Sentimental Letters in the Postal Age: Media, Communication, and Emotion in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Epistolary Literature and Culture

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Asian Languages and Literature

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Abstract

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This thesis seeks to understand the discursive emergence of the intimate relationship between letters and sentimental feelings by examining various texts that are either composed of or about "sentimental letters" in early twentieth-century Chinese popular literature. Theories from media studies will be employed to understand letters as a form of media and the exchange of letters as a process of communication. Based on this distinction, I respectively analyze the multiple mediations of emotion in Xu Zhenya's *Jade Pear Spirit* (1912), the transmission of sorrowful feelings in Bao Tianxiao's "Soaring Wild Goose" (1915) and Zhou Shoujuan's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" (1921), and the undelivered sentimental letters in Jiang Hongjiao's postal stories (1921-1925). This thesis proposes that the sentimental letters embody heightened

consciousness and sensibilities around media, communication, and postal delivery in relation to the overflowing expression of emotion. The specific ways in which emotion is mediated and communicated by letters offer rich insights into a series of intersubjective issues, including gender relations, in the face of the postal age.

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NOTES ON CONVENTIONS

Unless otherwise noted, all English-language translations of the texts and titles of Chinese-language literary and scholarly works are my own.

For the titles in the main text, the English translation appears first, followed by the *pinyin* Romanization and Chinese characters in parentheses. In notes and bibliography entries, the Chinese *pinyin* and characters precede the English translation provided within brackets. An English translation in capitalized sentence-style within brackets indicates my own translation; one in capitalized headline-style indicates the English translation found in the original publication or is commonly used.

When an author's name is followed by a different name in brackets, the latter one is the name under which the article was originally published.

Unless otherwise noted, the choice between traditional or simplified characters is based on the actual usage in the referenced Chinese publications.

Most texts cited in this study from Republican-era periodicals and books were originally presented in a vertical layout, with traditional punctuation marks placed to the right of the characters. In such cases, I have chosen not to add new-style punctuation, instead inserting only the Chinese period to divide the sentences in the texts.

Many Republican-era periodicals feature independent rather than consecutive pagination. The page numbering renews with each individual article. In such cases, I have marked the page numbers only when citing original texts from these periodicals.

Introduction:

The Emergence of Sentimental Letters

People of today naturally see letters as a medium that carries the weight of emotion. The familiar Chinese phrase that "letters are short, but emotion is deep" (*zhi duan qing chang* 紙短情長) has often been used to describe how a short letter can attach its sender's unquantifiable, deep feelings toward the receiver. However, it is less known that this phrase originates from some affectionate letters between men and women in popular stories published in the 1910s or so. It is from a letter sent by the courtesan Qiu Ying 秋瑛 to her lover Scholar Tang 唐生 after they are separated in the 1907 short story "History of Resentment" ("Hen shi" 恨史).[1] It is also used by the widow Liying 梨影 in a letter to comfort her secret lover Mengxia 孟霞 who is sick in the 1912 novel *Jade Pear Spirit* (*Yuli hun* 玉梨魂).[2] These letters, with the fictional stories they come from, mark the discursive emergence of the intimate relationship between letters and sentimental feelings. To understand the literary and cultural significances within this relationship, this thesis examines various texts that are either composed of or about "sentimental letters" in early twentieth-century Chinese popular literature.

The term sentimental letters (*yanqing chidu* 豔情尺牘/言情尺牘) as a generic category refers to love and marriage-themed letters that are characterized by the expression of overflowing feelings and was popularized during the 1910s and 1920s.[3] In 1915, the term

[1] Tao Youzeng 陶佑曾 [Baopi 報癖], "Hen shi" 恨史 [History of resentment], *Yueyue xiaoshuo* 月月小說 [The All-Story Monthly] 1, no.8 (1907), 153.
[2] Xu Zhenya 徐枕亞, *Yuli hun* 玉梨魂 [Jade Pear Spirit] (Shanghai: Dazhong shuju, 1948), 45.
[3] The two words 豔情尺牘 and 言情尺牘 are used interchangeably in this context, despite the fact that 豔情 can be associated with the late Ming and early Qing fictional category called *yanqing xiaoshuo* 豔情小說. This type of

experienced widespread circulation within print culture. *New Journal of Fiction* (*Xiaoshuo xinbao* 小說新報) published a total of 53 sentimental letters under the column 豔情尺牘 across its 11 issues that year.[4] Most of them are expressions of love between a man and a woman, while a few are written to congratulate another person's marriage.[5] *Jade Pear Spirit*'s original and successful incorporation of sentimental letters led its author Xu Zhenya 徐枕亞 (1889-1937) to continue this choice in its sequel *Tearful History of the Past* (*Xuehong lei shi* 雪鴻淚史), and this work was advertised as "a must read for those who love reading sentimental letters" (愛閱言情尺牘者不可不讀) in *Thicket Journal of Fiction* (*Xiaoshuo congbao* 小說叢報) in 1915.[6] A collection of sentimental letters titled 言情尺牘 compiled by Li Jingzhong 李警众 was also published in the same year, including four letters from *Jade Pear Spirit*.[7] Sentimental letters may come from fictional stories, but they can also exist as self-contained works, and in this case, they are usually titled with *dai* 代 (on behalf of) or *ni* 擬 (to imitate), which means that these letters are crafted within imaginary rather than actual situations.[8] This thesis focuses on sentimental letters when they are integrated into popular stories in particular. These stories are either

fiction usually includes contents about sexual desires and acts rather than only love and feelings.

[4] This statistic is cited from Chen Pingyuan's book. See Chen Pingyuan 陈平原, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuanbian* 中国小说叙事模式的转变 [The transformation of narrative modes in Chinese fiction] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1988), 213.

[5] For example, Haoshi 好事, "Dai Jin Shanshan zhi mou ke shu" 代金珊珊致某客人書 [On behalf of Jin Shanshan writing to a guest], *Xiaoshuo xinbao* 小說新報 [New journal of fiction] no.1 (1915). Xiaoyu 笑余, "Dai Shunhua nüshi he mou nüshi jiehun shu" 代蕣華女士賀某女士結婚書 [On behalf of Miss Shunhua congratulating a woman's marriage], *Xiaoshuo xinbao* 小說新報 [New journal of fiction] no.1 (1915).

[6] See "Xuehong lei shi" 雪鴻淚史 [Tearful history of the past], *Xiaoshuo congbao* 小說叢報 [Thicket journal of fiction] no. 13 (1915).

[7] Li Jingzhong 李警众, *Yanqing chidu* 言情尺牘 [Sentimental letters] (Shanghai: Yazhen tushu ju, 1915).

[8] As a way of literary impersonation, *dai* and *ni* are common literary practices that can be traced to as early as Han literature. For instance, the exchange letters between Li Ling 李陵 and Su Wu 蘇武 are believed to be written through the persona of the two historical figures. See Eva Yuen-wah Chung, "A Study of the Shu (Letters) of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220)" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1982), 335-336.

composed entirely of letters or centered around letters and thus can be called epistolary literature in a broad sense.[9]

Popular writers celebrated sentimental letters as "being used to express noble and sincere love" (用以傳達高尚真摯之愛情).[10] But the new culturalists condemned the genre for its detrimental impact, as evidenced by the often cited negative comment from Qian Xuantong 錢玄同 in 1919:

> Anyone with a little knowledge can discern that "Black Curtain" books are poisonous to young people. While everyone knows that "Black Curtain" books are a kind of improper books, there are many works of a similar nature, including "Sentimental Letters," "Fragrant Boudoir Rhymed Words," "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School Fiction," and so on.
> 『黑幕』書之貽毒於青年，稍有識者皆能知之。然人人皆知『黑幕』書為一種不正當之書籍，其實與『黑幕』書同類之書籍正復不少：如『豔情尺牘，』『香閨韻語，』及『鴛鴦蝴蝶派的小說』等等，皆是。[11]

Sentimental letters were criticized alongside the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School (*yuanyang hudie pai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派) as well as the "Black Curtain" (*heimu* 黑幕) fiction for being poisonous to the nation's new generation. Qian further explained the reasons: they were products of the old

[9] In discussing letters' interactions with other genres in the Chinese context, Antje Richter distinguishes two ways of using the letter form: "The basic letter form can be easily appropriated by most other genres, either by fashioning an entire text as a letter or a correspondence (for instance a poem, disquisition, or novel) or by inserting epistolary elements into another text (for instance a song, biography, tale, or drama)." The primary texts analyzed in this thesis include both ways. Some literary texts are entirely in the letter form, while others only incorporate epistolary elements. I refer to both as "epistolary literature." See Antje Richter, "Introduction: The Study of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture," in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 7.
[10] See the preface to Li Jingzhong's *Yanqing chidu*.
[11] Qian Xuantong 錢玄同, "'Heimu' shu" 『黑幕』書 ["Black Curtain" books], *Xin qingnian* 新青年 [New Youth] 6, no. 1 (1919): 74-75.

literary techniques and thus represented the corrupt culture of the past, and they only catered to commercial entertainment and lacked the "reform ideology" (革新之思想) advocated by the new culturalists.

Contemporary scholars have recently reevaluated the previously stereotyped and misunderstood Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School popular fiction, while also touching upon how the sentimental letters are innovatively used in literary texts. For instance, C. T. Hsia's 1981 article on *Jade Pear Spirit* especially devotes one section to discussing the novel's massive adoption of letters. Hsia argues that letters impart "the novel's peculiar power and tone of authenticity" and the author Xu Zhenya is "the Chinese Samuel Richardson in directing the Chinese novel toward greater coverage of subjective experience through his regular use of the epistolary form."[12] Hsia not only offers a close reading of letters within the novel, but also situates them into the wider cultural network of letter-writing related publications, including the famous Qing-dynasty correspondence collection *Letters from Autumn Water Retreat* (*Qiushuixuan chidu* 秋水軒尺牘) as well as some early Republican-era collections of imaginary sentimental letters.[13] Hsia's illumination of the literary significance and cultural context of the letters in *Jade Pear Spirit* paves a way for a more comprehensive examination of the sentimental letters in other popular stories from the Butterfly school.

Some other studies are more attentive to letters as a narrative form. This second thread of research is exemplified by Chen Pingyuan's 1988 book on the transformation of narrative modes in modern Chinese fiction. Chen suggests that the narrative capacity of traditional Chinese letter writing prepared for the development of epistolary fiction in modern China.[14] Unlike Hsia, Chen

[12] C. T. Hsia, "Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun*: An Essay in Literary History and Criticism," *Renditions* 17&18 (1982): 227.
[13] Ibid., 228.
[14] Chen Pingyuan, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuanbian*, 215.

suggests that Xu Zhenya and other popular writers only used the letter form to display excessive emotion and thus failed to develop it as an innovative literary technique to explore inner thoughts and subjective feelings of the characters; in contrast, Chen praises May Fourth authors' use of epistolary form for helping create new types of narrative time, perspective, and structure in Chinese fiction.[15] Chen's narratological approach has inspired this thesis to consider the insertion of letters as a technique of storytelling in the texts read here. As Janet Gurkin Altman suggests in her classic study of Western epistolary novels, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982), the epistolary form "as narrative instrument can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types, and narrative self-consciousness." [16] However, this thesis will demonstrate that Chen's argument has made over-generalizing claims about the diverse narrative choices made by popular writers' use of sentimental letters in their stories, and is biased in its prioritization of May Fourth epistolary fiction.

Unlike Chen's devaluation of sentimental letters, other scholars have recently begun to examine the connection between emotion and letters from more critical perspectives. This newest trend of research is first seen in Pan Shaw-yu's (2017) survey of how the genre of lover letters, as a way of practicing romantic love, underwent a transformation from traditional to modern during late Qing and early Republican era.[17] Butterfly writers' sentimental letters combine new vocabulary and modern concepts with traditional lyricism, reflecting social changes of that era.[18] Focusing on the rhetoric of emotions or pathos in the epistolary situation of addressing a correspondent, Lee Fu-ming (2020) argues that the "communicational tension between addresser

[15] Ibid., 213-215.
[16] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to A Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 9.
[17] Pan Shaw-yu 潘少瑜, "Shuqing de jiyi: Qingmo Minchu de qingshu fanyi yu xiezuo" 抒情的技藝：清末民初的情書翻譯與寫作 [The Craft of Lyricism: Translations and Writings of Love Letters in the Late Qing and Early Republican Periods], *Dongya guannianshi jikan* 東亞觀念史集刊 12 no. 6 (2017): 239-286.
[18] Ibid., 264-272.

and addressee" in late Qing and May Fourth epistolary writings transformed the first-person mode of expressing feeling in Chinese literary history.[19] These two articles do not view sentimental letters solely as narrative devices; instead, they regard them as manifestations of cultural and social changes, as well as a new mode of expressing emotion in modern China. These perspectives indicate an interdisciplinary direction for future studies.

Why did the genre of sentimental letters become so appealing that it saturated popular stories during the early Republican era? How do we understand the literary, cultural, and social meanings of these stories? By examining various literary texts using sentimental letters as formal and thematic elements in popular fiction, this study seeks to address the following specific questions: In what sense do the sentimental letters continue and transform the Chinese narrative and lyrical traditions? What kinds of notions about emotion and the way through which it is expressed and communicated were embedded in these stories? What does fictional correspondence reveal about issues such as interpersonal connection, gender relations, and moral coding in early twentieth-century China?

To answer these questions, this thesis offers a close reading of selected epistolary texts including a novel and some short stories. Some texts are widely known while others are relatively new to modern readers. My reading focuses on the epistolarity of these texts, especially the intra-textual relationship between the letter text (framed by the character's voice) and the non-letter text (framed by the narrator's voice) within a story. This approach draws on both Western studies of epistolary novels and the structure of Chinese narrative tradition. In discussing the role of the reader in epistolary fiction, Altman makes a distinction between the

[19] Lee Fu-ming 李馥名, "Cong qingshu dao yishu: Zhongguo ershi shiji chu shuxin yanqing wenxue de xiuci qingjing zhuanbian" 從情書到遺書：中國二十世紀初書信言情文學的修辭情境轉變 [From Love Letters to Last Words: Early 20th-Century Epistolary Literature in China and the Rhetoric of Emotion], *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue* 中國現代文學 37 no. 6 (2020): 41-64.

internal reader, "a specific character within the world of narrative, whose reading of the letters can influence the writing of the letters," and the external reader, "we, the general public, who read the work as a finished product and have no effect on the writing of individual letters."[20] Classic epistolary novels often motivate a movement from private to public reading by either "the presence of a reader-editor figure whose collecting of letters is part of the action of the narrative" or "the internal representation of letter circulation among a wide public." Such "internal publication" creates a "path from internal private reader to internal public reader to external public," thereby linking the fictional to the historical world and adding authenticity to the story.[21] This analysis yields rich insights when applied to the early Republican-era popular epistolary stories, as their narrators play a variety of roles in framing the letter text and some even include the process of "internal publication" as a way of narrative transmission. This thesis adopts an external public's perspective to examine the continuity and discrepancy between character's internal private voices and the narrator's internal public narration.[22] In doing so, it aims to understand the different ways in which sentimental letters are employed to construct fictional worlds and their ensuing effects in circulating emotion.

