Yu Dafu’s Romantic Fiction

Youth consciousness in crisis

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Life and career

Yu Dafu (1896–1945) was born in Fuyang County, Zhejiang Province. At a young age, he read a wide range of classical Chinese literary works and received a traditional education. Then he began to write classical-style poetry and managed to have some of them published. In 1913, he went to Japan for further education along with his elder brother. After his brother returned to China, he remained there for almost ten years. He changed his major several times, first from medical science to law, and then to economics, but he never lost his interest in literature. During his study in Japan, he read a large number of foreign novels in Japanese, English, and German, which helped him acquire fluency in these three languages.

Among overseas Chinese students in Japan, Yu Dafu shared similar views with Guo Moruo on how to rejuvenate Chinese literature, and keep it in line with the zeitgeist at the time. Along with other friends who supported their ideas, they founded Creation Society (Chuangzao she) in 1921. It was a writing community inspired by Western aesthetics of romanticism as well as the ideology of individualism. Drawing on his personal experience, Yu started writing short stories that were thematically concerned with the lives of Chinese students aboard and their emotional and psychological problems.

Upon receiving his bachelor’s degree in economics from Tokyo Imperial University, Yu returned to China in 1922. He firstly taught at different institutions of higher education across the country for some time. Later, he gave up teaching and worked as an editor for The Creation Quarterly (Chuangzao jikan), The Creation Monthly (Chuangzao yuekan), and other periodicals in Shanghai. Meanwhile, he published several critical essays on the novel and drama. During this period, he was continuously faced with financial difficulties. This personal predicament was reflected in his social concerns and criticism in his creative writings. The collection Cold Ashes (Hanhui ji) shows an increasing realist tendency in his works, as he became more engaged in social affairs by taking part in many literary activities. Apart from short stories, Yu also published his diaries, as he saw this genre as an essential part of literature. “Nine Diaries” (Riji jiuzhong) sold more copies than his most celebrated collection Sinking (Chenlun). It is a detailed account of his love story with Wang Yingxia, a famous beauty in Hangzhou. The couple got married with a big wedding in 1928, but ended their marriage with a nasty divorce 12 years later. In addition to his short stories, essays, and poems, Yu translated a great deal of literary works from Western literature into Chinese.
When the Sino-Japanese War broke out, he became actively engaged in politics, participated in activities for national salvation and produced numerous anti-Japanese articles. In 1938, Yu went to Singapore at an invitation from *Sin Chew Daily*, and became a leading figure among the anti-Japanese activists there. He helped establish the South Sea Society (Nanyang xuehui) to improve the Chinese literary studies in Singapore. After Singapore was taken by the Japanese, Yu fled to Sumarta and lived under the pseudonym of Zhao Lian. Because of his fluent Japanese, he was forced to work as a translator for the Japanese army. Using this job as a cover, Yu secretly helped and protected many Chinese citizens and residents. Unfortunately, his real identity was discovered by the Japanese police, and in 1945, he was arrested and secretly executed.

**Literary achievements**

Yu Dafu’s literary achievements rest chiefly on his short fictional works, though in his literary career, he produced several collections of refined essays, literary criticism, and literary theory. His better-known collections of stories include *Sinking* (1921), *Cold Ashes* (1927), and *The Past* (Guoqu Ji, 1927). His longer works such as *Spring Tide* (Chunchao, 1922), *The Lost Sheep* (Miyang, 1927), *Late-flowering Cassia* (Chiguihua, 1932), *She Was a Weak Woman* (Ta shi yige ruo nüzi, 1932), and *Flight* (Chuben, 1935) are also well known.

*Sinking* marks Yu’s controversial debut in the literary world. It consists of a novella and two short stories: the title story, “The Silver-grey Death” (Yinhuise de si) and “Moving South” (Nanqian). The title story portrays the physical and emotional frustrations of a melancholic young student who always feels isolated and humiliated by his Japanese classmates. “The Silver-grey Death” narrates the death of a drunken widower who desires love from women but fails to get it. “Moving South” depicts the protagonist’s affair with a married woman and his traumatic experience of being manipulated by her. Overall, these stories are characterized by bold descriptions of sex and sexuality as well as erotic themes. In terms of language, they are enveloped by a depressed, sometimes decadent tone, which constituted the hallmark of Yu’s unique writing style. At first, most critics argued that the book was immoral for its overt writing of sex, but Zhou Zuoren defended Yu’s work in an article on *Supplement to Morning News* (Chenbao fukan), quoting Albert Mordell’s criteria of “immoral literature” in *The Erotic Motive in Literature* (1919) as the ground for his defense. Zhou praised the book as a piece of artistic work with a serious moral sense, and radically changed the public’s opinion on Yu’s writings. From then on, the book was regarded as the first collection of short stories written in vernacular Chinese (Baihua), and Yu Dafu was considered one of the founders of modern Chinese literature.

