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Tonglu Li

Iowa State University, tongluli@iastate.edu

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Abstract

Modern essay, or creative nonfiction prose, whose success almost surpasses that of poetry, theater and fiction,¹ was born out of the marriage of traditional Chinese and Western culture.² On a superficial level, it distinguishes itself from traditional essay by using vernacular instead of classical or literary Chinese, and thus is more accessible to the masses. In terms of genre, it is narrower in scope than traditional essay which includes all non-verse writings, literary or not. More importantly, as Yu Dafu points out, modern essay values the expression of individuality and personality more than any other writings.³ By contrast, traditional essay assumed a political and ideological mission to assist state operation, or to uphold the Way (zaidao) by such figures as Cao Pi (187–226), Liu Xie (465–520), and Han Yu (768–824). In the eyes of modern essayists, traditional essay would be propagandist.

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Comments

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MODERN CHINESE ESSAYS

Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang and others

Tonglu Li

The rise of modern Chinese essay

Modern essay, or creative nonfiction prose, whose success almost surpasses that of poetry, theater and fiction,¹ was born out of the marriage of traditional Chinese and Western culture.² On a superficial level, it distinguishes itself from traditional essay by using vernacular instead of classical or literary Chinese, and thus is more accessible to the masses. In terms of genre, it is narrower in scope than traditional essay which includes all non-verse writings, literary or not. More importantly, as Yu Dafu points out, modern essay values the expression of individuality and personality more than any other writings.³ By contrast, traditional essay assumed a political and ideological mission to assist state operation, or to uphold the Way (*zaidao*) by such figures as Cao Pi (187–226), Liu Xie (465–520), and Han Yu (768–824). In the eyes of modern essayists, traditional essay would be propagandist.

Despite the substantial differences, many modern essayists are open to the influences from the aesthetics of traditional essay, and “[f]iction, drama, and poetry do not enjoy the same comfortable relationship with tradition as the essay.”⁴ Lu Xun (1881–1936), for example, acknowledges the deep connections between his essay and the Wei-Jin writers such as Ruan Ji (210–263) and Ji Kang (223–262). Meanwhile, Western influences, particularly those from the essay works by the 18th-century British essayists such as Charles Lamb (1775–1834) are indispensable for the birth of modern essay in China. According to Lu Xun, the British essayists’ influences brought modern essay a humorous and poised attitude, and a beautiful and deliberate style.⁵ In tracing the etymology of modern essay, Zhou Zuoren (1885–1967) goes back to the individualistic and expressionist late Ming (1550–1644) literature. In the meantime, for the formation of modern essay’s own spirit he gives credits to the inspirations from Western

philosophy, science and literature.⁶

Receiving inspirations from various sources, modern essay is highly versatile and flexible in handling different topics by integrating lyrical, narrative, argumentative and informative elements. The most successful subgenre of essay from the first decade (1917–1927), *xiaopin wen*, however, centered on the celebration of individual self,⁷ which had often been repressed in traditional essay. The two figures who established the paradigms for modern essay are Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren, both wrote highly individualized essays besides their numerous *zawen* (miscellaneous essay), or satirical and polemic sociocultural commentaries. In his poetic prose collection *Wild Grass* (Ye cao, 1927), Lu Xun presents a modern soul struggling between the individual and the crowd, hope and desperation, resolution and hesitation, darkness and brightness, and dream and reality. His *Morning Flowers Plucked at the Sunset* (*Zhaohua xishi*, 1928) turns to recollect his early and recent memories about people crucial to his life, such as his father, teacher, Japanese professor, maid and friend among others. It blends a strong nostalgic sentiment with sociocultural criticism. Zhou Zuoren introduced *belles lettres* into China and exemplified it with his casual, simple yet profound essays such as “Tea Drinking” (He cha, 1924) and “Bitter Rain” (Kuyu, 1924). In a manner of Rousseauian confession, Yu Dafu (1896–1945) exposes his agonistic inner world in “Home-returning” (*Huanxiang ji*, 1923) and “A Man’s Journey of Solitude” (*Yigeren zai tushang*, 1926). Zhu Ziqing (1898–1948) gives masterful depiction of natural sceneries in embellished language, and later turns to write with unadorned expressions about family life, such as his father’s unexpressed love in “Back Shadow” (Beiying, 1925). With childlike innocence, Bing Xin (1900–1999) extensively elaborates the theme of love for nature, mother, and homeland in her *Letters to Young Readers* (*Ji xiaoduzhe*, 1926).

The self-centered orientation faced challenges during the second decade (1927–1936) with the looming political and national crises. The pro-liberal writers such as Zhou Zuoren, Lin Yutang (1895–1976), Yu Pingbo (1900–1990) and Shi Zhecun (1905–2003) continued to write about the self in an apolitical, humorous manner, but the Leftists called for a more politically engaging approach. Lu Xun insisted on writing essays with political and social concerns, and labeled what Zhou advocated as trivial decorations.⁸ To him, promoting the leisure, the humorous, and the individualistic in an era of darkness meant distorting the harsh

reality and shedding off one's social responsibility. Rebuffing Lu Xun, Zhou called the Leftist literature "sacrificial utensil" serving the political causes (ineffectively),⁹ and explained that the literature of leisure was the result instead of the cause of the political and social crisis.

