

## The Universality of the Concept of Modern Literature:

Wang Guowei, Zhou Zuoren, and Other May Fourth  
Writers' Conception of *Wenxue*<sup>\*</sup>

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### Abstract

*Wenxue* is the modern Chinese term for literature. However, it is an ancient term that originated from the Confucian classics where it did not bear the same meaning as it does now. While some scholars have pointed out that *wenxue* was reintroduced as the modern Chinese term

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for “literature” during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what qualifies this term to serve as the modern referent for “literature” is a question that remains underexplored. In this paper, I analyze the works of Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877-1927), Hu Shi (胡適, 1891-1962), Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀, 1879-1942), Liu Bannong (劉半農, 1891-1934), Luo Jia Lun (羅家倫, 1897-1969), and Zhou Zuoren (周作人, 1885-1967), among others, to show how *wenxue* articulates of set of cosmopolitan values such as the idea of individual life and the call for a reflection on the humanity as a whole.

Keywords: *Wenxue*, aesthetics, language, humane literature, life

## 現代文學觀念的普世性：

王國維、周作人和其他五四文人的「文學」觀

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摘 要

在現代中文語境裡，文學常被視為“literature”的對譯語，然而，文學實出自儒家經典的古語，在上世紀初以前並無現代語意下的文藝內涵，雖然許多學者透過語源學、詞源學的研究，企圖描繪文學成為“literature”相對應概念的軌跡，不過，對於文學如何成為具有普世人文價值概念的形成過程，則較少觸及。本文藉由分析王國維（1877-1927）二十世紀初關於美學的一系列文章，五四作家胡適（1891-1962）、陳獨秀（1879-1942）、劉半農（1891-1934）、羅家倫（1897-1969）在新文學論戰中區分文學與文字的論述策略，以及周作人（1885-1967）〈人的文學〉一文中關於人生與時代的修辭學，來揭示文學轉變為現代概念所預設的普世與跨文化價值系統的論述基礎。本文認為，雖然文學在現代中文語境裡已成為想像世界文學體系的標準詞彙，然而這種想像的過程與方法卻有其自身的進路，本文期望透過梳理文學一詞在晚清民初的語意轉變，打開讀者對於現代文學概念的想像與理解。

關鍵詞：文學、美學、文字、人生、時代

## The Universality of the Concept of Modern Literature:

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Carlos Lin Yu-Kai

*“What is literature? This question has been discussed by many authors. One might argue that ‘literature conveys Dao.’ But Dao is Dao; literature is literature.”*

—Liu Bannong 劉半農, 1917.

*“We have often heard of voices calling for ‘Literature! Literature!’ ‘Preserving classical literature!’ or ‘Creating new literature!’ But what is literature? Not only readers but I too am troubled by this question.”*

—Luo Jialun 羅家倫, 1919.

*“Both speech and writing are means of conveying ideas and feelings. If such deliveries are done nicely and wittily, it is literature. But what qualifies ‘nicely’ and ‘wittily’? This is hard to*

say.”

—Hu Shi 胡適, 1920.

### “Literature”=*wenxue*?

The New Literature Movement in China during the late 1910s and 1920s is characterized by a literary reform that sought to establish a new Chinese literary tradition. During the May Fourth period, the call for a fundamental reexamination of Chinese culture, politics, identity and diplomacy had reached new heights, so much so that Chinese intellectuals no longer believed political reform alone could change the fate of their declining nation. This recognition of political reform’s limit urged May Fourth intellectuals to search for new goals and tools to perpetuate the unfinished project of modernizing China. May Fourth intellectuals might still believe that modernization is a necessary path to pursue after, but unlike their late Qing predecessors who prioritized institutional changes, the May Fourth intellectuals had come to realize that literary modernity is equally important to cultivate a nation before its people can even recognize the right and value of a modern individual. It is under this circumstance that Chinese literary production was subject to serious discussion and redefinition.

While contemporary scholars generally agree that Chinese literature underwent a radical transformation during the May Fourth period, the relationship of the ancient term *wenxue* (文學), derived from the Confucian classics, to the modern concept of *wenxue* used in much of the New Literature Movement discourse, is yet to be fully investigated. Indeed, the traditional Chinese concept of *wenxue* is complex and ambiguous, especially when one considers the term, *wen* (文), which has a wide

range of implications and connotations in ancient China. What comes to one's mind is perhaps Confucius' famous remark, "Even though King Wen has perished, didn't wen continue to exist in me?" (文王既沒，文不在茲乎). To Confucius, wen refers to the cultural heritage of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1122-221 BCE) which can be passed down to anyone who studies and follows the teachings of certain ancient sages. In this rendering of wen, what is important is perhaps the act of practicing a set of cultural rules and revitalizing a tradition that Confucius values. Peter K. Bol thus argues, "In the *Analects*, the term 'wen' can mean the external appearances and forms in general as well as the normative patterns and models"<sup>1</sup> that derived from the Zhou Dynasty. Zong-qi Cai even suggests that wen has "so broad a semantic field that it practically covers the entire spectrum of traditional Chinese culture"<sup>2</sup> since even when this term is used in a more specific sense, it still refers to various Chinese cultural elements such as "royal posthumous title, ritual objects, rites and music, norms and statutes; dignified deportment, the polite arts, graphic cosmic symbols, eloquent speech, writing, rhymed writing, and belles-lettres."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the classical implication of wen is almost as diverse as a culture itself.

The conceptual complexity of wen is also observed by Lothar von Falkenhausen, whose study of early classical texts and Bronze Inscriptions used in Chinese ancestral cult in the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046-256 BC) reveals that different semantic strains of wen co-existed, and thus this

<sup>1</sup> See Peter K. Bol, "This Culture of Ours": *Intellectual Transitions in Tang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 1, 84-5.

<sup>2</sup> See Zong-qi Cai, "Wen and the Construction of a Critical System in 'Wenxin Diaolong,'" *Chinese Literature: Es-says, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 22 (December 2000): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

term might not have a consistent and locatable lineage.<sup>4</sup> Yuan Jin in his meticulous study of the concept of *wenxue* also discusses the diverse implications of *wen*. Yuan, however, emphasizes the role of Confucius in shaping the connotation of *wen*, which is always associated with an earthly understanding of *Dao* that ultimately leads to an ethical-socio-political agenda that prescribes both individual conduct and social order. This understanding of *wenxue* as a medium of governance is thus rooted in the Chinese tradition and has long shaped (and limited) Chinese literati's imagination of *wenxue* as an independent knowledge category regulated by its own values.<sup>5</sup>

While the meanings of *wenxue* can be potentially complicated by the multivalence of *wen*, some scholars have tried to reveal the aesthetic implication of *wenxue* in the pre-modern context. Zeng Yongyi and Ke Qingming, for example, argue that although *wenxue* had much broader meanings in the ancient Chinese context,<sup>6</sup> it had come to bear the modern

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<sup>4</sup> Falkenhausen thus implies that the exact, original meaning of *wen* might not be knowable. See Lothar von Falkenhausen, "The Concept of *Wen* in the Ancient Chinese Ancestral Cult," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 18 (December 1996): 1, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Although *Dao* is understood as a primordial force that regulates the entire cosmic order, its actual application is often understood as the construction of an ideal political system, since ancient Chinese philosophers have always tried to come up with different political agenda according to their understanding of *Dao*. It is obvious that the Confucius' version of *Dao* that emphasizes the role of intellectuals in participating and continuing the teaching of ancient sages is the most influential. See Yuan Jin 袁進, *Zhongguo wenxue gainian de jindai biange* [中國文學概念的近代變革] (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue yuanchubanshe, 1996), 1-27.

<sup>6</sup> Zeng and Ke argue the term "*wenxue*" denoted "general knowledge" in the Confucius' time and "academic study" in the Han dynasty. See Zeng Yongyi 曾永義 and Ke Qingming 柯慶明, *Zhongguo wenxue piping ziliao huibian—lianghan weijin nanbei chao* [中國文學批評資料彙編——兩漢魏晉南北朝] (Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1978), 2-6.

connotation of literature as early as the Six Dynasties (222-589), since literary works at the time had been evaluated according to their “depth of thoughts” (*chensi* 沈思) and “sophistication of rhetoric” (*hanzao* 瀚藻).<sup>7</sup>

The two authors thus maintain that Chinese literati in the Six Dynasties had already “defined literature (*wenxue*) from an artistic (*yishu de* 藝術的) viewpoint,”<sup>8</sup> concluding that the concept of literature at that time is no different from today’s. However, such a conclusion is problematic, for neither “literature” nor “art” was considered an independent category of knowledge before the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Although the terms *wen* and *yi* (藝) had been paired together by Ban Gu (班固, 32-92) in his *yiwenzhi* (which is now often translated as “treaties on literature” 藝文志), a section in the *Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), the concept of *yiwen* (藝文, literally “art literature”) was still understood as a branch of historiography. It is the concept of *shi* (史) that serves as the overarching framework of Chinese cultural tradition. What is often discussed about *yiwenzhi* is Ban Gu’s list of ten schools of thought that emerged during the Zhou dynasty, including Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, Agriculturalism, Nominalism, the Miscellaneous School, the Yin-Yang School, the School

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Yuan Jin takes a different approach toward this question. He argues that the Chinese concept of aesthetics (*mei* 美) had always been associated with the “Doctrine of the Means” (*zhongyong* 中庸) which he believes to be originated from Confucius’ teaching: “being expressive of enjoyment without being licentious; being expressive of grief without being excessive [樂而不淫，哀而不傷].” See Yuan Jin, 133-54.

<sup>9</sup> He Changsheng 賀昌盛 also notices that the concept of art (*mei* 美) had never been an independent intellectual concept in the Chinese intellectual tradition. The first occurrence of this term indicating a separate knowledge field might be found in an English-Chinese dictionary compiled by a British missionary, Wilhelm Lobscheid (1822-1893) in 1866. See He Changsheng, *Wanqing minchu wenxue xueke de xueshu puxi* [晚清民初文學學科的學術譜系] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2012), 75.



of Diplomacy, and the School of Minor-talks (*xiaoshuo* 小說), among which the School of Minor-talks is considered the least important. Two things can be observed from this list. First of all, what was understood as *yiwén* actually referred to a variety of knowledge and value systems ranging from the cultivation of an individual, the belief in the strength of a nation, the knowledge of diplomatic relations, to the study of mysterious natural forces. In this view, the term *yi* denotes the set of skills that are considered important to a specific school, while *wén* means the records of these skills and knowledge. The classical connotation of *yiwén* is thus diverse and ambiguous. Second of all, the term, *xiaoshuo*, which is now the modern Chinese term for “fiction”, was actually a school of thought in classical Chinese philosophy.

