The Chinese essay is arguably China’s most distinctive contribution to modern world literature, and the period of its greatest influence and popularity—the mid-1930s—is the central concern of this book. What Charles Laughlin terms “the literature of leisure” is a modern literary response to the cultural past that manifests itself most conspicuously in the form of short, informal essay writing (xiaopin wen). Laughlin examines the essay both as a widely practiced and influential genre of literary expression and as an important counter-discourse to the revolutionary tradition of New Literature (especially realistic fiction), often viewed as the dominant mode of literature at the time.

After articulating the relationship between the premodern traditions of leisure literature and the modern essay, Laughlin treats the various essay styles representing different groups of writers. Each is characterized according to a single defining activity: “wandering” in the case of the Yu si (Threads of conversation) group surrounding Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren; “learning” with the White Horse Lake group of Zhejiang schoolteachers like Feng Zikai and Xia Mianzun; “enjoying” in the case of Lin Yutang’s Analects group; “dreaming” with the Beijing school. The concluding chapter outlines the impact of leisure literature on Chinese culture up to the present day.

The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity dramatizes the vast importance of Chinese Literature. “More than any scholar in the field, Charles Laughlin has placed the prose essay at the heart of modern Chinese literary production and reception—where it rightly belongs. As a whole, his work demonstrates both the variety of approaches modern Chinese writers have taken to the prose genre and the essential interconnectedness of political literature and the literature of leisure. With this volume, the field seems to have matured to the point that we no longer need to obsess about ‘alternatives modernity’ as counterweights to the hegemony of the May Fourth mainstream. Since essays are (little prose pieces) were explicitly associated with the prose writing of late imperial China, Laughlin’s book also shows us how the rigid dichotomy between tradition and modernity has been a false construct in the scholarship on modern Chinese literature. Finally, organized around schools of prose, the book contributes greatly to our understanding of prose’s critical role in the shaping of a Republican-era literary field. Important on so many levels, The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity is a must-read.” —Kirk A. Denton, The Ohio State University

“The essay is a uniquely Chinese modern literary genre, and Laughlin is the first to have made it fully accessible to English-language scholarship. In this book he provides a thorough and knowledgeable overview of the main schools of essay writing in the 1920s and 1930s. His readings and analyses of the works truly open up the beauty and complexity of the genre to any reader interested in literature, and he frames his discussions in a consistent argument about what he calls a ‘literature of leisure’ that shows us a different and indispensable side of Chinese modernity.” —Michel Hockx, Soas, University of London

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The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity
The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity

Charles A. Laughlin

University of Hawai‘i Press
Honolulu
For my mother, my wife,
and my daughter
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Introduction
Writing as a Way of Life

Often when we look at modern Chinese literature we are more concerned with how it comments on history and national identity and do not fully recognize how the author conveys a philosophy of life or a commitment to principles. But literary writing in China is as much about establishing an image of a way of life (the implied author) and generating or attracting a community receptive to the author’s personality (the implied audience) as it is a discourse about Chinese affairs, whether the writing is revolutionary, reactionary, or ostensibly apolitical.

This book looks at an essay genre called *xiaopin wen* (little prose pieces) that emerged in the 1920s and reached the peak of its popularity shortly before the War Against Japan broke out in 1937. The *xiaopin wen* genre embodies a way of writing, a way of building and maintaining a range of literary communities, that had shown itself many times in China’s cultural past and continues to have considerable appeal in modern and contemporary China. The way of writing, and lifestyle, that most forms of *xiaopin wen* represent, can be called a “literature of leisure” (*xianqing wenxue*). The literature of leisure, however, is not limited to *xiaopin wen*. Particularly since the beginning of the seventeenth century, but earlier as well, a long tradition of Chinese writers—supported by a growing readership—felt that literature was more than the expression of political ambition and loyalty, or the praise of moral virtue, despite the fact that the often central Confucian tradition of literary exegesis held these to be the highest aims of literary creation.

The literature of leisure inherits and combines at least three traditions that can be traced to the earliest stages of Chinese literary history, but were marginal to mainstream Confucian culture. The first is the playful philosophical critique of Confucianism represented most dramatically by the Warring States
text *Zhuangzi*, one of the two foundational works of Daoism (the other being the mystical poem *Dao de jing*). The second is the hermit tradition represented by writers like the Six Dynasties poet Tao Qian, who conspicuously turned their backs on official positions to live the simple life of a farmer or hermit and left behind a literary record of their exploits. The hermit tradition differs from philosophical Daoism in its undertone of political and moral frustration. Finally, leisure literature may also be aligned with the influence of Buddhism on Chinese literature, especially its engagement with the dialectic of desire and transcendence. When leisure writing is serious, it attends to the tragic transience of worldly pleasures, even as it richly immerses us in the elaboration of those pleasures. It is this discourse of detachment that permits the cultivation of sophisticated tastes that are not equivalent to—indeed are often in opposition with—hedonistic pleasure-seeking. By the late imperial period, in addition to these traditional alternatives to the Confucian worldview, the proliferating stimuli of urban life drew writers’ attention to many new areas of pleasure and enjoyment, from the exuberance of rustic simplicity to the most lavishly detailed urban sophistication; urbanization provided access to new and more varied forms of income, which increasingly distracted literati from concern with the fate of the realm. It also made high culture available to affluent monks and socially ambitious businessmen. The Buddhist connection makes the study of modern leisure literature particularly fascinating, since it highlights the encounters of twentieth-century writers with Buddhist thought in their own reading and through cultural figures like Su Manshu and Li Shu-tong.

In this context, the cultivation of a meaningful private life and its expression in literary form became an alternative objective to the service to realm and emperor represented by the civil service examination system. Pursuit of this lifestyle may not have dominated late imperial literati life, but by the late Ming, it did exist as a fully fledged and widely practiced alternative, perhaps for the first time in Chinese history. The construction of a space, both actual and literary, in which to enjoy one’s leisure—gazing at natural scenery, contemplating rare books and antiques, listening to music, enjoying tea and wine—is the milieu and the most common subject matter of the literature of leisure. Leisure literature in the late Ming was manifested in poetry, a growing variety of prose forms, and in significant sections of vernacular novels that were produced throughout the late Ming and Qing dynasties; in this sense it is less a genre than a mode into which one can shift or sustain indefinitely, so I refer to it as a “way of writing.” By the end of the Ming dynasty, the humble prose pieces called *xiaopin wen* had become its most characteristic form.
The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity

The premodern legacy of leisure literature, informed by Daoist, hermitic, and Buddhist critiques of the utilitarian, redemptive discourse of Confucianism, uses trivia, irony, and humor not only to appeal to a certain aesthetic of charm and pleasure, but also to deliberately taunt self-important writing. At the same time, it affirms alternative values that often came into conflict with Confucian virtues rigidly interpreted—alternative values like friendship, romantic love, beauty, and the pursuit of a variety of simple and complicated pleasures. It is important to note here, however, that the leisure aesthetic is not exhausted by “pleasure”; it also means to recognize and cultivate the complex and contradictory textures of emotional life—particularly its ambivalent and negative sides—that are often simply neglected by Confucian thought.

The legacy of leisure literature is not only a critique of Confucian moral rigidity, but also a celebration of the pleasures of a fun and emotionally rich life. The basis of this critique/celebration in lived experience became greatly enriched in the urban centers of late imperial China, where an increasingly large and underemployed literate elite found ever more numerous ways to occupy their time and resources, thanks to unprecedented developments in entertainment and the popular performing arts. Within this context the “literate” were now not limited to the literati class trained to take the civil service examinations, but also included Buddhist and Daoist clergy and laypeople who were often prominent cultural figures in their own right. Literacy also extended to merchants and other “middle-class” figures who may have learned to read and write in an effort to rise into the literati class through the civil service examination system. Even when they failed, members of the middle class now had access, by virtue of their literacy and economic capital, to the means of cultural production and consumption. In most cases this meant active involvement in and/or patronage of a cultural life that might include performing dramas, writing and circulating fictional texts, and other self-fulfilling activities of the sophisticated urban demimonde. This sector of social and cultural life, which had little to do with the Confucian social hegemony that twentieth-century New Culture iconoclasts wanted to attack and overthrow, nevertheless became an occasional target of their attacks on account of its apparent decadence and frivolousness. However, this did not diminish its appeal to modern literates who still had access to its cultural products (largely in the form of texts and performances).

In his famous epilogue to *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* “Obsession with China: The Moral Burden of Modern Chinese Literature,” C. T.
Hsia observes that Chinese literary modernism is in some ways opposite to European modernism precisely because of its unbridled and un-ironic enthusiasm for the technological and economic trappings of modernization. European modernism, he argues, is worlds apart from the spirit of modern Chinese literature, because it views technological progress and the accumulation of wealth and power with a jaundiced eye and no small amount of anxiety. In addition to this it can be viewed as a neoclassicism in response to the anticlassicist spirit of Romanticism. Canonical European modernists’ interrogation of modern *anomie* very often resorts to classical (in Europe’s case, Greco-Roman) sources to ironically mythologize the trivia of daily existence.

In the widely accepted narrative of modern Chinese cultural history, the principal driving force of modern Chinese culture is the call for a socially or historically redemptive literature that would fundamentally change Chinese social relations and usher in an unprecedented era of freedom and prosperity. Such a literature is often much too enthusiastic about progress and the future to engender either in the reader or the writer the characteristic ambivalence that marks the European modernist. It is true also that those writers who most resemble the European modernists in their urban emphasis, their themes of alienation, irony, and psychoanalytic preoccupations were, in the 1930s at least, few in number and marginal in their literary influence. It has not occurred to many, though, that the widespread practice, across the spectrum of politics and literary groupings, of informal essay writing throughout the 1920s and 1930s, with its contrarian affirmation of heterodox aspects of traditional Chinese culture, its emphasis on humor and irony, so rare on the modern Chinese literary scene, might be considered more modernist at least than the realistic/revolutionary fiction, drama and poetry that subsequently became central to the canon of modern Chinese literature.

Such an observation might be easy to dismiss, seeing how little importance is usually attached to the essay genre in literary histories in Chinese as well as English and how little short informal pieces are taken seriously. Yet leisure literature as described here was a substantial component of the literary practice of most every major modern Chinese writer. For many at the time, it constituted the front line in the establishment of standards for modern written Chinese, and it certainly played an important role in education, where it served as the vehicle for training young Chinese writers in their own language and developing their literary sensibilities; moreover, it was through this form that they most often conveyed their literary responses to the world they lived in.

The remarkable discourse on smoking in the magazine *Lunyu banyuekan* (The Analects fortnightly) illustrates the relationship between tradition and modernity in leisure literature. In a half-serious list of ten restrictions ("com-
mandments”) for contributors to The Analects Fortnightly, writers are forbidden to deny themselves their addictions “such as smoking, sampling fine teas, admiring cherry blossoms, and reading books.” Describing these activities as “addictions” pihao is clearly ironic, they are innocent activities that, with the exception of smoking, do not harm the individual or others around him. They are, however, activities that can be enjoyed in solitude, and by not being tied to any professional or national project, they might best be described as leisure activities. Furthermore, by including smoking among them, and affirming them collectively with this rule, a decided statement is being made of the individual’s right to spend at least some of his time as he pleases, even when it is devoted to the enjoyment of a nonproductive and solitary pleasure.

Thus if we divide “leisure” in industrial society into three types—the whiling away of time on one’s own or with the family, “passive leisure” such as enjoying television, radio, and film, or “active leisure,” as in the pursuit of hobbies, pastimes, or sports—the practice of smoking should belong to the first category, yet the discourse of smoking in The Analects Fortnightly is a form of cultivated leisure of the third type. Particularly in the case of Lin Yutang, the discourse of smoking becomes a banner not only in favor of smoking itself, but a symbol of the individualist attitudes and marginal or eccentric affinities. The manner of the discourse, moreover, being largely tongue-in-cheek, is an affirmation of humor as a discursive mode, which was highly contested in the 1930s literary scene.

Analyses of leisure in the modern industrial world may be of some use in examining the place of leisure in modern Chinese culture, but we must make adjustments in our consideration of the relation of literary expression to leisure in China. These may be summed up in the observation that when Lin Yutang sings the praises of smoking, though the cigarette (or pipe or cigar, he promotes all) carries unmistakable connotations of modernity as Westernization, this kind of leisurely enjoyment had a rich tradition in other forms, such as the “sampling of fine teas” (chuoming), long before the onset of industrial modernity. The cultivation of pleasure and cultural discourse about cultivated pleasures both boast a long history in China that bears no relationship to the modern opposition of leisure time and industrial labor. This opposition defines leisure as the pursuits and activities workers, clerks, shopkeepers, and managers engage in when they are not engaged in productive labor. In the premodern Chinese context, among the literati, it is in fact rather difficult to distinguish “productive labor,” which generally took the form of writing and civil administration or military command, from leisure activities. Ouyang Xiu’s (1007–1072) “Zuiweng ting ji” (The old toper’s pavilion) is a case in point, one rated important enough to have been included in the
Guwen guanzhi (Masterpieces of ancient prose). In this piece, Ouyang, an illustrious Song dynasty literatus, commemorates building a pavilion from which he can enjoy the view in a locale where he served as prefect. There is something more in the modern Chinese cultivation of pleasure, then, than an attempt to generate something meaningful while off duty; there is an affirmation of a tradition of looking beyond social and bureaucratic duties to nature, to beauty, to the cultivation of emotional sensibilities through the appreciation of drama or fiction or nonfiction essays.

The fact that smoking and other individualistic enjoyments can take on this role in modern China has everything to do with a particular attitude toward cultural difference or cross-cultural interactions. While Lin Yutang’s critics might attack the “Westernized” profile he sports with his smoking and unalloyed admiration for British attitudes and practices, from Lin’s point of view, these are merely modern manifestations of attitudes and proclivities received from premodern Chinese culture. Even with its palpable link to tradition, however, essays on topics like smoking do not constitute an assertion of “essential Chineseness,” as their contested position on the contemporary literary scene demonstrates. Critics of the Analects group are just as likely to cite something like “inadequate Chineseness” as the problem.

Leisure literature articulates the experience of domestic space in an everyday temporality often layered with a nostalgic longing for the past. This combination of time and space is itself the project of careful cultivation. The everyday is embodied in the concreteness of experience in contrast with vapid theory and philosophy. This commitment to concreteness, which, from the point of view of moral philosophy is “trivial,” is deeply shared by the proponents of leisure literature in China. Since late imperial times and often much earlier, literati prose writings were packaged (that is, collections were titled) in terms of dwellings or studios. A writer would be identified with the name of his studio or a particularly meaningful dwelling, and that name would in turn identify collections of all kinds of creative writing.

Examples abound, such as Zhang Dai’s Tao’an mengyi (Dream recollections of the Tao Hermitage), Ji Yun’s Yuewei caotang biji (Notes from the Cottage of Close Observation), Pu Songling’s Liao zhai zhiyi (Strange tales from the Make-do Studio), Yuan Mei’s Sui yuan shihua (Discussions on poetry from the Sui Garden), and others. Many modern essayists titled their books in a similar way, and it was not entirely a matter of literary convention or artifice. Zhou Zuoren (Kuyu zhai—Embittering Rain Studio), Feng Zikai (Yuanyuan tang—Fated Hall), Xia Mianzun (Pingwu—Bungalow), Liang Shiqiu (Yashe—Elegant Lodging) all to a greater or lesser extent built, arranged, or imagined their houses or studies to optimize humble and sophisticated pleasures; they
placed great emphasis on the process of this spatial cultivation and on the social ritual of naming, and titled their writings in connection with these environments and their names.

The individual-as-writer identified with the named space, and so the interior of that space would take on his or her personality. Because private dwellings were designed, built, and decorated with such loving care, the space in turn became emblematic of the author’s status as a private individual, an individual personality. At the same time, such dwellings contained the external world in the form of texts and artifacts, the world as constructed by the sensitive and erudite author; this world might or might not be circumscribed by China’s national or cultural boundaries. With so much emphasis on the study or dwelling in a work’s title, authors often devoted at least part of their prefaces to the story of the dwelling and might dedicate several essays to vignettes from life there—everything from family anecdotes to visits from notable friends to the author’s own puttering around with furniture and plants as he tries to refine the domestic environment in one way or another.

_Xiaopin wen_ in the 1920s and 1930s

The conspicuous alignment of a modern literary form with a particular strand of premodern writing is rare in China. Fiction, drama, and poetry do not enjoy the same comfortable relationship with tradition as the essay. In the case of poetry, insofar as modern literature was meant to be “vernacular” or _baihua_, it was difficult (and arguably impossible in the case of _shi_) to write modern poetry using traditional forms. Moreover, many of the ills attributed to premodern literature in Hu Shi’s “Modest Proposals” (imitation, “moaning without an illness,” hackneyed and formal language, arcane allusions, parallelism) were most conspicuous in poetry.¹⁰ Fiction and drama, it could be argued, were more indebted to premodern (mostly late imperial) narrative practice, but even then, these connections were suppressed and often even unconscious, while polemical writing and criticism asserted a complete break from traditional forms.¹¹

The modern essay emerged in the atmosphere of the Literary Revolution and aligned itself with European belles lettres while distancing itself from premodern _guwen_ (ancient style prose) and _bagu wen_ (“eight-legged essays”). But only a decade later, in 1932, Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) was already able to associate it on a fundamental aesthetic and ideological level with the late Ming dynasty _xiaopin wen_, while still claiming that the career of the modern essay was one of the most successful genre stories in New Literature and the
greatest triumph of baihua style. Zhou contends that the modern essay should be distinguished from the premodern one because it uses the medium of baihua, but this distinction seems more superficial in the case of the essay than it does with other genres. Looking closely at the essay in practice, it is hard to maintain that it was a strictly baihua form in the 1930s.

The modern xiaopin wen, insofar as it constitutes a literary sensibility and heir to the premodern literature of leisure, also represents a critique of the simplistic dichotomy between classical and vernacular written Chinese. It challenges this opposition by indulging in a playful mixture of the two. In fact, it challenges the very opposition of “traditional” and “modern” upon which the New Culture movement, the Literary Revolution, and the May Fourth movement were based. Though its proponents and defenders did not launch a systematic or even markedly polemical critique, I argue that informal essayistic practice—the literature of leisure—questioned the particular manner in which “tradition” was defined by cultural activists in 1917–1921 in their efforts to establish literature as an instrument of social reform or revolution. As Theodore Huters has shown, this vision of New Literature’s purpose is itself traceable to important premodern strands; indeed it arguably represents the orthodox premodern vision of literature. Though often seen as “traditional,” the modern literature of leisure may be more usefully viewed a deliberately unorthodox, yet unquestionably modern, development in twentieth-century Chinese literature.

The explosion of prose essays from the Literary Revolution of 1917 to the outbreak of war against Japan in 1937 is one of the less-often told stories in modern Chinese literary history. Yet it is important enough to have warranted at least a brief discussion in C. T. Hsia’s *History of Modern Chinese Fiction*:

In the context of Chinese literary history, the ascendancy of the familiar essay means primarily the reassertion of traditional sensibility. Despite the great popularity of fiction, the familiar essay had always had its practitioners since the Literary Revolution. . . . Not only was this genre practically an offshoot of the indigenous tradition, but it answered such personal needs of writers and readers as the experimental fiction, poetry, and drama had left unsatisfied. . . . One therefore often detects the odd persistence of traditional moral feelings and aesthetic preferences in modern Chinese writers otherwise intellectually and even emotionally committed to a new ideology. Even with such progressive writers as Kuo Mo-jo and Pa Chin [Guo Moruo and Ba Jin], one finds, especially in their incidental and personal writings, a nostalgia for home and childhood, a fondness for flowers and pets, and a deep-seated Confucian or Taoist piety, which are completely alien presences in their world of revolution—
ary action. At a period when traditional sensibility remained suppressed in its more serious literature, the writing of familiar essays was for many authors a personal necessity.14

Zhou Zuoren led the way with a dozen or more volumes of essays of various kinds and launched the influential periodical Yu si (Threads of conversation, 1924–1930) with his brother Lu Xun. Other well-known authors like Ye Shengtao, Yu Pingbo, Chen Xuezhao, and Xu Dishan also came out with volumes of sanwen, suibi, or xiaopin wen.15 However it was the spread of xiaopin wen into literary magazines in the early 1930s that made people across the cultural landscape take notice and begin to view the situation as something of a phenomenon. Magazines devoted to xiaopin wen began to appear in 1932, and Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang were particularly involved in the promotion of this form:

In 1932 Lin Yutang, the leader of this [Analects] group, launched a magazine of humor, The Analects [Lunyu], which proved to be an instant success. In 1934 and 1935 he published two similar magazines to promote the familiar essay and other types of personal writing, This Human World [Renjian shi] and The Cosmic Wind [Yuzhou feng]. These magazines constituted a sizable setback for the League [of Leftwing Writers] insofar as they enjoyed a wide popularity even among progressive student circles. When its concerted attack on these magazines proved of little avail to curb the fashion, the League had to put out a personal magazine of its own, T’ai Pai [Taibai], to counteract Lin Yutang’s influence.16

The xiaopin wen phenomenon in the 1930s was largely a result of Lin Yutang’s influence on the literary scene. If 1934 was supposed to be “the year of the magazine,” or “the year of the xiaopin,” as is often stated in contemporary discussions of this phenomenon, Lin and his magazines were instrumental in making that happen. His Analects Fortnightly was devoted to satire, poking fun at current events and persons. Also biweekly, This Human World appeared in April of 1934 and specialized in xiaopin wen. This Human World’s editorial statement was a shot across the bow for the socially conscious, redemptive literature of the early 1930s: “The only success in fourteen years of modern Chinese literature is that of xiaopin wen. Though in the creation of fiction there have been some good works, they have also come out of the training provided by xiaopin essays. Xiaopin wen . . . centers upon the individual, takes a leisurely tone, and differs from other forms; it [exhibits] what Westerners call ‘personal style.’”17 This bold statement stirred up a controversy in the literary arena
about whether writing *xiaopin wen* was appropriate in modern times, an issue discussed in detail below and at the end of chapter 4.

One of Lin Yutang’s most extended writings on late imperial prose is a pair of articles entitled “Lun wen, shang xia” (On writing, parts I and II) written as an appreciation of Shen Qiwu’s pathbreaking collection of late imperial informal prose, *Jindai sanwen chao* (Early modern essays transcribed, 1932).\(^{18}\) The title of Lin’s double article echoes Yuan Zongdao’s (1560–1600) well-known Gongan school manifesto, arguably the founding document of the pre-modern *xiaopin wen* form.\(^{19}\) Lin compares the anticlassicism of the Gongan and Jingling schools to that of the Western Romantics and to Hu Shi’s, yet he also compares their shortcomings, which follow from the limitations of literary Chinese, to those of a woman with liberated feet (perhaps alluding to Hu Shi’s comment about his own vernacular poetry).\(^{20}\) By contrast, Lin says, Jin Shengtan’s preface to the *Shuihu zhuan* is more like “natural” feet.\(^{21}\)

In the second section, entitled *xingling* (“native sensibility,” after James Liu), Lin Yutang expresses particular approval of the collection’s title (*Early Modern Essays Transcribed*), because it emphasizes how the Gongan essayists were the forefathers of literary modernity in China. In his characteristically bold style, Lin glosses one of the great catchwords of late imperial literature, *xingling*, as simply “self” (*xingling jiushi ziwo*).\(^{22}\) For Lin, and for Gongan essayists as he reads them, self-expression is necessarily antitraditional, anticlassical; thus Lin views Irving Babbitt’s neoclassical influence in China, represented especially by Liang Shuming and Liang Shiqiu, with disapproval.\(^{23}\) Writing is not old or new, but false or real: classicism is by definition deceptive, because the writings of the ancients were not imitative, while modern classicism must be so.

By the time of the publication of the *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium of Chinese New Literature, 1935), which included two volumes of essays published in the 1920s, the claim that the vernacular essay was the greatest success story in modern Chinese literature was well established. In his *Wushi nian lai zhi Zhongguo wenxue* (Chinese literature in the past fifty years, 1922), Hu Shi writes, “Vernacular essays are very well developed. The progress of long expository essays is obvious, and we can refrain from discussing it. In the past few years, the most noticeable progress in prose has been the ‘xiaopin wen’ essay promoted by Zhou Zuoren. This kind of *xiaopin wen* uses casual conversation but has profound meaning hidden within it. Sometimes it seems clumsy, but is actually funny (*huaji*). The success of works of this type can completely dispel the myth that ‘belles lettres cannot be written in the vernacular.’” In 1928, Zhu Ziqing’s “Lun Zhongguo xiandai de xiaopin wen” (On China’s modern *xiaopin wen*) cites Hu Shi’s comments
and adds that, though drama and fiction subsequently made considerable progress, the development of modern poetry was far less impressive than Hu Shi predicted, and “the most progress has been made in the xiaopin essay.”

Zhu attributed the success of the modern essay in large part to the fact that the prose essay was a privileged genre in premodern times, so its modern counterpart could coast on its prestige. But it was formal prose that was prestigious, not the kind of informal essays that began to be referred to in the late Ming as xiaopin wen; thus Zhu is in effect comparing the modern Chinese essay to rigid model examination essays (bagu wen), official memorials, and philosophical writings. As early as 1930, on the other hand, Zhou Zuoren began to link the vibrant modern form to the specific casual forms—prefaces, colophons, personal letters, reading notes—to which the term xiaopin wen properly applied. Moreover, Zhou made the extravagant claim that “xiaopin wen is the apex (jizhi) of literary development,” and expanded on this idea throughout the 1930s in a variety of writings I will be discussing throughout this book.

Even Lu Xun in his hostile “Xiaopin wen de weiji” (The crisis of xiaopin wen, 1933), which opposed the burgeoning spirit of everyday individualism that characterized most xiaopin wen, had to at least acknowledge the sway they had over the literary market. Lu Xun surprisingly chimes in with Hu Shi and Yu Dafu in acknowledging that the extraordinary success of the essay in China of the 1920s was equal to that of any other New Literature genre. Lu Xun uses the term xiaopin wen here in a broad sense that suggests all forms of artistic short prose writing, including what was being called suigan, suibi, xiaopin wen, zagan, and sanwen. The point of the “Crisis” essay, however, was to satirize a certain kind of xiaopin wen—that composed by Zhou Zuoren and his followers—as a kind of antique curio (xiao baishe) that its old-fashioned, decadent practitioners and readers keep on a shelf to admire and fondle. Though important to Chinese modern literature, Lu Xun asserts, the xiaopin wen must not be curios, but “daggers and spears,” writings that criticize and attack, an image that is now invariably associated with Lu Xun’s satirical zawen essays.

The xiaopin wen craze is put into relief by the appearance, noted by C. T. Hsia in the passage quoted above, of the journal Taibai (Venus). Taibai was a prose literature journal established by a group in which Leftwing League members Xu Maoyong and Chen Wangdao, as well as the “White Horse Lake” essayists Ye Shengtao, Zhu Ziqing, and Xia Mianzun, figured prominently. The journal’s September 20, 1934, statement of purpose offers no discussion of xiaopin wen (it is only mentioned off-handedly and neutrally); nor is the Leftwing League mentioned by name. The magazine’s purpose is set out in Xu
Maoyong’s “Yao ban yige zheyang de zazhi” (This is the kind of magazine we want to run) as the promotion of “mass language” dazhong yu through prose works that are written by or from the words of “the masses.”

According to its critics, the problem with xiaopin wen was its frivolity (the attitude of the author), its lack of concern with national affairs (the content), and particularly its promotion of individualism and leisure (the ideology underlying the writing). Rather than simply denouncing the essay, however, the special issue of Taibai devoted to xiaopin wen and cartoons raises a variety of issues and expectations as to what the form should be or do. I will present these arguments in more detail in chapter 4, but wish to point out here that proper uses of xiaopin wen asserted by its critics include: training for fictional writing, as a vehicle for education, particularly for the popularization of scientific knowledge, and as a compositional model in middle and high school Chinese classes. Most of those who suggested this latter use had already put the idea into practice as schoolteachers and in their educational publications.

In relation to the antitraditional thrust of the New Culture movement, the modern essay’s comfortable relationship with its premodern counterpart was seen as downright subversive, especially since many of its practitioners were also prominent authors in more politically progressive genres. Why, then, did this form of expression hold an attraction for moderns, who otherwise seemed thoroughly committed to casting off tradition and contributing as much as possible to China’s progress in the modern world? Was it, as C. T. Hsia states, a question of a personal psychological need for nostalgic comfort, for surrounding oneself with familiar content and expressing one’s feelings in a time-honored way, in the face of constant inundation by the harsh and tiring realities of modernity, revolution, and progress? Hsia’s way of putting the matter may exaggerate the contrast between a “traditional” sensibility and modern experience. I would contend that such expression itself constituted a sophisticated way of being modern, one that did justice both to Western and Chinese sensibilities. Why should it have been necessary to “struggle” with literature in order to be culturally modern in China?

**The Literature of Leisure and Modern Chinese Literary History**

This book endeavors to question the marginalization of xiaopin wen from the literary historiography of modern China, both in China and in the West. Though the evidence clearly indicates that xiaopin wen was an important and influential literary genre in the late 1920s through the 1930s, it is not empha-
sized in historiography because the attitude behind *xiaopin wen* flies in the face of the whole complex of shared assumptions about what modern Chinese culture is about, assumptions that were in large part generated in the May Fourth movement and redeemed or recontained in the formation of modern Chinese literary history under the direction of the Chinese Communist Party throughout the 1940s, into the People’s Republic of China in 1949, and beyond. Principal among these assumptions, the new literature of China would be written in a vernacular idiom that bore as little resemblance as possible to the classical Chinese written language, that New Literature would be a literature *for, about, and to a greater extent than ever before,* by the common people, and that the main thematic concerns of New Literature would all be conspicuously tied to the modern Chinese historical predicament and possible ways out of it.

The debate about the writer’s autonomy from political aims supposedly ended up with those advocating the “third kind of person” (politically neutral, dedicated to art) losing to those who demanded political commitment and progressive social contributions from writers. I will use *xiaopin wen* as an unusual example straddling the categories of “pure literature” and literature “for life’s sake” to illustrate this debate and assess its representation in literary historiography. It is not my intention here to portray the modern trend of socially conscious and revolutionary literature in a negative light, and simply champion the achievements of modern practitioners of leisure literature as a form of heroic resistance to the revolutionary cultural hegemony. Those who promoted *xiaopin wen* as a cause were no less prone to be hypocritical and self-serving than their adversaries. Rather, I want to bring a serious consideration of this observably powerful phenomenon into our understanding of modern Chinese culture as a whole. The tendency to dichotomize leads those who privilege the revolutionary trend to minimize the importance of *xiaopin wen,* and those who champion *xiaopin wen,* out of a dedication to the autonomy of pure literature, to demonize the hegemony of revolutionary literature in China. The fact is that, while revolutionary literature is often thought to have dominated the literary scene by the 1930s, both impulses were necessary to the dynamics of modern Chinese culture, and neither can be understood properly without reference to the other. This explains why one can observe elements of *xiaopin wen* reemerging in socialist cultural phenomena such as the orthodox lyrical essays of Yang Shuo and Liu Baiyu and the very *xiaopin wen*–like writings of Deng Tuo in the early 1960s, not to mention the tremendous resurgence in popularity of all kinds of ancient and modern informal essays after the decline of what may have been the last era of socially committed Chinese literature in the 1980s. On the other hand, and
no less importantly, this also explains the discernible moral gesture, if not overt political commitment, in most of the major Republican-period manifestations of the modern informal essay. That is to say, the interdependence of the literature of leisure and the literature of revolution can be observed both in the room for leisurely lyricism within revolutionary discourse, as well as in the implication or explication of moral commitment to principles in most leisure literature.

Wenzhang: The Question of Form in Modern Chinese Prose Writing

If a genre is a specific literary form with identifiable features accompanied by a normative discourse governing its creation and development, the *xiaopin wen* creates special problems. The term was first applied to literary prose writing in the late Ming dynasty, not to assign to a single form certain definable features, but as a blanket term encompassing a number of existing forms—prefaces, colophons, personal letters, biographical notes or memoirs, inscriptions on paintings, travel essays, and many more. It was borrowed from a term in Buddhist literature referring to excerpts from or summaries of larger scriptures, in which the element *pin* (which can mean to taste or sample, and by extension to evaluate and rank) was much more actively meaningful. In fact, some of its earliest uses in titles of literary anthologies clearly derive more from this meaning than the later sense of informal short prose essays.

The miscellaneous variety of the forms classified as *xiaopin wen* did not diminish once the term was adopted in the literary context. Its import was less the identification of a definable form, than the identification and legitimation of what these modest forms have in common. This can be described as a comparatively casual mood and an emphasis on the trivial, the everyday, the little things that make life charming and meaningful on a day-to-day basis. It is possible to identify features that are common to this kind of essay and that distinguish it from more grand and self-important modes of prose writing—vernacular, local and colloquial elements in the language, generally short length of text, emphasis on certain kinds of subject matter—but that does not take away from the fact that in the premodern period, the various specific forms included within the broader category continued to exhibit their distinctive characteristics. Even in the twentieth century, writers’ essays are still subcategorized into prefaces, colophons, travel essays, diaries, and biographical essays.

The *xiaopin wen* was a force to be reckoned with from the 1920s to the 1940s. Once it became associated with the early modern literature of leisure
in the early 1930s, the various forms its practitioners adopted all contributed to the elaboration of its philosophy of the importance of the trivial, the everyday, and the personal. Moreover, the term enjoyed a much broader currency in this period than it did later. It corresponded roughly to the way the term *sanwen* is now used in Chinese to generally denote prose essays with literary value. But because polemical debates eventually stigmatized it as frivolous and suspiciously unpatriotic (even associating it with wartime collaboration with the Japanese because of its association with the literature of occupied Shanghai in the 1940s), it became difficult to use the term after the 1940s without attempting to redefine it entirely.

A good deal of the discussion about essays and other kinds of writing tends to lump different forms together under the term *wenzhang*. Though synonymous with belles lettres in premodern usage, in modern Chinese *wenzhang* loosely refers to any piece of writing, particularly prose. That is, whether an author is writing a diary entry or letter, a lyrical essay or a polemical or satirical piece, it can be conceived as the author’s *wenzhang* regardless of the particular form it takes. Even works of fiction, poetry, and drama are referred to at least casually in critical discourse as *wenzhang*. It is thus only in exceptional cases that authors become particularly well known for a certain form of essay writing; Lu Xun and his satirical *zawen* are such an exception. Unfortunately, this has led to a tendency among scholars and historians to pay attention only to these exceptional cases, while ignoring the vast volume of *wenzhang* produced by authors known for more clearly delineated genres, particularly fiction or poetry.

The association of an author with a particular genre in modern Chinese literature does a disservice to the modern Chinese essay, which, judging from trends in scholarship, seems to be thought not to matter as much as other forms of modern Chinese writing. But many of the authors we know best for their achievements in poetry, fiction, and drama also have significant accomplishments in the form of the essay, and readers of their time and later generations have read their essays with just as much interest as their other work. They have done so, moreover, not merely to discover biographical information about the author, but to experience further the author’s literary personality through his or her style, vocabulary, and rhetoric. What they hope to find, if appreciations of essays are any guide, is not artistic achievement, but sincerity and authenticity.

Chinese readers read an author, and writers write *wenzhang*, because through writing in a variety of forms the author is ultimately able to construct a legible *self*, and the reader thus gets to know him or her. Reading for biographical information is more what European and American critical biographers
of Chinese writers do. They look for information in the sense of facts that can be translated and paraphrased without danger of losing anything valuable in the process. Style is of no importance in the gathering of information, because the information is gleaned entirely for the purpose of tracing a profile of the writer, without letting that writer him- or herself color that profile with his or her own style or idiomatic way of putting things. An oft-cited example for distinguishing style from content is the first sentence of Lu Xun’s essay “Qiu ye” (Autumn night): “In my rear courtyard you can see two trees; one is a date tree, and the other one is also a date tree.” The information here presents two trees, but what strikes readers is that mysterious repetition of the same information about each tree, typical of Lu Xun’s challenge to vernacular language and conventional thinking. It is precisely the idiomatic style and pattern of expression that draws Chinese readers to a particular author’s wenzhang, because wenzhang as such entail the unique and particular textures and structures of words the author weaves, even when writing “factually” about him- or herself.

The modern Chinese reception of essays has also tended to exclude them from serious consideration as a facet of literary history. Because they represent stylistic achievement more than a well-rounded sense of literary importance, Chinese readers most commonly approach them as objects of literary appreciation. Since late imperial times, moreover, a rhetoric of impressionistic criticism, whose unsystematic character and opacity defy analysis, has grown up around the discussion and evaluation of prose writing. This rhetoric has, in effect, created a myth about the ineffability of the essay’s meaning that is closely intertwined with a very modern sense of cultural and national identity. Many Chinese readers believe that essential elements of Chinese culture are not translatable or legible to foreigners, and these elements are particularly prominent in the essay. The impressionistic appreciation of essays, which often uses premodern critical terms without analysis, reinforces this tendency by explicating essays in a metalanguage that is itself ineffable. My readings of essays in this book attempt to resist this tendency, demonstrating the legibility of modern Chinese essays while still doing justice to their artistic achievements.

Another facet of cultural identity relevant to the informal essay concerns its status as a response to the pressure modern Chinese writers faced to create more or less realistic narrative literature for the purpose of promoting social reform or revolution. I argue that since modern essayists identify a kinship of spirit with, say, late Ming practitioners of xiaopin wen like the Yuan brothers, this opens the possibility that “being modern” need not necessarily mean “being Westernized,” at least not as it is commonly understood. The discourse of modern xiaopin wen was grounded in a realization that a certain urbane
mode of late imperial cultural sophistication manifested in early modern informal prose writing constituted a compellingly “Chinese” (or at least non-Western) way of being modern, while still speaking to issues that looked “universal” to Chinese in the early part of the twentieth century, such as the dignity of the individual and the cultivation of a skeptical outlook toward human foibles and especially public affairs. Susan Daruvala’s work makes clear that Zhou Zuoren’s literary project, for example, proposed an alternative to the redemptive, socially engaged literary discourse subsumed under larger political and historical aims. Daruvala has also delved deeply into late imperial Chinese critical and philosophical writing, exploring key elements of the *xiaopin* aesthetic such as *quwei* (fascination) and *bense* (true color) that have influenced modern forms. For Daruvala, what this boils down to in Zhou Zuoren’s case is a different ontological foundation for national identity than that espoused by more mainstream literary revolutionists. Zhou’s sense of national belonging derived from local experience, not from an abstract conception of the nation as a whole. With this, Daruvala links Zhou Zuoren’s sense of national identity with that of the Beijing school “native soil” writers such as Shen Congwen, Shi Tuo (Lu Fen), and Xiao Qian, as well as the individualistic and everyday aesthetic of late Ming *xiaopin wen.*

**Grouping Authors, Classifying Wenzhang**

If modern Chinese essays and other literary forms can be viewed equally as *wenzhang*, how does one group authors and essays in a study that proposes to investigate the relationship between leisure literature and Chinese modernity? I do not claim that *xiaopin wen* and related forms such as *suibi* and *zagan* or *zawen* are formally distinguishable subgenres; such an endeavor would be highly artificial and of dubious value. But there are other ways this corpus can be divided. One could, for example, divide the entire corpus of modern Chinese prose into two streams, one issuing from Lu Xun, the other from Zhou Zuoren. The writings of these two in the 1920s asserted two sensibilities that, in combination, can be said to encompass the whole of modern Chinese writing: One was devoted to the radical transformation of society and the other to the expression of personality, yet they share a keen sense of moral responsibility. Significant practitioners of essay writing in the 1920s and 1930s can be aligned more or less with one of these two individuals, either by temperament or by actual social relationship; a significant number of essayists were socially linked to both brothers. This manner of division involves criteria both internal and external to the essay text.
Modern Chinese essays might also be divided according to smaller social groupings, societies, or salons that, even if traceable back to Lu Xun or Zhou Zuoren, add further diversity and assert a distinctive character. In this framework, most well-known essayists belonged variously to the Crescent Moon group, the Creation Society, the White Horse Lake group, the Beijing and Shanghai schools, or the Analects group. While such groupings rarely entailed official organizations, they do cohere because of common interests, mutual friends, and often the common endeavor of maintaining one or more magazines, or literary newspaper columns or supplements.

This brings us to a third way of grouping the essay corpus, one almost inextricably linked to these social groups of tongren (associates): namely, the media they used as their vehicles of publication. More often than not, modern Chinese literary groups cluster around journals, magazines, or literary newspaper supplements that they can claim in greater or lesser degree to be their own. What complicates the matter is that a group of like-minded individuals can never quite be reduced to the editorial board or frequent contributors to a particular publication. Some groups of associates, such as the Analects group mentioned above, were more publication-oriented than others—their commonality extended over a variety of magazines, all of which centered around the figure of Lin Yutang. At the opposite extreme, some individuals were relatively independent of such groups, or did not appear in any serial publications. Zhu Ziqing, whose name for many is synonymous with the modern Chinese essay, published essays and poetry in at least twenty-nine different periodicals, but apart from a relatively high concentration of ten pieces in the Chinese Literary Association stronghold Xiaoshuo yuebao (The short story magazine), Zhu’s works appeared in publications scattered across the social and political spectrum, with not more than two or three pieces appearing in any one.38 Others appear in the publications of many different groupings as well: Yu Dafu, for example, can be found in publications spanning the Creation Society, the Analects group, the Shanghai and Beijing schools, and perhaps others; Feng Zikai, the most popular and gifted cartoonist of the time, was also a respected essayist, and his wenzhang, like his cartoons, appear in magazines of all camps.

Despite these complications, periodicals are one of the most rewarding sources for the study of the essay; through their published reader correspondence one can see how different writers responded to each other’s work, and surmise a good deal about other readers. Literary periodicals are also often full of advertisements that reveal much about the publication’s target readership and its connections within and beyond the publishing industry. Their tables of contents and editors’ comments can show how much prominence a
piece of writing and its author were given in relation to other genres and
other authors, revealing their status in the literary field of the time as well as
the individual preferences of the editor or editorial board.

Other popular methods of grouping authors and works could be applied
to the modern Chinese essay, including by period (usually articulated by po-
itical events in 1927, 1937, 1949, etc.) or by geography. The latter has been
recently dominated by a Beijing school/Shanghai school divide, but much
more interesting things can be drawn from more marginal or obscure geo-
graphical groupings. For example, the White Horse Lake group discussed in
chapter 3 is defined at least in part by their common experience of teaching at
Chunhui Middle School near Shangyu, Zhejiang, in the early 1920s; the
writers sojourning in Guilin or the Southwestern United University group in
Kunming during the early 1940s are also compelling groups whose works dis-
play elements of artistic unity due to their respective locales.

Each of these principles for grouping works and authors features a socio-
logical or historical aspect, so in this book I do not pursue a strictly aesthetic
or formal subdivision. Each principle also yields somewhat different results, a
different take on a given author or set of texts in a given time or place. In the
end, I have found that, to a significant degree, all these groupings intersect
and reinforce each other. For example, 1926 marked the beginning of a mo-
mentous move southward for a large portion of the literary community based
in Beijing, and the idiosyncratic group who remained behind formed the
basis of the Beijing school; the outbreak of the War Against Japan in 1937
again rendered regional groupings tentative and even misleading. My re-
search suggests a degree of congruence between social groupings and literary
periodicals, and of course these are largely borne out by the members’ resi-
dence in the same city. While geographical parameters alone prove futile over
time, many groups did come into being by virtue of shared experience in time
and space, such as a shared birthplace, studying in Japan at the same time, or
teaching at the same school or university. These kinds of shared experience
gave rise to cohorts, and it is in terms of such cohorts, defined with reference
to as many criteria as possible, that I divide the present study into chapters.
Moreover, I will try to show how the intersections of these criteria shaped the
aesthetics, themes, and style of the texts written by a group’s members, and
this will be as close as I get to identifying “subgenres” of the modern Chinese
essay.

Though I thus resort to sociohistorical connections in my arrangement
of the material, I want to make clear that this is not a study in literary sociol-
ogy, but principally concerns the aesthetics of the informal modern Chinese
essay as a unique vehicle of individual literary expression. At the same time,
I want to emphasize how the essay’s aesthetics are as dynamic a part of the literary field as the “external” conditions that shape and help define them. My goal is to define the literature of leisure as a modern Chinese literary voice, and ascertain how this voice spoke to the literary field of its time.

The Varieties of Leisure Literature

In my first chapter, I use prefaces and colophons to modern editions of leisure literature works, Chinese literature textbooks, as well as publishing industry data and secondary scholarship to explore the Republican-period fascination with late imperial leisure literature. Due to the biases of most sources of modern literary history, it is easy to underestimate the appeal and popularity in the Republican period (1911–1949) of such late imperial writings as Li Yu’s Xianqing ouji (Sketches of idle pleasures), Wang Shizhen’s (1634–1711) Chibei outan (Random discussions north of the pond), Zhang Dai’s Tao’an mengyi (Dream recollections of the Tao Hermitage), Jin Shengtan’s heterodox canon of Six Great Masterworks (Qu Yuan’s “Encountering Sorrow,” Zhuangzi, Sima Qian’s Records of the Historian, Du Fu’s poetry, Wang Shifu’s play Romance of the Western Chamber, and Shi Nai’an’s Outlaws of the Marsh, including his copious commentaries), Shen Fu’s Fusheng liuji (Six records of a floating life), even going back much further to Su Shi’s Dongpo zhilin and Dongpo xiaopin, and the anecdotes of Liu Yiqing’s Six Dynasties Shishuo xinyu (New account of tales of the world), not to mention the xiaopin essays of the late-Ming Gongan and Jingling schools. Jin Shengtan’s eccentric canon was not entirely comprised of leisure literature, but the individualistic passion for self-expression embodied by each of its authors has much in common with the attitude of the literature of leisure. Modern writers of every political persuasion not only enjoyed reading these writings as much as shi and ci poetry and late imperial fiction, but also often helped cultivate interest in them through editing or writing prefaces to modern editions. All this is in play before, during, and after the New Culture movement’s antitraditionalist cultural campaign. The key to this apparent contradiction is understanding that the modern reception of leisure literature did not necessarily appreciate it as “traditional,” but rather as a worthy contribution to the world literary legacy, and as a sophisticated expression of attitudes to which these moderns could relate without difficulty. It could and did inspire them to cultivate leisure in their lives and writing as well, and it is their efforts in these directions that I will explore in this book.
Having thus presented the legacy of leisure literature in chapter 1, each subsequent chapter will consider a distinctive mode of essay practice that can be associated with a certain cohort. The second chapter will be concerned with the salon of Zhou Zuoren, in which Lu Xun played a role, and whose contribution to the modern Chinese essay is more or less encompassed by the magazine *Threads of Conversation*. Based in Beijing in its most influential years, this periodical represents a watershed in the development of the modern vernacular essay, but the literature of leisure still competed with other prose voices—polemical, satirical, narrative—even within its pages. Its contributors spanned the Beijing literary community—most of whom were affiliated somehow with the major universities of Beijing—but the core group can be identified as the Zhou brothers’ colleagues and protégés who frequented the house Zhou Zuoren dubbed Kuyu zhai (Embittering Rain Studio); these included Qian Xuantong, Yu Pingbo, Liu Bannong, Fei Ming, Jiang Shaoyuan, Yu Dafu, and Sun Fuyuan.40 Even more importantly, it was during or perhaps after the life of this magazine that essay writers and critics began to realize the resemblance between their writings and those of late imperial precursors. It was this discovery of an indigenous response to the British familiar essay, of a way to take on modernity with a modern Chinese prose idiom that exhibited sophistication and cultural depth, that marked the modern reestablishment of leisure literature in the form of the *xiaopin wen* essay. The crucial importance of *Threads of Conversation* can also be seen in the fact that many of the major figures in the later cohorts of essay practice had contributed to the magazine’s peculiar heteroglossia.

Chapter 3 concerns a grouping defined by their commitment to an educational mission. The writers Xia Mianzun, Feng Zikai, Zhu Ziqing, Ye Shengtao, Zhu Guangqian, and Yu Pingbo are all well known in their own right, but what they have in common is often overlooked. They all hailed from the Shaoxing area in Zhejiang, and all had a particular concern with aesthetics and art; many of them developed connections to Buddhism through Li Shutong, in addition to all being schoolteachers who shared a commitment to the modernization of teaching and curriculum in the middle schools. Perhaps their most important shared characteristic, though, is the experience of teaching at Chunhui Middle School during the early years of its existence in the 1920s. This well-funded private middle school located on the shores of White Horse Lake was established by an idealistic educationist named Jin Hengyi.41 Its establishment was meant to cure the ills of the public education system, and Jin’s friend Xia Mianzun was charged with the responsibility of assembling a faculty of brilliant and progressive contemporary thinkers. These men were not together long at Chunhui—in fact Zhu Ziqing hardly
overlapped with the others at all—but aspects of their experience there, particularly their settling into its lakeside cottages and forming a lively social and intellectual community in the context of an educational enterprise that took literary composition as its central task, had noticeable effects on their own literary work. These writers later became contributors to various magazines like Zhongxuesheng (The juvenile student, 1930–) and Yiban (The ordinary, 1926–1929), but as a group they reappear most conspicuously about ten years after their middle-school stint in Chen Wangdao’s magazine Taibai, which, as I have mentioned, comes into play in the wake of a public dispute about xiaopin wen in 1936.

Chapter 4 is devoted to Lin Yutang’s magazines and their contributors, often referred to as the Lunyu (Analects) group. The Analects group presides over the peak popularity of the xiaopin wen and the climax of the mid-1930s explosion of literary magazines. In contrast to the relatively serious “fascination” or quwei pursued by Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and his followers engaged in a kind of “humor” more derivative of the English familiar essay. What they do have in common with Zhou is a “contrarian” attitude, one often manifested in discourses on smoking and other forms of enjoyment that pepper the pages of their magazines. Following the lead of the Analects essayists, I take special interest in the themes of humor and enjoyment, as particularly illustrative of the posture assumed by this group within the literary field and with respect to society and history in general. By cultivating an aloof and skeptical attitude, the Analects group ironically launched the most pointed attack on the values of social reformation and revolution that had been arrogated mainstream status in the literary field of the 1930s. Their efforts drew a counterattack from many members of the White Horse group and others through the leftist literary magazine Taibai.

My final chapter deals with a group that also wanted the essay to be free of politics: a faction of the returned students from Britain and the United States who were active around Xinyue (Crescent Moon) magazine in the years leading up to Xu Zhimo’s untimely death in 1931. These writers stood for the purity and autonomy of literature and formed the core of the 1930s Beijing school, which produced the literary supplement Wenyi of the Tianjin edition of the newspaper Dagong bao (September 1935 to June 1937) and the journals Wenzhong xue jikan (Literature quarterly, 1934–1936), and Shuixing (Mercury, 1934–1935). The Beijing school also came out publicly against xiaopin wen as represented by the Analects group, but for a very different reason—not because xiaopin wen writers did not take politics and history seriously enough, but because they did not take art seriously enough. Prose and poetry style were high priorities for this group. In his 1980 preface to a collection of Li
Guangtian’s essays, Bian Zhilin writes that, while together at Peking University, He Qifang and Li Guangtian, though they would later become known for their poetry, were equally serious about revolutionizing the essay form. They certainly did so, and with considerable artistic success; their work along with that of colleagues and protégés Lu Fen, Xiao Qian, and of course Shen Congwen, made the modern Chinese essay into a largely narrative or iterative vehicle for the “native soil” or xiangtu aesthetic.

I usually prefer to use original journal issues or author-edited collections as my primary material. Yet for this project I have not been able to resist some recent publications that have made navigating the seas of xiaopin wen much easier. One is the high-quality republication of Zhou Zuoren’s self-edited collections undertaken by Zhi An. Another is Li Ning’s classic collection of xiaopin wen polemics Xiaopin wen yishu tan (Discussions on the art of the xiaopin wen), which culls the essentials from Chen Wangdao’s Xiaopin wen he manhua, and several entries of which should also qualify as xiaopin wen themselves. Finally, there are the volumes of the series Minguo mingkan jingxuan (Selections from famous magazines of the Republican period), each of which cull one volume’s worth of representative prose (wenzhang), particularly from those popular journals in which artistic essays figured prominently.

By thus delineating the borders of my study, I have no doubt already raised questions about my exclusion of certain writers or groupings—why no discussion of Xin qingnian (New youth)? Why is the “Shanghai school” so poorly represented? Since writing wenzhang was the occupation of modern Chinese writers as a whole, and every writer wrote essays, any attempt to write a comprehensive overview of the essay in the Republican period would be foolish. This book concerns itself with authors and groups of writers who particularly cared about the modern Chinese essay and wanted it to make a mark on literary history, not just record the thoughts and experiences of an individual. More specifically, this study tells the story of the rise and fall of the modern xiaopin wen as an ideal or paradigm for modern Chinese prose expression. My conclusion takes stock of that story as reflected in the chapters here and looks back on it from the perspective of later developments and the contemporary literary situation in China and throughout the Chinese-speaking world.
Now everybody agrees that what we enjoy most in life is friendship, and what we enjoy most in friendship is the leisurely conversation. My house faces a broad river with a bank of tall trees where my friends can loiter or squat or sit down as they like. I have only four old maids for attending to the kitchen and serving the guests; as for the dozen houseboys, they do the job of running errands and sending invitations. In their leisure hours, I make them weave mats and make broomsticks, for the purpose of keeping the room fit to receive my friends. When all of them come to see me, there is a total of sixteen persons, but it is rare that they all come and, except for rainy windy days, it is equally rare that none of them turns up. As a rule, six or seven friends gather at my place. They do not make it a rule to drink when they are here; they may do so or not just as they like, for what they enjoy are not the drinks, but the conversation.

—“Preface to Shuihuchuan,” Chin Shengtan

In spite of the achievements and innovations of modern Chinese cultural studies over the past ten or fifteen years, what students often still learn in introductory courses is that modern Chinese literature was defined by the May Fourth movement’s radical rejection of “traditional” Chinese culture, that it was formed in the crucible of Western literary influence, and that realistic fiction was overwhelmingly the dominant mode of artistic expression. If it is mentioned at all, the vernacular essay, according to this conventional account, is described as a vehicle for cultural criticism and polemic, or otherwise as a haven for traditional sensibilities and morality
when modernity got too tough for modern writers to stomach. This argument is echoed in Perry Link’s characterization of Mandarin Duck and Butterfly fiction during the same period as a “literature of comfort” for literate and semiliterate petty bourgeois urbanites bewildered and disoriented by the modern world. By using the term “literature of leisure,” I instead mean to stress that modern xiaopin wen occupied in practice, if not in theory, a position in the polemical field, rather than departing from it.

If we view xiaopin wen as traditional, we must also recognize that the concept of “tradition” itself is a modern invention, part of the discourse of modernity. Whether something can be viewed as traditional, moreover, will depend on how one defines the term. The modern promoters of the literature of leisure believed that late Ming and Qing writers of informal prose often had more in common with twentieth-century writers in terms of both thinking and style than they did with either their predecessors or their more conservative peers. Even in premodern practice, informal prose was arguably modern in its attempt to wrest itself free of artistic convention and the literati’s traditional moral burdens.