This overarching debate is rather productive for both sides. Lu Xun continued to produce polemic essays to the extent that a new genre *zawen* was established. Besides, the essays he wrote to remember the loss of his friends such as "Remember to Forget" (*Weile wangque de jinian*, 1933) are of high influence. Mao Dun (1896–1981) symbolically called for a cleaner world and brighter future in "Before the Thunderstorm" (*Leiyu qian*, 1934). Viewing the world through the eyes of an innocent child, Xiao Hong (1911–1942) documents her suffering and struggle in poverty in Manchuria in her *Market Street* (*Shangshi jie*, 1936). Meanwhile, Zhou Zuoren turned further away from the immediate social reality to write on folk culture and everyday life as his way to understand people, and to construct a new way of life for them. Promoting the literature of humor and leisure, Lin Yutang tried to bring back the late Ming essay style to modern life. Many others, who did not declare to belong to either camp, also produced numerous masterpieces. In his "To My Late Wife" (*Gei wangfu*, 1932), Zhu Ziqing lamented the death of his late wife and reiterated her dedication to the family. Yu Dafu continued his melancholic tone to memorize the autumn of the old capital city Beijing (1934), which implied a limpid, quiet, and sad atmosphere. Overall, in the 1930s, the authors acquired broader visions, more diverse interests, and deeper insights, even when they wrote about the everyday matters.¹⁰

In the following decade of the war against Japan, however, literary production was further divided. In areas occupied by the Japanese, Zhou Zuoren, who had started his collaboration with the Japanese in 1938, played a leading role in setting the tone of essay writing. He and his followers such as Wen Zaidao (1916–2007) and Fei Ming (1901–1967) devoted themselves to writing about the everyday, folk culture, and anecdotal accounts of historical and personal events

with an apolitical tone. In the areas respectively controlled by the Nationalists and the Communists, the concern for the fate of the nation dominated literary production, and the expression of the self and the quotidian was further overshadowed by the central mission of national salvation. Therefore, Liang Shiqiu (1903–1987), Lu Xun's old rival, was harshly criticized when he proposed that matters indirectly related to the war of resistance should also be allowed.¹¹ However, he adhered to his apolitical opinion and published a serial of short essays on everyday topics, such as shaking hands, taking bath, haircut, and manner at dinner table, etc. Liang have them published as *Yashe xiaopin* in 1949. Nevertheless, just as She Shusen points out, the lyrical essays highlighting the self, the affect, and the aesthetical gave way to the narrative essays highlighting the collective, the realistic, and the pragmatic aspects.¹² As a rapid way to cover social reality, reportage (*baogao wenxue*) a subgenre of the broadly defined essay genre that combines literature and journalism prospered.

Zhou Zuoren: essay and the formation of modern self

Life and career

Born in Shaoxing, Zhejiang in a declining gentry-scholar family, Zhou followed his elder brother Lu Xun to Nanjing in 1901 and attended the Jiangnan Naval Academy, and then went to Japan in 1906 on a government scholarship. There, in addition to literature, he developed lifelong interests in cultural anthropology, folklore studies, Greek mythology and the psychology of sex. Coming back to his hometown in 1911, he focused on folklore and fairy tales besides working in the field of public education. In 1917, Zhou started to teach at Beijing University, and soon became a key figure in the May Fourth enlightenment movement. He set the humanistic tone for the new literature in 1918, arguing that humans evolved from animals and it is problematic to indulge in sensual desires, or to repress such desires with ascetic religious disciplines. In 1921, he made it clear that literature is for life's sake.¹³ Nevertheless, after sensing its irrational and violent tendency in such campaigns as the Anti-Christianity movement starting 1922, Zhou decided to withdraw from the New Culture Movement and turned to cultivate his personal artistic garden. In a 1925 essay, he declared to stay

away from the masses and live in his Ivory Tower located at the crossroads to observe the society from a distance.¹⁴ He struggled between a split self, which was occupied by two demons: the ruffian pushing him to challenge the preexisting social order, and the gentleman admonishing him not to do so.

