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## Intellectuals in Chinese Novels at the Dawn of the 21st Century<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The dawn of the 21st century saw images of intellectuals in novels change in a drastic way. Intellectuals, and those in the humanities in particular, are no longer portrayed as privileged Enlightenment thinkers or sages with Confucian ideas of salvation. In the novels that take intellectuals as their subject matters, such characters often end up involved in betrayal, self-exile, or spiritual/mortal death. This is not a historical process, nor an inevitable course for intellectuals to be sure, but it remains a legitimate question to ask why these fictional intellectuals are becoming, more often than not, new tragic heroes. Why are they becoming misfits in their society and ending up in exile, abandonment, and even death? The present paper examines different images of intellectuals and the makings of their destinies.

**Keywords:** contemporary Chinese literature, novels, intellectuals

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Admittedly, *The Song of Youth* (1958) establishes the norm for depicting intellectuals<sup>2</sup> in contemporary Chinese literature, exerting its influence until the early 1980s. The “Rightist Intellectuals” in “Reflective Literature,”<sup>3</sup> who express an unrepentant belief in their cause following their triumphant return, are essentially mirror images of Lin Daojing, the intellectual and female protagonist of Yang Mo’s *Song of Youth*. These intellectuals are made to suffer, but suffering cannot make them change their convictions. One might say it is precisely the suffering that reinforces their convictions. Such narratives about intellectuals have been partially addressed in histories of contemporary Chinese literature (Hong; Chen).

Interestingly, following the publication of Jia Pingwa’s *Ruined City* (1993), that ends with the departure for the South of its protagonist Zhuang Zhidie, a famed writer based in Northwestern China, there appears a noteworthy flow of novels featuring intellectuals cast as the new “Superfuous Man”<sup>4</sup> that end up in acts of “betrayal” or self-exile. Examples can be easily found in

a string of novels published at the dawn of the 21st century, including *The Dark Green Water* (2001) by Yan Zhen, *Unforgettable Hollyhocks* (2001) by Zhang Wei, *Restless Women* (2002) by Zhang Kangkang, *Classic Relationships* (2002) by Mo Huaqi, *Peaches and Plums* (2002) by Zhang Zhe, *The So-Called Writers* (2003) by Wang Jiada and *Mi Xiang* (2004) by Dong Libo. Why do these writers unanimously opt for “betrayal” or self-exile for their protagonists in an era where the concept of literature is already diversified? Why do these fictional intellectuals have to embark on unknown journeys of life anew? This evidently poses a new issue worthy of critical attention.

### 1. Intellectuals’ “Betrayal”

The image of confusing, hesitating and wandering intellectuals in the face of hard realities including conflicts of revolution in particular, finds its most comprehensive, focused, and authentic expression in *The Rich Man’s Children* (1948) by Lu Ling. However, these intellectuals are not yet portrayed as “traitors” in reality or in spirit. A quintessential traitor-intellectual is represented by Fu Zhigao in *Red Crag* (1961), whose petty bourgeois intellectual sentiments, tastes, and eventual defection under the manipulation of political ideologies logically unfolds in this novel, a Chinese Red Classic. Literary narratives of the 1980s revisit the theme of intellectuals’ fluctuation and impurity, and imagine that the political chastity of the fictional intellectuals remains intact in spite of their suffering. With the authenticity of these narratives later held in irrefutable skepticism, the literary value of these novels is significantly diminishing. The new millennium witnessed a rewriting of intellectuals with regard to tales of their defection and “betrayal,” in such a way that the image of intellectuals as a social group or class seems startling. In the meantime, complexities of the intellectuals’ souls are so represented that the fictional complexity seems in portion with the literary richness of the novels.

The publication of the novel *Bai Dou* (2002) brought instant fame to Dong Libo and made him one of the most sought-after writers. Dong’s next novel was *Mi Xiang* (2004). In terms of subject matter, historical background, characters, and plot, it shares an unmistakable lineage with *Bai Dou*. Also set in Xiayedi, a fictional farm in the frontiers of Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, it continues to deal with themes intertwining with human nature, desire, power, and violence relevant to the particular historical epoch.

