This thing we call reality is unsystematic, like seven or eight phonographs playing all at once in a chaos of sound, each singing its own song. 
（現實這個東西是沒有系統的，像七八個話匣子同時開唱，各唱各的，打成一片混沌。）
——Eileen Chang, *Written on Water* (流言 Liuyan) (1945)

At times America may appear abroad to be speaking with too many voices to be intelligible. —John W. Henderson, *The United States Information Agency* (1969)

In late 1952, celebrated Chinese author Eileen Chang (張愛玲) applied to work at the United States Information Agency (USIA) in Hong Kong. Her past three years had been difficult professionally. Although in the 1940s she had established a reputation as a premier writer in Shanghai, the military victory by the Chinese Communists in 1949 imperiled her career. Chang’s modernist style and emphasis on middle-class stories clashed with an increasingly state-sanctioned leftist proletarian aesthetics. Uncertain of her future on the mainland, Chang moved to Hong Kong to enroll as a college student. Her presence in the city—a China “listening post” for British and American intelligence officers (Mark 2004, 33)—caught the attention of Richard McCarthy, the director of USIA cultural operations in Hong Kong. McCarthy, well informed about modern Chinese literature, had followed Chang’s career since its very beginning and admired her writing. He could hardly miss the chance to recruit this “literary genius” to the cause of US information deployment in East Asia (Gao 2002). McCarthy tracked her down at her dormitory in late 1951 and persuaded her to apply for a translation position. Her application was accepted and Chang got to work that spring.
Chang’s three-year stint (1952–1955) working for the USIA signaled a sharp break in her writing career, and this break has long puzzled scholars of her work. Her writing before and after Hong Kong reveals a curious dichotomy: in the 1940s in Shanghai, Chang wrote exclusively in Chinese, focused on short stories, and made use of a distinct modernist style. After 1952, she switched to composing in English, began writing in a thick realist style, and published a string of novels. Chang would immigrate to the United States in 1955 and initiate a relatively successful career as an American novelist. She appears to have abandoned her career in Shanghai, devoting her energies to drafting popular anticommunist tales for American audiences. Scholars have thus isolated her pre- and post-1952 writings, finding the space between unbridgeable. While China studies scholars tend to focus exclusively on her earlier, Chinese-language writings, Americanists have largely focused on her English-language, American novels. For both scholars and readers, the individual known as “Eileen Chang” has always been two: a writer with two names, two lives, two histories, and two authorial careers.

Solving the puzzle of Chang’s sudden conversion into an American author would lend needed insight into a writer widely regarded as one of the best Chinese modernists of the twentieth century. This puzzle offers an important account of the growing entanglements among US political strategy, American literary history, and the rise of communication studies in the early Cold War era. Missing from Chang scholarship is a view of her integration into a newly formed international media system, one essential to US Cold War operations in the 1950s. It is this context more than any other that illuminates the nature of her transformation into an American realist author. At the same time, Chang’s time at the USIA—she worked as both translator and author—also sheds light on the process by which information and literature became increasingly intertwined during this period, literature viewed as an effective vehicle for the dispensation of information. Finally, Chang’s story is political, in that it makes apparent the history of American imperial ambitions in East Asia and how the US state came to recruit diasporic authors such as Chang to develop new modes of writing crucial to the containment of “Red” China.

This essay develops three related arguments. First, the USIA operation in Hong Kong, and Asia more broadly, represents a critical yet neglected aspect of the formation of “information theory” in America
in the 1950s. Recently, a body of scholarship has emerged focusing on the rise of information theory within the context of cybernetics, research projects organized by the Rockefeller Foundation, and the empirically minded work of Warren Weaver, Nobert Wiener, and others (see Geoghegan 2011, Hayles 1999, Liu 2010, and Gleick 2011). This scholarship is inherently Atlanticist in orientation: it tracks the correspondence between American and European scientists devoted to constructing an anti-Soviet “world-wide fraternity” of sociologists, linguists, mathematicians, and anthropologists (Geoghegan 2011, 108). A different apparatus, animated by a different set of problems represented by China, appeared in the Pacific. The version of information-communication theory that materialized in East Asia focused more on resolving practical issues that materialized for agents on the ground. Information workers in Hong Kong faced an immediate and highly effective enemy in China. This adversary was perceived to be more inscrutable than Russia, and within East Asia it appeared to be winning the information game against America. Agents were forced to rethink the theories passed down to them from on high, and over time a revised version of information theory emerged in the Pacific as a result of local conditions.

Second, a key aspect of this process was the USIA’s emphasis on exploring the literary dimensions of information itself. This aspect differentiated it keenly from counterpart Atlanticist projects at the Rockefeller Foundation and elsewhere. While the latter, led by scientific breakthroughs by Claude Shannon and Wiener, sought to excise the idea of content or semantics from theories of information, communications scholars associated with information work in the Pacific, such as Wilbur Schramm, assumed a more flexible view of information that retained traces of affect and meaning. Schramm—widely seen as the father of communication studies in America—is a central figure for this essay. Unlike colleagues such as Shannon and Paul Lazarsfeld, Schramm initially trained as a humanist, earning a PhD in English and serving as an English professor for several years at the University of Iowa, and he appeared committed to integrating empiricist and humanist conceptions of information (see Glander 2000). It is entirely unsurprising then that McCarthy, a friend and colleague of Schramm’s, turned to hiring novelists like Chang to reenergize a faltering US information project in East Asia. Information workers and theorists believed that Chang, who possessed both
vast literary talents and an ethnographic knowledge of China, could supplement the USIA’s empirical work. Ultimately, a new conception of literature and information emerged from this encounter.

