

## Handwritten Entertainment Fiction (手抄本)

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### Summary

Entertainment fiction manuscripts from the Chinese Cultural Revolution are objects that were forbidden at the time as their very existence was against the prevailing ideology, yet they were extremely popular, in particular among young readers. This biography presents this type of fiction as material object by tracing how they were produced and consumed, how both the material objects and the concrete texts were transformed and how these practices anticipated developments in the literary and cultural field commonly associated with the post-Mao era.



### Introduction

It is uncommon to approach a piece of literary writing as a material object. As a result, we tend to overlook that the materiality of literary texts determines not only their production, circulation, and consumption, but, as a result, also their content and style. Unofficial handwritten entertainment fiction (also *shouchaoben* literature, *shouchaoben wenxue* 手抄本文学) from the Cultural Revolution may serve as a particular case to illustrate this phenomenon. It also tells us much about literary and intellectual aspirations during the decade and about the conditions for literary production and consumption. Lastly, given that a former *shouchaoben* novel became one of the first post-Mao literary bestsellers, the genre also represents a connection between the literary and cultural fields of Mao and post-Mao China.

### The stage: A lively unofficial literary scene





The official literary scene of the Cultural Revolution was dominated by propaganda works that were both colorful and predictable in their storylines and characterizations of their protagonists. Unofficial literary life, by contrast, presented more diversity for readers, provided they had access and the necessary courage to engage in unofficial and, at times,

illegal activities that resulted in harsh prison sentences or even capital punishment for some. Literary salons existed, particular for young aspiring poets. Books published within the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) system of internal publications circulated far beyond this narrowly defined readership. In particular, young people kept notebooks into which they copied noteworthy poems, quotations, or entire books, including titles from within the system of internal publication. Practices of hand-copying (*shouchao* 手抄) were therefore widespread. Others wrote new works of fiction into notebooks or on sheets of paper, circulated these *shouchaoben* 手抄本 (hand-copy-books) among their friends, copied out and/or rewrote these stories which soon travelled across the entire country as 'flying books' [see source: Sample of *shouchaoben* fiction, also depicted to the left]. *Shouchaoben* fiction was extremely widespread during the later years of the Cultural Revolution providing, in particular, the sent-down educated youth (*zhishi qingnian* 知识青年 or *zhiqing* 知情) with the entertainment, leisure, and the distraction many craved: stories about espionage, crime, love, and – sometimes – sex. [See source: Spy stories]

## Lifecycle(s) of a shouchaoben

In most cases, *shouchaoben* were written anonymously. Their authors handed the texts to friends who handed them on and on and on, turning the manuscripts into 'flying books'. Some of these readers copied out the texts for further circulation, or for simple preservation as the texts were written on thin and fragile paper. In this process, they sometimes modified the text either because pages (or parts of pages) had been lost or because they felt their modifications would enhance the text in terms of style or plot.

In the case of *The Second Handshake* (*dierci woshou* 第二次握手), one of the most widely circulating stories of the time, its author Zhang Yang 张扬 (\*1944) became famous after the Cultural Revolution and wrote a full-length book about the genesis of the text. From this, we can see that there was neither the one and only valid and legitimate text nor the one and only manuscript as material evidence of the story. Rather, manuscripts and contents mutually interacted, bringing about change and variation as both texts and manuscripts came into being, vanished, and were recreated. [See source: *Shouchaoben* cover of *The Second Handshake*]

*The Second Handshake* narrates a triangular love story among three scientists: As a student of chemistry Su Guanlan is supposed to get married to Ye Yuhan, a student of medicine and the daughter of his father's friend. But he falls in love with Ding Jieqiong who studies to become a physicist in 1928. His influential father prevents the two love-birds from uniting and it takes decades before they shake hands for a second time in 1959 [See source: Translation of the beginning of the 1974 *The Second Handshake*].

