

# Cultural Biography of the “Avant-Garde”: Intellectual Bookstores and the Legacy of High Culture<sup>1</sup>

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The Nanjing-based bookstore Librairie Avant-Garde is an intellectual bookstore with cultural influence in contemporary China. Situated in a consumer society today, but also established as a place representing the high culture legacy of 1980s China, this bookstore becomes a site where commercialization and the counter-drive of cultural autonomy intertwine. The ideal of cultural autonomy, embedded in the 1980s high culture legacy, is evoked by the bookstore in its employment of the mutating concept of the “avant-garde” over the years. This essay takes the bookstore as a case study to consider China’s high culture legacy since the 1980s. From the perspective of a cultural biography of places, the essay argues that, rather than causing a neat rupture in China’s cultural field, the ever-broader extent of commercialization in post-Mao China’s social life since the 1990s does not replace its high culture legacy as much as it casts the latter into a prolonged process of adjustment with consumer culture. As a result, distinctions between the highbrow and the popular, modernism and postmodernism, spiritual autonomy and consumerist self-indulgence have become highly ambiguous in post-1990 China.

## *Introduction*

Lining up to buy books is a lively memory that is quite peculiar and emotive to many Chinese people, especially to those who were intellectually active during China’s early “Reform and Opening-up” (1979–1989) era.<sup>2</sup> Representing the site of knowledge in the background of such a shared memory, the bookstore can work as a symbol of the upbeat cultural atmosphere of 1980s China. However, as commercialization and marketization have gradually swept through most spheres of life in China since the 1990s, bookstores seem to have lost their awe-inspiring status, becoming highly

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1 This paper has been developed as part of the ERC-funded project “The Politics of Reading in the People’s Republic of China” (READCHINA, Grant agreement No. 757365/SH5: 2018–2023). I would like to thank the READCHINA team and the DVCS participants for their comments and suggestions.

2 The scene of lining up to buy books in the 1980s often appears in frequently cited old pictures, documentaries, and memoirs, and is even depicted in fiction in China’s cultural field. See for example the news article on Shanghai people’s cultural memories, *Pengpai xinwen* 2019.

commercialized. For many people who saunter into a fancy bookstore in China's grandiose shopping centers today, they are likely to form the impression that bookstores in China have bowed to consumerism; they now contain very little knowledge, despite a proliferation of symbols of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Such a sense of Chinese bookstores' diminishing cultural seriousness seems to be backed by a widely accepted understanding of China's cultural-political changes from the 1980s onward. This impression is informed by studies of various aspects of post-Mao China, whereby the turn of the 1990s draws a dividing line in post-Mao Chinese society.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, after the social turmoil of 1989, China was again under tightened ideological control. As economic development became a major issue that the CCP regime clung to as a way to justify its rule, and as marketization swept through most spheres of life at a shocking speed, China's social consciousness changed from the intellectual-led discourse of "looking forward" (*xiang qian kan* 向前看) to a mentality of "looking forward to money" (*xiang qian kan* 向钱看).<sup>5</sup> The repercussions of this change in the cultural field are that the high culture of the 1980s,<sup>6</sup> together with its spiritual pursuit and its ideal of artistic / critical autonomy, was defeated by a newly emergent pop culture, driven by money-making, and characterized by a maelstrom of consumerist cults, entertainment, and new media. In the changed cultural setting, the significance of bookstores in terms of their role in knowledge and cultural production seems to be easily overshadowed by consumerist culture.

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3 I would like to thank the keynote speaker, Michael Radich, and other audience members from the DVCS who shared their impressions of China's bookstores with me, and brought up ideas about the "symbolic (exchange of) knowledge."

4 Maghiel Van Crevel's study of China's contemporary poetry, Xudong Zhang's studies of China's social transition from modernism to postsocialism (see his books *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms* and *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*), and Chris Berry's study of post-Mao China's cinema (see his book *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution after the Cultural Revolution*) are some of the many examples that have followed the 1980s/1990s rupture.

5 Zhang Xudong and Xu Yong 2020. Van Crevel also stated a very similar opinion, that Chinese society has gradually abandoned an idealist "life of the mind" and since the 1990s entered the "time of the money." Van Crevel 2008, pp. 13–14.

6 Post-Mao China's high culture is broadly perceived as a manifestation of the Chinese intellectual elites' (now failed) collective endeavor to establish their discursive autonomy. See Zhang 1997, p. 6. The popular (if sometimes implicit) conclusion drawn from such a perception is that as the Chinese intellectuals rapidly lost their authoritative discursive positions after 1989, the status and influence of high culture was soon replaced.

In this essay, however, I will argue that neither the above impression of contemporary China’s bookstores, nor the cultural sketch of post-Mao China with this gaping rupture stands up to scrutiny. The development of China’s bookstores does not comply with a homogeneous description that draws on the socio-political rupture as a dividing line. Rather, the cultural image of China’s bookstores has undergone continuous (if rapid) transformation, whilst also reflecting rich variety in terms of type and approach to running the business. As a place filled with cultural messages, a bookstore’s trajectory of development can reflect that of the cultural concept or social idea it promotes. Lucy Delap’s study on the feminist bookshops in the 1974–2000 British society,<sup>7</sup> for example, convincingly shows that those bookshops not only contributed to the cultural transmission of feminist ideas, but also challenged the claims made about the “fluid and ephemeral nature of Women’s Liberation.”<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, the continuous and diversifying development of China’s bookstores over the past 40 years in fact reflects heterogeneity and continuity in China’s cultural field rather than rupture. There is a mutually explanatory relationship between the bookstore and the cultural atmosphere surrounding it: the former provides a sensory space where the latter can manifest itself in a tangible way, whilst the latter is the major source of cultural capital the former draws on.

This essay will expound the symbiotic state of post-Mao China’s high culture legacy (in full fledge during the 1980s) and the consumerist culture (considered to have rapidly gained the upper hand since the 1990s) by focusing on the development of China’s bookstores in the same period. In order to trace the development of post-Mao China’s bookstores and their changing cultural messages, this essay will combine a micro-historical view with a historical one. Whilst taking note of the broad historical picture of China’s bookstores throughout, the essay will focus on one bookstore with an in-depth case study: the Nanjing-based bookstore Librairie Avant-Garde (*Xianfeng shudian* 先锋书店). As a typical Chinese intellectual bookstore with a cultural reputation and historical value, this bookstore provides an advantageous vantage point for reconsidering China’s cultural transition from the 1980s to the 1990s and after. Most notably, it is situated in a society that is accelerating towards marketization, and it is also a direct “posthumous child” of the 1980s idealist spirit.<sup>9</sup>

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7 Delap 2015.

