
Understanding Authenticity in Chinese Cultural Heritage

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Chapter 17

Authenticity beyond Authority? The Case of Handwritten Entertainment Fiction from the Chinese Cultural Revolution

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Introduction

How can a handwritten piece of spy fiction, slightly torn apart, with no clear indication of its place or time of production, and without attribution to either author or copyist, be considered an authentic source about the Cultural Revolution? How can we maintain this ambiguity when working with the text and preparing digital editions? Entertainment fiction written and copied during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) circulated widely at the time. While most educated youth were aware of the phenomenon or participated by reading (or copying) the texts, for most surviving artifacts, we have little details about their production, circulation, and consumption. Who first wrote the text or copied it later? When exactly and where? Most artifacts provide no such information, and with the one text discussed below that is an exception; the information does not help to trace a distinct author. In this chapter, however, we argue that it is these characteristics—the fragile materiality, the particular conditions and practices in the production, circulation, and consumption of the texts, and their contents—that render these manuscripts authentic. While concerns about conservation play an important role in our attempt to digitize these sources, we will focus on the challenges of inquiring both the historical status and provenance, as well as the narrative contents, of this genre. As in other eras and regions, manuscripts are an efficient tool to circulate literary artifacts beyond the grasp of authorities (both political and authorial), and they represent a means to circulate commentary on news and rumors, thus reflecting the *zeitgeist* of the time. They are authentic not as the urtext of a given literary artifact, but as a mirror of what were then the events of the day and of what we now look upon as history.

Text and Materiality

At the heart of this case study are works of *shouchaoben* 手抄本 (“handwritten entertainment fiction”; hereafter SCB) fiction, sources that have been largely overlooked by scholarship. After an early groundbreaking work by Perry Link (1989) and a few in-depth discussions by Yang Jian (1993, 2013), it is only recently that

interest in the subject has increased. Lena Henningsen, for instance, has detailed the contexts of SCB, as well as written on a number of their concrete stories and their literary and historical background (Henningsen 2017, 2019, 2021; see also Kong 2020). Some stories were rewritten and officially published after the Cultural Revolution, and the manuscripts themselves are not as ubiquitous as they were during the Cultural Revolution, but most still can be traced down on second-hand, book-selling websites. Critical editions of the manuscripts, however, are rare. Bai Shihong 白士弘 (2001) compiled a book with seven pieces of handwritten entertainment fiction. His editorial strategy consisted in increasing readability—for example, by identifying wrong characters to create more coherent texts.

SCB are distinctly characterized by the contents and style of the texts and by their materiality, each of which are closely tied to the practices of writing, copying, circulating, and reading the genre. The materiality of unofficial handwritten entertainment fiction had a distinct impact on its circulation, consumption, and contents. It was written, circulated, read, copied, and rewritten within the literary and intellectual field of the Cultural Revolution. At the time, the field was dominated by political control and literary and media censorship, and, at least officially, all production, circulation, and consumption of literature was tightly controlled and had to serve the goals set by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Starting in 1968 with the rustication movement, this system began to erode. As urban-educated youth were sent to the countryside, they took along books—including forbidden or internal publications meant for party cadres only—and they began to write, copy, and rewrite essays, poetry, and fiction themselves, becoming secondary authors in the process. In the case of SCB fiction, some copyists took great liberties with the “original” and rewrote stories or parts thereof. Secondary authorship thus acknowledges the contribution of the copyists to the preservation and, more than that, to the creative transformation of the stories. All these texts circulated, sometimes widely, and were shared and discussed among friends. Writing, copying, or rewriting an entertainment novel could thus serve different purposes: entertainment at a time when this was scarce, keeping contact with friends, or practicing one’s skills (and ambitions) in literature or calligraphy.