Instead of seeing the excessive display of emotion in the sentimental letters as something superfluous (Chen), this thesis considers the social and historical meanings of this display.[23] Emphasizing the significance of feelings as not simply "personal" experiences or the merely superficial or incidental "small change" of society, Marxist critic Raymond Williams coins the

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[20] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to A Form*, 112.
[21] Ibid., 110-111. Also see Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh, "Epistolarity: Theoretical and Generic Preliminaries," in *The Epistolary Renaissance: A Critical Approach to Contemporary Letter Narratives in Anglophone Fiction*, ed. Maria Löschnigg and Rebekka Schuh (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 25-26.
[22] The general public's reading could also become a part of the object of the thesis's critical perspective. In this sense, the thesis's position sometimes stands outside the general public.
[23] For the field of history of emotion, see Jan Plamper, "The History of Emotions: An Interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns," *History and Theory* 49 no. 2 (2010): 237-265.

concept "structures of feeling" and suggests that feeling can be structured and shifts with the change of social conditions.[24] Instead of more formal concepts such as "world-view" or "ideology," Williams uses "feeling" to capture emergent beliefs and values, social experiences and relationships, providing an important connection between feeling and thought. In modern Chinese literary studies, Haiyan Lee's book *Revolution of the Heart* (2007) deploys Williams's notion to construct a genealogy of love in modern China by categorizing three different, evolving structures of feeling: Confucian, enlightenment, and revolutionary.[25] In this typology, Butterfly writings belong to the Confucian structure of feeling which is preoccupied with virtuous sentiments. Though effectively bringing Williams's notion into the context of modern China, Lee's three keywords are too general to capture specific social and historical details of Chinese modernity.

This thesis looks at how the rise of effervescent expression of emotion paralleled the heightened consciousness and sensibilities around media and communication in the so-called postal age of early twentieth-century China. During this period, the development of modern postal system facilitated cheap and convenient postal services that made the exchange of letters among people frequent and fast. Apart from face-to-face conversation, letters thus became the most important, accessible means of interpersonal communication.[26] This social transformation also influenced how people perceived and used letters to express emotion in both real lives and fictional works. For example, in the preface to the collection *Sentimental Letters*, Li Jingzhong writes: "Sentimental letters are used as the medium (of love) between men and women" (言情尺牘。男女間以之為媒介也).[27] How do we define this new conception of sentimental letters as

[24] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 131.
[25] Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).
[26] See the discussion of postal development in modern China in Chapter Three.
[27] See Li Jingzhong, *Yanqing chidu*.

meijie 媒介 (medium)? Is emotion now conceived as something that ought to be mediated by letters rather than spontaneously expressed? To better understand Li's treatment of sentimental letters, this thesis theorizes letters as a media form and the exchange of letters as a process of communication. Bruce Clarke, in distinguishing the topic of communication from the topic of media, suggests that the former belongs to the social while the latter pertains to the technical: "communication attaches most directly to the sources and destinations of messages, whereas media most directly concern the means by which messages move from one to the other."[28] In light of this distinction, letters could be proximate to either media or communication. The textual aspects of letter fall under the realm of media, but issues such as sending, reception, and the delivery of letters, which are more related to "the sources and destinations of messages," are part of the social dimension of communication. Sentimental letters thus serve as an interface facilitating our understanding of both the media of emotion and the communication of emotion.

Based on the media/communication distinction, Chapter One examines multiple mediations of emotion between the separated man and woman in Xu Zhenya's *Jade Pear Spirit*. Chapter Two focuses on the transmission of sorrowful feelings in Bao Tianxia's 包天笑 and Zhou Shoujuan's 周瘦鵑 epistolary stories. Chapter Three turns to the undelivered fate of sentimental letters in Jiang Hongjiao's 江紅蕉 postal stories. By employing new theoretical frameworks, including media studies and communication theory, in the close reading of popular stories, this thesis aims to offer new perspectives on existing studies of late Qing and Republican-era sentimental fiction. As an interdisciplinary study of the vibrant case of modern

[28] Bruce Clarke, "Communication," in *Critical Terms for Media studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 133-135.

Chinese sentimental letters, the thesis also hopes to enrich the study of epistolarity in world literature.

Chapter One:

The Mediations of Emotion in Xu Zhenya's *Jade Pear Spirit*

In his enthusiastic reevaluation of the literary and artistic value of Xu Zhenya's novel *Jade Pear Spirit*, C. T. Hsia praises it as being not only a "tragical novel of love which commented powerfully on the society and family system at that time," but also "the culminating work" of the "sentimental-erotic tradition" in Chinese literature; this tradition can be traced back to *Chuci* 楚辭, and it includes poets such as Li Shangyin 李商隱, Du Mu 杜牧, and Li Houzhu 李後主, as well as works of fiction and drama such as *The Story of the Western Wing* (*Xixiang ji* 西廂記), *The Peony Pavilion* (*Mudan ting* 牡丹亭), and *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢).[29] Hsia's notion of "the culminating" suggests that *Jade Pear Spirit*, the one-time best seller in the early Republican print market, represents a final expression of a tradition that then seems to disappear. The fact that *Jade Pear Spirit* synthesizes many literary conventions of previous sentimental-erotic works, such as the lyrical language and poetic register, the motif of burying flowers, the theme of *caizi jiaren* 才子佳人 (gifted scholar and beautiful lady), and the excessive display of feelings, clearly shows how its author collapsed all the previous literary discourses of *qing* 情 (emotion, feeling, sentiment) into a tearful popular story.

A reader of *Jade Pear Spirit* would find they are immersed in a world of *qing*. Not only are there countless categories of feelings—*beiqing* 悲情 (tragic feelings), *aiqing* 哀情 (sorrowful feelings), *duoqing* 多情 (full of feelings), *zhiqing* 至情 (ultimate feelings), etc.—but the

[29] C. T. Hsia, "Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun*," 213.

protagonists also identify themselves as "people full of feelings" (多情人).[30] The overall salience of the discourse of emotion in the novel, however, lies not in its dazzling multiplicity and intensity. I argue that it is the author Xu Zhenya's peculiar interest in how emotions are conveyed and channeled that distinguishes his *Jade Pear Spirit* from its sentimental-erotic predecessors. Insofar as the male and female protagonists in the novel are physically separated and can hardly communicate with each other in a face-to-face way, they always need to resort to something intermediary, such as, in most cases, letters, to express their romantic feelings toward each other. Consequently, emotion in *Jade Pear Spirit* is more mediated than spontaneous. Xu himself is also conscious of the vital connection between emotion and its supporting mediums. There are two chapters in the novel titled with the Chinese character 媒 *mei* which means matchmaker, intermediary, and medium: chapter four is "Intermediary of Poetry" (詩媒) and chapter fourteen is "The Medium of Calamity" (孽媒). Xu even uses the modern Chinese word 媒介 *meijie* in some phrases such as "招恨之媒介" (the medium that incurs resentment).[31] These words constitute the conceptual cartography of *mei* 媒 in the novel, which pushes us to rethink some key epistemic points around the concept of the "medium."

In this first chapter of my thesis, I propose a new reading of *Jade Pear Spirit*'s sentimentalism through the lens of media studies. Recent scholarship in media studies has liberated us from a narrow focus on modern technical (mass) media, elaborating on the heterogeneous origins and histories of media forms and concepts, as well as the mediating process.[32] Focusing on what I call the mediation of emotion, this chapter will discuss how the

[30] In her study of the genealogy of emotion in modern Chinese literature and culture, Haiyan Lee reads *Jade Pear Spirit* and sees it as an early example of associating romantic love with patriotism and linking the personal and political. See Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 83-86.
[31] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 36.
[32] For example, John Guillory examines the ideas related to the media concept in the history of Western

novel continues the earlier convention of the intermediary in classical Chinese love stories and transforms the device of letters into meaningful formal and thematic elements in the epistolary expression of feelings. In particular, I address such following questions: What specific roles do the various intermediaries play in the romantic relationship between male and female protagonists? How do the epistolary elements of the novel serve for the mediation of emotion in the story? Why is there a necessity for the protagonists to avoid the direct and immediate expression of feelings?

Emotion and Its Multiple Intermediaries

Jade Pear Spirit tells a tragic love story between the male protagonist He Mengxia 何夢霞, who is a young teacher in a village school, and the female protagonist Bai Liying 白梨影 or Liniang 梨娘, a widowed woman whose eight-year-old son Penglang 鵬郎 is tutored by Mengxia. Though Mengxia and Liying rarely meet and talk to each other, they fall in love by exchanging letters and poems. The novel begins on the day when Mengxia observes from his room that the pear blossoms in the yard are devastated by the wind and have fallen on the ground. This emotional young man shows a strong sympathy for the fallen flowers by not only ruminating on their shared miserable fate but also picking up, burying, and crying for them. On that night, Mengxia has his first encounter with Liying. Awakened by a woman's sorrowful whimpers, Mengxia gets up and looks from the glass window, finding to his surprise that a very beautiful woman near the pear tree is also crying for the flowers. Then he accidentally bumps against the

philosophical thoughts and shows how to trace the conceptual history of media and communication before media was understood as technical media. See John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 2 (2010): 321-62. In Chinese studies, Shaoling Ma's recent monograph *The Stone and the Wireless* is an effort to rethink the issue of mediation, which concerns the interplay between the material forms of technical media and the discursive representation or signifying process of media, in the context of late Qing China. See Shaoling Ma, *The Stone and the Wireless: Mediating China, 1861-1906* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

window, and the sound makes the woman disappear. The fact that this encounter is both initiated and ended by wordless sounds shows that this night encounter is indirect. Neither of them recognizes the other, even though they are extremely close to the extent that Mengxia is only two to three *chi* 尺 away from the woman.[33] A close reading of the sensory details in these scenes presented in the first two chapters gives us some basic clues to approach the mechanism or mode within which Mengxia and Liying interact with each other. This emotionally excessive but morally conservative story sets its male and female protagonists always in a condition of physical and spatial separation, which inevitably provokes a desire for communication at the same time.

Mengxia and Liying are thus close to yet distant from each other. Though they live in the same house, they are isolated by walls and confined to their own rooms. In chapter eighteen, their only face-to-face meeting in Liying's room occurs not on the occasion of a romantic exchange but for the purpose of clearing up a misunderstanding brought by Mr. Li's malicious meddling. Moving apart the two protagonists in love, the story characterizes both their affinity and solitude. It also juxtaposes the worlds of Mengxia and Liying as a set of parallel narrative scenes. The rare moments of chance encounter between Mengxia and Liying are marked by either a sense of clearness or blurriness. When Mengxia sees Liying for the first time that night, he is actually gazing at her bodily details in a voyeuristic way: "Under the bright moon, from her sideburns and tips of her eyebrows above to the pleats of her socks and skirt down below—every detail is vivid to Mengxia's eyes" (月明之下。上而鬢角眉尖。下而襪痕裙褶。無不瞭然於夢霞之眼中).[34] While it is arguable that Mengxia in this scene enjoys a relatively dominant

[33] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 8. *Chi* is a traditional Chinese unit of length. One *chi* is equal to 1/3 of a meter.
[34] Ibid.

position in their interaction despite the condition of separation, in other incidents, Liying is also able to create the opportunity for the indirect meeting. In chapter sixteen, "Feast of Lanterns" (燈市), Liying knows Mengxia will show up at the lanterns feast, so she dresses up and goes there, successfully producing a chance encounter in which Mengxia vaguely sees her set off by the light in the distance.

On most occasions, Mengxia and Liying's communication of feelings relies heavily on a third party, something intermediary. If we situate *Jade Pear Spirit* into Hsia's sentimental-erotic tradition, we will find that the intermediary is an auxiliary device commonly used in fictional works such as *The Story of the Western Wing*, in which Cui Yingying's maid Hongniang serves as an important matchmaker for Yingying and her lover Zhang Sheng. In *The Peony Pavilion*, it is Du Liniang's 杜麗娘 portrait that first introduces her to Liu Mengmei 柳夢梅 and stirs up his affection. Poems and letters also participate as written intermediaries in these earlier works. Ling Hon Lam even theorizes the dreams in *The Peony Pavilion* as "a mediating space that structures emotion and subject positions."[35] Likewise, *Jade Pear Spirit* also includes these types of intermediaries, such as the maid Qiu'er 秋兒 and a photograph of Liying. But a notable difference is that in the earlier conventions, the intermediary only serves as a bridge between the man and the woman before they formally meet. Through the help of the intermediary, they are subsequently able to freely and directly communicate and interact with each other. *Jade Pear Spirit* exaggerates this convention to the extent that it is only through multiple intermediaries that Mengxia and Liying can express their love to each other.

