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Uncertain Satire in Modern Chinese Fiction and Drama: 1930-1949

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Xi Tian

August 2014

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Uncertain Satire in Modern Chinese Fiction and Drama: 1930-1949

by

Xi Tian

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature
University of California, Riverside, August 2014
Dr. Perry Link, Chairperson

My dissertation rethinks satire and redefines our understanding of it through the examination of works from the 1930s and 1940s. I argue that the fluidity of satiric writing in the 1930s and 1940s undermines the certainties of the “satiric triangle” and gives rise to what I call, variously, self-satire, self-counteractive satire, empathetic satire and ambiguous satire. It has been standard in the study of satire to assume fixed and fairly stable relations among satirist, reader, and satirized object. This “satiric triangle” highlights the opposition of satirist and satirized object and has generally assumed an alignment by the reader with the satirist and the satirist’s judgments of the satirized object. Literary critics and theorists have usually shared these assumptions about the basis of satire. I argue, however, that beginning with late-Qing exposé fiction, satire in modern Chinese literature has shown an unprecedented uncertainty and fluidity in the relations among satirist, reader and satirized object. My dissertation analyzes not only satire, but several related varieties of pathos and humor, in the work of Wu Jianren, Xiao Hong, Lao She, Yang Jiang and Qian Zhongshu and makes comparative references to foreign writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Jonathan Swift, who were deeply influential in shaping the understanding of satire among Chinese writers of the era.
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Introduction

In the history of satiric writing and scholarship, fixed and stable relations among satirist, reader, and satirized object have long been practiced. This satiric triangle emphasizes both the opposition of the satirist and satirized object and the reader’s alignment with the satirist’s naturally presumed (moral) judgment of the object of satire. The stability of the satiric triangle is assumed by many critics and also considered as the most conspicuous quality of satire. Based on this presumption, scholars such as Friedrich Schiller, Roland Paulson, Alvin Kernan and Northrop Frye explore the motives, narratives, structures, history and evolution of satire. Frye, Kernan and many others also attempt to define satire as a genre, and take pains to anatomize and analyze its elements, qualities, necessary techniques and ultimate purpose. However, they are disappointed to find that satire is more a formless mode than an identifiable genre. Without an identifiable or fixed form, satire inhabits other genres, such as drama, poetry, prose and fiction. Biographical and psychoanalytic critics inspired by Freud tend to look at satire through the author’s perspective, reading it as a product of the author’s fears, hates, or grudges, or as a manifestation of personality disorder. Others view satire as persuasive rhetoric, with a moral goal to correct folly and to “lash vice” (Connery 5).

Recent scholarship challenges this fixity of the satiric triangle. Fredric Bogel notices readers’ occasional “unease” with the satirist’s claimed authority. He points out that “our presumed identification with the satirist and our presumed difference from the
satiric object become problematic linkages in which the desire for utter clarity of relations comes to look more and more like a strategy for casting out ambiguity and establishing a gratifyingly idealized—but therefore false—coherence of both self and other” (46). Instead, Bogel suggests an intrinsic double structure of satire. According to Bogel, the second structure works against the first structure, and “produces much of the difficulty, profundity, and interest of the satiric mode” (5). This second structure emphasizes the reader’s conception of satiric rhetoric and considers satire a cultural work that connects different societies and cultures by its rhetorical effect, such as the reader’s identification with the satirist and rejection of the satirized object (Bogel 47). Different from the anatomical or anthropological studies of satire, this concept raises Bogel’s ultimate question: “By what authority, and on what grounds, does the satirist presume to identify what is central to a culture and to attack what deviates from that perceived centrality” (82)? His theorization of satire is therefore fundamentally a cultural study of the roles of the satirist and reader.

Inspired and indebted to Bogel’s work, my study of satire in modern Chinese literature builds on Bogel’s double structure to redefine satire and re-examine the dynamic satiric triangle by focusing on different types that are generated by the unprecedented uncertainty and fluidity in satiric narrative and rhetoric. In this work I first propose some of the major features of satire, but without denying that there will be exceptions and incongruities, since imposing limitations on the concept of satire is not my intent. Firstly, a satirist is a self-appointed guardian of certain moral or aesthetic
standards. Such standards may range from ideals to desirable and widely-accepted cultural and social norms. The “right” values that satire guards are not necessarily right, because one’s frame of reference is subjective and changing, yet the existence of such a frame is the premise of satire. Secondly, satire is characterized by an indirect and often refined attack on, or censure of, vice or social evil, or a comment on the perceived deviation from a cultural center or established social norms. Since satire is a protest against the deviation from an ideal, it usually fuses its moral and ethical judgment with the use of rhetorical wit, irony, humor, caricature, burlesque, hyperbole and sarcasm, but it is not limited to them. In sum, satire generates different degrees of laughter. It is not a genre that stands alone, but rather inhabits various other genres, such as drama, fiction, prose and film. Last but not least, satire is structurally, rhetorically, literarily and culturally uncertain and ambiguous, as we can see in the selected works that I analyze in this dissertation.

* * *

In early twentieth-century China, Western language words for “satire” were introduced and translated as *fengci*, 讽刺, before there was much study of what this new term meant. This may be one reason why scholarship since then has largely overlooked the uncertainty and fluidity that *fengci* includes. Although *fengci* is a new word with only approximately a hundred-year history in modern Chinese language, satirical writing has long been practiced in Chinese literary history. The origin of *feng* and *ci* can be traced as far back as *Classic of Poetry* (Shi jing, ca. 840-620 BC) in which *feng*, 風, “wind” or
“airs” is written and collected to inform the rulers of the people’s grievances, and to achieve the goal of correcting the rulers’ faults. In the “Air of Wei,” the peasants’ voice in a poem pleads: “Big rat, big rat, / Do not eat my sprouts! / Three years I have served you / But you give me no comfort. / I am going to leave you / And go to those happy fields; / Happy fields, happy fields; / Who there shall long moan” (Shijizhu 66-67)? By comparing the rulers and the local tax collector to big rats that steal and eat up all the grain in every household, the poem criticizes heavy taxation and exploitation, and expresses people’s longing for a utopian society.

Feng, 風 and ci are both verbs, here meaning respectively, “admonish and advise” and “criticize and expose.” Neither feng nor ci is considered a literary genre. Any forms of literature can be used to feng or ci. The modern Chinese writer Lao She (1899-1966) observes that “in terms of literary genre, we see satire in poetry, drama and fiction, all with unique style. […] Additionally, fairy tales, myths, fables and jokes all more or less have some satiric traits” (95). In imperial China, satirical works are found mostly in anecdotes, fictionalized historical accounts, drama, and fiction, rather than in the more orthodox literary practice of poetry. Anecdotes and miscellaneous works, such as those in A New Account of the Tales of the World (Shishuo xinyu, ca. 430 AD), often record and mildly ridicule fools, cowards, impostors and hypocrites. One entry in the category of “appearance and manner” in that work extols the handsome Pan Yue (P’an Yüeh) and mocks ugly Zuo Si (Tso Ssu) for his foolish emulation of Pan Yue:
P’an Yüeh has an extraordinarily handsome appearance and attractive personality. When he was young he used to carry a crossbow and go out on the streets of Loyang, and all the women who met him would join hands to encircle him. Tso Ssu, on the other hand, was extremely ugly. He too walked about imitating Yüeh, whereupon a bevy of old crones joined in a line and spit at random at him. Ducking his head he hastened home. (Liu 608; Mather 332)

When the civil service examinations supplied candidates to the bureaucratic government in late imperial China, the corruption of officialdom, the reputation-obsessed scholars, and the rigid civil service examinations themselves became targets of satire, especially in drama and fiction. For example, the Ming scholar and playwright Wang Heng (1561-1609), the highest jinshi degree holder but also a victim of the examination system, wrote a play entitled Yulunpao. By distorting a story on the well-known Tang poet Wang Wei, he exposes the heinous nature of the examination system, corrupt with favoritism and the abuse of power, and calls for its abolition. Mockery of ignorant scholars and corrupt officials appears so often in jokes, anecdotes and stories that many basic patterns and scenarios are revised, quoted and incorporated into various writings, and passed along with slightly different faces. This satirical tradition reached its apex when The Scholars (Rulin waishi) was completed in the 1750s and continued with late Qing exposés like The Exposure of the Official World (Guanchang xianxing ji, 1903-1905).
The theme of jealous wives and henpecked husbands was also very common in satirical writing. Yenna Wu provides us with a rich study on this prominent theme and historical phenomenon in her book *The Chinese Virago: A Literary Theme*. Institutionalized religions also evoked much satirical laughter and critique in Ming and Qing dynasties. Licentious monks and nuns, profit-driven monasteries and pretentious laymen prevailed in Ming-Qing vernacular stories, especially those of Feng Menglong (1574-1646) and Ling Mengchu (1580-1644).

Pre-modern Chinese satiric works possess different properties from their modern and Western counterparts. English satire in particular falls into merciless personal attack; in contrast, pre-modern Chinese satire is well-intended. Its purpose is not merely to lash vice, to ridicule idiocy, or to condemn the wicked, but to mend faults, to cure social diseases, to set moral examples, and ultimately to make corrections. With such didactic and pedagogical purposes, satire is usually expected to be indirect and gentle. In her book *Ameliorative Satire and the Seventeenth-Century Chinese Novel*, Yenna Wu argues that invective is traditionally not an appropriate component of Chinese satire, whereas elegant wit and humor are more appreciated (20). The teaching purpose of satire furthermore establishes fixed and stable relations between satirist, reader, and satirized object—namely the opposition of satirist and satirized object and the reader’s alignment with the satirist and presumed judgment on the object of satire.

Despite the existence of a fairly large amount of satirical writing in imperial China, writers, scholars and literary critics showed little interest in theorizing satire. Not
until Lu Xun published his book *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilüe) in 1925 did modern Chinese writers and critics begin to delve theoretically into the techniques of satire. Lu Xun categorizes *The Scholars* as a prime example of satire for its “sorrow,” “humor,” and “subtlety,” but he rates the late Qing exposés, *qianze xiaoshuo*, low:

> Although they were intent upon reforming the age and thus seems to be in the same category as novels of satire [such as *The Scholars*], their expression is superficial and their biting style is without any subtlety. More than that, they are full of exaggeration to accord with the preferences of the time. There is, then, a marked poverty in their skill and their degree of tolerance. [...] The result is merely a compendium of gossip, good only for providing those at loose ends with material for idle chatter. (*LXQJ IX* 295-96)

Many of Lu Xun’s literary thoughts evolved as time proceeded, but his exclusion of exposé literature from satire persisted. In 1935, the year before his death, he reiterates in “What is satire?” that “satire is not ‘fabrication,’ nor ‘slander.’ It is not to ‘expose privacy,’ not to record sensational ‘strange things’ or ‘bizarre phenomena’” (*LXQJ VI* 340). He also emphasizes that satire is “refined” art. For him, satirical materials that appear in news are not satire because of their “raw” nature, which would virtually exclude all the above-mentioned anecdotes and accounts in pre-modern Chinese literature that were supposed to be “true” records of people’s talk and behavior. He extols Swift and Gogol as great satirists who transform ordinary events into “excellent” satire. But
echoing the ultimate goal of pre-modern satire, Lu Xun believes that real satire is well-intended and aims for improvement. Otherwise, it is only a “cold sneer” (LXQJ VI 341-42).

When practicing satiric writing, Lu Xun is a much harsher attacker of the old tradition and society than the satirist whom he depicts in theory. He consciously keeps a distance from all the fictional characters in his stories, and he mercilessly castigates his enemies (often out of personal revenge) in his essays. These features deprive most his satirical work of any warm, or even lukewarm, sentiment, and leave only the “colder sneer” that he believes satirists should avoid.

As the founding father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun sets a benchmark for modern Chinese writers. His writing was believed to have captured the true essence of Chinese society and culture. Lu Xun’s success showed modern Chinese intellectuals how effective as a subversive tool satire could be. Often written as a response to social diseases and national crises, for the first time in Chinese history satire became a widely accepted literary form praised and practiced by most serious intellectuals and writers. They considered the Lu Xun-style satire representative of modern Chinese satire that “stabs” the satirized objects like a “knife.”

Despite Lu Xun’s extensive influence, the world of satiric writing was not monolithic. Although much satire written in the first half of the twentieth century displays the satirist’s clear mockery of satirized objects and evokes the reader’s censure of the absurdity presented, other writing shows much more complicated and dynamic
relations among satirists, satirized objects and readers. The satiric narrative can be vague or subtle enough to produce various interpretations, while its characters can reveal or arouse ambivalent emotions. For example, Xu Xu (1908-1980) in a 1940 story, “The Faces of Writers” (Wenxuejia de liankong), deals with a sporty, rich young man’s attempts to become a Lu Xun-like writer in order to impress and win a girl who likes reading revolutionary fiction and leftist magazines. Completely ignorant of literature, the young man believes that by imitating a writer’s appearance and behavior he can become one. After several failed attempts, he collects many portraits of Lu Xun, and in less than a year plays tennis, swims, dances and plays cards, all in a “Lu Xun style” (Xu 57). At the end of the story, he is dressed like Lu Xun, but still knows nothing about literature. But the girl marries him with satisfaction, and thereupon is “unworried about livelihood, and lies in bed reading Gorky’s novels and the complete collection of Lu Xun” (Xu 57). This story ridicules revolutionary writers and readers, including those who are not interested in literature at all and those who pretend to be an expert in revolutionary literature.

By no means does the story merely laugh at charlatans of revolutionary literature. When hearing that the sporty man models himself on Gorky, his friend jokingly suggests that he learn from the “Chinese Gao Erchu.” Gao Erchu, a pun on Gorky’s Chinese translation Gaoerji, is a satiric character from Lu Xun’s story “Master Gao” (Gao laofuzi), which incisively reveals Chinese intellectuals’ false emulation of foreign revolutionary writers, such as Gorky. The allusion to Gao Erchu explicitly points to the sporty man, but the satire becomes more intriguing when his girlfriend tells him that Gao
Erchu is a character created by China’s Gorky, Lu Xun. Despite the fact that Chinese respectfully called Lu Xun “Zhongguo de Gaoerji,” or China’s Gorky, people’s reverence for Lu Xun falls into jeopardy when the story juxtaposes Gao Erchu, a self-claimed name of Chinese Gorky, with “Zhongguo de Gaoerji, Lu Xun.” The story silently implies: “Does Lu Xun really want or like the title that his admirers give him?” If he does, Lu Xun himself is as hypocritical as his character; if he does not, the prevalent admiration, imitation and canonization of Lu Xun capitalize on his work. Such ambiguity enriches the satiric narrative, invites different interpretations, and further challenges readers’ perceptions of the satiric effect.

Similar examples that showcase the fluidity and instability of the relations among satirist, satirized objects and readers are prominent in the fiction and drama of the 1930s and 1940s. The reasons for this literary phenomenon are various and deserve more study. I propose that the influx and exchange of new ideas, the collapse of former social values, and the maturity of literary techniques, especially in fiction, contribute to the flourishing of satire and its complexity. Satire is subversive by nature. Grievances give birth to satire. China had drastically declined from the world’s most wealthy country to a deeply humiliated and war-worn state by the end of the Qing dynasty. Intellectuals desperately needed to vent their indignation and anxiety, but preferred to do so in a smart and refined mode, like satire. The introduction of new Western ideas, as well as vehement debates on social reform and national salvation provided a rich platform for generating different and oftentimes adverse ideological and cultural understandings. The diversity of social values
further complicated people’s conception of “right” and “wrong,” “normal” and “abnormal,” what to guard and what to eliminate, and so forth. After a decade of development in the 1920s, modern Chinese literature, informed by Western literary technique and theory while undoubtedly still rooted in traditional Chinese literature, reached its apex in the 1930s. Longer narratives with numerous characters, twisting plots and aesthetic unity provided many layers and perspectives for interpretation, and enhanced the complexity of satiric writing.

All these features call for a new reading of these satiric works and a comprehensive study of satire itself. Therefore, this dissertation attempts to delve into the satiric elements in selected works of fiction and drama, and to propose a few types of satire that explain the fluid satiric triangle. I focus primarily on works by Lao She, Xiao Hong, Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang, analyzing their literary craft and idiosyncratic talents (including their influences from foreign writers such as Charles Dickens, Nikolai Gogol, Jonathan Swift, and others) against the background of the social and cultural patterns that their work exemplifies and sometimes helps to shape. My analyses have produced a range of theoretical categories that I label self-satire, empathetic satire, self-counteractive satire, and ambiguous satire, which complicate the standard conception of satire and the satiric triangle. Through close reading of these works and careful study of both their continuation of literary convention and their departures from it, I show how the satirist, reader, and satirized object interact in ways that are seldom if ever found in Chinese literature before the twentieth century. In the first half of the twentieth century,
the “certainties” of satire break down in China and a richer field emerges. I find laughter, anxiety and even pathos intertwined in a complex tapestry.

* * *

The first chapter of my dissertation compares the well-known Chinese eighteenth-century satirical novel *The Scholars* and the early-twentieth-century exposé, *Strange Things Observed over the Past Twenty Years* (Ershinian mudu guai xianzhuang). I examine the paradigm shift and cosmological change represented from the former to the latter, which gives rise to what I call self-satire. Self-satire is often used in first-person narrative to emphasize the authenticity of the absurd things this narrator encounters. While traveling the corrupt world, the satirist-narrator often has to adapt to it to survive, thereby to a certain extent behaving just like the object of his or her satire. This consequently blurs the line between the satirist and the absurd things and people he or she ridicules. Without the satirist being aware, the satiric narrative goes beyond the satirist’s sovereignty and scheme, causing a self-satiric effect. Self-satire in *Strange Things* also juxtaposes tears with laughter and highlights the author’s concern with the looming national crisis, which can be found in many new types of satire in the 1930s and 1940s.

Works of Lao She and Xiao Hong often demonstrate the features of another type of satire: empathetic satire, the theme of my second and third chapters. Influenced by Russian satirist Nicolai Gogol and his Chinese promoter Lu Xun, Xiao Hong’s novel *Tales of Hulan River* (Hulanhe zhuan) is representative of empathetic satire that laughs at follies through tears. In empathetic satire, the satirized person is made to be a proximate
satiirized object, not an ultimate satirized object, because the satirized person is at once a victim of and a participant in a moribund society. The satirist’s capacity for understanding the satirized object’s situation and the cause of any absurdity allows him or her to express profound sympathy towards human misery. Moreover, the satirist occasionally withdraws from his or her superior stance to the position of the satirized object or person and stands in that same position, where he or she can better empathize.

In Xiao Hong’s work, the proximate satirized object is sometimes the invented “national character,” while Lao She’s novels, such as Divorce (Lihun) and The Biography of Niu Tianci (Niu Tianci zhuan) feature compassion for ordinary people, lost intellectuals and nostalgic sentiment that fuels hopes for the future.

Although often mocking sentimentalism, many Chinese satiric works created in the first half of the twentieth century are lined with sorrow, indignation and cultural anxiety, as we can see in Lao She and Xiao Hong. But others, such as Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang, reveal a more level-headed and reserved modern urban culture. In my fourth chapter, I examine Qian Zhongshu’s stories and essays in Humans, Beasts and Ghosts (Ren, shou, gui), Writing in the Margins of Life (Xie zai rensheng bianshang) and his novel Fortress Besieged (Weicheng). Qian’s pursuit of playfulness and his refusal to maintain a fixed standpoint contribute to what I call self-counteractive satire, which is a kind of self-conscious undermining. Qian’s witty arguments often act against themselves, making sense in their immediate context without claiming a final corrective. Self-counteractive satire distinguishes itself from other types of satire by the satirist’s
awareness (and even acceptance) of the coexistence of several frames of reference, and more importantly, by his or her refusal of a single referential frame. There is no absolute right or wrong; the satirist is more of an urbane spectator amused by life’s absurdities.

In the final chapter, I analyze what I call ambiguous satire in the satirical plays and stories of Yang Jiang, written in the 1940s. Ambiguous satire results from the collapse of fixed cultural and social standards. Aesthetically, the satirist’s reserved tone further prevents the direct and explicit transmission of moral judgments; the effects of satire, therefore, primarily rely on readers’ and audiences’ own interpretation of the texts. In China, a contact zone for cultures and ideas during a transitional time of culture clashes and confusion, the “right” cultural and social norms on which one’s moral judgments could be based were always in flux. When a satirist deliberately disguises her satirical voice, readers have difficulty discerning who and what they wanted to condemn in the satirical work.

By better defining and clarifying satire, and by examining different examples of it, I hope my work will help to shown how satire in the 1930s and 1940s arose in China as a response to social and political events and sentiments, as a strategic reaction to censorship and political controls, as the creative invention of individual writers, and, most broadly, as an emerging trend in modern Chinese literature that legitimizes satiric writing as part of serious literary practice.
CHAPTER ONE

A New Face of Late Qing Exposé:
Self-Satire and the Blend of Tears and Laughter

The uncertainty of satire in modern Chinese literature can be traced to late Qing exposés—Lu Xun called this genre qianze xiaoshuo, literally “tales that chastise or excoriate.” Although in his Brief History of Chinese Fiction Lu Xun concedes that late Qing exposés do share the socially corrective goal of “real” satiric works like Wu Jingzi’s The Scholars (Rulin waishi, ca.1750), he rules out exposés as satire by critiquing their “exaggeration” and the lack of “innuendo” (LXQJ IX 291). Indeed, some of the late Qing exposés present certain traits—not aesthetic or technical—that differentiate them from earlier satire. The late Qing exposé Strange Things Observed over the Past Twenty Years (Ershinian mudu guai xianzhuang, 1903-1910) by satirist Wu Jianren (1866-1910) represents this new approach to satire.

Strange Things was serialized in New Fiction (Xin xiaoshuo) in 1903. It is composed of 108 chapters, and adopts the story-in-story structure of traditional Chinese novels. It has two narrators and an editor. The principle I-narrator Jiusi yisheng—literally, “Nine deaths, one life,” or more loosely, “Barely alive after multiple perils”—is the supposed author. He travels around the country and keeps a dairy recording the strange things that he has witnessed or heard from friends over a period of twenty years. When he leaves Shanghai because of bankruptcy, he entrusts his diary to a friend to find some kindred spirit to publish it. This diary eventually comes to Sili taosheng, or
“Narrow escape from the jaws of death,” whose pseudonym bears a striking resemblance to Jiusi yisheng. Sili taosheng edits the dairy, turns it into a novel, and sends it to Liang Qichao’s journal New Fiction (Xin xiaoshuo). The adventure of the manuscript is thus told by an anonymous narrator who probably works for New Fiction.

The essential distinction between The Scholars and late Qing exposés like Strange Things is that Wu Jingzi, having realized the degradation and the malfunctions of the institutionalized Confucian lifestyle, nevertheless advocates the “pure” ancient Confucianism and holds up model scholars like Wang Mian for emulation. The certainty and fixity of the classical satiric triangle characterizes The Scholars, whereas the exposé writers as well as their satiric narrators are so used to these ubiquitous absurdities that the bizarre is accepted as routine. Everyone is trapped in the evil and chaotic world, and only by confronting and, sometimes, collaborating with it can one survive and even succeed.

When Wu Jingzi satirizes, he sets up the ancient Confucian way of being as the ideal value system, but Wu Jianren mercilessly lays bare the collapse of any form of the Confucian value system. There exists an ideal that serves as the standard of right and wrong, but such an ideal is so difficult to realize that the opposition between satirist and satirized object is undermined. Therefore, the late Qing exposés disturb the fixity of the satiric triangle, simultaneously complicating the relations among them and distinguishing themselves from satire that is governed by certainty, such as The Scholars. I argue that it is the dissolution of the satiric certainty and emergence of the characteristics of self-satire and the co-existence of tears and laughter that grant the late Qing exposés a new face,
which is particularly demonstrated in Wu Jianren’s novel *Strange Things Observed over the Past Twenty Years*.

**The Collapsed Value System in Strange Things**

In his comparison between the eighteen-century satiric novel *The Scholars* and early-twentieth-century *Strange Things*, David Der-wei Wang points out that “Despite the fact the scholarly class had faltered by the early Qing, the characters in Wu Jingzi’s novel harbor a hope of, or nostalgia about, the coherent relations between Confucian elitism and its political manifestations” (195). He further states that “Wu Jianren […] knew nevertheless that outside this tradition [of Confucian teachings] different axiological possibilities had arisen, among which Western learning was the most prominent” (196). But I argue that Wu Jianren’s hopeless narrative illustrates that none of these axiological alternatives has been able to serve as the moral and philosophical basis of his satiric exposés. What distinguishes his satiric exposés from *The Scholars* is not that they are created according to different referential frames, but rather that the late Qing exposé reveals a despairing truth that the collapsed value system is beyond restoration. A comparative reading between certain important characters in *The Scholars* and their counterparts in *Strange Things* will highlight this.

*The Scholars* reaches its culmination when an ancient ceremony is replicated and dedicated to the legendary Confucian sage Wu Taibo. Taibo is the eldest son of King Tai of the Zhou clan. According to the legend, he leaves home, traveling to the Wu region to find medicine for his sick father. When his father passes away, he is adamant that his
youngest brother receives the throne. After three separate arguments, he eventually
persuades the brother to accept it. The core concept of Taibo worship is yielding and filial
piety. Modern scholars argue that Taibo’s refusal to return to Zhou seems to be a “hidden
virtue,” but it also shows his impiety towards his father. Nevertheless, Wu Jingzi and his
contemporaries interpreted and accepted the Taibo myth in accordance with the
Confucian canon. Therefore, the honoring of Taibo indicates two major goals that Wu
Jingzi pursues—to advocate filial piety, and to advise scholars to keep their non-
competitiveness and moral integrity in times of corruption.

Wu Jingzi sarcastically highlights the discrepancy between Confucian doctrines
and the Confucian scholars’ deeds, and their constant pursuit of prestige, rank and
bureaucratic success. He also sets Confucian role models for educative purposes. Besides
Taibo, he uses the ideal Confucian scholar, Wang Mian; Yu Yude, the present-day model
Confucian scholar-official; and Guo Xiaozi, a living familial son, as well as many other
lesser heroes. These characters represent the real Confucian concepts that Wu Jingzi is
eager to restore: ritual, righteousness, modesty, benevolence, loyalty and filial piety.
Interestingly, over a hundred years later, Strange Things expresses Wu Jianren’s
impressions of these concepts with a set of absurd characters opposite to Wu Jingzi’s.

The principal filial son in The Scholars is Filial Guo, or Guo Xiaoz, who spends
twenty years in the country in search for his father, and insists on fulfilling his duty as a
son even though he is rejected and mistreated by him (chaps. 37-38). More importantly,
Filial Guo meets his moral obligation at the expense of his career; preoccupied by the
search for his father, he never has the chance to take the civil service exams. He receives
unreserved support and commendation from men of Yu Yude’s circle who establish their reputation for replicating the Taibo ceremony and for practicing Confucian values in deeds rather than in words. It is not coincidental that Filial Guo is introduced in the same chapter as the Taibo ceremony. Rather, he is constructed as a determined practitioner of Confucian instruction, “an extension of Confucian ritual” (Shang 56). *Strange Things* also records a story of a “filial son,” Young Master Chen. The narrator first meets Young Master Chen in a brothel in Shanghai, when Chen is escorting home the coffin of his late mother. Although still in mourning, Young Master Chen frequents brothels and lives a lavish life. He is so intemperate in the pursuit of sexual pleasure that it eventually costs him his life. Although extremely unfilial, he is nevertheless commended by the hypocritical local officials and gentlemen. More ironically, an honorary title, “filial son,” is conferred on him. According to his long obituary, he is widely admired because he refuses to go home to take the provincial exam so that he can tend to his father who holds an official position in a frontier province. His disgraceful death is re-constructed as the result of a devastated son’s determined will to die for his deceased mother (chaps. 85-86).

Wu Jingzi’s satire reveals the incongruity between Confucian ideals and disappointing reality, whereas Wu Jianren’s harshly censures the falseness of Confucianism and Confucian narrative. In a time when anything is exchangeable for profit, Confucian values merely create false appearances for the wealthy, the privileged and the powerful.

In Wu Jianren’s world, Confucian values are not only manipulated to whitewash moral transgression, but are also used by profit-seekers to facilitate their inhuman schemes. Take Gou Cai, the principle villain, for instance (chap. 88). Gou Cai’s daughter-
in-law follows the rules of Confucian rectitude and remains a chaste widow after her husband passes away. But Gou Cai plans to give her as a gift to the Viceroy in hope of regaining official favor after his dismissal from office. In the name of filial piety, the Gou Cai couple entreat her to help, overriding the young widow’s steadfast objection. She eventually gives in and becomes the Viceroy’s concubine. This story of a chaste wife is entirely opposite to the one in *The Scholars*. In chapter 48 of *The Scholars*, widow Wang acts like an ideal chaste wife by insisting to die for her deceased husband, which brings her parents and in-laws great sorrow. Although she gains the glorified reputation of being a chaste wife, her cause is quite hopeless because her parents already have to support her widowed sister and she does not want to be a financial burden to anyone. Her family takes pains to persuade the young woman to abandon her plan, just as the Gou Cai couple beseeches their daughter-in-law. But the natures of these two acts of persuasion are in conflict with each other: the former is a realization of Confucian benevolence and altruism, while the latter is a fundamental destruction of the Confucian value.

Wu Jingzi’s satiric attack on contemporary scholars and literati is supported by his belief in the educative function of Confucian ritual and the new life that the worship of the ancient sage Taibo may bring to the literati community. Therefore, he sees hope in the present-day sage Yu Yude. Yu Yude meets all the expectations of a Confucian scholar in terms of public service and personal cultivation. He is the only one who has passed the palace exam among the literati-admirers of Taibo, and also registers great humility and a sense of non-competitiveness. He is the embodiment of the ideal official of rectitude. Contrary to the ideal official and scholar under Wu Jingzi’s pen, Wu Jianren
depicts his upright officials with great reservation. Wu Jizhi, the presumed good man and upright official and the narrator’s role model in *Strange Things*, is unable to maintain his moral integrity and is unwilling to stand out as an honest man. In the narrator’s opinion, the only man of rectitude, Cai Lüsheng, is rather headstrong and stubborn. It is not surprising when Cai is falsely accused of embezzling government relief funds by his fellow officials, dismissed from his post, and ultimately jailed. This transition from “omnipotent” official of rectitude to “impotent” official of rectitude, as Chen Pingyuan asserts, destroys the dichotomy between the virtuous man and the vicious man (205). The world Wu Jianren creates is crowded with monstrous villains instead of exemplary Confucian gentlemen.

Wu Jianren even questions Confucian historiography in his writing. Hearing that Young Master Chen is about to be registered as “filial son,” Jizhi offers a parallel example of Fang Xiaoru, the orthodox Confucian scholar of the Ming dynasty, in order to reveal hypocrisy. As the mentor of the Jianwen Emperor of the Ming dynasty, Fang Xiaoru was still loyal to Jianwen Emperor after the Prince of Yan usurped his throne. Feeling humiliated, Prince Yan eventually had Fang Xiaoru executed. Therefore, he was universally accepted as the symbol of loyalty and uprightness. According to the legend of Fang, after his death, a stone was soaked in his blood, turning it crimson. As a testimony to the martyr, the stone was worshiped by everyone, but Jizhi does not believe it: “It’s actually a piece of red marble. […] But since everyone wants to believe it true, there is nothing we can do but to follow. Never think about exposing it” (*Guaixianzhuang* 601). He further doubts the authenticity of the Classics and Histories, claiming that they are no
more reliable than novels (609-91). Through Jizhi, Wu Jianren not only casts doubt on the authenticity of history, but also on the canonical narrative of Confucian writing and sages, which discredits the legitimacy of existing mores and moral exemplars. Wu Jingzi, on the other hand, finds hope in Confucian ritual. His use of the Taibo ceremony establishes a renewed relation between the legendary sage and the imagined literati community. Shang Wei insightfully states that:

Wu Jingzi’s questioning of the authority of historical narrative does not lead to cynicism and nihilism. Instead, it constitutes an integral part of his effort to reconstruct Confucian norms. [...] Wu Jingzi went further than any of his contemporaries by suggesting a new Confucian vision of the ritualized world based on the absolute norms of ascetic practice. (19)

But only a hundred and fifty years after The Scholars was written, Jizhi’s expression of regret, “The world is a swindle” (Guaixianzhuang 601), reveals the fundamental collapse of traditional values in the late Qing. One finds no cognitive or ethical frame against which the strange world can be measured. Consequently, once one is reduced to rely on one’s own judgment and values, the satiric narrator and his friend, such as Jizhi, turn from cynic to nihilist. The satiric narrator thereby participates in the corruption he is satirizing, and opens himself to the same kind of satire that he uses on others. The humble lesser heroes in The Scholars are able to follow the legendary exemplars’ footsteps and continue the true Confucian culture and morality, because Wu Jingzi “treats the world on the whole kindly, with benign humor” (Hsia 231). However, in Strange Things’ hope-
deprived world, anyone neither abnormal nor absurd is bound to be expelled, and there is no exception for the narrator or his friends.

Even though the traditional Confucian value system has ceased to function with efficacy in Wu Jianren’s *Strange Things*, shall we take Western leanings and teachings into consideration, as David Der-wei Wang suggests? Is it true as Theodore Huters argues that the role played by Western technology such as the telegraph and steamship is so significant that it determines the development of the story, facilitating characters’ communication, enabling travel, and, ironically, contributing to the tragic end (146-48)?

