

REVIEW

BENJAMIN KINDLER, *WRITING TO THE RHYTHM OF LABOR: CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE CHINESE REVOLUTION, 1942–1976*. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025. 296 PP. ISBN: 9780231219327.

The past decade has witnessed a revival of scholarly interest in Chinese revolutionary literature. Cai Xiang's pioneering work, *Revolution and its Narratives: China's Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966* (2016), crucially revisits the intricate relationship between socialist politics and literary narrative from 1949 to 1966.¹ It reveals how the utopian project of the Chinese revolution simultaneously informed and was problematized by its narrative in this era's literary writings. Acknowledging the dialectical nature of revolution that continuously produced cultural crisis, Cai nonetheless calls for a political reinterpretation of Chinese socialist literature, a rich legacy which harbors profound potential for the contemporary world to challenge the increasingly alienated and alienating capitalist world order.

Following Cai's spiritual calling, Benjamin Kindler's new book *Writing to the Rhythm of Labor: Cultural Politics of the Chinese Revolution, 1942–1976* (2025) adds a fresh voice to this trend. It tackles the revolutionary transformation of literature from the Yan'an period (1942–1945) to the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) by foregrounding the changing significance of the labor of writing itself. Calling into question the conventional depoliticized understanding of literature's social function and the prestigious role of professional writers, the Chinese revolution initiated a radical transformation of “the most fundamental coordinates of what it means to write” (p. 2). The transformation aims not only to overcome the division between mental and manual labor by turning writers into “cultural workers” on par with the productive masses in terms of their social status, but also to reconfigure the labor of writing as both a bodily and a social practice into an organic part of the totality of revolutionary

¹ Cai Xiang, *Revolution and Its Narratives China's Socialist Literary and Cultural Imaginaries, 1949–1966*, trans. Rebecca, E. Karl and Xueping Zhong (Duke University Press, 2016).

social life. However, this was not an easy task, especially when its difficulties were themselves grounded in the social and economic structures and dynamics of socialist China. Kindler grasps these difficulties through the notion of “rhythm,” meaning the uneven temporalities of different forms of social practices, such as writing (which is often assumed to be an individual and mental mode of labor), factory production and field work (which are mostly manual and collective modes of labor), reproductive labor, etc. To overcome such a division between mental and manual labor in revolutionary praxis, one must then “write to the rhythm of labor,” (as the book’s title suggests), eventually aspiring to synchronize the contradicting temporalities of writing and other forms of productive labor.

Between 1942 and 1976, such a contradiction and its attempted solutions informed many political struggles, institutional reforms, and theoretical debates, to the point that this contradiction became a central theme reckoned within literary narratives. To fully account for the unfolding of this contradiction in socialist China, Kindler interweaves two threads of investigation: a series of interpretations of literary texts showcasing the uneasy transformation of writing, and a powerful theorization of the crucial concepts emergent during the course of this period.

In terms of the interpretation of Chinese revolutionary texts, the book discusses many familiar names, such as Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986), Zhou Libo 周立波 (1908–1979), Li Zhun 李准 (1928–2000), Ru Zhijuan 茹志鵠 (1925–1998), Bai Lang 白朗 (1912–1994), etc., revealing the contested process through which these revolutionary writers strived to transform from their narrative position of individual subject to that of collective sociality. More importantly, Kindler expands the scope of examination to lesser-known amateur writers such as Tang Kexin 唐克新 (1928–2023), Hu Wanchun 胡萬春 (1929–1998), Duan Ruixia 段瑞夏 (1947–2019), and so on. In doing so, Kindler highlights the role of literary writing in mediating the various temporalities of individual habitus, mass collaboration, industrial production, and what Louie Althusser calls the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs, e.g. school and media, and for Kindler, the Chinese Writers Association in the socialist period). Remarkably, Kindler pays particular attention to how the dynamism of literary form indicates the problem of social temporality.

A compelling case in point is Kindler’s rediscovery of the genre of “short short story” *xiaoxiao shuo* (小小說), an experimental literary form that comprises texts less than two thousand characters. The promotion and proliferation of such a highly condensed form during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), Kindler argues, corresponded to the accelerating

temporality of industrial production at that time through a complicated mechanism: not only that their contents would represent the immediate and intense labor experiences of amateur writers, but also that the collective reading of these stories “at the site of production” would “in turn, stimulate a new commitment to extended and intensified temporalities of production during the Great Leap” (p. 105). The labor of writing attained its full political intensity only through its interactive embedment in the system of mass production. Notably, with the discussion of He-Yin Zhen’s 何殷震 (ca. 1884 – ca. 1920) anarchist conception of labor in the beginning (Introduction), Bai Lang’s and Ru Zhijuan’s writings on domestic and reproductive labor in the middle (Chapter Two and Chapter Four), and Ding Ling’s complicated journey of transformation throughout, the book underscores a unique gendered dimension of revolutionary literature, for which the concern with the temporalities of domestic and reproductive labor has always been an intrinsic part of the labor of writing.