[35] Ling Hon Lam, "The Peony Pavilion: Emotion, Dreams, and Spectatorship," in *How to Read Chinese Drama: A Guided Anthology*, ed., Patricia Sieber and Regina Llamas (Columbia University Press, 2022), 212-213. For a more comprehensive account of this argument, see Ling Hon Lam, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

The intermediaries are ubiquitous and interconnected, taking the forms of human characters, physical objects, and even the poetic technique of writing. The major human intermediary is Penglang. As both Liying's son and Mengxia's student, he enjoys unique mobility and connectivity, effectively serving as the messenger to facilitate the exchange of letters and gifts between his mother and tutor. Penglang delivers the letters, and to each letter, the talented man and woman would attach a manuscript of a poem whose texts are fully present in the novel. When face-to-face interaction is forbidden, poetic composition now becomes an intermediary method, as the primary goal of their writing of poems is to communicate feelings. The successful exchange of the poems is based on the expectation that the reader can not only understand the textual meaning of the poem but also recognize the writer's passionate personality and poetic talent. Chinese lyric poetry is thus used as a medium of performing feelings and building intimacy. In chapter four titled "Intermediary of Poetry" (詩媒), Mengxia finds a poetry manuscript missing from his desk and a rose left by someone in his room. He guesses that these are implicit messages from Liying and so he initiates the correspondence with her.[36]

Moreover, human, object, and poetic intermediaries constitute a chain of emotional mediums, establishing different intermedial relationships. The photograph and the flowers that Liying sends as gifts to Mengxia are interpreted by poetic texts so that the object intermediaries join hands with poetic intermediaries to express feelings. The photograph as an object intermediary tellingly illustrates how technical media and material culture are represented in fictional text. As Shengqing Wu discusses, Liying's photograph is an example of intermedial relations where "a photograph triggers emotional responses and serves as the key for romantic

[36] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 17-22.

building in narrative development."[37] Finding that Liying has left a photograph of her within a glass frame and understanding that it is sent to relieve his lovesickness, Mengxia also looks for other textual traces but only gets a fragment of the poetic line "Remotely, a person also recedes like the tide" (悠悠人亦去如潮).[38] Mengxia's desire to seek for textual substantiation of photographic feelings shows his (and the writer's) indulgence in the technique of poetic medium, to the extent that he himself writes two poems on the back the photograph to restore the lost intermediality. Previously when Mengxia falls ill, Liying sends him two pots of different kinds of orchids together with two poems on them transcribed in a letter. The literary object of flowers and the poetic texts work together as the intermediary of Liying's caring for the sick man, as the lines of the poem suggest, "By means of this seed of feeling, I accompany you in your life of sickness" (藉茲情種子。伴爾病生涯).[39]

Chinese Lyricism as the Medium

In *Jade Pear Spirit*'s intermediary assemblage, the poem, or more precisely, the technique of Chinese lyricism is consequently the overarching medium of emotional expression, because all types of intermediaries finally point to this technique. This technique is not only employed by the letters and poems that are exchanged in the fictional world, but also is constituted as the discernable formal element of the entire novel. Here "technique of Chinese lyricism" refers to as both the novel's extensive use of poetic forms and expressions, and an overall style or stance that consciously appropriates the lyrical tradition. On one hand, different layers of texts and genres are interconnected: a lyrical poem as a part of a sentimental letter, which is itself a part of the

[37] Shengqing Wu, *Photo Poetics: Chinese Lyricism and Media Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 154-157.
[38] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 51.
[39] Ibid., 45.

fictional text of the novel. On the other hand, the choices of these lyrical conventions and combinations are actually the novel's reflexive self-positioning in the "sentimental-erotic tradition." By deliberately performing this tradition, the novel itself becomes a sentimental artifact that is mediated by the technique of Chinese lyricism. In criticizing C. T. Hsia and Perry Link's attempt to assimilate Butterfly literature into the "tradition," Rey Chow maintains that Butterfly literature only "produce[s] the effect of a silent display of, or a problematic nostalgia for" tradition through some stylized ways by employing "recognizable conventions of storytelling as its techniques of transmission."[40] Chow further suggests Butterfly literature's parodic narrative modes require a rereading of the *mediated* nature of fictional discourse, which is "crucial for deconstructing institutionalized criticism's erudite and persuasive mishandling of popular cultural forms."[41] In Chow's rereading, she argues that the construction of love through "endless series of masquerades" such as letters, lost handkerchiefs, photographs, flowers, etc., is "a fundamentally empty process of signification, an artful play whereby gestures could be continually exchanged without any positive goal."[42] I agree with Chow's insights as for how *Jade Pear Spirit* constructs itself through conscious performance of literary conventions and how love is made by "masquerades" of literary objects. But for the sake of deconstructing institutionalized criticism, Chow devalues the meaning of the *mediated* nature of the fictional discourse used in this novel. What does the mediation of Chinese lyricism tell us about the

[40] What Rey Chow criticizes are Hsia's attempt to assimilate Butterfly literature into the tradition of Chinese literary canon and Link's sociological approach that sees Butterfly literature as a reflection of the ambivalence in the Chinese attitudes toward modernization. See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 54. According to Perry Link, "the love stories of the 1910s usually included some social problem currently on people's minds" and the problem in *Jade Pear Spirit* lies in Liying's repression of her love. See Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1981), 42.
[41] Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, 55.
[42] Ibid., 70.

novel's conceptions of emotion? I suggest analyzing the media-related words and imageries in this novel would aid us in recognizing the extent to which emotion and medium are even mutually constructed.

Since we have already seen the multiple intermediaries in the fictional world of *Jade Pear Spirit*, now I turn to focus on the semantics of the terms *mei* 媒 and *meijie* 媒介 in the text. The character *mei* 媒 originally means the matchmaker in early Chinese texts such as the poems on love and marriage in *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經). These texts suggest that in the ancient marriage system, the relationship between men and women should be channeled and legitimated by the matchmaker, otherwise it would be illicit. This meaning is still relevant to *Jade Pear Spirit*, especially in its use of words including *meishuo* 媒妁 (matchmaker) and *liangmei* 良媒 (good matchmaker) which directly come from the textual tradition of *Classic of Poetry*. A more figurative and abstract usage of *mei* 媒 points to the medium or means that can evoke negative feelings or incur sickness, such as the phrases and sentences "Melancholy haunts the heart, becoming the medium that incurs disease" (愁緒縈心。引病之媒也) and "the early morning scenes of the spring river on the way" (一路江春早景) "are all the materials to organize sorrow, the medium to evoke melancholy" (皆組織愁絲之資料。招徠愁魔之媒介也).[43] Both of the two literal uses of *mei* 媒 are situated within the context of Mengxia and Liying's sentimental world, and like the imageries of human and object intermediaries, they have to do the mediation of love and (negative) feelings.

As the most powerful medium in the novel, the technique of Chinese lyricism travels across textual forms and retains the abundance of emotion. The overall sentimentalism of the

[43] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 61, 153.

novel even positions *qing* itself into the status of a medium, which is similar to the use of *mei* 媒 as the means that evokes negative feelings. In chapter seven, the spring scene triggers Mengxia's sentimental sense of himself as a lonely sojourner, and the narrator uses a free indirect speech on his behalf to link his previous boredom with resentment: "Recollecting the time when I buried flowers and the mood I felt while holding the soil, I was merely expressing a sojourner's idle feelings and boredom. Little did I realize that these were the beginning of lovesickness and the medium that incurs resentment" (回憶葬花時節。掬土心情。原屬羈緒無聊。閒情偶寄。孰知即為相思之起點。招恨之媒介).[44] Chapter fourteen titled "The Medium of Calamity" (孽媒) is a turning point of the story, as Liying' s being torn between traditional morality and romantic desire eventually leads her to retreat by letting her sister-in-law Yunqian 筠倩 substitute for her. Liying asks Yunqian to be Mengxia's legal wife, and now Yunqian becomes the victim of the exhausting relationship between Liying and Mengxia. This is exactly what the novel means by *qing* being the medium of calamity. In configurating *qing* as both a mediated and a mediating force, Chinese lyricism exhibits the ubiquitous appearances of feelings in the textual world of *Jade Pear Spirit*.

The Epistolary Mediation of Emotion

The novel's insertion of intermediary letters can be traced back to the Chinese narrative conventions, while its innovative use of them as a narrative technique is comparable with Western epistolary novels such as Samuel Richardson's works.[45] But what I am interested in exploring is how Xu Zhenya depicts the epistolary mediation of emotion in Mengxia and

[44] Ibid., 36.
[45] C.T. Hsia, "Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun*," 227.

Liying's story. In this section I read the development of the plot in *Jade Pear Spirit* by means of the conceptual tool of epistolary mediation. First, the notion of mediation is used in relation to letters as a medium or a form of media, and I focus on what the medium *does* in the creation of thematic meanings. These meanings are inevitably centered on the relationships between the two correspondents, which evokes the second notion of mediation as the production or negotiation of relations. As John Guillory suggests, "If we think of mediation as a process whereby two different realms, persons, objects, or terms are brought into relation, the necessity for mediation implies that these realms, persons, objects, or terms resist a direct relation and perhaps have come into conflict."[46] Because direct communication between the protagonists is impossible, what letters facilitate is exactly the process of mediation whereby Mengxia and Liying are brought into relation.

In Janet Altman's classic study of how letter's formal properties create meanings in Western epistolary novels, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, she summarizes six approaches grounded in the letter's polar dimensions of thematic emphasis and narrative potential, including bridge/barrier, *confiance*/*non-confiance*, writer/reader, etc.;"the definition of epistolarity is thus charged with paradox and contradiction."[47] Though the six approaches may not all be applicable for *Jade Pear Spirit*, some contradictory elements are still quite visible in the novel's epistolary mediation process. For Mengxia and Liying, the letter's intermediary property makes it a means that both connects and interferes, facilitating mutual understanding while also giving rise to misunderstanding.

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[46] John Guillory, "Genesis of the Media Concept," 342. Reymond Williams in his *Keywords* details the developed uses of mediation as reconciliation by mapping three stages: "finding a central point between two opposites"; "describing the interaction of two opposed concepts or forces"; "describing such interaction as an active process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated." See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 153.
[47] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity*, 186-187.

According to the narrator, the first exchange of letters between them has fostered their understanding of each other and brings a sense of intimacy:

> Mengxia's writing the letter to Liniang is not in order to flirtg with her. He appreciates her talent and laments her fate, which further stirs his self-appreciation and self-lamentation. They find themselves equally at the end of the world, equally misfortunate, and each has a reason for not ceasing communication. Liniang responds with a letter whose contents coincide with Mengxia's intentions. She knows Mengxia's heart deeply, so her words are poured out with deep feelings. This is what is called a mutual understanding between two hearts.
> 夢霞致書於梨娘。非挑之也。憐其才而悲其命。復自憐而自悲。同是天涯。一般淪落。自有不能已於言者。梨娘覆書。內容如此。正與夢霞之意。不謀而合。梨娘深知夢霞之心。乃有此盡情傾吐之語。此正所謂兩心相印。[48]

After this successful first correspondence, however, things start to change. In chapter six the novel introduces a young man, Mengxia's colleague and friend Shichi 石癡, who is leaving for Japan to study. Then in chapter seven, Liying sends her second letter to Mengxia, in which she urges him to not waste his talent and to study abroad. This letter makes Mengxia feel Liying's caring but also triggers self-lamentation over his fate and unfulfilled talent, which leads him to be sick. Then Liying realizes her encouragement "touches on his thoughts and enhances his sorrow" (觸其心事。而增其悲痛也).[49]

If Mengxia's sickness implies that the exchange of letters can sometimes be detrimental, then Liying's falling ill in chapter ten, "The Consuming of Feeling" (情耗) and chapter eleven,

[48] Xu Zhenya, *Yuli hun*, 25-26.
[49] Ibid., 40.

"The Tide of the Mind" (心潮), just intensify the scenes of epistolary miscommunication. In these two chapters, Liying decides to repress her feeling and desire as she considers her relationship with Mengxia immoral and is not willing to see the young talented Mengxia sacrifice his bright future for a widow. But Mengxia is lovestruck and determined; he even promises in his letter that he would rather choose lifelong singlehood if his passionate love cannot be reciprocated. Liying feels so anxious about this sentimental oath that she also gets sick. Mengxia could at this point repress his love to allow Liying to heal, but he instead keeps writing and sending sentimental letters which worsen her illness even further. Here the exchange of letters facilitates disagreements rather than mutual understanding. Such disagreements are made possible through the feature of epistolary communication, which is a delayed, asynchronous, and reactional process allowing careful presentations of one's own feelings and thoughts in an intimate textual space. By using the technique of Chinese lyricism in letter writing, Mengxia is able to accomplish a personal performance of his sentimental identity without any compromises. For Mengxia, the cult of *qing* is the supremacy, as the narrator simulates and comments:

> His intention is as if to say: "If Liniang is sick, then I will be sick with her; if she dies, I will die with her. Death and life are trivial matters, but this oath of heart and blood should be preserved everlastingly and cannot be allowed to vanish." He sends a letter to comfort her, fully knowing that Liniang's illness will be worsened when she reads it. If he were to end the affair by heart-broken words, his heart has what would not be at ease, his love has what would not be stopped.

其意若曰。梨娘病。我與之俱病。梨娘死。我亦與之俱死。死生事小。惟此嘔心嚼血之誓言。當保存於天長地久。而不可銷滅。其作書慰問也。明知梨娘閱之。其病有加無減。以傷心語作了世事。亦心有所不能安。情有所不容已耳。[50]

From a mutual understanding between two hearts to both being sick, we see the epistolary communication in *Jade Pear Spirit* creates not merely mutual understanding but also the conflict that is detrimental to the body. Paradoxically, the detrimental effects of miscommunication serve as proof of the intensity of their feelings, as their oath of heart and blood suggests and thus could also be read as an expression of a successful activation of passion. In other words, the epistolary mediation, by its nature, is extremely effective in conveying emotion. Moreover, the seemingly unpromising miscommunication also paves the way for communication. If Liying and Mengxia had already reached a consensus or were quite transparent to each other, there would be no need to exchange letters. It is exactly the conflict, which comes from Liying's moral concern, that mobilizes the epistolary mediation in the novel.

