

## Hermeneutics of Doubt: Atmospheric Knowing and an Ecology of the Mind

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO think about weather and doubt together, when, in the age of climate crisis, the “air” has become both a “matter of fact” and a “matter of concern”?<sup>1</sup> And what do we gain by bringing cinematic weather or, more broadly, media/climate into view? My attempt to reconnect weather and mood, climate and media, knowledge and doubt, is not intended to cast doubt on the reality of climate change, which implicates all of us—albeit in unevenly distributed manners—as collective agents of the Anthropocene. My interest is in moving beyond the scientific paradigm of climate as an objective entity “out there” and reconsidering climate as a matter of mind, medium, and society.<sup>2</sup> Climate, as Eva Horn reminds us, is both natural and cultural, and what we contribute to climate—not as the singular species *Homo sapiens* but as a diverse set of cultures, societies, and histories that cuts *across* nations—is not simply pollution but *meaning*, “be it individual, social, cultural, spiritual, or aesthetic.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a conception asks us to revisit interpretation, to treat climate not as its object but as its model for understanding. I call it a “hermeneutics of doubt,” which moves us away from the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that haunts the human sciences and popular and political cultures of conspiracy.<sup>4</sup> This hermeneutics of doubt does not reach deep in to the substrate of

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**ABSTRACT** This essay dwells on atmosphere as a mediating, climatic environment to consider climate as the nexus of mind, medium, and society. An inquiry into atmosphere, I argue, opens up climate from an objective entity into a constellation of aesthetic, infrastructural, and epistemological operations. I situate this richer notion of climate in China during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath by focusing on “doubt” as a unique atmosphere caught in the transnational traffic in media practices, psychological war, and genre film. Through an intimate conversation between aesthetics and technology, hermeneutics and media ecology, this essay conducts an experimental climatology to consider climate not simply as a physical milieu but as a *method*. Such a climatology—bringing together infrastructural analysis, aesthetic design, and sociopolitical projects—will allow us to engage “global climate change” and “affective climate change” as interconnected and integrated projects of sustainability. **REPRESENTATIONS** 157. © 2022 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 142–72. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.7.142>.

knowledge but moves horizontally through a dynamic ecology that questions the conditions and possibility of knowing. To prepare us for this mutual rethinking of doubt and hermeneutics, I conduct an experimental “climatology.” I dwell on atmosphere as a mediating, climatic environment to consider the aesthetic, infrastructural, and epistemological dimensions of climate. As my inquiry into China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and its immediate aftermath shows, this triad not only reorients climate as both *interface*—the mediation between nature and culture—and *environment*—the infrastructure of life, as Eva Horn’s and John Peters’s exemplary studies have demonstrated. More importantly, this climatic notion of medium as mediating environment binds the landscape of society and interiority through an intimate conversation between aesthetics and technology, between hermeneutics and media ecology.

I start by unpacking the significance of atmosphere for set design and *mise en scène* in generating a sharable mood that traverses the boundaries between interiority and exteriority. This aesthetic conception of atmosphere is complemented by a media infrastructural framework, which reveals the terrifying face of atmosphere: China’s participation in the psychological war against Japanese invasion took the form of an “atmospheric war”—the media saturation of the ether and the mass mobilization of media and people. Crucial to this “war of nerves” was the deployment of psychotechnics to break down the human psyche through the rational organization of body, movement, and time. The atmospheric war, in other words, cast a shadow on Gregory Bateson’s euphoric “ecology of mind” by redistributing consciousness through social reorganization.<sup>5</sup>

These aesthetic and material dimensions of atmosphere prepare ways for us to understand atmosphere as a distinct, affective mode of knowledge. I focus on doubt as an amorphous, mutating mood marked by negativity, stasis, and a crisis of knowledge. Doubt, I argue, is the hollow center of the hyperrationalist discourse and practice of psychology that underpinned the “war of nerves.” The postwar resurgence of doubt, however, marks the consolidation of contingency as a statistical model of knowledge to make sense of postwar paradoxes of disconnection and connection, knowledge and ignorance, information and misinformation. Doubt is the mood and mode of knowledge that both acknowledges and strives to master contingency.

This atmospheric mode of knowledge, most vividly staged in the unsettling of one’s interiority, can be more concretely grasped when we look at how the postwar landscape of interiority was reshaped in medial and aesthetic terms. In particular, I argue that *yiyifeng*, a highly gendered onsite translation practice popular in postwar movie theaters, was not simply a wireless device but a human-technological media system that helped instantiate

a new way of listening and viewing that was crucial for restructuring interiority. Through *yiyifeng*'s triadic structure—conjoining the screen, the simultaneous interpreter, and the audience—and conspicuously mediated and generative process, interiority turned into a constantly renewing loop of the self with plural agents and players. Such interiority is no longer a static entity or a distinct voice but a dynamic environment, a kinetic circuit between the mindscape and the social sphere.

This notion of a *yiyifeng*-modulated interiority as mobile social space, itself constituted by medium as environment, allows me to dwell on a hermeneutics of doubt that brings together the aesthetic and media infrastructural dimensions of climate in the production of a distinct mode of knowledge and sociality. I turn to the scenes of domesticity in postwar Chinese films that grapple with the aftereffects of the war of nerves in the changing social dynamic and sense perception of the world. Focusing on the *mise en scène* and sound design of a noirish film, *Shengui yiyun* (The cloud of doubt in the boudoir) (dir. Xu Changeling, 1948), I investigate how a “hermeneutics of doubt” moves us away from the teleological search for clues to an immersion in an atmosphere of uncertainty. Through a dialogue with phenomenology, I show how this climatic mode of knowledge allows us to rethink hermeneutics and reengage aesthetic inquiries in the posthermeneutic turn to media as environment.

### Atmosphere I: History of An Aesthetic

Atmosphere entered Chinese film and theater discourses in the early 1930s, riding on the rising interest in *mise en scène*, until well into the Second Sino-Japanese War.<sup>6</sup> For filmmakers and dramatists such as Xu Xingzhi, Zhang Junxiang, Hong Shen, and Jiao Juyin, atmosphere concerned the desired effect of a designed environment in relation to the human characters and the audience, an ideal means of transporting the actors and spectators to a subjective realm that is ephemeral yet materially manufactured.<sup>7</sup> In their manifold conceptions of atmosphere (*kongqi*, *fengwei*, *qifen*), filmmakers and dramatists developed a vocabulary for connecting exteriority with interiority, senses with mood, and the aesthetic with the technical. Together these artists help us understand atmosphere as a nuanced process of aesthetic-technical production and sense perception.

Xu Xingzhi, an avant-garde artist, set designer, and filmmaker/dramatist, tried to articulate this process systematically. Xu saw atmosphere as the creative product binding the “internal” affective process of *linggan*—intuition, psychic communication, and magical resonance—with the “external”

technical execution. Thus, the affective elements—*qingxu* (feeling), *qingdiao* (mood), *ganjue* (sense perception, sensual experience)—provide filters for the technical manipulations in a three-step procedure. Art first distills “diffuse emotions in life” into *qingxu*, and *qingxu* filters all the technical elements on stage (light, color of set and costume, sound, speech, and gestures) to create *qingdiao*—the harmonious unity consistent with the content and form of the play.<sup>8</sup> *Qingxu* thus serves as both a mental disposition and a technical *dispositif*, which Xu compares to natural light. Like the sunset and moonlight that transform the landscape with a distinct tonality, *qingxu* binds and transmutes disparate elements on stage with a tangible effect. *Ganjue* constitutes the third and final step: that which is filtered through *qingxu* and *qingdiao* merges in a soul-affecting (*linggan*) atmosphere that generates psychological pleasure.

