This is the ninth issue of *East Asian History* in the series previously entitled *Papers on Far Eastern History*. The journal is published twice a year.

Contributions to *East Asian History* are invited on all aspects of East Asian history, from prehistory to the present. Contributors should send 5 copies of their article and a brief biographical note to the Editor, *East Asian History*, Division of Pacific & Asian History, Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra ACT 0200, Australia. Please include details of any grants or assistance received, and information on the intended audience of the article. Contributors are encouraged to discuss their work in conferences and workshops and are welcome to attend.
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Cover picture  From the photograph-album of Rewi Alley: “After tiffin, Henli, August 1930,” Kathleen Wright Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand
In Memoriam

NG MAU-SANG

The article that follows is probably the last completed work by our late friend and colleague, Dr Ng Mau-sang, who passed away on 19 August, 1994. He was only in his middle forties, having been born in 1948. He had warned me by e-mail, before he returned from Cambridge to the USA to have treatment for his leukaemia, as I suspect he had warned other friends—a characteristically kindly act—that his chances were not that good. Even so, his early death at the height of his powers, and so full of good humour and good nature, came as a great shock whose effects have still not disappeared.

Mau-sang was trained at the University of Hong Kong in Chinese and English literature, wrote his doctorate at New College, Oxford, and then took a job as a Lecturer at the National University of Singapore. He told me afterwards that he found the atmosphere in the city-state intellectually “oppressive,” which for such a free, politically leftwards-leaning, and cosmopolitan spirit is easily understandable. He was delighted to escape to the Chinese University of Hong Kong and then to Davis, California. He also spent time at Harvard, as a Visiting Fellow, during 1988.

Mau-sang’s monument is his The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction, published by the State University of New York Press and the Chinese University Press in 1988. It owes something of its origins, perhaps, to Mather’s work on the ‘positive hero’ in Russian fiction, and more to his former Oxford thesis supervisor, and good friend, Professor John Bayley, but remains a distinctive and orginal work. I personally enjoyed many conversations with him about the ‘social novels’ (shehui xiaoshuo社會小說) of the 1920s and ’30s; and I can still hear echoes of these in this last article.

In 1993, Mau-sang moved to Cambridge University, where he was delightedly happy with the intellectual company that he found. David McMullen, Professor of Chinese there, wrote an obituary in the Bulletin of the British Association for Chinese Studies (1994), that he has generously allowed us to draw on, and which should be referred to for more details.

Dr David Faure, now at Oxford University, knew Mau-sang closely since their days together at HKU, and has very kindly sent us a brief memoir, which we print below as a tribute.

Ng Mau-sang was a dear friend. We met at Hong Kong University at a time when we both thought a worthwhile contribution to Hong Kong might be running workers’ education classes. In 1973, I went with him in the company of Wong Siu-lun [now Professor of Sociology at HKU—Ed.] and his good friend from secondary school Poon Sum-cheng to Guangzhou. The two of us then went from Guangzhou to Guilin, Hangzhou, Shanghai and Suzhou, where we noticed that most of our money had been spent, and so we returned to Guangzhou on a hard-seater by a thirty-six-hour train ride. I think Mau-sang thought of that as his first trip into China: I am
not sure if he had been to China as a child. I can well remember the excitement of crossing the border at Lowu, and more excitement when we were given permission at Zhaoqing to proceed to Guilin. It was a lovely journey up the West River, where the scenery was matched only later by the excitement of walking down the street in Hangzhou to find that the beauty of Hangzhou women lived fully up to their reputation. We were young men then, and I guess Mau-sang fell in love with historic China.

Mau-sang read literature, and he was very pleased with the Russian literature that he learnt at Oxford. I can’t remember the name of his supervisor [John Bayley—Ed.], but if any one man had an influence on his work, it was he. Aside from that, Mau-sang’s work reflects the lively spirit of a cheerful soul peering through the miseries of the Chinese intellectual. He learnt his Chinese history from the street corners of Hong Kong, where as a young boy he read historical cartoons (连环画) that were rented out at street-corner bookstands. He recalled many time moving on from the cartoons to reading full-length books, for free, because he did that standing by the bookstacks in the bookshop. (I have forgotten the name of the shop; it might have been the Shanghai Shuju.) They probably gave him the first image of the Chinese hero, which he took to its sorry destruction at the hands of Lu Xun in his thesis. Having done that, he turned his back on heroes because he wanted to understand the xiao sbimin 小市民. We talked about that at length; by then he had discovered that much could be learnt by talking to people who had spent much of their lives in Shanghai, and that moving between Hong Kong and Shanghai there were quite a few people he could speak to. He discovered the popular magazines, especially Saturday (礼拜六), the Great World, [Qing Shouou’s] Quibaitang 秋海棠, and the mass entertainment industry. We talked about the xiao sbimin at Davis, and decided that the term stood, not for the ‘petty bourgeoisie’, but for no less than the ‘common man’. We did worry about the masculine overtone in this latter phrase, and had thought about ‘common people’. Mau-sang was always a historian. Chinese literature spoke to him about ‘the history of the age’. At the point of his move to Cambridge, we had drafted a plan for a collaborative volume on the history of the ‘common man’, and I still have half a chapter written by him that will one day appear in print.

Mau-sang’s hallmark was that he was always cheerful. We went through a lot of ups and downs together; he was always a loyal friend, and a source of intellectual and emotional support. The diagnosis of leukaemia within his first term at Cambridge came as an enormous blow. He realized the danger of the treatment that he had chosen, but I guess he thought he would survive. I was on the ‘phone with him, Michelle [his wife—Ed.], and his sister Yin-yuk in his last month. There was little one could say to cheer him. His death came as a blow to his many friends in Hong Kong, Oxford, Singapore, Davis, and Cambridge could all have their claim on Mau-sang; but he was, above all, a product of Hong Kong in the 1970s. And of his achievements his peers can be proud.

All of us at East Asian History extend our sympathies to his wife, Michelle, and his young son, Kevin.

M.E. Ng Mau-sang with Anna Law and David Faure, Oxford 1994
A COMMON PEOPLE’S LITERATURE: POPULAR FICTION
AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN REPUBLICAN SHANGHAI

Ng Mau-sang 吳茂生

More than three million copies of *Qiuhaitang* 秋海棠 (Begonia) were sold, and this does not include pirated copies which appeared over all these years which cannot be accounted for, making it one of the most popular fictional works in twentieth-century China.

