquity, defined by untrammeled physical ferocity: “This boatman had a wide lower jaw, wide shoulders, and when he smiled he showed teeth as white as

snow. Simply put, nothing about him wasn’t rough (粗野) and strong (强壮). You can imagine he had the strength to best five rough and tumble youth just like himself.”

Taken in by the lush landscape around him, the narrator begins to absent-mindedly rock the boat. The boatman speaks up: “Mister, please don’t rock the boat carelessly...you simply- do you want to make us visit Ah-Ti; do you know that Ah-Ti is here?” Ah-Ti is a “demon” (鬼) who lives in the river around Orchard Town, with a small body the size of a sleeping child. After the boatman warns his passenger about Ah-Ti, the reader is provided with a brief history of the demon’s social relations with the town. The town first became aware of the demon when he got into a scuffle with a local boatman. The latter found Ah-Ti sleeping at the hull of his boat late one night. Angry that a demon would use his boat as a place of rest, the boatman kicked Ah-Ti deep into the river. The demon swam ashore and sneezed water out of his lungs, mocking the boatman’s ferocity: “You old bastard, why are you so angry...in the future your son is going to be nothing more than a provincial examination graduate, so what do you have to be so haughty about!” News of the ghost’s existence travelled through Orchard Town quickly, and other people began to see Ah-Ti along the riverbank as well. Stories circulated that he could be found riding inside the baskets of watermelon sellers late at night, or bewitching male school teachers and turning them into women on top of the city wall.

For the narrator, all such tales are examples of the simplistic nature of the people of Orchard Town. He goads the boatman to provide him more information about the current whereabouts of Ah-Ti, incredulous that someone could actually believe that such a water demon could exist. The narrator acerbically tells the reader that only the “innocent, optimistic, un-intelligent (没有頭

54 Ibid, p. 513.
56 The characters which make up Ah-Ti’s name (阿嚏) are homonyms for the sound of sneezing, and the “ti” character itself denotes sneezing. Thus, we are told, whenever a person sneezes in town people around him or her will ask who just kicked them, referring to the Ah-Ti origin story.
...commoners of Orchard Town” could actually believe that there is a demon living in the water. Yet for the boatman Ah-Ti is not mere superstition, nor is he an idea without material substance, a kind of tall tale to scare river goers. He is a physical living creature in the water, in possession of complex emotions and a distinct relationship to the town:

“You say [Ah-Ti] is downriver, is he doing business there?” I [the narrator] mockingly asked him.

The boatman thought my perspective was quite out of line (頗不以為然). “It’s not certain...why would he have to be doing business [downriver]? Please don’t make jokes, sir. You should know that Ah-Ti has always lived here. Having always done so, sometimes his spirits will be low (氣悶). When people have long-lived in a place they will all feel low sometimes, so it’s natural that Ah-Ti would want to leave here to travel a bit.”

Once I heard the boatman’s opinion, you could imagine how close I was to letting out a great big chuckle. “But you said that we would soon meet Ahi-Ti, old grasshopper?” I could not see the boatman’s expression, for I was sitting at the front of the vessel. But I believed he certainly thought my words were ridiculous, his eyes widening in astonishment.

“I said we will go see Ah-Ti if we are not careful, if we rock the boat too much,” he said. “Why wouldn’t we be able to see Ah-Ti? Orchard Town is his hometown. If he’s feeling happy, naturally he would come back.”

The exchange captures an essential point of difference between the narrator and the boatman. The narrator’s questions are insulting precisely because they see Ah-Ti’s relationship with the town, indeed the very possibility of his existence in the water, as sheer nonsense. The boatman keeps his composure in the face of his customer, his disdain at the latter’s sarcastic jokes conferred only by the widening of his eyes. He tries to maintain a restrained tone, despite his customer’s antipathy for his own understanding of the material life of the river. On the matter of the demon’s existence the boatman is absolutely clear: “Please don’t make jokes, sir. You should know that Ah-Ti has always lived here.”

For the boatman Ah-Ti is an essential attribute of the life-world that defines Orchard Town, existing in the same time-space as the local residents themselves, every much a part of the town’s

57 P. 516.
58 P. 517.
landscape as its rivers, trees, and orchard groves. The fact that Ah-Ti possesses emotions (“his spirits are low”), as well as the need for companionship and travel, is not in the least astonishing. Indeed, it is perfectly logical, given that the demon is a sentient being whose home is at the bottom of the river, capable of feeling both connection to this space as well as boredom within it.

This short chapter does not provide a deeper examination of how the townspeople seek to live in comfortable relations with the river-demon. Yet the story does allow the boatman to insist on his own understanding of Ah-Ti: “Please don’t make jokes sir. You should know that Ah-Ti has always lived here.” As such, it allows for the expression, however muted, of the boatman’s understanding of the world around him: one rooted in the materiality of the river and the inherited oral culture passed down amongst the townspeople, which includes stories of Ah-Ti as a sentient being within the river itself, a physical force to be respected rather than mocked. This is a worldview that disrupts the narrator’s casual secularism, blurring boundaries between the living and the ghostly, the physical world of the river and the powerful abilities of demons.

Other narratives in Shi Tuo’s collection further explore the moral and imaginative dimensions of the oral culture of the townspeople. One particularly important story in this respect is “The Storyteller” (說書人), in which the narrator presents a moving lament for the town’s storyteller. This social figure regaled generations of townspeople with narratives he told outside the Temple of the City God (城隍庙). The narrator lovingly recalls the sonic power invoked by the storyteller’s performances:

In truth, we were all enchanted. He would speak from early evening all the way until darkness. The first watch would sound, and then following that the great clock in the temple, and then finally the cloud-clapper on top of the far off drum-tower. After all of these great, familiar sounds rang out, when the stalls of the small peddlers had all been shuttered, and the temple was completely quiet, there standing in the darkness would be the storyteller and his listeners. In fact, the only thing that was left was the great thief from hundreds of years ago Liu Tang (六唐) or the boorish Wu Song (武松), who never really did exist...even as time passed, in this small town, situated in a corner of the
world nobody paid any attention to, the storyteller still hasn’t stopped. He still has his tattered fan, his wooden clapper, and his small basket for collecting money.59

The storyteller is a figure at once intensely local and yet able, through his performative gestures, to seemingly transgress temporal boundaries, conjuring up martial heroes from the historic past to fill the darkened square in front of the temple night after night. Liu Tang and Wu Song are both characters from the famous Ming Dynasty vernacular novel The Water Margin (水浒传), who each in their own way exhibit martial valor and loyalty to their outlaw brethren.60 Along with The Water Margin, the storyteller also includes in his performances tales from works such as Fengshen (封神), Sui-Tang (隋唐), Qixia Wuyi (七侠五义), and Jingzhong Zhuan (精忠传), all examples of popular vernacular narrative of the imperial period.61 Such narratives emphasized notions of justice

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59 Ibid, p 534.

60 Wu Song’s most famed moment in The Water Margin emerges in Chapter 22 of the work, where he demonstrates great courage by being willing to pass a mountain ridge alone at night that is stalked by a tiger who has killed many travelers. After confronting the bloodthirsty tiger and killing it with his bare hands, he is celebrated by the local community and given the position of lieutenant in the local yamen. Offered strings of cash by grateful wealthy families in the district, he donates this financial reward to a group of hunters who had incurred the local magistrate’s wrath by their inability to kill the tiger. Wu Song is thus celebrated as virtuous and just, someone who “must have eaten the heart of a wolf, the gall bladder of a leopard, and the legs of a lion”(309) in order to display the courage he did. After more adventures in which he gets embroiled in conflicts with corrupt officials and scheming family members, he eventually joins the outlaws at Liangshan Marsh. For more, see Shih (1968), pp. 300-464. Liu Tang, nicknamed the Red Haired Devil, first appears in chapter 13 of the work. He hatches a plan with the mighty warrior Chao Gai to rob the Grand Secretary Liang of the Northern Capital of one hundred thousand strings of cash worth of jewels which he is sending to the Eastern Capital to present to his father in law. Believing the government to be corrupt and the goods to be ill-gotten, Zhao agrees to the plan, rounding up five other characters to help carry it out. After executing the robbery, the outlaws flee to Liangshan Marsh. For more, see Shih (1968), pp. 156-269.

61 Fengshen refers to the Fengshen Yanyi (封神演義), a 16th century, one hundred chapter vernacular novel attributed to Xu Zhonglin. Set in the Shang dynasty, the work features deities, spirits, and demons, telling he tale of the overthrow of King Zhou, the last ruler of the Shang, by Ji Fa, the founder of the Zhou dynasty. For more, see Gu (1992). 隋唐 refers to 隋唐演義, a Qing dynasty vernacular novel by Chu Renhuo, told in a performative, storytelling style, that dramatized the history of the Sui and Tang dynasties. Though published during the Kangxi reign, the novel built on a long history of drama, novels, storytelling books, chuanqi tales, and official histories about the Tang and Song periods to create its narrative. For more, see Chu (1987) for more. Qixia Wuyi, also known as Zhonglie Xiayi Zhuan (忠烈俠義傳), is a 120 chapter novel published during the Guangxu Reign (1875-1908) reign of the Qing dynasty, based on storyteller Shi Yukun (石玉昆)’s sung-ballads (唱本). The story’s revolve around the Song dynasty official Bao Zheng, who with the help of a group of knight-errants (遊俠) fights crime and evil-deeds. See Shi (1989) for more. For a fascinating discussion of not only the various versions of the work published in the late-Qing period, but their use of onomatopoeia as a means of creating a sensorial lively (热闹) reading experience, see Keulemans (2007). Finally, Jingzhong Zhuan refers to a series of narratives that storytellers performed based on the the Qing dynasty novel Shuo Yue Quanzhuan (説岳全傳), published during the Qianlong reign. The work detailed the exploits of Yuefei (岳飛), the legendary Southern Song military official who led expeditions against the Jin dynasty in the 12th century. For more on the complex textual history of Yue Fei based vernacular fiction that the novel 說岳全傳 built off of, see Zou He (2011). For a study of Yue Fei as a foundational figure in the Chinese cultural imaginary, see Wilhelm (1962).
that revolved around ethical action between ruler and ruled, as well as loyalty to friendships forged through virtuous struggle against injustice. Within the sensuous listening experience produced by the storyteller, martial valor and ethical reciprocity become paramount ideas. As the narrator puts it, in addressing the legacy that the storyteller left behind: “Did you ever once think...about how you blew vital air into this stilted world, how amidst this common human life of ours you created a different universe, one of martial courage (狭义勇敢), which the common people could never hope to reach?”

Unlike his portrait of the boatman, the narrator does not read the storyteller as an example of residual ignorance diluted by traditional narratives. Instead, the brief chapter becomes a moving elegy for the ferocity of the storyteller’s performances, which could conjure up an entire moral world of chivalrous struggle through the use of his body alone:

“When we look back upon it, was there anything that could more powerfully move us? When everything that once made us delighted and pained has all past...the only thing left in our ever so foolish hearts are these characters, some of whom were castigated and others who never existed at all.”

By paying attention to the careful details of the storyteller’s performances- the songs he sings, the sounds he employs, the movements of his own body- the chapter allows him to emerge as a figure of profound skill, neither deluded citizen nor potential revolutionary. He is, rather, a performer

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63 Ibid, p. 534.
64 The narrator’s description of the storyteller’s performances: “He spoke of Wu Song on Jingyang Ridge Fighting the Tiger, he spoke of Li Kui jumping down from the top of the restaurant, he spoke of Crucifix Ridge and the Cheerful Forest, Daming Palace and Bajia Village. His voice was not high and he often coughed, and yet it was very clear. At certain times he would even roar like Lu Zhishen and shout like the bandits. He used his fan to strike, prick, cut, and chop. When he reached the critical point of a story he would strike out with his wooden-clapper. Each time you heard a story you would give him one or two copper coins.” See Ibid, p. 533.
with mastery over a narrative store-house, one whose legends, fantastical feats, and moral struggles long pre-dated modern Chinese nationalism.\(^{65}\)

Oral performance amidst the non-national everyday is further glimpsed in two other chapters in the work: “Lamp” (灯) and “Mister Postman” (邮差先生). In “Lamp”, the reader is provided an onomatopoeic vignette regarding the town’s lamp-oil salesmen. He shoulders his carrying pole every evening and walks through the town’s laneways, putting on a quotidian performance of his own by hitting his wooden clapper to announce his arrival: “Lamp Oil for Sale! Clap, clap, clap!”(537). He slowly walks through the lane ways, stopping at the doors of families he has known for years. His aged hands ladle oil into their lamps, and he sometimes sells them a few other household items (matches, incense, candy, etc.). With his longtime customers he complains about the base price of his commodities, which of course are always going up, and jokes with them about settling their outstanding debts. When he comes across an old lady who has just welcomed a young wife into her home, he enthusiastically congratulates her:

“You certainly have a happiness that must have come from burning lots of incense in a previous life. Old mistress, to take such a wife, you’re going to need new lamp oil every two days!” He took one look at the lamps [in her doorway] and knew instantly that there was a new bride in the home.

The old lady was so happy that tears almost fell from her eyes. “She can work (会做活呢),” she retorted, “now just give us the usual amount!”

“The gods are just (老天爷是见证).” He vowed vigorously.\(^{66}\)

What is telling about the exchange is the shared way of reading object and spiritual life that exists between the salesman and the old lady. For the oil salesman, the marriage is a confirmation that the gods do look righteously on common people. For him, there is some justice after all in the cosmic

\(^{65}\) C.T Hsia describes the cultural and moral world of the novel in the following terms: “The more memorable heroes inhabit by and large a picaresque world of military officers and yamen officials, merchants and innkeepers, thieves and prostitutes, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests, who constitute a far more diversified and vibrant human landscape than the world of the Three Kingdoms...a hero (hao han, good fellow) can always tell his kind from the bad fellows because of the latter’s failure to observe the hero’s code...though the heroic code endorses every Confucian virtue, it actually abolishes finer ethical distinctions by insisting that one must above all follow the dictates of friendship or i [義].” See Hsia (1996), p. 86.

\(^{66}\) Shi Tuo (1946), p. 538.
order around them. While the old lady’s claim that the new wife “can work” may at first seem to reduce the bride to nothing but an object of household labor, it is uttered as a retort to the oil salesman’s vigorous celebration of the old lady’s household. Its warm tone denotes the respect the old lady has for the young wife and the prominent role she will play in their home. The idea of the spiritual righteousness of the gods is, for both the old lady and the oil seller, a belief untinged with irony or historical critique. Like Ah-Ti for the boatmen before them, intervention in human affairs by non-human sentients (be they ghosts or gods) is an integral part of the way the oil seller and the old lady read the world around them. Like Xianglin Sao before them, this is a vision of the world in which karmic accumulation has important consequences in the here and now: “You certainly have a happiness that must have come from burning lots of incense in a previous life. Old mistress, to take such a wife, you’re going to need new lamp oil every two days!” In providing us such dialogue, the work stages the way such spiritual ideas get woven into everyday patois, becoming a casual idiom shared between neighbors in their jokes with one another. The modest detailing of their commercial routine also emphasizes the face-to-face world they exist within, one informed by concerns as mundane as the need to refill lamp oil in the evenings and as cosmic as the intervention of the gods into their own lives.

In “Mister Postman,” readers are provided with a final vignette of quotidian practice. Here, one witnesses a moment of transition, where the village subject immersed in local rhythms becomes a national subject in possession of a larger sense of geographic belonging. The short chapter details the ambling rhythms of the town’s postman, making his daily rounds delivering letters to people’s doors:

He moved about on the wide, open street, where few people were walking. He thought that if he encountered a pig being led by its mother across the street, he would have to walk around them from the side. The small town sun shined on his grey hair and on his back, which was covered in a black-cotton mandarin jacket. He happily kicked dust upward with his feet, which fell on his white cottons socks and the belted bindings around his legs. In this small town he did not have to wear a
specialized uniform...the people who wrote letters did not all know him, in fact you could say that none of them would ever think of him, but that was no matter, for he knew them.67

Once again, the reader encounters a figure whose social world is mediated by face to face relationships, as he takes great pleasure in delivering the letters to the townspeople and, amidst doorstep chatter, hearing about what may be inside of their correspondence. Though he stands as a small, if vital, part of a vast national mailing system, his cognitive mapping of the world beyond Orchard Town is itself not coterminous with any form of national geography. The far off origins of the letters that arrive in his office amuse him with their distanced origins:

“This one came from very far off!” He couldn’t help but thinking when he happened to glance at a letter from Yunnan or Gansu. He had never thought before of places that were further than those. In fact, he didn’t really know were Yunnan or Gansu were— who taught them to be so far away from here, so far that all your life you didn’t care to eat their great dishes or even their rice?68

While some readers may interpret his disinterest in the world outside of Orchard Town as a kind of quaint geographical introversion (if not ignorance), it is precisely the difficulty of defining how he maps the world that is of interest here. Like the oil seller, the postman takes comfort in face-to-face practices of direct social interaction, where there is always time to inquire after neighbors concerning their loved ones and social relations: “He wore a dignified and reposed expression, imbued with a particularly graceful bearing. If you looked at him you would think he had just gone out for a stroll. Honestly speaking, why did he need to feel hurried?”69 Yet his letter carrying makes textual communication across space possible, a key precondition for national consolidation. As scholars have long noted, the administering of postal services for all citizens (rather than just imperial administrators) was a key part of nation-state building throughout the world.70 The text thus presents to us the minjian subject-in-transition: the nation is scripturally invoked by the

69 Ibid, p. 540.
70 For an examination of efforts during the late-Qing period to build a national postal system, see Tsai (2015). For the postal service as an important part of national consolidation in the United States of the 19th century, see Henkin (2006).
battered letters in his hands, on the other end of which are the student-intellectuals writing back from universities in the cities.\textsuperscript{71} In giving the letter to the families waiting in their homes, the remote village is materially linked, however tenuously, with the larger community beyond.