Mostly, these texts were written into notebooks or on thin notepaper that was then bound at the left or top margin. Sometimes, official work unit paper or the back sides of official paper such as hospital records were used. Mostly, the texts carry neither the author’s or copyist’s name nor information on the place or time of production (a rare exception is found with *Three Journeys to Jiangnan*, discussed below). Official letterheads or information from the back sides can be used to make guesses about the geographical provenance of the respective copy. A manuscript written on paper from a distinct work unit likely was produced in the respective city, by an employee of the respective work unit or by a friend or family member who somehow gained access to this paper. Some copies remained half-finished. In some cases, marginalia exist. Many others became incomplete from wear and tear, some missing pages, or parts of pages, with the margins at

the bottom or at the side missing. The fragile nature of the paper itself contributed significantly to the deterioration of the manuscripts.

These particularities of the material condition of these manuscripts represent both challenges and opportunities to conservation and research. The number of extant manuscripts is massive, yet they are fragile and thus difficult to conserve. The sheer amount of extant copies allows for research across different versions of the “same” story and their material conditions. Similar to what Corina Smith observes for *shu* 書 from early China in her contribution to this volume, the chronology in which individual witnesses of the text were created is difficult to assess. In most cases, it is impossible to identify an original urtext, as these are not preserved. As with earlier textual traditions, orality played a distinct role in the spread of stories. In this, radio broadcasts of news of events and rumors sharing such news or assumptions about news may have fed into their creative reimagining, so synchronous parallel origins are a distinct possibility. In addition, the anonymity poses an obstacle to research into the provenance of individual texts and manuscripts.

Due to the generally anonymous hands, and the bulk of copies extant, this type of manuscript has so far failed to acquire collectors’ value among bibliophiles. Unlike original drafts by famous authors, or cherished specimen from the more distant past, these sources occupy a precarious niche below the threshold of cultural heritage preservation efforts. The situation is exacerbated by the characteristically poor quality of the textual carriers, making conservation a pressing issue. Preserving the sources for future research is, therefore, the primary goal of our current collection efforts, while at the same time making the text(s) accessible for analysis (READCHINA n.d.). With this work on SCB, we share a data collection of digital scholarly editions (DSE) that includes both high-quality facsimile scans published via IIIF and tei-xml transcriptions of each copy. Both technologies are the de facto standard for conservation of “rare book” manuscripts by special collections (TEI Consortium 2018; IIIF Consortium n.d.). By following the same open standards, we hope to build on a foundation of interoperability that is proven to work at scale, despite the fact that comprehensive attempts at collecting and preserving these sources have yet to begin.

Three Journeys to Jiangnan, which is at the core of our analysis, counts among the widespread manuscript SCB fiction stories. The sample we assembled for this project consists of eight different manuscript copies, and further hand-copies of the story continue to appear on the secondhand book market. In addition, a revised and expanded version of the story was published after the end of the Cultural Revolution by Zhang Baorui 張寶瑞 in his *Cultural Revolution Manuscript Fiction* series, though it is not considered here because it is a print publication on the regular book market (Zhang 2007, 2010). In this chapter, *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* is used to refer to our collection of witnesses, as this is the title that the majority of witnesses adopt: Five of the copies at hand have the title *Sanxia Jiangnan* 三下江南 (*Three Journeys to Jiangnan*, Anonymous [1]), and one copy each of *Ye Fei Sanxia Jiangnan* 叶飛三下江南 (*Ye Fei Journeys Three Times to Jiangnan*,

Anonymous [2001 (1977)], *Yu Fei Sanxia Jiangnan* 余飛三下江南 (*Yu Fei Journeys Three Times to Jiangnan*, Anonymous [2]) and *Sanjin Nanjingcheng* 三進南京城 (*Three Times to Nanjing*, Anonymous [3]). The first five copies are very similar, differing mostly on the level of words and expressions; the second one (*Ye Fei Journeys Three Times to Jiangnan*) was published in an anthology of manuscript fiction by Bai Shihong (with slight editing), and—together with the third version (*Yu Fei Journeys Three Times to Jiangnan*)—represents minor variations. The last version (*Three Times to Nanjing*) still is clearly recognizable as belonging to the same story set, yet there are several differences in relation to style and subplots (Henningsen 2021:79–90).

