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Postsocialist Symptoms, Recursive Readings:

A Review Essay of Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China*

Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China
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Introduction

Xiao Liu's *Information Fantasies* provides a timely answer to the question: what can media theory learn from modern China? Unearthing a history of China's role in the global production and circulation of information, Liu's work to some extent inaugurates current research interests in modern Chinese humanities that attend to materiality, infrastructure, and bodily affects. Consisting of five chapters, the study's first part explores the histories of extrasensory powers, *qigong* (Chapter 1), and Artificial Intelligence-driven systems (Chapter 2). The second part examines the cultural imagination of information and systems in new cinema (Chapters 3 and 5) and literature (Chapter 4 and the epilogue). Engaged in media theories, each chapter illustrates how key concepts, "the digital, the interface, the system, noises, and the liminality of cinema" (35), interact with postsocialist practices.

Whereas "information fantasy" denotes the dream of "all-inclusive mediation that integrates human beings into seamless, real-time information circuits" (22), Liu focuses on the "cybernetic body" that sustains or disrupts these circuits. From mass media to AI-driven systems, when technologies incorporate human bodies into ceaseless flows, Liu urges us to recognize the frictions and perils of such information fantasies. "Anticipating the discussions on information surveillance, data collection, and precarious labor conditions in the economy today," Liu envisions, "this project thus provides an *ur*-history of the digital" (35).

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Chapter 1 begins with the craze over magical waves through extrasensory powers and *qigong*—a traditional medical practice combining breathing techniques and meditation for bodily balance. These waves acquired a universal convertibility beyond the confines of the body and environment, incorporating the body into instant information transmission. For scientists such as Qian Xuesen, a "somatic science" was thus worthy of serious study, treating the body as information. Instead of viewing the digital as binary coding, this underexplored cultural history of magical waves envisions new corporeal relations between bodies and environments.

Chapter 2 rethinks the interface through an AI-driven expert system that emerged in China in the late 1970s. Comprising specialized "expert" knowledge with an inference engine, the expert system aimed to provide professional consultation—particularly for traditional Chinese medicine—even in the absence of a human expert. The system presumes "neutral," professionalized knowledge, converging with the "politics of depoliticization" in postsocialist China (108). However, such a system continues the (Western) philosophical binary that separates intelligence and reason from the human body. Whereas scientists call for a more inclusive "metasynthetic engineering" to incorporate bodily affects or a "user-friendly interface," Liu sees the interface as symptomatic of a fragmented society that requires communicative labor to bridge its segregated layers.

Chapter 3 on the "ultrastable system" may be the most ambitious case study. Reading new cinema (Chen Kaige and Huang Jianxin) alongside intellectual history (Jin Guantao and Liu Qingfeng), Liu situates emerging modernist aesthetics within a Needham-style question asked by scholars such as Jin and Liu in the 1980s: Why did feudalism persist in China, and what was missing in Chinese culture that prevented its modernization, unlike the West? Liu specifically focuses on Chen's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Huang Jianxin's *Black Cannon Incident* (1985). Whereas former scholarship focuses on how new-wave cinematic aesthetics were influenced by global modernism or Chinese tradition, Liu illustrates that, in this intellectual environment, they actively participated in a "scientific" system theory-based discussion: is China an "ultrastable" system? And if so, what can Chinese culture do in the face of global modernization?

In two strikingly different circumstances—the former in a rural loess plateau and the latter in an urban industrial area—the directors contemplate people's agency within and beyond systems. Their distinctive film language, such as Chen's immobile camera as well as long shots, and Huang's low-angle shots and "strange loop" patterns, also depicts landscapes of eternal stagnation and people's deep-seated anxiety in the recursive loops of bureaucratization and modernization. In this light, while the protagonists in these films are observers

of the system—a Party representative seeking folk songs and inspiring a peasant girl, and a factory expert mistakenly accused of espionage—they are nonetheless trapped within the systems they observe. The dilemma, as Liu asks, is this: "Is this man involved in the circuit an operator/observer of the system, or is he himself a black box functioning no differently from an input/output device?" (140).

Chapter 4 rereads the experimental writing of Wang Meng alongside the rise of the market economy and the return of advertising. In the face of "information bombing"—enabled by wireless radio and television broadcasts—what is information, and what is noise? Liu contextualizes emerging modernism alongside the cacophony of multimedia advertising, arguing that experimental literary styles—"metonymy, unconventional association, and defamiliarization"—were also valued skills in advertising and information aesthetics (183).