Finally, a focus on the particular issues of media and information in the USIA’s struggle for ideological control in the Pacific also usefully inflects our understanding of how the Cold War was conducted in this region in the 1950s. Since the early twentieth century, China had been an alluring object to the US state. Its vast territories represented “700 million potential customers” for American corporations to exploit (Kim 2010, 149). With the military victory of the Communists in 1949 and the “loss of China,” however, the nation transformed from a potential economic partner into a political menace. State Department leaders argued that China signaled a greater threat than Russia because it controlled a larger population and held greater political prestige in the region. By the mid-1950s, the United States feared that China would incite further East Asian national liberation movements, convert “Free Asian” nations to communism, and tip the balance of power against the United States in the region. The State Department responded to this threat by developing a sophisticated communications apparatus to counter the spread of Chinese “Red” propaganda. Specifically, given the difficulty of gathering information in China versus in Latin America or Russia—there was no democratic “underground”—they generated unusually flexible theories of communication that focused on literature and the hiring of cultural intermediaries such as Chang (see Cull 2008). Chang’s story reveals new dimensions to the history of Cold War ideological competition in the Pacific by drawing attention to the process by which literature became “weaponized” for the purpose of challenging, and neutralizing, Chinese propaganda in the 1950s.

I refer to this process as a form of “literary information warfare.” The idea of information warfare as a function of technology and media is a relatively new concept, one that has assumed a more specific cast in recent years. The US State Department first coined the term and integrated it into its military strategy in 1993, and before that, had deployed a proto-version in its psychological warfare tactics of the 1950s (Stein 1998, 52; see also Rubin 2001). This essay traces a literary genealogy of information warfare as it emerges in the early Cold War period. I argue that present at its creation was an investment in, as well as hard rethinking of, literature’s purpose in an age of new communications technologies. Scholars have shown that the development of
theories of information was inseparable from the history of literature; here, I suggest that literature also played a central role in imagining information in its weaponized state (see Goble 2010; Menke 2008; and Wollaeger 2006). And it is precisely within the Pacific, in the Cold War rivalry between the United States and Communist China, that this process first took place, a war of information that has only become more relevant and pressing today.

**Aesthetic Information in Hong Kong**

When Chang came to work for the USIA in Hong Kong in 1951, the agency had only just recently come into existence and represented a significant evolution over its predecessors. Its earliest roots could be found in the US Creel Committee on Public Information (CPI). During World War I, the committee was created to generate public enthusiasm for the war effort, but it was later disbanded due to a growing discomfort with the idea of propaganda—a concept that signaled manipulation and control (see Sproule 1997, 12–37). Nonetheless, a version of the committee was resurrected during World War II in the form of the Office of War Information (OWI). Compared to the CPI, the OWI, which relied more on a factual approach to propaganda, was far better received by the public. In response to German propaganda techniques in Europe, the US government assembled a team of communications experts, such as Lazarsfeld and Carl Hovland, to conduct research in psychological warfare and invent new models of mass persuasion (Sproule 1997, 188–94).

The end of World War II and the start of the Cold War, of course, marked a major shift in communications strategy for the US state. The political terrain looked different: the nation no longer had an explicit military enemy, but rather a more conceptual foe in the form of Russian Communism. Moreover, the government seemed newly cognizant of the “explosion” of new media technologies that had occurred in the past decade, which included radio, the telegraph, and cinema. These two developments combined to spur the creation of a United States Information Service (or USIS) devoted to the global control of information through new media forms and devices. That is, the world now appeared promiscuously awash with words in an unregulated and borderless media field. In order to win the war against Communism, the US state needed to gain control of this field—to manipulate the meaning of such
words and direct their movement to the cause and consolidation of democracy. In 1948, the Smith-Mundt Act was signed by Harry Truman, bringing into existence the United States Information Service and its subsidiary elements (see Tobia 2008, 17–49).

Truman took at best a passing interest in the USIA; it was Dwight Eisenhower, newly elected to the president’s office in 1952, who elevated the agency to a central role in US Cold War political strategy, endowed it with increased funds, and expanded its staff worldwide. Most important, he also assumed a more intellectual posture in thinking through the agency’s function. In 1953, he wrote: “The purpose of [the USIA] is to depict imaginatively the correlation between U.S. policies and the legitimate aspirations of other peoples in the world” (Cull 2008, 101). Eisenhower pressed for the development of advanced research in the information field, recruiting back to the fold a number of scholars who had first cut their teeth at the OWI. Key figures that reemerged were Lazarsfeld, Edward Bernays, and Harold Laswell. Differences in both disposition and method set them apart, yet a commitment to empirical study focused on explicating the effects of mass communication bound them together. That is, most of this group favored a version of communications research that was social scientific in nature, often making use of sociological or psychological models. The concept of information was critical to this work. Specifically, scholars such as Lazarsfeld replaced propaganda with information in order to draw attention to its scientific rather than purely ideological significance for communications research (102). The most obvious reason for this shift in terminology was that propaganda had taken on a negative connotation during the First World War, and the newly formed USIA wanted to stand apart from this legacy. Yet it also signaled the rise of “the fact” as communication’s most trusted ally in the coming “war of words” between democracy and Communism (Osgood 2008, 1). The US State Department leadership fervently believed that facts proved more effective than “accusations and unsupported assertions” in winning over undecided peoples of foreign cultures (102).

The USIA’s emphasis on facts over propaganda derives heavily from the ideas of Lazarsfeld, the eminent quantitative sociologist and communications expert, who played a significant intellectual role in the development of the USIA, as well as its broadcast unit, the Voice of America. The imprint of his “two-step” theory of the diffusion of ideas is most evident in the USIA’s operations. In this theory, he argues that
new ideas emerge first within the media and are then interpreted and reappropriated by political or social elites who diffuse them to the general public. Lazarsfeld saw this as both a useful and inevitable process given the complexity of the modern world. Against the sudden rise of new political regimes and ideologies, which render the postwar world “a dark and confusing place” (quoted in Glander 2000, 120), information services allow the modern man to orient himself in his surroundings. Information services help this individual by producing a coherent narrative in which the world, in all its complexity, is distilled into manageable bits. Based on extensive research, Lazarsfeld argued that “circumstantial, detailed facts” (120) were most attractive to ordinary men and women, and that facts could serve as models for the explanation of complex phenomena. Importantly, technologies of new media, such as the radio, played a vital role in their capacity to deliver such facts or information in compressed packages of discourse. Ironically, Lazarsfeld called on the forces of technology to counter the disorienting effects of modernity itself.