For our discussion of authenticity, it is important to contextualize these manuscripts within their specific *zeitgeist*, and, in particular, within the literary and information politics of the era. These both impacted notions of knowledge, truth, and the real, which in turn is prominently reflected in the manuscript fiction at hand. During the Cultural Revolution, socialist realism was intensified into revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism. During the “17 years” lasting from 1949 to 1966, which need to be considered the literary point of reference for the creators of SCB, literary creation had to be modeled on literary texts from the Soviet Union and on Mao Zedong’s 1942 call that literature and the arts be cogs and screws in the political machinery of the CCP. Literary texts were to be created for the masses of the people, in a language accessible to them, and based on their own experiences. Authors were therefore instructed to collect their materials among the masses and then create exemplary stories about exemplary heroes that would inspire readers to emulate these heroic figures. Literary texts thus made claims on the real and on the representation of truth, while at the same time tampering with it in their creation of better-than-ordinary heroes. In their plot, style, and characterization of heroes, most SCB, including the *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* texts, conform to the rules of socialist realism, while at the same time subverting it to a certain extent. In the process, they make their own claims to authenticity by reflecting on the realities of the Cultural Revolution—on realities outside officially permitted discourses.

As a genre, SCB fiction also has distinctive characteristics as to its style and contents. Stylistically, it borrows much from socialist realist fiction as well as from earlier traditions of entertainment fiction. Most narratives relate stories of crime, espionage, love, and, in a few rare cases, sex. They thus provided readers with entertaining stories that were missing from the literature that was officially allowed. At the same time, many of the heroes in these stories conform to the ideals prescribed by the official dogma: they work as upright detectives for the country’s security forces and are flawless, always putting the well-being of society and nation before their own needs. The enemies typically come from the ranks of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party)—the CCP’s long-time political adversary—and are clearly described as negative characters through various markers in their comportment and everyday activities.

Cultural Revolution manuscript fiction had a clearly dissident status on account of its entertaining qualities and its transgressions of literary norms. More than that, its mere existence outside the official literary system rendered it illegal, thus putting practitioners—(secondary) authors, copyists, and readers—under severe threat, as evidenced by the case of the author Zhang Yang 張揚, who was imprisoned from 1975 to 1979 for writing the novel *Di erci woshou* 第二次握手 (*The Second Handshake*; Zhang 1979, 1999). Only a few texts can be described as outright dissident on account of their content and style, namely *Bodong* 波動 (*Waves*) by Bei Dao 北島 (Zhao Zhenkai 趙振凱), *Gongkai de qingshu* 公開的情書 (*Open Love Letters*) by Liu Qingfeng 劉青峰, and *Jiujilang* 九級浪 (*The Ninth Wave*) by Bi Ruxie 畢汝協 (Henningesen 2021:101–137). Of the primarily entertaining stories, some conform to the literary norms at first glance, yet they play with these conventions or challenge some of the assumptions officially prescribed for fictional heroes and real-life persons. While asserting the rightful place of the CCP and the righteousness of the revolutionary course of the party, these tales tell of the emotional suffering endured; they challenge some of the policies, or they counter the ideal of a hero who selflessly subordinates his (the heroes most often are male) own desires and needs under the goals set by the party by asserting for the individual the right to strive for a fulfillment of these desires and needs (even though they may remain unfulfilled). A case in point may be *The Second Handshake*, which weaves together a narrative of revolutionary struggle with a triangular love story centered around a male protagonist who is upright in his political convictions yet ambivalent in how to handle his amorous life.

Three Journeys to Jiangnan

Our collection of *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* witnesses, and the variations to this story (such as individual versions of *Three Journeys to Jiangnan*, *Yu Fei Journeys Three Times to Jiangnan* or *Three Times to Nanjing*), similarly explore the borders of the permissible. It is an exemplary piece of entertainment fiction written by anonymous authors during the Cultural Revolution, which then circulated widely, and in different versions. The story is divided into five parts, which are made visible in most versions by section headers: a prologue that sets the scene for the action, three successive trips to Nanjing, and a brief epilogue.

