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The Cost of Living Up to the Demand of Autobiographical Fiction: An Analysis of the Interaction between Yu Dafu's Fiction and His Life

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ABSTRACT

Yu Dafu's subscription to the notion that "all literary work is nothing but the author's autobiography" is well-known, but the impact of this conviction on his fiction and, more importantly, his personal life has not been adequately researched. By analyzing the influence of the self-image Yu Dafu came to adopt through his exposure to the Japanese "I-novel" and the Russian works about the "superfluous man," a self-image that emphasizes social alienation, mental crises and exhibitionist behavior, the present essay studies how the dictates of self-exposure and Yu Dafu's attempts, as a professional writer depending on his pen for a living, to satisfy his readers' interest in scandals, shaped the course of his private life.

KEY WORDS

scholar-beauty (<i>caizi-jiaren</i>)	effeminacy
Yu Dafu	autobiographical fiction
sincerity	self-exposure



Yu Dafu's well-known subscription to the notion that "all literary work is nothing but the author's autobiography" has provided an important key to the understanding and interpretation of his fiction, particularly his early fiction. From the beginning of his literary career, many of his stories, with the undeniable incorporation of his life experiences in them, have been regarded as thinly disguised autobiographical works. In their efforts to sort out the parallels between Yu Dafu's life experiences and his literary works, critics, however, have not paid adequate attention to the negotiations he conducted between the two realms. By focusing on such negotiations throughout his career the present essay intends to analyze, on the one hand, Yu Dafu's imaginative transformations of his life in the course of following the literary model he adopted and, on the other hand, the aftermath of his autobiographical approach in his personal life.

As the first step in our analysis, we should bear in mind the literary influences Yu Dafu received before he became a writer. Born in 1896 and growing up in an age marked by historic upheavals and cultural interactions between tradition and modernity, Yu Dafu began to receive a strict traditional education at seven, and, according to his own account, by the age of nine he could already compose traditional poems that impressed his teacher and classmates (*Yu Dafu quanji* 9:65). Indeed, the more than four hundred extant traditional poems he wrote during his lifetime are regarded as the best part of his oeuvre by some critics (qtd. in Wang and Chen 534). As occasional pieces, these poems are lyrical in nature, yet they are also characterized by the heavy use of literary and historical allusions, a result of Yu Dafu's extensive knowledge of traditional literature and history. The mediation of emotion through textual references would, as we shall see, become a crucial

characteristic of his fiction as well.

After going to Japan in 1913, Yu Dafu came into contact with Japanese and Western literature, on which he spent most of his time during preparatory school and college. Of the wide range of fiction he read in this period, two genres stand out in their influence on his future works—the Japanese "I-novel" (*shishosetsu*) and the Russian works about the "superfluous man" (Ng 83-127). The importance of these two genres is that they provided him with a composite model for his self-image. Purported to be derived from the author's "real-life," the I-novel, a dominant literary genre in Japan in the early 20th century, presents a naturalistic image of the self as a spontaneous, irrational and unsocialized being immersed in the flow of unorganized sensual and subjective experiences. Similarly, the "superfluous man" in Russian literature is characterized by his alienation from society and his ineffectiveness in the world of external events in spite of his intensified sensitivity to social and ethical problems. As a result, the only freedom he can exercise is the freedom of scrutinizing his own thoughts and feelings by means of a solipsist discourse. What is also noteworthy is that, in addition to their gloomy dissatisfaction with life, both the I-novel and the "superfluous man" literature are shot through with a pervasive feeling of mental crisis and a strong urge to expose the crisis. As he embarked on his literary career, Yu Dafu adopted these tendencies as the foundation of his self-image. Consequently, unresolvable conflicts in personal life—introversion versus a yearning for companionship, megalomania versus an inferiority complex, an impulse for sexual transgression versus a guilty conscience, and excessive sentimentality versus cool-headed self-examination, to name a few of the most intense conflicts—became the hallmarks of his self-projection.