Between 1963 and 1979, Zhang Yang wrote and rewrote the story at least six times: The 1963 version was entitled 'episode' (*langhua* 浪花). Zhang rewrote the text a year later and it was now called 'The Leaves at the Fragrant Hills are Red' (*xiangshanye zhenghong* 香山叶正红). In response to feedback from friends and teachers he introduced premier Zhou Enlai into the plot. In 1965, Zhang Yang was sent to the countryside as part of an early generation of sent-down youth that departed before the large-scale movement began in 1968. Between 1968 and 1970, he was then imprisoned for two essays he had written in 1967 in which he criticized the rustication movement. Upon his release and return to his village, he recalls joining his comrades at the campfire where people were

exchanging gossip and stories. A number of these stories were those also circulating on manuscript papers as *shouchaoben* and, to his astonishment, one person narrated 'his' story in its entirety, deeply moving the audience. While he kept silent, the others speculated about the origins of the various titles of the story ('The Return' which was the most widespread title at the time, 'The Mother of the Hydrogen Bomb', or 'The Pride of their Generation') and about the background of the author, who they variously claimed with certainty to be American, a sixty year old Hongkongese, the child of a high ranking cadre (on account of the story revealing internal matters), or a scientist narrating his autobiography.<sup>1</sup> [See [source](#): Excerpt from Zhang Yang's autobiography]


At this point the story was therefore circulating in writing and orally, i.e. both as a material object as well as in immaterial form. Some manuscript copies were copied out from extant copies of the text, while others were written down from memory by those who had read it earlier or had listened to it at storytelling events. And Zhang Yang himself continued to write the story down as well. These various forms of circulation of the literary text indicate its large popularity and they had a profound impact on the contents, style and form of the text. Texts were not merely copied out. Rather, some copyists chose to modify the text simply because the manuscript from which they copied was incomplete or had missing pages (or parts of pages torn off or worn out), or because the respective copyist simply found his or her version of the story more convincing. The copyists need to be credited not only with preserving the texts, but also with at least partial authorship of the story. And the different titles discussed at the campfire likewise go back to inventive readers. Filling in blanks in the original narrative (or on the title page of the manuscript), these writers/authors resemble the authors of contemporary fan fiction. As a result, *shouchaoben* stories generally circulated in a multitude of different versions.

## Cultural Revolutionary Persecution


Authorities, however, were alerted when a multitude of different manuscript versions of *The Return* spread across the entire country. Both the contents and the materiality of the text contributed to the persecution of its author: the central position of intellectuals within the plot, the legitimacy claimed for striving for individual love and the primacy attributed to Zhou Enlai (instead of Chairman Mao) resulted in Yao Wenyuan – who would be blamed for much of the evil caused during the Cultural Revolution as a member of the 'Gang of Four' after Mao's death in 1976 – calling for an imprisonment of its author. Zhang's anonymity notwithstanding, he thus was imprisoned again in early 1975. He was released only four years later, facing a likely death-sentence throughout – but rewriting the text again, amidst adverse conditions of a prison cell.

## Post-Mao lifecycle(s) of a shouchaoben: from underground to bestseller



Upon his release, Zhang Yang was asked by China Youth Publishing to write down the story once more, this time for publication. He was assisted in this by members of staff of the publisher. They were necessary aids at the time as he was bedridden and in hospital for some time after his release. The book was published in July 1979 as *The Second Handshake* – the title under which it circulated most widely at the time, yet another title chosen by Zhang’s readers – and became a national bestseller. This, however, by no means represents the end of the story of the transformation of this particular literary text. [See source: Cover of the 1979 and 2018 published versions of *The Second Handshake*, also depicted to the right]