Lazarsfeld offered a conceptually coherent, top-down approach to information work. Yet almost immediately, workers in the field resisted this approach, finding a number of flaws. In 1953, Leo Bogart and Schramm, both at the University of Illinois, carried out an intensive survey of USIA protocols based on interviews. USIA operators were an unhappy lot, even for a group of public employees. What most upset workers was the feeling that within the agency, despite the research of Lazarsfeld and playbooks like “The Role of the Propaganda Planner” (Davison 1950), which also drew from his work, “all decisions were made ad hoc by operators in the field.” One interviewee went so far as to say that “the agency suffered from a kind of collective schizophrenia” (quoted in Bogart 1969, 13), unable to decide a single course of action. The net result was that the USIA seemed to be “speaking with too many voices to be intelligible” (Henderson 1969, 20).

Interviews suggest that the root of the crisis lay in an inadequate conception of information, and how information should be used and understood. Agency workers, particularly the most disgruntled, felt that their work consisted of the mindless collection of data, one not guided by a broader vision. Many failed to grasp the methods of their gathering, the meaning of what they found, or what the effects of their labor would be. Further, they found the statistical distillation of information into facts unproductive and simplistic. The most important
findings could not be broken down into numbers. Overall, USIA agents report a basic remoteness from the final product, often feeling like cogs in a vast information machine. The root of this dissatisfaction can be traced back to primers such as “The Role of the Propaganda Planner,” which provide a general set of guidelines for USIA agents. While the text admits that information about the world at large is vast and multifarious, it is the role of the agent to distill this information into “content statements” (Davison 1950, 6), or easy-to-digest simplifications, in order to be further refined as sound bites fit for radio distribution. The text is especially curious in how it strains against its own rules and procedures. It insists that facts articulated in one report must confirm facts in another, so as to produce a self-reinforcing chamber of described reality, one impervious to new information that might contradict itself. The final effect is a potential circularity of reporting—a peril noted by the manual itself (A-72).

Problems of this nature were felt most keenly at offices in East Asia. The absence of a network of informants or prodemocratic underground in China only exacerbated the felt echo chamber of information circularity at the USIA, while at the same time, a flood of Western racist perceptions of Asian culture, such as claims about the “child-like mind of the Oriental” (Bogart 1969, 104), appear within the surveys as a stand-in for the lack of real data about the culture. The majority of USIA field agents in Asia were white males who found it difficult to blend in at important sites, such as the rural countryside, and thus getting reliable information about China was very difficult. These obstructions only intensified the feeling that the USIA was disconnected from reality.

The USIA in Asia needed a new conceptual direction and Schramm, the cosponsor of Borgart’s study, aimed to fill the void. Schramm is widely regarded as the father of communications studies in America. He penned over a dozen canonical texts in the field, including The Process and Effects of Mass Communication (1954), and founded key communications departments at Illinois, Iowa, and Stanford. Many ascribe the success and dynamism of the field to Schramm’s personal charisma, organizational skill, vast quantity of writings, and training of graduate students. However, his earliest training and employment was in literature. In the 1940s, he earned his PhD in English at Iowa, where he immediately took up a position as an assistant professor and, among other things, cofounded the Iowa Writers’ Workshop with Paul Engle.
Most historians interpret Schramm’s rapid ascent within the social sciences as an explicit rejection of his humanist education and an attempt to place himself within a field of scholarship seen as more powerful and influential than literary criticism. Some, such as Ron Rubin (2001, 101), discern Schramm in the 1950s as determined to shed his earlier affiliations with the humanities and to shore up his social scientific credentials.

Much of this is true, yet part of Schramm’s appeal and what distinguished him from colleagues such as Lazarsfeld in the hard social sciences, was precisely his humanist background, which brought a needed subjectivist element to what was quickly becoming a purely numbers-based academic discipline. Schramm was highly ambitious: part of this ambition meant sloughing off his earlier “weak” literary training, but part of it meant seizing on what he did know in order to shape debates in the field. Consider the prologue to his *Mass Communication* (1954) a study produced explicitly as a handbook for the USIA. The volume’s ostensible topic is the general concept of communications and how best to theorize it, yet animating its discussion is the problem of international communication, particularly as it manifested in the 1950s Cold War world. Schramm (1954, foreword) argues that the goal of communications studies is to constitute a “communication chain” between nations, such as America and Korea, that have always lacked strong links. The “special difficulty” to this work is to find a way to “transfer meaning between subjective individual fields” or cultures defined by different norms. In the book’s first essay, he continues this line of thought by exploring how texts can encode messages that perform this work of meaning transfer. He writes that communication occurs through messages and messages must be encoded, and it is “words,” which “go furthest,” that most ideally channel those messages. Schramm offers an image of “overlapping circles” in which each circle represents a culture that is bound to a wider “common space of knowledge.” Some cultures, however, have little overlap and thus require additional mediation to encode a message and transcend their “distance” (6).

The introduction contains obligatory references to the more mathematical work of Shannon, yet Schramm’s thought is fueled by a stream of literary allusions, such as to *The Iliad* and *Gone with the Wind*, that underscore his belief that literature, perhaps more than any other textual object, best performs the work of encoding. He suggests that
semantically dense literary texts ideally facilitate the work of “meaning transfer” across highly disparate cultures and peoples (1954, 4). His residual humanism here comes as a mild surprise. However, when read within the context of an earlier corpus of literary writings, his interest in defining literature as a kind of communicative object becomes more evident. Schramm (1941, 194) contributed an essay, “Imaginative Writing,” to an important collection of literary criticism, Literary Scholarship, edited by Norman Foerster, Schramm’s mentor at Iowa. In this essay, Schramm focuses on defining literature as a medium that not only perceives reality but aggressively “shapes” it, echoing earlier formulations by W. D. Howells and others. He pushes this idea a bit further in describing literature as a “kinetic thing” that operates via “fusion, concentration, and intensity” (194). Here, Schramm conceives of the literary text as an object that “makes reality” through procedures specific to its own form and design. Literature reenergizes reality for a particular social end.

