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On the Varieties of Factoid:
New Ones Bred
of Phantom *Polski* and Snarky *Deutsch*,
Old Ones Engendered
by the Quirks of Gertrude Stein and Mi Fu

by
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On the Varieties of Factoid:
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By Conal Boyce

White Bear Lake, Minnesota

Suppose you grow up in Montevideo, and your mother owns a volume entitled *Poemas completos de Edgar Allan Poe*, translated from the English by one Esteban Ponce. One day at the National Library of Uruguay, you look up Poe's *Complete Poems* and find that no English edition contains more than seventy items, while your mother's volume boasts eighty-five poems. "Could it be," you wonder, "that only in *el mundo hispanohablante* can one know the full scope of Poe's poetry, while those Anglophones in *el Norte* have never seen it all?" Etc. In this scenario, whenever you see the statement "Ponce's volume is a translation of Poe's *Complete Poems*," it will rankle. Given the rare, wrong-way disparity (i.e., one that would seem to recommend the "translated" volume as canonical), you will come to regard the statement as an especially irksome factoid. (The word *factoid* can itself be problematic, I realize; if you would first like to review its definitions, you will find them all in the appendix.)

The example concerning Poe just given is not real; but the actual publication mystery that I'm thinking of is even wackier than the fairy tale above. Yet if I close one eye to its basic bibliographic morass, I may distill the essence of the factoid in the following brief (but false) assertion: "*One Human Minute* is Leach's translation of *Biblioteka XXI wieku* by Lem." At the next level of detail, the (actual) "wrong-way discrepancy" that I have in mind is a fifteen-page block of the Polish original that — how do we say this? — simply fails to exist, just like the mythical fifteen Poe poems above. To summarize the two scenarios, one invented and the other real, Ponce:Poe :: Leach:Lem.

Nowadays it is natural to associate factoids with the Internet, but many such distortions of the truth existed long before Google Corporation (1998) or the World Wide Web (1991). For example, the

false assertion about the Lem/Leach translation of 1986 is thirty years old as I write. (See Swirski 1997: 11 and 45, where Swirski first then Lem himself, in an interview, keep the factoid alive and well.) Being so deeply entrenched, it will likely live on forever, never mind that it perpetuates an absurd situation whereby Lem's readership in his native Poland are the ones who have never seen the work in its entirety, while those of us who read its alleged "translation" into English are the ones who know the whole work — arguably the most important that Lem wrote, by the way, which is why I noticed the gaping hole in the first place. (Quite aside from the factoid itself, one might ask: But *how* did those fifteen pages go missing? When I pointed out the discrepancy to the Lem Foundation at lem.pl, they merely said, in effect, "Yes, you are correct; we confirm the discrepancy that you have noted." Swirski (private communication) proposes that the pages in question [Lem/Leach 1986b: 22–36, which comprise sections II and III of "One Human Minute," in *One Human Minute*], might have been written by Lem *in* English from the get-go.)

I will not cite additional factoids of this relatively clean-cut variety ("fifteen pages are missing"), since the reader can readily supplement my example with his/her own. Instead, we focus for the remainder of this piece on a type that I call the *fuzzy factoid*, one that involves multiple readings of a text (or multiple takes on a changed Chinese name). We may take the following as the mother of all fuzzy factoids: "Referring to the [whole] City of Oakland, Gertrude Stein declaimed, 'There is no there there.'" Latched onto by Berkeley/S.F. partisans, no doubt, the (assumed) put-down of Oakland was soon being celebrated around the globe by all cognoscenti (one of whom I encountered in Vienna, for example), as they nodded their heads knowingly about a wit so sharp that it could put down a whole drear metropolis with only five syllables.

Read Stein's words in context, however, and we learn that they refer quite simply to the disappointment of returning after too long an absence to one's childhood neighborhood only to find it transformed beyond recognition. It's just that sort of experience that might be recorded in *everybody's autobiography*, is it not? (Recommended: In Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, read pages 69 and 289–291; in Oakland, walk from Lake Merritt to the corner of 13th Avenue at East 25th. It's a beautiful city.)