The 1927 White Terror pushed Zhou further away from social intervention. Next year he proposed to read history behind the closed door, regarding the violent reality as the enchanted reincarnation of history: progress leading to a new epoch became unlikely.¹⁵ In the early 1930s, he involved in the debate with the Leftists, and considered literature to be for self-expression, not for propaganda. Viewed as a modern hermit by the Leftists, Zhou became the leader of the Beijing School – a group of liberal intellectuals who wanted to stay away from the conflicts between the Communists and the KMT regime. During his collaboration with the Japanese started from 1938, he held several posts including dean of the Liberal Arts College at Beijing University, curator of the University library, supervisor of the Ministry of Education, and councilor for the Nanjing puppet regime. After the war, he was sentenced to ten years' in prison by the Nationalist government. In August 1949, he moved back to Beijing with the defeat of the KMT. In the coming years, Zhou made a living on translating classical Japanese and Greek literary works, and writing about Lu Xun's life and works. He also published many short essays, sometimes recycling much of his earlier works, hoping they would be useful in the new China, but with a much less critical tone. Zhou died in May 1967 after being tortured by the Red Guards.

Literary achievements

Besides introducing the genre *belles lettres* to encourage a style featuring non-decorative geniality and personal taste in early 1920s, during the 1930s, Zhou promoted the individualist *zhanzhi* (expressing one's genuine intent) literature. He continuously stated the importance of leisure, comic and obscene as an antidote to the Leftist *zaidao* (sustaining the dogma) literature.¹⁶ To him, the culturally repressed features such as leisure, comic and obscene represent the genuine emotions of common people. Therefore, he identified the *zaidao* literature's lacking jokes as a symptom of unauthenticity, as well as an indication of the Neo-Confucianism's domination of human mind.¹⁷ Comparing the folk paintings of Japan and China, Zhou found that the Japanese woodblock painting

Ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) are able to represent the richness of the mundane world. However, by contrast, with a focus on the imposed auspicious meaning, the Chinese folk arts are unrealistic and merely allegorical. Zhou admires Miyatake Gaikotsu's (1867–1955) genuine interest in the obscene subject matters, because they directly contested the seriousness of Confucianism. He also praised the erotic literature of the Renaissance for its anti-moralism.¹⁸ With a playful attitude, Zhou challenged the traditional ethical codes and the Leftist literature's ideological premises following François Rabelais's (1494–1553) example.¹⁹

In the 1930s and 1940s, against Lu Xun's polemic miscellaneous essay, he promoted another type, which "literally means the mixed-up collection of essays with mingled thoughts and styles."²⁰ Zhou's essay writing thus became more miscellaneous, fragmental and hybrid. His playful manipulation of language in his hands became a strategy to resist and mock the ideologically overloaded literature. Beneath his seemingly plain language, we often see allusions to historical and contemporary affairs, mixture of colloquial and classical phrases, and Europeanized syntax, intertextual references. One major strategy Zhou used to construct the labyrinth of his textual world is similar to what Walter Benjamin plans to achieve – writing purely consisted of the mosaic of quotations of others' works.²¹ Before the 1930s, Zhou mainly quoted from Western thinkers such as Havelock Ellis and James Frazier. Afterwards he turned to quoting from pre-modern thinkers to examine the problems in Chinese intellectual and cultural history. As a result, the "center" of his essays became difficult to locate, and even the subjective voice of the author became only one thread among the Bakhtinian polyphonic voices he quoted. Such a writing style raised doubts among his contemporary critics. Even Lin Yutang could not understand its significance and mocked Zhou as "Mr. Plagiarist" (Wenchao gong). Only until after the 1980s that scholars reassessed it as an "unprecedented invention"²² that assisted Zhou to create a decentered intertextual world in which the textually constructed "self" acquired a historical depth and intellectual broadness going beyond the confined individual subjectivity.

The masterpiece: "Tea Drinking" and the art of life

During his lifetime, Zhou published over 3,000 essays, covering a wide range of topics from

literature and art, everyday life, folk customs, current affairs, medical, religious and intellectual history, to philosophy, psychology, biology and anthropology. Almost anything related to human life became his subject matters. Appealing to the public, he intended to create a rationalist version of commonsense by blending the informative and affective factors. In 1945 he categorized his highly diverse writings into “serious” or “formal” essays and leisure essays, and regarded the former as staple food (rice and bun) and the latter as drinks (tea or wine.)²³ This metaphor is central in understanding Zhou’s promotion of “the art of life” starting from the mid-1920s. As he himself reflected, he held a missionary mindset when first joined the New Cultural Movement in 1917, but soon became aware of its religiosity (for being irrational, fanatic and violent) and jumped out of such utopian dreams to cultivate the art of life, whose significance to him had long been marginalized in mainstream culture. In Zhou’s eyes, besides the “significant” cultural, social or political movements, or revolution, cultivation of the art of life dealing with the everyday should also become an indispensable part, or even the central part in improving the overall human condition.