With the collection *Cold Ashes*, the author’s focus turned from the bitterness of sex to the bitterness of reality. In this book, “Colored Rock by the River” (Caishiji), “Nights of Spring Fever” (Chunfeng chenzui de wanshang), “A Humble Sacrifice” (Baodian) are the best-known. “Colored Rock by the River” is a historical novel featuring the poet Huang Zhongze (1749–1783) in the Qing Dynasty. Through the poet’s emotional sufferings, the author expresses his social critique of the darkness in his society which destroys the young talent’s ambition. “Nights of the Spring Fever” depicts the encounter between a down-and-out writer and a strong-willed factory girl, which exposes the sweat and toil of the common workers at the time and presents a true friendship between an intellectual and a worker. “A Humble Sacrifice” describes a tragic death of a rickshaw puller. The poor man’s biggest dream is to buy his own rickshaw to earn a better life, but the harsh reality dashes his dream to pieces. Through the first-person narrator’s account of his interactions with these workers, the author not only shows deep sympathy for the exploited working class, but also cherishes his great admiration for their kindness, honesty, and
moral virtues. These stories also demonstrate Yu’s artistic improvement in characterization and plot construction and signify his entry into a new stage.

The title story in the collection *The Past* marks the full maturity of Yu’s novel writing, and has been praised by many critics as his finest work with skillful narrative techniques. It tells of a short reunion between Li Baishi and Laosan who once had a crush on Li. Adopting Li’s point of view, the narrator “I” recounts his past days with Laosan’s family. The narrator falls in love with one of Laosan’s sisters. Out of an abnormal sexual desire for her, he endures her beating and scolding joyously, without knowing that Laosan was in love with him. After learning the truth, he wants to retrieve the lost love between them, but Laosan is now a widow, and turns down his courtship. In the end, the narrator leaves the city with a melancholy heart. The plot is rather simple, but within the limited narration, the author expands the story time to the past history of the characters, which to a great extent shows a distinctive technique of stream of consciousness. Instead of constructing the story in a clear storyline, this short story is more like a floating of emotions, revealing the emotional struggle of a sentimental narrator.

In general, Yu Dafu’s major contribution to the development of modern Chinese literature lies in three aspects. First and foremost, he creates the genre of autobiographical fiction writing, along with the signature use of homodiegetic narrator. Yu was greatly influenced by the Japanese I-Novel, a kind of writing which draws its inspiration from naturalism but primarily focusing on self-exposure and self-representation. Thus, he tends to look inwardly, and examines himself through the lens of sexuality. Secondly, he creates the literary archetype of the superfluous man. In many of his fictional works, the protagonists are all marginalized intellectuals who manifest the common symptoms of hypochondria in the May Fourth era. They are devoted to genuine love but always meet with a dead-end, and fail to find their proper places in society. Echoing the characterization of superfluous men in Russian realist tradition and the fin-de-siècle mood in Western literature, Yu creates his version of superfluous men as an epitome of the new generation of Chinese intellectuals at the time, who experience hope, disillusionment as well as frustration. Thirdly, he explores and opens the path of romantic writing which is different from the path of realism advocated by his contemporary writers such as Lu Xun. As a whole, Yu Dafu’s insights into the Chinese youth consciousness in his time and his remarkable way to describe the youth consciousness in crisis under multiple pressures are major reasons for his significant literary achievements.

