

Illusionary Cosmopolitanism and Flawed Humanity: A New Interpretation of Xu Xu's "Modern Tales of the Strange"

Xiaoping WANG

School of Chinese, Xiamen University, China

Email: [wxping75@hotmail.com](mailto:wxpings75@hotmail.com)

Abstract:

Xu Xu's (1908-1980) "modern tales of the strange," produced in 1940s China, is often read by critics in the framework of "romanticism" or "modernism." This paper takes a new perspective in interpreting his stories with a practice of political hermeneutics. By analyzing the two major themes together with their fissures in the fiction: aborted romance and illusionary cosmopolitanism, shadow and tension in a "universal humanity," the study contends that his "modern tales of the strange" is a genre of "modern literati fiction" aimed to express the writer's cultural reveries and anxieties in a seemingly hopeless social-historical reality. It shows the predicament the liberalist intellectuals faced in the society at the time when there was no material conditions to realize their bourgeois ideal of cosmopolitanism and universal love

1 INTRODUCTION

Xu Xu's (1908-1980) "modern tales of the strange," written in the wartime 1940s, were the writer's "trademark" and very popular in the time when they were first published, which now are often read by critics against the framework of "romanticism" or "modernism." But this paper tries to take a new perspective in understanding his stories by including the social-political context as their subtexts.

Xu Xu (real name Xu Boyu) was born in 1908 in a rural household of Cixi, Zhejiang province, which had fallen into poverty in his father's generation. His parent separated and when he was five, consequently he was sent to a missionary school as a boarder. The life of solitude contributed to his longing for parental love. Graduated from the philosophy department of Peking University in 1931, for two years he continued to study in the psychological department out of personal interest. Around this time he began his literary adventure. Thereafter he went to Shanghai to assume the editorship of the magazines such as *Lun Yu* (Analects), *Renjianshi* (The Human World), etc., which were led by Lin Yutan (1895-1976), the famed promoter and leader of what he called "humorous literature." In 1936 he went to Paris to study philosophy, but soon returned to Shanghai when the War broke out one year later. He went to Chongqing in 1942 and worked in a bank, while simultaneously holding academic positions in some universities. Two years later, he went to the States as a special correspondent for a domestic newspaper. Returning to China in 1946, he moved to Hong Kong after 1950.

Like many intellectuals in his time, Xu Xu had experienced a left-leaning period. He read many Marxist canons in his college years, and his earlier writings bear the imprints of the leftist thoughts. They express compassionate feelings towards the repressed and the dispossessed. Yet elements of class struggle aside, his works also show sympathy towards degenerate peoples, displaying his ingrained belief in the bourgeois ideology of "universal humanity." His overseas study in France consolidated his turning away from radical politics. The reading of the trial record of Trotsky facilitated his disillusion with the merciless power struggles within the revolutionaries, and thus the communist doctrine. Meanwhile, the advanced capitalist society of France with its "free way of life" greatly attracted him. From then on, he regarded himself as an individualist, and abjured revolution and mass movement.

The writer's subscription to the discourses of "human nature," love and beauty, and his curiosity in romantic adventures, characterize his creative direction. But the "universal" and the "common" can only be understood through the analysis of the concrete and the particular, namely the ideologemes within the texts. Through analyzing the two major themes in his fiction together with their fissures: abortion and illusion in apparent romance and cosmopolitanism, shadow and tension in a "universal humanity," this study reveals that his "romantic" writings are a kind of "modern literati fiction," a symbolic reaction to the political and cultural crisis of the era.

2 ABORTED ROMANCE AND ILLUSIONARY COSMOPOLITANISM

Xu Xu's stories often focus on such thematic concerns as cosmopolitanism and "universal humanity," and are also often couched in aborted romances, filled with shadow and tension.

During his study in Paris, he wrote his first masterpiece, the novelette *Gui lian* (Love with a Ghost girl). The story was well received and went through nineteen printings in seven years. The first-person male narrator, with an ambiguous identity but almost can be identified with the author-like figure in many of his stories, happens to meet the heroine in the street in a night. She addresses the latter as "man," which triggers the narrator's curiosity, but she soon reveals herself as a "ghost." Enchanted by her mysterious beauty, the narrator is struggling between his sense of modern "rationality" and the credulity of this unbelievable captivation. Nevertheless, she insists that love is futile between a man and a ghost. Finally he gets her story, though he still could not get into her heart. It turns out that she was once an underground revolutionary. Having assassinated more than a dozen political enemies, she was imprisoned and had lost his lover. When the revolution is betrayed, she declines the daylight world. Notwithstanding the narrator wishes a normal union with her, she leaves him without further message. The phantasmagoric plot as well as the fantastic atmosphere envelopes the story in a surrealistic ambience.

