



National Crisis and Masculinity in China's 1920s: Weak and Painful Men in Yu Daifu's Novellas

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Abstract. This article focuses on the male images in Yu novels and explores their significance from the perspective of gender studies. Traditionally, in the research on Chinese masculinity, the focus has mainly been on the pre-modern and contemporary periods, with relatively little research on the Republican period. As an important writer in modern Chinese literature, Yu Dafu's works reflect the mentality of men in a specific era. This study analyzes the male images in *Sinking*, *The Silver-Grey Death*, and *Southern Exodus*, showing that overseas students who faced loneliness and depression in a foreign country were trapped in spiritual dilemmas partially due to the weakness of their motherland. Yu's novels reflect the transformation of male images from traditional literature to modern literature. He depicted the inner contradictions of men through psychological realism. His works demonstrate the resonance between the fates of male figures on the margins of society and the fate of nation. His works not only shed new light on the study of masculinity and the evolution of male images in Chinese literature, but help deepen our understanding of the transformation of contemporary gender culture in China.

Keywords: Masculinity, Yu Dafu, Modernity, Nationalism, Chinese Literature.

1 Introduction

Traditionally, gender studies have been equated with women studies. But in recent years, the study of men and masculinities has emerged as a new direction of gender studies. It can counter the imbalanced gender analysis, promoting more equal gender interactions. The study of none western masculinities can help deconstruct the Euro-centric notion of masculinity and provide the global perspective for the examination of gendered men.

The research on Chinese masculinities has been focusing on the two periods. One is pre-modern times. Male characters in this period can be divided into two typical categories, gentry class scholar-officials and martial art practitioners [1]. The other period is contemporary Chinese society, during which time a variety of new male images emerged in films, TV dramas and other forms of digital entertainment [2]. But between these two periods, the Republican period (1912-1949) of China remains understudied in terms of masculinities. Studying the male image during this period can better explain

the transition between the traditional and modern types of masculinity and deepen people's understanding of the psychological struggles of men in this period. This research focuses on the evolution and transformation of masculinity and gender relations from pre-modern Chinese traditions to modern times. It fills a critical gap in Chinese masculinity studies within this field. Studying this subject holds particular significance for deepening our understanding of gender concepts and discourses, as well as for exploring how modern notions of masculinity were introduced to China and their subsequent sociocultural impact. Among modern Chinese writers, Yu Dafu is a key figure deserving in-depth scholarly investigation.

Yu Dafu (December 7, 1896-1945), formerly known as Yu Wen, was from Fuyang, Zhejiang Province. He was a novelist, essayist, and poet of great significance in the history of modern Chinese literature [3]. Yu was one of the founders of the new literary group "Creation Society". His representative works include *Sinking*, the first collection of vernacular short stories in modern Chinese literature, as well as *Autumn in the Old Capital*, *Intoxicating Spring Nights* and *Late-Blooming Osmanthus*, etc. (Ibid). His works are renowned for their autobiographical narration, psychological description, and social criticism, and they profoundly reflect the depression of intellectuals and their feelings of patriotism and concern for the nation. The anguish of Chinese students in Japan depicted in Yu Dafu's works stems from his own study abroad experiences. *Sinking*, *The Silver-Grey Death*, and *Southern Exodus*. In these works, themes of sexual repression, feelings of inferiority, and national consciousness are intricately intertwined, revealing the complicated psychological dimensions of masculinity. These works hold multiple groundbreaking significance in literary history, with *Sinking* being recognized as "the first collection of vernacular short stories" in the history of modern Chinese literature.

During Yu's lifetime, China remained in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society: foreign powers dominated its economic lifelines, warlords engaged in incessant conflicts, rural economies collapsed, and urban workers endured extreme deprivation. Following the New Culture Movement, Western ideologies—such as democracy, scientific rationalism, and Marxism—violently disrupted the traditional Confucian framework. Intellectuals such as the famous writer Lu Xun (1881- 1936) vehemently criticized traditional ethics and advocated importing Western learning to reform national consciousness [4]. While "wholesale Westernization" emerged as a radical intellectual current, it coexisted with pluralistic explorations, including Hu Shi's gradualist reforms and left-wing revolutionary literature (Ibid). This ideological landscape epitomized the intricate interplay between national salvation and cultural transformation amidst China's existential crisis. Yu's works, situated within this turbulent historical and cultural context, provide a unique lens through which to examine the evolution of Chinese masculinities during a period of profound social transformation. Despite the critical acclaim for his literary achievements, existing scholarship has yet to fully explore the intricate interplay between his representations of male subjectivity and the broader discourses on gender, nationalism, and modernity. This gap in the literature underscores the necessity of re-examining Yu's contributions through the framework of gender studies, particularly in relation to the construction and negotiation of masculine identities.