8 Delap 2015, p. 172.

9 The second section of this essay, which focuses on the post-Mao Chinese intellectual bookstore’s trajectory of development, will explain in what specific sense this bookstore is a

In need of a concrete case to comprehend post-Mao China's high culture legacy and its interrelation with the consumerist culture, this essay will focus on one particular school of high culture: the avant-garde, given that Librairie Avant-Garde deliberately aligns itself with this movement through its name. By tracing how the cultural knowledge of the "avant-garde," as a representative of China's high culture legacy, has mutated over the years in the bookstore, this essay argues that the process of commercialization in post-Mao China did not eradicate the high modernist cultural legacy. Instead it cast the latter into a state of prolonged re-shuffling with consumerist culture, until the distinctions between the highbrow and the popular, modernism and postmodernism, spiritual autonomy (as pursued by high culture) and consumerist self-indulgence have become blurred and ambiguous. Post-Mao China's cultural field is hence much more complex than a neat historical rupture would suggest.

In attempting to decode the cultural knowledge the bookstore helps to produce and convey to the public through its space and its self-narration, this essay also questions the widely shared distinction between the "actual knowledge" and the "symbolic (representation of) knowledge." Backed by the traditional imagination of the process of knowledge acquisition, what is regarded as actual knowledge is attained from either meticulous scientific probes, or diligent learning activities that involve a lot of deep reading into difficult books. Whilst actual knowledge is characterized by an impersonal objectiveness, and a sense of depth, richness, and stability, the symbolic representation of knowledge, by contrast, only flaunts the various cultural symbols of the "actual knowledge" and leaves out its rich content to be seriously read and comprehended. The latter is hence deemed as superficial, empty, formalistic, and fake. Such a distinction has already been questioned in the postmodernist view.<sup>10</sup> Yet in the case of post-Mao China, it is especially telling that the symbolic representation of a new cultural trend helps to establish (and re-establish) people's perceptions of that trend, and to decide on its localized contents in the Chinese cultural field.

In its attempt to connect the historical dimension to the richness of spatial analysis, this essay strikes a chord with Christian Jacob's suggestion of the "lieux de savoir," in that both endeavor to blend anthropology and micro-history, and adapt them to the spatial turn.<sup>11</sup> Following the same line as Jacob, this essay pays attention to "the way

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"posthumous child" of the 1980s idealist spirit promoted by the high culture of the Chinese intellectuals.

10 Notable theories include Roland Barthes' semiotic cultural studies and Michel Foucault's challenges to the naturalistic view of scientific and social knowledge.

11 Jacob 2017, p. 89.

knowledge is rooted in places and cultures that define its nature, purpose, and efficiency,” and it adopts the view that “knowledge has to be embodied in material devices or in individuals that will allow it to circulate and to cross the borders of countries, of cultures, of language, of writing systems.”<sup>12</sup> To better suit the essay’s analytical purposes, the notion of a “cultural biography of places” is applied as the overarching conceptual guide for its methodological choices.

Kopytoff introduced the “cultural biography of things” when he suggested a new perspective for observing the cultural and cognitive elements at work in an object for commerce.<sup>13</sup> A similar term is suitable for studying commercial places that also contain rich cultural elements. The cultural biography of a bookstore provides the opportunity to tackle questions that are traditionally reserved for anthropological studies: where does the place come from and who made it? What are the biographical possibilities inherent in the bookstore’s status, and how are these possibilities realized? How has the place changed, and what happens to it when it ages over time?

The following analysis is structured in three parts. Each part investigates a major aspect of the cultural biography of the bookstore Librairie Avant-Garde, applying different methodologies. The first part discusses the spatial aspect of the bookstore, sketching the immediate sensorial impression and the initial perceptions of the cultural knowledge of “avant-garde” the bookstore’s spatial elements produce for its visitors. The second part discusses the biography of the bookstore. Tracing the history of the bookstore’s establishment of its identity, this part adopts historical and micro-historical viewpoints, together with narrative analysis. The third part focuses on the culture of the bookstore, especially the vicissitudes of the nature of the “avant-garde” as a literary / artistic school *qua* cultural stance *qua* lifestyle. The realm of intellectual history is also considered in the bookstore’s cultural messages here. Ultimately, space and history, the synchronic and the diachronic, the incessant vicissitude of the bookstore (over time) and its crystallization (in a certain period of time) into a coherent spatial entity containing relatively stable contents of knowledge will be presented in synthesis.

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12 Jacob 2017, pp. 91–92.

13 Kopytoff 1986, p. 65.

## *Sensory and Semiotic Space: Engraving Cultural Knowledge*

Bookstores provide a space in which reading activities are staged in an often well-designed cultural setting.<sup>14</sup> The encounter with new books and other materials in the bookstore, therefore, coincides with learning to understand the cultural messages



*Figure 1. The slope to the bookstore entrance*

these materials convey when the visitor experiences the bookstore's cultural atmosphere sensually. Librairie Avant-Garde is unusually beautiful, even uncanny, in its cultural atmosphere and spatial environment. Located neither inside the shiny shopping mall nor on the open street of Nanjing City, the flagship store of Librairie Avant-Garde hides in what was once an underground garage, which now still preserves the slope and the driveway lines in its architectural design (figure 1).<sup>15</sup> Before that, the location was originally a bomb shelter. To enter the bookstore, the visitor steps into a peculiar self-contained space that is separated from the outside environment. Xu Chong 徐冲, a senior bookstore manager who worked for

the New China Bookstore (*Xinhua shudian* 新华书店) for a long time, described his sensory impression of the site of Librairie Avant-Garde in his book on contemporary Chinese bookstores:

An underground garage, there is a slope that sinks to the bottom line of one's visual horizon, lowering down the arrogance of the self. Then there is a sharp turn, the long space extending forward, as if endless. The roof is low, and the suppressed atmosphere suitably creates an intensifying aura of awe. Such a site does not just ward off the worldly noise; the vanity and frivolity in one's mind also subside.