As Zhou repeatedly writes, tea drinking, a seemingly unsubstantial activity beyond necessities perfectly embodies such an art of life. Published at the end of 1924, the year after his disillusionment with the increasingly repressive mainstream enlightenment movement, “Tea Drinking” begins with introducing *chadō*, the Japanese tea ceremony. He explains it as “stealing a moment of leisure from heavy workloads, and finding happiness from misery,” or “to enjoy a little bit beauty and harmony in the imperfect world, and to experience eternity from an ephemeral moment.”²⁴ However, while Zhou agrees with this sentiment, he intends to illustrate his own view on the Chinese way, which is less ritualistic and mystic than *chadō*. After dismissing the mystic Japanese, he disapproves the pragmatic Western approach of taking tea drinking as having a meal. Then, referring to *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* by George Gissing (1857–1903), he implicitly mocks the pragmatic approach, which regards the English afternoon tea with butter and bread as more enjoyable than the dated Chinese way of tea drinking.

Zhou suggests that, in tea drinking, green tea is preferred, while the black tea that often comes with added sugar and milk is not because the former provides an opportunity to appreciate tea as tea itself. To him, tea drinking is “to drink the tea itself, to appreciate its color, scent and flavor. It is not intended for quenching one’s thirst, needless to

say filling the stomach.” Then he describes it as “the exquisite taste of nature” based on the *Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzō (1863–1913).

Unfortunately, due to the rapid westernization, this style of tea drinking has been disappearing. Next, Zhou imagines the ideal occasion of tea drinking, what can serve as tea snacks, and the procedures of preparation. In his imagination, “tea drinking should happen under the paper-covered window of a tile-roofed house. Using a set of simple but elegant teapot and cups, one, with two or three acquaintances, should drink the green tea prepared with clear spring water. Such a moment of leisure is worth ten years’ dusty dreams.”²⁵ This poetic, natural scene, which is devoid of the influences from modern industrial civilization, reminds us of the lifestyle of such traditional hermits as Tao Qian (365–427). In the end, Zhou introduces the Japanese *chazuke* (tea-soaked rice) and compares it with its Chinese original, concluding that unlike the Japanese, Chinese people seldom pay attention to the intrinsic taste of such simple dishes.

In this short essay of 1,500 words, Zhou manages to situate his version of tea drinking into a broader cultural context. Although he himself established his worldview based on Western culture (biology, sex psychology and anthropology), he is not satisfied with its materialistic and pragmatic orientation. To him, Westerners cannot apprehend the subtlety of the Chinese way, in that the Western way of tea drinking is close to satisfying the basic, material needs and thus is less spiritual. In his view, even tea snacks are not completely material: “the culture and history of a country will leave traces on the everyday life. Such traces, being it splendid or delicate in style, should be refined in nature.” He complains that the outcome of the modernization in China—a vulgar copycat of the Western counterpart—is rather horrible.²⁶ On the other hand, the Japanese way has deep historical connections and thus can shed light on the understanding of the Chinese way. However, the Japanese way is more of religious implications, as he elaborates twenty years later in his Preface to the Chinese version of *The Book of Tea*: Tea drinking is originated in China, but *chadō* (the Way of Tea) is not. The reason, according to Zhou, is that, Chinese people are less religious than the Japanese is, and what they pursue is the worldly pleasure through tea drinking instead of transcendental enjoyments.²⁷ Being spiritual yet still worldly, with a flavor of simplicity, austerity and even nostalgia, the Chinese way, therefore, is a middle way.

Of course, even before writing this essay, Zhou had been already aware that due to the haste of modern

life such a leisure moment was difficult to achieve.²⁸ The difficulty here, as mentioned before, partially lies in the fact that the everyday leisure activities have become marginal in the nation-state centered modern culture. Questioning this marginalization, Zhou insists that, “it is necessary to have the short moment of carefree leisure.”²⁹ To him, all human activities are equally important, and as a part of life, including leisure activities such as drinking tea.³⁰ The leisure activities comes with an aesthetic nature, which is “purposive without purpose” in the Kantian aesthetic framework, or in Daoist terms, has the usefulness of uselessness. He even complained about the quality of Beijing’s tea snacks, arguing that,

Besides daily necessities, we have to have some useless games and enjoyment to make us feel that life is interesting. We appreciate the sunset, the autumn river, and the flowers, listen to the rain, and smell the scent of the incense. We drink wine not intended for quenching one’s thirst, and eat delicate cookies not intended for satisfying one’s hunger. All these are necessary in life – even though they are useless – and the more refined they are the better.³¹

Cultivating the art of life beyond necessity is a constant thread of thinking in Zhou’s writings. In a public letter to the abdicated emperor Puyi also written in 1924, Zhou argues that civilization is a necessary luxury beyond necessity, and the emergent tasks facing China is survival. However, it is still important to pay attention to these leisure activities in that the ultimate goal is to make it possible for people to enjoy them in the future.³² In the 1930s, Zhou continues to promote the rational understanding of tea in such essays as “Further Discussion on Tea Drinking Again” (Zailun chichi, 1934) and “On Bitter Tea” (Guanyu kucha, 1935). To Zhou, leisure activities, such as tea drinking and traditional festivals provide a temporary escape for those people toiling in the tedious quotidian world. However, in the bifurcated literary field, his views became the target of the Leftists’ criticism. For example, Lu Xun questions Zhou’s view by emphasizing the central mission China was then facing: survival. He argues that the meticulously refined sense cultivated through such activities as tea drinking might become obstacles for the nation to survive and evolve in the chaotic and harshly competitive world.³³ In this sense, Zhou was born too early for his time, and it was only after the 1980s that his proposals regained their market.

