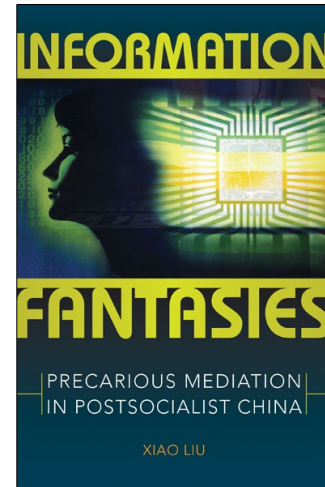


Xiao Liu, **Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China**, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 376 pp., \$28.00 (paperback).

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Xiao Liu's book, **Information Fantasies: Precarious Mediation in Postsocialist China**, excavates a genealogy of digital media in China from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, a time when China started to drastically integrate itself into the global market and information systems. The book centers around the notion of what Liu terms "information fantasies," the aspirations and anxieties along with scientific and technological advancements, as well as its manifestations in social, cultural, and artistic practices. Drawing on the concept of "mediation" in media studies (Galloway, Thacker, & Wark, 2013), Liu considers the social and cultural specificities of 1980's China and argues that "mediation is always precarious" (p. 22). She carves out the contradictions and contestations in mediating practices, especially how they relate to human subjectivities. By looking at information technologies (e.g., electronic computing, cybernetics, and AI) and its discontents in literature and the arts, Liu's interdisciplinary work combines literary studies, science and technology studies, critical media studies, and cinema studies with postsocialist studies in examining how sociocultural and political phenomena were intertwined with scientific and technological changes.



The center of Liu's exploration is the political and sociocultural implications of the "cybernetic body" (p. 35). In five chapters of the book, she examines multiple manifestations of how Chinese society attempted to incorporate the human body into ceaseless informational flows. Chapter 1, "Extrasensory Powers, Magic Waves, and Information Explosion," begins with the interesting case of *qigong*, a traditional self-care practice in China that combines breathing techniques with mediation in order to achieve the inner balance of the human body. Revived in China from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, *qigong*, along with scientific and social research on extrasensory power and "magic waves" that purportedly allow the human body to exchange information with the surrounding environment in a short amount of time, were believed to reveal the secret informational mechanisms of the human body by renowned scientists such as Qian Xuesen. Liu considers this fascination with *qigong* and magic waves in relation to the social desire for information, an anxiety of synching up with global information capitalism (p. 44). The expansion of television and the use of wireless broadcasts in the 1980s also illustrated such desire since the two mediums both functioned as versatile information retrieval and transmission platforms that illustrated the cybernetic vision of human-machine interactions. Nonetheless, through a close reading of the science fiction story *A Lost Dream*, Liu offers a counter-narrative of the cybernetic fantasy. In the story, the author emphasized the corporeal specificities of the human body, which, according to Liu, exhibited a kind of resistance to the abstract information body as scientists imagined.

In chapter 2, "The Curious Case of a Robot Doctor," Liu reflects on the politics of the cybernetic body by looking at labor issues of early AI-driven expert systems in late 1980s China. The author first traces the development of expert systems in China, arguing that the research on expert systems in the late 1970s and 1980s was driven by the anxiety about the loss of traditional values and knowledge, as in the case of medical consultation systems that aimed at preserving, commercializing, and modernizing traditional Chinese medical practices. Meanwhile, the development of expert systems also reflects the dream of building infallible computerized knowledge systems that could go beyond human limits and function as sites of labor exploitation. With the reorganization of highly specialized and professionalized knowledge in machine methods, Liu argues that expert systems in 1980s China illustrates a bigger social phenomenon: the rise of a depoliticized professionalism and the neutralization of knowledge in post-Mao China. What followed the rise of professionalization was the politics of life itself, especially how human labor was transformed and redefined by new information environments. To address this point, Liu pulls out a science fiction story featuring a female doctor whose identity shifted between a rational medical professional in her work and an affective, caring mother in her personal life. The "affective labor" of the female doctor, Liu suggests, was exploited to provide an interfacing and mediation effect to an increasingly atomized and fragmented society due to the specialization and division of labor (p. 103).

Chapters 3–5 examine how cultural practices such as cinematic arts, advertising, and experimental writings reflect on the relationship between the body and information environments. Chapter 3, "The 'Ultrastable System' and the New Cinema," discusses how, with the rise of scientific rationalism and modernity, Chinese intellectuals in the 1980s developed the notion of the "ultrastable system" to describe Chinese society, and how their intellectual discussions moved into the realm of the arts. In new-wave cinema, directors and cinematographers employ new cinematic languages and theories to reflect on the relationship between human beings and their living environments. The iconic film *Yellow River*, for instance, uses long shots of immobile images to represent landscapes. Liu argues that the cinematography creates a "timeless, ultrastable system" (p. 135) within the frame and questions the role of the observer, who becomes indistinguishable from the system itself. Similarly, the self-reflexive aesthetic and recursive strange loops within the film *Black Cannon Incident* invoke questions of human agency within overarching systems.

Chapter 4, "Affective Form," considers the information body in relation to the rise of the market economy. When advertising studies emerged in China in the 1980s, it functioned as a form of information management that affectively produced cybernetic loops between producers and consumers. Experimental writings emerged from this new media ecosystem permeated by advertising. Through experimental works, writers such as Wang Meng unfolded the contradictory forces of postsocialist cultural politics caught between commercialization and the pressure of marketization.

Chapter 5, "Liminal Mediation and the Cinema Redefined," centers around how cinema gains flexibility and plasticity at the threshold of drastic social change. The "liminality" of new cinema, Liu argues, refers to the uncertainties and contradictions in the production and functions of cinema. This kind of "liminality" also points to how the human body was redefined by images and simulacra produced by media technologies, as well as the crisis and ethical issues of representations. The chapter ends with an in-depth analysis of a horror movie released in the late 1980s that reflected on the ethics of mediation.

Current scholarships on the sociocultural and political dimensions of digital media in China often emphasize its effect on contemporary society (Yang, 2009). This book joins scholars in the field of media archaeology to understand the newness of emerging media through an examination of the past (Parikka, 2012). It traces the historical origin of Chinese digital media in the post-Mao sociopolitical environment through an excellent juxtaposition of unique primary sources, including literary works (e.g., science fiction, experimental writings), cinematic arts, journal articles, film critics, photographs, and paintings. Meanwhile, by seriously examining the materiality of aesthetic and cultural texts and taking them as "legible social forms," the book effectively investigates how technocultural imaginations interact with the technical discourse.

Moreover, by combining historical and social specificities of 1970s and 1980s China with theories in media studies, cybernetics, digital humanities, and postsocialist studies, the book helps us to rethink some of the concepts commonly seen in media and information studies today. For instance, the case of qigong illustrates that the notion of the "digital" reaches far before the advent of computerized media (Manovich, 2002). The case of expert systems in chapter 2 helps us to rethink the role of the interface as the symptom of a fragmented postsocialist society. In this way, the book develops its own critique of contemporary information technologies.

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