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Laughlin/The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity

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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*).¹ The second is the eremitic 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 eremitic 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 Shutong.

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.² 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.”³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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).⁸ 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.⁹ 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 *dwelling*s 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 *Yuwei 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.¹² 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 Hutters 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.¹³ Though often seen as “traditional,” the modern literature of leisure may be more usefully viewed as 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 Shengtian'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, anti-classical; 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.”²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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).²⁷ *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."²⁸

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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³

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.³⁴ 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*.³⁵

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.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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 political 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 geographical 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;³⁹ the writers sojourning in Guilin or the Southwestern United University group in Kunming during the early 1940s are also compelling groups whose works display elements of artistic unity due to their respective locales.

Each of these principles for grouping works and authors features a sociological 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 momentous 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 research suggests a degree of congruence between social groupings and literary periodicals, and of course these are largely borne out by the members' residence 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 sociology, 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 Shengtān'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 Shengtān'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 *Wenxue 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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Finally, there are the volumes of the series *Minguo mingkan jingxuan* (Selections from famous magazines of the Republican period),⁴⁵ 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.