What has convinced many that late imperial prose is traditional, however, is the fact that it is written in wenyan, that is, classical Chinese. The link-age established in the New Culture movement of wenyan with tradition and baihua (vernacular) with modernity effectively disqualified anything written in wenyan from enjoying the sincere interest or enthusiasm of most of the true believers in New Literature. The advocates of leisure literature, as well as leftist bibliophiles who did not advocate modern xiaopin, do not make so clear a distinction between wenyan and baihua in practice, and indeed frequently used both, sometimes in combination. In the case of Lin Yutang’s “analect style” (yulu ti), for example, we have a written idiom that cannot easily be categorized one way or the other. Under the existing terms of cultural discourse, this position could only be interpreted as reactionary and traditionalist, but I would argue that these writers shared a discernibly modern sensibility, even if it was not the supposedly predominant vernacular one. We need only to allow for the possibility that one can be “modern” in wenyan.

The modern informal essay came into its own in the early 1930s with the surge of interest in late Ming (early seventeenth-century) xiaopin wen and other forms of late imperial leisure literature. This attention to the early modern, seems opposite to—or not to fit with—what historians and theorists have told us was going on in the 1930s. This was supposed to be the time when leftist writers achieved dominance in the literary scene, but the contents of some of the most prestigious literary magazines of the time, Xiandai (Les contemporains), Wenxue jikan (Literature quarterly), and Yuzhou feng
(Cosmic Wind)—tell a different story. The fascination with the early modern, rather than manifesting incipient cultural conservatism or some kind of traditionalist nostalgia, can also be viewed as a dynamic, perhaps even “modernist,” element in the formation of modern Chinese culture, and the role of the essay and other writing practices that lay at or beyond the edges of the revolution-centered canon needs to be reassessed.

Setting Terms

As explained in the Introduction, I have adopted the term “literature of leisure” (xianqing wenxue) as a general category for what might be called an unofficial canon of late imperial writing, a canon that came into its own perhaps only in the early twentieth century through the efforts of Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang, Shi Zhecun and many other, lesser-known scholars, anthologizers and promoters of these forms. Leisure literature includes not only xiaopin wen, but also literati novels like Li Ruzhen’s 1820 Flowers in the Mirror,4 biji fiction such as Ji Yun’s 1800 Notes from the Cottage of Close Observation,5 travelogues, and philological and historical biji.6

The term “leisure,” corresponding to the Chinese xianqing, refers to the enjoyment of free time (xianxia), as opposed to business, a usage that appears in poetry as early as the Tang dynasty, but for moderns was perhaps most closely associated with Li Yu’s tour de force Xianqing ouji (Sketches of idle pleasures, 1671), a multifaceted guide to the good life of cultural sophistication in late imperial urban China.7 For writing to be identified as “leisurely” is largely a matter of attitude, tone, and subject matter—it is writing unconcerned with public affairs, moral cultivation, or the meaning and application of the orthodox Confucian classics. It is tempting, though arguably anachronistic, to associate leisure with social class, except that in the rhetoric of Chinese leisure literature, it has always been possible to enjoy the finer things in life in the absence of wealth. This could be ideological window-dressing, however, and simply because of the resources required to attain full literacy, one would not expect to encounter xiaopin wen by peasants or tradesmen’s apprentices; still, the class ambiguity of the leisure literature perspective persisted into the twentieth century and added to its agency as a counterdiscourse to the class-based view of literature asserted by socially conscious writers. It was common for leftist writers of the 1930s to disparage leisure literature in their critical writings, according to convenient and currently circulating categories of class struggle and historical materialism; yet the fact that these same writers not only felt compelled to acknowledge the phenomenon
and actually took part in it themselves is far more interesting than their critique.

Modern essayists who promoted the perspectives of leisure literature wrote of xiaopin wen, suibi, or more broadly sanwen, a term approximated by the English “prose literature.” Though Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang, and Shi Zhecun place much emphasis on the xiaopin wen of the Gongan and Jingling schools of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the category can be extended back much earlier to the Six Dynasties to include texts like the sixth-century Yan shi jiaxun (Yan family instructions) and New Account of Tales of the World, some Tang writings such as those by Han Yu and Liu Zongyuan, and the more casual writings of Su Shi because of the similarly quotidian, individualistic, intimate, and informal characteristics of these works. For the same reasons, many writers of the Qing period are also included in the category, such as Yuan Mei, Jin Shengtan, Li Yu, Shen Fu, Zheng Xie, and Yu Huai.

This study is mainly focused on the modern xiaopin wen essay, but in cataloging its premodern influences I speak more broadly of a “literature of leisure” in order to include the category of fiction. Parts of many fictional works may also be considered literature of leisure because many early twentieth-century sources allude to them in the same breath as informal wenyan prose writings. Several contributors to the 1975 book Wenren xiaoshuo yu Zhongguo wenhua (The literatus novel and Chinese culture, edited by C. T. Hsia), for example, take Wu Jingzi’s Rulin waishi (The scholars) and Li Ruzhen’s Flowers in the Mirror as examples of the “literatus novel,” which contain many essayistic digressions. To the editor C. T. Hsia, what sets the literatus novel apart from the great “classic” novels on the one hand, and the more popular novels such as martial arts fiction and scholar-beauty romances on the other, is their characteristic combination of scholarly erudition with a playful lack of seriousness. Both of these features are shared by xiaopin wen.

To sketch the outlines of the legacy of late imperial leisure literature as received in the twentieth century, I compiled many of Zhou Zuoren’s references to and writings on Ming and Qing informal prose, Shen Qiwu’s 1932 collection Early Modern Essays Transcribed, Shi Zhecun’s influential 1935 Wan-Ming ershi jia xiaopin (Twenty late Ming xiaopin masters), and Zhu Jianmang’s 1936 Meihua wenxue mingzhu congkan (Great works of aesthetic literature), as well as the Republican-period discourse about late imperial prose and its influence on modern Chinese culture, particularly in the forms of modern Chinese essay. This conversation took place in a number of published venues, including Zhou Zuoren’s essays (particularly in the prefaces to his and others’ essay collections), journals devoted to the promotion of essays such as Threads of Conversation, This Human World, The Analects Fortnightly,
Cosmic Wind, general literary magazines, and the literary supplements of contemporary newspapers. By the mid-1930s, in part because of the unprecedented popularity of the modern xiaopin wen and similar forms, this conversation was becoming rather shrill, and so it is on these years, roughly 1922–1936, that I focus most of my attention in the following chapters. This chapter is meant to illustrate the living presence of the late imperial legacy of leisure in the imagination of twentieth-century writers, especially in its illumination of the process by which various notions of traditional Chinese culture came into being in the early twentieth century.

Zhou Zuoren and Late Imperial Informal Prose

Zhou Zuoren’s 1932 account of the origins of modern Chinese literature differs significantly from what came to be the standard version:

In the New Literature, it is modern essays that have been the least influenced by foreign literature. It would be more fitting to call them the product of a literary renaissance than a literary revolution, although both represent progress in the development of literature. Before the complete flourishing of neo-Confucianism and ancient-style prose, the lyrical essay had already achieved a considerable level of development, but the grand men of learning naturally did not look upon it kindly. When we read writings by some of the Ming and Qing masters, they seem to be of the same mood as modern writing, despite the inevitable intellectual differences; the rebellion against the culture of ritual expressed by Ming writers has a modern air about it.9

Zhou Zuoren thus sees modernity in a 300-year-old form. Most others, when they acknowledge the traditional roots of the modern essay, interpret it as an indication of a more nostalgic quality. C. T. Hsia refers to Zhou’s use of the terms zaidao (conveying the way) and yanzhi (expressing one’s heart’s intent) as being a “traditional dichotomy,” but as Qian Zhongshu points out in a review of Zhou Zuoren’s Sources of Chinese New Literature, these terms were not traditionally opposed to each other and in premodern times probably did not have the meanings Zhou reads into them.10 Zhou understands zaidao simply as didactic, and by implication boring, while yanzhi is expressive, and thus charming at its best. Qian Zhongshu notes, however, that zaidao is traditionally asserted as a goal for formal prose, whereas yanzhi is the stated essence of poetry, but both emphasize the importance of conveying moral truth. Zhou Zuoren’s reading of xiaopin wen and other such texts is, for better or worse, not really “traditional.”
Zhou Zuoren’s account of the emergence of the modern vernacular essay in his 1935 introduction to the first of two volumes of essays in the Compendium of Chinese New Literature places the May Fourth movement at the end of a generation-long process of vernacularization in writing that began with Qing court’s attempts to reform and modernize in the 1890s. Zhou stresses that modern vernacular essays emerged out of a process of experimentation with vernacular written forms in a variety of contexts (education, politics, journalism, etc.), with sanwen finally evolving into a literary form in its own right in the 1920s. Moreover, Zhou stresses that despite its vernacular idiom, in all other—largely artistic—aspects, the modern Chinese essay is the only literary genre with an affirmative organic tie to a premodern counterpart, which he identifies as late Ming dynasty xiaopin wen. Finally, Zhou is aware of the fact that this relationship between the xiaopin and the modern essay is not a direct connection of traceable ancestry: “Modern essays (sanwen) are like a river buried under the earth whose lower reaches are uncovered many years later. It is an ancient river, yet it is also new.” So the “river buried under the earth” flowed from the late Ming beneath most of the Qing, obscured especially by the distractions of foreign rule, the literary inquisition, the Opium War, the Taiping Rebellion, and other cataclysmic historical events, but was “uncovered” again in the early Republican period by writers such as those included in the Compendium.11

Zhou Zuoren does not cite formal prose (wen or guwen) as antecedent to the modern essay; he is interested in formal prose, even going so far as to defend its most notorious manifestation, the bagu wen or “eight-legged essays,” as a legitimate object of study for modern literary history.12 What fascinates him more about xiaopin wen and similar forms, however, is the attitude of their authors toward the nature of written expression, particularly in the way it differs from the mindset demanded by formal prose composition. Theodore Huters’ work on the evolution of late imperial theories of prose and their role in turn-of-the-century literary transformations provides a useful context here. In an effort to dramatize the important role of late imperial Chinese literary culture in the formation of modern cultural consciousness and literary practice at the beginning of the century, Huters shows how theories of formal prose were foundational in the revolutionary elite’s conception of the nature and tasks of modern literary expression.13 Leisure literature—the various types of late imperial prose writing alluded to in Zhou Zuoren’s essays—in the same period proliferated along with late developments of fiction and drama, arguably coming to form a significant countercultural phenomenon in the Qing, even while, for example, the Tongcheng school was trying to regularize formal prose composition. And though vernacular fiction and drama had their champions in
Feng Menglong, Li Yu, and Jin Shengtan, the informal prose forms later treasured by Zhou Zuoren and others were not theorized or promoted much in their own time, and would not have guided turn-of-the-century reformers’ efforts consciously or unconsciously.

What was being explicitly theorized or promoted is not all that matters in literary history. Too much of what we know about modern Chinese culture is based on manifestos, polemical essays, debates, and prescriptive books, articles, and speeches, and too little is based on the actual creative practice of writers. What is interesting about prose literature is precisely the fact that it is uncalled for and yet persistently written, published, purchased, and read. This was true in the late imperial period of wenyan leisure literature, true of those same texts’ reception in the Republican era and beyond, and, notwithstanding promotional efforts by Zhou Zuoren and a few others, also true of vernacular sanwen in the twentieth century.

Zhou Zuoren may leave something to be desired as a literary historian or theorist. However, his ideas, including the above-mentioned distinction between didactic (zaidao) and expressive (yanzhi), are germane to our understanding of the modern Chinese essay and its place in modern Chinese culture, over which Zhou’s creative efforts exerted considerable influence. Essential to Zhou’s understanding of what he calls yanzhi or expressive aesthetics, especially as manifested in xiaopin wen since the late Ming, is the idea of quwei or qingqu (“interest,” “flavor,” or “fascination”). Zhou Zuoren as a central proponent of the May Fourth generation shares many of that generation’s attitudes, such as a disdain for what he perceives as “decadence” in literature and a moralist’s concern for the influence of literature on the minds of young readers; yet in the years following the May Fourth movement, his pursuit of “fascination” in prose writing shows that these concerns do not amount to a view that literature should always be a solemn vehicle for moral suasion or social transformation. This is demonstrated clearly in Zhou’s creative essays, and indeed these very essays hold a wealth of information about his relationship to late imperial literary culture in the form of explicit allusions. In many essays, Zhou writes in defense of “politically incorrect” texts and practices like “obscene” poetry, eight-legged essays, and lying (see chapter 2), but in most cases he points out that such things should only be approached by the “initiated.”

The majority of Zhou Zuoren’s essays from the 1920s to the 1940s allude to a stunning variety of Chinese, Japanese, traditional and modern Western works of literature, philosophy, ethnography, and many more subjects. Works of leisure literature figure prominently among the texts Zhou uses to flesh out a point, and in fact Japanese and Western texts often come into play in comparisons with them. In a cursory examination of Zhou Zuoren’s collections,
I found that at least thirty-six essays allude to nearly one hundred premodern works of Chinese leisure literature, most of which were authored or edited by people who lived through the Ming–Qing transition. These include Qing dynasty “literatus novels” like The Scholars and Flowers in the Mirror, wenyan ghost stories such as those in Pu Songling’s Strange Tales from the Make-do Studio, Ji Yun’s Notes from the Cottage of Close Observation, scholarly jottings (biji) such as Duan Kegu’s (803–863) Youyang zazu (Youyang miscellanies) and Wang Shizhen’s Random Discussions North of the Pond, geocultural and ethnographic collectanea like Gu Yanwu’s (1613–1682) Rizhi lu (Daily chronicle), and collections of personal correspondence. This last category is particularly revealing, as Zhou devotes an entire essay to distinguishing formal correspondence (shu), which conventionally deals with broad, abstract topics and moral reflections, from informal or personal correspondence (chidu), which he finds much more interesting for its spontaneous momentary expressions of feeling between individuals.

For the most part, shu are a type of formal prose composition (guwen), something that could be included in a person’s official works. Their function is to talk big, using great clanging diction to voice highly serious moral arguments. Chidu, however, are not formal prose, as is proven by the fact that the Tongcheng prescription for formal prose explicitly forbids the use of chidu diction.17

Zhou elaborates further on the value of letters in “Chidu yu riji” (Letters and diaries, 1925):

Poetry, fiction, and drama are all written in the third person, so although artistically they are polished, they also have the traces of artificiality (zuozuo). Letters are written in the second person, and diaries to oneself (except for those deliberately written for later publication), so of course they are more real and natural. I feel like my own essays are even a bit artificial, so I go back and read others’ letters and diaries, and it brings me great pleasure. I cannot write a diary well, and am even worse at writing letters. I get a vague feeling of my true self in my heart, but when I try to put it down in words, even though I know I am writing privately, I am never able to avoid some artificiality. This is not deliberate, it is really because of inadequate cultivation, and so I feel even more the exquisiteness, the pleasure, and the value of others’ letters and diaries.18

Zhou gives examples from the Six Dynasties, but also from the Japanese haiku poets Basho and Issa. Of the Japanese figures’ letters and diaries, Zhou
says “These unorganized (bucheng zhangjie de) passages are rich with implications and power, when you read them it seems as if you can see the author and his world (beijing); it is almost more effective than their haiku. I love Issa’s collection My Spring, but I also love his diaries, even if, apart from reciting, it is just a line or half a line of daily chronicle. To me it has all of the fascination (quwei) of literature.”

Many of the late imperial works of Chinese leisure literature that pepper Zhou Zuoren’s essays had become available in editions published in modern binding in the early Republican period. In addition to existing traditionally bound editions, 1920s editions featured a rich variety of such works, often with commentary by modern aficionados. Zhou Zuoren may not have always consulted an old family library collection; he could just as well have gathered his late imperial materials in relatively new editions in Beijing bookstores. Zhang Chao’s You meng ying (Quiet dream shadows) was published as early as 1915; Shi Zhenlin’s Xiqing sanji (West green notes), Huayang sangao (Random writings on Huayang), and Shi Hugang biji (Notes of Shi Hugang) came out in 1915–1916 editions; Shen Fu’s Six Chapters of a Floating Life had a 1924 edition which, like the 1927 edition of Zhang Dai’s Dream Recollections of the Tao Hermitage, was annotated by Yu Pingbo and carried a preface by Zhou Zuoren. Zhou was not the only one interested enough in late imperial prose to comment, promote, and republish it. Zheng Zhenduo, Qian Xingcun (A Ying), Qian Zhongshu, Shi Zhecun, and many others were bibliophiles like Zhou, and many of them even published essays about their book-shopping excursions. In Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, Leo Lee writes of how Shi Zhecun used to take his protégés around the French Concession bookstores in the early 1930s searching for the latest French and English modernist works, his point being how we have tended to underestimate how sophisticated and multilingual these writers were. What Lee does not tell us, yet is evident in the writings of Shanghai bibliophiles, is that such excursions would certainly have included perusal and purchase of old books. Across the political and literary spectrum, most modern writers were also avid collectors of late imperial literature, particularly if it had the “marginal” quality of vernacular fiction, drama, or essays and random jottings.

Aspects of the Literature of Leisure in Republican China

To give an idea of what sort of presence late imperial prose literature had in the publishing scene of the late 1920s and early 1930s, I will present examples of books published, their editors’ explanations of why they published them,
critics’ and other writers’ reception of such books, and some of the bibliographic and academic efforts to sort out especially the voluminous legacy of Qing prose in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I will begin with the remarkable interest in late Ming xiaopin wen that took hold in the early 1930s.

The earliest collection of late Ming xiaopin wen I have been able to find edited by a twentieth-century figure is the 1932 work *Early Modern Essays Transcribed*, edited by Shen Qiwu. In compiling this anthology, Shen seems to have consulted rare, often Ming, editions of collections, often ones obtained from Zhou Zuoren’s library. Shen lists all his sources, and few of these titles have editions printed in the decades leading up to his collection. A good example was likely Shen’s most important anthology source, the *Cuiyu ge pingxuan Huangming xiaopin shiliu jia* (Sixteen xiaopin authors of the Great Ming, selected with commentary from the Cuiyu Pavilion, 1633), edited by Lu Yunlong. According to online library records, while there are several copies of the 1633 edition in existence, there are no later editions until the 1980s. The contents of Shen’s collection, though it extends well into the Qing dynasty, reflects Lu Yunlong and company’s sense of who were the important Ming essayists. Beginning with selections from each of the three Yuan brothers (Yuan Zongdao [1560–1600], Yuan Hongdao [1568–1610], and Yuan Zhongdao [1570–1623]), who comprised the Gongan school, the selections continue with Jingling school essayists like Zhong Xing (1574–1624), Tan Yuanchun (1586–1637), and Liu Tong (1591–1634), and then follow several notable writers from the end of the Ming and throughout the Qing who are not normally grouped with anyone, including Chen Jiru (1558–1639), Zhang Dai (1597–1676), Li Yu (1591–1671), and Jin Shengtan (1608–1661). With about 170 works by seventeen authors spanning nearly a century, along with biographical essays on each author and a complete list of sources consulted, *Early Modern Essays Transcribed* is one of the most important surveys of late imperial informal prose.

Zhou Zuoren wrote two prefaces for *Early Modern Essays Transcribed*. Apparently publication was delayed for about two years, and Zhou felt there was enough lacking in the original preface to write another one. The result is two very interesting sets of comments on the literature of leisure. The earlier preface, which appears to have been written in 1930, begins haltingly with a great deal of humor and modesty about how Zhou did not get around to writing his preface until after Yu Pingbo had finished his colophon, but from there it abruptly shifts into hyperbole about the high status that should be accorded to xiaopin wen: “I would venture to suggest that xiaopin wen is the apex of literary development (wenxue fazhan de jizhi).” Zhou divides the history of literatures into periods of collective creation and periods of individual art; while
he insists that they can and still do exist simultaneously, he associates the collective with earlier periods of cultural development, and the individual with later ones. He also associates collective creation with times of political order, with “conveying the way” zaidao, and he quotes Yu Pingbo describing such writing as “the great, the high, the straight,” yet almost always “a pile of rubbish” that puts one to sleep. In times of disorder, though, when political power is fragmented and “a hundred schools of thought contend,” Zhou feels more interesting works of literature emerge, explaining that works of such times tend to belong to his favored “expressive” yanzhi school. “Xiaopin wen stands at the apex of individual literature, it is an expressive essay (yanzhi de sanwen) whose nature is saturated with combined elements of narrative, exposition and lyricism. . . . So it is the leading tide of early modern literature (jindai wenxue de chaotou), standing out in front; if there is a wall to run into, it will run into it first.”

Zhou Zuoren’s “New Preface,” by contrast, seems almost sheepish about the grandiose tone of the first, and sets out to say a few more things specifically about Shen’s collection. First, he notes that Early Modern Essays Transcribed remedies the common neglect of the Gongan and Jingling schools in literary histories, which conventionally perpetuate the bias toward ancient prose, “as if after the former and latter Seven Masters, there is Gui [Youguang] and Tang [Xianzu], who bring us directly up to the Tongcheng school.” Ironically the essayists featured in the literary histories are the most conventional of classicists, while the Gongan and Jingling schools were the “New Literature movements” of their time, eschewing classicism and promoting a written idiom close to the rhythms and textures of contemporary lived experience. Zhou asks why modern literary historians would not want to emphasize that side of essay history more. The second point is similar, but concerns literary models—why, in presenting literary (classical) Chinese to students, should only Tang and Song essays be used, and no Ming or Qing—early modern—essays? In passing, Zhou also points out the service Shen Qiwu has done by bringing together texts that were becoming difficult to obtain; precisely because of their general neglect, there is some chance that had he not, some of them might actually have been lost.

Like Zhou’s Sources of Chinese New Literature, Early Modern Essays Transcribed was reviewed by Qian Zhongshu in Xin yue (Crescent Moon). Qian’s review raised a difficult question: if, as Zhou argued, the motivation for one’s interest in late imperial prose is its informality, carefree spirit, and flouting of literary convention, why stop at the Ming? Why not include unconventional letters going all the way back to the Six Dynasties or the Warring States period? And if modernity is reducible to unconventionality and individualism,
then it is probably not something you can limit meaningfully to the early modern (jīndai) period referred to in the title. ²⁹ In fact, Fei Ming commented in 1935 that Zhou Zuoren, while paying lip service to the late Ming Gongan school, in his own writing seems to have been less indebted to them as models than to the Yan shi jiaxun and other Six Dynasties prose works, and indeed even to the Analects of Confucius. ³⁰ Qian’s point is further supported by Lin Yutang’s 1960 collection of essays translated into English under the title The Importance of Understanding. Lin was one of Zhou Zuoren’s most ardent admirers, but this collection, which can be viewed as a sampler of leisure literature through the ages up to the twentieth century, almost completely omits late Ming writing while including many entries from medieval and ancient times.

I think there are answers to Qian’s questions, but they did not emerge at the time. ³¹ If we may make inferences from Zhou’s writing, an important implication of his 1935 preface to the Compendium of Chinese New Literature’s first essay volume is that the xiaopin wen may be said to originate in the late Ming not only because of their informal and unorthodox qualities, but because they were the product of a definite and unprecedented historical milieu. If similar works appeared earlier in Chinese literary history, they were not part of a historical phenomenon with long-ranging ramifications, but the late Ming xiaopin wen was. Because Zhou seems to historicize the emergence of xiaopin wen at the threshold of what by his time was already being called China’s jīndai or early modern period, he is also implying that the genre is modern.

Qian’s review, on the other hand, denies the possible modernity of xiaopin wen, when he claims that its characteristic expressive mode had always existed. Thus his critique reveals a discomfort with the implied historicism of Zhou Zuoren’s vision of the late Ming xiaopin wen, particularly in its connection with what is distinctively modern in Chinese literature. While it seems unlikely that Zhou Zuoren would have defended himself on historicist grounds, he does seem to have been committed to a vision of literary evolution in China, which claims that the emergence of xiaopin wen in the early seventeenth century was something unprecedented; in his mind this played a major role in conditioning the early twentieth-century literary scene in which he found himself. Zhou Zuoren’s achievement was to disconnect modernity from Western culture and Chinese culture from traditionalism. As is the case with practitioners of and commentators on other literary genres and schools, the “essence” of modernity is very much what you make of it.

Despite the attention Shen Qiwu’s collection received at the time of its publication, Shi Zhecun’s 1935 Wan-Ming ershi jia xiaopin (Twenty masters
of the late Ming *xiaopin*), and would become the twentieth century’s most successful collection of late Ming *xiaopin wen*. The editor is better known to us now as editor of *Xiandai* magazine (Les Contemporains, 1932–1935) and author of fascinating modernist psychological short stories. He starts his collection earlier in the Ming than did Shen Qiwu, with Xu Wei (1521–1593), and features five other pre-Gongan figures, including Tu Long (1542–1605) and Tang Xianzu (1550–1616); then he fills out the late Ming with a total of twelve figures not included in the Shen Qiwu collection, and eight authors in common (the three Yuan brothers, Li Liufang, Liu Tong, Zhong Xing, Tan Yuanchun and Chen Jiru), in all about 280 pieces by twenty authors.

Shi Zhecun creates interesting ambiguity in his preface to the collection when he explains how it came into being: “... it was only in response to the publisher’s invitation, that I selected from the collected works of late Ming writers a volume of *xiaopin wen*, which are just now quite popular, in order to meet the market demand.” But just what was “quite popular”—the late Ming *xiaopin wen* or modern vernacular *xiaopin wen*? If it was late Ming *xiaopin*, what need would there be for another collection? If it was modern *xiaopin*, what connection could there be between the two? Later in the preface Shi Zhecun states what he thinks is the relationship between the late Ming literary situation and the literary scene in 1930s Shanghai:

From a political perspective, there are none among these twenty authors who became eminent government officials; from a literary perspective, none of them dominated the literary arena either. However, because of the carefree, reclusive attitude that emerged from their distaste for fame and position, and because of the intellectually and emotionally spontaneous compositional style they created out of distaste for orthodox genres that fetter the native sensibility (*xingling*), by which they changed the air of late Ming letters, these twenty people could easily be viewed as a crack regiment.

Precisely because they were rebels against literary orthodoxy, and not eminent figures who could rely on political backing, this group of authors continually suffered censure and attack. If you promote reclusion in mountains and forests, people curse you for raising yourself up and seeking fame, scheming to use reclusion as a shortcut to preferment to an official position; if you affirm that composition must give in entirely to native sensibility, they will accuse you of cliché and formula (*landiao fuci*), of vulgarity beneath contempt. This kind of situation, in which literati, out of sheer mutual contempt, take no account of the value of the other but simply attack with cold mockery and heated ridicule, is not a bit different from today, three hundred years later.
Shi further explains that for this reason he has deliberately included pieces in his selection that convey these writers’ attitudes toward literature and manifest the integrity of their character; he says that although “so doing may have a somewhat didactic flavor (zaidao qiwei), I feel it is warranted under the present circumstances.” According to Shi, people who praise xiaopin wen praise it because the writing is good, but those who criticize xiaopin wen do so because they feel its authors are of dubious moral character. The parallels to the difficulty of upholding modernism, literary autonomy, and “pure literature” in the 1930s against the attacks of the increasingly dominant leftist literary mainstream are unmistakable. And apart from the modernist experiments Shi nurtured in his magazine Xiandai, an even more evident counterpart to the late Ming xiaopin is of course the modern vernacular xiaopin wen.

Lastly, Shi returns to his specific selections, pointing out that he did not include Zhang Dai because he lacked a copy of the coveted Langhuan wenji, while it was easy to buy Zhang’s Dream Recollections of the Tao Hermitage and Xihu mengxun (Chasing dreams of West Lake). Here and later when he says his principal criterion for inclusion was the rarity of existing editions, Shi Zhecun is clearly implying that late imperial informal prose already had a considerable presence in the publishing market.

In addition to works of Shen Qiwu and Shi Zhecun, another notable collection of late imperial prose is Zhu Jianmang’s Great Works of Aesthetic Literature. This book was also published in 1936 and includes Zhang Dai’s Dream Recollections of the Tao Hermitage and Shen Fu’s Six Chapters of a Floating Life among its ten works. In the introduction to Aesthetic Literature, Zhu writes in classical Chinese of his passion for literature since his youth. He points out that, as a young man, he was acquainted with Liu Yazi (1887–1958), who brought him into contact with the Southern Society (Nanshe). In their elegant excursions to famous sites, Zhu argues that he discovered what it was that made exquisite works of literature beautiful. Zhu Jianmang defines literary beauty in terms of supreme achievement in description, expression, narration, and meditation as opposed to superficial ornamentation. The ten works included in Aesthetic Literature are classified as chronicling either sorrow or joy, but Zhu also groups them in terms of lyrical or travel essays, noting that Shen Fu’s Six Records of a Floating Life has elements of both. Each has been included for its consummate achievement in its respective literary type (echoing Jin Shengtan’s justification for his unorthodox literary canon). If the Creation Society’s supposed motto “art for art’s sake” could be applied to premodern Chinese literary culture, it would be to works like these.
Zhu Jianmang’s collection consists of works written by sensitive men about remarkable women close to them who suffered tragic fates. This is a classic theme, traceable, especially in Chinese poetry, to the Tang dynasty; but these works convey their stories of domestic intimacy in the forms of biography, elegy, biji (random jottings), or xiaopin wen. A collection like Zhu Jianmang’s was published in the 1930s because at that point it was, perhaps for the first time, possible to recognize such writing from the Ming and Qing dynasties as a tradition.

One of the striking characteristics of *Aesthetic Literature* is the supplementation of the texts with lengthy vernacular introductions often entitled kaozheng (evidentiary studies) that include authors’ biographies, information about the subjects of their writing, elaboration and proposed resolutions of controversies about the authors or their beloved women, and sometimes the editor’s reflection on the artistic and cultural significance of the works. The introduction to Ye Shaoyuan’s (1589–1648) “Yao wen” (Things heard from obscure places), for example, stresses the sorrow of the author’s family life. “Yao wen” and its sequel “Xu yao wen” relate the author’s deceased wife and daughters’ experiences in the afterlife, the term “obscure” referring to the realm beyond death. This theme in itself is not particularly unusual (we see it in *Six Records of a Floating Life* as well), but the editor advances an interesting theory about supernatural content in religious and artistic expression: It arises, Zhu says, either from greed (begging the gods for favor and fortune) or remorse (chanhui). In the early stages of cultural development, he says, people who suffered in life would react by blaming the gods for their pain, but in a later stage, the law of karma emerged to encourage remorse rather than blame, thus better resolving the sufferer’s resentment and encouraging him to take on more personal responsibility as well. You can see such karmic connections at work in *Six Records* when Shen Fu reflects that he and his wife brought their miserable fate upon themselves by loving each other too much. For Zhu, the type of belief in the supernatural that informs a truly beautiful literature is inspired by noble remorse. This affirmation of the human and artistic values of repentance amounts to a more modern, psychological justification for the literary treatment of the supernatural, giving twentieth-century readers a way to appreciate certain kinds of premodern art that would otherwise be summarily dismissed as unscientific. In a modern literary atmosphere in which traditional literature was often stigmatized for its indulgence in the fantastic and a “scientific” approach to realism was in vogue, this could also have served as a rationale for modernist departures from realism in the 1930s, such as Shi Zhecun’s “Mo dao” (Sorcery) and the quasigothic novels of Wuming Shi and Xu Xu.
Similarly, Zhu asserts in the introductory notes to Zhang Dai’s *Dream Recollections of the Tao Hermitage* that while most praise Zhang for his patriotic gesture of becoming a hermit after the establishment of the Manchu Qing dynasty in 1644, his entering the religious life may have had more to do with his personal remorse at his inability to appreciate how lucky he was when things were going well and his sense of the vanity of existence that was probably only reinforced by the collapse of the Ming. This is tame enough as a literary appreciation, but in a literary scene in which nationalistic and revolutionary voices struggled to dominate, ideas about repentance and Zhu’s unusual assertion of personal vision over national identity in reading Zhang Dai’s retreat from society, constituted a bold statement of the autonomy of art that *Aesthetic Literature* was intended to epitomize.

A volume entitled *Ye Tianliao sizhong* featured Ye Shaoyuan’s autobiography, diary, and other writings; it was published by the Shanghai Magazine Company, also in 1936. It was part of the series *Zhongguo wenxue zhenben congshu* (Treasures of Chinese literature) that had begun the previous year and was edited by none other than Shi Zhecun. Though the series title is broad in scope, *Treasures of Chinese Literature* seems to have been entirely devoted to late Ming and early Qing material. Shi had help editing, punctuating, and critiquing individual volumes of the series from modernist poet Dai Wangshu (for the early Qing short story collection *Doupeng xianhua* [Idle chatter from the bean trellis]), and the leftist literary historian A Ying (for Jin Shengtan’s *Changjing tang caizi shu huigao* [Collected manuscripts on the masterworks of geniuses from Changjing Hall] and Yuan Hongdao’s collected poems and essays). The collection also includes the philosopher Li Zhi’s (1527–1602) *Fen shu* (Book for burning).

Another lens through which we can observe the circulation of late imperial leisure literature is the magazine. For ancient material to appear in a medium that thrives on fresh content and maximum circulation speaks to the impact of the debate on *xiaopin wen* and leisure literature. It is partly for this reason that Ming and Qing *xiaopin wen*, poetry, passages from the *New Account of Tales of the World* and the *Yan Family Instructions*, did not appear in many magazines until the 1930s. Magazines were the principal publication vehicle for most of the essays I will be considering in the following chapters, and many of them began to feature premodern content, if only marginally, at this time. I will be describing the format and contents of a number of different magazines when I get to them, but it should be pointed out here that most literary magazines in the 1920s–1940s featured a combination of original local content (new and, more rarely, old), translated foreign texts, advertising, and illustrations.
It was in the Analects group’s magazines that premodern content appeared most conspicuously and consistently. The first several issues of their *xiaopin wen* magazine *This Human World* featured a column called “Xiaopin wenxuan” (*Xiaopin selections*), in which most pieces were premodern, featuring such authors as Li Shangyin, Su Shi, Yuan Hongdao, and Tu Long. Similarly *The Analects Fortnightly* featured a “Youmo wenxuan” (Selections of humor) column that included quotations from Li Bai, Gong Zizhen, and the *Shishuo xinyu bu* (Supplement to New account of tales of the world). In *Cosmic Wind*, a column called “Kexi yu” (Delightful words) included quotations from Confucius, Zheng Banqiao, Yan Zhitui, Zhang Dai, Yuan Mei, Zhu Guozhen (1557–1632), and Zeng Guofan. Lin Yutang’s editor’s remarks in the first few issues often discussed writings by Zeng Guofan, which must have also been making the rounds in the 1930s. Though what I have seen of reprinted leisure literature in magazines is limited to publications of the Analects group (and even then, those selections take up only a very limited space), the discussion of such texts by contemporary contributors was much more voluminous and, by the mid-1930s, spread well beyond the publications dominated by this group.

The account I provide of Republican-period publications here is partial, but clearly suggests the level of interest in late imperial leisure literature perceived by editors and the publishing industry, and the increase of this interest through the 1930s. Insofar as these are historically modern projects, they should be considered part of modern Chinese culture. I assume a significant part of the market for these materials valued them as recreational reading, but many of these lesser-known editors and compilers of modern editions of late imperial informal prose, if other publications under their names is any indication, were educators who felt that such texts were of use in the teaching of *wenyan* composition. *Guwen guanzhi* (Masterpieces of classical prose), the famous early Qing collection featuring formal prose from the Zhou to the late Ming dynasties, was available in several editions in the 1930s, and was also widely used as a composition model. The fact that late imperial *xiaopin wen* were also being adapted for this purpose indicates that not all educators were satisfied with *guwen* or formal prose, and that the style of *xiaopin wen* and similar genres may have been considered more appropriate for modern students. I will explore this subject in detail in chapter 3.

The general popularity and influence of *xiaopin wen* in the literary scene came to an abrupt end, not surprisingly, with the outbreak of the War Against Japan in 1937. The publishing industry was fragmented by metropolitan China’s exodus from the east coast to the interior, and what were perceived as legitimate functions of literary expression were greatly narrowed in the urban
rear areas, rural communist bases, and battle zones not yet occupied by Japan. It is the literature of these interior regions that is overwhelmingly the focus of standard Chinese literary histories covering this period.

The most dramatic illustration of the radical change in atmosphere is the attack on the Beijing school critic Liang Shiqiu. Liang took over the literary supplement for the *Central Daily* and announced that literature about war would be welcome, but that contributions of quality unconnected with the war would also be welcome. Liang particularly offended the large community of activist writers by stating that “Resistance War eight-legged essays” (*kangzhan bagu*) were not welcome anywhere. Soon thereafter, Liang began writing *xiaopin wen* unconnected with the war and publishing them in lesser-known venues brought out or edited by his friends; they would be published together in his collection *Yashe xiaopin* (*Xiaopin from the Elegant Lodging*), which developed an appreciative readership especially in Taiwan after 1949.44 Things were much different in occupied Beijing and Shanghai, however, as is vividly demonstrated in Edward Gunn’s *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking, 1937–1945*. Suddenly it was no longer possible to publish works with anti-Japanese, or even contemporary social themes, and *xiaopin wen* became one of the few “safe” avenues of self-expression. By the same token, there was much interest in the early 1940s in the preservation, cataloging, and investigation of politically unobtrusive late imperial texts, and even these activities became a focus of attention in literary periodicals as never before.

Modern Chinese literature would never be the same after the outbreak of the War Against Japan in July of 1937; new forces were set into motion by the unusual dynamics of cultural life on the so-called “solitary island” and beyond.45 The unusual cultural politics of occupied Shanghai can in some sense be viewed as the removal or absence of restrictive tensions that had shaped literature in modern China before the war; in another way it can be said to have presented new constraints, pressures and conflicts that writers dealt with in ways that may not have been new, but were different in method, emphasis, and aesthetics from those that had previously dominated China’s literary scene.

Edward Gunn’s *Unwelcome Muse* shows that what emerges in the culture of occupied Shanghai is an unprecedented affirmation of modernism saturated with elements of traditional Chinese culture, which had been marginalized in all but popular literature before.46 In his chapter on the essay, Gunn shows how this shift of emphasis was highly conspicuous in the Analects group magazine *Gujin* (*Ancient and modern*) and other similar magazines in the form of the *xiaopin wen*. Similarly, Po-shek Fu elaborates in his book *Passivity, Resistance*
and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai on the legacy of the xiaopin wen in occupied Shanghai. In his section on Gujin, which he uses to represent the choice of “collaboration,” Fu writes, “Contrary to the official call for ‘militant realism,’ [collaborationist writers] championed what I call a literature of yimin, a genre of lyrical essays that ought to blend remembrance with penitence and history with remorse, as a personal testimony to human tragedy. The banality of survival was celebrated as an inexorable law of human nature that mocked moral assertions. This philosophy of shame and self-pity was embodied by a group of men of letters centered around the bimonthly Gujin between 1942 and 1944.”

This attitude resonates strongly with Zhu Jianmang’s celebration of remorse in his commentary in Aesthetic Literature.

Though both Gunn and Fu acknowledge the pre-existence and even popularity of the forms and writers they discuss, these studies leave the impression that the culture of occupied Shanghai was an anomalous, almost miraculous, blooming of art under bizarre historical and cultural conditions that were unprecedented and could not be repeated. However, the culture of occupied Shanghai may not have been so different from the culture of Shanghai before the occupation, except for the absence of an elite group of revolutionary writers and those sympathetic to them, who left their homes after the outbreak of war to use literature as a weapon of resistance in the Nationalist-controlled rear and communist base areas. Remaining behind were writers, arts groups, and pockets of artistic activity that in many cases were already robust, but would subsequently be repressed in the emerging canon of modern Chinese literature.

According to Po-shek Fu, writings in Ancient and Modern were “filled with allusions to and long quotations from classical texts, its dating followed the lunar calendar, and its columns were lined with discussions of the traditional lifestyle and local customs. This endeavor was applauded by Zhou Zuoren who praised it as the organ of a ‘self-sacrificial struggle to preserve Chinese culture from destruction,...’”

Gujin and similar occupation-period magazines like Xifeng (West Wind), Tian di ren (Heaven, Earth, and Man), and Fengyu tan (Chats in the Wind and Rain), can be connected with the series of magazines including Threads of Conversation, The Analects Fortnightly, This Human World, and Cosmic Wind, which promoted the xiaopin under the direction and influence of Lin Yutang.

In the academic or bibliographic realm, the scene was set for a revival of interest in early modern occasional prose as early as 1935 with Wang Zhongmin’s Qingdai wenji pianmu fenlei suoyin (Subject index to titles in Qing dynasty literary prose collections), completed at the National Beijing Library.

It is not likely a coincidence that a comprehensive overview of Qing writing,
both formal and informal prose, would occur at the peak of the modern *xiaopin wen*’s popularity and at the crossroads of interest in both the modern form and its late imperial precursors. Some years later, in 1944, leftist scholar Zheng Zhenduo completed a larger catalogue of Qing collections he had been working on throughout the war in occupied Shanghai; in the colophon to the catalogue (which, like all of his other comments on premodern bibliography, is written in classical Chinese), Zheng points out that through his own untiring efforts, not only was he able to acquire over 70 percent of the titles listed in Wang’s 1935 catalogue, but also 480 works not listed in that catalogue, more than doubling the number of identified titles.50

In the early 1940s, there was also in both Beijing and Shanghai a kind of *biji* fever in academic circles. Yi Shi (pseud. Xu Renjin) ran a column in the Beijing magazine *Zhonghe yuekan* (Middle harmony monthly), amounting to fourteen ten-page entries over a three year period from 1941 to 1944 and entitled “Jindai biji guoyan lu” (Notes on scanning early modern *biji*). These are summaries of works of *biji* fiction, but as such very much part of the legacy of leisure literature; like the more famous works compiled in Zhu Jianmang’s *Aesthetic Literature*, these works depict the world of domestic intimacy and the art of living among late imperial elites.51 One cannot help but wonder whether Zhou Zuoren, also residing in occupied Beijing and closely associated with the National Beijing Library, was acquainted with or involved in these activities, which ran so close to his own explorations of late imperial prose of a few years before.

Qian Zhongshu’s reviews of *Early Modern Essays Transcribed* and Zhou Zuoren’s *Sources of Chinese New Literature* demonstrate an early fascination with the issue of the late imperial role in modern culture. In 1948 Qian’s magnum opus (at that time) *Tan yi lu* (Discussions on [literary] art) appeared, the product of research that had been going on for a decade or more. Qian Zhongshu’s fragmentary and epigrammatic approach to literary criticism is the first study of the indigenous literary tradition to reflect a modernist sensibility. While Qian’s investigations in premodern materials (mostly poetry and poetic theory) themselves may not be representative of the legacy of leisure as I have presented it here, I think Qian’s own comments on his methodology can shed light on the implications of this legacy. Ronald Egan, in his introduction to his translated selections of Qian’s 1979 masterwork *Guanzhui bian* entitled *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters*, quotes from Qian’s essay on G. E. Lessing’s 1766 work, *Laokoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry:*

... in poetry, song lyrics, random notes, fiction, and drama, and even in popular sayings and classical commentary, a few short phrases jotted down
carelessly often convey a refined and original insight that truly enhances understanding. . . . Theoretical systems become . . . like buildings that were once grand and imposing but have subsequently fallen into ruin. In their present state they cannot be lived in and will impress no passerby. But certain of the materials used to construct them, some timber, stones or tiles, may still be valuable and useful to other generations.52

Qian Zhongshu’s literary criticism often drew on late imperial works, and he was by no means disinclined to include examples of leisure literature. Qian’s own mode of expression is described by Egan as biji (random jottings) or zaji (reading notes), “an alternative to the classical commentary and the formal essay” for over 1,000 years. “‘Random notes’ (biji) became a particular favorite of Qing dynasty scholars and was one of the primary vehicles with which they carried out their exacting philological and historiographical ‘investigations.’”53 If there is something modern about Qian Zhongshu’s approach, I think it is not only the fragmentary, antisystematic quality of his presentation of ideas (which mirrors much leisure literature), but also the recognition that leisure literature was just as likely as formal prose essays and poetic criticism to convey valuable insights into life and art.

**Informal Prose and the Idea of the Miscellaneous**

There is a feature of traditional Chinese bibliographic cataloguing that bears on the general issue of informal prose: the prevalence of “miscellaneous” or za categories in almost every Chinese taxonomy of written forms. Perhaps it is not surprising that most of the late imperial material that found popularity in Republican China belonged to a set of categories that is last in order of importance, cannot be defined in terms of form, subject matter, or authorship, and functions basically as a receptacle for leftover texts that are not deemed appropriate for venerated categories like classics (jing), history (shi), philosophy (zi), or belles-lettres (ji). After all, it was the elite custodians of cultural orthodoxy who created these hierarchical taxonomies, and they can be excused for taking such minor writings as book prefaces, casual correspondence, biographical notes, and meditations and “putting them in their place.” But such miscellaneous categories were maintained, and collectors and cataloguers of texts were unwilling to let leftover texts go unnoticed. This is particularly dramatic in Wang Zhongmin’s above-mentioned taxonomy of Qing prose collections, in which there are a dozen or so miscellaneous subcategories scattered throughout the scheme; almost every subcategory ends with a
miscellaneous section. Even more remarkable is the fact that, along with Scholarship and Biography, “Miscellaneous” is one of Wang’s three principal categories of prose collections.54

The most interesting implication of the prominence of the miscellaneous, however, is that it begins to take on a life of its own by virtue of the style and posture of the texts that make it up. Since the texts in miscellaneous categories often concern the casual side of literati life, connoisseurship, and personal relationships, eventually this mode of writing becomes a tradition with its own aesthetic conventions and ideology, ones that overlap considerably with the ideology of vernacular narrative literatures, also originally marginal, that came into their own during the late imperial period as well. By contrast, modern, more systematic ways of categorizing culture tend to be less flexible or tolerant of whatever is not easily categorized. To paraphrase the idea presented in Qian Zhongshu’s quote above, the presence of the miscellaneous is an unsettling yet refreshing reminder of the ultimate inadequacy of totalizing schemes. Indeed in Europe and America, cultural thought has, since the heyday of positivism that helped inspire the May Fourth movement, come to be almost more interested in the cracks and fissures in grand theories than in the theories themselves—this has been a major strategy in post-structuralist theory and cultural studies. The posture of leisure literature in this sense anticipates the critique of grand theories: the informality of modern xiaopin, traditional-style fiction, memoir, diaries, and so forth, is implicitly, but quite evidently, a critique of the intellectual foundations of New Literature and its revolutionary legacy.

It would be naive to suppose that when Zhou Zuoren wrote famously of “his own garden” he was simply demanding the right to mind his own business and be left alone.55 His essays’ stimulating—or should I say irritating?—effect on the socially engaged literary elite can and should be read as another variation of the Chinese politics of literature. I do not think Zhou Zuoren wanted literature left alone by the world or for literature to leave the world alone; it is rather a question of the mode of intervention and the writer’s relationship to his literary identity. It is relevant here that his brother Lu Xun, though his fiction receives more attention, made his principal cultural intervention through the zawen (miscellaneous writing) form whose meaning his efforts changed forever. Fulfilling the promise of its categorical importance in traditional Chinese literary taxonomy, informal prose, promoted by its modern proponents, has helped make the “miscellaneous” into a substantial, positive presence in the landscape of Chinese literary culture: it has become the literature of leisure.
I will certainly not describe the narrow streets and shops of Hangzhou, I have not the time for that kind of fine grinding and polishing, nor do I have the ability to gather scattered and broken threads and weave them into a seamless, heavenly garment. I have no choice but to conceal my incompetence. What I earnestly wish to show is a feeling of attachment to the place, a feeling as mild as water, an indistinct sense of clinging yet with no moorings, a clinging one feels within the rays of the setting sun and beside the glow of the streetlamp. This kind of feeling, at once delicate, yet which penetrates into the bones, can only be fermented through the accumulation of countless dreams and mundane experiences. It gives you nothing remarkable to point to, and credit for it cannot be given to a single morning or night. I really do not know where to begin, but feel I must express it.

—Yu Pingbo, “Qinghe Lane”

Yu Pingbo’s explanation of his approach to describing a favorite street in Hangzhou is an exploration of prose’s ability to lyrically pursue a feeling without exactly capturing it. If poetry accomplishes this through ambiguity, parataxis, and structures of imagery, prose can add to this the unfolding of and wandering through ideas. Grammatical structures and terminology adopted from Western languages allowed for the expression of ideas through linear articulation to supplement the vertical implication or suggestion inherent to traditional Chinese prose: “This kind of feeling, at once delicate, yet which penetrates into the bones, can only be
fermented through the accumulation of countless dreams and mundane experiences.” Being inspired by foreign languages, this linear unfolding may have contributed to the stigmatization of certain writers’ “Europeanized” style, yet it opened expressive opportunities unavailable in classical Chinese prose or poetry. Yu Pingbo’s essays, among the earliest modern Chinese essays with serious artistic intent, are particularly rich with such long, interconnected clauses.

The groups of modern essayists that emerged in China in the 1920s and 1930s can be traced back to a seminal group, but are eventually distinguishable from one another by the gestures or attitudes that characterize their essay writing. If we take the proliferation of essay magazines in the early 1930s to be the culmination of the popularity and influence of the modern Chinese informal essay, its roots reach back to the literary supplement to Beijing’s Chen bao (Morning news) and Threads of Conversation (1924–1930). These periodicals in no small way helped extend the literary influence of the Zhou brothers, Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, who embodied two distinctive approaches to modern Chinese writing: one critical/satirical and the other lyrical/scholarly (this latter being closer to the literature of leisure). Threads of Conversation centered on the social circle of Zhou Zuoren. Remarkably, even though Lu Xun had not been on speaking terms with Zhou since 1923, he too was a contributor.

More broadly speaking, the Morning News Supplement and Threads of Conversation are the fountainheads of all the various types of modern Chinese essays (lyrical, polemic, expository, travelogue, memoir); while the modern essay’s late imperial connections are most conspicuous in retrospect, the story of xiaopin wen’s emergence and differentiation really begins in these publications. What is striking about essays in Threads of Conversation, apart from their variety, is their freshness, their complete lack of cliché and stereotype. There is, however, an important difference between the Threads of Conversation essay and later developments: Threads of Conversation offerings are often not self-consciously artistic, nor do they demonstrate a desire to advance the cause of the essay genre in modern China. Of course, these works are all wen-zhang; but many contributions did not demonstrate the polish and attention to detail that would distinguish the essays of Zhou Zuoren and his closest protégés. As advocates of the vernacularization of writing for whom translation was a crucial avenue of cultural evolution, the Threads of Conversation writers evince conspicuous traces of European linguistic influence before it was deemed problematic. For all these variables, we can still find examples of xiaopin wen in the pages of Threads of Conversation that represent a distinctive style, and they will be the focus of my attention in this chapter.
Qian Xuantong, Sun Fuyuan, Chuan Dao [Zhang Maochen], Jiang Shaoyuan, Gu Jiegang, and some other men gathered at the Kaicheng Restaurant in Beijing’s Dong’an Market on November 2, 1924, to discuss the publication of a new weekly magazine. Sun Fuyuan had recently resigned his post as editor of the popular *Morning News Literary Supplement* when the newspaper’s editor, without consulting him, had pulled a satirical poem by his mentor Lu Xun that Sun had slated for inclusion in the supplement. The group of frequent *Literary Supplement* contributors assembled at the restaurant felt they needed a new vehicle for their writings.

According to Chuan Dao, that day at the Kaicheng Restaurant, “Gu Jiegang had a copy of *Women de qiyue* [Our July] and found in it the words *yu si* [‘language’ and ‘threads’]; they seemed both comprehensible and incomprehensible, but at least it sounded like a name, so everyone agreed to it.” Our *July* (1924) was a magazinelike collection of poetry and lyrical essays by Yu Pingbo and Zhu Ziqing; it was followed in 1925 by a similar collection entitled *Women de liuyue* (Our June). These have the distinction, along with Zhou Zuoren’s *My Own Garden* (1924), of being among the earliest anthologies of vernacular essays. Since the words *Yu si* “sounded like a name,” it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at the two Chinese characters that make up the magazine’s title.

*Yu si* has been translated “Threads of talk,” but “talk” may not sufficiently convey the sense of *yu*. “Talk” refers generically to human speech, with some connotation of gossip and telling tales or stories; it would probably be a more accurate rendition of the Chinese *hua* than *yu*. The word *yu* used in a Chinese book title, on the other hand, specifically connotes dialogue and company, as in the *Analects of Confucius* (*Lunyu*) and *New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu*). *Si* refers to a thread or filament, such as the thread spun by the silkworm; it connotes tenuous but significant connections, webs or networks, as well as the act of spinning or putting out threads. *Si* is also homophonous with the word for “thought” or “reflection,” which represents the largely academic profile of the group, and suggests something of the style of writing the magazine would represent. Because of the implication of lively dialogue in company, I have translated *Yu si* as *Threads of Conversation*.

Zhou Zuoren’s style of essayistic digression has an academic component, an enthusiasm to share sometimes arcane insights the author feels are fascinating (*you quwei*), a component particularly in evidence among the professorial contributors to *Threads*. Ethnography and related issues of linguistics were particular interests of certain members of this group, including Pan Hannian, Jiang Shaoyuan, Feng Yuanjun, and Su Xuelin. This interest resonates strongly with the late imperial fascination with linguistics and local
culture manifested in literati novels like *Flowers in the Mirror*, and *The Scholars*, a central strand of the late imperial literature of leisure.

**Digressing: Intertextual Wandering**

The idea of wandering alluded to in this chapter’s title emerged from my analysis of some of Zhou Zuoren’s most important essays published in *Threads*. “Guxiang de yecai” (Herbs of my hometown), for example, moves from considerations of local identity, to certain herbs and the foods you can make from them, to the seasonal rituals of gathering herbs, and finally to references to them in Japanese poetry and lore. The herbs, especially shepherd’s purse (*jicai*) provides the connection between these topics, but it is more associative than logical, analytical, or causal. Similarly, Zhou’s “Cangying” (Flies) ranges over local lore, child’s play, Greek mythology, and haiku, all held together by the subject of flies (loosely, as at least one of his sources apparently refers to mosquitoes). Digressing is not about completely departing from a topic, but the connections between one and the next appear, thanks to the author’s craftsmanship, only arbitrary or coincidental. In effect this represents a certain resistance to other ways of organizing prose essays, such as narrative, including travelogues, that unfold along principles of sequence and causality, or expository/polemical essays that are organized—one always hopes—on logical or rhetorical principles.

The digressive essay operates in a field almost entirely defined by texts—it combines reading experience with real life observation and, especially in Zhou Zuoren’s case, with memories of childhood and references to other cultures, knowledge acquired through reading. The cultivated wandering in creative digression generates pleasure of its own accord, a pleasure that is a crucial element of the “art of living” Zhou talks about, and which might be said to be modeled on the art of conversation that figured so prominently in these circles.4

In “Herbs of My Hometown,” an essay that sounds like it should focus on local identity, Zhou Zuoren also writes about small humble things. Does he see the universe in them, or just small humble things? This is a very short text, of only a little over 1,100 characters. From what the author has to say about certain herbs and grasses, it is not that their symbolic value makes them worth writing and reading about (although their role in local lore does play a part), rather, their value lies in the ways they fascinate and become part of the tapestry of everyday life.

Although Zhou Zuoren often wrote about his hometown, the word “hometown” does not often appear in the titles of his essays; so in “Herbs of
My Hometown” it is unsurprising that he dwells on the meaning of “home” in the opening paragraph. Many another writer under these circumstances would nostalgically dwell on his or her own hometown, emphasizing how different it is from anywhere else, but Zhou takes an interesting and unexpected approach:

I have more than one hometown, because everywhere I have lived is my home. I have no particular attachment to my hometowns, only because I have fished and rambled here, seen them morning and night, I have eventually become acquainted with them, just like a neighbor in a village—although you may not be relatives, you will remember him from time to time after leaving. I lived in eastern Zhejiang for ten years, then six years each in Nanjing and Tokyo, so they are all my hometowns. Now I live in Beijing, and so Beijing has become my hometown.