14 The bookstore discussed in this essay refers only to the brick-and-mortar bookstore with a physical presence. Online book retailers are not included in the discussion.

15 All the pictures in this essay were taken by the author, following the approved research procedures of the ERC.

地下车库，一道斜坡沉入视线下方，将自我的标高自然降格；然后一个大转折，漫长的空间向前延伸，似乎难寻尽头；层高偏低，压抑的气氛却逼真地营造出敬畏陡增的气场。这样的场所，且不说隔断了尘世的嘈杂，连内心的浮躁与虚幻也得收敛许多。<sup>16</sup>

As is illustrated in Xu’s account, the bookstore’s underground space creates an intense, awe-inspiring, and slightly forbidding atmosphere. This atmosphere can be perceived almost immediately, which is compatible with the nonconformist spirit of the avant-garde among those who have even just a vague impression and related imagining of what an avant-gardian artistic “aura” should be (especially) in the post-Mao Chinese cultural field.

Broadly accepted as a hallmark of high modernism, the avant-garde can be regarded as a defiant cultural stance that is represented by innovative artistic experiments, unorthodox (schools of) thoughts that launch sharp criticisms on modernity, and undaunted social movements advocating for radical revolutions in the modern world. In its birthplace in Europe, the avant-garde has a widely acknowledged history of development, including origin, artistic and philosophical canon, representative figures and schools. In its deep connection with high modernism, on the other hand, the avant-garde shares what was concluded by Fredric Jameson to be a feeling of alienation and existential anxiety in the modern world, a sense of disconnection between the human self’s deep subjective world and the crumbling authority of the outward systems.<sup>17</sup>

When it was re-introduced and gained much popularity in China in the 1980s, the concept of the avant-garde, together with other Western modernist arts and thoughts, played an important role in the resurgence of post-Mao “high culture,”<sup>18</sup> most notably in the various forms of artistic new wave and literary experiments. On a deeper level, modernism and the defiant culture of the avant-garde worked well with the Chinese intellectuals’ endeavor to establish discursive autonomy in their criticism of Chinese modernization at the time; it also provided rich and new cultural resources for Chinese intellectuals to draw cultural authority from. The avant-garde in post-Mao China’s high culture, therefore, shares many common features with the movement in the West, except that in post-Mao China, the cultural stance of the avant-garde leans more

16 Xu Chong 2011, p. 351.

17 Jameson 1997, p. 295.

18 I define post-Mao Chinese high culture as a cultural discourse built by Chinese intellectuals since the 1980s, with the collective intention among the intellectuals themselves of obtaining an advantageous / prestigious position in post-Mao Chinese society.

towards elitism and the highbrow aesthetic taste than the radically implacable and subversive cultural spirit.

It is exactly these features of the avant-garde in the post-Mao Chinese cultural field that the bookstore captures with great sensitivity. First, most immediately and sensually, the bookstore materializes the popular (if still vague) imagining of the concept of the avant-garde in its spatial environment by tactfully presenting its highbrow aesthetic taste in every aspect of its setting: black-and-white furnishings, well-selected jazz or light rock music in the background, and, most markedly, the black crosses installed at either end of the long inner space (figure 2). The two crosses join the slope, each on one end, so that when the visitor ascends to the high point of the bookstore's driveway slope the bright cross will be within sight, and when visitor returns from the inner space, the supine cross will be visible as visitor descends. The overall solemn and other-worldly atmosphere is greatly intensified by such religious (Christian) symbols.



Figure 2. Two huge crosses inside the bookstore at both ends of the driveway slope

The bookstore also flaunts its broad knowledge of the original (Western) avant-garde in the choice of its concrete décor. There are huge, slightly intimidating posts of Western artists and thinkers who are either representatives or precursors of the avant-garde and modernism: Kafka, Baudelaire, Novalis, Hemingway, Wilde, to name but a few. Aside from the images, various texts and pieces of art (paintings, sculptures) containing strong allusions to the nuanced modernist sense of alienation are employed. The line “strangers on the earth” (*dadi shang de yixiangzhe* 大地上的异乡者, from the Austrian poet Georg Trakl’s verse), for example, appears on the wall behind the cashier table, near a human-sized replica of Rodin’s “The Thinker” that faces the gate.

This line is also carved into one of the big crosses. The space intended for cultural narration is vast for such a place. For example, the bookstore is referred to as a site that has grown out of a non-place, it turns “the rotten into a miracle” (*hua fuxiu wei*

*shenqi* 化腐朽为神奇).<sup>19</sup> It is also a place in which “poetically, man dwells” (*ren shiyi de qiju* 人诗意地栖居)<sup>20</sup> (figure 3).

Existentialist philosophy, modernist Western poetry, and a modernized Christian faith, combined with the many well-chosen cultural figures and pieces of fine art, constitute a reservoir of cultural symbols of the avant-garde, from which the bookstore innovatively chooses to produce and engrave cultural messages of the avant-garde onto its physical presence, even including the nuanced modernist uncanny aura. It is possible to directly “read” into this space to attain knowledge of the post-Mao Chinese “avant-garde”: the significant influence of its Western origin, its particularity in the Chinese cultural field, and the best-known group of avant-garde figures for the Chinese, etc. The bookstore can thus be seen as a well-structured semiotic field in Roland Barthes’ sense, or a phenomenological field that brings about new horizons of cultural knowledge based on its visitors’ sensorial experience and interpretations of the space.

However, to the culturally savvy visitor, what is uncannier about this bookstore is not the high modernist elements, but the atmosphere of a leisure consumerist culture that sits side by side with its highbrow decor. It has become increasingly obvious in recent years that the bookstore has consented to this tendency. The bookstore is no longer inhibited about reflecting the leisure consumerist culture, if that was once resisted. The comfortable coffee area, the souvenir and cultural goods section, the postcard wall, and the incessant flow of tourists, all make the bookstore occasionally feel like a highly commercial bookstore. As a result, the bookstore’s initial avant-gardian atmosphere has become increasingly duplicitous over the years.