—*Qin Shouou* 1

A Popular Story

Author Qin Shouou’s 秦瘦鷄 claim to the popularity of his work is hardly exaggerated. 2 According to Chen Cunren 陳存仁, a long-time Shanghai resident and well-known scholar of traditional Chinese medicine, when the work was serialized in *Shen Bao* 新報 in 1939–40, it was so popular that he would hear passengers discussing it in buses and trams. 3 Immediately after the serialization, the work was adopted into the Shanghai opera, and was performed to packed houses for six consecutive months. The popularity of the opera caught the attention of Huang Zuolin 黃佐臨, a famous playwright, who adapted it into a modern drama which had its first performance on 24 December 1942. It is reported that when the play was staged in the Carlton Theatre, one of the classiest in Shanghai, the audience was mostly “from the well-dressed middle or upper-middle class,” but later it also attracted members of the lower classes. A janitor of the cinema was quoted as saying that after each performance the floor was scattered with orange and banana peels, as well as peanut and melon-seed shells, something rare with the usual Carlton audience. Following this, the celebrated woman story-teller of the time, Fan Xuejun 范學君, adapted the story, singing and narrating it to her well-attended audience. 4 It was not much longer before a film version of the work appeared.

1 Interview with Qin Shouou at his home in Shanghai, August 1987. Qin, a native of Zhejiang, was born in 1908. A graduate in business studies, Qin worked full-time as a bank officer. His first novel, *Niehai tao* 海棠 (Waves of the bitter seal) is written in the *heimu* (黑幕) style made popular by his late-Qing predecessors. He is well-known for his translation/adaptation of ‘Princess’ Del’ Ling’s Proudest in the Forbidden City. Proud of his English, Qin insisted for the most part on using that language during the interview. After 1949, Qin worked as a journalist for a Shanghai newspaper, and from the early 1950s was employed by the *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 in Hong Kong. At the time of the interview he was living in retirement in Shanghai.

2 *Qiuhaitang* was first published by Shanghai Jincheng Tushu Gongsi in 1942, three thousand copies being printed in the first edition. By January 1944 it was already in its seventh printing. According to Qin, numerous unauthorized editions appeared before 1949 in China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.

3 Chen Cunren, “Qin Shouou de liangben Qinggong xiaoshuo” 秦瘦鷄的兩本清宮小說 [The two volumes of novels on the Qing court by Qin Shouou], *Dacheng* 大成 18 (May 1975): 23–4.

4 Ibid.
CALENDAR POSTERS

Geremie R. Barmé

This issue of *East Asian History* opens with the present article by the late Dr Ng Mau-sang, "A Common People’s Literature: Popular Fiction and Social Change in Republican China.” Dr Ng was a dear colleague and friend who passed away before he could see this essay in print, and we are publishing his work both as an acknowledgment of his scholarship and as an expression of our sense of loss at his passing.

Many of the illustrations we have chosen to accompany Dr Ng’s article are taken from ‘calendar posters’ (*yuèfēnpái bùa* 月份牌畫, *yuèfēnpái guānggào bùa* 月份牌廣告畫, or more simply *yuèfēnpái* 月份牌). The term ‘calendar poster’ dates from the late-nineteenth century when Shanghai companies began giving away posters as part of their sales promotions. They were among the earliest form of modern advertising to appear in China.

Printed posters accompanied by calendars appeared as early as the Song Dynasty, featuring images of the Hearth God or the arrival of spring. The Taohuawu 桃花屋 in Suzhou, the main southern centre of New Year’s paintings (*níanhuà* 年畫), also produced traditional-style calendar posters in the 1880s. But it was not until the turn of the century that companies, both Chinese and foreign, based in Shanghai, Chongqing, Guangzhou and Hong Kong began to use posters created by commercial artists who combined elements of traditional New Year’s paintings with modern commercial advertising to promote products and services. Companies selling tobacco, oil, wine, cloth, cosmetics, medicine and batteries, as well as insurance companies and banks, variously took advantage of this new style of advertising.

Calendar art invariably featured women, very rarely men or boys, in either traditional or modern settings. Legendary beauties from throughout Chinese history like Xi Shi 西施, Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 and Wang Zhaojun 王昭君 were among the most common litesome figures from the past, although during the war years of the late 1930s and 40s, the woman warrior Hua Mulan 花木蘭 was a popular character in many of the paintings. Some of these images may appear to be sexist and exploitative to the jaded and cynical gaze of the *fin de siècle* viewer, but for people in the 1920s and 30s many of these pictures were nothing less than revolutionary. Here were women depicted in a generally modern, urban environment looking self-assured and vampish. These were not the victims of late Qing feudalist oppression; gone were the bound ‘three-inch lotus’ feet, shapeless robes
and downward gaze, replaced instead by natural feet, tailored qipao旗袍 and a confident, often coquettish, gaze. Some were professional women dressed and posing as much to impress their female friends as anything else. The 'chaste woman' or model of Confucian virtue had no place in this painterly realm. Instead viewers were presented with idealized versions of modern, internationalized consumers.

The posters were painted in crayon and water colour and printed as lithographs. They combined art work with advertising and calendars to produce the most popular form of mass advertising art in China this century. As James B. Twitchell has observed, “Advertising is the folklore of a commodity culture.” It is only since the 1980s that calendar posters from the Republican period have found a place in modern Chinese art history, although their role in twentieth-century Chinese folklore has yet to be recognized. Calendar pictures are once more a major element of mass culture in China; each New Year witnesses the sale and exchange of a huge variety of bizarre images that are an important part of annual social and business intercourse. The calendar paintings of the 1920s and 30s are a reminder of the rich past of what was once an art form.

Since the late 1980s, antique markets throughout China have rediscovered the value of the old calendar posters. Impressive collections of the paintings have also been produced by the editors of Echo Magazine (Hansheng漢聲) in Taiwan and by Joint Publishers in Hong Kong.