This passage actually minimizes the importance of the hometown per se—the author does not even mention the name of his actual hometown—and instead emphasizes his international movements and how each place of residence becomes a part of you “just like a country neighbor.” The language Zhou uses combines arguably Europeanized diction: “everywhere I have lived is my hometown” (fan wo zhuguo de difang dou shi guxiang); “I have no particular attachment to my hometowns” (guxiang dui wo meiyou shenme tebie de qingfen) with terser, classical phrases: “only because I have fished and rambled here, seen it morning and night, I have eventually become acquainted with it” (zhi yinwei diao yu si you yu si de guanxi, chaoxi huimian, zhu cheng xiangshi). These short phrases are not clichés, but simply elegant diction, which might be said to be an expression of Zhou’s personality and to characterize his prose style.

Equally important to defining his style, though, is the relationship between the author and the essay’s content. Zhou Zuoren comes close to being autobiographical, but soon moves away from that mode and depersonalizes what he is writing. He expresses his personality, but not by telling his own story; this is crucial to understanding Zhou Zuoren’s sense of self-expression. Zhou Zuoren’s ego, his particular experiences, step into the background in favor of the topic, a thread of association through a variety of edible plants. But because the author starts off with the notion of “hometown,” the reader realizes the herbs are not being written about for their own sake, but for a certain feeling that connects them with “hometown.” In other words, the author is communicating how these herbs, as physical and cultural objects, elicit a feeling, and that feeling is a part of his personality he wants to convey. In his es-
say “Flies,” Zhou frequently returns to children’s rhymes and songs, and he does so in “Herbs of My Hometown” as well. Though his “hometowns” are many, and he frequently shares children’s rhymes and songs, they are almost always those of his original hometown, so Zhou is after all stealthily writing about his own childhood. Moreover, it is this frequent return to what he feels is a child’s perspective on his topic that makes it fascinating.

“Herbs of My Hometown” continues, “My wife came back from the Xi-dan market the other day and mentioned they were selling shepherd’s purse (jicai), and it made me think of eastern Zhejiang.” Zhou describes the gathering of the sprouts as “an interesting chore, like a game” and a children’s ditty is brought up: “Shepherd’s purse, malan tou, Sister’s married her back-gate beau.” The author introduces shepherd’s purse lore from the area of southern Jiangsu and northern Zhejiang provinces identified with the ancient state of Wu, quoting Tian Rucheng’s Xihu youlan zhi (West Lake sites) and Gu Lu’s Qingjia lu (Record of the Jiaqing reign of the Qing dynasty). These premodern works also cite children’s ditties, making Zhou’s doing so somehow more than nostalgic reminiscence. Turning to another plant, huanghua (day lilies), the subject also turns to making cakes with herbs. Most of these activities (because associated with herb sprouts) are seasonal to the spring and center on the Qingming Festival and grave sweeping.

“Herbs of My Hometown” ends with a most humble herb because, though it is light and tasty, and its blossoms make a beautiful sight spread out before you like a tapestry, the Chinese milk vetch (ziyun ying; Astragalus sinesis) is used as fertilizer by peasants. No slur on peasants is intended; rather, Zhou’s observation blurs the dichotomy between beauty and utility and challenges an assumption his elite readers would have taken for granted—that what is valuable is always exalted and scarce. Zhou’s praise for the milk vetch’s merits is summed up by saying it is “very much loved by children.” Zhou then quotes the Great Haiku Dictionary (Haiku daijiten), which says how common it is for young girls to pick the vetch. In the midst of local uses and lore, this cross-cultural reference has a powerful effect. Like his other references to Japanese sources, this suddenly broadens the cultural and historical scope of the topic, bringing it beyond the “hometown” into the larger world of East Asia. Moreover, the semiotic regime of Zhou Zuoren’s essays is comparable to the Haiku daijiten: if you look up an herb in a poetic dictionary, while it will identify the plant, its real function is that of an index to the herb’s human meaning—what people do with it, what its emotional connotations are, what activities it is associated with, and citing literary texts as examples—in short, what Zhou is doing here with herbs and with other richly significant, if humble, objects in other essays.
It is interesting that it is a haiku dictionary that exemplifies Zhou’s method, since his method may very well have arisen in part through his momentous and highly textual encounter with Japanese culture. After all, the aspects of Japanese culture that fascinated Zhou were the modes of human interaction with the material environment, and especially with objects of particular interest. Zhou approached Japanese sources as products of an essentially foreign culture. He viewed Japan as one of the world civilizations, not as a branch or variation of Chinese culture—Zhou was never a cultural chauvinist, as his attitude toward the notion of “hometown” indicates—not as an improved repository of Chinese culture as in the rhetoric of Japanese imperialism, of which Zhou was well aware. The effect is cosmopolitan, but not on an abstract global level.

Zhou Zuoren is not usually read as a literary critic, but his essays whose titles refer to literary works devote most of their attention to the referenced work. “Jinghua yuan” (“Flowers in the mirror”), however, takes this 1820 novel by Li Ruzhen, more as a point of departure for a wide-ranging discussion of the author’s early education, the relationship between “lying,” childhood, and artistic creativity, as demonstrated in Oscar Wilde, as well as a critique of philistines who fail to see the value of fabrication.

The essay begins with a discussion of the author’s grandfather’s approach to educating the boys in the family. While they did have to learn the usual Four Books, the grandfather eased them into it by encouraging them to read “freely,” which in those days meant reading late imperial vernacular novels. He especially recommended an interesting selection of titles: *Xiyou ji* (Journey to the west), *Flowers in the Mirror*, and *The Scholars*. These are usually grouped together with *Sanguo yanyi* (The romance of the three kingdoms), *Shuihu zhuan* (Water margin), and *Dream of the Red Chamber* as the great classics of Chinese fiction, but Zhou does not even mention those latter novels here. *Journey to the West* and *Flowers in the Mirror* are much less realistic than these others, while *The Scholars* is renowned for its bold satire of imperial officialdom. The author does discuss *Flowers in the Mirror* long enough to establish that with all its fantastic adventures, set in the reign of the Empress Wu Zetian (who usurped the throne in the Tang dynasty), the novel functions as a repository of ancient lore about foreign lands and fantastic beasts from the *Shanhai jing* (Classic of hills and seas), *Shizhou ji* (Account of ten continents), and the *Bowu zhi* (Chronicle of the breadth of things), ancient works that may have not been known well in modern times if not for Li Ruzhen’s novel. The author’s favorite character is the venerable yet down-to-earth navigator Duo Jiugong, who seems to possess every variety of arcane knowledge and can apply it in every imaginable situation. Fantastic creatures like nine-headed birds and single-legged oxen, as well as magical objects and other
wonders, frequently occur in the novel. Though completely “absurd,” these things are delightful to him:

Some would say that these absurd narrations [in *Flowers in the Mirror*] are lies. Of course I admit they are. I want to explain, however, that only people who relate untruths for the purpose of misleading others are reprehensible. Innocent lies—lying for the sake of lying—at least in the realm of art, have nothing to do with right and wrong. People always say that when a child loves to lie, it is the beginning of a life of crime; it is only because of modern research that we know this is not the case. The lies of children are usually the expression of their imagination; you could call them artistic creations. When he says today he saw a red snake with horns, it is not because he wants to gain some kind of benefit from the deception; it is actually just an exercise of the creative faculty, using ordinary material to put together a fantastic thing to amuse himself. To narrate the products of one’s own imagination is just as real as to narrate actual life in the contemporary world, because experience is not limited to that of the senses. We want children to be true, but we want to extend that so that they are also true to their own imaginations. The harm in lying is in its being used to deceive; innocent lying is only deceiving yourself, and others may be deceived—but to be deceived into the beauty of a fantasy, of course, cannot be any harm.11

Though it narrows deliberately into an argument in favor of the “nonsense” of the creative imagination, Zhou’s essay “*Flowers in the Mirror*” manages in only a little over two pages to range over a wide variety of foreign sources—the *Odyssey*, which is compared to the ocean voyage that takes place over the first third of *Flowers in the Mirror*, Oscar Wilde, whose dramatic dialogue *The Decay of Lying* makes the same argument about lying in much more detail, and Lord Dunsany’s *A Dreamer’s Tales*, whose 1917 introduction describing Dunsany by Padraic Colum Zhou quotes at length:

He is like the man who comes to the hunter’s lodges and says “You wonder at the moon. I will tell you how the moon was made, and why.” And having told them about the moon, he goes on to tell them about marvelous cities that are beyond the forest, and about the jewel that is in the unicorn’s horn. If such a one were rebuked for filling the folk with dreams and idle tales, he might (had he the philosophy) make reply “I have kept alive their spirit of wonder, and wonder in man is holy.”12

This is a fundamental literary principle to Zhou Zuoren, and one at odds with the social realistic emphasis being promoted in the literature and criticism
of his contemporaries. He quotes a line from a poem in Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales from the Make-do Studio*: “Since it was put this way, let’s just listen” (*Gu wang yan zhi gu ting zhi*) and stresses that “nonsense” is the key to the greatness of novels like *Journey to the West* and *Feng shen yanyi* (Investiture of the gods), but their fascination is limited, as Zhou occasionally says, to “the initiated.” He calls those who are not the initiated “people whose thoughts have already entered into Oxhorn Bay. If they are not measuring art with sextants and microscopes, they are burning incense and joss sticks before pictures of Zhong Kui [the ghost-queller]; as far as they are concerned, if *Flowers in the Mirror* is not a bunch of execrable nonsense, it must be a true history.”13 In short, they exhibit dualistic thinking.

“Oxhorn Bay” is a variation on the expression, “walked into the tip of an oxhorn,” the sense of which is somewhere between going down a blind alley and painting oneself into a corner. It is an interesting expression for Zhou Zuoren to use; given the arcane nature of his references, and apparent disconnect of the content of his essays from contemporary society, he seems particularly vulnerable to such a description. But Zhou is getting at how one gets stuck in a very pedestrian place when one relies entirely on reason or rigidly hierarchical thinking without giving free reign to imagination. This relates directly to the method of intertextual, cross-cultural wandering demonstrated in Zhou’s essays. Expository essays must present ideas along legible, linear paths of argumentation, but *xiaopin wen* have no constraints on the direction or nature of connection from one idea to another. They can move, guided by the principle of fascination (*quwei*), horizontally as well as vertically, and are unconstrained by boundaries of culture or distinctions of ancient and modern or high and low culture. Thus, while sometimes they feature a sustained intellectual discussion of a topic, Zhou Zuoren’s essays usually accomplish something more or different as well. Points gain weight usually not by their logical rigor, or direct support from cited sources, but rather from their resonance with other texts, be they expository or literary. This kind of association and digression is an intellectual or textual form of wandering.

Lu Xun is unusually close to Zhou Zuoren as an essayist when he does facetious “evidentiary studies” of such things as the phrase *ta made* (literally, “his mother’s”), which he calls China’s “national term of abuse,” in his reaching for counterparts through Chinese history and foreign cultures.14 Or when he discusses language and translation, as in “Budong de yinyi” (Incomprehensible transliteration) and “Yaowen juezi” (Ruminating on words).15 Lu Xun plays with the ignorance and folly he encounters in newspapers committed by people who are less knowledgeable about foreign languages and cul-
tures, and since the examples are often unrelated to each other, the structure of the essays seems casual and random. Since Lu Xun is comparing words, names, and their meanings, and carting out ancient and foreign examples, these pieces have more of the academic flavor of other Yu si contributors like Jiang Shaoyuan and Pan Hannian. While the targets of his ridicule are his usual enemies—National Essence advocates, philistines, and reactionary political figures—in these word-play essays, Lu Xun seems to feel less pressed to wax polemical about what China needs in its current plight. Yet we are never allowed to forget the undertone of national crisis and Chinese moral bankruptcy that seem to sustain all of Lu Xun’s writing.

Lu Xun’s “Lun zhaoxiang zhi lei” (literally, “On categories of photography”) seems almost as much concerned with fantasy as Zhou Zuoren’s “Flow- ers in the Mirror,” but from a very different point of view. Its argument certainly wanders, but the piece, divided into three sections that are each long enough to be a xiaopin wen, is much longer than Zhou Zuoren’s offerings. From the title alone, the reader might expect an essay in cultural criticism centering on aspects of photography such as technology, modernity, mimesis, and perhaps changing concepts of time. Instead what the reader encounters are rumors of foreigners pickling human eyes in the author’s youth in his hometown, pickling practices in the town and elsewhere in China, the worship of certain idols in shrines to cure eye diseases, conventional beliefs regarding eye physiology, foreigners extracting hearts and livers for lamp oil to hunt for hidden treasure, and other superstitious beliefs of “S City” and its environs.

The essay’s first section is entitled “Cailiao zhi lei” (Categories of material). The point of departure is set thirty years before, in the author’s childhood “S City,” circa 1895. Lu Xun recalls how a local servant woman left the foreigner’s household in which she was employed on seeing a crock supposedly full of pickled human eyes, “piled up like carp fry.” The entire first section only makes one off-handed mention of photography, as one among several practical uses foreigners were supposed to have for pickled eyes. Lu Xun presents these matters deadpan, as if he accepts their accuracy and wisdom, and consistently refers to foreigners as “foreign devils.”

The second section is titled “Categories of Form” and the third “Untitled Categories.” “Categories of Form” concerns the author’s impressions of the photo studio in S City, again in the days of his youth. He dramatizes the conflicting feelings held by those in the community toward photography, some avoiding it because it snatches away one’s soul, while the photo studio contributed to the glorification of early modern cultural heroes or celebrities like Zeng Guofan, Li Hongzhang, and Zuo Zongtang by displaying their likenesses.
prominently: “A well intentioned elder from my clan once used these photographs to offer me moral instruction. ‘These men,’ he said, ‘were all great officials of the day, distinguished public servants who suppressed the Long Hair rebellion [the Taiping Rebels against the Qing court, c. 1865], you should follow their example.’ At that time I was keen to follow their example; yet I thought that for this to be possible there had better soon be another Long Hair rebellion.”18

Lu Xun also details the poses adopted by those “unlucky people” who flout superstitious taboos and deign to have themselves photographed. First, there is the conventional setup, the full-length portrait (since the Qing court had “long since abolished bisection as a form of execution”), standing next to a table with a hat rack on it, a tea bowl, a water pipe, a flower arrangement, and a spittoon below “demonstrating that the subject’s bronchial tubes were full of mucus and in need of continuous cleaning.” Standing or sitting, he is likely sporting a large pocket watch from which, “if we look at the photograph with a magnifying glass, we can know what time the picture was taken.”19 Then there are the creative types who arrange their portraits differently by trick photography—showing two images of themselves as host and guest, or master and servant, which they might entitle “Two Selves.” Or one of the figures might be sitting with the other in a pathetic, humiliating attitude, kneeling and begging the other; this they might call “Beseeching Myself.” On these, the customer often inscribes a song-lyric to an ancient tune and hangs the image in his study.

Regarding the second example, the author recalls Theodor Lipps’ *Ethischen Grundfragen* (Fundamental problems in ethics), in which Lipps states that “anyone who is a master can easily become a slave”—since they both acknowledge the master-slave relationship, a master who loses his authority will easily bow to his new master. Lu Xun then cites the Chinese example of Sun Hao, an arrogant and cruel tyrant when he conquered Wu, who then became a shameless slave to the Jin on his surrender to them: “In China there is a common saying that gets right to the heart of the matter: ‘He who is arrogant to his inferiors will be servile to those above.’ But nothing surpasses the ‘Picture of Me Beseeching Myself’ in fully expressing this idea. If in China we were to print an illustrated *Ethischen Grundfragen*, this would truly be a perfect illustration, one that even the world’s greatest satirical artist could never imagine or draw.”20

In the third section, “Untitled Category,”21 Lu Xun turns to contemporary Beijing and particularly the ubiquity of photographs of the Peking opera star Mei Lanfang as a heavenly fairy, or as Lin Daiyu, heroine of the 1790 novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, in her famous flower-burying scene. The
author notes that, unlike the S City photo studio of his youth, Beijing studios display very large portraits of celebrities and high society. These are changed frequently, except for Mei Lanfang’s image, which can be found everywhere, and never seems to go away. Here the object of Lu Xun’s satire is not photography, but the Chinese fascination with female impersonators, which like other things that make Chinese unique, captures Lu Xun’s imagination, and so he uses it particularly to poke fun at National Essence defenders. In another example, when he explains in “Categories of Form” that Chinese do not like to have their pictures taken, it is out of fear of having their spirits (jingshen—a modern neologism via Japan) taken away. He glosses this with a more traditional term weiguang “noble light.” Later in life, the author has heard of an eccentric who refused to bathe so as to preserve his yuanqi (vital essence): “…the vital essence being no doubt equivalent to the ‘noble light.’ How much wiser I now am: the Chinese spirit is that vital essence and noble light, and it can be stolen with a camera and washed off with water.”

Lu Xun goes through a litany of photographs of foreign figures he has seen, with humorous comments on the expressions of Tolstoy, Ibsen, Rodin, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Romain Rolland, and Maxim Gorky, but notes he has never seen any of them dressed as a woman. He observes how there are many well-known artists and writers in China, but you scarcely ever see their photographs, so the proliferation of Mei Lanfang’s image speaks to a peculiar modern Chinese aesthetic sensibility, “because from the point of view of either sex, he is like the opposite sex—men see the ‘impersonated female,’ women see the ‘male impersonator,’ so the image will always hang in photo studios and in the hearts of the nation. Foreign countries have no such consummate artists, so they have to put on airs with their ‘chisellers, color-mixers, and scribblers.’ ”

The topic of this essay is clearly set out in the title as photography, but Lu Xun takes us through the entire first section with only one off-handed mention. Like Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun uses his youth and hometown as an important context and starting point for his essay, one that he refers back to effectively in later sections, even though the point of departure has nothing structurally to do with the topic. The connection between his hometown and photography, elaborated in the second section “Categories of Form,” is casual, arbitrary, as is characteristic of, and perhaps required by, the genre—not as a lun (discourse)—but as a parody of a lun, as a xiaopin wen.

In his influential essay, “Xiaopin wen de weiji” (The crisis of xiaopin wen), Lu Xun comments many years later on the phenomenal popularity of the form. As may be expected, he was opposed to the individualistic aesthetic of gentlemanly leisure that was so popular in the genre in the early 1930s,
thanks to Zhou Zuoren’s promotion of the late Ming xiaopin wen and Lin Yutang’s quickly growing magazine empire. At the time Lu Xun wrote “On Categories of Photography” (January 1925), he might have called it a sanwen (essay), or a suigan, perhaps even a xiaopin wen. By the time he got to “The Crisis of Xiaopin wen” (1933, as much as a year after the establishment of Lunyu magazine), it is clear that Lu Xun did not like the way the xiaopin wen genre was developing, yet he did not seem to identify the crisis with the name: xiaopin wen could be redeemed. In fact, he chimed in with Hu Shi and Yu Dafu in acknowledging that the extraordinary success of the essay in China in the 1920s had almost exceeded that of the other New Literature genres. In the “Crisis” essay, Lu Xun uses the term xiaopin wen in a broad manner that suggests he means to include all forms of artistic short prose writing, including what was called suigan, suibi, xiaopin wen, zagan, and sanwen (in the narrow sense). Lu Xun decries the humorous aspect of xiaopin wen, but not the features of bense and quwei (true color and fascination) that had been valued in the form since the late Ming. When he prescribes remedies, they entail his famous dictum that essays (xiaopin wen) should be “daggers and spears.” He does not recommend the abandonment of xiaopin wen writing, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that Lu Xun himself considered “On Categories of Photography” a xiaopin wen, both when he wrote it, and later.

The last section of the essay’s concentration on images of Mei Lanfang in Beijing photo studios seems to have little connection to the previous two sections, yet it clearly contains the main point Lu Xun wants to make. Though not about photography, it entirely relies on photography, since it is only because of the ubiquity of the Mei Lanfang image that Lu Xun can generalize about what it signifies. Though he jokes about this portrait’s difference from foreign cultures’ photographs of their artists, he does not seriously explore what the photographic image of Mei Lanfang tells one about China, or has done for Mei Lanfang in China. But since this essay is not a serious exposition of ideas, there is no reason why he should.

The unique style of Lu Xun’s essay comes not from his choice of words per se; he does not use vocabulary that draws attention to itself. His use of grammar, mixing vernacular Chinese, Europeanized modern grammar, and classical Chinese, is not especially unique either; this is characteristic of Yu Pingbo’s and Zhou Zhouren’s writing as well. What distinguishes Lu Xun as an essayist is the ironic distance he creates between serious rhetoric and content that is patently ridiculous. This of course relies in large part on a common understanding between the author and the reader. The idea that plucked-out human eyes are shaped like carp-fry is not only ridiculous, but
specifically indicative of the ignorance of both common sense and scientific knowledge among benighted rural Chinese people, and this, Lu Xun hopes, is obvious to all of his readers. By not directly articulating this idea, his deadpan observations carry both critique and humor with great efficiency. The art of Lu Xun’s prose, then, lay in the art of suggestion, made even more humorous by his modulation of linguistic registers, from vernacular to classical to clumsy European-style constructions, and especially the deft combination of all three in one sentence, or their juxtaposition in several.

In writing, wandering amounts to willful departure from a script or itinerary. Lu Xun is characteristically clear here about the objects of his derision, but the meandering structure, the frequent digression, and the parody of a more serious type of writing tell us as much about the milieu of Threads of Conversation as they do about him. Though all kinds of modern prose writing, including expository, polemical, and satirical essays that are not xiaopin wen, found their most influential early practitioners in Threads of Conversation, this magazine’s distinctive contribution to the modern literature of leisure is its cultivation of wandering, a key characteristic of xiaopin wen aesthetics. In the texts on practices and products by Zhou Zuoren and Lu Xun, wandering is manifested as digression; in texts about movement through space it is literal wandering, more specifically wandering off, departing from the charted course. On the emotional plane, wandering explores feelings that are not necessarily consistent with simply conceived aims and themes, and often manifest themselves in a discourse of hesitation. Typically, “emotional wandering” will elaborate negative emotions such as frustration, despair, remorse, and loneliness that arise in the gaps between social ideals and lived experience.

Wandering is not random movement, but movement without an explicit purpose (or it is a willful departure from a stated purpose), for sheer fascination (quwei) with something encountered, often unexpectedly, along the way. It is not random because there are reasons for and meaning underlying each twist and turn, but because stops along the way are not part of a scheduled itinerary. These things encountered and dwelt upon connect organically and form a system of meaning in their own right. While the topographical, textual, and emotional modes are distinguishable from one another, they are not exclusive categories, but rather facets of almost any “wandering” essay. Travel essays manifest intertextual and emotional dimensions, but I find it useful to distinguish these dimensions because essays that emphasize one of them over the others seem to be of a type or subgenre that a particular author will often show a preference for.
Off the Beaten Track: Wandering through Landscapes

Digression relies on ordered exposition, but only as a convention to work against. If extended into spatial and narrative contexts, as with essays on travel and other treatments of place, digression has a structural similarity to “wandering off,” which is arguably essential to essays of place. A tourist or traveler either has an itinerary that structures his or her movements, which can be departed from, or he or she simply wanders off without an itinerary, the effect of which is much the same. Sometimes a place can imply an itinerary without the author necessarily having one. Readers familiar with West Lake in Hangzhou, for instance, can reasonably expect a writer like Yu Pingbo in his essay on the eve of June 18, discussed below, to at least consider going to, if not actually visiting, a certain number of famous sites there, such as the Broken Bridge, Su Shi’s embankment, or the Three Pools Reflecting the Moon.

Travelogue or youji is a venerable subgenre of the Chinese essay; it would be inaccurate to associate it generally with any one of the various groups I am describing here. Nevertheless, the Threads of Conversation group made their wandering mark on the form. Travel writing is usually too lengthy to qualify strictly as xiaopin wen, and it would be well beyond the scope of this book to do justice to modern Chinese travel writing, but many essays of place in Threads help illuminate the group’s aesthetics of wandering. These are most often excursions to famous scenic places or explorations of more humble locations, but they always feature departures from a given or implicit itinerary that are elaborated in connection with intellectual or emotional aspects of the essay.

Zhou Zuoren’s essay “Wupeng chuan” (Black canopied boats) is a case in point. “Black Canopied Boats” is one of Zhou Zuoren’s most famous and perhaps most engaging pieces of xiaopin wen. It takes the form of a letter to a friend named Zirong, giving the addressee advice about how to enjoy himself on a trip to the author’s hometown. As in “Herbs of My Hometown,” he does not mention the place by name. Although most readers would be aware that Zhou Zuoren was from Shaoxing in Zhejiang Province, his omission of the place-name reinforces the generality of his elaboration, reducing the chances of the essay being read as simply a description of Shaoxing, as travel prose, even as an essay of place. This studied avoidance of locality or localism is further reinforced by the author’s uncharacteristic concentration on a single topic, the black canopied boat. Much appreciation of this essay centers on its effortless yet detailed description of the black canopied boats:

What I want to tell you about is not the customs and people there, there would be no end to that, and you will easily find out about them upon arrival . . .
want to tell you about something fascinating, and that is the boats. . . . There are two kinds of boats; the usual kind one takes are black canopied boats; ones with white canopies are usually used for long-distance excursions [between large cities]. Taking the overnight to Xiling is especially fun [you fengqu], but it would not be convenient for you . . . Of the black canopied boats, the big ones are called Sy-menngoa, the small ones are foot paddled uoa or just little boats. But the most useful are the sandao, the middle-size, three-part canopy boats. The canopy is arched and woven of bamboo strips with indocalamus [ruozhu] stuck in between, and painted black; between the two “fixed canopies” there is a shade, also arched, with wooden panes about one inch across, inlaid with layers of little fish scales, so that some light can shine through, somewhat like glass, but it is sturdy and long-lasting, and this is what they call “bright tiles” [mingwa]. “Three-part canopy” refers to ones that have two of these [canopies] amidships and one aft. At the tail they use sculls, usually two, while the bow has a long bamboo pole for anchoring. The bow is decorated with eyes like a tiger’s, but that seem to smile, very comical and not in the least frightening.

On the surface this appears to be an essay about local color in the Shaoxing area, but it is in effect an expression of Zhou Zuoren’s ideal of leisure. The black-canopied boats create a set piece that, being concrete and intimately familiar to the author, he can describe in vivid detail and in a manner that emphasizes the boats as an attractive and congenial environment for whiling away the hours in comfort and leisure. The humble boat is not luxurious, nor does it connote laziness, since it is a common conveyance in the locality:

The height of the three-part boats is enough to allow you to stand upright, with a cabin wide enough for a table for four to play mahjong—you have probably already learned that game, right? . . .

If you go out on a boat, you mustn’t be anxious as if you were riding on a trolley, immediately anticipating your arrival. If you are taking a trip thirty or forty li (a li is short for us down there, one li being only one third of an English mile) out of town, you would need a whole day for the round trip. As you sit on the boat, you should have the same attitude as if you were wandering in the mountains: look at the scenery all around you, mountains you can see from all over, bird cypresses along the banks and the red knotweed (hongliao) and white cloverfern (baiping) by the river, fish houses, and all kinds of bridges. When you’re feeling sleepy you can lie back in the cabin and take out some suibi essays to look at, or brew a bowl of clear tea to drink . . . At night, sleeping in the cabin, listening to the sound of the water and the sculls, the calls between the passing boats, the dogs barking and chickens clucking in the villages,
are all very interesting. If you hire a boat to go down and see a temple play, you can get the real flavor of old Chinese theater, and besides you are free to do what you like on the boat—if you want to watch, watch, if you want to sleep, you sleep, if you want to drink wine, you drink; to me that amounts to the ideal form of enjoyment.³⁰

This message of leisurely enjoyment is one the author feels particularly worth communicating to his addressee, Zirong. Many of Zhou Zuoren’s xiaopin wen are in the form of letters, usually to friends, colleagues and students of the author such as Sun Fuyuan and Yu Pingbo. Zirong, however, is not a well-known cultural figure, and Zhou’s comments to him in this essay create odd effects. Zhou feels it is necessary to explain: “Where you’re from, you always take rickshaws, trolleys and automobiles, but in my hometown we have none of those things. . . .” He never specifies the addressee’s native place, but it is apparently a modernized city like Shanghai or Beijing. The fact that the author feels he has to explain water transportation in southern China (unless he is doing it for the sheer pleasure of it), that he has to identify the Chinese li in terms of English miles, and that he wonders whether Zirong has learned to play mahjong yet, all seem to suggest that Zirong is not even Chinese. Since the letter is written in Zhou Zuoren’s idiosyncratic Chinese, though, Zirong’s Chinese must be excellent.

As it turns out, his Chinese is indeed excellent, since “Zirong” is none other than one of Zhou Zuoren’s pen names! This is not a real letter, but a conveniently homely vehicle for the author to express both his appreciation for the humble elegance of the black canopied boats and his belief in the value of simple, leisurely amusements. This demonstrates the fact that Zhou admires letters not for their communicative function, but for reasons of aesthetics, a style or tone he is attempting to achieve here by using the format of the personal letter. Zhou Zuoren would have never written a letter like this to his real acquaintances, as they would already know much of what Zhou takes such evident pleasure in explaining and describing. In other essays, where there is no fictional relationship established between the author and the reader, Zhou has no opportunity to elaborate on subject matter he knows many of his readers are familiar with. He had to construct a persona for the addressee who is unfamiliar enough with things Chinese for Zhou to adequately defamiliarize the boats and the experience of using them.³¹

Zhou’s pleasantly imagined boat excursion calls to mind the essays of his friend Yu Pingbo. Yu Pingbo (1900–1990) is a well-known modern Chinese cultural figure, but his achievements in the essay are taken for granted and, I think, not well understood. The scion of an eminent scholarly family, Yu grew
up in the family home in Suzhou, raised by his elder sisters—their parents, Yu Biyun and wife, having moved to Beijing. Yu entered Peking University in 1916, and in 1917 he married Xu Yinghuan, with whose brothers Yu collaborated on a translation of Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Oblong Box” that was published in *Crescent Moon*. While at Peking University, Yu came under the influence of Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, and became, with Ye Shengtao, Zhu Ziqing, and others, part of the student group that began publishing *Xinchao* (Renaissance) in 1919. In the early 1920s, between travels to Europe and America, he initiated research projects on *Dream of the Red Chamber*, the *Shijing* (Classic of poetry), and the Thunder Peak Pagoda overlooking West Lake in Hangzhou. He also began writing essays at this time and published a joint collection with Ye Shengtao entitled *Jianqiao* (Scabbard) in 1924. According to the *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, Yu’s “creative writing in the prewar period consisted almost entirely of short prose pieces, many of which were introductions, prefaces, and appreciations written for or about books by his friends. Some were in wen-yen, others in pai-hua, and still others in that strange mixture of the two which is peculiarly characteristic of his style.”

Yu wrote many academically oriented, polemical, and other types of informal essays, but in the following, we will concentrate on two of his essays dealing specifically with excursions.

One of the most frequently anthologized essays by Yu Pingbo is “Jiang-sheng dengyingli de Qinhuai he” (The Qinhuai River amid sounds of oars and the glow of lanterns), which is a companion piece to another famous piece of the same title by Zhu Ziqing. These essays narrate an excursion the two writers took together in the famed Nanjing pleasure quarter, sometime in the summer of 1923. It is an area about which Zhang Dai had written extensively in his *Dream Recollections of the Tao Hermitage*, of which Yu Pingbo edited a modern edition published in 1927. Yu’s version of the events features a relentless verbal pursuit of an ineffable feeling:

The fogginess seemed to have given birth to a floral smile—a pretty smile so subtle, so subtle as to be inexpressible, incomparable, unimaginable, but in the end we were dazzled beneath its separating and uniting eerie lights. Though we have no means of convincing people it is there, yet we do not believe it is not there. If I were to try to put it philosophically, it is perhaps close to what the Buddhists call emptiness: while it would be going too far to say it is nothing, you cannot really say it is something, either. In other words, it is there, but because there is nothing to which one can compare its manner of existence, on the face of things, it seems little different than nothing. If you insist that I put it more concretely; suppose the east wind is just picking up a bit, the person...
holding the string attached to that kite way up there is of course terribly far away—who knows whose family she is from? Yet judging from that multicolored tail leading down from it, it is easy to surmise that in the world of humanity below, there is certainly a pair of pinkish white hands with their wide, white, silken sleeves rolled up holding tight to the fateful tether of that little kite. What could the soaring be but the force of the east wind and the latent power of the kite? Yet its root relies on something else. What, I ask you, does this have to do with the awareness (or lack thereof) of the kite? That is why we cannot stand it if the subtle smile is nonexistent, and cannot stand it if the obscure thing is nothing other than the smile. We ought to put it this way: the obscurity is pregnant with a floral, wondrous smile, mixed inextricably with obscurity itself, because after all it is very subtle, a very subtle one.34

Yu Pingbo brings a decidedly poetic ambiguity to his prose meditations, which undoubtedly contributed to the ambiguity-intolerant literary left’s increasing impatience with him.35 As if recapitulating this passage in another context, Yu Pingbo reflects on the experience he had and his effort to articulate it:

The thoughts and feelings I had on the way back, in this twilight, the scene and my mind mixed together, interpenetrating, its complexity far exceeded words. Philosophical thought centering on mind or object, from my amateur perspective, really puts things too simply, too easily, too clearly. What was really there was more like a holistic feeling. Consider this evening excursion on the Qinhuai River: naturally it is possible to analyze the constituent elements, factors, reasons in between where we started and where we ended up. Yet to attain a thorough and exhaustive solution/conclusion, to bring together fragmentary elements to represent the concrete experience of the moment, I think this is not really possible, at least it is this way for us now.36

Beyond simply stating that the essence of experience cannot be articulated in words, Yu makes the more forceful point that it is worth trying to put the words together, but only if not in an analytical, “philosophical” framework. To deliberately put things in a contradictory manner, to confuse polar opposites and speak in terms of images, all are part and parcel of art, and Yu thus places art at least on a par with philosophy for its ability to render the ineffable at least intelligible, at least perceptible. Perhaps more than Zhu Ziqing writing of the same set of activities on the same evening, Yu Pingbo makes this essay into an apology for the unique power of verbal art to establish a relationship between the subject and experience that is not reducible by analysis.
Yu’s “Xihu de liuyue shiba ye” (The eve of the eighteenth of the sixth month on West Lake) is an account of a visit to the West Lake in Hangzhou, also a pleasure destination for centuries and a favorite topic of premodern leisure essayists. As with “The Sound of Oars,” Yu takes this as an opportunity to meditate on the ineffability of experience. Yu and his wife, friend H and his family try to stay up all night on West Lake, as is traditional in Hangzhou on the eve of the Bodhisattva Guanyin’s (that is, Avalokiteshvara’s) birthday. The custom of staying up all night by West Lake began because of the custom of burning incense early in the morning to celebrate the holiday. Because all the gates that face the lake close at night and do not reopen until relatively late in the morning, celebrants must spend the night outside the Hangzhou city wall, and take the occasion to entertain themselves on the lake.

Here, perhaps because of the late night setting, light takes on a greater significance than in the Qinhuaui essay: “The white pointed auras of the kerosene lamps on the shore dimmed the powers of the other lanterns and the moonlight, so we decided to move on.” As is the case in the other essay, the more modern the lights, the less they contribute to the desired atmosphere. The wandering depicted here concerns the spontaneous movements of the group, which are prompted by reasons of inconvenience and the personal preference. For example, the party prepared for the night’s excursion by reserving a boat and buying snacks in town before returning to the lake, but when they arrived at the boathouse it was already much more crowded than they imagined it would be. This enhanced their excitement and they quickly ate dinner, wanting to get on their boat right away, but a group of ladies cut in front of them. H was not fond of crowds, and suggested they wait for the moonrise by the relatively peaceful Xileng Bridge, then get a boat. So already at the beginning, the planned itinerary has been abandoned, but the resulting vignette sets an eerie tone for the rest of the essay:

The area around Xileng Bridge was still cool and quiet. We sat for a while listening to the distant flutes and drums, and the sound of people talking and laughing was very muted and sparse. I suddenly felt a kind of loneliness, completely opposite to what we expected at the outset. Every time two or three lotus lamps would come floating towards us on the surface of the water, the children would say “The lamps are here.” As I looked at their solitary bobbing, I thought it was very sad. Later a flotilla of Japanese “Jintan” advertising boats showed up strung with red lanterns and deep hollow drums, weaving back and forth in the inner and outer lakes like flaming dragons, shook off some of the lonely feeling. But before long the redness they projected into the water became more distant and faint as it undulated, and without a boat we could not catch
them, adding greatly to our restlessness—the pale, yellow moon already began to bubble up in the east, and the sky and water both got a bit lighter, but our boat was still in a misty void.38

Impatient with the scene, the party heads back for Yulou, the guesthouse on the lake where they are staying, where they are somehow reinvigorated by the considerable crowd there, and after eating a bit more they discover there are lots of boats available now, so they set forth on the lake. Again disappointed by the waning lotus lights (most of them taken away by sightseers), they head towards “Three Pools Reflecting the Moon,” a famous site on one of West Lake’s islands, but on the way they pass the Park Landing, which is crowded and over-illuminated with kerosene lamps, which drives them away.

The pure white of the midnight moonlight is difficult to articulate. The middle of the lake was quiet and cold; the singing and voices on the lakeshore surrounding us on all sides, the weak glow of the lanterns, when clustered all together actually fused into a warm aura enveloping the lake. Our hearts were not entirely lonely because of this, as they would be on an ordinary night journey; they only beat limply with half the excitement and twice the listlessness. Everything harmonized with the movements of our hearts: the uneven strings of lantern light, the wrinkled ripples of waves, the scudding clouds, and the undulation of the boat. If such soft smoothness is the only symbol of entering into a dream, then that moment was nothing short of a dream.

The party becomes sleepier as they move along, reinforcing the dream-like quality of the experience. They disembark and walk around the small island with the three reflecting pools, where the author stops to provide a verbal snapshot of the scene, illuminated now entirely by the moon with the Thunder Peak Pagoda in the background. But they are so tired they quickly prepare to return. On the way, they approach the sound of singing, but the boat goes silent as they arrive, leaving them disappointed, and they decide to move on again.

Dreams are never far from the author’s mind as the night continues, since his party is trying to stay up until dawn, and much of what is experienced in the essay is experienced in a groggy trancelike state. It is hard for the group to stay awake, to hold out until dawn as was customary; H is worried about the children out on the water and goes to get them or call them in.

Everything seemed distant from me. Even my own shadow in the bright moonlight was blurry to the point of mist. Only then did I think of turning to
go to bed. But for some reason my feet hesitated, and a dream remnant like a flying arrow suddenly stopped, then immediately continued its flight like a javelin. I have not known what to make of this brief “midsummer night’s dream” since. After all, it left me only after turning its head and taking one last look at me. How can I blame it? Did I enjoy it? No, not one bit!39

Both of these essays by Yu Pingbo involve experiences at famous scenic spots many readers would have visited, and thus might not seem to contribute to an aesthetic of “wandering” on the level of spatial representation. The author’s impressionistic musings, however, are very much wanderings, and on this abstract level, Yu is quite explicit in his avoidance of systematic “itineraries” of thought.

Fei Ming’s Bridge: Fictionalized Spatial Wandering

Fei Ming (Feng Wenbing, 1901–1967), another protégé of Zhou Zuoren, was among those Zhou selected for inclusion in the Compendium’s first essay volume. Fei Ming had published many prose essays, but what Zhou included in the Compendium volume were all excerpts from his novel, Qiao (Bridge), which was not to be published in its entirety until 1932.40 Fei Ming’s fiction is one of the few such items Zhou Zuoren made any attempt to justify: “Fei Ming’s offerings are actually short stories, but in my view they can be read as essays (xiaopin sanwen)—no, not only can be, in fact, they probably are more interesting this way.”41 Why should it be more interesting to read excerpts of a novel as though they were essays? One reason may be that Zhou Zuoren wished to strain the distinction between fiction and essays, an issue we will return to in chapter 5.

Bridge is a possibly autobiographical novel, written in a highly impressionistic, lyrical style. It portrays in a series of vignettes the experiences of its protagonist, Cheng Xiaolin, centering on his interactions with a neighbor girl named Qinzi. The novel is written from the point of view of Xiaolin and the other children in it, who all seem to be on the verge of puberty. Their thoughts and feelings thus carry an affecting combination of innocence and passion. Most of Zhou’s selections from Bridge are written from the protagonist’s perspective. They often involve his wanderings to this or that place, each of which has significance for Cheng because of connections to stories and other lore, often involving ghosts. The stories present many landscapes, but perhaps the most extended treatment of a physical environment among Zhou’s selections occurs in “Bei” (Stone tablet), which relates Xiaolin’s
attempt to find the village temple (cunmiao, the local term for a shrine to which recently departed spirits are led by lamplight). Xiaolin loses his way, wanders through the woods, and ends up on a large slope called Fang ma chang (Horse pasture). There he gazes at the familiar Niubei Mountain, and for the first time notices a path, which captures his imagination:

“There’s a path on the mountain!” He was talking about a little path in a hollow of the mountain. You could tell he had never noticed it before, but one look and he knew it was a path. And it really was; it seemed to move upwards, not that there were people on it. The path was tortuous, appearing now here and now there, but it was actually visible from the foothills to the peak. “Where do you have to go to get on that path?” he asked. Of course he was only asking. But how he wanted to get up there and walk around! If at this moment someone asked him, what do you want to be most? he would certainly answer without hesitation: a person on that path.

Xiaolin expresses a desire to project himself into a landscape of which he feels he is not a part. Later, recovering from his frustration at being stuck on the slope and not able to approach the faraway mountain, Xiaolin encounters a stone tablet with the name Amitabha inscribed on it:

Amitabha? Anyone can say that! The mangy-headed nun that often comes to his house always says that when she sees his mother.

But he also felt it was strange—

“Just this Amitabha.”

He had heard it so many times and only today did he see that it was written like this.

The tablet weighed on his mind just as this place did: finally here was something to hold onto. He grasped the top of the tablet with his hands, taking a long look at the word that had not much impressed him. As he raised his head with the thought of going back, he started; on the slope opposite, which had looked so distant a moment ago but now from the tablet seemed much closer than it had from where he entered the pasture, a monk was walking toward him.

He immediately remembered his dream the night before: “No wonder I had a dream like that!”

A conversation begins between the two, in the course of which readers learn the legend of the tablet, that it was put there to hold down a ghost that appears in daylight. The monk does not tell the story to Xiaolin directly, apparently to avoid frightening him. They turn to the name of the slope, Horse
Pasture, which Xiaolin had not known, wondering whether it actually ever was a pasture, a subject to which even the narrator warms and expresses some curiosity. The conversation eventually gets around to how Xiaolin ended up there:

“Are you going back? Let’s walk together!”
“Where are you going, Master?”
“I’m right at the Shrine to Lord Guan, not far from Shijiazhuang; do you know it?”
“I don’t, I was looking forever for the village temple but never found it.”

The monk smiled—This kid doesn’t know how to talk.

One sentence at a time, in due course, the monk figured out the details.
The village temple is right next to the Shrine to Lord Guan; right, it was just through the wood as Qinzi had said, but Xiaolin had lost his way in the wood, went through another wood, and found himself at Horse Pasture.

Xiaolin asked the monk about Lord Guan’s sword, what had happened to it after he was killed. This offers the narrator an occasion to explore Xiaolin’s thought process: “He suddenly asked this—though the asking itself was unexpected, he had been tangling with it in his mind for some time, and it would be easy for us to find the thread: Shrine to Lord Guan, and then Lord Guan himself, Lord Guan’s sword, and the monk belonged to the Shrine to Lord Guan.”

The association sounds juvenile, and reflects the interests of someone who had recently read Romance of the Three Kingdoms, but as the narrator says, it is easy to trace, and thus easy to understand. The story then continues weaving the web of associations:

Xiaolin could never have guessed what the monk was thinking at that moment. The monk had once been an actor, he could play Zhao Kuangyin [the founder of the Song dynasty], and he could play Guan Yunchang [Lord Guan], but then he ended up as a monk in the Shrine to Lord Guan, and there had often laughed as he looked at Lord Guan’s dark red face—by now he had been “working for the Bodhisattva” already over a dozen years.

“You certainly know your Three Kingdoms well . . . that sword once fell into my hands, do you believe it?” The monk laughed.

This unexpectedly made Xiaolin unwilling to speak anymore. The monk didn’t continue either.

But the purpose of unfolding these odd connections was not to explore or better understand Xiaolin’s mind. The text goes well beyond Xiaolin’s
mind; it is the idiosyncratic network of cultural and topographical associations that makes up the texture of Bridge’s world, one that Xiaolin is more than adequately in tune with, yet does not exhaust within himself. And the way the text, though fictional, moves through space and related cultural and emotional associations, is very much digressive, a relentlessly constructive wandering off.

**Hesitation: Emotional Wandering**

In the previous two sections, I have discussed intellectual wandering (digressing) and literal wandering as approaches characteristic of the *xiaopin wen* essays in *Threads of Conversation*. There is at least one other type of wandering one can observe in the prose literature of this group, and that is wandering within emotional landscapes.

Part of the work of the new Chinese literature from the beginning of the twentieth century has been the construction of a language and a rhetoric of emotions. The expression of emotions in prose had a rich premodern legacy in the classical language to draw upon, particularly in the aesthetic of merging emotion and object (*qingjing jiaorong*) much discussed in premodern times as well as more recently in Wang Guowei’s studies of song-lyrics. But the influence of Western culture could not help but transform the ways in which the relationship between emotions and experience are imagined and articulated. This is true of all literary genres, but the aesthetic of emotional wandering is particularly prominent in prose works by the Threads of Conversation group.

Some of the contributors to *Threads,* including Su Xuelin (1899–1999, who often signed her essays with the pen-name Lü Yi), Lu Yin, Lu Jingqing, Shi Pingmei, Chen Hengzhe, and others, derived their literary identities at least in part through membership in a community of academic women, many still students or recent graduates. In the case of Shi Pingmei and Lu Jingqing, most if not all of their contributions postdated the wave of student activism initially inspired by the anti-Japanese May Thirtieth Movement of 1925, which in Beijing came to a bloody conclusion with the March 18 massacre in front of Duan Qirui’s government building in 1926. In the latter incident, a student of Lu Xun’s at Beijing Women’s Normal College named Liu Hezhen was among the forty or so killed, eliciting an impassioned response from the Beijing literary community. Most of the above-mentioned women were Liu’s classmates or otherwise acquainted with her. Part of the aftermath of these incidents was the armed occupation of Women’s Normal by Beiyang
government troops and the expulsion of postgraduate students including Lu Jingqing in October of 1926.51

In part because of the distressing turn of events from 1925 to 1927 in Beijing, which ultimately forced Threads of Talk to relocate to Shanghai, more contributions during this time were characterized by the articulation of emotional suffering at the death or illness of close friends who are devastated by personal and collective setbacks in their struggles. These are not confident works of agitational literature, but painful explorations of loss and failure, and the sometimes desperate search for hope. The context for these explorations is often also a physical landscape, but unlike the pieces in the first section that emphasized the cultivation of leisure, these essays are often dramatized by gestures of departure, which emotionally are attended both by the pain of separation and a desperate desire to locate signs of hope on the horizon.

The connection of this more serious, reflective essay with the literature of leisure lies in its wandering quality. Though it is not in its content an articulation of relaxation or pleasure, it nevertheless deliberately eschews deliberateness. It metaphorically steps back from purpose-driven activity, to reflect on its human costs and emotional drain. This might not strike one as leisure literature, but it resonates with the “aesthetic literature” compiled by Zhu Jianmang some years later, which often dwells on regrets at the loss of loved ones and of the casual intimacy of more innocent times.52 In other words, the more somber work of these women writers is leisure literature because it laments the loss of leisure and the frustrations of earnest purpose in a hostile environment, while maintaining the meandering logical and rhetorical structure of more lighthearted works.

The departures and separations examined by Lu Jingqing, Chen Xuezhaoy, and Shi Pingmei are directly or indirectly brought about by the violent reprisals against student activism in 1925 and 1926. In her “Lü wu” (Green Dwelling), Lu writes from her new temporary lodgings in a boarding house or apartment building called “Beiguan,” on the west side of the city, after her expulsion from the Women’s Normal College. The experience of expulsion provides an interesting situation, both narratively and in terms of the feelings generated and expressed, not to mention the state of relative independence Lu achieves in the course of events.

On first leaving the “Red Building” [Lu’s dormitory at Women’s Normal], how upset I was! Although I have this “Green Dwelling” to stay in, my heart is never settled. All the time I feel anger and desolation; during the day I have many friends around me, and so I struggle to suppress my feelings, but at night, in
the deadly quiet of the depths of night, my thoughts surge like huge waves, and I am even capable of thinking of many dangerous thoughts, of going insane, of dying! The next day, my face is noticeably pale from lack of sleep.53

Devastated by her expulsion, Lu was dependent on her close friend Shi Pingmei and others to find her new living quarters and arrange the move. Shi’s role was so important that it warranted special mention in Lu Jingqing’s essay (the title being the name Shi bestowed on the apartment after she decorated it all in green). Shi Pingmei’s essay “Xue ye” (Snowy night), published only six weeks later, describes her departure from Lu Jingqing’s apartment on a snowy January night. The beginning paragraphs of “Green Dwelling,” apart from the description before and after she had redecorated Lu Jingqing’s new apartment, is typical Threads of Conversation fare: they devote considerable attention to describing the situation at the Women’s College and are not rich in description or imagery. The emotional and artistic crux of the essay is the description and narration of the act of departure itself (from the diary entry of October 18, 1926, embedded in the essay):

As I cried myself awake from a dream, the sky was not yet light. Feeling across the pillow it was all cold and wet, and I remember that before I went to bed last night I walked around all the familiar spots on campus, bidding a silent farewell to each of them. How desolate were my feelings and the scene then! How I wish I could have deeply marked each spot with my tears as a memorial to our humiliation at being evicted in this manner, as testament to the cruelty of which the human heart is capable!

My things had long since been packed; after rising from bed I went about my daily business with a nonchalant air. In the lavatory I made an even greater effort at a show of cheerfulness, chatting about trifles with the other girls just like any other day. Because of this, none of them imagined that I was about to leave the school, that I was about to sneak out of this school, and I wished never to return.

After eating porridge, my neighbors picked up their books and went off to class, while I continued to sit on the bamboo chair reading the newspaper. Even when [Shi Ping-] Mei came, I did not say anything about leaving. Only when the last of them had disappeared from view did I stand and wipe the tears from my eyeglasses, call the orderly to pack up my bedding, and write cards to my friends. Once everything was ready, I went again for another walk around the practice field out back, and then stood again stupidly in my room for a while. When Mei returned, I took her arm and without hesitating quietly exited from the school via the West Wing. As we passed the auditorium, I solemnly
glanced through the crack in the doors at the memorial portrait of Liu Hezhen.

Yesterday a friend had already secured a room for me in Beiguan, and I am grateful for his kindness. When I walked into that cold and empty room with M, and stood in this pile of withered leaves, I struggled to lift my eyes and look upon the four walls caked with dust. My heart ached, and the image of the “Red Building” flashed before my eyes. I wanted to cry!

Because of Mei’s supervision and earnest exhortations, we started to plan the decoration of my lodgings. We found someone to hang wallpaper and got the orderly to sweep out the dust and garbage, and towards evening I asked Suqiu to accompany me to Dong’an Market to buy a few sundries, but when we got back the “jade hare had risen in the East,” and in the clear cool moonlight, I was overcome with depression and uncertainty.

One is impressed by Shi Pingmei’s efforts to make the shabby dwelling cheery, elevating it almost to literary status after the habit of Chinese authors for centuries by bestowing a name that would tie a place to their study and creativity. However, even this does not completely cover up or displace Lu Jingqing’s sorrow and her sense of being wronged, not to mention the inherent desolation of the place.

The pain evoked by Lu Jingqing’s piece is if anything intensified in Shi Pingmei’s “Snowy Night,” where we learn that, only a little over a month later, Lu Jingqing is now nursing an illness in the Green Dwelling, one probably brought on by her emotional turmoil. Shi’s essay devotes much more energy to the expression of distress, and the rhetoric carries her hesitation and ambivalence. Shi takes the arrival of another friend in the late evening as an occasion to depart from Lu’s apartment into the snowy night. The departure is slow, however, she lingers at length in the doorway, vacillating between the snowy world outside and her ailing friend within:

In the tangled skein of my mind, I thought of many things related to snow, many things related to my sick friend, twisting together into an indescribable state. As I opened the door and looked out at the snow, then turned back, lifting the door curtain and looking at my sick friend, I just didn’t know why my heart was so restless and wandering (panghuang)? Who should I curse, the world or humanity? Looking at the beautiful snowflakes, I exalted the world, but when I turned my head and heard moans of my sick friend, I cursed the world. We fall down bearing wounds and struggle again, fall and struggle again, and in defeat we still anticipate warriors. Though this world is cold and unfeeling, we optimistically hope to use our enthusiasm to warm it; though the
world is brutal and vicious, we always pray that we may use our goodness to change it. Recently we took a serious blow to our battle line, our meager strength winning us only this limitless sorrow. When will we be able to continue the struggle, and when will our moment of triumph arrive? I only pray to the flames in the stove to give us strength, to make this medicine cure my sick friend and quickly gallop toward the enemy, sweeping away the darkness.\textsuperscript{55}

Shi’s long declamation is not related much to observation at this point in the essay; it is an abstract meditation on the forces that keep progressive struggle at bay, in the style of many of Lu Xun’s essays. The homily is followed, however, by a much more concrete account of the quiet, snow-covered night that engulfs her, a rich litany of references to sites in Beijing, both those that lay before her eyes and those that arise from her memory.\textsuperscript{56} This ramble through the snowy night is still contained, however, by the relentless concern Shi has for the struggle between social change and stagnation, a struggle whose sacrifices seem almost too great to be worth making. Yet at the end, she arrives, with no small degree of difficulty, at a note of ambivalent hope.

As I emerged from the Green Dwelling, I hesitated (paihuai) at the quiet, white crossroads; how fine was the cold clarity of this market street, with its powdered and polished aspect. At this time I thought of the desolate quiet of Taoran Pavilion, the majesty of the Gate of Heavenly Peace (Tiananmen), the barren expanse of the Ten Temple Lakes (Shichahai), the pretty sumptuousness of the Park, the leisurely elegance of Beihai. Even this bustling, busy intersection has a different kind of after-snow pensiveness; usually Beijing is shrouded in dust and mud. I have been down and out here all these years, nothing but layers of dark webs binding me from all directions, heavy iron sluice gates of sin weighing down on me, the air so dry, life so dry, my heart so agonized, what need is there to speak of the cries of hunger and cold outside the great mansions of luxury and dissipation? Yet I finally awakened from this dream, opened my eyes wide and saw this lovely, wonderful world, just because of a blanket of snow that would momentarily vanish, I discovered to my great comfort a wonder I had not felt in years. Though it was only a tiny glow like a will-o-the-wisp in the midst of darkness, I recognized that the world had been wiped clean instantly; I hoped, I wished that all people would have such an instantaneous discovery, to correct my bleak assessment of the world.

