More than six decades have passed. Looking at the papers on my desk that I have finished copyediting, I do not know if I am in a dream or reading someone else's story. What we went through was absurd and strange, and yet it was utterly ordinary for our generation of intellectuals. . . . What Congwen and I shared—this life—was it ultimately happy or unhappy? This is a question that cannot be answered. I didn't understand him, not fully. Later I began to understand him a little, but it is only now, after compiling and editing the papers he left behind, that I really came to comprehend who he was, and the heavy burdens he bore throughout his life. . . . The more of his writings in this moldering pile of papers I flip through, even if they are fragmented or unfinished, the more I realize how precious this man was. Too late! . . . I respectfully offer this book to those readers who loved him. At the same time, I will lay bare a little of my own feelings.

In 1949, Shen Congwen's renowned literary career terminated with an attempted suicide, exclusion from the Chinese Writers' Association, and, a few years later, the destruction and prohibition of his works in both Mainland China and Taiwan. Thus erased from Chinese literary histories, Shen Congwen devoted the second half of his life, the next forty years, to . . .

1 Zhang Zhaohe, "Afterword" (Houji), in Shen Congwen jiashu, 740.
years, to the preservation and study of archeological artifacts, writing cultural historical books and articles, personal and professional letters, a few classical-style poems (which were intended to be, but failed as, propaganda) as well as the requisite “dossier genres” of reports and confessions. Beyond a few self-criticisms published in newspapers, Shen Congwen’s audience shrank from the broad reading public to a small number of cultural bureaucrats, a handful of friends and family members, and the policing eyes of authorities in successive political campaigns. Posthumously published in The Complete Works of Shen Congwen (Shen Congwen quanji 沈從文全集) in 2002, Shen’s post-1949 writings have only recently begun to receive some scholarly attention—as clues to his biography, as evidence of his literary death, and as fragmented reflections of his historical and aesthetic vision.2

It is difficult to draw a clear line between Shen Congwen’s private letters as biographical sources and his published writings as “literary works.” Rather than reclaiming his letters as works of literature in their own right, I propose an epistolary reading method that takes into account not only the form and content of the letters, but also the circumstances of their production, transmission, and reception. This reading method attends to the intersubjective nature of these literary artifacts that melds together the subjectivities of the author, his subjects, and his readers, so that even misreading and belated recognition become essential parts of their story. For almost six decades, Shen’s wife Zhang Zhaohe 張兆和 (1910–2003) was the primary recipient of his letters, but as she suggests in the “Afterword” cited in the epigraph, her reading and understanding of them was often belated. As well as a recipient, she turned out to be a trustee of these letters. In selecting, editing, and publishing them for a wider readership of later generations, she also served as a “postal service”—a medium through which these letters were transmitted, filtered, and alloyed with historical patina and sentiments of her own.

This essay examines Shen Congwen’s correspondences with his wife and children in the Mao era, as published in his Complete Works as well as in a separate volume entitled The Family Letters of Shen Congwen (Shen Congwen jiashu 沈從文家書), edited by Shen Congwen’s second son Shen Huchu 沈虎雏.3

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2 Huangfu, “Roads to Salvation”; Li Yang, Shen Congwen de zuihou sishi nian; David Wang, Shuqing chuantong yu Zhongguo wenxue, 3–130; Xiaojue Wang, Modernity with a Cold War Face, 54–107; Zhang Xinying, Shen Congwen jingdu, 173–275.
3 Even taken together, the Complete Works and Family Letters only provide us with a fraction of the total correspondence between Shen Congwen and his family. Both sources have also transcribed rather than made facsimiles of the original manuscripts, so I do not know if the editors have also excised passages within the letters.