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‘Modest’ and ‘Faithful’: Centering Pseudonyms in Fiction in Early Twentieth Century Chinese Periodicals

Zhenkai Tong

Some people say that young people do not commit suicide, but rather that the old society kills young people. Yuwo can be said to be killed by the evils of society. Alas, he is dead! I am afraid he will not be the only one who will die like this![1]

Mrs. Huang is indeed a poor person who has a difficult life. But what of her knowledge and perseverance? She is not comparable to those poor women who commit suicide. She is not comparable to those who do nothing but sulk, sigh, and complain. May all the poor women of the world follow the virtues of Mrs. Huang.[2]

Introduction

The early twentieth century was a tumultuous and iconoclastic period in Chinese history. This was no less the case for Chinese literature. In this article, rather than focus on authors who were either well-known enough to form part of what scholars call the May Fourth and New Culture literary canon, or who were known to have made relevant contributions to the body of literature, I examine literary fiction produced by authors who have their identities hidden behind pseudonyms. I argue that these authors, whose identities we may not know for certain, and their literary works may further reinforce or challenge established understandings of the May Fourth and New Culture literary canon.

Scholars have written extensively on how the literary space in China was debated and reinvented, particularly in the case of the May Fourth and New Culture movements of the late 1910s and early 1920s. Chih-tsing Hsia’s work provides a broad overview and critique of the minds behind May Fourth and New Culture writers. His work highlights the myriad connections between a perceived Chinese tradition, an imagined Chinese modernity and comparisons to the ‘otherness’ of Western literature that coalesced into a crucible called literary revolution.[3] Other works, such as an edited volume by Milena Dolezelova-Verlingerova and Oldrich Kral, challenges the notion that the May Fourth and New Culture

[1] Xuxin, ‘The Death of my Friend Yuwo’, Ladies’ Journal, 7.9 (1921), 144-145 (p. 144).

[2] Zhongyan, ‘Sister Huang’, Ladies’ Journal, 13.3 (1927), 92-93 (p. 93).

[3] Chih-tsing Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 1-15.

movements were strictly a period of radical iconoclasm by reexamining these movements as an arena in which new and experimental literary discourses clashed, rather than assuming that these discourses ran in conjunction with each other as one homogenous literary group.[4]

More recent scholarship highlights the involvement of women and the role of gender. Jin Feng, centering on the 'new woman' trope that emerged during this period, examines the ways in which women were used in literature as dualistic reflections between Chinese tradition and modernity, the 'good' and 'bad' within Chinese society and hope and despair for the future of Chinese women.[5] Haiping Yan approaches this period through a feminist lens and examines the ways in which women writers navigated a literary arena that was dominated by men. Yan's analysis unpacks the different images that women were constructed into, from women warriors to wise mothers, and examines these images by placing them specifically within the discussion of women writers.[6]

While ample scholarship has been produced in the literary field of the May Fourth and New Culture movements, there is one category of literary sources that is overshadowed by works published by well-known authors. These include Lu Xun, Lu Yin, Mao Dun, Ding Ling, and Ba Jin, whose works form a literary canon of the May Fourth and New Culture movements. The themes that underpinned their works vary greatly. They range from commentaries on society and politics to absurdities of the human condition. There has been a push to utilize lesser-known authors, in an area called popular fiction, as discourse and literary analysis and to examine the ways in which these popular fiction writers contradict, reinforce, or provide different perspectives on the literary norms established by authors of the May Fourth and New Culture canon.

However, few have discussed a prevailing practice and the potential implications it may have on our understanding of May Fourth and New Culture literature: works produced by authors who used pseudonyms. Grace Fong touches upon the methodological issues associated with literary

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[4] Milena Dolezelova-Verlingerova and David Der-wei Wang, 'Introduction', in *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: A May Fourth Project*, ed. Milena Dolezelova-Verlingerova and Oldrich Kral (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 1-27 (p. 1-5).

[5] Jin Feng, *The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2004), p. 1-12.

[6] Haiping Yan, *Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-3.

works produced by these authors. In Fong's case, the 'literary cross-dressing' that authors would do to project themselves as someone who they were not significantly complicates historical analysis; there are some authors whose identities behind their pseudonyms were known, but there were many instances where authors would adopt a different gender as their name.[7] A further layer of difficulty is added when authors used names that were not proper names. Scholars may never know for certain who the authors behind these pseudonyms were. The methodological issue here is that analysis of the lives of the authors, and extrapolation of the context of their writing through biographical analysis, may not be possible. However, that does not mean that these literary works are of little consequence for a broader analysis of May Fourth and New Culture literature.