Wu Jianren’s critique of China’s blind acceptance and worship of Western science and technology is fully illustrated in chapters 30 and 31 on the Jiangnan Arsenal and Translation Bureau. He ridicules the foreign charlatans who hypocritically boast their technical expertise, while simultaneously pitying those talented Chinese engineers whose knowledge and skill cannot be appreciated merely because they are Chinese. The narrator’s censure of the bogus Western engineers and translators displays a profound skeptical attitude towards Western culture, a theme of which would be fully demonstrated in Wu Jianren’s later science fiction novel *The New Story of Stone* (*Xin shitouji*, 1905-1908). In this novel, he creates an ultimate utopia that is built on the foundation of traditional Chinese morality, but is also equipped with advanced Western science and technology. Another satirist, Lao She, would refashion the allegorical pair of real China and ideal China twenty years later in his semi-science-fiction satire *Cat Country* (*Maocheng ji*), in which he also rebukes contemporary China (the cat country) from the perspective of a pilot from the ideal China.
Noticeably, the idea of combining the merits of China with that of the West is conceived as early as in *Strange Things*, which is embodied by the narrator’s unnamed female cousin. Critics have noticed the distinctive role of this cousin in the maturation of the narrator, especially in terms of domestic values and moral behavior. Patrick Hanan praises her: “She is practical, decisive, and efficient, and frequently makes decisions for the whole family. Her views, which are not cynical like Wu’s [Jizhi’s], must have seemed quite advanced for the time” (169). She is so perceptive, learned and talented that the narrator considers her his teacher on family matters. Her true uniqueness is revealed in her re-interpretation of the rigidly practiced Confucian doctrine on women’s education. In addition, she has progressive views on role played by women in family and society as well as Confucian views on other family values, such as filial piety and gender segregation (chaps. 20-21). Jizhi’s mother and his wife, perhaps not as outstanding as she, also shows great capacity for open-mindedness and a humanitarian understanding of Confucian learning and values. These female characters seem to represent a promising role model in which traditional Confucian values can be revived.

Can we argue, then, that these positive female characters embody the prescription for China’s salvation? We cannot ignore the gender restriction placed on them. It is true that the narrator’s cousin is as wise and insightful as Jizhi, and perhaps more morally virtuous than he, while her gender and social role determines that she cannot practice her theories in the outside world. All her opinions and ideas are merely “talk” and never have the chance to be tested regardless how inspiring and enlightening this “talk” is. Therefore, she remains an ideal new woman in theory. Would she be able to maintain her
moral rectitude if she were given the opportunity to live like a man? The question remains unanswered.

Perhaps the author already provides the readers with a negative answer when the cousin disappears in the latter half of the book and the narrator matures and becomes more cynical. Also, stories about family life occupy a great portion of the latter half of the novel, so more female figures are exposed to satiric attack. Disenchanted, Jizhi even concludes that:

Having a few more years of experiences and also seeing more things, I recently feel that despite of their social status, all families more or less have some secret misfortunes. If you ask me where these misfortunes come from, ninety-nine percent of them are caused by women. In a word, it is because women have not been taught well. (Guaixianzhuang 530)

There is no evidence showing that Wu Jianren is misogynistic; we cannot consider his writing misogynistic simply because he puts female figures under the satiric microscope, either. He is equally harsh, if not more, on his male characters. However, we cannot ignore the striking increase of female satirized objects over the course of the novel. Such a tendency, along with the narrator’s cousin’s withdrawal from the scene, undoubtedly heightens the sense of hopelessness and disillusionment. In the first forty chapters, the domestic world, though under severe threat of corruption, manages to keep its integrity and even shows hope in some of the promising figures in the narrator’s family as well as Jizhi’s. But in the last thirty-five chapters, the absurdity illustrated by female characters, ranging from greedy prostitutes to shrewish mistresses in officials’ households, to bully
maidservants and malicious mother-in-laws, outweighs the virtue found in women like the narrator’s cousin. The virtue and precious family values once embodied by the narrator’s cousin in the domestic world are consequently overtaken by charlatans, impostors and scoundrels, degenerating into the world of business and bureaucracy that Jizhi detests.

Although Wu Jianren’s presentation of life is bereft of hope, he holds great hope in literature and its functions. The incongruity between his belief and his writing is especially obvious when he attempts to express deep sorrow and tears through laughter and jokes, as I will examine next. Incorporating tears in satire would also become a special trait in satiric works of the 1930s and 1940s.

**Laughter and Tears**

Satire makes people laugh—sometimes condescendingly, sometimes bitterly, and sometimes even with tears. Wu Jianren’s enthusiasm for collecting jokes and anecdotes was well known during his lifetime. He wrote and compiled several collections of jokes, anecdotes and “social news” which were in fact rumors and gossip. He also worked as a journalist and editor for several entertainment newspapers for years. Scholars have noted the significance of jokes in Wu Jianren’s literary career. “Incorporating jokes into novels,” as Chen Pingyuan points out, “is a prominent feature of late Qing satiric novels” (272).

In his analysis of works by Wu Jianren and Li Boyuan, David Der-wei Wang also stresses the importance of laughter in late Qing exposés by claiming that “late Qing
writers extended a Chinese fictional capacity to view life through humor. [...] [And these] writers systematically topple the noble and serious and raise up the vulgar and animalistic” (190). Indeed, Wu Jianren values comic discourse over serious writing. But comedy is only taken as a better means to achieve the educational purpose of fiction. In the preface of History of the Jin Dynasty (Liangjin yanyi, 1906-1907), Wu Jianren asserts that his determination to reform society by writing novels “has never ceased for a single moment” (Wei 143). In his opinion, novels can be loosely categorized as qi (strange or eccentric) and zheng (correctitude or formal) (Wei 143). Although he believes that “straight-out advice and correction is not as good as implicit admonishment; serious words cannot be taken as easily as words in jest” (Wei 143), we can hardly say that he celebrates the grotesque and absurd with carnivalesque laughter. Nor can we say that the satirist means to topple “the noble and serious” or intellectual superiority. Instead, through the cynical and bitter comments from characters like Jizhi, he laments that “the noble and serious” are too vulnerable when they confront “the vulgar and animalistic.”

The educational and curing function of literature is always the top priority for Wu Jianren. Are Wu Jianren’s satiric novels really amusing, or do they produce tears? In late Qing exposés, the horrible world is viewed with a sneer rather than through comedy, which makes Jianren’s humor unusual. I believe that late Qing exposés aim not at laughter but at sorrow, anger, reflection, correction, reform, and ultimately, unreachable salvation.

How Wu Jianren utilizes humor needs our scrutiny. In the preface of his book The New Collection of Jokes (Xin xiaolin guangji), Wu Jianren writes that:
Recent scholars are deeply aware of the capacity of novels to reform the society, and thus novels are under heated discussion. I humbly believe that for those literary works that appeal to readers, serious and formal writing is not as good as jocular words. That’s why jest-novels [xiaohua xiaoshuo] have become the vogue. *(Wofoshanren 457)*

Wu Jianren was well known for and proud of his capacity to tell *xiaohua*, or jokes. Indeed, His writing is amusing when he plays with words to show his wit and intellectual knowledge, and when he ridicules phony scholars which are the typically satirized objects in the satiric convention of Chinese literature. His satiric novel *Strange Things* particularly resembles Wu Jingzi’s *The Scholars* in terms of such types of *xiaohua*. In his sojourn in Shanghai, the narrator of *Strange Things* attends a literary gathering of local scholars and poets. In the gathering, the phony poets attribute the Tang poet Li Shangyin’s pseudonym *Yuxi sheng* to Du Mu and Du Mu’s pseudonym *Fanchuan* to Du Fu, believing that Du Shaoling (Du Fu’s pseudonym) must be Du Fu’s father; they praise a fake roll of calligraphy of the celebrated Tang calligrapher Yan Zhenqing as well as Su Shi’s poem copied in the calligraphy, but do not realize that Su Shi of the Song dynasty would not be born until three hundred years later. They make a fool of themselves by their shocking ignorance (chap. 35). In *The Scholars*, Wu Jingzi also satirizes how narrow some Confucian scholars’ course of studies can be. For example, Fan Jin has never heard of Su Shi and thinks that Su Shi is an unknown student who has taken the prefectural examination. Wu Jingzi’s joke about Su Shi is not original. It is actually refashioned from similar jokes and anecdotes that appear in several Ming writings.
In his canonical book *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, Lu Xun sharply contrasts *The Scholars* with late Qing exposés, especially those of Wu Jianren and Li Boyuan. He admires Wu Jingzi’s writing for its “implicit satire,” but believes that the late Qing exposés are poorly written. He is especially harsh on Wu Jianren’s *Strange Things*, particularly from the aesthetic perspective:

Unfortunately, his [Wu Jianren’s] descriptions are too hurried, and he sometimes errs by overstating the evils he is depicting. His words disregard reality, and their power to affect people is thereby diminished. The result is merely a compendium of gossip, good only for providing those at loose ends with material for idle chatter. (*LXQJ IX* 295-96)

Despite his neglect of unprecedented traits in late Qing satire, Lu Xun’s instinct is correct in that he sees the roughness of most jokes that Wu Jianren writes in *Strange Things*. In this novel, many strange things are referred to as *xiaohua* as well. *Xiaohua* in Wu Jianren’s writing, more often than not, are not the amusing humor or comic jokes that we usually expect. They represent conduct that violates the law of propriety. Sometimes, this type of moral transgression is too absurd and improper to be the mere objects of laughter or mockery. *Xiaohua* is just a euphemism for absurdities and disgraceful actions. These strange and unbelievably ridiculous human misdeeds, in both the public realm and within the family domain, oppose reason, righteousness, benevolence, dignity and sympathy. Wu Jianren’s *The New History of Laughter* (*Xin xiaoshi*, 1903-1905) includes many *xiaohua* like this. In one joke, he tells the story of Lu Xiufu, a high-ranking imperial official in the Song dynasty. During national crisis, Lu believes that dynastic
change is in accordance with the universal change of Tao; in his opinion, the downfall of his country is something that ought to happen. Wu Jianren cries, “Treating the downfall of one’s country as something natural is really heartless. What a big joke” (Wofoshanren 497)! Wu Jianren retells Lu’s opinion with great indignation; the joke of Lu Xiufu is so outrageous that it clearly serves to alert readers about their own, similar national crisis. Even though this book is supposed to be a collection of humorous jokes, for Wu Jianren, xiaohua may not be able to provoke laughter at all. A xiaohua may be completely deprived of laughter in terms of its content, the storyteller’s intention and its effect on readers. For Wu Jianren, xiaohua covers a wide range of stories—some of which are entertaining, while others are disturbingly strange and immoral.

The abnormalities witnessed in Strange Things are also often considered as haoxiao or kexiao. Haoxiao/kexiao can be used to refer to things or deeds that are comical or absurd. Conferring the title of imperial lady to former prostitutes is already very haoxiao, while an imperial lady willingly sent by her husband to be a prostitute is even more haoxiao (Guaixianzhuang 16-17). For the young narrator, such things are “dishonor” (18), and merely talking about these transgressions is not a noble deed in Jizhi’s eyes (18). In this context, haoxiao/kexiao is least indicative of anything amusing and comical. There are many xiaohua about officialdom as well. One of them is a low-ranking county official who is devastatingly impoverished and eventually commits suicide because of his lack of political connections. The narrator concludes that officialdom is a sea of misery from this xiaohua (Guaixianzhuang 80).
Ridiculous xiaohua also occur in the family realm. One story is about a greedy man bringing a false charge against his own father, claiming that his father once joined the Taiping rebellion and is conspiring against the state. Everyone who hears the story believes that the son should be charged as unfilial (Guaixianzhuang 349). Suffice it to say that these xiaohua can cause neither wholesome laughter nor gentle smiles. Rather, for observers and listeners of these outrageous events, they are universally despicable. At best, they engender sneers, bitter laughter and shock; but far more often they provoke uneasiness, disapproval and grief. It is precisely the lack of innuendo in this type of xiaohua that makes Lu Xun prefer to call the late Qing satiric exposés “novels of censure,” qianze xiaoshuo (298).

As Wu Jianren expressed on many occasions, satire and xiaohua awakens his readers with absurdity in order to cure social disease. In spite of his intention to correct, the satiric world he represents is obviously without any healing warmth. This unescapable, nihilistic world is populated by cruel and absurd people that are incurable, leaving no space for hope. The good are doomed to perish, while the evil are bound to revel. In Wu Jingzi’s satire, one’s withdrawal from society is of one’s own volition, but Wu Jianren’s characters are expelled from it. Cai Lusheng is framed by his fellow officials; Jizhi is dismissed from his post because he refuses to bribe higher officials; the principle narrator Jiusi yisheng has to return home when he is finally ruined. Sili taosheng, a former dandy who squanders his money in all sorts of entertainment, laments that “the world is big, but I finds no place to shelter myself,” when he decides to quit his
licentious life (*Guaixianzhuang*) 3). Excessive jokes do not arouse excessive laughter—one can only weep in despair.

Liu E, another prominent late Qing exposé writer, laments in the preface to his novel *The Travels of Lao Can* (*Laocan youji, 1903-1904*):

We of this age have our feelings stirred about ourselves and the world, about family and nation, about society, about the various races and religions. The deeper the emotions, the more bitter the weeping. [...] The game of chess is finished. We are getting old. How can we not weep? I know that “a thousand lovely ones” and “ten thousand beauties” among mankind will weep with me and be sad with me.

(Liu 1; Shadick 1)

Seemingly different from Liu E’s overt mourning, Wu Jianren’s works, under the guise of satiric laughter, are actually quite sad as well. He even juxtaposes tears with satire, which directly challenges the established understanding and expectation of satire. In 1902, Wu Jianren published a short essay consisting of fifty-seven satirical comments, entitled “Wu Jianren Weeps” (*Wu Jianren ku*). Each entry is a satirical comment and critique of the status quo, followed by the remark, “Wu Jianren weeps.” For example, one entry writes:

There was a man who wanted to seek official career, and asked an experienced man who knew a lot about officialdom “How can I become an official?” The experienced man answered: “if you want to learn to be an official, you’d better go to a brothel and learn from the prostitutes. You need to learn how to ingratiating yourself, how to read others’ minds. And you need to practice it and improve your
skills, then you may be an official. Otherwise, you will fail.” Wu Jianren weeps.

(Wei 272)

At the beginning of the essay, he explains, “Why does Wu Jianren weep? In the world, there are extremely outrageous things, extremely sorrowful things, and also things outrageous beyond tolerance, sorrowful beyond grief. Then the only thing I can do is to weep” (Wei 266). Wu Jianren’s sorrow is so deep that only excessive tears can express his condemnation of the corrupt world. Meanwhile, juxtaposing satire with moral judgments clearly registers his great anxiety about national crisis and salvation.

In the same year that Wu Jinren started the Strange Things series, he also worked on a new historical novel The History of Pain (Tongshi, 1903-1905) which is about the turmoil of the late Song and early Yuan dynasties. Undoubtedly, The History of Pain parallels the upheaval of late-Qing China. The History of Pain and The New History of Laugher, like tears and laughter, are two sides of a coin, employed to realize Wu Jianren’s social reform agenda. However, David Der-wei Wang sees alternative goals and modernity in late Qing exposés, asserting that:

With its refusal to identify the real with the presented, its skepticism of the superiority of intellectuals, and its systematic degradation of established values by means of imaginary laughter, late Qing grotesque exposés ought to have served as an antidote to May Fourth writers’ “obsession with China.” (250)

As I will show in the next section, through the techniques of first-person participant narrative and the blend of reportage and personal accounts, Wu Jianren makes every attempt to create verisimilitude. Furthermore, despite the name of “jokes,” poignant
weeping resounds in its presentation of a collapsed world order with incompatible values and ideas. Late Qing exposés actually anticipate the May Fourth writers’ “obsession with China.” Wu Jianren might approach literature differently from Liang Qichao, but he primarily acts following Liang Qichao’s call, which argues that the reform of literature leads to the reform of society. Since the late Qing, moral responsibility has become indispensable to Chinese satire. Consequently, tears accompany satire in many writers’ works, such as Lao She’s *Cat Country, Divorce* (Lihun) and Xiao Hong’s *Tales of Hulan River* (Hulanhe zhuan). Lu Xun distinguishes himself by the harsh attacks in his political satire and the aloof tone in his satiric stories. But many readers are already well-prepared to embrace both tears and laughter in satire when the Russian term “laughter through tears” is later introduced to China, despite any differences from late Qing satire.

**Self-satire and an “Authentic” Account of the Absurd World**

Many critics praise the striking innovation of first-person narrative used by Wu Jianren in his satiric novel *Strange Things*. Patrick Hanan suggests that first-person method leaves the reader a feeling that the narrator possesses complete sovereignty over the text as well as the materials he wants to select for and present (170). However, some first-person narratives, like *Strange Things*, guarantee that the narrator is an active participant in the world he depicts, rather than a disinterested observer, and that he bears the double-role of commentator and satirist. But quite often, the I-narrator does not have complete sovereignty over his narration. Thus, he falls into the position similar to those
he satirizes. It is precisely the presumed contradictory nature of participating in evil while maintaining the superior stance of the satirist that results in the effect of self-satire.

In some ways, *Strange Things* can be compared to a European bildungsroman that tells a young man’s initiation into society and his intellectual growth in the process of experiencing absurd things and adjusting to them. At the early stage of the narrator’s journey, he is presented as a young man of great naïveté who perceives the world through Confucian morality. With the belief that everyone behaves in accordance with Confucian principles, he even resists comprehending the fraudulence that is laid bare in front of him. The fifteen-year-old young man sets out into the real world for the first time when traveling from his hometown to Hangzhou where his father is fatally ill and dies soon before his arrival. Despite a warning from his father’s trusted shop assistant, he entrusts his uncle to handle his father’s assets, counting on the brotherly love and moral obligation his uncle is expected to demonstrate by Confucian standards. Unfortunately, the uncle soon turns out to be an untrustworthy man. He claims that the narrator’s money is deposited in a reliable bank but does not reply to the narrator’s further inquiries about the interest. Therefore, the narrator has to go to Nanjing to visit his uncle in person, hoping to claim his assets. However, his uncle’s family refuses to receive him under the excuse that his uncle left on official business, which almost impoverishes the young man in a strange land. Luckily the young man meets Wu Jizhi, an old fellow pupil. Ten years the narrator’s senior, Jizhi has already passed the metropolitan examination and has been assigned to the nearby county for appointment. Knowing the narrator’s difficulties, Jizhi
immediately offers him the hand of fellowship, taking him to his household and even offering him a position in his own private secretariat.

His lack of knowledge and experience results in the narrator’s inability to understand the strange things he encounters and to make sensible judgments. At this stage he is just an inexperienced reporter of the strange things that confuse him, whereas Jizhi serves to reveal the ugly truth, and to act as a satiric commentator to condemn the dysfunctional society. Compared with the narrator’s uncle and others who have betrayed his trust, Jizhi meets the Confucian expectation of a decent and righteous man. He is a talented scholar, a filial son, an amiable gentleman and a fatherly official. Thinking of Jizhi’s unreserved friendship and genuine counsel, the narrator admiringly comments that even real brothers cannot do better than Jizhi (Guaixianzhuang 19). The narrator’s construction of Jizhi shows that Jizhi, although perhaps far from being a saint, is good enough to be a real gentleman in a moribund world.

Working closely with Jizhi, the narrator soon realizes that officialdom is no better than “a sea of misery” for those who have no connections with higher officials (Guaixianzhuang 80). Showing the narrator the ubiquity of corruption in officialdom, Jizhi instills in him the necessary wisdom to survive. For instance, in response to the narrator’s doubt about the ubiquity of graft and corruption in the navy, Jizhi explains:

That’s why I say that you’re inexperienced and unschooled in the way of the world at all. Who is there that does not want money when he sees it? Besides, everyone is like this. If you insist on parading your virtuousness, you are bound to reveal the flaws and corruption of the others’. But don’t think about surviving
even a single day if you do that. Take, for instance, the Customs of which I am in charge. There’s a lot of money which I really don’t want to take. But since it has been done all the time, why should I take trouble to disclose it and incur the displeasure of my successor by breaking the tradition? As long as I don’t seek more illegitimate sources of fraud, I am a good man. (Guaixianzhuang 82. Italics mine.)

He further points out the young man’s naivety in assuming that the Viceroy and Governors are incapable of making a thorough investigation, and laments that “There you are again. Who says the Viceroy and Governors have been asleep? They have been much more awake than you and I. If they were to get rid of all the corruption, how could they be able to do personal favors for their own men” (Guaixianzhuang 82. Italics mine.)?

David Der-wei Wang insightfully suggests that although late Qing exposé writers start out positing a superior stance, they are not “interested in” maintaining it throughout their narratives. They and their intended readers are well aware of the fact that “no one is immune to absurdity” (213). It is debatable if the late Qing exposé writers have no interest in maintaining their superior stance as satirists, but the satiric narrators apparently are conscious of the necessity to compromise one’s principles and adjust to reality. Jizhi’s advice to the narrator demonstrates not only his struggle against degradation and his moral superiority to most of his colleagues, but, more importantly, that those who have only one foot in corruption might think that they are cleaner than the fallen ones, but no one can find a way to pull out from it.
As the narrative goes on, the reader gradually becomes uneasy about Jizhi’s self-righteousness, thereby questioning the opposition between the satirist and his satirized objects. In chapters 42 and 43, Jizhi invites the narrator to secretly mark examination papers in the inner chambers of examination sections. Thus, the narrator has the opportunity to be exposed to all sorts of corruption in the civil service examinations, especially the so-called “free pass,” tong guanjie. A free pass is a previously-made arrangement between an examiner and a certain examinee; when recognizing the pre-arranged characters and words that appear in certain place of an examinee’s paper, the examiner gives the paper a high rank. If the paper does not go to the expected examiner, the examiner can go to other examiners to look for it. Such arrangements become unfeasible in a “black section,” in which the examiner not only refuses to arrange free passes, but also prevents other examiners from looking for the papers they need in his section. An “extreme” upright examiner in a “black section” may even report these pre-arrangements to his supervisor.

In Jizhi’s opinion, examiners in “black sections” are odd and stubborn, and it is absolutely unwise to report the misconduct to the chief examiner. Jizhi expresses his disapproval with a true story about a “black section” examiner, nicknamed “Confucius of the Qing dynasty”: “In order to be an upright gentleman and stay clear of the dirty tricks, one disregards the harm he does to others. Why bother to do that” (Guaixianzhuang 270)? Here, Jizhi equates the disclosure of cheating to causing trouble and harming the cheaters, zuohairen. He is determined not to be involved in arranging free passes with any examination candidate, but also not to pose as a solemn man of virtue, because it
surely will arouse disgust among other corrupt officials. His cooperation with those who look for particular papers in his section receives applause from the narrator, who believes that Jizhi’s smart strategy makes sure that he acts the part of an upright man, and at the same time he is good to others (Guaiixianzhuang 269). Obviously, both Jizhi and the narrator do not desire and are unable to maintain moral integrity, when the world is warped by money, fame, rank and self-interest.

The significant contrasts in this story lie not between the “black section” examiners and those who engage in pre-arrangements, but between these two types of official examiners and Jizhi. Both the stubbornness of the “Confucius of the Qing dynasty” and the contemptibility of the “red section” examiners serve as the object of critique and mockery, since the “Confucius of the Qing dynasty” eventually surrenders to the corrupt examiner’s new trick of faking insanity. The presumed righteous man’s way of handling the matter ends up futile and even farcical, whereas Jizhi, with his cynical but practical attitude, adroitly handles the matter and even clandestinely recommends quite a few promising examination candidates who have shown great capacity for diagnosing the nation’s diseases. In a ridiculous world of impostors, charlatans, clowns, sycophants and hypocrites, “good” and “upright” men are the ones like Jizhi who are better than the villains yet worse than the ideal Confucian scholars and officials. Nevertheless, Jizhi’s compromised morality undermines the legitimacy of his satire. And the distinction between him and the absurdities is not as straightforward as expected.

Jizhi is not merely the narrator’s mentor; he is also a double of the narrator. He represents the type of man who the narrator will probably become. Like Jizhi, the narrator
gradually becomes more cynical. He shows his first maturing in chapters 17 to 20, when he travels back home to rescue his mother and family assets from the predatory relatives. His competence in handling the issue also displays a tendency to establish retaliatory relations with others, though it is in its embryonic stage. As the narrative proceeds, the narrator’s naïveté transforms into insight acquired from his experiences in business. To the narrator, the former absurdities become simply indicative of the way the world works, rather than something strange.

Deeply involved in business, the narrator shows even greater flexibility in his moral principles and standards than Jizhi does. For instance, in chapter 45, the narrator recounts quite a few stories about affluent salt merchants who are extremely ignorant in literature and art, yet love to pose as connoisseurs of painting, calligraphy and antiques. Meanwhile, he ridicules art agents who fool the salt merchants by selling them fake antiques at high prices. Both interestingly and disturbingly, one of the narrator’s close friends asks him to imitate a seal of Dong Qichang, a well-known Ming calligrapher and painter, so that he can sell a fake scroll to the salt merchants who are convinced that as long as a piece of work contains a famous seal, it is genuine. The narrator agrees to help his friend without the slightest sign of hesitation or objection. When depicting the salt merchants and art agents, the narrator obviously poses a privileged stance, but he does not realize that he and his friend are no less fraudulent. The more wisdom the narrator gains, the more at ease he behaves, yet he is more like those he caricatures.

Towards the end of the novel, almost twenty years after the narrator entered society, Jizhi pessimistically tells the narrator that one cannot be a spoilsport by revealing
the falseness of the world, and “if one is always disagreeable to others, he cannot survive anymore” (Guaixianzhuang 601). This piece of wisdom echoes Jizhi’s advice on how to be a “good man” and not to “cause trouble to others.” The falseness of the world obviously annoys the narrator and Jizhi, and indeed there are also others “more awake” than they are. However, none of them take a steadfast position in firmly resisting evil because it is not wise or profitable to do so. The narrator is deeply involved in the sick society and inevitably participates in the “strange things” that are nevertheless despicable. The things he learns to do in order to survive would also have been undoubtedly “strange” to him if he were younger. The narrator’s maturation is a journey to hopelessness rather than to enlightenment. His maturity shows, inevitably, that he is “no better or no worse” than the absurdity he had ridiculed (Wang 190).

Is it possible that Wu Jianren deliberately tells a story that betrays the narrator’s position as self-satirist? A closer study of the form of this quasi-bildungsroman may shed light on the creation of self-satire. The journey of the narrator is in the form of a diary and quasi-reportage, both of which emphasize the reliability of what has been recorded. Claiming that a certain text is a diary or an account by someone who experienced the story is a commonly used literary convention. But we should not read Strange Things from traditional reading perspectives. In his study of the origin of modern Chinese novels, Chen Pingyuan claims that the mantra of “write realistically,” xieshi, was widely accepted and applauded by late Qing exposé writers as a supplement to or even substitute for history; many writers further regarded novels on contemporary social events as another form of news or reportage (258-63). In light of the general advocacy of
authenticity and realism, it is not surprising that the contempt for newspapers, journalists and editors is one of the recurrent themes in *Strange Things*. The narrator complains that readers never find out what exactly happens from newspapers because news is either “hearsay,” or “needs to be verified.” Therefore, reading news is like consulting rumors (*Guaixianzhuang* 46). Contrary to the incredibility of news, the narrator’s reports of strange things are “eyewitness” accounts which are witnessed or experienced either by the narrator or his acquaintances.

Wu Jianren’s theory on the functions of fiction reminds us about the earliest understanding of accounts of interesting individuals and strange things as an alternative of historical writing in the Six Dynasties (220-589 AD). For a reader accustomed to traditional third-person novels, a first-person participant narrative undoubtedly strengthens the sense of authenticity. Although Wu Jianren emphasizes that the strange things he writes about are real, he is well aware of the fictitious nature of his writing. By highlighting the social importance of fiction, he attempts to follow Liang Qichao’s call to legitimate—which exaggerates, to a certain extent—fiction’s role in building a strong, new China.

By reiterating the authenticity of the stories and experiences, Wu Jianren diminishes the distance between author and first-person narrator. Conceding the fictitious nature of the novel, he takes pains to eliminate any skepticism. He stresses his novel’s capacity to reveal how people act towards a degraded society. Unaware of the limits and contradictions of his narrative, the author means to show that the I-narrator is not a hypocrite. Like Jizhi, he is just a despairing cynic struggling to survive the social mire.
The narrator that Wu Jianren means to create is more of a reliable satirist than a satirized character, while self-satire is a narrative effect beyond the writer’s intention. In the narrative of story-reporting, the voice of the I-narrator is individual and personal. By diminishing other characters’ self-presentation, he seemingly controls the narrative discourse as well as his privileged stance to judge. But his own conduct shows his limits to satirize, thus generating a discrepancy between his presumed moral standards as a satirist and his own self-presentation.

Wu Jianren’s essay “Wu Jianren Weeps” registers a sentiment similar to self-satire. One entry writes: “I often told myself that the reason that China is not open and progressive and able to reform is its shortage of educated people. Suddenly, however, a different thought came to me: It is precisely because there are too many educated people in China that it is not open and progressive and able to reform. Wu Jianren weeps” (Wei 268). Does Wu Jianren realize that he is also a member of the educated people he rebukes? One may argue that Wu Jianren probably places himself in a higher position when censuring his fellow intellectuals. But in another entry he also writes: “Wu Jianren himself admittedly has not made any progress, but it can be seen that others have not either. Wu Jianren weeps” (Wei 268). Again, the sense of superiority is still detectable, which serves as the basis of satiric writing. But Wu Jianren is, like the I-narrator and Jizhi, conscious of the limitation of his moral superiority as a satirist, and willing to surrender himself to mockery and censure.

Despite his intentions, Wu Jianren offers no hope of salvation in his writing. Higher moral standards exist only in a utopia. The loss of reliable moral authority
inevitability results in epistemological chaos. Aware of such a reality, the satirist concedes that his privileged stance is severely undermined, and that he might be a little better than the satirized object, but he cannot escape moral trial. This disturbed satiric triangle as well as its literary ambiguity would reoccur frequently in 1930s and 1940s satiric writing.
CHAPTER TWO

National Character, “Little Man” and “Laughter through Tears”:
Empathetic Satire in Xiao Hong’s Fiction

“What happens after Nora leaves home?” Lu Xun (1881-1936) asked in a speech addressing college women in 1923. He predicted that there would be only two options for an economically dependent woman like Ibsen’s Nora: she will either become a prostitute or return home. Xiao Hong (1911-1942), one of the best modern Chinese writers and Lu Xun’s dearest disciple and close friend, verified Lu Xun’s concern through her life story.

Born to a landlord family in the northeast China, Xiao Hong experienced all the shackles of a patriarchal family and the stagnation of an inland society. Unable to bear the oppressive life in the rural backwater, she fled from home and started her literary career. She did not become a prostitute, but she had no stable income, and for a long time survived only on bread and water. She did not return home again, but poverty devastated her health and wasted her talent. She died lonely and in despair at the age of thirty-one, far from home. Readers find a sense of loneliness and a lyrical mood in most of her works that echo her drifting life. She is particularly interested in depicting the miserable down-trodden with great empathy, even in her satire. Her 1940 novel Tales of Hulan River (Hulanhe Zhuan) reveals its literary affinity with Lu Xun’s works. Her continuation of the Chinese “national character” discourse, and more importantly, influence of Russian satirist Nikolai Gogol, develop the tendency of bringing tears to satire that we see in Late Qing exposés.
Lu Xun’s Legacy and Gogol’s Influence in China

Lu Xun ends his essay “What is Satire?” with, “If a work looks satirical but lacks kind aims and genuine passion, simply convincing its readers that there is nothing good in the world, nothing worth doing, this is not satire but sneer” (*LXQJ VI* 341-42). Quite unlike the harsh attacks he made in many of his essays, he stresses shanyi, “kind aims” and reping, “genuine passion or enthusiasm towards life.” For him, satire is nothing but “truth” about “irrational, ridiculous, disgusting or even detestable” incidents. These incidents “take place publicly and frequently” (340), but are often neglected because of their commonplace nature. Lu Xun applauds works of Swift and Gogol for their talent to create “excellent satire” out of insignificant incidents because he believes that “In certain societies the more common an incident, the more prevalent, the more suited it is for satire” (341). From this essay, one may draw a formula for “excellent satire” that suits Chinese society best: written in concise but artistic language, telling “the truth of certain aspects of some group of people,” but also, necessarily with positive aims (*LXQJ VI* 340). Gogolian satire, at least for Lu Xun, represents his ideal.