Ostensibly a realistic work about an aborted romance between the narrator – an alter ego of the author – and an erstwhile revolutionary, the story is better to be read as a fable: From the very beginning, this chance encounter is, if not a daydream, then a night-dream that barely can be seen as realistic. But more incredible is the "love" between the two. In all capacity, both the female revolutionary's legendary career and her mercurial character appear mystical to the narrator. He admires her courage, and is attracted to her revolutionary ideal, to be sure; yet unearthly as she is, she is always an alien to him, refusing his intellectual understanding. She is "unreasonable;" whereas reason, or modern rationality, is what is cherished by the sober intellectual. With a seemingly sacred aura, she is nevertheless a "ghost" that cannot appear in daylight world. She is hard to be approached and understood. Though she still sends flowers to the narrator when he is ill, he never sees her any more – the spiritual relations still continues, he is still sympathetic to revolution and his erstwhile leftist ideal, yet there is no possibility for him to return to the historical site, to join with the ghost-like, mysterious, attractive yet dangerous alien, although he is "blessed" by the latter. The aborted romance is a fable of a failed integration. That this episode is narrated in the present time-space when it has passed ten-more years reveals that this is a memoir about a phantom, or a romantic reverie. To be more specific, the story, in its renewed, modern version of "the traditional Chinese tale of mortal man enthralled by predatory female ghost,"¹ narrates in a historical fable symbolically the author's severance with his erstwhile leftist passion with the revolutionary ideal.

What makes the "romance" possible from the very beginning, however, is that this "revolutionary" has died to the world: She insists that she is a ghost; dressed in a Buddhist nun, she wishes to escape from reality. In other words, she does not hold her erstwhile passion any more, and loses her faith in the cause. This makes her more compatible with the narrator. Still,

¹ David Polland, entry of *Guilian* (Love with a Ghost), in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová eds. (1988), 188.

she is a mysterious alien. Apparently she refuses the narrator's proposal because she regards love an absurdity in the human world; but it is not difficult for us to recognize that it is because she harbors deeply, genuine emotion towards her late lover, a martyr, that she could not accept any other man any more. Revolution is subtly conveyed as uncanny; but since she has negated the political cause, there is barely reasonable that she still refuses to enter the secular world – if it is because her heart has been dead, it is paradoxical that she still cares for, if not falls in love with, the narrator. The latter's criss-crossing of the boundary between the real and the unreal to deliver his intended message, in this light, has many fissures waiting for patch-up.

“Alabo hai de nvshen” (Goddess of the Arabian Sea) is another story that the writer produced when he studied in Paris. The first-person narrator meets a woman in a steamship when he travels to Europe. Her unusual mannerism and unbelievable youthfulness indicates she is a surrealist character. She informs him that she is a nomadic sorceress traveling around the world. And her cosmopolitanism is shown in her erudition of world cultures and her capability to speak fluent Chinese. But what is significant in their discussions of all supernatural tales is the story about the legendary Goddess of the Arabian Sea, who was a beautiful Arabic girl. She is looking for the truth from various sacred doctrines, such as Confucianism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islamism, yet could not decide which one she should take in as her religious faith. After many overseas trips looking for the ultimate enlightenment, she avails nothing so she drowns herself. The sorceress' question for the narrator is: what he can answer if the Goddess seeks from him the answer to her query. His reply shows he takes love to be the highest truth: “religious commandments are nothing but the sublimation of sexual desire...while love is the God for the youth.” Unquestionably, for him, the “universal humanity” of love prevails over any religious teachings.