Xu’s tripartite understanding of atmosphere fundamentally destabilizes the distinctions between subjective and objective, psychic and technical. Despite the tendency to distinguish mood from atmosphere—with mood associated with an interior spirit and atmosphere with an exterior, manufactured environmental effect—the two terms were closely associated, evoking connotations of climate and weather. Zhang Junxiang contrasts mood—“the inner character of a play,” which he considers amorphous, vague, and slippery—with atmosphere, “pure external comportment (*yibiao*),” which is more concretely conveyed on stage through design.<sup>9</sup> Zhang’s notion of atmosphere is akin to *milieu* or climate in cultural geography—popularized through Hippolyte Taine’s tripartite philosophy of art as reflecting race, milieu, and moment, which was translated into Chinese in the 1940s. Yet atmosphere for Zhang is not simply the sum total of background—time, season, country, place, and social environment—but also the air and sense experience (*ganjue*) associated with it.<sup>10</sup> In the sensible, climate-like atmosphere, mood unfolds like weather, not as a prior affective state but as an affective *reaction* to an aesthetic situation, often evoking sensory experiences as coordinates of a specific spatial experience through sound, color, light, and temperature.<sup>11</sup>

These diverse conceptions of atmosphere and mood carry on an active dialogue with an environmental notion of the medium, at the intersection of aesthetic theory and discourses on environment across the natural and social sciences. In terms of aesthetic theory, these understandings of mood and atmosphere evoke the notion of *Stimmung* (attunement, mood, tonality), an aesthetic response of active perception through environment.<sup>12</sup> *Stimmung* was formulated through the discourse on *Einfühlung* (feeling-in)—a descendant of the empathy theory originated by eighteenth-century German Romanticism and British discourses on sympathy, and further developed in late-nineteenth-century art theory.<sup>13</sup> Xu Xingzhi’s

conception of mood recalls the notion of *Stimmung* as a harmonious bonding of antithetical elements: “the subjective and objective, factual and psychological, formal and ephemeral, man and environment.”<sup>14</sup> The aesthetic ideal of *Stimmung* inherits an archaic conception of milieu as the medium of perception, as shown by Leo Spitzer’s historical semantics of milieu from Greek philosophy to modern European thought. Spitzer observes that climate and air are active and vital in conditioning life, which evokes a sympathetic notion of perception between the cosmos and the human. Spitzer cites Cicero as distilling this point: “air is not only that by means of which we see and hear, but that which sees and hears with us.”<sup>15</sup> This reciprocal relationship between atmosphere and perception helps us see how *Stimmung* continues to thrive in modern iterations of milieu—*Umwelt*, environment, ambience, and atmosphere—through plural discourses on environment across experimental psychology, evolutionary biology, geology, and sociology. This intersection between aesthetic theory and environmental thinking creates a vital field for the valuation of atmosphere as an aesthetic ideal for *mise en scène* and notions of spectatorship as transience, transport, and transformation.

These transnationally trafficked connotations of atmosphere spoke to the interests of Chinese intellectuals and artists whose mastery of a rich vocabulary of air and wind—from Daoist cosmology to neo-Confucian thought to aesthetic traditions of *qing* (emotion, feeling) and *qiyun* (spirit resonance) in poetry, literature, and art—provided them ample room for creative negotiations and interpretations. In these articulations, *qi*, which supplements the modern connotations of *kongqi* (air, atmosphere) and *fenwen* (ambience), is an amorphous, quasi-material substance and an evolving environment. Its association with the body, the cosmos, and sexual desire was subordinated and sublimated into a spiritual, moral value in neo-Confucian thought from the eleventh century onward, only to reemerge in the sixteenth century as a medium of cognition, knowledge, and experience, the key to connecting the cosmic and human for self-cultivation.<sup>16</sup>

In its aesthetic articulation, *qi* is manifested in *qiyun*, or spirit resonance, a classical artistic principle privileging the “interior workings of the spirit” over formal likeness, revived in the early twentieth century when the aesthetic discourse of *Einfühlung* entered China as *yijue* (relocated perception) by way of art critics Teng Gu and aestheticians Zong Baihu and Zhu Guangqian.<sup>17</sup> These Chinese writings index the fraught comparativism that attempted to reclaim modernism as “Eastern art,” as William Schaefer insightfully remarks.<sup>18</sup> Their engagement with the art discourse of *Einfühlung* by Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Wilhelm Worringer, which aligned *qiyun* with an aesthetic of abstraction, helps us situate the preoccupation of Chinese filmmakers/dramatists with mood and atmosphere. For them, it becomes the coproduction of technical elements and sense

perception, with a magical resonance crossing the boundaries of the external and internal, the material and spiritual.

This emphasis on technical formalism and synesthesia characterizes *Stimmung* through the psychology of perception. The formalist and synesthetic notion of atmosphere thus generates a sensation that builds on and transcends individual sense perceptions in creating another field that is not necessarily total and unified but mixed, plural, and permutating. One striking aspect of atmosphere is its ambiguity, transience, and ephemerality—in other words, its attunement of and to individual perception. In Bergsonian terms, it carries the character of duration and affection, as a transitory status enabling qualitative change; it also characterizes what I have previously called an “affective medium”—a mediating, enabling, transformative environment that is mutually constituted by affect and medium. Ben Anderson has coined the term “affective atmosphere” to capture atmosphere as a collective affect, as prepersonal and transpersonal intensities full of ambiguities “that enable us to reflect on affective experience as occurring beyond, around, and alongside the formation of subjectivity.”<sup>19</sup>

Xu Xingzhi recognizes the ambiguity of atmosphere in his critique of the “group individual”—the perfect unity between individual and group identity—when he contrasts atmosphere with style. He sees style as rational, unified, concrete, systematic, stable, continuous, and collective, whereas atmosphere is fragmented, abstract, chaotic, noncontinuous, unstable, and noncollective. Thus, for Xu, atmosphere contrasts with the unified style characterizing an artistic school—hence the impossibility of referring to atmosphere as “individual” or “national.”<sup>20</sup> These discussions, conducted at the height of the “national style” (*minzu fence*) debate across the nationalist and communist regimes, signal an aesthetic discontent of the atmosphere with a pervasive unity and uniformity.

If, as these thinkers suggest, the senses cannot be disentangled from aesthetics and technology, atmosphere invites us to investigate notions of medium and the senses such that we can decouple a biologically determined notion of the senses from culturally, technologically, and aesthetically conditioned sense perceptions. Such a notion of highly mediated sense perception also provides us a way to investigate the material formation of atmosphere itself, which evolves in an ecological sense of the environment as a system of multiple, mutually affected elements of operation.

## Atmosphere II: The War of Nerves

Although atmosphere is an aesthetic staple of *mise en scène*, its material dimension connects it to a much broader terrain of media during

the Sino-Japanese war. The filmmakers/dramatists' aesthetic interest in atmosphere culminated at the height of the war of nerves, which operated precisely by weaponizing the atmosphere against human flesh, psyche, and sense perception. The "atmospheric war," which Peter Sloterdijk theorizes as a climatic mode heralded by the use of poison gas during the First World War, was waged in China on both sides—not simply as a physical means of destruction, as in the Japanese terror air bombing of Chinese cities, but also as a media war that saturated the atmosphere.<sup>21</sup> On the China side, in the Nationalist hinterland, an ecology of "wirelessness" integrated the new technology of wireless transmission with older forms of media, repurposed as mobile art, propagating in the open air—from oral arts such as singing, poetry recitation, and storytelling, to ephemeral visual arts such as murals, cartoons, and wall-posted newspapers, to live shows such as street performance, parades, and mobile film projection.<sup>22</sup> This "wireless" war of resistance, broadly construed, not only contracted space-time into a perpetual present but also created an enveloping, mediating environment, an affective medium that was simultaneously material and immaterial, an atmosphere that processed and contributed to the climate of the war.

Although some have traced "the war of nerves" (*shenjingzhan*) to age-old tactics of psychological warfare, the notion itself was new in China. The term did not appear in popular discourse until 1937 and started to garner attention between 1940 and 1941, reaching a peak in 1949.<sup>23</sup> The war of nerves, intersecting with the global psychological warfare that reached a pinnacle during World War II, was understood in China as a distinct form of warfare, different from but also interconnected with physical combat, involving modern and ancient media through oral, textual, visual, and aural means of production, reception, and dissemination.<sup>24</sup> While the war of nerves has often been equated with propaganda (*xuanchuanzhan*), the term *shenjingzhan* highlights its psychological impact, and the "nerves" became increasingly interchangeable with communication media.<sup>25</sup> The war of nerves thus worked in tandem with propaganda, weaponizing the human psyche through physical and medial disturbances of the air.

The war of nerves was atmospheric in both the "medial" and perceptual sense: it relied on mass media to create an altered environment, a media atmosphere, to impact sense perception. Yet little has been said about the role of psychologists in this war, which coincided with a reorientation of psychology that radically reconceived the senses. A shifting emphasis from general to applied psychology—from a philosophical to a mechanistic approach—converted the human senses into statistically manipulable *data* and physiologically predictable and measurable *behavior* under control and conditioning. The senses, in other words, underwent a transformation from distinct quality to ubiquitous quantity, subject to a universal law of

conversion, that was similar to the transformation of media. Previously conceived as distinct from one another, the senses and media now generated interconnected, transferrable data through a set of media/perceptual portals.