*Sinking: youth consciousness in crisis*

*Sinking* narrates the story of a young Chinese student studying in Japan. It opens with a pastoral scene in the countryside where the protagonist is by himself, reading Wordsworth’s poems aloud. The melancholic young man feels lonely in school, so he often escapes to the secluded place to enjoy the company of nature. One day when he walks with three Japanese classmates, they encounter several Japanese girls. While others are flirting with the girls, he feels ashamed and fails to speak a single word to them. Furiously, he blames his awkward behavior on the prejudice and discrimination these students have for him, and writes in his diary a wish to have an Eve whose body and soul belong to him alone. Soon, upon leaving Tokyo for college, he becomes immensely sentimental about the city, and writes a few sad poems to his friends. At his newly rented house, the protagonist secretly falls in love with the landlord’s daughter and indulges in daily masturbation, for which he feels deeply ashamed of himself. Later, he peeps at the daughter having a shower and is discovered by the latter. Out of fear for being humiliated, he moves to a new accommodation in a more isolated place on a mountain. Just when he feels everything is back to normal as he enjoys the solace of nature and his books, he runs into a big
Yu Dafu’s romantic fiction

fight with his brother. For the sake of rebellion as well as revenge, he changes his major so as to spite his brother. One day, while he is strolling around the nearby field, he overhears a couple having sex in the wild. Emotionally exited by the accidental encounter, the protagonist retreats to his bed, but the sleeping is unable to quell his sexual urge. So, he goes to the city, intending to seek emotional comfort in a brothel. While inside the brothel, he feels he receives unequal treatment from the waitress who treats him differently from Japanese guests. Half-drunk and half-disillusioned, he writes poems and sings them loudly to show his complaint. After he wakes up from his drunkenness, he pays the bill and gives the female waiter the last penny in his pocket. Now, penniless, he cannot make his way back, so he goes to the seashore in despair. Facing the direction where China lies, he slowly walks into the sea.

Regarding the ending, it is uncertain whether the protagonist commits suicide or not, but the tenor of the novella is undoubtedly desperate and tragic. Thus, the title “Sinking” could be read as imparting multiple symbolic meanings. First, it may refer to the protagonist’s drowning in the sea. For this reason, some critics argue that the story is a suicidal tragedy. In a more meaningful way, it could be interpreted as a metaphor for the protagonist’s moral degeneracy in life and his failure to solve the multiple conflicts in the formation of his selfhood. In the preface to Sinking, Yu Dafu states that the title story depicts the psychology of a sick youth.\footnote{1} The story could also be read as an anatomy of juvenile hypochondria brought about by multiple pressures and bitter experience in life. The bitterness he tries to represent is the conflict between body and soul, caused by the mood swings of adolescence. From this perspective, the story is not only about the personal experience of a melancholic youth, but also expresses a larger concern with the crisis fermenting among the young Chinese in their search for themselves. Situating the story in its context of the May Fourth era when pressures arose due to profound intellectual revolution, Yu’s story may be read as his response to the heated discussions centering on the formation of the new youth, which is permeated with crises, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

\textit{From new youth to sick youth}

Initially, the image of the new youth was created by enlightened Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century in contrast with that of the old, sick man of China. The late-Qing intellectual Yan Fu may be the first to use the epithet of sick man as a metaphor for China beset with external and internal crises.\footnote{2} Lu Xun, through his relentless portrayals of men with physical or mental illnesses, pinpointed the sickness within the feudal society as well as traditional Confucian values. Regardless of the actual age, the image of a sick Chinese embodied the aging and deteriorating sociopolitical system of the country and was employed as a foil by some intellectuals in the formation of national consciousness. Against such a portrait of the senile China, the May Fourth revolutionaries laid the hope and responsibility of rejuvenating the country on the younger generation. Following the lead of Liang Qichao’s “juvenile China”\footnote{3} and Li Dazhao’s “youthful China,”\footnote{4} Chen Duxiu called for the making of the new youth. The primary task for these young Chinese was to carry out the intellectual revolution to modernize China, as he wrote on the opening issue of the periodical \textit{New Youth} (Xin qingnian), “the strength of our country is weakening, the morals of our people are degenerating, and the learning of our scholars is distressing. . . . Our youth must take up the task of rejuvenating China.”\footnote{5} Specifically, he set out six qualities\footnote{6} to effect a fundamental change in the national consciousness of the Chinese youth. In the environment of the New Culture Movement, the new youth was a vanguard infused with a strong romantic individualism in the pursuit of science and democracy. At this point, to be a new youth was to make a total break from the traditional values and to embrace the ideas of liberty, equality, and individuality celebrated in the Western discourse. Yet in practice,
the complexity of the traditional culture and the diversity in the concept of modernity made it impossible for the young Chinese to have a clean break from the past. Understandably, the force of cultural continuity played an unrecognized role in the formation of modern consciousness and selfhood. Thus, crises rose among young students and caught the attention of some sensitive writers in support of the New Culture Movement.