When I passed over the bridge at Shunzhi Gate\textsuperscript{57} I could make out two barren branches adorned with snow like clouds and mist and the flat pure white surface of the river. By now it was late at night; there were few out walking on the streets. In the distance I could hear dogs barking and the remote,
limpid peal of a bell. As my feet shuffled crunchily on the white snow illuminated by the silvery electric lamplight, I felt transported from the human realm. The uneven stone border of the city wall was shrouded in layers of white snow, and I looked up and saw the snowy peak of the gatehouse roof where icicles dangled. Underneath it a deep black hole—from a distance it appeared a terrifying, unthinkable portal. I stood in this silent, empty cave, looking forward and back, hesitating (chichu), and I still could not believe the noisy, bustling intersection could at times be so lonely and quiet.  

“World” is equated with the physical surroundings of Beijing which, covered with a fresh blanket of snow in their uncharacteristic midnight silence, reassure the narrator that despite all the pain and struggle she and her classmates have gone through, a dramatic transformation into a vision of beauty need only take a matter of minutes or hours. This meditation on the malleability of the landscape is the essay’s first concrete level. The second is the layer of “humanity,” which animates the landscape in daytime and is both the cause (in the form of “dark forces” and “enemies”) and the subject (the author herself, Lu Jingqing, and others) of struggle and suffering. In the vision of silvery purity untainted by the workaday throngs, the dark “unthinkable portal” to the future is terrifying, yet the sheer beauty and tranquility of the scene are enough to comfort the narrator; not only may things of beauty be appreciated under the worst of circumstances, but the more abstract “prospects” of the historical situation can and perhaps will suddenly take on a different appearance. That such transformation is possible, that it is imaginable, is enough to protect the narrator from despair.

These essays, both of them direct responses to the expulsion of graduate students from the Beijing Women’s Normal College for political reasons, demonstrate a move away from the direct engagement in polemics that had been the essay’s primary role since the eruption of the literary revolution in 1917—they articulate a richer and more complex tapestry of emotions than had been seen before in Chinese prose writing. What these essays further demonstrate is that this tendency did not require literature to steer clear of politics; there is no mistaking the political stance of their authors, and yet their essays are not a platform for the articulation of that stance. Instead, through a process of wandering, they reveal the psychic and emotional depth of their commitment, and the sacrifices and suffering that political engagement often entail.

Throughout the interlocking layers of literal, textual, and emotional wandering we can observe in the Threads of Conversation group’s essays not
so much a lack of direction or purpose as a concerted effort to define the literary as such in the modern Chinese prose essay. The magazine’s editorial statement, penned by Zhou Zuoren, expresses an intention to diverge from the ordinary: “We just feel that life in China today is too dull, the intellectual climate too oppressive. Feeling a kind of displeasure, we had some things to say, so we started this little publication as a place to freely express them.” As shown in works discussed here, this aim worked itself out in practice as the deliberate frustration of utilitarian readings of self-expression. These writers are not (or at least not only) conveying information for the edification of their readers, or trying to drum up support for a political cause. Though many contributors were well known as political activists and cultural critics, in addition to the familiar polemical type of essay, they made their mark with sincere or ironic examinations of moral and emotional ambiguity, matters of academic or otherwise trivial interest, discourses of pleasure and enjoyment, and the exploration of ineffable emotional experience, none of which adds up to a definitive social or cultural agenda. In each of these vectors lay the kernel of a general direction of development that would be represented by other groups of essay writers.
All good compositions are written because their authors cannot help but write them. When you have had an experience or thought that you feel is different than usual, because it is fresh or insightful, it is worth writing down as a marker of your personal life, to be examined in the future when necessary; this is why a writer picks up his pen and writes a composition. On the other hand, perhaps you have a person or group of people in mind with whom, because you have a certain relationship, you must communicate your experience or thought; this is another reason a writer might pick up his pen and write a composition. The former is for you; the latter is for others. In any case, it is never a game of pen and ink or something written randomly to no purpose.

—Ye Shengtao, *Wenzhang lihua*¹

The aesthetic of the everyday (the “familiar” in the familiar essay) refers to the expression of unique feelings that occasionally arise in the course of daily life. These feelings and their expression should be clearly distinguishable from stories of heroic or epic confrontation, or the grand discourses of philosophy, politics, history, culture, and religion. The everyday looms large in the modern Chinese literary essay and so is a subject of interest to cultural critics with good reason. Many believe that previous approaches to the arts, social science, and public policy have placed too much emphasis on the perspectives of grand discourse, abstraction, and summary.² The experience of everyday life takes on a special meaning from this perspective; it is more than an accumulation of trivial details. It can pose a serious challenge to abstract discourses, a concrete critique of hollow theories. This is because grand theories by their very nature lose touch with reality, while
writings that focus on the everyday can yield deep insights through their meditation on the subtle and complex meanings and connections of apparently insignificant objects or incidents. We often assume that since *xiaopin wen* and other informal forms do not address abstract theories or major trends or changes in society, they are themselves trivial. Often, however, the quotidian minutiae discussed in these works are of the utmost relevance, since they suggestively or symbolically express the author’s concerns while raising doubts about, or even remedying, the disconnect between grand discourse and everyday life. In fact the little discourses—the idle chatter of *xiaopin wen*—have potential as a corrective for theory, only their authors have not taken the trouble to analyze them so; analysis, after all, belongs to the methodologies of grand discourse.

One group of Chinese essayists was particularly aware of the role played by composition in nurturing a person’s character and, by extension, encouraging participation in social change. Because these writers, who include Ye Shengtao, Zhu Ziqing, Xia Mianzun, Li Shutong, Feng Zikai, all spent time teaching at Chunhui Middle School near the town of Shangyu in Zhejiang Province, on the shores of White Horse Lake, I adhere to the practice of calling them the “White Horse Lake group.” Most of these writers could be included with other familiar literary groupings, but in the context of a study of leisure literature, it is more appropriate to use this place-grouping, a social space based in a pastoral setting that included the workplace where they taught, a bucolic community of residences, and the society these men enjoyed together in the early 1920s when they shared all this. Though the duration of this idyll was brief, it shaped or influenced the personal traits and ideals of these writers in ways observable at other stages of their lives and in other places; their experience there conditioned the aesthetics of a significant portion of their essays.

Established in 1921 near Xia Mianzun’s hometown, Chunhui Middle School was a private institution whose founders aimed to realize the pedagogical ideals of Zhejiang’s progressive schoolteachers, who had been at every turn frustrated by run-ins with public school officials. These aims were both educational—using innovative versus traditional teaching methods—and political—centering on the right of students and teachers to speak out against the government in defense of China’s national interests. Individuals thus frustrated by the provincial educational system included writers and intellectuals of some renown. In a sense even Lu Xun, an experienced Zhejiang educator years before, can also be included in this category, though by the early 1920s he was already in Beijing enjoying his role as the leading writer in the New Literature pantheon. This cohort of Zhejiang teacher-intellectuals was assem-
bled by Xia Mianzun, who had been charged by the Chunhui headmaster Jing Hengyi to gather a faculty of the most distinguished cultural figures in China.

An advantage of classifying a group of writers by place is that it encompasses multiple levels of relationships or similarities. For instance, because many of the Chunhui faculty had studied at the Zhejiang Province No. 1 Normal School, they had all come under the Buddhist influence of Li Shutong (1880–1942), also known as Dharma Master Hongyi, an influence that would have been manifested both in terms of teaching philosophy and in terms of a commitment to the art of living. Xia Mianzun, for one, had been Li Shutong’s colleague at Zhejiang No. 1 Normal College, while Feng Zikai (who would become Chunhui Middle School’s art instructor) had been one of Li’s favorite students. Before deciding to become a monk, Li Shutong had had an educational mission, one that focused on reforming Chinese education with an emphasis on the arts at the elementary and middle-school levels. While teaching with Xia Mianzun at the Zhejiang No. 1 Normal College, his mission was to create “renaissance men” and, in the case of his student Feng Zikai, he may be said to have succeeded.

These writers published their essays, poems, stories, and other writings in many of the same periodicals, including the Chunhui school publication Chunhui, Xia Mianzun’s general educational magazine The Juvenile Student (1930), his literary magazine The Ordinary (1926–1929) and other literary magazines like Taibai (1934–1935) and Wenxue (Literature, 1933–1937). Publications cannot by themselves delimit a literary grouping, but a sense of camaraderie and a common set of themes and concerns can form among a group of regular contributors and editors.

The educational and cultural journeys of each of these men are, moreover, inextricably tied to Japan. According to Chen Xing’s biography of Feng Zikai, when the Zhejiang No. 1 Normal College was established, the school hired mostly Japan-returned scholars and Japanese teachers as faculty. One Japanese member of the Teacher Training Department, for example, was Nakagiri Kakutaro (1872–1944), and his Chinese translator was Xia Mianzun, who had studied in Japan from 1904 to 1907. The headmaster, Jing Hengyi, also brought in Li Shutong from Shanghai, who had contacts back in Japan as well, for example, his art teacher, Kuroda Seiki (1866–1924).

The encounter with Japan forms an important part of any narrative of the development of modern Chinese culture. The archetype for this is Lu Xun’s account of a biology class slide show. In the context of explaining how he came to write fiction, Lu Xun relates how he was confronted with a lantern-slide in a Japanese college biology class depicting the execution of a Chinese spy during the Russo-Japanese war. The execution took place in
Manchuria, Chinese territory, and the crowd of Chinese onlookers looks shockingly apathetic. It is a scene rife with overtones of imperialism: the young Lu Xun studying science in the more powerful Westernized nation of Japan, the Chinese spy being executed by foreigners on his own national territory, and the apathy of a premodern people ignorant of the conditions of their nation’s repression on the global stage. Similar themes are foregrounded in “Sinking,” Yu Dafu’s 1921 story about a young Chinese student in Japan who is transfixed by the healthy allure of young Japanese women, yet hindered from any natural human interaction with them by his excessively keen and tragic sense of national inferiority. He actually blames China for his social and sexual impotence. Lu Xun makes the significance of his anecdote clear, but there are different ways to read Yu Dafu’s story than as an indictment of the inequality of nations, or a young patriot’s resentful outcry against imperial domination, depending on the degree of irony you allow the author.

We know that these encounters are representative of the important phenomenon of Chinese studying in Japan, which was deeply intertwined with the history of imperialism. Japan’s status as a local Western-style imperialist power combined with its physical proximity to China made it a Mecca of modernity for ambitious young Chinese from the beginning of the twentieth century. Japan’s economic and political designs on China going back well into the nineteenth century were part and parcel of Japan’s self-positioning as the leader of East Asian modernization, so that, schematically, Chinese intellectuals learning from Japan supported Japan’s claim to leadership. Thus, while the emergence of the Lu Xun / Yu Dafu version of that cultural encounter was inevitable, it was not the only type of experience Chinese would have in Japan.

Zhou Zuoren, for example, was in Japan with Lu Xun, but the experience seems to have affected him altogether differently. Zhou’s reflections on Japanese culture in fact are the only alternative we usually get to Lu Xun’s. For Zhou, Japan was a rich point of access to all the cultures of the world and, moreover, it laid claim to an impressive premodern culture of its own, quite apart from its success as a “Western” nation. We know, for example, that Zhou Zuoren was inspired by Mushanokōji Saneatsu’s socialist ideal of the atarashiki mura (new village or xin cun in Chinese); quite independently of Zhou, Xia Mianzun also aligned himself with this pastoral ideal of social progress. The association of idealism with rural living in humble circumstances seems to have been acted out dramatically in Xia’s assumption of the central role in the community of Chunhui Middle School faculty residing in a neighborhood of small dwellings on the shores of White Horse Lake in the early 1920s. There the group did not attempt to live out any explicit program of socialist ideals, but the association of pastoralism with education and the

80 Chapter 3
art of living played out spontaneously by these neighbors took on a momen-
tous quality, especially when recalled nostalgically, and this community may
have inspired the setting of the first half of Ye Shengtai’s 1928 novel Ni
Huanzhi (Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi).

**Education and Writing**

My interest in this group and their activities stems from the fact that they
were an influential voice in the discussion about the modern Chinese vernac-
ular essay, a voice that represented the concerns and ideals of primary and
secondary education more than that of any other group of cultural figures. In
the Chinese *guowen* curriculum, which we might today refer to as language
arts, educationists like the White Horse Lake group redefined the student’s re-
lationship to the cultural legacy and other educational content by placing spe-
cial emphasis on writing; they were thus able to integrate reading and writing
holistically into a modern life of the mind.

Ye Shengtai stresses this in the preface to his 1937 *Comments on Selected
Essays*: “A friend suggested I start a magazine column in which I select some
good essays to give youths to read. . . . Among these compositions (*wenz-
hang*) some are artistic works, but I approach them as ordinary composi-
tions, and I discuss them with readers in terms of the principles of ordinary
composition.” From this we perceive the clear distinction in Ye Shengtai’s
mind between literary works and *wenzhang,* and whatever that difference
might be, compositions by comparison are “ordinary.” Nevertheless, they are
worth talking about with a youth audience, even more so than literary works,
precisely for their *ordinariness.* This is because these works of modern prose
are being presented as models for writing, and thus are by implication more
useful than works of art in and of themselves. In the passage quoted in the
epigraph to this chapter, Ye expands on composition from the point of view
of usefulness.

The reason for drawing a clear distinction between artistic works and or-
dinary compositions is to demystify artistic works, to emphasize that all you
need to write a good composition is to have experiences and thoughts, to be
able to express yourself, and to be literate. Good compositions are merely se-
lected from choice material and written in carefully considered language.
This can be traced to one conception of the art of living in that “for someone
to lead a meaningful life in society, he ought to seek choice experiences and
thoughts, and carefully considered language. And that is not for the sake of
writing compositions, but for the sake of life. But someone with that kind of
cultivation will find that he will have a large number of compositions to
write, and many of them will be good ones. . . ”
10 Unlike Zhou Zuoren’s art of living, which centers on the cultivation of fascination (quwei) as an end in itself, the function of writing for Ye is oriented toward leading “a meaningful life in society.”

The status of Chinese language and literature education in the 1920s and 1930s tells us that writers who came of age during this time were taught what writing is and what it is for.11 In this connection it must be pointed out that the White Horse Lake group was not necessarily interested in training literary authors. Literary creation is not for everyone, they often said, but everyone should have literary cultivation and be able to write well. In early works they lay out the nuts and bolts of writing;12 but one can see these ideas in action even more in Wenxin (The heart of writing, 1933), which presents the process of reading and writing education in fictional form. Sincerity, honesty, and directness—and on the stylistic level, clarity—are the values most emphasized both in the guidebooks Wenzhang zuofa (Compositional method, 1926), Zuowen lun (On composition, 1933) and in The Heart of Writing. The introduction to On Composition, in stark contrast to the conformity and affectation of the classical Chinese “eight-legged essays,” stresses the utilitarian and natural aspects of modern writing: “Humans are social animals, by their nature as well as by the reality of everyday life; they must announce their observations, experience, ideals, and feelings, and hope to reach the widest possible audience.”

These primers emphasize the functional and expressive objectives of writing, and all questions of form are subordinated to them. The efficient and effective transmission of meaning and questions of beauty usually resolve into issues of clarity and economy, not ornament.

The Lakeside Community

Apart from their shared ideas about the place of writing in education, members of the White Horse Lake group each built or bought a little home on the shores of the lake near the school and near to each other, creating a certain kind of physical environment and a correspondingly unique sense of community. Xia Mianzun was the first to move there, in 1921 before Chunhui even opened. One of Xia’s best-known essays is “Baima hu zhi dong” (Winter at White Horse Lake, 1933), which describes the atmosphere around the lake area before the school officially opened, and the special flavor of everyday life there:
The wind blew practically every day there, booming and roaring like a tiger. Though the buildings were new, they were crudely constructed and the draught that came through the cracks round the door and windows nearly cut you in two. After we had pasted layers of paper over these cracks, the wind still came in through gaps around the rafters. When the wind was strong we shut ourselves in before dark and all the family took to their beds after supper and lay there listening to the angry howl of the wind and the waves of the lake washing on the shore. A little rear annexe facing the mountain which served as my study was the room most sheltered from the wind. I used to pull my Russian hat down over my ears and work till the small hours by the light of a kerosene lamp. The wind roared down from the pineclad hills like a wild beast, frosty moonlight framed the window, hungry mice scurried squeaking over the ceiling. It was at times like these that I most keenly appreciated the poetry of desolation: all by myself, I would frequently stir the embers in the stove and prolong my vigil. Casting myself as the tiny figure we often see in landscape paintings, I gave myself up to fanciful musings.14

Each lakeside resident/teacher gave his house a name: Xia Mianzun called his Pingwu (The Bungalow); Feng Zikai called his Xiao Yangliu Wu (Little Willow Hut). We know from Zhu Ziqing’s essay “Baima Hu” (White horse lake), in which he fondly recalls Xia Mianzun’s frequent dinner parties in his tastefully appointed “bungalow,” that he also lived in a house nearby, as did Zhu Guangqian and others on the faculty:

Chunhui Middle School was at the best part of the lake, and the semi-Western houses we lived in were not far from it. The picturesque mountain and lake scenery came in through the doors and over the walls, up to my window and onto my desk. Our houses were lined up next to each other, and Old Mian’s [Xia Mianzun’s] was the best appointed. Inside there were famous works of calligraphy and ink painting, antique porcelain, bronze buddhas, and the whole yard was filled with flowers. The furnishings in the rooms were often changed around, giving an effect of freshness. Since he had such a house, and was completely devoted to hosting, we all often found ourselves going over there to drink old wine.15

Apart from the community-building proximity of these living arrangements, they also inspired the writers in the neighborhood to follow the time-honored tradition of using the names of their dwellings for the titles of their literary collections. Though it was not published until 1936, Xia Mianzun’s prose collection, Pingwu zawen (Random writings from the
bungalow), is a case in point. According to his preface to the work, after the sale of their ancestral home, Xia had no place to call his own until he built the little bungalow by White Horse Lake, so for him its construction was a "great event worth remembering." He points out that most of the pieces contained in the collection were written after he left White Horse Lake, but it is significant to him that the earliest dates from the year the bungalow was built. From this we can see that the move to White Horse Lake was a meaningful juncture for Xia, and even more, that the construction of the bungalow created a moment in his life defined by space, not only of the domestic structure in question, but the neighborhood of Chunhui colleagues and the close proximity of the lake—really a meandering chain of lakes that looked more like a river, according to Zhu Ziqing. The fact that Xia was able to bring in Kuang Husheng (1891–1933), Liu Xunyu (1896–1967), Liu Yanling (1894–1988), and Zhu Ziqing as teachers, and the likes of Yu Pingbo, Li Shutong, and Zhu Guangqian as guest lecturers, reflected his reputation in the intellectual scene at the time. Several of the essays or stories included in Random Writings from the Bungalow touch upon the White Horse Lake living situation and social life, as I will show below.

Random Writings from the Bungalow

By Xia Mianzun’s own account, Random Writings from the Bungalow does not consist exclusively of essays:

From the point of view of the nature of the writings, there are critical essays, stories, suibi essays, and not only are they slight in size, but each is also a kind of motley mixture (busan busi de keyi), so the critical essays don’t seem like critical essays, the stories aren’t like stories, and the suibi are not like suibi. Recently some have created a new term, zawen, to refer to writings of a mixed nature; I think this name fits my writings perfectly, so I have decided upon the title of this book. Xia’s take here differs from our current use of zawen to denote the genre of aggressive but artistic satirical essays (“daggers and spears”) pioneered by Lu Xun and developed by his followers. Xia’s usage, though he attributes it to a current trend, works from the traditional meaning of za as “miscellaneous.” For informal artistic essays Xia uses suibi (following the brush)—jottings or ramblings—a term roughly equivalent but not as common in China at the
time, even though Feng Zikai’s prominent *Yuanyuan tang suibi* (Essays from the Fated Hall) had come out in 1931.20

Though the selections in *Random Writings from the Bungalow* differ from each other in terms of fictionality, lyricism, or polemic, they are all prose pieces “slight in size,” and the author makes no attempt to sort them out, implying they have something in common despite these disparate elements. On the level of theme we see attention to discrepancies between appearance and reality, and meditations on modernity’s departure from the past and the familiar. The Bungalow environs and the experience of living in it ties them all together, though often not explicitly. Other pieces not concerned with the Bungalow still demonstrate the kind of close observation developed in the Bungalow period—“The Fortuneteller,” “The Coward,” “Humor in a Vendor’s Cries”—collectively create a feeling for the city; there is a palpable sense of the streets one could connect with the *flaneur.*21 Xia, however, is not really a roving reporter uncovering the underbelly of the modern metropolis, but a more passive observer, deriving amusement, philosophical and political reflections from the sights and sounds he encounters. He can be compared with Feng Zikai as a cartoonist in this respect.

As Xia’s introduction points out, *Random Writings from the Bungalow* also includes short stories. These can be distinguished from the *suibi* by their consistent narrative character and greater length, but in terms of subject matter and themes and even proximity to the author’s private life, they have a great deal in common with the shorter essays. It is as though Xia is experimenting with a variety of different vehicles—direct analysis, lyrical expression, narrative exposition—to portray and reflect upon a unified set of experiences.

The second piece, “Mao” (The cat), is explicitly set in the Bungalow, indicating that it is autobiographical; but it is still presented in an entirely narrative format, and with all the marks of a short story.22 Though the setting is explicitly identified as the author’s Bungalow, little attention is given to physical description. Rather, it is the human environment that comes through, especially at the beginning during the rare visit of the narrator’s younger sister. The subject of cats comes up as an attempt on the narrator’s part to steer the conversation away from unhappy developments in the siblings’ respective personal lives, and one result of this is the sister’s offer to provide the family with a cat (mostly to catch mice). This cat, a descendant of the cat the narrator grew up with, generates nostalgia for his youth. The domestic interaction and the inherent domesticity of the cat and its family history mark the narrative space of this story as not being historical or social, but private and personal. There is tragic irony in the fact that the new kitten’s arrival coincides with the pregnant sister’s taking ill, and finally dying of dysentery after miscarrying. The kitten...
then comes to symbolize unhappiness for the family. Later, after the stigma of the cat’s association with death wears away, it mysteriously disappears and is later found dead in a ditch, having been attacked by another animal. The narrator’s wife reacts superstitiously; she first connects the sister’s death with the kitten’s arrival, then associates the cat’s own death with the sister’s. On the level of the implied author, the essay features underlying themes of transience and the preciousness of life, the tenuous but rich value of family interactions and memories. The extraordinary pathos of this story, especially when read as true, is equaled only by the final sentences of the author’s preface to *Random Writings from the Bungalow*, which describe how helpful Xia’s daughter Jizi was in organizing and preparing his writings, only to die young before the book was published.

A number of pieces in *Random Writings from the Bungalow* explore, both analytically and artistically, the relationship between leisure and modern social life and the identity of intellectuals. “Chang xian” (Lengthy leisure), like “The Cat,” appears to be a short story, also set in Xia’s Bungalow. It tells of an educator who takes six months off to get some creative writing done on the shores of White Horse Lake. As we learn from the beginning of the narrative, the man is not doing anything at all, just killing time at home. This story is largely an unflattering anatomy of “leisure”:

He awakened from his siesta and discovered that the volume of *Works of Tao Yuanming* he had been holding in his hand had fallen beside the pillow and gotten creased. The sky that had been overcast at lunchtime was suddenly almost clear; the swaying of the willow fronds outside the window had also changed direction. Fresh rays of sun illuminated the wrinkled mountain range across the lake with particular clarity, and it seemed as if the hills had moved closer. New greens were introduced into the old ones with a hint of yellow mixed in, and he began unconsciously to mutter the lines, “Deep meanings lay herein/ Though I wish to speak it, there are no words,” rubbed his sticky eyes and headed for the dining room. There on the table lay two book bags in a row, telling him that his two daughters were already back from elementary school. In the silence of the house, an almost finished, unlined garment for one of the children was carelessly (xian) draped on his wife’s knitting basket, the knitting needles crossed and stuck into a knot. The clock on the wall read exactly 4:30.

Though relaxed in tone, describing artful and literary reactions to the household atmosphere and surrounding natural landscape, the fact that the protagonist’s midday nap had used up the entire afternoon, the book bags on
the table and the wife’s knitting quietly suggest industry and indicate awareness that the protagonist has crossed the line from leisure to laziness.

That night, the author’s conscience catches up with him, and he resolves to get some work done. He goes to his study and writes a few lines, but gets distracted looking at a lovely painting a friend had given him, a scene of an otherworldly paradise with the inscription “For tomorrow’s tasks we have tomorrow / But squander not this moonlit parasol tree!” The author eventually decides he has to take the painting down to concentrate. He cannot stand the wall being bare, though, so after some deliberation he chooses to hang a motto written by Master Hongyi that is more stimulating: *Yongmeng jingjin!* (Advance capably with fierce courage!). This necessitates more puttering as he rummages through his scrolls, labors he must perform quietly because the family is already sleeping. But Master Hongyi’s motto is a little intense for him, so he does some calligraphy of his own, a quotation from Tao Yuanming, whom he had been reading in bed before, *Qinmi yulao xin you changxian* (Though languishing in toil, my heart abides in leisure), and hangs it below Hongyi’s motto. Without further obstacles to composition, our hero settles himself down to write, but nothing comes out. Near the end of the story, the clock chimes in the other room, and he stands up, yawns, and goes outside to admire the moonlight, muttering “For tomorrow’s tasks we have tomorrow / But do not squander this moonlit parasol tree!”

Turning to a more or less polemical essay from the same collection entitled “Zhishi jieji de yunming” (The fate of the intellectual class), Xia argues that, due to their higher levels of education, intellectuals are better able than businessmen to overcome lower living standards and manage to seek out pleasure and elegance in the midst of humble or impoverished circumstances. In fact, in a preface Xia wrote for Feng Zikai’s cartoon collection, *Zikai manhua* (Zikai’s cartoons), he salutes Master Hongyi for his achievements in the pursuit of humble, rustic pleasures:

To him, there was nothing in the world that was not good, everything was good; the little inn was good, traveling in steerage was good, spending the night in monasteries was good, his tattered straw mat was good, his rag of a handkerchief was good, cabbage was good, radishes were good, salted bitter vegetables were good, running about was good—everything was interesting *[you wei*, had flavor], and everything was superlative.

What a state of mind this was! Putting aside religion, when the details of everyday life come to this state, is it not what they call the art of living? Others say he is suffering, but it seems to me he is enjoying it.
The intellectual class, however, is not without property; Xia’s essay “Wo zhi yu shu” (Books and me) describes the author’s library and his attitude towards books. Xia views his book collection with a great deal of satisfaction. Considering that social classes are usually defined in terms of their property (or lack thereof), insofar as intellectuals can be described as a “class,” their book collections can be said to be their characteristic form of property. Even the poor intellectual Xia describes in “The Fate of the Intellectual Class” has books. What kind of role does the intellectual’s book collection play in his or her life? What place do private libraries occupy in the domestic landscape of the intellectual? Some books are rare and valuable; their “value” need not have any relation to their content, but rather derives from their scarcity and their condition, much the same as ancient porcelain or the paintings and calligraphy of the old masters. Even if one possesses no rare books, however, the presence of a collection of books (including those strewn over tables, next to the bed, and in the bathroom) is an important hallmark of an intellectual household.

Xia Mianzun’s declaration that he is not fond of borrowing books from libraries or friends (it “doesn’t hit the spot,” guobulai yin) indicates that, for him, books as property have a class nature. He prefers to hunt down and acquire books in bookshops because of the “desire for possession,” and he “feels the happiest when he has bought several new books and put his mark on each and every one of them.” Unlike an antique collector, he does not take measures to protect or preserve them: “When I read books, I often mark places I think are important, in traditional volumes bound with thread I make circles with my brush, and in Western-bound books I underline with thick red pencil. Of those that I have read, there are not many that are clean from cover to cover.” Still, these books that he spent “ten or twenty percent of his living expenses on” over twenty years are a major landmark in the landscape of his household. When he has bought a new book, he reads the preface and table of contents, and once he knows the parts that might possibly be of interest he immediately places it in his bookcase, reading it only when his interests dictate. “I often compare myself to an ancient emperor, and the books in my bookcase are like my palace ladies lined up in their chambers.”

This “desire to possess” does not characterize all intellectuals; many have achieved great things almost complete relying on others’ libraries, public and private. The desire is peculiar to the type of intellectual Xia Mianzun is describing, and most modern Chinese practitioners of leisure essays share his preeminent concern with maintaining a cultured physical landscape in his domestic living space. Unlike businessmen and clerks, intellectuals have “a
study of their own,” which determines the configuration of their homes, their writing, and manifests the way their living environment and the imaginative cultural space in their works continually define each other.

“Gangtie jiashan” (Ornamental steel mountain) is a meditation on a domestic object, part of this cultured interior that brings history into the domestic landscape most forcefully. The essay draws the reader’s attention to contradictions between tradition (curio collecting) and modernity (bomb shrapnel, history, violence).33 The author discusses a bomb fragment with which he has adorned his desk. He picked it up in the rubble near the half-destroyed Lida Middle School after the January 28 Incident in 1932, when the Japanese bombed Shanghai on the pretext of violent anti-Japanese demonstrations and boycotts: “Corpses could still be seen among the rubble when I was there. That small bomb fragment must have taken part in the murderous work: like the executioner’s sword it carried the reek of blood.”34 He takes the fragment home and puts it on his desk, finding its uneven, shattered edge of the fragment reminiscent of the silhouette of mountains depicted in traditional Chinese paintings: “The surfaces that are broken off cleanly are like the cliffs in Shen Shitian’s Ming dynasty landscape paintings, the irregular surfaces are like the veining effect in Huang Zijiu’s Yuan dynasty landscapes, while the peaks and valleys remind me of Ni Yunlin’s contours.”35 But the narrator can not figure out how best to situate the object in his house. The rough edges threaten to harm the surface of his desk, so he thinks of having a wooden pedestal made for it, as you would an unusual stone or other curio. He decides against this, however, because he does not feel comfortable taking an object symbolic of—in fact actually complicit in—violent Japanese aggression against China, and displaying it like an object of leisurely amusement. So he stores it away until, when he moves house, it is accidentally discarded by a family member. It takes a good deal of time to find it again, an effort that shows the strength of his attachment to it. Finally he decides he has no alternative but to have it mounted on a pedestal and engages a woodworker near the Temple of the City God (Chenghuang miao) to make one for him. Once it is mounted, he feels he has to inscribe something on it as a reminder of its provenance, a problem that he treats in great detail, eventually deciding to write in red lacquer, because it looks like blood, on the upcoming third anniversary of the January 28 Incident. He feels he must inscribe something to prevent any confusion of the object as evidence of brutal violence with its appearance as a lovely miniature mountain, so he must find language that can redeem the object and himself from the ambivalent position between tradition and modernity, between literatus and intellectual . . . but he does not tell the reader what he will write.
Thus, while the text closes with a hopeful affirmation of the power of culture and the written word, the ambivalence is not ultimately resolved.

**Essays from the Fated Hall**

Years before the establishment of Chunhui Middle School, Feng Zikai was a student at the Zhejiang No. 1 Normal College. This was just before the May Fourth movement, when Li Shutong and Xia Mianzun were teaching there. Feng Zikai was supposedly a favorite student of Li and Xia, developing his interest in art and music under Li Shutong’s guidance, while Xia Mianzun helped him learn Japanese and arrange his journey to Japan. Despite diverging life and career trajectories, the three men remained in close contact throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Like *Random Writings from the Bungalow*, Feng’s 1937 *Yuanyuan tang suibi* (Essays from the Fated Hall) reflects this relationship in varying degrees of explicitness.36

Though Feng Zikai’s house at White Horse Lake was called Little Willow Hut, *Essays from the Fated Hall* is named after yet another domicile built several years later in his hometown of Shimenwan in northeastern Zhejiang. Like Xia’s Bungalow, Fated Hall was also the product of the author’s painstaking design and interior decoration endeavors, made possible by a certain amount of success on the literary and art scenes, and yet the author was only able to live there a short time. Essays in this collection do not go into detail about the specific experience of living in Fated Hall, but when they are not philosophical meditations on art or religion, they are often reflections on domestic life and experiences. One can see that the domestic scene for him, particularly the behavior of and his interactions with children, has philosophical import. Thus the domicile deserves to be the name of his essay collection insofar as this work embodies compelling messages about home life and the art of living in general.

The pieces in *Essays from the Fated Hall* exhibit many important characteristics of Feng Zikai’s writing in particular and the modern *xiaopin wen* form in general. The collection has running through it, for example, the romantic themes of the greater beauty of nature undisturbed by human intervention and the purity of children’s hearts and behavior. These themes find emphasis in many other essayists’ work at the time as well, including that of Zhou Zuoren, Bing Xin, and Ye Shengtao. This is seen through Feng Zikai’s particularly artistic eye in the essay “Ziran” (Nature), in which he points out that it is not when the model is posing on the pedestal that she is most beautiful:“[O]nly at break time, when the woman is sitting or lying on the velvet
Feng Zikai’s fascination with children is one of the best-known aspects of his essays and cartoons; his “Huazhan de riji” (Hua Zhan’s diary), “Gei wo de haizimen” (To my children), and “Er nü” (Sons and daughters) are among his most anthologized essays.40 On the level of language, he achieves a conspicuous simplicity and schematic quality, particularly in “Sons and Daughters”: “The next evening, I took the four children—nine-year-old Ah Bao, seven-year-old Ruanruan, five-year-old Zhanzhan, and three-year-old Ah Wei—under the shade of the pagoda tree in the little courtyard.”41 This kind of enumeration (“there are four, named a, b, c and d”; or as Zhanzhan later puts it, “four people are eating four pieces of watermelon”) is common in Feng’s quotations of his children’s speech and manifests his effort to capture a child’s view of the world in his writing and cartoons. With this enumeration goes an aesthetic categorization apparent in his use of colors in the sentence “In the purple color of the sunset, the redness (hongwei) of the hot sun gradually faded away while the blueness (qingwei) of the cool evening gradually thickened.”42 This categorization even takes on an ironic flavor when he characterizes the expressions of the children’s appreciations of the watermelon as “musical,” “poetic,” and finally “prosaic and mathematical.” Even children, then, in proportion to the development of their language skills, undergo a gradual loss of the full appreciation of sensual experience, especially as the subject of human communicative expression: “The healthiest vision is the exclusive property of children; the true quality of things in the world can only be seen clearly and completely by children. Compared with them, the true vision of the heart in me has been clouded and mutilated by worldly wisdom, dust and toil, pathetically handicapped.”43

How is this true vision of the heart manifested, other than in these various reactions to eating watermelon?
I set up a small desk beneath the south window of my little house, with composition paper, letter box, inkstone, ink bottle, glue bottle, clock, and tea tray, all arranged according to a certain order, and I do not like people moving them around; this is a strange habit I acquired while living alone. My movements—the movements of adults—are always cautious, delicate, proper, and civilized. For example, grinding ink, putting down a brush, pouring tea, are all done carefully. That is why the arrangement on the desk never changes; it is never ruined or disturbed. . . . But as soon as my children climb onto my desk, they disturb the order, ruin the composition of my desktop, and damage my supplies. When they pick up my fountain pen and wave it in the air, ink spots spatter the desktop and my clothes; then they stick the tip of the pen in my glue bottle. Prying open the metal collars of my brushes, they knock the teapot off the desk with the back of their hands and it shatters on the floor. . . . Such times try my patience, and I instinctively yell at them, snatch away the things in their hands, ready to slap their little cheeks, but I immediately regret it. My yelling transforms into a smile, I return my supplies to them twofold, and the hand that would slap them stops in mid-air and transforms its motion to a caress. This is because I realize how wrong it is. How absurd of me to expect children to behave like I do! My movements—the movements of adults—are all cautious because the muscles in our bodies and hands have atrophied by the various pressures of reality. Children still enjoy natural and healthy hands and bodies and the unsullied life energy (yuanqi) given to them by heaven. How different they are from the adult cowering, bowing, reciprocal and circumscribed actions we call politeness, like instruments of torture that mutilate our healthy, heaven-endowed bodies. Lively persons are thus gradually transformed into paralyzed cripples with numb arms and legs. Yet the cripples demand that the healthy ones move like them—how absurd!44

Here the distinctive purity and healthiness of children is manifested in their destruction of the order of the author’s desk, in their messiness and disregard for delicate objects. This raw hymn to the innocence of children quickly turns into a bitter indictment of culture, whose care, politeness, and order are characterized as “instruments of torture” that “cripple” healthy limbs (and psychological attitudes, by extension). Feng Zikai is going much farther, then, in the idealization of children than most other authors by depicting as almost divine behavior that any adult reader would abhor. When one imagines the world in which there is no such “crippling,” it could hardly be anything other than anarchy. Significantly, this idealization of disorder, which resonates with the author’s appreciation of natural poses on the part of models as well as the poor and working class, is at a far remove from the atti-
tude of a civilized art of living that informs many leisure essayists, particularly Zhou Zuoren.

Yet even in Essays from the Fated Hall as well as elsewhere, the author’s fastidious arrangement of his desk is counterbalanced by essays in which Feng Zikai’s construction and arrangement of his domestic environment is depicted with discernible pride. Take, for example, the essay “Xian ju” (Living in leisure):

In my spare and threadbare study, I am fond of taking my few pieces of crude furniture and moving them about, even several times a month. Once I have re-arranged the furniture to the point where even the spittoon cannot be moved an inch and the washbasin cannot be rotated another degree, a very apt configuration appears. At such times I sit at my commanding position and look around me on all sides like a lord regarding his domain. Everything is oriented toward me, all fulfilling their obligations for me like a throng of ministers facing the emperor in court, or the myriad stars revolving around Polaris. Even the little nail on the wall seems to be situated in just the right place, an organic member of the whole and fulfilling his specialized duties to me. As I gaze regally at my realm with the bearing of a south-facing king, I can enjoy several days of satisfaction.45

As in Feng’s desk array, we observe the author carefully arranging objects to configure his domestic environment, and though this fastidiously civilized activity is not the object of criticism here as in “Children,” there is nevertheless a clear undercurrent of self-parody in the author’s placement of himself at the center and imagining himself an emperor, not unlike Xia Mianzun in his private library. (The reader familiar with “Sons and Daughters” awaits some healthy disruptive force to upset his complacency.) There is also a sense in this description that, like Xia Mianzun’s insomniac writer in “Lengthy Leisure,” the author has too much time on his hands (thus the title), adding to the sense of parody.

One day, his attention is drawn to his wall clock, whose arabic (literally, “mathematical”) numerals are getting on his nerves: “[Clocks with] roman numerals look fine, but that one in my study has great big arabic numerals on it. I get a headache every time I see the nine numerals—who wants to do math all the time?” He continues:

One day, probably a leisurely day among the leisurely days and months, I invited him [the clock] down from the wall and painted his face sky blue with oil paint, then painted several green willow branches on top, and cut two soaring
swallows out of tough black paper, gluing them onto the tips of the hour and minute hands. Thus it became a round-topped oil painting of two swallows flying amidst willow branches. Every day at 3:20 and 8:30, the composition of the painting is just right, because the swallows are a little off to the side, seemingly chasing each other, thus maintaining the balance of the entire composition. And it is quite easy to figure out the time of day without the numbers.46

While it is possible to discern a degree of self-parody in Feng Zikai’s lording it over the furniture in his study, consistent with his desk-straightening, here the tone is one of unmistakable pride in transforming a necessary but ugly object into a work of art. A similar pride of craftsmanship is exhibited in Feng’s contribution to the special issue of Taibai magazine devoted to a discussion of the xiaopin wen and cartoons.47 In such a collection, one would expect a prominent cartoonist, and by then relatively prolific essayist, like Feng Zikai to contribute a uniquely knowledgeable perspective. But Feng claims to be unable to address the topics and, on the advice of a student, decides instead to tell the story of how he developed his own peculiar homemade sketchbook. In the process he reveals much about his work methods and values. The description of his homemade apparatus is brief and left to the end; the bulk of the essay is devoted to the detailed description of his futile attempts to use the often expensive versions supposedly designed for the purpose.

A text like Feng’s is significant not because it draws attention to leisure per se, but rather how the individual fills his leisure—constructively, creatively, governed by a spirit of improvement, beauty, and even humor. It is a matter of quality of life, which under the conditions of industrial modernity could be said to be in a state of crisis across many classes, not just the working classes. The discourse of social realism and revolution that at some point began to enjoy privileged status in modern Chinese literary culture sorely neglected this issue, except in the negative sense of pointing out the lack of minimal humanity accorded the working classes and the poor. The forces of social transformation stigmatized leisure and associated it exclusively with the upper classes, so that the cause of the revolution implied its elimination. What kind of world would the revolution bring if there was no time for leisure? Even if there is time, how would the working classes spend their free hours in the absence of a positive, constructive discourse on the quality of life?

After its counteraesthetic exploration of the natural and meditations on children as a critique of culture and adulthood, the third prominent characteristic in Essays from the Fated Hall is the tension between leisure and aes-
thetic pleasure on the one hand, and the sober reminder of the cosmic interconnectedness of all things on the other. The first essay in the collection, “Jian wang” (Cutting the net) forcefully introduces this theme. The text begins with the author’s uncle returning from Great World (Da shijie) amusement center, exhausted but fulfilled, marveling at how diverse and numerous the distractions are in Shanghai, but reflecting on the money he spent spoils his mood. The starting point is a leisure pastime, but what is being remembered is its connectedness to the economy, which spoils the illusion of a break from toil and trouble that one strives for in one’s leisure.

“Cutting the Net” at first sounds very Marxist, with its critique of how price or money taints the “meaning” of everything, but when the author compares enjoying a pot of tea without thinking about the price, to looking at a beggar without thinking that he wants money, or looking at a field of wheat and not thinking it will ultimately produce bread—a habit of thought the author calls “cutting” things out of the “net” that connects them all—one realizes that the author yearns for a quasireligious aestheticism, by which things can be enjoyed in their purest aspect without regard for their connectedness to “life,” the economy, or other things.

What is of interest here, beyond the leisure pastime as starting point, is the essay’s spatial point of departure—the uncle’s return home, as he puts his two bags of chestnuts on the table, and plops down in the wicker chair. There is no more vivid indication of place anywhere in the rest of the essay. The uncle makes the point about money, and this, in the fictionalized narrative structure, leads the author to meditate on situations that generate a similar feeling: how artistically arresting images of a beggar or fields of grain are until one recalls their connection to money. He then sums up their common burden of materiality in the image of a net, a particularly apt image because things large and small, abstract and concrete, all seem to be connected with one another inextricably and in often complex ways. We normally cannot conceive of connection except through physical tethering as with a string or rope, or some abstract version suggested by such an image. A net presents innumerable other nodes, and presumably material and immaterial phenomena close by a primary object are also affected by any pulling on that object, and they in turn affect infinite numbers of further objects. This train of thought is energized by frustration at the connectedness of things, which seems to sully their purity, and yet by citing numerous examples the author only reinforces the connectedness of things. The final sentence seeks a solution in religion and art, which the author hopes to use as scissors to cut the net; but this leaves the reader wondering why the author resents the net and cannot come to terms with it.
In a different essay, “Yanmian” (Faces), Feng makes an artistic attempt to “cut the net”—to his regret, it would seem:

Among the five features of the face, the ears play no role in expression. I recall an author once saying that the ear is most revealing of man’s bestial side. Once I took a large piece of paper, cut a small hole in the middle, and fitted it over a friend’s ear so I could study what the ear looked like in isolation. After a while it didn’t look like an ear to me anymore, and it began to frighten me. This is probably because the ear is usually hidden behind the temple hair and never steps onto the stage of facial expression.48

Here, though clearly not appreciative of the ear, Feng is only demonstrating that the features of the human face play off each other and only look attractive as part of an organic whole. His method, however, is both artistic and suggestive of the do-it-yourself attitude with which he built and gardened his Fated Hall, rearranged his furniture, and transformed his wall clock.

The contradiction here comes out more blatantly in his longer essay “Yiershi” (Memories of my childhood). Like “Sons and Daughters,” the lyrical structure of this meditation is simply and schematically structured: three separate iterative passages describe treasured activities of his childhood that Feng now abhors because of his Buddhist belief in preserving the life of sentient beings. Each of the three sections of the essay describes a lingering memory about Feng’s childhood, each of which, as he complains, involved the taking of innocent life. The message is dogmatic, but it is balanced, even challenged, by the palpable pleasure, vividly expressed, that the young Feng Zikai derived from raising silkworms with his grandmother, eating crabs with his father, and fishing with his friend Wang. It is an essay about these people too, but they stand in the wings as the description of material pleasure takes center stage. The essay is thus held together by the contradiction between the author’s adult knowledge of the preciousness of all forms of life and his infectious childhood pleasure. This can be linked to Feng’s excessive, even transgressive fascination with childhood in other essays.

The first vignette relates a memory of his grandmother’s silkworm raising when Feng was five or six years old; this was an activity that pleasantly gave added structure and a sense of anticipation to the spring season. As the author relates it, he realized later that his grandmother—“a woman who knew how to enjoy herself and was full of the zest for life”—was not raising silkworms for economic reasons, but rather as a kind of seasonal ritual. This family ritual was worked out in the substantial rearrangement of the house; that is, in order to feed the silkworms, frames were set up in the courtyard,
along whose beams the children enjoyed walking. From the child’s point of view, and apparently from the grandmother’s as well, this ritual rearrangement of the domestic space, with its drama of life and growth—not to mention the special treats brought out for the temporary help—was one of the things that made life worthwhile. While this activity should belong to the kind of learned human culture that Feng Zikai despises in his essays extolling the purity of children, it instead provided great pleasure.

The second section recalls Feng’s pleasure at eating crab with his father, who was apparently very fond of the humble delicacy: “On the octagonal table was an oil lamp, a red clay wine pot, the shard of a broken bowl for holding hot dried tofu, a water pipe, a book, and an old cat sitting primly at the table’s edge—this image is deeply imprinted in my mind, so that even today it clearly floats up into my consciousness.”49 This reads like a Feng Zikai cartoon; he creates the mood with a scene composed of a simple array of objects, in this case made elaborate by their variety. Again he effects a certain seasonal mood, autumn in this case, by the habitual ritual practices of his father. Combined with the delicious flavor of the crab, particularly adored by the children, this comes across in memory as well as at the time as a fulfilling experience of life’s pleasure. The author describes in detail his father’s elaborate and practiced technique for extracting all of the crab flesh:

Father said eating crab is an elegant thing, only insiders know the technique. First break the legs, then open the carapace . . . how to clean out the meat in their fists. How to pick all the meat out of the belly . . . the crab claw-tips can be used to pick out the meat . . . the bones in the crab’s pincers can be assembled into a fine butterfly. . . . Father was an expert at eating crab and could clean one out completely.50

Here again the object of reminiscence—the seasonal enjoyment of crab—is associated inextricably with a person, in this case the author’s father; the narration stops with the father’s death, as if the deaths of the grandmother and father put a stop to raising silkworms and eating crab, respectively.

The third item, the author reminiscing about fishing with his friend at the age of 12 or 13, goes into a little more detail. It recalls lines of poetry that give fishing the air of high culture in China and use fishing as a metaphor for one’s hometown.51 Each of the other two items is also presented as something the ancient poets had sung the praises of, if only to enhance the irony of Feng’s harangue about the sinfulness of killing living beings at the end of each section. He even goes as far as to compare all the killing of creatures in his childhood to the May Thirtieth killings of students and other demonstrators.
One cannot come away from *Essays from the Fated Hall* without the feeling that it presents a series of didactic messages. While it would be tempting to say that the *xiaopin wen* form is not supposed to be didactic, one cannot say that it does not carry a message, or that if a piece does not seem to have any message, we might not like it as much. Zhou Zuoren's essays can be boiled down to their messages, but there is a lot more between what he actually writes and the messages he conveys than we see in Feng Zikai. This can be traced to the White Horse Lake group's general conviction that writing redeems itself only in the service of a larger life mission, while the Threads of Conversation group seemed to view their essayistic wanderings as ends in themselves or pure elaborations of the elegant way—the fine crab-eating technique without the sermonizing about sentient beings. Feng Zikai's essays, like his cartoons, hover between the didactic and the vivid observation of the accidentally beautiful.

**Zhu Ziqing**

Zhu Ziqing is the most influential of all modern Chinese essayists. His connection to the White Horse Lake group does not define his identity, but like the others who taught at Chunhui Middle School, he shared their experience of teaching in different schools around Zhejiang before arriving at Chunhui. Zhu went to visit Chunhui Middle School in March of 1924 for a month, and the following year he accepted Xia Mianzun's invitation to teach there. He moved his family into a lakeside cottage and became a member of the Chunhui neighborhood. Zhu's arrival at Chunhui was the latest, and when the backbone members of the faculty left after the spring recess of 1925 because of a dispute with the administration—some to set up the Lida School in Shanghai—this left Zhu Ziqing the only Chinese language arts teacher at Chunhui for the remainder of the spring term. The following fall he too would leave to take up a position as professor of Chinese at Tsinghua University.\(^{52}\)

In his essays of the 1920s Zhu Ziqing actually shows little interest in, and even some contempt for, the textures and pleasures of domestic life. His “Er nü” (Sons and daughters) is clearly different than Feng Zikai’s essay of the same title in this respect. Though he wants to talk about some of the lovable gestures and habits of his children, what they mostly cause him is inexpressible suffering. The passage with the most vivid sense of the everyday describes the chaotic scene at mealtime:

> Have you read Lu Xun’s “A Happy Family”? We are just that kind of “happy family”! Every day lunch and dinner are like the daily tides. First the kids come
snooping around the kitchen and the dining room by turns, urging my wife or me to issue the order to “put out the meal”! Hurried and chaotic footsteps mixed with laughter and shouting come at us in waves until the order is issued. One after another they go running and yelling to transmit the order to the servants in the kitchen, then immediately return to fight over seats. One says, “I’m sitting here!” Another says “Eldest Brother won’t let me sit here!” But Eldest Brother says “Little Sister hit me!” I try to mediate, saying nice things. But sometimes they are stubborn, sometimes I am impatient, and I scold them. When scolding doesn’t work, I am forced to strike them hard. Then after some crying, they sit down and the scene is brought to a conclusion. But then you want a big bowl and he wants a little bowl, you said red chopsticks are best, and he says black. This one wants rice, that one wants porridge, tea here, soup there, fish and meat; I want tofu, I want radishes; you say he’s got more to eat, he says you got the choicest morsels. My wife typically consoles them, but this clearly takes too long. I am a short-tempered man, how can I wait? Needless to say, I use the old method to immediately subdue them; although there is crying, it isn’t long before they dry their eyes and pick up their rice bowls. After we finish, they climb off their stools, and the rice grains on the table, the sauces, bones, and dregs, not to mention the crisscrossed chopsticks and slanted spoons, look like a model for a colorful map.53

The chaos described here is similar to that of Feng Zikai’s children messing up his desk, but the author’s attitude is different. Zhu Ziqing wrote elsewhere of how, when his children were still small and they would fuss and fight around their mother, he would use violence to deal with them: “My wife said to me, ‘You were so coldhearted back then!’ But my pain was also real. I once wrote to [Ye] Shengtao, telling him I could not stand the torture my children inflicted on me, and sometimes I thought it would be better to kill myself. These were words said in the heat of the moment, but I really did have such feelings.”54 By the end of the essay, the author states that it was only after years of experience and interaction with friends such as Yu Pingbo, Ye Shengtao, and Xia Mianzun that he gradually came to realize how to be a good father: “The essays Zikai wrote for Huazhan are truly ‘the amiable teachings of the benevolent.’ Shengtao also often worries about his children: when they graduate from elementary school, what middle school will they go to? He has said such things to me two or three times. I feel so ashamed next to them!”55

Compared to homely writings like these, Zhu Ziqing’s most well-known essays are far more consciously artistic constructions of misty dreamlike aesthetic worlds or moods that seem at a far remove from the mundane annoyances of domestic existence. Yang Pu’s psychoanalytical exploration of Zhu
Ziqing’s “Hetang yuese” (translated by David Pollard as “Lotus Pond by Moonlight”\textsuperscript{56}) and other essays makes an effort to explain that Zhu Ziqing, by constructing an aesthetic paradise with a beautiful goddess archetype at its core, actually may have been fulfilling certain psychological desires, since he was apparently not happy with his marriage or family life.\textsuperscript{57} The essay that most plainly presents his idealized image of the archetypal woman, “Nüren” (Woman), was written while Zhu was living at White Horse Lake.\textsuperscript{58}

“The Sound of Oars and Glow of Lamps on the Qinhuai River,” companion to the essay of the same title by Yu Pingbo discussed in the previous chapter, is one of Zhu’s most famous. Like Yu’s version, it is longer than usual for a lyrical essay, perhaps indicating a heightened seriousness of purpose. For those widely read in modern Chinese literature this seriousness of purpose may not be immediately evident in a narrative of an evening’s pleasure boat excursion on the Qinhuai River. But the tensions that drive the text, whose imagery centers on the senses, female beauty, and pleasure, resonate deeply with doubts and ambivalence about Chinese cultural identity in the face of modernity and Western culture that haunts much fiction, poetry and drama of the period. Zhu’s piece, and Yu’s with it, in this sense, are palpably modernist. Written very much in the familiar tradition of leisure prose, the smooth picture cracks along fault-lines of modern anxiety: obsessive use of female body imagery to describe the landscape, self-consciousness and unpleasant moral struggle in dealing with singing girls, and an imagined nostalgia generated when a richly significant place is perceived to be utterly different from its attractive reputation.

That being said, the essays Zhu Ziqing wrote about his experience living at White Horse Lake show an intersection between the texture of everyday life and beautiful dreams of desire. I have mentioned Zhu Ziqing’s praise for the collegial interaction and social life of the White Horse Lake group, particularly the central role played by Xia Mianzun. His essay “Chunhui de yi yue” (One month at Chunhui), published in April of 1924 in issue 27 of the school magazine, \textit{Chunhui}, expresses Zhu’s overall impression of the place after his month-long visit there.\textsuperscript{59} After describing the White Horse Lake environs with a technique similar to that used in “Lotus Pond by Moonlight,” he describes three “gifts” Chunhui Middle School has given him. The first is the beauty of the natural surroundings and the carefully wrought campus: “. . . the buildings in the campus, their style and arrangement are of course tasteful, but even among the furnishings within them, there is not one that does not display an ingenious craftsmanship, and none shows traces of shoddy workmanship. In the evening when I went to visit the houses of a few colleagues, calligraphy and paintings hung on the walls, and the interiors
were arranged just so, making them a pleasure to spend time in. This feeling is just the same throughout the campus buildings and natural surroundings. The second gift is the lack of distance between colleagues, teachers, and students, the sincerity of their natural and intimate interaction and communication: “In the course of this month, although I was actually only at Chunhui for fifteen days (I was also teaching courses at the No. 4 Middle School in Ningbo), I have come to feel very close to everyone, because here there really are no barriers. I could not see any boundaries, and so I did not need to be on my guard or to have misgivings; I could just do what I liked. This is freedom.” The last gift is the special kind of leisure one can only enjoy at a far remove from the interference and temptations of the urban environment: “Speaking for myself, I greatly enjoy life in the country, and even more enjoy country life in this place. I am a person who grew up in the narrow spaces and cages of the city, and I needed a remedy for this monotonous life. At the moment I live in a clamorous metropolis, and I need a leisurely state of mind to balance it. I love the leisure of Chunhui! A life of leisure is the third gift Chunhui has bestowed on me!”

In this way, Zhu Ziqing partially resolves the tension between sensual pleasure and morality raised in “The Sound of Oars and Glow of Lamps on the Qinhuai River.” At least on the level of the text, Chunhui Middle School realized the kind of dreamlike environment the author had written about before, and because it was not the annoying environment of the city, it gave him that much more freedom to create this state of mind. Where Feng Zikai found deeper meaning precisely in his family life, this did not resolve the conflict between sensory pleasures and religious belief. His essays are like his cartoons in that they can only be a salute to certain exquisite moments of everyday life, and however he might try, they cannot be raised to a higher religious plane. Xia Mianzun was different again in that the leisurely state of mind he was able to achieve on the shores of White Horse Lake could not satisfy his desire to affirm a special status for the intellectual class in modern society.