In this article, I analyse literary works that were written by authors who kept their identities hidden behind pseudonyms. We may be able to uncover their identities through further research, but there is a possibility that we may not know for certain who they were. I argue that we should focus on literary works produced by these authors and examine the ways in which their works reinforce or challenge the established scholarship surrounding May Fourth and New Culture literature. Through examining these works, we are able to expand our understanding beyond the May Fourth and New Culture canon.

I present two examples from the periodical magazine, the *Ladies' Journal*, published in Shanghai from 1915 to 1931. The early twentieth century in China had an abundance of periodicals; in many ways these periodicals served as the primary medium for which May Fourth and New Culture literature were written, and through which they were disseminated, and debated. The spatial and temporal interactions of periodicals with Chinese society during this period has been extensively discussed. Christopher Alexander Reed provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the periodical press in Shanghai from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Reed emphasizes the significance of technological and administrative transformations that occurred to facilitate the distribution of

[7] Grace Fong, 'Radicalising Poetics: Poetic Practice in Women's World, 1904-1907' in *Women and the Periodical Press in China's Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Michel Hockx, Joan Judge, and Barbara Mittler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 104-120 (p. 105-108).

the periodical press from within Shanghai and to other regions within China.[8] An edited volume by Michel Hockx, Joan Judge, and Barbara Mittler examines the relationship between women and the periodical press through a multifaceted approach that combines analysis from different genres; these include short stories, poetry, and artworks that were often found within periodicals. Their analysis seeks to further the understanding of periodicals as objects that were more than polemic, as is usual in describing May Fourth and New Culture literature, and instead as objects where new perceptions of people and their relationship with society were debated within the context the uncertainties surrounding the May Fourth and New Culture periods at the time. The *Ladies' Journal* was by no means the only periodical magazine in circulation. Periodical press publications operated in a dynamic environment where issues frequently overlapped, criticisms exchanged and opinions shared.[9] But the *Ladies' Journal* was distinctive for its length of publication. It lasted nearly fifteen years and bore witness to tumultuous events during this period in Chinese history.

Periodical magazines such as the *Ladies' Journal* usually contained many literary genres, though different publications would focus on different categories. The *Ladies' Journal* focused on essays and commentaries on Chinese society and on the role and condition of women. However, the *Ladies' Journal* also had categories for short stories, poems, self-help guides and visual arts showcases. Advertisements were frequently placed after each successive category. These ranged from beauty products to textbooks and various services. Indeed, one could be reading an essay that discussed the blight of arranged marriages in Chinese society and next to it see an advertisement for a skincare product.

'Modest' and 'Faithful'

The two works presented in this article are fictional short stories written by authors who hid their identities behind pseudonyms. I approach these works by first outlining a summary of the story and providing commentary before proceeding to analyze and extrapolate the themes of what the authors

[8] Christopher Alexander Reed, *Gutenberg in Shanghai: Chinese Print Capitalism, 1876-1937* (Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), p. 1-5.

[9] Joan Judge, Barbara Mittler, and Michel Hockx, 'Introduction: Women's Journals as Multigeneric Artefacts' in *Women and the Periodical Press in China's Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Michel Hockx, Joan Judge, and Barbara Mittler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1-18 (p. 1-10).

may be attempting to express. I then place these themes within the backdrop of the larger discussions within May Fourth and New Culture literature, and then examine the ways in which these works reinforce or challenge established understandings of the literary canon. In doing so, I also analyse these works comparatively with each other.

The first story was written by a particular Xuxin ('Modest'). Xuxin begins their work in an abrupt manner that establishes the story's tone: 'My friend Hu Yuwo died in the ninth year of the Republic of China. He was eighteen years old'.[10] Xuxin then proceeds through first-person narration to tell the story of Yuwo and why he died. Yuwo, the narrator begins, was not a weak person. He was smart worker. He was good at sports and he had a bright future ahead of him. So why did Yuwo die? What disease did he carry with him? Yuwo himself had aspirations. He was studious. His ambitions, however, were stifled when he received word from his family that he was to attend an arranged marriage. Yuwo protested this decision, but was scolded by his parents and ordered to return to his home village. Being the filial son that he was, Yuwo conceded and returned.[11]

As soon as the narrator received word that their friend was to marry, the narrator sent letters congratulating him. However, when the narrator received Yuwo's reply, the response was stark: 'What fun is there for Chinese families?' he writes, 'It is a living hell'.[12] Following the marriage, Yuwo continued writing letters to the narrator. With each succeeding letter, Yuwo became increasingly troubled. His sudden discussion of suicide and the reasons people committed suicide was a grave cause of concern for the narrator. 'I did not know what disease he had', the narrator observes, 'but I think his disease lies here'.[13]

The letters continued until one day, the narrator visited Yuwo's home. During their conversation, Yuwo became delirious: 'I think it is better for people not to study and have no knowledge', he abruptly told the narrator, 'the more you read, the more sad thoughts you will have in your mind. Nothing can go as you desire it. Unless you die! Chinese marriages can be said to be forced marriages. [...] They have

[10] Xuxin, 'The Death of my Friend Yuwo', p. 144.