Yu Dafu was one of them. He sensed that the new youth was sick, because a variety of crises were appearing in the youth consciousness, and went ahead to expose the internal conflicts and turmoil by means of creating memorable youth characters in his fictional works. In his depiction of the new youth, he focused more on the anxiety, uncertainty, and the disorientation of their newly established self. He approached the issue of youth consciousness in two major ways, as is shown in his characterization of the protagonist in his novella *Sinking*. On the one hand, although drawing the same inspiration from Western romanticism, Yu Dafu’s young men are different from the poised and robust archetype in the new youth narrative. Unlike Chen Duxiu’s reproduction of a Byronic hero on the Chinese soil, Yu Dafu’s young heroes always possess a quite narcissistic, melancholic, or sometimes decadent personality, showing another face of the new youth in the making. On the other hand, Yu’s image of the new youth remains, at the same time, quite traditional. For example, in the story, the protagonist’s great sentimentality at the train station of Tokyo echoes the classic scenes described in traditional Chinese poems on one’s departure. And the traditional intellectual’s lifestyle of being accompanied by women and wine to stimulate creative imagination finds strong resonance in Yu’s characterization. Denton is right to point out that “the story also enacts in spatial terms and through literary allusions the irresolvable modern tension between a radically alienated consciousness attempting to understand itself in social isolation and nostalgic longing to return to the comfort of a traditional community of like minds in a unified moral cosmos.” Therefore, by revealing the psychological development of the tragic end of an overseas Chinese student in Japan, Yu represents and delves deeply into this crisis from three aspects: juvenile hypochondria, the discovery of one’s body, and the anxiety over one’s national identity.

**Hypochondria as symptoms of mental crisis**

The crisis first appears as a discrepancy in the young protagonist’s perception of himself, which gradually develops into a mental illness of hypochondria. Like a typical coming-of-age story, the young protagonist is concerned with his role in society as he interacts more deeply with the world. But, instead of focusing on the outside adventure in shaping one’s consciousness, Yu’s primary concern lies in the emotional and psychological turmoil experienced by the nameless youth. The story reveals a series of frustrations: the alienation and loneliness he feels in his relationship with his classmates, the uncertainty with his intention to study in Japan, the worries about his future when he gets back to China, the lack of male charm to develop a relationship with girls. Meanwhile, immersed in the vast romantic works from Western literature, he strongly identifies with the romantic heroes portrayed in those books. Imitating their love of nature, passionate personality, and strong rebellion against established norms and social conventions, he forms an idealist image of himself as a romantic hero. As a result, a discrepancy appears, for the protagonist is nothing but a frustrated youth due to his lack of capability as well as the charisma for becoming such a hero in real life.

In fact, the protagonist’s love of nature is more like an escape from dealing with the discrepancy in his consciousness. Because of his failure in developing intimate relationship with girls around him, he resorts to nature, seeing nature as his desired female. This is clearly portrayed when he enjoys the natural scenery in an open field:
This, then, is your refuge. When all the philistines envy you, sneer at you, and treat you like a fool, only Nature, only this eternally bright sun and azure sky, this late summer breeze, this early autumn air still remains your friend, still remains your mother and your beloved. With this, you have no further need to join the world of the shallow and flippant. You might as well spend the rest of your life in this simple countryside, in the bosom of Nature.