Lu Xun’s literary connection with Gogol started even before his first vernacular story “A Madman’s Diary” (Kuangren riji, 1918). When analyzing his stories, Patrick Hanan compellingly argues that Lu Xun is drawn primarily to Gogol’s irony (230-45). Both his contemporaries and later readers notice Lu Xun’s admiration for Gogol’s comic satire and his humanitarian compassion. However, before I delve into the examination on compassionate satire, the translation and reception of Gogol’s works in twentieth-century China needs to be briefly discussed.
Despite his humor, love for and sympathy with the Ukrainian life demonstrated in his early works such as *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*, Gogol was introduced to China primarily as a satirist. The surrealist and grotesque aspects of his writing derived from Ukrainian culture and folklore were widely ignored. On the one hand, the “Russian character” in his play *The Government Inspector* and his last novel *Dead Souls* were highly controversial for his Russian readers, many of whom considered his characters Ukrainian instead of Russian and asserted that the Ukraine-born writer’s lack of experience of Russian life made his representation of Russia slanderous (Edyta 236-51). On the other hand, Chinese intellectuals and scholars believed his writing showed “real” Russian character and took characters like Chichikov to be “an immortal international prototype” (Zhou 10).

Lu Xun, one of the most ardent advocates and translators of Gogol’s work, published his translation of the Japanese critic Nobuyuki Tateno’s essay on Gogol and Gogolian satire on the first issue of *Yiwen*, “Translated Literature.” In this essay, Nobuyuki Tateno expresses the familiar feeling of Gogol’s characters, and thinks that such characters transcend nation and society, providing Japanese writers with an example of how to use satiric tools to reform their society (*Lu Xun yiwen ji* 422-7). Although Lu Xun himself was not only fascinated by Gogol’s satiric techniques, but also very interested in the surrealist and grotesque strains that illustrate Ukrainian culture, contemporary readers and critics resonated with Nobuyuki Tateno’s view on Gogol, and

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primarily regarded Ah Q in Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q” as representative of Chinese national character. In addition to the critics’ admiration for Gogol’s insightful representation of Russian character, Chinese critics appreciated his deep Romantic sensibility and his technique of interweaving pathos and mockery in his stories. Pushkin once used the term “laughter through tears” to describe Gogolian satire, which was introduced to China and widely-accepted by Chinese critics. They further believed that Pushkin’s description applies to Russian satiric literature as a whole (Zhou 9).

The Chinese reception of Gogol focused so much on “national character” (guomin xing) and “laughter through tears” that many writers wittingly and unwittingly associated their satirized object somewhat with the Chinese national character. As the leading figure of the May Fourth intellectuals and modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun criticized Chinese society by creating a series of characters, mainly lower-class rural peasants, who embody the Chinese national character, in stories such as “A Madman’s Diary,” “Kong Yiji” (Kong Yiji, 1919) and “The True Story of Ah Q” (Ah Q zhengzhuan, 1921). Part of the Chinese national character is featured by Chinese’s numbness towards tragedy and human misery, the cannibalistic nature of Confucian culture, the lower-class Chinese’s slave mentality, the enthusiasm for spectacle-watching, and a lack of sincerity. I will show how these work in Xiao Hong’s novel Tales of Hulan River. The construction of “National Character” demonstrates the Chinese intellectual’s humanitarian reflection on national identity. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, when China was invaded by the Japanese, the overall intellectual trend gradually turned left. Leftists believed that China had already passed the time represented by the characters in Lu Xun’s stories and that
writers should focus on China’s progression and revolution. Unlike most of her leftist and revolutionary friends, Xiao Hong insisted on using the humanitarian tradition of Lu Xun in her writing, even after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war. Her gradual turning away from revolutionary writing and returning to the May Fourth humanitarian tradition in *Hulan River* eventually brought sharp criticism from left-wing writers and critics. This is why that even as her best work, *Hulan River* was largely ignored in the following decades.

Xiao Hong narrowed the target of her critiques to the chronic social disease of national character. Although there is no direct affinity between Gogol’s writing and Xiao Hong’s works, it is reasonable to assume that she read and was familiar with Gogol’s works that were translated into Chinese.¹ She was very fond of foreign literature, and constantly asked friends to mail her the Chinese translations of foreign novels and stories, as well as magazines that advocated foreign literature such as the above-mentioned literary magazine *Yiwen*.² Xiao Hong moved to Shanghai with Xiao Jun, and started a friendship with Lu Xun in October 1934. She frequented his home in the spring of 1936 when the Xiao couple moved very close to him. Until she went to Japan in July, she paid

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¹ Xiao Hong definitely learned Russian once, and wrote an essay on her Russian teacher, entitled “The Sorrow of Sophia” (Suofeiya de chouku). In an account of Xiao Jun, the Xiao couple learned Russian from a private tutor in Harbin until 1934. Some of the reading materials they used were poems of Pushkin and fables of Russian fabulist Ivan Andreyevich Krylov. According to Xiao Jun, Xiao Hong’s Russian was much better than his, and she was a more diligent student. However, they studied Russian for only a short time (probably about a year), and there is no evidence showing that Xiao Hong’s Russian was good enough to read works in the original language. See Xiao Jun 51-56.

² Thanks to Lu Xun’s fondness of Russian literature and his great contribution to the operation of *Yiwen* in the 1930s, the majority of works published in *Yiwen* are Russian literature, including Gogol, Chekhov, Gorky and Epomehkt, and so forth. When Xiao Hong was in Japan in 1936, Huang Yuan, the editor of *Yiwen*, regularly mailed *Yiwen* to her at her request. See Xiao Hong’s letters to Xiao Jun on September 9th, 1936, and her letter to Huang Yuan on October 17th, 1936 in *Xiao Hong shujian jicun zhushi lu* [An Annotated Collection of Xiao Hong’s Letters].
almost daily visits to Lu Xun’s home and found emotional solace in his family. It is at this time that her friendship and tutelage with him developed. Coincidently, it was during this period of time that Lu Xun was busy translating *Dead Souls*. Some of the Xiao couple’s friends even played in the Chinese version of *The Government Inspector* (J. Xiao 139). Xiao Hong’s work does not necessarily resemble Gogol’s, but we do know that she read him and was friends with people who admired him.

In her drifting life, Xiao Hong felt scared by the morbidity of society. From Japan, she wrote to Xiao Jun that life there is not “life,” and the “morbid,” “withered” Japan “has no healthy souls.” She further compared China and Japan:

> Among the nations in the world, China’s souls are morbid. But after arriving in Japan, [I found that] the Japanese [souls are] even more morbid than ours. […] Chinese has national morbidity, but we don’t have enough time to cure it. Coming to Japan, and learning from them—that only makes the morbid even more morbid. (J. Xiao 101)

Xiao Hong is concerned more about national diseases and the inherent flaws of Chinese than any individual evil, in the same way as Lu Xun explicitly pinpoints such “essential” flaws of Chinese national character in his stories. In response to the common view that she is a better essayist than novelist, Xiao Hong said: “[they] mean that I don’t know how to write a novel, but I will [obstinately] do it. […] [I will write] things like ‘The True Story of Ah Q’ and ‘Kong Yiji,’ and surpass Lu Xun at least by the length of my novels” (*Xiao Hong xuanji* 3).
Now, over sixty years since passing away in 1942, Xiao Hong is recognized to be one of the best novelists on the modern Chinese literary scene, though she died before reaching her full potential. She wrote only three novels: *The Field of Life and Death* (1934), *Tales of Hulan River* (1940) and the unfinished *Ma Bole* (1940). *Ma Bole* is a satiric novel with clear moral messages and evokes readers’ laughter at the world, whereas readers and critics usually regard *Tales of Hulan River* as a semi-autobiography, a reminiscent or realistic novel in spite of their acknowledgement of its ubiquitous irony and conspicuous satiric tone. However, the semi-autobiographical, reminiscent or realistic respects of a novel do not prevent a satiric style. As I have argued, satire is not a genre by itself, but rather inhabits various forms of other genres, be it biography, reminiscence or fiction. Recalling the ties of satire and reality Lu Xun asserts, we may draw the conclusion that for modern Chinese writers, satire is surely compatible with realism. But why are critics reluctant to call *Tales of Hulan River* “satire”? In his influential preface to the novel, well-known writer and literary critic Mao Dun defends the uniqueness of Xiao Hong’s writing by saying:

| Satire is here, and humor. At the start you read with a sense of relaxation; then little by little your heart grows heavier. (*Hulan River* 99) |

Mao Dun’s analysis seemingly juxtaposes satire with lyricism and laughter with sensibility, but his emphasis on the novel’s poetic complements have such a tremendous
impact upon later critics and readers that their appreciation of the novel’s lyrical strain outweighs its satiric effect, especially when satire usually is often considered a means of personal attack. Therefore, Xiao Hong’s lyrical and sorrowful novel seems less a satire.

Xiao Hong’s mentor Lu Xun reminds us that the “real” and “excellent” satire is Gogolian satire. Gogol once said, “When I began to read Pushkin the first chapter of Dead Souls in the old version, Pushkin, who always used to laugh at my reading (he always laughed so willingly), became gradually gloomier and gloomier. After the reading was over, he said in an anguished voice: ‘My God, how sad our Russia is’” (Pushkin 57)!

Pushkin’s anguish highly resembles the above-mentioned perception of Xiao Hong’s satire from Mao Dun.

Tales of Hulan River inherits this sensibility and lyrical mood from Gogolian satire. The Chinese offspring of Gogolian satire expresses a humble passivity and profound sympathy towards human misery; the satirist conveys empathy with the satirized object in narrative as well. I call this empathetic satire. In empathetic satire, satirical laughter is intertwined with compassionate tears. The moral inadequacy of the satirized person appears as a proximate satirized object, not an ultimate satirized object, because the satirized person is at once a participant in and a victim of a moribund society. While exposing the moribund society as the ultimate satirized object, the satirist shows a capacity for understanding the proximate satirized object’s situation and the cause of absurdity. Moreover, the satirist occasionally withdraws from his or her superior stance to the position of the satirized person and stands in that same position, where he or she can better empathize with the object of satire. In Xiao Hong, as in Gogol, the proximate
saturized object is the invented “national character,” while the “little man” is often the object of empathy.

**National Character as the Proximate Satirized Object**

By *Tales of Hulan River*, Xiao Hong pays homage to the humanitarian Lu Xun. *Hulan River* is a biography of a place—a lyrical portrait of the people, locales and circumstances that linger in the narrator’s mind. The novel is composed of seven chapters. In the first two chapters, a slightly detached adult voice makes an anthropological introduction of the town of Hulan River, capturing its seasons and weather, its landscape, its main festivals, the daily life of its inhabitants, and their view of life and death. Through this panoramic depiction, Xiao Hong creates a sealed world that seems to transcend time; here, nothing changes—birth and death is as routine for nature as eating and sleeping is for humans. When the human world transcends time, it also transcends change and revolution. Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua point out that the historical figure in the novel is actually “the inheritance of diseased social culture of the rural backwater” (195).

As a literary style, reminiscence endows the adult-narrator with the freedom and intelligence to contemplate the past and to bridge the gap between past and present. Naturally, Xiao Hong’s adult-narrator is able to introduce aspects of life that a child would otherwise not comprehend. However, the adult-narrator takes a detached tone that seemingly shows no more significant wisdom than that of the townsfolk. She has no identity; she is by no means the impotent intellectual-narrator (or revolutionary-failure) in
many of Lu Xun’s stories. By recording the life of the town and its people, she says, it was once like that, and it still is. The emotionless survey of Hulan creates an effect of objectivity and noninvolvement, and accordingly, a sense of verisimilitude. Ironically, by writing from the perspective of the local people, yet simultaneously providing the reader the opportunity to form their own judgment, Xiao Hong censures the town of Hulan and its inhabitants as being ignorant, superstitious, indolent and unfeeling.

In the “local chronicles” of Hulan, the narrator tells a brief story of Widow Wang, who passes her days peacefully until her son drowns when bathing in the river, causing her to lose her mind. This tragedy causes interest among the locals, but their sympathy soon dies away. Life continues, and she “returns to her uneventful existence” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 224; Hulan River 113). The narrator explains that the unfortunates (such as the crippled, the blind, the insane and slow-witted) can be found in every district, county and village, but “the local inhabitants have apparently heard and seen so much of them that their presence does not seem unusual” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 244; Hulan River 113).

The ambiguity of the Chinese language helps to enhance the adult narrator’s critique of the Hulan locals’ indifference to human tragedy. Immediately after the above-quoted sentence, the narrative runs, “偶尔在庙台上或是大门洞里不幸遇到了一个, 刚想多少加一点恻隐之心在那人身上，但是一转念，人间这样的事多着哩” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 244)! Literally, it translates to, “[ ] unfortunately encounter[s/ed] one of them on the temple steps or inside a gateway alcove, and feel[s/felt] the momentary compassion for that particular individual, but quickly realize[s/ed] that the world has

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4 Widow Wang’s story reminds us of Lu Xun’s “New Year Sacrifice” (Zhufu).
untold numbers of such things [and people].” Because of the omission of a subject and the absence of tense, person and conjugation in modern vernacular Chinese, the narrative can be read either as the narrator’s commentary on the townspeople’s lack of sympathy, or as free indirect speech that could be the thoughts of one of the locals, or even the narrator herself. Free indirect speech enables the narrator to perceive the world like her criticized objects, thereby presenting cruelty in an ostensibly reasonable and innocent fashion. The adult-narrator uses this narrative irony to censure the cruelty overlooked in a stagnant society. In a placid yet ironic tone, the adult narrator uses her intellectual viewpoint to show the ultimate object of her satire, which is the moribund society—the collective power generated by its members to exclude and eliminate the abnormal ones, and this diseased society’s immunity to any possible change or hope. In another example, the narrator says:

Then there was the calamity that struck the bean curd shop: During a fight between two of the employees, the donkey that turned the mill suffered a broken leg. Since it was only a donkey, there wasn’t much to be said on that score. But a woman lost her sight as a result of crying over the donkey (she was the mother of the employee who had hit the donkey), so the episode could not simply be overlooked.

Then there was the paper mill in which a bastard child was starved to death. But since it was a newborn baby, the incident didn’t amount to much, and nothing more need be said about it. (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 245; Hulan River 114-15)
The narrator intentionally adopts the local populace’s indifferent attitude towards such tragic incidents—the starvation of a newborn child does not deserve too much attention, and can be ignored as easily as a donkey’s broken leg. Misery is taken as a matter of course.

Beginning in the third chapter, the narrative voice transitions to a little girl, and the focus of the novel shifts from the panoramic depiction of the town to the stories of several particular characters that the child-narrator meets daily, which are primarily the narrator’s Grandfather, Second Uncle You, the Hu family’s child bride and Harelip Feng. In these chapters, Xiao Hong creates a group of individuals (not necessarily the above-mentioned main characters) embodying the “national character” represented by Lu Xun’s stories. Emerging from the faceless mass of the unconscious collective, these cruel and indifferent individuals serve as the object of Xiao Hong’s satire. In Hulan River, although the narrator was born into a landlord family, the upper-class life is on the periphery of her narrative, while the poor lower-class predominates. In Lu Xun’s stories, national character mainly shows in the numbness of the peasants he depicts, and Xiao Hong’s world of peasants surely continues this humanitarian convention. A closer look at the character Second Uncle You in both Tales of Hulan River and a 1936 short story entitled “The Family Outsider” (Jiazu yiwai de ren) illustrates You’s kinship with Lu Xun’s lower-class characters such as Ah Q and Kong Yiji.

In Hulan River, Second Uncle You is a distant relative of the narrator’s family. Thanks to his obscure affinity with the family, they allow him to stay as a dependent, but nothing beyond that. He actually lives as a servant—even worse, an incompetent one. His
awkward position in the household—a member of the masters in name, an incapable servant in nature—determines his obsession with face-saving and social hierarchy. He has a strong sense of vanity and is eager to obtain others’ recognition and respect. For instance, he is pleased when people of his class call him with honored names that he does not deserve, such as “Second Landlord You,” “Second Master You,” or “Second Proprietor You.” On the one hand, he realizes the social inequality he experiences every day. On the other hand, he obediently follows and supports the hierarchical social system with an Ah Q-like “spiritual victory.” He is happy when Grandfather calls him with his pet name, Youzi, “Little You.” Second Uncle You has his own theory on its legitimacy: “When you speak to an emperor, you refer to yourself as slave. There’s always a high and a low: a prime minister may be high, but he must prostrate himself before the emperor. Though superior to the multitudes, he is yet inferior to one man” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 308; Hulan River 237).

The slave mentality denounced by Lu Xun leads Second Uncle You to be a hardcore follower of the existing social system. A laughingstock belittled not only by his peers but also by children, he lives a pathetic life, and survives partially by stealing. This reminds us of the best-known thief character in modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun’s Kong Yiji. However, Lu Xun’s stories focus more on the exposure of the multitudes’ “incomprehension of and unresponsiveness to the revolutionary currents in society” (Anderson 37). Such a political agenda draws a line between Lu Xun and the 1940s Xiao Hong, and also distinguishes Xiao Hong’s early work The Field of Life and Death from Tales of Hulan River. In his preface to Hulan River, Mao Dun complains of the novel’s
lack of progressive thoughts and revolutionary hope: “We are shown no trace of feudal oppression and exploitation, no trace of the savage invasion of Japanese imperialism. But these must surely have weighed more heavily on the people of Hulan than their own stupidity and conservatism” (Hulan River 100). But the absence of class conflicts or revolutionary elements in Hulan River is actually out of artistic deliberation. Second Uncle You is apparently derived from Xiao Hong’s “The Family Outsider,” the title of which refers to him. Although this 1936 story is also narrated by a young girl of a landlord family, and Second Uncle You’s personal flaws are also the same, what strikes the reader is the hostile environment in which he has to endure under the landlord family.

In “The Family Outsider,” Xiao Hong stresses Second Uncle You’s conflicts with the child-narrator’s parents. In a detailed scene, the narrator’s father, the young master, cruelly beats the old servant Second Uncle You, while her mother and others indifferently (or happily on her mother’s part) watch the spectacle. Obviously, this scene reminds readers that Second Uncle You’s tragedy mainly derives from class oppression.

The beating of Second Uncle You is also mentioned in Hulan River, but only in five sentences:

Once Father beat up Second Uncle You. Father was just over thirty, while Second Uncle You was nearly sixty. As Second Uncle You got to his feet, Father knocked him back down. He got up again, and once more was knocked down to the ground. Finally he could no longer get to his feet, so he just lay there in the courtyard with blood oozing from his nose, or maybe his mouth. (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 314; Hulan River 247)
However, unlike what is depicted in “The Family Outsider,” after being beaten, Second Uncle You conducts a series of farces. He curses and cries, but when this no longer attracts attention, he dramatically resorts to false acts of suicide by pretending to hang himself and jump down a well. The panicked crowd rushes to save him, only to discover that he is calmly sitting and waiting for them. Thus, in *Hulan River*, the focus of the incident is shifted from the episode of cruel young master beating up a poor servant to the disgraced servant faking suicide in order to win back his reputation and the public’s attention and sympathy. The critique of the landlord class is still present, but it is much milder than the satire of Second Uncle You’s defective personality and the morbid spectators.

Lu Xun once commented on people’s enthusiasm for spectacle-watching: “The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes they are watching a comedy” (*LXQJ I* 170; *Selected works* 91). As Ah Q is ashamed of not being able to sing any line in an opera to gain the spectators’ acclaim when he is about to be decapitated, Second Uncle You initiates the suicide drama, and consciously satisfies others’ thirst for watching a sensational scene in order to add excitement to their dull lives.

The theme of “enjoying the spectacle” as one of the main components of Chinese national character recurs in *Hulan River*. It is presented to its fullest in the episode of “watching the child bride’s public bath.” Chapter five tells a tragic story of a little girl who is a victim of an arranged marriage. But the tension occurs between the child and her mother-in-law (her husband counts so little in the story that he serves only to introduce
our victim). The mother-in-law habitually beats and abuses the child bride, and resorts to summoning a sorceress when she is bed-ridden. The sorceress prescribes a public bath, and the narrator sarcastically says:

As news of these unusual spectacles [that a sorceress will dance at the Hu’s and the child bride will be given a public bath] spread, people came in droves to get an eyeful. As for the paralyzed and the palsied, while no one gave much thought to the tragedy of their physical incapacity, the fact that they were incapable of personally witnessing the public bathing given to the Hu’s child bride was, in their eyes, the calamity of a lifetime. (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 299; Hulan River 223)

Xiao Hong further develops the “onlooker” (kanke) convention in that the onlookers are not apathetic to the victim’s suffering, as Lu Xun criticized in Call to Arms (Nahan), but actually participate in and expedite the process of murder despite their self-claimed mercy and pity. In Lu Xun’s “The True Story of Ah Q” and “Medicine,” or the account of the slides that he saw in class, decapitation is a public event that functions as a ritual ceremony to legitimately eliminate the alien. Watching the alien—criminals, rebels and revolutionaries, for example—being beheaded is not only entertainment, but is encouraged by the authorities because it consolidates the existing regime. Xiao Hong deepens the “watching the spectacle” motif by focusing on the publicized private act of bathing in the story of the child bride. As soon as the private act turns into a public show, onlookers are automatically granted the right to participate, and accordingly a chance to intervene in others’ private lives. If Lu Xun’s characters are virtually killed by the unresponsive masses, Xiao Hong’s child bride is essentially murdered by the constant
abuse of her mother-in-law as well as the superstitious and enthusiastic onlookers who are entertained by her suffering. She passes out each time when dumped into a vat full of scalding water. Boasting about their kind-heartedness, the neighboring families immediately intervene to rescue her. The narrator gives an exhaustive account of the spectators’ mentality and their circular arguments:

If there was still a spark of life, then they need not worry about rescuing her. But if she was breathing her last, then they must hurriedly douse her with cool water. If there was still life in her, she’d come around on her own, but if her life was ebbing away, then they would have to do something quickly in order to bring her to. If they don’t, they’d surely lose her. (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 301; *Hulan River* 226)

Xiao Hong’s parody poignantly aims at the female seniors, the morbidly curious spectators, and the cruel, mindless stupor of the populace. Lydia Liu illustrates the creation and development of the national character discourse in China, asserting that it derives from the missionary discursive practice that helps to shape reality rather than passively responding to it. The subsequent reaction, confirming, disagreeing, defending, or attempting to destroy this practice, ultimately contributes to the legitimization of the myth of Chinese national character (Liu 58-69). Xiao Hong and her *Tales of Hulan River* unavoidably take a part in and reinforce such discourse, and it in turn confirms the authenticity of Xiao Hong’s work.
When evaluating the authenticity of modern Chinese novels, C.T. Hsia states that:

[Western reports on conditions in China by earlier missionaries as well as more recent historians and journalists have largely confirmed what modern Chinese writers have to say about their country. Thus Theodore White’s capsule description of Chinese villages in the forties in no way deviates from what we have learned from Lu Hsün [Lu Xun] or Hsiao Hung [Xiao Hong]. (Hsia 325; Italics mine.)

C.T. Hsia highlights the association between the Western perception and Chinese writing of China and its “reality,” failing to notice the colonial and self-imposed colonial ideology in such practices. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Hulan River would be especially authentic to readers who are familiar with the prominent May Fourth writers such as Lu Xun. Indeed, they all fuel the imagination of China and its people with their own writing. Acknowledging Hulan River’s continuation of the humanitarian convention represented by Lu Xun, I’d like to further inquire, “What distinguishes Xiao Hong’s satiric narrative from Lu Xun’s and the other predecessors’?” and “What elements contribute to and determine the empathetic trait of the satiric narrative?” An exploration into the “little man” complex in Hulan reveals the main determinant of empathetic satire in this novel.

“Little Man” as the Object of Empathy

The term “little man” derives from Russian literature, often referring to an insignificant official crushed by the monstrous administrative system. The “little man”
against the system was a very popular theme in nineteenth-century Russian literature that can be traced to Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* (1833). In Gogol’s story “The Overcoat,” Akaky Akakievich is considered as a quintessential “little man.” The connotation of “little man” seems irrelevant to a novel about Chinese country life like *Hulan River*, but the thematic confrontation between the individual and the oppressive environment allows me to borrow the term to generate my argument. In my view, “little man” is both normal and abnormal. He is normal because he voluntarily submits to the fundamentally dysfunctional social structure and codes, blindly following the expectation and requirements imposed on him by the problem-ridden culture. Thus, he inevitably belongs to the unenlightened masses, thereby becoming the object of social satire. Although the little man strives to behave normally like “everyone else;” he somehow deviates from the mainstream, usually because of his incapability, weakness and poverty. Such features make him a laughingstock of other “normal” people. For the satirist, the little man is simultaneously the participant and victim of the cannibalistic society. But sometimes he is also the empathetic object of the satirist who also feels alienated by and from the environment. More importantly, the little man and the satirist occasionally share similar emotional experiences, if not a physical one. Xianglin’s wife in “New Year’s Sacrifice,” Kong Yiji in “Kong Yiji,” Runtu in “My Old Home” and other peasant characters of Lu Xun can be considered as members of the “little man” family. Noticeably, in “New Year’s Sacrifice,” “Kong Yiji” and “My Old Home,” the narrator holds a stance that is somewhat superior to the “little man.” As a result, the critical and satiric tone on the “little man” outweighs the sympathy for him, which constructs an
opposition between the satirist and the satirized object and prevents the satire from being empathetic.

In *Hulan River*, the child-narrator is constructed as an alienated member of her own family and class, thereby aligning herself with the “little man,” the supposed satirized object. In her examination of Xiao Hong’s childhood and self-assessment, Chan Kit-yee argues that for Xiao Hong, servants, children, the poor and the old are all “weak” and “lack security.” They are “our own men,” and she considers herself as part of the disadvantaged group (32). Xiao Hong once talked with Nie Gannu about her novel *The Field of Life and Death*, stating the difference between Lu Xun’s writing and hers:

> Lu Xun as an awakened intellectual has pity on his characters from high above. […] I am unqualified to feel compassion for my characters. I am afraid they should take compassion on me. Compassion can only be from the top down, not from the bottom up, nor among the peers. My characters are higher than I am.

(*Xiao Hong xuanji* 4)

This conversation between Xiao Hong and Nie Gannu occurred in 1938 when Xiao Hong was traveling from one liberated area to another and surrounded by a group of friends that could be loosely considered as revolutionary or progressive writers and critics. Compared to these friends, Xiao Hong was obviously not “progressive” enough, and even “backward” in her insistence on humanitarian writing. This is probably why she claimed that the awakened characters in *The Field of Life and Death* were higher than she was. Her gradual turning away from revolutionary writing and returning to the May Fourth humanitarian tradition in *Hulan River* eventually garnered sharp criticism from left-wing
writers and critics. In fact, the narrator’s dual identity of adult and child allows Xiao Hong the flexibility to switch from a detached satiric tone resembling Lu Xun’s stories to an involved-empathetic tone that can be generated only from peers of the “little man.”

Scholars and biographers have noticed the awkwardness of Xiao Hong’s position in her family and how she perceives herself—she is believed to be most unlike a young mistress from a landlord family. Lack of parental love and feeling alienated from family is a recurrent theme in Xiao Hong’s works. In her essay “When Grandfather Passed Away” (Zufu sile de shihou), she writes:

Father was never friendly with me, neither with the servants, nor with grandfather. The servants were poor, grandfather was old, and I was a little child, so we were insecure and all in my father’s hands. Later my new stepmother, too, fell into his hands. When he liked her, he jested with her. When he was annoyed, he scolded her. My stepmother gradually became afraid of father as well.

Stepmother was not poor, not old, not a child, how come she was also in dread of father? I went to my neighbors. Women were afraid of their men as well. I went to my uncle’s. My aunt, too, was afraid of my uncle. (Xiao Hong sanwen 390)

Even though Xiao Hong is not the “little man”—a little man is never in a position to reflect on the causes of the absurdity of his life and that of society—the above account nevertheless illuminates how the insecure “little man” is defined and positioned in the

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5 According to Xiao Jun and her younger brother, Xiao Hong is actually not the biological daughter of her father, landlord Zhang. Her mother married into the Zhang family when Xiao Hong was a baby. However, Xiao Hong was never revealed the truth, even though she probably suspected it. See Xiao Jun 45-47.
world from her perspective. One is a “little man” as long as one is weak, oppressed and has no ability or means to obtain and protect one’s rights. Class plays an extremely small part in the process of identifying “little man” and his kinsfolk. The narrator of *Hulan River* reiterates that “My home was a dreary one.” In her dreary home, the lonely girl’s companion is mostly her granddad and sometimes Second Uncle You as well. Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua view Xiao Hong’s life and writing as a binary system—the opposition between “the ice-cold parent-child relationship and the warm and unconstraint relationship with her granddad” (175)—which originates from her childhood experience. They state that the little girl’s fondness of playing with poor friends and her potential identification with Second Uncle You is an extension of her affection for her granddad, while the cold parent-child relationship generates the distance and sense of alienation towards her stepmother and grandmother (Meng and Dai 175). Imposing such a simplified dichotomy on the writer and her works is problematic and open to discussion. Nevertheless, it still helps us to understand Xiao Hong’s opinion of the world, especially when examining the narrator’s stance in a satiric narrative such as *Hulan River*.

Even though Second Uncle You is a habitual thief and a social outcast, psychologically and emotionally, the child-narrator is not superior to him. Because of poverty, Second Uncle You often steals from the landlord family. One day he is caught by the child-narrator when she is also stealing: “He had a brass flask under his gown tucked up against his belly, I was holding a jar of dried black dates pressed against mine. He was stealing, so was I, and both of us were scared” (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 311; *Hulan River* 243). The two eventually reach an agreement not to denounce each other. On the
one hand, Second Uncle You’s thieving puts him on ethical trial by the narrator, making him a satirized object and an obvious allusion to Lu Xun’s story “Kong Yiji.” On the other hand, the shared experience enables the narrator to observe that Second Uncle You’s notorious reputation makes him a scapegoat: “As a rule, whenever something was missing from the house, he was accused of stealing it. The cook had actually stolen some of those things, but he passed his blame on to Second Uncle You. Some I’d stolen to play with, and Second Uncle You was blamed for them, too” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 311; Hulan River 243). The child-narrator understands that Second Uncle You steals only because he is impoverished and is only a scapegoat for those who laugh at and criticize him. Stealing things is not a sin of one individual anymore, but rather a common necessity for survival in lower-class society.

Both Second Uncle You and Kong Yiji are thieves, but the narrators’ attitude about theft demonstrates the difference between Xiao Hong’s empathetic satire and Lu Xun’s acerbic satire. In “Kong Yiji,” the narrator, a pot-boy in a tavern, depicts the lower-class scholar, Kong Yiji, as a laughingstock that contributes to everyone’s enjoyment. Although neither socially nor morally superior to Kong Yiji, the pot-boy narrator never thinks about what causes Kong Yiji’s dishonest behavior, but rather laughs at Kong Yiji with the other onlookers. When Kong Yiji attempts to teach him Chinese characters, the narrator responds contumuously, “Who did this beggar think he was, testing me! I turned away and ignored him” (LXQJ 459). By telling the story of Kong Yiji from the perspective of a pot-boy narrator, Lu Xun distances himself from his characters, criticizing not only the hypocrisy of the old-style scholar such as Kong Yiji,
but also the onlookers’ indifference to others’ misery as well as their morbid enthusiasm for spectacle-watching. Like the other onlookers, the pot-boy narrator also becomes the object of Lu Xun’s satire. On the other hand, the child-narrator’s empathy with Second Uncle You culminates when Second Uncle You admits that “‘Your Second Uncle You doesn’t have any money.’ Growing impatient, I asked him: ‘Couldn’t you steal a little’” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 312; Hulan River 244)? Through the little girl, Xiao Hong shows that only the little man understands each other—their petty selves and misery.

The empathetic effect is also often achieved by the naïveté of the child-narrator as well as her mistimed questions and remarks. The little girl’s unusual perspective often seems ostensibly limiting, but actually reveals the absurdity of the world. For her, Second Uncle You’s ragged bedding is like “a living map, with the provinces moving on their own” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 309; Hulan River 239). He rolls up his bedding every morning and carries it to wherever he would take up temporary lodging every night, which leaves the girl an impression as if Second Uncle You is always about to go camping or off to the market. Behind the “fun” activities of camping and going to the market, or having a unique portable map-like bedding, lies the author’s serious inquiry into the social causes of Second Uncle You’s homelessness and poverty.

Besides the pervasive theme of longing for love and family, another recurrent but often ignored theme in Xiao Hong’s works is the obsession with sustenance. In her days in Harbin, Xiao Hong (and later, with Xiao Jun as well) was beset by a scarcity of food, fuel and medicine. Her second book Market Street (Shangshi jie, 1935) is a recollection of those unforgettable hard days. The dominant subject matter of this book—opened by a
chapter entitled “Hunger”—is hunger and the struggle to make a living, occasionally supplemented by some lighthearted diversions. Howard Goldblatt notices the physiological and psychological effects on Xiao Hong brought by constant hunger in Market Street: “Their obsession with their bellies makes them incapable of performing almost any normal activity.” However, her own plight also enables her to understand and pity others in similar predicaments (Hsiao Hung 58-59). Unfortunately, the effect of hunger and cold on Xiao Hong was permanent. Even when she no long needed to compromise for food and lodging, she never stopped obsessing over them, which is manifested in her letters to Xiao Jun, her reminiscences and her last two novels Tales of Hulan River and Ma Bole. The amount of cooking in Ma Bole is extremely verbose to the point of being laborious.