If one were to say that *Mi Xiang* narrates the innocence, beauty, and subsequent indulgence of Mi Xiang after being betrayed, the novel would not present much novelty other than a different historical setting. The remarkable distinctiveness of *Mi Xiang*, however, lies in its concurrent portrayal of a female character named Song Lan. The contrast in the destinies and personalities of these two women allows *Mi Xiang* to shine with a few brilliant and unexpected rays of light within its otherwise plain narrative. Song Lan, whose given name “Lan” literally means “orchids,” volunteers to work at Xiayedi in Shanghai as one of the many “educated youths,” whereas Mi Xiang, whose name literally means “fragrance of rice,” is forced to leave her hometown of rice

fields due to flooding and seeks refuge in Xiayedi as one of the many “blind-flow” migrants. Song Lan is educated and can read *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1934) by Nikolai Ostrovsky, whereas Mi Xiang is almost illiterate. Yet, fate does not arrange their lives according to their social status. After being raped by the shepherd Old Xie, Song Lan ends up marrying him. As Old Xie often uses violence to discipline his wife, Song Lan finds her submissive nature undergoing a revolutionary change after her accidental abortion. She overturns or “subverts” violence from Old Xie by killing his beloved dog Ah Huang when she finally finds her life-worse-than-death existence unbearable. Surprisingly, the couple comes to terms with each other after Song Lan’s act of violence and both feel they have finally found good days for their life. By the time policies allow all “educated youths” from Shanghai to return home, Song Lan chooses to stay behind with Old Xie in Xiayedi, a place she can hardly love at first and then finds it hard to give up.

Mi Xiang’s fate is entirely different. As the protagonist of the novel, her life is naturally designed to be complex and twisted by the author. Despite her humble birth and background, she aims high. Born with physical beauty and a romantic nature, she also develops love for intellectuals. Her tragic fate is doomed by the incompatibility of her upbringing and her character. Mi Xiang has every right to choose her own life and love of life in spite of her lowbrow upbringing of course, but she has to love Xu Ming, another “educated youth” from Shanghai, and succumbs to his physical desire before the official approval of their marriage application. She ends up an abandoned woman. In time, Xu Ming chooses career success and fame rather than a wife, denying he has anything to do with Mi Xiang’s pregnancy and breaking his promise to marry her. This devastating blow completely transforms Mi Xiang, who begins to indulge bodily pleasures recklessly in order to resist against or seek revenge for the injustice. Although such indulgence seems to make Mi Xiang “live a better life than any other woman in Xiayedi,” she can no longer find what she truly wants. She is the protagonist in the tragedy of Xiayedi for real.

Apart from historical factors at work in the tragic fate of Mi Xiang, one cannot ignore the fact that the direct catalyst for Mi Xiang’s tragedy is the “intellectual” Xu Ming, a supporting character in the novel. To quote an old saying, “Character is destiny.” With their characters deliberately swapped by the author, Mi Xiang (whose romantic nature and taste should be Song Lan’s) and Song Lan are destined to be burdened with lives not meant for them. This interplay of contingency and extremism is what makes *Mi Xiang* most enthralling. Without contingency, the swapped fates of the two women would not exist; without extremism, the lives of Mi Xiang and Song Lan would not resonate as deeply. Both women transform themselves in extreme terms. Mi Xiang’s infatuation for intellectuals gives Xu Ming an exploitable opportunity. The image of a humble and meek intellectual is not hard to find, nor is it hard to see the novel is structured on the narrative prototype of “beginning in chaos and ending in abandonment.” Yet the emotional betrayal of the intellectual figure constitutes a decisive factor in Mi Xiang’s tragedy. Without Xu Ming’s betrayal, Mi Xiang would not resort to a life of reckless abandonment. The story of Xu Ming’s betrayal is simple enough. Once a “prince charming” in trouble, Xu Ming is saved by Mi Xiang’s love at the darkest hour of his life, but eventually gives up love in favor of “fame and fortune.” Although

the story might seem familiar, the author's decision to revisit this narrative archetype in the new millennium underscores his doubt or mistrust of the intelligentsia. Far from a closed chapter of history for intellectuals of previous times, Xu Ming's story continues to unfold to date.