Raffiniert ist der Herr Gott, aber boshaft ist er nicht.

(Subtle is the Lord, but malicious He is not.)

—Albert Einstein

Pais 1982: 113.

Our next fuzzy factoid centers on the bon mot of Einstein's that is shown above along with an English rendition. (Abraham Pais was a life-long friend and colleague of Einstein's, also his official biographer. N.B. The aphorism in question was not written down by Einstein but spoken by him in 1921, then subsequently transcribed; consequently, there are variations in both its orthography and punctuation: both *Herr Gott* and *Herrgott* occur in Pais, for instance; see p. vi.)

Encountered out of context, the sentence comes across as mild and Yoda-like, a timeless pearl of wisdom. But as we learn more about it, by reconstructing its historical context, we realize that it might have been the very opposite sort of utterance, colored by innuendo and peevishness. By reading Pais: 303–308 and 113 (in that order), we can begin to see the genesis and the wholly unexpected purport of those famous nine words. First comes the question of light-bending. In 1907, Einstein believes light-bending by the sun must occur, but it is surely far too subtle ever to be measured. As of 1911, he decides that the bending can be measured, after all, and he even predicts its value: $87/100$ of a second (= 0.000241 degrees). The plot is then thickened by a pair of solar eclipses, in 1912 and 1914, which have the potential to confirm his conjecture, except that neither is properly observed, alas. In 1915, he signs a letter, "Your infuriated Einstein" (which, as Pais remarks, is out of character). Next, thanks to other vagaries of history, Einstein is saved the embarrassment of publishing his Newton-compliant value of 0.87, which he emends (in that same year, 1915) to 1.74 seconds, having now factored in the (Einsteinian) curvature of space itself. Two more frustrations lie ahead. In Venezuela, a 1916 eclipse eludes observation, and in the United States, observations of a 1918 eclipse are inconclusive. Not until 1919 do a pair of expeditions to Sobral and Principe confirm his 1907 qualitative conjecture and his 1915 quantitative prediction.

Now, assuming you believed in a *Herrgott* and were intent on discerning if His personality were *raffiniert* (subtle) or *boshaft* (malicious), how would *you* have voted at the end of that twelve-year saga? I believe many would lean toward *boshaft*. Hold that thought, please. Einstein's bent-light

project, which spanned 1907–1919, provides the backdrop for the story. But to grasp the purport of the “*Raffiniert ... boshaft ...*” sentence, we need also to be aware of the roughly contemporaneous “aether-wind” workers: During the period 1900–1921 there was the Michelson-Morley zero result, followed by Dayton Miller’s tiny *non-zero* result for aether-drift, to the tune of 1.5 “interference fringes.” On hearing of Miller’s non-zero result in 1921, Einstein, in effect, has the following reaction: “Only in a world created by a *boshaft* God could there be something *so* excessively subtle and elusive as these ‘1.5 fringes’ of Dr. Miller’s.”

But think about it: How is “1.74 seconds” (= 0.000483 degrees) not just as subtle and elusive as “1.5 fringes”? Yet Einstein perversely accepts his 1.74 seconds as the work of a God who is not *boshaft* but *raffiniert*. To me, his stance on the matter makes no sense; it had to have been driven by emotion. Moreover, his stance is disingenuous. In stating “*Raffiniert ... boshaft ...*” he seems to be saying that his own work with the bending of light was *not* a twelve-year ordeal that made him feel (understandably) “infuriated” (v.s.); rather, it was a smooth and orderly project, carried out under the pleasant mien of a benevolent God. From that falsely lofty position, he then casts Miller’s twenty years of labor as quixotic folly, as if to say Miller’s industrious efforts were qualitatively distinct from (and somehow inferior to or absurd beside) his own. One final piece of context: Note that if the aether does exist, that puts the kibosh on Einstein’s theory of relativity. (Eventually, over the decades, all of Miller’s “non-zero values” were revisited and explained as errors, of course, but that outcome is not relevant here as we focus on the historical matrix of 1921.) I say Einstein was being catty and disingenuous, and it just happens that the words he chose *also* work, when heard without context, as a lofty-sounding aphorism of Alpine purity, suitable for Yoda-speak or framing. (In fact the words were later engraved in stone above a fireplace at Yale. In connection with that event, Einstein himself provided exegesis, in 1930. But I find that it adds little to our discussion; the exegesis can be found in Pais: vi and 114n.)

