

*Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience.*

By Charles A. Laughlin.

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In this meticulous examination of twentieth century Chinese reportage, Charles A. Laughlin attempts both to outline the primary characteristics of reportage (*baogao wenxue* 報告文學) and to recuperate it as a form of *literature* from the more recent memory of exposé journalism during the 1980s in Mainland China. As such, the subject of Laughlin's study should be taken not as a broad examination of reportage, but rather as a more focused project that seeks to define a particular body of reportage writing as respectable literature. For Laughlin, reportage represents a powerful narrative expression of Marxist understandings of the historical experience, where "the whole truth" is more than the "empty facts" of bourgeois journalism. Reportage literature establishes what Laughlin calls a "new, unprecedented culture that would be the model for China's future" (p. 200), primarily through the new means by which it narrates space and physical experience.

Laughlin begins by attempting to locate indigenous Chinese textual traditions that underlie reportage's preoccupations with finding and reporting "the truth." Citing prominent scholars of Qing history, he adheres to a theory of indigenous

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modernization that is often connected to debates over “proto-industrialization.” This theory also tends to blame the twentieth century intellectuals, particularly during the May Fourth era, for discounting the rich “empirical” tradition of early modern China. Thus, Laughlin adduces Xu Xiake’s 徐霞客 geographical works and Guo Songtao’s 郭嵩燾 travel diary as evidence for a tradition of “fact-finding” (particularly when connected to national emergencies) that would later go on to inform later reportage writing.

Next, Laughlin describes how performance and narrative intermix in reportage writing on public demonstrations during the May Fourth era. Citing Antonin Artaud’s “Theater of Cruelty,” he wishes to show how the performative act of a demonstration can fuse the performer and the audience into a single experiential subject. In his eyes, then, the rather formulaic and melodramatic tendencies of demonstration reportage—for example, its depictions of looters who weep, savagely beating popular politicians such as Cao Rulin 曹汝霖, while simultaneously weeping policemen look on sympathetically—is explainable through the scripted nature of the demonstrations themselves. Drawing on anthropological theory, Laughlin suggests that demonstrations operate in a way analogous to a public ritual, and that the reportage seeks to further define and reflect the fundamental rules of this ritual, meaning that both ritual demonstration and reportage text are engaged in reproducing each other. However, Laughlin does fully not explore the more chaotic elements of the protest, such as onlookers who deride and jeer the idealistic protestors, just as Artaud was unable to cope with the scorn and contempt of French academics when he performed “The Theater and the Plague.” Thus, although events often seem tightly scripted, we should pay close attention to instances in which they are not, and what that might mean for a literature that attempts to capture “the whole truth” about how history is experienced.

In the third chapter, Laughlin delves deeply into tropes of “unmasking” that gained prevalence in reportage literature during the 1930s. In a movement described by Laughlin as largely leftist and literary, authors of reportage penetrated into the very heart of KMT China’s “modernization”—the factory. Focusing heavily on the quotidian, physical realities of workers, the authors often attempted to “immerse” themselves in the environment of China’s proletariat. Treating Peng Zigang’s 彭子剛 “Behind the Machines,” Laughlin demonstrates how the new reportage literature dissertates on the internality of its suffering subject (the worker). It does this in theorizing that their subjugation to the metronomic demands of the machinery of capitalism signals a kind of spiritual death. Laughlin also struggles to show how the experiences of individuals can be deployed in a reportage narrative to make a larger statement on a historical process—specifically, China’s. These themes and devices, as well those from the previous chapter on public demonstration (including Mao Dun’s 茅盾 “literature of blood and tears”), underlie the following two chapters’ analysis on wartime reportage.

Laughlin’s book is strongest when it deals directly with the reportage of the War of Resistance. Artfully analyzing diverse works from Xie Bingying 謝冰瑩 to Qiu Dongping 丘東平, Laughlin makes a strong case that war reportage was both a continuation of literary traditions from the May Fourth era and also the invention of a literature that spoke from entirely new kinds of subject positions and within totally novel literary topographies. He divides his discussion into those reportage authors who dealt with the frontlines and those who were describing guerrilla warfare. In terms of space, these are separated by the frontline’s transformation of urban space into a congested war zone and lost home, while the guerrilla existence is narrated during the urban intellectual’s rediscovery of the Chinese countryside. Revisiting and writing about the locations of Chinese literati’s travelogues and *kaozhengxue*

考證學 scholars' investigations, modern authors are re-describing and re-inventing the textual cartography of China, collapsing subject and landscape into a totalizing national identity.