Calendar art disguised a darker aspect of Shanghai's urban life. The art deco gloss of much of the advertising, the modish women and the comely objects—the cigarettes, soaps, medicines and other commodities—glorized the seamier side of modern prosperity. The story of Begonia discussed by Dr Ng reflects one dimension of this disturbing world. We include here also Lin Yutang's 1930s' “A Hymn to Shanghai,” in which the essayist, a long-term resident of the city, both extols and resiles from the enthralling horrors of the international port. A second passage is taken from a popular journal of the time, translated by Jonathan Hutt.
Readers responded enthusiastically by writing to Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鹤, literary editor of the “Chunqiu 春秋” (Spring and Autumn) page of Shen bao where the novel first appeared, asking for a sequel of the work. When Qin could not be persuaded, Zhou was encouraged to write it himself, which he did. A twelve-part sequel, entitled Xin Qiuhaitang 新秋海棠 (New Begonia) appeared in the monthly magazine Ziluolan 紫羅蘭 (Violet) in April 1943. A revised edition of Qiuhaitang was published in Shanghai in 1957, and again reprinted in 1985. Feeling the demand for this type of work, Qin wrote Mei bao 梅寶, his own sequel to Qiuhaitang, in 1984 (the work was first serialized in Jiejiang Ribao 解放日報 [Revolution Daily] in Shanghai). However, the appeal of Qiutaitang was not confined to Shanghai. In 1957, Yu Junzhi 夏君質 adapted it to a Taiwan setting and gave it an anti-communist theme, And as recently as the 1970s, the Hong Kong Television Broadcast Corporation made a TV drama on the same theme, and broadcast it to a wide and receptive audience during prime-time. What is in the story that made it so popular? I shall begin my enquiry by recounting the tale.

The time is the 1910s. The setting is Beijing and Tianjin. The story begins with the warlord General Yuan wanting to seduce the young opera-singer, female impersonator Wu Yuqin. With help from his fellow ‘Pear Garden brother’ (liyuan dixiong 李園弟兄—brotherhood by virtue of being taught singing and acting by the same master) Yuhua, Wu manages to escape the general, and Yuhua has to flee for his life. Time passes, Yuqin rises to fame, and changes his name to Qiuhaitang (Begonia). In the meantime, General Yuan has tricked the high-school graduate Luo Xiangyi into marrying him. By coincidence, Begonia has come to perform in Tianjin and meets Xiangyi. It is love at first sight. They have an affair, and a daughter, Mei Bao, is born to the lovers. When he discovers their secret, General Yuan scars Begonia’s face. With the help of Zhao Yukuan, his other ‘Pear Garden brother’, Begonia takes Mei Bao to settle in his native village. Despite various hardships,
life in the village is peaceful. Mei Bao grows up to become a lovely young schoolgirl. Hoping to find work to ease her father's financial burden, she is enticed by Shang Laoer, a neighbour who is a worse than indifferent vocalist, to learn opera-singing from him. When by accident Begonia discovers this, he commands Mei Bao to stop the lessons. Laoer, meanwhile, abducts Mei Bao from school. In Begonia's desperation, his 'brother' Yukuan again comes to the rescue. It is already 1937. With North China falling under Japanese attack, the group flee to 'orphan island' (guido 1ill),$ Shanghai. His hope of resuming singing shattered, Begonia becomes an acrobat, and ends up collapsing on stage. Desperate to keep the family alive, Mei Bao and her neighbours, the Han family, take up singing nightly in Shanghai's restaurants and on street corners. Mei Bao catches the attention of a young man, but also attracts some rogues in western costume. One night, when the latter try to drag her away, a beggar, who turns out to be the 'Pear Garden brother' Yuhua, appears and fights them. Mei Bao narrowly escapes, but Yuhua is killed. The young man, Luo Shaohua, invites Mei Bao to sing for his aunt Xiangyi. Too emotional to reveal her identity in the restaurant, Xiangyi asks Mei Bao to see her at home the next day. Mei Bao tells Begonia what has happened. The next day, mother and daughter are reunited, and upon arriving to take Begonia, who is suffering from tuberculosis, to the hospital, they find that he has ended his life by jumping from his window.

Critics have condemned this kind of work for imposing “false needs” and “false desires” on their readers, preventing them from understanding their own best interests. The problem with this view, which has affinities with the mass cultural critique associated with the Frankfurt School of the 1930s and 40s, is that it subscribes to a narrowly-defined cultural-political theory which sees the ordinary people as conservative, reactionary, unsophisticated and therefore easily manipulated. According to this view, a sensitive reading of popular texts becomes impossible. It also leads to an over-simplified interpretation of the cultural dynamics in Republican China. One example is the exaggerated claim about the impact of westernized May Fourth

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8 See, for example, Ye Su's essay, “Libailu-paide chongzhen” [The revitalization of the Saturday school] in Shanghai zhou bao (Shanghai Weekly), 2:26, reprinted in Yuyang budepai wenxue ziliao [Sources on literature of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school] (Fujian: Fujian Renmin Chubanshe, 1984), pp. 813-17. This point of view was commonly expressed in the daily press when "Saturday School" fiction became popular in the early 1930s. See Chen Shinong, "Xiaoliande shu yu youyongde shu" [Leisure literature and useful books], Xinwen bao, 28 Dec. 1935, p.16.

9 Leftist critics coined the term xiao shimin yishi 小市民意識 (petty urbanite consciousness) to categorize this urban mass consciousness. As far as I can tell, the term was first used by critics describing the taste for romance movies and martial arts stories produced in Shanghai around 1930. The term xiao shimin was soon used independently to categorize an urban population undirected and lacking consciousness. See She Yanbing (Mao Dun), "Fengjiande xiaoshimin wenyi" [The feudalistic nature of the literature of the common people], Dongfang zazhi [Eastern Miscellany] (1 Feb. 1933): 30, 3.
culture on the Chinese national consciousness. Having said this, what kind of yardsticks should we apply in order to understand popular works of this kind? It is my aim in this article first to uncover through a close reading of *Begonia* how the narrative builds up meaning through its symbolic structure, and second, to expand my ambit to examine the cultural-historical context that produced such popular narratives which share a common structure, and to see how readers make sense of the signs these texts transmit, and incorporate them into their everyday lives. Such an approach will, I hope, shed light on a much-ignored field in modern Chinese cultural enquiry—the discourse of the common people and its relation to everyday consciousness.

**Narrative form**

One major structural device in *Begonia* is the way it interweaves two different generic modes of narrative—social fiction depicting social ills and romance—and generates meaning through the systematic exploitation of their relationship. Let us first examine the social 'text'. The social setting is treated critically and signs of unrest are embedded early on in the story. One reads about the cruelty of warlords, the corruption of government officials and the ineptitude of educators; the invasion of China by foreigners and the suffering this inflicted on innocent people; the differences between the rich and poor, the social evils of big cities such as Tianjin and Shanghai, and the bankruptcy of the Chinese countryside. These combine to create a powerful symbolic atmosphere of the turbulent and evil times China experience from the 1910s to the 1930s. By giving the text such period details and repeatedly thematizing them through this group of signifiers (family, school, work, farming, hunger, singing, acting, escape, poverty, modern fads), which function like a collective code, the author provides another specified signifier—the central character Begonia—with its semantic value. The image of this famous opera-singer represents the progress from youth to death and the rise and fall of a generation of Beijing opera-singers—opera being one of the most important cultural forms of the time and the actor, as a result, a powerful cultural symbol. Through this mode of address, the text conjures up a 'representative reality' which binds the reader to a homogeneous time—the historical moments of its production—and in a coherent way recreates or extends the reader's horizon of expectations.