While it is known that *xiaoshuo* had been considered an inferior form of writing and a subcategory of historiography in the Chinese tradition, what is underexplored is the way in which this term came to translate the modern notion of the novel, which is now considered a category of literature. One may recall Liang Qichao's (梁啟超, 1873-1929) famous article in 1902, “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People,” proposes a “revolution of fiction” (*xiaoshuo jie geming* 小說界革命), seeking to redefine *xiaoshuo* as the exemplary form of *wenxue*.<sup>10</sup> But the question is: when he mentions *xiaoshuo* and *wenxue* in that article, does he already have in mind a *modern* concept

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<sup>10</sup> He writes: “*Xiaoshuo* is the exemplary form of *wenxue* [小說為文學之最上乘].” See Liang Qichao, “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People [論小說與群治之關係],” in Liang Qichao wenji [梁啟超文集] (Beijing: Beijing yanshan chubanshe, 1997; hereafter *LQW*), 282. Kirk Denton translates this sentence as “fiction is the crowning glory of literature.” See Kirk Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on literature 1893-1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996; hereafter *MCLT*), 72.

of literature? I argue the contemporary equation between *wenxue* and literature was yet to be fully established at that time, since Liang does not define *wenxue* as an artistic concept but simply as a tool to convey political ideologies. Although later he did use *wenxue* to refer to poetry and lyrics in *Yinbingshi shihua* (*Poetry talks from the ice-drinking studio* 飲冰室詩話; hereafter: *Shihua*) in which he displays an appreciation of the beauty of poetic language,<sup>11</sup> it is far from certain that the concept of art or aesthetics had already existed as an independent category of knowledge or academic discipline in Liang's understanding of *wenxue*. In fact, it is not until the mid-1900s in which Wang Guowei introduced European aesthetic theories to Chinese readers that the concept of art had gradually become a more recognized subject of study. Indeed, the difference between art as an independent category of knowledge versus art as a simple appreciation of the beauty of things is not always clear in Liang's writing, especially when his comments on this term are often so brief, making it difficult to determine his definition of *wenxue* in an absolute sense. However, maintaining such a difference in our inquiry into Liang's thought will be helpful in revealing the various layers of meanings of *wenxue* not only in Liang's works but also in the late Qing context in general. For now, it is

<sup>11</sup> He writes at the beginning of *Yinbingshi shihua*: "I love my friends as well as *wenxue*. Whenever I read about the poems and lyrics of my friends whose words are full of fragrance, I'd recite them so that I can imprint them on my mind [我生愛朋友，又愛文學。每於師友之詩文辭，芳馨菲惻，輒諷誦之，以印於腦]。" If we judge this sentence alone, it is clear that Liang Qichao had recognized the beauty of language as one of the qualities of *wenxue*; but if we judge the overall argument of this work and the fact that Liang's conception of literary reform is always political by nature, we may also argue that *wenxue* has yet to be imagined as an independent category of knowledge whose value is free from any utilitarian purpose. See Liang Qichao's *Yinbingshi shihua* [飲冰室詩話] in his *Yinbingshi quanji* [飲冰室全集] (Tainan: Dafu shuju, 1990), vol. 4, 74.

perhaps safe to argue that *wenxue*, at least in the case of Liang Qichao, has yet to become a well-defined field of knowledge that is free from the influence of any utilitarianism. A closer analysis of *Shihua* will reveal that Liang's proposal of a literary reform is actually charged with utilitarian purposes.

While *shihua* is often considered the work in which Liang proposes a revolution in poetry (*shijie geming* 詩界革命), a proposal that is often compared to his previous call for a revolution of fiction, in this work, Liang still considers the introduction of new ideas and thoughts the primary purpose and value of new poetry. This is perhaps why new poetry is referred to as the “poetry of new knowledge” (*xinxue zhishi* 新學之詩)<sup>12</sup> in Liang's *Shihua*. He praises Huang Zunxian (黃遵憲, i.e., Huang Gongdu 黃公度, 1848-1905), a late Qing poet whose works Liang considers as definitive form of the new poetry: “Among all recent poets who can incorporate new ideas into the classical form, Huang Gongdu is the exemplar.”<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere in the same work, Liang also maintains, “If the work [of Huang Gongdu] needs a title, I would name it as *The Modern History of India, A Brief History of Buddhism, On the Religion of the World, or The Relation between Religion and Politics*.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the ultimate aim and value of new poetry, like new fiction, is to disseminate the modern, Western knowledge, rather than to convey the aesthetic quality of literary language.<sup>15</sup> Liang might have recognized

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 74. Elsewhere in *Yinbingshi shihua*, Liang Qichao also praises Qiu Fengjia (丘逢甲) for using the vernacular language in poetic writing.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>15</sup> Yuan Jin even opines that although Liang Qichao strongly endorsed Huang Zunxian's pioneering poetic works and called for a revolution of poetry, what Huang merely incorporated a few Western, scientific phrases into his works that actually “jeopardize the aesthetic quality of poetry [破壞詩的美感]”. See

the beauty of poetic language, but his primary concern has always been political by nature.

It is for this reason that I turn to Wang Guowei (王國維, 1877-1927), whose works provide another perspective on the changing connotation of *wenxue* during the first decade of the twentieth century. Wang published a series of articles that emphasize the relation between aesthetics (*meixue* 美學)/art (*meishu* 美術) and the value of literature (*wenxue* 文學) in the mid-1900s. Although he does not make a clear distinction between aesthetics and art, and seems to relate these two terms with others such as philosophy (*zhexue* 哲學) and literature, he repeatedly argues that literature is not politics and should not serve any utilitarian purpose. To him, the ultimate value of art is to represent human beings' eternal struggle against their desires and to alleviate the anxiety caused by such desires. While Wang does not provide a detailed explanation of either the concept of art or that of literature, he does start to mention *wenxue* in his elaboration of art.<sup>16</sup> This gradual articulation of art and literature, I argue, is important since it lays the foundation for the later New Literature Movement during which Chinese intellectuals would continue to redefine *wenxue* as an artistic and independent knowledge category that is opposed to the utilitarian concept of "literature". It is also through this synchronization of

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Yuan Jin, 184.

<sup>16</sup> What should be noted is that Wang Guowei has a rather general idea of what he means by art (or aesthetics) as he only defines it as that which is pure and free from any utilitarian purpose. In this paper, I will follow his definition and will not make any further distinction between the concepts of art and aesthetics, nor will I provide clarification of these two terms. This is not to say that such inquiries are not important; however, owing to considerations of length, I limit myself in the present essay to an analysis of the concept of *wenxue*. A recent work that addresses some of the same issues is Ban Wang's *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

art and literature that May Fourth writers are able to consciously compare and negotiate the difference between the Chinese and Western concepts of “literature.”

Below, I explore how, in May Fourth intellectual discourse, *wenxue*, I focus on how *wenxue* is distinguished from *wenzi* (written language 文字) and eventually becomes a universal concept that implies transcultural values. The analysis of the emergence of this modern Chinese concept of *wenxue* allows us to rethink how we conceptualize and imagine a global literary system (that goes by various names, such as world literature, comparative literature, transnational literature, etc.) in the Chinese context. A detailed study of the rise of *wenxue* as a modern concept is part of a much larger project; in this paper, I only aim to discuss some of the key players in this process to reveal the zigzagged routes that *wenxue* takes before its arrival in contemporary Chinese semantics as a new term that indicates a universal value system.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In regard to the universal implication that is implied by the concept of modern literature, it is noteworthy to point out that such an implication is both synchronic and diachronic. That is to say, the concept of modern literature is imagined as cross-cultural and transhistorical at once: on the one hand, it is considered a kind of *lingua franca* that can be immediately understood throughout the current world; on the other hand, it becomes a criterion with which one can use to evaluate and delineate the development of a literary tradition. Indeed, the historicization of a literary tradition sometimes requires an ahistorical concept of literature. It is perhaps for this reason that there emerged an amount of writings on Chinese literary history since the early twentieth century.

## The rise of *wenxue* as literature: etymology and lexicography

Recently, some scholars have started to pay more attention to the Western and Japanese influence on the formation of modern Chinese language. In the case of literature, the issue is complicated by China's rather long literary tradition. The assumption that there has always been a corresponding concept in Chinese that is equivalent to the modern, Western concept of "literature" is a fallacy that ignores the linguistic and contextual difference. It is perhaps for this reason that many recent studies adopt an etymological approach to investigate the rise of *wenxue* as a modern literary concept.<sup>18</sup> For example, Federico Masini suggests that *wenxue* was first invoked by Giulio Alenio, an Italian Jesuit missionary, to translate the Western concept of literature in *Zhifang waiji* (*Record of Places outside the Jurisdiction of the Office of Geography* 職方外紀) as early as 1623. Masini bases his argument on a sentence quoted from Alenio: "All Western countries highly esteem literature" (*ouluoba zhuguo shang wenxue* 歐羅巴諸國尚文學), thereby suggesting that the first equation between *wenxue* and literature may be dated back to the seventeenth century. This view, however, is not supported with substantial evidence, nor did Masini provide a complete list of texts which he consulted that lead him to such a conclusion.<sup>19</sup> Drawing on

<sup>18</sup> Raymond Williams argues that the term literature began to be associated with an awareness of writing as a professional practice as early as the mid eighteenth century. See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 152.

<sup>19</sup> See Chu-ren Huang, "A Book Review on The Formation of Modern Chinese Lexicon and Its Evolution toward a National Language: The Period from 1840 to 1898 by Federico Masini," *The China Quarterly* 145 (March 1996): 230-231.