If Xu Ming's betrayal in *Mi Xiang* represents an emotional betrayal of intellectuals, Chi Dawei in Yan Zhen's *The Dark Green Water* embodies the betrayal of intellectual integrity and autonomy. The richness and complexity of *Water* can be explored from many perspectives, such as the relationship between intellectuals and cultural traditions, the dominant impact of the privileged class on social and spiritual life and psychological structure, and the relationship between human desires and values in a commodity society, among others. As such, the creativity and literary value of *Water* is obvious. However, from my point of view, what is most noteworthy in this novel is its focus on the mindset and choices of intellectuals under market economy conditions, the malignant surge of latent desires under external pressure, forced identification in dialogue with reality, and subsequent crises of the politics of recognition and dignity in contemporary society.

Chi Dawei, the protagonist of *Water*, is portrayed as a noble old-school intellectual that ends up a modern bureaucrat. As such, the narrative framework of his story may have not gone beyond that of Julien Sorel in *The Red and the Black* (1830). There is no essential difference in the psychological structure of Julien's longing for high society and Chi's aspiration for a central position of power. What distinguishes the two characters is Chi's aspirations are not rooted in original scheming like Julien's. Despite his humble family background, Chi first sees himself a follower of the conservative cultural tradition that demands a man to keep his personal virtues, and seeks to safeguard the "spiritual Chinese garden." This sentiment is not only fundamentally at odds with modern society and very much detached from the modern intellectual's enthusiasm for participating in public affairs, but it also raises questions about the healthiness of the scholar-official mentality that seeks spiritual seclusion, as the mentality signals clear dependency on an outdated culture. While this may be Chi's personal choice and deserves social respect, the challenges he faces in upholding it stem not from himself but from his dialogues with "significant others."

Studies show the shaping of an individual's self and way of life is not solely achieved by oneself, but by having "dialogues" with others. We are profoundly shaped by love and care from "significant others," people who give us nurturing words and influence. In the case of Chi, his father is his first "significant other." In the seven years following his graduation from college, however, he suffers from serious imbalances and struggles to stand by his "spiritual garden" as an ordinary clerk, especially after he has "dialogues" with these "significant others": his wife Dong Liu, his boss Director Ma Chuizhang, retired colleague Yan Zhihe ("Master Yan"), and his son Chi Yibo, a potential interlocutor. These diverse social and familial relationships reshape Chi. The "dialogue" he has with Yan, a "modern hermit" who confides to him his regrets and offers him advice, turns out to be a turning point in his life. Chi gets promoted three times within a short period of time, with two of the promotions resulting in delightful relocation and new residence. These desirable changes eventually bring about self-recognition and a "sense of dignity" for Chi, both of which result from social and family recognition.

Therefore, *Water* not only raises questions about Chi's psychological journey and changes of life philosophy, but it also generalizes, rather poignantly, the omnipresent politics of life that we have perceived but not yet experienced, that is, "the politics of recognition." Charles Taylor points out that "nonrecognition or *misrecognition*" can inflict harm for a group of people or a person, and that it can be "a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being" ("Politics" 25). According to him, *misrecognition* can not only afflict horrifying trauma for the victim, but it can also cause fatal self-hatred. While nonrecognition may exist in varying degrees in any society, it is omnipresent in Chi's living environment. Prior to his promotions, Chi internalizes the image of an inferior and demeaned self imposed by others, which is confirmed by his all-too-familiar daily life with his wife, and his relationship with the ignorant, shallow, and incompetent Ding Xiaohuai, with the overbearing Director Ma, and even with his son.