Unlike the serious and slightly melancholic tone that describes food and hunger in Market Street, the accounts of food and eating in Hulan River and Ma Bole are sarcastic and melodramatic. The excessive obsession with food becomes the object of satire. Obsession with things is a trait frequently found in the “little man.” Because of the lack of external recognition, he gains satisfaction and comfort only through certain material objects. In his study on Gogol’s “The Overcoat,” Dmitry Chizevsky points out that “One of the leading ideas in Gogol’s fictional works is that each person has his particular fervor, his passion, his enthusiasm,” an old theme which can be reached back as far as Horace (315). Chizevsky argues that these ardent emotions are all directed at insignificant objects. For Akaky Akakievich, whose fervor is probably of the lowest order, the object of his ardent love that is “capable of overcoming death itself” is an
overcoat (Chizevsky 317). Gogol creates a sharp contrast between an extremely insignificant object and overpowering love for that object which transcends death. Chizevsky compellingly argues that through the caricatured Akaky Akakievich, Gogol scrutinizes the attachment of human life to things as well as the external world, in order to reveal the danger of worldly obsessions and passions.

Although their purposes of depicting passion and fervor are quite different—the Ukrainian baroque and Russian Orthodox determine the inevitable orientation of Gogol’s writing towards the religious and spiritual realm, not only to social critique as many Marxist critics claim—the theme of excessive obsession has its Chinese counterparts, if not offspring, in literary works in the 1930s and 1940s. David Der-wei Wang first notices that “In Lao She’s comic fiction, one comes across a long list of good or bad characters obsessed with things or ideas ranging from money, matchmaking, and patriotism to modern wives” (146). In Camel Xiangzi, Xiangzi is surely on the list for his devoted love to his rickshaw. Lydia Liu later designates Xiangzi as a thrifty *homo economicus*, characterized by the counting and calculating acts throughout his life (114).

The tragic keynote of Xiangzi’s life story rules out possibilities of reading Xiangzi as a comic or satiric figure. But as I previously mentioned, the hyperbolic humor of *Hulan River* manifested in the portrayal of the little man’s obsession shows Xiao Hong’s reflection on the psychological effect of hunger. For the first time, she treats the obsession with food and eating as the object of satire without drawing from her own depressing experiences of starvation. The fifth chapter of *Hulan River* tells the tragic story of Hu family’s child bride whose mother-in-law is stingy, cruel, superstitious and
abusive. Because of the mother-in-law’s constant abuse of the girl, she falls seriously ill. Having given her various ineffective home remedies, the mother-in-law resorts to a Taoist. Describing the negotiation between the villain character and the Taoist, the narrator naturally pictures the mother-in-law’s calculation of cost and profit when she hears that each divining lot costs one hundred strings of cash. The narrative, thus, slightly deviates from the negotiation process and enters the mother-in-law’s mind:

[A]t a hundred of strings of each apiece, it was not something to be taken lightly. For ten strings of cash she could buy twenty cakes of bean curd. Now if she bought one cake every three days, then with twenty cakes—since two threes are six—that would be enough bean curd for sixty days. But if one cake were bought only every ten days—that’s three cakes a month—then there would be enough bean curd in the house for half a year. Continuing along this line of thought, she wondered who would be so extravagant as to eat a cake of bean curd every three days. According to her, a cake a month was enough for everyone to have a taste every now and then, in which case twenty cakes of bean curd—one each month—would be sufficient for twenty months, or a year and a half plus two months.

(Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 292; Hulan River 208)

The mother-in-law’s imagination does not stop at buying bean curd, but switches to another method—substituting a little pig for bean curd as the calculating unit. She calculates how much she would earn in a year if she used the money to buy little pigs. Next, the pig is replaced by chickens. With a melodramatic and sentimental tone, the mother-in-law lectures on the care and attention required when raising them. Then,
starting with the declaration “Raising chickens is more refined than raising children” (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 293), she delivers a lengthy speech on why it is reasonable for her to beat her only son for once stepping on a chick and killing it.

The mother-in-law’s primary concern for her whole life emerges from this series of long (four pages!) digressions—how to get food at a barely subsistence level. On the one hand, unlike Robinson Crusoe’s careful calculations of capital accumulation, her calculations for making money from food are unrealistic. Her extensive fantasies reveal to what an absurd extent one’s obsession with food can reach—a chick or a cake of bean curd means much more than a man’s life. Everything is priced, but life is worthless. The condemnation of the objectification of humanity silently undermines the mother-in-law’s hilarious logic and “sensible” argument. On the other hand, the foundation of such fantasies is highly realistic. In light of the plight of peasants and the severity of life in a provincial town in North China, her calculations are quite understandable, revealing the everyday hardship in a hyperbolic fashion.

The theme of food and eating recurs in the novel, implicitly presented with wry humor or explicitly mocked as in the above scene. For example, in the first chapter that surveys the life of this provincial town, we learn that when the peddlers go down the alleys, people living in the adjacent houses do not buy anything, but they like to ask the price to see if it is the same as before:

Every once in a while someone will walk over and lift up the piece of cloth that covers the basket, as if she were a potential customer, then pick one [fired sesame twist] out and feel to see if it’s still hot. After she has felt it, she puts it right back,
and the peddler is not the least bit angry. (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 248; Hulan River 120)

The narrator doesn’t tell the readers why the peddler is not the least bit angry, nor why people from the neighborhood are curious about the price despite having no intention to buy. Everything is told literally, as if what the narrator describes are commonplace facts. Such a deliberately tranquil tone invites an agreement between the narrator and the reader, which is based on the normalization of the scarcity of food and starvation. This agreement also implies the acceptance and indifference to any natural or manmade plight. Nevertheless, the reserved account poignantly illuminates the fraudulent nature of such an agreement, which reminds any reader who might ignore the absurdity in the calm narrative that the characters’ ostensibly “common” attitude towards food is actually unusual and abnormal, and it would not happen with material sufficiency. Under such circumstances, characters’ excessive obsession with food and eating is simultaneously the object of satire and compassion, especially when it resonates with the author’s self-reflection on such a topic. The little man’s absurd obsession consequently contributes to the construction of empathetic satire.

Hope of the Nation: Returning to the Natural State

For decades, Tales of Hulan River did not receive the recognition it deserved, primarily because of left-wing and socialist critics’ rigid Marxist interpretation. Represented by Mao Dun, Marxist critics complain that Xiao Hong spends too much time on the Hulan people’s stupidity and completely ignores the war between China and
Japan. Acknowledging his admiration of Xiao Hong’s characters’ vitality, Mao Dun insists that their tenacity to life is primitive and opposite to the awareness that he finds in revolutionary spirit. Although contemporary critics and scholars do not agree with Mao Dun’s Marxist approach to literature anymore, they either ignore the satiric nature of *Hulan River*, or consider satire as only a technique occasionally employed by Xiao Hong. Meanwhile, based on the satirist’s explicit opposition to cowardice, selfness and hypocrisy, they agree that Xiao Hong’s unfinished novel *Ma Bole* is undoubtedly a satiric work. Surprised by the exceptional humor and heavy satire in the novel when juxtaposing it with *Tales of Hulan River*, Howard Goldblatt states that “The former […] is as untypical of Hsiao Hung [Xiao Hong] as the latter is typical” (*Hsiao Hung* 97). Then what is typically Xiao Hong? I believe that her typical writing is characterized by lyrical representation of the world that *implicitly* expresses her moral preference.

Goldblatt’s assertion represents the dominating understanding of Xiao Hong’s last two novels, which were written almost at the same time. Reading these novels separately actually prevents us from seeing Xiao Hong’s contemplation on revolution, the nation’s future and the possible resolution to the status quo. As a result, radical revolutionaries criticize Xiao Hong for the lack of progressive spirit in her humanitarian writing, whereas her supporters eulogize her for being an exceptional writer, true to herself in an over-politicized era. Those who focus more on the artistic and aesthetic characteristics of literature find the stylistic rupture in Xiao Hong’s last two novels perplexing, thereby attributing it to the possible immaturity of her skill as a writer.
If we read *Ma bole* as a supplement to *Hulan River*, the deeply-buried resolution that Xiao Hong provides for the nation and the unchanged hope that she sees in Chinese peasants’ persistence and vitality will be much more obvious. In spite of the general underestimation of *Ma Bole*, most critics believe that it satirizes modern intellectuals through its protagonist, Mao Bole. In light of the intellectual quest for ideas to rejuvenate the nation in the 1930s and 1940s, the satirized objects point to mannerism, pretentiousness, cowardice and lifelessness that characterize many highly-developed cultures, be it the old “rotten” Chinese culture or the new, “promising” Western one. Ma Bole and his family are the offspring of Lu Xun’s “Bogus Foreign Devil” in that they learn only the modish Western culture and Christian religion, whereas their self-righteousness aggravates the selfishness, weakness and hypocrisy rooted in Chinese culture. Mao Bole believes that everything Western is better; his most-used curse is “Mother-fucker Chinese!” His stingy father, a “religious” Christian, often tells his children: “Those who are most religious to Jesus will have the most of my money and property” (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 339). Ma Bole hates the rich and only makes friends with the poor, because when socializing with the latter, cheap snacks can easily satisfy them (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 340).

From her biting satire, Xiao Hong indicates that after decades of revolution and reforms, Western-culture-bathed “new men” distinguish themselves from their ancestors merely by their appearance. Their increased superficial knowledge provides them with no wisdom. Even worse, they have lost the strength to live. In this sense, the Ma Boles under Xiao Hong’s pen degenerate from either the awakened heroes or the disillusioned heroes
in her earlier writing. In the unmistakable satirical certainty *Ma Bole* reiterates a message that political agendas and social blueprints which once sounded so promising have turned out to be dysfunctional.

In empathetic satire, the satirist’s ambivalent attitude towards the satirized object creates a possibility to discover the hidden virtue of the satirized object. The empathetic sentiment in *Hulan River* shows that traces of vitality and persistence survive the stagnant life in a little town populated with obstinate country folk, even in figures like Second Uncle You and the child bride’s mother-in-law. Although critics like Mao Dun belittle the “primitive tenacity to live” in *Hulan River*, this feeble thread of life actually bears hope for the nation’s future. In Xiao Hong’s works, primitiveness as the opposition to a sophisticated but degenerate civilization represents the precious quality of China and its people, though in a relatively reserved sense. Her contemplation and reflection on culture, reform and modernity is fully illustrated in *Ma Bole*, and her harsh censure of hypocrisy and selfishness in a cultured society serves as an illuminating contrast to her reserved advocacy of the primitive simplicity and naiveté in *Hulan River*.

This quasi-Rousseauist idea on “state of nature” was not unique or novel in the 1930s and 1940s. Having experienced the iconoclastic May Fourth movement and the consequential social and cultural reform, many intellectuals expressed their doubts about reforms initiated with Western influence, and started to seek other possibilities to rejuvenate the Chinese nation. For them, the modernization of society was not as appealing as it promised to be. Instead, they turned to the vigorous flow of native life as the nation’s salvation. The celebration of primitive forces—physical strength, gallantry,
innocence and so forth—are manifested in Cao Yu’s exploration of the force of life and sexual desire in *The Wilderness* (Yuanye, 1937), Lao She’s *Divorce* (Lihun, 1933) and *Camel Xiangzi* (Luotuo Xiangzi, 1937) as well as in most of the native-soil writing such as Shen Congwen’s creation of the heavenly enclaves in his works on Xiangxi.

The disappointment—perhaps even disillusionment—with the once-seemingly-promising modern means also can be found in the Gogolian works that were well-received in China. In addition to the popularity of *The Government Inspector*, which mocks bureaucracy and hypocrisy that characterize a civil society, stories that are heavily laced with Ukrainian folklore and nostalgia—such as *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* and *Mirgorod*—were (re-)translated into Chinese by the late 1930s. Edyta Bojanowska suggests that Gogol, originally from Ukraine, feels alienated in Westernized modern cities like Petersburg, because for him its society lacks “national uniqueness” and “resembles a European colony in America in its lack of indigenous nationality and an abundance of heterogeneous foreign elements” (189). Contrary to his “uncomplimentary portrayal of the Russian capital” (187) and his malicious laughter at the corrupt bureaucratic system and officialdom as we can see in his satirical stories, laughter in his depiction of provincial Ukraine “is balanced by the[a] layer of sympathy” (190). Gogol takes pains to seek the Russian spirit in the “vast expense” outside of the big cities, where contamination from corrupt culture and civilization is reduced. Whether such an attempt is successful is a topic beyond the scope of my study. But his unique bittersweet love for Ukraine shows sentiments that we can perceive when reading *Ma Bole* and *Hulan River*

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6 For more details on the different versions of Gogol’s stories, see Li 248-50.
together. They also appear in many other native-soil works such as those of Lao She—the life force of the nation resides in its people, in its down-to-earthness and its humility.

Xiao Hong’s condemnation of the superficiality and hypocrisy of contemporary Chinese culture and the weakness of the populace illuminate the resolution she implies in *Hulan River*, which is embodied in the honest peasant characters such as Harelip Feng. This misfortune-ridden man is not wrecked by impoverishment, the death of his wife, and the birth of two unaffordable children. He “does not hang himself nor cut his throat” as the spectators around him excitedly expect; he is not defeated by the throes of despair, but survives with his sons “as a man with a firm grip on life,” which appalls his neighbors who wish to “see some fun” (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 270). They are bewildered, wondering, “How could such a thing happen on the face of the earth” (*Xiao Hong xiaoshuo* 271)? Compared with the mannered but lifeless Ma family in *Ma Bole* and with the local populace that champions every existing social rule and norm, Harelip Feng is unexpectedly (and somewhat inappropriately) tenacious, genuine and full of a relentless drive for life. He represents the humblest among those who live without knowing why, those unawakened who are wryly satirized but profoundly understood by Xiao Hong.

*Tales of Hulan River* ends lyrically:

These things I cannot know.

I heard that Second Uncle You died.

If the old cook is still alive, he’ll be getting on in years.

I don’t know what has become of any of our neighbors.
As for the man who worked the mill, I haven’t the slightest idea how things have
gone with him.

The tales I have written here are not beautiful ones, but since my childhood
memories are filled with them, I cannot forget them; they remain with me—and
so I have recorded them here. (Xiao Hong xiaoshuo 329; HulanRiver 273)

The narrator encapsulates lives without indicating hope for social change, but the
distinction between empathetic satire and satire that possesses fixed relations among
satirist, satirized object and reader silently betrays the resolution to the future that Xiao
Hong proposed.
CHAPTER THREE

Ambivalent Love and Reserved Reproach: Little Family Man, Superfluous Intellectual and Native Soil in Lao She’s Empathetic Satire

As a highly prolific writer on the modern Chinese literary scene, Lao She is known for his humanitarian works and for using literature to express patriotism. He is remembered foremost as a master of humor, a writer of native soil literature, and praised for his identification with the people, his painful efforts to fit into the communist regime and his active participation in the socialist movement in China. However, in the early years of his career, Lao She displays a rather ambivalent attitude towards his native soil and a deep pessimistic view of China’s future, especially through his satiric fiction written from 1930 to 1937 in Jinan.

Since the early days of his writing career, Lao She was considered one of the prominent humorists on the modern Chinese literary scene. In the article “On Humor,” he attempts to differentiate satire from humorous writing, arguing that humor is not necessarily satiric, because satire must have a moral purpose. By employing laughter, satire corrects or attacks social evil (Laoniu poche 76). Lao She stresses that it is compassion that distinguishes satire from humor. He believes that satire is harsh and pungent, while humor shows great tolerance and kindness towards the world (Laoniu poche 71-75). Humorous people treat everything equally, because they are equally funny and ridiculous. Humorists themselves are accordingly objects of laughter as well. Thus, they possess no superiority to the ridiculous and the absurd (Laoniu poche 78-79). In this
sense, contrary to satirists, “[humorists] never bear any grudge or get irascible for unpleasant things” (*Laoniu poche* 80).

Following Lao She’s argument, one may generate a spectrum of writings that may provoke laughter of different degrees: on one extreme is the harsh, relentless attack on social evil and vice, which should be considered satire. The purpose of satire is to censure and correct vice. Lao She particularly lauds Swift for his satiric writings that “stab” like “swords” and “explode” like “fire” (*Laoniu poche* 75). In fact, Lao She’s understanding of Swiftian satire is highly reminiscent of Lu Xun’s notorious satiric essays, especially Lu Xun’s political satire and incisive attack on his “enemies” in vehement intellectual disputes and public controversies.¹ For Lao She, the oppositional relation between satirist and satirized object is determinative, which is the typical expectation of fixed satire. On the other extreme of the spectrum is humorous writing. Humorous writing, Lao She believes, presents and sometimes ridicules the discernible follies in life with understanding and sympathy. Humorists write in “an amiable manner,” “free of anxiety and worry” (*Laoniu poche* 80).

Despite Lao She’s enthusiasm for humorous writing, he recognized that it had limited appeal from the late Qing because of deep concerns about national crisis and salvation. Many Chinese intellectuals such as Lao She found it difficult to hold a light-hearted attitude towards an absurd world. In 1930, having come home from England with high expectations of national salvation, Lao She was invited by the University of Qilu to

¹ In his memorial essay to Lu Xun, Lao She expresses his admiration for Lu Xun’s harsh satire and jeers as well as the “rage” (muhuo) in his writing. See “Lu Xun xiansheng shishi liang zhounian jinian,” [Written for the Second Anniversary of Lu Xun’s Death], in *Lao She wenyi pinglun ji* [A Collection of Lao She’s Critical Literary Essays], 15.
serve as a literature professor in Jinan. Once there, he investigated the “actual massacre and horrific situation” of the May Thirtieth Movement, in preparation for writing his new novel *The Daming Lake* (Daming hu) (Zhang 67). He taught in Jinan for seven years until the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937.

In those prolific years in Lao She’s life, he wrote many humorous essays mainly to earn money and to make readers laugh. In many essays written for Lin Yutang’s journals *Analects Fortnightly* (Luyu banyuekan) and *Wind of the Universe* (Yuzhoufeng), he temporarily puts aside his lifelong patriotic concerns and concentrates on life’s trivialities. These essays eventually engendered disdain by writers like Lu Xun. Despite Lao She’s intention of creating light-hearted humor, these essays neither convey the sense of being carefree nor arouse genuine laughter. Lao She still suffers the vexation of poverty, and he seems eager to take every opportunity to relate his difficult experience of trying to make a living. Additionally, there are also novels and a great many stories of sober thoughts that enable readers to reflect on reality rather than to merely laugh. Thus, where shall we position those novels, particularly *Divorce* (Lihun, 1933) and *The Biography of Niu Tianci* (Niu Tianci zhuan, 1934) which he wrote in the Jinan period?

If we look at them closely, these novels actually fall somewhere in between “satire” and “humorous writing” according to Lao She’s criteria. As mentioned above, like most intellectuals of his generation, Lao She was inevitably obsessed with the fate of the nation, and was never able to lay down the “moral burden.”² He was also aware of the limitations of his “humor.” He is not satisfied with *Divorce* because “it is far too

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² By analyzing the moral burden of modern Chinese literature, C.T. Hsia raises the concept of “obsession with China.” See Hsia Appendix 1.
exquisite; it laughs even with a slight acid taste,” and “laughter in *Divorce* is too weak.” He further complains that those well-off who are proud of their “grace and charm” often mention “humor” as “laughter through tears” (*Laoniu poche xinbian* 42). But he derides this idea as affectation and pretension because “laughter is the polar opposite of tears,” and “laughter through tears stands nowhere” (*Laoniu poche xinbian* 42-43). Although Lao She opposes “laughter through tears” and humor without subtlety, his works refuse to fit into his own theoretical framework. His exposure of the follies and absurdities, his humanist concern with the social underdogs, his hatred of impotent Chinese culture, his sorrow over the inevitable loss of the placidly exquisite way of living, and his suspicion about the new world are inextricably interwoven into what I call empathetic satire, which is unique in that it often integrates compassion and tears.

Unlike Xiao Hong’s empathetic satire, which is primarily generated by the shared experience of the satirist and the satirized objects, Lao She seldom appears as the first person narrator-satirist. Dominated by third-person narration, his empathetic satire is characterized by the satirist’s critique of the present and doubt about the future in general, yet indicates his compassion for the satirized objects in particular. Throughout his eventful life, Lao She is always a sober realist, even in his heyday under Mao’s regime. Although optimistic patriotism dominates the latter half of his writing career before his suicide in 1966, he is never an idealist or a romanticist. As for Lao She’s novels written in the 1930s, the pessimistic tone derives from conflicting cultures and ideological competition. Living in a time of drastic social change, he keenly observes the sense of
confusion that it brings, taking pains to honestly present the complexity of people’s reactions.

When talking about how he wrote his stories, Lao She mentions that much material and subject matter of his short stories, such as “An Old Tragedy in the New Time” (Xin shidai de jiu beiju, 1935), are taken from his unwritten novels. The novella “An Old Tragedy in the New Time” demonstrates the main types of characters that recurred in his fiction, namely Old Master Chen, the representative of the past, Long Yun, the representative of the new time, and Lian Bo (who is “seventy-percent old and thirty-percent new”) and Lian Zhong (who is “half-old, half new”), the representatives of the partially-old-partially-new ones (Laoniu poche xinbian 52). “Old Tragedy in the New Time” is a realist novella with few satiric passages; the author’s attitude and message is Lao She’s revealing commentary on this transitional period of culture. Emphasizing the force behind the progress of history, Lao She bitterly illustrates the overwhelming triumph of the greater evil of the profit-oriented modern society over the lesser evil represented by the rigidity and hypocrisy of the old society. He mercilessly exposes the corrupt culture and people of modern society; he is especially skeptical about and keeps emotional detachment from the new man, the nihilistic revolutionaries on whom the future may rely.

The abovementioned story recapitulates the leitmotif of Lao She’s works written in Jinan, especially his satiric writing, such as Divorce and The Biography of Niu Tianci. The old world is useless and doomed to die, but it is lovely and humane. Most importantly, even commoners in the good old days sometimes behave nobly like a
knight-errant. The new ideas and style of living are progressive and may offer hope, but they are callous and ruthless as well. It is difficult for Lao She to completely align with any of the existing cultural and ideological options, namely the traditional culture, the modern industrial culture and the revolutionary utopia. In fact, modern life receives his most relentless criticism, while he laments the defeated who believe that the old principles still apply. Through his fiction, he oscillates among several cultures, times, and the realistic and sentimental. His lighthearted laughter, bitter mockery and melancholic tears bring about the complexity of his satiric writing, but also characterize his fiction with a sense of empathy for those who have little choice in a meaningless world.

**Little Family Man: Living in a Delicate but Doomed World**

In the sweltering summer of 1933, Lao She started writing a new novel *Divorce* by request of Lingyou Press. Maybe because this book was unusual as a last-minute contract, Lao She turned to materials that he was most familiar with—Beijing, rather than his new life in Jinan. On how he wrote this novel, he explains that “Beiping [Beijing] is my hometown. As soon as I think of these two characters, there is a long scroll of ‘Scene of the Old Capital’ that appears in my mind” (*Laoniu poche* 48). As Cyril Birch comments, “Peking is more than a background... [it is] a personage in the novel *[Divorce]*” (51). If there is a man that perfectly matches this old city and represents its charm, it must be someone like this: “I don’t know him, but I saw him almost every day when I was twenty-to-twenty-five years old. I was always envious of his manner and attire, and constantly noticed the minor variations. […] [He is] so stable that almost
everything in him is merely an exhibition of the interests of living” *Laoniu poche* 48). This fictional image eventually became a main character, Big Brother Zhang, or Zhang dage, in *Divorce*, whereas the nostalgic overtone and self-reflection of Beijing, its culture and its people become the keynote of this novel.

Set in the Republican era, *Divorce* portrays a series of frustrations the protagonist experiences in his personal life and his career, where he encounters a parade of impostors in the bureaucratic system. As a low-ranking official, protagonist Lao Li resembles many sentimental intellectuals created in the 1920s novels—he is romantic and anguished, feeling entrapped yet embracing a sense of superiority to most people around him. He takes pains to pursue spiritual and individual freedom, but often becomes a laughingstock and is eventually defeated by those who corrupt society. Two of Lao Li’s colleagues, Big Brother Zhang and Xiao Zhao, are representative of the invisible force that frustrates Lao Li in his quest for love and meaning. Big Brother Zhang is a hospitable and sophisticated symbol of native Beijingers. He tries hard to curb Lao Li’s “unrealistic” dreams about marriage and life, and attempts to teach him to adjust to and enjoy the ugly reality glossed over by everyday pleasures. Xiao Zhao, the archvillain of the novel, excels at capitalizing on others’ misfortunes and mistakes. Xiao Zhao’s evil culminates in his aggressive negotiation with Lao Li and Big Brother Zhang to release Big Brother Zhang’s son from jail. Fooled by Xiao Zhao’s scheme and disillusioned with love and marriage, Lao Li eventually realizes the futility of his quest for poetic meaning, and leaves his family in Beijing for an unknown life in the countryside. Through Lao Li’s eyes, the novel showcases the most beautiful side of the sophisticated old Beijing as well
as the most brutal journey a provincial man may take in this capital city that also undergoes transformation and gradually loses its glory and humane glow.

The opening lines of *Divorce* introduce Big Brother Zhang, the representative of Beijing and its life, in an ironic fashion reminiscent of the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*:

Big Brother Zhang was everyone’s Big Brother. He was such a man of big brotherly presence that you would think that his own father needed to call him Big Brother. He dedicated his life to a sacred mission—to be a matchmaker and to oppose divorce. *In his eyes, every woman should have a proper husband and every man must be in want of a suitable wife.* (Lihun 149; italics mine.)

Big Brother Zhang is like a microscope and a pair of scales; his creed is to scrupulously examine a man and a woman, put them on the scales of marriage, and most importantly, keep the balance of the two parties. “Balance” is the secret of arranging a successful marriage, while divorce is a sin needing to be “eliminated” (*Lihun* 150).

It is by no means accidental that the novel begins with Big Brother Zhang’s lengthy philosophy of marriage and divorce. In the first few chapters of the novel, the protagonist Lao Li seems to be the only one who suffers from a vapid and oppressive marriage, and who can no longer bear the dullness and absurdity of life. However, as the story proceeds, most of his bureaucratic colleagues also encounter marital problems, and then seek divorce. Their route of marriage starts from a balance, *pingheng*; it needs to be maintained, *weichi*; when conjugal conflicts emerge, one usually drags on in a
perfunctory manner, *fuyan*; maybe one thinks of resorting to divorce occasionally, but due to the lack of courage, one ends up muddling along, *hun*, without exception.

The marriage route in *Divorce* serves as an emblem of life and the essential way of living. Everyone in *Divorce* is trapped in their unhappy marriage. When marriage comes to an end, divorce offers a way out. The route from marriage to divorce represents the path one takes when experiencing the ups and downs in life. To divorce and refuse to drag on a dead marriage is a proactive action that removes a paralyzing aspect of one’s life, whereas compromise indicates weakness and cowardice. For our protagonist and his friends, life, like the failed marriage, is full of problems. At one point or another, hope and determination to solve the problems arises. But eventually every effort turns out to be futile, which leads to even deeper frustrations.

Cyril Birch believes that in *Divorce* “Basically his [Lao She’s] position meant acceptance of the new China as it was shaping up, given the faith that the foibles of the human character, if enough fun and enough pity were played on them, might at length be minimized” (52). Birch reads Lao She optimistically, accepts his humor at face value, and overstates Lao She’s faith in the future. However, Lao She’s satire of the triviality of marriage and life itself tints his bitter laughter and mockery with a pessimistic undertone which can be applied to his critique of society and culture. In his writing before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the passive commentary on social change betrays his dissatisfaction with the status quo, as well as his doubt about the effectiveness of any existing reform or solution. Such a pessimistic view derives from Lao She’s understanding of the Chinese national character. His unhappy yet eye-opening
experiences in England undoubtedly provided him with a new perspective from which to contemplate his homeland and countrymen. He consequently inductively generated a series of characters to reveal the Chinese national character, which is most obvious in The Two Mas (Er Ma, 1929) and reappears in his final, uncompleted novel Beneath the Red Banner (Zhenghongqi xia, 1962).

Even though writers and intellectuals take pains to generalize mental and moral qualities that characterize Chinese and China as a nation, the alleged “national character” more or less differs from one writer to another, depending on their background, experiences, and more often, the places and people most familiar to them. In his memorial essay to Lu Xun, Lao She humbly yet affirmatively wrote:

Later writers cannot deny the influence of works like Ah Q [“The True Story of Ah Q”]. Even though they do not imitate its words or ideas, they are at least inspired by it. […] Some people said that I am part of the “Lu Xun School.” I surely do not want to acknowledge that, but I cannot unconsciously deny the greatness of Lu Xun and the prevalent influence of his works. (Pinglunji 11-12)

Indeed, although Lao She also satirizes national character, it is colored by Beijing and the culture preserved in its upper and middle classes, with excessive care for material satisfaction, obsession with social mores and manners, and the endeavor to keep the balance of all aspects of life, even at the expense of sacrificing discipline and integrity. It is also characterized by a kind of Confucian naïveté that considers compromise and endurance effective means to achieve social and personal harmony and stability, which Lao She believes are in fact just hopeless illusions in times of crisis. As the archvillain
and satirized object in *Divorce*, Lao Li’s colleague Xiao Zhao is too evil to arouse any laughter. On the other hand, the amiable and popular Big Brother Zhang is the spokesman of the exquisite yet effete culture that Lao She aims to expose and attack through laughter.

The cultural critique of *Divorce* focuses on two cultural evils—the preoccupation with the materialism and the habit of compromise in social communication, eventually bringing about appeasement with evil. For characters like Big Brother Zhang, compromise and endurance guarantee the integrity of marriage, while divorce is evil because it radically breaks the “stability” of marriage. Actively combating with evil is an escalated and undesirable divorce-like action. Thus, when family crisis occurs, Big Brother Zhang prefers to appease Xiao Zhao rather than confront him. However, his compromise further stimulates Xiao Zhao’s avarice and leads him and his family to a more devastating situation. The failure of Big Brother Zhang’s philosophy is the failure of the old ethos of Beijing and China. Lao She’s critique of the national character is therefore fundamentally cultural criticism.

A refined and always well-dressed little family man, Big Brother Zhang lives a life of smug respectability. *Divorce* opens with a sharp contrast between the sophisticated native Beijinger Big Brother Zhang and the country bumpkin Lao Li. Even though Lao Li is more learned and qualified in the Bureau of Finance, “when they were sitting together, Big Brother Zhang would look like a very important person, while Lao Li would hardly be counted as even a clerk. If Big Brother Zhang mixed with ambassadors and diplomats, he would say charming and smart things, but Lao Li was embarrassed even when talking
to a waitress in a restaurant” (Lihun 153). Big Brother Zhang is like a walking encyclopedia, and “never failed to become well liked” no matter where he works, whereas Lao Li is an “awkward person” who “could never succeed in making people feel at ease in his company” (Lihun 153). Unlike Lao Li, Big Brother Zhang fits into society. He was born in Beijing, the “center of the world.” He lives the ideal aesthetic life, eating, dressing and caring for family. For his philosophy, “to eat and dress according to the season was a pleasure of life,” and “pleasure was more cultured than necessity” (Lihun 156). Although political and social upheavals are looming, he believes that “there would be peace in the world if there were full stomachs and happy marriage” (Lihun 159). This same theme recurs in Lao She’s anti-Japanese novel *Four Generations under One Roof* (Sishi tongtang, 1946), in which Old Master Qi is unhealthily preoccupied with his eightieth-birthday banquet while Beijing is on the verge of occupation by Japan. For people like Big Brother Zhang and Old Master Qi, living according to the aesthetic and old manners bears much more weight than anything else.

Lao She’s satire of Chinese culture goes far beyond the critique of hypocrisy, pretentiousness and the obsession with the pleasures of life. Through Lao Li’s reflection on society, he suggests that “A culture is better to keep one’s vigilance, rather than to make one intoxicated” (Lihun 324). He attacks the impotent culture that produces docile citizens who are like birds in a cage: “They sing only to entertain others in peacetime,” but “when danger comes, all they do is to close eyes and wait for death, not even uttering a word” (Lihun 324). They believe that everything will turn out to be good, as long as one behaves in accordance with the golden mean, never incurs others’ displeasure and
behaves with propriety and decorum. Their cultural pride creates a fantasy that the world pivots on traditional customs, just as “Beiping [Beijing] is the center of the world” (Lihun 152).

The docile sons of such a culture, represented by Big Brother Zhang, laud and pursue a harmoniously balanced life. With elegance and leisure, they seem to be able to find solutions to any problem, and successfully maintain the status quo. However, to achieve the skin-deep harmony of life, compromise plays a key role. Lao She unreservedly shows that intoxication with the pleasures of life exerts a negative influence on people while celebration of amiability engenders the appeasement of vice. In fact, the common philosophy, characterized by Big Brother Zhang’s strategy of maintaining a marriage, becomes ineffective when confronted with the crisis of life. When Big Brother Zhang’s son, Tianzhen, is in trouble, Lao She caricatures Xiao Zhao’s impudence and vileness, as well as the ignorance and predatory nature revealed by Big Brother Zhang’s colleagues. Tianzhen is arrested as a Communist suspect by a secret bureau that is “above all others and responsible to no one,” and that “is as mysterious as hell itself” (Lihun 280). To repay Big Brother Zhang’s kindness, Lao Li volunteers to help Big Brother Zhang and negotiate with Xiao Zhao who claims to have connections that can release Tianzhen. Xiao Zhao agrees to help, in exchange for Big Brother Zhang’s property and daughter. Outraged but hopeless, Big Brother Zhang considers accepting Xiao Zhao’s rapacious demand. His complete breakdown in front of Xiao Zhao shows that compromise and tolerance only foster villainies. He realizes that:
Xiao Zhao was an aircraft, while Big Brother Zhang was a mule-cart. The mule-cart did not mean to chase the aircraft, but the aircraft dropped bombs on the cart and blew it away. He [Big Brother Zhang] recalled an old donkey hitting by a car at the Shunzhi Gate two years ago. The car drove towards it. The donkey crouched down, two eyes staring at the wheels that had smashed its head. A puddle of blood. Stillness. Wide-opened eyes. […] He was that old donkey, crouched in front of Xiao Zhao, begging him to spare him. (Lihun 328)

Lao She is undoubtedly disappointed in the effete Chinese culture represented by Big Brother Zhang, but his melancholy and compassion for this declining civilization outweighs his mockery and criticism. The death of a culture that bred him is too heartrending to be laughed at anymore.