The story serves as an explanation of the Lin Biao 林彪 affair, an actual historical event that caused much turmoil at the political center in 1971 and was a watershed event of the early 1970s in China. Lin Biao, minister of defense, had been nominated as potential successor to Mao Zedong 毛澤東. However, a rift began to develop between the two culminating in the Lin Biao affair. Historical evidence on the incident remains somewhat unclear, as the Chinese side destroyed most evidence after the end of the Cultural Revolution. The official narrative claims that Lin and his supporters had planned an assault on a train on which Mao would travel. After this was exposed, Lin, together with his wife and son, attempted to flee the country and died as their airplane crashed in Mongolia, on their way to

the Soviet Union. Investigations by other parties cast doubt on the details of this narrative, but Lin's death through a plane crash can be ascertained.

The *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* stories begin with a flashback to a mysterious event on the bridge crossing the Yangzi River in Nanjing a year before the Lin Biao affair, with the mysterious disappearance of one (or alternatively two) agents and the subsequent deployment of agent Ye Fei (or Yu Fei) to investigate the matter. He travels south three times, each time reporting back diligently to Beijing. In the end, a suspect is captured, and Ye Fei learns what happened: the suspect, a somewhat unruly young man who refused to join the rustication movement, had been tricked into joining what he believed to be the People's Liberation Army—but which turned out to be a ruse. Eventually, he realizes that something is fishy and thus averts a major assault on Nanjing bridge—and on Mao Zedong's train, as the reader later learns. The epilogues, in different ways, then make the connection to Lin Biao explicit. Ye Fei exemplifies the morally upright character devoted to the cause of the party known from socialist realism fiction; the unruly young man who is first tricked into attempting to assassinate Mao but then saves his life, represents a plotline of conversion to the right (and righteous) path of the CCP. The absolute moral and political authority of the party and its chairman are not called into question by this story. However, in its depiction of the unruly man—a hooligan by official standards who resisted the call to participate in the rustication campaign proclaimed by Mao himself—as the courageous young man who in the end distinguishes right from wrong and thus saves Mao's life, the story challenges conventional evaluations of such ruffians who defied official policies.

The story is very much embedded in its historical context. While clearly fictional, it plays with markers of factuality. Not only does Mao Zedong appear as a point of reference, but the text (claims to) explain a major historical affair and relates to real-world places and the rustication campaign that distinctly shaped how countless individuals and families experienced the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, the *Three Times to Nanjing* version even has paratextual markers on its title page to frame it as a factual report (Figure 17.1).

The title page reads:

Record of Chinese Counter-Espionage

Original manuscript

Three Times to Nanjing

Record of how Agent Three Yu Fei from the Central Ministry of Public Security cracked a case

Collected and edited in Nanjing in 1974

Huang Shiyou

This factual frame, on the one hand, may be seen as a mere game on behalf of the writer, playing with readers' expectations or claiming more authenticity for the text at hand. On the other hand, this also needs to be seen in relation to contemporary flows of information. While the top leadership kept itself reasonably