It could be said that two distinct code systems—that of the leisure consumerist culture and that of the high culture legacy—are offered to the visitors of the bookstore space simultaneously, and people are given space to interpret, as well as to selectively



Figure 3. “Poetically Man Dwells,” alluding to Heidegger in front of one sub-bookstore.

19 Wong 2015.

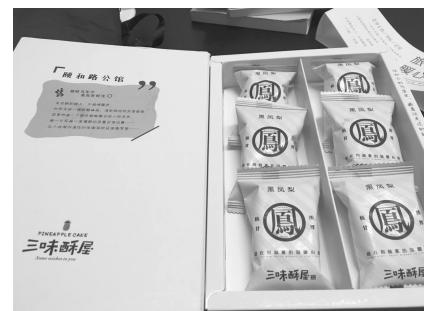
20 “Poetically man dwells” alludes to Martin Heidegger’s essay title. This line appears inside the flagship store. It is also one of the bookstore’s most frequently appearing quotations in all its branch stores.

combine, the two forms of culture. The spatial arrangement of the bookstore does actively designate different areas for different types of visitors—curious one-time tourists, whimsical leisure seekers, readers looking for entertainment, serious scholars, etc.—by positioning different types of books and cultural goods in different areas, so that people can access auras that suit their purpose.

However, it perhaps makes sense to acknowledge that, more often than not, the two forms of culture become too intertwined and indistinguishable in this space, despite the bookstore's efforts to demarcate different regions. It is very hard to separate these two cultures, for example, in the goods positioned in the bookstore's space, which are simultaneously highly culturized and highly commercialized. For the cultural commodities (books included) the bookstore sells, these objects could be seen as microscopic spatial regions in the bookstore; they bring the mixture of two cultures to the level of the bookstore's spatial molecules. Volumes of Bob Dylan's poetry are wrapped in crisp bags, making them somehow misplaced, like they should really be sold in the coffee area (figure 4). When the visitor does go to buy sweets in the recreational region, however, they are likely to be befuddled when, this time, they are given a “book” to eat (figures 5 and 6). This ironic confusion of art and food products blatantly associates cultural appreciation with the basest sense of consumption—materialistic, hedonistic, like filling the stomach.



Figure 4. Volumes of Bob Dylan's poetry with a crisp bag-like cover design.



Figures 5 (left) and 6 (right). Dessert sold in the bookstore, designed to look like a book.

Even for other commodities the nature of which is not disguised to the degree of misrecognition, the employment of fine art and sophisticated cultural knowledge in the commonest goods is mesmerizing. The tiny reading-room decoration that invokes Tagore's lines, for example, is artistically creative and touching (figure 7); and a poem by Wislawa Szymborska is printed on the packaging of the hyper-commercialized bookselling promotion called “blind choice” (*mangxuan* 盲选) (figure 8).<sup>21</sup> Reading the poem via such a commercialized medium could nonetheless arouse an unexpectedly refined aesthetic effect.



Figure 7 (left). Tagore's poetry<sup>1</sup> invoked by a decorative good in the bookstore.

Figure 8 (right). Szymborska's poetry on the packaging for bookselling promotion.

Moreover, the overall atmosphere of the bookstore remains consistent (if duplicitous), despite the space being divided into different regions. As exemplified above, the cultural and material resources in the bookstore, even the most consumerist ones, are deliberately decorated with a stylish shell that is compatible with the avant-gardian or the highbrow modernist taste. The actual forms of reading taking place in the bookstore, however, and the reading culture that is secretly endorsed by the bookstore's space, are now primarily following the features of consumerism and postmodernism: depthless, parodic, immediate, ambiguous, and full of free-plays of cultural symbols.

21 The rule of “blind choice” is when the consumer spends 99 RMB on a package containing two to three books chosen randomly by the bookstore, not knowing what they are.

By analyzing the spatial aspect of the Librairie Avant-Garde bookstore, it is possible to develop an initial and sensorial understanding of the cultural concept of “avant-garde” in contemporary China. Yet how does the avant-garde as a rich and flexible cultural concept mutate over time in post-Mao China’s fast-changing society, particularly given that the consumerist culture has been challenging the authoritative position of the intellectual elites’ high culture since the 1990s? What socio-political stories are hidden in the historical development of this bookstore, and more broadly, of the entire bookstore business in the post-Mao era? And how can we re-image a more nuanced culture picture of post-Mao China, in which multifarious social elements and cultural forms interact with each other, rather than simply replacing each other? These further tasks necessitate careful historical and cultural investigation into the bookstore, which leads to the essay’s second section: the bookstore’s history and its narratives on cultural identity.

### *Narrating a Life Story: History and Personified Identity*

Regardless of the commercial nature of a private-run bookstore, on every possible occasion Librairie Avant-Garde has resisted being seen, or at least being *reduced* to a commercial place whose *raison d'être* is making money by trading books. It even seems that the bookstore is not satisfied with remaining a mere place. It strives to be appreciated in a personified and personalized way. The staff member I interviewed introduced the bookstore by recounting the “course” (*licheng* 历程) it has taken over the years, with various ups and downs in its path of growth.<sup>22</sup> The proprietor called his bookstore “she” (她), and endowed “her” with many identities: his belief and dream, his personal piece of art, the “Holzwege” (*linzhonglu* 林中路)<sup>23</sup> in his life, a “third space” for other citizens, etc. On its twentieth birthday, the founder of the bookstore, Qian Xiaohua 钱小华, even published a book about the store that has been perennially on sale since then; it reads very much like a biography of a genre.<sup>24</sup> To do justice to the cultural significance of this bookstore, therefore, it is necessary to

22 The 56-minute interview took place on August 28, 2019, inside the bookstore. The interview followed the procedures of READCHINA’s ethical report, which has been approved by ERC. The interview materials are encrypted and stored in READCHINA’s database.

23 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 331. The term is borrowed from Heidegger’s eponymous book title.

24 The book is called *Librairie Avant-Garde: Born in 1996. Xianfeng shudian, sheng yu 1996* 先锋书店, 生于 1996 (referred to as *Born in 1996* in this essay). It was edited by Qian himself.

consider the “life story” the bookstore tries to tell with sympathy. Before going deeper into the narrative of the bookstore’s identity-seeking, however, it is also necessary to sketch the history and the overall picture of post-Mao China with regard to the development of bookstores.