Without recognition, there is no dignity to speak of. Chi's "awakening" is triggered by his loss of dignity. The dignity of equal recognition seems possible in modern society wherein everyone may share equal social concern. Taylor illustrates this viewpoint by noting that everyone can be called "Mr.," "Mrs.," or "Miss," rather than some people being called "Lord" or "Lady" (27). However, this facade of equality has never penetrated the core of life, nor has it become the dominant civilization in reality. In our social life in particular, stratification of social class or the sense of dignity derived from social status is close to an unannounced yet deeply ingrained notion or unwritten statute.

The advent of modern civilization also marks the beginning of the decay of hierarchical societies. What modern civilization emphasizes and seeks is the ideal of "authenticity" as termed by Johann Gottfried Herder, who put forward the idea that every individual has his or her "original way of being human," or that everyone has their own "measure" in his words (qtd. in Taylor, *Authenticity* 28). Announcing the death of universal "measure," Herder's idea calls forth a life dictated by our own "measure," suggesting a life imitating the "measure" of others is meaningless. An authentic life as such is a life with the realization of our full potential, as well as the realization of our self-dignity. However, such an ideal of "authenticity" is nothing short of a pipe dream for Chi. Should he wish to keep his "scholar-official" sentiments and way of life, he would become, years later, "Master Yan." The prospect would not be agreeable to his wife, nor would he choose to do so eventually. Should he do so for real, he would not have any chance to change the mirror-image of an inferior or demeaning self and achieve a sense of dignity by separating himself from the "subaltern" class.

"The politics of recognition" thus permeates our daily life. It is manufactured by the privileged class, and is desired and reinforced by the commoners. In Chi's life, these two classes are represented by Director Ma and his wife Dong respectively, with himself eventually becoming the "measure" for future generations. I find myself seized by an acute sense of dread after reading the novel, wondering how an individual can be "recognized," and how the crisis of self-dignity can be alleviated in our present social life. It entails a spiritual metamorphosis for intellectuals today to maintain their own "measure" of spiritual stance, and the process remains incomplete without

them betraying their soul or going beyond temptations in reality.

## 2. Intellectuals' "Exodus"

Self-exile of intellectuals is a classic scenario in 20th-century novels. It is common practice for writers to have their intellectual-protagonists end up leaving home for an unknown destination as a way of protest against or distaste for an oppressive family clan system and grim social realities. Indeed, no one can know where the intellectuals are going. Lin Daojing might be considered an exception. She leaves home of course, but she ends up finding a "home" and becomes the protagonist of what might be called China's first "coming-of-age" novel.

The new millennium finds Chinese intellectuals embarking on a new "exodus." Many novels feature intellectuals who end up leaving home but for a different reason. Their home-leaving is more often a kind of self-exile, and it is no longer a result of social pressures, but a result of disillusioned dreams or pursuit of a utopian dream elsewhere. Once again there appears to be literary evidence of helplessness and alienation of intellectuals today.

Mo Huaiqi's *Classic Relationships* is a novel depicting lives of ordinary people, focusing on a group that could be termed "the intelligentsia"—its main characters are people with higher education. Given the fact that today's literary narratives of contemporary life tend to favor two groups of people, the young and the successful, one may be misled to believe that changes in our social life are limited to these groups. *Classic Relationships* makes it possible for us to see unexpected changes have indeed taken place in our lives today, and that changes of lives for under-noticed groups are perhaps the real changes.

"The intelligentsia" and what they adhere to seem to hide behind a mysterious veil in past discourses of public opinions or ideologies. In various narratives, intellectuals still seem to be regarded as China's last spiritual and moral fortresses, believed to have convictions of life and moral values different from those of the general public, though living in their own illusions. In reality, however, the mid-1980s began to see changes among intellectuals, who left campus or their study with mixed feelings as covert signs of their "wavering" or changes. The 1990s saw a heated debate, though not without positive arguments, about intellectuals venturing into business. Looking back, the debate itself reveals the issue of intellectuals being too accustomed to theorizing and being quick with words but slow to act.