[11] *Ibid*.

[12] *Ibid*.

[13] *Ibid*.

never seen each other before, and they expect them to become a lifelong couple!'[14] The narrator left Yuwo, with the latter in tears, following this outburst. Sometime later, Yuwo committed suicide.

In looking back at this outburst, the narrator scolds themself for not realizing Yuwo's blight earlier. Yuwo's death, the narrator concludes, was regrettable. However, it was not suicide. The disease that compelled Yuwo to his fate was the society that surrounded him. In short, what killed Yuwo was not Yuwo, but Chinese society. For this reason, the narrator concludes, there will be many more people that will share Yuwo's fate.[15]

The use of suicide as the main driving force of the plot was nothing new. It was a common theme used by authors during this period, often using the act of suicide to symbolize the destruction of the human spirit under the weight of traditional Chinese society. In this case, Yuwo represented a collective group of people that suffered the weight of this society that the narrator identified as the 'disease'. Bryna Goodman writes extensively on how suicide was seen by the periodical press and in literature during this period; for Goodman the circumstances surrounding the suicide and how the image of the person who committed suicide was constructed by the periodical press plays an integral role in how the public consumed the news (or story) of the event.[16] The suicide of a woman who was constructed to represent the 'face' of Chinese modernity, for instance, left a different impression upon both writer and reader when compared to the suicide of a woman who was constructed to be a product of the traditional Chinese family.

However, what makes this particular piece by Xuxin distinctive was that the character who commits suicide was a man. Suicides in May Fourth and New Culture literature were largely women; the gender dynamic of this act was tied closely to perceived constructions of women and their duties to the family, or that they were portrayed as being significantly more emotional and needed another person to watch over them. As Goodman shows, a woman committing suicide was a normalized trope in May Fourth and New Culture literature and was reinforced by press coverages of suicides during

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 144-145.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 145.

[16] Bryna Goodman, 'The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory and the New Republic', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 64.1 (2005), 77-101 (p. 77-79) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911805000069>.

this period.[17] In telling the story of a man who descends into madness from his arranged marriage and proceeds to take his own life, Xuxin was one of the few writers who showed the vulnerability of men in meeting the expectations of Chinese society.

Though, this is all subject to interpretation. Xuxin could also be focused more on traditional Chinese society as an evil rather than the visceral death of a person. By subjecting Yuwo to an unexceptional occurrence that was product of his own circumstances, what Xuxin effectively did was to shift the focus away from the individuality of suicide and towards suicide as social commentary. The agency of Yuwo, and that which made Yuwo an individual person, was superseded as consequence of circumstances. We do not know what the reaction of the family was, we do not know what happened to the wife; the wife, now widowed, would very likely have her life ruined. Xuxin did not comment on these issues, and it could be argued that removing the visceral consequences of Yuwo's death dehumanizes him to a degree. Indeed, Xuxin denies that Yuwo committed suicide. He was, the author argues, murdered.

The second story was written by a particular Zhongyan ('Faithful'). Zhongyan begins their story by introducing to the audience the Huang family. There was nothing particular about this family; Mr. Huang was a primary school teacher and earned a monthly salary of twenty yuan. Mrs. Huang was also a teacher and earned anywhere between six to fifteen yuan. Together, they had a frugal living.[18]

That was until one day, Mr. Huang fell grievously ill and died. He left behind Mrs. Huang, his elderly mother, and a child. Mrs. Huang, being the only person in the household with a job, could not financially support the family. She took loans of over two hundred yuan. Mrs. Huang, the narrator tells us, suffered both the grief of widowhood and mounting debts.[19]

The narrator pauses Mrs. Huang's story and asks the audience how Mrs. Huang found herself in such a situation. 'Mencius said', the narrator answers, 'everyone has compassion. But in this world, this sentence is no longer reliable. It can be changed to say: compassion is rare'.[20] The narrator then comments

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Zhongyan, 'Sister Huang', p. 92.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *Ibid.*

on Mrs. Huang's situation. She was miserable and pitiful; to add insult to injury, when Mr. Huang's coffin was being laid to rest, the debt collectors came to demand that she pay her debts immediately. When she could not, they proceeded to ransack her home and took anything of value as payment.[21]