Unlike the philistines with whom he cannot find common ground, the sun, the sky, the breeze, and the air become his friends, the mother, and the beloved that the protagonist can identify with. Here, nature is an extension of his own self-awareness, and at the same time, a projection of his inner desire. In this sense, the love of nature acts as a source of consolation for the inadequacies of the young student, facilitating his self-imagined creation of a hero like those in romantic literature. What comes along within this self-expression is a cluster of strong feelings of melancholia and pity. The reason for these feelings is unknown, but it is important to show that expression on his face. For example, when the protagonist hears the approaching of a peasant, he soon changes his smile into a melancholy expression, “as if afraid to show his smile before strangers” (33). In the same vein, his favorite books such as Emerson's *Nature* or Thoreau's *Excursions*, and his love of romantic writers such as Wordsworth, Henie, and Gissing, become objects onto which he projects his self-awareness. As C.T. Hsia notes, “a Wertherian self-pity exaggerates alike the hero’s love for nature and the ache in his heart.” Opposite to this keenly identification with nature as well as romantic literatures, the distance between him and his classmates epitomizes his failure to identify with the social milieu in which he lives. For him, it is hard to think and to convince himself that he is one of them. This intentional distancing from the social world in turn generates more feelings of pity and loneliness that enhance the image of a sentimental hero. As the narration goes, “his emotional precocity had placed him at constant odds with his fellow men, and inevitably the wall separating him from them had gradually grown thicker and ticker” (31). Thus, the protagonist is torn between the two contrasting selves: one is the ideal self as a romantic hero at oneness with nature and literature, and the other one is the isolated self as a marginalized youth in need of women’s love and care.

At the same time, the discrepancy in the self is revealed by the narrative distance between the narrator and the protagonist. Although the story is narrated from a third-person point of view, the narrator tends to use a judgmental eye in observing the protagonist’s behaviors. Taking the narrator’s standpoint, readers know more than the protagonist in the story. There are three important statements made by the narrator, signifying the gradual illness of the youth. The first one is the beginning sentence of the story, “lately he had been feeling pitifully lonesome” (31). This foretells the coming of hypochondria that develops from pitiful loneliness in the plot of the lonely character “he.” Following this statement, the rest of the opening section could be read as a supporting example for such a statement. Then, at the beginning of Section Two, the narrator makes clear that “his melancholy was getting worse with time” (34). This is the first stage of the development of the protagonist’s hypochondria, showing instances of the character’s inability to befriend with his classmates. The final stage is alluded to in the opening sentence of Section Six, “after he had moved to the mei grove, his hypochondria took a different turn” (47). This is a confirmation of the illness and, at the same time, a notice of the new symptoms from this sick youth. The statements altogether function as a diagnosis of the illness of the protagonist, along with the inspection of his psychological thoughts for causes and symptoms. Secondly, the protagonist expresses his real emotions through his diary and his confession in the manner of self-exposure. However, under this frankness of expressing one’s mind, careful readers could
notice the protagonist’s habit of fantasizing himself as a victim, which makes his account of himself unreliable. For example, there’s an apparent narrative discrepancy at the scene when the protagonist is leaving Tokyo. At the station, the protagonist bids a pitiable farewell, crying with tears while mocking himself for crying without a reason. Since he doesn’t have a single sweetheart, brother, or close friend in the city, then for whom are his tears intended? But in the next few lines, the protagonist starts to write poems “intended for a friend in Tokyo” (39). The discrepancy between the protagonist’s point of view and the narrator’s point of view further renders the writing of hypochondria a self-diagnosis of one’s failure in constructing a unified, coherent self. As Ou-fan Lee states, behind the young student’s coming-of-age story lies “a maze of ambiguities between reality and appearance, between the self and visions of the self.”

To some extent, many critics agree that Yu’s anatomy of the young protagonist’s hypochondria functions as a kind of writing therapy that provides its author a place to outpour his sufferings while studying in Japan. Guo Moruo speaks highly of Yu’s story for the author’s admirable sincerity, and because of his audacious self-exposure, it is firstly a fresh spring breeze, awakening countless youthful hearts, and secondly a storm as well as a shock to the hypocrisy of the old literati and pseudo-scholars. Similar to this critical stance, C. T. Hsia reads Yu’s story as an autobiographical account, recognizing the nameless hero as an authentic representation of Yu himself. Taking a rather conventional approach, Hsia interprets the story within the frame of psychological realism, drawing a conclusion that the story tends to be purely mawkish sentimentality. The two readings seem to have overlooked the importance of narrative distance between the narrator and the protagonist. In the opinion of Michael Egan, there’s an ironic effect in terms of the rhetoric of the story. The irony is achieved through the narrator’s constant distancing from the protagonist. Drawing from the narrative theory of Wayne Booth, he uses ample textual evidences to illustrate the difference among the author, the narrator and the protagonist. Accordingly, the sentimental hero appears laughable and lacks self-knowledge to the reader. By identifying the irony within Yu’s autobiography writing, Egan directs the critical attention to the story’s literariness, pointing out the universal appeal of such an essentially apolitical and individualistic text. However, my readings, particularly through the way in which Yu deals with hypochondria, recognizes the importance of the narrative distance between the narrator and the protagonist, but the purpose is not to form a rhetoric irony as Egan asserts, but for a representation of the discrepancy between the self in one’s own eyes and the self from others’ eyes. By writing a hypochondriac youth, Yu exposes the crisis in the young man’s consciousness in formulating a healthy personality.