Chapter 5 continues the discussion of new cinema and situates its transformation in fierce competition with television and videotapes. Starting with film theorization such as "idea-image" (*yixiang*)—ideas that move beyond realism and value simulacra and affective power—Liu contends that a tension emerged in discourses on postsocialist film: whereas critics regard film viewing as an intellectual inquiry, the production and marketization "carried film spectatorship toward sensorial stimuli and simulacra with no origins" (244). This divergence is particularly striking in what Liu calls "haunted media": films that depict the coexistence of different epistemologies and realities. *The Lonely Spirit in a Dark Building* (1989) is a prime example. By placing the process of filmmaking within the film, this horror movie explores the limits of communication and the ethics of mediation.

The book concludes with an analysis of an online sci-fi story about the opposition between humans and machines, "Youth, Chinese-style" (2006). Highly influenced by multimedia popular culture, such stories depart from postsocialist histories and politics, where even themes of "resistance" and "revolution" appear deflated and dehistoricized, "symptomatically [underlining] the postsocialist politics of depoliticization in the understanding and imagination of information technology"(261).

Xiao Liu renews our understanding of the vibrant moment of post-socialist "culture fever" in the 1980s and 90s. Engaging in dialogue with pioneering works such as Rey Chow (1995), Wang Jing (1996), Zhang Xudong (1996 and 2008), and more recent scholarship like Erin Huang (2020), Liu's analysis is informed by theories and histories of information, systems, and cybernetics. By contextualizing aesthetics and politics within concrete technological backgrounds, Liu demonstrates that (post-)modernist aesthetics in new

literature and cinema are not merely transposable or translatable techniques; rather, they are deeply embedded in and contributory to circulating discourses on information.

For instance, whereas Rey Chow—whose primary example is also Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*—astutely observes that reform-era intellectuals had a "primitive passion" to reconstruct a lost origin, Liu anchors this psychoanalysis-oriented discussion within cultural history and system theory. *Yellow Earth* ends ambiguously: a child runs toward the Party representative, an embodiment of the Party's idealism, but is ultimately consumed by the frantic masses. Chow, illustrating the distance between intellectuals and the masses, comments that the film "leaves us with a cognitive repetition and roughening of the oppression whose true origins remain ambiguous with historical weight" (103). Liu, however, offers a different reading: when the outsider-representative disappears into the landscape of the people, "the observer no longer occupies a view of command but becomes indistinguishable from the system he observes" (140). In a self-reflexive manner, the intellectual's dissolution into the masses recursively embodies artists' unsettling circumstances within the "strange loops of knowledge" (Liu 157). Liu's work itself participates in this loop, composing a recursive historiography of China that unravels changes both from within and outside the system.

Yet, how can STS histories and texts traverse so many domains? Here, "symptom" emerges as a crucial keyword in Liu's work, where information fantasies are consistently framed as symptoms of postsocialism. This symptomatic reading presupposes latent meanings and systemic oppressions waiting to be unveiled. As Eve Sedgwick insightfully comments on paranoid reading, such a "hermeneutics of suspicion" can have unintended consequences: "they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given pieces of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (124). The multifaceted relations that shaped the cultural productions are always quickly tamed as sociohistorical forces, particularly the "politics of depoliticization." While this framework has explanatory power, it is less effectual in describing Chinese culture today and, in some cases, within Liu's book itself. For example, many of the films discussed still operate under the shadow of the Cultural Revolution. Ironically, many literary experiments were made possible by subsidies from the socialist cultural system. How might history appear differently if we applied alternative reading practices beyond symptomatic reading?

Reading Liu's work is like looking into a kaleidoscope of postsocialist China, where bewildering texts, news, and films make us question: from whose perspective are we witnessing these mediations? Mediation is always precarious,

Liu reminds us—not only because media is prone to dysfunction and failure, but also because China's postsocialist transformation is full of uncertainties. What, then, is the value—whether negative or positive—of precarious mediations when mediations either overflow or undermine the circuits of global capitalism? In the wake of post-2008 structural crises in finance and globalization, does precarity hold alternative potential, or will it be redirected to construct an even more all-encompassing system? Liu's work invites further research into the radical potentials that emerge at the intersection of human bodies and information circuits, urging scholars to scrutinize the shifting dynamics of mediation in postsocialist China and beyond.

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