The accentuation of mental crisis starts with Yu Dafu's first work of fiction, "Silver-grey Death" (*Yinhui de si*), a story, written in Japan in early 1921, that foregrounds a Chinese student's devastation at the news of his wife's death back in China, his subsequent attempts to dispel the unbearable feeling of loneliness through heavy drinking and flirtation with barmaids, and his eventual death. In this story inspired by R. L. Stevenson and Ernest Dowson, the main character obviously

bears a physical resemblance to the author in age, height and facial features. However, the death of his wife, a pivotal event in the story, is nothing but a product of imagination, for in real life Yu Dafu's wife survived him and lived until 1978. Leo Lee correctly points out that in this story Yu Dafu, by blending reality with imagination, attempted to accomplish two tasks: "to paint the contours of an imaginary figure based on his own image and to inflate this fictional personality to the proportions of an ideal, larger-than-life vision" (Lee 13). What we see in this example is that, as vision gets the upper hand of reality, certain facts of life are changed to fit in better with a literary model predicated on desolation and alienation. This strategy, we should note, is regularly employed in Yu Dafu's later stories, so much so that one could easily point out many discrepancies between his self-projection and his life experiences. For instance, in his early stories the focal figure is invariably depicted as a friendless, sexually deprived young man in an alien land. Yet many of his early poems were poetic exchanges with Japanese devotees of classical Chinese poetry and, according to his own poems and to his friends' recollections, he had several relationships with Japanese women while studying in Japan (Chen and Wang 29). If one believes his Japanese schoolmates' accounts of his friendships with them, one could even raise serious doubts about the veracity of the traumatic racial discrimination his fictional counterpart so emphatically and consistently internalizes (Li Ping 278-84). As revealed by these discrepancies, Yu Dafu's early stories are by no means factual records of his personal life. Instead of copying life faithfully, they imaginatively mold life according to the dictates of a literary model he came to embrace through his contact with Japanese and Western literature.

Frequent textual references in these stories and the descriptions of their crucial influence on the focal figure as inspirations for his thoughts and behavior also amply demonstrate Yu Dafu's awareness of the workings of imagination. Immersed in a rich, heterogeneous textual world, Yu Dafu's fictional counterpart tends first to perceive his world from an artistic perspective he has acquired through reading and then to project his perceptions as facts of life. Take the main character in

"Sinking," Yu Dafu's best-known story, as an example. He spends much of his time reading Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heine, Gogol, and George Gissing, as well as French naturalist novels and Chinese pornographic fiction and, as he in turn reads or makes allusions to diverse literary works, he imagines himself in different situations accordingly. Consequently, his active imagination results in a clear ironic contrast between his perceptions and what is more or less wryly hinted at by the narrative text, as Michael Egan has pointed out (Egan 309-24). As a story that foregrounds its main character's subjective experiences at the expense of a realistic depiction of the world he lives in, "Sinking" deliberately shows that, just as paradigmatic narratives can shape one's mental world, they can also prevent one from coming to grips with the elusive reality of life.

Inattentive to the ironic gap between literary, artistic consciousness and experiential reality so poignantly presented in the story, the first readers of "Sinking" largely took it as an autobiographical work as it came out in print in October 1921. With his story's explicit descriptions of, among other things, masturbation and voyeurism, Yu Dafu quickly gained the reputation of "China's Rousseau" for his relentless self-exposure. In the meantime, his first collection of stories named after "Sinking" became a bestseller of the time and within two or three years thirty thousand copies of the book had been sold. Indeed, Yu Dafu's self-exposure was inspired by Rousseau, particularly by Rousseau's firm belief in sincerity, which called for the revelation of shameful acts, feelings and impulses. With its inseparable link to misfortune and depravity, the notion of sincerity brings its own ideological priorities as it battles the established moral hierarchies: emphases on introspection, sentiment, spontaneity and uniqueness as the most important ideals in self-actualization. Premised on these requisites of sincerity, "Sinking" set the tone for Yu Dafu's subsequent works. It also set a limit to his self-fashioning, both in his fiction and in his life, in that once he had created a popular persona for himself in a particular way he could alter it only at the risk of appearing to act out of character and perhaps offending or even losing his audience. In order to make his writing "true to life," then, he had to keep acting out the role dictated by