**Physical crisis in the body**

Secondly, the crisis lies in the discovery of the intertwined discursive practices on one’s body, mostly through the lens of sexuality. The young protagonist suffers from an uncontrollable sexual desire which leads to his daily masturbation, voyeurism, and internal conflict between the mind and the body. In spite of the protagonist’s harsh self-reproach, he is unable to control himself. Whenever he surrenders to his sexual addiction, he finds little pleasure in his deviant behaviors, but for most of the time, a profound bitterness, guilt, and regret. Many critics see this bitter view of sex as a common syndrome of a teenager in his puberty burdened with the national inferiority of being a humiliated Chinese in Japan. For instance, Kirk A. Denton views the bitterness being intertwined with “the protagonist’s continent blaming of his country’s weakness for his own sexual inadequacies.” Nevertheless, this view of adolescent frustration mixed with national humiliation has been questioned for its insufficiency to explain the motive behind the protagonist’s possible suicide at the end of the story. In the opinion of Ming Dong Gu, he
suggests a Freudian interpretation of such bitterness, recognizing the frustrated youth as a Chinese Oedipus in exile. He holds that the story is structured on the central theme of a fragmented Oedipus complex, and the root cause of the protagonist’s tragedy lies in his complete unawareness of the hidden Oedipal conflict in his consciousness, which fuses all his personal problems with an emotional matrix composed of a series of related ideas like the beloved, mother-love, mother nature, and the motherland. Thus, the final scene of the youth trying to drown himself is his attempt to be reunited with the maternal matrix represented by the image of the ocean. It is a fascinating argument, but I wish to complement his reading by examining the role the body plays in causing the protagonist’s emotional and psychological crisis under dual pressures from Confucian tradition and Western modernity. The sexual frustrations make him aware of the discourse that has been imposed on his body which is the locus of different discursive forces. The primary one is the Confucian morality, and an opposing force comes from the Western discourse of romanticism, along with another significant one derived from modern medical pathobiology.

At first, the emerging desire from his body is recognized as a natural phenomenon. “With all nature responding to the call of spring, he too felt more keenly the urge implanted in him by the progenitors of the human race.” (42) The protagonist thinks that his body is a part of nature, so that’s why he feels comfortable and complete when he is back with nature alone. Naturally, he feels the sexual impulse is normal, but when that impulse leads to his frequent masturbation, he feels guilty instead of pleasure for he thinks these actions are immoral. His inner thought goes as follows:

He was ordinarily a very self-respecting and clean person, but when evil thoughts seized hold of him, numbing his intellect and paralyzing his conscience, he was no longer able to observe the admonition that “one must not harm one’s body under any circumstances, since it is inherited from one’s parents.” Every time he sinned he felt bitter remorse and vowed not to transgress again.

(42)

This is the moment when he starts to experience the discursive force of Confucian doctrine that has been inscribed on his body. The Confucian belief bonds his body to the larger context of the collective consciousness. That his body doesn’t belong to him, and that he should obey the moral codes that confine his desires and emotions. Unlike a naturalistic representation of his natural reaction, he views it as a sin and a stain, thus evaluating his body through a moralistic lens. The biological impulse is regarded as an evil thought which numbs his intellectual ability as well as paralyzes his conscience. According to traditional morality, the body is not a property of his own to exert his will for personal fulfillment, but an instrument in the service of Confucian biopolitical power as well as the continuity and honor of the family. Since Confucius states that self-respect and the integrity of one’s body constitutes the fundamental base of filiality, then what the protagonist does with his body clearly violates these set of rules, resulting in his sense of guilt and remorse. As a consequence, he sees his body dirty and morally degraded, and the natural actions out of his own will then is being judged as a transgression which should be banned forever.

