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Reportage and its Contemporary Variations: An Introduction

Charles Laughlin and Li Guo

Rethinking Reportage

When a genre thrives, its name tends to be applied broadly to a range of texts, but when it declines because of changing literary or political trends, people avoid the name, even when it could be useful. This process makes things difficult for literary historians when they try to sort out the evolution of the genre. Take “reportage literature” (*baogao wenxue*) for example. The term won legitimacy in China from 1930 on. As a new form of writing, it allowed Chinese writers to participate in a proletarian literary movement that was happening simultaneously in the Soviet Union, Weimar Germany, Japan, and other places through the creation of short, socially impactful nonfiction texts (Laughlin 2002: 115). Although *baogao wenxue* did not mobilize factory workers as cultural producers, it did provide a way to proletarianize writers of new literature who wanted their literary intervention to matter socially, politically, and historically. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) embraced *baogao wenxue* as a useful and exciting new literary form and a mode of training and indoctrinating aspiring young revolutionary writers. Even when the first wave of revolution in the cities encountered setbacks, reportage literature gained

enormous space to grow and new scope for its application, thanks to the War of Resistance against Japan, the CCP's shift to a rural focus, and the establishment of revolutionary base areas in remote mountain regions. In this historical context, *baogao wenxue* had become the catchword for any kind of progressive-leaning nonfiction literary text.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the important role reportage had played in revolutionary and wartime culture won for it orthodox status, including dedicated sections in many of the major national and provincial literary journals of the Chinese Writers Association. Yet the task of reportage literature had changed radically from the pre-1949 years; now reportage writers were expected to extol the achievements of socialism and only depict struggles or antagonisms as vestiges of the old society. Reportage became a victim of the general evisceration of culture during the first seventeen years of the PRC, when literature could no longer be used as a weapon of critique or resistance. A crucially important development in this process was the brief reemergence of critical literary fiction and nonfiction in the late 1950s, in the context of the Hundred Flowers campaign, especially nonfiction texts by Liu Binyan. Liu emphasized a new term, *texie* (feature stories), to align his work with a parallel trend in the Soviet Union, the *oçerk* as practiced by Valentin Ovechkin, a Soviet writer with whom Liu was acquainted (Wagner 1992: 311–312). The adoption of this term shows that Liu was signaling a deliberate departure from the upbeat and frankly unreal blandishments of existing *baogao wenxue* texts. Liu was acting as a serious journalist (and a loyal communist) by uncovering wrongdoing within the CCP and the socialist establishment, for which he would be labelled a rightist and expelled from the Party in 1957. At the same time, he carried on the mantle of reportage literature from before 1949 by making liberal use of literary techniques and emotionally-charged rhetoric.

The legitimacy of the term “reportage literature” among writers and readers would not be so easily challenged, though. Liu called his works

texie, and there was some editorial emphasis on this new term and category, but his works often appeared in *baogao wenxue* columns and anthologies. More important, in the cultural renaissance of the period of reform and opening starting in 1978, the term *baogao wenxue* returned to the center of lively cultural production and debate, and the just-rehabilitated Liu Binyan stood at the center of it. Reportage literature reached an unprecedented peak of popularity in the early 1980s, a time when tearing off the mask of socialist fantasy to reveal inequity, anguish, and dehumanization under socialism was the order of the day for all literary forms. The reform-minded government of Deng Xiaoping permitted such unmasking because it validated the moderate politics and economic pragmatism of the post-Mao era. Like the rehabilitation of scientists and intellectuals purged under Mao, reportage literature regained its true mandate and social and cultural purpose, and to some extent became the signature literary genre of the new era.

The vagaries of history and politics, however, saw that it did not last. During the period of reform and opening, CEOs of private concerns began to hire reportage writers to promote their enterprises in literary magazines; this corruption of reportage undermined its legitimacy. By the late 1980s when the social pressure for democratization and political reform generated waves of political demonstrations, the kind of trenchant social criticism that had characterized reportage writing in the early 1980s had suddenly become a political third rail in the literary scene. Reportage retreated to a role of extolling the achievements of socialism and selfless political leaders, and the term suffered a drastic loss of legitimacy among writers and readers from which it would never recover. However, in the wake of this dramatic downfall of the term “reportage literature,” other forms of critical literary nonfiction, such as “documentary literature” (*jishi wenxue*), “documentary fiction” (*jishi xiaoshuo*), “biographical literature” (*zhuanji wenxue*), and the new term “nonfiction” (*feixugou*), have emerged on the literary scene, a trend that is the genesis of this special issue.