The essays of these writers are all entangled in contradictions between sensual experience and morality. The connections between cultural capital, quality of life, and leisure are the common concerns of these essayists, all of whom happened to be schoolteachers. It was only the enterprise of education that allowed this beautiful rural environment to manifest its value to modern social life. But because of the campus controversy in the spring of 1925 and the subsequent scattering of this community of writers, the unusual cultural space they created at White Horse Lake was destined to be short-lived. For years later, though, as Xia Mianzun observed, their writing practice never stopped showing the meaning of this experience to their artistic pursuits and...
in their philosophy of life. Many of these writers would reappear in the debate over the *xiaopin wen* more than ten years after their departure from Chun-hui, aligning themselves with the most utilitarian view of the informal essay’s function and value.

More than simply defining the role of writing in the education and social being of modern men and women, the White Horse Lake group’s composition primers promoted a particular style or attitude that is typical of moderately leftist educationists. No matter how much attention and value they place on the appreciation of beauty and the cultivation of vivid literary technique and rhetoric, their view of writing is at its base utilitarian. The pedagogue’s patient insistence on clarity and literary craftsmanship may be helpful for students struggling with the difficulties of composition, but it also harbors an ideological intolerance for apathy, ambivalence, and bohemianism that would later evolve into the dogmatic restriction of writers under the Communist regime in the Yan’an period and through the early decades of the People’s Republic of China. Though not the most politically radical among cultural figures, members of the White Horse Lake group did their best to stay the course and keep faith with the Chinese Communist Party, sometimes with tragic results.
This word “humor” has over ten different definitions in the dictionary. Let’s put the dictionary down and just chat about it.
—Lao She, “Discussion of Humor,” *Cosmic Wind*

The pipe draws wisdom from the lips of the philosopher, and shuts up the mouth of the foolish; it generates a style of conversation contemplative, thoughtful, benevolent, and unaffected.
—William Makepeace Thackeray, *Sketches and Travels in London*

During the 1920s, when the White Horse Lake group were first writing essays and applying principles they had developed to compositional instruction, and *Threads of Conversation* was virtually the only publication devoted to literary prose, essayists in China were not generally considered as belonging to different schools. The achievements of the genre were credited to all those who made an impact through their essays in the early years of the development of New Literature. Hu Shi, Bing Xin, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Yu Pingbo, Zhu Ziqing, Xia Mianzun, and Liu Bannong—writers from across the political and literary spectrum—were heralded as influential practitioners of a form that had made perhaps the most impressive strides of any modern genre in the first decade after the May Fourth movement. Though Zhou Zuoren was already under attack in the late 1920s for his relatively extreme position of social and historical disengagement, and readers and critics began to perceive differences between individual writers in style and mode, these writers were all widely read and had no reason to suppose their relationship with one another or anyone else was adversarial. This spirit of unity in diversity was particularly evident in *Threads of Conversation*, as we have seen. However, the departure of many progres-
sive intellectuals from Beijing in 1927 to escape political persecution, the Nationalist Party’s purge of Communists in the same year, the dissolution of virtually all leftist literary organizations and publications, the resulting fragmentation of the literary scene, and subsequent recuperation of literary leftism under the League of Leftwing Writers from 1930, cumulatively had the effect of isolating and stigmatizing certain kinds of essay writing. This led to a state of affairs in which groups and styles of essayists became more aware of themselves and their differences from others. Whatever their position in the literary field, editors, critics, and members of these groups increasingly defined themselves in contrast to others. Zhou Zuoren, beyond the salon of friends he had about him in the 1920s, drew an increasing cohort of adherents among the younger generation, and so in the early 1930s one could begin to conceive of Zhou’s “mild” (pingdan) mode of essay writing as a modern tradition one could adhere to or resist. The 1930s, moreover, was a heyday for the publishing industry. The variety and quality of literary publications greatly increased over those of the 1920s and, for some, magazines continued to be a way to define an aesthetic or get a message across, while for others, literary magazines became more diverse and professionalized than ever before.

**Lin Yutang and His Magazines**

Lin Yutang is one of those modern cultural figures who had a specific cultural agenda and was able to see it through largely through publishing enterprises. As Qian Suoqiao’s dissertation on the Analects group shows, Lin Yutang’s project, broadly speaking a liberal humanist one, began in the English-language magazine *The China Critic* (1928–1945), and in particular his column “The Little Critic,” which was later published in a series of books under the same title. Broadly speaking, Lin Yutang can be identified with what in English-language scholarship is called the Anglo-American group, in which Hu Shi was a central figure. The complexity of his connections can be gathered from the following quotation from an unpublished article by Qian Suoqiao:

> Because of his connection with Yusi members in the 1920s in Beijing, Lin was able to invite these old friends to contribute to his new journals. These include Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Yu Dafu, [Sun] Fuyuan, and so on. One of the most frequent contributors at this time was Zhou Zuoren, accompanied by his so-called Jingpai (Beijing School) group of writers. On the other hand, as a
St. John’s graduate and with an MA from Harvard and PhD from Leipzig, Lin had wide connections with a group of Western-trained elites in Shanghai at this time. Regular contributors in this group include Shao Xunmei, Pan Guangdan, Quan Zenggu, Li Qingya, Zhang Yiping, Zhang Kebiao, Lin Yu, and others. Some of them were members of the Xinyue group and most of them can be considered as Haipai (Shanghai School) writers at large.3

Confusing as this mixture of “Beijing School” and “Shanghai School” with remnants of the Crescent Moon society might seem, two points can be made to simplify this network of connections. First, though Lin spiritually aligned himself with Zhou Zuoren and the group around him, he functioned independently of them and in effect initiated his own group. This appears to have been a matter of academic connections. Zhou’s group is referred to as the Beijing school (Jingpai) insofar as they maintained close connections with academic departments in universities in Beijing, mainly Peking University and Tsinghua University. Lin, on the other hand, was a graduate of a Shanghai institution (St. John’s University) and developed his base of operations there after returning from graduate studies in the United States and Germany, making him part of what is now more often called the Haipai or Shanghai school.4

Second, while the older members of the Analects cohort were friends of Lin’s from the Threads of Conversation days who resided in Shanghai, and Li Qingya studied in Shanghai at Fudan before doing his studies in France, many of the important younger figures were specifically English-language educated figures from Shanghai, or Tsinghua graduates now working there. Huang Jiayin and Huang Jiade, for example, as well as Shao Xunmei, were all 1920s graduates of St. John’s University.

The China Critic was a news commentary weekly whose editorial board and principal contributors were Chinese academics who had studied in the United States or England. The managing editor was a professor of English, H. H. Chang (Zhang Xinhai, 1898–1972), and later the economist Dakuin K. Lieu (Liu Dajun, 1891–1962) took over. Each issue featured a large section of brief editorial reactions to a variety of local, national, and global events, feature articles by contributing editors, outside (sometimes non-Chinese) contributors, and by notable Chinese like Hu Shi and Cai Yuanpei, translated into English by the editors. There was also a selection of book reviews in every issue, usually edited by Quentin Pan (Guangdan). The rhetoric of the commentary suggests the intended readership was foreign residents of Shanghai and other large Chinese cities, and the Anglophone Chinese with whom they worked and interacted, although there may have been a readership outside...
China as well. Though Lin Yutang’s name begins to appear among the contributing editors in 1928, there were few if any articles by him before the launch of his column “The Little Critic” on July 3, 1930. Unlike the rest of the magazine, “The Little Critic” strove for wit (if not always humor) in its short discussions of current events and the author’s personal observations. The initiation of “The Little Critic” also coincided with the first publication of cartoons in *The China Critic*, which were selected from Chinese newspapers and magazines of the time. *The China Critic* lasted for many more years, but “The Little Critic” continued for only a year or so, and was taken over by Quentin Pan for a few issues in 1931 before it was phased out.

It is difficult to say what the relationship was between Lin Yutang’s English-language publications and his Chinese writings, but it was not until 1932 that he began, with some of his associates from *The China Critic*, to publish a Chinese-language humor magazine. That magazine, *Lunyu banyuekan*, or *The Analects Fortnightly*, was deliberately and playfully named after Confucius’ ancient classic of moral and political philosophy. This group around Lin Yutang included various disparate elements: some were colleagues and friends not as well known as Lin Yutang who could be said to have formed the backbone of *The Analects*: Quan Zenggu, Pan Guangdan, Li Qingya, and Zhang Kebiao. This is essentially the initial salon that Lin jokingly discusses below in the “Origination.” Li Qingya (1884–1969) was one of the elder members of the group (about one year older than Lin). He hailed from Xiangyin, Hunan, and studied at Fudan University in 1907, going on to a university in Belgium to study science and technology, as well as French literature. Returning to China in 1913, Li taught in various schools in Hunan in the early years of the Republic. He took an administrative job (*chuzhang*) in the Peking-Hankow Railway in 1927, and served as the principal of the Tongji University Affiliated Middle School beginning in 1929, and later assumed professorships at a number of universities.

Quan Zenggu (T. K. Chuan, 1903–1984) graduated from Tsinghua College in 1923. He studied at Stanford University, receiving a bachelor’s degree in 1925, and a master of arts from Harvard in 1927. After returning to China, Quan served as a professor at a number of different universities, and he was a co-editor of *The China Critic*. Quan became editor of *The Analects* in 1933, and of *T’ien hsia Monthly* in 1935. There were younger Beijing-educated members at the core of the group. One was Xu Xu (1908–1980), from Ciqi, Zhejiang, who entered Peking University’s philosophy department in 1931. After completing his bachelor’s degree, Xu pursued graduate studies in the psychology department. He became *Analects* editor in 1933, edited *This Human World* in 1934, and in 1936 co-edited *Heaven, Earth, and Man*. Well-
known authors such as Shao Xunmei, Yu Dafu, Xie Bingying, and Lao She, whether because of friendship or similar inclinations, also frequently contributed to Lin Yutang’s magazines.

In addition to *The Analects Fortnightly*, Lin Yutang launched two other important magazines. *This Human World* was ostensibly devoted to the *xiaopin wen* style informal essay, both traditional and contemporary. *Cosmic Wind*, on the other hand, continued *The Analects Fortnightly* tradition of variety and amusing social commentary, in addition to serving as a major literary magazine. *Cosmic Wind*, like *The Analects Fortnightly*, carried writings in all genres and serialized many important works of modern Chinese literature, including Lao She’s *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Camel Xiangzi), Xie Bingying’s *Yige nübing zizhuan* (Diary of a woman soldier), Zhou Zuoren’s *Fengyu tan* (Chats in wind and rain) and Feng Zikai’s *Essays from the Fated Hall*, all in 1936. *Cosmic Wind* managed to continue publication throughout the war, moving from one city to another in the Nationalist-controlled areas, and the tradition of Analects group publications continued in occupied Shanghai as well, in the essay journals *Ancient and Modern*, *Yijing* (Classic of leisure, 1936–1937), *Chats in the Wind and Rain*, *Yuzhou feng yikan* (Cosmic Wind II, 1939–1941), *Ren shi jian* (In this human world, 1939–1942), *Heaven, Earth, and Man*, and others.

**Transliterating Humor**

What kinds of writing characterized this group? To begin with, one common practice of the Analects group might be called “creative transliteration.” Since the group was generally Chinese-English bilingual, this usually meant the unorthodox transliteration of English words into Chinese words whose meaning added resonances that were humorous to readers who understood both languages. In those days, foreign words were already beginning to be transliterated systematically into Chinese characters that are either rare or exclusively used for transliteration purposes. But Lin Yutang’s group would use much more common Chinese characters with the same sound to generate new meanings.

For example, in one essay for *Cosmic Wind* comparing the Chinese and Western new year celebrations, Lao She renders “Happy New Year” as *hai pa niu er* (afraid you’re going to twist my ear). Another typical case is the caption to an illustration for *The Analects Fortnightly*, which reads “*Jian tou man*” in Mandarin. It depicts a man of indefinite ethnicity in snappy Western evening wear, hair middle-parted and slicked down along his long, pointed...
head, stiff collar and black tie, smoking a cigarette in a holder from which swirls a plume of smoke. His eyes are closed as if savoring a drag he has just taken, and there is no indication of anyone else around, even though he seems to be dressed for a social occasion. The Chinese characters literally mean “pointy-headed slow,” but their pronunciation suggests the English word “gentleman.” The significance of the “pointy-headed” part is obvious enough, but “slow” is not so clear. Standard transliteration does not use this character for the sound “man,” so the cartoonist could be poking fun at the subject, implying that the slick dandy is not “quick” or sharp. Or the “slow” might be related to the cigarette and closed eyes, suggesting the unhurried, leisurely attitude of the “gentleman,” represented by his pausing to capture a thought, or simply enjoy the sensation of a smoke.

The Chinese caption, in short, is as much a creative act as the cartoon itself. The cartoonist knows that the English word “gentleman” does not have a precise Chinese equivalent. The Chinese terms junzi—in the ancient Confucian sense, a good man whose literacy also guaranteed that he is of high social status—and shenshi—more neutral, but still culturally marked, a member of a landowning family who would be at the top of the local social structure—are both usually translated as “gentleman,” but neither comes close to the foppish twentieth-century image depicted in the cartoon. By creating a Chinese neologism, the cartoonist is both defining a type and associating it with overt Euro-American influence.

Such illustrations, or cartoons, were an integral part of The Analects Fortnightly and Cosmic Wind. The Analects Fortnightly, in fact, differed from most essay magazines in its copious use of cartoons. In the 1930s publishing industry, illustrations were an important feature in books and other periodicals, but rarely appeared in literary magazines. Dongfang zazhi had always featured illustrations that provided content-centered information. Photography enabled magazines so inclined, like Liangyou huabao (Young companion pictorial), to become vehicles for their images. The political cartoon was also alive and had run in papers like Jingbao (The crystal) since the 1920s. To the best of my knowledge, however, the Analects group was the first to feature foreign and domestic cartoons as a specialty. Early issues of The Analects Fortnightly borrowed cartoons from foreign magazines and books, especially from recent issues of the British humor magazines The Humorist and Punch. These British cartoons tended to satirize middle- or upper-middle-class domestic life, often depicting situations in which a well-meaning but inept housewife is caught burning dinner or making trouble by gossiping with her friends, suggesting a patriarchal bias and an apparent desire on the part of editors and readership to model themselves on the droll bourgeois European man of the house.
Although they were scattered throughout the pages of the magazine, *The Analects*’ table of contents listed *katun* (cartoons) together, as though they belonged to a special department. By the early 1930s, the term *manhua*, from the Japanese *manga*, was already gaining currency in China, thanks especially to the enthusiastic reception of Feng Zikai’s brush cartooning. The Analects group, however, used the much more orthographically jarring characters *katun*, one of their particularly inventive transliterations. In addition to being used phonetically, the character *ka* can mean “stuck”; *tun* means “to swallow,” and by putting them together, the Chinese suggests swallowing (or not being able to) something that is stuck in the throat.

The most important transliteration of all, though, is the term *youmo*, after the English word “humor,” a term coined by Lin Yutang that continues to enjoy widespread use. Once Lin Yutang’s magazines had met with a measure of success, they began to be attacked on charges of frivolity and amusement as if those were out of step with the times. If Zhou Zuoren promoted an aesthetics of *bense* (original color) and *quwei* (fascination) that he perceived in late imperial *xiaopin wen*, Lin Yutang wished to do the same, but add to it a new and important component he called *youmo*. The term points to levity, but Lin was quite serious about it, and felt it met the needs of contemporary writing. Perhaps in response to the charge of frivolity and to debates about the meaning of *youmo*, in 1935 Lin republished in *The Analects Fortnightly* excerpts of what he described as his two earliest articles on the subject.¹³ Both had originally been published in the *Beijing Morning News Supplement* in 1924, ten years before the backlash against Lin’s essay magazines.

The first of his articles asserts that Chinese do not lack a sense of humor, but they are unable to deploy it in literary writing. For some reason, in China, seriousness and humor have been strictly separated, so that serious discussions are too serious, and funny things are invariably undignified. The implication here is that the proper use of humor involves a mixture of comedy and seriousness that is not, in the end, undignified: “Because righteousness and morality are always discussed in too serious a manner, chilling one to distraction, the armchair of reason and philosophy is uncomfortable to sit in. Sometimes one wants to take off one’s false mask and let the repressed ‘natural person’ come out and enjoy himself, so as to avoid the withering of the nerves or the onset of mental illness.”¹⁴ When Chen Duxiu criticizes conservative literati, he is lacking in humor. In contrast, “The gentlemen writing in the ‘Random Thoughts’ columns recently are much better, but signing *xiaopin wen* with pen names is not very original. If you make jokes under a pen name like ‘Lu Xun,’ that’s an old Chinese tradition, but if only you make elegant jokes on behalf of society under the dignified name of Professor Zhou of
Peking University, would that be in line with the Western sense of ‘humor’ (there’s no shame in humor and to use it involves no disgrace).” While this may seem a small matter, it illustrates Lin’s point well: He is criticizing Lu Xun for using a pen name because Lu Xun thinks it is undignified to sign his real name to a facetious text.

In this first article, though, Lin deliberately refrains from defining humor: “as to what kind of thing humor is, I think it would be preferable to be a bit mysterious here and not give it away.” The motivation for writing the second article was that ensuing discussions convinced Lin that it was not fair to readers—or to humor—for him to have been so vague. Though he repeats the lines here that “Those who understand it (the initiated) know it as soon as they read it, while those who don’t get it will not understand what is being said even if you strike their palms one hundred times.” He feels that pulling out Western books on the theory of humor would turn readers away, though he does cite Bergson, George Meredith’s *Essay on the Idea of Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit*, Theodor Lipps’ *Komik und Humor*, and Freud’s *Der Witz*. Lin here explores humor in the form of answers to questions his previous article raised. The first of these addresses the issue of transliteration: “The two characters youmo are nothing more than a transliteration that I thought of while writing. I did not choose it after careful consideration and a lengthy selection process, or have some profound idea behind it. Humor cannot be translated as xiaohua [joke] and is not entirely the same as huixie [jocular] or huaji [funny]. If one had to translate its meaning, one perhaps could render it fengqu, xiequ, or huixie fengge.” Lin prefers to transliterate it, though, because it is a more “direct” approach and less likely to engender misunderstandings. One could use a number of other transliterations, since for phonetic purposes, the meaning of the characters is not important. Since he has chosen the specific characters youmo, however, Lin explains that one could say that a good humorist must have a “hidden” (you) sense of humor, while someone good at appreciating humor appreciates it “silently” (mo) in his heart; one has a feeling of not being able to communicate it to others, and this distinguishes it sharply from the crude, outgoing entertainment of a joke. “The more ‘hidden’ and ‘silent’ humor is, the more exquisite it is.”

The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* gives two basic meanings for “humour.” The first set of meanings deals with the vital fluids of plants and animals in classical Greek medical theory (Galen, for example); in humans, they were comprised of blood, choler, melancholy, and phlegm. The second set of meanings has to do with mental states or dispositions, which, in earlier usage, were associated with these fluids. Thus in Western culture at least, tem-
perament and disposition were for a long time associated with physical material in the body.

While Galen’s model is alien to traditional Chinese thought, the general sense of “humor” is not entirely unlike the idea of qi, which, though not differentiated in type, was thought to be a material basis for psychic energy and temperament. Corollary to this second set of meanings is the modern sense of “humor,” given as the very last definition, of “A quality of action, speech, etc., which causes amusement; facetiousness, comicality; (more fully sense of humour) the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is ludicrous or amusing; a sense of the ludicrous or amusing.”

Lao She (1899–1966) also had much to say about humor. Though he was apparently never an editor of one of the Analects group’s magazines, he must be counted as one of the group’s most prominent regular contributors. Modern Chinese literary history tends to frame Lao She as a novelist. Chinese scholarship tends to put more emphasis on the Beijing localism of Rickshaw, Teahouse, and Four Generations under One Roof, while in addition to Rickshaw, Western scholars focus more on his other novels, such as The Two Mas, Master Zhao Says, and Heavensent. Either way, we see Lao She through his larger projects and define his aesthetic in terms of his imaginative creations. If we look at his writing in the mid-to-late-1930s, however, Lao She comes across as a devoted humorist in the cast of Mark Twain or Stephen Leacock. Considering the volume of short humorous pieces he was producing weekly between 1934 and 1936, it is hard to imagine where Lao She found time to write his novels.

Most of Lao She’s humorous pieces for The Analects Fortnightly, Cosmic Wind, and This Human World are fictional, what you might call “funny stories.” They are not xiaopin wen in the sense of being a certain kind of prose essay. One could call them xiaopin wen, but it would be closer to the modern sense of xiaopin as a theatrical skit—a “bit.” This is because they are entirely narrative and apparently fabricated—staged—for maximum comedic effect. One cannot say for sure that these texts were not factual, but the conspicuous exaggeration and repetition suggest that the author has invented funny situations to make fun of certain modern social phenomena, something like verbal caricatures.

Lao She’s article “Tan youmo” (Discussion of humor) was published as part of the book Lao niu poche (The old ox with a busted wagon), a series of critical writings mostly of the “how I came to write . . .” variety, originally serialized in the early issues of Cosmic Wind. In “Discussion of Humor,” Lao She divides writers into three basic categories—tragedians, narcissists, and humorists. He is in agreement with Lin Yutang that there is more to humor
than being funny (*huaji*), and for Lao She, that something extra is sympathy: the humorist “sees the funny aspects of all things, and writes about them cleverly [literally, “with technique”]. He can discern the flaws in the human world and wishes others to see them as well. Not only does he see them, but he also acknowledges the flawed character of humankind, so all people have a laughable side, and he himself is no exception. From a broader perspective, people only live a century, but their plans are infinite, and this basic contradiction is laughable in itself. His laugh is a sympathetic one, and humor has a kind of profundity.”

The rest of the essay is structured as an exploration of a number of terms related to humor. What is odd is that he presents all these words in English with Chinese equivalents: *fanyu* (irony), *fengci* (satire), *jizhi* (wit), *huaji ju* (farce), *qiqu* (whimsicality). If all these can be expressed in Chinese, why provide the English equivalents for every one? One answer is that all of his sources are British authors: William Thackeray, Horace Walpole, Jonathan Swift, and G. K. Chesterton. But Lao She does not claim that the British have some kind of privileged access to humor. Another possibility is that he wants to give precedence to the English terms, to emphasize that he is explaining something foreign that he has the bilingual competence to explain—*younuo*.

Lao She deliberately shies away from discussing how humor may be used to affect the reader. His narrative pieces turn on humorous misunderstandings of words or meanings, and repetition. Like Xia Mianzun’s quasifictional pieces discussed in the previous chapter, most of Lao She’s humorous essays also share a core group of characters, especially Er Jie (Second Elder Sister) and Old Tian the servant, hinting that the subject matter is not fictional, however outrageous it might be. The comedy techniques, which sometimes include cross-talk-like dialogue, could be superficial just to do their part for the mechanics of the comedy, but the specific things that are misunderstood such as lilies as a subject of poetic contemplation versus a stir-fried snack or the important activity such as creative writing that is relentlessly interrupted by mundane matters, have deeper resonances for the meaning of modern life and the role of the writer, the clash or balance between tradition and modernity. Lao She never diverts his attention from these topics, however light his fare, no matter how short his essay, so he is also meeting Lin Yutang’s expectation that levity and seriousness can be integrated.

**Humor in The Analects Fortnightly**

The best way to understand *younuo* is to examine it in practice. One of the most remarkable texts to emerge from the Analects group is Lin Yutang’s in-
augural editorial article for *The Analects Fortnightly*, “Yuanqi” (Origination). Usually an inaugural statement (*fakan ci*) will be a straightforward statement of the reasons for a magazine’s existence, an explanation of whether it is a publication of associates (*tongren kanwu*) or a more diverse and open venue, and the kinds of literary or other ideals it stands for. Lin Yutang’s “Origination” certainly makes clear what *The Analects Fortnightly* is about, but it is anything but straightforward in expressing it. I translate and discuss this piece at length because it so well exemplifies the key characteristics of this group and the themes of their writing:

The colleagues of the Analects Society, seeing the Way diminishing day by day, and human hearts in increasing peril, aggrieved for Heaven and pitying man, had the notion to issue a periodical, to express our humble views and to make a contribution to society and the nation. The events proceeded more or less in the following manner: our group of friends descends from generations of scholars, reciting the classics, intoning poetry, and playing and singing music since we were young, of strict family upbringing and deeply saturated with an air of morality. When visited by guests, we always straightened our clothes and sat solemnly, and our guests all trembled with fear. We discussed nothing other than benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom, and our answers never varied from “How dare I presume?” and “Thanks to you!” I believe we were never lacking in decorum, but for reasons unknown, the horses and carriages before our gates began to dwindle in number.25

In these opening lines, Lin Yutang establishes the conceit of referring to the Analects cohort (most of whom had already been working together on *The China Critic*) as though they were ancient political philosophers in the mold of Confucius and his disciples. Lin makes heavy use of classical diction and idioms rather than vernacular language. Readers knowing the cosmopolitan English-speaking background of Lin Yutang and his friends would be amused at this self-portrayal, knowing full well that it could not be further from the truth. Within the text, moreover, the narrator’s apparent ignorance as to why “the horses and carriages before their gates dwindled” further pokes fun at the solemn moralist image, giving the reader further cause to distance the actual author from the words of the narrator.

Lin’s narrator then describes a period of indecision, which ends up with the group living off the inheritance of one of their members. This retards their plans to act, so that even when approached to take positions in teaching or government, the sagely colleagues brushed them off as if they were beneath them. Here Lin further develops the Confucian parody and introduces the
theme of enjoyment, typically, in the form of tobacco smoking. The language in the following passage alludes to famous passages in Confucius’ *Analects* and the *Mencius*, but ironically in that the characteristics cited in the originals are understood to exemplify nobility of spirit, while this modern group is portrayed as privileged self-indulgent slackers:

Here I will point out that, out of reverence for the Sage, we friends have taken on the names of Confucius’ disciples as nicknames. Though it may seem a bit frivolous, it is only a joke and in reality does no harm. For example, the one who would listen but was unable to put it into practice calls himself Zi Lu;26 the one who had a father who liked to eat jujubes27 was Zengzi, the one who lived in a run down alley and could not bear his worries was Yan Hui;28 the one who liked to compare people when he talked is Zi Gong.29

Here and below, the quotations and distortions of Confucius’ *Analects* have the effect of featuring human flaws through the gesture of self-parody. Rather than using the classical description to ennoble the figure described or edify the reader, these misquotes create amusing caricatures of a group of modern eccentrics. And the image Lin Yutang would use more than any other to typify the modern eccentric is tobacco smoking:

Though none of us could find a job, we did have to smoke nevertheless. Zi Gong was fond of Luzon cigars; Zengzi liked to smoke a pipe *[danbagu*, an old transliteration of “tobacco”]; Zai Yu is not without a cigarette in his mouth night or day; although Zi Lu does not smoke, he also has the air of a smoker (*yanqi yi pozhong*), just like the proverbial man who on “passing the butcher’s shop begins to chew.” As for You Zi, he “puts himself in the place of others”: although he does not smoke, he fills his house with the necessities, so everyone loves to hurry to You Zi’s door. You Zi once said, “I do not smoke, but smoking is done because of me,”30 causing everyone to be impressed by his grasp of decorum. Even though he is a nonsmoker, we never take him to task for his vulgarity. In times of idleness we congregate at You Zi’s household, sometimes puffing smoke at each other for an hour without saying anything, but in our spiritual journey we all understand each other, then, having been uplifted, we each go our own way.

One day, You Zi noticed that the tobacco we smoked was of a vast quantity, and sighed deeply, ‘How can you all smoke and do nothing? You are like petty men; are you not like thieves who break in or climb over the walls?’31 Yan Hui was shocked and answered, ‘I once heard the Master say, It is no easy matter for a man who always has a full stomach to put his mind to some use. Are there not gamers and chess players? To do that would be better than being
idle!32 ... Zi Lu also said, “I once heard that the Master became the object of dislike upon reaching forty, and he remained what he was to the end.”33 With this everyone agreed to publish a magazine (*ban bao*), to fulfill the Way of man and repay the cigarette bill.34

The second part to “Origination” is comprised of a much more vernacular comic dialogue in which, interrogated by visitors about the purpose and financial backing of the magazine, the narrator claims not to know, and when pressed he explains that while someone may want to do something for a purpose, the reason why things (like *The Analects Fortnightly* magazine) actually come to be is quite another question, one that cannot be answered.

“Origination” is essentially a funny story whose techniques and themes exemplify key characteristics of the Analects group’s aesthetic and worldview. But Lin Yutang found a much more concise way to define what the Analects group stands for, without removing his tongue from his cheek: in the first issue, and at various locations in virtually every subsequent issue, *The Analects Fortnightly* posts a list of restrictions (*tongren jietiao*)—Ten Commandments, one could say—for members of the Analects Society. Some of these restrictions were so suggestive that contributors commented on them and played off them in their own submissions for years. I present the list here in its entirety with some of my own comments.

1. No reactionaries.
2. No discussion of those we disdain, but we must criticize those we love, such as our nation, modern warriors, authors with potential and revolutionaries who are not completely without potential, to the best of our ability.
3. No gratuitous cursing—we must playfully taunt without being abusive, and while it is forbidden to laud enemies of the state, it is also unnecessary to call them bastards (*wangbadan*).
4. No taking money from others, no speaking on behalf of others—no paid propaganda for anyone whatsoever, but we may engage in propaganda, and even antipropaganda, for free.
5. No flattering the prestigious, and especially no flattering the rich and powerful—absolutely no touting of stars of the Peking opera stage, stars of the silver screen, stars of society, stars of culture, stars of politics, or any other kind of stars.
6. No mutual congratulation, no sentimental cliché-ism (*roumazhuyi*)—avoid all utterances with the tone “the scholar,” “the poet,” “my friend Hu Shizhi” etc.
7. No softheaded love poetry, no sexy lyrics.
8. No insistence on fairness. We only discuss our honest private opinions.
9. No quitting of habits—like smoking, fine tea appreciation, admiring plum blossoms, reading books, etc.—or urging others to quit smoking.
10. No one shall say his writing is not good.

“Reactionary” (fan geming, often literally rendered “counter-revolutionary”) is exactly what Lin Yutang and many of his colleagues were accused of being by their detractors on the left. So while in the first prohibition, Lin is creating irony with its counterfactual resonance, at the same time there is a degree of sincerity in Lin’s implication of support for just social revolution, as long as it does not curtail individual freedoms. Regardless of his politics, I think the serious message here is, contrary to what the leftists believe, Lin had no desire to promote or produce materials in his magazines that would serve as an obstacle to the achievement of any political aims. His point is to engage in an entirely apolitical cultural enterprise.

In the second item, as in many of the others, the restriction takes on meaning when compared to its opposite or alternative. The theme is the proper use of criticism. As the third item also points out, it is not gentlemanly to vent hostility toward those you disdain (po kou ma ren), but that does not mean there is not a place for criticism even in a humor magazine—on the contrary! Furthermore, “those we love,” given its explication, includes the broad majority of the population and cultural figures, which is to say, virtually no one is above their criticism. On the other hand, this sharply distinguishes the Analects group from most other sectarian groups and journals, which as Lin Yutang would put it, are quick to “pull a long face” and criticize those they disdain at length.

Prohibitions 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10 are directed primarily at forms of insincerity in the interest of reputation or personal gain. While the implication is that Analects Fortnightly contributions should be both sincere and direct in spirit, it must be pointed out that this is not the case on the literal level. Humor often depends on a distancing of words from their meanings, and so Analects group members will often play with these rules by appearing to break them facetiously while in fact adhering to them in spirit.

The “softheaded love poetry” prohibited in item 7 translates tanmi shi. Tanmi is an illness in traditional Chinese medicine in which phlegm congesting the heart (mind) cavity results in a kind of confusion or dementia. In chapter 57 of The Story of the Stone (c. 1790), the hero Jia Baoyu, on hearing his beloved Lin Daiyu will be sent to Suzhou to marry, is shocked into a stupor, which is diagnosed by Dr. Wang as tanmi.35 Thus it is likely that in early
modern times the illness became associated with adolescent love. Like others of the Analects Society commandments, this is occasionally discussed in the pages of the journal, and Lao She defies the injunction by composing three “New-Style Softheaded Love Poems” for issue 27, apparently satirizing clichéd love poems that drew heavily on images and ideas from Western literature.

The eighth prohibition puts an unexpected twist on the universally lauded notion of fairness (gongdao); by opposing it to “honest, private opinions,” Lin makes fairness sound like what we call “political correctness,” marking it as a hindrance to the unfettered expression of personal views. This creates more room for eccentricity and suggests hypocrisy on the part of those who insist on fairness.

The ninth prohibition is the most important of all, at least in relation to the cultivation of pleasure. The specific pleasures identified—tea drinking, flower viewing, and reading—were all important pastimes for premodern Chinese literati, ones that occasioned a large portion of the traditional literary corpus. What, then, is smoking doing among them, and why is it given precedence over the others? As I will show, smoking as a symbol of modern enjoyment exemplifies the Analects group’s particular approach to cultural modernity as much as the discourse of humor does. Writing about smoking dramatizes the link between humor and enjoyment. But this comedic tone is not sustained by Lin Yutang in his other magazines. Increasingly, his project became the serious promotion of the expression of the independent free spirit through the form best suited to it, the short informal essay.

If The Analects Fortnightly was the premiere vehicle for humor in the Republican period, the appearance of This Human World in 1934 was the climactic moment in the history of the modern Chinese xiaopin wen essay. Essays in the Morning News Literary Supplement, Threads of Conversation, Zhou Zuoren’s essays and identification of the late Ming informal essay as the root of Chinese literary modernity, and Lin Yutang’s “Little Critic” column and The Analects Fortnightly had all paved the way for a publication entirely devoted to the xiaopin wen. The magazine’s content “included everything, as great as the cosmos, as minute as a fly—all can be used for material, so we call it This Human World.” For many commentators, these words were the straw that broke the camel’s back, and from this moment attacks were launched from different quarters on the xiaopin wen.

In a short piece entitled “Shuo xiaopin wen banyuekan” (On the xiaopin wen fortnightly), Lin addresses the interesting issue of publication frequency and its relation to genre: “Weeklies, semimonthlies, monthlies, quarterlies, all have different kinds of writing in them. Weeklies are too immersed in the
present, but quarterlies put too much emphasis on eternity (*wanshi*). Most of what is written in weeklies is not worth looking at after ten days, while the writing in quarterlies can be recited for years. Monthlylies manage to be both serious and casual, but they are never as trenchant and natural, as refreshing and delightful as fortnightlylies.37 He also observes that, if monthlylies are like a regular army, semimonthlies are “guerrilla troops.” Lin is making no mention of genre here, but only writing (*wenzi*). His statements apply equally well to fiction and all kinds of nonfiction prose, including commentary and academic articles, as well as creative essays. At the same time, one suspects that since Lin was mainly concerned with the promotion of the essay, and the magazine in which this article appeared was concerned specifically with the *xiaopin wen*, his statements are relevant mainly to that genre.

Established in September of 1935, *Cosmic Wind* proved to be the longest lasting magazine of the Analects group, ceasing publication only in August 1947. In his editorial statement, Lin Yutang again asserts autonomy, independence, and freedom of speech. Lin’s remarks are similar to Liang Shiqiu’s infamous remarks on taking over the literary supplement to *Central Daily News* that would get him into so much trouble in 1938.38 Lin writes that literature does not need to save the nation, nor is it required not to save the nation; he describes the attitudes and writing practices they encourage—“sincere, skeptical, liberal, tolerant, naturalist”—as distinctively modern, and distances himself from “moralists, ancient and modern.” Everyone can easily relate to attacking “ancient” moralists, but Lin gets a jab in at leftist literature in his reference to “modern moralists.” His main point is that articles and literature worth reading must cleave to life and human feeling, and he refers to revolutionary literature as informed by, for lack of a better phrase, a literary worldview that does not cleave to human feeling. Lin was safer here almost two years before the war than Liang would be with the same message in wartime. He makes mention of “the year of the magazine” in the article on *xiaopin wen* and magazines, pointing out that however bad the economy may be, magazines can still flourish, and also pointing out that as editors they do not believe that the nation can be saved on paper; if contributors or readers do believe so, they are encouraged to turn their attention to other publications, and indeed the editors would be happy to read those writings themselves, as long as they are published elsewhere.39

The contents of *Cosmic Wind* include all literary genres, criticism, and book reviews. Most articles are reflections on contemporary affairs, and by 1936, each issue featured articles written about Paris, London, and Germany from contributors living in those places. Premodern works are also, but rather rarely, excerpted. One column called “Kexi yu” (Bon mots) that includes quo-
tations from Confucius, Zheng Banqiao, Yan Zhitui, Zhang Dai, Yuan Mei, and Zeng Guofan, as well as foreigners like Robert Maynard Hutchins (president of the University of Chicago), Edward S. Martin, and Princeton University president Francis L. Patten. By mixing Chinese and Western sources, Lin Yutang draws less attention to premodern Chinese materials as such (unlike *This Human World*), but like *This Human World*, *Cosmic Wind* includes considerably more premodern Chinese leisure literature than *The Analects Fortnightly* did.

### The Essay as a Discourse of Enjoyment

Any discussion of modern Chinese humor must include Liang Yuchun (1906–1932). Liang died too early to contribute to *The Analects Fortnightly*, but he was clearly a kindred spirit. His promotion of English familiar essays as a model for modern Chinese *xiaopin wen* was unmatched by any other individual, and he had as firm a grasp on irony and comic exaggeration as Lin Yutang. Moreover, his writings demonstrate the linkage of humor to the larger discourse on enjoyment.

Liang’s influence in the early 1930s must have been greater than is reflected in later literary histories. For example, the *Compendium of Chinese New Literature* (1935) had an editorial policy that texts first published later than 1926 were not to be included, but Zhou Zuoren nonetheless saw fit to include three of Liang Yuchun’s essays from his 1930 collection *Chun lao ji* (Spring wine). His rationale was that like Xu Zhimo, Liu Bannong, and Liu Dabai, also placed at the front of the volume, Liang had already passed away. One of the essays included in the *Compendium*, and perhaps the most anthologized of Liang Yuchun’s works, is his 1930 essay “Chun zhao yike zhi qianjin (landuo han de landuo xiangtou zhi yi)” (Priceless moments of a spring morn: Idle thoughts of an idle fellow, #1). Liang’s essay explores the enjoyment of one kind of pleasure—sleeping late. However, apropos of my comments on the Analects group’s commandments relating to sincerity and directness, Liang does not write about this enjoyment straightforwardly or naively. Instead, he exploits a wide range of norms and assumptions to make this exposition on pleasure particularly ironic and humorous. These norms and assumptions come into play logically as he articulates the rationale for sleeping late and rhetorically as he attempts to persuade the reader to try sleeping late him- or herself.

Liang begins by asserting that though he has sought friends and teachers for ten years, none of his efforts at self-improvement have yielded as much
benefit as getting up late: “This is because whatever clever or viable ideas that are now in my head have mostly surfaced while I lazed around in bed in the morning.” This sounds like a potentially convincing practical argument for getting up late, but we are soon acquainted with Liang’s narrator’s idea of what is “clever and viable”: “snickering at people who busy themselves over nothing, reliving the silly dreams I had the night before—that’s much better than dreaming, or contemplating the advantages of getting up late.” As the first paragraph progresses into the next, he introduces two lofty levels of discourse in connection with getting up late; one is “art” and the other religion (he describes beds as “our sacred temples”). It is the art idea that Liang pursues: “Although I am a complete layman as far as art is concerned, I can nevertheless lay claim to being an expert in the particular art of getting up late, because I possess both the critical power of minute discrimination and the spiritual commitment to experience all the pain and pleasure involved.”

Liang’s narrator developed the habit of getting up late while going to school in northern China (i.e., Beijing—Liang was from Fujian Province), where the cold winter weather was particularly conducive to it. From that point he had to begin dealing with the expectations of both his parents and his teachers. His family dealt with his new habit by lecturing him with the full complement of clichés on the benefits of early rising. “Although I was loath to lose the goodwill of my seniors, I had to be faithful to my art, and so I let myself fall from their good graces.” He reintroduces the theme of the tortured artist here, and adds to it an attitude of contriteness with respect to his failure to listen to his parents; this allows him to cast his “selfless” pursuit of the art of sleeping late as heroic, while at the same time using his supposed pangs of guilt to make him look like a caring, filial son. “Later, when the old folk realized that I was a hopeless case, they took pity on me: they tiptoed past my room at nine in the morning. Though loving indulgence of our weaknesses is the surest way to arouse our conscience, I could not turn back on my beloved art, and so, with a contrite heart, I stayed in bed.”

Liang then proceeds to enumerate the benefits of getting up late. The first is an argument by analogy. One who has a glorious youth will not have wasted his life, because in old age he can derive pleasure from the memories, a poignant observation in retrospect, since the author only lived to the age of twenty-seven. Similarly, each day, if begun in a glorious manner such as getting up late, will continue to be fulfilling on the strength of the morning alone, and this feeling of bliss is multiplied by the anticipation of its continuation the next day. The crowning argument, however, is Liang’s ex-
planation of how sleeping late can relieve the monotony of mechanical, modern life:

If you feel that life is boring, please stay in bed for an extra thirty minutes—better still if you can make it an hour. When you get up, you are sure to find that you do not have enough time to attend to all sorts of pressing business. As a result you will be extremely busy, and being “busy”—particularly the kind of your own making—is the golden key to the palace of joy. . . . Who, in the midst of spraying toothpaste, splashing water, holding a comb, facing the mirror, and munching some bread, can say that life is uninteresting?45

Boredom is arguably the real problem this essay addresses: the boredom of modern life, the insignificance of the individual’s existence, and the utter remoteness of circumstances that require nobility, heroism, and create adventure.

In my opinion, those who have tasted the full flavor of life would all agree that pain is far superior to colorless monotony for the simple reason that pain is alive, whereas a colorless life is the symbol of death. Getting up late in itself may seem a lazy thing to do, but it provides us with the greatest possible energy, it makes our life vibrant and stimulating. The laziest people in the world are those who get up at dawn, finish all their work by the earliest possible time, and then sit around yawning.”46

Liang wrote other essays in this vein, such as “Ren si guan” (Outlook on death) and “Tan liulang han” (On vagabonds), each a reversal of conventional discussions of the philosophy of life and gentlemen, respectively, as well as works of a less pointedly sarcastic nature on subjects such as love, the philosophy of life, and particularly the insights of English poetry and prose literature, of which he was a principal interpreter and translator in China at the time, despite his young age. The important element in this essay on sleeping late is its particularly humorous discourse on the enjoyment, even the laudatory aspects, of what is conventionally viewed as a bad habit. The essay inverts conventional morality and makes a mockery of heroic language and imagination. The beauty of its comic rhetoric, moreover, is that it would be foolish to try to “refute” his arguments, because in doing so you would be playing the “straight man” to his comic, and thereby only helping his cause. He has left behind the assumption that literature is an instrument of moral, social, or political guidance, and either you get the joke and join his ranks, or you do not, and look like a stick-in-the-mud. This is a spirit of writing in which many of the Analects group partook at length and with relish.
It is not only their humor that links Liang Yuchun’s essay projects to those of the Analects group. Liang was clearly interested in the cultivation of pleasure in his daily life, not out of an unprincipled hedonism, but out of a desire to ensure that life remains worth living from one moment to the next. The best that leftist writers could do in this direction was to elaborate the joys of labor under just working conditions.47 The xiaopin wen writer, on the other hand, insists that the pursuit of happiness remain on the agenda of literary expression.

Tobacco smoking—most often cigarette smoking—functioned in Analects group writing as an effective emblem of their particular conception of enjoyment. It is evident from the number of articles in Analects group publications about cigarette smoking, and the number of cartoons concerning the group’s own identity featuring smoking imagery, that smoking was an important issue in the group’s identity and the aesthetics of their essay writing. Considering smoking as a literary image across the better part of a century and a cultural divide, whatever it may be symbolic of, is a delicate business. Cigarette smoking in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is on a sharp decline,48 and is a contentious political issue, tightly interwoven with people’s sense of constitutionally guaranteed freedoms, environmentalism, and a growing concern with its grave health risks, as well as with the substantial economic and political interests of the huge American tobacco industry. At the same time, foreign markets for American cigarettes, particularly in the third world—China included—are rapidly growing. At present, the production and consumption of cigarettes is yet another example of the inverted relationship of the United States to the rest of the world.

Given the highly charged resonances of cigarette smoking in the present day, how can we understand the meanings tobacco use had in Chinese humor magazines of the 1930s and 1940s? The ideas of smoking as a health hazard, as a politically and medically incorrect, addictive and selfish, inconsiderate behavior, as yet another form of insidious American economic imperialism enthralling the third world, all must inflect our reading of the Analects group’s praise of tobacco.

These issues may seem trivial and irrelevant to the study of literature, but in fact they go right to the heart of the study of the modern Chinese literature of leisure. As the preceding chapters have shown, the literature of leisure in modern China has marked contrarian tendencies, as if continually trying to carve a niche for modern eccentrics. Nonconformity is close to the heart of prose writing conceived as a sounding board for the independent spirit, a vehicle for the individual woman or man to say her or his peace with honesty, however obliquely or ironically, and without concern for political correctness.
What may be surprising is that, judging from the themes and rhetoric of Analects group writing and cartooning, the significance of smoking in Chinese society in the early twentieth century is not all that different from the present global situation. Analects writers are aware that cigarette smoking is hazardous to the health and make references to social pressures coming from those opposed to smoking. Beyond the health hazards, opposition to smoking in China in the 1930s and 1940s also appealed to standards of public hygiene and courtesy that are familiar in our current debates. Thus we can read Analects writers’ conspicuous advocacy and celebration of smoking as a deliberate flouting of its growing social stigmatization.

But smoking was heavy and widespread among Chinese intellectuals and cultural figures. One would be surprised to find reference to an author who did not smoke, though there were among the Analects group some who claimed not to. And we also know that many or most famous modern Chinese authors smoked excessively and often died of smoking-related diseases. That matters little, however, as I am not reading the Analects’ celebration of smoking literally, but as a posture, an attitude, and a lifestyle or philosophy of life that, however much its proponents may actually enjoy the practice of smoking, means a great deal more.

Especially pertinent here, the practice of smoking opium remained widespread in early twentieth-century China, though considerable efforts on the part of government, missionaries, health professionals and social activists had greatly curtailed the scope of addiction. The Chinese noun yan (smoke) and the verb phrase xi yan (to smoke) can be applied either to tobacco or opium, and at the turn of the twentieth century probably more often referred to the use of opium than tobacco. Nearly a century before, the British, after exerting efforts to achieve a window of trade with China through the port of Canton, had discovered that Chinese exports such as tea, silk, and porcelain were much more popular in England than British exports were in China. The story goes that it occurred to the British that they could shift the balance of trade in the other direction by introducing the instantly addictive, Indian-grown opium into the Chinese market. When the slow-reacting Qing government finally realized the cynicism of the British policy and the gravity of the health/military/political crises facing China, its resistance to the opium trade was met with military aggression in the form of the Opium War and related conflicts of the mid-nineteenth century. For the Chinese, the idea that the world’s greatest military power was using brute force to compel the Chinese to accept its damaging and unfair trade practices was the height of humiliation, and set the tone for Chinese international relations and cultural self-portrayal for generations; throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth
centuries, China considered itself a nation victimized and bullied by aggressive European powers, and resentment over this was one of the greatest sources of psychic fuel for modern resistance and revolution. And it all revolved around smoking.

It could be argued that opium and the Opium War created modern China. If cigarette smoking in the twentieth century carried a certain Western-inspired prestige, it is certainly ironic that opium, perhaps the most conspicuous material symbol of the harm wrought on Asia by Western imperialism, was still being smoked, and still being called yan. More surprising is the fact that, even when confronted with this double-entendre, the Analects group did not seem to take it seriously.

What is interesting to Analects group writers about smoking is not just the experience, but making a show of it, what it is associated with (tea appreciation, admiring plum blossoms, “reading books”—a certain way of reading a certain kind of book), and what it symbolizes (freedom, individuality, idle contemplation, even genius, but also a comfortably “human,” somewhat disheveled and not entirely hygienic, affable kind of self-neglect). More importantly, it is their discoursing on smoking as enjoyment that is a meaningful and humorous exercise for these writers. Smoking is a sensual indulgence of no nutritional value; it provides a sensation of stimulation through the introduction of mild toxins into the bloodstream; as Richard Klein points out, its allure is in no small part due to the mixture of pain and discomfort with pleasure, not to mention constant social pressure to quit. Smoking involves generating clouds of smoke that impinge upon those around one; these are generally not appreciated and only tolerated with equanimity by neighbors who are themselves smokers. It also occupies the hand and mouth in various ways that limit certain kinds of activity while facilitating others, and these vary among different types of people as well.

Among the Analects group, at least in the 1930s and 1940s, cigarette smoking carried connotations of Western industrialized modernity; its history is as long as or longer than that of the industrial revolution, but like industrial products, modern transportation conveyances, and communications systems, it was not introduced into China until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Tobacco smoking using various kinds of pipes, however, had been practiced for much longer, at least well back into the Qing dynasty. This familiarity with tobacco made the rolled cigarette, because of its convenience and Westernized flair, popular among the urban intellectual and merchant classes, even if it was more expensive than the often domestically grown pipe tobacco. Cigars, on the other hand, if Republican-period fiction and drama is any indication, were an expensive status symbol that carried
particular overtones of the American-style magnate; these were reserved for big businessmen and other power brokers. The cigarette’s exoticism was fleeting, however, as cigarette smoking became so widespread during the war against Japan, in particular its conspicuous consumption—undoubtedly in its domestic varieties—by the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, that by the time of the civil war in the late 1940s it probably no longer carried any Western connotations.

One odd thing about the fondness of the Analects group for cigarette smoking is its status as the only habit with modern and Western connotations that must not be kicked by Analects members—the others being appreciation of fine teas, viewing plum blossoms, and reading books. So what does smoking have in common with these activities within the milieu of modern Chinese culture?

**Smoking, Learning, and Freedom**

Lin Yutang’s well-known essay “Wo de jie yan” (My turn at quitting smoking), instead of describing the difficulty of trying to struggle free of the habit, ends up with the author patting himself on the back for mustering the strength to resist his wayward impulse to quit and courageously—even righteously—returning to the habit, which through rhetoric and imagery is associated with sophistication and civilization:

Anyone who has been a smoker has, in moments of confusion, made the grand resolution to give it up. For a certain period of time they vow to wrestle with the demon of tobacco to see who will be the victor and who the vanquished, only coming to their senses after ten days or so. I too once strayed down this path, declaring in a sudden fit of excitement that I was going to quit smoking. It was not until three weeks later that, pricked by conscience, I came to regret my foolishness. I swore that never again would I allow myself to become so dispirited or so lacking in self-control, and that hereafter I would be a faithful believer in smoking until the day I reached senility. At that point, I might very well be swayed by the heresy of those busybody women from the temperance society of the YMCA to give it up altogether, since in old age people become fainthearted, are unable to control themselves, and cannot be held responsible for their actions. However, as long as I am in possession of my faculties and am still able to tell right from wrong, I will never again submit to this kind of temptation. Having learned my lesson, I have come to the realization that to give up smoking for no reason, thus depriving my soul of ease and carefree comfort, is an immoral act, that shortchanges me while bringing no benefit to others. . . .
Rationality and common sense lead us to ask: is there any good reason—political, social, moral, physiological, or psychological—why people should refrain from smoking? Why should they knowingly use their intelligence and will to violate conscience and harm their good nature, thus depriving themselves of a *carefree and serene state of mind*? Everyone knows that writers must be *energetic and free-spirited, uninhibited in mind and unobstructed in perception*, if fine writing is to emerge. When reading, one must also let mind and spirit converge, *ridding the heart of obstacles and allowing the spirit to roam*; only then can it qualify as true reading. Can such a mental state be attained if one is not smoking? At the moment of greatest inspiration, reaching for a cigarette is the only reasonable thing to do. Slipping a piece of chewing gum in one’s mouth, by contrast, would be unbearably vulgar. . . .

One afternoon, I went to visit a Western woman friend. She sat at a table, one hand holding a cigarette, the other resting on her knee. Her body listing slightly, she cut an entrancing figure, and I felt that my *moment of awakening* had arrived. When she extended her box of cigarettes to me, I withdrew one slowly and calmly, knowing that from this moment onward I would again *attain salvation*.53

This moment of salvation, of liberation from the folly of trying to quit smoking, is mediated by the exotic vision of a foreign woman languidly enjoying a cigarette and offering one to the author. We see her cigarette, her hand, her knee, the lean of her torso. Apart from the author’s subtle emphasis on libidinal pleasures and the conflation of different forms of sensual gratification, this framing of the smoker’s epiphany bespeaks a particular attitude of autonomy and indulgence that Lin Yutang attributes appreciatively to British culture, yet is also consistent with the sort of late imperial eccentric individualism revered by modern promoters of the *xiaopin wen*. Lin Yutang elaborates on this appreciation in the 1933 essay “On Oxford.”54 There is almost a tone of envy in his description of the life of research fellows there: “Apart from reading, smoking, and writing articles, they have no duty whatsoever to the world of men.” Lin is impressed by the lack of organization and rationality in the institution, pointing out that no one knows why there are thirty colleges and that they do not even standardize the names of their masters (master, warden, principal, president, etc.). In an essay by the Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock (1869–1944),55 Lin finds a cultural/educational justification of the value of smoking that supplements his arguments in the previously discussed essay: “If we take some of the most splendid parts of this essay and retranslate them, not only can readers be made to understand the spirit of education at Oxford University, but they can also prove
that *The Analects*’ promotion of smoking is not only not unreasonable and facetious, but actually has a solid and deep basis in the theory of learning.”\(^\text{56}\) By distilling the function of the tutor from the testimony of different students, Leacock concludes that tutors “get a little group of students together and smoke at them. Men who have been systematically smoked at for four years turn into ripe scholars. If anybody doubts this, let him go to Oxford and he can see the thing actually in operation. A well-smoked man speaks and writes English with a grace that can be acquired in no other way.”\(^\text{57}\) Lin’s extravagant claim for the educational value of Leacock’s observation is itself facetious, since Leacock was a satirist making fun of English university culture and not concerned with advocating a “theory of learning.” Lin concludes that what is remarkable about Oxford is that it “will never accommodate itself to world trends,” and this is why “for hundreds of years it has been able to maintain its unique character. Even under the most unreasonable circumstances, it has never lost its identity as the top school and the center of learning in its nation, so that ‘Oxford students walk as if they alone rule the world.’ If you want to find such a spirit in China, only Kang Youwei and Gu Hongming have it. The revolutionaries revolt, the counterrevolutionaries counterrevolt, but if everyone were not opportunistically following the shifting winds, China would naturally begin to show progress.”

In the tenth issue of *The Analects Fortnightly*, Lin further elaborates on the connection between smoking and learning with a piece called “Xiyan yu jiaoyu” (Smoking and education).\(^\text{58}\) After quoting Stephen Leacock again on how smoking is used in Oxford, Lin points out the Chinese word *xuntao*, which also invokes a “fumigation” image of learning: “Most Chinese people believe that a person’s knowledge and character must be attained through gradual forging and fumigation. . . . When the ancients said ‘one evening’s conversation with you is better than reading books for ten years,’ you can see that knowledge is thought of as being kneaded out of casual chats with hermits. Since these are evening chats, smoking is probably involved. Smoking is treasured because it represents a style of free-ranging academic discussion.” But in China’s colleges, the places and times for smoking are separated from those for learning, “or in other words, when one is reading, one is not free, and when one is free, one is not reading.” The seriousness of this humorous argument can be seen in Lin’s equation of smoking and freedom, and his implication of the extremity of what might be called behavioral hygiene in the contemporary Chinese school.