However, opposing this discursive force is another force imparted from Western literary works he reads. His sexual fantasy has an obvious Western imprint, as he craves for “an Eve from the Garden of Eden” (36), and these desired female images floating in his head are all naked madam, luring him with decadence (42). The seductive female coincides with the Western cultural imaginary. His surrender to these middle-aged Eves, mostly from the romantic literatures, once again shows his identification of himself as the romantic heroes, and also indicates a strong
desire of an autonomy of selfhood. The hard struggle made by the protagonist is in fact a contention of two opposing forces between Confucian morality and Western individualism. Another piece of supporting evidence is that when the protagonist learns that the great Russian writer Gogol suffers the same habit as him, his fear of being intellectually unproductive due to the immoral actions has been greatly alleviated, showing his dependence on the Western discourse to enhance his knowledge of himself. In one critic’s words, “Yu’s characters can be read as emblems of modernity’s tensions between desires for an autonomous self and traditional desires for stability defined within a shared cultural meaning system.”

Apart from the above two forces in defining and regulating the protagonist’s body, there is also the interplay of the medical discourse that affects his view of such sexual frustrations. In the first place, he regards these frustrations as the symptoms of hypochondria. Psychologically, his love turns quickly into hate whenever he fails in making social contacts with others, leading to his frequent statement of revenge inside his heart. To some extent, these frustrations not only reproduce the physical grounds for the sick protagonist to declare revenge, but also reinforce the reasons for self-reproach, justifying and enhancing the verbal actualization of the neurotic depression. Secondly, when the morning masturbation grows into a habit, the protagonist starts to worry about his psychical health as well as his intellectual ability as he goes to the library for medical help. When he learns from the medical books that masturbation is harmful to one’s psychical health, he uses the words “abuse” and “harmful” to describe his behavior. He sees his body in the unhealthy state from the medical gaze, and intends to remedy the abused part of his body. As a result, he adopts the medical approach to make up for the loss. He incorporates milk and raw eggs into his diet, and takes a bath every day. Consequently, troubled by the fear emerging from the medical discourse, and the guilt coming from the moral discourse, the protagonist feels his hypochondria worsened, forming his own image as a sick youth with prominent cheekbones, big bluish-gray circles around his eyes, and his pupils as expressionless as those of a dead fish. It is with conflicting emotions that the protagonist attempts to make sense of his sexuality through the discovery of his body under different discursive forces. In this way, the struggle between the mind and body of the melancholic youth haunts the young man’s efforts to construct one’s selfhood.

Yu Dafu’s story reveals the awakening desire within one’s body, transcends the issue of a character’s sexuality, and delves into the cause for anxiety and frustration of a modern man’s existence in the world. The protagonist forms his self-consciousness through the discovery of his body. The discovery conforms to the modern conception of how one’s body is constructed by various discourses, and how the body becomes the locus of competing discursive forces.

Crisis in national identity

The discourse of the body in Yu Dafu’s story shows that the crisis is both individual and national. The construction of oneself is closely related to the national consciousness, especially in the context of the overseas Chinese students. Although China is not a focus in the narrative, it remains as a subtext in fueling the protagonist’s crisis in constructing his national identity. The feeling is quite complicated. He is emotionally attached to the traditional image of a cultural China, but the image is broken by the present condition of a weak and debilitated China; he is fascinated by the Western concepts of individuality, but he remains doubtful about the benefits of modernity coming from the West. Implicitly, this crisis in the young man’s recognition of his national identity further points to the dilemma between tradition and the modernity. Within his emotional conflict, the crisis has been aggravated, leading to the tragic end of the young protagonist.
Yu Dafu's romantic fiction