At the same time, this social 'text' is systematically interlocked with a more personal, romantic one—the fate of Begonia and his daughter Mei Bao and, to a lesser extent, the love affair between Begonia and
A COMMON PEOPLE’S LITERATURE

Xiangyi. This personal text is located within a network of images and symbols designed to highlight common people’s experiences. The text unravels the trials, tribulations and sufferings of all three. Evil rides high but is, in the end, overcome. One reads in this connection about the bad luck of General Yuan, who is denied the chance to retire from the army and take up a life of luxury and comfort in Shanghai, as most warlords did, instead dying at the hands of his own rebellious troops. One learns also that the agent who brings about the breakup of Begonia and Xiangyi, the devilish Ji Shaoxiong, is “tackled” by Yuan Shaowen, a friend of Begonia, with a revolver. Though Begonia in the end kills himself, he knows that he can leave the world with his eyes contentedly closed, as the Chinese saying goes, because his beloved daughter is reunited with her mother, and that happiness awaits them. Thus a kind of moral retribution is constructed which provides a morally satisfying ending for an audience well-attuned to a world of yinguo baoying 因果報應 (retribution).

There is no dispute that in enacting Begonia’s personal drama, the text provides repertoires of melodramatic conflict, as in the easy identification of good and evil, of menace and salvation. It gives a set of situations where virtue is held prisoner while evil goes on the rampage, and offers highly exteriorized versions of the latter’s triumph (as, for instance, in Mei Bao’s meeting her lost mother and Begonia’s suicide). In fact, there is no lack of what John Cawelti calls “moments of crisis” in the text. The narrative depends to a large extent on coincidences and accidents as a plot device, as well as on the rapid establishment and shifting of emotional responses. The text is structured by and centred on a sequence of such responses: for example, the scene in which General Yuan tries to seduce Begonia is immediately succeeded by another where General Yuan wants to seduce Xiangyi. These scenes are followed by one in which Begonia seeks help from Xiangyi, who is already the warlord’s concubine, and it is during this meeting that they fall in love. Thus, instead of the complex explorations of motive and significance, the text employs the technique of intensification and simplification, one that traditional Chinese storytellers called “yi bo weiping, yi bo youqi 一波未平，一波又起” (one tidal wave chasing another), displaying what Peter Brooks defines as the “expressionism of the moral imagination.”

However, it is equally important to see the authorial control exercised in the construction of this personal text. Little is said about the relationship between the pair of lovers, Begonia and Xiangyi. The end of their love affair is as abrupt as its beginning. Xiangyi in fact does not reemerge until the final chapter, when her appearance is required to bring about the reunion with her daughter. The main focus is therefore on Begonia, and specifically on his relationship with Mei Bao. Even here there is a noticeable absence of sentimentality in regard to their relationship. Rather, the text highlights the hardship that both have to bear in order to survive: the reality of resistance and survival. Begonia’s retreat to the countryside is nothing less than dramatic. He

10 Qin Shouou, Qiu haitang (Chengdu: Beixin Shudian, 1945), p.317.
13 Qin Shou informed his readers in the preface to his work that he was aware of possible melodramatic conflicts in the text when he departed from the traditional Chinese fictional formula of the grand union (da tuanyuan) and let Begonia commit suicide. A grand union, however, is exactly the device that Zhou Shoujuan employed in his New Begonia. According to Zhou, many readers wept over Begonia’s sad ending, and to comply with their demands he allowed Begonia to escape death in the sequel. The family thereafter starts a new life in the beautiful environs of Hangzhou, and the pattern of trials and tribulations is repeated. Zhou Shoujuan, “Introduction to Xin Qibaitang,” p.190.
becomes a farmer, leaving the glamour of the stage—a world larger than life—behind him, and fights for his livelihood in the heart of the countryside. As the narrator comments: “Begonia has toiled hard enough these ten-and-more years. Through constant labour, his physique is now much better than when he was earning tens of thousands of dollars on stage. But compared to other peasants, he is still weak…” (p.195). It is this process of trying to overcome his past and re-learn the basic means of survival that gives meaning to Begonia’s existence, and the reader witnesses the growth in his personal stature as his ability in farming improves. Bringing up his daughter is the core of his struggle for survival and the importance of domestic concerns is foregrounded by a series of markers such as Mei Bao’s decent clothes, her good looks and intelligence, her achievements in school, her attachment to her father; and Begonia’s tender care for her, as shown by his ensuring that she does not get a cold during the rain and his modest hope that she will one day graduate from middle-school and become a village school-teacher. These are the details which bring out the world of both father and daughter—details of everyday life and the common, down-to-earth wisdom of rural dwellers.

It is in this context of survival that certain values are exalted in the text. First and foremost is that of the family. Home in the remote countryside is depicted not as a retreat, but as an arena of action in which the self can be expressed and can begin to interact with the world. Despite their poverty, life in Zhangshutan is one of domestic bliss for father and daughter. The countryside is not only an imaginary landscape. The famous opera-singer, by becoming a peasant and tilling the land in a remote village, functions as an integrating cultural symbol set against the darkness of the city life to which he was previously exposed, throwing his colourful past into sharp relief. It is in the process of ‘mothering’ Mei Bao and seeing her grow up that gives Begonia his greatest joy. On the other hand, Mei Bao is the model of the filial and dutiful daughter. This familial relationship built on the bedrock of kindness and piety (ci 慈 and xiao 孝) is further strengthened when they move to the hostile environment of Shanghai, where Begonia risks his life performing acrobatics on stage and Mei Bao exposes herself to the pawing of her patrons as a singsong girl. And she takes on the extra role of nursing her father when he falls ill saying, “If you still consider me your daughter, you must leave your job” (p.301). All these signify the everyday realities that beset the poor and disenfranchised. Begonia’s dual role as father and mother finally comes to an end when Mei Bao is safely delivered back into the hands of her mother.
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Around the core relationship of xiao is a network of relationships built up in the name of xia (knight-errantry), yi (righteousness) and zhong (loyalty). The social network is triggered into action whenever Mei Bao, the symbol of hope and future, is in danger. Zhao Yukuan, Begonia’s ‘Pear Garden brother’, twice delivers Mei Bao from danger. He actually compares himself to his namesake General Zhao Zilong of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, who escorted the son of his ‘brother’ Liu Bei to safety. When Mei Bao is in danger on a Shanghai street corner, it is Liu Yuhua, another of Begonia’s ‘brothers’ who risks his life to spare her from being harmed. The knot of the ‘brotherhood’ of the Pear Garden harks back to the story of the ‘brotherhood of the Plum Garden’ in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which has become part of folk legend.