In another evening, she tells the man a modified story, in which the story she has told is changed to be her personal encounter with the Goddess some twenty years earlier. This makes her words less credible to him. In the second day, he meets a girl with a black veil over her face. He suspects her to be the Goddess, and tells her that for the Chinese, there are three phrases of religious belief. “When he is a child, his parents are his religion; in his youth, lover; and in his old age, his scions.” He explains his words: “religion is love, is a belief, is (the will to) sacrifice;” for the Chinese, secular concerns are their religion. However, this self-supported, secular belief is challenged by the following happenings.

He gives her his ring as a gift because she likes it. The next day he finds that she wears a gigantic silver ring with some pictorial inscription on it. Upon his request, she informs him that there was a custom that was practiced in a certain place, where lovers of different religious beliefs, for the sake of living forever together without the intervention of religious taboo, would kill themselves. She gives him the ring, and accepts his request to let her mask be unveiled. The blessed moment of this symbolic exchange of token of love is sabotaged by his careless missing of the girl's veil to the sea, which leads to the final episode, when the sorceress appears, and he is informed that the girl is her daughter. As the latter's heart has been taken by a man (the mask symbolizes the chastity of an Arabic woman), she could not take her mother's occupation anymore but has to be married to him. Yet like Luo in *Woman in Pagoda*, only at this moment

that the narrator “remembers” that he has a wife and three children. He has to throw himself into the sea; the girl follows. Immediately, all of these are revealed to be a “romantic” dream.

Again, apparently “love” surmounts all the divides between religions, races, morality, and even any ultimate concerns – if we remember that the secular persona of the “Goddess” has committed suicide because she could not find the ultimate belief, then now she does it a second time just for love. In this way, she gets what she desires – the eternity, because love in this moment is seen as leading to the eternity (she says to “me” when she jumps to the sea: “my lover, this is our life in the secular world.”) Love, even it is merely a moment, prevails over any secular concern, and defeats mortality.

Yet from another perspective, we can also see love simultaneously loses in its battle with the religious taboo, and with the secular morality: The narrator can excuse his emotional impulse by arguing that his heart has a correspondence with the girl, yet he implicitly refuses her mother’s request to marry the girl for the ethical-moral convention of his mother country; meanwhile, they have to die in order to get love. Cosmopolitanism – love as a medium to tie in peoples around the world regardless their religions – is a dream that is in no way to be realized in the real world. Indeed, as the narrator admits his life philosophy to the sorceress, “other peoples are seeking for true dream in life, whereas I’m seeking for a real life in my dream.” We can rephrase this sentence a little bit to make its import clearer: there are some who seek to realize the utopian project in the secular world, whereas I construct a utopian world in my daydream. “Abandoning the present” is seen as the inevitable road leading to the utopian “seeking for the eternity.” But whereas he sees this as “a possibility that at least offers the freedom [to choose by oneself],” by taking the false for the real, this fantasy merely becomes a modern literati fiction.

This tendency is more explicit in a later story *Huangmiu de yingfa haixia* (Absurd Dover Channel). Under the same framework of the narrator’s daydream, it recounts his experience in a utopian world, a place reminiscent of the Peach Blossom Shangri-la (Taohuayuan) offered by the ancient Chinese poet Tao Yuanming (367-427), but the social-political structure of the society and the spiritual world of the populace are more bearing the imprints of the political Utopia described by Thomas More (1478-1535), the famed pioneer of the “Utopian socialism.” Being “kidnapped” by pirates in a steamship, “I” am invited by the pirates’ leader, a captain who loves Chinese culture, to live in a paradise which has no hierarchy of classes, no discrimination of races, no commodities and currencies, and has goods allotted by needs. This implicit, yet also more-than-clear reflection and critique of modern civilization is aided by the repetition of a complaint articulated by the passengers and the narrator himself at the beginning and the end of the text respectively: While the distance of the strait that divides the two states is short, there is no possibility to build a bridge or undersea tunnel to facilitate communication. This is a man-made obstacle that separates the peoples, making cosmopolitanism merely a daydream. The critique of capitalism, and in particular imperialism, which hampers the realization of this “great union” (*datong*) is conveyed by the narrator’s reference of the forefather of the British as the originators of the pirate, and the denunciation by the leader of this socialist fantasyland, who accuses the imperialists for their plunder in their colonized areas.