Masini's research, Lydia Liu, however, argues that Masini's speculation might be anachronistic since the semantics of "literature" in seventeenth-century Europe is different from that in the post-Enlightenment era. Liu suggests that the translation of literature as *wenxue* might happen later in the hands of an American missionary in the nineteenth century, and this translation was brought to Japan and then reintroduced to China in the early twentieth century. Liu, however, does not explain who this American missionary is, nor does she elaborate how this translation traveled to Japan and came back to China. She merely describes this process as "a round-trip diffusion"<sup>20</sup> to underscore the cross-cultural and trans-lingual connection between modern Chinese and Japanese. Liu's model is useful in revealing the multi-linguistic nature of the concept of literature in the East Asian context, but falls short of the analysis of how such a concept is actually constructed and circulated in a specific cultural context. For example, in her analysis of the canonization of modern Chinese literature, she takes Zhao Jiabi's ( 趙家璧, 1908-1997) *Compendium of Modern Chinese Literature* (*Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi* 中國新文學大系) which was published in 1935 as an example to demonstrate how May Fourth writers' literary works are legitimized through Zhao's periodization and categorization. She argues that *xiaoshuo* (fiction 小說), *shige* (poetry 詩歌), *xiju* (drama 戲劇), and *sanwen* (familiar prose 散文) are used as the four basic categories in Zhao's work that describes the literary scene of May Fourth China. Interestingly, instead of exploring the "translingual formation" of *xiaoshuo*, *shige*, *xiju*, and *sanwen*, Liu simply equates these four terms with fiction, poetry, drama, and familiar prose: "The

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<sup>20</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35, 273, 391.

*Compendium* organized all literary works around these categories, which were understood to be perfectly translatable into 'fiction,' 'poetry,' 'drama,' and 'familiar prose,' respectively, in English."<sup>21</sup> The linguistic and contextual difference between English and Chinese traditions, at least in the case of modern Chinese literature, is not treated as an issue here. Indeed, Liu's argument will be more illuminating had she explained how these terms were actually circulated and used in the Chinese context.

In addition to the Japanese influence on modern Chinese literature and language, we should also pay attention to the influence of Western missionaries who have been working, writing, translating in China as early as the sixteenth century. Analyzing the works of these Western missionaries might give us another clue of how the Western concept of literature was introduced to China. Tsai Chu-ching's meticulous study on the English-Chinese/Chinese-English dictionaries published during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides a good example to explain how *wenxue* is synchronized with literature. She argues that Western missionaries have started compiling English-Chinese dictionaries as early as the 1820s for the purpose of learning Chinese and spreading Christianity.<sup>22</sup> However, the Chinese definitions of literature in these dictionaries at the time were heavily influenced by the Confucian tradition in which literary writings were still understood as ancient writings or the act of learning classical literary tradition. For example, literature was translated by Robert Morrison, a British Protestant missionary, as

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>22</sup> See Tsai Chu-ching (Cai Zhuqing) 蔡祝青, "The Modernizing Process of the Circulation of Literary Conception: A Study on the Entry 'Literature' in the 19th and Early 20th-Century English-Chinese Dictionaries [文學觀念的現代化進程：以近代英華／華英辭典編纂文學相關詞條爲中心]," *Journal of The History of Ideas in East Asia* 3 (2012): 275-335.



“*xuewen*” (learning to read 學文) and “*haogong guwen*” (fond of studying ancient writings 好攻古文) around 1815. It was later translated by Walter Henry Medhurst, another British missionary, as “*wenzi*” (language 文字), “*wenmo*” (writing and ink 文墨), “*wenzhang*” (essays 文章), and “*guwen*” (ancient writings 古文) in 1847. In 1866, Wilhelm Lobscheid, a German missionary, further deployed “*wenxue*” (literature 文學?) and “*jinwen*” (contemporary writing 今文) to define literature. These early definitions of literature have influenced the way *wenxue* is understood by Chinese intellectuals, especially those who compiled English-Chinese or Chinese-English dictionaries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Feng Jingru (F. Kingsell 馮鏡如, ?-1913), for example, listed *wenxue* as one of the Chinese definitions of literature in *A Dictionary of the English and Chinese Languages*, which he published in 1899.<sup>23</sup>

Although *wenxue* was already listed as a possible translation of literature in the late nineteenth century, it was not until Yan Huiqing (顏惠慶, 1877-1950) who published *An English and Chinese Standard Dictionary* (*Yinghua Da Cidian* 英華大辭典) in 1908 that *wenxue* was more specifically defined as a term closer to the concept of modern literature. Yan defined *wenxue* as such: “the collective body of literary productions of a country or an age, in general or in some special department ... a body of literary compositions which, to the exclusion of merely philosophical [or] scientific, and technical works, are occupied mainly with that which is spiritual in its nature and imaginative in its form, whether in the world of fact or the world of fiction ... The profession of letters ... belles-lettres.”<sup>24</sup> Tsai Chu-ching thus suggests Yan Huiqing’s

<sup>23</sup> His dictionary is mostly based on Lobscheid’s *English and Chinese Dictionary* which was published in 1866.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

*An English and Chinese Standard Dictionary* might represent Chinese intellectuals' first attempt to define *wenxue* in a modern sense.<sup>25</sup>

Tsai's exegetical analysis has shed much light on the modern connection between literature and *wenxue*. However, our inquiry into the rise of *wenxue* as the modern Chinese term for literature cannot stop at the analysis of dictionaries. If the modern meaning of *wenxue* has been established as early as 1908, how are we going to account for the New Literature Movement of the late 1910s and 1920s in which the meaning of *wenxue* is again subject to redefinition and debates? The rise of the New Literature Movement and its debates reveal that the definitions of literature in these dictionaries cannot guarantee the standardization of Chinese intellectuals' understanding of *wenxue*. Moreover, what kinds of discourses were circulated, around or before 1908, that lead Yan Huiqing to define "literature" in a dictionary in such a specific way? Yan may have based his definition of "literature" entirely on *Nuttall's Standard Dictionary of The English Language* and *Webster's International Dictionary of the English Language*, which are two of the most widely-circulated dictionaries at the time,<sup>26</sup> but the actual ways in which the concept of "literature" was received and negotiated by Chinese readers require further analysis.

In the rest part of my essay, I propose to investigate the ways in which *wenxue* was discussed and defined outside the realm of dictionaries. I focus on the relation between *wenxue* and art, as well as *wenxue* and language, during the early twentieth century, to provide a preliminary

<sup>25</sup> Tsai's article is obviously more ambitious than what I have summarized here as it even explains how "literature," "*wenxue*," and "*bungaku*" were defined and synchronized in dictionaries compiled by Japanese scholars in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>26</sup> I owe this information to Professor Tsai Chu-ching.

research into the conceptual history of *wenxue* in the Chinese-speaking context. I argue that some kinds of aesthetic values were built into the definition of *wenxue* in the early twentieth century, in which the concept of art began to be defined as an independent field of knowledge, whose value is universal and beyond the reach of utilitarianism. I do not, however, aim to further explore the differences between *wenxue* as an ancient term and literature as a modern concept, since such an analysis will easily lead to an essential assumption of either an apodictic Western concept of literature or a Chinese notion of *wenxue*. I also do not attempt to designate a precise year, work, or person as the absolute origin of the modern equation of literature and *wenxue*. On this part, I agree with Lydia Liu that we should allow for “a fluid sense of etymology,”<sup>27</sup> to account for the complexity of the East Asian linguistic context.

### Wang Guowei and the rise of “literature” as an aesthetic concept

As early as the late 1890s, Chinese intellectuals such as Yan Fu (嚴復, Ji Dao 幾道, 1854 -1921), Xia Zengyou (夏曾佑, Bie Shi 別士, 1863-1924), Liang Qichao, and Kang Youwei (康有為, 1858-1927) have all written articles that emphasize fiction’s potential in civilizing a nation. For example, in 1898, Kang Youwei argues in the *Catalogue of Japanese Books* (*Riben shumu zhi* 日本書目誌) that fiction has the potential in modernizing a nation by conveying political knowledge. This view is later adopted and valorized by Liang Qichao in the name of “new fiction” (*xin xiaoshuo* 新小說) which he believes to be a literary form that can

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<sup>27</sup> Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 35.

fundamentally transform the entire nation. He argues in his far-reaching article, "On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People," that "If one intends to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction."<sup>28</sup> Contrary to the traditional understanding of fiction as a low-class literary form, Liang emphatically argues that fiction has a "profound power in transforming people's minds"<sup>29</sup> and therefore should be considered an "exemplary form of literature (*wenxue*)."<sup>30</sup> Although fiction and literature are already discussed together at the time, it is not altogether clear if Liang's use of the term "literature" is already a modern expression of literature that is defined by a set of artistic or aesthetic values. Yet, if we judge by the fact that Liang sees fiction primarily as a carrier of ideology and a means through which political messages can be disseminated, chances are that he still deploys this term in a way that sees literary writing merely as a vehicle to convey truth or knowledge.<sup>31</sup> The aesthetic qualities of literature are nowhere discussed in his article.<sup>32</sup> From the perspective of May Fourth writers, Liang may

<sup>28</sup> *MCLT*, p. 74. See also *LQW*, 282.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The fact that fiction and literature (or *xiaoshuo* and *wenxue*) are already paired together as early as 1902 provides another example for us to measure how literature/*wenxue* was imagined and understood at the time.

<sup>31</sup> This idea, as some may argue, is not that different from the Chinese tradition of *wenyi zaidao* (literature conveys Dao 文以載道). In discussing Hu Shi's article on literary, Leo Ou-fan Lee also argues that Hu Shi's proposal is the "modern credo" of *wenyi zaidao*. The only difference is that this new "*Dao*" is no longer related to the Confucian classics but rather "individual personality and its unadorned, uninhibited expression." See Benjamin Schwartz, *Reflections on the May Fourth Movement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 76.