2 Literature Review

Masculinity in Yu's works remains an understudied area, yet some scholars have examined the male images in Yu's novels from various perspectives. According to Lu (2025), Yu's works construct the modernity through disenchantment and openness in modern male subject formation of Chinese modern literature, the writing portray inner fragmentation and weak youthful distress of the character when they break away from the traditional gender hierarchy and become alienated from the grand ideals often found in literary works that focus on male images [5].

Wang (2024) further analyzes the inherent weaknesses of male characters in Yu's fiction, arguing that their psychological fragility, manifested as hypersensitivity, social suspicion, and chronic self-doubt, fundamentally stems from China's sociopolitical decay and moral degeneracy during that era [6]. Wu (2014) also mentioned that Yu vent anxiety of nationality as a citizen of a poor country, as well as the feminized humiliation experienced before dominant civilizations. Through narrating the lack of interaction between intellectuals and local underclass, negotiates the anxieties inherent to his identity as both a socioeconomically disadvantaged male and an intellectual in colonial contexts [7].

Yao (2015) expounds on the marginalized and pathological body forms of men [8]. In Yu's autobiographical fictions, there are many male characters who are tormented by spiritual issues such as sexual frustration, voyeuristic tendencies, fetishistic impulses, nostalgia, and youthful melancholy. They are always indecisive affectation, making it difficult for people to believe their introspective soul-searching are truly from the bottom of their hearts. Rather than being tortured by their own "pathological" conditions, it is more accurate to say that they enjoy such a "pathological" state within the normalize discourse.

Yang (2021) highlights that Yu's works explore the conflict between traditional Confucian morality and emerging Western ideologies through the concept of "modern bodies," reflecting the identity anxieties of individuals times in of social upheaval [9]. The "superfluous man" (*língyúzhě*) in Yu's fiction represents disoriented petit-bourgeois intellectuals during early 20th-century China's revolutionary turbulence. These marginalized characters embody the tension between tradition and modernity, critiquing rigid Confucian moral systems while revealing the contradictions between individual autonomy and societal demands. Yu's portrayals of these figures expose the profound impact of societal change on masculine identity, showcasing the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. His contradictory social stance and bodily narratives thus become defining features of his literary project.

In summary, Lu's research takes the first step towards modernity from the historical background. He proposes that Yu constructs literary modernity through the "inner fragmentation" of male characters, especially focusing on their "youth pain" after disengaging from the traditional gender hierarchy. Although this perspective doesn't deeply analyze the root causes of the fragmentation, it inspires subsequent scholars to think about how the dilemma of men, after losing their traditional positions, will interact with social changes. Wu's article adds a colonial perspective based on Lu's research. He reveals the anxiety of the male characters under the dual identities of "citizens of a poor

country” and “colonial intellectuals” in Yu’s works, especially the metaphor of “feminized humiliation”. This not only continues the discussion of deconstructing masculinity but also directs the issue to the level of national identity, laying the groundwork for subsequent analyses of the social and political background.

Wang’s research concretizes the identity anxiety mentioned before. He points out that the “excessive sensitivity” and “chronic self-doubt” of men’s psychology are not personal flaws but projections of social and political decline. This leap in perspective from the individual to the era explains how the anxiety proposed by Yu is catalyzed by the historical environment and also provides the social context for subsequent analyses of physical ailments. Yao’s research focuses on how the dilemmas accumulated previously erupt at the physical level. Through pathological physical symbols such as sexual dysfunction and voyeurism, she reveals that men do not passively endure pain but achieve passive resistance against cultural discipline through “enjoying the sickness”. This deepens Hu’s social pathological observations and, using the body as a medium, transforms psychological traumas into visible cultural symptoms.