**All Social Problems are Textual Problems: Shen Congwen’s Literary Project Amidst Wartime**

The writer who did the most to explore cultures of place, both ecological and social, within his fiction was no doubt Shen Congwen. Amongst all writers of the wartime period who turned to localist representation, Shen went furthest in questioning whether or not the New Literature, as a text-based technology for producing modern readerly subjects, could adequately represent the complex matrix of human, natural, and spiritual elements that made up village communities in Mainland China. Shen made one such regional matrix- the river region of West Hunan (湘西) where he had grown up before gaining literary fame in Beijing in the late 1920s- the focus of his own fiction.\textsuperscript{72} How to use the vernacular literary language to adequately represent the forms of human and non-human life that existed in the region was a concern that coursed through much of his fictional writing and essays of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{73} *Long River* (長河) was perhaps his most evocative attempt at working out the implications of this dilemma.

From the 4th to the 7th of August, 1938, as something of a preface to the publication of *Long River*, Shen Congwen published in *Constellation* a three-part essay entitled “Discussing Progress” (談進步). The day after the final section of the article appeared, *Long River* began its

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\textsuperscript{71} When he hears a parent complaining over the progress of his son’s schooling, he is filled with a rueful happiness: “He would listen to something he had heard countless times before- a kind, hardworking old person complain about his beloved son. The man’s heart was full of good intentions, so he couldn’t help but laugh” (540).

\textsuperscript{72} For a detailed overview of Shen Congwen’s biography and literary-work, see Kinkley (1987). For a reading of Shen Congwen’s West Hunan centered fiction as a form of “imaginary nostalgia,” see Wang (1992).

\textsuperscript{73} In addition to *Long River* (first published in 1938), Shen published a formidable amount of material throughout the 1930s centered around West Hunan as a social and imaginative region, including a variety of short and long-form fiction, as well as autobiographical essays, letters, and travelogues. The most notable of these works include *Border Town* (邊城), a highly-praised novel which began to be serially published in the National Weekly News (國聞週報) in January of 1934; *The Autobiography of Shen Congwen* (沈文自傳), first published in 1934; *Notes on Travels in West Hunan* (湘行散記), a collection of essays first published in 1936; and *West Hunan* (湘西), another collection of essays on the region published in 1939. For a bibliographical overview of Shen’s literary output, see Shao, ed.(2011), *Shen Congwen Research Materials Vol.2* (沈從文研究資料 vol.2), pp. 762-783.
serial publication in the journal, a process which lasted until November of that year.\textsuperscript{74} As a device that would frame readerly expectations regarding the novel, Shen’s article raised issues that went to the very core of the New Literary mission itself.\textsuperscript{75} Shen argued that in the pre-modern past, in China as in other parts of the world, religion (宗教) had used powerful symbols (符號) to invoke awe, dread, and fear in its subjects. With the advent of writing, religion employed characters (文字) in order to produce classic texts (經典) which expressed essential tenants regarding various systems of faith. Such texts possessed a “spiritual aura” (神性) which demanded reverence from people. In the modern period, however, as religion and its classical texts lost their emotive power, a new dogma made use of the power of textuality to evoke emotion: politics (政治).

For Shen, politics had become a new religion in the Chinese republic, with drastic consequences for the fate of modern systems of writing in the country:

\[\text{In the modern period\]} an idea once again emerged: literature (文學), in whatever situation it finds itself, should become classical (都應該成為經典). The content of this classicism must express contemporary political and theoretical ideas. In other words, writing can express \textit{Dao} (文可載道), literature must also express \textit{Dao} (文學也要載道)...\textit{[a form of writing]} that takes capitalism as its opponent becomes “Socialist Literature” (社會主義文學); one that takes struggle against the aggression of another country and people becomes “Nationalist Literature” (民族主義文學) (or

\textsuperscript{74} While Shen would publish a version of the novel serially in the Xingzuo in the summer and fall of 1938, it was not until 1945 that the work would be published in monograph form by the Kunming Cultural Publishing House (昆明文聚出版社). The 1945 monograph version, which has become the standard version of the novel published in all subsequent editions, is over 3000 characters longer than the serial-edition published in 1938. Due to the novel’s critical treatment of the GMD’s New Life movement, as well as the negative manner in which it depicts its monopolistic rule, Shen had to heavily edit his novel in 1938 in order to pass through wartime censors. The tortured process of navigating the GMD’s wartime machine for literary censorship, which entailed multiple re-writings of the novel, is directly addressed in Shen’s 1943 preface to the work, when he stated that “evaluated from the perspective of the principles of the current system of censorship (審查), the honesty of the work (作品的忠實) meant that it was unavoidable that it would infringe upon certain taboos (便不免多觸忌諱), making it relatively easy for it to become a valueless undertaking. As a result, the work had to be first published in Hong Kong, but part of it was removed, to the point that the work was not cohesive from beginning to end. When last year I went to rewrite and publish it once again, there was still a section of it that could not be published. When I set out to publish it in Guilin and it was sent to the authorities, the parts under inspection were all considered to have inappropriate thought (思想不妥), and they were all removed. Luckily, some friends stepped in and had it sent to Chongqing to be re-examined, where they added the parts that had been removed and I was able to return it to the printers”\textsuperscript{8}. Shen had originally planned to write \textit{Long River} as a three-part saga examining the effects of militarism, civil war, and modernizing state initiatives on West Hunan. The difficult censorship of the work’s first part, combined with the highly politicized atmosphere for publishing both before and after 1945, worked to ensure that Shen never completed his planned second or third parts. For more, see Kinkly (1987), pp. 245-249.

\textsuperscript{75} A reprint of \textit{Discussing Progress} is available in Shen (2002b), pp. 479-488.
Fascist Literature (法西斯主義文學). The two seem totally different on the surface, but in fact are the same: both demand that literature ally itself intimately with prevailing political and theoretical views. They demand literature’s social function and value.  

Though Shen rejected such dogmatic conceptualizations of writing, he did not do so because he envisioned literature as a creative project with no social import. In fact, it was precisely because the dogmatic suturing of New Literature to politics had rendered such writing unable to properly capture the complexity of human life in China that he resisted such theoretical projects. As Shen put it in his essay, while modern China faced many problems, “instead of calling [them] social problems (社會問題), it was better to call them “writing problems” (文字問題).” That is, the very language intellectuals used was so loaded down with political dogma and abstract typification that it could not adequately represent the social reality around them. This crisis in representation lead to a massive misapprehension of the ideas and practices that defined common people’s lives in the country, particularly in its rural sections.

In a formal preface to Long River that Shen published in 1943 in the Chongqing-based Dagong Bao (大公報), and that would be included in the first monograph version of the novel published in 1945, he would elaborate in greater detail on how the new religion of politics, backed by dogmatic forms of literary expression, exacerbated this crisis in textual representation. Shen discussed the various trips he made in the 1930s back to his home region of West Hunan, which provided the impetus for his writing of the novel. He critiqued the young “enlightened” intellectuals who came from the region, who were well versed in politics but who could find no language by which to understand the common people living there. As Shen put it:

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76 See Ibid, p.481.
77 Ibid, p.481.
78 The preface and subsequent novel are reprinted in their entirety in Shen (2002a).
[If a young person] is an ordinary student, if he has a little bit of thought then he simply must read xx publishing house’s political and economic volumes. He will know a few anecdotes regarding newsworthy people from the literary scene or sporting stars. These students all express their displeasure at the current state of affairs, but none of them know where exactly the problems of the country lie, or what kind of work will produce genuine progress. (To speak of this particular region [West Hunan], young people have no ability to recognize the good qualities of the elderly generations, the diligence of their livelihood (勤儉治生) and the generosity of human relations (忠厚待人) that define their lives, particularly those of its women, grandmothers, and aunts. Nor can they recognize the lyrical atmosphere that remains latent within the simple beliefs [of the people], which are set against this unadorned natural landscape. Young people cannot understand how these things have been steadily destroyed by the foreign cloth and coal from the outside. And there is no way that young people can come to recognize these things from their studies.)

For Shen, West Hunan was losing a vital part of the human culture that defined the region, which he described by the terms honesty (忠厚), diligence (勤俭), as well as a kind of vital warmth (热情).

The marrying of literature to the dogmatism of politics had not allowed the written word an ability to express these dimensions of the lives of common people, creating an entire generation of intellectuals who were blind to their existence, and as such had no ability to analyze the forces that were driving their destruction.

Shen was clear that the incorporation of West Hunan into modern political regimes put these regional elements under assault. According to Shen, such regimes replaced older, positive values with what he described as “a vulgar life-view that grasped only reality and only profit.”

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80 As an ethnically diverse region that mixed Han and Miao peoples, and who stood only partially integrated into the Qing dynasty’s political regime, West Hunan had always been considered a social and cultural border zone, resting at the limits of the cultural and political institutions of imperial life. Its long history of regional self-governance, which stretched across the 1911 divide, ended with the civil unrest of 1934-36, when the reign of regional warlord and “King of West Hunan” Chen Quzhen ended when the GMD-backed Governor of Hunan He Jian sent two division of his own troops to occupy the region, following a regional skirmish with competing regional militarists loyal to the CCP. Chen made peace with the central authorities from Changsha and effectively ceded military and administrative control of the region to them. This did not end social upheaval in the region, however, for in 1937 a Miao rebellion emerged to contest He Jian’s military rule. While this prompted Chiang Kaishek to replace He with a more loyal general, Zhang Zhizhong, the region would remain contested and wracked by civil violence until the late 1940s. “Order was restored only by drastic political and military pacification measures under the Communists in the 1950’s...[from the mid-1930s onward] the region was, in other words, in rebellion against national (or really provincial) integration” (Kinkley, 237). For more on this social history, see Kinkley (1987), pp. 235-245. For West Hunan placed in longer term historical perspective, see Kinkley (1987), pp.8-36. Writing in 1981, Shen Congwen would describe the GMD incorporation of his region into their political regime in the following terms: “Chiang K’ai-shek won a temporary victory in Jiangxi, then sent an army to annex and oppress the district, naturally achieving this without much trouble. The generals had to resign, the troops were reorganized and posted elsewhere; then Chiang K’ai-shek’s soldiers came in as conquerors and ravaged the countryside” (10). See Shen (1982), pp.5-15 for more.

81 Shen (2002a), p.3.
For Shen, modern politics was nothing but “a bunch of people jumbled together, believing this, advocating that, destroying this, protecting that.” Such jockeying for material and political power did little to improve the lives of common people, to say nothing of nurturing the existing values by which they lived their lives. Indeed, they put those values at risk, replacing them with the destabilizing currents of militarism and consumerism.

Shen thus conceived of his literary project as an attempt to distance literature from the dogmas of politics, precisely so his writing could express what he felt developmentalist systems of knowledge (nationalism and revolution, from the left or the right) were perforce blind to: the moral sensibilities and quotidian practices of the common people of his region. He construed these as having been almost entirely lost by the processes of civil war, militaristic integration, and economic extraction which had come to engulf West Hunan:

Although [what is depicted in the novel] is a small affair in a corner of West Hunan, one may be able to say that it is quite similar to many other regions in the Southwest...perhaps the war as already politicized all of China (完全政治化了中國). Still, to take this social landscape (社會風景), which is almost like a historical trace (近於歷史陳跡), and to use characters (文字) to heartily preserve it (好好的保留下來), so that it can be compared to our “contemporary” state of affairs, perhaps this can provide us with something of a new recognition regarding society (對社會有一點新的認識). Amidst war, one region’s development must contain numerous oppositions in the realm of human sympathies (人情) and the reconstruction of relations between people (人和人关系的重造).

At a time when Shen feared that the country had become entirely subsumed by political dogmatisms, he turned to the novel form as a practice of cultural preservation (保留). It was within the space of his novel that he could explore the local principles and practices which, he felt, could not be identified, none the less nurtured, by the epistemological systems that modernity had brought to China’s intellectual classes. Shen’s writing thus attempted to turn the New Literature against

\[82\] Ibid, p.3
\[83\] Ibid, p.4.
\[84\] Ibid, p.7.
itself, as it were, so that it could express what its politicization had rendered it blind to. Shen did not stage local community as either the essentialized ethnic community to be (民族) or the proletarian revolutionary soul in waiting (階級). It was, rather, a space whose ecology and society needed to be understood via a set of different concepts.

**On the Logic and Warmth of Reciprocity: 熱情, 理, and 王法 in Long River**

*Long River* used a meandering narrative pace across its eleven chapters to introduce West Hunan as a region. In the first chapter, fittingly titled *People and Earth* (人與地), a rueful narrative voice provides an eclectic overview of the region, introducing readers to its major waterways, its small townships, its important local products (including the abundant oranges that dot its landscape), and the rhythms of social life that define the people who live there, both the boatmen who toil on the region’s waters and the farming families who remain tied to its earth. In later chapters we are introduced to four major characters that inhabit Lüjiaping, a village which forms the focus of the narrative action. There is Teng Changshun (滕長順), the owner of an abundant orange grove in the village and the patriarch of a large, prosperous family. There is Yaoyao (夭夭), Changshun’s precocious daughter, who bounds from planting fields to river docks, orange groves to mountain hillsides, vigorously helping the older members of her family with many of its laboring tasks. She embodies an ecological sensuousness that echoes the young girl found in Xiao Hong’s *Hulan*. There is the merchant head (商會會長), a gentry who mediates commercial disputes on behalf of the local community and interfaces with the military command the region exists under. In this role, he has to find creative solutions to deal with the rapacious greed military officials constantly exhibit, with their arbitrary taxes and levies. Finally, there is the old boatman (老水手), a good friend of Teng Changshun’s who once made a living as a trader on the water, but has now retired to oversee the village’s ancestral temple and occupy his days with gossip and jokes.
Shen’s chapters amble slowly through one autumn season in the lives of these four characters, depicting the region as possessing a kind of vital warmth (the sense of 热情 alluded to in the introduction). There is, for example, the affection and respect the people have for the land, water, and dense hillsides around their houses, whether that be found in the old boatman’s intimate knowledge of the waterways in the region, or Yaoyao’s delight at picking the oranges that abound in the groves around her home. Shen’s narrative provides dense passages of landscape description, often revolving around the movement of boats and people on the waterways, as well as the vegetative abundance that can be found on land. For example, the narrator describes one bucolic dusk after the raucous liveliness of a village opera has ended:

The din of laughter and idle-talk was everywhere. The particularly interesting parts of the opera that had just ended generated much humor and debate. The crossing at Lüjiaping was particularly lively, for there were many people bunched together waiting for boats to take them across the river. Even though two more boats were added for the occasion, there was simply not enough of them. A large, flat-faced ferry full of returning opera-goers moved slowly across the quiet water. The small mountains on either side of the water had become strips of purple, as the reflections of the clouds in the skies turned from yellow to red, and then from red to violet. In the spaces where there was no clouds, one could see a deep blue, possessing a special clarity that came with autumn. At the end of the clear blue sky a star streaked slowly upward, emitting light that looked like white-gold. Dusk was almost falling across the wild fires in the far off mountains, as a deep blue settled over the horizon, white smoke turning into red fire...there was not a single aspect of this scene that wasn’t mysterious and moving. But the people mixed harmoniously within it, taking their happiness and exhaustion back home with them. Not a single one of them could remain distanced from this society’s happiness and exhaustion, its sound and color, the freshness that could be grasped and enjoyed here by one’s eyes and ears.85

This is a social matrix that combines shared human practices (the comfortable banter of opera goers as they wait to cross the ferry home) with a physical topography of not only stunning beauty but cosmic resonance (hills turned into bright strips of color, shooting stars emitting gold light in the sky). Landscape here is not a foil for the projection of revolutionary emotion (as within the narratives of Jiang Guangci we examined previously), nor is it written as a cold barrenness that allegorizes national underdevelopment. On the contrary, it is defined by a rich ampleness, a

sensuous density of sight and sound, marking the vitality of the region in ecological and moral terms.