This reorientation in psychology from philosophical musing to empirically driven testing, from a humanistic discipline to a science buttressed by empirical observation and experimental laboratory research, is aligned with the history of the discipline itself in the West since the nineteenth century. But it picks up a particular thread emerging in China in the early to mid-1930s, spearheaded by industrial psychology. Industrial psychology—“the science of work” that focused on labor and organizational behavior, which flourished during World War I—made its way to China in the same period through vocational guidance, scientific management, labor protection and regulation, and bureaucratic efficiency efforts.<sup>26</sup> Yet the discipline was not institutionalized in China until the mid-1930s, when applied and industrial psychology rode in on the wings of the New Life Movement—which sought, unsuccessfully, to regulate everyday life in the service of a military modernity.<sup>27</sup>

The onset of the Sino-Japanese War ushered in a golden age of applied and industrial psychology. The repurposing of the discipline, sometimes under the name “wartime psychology” (*zhanshi xinlixue*), went surprisingly smoothly in the transition from industrial to military modernity.<sup>28</sup> Vocational psychology’s aptitude tests of cognitive, perceptual, and physiological capacity were handy for selecting soldiers, officers, skilled laborers, and civil servants. The emphasis on efficiency in industrial psychology and the scientific management of fatigue, motivation, and morale were applied to both military and industrial operations. The toolkit of industrial and military psychology was not simply comparable to but *conjoined* in the superenterprise of the war. The selection of personnel, as psychologist Ni Zhongfang argued at the time, is as important as the choice of a weapon.<sup>29</sup>

The industrialized war posed physical, mental, and psychological challenges for the new soldier-workers. The soldier-workers needed to sharpen their sensory motor skills to facilitate spatial and geographical orientation. At the same time, they were to improve their physical and mental coordination in the technical complex of new weaponry and mechanized movement that conjoined the military, industrial, and service sectors.<sup>30</sup> These challenges produced various effects that preoccupied military, civil, and industrial organizations: psychological and neurological issues such as shell shock and fatigue; emotional disturbances such as anxiety, fear, and anger; and the difficulty of consolidating group morale, building desirable character, and stabilizing mood.

The war of nerves tapped into this broad enterprise of total war through psychological and social reconstruction. Nerves conjoin muscles, glands,



senses, moods, and psyche in the soldier-worker while wires, tires, cogs, wheels, and engines enable weapons and machinery. This gigantic nerve-machine of the war operated through pens and weapons, desks and troops, humans and machines, mechanics and bureaucracy. The war of nerves did not simply weaponize media to destroy the enemy's morale. Instead, it orchestrated a double reorientation of media and psyche. Whereas media turned into atmosphere under the rubric of "wirelessness," psychology turned the mind into an ecology, an evolving system of social organization that binds the psyche with electromechanical and corporeal operations. In defending against terror attacks such as air raids, psychologists called for organizational efforts to assign and train the masses for tasks such as fire-fighting, assisting the wounded, and the evacuation of people. In keeping civilians occupied—inserting them into a kind of assembly line—social organization turned fear into productive action.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, mass mobilization theatricalized the everyday through hyperorganized rallies, singing, pageant plays, street performance, and sports games. The "wireless" media, in short, operated through a corporeal infrastructure of hands, legs, ears, eyes, and minds to perpetuate the atmosphere of war.

### **The Wind of Interpretation: *Yiyifeng* and the New Landscape of Interiority**

Atmosphere, seen through the double histories of set design and the war of nerves, reminds us how climate and weather can be both media and aesthetic affairs, caught in the nexus of mind, medium, and society. The medial and aesthetic constitution of air pertains to the third dimension of atmosphere, as a distinct mode of knowledge. This atmospheric knowing loomed large in the social climate and mental weather of the postwar era, registering the social disconnect when the celebration of victory was dampened by a sense of defeat, when groups from different social strata and geopolitical zones assumed new roles within changing dynamics of power. The epistemological uncertainty, propelled by financial and social crises marked by a high rate of inflation, unemployment, and housing problems, was exacerbated by the threat of a civil war. It made the near future seem like a grand suspense film. The air of the postwar era was filled with a meteorological sense of unrest, blending anxiety, fear, and frustration with nostalgia, melancholy, and hope. This mixed sensibility, difficult to localize or parse into codified emotions, became the dominant mood in postwar China.

No wonder postwar cinema in China was saturated with this climatic atmosphere. A significant number of postwar films—detective fiction, spy films, romantic comedies, musicals, melodramas, and horror films—were

dark, drab, and pregnant with foreboding, coinciding with the Hollywood noir films that flooded the Shanghai film market.<sup>32</sup> The noir sensibility, a transgeneric phenomenon with a predilection toward human and psychological darkness and an emphasis on mood, atmosphere, and weather, suggests how mindscape and socialscape intertwine, and how internal and external weather collide. Such an entwinement of mind, weather, and society provides us with a window onto how these films negotiated with the wartime construction of senses and media in the course of their postwar reconfiguration.

This reshuffling of the social and media order was vividly captured inside the movie theater. An intimate performance culture, paradoxically private and public, was facilitated by the revival of *yiyifeng*, a simultaneous interpretation service that was introduced in first-run movie theaters in 1938 and halted in 1943 by the Japanese banning of all allied films in the occupied cities.<sup>33</sup> The end of the war saw the revival and expansion of *yiyifeng* in Shanghai and into other cities. Although it lasted only a decade, and lost its popularity to dubbing and subtitling, *yiyifeng* ushered in a historically specific sensory sphere for audiovisual perception and social interaction.

*Yiyifeng* was a wireless transmission that allowed the audience to watch foreign films with a live soundtrack in their native tongue. On the audience end, *yiyifeng* consisted of a square box in the seatback containing a wireless receiver, a plug for the headset, and a hidden antenna.<sup>34</sup> The box was connected to a booth at the back of the auditorium where the simultaneous interpretation took place (fig. 1). For an additional dime, one could get a separate ticket at the box office for *yiyifeng* and receive a bronze-banded headset from the usher. When the earphones were in place, all other sounds were blocked out. The earphone thus created an inner circuit of communication, cut off from the external world, that generated a new disposition and technique of listening, a different sort of connection to the screen and social space.

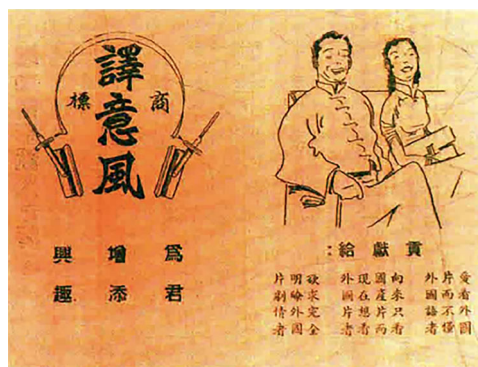


FIGURE 1. The Grand Theater's advertisement for *yiyifeng*. Shanghai. *Shenbao*, 7 November 1939.

The name *yiweifeng* is a transliteration of the English term “earphone” into “phone for interpreting meaning.” The word *feng*—the transliteration for “phone”—also means “wind,” taking on the connotation of *shunfenger*, the Daoist all-hearing god who detects sound carried by wind over distances. The “wind” thus denotes not so much a technological device as a multifaceted environment—like the medium of wind, invisible but pervasive, and varied in speed, movement, and power. With its additional connotations of a trend, style, or fashion, the “wind” of this techno-environment reshapes listening/reception and refashions everyday life. Its mixed contemporary reception adds nuance to the wind metaphor. For a southerner speaking Shanghai dialect, for instance, the Mandarin-speaking *yiweifeng* was the “Northern Wind” (*beifeng*) and “Winter Wind” (*dongjifeng*), evoking uninviting linguistic and seasonal associations.<sup>35</sup> Its atmospheric conflation with wind is highlighted by a humorous tale about a family going to Shanghai’s Grand Theater for its quality “atmosphere” (*kongqi*) plus “air conditioning” (*lengqi*). When the father asks if the mother needs a *yiweifeng*, the child grows concerned and asks, “Would it be too cold to add wind, since we already have air conditioning?”<sup>36</sup>

*Yiweifeng* enabled the audience to listen “alone together,” an oxymoron that Jonathan Sterne evokes to characterize a bourgeois “audile technique” that privatizes sonic space, with consumers “owning the material component of a technique of producing that auditory space—the ‘medium’—that stands in for a whole set of framed practices.”<sup>37</sup> This model of universal bourgeois consumption, predicated on the individual as a cohesive unit and the medium as a technical device, is complicated by *yiweifeng*’s social-technics involving gender and class dynamics. *Yiweifeng* interpreters were exclusively female.<sup>38</sup> The social visibility of these young, educated, stylish modern women helped mitigate the strangeness of technology while obscuring the complexity of their work. In reality, *yiweifeng* ladies were newly anointed wage laborers working under considerable stress in modest “offices”: tiny, isolated booths with “holes” in the walls that faced the screen, often subjected to extreme temperatures in the winter and summer. Plugged in the electromagnetic circuit between a sound receiver for the “Anglophone” (*yingyifeng*), a microphone for the “Sinophone,” and a gramophone for music, “Miss Yiweifeng” is literally a medium—a middle—a mediating and enabling agent. Her duality operates on both technological and aesthetic registers. Simultaneously an interpreter, voice actor, and narrator, she combines the art of film, spoken drama, and public speech, thus serving as the intermediary between the characters on the screen and the audience’s imagination. Meanwhile, she is a media operator and a server in a technological setup. Her work involves rapid-fire coordination of eyes, ears, mouth, and mind to keep the media network running.<sup>39</sup>

If gender played a conspicuous role in bringing home an alien technology and language, social space was renegotiated when *yiyifeng* turned the movie theater into a divided public sphere. *Yiyifeng* users were often from the lower or less-educated classes previously barred from the first-run theaters due to linguistic barriers. Their newly acquired ability to “listen alone together” with *yiyifeng* exposed the artificiality of established norms of public privacy—a cinematic voyeurism that relied on continuity cues, viewing protocols, and audiovisual unity. The educated, who preferred the original soundtrack, were not shy in expressing their disparagement, criticizing the vulgar masses for invading their sacred public privacy and compromising their privilege. The corruption of such public privacy took the form of *etiquette*, when the sub-public sphere created by *yiyifeng* was made audible by technical breakdowns: whenever problems occurred during *yiyifeng* transmissions, the soundscape at the movie theater was disrupted by a riotous collective knocking on the earphones and seatbacks.<sup>40</sup> The very intimacy and privacy of *yiyifeng* for some became a source of distancing and isolation for others.<sup>41</sup> The contentions surrounding *yiyifeng* became a battle of class-based tastes and access, perpetuated by the ideology of technological and perceptual naturalism.