Nor is righteousness confined to the ‘Pear Garden Brothers’. Yuan Shao-wen shoots General Yuan’s attendant, an act for which Yuan is imprisoned, and takes care of Begonia and Mei Bao for no reason except that of friendship. Indeed, examples of friendship, brotherhood, righteousness and loyalty abound in the text. One can cite the loyalty of Xiao Guozi, who undertakes the arduous task of travelling to Beijing on a meagre twenty dollars to search for the kidnapped Mei Bao, the yiqi (righteousness and gallantry) of the martial art instructor Zhang, and the friendship of the Liu family who introduce Mei Bao to singing. It is this web of relationships, bound up in the folkloric idea of yiqi that makes the world of Begonia work. It is a world in which prescribed morals bring about social cohesion and, in turn, the social-ethical network reinforces the individual meaning of existence in the modern setting of Shanghai. The hostile environment of urban China actually triggers these values into action.

As the novel progresses, the reader discovers that the historical moment is subjectivized and the personal takes priority over the political, to the point where history and politics become simply period-markers. These two texts, the social and personal, do not co-exist as equals, but one is recruited as a means to renew the other. Again and again, a series of metaphors develop the sense that the dominant concern is a personalized relationship—that of zhong, xiao, yi, sacrifice for the family—variously signified in forms which displace the political. As a result of this textual construction, the difficulties of the war years in
A HYMN TO SHANGHAI

Lin Yutang

Shanghai is terrible, very terrible. Shanghai is terrible in her strange mixture of Eastern and Western vulgarity, in her superficial refinements, in her naked and unmasked worship of Mammon, in her emptiness, commonness, and bad taste. She is terrible in her denaturalized women, dehumanized coolies, devitalized newspapers, decapitalized banks, and denationalized creatures. She is terrible in her greatness as well as in her weakness, terrible in her monstrosities, perversities, and inanities, terrible in her joys and follies, and in her tears, bitterness, and degradation, terrible in her vast immutable stone edifices that rear their heads high on the Bund and in the abject huts of creatures subsisting on their discoveries from refuse cans. In fact, one might sing a hymn to the Great Terrible City in the following fashion:

O Great and Inscrutable City. Thrice praise to thy greatness and to thy inscrutability!
Thrice praise to the city renowned for her copper odour and her fat, oily bankers, with green-tinted skins and sticky fingers;
To the city of hugging flesh and dancing flesh, of flat-chested ladies fed on jin-sen sand doves'-nest congee, and still looking anaemic and weary of life, in spite of their jin-sen soup and doves'-nest congee;
To the city of eating flesh and sleeping flesh, of ladies with bamboo-shoot feet and willow waists, rouged faces and yellow teeth, cackling “He! he! he!” like monkeys from their cradles to their graves;
To the city of running flesh and kowtowing flesh; of hotel boys with shining, slippery heads and more slippery manners, who minister to the fat, oily bankers with green-tinted skins and sticky fingers and to the hugging flesh and dancing flesh with rouged cheeks and yellow teeth;
Great and inscrutable art thou!
In the still hours of the night, one conjureth up a picture of thy monstrosities;
in the muddy stream of human traffic on Nanking Road, muddier than the muddy fish of muddy Whangpoo, one thinketh of thy greatness also;
One thinketh of thy successful, pien-pien-bellied merchants, and forgettesthether they are Italian, French, Russian, English, or Chinese;
One thinketh of thy masseuses, naked dancers, Carlo Garcias, and thy Foochow Road sing-song houses;
Of thy retired tao-tai and tufei and magistrates and generals, with tortoise-shell spectacles and roof-shaped moustaches, trying to court sing-song
girls with their loot, and finding their love repulsed and their sexual hunger
still unappeased after months of courtship;
Of the idiotic and half-witted sons of these retired tao-tai and generals, who
help to rid them of their ill-gotten and sin-smelling wealth;
Of thy wealthy, degenerate opium smokers who parade the streets in Packard
eights, guarded by robust well-fed, uniformed Russians;
Of thy Whangpoo River daily receiving its quota of would-be suicides, of thy
dancing girls and heart-broken young men mingling with the muddy Whangpoo fish;
Of thy hotel tea balls, where vulgarity gathers to meet vulgarity and see how
vulgarity dresses;
Of thy dog races, where white women in V-necked evening dress mingle
merrily and rub shoulders with yellow shop apprentices and grey dogs
and pink-eyed rabbits;
Of thy nouveaux riches, lost and giddy in the whirlpool of parties and rides,
 millionaires who order the hotel boys about like lieutenant colonels and
eat their soup with their knives;
Of thy nouveaux modernes, intoxicated by a few phrases
of yang-ching-pang pidgin and never letting an oppor-
tunity slip for saying “many thanks” and “excuse me” to
you;
Of thy girl students sitting astride their baggage on the
rickshaws, with rolled socks and hats on which perch
Robin Redbreasts and chrysanthemums of different
colours;
Of thy haughty, ungentlemanly foreigners, so haughty
and ungentlemanly that one knows where they belong
in their own countries—men with a moderate head, but
stiff boots and strong calf muscles, who also make good
use of their stiff boots and strong calf muscles—
Men who give large tips and complain of exorbitant prices,
who feel legitimately aggrieved and insulted when
people fail to understand their native language;
One thinketh and wondereth of these things and faileth to
comprehend their whence or their whither.
O thou city that surpasseth our understanding! How
impressive are thy emptiness and thy commonness and
thy bad taste!
Thou city of retired brigands, officials and generals and
cheats, infested with brigands, officials and generals
and cheats who have not yet made their fortunes!
O thou the safest place in China to live in, where even thy
beggars are dishonest!
modern China are diffused by the sense of strength and regeneration symbolized by the survival and empowerment of Begonia and Mei Bao. While disaster looms in the background, hope and youth gain ascendancy (thus a chapter is entitled “The Fire of Youth”), and harmonize the contradictions in the fictional world.