Against Immediacy

If letters can facilitate the communication of emotion, then they also represent the necessity of avoiding direct and immediate expression of emotion. Now the questions become: Why is directness impossible? What are the moral and aesthetic imperatives that underlie these omnipresent intermediaries and mediating agencies? In fact, when the first exchange of letters between Mengxia and Liniang is recognized by the narrator as a successful fostering of intimacy, a moralistic voice is already involved in clarifying the difference between licentious desire and

[50] Ibid., 64.

pure emotionality: “They move each other with their ultimate feelings rather than carnal desire” (兩人之相感。出於至情。而非根於肉慾).[51] The narrator details:

> Moreover, if Mengxia, as a visitor, had the intention of “seeking fragrance,” and Liniang, as a widow, had the sentiment of “yearning for spring,” they would be like the unmarried men and women picking and sending flowers to each other. Wouldn’t they almost be considered a laughingstock? As a writer with no talent, I never dare to write about such licentious emotions, which would contaminate my precious pen and ink and offend you as the. This is my real intention in transmitting and writing this book, and the reader should not be ignorant of it.
> 況夢霞以旅人而作尋芳之思，梨娘以嫠婦而動懷春之意，若果等於曠夫怨女，採蘭贈芍之為，不幾成為笑柄？記者雖不文，決不敢寫此穢褻之情，以污我寶貴之筆墨，而開罪於閱者諸君也。此記者傳述此書之本旨，閱此書者，不可不知者也。[52]

But less important than the narrator’s moralizing voice is that of Liying herself, which is directly inserted in her letters, such as “Because there is a division between inside and outside, suspicion must be avoided” (只以內外隔絕。瓜李之嫌。理所應避).[53] As previously discussed, in Chinese textual and cultural traditions the notion of *mei* 媒 as the matchmaker is concerned about the proper way of connecting men and women in relationships and marriage. Now letters and other intermediaries in *Jade Pear Spirit* take over this legitimate role in a similar way. That is to say, the device of letters itself is an emblem of morality in the novel. Its writability and readability open a possibility for transmitting more moral messages, such as Liying’s own

[51] Ibid., 25.
[52] Ibid., 26.
[53] Ibid., 44.

moralistic voice. Xu Zhenya's interest in the role of matchmaker is also clearly shown in chapter twenty-one "Testimony to Marriage" (證婚), in which he calls the character Shichi back and appoints him as the official matchmaker between Yunqian and Mengxia, suggesting that the moral propriety underlying the construction of men and women's intimate relationships is an important theme in *Jade Pear Spirit*.

What happens when morality encounters feelings? Or more specifically, what aesthetic effect can be generated when situating Chinese lyricism within the moral framework of *Jade Pear Spirit*? To answer this question, let's look at C. T. Hsia's notion of "morbid lyricism" in the final portion of his article, when he talks about the tubercular imagination in Liying and *The Lady of the Camellias*' heroine Marguerite, as well as Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*. "Prodigiously decked out in the vocabulary of melancholy, sickness, grief, despair, decay, and death, *Yü-li hun* surpasses all previous works of the Chinese sentimental-erotic tradition with its morbid lyricism."[54] Hsia's notion of morbid lyricism insightfully points to a negative aesthetics in the novel. While his notion is mainly centered on the illness (tuberculosis), I suggest we could turn towards viewing the issue of negativity by analyzing the entanglement of sentimentality, morality, and the mechanism of repression. The aesthetics of negative feelings in *Jade Pear Spirit* suggest that the more repressed the feelings are, the more tragic the love story is. Mediated by the moral imperative, a negative Chinese lyricism would appreciate an ultimate feeling that is indirect, twisted, and poignant.

[54] C. T. Hsia, "Hsü Chen-ya's *Yü-li hun*," 239.

Chapter Two:

Death, Wild Goose, and the Transmission of Sorrowful Feelings:

Epistolary Stories by Bao Tianxiao and Zhou Shoujuan

In 1915, Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973) published an epistolary story "Soaring Wild Goose" ("Minghong" 冥鴻) in two parts under the thematic category of "fiction of sorrowful feelings" (*aiqing xiaosho* 哀情小說) in the Shanghai-based literary quarterly *The Grand Magazine* (*Xiaoshuo daguan* 小說大觀).[55] As one of the many fictional categories employed by late-Qing and Republican-era publishers and writers, the term *aiqing xiaoshuo* characterizes a particular branch of popular sentimental stories usually covering the topics such as illness, death, and tragic feelings.[56] With *hong* 鴻 signifying the letter and *ming* 冥 meaning the netherworld in the title, this story is composed of eleven letters written by a widow to her deceased husband, expressing her memories and longing for him. In 1921, another popular writer Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵑 (1895-1968) who was famous for crafting "fiction of sorrowful feelings," published the story

[55] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑], "Minghong" 冥鴻 [Soaring wild goose], *Xiaoshuo daguan* 小說大觀 [The Grand Magazine] nos. 2, 4 (1915). The word *minghong* 冥鴻 is originally from the line 鴻飛冥冥 in Han scholar Yang Xiong's 揚雄 philosophical treatise *Exemplary Figures* (*Fayan* 法言), where *hong* refers to wild goose and *ming* refers to the dimness of the distance at which the geese soar. It is then usually used to refer to the figure of the recluse in Chinese literary tradition. It is in this original sense that I translate *minghong as* soaring wild goose. Considering that *ming* also refers to the darkness of the netherworld and *hong* metaphorically refers to letters, however, the title of the story can also be translated as "Letters to the Netherworld."

[56] Historically, the category was first employed by the Commercial Press 商務印書館 in 1906 for its translated novel *Peony in the Cold* (*Han mudan* 寒牡丹) featuring a woman's miserable fate. An adaptation of Russian novel, the Japanese version of *Peony in the Cold* was written by two Meiji-era authors Ozaki Kōyō 尾崎紅葉 and Osada Shūtō 長田秋濤. It was translated into Chinese by Wu Tao 吳檮 in the Commercial Press's "Fiction Series" (Shuobu congshu 說部叢書). See Chen Dakang 陈大康, *Jindai xiaoshuo shi lun* 近代小说史论 [On the history of early modern fiction] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2018), 859. Subsequently there were more works labeled with *aiqing xiaosho*, including both translated and original ones. It late became the mostly composed fictional subtypes of stories about feelings in late Qing and Republican era. See Chen Dakang 陈大康, "Guanyu wanqing xiaoshuo de biaoshi" 关于"晚清"小说的标示 [On the markers of late Qing fiction], *Mingqing xiaoshuo yanjiu* no. 2 (2004): 130.

"Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" ("Quanxia guiyan" 泉下歸雁) in his independently edited *The Half Moon Journal* (*Banyue* 半月). In this story, Zhou composes ten letters on behalf of a recently dead woman to her husband whom Zhou claims as his friend.[57] As Chen Dingshan 陳定山 suggests that "Zhou Shoujuan privately learned from Bao Tianxiao in writing and translating vernacular stories" (周瘦鵑私淑包天笑，寫譯白話), it is interesting to see how the two stories share commonalities in title, theme, and form.[58]

The two stories even follow the same narrative choice by using the narrator's commentary to frame the epistolary texts. Bao's "Soaring Wild Goose" is now often cited as the first epistolary story in modern Chinese literary history due to its groundbreaking use of the letter form.[59] However, less remarked upon is the fact that Bao's story not only includes the text of eleven letters, but also features two important introductory-commentarial paragraphs. They appear at the openings of its two parts and provide commentaries on the letter texts. Written in the voice of a narrator who identifies himself as the author Bao Tianxiao, the two paragraphs tell the readers where the letters come from, how the narrator acquires them, and why he presents them. Zhou's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" also employs the same way of framing by inserting a paragraph before the letter text, explaining the background story and why he writes these imaginary letters. This narrative technique reflects the two stories' allegiance to the process of narrative transmission commonly seen in traditional Chinese fiction.

[57] Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵑, "Quanxia guiyan" 泉下歸雁 [Returning wild goose in the netherworld], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon Journal] 1, no. 5 (1921).
[58] Chen Dingshan 陳定山, *Chunshen jiuwen* 春申舊聞 [Anecdotes of Shanghai] (Taipei: Shijie wenwu chubanshe, 1971), 155. *Sishu* 私淑 (to privately or personally learn) refers to the situation where a student regards someone who does not formally teach him as his teacher and learn from him.
[59] For example, Chen Pingyuan, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo xushi moshi de zhuanbian*, 212.

Andrew Plaks points out that the function of transmission, which legitimates the narrative as a faithful and factual representation of human experience, occupies the central position within both historical and fictional branches of Chinese narrative traditions.[60] John Christopher Hamm in his study of Republican-era martial arts fiction further suggests this narrative transmission also remained a feature of popular commercial periodical fiction in early twentieth century.[61] In this chapter, I study how the two texts not only continue but also innovate this tradition of narrative transmission by using the epistolary form to tell sorrowful stories. On one hand, the intimate and subjective nature of letters makes them particularly compelling and reliable texts for transmission and preservation. On the other hand, the communicative purpose of letters involves the transmission of words and feelings from the sender to the recipient. This dual meaning of transmission imbues the textual universe of the two stories with a sense of connectedness, forging affective links between the narrator and reader, as well as the sender and recipient. In the first and second sections of the discussion below, I show the two stories' different approaches to the issue of narrative transmission in their intertextual contexts. The third section discusses the realistic temporal relations generated by the epistolary communication in the two stories. The last section critically examines how the two author-narrators, Bao and Zhou, appropriate female voices and the related gender dynamics.

Fictional Materials, Letters, and Transmission

Bao Tianxiao was both the editor-in-chief of and one of the main contributors to *The Grand Magazine*. The majority of his creative works in this journal are categorized using the term *qing*

[60] Andrew H. Plaks, "Towards a Critical Theory of Chinese Narrative," in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays,* ed. Andrew H. Plaks (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 312-313.
[61] John Christopher Hamm, *The Unworthy Scholar from Pingjiang: Republican-Era Martial Arts Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 49-51.

情 (feelings), including six pieces of "romantic fiction" (言情小說), two pieces of "fiction of extraordinary sentiments" (奇情小說), and two pieces of "fiction of sorrowful feelings"—"Soaring Wild Goose" and "Die." In fact, He only published four short stories marked with "fiction of sorrowful feelings" in his entire literary career and the other two are "The Unexpected Diary" ("Feilai zhi riji" 飛來之日記) and "The Elliptical Portrait" ("Tuanyuanxing zhi xiaoying" 橢圓形之小影), both published by the periodical *Chung Hwa Novel Magazine* (*Zhonghua xiaoshuo jie* 中華小說界). Grouped within the same fiction category, these four stories can be read together, as they are not only structured by some interconnected themes around transmission, sorrowfulness, and death, but also concerned with a common question about how letters and other forms of documents could be affective materials in the process of narrative transmission.

In "The Unexpected Diary" the narrator receives an anonymous letter from a woman who feels heartbroken and imagines that her personal history could serve as great "fictional materials" (*xiaoshuo cailiao* 小說材料) for Bao.[62] Believing that her sorrowful diary entries are comparable with the diaries of Marguerite Gautier, she hopes Bao could slightly polish her manuscript and transform it into a fictional work like what Alexandre Dumas *fils* did. Before the main story unfolds, an prefatory or commentarial paragraph is introduced with the phrase "Scholar Tianxiao says" (天笑生曰) that identifies the first-person narrator as the author Bao Tianxiao. Here the author-narrator explicitly discusses the technique of transmission (*chuan* 傳) as a way of faithful recording. The narrator worries that the anonymity of the female protagonist might confuse the

[62] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑], "Feilai zhi riji" 飛來之日記 [The unexpected diary], *Zhonghua xiaoshuo jie* 中華小說界 [Chung Hwa Novel Magazine] 2, no. 2 (1915).

reader, but he refuses to alter it as he thinks that the writer as a transmitter should not go beyond the range defined by the materials themselves. At the end of this paragraph, the narrator further suggests the affective possibilities of such a faithful yet limited way of narrative transmission: "Alas, this person wants [her story] to be transmitted by my writing. How can one know whether my writing will prove inadequate to convey [the meaning], or whether by means of this fragmented-jade and broken-jasper [account of] events, it will cause people [i.e. readers] to be moved by unforgettable emotion?" (嗟夫。彼人乃欲藉我文字以傳。詎知吾文不足傳。或將藉此片玉碎瓊事實。而令人纏綿不能已已耶).[63] Here the fragmented-jade and broken-jasper (*pianyu suiqiong* 片玉碎瓊) refers specifically to the letters and their segmented account of authentic matters (*shishi* 事實). The narrator implies that the transmission of the woman's letters could potentially evoke an emotional response from the readers.

Transmission is more fictionalized in "The Elliptical Portrait."[64] Now the narrator identifies himself as not the author Bao Tianxiao but his friend named "The Historian of Regret" (Henshi shi 恨史氏). More than half of the story is about the narrator's encounter with a portrait of a beautiful lady in an old woman's street stall and his obsession with it after bringing it home. One night he breaks its glass frame and finds a hidden sheet of paper. The following part of the story presents the text found on the paper, in which the painter of this portrait, the lady's husband, tells a sorrowful story of his beloved wife dying from illness only three months after they get married. The painter hopes that the portrait could be passed to a writer who would read the notes, feel his sorrow, and transmit the story.

[63] Ibid., 1.
[64] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑], "Tuoyuanxing zhi xiaoying" 橢圓形之小影 [The elliptical portrait], *Zhonghua xiaoshuo jie* 中華小說界 [Chung Hwa Novel Magazine] 1, no. 4 (1914).

Both “The Elliptical Portrait” and “The Unexpected Diary” feature the incorporation of special documents such as diary entries and paper notes as fictional materials, while “Die” personifies the document as a fictional informant. The story records Miss Hehe 荷荷女士 telling the author-narrator about what tragically happens to her classmate, a young girl just who has just died because of illness.[65] The title comes from the last word that the girl writes on a paper, the English word “Die.” This story intensifies the theme of writing and transmission: the girl announces her own death by writing, while Miss Hehe tells the event of her death and the narrator transmits it by writing the story. In the last paragraph, Miss Hehe is described as frequently sighing and weeping while telling of the girl’s miserable fate; the narrator then confirms its sorrowfulness and suggests that writing the story could let others feel relief from death and grief. The story describes the prevailing sorrowful feelings when Miss Hehe and the narrator tell, hear, and record the girl’s death, affectively connecting these acts of transmission.