More than just a technical device, *yiyifeng* was a human-technological system: the wireless setup connected the audiovisual world of the screen, the female interpreter/vocal actor, and the audience. The media effect of *yiyifeng* thus goes beyond a technologically mediated female voice for private consumption. Rather, this new configuration of public privacy contributed to the postwar reshaping of social space through the reconstruction of interiority itself. The very substance of interiority was changed by a new material constituent of voice and inner voice. In other words, *yiyifeng* introduced a new material habitus and disposition for audibility and orality that reshaped interiority. This double consciousness, simultaneously alien and intimate, foreign and native, marked interiority as a media effect.

Once we see interiority not as a distinct voice but as a kinetic circuit between the mindscape and social sphere, we can better appreciate the humor of *yiyifeng* as the wind/*feng*, a moving atmosphere. In this sense, the media-social network of *yiyifeng* becomes the mythical force of the wind whose material immateriality permeates the boundaries between exterior and interior to mobilize a social space of dwelling, thinking, and perceiving. This leads to an atmospheric conception of interiority as a nebulous fog, with no clear margin and not bounded by the skin.<sup>42</sup> We can thus see interiority as a constantly morphing space of cohabitation and interaction whose social dynamic can be further investigated in postwar Chinese cinema.

## The Cloud of Doubt: A Domestic Ecology

At a post office in Chongqing, a handsome young man rushes in to send a telegraph. Anticipating the joy of reuniting with his wife after eight years of war, Zhao Huaijin dwells on the fancy momentarily and then tears up the message he's just written. Wouldn't she be more thrilled if he suddenly showed up at the door? Upon leaving the post office, he encounters an old pal with news from his hometown: the old city of Beijing and Zhao's wife are fine, but something, his friend shakes his head, has changed. What could be so familiar that is now different? A mystery stirs in the air. A cloud of doubt creeps up Zhao's cheery face.

Xu Changeling's 1948 *Shengui yiyun* (The cloud of doubt in the boudoir), a noir-like film produced in Beijing, brings home the ambiguous atmosphere of the postwar reunion, when the country and families, previously divided by separate geopolitical zones, came to a temporary unity under the Nationalist government, which relocated from hinterland Chongqing back to the east coast, accompanied by a vast migration wave of civilians and military, along with factories, schools, and financial institutions. The film joins a cluster of "homecoming" films that dramatize the challenge facing the returnees from the hinterland, who were denied physical and symbolic dwellings in the alienating city—but, as I will show, it does so with a twist.<sup>43</sup> The naming of the protagonist Zhao Huaijin suggests "contemplating the present" (*huaijin*) for a postnostalgic homecoming.<sup>44</sup> His trench coat, seemingly fresh out of a Hollywood noir, evokes the military outfit that weathered the two World Wars before it became a screen fashion.<sup>45</sup> The film is haunted by Zhao's experience of the war in Chongqing as a disposition that lingers in the air, a mentality not properly stored inside but wafting between people like a mutating cloud. Throughout the film, Zhao manifests an acute sensitivity to vision and sound, an excessive capacity for perception, which, instead of aiding him in the trench, keeps him constantly on edge.

This atmosphere of suspenseful uncertainty haunts postwar cinema. These films respond to the wartime reconstruction of the senses and media through a distinct configuration of space-time. Whereas psychological warfare privileges the present by reducing the distance between the senses and media through a quantitative model, media and senses are reconnected and mutually mediated in postwar films. These films rely on a spatiotemporal mode of suspension and indeterminacy that implicates the openness of the past and near future. Such indeterminacy is manifested as doubt, a mental disposition unfolding, like the atmosphere, as a mode of knowing, moving, morphing, and reorienting, cloud-like.

A cloud of doubt hangs over both the wartime and postwar construction of the senses and media in space and time. As a mental disposition, doubt was either a desired or unintended effect of psychological warfare, but, epistemologically, the cloud of doubt implies contingency within the quantitative register of statistics and psychotechnics, or the data sciences that Paul Edwards would later apply to meteorology, the science of the atmosphere as the computable cloud.<sup>46</sup> If psychological warfare created an ecology of the mind in its Sisyphean attempts at total knowledge and total coordination that further fragment sense and perception, postwar cinematic doubt suggests a critical transformation. Conjoining the material and aesthetic constitution of atmosphere, the cinematic construction of doubt unfolds as a new mode of knowledge, both as the symptom of and antidote to the social disconnect and distrust exacerbated by the war of nerves.

Cinematic doubt therefore reveals both the epistemological vulnerability of atmospheric knowing and its fundamental openness. Its metamorphosing movement takes us beyond the rational fence of knowledge, foregrounding the mutual constitution of senses and media, with the unseeable, inaudible, insensible, and unknowable at its center. Doubt thus unsettles the distinction between system and environment, between organism and milieu, undermining a static separation of inside and outside and subject and object of knowledge. Instead, the perpetual movement of doubt becomes the basis of *understanding*, which, as I will show, opens up a phenomenological conception of hermeneutics that reconnects the senses and media.

Postwar cinema undermines selfsame knowledge and identity by rendering the domestic interior unhomely, the space where estranged companions learn to live with each other. Thus, *Shengui yiyun*, a largely forgotten “generic” postwar film, ushers us into a cinematic war of nerves, waging the atmospheric war as a domestic “cold war,” which stages the postwar social disconnect as the precarity of both wartime psychotechnics and the postwar reconfiguration of geopolitical forces and social strata.

The film unhinges the “self” from two anchors of interiority—the domestic interior and the inner voice—to generate new ecologies of the mind. I will now focus on how these ecologies are rendered through *mise en scène* and sound design, as the minds of the characters wander around the house and split into multiple voices. In this context, the cloud of doubt is not safely contained within but is rather a perpetual, nebulous movement of the air. Its movement registers postwar anxiety and the attempts to restore the individual self and the romantic couple as the social unit of organization. The domestic “war” plays out in gendered terms: the struggle for interior coherence, both spatial and acoustic, becomes the battle between physical embeddedness and visual command, attunement and discordance.

These struggles generate the ambiguous atmosphere in the film, experienced as the dynamic between climate and weather, between place-bound constancy and a temporally brewing event. As Zhao's wife Lan strives to "air condition" the home, to create a permanent spring against the wintry weather outdoors, Zhao continues to disturb the air with his cloud of doubt and suspicion, causing the inside temperature to fluctuate in just one day across four seasons.

Home, we soon find out, is a luxurious mansion with a posh interior, a feminine space with an inviting air of mystery.<sup>47</sup> The fathomless boudoir, or *shengui*, highlighted by the film title suggests not only the recesses of the house but also intricate layers, folds, and dead ends. Lan ("orchid" in Chinese) does not simply inhabit but embodies the boudoir, which is extended throughout the house and entangled in an elaborate web of furnishing. This web frames two prominent windows in the living room, which face the main and intermediate landings of the staircase; these landings provide dramatic vantage points throughout the film (fig. 5).



FIGURE 2. Lan, half-buried in a sofa by the fireplace. *Shengui yiyun* (The cloud of doubt in the boudoir), directed by Xu Changeling (China, 1948), DVD. All images are from this DVD.

Lan's embodiment of the boudoir is established upon Zhao's homecoming. We are greeted by the elegant living room, largely composed of Edwardian furniture. A hesitant long take carries us slowly across the room, scanning the exquisite array of objects that creates layers of frames—marble columns at each entrance punctuate the space; a mahogany table is surrounded by upholstered chairs that mirror the floral patterns of the tablecloth; two candelabras guard an ancient Chinese vase, the table's centerpiece—until we reach Lan, half-buried in a sofa by the fireplace, her figure dwarfed by the gigantic and excessively sculpted mantelpiece with floral relief (fig. 2). As her face is illuminated by the warm hue of the hearth, her calm presence arouses suspicion and anxiety.