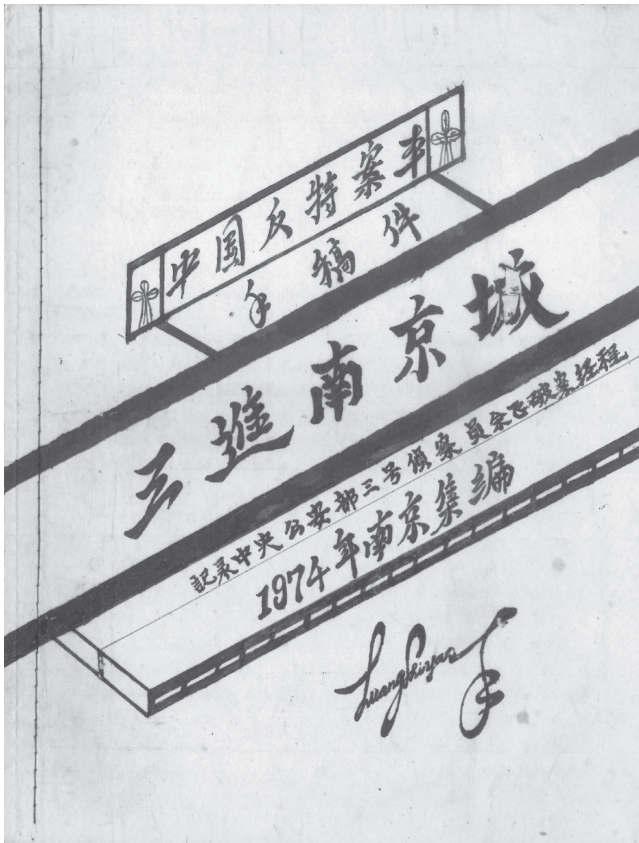


Figure 17.1 Facsimile of title page of *Three Journeys to Jiangnan*, witness A.

well-informed about what was going on in the country with the help of the aforementioned internal publications, the general public had access to much less reliable information about domestic and global events resulting in the wide proliferation of rumors. The text, thus, also feeds into the need of the public to know about events on the top level and into the fantasies that developed out of the information gaps that remained. At yet another level still, the factual frame may serve to protect the writer of the text from legal persecution.

Complying with the conventions of socialist realism, as a piece of fiction, the story is embedded in Chinese reality. Yet, posing as a factual genre and in its particular view on the reality observed, the story plays with notions of factuality and truth. It adds a twist to reality and presents its own version of historical truth. The story in its different versions also represents a meta-fictional comment on the conditions of text production during the era. In their interaction with and creation

of knowledge about the realities of the Cultural Revolution, the stories challenge the authority and authenticity of official discourses, providing counternarratives to these and establishing their own textual authenticity.

Editorial Strategy

When reading SCB fiction, one is confronted with two competing understandings of authenticity. One is based on the provenance of a given witness. Is the witness giving voice to an authentic experience of daily life during the Cultural Revolution, or to put it differently, is it an authentic product of this particular time and place? The second is narratological, as a story playfully engaging with current events, and with rumors traveling the country during times of limited information flow. Does this correspond to other documents attesting to popular sentiments, instead of “historical truth?” Consider, for example, the use of literary devices, such as the incorporation of artistically stylized personae, or subverting readers’ expectations via paratextual elements that masquerade as factual reporting. Is the use of such devices coherent within the larger network of narrative variations? Is the whole narrative plot consistent with other versions of this story? Preserving and making both dimensions of authenticity accessible to analysis presents the main editorial challenges for our corpus.

With *Three Journeys to Jiangnan*, plot variations remain minor. We can establish a stable narrative core of the story based on nine witnesses within our corpus. This allows us to judge new witnesses by their adherence to the main template, as narratologically authentic accounts of the story circulating at the time. For a literary analysis, the ambivalent status of a place name (“Nanjing”) or of references to real personae (“Mao Zedong,” “Lin Biao”) open up the text for inquiries into the framing of what is factual inside a fictional text. For a digital edition, this poses a problem. “Mao Zedong” in the text wants to be read as referring to an authentic person, yet his character in the story is clearly fictional. An algorithmic approach to analyzing or tagging the text runs a high risk of correctly identifying Mao as a known historical agent but falsely linking fictional events or quotes to the historical person. To tackle this challenge, we build upon related work for the data model of *ReadAct: A Database of Reading Acts* and, in particular, its definition of meta-reading (Henningsen and Paterson 2020). If we treated these documents as “merely” historical sources, we could perform simple lookup operations for named entities, such as “Nanjing City” or “Mao Zedong.” These names occur in the narrative, and corresponding real-world entities exist. Yet there remains a crucial difference between “Nanjing” occurrences on the title page (Figure 17.1) and the colophon on the last page of the manuscript, which reads (cited in the original simplified Chinese):

一九七四年於南京城收集編 Collected and edited in Nanjing in 1974

一九七四年冬於南京城轉集編 Passed on and edited in Nanjing in winter 1974

一九七六年转抄於浙江西湖 Transcribed in Xihu (Zhejiang) in 1976
 一九七六年东转抄於榕城 Transcribed in Rongcheng [Guangdong] in 1976
 一九七七年春转抄於鲤城之中 Transcribed in the center of Licheng [Fujian]
 in spring 1977