Lin Yutang: creation of the literature of humor

Life and career

Born into a rural family in Longxi, Fujian, Lin Yutang is arguably the most cosmopolitan writer in modern China. As a son of a priest, Lin had a happy childhood. He finished his Western education, first at church schools in his hometown, and then in Shanghai at St. John’s University (1912–1916). Afterward he taught at Tsinghua School and soon realized that attending church schools deprived his opportunity to learn about the Chinese heritage. Believing in a total Europeanization for China’s future, he participated in the New Cultural movement with his writings on language reform.³⁴ Starting from 1919, he studied comparative literature at Harvard University, and then went to Europe to study linguistics at Leipzig University, where he made up his education in Chinese traditions. In 1923, he returned to China and started teaching at Peking and Tsinghua University. Equipped with his Western education Lin endeavored to rediscover Chinese society.

Next year he joined the *Yusi* (Threads of Talk) camp led by Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren and wrote numerous polemic essays on various social and cultural phenomena, such as national character, intellectuals’ ethics, and student movements. Lin fled from Beijing in 1926 for fear of political persecution and taught at Amoy University, where he established closer relationship with Lu Xun. After briefly serving in the Nationalist Government, he settled in Shanghai in 1927. Hesitating long between “being revolutionary and anti-revolutionary,” in the 1930s Lin turned to promote the literature of humor, self-expression and leisure. With the success of his English work *My Country and My People* (1935), Lin moved to the United States in 1936 and started publishing widely to introduce Chinese culture and society with such works as *The Importance of Living* (1937), *Moment in Peking* (1939) and *The Gay Genius: The Life and Times of Su Tungpo* (1947).³⁵ In 1966, Lin moved to Taiwan, and died in Hong Kong in 1976.

Literary achievements

Lin is the key figure who made possible the prosperity of a literature of humor, self-expression and leisure in the 1930s with his theoretical and creative writings, as well as with his founding of the three literary magazines *Lunyu* (Analects),

Renjianshi (The Human World) and *Yuzhou feng* (The Cosmic Wind). If his writings in the 1920s often come with a straightforward, elaborative, and polemical style, in the 1930s he pursued a style of nuance and subtlety, with a lighthearted, humorous and witty style in a language mixing vernacular and classic elements. His praise of the late Ming individualistic essayists echoes the view of Zhou Zuoren. Although they came from the same camp of the individualistic literature, they have different emphasis. As Laughlin puts it, "If Zhou Zuoren promoted an aesthetics of *bense* (original color) and *quwei* (fascination) that he perceived in late imperial *xiaopin wen*, Lin Yutang wished to do the same, but add to it a new and important component he called *yumo* [humor]."³⁶

The differences can be traced back to the different cultural resources they borrowed. Zhou mainly relied on the examples of Japanese literature and reinterpretation of the Confucian traditions as devices to make his argument for an individualistic literature. Lin, on the other hand, mainly based his proposals on the works in Western literary theories, such as George Meredith (1828–1909)'s "Essay on Comedy," which regards humor as a mixture of ridicule and pity on someone.³⁷ To Lin, it is not the ridicule of the mocked object, but the presence of pity that makes humorous literature humane. Based on the theories of Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) and E. Spingarn (1875–1939), Lin also argues that being innate to human life, humor is often a trait of the expressionist literature. Lin's literary practice was so influential that the year 1933 became "The Year of Humor." It aligns well with Zhou's individualistic theory, but directly opposes Lu Xun's socio-politically orientated approach. Out of a sense of emergency, Lu Xun states that, there is no room for humor in China and a literature of humor and leisure can only obscure the oppressing classes' ruthlessness.³⁸ To counter the literature of humor, the Leftists established a new journal *Taibai* (Morning Star) in 1934 with polemic social criticism and promotion of scientific essay (*kexue xiaopin*) as emphasis.

The masterpiece: "Touring Hangzhou in a Spring Day"

Published in May 1933, "Touring Hangzhou in a Spring Day" (Chunri youhangji) represents Lin's typical style in the 1930s.³⁹ Promoting a literature of humor, Lin was attacked by the Leftists as an escapist closing his eyes in front of the harsh reality. However, a close reading of this essay reveals that such factionist charges might be unfounded. The

essay first introduces the chaotic and depressing social environment: The Japanese just occupied the northern city Qinhuangdao and he could not focus on his job, but the Nationalist government will label protesting as pro- Communist. Touring Hangzhou thus becomes the only alternative. Meanwhile, Lin and other advocates of humorous literature are to blame for the fall of the state in the eyes of the Leftists. However, he would be happy to resume such responsibilities if China can be saved that way. Then the essay describes in details his two VIP neighbors on the train about their gluttonous and rude behavior. In the following space, Lin describes the artwork-like sceneries: "Arriving at the West Lake, it drizzled. (We) then settled in a room. Looking far out of the window, the inner lake, the Solitary Hill, the causeway, the pagoda, yacht, and tourists, all are like a painting."⁴⁰ This succinct and carefree style resembles that of the Late Ming hermit essayists.