<sup>32</sup> This will contradict Ban Wang's view that Liang Qichao is among the early Chinese figures in pushing the aesthetic to the front of the national scene and public debate. See Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

have laid the foundation for fiction to become a recognized literary form, but the question of literature *per se* in terms of its qualities, forms, and in particular, aesthetic meanings remains unexplored. Such a utilitarian view on literature continues to dominate Chinese literary criticism in the first decade of the twentieth century, during which most critics still follow the lead of Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei and see fiction-and perhaps literary writing in general-as essentially a political tool.<sup>33</sup>

While this utilitarian view on literature is widely accepted at the time, a few writers have started to define literature from an artistic viewpoint since the mid-1900s. The most notable example is perhaps Wang Guowei, who emphasizes the significance of aesthetics (*meixue*) and its relation to the value of literature (*wenxue*). Many scholars have pointed out that Wang has played an important role in introducing the concept of modern literature to China. For example, Yuan Jin argues that Wang Guowei had sought to introduce the Western concept of literature to China long before Jing Songcen (金松岑, 1873-1947) and Huang Ren (黃人, 1866-1913) introduced the Western literary thoughts.<sup>34</sup> Other scholars also maintain that Wang Guowei is the first Chinese author who applies the concepts of modern literature and aesthetics to Chinese literary studies.<sup>35</sup> Contrary to

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<sup>33</sup> The trend of “new fiction,” which was initiated by Liang Qichao in 1902, after fifteen years of development, has begun to be subject to criticism by some May Fourth writers who were seeking a new form of literature that could reach out to the public other than the small group of highly-educated literati. In fact, after thirteen years of the publication of “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People,” Liang Qichao himself also deplored the development of “new fiction.” He argues that recent fiction writers have gone astray and only wrote stories that “promote robbery and licentiousness.” See Liang Qichao, “Gao xiaoshuo jia [告小說家],” in *Yinbing shi heji* [飲冰室文合集], vol. 12 (Taipei: Zhonghua shuju., 1960), 67-68.

<sup>34</sup> See Yuan Jin, 78-83.

<sup>35</sup> See Zhao Limin 趙敏俐 and Yang Shuzeng 楊樹增, *Ershi shiji zhongguo*

most scholars who accredit Wang as the forerunner of modern Chinese literary criticism, Li Guisheng argues that Wang's view on literature has yet to reach the height of "pure literature" (*chun wenxue* 純文學) which indicates an autonomous and self-sufficient imaginative world. Li bases his argument on M. H. Abrams's classification of four categories of literary theories (i.e., the mimetic theory that emphasizes a work's relation to the external world, the pragmatic theory that focuses on a work's relation to the reader, the expressive theory that explores a work's relation to the author, and the objective theory that highlights a work's relation to the work *per se*). Li argues that Abrams's classification can be reformulated into a sequence according to the purity of literature that is implied in each theory. For example, he maintains that the mimetic theory that emphasizes a work's imitational relation to the external world implies the least pure form of literature, because "the primary function of language is to record and describe the world ... if literature is merely about capturing the world, there will be no obvious difference between it and the ordinary language."<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, the objective theory that focuses on a work's relation to the work *per se* implies the purest form of literature since this perspective solely and exclusively values the imaginative literary world described in the work itself, disregarding any personal or social factor or utilitarian purpose that may influence the way this work is evaluated. Judging from this perspective, Wang Guowei may argue that the value of literature is not determined by any political

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*gudian wenxue yanjiu shi* [二十世紀中國古典文學研究史] (Xian: Shanxi remmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1997), 41.

<sup>36</sup> See Li Guisheng 李貴生, "Chunbo hujian—Wang Guowei yu zhongguo chun wenxue guannian de kaizhan [純駁互見——王國維與中國純文學觀念的開展]," *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* [中國文哲研究集刊] 34 (March 2009): 174.

utilitarianism, but he still believes that the function of literature is to represent and alleviate the reader's inner struggle. Li thus concludes that Wang's conception of literature cannot be understood as the purest form of literature which is characterized by an entirely self-sufficient world that is free from any purpose-oriented evaluation.<sup>37</sup> While Li's argument is interesting and refreshing, such an argument is potentially problematic and misleading in terms of his reliance on the concept of "pure literature." Indeed, what qualifies a pure literature may have different interpretations and can be subject to further debates. Basing his understanding of pure literature entirely on a rather ungrounded interpretation of M. H. Abrams' work might be dangerous as well, since Abrams's real focus is not on the concept of literature itself but methods of classifying literary theories.

Although Li's conception of pure literature could be problematic, his study has the merit of pointing out the danger of accrediting Wang as *the* first Chinese writer who deployed the term *wenxue* to denote the concept of modern literature. In my own analysis of Wang's conception of literature and art, I will focus on how Wang's use of *wenxue* is accompanied by other terms and knowledge categories such as philosophy, art, and language, demonstrating that *wenxue* has yet to become a fully independent category of knowledge system in Wang's writings. In addition, rather than searching for and relying on a specific definition of literature, I seek to reveal the transcultural and cosmopolitan awareness that Wang displays in his theorization of *wenxue* as a form of art. I argue it is this gradual articulation of *wenxue* with an awareness of universal human nature that marks Wang's most remarkable contribution to the modernization of the concept of *wenxue*.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 176-204.

<sup>38</sup> Ban Wang has pointed out that Wang Guowei's theory of aesthetics has a rather

In 1904, Wang Guowei published “A Review on *Dreams of the Red Chamber*”<sup>39</sup> in which he elaborates the aesthetic value of this classical Chinese fiction written in the eighteenth century. He begins the article by relating art to human life, arguing that the basic condition of humanity is governed and regulated by desires, which will only produce pain when they are not satisfied. Art, however, can ease the anxiety that is created by unsatisfied desires and obliterate the distinction between the inner self and external world. He quotes Goethe: “What in life doth only grieve us/That is art we gladly see.”<sup>40</sup> He then compares *Dreams of the Red Chamber* (hereafter: *Dream*) with Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, arguing that the purpose of literature as a form of art is to represent human beings’ eternal struggle against their own desires.<sup>41</sup> In Wang’s view, *Dreams* is the exemplar of art, since its story is a complete tragedy that contradicts Chinese readers’ expectation of a happy ending. Wang’s effort in exemplifying *Dreams* in his elaboration of the significance of aesthetics makes his article unique at the time since most Chinese critics still view literature from a utilitarian viewpoint.<sup>42</sup> Of course, one may argue that

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complex political and ideological motive. For more in-depth discussions on the political implication of Wang’s writings, see Ban Wang’s *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>39</sup> See Wang Guowei, “Hong loumeng pinglun [紅樓夢評論],” in *Wang Guowei quanji* [王國維全集] (Hangzhou/Guangzhou: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe, Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2009; hereafter *WGQ*), vol. 1, 54-80.

<sup>40</sup> See *WGQ*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Wang Guowei considers poetry, drama, and fiction as the three most representative categories of art, which is defined by him as an artistic expression of human beings who are always troubled by various desires and needs. *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Yu Ying-shih 余英時 even credits Wang Guowei as the first Chinese critic who evaluates *Dreams* from a literary perspective. Kuo Yuh-wen also argues that Wang Guowei, if not necessarily *the* first, is among the first group of Chinese



Wang's view is utilitarian itself since art for him also exists for a specific purpose. But perhaps the opposition between art and the utilitarianism that Wang has conceived is more of a result of his equation between utilitarianism and political reform, which is an ideology that was quite popular at the time.

In 1905, Wang published "The Call of Philosophers and Artists",<sup>43</sup> to further his view on the independent value of art. He argues that philosophy and art are two of the most sacred and noble forms of knowledge in the world. Contrary to the popular view at the time that sees artistic production and philosophical argument useful only when they are related to the country's development, he claims that the value of art and philosophy is determined by its own sacredness. He emphasizes, "What philosophy and art aim to achieve is the attainment of truth-universal, eternal truth, not temporary idea."<sup>44</sup> Although in this article, philosophy and art are often paired together and used interchangeably, it is clear that art is the main focus for it is articulated as an independent and universally-understood value system. This can also be seen from the fact that Wang repeatedly draws on the European aesthetic theorists such as Kant and Schopenhauer to build his argument. The term, literature, is only briefly mentioned and ambiguously implied in both categories of art and philosophy. That is to say, although some kinds of aesthetic meaning have been built into the concept of literature, literature is yet to become a singular field

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intellectuals who commented on *Hong lou meng*'s aesthetic value. See Kuo Yuh-wen 郭玉雯, "Wang Kuo-wei's Commentaries on the *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Schopenhauerism [王國維《紅樓夢評論》與叔本華哲學]," *Hanxue yanjiu* [漢學研究] 19, no. 1 (2001): 277-308.

<sup>43</sup> See Wang Guowei, "Lun zhexuejia yu meishujia zhi tianzhi [論哲學家與美術家之天職]," in *WGQ*, 131-3.

<sup>44</sup> See *WGQ*, 131.

of knowledge that is independent from philosophy, history, classics, or politics.

The ambiguous status of literature can also be observed in Wang Guowei's other articles. For example, he published "On the World of Scholarship in Recent Years"<sup>45</sup> in which he compares "literature" with "philosophy," arguing that the study of literature and philosophy cannot be conducted merely for the purpose of political education. He argues that literature is not that different from philosophy, whose value is ignored and merely treated as a tool for education. Instead of differentiating the two concepts, he concludes, "To develop academic learning (*xueshu* 學術), one must pursue it as an ultimate purpose, not a tool."<sup>46</sup> If *xueshu*, which can be roughly translated as academic learning in general, is the term that he uses to summarize the study of "literature" and "philosophy," it is hard not to suspect that the term, literature (*wenxue*) is still defined by its ancient semantics in which it is understood as "general knowledge" and "academic learning."<sup>47</sup> Wang argues in another article, "On the

<sup>45</sup> See Wang Guowei's "Lun jinnian zhi xueshujie [論近年之學術界]," in *WGQ*, 121-125.

<sup>46</sup> See *WGQ*, 125.

<sup>47</sup> In 1906, Wang published "Miscellany on Literature" in which he pairs "literature" and "philosophy" again. He maintains that the value of literature cannot yield to any utilitarian purpose: "All academic studies can be pursued for fame and wealth, but not philosophy and literature. Why? The scientific research is always conducted for utilitarian purposes and this is why it never contradicts the interests of the society and politics ... But if a philosopher succumbs to the interests of politics, sacrificing his pursuit of truth, there will be no true philosophy ... So is literature; the kind of literature that is decorative and expressive is not true literature." He concludes that the study of literature should be pursued for its own sake. See Wang Guowei, "*Wenxue sanlun* [文學散論]," in *Wang Guowei Wenji* [王國維文集] (Beijing: Zhongguo wenshi chubanshe, 1997; hereafter *WW*), vol. 1, 24.