Liu Dajie (1904–1977) takes up the educational theme once again, folding in many of the points subsequent contributors added to the discussion in between.\(^\text{59}\) His 1934 piece, “Shuo chou yan” (Speaking of smoking), takes the
lore about Oxford University, that upperclassmen do their learning in the armchairs of professor’s homes and offices, smoking and drinking coffee, as his point of departure for talking generally about the relationship between smoking and culture. Liu wants to liberate tobacco smoking from the stigma of mere sensual pleasure and bestow upon it a spiritual value:

Tobacco in our daily lives is a luxury, something useless. But in our spiritual lives it is an essential element. . . . When someone has lost at love, or has descended into a painful period in his life, he always wants to smoke, one cigarette after another. In the perpetual smoky shadows is another world that ordinary people cannot see, where it seems as if all one’s feelings of pain, sadness, tears, despair and disillusionment dissolve into that cloud, and this can give us momentary solace.  

It is not only a solace in times of pain, it also transports the user to “another world that ordinary people cannot see.” The particular negatives Liu details in the passage (loss at love, descent into a painful period in one’s life) metaphorically suggest the loss of power and dignity, and the victimization at the hands of foreign powers that underlie the Chinese experience of modernity. Liu also claims that few significant works of modern literature were written without the aid of smoking, and he speculates about what ancient writers must have relied upon instead: things such as women and wine. He then talks about the futility of trying to quit smoking, though he has been tempted by all the political and moral fasting going on—Gandhi, women factory workers, Hilaire Noulens—but he cannot stand more than a few hours without a cigarette and imagines other smokers are the same. Liu in closing alludes to a play by Ding Xilin published in Crescent Moon and entitled Beijing de kongqi (The air of Beijing). It is about two friends who talk late into the night and run out of cigarettes. They frantically cast about in an unsuccessful search for more smokes, ultimately scrounging cigarette butts left by the servants. Liu says nonsmokers cannot be expected to appreciate the feelings conveyed by Ding Xilin here, but recommends that all smokers have a look at the play.

“My Turn Quitting Smoking” and “On Oxford,” in combination with the ninth “commandment” against quitting vices like smoking, triggered a sporadic but wide-ranging and persistent discussion on the meaning, enjoyment, and history of smoking over the first year or so of The Analects Fortnightly’s existence. “My Turn,” in fact, was followed by the announcement that “This magazine will publish as many articles and advertisements about smoking as possible.” There are facetious misreadings of Confucius, exploring the ques-
tion of whether he and his disciples were tobacco smokers, histories of the cigarette and tobacco use worldwide and in China, and smoking-related anecdotes, some of which raise issues of class and opium use that clash with the generally facetious tone of the magazine.

The seventh issue, for example, includes a letter to the editor from a reader signing himself as Xiao Fan, that describes the circumstances under which he purchased and read the previous issue: he bought the magazine at the school bookstore, and sat on the grass reading with his back warmed by the rays of the sun. He then mentions reading “My Turn,” and objects that smoking is given far too much credit. “At first I thought you were talking about quitting an opium habit; then I realized that the source of your addiction was a measly little cigarette.” The writer claims that other kinds of stimulation—candy, dolls, peanuts, all can be given credit for artistic genius and profound thought, and he suspects that the Analects group is hanging it all on smoking because they are in cahoots with cigarette manufacturers. In reply, the editor (probably Lin Yutang) writes, “Mr. Xiao Fan: Your posture when reading Analects Fortnightly is superb. As for the rest, there is nothing worth commenting on.”

In the eleventh issue, a letter writer whose pen name Ping Fan is vaguely similar to that of Xiao Fan, also writes criticizing the magazine’s fascination with tobacco. His “Xiyan shibaizhe laihan” (Letter from a failed smoker) refers to the ninth issue’s “On Oxford” and “Zhiyan kao” (Studies in the cigarette, an overview of the history of the cigarette). The writer worries that shop assistants, youths, and students will be negatively influenced and rebel against the conservative educators, saying that “Mr. Lin Yutang says smoking is good.” This letter writer seems ambivalent. He says he is a “common person who could smoke himself to death without appreciating a bit of the wonder of smoking,” that he had “once smoked for ten years, without receiving any benefit.” Still, he regrets that Analects did not exist in those days, suggesting he wishes he could understand or feel whatever it is about smoking that warrants all the attention. He makes a couple of humorous references to the Analects Regulations, asking whether The Analects Fortnightly’s promotion of smoking counts as “free advertising” (fourth prohibition, against paid advertising and propaganda), and suggesting that the “honest expression of private opinions” (eighth prohibition, against “fairness”) may not always be appropriate in front of impressionable youths. Though the letter writer’s concerns may seem petty, they relate to the very serious issue of the magazine’s posture in the public sphere, and its challenge to common assumptions about the appropriate content of speech given the public sphere’s received—and undiscussed, unquestioned—educational and moral mandates. The brief editor’s reply
indicates that cigarette advertisements were solicited, but the companies were not interested.62

A more frequent commentator on smoking and other habitual enjoyments is Shu Shan. In an article entitled “Yan yu shijie mingren” (Tobacco and famous world figures), the author ennobles smoking by associating it with famous European writers and historical figures.63 He uses (as an epigraph) the same Thackeray quote that heads this chapter.64 Shu Shan’s response to this quote demonstrates an awareness of the health risks of tobacco smoking: “When we see this passage of praise, we can see there is a kind of greatness even in a thing like tobacco, which everyone knows is full of the toxin nicotine and smoking it is harmful to one’s health.” The purpose of the article is not to advocate smoking, but to provide readers with leisurely amusement (quwei) in the form of stories about smoking from around the world. In other words, Shu Shan hopes his writing will have effects similar to those attributed to tobacco smoking itself.

One such is a story about Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle, who admired each other’s work yet found no kindred spirits in their respective American and British literary circles. On encountering one another in England in 1833, though both men brimming with things to say to each other, they remain silent. They take their seats, smoke their pipes, and experience a kind of communion in smoke. Once the tobacco is finished, they simply shake hands and take their leave, still without a word. The second story is about Alfred Lord Tennyson, who is invited to a dinner party by a friend, who asks him about his upcoming trip to Venice and what interesting things he will be doing there, to which the reply comes that Tennyson does not like Venice, because he cannot find any tobacco to smoke there. Turning to science, Shu tells of Thomas Huxley, who while giving remarks on tobacco issues at a banquet held by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, starts out by talking about how as a medical student and a young man, he did not see anything in tobacco, which elicited the applause of anti-smokers in the audience. Then, however, he tells how he had been on vacation and the men in an inn were smoking together and apparently enjoying it a great deal, so he tried it and found it quite pleasant. Since then he felt the enjoyment of smoking outstripped that of drinking tea or eating meat by many times, which elicited applause from the pro-smoking contingent.

Shu Shan also includes stories about military heroes, including Ulysses S. Grant, who seemed never to be without a cigar, and Otto von Bismarck, who related how, having only one cigar left while in battle, he held onto that cigar like a miser onto some treasure, but when an officer was suddenly wounded there was no way to comfort him other than giving him the cigar. This put a
smile on the officer’s face, but Bismarck having lost his treasured smoke, became irritable. Alternatively, the author gives the example of Napoleon, who, when offered tobacco by a Turkish ambassador, failed in his attempt to smoke it. The story notes that a critic responded, had Napoleon only known how to smoke when he was exiled on St. Helena, he could have received much comfort and, moreover, could have written uplifting essays as he smoked and surely would have left a fine written legacy for future generations. Then there was a story about the Italian national hero, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–1872), who was often beset by assassins. One night an assassin broke into Mazzini’s room, only to find him smoking. The smoker says to the assassin, “I know what you have come here to do; you want to kill me. But there’s no hurry, you can have a smoke first and then accomplish your mission.” Mazzini’s nonchalant heroic calm was so unnerving that his assailant got down on his knees and begged forgiveness.

While these and other anecdotes cited by Shu Shan do not specifically advocate smoking, they place smoking into a discourse of character and communion of spirit that goes well beyond sensual pleasure. The stories about Tennyson, Grant, and Bismarck seem little more than evidence of profound nicotine addiction, but the meeting of minds between Carlyle and Emerson, the commentary on Napoleon’s inability to smoke, and Mazzini’s calm, attribute to smokers an almost transcendent tranquility and an expansive and generous spirit. Moreover, since most of the comments and anecdotes described refer to travel, international encounters, and military campaigns, they mark tobacco as a civilized necessity for coping with momentous encounters in the expanding and diversifying modern world.

Most of the positive discussions of smoking I have described here associate the practice explicitly or implicitly with upper-class models of leisure and enjoyment; they generate images of men of means and education (whether European or Chinese), using cigarettes to communicate subtle understanding and knowledge in the midst of the enjoyment. As was obvious to any reader of The Analects Fortnightly, however, the pleasures of tobacco were by no means restricted to the upper classes, and in Shanghai, it was especially the cigarette that crossed class boundaries. Encounters with the poor and working class smokers also found their way into the Analects’ discourse on smoking, but the results created much more ambiguous meanings than these paeans to global smoking culture.

Dun Ding’s “Yangai” (Cigarette beggar) is an essay about a poor denizen of the Eight Immortals Bridge (Baxian qiao) trolley stop in Shanghai. The author remembers that the first time he saw her, he was about to give her some change, but then French soldiers came up. One of them was also preparing to
give her change, but one of his comrades stopped him, lit a cigarette instead, took a long drag, and then threw it out into the street. The woman ran out and picked it up, carefully extinguishing it and putting it in a paper wrapper. The comrades all followed suit, each tossing a cigarette, and the woman chased each one down and carefully put them all away. This attracted the attention of the smokers on the trolley, most of whom also tossed out their cigarettes, and she scurried around to pick them all up. When the trolley operator is asked about this, he explains that she only wants cigarettes. If someone were to give her money instead, she would only take it to the store and buy cigarettes with it: she can go without food, but not without cigarettes. As the trolley departs she blows them a big kiss, presumably because of her big harvest.

Through the author’s rhetoric and spare commentary, the reader senses pity for the woman because of her poverty, her slavish addiction to nicotine, and the way so many of the onlookers toy with her like a trained animal. But Lin Yutang’s comments appended after the essay strike a markedly different tone: he praises the woman’s placement of cigarettes above food, claiming that she understands the true meaning of Li Bai’s poetry and Gong Zizhen’s essays—for him, the woman is an ascetic master of the art of living. His response seems to come from different values than those of the author, who said he wrote this in response to Shu Shan’s piece about smoking celebrities. This essay reads like an assertion of conscience, a reminder of China’s difference from the homogeneous, gentleman’s club atmosphere of “On Oxford” and “Tobacco and Famous World Figures.” Dun Ding comes at the reader with poverty, imperialism, and inhumanity, but all the editor sees is a peculiar kind of devotion to smoking.

A similar tension unfolds in Yin Xin’s “Qiutu xiyan suoji” (A prisoner’s notes on smoking). The narrational frame is as jocular as Lin Yutang’s; playful allusions are made to the Analects commandments, and the author positions the text as a response to the “Cigarette Beggar” piece, which, when mentioned to a friend who had spent time in jail, had the effect of “releasing the spring of his prison experience, which vigorously spun the wax disc [of his chatter].” The text turns to his friend’s story, which is eloquent testimony to the trials and tribulations of smoking in prison. The narrative voice is humorous, saying words to the effect that he was not really an addict, but just had the habit of smoking on the toilet; he missed cigarettes particularly in prison because the toilet was right there in the cell. On telling how the experience enhanced his love for cigarettes, the friend pauses to take a drag: “... at this point Mr. X got a little excited, and brought the cigarette fixed between his index and middle fingers up to his lips, and extended a finger stained
brown from smoke before my eyes, as if this drag was in honor of his hatred for prison life.”

The ex-convict explains the techniques for obtaining cigarettes from a guard who buys them for a price on the outside and how to enjoy them on the sly. He talks about signals warning of the approach of guards who are not in on the cigarette trade, and how to rig up a homemade “demon-revealing” mirror for detecting whether a guard is watching through the hole in the door without giving oneself away. Some prisoners have visitors who might be able to get money to them, either through the guards or through the accountant, but even then they can hardly ever get their hands on cigarettes.

Mr. X cannot contain his excitement at the ingenuity of prisoners. Those who have the privilege of purchasing accounts are only able to buy things like preserved radishes or other vegetables; but these are often wrapped up in dried lotus leaf, which some prisoner from Guangdong figures out can be made into a substitute for tobacco: “Although when you smoke them they are somewhat different from cigarettes, that feeling of ‘swallowing clouds and spouting mist’ is every bit the same.” Finally he teases the reader with the question of how this crushed lotus leaf could be smoked, returning again to his enthusiastic admiration of prisoners:

... if only a person is determined and has the ingenuity to take advantage of his surroundings, he can certainly come up with a way where there was none. Besides, prisoners are no doubt the most leisurely of the leisure classes of the world! They have nothing but leisure they don’t know what to do with; they can easily exploit this leisurely attitude to mobilize their cellmates to satisfy even their slightest needs. And thus their tobacco pipes are products of their leisure.

This is arguably the literature of leisure at its best, but a far cry from Lin Yutang’s pursuit of humor. The prisoners make their pipes out of chunks of bricks from the cell walls, carved out with nails or penknives and attached to ink brush handles. They make sparks by rubbing cotton fibers and ignite dried grasses with them. “In this way, not only prisoners who have cigarettes avoid breaking the ninth commandment of the Analects society, even the majority who have no cigarettes can, by alternately keeping watch with the ‘demon-revealing mirror’ and using this remarkable method for generating fire, light up this unusual tobacco substitute in the unusual pipe and smoke up like gods! Behold the spiritual freedom of the smoking prisoners!”

In a sequel to this text, Yin Xin extends the story to include lifetime inmates who make cigarettes for themselves or to sell to other inmates, the orderlies who act as go-betweens for such sales, the “open cell” hour when these...
people get to interact, how the cigarettes are shared among cellmates, and how inmates find out about cigarettes in other cells. The piece closes with the tale of a notable imprisoned for embezzlement in the salt trade, whose brazen behavior upsets the delicate system for everyone. The embezzler openly smokes the cigarettes he buys and reveals who he bought them from. This gets them both put in solitary confinement for three days and instigates a sweep of the whole prison for cigarettes and the straightening up of the administration. After this even more articles appeared about smoking in prison. Yin Xin’s observations about the radical “leisure” of the prisoner appear to have opened up the richly allegorical world of genteel poverty, which speaks to man’s indestructible capacity for enjoyment, even in circumstances of confinement.

Another somber side of The Analects Fortnightly’s discourse on sensual enjoyment is its reference to opium smoking in the letter from Xiao Fan mentioned previously. Ultimately what occasioned discussion of opium in The Analects Fortnightly was the publication in 1930 of Jean Cocteau’s Opium: The Illustrated Diary of His Cure, which apparently helped create renewed interest in opium use among cosmopolitan youth in China. Excerpts from Opium, translated by Zhang Yiping, were published in issue 10 of the magazine. The Cocteau selections reinforce the linkage between the pleasures of opium and those of cigarette smoking. Many subsequent Analects contributions allude to Cocteau, including one by Lin Yutang, in which he becomes unusually earnest in asserting that The Analects Fortnightly absolutely does not condone opium smoking.

In an article entitled “Yápiàn yù zuojia” (Opium and writers), Shu Shan also comments on Cocteau. He uses Cocteau’s text as a point of departure, first affirming that it is clearly the work of a true opium addict, and then observing that opium smoking is becoming fashionable among modern youths in Henan Province, and opium dens are doubling as brothels to double one’s pleasure. Their advertising jingles mimic classical poetry, mixing lofty sentiments with references to the opium pipe and smoke, and are compared to Cocteau’s eloquent reflections on how opium makes a strange place familiar, and how opium-smoking travelers are never nervous. Shu Shan then cites the example of Thomas DeQuincey, author of Confessions of an Opium Eater (1821), perhaps the most influential essay on opium use in history. Since Jean Cocteau’s book had only recently been published, perhaps this discussion of DeQuincey was motivated by Cocteau’s impact on the literary scene. DeQuincey was thoroughly addicted to opium until his death, so that he could not create without it. DeQuincey’s nightmarish hallucinations, if meant to be a sign of genius or creativity, remind us, if only ironically, of the argument in
defense of fantasy as “lying” Zhou Zuoren asserted in his praise of imaginative fabrication in the review essay of Flowers in the Mirror.

However compelling the claims for liberty and leisure, the twentieth-century Chinese writer cannot bring himself to discuss opium without roundly condemning it. As if losing the thread of the conversation, Shu Shan suddenly tries to situate himself in this discourse on opium smoking. From the extremity of DeQuincey to the dabbling of Cocteau, which was translated and discussed in Analects only for the purpose of “a random discussion and nothing else,” Shu Shan returns to a tone of moral and historical concern more typical of revolutionary and patriotic modes of literary expression. “As for me, oh! could it be that I am not aware that the cause of China’s current painful debilitation comes from the Opium War and the resulting fierce competition to sell, consume, and tax opium? I would certainly never think of promoting the use of opium, which has the power to ruin families, kill people, destroy countries, and eliminate races.”

The author admits to some use of opium and even heroin (baimian), but the instances are few and far between “so of course I feel that in writing this opium essay, I lack sufficient experience and literary reflection. However, I would rather be inadequate to the task of writing a relaxed and ingenious essay like Opium, The Illustrated Diary of His Cure.” From here he proceeds to an increasingly impassioned protest at the damage still being done in China by opium use, quoting at length the alarmed editorial of an official named Zhou Lisheng, who decried the depths to which opium use in Hubei Province, especially in the cities of Wuhan and Yichang, had dragged the people there. As Shu Shan’s article reaches its conclusion, the cultural fascination with the drug coming back from Europe is brought into direct confrontation with opium’s sinister history in China: he highlights the discrepancy between the contemporary fashion for opium and grim realities in the interior, as well as the growing threat from Japan, which could benefit from Chinese weakness brought about by opium. The reader can only wonder, then, why The Analects Fortnightly celebrates other addictions, tobacco foremost among them, that profit the forces of economic imperialism?

*Taibai and the Utilitarian Critique of the Analects Group*

To put the Analects group’s project in a larger perspective, I will close this chapter with a discussion of the most concerted attack on the xiaopin wen, launched mainly by left-leaning writers. However seriously writers like Yu Dafu and Lin Yutang may have taken the genre, the xiaopin wen craze is
brought into sharpest relief by the appearance of *Taibai*, a prose literature journal established by a group largely populated by League of Leftwing Writers. The magazine’s purpose is set out in Xu Maoyong’s 1934 statement “Yao ban yige zheyang de zazhi” (This is the kind of magazine we want to run): it was to be a vehicle for the promotion of “mass language” (*dazhong yu*) through prose works written by or from the words of the masses. The departments included *duan lun* (brief critical essays), *suxie* (sketches), *mantan* (rambling talk), *kexue xiaopin* (scientific *xiaopin*), *dushu ji* (reading notes), *fengsu zhi* (customs and folkways), *zakao* (miscellaneous studies), and *wenxuan* (selected texts; these were often late imperial informal prose). Woodcuts and cartoons (*manhua*) were also included. The contribution guidelines say that “any kind of text is welcome,” but no poetry, fiction, or drama was ever included. Thus while C. T. Hsia is right in maintaining that *Taibai* seems to have been a leftist reaction to the *xiaopin wen* craze, it should be pointed out that the content of these various departments was indeed in a much simpler language than that in Analects group publications, and many of the critical articles were concerned with the issue of “mass language” and its promotion. If Leftwing League writers were going to practice something like *xiaopin wen*, they were nonetheless disinclined to call it *xiaopin wen*, and the product was in fact quite different from what filled the pages of *This Human World*.

Still, the reactive quality of *Taibai* is evident in a special supplementary issue brought out in book form entitled *Xiaopin wen he manhua* (*Xiaopin wen* and cartoons), in which dozens of contributors put in their two cents about the directions *xiaopin wen* should and should not go. According to the editor’s introduction, the phenomenal development of the two forms in the mid-1930s prompted the editors to solicit contributions by letter from as many writers as they could. The *xiaopin wen* explosion was of such magnitude that what by all accounts was the leftist literary “mainstream” felt a critical need to address the phenomenon on its own terms, and the editors rushed through the process of editing and typesetting, adding many of the late contributions in the order they were received. If Lu Xun’s 1933 “The Crisis of *Xiaopin wen*,” discussed above, was the first shot across the bow, by 1935 and publication of the special issue of *Taibai*, the sense of crisis was all the more acute.

Most of the special issue’s initial articles express opposition to modern *xiaopin wen*, their authors seeming to view it as a kind of a cancer on contemporary literature. Mao Dun’s first article is representative, beginning with the sentence: “I don’t believe that ‘xiaopin wen’ should be centered on the individual, personal style, *xingling*, or leisure.” Mao Dun is responding directly to the language of Lin Yutang’s editorial introduction to *This Human World*,
quoted above in the Introduction. He goes on to say that though xiaopin wen may have had these characteristics in a certain era, we should not take this to mean that they are inherent to the form or we should imitate them. Many other articles chime in, eager to take down the popular xiaopin wen industry.

Other articles emphasize the positive possibilities for xiaopin wen, among them Ye Shengtao’s “Guanyu xiaopin wen” (On xiaopin wen). Even more than Mao Dun, Ye represents the perspective of the White Horse Lake group, whose attitudes toward essay writing had not changed discernibly since it formed in the early 1920s. In this article, Ye is not so much concerned about what literature is supposed to do, but conveys rather the worries of an educator who sees a proliferation of bad, dry prose writing in newspapers and magazines and textbooks. Ye calls for a heightened attention to xiaopin wen as a positive stylistic alternative to writing that he associates with dull teaching materials and lecture notes. In closing he refers to the recent emergence of the notion of xiaopin wen as a form of literature, whereas before literature was thought to include only fiction, drama, and poetry. He retroactively looks at great works of prose from the premodern period, including but not limited to leisure literature, and asserts that these were nonfiction prose works and yet were of great literary value.

A contributor named Fo Lang also seems enthusiastic about the xiaopin wen genre, but he draws a clear distinction between the traditional form and the modern one. Fo Lang is accurate, I think, in characterizing the traditional form as a “leisure activity,” a form of writing that was an alternative to zaidao or utilitarian/moralistic prose. This, he asserts, was a kind of ornamental game, one he compares to antique connoisseurship or raising flowers and birds. This kind of writing helped literati (wenren) kill time and escape boredom, and may have stimulated conversation over tea or wine, but, he insists, it was ultimately “wasted ink.” By contrast, Fo Lang argues, the reason that modern xiaopin wen has flourished in recent times is that it meets crucial needs in contemporary social life. In a tumultuous era, the masses expect to fulfill their desire for knowledge economically, and that is why xiaopin wen, with its characteristic brevity and clarity, has become the most appropriate form of reading material these days.

I doubt that modern xiaopin wen and other kinds of sanwen in the 1930s functioned exactly the way Fo Lang puts it here. It may be that he wishes it were so, and is projecting the desires of modern, “progressive” intellectuals for writing in general and especially literature onto the genre of essays. He may, however, be also aware that, first of all, the leisurely, playful, and ornamental qualities of traditional essays may not be a bad thing that excludes them from the category of literature. Second, many modern writers were responding to
what was best in the late imperial essay when they created modern xiaopin wen in the vernacular idiom. Fo Lang’s characterization of the late imperial essay as “pure amusement” overstates the case, for there was something of value in amusement that was being preserved in the modern essay as well. Fo Lang does say that there are dregs of the traditional xiaopin wen still in existence, but from an evolutionary perspective, the proliferation of new and different experimental forms, including scientific xiaopin and reportage literature, was encouraging and presumably would hasten the demise of the decadent, traditional style xiaopin wen.77

In like manner, Xu Qinwen’s “Guanyu xiaopin wen” (About xiaopin wen) makes an effort to give a balanced account of the place of xiaopin in modern culture.78 In his concluding paragraphs about how he employs xiaopin in his own creative process and its relationship to writing fiction, however, his sympathies are revealed in a vivid and homely simile: “I once went through a period where, after having stopped writing for a while, I always had to write a few xiaopin before I could begin to compose fiction again. It was like in preparing to give a speech, you have to spit out the phlegm in your mouth first.”79 In sum, there is little surprising in the hostility of leftists (and other May Fourth writers committed to literature’s social function) toward xiaopin. What is striking is that, even as they criticize, they do so fully mounted on the bandwagon, publishing xiaopin wen themselves, as we see in the essay magazine Taibai. But it was not only the leftists who attacked the xiaopin wen of the Analects group. In the next chapter we will see the way cleared for modern essay writing of unprecedented artistic seriousness, from the younger generation of the Beijing school.
The dream is a literary trope familiar to the Chinese reader. From earliest times, the dream has been invoked in Chinese writing to present philosophical skepticism about the self/world opposition and other dichotomies (Zhuangzian Daoism), to suggest the illusory quality of life, suffering, and desire (Buddhism), to imagine a bridge or a line of communication between the living and the dead, between spirits in the heavens, under the seas, or in the underworld (folk culture, vernacular fiction). The dream has been associated with literature at the margins of the intellectual, social, and moral norms of Confucianism—the literatures of hermits, eccentrics, and poets of unusual imagination and lyrical vision, particularly in the late imperial period, when works of fiction, drama, and essays that elaborate the trope of the dream were particularly numerous. I have illustrated in chapter 1 how central such dream literature was to the tradition of leisure literature, and especially how moderns like Zhou Zuoren and Zhu Jianmang understood and explained it. What makes the dream differ from wandering, indulgence in enjoyment, and humor (though not from learning), is that its

Xiaopin wen and cartoons are richest in dreamlike qualities among forms of creation; images in dreams, no matter how false, or how real the feelings, remind one of the special consciousness of xiaopin wen and cartoons. From this it can be surmised that good xiaopin wen and cartoons must bring the reader or viewer into a hypnotic state, a state of mind just like dreaming. Put another way, the closer the content of xiaopin wen and cartoon are to a dream, the more valuable they are as works and the more able they are to move people.¹

—Sun Langgong, “Xiaopin wen, Cartoons, and Dreams”
elaboration in prose essays is rarely done for the sake of amusement. Among the activities I have used to define the various types of modern essay, in fact, dreaming may be said to be the most serious and the paradigm that lends itself best to the creation of lasting works of literary art.

The elaboration of difference between the so-called Beijing and Shanghai schools has complicated the grouping of modern Chinese writers; where before writers had been grouped mainly by social affiliation, publishing house/bookstore, or membership in a literary association, the later geographical distinction added a new layer to this mix. Additionally, the Shanghai/Beijing split is not geographic in the sense of origin, since Beijing school writers were not generally from Beijing, and Shanghai school writers were not from Shanghai.2

The Beijing school is especially hard to pin down. This is readily understandable when you see that the various ways of defining the Beijing school all share some form of affiliation with institutions of higher learning in Beijing.3 This category includes writers from a number of different groupings, by virtue of the fact that they were attracted as students or as faculty to the premier educational institutions in the land. Higher education affiliations in Beijing characterize the group around Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren (the Threads of Conversation group); the Anglo-American-oriented writers of the Crescent Moon and Contemporary Review groups were also made up mainly of university faculty; many Chinese Literary Association writers who became critical of the “pure literature” emphasis of the second group were also affiliated with universities in Beijing (Zhu Ziqing and Wen Yiduo at Tsinghua, for instance). And I have observed that the core of the Analects group shared an academic profile in Shanghai, although many had been schooled in Beijing.

Another thing these groups had in common was the belief that artistic creation should be more or less independent of politics, a belief manifested in a variety of different ways. Thus all the various subgroups of the Beijing school tended to take the essay more seriously as an art form than other groups of modern Chinese writers. Since I have already treated the Threads of Conversation and the White Horse Lake groups above, in this chapter I will concentrate on what may be considered the origin or core of the Beijing school—the Crescent Moon group, which would continue through the 1930s and beyond. I only treat them now for two reasons: First, with the exception of Xu Zhimo, members of this group only began to take writing artistic essays seriously relatively late, in the mid-1930s.4 Their intervention in this genre, like the Leftwing League’s Taibai effort that included members of the White Horse Lake group, was a reaction to the proliferation of xiaopin wen under
the influence of the Analects group. Second, and more important, the essays of the Beijing school best represent the modern Chinese essay in its artistic maturity. Though less well known in literary history than the essays of the Threads of Conversation or Analects groups, the Beijing school essays, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the relative seriousness with which they regard essay writing—a seriousness that generally rubs against the grain of leisure literature—deserve attention as a vital part of the modern Chinese literary legacy.5

Essays of the Crescent Moon Group

The Crescent Moon group originated in a Beijing salon that centered on Hu Shi, Liang Shiqiu, and Xu Zhimo, and was active between 1923 and 1926. After the 1926 exodus of cultural progressives from Beijing, Xu and company reassembled in Shanghai in 1927 and established the Crescent Moon bookstore (also a publishing house) and the literary journal Crescent Moon Monthly, which ran until 1934. With members like Chen Xiying, Ling Shuhua, Wen Yiduo, and others, the Crescent Moon group represented the outlook cultivated through Anglo-American educational experience, both in terms of political positioning and artistic and critical sensibilities. Many of them had past or ongoing links with universities in Beijing, so although they worked in Shanghai at the peak of Crescent Moon Monthly’s influence, they retained a core connection with the “Beijing school.” In fact, the Beijing school would evolve largely from the remnants of the Crescent Moon group.

The literary essay was not a central concern of the Crescent Moon group in the early years of its existence; its members were more interested in poetry, criticism, and fiction. Crescent Moon magazine occasionally carried essays by Peking University English professor Chen Xiying (1896–1970) and a young critic returned from Columbia University named Liang Shiqiu, but much more space was devoted to other forms.6 I draw attention to the original Crescent Moon group here because of their social continuity with the Beijing school and their introduction of a dream-oriented sensibility that crossed genres and in some cases blurred the boundary between fiction and essays.

My discussion of the Crescent Moon group must begin with an examination of dream states and fictionality in Xu Zhimo’s narrative writing, including his short stories and essays. It was Xu who had, early on, devoted unusual energy to writing lyrical and narrative prose essays, most of which appeared in books. In the aftermath of Xu’s death in 1931, Shen Congwen and other remnants of the Crescent Moon group led a new generation of young academics to
form a more or less distinctively literary school in Beijing in the mid-1930s. Following Shen Congwen’s lead in the articulation of a regionally flavored lyrical consciousness, younger members of the group like Bian Zhilin, He Qifang, Li Guangtian, Lu Fen, and Xiao Qian, revolutionized the modern Chinese literary essay. Their works appeared in a set of venues that came to be associated with the Beijing school, such as the supplement Wenyi (Literary art) of the Tianjin edition of the newspaper Dagong bao (L’Impartial), Ba Jin and Jin Yi’s literary journal Wenxue jikan (Literature quarterly), the magazine Shuixing (Mercury), and the publisher Wenhua shenghuo chubanshe.

This trajectory was greatly hampered by the outbreak of war in 1937. At that point, many of these writers left Beijing and became engaged in anti-Japanese literary activism, for which the prose modes they had pioneered could only be used in the creation of reportage with explicitly anti-Japanese themes. Nevertheless, it was from among the ranks of the Crescent Moon generation that the most resounding voice in favor of literary autonomy emerged. As mentioned in chapter 1, Liang Shiqiu provoked a severe attack from the mainstream community of activist writers by welcoming literature unrelated to the war in his newspaper supplement. In the face of this unpleasantness, Liang went on to publish one of the most historically detached but influential collections of the war period, Yashe xiaopin (Xiaopin of the Elegant Lodging). It is almost ironic that a proponent of the Beijing school who, as a group, produced their most lasting contributions to modern Chinese prose in reaction against xiaopin wen, should produce one of the twentieth century’s most influential collections of xiaopin wen at the height of the war against Japan.

Xu Zhimo: Confessions of a Dreamer

Notwithstanding Lin Yutang’s elaborate praise for the smoky, eccentric character of British academe, it was Xu Zhimo who first brought a vivid encounter with England, and other parts of Europe, back to China in the form of rhapsodic poetry and prose. Xu Zhimo’s prose essays essentially do two things—first, they present a vividly realized, sensual, and idyllic dream, a romantic fantasy of encounters with a soft-focused, resplendent Nature and idealized visions of women, similar to Zhu Ziqing’s lyrical world. Second, to varying degrees, his essays realize the awareness, the possibility, even the experience of awakening from these fond dreams to a state of disillusionment, but one that is not quite a realistic, historical vision of social reality. Rather, this disillusionment combines realization of the unreality of the vivid dreams with an almost Buddhistic awareness of the inescapability of decay, suffering, and death. In short, the dreamer awakens not so much to the necessity of so-
cial action as to the pitiful vanity of it all, whether hopes for fulfillment of the
dream in a kind of spiritual redemption or victory in the struggles against
feudalism, capitalism, and imperialism. This type of awakening echoes that of
Zhang Dai retreating from the world in the early Qing, after the opulent plea-
sure world of his late Ming youth collapsed around him.

Reading, for example, Xu’s “Wo suo zhidaod de Kangqiao” (The Cam-
bridge I knew) and “Feilengcui shanju xianhua” (Chats from a Florentine
mountain lodge) against his “Zipou” (Self-analysis), one can see that the tran-
scendent visions of beauty, nature, and purity that Xu achieves (significantly,
only in a foreign environment) are never completely free of his awareness of
the growing political violence in China in the mid-1920s, which would over-
whelm him on his return to China in 1925. The idealistic and idyllic sides of
these essays may be said to be the prose version of Xu’s larger lyrical vision ex-
pressed in his poetry as well.8

Xu Zhimo also situates himself in the tradition of leisure literature by
writing elegies like his tribute to Lin Huiyin’s father Lin Changmin, and one
of his last writings, the preface to the collection Menghu ji (Ferocious tiger)
published in 1931, the year Xu died. Like his “Self-Analysis,” these pieces con-
tain substantial autobiographical elements, conveyed at times with excessive
self-deprecation. The elegy to Lin Changmin in particular brings into sharp
focus domestic life as a site of human meaning, a theme that I have shown
was important in the White Horse Lake group’s essays.

Xu Zhimo’s unique contribution to the modern Chinese essay was his in-
troduction of conspicuously fictional elements, which created new possibili-
ties for exploring themes of illusion and disenchantment, and would set the
course for the Beijing school essay. These can be seen with particular clarity
in his enigmatic works “Nongde huabukai (Xinjiapo)” (Too thick to dissolve
[Singapore]) and “Sicheng (Beijing de yiwan)” (Dead city [A Night in Bei-
jing]).9 In terms of writing technique, these pieces are atmospherically satu-
rated, but quite differently in each case. “Too Thick to Dissolve” is an
extended meditation on the tropics—here represented by Singapore—as a
kaleidoscope of sensual richness—deep thick greens, dark browns and black,
the jungle cacophony, monsoon rains, overdeveloped and brightly colored
luscious fruits and flowers, a sensual dark-skinned woman, and even the taste
of chocolate. Over the course of the essay’s vivid and sometimes giddy de-
scription, the title recurs as a kind of refrain, applied to substances, sounds,
and tactile sensations. “Dead City,” on the other hand, depicts Beijing as a
great silent graveyard on a starry night. Moon and snow are the principal vi-
suals, against which the Qianmen gate is perceived as a great dark skull. Long
dark “hutong” alleyways reveal only the black sky, moon, and stars, before at
long last opening out onto a large road. This night scene is populated only sparsely, the occasional figure eerily eliciting baleful imaginings and meditations in the mind of the protagonist.

Though Zhou Zuoren included both of these pieces in the first essay volume of the 1935 *Compendium of Chinese New Literature*, they are plainly short stories, or chapters of a novel. Both of Xu’s “essays” share a protagonist by the name of Lin Lianfeng, whose activities are narrated without irony in the third person by an inconspicuous narrator who has complete access to Lianfeng’s thoughts and emotions, which take up the lion’s share of space in both works. Lin is for the most part alone, but each text dramatizes an encounter with one other character toward its conclusion, an encounter whose exposition is inextricably bound with these works’ theme of disenchantment.

Each text narrates events taking place over a period of a few hours, an afternoon or evening in “Too Thick to Dissolve” and late at night in “Dead City.” The reader is told nothing about Lin Lianfeng, but the nature of his encounters with these two places suggests he is traveling, and neither place is home. “Too Thick to Dissolve” begins with Lianfeng’s meditation on the lush, moist, south seas environment of Singapore, followed by a brief excursion, after which he returns to his lodgings after a refreshing rainfall. There, he is struck dumb by an encounter with an exotic, dark-skinned beauty near the stairs of the inn. Lianfeng’s head spins with the associations of a gallery of modern artists, Gauguin conspicuous among them, and an obsessive association with the taste of chocolate, which becomes Lianfeng’s private nickname for the woman. This reverie is taking place in the privacy of Lianfeng’s room, when “Chocolate” suddenly opens the door, walks into the room, and sits on his bed. She begins to tell him how she noticed him looking at her—does he not love her, would he not take her for his wife? Chocolate’s behavior suggests that she is either Lianfeng’s fantasy, or a prostitute. An impressionistic passage then suggests love-making, and when the text recovers a degree of clarity, we find Lianfeng lying in a sweat, with the taste of chocolate—“too thick to dissolve”—lingering in his mouth.

“Dead City” begins with Lianfeng’s arrival by train late at night. The old train station stood right next to and outside the Qianmen gate, a short distance from the foreign concession. As noted, Lianfeng encounters the Beijing night vista as enshrouded with the pall of death, and his seeking diversion on the moonlit night of his arrival, only adds to the elegiac tone. After wandering about atop the city wall, he hears gay voices from an ice skating rink in the American military base, but an exchange of glances with the guard outside the compound confirms his suspicion that the place is off limits to Chinese. Lianfeng then continues his stroll through a long *hutong* in the foreign concession,
where he suddenly finds himself in a clearing before an open gate to a cemetery. Inside the snow cover is, unlike the dirty slush on the road, pure and untrammeled. He enters the foreigners’ cemetery and begins to peruse the headstones, when he discovers the grave of a German woman who had apparently died when she was only twenty-two. This sends Lianfeng into a fit of melancholy, punctuated by the occasional awareness that he is freezing cold, but dominated by his fantasy of addressing the young lady, almost as if he were in love with her.

In the famous Ming dynasty romantic play *Peony Pavilion* by Tang Xianzu, Du Liniang, a beautiful and talented young woman, falls in love with the hero, Liu Mengmei (“Liu Dreams-of-Plum-Blossoms”) in a dream, without ever having met him in waking life. She is so stricken that she falls ill and dies. The promising young Liu Mengmei, on his way to the capital to take the civil service examination, encounters Du Liniang’s spirit and agrees to bring her back to life by reuniting her spirit with her body. Liu is beset with many obstacles, particularly Liniang’s family, in the process, but he is ultimately successful.

It would be clear to Xu Zhimo’s readers that Lin Lianfeng is imagining himself as a modern Liu Mengmei to the Du Liniang of “Fraulein Eliza Berkson,” which is to say that Lin has entered a dream world in which star-crossed lovers separated by death can communicate their pure desires without worldly obstacles such as family, society, or even nationality or culture. The dream as a bridge to the supernatural eases the suspension of disbelief, particularly for modern readers, but it is also a staple trope in late imperial Chinese fiction and prose literature, whose central emphasis on the cult of emotions and conspicuous resistance to conventional Confucian social/moral norms mark it distinctively as the literature of leisure I describe above in chapter 1.

Lin Lianfeng’s soliloquy on love and death elicited by this encounter, the gist of which is, “I am not dead, but you, who are, have somehow kindled the fire of passion within me,” goes on for paragraphs, but as Lianfeng gradually becomes aware again of his frigid, desolate surroundings, a mysterious figure enters the gate and wanders about the graveyard, eventually heading towards Lianfeng. Predictably, Lianfeng is gripped by apprehension, suspecting he is being approached by a ghost, perhaps even that of the foreign woman; it turns out, as one might expect, to be the cemetery’s gatekeeper, an old man at the extremes of poverty.

The text takes a left turn here. What follows is a dialogue between Lin and the gatekeeper that, through the old man’s perspective, presents Beijing as a “dead city” in a very different way—a city full of starving homeless people in
the midst of economic and political turmoil, abandoned by “the rich people” who might have come to the poor’s assistance. The tale of a failed suicide pact between a desperate married couple is related in gruesome detail as evidence that at their extreme, poverty and suffering bring one to want nothing more than death. Essentially frightened away by the bitter old man, Lianfeng hires a rickshaw to return to his lodgings. Several times during the trip northwest, we are told that Lianfeng thought to stop the rickshaw puller and suggest changing places with him, but “he could not bring himself to say the words.” Having attempted unsuccessfully to communicate with the dead girl, Lianfeng is then harangued by the gatekeeper, and although moved by his speech, is nevertheless unable to speak or act in response to it.

Like “Too Thick to Dissolve,” “Dead City” ends with the protagonist left in a state of disillusionment brought about by a real encounter with someone who seemed at first to step out of his fantasies. The texts achieve no resolution, but rather leaves the reader with the protagonist’s emotional distress and ambivalence—about himself and about life—brought on by his awareness of disillusionment or disenchantment, even as fragments of his fantasies still haunt him.

The reality of this emotional state on Xu Zhimo’s part is brought home in his preface to his third and last poetry collection, *The Ferocious Tiger*. Xu recapitulates his poetic career, placing particular emphasis on how other Beijing school poets like Wen Yiduo, Chen Mengjia, and Chu Anping (1909–1956) made Xu realize how childish and undisciplined his earliest works were. But Xu ends the preface with a sudden and excruciating appeal to critics who find him lacking in social consciousness:

I just want to take this opportunity to reassure my friends and let them know that I still have something left in me; I still have something to say in the midst of all the pressures of real life.

You must not criticize me any more. I feel like my head is all bloodied, and it is a wonder that I can even hold it up. You also don’t have to remind me of the times we are living in, tell me of the disaster everywhere and the greater chaos that we can see now and that is hidden for the future. You do not have to tell me that today alone there are a hundred million people submerged in a flood, or ten billion starving people begging to be saved. Nor do you have to persuade me that a few lines of rhymed or unrhymed poetry are not going to save a single life, that my thinking is backward or my rhymes are in line with an obsolete ideology . . . all of this, and much more, I know, I know it all, and every time you say it, it makes me more miserable. I have nothing more to say, I just want you to remember there is a kind of bird that heaven made to sing
until it spits up blood. Its song contains the happiness of another world it alone knows, and a tragedy and pain it alone knows. A poet is such a foolish bird; he places his tender heart firmly upon a bed of thorny roses, and in his mouth he sings of the brilliance of the stars and moon and the hope of mankind, and he doesn’t stop until the blood of his heart drips out and makes the white flowers completely red; his pain and happiness are all mixed up together.¹⁰

Shen Congwen and the Emergence of the Beijing School

Xu Zhimo’s sudden death in an airplane crash on November 19, 1931, was a crushing blow to the Crescent Moon group as such. The disappearance of the Crescent Moon name from literary discourse, even while group members like Lin Huiyin, Shen Congwen, and Liang Shiqiu continued to pursue literary activities more or less in line with Crescent Moon’s aesthetic positioning, can only be interpreted as deference to Xu Zhimo himself, who to them embodied Crescent Moon. Yet it was in the early 1930s that the lines were drawn for a battle between socially redemptive and pure literatures, and the remnants of the Crescent Moon group in Beijing aligned themselves without exception on the side of the autonomy of art. Apart from Liang Shiqiu (and, to an extent, Shen Congwen), they did not engage in polemical battles. Rather, they made their point by quietly crafting some of the best works of fiction, poetry, drama, and essays of the first half of the twentieth century. Eventually these reached a critical mass that allowed Shen Congwen to draw attention to them in his article “Learn from the Facts”:

In the process of wrangling over slogans, names, right and wrong, gain and loss, the South—with Shanghai at its center—had reached the achievement of “zawen above all else” . . . while in the North, in the so-called deathly silent great city, a group of powerful and lively writers had grown up. Cao Yu, Lu Fen [Shi Tuo], Bian Zhilin, Xiao Qian, Lin Huiyin, Li Jianwu, He Qifang, Li Guangtian . . . have successively become well known to people in this period, and it is not only their names that have become well known, but the excellent works produced by their modest attitudes . . . though this development has been slow and sluggish, most people can see how far and deeply their influence continues to exert itself. In terms of the kinds of support it has taken to achieve this, we must not forget the ideals of Dagong bao’s literary supplement, the approach to running a university literature department shared by Zhu Guangqian, Wen Yiduo, Zheng Zhenduo, Ye Gongchao, and Zhu Ziqing, and the approach brought to the running of big literary journals by Ba Jin and Jin Yi.¹¹
This list of authors includes playwrights, novelists, and poets, some of whom devoted considerable energy to writing essays, but none of whom was principally known for that. When Shen Congwen speaks derisively of “zawen above all else,” he is not only talking about what we now refer to narrowly as zawen—the combative satirical essays after the style of Lu Xun. In the 1930s, zawen still referred broadly to “miscellaneous prose” (I noted Xia Mianzun’s use of the term this way in the preface to his Random Writings from the Bungalow), so in effect, Shen is referring to essays in general. When he extols the new crop of writers emerging in Beiping under his sponsorship, their accomplishments in this genre are not his uppermost concern, and in fact, the rhetoric of this passage almost opposes zawen to literature of the kind and quality he is applauding.

Shen Congwen himself is of course famous for nonfiction prose writing, especially his Xiangxing sanji (Notes on a journey through Hunan) and Xiang xi (West Hunan), both of which are lavishly descriptive collections of essays about western Hunan, the backdrop of Shen’s most famous works of fiction as well. Notes on a Journey through Hunan, the earlier work, is more straightforwardly a travelogue that digresses into consideration of the texture of daily life among people who live along the Xiang River. West Hunan further explores the at times mythic situations and character types of this half-imagined local world to which Shen Congwen lays exclusive claim.

Studies of Shen Congwen discuss several of the essays in these collections, largely to illuminate the meaning or techniques of Shen’s fiction by contrast. Although the vivid tapestry of rural life among the Miao in Western Hunan is quite different in subject matter from the urbane and cosmopolitan imaginative worlds of Crescent Moon writings, the imaginative fictionality, the multiple temporalities, the idealized discourses of desire often attributed to Shen Congwen’s nativist vision, are all indicative of the Beijing school’s penchant for creative dreaming, which we can already see in Xu Zhimo’s essays. It is even more evident in Beijing school poetry.

Some of Shen Congwen’s early published writings were very much in the mythical-romantic vein characteristic of the Crescent Moon group, and they often took the form of short essays. But Shen would prove his devotion to fiction as a creative outlet in ensuing years, and his later more influential literary essays such as Notes on a Journey through Hunan, were much longer than the works of Li Guangtian and He Qifang I discuss below, making them more akin to short stories than to xiaopin wen. Though Li and He were later to become principally known as poets, their earliest recognized efforts were in the form of essays that are arguably xiaopin wen; He Qifang’s first essay collection Huameng lu (Pictures of dreams) and Li Guangtian’s Hualang ji (Gallery)
were probably the works that earned them recognition in Shen Congwen’s quotation above.

Shen was probably the most important bridge between the Crescent Moon group and the Beijing school. A veteran of the Crescent Moon group, he unified the literary academics who remained in Beijing after the southern migration of revolutionary writers, by publicly declaring their presence and defining them as serious literary artists in contrast to his view of the Shanghai school. And by writing literature that resisted mimetic interpretation and connections with current events and social issues, he reasserted the autonomy of literary art.

**The Beijing School and Xiaopin Wen**

As I have shown in the previous chapter, the provocative stance of the Analects group elicited heated discussion among leftists and others committed to socially effective literature about the nature of xiaopin wen and how it should be used. Interestingly, Beijing school writers, who were certainly not allies of the left wing, also came out against xiaopin wen. Though the Beijing school writers did not represent a single view of literature, the affiliation of most of them with Peking University’s foreign literatures and philosophy departments provided a more sophisticated common encounter with Western literature than that shared by the May Fourth generation, one informed moreover by the theoretical lights of New Criticism. Literature for them was serious business, the product of erudition and hard work, and thus their distaste for xiaopin wen had less to do with its social inefficacy than with its perceived frivolousness. Zhu Guangqian, in an early 1936 letter to a “Mr. Xu” (Xu Xu of the Analects group), responded to a request to write something for Xu’s new magazine Heaven, Earth, and Man, which was supposed to be something like This Human World but “more youthful.” Zhu surmises from this that the magazine still intends to feature xiaopin wen and questions the need for yet another such magazine—we have plenty of xiaopin wen already, too much will make us sick of it. Then he launches a harsh critique of the project to promote Ming-style xiaopin wen in modern times: The Gongan and Jingling writers of the late Ming advocated the direct expression of feelings and concerns in lucid contemporary language as opposed to the imitation of ancient literary style and the passive regurgitation of conventional morality. If twentieth century writers and readers idolize such writers and imitate their style, are they not also imitating the ancients? “The common ailment of all Chinese art has always been the production of fake antiques.”
If we who are born in the twentieth century insist on making a great fanfare for late Ming xiaopin wen, are we not playing the same fake antique game as the “ancient style” (guwen) promoters Gui Youguang and Fang Bao? Both the Gui/Fang school and today’s believers in late Ming xiaopin are striving toward “elegance” (ya), but what they have come up with is “an elegance of unbearable crudity (su).” If you want elegance it should be elegant from the beginning; if you have to learn it you’ll never escape vulgarity.18

Shen Congwen had already taken up the issue from the point of view of “elegance” and “vulgarity,” but his concern was more moral, and thus his objection to humorous essays resembles that of the left more closely. His “Fengya yu suqi” (The elegant and the vulgar) is mainly critical of xiaopin wen as a hypocritical pose of sophistication assumed by authors who in many cases had embraced earnest moral agendas in the May Fourth era, but were now using xiaopin wen to maintain or uphold their reputation on the literary scene. Shen does not name names, but everybody knew who was promoting xiaopin wen. Shen decries the demoralizing influence such writing has on young readers and writers and yearns for the emergence of writers who are not afraid to be “vulgar,” which he uses sarcastically to mean straightforward and sincere.

In typical Beijing school essay fashion, Shen approaches this point through a narrative and a perhaps imaginary character. He describes a “friend” who represents the attitude he is attacking, who, in order not to seem old-fashioned, claims that artistic technique is less important than the ideas and the content of a literary work, yet in another context adamantly insists that literature cannot be subordinated to moral or political agendas. This latter position Shen refers to as “elegant sophistication” (fengya) and implies that it is hypocritical. Shen’s conclusion is, for the Beijing school, uncharacteristically “obsessed with China”:

To me, the only hope for a nation to produce great works is if it abounds in people who have courage, who can go crazy, be thoroughly stubborn, and take big chances. The overall effect of humor magazines is to teach authors and readers, young and old, to be jaded (shigu), as if everybody is very clever and unruffled, and so wash their hands of any evil forces or trends. In the dark they may poke or pinch at so-called enemies, but they also know how to make a quick getaway and avoid any consequences. But [this way] no one possesses any personality, enthusiasm, no “muddleheaded” hopes or “risky” plans, no guts or doggedness. If we keep sliding along like this, how many more years can this country slide?19
Shih Shu-mei identifies “jingpai writing” as the critical and creative writings of Zhu Guangqian, Zhou Zuoren, Fei Ming, Ling Shuhua and Lin Huiyin. In her general discussion of Chinese modernism from a postcolonial theoretical perspective, Shih defines the Beijing school less in terms of the authors’ social affiliation or association with certain literary journals than by their alignment, by virtue of bicultural (generally Anglophone-Chinese) educational backgrounds and sensibility, with the so-called neotraditionalist critique of what Shih describes as “May Fourth Occidentalism.” That is, due to their bicultural (and thus global) perspectives, Beijing school writers were able to apply the current Western modernist critique of modernity to the Chinese situation and thus develop a much different idea of Chinese tradition than was current among the May Fourth cohort, who believed that complete Westernization and the rejection of virtually all aspects of traditional Chinese culture were essential to China’s survival. As Shih’s section title for the Beijing school (“Modernity without Rupture”) indicates, the philosophers, critics, and writers of this group did not believe that a break with the cultural past was necessary to the task of rejuvenation, any more than did their Western mentors Henri Bergson, Rudolph Eucken, Bertrand Russell, and Irving Babbitt. Accompanying the nonteleological philosophies (including critiques of Nietzsche, Darwin, and Hegel) promoted by these thinkers and brought into China by Liang Shuming, Zhang Junmai and Zhu Guangqian, was a richer philosophical basis for a theory of pure, universal art, which may be said to be one defining context for Beijing school writing.

Fan Peisong, however, in his Zhongguo xiandai sanwen piping shi, discusses a different—though not unrelated—group of individuals as Beijing school essayists. Following Shen Congwen’s discussion of Beijing writers in “Learn from Reality,” Fan identifies the group in terms of its association with Peking University and the literary periodicals cited above. Comparing with Shih Shu-mei’s list, Fan Peisong’s seems to be missing Zhou Zuoren and Fei Ming, but the authors he mentions that are missing from Shih Shu-mei’s list (Cao Yu, Li Guantian, He Qifang, Bian Zhilin and Xiao Qian, for example) are all arguably more bicultural than was common on the Chinese literary scene.

As quoted by Fan Peisong, Shen Congwen cited three enabling factors behind the Beijing school’s convergence: newspaper supplements, the university, and literary journals. The support of publications cannot be overemphasized, but to my mind it was their association with the academic study of literature in Beiping, particularly at Peking University in the late 1920s and
early 1930s, that can be viewed as the defining element of Beijing school writers. Fan adds that among these writers, Shen Congwen, Lu Fen, Xiao Qian, He Qifang, Zhu Guangqian and Li Guangtian distinguished themselves as essayists, but they are so different from one another they can hardly be called a “school” (liupai). Nevertheless, their creative practice generally resembles that of what Fan calls the “expressive school” (yanzhi shuo sanwen piping), thus aligning them with Zhou Zuoren and his followers.22

Furthermore, Fan reconstructs a definition of “expression” (biaoxian) from the various (if few) pieces by Beijing school essayists about prose writing:

“Expression” is remote from “reality”; the Beijing school writers tend to avoid contemporary social reality. Both Li Guangtian and Lu Fen define themselves, like Shen Congwen, as “country people,” evoking a sense of alienation from the city and its people, particularly intellectuals brought up entirely in an urban environment.

“Expression” is “self”; this is associated with the memory/history of dreams by Shen Congwen, He Qifang, Lu Fen, and Li Guangtian.23

The association of expression with self resonates strongly with Lin Yutang’s extravagantly individualist definition of xingling: “Xingling is nothing more than ‘self.’”24 Fan also points out that the Beijing school essayists’ notion of expression is close to Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang’s idea of yanzhi (expressing what is on one’s mind); the only difference is that the Beijing school essayists did not adopt a leisurely style due to their posturing as country people who had contempt for the leisure of city people.25

The Beijing school writers as identified by Shu-mei Shih also share the common project of creating modernity through negotiation between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture, negotiation that is not premised on the bankruptcy of tradition and the depravity of contemporary society:

I seek to understand how a mode of writing that did not base itself on a teleological conception of history and culture arose in the post-May Fourth era, how its nonteleological position marked a particular form of modernity and modernism (in this sense closer to Western aesthetic modernism than the May Fourth Modernism . . . ) and how this modernism theorized space, place, and locality in their connections to culture in the global context.26

This is evident in Shih’s examples, which feature literary theory and fiction, but it is less apparent in the Beijing school writers’ prose essays. Shih’s obser-
vation that Beijing school writing should be viewed as a form of modernism is an important insight, but how was this modernism manifested in essay practice?