With this issue, we seek to broaden the scope of the existing scholarship on reportage. Xiaomei Chen (1985) has observed that the assimilation of Chinese reportage as a genre into the canonical literary system attests to the demands of political and literary history. Yingjin Zhang (1993) has argued that reportage illustrates “the ideological workings of narrative” and “consciously interpellates individuals (writers, characters and readers) as subjects in their own rights” (212). Charles Laughlin (2002) identifies a central feature of Chinese literary culture that has been particularly important in the modern and contemporary periods: the literature and art of the real, which includes reportage literature, feature stories, documentary literature, documentary film (*jilupian*), and non-fiction. Where it concerns prose writing, the changes in terminology are affected by politics and the fashions of cultural discourse, which includes the marginalization and sometimes abandonment of earlier terms like *baogao wenxue* and *jishi wenxue*. In addition, Yin-Hwa Chou (1985), Zuyan Chen (1993), Thomas Moran (1994), Rudolf Wagner (1992) and others also contributed studies on the hybrid modes of reportage. This special issue continues these critical interventions, but adopts a wider scope to delineate the commonalities and forms of the art of the real in diverse literary and artistic expressions in modern and contemporary Chinese culture.

Approach and Contribution

As the contributors to this issue show, reportage has found expressions in a nexus of genres, from late imperial exploration narratives to Ai Wu’s travel accounts, from the League of Left-wing Writers’ promotion of reportage as a pathway to proletarian realism to the search for truthful cinema in documentary filmmaking. They read closely literary and visual reportage texts, discuss the representations and variations of the reportage concept, and explore an aesthetics of contemporary global reportage. The seven essays evaluate the activist function of reportage and assess its potential ideological limitations, idiosyncratic constraints, and

ethical challenges. Further, the contributors advocate an interdisciplinary understanding by including both literary texts and visual reportage and engaging them in productive comparisons. Specifically, the essays cross-examine literary reportage and documentary cinematography by adopting multidisciplinary approaches to explore the textualization of real-life images and the visualization of texts narrating real people and events.

The reportage texts studied in these essays stress the activist function of reportage in documenting voices of socially marginalized groups and the ethical responsibilities of authors, filmmakers, and audiences. Examples include Charles Laughlin's essay on images of aging and dying in reportage films, Harlan Chambers' essay on Liang Hong's reportage about Chinese peasantry, and Li Guo's discussion of environmental activism in Xu Gang's environmental reportage. Authors also explore how the ideological function of reportage leads to tensions and incongruities between collective master narratives and personal memoirs, between professional neutrality and individual disclosures. Examples include Jie Guo's study of Ai Wu's travel writing reportage; Chen Po-hsi's essay on Lan Bozhou's adoption of reportage to rewrite Taiwanese nativist history; Lawrence Zi-Qiao Yang's study of advocacy films and the rise of the documentary avant-garde in Taiwan; and Yingjin Zhang's reflection on how documentaries and literary reportage foreground a responsible observational mode in documenting the underprivileged other.

This special issue promotes new perspectives on the formal fluidity of the reportage genre and its diverse cultural expressions. The essays engage in critical readings of written textual materials and reconsiderations of visual reportage as texts for reading, as well as their contribution to an interdisciplinary understanding of reportage. By placing literary and cinematic studies in productive conversation with each other, the special issue suggests an approach to documentary films as texts of reel nonfiction, and call attention to visibility, aurality, and materiality in literary reportage. The authors explore reportage realism through multidisciplinary

angles and examine how visual and written reportage texts employ various combinations of multimodal techniques. Such stylistic hybridity and lack of formal structure give reportage an aesthetics of immediacy, intimacy, and emotional affect. Also, three essays in the special issue examine how cinematography documents the actualities and details of real socio-historical figures and circumstances.

The Essays

One of the thematic interfaces of these essays is the distinction between fictional and non-fictional prose. The first essay by Jie Guo provides a much-needed study on Ai Wu's *Journey to the South* (Nanxing ji, 1935), and its two sequels, *Second Journey to the South* (Nanxing ji xupian, 1964) and *New Journey to the South* (Nanxing ji xinpian, 1983), based on the author's three separate visits to the Yunnan-Burma borderlands. Of all the authors treated in this issue, Ai Wu is the author closest to the origins of modern Chinese reportage literature. His works show that over time, an author may choose to adopt fiction or reportage, even when he writes about the same people and places. The intersection of fictional and non-fictional prose is also seen in Lan Bozhou's *Song of the Covered Wagon* (Huangmache zhi ge), whose nonfictional character is demonstrated in Po-hsi Chen's contribution. As Lan's text and the history of its reception shows, in the space of politically-engaged prose literature, the text's literal truth does not determine its meaning or value.