Schramm’s ideas remain underdeveloped and draw heavily from the writings of Kenneth Burke and other earlier US literary critics. Yet they appear newly innovative within the context of his information work for the USIA. If we draw these two texts, Mass Communication and “Imaginative Writing,” separated only by ten short years, back together, there appears a new view of communication studies and the theory of information as coextensive with aesthetic questions. Schramm proposes a theory of, to borrow a phrase from William Paulson (1988, 83), “aesthetic information,” a theory of communication that posits literature’s unique and privileged capacity to render, shape, and transmit information. Paulson reminds us of the multiplicity of codes that naturally exists within a literary text; similarly, Schramm argues that if communication is all about encoding, the best medium to enable this is a text rich with codes. He essentially inverts Lazarsfeld’s theoretical framework: rather than distill reality into compressed facts through texts, Schramm uses literature to reenergize the former.

It is difficult to measure the impact Schramm’s ideas had on the day-to-day operations of the USIA in Hong Kong; adequate documentation does not exist. We can, however, observe the degree to which those ideas penetrated and in part gave shape to a broader 1950s information apparatus in the United States and Asia. He was at the forefront of reviewing and creating new practices for the USIA. He was asked
repeatedly to produce studies for the State Department such as *Four Working Papers on Propaganda Theory*, and these studies directly impacted policy. Further, Schramm took a particular interest in Asia—Taiwan, Korea, and China—in testing out his concepts in an especially rich and challenging environment, one also relatively untouched by his rivals in the field, such as Carl Hovland and others. He conducted on-site research in Korea on the effects of Communist propaganda on soldiers and later served as a member of the East-West Center in Hawaii, exploring mass media in emerging Asian countries. For Schramm, the East was very much a career. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind the importance of literary institutions within this matrix: many of his ideas first incubated while at the University of Iowa, where his work with the Writers’ Workshop helped him clarify his thoughts on writing and communication. Schramm moved on to Illinois in 1955 but retained ties to the Workshop, which under Engle received funds from the US State Department. What I outline here is a united institutional field in which foreign diplomacy, literature, and communications studies converge within Schramm’s writings and career.

Schramm’s synthesis of literature and communications theory seems out of step with the period’s general ideas about information, which emphasized a robust empirical and social-scientific approach. But in many ways he was merely reanimating an earlier 1930s US State Department project that sought to facilitate the dispersal of information through literature. In 1937, the State Department created a “Division of Cultural Cooperation” to broker contact between the United States and strategic wartime regions, such as China, and promote American political values, such as democracy, through the diffusion of literature (see Ninkovich 1981, 28–34). Operatives for this group, such as John K. Fairbank (later, the eminent historian of China based at Harvard), argued that literature, more than any other medium, fulfilled the task of disseminating complex ideas. Further, the division invited a number of important Chinese authors, such as Cao Yu, Lao She, and Helena Kuo, to serve as visiting authors under its auspices.

Although the government would disband the division after the end of World War II, Schramm merely resurrects its essential form within the USIA’s China division in Hong Kong. Several authors, such as Helena Kuo, recruited through the Division of Cultural Cooperation’s wartime project, continued to work for the State Department at the Voice of America, while others, such as Richard Kim and Nieh Hua-Ling,
Schramm brought into the USIA fold through his relationship with the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, which invited a number of East Asian writers in the 1950s (see Wu 2008). It became clear to Schramm that the difficult work of mediating cross-cultural information within the form of literature would best be completed by actual East Asian cultural intermediaries such as Chang. Such novelists, themselves human effects of the Cold War division of “democratic America” and “Red Asia,” could mediate that division by inscribing the various mediations of culture they performed as individuals within the form of the novel. Chang spent her first few months at the USIA producing news reports and translating classic American texts, such as *The Old Man and the Sea*, into Chinese. Richard McCarthy was so thrilled at her ability to fuse information and aesthetics into a pleasing whole that he immediately relayed back news of her success to Schramm at Iowa. Schramm’s response: *get her to work on a novel*.

**Mediated World of Whispers**

It would be inaccurate, however, to view Chang as a malleable instrument for the USIA and its various goals. Chang was no mere tool to McCarthy: she came to the agency as an accomplished author who had built a formidable persona in China and had her own well-formed ideas about writing and communication. In this section, I reconstruct a partial view of her notions about communications. My argument is that Shanghai in the early 1940s provided Chang an ideal context to reflect on and theorize new modes of media and information that she would later bring to the USIA in East Asia.

The quotation that serves as this article’s first epigraph is drawn from *Written on Water* (*Liuyan*), a collection of brief essays on art and life. First published in 1945, the collection made an immediate splash in Shanghai upon publication, becoming a fast and lasting best-seller during a time of war. Today, it is regarded by China studies scholars as a one of the best examples of Chinese modernist prose. What most likely captured audiences then and now is its fine, nuanced descriptions of social life during a time of intense change and social chaos. Some ruptures are evident: the city of Shanghai was semicolonized by a cohort of Western nations in the early twentieth century, while by the 1940s, it fell victim to Japanese military occupation at the height of the Second World War in East Asia. Others are more subtle:
as a treaty port city, Shanghai served as a veritable exchange site for China's encounter with Western culture. Few, if any, other Chinese cities embraced this culture clash, based largely upon commerce and consumerism, with more aplomb than Shanghai in the 1940s. The city was unusually racially and socially diverse (although groups were segregated to their various corners), and flooded with an assortment of sensational Western goods. Moreover, the city, despite occasional bans on the press, was home to a rich publication and writing scene that fueled a lively culture of gossip and hearsay. Chang’s vignettes capture this sense of the city through an arresting field of metaphor, image, and symbol (see Shih 2001 and Lee 1999).