The protagonist shows constant nostalgia for the cultural past of China, identifying himself with the traditional Chinese poet. In the first section, after he reads the first and third stanzas of Wordsworth's “The Solitary Reaper,” he suddenly has an impulse to translate them into Chinese. Particularly, his translation of the third stanza is full of nostalgic feelings for the irretrievable past characteristic of the nostalgic theme and melancholic tone in classic Chinese poetry. What’s more, he skips the second stanza and focuses on the third one, which explains that his real intention of reading these naturalists’ works is to find the similar scenes that he can relate to his own cultural taste and aesthetics. After translating these stanzas, he immediately reproaches himself for this silly act, saying that “English poetry is English poetry and Chinese poetry is Chinese poetry; why bother to translate” (33). Obviously, for the young protagonist, both cultures are unique. When translating Wordsworth’s stanza into Chinese, the original poem becomes an insipid hymn and loses its essence and uniqueness. The same applies to Chinese poetry. Therefore, the young protagonist does not feel inferior for his own culture in his encounter with the Western literary works, and instead has a strong confidence in his cultural identity. Before he walks into the sea, he faces the direction in which China lies. This is a symbolic gesture for his emotional return to the ancient, remote, and misty motherland. This nostalgic attachment is further presented in the protagonist’s writing of classical-style poetry on the departing scene at the Tokyo train station and in the brothel. Echoing his Chinese poetic ancestors in the same condition, he conveys the similar mood in the traditional lines, “looking homeward across the misted sea, I too weep for my beloved country” (53).

In the meantime, he feels ashamed all the time of being a Chinese student among his Japanese peers. Contrasting the old and weak China with modernized and powerful Japan, he feels a strong sense of inferiority and blames his poor motherland for all his problems and death. After the Sino-Japanese war, the defeated China sent its young students to Japan in order to bring back new knowledge and power. To learn from Japan which used to be a pupil of China was not something to be proud of for the young protagonist as well as the author. Yu Dafu himself once wrote:

In youth, one always passes through a romantic lyrical period, when one is still a muted bird but wants nonetheless to open one’s throat and sing out, especially for people who are full of emotions. This lyrical period was spent in that sexually dissolute and militarily oppressive island nation. I saw my country sinking, while I myself suffered the humiliations of a foreigner. . . . Like a wife who had lost her husband, powerless, with no courage at all, bemoaning my fate, I let out a tragic cry. This was “Sinking”, which stirred up so much criticism. 18

The image of his national identity is described as a powerless widow, which adds a new dimension in the interpretation of the sexual inadequacy of the protagonist. Being sexually unattractive is not a personal failure, but a consequence of national humiliation. The protagonist’s experience with Japanese girls makes him feel doubly humiliated because these women were already inferior to the Japanese male. And this sense of humiliation is further intensified by his encounter in the brothel. The protagonist goes to the brothel but feels mistreated by the waitress for she serves the Japanese man instead of him. He angrily thinks that even a prostitute dares to tread on his dignity, and as an emotional consolation, he vows to seek revenge, but ironically, he never takes any concrete action. The shame and humiliation make the young protagonist run away from identifying with his country, as he intentionally cuts himself from participating in the social circle of the Chinese students in school. In a lesser way, his intentional break from his
elder brother could be interpreted as a break from the homeland. This conscious rejection of the motherland is what the critic has pointed out as “the self-imposed exile.”

In conclusion, the young man’s tragic end is brought about by a heterogeneous interplay of multiple forces, national, social, personal, emotional, and spiritual. As a sharp and sensitive observer, Yu Dafu adequately notes a striking contrast between the idealized image of the new youth called for by the New Culture Movement and the weak, timid, and disoriented young Chinese in reality. The making of the new youth embodies an intellectual as well as political autonomy in the awakening of the young Chinese consciousness, but Yu Dafu’s writings uncovered the hidden dimension of a great crisis in the consciousness of the Chinese youth in his time.

In many ways, the protagonist in his novella represents a large number of Chinese youth who attempted to recover the repressed humanity from tradition, but were thrown into emotional, psychological, and spiritual crisis due to their bitter encounter with stark reality. Through the examination of juvenile hypochondria, the discovery of the body, and the recognition of the national identity, *Sinking* probes deeply and artfully into the crisis in youth consciousness arising from the New Culture Movement. Its insight into the tragic experience of the protagonist contributes to a better understanding of the image of the new youth, while at the same time, it evokes reflections on the construction of selfhood in the May Fourth era.

**Notes**

7. The word “face” used here echoes Matei Calinescu’s identification of five features of modernism. It’s unclear whether Yu read the book or not, but his perception of modernity has a lot in common with Calinescu’s from *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 151–157.

Further readings