Finally, Yang’s sensitive philosophical summary reaches the peak of depth. His concept of “modern body” integrates the previous five layers of research: it encompasses Lu’s modernity, Wu’s colonial trauma, Wang’s social ailments, and Yao’s physical alienation. Moreover, through the “excessive person”, he reveals the fundamental contradiction—the eternal conflict between individual freedom and social constraints. This synthesis not only explains the inevitability of men’s dilemmas but also elevates them to a universal proposition of human existence.

While the above studies have been focusing on the specific historical contexts of Yu’s works in the early 1920s, the current study positions his works in a broader context of the development of masculinity in Chinese culture and society and explores the significance of the masculinities constructed by his literary works. In what follows, the paper will focus on three representative novellas written by Yu, namely, *Sinking*, *The Silver-Grey Death*, and *Southern Exodus*, to delve into the characteristics of the male images in his early writings.

3 Men in Yu’s Three Novellas

Sinking centers on a Chinese young man studying in Japan who suffers from a severe depression disorder. He cannot get along well with others and is discriminate against by the Japanese people around him. His weak soul is tortured by gloom and sadness, meanwhile trapped by sexual distress in adolescence [10]. He dreams of women, spends lots of time on masturbating, further watches a girl bathing and eavesdrop on a man and a woman having an affair. However, the traditional education he receives makes him feel self-reproach and scared, he is unwilling to sink into extricate himself. Finally, he jumps into the sea and commits suicide (Ibid). Deep into the character’s soul, he has awakened under the impact of New Culture Movement (1915-1919) and western ideological trend, so he desires true love and respect from others, but it is almost impossible to acquire these under the circumstances as a citizen of a weak nation. In terms of nation, he loves his motherland, but he feels helpless as China gradually declines, this

triggers a fierce conflict between his self-esteem and feelings of inferiority. All these feelings combine and finally led to the disastrous ending of the protagonist.

The Silver-Grey Death also depicts a student studying in Japan. He lives in poverty and had to make a living by pawning his clothes and relying on the help from his friends [11]. After his wife passes away due to lung disease, he indulges in alcohol, trying to release the pain of losing his beloved and the pressure of survival. Later, he gets acquainted with Jing'er, the pub owner's daughter, and he doesn't hold back his desire for love towards her, only to be rejected by the girl. After struggling with his feelings for several times, he fails to win Jing'er's love and, in a state of disappointment, he eventually drinks himself to death under the silvery moonlight (Ibid). The novel expounds the person's basic require on life regarding material physical things and the spiritual realm, and reveals a person's genuine needs for a meaning of life.

In *Southern Exodus*, the main character Yi Ren is deceived by a Japanese woman, suffering great mental anguish and loneliness, which leads to a gradual deterioration of his health [12]. Later, introduced by a friend, he relocates to the countryside in the south for some rest. At his place of residence, he encounters and falls in love with a beautiful Japanese female student. Subsequently, both the female student and Yi Ren fall ill successively (Ibid). The novel concludes with the worsening of the two people's conditions. The narrative of *The Southward Exodus* thus culminates in a tragic conclusion. Yi Ren's characteristics also embody a combination of various contradictions. He can see the injustice and evil, yet he is weak and doesn't seek for fight. When faced with impoverished Japanese laborers, he is passionate and indignant, saying, "She is your lawful wife or child, otherwise those army commanders, division commanders, chairmen, county magistrates want her to be the eighth or ninth concubine in their households, can you refuse?" [12]. When reflecting on the suffering of Chinese people in their homeland, he feels overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy and powerlessness. He harbors dissatisfaction with the status quo yet remains passive in effecting change.

These three characters in the three novellas have something in common. As individual subjects, they have all experienced studying abroad in Japan, far away from their hometowns. The geographically distance leads to a lack of psychological support from friends or families. Language barriers, past psychological traumas, their sensitive and sentimental personalities, as well as the long-term isolation and loneliness cause the difficulty of communicating with others, casting their lives with a thick layer of pain and contemplation. As Chinese people during the Republican period, their motherland endures brutal foreign oppression, existing a semi-colonial and semi-feudal state marked by the loss of sovereignty. The nation's weak international status not only affects their self-positioning but also exacerbates subconscious anxieties regarding interpersonal communication. They harbor anger toward the nation's weakness yet feel powerless to effect change. Exhausted both physically and mentally, they seek solace through emotional, romantic, and sexual relationships as a means of self-preservation. When love also fails, their lives inevitably tend toward death. This is a tragedy of the time, a reflection of the mental situation of Chinese men under the heavy pressure of the times, with nowhere to turn for support.