his self-image in "Sinking." In this sense the investiture of voyeurism, fetishism, homosexuality, masochism and kleptomania in his self-image, a proof in C.T. Hsia's view, of the versatility of Yu Dafu's autobiographical hero should be considered a result of his attempts at demonstrating his moral courage in self-exposure (109). As a strategy Yu Dafu employed to strengthen his position in the May Fourth literary world, the emphasis on sincerity in turn determined both the mode of his fiction and his lifestyle.

We should note that, as Yu Dafu made one unseemly revelation about himself after another in his fiction in the early 1920s, he continued to demonstrate that his self-exposure was inspired by a wide array of literary works. In "Endless Night" (*Mangmang Ye*, written in February 1922), for instance, the focal figure Yu Zhifu's homosexual feelings toward a young male friend are prompted by Yu's fleeting vision of the pure love that Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine had for each other when they lived in the idyllic Belgian countryside in 1872. When, in a recollection of the torment of sexual fantasies described in great detail in "Emptiness" (*Kongxu*, written in July 1922), the same character Yu Zhifu lies down and avidly smells the lingering body scent left on his quilt by the object of his fantasies, a Japanese girl who came to seek his company on a frightening thunderous night, he is in fact reenacting the scandalous scene that ends Tayama Katai's *Futon*, the first I-novel in Japanese literature. Ironically, by following literary precedents so closely these self-revelations prove to be little more than examples of life imitating art and, as such, they call their own authenticity into question.

At this point one begins to wonder why Yu Dafu, with all his awareness of the textual, imaginative nature of his works, kept coming back to his personal life for material instead of striking out in a different direction. It seems to me the answer to this question lies in the way he made his living. After he burst onto the literary scene and gained fame with the publication of "Sinking," he became an editor for the Creation Society and was in turn put in charge of *Creation Quarterly*, *Creation Weekly*, *Creation Daily*, *Creation Monthly*, and other Creation Society publications. To keep these numerous projects going, he

had to double as one of their major contributors. In the meantime, as his celebrity stature grew, editors of other literary magazines and publishing houses constantly solicited him for submissions. To meet the incessant demands for his works he indiscriminately contributed fiction, essays, sketches, commentaries, translations, letters and even diary entries to various venues. As far as his fiction was concerned, pressed for time, he continued to turn mainly to his own life, as it was the most readily accessible source. Since he made his living almost entirely with his pen except for a few stints as a professor, he had to keep writing and publishing to support himself and his family. As a result, he tended to draw material for his fiction from what had just happened in his life. For example, the short story "The Third Day of the Eleventh Month" (*Shiyiyue chusan*), a record of the happenings on his birthday in 1924, was written on the very same day. As a writer he realized that many of his works were potboilers written in haste, and he made numerous scathing remarks about them. In a postscript to "She Is a Weak Woman" (*Ta shi yige ruo nuzi*), a novella he dashed off in ten days in early 1932 and one of his worst failures by his own admission, he makes the following statement: "After finishing this story I read it carefully and found many flaws. But I was under deadly financial pressure and could not revise or rewrite it. So I handed it over to the publisher and let him publish it" (*Yu Dafu Xiaoshuoji 2*: 697). Financial pressure also resulted in his exploitation of the so-called printing right—the right to let a publisher print his works in different combinations while he himself, as the author, retained the copyright of the originals (2: 830-31). Despite his awareness that unsuspecting readers would be tricked into purchasing duplicate copies of his works, he continued to publish his works in different collections after they had first come out in magazines and newspapers. Obviously his moral qualms had yielded to financial pressure.