Introduction of Neologism”<sup>48</sup> which he published in 1905, that “one of the most notable phenomena of [the development of] literature in recent years is the introduction of neologisms.”<sup>49</sup> Although he seems to specifically talk about the development of literature in this article and does not pair “literature” with other terms such as “art” and “philosophy,” it is clear that he defines literature as “language” or “social thought” in general,<sup>50</sup> since he spends the rest of the article discussing the Chinese translation of certain English words such as “evolution,” “sympathy,” “space,” “time,” “intuition,” and “idea.” This conceptual ambiguity again indicates that literature is yet to be understood as a specific and independent field of knowledge. Literature is only vaguely understood as a synonym of language or general knowledge.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>48</sup> See Wang Guowei, “*Lun xinyu zhi shuru* [論新語之輸入],” in *WGQ*, 126-130.

<sup>49</sup> See *WGQ*, p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere in the article, Wang Guowei writes, “Language is the representation of thoughts. Thus the introduction of new thoughts means the introduction of new language. A decade ago, the introduction of Western knowledge was limited to physical science. This is why although neologisms were introduced, they did not form an obvious impact on *wenxue*.” Ibid., 127.

<sup>51</sup> In 1907, Wang Guowei published “The Position of Classical Gracefulness in the Realm of Aesthetics” in which he re-appropriates a classical Chinese term *guya* (古雅) which can be roughly translated as “classical gracefulness” and develops it into a Chinese theoretical concept of aesthetics. He particularly mentions Kant’s concepts of the beautiful (*youmei* 優美) and the sublime (*hongzhuang* 宏壯), and compares them with the concept of *guya*. Wang contends that while Kant’s theory of aesthetics emphasizes the transcendental and universal nature of the judgment of aesthetics, *guya* is defined by empirical, personal, and time-space specific experiences. Although Wang does not further explore the contextual difference between the Chinese and European literary traditions, he constructs *guya* into a concept that is specific to the Chinese context. This redefinition of *guya* consolidates Wang’s theorization of aesthetics, which is crucial to the understanding of literature. See Wang Guowei, “*Guya zhizai meixue shanghai weizhi* [古雅之在美學上之位置],” in *GGW*, pp. 31-35. For more discussion on the concept of *guya*, see also Luo Gan 羅綱, “Wang Guo-Wei de *guya* shuo yu zhongxi shixue chuantong [王國維的「古雅說」與中

Despite the ambiguous status of literature, it seems clear that this term is gradually articulated with the concept of art in Wang Guowei's writings. It is perhaps through his efforts in articulating and valorizing the concept of art in the Chinese context that later critics are able to construct a Chinese literary history and even propose a literary reform without having to legitimize the artistic value of literary creation.<sup>52</sup> In short, before the New Literature Movement took place in the late 1910s, the term *wenxue* had slowly emerged as a concept associated with art, ceasing to be a mere vehicle for political education. This perhaps explains why Chinese writers during the May Fourth period generally refer to literary writings as *wenyi* (文藝, literally "literature-art"), a term that is continually in use even in contemporary Chinese-speaking context.

## The separation of literature from language

As early as the mid-1900s, a few Chinese writers have begun to

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西詩學傳統],” *Nanjin daxue xuebao* [南京大學學報] 3, (2008). Available at <<http://www.literature.org.cn/Article.aspx?id=65006>>

<sup>52</sup> In 1910, Huang Ren also published *Putong baike xin dacidian* [普通百科新大辭典] in which he defines literature as that which is “related to human cognition and is primarily characterized by its connection to aesthetics.” See Huang Lin 黃霖, “Tantan 1900 nian qianhou de sanbu zhongguo wenxueshi zhuzuo [談談 1900 年前後三部中國文學史著作],” *Fudan daxue xuebao* [復旦大學學報] 1 (2005). Available at <<http://www.文学遗产.中国/Article.aspx?id=62891>> This emphasis on the relation between aesthetics and humanity perhaps finds its clearest statement in Guan Da-Ru's 管達如 “*Shuo xiaoshuo* [說小說],” an article published in 1912, in which Guan argues “Literature is a form of art, and fiction is a form of literature. Human beings have the tendency to enjoy aesthetics, and so there is no one that does not enjoy literature and fiction. See Chen Pingyuan and Xia Xiaohong, ed., *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao* [二十世紀中國小說理論資料], vol. 1 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997), 380.

write on Chinese literary histories. For example, Lin Chuanjia (林傳甲, 1877-1922) published *Zhongguo wenxue shi* (A History of Chinese Literature 中國文學史) in 1904. Huang Ren also published a work on Chinese literary history under the same title around 1910. Dou Jingfan (竇警凡, 1844-1909) published *Lichao wenxue shi* (A Literary History of Chinese 歷朝文學史) in 1906. Although these works might represent Chinese intellectuals' early efforts in clarifying the concept of literature by making it an independent field of knowledge, the discursive effect these works create is very limited and therefore does not constitute a conceptual revolution among Chinese readers. It is not until the May Fourth period that the concept of literature is fervently-discussed and radically-redefined so much as that *wenxue* appears as a neologism, which invites almost all May Fourth writers to create “new” and “modern” meanings for this ancient Chinese term. While much scholarship has been devoted to situating the New Literature Movement in the broader socio-political context of the May Fourth period,<sup>53</sup> I want to focus on how the concept of literature is actually articulated and emerges as a brand new concept that demands new interpretations. May Fourth writers generally acknowledge the connection between aesthetics and literature, but they further clarify the concept of literature by differentiating it from the language. This conceptual differentiation is crucial in revealing the specificity of May Fourth intellectuals' theory of literature. On the one hand, it allows them to challenge the Chinese literary tradition, which is predominantly represented by Confucian classics. On the other, it creates a condition of

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<sup>53</sup> For more discussions on the May Fourth Movement, see Yu-sheng Lin's *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979). See also Liang Shiqiu's 梁實秋 “Wusi yu wenyi [五四與文藝],” in *Wusi lunji* [五四論集], ed. Zhou Yu-shan 周玉山 (Taipei: Chengshan chubanshe, 1980), 543-548.

possibility for May Fourth intellectuals to define literature as a special kind of discursive space that is capable of accommodating different ideas and thoughts-particularly those that are considered necessary to the literary reform.

In 1917, Hu Shi (胡適, 1891-1962) published “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature” on the second issue of *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian* 新青年), a literary magazine at the time that aims at introducing Western social thoughts. Hu Shi proposes a literary reform that purports to abandon classical literary expressions and promotes the use of the vernacular language. His article soon invites a series of debates and discussions on the nature of literature. While some critics argue that classical Chinese (*wenyan* 文言) should be entirely replaced by vernacular Chinese (*baihua* 白話), others defend the orthodoxy of the former, maintaining that classical Chinese is still useful in carrying and conveying Western knowledge. There are still others who argue that Chinese written language should be abandoned altogether and replaced by Romanized letters or Esperanto. Despite various positions are taken, it is obvious that language (written or oral) has become the main criterion with which literature is understood and evaluated. Hu Shi provides eight guidelines for the literary reform: “1. Writing should have substance. 2. Do not imitate the ancients. 3. Emphasize the technique of writing. 4. Do not moan without an illness. 5. Eliminate hackneyed and formal language. 6. Do not use allusions. 7. Do not use parallelism. 8. Do not avoid vulgar diction.”<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that these guidelines are directly or indirectly related to the question of language (classical or

<sup>54</sup> Hu Shi's proposal includes: 1. Writing should have substance. 2. Do not imitate the ancients. 3. Emphasize the technique of writing. 4. Do not moan without an illness. 5. Eliminate hackneyed and formal language. 6. Do not use allusions. 7. Do not use parallelism. 8. Do not avoid vulgar diction. The English translation here is based on Kirk Denton's. See *MCLT*, 123-4.

vernacular), including its use, value, form, content, and social function. Of particular importance is the way Hu Shi differentiates literature from language when proposing a new literary practice. He writes:

The greatest malady of letters [*wenxue*] in our nation today is language without substance. All one ever hears is ‘If writing is without form, it will not travel far.’ But nothing is said about language without substance, nor what function form should serve. What I mean by substance is not the ‘literature conveys Dao’ [*wenyi zaidao*] of the ancients.”<sup>55</sup>

It is noteworthy to point out that Hu Shi begins by identifying the major problem of Chinese literary tradition as “language without substance.” By quoting a famous saying of Confucius, he suggests that Chinese literary tradition has long been governed by Confucian doctrines that emphasize on the moral and educational nature of literary writings. Hu Shi tries to break away from this tradition by relating literature with “feeling” and “thought”—the two qualities that he considers crucial to a new form of literature. However, by identifying the lack of such qualities as the major problem of Chinese literature, the underlying logic is that literature no longer merely consists of beautifully-written words or morally-indoctrinated writings that are associated with Confucian classics. Literature is now considered a special concept that can accommodate all possible sensations, emotions, thoughts, and ideas that fall outside the permitted realm of Confucian doctrines. To further explore this new possibility of literature, Hu Shi continues to elaborate what he means by the literary substance. He writes in the section on feeling:

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 127.

*Feeling.* In the “Great Preface” to the *Book of Songs* is written” “Feelings come from within and are shaped through language. If language is insufficient to express one’s feelings, then one may sigh; if chanting or singing is insufficient, then one may dance with one’s hands and feet.” This is what I mean by feeling. Feeling is the soul of literature. Literature without feeling is like a man without a soul, nothing but a wooden puppet, a walking corpse. (What people call aesthetic feeling is only one kind of feeling.)<sup>56</sup>

As Hu Shi has implied through the passage from *Book of Songs*, the literary substance, feelings, cannot be fully expressed through language, which is only one of the many ways through which this literary substance can be revealed. Speaking, sighing, chanting, singing, and dancing are all possible ways to express feelings, a quality that Hu Shi considers so crucial to the constitution of literature. From this perspective, literature is exalted to a place and understood as a concept that is different from the language, which is merely a medium via which feelings or thoughts can be delivered.