She is, of course, not a stranger to the film audience: Lan is played by Chen Yanyan, who rose to fame in the 1930s Golden Age of Shanghai cinema and graced the screen in celebrated films such as *Nanguo zhichun* (Southern spring, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1932), *Fendou* (Struggle) (dir. Shi Dongshan, 1932), and *Dalu* (The big road) (dir. Sun Yu, 1934). To some extent, the wartime choices made by both the film industry and many families across the nation are embodied by both of the leads. Xie Tian entered Shanghai's film world as a minor actor before he followed the westward relocation of the nationalist film industry to Sichuan and rose to stardom on the Chongqing stage. By contrast, Chen stayed in Shanghai as a wartime staple of "occupied cinema" and became the mistress of none other than Zhang Shankun, the powerful film entrepreneur who collaborated with the Japanese. In *Shengui yiyun*, Zhao's homecoming dramatizes the anxiety of occupation in light of the uncanny encounter between Xie Tian, the emerging actor from Chongqing, and Chen Yanyan, the "tarnished" star from Shanghai. The onscreen reunion of Chen and Xie as stars and characters heightens the challenge of reacquaintance and reconciliation, punctuated by distrust, misconception, and mystery.

This anxiety of occupation is furthered by the historical sedimentation of space, which surfaced at the site of the film studio itself, known as the Third Branch of Central Film Studio (hereafter Zhongdian sanchang). It was established in 1945 after the repossession of the Japanese-run Huabei dianying gongsi (Northeast Film Corporation). Zhongdian sanchang boasted the best facilities among the studio's three branches (the other two were in Shanghai). It maintained three shooting studios and one of only two automatic film processors in China.<sup>48</sup> It was also the first to import rear projectors from the United States in 1948. The studio's mixed legacy—its affiliation with the Propaganda Ministry (*xuanchuanbu*) and its commercial operation since 1947—was further complicated by the shadow of occupied cinema. The studio inherited not only the space and equipment but also



more than one hundred film technicians who previously worked in the Japanese studio, including *Shengui yiyun*'s cinematographer, Gao Hongtao. The studio's physical distance from Shanghai, the capital of the film industry, made it a refuge for those escaping indictment as Japanese collaborators in the film industry (*hanjian dianyingren*), including film directors such as Tu Guangqi and actresses such as Ouyang Shafei and Chen Yanyan. The studio embodied divisions between "Chongqing" and "Shanghai," between the didactic and commercial dimensions of cinema and between divergent political ideologies.

Given the multiple histories, conflicting interests, and uncertain futures facing the studio and its human capital, the atmosphere across the studio, the screen, and reality itself was particularly potent. This is especially the case in Xu Changlin's gothic horror film, *The Haunted House No. 13* (*Shisanhao xiongzhai*), which was a box-office sensation.<sup>49</sup> Made in collaboration with the small studio Yihua, the film spurred a widely publicized libel lawsuit filed by the original owner of the "haunted house," which was the prime location for the film and the residential hall for the employees of Zhongdian sanchang.<sup>50</sup> Compared to the horror and thrills generated by *Haunted House*, the atmosphere in *Shengui yiyun* seems rather light-hearted. Yet the film alternates between romantic comedy and gothic suspense thriller until Zhao plunges into paranoia.

This alternating atmosphere—generated by an elaborate set, a conspicuous play of light and shadow, and fluid camera movement—became the major selling point of the film. The cost of the set design was record-breaking; the garden and the living room alone cost 200 million *yuan*.<sup>51</sup> For the climactic scene of conflict, which involved Zhao running downstairs to the living room, Xu and the cinematographer Gao Hongtao spent two days designing tracking shots. The track was built in the shape of a meandering bridge with steep curves, in sync with the choreography of Xie Tian's movements. They spent another twenty-four hours experimenting with various shots before they started filming. The attention lavished on the set, camera angles, and lighting was publicized with great fanfare and further embellished by the contribution of Hollywood cinematographer James Wong Howe (Huang Zongzhan). Wong visited Zhongdian sanchang while in China to plan a film adaptation of Lao She's *Luotuo xiangzi* (The rickshaw boy). Wong reportedly oversaw two or three shots and adjusted the lighting and performance of the actors.<sup>52</sup> These shots may well have included Chen Yanyan's star entrance.

Lan is fully embedded in the domestic interior. Like the potted plants in every corner of the house, Lan and the objects are interwoven into layers of domestic enclosure, exerting cosmogonic forces that regulate the indoor climate as a dynamic constant. The challenge for Zhao is to confront what

FIGURE 3. Zhao searches across the balcony and encounters his own shadow. *Shengui yiyun* (1948).



Emanuele Coccia has described as “absolute interiority,” which defies the distinction between container and contained and turns interiority into a dynamic topology.<sup>53</sup> Zhao’s failure to understand this absolute interiority makes him a misfit at home. His desire to return to a container-like home perpetually shuts him out of this interiority’s slippery and folded surfaces. Zhao soon discovers that behind the boudoir door there is another door nailed shut; he gains access via the balcony that leads to a room Lan rented out to a bachelor, a college professor who recently moved out. But instead of uncovering any secret, Zhao encounters only an empty room and his own gigantic shadow (fig. 3).

Striving to rise above the web of objects and threat of physical imbrication, Zhao frequents the intermediate landing of the staircase, transforming it into an observational tower and a dramatic platform for his reconnaissance of the home’s many hidden corners. Instead of apprehending this interiority as a vital system of life, he conducts a physiognomic study of it, so that objects become potential clues. Thus, in preparing for a skating outing, the disappearance of his favorite sweater justifies a tantrum; the staging of this reaction emphasizes that *something* has been taken from this home. Chilling the room temperature and bringing in the snow from outside, Zhao blames a sobbing Lan for scarring his heart like the ice that chipped the blade of the skate.

Zhao’s frustration with domestic objects illustrates how doubt undercuts the epistemological drive of suspicion. The futility of his search is structurally implied by suspicion as a modern regime of disposition. Elisabeth Strowick compellingly argues that suspicion functions simultaneously as a modern form of knowledge and technique of power.<sup>54</sup> She suggests

a reading of suspicion by reference to *abduction*, a notion of inferential reasoning discussed by Charles Sanders Peirce. Abduction draws nonexclusive conclusions (a hypothesis) based on a combination of clues and the flash of insight. Characterized by its event-like temporality and affective intensity, abduction is a “fallible insight.” Like a (photographic) flash that comes at the cost of sight, abduction reveals the epistemological unreliability of suspicion.<sup>55</sup> For Strowick, this unreliability is built into the semiotic structure of suspicion as a “performative indexicality,” a trace that leads to other traces that defer and retrospectively produce the referent.<sup>56</sup> Secrecy thus becomes an effect instead of a prior condition, perpetuated by the schema of suspicion as a mode of knowledge production. Suspicion, Strowick points out, is “structurally object-less.”<sup>57</sup>

Strowick argues that this fallible insight, which introduces new knowledge, serves as a technique of power through self-suspicion. Given the groundlessness of suspicion and its perpetual deferral of traces, suspicion turns into an effective means of power, in the form of discipline and self-discipline. Strowick highlights the central role of suspicion in the modern



FIGURE 4. Zhao framed in a trifold mirror. *Shengui yiyun* (1948).

care of the self as self-discipline. Through the investigative apparatus of observation, examination, and interrogation, the modern modes of confession in the human sciences—pedagogy, psychoanalysis, and criminology—turn a tormenting suspicion of others on the self.<sup>58</sup>

This is clearly at play in *Shengui yiyun* when Zhao's suspicion, which drives incessant scanning of the house for clues, frequently bounces back to him in the empty stare of the objects or the abyss of the soul. In one scene, Zhao's piercing gaze into Lan's eyes, perpetuated by the camera close-up, evokes Lan's protest at being "interrogated" like a criminal but ends without an affirmation of a crime. Instead, Zhao's suspicion of others turns increasingly into self-examination and self-suspicion. This culminates in the film's climactic scene. It begins with Zhao brushing his teeth, framed in a trifold mirror that creates three adjacent close-ups of his face, like a clinical examination of multiple personalities (fig. 4). In a fit of suspicion, he searches through the boudoir and this time chances upon a Prince tobacco pipe marked with the initials "W. B." lying at the petal-shaped base of a lamp. Holding the pipe in what looks like a parody of Sherlock Holmes, he dashes out of the boudoir, rushes down the stairs, and pauses at the intermediate landing, which affords him a panoptic view of the living room (fig. 5). As his inner voice addresses the objects in the room, Zhao begins to "supersense" W. B.'s traces in each one: "this table, these chairs, these cups, and this . . ."—the camera points to Lan entering the living room, carrying a breakfast tray. An anxiety of occupation overwhelms Zhao, pushing him into paranoia.



FIGURE 5. Zhao's dramatic platform of reconnaissance, with the web-framed window in the background. *Shengui yiyun* (1948).