Financial pressure, real or imagined, could not but sensitize Yu Dafu to his readers' tastes and predilections and, as a professional writer depending on his pen for a living, he had little choice but to cater to his consumers. In this respect he was encouraged and helped by his publishers, who shared the same financial interest with him. To solicit

readers' opinions, Kaiming Publishing House, for example, attached a questionnaire in the back of *Old Pieces (Guoquji)*, a collection of his works it published in November 1927. With the commercial success of "Sinking" in mind, Yu Dafu chose to follow the beaten track for much of the 1920s and continued to write autobiographical fiction with self-exposure as its main goal. The result was a certain monotony and repetitiveness in his works, as his one-time student and critic Liu Dajie complained upon reading his popular novella "Stray Lamb" in early 1928 (He Yubo 129). On the other hand, the need to write autobiographical fiction with insurmountable alienation as its subject matter had a direct impact on his life, for Yu Dafu, with all his recourse to imagination as a means to intensify or even create crises in his life, as we have seen in "Silver-grey Death," retained to a certain degree the realist conviction in the correspondence between life and literature. To maintain this correspondence he had to make certain sacrifices in his life for the sake of his fiction.

To illustrate the impact of Yu Dafu's fiction on his personal life, I will use his relationship with his wife Sun Quan as an example. Born in 1897 and brought up on rudimentary Confucian texts for girls, Sun was betrothed to Yu Dafu in 1917 and married him in 1920. Judging from the extant poems Yu wrote to Sun between 1918 and 1920, one can see that their relationship, though arranged by their families, was not one totally devoid of love and understanding, as he would later describe it to his lover Wang Yingxia. After Yu Dafu started his writing career, Sun began to appear in his stories as a docile wife who takes whatever befalls her, including her husband's frequent verbal abuses, without any complaint. In "Wistaria and Dodder" (*Niaoluo xing*), a story inspired by two parasitic plants mentioned in a minor ode in the *Book of Poetry (Shijing)* and written in 1923 on the day of the traditional Bright and Clear Festival, a customary occasion for young couples to go on a spring outing to the country, we encounter little more than a lengthy remorseful apostrophe to Sun who has just unwillingly left Shanghai with a small child to live with Yu's ill-tempered mother. Significantly, this story derives its strong emotional appeal from the couple's separation from each other, without which it would not have been written in

the first place. In real life, prolonged separations also marked Yu Dafu's marriage before he finally abandoned Sun in 1927, with Sun living either with his mother in Zhejiang or with his elder brother in Beijing. Yu himself attributed the separations mainly to financial hardships, a claim not entirely convincing in view of his support of Sun. For example, the extant entries of his diary show that he remitted money to Sun from Guangzhou to Beijing three times in November and December 1926, each time a considerable sum (*Yu Dafu quanji* 12: 37, 44, 58). Keeping these remittances in mind, one might argue that it would have been less expensive for him to live with his wife under one roof. Meek and obedient as Sun was by all accounts, it would also have been unlikely for her to pose a serious threat to Yu Dafu's hedonistic lifestyle had they lived together. All things considered, it probably would not be too unreasonable for us to contend that Yu Dafu's separations from his wife were at least partially dictated by the subject matter of his autobiographical fiction. Predicated on alienation, privation and misery, Yu Dafu's autobiographical fiction turned out to be fundamentally incompatible with his purported yearning for companionship, peace and harmony in his personal life.