Through this process of signification, the text fixes the image of Begonia and Mei Bao amongst what Barthes calls the “floating chain of signifiers.” It directs and persuades the reader to accept a prescribed interpretation by affirming the meaning of a value-system and a mode of social-ethical behaviour. A closure of signification is urged through the meta-text and produces a myth, since “it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested.” As Barthes notes, a text of this kind has a repressive value, because “it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.” It establishes a natural layer in what is justified culturally.

This meta-text provides artificial resolutions to the real contradictions in society. It proposes the ideal-Utopian order of the nuclear family built on conventional ethical principles, of people honouring work in the darkest of times, of righteousness and generosity—a regenerated social network and value system. By privileging this constructed order in the narrative, the reader who longs for the imagined joys of a society built upon trust and mutual help is able to find some comfort and security. The fiction presents an image of people who have been domesticated by external authorities and forced to curb their own desires. But as they learn to transmute rebellious passion into tolerance and resilience, their powerlessness becomes a source of strength. The novel thus informs the reader how to live without power while waging a protracted struggle which will result in their own empowerment via their exclusively close-knit and mutually supportive family and social relationships. At a time when the Shanghai reader is besieged by Japanese intruders, such relationships tie in with his own historical moment. Thus, the narrative acts to remoralize, symbolically, a differentiated Chinese order, and offers a vision of the “possibility of the future or ideal.” It is this vision, Northrop Frye remarks, which accounts for the appeal of romance.

Given that this is how, as an aesthetic form, Begonia interprets and makes sense of experience, the question to ask at this juncture is why a work which honours a code of values considered by May Fourth intellectual thinking to be “feudalistic” would capture the imagination of Shanghai readers? To attempt an answer, one must go beyond textual analysis to examine the cultural and historical contexts of the fiction’s production and reception. I shall delimit my discussion on Begonia and include other popular works so as to attain a more general understanding of the relationship between popular fiction and cultural change in Republican China.
Popular Fiction and the Culture of Everyday Life

In a contribution to the “Shanghai Life” feature-page of the popular *Xinwen bao* 新聞報, a reader summarizes what s/he considers to be the living environment of present-day Shanghai. The dominant feeling, s/he writes, is one of imperialism weighing heavily on people’s daily lives. This is coupled with economic suppression, the lack of resources to survive urban living, mechanistic human relationships that lack any sense of community and the vanity marking the Shanghai style of living. All these things cause Shanghai people, especially the young, “sorrow and anxiety.” As a result, the reader laments, 168 people committed suicide in the single month of August 1933, many of these deaths resulting from family and economic problems.¹⁶

This contribution highlights the viewpoint of many who wrote to the newspaper in the 1930s.¹⁷ Indeed, another contributor points out that the word *jannao* 煩惱—sorrow and anxiety—appears most frequently in the “Shanghai Life” page.¹⁸ This feeling is understandable. According to a 1950 census, 85 percent of Shanghai’s population before 1949 were first-generation immigrants from other parts of China, many from the countryside.¹⁹ Life in a city where they dwelt but that had yet to become their own proved to be hard on many. They were exposed to socio-economic problems of all kinds, aggravated by the fact that they were at the forefront of foreign domination. Parks in which Chinese were not allowed, or trolley-buses where Chinese were only admitted to the third-class compartments, were but sanguine reminders of this.²⁰ Newspapers, where most ‘popular’ fiction was first serialized,

¹⁶ Sheng Weihui, “Shanghai qingnian shenghuode fannao” [The melancholy of Shanghai youth], *Xinwen bao*, 14 Oct. 1933, Shanghai Feature, p.5.
¹⁷ My statement is based on a close reading of the *Xinwen bao* of the 1920s and 30s. Letters to the editor, Xiaojizhe, were published almost on a daily basis concerning the problems of life in Shanghai. Terms like *jannao* (melancholy) thus took on a connotative meaning.
²⁰ The well-known popular-fiction-writer Xu Zuoai recounted that in the early years of Republican China, Shanghai theatres would charge Westerners, and by extension, people in Western costumes, double for admission as a way of expressing their anger towards the intruders. See Hema (pen name of Xu) in *Shanghai shuhua* [Books and paintings on Shanghai] (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenhua Chubanshe, 1956), pp.17–18.
became vital cultural instruments which constructed a ‘reality’, an imagined world visibly based on everyday life—the common people’s habits, manners, likes and dislikes, fears and apprehensions, tastes and preferences. As this is not the place to delve into the influence of newspapers on the changing structure of Shanghai life, I shall confine my discussion to the role newspapers played in constituting or re-constituting the consciousness of its imagined readers.\(^{21}\) I shall use as examples *Xinwen bao*, the most popular Shanghai newspaper with a daily circulation of 150,000, and *Jing bao*晶報 (The Crystal), the most widely-read tabloid of its day,\(^{22}\) which, according to one account, had a circulation of 100,000 at one point.\(^{23}\) Given a population of about three million in the mid-1930s, we can see the importance of newspapers on their readers.

It is clear that the Shanghai feature-page of *Xinwen bao* persistently informs its readers concerning the practicalities of daily living, relating to and sharing with them various experiences, problems and conflicts. It succeeds in inducing them to make sense of the world around them and encourages them to become participants. For example, it provokes lively discussion on issues effecting people’s lives, and contributors to the page—by extension, readers also—came from all walks of life: students, apprentices, teachers, housewives, clerks, shopkeepers, bus-conductors, factory workers, small businessmen, managers, dancing girls. There is the example of a group of apprentices in a shop whose right to bring newspapers to the workplace was revoked by the store manager, and who wrote to the editor to air their grievances, complaining they were being deprived of “spiritual nourishment.”\(^{24}\)

There are ample discussions on the meaning and effect of ‘*modern*’ (modernity) on everyday life,\(^{25}\) And there are examples of college students laying bare their minds about their past wayward behaviour, such as frequenting dance-halls and becoming depraved.\(^{26}\) By presenting the simultaneity of a people living in a homo-geneous time and sharing the same destiny, and by appealing to the commonsense of the readers—to their

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21 The concept of imagined reader is borrowed from Benedict Anderson who says that readers are imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. According to Anderson’s thesis, communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity or genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, Verso, 1983), p.15.