This is rendered in our digital edition as follows:

```

1. <div type="colophon">
2.   <p>
3.     <lb/>
4.     <date when="1974">一九七四年</date>
5.     <choice>
6.       <orig>於</orig>
7.       <reg>于</reg>
8.     </choice>
9.     <placeName type="city" ref="#P0001">南京城</place
Name> 收集编 <lb/>
10.    <date when="1974">一九七四年</date> 冬於 <place
Name type="city" ref="#P0001">南京城</placeName>
11.    转集编
12.    <lb/>
13.    <date when="1976">一九七六年</date> 转抄於 <place
Name type="location" ref="#P0026">浙江西湖</placeName>
14.    <lb/>
15.    <date when="1976">一九七六年</date> 东转抄於 <place
Name type="district" ref="#P0023">榕城</placeName>
16.    <lb/>
17.    <date when="1977">一九七七年</date> 春转抄於 <place
Name type="district" ref="#P0037">鲤城</placeName> 之中
18.  </p>
19. </div>

```

While the title page as a whole belongs to the fictional world of the narrative establishing “Nanjing” as the location of the plot, and to the genre of the narrative, conversely, the colophon makes a first-order claim about the provenance of the document. The second occurrence of “Nanjing” on the title page is repeated verbatim within the colophon, which suggests a provenance claim, yet a narrative claim about the proximity of the report to the events it depicts remains a possibility. We, therefore, establish a functional distinction between historical and fictional named entities, which closely follows *ReadAct* data model for fictional reading acts. The distinction between historical and fictional named entities is necessary so that persons, such as Prince Shihanouk of Cambodia, Zhou Enlai, and Mao Zedong are clearly marked as *fictional* entities that belong to the world of the narrative when they appear as part of the plot. Treating this distinction

primarily as a function of the text allows us to utilize structural textual features, which are easily accessible through xpath in our xml transcriptions. Fictionality as a distinct attribute is reserved for the class of purely fictional entities, such as the agent Ye Fei. Our editions use <standOff> to provide a central collection of authority lists for people, places, and organization, which include cross-references to *ReadAct* where these exist.