With the close proximity between writing and life experience mentioned above, the realist notion of "mimesis" was stood on its head in Yu Dafu's case: just as "real-life" events gave rise to fiction, fiction in turn altered the course of "real-life." In this regard his relationship with Wang Yingxia offers a good example. According to his diary, he met Wang on January 14, 1927 and immediately fell in love with her. The emotional vicissitudes he experienced thereafter were recorded in great detail in his diary. In September 1927 he published the diary entries he had written intermittently between November 3, 1926 and July 31, 1927 under the title *Nine Diaries*, with a postscript dated August 14, 1927 that laments, among other things, his fate as a writer who had to sell his diary to make a living. Since *Nine Diaries* was published on the heels of the recorded experiences, it makes one wonder whether the diary entries were written with the intention of publication in the first place. If that was the case, the intention would influence the entries and even the diarist's behavior. In fact in his writing

career Yu Dafu had a habit of publishing his diaries, a habit that significantly affected their content and style. In a diary entry written on October 5, 1921 in Anhui Province and published a month later in the Shanghai newspaper *Shishi Xinbao*, for example, we read the following statements apparently addressed to the passionate reading public rather than the diarist himself or the apathetic, gullible peasants described in the entry:

After being flooded, the area along the Yangtze River has been exposed to dry weather for so many days that I am afraid wheat cannot be planted. Oh, my compatriots! Oh, poor peasants! Having experienced so many wars, famines and floods, why haven't you gained consciousness and risen to fight those commanders, presidents, general directors and all those abusive officials and wealthy people to the death? For you it would be better to stand up and try to fight than to wait to be slaughtered. Whether your enemies come from the south, the north or any other direction and whether they are bandits or robbers, there will be hope as long as you fight your way forward. In this matter you have no need for a representative, because representatives are invariably parasites and every one of them is worse than those commanders and officials. Representatives for students, for peasants and for workers are all the same. (*Yu Dafu quanji* 12: 33)

In a June 1927 essay, "Diary Literature" (*Riji wenxue*), written in the midst of his mad pursuit of Wang Yingxia, Yu Dafu makes his awareness of the reading public's desire clear by acknowledging their curiosity about the author's private life as the strongest motivation for reading both diary and fiction (*Yu Dafu quanji* 5: 314). In consideration of this acknowledgment, authenticity, in his view the main virtue of the diary as a literary genre, turns out to be little more than a lure for the readers' voyeuristic impulses.

To satisfy his readers' curiosity about his personal life, Yu Dafu

in *Nine Diaries* resorts to the strategy of dramatizing the psychological ups and downs he went through in his relationship with Wang Yingxia. In turn we come across his instantaneous infatuation, his uncontrollable craving for Wang's company, his ecstasies over gestures that could be construed as her favorable responses and his acute dejections at the slightest, often misunderstood, signs of indifference or rejection. Bearing an unmistakable resemblance to Yu Dafu's counterpart in his fiction, the self-image that comes out of the *Nine Diaries* is characterized by sentimentality, volatility, self-indulgence, active imagination and paranoia. However, there is a significant difference: the lack of ironic distance between the focal figure and the implied author in the diaries. As if acting out in real life the part he had scripted for himself in his fiction, Yu Dafu, as revealed in these supposedly factual records, blurred the distinction between life and fiction and, as his life became a drama, ended up losing the self-awareness necessary to seeing things in perspective. To illustrate his dramatization of his relationship with Wang Yingxia in *Nine Diaries*, I will quote an entry, dated January 24, 1927, in its entirety:

After getting up at nine in the morning, I thought that, after I had wasted the whole day yesterday waiting for her [Wang Yingxia], she would certainly come today. So I decided not to go back to Fuyang but to spend another day waiting for her at the train station.

Before the scheduled arrival of the first train I went to her alma mater, Women's Normal School, to ask for her address in Hangzhou. The office clerk there was stupid beyond description and in the end the confused dolt did not give me anything.

When I went back to the train station before noon, the morning express train from Shanghai had not got there yet. Bored out of my mind, I went to a second-hand bookstore and spent five or six dollars on used books. . . .

Not until after one o'clock in the afternoon did the express train from Shanghai show up. With cold sweat on my

palms and a pounding heart, I strained my eyes to search for her among those who got off the train and almost approached several disembarking young women by mistake. In the end she did not come.