23 Mr Zheng Yimei gave me this information during an interview with him in Shanghai in August, 1987.
sense of togetherness, neighbourliness, optimism, confidence, patience, tolerance, and family support—in dealing with their daily problems, the newspaper creates, as Benedict Anderson puts it, "that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations."27

In its appeal to the common feeling of its imagined community, the newspaper also resorts to what Raymond Williams calls the “residual elements in a culture.” These are elements which have been effectively formed in the past, but which are still active in the cultural process “not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.”28 The newspaper binds its imagined readers together through the creative use China’s cultural past. The daily flow of information brings to the fore the importance cultivating the ethical self to confront the various problems of everyday life. As Yan Duhe, editor of the “Xin Yuanlin 新园林” (New Garden) section of Xinwen bao made clear in his opening essay, readers should have courage and cultivate their daxing 德性 (righteous self) in the face of the sufferings with which they are confronted.29 By emphasizing the resource-fulness of traditional family and social relationships, valourising concepts such as loyalty, righteousness and patience which are deeply rooted in the readers’ consciousness, while at the same time resisting its patriarchal domination and upholding the importance of individual regeneration and personal struggles, new and traditional patterns are fused to form a novel synthesis.

In The Crystal, the appeal for common feeling takes the form of a continued and extensive coverage of conventional practices and an ambivalence towards, or even a disgust for, things Western (for example, its condemnation of ballroom dancing because it emanates from the barbaric West). As a newspaper, it is remarkable how little news as such was included in its pages. Instead, there was an abundance of details to do with daily living: political pot-pourris, historical memories, gossip, ridicule, jokes, hobbies, writings about antiques and objects of the past, and fantasies on famous opera-singers and singsong girls. The Crystal thus established something close to a formula for the maintenance and reinforcement of conventional forms of imaginative expression, successfully articulating a pattern of fantasy desirable to its imagined readership.

In short, the Xinwen bao and The Crystal articulate an artificial but real symbolic order that serves not only to inform, but also to confirm, not only to change attitudes but to represent an underlying order of things, and to manifest a continuing social process. They made it a daily ritual in redefining the boundaries of the ‘residual elements’ in modern Chinese culture, making natural China’s cultural past in its appeal to the imagined community. As Anthony Giddens argues, in a time of rapid social changes, when the “ontological security” (the security of “taken-for-granted routines which give a sense of continuity of being”—R. D. Laing) is threatened, feelings of commonality of language and of belonging to a national community become a

25 There is the example of Zheng Ping, a petty clerk, who exalts the joy that the modern, nuclear family brings to him and his family. See his “Wode jiating” [My family], Xinwen bao, 27 Nov. 1932, Shanghai Feature, p.21; Han Ruixing lashes out on the misconception of “modernity” to mean new fashions in “Zenyang caishi modeng niixing” [What is a modern woman?], Xinwen bao, 25 July 1934, p.15; so did Luoshe in “Zhongguode niixing” [Chinese women], Xinwen bao, 14 Oct. 1932, p.17.
27 Anderson, Imagined communities, p.79.
City nights—nights of excess and dissipation!

An unbroken stream of waxen figures flows from the towering skyscrapers that are sheathed in funereal white. The neon sign atop the Sanyo Building shines forth like a beacon, boasting the city’s formidable wealth. Bright young things sway to the popular tunes of the day, conducting transactions both romantic and financial. The finest French georgette, the sparkle of diamond rings. The mistress of a certain prominent gentleman makes a grand entrance. The maître d’ gives her the eye. Having adjusted her high collar and smoothed the fabric over her lissome waist she enters the social fray. Greeted warmly she engages in some humourous banter. The modern woman laughs. Like the others of her sex gathered in this room she is here with a mission: to find a man who can satisfy her carnal desires.

The silken purr of the latest-model car is heard as it glides across the smooth asphalt, its streamlined body illuminated by the dark red neon that adorns the skyscrapers along the street. Inside the vehicle a fat merchant gropes his female companion, a svelte vixen who giggles wildly.

At the XX Nightclub and the Café XX the strains of a waltz can be heard, a syncopated rhythm swelling with desire. Couples in this rosy dream dispense with decorum and give themselves up to bawdy pleasures. Flesh presses against flesh, desire meets desire. Beer, absinthe and booze. Hysteria erupts and smoulders, burns and ignites these deadened souls.

On such metropolitan nights countless people are engaged thus in this ritual of slow suicide.
In their attempt to give form to the fragments of a newly-emerging national life, the budding newspapers created a spirit of unity among people by forging a sense of affinity with, and expressing the cultural similarities within and among, groups of different pertinencies. They provide their readers, especially those disempowered, with the collective personality of the people, of being ‘Chinese’. Individuals are seen as subjects embodying cultural traditions actively participating in China’s modernizing process. By providing a formula with an admixture of both these residual elements and perceived modern values, the newspapers bind their reader to the culture of everyday life, and in so doing, help them to adapt to the rapidly changing environment of Shanghai.

This is precisely the context in which fictional works like Qiuhaitang produce meaning. As Zheng Yimei, the popular fiction and Shanghai history writer, emphasized to me in an interview in Shanghai, the reason behind the popularity of these serialized works lies in their ability to represent what he calls the life-style and aspirations of the common people. His point can best be illustrated with an example from Bao Tianxiao’s fictional work on Shanghai life serialized in The Crystal between 1921 and 1932, and reprinted in 1939 because of its relevance to the contemporary situation. Bao, influential in the Shanghai literary circles by virtue of his one-time editorship of the Shanghai shibao (Shanghai Times), wide connections, prodigiousness and seniority, employs his favourite device of relating a country bumpkin’s experience in metropolitan Shanghai to depict social changes in the city. The old country gentleman, who has come to Shanghai filled with hope and expectation, finds himself caught up in the labyrinth of the new urban world. The more he tries to find meaning in modern appurtenances such as cars, elevators, telephones, and Western manners and practices, the more he makes a fool of himself. While the central figure of the narrative is the man from the countryside incapable of coping with modernized society, what his image signifies is more diverse. The old gentleman’s ‘follies’ in the big city no doubt propel the narrative forward, but as the story progresses he wins the sympathy of the narrator—and the reader—by virtue of his decency and honesty. In contrast, urban Shanghai is depicted as mean, heartless, brutal, shallow and spineless. The final word is, interestingly, reserved for an old Confucian tutor in the serial “No Changes in Shanghai.” The old scholar reveals to Dr Big Word (a product of Western education,
hence the title “Dr”), that despite all the so-called “drastic changes,” the 
heart of the average Shanghainese has not changed—“renxin bubian”
人心不变. 33