Big Brother Zhang’s failure is not only personal, as it also symbolizes the inevitable defeat of the traditional mindset and ethos. The Biography of Niu Tianci, another satiric novel written only a year after Divorce, shows this theme more lightheartedly. Set in the countryside, the novel depicts the growth of a foundling, Niu Tianci, into a petty bourgeois hero, and how family, society and environment participate in his education. Tianci’s education demonstrates not only the clash of various principles and morals, but also their emptiness and absurdity, be it old or new, traditional or modern. David Der-wei Wang points out that this novel is populated by impostors; in the “massive game of fraud,” “values form and evaporate like bubbles, and morals are but a matter of manners” (135). Despite the ubiquitous corruption of morals and norms, the
The overall trajectory of the story indicates the defeat of the old manners by the new, and lesser evil by large-scale evil.

The death of Mrs. Niu, Tianci’s foster mother, a hardcore advocate of the old values, represents the end of the traditional ethos. When Tianci is expelled from school for no good reason, she launches a moral attack on the school headmaster in an old-fashioned manner:

“You are the headmaster who entered here by climbing over the wall?”

Mrs. Niu did not look at him. She was sitting erect, with her hands on her lap. Her voice was low but powerful. She was the picture of an empress dowager. “I have not come to beg you to take back Heavensent [Tianci], so please get that clear first. I have come to ask you why you have expelled him.” […]

The headmaster rubbed his hands together, breathed hard, twitched his lips, and felt very much relieved [and pleased]. Mrs Niu did not want him to take the boy back, and that made matters very simple. Then whatever rude things she might say would not really matter. (Niu Tianci 476; Heavensent 146-47)

By “attacking her enemy’s moral pride,” Mrs. Niu plans to force the headmaster to renounce his expulsion of Tianci, but how can she win a battle, when her enemies no longer follow the same moral rules? Her self-superiority does not bring the expected pressure to her enemies because they are shameless. She collapses after the fight. On her deathbed, the narrator says, “She felt that it is time to die. In her entire life, she stands on the side of Confucian codes, supporting propriety, honesty and honor, following the
customs that all middle-class families share. But now, it seems that these rules do not exist anymore” (Niu Tianci 478).

The death of Mrs. Niu begins the downfall of the family and Tianci’s social education, which is entirely based on the fetish of money and exchange value. In fact, the new values system Tianci encounters is even more cannibalistic and treacherous than the manneristic old one. In the old days, docile and warm-hearted Big Brother Zhang fit the society the best, whereas in the new dystopia, only a man with money like Xiao Zhao—who has “no religious belief,” “no ethical conception,” “no principles of any kind”—can make peace with the world (Lihun 331). Compared to the callous new hell, the past is more humane.

Despite Lao She’s critique of the degenerated culture’s lack of vigilance in *Divorce*, the lyrical depictions on the hustle and bustle of Beijing life that start the story reveal Lao She’s nostalgic and sentimental affection for his old home Beijing and its life: “Under the arch of the market place, hot soya milk, almond tea, sliced date cake, wheat tea, and oatmeal, all these delicacies were emitting steamy heat, with a special fragrance” (Lihun 178).

If the street peddlers cannot fully exhibit the warmth and beauty of the traditional way of living, Big Brother Zhang’s banquet highlights the aesthetic taste of the sophisticated culture, its elegancy and its poetic meaning entrenched in ordinary life:

The shadow of the west-side chamber spread over half the courtyard. The evening primroses and tuberoses gave out a delicious fragrance, beckoning a few bees quivering their wings on the flowers. […] A round table was set out in front of the
west-side chamber and covered with a snow-white tablecloth. On a square table were packages of cigarettes, black-tipped matches, and bottles of soda water. Under the table were several huge watermelons brushed as if they had been lacquered with green paint. (Lihun 346)

This well-prepared dinner is to celebrate Tianzhen’s release from prison. But the guests have shunned Big Brother Zhang and coveted his position in the office while Tian Zhen has been under arrest. Lao She’s satire of Big Brother Zhang’s excessive care with quotidian enjoyment is fundamentally a lament for a culture and life that is corrupted by its highly developed delicacy and its members’ idleness and delusive belief in social harmony. Just as his ambivalent feeling towards Big Brother Zhang, such a culture is enviable in its most mature form, yet so exquisite that it degenerates to an exhibition of manners and empty mores.

The world of Big Brother Zhang and Mrs. Niu is a world with order and established principles, though its own over-sophistication often leads to its deprivation of gallantry and authenticity. In his satire, Lao She shows that such a world is doomed to be replaced. But by what? Unfortunately, Lao She implies that the triumph might belong to anarchy, bare-faced shamelessness, monetary worship and dehumanized “animals.” The sense of indignation and dignity that Lao She values triggers his condemnation for the cowardly and obedient people who cling onto the obsolete manners and small interests of life. But at the same time, disappointment and pessimism also generate nostalgia for the placid past and compassion for the little family man who, after all, has no vicious intent.
His ambivalent love for tradition and its subjects eventually result in the strong empathy between him and his satirized objects that live in a delicate yet doomed world.

**New Hamlet: from the Superfluous Man to the Nihilistic Revolutionary**

In 1924, at the age of twenty-six, Lao She went to England to serve as lecturer in the School of Oriental Studies at the University of London. While in England, Lao She indulged in reading literature to improve his English. His extensive reading list includes works of Conrad, Dickens, Swift, Fielding, Shakespeare, Carroll, H. G. Wells, Twain, translated works of Goethe, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Flaubert, Dante, and many other lesser known writers. On many occasions, he mentioned Dickens’ huge influence on his writing; he also considered Conrad as his favorite writer and *Divine Comedy* the greatest work.  

In spite of the fact that he seldom talked about Shakespeare, the Danish prince Hamlet has a strong presence in many of his works, especially those written in Jinan. His creation of Hamlet-like intellectuals underlies his complicated feelings towards the present and his doubt about a hopeful future of the nation.

David Der-wei Wang summarizes “the Hamlet syndrome” in many of Lao She’s works as “procrastination, prolonged anguish, and self-torturing philosophical poses” (126). However, Lao She’s Hamlet-like protagonists are far less serious and sober, and far more superficial. His short story “New Hamlet” (Xin Hanmuliede, 1936) provides an archetype of Lao She’s understanding of the new intellectuals who presumably represent the future of the nation. The story deals with a young college student, Tian Liede, who

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3 See his literary reviews and critiques in *Lao She wenyi pinglun ji* [A Collection of Lao She’s Critical Literary Essays].
shares the first name with Hamlet (Hamlet is translated as Hanmu-liede in Chinese). Like Hamlet (Hanmu-liede), Tian Liede ponders all the time, but fails to carry out any of his ideas or to help his businessman father survive the economic crisis.

The Chinese Hamlet’s hesitation and inability to act is only one of his characteristics. The new Hamlet under Lao She’s pen is more of a parody of the Shakespearian Hamlet because of his superficiality, doctrinaire attitudes and his parasitical life. The opening of the story is, “Once when he was slightly drunk, Tian Liede said to a friend, half self-mocking, half in self-conceit, that ‘I am Shakespeare’s Hamlet. It seems that we have different family names but share the same given name” (Lao She 69. italics mine.). “It seems” and its emphatic position in the original sentence—“同名不同姓，仿佛是”—reveal the character’s self-delusion and his phony nature. It also illustrates the satirist’s distrust and sarcastic attitude towards the youth whose foreign education is often limited to Hollywood movies or fragments of Western ideas. They are the ordinary young men who dismiss the status quo out of a dream for social modernization, but blindly believe that anything foreign is progressive. More ironically, none of these quasi-leftist/revolutionary youth are financially independent; in fact, many of them use their families as sources of income for Western-style recreation, while harshly criticizing them as social enemies at the same time. Consequently, their half-baked knowledge and naive confidence is unsurprisingly the main object of Lao She’s satiric attack.

The above-mentioned traits of “new Hamlet” are caricatured to the fullest with Big Brother Zhang’s son Tianzhen in Divorce. Lao She’s cynical prophecy of the future
declares its legitimacy in the character’s name Tianzhen, “Naïve.” But unlike Tianzhen, who carelessly enjoys all the modern comforts and resists any serious thinking, Tian Liede’s self-proclaimed superiority in intelligence and judgment brings about a slight sense of discomfort and loss, no matter whether he is in the city or the countryside. Tian Liede frequents theaters, but never enjoys movies; he dreams of emancipating women and enlightening the poor, but his condescending gesture makes his sympathies hollow and pretentious; he hopes to reshape the world with his knowledge, but does not even know where to start. The bankruptcy of the family business eventually throws him into an awful predicament. But he ignores it to obsess over a romantic painting of a maiden in water, which cheers him up because “he felt that he was capable of critical judgment” (Lao She 84).

The repudiation of the “new Hamlet” as well as his self-delusion culminates in this sharp satire of his “poetic sense,” which is reminiscent of Lao Li in Divorce. If Lao She’s mockery of Tian Liede is still lightheartedly amusing, his satire of Lao Li’s incompetence and reflection is so serious that it becomes pathos. In fact, both Lao Li and Tianzhen are versions of the new Hamlet. Tianzhen is the naive, superficial and material-fetishist, while Lao Li is the superfluous social misfit.

According to Lao She’s own accounts of works that he read, critics usually draw the conclusion that both Hamlet and Freudian psychoanalysis contributed to the creation of Lao She’s introverted type of intellectual character whose self-analysis and doubt render him incapable of action, such as Ma Wei (The Two Mas), Little Scorpion (Cat
Country), Lao Li and Tian Liede. Although these characters show basic traits of egotism and self-analysis, the central object of their contemplation is more often their surroundings and the social condition rather than their repressed desires. Determination preoccupies their thoughts. For instance, at first glance, Lao Li’s “poetic ideas” result from his dissatisfaction with his dull marriage and his vulgar wife who is preoccupied with household duties. His “poetic ideas” are closely associated with the pursuit of “a girl not yet spoiled by the lessons of reality, passionate as a poem, delightful as a melody, chaste like an angel” (Lihun 165). More importantly, these “poetic ideas” represent an existential alternative which bears symbolic weight in one’s life and contradicts the widely-accepted attitude of simply accepting one’s situation without complaint or action. The “poetic ideas” are fundamentally aligned with “freedom,” “eternal paradise,” and “peace.” Lao Li’s attempt to break through the oppressive human conditions foreshadows Xiangzi’s repetitive individual struggle in Lao She’s later novel Camel Xiangzi, whereas the reflection on a monstrous and stagnant society further develops into bare social reproach in Camel Xiangzi.

Equipped with lofty ideas but failing to carry them out, Lao Li reminds us of the superfluous heroes in Russian literature. Disillusioned with the Russian intellectuals in the 1840s, Ivan Turgenev delivered a lecture on “Hamlet and Don Quixote,” in which he expressed his disappointment with his contemporaries for lacking the capacity for action. In light of the contemporary Russian reality, Turgenev suggests two contradictory types of human beings which are based on Hamlet and Don Quixote respectively. One

4 For more discussions, see Wang 123-130.
illustrates the archetype of Russian “superfluous man,” as set forth in Turgenev’s *The Dairy of a Superfluous Man* (1850) and *Rudin* (1856). The other is the Don Quixote type of human being who “burns with enthusiasm and is happy despite his failures” (Kagan-Kans 11). “Superfluous man,” as the Russianized Hamlet, may also be applied to characters in earlier works, such as Alexander Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin (*Eugene Onegin*, 1833), Mikhail Lermontov’s Pechorin (*A Hero of Our Time*, 1840) and the eponymous character of Ivan Gancharov’s *Oblomov* (1859). The idea of “superfluous man” was introduced into China along with the extensive translations of Russian literature, especially those of Pushkin, Lermontov and Turgenev.° “Superfluous man” in Russian literature mainly refers to cynical individuals, usually aristocrats, born with wealth and privilege, and indulging in gambling, romance and duels. Existential boredom characterizes a typical superfluous man.

The superfluous man’s Chinese counterpart is usually a young hypersensitive intellectual with little money, if not impoverished, “whose desire to be of use to mankind and society is unfulfilled, [and] who tries in vain to commit himself to something or somebody” (Ng 100). The Chinese superfluous man reappears in Yu Dafu’s stories in the 1920s, for instance, “Sinking” (Chenlun, 1921) and “Intoxicating Spring Nights” (Chunfeng chenzui de wanshang, 1921). Directly influenced by Turgenev, Yu Dafu entitles one of his short stories “Superfluous Man,” *lingyu zhe*. Mau-sang Ng points out that “despair at the hopelessness of the situation remain[s] the constant theme of Yu’s fiction, and the main obsession of his hero” (101). Indeed, the predominant trait of the

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° Qin Gong does thorough research on the different versions and editions of the translations of Golden-Age Russian literature in the May Fourth era. See Qin 212-30.
Chinese superfluous man lies in his inability to act and his existential confusion, rather than the aristocrats’ existential boredom in Russian literature. The revised Chinese version of “superfluous man” was so influential that it gradually became inseparable from intellectuals. In the 1930s, Rudin as a typical superfluous man in Russian literature was considered by many as an alter ego mirroring Chinese intellectuals who were “greater talkers than doers,” and “Rudin” was therefore often used as the nickname to humiliate an intellectual on the literary scene.6

It is still unclear how much Lao She learned from his reading of Russian literature, or even what Russian writers he read. However, it is inaccurate to attribute the foreign influence on his writing career solely to English literature, or to neglect the social and intellectual environment when Lao She came back from England. The Russian “superfluous man” inherits the psychological malaise, excessive wit and excessive sensibility that characterize Hamlet on the one hand, and evolves the disability to participate in an environment from which he feels constantly estranged on the other. Due to the similar social and political situation between nineteenth-century Russia and twentieth-century China, Hamlet-like and Byronic heroes filtered by Russian literature are more acceptable and familiar to Chinese intellectuals. Lao She’s “new Hamlet” intellectual characters, like Lao Li, are superfluous in the sense that they suffer from the social environment that is impervious to the looming national crisis and from the general disillusion with life than the psychological Hamletian self-indulgence. The profound

6 Li Jin examines the history of translating Russian literature in modern China. See Li 283.
social concern associates Lao She’s intellectual characters with their Russian counterparts in spirit, rather than with the English ones in name.

Lao Li is not even aware of his own poetic ideals or his own ambitions. He possesses neither excessive wit nor excessive sensibility that causes the suffering of Hamlet. Although Lao Li, like Rudin, is a “greater talker than doer,” he realizes his own weakness and attempts to act. His indignation at the smug, clown-populated society eventually encourages him to act, which is demonstrated when he attempts to rescue Tianzhen. But the impulsive and impractical nature of his “poetic ideas” turns out to be childishly romantic and futile. He is not only fooled by Xiao Zhao in their negotiation of rescuing Tianzhen; he would also have brought about greater disaster to Big Brother Zhang and his family, had it not been for Second Master Ding’s final resort to violence. In this sense, both his mind and actions fail him. However, Lao Li preserves the humanistic nature that Lao She cherishes in his lament of the past. Being sensitive and sentimental, Lao Li has the capacity for humanity, righteousness and sympathy. Fully aware of Big Brother Zhang’s pettiness, he nevertheless offers to help, but his noble yet impractical means leads to his failure. As a parody of Hamlet, Lao Li’s anguish and his predicament show Lao She’s sympathy for the generation of incompetent intellectuals with goodwill. Yet Lao Li’s naiveté and the superficiality of his thoughts prevent him from being a tragic hero. He is, after all, a double of Tian Liede, an incapable superfluous man evoking both laughter and compassion, but never awe.

*Divorce* ends with Lao Li’s escape from Beijing with Second Master Ding, the parasite on the Zhang family. It is not completely surprising that Lao Li pairs up with
Second Master Ding in that, to a certain extent, Second Master Ding as a superfluous friend to the Zhang family is Lao Li’s double as well. Moreover, Second Master Ding’s murder of the archvillain Xiao Zhao indicates the nihilistic steps that Lao Li might take in the future. In his analysis of Turgenev’s superfluous man Bazarov, Irving Howe concludes that the components of nihilism are “19th century scientism, utilitarianism, a crude materialism, a rejection of the esthetic, a belief in the power of the free individual, a straining for tough-mindedness and a deliberate provocative rudeness” (131). These traits can be found in many of Lao She’s characters, especially in their relationship with family: Lao Li’s final repudiation of his family and his disagreement with Big Brother Zhang’s family-centered philosophy show a potential kinship with the Russian nihilism; Tian Liede’s apathy towards the bankruptcy of his father’s business and the financial crisis that his family undergoes reveals the nihilistic aspect of Lao She’s superfluous man.

The above examination of superfluous intellectuals like Lao Li illustrates Lao She’s disapproving yet understanding attitudes towards many of his contemporary intellectuals, but radical nihilists who represent an advanced stage of the superfluous man receive his deeply-rooted doubt. Lao She’s writing often features lyrical depictions of the local Beijinger, which serve as a point of contrast to these nihilists. In the lives of many old Beijingers, Lao She sees and eulogizes positive action, friendship, understanding, and mutual support among family members, intimate neighbors and the community. He wrote a short story, “Black Li and White Li” (Heibai Li) in 1934, only a few months after the creation of Divorce. Seldom have his other works given a better clue to Lao She’s
pessimistic view on all existing options and solutions for the future of the nation. The main characters in this story, Black Li and White Li, are brothers who look very much alike, except that Black Li has a big black mole. The characters are intentionally designed to illustrate the clash of the old and the new, because the narrator states at the beginning of the story that Black Li is old-fashioned while White Li is modern. Following this binary structure, the story displays the traditional lifestyle and mindset of Black Li, and the modern and nihilistic life of White Li, who treats sex carelessly, has few emotions, and always justifies means by ends. Out of brotherly love Black Li eventually removes his mole and sacrifices his life on behalf of White Li in a revolutionary riot, whereas White Li survives and begins to look more like Black Li. The death of Black Li conveys a political message that the old style of thought and behavior will inevitably be extinguished during historical progress. Although the narrator, a friend of Black Li, understands White Li’s revolutionary viewpoint, his emotional detachment from White Li illustrates his distaste for the radical path that nihilists take, and more importantly, his profound uncertainty about the future of the nation that might be in their hands. The story ends with a line from White Li, which accentuates the narrator’s stance—“Number Two [Black Li] probably has gone to heaven; that is a perfect place for him. But I am still here smashing the gates of hell” (Duanpian 15). For White Li, behind the smashed gates is not utopia, but dystopia. In this sense, radical revolution under Lao She’s pen is accepted passively as fact rather than hope.

Lao She’s ambivalent portrait of superfluous heroes such as Lao Li, Little Scorpio and Ma Wei reveals his understanding of their moral predicament, his indignation at the
weakness of their character, and his sympathy for their mental anguish and failure. These ambivalent feelings enable the complexity of Lao She’s satiric writing, thereby distinguishing his satire from the “sword-like” attack that he claims real satire should be. Although his complicated feelings towards the satirized object are explicit, when the superfluous heroes fully become nihilists, the satirist becomes a detached observer, and intentionally withdraws from any emotional involvement in the story. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Lao She’s writing would soon become infused with his patriotic passion, which would not die out until his suicide in the 1960s. However, in the short yet prolific period in Jinan, a strong sense of distrust of the radical revolutionary underlies his work. These works diagnose the social ills, but they are by no means prescriptions.

Native Soil: A Potential Anchor for the Homeless

Praise of ordinary, down-to-earth Chinese is a recurrent theme in Lao She’s writing. In Divorce, it is Second Master Ding, a man without any education but with a big heart, who kills Xiao Zhao and saves Big Brother Zhang’s family and Lao Li himself. His gallantry leads Lao Li to see merits in this supposed clown character and flee with him to the countryside for a new life.

When analyzing the ending of Divorce, David Der-wei Wang asserts that “By using Second Master Ding as deus ex machina, Lao She obviously intends to caricature not only the archetype of knight-errantry but also the easy poetic justice in a middlebrow popular novel” (129). He further argues that “Lao She seems to indicate that one can rely
neither on government forces nor on public justice to counter social irrationalities and abuses, but rather on one’s own action—action that may be just as violent and desperate as the villains’” (129). Wang’s perception of the radical tendency in Lao She’s fiction seems reasonable, since some of his heroes are complete nihilists. However, as I discussed above, these characters display Lao She’s moral distaste for the tough-minded revolutionaries that cold-heartedly demand others’ sacrifice. Violence based on utilitarianism cannot be the resolution of social abuse and injustice. In this sense, is Second Master Ding’s rash action simply a parody of literary convention as Wang claims? Some comparative and parallel reading of Lao She’s other works in the same period will illuminate the significance of Second Master Ding and the meaning of his seemingly unconvincing action.

Second Master Ding belongs to the parasitic-and-incompetent relative-servant category in Chinese literature; he is in many aspects reminiscent of Second Uncle You in Xiao Hong’s Tales of Hulan River. He is not a servant in Big Brother Zhang’s but he helps to look after the house. He is “exceptional” in Big Brother Zhang’s word: “a man without family and career” (Lihun 168). “Living on the relatives” is not a real man, but rather “trash” (168). Supposedly helping with housework, Second Master Ding’s presence is “invariably to get in everyone’s way, to give more trouble, and to cause more work” (Lihun 185). He is so despised by everyone that even little kids make fun of him. Yet, this funny character embodies some qualities that can be found in a healthy and humane society, such as humility, honesty, gallantry, mercy, righteousness and the ability to love, most of which are rarely found in a superfluous man and repelled by a nihilist.
Ironically, it is exactly these qualities that contribute to his degradation in an irrational society—a theme that recurs and dominates in Lao She’s later work *Camel Xiangzi*. Even though he violently kills the villain Xiao Zhao, his positive qualities distinguish him from the ruthless nihilists in that he is haunted by a strong feeling of guilt. Disillusioned with his life in metropolitan Beijing, Lao Li pairs up with Second Master Ding to go to the countryside where its native soil preserves the plain and the down-to-earth qualities of a nation, as opposed to the corrupt and hypocritical high civilization.

In Lao She’s fiction, the degeneration of civilization is not necessarily tied with the city, nor are positive attitudes of life tied with the countryside. For example, his satiric novel *The Biography of Niu Tianci* is set in a small country town dominated by fraudulent middle-upper gentry and populated with impostors. The incompetent relative-servant character also appears in this novel as Master Tiger. Just like Second Master Ding, for most of the novel Master Tiger is portrayed as a joker and comical playmate for Niu Tianci. But it is he who gives Niu Tianci shelter when Niu Tianci is abandoned by everyone else; it is his sheer dogged endurance and persistence that helps Niu Tianci survive his downfall. As the story proceeds, Master Tiger’s perseverance to act not only counters his inability to work efficiently, but also contrasts sharply with Niu Tianci’s idleness and vanity which characterize the local gentry.

This type of downtrodden, unassuming character is not rare in the 1930s Chinese native soil literature; they often serve as models of genuine people, such as that of Shen Congwen and Xiao Hong. In spite of the various geographic settings of those stories by different writers, the essential quality of this type of character lies in their natural attitude
towards life and their humble obedience to nature and fate: “Vulgarity is a kind of force, while exquisiteness is often a defect. Bound feet have beauty, but are also a cultural disease. Only a diseased culture appreciates the unnatural phenomenon, and calls it beauty,” Lao She once remarked (Laoniu poche 42). The real contrast in his works is the one between an over-mature culture and a plain understanding of life that has not yet been corrupted by the poison of civilization, instead of the literary dichotomy between city and countryside, intellectuals and peasants or even West and East. It is therefore understandable that a realistic writer like Lao She often caricatures his characters’ affectations and other deficiencies cultivated by the sick culture, but never portrays the down-to-earth characters as complete buffoons. On the contrary, at one point or another, these laughingstock-ignorant characters reveal the truth of life to the protagonists. For example, in The Biography of Niu Tianci, Tianci ignores his father’s illness and his business at the expense of organizing a birthday party for him. For the party, Tianci excitedly attempts to train Master Tiger to be a perfect butler that his hypocritical friends from the local literary club often laud:

“Master Tiger, if someone comes to see me, you should report it by standing outside the screen and calling aloud: ‘I beg your report.’ Understand this? After I have answered you, then you should call aloud again to the visitor, saying: ‘Will you please come this way?’ After that you hold up the visitor’s card, and raise it as high as your ear; you lead the way and ask the visitor to follow you. Do not hurry, walk leisurely, with your eyes on the ground. […]”

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After a moment of reflection Master Tiger said: “Brother, let us be frank. I cannot do it! Even if I could, I would not do this kind of funny business. Understand me? If you do not want my service any longer, damn it all! I am not used to this monkey business.” (Niu Tianci 523; Heavensent 216-17)

Master Tiger’s blunt refusal exposes the vanity and empty manners that corrupt civil society, which in return undermines his own image as an ignorant buffoon that is built up by more “civilized” characters.

En route to China from England, Lao She reports his observation of Chinese in Singapore: “Chinese can endure the most serious sufferings; they can resist all pains and diseases. […] They are not afraid of death. […] They are not pessimistic, because they show great endurance and real effort” (Laoniu pochhe xinbian 21). In these qualities, he sees hope and realizes that “new ideas are in the East rather than the West” (Laoniu pochhe xinbian 26). This viewpoint underlies many of his short stories written in Jinan. The inevitable failure of social underdogs in “Crescent” (Yueya), “This Life of Mine” (Wo zhe yibeizi) and “Lethal Lance” (Duanhun qiang) symbolize the defeat of old-fashioned righteousness and virtue in a ruthless and fast-changing world, which generates the nostalgic sentiments that permeate Lao She’s works. These down-to-earth virtues preserved in native soil provide a possible anchor for the superfluous heroes who lose their positions in life and become homeless misfits.

The predominant characteristic of native soil culture in Lao She’s works is chivalric spirit that is lauded and practiced by ordinary people. One does not need to be a knight-errant to act chivalrously; a commoner may be more notable than an official in
terms of his worldview and daily conduct. In *Divorce*, the chivalric action of Second Master Ding is by no means a cheap parody of “the archetype of knight-errantry.” Chivalry represents humanitarianism that is superior to the impotent superfluous heroes’ like Lao Li, the obedient citizens like Big Brother Zhang, or the callous revolutionaries like White Li. Lao Li’s determination to solve Big Brother Zhang’s problem is not driven by their friendship. Instead, it is the chivalric impulse that urges Lao Li to take bold yet unrealistic action. Even Black Li’s self-sacrifice echoes the brotherhood loyalty of chivalry.

Martial arts and other folk arts play a highly important role in Lao She’s life and his writing career. His serious and genuine love towards folk art and customs is demonstrated by his confidence in the educational function of popular culture and his constant efforts to write popular literature such as xiangsheng (comedian’s dialogue) and dagushuci (scripts for drum-storytelling). In his early twenties, Lao She showed great interest in martial arts. He learned various kinds of Chinese boxing and swordsmanship. He put so much effort in practicing martial arts that he even volunteered to perform in front of guests (Zhang 25). This hobby affected his worldview and his writing career as well. For instance, “Lethal Lance” was originally a small section of a martial-art novel *Second Boxer* (Er quanshi) that he planned but never had a chance to write for years (*Laoniu poche xinbian* 50). In an article on reading novels, Lao She differentiates *xia* (chivalry) from *jian* (sword), stating that if a writer focuses on the presentation of chivalry, a sense of righteousness will be captured and the readers will therefore embrace the ambition to practice justice; on the other hand, if the writer writes only about the
skills of martial arts and not its ethics, his readers will gradually be lead down a demonic path (“Zenyang du xiaoshuo” 521). In Lao She’s view, novels of martial arts that advocate the chivalric spirit positively contribute to the healthy development of society. Unlike David Der-wei Wang’s claims, for Lao She, the martial arts novel is not a mere “middlebrow popular novel.” It is therefore understandable that many of his characters more or less demonstrate the features of knight-errantry.

With the above acknowledgement of the importance of martial arts and chivalric spirit in Lao She’s works, Lao Li’s decision to leave “the world-center” Beijing is by no means escapist. If bringing his family from the countryside to Beijing represents the triumph of Big Brother Zhang’s philosophy of compromise, it is also a way to protest the oppressive social norm. In fact, a knight-errant is different from a superfluous hero in that the former wanders physically while the latter wanders spiritually. When examining Lao Li’s partnership with Second Master Ding, David Der-wei Wang argues that “The sense of incongruity surrounding this odd couple proves once again that, in Lao She’s comical /farcical world no one is privileged to carry out a heroism that exists only in fiction. The real winners are the buffoons in Lao Li’s office who dominate the city of Beijing” (129-30). As Wang observes, at the end of Divorce, Big Brother Zhang anticipates that Lao Li will come back soon, and neither Lao Li’s nor Second Master Ding’s action is ideally heroic. But Lao Li’s pairing up with Second Master Ding indicates a potential improvement of and complement to the superfluous hero, which is much more significant than a mere reconfirmation of the unchallenged absurdity of the world. Returning to the chivalric life demonstrates Lao She’s lament for a lost time that celebrates virtue over
manners. Complemented by this future-oriented nostalgia, Lao She’s satire of the present is intertwined with compassion for and empathy with his satirized objects that include not only Lao Li and Second Master Ding, but also characters like Big Brother Zhang.

Since these are satiric works, Lao She presents these traditional virtues mostly by comical jokers. It is easy to overlook the underlying seriousness and positive function in the reconstruction of the nation. Moreover, in his other non-satiric works, these virtues are often found in characters that are defeated by life and fated to be eliminated in the process of history. Lao She’s approval of the force of native soil is intentionally reserved, and traditional virtues are tenuous concepts that one may clutch at in a world of no meaning. Together with Lao She’s ambivalent attitudes towards the little family man and superfluous intellectual, his implicit advocacy of traditional virtues marks his doubt about the present and the future, especially during his stay in Jinan. Although Lao She emphasizes in his articles that a humorist feels no superiority to the world of which he makes fun, his resistance to the status quo and search for true meaning and values that support a healthy society illuminate his unyielding pursuit of ideals as well as the implied superiority of a satirist. A humorist in name, Lao She is a satirist in heart, but, as he claimed, with profound compassion for his characters.
CHAPTER FOUR

From Playfulness to Pessimism:
Qian Zhongshu’s Pride and Prejudice in Self-Counteractive Satire

When disembarking at Hong Kong after a voyage from Europe in 1938, Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998), one of the greatest novelists and satirists in modern Chinese literary history, was still little known. Although he had already gained fame for being erudite among intellectuals, Qian’s satirical works did not draw wide public attention until the serialization of his novel *Fortress Besieged* (Weicheng) in 1946. The work was published in a single volume in May 1947, and was in its third edition by 1949. For a short period of time before the advent of the PRC, everyone talked about Qian Zhongshu and his *Fortress Besieged*. Never running with the herd, and deliberately staying aloof from politics during the continuing political and social upheavals in the Republican era and PRC, Qian ceased writing non-scholarly works after 1949. Therefore, the period from 1938 to 1949 deserves especial attention from those who are fascinated by Qian’s brilliant satirical works.

Focusing on his writings in the 1930s and 1940s, this chapter examines Qian’s essays in *Written in the Margins of Life* (Xie zai rensheng bianshang) that was published in 1941 with a preface dated 1939, stories in *Humans, Beasts and Ghosts* (Ren, shou, gui) that was published in 1946 with a first preface dated 1944, and the celebrated *Fortress Besieged*. I will attempt to depict the gradual yet obvious transformation from playfulness in Qian’s satirical works in the late 1930s to the deep pessimistic undertone of his work
in late 1940s. I argue that playful satire in essays of the late 1930s and early 1940s is characterized by a self-conscious undermining of the satirist’s arguments, which are dominated by lighthearted casualness. Most importantly, the satirist accentuates the value of fragmentary thoughts that enhance the carelessness and incoherence of playful satire. In this stage of Qian’s writing, he usually satirizes in a flippant fashion, probably in part due to the length of these essays. By comparing the essays with his views on classical Chinese literature, and by analyzing what I call the self-counteractive structure of these essays, I probe the logic and reasons for the flippant and tongue-in-cheek tone that Qian possesses.

Continuing the persistent mockery of intellectuals and the ubiquitous hypocrisy in human world presented in his early essays, Qian’s stories and especially his *Fortress Besieged* show a misanthrope who displays deeper distrust and disgust for women than ever before. Deficiencies and defects of women not only endanger men’s lives, but also demonstrate a human destiny that is bereft of hope and sanctuary. Surprisingly old-fashioned in his sarcastic portraits of female vanity and excessive desire, Qian reinforces society’s expectations of women and their roles in families. When women refuse to fulfill their duties, human beings, represented by men, experience an existential anxiety, and are perpetually trapped in a spiritual and physical homeless status.