In the wake of my anger I thought of going back to Fuyang to find out how ravaging the recent war was. When I got to the pier, however, I could not find any boat or bus. Meanwhile, snow began to fall from the grey sky.

At my wits' end, I had no choice but to return to the train station by rickshaw and waited there. She did not come on the second express train, either. After I had stood in the snow for two or three hours, I was brought to the verge of tears. As darkness gathered, snowflakes kept landing on the lapel of my gown and a cold wind also kept hitting my face. I had no choice but to buy a ticket and return to Shanghai by the evening train.

I got back to my home in Shanghai at one o'clock in the morning. After I took a bath and changed my clothes, I got into bed, covered my head under the quilt and cried to my heart's content all by myself. (*Yu Dafu quanji* 12: 88-89)

As a drama of infatuation and obsession, Yu Dafu's recorded experiences on this day demonstrate his lack of control over his own actions. Yet this lack of control is belied by his awareness that it was this kind of drama that would attract his readers' attention. His attempt to satisfy his readers' voyeuristic appetite proved to be a big success. *Nine Diaries*, first published on September 1, 1927 by Beixin Publishing House, quickly went through nine large print runs and thirty thousand copies were sold in just a few years, making it the second best-seller in his career after "Sinking." Moreover, its success was not just commercial. Published despite a promise Yu made, in a letter to Wang Yingxia dated March 11, 1927, that he would never publish these diary entries during his lifetime and with no advance notice to Wang, *Nine Diaries* turned its author's romance into a fait accompli in the eyes of the general public (*Wang Yingxia zizhuan* 61-64). In real life it might

have contributed in no small measure to Yu's "formal wedding" with Wang in January 1928 without first divorcing his wife, upon which Wang had insisted from the very beginning of their relationship. Numerous entries in *Nine Diaries* show that what to do about Sun Quan had remained a thorny problem for Yu Dafu. Torn between his guilty conscience and sensual desire like the focal figures in his fiction, he had no intention of abandoning his wife outright for another woman. Even after he was "engaged" to Wang in June 1927 he still agonized over this issue. With his romance turned into a fait accompli by *Nine Diaries*, however, he managed to "formalize" his relationship with Wang without surrendering to her demand. By publicizing a relationship in progress, Yu Dafu in effect succeeded in leading it in a direction he desired and, as it turned out, Wang Yingxia's unresolved marital status would eventually make it possible for Yu to enhance the drama in his life by derogatorily branding her as a "concubine" after they broke up.

Yu Dafu's "marriage" to Wang Yingxia in January 1928 was a watershed in both his personal life and his writing career. As his daily life became relatively tranquil under Wang's management, he largely stopped writing the kind of fiction he had been known for: autobiographical fiction in which he projected himself as an ostracized, poverty-stricken and victimized man of letters. In the few autobiographical stories he wrote after the "marriage," there is a noticeable change in content, style and mood. To see this change, let us turn to "Traces of Smoke" (*Yanying*), "Dance of Banknotes" (*Zhibi de tiaoyao*) and "Dongzi Pass" (*Dongzi Guan*), a sequence of thinly disguised autobiographical stories. Written in March 1926, "Traces of Smoke" has a main character, a poverty-stricken writer named Wenpu, that shares with Yu Dafu numerous experiences such as the stay in Japan as a student, a stint as a professor cut short by student unrest, poor health caused by tuberculosis and a wife living in Beijing with small children. After running into an old friend on the street, who gives him some money out of pity, Wenpu decides to go to his hometown for a visit, only to see his peevish mother who scolds him for not sending her money. While listening to his mother's complaints at the dinner table,