Of course, it is impossible for “the heart not to change.” Bao’s work can 
in fact be read as a kind of desire on the part of people, who, like the author, 
saw the necessity of modernization, fear that some endearing traditional 
Chinese values will be bulldozed away in the process. Thus, while 
welcoming the fruits of modernization such as improved communications, 
better hygiene and modern conveniences, Bao, in his fictional works, never 
fails to dramatize the dark forces of urbanization. For example, in one of his 
early works, *Haishang shenlou* (Shanghai Mirage), he recounts Zu 
Shucheng’s experience of working in Shanghai. Successful though he is as 
a Shanghai journalist (he is therefore conveniently located to look at 
Shanghai life), Zu habitually visits his native Suzhou to retain his sanity. 
Suzhou epitomizes for him a life-style—the idealization of a ‘Chinese’ 
world—that the modern city cannot provide. 34 Unlike Dickens who chronicled 
the evils of industrialization and capitalism in Victorian London, Bao and his 
peers, like the enormously popular Zhang Henshui 張恨水, were more 
concerned to represent the dialectical relationship between the forces of 
tradition and modernity, underscoring the tension experienced by many 
readers as they participated in formulating life’s rituals in modern Shanghai. 35

The ‘social reality’ constructed in these works has its source in the 
everyday consciousness and practices of the imagined reader. In the case of 
*Begonia*, what the author Qin Shouou did was to refine a novelistic 
convention made popular by the works of Zhang Henshui and others since 
the early 1930s, notably in *Tixiao enyuan* 喜笑恩緣 (A Romance of Tears 
and Laughter), *Xiandai qingnian* 現代青年 (Modern Youth), and Gu 
Mingdao’s 顧明道 *Naibetian* 奈河天 (Mischiefous Fate), all of which were 
serialized in *Xinwen bao* and later made into films. 36 Indeed, a common 
narrative structure pervades these works which juxtaposes a marginalized 
subject of somewhat traditional bearings in his/her struggle through the 
maze of modern urban living. 37 In recreating the subjects’ concerns, 
anxieties and social conflicts to do with living in the city, these works not 
only incorporate the homely particulars of life among the ordinary, but also 
give the disenfranchised power and centrality in that scheme. The daily-life 
ideology actually becomes a flexible coordinator which synchronizes competing images, symbols and meanings into a ‘popular’ form of consciousness. 
The authors work with narrative conventions and familiar themes and 
images which have sturdy historical roots and are tenaciously entwined in 
the psychology of the common people. For example, the valorisation of the 
gallantry of martial-art instructor Guan Shoufeng and his daughter Xiugu in 
*A Romance of Tears and Laughter* connects Zhang Henshui’s work to the 
popular knight-errant tradition in Chinese culture, while Li Hanqiu’s 李涵秋 
*Guangling chao* 廣陵潮 (Yangzhou Tide) offers a narrative proposition to

33 Hushuo bushi (pen name of Bao Tianxiao), 
“Shanghai bubian 7,” *Crystal*, 1927, 4.3.
34 Wumen Tianxiao sheng (Bao Tianxiao), 
*Haishang shenlou* (Shanghai: Zhonghua 
Shuju, 1926).
35 The sense of loss on seeing the old world 
pass away is explicitly depicted in Bi Yihong’s 
*Renjian diyu* (Purgatory), first serialized in 
*Shen bao* in 1923–24, and Zhang Henshui’s 
fiction, notably *Jinfen shijia* (Family of 
gold and glory), published in 1932.
36 The social melodramas of Zhang Henshui 
and Gu Mingdao, who also wrote the 
immensely popular martial-arts story *Huan- 
jiang niixia* [The woman warrior of Huan-
jiang], contributed significantly to making 
the reading of popular fiction an important 
pastime.
37 He/she is marginalised by virtue of being a 
caizi或caimi女 (man or woman 
who excelled in traditional literature), like 
Yu Lun in *Guangling chao* [Yangzhou tide], 
and Leng Qingqiu in *Family of gold and 
glory*, or due to his social position, like the 
actor Begonia, or his rural background, like 
the countryfolk in Bao’s work discussed 
here.
the regenerated family relationship based on the reshaping of the Confucian principle of lun 倫 (differentiated relationship).38

Indeed, these works are popular because their texts are a composite of commonly held sets of beliefs and values which not only signify a continuity with the past, but also fix certain aspects of the shifting landscape of modernity into a dialectic relationship with this symbolic past. By giving expression to the common and lowly as well as to values such as zhong, xia and yi, which are interpreted with sufficient ambiguity in these works to permit fusion with new ones, these works succeed in structuring into readily identifiable emotional symbolism the metamorphosis taking place in China in the 1930s and 40s.39 Indeed, their structure can be seen as a socially symbolic act, in Jamesonian terms, responding to China’s historical dilemma. They offer serious propositions to China’s longing for national form. Melodramatic though the conflicts depicted may have been, these works are not trivial. It is a form used by these writers in their debate on cultural meaning with the pro-Western or leftist opposition: tradition versus modernity, national heritage versus Westernization, the individual versus the community, private versus public—a debate which persists even today, albeit in different ideological battlefields.40 They rally their readers by providing the ideological framework—the interpretation of everyday understanding—of those individuals, and the readers, in turn, create their own text by bringing to it their pre-existent ideological set. The framework of expectations and criteria drawn from the reader’s personal experience is reproduced or extended as a result. Judging from the popular demand for mediated messages, these texts emerged as powerful symbols in the cultural sites for the contestation of meaning and power.

The question can be asked whether this ‘invented tradition’ of popular fiction provides a formulaic structure reproducing cultural consensus—an artistry of escape, as John Cawelti puts it in his seminal study on popular fiction in the West. In Cawelti’s view, the popularity of the literary genre rests in its ability to provide security and consolation for the reader: “the tensions, ambiguities and frustrations of ordinary experience are painted over by magic pigments of adventure, romance and mystery.”41 Given the complexity of the individual reading situation, the ‘escapist’ model is no doubt one way of tackling the problem of popular consciousness. The reader may indeed be drawn into the ‘magic’ structures, and for a time blend him or herself with the object images, becoming one with the object regardless of reality. As I see it, the issue at stake here is not that of fantasy identification, which is not privy to the consumption of ‘popular’ fiction, but one of the production of meaning in the reading process.