Free-willed reveries aside, here the author shows a strong tendency of anarchism, a cultural-political radicalism that repudiates any collective organization in a community; instead, in the fantastic dreamworld there is no class, no bureaucracy, because “everyone is governing himself and the others” and there are simply no fights out of differing interests; the leader is merely the servant of the people and he has no authority; there is no college there because everyone is simultaneously engaged in work and study. To be sure, the author probably intends the piece to be a mirror reflecting back the contemporary dirty reality.² And this critique was supported by the intellectual trend of the time interrogating the validity of modernity for the realization of happiness, or the debatable value of modernization (there is no mobile bicycle in the “state”). Yet the author has no way to evade the social-historical institution that casts a shadow over the dream, which is in particular shown in the formulaic entanglement of various forms of “love triangles.” He stresses that marriage as an institution is well observed there, for which he nevertheless faces a dilemma: Falling in love with a girl – the sister of the captain that he befriends – he has his wife and children in his homeland; meanwhile, a local youth is also enamored of the beauty and envying the love that his sweetheart bestows upon the narrator. This predicament also besieges the captain and the Chinese girl that he loves who has been detained there for three years and who has her own fiancé back home. The solution for all these entanglements is debatable: Because there is a local carnival festival in which the order of women is irrefutable, so everyone implicated finally seemingly gets his/her desired outcome: the Chinese girl proclaims the leader as her lover, the leader’s sister accepts the advance of the local youth, and the narrator gets what he does not expect and might not be very pleased: another girl that he socializes in those days. This picture is made possible by the change of mind of the Chinese girl (which is unexplained) towards the proposal of the leader; to further the settlement of the difficulties, the two set the arrangements for all the others. But we might ask: Is the girl who is going to be married to the local man really happy, given her passion on the narrator? Will the “marriage” between “I” and the other girl be happy, given that “I” never has romantic feelings to her? How should the girl being engaged to the leader deal with her fiancé at home, and “I” with “my wife and children in my home country”? Cosmopolitanism (or rather, here a form of internationalism) is impossible here, not merely because of the separation of states, not even by the imperialist’s colonial advance, but it is by something invisible. As a “story of conception,” it has entertainment value (thus entitling it to be a “middle-brow” literature, namely a work for the distraction of middle class readers), whereas its social concern and critical message is undercut by its “unrealistic” reveries and easy-and-cheap ending. While in the text social democracy and internationalism are idealized, it only betrays the real shortage of these in reality; thus the utopian picture offered there in terms of a new political world has much more entertainment value than any realistic significance.

3 SHADOW AND TENSION IN A “UNIVERISAL HUMANITY”

² Apart from a critique of Western and Japanese imperialism and Soviet-styled Communism, China is not absent from this picture, as the narrator numerous attacks the ugly world of the contemporary Chinese society.

As said, the cosmopolitanism expressed here is premised on the belief in a universal humanity regardless of social-historical limitation. Yet the series of “romance stories” that the writer created thereafter, while still preaching this “religion of love,” again show the fissures therein.

Secluded in Shanghai, Xu Xu continued to write stories, which established his artistic parameters and brought about such stories as *Jipusai de youhuo* (Gypsy Enticement), *Jingshen binghuan zhe de beige* (Elegy of Psychotics), and the one we just discussed. On the surface, the first story eulogizes a free-willed life unconstrained by social customs; the second exemplifies a selfless love and self-sacrifice. A careful textual analysis will reveal multiple tensions underneath the euphonious, and numerous gaps within the narrative texture, to the extent that they deconstruct the superficial message, showing desolate ruins out of the relentless demolishing force of the inequality of class hierarchy.

Ostensibly, “Gypsy Enticement” presents a romance between a first-person narrator, a Chinese intellectual who is returning from Paris to China, and a French model, who is a socializing celebrity. A romance between a pair of couple who own vastly differing identities apparently displays a cosmopolitan flavor.