In the very first essay of Written on Water, Chang outlines a theory of writing that articulates the literary text’s capacity to function as a “kinetic thing.” Literature’s special power consists in its ability to contain, as well as harmonize and project, contradictory or contrasting images or ideas. This mediation releases a specific kind of affective energy into the world that, Chang argues, accounts for literature’s unique appeal:

The common, crudely simplified conception of contrast (對照) is red against green, while matching (和諧) is green with green. But what most people do not realize is that the clash (衝突) between two different shades of green is extraordinarily clear, and the more closely the two shades encroach (推扳) upon one another, the more uneasy the viewer will become. The contrast between red and green can be delightfully provocative (可喜的刺激性). (2005, 6–7)

In her next essay, “Writing of One’s Own,” she makes clear the reason for adopting this aesthetic sensibility as her chosen style of writing: “I like writing by way of equivocal contrast (參差的對照) because it is relatively true to life” (17). This aesthetic effect marks the text’s capacity to contain, and then release, a moment of intense and pure “reality.” Reality, or “the real,” exists for Chang as discrete moments of contradictory visions that momentarily harmonize. Within that fugitive moment of fusion, a broader image of reality slides into view, captured in miniature by the text. The reader infers a sense of total reality within such moments of “equivocal contrast.”

Chang anticipates Lazarsfeld and Schramm’s abiding interest in the representation of reality through compressed packages of textual information. Chinese scholars, such as Leo Ou-Fan Lee (1999, 271),
have long identified Chang’s writing as composed of “fragments,” a “world of detail,” rather than a panoptic or coherent view of society. Each text preserves and documents a mere “part” of the world that has splintered off from a presumed, larger “whole.” However, while scholars such as Lee tend to view this emphasis on fragment and fugitive presence as a resistance to grand historical narratives and a turn inwards to the domestic and individual experience, such readings overlook the ability of the text to function socially precisely as a fragment. Chang’s use of equivocal contrast serves to radiate information and a sense of social reality. That is, it bears a specific social force that enters the world as a beam of light or electric pulse. Chinese critics of the time described her writing as “a flicker of phosphorescent light” (281).

Chang’s idea of equivocal contrast retrospectively lines up with both Schramm’s and Lazarsfeld’s theories of communication. For Lazarsfeld, Chang’s focus on the text as fragment accords with his belief that information must be compressed into bits of textual data in order to convey, paradoxically, the totality of the world, while in terms of Schramm, her belief in the power of writing to radiate force and “provoke” the reader echoes Schramm’s explication of the literary text as a “kinetic thing.” Both communication theorists, of course, were most interested in information as a means to reveal an essential truth or “reality” of the world to mass audiences. They saw in texts the capacity to work as “data,” miniature moments of profound revelation. In the early 1940s, facing an earlier moment in which the world seemed to be falling apart, Chang similarly saw the work of literature as a regrounding of reality, as well as a deep and lasting exposure of the real itself. She writes: “we need to take hold of something real, of something most fundamental. . . . It is this era that constitutes my artistic material, one for which I believe the technique of equivocal contrast is appropriate. . . . By these means, I provide to the reality that surrounds me a revelation” (2005, 18). Chang frequently thus begins each vignette with a declaration: “this is real,” (2005, 79) “every word that follows is true” (2005, 145). Implied in such declarations is that the text to follow will release some keen illuminating light of truth, made so by the force of her prose.

The notion of literature as holding a particular directional force also squares well with Lazarsfeld’s diffusion theory: the very purpose of
compressing “reality” into bits of informational data is to disseminate it broadly. Both Lazarsfeld and Schramm agreed that literature served this function ideally because of its inherent compactness, and here Chang’s view on writing retrospectively accords with their work as well. She famously titled her book *Liuyan* (流言) (literally, “flowing words”) in order to ascribe a particular meaning to the text’s performance as language. As Nicole Huang (2005, 12) describes, “[Chang] does not expect her writing to endure—instead, her work should be like words written on water . . . she also hopes that her writing will be endowed with the spirit of ‘rumors’ or ‘gossip’—a second denotation of the word *liuyan*—flowing freely and swiftly in order to reach the widest possible audience.” In the text, Chang consistently frames the energy or radiance of her text as facilitating a circulation of language and thoughts. The literary text mimics “gossip” in transmitting shards of emotion, knowledge, and news in the form of tiny bursts of language. Her writing is like gossip because it exists most purely and effectively as words in motion, the diffusion of language: “So pretend, if you will, that you heard these words whispered endlessly into your ear on a night when the moon slowly sets like a golden basin” (Chang 2005, 146). The text is not meant to be held down by a single reader, grasped by greedy hands. It is designed to pass through countless hands and eyes and ears. Chang supplements her conception of literary writing as embodying a powerful equivocal contrast by discerning in that force its capacity to participate within broader, external circuits of social diffusion.