This paranoia, which registers the breakdown of the boundary between interiority and exteriority, accompanies him into the street, where he sees every look and hears every conversation as a mockery of his wife's infidelity; his face and body are superimposed on the streetscape that underscores his homelessness. A second clue, delivered by the mailman, exacerbates his breakdown: a letter, addressed to Lan and bearing the same W. B. initials, with a bracketed "details inside" on the envelope, plunges him further into the abyss of doubt. Sinking into the sofa, looking at the pipe on the side table, Zhao's face is encircled by a multiplication of pipes. As Zhao's interior monologue protests that the pipe follows him everywhere, an animated pipe spins out from the center of his forehead to occupy the full screen. As Zhao (his nostrils moving) starts to smell the smoke—the traces of W. B.'s presence—a few puffs of smoke rise on the screen (fig. 6). At this point, sound, vision, and smell collide; the sensory, trans-sensory, and supersensory can no longer be distinguished. The tobacco pipe, instead of serving as evidence,



FIGURE 6. Zhao's head circled by pipes, his nostrils moving to smell the smoke. *Shengui yiyun* (1948).

has trapped him in an endless loop of doubt, usurping the teleological drive for knowledge with an atmosphere of contingency. Such is the new, reflexive ecology of the mind that underscores the irrational core of its wartime counterpart, the “war of nerves” that redistributes consciousness through total organization, which ironically induces doubt and self-doubting.

This scene highlights something about Strowick’s insight that I’d like to develop further. The complex landscape of psychology, media, and social restructuring in wartime and postwar China foregrounds doubt not as a byproduct of but intrinsic to the operation of suspicion. Doubt, the twin of suspicion, is a mirror image appearing as its opposite: in contrast to suspicion’s drive toward a conclusion, entailing speed, action, and eventfulness, doubt induces inaction and suspends certainty; its temporality is marked by a slow drift, like Zhao Huaijing’s “contemplation of the present.” It is always caught between the haunting past and the indeterminate future. The more fitting Chinese term for doubt is *chiyi*, as opposed to *huaiyi* (suspicion); its emphasis on slowness and hesitancy is more contiguous with *yi Yun*—the cloud of doubt. Incidentally, *Shengui yi Yun* is also the Chinese title of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Suspicion*; this conversion of suspicion into the cloud of doubt seems fitting.

### Voices that Other: Inner Voices and the Hermeneutics of Doubt

Doubt is an existential disposition that accompanies suspicion, and inner voices are its vehicles. *Shengui yi Yun* orchestrates a quartet of four inner voices in a voice-off/-over, a double-gendered perspective involving the two protagonists and the supporting characters: Madam Yang and the male tenant, W. B. These interior monologues, specified as “O. S.” (off screen) in Xu’s screenplay, provide a specific type of voice-off to create a subjective distance from the scene; they unfold in the present tense, describing the scene, directing the subject’s movement, and filling in between conversations.<sup>59</sup> Mary Ann Doane reminds us that voice-off—the voice of a character temporarily off screen but indicated as present in the diegetic space—is never “off” but measured in visual terms in relation to the screen space. In the case of interior monologue, the simultaneity of voice and the image of the body does not reinforce what she calls the “fantasmatic body”—the illusory unity of sound and image—and its self-presence but reveals its “inner lining”: “The voice displays what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible. The voice here is the privileged mark of interiority, turning the body ‘inside-out.’”<sup>60</sup>

This interiority, in other words, is already flipped outward, its privilege perverted by the voice not as the “expression” of an ulterior interior but as

the movement of the air itself—the voice-offs in *Shengui yiyun* meander the screen space as an eerie presence, making the inner voices surround, interfere with, and create crevices in the diegetic space. This use of interior monologue as a distinct voice-off did not sit well with viewers. With the exception of W. B.'s voice-over flashback, contemporary audiences found the interior monologues excessive and jarring, undermining the actors' performances.<sup>61</sup> Interestingly, the voice-off was often referred to as *peiyin* (dubbing), or “deploying someone to narrate on the side, to explain the characters' thoughts and emotions.”<sup>62</sup>

The interior monologue is thus understood as a secondary performance, outside of and potentially detrimental to the diegesis, much like the job of Miss Yiyifeng. Put differently, *yiyifeng* constitutes a kind of voice-off in film exhibition that traverses three cinematic spaces—the diegetic space, the visible space of the screen, and the acoustic space of the theater—such that the inner voices, the privileged register of interiority, operate as a media system, a mobile loop of the self that perpetually multiplies that self. What *yiyifeng* exposes, and what the bourgeois audience never gets, is that the voice-off is a general condition of film sound. The “naturalist” insistence that the sound/image unity is disrupted by *yiyifeng* belies the fact that film sound never comes from on the screen: in film production, sound was historically produced in a separate space. In other words, Miss Yiyifeng's position mirrors that of sound recording engineers such as Chen Yanxi, the woman who recorded and mixed the sound in a room—watching the performers through a glass window and listening to the dialogue with an earphone (*yiyifeng!*), while choosing music for the scene from a shelf of music records by her side.<sup>63</sup>

The self-proximity and self-distancing of inner voices is elaborated by Denise Riley in the terms ventriloquy and autoventriloquy, with tangible political implications.<sup>64</sup> Whereas ventriloquy is inherent in any uttered language, the autoventriloquy of inner voices spells out a mechanism of power. Key to this mechanism is the *middle voice*, distinct from active or passive voice and more than a simple reflexivity. Riley draws on linguist Antoine Meillet's comparison of the middle voice to the self-performed ritual sacrifice through which I act on myself “vicariously for the priest.”<sup>65</sup> Interpellation thus acts through the “loop of *a self formally distanced from itself*,” an active passivity on the subject's part on behalf of the power from without, an automaticity confused with autonomy.<sup>66</sup>

Riley draws on the structure of language as a universal medium to debunk the myth of inner voices. Yet the rhetorical figures that Riley evokes—“internal chattering radio,” attention switching as if channel switching, and a “rapid low-grade commentary without authorship”—remind us that modern media has constituted not only language but also

ways of thinking about inner voices.<sup>67</sup> The scene of autoventriloquy enabled by the middle voice is both institutionalized and complicated by *yiyifeng* as a media system. If Miss Yiyifeng is the agent of this middle voice, the dynamic environment of *yiyifeng* that disperses the agency of the middle voice—between Miss Yiyifeng, the audience, and the actors and characters on screen so that each can speak on behalf of the other in a triangulated structure—opens up the scene of interpretation from a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to a “hermeneutics of doubt.”

Instead of the unidirectional interpretation as suspicion, *yiyifeng*, as the mediated figure of the inner voices, instantiates *understanding as doubt*—an understanding seen phenomenologically as an existential condition, a mode of knowledge-as-attunement. Martin Heidegger, who defines the method of phenomenology as hermeneutics, invokes communication as a figure or means for understanding, as “attunement-with and understanding-with.”<sup>68</sup> Pairing speaking with listening, Heidegger stresses the externality of speaking as Da-sein *expressing itself* not from an isolated within but from an “already ‘outside’,” which is “the actual mode of attunement (of mood)” pertaining to the “full disclosedness of being-in.”<sup>69</sup> In this sense, “poetic” speech, not unlike *yiyifeng*’s performance/interpretation, becomes the vehicle through which “being-in and its attunement are made known . . . by intonation, modulation, in the tempo of talk, ‘in the way of speaking.’”<sup>70</sup> Correspondingly, he evokes “listening to” as “the existential being-open of Da-sein as being-with for the other,” in the example of inner voices—“hearing the voice of the friend whom every Da-sein carries with it.”<sup>71</sup> Hearing the outside-in inner voices becomes equated with understanding: “Da-sein hears because it understands. As being-in-the-world that understands, with the others, it ‘listens to’ itself and to *Mitda-sein*, and in this listening belongs to these. Listening to each other, in which being-with is developed, has the possible ways of following, going along with, and the privative modes of not hearing, opposition, defying, turning way.”<sup>72</sup> Thus listening and speaking form a loop, an autoventriloquy that affirms not the selfsameness or a singular middle voice but an attunement of listening to, with, and against the others. This distinct mood and attunement of understanding is what I call doubt. Doubt, in the age of *yiyifeng* and mediatized inner voices, leads not to self-suspicion but to self-doubting, yoking doubt and inner voices in “the primary and authentic openness of Da-sein for its ownmost possibility of being.”<sup>73</sup>

In its enactment of doubt as an existential openness, an atmospheric mode of knowledge, *Shengui yiyun* illustrates an opportunity for understanding and reconciliation. Although suspicion perpetuates the dramatic movement of the film, like the weather, through mood swings from the comical to the horrific, antagonistic to amorous, doubt persists as the slow drifting and



ambiguous atmosphere, like the climate, that dissolves the boundaries of individuated moods and permeates the divided domestic and public spheres. This dynamic between suspicion and doubt, weather and climate, facilitated by the polyphony of inner voices caught between self and other, opens up the possibility of knowledge and experience of a shared climate. It reaches a pivotal stage when a new inner voice arrives, along with a letter.