Po-hsi Chen's article brings out another theme that will continue to be important in future studies of reportage: contemporaneity. If we look at the discussions about reportage literature at the time of its emergence in the 1930s, as well as in the scholarship on the genre's early development, almost every definition of the genre includes some reference to its focus on contemporary society and depiction of events proximate to the time of its composition; it was initially conceived as a literary form that could respond rapidly to social and historical change. This assump-

tion continued after 1949 in Liu Binyan's critiques of socialist bureaucratism and corruption. And yet in the case of *Song of the Covered Wagon*, as well as such texts as "The Great Earthquake in Tangshan," discussed in Yingjin Zhang's essay, the form often takes a retrospective approach written years or decades after the events occurred. Does this make it no longer reportage? Or was the initial definition and usage too limiting?

If Liang Hong's *China in Liang Village* (Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang) and sequel *Chronicles of Leaving Liang Village* (Chu Liangzhuang ji), which are invariably referred to as "non-fiction literature," have a relationship to reportage, it may be, as discussed in Harlan Chambers' essay, one of an ambivalence about the literary epistemology that defines the modern Chinese author's relation to social reality, in particular to the rural village. Chambers identifies a building tension in Liang's works between her rural investigations and her role as a writer and literary critic and explores Liang the investigator's engagement with "feeling" as a field of experience vis-à-vis the social logic of the postsocialist market economy. A professor of modern Chinese literature, Liang is deeply aware of the archetypal quality of an author's return to her home village and the sociohistorical reflections it engenders, but her works frustrate any expectations of the enlightenment and redemption that have accompanied this trope throughout the twentieth century. As displayed here, the relationship of the individual and subjectivity to the artistic rendering of the real, as well as the contemporary emergence of a growing reflexivity, are destined to be fruitful areas of further research.

This special issue was put together with the notion that documentary filmmaking, which has clearly become a major aspect of contemporary Sinophone culture, is a non-fiction form relevant to a continued discussion of reportage literature and its modern impact. The authors are not claiming that documentarians were deliberately continuing the tradition of reportage literature or aligning their work with the aim of its further development; rather, as displayed in Yingjin Zhang's study of reportage

and documentaries on the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, the theoretical significance, social function, reception, and artistic meaning of documentary films are in some senses comparable to those of reportage. Documentary films and reportage works even sometimes reference the same event. In addition to allowing for individual artists' articulation and interventions, reportage and activist documentaries both arguably embody a distinctive epistephilic aesthetic that could be said to be a deeper and more meaningful characteristic than their purported veracity.

Charles Laughlin's essay offers a study of the art of the real and images of aging in documentary and narrative films from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in the last two decades. Images of aging and dying in these films, Laughlin argues, evince an aesthetic of actuality that can be traced back to the rise of Chinese reportage literature in the 1930s and has had a more recent development in documentary filmmaking and contemporary narrative films. For Laughlin, documentary film surpasses written reportage texts in capturing inarticulable traces of veracity through ambient sound or unintentionally captured images. By analyzing films directed by Wu Wenguang, Wang Xiaoshuai, Tseng Wen-chen, Yen Lan-chuan and Juang I-tseng, and Ann Hui, Laughlin proposes that documentary film offers a possibility to transcend the limits of language and inspires new understandings of the actual. He concludes by suggesting that sober images of aging can be read as a symbolic inversion of the celebration of youth through much of the twentieth century, marking a sea change in the evolution of modern Chinese culture.

Also focusing on audiovisual reportage, Lawrence Zi-Qiao Yang's essay offers a timely study of a broad media ecology of the Nationalist propaganda culture in postwar Taiwan. Yang's essay consists of two parts. Part I focuses on advocacy cinema, newsreels, and technocratic discourses about land-reform and agriculture of the Sino-American Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR). Yang treats the media cluster of JCRR

as a genre of audiovisual reportage—that is, a discursive operation in pursuit of an absent “Real.” He argues that filmmakers involved in JCRR media production were engaged in the ideology of rural modernization in Cold War Taiwan and were haunted by the inaccessible landscape of mainland China and a futuristic rural modernity in Taiwan. Part II offers discussions on the career of filmmaker Richard Yao-chi Chen and some of the JCRR-sponsored projects with which he was involved. Yang argues that Chen’s creative and experimental approach to documenting evinces a new cinematic aesthetics. By transforming JCRR’s agenda of acceleration and progress, Chen’s documentary films project a new politics of slowness that questions Nationalist truth-stating and worldmaking in 1960s and 1970s Taiwan.