Besides textual interpretation, the more ambitious agenda of the book lies in its theorization of the revolutionary episteme of writing. Taking the dialectics of temporality as the focal point, Kindler revitalizes a constellation of vocabularies coined in the cultural policies and literary criticisms at the time. For example, he traces the theoretical genealogy of the seemingly ordinary category of “life” (*shenghuo* 生活). Starting with Zhou Yang’s 周揚 (1907–1989) translation and appropriation of Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s (1828–1889) realist aesthetics, Kindler examines how, in Zhou’s materialist science of aesthetics, the problem of *shenghuo* should not be understood in terms of individual experiences; rather, it is fundamentally constituted by the social relations and the underlying material substance. Therefore, the call for writers to “enter into life” (深入生活) since the Yan’an period was not an invitation for writers to find new literary themes and figures in the lives of the masses, but a demand to transform their subjective position from an isolated intellectual divorced from material production to a “cultural worker” embedded in and configured by the complex matrix of temporalities of the social totality. The concept of “*shenghuo*,” in this sense, helps us capture the persistent efforts in the Chinese revolution to open up a space (both in theory and in practice) in which writers could encounter and overcome their social separation with the laboring masses, there by restructuring their writing accordingly.

However, such revolutionary efforts were punctuated by the opposing social-political forces that kept reproducing the separation. Particularly, Kindler unravels the recurrent debates over “professionalization” (*zhiye hua* 職業化) and “bourgeois right” (*zichan jieji faquan* 資產階級法權), in which the latter notion encompassed a complex system of

cultural ideas (such as individual authorship), economic rules (such as manuscript payment), and social institutions (such as the Writers Association) underlying the reconstruction of the social identity of “professional writer” that, in many cases, defied the synchronization of the rhythm of writing and that of productive labor. What is more, he delves deeply into a particular element of plot that commonly appeared in revolutionary novels in the Cultural Revolution: the singular act of heroism of protagonists that offers an aestheticized final solution to the conflicts in the narrative. For Kindler, the temporality of such a singular moment of narrative closure should be viewed as a symptomatic abnegation of the possibility of transforming the system of political economy through the repetitive – but not singular – experiences of *shenghuo*. The attribution of the transformative power to the protagonists’ “communist consciousness of labor” in late Maoism closes off the space of socialist transition and mediation of temporalities that the idea of “*shenghuo*” used to open up, resulting in “the rejection of its most transformative and egalitarian theoretical vocabulary” (p. 179).

The book makes a refreshing contribution to our understanding of Chinese revolutionary literature. It joins an emerging group of scholarship (in both English and Chinese) that attempts to critically reengage with the literary concepts and experiments in the Chinese revolution as a medium to rethink and reimagine a more transformative relationship of culture and politics. In fact, the arguments of the book would form an interesting dialogue with, and at the same time benefit from, recent works by scholars in the Chinese Mainland. For example, in the history of Chinese leftist literature, the debate over the relationship of culture and politics did not start in Yan’an but can be traced back as early as the late 1920s (Zhang Guanghai, 2024). How can we compare the different conceptualizations of writing and its relationship to political transformation during the Maoist revolution and in earlier leftist traditions in China? What is more, given the internal and sometimes factional tensions within the Writers Association and other ISAs (Zhang Lin, 2020), such as that between Zhou Yang and Ding Ling, two figures Kindler discussed extensively in this book, was there possible room for competing theoretical orientations in the operation of the ISAs regarding the issue of writing? Finally, amateur writing did not end with the Cultural Revolution; quite the opposite, it became even more flourishing in the early 1980s (Shi Anshu, 2023). What then were the social forces that

constituted the dichotomy of professional and amateur writing in the reform era?²

Addressing these questions would undoubtedly renew our understanding of revolutionary literature across a longer historical period. Yet such insights would be difficult to attain without Kindler’s promising perspective in this book: recognizing that writing, after all, is a form of labor that is historically constructed. Whereas the conventional notion of aesthetic autonomy oftentimes implies a fixed and ahistorical conception of writing per se, Kindler shows the over-determination of the labor of writing that has been caught in, mediated by, and continuously reshaped through various social relations, forces, and their competing temporalities. In this sense, he delineates a self-reflective historicization of literary writing in a way that opens up the possibility for its future transformation.

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2 Zhang Guanghai 張廣海, “*Geming wenxue*” lunzheng yu jieji wenxue lilun de xingqi “革命文學”論爭與階級文學理論的興起 [The Polemic of “Revolutionary Literature” and the Rise of the Theory of Class Literature] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2024); Zhang Lin 張霖, *Zhao Shuli yu tongshu wenyi gaizao yundong (1930–1955)* 趙樹理與通俗文藝改造運動 (1930–1955) [Zhao Shuli and the Transformation Movement of Popular Literature and Arts (1930–1955)] (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe, 2020); Shi Anshu 石岸書, *Chongfan kaiduan: Xinshiqi wenxue de “qunzhongxing” (1977–1984)* 重返開端：新時期文學的“群眾性” (1977–1984) [Returning to the Outset: the “Popularity” of the Literature of the New Era (1977–1984)] (Taipei: Renjian, 2023).