He also contends with the works of reportage authors more and less famous in order to demonstrate the commonalities between their writing. Laughlin argues persuasively to revise Chang-tai Hung's 洪長泰 reading of Xie Bingying as a resurrected Hua Mulan 花木蘭 in favor of viewing her as a bold, new revolutionary voice for Chinese women in the twentieth century—particularly in her disregard for conventions, her physical suffering and her active role as a soldier in both the Northern Expedition and the War of Resistance (though one might argue her direct participation in the latter was much more reduced). Xie's life is reduced to the most basic human physical experiences, binding her even more tightly to the rough country characters, with whom she is traveling. Qiu Dongping, whom Laughlin praises as having invented the literary psychology of warfare out of whole cloth, mixes atmospheric elements of his stories with commentaries on the terror of battle, carrying on Chinese reportage's tradition of collapsing the environment and the speaking subject. During his discussion of Qiu's work in *The Shanghai Incident*, Laughlin makes the following bold statement: "Thus, while the writer seems to delve into the individual personality to wrench free a sober, humanistic tale of the horrors of war, the cumulative effect of doing so repeatedly with different individuals is the author's *self-effacement* as an individual personality. The consequence of this variety of voices is a fragmentary human universe with certain collective truths and emotions brought to the surface by the shared experience of war." (p. 191) In other words, according to Laughlin, even if the author, as Qiu did, uses the first person voice to express his or her feelings about the war, the effect of this psychologically stimulating and trying tale is to draw the reader and the story's characters into one experiencing

subject.

Although Laughlin does not stress this point, the collapse of the KMT army after the battle for Hankou 漢口 and the movement of intellectuals and soldiers into the countryside completely transformed the focus of reportage. He does demonstrate well how this new “guerrilla literature” prepared the way for later CCP (Chinese Communist Party) dominated narratives of war and revolutionary experiences. Here, his authors are primarily those associated with the Chongqing 重慶-based All China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists (*Zhonghua quanguo wenyijie kangdi xiehui* 中華全國文藝界抗敵協會), founded in 1938 by Lao She 老舍. First of all, the new reportage aimed at establishing a “militarized rural milieu” (p. 205) and alienated the fighting body (a hodgepodge of soldiers, peasants, and workers) from the effete urban officials and the pale-skinned Japanese invaders. The unified identity shifted from being the Chinese people to “our comrades,” signifying an ideological leap that was distinct if small. Later, in Chapter Six, Laughlin takes pains to show how the “consciousness” constructed by this literary form was “invaded” by the CCP in order to find a vehicle to express its new ubiquitous and domineering subjectivity. In the post-1949 era, the CCP would use reportage to encompass and define all human relations—at least on the level of narrative.

All told, Laughlin does a fine job outlining the roots and consequences of reportage literature prior to the 1980s. The relationship—between socialist literature’s creation of a unitary speaking / experiencing subject (the proletariat) and the tendency of war reportage to strive for author-audience-subject unity—a relationship touched on in this book, is one that I have often noticed reading such literature from the war in East Asia, particularly in Hino Ashihei’s 火野葦平 *Wheat and Soldiers* (麦と兵隊). However, one might ponder how well China’s war reportage, when taken out of the narrative of the May Fourth era and read

independently, would fit into a purely leftist framework. Surely some authors of the genre maintained their political beliefs throughout the war, but not all reportage authors came from activist backgrounds. Even if a reportage author was in the front of Cao Rulin's house throwing stones in 1919, this author's past activism did not necessarily translate into a clearly "leftist" mode of writing during China's 1937 "national crisis." Also, as part of protecting the integrity of the "United Front," CCP writers were often asked to drop their politics in order to support war mobilization (though some chose to ignore this). A randomly chosen sample reading of less famous authors of reportage literature in newspapers out of Guangzhou 廣州 or pre-1939 Hankou (e.g., *Qianjin ribao* 前進日報, *Qianxian ribao* 前線日報, or *Xianbing ribao* 憲兵日報) also reveals a strong tendency towards militaristic or even fascist politics. One must then ask the question: whenever "class struggle" is removed but "unity" remains, what politics is reportage really advocating? On page 105, Laughlin describes a remarkable scene in which protestors, in search of a leader, find themselves split evenly between the Communists and a famous army general. Perhaps the remarkable aspect of war reportage is not its role in a continuous leftist literary tradition, but its ability to combine and subsume these two political discourses, as it collapsed all people and even landscapes into one subject.

That being said, Laughlin's book is a sharp and thorough reading of China's modern reportage literature, correcting much neglect in English on this very important topic. Comparing the texts with which Laughlin worked to analogous literary movements in wartime Japan and the Soviet Union would undoubtedly be very fruitful. On the other hand, at this point, what is really needed is a better understanding of how literary forms such as reportage influenced war diary writing and vice-versa. After all, as Laughlin pointed out on page 205, Xie Bingying felt that losing her "diary" was worse than losing a friend. We should not assume that

all diary writing, as a kind of inscribed “historical experience,” necessarily took place in imitation of the forms discussed by Laughlin, or conversely that all reportage is immune to the influence of the author’s own personal writings. To force such literary production into a taught, perfect narrative would ignore the impact of the chaos of the battlefield.