The Teng family’s sociality is defined by a consistent joking banter amongst its members, a long series of back-and-forth exchanges that take place between Yaoyao, her siblings, their father, and the old boatman. These exchanges can include references to famous myths and legends from the vernacular narrative tradition, tall tales about life on the waterways, and sly metaphors that refer to sensitive subjects such as marriage, love, and sexuality. Like the story teller in Shi Tuo’s Orchard Town, the family’s dense oral culture possesses imaginative depth that extends across boundaries of time and space, where the specter of mythical legends or famous princesses is conjured up effortlessly in the discussion of current affairs, regional business, or the future of individual family members. The joy that defines family life is often to be found precisely within these oral exchanges, often done as the family members are performing domestic labor amongst themselves.

Both the dialogue the characters use, as well as the descriptive terms that abound within the text, are studded with non-standardized terms that emanate from the local language of the region. Indeed, there is so much use of local terminology in the novel that when Shen was revising it for monograph publication in 1944, he created for himself a chapter-by-chapter glossary explaining various elements of local patois found in the work. Shen kept the glossary for himself throughout subsequent publications of the novel, the document being only published posthumously in the 2002 edition of Shen’s complete works. In his glossary, Shen referred to the dialect to be found in the novel as “Changsha speech” (长沙话). What the glossary reveals to readers, when read in conjunction with the original text, is the sheer density of dialect sound to be found therein. The

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86 See Shen (2002a), p. 177. For more on Shen’s use of terms emanating from Miao and Fenghuangese dialectsin his fiction, and his need to annotate his works for the ease of a national readership, see Kinkley, pp.120-125.

87 According to an editorial note in Shen’s complete works, the glossary was written out by hand by Shen in December of 1944, as he prepared the manuscript for publication by the Kunming Cultural Publishing House (昆明文聚出版社). The glossary was never published but was kept by Shen with his personal effects for over 50 years, finally being made available to editors over 50 years later. Though some of the glossary was lost, what remained of it was included in printed form in the 2002 edition of Shen’s complete works. See Shen (2002a), pp. 171-182 for more.
dialect expressions act as disruptive elements within the text, forcing readers not versed in Changsha speech to stop and consult the glossary each time a non-standardized term appears. At times Shen uses written characters to directly transcribe the sounds of the region’s language. In these instances the text’s printed characters play an onomatopoetic role, mimicking the sounds of the region’s oral world rather than expressing any literal meaning. One example of where such onomatopoetic use of language occurs is in the chapter “The Human Affairs of the People of Lüjiaping” (吕家坪的人事). In response to a boatman’s sarcastic question of whether or not the military captain’s corrupt practices will be so effective that he will be able to gather in over five thousand yuan this year, that merchant head replies: “怕不是协叶合苏.” According to Shen’s glossary, the retort is a transcription of oral slang, which someone not versed in Fenghuanese was supposed to read it for sound rather than its literal meaning. The last four characters, when read for direct meaning, have no clear referent, making sense in the text only as sonic elements. As a literary device, it is difficult to translate into English, where the translator would need to find an English rendering that could operate in an onomatopoeic rather than referential fashion.

These linguistic interruptions cut into the densely woven baihua of the descriptive passages, gesturing to an oral world whose language was not widely shared by the national readers of Shen’s work, whether they be found in Hong Kong during the novel’s initial print run, or the rest of the Mainland as it was disseminated in monograph from 1944 onward. As marque localisé, the work’s studded dialogue emphasized the presence of a regional linguistic world folded into the “national language” of the ethnographic narrative voice. In this way, the text insisted on the polyphonic nature of Mainland China, where down far off waterways lay still un-assimilated linguistic tapestries that the national project had to somehow come to terms with.

This coming to terms with local life-worlds forms the major conflict around which the novel revolves, found in its depiction of the GMD’s attempts at imposing its “New Life” (新生活)
political doctrine on the people of the region.\textsuperscript{89} Throughout Shen’s novel, characters discuss rumors they have heard that the New Life program is coming to West Hunan, with stories circulating of its implementation at various places down river. As such, the question of what “New Life” means for the people of Lüjiaping, and how it differs from the current patterns of sociality that now defines them, is a consistent pre-occupation of the work. Stories of the GMD’s program first emerge as jokes amongst the boatsmen of the region. For example, they have heard that in places downriver where the doctrine has been implemented people can only walk on certain sides of the roads and laborers must cover up their bare arms and legs, lest young intellectuals yell at and threaten to punish them.

Eventually the New Life comes to have a concrete manifestation in the village, in the guise of the military captain (隊長) of the GMD backed peace preservation corps (保安隊), the local military apparatus that rules over the region. The captain is depicted as being totally ignorant of the communal structures by which people in West Hunan live their lives. This dissonance emerges most forcefully when the captain seeks to buy a boatload of oranges from Teng Changshun. When the captain arrives (along with his fawning secretary) at Teng’s home to buy the oranges, the latter is placed in an extremely difficult position. For there is a long standing custom in the region not to commodify the oranges that are such an abundant part of the region’s landscape. The rationale behind this local practice is made abundantly clear in the first chapter of the work:

After all, this locality is an orange producing region, for a hundred miles all along the river oranges are simply everywhere. There are too many oranges. They aren’t worth much money and are not easy to sell. Furthermore, according to a local saying, the more you eat oranges, peaches, and

\textsuperscript{89} The New Life Movement (新生活運動) was an ideological and social movement led by the GMD, inaugurated in February of 1934 and lasting roughly until the outbreak of war with Japan in 1937, when what little mobilizational energy it once possessed petered out amidst the exigencies of wartime. It sought to combine Confucian discourses and symbols from the imperial past with the GMD’s brand of militaristic nationalism in order to provide a viable ideological alternative to the CCP’s class-critique of Chinese society. Reviled by progressive intellectuals across the ideological spectrum, and having little voluntarist support from the grass-roots of either urban or rural China, it held little purchase as an ideological movement outside of its state-backed representatives. For a seminal analysis of the movement as a form of ideological “counterrevolution,” see Dirlík (1975).
plumbs the more they are going to grow, and thus you should not accept money for them in this place.\textsuperscript{90}

The orange thus exists in the region as something of a common object that all people have access to. They are used as gifts to be exchanged amongst neighbors and social relations, offered freely as ways of developing human sympathy within the locale.\textsuperscript{91} In these circumstances, to try to make a profit from oranges would not only be economically useless but also socially disreputable. When the military captain comes to Teng Changshun’s home demanding to buy a boatload of oranges, he is asking Teng to betray a longstanding communal principle. Though the military captain tells Teng he wants to buy the oranges so as to offer them as gifts to his friends down river, Teng quickly intuits the captain’s scheme: he is planning on buying oranges here on the cheap and, using his military status, bypass levies and taxes downstream in order to sell them at a profit. Teng wants no part of this deal, which would not only make him party to bureaucratic graft but make him suffer a loss of dignity amongst people in the village. When the captain absolutely insists on buying the oranges, Teng tries to explain to him why he cannot sell that particular object here:

Changshun smiled anxiously: “That’s not what I mean. Secretary, you’re an understanding person. If someone offers money to buy my oranges, can I say I won’t sell them? My point, however, is that in this locality oranges aren’t worth anything. If the captain wants to use them as gifts (隊長要送禮), he doesn’t need to buy them, he doesn’t need to waste his money. I can easily call some people to haul over ten poles of oranges right away. This year we have so many oranges. The captain has brought his brothers to our small village to help keep the peace, he’s endured a lot. If he wants to eat some oranges, would it really be right of me to accept his money? If I accept money over such a small matter, would I who am named Teng still seem like a person (这点小意思也要钱, 我姓滕的还象個人嗎)?\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{90} Shen (2002a), p.11.

\textsuperscript{91} Shen references this sense of human sympathy in his 1943 preface to the novel when he claimed that “amidst war, one region’s process of development must contain numerous oppositions in the realm of human sympathies (人情) and the reconstruction of relations between people (人和人关系的重造)” (7). It was precisely this vital concept of the region’s 人情, and the impact that civil war, modern political integration, and new ideological movements for popular mobilization had on it, which Shen was interested in decoding in his fictional work.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, p.111.
Teng’s insistence that he cannot sell his oranges enrages the military captain, who feels that not only is it a mark of disrespect to him, but that it betrays a perfectly logical principle: “Money on hand for goods on hand” (現錢買現貨). Teng’s refusal is, for the captain, a mark of the fundamental backwardness of the people of the region, who cannot understand a perfectly logical principle like the free exchange of commodities. He threatens to cut down Teng’s entire grove of orange trees if the latter does not agree to sell him a boatload of the goods. For Teng, the irrationality is completely on the side of the captain. After the officer has left his home, he can only stand in silent anger over the insulting encounter:

[Teng Changshun] was so angry that he simply couldn’t open his mouth. Over the course of a twenty year civil war, he had, on land and on water, seen many strange and curious things. Yet never had he seen a person as arrogant and haughty as he had today. [The captain] had simply not spoken reason (不大講理).

The novel returns to this concept of the reason/logic (li) that defines West Hunan a number of times, with outsiders to the region seen as repeatedly failing to recognize and understand it. For example, at an earlier point in the novel, when a junior military officer tries to buy the oranges of one of the town’s aged boatsmen, another misunderstanding ensues. The boatman insists that the oranges are not for sale, which the military officer interprets as a ploy to jockey for a better

93 Ibid, p.111.

94 To make matters even more complicated, a number of days before the captain visited Teng Changshun, he had heard that the latter had “sold” a boatload of oranges to his kinsmen the merchant head. Hearing that such a “deal” had gone down, the captain wanted to buy some oranges for himself. The military captain thus ask Teng Changshun why if he was willing to “sell” his oranges to the merchant head he’s not willing to sell them to a military officer. But the military captain has fundamentally misinterpreted the nature of the transaction between the merchant head and Teng Changshun. In Teng’s mind, his delivery of a boatload of oranges to the merchant head was a gift, and its primary purpose was to allow the latter to offer the oranges as gifts to customers down river. While the merchant head insisted on sending two hundred yuan in exchange for the gift, it is completely unclear if Teng is going to accept the money: more likely, as is hinted at for the reader, he is going to get his daughter Yaoyao to return the two hundred yuan in a complex game of social etiquette between the two men. And Teng only agreed to hand over the oranges because he was convinced that the merchant head was really going to use them as gifts down river. As Teng puts it, in rationalizing the deal to himself: “The merchant head was a relative, [the deal] was half gift and half purchase, in return for two hundred kuai. And [the oranges] were really meant to be sent to relatives down province. The gift could thus be attributed, in half, to his exhibition of human sympathy (這禮物也就等於一半是自己做人情)” (109). It is through this lens of human sympathy, rather than the profit derived from the commodification of the oranges, that Teng analyzes the transaction. And it is precisely because the sale of the oranges to the military captain would betray the norms of sympathy in the village that Teng must reject the captain’s deal.

95 Ibid, p. 111.
sale price. He angrily offers to give the boatsman more money, which the latter is eventually forced to take, despite the fact that he would have been happy to simply gift the oranges to the officer. Like Teng Changshun, all the boatman can do is rue the fact that the militarists simply do not understand the 理 which defines the region:

[The aged boatman] who had sold the oranges pinched a couple of dirty bills in his hand, waving them back and forth. He smiled unnaturally and spoke to himself: “I offer to gift [the oranges] to you and you don’t want to eat them, and yet you still blame me. As for your “money on hand for goods on hand” (現錢買現貨), where is your money from? Foreign fur grows on foreign bodies. It certainly isn’t the case that all West Hunan people get a share(大家有分)...[government agents] simply don’t speak reason (他們那麼不講理), the moment they open their mouths they curse people. I’m not scared of you! When the head of the [government] committee comes here he must speak reasonably (也得講道理)! Peace preservation corps, please, those sandy-headed shells, knock them a bit and what do you get but a small bubble of water? Me, scared of you?96

The boatman insists on the particular logic by which communal relations are governed in the region, which outside forces must conform to if they are to have any moral legitimacy in the eyes of common people. In this case, such a logic dictates that the oranges are not to be sold here, no matter how much money is offered for them.

Thus the GMD’s New Life campaign comes to the people of West Hunan as a profoundly alienating social force, in the guise of rapacious officials who combine material greed with profound ignorance about local social practice. Indeed, it is precisely because the New Life cannot speak to existing practices- and, in fact, threatens them with destruction- that it emerges as an irrational and frustrating force for the people of the region. Such local practices are not grounded in

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96 Ibid, p.77
modern nationalism,\textsuperscript{97} even less so the discourse of class exploitation that the revolutionary literature narratives insisted upon.\textsuperscript{98} When Lüjiaping’s gentry and boatsmen think about the power relations that define their social world, they conceptualize them, like the oranges, through a language of ethical reciprocity. For example, a number of days after the disagreement between Teng Changshun and the military captain, the latter once again passes through the family’s village, stopping to make not-so subtle advances towards Yaoyao. The old boatsman is disgusted by the captain’s bawdy jokes, feeling they are entirely inappropriate for a political leader to say to a young girl. He searches for a way to deflect the captain away from Yaoyao without further straining relations between the military leader and the family:

“Captain, where are you off to? Are you headed to Zhenxi county to conduct a meeting? You must certainly be busy!” The tone of his voice contained a little politeness, even a little flattery, but not a bit of fear. The old boatsman had not violated the law of rulership (不犯王法) and thus had nothing to fear. He knew that the captain had power in Lüjiaping, but the captain could not arbitrarily punish an upright commoner without any reason.\textsuperscript{99}

\textsuperscript{97} While the literate classes in the village, such as the merchant head and Teng Changshun, read the national, Shanghai-based Shenbao (申报), even they face a total impasse when they attempt to connect the discourse about national progress they read in the paper to the violence that “modernizing” forces bring to the region year after year. Aside from a kind of distance belief in something called “China,” they have very little ability to understand how the new project of national developmentalism is going to help West Hunan, given that the forces who are responsible for executing it (the new military-political apparatus) seems so intent on exploiting the region rather than understanding it. The narrator eloquently summarizes this impasse when he discusses Teng Changshun’s relationship to the Shenbao: “Changshun was an old Shenbao reader, he had felt the blows of over twenty years of change, and though he did not believe in officials, he did believe in the country (可不大相信官，可相信国家). Towards the officials he always harbored an attitude that mixed hatred with forced respect. As for the nation, he couldn’t help but feeling a bit of “belief.” This belief was exactly like the sensibility he brought to his family business, and could accord with the social experience he had accumulated over twenty years. He had a pure and honest faith, a belief that the nation had ‘an old general (老总)’ and as such would be much better off. The fate of the family and the state were the same (国运和家运一样), everything would come around slowly to the good (一切事得慢慢来，慢慢的会好转的)” (90). The Neo-confucian connotations through which he reads modern politics- that the nation and the family were essentially connected, and that only with an honest general/emperor can the realm be peaceful- are unmistakable.

\textsuperscript{98} Indeed, in Shen’s communal vision, there is no class exploitation at all, in the sense that even the landowning classes (Changshun, the merchant head, etc.) treat their laborers and tenant farmers with the same warmth and reciprocity (热情) that they do the members of their immediate family. Understanding themselves as guardians of a community whose material and spiritual abundance it is their responsibility to protect, they could not be further than the decayed, purile land-owning gentry to be found in the works of leftist writers such as Jiang Guanc, or even in Shi Tuo’s treatment of gentry life in Orchard Town.

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid, p.150.
It is through the prism of wangfa (王法), or the law/responsibility (法) that should define the king/monarch (王)’s rule, that the old boatsman conceives of his political relationship to the military captain. The use of wang to name the military captain, as oppose to a modern term such as captain (duizhang 隊長), grounds Teng’s sense of the political in a social imaginary that stretched far back into the imperial period.¹⁰⁰ The military captain is in the wrong, for his threats against the family’s orange grove, as well as his lascivious advances towards Yaoyao, is a complete betrayal of the care he should exhibit towards the commoners within his jurisdiction. Such concern for the common people is the very core of his political responsibility, giving legitimacy to his sovereign presence as ruler over the region. Yaoyao’s family has done nothing to damage the public good, to say nothing of openly resisting government authority, and yet they are still subject to the captain’s threats of violence. He has thus failed to live up to the standard of wangfa that defines the boatsman’s sense of the political. Yaoyao too understands the captain’s behavior as a transgression of wangfa:

Yaoyao could only think that the person who joked and sang in front of her [the military captain] was not very bright, in fact he was stupid. She could only smile, as if these were all trivial matters, as if she was happily watching ducks on the water fight with one another. The local people (本乡人) were all afraid of this official, but she was not particularly afraid of him. He could exhibit his authority, but the common people had not betrayed wangfa (老百姓不犯王法), and as such there was nothing he could do. There was simply no reason to be afraid.¹⁰¹

The novel stages wangfa as a powerful moral concept within the region, one that is under attack by a corrupt militaristic regime whose own epistemology fails to see it as an affectively potent idea. In this sense, the central concern of Shen’s novel is epistemic unevenness: what happens when an ecologically rooted culture of neighborly reciprocity runs up against a materially coercive regime that takes ethnic-nationhood as its analytical foundation? Though in his preface

¹⁰⁰ The terms for kingly rule (王) and law/principle (法) have complex etymological histories that extend all the way back to the Zhou dynasty. For more on the concept of 法 and its implications for governance in early imperial thought, see Ames (1994), pp. 108-142.