In summary, it strikes me that we have here the inverse of the Gertrude Stein case. Her “no there there” was written in all innocence, with a *narrow* scope relating to *private* frustrated nostalgia, yet it was “heard” by the world intelligentsia as sweeping, stentorian, dismissive. Conversely, the “*Raffiniert ... boshaft ...*” remark was imbued with pettiness and colored by snarkiness, yet “heard” by the laity as something so uplifting that Einstein’s biographer could not resist using it as the title of his book: “*Subtle Is the Lord...*”

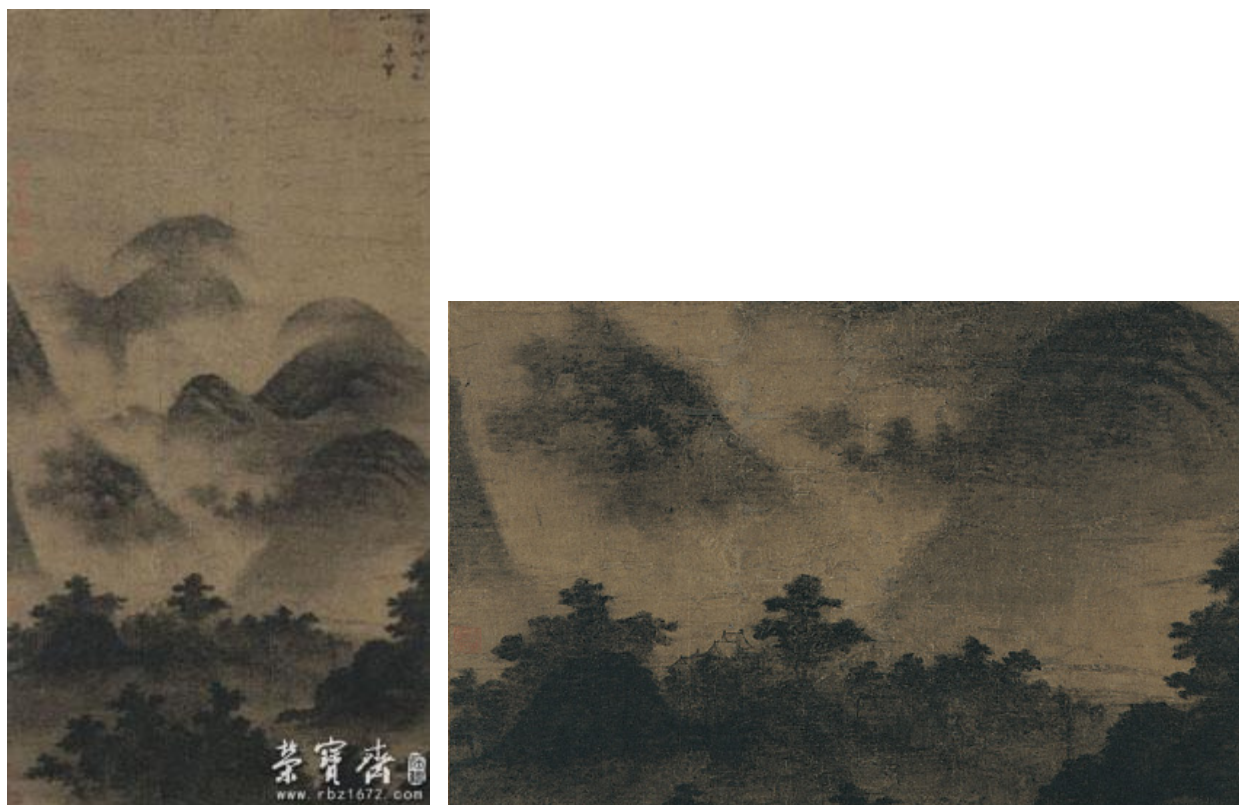


Figure 1a: Pavilion of the Rising Clouds; Figure 1b: detail

As prelude to our next “fuzzy factoid,” please refer to Figure 1a, Yúnqǐ lóu tú (雲起樓圖 / “Pavilion of the Rising Clouds”). Here I must confess that the factoid in question is one under which I myself labored for more than half a century. From 1957 to 2017, I was secure in my belief that the landscape shown in Figure 1 had been painted by or was attributed to or was “in the style of” a Song Dynasty master known as Mi Fei. But the name in question is actually Mi Fu; there is no Mi Fei (probably: see discussion below). That mistake of mine was partly a generational thing. For instance, in the following books that I have on hand, most of which are old (since I was born in 1943), we find “Mi Fei” used throughout: Chiang (1938: 68, 82, 221); *Gwoyeu Tsyrdian* (國語辭典) (1936–1947, I: 355); Munsterberg (1955: 45); Lee (1964: 349–352); Sullivan (1967: 156, 187–188, 211); Yung (2008: 28, 175). (In these particular books, whose publication dates span seven decades, the sole hint of variation is “(or Mi Fu)” in Sullivan 1967: 187.) For contrast, consider the following monographs on Mi, all of which eschew “Fei” in favor of “Fu” (or French “Fou”) in their titles: Vandier-Nicolas 1964, Ledderose 1979, Sturman 1997.