Moreover, since feelings “come from within,” it implies that literature is a spontaneous and personal exploration of one’s inner self that is expressed through the external medium of the language. From this perspective, literature is elevated to a place to where there is no direct and easy access, except through an exploration of one’s inner world. The final sentence in the paragraph is also worth our attention. What is called

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. To a certain extent, this definition is already somewhat similar to William Wordsworth’s definition of poetry which he defines as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. See William Wordsworth’s “Preface to Lyrical Ballads” (1802). Available at <<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jenglish/Courses/Spring2001/040/preface1802.html>>



the aesthetic (*meigan* 美感) is only one kind of feeling that is crucial to literature. In other words, what literature is capable of conveying is not only the value of aesthetics that Wang Guowei had tried so hard to articulate in the 1900s, but also a person's living experiences which include all possible emotional reactions that one might have. It is in this sense that literature becomes an all-inclusive concept that refers to all kinds of ideologies. This logic is also revealed in Hu Shi's definition of "thought," the other substance that he considers crucial to literature:

*Thought.* By "thought" I mean one's views, perceptions, and ideals. Though need not depend on literature for transmission, but literature is enriched by thought and thought is enriched by the value of literature ... As the brain is to man's body, so is thought to literature. If a man cannot think, though he be attractive in appearance and capable of laughter, tears, and feelings, is this really sufficient for him? Such is the case with literature.<sup>57</sup>

Although Hu Shi defines that what he means by thought as "one's views, perceptions, and ideals," he does not really explain what kinds of thought are considered proper in the realm of literature. This definition thus potentially includes all possible meanings and portrays literature as a category of knowledge that is capable of growing, evolving, and developing. From this perspective, literature is an open-ended project that consists of inexhaustive experiences and an endless exploration of the self in relation to the world.

In addition, the content of literature is no longer determined by the Confucian tradition that emphasizes the value of ancient knowledge which

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

is transmitted from the previous to next generation. In fact, Confucius considers himself more as a guardian of the tradition than a creator of knowledge. This is why literary writing from the Confucian perspective is considered a medium through which ancient sages' moral teaching can be delivered, and as a result, the concept of literature (*wenxue*) in traditional Chinese context is not that different from the concept of language. It is in this sense that Hu Shi's definition of literature marks a breakthrough in the development of *wenxue* as a modern literary concept.

Although Hu Shi divides literature into two new categories, his descriptions are rather figurative and metaphoric. In particular, the metaphors that he uses are often associated with human bodies. For example, in describing "feelings," he says "Literature without feeling is like a man without a soul, nothing but a wooden puppet, a walking corpse." In depicting "thought," he suggests that "If a man cannot think, though he be attractive in appearance and capable of laughter, tears, and feelings, is this really sufficient for him? Such is the case with literature." These metaphoric depictions that invoke various images of human bodies perhaps reveal May Fourth intellectuals' belief that ultimately it is the actual people that need to be awakened and enlightened before any institutional reform can be successful, and language, as the carrier of thoughts, is the key to the door of modernization and cure to illness of the social body of this declining nation. In discussing the script reform in China during the 1930s, Andrea Bachner also argues that such kind of corporealized metaphors are used by Chinese language reformers to articulate the symbolic function of a new Chinese language that is crucial to the building of a modern Chinese nation-state. She suggests that the linkage between bodies and language in this context indicates the Chinese intellectuals' desire for national, cultural, and perhaps racial stability of

an imagined homogeneous Chinese nation.<sup>58</sup> While Bachner's example of the corporealized metaphors come mainly from the writings of Hu Yuzhi (胡愈之, 1896-1986), a Chinese writer in the 1930s, judging by Hu Shi's definition of literature, it is clear that the discourses on "corpographies," to borrow Bachner's parlance, have emerged as early as the May Fourth period.

Hu Shi's view on literary reform soon invites a fervent discussion on the definition of literature. Chen Duxiu (陳獨秀, 1879-1942) published "On Literary Revolution" (文學革命論) subsequently on *New Youth* to respond to Hu Shi's article but he further positions this literary reform as a revolution. He comes up with three ideological tenets for the literary revolution in the article: "(1) Down with the ornate, sycophantic literature; up with the plan, expressive literature of the people! (2) Down with stale, pompous classical literature; up with fresh, sincere realist literature! (3) Down with obscure, abstruse eremitic literature; up with comprehensible, popularized social literature!"<sup>59</sup> It is clear that what Chen aims to promote is a new form of literature distinguished by its clarity and sincerity in opposition to an old literary practice that is characterized by obscurity and formality. Although Chen lists three sets of binary concepts in separating the old and new forms of literature, he also distinguishes "the writing of literature" (*wenxue zhi wen* 文學之文) from "the writing of practical composition" (*yingyong zhi wen* 應用之文), criticizing that Chinese literary writing has been confined in traditional literary expression that focuses on rhetorical embellishment and moral indoctrination, and

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<sup>58</sup> See Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4, 14, 19-25.

<sup>59</sup> See *MCLT*, 141.

therefore has lost its independence and self-confidence.<sup>60</sup> While the writing of literature is yet to be fully developed, the writing of practical composition including inscriptional writings and epitaphs still dominates literary production in China. He therefore advertises for a new form of literature characterized by its expressiveness, realistic description, and the potential to benefit the majority of the people. Different from Hu Shi's definition of literature that focuses on the experiences and exploration of the self, Chen Duxiu's emphasis lies on the social responsibility of literature in representing the entire society and nation. However, like Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu's agenda of literary revolution also presupposes a separation of literature from the language and writing in general.

Liu Bannong (劉半農, 1891-1934), following Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu's discussions, also tries to define literature by differentiating it from the language. He writes in "My View on Literary Reform: What is literature?" (我之文學改良觀): "This question has been discussed by many authors. One might argue that 'literature conveys Dao.' But Dao is Dao and literature is literature."<sup>61</sup> Although various English Chinese or Chinese English dictionaries have been published before the May Fourth period and many of which have defined *wenxue* as literature,<sup>62</sup> it is clear that these dictionaries have yet to standardize May Fourth writers'

<sup>60</sup> See Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀, "Wenxue geming lun [文學革命論]," in *Zhongguo xin wenyi daxi: wenxue lunzhan diyi ji* [中國新文藝大系：文學論戰第一集], ed. Hu Shi (Taipei: Dahan chubanshe, 1977; hereafter ZXWD), 88.

<sup>61</sup> See Liu Bannong 劉半農, "Wozhi wenxue gailiang guan [我之文學改良觀]," in ZXWD, 108.

<sup>62</sup> See Tsai Chu-ching, "The Modernizing Process of the Circulation of Literary Conception: A Study on the Entry 'Literature' in the 19th and Early 20th-Century English-Chinese Dictionaries [文學觀念的現代化進程：以近代英華／華英辭典編纂文學相關詞條為中心]," *Journal of The History of Ideas East Asia* 3 (2012): 275-335.

understanding of the term, *wenxue*, which is still understood by many as a concept derived from the Confucian literary tradition. The definition of literature in the Chinese context, as Liu Bannong's article has indicated, is yet to be fully settled down toward the end of the second decade of the twentieth century.<sup>63</sup>

Liu Bannong agrees with Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu's proposal for a literary reform, but he proposes to clarify the concept of literature in Chinese (*wenxue*) by resorting to the English definition of literature. He writes in both Chinese and English:

To define the boundary of *wenxue*, one should follow the Western scholarship by differentiating everything into wenzi **Language** and *wenxue* **Literature**. In English, the term **Language** is translated as “**Any means of conveying or communicating ideas**” which means that wenzi only transmits meanings literally. And yet, **Language** is also used interchangeably with *yuyan* **Speech** and *kouyu* **Tongue**, which are defined separately as follows: “**LANGUAGE is generic, denoting, in its most extended use, any mode of conveying ideas, SPEECH is the language of sound: and TONGUE is the Anglo-Saxon term for Language, especially for Spoken Language.**” Hence, wenzi is no difference from *yuyan*, since it is also characterized by its function to get ideas across easily and effectively ... As for Literature, it is defined as “**The class of writing distinguished for beauty of styles, as poetry, essays, history, fictions, or belles-letters [sic]**” which is different from the kind of wenzi represented by the common *yuyan*.

<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Liu Bannong clearly sees literature as an artistic concept as he writes, “Literature as a form of art has been recognized by writers in the world. See *ZXWD*, 108-9.

What I mean by *wenxue* in the rest part of my article will be based on this definition. (This is my personal opinion and that's why it is only a presumption, not a conclusion.)<sup>64</sup> [All English words that appear in the original text are highlighted in bold font.]

In this long paragraph, not only does the concept of literature is carefully differentiated from that of language, but the concept of language itself is also categorized into speech and tongue. More importantly, Liu has cited an amount of English words (literature, language, tongue, and speech) and the way they are defined in the English-speaking context, to clarify their corresponding Chinese terms (*wenxue* 文學, *wenzi* 文字, *kouyu* 口語, and *yuyan* 語言.) Such an effort in synchronizing the English and Chinese linguistic contexts reveals that the definitions of the term *wenxue* are yet to be standardized among the Chinese intellectuals. As Liu emphasizes at the end of this paragraph, what he proposes is “only a presumption, not a conclusion.” It is clear that the modern equivalence between *wenxue* and literature is still in the process of forming by the time.

To further clarify what he means by literature, Liu continues, “Literature is defined by its spirit. It happens in the minds of the writers, who must be able to deploy his will and consciousness, merging them with emotions, and express them in words.”<sup>65</sup> This definition reminds us of Hu Shi's earlier definition of literature as an expression of the writers' inner world through the external medium such as the language. Liu's contribution to the literary reform is distinguished not so much by his definition of literature, but by his awareness of the contextual difference between English and Chinese, and more specifically, his conscious efforts

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 111.

in synchronizing the semantics of these two languages, through paralleling a list of English and Chinese words in corresponding manners. Although Liu Bannong disagrees with Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu on totally obliterating the classical language, he still separates literature from language, arguing the former is characterized by its spirit, which the latter lacks. He emphasizes that it is not that language should be spiritless, but that spirit is to be found in the things that are described, not in the words *per se*.