These multiple strands of thought coalesce in the final essay of *Written on Water*, “Epilogue: Days and Nights.” In this brief vignette, Chang describes Shanghai as a vast yet interconnected social organism, held together by a flow of voices that bind person to person, person to city, and city to nation. As she walks through her city, Chang hears the sound of the drum tower as it beats the rhythm of time. She listens as “the Shanghainese *shenqu* songs pour volubly from the wireless, also deliberating endlessly on the long and short of various family affairs” (2005, 217). As she passes, she hears the gossiping human voices spilling from the stores and homes, and popular music emanates as electric signals through “the wireless” (218). The world of Shanghai comes to Chang as a cacophony of sounds and voices, yet this cacophony is intensely pleasurable in generating the glue that binds her to the experience of the city:
I am truly happy to be walking underneath a Chinese sun. And I like feeling that my hands and legs are young and strong. And all this seems to be connected together (連在一起), but I don't know why. In these happy moments— the sound of the wireless (無限電的聲音), the color of the streets (街上的顏色)—a portion of all this seems to belong to me, even if what sinks sadly to the ground is also Chinese silt (中國的泥沙). At bottom, this is China after all. (218)

Importantly, this passage signals one of the few moments in which a “new media” object, the wireless, appears in the text. On the face of it, it seems that technology engenders this scene of vast social connection, the fusion of disparate human experience. Yet this is not entirely so. Rather, it is Chang herself—or more precisely, her textual voice—that makes possible the convergence of these various social forces. It is she who stands among the voices from the shops, the wireless, the shenqu, and joins them to “the streets” and “the ground” that is China. It is the text itself that mediates this relationship.

Appropriately, Chang (2005, 218) concludes the piece with a scene of writing that produces a textual account of everything that she has just reported in the essay itself:

When I get home, even before I have had a chance to pile the groceries in the kitchen, I sit down at the desk. Never before have I written anything so quickly; even I’m a bit shocked. After some revision, what I have is this:

“Days and Nights of China”
My road passes
across the land of my country
Everywhere the chaos of my people;
patched and patched once more, joined and joined again,
a people of patched and colored clouds.
My people,
my youth.
I am truly happy to bask in the sun back from market,
weighed down by my three meals for the day.
The first drumbeats from the watchtower settle all under heaven,
quieting the hearts of the people;
the uneasy clamor of voices begins to sink,
sink to the bottom . . .
China, after all.
Here, Chang makes clear that it is the work of writing, the task of literature, that renders the connectedness of Shanghai, and thus social life in general, legible. Literature, as a kind of “whisper” that flows endlessly through the world, mediates the relations between different peoples and ultimately unites them to a common human experience. In ending her vignette with a poem that essentially rewrites the vignette, Chang transforms a simple representation of this process into a piece of writing that will perform the process itself. The poem bears the same title (“Days and Nights of China”) and same last line (“China, after all”) as the vignette. Here, the text evolves from a description of vast connectivity in Shanghai into a short explosion of affect, a poem that is meant to circulate and disseminate across the city itself now. The vignette becomes a whisper, calling out to different readers and aspiring to be casually overheard in homes and stores.

This is Chang’s mediated world of whispers. It is a world in which literature performs as rumor and gossip, but it is intensified and more capable of joining people to a sense of shared humanity due to its unique powers of affect or equivocal contrast. Moreover, literature stands between traditional forms of communication, such as the bell tower in “Epilogue,” which mediates social relations by keeping time, and newer modes of media, such as “the wireless,” which mediate relations through technology. While in Chang’s final vignette, both types of media play a significant role in binding the city’s people to a shared notion of time and place, it is literature—the poem her vignette turns into—that fulfills this role most effectively and meaningfully. It is only through this poem that the reader becomes truly aware of his or her links to others, whether in the city or the nation. Literature conveys this information, and literature performs the work of mediation itself. This, we imagine, is what McCarthy saw in Chang’s work.

**Famine as Feeling: The Rice Sprout Song**

In this last section, I return to Chang’s literary writing for the USIA, namely her novel *The Rice Sprout Song*, which she wrote explicitly for the agency. I examine how Chang’s idea of a “mediated world of whispers” inflected the USIA’s evolving framework of communications theory, particularly as imagined by Schramm, and vice versa, how the institutional context of the USIA transformed Chang’s work. The two come together to intensify Chang’s early 1940s imagining of literature’s dynamism.
The Rice Sprout Song is a curious case for literary history. Published and read widely in the United States in 1955, the novel was a domestic success: it got glowing reviews in Time, the New Republic, and other major magazines, and was a best seller for most of that year. Since the 1970s, however, the novel has become a casualty of Cold War literary politics. The Rice Sprout Song today is lumped together with various other Cold War novels considered middlebrow, such as James Michener’s 1947 Tales of the South Pacific (see Klein 2003). Chang’s work is interpreted as anti-Communist pseudopropaganda, light on literary or aesthetic merit. Despite critical acclaim in the 1950s and authorship by one of the era’s most eminent modernists, the novel has failed to make its mark in American letters.

The Rice Sprout Song is also curious because of its double life as a work of modern Chinese literature. Chang translated the novel into Chinese immediately after its publication in English in 1954: the text was serialized in the USIA-sponsored magazine The World Today (今日世界) as Yang Ge (秧歌). Since the 1970s, Chang’s novel has fared better in Chinese scholarly circles than its US counterpart. After a period of neglect in the 1950s to 1960s, Chang’s writing experienced a resurgence of interest in China in the 1980s. Part of this revival was a recovery of her forgotten English language novels, such as The Rice Sprout Song and The Naked Earth. Today in China studies, such works are regarded as serious literature. While such attention has been positive, new readings of The Rice Sprout Song still tend to read the novel as continuous with Chang’s earlier Chinese-language modernist works, despite being written in English for an American audience. Chinese literature scholar David Wang rightly notes that Chang’s novel was commissioned to combat Chinese Communist “land reform” texts from the 1950s as anti-Communist propaganda. Still, Wang (2000) contextualizes The Rice Sprout Song within a Hong Kong and Taiwanese Sinophone tradition when in fact it was produced for and inside an explicit US literary and administrative matrix.

Chang was called in to produce a novel for the USIA to confront a specific crisis. While her initial work focused on translations or reports, a growing fear of the apparent effectiveness of Chinese Maoist propaganda prompted McCarthy to explore alternative methods in counterinformation tactics, an approach based more on what Schramm argued to be information’s basis in affect and literature. Indeed, the struggle to win Asian hearts and minds from Communist China
hinged on one main question—does liberal capitalism or collectivist socialism represent a more sustainable model of development for emerging nations?—and in this area, the United States had begun giving solid ground to China within the realm of communication and ideas. Genuine anxiety hung in the air (see Cullather 2010 and Ekbladh 2010). The USIA was tasked with spreading to all of East Asia the message that socialism cannot work because it spurs underdevelopment, which leads to famine (see Cull 2008, 53–54).