For a long time in the history of the PRC, the bookstore was not a profit-driven place, nor was it a commercial site in Chinese people’s impressions from the 1950s all the way to the 1980s. After the “three major reforms” (1956), the bookstore became literally *the* bookstore in the lives of the Chinese as the state-run New China Bookstore monopolized the bookselling field. Although private-run and commercially driven booksellers re-emerged in the late 1970s, they were of very little cultural influence at the time, and most were only small vendors who sold poor quality books.<sup>25</sup> The bookstore that people lined up in front of was still the New China Bookstore by default in the collective memory of the 1980s. This largely established the noble image of the bookstore in many people’s perceptions during that decade: a non-commercial, much-desired, and privileged site of spiritual pursuit. Getting or reading books from it was also a privilege that did not come easily.

The spotlight began to move onto private-run bookstores in about the mid-1990s. According again to the memories of Xu Chong, private-run bookstores began to catch his attention in about the mid-1990s, when two major trends took place. He referred to the first trend as “the radicals” (*jijiinpai* 激进派). This constituted ambitious bookstore owners who aspired to expand their book retail business by enlarging the scale of the selling space, and, more notably, launching price wars. This trend in the private-run bookstores did not last long. Xu called the second trend “the carefree” (*xiaoyaopai* 逍遙派), referring to the emerging “academic bookstores” run by intellectuals who were savvy about books. This type of bookstore intended to win over customers with their refinement of taste and by upgrading the quality of their books. This second trend proved to be successful and ultimately even the complacent New China Bookstore learned from it.<sup>26</sup>

Xu’s observation of the growing influence of the “academic bookstores” is backed by other more objective research on China’s book business. It has been agreed that these bookstores enjoyed a good reputation among the public. They created a phenomenon in China’s book trade and “helped to change the public’s perception of private

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25 See Liu 2018, p. 138.

26 Xu Chong 2011, p. 334.

booksellers and hence reshaped the retail book market and book culture in China.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, to a large degree, and somewhat counter-intuitively, the shiny, blatantly commercial-driven bookstores in China today are either direct descendants of, or significantly inspired by, the academic bookstores run by “the carefree.” This is because a consensus has been formed since the 1990s: bookstores trying to increase profit by selling books *alone* or as if books are *merely* ordinary commodities, with price wars and sales promotions as a standard does not work—private-run bookstores are especially vulnerable in price wars. By contrast, the more adept a bookstore is at playing the “cultural card” derived from books (and other derivative commodities), and from the noble cultural image of the bookstore in people’s collective memory, the better it is likely to do economically.

There appears therefore an intriguing historical outlook in the development of China’s private-run bookstores: the ones who claimed to have little ambition in financial pursuit, and to devote themselves to the expansion of knowledge (by providing high quality and difficult books), became role models for today’s shiny bookstores that fully embrace the consumerist leisure culture and contain very little “actual knowledge.” There is a smooth line of inheritance between the two, as the academic bookstores showcase exemplary strategies in mobilizing the cultural resources that most successfully appeal to the public. More specifically, they resonate with the public’s sympathetic admiration for the high-minded pursuit of knowledge and new thought in the 1980s, and the public’s nostalgia for the Chinese intellectuals’ idealized way of life that characterized the cultural atmosphere during that period.

From this point, it is beneficial to turn from the big historical picture to focus on the micro-history of Librairie Avant-Garde and its biographical narration. I refer to this type of bookstore as an “intellectual” bookstore rather than “academic,” so as to highlight the human agency behind these bookstores. This term also follows the bookstore’s own proclamation.<sup>28</sup> Through Librairie Avant-Garde’s biographical narrative we can see that the 1980s high culture trend, deemed defeated after the tragic turmoil of 1989, had actually just come alive as a gradually stabilized cultural legacy by means of the social activities (for example, running a bookstore) of the intellectuals who once gave it the loudest voice. A cultural legacy’s social influence is rightfully often considered as being latent or in dormancy, in that it becomes a ghostly ideal in the public memory and, as a perception in people’s minds, hard to extinguish but also

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27 Liu 2018, p. 138.

28 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 52.

hard to fathom. Yet a tangible cultural site such as a bookstore provides room for this legacy to manifest itself, enabling us to trace its shadow in the bookstore's identity narrative.

An objective, rhetoric-free summary of Librairie Avant-Garde's history is as follows. The bookstore came into being in 1996 in Nanjing, founded and run by Qian Xiaohua, a country-born intellectual who graduated from Nanjing University's “writer's class” (*zuojiabān* 作家班). Starting with a tiny store containing only 10 bookshelves, the bookstore has expanded into a chain brand and gained a remarkable reputation since. As of June 2020, it has one main store and 15 branch stores, most of which (including the main store) are situated in Nanjing. The history of its development is not without hardship, which reflects the predicaments of China's book retail business and the changing society.

Several turning points mark the bookstore's trajectory.<sup>29</sup> In its obscure early years (the 1990s) it survived the severe financial loss when a drunken driver hit the bookstore with his van. After several changes of location, however, its prospects looked up when it moved adjacent to Nanjing University and expanded its scale in 2001. Two or three years later, it faced another crisis: a business misjudgment on the location for an ambitious new sub-store, and a stark season for China's physical bookselling (due to the emerging digital reading habit). The bookstore's strategy in the 2000s was to choose Nanjing's famous tourist sites to expand new sub-stores, and to start selling small creatively-designed goods (*wenchuang chanpin* 文创产品).<sup>30</sup> After several years of smooth development, the 2010s saw a price war launched by online booksellers, which again put bookstores in danger, and many did not survive. This time, Librairie Avant-Garde upgraded its spatial design for customers, like other bookstores, and incorporated coffee / recreational areas into its stores. In the mid-2010s Librairie Avant-Garde began to be praised by Western media,<sup>31</sup> which boosted its reputation immensely. It has also been actively experimenting with “rural bookstores” (*xiangcun shudian* 乡村书店), which look to be very promising, according to my interviewee. In the last few years, there has been a mixture of opportunities and challenges. The state's tightened control over book publishing largely increases the

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29 Summarized from my interview.

30 These goods are mostly small decorative commodities or items containing innovative designs, including souvenirs, notebooks, keychains, cotton bags, etc.