The argument that literature should be conceptually separated from language continues to 1919. Luo Jialun (羅家倫, 1897-1969) published “What is Literature?—The Definition of Literature” (甚麼是文學——文學界說) in which he argues that what literature aims to achieve is more than fulfilling the function of language itself. Structurally speaking, his article is similar to Liu Bannong’s. Both start by recognizing the ambiguity of the concept of literature in the Chinese-speaking context and subsequently resort to the Western (primarily English) definitions of literature to settle down the debate of the literary reform. Luo Jialun begins by arguing: “We have often heard of voices calling for ‘Literature! Literature!’ ‘Preserving classical literature!’ or ‘Creating new literature!’ But what is literature? Not only readers but I too am troubled by this question.”<sup>66</sup> It is surprising to find out that almost two years after Hu Shi and Chen Duxiu’s call for a literary reform, there is still a prominent writer such as Luo Jialun, thinks that it is necessary to further clarify the relation between literature and the language. This perhaps indicates that the meanings of literature are still in debate and yet to be determined.

Luo Jialun makes a bold claim in his article that in the past one hundred years, only two Chinese authors have attempted to define

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<sup>66</sup> See Luo Jialun, “What is Literature?—The Definition of Literature [ 什麼是文學？——文學界說 ],” originally published in *Xinchao* [ 新潮 ], 1.2 (1919).

what literature is-Ruan Yuntai (阮蕓台, 1764-1849) and Zhang Taiyan (章太炎, 1868-1936).<sup>67</sup> While Ruan maintains that “only rich thoughts and sophisticated rhetoric can be defined as the literary,” Zhang defines literature as “a study on the laws and forms of what are written on the bamboo and silk.” Since Ruan is a proponent of “classical parallel prose” (*pianwen* 駢文), Luo argues that Ruan’s understanding of literature is largely confined to classical prose that is characterized by parallelism and rhythmic structure. As for Zhang, who suggests all written texts on bamboos and silks can be regarded as literature, generalizes literature as an umbrella term that refers to everything that is written in the Chinese history. Luo Jialun thus argues that these two definitions are either too narrow (classical prose) or too general (all written texts). Like Liu Bannong, Luo Jialun also proposes to resort on Western critics’ definitions of literature to clarify the concept of *wenxue*. The first thing he does is to separate *wenzi* (language) from *wenxue* (literature). He gives an interesting example to elaborate such a difference: “When we learned English for the first time, we were leaning the English language, not the English literature. My article ‘What is Literature?’ is hence a work consisting of Chinese words, not necessarily a work of literature.” He subsequently offers a long list of quotations from a range of authors including Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Henry Hudson, Leigh Hunt, Matthew Arnold, T. H. Huxley, Stopford Brooke, and Henry Hallam. Of particularly interesting is that even the English biologist, T. H. Huxley, who is known for his advocacy of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, also appears on the list. Although Huxley simply defines literature as “belles-lettres,” Luo Jialun takes it as

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<sup>67</sup> Luo Jialun might have exaggerated his claim since writers such as Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu and Liu Bannong have all tried to (re)define the concept of literature as early as 1917.



a point of departure to explain why literature is not just beautifully-written words. He emphasizes that beauty is only one quality of literature and Huxley's take on literature is thus not that different from Ruan Yuntai's which also prioritizes sophisticated rhetoric as the essential element of literature.

While the four writers in the May Fourth period have different emphasis in defining the concept of literature, they all made a distinction between literature and language, allowing them to give the latter additional rooms for explanations. And since language is understood as a medium through which literature is expressed, the proponents of literary reform can retain the right of determining the content as well as the concept of literature. This also allows May Fourth writers to position "literature" at a special place "untainted" by classical literary tradition.

### The rhetoric of "life"

While the concept of literature is gradually differentiated from the language, the term "life" (*rensheng* 人生) slowly emerges as a popular rhetoric among the discourses on the definitions of literature during the May Fourth period. The definition of literature as an expression of life is crucial yet different from other definitions because it allows May Fourth writers to define literature as human experience that is at once personal and universal, specific and general, thereby creating a holistic view on humanity. Indeed, some readers may point out that Wang Guowei had compared art with human life in his "A Review on *Dreams of the Red Chamber*" as early as 1904. However, Wang's understanding of human life is still limited to a physiological perspective as he argues that the basic condition of mankind is governed and regulated by desires,

which will only produce pain when these desires are not satisfied. Such a physiological understanding of humanity is reflected in his choices of terms in denoting the concept of life. For example, he uses “*shenghuo*” (“life” or “living” 生活) and “*rensheng*” (“life” 人生) interchangeably to refer to the physiological nature of living. The kind of life that is understood as one’s various experiences from birth to the moment before death, is still absent, at least not specified, in Wang’s article. It is not until 1910 that Huang Ren begins to define life in a more general way by relating it to literature. In *Zhongguo wenxue shi* (中國文學史), Huang Ren argues the three main purposes of life are truth, goodness, and beauty—and literature is associated with all three categories. Although critics had associated literature with life as early as 1910, the rhetoric of life has yet to become a widely-discussed and invested concept in defining literature. It is not until 1918 that the idea of literature begins to be closely and specifically defined through the rhetoric of life that is understood as an assemblage of all possible human experiences.

In December 1918, Zhou Zuoren (周作人, 1885-1967), Lu Xun’s brother, published “Humane Literature” in which he argues for a kind of literature that features on humanitarianism (*rendao zhuyi* 人道主義), a term that he deploys to negotiate the rhetorical opposition between “the old” and “the new” during the New Literature Movement. He writes,

“New” and “old” are really inadequate terms; actually, according to the principle that there is “nothing new under the sun,” we can speak only of “right” and “wrong” but not of “new” and “old.” If we use the term “new” as in “New Literature,” then we use it to mean “newly discovered” but not “newly invented.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See *MCLT*, 151.

Although generally considered a leading intellectual of the New Literature Movement, Zhou was obviously not satisfied with the mainstream discourses that all too often establish an absolute difference between the new and old literature-terminologies which he believes to be misleading and thus unable to address to the crucial problem of Chinese literary tradition-the lack of a concern for the well-being of humanity. It is for this reason that he proposes to use “humane literature” to replace “new literature” to clarify the goal of literary reform. It should be noted, however, that the kind of “humanitarianism” that Zhou Zuoren emphasizes cannot be understood as a concept denoting the altruistic practices of or belief in charity or philanthropy, but one that seeks to theorize the nature of literary production in an age in which global awareness is crucial to the survival of not only an individual, but humanity as a whole. He explains, “what I call humanitarianism...is rather an individualistic ideology of basing everything on man.”<sup>69</sup> It is clear that humanitarianism was still a neologism which is new to Chinese readers and, therefore, is open to interpretations and elaborations. It is also interesting to note that Zhou Zuoren connects humanitarianism with individualism, emphasizing the correlation between individual and mankind in general, as he explains, “Within humanity, a man is just like one tree in a forest. If the forest thrives, the single tree in it will also thrive. But if we want the forest to thrive, we have to care for each single tree.”<sup>70</sup> The simile of a tree (as to an individual) and forest (as to humanity as a whole) portrays a dynamic framework that not only accommodates the particularity of a single person but also relates this particularity to a broader picture of mankind. The emphasis on the universal understanding of man can also be observed

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<sup>69</sup> See *MCLT*, 154.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

from the Japanese term *-ningen* ( にんげん or 人間 in Chinese)-that Zhou Zuoren appropriates to explain what he means by individualism.<sup>71</sup> The fact that he needs to resort to the Japanese term to define the meaning of individualism indicates that these various ideas of humanity, humanness, humanism, and humanitarianism are yet to be fully established in the Chinese context. Many scholars have pointed out the connection between Zhou Zuoren's theory of literature and classical Chinese literary traditions of *shi yan zhi* (poetry expresses emotions or thoughts 詩言志) and *wen yi zaidao* (writings convey Dao). For example, Ernst Wolff argues that Zhou Zuoren obviously chooses to stand on the side of the *shi yan zhi* tradition since it allows him to elaborate humanitarianism and individualism as modern literary concepts. "This adherence to the *yen-chih* philosophy of literature," Wolff writes, "with its insistence on freedom of individual creativity in art and the high value placed on the esthetic element in literature, rather than on the moral that is preached, brought him rather close to an 'art for art's sake' concept of literature."<sup>72</sup> In elaborating Zhou Zuoren's concept of individualism, David Pollard also maintains that since this term did not exist in the Chinese context, it can only be understood through an analysis of the tradition of *shi yan zhi* and the values that this tradition embraces.<sup>73</sup> Although scholars have elaborated Zhou Zuoren's theory of literature by tracing its roots in Chinese literary tradition, I want

<sup>71</sup> Kirk Denton's translation of "geren zhuyi de renjian benwei zhuyi [個人主義的人間本位主義]" as "an individualistic ideology of basing everything on man" excellently captures the all-inclusive connotation of individualism (*geren zhuyi*) that Zhou Zuoren tries to establish here. I simply want to point out that Zhou's choice of words reveals the fact that the ideas of individualism and humanitarianism are still vague and ambiguous at the time.

<sup>72</sup> See Ernst Wolff, *Chou Tuo-jen* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 83-84.

<sup>73</sup> See David E. Pollard, *A Chinese Look at Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1973), 53-71.

to focus on how he develops his theory by incorporating new rhetoric that works to transform *wenxue*, a term derived from Confucian classics, into a universal concept that is to be equally understood by readers from different cultural backgrounds.

While concepts such as humanity, humanness, individualism, and humanitarianism are introduced in Zhou's article, he feels the need to explain these intricate neologisms in a simpler way, and "human life" (*rensheng*) seems to be the perfect rhetoric to encompass as well as summarize these various concepts and, particularly, the dynamic relation between individuality and humanity. In defining what he means by "humane literature," Zhou Zuoren concludes, "Writing that applies this humanitarianism in its recordings and studies of all questions concerning human life, that is what we call humane literature ..."<sup>74</sup> By highlighting human life as the ultimate goal and content of literature, Zhou has expanded the narrow definition of life which was simply understood as the representation of desires in Wang Guowei's writings into a cosmopolitan human condition that presupposes the universality of individuality and vice versa—a cross-cultural representation of human experience that can be readily shared and understood by people around the world. Though, like Wang Guowei, Zhou Zuoren also uses *shenghuo* and *rensheng* interchangeably, the connotations of these two terms in Zhou's writings have changed. Human life has become a rhetoric that bears a cosmopolitan implication. It refers to the experiences of people in an international world.