However, the trouble with this strategy is that this message could only be built on the most speculative and indirect forms of information. USIA agents fervently believed that socialism equaled famine and that capitalism ensured its people adequate food. Yet they still needed evidence to support this claim, and China’s information blackout made this work nearly impossible (see Bogart 1969, 80). Chang’s task was to produce an accurate picture of China’s famine based on her perceived ethnographic inside knowledge of the country she had just left. That Chang herself could not access up-to-date information about China posed no issue. Rather, the novel itself represented a site of information acquisition and dispensation by offering a humanized account of what was actually happening in rural China. Literary narrative could create a more total visualization of Chinese life than cold, hard facts by capturing individuals’ hopes and fears. McCarthy admits that he readily fed story ideas to Chang, but he absolves himself of wrongdoing by averring that literature, unlike information-based media, is more capable of presenting a complete and thus accurate view of reality (see Gao 2002). Echoing Schramm, McCarthy argues that novels imbue facts with a richer sense of reality through figurative language. Hu Shi (1955, 1), the eminent Chinese scholar, even suggested to Chang that she title her novel *Famine*.

*The Rice Sprout Song* is a fairly conventional and sentimental critique of China’s land-reform movement in the early 1950s. Its protagonists are Gold Root and Moon Scent, husband and wife, who live in a poor rural village. Communist land-reform policy has come to their village in the form of Comrade Wong, a cadre member devoted to executing the state’s food-rationing policies. Despite Wong’s fervor, land reform has failed to improve the lives of the village’s people: apparently, they eat less than before, and worse, they are often forced to pay fees to the state. Nonetheless, the state, embodied by Wong, refuses to believe that the people suffer due to Communist policies,
and thus dismisses reports of corruption as irregularities. Conflict between the people and the state come to a head when a group of starving villagers, led by Gold Root, storm a local granary demanding food and Wong’s militia fires on them, killing many.

This broader social tragedy is framed by a more intimate tale of domestic ruin, the erosion of love between Gold Root and Moon Scent. Love cannot exist between woman and man, it seems, when neither can find enough food to eat. This interior story uses formal devices to describe hunger as a catastrophic affective state as well as a social crisis. Vivid images reveal the psychological dimensions of famine:

The strange dull, gnawing sense of hunger, something new to him—a cross between toothache and heartache—made everything else seem unreal, the sunny field, the woodcutters on the hillside, the sound of distant gongs. (1998, 84)

The movement of figurative language is interesting here. Hunger begins as a concrete, conventional figure, “the toothache,” yet is quickly transposed into an image of the natural world: “the sunny field.” The feeling of hunger becomes a part of the larger world, the world itself an expression of starvation. Importantly, this transposition renders the world alien to the speaker himself. Hunger not only causes physical pain but it also makes one a stranger to one’s own body. The text succeeds in describing starvation as a vivid sensation. It argues that hunger alters a person’s basic cognitive state, corrupting one’s capacity to grasp social reality.

Chang creates a textual screen of metaphors to convey this altered mental state in the novel. Another passage in this vein reads: “He [Gold Root] had not gone half the distance when he had already worked off the dinner and was hungry again. At this stage it was not a disagreeable sensation, feeling all empty and clean inside and so light, almost as if he could easily walk upside down and romp around the moon” (1998, 21). We again discern the movement of hunger’s description from a basic sensation to a more evolved and encompassing perception of reality. Gold Root admits that the feeling is not bad but it is dangerous in its evocation of unreal fantasies, such as romping on the moon. Chang is well known for capturing the unreality of urban living in Shanghai in her various 1940s Chinese-language essays. However, while it is the city itself that induces these feelings in the context of Shanghai, we see the reverse in rural China: it is the banal and rural experience of hunger that creates Gold Root’s dreamlike state.
This is the continuity between *The Rice Sprout Song* and *Written on Water*. Both deploy the singular resources of literature—whether “equivocal contrast” or metaphor—to produce a highly charged and animated vision of reality. Both operate dynamically, as a kind of media, to reveal a vision of reality that penetrates its more surface, ephemeral appearance. Here, the two merely take different means for the same ends: the dazzling modern city versus the impoverished rural village. Each uses figurative language to document its social world as a cacophonous flow of voices heard from within and outside of one’s self. While in *Written on Water*, the text’s river of gossip appears more explicit, in *The Rice Sprout Song*, the text similarly melds the minds of its characters into a single entity united by a desire to express the collective pain of famine. The passage I quote above belongs to two different characters, Wong and Gold Root, yet they blend together to reflect on a common plight: the lack of food. Starvation manifests as an intersubjective condition.

Chang sharpens her critique of famine in China by invoking the image of “the dream world.” Unlike *Written on Water*, no actual new media such as the gramophone appears in the text—it takes place in rural China—yet Chang is still interested in the question of what one knows and doesn’t know, and the problems that arise when the two begin to blur. It was reported in the United States that Chinese officials refused to circulate information about famine across different regions via news sources to contain dissent. No one knew others were also starving. Thus, the alleged famine in China was worsened by its obfuscation by the state. The text summons the “dream world” to describe this suppression of information:

> Of course he could not speak to anybody about the matter [famine], and least of all to Comrade Wong. So he had no means of finding out whether the situation was only local or spread over a large area. He could find no mention in the newspapers of famine in this or any other part of the country. He had a curious sensation of having dropped out of time and space, living nowhere. (1998, 84)

This image of being nowhere, “out of time and space,” recurs later as a “dream like” (143) feeling and disturbingly, “a dead world” (79). Here, Chang (2005, 160) inverts the image of the city as a dream state from her Shanghai modernist texts. While in *Written on Water*, technological modernity reveals the city to be a dream, in *The Rice Sprout Song*, it is the lack of communications media that produces
this sensation. The text carefully describes the process by which the peasants are denied information about the famine. Their slow realization builds to a panic that culminates in the novel’s climax: the peasants’ revolt against the state.