As a wronged Lan opens the letter, a flashback begins, narrated by the still mysterious W. B., presumed by Zhao to be her illicit lover. Shot largely on location at some of the most iconic sites in Beijing, the flashback sequence, connected by a series of dissolves, is structured like four sonnets, each contained in a single mood aligned with one of the four seasons. This lyrical sequence is simultaneously a love song to Lan and a tribute to the old city of Beijing. The flashback recounts W. B.'s social outings with Lan and Mrs. Yang—spring boating and a picnic amid peach blossoms in the Summer Palace, summer tea under a locust tree, autumn dancing in the sumptuous ballroom of the Beijing Hotel, and winter ice skating in Beihai Park—which witnessed his failed attempts to express his feelings for Lan, whose thoughts keep drifting to Zhao.

The postcard images of Beijing give Lan and Zhao—who reads the letter later—momentary relief from the snowy winter and the unhomey interior, now dominated by distrust and paranoia. Moreover, the alignment of Lan's and Zhao's inner voices with the tenant's epistolary voice moves them into a space of reconciliation through a form of time travel. This allows the audience to indulge in a moment of cinematic tourism and collective nostalgia for a peaceful Beijing untouched by the ravages of war. W. B.'s narration—a wartime memory without war—reflects an imagination that drifts between a timeless past and an undetermined future. After the flashback, we hear Lan's and Zhao's inner voices expressing their anguish and doubt, and a remorseful Zhao watches a tearful Lan preparing to depart, leaving Zhao the keys to the house's many enclosed spaces. At this moment, however, the mailman rings twice. He reminds the couple to keep the door closed, in case of thieves, as he delivers a package—Zhao's favorite sweater, which he thought was "stolen," has been returned from Chongqing, its original destination, back to Lan, its sender. As Lan and Zhao reconcile, W. B., who witnesses the scene upon his unannounced visit, quietly retrieves his pipe. The letter, which always arrives at its destination, is blown into the fireplace by the wind, where it disintegrates.

As the film draws to a close, we are struck by the lyrical digression that ends with a blue sky and floating clouds. W. B.'s recollections confirm Lan's fidelity, yet the amorous and nostalgic mood—delivered by the perfect weather, the lovely settings, and the sensual texture of the voice-over—overwhelms the message. In other words, the *strange climate* of the lyrical

sequence, as much an audiovisual testimony conveyed by W. B.'s inner voice, undercuts the letter's message. As we are transported to scenic Beijing, we cannot help noticing that Lan has spent a lot of time with W. B., albeit always with Mrs. Yang present. These mediated encounters, punctuated by the seasonal structure of the sequence, transform the events into the everyday, from weather to climate. Perhaps the most intriguing detail is the ice skating incident, as we learn from the letter, which happened the day before W. B. moved out. As W. B. spins and falls on the ice, provoking Lan's laughter, we recall Zhao and Lan's earlier conflict in Lan's boudoir. Was the chip on the ice skate blade, which Zhao compares to his heart, actually caused by W. B.'s fall on the ice? But if we surrender to the blinding insight of suspicion, we miss a larger point. What matters is not whether Lan had an affair; rather, it is the strange weather—the movement of doubt through inner voices in the domestic interior—that puts in check the collective denial of wartime. This cloud of doubt is the condition of reconciliation, facilitated by the artificially perfect weather—like the ice skating scene that was shot in the studio with rear-projection footage of Beihai Park. Perhaps that's why people went to the movie theaters, where the wind of *yiyifeng* supplements the air conditioning.

### Conclusion

In an age of climate crisis and a social media maelstrom, in which the cacophony of voices continually divides into bubbles of competing realities, what lessons can we learn from a hermeneutics of doubt that reconnects weather and mind, climate and media?

As an “object out there,” climate is in crisis, but this crisis has shaped new modes of thinking and doing, creating a “climatic turn” in media operation, critical analysis, and political action. Climate is not simply the milieu; it provides us with a model for rethinking media and aesthetics that reconnects subject and society as modes of material operation, experiencing, sensing and feeling, and knowing. Climate, in other words, has become an object as well as a model and a method, an aesthetic, an affect, with real social effects. Only by thinking of climate as the nexus of mind, medium, and society can we consider “global climate change” and “affective climate change” as interconnected and integrated projects of sustainability.<sup>74</sup>

Reengaging aesthetics with media archaeology and ecology, I have situated media/climate within the transnational traffic in media practices, psychological discourse, and film. Postwar Chinese cinema suggests a hermeneutics of doubt as a new mode of knowledge that moves from causality to contingency, a spatiotemporal processing that I call “atmospheric

knowing.” This atmospheric or climatic knowing is not about the authority of total knowledge or the insatiable desire for big data. Rather, it allows for a kind of *aesthesis*—an elementary process of sensing, perceiving, and knowing through media as climate. Media and climate, in other words, are not simply objective entities out there for us to grasp; rather, they constitute each other—media creates and operates as climate while climate serves as a mode of mediation, communication, and experiencing. Media/climate teaches us to trust doubt—the slow, immersive becoming of knowledge conditioned by porosity and temporal plurality. In making sense of the sensible through perpetual temporal processing and openness, we can become newly sensitized citizens and couple climatic and social change to reach a shared understanding.

This nexus invites a return to aesthetics, which recedes on our horizon of analysis when the antihermeneutic and posthermeneutic turn in media studies shies away from “meaning” and focuses on “being,” moving from semantic and representational worlds to material and technological systems, from renditions to operations. As I have tried to show, these are not opposites but mutually constituted polemics. Meaning making, if we follow Heidegger’s existential notion of hermeneutics, is not a deduction from or a recovery of a pre-existing idea or concept but an openness to one’s being-in-the-world. The hermeneutic circle of reasoning is not a “matter of grounding by deduction but rather of laying bare and exhibiting the ground.”<sup>75</sup> The “circle” of understanding, in other words, is not a vicious circle but an ontological structure of meaning.<sup>76</sup>

If atmosphere allows us to enter this circle—to pair understanding with being through attunement and disclosure—attunement is not possible without aesthetic operation. In the context of our discussion, the hermeneutics of doubt is fundamentally an *aesthesis*, a resensitization, an education of the senses in order to make sense of the sensible. This education occurs in cinematic *mise en scène* and sound design, which are simultaneously media systems and representational universes. Together they manufacture the air that is not simply conditioned or conditioning but that becomes the means of knowledge through our attunement, and our being-in as being outside, with others. This is precisely where the material, technological articulation of air—the media atmosphere, as in wartime’s “war of nerves”—loses its battle to the aesthetic of doubt, a reflexive ecology of mind as immanent critique, that takes its cues from the medium-environment and the self that remains evolving. Importantly, this attunement requires both turning away from and turning toward others, which means that atmosphere is not a total sphere but a process of differentiating multiplicity as the condition of consenses. From *media sense*, which conflated media and senses during wartime,

to *media aesthesis*, atmosphere is ultimately the medium of perception and dwelling, the world inside which we proceed as being, outside in with others.

To think about weather and doubt together, then, is not to deny climate but to reconceive doubt as a climatic mode of knowledge that opens us to aesthetic operation and allows us to sense and make sense of climate change's natural and social implications.

## Notes

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1. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225–48.
2. See Eva Horn's critique in "Air as Medium," *Grey Room* 73 (2018): 6–25.
3. *Ibid.*, 16.
4. For an astute critique of this broad culture of "hermeneutics of suspicion," see Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago, 2015).
5. Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York, 1972).
6. Fei Mu, "Lüetan 'kongqi'" (A brief discussion of air), *Shidai dianying* 6 (1934): 22. The Sino-Japanese War intersected with World War II, with Japan signing the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in September 1940, and China joining the Allied forces in December 1941.
7. In a nuanced analysis of Fei Mu's films and aesthetic, David Wang has pointed to this paradox of materially generated atmosphere and the resort to visual devices to create an atmosphere that is not registered visually. See David Der-Wei Wang, "Fei Mu, Mei Lanfang, and the Polemics of Screening China," in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinema*, ed. Carlos Rojas (New York, 2013).
8. Xu Xingzhi, "Lun fengge yu qifen" (On style and atmosphere), *Yicong* 1, no. 1 (1943): 48.
9. Zhang Junxiang, "Daoyan de fenxi" (Analysis of directing), *Xiju shidai* 1, no. 6 (1943): 12.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. On *Stimmung* in film, see Robert Sinnerbrink, "Stimmung: Exploring the Aesthetics of Mood," *Screen* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 148–63; see also Inga Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism: Film Theory and the Question of Life* (Amsterdam, 2018), 168–93.
13. Magdalena Nowak, "The Complicated History of Einfühlung," *Argument* 1, no. 2 (2011): 301–26.
14. Matias del Campo, *Evoking Through Design: Contemporary Moods in Architecture* (Oxford, 2017), 37.
15. Leo Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 3, no. 1 (1942): 4.