4 Modernity and Nationalism

This paper analyzes the transitional characteristics of male figures from tradition to modernity in Yu's novels and their nationalist expressions. Through the portrayal of "superfluous men" in novels including *Sinking*, *The Silver-Grey Death*, and *Southern Exodus*, Yu profoundly exposes the spiritual dilemmas of intellectuals at pre-modern times. These characters diverge fundamentally from the Confucian scholar-official archetypes in classical literature while simultaneously pioneering explorations into the relationship between individual psychology and national destiny in modern literature.

The male figures in Yu's novels diverge markedly from traditional scholar-official archetypes in classical Chinese literature. The male image in Chinese literature has undergone a transformation from pursuing official career and worldly success (Shitu Jingji) to that of the "superfluous man" who is squeezed by social pressures and becomes incapable of self-protection. In classical Chinese literature, male characters are predominantly centered on Confucian ethics, emphasizing the sense of mission—"Cultivate oneself, regulate the family, govern the state, and bring peace to all under heaven." (Xiushen, Qijia, Zhiguo, Pingtianxia) [13]. This is exemplified by the loyal warriors in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and the imperial examination scholars depicted in *The Scholars (Ru Lin Wai Shi)*. While Yu's male figures exhibit intense inner contradictions: they yearn for personal freedom and emotional liberation while simultaneously yield to self-loathing, decadence, and existential isolation. In *Sinking*, for instance, the main character is discriminated in Japan as a "citizen of a weak nation", with combination of sexual repression and national humiliation, all these causes a double dilemma in "existential anguish" and "erotic torment". Such psychological anxiety starkly contrasts with the Confucian ideal of "harmonious moderation", which prioritizes balance and harmonious.

The two types of characters further reflect a transformation from "family-state obligations" to "individual alienation from collectives." Traditional male archetypes are often bound by the interconnection between personal destiny and collective responsibilities. In contrast, the male protagonists in Yu's novels, impacted by modernity, become trapped in existential estrangement from societal frameworks. The protagonist Mr. Y in *The Silver-Grey Death* embodies this dislocation through his alcoholic self-destruction while adrift in Japan—unable to assimilate into foreign society yet equally despairing of his homeland's weak, ultimately resolving his isolation through death. This rootlessness reflects the spiritual dislocation of May Fourth intellectuals following the collapse of traditional value systems.

Yu's characterization inherits the classical lyrical tradition of sentimentalism while infusing it with modern psychological narrative techniques. Though embodying modernity, the male character in Yu's fiction retains emotional expressions deeply rooted in Chinese classical literati sensibilities: These literary works have the character of an exquisitely sensitive linguistic style that poetically immerses itself in the natural landscapes. It manifests a conscious retreat from the adversarial social sphere full of interpersonal hostilities and contradictions, and seeking spiritual refuge in nature—the all-encompassing wilderness that nurtures all beings. The protagonist in *Sinking* exemplifies, such as the painterly Fuchun River "flowing through" under "jade-green sky"—

simultaneously recall of native soil and conscious deployment of the “scene-setting to convey emotion” (Yi Jing Xie Qing) aesthetic. This mode inherits the Qu Yuan’s “fragrant herbs and beautiful women” (Xiang Cao Mei Ren) tradition, yet redirects its focus from political ideals to individual existential experiences.