Shen asserted that the local principles and practices he sought to “preserve” (保留) were almost all already gone, and were thus like “historical traces” (近于历史陈迹) on the page, the hegemony of the GMD’s modern project is hardly so triumphantly assured in the novel itself. For example, Teng Changshun shows no willingness to abandon his belief that oranges should not be commodified in West Hunan. It is the military captain that must accept this particular rebuke, as Teng shows quiet resolution in the face of his threats. Indeed, by depicting characters who use their own language to assert the value of the moral concepts that are meaningful to them, Shen’s novel powerfully insists on the sense of linguistic and epistemic difference to be found in West Hunan, one that could not be so easily co-opted by the coercive New Life that the GMD sought to impose.

The novel ends before any massive disruptions into West Hunan’s social life occur because of modernizing initiatives. Censorship and ideological coercion prevented Shen from completing his planned second and third volumes to the novel. These were to have depicted in even more detail the social and moral upheaval created in West Hunan by the GMD’s attempted incorporation of the region into its political regime from the mid-30s onward. That these narrative were never written is, perhaps, fitting, for West Hunan remains a site of epistemic difference within Shen’s œuvre, its incorporation into modern regimes of politics and knowledge only partial. The New Life thus remains more of a looming threat than a contemporary reality for the people of Lüjiaping. It is the novel’s very lack of resolution on these points that provide it enduring power, for at no point does it suggest that the region can or should be integrated into developmental programs organized around the nation-state form. Indeed, it is those very developmental programs that appear as irrational and violent, forces that damage rather than secure the cultural practices that are central to communal life in the region. It is not the rural locality that is backward in historical time, but its modern political counterpart that appears as the height of historical folly. 理 and 王法 are not presented as developmental pathways towards an ethnic-national future, but dense forms of sociality in their own right, ones which the GMD’s forces have no ability to account for, none the less co-opt.
Just as the novel refuses to assimilate West Hunan into a national-community to be, so too does its ecological abundance leave the reader with a distinctly regional sense of time and space. For the novel’s slow-moving chapters, which amble from character to character, waterway to waterway, mixing jovial conversations with extended landscape description, can hardly be seen as conforming to a linear sense of historical progression. The work’s temporal sensibility operates, instead, through the cyclical rhythms of ecological life, references to which abound in almost every chapter of the work. Such rhythms are at once intensely material (relating directly to the land, water, and air in the village) but also studded with cosmic meaning. An exchange between Yaoyao and the old boatsman vividly captures this cosmically suffused eco-tableau:

Yaoyao’s eyes followed the direction that the old boatman’s pipe was pointed to, smiling: “Uncle, hasn’t the small fire in your pipe been brimming now for decades? The sun shines red for half of the day, who knows for how many thousands of years it’s been doing so. What is beautiful should exist for a long-time.

As if wanting to follow up on some solemn question, the old boatman said, “Hmm, the beautiful should exist for a long-time. Who decided on this?

Yaoyao replied: “I decided. It’s just a pity, when weaving a basket these hands of mine are no match for yours. I think it’s best to let you weave. I give the universe to you to manage. If you did so it would be a lot more fair.”

With great feeling the old boatman sighed: “Here she goes again! Yaoyao, I think that what is beautiful cannot exist for a long time. A good bowl can be easily broken, a good flower can easily freeze in the cold and die. Good people won’t live forever, but evil ones will live for thousands of years. The affairs of the world are difficult to talk of...what will come of tomorrow? Only heaven knows all things, people cannot. Your brother is now loading up a boat full of oranges to take to Changde- who knows if in the future he will become the provincial governor. He has a face that looks like an official!”

The boatman’s pipe, basket weaving, the shining sun, flowers in the winter, boats full of oranges.

While there is cosmic intervention in the unfolding of this history (“heaven knows all things”), it is not a deliverance that mere mortals can understand. What can only be proclaimed for certain are the wavering fragilities of ecological and human life that the boatman sees around him (“a good bowl

102 Ibid, P.169.
can be easily broken, a good flower can easily freeze in the cold and die”). Such fragilities are enmeshed within a time that folds back on itself, studded with a paradoxical sense of constancy and impermanence: “The sun shines red for half of the day, who knows for how many thousands of years it’s been doing so. What is beautiful should exist for a long-time...what is beautiful cannot exist for a long-time.”

**Conclusion: Towards Other Worlds**

All three of the works I have examined in this chapter were written by authors who responded to the exigencies of the anti-Japanese war, and the personal and social displacement created because of it, by refusing to write a literature of ethnic-national unity and public mobilization. While the All-China Literary Circles Resistance Association could proclaim in 1938 that “there is not a single successful [literary] work that is not a cry from the nation’s soul (民族的心靈的吶喊), revealing without any reservation the reality of the nation (民族的現實),” the works examined here creatively upended this iron-clad suturing of literary practice to the discourse of nationhood.

It was not a “national reality” that could be found in the domestic gardens, orchard groves, and meandering waterways which these texts so creatively explored. Instead, these terrains combined ecological, human, and spiritual life to create tableaus of regional incommensurability. In *Hulan River*, fanhua becomes a means of absorbing- as sensuous experience before sociality- the ecological world around one. In *Orchard Town*, demon gods reside deep within rivers and karmic storehouses affect lives to come, confounding the secular assumption of its intellectual narrator. In

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103 Harootunian (2012) describes historical incommensurability in the following terms: “Historical societies always display the overlay and structural coexistence of multiple modes of production, and even when one mode dominates over the others, the process of combining residues from earlier times persists, though these are assigned a dependent status on the new. Because the vestiges remain partially unassimilated to a dominant system, often assuming the appearance of revenants capable of reminding contemporaries of what has been lost and possessing the capacity for sudden, unscheduled surfacing, they can always challenge the principle mode of production and demand a space of their own...”(28). While I conquer with the idea of the “structural coexistence” of multiple modes of production in any society, I would object to Harootunian’s description of inherited life-worlds as “residues,” for as the texts examined in this chapter show, regional practices and ideas possessed their own potency for village people, ones that were active in the present they shared with the modernizing agents and intellectual narrators they came into contact with.
West Hunan, the GMD’s national project seems at a loss to engage with, none the less incorporate into its folds, a community grounded in neighborly reciprocity (“this locality is an orange producing region...you should not accept money for them in this place”).

These works stood out amongst the wartime vernacular press of the early 1940s, insisting for readers that rural communities located deep within Mainland China did not have to be read as the ground for slumbering revolutionary identity or ethnic-national belonging. The practices found within these works suggested longer standing principles through which community could be organized, based on interrelations of land, water, seasons, spirits, neighborliness, and play. Most importantly, minjian people could be seen in these works as demanding recognition of the principles which founded their communities (as Teng Changshun demands the military captain recognize the moral logic around which human relations are organized in West Hunan). Here, the local, as it has been in so many of the texts examined in this study, is not a site of self-same identity, but a terrain of difference.
The writer Wang Luyan 王鲁彦 (1902-1944) can be considered a most representative example of the literary intellectuals of his generation. Born into a well off Zhejiang family in Zhenmei county, Wang spent his early scholastic life in private gentry schools (私塾). At seventeen he left his home region to go first to Shanghai and then to Beijing, where he participated in the student “learning and studying” corps organized by Cai Yuanpei and Li Dazhao. He also sat in on courses at Beijing University, where he became enamored by the “Literary Revolution” then roiling progressive intellectual circles in the country. He began to produce his own short fiction, which probed the linguistic and spiritual dimensions of his native Zhejiang. He also learned Esperanto so that he could translate foreign works into Chinese.¹ Like many of the young writers at Beijing University in the early 1920s, his period of cultural engagement in the capital was followed by a career of unrelenting academic and professional itinerancy. In 1923 Wang took an instructorship inland at Commoners University (平民大学) in Changsha, Hunan. This was but one of many jobs in teaching and publishing that he would have over the next two decades, which would take him to Shanghai, Wuhan, Fujian, Shanxi, and Guilin.

This sojourning condition marked many of the lives of the intellectuals and writers examined in this dissertation. After childhoods in villages and townships located at different points across the Chinese mainland, they came of age at transnational educational institutes in coastal metropolises, immersing themselves in print networks that were global in reach. For Wang, as for his counterparts, this itinerant condition was the context in which to look again, with new eyes, at the village spaces they had grown up in and emerged from. A most basic argument that this dissertation has presented is that this look back was freighted with a profound sense of epistemic

¹ This biographical information is taken from Wang (1997), pp.407-410. Wang was also during the early 1920s a member of the most important literary group of the time, the Literary Research Society (文学研究会). For more on Wang’s life and works, see Wang (1984), pp.3-18.
uncertainty, as modern developmentalism pushed intellectuals to conceive of the countryside as an undeveloped periphery in a global capitalist system. Yet what was at stake in this _look back_ was not just the imposition of new ideas onto rural people—imbuing them with the nationalist and/or class consciousness that was required for revolutionary mobilization—but a reckoning with the complex languages and practices that already existed in village life, and that formed the basis of the _xiangtu_ culture that so fascinated these intellectuals.

Wang’s 1937 short story “By The Riverside” (河邊) is an important work to examine in this regard. Told in a third-person perspective that makes strategic use of free-indirect discourse, the work presents an aged woman in rural Zhejiang who is waiting for her son, Hanzi, to return home. Hanzi has gone off to Shanghai to study, and it has been three years since he last returned home to visit his mother. Though she is wracked by illness, she has an unshakeable faith that the Guanyin Bodhisattva (菩薩) will protect her. When her son does return home she refuses his requests to go to a doctor, telling him that all she wants to do is go to the local temple to pray to Guanyin, who is the only force she believes that can protect her health. Hanzi reacts angrily to her desire for temple worship, seeing it as nothing but feudal superstition:

He knew that one could discuss anything with his mother, but on this point she was tremendously stubborn, the same as three years ago, the same as twenty years ago. She believed in Guanyin, not in the power of humans. Trains, planes, steamships, objects of marvelous science could be placed in front of her eyes, science had even baptized the food, clothes, and sewing needless that she used everyday, proving over and over again that the spiritual world was superstitious, and yet she continued to believe in the power of the spirits...He and his mother had originally been one heart, living in the same world; and yet now they lived differently, and between them lay a chasm, their world having been divided in two.²

The power of Wang Luyan’s text resides not in its presentation of Hanzi, with his strict belief in secular rationality, but in its sensitive exploration of the life-world of his mother. The story’s free indirect discourse brings the reader into a world in which the material and the spiritual

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are intertwined. Take, for example, how Hanzi’s mother understands Guanyin’s powers of intervention into human affairs:

How will Guanyin cure her illness? [She] does not have a microscope, incubator, stethoscope, or thermometer. Can a clay sculpture know what kind of illness one has? This is what she [Hanzi’s mother] believes: you light three joss sticks and get on your knees, performing a couple of kowtows. You then take a handful of ashes and lay them out on the table [in front of the alter], as if Guanyin had left for her spiritual medicine (就以為菩薩給她放了靈藥). You then pick the ashes up and swallow them.³

As in Tai Jingnong’s “Red Lamp” and Lu Xun “New Year’s Sacrifice,” this is an object world that has not yet been disenchanted, in which joss-sticks and ash become a means of encouraging spiritual forces to intervene directly on the body. When Hanzi questions his mother regarding how clay sculptures in a temple can act as conduits to actual spirits in heaven, his mother matter of factly replies: “If they receive enough incense, [the spirits] will of course pay attention to us.”⁴ For the son this is a rational impossibility, and he can only acidly retort: “Then does the stone over there have a spirit! Does the table have a spirit! Did the stool have a spirit! Did this house have a spirit! Has everything turned into demons and spirits!”⁵ His mother pushes Hanzi to go to the temple with her, and when they arrive they are faced with a great mass of people, all of them seeking spiritual salvation through votive practice. The narrative voice, speaking from Hanzi’s point of view, relays the scene in the following manner:

Boats had already filled the place: small skippers, large sailboats, there were many that, even in this stormy weather, did not have canopies. There were some that came from mountainous regions over twenty Li away, he could tell by looking at the names on the boats...He helped his mother onto the shore, as a magnificent temple and a roaring mass of people flashed before his eyes...there were those with white hair, those with missing teeth, deaf, blind, old, young, men and women, some seated in carriages, others in sedans, others in boats. They came from the roads, from the rivers, from near and far, and in their midst there were those with swollen eyes, sores, crushed legs, coughs, fevers, illnesses in their kidneys, stomachs, hearts...[they all] considered Guangdi and Guanyin to be limitless in their power and knowledge. Everyone of them entered [the temple]

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³ Ibid, p. 266.
⁴ Ibid, p. 268.
⁵ Ibid, p. 268.
clutching joss sticks in their hands, and everyone of them exited clutching ashes and divination slips.\(^6\)

This a human collective amassed not by the force of proletarian revolution or ethnic-national mobilization, but by their belief in the interventionist power of spiritual forces. This dissertation has examined how intellectuals in the Republican period wrote about minjian communities such as the one foregrounded in Wang’s text. For the folklorists of the *Geyao Zhoukan*, the songs of the minjian possessed a linguistic and thematic diversity that pushed against the limits of their classificatory systems. For language reformers seeking to reproduce in print the voices they heard throughout the country, the different dialects of the minjian presented equal parts challenge and opportunity for fashioning modern writing systems. For the vernacular writers of the time, epistemic uncertainty was expressed every time narrators were confronted with votive objects and household rituals they struggled to understand. As evidenced by the writings of Shi Tuo and Shen Congwen, as late as the 1940s the common people could appear as a potent source of spiritual and linguistic difference for intellectuals seeking to make village life legible for their reading audiences.

Taken together, the works examined here should encourage us to problematize the binarial mode through which the problem of the rural in the Republican period has been treated by scholars, in which Republican intellectuals have been understood as “inventing” a “culturally distinct and alien other, passive, helpless, unenlightened.”\(^7\) The writings of Shen Congwen, Shi Tuo, Tai Jingnong, and Xu Qinwen, the collection work of Liu Bannong, Chang Hui, Zhou Zuoren, and Gu Jiegang, and the efforts at dealing with linguistic poly-phony of the Dialect Survey Society and others clearly attested to a popular culture that was not lacking in autonomy and creativity, but that indeed was far too autonomous and creative for intellectuals to discipline into clear taxonomies and fields of knowledge. The village emerges in their works not as a passive and disconnected space,

\(^6\) Ibid, p.271.

but one that was linguistically and aesthetically active, imbedded as it was in larger cultural networks.

While a Sinified Marxism reconceptualized China’s minjian into being proletarian subjects whose historical mission was to lead China out of its semi-feudal, semi-colonial condition, transforming the polyglot minjian into citizens of a proletarian nation-state was a process of cultural reconstruction that would take decades to implement, stretching far into the post 1949 period. The question of how intellectuals, cadres, and party leaders during the Maoist period dealt with the points of heterogeneity identified in this study remains to be analyzed. As early as the 1940s party cadres were studying the oral forms of the people in the base camps under CCP control. This interest in oral folk forms was mediated, however, by the desire to “put new wine into old bottles” (舊瓶裝新酒) - to adapt pre-existing folk forms so they could express new revolutionary content. As the scholar Wang Hui puts it, such cultural work “arose out of ‘starting with a definite political propaganda result’ [in mind],” with popular forms being seeing as fertile media for communicating revolutionary ideas to audiences. CCP cultural work in the 1940s (and later in the PRC) thus differed from the 1920s work of folklorists such as Gu Jiegang and Zhou Zuoren, who insisted on recording the oral culture of the minjian as it existed before modernizing initiatives - i.e. without trying to adapt it into source material for revolutionary projects. While the study of dialects did continue after 1949, here too the emphasis shifted. What dominated the period was not the question of whether dialects could gain scriptural vehicles of their own, but the championing of the national language, which was understood as both a written technology and a spoken tongue. In the form of the CCP, this national language received the patronage of a unified and interventionist state apparatus. As Wang Hui puts it, Mandarin could only become a common national shared language through “systematic stipulation and implementation by a modern nation,” a process which took

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decades to achieve. In terms of spiritual practice, the reconstruction of minjian life entailed the PRC state’s negotiation with various Buddhist, Daoist, and popular votive practices. Here Hanzi’s reaction in “By The Riverside” to the votive practices he sees in the temple in front of him— he became so angry at the worshippers that he wanted to “use a cudgel to smash [their] statues”— becomes eerily prophetic. Popular religion under the PRC remained a contested site for state authorities, though much research remains to be done on how the new state sought to dislodge pre-existing temple practices in specific localities throughout the country.