But my mistake was also due to complacency, and a missed signal: in one of my graduate school classes in 1972, Mi's name came up in an historical text, whereupon Professor Achilles Fang wrote 芾 and 黻 on the whiteboard and said that 芾 was an abbreviated form of 黻, which was Mi's real name, pronounced Fù. (That is the correct reading of the latter character, but the character itself was a curious, not to say erroneous, choice in that context; see below.) I thought his remark important enough that I copied the characters down; on the other hand, I also suspected that he was just showing off his fabled encyclopedic memory, and had no substantive point to make. There I was mistaken: it turns out that studying the master's name-change from 米黻 to 米芾 is practically a cottage industry. (However, starting from Fù 黻 specifically, not from Fú 黻, seems to put my professor in a tiny minority. One may try to bring him into the fold by recalling the phrase fūfú wénzhāng (黻黻文章), which synthesizes the four kinds of 亞-like embroidered patterns on official robes, colored white/black, black/green, green/red, and red/white, respectively; see Feng: 29. (We shall return to these 亞-like patterns when discussing Figure 2. Note that they are sometimes called *fǔxíng* (斧形 / “ax-shaped”) instead; see the entry for *fǔ* 黻 in the *Gwoyue Tsyrdian* (國語辭典 / *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*) I: 516, hereafter referred to as “GYTD.”)

Through most of the nineteenth century and all of the twentieth century, it was assumed that Mi (1051–1107) made his name change in 1091, i.e., when he was forty-one years old, or, by non-Chinese reckoning, at age forty (a mid-life crisis?). During that period, the authority for “1091” had been the *Mǐ Hǎiyuè niánpǔ* (米海岳年譜 / *Chronicle of Mi Haiyue*), compiled by Wēng Fānggāng (翁方綱) (1733–1818). But in 2007 a carefully formulated challenge to Weng's methods was published by Zhū Liàngliàng (朱亮亮). Zhu's thesis is more than academic: uncritically following Weng, the curators' dogma had long been: “If a piece is dated before 1091 but signed with 芾 [rather than 黻], it must be a fake.” On p. 107, Zhu cites a specific painting, dated 1088, that fell prey to this logic. See also the three passages with *yànjì* (贗迹 / counterfeit artifact) in Zhu: 108–109. (Caution: on page 109, there is a printer's error showing “1094” for “1091.”)