With the help of a Gypsy vagrant Lola, I meet the beauty named Pauline (Panlei as her Chinese pronunciation) who works in a fashion boutique, taking her to be an innocent fairy. Yet she tells me that she only leads a misshapen, chaotic, and contradictory life everyday, because she has to support her family. I spend large sum of money to please her, taking it to be a spiritual love, which invites mockery from Lola, who scoffs at it as a “middle class bookish romance” and informs me that Pauline can be easily prostituted if I pay money. Infuriated, I reluctantly agree to test Pauline for what Lola says, and is appalled to find that it is true. Out of indignation and disappointment, I scold Pauline mercilessly. But shortly later, I have to accept Lola’s advice to sell myself to a rich bitch because I’m penniless, only to find the guest is Pauline. Having reconciled with her, I bring Pauline back to home country for marriage, irrespective of Lola’s warning that she is a “bourgeois” woman who is used to an extravagant life and would not be used to a simple life. Again, Lola’s premonition comes true, and I have to take her back to France. Pauline works in her previous profession, having much commodity value for the products she helps to promote. But I feel sloppy, and follow Lola to travel to the States and to South America. After several months, being afraid that I’m falling in love with a Gypsy girl, Pauline resigns her job and follows me. “We” follow the Gypsies to travel everywhere as they please. Taking mendicancy and legerdemain as a profession, from now on we live a happy life!

The adventure itself is a middle class romantic fantasy. From the precondition for the acquaintance (even though the narrator is a middle-class intellectual, Lola tells him that only he is dressed in handsome coat could there be the possibility for him to attract the woman) to the process of acquiring her heart (“I” spend lost of money, even by borrowing debts, to win her favor), all of which indicate that this romance itself has its particular class nature. Pauline can lead a decent life by her legitimate profession, but she works as a prostitute for more luxurious

life.³ Lola has aptly remarked on the true nature of this romance: “In all honesty, what is your love towards her? It is nothing but her pretty outlook and pleasant manner.” (153)

Exotic orientalism is everywhere, which is taken to be a form of cosmopolitanism. “To be natural, always in exile, and free – this is the soul of our nation.” Lola, the Gypsy girl says. I admire this “spirit,” and recommend this to the readers. What is easily neglected, however, is the price this “romantic” life pays: Lola has to engage in a career that “professionally” hoodwinks money from the rich (and ironically “I” even recommend this as one asset of the ethnic group for emulation), and her repetitive insistence on getting exorbitant pay from me for any “service” she provides has also invited my antipathy. She also has complained that the children of the race have to travel everywhere to beg for food and clothes, living a miserable life. Therefore, although they see themselves as a group and help each other when needed, they are none other than the class of “lumpen-proletariat” without a salient class consciousness. They are the subaltern, the outcast, rather than a free nation that this legendary tale holds. Yet, out of the mouth of Lola the author shows the seemingly enviable free lifestyle of Gypsy’s “philosophy of love and beauty” – they engage in “free romance” anytime they please; yet for the Gypsy, this is a custom that is brought about by their destitute and insecure life; while for the author-narrator, it is another middle class fantasy about “free love.”

When Lola preaches this “carefree and natural” “Gypsy soul,” the “happiness” of the group is attributed to their “free will” that obeys the order of the supernatural, while they fight nothing for the betterment of their life. The narrator expresses his admiration of this philosophy, “I love the attitude of your race: your generosity, innocence; you are not engaged in overdue study, not immersed in the interests of social affairs, having no curiosity over anything, not making deliberate efforts, not determined to devote to anything, not pursuing knowledge perfunctorily, not fighting for success, having no ideal and desire ... You are only believing in the blue sky and the bright moon, living peacefully and leisurely underneath.” (166) This exoticization of the oppressed race is not merely out of the influence of a Buddhist philosophy, not even from the ideal of Christianity, but it is for the spiritual needs of the Chinese intellectuals seeking for a utopian life outside the constraint of the harsh reality. It is believed that if an individual has no power to change the world, he can at least follow the “nature,” the order of the God, to acquire happiness. “I prefer to seek a true life in daydream,” the narrator says.

“Elegy of a Psychotic” is about a healing process for the “convalescence” of a “psychotic.” “I” am a Chinese student studying psychology in Paris, and is hired to be an assistant of a psychiatrist for the treatment of a Madam named Betty (Baidi), who lives a debauched life ever since she was forced by her father to marry his business partner (which she declines). To prepare for this mission, I’m asked to receive some special training, such as boxing, shooting, horse riding, etc, which is reminiscent of the special training that some employed agents have received from their employers for tough mission – and indeed, some of the trainings play their

³ Lola aptly comments on her life, “She is a genuine bourgeois woman in a capitalist society...Life to her is fire; she is used to a romantic, sumptuous life-style, in need of meaningless party; fresh stimulations give her excitement.” Xu Xu (1996), 151.