In short, the historical questions examined here do not end at the 1949 divide. What this study can insist upon is that during the Republican period the “common people” on the Chinese mainland were a source of difference which intellectuals of the time had to grapple with. Their songs, languages, and spiritual beings imprinted themselves upon the form, content, and direction of intellectual work. For the folklorists, writers, and linguists examined here, to look out upon the village was not to see a passive and residual culture, but one that was far too active and present, whose diversity challenged the epistemological foundations of the very fields of knowledge they worked in. These were communities whose languages were multiple, whose practices were non-secular, and whose sense of time was rooted in the festive rhythms of the lunar calendar. To write about the village was thus, to borrow Wang Luyan’s term, to dwell within that “profound chasm” that existed between performer and folklorist, dialect speaker and language reformer, village

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9 Wang Hui (2011), p.116. The pre-war period was defined by descriptive linguistics, which was employed by scholars such as Zhao Yuanren and others associated with the Academia Sinica’s Institute for History and Language, which initiated six large-scale dialect investigations during this time period. In the 1950s, “the emphasis in dialect research shifted from actual dialects and their historical transformations to comparison between local pronunciations and the common language.” Of course, the unification of spoken language on the Mainland was never total. As late as 1974, a team of foreign linguists visiting the People’s Republic of China remarked upon translation as an everyday linguistic practice: “In most areas, the use of Putonghua to express the life experience of working people will require an exercise in translation” (19), working from local dialect into the national language and back again. Despite thirty years of nationalizing work, the researchers noted “many perturbations of the tone system due to the conflict between the Putonghua system and the local dialects...very few speakers in areas outside of Peking had mastered the details of standard pronunciation of Putonghua. This was true in Linxian, Zhengzhou, Yenan, Sian, Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Canton” (35). For more, see Lehmann ed. (1975), pp.1-70.


11 For secondary work that has examined popular religion in the PRC, see MacInnis (1972) and Luo Zhufeng, ed. (1991).
domestic and cosmopolitan writer. It was to present “those with white hair, those with missing teeth, deaf, blind, old, young, men and women” not as a fallen essence that needed to be reformed, but a potent cultural force, whose objects, songs, and spiritual beings possessed dynamic meaning in the here and now.
Appendix 1
The Polyphonic Promise: Rendering the Regional in the Absence of a National Language

When the folklorists at Beijing University admitted that they could not hear one another’s songs in print, and that there were sounds across the Chinese mainland for which they did not possess scriptural markers, they were in fact grappling with a problem that would challenge writers, literary theorists, linguists, and political leaders in mainland China for the greater part of the 20th century: the lack of a unified national language. By the early 1920s intellectuals such as Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879-1942) had succeeded in convincing the government of the new Republic to adopt a vernacular script (白話 baihua) that was based on Beifanghua (北方話), the oral speech to be found with regional variance across the northern and central parts of China.¹ For intellectuals like Hu and Chen, this baihua script was meant to replace what they saw as a hermetic classical script (文言文 wenyan wen) whose syntactical rigidities and Confucian ideological associations made it unsuited for an era of mass translingual practice in the name of the modern nation.² Though baihua sought to be a scriptural representation of northern speech, the new script was in fact a translingual mixture of notable complexity. It combined an older style of vernacular script to be found in popular novels from the Ming and Qing periods with Euro-American syntax and vocabulary, words often derived from Japanese re-translations of foreign terms using older Chinese compounds imbued with new meanings.³

¹ For a general overview of linguistic reforms during the early 20th century, see De Francis (1950). For a more detailed engagement with debates and experiments in language reform before the 1920s, see Kaske (2008).
While the production of the baihua script has been narrated as the first step towards building a modern national language for China, scholars have been less inclined to dwell on the intense anxiety that baihua generated amongst intellectuals throughout the Republican period. Its highly constructed, linguistically polyglot form seemed to betray its own stated goal: this was not the direct transcription of the speech of common people, even among the northern dialect region it was supposed to be based on, but another highly refined script that, according to its critics, could not be orally understood when read aloud. In 1932 Qu Qiubai famously declared that the baihua script was nothing more than a “new classical language” (新文言文), arguing that it was just as elite, and just as distant from everyday speech, than the old classical script it had sought to replace. Qu argued that this failed vernacular did little to help writers who wanted to capture the oral worlds of minjian people throughout the Chinese mainland.

In so much as, in the words of the literary historian Edward Gunn, the “local languages of China entered the twentieth century with no sustained tradition of writing,” it was not at all clear that regional literature was linguistically possible in the new republic, given that there existed no widely available scripts that one could use to capture the soundscapes of non-Mandarin speaking regions. What was a writer to do if he or she wanted to write, lexically as well as grammatically, in the Wu, Minnan, Kejia, or Yue languages? At best, writers could use the northern based baihua to represent the social worlds of non-Mandarin speaking regions. The noted literary critic Mao Dun described such linguistic disjunction in the following terms: “The primary problem facing writers in this particular region [the south of the country] is that the distance between the language of literary works and the language of the people is as vast as that between English and French.”

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6 See Mao Dun’s “Discussing Dialect Literature” (Zatan Fangyan Wenxue 雜談方言文學), which was first published in January of 1948 in the journal Qunbao (群眾 no. 53), later re-published in 1949 in Happy World 26 (幸福世界第 26期) p.4-7. I have been able to consult the latter reprint of the article.
the phonocentric goals of script reform seriously - to bring text and speech in line with one another - it seemed as if the baihua was a most flawed scriptural instrument. The only solution, Mao Dun argued, was to build scriptural vehicles for the expression of local oral languages: “If you want to make literary works serve the people, at the very least you must use their oral language: dialect.”

Mao Dun, along with many others, thus endorsed a second category of prose production - dialect literature (方言文学) - to be developed alongside the “national” vernacular.

Despite the disjunctive anxiety that baihua provoked, as we have seen the 1920s-1940s was an era in which there was a profusion of creative writing about regional and local life across China. Such a literary practice was made possible by a form of geographic displacement that was a central feature of modern experience for the members of the May Fourth generation. Young students left their village hometowns and imbedded themselves in the cosmopolitan cultural centers of Beijing, Shanghai, Tokyo, and (for some) Cambridge, London, Paris, and New York City. Even for those youth who never left Mainland soil, this was no mere “domestic” form of sojourning, for their presence in these urban centers wired them into translingual networks of print culture which introduced new lexical and syntactical structures to them. To be a consumer, producer, and critic of

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7 See Mao Dun (1949), p.5.
9 Leo Ou-fan Lee (1973) has described this form of geographic, linguistic, and epistemic displacement as a “common pattern of life experience” (248) for early 20th century intellectuals in China. Coming of age in the first decades of the twentieth century, the route to social and professional advancement that had historically been available to the educated class - service to the state via attainment in the civil service examination - was abolished in 1905. The destruction of one institutional system forced experimentation with new professional and commercial roles, such as public school teacher, university professor, writer for hire, translator, civil servant in the Republican bureaucracy, advertising illustrator, among many others. Such experimentation occurred across linguistic and geographic spaces. All of the writers examined in this study experienced such trajectories. Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Zhou Zuoren, and Guo Moruo all spent numerous years as students and scholars in Japan, before and after the fall of the Qing dynasty. Qu Qiubai and Wu Zuxiang learned Russian and studied Marxism in the Soviet Union. Hu Shi composed his famous call for literary form while a student at Cornell University, while Lin Yutang’s studies took him to Harvard, the Chinese Labor Corps in France, and eventually to the University of Leipzig. Shen Congwen, Xiao Hong, Ai Wu, and Tai Jingnong all left their village hometowns to embark on literary careers that saw them sojourn across China, from Beijing, Shanghai, and Harbin to Hong Kong, Kunming, and Taipei.
literature in the early 1920s was to be translingual: to move between a variety of different oral languages (one’s regional dialect, Northern Mandarin, and foreign oral forms) as well as scriptural systems (wenyan, the new baihua, and foreign written languages that the new baihua structurally borrowed from, most notably Japanese, English, and German).

When the world was already in one’s written script- from Japanese re-inscriptions of European terms to grammatical structures derived from Romance languages- how did one capture the orality of local life, an orality which possessed only a tenuous relationship to the script one was forced to write within? This appendix will examine the literary debates and scriptural experiments generated by this condition of linguistic disjunction during the Republican period. It will argue that the various conceptualizations of local and popular writing that emerged during this time period (including xiangtu wenxue 鄉土文學, minzhong wenxue 民眾文學, dazhong wenxue 大眾文學, fangyan wenxue 方言文學, among others) were each, in their own distinct ways, means of grappling with the polyphonic promise of the Chinese continent: a land-mass of multiple language zones whose “national” script was still under hotly-debated construction. Some intellectuals took up the challenge of developing latinized scripts for these regional languages, while others sought to represent regional voices by creatively intervening into the northern baihua. All agreed that the baihua itself was a problematic solution to a problem that could not be solved in their lifetimes: how to bring the old territory of the Qing empire into some kind of linguistic unity.

Like the folklorists who were their contemporaries, what literary reformers saw when they looked out upon different regional spaces was not a fully formed ethnic community with one shared language, but the unevenness of a continent that was not yet a nation state, whose linguistic heterogeneity demanded repeated recognition, negotiation, and accommodation.

The Polyphonic Challenge: Was Regional Literature Possible in China?

From almost the moment that the baihua gained a foothold as the script of general media publication, leading intellectuals in Beijing, Shanghai, and elsewhere expressed concern over its
semiotic limitations. In the years 1921-1922, members of the most pre-eminent literary group of the
decade, the Literary Research Society (文學研究會), would engage in a debate regarding the
concept of Common People’s Literature (民眾文學). This debate would be the first in a chain of
discussions probing the limitations of the baihua script in light of China’s particular linguistic
conditions. Such discourse included the discussions regarding Revolutionary Literature (革命文學
1926-1928), the Mass Literary Arts (大眾文藝 1932-34), on Latinization/Romanization of spoken
forms (ongoing since the early 20th century), on National Forms (民族形式 1937-1942), on the
Literary Arts at Yan’an (1942), and the discussions regarding Dialect Literature (方言文學) in the
late 1940s in Guangdong and elsewhere. While such discussions were themselves internally
heterogenous, and touched on a number of literary and political questions, what coursed through all
of them was a profound anxiety over the linguistic disjunction between script and speech on the
Chinese mainland.

As early as 1922, Yu Pingbai remarked that the concept of a “national language
literature” (國語文學) was in fact incompatible with the linguistic realities of the Chinese
continent. Given the high levels of illiteracy in the new republic, what was needed was the
development of a script that could be understood orally by all people regardless of what region they
lived in. Yet given the prominent linguistic differences that defined certain regions, it was difficult
to see how a common national language (and corresponding script) could be achieved without
arduous effort over a vast period of time. To take a script based on only one regional language and
raise it up to the level of a national script, forcing it to represent the social realities of other
linguistic regions, would be to ensure an essential split between script/voice at the heart of the New
Literary project. As he put it, “we know that you cannot use a dead language to depict living people,

10 See Yu’s contribution to “Discussing Common People’s Literature” (民眾文學的討論) found in Literature Fortnight
No.26 (文學旬刊 第26期), the literary supplement of the Shanghai Times Journal (上海 时事新报). The articles in the
discussion are reprinted in Jia Zhifang, et all eds. (2010), pp. 211-227.
naturally you cannot use the language of Beijing people to depict Jiangnan people.”¹¹ The need to avoid such semiotic disjunction would push Yu into advocating that multiple regional languages rather than one national language take prominent place in the literary arts of the nascent republic:

For example, if I depict a segment of life in Jiangnan, those living people clearly use dialect. However, because I want to diligently create national-language literature (要努力做国语的文学), I will take every sentence and read them in the national language. Even though the national language will have been established, literature has already been diminished by half... Though you can force the establishment [of national-language literature], it will already be very far from the original sensibility and impressions [of a region], and you are actually “deceiving yourself and others” in doing so... When Jiangnan people can all speak the national language, the literary arts can have a role of bridging the walls between the north and the south. At this moment, if we are to respect the accustomed attitude of the literary world- truthfulness- then we cannot but give dialect a place in mass literature.¹²

Yu thus suggested that popularization (i.e. the creation of literary arts readable, understandable, and writable by people in various locales) and the creation of the national language be looked upon as two distinct projects. As Yu put it, “I believe that the national language is one matter, yet the popularization of the literary arts, the instilling of knowledge in the masses, is another matter entirely.”¹³ What could not be done was to delude oneself into believing that a national language actually existed, or to consign non-Mandarin speaking regions to the condition of perpetual linguistic disjunction. Such a position was, for Yu, a linguistic centralism that needed to be opposed. As he put it, when it came to linguistic matters, “what I hate the most is the exaggerated dream of great unity” (大一统的誇大夢). Our current Republic of China is an undeniable example of this kind of unity, which cuts of one’s feet to make them fit into one’s shoes (削趾適履)”¹⁴

Many notable intellectuals of the time, including Ye Shengtao and Zhu Ziqing 朱自清 (1898-1948), would echo Yu’s diagnosis of the short-term impossibility of national linguistic and

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literary unification. In his contribution to the discussion, Ye claimed that the minjian moved constantly between oral and textual forms in their consumption of the literary arts, and that their popular operas, songs, oral stories, and narrative chapbooks represented a massive cultural network that would take great effort to research, classify, and intervene into. Zhu Ziqing argued that the new mass literature had to be directly connected to the oral forms of the common people, arguing that intellectuals could creatively adapt the thriving oral forms that already existed amongst the minjian: folk songs that were passed on via singing and listening, stories, rhyming narrative ballads, and operas. He argued that much work remained to be done to collect such oral materials, praising the folklore work of Gu Jiegang for showing how the people’s arts could be captured in written form and preserved. Because of the linguistic particularities of each region, this work had to be done by local people in local languages: “Only local people can do collection work, for these materials are rich in xiangtu coloring (濃厚的鄉土的色彩), such as particular local customs and dialect...how can outsiders (外鄉人) possibly be more familiar with these than local people (本地人)?”

Such discussions seemed to outline a multi-tiered pathway for the development of literature in the new republic: the need for national linguistic unification would make the production of a common vernacular necessary, yet one that could only develop alongside of the scriptural preservation of regional languages, tied to the minjian oral forms that so fascinated Ye, Zhu, and others. As discussions concerning the populist aims of literary production in the new republic

15 Even an intellectual as committed to constructing a national common vernacular as Hu Shi recognized that the new national-language literature (國語文學) would have to have a relationship with the heterogeneous spoken vernaculars that could be found across the Chinese mainland. Hu Shi thus evidenced a surprising openness to the concept of dialect literature (方言文學), even if its actual scriptural and linguistic parameters were not developed in detail in his writing. For Hu Shi’s relationship to the concept of dialect literature, see Jin Liu (2013), pp. 31-40.

16 See Ye Shengtao’s article in Jia Zhifang et all, eds. (2010), p. 219-22. Ye was clear about the linguistically fractured nature of the new republic: “The situation in our country is peculiar...regardless of how high a level you raise a [literary] object up to, there will only be the smallest of a small number of people who will have any relationship with it; the great numbers outside of this will not have anything to do with it, no matter what you do. [Are they to be] forever cut off?” Quote found on p. 220.

continued throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, it was clear that on both fronts—how to produce a national language literature and how to produce dialect literatures—there was still considerable methodological uncertainty. Such uncertainty burst out into open confrontation in an important exchange that took place between progressive cultural leaders Qu Qiubai and Mao Dun in 1932 over the question of mass literature (大眾文藝). In an article published in Literature Monthly (文學月報), Qu took up the linguistic disjunction that existed at the heart of the New Literary project:

The new-style gentry [i.e. intellectuals] and the common people have no common language between them. This being the case, it doesn’t matter how good the content of revolutionary literature is, as long as these works are written in the language of the gentry, they will have absolutely no relationship with the masses of common people. For this reason, the May Fourth New Literature movement had absolutely no influence on the common people...[May Fourth intellectuals] completely ignored the customs of China’s oral languages, using grammatical rules from the classical script, from European scripts, from the Japanese script, writing a so-called vernacular that cannot be read. Even if you can read it, it is a vernacular that defies oral conventions.18

Interestingly, while Qu denounced May Fourth baihua as an elite scriptural composite with no spoken equivalent in the country, he did not abandon the category of “the vernacular” all-together. For he suggested that the key to creating a truly mass literature was “to write using the vernacular (白話) of modern Chinese people, particularly the proletarian.”19 This proletarian vernacular was to be found in Shanghai, the city whose industrial workplaces brought people from across China together in a demographic, linguistic, and social tumult:

The proletariat are unlike the average “country folk” peasants (鄉下人的農民). The language of the “country folk” is primitive and remote. In the polyglot metropolis, in the modernized factories, the language of the proletariat is already producing a national common language. (This is not the so-called national language of the bureaucrats). [It] absorbs many different regional dialects, wearing down their sense of remoteness, as well as accepts foreign terms, creating a new technical language of modern sciences, arts, and politics. At the same time, this is unlike the new classical language of the intellectuals...the developmental growth of the putonghua of the proletariat, as well as its


19 Ibid, p. 58.
capacity to absorb foreign terms and syntax, are both grounded on the grammatical customs of the oral language of Chinese people.20

For Qu, the baihua question could be solved if writers focused on this emerging putonghua of the proletariat, to which he imputed an almost magical power to both absorb foreign terminology, and even sentence structure, but somehow remain loyal to the spoken patterns of Chinese phonology.