16. On the neo-Confucian notion of *qi*, see *Ruxue de qilun yu gongfulun* (Philosophies of *qi* and *gongfu* in Confucian thought), ed. Yang Rubin and Zhu Pingci (Taipei, 2005).
17. See William Schaefer, *Shadow Modernism: Photography, Writing, and Space in Shanghai, 1925–1937* (Durham, NC, 2017), 30.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009): 77.
20. Xu Xingzhi, “Lun fengge yu qifen,” 47.
21. Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles, 2009), 18. During the Sino-Japanese War, China split into five geopolitical zones with separate political regimes: the Nationalist hinterland in southwest China, Japanese-occupied eastern China, the communist northwest, British-occupied Hong Kong, and foreign concessions in Shanghai. I am only focusing on the Nationalist hinterland.
22. See Weihong Bao, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis, 2015), chap. 6.
23. Chinese Periodicals Full Text Index, <https://www.cnbkys.com>.
24. Anonymous, “Xinyu jieshi: shenjingzhan” (New lexicon: war of nerves), *Guojijian* 1, no. 12 (1940): 372; Zhang Yinhan, “Dazhan yu shenjingzhan” (The world war and war of nerves), *Zhongguo gonglun* 9, no. 6 (1943): 5–10.
25. On the psychological dimension of the war on nerves, see He Zi, “Shenjingzhan: shishi mingci xiaoshi” (War of nerves: brief explanations of news vocabulary), *Xuesheng bao* 7 (1946): 2; and Luo Jing, “Shenjingzhan” (War of nerves), *Xin minsheng* 1, no. 7 (1944): 11. For references to old and new communication technologies as “nerves” of war, see the two-page photo report titled “Zhendi shang de shenjing” (Nerves on the battlefield), *Dadi huabao* (Tati) (April 1939): 34–35.
26. For more on industrial psychology in the broader context of “the science of work,” see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York, 1990); and Zhou Xiangeng and Chen Hanbiao, “Zhongguo gongye xinlixue zhi xingqi” (The rise of industrial psychology in China), *Zhongguo xinlixue bao* 1, no. 2 (1936): 47–73.
27. Guo Yicen, “Choubei ‘Zhongyang xinli yanjiusuo’ zhi jianyi” (Suggestions for the plans for Academia Sinica’s Institute of Psychology), *Jiaoyu zazhi* 21, no. 3 (1929): 11–27; Wang Jingxi, “Zhongguo xinlixue de jianglai” (The future of psychology in China), *Duli pinglun* 40 (1933): 12–15.
28. Fu Boning, “Kangzhan qizhong xinli xuejia de gongzuo” (Psychologists’ role in the war of resistance), *Jiaoyu yanjiu* 80 (1937): 41–52.
29. Ni Zhongfang, “Zhanshi xinlixue” (Wartime psychology), *Jiaoyu yanjiu* 79 (1937): 33.
30. Yu Wenwei, “Kangzhan ruhe yunyong xinlixue” (How to apply psychology during the war of resistance), *Qiantu zach* 5, no. 9/10 (1937): 52–59.
31. Yong Zhong, “Shenjingzhan” (War of nerves), *Kexue huabao* 8, no. 1 (1941): 1.
32. Law Kar, “Zhanhou Shanghai he Xianggang de heise dianying yu jinbu dianying de xianghu guanxi” (The relationship between postwar Shanghai and Hong Kong noir films and progressive film), *Dangdai dianying* 11, no. 1 (2014): 65–70.
33. “Yiyifeng zai Daguangming” (Yiyifeng in the Grand Theater), *Qingqing dianying* 4, no. 33 (1939): 2; Shi, “Chuanshengtong” (Gossip), *Yazhou yingxun* 4, no. 3 (15 January 1941): 1.
34. Hua, “Yiyifeng,” *Zhongxue shidai* 1, no. 7 (1939): 75–76.

35. Wai Zhui, “Yuhuiji” (Zigzags), *Yihai zhoukan* 7 (1939): 12.
36. Wei Aixue, “Yiyifeng,” *Jia* 42 (1949): 190.
37. Jonathan Sterne borrowed the term “listen alone together” from William Kenny, *Recorded Music in American Life: The Phonograph and Popular Memory, 1890–1945* (New York, 1999), 4; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC, 2003), 163, 160.
38. See Zhang Zuping, “Jingong lide Yiyifeng xiaojie” (Miss Yiyifeng in the forbidden palace), *Funü* 11 (1947): 18.
39. Ma Li, “Haolaiwu zhuhua daiyanren: Wo zuo yiyifeng boyinyuan” (Hollywood’s Chinese spokesperson: my job as a yiyifeng broadcaster), *Jia* 23 (1947): 436.
40. Tang Luo, “Yiyifeng yu Zhongwen zimu” (Yiyifeng versus Chinese subtitles), *Dongfang ribao*, 9 January 1949, 3; Chunqiu, “Hengsha yiyifeng” (How I loathe yiyifeng), *Zhonghua shibao*, 19 July 1947, 3.
41. Chunqiu, “Hengsha yiyifeng,” 3.
42. Denise Riley, “‘A Voice Without a Mouth’: Inner Speech,” *Qui Parle* 14, no. 2 (2004): 94.
43. On these homecoming films, see Weihong Bao, “Diary of a Homecoming: (Dis)Inhabiting the Theatrical in Postwar Shanghai Cinema,” in *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, ed. Zhang Yingjin (Chichester, UK, 2012), 377–99.
44. On postnostalgia, see Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 92.
45. On the early history of the trench coat, see Jane Tynan, “Military Dress and Men’s Outdoor Leisurewear: Burberry’s Trench Coat in First World War Britain,” *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 2 (2011): 139–56.
46. Paul N. Edwards, *A Vast Machine: Computer Models, Climate Data, and the Politics of Global Warming* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).
47. Wu Hung defines “feminine space” as a changing spatial construct in Chinese art that embeds the female body within her environment; Wu Hung, *Zhongguo huihua zhongde “nüxing kongjian”* (Feminine space in Chinese painting) (Beijing, 2018).
48. “Zhongdian zuotian zhounian jinian, sheyingchangli canguan de Ren luoyi bujue” (Central film studio’s anniversary since turning commercially run, numerous people visit the studio), *Dagongbao*, 17 April 1948, 4.
49. Xu Changlin’s *Haunted House* was a collaboration with another small studio.
50. He Haisheng, “Chen Yanyan Beiping zhu xiongzhai” (Chen Yanyan lives in the haunted house in Beijing), *Tiebao*, 26 March 1948, 4.
51. Xiaodian, “Shengui yiyu, bujing haohua” (Extravagant set for *Shengui yiyun*), *Chengbao*, 15 May 1948, 4.
52. “‘Shengui yiyun’ chunü jingtou, Huang Zongzhan zuguo xiaolao” (“Shengui yiyun” initial shots, Huang Zongzhan contributes to the motherland), *147 Pictorial* 20, no. 2 (1948): 9; “Huang Zongzhan canguan ‘Zhongdian’ Beiping sanchang, wei ‘shengui yiyun’ kechuan sheying” (Huang Zongzhan visits “Zhongdian” Studio 3 in Beiping and guest-shoots film for “Shengui yiyun”), *Moli* 1, no. 3 (1948): 10. These two reports did not specify where in the film his shots occur.
53. Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan Montanari (Cambridge, 2019), 70.
54. Elisabeth Strowick, “Comparative Epistemology of Suspicion: Psychoanalysis, Literature, and the Human Sciences,” *Science in Context* 18, no. 4 (2005): 649–69.

55. Ibid., 651. Strowick points out the direct connection between Charles Sanders Peirce's metaphor of flash and the photographic medium.
56. Ibid., 654, 657, 658.
57. Ibid., 658.
58. Ibid., 660.
59. Xu Changlin, "Shengui yiyun," serialized in *Heping ribao*, 2–25 September 1948.
60. Mary Ann Doane, "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (1980): 41.
61. "'Shengui yiyun' de jiaoyu yiyi," (The educational significance for *Shengui yiyun*), *Yishibao*, 25 September 1948, 3.
62. Tian Shi, "Kan 'Shengui yiyun'" (On viewing *Shengui yiyun*), *Dagongbao*, 7 October 1948, 7.
63. *Huawai xinsheng: Chen Yanxi koushu lishi* (Off-screen sound: oral history of Chen Yanxi), ed. Chen Mo (Beijing, 2016), 41.
64. Riley, "'A Voice Without a Mouth,'" 57–104.
65. Ibid., 74.
66. Ibid., emphasis original.
67. Ibid., 58, 72.
68. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY, 1996), 152.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid., 153.
71. Ibid.
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Dora Zhang, "Notes on Atmosphere," *Qui Parle* 27, no. 1 (June 2018): 123, 129.
75. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 6.
76. Ibid., 143–44.