Moreover, his insistence that the understanding of any individual should not be separated from that of mankind leads him to conclude that any reader or writer of humane literature, namely, new literature, should

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<sup>74</sup> See *MCLT*, 155.

not confuse criticism with proposals. “In criticizing the writings of the old, we have to realize their time and age, to correctly evaluate them and allot them their rightful position. In propagating our own proposals we must also realize our time and age.”<sup>75</sup> The rhetoric of age (*shidai* 時代) is crucial here since it becomes an important criterion with which one can measure and balance his or her criticism of either the old or new literary production. For Zhou Zuoren, there should not be any quick and easy opposition between the old and new literature, nor a radical difference between the modern writers and classical essayists. Instead, one can only consider the boundary of literature based on “our time and age”<sup>76</sup> without staking out other boundaries. This logic leads Zhou Zuoren to believe in the common fate of humanity that is equally shared by every individual living in the same age. He concludes, “Because mankind’s fate is one and the same, the anxiety about my own fate should therefore also be anxiety about the common fate of mankind. That is why we should speak only of our time and age and not distinguish between Chinese and foreign.”<sup>77</sup> This conclusion that one should no longer speak of the difference between us and them, Chinese and foreign, again reveals the cosmopolitanism in Zhou Zuoren’s view on literature as well as his inquiry into the literary reform during the May Fourth period.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. With the aid of Darwin’s theory of evolution, the twentieth century consciousness becomes a popular rhetoric among the May Fourth intellectuals. For more discussion on the changing concept of history, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, “In Search of Modernity: Some Reflections on a New Model of Consciousness in Twentieth Century Chinese History and Literature,” in *Ideas Across Cultures: Essays on Chinese Thought in Honor of Benjamin I. Schwartz*, ed. Paul A. Cohen and Merle Godman (Cambridge: Harvard, 1990). See also Lee Ou-fan, *Lee Ou-fan lun zhongguo xiandai wenxue* [李歐梵論中國現代文學], ed. Ji Jin 季進 (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian, 2008), 1-43.

<sup>77</sup> See *MCLT*, 161.

The discursive effect that Zhou Zuoren's "Humane Literature" produces is unprecedented. It opens up another wave of discussion on literature that is articulated through the rhetoric of life. For example, Luo Jialun concludes in his "What is Literature," an article published in 1919, that "Literature is the expression and criticism of life." In 1921, Lu Xun comments in his postscript to his translation of "Sanpu youwei men de zuihou" (三浦右衛門的最後) that what a writer should aim to capture is the truth of "*ningen*" (Japanese kanji for human life). In the same year, Liu Yi (六逸) emphasizes in his "On the Methods of Writing Fiction" (*Xiaoshuo zuofa* 小說做法)<sup>78</sup> that what a novelist should depict is the various representations of life, and new literature is the discovery of a new perspective on human life. In his famous essay, "Naturalism and modern Chinese fiction" (Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai *xiaoshuo* 自然主義與中國現代小說)<sup>79</sup> Shen Yanbing (沈雁冰, Mao Dun 茅盾, 1896-1981) also argues that the function of literature is to represent the universality of life. In 1922, Qu Shiying (瞿世英, 1901-1976) equates the domain of fiction with that of life itself.<sup>80</sup> Although various articles are published in the following years and Zhou Zuoren's rhetoric of life is constantly invoked and appropriated to define the purpose of literary production, no one has felt the need to further clarify what the rhetoric of life actually or may differently mean. It is as if Zhou's "Humane Literature" has sufficed to elaborate the relation between literature and life.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See Liu Yi's "*Xiaoshuo zuofa* [小說做法]," in *Ershi shiji zhongguo xiaoshuo lilun ziliao* [二十世紀中國小說理論資料], ed., Yan Jiayan 嚴家炎, vol. 2 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1997; hereafter ESZXLZ), 195-201.

<sup>79</sup> See Shen Yanbing, "Ziran zhuyi yu zhongguo xiandai *xiaoshuo* [自然主義與中國現代小說]," in ESZXLZ, 226-240.

<sup>80</sup> See Qu Shiying's "*Xiaoshuo de yanjiu* [小說的研究]," in ESZXLZ, 241-275.

<sup>81</sup> It is not until 1942 in which Luo Jialun published *Xin rensheng guan* (A new perspective on life 新人生觀) that the discussion on life reaches another peak.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the rise of *wenxue* as a term that is associated with art in the 1900s and its emergence as a neologism in the late 1910s and early 1920s. However, the question that if we can see *wenxue* as the Chinese translation of the English term, literature, still remains. After the course of transformation of the connotation of *wenxue* during the first two decades of the twentieth century, does this term, as Ernst Wolff suggests, come closer to the concept of modern literature?<sup>82</sup> I argue that there is always a part of the modern Chinese semantics that prevents *wenxue* from becoming a complete translation of the English term, literature, not so much because *wenxue* was an ancient Chinese term later reintroduced to translate the Western concept of literature, but that this Chinese term has been paired, combined, circulated, and invested with various terms, concepts, meanings, and discourses that are either new or old to Chinese readers over a long course of history of the encounter between Western and Chinese civilizations. The question of language is obviously important to the development of *wenxue* as a modern literary concept. Since most ideas pertaining to the concept of modern literature such as art, fiction, national boundary, and cosmopolitan mindset, were still ambiguous, if not totally absent, in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century China, Chinese intellectuals at the time could only resort to cultural resources that were available to them and appropriated existing terms from their own language, sometimes creatively and sometimes falsely, to make sense of any idea that was new or foreign to them. Even though recent scholars have pointed out that various English-Chinese

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However, in this work, literature is no longer the center of discussion.

<sup>82</sup> See Ernst Wolff, *Chou Tuo-jen* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 84.



or Chinese-English dictionaries had been published in which *wenxue* is listed as a Chinese definition of the English “literature” long before the New Literature Movement, there was still a huge gap between how *wenxue* was understood as a term and how it was imagined as a field of knowledge as it is now. The construction of *wenxue* as a modern literary concept that presupposes a cosmopolitan awareness is not a quick and easy task; it requires efforts of generations of writers, translators, dictionaries compilers, intellectuals, missionaries, reformers, and traditionalists, from both the East and West, to make the contemporary hypothetical equivalence between *wenxue* and literature even possible at the surface level.

Although *wenxue* is now widely-accepted as the modern Chinese term for literature, the way it is imagined and articulated as a universal and transcultural concept is filled with turning, rerouting, detouring, diverging, and even dead-ends. We may accept the hypothetical equivalence between the Western concept of literature and its various counterparts in many other linguistic traditions to maintain the possibility of transcultural communication; however, we cannot ignore that fact that the way literature is imagined as a universal category in each linguistic context is characterized by a different constellation of terms or concepts as well as a changing web of discourses and knowledge systems that either collaborate or contradict with one another. In a cultural tradition that is radically different from the West, the concept of modern literature can only be translated into a non-Western language by appropriating existing terms and creating a discursive space in the local linguistic context to accommodate and negotiate with all possible meanings and interpretations of that foreign concept. It is for this reason that no matter how the concept of literature is translated and articulated, the way it is integrated into the local discursive

system might contain alternative connotations, create new semantics, and therefore, further open up our understanding of what literature is.

## Glossary of Chinese characters

- baihua 白話  
Bie shi 別士  
Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀  
chun *wenxue* 純文學  
Dou Jingfan 竇警凡  
Feng Jingru 馮鏡如  
Guan Da-Ru 管達如  
guwen 古文  
guya 古雅  
*Hanshu* 漢書  
hanzao 瀚藻  
haogong guwen 好攻古文  
*Hong lou meng* 紅樓夢  
hongzhuang 宏壯  
Hu Shi 胡適  
Hu Yuzhi 胡愈之  
Huang Ren 黃人  
Ji Dao 幾道  
Jing Songcen 金松岑  
jinwen 今文  
Kang Youwei 康有為  
kouyu 口語  
Liang Qichao 梁啟超

*Lichao wenxue shi* 歷朝文學史

Lin Chuanjia 林傳甲

Liu Yi 六逸

Liu Bannong 劉半農

Luo Jialun 羅家倫

mei 美

meigan 美感

meishu 美術

meixue 美學

pianwen 駢文

*Putong baike xin dacidian* 普通百科新大辭典

Qiu Fengjia 丘逢甲

Qu Shiyong 瞿世英

rendao zhuyi 人道主義

renjian 人間

rensheng 人生

*Riben shumu zhi* 日本書目誌

Ruan Yuntai 阮芸台

sanwen 散文

shenghuo 生活

shensi 沈思

Shen Yanbing (Mao Dun) 沈雁冰（茅盾）

shidai 時代

shige 詩歌

shi yan zhi 詩言志

Shuo xiaoshuo 說小說

Wang Guowei 王國維

wen 文

wenmo 文墨

wenxue 文學

*Wenxue sanlun* 文學散論

*wenxue zhi wen* 文學之文

wenyan 文言

wen yi zai dao 文以載道

wenyi 文藝

wenzi 文字

wenzhang 文章

*xiaoshuo* 小說

Xia Zengyou 夏曾佑

xiju 戲劇

*Xin Qingnian* 新青年

*Xin rensheng guan* 新人生觀

xinxue zhishi 新學之詩

xin *xiaoshuo* 新小說

Yan Fu 嚴復

Yen Huiqing 顏惠慶

yi 藝

*Yinbingshi shihua* 飲冰室詩話

*Yinghua Da Cidian* 英華大辭典

yingyong zhi wen 應用之文

yishu 藝術

yishu de 藝術的

*yiwenzhi* 藝文志

youmei 優美

yuyan 語言

Zhang Taiyan 章太炎

zhexue 哲學

Zhifang waiji 職方外紀

Zhongguo wenxue shi 中國文學史

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