Li Guo’s essay provides a study of environmental reportage by mainland Chinese writer Xu Gang. Through an analysis of *Loggers, Wake Up!* (Famuzhe, xinglai! 1987) and *Watching over Home* (Shouwang jiayuan 2005), Guo explores how Xu’s reportage reconceives topophilic imaginations of home and calls for an understanding of human affective experiences in encounters with nature. The representation of home in relation to hometown, village, or nation connects Xu Gang’s works to rich traditions in Chinese literary discourse. Xu’s imagination of “ecological love” (*shengtai zhi ai*) refers to an affective ability to connect one’s subjective experiences with one’s surrounding ecosystems. Environmental reportage, as illustrated through Xu’s works, can make an activist intervention in the process of retrieving damaged and marginalized lands and redeeming such places as beloved sites. In discussing Xu Gang’s exploration of the poetic characteristics of reportage, Guo’s essay resonates with the interrelation between the pursuit of actuality in reportage and the literary features of the genre explored in essays by Jie Guo, Harlan Chambers, and Po-hsi Chen. This exploratory study calls for more research on environmental reportage and the genre’s potential to inspire conversations with a global audience.

Looking Forward

This special issue is the result of two conference panels on reportage, as well as a collaborative reading workshop on reportage and its contemporary variations held at the University of Virginia in October 2018 and supported by the American Council for Learned Scholars Collaborative Reading Workshop Grant. The issue suggests many exciting directions for future research. First, modern women authors' renovations of the reportage genre, from Bai Wei's hospital reportage to Chen Xuezhao's wartime reportage, deserve greater scholarly attention. Second, further research can be conducted on contemporary independent documentaries as forms that struggle against political, ideological, or artistic censorship. Productive topics also include Hong Kong, its Indie-Doc, citizen documentation, and the social movement since 2014 (Louisa Wei 2017). Third, reportage photography invites considerations on the relationship between art photography and reportage, the tensions that the "decisive moments" evoke, and the photographers' negotiations between traditional photo-reporting and personal, artistic representations. Fourth, reportage poetry, be it wartime reportage poetry (*baogao shi*) in the 1930s and 1940s or contemporary internet poetry, opens up an intersubjective space for the articulation of personal feelings through historical experiences. Critical-artistic interventions of social reality in reportage poetry, in this light, need further exploration. Fifth, another subgenre, reportage theater, also calls for in-depth study. The critical-realist plays of the 1950s, Xiaomei Chen (2016) insightfully argues, "functioned as 'factual reportages' of the discrepancies between an ideal new socialist life and its harsh reality." Finally, in light of the intersection between contemporary arts and political activism, studies of reportage can benefit from discussions of animation, theater, dance, street graffiti, and other popular art forms.

Glossary

Ai Wu	艾芜
Ann Hui	许鞍华
Bai Wei	白薇
baogao shi	报告诗
baogao wenxue	报告文学
Chen Xuezhao	陈学昭
<i>Chu Liangzhuang ji</i>	出梁庄记
<i>Famuzhe, xinglai!</i>	伐木者, 醒来!
Feixugou	非虚构
<i>Huangmache zhige</i>	幌马车之歌
Jilupian	纪录片
jishi wenxue	纪实文学
jishi xiaoshuo	纪实小说
Juang I-tseng	庄益增
Liang Hong	梁鸿
<i>Nanxing ji</i>	南行记
<i>Nanxing ji xinpian</i>	南行记新篇
<i>Nanxing ji xupian</i>	南行记续篇
Richard Yao-chi Chen	陈耀圻
shengtai zhi ai	生态之爱
<i>Shouwang jiayuan</i>	守望家园
Texie	特写
Tseng Wen-chen	曾文珍
Wang Xiaoshuai	王小帅
Wu Wenguang	吴文光
Xu Gang	徐刚
Yen Lan-chuan	严兰权
<i>Zhongguo zai Liangzhuang</i>	中国在梁庄
zhuanji wenxue	传记文学

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