role when I deal with the subaltern world where Betty is socializing. After observation, “I” believe the cause for her abnormal behavior and psychological disarray is her distrust of any person around her, who in her mind only uses her whereas harbors no love for her. To remove this mentality, “I” set up a scheme, firstly by persuading her that her maid Helen (Hailan) and “I” are truly caring for her; then by pretending that I’m in love with Helen in order to arouse her envy and passion. Betty is almost “cured,” yet unexpectedly Helen and “I” are really falling in love with each other in the process. The maid commits suicide to fulfill the will of her master. Moved by this “self-sacrificing” behavior, Betty devotes herself to the God by becoming a nun and “I” decide to work in the psychotic hospital for my remaining time.

The latter half of the story is a moving, if somewhat sentimental and stereotyped, melodrama. Nevertheless, when the “romance” is undergoing a social-psychoanalytic procedure, everything apparent that has been narrated would be turned upside down. To begin with, “I” am merely a hired employee, as Betty accuses me incisively when Helen commits suicide, that I “devote life, time, love and passion to be a slave of several thousand Francs.” Although “I” try to explain away this apt charge by arguing that “I am only a slave of my job. I love my job, and I’m willing to devote everything for my job.” We should remember that “I” have tried to quit my job quite several times, but is rejected by the threat that “I” have signed a contract so “I” should be “willing” to do everything that is requested. And this requirement obviously compromises “my” integrity. When Betty continues her perceptive interrogation, “You dare to use your debase scheme to beguile two vulnerable girls” by using innocent Helen to manipulate her emotion, “I” try hard to gloss over the ulterior motive of my intension to accomplish my assigned mission; in particular, “I” use the rhetoric of love. In counteracting her accusation that “your job is being hired (by my parents) to cheat me,” “I” protest: “But I know their intension is love.” Obviously this is a (at least partially) false excuse, as Betty had been forced to marry a business partner for business interests.

The following self-conflicting excuse furthermore betrays my innate scheme and my guilty conscience. Betty cynically yet perceptively points out my hypocrisy, “Your ‘love’ is your job.” “‘No,’ I protest, I can swear that only during my work that love emerged in my heart.” “What is your job anyway apart from ‘love’?” Betty ingeniously fights back. Besides, granted what “I” said is true, this “love” is in conflict with the professional ethics, so “I” haste to gloss it over, but in this way “I” have refuted what “I” just said, “Supposed my job is merely love, and this ‘love’ is real, what is the disgrace anyhow?” This “supposition,” however, is a completely fake hypothesis. Earlier “I” have confessed that I do not love Betty at all; but to achieve the goal (of letting Betty become a “normal,” “decent,” middle class aristocrat woman), “I” have pretended to love Betty, arousing her passion by manipulating Helen. Betty eventually sees through the schemes, and reproaches convincingly my scurvy motive and behavior. “I” has no way to refute her accusation, but try to evade her incisive interrogation with the rhetoric of love.

This does not mean Betty has no her problem. Though that she earnestly looks for genuine love that her highly oppressive family declines to her, she also tries to selfishly manipulate and monopolize “my” love; when she sees the manifestation of “love” between Helen and “me,”

she indeed falls into the pitfall that “I” set up for her. Having been aroused of her sense of envy, and with the death of her maid – thus the removal of her rival in love, she returns to be a “normal” woman. That she finally decides to join a convent is due to her realization that she has vicariously deprived the love of her maid, and forced her to commit suicide (Helen has no way to compete with her master for love). But the cardinal culprit of the tragedy is “me,” nevertheless. Alienated by the capitalist money economy, “I” sacrifice my integrity and use foul means. That “I” eventually decide to work in the psychological hospital, in this light, is a sign of atonement; but judged with what “I” have done, this action appears dubious, if not ridiculous.

Like the last story, this tale tries to displace the difference between classes, and the concomitant problems it brings about (the inhuman work ethics, the inequality between the master and the maid, and the mercenary nature of money economy) with a discourse of natural humanity. But this story of apparent euphoria of love displaces and covers up a merciless, cruel tragedy perpetuated not merely by individuals, but by the whole social-economic system in general. The author has tried to smooth over the edges with a beautiful veil, yet the tensions and fissures exist in all those rhetorical exchanges betray the ulterior secrete.