31 Most notably Wong 2015, as well as media in the UK, France, and Germany.

price of books; however, the state has also introduced favorable policies to protect the development of bookstores.<sup>32</sup>

The above summary presents a picture that is largely determined by economic and political trends. However, when we turn to the narratives that spin tightly around the bookstore, another image emerges. The bookstore appears to possess cultural autonomy that often runs against the odds of social-economic trends, and it is presented as possessing a unified cultural self-consciousness mirroring that of its proprietor, Qian. The bookstore's quasi-biography, *Born in 1996*, begins its narration with a 40-page interview with Qian, which reads like a sentimental autobiography.<sup>33</sup> Following this interview are four pieces of Qian's memoir. The secret behind the bookstore, these first five articles indicate, is that it was born out of despair and has been growing in despair, a despair rooted in Qian's tragic life experience and his tortured soul in a deteriorating society. A family tragedy, aborted young love, a good factory leader who sent Qian to study at Nanjing University (1989–1991) and was driven away from his old position (vaguely recounted here), Qian's failure to fit into an unspecified state-run institute, and his failed tea business. Then, the vision of running his own bookstore emerged, stemming from the memory of waiting in a long line to buy books from the New China Bookstore in his youth in 1989.<sup>34</sup>

The prehistory of the bookstore is presented in a very sophisticated manner, both obscure and telling. It is obscure in that the accounts of Qian's life experiences are often evasive and disjointed, whilst telling in that such evasion is combined with meaningful reference to the specific years around the turn of the 1990s, in the invocations of the 1980s discourse on new enlightenment, and in the painful socio-historical accusations of intellectuals. Moreover, from its prehistory, the bookstore's biography is intertwined exclusively with Qian's visions and his struggles. It is his personal bookstore, representing his voice and his cultural identity as a pure-spirit intellectual who has been reduced to despair since his formative age. The bookstore's development is outlined by marking the many blows it endured, the contemptible

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32 According to my interviewee, the state has implemented a tax-free policy for bookstores in recent years.

33 Note that this interview was largely controlled by Qian, with very short questions and very long answers. According to the interviewer's endnote, Qian also added thousands of words to the draft and replaced most of the original subtitles with more poetic ones in later-stage revisions. See Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 80.

34 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 53. The "lining up to buy books" scene was nothing new in 1989. Qian specified that year from his memory without explanation. The reason is left for us to guess.

nature of which pained Qian greatly, but he finally pulled through with spiritual strength. The bright turning points of the bookstore, on the other hand, are mentioned with a very light touch that tends not to draw the reader's attention.

The remaining articles are mostly other people's memories of Qian and his bookstore. Carefully selected, these articles enhance the unified aura of the bookstore narrated throughout the book: humble but awe-inspiring, tragic heroism walking hand in hand with redemptive spiritual peace, with Qian's figure looming large. I got a similar impression of the bookstore's general enterprise atmosphere as I did the interview and when I tried (and failed) to talk to more persons working for the bookstore. The running of the bookstore has a strong unified personal will behind it, dictating which employees can accept interviews, and very likely what patterns of introduction they should follow. Such a sense of discipline does not emerge from some dehumanized company rules but is highly personified and personal.

It is of little point arguing about whether these strictly organized narratives are truthful or not. Nor is it helpful to dismiss them as rhetorical tricks decorating the bookstore's socio-economical facts. Rather, the bookstore's life story consists of a personified cultural identity, and it helps to capture people's impressions of the just-passed 1980s cultural atmosphere in a unified narrative style and aura, enabling us to observe and define it. With regard to this identity, it is clear that the bookstore is intended to represent that of the 1980s young intellectuals who have become disillusioned, embodied by Qian's personal struggles. The control of narratives also accidentally reveals many traits of the social discourse of the Chinese intellectuals at the time: passionate, defiantly heroic, fond of grand narratives, elitist, and often domineering. With regard to the narrative style, the cultural experience we take from here is that of high modernism, which is, as concluded by Fredric Jameson, characterized by a feeling of alienation and existential anxiety, a disconnection between one's deep subjective world and the crumbling authority of outward structures.<sup>35</sup> To borrow Qian's words, the bookstore's narratives render it “symbolic of a declining era” (一个失落时代的象征)<sup>36</sup>, an era marked by passionate pursuit of spiritual liberation, the meaning of individual life, and the entire society's well-being.

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35 See Jameson 1997, pp. 294–297.

36 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 184.

### *From Culture to Culturalization: The Ambiguous Avant-Garde*

A hyper-symbolic state of existence, or a mere symbolic manner of exerting influence, is not enough to sustain a cultural legacy's liveliness, however rich and creative its process of symbolification is. No longer a spiritual source that is imbibed by many Chinese as a way of life since the 1980s, post-Mao China's high culture as it is recorded latently in the Librairie Avant-Garde's narratives and manifested in the bookstore's identity establishment becomes worrisome. The managers of the bookstore (led undisputedly by Qian) clearly sense that the high culture they try to evoke, which was led and vividly experienced by the 1980s intellectuals, has gradually become obsolete over the years. Qian, for example, bitterly decried the loss of spiritual autonomy more than once in *Born in 1996*, claiming that he loved China's book business in the mid-1990s, but came to detest it a decade later.<sup>37</sup> He also claimed that his vocation in the book business was to re-establish its "enlightenment spirit" (*qimeng jingshen* 启蒙精神) and to sustain his "dream of culture savior" (*wenhua jiushi mengxiang* 文化救世梦想)<sup>38</sup>, and he almost as often noted disillusionment despite the bookstore's success, not knowing what exactly his bookstore persevered for when the entire situation of the business and of the society had changed so much.

The smell of desperation is also revealed in the bookstore's ever-harder effort to intensify the affective force of symbolization. Sometimes such an effort reaches the level that the bookstore's cultural image turns from a humanized and personified one to something larger than human, to a site of martyrdom and consecration. The bookstore is imagined as a mausoleum, a tomb-like home for people who are alienated in a spiritless society.<sup>39</sup> The invocation of religion (Christianity) in the narratives marks a climactic stroke in the intensification of symbolic effect. These death-related, mournful, "larger than life" messages ironically reconfirm the lifelessness of the high culture the bookstore tries to preserve.