After contextualizing the notion of transmission in Bao’s other stories, we can find that the issue of narrative transmission is still very central in his epistolary texts “Soaring Wild Goose.” Both of its two commentarial paragraphs are told from the perspective of the author-narrator Bao Tianxiao. Like “The Unexpected Diary,” Bao’s first-person narration is introduced after the phrase “Scholar Tianxiao says” (天笑生曰). In the first commentarial paragraph, he tells the reader that his friend, a revolutionary activist called Da’ai 大哀, has died for the sake of his country in the Xinhai revolution. When leaving on his mission, Da’ai had asked his wife Juan 娟 to write and send a letter from home to him each week. After he dies, Juan still keeps writing letters but then burns them, sometimes without keeping a draft. The narrator has solicited some

[65] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Wumen Tianxiao sheng 吳門天笑生], “Die,” *Xiaoshuo daguan* 小說大觀 [The Grand Magazine] no. 14 (1919).

of her drafts and sees them as "precious jade" (拱璧). He ends by explaining that the woman has promised to continue offering him more letters so the reader can anticipate them. The information provided by the narrator frames the external contexts for the letters. Bao explains his personal relationship with these letters while connecting them to actual historical and political events. This context makes the letters as a material for narrative transmission more reliable and authentic.

The second introductory-commentarial paragraph more directly shows a desire for transmission when the narrator praises the value of Juan's writing:

> The previous "Soaring Wild Goose" is like fragments of silk, incomplete traces of ink, single feathers, or lone scales. Yet, it is only this writing from the boudoir, which seeks no one's recognition, that is more valuable than other great literary works. Since I had previously received Mrs. Juan's commitment to provide several more drafts, I wrote to implore her to uphold this golden promise. She kept her word and shared a few letters, saying that they were reconstructed from memory after the original ones were burned. I was afraid these excellent writings might be left in obscurity forever.
> 往者冥鴻一篇。雖零縑斷墨。片羽一鱗。然惟此璇閨不求人知之文章。比諸鴻文鉅製。尤可寶貴。前以得娟夫人之許可。允復賡賜書稿數則。乃肅書乞踐金諾。夫人不能爽初約。勉示數牋。謂焚餘追憶得之。恐以後金玉永悶矣。[66]

The narrator once again explains the source of the letters that will be presented. Emphasizing the excellence and preciousness of these letters written by a woman, he

[66] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑], "Minghong (2)" 冥鴻（二） [Soaring wild goose (part 2)], *Xiaoshuo daguan* 小說大觀 [The Grand Magazine] no. 4 (1915): 1.

suggests that they deserve transmission; otherwise, it would be regrettable if they were to remain unknown. As the overall backstories offered by the two commentarial paragraphs are addressed to the reader, they motivate a two-stage transmission from the character Juan to the author-narrator Bao and thence to the reading public. The role of the two commentarial paragraphs, which can be likened to the "internal publication" suggested by Janet Gurkin Altman, is to claim authenticity and blur the boundary between fictional world with the historical world.[67]

Empathetic, Visual, and Epistolary Transmission

Zhou Shoujuan's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" is also structured by inserting an introductory-commentarial paragraph before showing the letter text. Like Bao, Zhou adds a personal connection to the external context as he tells the backstory of these letters. Zhou's friend Huang Xiufeng 黃秀峯 had married a woman named Zhang Shufang 張淑芳 in the previous year, after five years' acquaintance. But Zhang has suddenly died of illness and Huang sorrowfully weeps every day. In an effort to comfort his friend, Zhou writes ten letters on behalf of the woman's spirit. In a departure from Bao's identity as a conventional author-narrator, Zhou Shoujuan puts himself in an imaginary position by stating his identity as the one acting as and imitating (*daini* 代擬) his woman character, admitting the fictionality of her letters. This *daini* authorship reminds us of how writers composed individual sentimental letters in periodicals and letter collections. However, Zhou strategically claims authenticity by explaining his positioning himself in the woman's place as a means for the empathetic transmission of words:

[67] Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity*, 110-111.

> What I have said is probably what Miss Shu would like to say. If her fragrant soul had not disappeared, would she treat me as a friend who understands her words?
> 吾之所言。或即淑君之所願言者。芳魂不昧。其亦許吾為知言乎。[68]

Zhou's empathetic connection with Shufang further complicates the issue of authorship. His proximity to, or appropriation of, the position of the woman character creates a unique identity that blends author, narrator, and character. This multifaceted speaker builds a tremendous tension between authenticity and fictionality. If Bao uses the author-narrator to conceal the trace of fictionality, then Zhou embraces the fictional writing technique of *daini* as a powerful tool to claim authenticity in the process of transmission.

Another of Zhou's techniques of narrative transmission is to strength the external context by resorting to intertextual resources. Unlike Bao's use of sequels or serialization, Zhou extends the narrative through visual and correspondence networks built around these letters and the "true" story behind them. The literary text "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" is actually accompanied by two additional texts within the same issue of the periodical. One is a photo collection titled "The Setting of 'Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld'" ("Quanxia guitan zhi bujing" 泉下歸雁之佈景) as shown in figure 1.[69] It includes three photographs related to Zhang. The first one is her portrait, titled "The Posthumous Portrait of Mrs. Huang Zhang Shufang" (黃張淑芳女士之遺像). The second, titled "Couple Photo before the Aircraft" (飛艇前之儷影), is a souvenir photo taken with an aircraft they boarded during a tour of the Beijing cityscape, which is mentioned in the woman's eighth letter. The third photo, taken after her

[68] Zhou Shoujuan, "Quanxia guiyan," 1.
[69] Zhou Shoujuan 周瘦鵑, "Quanxia guiyan zhi bujing" 泉下歸雁之佈景 [The setting of "returning wild goose in the netherworld"], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon Journal] 1, no. 5 (1921).

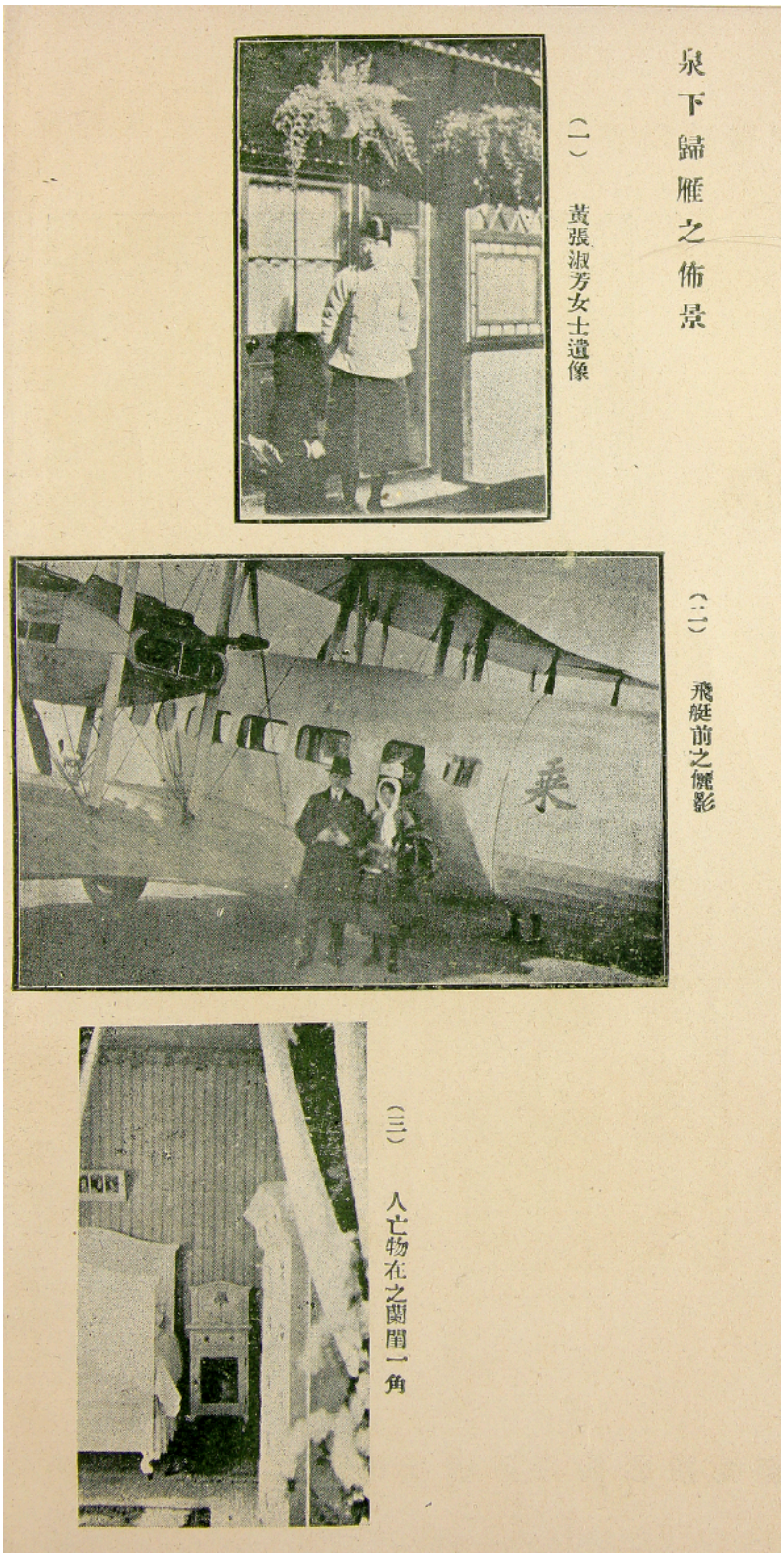

Figure 1. Three photographs in “The Setting of ‘Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld’.”

Banyue 1 no. 5 (1921).

death, portrays the personal belongings she has left behind in a corner of her room, and is titled "A Corner of Boudoir: The Person Perished but Her Personal Belongings Remain" (人亡物在之歸閣一角). This set of photographs visually capture the woman's lived body and the couple's joyful experience in the past and puts them in a dialogue with the present situation in which she has passed away and is remembered. This contrast evokes a nostalgic feeling mixed with a sorrowful mourning. These photographic testimonies also significantly contribute to the sense of authenticity for the external context of the letters and thereby exhibit a visual way of transmission.

Zhou further reinforces the external context of the story by adding letters sent from Huang Xiufeng. The "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" itself has an affiliated sub-text after the ten letters conclude, called "Letters from Mr. Huang Xiufeng" (黃秀峯君書), which is composed of two letters from Huang.[70] In the first letter, Huang recounts his wife's tragic death, including many illness-related details, and seeks a comforting response from Zhou. In the second letter, Huang suggests that he has received two letters from Zhou, and reiterates the profound sorrow he feels. Then Huang concludes by asking Zhou to also inform Lanniang 蘭孃 about the story of Shufang, as he believes that knowing Shufang's tragic fate, Lanniang's own sorrows would be relieved to some degree.[71]

Besides the two affiliated letters, a text titled "An Echo to 'Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld'" (泉下歸雁之迴響, hereafter, "Echo") published in the seventh issue, is a letter

[70] Zhou Shoujuan, "Quanxia guiyan," 9-11.
[71] Lanniang 蘭娘 refers to the imaginary character Ziluolan 紫羅蘭 (Violet) who is projection of Zhou Shoujuan's past lover Zhou Yinping 周吟萍 (whose English name is Violet). Their love was tragically thwarted by Zhou Yinping's family, leading Zhou Shoujuan to infuse his own sorrow into the character of Ziluolan. See Chen Jianhua 陈建华, *Ziluolan de meiying: Zhou Shoujuan yu Shanghai wenxue wenhua, 1911-1949* 紫罗兰的魅影：周瘦鹃与上海文学文化，1911-1949 [The phantom of violet: Zhou Shoujuan and Shanghai literature and culture, 1911-1949] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2019), 247-265.

written by Huang after reading Zhou's imaginary letters. The main purpose of this "echoing" letter is to revise and correct some inaccurate details in the previous ten letters:

> My brother Juan: may this letter be as if we were seeing one another face to face. I have read the ten letters sent from netherworld imitated by you in the fifth issue of *Banyue*, and you indeed understood my words. One who does not understand me like you, my brother, could not have produced such writings. But it is regrettable that you did not ask for my permission beforehand, resulting in some inaccuracies within the letters. I respectfully present them [here] and hope for your kind consideration.
> 鵑兄如見。讀「半月」五號。尊擬泉下來書十通。自是知言。非知吾如兄者。不能有此手筆。惜事前不徵弟同意。間有不符之處。謹敬摘陳。幸垂察焉。[72]

Toward the end of this letter, a handwritten signature from Huang is also attached as an illustration (figure 2). Continuing to enrich the external context, Huang's suggestion for revision does not criticize the fictionality in Zhou's letters but rather acknowledges the original version as highly reliable facts, seeking to perfect them as wholly reliable ones. The concept of *zhiyan* 知言 (one who understands [someone's] words) as a symbol of mutual understanding between Zhou and Huang mentioned here is also highlighted in the commentarial paragraph in "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld," where Zhou hopes his empathetic imitation could understand and transmit the woman's words. The narrative transmission in Bao's story thus becomes a circulation of words and sorrowful feelings among the three figures.

[72] Huang Xiufeng 黃秀峯, "Quanxia guiyan zhi huixiang" 泉下歸雁之迴響 [An echo to "returning wild goose in the netherworld"], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon Journal] 1, no. 7 (1921).

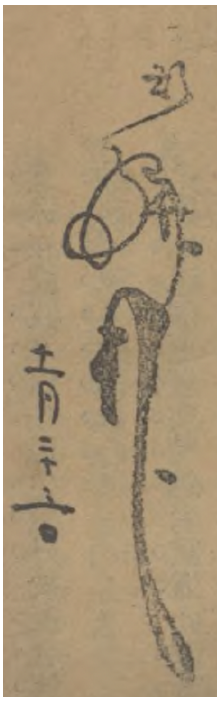

Figure 2. Huang Xiufeng's handwritten signature. *Banyue* 1 no. 7 (1921).

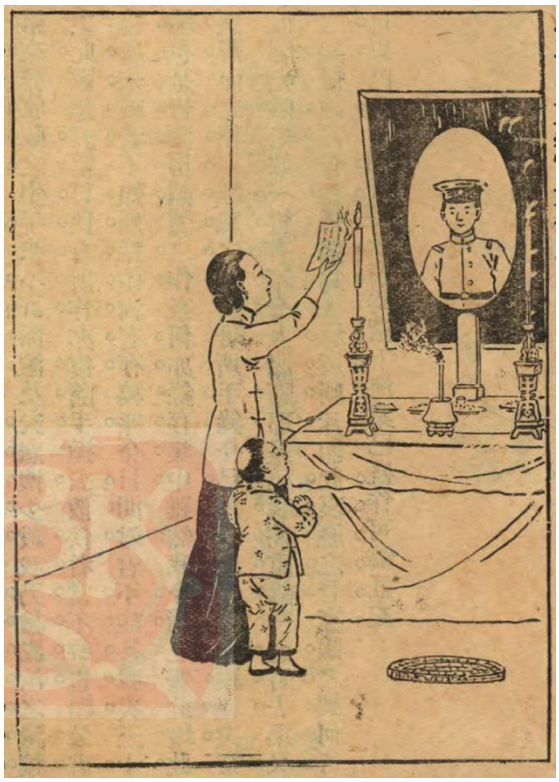

Figure 3. Burning letters in "Soaring Wild Goose." *Xiaoshuo daguan* no. 2 (1915).

