Consciously fictionalized narratives in China have always been labeled *xiaoshuo*, a term originally denoting “stories of minor consequence,” to indicate the lesser status they were assigned in the pantheon of native literary genres. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, the combination of shaken cultural confidence and the need to become “modern” had brought about abrupt cultural changes. Especially after the reformer Liang Qichao’s famous 1902 call to “renovate” *xiaoshuo*, the term was quickly understood to stand for Chinese equivalents of major fictional narratives in contemporary Japan and the West, narratives expected by writers and readers alike to carry out such serious missions as truthful self-expression and national reconstruction.

Because such expectations raised the status of all fictionalized writings in the eyes of both native and foreign critics and scholars, it has since been highly difficult to look at old-style *xiaoshuo* on its own terms—as predominantly recreational writings designed to give readers temporary respite from harsh or boring reality. Such writings, in the classical *wenyan* language, are part of a tradition dating back to at least the fourth-century ghost stories and the fifth-century anecdotes collected in such works as the *Shishuo xinyu* (New accounts of tales of the world). Later, when the tradition took the decisive step of adopt-
ing the vernacular *baihua* in imitation of oral storytelling, *xiaoshuo* flourished. From the latter part of the Ming dynasty (sixteenth century) to the turn of the twentieth century, the short stories and long narratives written in this more exhaustive language achieved high popularity among those who could read and who had the means to acquire either hand-copied or printed texts. By the 1920s, however, such people became the larger part of the populace in China’s urban centers, especially Shanghai, the result of the development of public education and the introduction of cheaper methods of printing that also launched modern journalism. Nearly all of the authors represented here were newspaper reporters or editors.

It should be no surprise that the new readership would gravitate to what amounts to a modern extension of a tradition of escapist writings, especially at a time of anxiety brought on by astonishing political and economic reforms. As popular as such writings quickly became, however, they were disparaged as shirking or betraying the modernizing duties Liang had charged *xiaoshuo* to take up. Liang himself, feeling by 1915 that his call to make *xiaoshuo* into instruments for leading the masses to modernization had all but failed, bemoaned the seemingly unshakable dominance of old-style fiction. Other reformist intellectuals soon followed suit. In spite of their regular references to modernized actualities in the urban centers, fictional narratives of the time were considered, at best, to be remnants of a past that needed to be transformed.

By the 1920s, though, in spite of Liang’s misgivings, the so-called May Fourth fiction—named after a 1919 student demonstration that turned into a national cultural movement—had come to the fore, openly and determinately attaching to fictional narratives the moral didacticism that premodern Chinese intellectuals had reserved for their official histories. At least in principle, the old “literati” had looked down on *xiaoshuo* for extending factual truth in order to provide escape. Now, under foreign influence, the fictionalizing had quickly be-
come respectable, while the traditional aim of providing temporary respite “after tea and meals” had not. Still, even in a rapidly modernizing metropolis such as Shanghai, readers in consistently large numbers gravitated to the traditionalist and escapist xiaoshuo, which unabashedly labeled themselves as stories for Saturday, a day with a recently instituted afternoon of leisure, when a person could curl up with a magazine and forget for a time everything he or she had to deal with for most of the rest of the week.

When considering the texts alone, the leisurely disengagement from realities is not always immediately apparent. The traditional need to captivate the reader has always brought on the regular inclusion of facts, even as the facts are inevitably dressed up. Historians looking for descriptions of, say, urban life in the Shanghai of the 1920s, can readily find valuable evidence in the stories here; one or the other of these may actually evince a certain amount of social concern. In practice, the line between escape and engagement in any written narrative has never been hard and fast. On the other hand, historical evidence that the Chinese traditionally considered fictional stories as narratives of no great moral or political consequence is beyond dispute, and we should not insist, even from good intentions, that the “old-style” writings here be something that they are fundamentally not. It is this insistence, as a matter of fact, that has prevented us from attaining a more accurate picture of what really happened to the vibrant xiaoshuo tradition when China underwent cataclysmic cultural change in the first half of the twentieth century. While the temporal and intellectual distance between us and the China of that era continues to increase, the stories can still help us transcend the barriers of time and change by allowing us to experience vicariously, and hence to understand better, the preferred reading fare of so many urbanized Chinese on Saturday afternoons throughout the Republican period—“after a week of exhausting work,” “with sunlight from the window,” and “with the scent of flowers” about their chairs.
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T. C. W.