It is not, again, that high culture is disappearing in China's cultural field or in people's perceptions. On the contrary, Librairie Avant-Garde thrives in its cultural reputation, proving that the proliferation of the high culture's signs and symbols, as well as the better understanding of its nature and contents, renders the high culture

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37 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 93.

38 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 115.

39 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 118.

more familiar to Chinese people today than it did 30 years ago, when it was just reintroduced after the Cultural Revolution. The point is that it is contaminated and distorted in a continuing process of dissemination: its cultural function now goes against the grain of its original spirit as it is shuffling with the consumerist mass culture that it is supposed to be critiquing by adopting a separate (higher) cultural position. The predicament of the intellectual bookstores is reflected here as well: they cannot ward off the tide of consumerist culture, which makes the high culture they represent look dishonest and tainted. The intellectual bookstore owners were once referred to as “the carefree” due to their relatively nonchalant attitude to the market, but now they must be quick to join the trend of commercialization, and to cater to the consumerist lifestyle. It is recounted, for instance, that selling cultural goods went against Qian’s own wish and infuriated some of the bookstore’s old visitors, but it was deemed a necessary compromise.<sup>40</sup>

More unnerving than the unwelcome compromises, however, are other moves the bookstore made that were designed to maintain a distance from consumerist culture, yet resulted in the opposite effect. The introduction of religious symbols to the bookstore is a typical example. This move was intended as a solemn, non- or anti-commercial gesture in remembrance of the bookstore’s initial vision of the cultural savior, as the bookstore claims, and because Qian himself is a Christian. However, in effect the Christian element has become a novel selling point attracting visitors as self-image hunters in the age of social media. The two huge crosses in the main store have become popular spots for taking pictures: the erect one is suited to unconventional wedding pictures, and the supine one is straddled daily by people taking selfies, whilst the employees halfheartedly remind them not to do so, knowing this is in vain.

Such “blasphemy” seems to be no more than the bookstore deserves, ironically, as it was one of the earliest to allow visitors to take pictures inside—at first a gesture of warmth and humanization.<sup>41</sup> With other bookstores copying this move in the time of new media self-exhibition, Librairie Avant-Garde inadvertently became a forerunner in further commercializing China’s bookstores, whether intended or not. Its experiment in “rural bookstores,” also being copied, is likely to develop into another such example. Claiming to return to the spiritual tranquility of the countryside and to “revitalize the countryside with culture” (文化振兴乡村)<sup>42</sup>, what the bookstore is

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40 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 198.

41 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 210. This was drawn from a bookstore visitor’s memory.

42 From my interview contents.

likely to contribute to is China's further urbanization, taking the consumerist lifestyle to more villages. However, this time, its attitude to state-endorsed consumerist culture is more ambiguous—or even cooperative—than resistant.

So, even the non- or anti-commercial moves that the intellectual bookstores made, originally to preserve the status of high culture, have ended up being assimilated by the consumerist culture. To make sense of this, it is necessary to distinguish two opposing natures that our understandings of culture in contemporary society reveal. The first is what human societies have traditionally perceived, and the core take-away here is that culture is independent from the inhuman logic of economy. The various cultural contents provide concrete “values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live.”<sup>43</sup> This is also in line with Kopytoff’s view that culture is the “counter-drive to the potential onrush of commoditization,” and that excessive commoditization is anti-cultural, because it homogenizes value.<sup>44</sup> The other nature of “culture” appears in the “consumer culture.” As Baudrillard argues, “culture” becomes a very misleading term in a consumer society;<sup>45</sup> it has lost its autonomy, and its nature is now a *function* within the system of consumption. Put another way, in a society dominated by consumerism, “culture” in effect becomes “culturalization.” It no longer denotes any living culture with independent contents or form. Rather, under “a raiding of all cultural forms”<sup>46</sup> by the consumer culture (i.e., “culturalization”), all former cultures are de-contextualized and leveled out in service of the structural logic of differentiation in the world of consumption.

It is the second nature of “culturalization” that determines the dilemma of China’s high culture. On the one hand, culture is “the very element of consumer society itself; no society has ever been saturated with signs and images like this one.”<sup>47</sup> High culture is thus constantly invoked, explored, and learned by cultural practitioners as well as consumers, together with the leisure mass culture. On the other hand, as all cultural forms are losing their independent social influence in a consumer society (China’s urban society has been heading that way with dazzling speed), the high culture is reduced to something like a cultural indicator of class in Bourdieu’s sense. “High” here no longer implies a critical transcendence over commercialization, but rather a positional difference, a social signifier within the entire sign system of consumerism.

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43 Eagleton 2016, p. 1.

44 Kopytoff 1986, p. 73.

45 Baudrillard 1998, p. 104.

46 Featherstone 2007, p. 64.

47 Jameson 1979, p. 131.

This is also the hidden reason why intellectual bookstores have become inadvertent forerunners for fancy commercial bookstores. As long as culture is a card to play, it does not really matter what anti-commercial contents or forms it contains.

The confused situation of China’s high culture today also points to a new reflection on the different nature of knowledge. The key problem with China’s bookstores today is not that the “actual knowledge” is replaced with a proliferation of empty symbols of knowledge—knowledge of culture is to a large degree about symbolic practices anyway. Rather, the on-going accumulation of knowledge on high culture has turned from a “lived knowledge” in the 1980s to a “static knowledge” since the 1990s, both content-wise and in its symbolic practices. The cultural knowledge of “avant-garde” can serve as a telling example of the mutating nature of knowledge on high culture in China since the 1990s. Originally a particular school in Western high modernism, “avant-garde” is a flexible and complex cultural concept in contemporary China that the Librairie Avant-Garde deliberately aligns itself with. In its attempts to define and represent the essence of “avant-garde” over the years, the bookstore has showcased that an increase of cultural sophistication does not necessarily lead to the energizing of cultural influence if the nature of cultural knowledge is changed.

Within the conceptual realm of post-Mao China’s high culture, “avant-garde” is a very peculiar concept. In Western languages and Chinese respectively, “avant-garde” and *xianfeng* 先锋 share compatible denotations and connotations. Both are originally military terms referring to a group of soldiers who scout ahead of the main force in a battle, and both are used in other extended realms of human society, referring to people who are at the front of a new and often radical trend or movement. Readily inter-translatable, *avant-garde* / *xianfeng* found its way into contemporary China’s artistic field very early on, and it was later ardently embraced.