Epistolary Temporality

Both epistolary stories share a theme of sending letters across the boundary between the dead and the living. But the intertextual network built around Zhou's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld," especially its relationship with "Echo," generates a more reciprocal way of sending and response. In Bao's "Soaring Wild Goose," the widow's dead husband can never read or respond to her letters. This lack of reciprocity is symbolized by the in-text illustration of the woman's act of burning of letters, represented in figure 3. The woman's burning of letters, resembling the custom of burning spirit money, serves to send them to her dead husband, whose portrait is also included in the illustration. From the perspective of media studies, this contrast points out a major difference not so much in letters themselves but in the mode of communication generated in the context of sending and receiving letters. In Clarke's first explanation of how communication differs from media, he states that "communication attaches most directly to the sources and destinations of messages, whereas media most directly concern the means by which messages move from one to the other."[73] If letters could be viewed as a form of media, then the relationship generated between sender and recipient points to the process of communication. Zhou's letters thus are involved in a full process of communication, as there is a response of "Echo" from the destination, while Bao's story stands out as an incomplete mode of communication: the one-way *transmission* of sorrowful letters. I use transmission rather than communication here because the former emphasizes a unidirectional movement while the latter suggests a more interactive process. If, as Clarke suggests, communication belongs to the social, then this difference is key to our understanding of relational issues such as the gender dynamics between the sender and receiver, a topic will be discussed in detail in the next section.

[73] Bruce Clarke, "Communication," 133.

The second distinction that Clarke makes between media and communication is that communication technologies such as gesture, speech, and telegraphy transmit messages directly, but forms of media such as drawing, writing, and photography inscribe and store the information they process. Hence communication involves "synchronous and sequential temporality" or "real time" while media create "virtual time" and "suspend or manipulate the time of communication."[74] Here once again, the case of letters occupies an ambiguous position in this media/communication distinction, insofar as the writing and delivery of letters involves both storage and transmission of messages, mixing real and virtual time. From this temporal perspective, both Bao and Zhou approach letters more as a means for communication, as their stories show the attempt to maintain a realistic sequential temporality in order to assert the authenticity of epistolary communication in the virtual world of fiction.

Bao's "Soaring Wild Goose" presents five letters, beginning from the 169th letter that the woman sends to his husband, in its first half: the 169th, 171st, 172nd, 175th, and 177th, as well as five letters from the 185th to 189th plus the 191st six in its second. In these letters, the passage of time is depicted in a chronological order based on a weekly frequency in writing each letter. The mention of seasonal details, such as "fresh apples have appeared on the market" (蘋果已上市) in the 171st letter and "it is now cold and bleak in the autumn and I have added a coat" (秋涼惻惻。已著夾衫) in the 172nd, implies that the two letters are written in the period of early autumn.[75] The 177th letter, which is presumably written one month later, concludes with the sentence "written by Juan beside the autumn window, when the begonias beneath the stairs have blossomed into a pitiful red" (娟書于秋窗。時階下海棠。已盛作可憐紅矣) as an indication of

[74] Ibid., 135-36.
[75] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑], "Minghong" 冥鴻（一） [Soaring wild goose (part 1)], *Xiaoshuo daguan* 小說大觀 [The Grand Magazine] no. 2 (1915): 3-4.

late autumn.[76] In the 185th, written two months after the 177th, the seasonal information "a spring chill is biting, so that the old plum in the courtyard has not been able to blossom" (春寒料峭。致庭前古梅。亦勒不發花) suggests it is in the range between late winter to early spring.[77] In contrast, in the second commentarial paragraph, presumably written after the narrator has collected the 191st letter, the seasonal detail notes that "I've just seen that the wintersweet outside the window is flourishingly blossoming" (方見窗外蠟梅。已著英繁).[78] All these seasonal details are carefully designed and organized as a temporal sequence that represents the realistic passage of time, aligning precisely with Clarke's notion of "sequential temporality" as a feature of communication.

The chronological progression within the ten letters in Zhou's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld" is also sequential. The second letter is composed on mid-autumn day, during which the woman articulates the deep sorrow of eternal separation on a day symbolizing reunion. The sixth letter is crafted on "the third seventh day" (三七) after her death and it includes seasonal information when she reminds her husband to dress warmly as the cold weather sets in. The ninth letter also contains seasonal information when mentioning the impending arrival of winter. Furthermore, in "Echo," Huang identifies a temporal discrepancy in the first letter, noting that the time duration since her death is mistakenly stated as "more than half a month" (半個多月) and suggesting a correction to "nearly half a month" (將近半月).[79] The reason for this correction lies in the fact that his wife passed away on 30th day of the seventh month in the lunar year. The initial error conflicts with the second letter, written on the day of mid-autumn, the 15th

[76] Ibid., 6.
[77] Bao Tianxiao, "Minghong (2)," 1.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Huang Xiufeng, "Quanxia guiyan zhi huixiang," 1.

day of the eighth month in the lunar year. This revision and other in-text temporal details reflect a consciousness that is attentive to the communicative feature of letters. Seasonal and temporal details link each individual letter to "real time" as if these letters are produced in the process of communication unfolding over time. Assembled in an aggregate text, the letters allow readers to survey a logical progression of event and narrative. The epistolary text thus performs not just mediated inscription and storage but also the communicative immediacy.

The Transmission of Female Voices

In discussing the "mournful voice of a widow addressing" in Bao's "Soaring Wild Goose," Haiyan Lee suggests that "the gendered pattern of male sacrifice and female memory…departs from the usual Butterfly formula in which the woman dies for love and the man lives on to tell the story and to construct the meaning of their passionate existence."[80] While Lee does not more deeply explore the meaning of the "reversal of gender roles—that is, giving women the power of words while reducing men to mute corpses," I propose a critical reading of the female voice in these letters as being shadowed by the authorial power of Bao in the process of transmission. In my previous reading of a series of Bao's "fiction of sorrowful feelings" texts, "Soaring Wild Goose" stands out due to the extensive use of the epistolary form, which provides very limited textual space for the narrator and his commentary. The female protagonist Juan thus has minimal interaction with the author-narrator Bao in the external context. As the fictional author of the letters, she displays no interest in transmitting her letter writings. In the broader context of the entire story, the form creates a sense of distance between the woman's first-person narration and the narrator's first-person commentary. Consequently, it seems that Juan has a more independent

[80] Haiyan Lee, Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart*, 86.

voice. However, upon closer examination of the content of her letters, we can discern the intermingling of Bao's role as the author-narrator within her voice. Her letters cover a lot of topics, but each letter only focuses on a single issue: comments on contemporary political and social events (169th, 175th, 188th), their son's education (171st, 185th), as well as her memories and longing for her husband (172nd, 177th, 186th, 187th, 189th, 191st). The woman's critique of social and political corruption should be read in relation to the external context established by the first commentarial paragraph, in which the author-narrator sets up the identity of her dead husband as a revolutionary patriot and this identity furtherly regulates the woman's critique as a form of post-revolutionary reflection. A reader familiar with Bao's literary career might also easily recognize that the education letters also mirror Bao's expertise in the translation and writing of educational fiction.

If the influence of the author-narrator is evident in letters dealing with patriotic and educational topics, we might expect that a female voice less overtly manipulated by Bao can be found in the letters about memories and longing. The 186th describes a dream encounter with her husband with Buddhist and psychic reflections. The 187th gives an account of the current growth of the tree her husband has planted a few years ago to lament the passage of time, in which the woman cites Yu Xin's 庾信 poetic lines "if trees are (having so many changes) like this, then how can humans endure it?" (樹猶如此。人何以堪).[81] These two letters are the relatively creative and touching ones, better than the 189th, written on her birthday and recalling fond memories about her wedding day and living with her sister after her husband's death, or the 191st, recording some sentimental thoughts on reading his diaries. Other letters further reflect gender dynamics. The 172nd letter portrays an image of a virtuous and loyal widow by narrating

[81] Bao Tianxiao, "Minghong (2),"4.

her own obsession with writing letters to the netherworld and her determination to continue writing "until the wrist cannot hold (the pen) and eyes cannot see" (至腕不能支。目不能視為止). She even sees herself as a vassal of her husband:

> You died for the sake of saving the country, leaving a heavy burden on my shoulders. Then Juan, as your pure vassal, will bend to the task and spare no effort, not ceasing until I die.
> 而哥以救國之故。一瞑不逝。一副重擔。加吾雙肩。則娟惟為吾哥一純臣。所謂鞠躬盡瘁。死而後已也。[82]

The 177th letter describes a friend of her husband coming to collect his poems and inviting her to be included in a collection of women's poetry (閨秀詩), but she refuses by devaluing her writing as simple and inauspiciously sorrowful. These two letters construct a conventional image of a widow as passive, subordinate, and insignificant. Bao's appropriation of the female voice shows that the narrative transmission is never a transparent field. The seemingly independent epistolary female voice is subject to intervention by Bao's role as author-narrator and supported by conventional gender ideology associated with the widow.

The letters in Zhou's "Returning Wild Goose in the Netherworld"feature a pure investment in sentimentality around past memories, without mentioning any social or political issues. In these letters, Zhang describes how she fails to resist the coming of death (4th letter), comforts her husband and urges him not to be saddened (1st letter), and reminisces about last year's wedding on mid-autumn day (2nd letter), their honeymoon trip to the mountains (5th letter), and an aerial tour of Beijing city (8th letter). She also mentions that she sees her husband

[82] Bao Tianxiao, "Minghong (1)," 3.

weeping when she comes back invisibly as a phantom (7th letter). Chen Jianhua has suggested that Zhou Shoujuan self-identifies with the sentimental literary figure Lin Daiyu 林黛玉 and often projects this image in his writing.[83] This is true when we see how the sorrowful first-person narrative of Shufang is told by Zhou in an empathetic, feminine position. Zhou's aesthetics of object fetishism often appear in stories about death, in which the absence of a corporeal body transforms into an imaginary and affective complement symbolized by an object.[84] A similar dynamic is evident in this story's letters. Zhang recalls how sentimental feelings are attached to specific objects, as when she attaches the white furniture with the design of white lilies to show their pure love (3rd letter) or attaches a phonograph record with the memory of their listening together (6th letter). Huang's response also feature this fetishism; he mentions that the phonograph record and others of her personal belongings, including a sewing machine and a hair crimper, are all sealed and preserved, and her "remaining rouge and powder are especially regarded as extraordinary treasures" (殘存脂粉。尤視為無上之寶。不世之珍).[85] Since narrative transmission imposes the narrator's cultural dispositions into the epistolary texts being transmitted, our understanding of Zhou's characters' epistolary writings is closely tied to our understanding of Zhou himself.

In the 9th letter, the fact of her death during pregnancy fuels the woman's sorrow and regret of not being able to give birth and leave a child for the man. In the last letter, she expresses a forward-looking hope by urging the man to remarry another woman. This shift from dwelling on past memories in the previous letters to a forward-looking emphasis on reproduction and

[83] Chen Jianhua, *Ziluolan de meiying*, 196-204.
[84] Pan Shaw-yu 潘少瑜, "Qingsi. Zinüe, lianshi: lun Zhou Shoujuan aiqing xiaoshuo de siwang shuxie" 情死·自虐·恋尸：论周瘦鹃哀情小说的死亡书写 [Love Suicide, Self-abuse and Necrophilia: The Death Writing of Zhou Shoujuan's Sentimental Novels], *Suzhou jiaoyu xueyuan xuebao* 35, no. 6 (2018): 48-51.
[85] Huang Xiufeng, "Quanxia guiyan zhi huixiang," 2.

remarriage suggests a potential path towards solace and emotional healing. In “Echo,” Huang suggests that remarriage is precisely what Shufang hopes for, and he promises to fulfill this wish by remarrying in the future a woman whom she loves and recommends during her illness. Because of the interaction between epistolary texts, Shufang’s female voice is heard, and her sorrowful feelings are echoed by the similar sorrowful sentiments from her husband. Compared with the isolated female voice in Bao’s story, although Zhou’s authorial shadow is still evident, his sentimental feminine literary masquerade creatively enacts empathetic dialogues between the underworld and the living world. Death is not envisioned as a barrier in the communication of words and emotions.

Chapter Three:

The Undelivered Sentimental Letters in Jiang Hongjiao's Postal Stories

In Jiang Hongjiao's 江紅蕉 (1898-1972) short story "Postal Couple" ("Youzheng fuqi" 郵政夫妻), the postal office serves as the intermediary for the two protagonists' love and marriage.[86] The man and woman exchange the portraits they paint for each other by mail, and they ask for each other's signature on the portrait as an agreement about their relationship. In their life after marriage, due to their conflicting work schedules, they are not able to have face-to-face communication and still rely on postal correspondence to express their feelings and discuss all kinds of household matters. The story was originally published in 1922 in the third issue of the magazine *The Home Companion* (*Jiating* 家庭) where Jiang was the editor-in-chef. The issue's Editor's Note remarks that "Hongjiao's 'Postal Couple' is a comical sentimental fiction, which describes a real incident" (紅蕉之「郵政夫妻」。是一篇滑稽的言情小說。也是描寫一件實事).[87] While the authenticity of the events depicted in the story remains uncertain, it hilariously exaggerates the role that the postal exchange of information and materials plays in shaping human emotions and interpersonal relationships in modern society.