In *The Jewish Comet* (Youtairen de huixing), again the discourse of universal humanity is superficially eulogized, now with a tone of patriotism, while in actuality it exposes the cruelty of the war that wreaks havoc on the human mind. The first-person narrator Xu is on a ship journey to Italy with a Jewish girl Katherine, nominally his wife. Then in a long flashback we are informed that he is introduced by his friend, a Norwegian Jew named Sherkels, to this girl because she needs a sham marriage to claim an inheritance home, and he agrees to do so for curiosity and for the discounted steamer ticket. On board, while they gradually fall in love with each other, Katherine is socializing frequently with an Italian sailor, which causes the narrator’s discomfort. When they arrive in Naples, he is informed by Katherine that they have to wait for five days for a lawyer, yet she is out everyday, seemingly for hedonistic activities. And while she asks him to consummate their love, he discovers that she intimately hangs out with the Italian sailor. But ultimately she reveals the mysteries to him: Katherine’s mother is fighting the fascists now in the Spanish civil war (to which historically many international socialists voluntarily joined). She is offering her hand by sabotaging the weapon supplies that Italian fascists provide to Franco. What makes us feel less comfortable, however, is that while she needs Xu’s assistance to enter the country, she has schemed to trap him because the task this time risks a person’s life. The real victim for this mission, however, turns out to be the Italian sailor, who loves Katherine and is hoodwinked to help her. He becomes the scapegoat for Xu, in other words. But Xu and Katherine consummate their love after they arrive in France. Shortly later Katherine departs for Germany again and sacrifices her life in another anti-War mission.

For love, Katherine can spare Xu’s life; yet also she inhumanly manipulates the love of the Italian sailor. Xu’s friend Sherkels has joined to the scheme which almost claims his life. Love and friendship are unreliable during the wartime. In the story, for the war efforts, any foul means are appropriated for the success of the war. In short, the war profoundly changes the

“natural humanity” of the mankind. Although the story extols Katherine’s “love and beauty, her spirit and her body,” the cruel aspects of the war are subtly conveyed.

This nuanced indictment becomes clearer in the writer’s major novel, his most celebrated Feng Xiaoxiao (*The blowing wind*), which was a big stir at the time. It treats the subject of resistance and merges elements of love stories and spy fiction, and is engrossed in a thrilling atmosphere. Again this is in a first-person narrative, which narrates the experience of a “modern scholar” (who studies philosophy) in the spy world. Like the author’s other stories, its popular reception and enticing subject matter endows it a “middle-brow” quality, what is often neglected is that it is also a “fiction of conception” or a “modern literati novel.” Interestingly, this novel share many features of Wumingshi’s *Book without a Name*, as its essential stake lies in a narration of an intellectual’s “spiritual quest,” though now it tells a more intriguing story with absorbing plots.

The story takes place in Shanghai, the place of which served as a locale for many espionage stories both in fiction and in reality at the time. In chance “I” rescues a wounded American military doctor named Steven and we become friends. Through him “I” meet Bai Ping, a beautiful nightclub hostess, and Mei Yingzi, a dazzling lass. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, Steven is captured by the Japanese and dies in the concentration camp. “I” am informed by Mei that they both are agents working for the Americans, and “I” become Mei’s assistant. Mei mistakes Bai Ping as a Japanese spy for her close association with the Japanese; yet Bai actually is an agent for the government. “I” am assigned to steal letters from Bai, but the action is discovered and I’m badly wounded. The miscommunication is reconciled shortly later, but the arrival of a Japanese female spy costs Bai Ping’s life. Mei revenges her by poisoning the enemy. When the story comes to its end, Mei resumes her duty in Shanghai (her identity is still uncovered), and “I” leave for the interior engaged in “philosophical contemplation.” Throughout most of the narrative space there is also a minor role, an American girl named Helen.