Using Mi's *writings* as a new source of evidence (as distinct from Mi Fu artifacts, on which Weng relied exclusively), Zhu demonstrates that as early as 1085, Mi was already using 芾 (p. 110). He also adduces evidence for a period when Mi was using the two names concurrently (元祐三年[...]黻和芾并行; Zhu: 110). See also his wry comment on Weng's forced interpretation of “以芾字行” at the

bottom of p. 109, which is reprised in the conclusion, on p. 107 [sic]. Better yet, Zhu finds a letter dated 1091 in which Mi uses 黻 and 芾 *together*, in that order, as if to formalize the transition; bottom of page 110.

Along with his refutation of the when-dogma (or factoid if you like), Zhu includes some ruminations on why Mi changed his name: 黻 has immediate connotations of officialdom and city life while 芾 suggests a retreat from politics into the hills and mountains (Zhu: 110, paraphrase). If we judged that idea only against the definitions cited near the end of this section (from GYTD I: 118, 429, 509), it would sound reasonable and complete. But it turns out there is much more to the story, touching on matters of ethnicity and Han bias. In his 1989 dissertation, Peter Sturman proposes an additional (and more fundamental) motivation for the name change, the essentials of which reappear in his 1997 book as follows:

A desire to shed familial origins also underlies Mi Fu’s attempt to change his name [...] just as [he] was settling into his life in Runzhou. [...] As a note by Mi Fu reveals, his surname was also involved, [along with] an extremely clever if dishonest pun: “Fu Fu 芾芾: this is a merging of personal name and surname. The surname of the kingdom of Chu was Mi 米, [with] 𠂔 [being] the ancient character. [Next, if we] bend the ends of the lower horizontal stroke [we] have 芾.” [...] [Thus] by sleight of hand, a Turkic tribe [from Sogdiana, now known as Uzbekistan] becomes the original people of Chu [in the South]. Here is Huang Tingjian’s reaction to Mi Fu’s nonsense: “... Fu 黻 and Fu 芾 can be interchanged, but Mi 𠂔 is the surname of Chu [...] A surname is something that cannot be changed under any circumstance. Just because the sounds [of 米 and 𠂔] are similar is no justification for mixing them and making them one.” (Sturman 1997: 92–93. The bracketed inset about a Sogdian origin is from Sturman: 56; my thanks to Victor Mair for pointing out that passage to me.)

In case you puzzled over the phrase “surname of Chu,” here are some excerpts from a dictionary to round out the picture for the rare character 𠂔:

Its primary reading is *mīe*, meaning *yáng míng* (羊鳴 / “the bleating of sheep”); its secondary reading is *mǐ*, meaning *Zhōu shí Chǔ xìng* (周時楚姓 / “the surname of [the progenitor of] the Chu State of the Zhou [Dynasty] era”).

— after GYTD I: 360, I: 356.

The focus of a 2016 article by Shàng Lěimíng and Lù Défù is the seal-character(s) used by Mi Fu (米芾) to represent the second character of his name.