**Playful Satire and Fragmentary Insights**

In his article on “Naive and Sentimental Poetry,” Frederic Schiller divides satirical poetry into pathetic (or punitive) satire and playful satire (117). In satirical
poetry, the satirist “can execute either seriously and with passion, or jokingly and with good humor, according as he dwells in the realm of will or the realm of understanding” (117). The former deals with serious subjects and “derives from a temperament that is vigorously permeated by the ideal,” such as satirical works of Juvenal and Swift, while the latter succeeds only with a beautiful soul in which the ideal “functions as nature” and reveals itself “in a state of calm” (119-120). Although Schiller’s discussion of the sublime and the beautiful, and the philosophical conventions to which they contribute, are not pertinent to my study, his general observation of the features of various types of satire illuminates aspects of Qian’s satire.

Even disguised by his signature wit and quirky sense of humor, some of Qian’s satirical essays and stories are permeated with antipathy, targeting and passing moral judgment on real-life individuals. This type of writing is akin to Schiller’s punitive satire. An example is his persistent attack on Lin Yutang, his fellow intellectuals of *Analects Fortnightly* (Lunyu banyue kan) and their promotion of humorous writing. But most of Qian’s satirical writing manifests Schiller’s essential light-hearted sentiment in playful satire, though Qian often deals with moral issues rather than the “morally neutral subject” that Schiller attributes to playful satire (120).

Stylistically, Qian is even more playful and careless than Schiller would suggest in that he is well-known for his sometimes unrestrained displays of erudition, excessive cultural and literary references and allusions, and casual associations and facile analogies. After conceding Voltaire’s wit and “wonderful variety of external forms,” Schiller expresses regret in the limitations of the author’s satire: “Everywhere too little
seriousness underlies his ridicule, and this justly brings his poetic vocation under suspicion. We perpetually encounter only his understanding, never his feeling. No ideal is manifest beneath that airy frame and scarcely anything absolutely fixed in that ceaseless motion” (124). Schiller’s critique of Voltairian satire applies to Qian’s satirical writing in the 1930s and 1940s. Scholars have long noticed the tongue-in-cheek nature of Qian’s writing, while Qian’s readers often find themselves confused and incapable of discerning the author’s true attitude toward his subject. His witty assertions are usually unable to hold up under close scrutiny; the overuse of analogies often betrays a lack of logic. Qian himself is apparently aware of the deficiency of this, because he often steps back from his personal opinion and turns to a contrasting point of view. In a word, Qian’s satire, like Voltaire’s, lacks a point of fixity.

In defining satire, Schiller proposes that its basis is “the contradiction between actuality and the ideal,” and “contradictions of the understanding […] leaves the heart indifferent,” which actually emphasizes the ultimate singularity of the ideal in a piece of satirical writing (117). It seems beyond Schiller’s imagination that co-existent ideals, let alone contradictory ideals, can be found in a single piece of satire. Northrop Frye suggests a subtler understanding: “Satire is militant irony: its moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured” (223). Frye’s definition provides plenty of leeway to propose a possible situation in which multiple, even contradictory, standards contend within a single piece of satirical writing. This is the case in most of Qian’s satirical essays and stories. On many occasions, Qian targets the fetish of fixed standards and absolute ideals. He suggests
examining things from various perspectives, and further celebrates ostensible casualness towards life and literary critique. In the preface to his collections of essays, *Written in the Margins of Life*, he compares life to a big book, and carelessly pokes fun at those book-critic types of people who know little about life (“read no more than a few pages”) but love to express comments and reviews. Half-heartedly and half-jokingly, he concedes that:

Yet, another type of person exists in this world. [...] Possessing the casualness and nonchalance of spare-time diversion seekers, they browse at their own leisurely pace. When an opinion strikes them, they jot down a few notes or write a question mark or exclamation mark in the blank margins of the book, akin to [the] “eyebrow comments” in the top margins of old Chinese books or [the] marginalia in foreign books. These piecemeal, spontaneous impressions do not constitute their verdict on the entire book, and having been written in passing they may contradict one another or go overboard. But the authors don’t bother about this.

*(Rensheng bianshang 1; Rea 32)*

Admitting his essays are simply spontaneous remarks and diversions, Qian once again distinguishes himself from “serious” critics who assume a didactic tone, and concludes, “Who has the ability and patience for such things [guiding readers and chiding the author]” *(Rensheng bianshang 1; Rea 32)*?

This short preface is highly representative of Qian’s playful tone that makes it even harder to pin down his satirical purpose. Here, Qian plays the role of a frivolous amateurish man of letters, to act as a foil to the vain moralists and conceited critics and to
acknowledge the unfathomable nature of life in his celebration of humility. He avoids predictable attacks from peers and intellectuals who would otherwise be offended by his sarcasm in the way he denies his sincerity. This self-defensive purpose reinforces the playfulness of his writing and demonstrates his refusal to take a fixed position, but in turn undermines his own assertions. After all, if he is just joking, should readers not take his words seriously? Shouldn’t they cease to look for “truth” and inspiration in Qian’s book? However, there indeed is something true in his insights. In other words, Qian consciously blurs the line between joke and sincerity, and between ideal and actuality. He seriously exercises his satiric technique, flaunts his learning and exposes the absurdities, only for fun.

In her reminiscences, Yang Jiang, Qian’s wife, repeatedly refers to Qian’s chiqi (痴气), a term that encompasses “puckish bent, charming mischievous quirks, sweet quirkiness, charming idiosyncratic ways… eccentric prattling, idiosyncrasies and [sic] foibles and so forth” (Wu 343). Even when he was young, Qian had already developed into an intelligent yet loquacious boy. He was so unconcerned about the consequences of his witty yet often overtly offensive comments that his father gave him an alternate name, Mocun (默存), when he was officially enrolled in elementary school. Mocun roughly means, “silently keeping one’s thoughts to oneself or preserving the (prudent) quality of being silent.” As a father’s attempt to admonish little Qian, it remains only a good wish. The writing that a young, talented Qian produced in his twenties already demonstrated his quick wit and mischievous quirks that would become his trademark.
Interestingly, for Qian, moral preferences and judgments are subjective and relativistic. In his essay “On Moral Instruction” (Tan jiaoxun), Qian observes that “In truth, worldly distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, deviant and upright, and so on sometimes boil down to the difference between self and other” (Rensheng bianshang 34; Rea 58). In “A Prejudice” (Yige pianjian), he further develops this idea, claiming that “[I]n the current age it is completely unnecessary to focus one’s words and deeds solely on the pursuit of rationality. Of course, ‘correctness’ and ‘common sense’ are basically also prejudices” (Rensheng bianshang 39; Rea 62). Acknowledging some exceptions that “incline to central and upright,” such as academic theories, he then admirably praises the “honest-to-goodness and out-and-out” prejudice, such as jottings written in the margins of life and passionate love letters (Rensheng bianshang 39; Rea 62). By classifying his marginalia, such as this piece of “A Prejudice,” as “out-and-out” prejudice, Qian seems to try to convince his readers that there is no absolute right or wrong; meanwhile, he silently invites his readers to question the legitimacy of his own argument: isn’t his cynical view of justice also a prejudice?

Towards the end of this essay, he quotes Schopenhauer, saying that a thinker should be deaf, and infers quite casually, in his typical fashion:

If he isn’t deaf, he will hear sounds, and if those sounds are noisy, he’ll have a hard time keeping his mind collected, with the result that prejudice will take the place of impartiality. At this point—having forgotten that you too are a noise-making animal; […]—you will find yourself even more impervious to other’s
complaints that your prejudice are too ingrained. As you add this new prejudice, you make another note in the margins of life. (*Rensheng bianshang* 43; Rea 65)

Once again, in this last sentence, he clearly categorizes his own writing and opinions on life as prejudices, though it is very likely another self-mocking joke. In the 1941 edition of this essay, the self-referral is even more obvious; it says, “I jotted down another essay” (you xiele yipian suibi) (Rea 85). At first glance, Qian’s cynical view of the subjective nature of “correctness” and “uprightness” sounds convincing, especially from relativistic or anthropological perspectives. However, when equating any opinion with any other outrageous prejudice, Qian goes so far that he sweeps away the weight and seriousness, if there ever was any, that he had built up. His arguments challenge the legitimacy of his satire, creating a “self-counteractive” effect that renders his satirical essays mere “Sunday amusement” for his readers as well as himself (*Rensheng bianshang* 39; Rea 62).

In his study of Qian Zhongshu, Theodore Huters inspiringly points out a strikingly paradoxical writing method that Qian often utilizes in his essays and stories, a device Huters calls “chedan fa” (“nonsense” or “making light” method) (79). In Huters’ opinion, *chedan fa* resembles the seventeenth-century European “baroque style” prose in that it “often equilibrates the two contrasting features of one issue,” but “the equilibration in this case is purely negative: the two features are equated on in the sense that neither is left standing” (79). By scrupulously analyzing Qian’s satirical essays, such as the abovementioned “On Moral Instruction,” Huters argues that “Structurally, Qian’s intention of forcing rigorous examination of the commonplace requires him to break down configurations of meaning as he builds them up,” by which Qian fundamentally
challenges the “conventional wisdom” and logic (86). Furthering Huters’ suggestion, Christopher Rea establishes a close connection between Qian’s satire and the Greek cynic Menippus. Featured by his revelation of “diseases of intellect” and “mental attitudes,” a Menippean satirist tries to “expose the inadequacies in others’ thinking through dissection and analysis, and to demonstrate his own superior intellect. His most conspicuous technique is the repeated and exuberant display of learning” (Rea 11).

Huters attempts to explain the incongruity, misconnected analogies, distorted logic and flippant associations that readers often encounter in Qian’s writing, while Rea notices the Menippean laughter Qian’s writing arouses. Considering his dazzling erudition, Qian is surely familiar with the baroque prose that Huters notices as well as the Menippean satire represented by Rabelais, Voltaire and Huxley. But any attempt to give an ultimate interpretation of Qian’s ambiguous and fluid works, especially through a Western theoretical frame, may seriously ignore, misread and even oppose Qian’s own understanding of his writing and critique.

In his introduction to Qian Zhongshu’s monumental scholarly work Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters (Guanzhui bian, 1979), Ronald Egan notices Qian’s “aversion to intellectual systematization and devotion to the particular” (15). Qian’s scholarly views, though fully mature only in later works, can illuminate our understanding of his early ones. When the essays and stories in Margins were written and collected, young Qian had just started his scholarly career. Even though life had already revealed its roughness to most Chinese through a series of foreign and domestic wars, Qian’s deeply pessimistic views had not yet been established. Qian squandered his
learning and wit carelessly, and mercilessly laughed at others’ intellectual failings and limits. He made his readers laugh with his playful attitude toward moral issues and social evil. He himself said that he neither expected nor wanted readers to treat his satirical insights as punitive tools or admonitory diagnosis. As he asserted on many occasions, they are just for “amusement.” But decades later, in his late scholarly works written in the 1960s and 1970s, he shows us that the playful tone in his early writing does not completely derive from the pursuit of fun or an eagerness to display learning; his notes written in the margins of life may not have been as frivolous as he claimed when he wrote them:

In inquiries into the history of premodern Chinese aesthetics, our attention has always been monopolized by a few celebrated theoretical treaties. […] At the same time, a candid person must admit that the great quantity of such writing that has been produced is not matched by the amount of insight it yields. Much of this writing is empty pronouncement. […] By contrast, in poetry, song lyrics, random notes, fiction, and drama, and even in popular sayings and classical commentaries, a few short phrases jotted down carelessly often convey a refined and original insight that truly enhances understanding. The act of culling out and developing such passages may be a real contribution to theories of the arts.

 […]

Furthermore, the desultory notes on poetry and other remarks on literature that we read so closely do not need to fit into some theoretical system. If we examine the history of theories, what we find is that many of the most tightly
constructed and comprehensive systems of thought and philosophy have not
withstood the corrosion of time. Their structure as whole has been demolished.
Yet some of their particular, isolated insights do survive and are used by later
ages. […] Just so, frequently the only thing of value that a great theoretical system
leaves to posterity is a few unconnected, partial thoughts. (Qi zhui ji 29-30; Egan
11. Italics mine.)

Qian wrote these words in his critical essay on Lessing’s Laocoon in 1962,
demonstrating an unreserved advocacy of fragmentary yet valuable insights that endure.
Northrop Frye writes that “The Menippean satirist, dealing with intellectual themes and
attitudes, shows his exuberance in intellectual ways, by piling up an enormous mass of
erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of
their own jargon” (311). As an acute satirist, Qian uses erudition to laugh at intellectual
follies; as a serious scholar, he sees the value of fragmentary thoughts. As long as the
often out-of-context thoughts are enlightening and insightful, whether they can fit into an
integral text is not Qian’s priority.

Scholars and fans who love and admire Qian’s erudition and wit admit that his
early writing, especially essays and stories, often lack consistency and coherence, but
take pains to find a deeply-buried reason to defend them. More importantly, they are
highly reluctant to admit the lack of integrity of Qian’s works. Perhaps Qian is not
expressing false modesty when he claims that his essays and stories are random notes.
His unwritten message might be that they are more valuable than any systematic theory
or criticism, despite their apparent carelessness. Learning and training teaches us to treat
a piece of finished writing as an integral unity, and we therefore expect to find coherent meaning from the whole. However, young Qian seems not to be bothered by the issue of textual integrity, even if he does not deliberately oppose it.

Animated by a zeal for exposing the fallacies of human belief, conventional wisdom and logic itself, Qian reveals that there is no absolute truth or ideal, and anything can be a legitimate object of satire. Consequently, satire itself can be self-counteractive. In the meantime, it is understandable if the satirical tone is playful. After all, if nothing is (morally) correct and deserves unconditional advocacy, how can one expect a satirist to be irritated by the follies of the world and serious about promoting the “ideal” that in fact is relativistic and subjective?

The Self-Counteractive Technique of Playful Satire

*Contradictions are the price of wisdom. This is life’s big joke on philosophies of life.*


Qian’s writing shows that wise people are aware of the contradictory nature of life. A wise satirist differs from a moralist in that the former treats heavy issues lightly, at the price of self-counteraction. The self-counteractive lines in Qian’s writing often occur at the end of a satirical piece to reverse or reduce the gravity of the satirist’s earlier arguments. Almost all essays and stories in *Margins*, such as “Windows,” “Eating,” “A Prejudice” and “On Moral Instruction” do this. Qian’s essay on rereading *Aesop’s Fables* best exemplifies this self-counteractive strategy and the accompanied tongue-in-cheek tone that it creates.
The essay starts with a cynical narrator describing people’s common attitudes towards age and seniority. This experienced narrator observes that people are often more tolerant and protective of those who are much younger, while envying those who are only slightly younger, because we can “flaunt” our age and enhance our dignity in front of the former, but we can hardly maintain the superior and condescending stance in front of the latter (Rensheng bianshang 28). By including himself in the “we,” the narrator shows his awareness of the universality of human defect in such regards, as well as his self-reflection. Cynical it may, but his satirical attack stabs precisely at the right point.

Still thinking in terms of age and time, the witty narrator claims that antiquity in human history corresponds to mankind’s infancy, while the modern age, coming later and with accumulated knowledge, is in fact more mature. Thus, “we believe that everything in the modern age to be more advanced than that of antiquity” (Rensheng bianshang 29; Rea 54). At this point, the narrator’s “rational” thinking seems not very plausible; as a satirical narrator, his reliability starts to be challenged. But because he is still using the “we” narrative, it is possible that he is mimicking and parodying social Darwinists, while he himself is actually excluded from the “we.”

Next, the narrator claims his former conclusion is drawn from reading Aesop’s Fables. He believes that Aesop’s Fables is a childish book written in an ancient time, about less evolved animals, so “we,” mature grown-ups who live in modern times, “sense that it contains a number of superficial views that require correction” (Rensheng bianshang 29; Rea 55). Proceeding to this point, the narrator once again belongs to the “we” group, but the self-mockery and self-reflection in the first paragraph fades away,
and the temporal confusion generated in the second paragraph is also cleared up. The satirical persona becomes a conceited narrator who possesses a blind faith in progress as well as the progress of future generations. This social Darwinist narrator therefore loses his superior position to satirize and becomes the satiric target of the invisible author who presumes the role of satirist. Consequently, readers lose trust in the narrator, and his rereading of *Aesop’s Fables* is expected to be merely ridiculous commentary.

Contrary to readers’ expectations, Qian reverses the narrator’s position once again through the narrator’s rereading of *Aesop’s Fables*. One entry particularly demonstrates the narrator’s sharp insight and acerbic tongue. It is even more ironic when Qian draws more and more scholarly attention:

The story of the ant and the cricket: When winter arrives, the ant takes out his winter rice to dry in the sun. Half dead with hunger, the cricket asks to borrow some food and the ant replies: “You’re the one who sang the summer away and now you’re going hungry—serves you right!” This story shouldn’t end here. According to the Platonic dialogue *Phaedrus*, when the cricket evolves he turns into a poet. We can deduce from this that a person who sits by and watches a poet suffer poverty and hunger, not deigning to lend him money, was undoubtedly an ant in his former life. The cricket himself turns into ant food after he dies. Similarly, great writers who were unable to provide for themselves while alive will have a whole group of people living off them after they die, such as relatives and friends writing sentimental reminiscences and critics and scholars writing research theses. (*Rensehng bianshang* 30; Rea 55)
This entry ends at “reminisces” in the 1941 edition, but in the 1983 edition, when Qian himself became the subject of scholarly research as a primary literary field in China, he added the last clause “and critics and scholars writing research theses.” With the Qian-esque “mischievous quirks,” Qian winks at his readers, humorously reminding them that many of them are crickets as well.

Through his reading of the fables, the narrator unfolds an ugly human world in which an impostor not only mingles with real talents, but also slanders others to cover up his own embarrassment when his is exposed. This is a new world where the fox tells others that ripe grapes are probably still sour, not out of jealousy, but because that can prevent others from sharing the grapes. Through his reinterpretations, the narrator turns into a cynical satirist critiquing social Darwinism, exposing the hypocrisy of modern society. While readers start to re-assess the satirist-narrator and to acknowledge the satirist-narrator’s critique, the narrator changes face again, asserting that:

Rousseau believes that fables are detrimental because they make unsophisticated children complicated and deprive them of their innocence. I believe that fables are detrimental because they make unsophisticated children even more simpleminded and childish. Fables lead them to believe that in human affairs the distinction between right and wrong and the consequences of good and evil are as fair and clear-cut as in the animal kingdom. (Rensheng bianshang 32; Rea 57)

With his pessimistic worldview, the sophisticated narrator lectures that when you are confident of your ability to see through the phenomenal world and to detect the ultimate truth and ideals, you are deceived by your own naïveté. The real world always functions
more absurdly than what you’ve experienced and can imagine. Suffice it to say that this corrupt modern world is much more degraded than in earlier times.

What does the narrator expect children to grow up to be so that they can survive such a world? He accuses Rousseau of a naïve belief in human nature and social justice, and places himself in opposition. He seems to attempt to teach readers and children to be more evil in order to beat evil. His satirical exposure of social vice becomes a social Darwinist demonstration of how to be the fittest and strongest, and his interpretation of fables therefore loses its satirical power and turns out to be a practical lesson. The narrator further accentuates his social Darwinist position at the end of the essay: “The essential difference between Rousseau and me is that he is a primitivist who advocates a return to antiquity, while I am a man who believes in progress—though not like the fly in the fable who sits on the axle of the cart wheel, buzzing, ‘it’s all my power that’s moving this cart along’” (Reshen bianshang 32-33; Rea 57). After depicting a bleak picture of the world, the narrator’s strong attachment to progressive thought is even more ironic. Repeatedly switching back and forth between cynicism and a progressivism, the essay alternates between social satire and cynical instruction. Through its self-counteractive narration, it skillfully satirizes both sides of the narrator, and in particular mocks progressives’ blind optimism in a society that is rotten to the core. But Qian’s satirical writing is so facile and the tone so playful that it conveys a clear message: “don’t take what I am saying too seriously.” Because the playfulness is so obvious, even a serious reader accepts Qian’s self-counteractive satirical writing, in spite of his or her first intuition to challenge Qian’s ostensibly “true” affirmation of the satirized objects.
The alteration of viewpoint and its self-counteractive consequences are visible in other essays in *Margins*, such as in “The Devil Pays a Nighttime Visit to Mr. Qian Zhongshu” (Mogui yefang Qian Zhongshu xiansheng). “Nighttime Visit” unfolds a conversation between the Devil and the narrator, “Mr. Qian Zhongshu.” But this first-person narrator is a representative of mediocre men of letters with limited knowledge and wisdom rather than the satirist Qian Zhongshu himself. The narrator’s lack of sensibility provides the visiting Devil with an opportunity to flaunt his insights into the human world. As the presumed source of all evil and a target of condemnation, the Devil partially serves as a cynical satirist by answering Mr. Qian’s questions. Cynicism not only allows the Devil to cut through the hypocritical world, but it also deliberately constitutes mockery of the conceived Devil, whose keen observation of the human world and his advice for surviving it magnify the hypocrisy, especially among intellectuals.

The self-counteractive narration in *Margins* is different from self-satire in *Strange Things Observed over the Past Twenty Years*. The first-person narrators in self-satire perceive themselves as reliable observers of absurd acts while never realizing their own impressionability or that they are by nature no different from the objects of their satire. Qian, on the other hand, creates a self-counteractive, cynical persona that reveals and lampoons sin and absurdity, but also constantly reminds readers of his own unreliability, thus provoking their contemplation of the issues at hand.

“Nighttime Visit” opens with the visitor’s revelation of his identity. He is the Devil, tempting and testing people who act in resolution. After referring to his description in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Barbey d’Aurevilly’s *Les Diaboliques*, the Devil laments
the lack of materials for an autobiography and complains that he has to “make up some new facts,” should he decide to write an account of himself (Rensheng bianshang 2; Rea 34). Mr. Qian points out that this view runs counter to the purpose of an autobiography. The Devil laughs at Mr. Qian’s outdated perspective, asserting that:

I never imagined that your knowledge and insight would be as pedestrian as a newspaper editorial. This is the age of new biographical literature. [...][A]utobiographers invariably don’t have much of a “self” to write about, so they gratify themselves by rendering a likeness that their own wife and child wouldn’t recognize. Or they ramble on about irrelevant matters, noting the friends they’ve made and recounting anecdotes about other people. So if you want to learn about a person, you should read biographies he’s written of others, and if you want to learn about other people, you should read his autobiography.

Autobiography is biography. (Rensheng bianshang 3; Rea 34)

The Devil’s summary of the “age of new biographical literature” reveals the degradation of literature and writers, a recurrent theme in Qian’s other works, such as “On Writer” (Shi wenren), “Cat” (Mao) and Fortress Besieged. However, the Devil soon admits that his familiarity with the literary scene is driven by an urge to keep up with the changing world. He takes pride in his “spirit of progress” and his “ability to roll along with what the newspapers call the ‘great wheel of the age’” (Rensheng bianshang 4; Rea 35). Here, in the words of the Devil, Qian once again expresses his doubts about progress. But the fact that even the Devil, the representative of all evil, takes pains to bridge the gap
between himself and the corrupt world fundamentally exposes the incorrigible nature of human corruption. If there is anything more evil than the Devil, it is this human world.

The comparison between the Devil and humanity pervades the story. Ironically, in the competition with humans, the Devil loses all battles. He is less evil, less ugly, less brutal, more humble, and more miserable, which directly endangers his own existence. He complains that:

As you know, I’m in the soul business. [...] God would keep the good souls, and I would buy and sell the bad ones. The mid-nineteenth century, however, suddenly saw a great transformation. Apart from a small minority, almost no humans had souls, and those who did were all good people who fell under God’s domain. [...] Now, even if there are a few souls left over from the ones God has selected, they’re usually smelly and filthy. If they don’t reek of laboratory medicine, they’re either covered in a layer of dust from old books or stink of money. [...] Bad people exist in the modern era too, of course, but they’re so bad they have no personality or character; they’re as inert as inorganic matter and as efficient as machines. (Rensheng bianshang 7; Rea 37-38)

The Devil’s critique of the modern world culminates in a confession: “I, too, am one of the unemployed—a sacrificial object of modern material and mechanized civilization” (Rensheng bianshang 7; Rea 38). The satire of men of letters therefore develops into a sense of disappointment with modern society. The Devil would eventually encounter a total fiasco if mankind were to become more evil. For him, defeat in his own domain is a kind of “kumen” (depression, agony, and suffering) (Rensheng bianshang 8). The story
ends with a depressing account of the Devil walking into dark rain, lonely and silent. For today’s readers, such a scene probably serves only to enhance the depressed feeling that the Devil has just expressed. However, in the 1930s and 1940s, it was an overtly satirical allusion to contemporary intellectuals and their psychological complex of *kumen*.

As early as the beginning of the literary revolution, Chinese intellectuals such as Yu Dafu, Ding Ling, and Lu Yin associated *kumen* with individual suffering, especially in terms of sexual and mental anguish. The word *kumen* was widely known due to Lu Xun’s renowned translation of Japanese critic Kuriyagawa Hakuson’s *Kumon no shōchō*. Lu Xun’s translation, *Kumen de xiangzheng* (Symbol of Angst), highlights *kumen*’s crucial status in modern Chinese literature and literary aesthetics, and makes clear the widespread anxiety among modern Chinese intellectuals. *Kumen* was later extended, under the pen of the progressive intellectuals such as Mao Dun, Zheng Boqi and Qian Xingcun, to the suffering of society, people and the nation. Through the 1930s and 1940s, *kumen* was often viewed as the most conspicuous characteristic of the *epoch* (shidai).¹ Therefore, Qian’s reference to *kumen* at the end of his story, especially with his depiction of the depressed Devil disappearing in the rain, is much more significant than it may appear.

The reference to *kumen* further exemplifies Qian’s self-counteractive strategy. In “Nighttime Visit,” in order to match people’s common imagination of the Devil as a shrewd tempter that entices people into all sorts of evil deeds, the Devil flaunts his

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¹ For a detailed discussion on the formation of *kumen* discourse and its impact on modern Chinese literature and national identity, see Tsu, chapter 7.
ability, teaching Mr. Qian how to adjust to the literary circle and to be a successful impostor in a corrupt world. These deeds expose the degeneration of literature and men of letters and lead to a condemnation of modern times. The Devil represents both a participant and a victim of modern life and culture. However, like the reversal in “Reading Aesop’s Fables,” the Devil’s depression introduces suspicion about his critique of the modern world. The Devil’s kumen originates from and reveals the nature of modernity and modern life, but it also parodies Qian’s contemporary intellectuals’ obsession with kumen, which they believe captures the spirit of the times. Qian shows a deep skepticism about this spirit, questioning his contemporaries’ diagnosis and their literary representation of the times and modernity. While pointing out modern men’s lack of souls, the Devil plays the role of satirist and invites the readers’ agreement and alignment with him. But when becoming the object of parody, his critiques are immediately taken as sentimental groans. The final touch of kumen transforms the Devil from a temporarily sad yet reliable satirist to the target of laughter and mockery. Thus, by deliberately poking fun at the Devil, Qian satirizes both modern life and intellectuals’ alleged serious reflection on it.

The ending of “Nighttime Visit,” which conveys a cynical and hopeless message, is especially revealing:

He said no more. His loneliness filled the air, reducing the warmth of the brazier. I was about to ask him about my own soul when he abruptly stood up and announced he was off. Wishing me a good night, he said that we might have a chance to meet again. I opened the door and saw him out. The boundless darkness
of the night awaited him in silence. He stepped outside and melted into it, like a
raindrop returning to the sea. (Rensheng bianshang 8; Rea 38)

Dark night, rain, solitude, unspeakable suffering, feeling lost and hopeless, and so forth—
these are the ingredients of the kūmen recipe, as we can see in Yu Dafu’s stories in the
1920s. However, as kūmen evolved into a broader concept that was associated with larger
social and cultural concerns, progressive intellectuals took pains to transform its narrow
connotation to a torment that contributes to the creation of greater literature in the 1930s
and 1940s. Kūmen became a necessary evil. In her study the Chinese kūmen, Jing Tsu
suggests that for revolutionary intellectuals like Guo Moruo, “failure becomes the only
driving certainty of revolution. Without suffering, there is no conviction in the nation’s
survival” (221). Accordingly, the depiction of kūmen in literature cannot be completely
negative, and can be a source of hope as well. But kūmen under Qian’s pen shows no sign
of such hope or passion. Although the last reversal of kūmen once again demonstrates
Qian’s fondness for fun and mischievous quirks, and the neglect of consistency in his
playful satire, Qian nevertheless makes it clear that kūmen results only in self-indulgence.
It is an ailment of modern society, not a remedy. Compared to progressive intellectuals’
positive views of kūmen, Qian’s caricature of kūmen carries a pessimistic tone despite his
characteristic light-heartedness, and this pessimism is fully developed in his later work,
Fortress Besieged.

Unfaithful Wives, Unfamiliar Lives: Men’s Alienated Homes

There may be heaven; there must be hell. —Robert Browning, “Time’s Revenges”
Many readers and scholars complain about the misogynistic undertone of Qian’s writing. Christopher Rea points out the sexual anxiety, claiming that “Qian’s harping on women’s vanity […] comes across less as democratic disgust for all hypocrisy and more as a personal prejudice against the female sex” (Rea 16). On the other hand, Qian and his wife Yang Jiang are renowned in the modern Chinese literary scene as a perfect couple. Qian’s unreserved appreciation and fondness of Yang gave him a reputation for being uxorious (Wu 225). Life rewarded Qian with a role model of all women and wives. So why does a man having an enviable conjugal life sound misogynistic in his fictional world? Even in Qian’s early essays where he consciously writes in a playful tone, he already shows particular prejudice against women. Such a misogynistic sentiment becomes more obvious in his stories and novel and ultimately serves as a critical factor that defines his cynical and pessimistic understanding of human existence. Most of Qian’s female characters are unfaithful wives or shrewd girls with excessive ambition, who deprive men of the access to hearth and home, the permanent haven from a difficult life. I argue that the anxiety of modern life in Qian’s works is characterized by a quest for a haven where a woman is supposed to be a symbol of sweet home, while, in his fictional world, men encounter only unfaithful wives who make homes unwelcoming, and therefore perpetuate men’s odysseys.

Women in Qian’s works are the ultimate representatives of vanity and superficiality. He seems to draw an analogy between the stereotypes of women and the absurdities in the world that he satirizes. For example, foot binding and high heels are invented to conceal the Devil’s deformities (*Rensheng bianshang* 5); men’s victory over
nature resembles women’s victory over men, since both are achieved through superficial compromise (Rensheng bianshang 11). In his discussion of moral instruction, Qian claims that,

Hypocrisy’s defining characteristic could be said to be shamelessness combined with an eagerness to preserve face. According to the words Prince Hamlet used to curse his fiancée, women’s use of makeup represents a concern with face combined with shamelessness: “God has given you one face, but [“and” in Shakespeare] you make yourself another.” Hypocrisy, too, is a cosmetic art.

(Rensheng bianshang 38; Rea 61)

Misogyny develops to an absurd extent in Qian’s story “God’s Dream” (Shangdi de meng, 1945). This story makes God and his creatures, man and woman, personifications of vanity, selfishness and hypocrisy. But woman is apparently the most despicable among the three. When depicting God’s conceited ecstasy, Qian says that only a young girl or a female college student “might be able to surmise and imagine a minuscule fraction” of this otherwise unimaginable joy and surprise (Ren, Shou, Gui 5).

In this story, woman is not created to be man’s companion. She is supposed to be an improved plaything for the lonely God: “Man was merely God’s first try, while woman was his crowning achievement. This explains why appearance-conscious men always mimic women, and why women who push the envelope too far transform into vixens” (Ren, Shou, Gui 7; Rea 97). Qian’s vicious remarks on women become unbearably coarse when he writes that God has carefully created woman with dew and water but forgets that “water flows downward” (shuixing jiuxia). As presumably the better-looking of the two
creatures, woman is also the more vicious. She possesses the shapeless and changeable nature of water, while *shuixing jiuxia* suggests *xialiu* (flowing downward), meaning morally degraded. This is the most malicious comment Qian ever made about women. Although his words are softer in his other writing, the association of women and moral dishonesty remains unchanged.

Women not only embody vanity in general but also are habitual liars in domestic life. In his 1946 (finished before 1944) collection of short stories, *Humans, Beasts and Ghosts*, Qian creates a series of unfaithful wives. Although Qian sarcastically concedes that loyalty and honesty cannot be found in *any* relationship, much of his writing focuses on wives who lack loyalty to husbands. An interesting satirical story on conjugal life, “Cat” demonstrates Qian’s distrust of women’s integrity. The story is well known for its transparent allusion to Qian’s intellectual contemporaries, such as Lin Yutang, Shen Congwen, Shao Xunmei and Luo Longji. But the most obvious caricature of actual people, which takes up half the story, is presented at an afternoon tea party in a lady’s parlor. The story is set in prewar Beiping where Li Aimo and her husband Li Jianhou keep an eminent salon. In scathing words, Qian showcases Mrs. Li, a dark, Westernized “alpha woman:”

To be the husband of a woman like Mrs. Li was a lifetime occupation, a Trade No. 361 added to China’s so-called three hundred and sixty trades. This full-time

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2 For discussions on loyalty and honesty, see “Shangdi de Meng” [God’s Dream], *Ren, Shou, Gui* in *Qian Zhongshu ji* vol. 5 [An Collection of Qian Zhongshu’s Works. vol. 5], 5.
job was busier than being a doctor and more exhausting than being a porter, not allowing for other interests or goals in life. (Ren, Shou, Gui 25; Rea 112).