The publication of the text gave rise to more transformations into other material objects and other versions of the story. To begin with, the commercial book market, which had been virtually out of operation over the previous years, resumed its work but still was inefficient in many ways. Demand exceeded supply, in particular in rural China. By the time young readers from the more outlying villages reached the official bookstores in towns (the only distributors of books at the time), *The Second Handshake* had sold out already. Some readers thus resorted to hand-copying, this time from the printed edition. 'There was no alternative but for 'hand-copies' to appear again. Of course, hand-copying takes time and care, but what else could we do!', one reader complained in a letter to the author.<sup>3</sup> The circulation of hand-copied manuscripts thus continued, albeit for different reasons and in a different context. Just as practices of hand-copying were not an invention of the Cultural Revolution decade but can be traced back into the early Mao-era, into Republican China, or even the imperial past, they likewise did not come to an end with the death of Mao Zedong.

In addition, the story inspired others to produce their own adaptations: *The Second Handshake*, thus, was put on the theatre stage, turned into a movie, translated into minority languages, and adapted as *lianhuanhua* books (Chinese-style comic books) [see source: covers of post-Mao comic versions]. The latter two types of book mostly were produced without the author’s knowledge, consent, or due financial compensation thus pointing to some of the copyright issues that would plague the Chinese book market over the coming decades.

## Shouchaoben as texts in motion

*Shouchaoben* from the Chinese Cultural Revolution are thus literary texts whose particular form and content were significantly shaped by their particular material nature. They were written on fragile paper and thus ephemeral, yet the stories were preserved by their readers, copyists and rewriters. They traveled the country. While in most cases, it is not possible to locate the provenance or travel routes of these texts and while it is virtually impossible to construct genealogies from different versions of texts that have survived, one text in my sample provides us with information about its genesis. *Three Times to Nanjing* is an espionage story that supposedly provided us with an explanation of the Lin Biao affair. The postscript to this brief story refers to four earlier manuscripts (likely lost or destroyed) preceding the one from which I quote:



- Collected and edited in Nanjing in 1974
- Passed on and edited in Nanjing in winter 1974
- Transcribed in Xihu (Zhejiang) in 1976
- Transcribed in Rongcheng [Guangdong] in 1976
- Transcribed in the center of Licheng [Fujian] in spring 1977 [See [source](#): Travel route of one *shouchaoben*, also depicted to the left]

The story thus traveled through South-Eastern China, from Nanjing (where most of the plot takes place) to Zhejiang province then further South to Guangdong and then North to Fujian. Also, it traveled between 1974 and 1977, i.e. until after what would later be called the end of the Cultural Revolution in the autumn of 1976. This indicates the longevity of *shouchaoben* practices and the continuities in cultural practices across the alleged 1976 divide. Lastly, it is worthwhile considering this snippet for the type of authorship it suggests: the original text in 1974, so the excerpt suggests, was 'collected and edited', later versions were 'passed on' and then 'transcribed' – but not explicitly marked as written or authored. None of these transmitters of the story claimed authorship of the text. Still, their creative literary output, inscribed on a fragile sheet of paper, gave material form to the novel and at the same also transformed it.

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## Footnotes

1. Zhang Yang 张杨, *The Literary Inquisition of 'The Second Handshake'* (*dierci woshou wenziyu* 《第二次握手》文字狱) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui chubanshe, 1999), 30-33.
2. Zhang Yang 张杨, *The Second Handshake* (*dierci woshou* 第二次握手) (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1979).
3. Zhang, *The Literary Inquisition of 'The Second Handshake'*, 370.

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## Sources

 IMAGE   文 TEXT   ▶ VIDEO   🎵 AUDIO   📄 PDF

1.  Image Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Sample of Handwritten Fiction
2. 文Text Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Spy Stories
3.  Image Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Cover Of The Second Handshake (第二次握手)
4. 文Text Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Translation Of The Beginning Of The 1974 The Second Handshake
5. 文Text Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Excerpt From Zhang Yang's Autobiography
6.  Image Handwritten Entertainment Fiction: Cover Of The 1979 And 2018 The Second Handshake
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## Further Reading

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