However, Mrs. Huang did not capitulate to her dire situation. Instead, the narrator tells the audience, Mrs. Huang persevered. She provided her son with tutoring and saved on food and clothing. Her attention to her son led to the latter being admitted to prestigious schools and scoring well in examinations. Eventually, the son joined a company in Shanghai and would earn enough money to pay off the family's debts. He also raised his own family, earning more than one hundred yuan per month. Mrs. Huang, still a teacher by this point, refused to retire when requested by her son to do so. 'I am used to working and making money', Mrs. Huang replied, 'you have to remain diligent'.[22]

Mrs. Huang survived such hardships and emerged from it a successful mother. She was not like the women who choose to commit suicide after facing these harsh situations. All women, the narrator concludes, should strive to become like Mrs. Huang.[23]

Zhongyan's story contrasts that of Xuxin's. Whereas Xuxin's story was of a man descending into despair and committing suicide, Zhongyan's was one where a woman emerged from a chaotic situation and achieved success. Zhongyan had established the setting against Mrs. Huang: her husband was dead, she had a family to feed, and she was in debt. Readers coming from Xuxin's story would suspect that she would also commit suicide. Instead, there was no mention of Mrs. Huang considering this option. She continued to raise and feed her family until the son could help repay family debts.

This particular kind of despair to success story from the perspective of a woman was not uncommon among May Fourth and New Culture literature. The literary trope usually follows the order of a breadwinner in the family dying (usually the husband), the woman (usually the wife of said husband) falling into despair, until finally the woman was able to muster her will to crawl towards success. Feng writes that the construction of the woman as a strong and steadfast character was

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 92-93.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 93.

one perception of what the 'new woman' was during the May Fourth and New Culture movements.[24] Different writers would have different expectations of what this woman was capable of, but a common theme that tied these different expectations was that this particular type of woman could overcome any obstacles placed before her. The trope of the husband dying and the wife taking over was one way in which this theme was manifested. However, what this also did was it painted the woman as an almost superhuman-like character, able to confront all challenges regardless of how dire they may be. Feng's criticisms for this type of literature was that on one hand, it attempts to empower women, but on the other, it constructs women as an infallible being and creates a false expectation of what women should become.[25] Whereas on one literary extreme, authors could construct the woman as a highly emotional being who could not fend for herself, the other literary extreme constructed the woman as beings who could turn tragic situations into successes.

Zhongyan's story takes this theme a bit further, for their story was not only about Mrs. Huang. At the last paragraph of their story, Zhongyan compares Mrs. Huang to those who have chosen to commit suicide and concluded that they were incomparable to her. 'May all the poor women of the world follow the virtues of Mrs. Huang', Zhongyan concludes.[26] By including this last portion in the story, Zhongyan shifted the focus from Mrs. Huang to a significantly larger issue that was discussed in Xuxin's story: suicide. Zhongyan describes the story of Mrs. Huang as a means to criticise those who turned to suicide after experiencing hardship. In a way, their story was similar to that of Xuxin's. The experiences of the main character could be seen to play a secondary role if the intent was to use these characters as a means for social commentary. In Zhongyan's case, the story contrasts with that of Xuxin's where the fate of the main character was suicide. Such stories were not uncommon, but for Zhongyan, the conclusion of Mrs. Huang as a virtuous woman juxtaposed against women who have committed suicide offers a contrast between two extremes.

Yet it could also be argued that Zhongyan's purpose was not to portray Mrs. Huang, and by extension women, as empowered beings who could overcome obstacles. Mrs. Huang's success was

[24] Jin Feng, The New Woman in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction, p. 6-17.

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Zhongyan, 'Sister Huang', p. 93.

attributed to her son. While Mrs. Huang raised and educated her son, it was what the son eventually became that was the marker of success in Zhongyan's story. The son's success was achieved by means of Mrs. Huang's efforts, for it was the son who would pay off all the family's debts and ensure that the family was financially secure. In Zhongyan's story it appears that Mrs. Huang's only purpose was to live long enough to ensure that the son would be successful. When success was achieved, Mrs. Huang seemed undeveloped even after suffering through the setting that the author established. In other words, her virtue was ensuring her son's success and not the fact that she had to suffer through the process of achieving it.

Conclusion

In examining these two pieces by Xuxin and Zhongyan, I have attempted to explore the ways in which fiction as written by pseudonymous authors could reinforce or challenge our established understandings of the May Fourth and New Culture literary canon. Further work could be done to examine how the themes of these writings changed over time and to what extent the historical contexts and circumstances have an influence on how these writings were produced. Further questions could be asked about the nature of these authors. For instance, to what extent were their writings influenced by the May Fourth and New Culture canon? Could it be possible that instead of being influenced by the canon, their collective works fed into what was understood to be the canon at their time of publication? Was there even a canon to consider during those particular periods, or was it only a product of recent perceptions of the May Fourth and New Culture movements? By examining these authors and their works further, it may be possible to create a better understanding of these issues and questions.

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