**Lyrical Features**

He Qifang studied at Peking University together with Bian Zhilin and Li Guangtian. Bian writes of this time in his preface to the 1980 *Li Guangtian sanwen xuanji* (Selected essays of Li Guangtian). In it, Bian emphasizes that, though the three of them became better known for poetry and indeed devoted themselves to poetic creation during that time, Li Guangtian and He Qifang were actually quite serious about essay writing as well. Aware of the vast popularity of essays, they were also aware of something missing.

All of us avoided writing essays within a certain framework; we did not hesitate to blur the boundaries between short stories, oral tales, short expository essays or even poetic fragments. We didn’t worry if what we wrote came out “neither fish nor fowl,” but it had to have artistic integrity; we did not approve of poor excuses for writing being passed off as “essays” (*sanwen*). For some time, Li Guangtian wrote more essays than anything else, and sure enough, he wrote them like the “floating of clouds and flowing of water” he expected from others—lyrical, unpretentious (*pusu*), and indifferent to worldly concerns. As for Qifang, he achieved a real breakthrough in this area in the beginning, writing with precision and polish, a dense splendor. Both of them poured a considerable amount of poetic feeling and artistry into it, so their first published collections were essay collections—Guangtian’s *Hualang ji* [Gallery] and Qifang’s *Menghua lu* [Portraits from dreams].

Li Guangtian and He Qifang were accomplished poets, and many of their essays demonstrate an interest in maintaining a structure of images through repetition and associative progression. One also notes bold manipulation of linguistic and conceptual relationships in both physical description and emotional expression. It is in this sense they are more “artistic” than *xiaopin wen* of the groups discussed in the preceding chapters, which are often characterized by an either accidental or deliberate artlessness.

The opening two paragraphs of He Qifang’s, “Yu qian” (Before the rain), for example, are full of synaesthetic images: the green of willow branches is covered by dust and transformed to a “withered color” (*qiaocui se*); the sound of hoped-for rain is described as “soft as fine grass.” The “climate of my heart,” the author says, is as lacking in rainfall as this northern land. His
feelings are projected also onto white ducks “in an urban waterway with an unclean color” (you bujie yanse de dushi de hegou). The writer’s gaze follows the ducks through the water to the bank where they take a rest; the writer remembers someone who raised ducks in his hometown, but his yearning for rain reminds him how far away he is. “In this dusty land, I only want to hear the sound of rain on the leaves of trees. If the lonely coolness of a little patter of rain could drip into my withered dreams, perhaps it would grow into a round tree of green shadow that could shelter my self.”29 Raising his head to the gray sky, the writer’s face is struck by “fragments of cold” and a falcon “from far away” catches his eye, seemingly angry at the threatening sky, diving down nearly to the water’s edge, then soaring up again. The essay closes with the falcon’s shriek, “like a great cry from the heart, or one calling out for his companion in the dark. But the rain still does not come.” This essay is essentially held together by the lyrical motifs of birds and rain.

The author expresses negative emotions here—loneliness, homesickness, and contempt for the city—but not the expression of personality you see in xiaopin wen. The self is characterized in terms of lacks: he is lonely, misunderstood, looking for an understanding heart. The author then uses nature and memory (nostalgia) to imaginatively construct what is lacking. Themes and images are thus linked in a network only loosely tied to the text’s narrative and descriptive axes.

In addition to this associative lyrical structure, Beijing school essays on the formal level also feature experimentation in linguistic modes, particularly as they relate to the writer’s identity and the relationship created between the reader and the essay’s subject matter. Li Guangtian’s “Ye dian” (Wayside inn, 1936), for example, has an indeterminacy of context that recalls the iterative mode of Shen Congwen’s essays. The authorial voice sets a scene that the reader feels is an actual scene, an actual sequence of events, but the author peppers his rhetoric with words like “often,” “perhaps,” “would,” that prevent specificity of reference and evoke a sense of an ongoing, cyclical state of affairs:

You walk into a remote village—this village is unknown to you, yet it seems familiar because you have been to many such little villages. Looking around, you see that some houses’ gates are already shut, while others perhaps are still ajar. Some men are just now trudging home, trailed by dogs, oxen or goats; some women are just standing at the gates looking around, or using soft, soothing voices to call someone in for dinner. Perhaps you hear the sound of some of these gates shutting—you are probably thinking “If only I could go into one of these houses for a rest!” But not much farther ahead,
you perhaps discover a little inn by the side of the road, or at the crossing. Although you have to get back on the road early tomorrow morning, tonight you will surely have some good dreams.\textsuperscript{30}

Being written entirely in the second person, “Wayside Inn” creates a relationship with the author as the reader is invited to vicariously imagine the scene along with him. Maintaining the second person voice is risky, because the author is telling you what you are seeing and doing: we imagine ourselves with our eyes closed and the author, like a hypnotist, telling us what we see, how we feel. This only works because the scene takes on a life of its own, and the author seems to disappear. Thematically, though, the essay is a celebration of the virtues of country folk and rural living, and it thus feels somewhat didactic, as if a man from the countryside is addressing you as an urbanite and telling you how to really live. Li Guangtian frequently suggests the notion of dreaming (literally, textually, and metatextually), which gives the reader the sense that, though clothed in the sensory material of everyday reality, there is more—psychologically or mythologically—to the story, but the author does not explicitly lead the interpretation in this direction.

Character Portraits

Li Guangtian’s “Taoyuan zaji” (Peach orchard notes), “Huaniao Jiuye” (Uncle Flowers and Birds), and “Guoshi” (Transgression) all appeared in \textit{Gallery}, published in 1936.\textsuperscript{31} All are autobiographical, relatively realistic pieces about the author’s hometown and youth. As such they have much in common with Shen Congwen’s \textit{Notes from a Journey through Hunan}, and even Lu Xun’s short stories about Luzhen and essays about his youth. They resemble Shen Congwen’s work more than Lu Xun’s, though, because of the utter lack of sociohistorical consciousness and “obsession with China” that characterize Lu Xun’s writing. One of the most memorable aspects of both “Uncle Flowers and Birds” and “Transgression,” is the vivid Uncle character and the author’s complex feelings of admiration and pity towards him, especially in contrast to his feelings toward his own father.

In Li Guangtian’s mythology of nativism, this Uncle (jiuye) evokes the pastoral eremitic tradition, with elements of Zhuangzi, Tao Yuanming’s rejection of worldly, human-centered, and political concerns. It also invokes elements of the “art of living” tradition, the tradition of cultivating the simple pleasures in life represented by Su Shi, the Gongan and Jingling \textit{xiaopin wen} writers Li Yu, Yuan Mei, Zhang Dai, and Shen Fu, all favorite \textit{xiaopin wen} models. On the other hand, Uncle is a clear departure from the elitist \textit{ningshi} (“eminent man”) overtones of these forbears. He is a poor craftsman (a cob-
bler), but he knows how to derive pleasure and enjoy leisure without the tremendous cultural and social capital these ancient precursors had behind and around them:

He loved every flower and every bird, whether it was his own, someone else’s, flying in the air or growing by the road. If a little bird of some kind or other flies past him singing, then disappears, he turns his face to the sky and stares for a long time. He would wander on abandoned roads or graveyards searching for wildflowers and herbs. Of course, Uncle raised a lot of birds at his own house, and although among his herbs and flowers there was nothing rare, thanks to their rich colors, his intricate care and spare time, he had arranged his flowers and plants in patterns that were almost natural works of art. So although his house was run down, he had decorated it very attractively. That’s why people coming from in front of the river embankment can easily be directed to this house with a little garden. As to the birds, they were just finches and such; he was even raising sparrows among them. But they lived a very comfortable life, as if they were happy to be in the cage of such a master, chirping, hopping, hanging way up by the eaves, or on trees, making their master proud and passersby envious. When from his grain, so hard to come by, he managed to save some for these birds, his happiness was greater than we can imagine.32

This Uncle is recognizable as the sort of figure Zhou Zuoren admired and praised without reservation; his arrangement of his home and his delight in simple pleasures is reminiscent of Feng Zikai and Xia Mianzun’s essays. But Uncle’s impracticality and lack of industriousness (though trained as a cobbler, he only works occasionally) does not escape the attention of his relatives. Though the author clearly admires Uncle, and most agree that he is a good man, the author is also aware, at least in retrospect, of the reasons for the tensions between him and the rest of the family. In “Transgression,” which largely repeats the outline of the same Uncle’s personality, the writer tells the story of how as a teenager he began to build a garden outside his window in emulation of Uncle, with some of Uncle’s Chinese roses. The author’s hard-working father returns home only to lash out at his son for his waste of labor and water, which could have been used out in the fields. The infuriated writer takes out his anger by pushing down his father’s prized wolfberry tree, which as the author well understood, occupied the same place in his father’s heart as the garden and birds did in Uncle’s—the embodiment of natural beauty nurtured with one’s own hands. The writer is immediately overcome with remorse, confessing his transgression to his mother while his father is out in the fields, and his compassionate mother manages to transfer the blame to a stray
donkey. This is a moral exploration of the value of play or amusement versus socially useful work, a theme that resonates strongly with the essay practice of all schools of xiaopin wen, yet without allusions to premodern texts or personages, or for that matter, foreign ones.

Like White Horse Lake group essayists, Li Guangtian employs living space as the medium through which this Uncle and his otherworldly pastoral values are expressed. Uncle’s materially modest but imaginatively extravagant garden and the numerous birds decking his eaves and nesting in the elm tree in front of his house are the physical embodiment of a world view; so the transformation (perhaps symbolic of the passing of Uncle’s mother) wrought when the tree is removed is disorienting to the author. Uncle’s old age and the loss of his mother erode his leisurely complacency, and awareness of this failure to fulfill his parents’ wishes moves him to express the hope that the author’s son does not “end up like him.” In “Transgression,” it is precisely the author’s emulation of Uncle’s environmental beautification that gets him in trouble with his hard-working father, yet at the same time allows him to recognize the same impulse in his father through the wolfberry tree in the courtyard. In all these cases, conflicting and converging values take shape in the contours of the home and its malleable, organic surroundings. The world in which the details and transformation of the physical environment of human existence all take on moral and emotional significance approaches the overdetermined landscapes of dreams.

**Fragmentary Stories**

Writing about the pleasures of domestic and both rural and urban outdoor space can be found in virtually all periods of Chinese literary history, but it became an important theme in the late imperial period, coinciding with the rise of xiaopin wen. Beijing school essayists did not necessarily construct places of leisurely amusement as did the late Ming xiaopin wen, Threads of Conversation, and Analects writers, but they did construct literary spaces that convey values of beauty, timelessness, and human truth—the values of pure literature they inherited from writings like those of Xu Zhimo in the Crescent Moon days. This is accomplished largely through carefully crafted style and a self-conscious manipulation of narrativity, often in the form of dreamlike stories or oddly constructed fables. The exploration of fictionality is the most distinctive feature of the Beijing school essay.

One common avenue for such exploration in Beijing school essays is the rural hometown space as a site of pleasures and nostalgia, a theme most readily associated with Shen Congwen’s Notes of a Journey through Hunan. Among Li Guangtian’s early essays, “Peach Orchard Notes” most resembles Shen’s
hometown essays in its sustained use of an iterative mode to describe cyclical activities and the numerous peach varieties of his rural home near Jinan, Shandong Province. However, one feature of Li Guangtian and He Qifang’s shorter essays, which also colors works of Lu Fen and Xiao Qian, is the greater degree of mystery, unfamiliarity, and apprehension that emerges from the gaps in their narrative integrity. The uncanny aspects of these sketches suggest nothing so much as the dream as narrative paradigm.

One of Li Guangtian’s most fascinating early essays is “Pingdi cheng” (Flat city, 1936). On the face of it simply the tale of a journey by mule cart across the wilds early one morning to visit the provincial capital, the essay’s skillfully created mood, woven together with the land and lore of regionalism, make it representative of the Beijing school’s aesthetic resistance to social realism. Moreover, it showcases one of the principal aesthetic features of Beijing school essays—the use of embedded fragmentary narratives. The author deftly creates the tone in the first few lines: “This was the first time I had experienced this kind of nocturnal journey. The large cart was rocking its way forward in the darkness, and the rumbling of its wheels sounded odd: the sound seemed to carry a long distance and was very loud (zhen er)—I actually worried from time to time, could it arouse some frightening thing?” The setting is realistic, with a reasonable explanation and a rural flavor, but the liminal time (neither night nor morning), the darkness, the writer’s awareness of doing something he has never done before, the fear of a nameless something in the darkness, strongly suggest a dreamscape. The writer is also taken aback by the splendor of the crystalline winter sky and stars: “The weather was clear, and brilliant constellations adorned the blue sky. I had never seen such beautiful starlight, you could distinguish all different colors in it—purple, blue, golden—and the rays of light stretched out clearly and dazzlingly. I almost didn’t dare to look directly at the rays.” The almost psychedelic hyperbole here suggests the narrator’s abnormal mood, and by extension his peculiar spatial and temporal situation. His heightened sensory and imaginative sensitivity prepares the reader for an otherworldly experience.

The first we hear of the drivers, an old man and a youth, is their happy chatting, represented by the phrase (not attributed explicitly to either yet) “Do you believe it? I ask you, do you believe it?” The cold along with his fear and awe cause the narrator to shrink into his several layers of frost-covered quilts on the mule cart. We still do not know how many others are with him. His mistaking the silhouette of a mass of graves for a distant town adds to the apprehension, and at this point even the drivers stop their chatting and pick up the pace. When after a while they start to talk again, the old man rattles off
bits and pieces of stories that are apparently preposterous. We do not find out what the stories are about, only that the youth is suspicious of them, saying “What? I don’t believe anything until I see it myself!”

The first story the old man tells is meant to prove that he has seen more than the young man. He sets it up as analogous to the present journey, but happening during his youth: He was trying to get home on a dark night, but could not find his way. Knowing that animals see better in the dark, he focused on his horse’s reactions, and at one point the horse halted and pricked up its ears. A great black mist came towards him, thick as if it were a solid wall, then split by a vertical white line in the middle. The line then transformed into what looked like a road. The man followed it but hours later he and his horse were exhausted and there was no sign of a town—only when it became light did he discover that he had been circling a graveyard not far from home. The old man does not emphasize the weirdness of this experience, and one imagines the youth scoffing at him for falling asleep and going around in circles, dreaming of black mist. What is interesting about the story is its eerie congruence with the immediate situation. The anxiety about the time and the baleful influence of graves, resonates with what has been going on in the narrator’s head in the preceding paragraphs. Moreover, the reference to supernatural manifestations in an early morning setting is also suggestive of the dream state, in which realistic settings can be visited by supernatural beings, and happenings can take on highly charged symbolic meanings.34

As the predawn temperature reaches its coldest point, the previously vivid sounds become muffled and the colors fade from the sky (suggesting that the writer has dozed off), just then, a light appears in the distance, and the old man announces they are approaching “Flat City” (pingdi cheng). The writer and other passengers see no wall, only some uneven dirt mounds, and they ask, “Flat City? Where is the wall?”

“Flat City—naturally it doesn’t have a wall,” the old man answers. “Flat City was our provincial capital, you know.” There once was a wall, but at some point in the ancient past, the old man didn’t know exactly when, the capital was suddenly moved, overnight. Only the gods could do such a thing, and it was said to be the work of Lu Ban, since he was a great carpenter:

They said he did the whole thing in one night’s time, he moved it all to the capital. The wonder of it was, every detail was intact, the north gate was north, the west gate west, not a blade of grass or tree was out of place. The sleeping people had no clue what was going on and were not disturbed, but when they awoke they found themselves in the midst of the mountains. “Isn’t our capital...
surrounded by mountains, and between two rivers flowing into the sea?” This city had been moved into a swamp, just like a ship sailing into a harbor, but there was a danger of the rivers flowing over their banks and flooding there. Between summer and autumn, the waters of those rivers would rise and that depression would become a great lake, so the city was in danger of being washed to sea. So the god placed a great stone stake south of the city to serve as a piling like you would tie a ship to; that mountain is called Shijue Mountain (Stone Stake Mountain) and without it we wouldn’t be here today.35

The light, the old man said, was the youtiao (fritter) seller at the south gate. “Like I said, not a blade of grass was left undisturbed, but this family of fritter sellers was left behind.” This got the listeners’ attention—“Why?” “The family got up in the middle of the night to get started for the day, and their lamp startled the god—by first cockcrow the whole project was finished and the fritter seller was left behind.”

This is not so much a story as a mythical explanation of the lay of the land. The old driver’s explanation about the fritter seller does not really make sense; surely he was aware that the city was being moved while he worked! Was it that you could only be moved if you were asleep? But the old man did not explain it this way. And if there are now no people around, for whom would he and countless generations of his ancestors have been making fritters? The logically threadbare “story” draws attention to the old man as a character, his relationship to place, and the role of imagination in that relationship. To return to Padraic Colum’s praise for Lord Dunsany’s mythologizing, quoted by Zhou Zuoren in his review essay, “Flowers in the Mirror,” although his narrations are clearly fabricated, they instill in the listener a sense of wonder. While Li Guangtian may not find this sense of wonder “holy” like Colum, it is a stratum of meaning inaccessible in the competing aesthetic of social realism, and thus an important literary value for the Beijing school.

The text ends with the full break of day, with passengers, mules, and drivers all covered with frost, as if returning from a supernatural journey. Apart from the writer’s rhetorical creation of the dreamlike atmosphere, it is the odd assemblage of “stories” told by the old driver that creates this impression. On one level you could just dismiss them all as the idle ghost stories of an old peasant, but on another they manifest the important sense in which regionalism is not only informed but defined by a whole imaginative world of lore that is intimately tied to local places.36 There is probably a historical explanation for an abandoned city on the outskirts of the provincial capital and some other way of explaining what a seller of fritters is still doing there, but it
would be no more important or significant to the reality of regional identity embodied by the old driver, no matter how improbable the details of that identity are. Furthermore, if this is indeed a kind of regionalism, it is not one that derives its value from the articulation of a specific place—in Li Guangtian’s case, that would be western Shandong Province. Beijing school authors are no more interested in being historicist than was Zhou Zuoren. On this level, the essay suggests the limitations of rationality and progress (Beijing school disdain for the city) in the face of the robust energy of imagination represented by regional identity as a universal value, regardless of the region.

As observed above, the old man’s tales are full of holes, and are continually interrupted by the youth’s cynical rejoinders. These are all reminders that the essay is not here for the purpose of conveying these particular tales. The tales are obviously as much a product of the old man’s imagination as of local community lore—every one emerges from the night journey in the mule cart, from the particular route they take, what is observable on the way, and the kinds of mood inspired by the environment (especially how the stories seem to feed on the narrator’s apprehension of the dark and his dreamlike state).

Like the ethereal, almost otherworldly atmosphere of this journey, the fragmented, improvised stories, like dreams, draw attention to their own incompleteness and remind the reader that the author has taken him or her beyond the confines of the instrumental rationality that governs realistic, self-consciously socially redemptive narrative literature.

In He Qifang’s “Lubian yehua” (Fireside tale, 1935), a text even more explicitly focused on storytelling, Changle’s Old Dad, a wrinkled white-bearded storyteller, is preparing to regale young travelers around a campfire. The time and place are indeterminate. The presentation of the scene alternates between a description of the listeners’ faces and the old man’s monologue. The “monologue” is more of a dialogue, though, since it includes explicit anticipation of listeners’ expectations and implicit (until the end) frustration of them. The story is about three youths seeking their fortune, who encounter each other in the woods—here the narrator adds, “we might as well imagine,” emphasizing the allegorical or archetypical nature of the tale. Each youth relates his different ambition—the first, admiring the fish of the sea, wishes to go to sea. The second is critical of his eagerness to depart from the mountains of their home region, but at the same time admits admiring the freedom of birds and expresses his desire to become a soldier. (The more the “story” becomes a debate, the less convincing it is as the discourse of a wizened old storyteller.) Finally the third, most committed to his native soil, wishes to delve deeper into the forests of the region. He also admires the fishes and the birds, but can no more leave the land than a baby his mother’s breast. The three then set off to seek their fortunes.
When essays use fictional narratives, why are they still considered essays and not short stories? Stories as such, like Xu Zhimo's “Too Thick to Dissolve” and “Dead City,” and the kind told by storytellers that become full-fledged works of fiction, are driven by ruptures in the normal (uneventful) course of events. Blockages or obstacles to the daily routine hurtle characters and their actions in new and unexpected directions, and it is the laborious process of responding to such disruptions and returning the flow of life in the author’s virtual world to equilibrium in a way that satisfies certain aesthetic expectations, that constitutes closure in narrative art. In these essays, however, it is not the flow of everyday time that is disrupted, but the narrative machinery itself. At this point in “Fireside Tale,” the old man stops and his listeners wait eagerly for the story to continue; they impatiently begin to knock on a hearthstone with the fire tongs:

“Go on, old man!”
“This story is already finished.”
“But it just got started!”
“Sure,” Changle’s Old Dad said, smiling, “The stories in books would all probably have the most to say after this point, but let me mock all those who tell stories here. If you want to know what happened after these three young men set out, you’ll have to ask them yourself.”

Upon more coaxing, the old man relents and lets them know at least what became of each of the three: the one who went to sea never came back; the one who went to battle was killed in a war, and the one who went further into the mountains became a chieftain (shouling), donated his wealth to the community from his deathbed, and asked that his coffin be returned to his hometown for burial. Then the old man went to sleep, leaving the listeners just staring at him. The epilogue lacks any mythic symmetry with the story’s setup, suggesting that the story may be true—perhaps the old man was acquainted with the three—so why did he tell this story? One of them went to gather more kindling for the fire while the others wondered about the old man. With so many stories of his own, why did he stay at home? Was he not also seeking his fortune?

The storyteller draws attention to the provisional quality of narrative content (“let’s say it was a forest where they met”), and the storyteller’s discourse, which does not fully comprise the essay—a narrative voice also describes and narrates the scene of the story being told, is self-interrupted by metanarrative considerations contrasting the old days with the present, celebrating the wanderers who return to the native place, and contrasting ordi-
nary stories with this story. Put another way, the nature of narrative in Beijing school essays is more like that of dream narratives, insofar as they are ever written or told, than any kind of consciously crafted fiction. It is full of overdetermined symbols and allegorical significance, its story fragments never approach rational or narrative closure. In this case, the significant content is a range of attitudes toward one’s native place, which the author embeds in an old man’s story presented within a fireside narrative frame; ironically, there is more action in the narrative frame than in the story itself, but the themes of the two layers converge in the anonymous listener’s puzzling over whether Changle’s Old Dad had ever “sought his fortune,” and the implied analogy with their own convergence in the woods.

He Qifang’s “Lou” (Tower, 1935), though short, casually braids together many layers of narrative: the writer’s excursion to his friend’s town; the writer’s own story; the story behind the tower; and the fairy-tale-like stories the writer imagines. Similarly, there is a complex set of relationships set up around the narrative scene: the writer addresses us as a storyteller; at the same time, there are two relationships between the writer and his friend: one an interactive dialogue, and the other in which the friend is storyteller and the writer his audience.

The essay begins with the writer fishing with his friend, whom he is visiting from afar. He expresses interest in a “tower” he had noticed the day before. Before he begins telling the tower’s story, though, the writer’s friend draws out the writer’s reasons for wanting to tell this story and aspects of his personality, so that we learn a good deal about the writer before we hear the story.

“Story of the tower?”
“Yes, the tower we were looking at yesterday at sunset.”
Yesterday we took a stroll to a faraway place, and ended up stopping on a stone bridge next to an old temple. A bamboo grove cast its shadow on the bridge, and the water beneath was rushing so noisily it generated a cool breeze. I pointed to a tower illuminated by the sunset, rising above a walled estate with white walls and black tiles, and asked whose house it was.

“There’s a story about that tower,” he had said. Today he had already forgotten about it.
“I lived in a desert region for several years; the wind there is really strong. Ordinary houses hardly ever have upper floors, but I have always had a fondness for climbing high and looking into the distance, so that tower from yesterday kept appearing in my dreams, within view but beyond reach.”

“That speech was quite moving,” the friend replied with a smile. But instead of proceeding with the story, he asks the writer whether he liked to fish
as a child, and the writer obliges him with a long explanation of how different he was from the boys who were always going out into the wild to fish or hunt, etc. At first, this explanation, in quotation marks, is directed at the friend, but the writer then continues, mentally, it would seem, directing a considerable amount of additional explanation at the reader. This reverie about the writer’s youth is followed by some silence, then a fouled up chance for the writer to catch a fish. The writer is torn, though, because he pities the fish. After an awkward silence, the writer reminds his friend that he has not told the tower story yet. Comparing this with the third section of Feng Zikai’s “Memories of My Childhood” (pp. 96–98 above), one can easily see the greater subtlety and artfulness of He Qifang’s management of the thematic and emotional resonances of fishing.

The story of the tower is told in two parts, both of which are evaluated by the writer as stories, as though his motivation for asking is to gather narrative material for his own literary creations. The writer’s willingness to follow such digressions is suggestive of the meandering quality of a leisurely chat between friends, but it also has the effect we have observed in other essays of disrupting (and in this case nearly preventing) the narrative.

At this second request, the friend begins to tell the story of the tower. The family that built it had come to the place many generations before. They only had one son each generation, so they were known to often worry about the continuation of the family line. The last male descendant was the one who built the tower:

This last descendant was named Ai Jungu; they say he was a very bright child, but spoiled, and became a dissipated libertine (yige zouma douji de wankuzi). He had friends and hangers on of every description. By middle age he still had no son, but became obsessed with landscaping and construction. No sooner had he completed an elaborate project, than he had a new plan and had to tear everything down and start all over. In this way he managed to squander most of the family fortune, and in the end he left behind only his wife and daughter when he died. The tower we saw yesterday on their estate was his last creation. People say if he were still alive, he still wouldn’t be satisfied.41

The tower is the physical manifestation of a man’s obsession with the constant reworking of his surroundings, or, on another level, of a writer who is obsessed with the constant reconstruction of stories. He Qifang in his more autobiographical essay “Mengzhong daolu” (Paths in dreams, 1936) emphasizes how his youth was spent losing himself in the imaginative world of fiction, and the personality of the writer in this essay displays the same kind of
impatience for achieving the most exquisite kind of narrative. On hearing the tale of the tower, the writer reacts,

I dare say that is the archetype of all sad stories. We all have an obsession with building castles in the air. Years ago at home while reading, I came across the phrase “Immortals like to live in towers” in some book or other, and it inspired many imaginings. In those days I was just a child. Later, it was probably the famous story of an ancestor of mankind that gave me a hint; I have always felt as if I were an unjustly banished innocent. But that did not make me feel a bit sad. I came to realize that if we are going to build a paradise, it has to be here on the ground, and we can only do it with our own hands. Yet I insisted on living in a barren place, tending sheep for over a dozen years in frost and snow, to prove my steadfastness.42

We can see that his interest in the story was at least in part a reflection of his own life and attitude. The story continues, though:

[ Ai Jungu’s] wife and daughter then depended on one another for survival, leading a lonely and increasingly impoverished existence on that estate. Most people viewed the tower as an accursed thing. The daughter resisted marriage, unwilling to marry down but unable to marry up; but they say she is a beauty.43

“The resonating echoes of a sad tale, I dare say; and one could follow its ripples to make a ballad.” The author’s response again combines evaluation with self-reflection—the second part of the story reminds him of how much he admired the figure of Scheherazade as she lay on King Shahryar’s bed, keeping herself alive by telling stories, and how inadequate he feels, hesitating between yesterday and tomorrow, and unable to do his work.

Even if not broken into pieces by the two friends’ conversation, this story of the tower possesses only the barest elements of a narrative; the friend’s relaying the story back to himself actually has the effect of detracting from its otherworldly chuanqi (tale of the wondrous) flavor. The writer’s insistence on hearing it reveals aspects of his personality that emerge as well from the rest of the essay—the digressions, his reasons for wanting to hear more about the tower, his reflections (presented to the reader but not articulated to the friend) and other elements of the chat.

Having now heard the tale, and responded with his own self-narrative, the writer looks on as his friend hauls in a fish and puts it on the bank—recall that the writer had failed to catch one. He is struck with pity for the fish because it cannot speak, then expresses this to his friend (here again, the writer
assumes two different roles with the same idea). As soon as the words leave his lips, he is overcome with sadness, reflecting on the fact that language is of no use anyway; the writer has so much to say, but it is all in vain. Nevertheless, he continues, introducing a number of topics for stories he wants to write: a madman (“I don’t know why, but I’m always drawn toward wild-haired madmen”), a girl who dresses like a man, a prince who deliberately becomes a beggar... “but, my friend, I am starting to miss my desert home; that desk under the north window is probably covered with dust by now. I’ve decided to go back tomorrow.” When all is said and done, he seems to have been suffering from writer’s block, and it has been cured by this conversation.

What he described as a cold desert home is vaguely legible as a metaphor for Beijing; taking away the metropolitan bustle, it is cold, dry, and desertlike. The desert image could also be read as symbolically suggestive of the barrenness of urban life; humanity and meaning are all richly available in the rural world dreamed up by the author. The fish and net imagery recall Zhuangzi’s well-known comparison of language to a fish trap: once you have caught the fish, you no longer need the trap, so the old philosopher yearns to find someone with whom he can converse without the constraints of language. The friend, having conveyed something to the narrator through the story, has caught his fish. The narrator himself, however, still caught in narrative obsessions and in the desire for stories, has missed his fish, even though he is ready once again to create. So he decides to return to the work, vain as he realizes it is.

The essays discussed in this section engage in a discourse about storytelling and story-making that interactively involves both storytellers and their audience. This can be compared to the more writerly intertextuality of the xiaopin wen written by the Threads of Conversation group. Instead of being texts about stories, their xiaopin wen, whether humorous or not, are very often texts about encounters with other texts, such that the writer often alternates between the roles of reader and author. And while the specific roles differ, the mode of play, role reversal, and discursive fragmentation and reconnection can be said to be part of what define xiaopin wen. An even closer affinity can be observed with the fictionalizing tendencies of Xu Zhimo’s essays, as discussed above.

I have shown that in terms of a general posture toward literary creation vis-à-vis social and historical experience, the Beijing school essayists’ position is close to those of the Threads of Conversation and Analects groups, despite their reservations—as expressed by Shen Congwen and Zhu Guangqian—about the effect of humorous essays on the 1930s literary scene. As Fan Peisong has observed, both groups wanted to maintain a respectful distance
between lived social reality and artistic creation, yet our readings here have also shown the Beijing school essayists, at least as represented by Li Guangtian and He Qifang, to be as concerned with essays speaking to issues of the philosophy of life and the exploration of meaning and values as were Zhou Zuoren and his followers. Considering that the members of the Beijing school were not enthusiastic about the xiaopin wen essay, it is interesting that they chose to adopt the short prose essay form. While enigmatic and perhaps relatively insignificant, the extreme brevity of these texts carries with it certain artistic limitations and opportunities—density and the stylistic subtlety manifested in word choice, rhetoric, and prosody, as well as lyrical structure, are all common features of both xiaopin wen and Beijing school essays. These are critical to the literary value of the texts, given how short they are.

Moreover, from the narrative perspective, what kinds of stories can be told in such a compact format? Xiaopin wen did not have much problem with this, since when there is narrative at all, it is usually a simple anecdotal episode from the author’s personal experience that is raised as an example of a point to be made or to be associated with a theme. With Beijing school essays, however, narrativity has become a serious project. The reader is presented with not only anecdotes, but also fables, dreamlike fragments, stories embedded within stories, an array of storytellers as characters, and layers of narrators and listeners. Even when the narrative project becomes thus enriched and complicated, Beijing school essayists do not generally move beyond the short format, and indeed it can be said that the constraints of the approximately one-thousand-character length positively necessitates precisely the kinds of narrative distortion and fragmentation that characterize Beijing school essays. For all these reasons, Beijing school essayists developed a new kind of narrative based in the symbolic and fragmentary model of dreams, and so if these may be viewed as xiaopin wen, the Beijing school greatly expanded the artistic purview of the genre.
Conclusion

The Legacy of Leisure and Contemporary Chinese Culture

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to tease out in the vast and indistinct corpus of the modern Chinese essay some coherent, legible meaning, something distinctive that could be used to assess xiaopin wen writings against more familiar forms of literary expression. In doing this, I have focused intensely on groups of writers in the 1920s and 1930s who cared so deeply about the essay that they went beyond writing itself to collect, preserve, assess, promote, and advance the form. They edited, published, wrote criticism, and often devoted whole publications to this enterprise. What I have been able to present here is only the tip of an iceberg—there is much more to say about the modern essay, even if narrowly conceived as the xiaopin wen. The four groups I have explored can be linked to lines of descent (or at least distinct sensibilities) in the latter half of the century, each of which is worthy of separate study, as are many of the individual writers I have of necessity only briefly touched upon.

Chen Pingyuan in his extensive exploration of master-disciple filiations through the Zhou brothers (Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren) suggests a lineage for the modern Chinese essay in which the first generation is Zhang Taiyan and Liu Shipei, the second is the Zhou brothers, the third is Yu Pingbo and Nie Gannu, and the fourth is Jin Kemu and Zhang Zhongxing (who were still writing at the time of Chen’s study).\(^1\) Chen’s line is roughly congruent with my Threads of Conversation group. By including Jin Kemu and Zhang Zhongxing, Chen ties the Threads of Conversation group to the Beijing school. A broader definition of the Beijing school would encompass both these sets of writers as well as the Crescent Moon group, but the more inclusive the grouping, the less descriptive value it has. Chen’s discussion does not touch upon the contributions of the Analects group, the White Horse Lake
group, or others to the modern Chinese essay in relation to the modern essay. Even if one were to argue that the White Horse Lake group is not a commonly recognized participant in the history of the form, I think I have shown that they were influential writers for whom the essay was a particularly important vehicle, and thus deserve comparison to the more commonly discussed groups.

The absence of the Analects group from Chen’s scheme is also significant, since most of their magazines emphasized the literature of leisure, extolled Zhou Zuoren, and frequently featured contributions by Zhou, especially during the war years. Neglect of the wartime phase is understandably a result of the stigma attached to Zhou Zuoren’s reputation after his collaboration with the Japanese puppet regime in Beijing. However, since Chen still places Zhou in the lineage of the form, one would think his importance as a model, mentor, and contributor to Analects group magazines in their prewar heyday would warrant the inclusion of Analects group essayists like Lin Yutang, Xu Xu, Shen Qiwu, Su Qing, and Liu Yusheng. One might argue that their exclusion is a question of quality. I have often heard that Lin Yutang and his colleagues were simply not good enough stylists to warrant canonical status. But even if that were true, it betrays an elitist academic disdain for popular culture.

At some points along the way, I may have created the impression that modern Chinese xiaopin wen and the literature of leisure in general is essentially an elite discourse of taste. As the expressive vehicle for the mingshi type of eccentric literati, the premodern phase of leisure literature was indeed arguably elitist. Even so, its important emphases on plain language, genuineness, and the significance of intimate and everyday experience left the door open for a twentieth-century recuperation of the genre that, because of the modern vernacularization of writing and the proliferation of mass media at least throughout urban society, would appeal to a much broader audience than works of the modern mandarins—the progressive intellectual elite. In the absence of hard evidence, it would be difficult to claim that the modern xiaopin wen form was more popular than, say, social-realist fiction. The common anecdotal refrain attesting to the popularity of Analects group magazines, however, such as references to 1934 as “the year of the magazine” and “the year of the xiaopin,” combined with the vehemence of the left’s attacks on the form discussed at the end of chapter 4, suggests the grip of leisure literature on the literary market of the mid-1930s. Beyond the specific criticisms about frivolity, lack of social consciousness, and their bad influence on youth, I think a more fundamental worry about Analects group xiaopin wen was that their large footprint in the literary market challenged the almost sacred distinction between elite and
popular cultures and threatened the authority of the liberal arts leadership of the time (that is, the professors of literature and history at Peking University) to maintain and define that distinction. Thus, rather than viewing modern *xiaopin wen* as a continuation of the cultural elitism of the later imperial *ming-shi* eccentrics, I believe it came close to realizing the latent potential of leisure literature to subvert the authority of the intellectual elite.

This is perhaps no more dramatically demonstrated than in the emergence of outspoken women essayists from the ranks of the Analects group in the war years. One of the most troubling aspects of this study has been the evidence of an almost universal marginalization of women from (or within) modern Chinese essayistic practice. In the early years, when women like Bing Xin (1900–1999) did gain recognition, their achievement was carefully and consistently contained in terms of “femininity”—sentimentality, tenderness, maternity—in such a way that it could not be equated with or assessed against the achievements of male writers. To be sure, women writers like Su Xuelin, Chen Xuezhao, Xu Guangping, Lu Jingqing, and Shi Pingmei were conspicuously present in *Threads of Conversation* and do not seem to have been as much constrained to gender stereotypes in their range of intellectual, emotional, or political expression—and yet narratives of modern Chinese literary history always have more to say about Bing Xin as an essayist than any of these writers. We must await a thorough study of women’s contributions to *Threads of Conversation*, since I was certainly not able to do them justice here. The relative prominence of women in *Threads* seems based in their high academic credentials and close connections to Peking University and other elite institutions—the network of associations that becomes the most accurate definition of both the *Threads of Conversation* group and the Beijing school, whether defined narrowly or broadly. In other words, these women’s voices are present in such strength due to their connections and high status, and, interestingly, they and their male colleagues scarcely ever discuss matters related to gender.

By contrast, we can observe a highly provocative discourse on gender in the pages of the Analects group magazines. On one hand the men’s club atmosphere of especially *The Analects Fortnightly* yields frequent patronizing praise and criticism of women, conceived especially in their role as wives. The portrayals of women in *Analects Fortnightly* cartoons borrowed from abroad as well as produced from within their own ranks, ranging from a gold-digging taxi-dancer, a giant walking her husband’s car on a leash like a dog, a modern girl smoking in an easy chair with her legs languidly draped over the chair arm, a dumb blond burning dinner, to a member of a coffee klatch manipulating her husband’s accomplishment of domestic chores, present a
panorama of male fears and fantasies. On the other hand, some of the most resounding women’s voices in the modern Chinese essay emerge alongside these portrayals. These range from Yao Ying, the well-educated if demure wife of a National government official who contributed a running gossip column on the foibles of the Nanjing political elite, to the already famous Xie Bingying, whose self-portrayal as a revolutionary soldier is the vehicle for a relentless and radical feminist narrative of her efforts to break free of the shackles of traditionally defined womanhood and enlighten whatever benighted women come her way.

Given the overtly patriarchal tone of the Analects group journals, it seems ironic that the women’s voices in them are so much more powerful than those in the Threads of Conversation group. This ironic tension comes to a head with the emergence in Analects group magazines of the Ningbo native Su Qing, and a few years later, her younger Shanghai associate, Eileen Chang. Their essays featured arguably the most eloquent and subversive cultural criticism from a woman’s point of view that modern Chinese literature had ever seen. It was not, however, a discourse on women’s rights, nor was it encumbered by the irritating issue of whether women’s liberation should be subsumed under the more general social revolution, war effort, or other national goals. It was a “critique of everyday life” from the distinctive perspective of women’s experience, and as such it not only challenged the strict division of elite and popular (vulgar), but also the elevated claims to universal truth arrogated by men who spoke to these issues.

Su Qing (Feng Yunzhuang, 1914–1982) was one of the conspicuous women contributors to Analects group magazines. The granddaughter of a juren (“presented scholar”) and daughter of a Boxer Indemnity scholarship student who studied in the United States, Feng Yunzhuang graduated from Ningbo Middle School and entered the English department of Central National Nanking University. She married before she completed her degree and moved to Shanghai with her husband. After a smattering of contributions to *The Analects Fortnightly* in 1935, she became a much more frequent contributor (eight essays) to *Cosmic Wind* through 1936. Her serialized autobiographical novel *Jiehun shinian* (Ten years of marriage) became one of the anchor attractions to the wartime Analects journal *Fengyu tan* (Chats in wind and rain). When the so-called “solitary island” period began in 1937 with Japan’s invasion of the entire Shanghai area save the International Settlement, the then highly popular Analects group literary magazine *Cosmic Wind* moved to Guangzhou (Canton), and a similar magazine (*Yuzhou feng yikan*, Cosmic wind II) was inaugurated by those who remained in Shanghai. Su Qing (under the name Feng Heyi) recommenced her humorous yet unsettling commentaries on gender and
morality in this new magazine, contributing eleven pieces over the ensuing two and a half years, up to the point when, after their attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese finally invaded Shanghai’s International Settlement as well.

Su Qing, encumbered with family cares, still remained in Shanghai. Not long after the Japanese invasion drove many of the remaining socially conscious authors out of the International Settlement at the end of 1941, Su Qing’s divorce pushed her to participate more actively in the literary scene, in large part just to make ends meet.4 Between 1943 and 1945, Su Qing established her own literary magazine (*Tian di*, Heaven and earth), a publishing house also called Tian di, where she published three of her own books: a popular collection of essays entitled *Huanjin ji* (Washing brocade), the autobiographical novel *Ten Years of Marriage*, and a collection of stories entitled *Tao* (Billowing waves). The first two titles were so popular, each saw over ten printings in the first year of their existence.

More than perhaps any other essayist in the first half of the twentieth century, Su Qing adheres single-mindedly to the elaboration of women’s issues, including education, sex, marriage, and work, to ethics, morals, and politics. Su Qing’s writing is striking in its level of sophistication, yet she had no scruples about writing frankly, graphically, and at times even crudely, about matters of sexuality and domestic relations. Her often brutal honesty, combined with a subtle wit and capable command of the Analects group’s typical mixture of classical and vernacular Chinese, made her as controversial as she was conspicuous (Yao Ying, for her part, was conspicuous without being particularly controversial).

The impact Su Qing made on the Shanghai literary scene, especially around 1943–1944 when she really seemed to come into her own, may have in turn been an enabling factor for the emergence of Eileen Chang. So much work has been done on Eileen Chang since her “rediscovery” by C. T. Hsia in 1961, particularly with an authoritative monograph in English now available, that there is little more to be said here.5 I would make the observation, however, that Chang’s essays, beautifully represented in English in Andrew Jones’ translation of *Liu yan* (Written on water, 1944), are arguably as much the artistic culmination of the peculiar practices, strategies, and themes of the modern Chinese *xiaopin wen* essay as they are the unique voice of a solitary genius, which is how Chang is most often read, especially in the West.6 The essays that make up *Written on Water* range from memoirs (“Whispers”) to cultural history (“Chronicle of Changing Clothes”), to outrageous commentary on modern urban life (“Notes on Apartment Life” and “Seeing with the Streets”) and patriarchal views of women (“Speaking of Women”). Some present somber reflections on how details of everyday existence in Hong
Kong and Shanghai in the early 1940s portend the imminence of war’s destruction of security, stability, and normality; some on the other hand yield unexpected epiphanies, such as in the striking kitchen image that appears in two of her essays—that of light shining through pieces of spinach stuck to the bamboo basket after washing resembling the more conventionally poetic image of snow pea blossoms on an outdoor trellis.7

There is no question that, in these achievements, Eileen Chang makes a unique contribution to Chinese and world literature. However, many of the features Nicole Huang highlights in her introduction to Jones’ translation, such as the associative structuring of ideas (wandering, dreaming),8 the pre-modern influences (legacies of leisure), the serious moral exploration of everyday material existence (wandering, learning), the elaboration of pleasures and the art of living (enjoying), all relate back to the various xiaopin wen themes examined in preceding pages. In short, whether or not she was directly influenced by modern Chinese essayists, the specific types of artistic breakthrough and excellence displayed in Eileen Chang’s essays were not unprecedented but do amplify the unique contributions made by essayists of the groups outlined in this book. It is only because we have been blind to the achievements of the modern xiaopin wen that Chang’s breakthrough appears to have come out of nowhere. What makes the xiaopin wen essay special, after all, and the reason it continued to be regarded with suspicion by the purveyors of nationalist and revolutionary literatures, is the genre’s close attention to the concrete emotional experience of the everyday, with its simple pleasures and poignant pains. This makes xiaopin wen at its best an excellent vehicle for an artistic critique of social life from a woman’s perspective.

Such a promising critique of modern Chinese culture and letters would, for political reasons, cease to have any foothold in mainland China. Many of the writers who distinguished themselves in this manner as incorrigibly individualistic and politically incorrect left China for Taiwan, Hong Kong, or other places around the world. In some conspicuous cases, like those of Liang Shiqiu and Lin Yutang, they continued to write, building further on the already considerable progress of the modern humorous cultural commentary, as well as continuing to promote the premodern legacy of leisure literature.

I have shown here, however, that the Analects group was not the only influential modern tradition of artistic prose. What became of the more “socially responsible” project of the White Horse Lake group? This leads me to one of the most striking aspects of the xiaopin wen in modern Chinese culture—it’s limitles resiliency and the apparently absolute necessity that leisure literature exist in some form under all circumstances. To illustrate this point we need not look to the tradition of the zawen pioneered by Lu Xun.
That the agency of an artistic prose form that would function as the “daggers and spears” of social struggle was perpetuated through the war years and into the second half of the twentieth century by disciples of Lu Xun like Tang Tao, Feng Xuefeng, Nie Gannu, and others, has been illustrated dramatically in Mary Scoggin’s dissertation. Under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, we might expect that such pugnacious zawen and the raw, realistic form of reportage literature would become the trademark prose genres. However, from the Yan’an period right through the first seventeen years of the Peoples’ Republic, there remained room for the lyrically emotional prose essays one recalls from writers like Zhu Ziqing and Xu Zhimo, as well as the intellectual wandering and academic digressions of the Threads of Conversation group. Here I am referring to the prose essays of writers like Liu Baiyu, Yang Shuo, Qin Mu, and Deng Tuo.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the term sanwen was more frequently associated with lyricism (shuqing) and opposed to expository (shuoli) prose essays. Three prominent writers who typify this moment in the modern Chinese essay’s evolution are writers Yang Shuo, Liu Baiyu, and Qin Mu. In practice, their lyricism is constituted by long descriptive passages, the frequent use of direct address to the reader in the second person, as well as rhetorically loaded interrogative, imperative, and expressive particles. At particularly rhapsodic moments, socialist sanwen texts take on rhetoric reminiscent of the ancient rhyme prose genre (fu), with its syntactic parallelism and the piling up of listed concrete objects and rich varieties of adverbs and adjectives, not to mention its overtones of flattery and patriotism. On the level of imagery, a general fascination with light, fire, and torches left over from the war period continues, but in part gives way to a new interest in flower imagery in the 1950s. Finally, conceiving a vista or an experience as a living landscape painting was a common strategy these writers used to emphasize a magnitude of vision and the accompanying emotional exhilaration.

Yang Shuo’s 1959 essay “The Highest Peak of Taishan” features this kind of overt reference to landscape painting. The text narrates the author’s ascent of the famous Shandong mountain, but the narrative structure of the climb is interwoven with a figurative structure consisting of three elements. The first is the traditional landscape painting motif: “All the way from the foothills, looking closely at the mountain landscape, I felt like what was before me was not the lord of the Five Famous Mountains, but more like a green and blue landscape painting of astounding size,” a conceit he develops with his descriptive language. Second, Yang refers to the calligraphy of famous visitors that has been carved into the mountain’s sides and the legends and stories about them: “After a while, I began to feel that I was not only looking at a
landscape painting, but randomly flipping through a historical manuscript.” The third and last layer of figuration is the author’s sense that he is not climbing a mountain, but ascending into the sky.

The conventional desire to watch the sunrise from Taishan’s peak is introduced at the essay’s outset and used to tease the reader occasionally throughout the text, but this desire is deftly frustrated in the rhetorical pursuit of what to the author is a higher aim: the containment of the Taishan travelogue as praise for the historical achievements of socialism. Once Yang Shuo’s narrator has passed through the Southern Gate of Heaven, the author sees the Shandong landscape spread out at his feet, but what he notices is not the patchwork agricultural quilt of yore, but the expansive commune wheat fields, and the plumes of smoke in the distance are not those of scattered villages, but of factories. Though the weather had been clear when the party went to bed early near the peak in order to get up in time for the sunrise, fog and rain overnight linger to create an overcast sky at dawn. We have already seen this technique in Yu Pingbo’s “The Evening of the Eighteenth of the Sixth Month at West Lake,” by which one’s attention is diverted from the expected attraction. Here, the author’s socialist/communist landscape epiphany of the previous evening has eclipsed the banal tourist wish for a beautiful sunrise—he has seen another kind of sunrise, that of the Chinese people and nation.

By the late 1950s, thanks in part to the encouragement of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, an unprecedented liberalism rejuvenated the literary scene. In addition to new novels, poetry, drama, and reportage that emerged in this relatively unrestrained atmosphere, the essay took a new turn in the hands of Deng Tuo (1912–1966). As editor of the first two editions of Mao Zedong’s Selected Works and founding editor of the party organ Renmin ribao (People’s daily), Deng’s political status was much higher and more conspicuous than that of Yang Shuo. In 1961 Deng inaugurated a column under the pseudonym of Ma Nancun in the Beijing Evening News (Beijing wanbao) entitled Yanshan yehua (Evening chats in the Yan Mountains [Beijing]). His little essays seem inspired by a combination of Zhou Zuoren’s fascination (quwei) and the utilitarianism of “scientific xiaopin.” Focusing especially on premodern material, and always with an appropriately educational or didactic message, Deng Tuo managed to bring an astonishing amount of late imperial Chinese arcana before Beijing readers in the early 1960s. Deng chimed in with politically correct themes such as fighting superstition with scientific knowledge and enthusiastically advocated learning new things, but he did so to an impressive extent by reference to a wide variety of premodern texts. In brief essays like “Unafraid of Heaven,” “Changing Three Unknowns into Three Knowns,” and “From Three to Ten Thousand,” Deng often took
inconspicuous figures from Tang *chuanqi* stories, Warring States period philosophical parables, or Ming dynasty novels and plays, and recast them as modern heroes for their iconoclasm and use of practical knowledge. In doing so he demonstrated impressive erudition, as well as promoting a spirit of self-education.

In an especially suggestive piece entitled “Welcoming ‘Miscellaneous’ Scholars,” Deng emphasizes the importance of broad, diverse knowledge and long experience in addition to specialized expertise. In the spirit that I describe as bibliographic enthusiasm for late imperial writing in the 1940s, Deng takes the term *za* from the criticism of erudite people as *zaluan* and challenges the first-century BCE historian Ban Gu’s marginalization of *zajia* in contrast to Confucius and Mencius, who he considers perfectly “miscellaneous.” Deng understands *za* not as “unsystematic” or “disorganized” but “eclectic” and “encyclopedic.” He praises the Warring States works *Huainanzi* and *Lü shi chunqiu* for these qualities and calls for a reassessment of ancient thought and its evaluative categorization; he also advocates reading the complete works of Chinese scholars of the past for their encyclopedic knowledge, citing as an example the Qing scholar Hong Liangji (1746–1809) “whose essay on population predated Darwin by a half century.”

Unfortunately, and perhaps predictably, Deng Tuo became a target of criticism in 1957 when Mao Zedong called him a “pedant editor” and had him fired from the *People’s Daily* post. The next several years saw increasingly negative Party scrutiny of Deng and his associates Wu Han and Liao Mosha (the three of them jointly authored a column of commentary entitled “San jia cun,” or “Three Family Village”), which ultimately led to public disgrace for all of them on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Deng took his own life in 1966.

These writers, though not much appreciated now, were influential in the first two decades of the People’s Republic and to some extent even into the 1980s, in part because of their work’s presence (except for Deng Tuo) in middle school and high school textbooks for a generation or more. The marked importance of lyrical expression and arcane knowledge in the work of these writers, with the apparent approbation of the Communist Party, was one of the tantalizing puzzles that drew me into this project. At first, I believed the indispensability of the lyrical voice to the literature of leisure spoke for itself. But the arguments advanced by the White Horse Lake group for the socially redeeming function of the essay present an even more convincing explanation of the essay’s privileged place in both orthodox and less orthodox socialist Chinese literature. Justifying the existence of the *xiaopin wen* in terms of enlightening readers, providing a model for composition, and presenting a
style enjoyable to read, as well as for its viability as practice for grander creative projects such as novels, Communist cultural and educational leaders found reason to tolerate and even encourage the development of this strange and lyrical communist cousin of modern Chinese xiaopin wen. This tradition lives on today in the sanwen or suibi columns of major literary magazines like Renmin wenxue (People’s literature), Shouhuo (Literary harvest) and Shi yue (October), and in the pages of the most mainstream essay magazine, Suibi. The term suibi may in fact be understood to be the politically safe recuperation of the much more common Republican-period term xiaopin wen.

Today essays (sanwen or suibi) are written by everyone, from writers known as novelists, poets, and playwrights, to other cultural figures including well-known and lesser-known scholars (the above-mentioned Chen Pingyuan is a prominent example, while the pugnacious Yu Jie is arguably better known as a satirist than as an academic), and media personalities. There is also a healthy representation of earlier layers of essay history, including some of the larger figures discussed here from the Republican period all the way back to the Ming and Qing dynasties, and sometimes earlier. There is little sense one gets from packaging, book reviews, or casual conversations with readers that there is any shape or structure to modern Chinese essay history, or that contemporary essay creation has a discernible landscape, with lines that can be followed back to earlier stages, or that such filiations could indeed provide access to a larger context of meaning for these writers’ works.

In explaining the persistence of prose lyricism and antiquarianism during the socialist period as testament to the resilience of the modern xiaopin wen, I would like to emphasize that, since the 1980s, fulsome praise for chairman, Socialism, Party, and Nation, or more generally the socially utilitarian deployment of the form, no longer carries much weight with readers, and in fact can scarcely be read in anything other than an ironic light. The end of the 1980s marked the end of the promise of a socially effective literature in China—this was as true of the essay as any other genre, and for most concerned with the progress of literature as an art form, this was good news.

In 1991 a well-known professor of Chinese drama named Yu Qiuyu published a collection of essays entitled Wenhua kulü (Bitter cultural journeys). Appearing first as a series in Literary Harvest, edited by Ba Jin, the essays appeared in book form in 1992. Yu’s essays gained attention for their emphasis on the plight of Chinese intellectuals and cultural figures throughout history. The response was extraordinary. It had been a generation since anyone had written about traditional Chinese culture outside an academic context, and his vivid depictions of well-known cultural figures such as Su Dongpo (Su Shi, 1037–1101), significant places and historical phenomena like the Buddhist
grottos in Dunhuang, and the thriving money lending and merchant communities of Shanxi Province in the late imperial period, mixed with themes of individual dignity and self-expression and the affirmation of cultural identity touched a nerve that no literary texts had been able to since before 1989.

Not only its refreshing take on its subject matter but reflections on cultural identity and meaning made *Bitter Cultural Journeys* so compelling. The form—the prose essay—in which it was written had also finally regained its full voice after decades of use for often fulsome, formulaic, orthodox, and impressionistic paeans to the Chairman, the party, and socialism. This orthodox mode also had had its day, but had lost its appeal for readers and probably writers as well in the post-Mao years, when guarded but painful explorations of the Cultural Revolution years in fiction and reportage pieces, with their rhetoric of faithful documentation, held sway.