As for the critical apparatus, we focus on textual features that have potential bearing on competing sources of authenticity. For example, on the title page, it is unclear whether to read the name of the “author” as Huang or Liang, owing to the ductus of the Romanized lettering (Figure 17.1, bottom line of text). In our digital edition, the title page is rendered as follows:

```

1. <titlePage>
2.     <docImprint>
3.         <lb/>中国反特案本
4.         <lb/>手稿件
5.     </docImprint>
6.     <docTitle>
7.         <titlePart type="main">三進南京城</titlePart>
8.     </docTitle>
9.     <byline> 记录中央公安部三号
10.         <choice>
11.             <orig>偵</orig>
12.             <reg>侦</reg>
13.         </choice>察
14.         <choice>
15.             <orig>員</orig>
16.             <reg>员</reg>
17.         </choice>余飞破案经程
18.         <lb/>
19.         <date when="1974">1974年</date>南京集编
20.     <docAuthor>
21.         <lb/>
22.         <choice>
23.             <unclear reason="eccentric_ductus">Hu</unclear>
24.             <unclear reason="eccentric_ductus">Li</unclear>
25.         </choice>ang Shiyou
26.     </docAuthor>
27. </byline>
28. </titlePage>

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To deal with this ambiguity, an “eccentric ductus” is encoded in lines 22–25 of the digital edition. The tasks of identifying individual hands or dealing with illegible or erroneous characters do not differ significantly between these

manuscripts and those more commonly studied by paleographers. However, given the comparatively narrow time frame of production and its firm location within PRC history, we decided to normalize the base text to simplified Chinese using explicit markup, in the service of greater accessibility and searchability.

Encoding textual features renders them accessible for analytical tasks, such as geographical analysis at various levels based on either narrative or historical dimensions. Ignoring categorical data distinctions is computationally trivial—for example, all places irrespective of fictionality, while the reverse operation, introducing the same distinction after the fact, is not. We, therefore chose, to include our interpretation of fictional entities within the data model of our transcriptions. We can compare individual witnesses of the same story to find outliers based on the locations of plot points or compare the locations of plot actions between different stories (or between different versions of the same story). At the same time, we can compare the circulation of individual copies based on place markers such as those in the colophon above. Structural markup increases the accuracy of simple analytical tasks, such as character counts or number of pages, and enables more elaborate tasks such as computing the “maoiness” of a story by calculating the median frequency of Mao quotes.

We have selected a small number of general interest measures that help users browse the overall collection. Since there is no limit to the kinds of questions researchers might have for these sources, a comprehensive set of measures remains impossible to calculate up front. Our selection is therefore eclectic. The goal of the SCB database is to enable researchers to do their own analyses, based on their own selection of textual features. To adequately address this point, one needs to go beyond facsimile images and engage in the semiautomated process of encoding the document. One area we plan to expand on is in the analyses of narrative structures. Because the fictional characters of the SCB are not yet part of *ReadAct*, we only have incomplete data on the literary function of individuals according to the categories of socialist realist fiction. Nevertheless, *ReadAct*'s data model provides a schema for encoding this information; we hope to extend our current markup in the near future so that we can begin to compute basic metrics about narrative structures and analyze the implementation or divergence from the theoretical framework of socialist realist fiction in more detail.

Conclusion

Authenticity and authority are always conceptually linked. SCB shows how a centuries-old medium was revived to establish circulation networks outside the direct grasp of authority. The authenticity of the majority of Cultural Revolution SCB fiction does not rest on a distinct urtext or authorial persona, beyond rare exceptions such as the work of Bei Dao or Zhang Yang. It is the contexts of their production and circulation, their material fragility, and the

resulting instability of their contents that—as we have argued in this chapter—render them authentic. Their particular narrative instability, with divergent witnesses frequently establishing plot variations, leads to a relational narrative core as one of the key features of their authenticity. This narrative instability is related to the truth claims inscribed into the stories and to the information regime during the Cultural Revolution. As truthful information that circulated the country was scarce, rumors and conjectures prospered—textual genres that claim to be representations of the truth, but that, albeit inadvertently, at least border on the fictional. Bits of factual information can be connected by assumptions of the “most likely” or by outright fantasy to make the narrative more interesting to one’s audience. The collection of witnesses from the *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* corpus clearly feed into this information regime. They do not reveal an absolute historical truth about the Lin Biao affair. But they present their readers with an authentic contemporary vision of what might have happened, and they present readers with an evaluation and interpretation of official policies, such as on the rustication campaign and of officially proclaimed heroism.

SCB fiction embodies a popular response to traditional forms of media control. As such, it is not without parallels to today’s circulation of fake news on social media. In both instances, adherence to textual conventions sets the stage for widespread circulation. Moreover, successful (viral) stories link to a preexisting canon of beliefs, which they embellish with a nonfactual twist, with authorial anonymity maintained by using pseudonyms or avatars. Just as today, it remains difficult to track the wider influence of a given piece of literary rumor or fake news. It is thus impossible to ascertain precisely how much stories, such as the *Three Journeys to Jiangnan* stories, influenced decision-makers or public opinion. But the adherence to literary conventions, and the relational narrative cores offer us a perspective onto the belief systems of both their readers and their authors. Compared to the venerable tomes of the Song, or early-modern Europe, the eclectic mix of very modern concerns, personas, and even living authors, with the tools and methods of the paleographical trade, offer a unique way to navigate the world in the absence of trusted sources for factual information.

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- Anonymous. n.d. 2. *Yu Fei Sanxia Jiangnan* 余飛三下江南. N.p.: Freiburg University Collection.
- Anonymous. n.d. 3. *Sanxia Nanjing* 三下南京. N.p.: Freiburg University Collection.
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