Traditional Chinese fiction prioritizes external characterization through colorful dialogue and behavioral description, often eschewing psychological depiction in favor of surface-level portrait so readers can infer mental states through actions—a narrative approach like Spring and Autumn Annals historiography (Chunqiu Bifa). In “Duke Zhuang of Zheng Defeats His Brother Duan in Yan” from Zuo Zhuan, Duke Zhuang of Zheng and Wujiang break their relationship due to the struggle for the throne [14]. They hate each other so much that they even wish to kill each other, and Duke Zhuang makes a solemn oath, saying, “I will not see her unless we meet under the Yellow Spring.” However, at the end of the article, Duke Zhuang regrets. “The Duke entered the tunnel and composed a poem,” meaning that Wujiang comes out of the tunnel and composes a poem, and then resuming their mother-son relationship as before (Ibid). Duke Zhuang makes up with Wujiang just for the sake of his reputation, and Lady Wujiang also cooperates with him and puts on an act in order to survive. Although there is no description of the characters’ psychological motives in the whole article, it cannot hide the author’s satirical intention towards them. Yu, however, revolutionizes psychological representation by assimilating Western literary techniques: Self-disclosure in Japanese private novels and Freudian Psychoanalysis. In *Sinking*, the protagonist peeks at the innkeeper’s daughter while she is taking a bath and can’t control himself. “He was as if nailed in place and couldn’t move at all,” even though he was “filled with fear and trepidation.” Also, he “cautiously bent down to listen” to the behavior of the man and the woman in the bushes, and he did so with “all his concentration,” even though he was “scolding himself so harshly in his heart.” Moreover, when he couldn’t bear it any longer because of matters related to his country, he went to a red-light district [11]. All of the above plots demonstrate the protagonist’s pursuit of natural human desires and his contradictory psychology. His opinions not only run counter to Confucian orthodoxy’s “Preservation of cosmic principles through suppression of human desires” (Cuntianli, Mierenyu), but also exposes modernity’s spiritual crisis through “psychosomatic conflicts”. This psychological depiction carnal impulses pioneered psychological realism in modern Chinese literature, establishing foundational paradigms for subsequent explorations of mental interiority.

Yu further embeds nationalist pathos into his characterization through an imbrication of individual suffering and collective national destiny. His male protagonists’ personal crises related to China’s humiliated modernity. The character cry in *Sinking* before his suicidal plunge — “O my motherland! You must grow rich and strong!”—This direct sublimation of individual death into a call for national rejuvenation. The “individual-nation resonance paradigm” transcends the singular narrative of “loyalty to the monarch and service to the state” in classical literature, internalizing nationalist sentiment as intellectual spiritual trauma, thereby manifesting the identity anxiety inherent to subjects of a weakened nation. The male protagonists in Yu’s fiction perpetually inhabit an interstitial space between Sinic tradition and Occidental modernity. Nurtured in China’s cultural soil yet abruptly thrust into Western ideological currents, their

existential crises specific through cultural collisions. In *Southern Exodus*, the protagonist Yi Ren, despite receiving modern education in Japan, descends into spiritual helplessness due to culture identity crisis. Yi Ren receives modern education in Japan and is influenced by Western individualism, pursuing personal freedom, independence, and self-actualization. He longs to achieve academic success and has his own plans for the future. For example, he intends to go to southern Europe to recuperate from illness after graduation and pursue his ideal life. However, the social realities of both China and Japan make him feel confused and helpless. He experiences issues such as the gap between the rich and the poor and class oppression. As an international student, he is in a relatively disadvantaged position both economically and socially. His individualistic ideas conflict with the value concepts in that emphasized collectivism and hierarchy, causing him to have an identity crisis in terms of social values. He doesn't know how to position himself and pursue his own values in Japanese society. Through the self-exile of the "superfluous individual", critiques the shackles of feudal traditions while interrogating the hegemony of Western modernity, attempting to forge a new positioning of national identity amid cultural conflicts.

Different from the straightforward patriotism and love for the homeland in ancient literature, such as Yue Fei's *Man Jiang Hong*, which directly express the aspiration to safeguard his homeland by using the words: "The humiliation of Jingkang remains unavenged, the ministers' bitter hatred—when will it be extinguished? We shall drive our war chariots, to shatter the defenses of Helan Mountain's pass!" [15]. However, Yu integrates nationalist emotions into daily details. For instance, in *The Silver-Grey Death*, Mr. Y indulges in excessive drinking and self-harm. Through the micro-narrative of an individual's humiliation, it reflects the macroscopic history of national humiliation. This writing strategy of "seeing the big from the small" and the literary expression of nationalist discourse have made nationalist discourse more artistically appealing in literature.