If the novel is read as a spy story, there are many technical problems. But the sort of discussion bypasses the real nature of the novel. As a “story of conception,” like the author’s other stories of this kind, again here political issue is treated from the perspective of cultural difference (although it is less distinct here, as there is little political context that is described). Mei was raised in Japan, with an American mother and a Chinese father (and implicitly trained by the American military weapon); her “hybrid” nature might have something to do with her unusual, merciless personality that spares no mercy on any innocent peoples with stakes in her political machination. This constitutes a sharp contrast to Helen, whose character more resembles the classical, allegedly peaceful Greek ideal; and it is also a contrast to Bai Ping, who, holding many traditional Chinese feminine features, is the embodiment of “a general harmony” or a “glittering conglomeration of all the graces of Nature.”⁴ For this, “I” has preferred to having her as my social mate (in fact “I” has stayed in one room with her for a sort of “spiritual love”). To be sure, here the author has no way to evade political issues. But politics, even the cause of

⁴ Wu Yiqin (1993): 146-61; 151-152.

national resistance, appears in the novel (to “me”) as nothing but conspiracy that is repulsive. “My” idealism of the universal humanity, in particular shown in beautiful girls, is sabotaged by these female spies with political missions. “I” feel repulsive over Mei’s merciless manipulation of Helen as a pawn for fulfilling her duty. In this regard, Bai Ping appears more human, as although she suspects “I” am a Japanese spy, she does not kill me and allows me to be taken to hospital. The Japanese spy is simply evil that is hard to be understood. Only Helen, a girl with no political consciousness, appears to me as the most ideal and becomes my true lover. “My” unhappiness with the utilization of innocent peoples as the political instrument is unquestionable, but the problem is that he takes the specific action, which itself is a form of class politics, to be the politics per se.

On other hand, here cosmopolitanism is also broken apart under the war circumstance. All these destructions of the intellectual’s ideal are a result of dirty politics. The “inhuman” side of the profession of spy serves to be a metaphor for the politics per se. Yet this apathy and repulsiveness towards politics can only be examined with the particular social-historical moment and the vulnerable identity that “I” assume in mind. The male narrator’s participation into the patriotic resistance is only of a temporary nature, less for the sake of patriotism itself than for conquering his sense of existentialistic angst and cultural-political anxiety (the loss of belief in the meaning of life). It functions as a medium for the narrator to look for an “ultimate,” “transcendental” life philosophy, for an identity that he is missing. Once he seemingly finds the latter out of a short-term adventure, he quits the dirty political world and packs off to the interior, returning to his life of “metaphysical thinking.” The political world of resistance is still an alien to him. He always “refuses to become entangled with reality;” he seemingly “can still transcend reality by embracing something deeper than patriotism – the quest for the meaning of life.”⁵ Yet without the patriotic activities that he temporarily joins, how can he settle his anxiety over his (national, and cultural-political) identity? After he ostensibly has established his identity and goes away, where does he embrace “the meaning of life”?

But just as a feminist critic has pointed out, although here to him “the professional female spies...do not seem to have the same ability to be introspective about their situations,” and they are “always erotic bodies with no access to this purified world,”⁶ it seems that these female professionals devoted to the patriotic mission have more solid subjectivity than this somewhat arrogant, and somewhat bookish man that often appears clumsy and wavering in the actions that he takes. His philosophy of celibacy – as he brags that “the love of a celibate belongs to the spirit...it is abstract and empty; it is perpetually giving instead of receiving; it belongs to all men and to history,”⁷ – appears hollow and empty. But I would suggest that the philosophy itself serves as a metaphor for a fruitless life-attitude of a certain class stratum when it is hopelessly being sandwiched among various political forces and propelled by the historical

⁵ Jianmei Liu (1998), 68.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Xu Xu (1990), 488. Quoted from Jianmei Liu (1998), 68.

wind towards the future. But he is not the Benjaminian “angel of history,” as his life is saved and spared by those female political workers that seemingly do not own his intellectual power. The distance that he tries to keep from the political world is illusory, this is not merely because he could not help but being embroiled in the political world by his secular concerns, but it is also because only from the politics that his “existentialistic angst” can be eliminated.

4 CONCLUSION

A symbolic reaction to the political and cultural crisis of the era, where there was simply little condition and space to realize these illusionary reveries, Xu Xu’s “modern tales of the strange” is a genre of “modern literati fiction” that aimed to express the writer’s cultural reveries and anxieties in a seemingly hopeless social-historical situation. It shows the predicament the liberalist intellectuals faced in the society where there was no material conditions to realize their bourgeois ideal of cosmopolitanism and universal love.

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