Wenpu conjures up in his mind a vivid picture of the suffering he and his wife are enduring as they live separately. "Dance of Banknotes," written in July 1930, was intended as a sequel to "Traces of Smoke," as is made clear by a note Yu Dafu attached to the story as it first came out in *Beixin Semimonthly*. Picking up where "Traces of Smoke" leaves off, "Dance of Banknotes" describes what happens the next morning. However, Wenpu's love-hate feelings about his hometown, his strained relationship with his mother and, more significantly, his ability to imagine his own suffering are all absent from the story. Hearing his loud coughing, his mother, now a caring parent, urges him to see a local doctor of Chinese medicine and gives him some money for the visit. In "Dongzi Pass," written in September 1932 as the third story in the sequence, Wenpu goes to see Doctor Xu at the instance of his concerned mother. Upon meeting Xu, he is quickly impressed by the doctor's generosity to his patients, his connoisseurship in antiques, his pacifist condemnation of all wars and, of course, his medical expertise. In comparison, the doctor's opium addiction appears to be an innocuous habit rather than a vice. As Wenpu heads home at the end of the story, he harbors nothing but admiration for the doctor, relishing the tranquil evening he spent with the "relaxed and magnanimous" gentleman who, in his mind, is perhaps the last epitome of the old tradition of China. The contrasting conceptions of self, family and life in general and the accompanying divergent emotional tones displayed in these stories so closely related in plot and story time, in my view, can only be explained when we take into consideration the author's different mental dispositions at different stages in his career. As a peaceful lifestyle undermined the ground for discontent and self-pity, it engendered in Yu Dafu a sanguine outlook capable of appreciating acts of concern, sympathy and kindness in life.

The change that occurred in Yu Dafu's works in the wake of his changed lifestyle indicates that in an important sense Yu Dafu remained a realist writer whose works, in addition to their obvious incorporation of his personal experiences, explicitly reflected his changing mental states and sentiments. Yu Dafu himself repeatedly emphasized the close connection between his life and works. In his most important

account of his own career, "A Retrospection of My Creative Life in the Past Five or Six Years" (*Wuliunian lai chuangzuo shenghuo de huigu*), for example, he reiterates his belief in the autobiographical approach by stressing first-hand experience and individuality in literary works. "I feel a writer's life should tightly embrace his art and the individuality [English in the original] in his works should never disappear" (*Yu Dafu quanji* 5: 341-42). Here we should realize that, given his strong conviction in the inseparable connection between life and literature, to strive for individuality in his works meant he had first to strive for individuality in his life. Interestingly, this article was written on August 31, 1927, at a time when Yu was madly pursuing Wang Yingxia and literally on the eve of the publication of *Nine Diaries*. With this context in mind, one cannot help but wonder whether his romance was an example of life embracing art and whether it was started, at least in part, with the individuality of its literary representation in view.

Individuality in both life and fiction, to be sure, thrives on dramatic events. By the same token, it is quite incompatible with serenity. As a writer who valued individuality, Yu Dafu, for all the benignity that came into his works after he began living with Wang Yingxia, was well aware of the stifling effect of a peaceful lifestyle on the autobiographical fiction, which put a premium on eventfulness. In a May 1933 story, "Superannuation" (*Chimo*), the last story in his career that contained autobiographical elements, he showed how tranquility in life could give rise to a feeling of satiety and boredom. Just as the title denotes, the main character Lin Xue, Yu Dafu's counterpart in the story, is a writer who feels he has lagged behind the turbulent times and opts to retire from the literary arena in Shanghai and move to the scenic city of Hangzhou. In the course of narrating the relocation of the Lins, an unexpected visit of an old poet friend, now equally past his prime and burdened with a family, and an unenthusiastic tour of the West Lake, the story foregrounds Lin's lethargy, the tedium in his life, and his prudence in behavior. Rendered irrelevant in this environment, sentimentality, self-exposure and imagination of alienation and victimization, all hallmarks of Yu Dafu's early fiction, are nowhere to be seen in

this story. As he reveals the languor and banality covered underneath a façade of contentment, Yu Dafu subtly indicates his dissatisfaction with a lifestyle unconducive to masochistic imagination of misfortune and crisis.