One month after Qu’s article was published, Mao Dun wrote a direct response to it in the same magazine. While Mao Dun agreed with Qu that the new baihua was a problematic script, in that it did not adequately reflect the oral life of common people in the country, he found Qu’s solution to the problem wholly inadequate. It was on the question of the putative existence of a “national common language” of the proletariat that their disagreement revolved. Mao Dun acerbically asked: “what exactly is a “modern Chinese common language”(現代中國普通話)...is this “common language” of the emerging classes marked more heavily by the coloring of northern-speech (北方話) or southern-speech (南方話)?”21

In order to test Qu’s hypothesis out- that there really existed a common language amongst the urban industrial proletariat- Mao Dun claimed he conducted investigative work amongst four different kinds of people in Shanghai: workers who labored on railroads, in printing, in textiles, and at wharfs. Such workers, Mao Dun claimed, included people from Jiangnan, Shandong, Fujian, Guangdong, Tianjin, Anhui, Hunan, and Hubei. There was not one form of “common speech” between them, but at least three. The first was an oral language that had Shanghainese as its base, but mixed with elements of Cantonese, Jiangbei, and Shandong speech. The second was a Jiangbei speech that mixed elements of Shandong and Shanghainese. And the third was a northern speech

20 Ibid, p. 58.


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inflected with Shanghai accents (“北方音”而上海腔的─話).\textsuperscript{22} The first of these languages held the most prominent place amongst the Shanghai proletariat, while the final one—the northern dialect—had “basically no force to speak of” amongst the working classes there.\textsuperscript{23}

For Mao Dun, such a survey proved that while a mixed Shanghainese was used as a common tool of communication in Shanghai, the notion of an emerging “national common language” was itself a fantasy. Orality in the south was by and large disconnected from Northern Mandarin, and the south was riven by languages of many different kinds, which retained their force even in Shanghai when people from a given linguistic region assembled together. Furthermore, if you went to different cities such as Tianjin, Hankou, Guangzhou, etc. you would find not an emerging Shanghainese as a common language, but the dialects native to those linguistic regions having primary oral force. The reality, Mao Dun argued, was that China was a heterolingual space, a fact that could not be mystified by fantasies of an emerging “national common language” of the proletariat. One problematic category (the baihua of the May Fourth) could not be replaced by another (the baihua of the proletariat) and expect the problem to be solved. Both were inadequate mystifications of a far more diverse situation.

Ironically, it was precisely because of his recognition of this absence of a national spoken and written language that Mao Dun was more sympathetic to the May Fourth vernacular than Qu was. For Mao Dun, the pandora’s box of language that the mainland represented meant that one could not but use the baihua script, in full knowledge that it was divorced from spoken orality even in the north. Of course, one had to try to shorn it of as much of its orally estranged elements as one could, including particles from the classical language and European syntactical conventions that had no basis in spoken life. Even if such “cleansing” (肅清) work could be accomplished, however, Mao Dun recognized that the baihua would still be far from an oral-based script. It was not that

\textsuperscript{22} See Ibid, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p. 115.
writers should be content with this sense of estrangement, but that there was no other scripts available to them that would get them closer to spoken life. This reality pushed Mao Dun to consider the need for dialect-based writing as a solution to the problem:

While we can say that in certain locations there can be found a “common language” of the rising classes, one does not exist throughout the entire country...I believe that dialect-based mass literary arts (土話的大眾文藝) is actually more feasible (可能性更大) than the “true modern Chinese speech” that Mister Songyang speaks of...in reality, we do not have a genuine modern “Chinese speech” (事實上未有真正現代 “中國話”)...for these reasons the question of “what speech we should use [in writing]” continues to exist, and should continue to be discussed.”

A month after Mao Dun’s article was published, Qu Qiubai wrote his own pointed response. While he was not willing to give up that there did exist at least the future possibility of a “genuine vernacular” amongst the proletarian masses of Shanghai and elsewhere, Qu agreed with Mao Dun that the linguistic future of China would have to be in the development of “dialect literature” (方言文學). Qu went on to propose an astoundingly pluralized linguistic future for the Chinese mainland: a multitude of latinized scripts existing throughout the country, slowly developing into literary languages in their own right, alongside of a “common language” that itself could be eventually rendered in latinized form. A kind of linguistic federalism for the new republic. As Qu put it:

The Chinese common speech (中國的普通話), Shanghai speech, Guangdong speech, Fujian speech...in the future we must absolutely use romanized letters (羅馬字) and abolish characters (廢除漢字), turning these [oral languages] into new Chinese writing (新的中國文), Shanghai writing (上海文), Cantonese writing (廣東文)...It is very easy to use romanized pinyin [to record] true vernacular-the speech spoken by living people, [thus] eliminating characters...Aside from a common Chinese script (普通話的中國文), there must also be the creation of dialect scripts that accord to the situation of every different region, as long as there is a cultural and political necessity for them. As long as the masses of every region, aside from their own dialect script, also studies the common Chinese script, they will then have the most basic tools for cultural life. This will be much easier than relying on the new classical script [i.e. May 4th Baihua] imbedded in the Chinese character system.

24 Ibid, p.117.
While such a commonwealth of literary languages for the China seemed like an enticing solution for theorists such as Qu Qiubai and Mao Dun, the question still remained: how did one go about making it a scriptural reality? As Mao Dun put it, “our greatest difficulty [at the present moment] is we have no symbols for recording dialect- correct and simple symbols.”

Clearly, experiments in dialect notation were desperately needed.

**The Polyphonic Promise of Sin Wenz: Towards Linguistic Federalism for China**

Attempts to build alphabetized scripts for recording regional speech had, in fact, been going on well before Mao Dun and Qu Qiubai’s exchange over the question of mass literature. Before pinyin was created in 1956-1958, there were three other major schemas of alphabetization that had gained notable attention and support during the Republican Period. The first was the National Phonetic Alphabet（國音字母）, later called Zhuyin Fuhao (注音符號), which emerged from a conference of leading intellectuals in 1913 in Beijing on the unification of pronunciation led by Wu Zhihui. This system used symbols that were themselves modified versions of Chinese characters, first developed by Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 in his writings on language reform. A draft of the system was released in July of 1913 by the Republic of China’s National Ministry of Education, and evidence of its use can be found in the print culture of the May Fourth years and beyond. For

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26 See Mao Dun (1932d), p. 117.

27 For a fascinating discussion of the creation of phonetic scripts for China’s varied languages before the Republican Period, see Jing Tsu (2010), p. 18-49. Jing Tsu’s investigation into the late-Qing reformers’ failures to “consolidate speech through sound scripts”(15) leads her to the important insight that “Chinese national writing, in essence, was an experiment that deferred, rather than resolved, the problems with which it began”(15). In other words, a sense of disjunction between polyphonic orality and a script that was understood as unable to represent it lies at the very origins of National Language Literature in modern China.

28 For monograph-length engagements with the problem of script reform in Republican China, see De Francis (1950) and Zhong (2014). For sociolinguistic analyses of language use in China in the 20th century, see Kratochvil (1968) and Ping Chen (1999). For an attempt at challenging common misconceptions regarding the scriptural and oral dimensions of something called “The Chinese Language,” see De Francis (1984).
example, when members of the Folklore Research Society sought to represent dialect-based songs, some of them turned to Zhuyin Fuhao to do so.\(^{29}\)

The second major system of alphabetization was the National Language Romanization (Gwuyeu Romatzyh 國語羅馬字, abbrev. GR), constructed by Y.R. Chao, Lin Yutang, Qian Xuantong, and two other notable linguists in 1925-26. It used romanized letters and indicated tones by spelling, doing so in fairly complex orthographic patterns. While Lin and Chao had ambitions to replace Chinese characters with GR as a daily writing script, a major stumbling block for the system was that it was based exclusively on Beifang speech. Its complex tonal-notational system could not be used to note the oral utterances of other linguistic regions, making it a tool of linguistic centralization rather than pluralization. While the nationalist government had officially adopted GR in 1928, it did so only as an accompaniment to the Zhuyin Fuhao system. The nationalist government was, in fact, fairly indifferent in its attitude toward GR, and it never promoted it enough to even come close to threatening the hegemony of character-based writing.\(^{30}\)

The third major system of alphabetization, Latinization (拉丁化) or the New Script (Sin Wenz 新文字), was by far the most plural of the three, and was thus the most potentially transformative for the problem of how to write local literatures using regional languages. The script used roman letters but indicated tones by diacritics, and only when necessary to resolve ambiguities. Sin Wenzi were originally developed in the Soviet Union in 1929-30 by Qu Qiubai, V.S. Kolokolov (1896-1979), and A.A. Dragunov. It was promoted in the Soviet Union from 1931-1937 as a script by which Chinese-Russians could gain literacy in their native Sinitic.

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\(^{29}\) For example, in the collecting guidelines of the Geyao Zhoukan, published in the journal’s first issue, the journal’s editors suggested that when collectors were faced with words for which they knew the sound but not of any corresponding characters (有其音無其字者), collectors should denote such sounds using Zhuyin Fuhao, Romanized Letters, or the Letters from the International Phonetic Alphabet. See “This Society’s Guidelines for Collecting Contemporary Folksongs Across the Nation” (本會徵集全國今世歌謠簡章) in GYZK 1, p.8. For more discussion on how to notate dialect in folksongs, including the use of Zhuyin Fuhao to do so, see the collection of articles and responses collected in Dong Zuobin’s “Further Explaining Dialect” (為方言進一解) in GYZK 49, April 6, 1924.

\(^{30}\) For more on the GMD government’s tepid support for GR, see De Francis (1950), pp. 78-84.
languages. The script gained an impressive following amongst progressive intellectuals from 1934-35 onward.  

Though the Sin Wenzi were originally developed as a means of writing Beifang speech, its advocates presented it as a textual system that could be adapted to write other forms of regional speech as well. This ensured that Sin Wenzi would not be a tool of linguistic centralism, but could act as a scriptural lever to enable reading and writing in local languages. As *Sin Wenz Rhumen* (新文字入门), a 1936 primer to the new scriptural system, put it in distinguishing itself from its competitors:

The New Script must be a pure phonetic script...[it] must be adapted to spoken languages (新文字要能口语适合). Chinese characters are scriptural markers that do not accord with spoken language. [If a script] can adapt itself to spoken languages, then it can become a tool for the transmission of language. If it cannot do this, it can only serve as the plaything of scholarly elites. Gwuyeh Romatzyh and Zhuyin Fuhao cannot be adapted to spoken languages, for they can only note guoyu (which is a dialect that very few people speak).  

The guidebook explained to readers the fundamentals of Sin Wenzi as a notational system, including how it dealt with the question of tones, as well as a detailed program for how to use Sin Wenzi to write Beifang and other forms of speech. What is fascinating about the guidebook is the weariness Sin Wenzi advocates had regarding the very concept of a “national language” (国语). If a full deconstruction of guoyu as a concept had remained only a semi-developed part of earlier discussions regarding linguistic disjunction in China, Sin Wenzi pushed this project of critique farther- so far, in fact, that the very concept risked becoming irrecoverable.

Sin Wenzi advocates focused on the role language played in the capitalist mode of production in its national form. *Sin Wenz Rhumen* argued, for example, that in the “feudal” period

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31 For a more detailed treatment of Sin Wenz’s creation in the Soviet Union and promulgation in China after 1934, see De Francis (50), pp. 85-137.

32 See Sin Wenzi Rhumen (新文字入门), p. 14. According to Sin Wenz Rhumen, the movement to popularize the new script had begun a year earlier, with the establishment in Shanghai of the Chinese Latinization Research Society (中文拉丁化研究會) and in Beijing with the Beiping New Script Research Society (北平新文字研究會).

33 The guidebook also provide readers with short chapters on the history of Chinese characters, the history of 20th century romanization efforts, and examples of essays and creative fiction produced using the New Script.
before the rise of capitalism, there did not exist the concept of a “national language.” As the primer put it, “the economic life of feudal society ensures that a given region produces self-sufficient goods. The cultural level of the people is low, transportation is not developed. The languages of every region are adapted to each regional environment, differing in sound (音調) and content (內容). At this time there is no unified national language, nor is there any need for one.”

During this time period, however, the ruling classes, precisely because they are free of the burden of manual labor, have the time and inclination to develop written scripts that facilitate worship, governance, and communication. These scripts then become tools of cultural authority and political domination.

With the advent of capitalism, this situation of linguistic and political disjunction changes radically. With the drive to unify labor, property, material resources, and the law into one market system, the need to have a shared spoken and written language amongst all classes of people emerges. As the primer put it:

The movement of commodities requires a unified market across national space...naturally, language acquires new content. New-style mechanical production forces capitalists to provide low-level scientific knowledge and technical training to the masses, and as such written language must be popularized and generalized. As one reaches the era of the competition of commodities, the further development of the so-called national economy and national consciousness serves as the competitive forces amongst the capitalist nations. A people need a kind of unified language and unified script to serve as the basis for international competition, while at the same time serving as the instruments of rule of the bourgeois class. As such, the government of every nation must carry out a language unification movement, and also force colonies and conquered territories to use the language of rule...the emphasis Christianity in China places on carrying out English language education is an analogous situation, while the forcing of students in Manchuria and Eastern Henan to study Japanese is an even more developed example.

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34 Ibid, p. 4-5.
35 See Ibid, p. 27.
36 The primer describes this form of linguistic domination in the following terms: The ruling classes develop "an elegant language, a mysterious and profound script. Their ample time and spirit enables them to love the study of ancient texts and myths, and as such amongst them there is a unified national language and a unified script...[this language] has no relationship to the laboring masses, and yet the ruling classes use it as a tool to suppress the laboring masses, combining “studying speech,” “recognizing characters,” and “political rule” together.” See Ibid, p. 27.
For the Sin Wenzi advocates, guoyu was not a question of patriotic unity, cultural continuity, or national identity, as it was for the liberal-nationalist GR advocates. Rather, it was question of linguistic domination rooted in the expansionary drives of capital, which sought to transform unevenly connected agricultural worlds into a unified market space, producing linguistic commensurability across industry, labor, and the law. This entailed the imposition of “national languages” over once heterolingual spaces, an integral part of the consolidation of capitalism in its national form. As the primer put it, a “national language is a common language exercised by the capitalism of one country in its domination of territory.”

As for China, its own linguistic situation could not be understood outside of the imperialist domination capitalist countries currently exercised over it:

China is a semi-colonial country...as such, China’s linguistic development carries with it a semi-colonial character. China’s national capital is the servant of foreign capitalist nations, it cannot develop independently. The abnormal development of cities ensures a tremendous gulf between the language of the cities and the language of the villages; transportation difficulties prevents the easy movement of various regional languages; feudal-forms of agricultural production ensures that peasants have very little need for a national script; the extreme exploitation of the compradors suppresses the totality of mass culture... because of the special difficult of studying Chinese characters, the hungry and strained masses, simply have no written script... [in these circumstances] China’s so-called “national language” is nothing more than the common language of the leisurely classes.

Sin Wenzi’s understanding of Guoyu as a product of capitalism, irrefutably linked to labor domination and colonial expansion, ensured that the movement could only ever have a highly contested, if not outright oppositional relationship, to the concept of a national language. Indeed, in

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38 This point about the Sin Wenzi movement- that its fundamental problematic was the question of how to resist capitalism in its imperialist form, from which developed its closely held critique of the relationship between language and market consolidation- is often overlooked by scholars who study the movement. For example, in her analysis of the movement Jin Liu (2013), despite her disagreement with De Francis over the extent of leftist intellectual support for latinization, joins him in treating the movement as primarily a question of localist expression vs. national unity. But creating alphabetized scripts for local languages was seen by latinhua advocates as a primary step in a rural revolutionary process, one whose target was the structural transformation of China’s semi-colonial, semi-feudal condition. It thus linked local literacy to political-economic revolution in global context in a manner that did not reify the nation in ethnic or linguistic terms. A treatment of debates on local and national forms during the wartime period that engages rigorously with the socialist problematic is Wang Hui (2011)’s contribution to this discussion.

39 Ibid, p. 28.

40 Ibid, p. 28.
Sin Wenzi’s most destabilizing move, it suggested that language should not be thought of as the basis for national unity, emphasizing that the vision of national culture that grounded the global capitalist system— one people, one nation, one language— was not consistent with the heterolingualism of actually existing societies. Citing the examples of Switzerland and Belgium, which featured multiples languages and multiple scripts within their social wholes, the primer “fundamentally rejected the notion that language was the primary factor in a nation or a people. A nation does not necessarily use only one language, and the use of one language does not necessarily ensure the formation of nationhood.”

For the Sin Wenzi advocates, nations were to be defined on the basis of whose class-interests they pursue and which ideals they were constructed upon, rather than any a-historical notion of belonging rooted in linguistic patrimony. For this reason, the primer argued that laboring people on in China had no “national” affinity with the comprador classes within China who exploited them, despite the shared language between them. The proletariat in China had more in common with fellow peoples caught up in anti-colonial struggles, such as Abyssinians, Egyptians, Syrians. The anti-colonial intimacies which linked laborers in the Middle East and in East Asia transcended regional linguistic differences, creating the possibility for trans-continental solidarities. It was these solidarities that the New Script was geared toward fostering, rather than homogenized visions of linguistic or ethnic unity.