Jianhou, Mrs. Li’s tame husband, is a fatuous man who graduated from a foreign university by paying his way. At the beginning of the story, Jianhou is eclipsed by his wife’s popularity and fame, and therefore decides to write his own book to regain confidence. Because Jianhou is by nature unable to motivate himself to pick up a pen and write, he hires a young college student, Yigu, as his secretary to do the job.

Apart from the lengthy description of the conceited intellectuals at the tea party, “Cat” shows how Jianhou and Aimo’s marriage eventually sours because of their unbalanced relationship, cumulative frustrations and frivolous conjugal fights. The young secretary, Yigu, acts as the catalyst for such a change. Soon after starting his job at the Li’s, the conceited Yigu perceives Jianhou’s utter incompetence. Meanwhile, Yigu takes a fancy to the irresistible Mrs. Li, and often deliberately ignores assignments from Jianhou. Detecting the young man’s admiration, Aimo coquettishly takes up most of his time when he is supposed to work on her husband’s book. On the other hand, Jianhou, feeling neglected and belittled, eventually flares up. Aimo and Jianhou have a fight, and subsequently, to everyone’s surprise, he elopes with a young girl and runs away with her to the south. In return, Aimo attempts to take her psychological revenge, so she asks Yigu to be her lover, which is an opportunity Yigu has desired for a long time. But on the verge of his dreams coming true, Yigu is suddenly frightened by Aimo’s fake fondness of him as well as her true vulgarity, and backs out. There is no winner in this game. On the train to the south, Jianhou “acutely regretted having set a trap for himself in a moment of
muddle-headedness when he had been unable to swallow an insult” (*Ren, Shou, Gui* 75; Rea 152).

At one point in the story, a guest of the Li’s, Chen Xiajun, jokes about love, commenting that the women most likely to win men’s love are plain and commonplace rather than beautiful, because women’s beauty is “like a danger sign that makes us [men] timid and cowardly, and we dare not approach her” (*Ren, Shou, Gui* 54; Rea 136). Beautiful women are dangerous; independent beautiful women intimidate men. When hearing that Jianhou has secretly left with a young, plain girl, Aimo bursts into tears, not because Jianhou has abandoned her, but because he has kept her in the dark. She is humiliated by the revolt of her “most tame” husband. But seeing her anger and tears, Yigu finds that “In hatred her face had assumed a sharp, hardened, even murderous look. He sensed that this was a formidable woman and grew scared” (*Ren, Shou, Gui* 72; Rea 150). For men who are in an inferior position either because of age or ability, women are cannibalistic Sirens.

The triangle of Aimo, Jianhou and Yigu is more intriguing than it first appears. As a social butterfly, Aimo charms men, not because of her talents (if she has any) or beauty (after a facial surgery), or her social status. She is enchanting because of her unavailability—she is someone else’s wife. Her charm is especially enhanced when she makes a man “a husband whose prestige comes from his wife” (*Ren, Shou, Gui* 25). On the surface, Jianhou is introduced as Aimo’s husband, but in fact, the existence of an inferior husband completes the legendary Aimo. Aimo’s charisma vanishes along with Jianhou’s resignation from his expected position as Aimo’s inferior husband. When she is
no longer someone’s wife, Aimo loses her temper and becomes formidable and agitated. Thus, Aimo enchants only in her parlor, as the hostess of the family, not as an independent new woman.

In Qian’s stories, women are unfathomable to men. This is not surprising, since they are unfathomable even to their creator, God, as the story “God’s Dream” tells us. Women are restless, ambitious, discontent with their lives, and ruled by excessive desire. Qian never denies men’s cowardice or their despicable petty selves, but he subtly implies that driven by vanity, women are the initiators of marital problems; they are first to break the fragile balance in marriage. Their excessive desires eventually make them formidable monsters and turn “hearth and home” into a hostile place. This formula is visible in his story “Souvenir” (Jinian) as well. “Souvenir” again is about an unfaithful wife, Manqian, who has an affair with her husband’s cousin, Tianjian.Narrated primarily from Manqian’s perspective, the story highlights Manqian’s discontent with her lifeless marriage and her romantic view of love. Although Qian deliberately distances himself from his main characters and scrutinizes their flaws and petty thoughts candidly, he subtly suggests that the woman is always the one who fails to confront the unsatisfactory reality. The couple’s attitudes towards a mud wall are highly revealing and symbolic:

Manqian saw the mud wall that circled her own courtyard. In this area, where there was a shortage of bricks and tiles, mud walls were common. But contrasted with the neighbors’ brick and stone walls, this mud one was unsightly and had brought lots of embarrassment to its mistress. When Manqian first looked at the house, she was reluctant to rent it because of that ugly wall. Sensing her
displeasure, the landlord offered to reduce the rent. It was precisely because of the wall that the deal was made. But only recently had she made her peace with the wall and become willing to accept the protection it offered.

Her husband, Caishu, not only accepted but also endorsed, bragged about, and praised the crude mud wall. That is, he was unwilling to accept it but used words to camouflage his true feelings. (Ren, Shou, Gui 101-02; Rea 177-78)

The mud wall represents a marriage with inevitable unhappiness. Fully aware of how disappointing it is, the wife is eager to get rid of it while the husband attempts to “whitewash” it from the very beginning. Mercilessly laughing at both parties, Qian nevertheless shows his readers that it is always the ambitious and discontented wife who destroys a couple’s life rather than the useless and henpecked husband. In fact, such a theme is closely associated with the fundamental absurdity of modern world, as Qian makes clear when he expand these short satirical portraits of modern marriage into his long novel, Fortress Besieged.

In her book The Chinese Virago, Yenna Wu points out that the envious wife and henpecked husband is a very common theme in traditional Chinese satire and jokes. In his satirical writing, Qian refashions this old theme, and transforms it into a trope that embodies the existential anxiety accompanying modernity. In his English essay “Chinese Literature” (1945), Qian believes that satire in traditional Chinese literature is mainly social critique, as in The Scholars:

The satire is almost exclusively directed against the corruption and snobbery of officialdom and literati. […] But the Chinese satirists glide off [sic] the surface
and never probe into the essential rottenness of human nature. They accept the traditional values, social and moral, believe in the innate goodness of man, and poke gentle fun at what they regard as unfortunate backsliding from probity and decorum. They lack that clear-sighted and dry-eyed misanthropy which understands that “the best men are but men at the best.” […] They remain only witty and shrewd observers. (English Essays 297-98. Italics mine.)

A cynical man of immense erudition, Qian experiences a trajectory from a “witty and shrewd observer” to “clear-sighted and dry-eyed” pessimist over the course of his career, as his satire transforms from play to almost nihilism. With great wit, he pokes fun at the “rottenness of human nature,” and enjoys his intellectual superiority, which affords him the comfort of distance, preventing him from being too agitated or misanthropic.

While tongue-in-cheek cynicism dominates Qian’s stories and essays of playful satire, in his novel he becomes more and more pessimistic. Due to the brevity of the stories, Qian never deals with the aftermath of all the embarrassing and hopeless scenarios in a failed marriage. But Fortress Besieged allows him to delve into the series of disappointments that one encounters, eventually revealing the unbearable tragic truth of modern life. Scholars such as C. T. Hsia and Edward Gunn agree that Fortress Besieged is dominated by a pessimistic theme, and that the protagonist “is the man forever seeking attachment and forever finding that each new attachment is but the same bondage” (Hsia 446). Consequently, the idea of marriage as forteresse assiégée (“a fortress besieged”) is extended to a reflective allegory on the human condition.
Does *Fortress Besieged* focus on the quest for general attachment in life? Starting in a time immediately before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war and ending in Shanghai’s “Orphan Island” period (1941-1945), *Fortress Besieged* deals with the protagonist Fang Hongjian’s initiation into society and his downfall as he adjusts to adulthood and a hostile world. The story begins with his return voyage, along with other graduating Chinese students, from Europe to Shanghai. One of the travelers, Miss Su, has a doctorate in literature from a French university, and shows great interest in Hongjian. However, he is attracted to, and has an affair with, a voluptuous woman, Miss Bao. Hongjian is introduced as a good yet useless man without serious plans about anything. He squanders his college life by transferring among humanities majors. Luckily, however, upon graduating from college, he is financed to continue his study in Europe by the father of his late fiancée, even though he does not care in the least about this girl whom he has never met. He idles for a few years in Europe, this time transferring among universities in major European cities. He cares little about degrees or education, but compromises his integrity by purchasing a fake doctorate to please his father and the father of his late fiancée.

The beginning scene foreshadows Hongjian’s misadventures and failures. His journeys and displacements advance the story, during which he encounters various impostors, charlatans and hypocrites. Many critics—Qian’s contemporaries and ones that follow—see a similarity between *Fortress Besieged* and the picaresque novel, especially
But Hongjian does not pursue picaresque actions. His journeys are always propelled by failed relationships with women.

Hongjian goes to Europe more because of the “free lunch” provided by his late fiancée’s father than out of curiosity for knowledge. When back in Shanghai, he stays with his late fiancée’s family, whom he finds foreign, and has a job at the family bank that bores him to death. But his stagnant life is kindled by a girl, Miss Su’s cousin Tang Xiaofu. Hongjian quickly falls in love with Tang Xiaofu, but their relationship ends abruptly due to Miss Su’s vengeanceful interference. Disappointed and heartbroken, Hongjian accepts an offer from a university—an offer clandestinely arranged by one of Miss Su’s suitors, Zhao Xinmei, who wants to keep Hongjian far away from Miss Su—and undertakes a long journey to the interior of China. Therefore, Tang Xiaofu is the reason that Hongjian both stays and flees Shanghai.

Hongjian quickly makes friends with Xinmei and acquaints himself with a female colleague, Sun Roujia, on his way to his new job. But people around him at the newly-opened college are malicious and narrow-minded. He finds it hard to enjoy teaching or socializing with his mean-spirited colleagues. Feeling isolated, he grows closer with Xinmei and Roujia, though he has no intent to develop an intimate relationship with the latter. Meanwhile, Xinmei starts a romantic relationship with Mrs. Wang, the wife of one of his colleagues. Their affair is eventually exposed and Xinmei quits his job immediately. Losing his friends and patron, Hongjian feels even more isolated, and this

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3 See Lin Hai’s “Weicheng yu Tom Jones” [Fortress Besieged and Tom Jones]. Originally published in Guancha (Observation) vol. 5, issue 14 (Nov. 27, 1948). Included in Yang ed. Qian Zhongshu pingshuo qishi nian [Seventy Years’ Comments on Qian Zhongshu]. Also see Hsia 442.
advances his relationship with Roujia. Soon after Xinmei’s scandal, rumors spread that Hongjian is “together with Roujia.” Roujia, who is very interested in Hongjian, seizes this opportunity, deepens people’s misunderstanding of the circumstances, and successfully leads them to draw the conclusion that the two are newly engaged. Their engagement provokes people’s envy and hostility. Without the patronage from Xinmei, Hongjian falls prey to office politics and is not offered an appointment for the next year. He has to relocate again, engaged to a woman for whom he has no passion.

Hongjian’s journey to the interior is a major downfall in his life, which leads to more and more misery. His marriage with Roujia is disastrous; he cannot find comfort from her, whereas she finds him useless and incapable of achieving anything in life. The couple’s marital fights over trivialities turn their vulnerable home sour. Before they marry, Xinmei repeatedly warns Hongjian that Roujia is a conniving girl, but Hongjian disagrees with his cynical view of marriage, and says: “You make marriage sound so awful. It’s like being denounced by everyone and deserted by your friends” (Weicheng 337). He still has high expectations of marriage and considers it a new start of life. But only a few months later, Hongjian laments to Roujia, now his wife:

Now when I think how serious I used to be about love before I got married, it really seems naïve. The fact is, no matter whom you marry, after you’re married, you’ll find it’s not the same person but someone else. If people knew that before marriage they could skip all that stuff about courtship, romance, and so on. When two people get to know each other and fall in love, they both conceal their true faces so that the whole time up until they get married they still don’t know each
other. It’s the old-fashioned marriages that are more straightforward. Neither party gets to know the other before marriage. (*Weicheng* 395; *Kelly* 344)

At this point, happy marriage and domesticity are no longer motivations that drive Hongjian. Home is both unfamiliar and wearisome. At the end of the novel, he breaks up with Roujia, but still embraces a vague hope for setting out on the road again. He wanders on the streets, starved and chilled, having no home to return to.

Hongjian is a mediocre man who has little ambition to become a success in any of the domains traditionally suited to men, such as academia or business. He drifts from place to place, from profession to profession, but the driving forces behind his downward trajectory are primarily failed relationships with women. In Qian’s stories, unfaithful women destroy families, while in *Fortress Besieged*, all female characters, except Tang Xiaofu, lack the qualities that can provide men with a haven-like home. In fact, even Tang Xiaofu may not be a good lover and wife — the misunderstandings between Hongjian and her would be easy to clear up, but she breaks up with him determinedly and shows no effort to gain him back. Even Hongjian himself cannot tell why he has been so passionate about Tang Xiaofu only a year after their separation. His long journey is a failed quest for a home. The attachment that he seeks is always associated with an ultimately comforting home and a good wife that never comes to be; all the women whom he encounters push him further and further away from the perfect home that he has vaguely imagined, and perpetuate his desperate odyssey, a journey without destination.

Qian started to write *Fortress Besieged* in 1944, and the novel was first serialized in the literary magazine *Renaissance* (*Wenyi fuxing*) in 1946. Compared to satirical
writings in his earlier collections—*Written in the Margins of Life* and *Humans, Beasts and Ghosts*—Qian’s perspective on the world had become more serious and pessimistic. It seems that wartime experiences in occupied Shanghai had changed him. Perhaps war was a catalyst that provoked the pessimism in Qian’s cynical view of rotten human nature. In 1940, a more world-weary Qian wrote in a vein of melancholy about the prewar years when he was writing his thesis at Oxford from 1935 to 1937:

> Years so pleasant to recall, yet so curiously remote: for the War, while most efficiently shortening human lives, gives one also a specious feeling of longevity, the feeling of having lived very long from being made to outlive a good deal in a short while. I only regret now with a wisdom after the event that I had done but niggardly justice to those years in not spending them to some better purpose.⁴

In sharp contrast to the peaceful prewar days, the years 1944-1946 during which he wrote *Fortress Besieged* were “a time of great grief and disruption, during which I [he] thought several times of giving up” (*Weicheng* 1). In a time of catastrophe, in a city under siege, for most people there was “No gate to save the nation, no path to survive” (qtd. in Fu 76).

> Tongue-in-cheek humor and lightheartedness could not gloss over the bitter and tragic nature of life anymore. Qian’s prejudice against women that could be found in his earlier wartime writing was eventually used to expose the absurd nature of human life: love is a joke; life is fickle; humans are inevitably trapped in an existential predicament; the world is a place without home. Satire turns from play to tragedy.

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⁴ Original in English. *A Collection of Qian Zhongshu’s English Essays* 82-83.
CHAPTER FIVE

Yang Jiang and Her Ambiguous Satire in a Time of Unstable Values

Shanghai, 1943. Life that had already been destroyed by the Japanese army’s total occupation of this coastal city was unexpectedly rekindled by a young writer named Yang Jiang (b. 1911) and her plays about love, marriage, and human relations. In that year Heart’s Desire (Chenxin ruyi), Yang Jiang’s theatrical debut, ran for 17 days in Shanghai. It was not among the longest runs of the time, but considering that comedies were not well-developed and popular as tragedies, its reception was a big success. Her second comedy, Forging the Truth (Nongzhen chengjia), was quickly staged in the same year, running a phenomenal span of 32 days.¹

The sudden popularity and surprising success of Yang Jiang’s comedies were not completely accidental. After the Japanese seized total control of Shanghai in late 1941, resilient Shanghainese gradually recovered from the initial wave of panic and fear. Even in the early days of the war when Japanese armies were marching towards Shanghai and fighter planes were screaming overhead, dressed-up Shanghainese still went to dance halls and cabarets on New Year’s Eve. People learned to survive and lived as happily as they could. Entertainment remained a necessary and important part of Shanghai culture during the occupation. Unfortunately for moviegoers, the previously prosperous Shanghai film industry was almost completely taken over by Japanese monitors and suffered severe censorship. But due to the film industry’s decline, performing arts, especially spoken

¹ See advertisements of the plays on Shen Bao, May 6-Jun. 3, 1943; Oct. 10- Nov. 11, 1943.
drama (huaju), found their niche in the entertainment industry. Still, new and modern plays were rare. The theatrical world suffered from a “famine of theater scripts,” juben huang (Mai Ye 170). The majority of plays staged were adaptations of popular romances, familiar stories, or foreign dramas, most of which were tragic love stories. For example, the most popular plays of 1942 and 1943 were Autumn Begonia (Qiuhaitang) and Six Chapters from a Drifting Life (Fusheng liuji) respectively. The former was adapted from “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” writer Qin Shou’ou’s tragic romance Autumn Begonia, while the latter was adapted from the autobiographic account of Shen Fu’s tragic love in the High Qing. The entertainment-starved Shanghainese—already wearied by suffering in real life and onstage—craved something new and light-hearted, something that they could relate to but which did not remind them of the depressing socio-political situation. Yang Jiang’s original comedies, therefore, appeared at just the right time and for the right audience. Her first comedy perfectly met the needs of the commercial theatrical enterprise. Audiences loved to see caricatured buffoons; they were also highly interested in the presentation of love, courtship and marriage in any form.

Contrary to their popularity in real life, Yang Jiang’s early works in the 1940s are deeply underestimated by today’s scholars, partially because her fame is eclipsed by that of her husband Qian Zhongshu. However, Yang Jiang’s early works deserve more scholarly attention, not only because of their real-life impact, as I will show in this chapter, but more importantly because they present us a new type of satire that reconfigures the relations among the satirist, the readers and the satirized objects, and that reveals the complex nature of satirical writing in modern Chinese literary practice.
In a “contact zone” at a transitional moment of culture clashes and confusion, the “right” cultural and social norms on which one’s moral judgments could be based were still in formation. The existence of the standard codes of conduct was under question. When a satirist deliberately hides his or her satirical voice, audiences and readers have difficulty clearly discerning whom and what they wanted to condemn in the satirical work. It is even unclear whether the reserved satirist actually has the “right” values in mind while silently laughing at those who are puzzled by the fast-changing world and run aimlessly in it. In the 1940s, many audiences liked Yang Jiang’s plays because they were “jocular (huaji), satirical (fengci), [and] humorous (youmo)” (Shen Bao, Oct. 10, 1943). But others found great sympathy for the satirized objects in her plays (Meng Du 110).

The above questions and the uncertainty felt by Yang Jiang’s audiences and readers generate a new type of satire: ambiguous satire. Ambiguous satire first and foremost results from the collapse of fixed cultural and social standards. Aesthetically, the satirist’s reserved tone further prevents the direct and explicit transmission of moral judgments; the effects of satire, therefore, primarily rely on the readers’ and audiences’ own interpretation of the texts. In fact, Yang Jiang’s satirical writing in the 1940s not only target formative social concepts, such as “modern love” and “family,” but also humorously allude to literary conventions and genres from a gendered perspective, which also ultimately contribute to their ambiguous effect.
Modern Love in Metropolitan Life

“Unprecedented and splendid!” “Box-office success, top-earning comedy,” “Best comedy of 1943” (Shen Bao, May 20-23, 1943)! The promotion of Yang Jiang’s stage debut Heart’s Desire celebrated the play’s novelty as well as its commercial success in occupied Shanghai. Anyone who is familiar with the hyperbolic rhetoric of contemporary advertising may take such enthusiasm with a grain of salt. Playwright and critic Li Jianwu (1906-1982) praised Yang Jiang’s play as, “If there is comedy in China, real comedy of manners refined from modern Chinese life, […] Forging the Truth is the second milestone in modern Chinese literature, […][while] as everyone knows, the first one is Ding Xilin” (Meng Du 110). One may also be skeptical about Li’s excited comparison of Yang Jiang and the established playwright Ding Xilin (1893-1974), since Li was a close friend as well as a kindred spirit of Yang Jiang. But one will acknowledge Yang Jiang’s real popularity, because Qian Zhongshu received wide public attention for his first (and only) novel Fortress Besieged (Weicheng 1946), and at this point, curious readers asked, “Who is Qian Zhongshu?” The reply cleared up any confusion: “He is Yang Jiang’s husband” (“Baisui huimou”).

Both Heart’s Desire and Forging the Truth were staged in 1943. Thanks to the huge success of these comedies, Yang Jiang became a popular dramatist in Shanghai overnight. Sophisticated audiences and critics immediately established connections between Yang Jiang’s plays and popular “comedies of manners” (fengsu xiju) with which Shanghainese were familiar, such as Richard Sheridan’s School of Scandal, Oscar Wilde’s Lady Windermere’s Fan, and the works of Molière and Bernard Shaw. As a Western
literature major, Yang Jiang was highly familiar with Western drama history and the canonical works. She read almost all of Molière’s works in college, but Bernard Shaw never interested her (Wu 106-09). Although we cannot definitively determine the aforementioned authors’ influence on Yang Jiang’s works, her comedies often incorporate characteristics of the comedy of manners: they are often set in drawing rooms, and they mildly satirize the manners of a social class, especially the beau monde, but refrain from moral or political critique.

Set in the parlors of wealthy families, *Heart’s Desire* and *Forging the Truth* take family and love among the Shanghai bourgeoisie as the primary objects of their satire. Interestingly, in neither play is the time period specified, though the settings and details clearly indicate that the stories happen in the Republican era. Such a setting may be a result of Yang Jiang’s prudent deliberation, because it prevents the audience and the authorities from tying the plays to any political event or indication of resistance.

The four-act comedy, *Heart’s Desire*, revolves around the experiences and encounters of Li Junyu, a well-educated modern girl from Beijing, among the Shanghai bourgeoisie. The play opens with Junyu’s arrival at the Shanghai home of her eldest uncle, Zhao Zuyin. Her late mother was the black sheep of the Zhao family due to her marriage to a poor artist. After Junyu’s parents’ deaths, her not-so-caring maternal relatives summon her to Shanghai, under the auspices of taking care of her. She sojourns from one uncle and aunt’s house to another, eventually ending up in her wealthy granduncle’s home. Through Junyu’s journey, the play caricatures the different kinds of couples she meets while also depicting two love triangles. Junyu’s cousins Jingsun and
Lingxian are in a relationship that has been blessed by the whole family, but Jingsun is such an overly romantic and fickle lover that he falls in love with Junyu at first sight, despite the fact that Junyu already has a boyfriend, Binru. The story ends happily. Contrary to both the characters’ and the audience’s expectations, Junyu’s wealthy granduncle likes the poor girl very much, and supports her marriage to her boyfriend, whose grandfather happens to be the granduncle’s old friend.

Yang Jiang’s contemporary critics applauded her realistic depiction of middle- and upper-bourgeois family life, believing that it resulted from her “scrupulous examination” of things with which “she is familiar” (Mai Ye 164). Indeed, most of the objects of her satire could be immediately appreciated by the Republican audiences living in cosmopolitan Shanghai. For example, a Western-trained artist like Junyu’s father cannot make a living as a painter, especially since he paints nude women. Junyu’s eldest uncle Zuyin is a moralist who rejects anything morally inappropriate, such as paintings of nude women. Hypocritically, he insists on hiring only attractive young girls as secretaries. Her second uncle Zuyi is a wholly Westernized former diplomat who sees nothing right or valuable in China and its people. He is so Westernized that he writes in English for Chinese readers—his travelogues must be translated. Her fourth uncle Zumao is a henpecked man, a type often encountered in comedies and fiction, whose money and life is controlled by his “philanthropic” wife, who superficially engages in various political activities to demonstrate how modern and independent she is. Readers and audiences found these characters highly familiar both in life and in the fictive world, and
they would soon encounter all these archetypes in Yang Jiang’s husband Qian Zhongshu’s fictional writing in the 1940s.

Yang Jiang specialized in presenting young people’s love with light-hearted amusement. Cousin Jingsun, a hotheaded romantic, projects his imagined love onto Junyu, firmly believing that she loves him as well, even though she never gives any indication that she shares his attraction. Jingsun is representative of the metropolitan young dandy whose love life is characterized by dramatic gestures learned from Hollywood movies, and carried out in materialistic forms and modern venues such as movie theaters, dance halls, cabarets, cafes and parks. The material components of his love are so dominant that they outweigh deeper emotional ecstasy or suffering. Jingsun, his love, and his sentiments have a strong feel of the modern metropolis.

The theme of modern metropolitan love and marriage is better developed and more focused in Yang Jiang’s second play, Forging the Truth. In this play, the realization of love is primarily facilitated by modern technology like telephones, cars and trains, based on urban leisure activities like moviegoing, and modeled after Hollywood movies, especially in its representations of the main characters. This play deals with two intertwined love-triangles. Zhang Wanru, born to a well-to-do family, is a girl full of romantic thoughts and fantasies. She is in love with a handsome, financially promising young man, Zhou Dazhang, who has just returned to Shanghai from studying abroad. However, Dazhang is, in fact, an impostor, a poor man pretending to be well connected. He attempts to seduce the naive Wanru in the hopes of marrying into the wealthy Zhang family. Meanwhile, he constantly flirts with Wanru’s beautiful and smart cousin, Yanhua,
who is economically dependent on the Zhang family. Wanru’s bookish cousin Zuguang also secretly loves Yanhua. Yanhua, on the other hand, has no interest in Zuguang. Just like Wanru, she is attracted to Dazhang, not only to his personality, but also to his “wealth” and “prominent family.” However, Wanru’s father, a shrewd businessman, does not trust the braggart Dazhang, and determines to arrange a marriage between Wanru and her cousin Zuguang. Through a series of comic misunderstandings and manipulative tricks, Dazhang eventually marries Yanhua, and both of them are disappointed to find that they cannot tell truth from falsehood anymore.

Yang Jiang’s plays feature a caricature of modern bourgeois life, their understanding of love, and how people behave when in love. Edward Gunn argues that many writers in the 1930s and 1940s, including Yang Jiang and Qian Zhongshu, are “antiromantics.” Gunn uses the term “antiromanticism” to characterize works that distinguish themselves with a “lack of heroic proportions” and “idealization,” skepticism about “individualism,” and a “concern with the theme of self-delusion” (Gunn 270-71). Under Yang Jiang’s mockery, urban love seems so light-hearted and materialistic that the suffering of the soul—namely the overflow of sorrow, remorse, nostalgia and self-indulgence, which characterized much romantic love in literature in the 1920s—is actually rare in her play. Although she mocks the 1920s romantic intellectuals in her 1940s plays, she primarily targets the new generation of romanticists—young, pleasure-seeking urbanites.

In her study of the construction of love as discourse, Haiyan Lee traces the decline of the idea of “romantic love” after the late 1920s, claiming that a romantic lover
was stereotyped as “a selfish, possessive, and potentially treacherous egotist bent on
pleasure seeking,” and “devoid of idealism and a sense of moral responsibility” (268-69).
More importantly, both liberals and conservatives treated the association of romantic love
with the bourgeois class as something present in society. Linked to superficiality and
materialism, romantic love is therefore “exiled from the realm of the sublime” (Lee 269).
Particularly in progressive fiction, only those revolutionaries who transcend romantic
love can have a meaningful life and reach sublimity (Lee 267).

The love Yang Jiang satirizes mostly resembles Lee’s analysis on “romantic
love.” In Jingsun, Wanru and Dazhang we see selfishness, a strong sense of self-
possesion, pleasure-seeking and moral irresponsibility. Indeed, nothing noble is shown
in such love. But unlike the “liberals and conservatives”—whoever these over-
generalized refer to—Yang Jiang does not (and probably does not mean to) attribute her
representation of love to a particular class; nor does she criticize a whole class through
the follies of its individuals. She is interested neither in class divisions nor in the
standards that determine what or who is the target of satire. She carefully restrains her
fictive world to the ordinary experience of the urbanite, relayed as a tedious, repetitive,
and frivolous state of existence that does not pertain to anything heroic. Like Jane
Austen’s characters, who enjoy their private and small circles and seem to have little to
do with the expansion of the British Empire, Yang Jiang’s men and women are
preoccupied with the excitement and troubles of their bourgeois lives, while appearing to
be oblivious to the ongoing revolution. Yang Jiang not only portrays her characters with
verisimilitude but also presents them and their lives in a modest tenor which respects the simple existence of humankind without an accusatory tone.

The goal of satire is to correct and to heal by mocking and revealing evils in the world, but in her satiric writing, Yang Jiang does not identify any possible deeds or activities in which “noble” meaning can be found, either in love or in life. We do not see anyone transcend his or her material life or mundane interests, not even supposedly “good” characters like Junyu. In *Heart’s Desire*, critics and readers often read the protagonist Junyu and her relationship with her boyfriend, Binru, as true love that is expected and observed, which is the opposite of the superficial love of Jingsun and Lingyuan. In a book review written by Lin Fan, an editor of World Book Press (Shijie shuju), *Heart’s Desire* is described as, “It is about a journey of love in which an impoverished couple is separated in hard times but eventually gets married in prosperous times” (48). Actually, the romantic relationship between Junyu and Binru is a relatively minor subplot of the play. More importantly, their happy ending is only realized by a *deus ex machina*, rather than the natural development of their relationship and their persistence and determination to overcome all the obstacles they have experienced. Were it not for Binru’s family friendship with the rich patriarch granduncle Langzhai, the blossoming love of Junru and Binyu would undoubtedly wither in the hands of her greedy relatives. As Edward Gunn points out, “The reconciliation is brought about by means of money, traditional values, and chance” (233). Although she clearly mocks the superficiality of Jingsun’s love, Yang Jiang leaves her readers and audiences with questions: is she actually silently laughing at the “true” love that some of her audiences
admire in her play? Is she indicating that Junyu and Binru’s love is nothing but a happily-ever-after fairy tale?

In Forging the Truth, these questions become even more intriguing. Different from Dazhang’s false love with Wanru, the affection between Yanhua and Dazhang is supposed to be genuine, deriving from real attraction between a man and a woman. Knowing that Dazhang is willing to use “love” to get access to the Zhang family’s wealth, Yanhua decides to take action to win Dazhang from Wanru, her rival. However, the motivation behind her deed is not love, but rather a deep grievance against the “unfairness” of fate. Similarly, Dazhang elopes with Yanhua only when he thinks that Wanru is going to marry her cousin, Zuguang, and therefore sees no hope of gaining access to her fortune. Zuguang, a man never bothered by financial difficulty, loves Yanhua unselfishly. He takes care of her and is genuinely concerned with her well-being. Knowing that Yanhua feels deep gratitude to him, he tells her that, “Gratitude is not love. I am absolutely against the idea that a woman sacrifices herself [and her love] to repay the debt of gratitude” (Zuopinji vol.3 397). His story, therefore, seems to represent true love. For some of the audience, he is a “noble” man with “good quality”; they admire him and his love (Lin 50). But at several points in the play, this seemingly ideal noble man is depicted as clumsily bookish, almost a clown. His proposal speech to Yanhua consists of five main arguments and several subtopics, delivered in a scientific fashion with bullet points. It begins by considering whether getting married is a topic that deserves serious discussion and then interrogates whether one should get married from a socio-political perspective. It is not unexpected that Yanhua complains about his proposal: “Who
proposes in such a way” (Zuopinji vol.3 396)? Together with Yanhua, audiences also laugh at Zuguang’s social awkwardness. However, Zuguang’s reply reveals how shallow Yanhua’s expectations are, while diminishing the absurdity evoked by his speech: “You think it should be in a certain way? Alas, Yanhua, you have watched too many films, and think that when proposing, a man must pose some romantic gestures and whisper some sweet tender love words” (Zuopinji vol.3 396). Again, by ambiguously and controversially depicting the “true” love with nobility, Yang Jiang casts doubt on the popular association of love with noble causes or attributes.