Nevertheless, Lin demonstrated a tension between his theoretical declaration and literary creation, as the essay turned out to be a critical commentary on political, cultural and social issues disguised by the relaxing appreciation of nature. The Lin family's tour always meet disturbance from the vulgar tourists who do not have any aesthetic tastes. He comments that with such citizens China is doomed. After appreciating the unique teapot used in the Buddhist monks and studying its mechanism, Lin even turns to discuss with the monk how they deal with sexual desire, which is not usually included in this type of writings. Through their conversation, Lin concludes that the monk's rationalization of asceticism resembles that of St. Paul, Kant and Plato. Interestingly, Lin observes that the monks hired a maid to help them, implying a problematic sexual relationship. Toward the end, Lin records a conversation with a peddler selling fake antiques. After purchasing a volume of sutra, Lin ridicules that they both got what they wanted through the transaction: it is money to raise family for the peddler and a book to read for himself. Following that line, Lin uses reduction to absurdity, arguing that people should understand the warlords' killing of people only as a profession to bring bread home instead of regarding it as a crime. Mixing elements of poetic and profane, pity and irony to create a comic style, the essay constitutes a subtle political protest that is not fundamentally different from the Leftist literature in spirit. Unfortunately, in some later versions, the beginning and ending parts of the essay were deleted to avoid censorship from the Nationalist government. This "textual castration" made it more

difficult to discern Lin's critical voices.

Odes to the socialist Mirage – Yang Shuo, Liu Baiyu and Qin Mu

Following the decree of Mao's 1942 Yan'an Talk, literature production of 1949–1966 in mainland China acquired an unprecedented ideological uniformity. With the foundation of the People's Republic in 1949, an optimistic and heroic atmosphere prevailed in cultural production. The essay writing largely fall into the following categories: odes to praise the heroes from both wartime and the era of socialist construction, the collective-oriented lifestyle according to the new customs, or the grandeur of natural landscape—the physical embodiment of the socialist state. Consequently, the writing of the individual self, the quotidian and the leisure that celebrated by Zhou Zuoren and Lin Yutang was not only regarded as irrelevant to the heroic sociopolitical struggle and the socialist construction, but was also dismissed as expressions of the unhealthy “petite bourgeois sentiment.”⁴¹

To put it simply, essay writing is “nationalized” and politicized to elaborate and praise the new collective Self. It thus “differs from Republican period forms in its characteristically friendly yet didactic second-person rhetoric, and its tendency to build verbal monuments for national heroes.”⁴² In terms of style, it often uses the “old society” as the contrasting backdrop, and promotes “a dispersed textual body with a concentrated spirit” becomes the new formula,⁴³ and the casual and decentered styles seen in Zhou Zuoren's essays disappeared. Seemingly, just a formal requirement, this formula became problematic when the “spirit” became exclusively dogmatic and predefined by the Party. In the process, with the individual self of the authors fades away from their essays, they often merely functioned as the technician to organize the subject matters around the “spirit,” the aforementioned grand themes of socialism. Nevertheless, this ideological uniformity does not imply any across-the-board monotonous aesthetic style in essay writing. Yang Shuo (1913–1968), Liu Baiyu (1913–2005) and Qin Mu (1919–1992) are the three paradigmatic essayists with distinctive aesthetic styles during the 1950s and 1960s.

Yang Shuo: common working people as true heroes

Yang Shuo was born in Penglai, Shandong. At his youth, Yang received training in classical learning.

He worked as a clerk for ten years since 1927. Starting from 1938, he participated in the anti-Japanese war as a journalist and writer, and created numerous war-related short stories and news report, often in a sketchy and rushed style. In early 1950s, he went to Korea as a journalist to report the war, and wrote a famous novel *The Three-Thousand-Mile Territory* (Sanqianli Jiangshan, 1953), in which the exuberant and sublime war heroes are highlighted. Since 1956, Yang started working in diplomacy and turned to focusing on essay writing based on his personal travel experiences. Much indebted to his early training in classical poetry, in his essays of the 1950s and 1960s Yang was able to develop a lyrical style of essay writing. Being persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, Yang committed suicide in 1968.