5 Conclusion

The portrayal of male figures in Yu Dafu's works marks an important transition in Chinese literature from traditional literati morality to the spiritual world of modern intellectuals. Through the "superfluous men" depicted in works such as *Sinking*, *The Silver-Grey Death*, and *Southern Exodus*, Yu not only deconstructs the Confucian male value system centered on "Self-cultivation, familial harmony, state governance, and universal peace" (Xiushen, Qijia, Zhiguo, Pingtianxia), but also exposes the spiritual trauma and identity crises faced by the intellectuals through depictions of their "spiritual yearning and carnal desire". These fractured protagonists—tormented by alienation, sexual repression, and existential despair—embody the disintegration of traditional moral frameworks and the birth pangs of modern self-consciousness, reflecting the tensions between China's cultural tradition and the powerful forces of Western modernity.

Yu pioneered the modern transformation of male characterization in Chinese literature. First, he transformed men from the premodern individuals of social functions into "spiritual individuals." By endowing male characters with traits of inferiority,

decadence, and loneliness features, he exposed the existential rootlessness of male subjectivity following the collapse of traditional ethics. This narrative writing subverted the one-dimensional portrayals of men in classical works like *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San Guo Yan Yi*) as loyalty carrier or *The Scholars* (*Ru Lin Wai Shi*) as fame-and-status pursuer, making Chinese literature a reflection of the spiritual crisis of men as independent individuals. Second, his psychological realism broke with the classical tradition of “implying inner states through external actions” (Yi Xing Xie Xin). This innovation laid the groundwork for later works like Eileen Chang's *The Golden Cangue* (*Jin Suo Ji*) and Yu Hua's *To Live* (*Huo Zhe*), which delve deeply into characters' psychological complexity. Third, Yu redefined nationalism through the micro-narrative of “humiliated citizens of a weakened nation.” Unlike other works of modern Chinese literature that feature the grand narrative of patriotism, Yu anchored nationalism in visceral individual experiences of shame and vulnerability. This “humiliation-driven” model of national consciousness profoundly influenced later works such as Wang Xiaobo's *The Golden Era*, a critique of historical violence, and even influence contemporary works like the film *Forever Young*, which tells a story of several young people sharing the same psychological struggles in an era of uncertainty and instability.

Yu's portrayal of the “superfluous man” breaks the stereotype that “men must be strong and flawless,” revealing the universal emotional needs of men as human beings. It encourages contemporary men to confront their vulnerabilities and loneliness openly, liberating them from the constraints of traditional gender roles. His characterization of male figures serves as a literary mirror reflecting the spiritual trauma of the male collective in a specific historical context. Through poetic emotional expression and profound depictions of human existence, his works offer a potential path toward detoxification from rigid label imposed by the modern hegemonic masculinity. By freeing men from the sole “strongman narrative,” Yu compels society to critically examine the narrow “success-driven narratives” imposed on male identity. His writing enriches the existential dimensions of masculinity, fostering a dynamic equilibrium in gender culture.

This study fills two critical gaps in the research on Chinese male archetypes: First, it transcends the traditional “state-family homology” (Jia Guo Tong Gou) framework in literary studies—exemplified by narratives of loyalty to the monarchy, patriotic devotion, and imperial examination pursuits—by revealing how Yu experienced a sorrowful resonance between the nation and individual. He interweaves intellectuals' psychological traumas (inferiority, decadence, and sexual repression) with collective national traumas (the identity of “subjects of a weak nation” and cultural legitimacy crises). This narrative strategy, which synthesizes “Freudian psychoanalysis” with China's national destiny, not only breaks the one-dimensional, formulaic depictions of men in classical literature, but also establishes a dual analytical paradigm for masculinity studies: it probes the subtleties of individual subconscious psychodynamics while contextualizing spiritual crises within the macro-historical framework of “China's colonial modernity,” thereby integrating personal psychology and nationalism into a unified analytical matrix. Secondly, it provides a theoretical path for historical tracing of the evolution of male images in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, such as the reflectors in the “scar literature” of the 1980s and the ordinary men with a “de-heroized” image in TV dramas and films of the 21st century.

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