The ambivalent depiction of characters dominates Yang Jiang’s satiric writing. Dazhang, the supposedly villainous character of the play, also mirrors the ambiguity of Yang Jiang’s satire. The second act of Forging the Truth presents audiences with Dazhang’s impoverished family and their clear awareness of their own pettiness and snobbery, as well as hopelessness. In this speech Dazhang denounces fate, society, and his futile struggle:

Ancestors! Ancestors! Did I get any blessing from our ancestors? Others were born with family fortunes, above tens of thousands of people. I climb one step after another, but cannot reach it. I know they look down upon me, dislike me, suspect me, but I have to climb up the social ladder, shamelessly climb up. […] Have I ever had any luck or happiness? I crawl on the ground with my head lifted. Let them spit on me, let them trample on me. If I succeed, they snort at me. If I fail, they sneer at me. (Zuopinji vol.3 384)
To some extent, Dazhang and the living conditions of his family provide audiences with an excuse for all his tricks, lies, and schemes. After all, he is just a young man struggling to find his way in a corrupt and unjust world. The play can be a satire on both the evil society and its snobbish people, but Dazhang’s denunciation of society is so powerful, and the depiction of his family’s poverty is so realistic that they neutralize the moral critique of his evil and the flaws in his personality. At the end of the play, Dazhang marries Yanhua, who, like Dazhang, also wants to change her fate and social status by marrying up into a rich family. The smart and ambitious couple takes pains to swallow their failure, but they preserve their spirit to “conquer the world” despite their unfortunate fate (Zuopinji vol.3 430). The satiric comedy was, consequently, read as a tragedy, and many of Yang Jiang’s contemporary critics and audiences consider Yanhua and Dazhang tragic figures vainly struggling in a corrupt world (Zuopinji vol.3 430). Critic Mai Ye (a.k.a. Dong Leshan) states that “Yang Jiang recognizes their [Dazhang and Yanhua’s] marriage, and makes them cheer for the beginning of a new life. This is not comedy at all, and it reduces the comic effect generated from the early acts” (172). Mai Ye perceptively detects the contradictory elements and effects of Yang Jiang’s comedy, which contribute to the ambiguity of her satire.

Another comic character, Wanru’s father, a businessman in all respects, also serves as a target for Yang Jiang’s satire. Equating marriage to doing business, he has some highly practical yet insightful viewpoints on love and marriage:

I am doing the calculation for our daughter. Talking about equality of men and women, it is not a good deal for girls. Equality was just talk in the past, and
women who were equal to men, like you, only needed to be household mistresses sitting in drawing rooms. After all, it was men who earned a living in the world. But nowadays, things are getting serious. Girls must go out of their homes and work like men. But can women demand equality when pregnant and giving birth?

(Zuopinji vol.3 350)

His conceptualization of marriage as trade is surely the object of satire in this play. But he also tears off the naive and romanticized veil on love and marriage that his daughter upholds, and exposes the vanity deeply hidden in Yanhua’s love. This profit-oriented businessman has real wisdom on love and marriage. By pointing out the double challenge women faced in career and in family, he actually echoes and further develops the famous question raised by Lu Xun in 1923: “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home?” Readers and audiences, then, cannot clearly discern whom among these various characters Yang Jiang is really satirizing and which attributes of modern love are desirable and admirable. According to standard understanding, a satirical work is usually expected to use humor to convey moral messages and condemn those who deviate from social mores, but Yang Jiang’s portrayals of the presumed satirized objects seriously challenge the readers’ and audience’s opposition to the satirized objects.

Yang Jiang’s tendency to deliver ambivalent messages in her satirical works can be traced back to the very early stages of her writing practice. Her maiden work, “Don’t Worry, Lulu!” (Lulu, buyong chou!, 1934) is also a story written in a satiric yet ambiguous fashion. The story realistically portrays a girl’s exploration of love and youth, and her worries and concerns in her relationships with two men, Xiaowang and Tang Mi.
The protagonist, Lulu, is a college student from a well-to-do family, who wants to marry a handsome young man that can afford the comfortable life to which she is accustomed. This desire proves to be the source of all her worries: Xiaowang’s wealth suits her well, but he is short and ugly; Tang Mi is handsome, but he shows too much self-consciousness and pride in his relationship with Lulu. She therefore vacillates between both men. Xiaowang and Tang Mi eventually distance themselves from Lulu, and neither man is willing to marry her. Lulu’s greed, insincerity and superfluity in love are clearly subject to Yang Jiang's satiric attack, but the story also recognizes women’s right to pursue the freedom of love and marriage. In light of the harsh social realities and women’s low status in the Republican era, her family’s views on her marriage and her hesitation are also practical, which reduces the possible moral judgment that can be placed on her. In the end, even though both men have left her because of her indecisiveness and capriciousness, she receives a piece of good news that provides her with an opportunity to get out of the mire. She wins a scholarship to an American university, which is a better option than marriage. The story concludes with, “Lulu, don’t worry! Don’t worry! Lulu smiles, and gently sighs with relief” (Zuopin ji vol.1 13). This final twist casts doubt on the moral messages that readers find earlier in the story, and the “punishment” Lulu received from both men loses its meaning completely. “Don’t worry, Lulu!” can be read as a comforting admonition that Lulu tells herself, but as the title suggests, it can also be read as a promise from the author from the very beginning of the story: “Girl, you don’t need to worry about these men. Do whatever you want to them. Don’t feel guilty, because eventually you will have a much more splendid life without them!”
As in her plays—especially in *Forging the Truth*—Yang Jiang strives to present her main characters as complicated persons rather than depict them in an over-simplified, cartoonish fashion. The ambiguous narrative and veiled rhetorical technique prevent her readers from clearly discerning her message—is she serious, or is she just being playful? Is she satirizing, or is she merely being realistic? Is she satirizing the fools who live in their imagined romances or the literary convention of romance itself? Readers can interpret her message and respond to her story quite differently, especially when they do not have an established understanding of “love,” “marriage,” “courtship,” and “family.”

**Ambiguous Satire and the Formative Referential Frame**

A major feature of satire is that the satirist (or satiric persona) judges and attacks the vice and evil that corrupt society or, on occasion, distinguishes and disagrees with deviations from the cultural center and ethical norms. This satiric judgment is founded upon the existence of a perceived centrality, the virtue or the ideal goodness to which the satirist (or satiric persona) refers when exercising his or her satiric practice. Satire grows out of cultural clashes and confusions, from “the macro-arena of cultures foreign to each other” to “the micro-arena of intimates who simply differ” (Bogel 82). In cultural clashes and confusions, the old cultural center and social norms are often subject to attack while the new ones are yet to be established. From the introduction of Western ideas in the late Qing period to the Communist Party establishing its cultural and ideological hegemony, Chinese culture and society was in a continuously changing state, with values and norms in flux. Many concepts, such as “family,” either lost their accepted meanings and
therefore their capacity to serve as referential frames of judgment, or were too foreign and too novel to dispel misunderstandings and achieve a consensus of meaning, such as “new woman,” “modern girl,” “love” and “free courtship.” It was a time in which signifiers lost their connection with the signified.

The satirized objects of ambiguous satire usually relate to older concepts which have been endowed with new meaning. Love, aiqing, is one of the most elusive new terms frequently addressed in the first half of twentieth-century China. Love and its difference from the traditional qing (affection), the presumed sharp contradiction of free courtship and arranged marriage, how to pursue love and act appropriately in free courtship—these were all under scrupulous examination and feverish discussion, and were wildly fantasized about. Shanghai, a “contact zone” of foreign and Chinese people, cultures and ideas, was a locale that particularly witnessed the confusion and chaos. In the 1930s and especially during the Japanese occupation, ordinary Shanghainese cared more about their own lives than the grand issues of revolution. Additionally, resistance, war, and the nation’s liberation were taboo topics due to the occupation and its censorship. Bourgeois tastes dominated urban life. The continuous popularity of “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” novels and similar works, especially those of Zhang Henshui and Zhang Ailing, demonstrated people’s obsession with love and marriage in literature. They were hot topics in life as well. Haiyan Lee insightfully tells us how “love” as discourse had been under formation since the late Qing. It is reasonable to believe that audience’s different responses to and interpretations of Yang Jiang’s plays
resulted at least partially from the ambiguity and fluidity of concepts like “love,” “the modern wife” and “marriage” during the 1930s and 1940s.

For Shanghainese and many people all over the country, love and concepts related to quotidian existence were so fluid that they still needed to be defined, taught, and learned. Many of them were eager to understand the nature of modern love and looked for role models of romantic love and modern marriage. For example, in 1935 the humorous magazine *Cosmic Wind* (Yuzhou feng) published an article entitled “Modern Maternity” (Xiandai muxing) in its second issue. The author, Feng Heyi, depicts the process of becoming a modern mother, from getting pregnant to educating children. During this process, husbands need to tell their pregnant wives that “Darling, I feel really sorry that I make you suffer so much [from pregnancy],” “I should save more money for our children’s education from now on,” and repeat these words every day as much as possible (Feng 72). A modern mother must have a nanny so the nanny can take care of all the dirty work, such as feeding the baby and changing its diapers, while the mother can show off her cute baby to her friends or live like an unmarried “Miss” and the young parents’ romantic (or sexual) life is not disrupted by the baby. Feng Heyi further states that, “Motherly love is the greatest love in the world” (73). In order to demonstrate their great love for their sons, mothers need to place their own pictures (when taking this picture, her hair must be permed, she must wear delicate make-up and pose a kind smile) on their sons’ desks, embroider their sons’ pillowcases with classic poems reminding them of their mother’s love, and send them frequent letters to enhance the effect of motherly love (Feng 73).
Today’s readers probably read this article as a parody of the affected and romanticized imagination of the modern mother and family, especially since it was published in a humorous magazine. Yet from readers’ later discussions of this piece and Feng’s other articles, we find out that it was intended to offer serious instructions on modern life and its contemporary readers were expected to live their lives accordingly. Another article by Feng, “Little Angel” (Xiao tainshi), published in the twelfth issue of Cosmic Wind, criticizes her female friend for dedicating herself to the petty life of a professional mother and losing the romantic love she used to have for her husband. Unlike her friend, Feng was a living role model of “modern maternity,” who completely entrusted her children to nannies and servants. Her articles were treated seriously by readers who were deeply concerned with how to balance women’s independence and their family obligations. In the letters to the editor, one reader asks in confusion, “Shall we live like Miss Feng Heyi, abandoning her children and enjoying a leisurely life?” “What are the differences between being a single woman and being a mother?” “Is marriage the grave of love? How can we make romantic love eternal” (Tao 104)? This reader does not find any answer to these questions, but at a certain point in her letter, she tends to agree with Feng on maintaining women’s independent role in society.

Ordinary people’s understanding of these new concepts did not become clearer in the 1940s. Although news on the war and wartime life dominated public attention in Shanghai, discussions of modern love and conjugal life often appeared in newspapers and magazines as well. These concepts were still under formation, especially in the realm of everyday life. In an editorial article in Shen Bao on the coeducation of men and women in
1943, the unnamed author cites some complaints from students’ parents asserting that, because of the coeducation of men and women, young students “talk emptily about freedom and love”; they “do not dedicate themselves to study,” and often “watch movies and go dancing together”; and that girls pay too much attention to “appearance,” and “wear make-up.” The author solemnly warns the young students that in a time of national crisis, students should respect each other and restrain their love and affection in order to bring solace to their parents and repay the country (“Nannü tongxiao” Shen Bao, Jun. 5, 1943). A few weeks later, Shen Bao published an article with a very different perspective. In response to the idea that students should not fall in love, the author, Shen Aiying, asks, “Falling in love, in its nature, is young people’s business. If one does not fall in love in youth, should one wait till one gets old?” She nevertheless concedes that one should first establish “a correct view on love.” In Shen’s opinion, love should not be based “merely on [sexual] desire,” or on the satisfaction of “emotional impulses.” Rather, “True love is mutually based on career, development of talents, pursuit of knowledge and care for social improvement.” Love is not sustained by “money, movie-watching, dancing, [and] wearing make-up,” but “listening to music, playing soccer, painting and walking” are all good activities for real recreation and dating (Shen Bao, Jun. 22, 1943). Apparently, for the author, activities like playing soccer are much healthier than “decadent” theatre-going. Although it is not clear for today’s readers (and probably for Shen’s contemporaries as well) why listening to music with one’s lover is a more healthful recreational activity than watching movies with him or her, the article indicates precisely how subjective and arbitrary the “right” code of social conduct could be when many
social norms were still under formation. It should be noted, however, that movie-going and dancing were indeed satirized as superficial activities by many of Shen’s contemporary intellectuals, including Yang Jiang.

These discussions reveal people’s serious examination of the role love played in everyday life and the proper balance of love and work. Although these discussions situate love in a time of national crisis, the core of these discussions is the quest for the spiritual meaning of love, what nourishes love and makes love sustainable, instead of placing love in a submissive and secondary position to other noble goals. Love may temporarily have to give way to serious yet depressing causes like national salvation, but those grand causes are not where love resides.

One also needed to learn whether one was in love, which further prevented Shanghainese from achieving unanimous understanding of satirical writings on love. The Shen Bao editors suggest that if readers answer most of the following questions affirmatively, they are probably in love: 1) Do you want to tell him/her your private matters? 2) Do you believe that he/she knows you better than anyone else you meet? 3) Do you think your lover is fun? 4) If he/she is going to have a painful surgery tomorrow, are you extremely worried? 5) When you are close to him/her, does your heart beat faster? 6) Have you spent more time adorning yourself recently? 7) Do you like to stay with him/her during the night, or have breakfast with him/her every morning? 8) If you have a quarrel, will you persuade your lover not to leave, even though you think you said nothing wrong? 9) Do you think you want to marry him/her, and live together forever? (“Ni zai lian’ai ma?” Shen Bao, Jan. 5, 1942). Whether one is in love cannot be decided
by simple tests like this, or by any test, be it simple or complex. For residents in
metropolitan Shanghai, it may nevertheless serve as a pseudoscientific index of the fluid
understanding of love and relationships, and probably be more helpful than the self-
indulgent crying that one witnesses in a sentimental romance.

In the 1940s, essays on love and conjugal life often appeared in magazines that
mainly targeted urban women, such as Women’s Light (Nü Guang) and Women Monthly
(Funü yuekan): “A Thought on Selecting Spouse” (Ze’ou de yimian guan), “Divorce and
the Feminist Movement” (Lihun wenti yu funü yundong), “Arts of Love” (Lian’ai de
Ideal Lover” (Wo de lixiang qingren), “My Ideal Wife” (Wode lixiang taitai), “On Pre-
marital Sexual Behavior” (Weihun fufu de xing xingwei), “A New Resolution of
Divorce” (Dui lihun de yige xin jieda), and so forth. The large number of articles and
discussions on love, marriage, and women’s role in family and society show that in the
1930s and 1940s love was certainly an enigma that warranted exploration.

Shanghai urbanites’ great interest in love in their daily lives is one main factor
that contributed greatly to the writing of Yang Jiang who is well-known for her
“verisimilitude” (xieshi). The ambiguous elements in her plays and stories can be seen as
realistic manifestations of the various understandings and conceptions of the new ideas,
such as love, marriage and modern women. Her plays and stories also offered her
audiences and readers an opportunity to experience these fluid concepts safely. From

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2 All these selected articles appeared in Nü Guang [Women’s Light] and Funü yuekan [Women Monthly], 1941-1947.
their different reactions, it is clear that behaviors or thoughts that were legitimate targets of satire in the eyes of some people might be objects of pathos for others.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the works by Yang Jiang which I discuss in this chapter are no longer satirical. Even though the lack of a stable referential frame may have confused some people, other individuals may have held their own steadfast value systems, against which they could form their satirical judgment on other moral deviations. Yang Jiang was surely one of the latter, and I suggest that her personal life serves the fundamental frame of reference for her satire on love and marriage. Yang Jiang and Qian Zhongshu are probably the most admirable yet reclusive couple on the modern Chinese literary scene. They fell in love at Qinghua University in 1932, and the couple’s legendary devotion to each other is exhibited in many of their writings, including Yang Jiang’s (auto)biographical work, *We Three* (Women sa, 2003) as well as Qian Zhongshu’s poems. On the proof copy of his collection *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts* (Ren, shou, gui, 1946), Qian Zhongshu wrote: “To C. K. Y., An almost impossible combination of 3 incompatible things: wife, mistress, & friend.”³ This dedication perfectly summarizes Yang Jiang’s unparalleled role in Qian Zhongshu’s literary and personal life. Wang Xindi once jokingly consulted Qian Zhongshu about the meaning of the English word “uxorious,” making fun of his excessive fondness of Yang Jiang (Wu 225). Similarly, in her reminiscences Yang Jiang repeatedly refers to Qian Zhongshu’s *chiqi* (痴气), a term that she feels encompasses Qian’s quintessential charm and personality. She once glossed the term as “puckish bent, charming mischievous quirks,

³ C. K. Y. are the initials of Yang Jiang’s real name, Chi-kang Yang (Jikang Yang, 杨季康). See Wu 219.
sweet quirkiness, charming idiosyncratic ways…eccentric prattling, idiosyncrasies and foibles and so forth” (Wu 343). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that Yang Jiang and Qian Zhongshu’s shared experiences informed the ethos of her satirical work. Although Yang Jiang excels at portraying sometimes contradictory love behavior, especially that of buffoons, she carefully hides her own voice in the ambiguous narrative, showing little interest in “telling” her readers which is right and which is wrong. Rather, the ambiguous rhetoric of her works amplifies her particular way of respecting life’s complexity.

**Ambiguous Satire as a Parody of Literary Convention**

Seeing a performance of *Heart’s Desire* in Shanghai, novelist and drama critic Zhao Jingshen (1902-1985) claimed that “only female writers can achieve the fineness of the details in this play” (Zhao 121). Whether or not male writers can depict their characters delicately is beyond the range of my topic, but Yang Jiang does handle most of the subject matter of her satiric works with subtlety, mainly from a gendered perspective, which I believe is also a deeply embedded parody of a male-dominated literary convention and which further contributes to the ambiguity of her satire.

Throughout her literary career, Yang Jiang has mainly written about conjugal life and love triangles. Her last two stories written before the advent of the PRC are also about how humans, particularly men, are disillusioned in love and marriage. Qian Zhongshu also touched upon this theme in his stories, such as “Cat” (Mao, ca. 1944) and his novel *Fortress Besieged*. It is hard to tell who learned from whom, or who influenced whom, but in her works, especially her short stories, such as “Romanesque” (title
originally in English, 1946) and “Indian Summer” (Xiao yangchun, ca. 1940s), Yang Jiang is more tolerant towards women than Qian, and never goes so far as to attribute monstrosity to them. In her stories, there is a type of woman who is seductive, capricious, at once fragile and powerful. These women are lovely femmes fatales in men’s fantasies. Their existence is first and foremost a welcome change in the male characters’ monotonous lives, and an antidote to their romantic illusions. Femmes fatales remind men of their futile quest for love as well its delusive nature. As I have discussed, because of the formative nature of “love” and “marriage” in the Republican era, Yang Jiang’s satire on these subjects is rather ambiguous. However, this type of ambiguous satire may also serve as a meta-satire on the literary discourse of love and marriage.

“Indian Summer,” written in the 1940s, deals with the extramarital love affair between a university professor, Dr. Yu, and his student Miss Hu, which, as the title indicates, brings “spring” to his dull conjugal life. Miss Hu is a dark beauty. Dark skin, in both Qian Zhongshu and Yang Jiang’s works, signifies new women’s unconventional character which is presumably modern and powerful. For example, the protagonist’s admiration of dark skin is explicit in “Indian Summer”: “White is the color of passionlessness. Black embraces the heat of the sun, or, like a dark cloud with lightning” (Zuopin ji vol. 1 40). The contrast between white and black parallels the opposition between Dr. Yu’s wife and Miss Hu. Interestingly, Dr. Yu not only feels inferior in front of Miss Hu because of his old age, but he also dreads his wife, whose bluntness and vulgarity always embarrass him. In a scene in which Miss Hu visits Dr. Yu, Mrs. Yu is vaguely aware of the chemistry between her husband and his student, so she initiates a
veiled verbal fight with Miss Hu. The confrontational atmosphere is so tense that even Dr. Yu feels attacked, but he is incapable of defending either party. Instead, he “listened to the Madame and Mademoiselle skillfully exchanging compliments, but could not chip in a single word. He sat there blankly, simpered twice, not knowing how to break the awkwardness” (Zuopin ji vol.1 45). It seems that he has not benefited at all from experience, knowledge and age. Dr. Yu is weak and cowardly to the core. His “spring” ends rather abruptly. But he dares not face his wife when she discovers his secret, nor does he dare continue dating Miss Hu when he detects that she has other suitors. The self-deceptive protagonist eventually withdraws from his love affair with happiness, because he has already felt overwhelmed and intimidated by women and their secret power.

In her satirical stories, Yang Jiang reconstructs and reverses the gender relationship that many of her contemporary readers anticipate, thereby interrogating the widely accepted and admired romances that are supposed to be modern and desirable. A talented scholar suffers from the vulgarity and dullness of his wife who is neither young nor charming, and meets a passionate female student who admires him deeply. The man is therefore caught in a moral and emotional predicament, feeling guilty about his wife but finding himself unable to resist the young girl: this is a hackneyed story that happened to many May Fourth male intellectuals; one may even find it a hyperbolic version of the life story of prominent figures, such as Lu Xun and Xu Zhimo. Although the main characters’ occupations, personalities and social status may differ from case to case, one thing remains the same: all men in this type of narrative are constructed as
victims of an unhappy (and oftentimes arranged) marriage, and women are either old and boring or young and immoral, depending on one’s interpretation.

In 1945 the well-known dramatist and director Hong Shen (1894-1955) wrote a three-act comedy, entitled Women, Women: A Man with Luck and Longevity (Nüren, nüren: yiming duofu duoshou nanzi), which also deals with a man’s extramarital love with his student. But Hong Shen’s masculinist attitude towards the love affair is obvious in the title of the play: it might be a fatal disaster for both women, but it is fortunate for the man. In fact, the husband never appears in this play because he is busy doing his research in the university laboratory and has not returned home for weeks, while all the confrontational scenes are carried out between his student and his wife as well as her friends. According to Hong Shen, when a woman has a miserable marriage or cannot attract her husband, several factors may be responsible: 1) the war and the corrupt socio-economic system; 2) the wife who voluntarily quits her own education and career, and dedicates herself to all the housework. (Although, it is perfectly reasonable for a busy man not to return home for a long time, despite the fact that his home is very close to where he works); 3) the wife who is ignorant of her husband’s work; and 4) the society that cannot offer public childcare.

In her works, as seen in “Indian Summer,” Yang Jiang retells the love triangle from a female author’s perspective and ultimately deconstructs the myth of caizi-jiaren, talented scholar and beauty. Stories of caizi-jiaren might be told and spread by men (and by many women) with relish, but in Yang Jiang’s hands they reveal the coexistence of men’s—especially intellectuals’—secret desire and unconquerable cowardice. By
explicitly satirizing her petty male characters, Yang Jiang implicitly laughs at the great intellectuals of her time as well as their romances, which were admired by many of her contemporaries. In fact, throughout her literary career, Yang Jiang’s depictions of love triangles never offer her characters any opportunity to reconcile guilt and desire, whether they meet true love or not. Such a tendency becomes particularly prominent in her New-Era writing, such as “What a Joke” (Da xiaohua, ca. 1977) and Baptism (Xizao, 1988). In these works, extramarital love can be serious and genuine, but when such a love affair is gossiped about by others, true love becomes “a big joke.” Its sincerity is consequently replaced by frivolity and unbearable lightness in people’s talks. In this sense, both characters and readers may doubt the nature—or even the existence—of romantic love heavily promoted since the late Qing.

“Romanesque” (1946), also written before the advent of the PRC, is a parody of the romance, the detective story, and the classical ghost story. The male protagonist, Pengnian, is trapped in an unsatisfactory relationship and is ready to plunge into an exciting yet unpredictable romance. In this love triangle, Pengnian's girlfriend, Lingyi, is a refined and composed fair lady, while the mysterious May, on whom Pengnian has a crush, is the exact opposite of Lingyi. She is a girl with unpredictable behavior, who is seductive and passionate, the embodiment of the “fox spirit” (huli jing) in traditional ghost stories. In Pengnian’s view, Lingyi is too elegant for a vulgar man like himself, while May’s stunning worldly beauty perfectly suits his sensual desires. Nevertheless, the contrast between the girls does not change Pengnian’s inferior position in his relationships with them. He respects and admires Lingyi like a younger brother. May, like
a “fox spirit” with magical power, heroically saves him from a kidnapping the first time they meet. In Pengnian’s opinion, May is as mysterious as the kidnapping experience itself. She may be a detective or a female knight-errant who, like himself, often helps poor people in trouble. The composed and levelheaded Lingyi, however, directly debunks the popular detective story and knight-errant novels, pointing out that “It is just a simple swindle,” and Pengnian is merely being “Romanesque” (Zuopinji vol.1 24-25)!

Furthermore, Pengnian’s obsession with a strange girl and the hyperbolic sensual astonishment he experiences when encountering May can also be seen as parodies of the sentimental fiction of writers like Yu Dafu and of the works of “New Sensationalism.”

As the story proceeds, it turns out that May is not such “a good girl” (hao nüren) after all; she actually colluded in the kidnapping. Pengnian nevertheless eagerly decides to elope with her. By taking her away from her troublesome life, his relationship with the girl seems to have been inverted with Pengnian now occupying the role of hero. However, the girl is a true femme fatale: she fails to show on the day they have planned to elope and disappears entirely, leaving no trace. Pengnian’s serious love plan is just a “romanesque” fantasy. Again, unlike the love triangle narrated and imagined by her male contemporaries, in Yang Jiang’s stories, women are at the focal point. They take the initiative; they are on top of everything, and are physically and mentally superior to men. The story not only mocks men as well as their futile effort and wild imagination in love, but also silently laughs at the literary conventions and discourses primarily constructed by men or in accordance with their preferences.
Despite the fact that Yang Jiang mocks romanticized views of love and reveals
the dull nature of marriage in her works in the 1930s and 1940s, her mockery of both
genders is rather mild. Occasionally, her characters attack each other acerbically, but
Yang Jiang’s voice is hidden behind her characters. Therefore, some of her contemporary
readers claim that Yang Jiang sympathizes with her characters (Meng Du 110). It was
true that audiences, readers and critics in the 1940s often associated laughter with
sympathy. More importantly, in a time lacking in established frames of references or
value systems, Yang Jiang apparently avoids presenting an “ideal” love or model family.
Her plays and stories are dominated by frivolous love games, romantic illusions, self-
projected affection, and sometimes, untimely and unrequited love. In her reserved
narrative, she empowers her readers and audiences to decide with whom they want to
align and what they would rather condemn. In her hands satire represents the ambiguous
nature of the formative social mores and elicits ambiguous effects from her readers.
Conclusion

The satirical practice of the first half of the twentieth century in Chinese literature was ultimately characterized by the pursuit of a modern China. To this end, tears, anxieties, frustrations, confusions, and most importantly, hope, are all mingled together in various types of satirical representation. However, satire has lost its charm since the 1950s. In 1942, Mao Zedong gave his far-reaching talk on literature in Yan’an, which would subordinate literature to politics for decades. Although many writers during this time were still very active, most of them were forced to either change their voice or become silenced. Because of its subversive nature, satire would primarily be considered a malicious attack on the revolution and its socialist regime. Satirical practice did not disappear, but it was deprived of the complexity and ambiguity that characterized the best works of the 1930s and 1940s. Satire was expected to possess black-and-white simplicity: both revolutionary and imperialistic enemies were bad, so they were caricatured. The people were good, so they were praised. Exposing the people’s flaws was not welcome; humanitarian sympathy for enemies was not needed. Xiao Hong passed away in 1942 when most of her former friends already considered her “backward.” Lao She took pains to adjust to the new regime and tried his best to learn to be a new writer. His talent was cautiously restrained and unavoidably distorted in his celebrated *Tea House* (Chaguan). He shined again in *Under the Red Banner* (Zhenghongqi xia), but was unable to finish it before committing suicide. Qian Zhongshu ceased writing and devoted himself to research. Yang Jiang would not write fiction (and memoir) again until the late 1970s.
In contrast to the depressing situation during the Mao era, satiric writing has revived and flourished since the 1990s, especially on the Internet, where expression now draws very close to daily life. The Chinese language, with its large supply of homonyms and homophones, has afforded especially rich turf for satiric wordplay. Of course there is censorship, but in recent times it has itself become a target of satire. Satire of the ruling party’s media manipulation, especially that of public opinion on the Internet, has become one of the most commonly discussed topics.

Within limited but still unregulated spaces on the Internet, satire of censorship and a wide range of related issues has flourished to a point where the traditional boundary between literary writing and ordinary communication has begun to break down. Social and political satire has also changed people’s understanding of the Chinese language. Its linguistic ambiguity often causes intended or unexpected irony or satire that would otherwise be free of confusion in a time when the government is the only authority to explain linguistic signs. For example, hexie, harmony or harmonious, used to have a positive connotation. But ever since the party has called for building up a “harmonious” Chinese society, with heavier censorship and oppression of free speech, the word “harmony” itself has taken on a negative and ironic connotation. “River crabs,” with a similar pronunciation to hexie in Chinese, is used to refer to harsh censorship. But “harmony” has such a strong party policy indication that its original meaning is gradually diminished. People find the word ironic even when it is not supposed to be. Those who are more politically sensitive even feel frustrated when they cannot use “harmony” to
mean “harmony” anymore. The exploding creative usage of Chinese language has greatly contributed to the diversity of satiric writing and reception.

Satiric practice in the 1930s and 1940s already shows the fluidity of the satiric triangle, and in recent years, it has continued to reinforce such instability. In 2012, “A Bite of China” (Shejian shang de Zhongguo), a documentary television series on Chinese food and cooking, was aired by the China Central Television. It immediately drew widespread popularity in China and from Chinese abroad. Its huge success garnered a second season in the spring of 2014. Contrary to CCTV’s expectations, its public reception was not good. Viewers complained that it contained too many propagandist messages and that a documentary on food should not be dominated by moral education. Almost at the same time when these critiques came out, I encountered the following post, parodying “A Bite of China,” on the website of Douban:

“Bite of China Season 3:

Episode 1. Running into Communism: Plenty of Steamed Buns in the Commune’s Mess Halls.

Episode 2. Two Steamed Cornbreads for One Meal.


Episode 5. Grass Is Tasty, Bark Is Sweet.

Episode 7. Fried Livers, Intestines and Kidneys, as well as a Stew of Baby.¹

This post is obviously a political satire on the Great Leap Forward under Mao’s reign and the devastating famine that it caused. Following Mao’s Communist reform, Chinese were mobilized to join the People’s communes and enjoy free food in the late 1950s. But the economic reality could not afford Mao’s utopian ideal, and people’s living conditions soon deteriorated. Steamed buns disappeared from dinner tables, followed by less refined cornbread. As the situation worsened, people had to live on grass and tree leaves, and when those were gone, some turned to white clay to release the undying feeling of hunger. The last episode points to the most horrifying stage of a famine: cannibalism. Considering the time this thread came out, it might also ridicule the sugar-coated “A Bite of China”—the food history of PRC is not as humanitarian as it depicts. Meanwhile, it might offend the hardcore fans of the documentary, who simply crave good food and are not interested in any kind of political message in their shows, be it propagandist or subversive.

Surprisingly, comments from the netizens on this satirical post show that lots of people did not get its ultimate satirical critique of Mao’s mistakes (it is likely that young people know little about GLF and the consequent famine). Some asked what the last episode was about; others mentioned current food security issues and Guangdong people’s crazy appetite. But one user suggested that Episode 8 should be on the well-known Hunan bacon, which is a biting allusion to Mao himself, who was from Hunan and now lies in Tiananmen Square, immune to decay like a piece of dry bacon. This post

highlights the dynamic of satiric triangle, showing again that although satire is often considered a literary practice with a clear intention, a satirist does not have the sovereignty over the text. The reader may be unable to align with the satirist, and deliberately ignore, distort, or extend his or her relations with the satirist and the satirized object.

In today’s China, there is little possibility for ordinary Chinese to express their political complaints through traditional media such as books and newspapers. But the Internet and satire provide them a platform to vent their grievances, and receive immediate responses from others. The instability of the satirical triangle becomes even more obvious in today’s satire, which is mixed with laughter, anger, carelessness and other emotions, simultaneously blurring the boundaries between satirist and the reader and even inviting unexpected satirized objects. Satire has become even more diversified in the past decade, illuminating various contemporary pursuits of Chinese people in an age dominated by pleasure-and-money seeking. More interestingly, many of them show a similar playful sentiment to Qian Zhongshu’s early writing (although not necessarily having his wit), which differentiates much contemporary satire from the compassion-ridden satire written during the Republican era. In his article “Political Humor in a Post-Totalitarian Dictatorship,” Liu Xiaobo points out that there are two ways to reveal the wrong and fight for the right: “truth-telling” and “joke-making” (186). He suggests that jokes on social and political evil may “become mere commodities to enjoy” and may bury “people’s senses of justice and their normal human sympathies” (184). Despite the fact that writers also suffered censorship in the 1930s and 1940s, most of them (such as
the ones I have studied in this dissertation) aimed to “tell the truth” rather than merely “making jokes.” This granted their works much more gravity, whereas many Chinese today carelessly mock anything, with anyone, and refuse to take anything seriously, claiming that “If you are serious, you fail” (认真就输了). This reminds us of the cynical satire that Lu Xun opposes. Playfulness indicates a lack of real concern for the status quo, while cynicism rejects any effort to change the world to a better one. I hope my reading of the different types of satire in modern Chinese literature can provide a comparative lens that helps to better understand the cultural, social and psychological features of contemporary satire, its function, and its aims, and how these contribute to people’s views of the future.

Acknowledging the possible negative effects of joke-making, Liu Xiaobo nevertheless insists on the importance of seeing “how far-reaching the corrosive effects of political humor can be” (187). Liu’s optimism echoes the hope in satire that Wu Jianren saw over a hundred years ago. There is never a singular form of satire. But I hope that my research, in addition to providing unique, new perspectives on some well-known authors, will also help to map out some of the larger cultural and historical contours of modern China and induce more studies on the prosperity of satire in China today.
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