Combing the classicist aestheticism and the orthodox ideological message, Yang's “flamboyant lyrical style redefined essay writing and reading in socialist China.”⁴⁴ Although mainly based on his firsthand travel experiences, his essays are not down-to-earth recount of these experiences as such. Rather, Yang often constructed his most celebrated essays, such as “Red Leaf of Mt. Fragrant” (Xiangshan hongye, 1956), “The Mirage” (Haishi, 1959), “Apex of Mt. Tai” (Taishan jiding, 1959), and “Litchi Flower Honey” (Lizhi mi, 1960) as allegories and/or eulogies. They became the testimony of the Maoist version of historical materialism: the masses are the true heroes in creating the new socialist reality through their dedicated hard work and struggle. Introduction to the beauty of the Nature or natural objects often serve as the prelude and background. With the narration goes on, the true protagonists, often veteran revolutionaries, ordinary workers or farmers, are presented, during which process the “old society” is brought in as a contrast to the new society. The “I” narrator (the author) becomes the humble learner, observer, and recorder of their stories. The ending of the essay often comes with an explicit enunciation of the intent for his writing. Artistically refined, structurally formulated, and thus easy to model on, Yang's writing style has been popular in middle and high school curriculum, but has also been questioned since the 1980s.⁴⁵

Written in 1959, “The Mirage” delineates the author's re-search for the legendary mirage—an optical phenomenon that has long been regarded as the realm of the immortals in ancient China—in his hometown Penglai. The essay begins with his childhood memory about the miracle phenomenon, and then turns to describe his

research of it, which leads us to the discovery of the fishermen's life on the fishing village located on the Changshan archipelago. With well-designed and constructed households, charming natural scenery, and inexhaustible seafood harvest. . . , the villagers are living a fairy-like happy life. To highlight the idea that such a life can only become possible in the socialist new China, Yang gives much space to his conversation with Old Song, the production team leader. Old Song has harsh experiences of suffering and eventually becomes a revolutionary. Therefore, only through such experiences does he become a true hero and gain the credit to lead the village. This might help explain some scholars' observation that, "no matter how transparent the symbolism and fervent the message of his essay, there is almost always slight ambivalence introduced by negative elements at the fringes."⁴⁶ The dark past is to make the present stand out, and the future promising. Ultimately, it is with the working people's defeating of their political and natural enemies through revolution and collectivization that their home of happiness – visualized as the true mirage on Earth – is constructed.

Liu Baiyu: nature as the symbol of the nation

Born in Beijing, Liu Baiyu is affiliated with the PLA. He once temporarily joined a local army out of passion for resisting the Japanese in 1931, and then withdrew to attend college in 1934, when he started learning writing. He started publishing literary works in 1936, focusing on social problems, often with a sentimental style. In 1938, he went to Yan'an, and turned to write about the military and the war of resistance in northern China with a new style that is full of grandeur and exalted spirits. Since 1946 he worked as a military journalist for Xinhua News Agency and wrote numerous news correspondence and reportage and about the life of soldiers during the civil war against the Nationalists, and later the Korean War. If war is a time for celebrating genuine comradeship to Sun Li (1913–2002), to Liu, it is the sublime marching lyrics toward the ultimate triumph of the future. After 1955, he became an official in the institutions in charge of cultural and literary affairs, and gained his reputation for essay writing. After the Cultural Revolution, Liu continued publishing works of essay and fiction, and won the "Award for Outstanding Essay" by Chinese Writer's Association in 1989, and the Mao Dun Prize on Literature for his novel *The Second Sun* (Di'er ge taiyang) in 1991.

Carrying over the heroic, combative spirit of the wartime as well as a deep faith in the society's

progressing into a bright future to the era of socialism, Liu Baiyu's essays often come with explicit political orientation. He overtly eulogizes – often with hyperbolic tone – the socialist construction, the struggle against Taiwan, and the political movements – even including the Great Leap Forward, which later turned out to be disastrous. However, what distinguishes Liu as an essayist is his expression of the political consciousness through a symbolic use of such natural imageries as the sun, the red color, blaze, light, monstrous wave and thunderstorm. Therefore, his best essays from the 1950s and 1960s include those dedicated to the depiction of the magnificent power and beauty of natural scenery such as the Kunlun Mountain, the Pacific Ocean and the Yangtze River. "Sunrise" (Richu, 1959) writes about the author's preference of sunrise to sunset, in that while the latter gives people the impression of sorrow and decline, the sunrise indicates the coming into being of a bright new life along with the light and heat after defeating the darkness.

Resembling a style of Beethovenian symphony, "Three Days on the Yangtze River" (Changjiang sanri, 1960) is a detailed journal on Liu's cruising on the long Yangtze River, which is full of "hidden rocks" and "turbulent currents" that all may endanger the course. Nevertheless, Liu suggests that the bright, splendid scenery will be awaiting ahead after overcoming such obstacles through the dark nights. The first day's trip starts on the turbulent river covered by thick, turbid fog, and then goes through the reefs in the dark night. However, the author sets the tone of opportunism and combating spirit, arguing that a life worth living is the one that struggles through such difficult situations. The second day then focuses on the sublime natural scenery (the unfathomable river, the steep mountains on the riverbank and the splendid sunrise) which comes along with the difficult course of the boat. The third day is about the tranquil moments after the boat going through the thrilling course, and the author's contemplation on the coming into being of a life of freedom out of perseverant struggle and sacrifice. This essay thus is not an objective travelogue, but a political allegory of the progressive course of socialist construction.