Such an anti-colonial mission pushed Sin Wenzi advocates to refuse the artificial imposition of a Beifang script and speech upon linguistic regions of China that were historically disconnected from it. Such an imposition did little to serve the needs of local people, they argued, for it “educated” them in a language that was of no use to them:

If intellectuals want to invite teachers down to the countryside in Guangdong to teach peasants there Beiping speech, even if the peasants study it, other than having leisurely conversations with their own teachers, it is simply of no use to them. This is to say nothing of our laboring brothers not having the time to study such playful things. When intellectuals see elementary school students in

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41 Ibid, p. 29.
Shanghai all studying the national language, and from this derive evidence [in support of the national language movement], in their glee they forget that these students represent nothing more than the children of the 20% of the country who are the wealthy few. Not only do they study the national language, they also study English, French, or Esperanto!42

Separating the country into scripturally different linguistic regions (分區制) allowed “the masses to quickly gain script without having to change their own language.”43 Though scripts would be plural, messages of proletarian struggle and unity could still be shared across them: “Though the masses of every region will be using different scripts, their consciousness will be unified, they will know who their common enemies and friends are. Speaking of national liberation, they will form a solid unified front for their common interests.”44

In order to pursue this vision of linguistic pluralism, the chapbook presented two different scriptural charts to readers. The first was the basic scriptural system as designed for northern Beifang speech (figure I.1), presenting syllables arranged on vertical and horizontal axes that the reader could visually bring together to produce words. The presence of Chinese characters helped readers identify what the meaning of these new terms were. For example, starting from the top of the chart, bringing b + a together produced ba, with the character 把 present to indicate the meaning of the latin term.

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Figure I.1: Conversion Chart Between Characters and New Script for Beifang Speech, from *Sin Wenzi Rhumen* (新文字入門).
The second chart (figure I.2) enabled readers to build scripts for non-Mandarin speaking linguistic regions, building off of the basic Latin script already introduced. The chart was divided into four different columns, the first presenting Latin terms in Beifang speech, the second presenting what their Latinized equivalent would be to accommodate different regional pronunciations. The third column informed readers in which geographic regions these scriptural changes were necessary for, with the fourth column providing a space for editorial commentary on the proposed changes. Thus, for example, a reader would learn that in the three Northeastern provinces, Tianjin, parts of Shanxi, Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and parts of Hubei, ch (吃) was to be written c, chai (柴) was to be written cai, shi (十) was to be written s, shan (山) was to be written san, etc. In this way, the student of Sin Wenzi could start to build a script that would be phonetically localized for these
areas. Over time, as regional particularities accumulated, including lexical additions and subtractions, readers would have been able to identify a certain text as, in effect, having been written in a regional language: Guandonghua, Minanhua, etc.

The system as presented in the chapbook was far from complete. The editorial commentary noted that there were many sounds in regional languages for which they had not yet figured out notational equivalents. For example, when it came to rh words (rh 日, rhen 人, rhou 肉, rhui 锐), the conversion chart stated that for Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunan, such words should be marked by the z sound, while in Hubei these sounds were made with a strait tongue, producing a light sonic effect to be noted by the sign r. Yet the editors pointed out that “there are many changes in rh/r sounds, and they are very difficult to scripturally note (很難拼注). Particularly for methods of reading related to Sichuan and Hubei, it is very difficult to denote what [the sounds] are close to. Within Beiping dialect these two kinds of sounds do not exist.”

In relation to the way an entire set of words (Chu 出, Rhu 入, Shu 書, and Zhu 逐) were spoken in parts of Shanxi and Gansu, the editors stated that “these sounds are quite particular...in our current alphabet we cannot find corresponding sounds, and as such we must use parenthetical markers to note the sounds they are close to.” The editors thus suggested that these sounds appear as (r), (s), and (z) in scriptural notation. In such small asides, one can sense the difficulty of creating scriptural commensurability across the multiple language zones of China, a process in which creative scriptural solutions had to be constantly sought across differing sonic landscapes.

It was this pluralized scriptural system that the Sin Wenz movement advocated for throughout the late 1930s and early 40s. For example, the Wuchang based Mass Writing Society (大众文字社) published in the winter of 1938 Latinxua Langiu (拉丁化研究), a mixed-script journal

45 See the second Dialect Comparison Chart (方音方音对照表) in Ibid, no page number.

46 See the third Dialect Comparison Chart (方音方音对照表) in Ibid, no page number.
that featured articles both in Chinese characters and latinized script.\textsuperscript{47} Contributors to the journal, which included notable intellectuals of the time such as Hu Feng, grounded their work in the belief that for the Mass Literature Movement (文藝大眾化運動) to succeed, the latinization of written scripts had to prevail. The pages of Latinxua Langjiu were devoted to familiarizing readers with the semiotic possibilities of the new script. One could find latinized articles with predominately nationalist messages, such as Ginniand 3-8, Ginian Sun Zhungshan Siansheng, Beiping Kuilei Zhengfu sh zenjang chenglid, as well short creative works such as Da Shengli, Da Daodui, and Zixui (Figure I.3). One could find articles, in both characters and Sin Wenz, detailing the education work being done in latinization around China, even recognizing the communicative and geographic displacements brought on by foreign invasion. For example, an article entitled Report on the New Script Movement claimed that Sin Wenz research societies had been established in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Xi’an, Changsha, Wuhan, and Yichang.\textsuperscript{48} It promised that a “Sin Wenz Handbook” (新文字者手冊) would be published in the next two months, featuring the creative contributions of many members of the Sin Wenz movement. An article in the April 16 edition of the journal detailed the Sin Wenz work that was being done by the Chinese Red Cross’s Education Corps in the treaty ports of Shanghai amongst refugees from all over China. The article, entitled the Latinization Movement on the Lonely Island (孤島中的拉丁化運動), claimed that it was only by learning the latinized

\textsuperscript{47} The journal was inaugurated with an article stating that advocates of the Guoyeh system had recently come to a consensus with their Sin Wenz rivals. While they still disagreed on how and with what frequency to mark tones in scriptural form, the both agreed on the fundamental need for script reform as the basis for linguistic transformation in the country. See “The Establishment of a Linguistic United Front”(語文聯合戰線的建立) by Ren Xin in Latinxua Langjiu 1, March 11, 1938. See also a follow up article written by Jiao Feng on the tenuous alliance formed between the two camps: “On the “Common Consensus” Regarding Language Reform” (關於語文改革的「共同認識」) in Latinxua Langjiu 2, April 16, 1938.

\textsuperscript{48} See “Report on the Condition of the Latinization Movement (新運情報) by the journal’s editors in Latinxua Langjiu 1, March 11, 1938, p.8.
script that illiterate refugees from different dialect regions could read fast enough to keep abreast of the war effort as well as express their own thoughts in print.  

49 See “The Latinization Movement on the Lonely Island” ([孤島」中的拉丁化運動] by Lin Xi in Latinxua Langjiu 2, April 16, 1938, p.4-5.

Coursing through the journal are repeated attempts at rebuking a critique that dogged the Sin Wenz movement throughout its history: that creating latinized scripts for all of China’s languages would harm the process of national unification, particularly at a time of foreign invasion and political crisis. The criticism was summarized by the journal’s editors in the following terms: “If every region each used its own oral dialect to write, then the day that the Sin Wenz are completely...
victorious and we no longer use the written characters that had once united the country, would we not return to the something like the Warring States Period before the Qin dynasty, or the condition of a multi-state Europe?"\(^{50}\)

Sin Wenz advocates responded to such a charge by arguing strenuously that the latinized script and national unity went hand-in-hand, for latinization was designed to empower common people to read and write. As such, its popularization would increase education levels, particularly about the war effort, imbuing people with a stronger sense of nationalist consciousness. As contributor Wang Wenshu put it in an article for *Latinxua Langiu*, Sin Wenz could contribute profoundly to the war effort, for it only took two months to learn and could then be used by the masses to depict their struggles against the Japanese. Furthermore, political parties could more effectively communicate with the masses if the latter could read and write. It was Chinese characters, which took an extended time to master, that actually blocked literacy in the country, and were thus unsuited for the purposes of building nationalist unity: “I’m afraid there is no time to use the extremely arduous Chinese characters to teach the masses.”\(^{51}\) In an effort to give further legitimacy to their movement, the journal even published an article thanking the “wise government” of the GMD controlled Wuhan, whose propaganda department had released a public statement expressing reserved support for the new textual experiments in the latin script.\(^{52}\) The article thanking the Wuhan government went out of its way to assure readers that “the Chinese latinization

\(^{50}\) See “This kind of opponent to Sin Wenz” (這樣的新文字反對者) by Jin Congtu in *Latinxua Langjiu* 1, March 11, 1938, p. 7-8. The 1936 chapbook introducing Sin Wenz had also addressed such objections. As the chapbook put it, the “Sin Wenz does not advocate immediately carrying out the unification of the national language, but rather takes the nation and divides into different linguistic regions, providing every region with its own scriptural program. This point is the one which most readily generates misunderstanding amongst scholars, for they believe that there is a danger that the country splits up (有分裂國家的危機).” See *Sin Wenzi Rhumen* (新文字入門), p.26.

\(^{51}\) See Wang Wenshu, “Two Questions” (兩點問題), in *Latinxua Langjiu* 1, March 11, 1938, p. 3-4.

\(^{52}\) See “The Latinization of Chinese and Our Perspective” (中文拉丁化與我們的意見) by Qiqi in *Latinxua Langjiu* 2, April 16, 1938, p.3-4.
movement will not harm linguistic unity. Just the opposite, it will actually help linguistic
unification."

While the editors of Latinxua Langiu could champion their nationalist convictions, the
linguistic unification question was no doubt a major source of tension within their movement, for
they evidenced far more enthusiasm for enabling regional dialects to “gain script” (文字的獲得)
then they did in raising any one of those scripturally enabled dialects to the status of a national
language. As the chapbook had made clear, the consolidation of a national language was an
integral process within the expansion of the capitalist mode of production, in both its national and
imperialist forms. If the goal of socialist revolution was to overthrow the capitalist mode of
production, which China expressed itself in its semi-colonial condition, did this not mean also
overthrowing the very concept of a national language, which the chapbook had made clear was a
tool for market consolidation?

The tension between socialist revolution and national integration was never fully, or even
partially, resolved in the discourse of Sin Wenz advocates. Indeed, the chapbook had evidenced far
more enthusiasm for revolutions in the statuses of local oral languages, which would be provided
scriptural sovereignty for the first time in Chinese history, than in imposing an already ideologically
discredit “national language” on the people. Even in their article praising the Wuhan government
for their support of Sin Wenz, they made it clear that they were against the “forceful
integration” (強迫性的統一) of language in China. Their vision of unification was loose, flexible,
and temporally distant. It was to take place after dialects had become properly scriptural languages

53 Ibid, p.3.

54 See the article “Is the Task of Alphabetizing Characters to Unite Script or Unite Language? (拼音文字的任務是統一
文字還是統一語言) by Jiao Feng under the section heading Discussion and Explanation (討論和解釋), Latinxua
Langjiu 2, April 16, 1938, p. 5-6.

55 See Wang Wenshu, “Two Questions” (兩點問題), in Latinxua Langjiu 1, March 11, 1938, p. 3.
in their own right, when the common people were in control of the linguistic and economic institutions of the country.

**From Latinized Script to Marque Localisèe: Regional Voices in Translingual Writing**

Despite the impressive accomplishments in organization and publishing of the Sin Wenz advocates, the movement did not succeed in convincing any writers of note to commit themselves to producing creative works in the latinized script. As Jin Qing 金青, a contributor to *Latingxua Lanjiu*, put it, the May Fourth movement could “show the goods” their efforts had produced: they had succeeded rather quickly in defeating the classical script practiced by the once culturally dominant Tongcheng school. The latinization movement, on the other hand, had not in its four years of development succeeded in “entrenching itself into intellectual groups.”

Even those prominent intellectuals who had actively championed the latinization cause such as the late Qu Qiubai, Lu Xun, and Mao Dun did not actively write in the script. Like the other alphabetization efforts before it, it did not succeed in displacing character-based baihua as the preferred medium of textual production amongst literate people of all kinds.

This was all the more ironic given that almost every progressive intellectual in the republic had denounced the baihua for failing to live up to its phonetic goals. This did not mean, however, that writers using the baihua gave up on efforts to render regional speech in the problematic script. Indeed, just the opposite— their unhappiness with the baihua, coupled with their lack of scriptural alternatives, pushed them to carve out a place for regional speech within the northern vernacular. If they could not write in a script that was lexically and syntactically developed directly from regional languages, they could at least weave into the northern baihua regional markings of many different kinds. Writers figured the regional through a process of admixture, combining the Euro-Japanese syntax and foreign loanwords of baihua with *marque localisèe*: personal pronouns, syntactical constructions, and idiomatic expressions that gestured towards non-Mandarin speaking worlds.

56 See The Latinized Literary Movement (拉丁化的文學運動) in *Latinxua Langjiu* 1, March 11, 1938, p. 3.
Lu Xun, Ye Shengtao, Xu Qinwen, and Wang Luyan were all early innovators in imbedding syntactical constructions derived from Wu regional speech in their baihua prose.\(^{57}\) Peng Jiahuang’s short stories of the 1920s are notable for their dialogue, which employ verbal constructions and onomatopoeia from his native Hunan.\(^{58}\) Lao She developed a prose style which sought to textually configure the soundscape of early 20th century Beijing life, complete with syntactical constructions from the oral language local to the city.\(^{59}\) Wu Zuxiang employed sentence final-particles from Southern Anhui; Sha Ting first introduced the Sichuan verb 稿, later codified as 搞 (a variant on the northern Mandarin 攪), in his works of the 1940s.\(^{60}\) Feng Wenbing 冯文炳 (pen name Fei Ming 廢名 1901-1967) combined a notably modernist inclination for textual play-shifts in narrative perspective and anastrophe- with Hubei speech particles.\(^{61}\) Of course, Shen Congwen’s novels worked across a variety of stylistic registers, combining a skillful use of baihua syntax, wenyan constructions, and West Hunan regional speech to create startling portraits of the region’s moral economy.\(^{62}\) Zhao Shuli 趙樹理’s 1943 *The Rhymes of Li Youcai* (李有才板话) was celebrated not just for weaving regional speech into baihua text (in this case Shanxi colloquialisms), but for

\(^{57}\) For example, the constructions 在 + Verb (著); 有著 (a representation in Mandarin of the Wu construction 有仔); A bu A (A mei A) + Substantive; Bu verb + compliment; Verb de 的 Object; Comparative bi 比; Ba 把 used for an equivalent to 用/拿; Verb + Object bu complement; and various interrogative phrases involving Subject-Verb with no interrogative particles can all be found in these authors works, and all are said to relate to Wu regional speech. For an overview of Wu regional elements in the fiction of this period, see Gunn (1991), pp. 204-216. For specific works in which Wu regional elements can be found, see Lu Xun’s *Soap* (肥皂, 1924); Ye Shengtao’s *Ni Huanzhi* (倪煥之, first published 1930, reprinted in 1958); Xu’s *This Time Leaving My Hometown* (這一次的離故鄉, 1926); and Wang’s *Juying’s Marriage* (菊英的出家, 1926, reprinted in 1997), *Riverside* (河边, 1937, reprinted in 1997).

\(^{58}\) See Peng’s *Instigation* (慫恿 1927), *A Joyous Occasion* (喜期 1927), and Fourth Chen’s *Cow* (陳四爹的牛), all reprinted in Peng (1997).

\(^{59}\) For discussion of Lao She’s distinct regional prose style, see Gunn (1991), pp. 109-116.

\(^{60}\) See Wu Zuxiang’s *1800 Piculs* (一千八百擔, 1934 [1998]). For Sha Ting’s use of the verb 稿, see his *Goldrush* (淘金記, 1943 [1962]).

\(^{61}\) For an analysis of Feng’s innovative prose style, see Gunn (1991), pp 126-129. and Shih (2001), pp.190-204.

\(^{62}\) The critical discourse on Shen’s prose style is an immense body of writing in its own right. I discuss Shen’s prose style, as well as the secondary scholarship regarding it, in chapter four of this study.
making minjian oral forms a formal axiom around which dramatic narrative could revolve (the kuaiban rhymes that feature so prominently in the story).\textsuperscript{63}

These are, of course, just the briefest of examples, stalks plucked out of a veritable hayfield of discourse in the Republican period. One can imagine a vast exercise in distant reading, a dictionary project compiling every experiment in regional construction attempted by writers of the time period, that would provide scholars with an orthographic mapping of scriptural changes across both time and space. Such a project would, no doubt, have to go beyond mere annotation of regional speech markings to an analysis of the aesthetic and political effects such markings produced, taking into account a whole range of contextual factors: venues and dates of publication of particular works, their circulation amongst different regions, readerly reaction, subsequent editorial and anthologizing work, etc.