Modern Chinese historical studies suggest that the importation of new technologies, including postal services, telecommunications, newspapers, and new-style transportation, largely changed the old imperial postal systems; it had a huge impact on Chinese society and closely

[86] Jiang Hongjiao [Hongjiao 紅蕉], "Youzheng fuqi" 郵政夫妻 [Postal couple], *Jiating* 家庭 [The Home Companion] no. 3 (1922).
[87] "Bianji ren dao zhe yi qi" 編輯人道這一期 [Editor commenting on this issue], *Jiating* 家庭 [The Home Companion] no. 3 (1922).

responded to the shifting economic, political, and cultural landscapes.[88] In the case of epistolary literature and culture, the practices of writing, transmitting, and imagining letters are inseparable from this new postal condition. The development of postal and information networks changed the way people perceived, used, and felt letters in both real lives and fictional works.[89] From 1921 to 1925, Jiang Hongjiao published a series of sentimental stories mixed with modern postal elements. Most of the stories are directly titled with words such as postal (*youzheng* 郵政), postal office (*youju* 郵局), postman (*youchai* 郵差), and (postal) delivery (*toudi* 投遞). Rather than being fully composed in the form of letters like Bao Tianxiao's "Soaring Wild Goose," these stories put letters into social circumstances of being delivered and undelivered, providing a wider perspective for our understanding of the connection between letters and emotion in early-Republican-era literary culture.

This chapter shifts from my previous focuses on the issues of mediation and communication to the postal delivery of emotion. Recent scholarship in media infrastructure studies emphasizes the material, cultural, and historical dimensions of infrastructures that facilitate the distribution of information.[90] Jiang's postal stories offer us infrastructural imaginaries around various postal circumstances, including the basic postal service, the

[88] See Tsai Weipin 蔡維屏, "Jiaotong youzheng yu xiandai Zhongguo shehui biandong" 交通、邮政与近代中国社会变动 [Transportation, postal system, and the social transformation of modern China], *Shixue yuekan* 史学月 no. 8 (2016): 10-13. Lane Harris argues that the development of postal system created "new information infrastructure for the modern China" and "transformed patterns of communication and ways of thinking by exposing Chinese to new ideas through letters, newspapers, magazines, and other types of information." See Lane Jeremy Harris, "The Post Office and State Formation in Modern China, 1896-1949" (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2012), 226-227.

[89] For example, German media theorist Bernhard Siegert in his *Relays* examines how the postal system impacted literary production in Europe: certain literary writings, including those by Goethe and Kafka, were premised on the technologies and institutions of information transmission; when the "idea that people can communicate with one other by letter" became a discourse of human nature, literature is produced "as an epoch of the postal system." See Bernhard Siegert, *Relays: Literature as an Epoch of the Postal System*, trans. Kevin Repp (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 13.

[90] Lisa Parks, "Stuff You Can Kick: Toward a Theory of Media Infrastructures," In *Between Humanities and the Digital*, ed. Patrik Svensson and David Theo Goldberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 355-357.

differentiation of delivery speed, the mechanism of returning letters, and the role of the postman, in relation to the everyday expression of emotions in the fictional world.[91] In this sense, the postal stories also function as a manifestation of a postal infrastructure of feeling, if we slightly modify Raymond Williams's famous concept of "structure of feeling." By offering a closing reading of these stories, I explore how these stories bring to the fore the "affective elements of consciousness and relationship" within the circumstances of postal delivery of letters.[92] I argue that the undelivered status of letters calls on our attention to not only the intra-textual tension between the letter texts and other parts of the story but also the gender dynamics within the failure of reciprocal epistolary communication.

The Postal Life of Letters

"Postal Couple" begins by introducing the recent trend of "correspondence marriages" in Japan, where Japanese men working overseas and women residing domestically get to know each other and build romantic relationships by exchanging their portraits through correspondence. In the main story, after the young man Songqing 誦青 leaves Suzhou for Shanghai to attend art school, the exchange of letters between him and his lover Little Xiu 小秀, the daughter of his former painting teacher in Suzhou, similarly fosters their romantic relationship. This is because through letters, they can articulate some romantic words that cannot be directly expressed in person. The narrator comments that sometimes correspondence can facilitate smoother communication than in-person conversations because its asynchronous nature allows for the accommodation of potentially embarrassing moments, such as saying something incorrect or encountering

[91] Infrastructural imaginaries, as Lisa Parks suggests, are "ways of thinking about what infrastructures are, where they are located, who controls them, and what they do." Ibid., 355.
[92] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

disagreement.[93] As previously mentioned, they get married after a successful proposal facilitated by the postal exchange of portraits and signatures. In their life after marriage, Songqing works for several companies during the day, while Little Xiu works as a night editor in a newspaper office. Their conflicting work schedules leave them with no opportunity for face-to-face communication. Instead, they once again communicate through letters, but fearing the prying eyes of servants at home, they rely on postal services to deliver letters to their workplaces.

Insofar as the story dramatizes the extreme conditions that compel the couple to resort to the postal exchange of letters in their daily lives, it actually does not celebrate but instead plays with this means of asynchronous communication across distance. Toward the end of the story, two of their letters are accidentally discovered by others in their respective workplaces, and the text of the two letters is revealed to the reader. This disclosure of their letters implies that the privacy and confidentiality kept by postal services are partially undermined. Moreover, the two letters are filled with various kinds of trivial personal and household affairs, which makes the letter texts a comical source for both the narrative and the readers. As such, by placing correspondence in a humorous social and postal context, the story builds tension between the narrator's narrative and the characters' narrative within their letters. Our interpretation of the letter texts thus largely depends on the other non-letter texts in the story. This intra-textual relationship differs from Chapter One, where Mengxia and Liniang's sentimental letters seamlessly align within the overall sentimental narrative of the storyteller, and Chapter Two, where the sorrowful letters themselves dominantly constitute the primary storyline. This discrepancy suggests the authors' different notions of using letters as formal and thematic choices in fictional composition.

[93] Jiang Hongjiao, "Youzheng fuqi," 7.

In the 1920s Republican era, as sentimental letters gained popularity in the thriving commercial print culture—whether incorporated into fictional stories published by periodicals or disseminated through love letter writing manuals—cultural discourses also tended to label them as formulaic rather than innovative. For example, Hu Jichen's 胡寄塵 1922 story "Copy Love" ("Chaoxi de aiqing" 抄襲的愛情) tells a story of how man and woman establish a romantic relationship by copying love letters. They encounter each other in a bookstore, purchase two halves of a love letter writing manual, copy the model love letters, and send them to each other; eventually, their correspondence leads to falling in love and getting married.[94] An extreme case suggesting how love or emotion is not spontaneously expressed but rather mediated by letters, this story can be read alongside Jiang's postal stories, as they all engage with the social life of letters in modern urban contexts.

As a practitioner of various genres of popular fiction, Jiang Hongjiao is particularly interested in writing sentimental, social, and family stories. While he himself claimed a preference for writing social stories, as he believed that society and fiction have a close relationship, his biographer Zhao Tiaokuang 趙苕狂 and other commentators argue that the majority of his works lean towards sentimental stories.[95] Nevertheless, Jiang's self-expectation of engaging with social issues is evident in the fact that many of his stories take place in rarely explored modern settings, such as the mint and the exchange, or include aspects featuring new

[94] Hu Jichen 胡寄塵 [Jichen 寄塵], "Chaoxi de aiqing" 抄襲的愛情 [Copy love], *Youxi shiji* 遊戲世界 [The Recreation World] no. 8 (1922).
[95] See Zhao Dikuang 趙苕狂, "Jiang Hongjiao jun zhuan" 江紅蕉君傳 [Biography of Mr. Jiang Hongjiao], in Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉, *Hongjiao xiaoshuo ji* 紅蕉小說集 [Collected stories by Jiang Hongjiao] (Shanghai: Shijie shuju, 1926), 1. Yan Fusun et al 严芙孙等, "Minguo jiupai xiaoshuo mingjia xiaoshi" 民国旧派小說名家小史 [Biographies of famous writers of Republican old-school stories], in *Yuanyang hudie pai yanjiu ziliao* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派研究資料 [Research materials on Mandarin duck and butterfly school], ed. Wei Shaochang 魏紹昌 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1962), 455-456.

developments in mass media, communication, and transportation, like film, the telephone, and the tram.[96] To a certain extent, his postal stories could read as a hybridity of sentimental and social stories, as his correspondent protagonists with their letters are usually embedded in a wide social network composed of the post office, postmen, and various delivery circumstances. In the following discussion, I will explore how his postal stories use the postal condition of letters to reflect human emotional experiences of connection and disconnection as well as gender relationships.

The Waiting Woman and the Letter Carrier

Unlike the exchange of letters that helpfully develops a romantic relationship leading to marriage in "Postal Couple" and "Copy Love", most popular postal stories feature a lack of reciprocal interaction between the two correspondents. In Jiang Hongjiao's "An Unlucky Postman" ("Buxing zhi youchai" 不幸之郵差) published in *The Half Moon Journal* (*Banyue* 半月) in 1921, the correspondence also begins after the woman Lanying's 蘭瑛 lover Zuoxin 作心 leaves Suzhou for Shanghai.[97] Despite their five-year romantic relationship and his promise to frequently write letters, Zuoxin only sends two letters back before the woman hears nothing more from him. In contrast, the lovestruck Lanying keeps sending letters to him every day.

[96] See Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉, "Zaobi chang" 造幣廠 [Mint], *Libai liu* 禮拜六 [Saturday] no. 103 (1921). Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉 [Hongjiao 紅蕉], "Dianhua zuo meiren" 電話做媒人 [Telephone as matchmaker], *Xiao hua* 笑畫 [Laughter] 1, no. 1 (1923). Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉 [Hongjiao 紅蕉], "Meiyou she cheng de yingpian" 沒有攝成的影片 [Unfinished film], *Xin Shanghai* 新上海 [New Shanghai], no. 1 (1925). Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉, "Dianche siji ren" 電車司機人 [Tram driver], *Libai liu* 禮拜六 [Saturday] no. 118 (1921). His most famous work is the financial novel *Exchange Unmasked* (*Jiaoyisuo xianxing ji* 交易所現形記) serialized from 1922 to 1923 in the journal *The Sunday* (*Xingqi* 星期), where Bao Tianxiao, also his relative, served as the editor-in-chief. See Fan Boqun 范伯群, *Zhongguo xiandai tongsu wenxue shi (chatu ben)* 中国现代通俗文学史（插图本） [A history of modern Chinese popular literature (illustrated version)] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 335-339.

[97] Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉, "Buxing zhi youchai" 不幸之郵差 [An unluck postman], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon journal] 2, no. 3 (1921).

Zuoxin's first letter is full of sentimental words, but in the second letter, which Lanying receives one month after the first, he tells a lie that he has sent letters every day but only received one from her. Lanying thus believes someone must be putting obstacles in the way of delivery. In the following days, she does nothing but go to the postal office to let the clerk check or ask the postman whether there is a letter for her. Desperately, she even suspects the postman must have thrown the letters for her into a river. One day, the postman comes to her home to deliver a letter for her father; knowing there are still no letters from Zuoxin, Lanying beats the postman and kills him with scissors.

This story portrays Lanying as an abandoned woman who blindly anticipates the delivery of her lover's letters. The woman waiting for her lover's letters is a recurring image that appeared in many sentimental popular stories from the 1910s to 1920s. For instance, in Chen Diexian's 陳蝶仙 1913 novella "Yutian's History of Resentment" ("Yutian hen shi" 玉田恨史), the first-person female narrator Ms. Yutian imagines her soul could be enclosed into letters so that she can be delivered to her far-away lover. She gets up early and awaits the postman's arrival every day, feeling lost if there is no letter for her.[98] As a part of her sorrowful autobiographic narrative, Yutian's anticipation of letters indicates a more conventional female characteristic of both sentimentality and passivity. In contrast, Lanying seems to have more agency as she not just awaits but actively and even aggressively searches for letters. By pushing his character to an extreme degree as a mad and abnormal woman, Jiang adds some sensational qualities to the

[98] Chen Diexian 陳蝶仙 [Tian Xu Wo Sheng 天虛我生], "Yutian hen shi" 玉田恨史 [Yutian's history of resentment], in *Yuanyang hudie pai xiaoshuo xuan* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派小说选 [Selected stories of Mandarin duck and butterfly school], ed. Wei Shaochang 魏绍昌 and Wu Chenghui 吴承惠 (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1990), 391-417.

story. This also reflects his interest in exploring the psychological and emotional reactions to unreliable asynchronous postal communication over long distances.

Comparing the moments when she receives the two letters gives us a clear understanding of Lanying's psychological development. When She receives the first letter from Zuoxin, whose "tone is very touching (詞調很纏綿)," she carefully reads it many times, appreciates his romantic words, and even memorizes his handwriting.[99] The second letter, as the story describes, "is written in plain words compared with the first one, but Lanying treasures it so much like receiving a precious jade" (比較第一封信已淡得多了。但蘭瑛卻如獲拱璧。寶貴得很).[100] For Lanying, the reception of the letter now is more important than what her lover would actually write in it. Even without romantic words, the letter still can energize her and provide temporary relief from her lovesickness. Meanwhile, the deceptive information given by Zuoxin in the second letter distracts Lanying from reading the letter, making her become suspicious and anxious about the problems in delivery. The change in Lanying's relationship with her lover's letter exactly shows how the reception and delivery issues shape the thematic direction of the story.

The figure of the letter carrier or postman is one of the most common characters in the story about postal experiences and encounters in modern society. Also published in *The Half Moon Journal*, Zheng Yimei's 鄭逸梅 1923 short-short story (*xiaoxiaoshuo* 小小說) "Postman's Wrongdoing" ("Youchai zaonie" 郵差造孽) tells just in a few concise words about how a postman intervenes into the relationship of correspondents:

[99] Jiang Hongjiao, "Buxing zhi youchai," 20.
[100] Ibid., 21.