Figure 2: A representative ‘芾’ seal from Shang/Lu: 140

Shang and Lu have gathered an impressive amount of data, including seventeen images similar to the one reproduced here as Figure 2. In the body of the article, they present their data in an objective manner, yet their “abstract” and “concluding remarks” carry a curiously incongruous tone, as if to scold the Master, dead these nine centuries. In the abstract, he is chided for having crafted an outré-looking seal-character whose twisty meander is taken by some to be 芾, by others to be 黻, and by others to be yà 亞 (Shang/Lu: 138). The burden of their study is to determine which of these readings is correct; they conclude that Mi’s intention was to present a *diézhuan* (疊篆) form of 芾 (141), grousing however that his specific way of implementing it is so “chop-ized” (*yìnhuà* / 印化) in its abstraction as to destroy the identity of the 芾 character (143). As for some people reading Mi’s seal-character as yà 亞, the authors’ search for the “correct” versus “incorrect” interpretation might strike us as odd, since some of their own valuable research shows that there is a real (not happenstance) linkage between 亞 and 黻. Thus, at one point they themselves remark, “黻是古代禮服上綉的黑與青相間的亞形花紋” (“The word *fú* 黻 denotes the greenish-black 亞-shaped pattern embroidered on ceremonial robes of yore”). And subsequently they cite the following passage: “黻謂兩己相背, 謂綉己字, 兩己字相背也” (“The word *fú* 黻 means ‘two 己-shapes back-to-back’; that

is, the character 己 is embroidered as a mirrored pair [the combined effect of which suggests, again, the 亞-shape]] (Shang/Lu: 141, emphasis added). (My earlier comments on the phrase fǔfú wénzhāng also bear directly on the 亞/鞞 linkage, of course.) As for their displeasure with Mi’s aesthetic sense: while a major part of Mi’s identity was clearly as “artist,” he was also a professional eccentric (or perhaps an involuntary one, à la Glenn Gould?). So one should hardly be surprised if sometimes his value system allows the goofy to trump the gorgeous. Perhaps we should regard his unorthodox seals as likely components of the Fu Fu 芊芊 game summarized above.

Closely related to the question of when and why Mi changed his name, there is interest also in how ‘葑’ should be pronounced, Fú or Fèi. And that leads to the question of how the incorrect reading “Mi Fei” might have arisen in the first place. Let’s take a stab at that next. Look up ‘葑’ in the dictionary and you find that its pronunciation is *fèi*, and that it follows immediately on *fèi* 肺 “lungs”; GYTD I: 428–429. Seeing 肺 and 葑 side by side in this way, one could easily form the impression that “肺 and 葑 are married by the rare phonetic 市.” But that would be illusory. In fact, 市 is its own (rare) character, pronounced *fú*; see GYTD I: 509 where *fú* 市 appears immediately before 葑 (in the latter’s secondary listing). Thus, “鞞 葑 葑 and 市 are all read *fú*,” notes Fēng Chángxī (1996: 30). And if 市 is (also) a “phonetic,” then it is a phonetic with a severely split personality, operating sometimes as FEI (in 肺) and sometimes as FU (in 葑), and never the twain shall meet — *unless* spuriously, as the *assumed* “phonetic FEI in 葑.” (The rare character 市 is easily mistaken for *shì* 市. Note the admonition “市 (不是 ‘市’)” in Feng: 30, and the remark “按: ‘市’字一橫未出头” (“Note: In the ‘市’ character, [beyond the] horizontal stroke there is no ‘head’ protruding [as a separate dot; rather, there is only the shape of a vertical line going *straight through* the horizontal line.]”) in Zhu: 109. Tip: To override the ubiquitous 市-shape, which tends to usurp even a legitimate 市 character, try applying a font such as MS Mincho to force the desired 市-shape.)

So, we’ve found the character 葑 in the *fèi*-block of the dictionary. But we have yet to speak of its meaning since it has *no definition there*. Rather, for semantic content, one is referred from GYTD I: 429 to the compound word *bifèi* (蔽葑) on I: 118, whose definition is “small appearance [of dense leaves]” from a line in the *Shī Jīng* 詩經; and from I: 429 one is referred also to *fú* (on I: 509) as the secondary reading of 葑. In this secondary reading, the character 葑 is defined as [1] “the flourishing of foliage” (草木盛) and [2] “an alternate for *fú* 鞞” (ceremonial knee-pads) — *not* as “an alternate for

fú 黻” (ceremonial blue and black robe), as we might expect in the context of the 米黻/米芾 name-change business. Nonetheless, both 黻 and 黻 are present on that same page, I: 509, with 黻 being cross-indexed as the second definition for 黻. Thus the circle closes, just barely.