What one can provisionally stress here is the paradox that, in some sense, all writers of the Republican era were regional writers, despite the impossibility of regional literature as such. That is to say, during this period there was no Wu alphabet, Minnan alphabet, Yue alphabet, etc. despite the attempts at creating a latinized script that would enable such alphabets to be developed. To write \textit{in} the Wu, Minnan, and Yue languages was scripturally impossible. Yet in the works of the most influential writers of the Republican Period it would be difficult \textit{not to} find at least some regional elements, not only because the baihua script itself was actually a regional dialect (from the Mandarin speaking north), but more importantly because it was one that had not been yet been codified. The script was a translingual field in which Euro-Japanese, wenyan, and regional syntax co-existed together, allowing the possibility for experimentation with utterances of a variety of kinds.

The condition of linguistic disjunction that spurned scriptural reforms during this time period was also treated thematically by the literary texts of the era. Many texts from the first full decade of baïhua writing thematized the problem of communicative failure between intellectual narrators and the minjian subjects they so desperately sought to enlighten. In the works of Ye Shengtao, Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Xu Qinwen, and others, the new “national” baïhua collides head on with the languages of minjian people, bringing to the fore the problem of communicative failure between intellectuals and minjian subjects.64

Take, for example, Ye’s 1925 short story “Amongst Commoners” (在民間), which begins with two female students who, while riding in a rickshaw, discuss the need to build political alliances between the intellectual class and the common people they want to save. Both students agree that the material suffering of the minjian imbues them with a moral dignity that is lacking in their own class. What is needed is to create concrete connections with these morally beatific subjects, and in the process provide them with the modern knowledge regarding nationhood, citizenship, and patriotism that they currently lack. As one of the girls puts it, “From this day onward, we must mix amongst them, like salt absorbed by water. We should tell them whatever we are thinking, just like the way two dearest sisters or beloved friends would treat one another.”65

Seized by this desire to immerse themselves, to the point of absorption, in and with the masses, the girls decide to stop the rickshaw they are riding in and walk back to their school, prepared to speak to any workers they can find on the street. Eventually they come upon a steel factory fronted by a public square where workers congregate:

The two of them crossed over a small bridge made of two slabs of stone, the road bending a bit until the square in front of the factory building was in front of them. Men and women moved about on the square, four or five them moving over here, ten of them moving over there, just like a gathering

64 See my analysis of Ye Shengtao’s 1925 short story Among the People below. See also Xu Qinwen’s This Time Leaving My Hometown (這一次離我的故鄉, 1923), Lu Xun’s New Year’s Sacrifice (祝福 1924), and Yu Dafu’s In Cold Wind (在寒風裡, 1929), each of which are discussed in chapter two.

65 According to Ye Shengtao, the short story was completed in November of 1925. It was published in the short story anthology In the City (城中,1926). A reprint of it can be found in Ye (1958), pp. 59-69. Quote taken from p.60.
in front of a temple. [There were] those selling watermelons and golden melons, beef soup and tofu broth and any manner of small snacks. They all called to one another in their own particular accents, rushing to and fro in this temporary market. Flies came to savor the excitement (趁熱鬧), flying first from the melon gourds to the beef, then from the beef to the small swamp that accumulated dirty water, [giving a] distinct feeling of boisterousness.66

The student’s are faced with the human community of the new industrial workplace of 1920s Shanghai: laborers from different regions congregating on the worksite, buying and selling daily food items with their meager wages, speaking in different regional accents to one another, if not distinct regional languages all together. The frenetic buzzing of the flies reinforces the sense of dynamic movement, even convulsion, presented by the scene. A worker’s union representative arranges a meeting for the two students in front of the female workers at the factory. Yet the workers show little interest in listening to what the intellectuals have to say:

The noisy voices of the audience would not cease, with the steward proving to be totally ineffective [at getting them to be silent]. This forced Pang to change the topic of her speech. She raised up a hand, arched her body, and spoke in a sharp voice: “Fellow female workers, please be silent, we have important things to discuss! The hubbub was like a torrent of rain, slowly dissipating, and after about a minute of time you could actually hear the voice of the cicadas from nearby trees. Pang explained to them why when a collective got together to listen to a speech it was important to remain silent; how after you listened, there would be benefits; and if you didn’t listen, how you would be at a disadvantage. When she spoke, she looked pointedly at the crowd below her, and she could not help but examine carefully each of her words, unwilling to let them slip out of her wily-nilly. And yet the examination was useless, for she could not find the appropriate words to express herself- for example, saying “order” (秩序) was not useful, but then how should you speak? Saying “collective life” (團體生活) was not useful, so really how should you speak? and when you speak you must follow a rhythm, you cannot stop yourself, and as such you must use these not terribly useful words. She felt uneasy, as if she was choking on something.67

This is a vision of communicative interruption, a literal stopping up at the mouth (“as if she was choking on something”), in which the student’s language possesses little force for the female minjian before them. These latter subjects have material concerns whose urgency is discussed fervently amongst themselves. The workers are in conflict with their employers, who haven’t paid

67 P. 67.
them owed dues. Other workers are unemployed, looking desperately for further employment. Others are concerned about a thief on the worksite trying to steal their wages. They are a restless group, showing little interest in being silent for the student lecturers. Even the students’ calls to a notion of gendered solidarity—“fellow female workers”—fails to gain purchase amongst the female workers.

The human community in the marketplace—a multi-lingual zone of handmade foodstuff preparation, petty-trade, and bodily consumption—is resistant to any easy disentanglement into the abstract concepts prescribed for them by the female students: “Saying “order” (秩序) was not useful, but then how should you speak? Saying “collective life” (團體生活) was not useful, so really how should you speak?” With their proliferous accents and vernacular practices, the minjian are presented as in possession of their own internal conversations, ones that student elites struggled to speak to, none the less transform. They exist, in the eyes of the intellectuals, as nothing so much as a plurality of sound: “The noisy voices of the audience would not cease...the hubbub like a torrent of rain.”

**Searching for the Phantasmic Unity of Voice and Speech**

A theoretical axiom that coursed through all discussions regarding linguistic reform and literary popularization of the era, regardless of whether they took place under the headings of Baihua, Romanization, Latinization, etc., was the notion that script and voice could be made to align with one another. The global system of national culture was always a mediating agent within these discussions, as intellectuals invariably pointed to what they understood as “successful” mergers of script and sound that had taken place in other nations. The editors of *Latinxua Langiu* were not hesitant to defend their project by explicit reference to perceived Euro-American scriptural standards. As one article put it:

In Europe and America, written characters and spoken words are unified (書面上的字音和口頭話裡的字音是一致的), textual script is written using a phonetic alphabet (字母拼音); and yet
Chinese characters are still created according to the so-called six books, and have regressed to today’s state through a variety of transformations...Chinese characters are disconnected from spoken language, and if you don’t have a method of alphabetization, form [形] and sound [音] will lose all connection. Latinization wants to take these and connect them!  

While intellectuals debated vigorously how best to make script bend to sound, few, if any of them, seriously questioned the phonocentric assumptions of the very concept of the vernacular itself. Intent as they were on reversing a resident hierarchy that they understood to have operated in China for thousands of years- the domination of wenyan writing over spoken forms- they never seriously questioned whether visual scripts could ever fully represent sound in printed form. Having placed one dominant sign under erasure- wenyan- they did not subject the new dominant terminology- baihua/pinyin/latinization, etc.- to similarly deconstructive critique. In this, they were certainly not alone. As Zhong Yurou has argued, Chinese script reform efforts must be understood within the context of phonocentrism as a global linguistic phenomenon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, one that understood the latin or roman alphabet as a directly transcriptive media for speech. Few, if any, advocates of language reform in China seriously took up the question of the impossibility of all “vernacular” scripts, the way their carefully crafted rules provide the illusion of sonic inscription, but one that can only be sustained by resorting to the constant invocations of exceptions to established patterns. As critical theorists of language have long noted, without these

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68 See “Theorizing Latinization with Mr. Chen Qiupu (和陳秋圃先生論拉丁化) by Jiao Feng, in Latinxua Langjiu 4, May 24, 1938, p.2.

69 In Derridean terms, once can say that they reversed the once dominant dyad (writing over speech), but did not displace the dyad all together. For more on deconstruction as a multi-pronged process, one based on both reversing dominant hierarchies and then putting the newly formed binary under similarly exacting critique, see Spivak’s preface to Of Grammatology in Spivak ([1974] 2016), p.xxvii-cxi.

70 See Zhong (2014) pp.1-25 for a more detailed discussion of phonocentrism as a global phenomenon in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the sense of crisis this produced for non-alphabetic scripts. Walter Ong (1980) has also commented on the phonocentric nature of literacy theory and pedagogy in the 19th century United States: “As in Shakespeare’s day and throughout earlier history in the West, literacy was still thought of in nineteenth-century America as somehow serving the needs of oratory” (198).
learned exceptions, vernacular systems of sonic reference break down: they are the loose ends that reveal the constructed nature of these textual edifices.\textsuperscript{71}

No doubt, there are moments in language reform discourse when intellectuals unwittingly reveal the constructed nature of the various written systems they championed. For example, by the late 1940s, a “Dialect Literature” movement emerged amongst literary workers in Hong Kong, many of whom had arrived there fleeing the Japanese advance during the war. Under the auspices of the All China Federation of Writers (中華全國文藝協會), a Hong Kong Branch of the Dialect Literature Research Society (香港分會方言文學研究會) was established. In May of 1949 the organization published a small volume entitled Dialect Literature (方言文學) whose various contributors championed the cause of writing directly from the mouths of the common people. Such articles repeated many of the same axioms regarding script, sound, and mass life that had been circulating since the Folklore movement of the early 1920s. Articles spoke not just of the political liberation of the country, but its linguistic liberation as well: freeing writers from the hegemony of a false universal (northern baihua script) and enabling them to write in their local language. As one contributor to the volume, the scholar Huang Sheng 黃繩, put it, the production of dialect literatures would “liberate many writers from the pain of having to study the common language,” which Huang argued had no relationship to the local languages which the masses used in daily life.\textsuperscript{72}

Yet Huang Sheng admitted that while dialect literature sought to represent the words that came directly from the people’s mouths, it still had to be selective regarding which words should

\textsuperscript{71} For a philosophical critique of phonocentrism as a symptomatic expression of a “metaphysics of presence” which European philosophy has been constructed around, which creates the sovereign, self-knowing subject which both represses and assimilates difference, see Derrida’s Of Grammatology ([1974] 2016), especially Part One: Writing Before the Letter, pp. 3-94.

\textsuperscript{72} See Huang Sheng’s “Reviewing a Number of Points Regarding the Dialect Literary Arts Movement” (方言文藝運動幾個論點的回顧) in The Dialect Research Society of the Hong Kong Branch of the All-China Literature Federation (中華全國文學協會香港分會方言文學研究會) ed., Dialect Literature (方言文學), pp. 21-33. Quote from p. 24.
actually be allowed to appear in printed form. Huang Sheng quoted from an article written by the scholar Zhou Gangming 周鋼鳴 to make his point. As Zhou put it:

When we speak of fangyan, we mean the language of a given region. Yet in the actual life of every region there are the lives of various social classes. As such, a given area’s fangyan is a language that expresses the life, identity, thought, and emotions of the various classes in it. For example, Cantonese has vulgar words belonging to the hooligans (流氓) of the marketplace (市井), [expressing] intimidation, swindling, dishonesty, licentiousness, and indecency...if the liberation of language and the liberation of dialect is not led by progressive and liberated thought, then it will be bound and stifled by this old and even poisonous language, it will distort the life of struggle that we want to express...as such, what must be pointed out is that as we advocate for fangyan literary arts, as we use dialect to write, we must at the same time subject the vocabulary in dialect to ideological criticism, one can say we must select and sublate it (可以說是要加以選擇和揚棄).73

Here, in the specter of the indecent, licentious, and intimidating language of the city’s underclass, the vulgar patois of market streets, we see the limits of what was deemed acceptable for print. Even in a research volume dedicated to “dialect literature,” we see not a direct figuration of local language in script, but an always already mediated treatment of local words, here subject to the standards of insertion, deletion, and re-inscription of an intellectual elite. For Zhou Gangming, only by the light of “progressive and liberated thought” would the script of the new fangyan literature be crafted, and some elements would definitively be left out of printed form.

What Zhou’s statement, and the many others like it that can be found in the discourse on dialect literature of the day, reminds us of is that the stated goal of the language reformers- direct transcription of speech onto page- was always a mediated and highly ideological process. The relationship between text and sound was already impure: subject to the ordering effects of scriptural markings inherited from the past, from foreign scripts, from the sonic complexities of oral speech patterns, as well as the political standards of what constituted acceptable speech and thought. A profound irony thus defined the entire period: the search for unmediated transcription from voice to page lead to only ever greater forms of mediation, whether those took the form of incursions into

73 See Ibid, p.25.
the baihua, experiments with latinized script, or simply the censorship of certain regional patois that were deemed too obscene to enter the written record.

Ultimately, the story of regional writing during the Republican Period may be one of a massive missed opportunity: the commonwealth of languages on the Chinese mainland envisioned by Mao Dun, Qu Qiubai, Hu Feng, and the Latinxua Langiu group never materialized. When the CCP consolidated power over the mainland, they moved quickly to champion beifanghua as a National Common Language (Putonghua). The need to make the mainland fit into the schema of national culture so globally dominant in the early 20th century world- one state, one nation, one language- was so immense that the pluralistic schema could not be supported. The new government employed the various units of the state apparatus they were in the process of building- universities, research institutes, elementary and middle schools, Danwei work units, newspapers, publishing houses, radio stations, and movie theaters- to aggressively champion this putonghua in the name of national unity.74

Of course, the nationalization of language in China was never total: local dialects continued to be used daily alongside of the national putonghua, which took decades to gain a foothold as a public language in workplaces throughout the country. As late as 1974, a team of foreign linguists visiting the People’s Republic of China remarked upon translation as an everyday linguistic practice: “In most areas, the use of Putonghua to express the life experience of working people will require an exercise in translation,” working from local dialect into the national language and back again.75 The process of linguistic unification was extremely uneven from region to region, dependent on a variety of factors: a region’s distance to the northern dialect zone, its economic and transportive connections with the rest of the country, the extent of penetration of mass media forms into daily life, the extent and quality of educational institutions, and the nature of daily speaking

74 For more on the process of national linguistic consolidation during the Maoist Period, see Schoenhals (1992), Wagner (1999), Ji (2004), and Ban Wang ed. (2011). For a document history of the scriptural reforms that took place after 1949, see Seybolt and Chiang eds. (1978).

habits. Despite thirty years of nationalizing work, the researchers noted “many perturbations of the tone system due to the conflict between the Putonghua system and the local dialects....very few speakers in areas outside of Peking had mastered the details of standard pronunciation of Putonghua. This was true in Linxian, Zhengzhou, Yenan, Sian, Shanghai, Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Canton.”\(^{76}\)

Yet what was clear was the scriptural commonwealth that had been envisioned in the Republican Period was never pursued. Yue, Wu, Minan, Kejia, and other languages were denied scriptural sovereignty, the goal so fervently held by the Latinization advocates and others. Indeed, leading intellectuals of the Republican Period such as Mao Dun, Ye Shengtao, Guo Moruo, and Lao She, who as late as 1949 were still actively championing local scriptural experimentation, all embraced the Putonghua project after the CCP regime consolidated its power. Ye Shengtao scrubbed his novel Ni Huangzhi of most of its Wu dialect expressions, while Lao She apologized for his extensive use of Beiping dialect in his pre-liberation works, promising to dedicate himself to the cause of writing in a clear and standard Mandarin.\(^{77}\)

What other literary energies, pleasures, and disturbances would have been made possible if dialects had gained their own scriptural systems remains an enticing historical question. Regional speech would still dot post-liberation literary texts, but only in the way they did pre-liberation, as pronoun expressions, distinct adverbial constructions, and passing onomatopoeia. These were additive supplements whose frequencies could be turned down or up depending on the level of regionality sought by the text, brief eruptions of regional idiom that, ironically, only served to reinforce the dominance of the constructed northern vernacular.\(^{78}\)

\(^{76}\) See Ibid, p.35.

\(^{77}\) For more on these linguistic and ideological reversals amongst leading intellectuals, see Gunn (1991), pp. 49-61 and pp. 109-133.

\(^{78}\) This is not to say that textual disturbances to the northern vernacular have been wholly, or even partially, contained in the post-liberation period. For a fascinating examination of how Cantonese gained its own written forms in the popular print media, novels, advertising, and comic books of 20th century Hong Kong, see Snow (2004), particularly pp. 125-175. Dialect use in television series, films, and plays has also seen a marked increase in the reform period. For more, see Liu (2013).
While this ensured a place for regional voices in the literature of the PRC, this was a far cry from the scripturally continental vision that animated language debates in the Republican Era. Simply put, an alphabet for every region had the potential to radically alter our sense of the languages, scripts, and borders of “Modern Chinese Literature.”
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