I argue that Chang adapts her vision of a “mediated world of whispers” to the demands of her USIA work. It happens first on the level of form. The novel itself acts as a media device to supplement the limits of USIA information strategies. Chang wrote *The Rice Sprout Song* to capture and encode “famine” as a lived, affective reality rather than a mere statistic. The lesson of 1940s Shanghai was that any medium, even a novel, could be used both to embody and to convey information. In this text, Chang uses the aesthetic resources of literature to electrify her own voice and vivify the facts. At the same time though, she also modifies her whisper theory at the level of content. If in Shanghai she valorizes the use of media to connect different individuals to a shared domain of information and common experience, in rural China the failure of communication creates an information blackout that foments social misery and revolt. The text’s most obvious goal is to critique the Communist mode of development. However, it suggests that what is worse than famine itself is the inability to understand why one is starving.

There are, however, aspects of the novel that exceed its mere implication within this US Cold War information matrix. A character that has drawn a great deal of critical attention is Comrade Ku, a young cadre member sent down from the city to the country to produce a movie about the peasants. His mission is clear: as a state-sanctioned work of art, the movie should depict the harmonious integration of state policy and peasant life. Ku bears witness though to the terrible events that overtake the village and the revolt against the state, yet as a faithful member of the party, he alters the facts of the story to produce an uncritical, shallow vision of social harmony. Ku’s film describes the exact opposite of what has actually occurred. Scholarly interpretations of Ku confirm the obvious: Chang included this character to demonstrate the ubiquitous state control of information in China, a cycle of lies propped up by the news media and culture industry.

However, Chang’s likeness to Ku (she also wrote film scripts and of course, the novel itself is a similar attempt to represent rural China for state interests) suggests a deeper meaning to his inclusion. Ku is ultimately a sympathetic character because he is constrained by the Chi-
nese state in his art; he has grand ideas for his film, ideas that cut to the reality of the village’s situation, yet he is limited by both the form of his medium (the Chinese film industry) and the directives of the state itself. Chang’s representation of Ku registers a sense of melancholy. However, it is a melancholy that exceeds the crisis of famine or media blackout in China, and one that speaks to the basic tragedy of all people who live beneath repressive political regimes, whether Chinese or American. The novel concludes with a lavish parade organized by Comrade Wong to downplay the recent granary revolt and celebrate the government’s accomplishments:

They [the town’s performers] proceeded slowly along the winding footpath that led across the tawny brown plain. The gongs and cymbals went on beating loudly, “Chong, Chong! Chi Chong Chi! Chong, Chong! Chi Chong Chi!” But under the immense open sky the sound was muffled and strangely faint. (1998, 182)

The disturbing concluding image of the “immense open sky” evokes a feeling of absolute power designed to stifle all that is beneath it, while the “muffled sounds” are human voices, struggling to be heard above the din. The sky is broad and the voices could be anywhere, not just in China. With this image, Chang correctly predicts the fate of her own book after it was published and deployed by the USIA. Despite her obedience to US state ideology, editors still altered the text in its Chinese translation. For example, a key scene in which a character condemns American military power in South Korea is excised. It is Chang’s own voice that is being muffled.

At the same time, this melancholic ending still illuminates the inherent dynamism of literature itself to press back against such incursions and excisions. It is vital that through Comrade Wong, we lay eyes on the only piece of new media technology in the entire novel: the film camera. Yet, from its very introduction in the novel, Chang describes the device as compromised by the state. Wong has in his mind a true story about the villagers, but then he stares at his camera, thinks about the state’s management of the film industry, and concludes that “he knew better than to tackle such a subject in his film” (1998, 91). The film camera, despite its capacity for vivid and “real” visual representation, in fact bears a negative relationship to the accurate portrayal of reality. Implicit in this scene is the belief that only literature—in the form of *The Rice Sprout Song*
itself—can expose the truth of Communist China, and it largely succeeds, regardless of the State Department’s controlling hands. We still hear Chang’s voice at the end of the novel, muffled as it is. And its operation as the text itself has created a vivid panoply of 1950s China.

This double-sided conclusion, melancholic and hopeful, underscores the primary thesis of my essay: the importance of cultural intermediaries, as reflected both in novels and the novelists who wrote them, to Cold War strategy in the Pacific. This history tells a somewhat different story than the mobilization of American literature for the purposes of propaganda at “home,” such as The Ugly American. It tells a different story than the diffusion of classic, prodemocratic American literature to Eastern Europe in the hopes of winning undecided citizens in that area of the world to the cause of democracy (see Rubin 2012; Ekbladh 2010, 178–80; and Vegso 2012, 190–97). The Pacific, confronted by an unusually unknown and complex opponent in the form of Maoist China, required a more flexible approach. Knowledge and information in the Pacific could not just be assimilated back into American culture or merely packaged and distributed outward; it needed to be mediated, and no other medium seemed to get the job done as well as literature. Asian writers were pressed into service to perform this task.

I would like to conclude with my own melancholic note that interprets Chang’s work through one more lens. While I generally read texts such as The Rice Sprout Song as marking a larger process and history of international information management in the early Cold War era, I also find within it the residue of the labor it took to participate within that process. And I see in that residue sweat, tears, and stress. Working for the USIA as a Chinese immigrant—being torn between one’s homeland and adopted country—was difficult both physically and emotionally. We can only imagine the toll it took on Chang’s psyche. If the final scene of The Rice Sprout Song registers some profound trauma over having one’s voice controlled, it is perhaps because Chang understood that she herself was being instrumentalized through the process of mediating knowledge about China for its adversary.
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