> Mr. Zhang Yunhe waited for Miss Zhou Fengxi's letter for a long time, but it did not arrive. In anger, he broke off the relationship with Miss Zhou. Miss Zhou Fengxi waited for Mr. Zhang Yunhe's letter for a long time, but it did not arrive. In anger, she broke off the relationship with Mr. Zhang. It turned out that the two letters were delayed by the postman.
> 張雲鶴先生。久候周鳳兮女士信不來。憤而與周女士絕交。周鳳兮女士。久候張雲鶴先生信不來。亦憤而與張先生絕交。原來這兩封信。都是郵差耽誤的。[101]

In another instance, Zhu Yuanchu's 朱鴛雛 story "Earrings and Letters" ("Dang zha ji" 璫札記), published in *The Half Moon Journal* in 1922, tells a story from a postman's perspective on "an outsider's obsession" (局外人之痴) with a woman in love.[102] When the woman eagerly awaits his arrival at sunset to receive letters from her lover, the postman seizes the chance to observe her beautiful appearance and voyeuristically peeks through a door gap to watch her kissing the stamp area before opening the letter. Sometimes the woman is not present when he delivers the letter for her. To make sure the letter could reach herself rather than her family members, he is even willing to delay the delivery and pay fines by himself. Stories like these vividly illustrate how the figure of postal worker also constitutes the social and emotional lives of letters. In Jiang's postal stories, the postmen are some minor yet necessary characters as they are part and parcel of the delivery process of letters. The postman's presence in popular stories shows how

[101] Zheng Yimei 鄭逸梅, "Youchai zaonie" 郵差造孽 [Postman's wrongdoing], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon journal] 2, no. 15 (1923).
[102] This story is originally included in Zhu's posthumous story collection titled *Collection of Red Silkworm Cocoon*. See Zhu Yuanchu, 朱鴛雛, *Hong canjian ji* 紅蠶繭集 [Collection of red silkworm cocoon], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon Journal] 6, no. 6 (1922). Its title alludes to the poetic lines "Jade earrings, a sealed letter—how to get them through? Ten thousand miles of cloud gauze, a wild goose winging" (玉璫緘札何由達，萬里雲羅一雁飛) from Late Tang poet Li Shangyin's 李商隱 "Spring Rain" ("Chunyu" 春雨) on a man missing an inaccessible woman. The translation here is by Burton Watson, See Burton Watson, *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century, with Translations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 192.

correspondents are portrayed as part of intricate social networks extending beyond the two points of their communication.

Undelivered Letters

"Family Letters Returned from the Post Office" ("Youju tuihuan de jiashu" 郵局退還的家書), another postal story by Jiang published in *The Home Companion* in 1922, presents the image of waiting woman in the postal conditions of undelivered and returned letters.[103] The story happens when the first-person narrator moves to a new place in Shanghai and unexpectedly receives an express letter (*kuaixin* 快信) sent from Hankou 漢口. Thinking that the intended recipient should be the former tenant of his house, Mrs. Tang 湯女士, he asks the postman to return it. In the next few days, he receives two returned regular letters (*pingxin* 平信) that were originally sent by Mrs. Tang to her husband in Hankou. In the first letter, which was written some days after her husband's departure, Mrs. Tang talks about various things, including personal matters, neighborhood, relatives, friends, and her husband's business. She expresses intimate concerns for him and urges him to write some letters to her, as she has been awaiting his letters almost neurotically—each time upon hearing knocking on the door, she feels it is the postman coming but always gets disappointed (我在家裏。盼望你的信。好像有種神經病一般。廳得門響。總以為是郵差。誰知總是[失]望).[104] The second letter, written two months after the first, mentions that she has sent seventeen long letters but with no response, and thirteen of them have even been returned. She hopes he is just busy working instead of being sick or involved in other

[103] Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉 [Hongjiao 紅蕉], "Youju tuihuan de jiashu" 郵局退還的家書 [Family letters returned from post office], *Jiating* 家庭 [The Home Companion] no. 1 (1922).
[104] Ibid., 7.

affairs. After a few days, the narrator receives a telegram sent to Mrs. Tang by his husband: "I regret what I did and will immediately come back" (所事我悔即返).[105] The narrator asks a neighbor to pass on this message to Mrs. Tang, but no one knows her current address, and the telegram is thus undeliverable.

The story's use of two letters to structure the plot is very similar to "An Unlucky Postman," which likewise suggests a shift in focus from the details of the textual contents of the letter to the woman's anxiety surrounding reception and delivery. Also, like "Earrings and Letters," the story is told by an "outsider" with a restricted narrative perspective. After reading the woman's two letters, the narrator comments that her writing is sentimental and pitiful. However, neither the characters nor the narrator has further information about where and for what reasons she has moved. We are also uncertain about what exactly happens to her husband, only knowing his regret and hurried return through the very brief telegraph message. But by connecting the express letter in the opening and the telegram at the ending, we may infer that her husband has probably received the returned express letter, and this motivates him to express his guilt through a faster means of communication.

By dramatizing the undelivered status of various letters and the telegram in modern postal circumstances as an indicative of an unreciprocated and gendered way of communication, "Family Letters Returned from Post Office" (alongside the previous "An Unlucky Postman") also portrays an image of man not replying to his lover's letters as being irresponsible or unfaithful in love. But in the 1921 story "Undeliverable" ("Wufa toudi" 無法投遞) published in *Pastime Monthly* (*Xiaoxian yuekan* 消閒月刊), co-authored by Jiang Hongjiao and Bao Tianxiao, this gender convention is reversed. Here it is the man who becomes the one anxious

[105] Ibid., 10.

about the delivery issue.[106] The overall development of the story's plot illustrates how postal communication shapes personal emotions and interpersonal relationships. Bonan 伯南 sends a love letter to a woman named Wanling 琬靈 with a third time attempt at a proposal, requesting her to reply within three months. He drops the letter into a mailbox on a hotel balcony. After just one month, however, he marries another woman. In the aftermath of his marriage, he is nervous about the postman's arrival with Wanling's reply letter, fearing the letter's disruption to his newly formed relationship. But his anxiety shown every time the postman comes still raises his wife's suspicions. His wife also receives two letters, sorrowfully learning her aunt's serious illness and death. These two letters, enclosed in blue envelopes that Wanling typically uses, further heighten his nervousness. Toward the end of the story, he finally receives a letter from Wanling congratulating him on his marriage but without mention of the proposal issue. It turns out that for some reason, his proposal letter is returned and thus has not been delivered or read by anyone. Then he burns it, and his "infinite tender sentiments of the past are turned into a smoke, blown away completely" (以前的無限柔情。化了一陣煙。吹散得乾淨).[107]

Although many letters appear in the story, only the text of Wanling's congratulation letter is cited:

> Respected Bonan: I have just learned that you have married your new wife. You must be very joyful as newlyweds. I am very happy. I hope you are like a famous actor, and your new wife is a famous script, which will complement each other to perform a famous play. Wan Ling.

[106] Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 [Tianxiao 天笑] and Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉 [Hongjiao 紅蕉], "Wufa toudi" 無法投遞 [Undeliverable], *Xiaoxian yuekan* 消閒月刊 [Pastime monthly] no. 1 (1921).
[107] Ibid., 20.

伯南足下。頃聞足下與新夫人結婚了。新婚燕爾。一定很樂。我很欣喜。我願你好像一個著名的戲子。新夫人是名家的腳本。一定輔助演成一本名劇呢。琬靈上言。[108]

In this letter, Wan Ling draws an analogy between the man's marriage and performance. Her attitude implicitly reveals her inner skepticism toward his past feelings and proposal (letter) to her. Her satirical tone merges into the narrator's perspective, together pointing out the easily extinguished or ephemeral, inauthentic, and mediated nature of the man's love.

In my last example of Jiang's postal stories, "Anonymous Love Letters" ("Wumingshi de qingshu" 無名氏的情書) published in 1925 in *The Half Moon Journal*, the woman character fictionalizes her correspondence with her former lover.[109] The story opens by mentioning the previous "Family Letters Returned from Post Office," and now the narrator relocates once again to a new place. One day he receives some letters dropped by the postman through a door crack. These letters lack a sender's name and address, so he cannot return them. Then the story presents the contents of the ten letters, nine of which are an anonymous woman's love letters addressed to a Mr. Autumn Wind 秋風先生. The last letter, however, is addressed to the narrator, and in them she explains the context of writing these letters: living in a fantasy that her former lover still loves, she has fictionalized this correspondence to relieve her deep sorrow. She hopes the narrator can send these letters to *The Half Moon Journal* for publishing without changing any words.

The woman's identity as a sentimental correspondent suggests the story can be viewed as a variation of those stories about woman waiting for letters from her absent lover. On the one

[108] Ibid., 19.
[109] Jiang Hongjiao 江紅蕉, "Wumingshi de qingshu" 無名氏的情書 [Anonymous love letters], *Banyue* 半月 [The Half Moon Journal] 4, no. 14 (1925).

hand, she composes these imaginary letters because of her inability to connect with her lover. On the other hand, she consciously reconstructs a situation of correspondence between them in these letters by repeatedly sharing her experiences and feelings about sending and receiving letters. For example, the very short seventh letter writes:

> After I finished writing the letter, I did not send it, and I received your letter written on the Start of Winter Day. I felt heartbroken after reading it, and I did not know how to reply to you. My previous letter was abrupt. I recognized my fault. Please forgive me. I was extremely sorrowful. I could not write more. Take care.
> 我寫好了這信後。還沒有發。又收到你立冬日的信。閱後心碎矣。不知如何覆你。前信唐突。我知罪矣。請恕我。我腸斷矣。不能多寫。珍重。[110]

Here the entire letter speaks of nothing but her correspondence with the man, depicting various acts of writing, sending, receiving, and reading letters that are affectively interconnected with each other. The woman also frequently expresses her anxiety about the issue of postal delivery, and even writes a scenario of letter censorship. In the fourth letter, she mentions that the letter of the Start of Autumn Day she received was already opened, censored, and resealed with a note stating "examined and resealed by military and provincial governors committee" (督軍省長委員查訖重封).[111] This detail also shows how the woman creates a realistic portrayal of the postal condition of their correspondence.

Compared with Jiang's other postal stories, this story is predominantly formed by the letter texts, akin to the two epistolary stories analyzed in Chapter Two. The role of the storyteller,

[110] Ibid., 6.
[111] Ibid., 4.

who is endowed with the responsibility of transmitting (or delivering) the story to periodicals and the public, is also similar. What distinguishes "Anonymous Love Letters" is that the story is not primarily premised on the authenticity of the letter as the value for transmission; instead, it draws our attention to the fictionality in the woman's love letters. Before the tenth letter reveals that the preceding nine are only her imagination, a critical reader might already have begun to question: if the woman has reliably represented the situation of the correspondence, then how could her letters, at least some of which have already been sent to Mr. Autumn Wind, be resent to the narrator and presented to the reader? The woman's construction of the postal situation of her correspondence thus becomes a metafictional discourse that comments on the fictionality of her letters. One could claim that this is Jiang's avant-garde experimentation with the *xiaoshuo* genre by using the epistolary form. But I argue that it results more from his treatment of letters not as a more genuine and intimate form of writing, but as a mirror of the postal age that may facilitate undelivered communication, fabricated information, and unrequited love phantasies.

In the "Envois" part of *The Post Card*, which is composed of many exchanged postcards, Jacques Derrida introduces a "postal principle" about the uncertainty of a letter's destiny and destination: a letter can always fail to reach its destination, potentially becoming lost in the delivery process.[112] We may consider Jiang's postal stories as framed by such a postal principle, as being undelivered is always depicted as a potential fate for sentimental letters. These letters are entangled into a logistical system involving mechanisms and human labor for processing the delivery, touching upon issues such as fragmentary desires, geographic mobilities, and interpersonal relationships in the urban environment. Moreover, this postal entanglement is rendered by using letters as specific literary techniques. The letter's potential for heteroglossia

[112] Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1-256.

creates an intra-textual tension between the character's voice within the letter text and the overarching narrator's voice. The letter's undelivered circumstances lead to a failure in reciprocal communication, and this one-sided, partial, or restricted narrative perspective makes the story more fragmented rather than coherent. This multiplicity in the narrative structure and perspective sometimes allows the story to blend comical and satirical elements with sentimental quality, articulating a hybridity in tones and even fictional subgenres. It could even reflexively direct the reader's attention to the fictionality of the story itself.

Conclusion

This thesis has delved into the engagement of four popular writers with sentimental letters in their fictional works. It challenges the biased treatment of the sentimental epistolary literature as a superfluous and excessive display of emotion in conventional literary history. Through close reading of the fictional use of letters in the novel and stories, the thesis reveals that the sentimental letters foreground a variety of formal and thematic concerns, interacting with the lyrical and narrative traditions in Chinese literature. Furthermore, this thesis reconceptualizes the meaning of sentimentality from the perspective of media studies, demonstrating how emotion is intertwined with sensibilities around mediation, communication, and delivery in the advent of the postal age. Focusing on the relational dynamics embedded in the epistolary mode of communication, this thesis also critically explores a series of gender issues in different cultural and social contexts, such as women's morality, the male author's appropriation of female voice, and the image of the letter-waiting woman.

As suggested in the introduction, sentimental letters faced severe criticism from the new culturalists who characterized them as outdated, regressive, and reactionary. Following contemporary scholarship's revision of some misconceptions and stereotypes about the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School literature in late Qing and early Republican era, this thesis has also undertaken to rethink the literary and cultural meanings of popular genres through the case of sentimental letters. The literary texts discussed in this thesis showcase a spectrum between traditional and modern styles. If *Jade Pear Spirit* still looks backward toward the great "sentimental-erotic tradition" by consciously appropriating conventional techniques, then some

of Jiang Hongjiao's postal stories feature innovative literary structures and themes, something even close to modernist literature.

While this thesis is optimistic about the rich meanings found in the case of sentimental letters, they are only a small part of modern Chinese epistolary literature and culture. A fully contextualized understanding of their significance should involve comparing them with other cases that are beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, a sharp contrast emerges between the male popular writers writing sentimental letters on behalf of women and May Fourth women authors expressing their own subjective and romantic experiences through the epistolary form. Considering this difference could help us critically think about the gender tensions structured by literary form and narrative discourse. Also, the new sensibilities around the communication and postal delivery of emotion are not a monopoly of popular writings. New culturalist Liu Dabai's 劉大白 vernacular new poem "Postal Kiss" ("You wen" 郵吻, 1923) describes the poetic subject's obsession with the trace of his lover's kiss on a stamp, a scene we may see as resonating with the postman's observation in Zhu Yuanchu's story "Earrings and Letters" discussed in Chapter Three.[113] While comparisons like these not necessarily challenge the overall argument of this thesis, they suggest starting points for a more comprehensive study of early twentieth-century Chinese literary and cultural epistolarity, and I hope some of my reading strategies will also be useful in such a study.

[113] Liu Dabai 劉大白, *You wen* 郵吻 [Postal kiss] (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1926), 1.

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