*Bitter Cultural Journeys* picked up the themes of historical soul-searching from the also immensely popular *He shang* (River elegy, 1988) documentary series about China’s historical struggle with the Yellow River, but it exchanged the earlier works’ veiled political and social criticism for a more politically correct and shrill note of wounded cultural pride and resentment at Western nations, particularly in the age of imperialism. Like *River Elegy*, *Bitter Cultural Journeys* became so popular and controversial that it became a cultural phenomenon unto itself. Historians and other specialists raised questions about the accuracy of some of Yu’s claims, and copies of the book became almost fashion accessories—one widely disseminated anecdote has it that a prostitute was arrested, having been found with no possessions other than her lipstick and a copy of *Bitter Cultural Journeys*. The phenomenal impact of Yu Qiuyu’s book (and later essay writing as well) probably has very little to do with the essay genre, but because Yu made his mark through the genre, he drew unprecedented attention to it, particularly to its modern legacy and its connections with premodern or early modern writing and literati culture.

Before Yu Qiuyu’s dramatic entry to the literary scene, there was an odd moment after the apparent failure of socially engaged literature post-Mao and the high culture fever and democracy movements when new anthologies of Republican-period essays by Liang Shiqiu, Lin Yutang, Zhou Zuoren, and others began to appear in the bookstores. This sign of permissiveness went hand in hand with the strict moratorium on political criticism that followed the tragic end of the democracy movement in 1989. On the reader/consumer side the permissiveness resonated with a newly discovered fascination and a real or imagined nostalgia for certain aspects of traditional and Republican-period society and culture. The appeal of Liang Shiqiu and Lin Yutang in par-
ticular could be associated with a general “Shanghai modern” fever in the 1990s that lasted for years, affecting fiction and film as well as scholarship.

The 1990s discourse on Republican-period culture in mainland China has tended to favor the Beijing school/Shanghai school dichotomy as a way to rearrange familiar writers and groups and confer more legitimacy on popular culture. On the Beijing side, the renewed interest in Zhou Zuoren had as much to do with the controversial idea of somehow rehabilitating a widely despised “traitor” as it did with any fondness for the Beijing cultural life conveyed in his works. However, Wang Zengqi (1920–1997), a self-proclaimed disciple of the central Beijing school figure Shen Congwen, was still actively writing in the 1980s and 1990s, and his later work showed a growing preference for essays that were often nostalgic reminiscences of the 1930s. At the same time, other academic figures a generation older than Yu Qiuyu, like Zhang Zhongxing, Ji Xianlin, and Jin Kemu, may not have been well known to the public, but they were able to write fluently and poignantly of their memories of Peking or Tsinghua University faculty like Zhou Zuoren, Cai Yuanpei, Fei Ming, Xiong Shili, Zhu Ziqing, Zhu Guangqian, and many others. Their work helped to feed the fascination for forgotten eras and adopted the rhetoric, style, and linguistic registers that more closely resembled the pioneers of the modern Chinese essay than did Yu Qiuyu’s.

These older scholars, who had all published in magazines of the 1930s Beijing school like Shuijing (Crystal) and Wenxue jikan (Literature quarterly), were a living link to the Beijing school as well as the Threads of Conversation group. Some actually attended college at Peking and Tsinghua universities in the 1930s, not long after Beijing school figures like Bian Zhilin, Fei Ming, He Qifang, and Li Guangtian were there. Purists reading more widely in these materials and even in premodern work (by Su Shi, Zhang Dai, Shen Fu, Li Yu, Zheng Banqiao, etc.) that to a significant extent inspired Beijing school writers, sometimes eschewed Yu Qiuyu’s oeuvre as comparatively vulgar popular culture by comparison with these more refined cosmopolitan voices. More writers of all generations took to writing essays, and while it would be an overstatement to claim that any of them were trying to resurrect the modern xiaopin wen, there is no mistaking the imprint of the genre’s influence on them, in the forms of suggestive reserve (hanxu), lack of artifice or arrogance, a fluid cleanliness of style uncluttered by fustian or pretense. In the wake of the Cultural Revolution and the thought patterns and prose conventions that characterized it, the appeal of an unassuming yet sophisticated and fluent discourse must have been similar to the appeal of xiaopin wen when revolutionary literature first attempted to dominate the literary scene.
When Zhang Zhongxing writes about famous people around Peking University in the 1930s, he tries to write something other than what is commonly said about them, presenting more or less a judgment of the person in an incident or two—a common strategy in premodern biographical essays going back to Sima Qian—or recreating the feeling the person engendered in him. The latter quickly leads us to a cumulative sense of who Zhang is. His biographical essays initially attract us with their subject matter, but as the reader becomes acquainted with the author, Zhang’s personality becomes an important part of the attraction. The simplicity and apolitical quality of his rhetoric is refreshing to many readers; in fact Zhang seems to have found a language that feels natural without being the least bit subversive, which of course is an ideal rhetoric of conservatism. This unobtrusive creation of himself as a likable implied author is comparable to Zhou Zuoren’s appeal.

A direct line from the Beijing school as I defined it narrowly in the previous chapter—the writers associated with universities in Beijing in the mid-1930s with Shen Congwen at their center—can be traced via younger members of that group, notably Xiao Qian and Wang Zengqi, though their further elaboration of the “native soil” aesthetic in the late 1980s, when it resonated so well with the contemporary “root-seeking” fiction. This is especially true in the work of the prolific novelist Jia Pingwa, who claims Wang Zengqi as his mentor, and who became arguably the foremost contemporary promoter of artistic essay writing. His journal *Belles lettres (Meiwen)* takes its title from an early Zhou Zuoren article with the same agenda.

Women writers have become more important than ever before, and this development was fueled in part by the reintroduction of Eileen Chang onto the literary scene. Fiction and essays by educated urban women, whether or not they flirted with the “old Shanghai fever” that accompanied Eileen Chang’s rediscovery, certainly focused on meaningful everyday details that had been neglected in the pursuit of grand narratives. Nevertheless, the forces of globalization can be detected in the consumerist emphasis of such writing. Moreover, the degree of immersion in the everyday material cultures of fashion, home design, and home management is often in inverse proportion to the author’s age, and the late 1990s saw the emergence of ever younger women essayists, to the point that teenage girls like Na Si, Huang’ai Dongxi, and Su Su now seem to dominate.23

At this point I could make the somewhat banal observation that the modern Chinese essay has somehow “picked up where it left off” in the Republican period, with the only thing distinguishing it from other genres of New Literature being a more self-conscious and positive relationship with an existing premodern form, namely the late Ming *xiaopin wen* and similar
informal essays of earlier or later times. But when you consider the *xiaopin wen* approach to essay writing as “an alternative response to modernity”—terms by which Susan Daruvala defined Zhou Zuoren’s intervention—the significance of this resumption becomes clearer.

The agency of this strand of late imperial literary practice and its modern reincarnation is not explicable in terms of a return or recovery of tradition across a clearly defined traditional/modern divide, rather in terms of the unbalanced condition of modernity in China to which the overwhelming cultural response was revolution and the mobilization of productive labor. Proponents of revolutionary literary discourse neglected leisure as a necessary counterpart to labor, and for a revolution or any productive social transformation to work, it is just as important that its culture address, both critically and creatively, the ways in which people in all walks of life spend their leisure time.
Introduction


2. Lin Yutang, The Importance of Understanding (Cleveland and New York: World Book Publishing, 1960). I am adopting the term xianqing (leisure) from its modern usage, but also from its appearance in prominent premodern works of leisure literature like Li Yu’s seventeenth-century work Xianqing ouji.

3. An excellent English introduction to this entire legacy from the hand of one of the major modern practitioners of the literature of leisure is Lin Yutang’s 1960 book The Importance of Understanding, which is in fact an anthology of Chinese leisure literature throughout history. The book’s Chinese title translates as “A translation of the most beautiful classical Chinese informal essays (xiaopin wen).” The collection includes ancient writings from Zhuangzi all the way to essays by Lin Yutang and some of his friends, but late imperial writers of the kind who were admired in essay circles in the late 1920s and early 1930s make up the lion’s share. Lin Yutang, The Importance of Understanding.


7. The academic status of most of these authors, from this perspective, resembles the mixture of labor and leisure in the life of premodern literati.


9. Just how far back would be difficult to say, and the question of historicity has considerable bearing on whether the resonance Lin feels is due to parallel historical developments in different cultures or to universal human attitudes.


15. See for example Ye Shengtao and Yu Pingbo, *jian qiao* (Shanghai: Shuang feng she, 1924); O. M., *Women de liuyue* (Shanghai: Dongya tushuguan, 1925); O. M., *Women de qiyue* (Shanghai: Dongya tushuguan, 1924); Xu Dishan, *Kongschan lingyu: Luo Huasheng sanji zhi yi* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1926); Chen Xueziao, *Juan lü* (Shanghai: Liang xi tushuguan, 1925); Chen Xuezhao, *Cun cao xin* (Shanghai: Xinyue shudian, 1927). For a comprehensive chronological listing of modern xiaopin wen collections, see Li Ning, ed., *Xiaopin wen yishu tan* (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1990). A number of terms were used more or less interchangeably to refer to short personal essays, including sanwen (miscellaneous writing), which came to be the formal generic term for essays, suibi (literally, “following the brush,” also used for centuries in Japan as zuihitsu), and suigan (following one’s feelings), which was the term Lu Xun used for his short essays published in *Xin qingnian* (New youth) magazine. In the 1920s and 30s, the term xiaopin wen was often used to refer to all of these, although many writers continued to use the other terms.

20. Hu Shi humbly compared his vernacular poems to the liberated feet of women who had had their feet bound. Although able to enjoy complete freedom of movement, their feet were so deformed and damaged that graceful walking was already out of the question. Having been encumbered by traditional Chinese poetic form and the linguistic and ideological restraints of a traditional education, Hu Shi was in this manner implying that he would not be able to write beautiful poetry in vernacular language. Hu Shi, Chang shi ji (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1922), 47, cited in Michelle Mi-Hsi Yeh, Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 116.
27. “Taibai” is a premodern Chinese term for Venus, the morning star; there is no connection implied with the Roman god, and so I will continue to refer to it below as Taibai.


33. Some might suggest that wenzhang as I am using it here is synonymous with sanwen (prose essay), and while it may be on an analytical level, the writers themselves much more often talk about their wenzhang. If you look closer at the Chinese terms, it is interesting to note that on a literal level they are nearly opposite: sanwen is something like “miscellaneous texts,” while wenzhang suggests “patterned passages.”


36. Most of the methods of grouping essayists in the following section were described to me by Zhi An in a personal interview, March 28, 2004.

37. This appears to be the approach taken by Chen Pingyuan in Chen Pingyuan, “Zhongguo xiandai sanwen zhong de Wei Jin fengdu yu liuchao wenzhang,” *Zhongguo xiandai xueshu zhi jianli* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1998). Chen ends up by tracing lineages to the late twentieth century from the two.

38. This according to the author index in Tang Yuan, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue qikan mulu huibian* (Tianjin: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1988).


41. Though China had been reforming its educational system since the late nineteenth century, by the 1920s, intellectuals who were exposed to international educational trends by, for example, studying education in Japan, discovered that China still lagged far behind. Though Western subjects and physical facilities had been adopted in Chinese schools, teaching and learning were still heavily influenced by traditional emphases on rote memorization, the absolute authority of the teacher, and strong moral emphasis in educational content. Younger teachers espoused more recent educational theories which was now influenced by psychological theory, student-centered approaches, and frequent adaptation of teaching materials to the needs of the times. Ye Shengtao’s 1928 novel *Ni Huanzhi* (Schoolmaster Ni Huanzhi) illustrates the situation of idealistic educationists in detail. Ye Shaojun
Chapter 1: The Legacy of Leisure and Modern Chinese Culture


6. One could identify some poetry, such as certain kinds of song-lyric (ci) poetry, as also belonging to the category of leisure literature, but I am mainly concerned with prose here.


10. Qian Zhongshu, “*Zhongguo xin wenxue de yuanliu*,” *Xin yue* 4.4 (1932) (pagination restarts in each department).


16. This is clear in his famous May Fourth manifesto “Humane Literature” (Ren de wenxue), as well as in his essay “Da Yunshen xiansheng” (Reply to Mr. Yun-shen), in which Zhou Zuoren acknowledges the existence of foreign literary influence in late Qing fiction, but refers to one of its most successful examples, *Yu li hun* (The jade pear spirit), as “decadent”: “This was also a literary trend in modern China between the Xuantong and Hongxian reigns [at the end of the Qing dynasty]; though in part an extension of tradition, it was also in part a reaction evoked by the waves of revolution. For there to have been a natural tendency toward decadence in itself is not blameworthy, but because the old manner of thinking got the upper hand, it gradually became more depraved and changed into things like *Yu li hun*.” Zhou Zuoren, “Da Yunshen xiansheng,” *Tan long ji*, ed. Zhou Zuoren, *Zhou Zuoren zibian wenji* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 93.


22. Shen Qiwu, ed., *Jindai sanwen chao* (Beijing: Renwen shudian, 1932). Shen Qiwu also co-edited an edition of Wang Guowei’s *Renjian ci* and *Renjian cihua* in 1933, a college textbook collection of model premodern essays (*Daxue guowen*, 1942), a collection of world literature in 1943–1944, and a collection of Feng Wen-bing’s (Fei Ming’s) poetry and essays called *Zhao yin ji* (Calling out the hermit), 1945.


29. Qian’s review also contrasts *xiaopin* (“little samples”) with *jipin* (“ultimate samples”—classic works), which are polemical and theoretical in ways he supposes the editor would want to avoid, yet he points out that Shen’s collection includes works in the forms of *xu* (prefaces), *ji* (records—of excursions, etc.), *lun* (treatises), and *shuo* (discourses), many of which seem to him to be *jipin*.


31. Actually Zhou Zuoren’s introduction to the first essay volume of the *Compendium of Chinese New Literature* takes these arguments up, but does not defend the modernity of *xiaopin wen* in doing so. Zhou Zuoren, “Dao yan.”


37. This work was something of a holy grail among Republican-period bibliophiles. It is mentioned by Zhu Jianmang in his preface to *Tao’an mengyi* in his 1936 collection *Meihua wenxue mingzhu congkan* (see below), and years earlier by Zhou Zuoren in his preface to Yu Pingbo’s first modern republication of *Tao’an mengyi*. While Zhu and Shi Zhecun both claim to be unable to locate an edition of *Langhuan wenji*, Zhou Zuoren in his preface to Yu Pingbo’s edition tantalizingly claims to have *seen* it in a bookstore, but failed to purchase it. A Ying includes an article about *Langhuan wenji* in his 1936 book *Hai shi ji* (Shanghai: Bei xin, 1936). During the 1930s and into the war against Japan, Zheng Zhenduo encountered at least three copies, finally purchasing one probably in the 1940s. He identifies the edition as from the Guangxu period of the Qing, between 1875 and 1908. See “*Langhuan wenji*,” “*Jiezhong deshu xuji*,” in *Xidi shuhua* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1983), 280. Despite all this there seem to have been at least three punctuated modern editions of the work in circulation; one edited by Liu Dajie was published in 1935 and 1936. If these were available, what was so tantalizing about the editions these collectors saw?

38. Excerpts from these as well as many of the late Ming and Qing masters anthologized by Shi Zhecun and Shen Qiwu are available in translation with an informative introduction; see Yang Ye, *Vignettes from the Late Ming: a Hsiao-p’in Anthology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999).
39. Zhu Jianmang, ed., *Meihua wenxue mingzhu congkan* (Shanghai: Guoxue zhengli she, 1936). A facsimile of this work was published by Shanghai shudian in 1982 in 10,000 copies. The collection reappeared in 1997 under the name of a different editor (Ai Shuren) under the title *Yingmei an yiyu: Xingling wenxue mingzhu huibian*, which borrows the title of one of the included texts by Mao Xiang. Ai, working with punctuator Ran Yunfei, removed all of the illustrations and introductions by Zhu Jianmang and his cohorts, as well as the chronological table comparing the life events of the authors and other related figures, replacing them with his own introduction.

40. Michel Hockx, *Questions of Style: Literary Societies and Literary Journals in Modern China, 1911–1937* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003); Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Literary Trends I: The Quest for Modernity, 1895–1927,” in *Cambridge History of China*, eds. John K. Fairbank and Albert Feuerwerker, vol. 12 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). The Southern Society was in some sense the precursor to modern literary associations in China. As Leo Lee points out, the Southern Society, which included Su Manshu and Li Shutong (a.k.a. Dharma Master Hongyi; see chapter 3) as well as prominent Mandarin Duck and Butterfly authors, in its membership, was an important crucible of modern Chinese literary culture as well, even though the period of the Society’s flourishing came in the 1910s, before the May Fourth movement. I have not yet been able to ascertain whether the Southern Society itself was engaged in the preservation and promotion of late imperial Chinese leisure literature, but both Liu Yazi and Liu Cunren (Yusheng) were contributors to the Analects group wartime magazine *Gujin* in the 1940s.


43. Li Zhi (Li Zhuowu) was a mentor to the Gongan school’s Yuan brothers. See Chou, *Yüan Hung-tao and the Kung-an School*, 22–26.


45. *Gudao*, referring to the period after November 12, 1937, when all of the greater metropolitan areas of Shanghai excluding the international settlement and the French Concession (the waterfront, financial and commercial districts, and the American and European embassies) fell to the Japanese, and before December 1941, when the United States entered the war. Po-shek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied Shanghai, 1937–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993). Studies of Shanghai culture during the war almost invariably work from within the conceptual frame of the “solitary island.”


49. Wang Zhongmin, ed., *Qing dai wenji pianmu fenlei suoyin* (Beijing: Guoli Beiping tushuguan, 1935). I am indebted to Glenn Perkins for bringing this work to my attention.


54. Wang Zhongmin, ed., *Qing dai wenji pianmu fenlei suoyin*.


**Chapter 2: Wandering**

1. Lu Xun writes that the group of colleagues contributing to *Threads of Conversation* was only a “society” by virtue of the fact that at their monthly dinner, a bamboo reservation plaque reading “Threads of Conversation Society” was hung outside their private room. Lu Xun plays down group unity, for as Zhu Jinshun notes it was not a society with a set member list, officers, and a set of regulations, but he also points out that *Threads of Conversation* was a publication for associates (*tongren*), which not only implied social connections among the regular contributors, but a general sense of common purpose, which I think are enough to indicate a significant literary grouping.


4. The Jin Shengtan passage that serves as the epigraph for Chapter 1 is a notable example of the association of essays with conversation.

5. *Diao yu si you yu si* seems to be an adaptation of *sheng yu si zhang yu si* “born and raised here,” a transformation that suggests the lack of rootedness Zhou is describing here.


8. The Chinese runs: *Jicai, malan tou, zhizhi jia zai houmen tou.*


10. The *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, the *Golden Mean* and the *Great Learning*, the last two being adapted sections of the archaic *Book of Rites*.


17. Denton translates these as “Material” and “Forms,” respectively. I retain “categories” in my translation because I think Lu Xun is drawing attention to a certain officious and ostentatious way of writing and thinking by repeatedly using the words “categories of:”


21. Denton renders this heading as “Without Title.”


24. “True color” and “fascination” are traditional aesthetic categories Zhou Zuoren promoted in his advocacy of *xiaopin wen*. For a detailed discussion, see


28. This is Zhou Zuoren’s romanization of the local dialect; in standard Mandarin romanization it would be *siningwa*.


33. Yu Pingbo, “Jiangsheng dengying li de Qinhuaí he,” *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi sanwen yiji*, ed. Zhou Zuoren, vol. 6 (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935). According to the signature, the essay was written on August 22 of that year in Beijing.

34. Yu Pingbo, “Jiangsheng dengying li de Qinhuaí he.”

35. Given the poetic interest in ambiguity and obscurity, it seems only natural, then, that something “misty” would emerge again out of the ashes of socialist culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s—Misty Poetry.

36. Yu Pingbo, “Jiangsheng dengying li de Qinhuaí he.”


40. Zhou also included two pieces of fiction in the eight pieces he chose of Xu Zhimo in the same anthology. When Zhou Zuoren and Yu Dafu accepted the task of editing the two volumes of essays for the *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* (Compendium
of Chinese New Literature), as each explains in his respective introduction, they faced a tricky division of labor. Zhou decided that, apart from Lu Xun and himself, he would make a selection of writers with whom he was most familiar, which turned out to be most of the members of the Threads of Conversation group; Yu Dafu was instructed to make selections of essays by Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren and then bring in everyone else worthy of consideration. Thus, the first volume, edited by Zhou Zuoren, includes Xu Zhimo, Liu Bannong, Liu Dabai, Liang Yuchun, Wu Zhihui, Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo, Yu Pingbo, Gu Jiegang, Chen Xiying, Xu Zuzheng, Fei Ming, Sun Fuyuan, Sun Fuxi, Xu Weinan, and Wang Shiyi. Zhou Zuoren, ed., Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi di liu ji: sanwen yi ji (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935). Yu Dafu's volume includes Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Bing Xin, Lin Yutang, Feng Zikai, Zhong Jingwen, Chuan Dao, Luo Heizhi, Zhu Dag, Ye Yongqin, Zhu Ziqing, Wang Tongzhao, Xu Dishan, Zheng Zhenduo, Ye Shaojun, and Mao Dun. Yu Dafu, ed., Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi di qī ji: sanwen èr ji (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935). This is not surprising, since Zhou Zuoren was in effect the editor of Threads of Conversation, the first and most prominent prose magazine in modern China. The first three years of its existence—the magazine's heyday—came to an end in 1927, and this coincided with the last year to be included in the Compendium.

44. Fei Ming, “Bei,” 398.
45. Not the large city that is now capital Hebei Province, but a local village; though nearly homophonous, the Chinese character for shi is different.
47. Fei Ming, “Bei,” 398.
49. Kojin Karatani's work, though controversial, examines the modern Japanese encounter with Western thought in a manner quite relevant to the modern Chinese situation as well. He argues that Japanese, especially writers, of the late Meiji found themselves unconsciously shifting their ontological orientation in response to visual, verbal, and even spiritual practices (such as “landscape” and “confession”) brought to them through Western literary and artistic works. Kojin Karatani, Origins of Modern Japanese Literature (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993).

51. There is a chapter devoted to the Women’s Normal controversy in Yi Zhuxian’s biography of Hu Shi. According to Yi, Yang Yinyu, the strict headmistress of the College, had a similar background to that of Hu Shi; she had also studied at Columbia University, but was extremely conservative in running her school. In November of 1924, she expelled three Chinese department students (I have not found their names) on the pretext of their returning late from their hometowns. This elicited the united rage of the student population, who issued a public written demand that Yang be removed. Yang received the support of Zhang Shizhao, an ultraconservative opponent of the New Culture Movement who was Chief Justice in the warlord Duan Qirui’s government. A fierce battle ensued in the newspapers and magazines as the intellectual community aligned themselves with either side. Most of the cultural progressives, like Zhou Zuoren, Lu Xun, and their colleagues, took the side of the students, but Hu Shi, who had a personal connection with Zhang and the mayor of Beijing, Chen Yuan, took the other side, arguing that students should be studying and not taking to the streets. Yi does not describe what transpired over the early months of 1925, but by April Zhang Shizhao was also made Minister of Education, and issued the journal *Jia yin* to promote the reestablishment of Confucianism and other traditional values. He also further assists Yang Yinyu by surrounding the Women’s College with police in August of 1925 and ordering all the students to leave, declaring the school closed. See Yi Zhuxian, *Hu Shi zhuan* (Wuhan: Hubei renmin chubanshe, 1987).


55. Shi Pingmei, “Xue ye,” *Yu si xuancui* ed. Li Chunlin et al. (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 2001), 50.

56. Chen Xuezhao’s “Biexu” (Parting thoughts), published in the issue of April 11, 1926, also features a lingering meditation on the sights and sounds of Beijing in the context of a departure.

57. This is a local nickname for Xuanwu Gate, a south-facing gate to the west of Beijing’s main south gate, Qianmen.


**Chapter 3: Learning**


4. See Sun Fuyuan, “Ji Gu Zhongyong,” Yu si 1.1 (1924). Here the father of modern Chinese literature is described in his role as a headmaster of the normal school in Shaoxing at which Sun was a student in 1908.

5. In his youth in Tianjin, Li had thrown in his lot with the reform faction in the Hundred Days Reform of 1898, which meant he had to flee to Shanghai to escape the Dowager Cixi’s coup. Being talented in the arts and literature, he began to edit art and poetry publications and studied with Cai Yuanpei in Nanyang University in 1902. After his mother’s death in 1905 he resolved to go to Japan, where many of his acquaintances had gone after the abortive reform movement. In Japan Li studied Western art and music and was a founding member of the famous Spring Willow drama society, in which he performed in La Dame aux camélias (Li played Camille), Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and Les Miserables. He returned to China in 1910 and lost most of his considerable fortune as a result of the Republican Revolution in 1911; he returned to Shanghai in 1912, where he continued teaching and became a prominent member of the newly established Nanshe or Southern Society, a literary organization devoted to the “cause of bringing new vitality to Chinese literature.” From 1913, he taught art and music at the Zhejiang Two-year Normal School, later called Zhejiang No. 1 Normal College, where Xia Mianzun, Tian Junfu, and Ma Xulun were among his colleagues, and his students included Feng Zikai, Liu Zhiping, Wu Mengfei, and Cao Juren. At about this same time, Li’s dissatisfaction with many aspects of life led him on a spiritual journey that began with Neo-Confucianism, a subject on which his father had been an authority, and led to experiments with Taoist asceticism, and ultimately entry into the Buddhist clergy.


12. For example, Xia Mianzun and Liu Xunyu, *Wenzhang zuofa* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1983). Originally published in 1926, this primer contains five chapters on various topics in practical composition based on curriculum used in 1919, as well as a long sixth chapter on the composition of *xiaopin wen*, which was based on a course taught at Chunhui Middle School in 1922.


19. See chapter 1, pp. 44–45.

20. Feng Zikai, *Yuanyuan tang suibi* (Beijing: Kaiming chubanshe, 1992). *Suibi* now enjoys widespread use in China and is virtually synonymous with *sanwen* in the narrow sense. Given the strong influence of Japanese culture on the two men (particularly Xia Mianzun, who translated a great deal from Japanese), it is possible that their preference for this term stems from its prominence in Japanese culture (*zuihitsu* is the Japanese pronunciation of the term).


27. At the same time, however, the essay displays a combination of envy and scorn for the wealthy because of the high social status their purchasing power

34. The Lida School had special meaning for the White Horse Lake group; it was a school set up in Shanghai by the core members after they were driven away from Chunhui by yet another ideological dispute. Xia Mianzun, “The Ornamental Iron Mountain,” 162; Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990), 393.
36. Feng’s collection is better known than Xia Mianzun’s, in part because of its warm reception in Japan. The 1948 edition includes a Chinese translation of a highly laudatory preface by Tanizaki Junichiro, as well as Feng Zikai’s negative reaction to it. Feng was very much involved in cultural efforts in Hankou and Guilin to resist Japan’s invasion of China in the late 1930s and early 1940s.
42. Feng Zikai, “Er nü,” 23.
49. Feng Zikai, “Yi ershi,” Yuanyuan tang suibi, 47.
51. The childhood friend is depicted in much the same manner as Runtu, a local childhood friend alienated by class differences in adulthood from the narrator in Lu Xun’s short story “My Old Home” (Guxiang).
52. According to Ji Zhenhuai’s biographical chronology (nianpu), Xia Mianzun wrote to Zhu on September 16, 1924, inviting him to teach at Chunhui Middle School. He assumed the post on November 3. In August of 1925, Tsinghua College became a university, and the Chinese department (guowen xi) invited Zhu Ziqing to join them as a professor. Thus altogether Zhu only lived at White Horse Lake for around ten months. However, it was not until January of 1927 that he moved his family from White Horse Lake to Beijing. Zhu Jinshun, ed., Zhu Ziqing yanjiu ziliao (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1981), 378–379.

Chapter 4: Enjoying
2. “Anglo-American” refers to the common experience of studying in England or America.

4. The notion of a “Shanghai school,” which includes a variety of other groups, incidentally, does not make a very useful category for sorting out groups of modern essayists. See Gao Hengwen, Jingpai wenren: Xueyuan pai de fengcai (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000), 2.

5. Lin Yutang’s interest in Su Shi, for example, is confined almost entirely to his English writings. Qian Suoqiao’s unpublished article on the Analects group, moreover, compares Lin Yutang’s Chinese rewriting of his own English essays, to others’ Chinese translations of them, revealing significant stylistic differences. See Qian Suoqiao, “Lunyu Group: Attracting the Modern Style of Gentlemen.” The present chapter is mainly concerned with the group’s Chinese productions, even if they are in some sense “derivative” of The China Critic and other English material.


7. Xu Youchun, Minguo renwu dacidian, 224. There is no mention of his major field of study, but judging from the titles of his books it must have been Western philosophy.

8. Thus he was at Peking University the same time as Li Guangtian, He Qifang, and Bian Zhilin, discussed in chapter 5.

9. After a stint in the economic research department of the Central Bank, Xu co-edited the magazine In This Human World from 1939. During the war he did further bank work and taught Chinese (guowen) in Chongqing. From 1944 to 1946 Xu reported from America for Saodang bao (later called Heping ribao or Peace Daily), and he remained on its staff on returning to Shanghai in 1946. In 1950 he went to Hong Kong and took teaching positions there and in Singapore over the next two decades. He died in 1980 at the age of 72. Xu Youchun, Minguo renwu dacidian, 700.


11. Leo Lee suggests that the jiantou in this term refers to leather shoes with pointed toes popular in 1930s Shanghai, which would make the transliteration of “gentleman” into a metonym for this kind of dandy. Lee, Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945, 40.

12. It is interesting to note that The China Critic published cartoons only next to Lin Yutang’s “Little Critic” column; they were works usually by Ding Song, chosen from the Chinese press, and they were rarely humorous. Instead, they were a form of visual metaphor as commentary, depicting topical issues in graphic, often anthropomorphic, form.

19. C. T. Hsia, for example, presents Lao She and Mao Dun as “the two major novelists of the second decade,” without even mentioning Lao She’s prose efforts. Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 165.
20. This is largely because of the limitation of most modern literary histories to the genre of fiction. Hsia, A History of Modern Chinese Fiction, 167–188; Wang Yao, Zhongguo xin wenxue shigao, Revised ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1982); Yang Yi, Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo shi (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1986), 181–222.
22. I am referring here to pieces like “Yi tian” (One day) and “Kexue jiuming” (Science saves the day) from 1933. See Lao She wenji (Collected prose of Lao She) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1990), vol. 14, 420–425, 454–455.
23. Lao She, “Tan youmo,” Yuzhou feng (1935). This piece seems not to have been published originally in the “Busted Wagon” series in Yuzhou feng, since the author’s preface to the book indicates that only pieces describing his various novels were published in the magazine, and the others were added to fill up the book.
26. This appears to be a parody of a line in chapter V, verse 14 of the Confucian Analects, which according to D. C. Lau’s translation reads, “Before he could put into practice something he had heard, the only thing Tzu-lu feared was that he should be told something further.” D. C. Lau, The Analects (Lun yü) (Harmondsworth; New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 78.
27. In his translation of Mencius, D. C. Lau renders yangzao as “jujubes”: “Because Tseng Hsi was fond of eating jujubes, Tseng Tzu could not bring himself to eat them.” See D. C. Lau, Mencius (Harmondsworth, UK, and Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), 202. The passage is often understood as a celebration of filial piety.
28. This distorts a line from Confucius (Analects VI:11): “How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy.” Lau, The Analects (Lun yü), 82. This idea is strikingly similar to Xia Mianzun’s praise for Dharma Master Hongyi, described above on p. 87.
29. *Analects* XIV:29: “Tzu-kung was given to grading people. The Master said, ‘How superior Ssu is! For my part, I have no time for such things.’” Confucius’ comment seems decidedly sarcastic. Lau, *The Analects (Lun yü)*, 129.

30. This parodies an old saying, “I did not kill Bo Ren, but Bo Ren died because of me.”


33. *Analects* XVII:26: “The Master said, ‘If by the age of forty a man is still disliked, there is no hope for him.’” As in Yan Hui’s statement, the meaning is humorously changed in the “Origination” narrative when The Master becomes the subject of the sentence, rather than just the narrator. The preceding three allusions are all to the same chapter of the *Analects*; thus it reads like a running parody.

34. Lin Yutang, “Yuan qi,” 2.


40. Liang’s second (posthumous) collection of essays, *Lei yu xiao* (Tears and Laughter, 1934), featured no less than three prefaces, by Fei Ming, Liu Guoping, and Shi Min.


42. Liang Yuchun, “The Priceless Moments of a Spring Morn,” 647.


47. For a discussion of one example in reportage literature, see Laughlin, Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience, 139–141.

48. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, cigarette smoking in the United States was less than half as widespread in 2004 (under 20 percent) as it was in 1965 (41.9 percent). There was a 20 percent decline between 1997 and 2004 alone. Health, United States, 2004 with Chartbook on Trends in the Health of Americans (Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Heath Statistics, 2004).


50. For a provocative and well-documented re-examination of opium's place in late imperial Chinese culture, and a critique of the simplistic rejection of opium that helped condition modern Chinese culture, see Frank Dikotter, Lars Laaman and Zhou Xun, Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).


57. Xu Zhimo provides an anecdote of a student who was at his own university (Clark University), carrying books, going to classrooms and listening to lectures, going about his studies dutifully for several years, and ends up with nothing to show for it. It was only when he went to Cambridge and started smoking with friends and chatting about his studies, that after only about a year or so he felt his readings were getting somewhere.


61. The last is a reference to Soviet agent Yakov Rudnik (1894–1963) who was imprisoned with his wife Tatiana Moiseenko (1891–1964) in the International Settlement on June 14, 1931, and then handed over the Nationalist authorities in Nanjing. They fasted to the point of unconsciousness in prison, and there was a worldwide campaign to free them. Though sentenced to death, they were finally

62. There are in fact few if any cigarette advertisements in the *Analects Fortnightly*, which is striking because the *China Critic*, in which the contributors are basically the same group of people (Lin Yutang, Pan Guangdan, Quan Zenggu), ran a huge advertisement for British American Tobacco Company products like Capstan in every issue.


64. This quotation is also included in Lin Yutang’s section “On Smoking and Incense” in the “Enjoyment of Living” chapter of *The Importance of Living*; it leads up to a complete and embellished English version of “My Turn at Quitting Smoking,” which is embedded in this section. Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1937), 222–230. Incense comes in after this discourse on the pleasures and practical uses of smoking when Lin points out that, though tobacco was introduced into China in the sixteenth century (“by Portuguese sailors”), after “ransacking the entire Chinese literature after that period,” Lin was unable to find writings about tobacco that did the weed justice. However, he points out, there are writings about incense in the late imperial period, and he cites examples by the late Ming *xiaopin wen* author Tu Long (Tu Chishui) and the early Qing writer Mao Xiang (1611–1693), whose *Yingmei an yiyu* (Reminiscences of the shady plum tree cottage) was included in Zhu Jianmang’s *Aesthetic Literature* from 1936 (see pp. 37–38). These examples indicate a considerable overlap in the perceived benefits of incense and of smoking. Both writers, as Lin quotes them, wax eloquent on the spiritual and psychological effects of burning fine incense and associate it explicitly with the sensual enjoyment of the company of women.


68. Yin Xin, “Qiutu xiyan suoji,” 606.


70. Signed November 3, 1933, “on an overcast dusk with low-hanging clouds.”


73. On the other hand, page 76 of the first issue of *Taibai* features an advertisement from Tianma Press for *xiaopin* collections by Zhou Zuoren, Feng Zikai and Shi Zhecun.

75. Originally published in Chen Wangdao’s *Xiaopin wen he manhua* (Shanghai: Shenghuo shudian, 1935) and reprinted in Li Ning’s *Xiaopin wen yishu tan* (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1990), 134–138.


77. Fo Lang, “Dui xiaopin wen de xiao yijian,” 38.


**Chapter 5: Dreaming**


2. It has been observed moreover that, while the Beijing school category makes sense in defining an aesthetic orientation and a recognizable posture, the Shanghai school was not unified enough to be useful as a category. Gao Hengwen, *Jingpai wenren: Xueyuan pai de fengcai*, 2.

3. It is precisely this academic world of their youth that the three popular contemporary essayists Zhang Zhongxing, Jin Kemu and Ji Xianlin write about in the 1990s. Ji Xianlin contributed to *Wenxue jikan* as an essayist and a book reviewer; Jin Kemu contributed to *Wenfan xiaopin*.

4. There were other distinctive essayists in the Crescent Moon group, notably Fang Lingru, but they mainly wrote longer pieces about places, as described in Wagner, “Landscapes of the Soul,” 92–141; and Alexandra Wagner, *Bildnisse des Selbstdie Neumondschule (Xinyue pai) und der moderne chinesische Essay* (Dortmund: Projekt, 1996).


6. Chen Xiying was actually well known for his essays included in the *Compendium of Chinese New Literature* and A Ying’s *Xiandai shiliu jia xiaopin* (Sixteen modern xiaopin artists), both from 1935. I exclude him from the present study mainly because these essays were all in the form of commentary, with virtually no discernible artistic features.


8. In the light of xiaopin wen, which are often defined by their brevity (around 1,000 Chinese characters), it is worth noting the variation in length of these essays.
“Chats in a Florentine mountain lodge” is close to 1,780 characters, while “The Cambridge I Knew” is more like 5,000; “Too Thick to Dissolve” is about 3,800.

9. Xu Zhimo, “Nongde huabukai,” Xin yue 1.10 (1928); “Si cheng (Beijing de yi wan),” Xin yue 1.11 (1929). Both pieces were included in a 1930 collection entitled Lunpan xiaoshuo ji (Roulette: Stories), and they share a fictional protagonist named Lin Lianfeng. There was a Hong Kong installment of “Too Thick to Dissolve” as well, which was published after the Singapore part and before “Dead City.” Though they are clearly works of fiction, Xu Zhimo’s foreword to Roulette, mentions both fiction and essays in speaking modestly about his own writing skills and praising his models in English literature; it does not explain why he is talking about essays in a foreword to a fiction collection. Zhou Zuoren, whose high regard for the essay has been established, included these two works along with only a few others that are more obviously essays in the first volume of essays in the Compendium of Chinese New Literature. Zhou’s preface does not comment on the specific Xu Zhimo works he chose in his introduction to that volume. As late as 1989, editor Wang Sun proves equally loose in his definition of the essay genre by including “Too Thick to Dissolve” in his Xinyue sanwen shiba jia (Eighteen Crescent Moon essayists). Yet the stories are not included in Yang Mu’s 1998 collection of Xu Zhimo’s essays, though there are a total of thirty-nine selections, including two fables. See Yang Mu, ed., Xu Zhimo sanwen xuan (Taipei: Hong fan shudian, 1998). I have no intention of proving that these pieces are essays in some rigorous sense; I think it is enough to show how porous the line between the two genres was and is in the eyes of Xu Zhimo and those who read him.


11. Shen Congwen, “Cong xianshi xuexi,” Shen Congwen wenji, vol. 10 (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 1984), 311–312. Quoted in Fan Peisong, Zhongguo sanwen piping shi, 119. The date of this text is not clear, but it is included in a collection entitled Shui yun ji (which I cannot locate) that includes other essays dated 1980, so it could be very late, and appears not to be contemporary with the period under discussion. Internal references in “Learn from Reality” suggest that it was written no earlier than 1950. See Fan Peisong, Zhongguo sanwen piping shi. Dagong bao was based in Tianjin; according to the Compendium of Chinese New Literature, the weekly literary supplement was called Wenyi fukan until August 1935, when it changed to just Wenyi; it stopped publication as of June 30, 1937, but resumed in Hankou from Oct. 3, 1937, to March 6, 1938, and later in Hong Kong from August 1938 through November of 1941. While in Tianjin during the mid-1930s, Shen Congwen acted as editor for several months, then handed it over to Xiao Qian. The “big literary journal” refers to Wenzue jikan, January 1934–December 1935, edited by Zhang Jinyi, Ba Jin, and Zheng Zhenduo.


19. Shen Congwen, “Fengya yu suqi,” 37. For the sake of precision, it should be pointed out that Shen did not single out *xiaopin wen* by name in this article, but expressed these views in response to a request for his comments on “humor magazines.”


21. Shih is here referring to what has generally been viewed as mainstream of May Fourth and post-May Fourth culture—revolutionary iconoclasm in which culture is to be employed in an overall project to save the nation from Western imperialism and capitalism.


24. See above, p. 10.


27. Bian Zhilin, “Xu.”


and other Stories, trans. and ed. Gladys Yang (Beijing: Panda Books, 1982), 23. The Panda books collection came to my attention after writing this chapter; translations are my own, with emendations based on Gladys Yang’s translations.


33. “Pingdi cheng,” Wang Shouchun, ed., Li Guangtian sanwen xuan, 29–33. Quotation appears on 29. The story first appeared in the magazine Wenhfan xiaopin 1.1 (Feb. 1935) and was later included in the collection Yinhu ji (Nov. 1936). It is also included in Li Guangtian, A Pitiful Plaything and other Stories, 27–32.

34. One may be reminded here of the symbolic landscapes and vignettes of Lu Xun’s story “Yao” (Medicine), except that the symbolism does not even suggest themes of national fate or revolution.


37. Journeys themselves create allegorical resonances—I am reminded here of Bi Ye’s long wartime reportage “Northern Wilderness,” which is constituted largely of an eerie all-night journey in a cart across a wasteland. See Laughlin, Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience, 37–74, 208–218; Bi Ye, Beifang de yuanye (Shanghai: Shanghai zazhi gongsi, 1938).

38. He Qifang and Lin Zhihao, He Qifang san wen xuan ji, 46.


Conclusion


11. This fascination is particularly evident in Liu Baiyu’s reportage works from the late 1940s. Qin Mu’s essays and some of Yang Shuo’s are filled with varieties of flowers and plants, enjoyed in themselves and as symbols of other things.
Ah Ying (Qian Xingcun)
阿英 (錢杏邨)
atarashiki mura 新村
Ba Jin 巴金
baihua 白話
Baima hu 白馬湖
“Baima hu zhi dong” “白馬湖之冬”
baimian “白麵”
baiping 白萍
ban bao 辨報
Beihai 北海
beijing 背景
“Beijing de kongqi” “北京的空氣”
bense 本色
Bian Zhilin 卞之琳
biaoxian 表現
biji (notes) 筆記
Bing Xin 冰心
Bowu zhi 《博物志》
bucheng zhangjie de 不成章節的
“Budong de yinyi” “不懂的音譯”
busan busi de keyi 不三不四的可以
Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培
“Cangying” “蒼蠅”
Chang, Eileen (Zhang Ailing) 張愛玲
Changqing tang caizi shu huigao 《朝經堂才子書彙稿》

chanhui 懺悔
Chen bao fukan 《晨報》副刊
Chen Hengzhe 陳衡哲
Chen Mengjia 陳夢家
Chen Pingyuan 陳平原
Chen Wangdao 陳望道
Chen Xuezhao 陳雪昭
Chenghuang Miao 城隍廟
Chibei outan 《池北偶談》
chichu 蹤躡
chidu (informal letters) 尺牋
Chu Anping 儲安平
Chuan Dao 川島
chuanqi 傳奇
chun wenxue 續文學
“Chun zhao yike zhi qianjin” “春朝一刻值千金”
“Chunhui de yiyue” “春暉的一月”
Chunhui zhongxue 春暉中學
Chunlao ji 《春醪集》
chuoming 啜茗
chuzhang 處長
Cuiyu ge pingxuan Huang Ming 《翠玉閣評選皇明小品十六家》
cunmiao 村廟
Da shijie 大世界
Dagong bao 《大公報》
Dai Wangshu 戴望鶴
danbagu 淡巴孤
Dao de jing 《道德經》
dazhong yu 大衆語
Deng Tuo 鄧拓
Dongfang zazhi 《東方雜誌》
Dongpo xiaopin 《東坡小品》
Dongpo zhilin 《東坡智林》
Doupeng xianhua 《豆棚閒話》
Duan Kegu 段柯古
Duan Qirui 段琪瑞
duanlun 短論
dushu ji 讀書記
“Er nü” “兒女”
fakan ci 發刊辭
fan geming 反革命
Fang Bao 方苞
Fang ma chang 放馬場
fanyu 反語
Fei Ming (Feng Wenbing) 廢名（馮文炳）
“Feiengcui shanju xianhua” “翡冷翠山居閒話”
Fen shu 《焚書》
Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰
Feng Yuanjun 馮沅君
Feng Yunzhuang 馮允莊
Feng Zikai 豐子愷
fengci 諷刺
fenggu 風趣
Fengshen yanyi 《封神演義》
fengsu zhi 風俗志
“Fengya yu suqi” “風雅與俗氣”
Fengyu tan 《風雨談》
Fu (rhymeprose) 賦
Fusheng liuji 《浮生六記》
“Gangtie jiashan” “鋼鐵假山”
“Gei wode haizimen” “給我的孩子們”
Gong Zizhen 龔自珍
Gongan pai 公安派
gongdao 公道
Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘
Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛
Gu Lu 顧累
“gu wang yan zhi gu ting zhi 呱妄言之故聴之”
Gu Yanwu 顧炎武
Guan Yunchang 閔雲長
Guanzhui bian 《管錐編》
gudaoy 孤島
Gui Youguang 歸有光
Gujin 《古今》
Guo Moruo 郭沫若
“Guobulai yin 過不來姻”
“Guoshi” “過失”
guowen 國文
hanxu 含蓄
He Qifang 何其芳
“Hetang yuese” “荷塘月色”
Hong Liangji 洪亮吉
“Hongliao 紅廖”
Hu Shi 胡适
huaji 滑稽
Hualang ji 《畫廊集》
Huameng lu 《劃夢錄》
Huang Jiade 黃嘉德
Huang Jiayin 黃嘉音
huanghua 黃花
“Huianiao jiuye” “花鳥舅爺”
Huanjin ji 《浣錦集》
Huayang sangao 《華陽散稿》
“Huazhan de riji” “華瞻的日記”
huixie 詞諧
Issa, Kobayashi 小林一茶
Ji Xianlin 李羡林
Ji Yun 纪昀
Jia Pingwa 贾平凹
“Jian wang” “剪網”
Jiang Shaoyuan 江紹原
“Jiangsheng dengying li de Qinhua he” “江聲燈影裏的秦淮河”
Jianqiao 《劍鞘》
jicai 齊菜
Jiehun shinian 《結婚十年》
Jin Kemu 金克木
Jin Shengtan 金聖嘆
Jin Yi 非以
“Jindai biji guoyan lu” “近代筆記過眼錄”
Jindai sanwen chao 《近代散文抄》
Jing Hengyi 經亨頤
Jinghua yuan 《鏡花緣》
Jingling pai 竞陵派
Jingpai 京派
jingshen 精神
jizhi (apex) 極致
jizhi (wit) 機智
junzi 君子
Kang Youwei 康有為
kaozheng 考證
katun 卡吞
kexi yu 可喜語
kexue xiaopin 科學小品
Kuang Husheng 匡互生
Kuroda Seiki 黑田清輝
Kuyu zhai 苦雨齋
landiao fuci 濫調浮詞
Langhuan wenji 《琅嬛文集》
Lao niu po che 《老牛破車》
li (distance) 里
Li Guangtian 李廣田
Li Liufang 李流芳
Li Qingya 李青崖
Li Ruzhen 李汝珍
Li Shutong 李叔同
Li Yu 李漁
Li Zhi 李贍
Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋
Liang Yuchun 梁遇春
Liangyou huabo 《良友畫報》
Liao Mosha 蕭沫沙
Liaozhai zhiyi 《聊齋志異》
Lida xuehui 立達學會
Lin Huiyin 林徽因
Lin Yutang 林語堂
Liu Baiyu 劉白羽
Liu Bannong 劉半農
Liu Dajie 劉大傑
Liu Dajun 劉大軍
Liu Hezhen 劉和珍
Liu Shipei 劉師培
Liu Tong 劉侗
Liu Xunyu 劉薰宇
Liu Yazi 劉亞子
Liu Yusheng (Liu Cunren) 柳雨生(柳存仁)
Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元
“Lou” “樓”
Lu Jingqing 陸晶清
Lushi chunqiu 《呂氏春秋》
Lu Xun 魯迅
Lu Yi 章熠
Lu Yin 廬隱
Lu Yunlong 陸雲龍
“Lubian yehua” “爐邊夜話”
“Lun ’ta ma de” “論’他媽的’”
“Lun wen: shang, xia” “論文上、下”
“Lun zhaoxiang zhi lei” “論照相之類”
Lunyu banyuekan 《論語》
半月刊
Luotuo xiangzi 《駱駝祥子》
Ma Nancun 馬南邨
malan tou 马兰头
manhua 漫画
mantan 漫谈
Menghu ji 《猛虎集》
“Mengzhong daolu” “梦中道路”
ningshi 名士
Mushanokoji Saneatsu 武者小路実篤
Nakagiri Kakutarō 中桐確太郎
Nan she 南社
Ni Huanzhi 倪焕之
Nie Gannu 汶紘弩
“Nongde huabukai (Xinjiapo)”
“濃得化不開（新加坡）”
“Nüren” “女人”
Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修
paihuai 彼徊
Pan Guangdan 潘光旦
Pan Hannian 潘漢年
panghuang 彷徨
pihao 瘰好
pingdan 平淡
“Pingdi cheng” “平地城”
Pingu 平屋
po kou ma ren 破口骂人
Pu Songling 濮松龄
pusu 樸素
qi 氣
Qian Xuantong 錢玄同
Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書
Qiao 《橋》
qiaocui se 憐悴色
Qin Mu 秦牧
Qingdaiziwenpu fenlei suoyin 《清代文集篇目分類索引》
Qingjia lu 《清嘉錄》
qingjing jiaorong 情景交融
qingwei 青味
qinni yulao xin you changxian 勤靡餘
勞心有常閑
qiqu 奇趣
“Qiu ye” “秋夜”
“Qiu tu xian suoji” “囚徒吸煙瑣記”
Qu Yuan 屈原
Quan Zenggu 全增嘏
quwei 趣味
“Ren si guan” “人死觀”
Renjian shi 《人間世》
Renmin wenxue 《人民文學》
Renshijian 《人世間》
riji 日記
Rizhi lu 《日知錄》
rouma zhuyi 肉麻主義
Rulin waishi 《儒林外史》
ruozhu 著竹
sandao 三道
Sanjia cun 三家村
sanwen 散文
Shangyu 上虞
Shanhai jing 《山海經》
Shao Xunmei 郭洵美
Shaoxing 紹興
Shen Congwen 沈從文
Shen Fu 沈復
Shen Qiwu 沈啓無
shenshi 紳士
Shi jing 《詩經》
Shi Pingmei 石評梅
Shi shuo xin yu 《世說新語》
Shi Tuo (Lu Fen) 師陀（盧梵）
Shi yue 《十月》
Shi Zhecun 施蟻存
Shi Zhenlin 史震林
Shichahai 什剎海
shigu 世故
Shimenwan 石門灣
Shouhuo 《收穫》
shouling 首領
shu 書
Shu Shan 曙山
Shuijing 《水經》
Shuixing 《水星》
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shuqing 抒情
“Sicheng (Beijing de yewan)” “死城
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Su Qing 蘇青
Su Shi 蘇軾
Su Xuelin 蘇雪林
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suibi 隨筆
suigan 隨感
Sun Fuyuan 孫伏園
Sun Langgong 孫俍工
suxie 速寫
sy-menngoa (siming wa) 四明瓦
Taibai 《太白》
“Taishan jiding” “泰山極頂”
“Tan liulang han” “談流浪漢”
Tan Yuanchun 譚元春
Tang Tao 唐弢
Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖
tanmi shi 疯迷詩
Tanyi lu 《談藝錄》
Tao'an mengyi 《陶庵夢憶》
Tian di 《天地》
Tian di ren 《天地人》
Tian Rucheng 田汝成
Tongcheng pai 林城派
tongren (kanwu) 同仁（刊物）
Tsinghua (Qinghua) 清華
Wan-Ming ershi jia xiaopin 《晚明二十
家小品》
wan shi 萬世
Wang Guowei 王國維
Wang Shizhen 王士禎
Wang Zengqi 汪曾祺
Wang Zhongmin 王重民
weiguang 威光
Wen Yiduo 聞一多
Wenhua kulü 《文化苦旅》
wenren 文人
Wenren xiaoshuo yu Zhongguo wenhua
《文人小說與中國文化》
Wenxin 《文心》
Wenxue jikan 《文學季刊》
wényan 文言
Wenyi 《文藝》
wenzhang 文章
Wenzhang lishua 《文章例話》
Wenzhang zuofa 《文章作法》
wenci 文字
“Wo de jie yan” “我的戒煙”
“Wo suo zhidaod de kangqiao” “我所
知道的康橋”
“Wo zhi yu shu” “我之於書”
Women de liuqi yue 《我們的六七
月》
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Wu Han 吳晗
Wu Jingzi 吳敬梓
“Wupeng chuan” “烏篷船”
“Wushi nian lai Zhongguo zhi
wenxue” “五十年來中國之文學”
xi yan 吸煙
“Xi yan shibaizhe laihan” “吸煙失敗
者來函”
“Xi yan yu jiaoyu” “吸煙與教育”
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Xiandai 《現代》
Xiang xi 《湘西》
Xiangxing sanji 《湘行散記》
Xianqing ouji 《閒情偶記》
xianqing wenxue 閒情文學
xianxia 閒暇
xiao baishe 小擺設
Xiao Qian 蕭乾
xiaohua 笑話
xiaopin wen 小品文
“Xiaopin wen de weiji” “小品文的危机”
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Xiaoshuo yuebao 《小说月报》
Xie Bingying 謝冰瑩
xiequ 諧趣
Xifeng 《西風》
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xingling 性靈
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yinmin 遺民
yongmeng jingjin 勇猛精進
you bujie yanse de dushi de hegou 有不潔顏色的都市的河溝
You meng ying 《幽夢影》
youji 遊記
youmo 幽默
Youyang zazu 《西陽裸姐》
Yu Dafu 郁達夫
Yu Huai 俞壇
Yu Jie 余傑
Yu Pingbo 俞平伯
Yu Qiuyu 余秋雨
Yu si 《語絲》
Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道
Yuan Mei 袁枚
Yuan Zhongdao 袁中道
Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道
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yuanqi (vital essence) 元氣
Yuanyuan tang suibi 《緣緣堂隨筆》
Yuewei caotang biji 《閱微草堂筆記》
yulu ti 語錄体
Yuzhou feng 《宇宙風》
za 雜
zagan 雜感
zaibiao 载道
zaji 扎記
zajia 齊家
zakao 雜考
zaluan 雜亂
zawen 雜文
Zeng Guofan 曾國藩
Zengzi 曾子
Zhang Chao 張潮
Zhang Dai 張岱
Zhang Kebiao 章克標
Zhang Taiyan 章太炎
Zhang Xinhai 張心海
Zhang Yiping 章依萍
Zhang Zhongxing 張中行
Zhao Kuangyin 趙匡胤
Zheng Banqiao 鄭板橋
Zheng Xie 鄭燮
Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸
Zhong Xing 鍾惺
Zhongguo wenxue zhenben congshu
  《中國文學珍本叢書》
Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi 《中國新文學大系》
Zhonghe yuekan 《中和月刊》
Zhongxuesheng 《中學生》
Zhou Zuoren 周作人
Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛
Zhu Guozhen 朱國珍
Zhu Jianmang 朱劍芒
Zhu Ziqing 朱自清
Zhuangzi 莊子
“Zi pou” “自剖”
Zikai manhua 《子愷漫畫》
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