Qin Mu: knowledge and its political implications

Born in the British colony Hong Kong, Qin Mu spent his childhood in Southeast Asia where he established a lifelong interest in exploring nature. As overseas Chinese, he also had abundant opportunities to observe the society that was full of inequality and violence,

especially towards the migrant Chinese. Returning to China in 1931 to attend high school, Qin Mu extensively read modern, Western and classical literature. Since 1938, he engaged in the anti-Japanese efforts as actor, teacher and editor in southern China, and started his writing career. From 1941 to 1944, Qin Mu stayed in Guilin, and demonstrated his talents by writing satirical essays to criticize the atrocity of the Japanese and the corruption, treason, poverty and violence under the Nationalist regime. After the war, he stayed in Hong Kong for three years as a professional writer, and joined the PLA in 1949. Qin mainly worked as editor for Zhonghua Press and *Yangchen Nightly News*, and as professional writer and officer in the local and national Chinese Writers Association in New China. When the satirical style-writing familiar to him started to cause him troubles in the 1950s, he changed his focus to write on topics welcome to the new society. A prolific essayist, Qin published more than forty collections during his lifetime. Qin Mu is widely known for his capability to summon knowledge from natural sciences, social sciences and humanities into his essay writing during the 1950s and 1960s. This constitutes one of the keys to his popularity.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, in his hands the boundless, encyclopedic knowledge is not for parading his learning. Rather, his passionate, exhaustive enumeration of knowledge on a specific topic serves to constitute a political ode to the new socialist era and its heroic people, or a philosophical reflection on the nature of everyday and social life based on the Marxist dialectical thinking. This way of using knowledge is quite different from the Hellenic attitude “knowing for knowing’s sake” that Zhou Zuoren promoted in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, in his “Collection Sea Shells on the Beach” (Haibian shibe, 1959), he discusses the function of seashell in human history, and eventually contemplates that in the endless process of evolution within the boundless world, the individual life is so trivial that, it has to associate itself with the collective or larger community. Still, Qin Mu belonged to the most cosmopolitan and intellectually reflexive writers of his generation.

An ordinary yet sacred element in human history, the land in Qin Mu’s eyes becomes a concentrated stage for the historical dramas of social oppression and resistance. In his essay “The Land” (Tudi, 1960) that abounds with passion, Qin Mu first argues about the symbolic importance of the land through describing a scene of 2,600 years ago in northern China, when the offer of dirt by a farmer to the fleeing prince ominously forebodes his eventual success in power struggle. Then he discusses how the emperors used the dirt in the ritual for appointing

provincial officials, and how the Western colonizers forced the colonized to surrender by putting dirt on their heads. Then he turns to bring up the other side of history by discussing how the diasporic Chinese carried the dirt of their motherland to their oversea destination, the struggle and suffering of the poor farmers over the issue of land, and the sacrifice people has been making to defend their own land. Finally, the essay comes back to reality, and proposes that the epoch-making social changes and mega construction projects can only happen when the land returns to the hands of the working people in the new socialist era. The essay then ends with open-ended questions: how to defend the land, and how to build a better home on it for the whole humanity.

Beyond the socialist heritage

The vicissitudes of the fate of these three essayists’ works reflected the dramatically shifting paradigms of cultural production and political atmosphere. They were highly acclaimed in the 1960s, and then in the early 1980s as a way to criticize the literary inquisition during the Cultural Revolution. With the transformation in political climate during the 1980s, however, critics started to question the gap between the glorious, sublime textual world of socialism they created and the disastrous political practices of the 1950s and 1960s, and then challenged the genuineness in their representation of historical truth. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that their political odes to the new socialist era are not sheer propagandist performances. Rather, their genuine optimism is rooted in the vivid contrast between the new society and the previous dark era of history, including the miseries, wars and natural disasters they experienced or witnessed. The problems, therefore, are not necessarily within their writings *per se*, but with the teleological vision of history and the utopic view of the future that mesmerized the whole nation: the promised arrival of the glorious new era itself ultimately turned out to be dystopic. Soon in the late 1980s and 1990s, the nation-centered, ideology-charged, teleology-oriented mode of writing gradually became obsolete, and the individualistic, heteroglossic mode of writing from the May Fourth enlightenment resurrected. Besides such veteran writers as Ba Jin (1904–2005), Bing Xin, Sun Li and Wang Zengqi (1920–1997) who remembered and reflected their past life, new generation writers such as Yu Qiuyu (b. 1946) and Jia Pingwa (b. 1952) expanded the territory of essay writing by making it more ideologically detached, culturally relevant and stylistically diverse.

Notes

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