From the ever-pretzeling relationship of the various characters and readings and definitions as sketched out above, we can see well enough how the “Mi Fei error” might have arisen. But doesn’t the picture presented above also suggest that there will always be *some* room for starting up another round of discussion? Perhaps, but with our earlier discussion of a false “phonetic” (the *assumed* phonetic FEI in 芾 when juxtaposed with *fèi* 肺), I think we’ve stumbled on the particular quirk at the heart of the system that may be tagged as *the* culprit. Between that and the case made by Feng, I find myself quite persuaded of the “Mi Fu” reading for now. Feng’s argument is based in part on statistics he compiled from sixty-nine letters sent by Lǚ Xùn (鲁迅) to Xǔ Shòusháng (许寿裳), courtesy name Jífú (季黻). To say more about Feng’s hilarious piece would be to put a spoiler in a film review, so I’ll leave it at that. For those who might prefer a more sober rationale for accepting one reading or the other, we can always turn to the museum where the painting shown in Figure 1 resides. Currently that would be the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., which has: “(傳) 米芾 Mi Fu, attr.” (accessed online 23 August 2016). For a treatment of the roughly “opposite” case, in connection with Bā Jīn (巴金), courtesy name Fèigān (芾甘) (really), see Zhōu Yǒubīn 2016. As for the question of *when* the “Mi Fei error” arose — I should think that could have happened any time between 1100 and 1900. If we keep an eye out for guidelines or debates expressed in terms of *fǎnqiè* (反切) spelling, buried somewhere in the vast historical record, perhaps the gap eventually can be narrowed.

POSTSCRIPT

If “factoids” as a topic all by itself strikes you as curious, that is because this essay started out life as part of a much larger project called “The Emperor’s New Information,” still unpublished. That piece would have provided an overview of all aspects of proto-data, data, factoids, and so-called “information theory” (a term that is itself, by the way, the very king of all pernicious factoids). If you are interested in that larger subject, I refer you to the book-length appendices that treat it at the back of Boyce, *The Chemistry Redemption* (2010).

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Many thanks to Dr. Bell Yung (榮鴻曾) for putting me in touch with Zhū Liàngliàng (朱亮亮) in Nanjing, who in turn made me aware of the articles by Fēng Chángxī (封常曦), Zhōu Yǒubīn (周有斌), and Shàng Lù. I am grateful to the SPP reviewers for pointing out the books by Vandier-Nicolas and Ledderose and Sturman. Sturman's work in particular adds a whole new dimension to the discussion.

APPENDIX: “FACTOID” DEFINED

“An item of unreliable information that is reported and repeated so often that it becomes accepted as fact.”

— en.OxfordDictionaries.com.

“The *Washington Times* [...] defined factoid as ‘something that looks like a fact, could be a fact, but in fact is not a fact.’ An example is the belief that the Great Wall of China is visible from the moon.”

— The Guardian,
TheGuardian.com/media/mind-your-language/2014/jan/17/mind-your-language-
factoids.

As for the coinage, that seems to have occurred here, with a slightly different meaning back then:

“Factoids [...], that is, facts which have no existence before appearing in a magazine or newspaper, creations which are not so much lies as a product to manipulate emotion in the Silent Majority....”

—Mailer, in *Marilyn* (1973). — Online Etymology Dictionary
www.etymonline.com

“The term factoid can, in common usage, mean [1] a false or spurious statement presented as fact; [2] a true, if brief or trivial, item of news or information.”

— Wikipedia, repunctuated.

COMMENT

It appears that certain people, having encountered the word *factoid* in all innocence, ventured a guess that it *might* mean *fact-let*; therefore, a second definition had to be appended. Thus, definition [2], when it made its eventual appearance on the scene, was *itself* a factoid. And it still is, relative to definition [1].

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