Given the demand of autobiographical fiction for extraordinary events, Yu Dafu's attempts to turn his life into a drama and his distaste for an uneventful life become understandable. The demand of autobiographical fiction, in my view, also provides an angle from which we can look at the most sensational event in his life—his public breakup with Wang Yingxia. According to Wang, she was in correspondence with Xu Shaodi, the Education Commissioner of Zhejiang and an old friend, in the spring of 1938 as she tried to introduce a woman to him as his girlfriend. When Yu Dafu came across Xu's letters to Wang he came to the conclusion that they were having an affair. He had the "love-letters" photographed as evidence and began to act crossly at home. Unable to put up with Yu's tantrums, Wang left him in early July. On July 5 Yu Dafu put out the following announcement in the Wuhan newspaper *Dagong Bao*:

Madame Wang Yingxia: It is a common occurrence that couples separate and form new unions in chaotic times. Your relationship with Mr. X, the jewelry, clothes, cash and deeds you took away are not irresolvable problems. The only thing that matters is that your mother and children are missing you sorrowfully. So I implore you to inform me of your whereabouts. (*Yu Dafu quanji* 7: 326)

It is important to note that, despite Yu Dafu's distribution of the copies of the "love-letters" among his friends and colleagues, they have so far not been discovered and, as a result, his charge of "adultery" against Wang has never been proven. In view of the lack of evidence, the "affair" might well be the product of Yu Dafu's resurgent masochistic fantasy that sought to relish publicly his status as an innocent, forgiving and altruistic victim.

The act of washing his dirty linen in public, as shown by his an-

nouncement in the *Dagong Bao*, meant that this time Yu Dafu had chosen to take a further step to strive for candid self-exposure at the expense of domestic harmony. Although his quarrel with Wang Yingxia was temporarily patched up after he was forced by Wang to make a public apology in the *Dagong Bao* and signed an agreement of reconciliation with Wang, the truce between the couple remained in a precarious state as long as it existed under the threat of Yu Dafu's urge to scandalize the public. In March 1939 Yu Dafu once again demonstrated this urge when he published a group of twenty traditional poems with detailed notes under the collective title "Poetic Record of Family Destruction" (*Huijia shiji*) in a Hong Kong magazine, *Dafeng*. As he must have anticipated, his poems and notes created a great sensation and, as a result, the issue of *Dafeng* that carried them had to be reprinted three times to satisfy the need of the reading public. In the meantime, they were also reprinted in magazines published in Shanghai and Japan. For her part, Wang Yingxia sent her rebuttals to *Dafeng* immediately after she saw Yu's "Poetic Record" and, with their rift becoming unbridgeable, she soon left him once and for all. Domestic peace was finally shattered by the demand for sensational events.

What is significant about the "Poetic Record of Family Destruction," Yu Dafu's last autobiographical work, is the obvious gap between the poems and the notes. Written mostly between March 1936 and September 1938 and, for many of them, published before, the poems in the "Poetic Record," like Yu Dafu's other poems, are occasional pieces that document separate events in his life and his emotional reactions. As such, they lack in interconnection and overall structure. Their linguistic medium—archaic classical Chinese and copious literary and historical allusions—also makes it rather difficult for an average reader to fully grasp their connotations at a glance. In contrast, the notes attached to the poems are written in simple, straightforward vernacular and are focused solely on the development of Wang Yingxia's alleged affair. A coherent retrospection of the deterioration of the union between Yu and Wang, they show how Yu Dafu, as an autobiographer, set out to reassemble the scattered events and impressions in his life into an artful invention aimed at catching public attention. As he tried

to satisfy the reading public's insatiable appetite for scandals, Yu Dafu proved that he would not stop his motivated inventions until the semblance of domestic harmony was completely destroyed.

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