Academic discussions of the Chinese avant-garde have dated back to Republican China’s New Literature (*xin wenzue* 新文学).<sup>48</sup> According to Van Crevel’s study of contemporary Chinese poetry, “avant-garde” has appeared in the CCP’s literary field since as early as the late 1960s.<sup>49</sup> The crucial moment of the avant-garde, however,

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48 See Chen 2007. Michel Hockx also argues that in Republican China’s literary field, the avant-garde is already “a fairly stable position … that has been ‘taken’ in many different ways by many different groups.” Hockx 1999, p. 12.

49 This was adopted by some precursor post-Mao poets as a label for their works. Stylistically, these poems cannot be called avant-garde in either the Western or 1980s China’s aesthetic sense, but they do defy political authority and speak with the voice of something like an

is from the latter half of the 1980s to the first few years of the 1990s, when it became the name of a particular school of fiction with distinguishable aesthetic traits, known as the *Xianfengpai* 先锋派 (Avant-Garde School). Shortly after the term gained popularity, thanks to the success of this school of fiction, “avant-garde” developed into an enormously influential yet rather vague concept that seeped into the entire literary field as the umbrella term *xianfeng wenxue* 先锋文学 (avant-garde literature), and then into society’s everyday life. It has been recognized as a buzzword for the late 1980s.<sup>50</sup> According to written memory, at that period of time in China, “there was ‘avant-garde’ everywhere.”<sup>51</sup> From the mid-1990s, the avant-garde was commonly deemed to be out of fashion in the Chinese literary field and society. However, the many on-going discussions about it, along with the constant references to it—be they in a context of nostalgia, doom-fortune-telling, “post-avant-gardian” arguments, or mourning—render a claim about “the death of the avant-garde” highly questionable.<sup>52</sup>

It was against the above background that Librairie Avant-Garde came into being. At first the bookstore was named without much cultural reflection: Qian had studied literary writing, he liked poetry best, and in critical discourse he had always “worshiped the avant-gardian books from Western literature and art”;<sup>53</sup> as a final touch, Qian happened to come by a literary magazine called *Jinri xianfeng* 今日先锋 (Avant-Garde Today), thus the name. “Avant-garde” in the bookstore’s early years appeared to be a natural reflection on the lived cultural fashion at the time—and note that it did not possess its Western name in the 1990s, just *xianfeng*. As the social fever for *xianfeng* subsided and the bookstore endeavored to establish its brand image on the market, it started to explore the cultural depth of *xianfeng*. It began to allude to spiritual elitism, wearing an attitude of defiance and nonconformity that was becoming quaint in the growing process of commercialization. In the 2000s, it settled on the French term as its Western name. Later in its narration, the bookstore invited a professor of philosophy from Nanjing University, Hu Daping 胡大平, to make it explicit that “avant-garde is a stance,” (先锋即是一种立场) and that this bookstore was a

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individual self. Then, from the late 1970s on, “most if not all successful contemporary poets subscribe to a designation of their work as avant-garde.” Van Crevel 2008, p. 6.

50 Zhang 1997, p. 6.

51 Written memory from *Xin zhoushan* 2014, p. 32.

52 For example, when Su Tong’s 苏童 novel *Hean* 河岸 (River Bank) came out in 2009, it was still widely appraised as “the last avant-garde literature” (最后的先锋文学). See Wang Gan 2013.

53 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 293.

promoter of “an alternative and heterogeneous way of thinking” (一种异质性的思维方式) in the homogenous modern society.<sup>54</sup> By now, the sophisticated cultural self-reflection had begun, whilst the “avant-garde” as a genuine way of life lived by people was fading.

The tendency continued. The bookstore showed firmer knowledge of what avant-garde meant and what it specifically related to in its Western origins. It was also more adept at advertising this with sophisticated allusions and symbols, most notably from existentialist philosophy and theology. Although there is no evidence that the bookstore managers today really thoroughly understand the difficult Western thoughts, they are definitely more familiar with them and more confident in toying with them. The resulting effect of a tension between the edgy connotations of “avant-garde” and the tranquil inner world secured by religion is impressive, suitably expressing the splitting-up of high modernism. However, this all took place under the realm of the leisure consumer culture, characterized by a parodic and depthless postmodernism. With the eventual fading away of the “ardent, intensive atmosphere of seeking knowledge” (热切的求知氛围)<sup>55</sup>, the static shell of knowledge tends to become a decorative part of the consumerist lifestyle rather than a lived way of life. Hence the ambiguous status of “avant-garde”: it can only be true to its defiant nature when it holds a separate stance or guides a subversive way of life, but now it looks more like a label of cultural taste subject to individual preferences.

### *Conclusion*

From an edgy defiant way of life to one of tamed cultural tastes in the self-indulgent consumerist lifestyle; from a lived (if somewhat shallow) cultural knowledge to its remnant of a set of well-defined yet static knowledge; and from high modernism’s critical cultural stance to a decentralized anti-elitist postmodernism, the concept of “avant-garde,” represented by the intellectual bookstore this essay focuses on, has become increasingly ambiguous in nature. Such is post-Mao China’s high culture legacy in recent years, in a broader picture.

Rather than ending this essay with a conclusion about either a total triumph of the consumerist culture (culturalization) over all other cultural forms, or that the highbrow culture and the avant-garde still energetically exist, only significantly changed, this

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54 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 296.

55 Qian Xiaohua 1996, p. 269

essay would like to remain in a state of ambiguity, and to end by pointing at the so far under-addressed, highly innovative element of human agency. It is after all the human participants in the concrete space that generate cultural effects, which effects hence always stand a chance to flee the controls of the prefabricated spatial designs and the consumerist sign-system. Based on my field trip in the summer of 2019, various characters showed up in the bookstore, and they were very active and creative. Human agency could overthrow the remaining gestures of superiority of the high cultural legacy, as in the case where visitors play with the religious decor. It could also subvert consumerism's sign-system by finding space for readers seeking in-depth cultural knowledge. Concrete places and human activities matter a lot in the cultural field. It is only to be hoped that their acting space is not further devastated in the aftermath of Covid-19.

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