The characters in *Relationships* are not merely armchair theorists. Whether through active choice or passive coercion, they align with the times and reconstruct new "classic relationships" with their new choices. Classic relationships are, in fact, the most common relationships in everyday life between husbands and wives, fathers and sons, father-in-laws and son-in-laws, teachers and students, and even lovers. As people's position within the social structure shifts, these relationships no longer represent traditional kinship or friendship, each imbued with new implications, interests, and crises.



In the “classic relationships” constructed by the author, the central figure is Dongfang Yunhai, a geological engineer and father-in-law of Mao Caogen. Yet his central position is merely symbolic in the fragile family relationships; in reality he is actually marginalized and finds it hard to get involved in the lives of his family members. Although his children still adhere to traditional filial piety, he can no longer influence their lives authoritatively. Realizing he cannot fit well in the society of his time, he chooses to commit suicide just like Wang Guowei, a well-respected scholar of Chinese literary history. Others in Dongfang’s family or related to it one way or another, such as Mao Caogen, Nan Yueyi, Dongfang Lan, Dongfang Hong, Motor, and even Mao Tou, seem to be in the narrative center, but they are not. Each of the characters is self-centered, including even the 10-year-old Mao Tou who shoots his father Mao Caogen and makes the good-looking dance teacher “half-blind” in order to compete with his father in attention from his “auntie.” Such self-centered “classic relationships,” once uncovered, are startling with their drama and cruelty.

In regard to what may be held accountable for the self-centered relationships, we may have to revisit the cliché topic of “modernity,” the historical context beyond our control with all its complexity. The history we are trying to make has also been making us. No one could have expected Mao Caogen, a self-righteous and easy-going dance teacher, to be “coerced” by Nan Yueyi, his student and lover, to venture into the business world. No one could have expected Dongfang Hong to plot against her elder sister with all her guile. Nor could anyone expect the insatiable Mao Caogen to end up being “thwarted” by his own son. “Classic relationships” are complex and simple. They are complex because individuals must navigate various relationships, without which there would be no interests or fulfillment of desires; they are simple because everyone operates with self-interest at the core. Although brimming with unconquered conscience, passion, and vitality, who can truly control their fate amidst such perilous relationships? Mao Caogen escapes the network of “classic relationships” under the pretense of rehearsing *Sichuan Boatmen’s Work Song*. It sees him, in fact, “depart” from the profit-driven “battlefield” in which he can hardly make a stand, and return to where he is supposed to be.

Zhang Kangkang’s *Restless Women* is a novel of its own kind. The female protagonist is named Zhuo Er, which literally means “extraordinary.” She is a pioneer of young women of our time, and also an adventurer eagerly sought by our time. Given the fact that she is endowed with job security, financial security, and a good education, her restlessness is beyond common understanding. She ought, it would seem, to live peacefully and contently with her husband. But she is fed up with the idea. Although we can hardly tell what exactly she wants for her life, we can tell she wants to be “extraordinary,” and to live a life after her own will in constant configuration.

Zhuo Er’s desire for the extraordinary may be universal, but few are fearless enough to follow it, or few can afford to be “restless” as she does. With the growing hegemony of commercialism today inciting or pumping up potential and ambivalent anxieties, we are made more anxious and restless than ever, each of us wanting to do something yet not knowing how. Zhuo Er is an exaggerated version of each of us. With novels published after the 1990s having imagined such inevitable consequences of social secularization in kaleidoscopic ways, especially among the

intelligentsia, Zhuo Er is but a master of the restless living of our time. Zhuo Er's restlessness goes beyond her gender. In this sense, *Restless Women* is not a feminist novel.

Zhuo Er's restlessness may stem from a quest for unfettered freedom. She cannot tolerate any restraints imposed by the conventional world and wants to do whatever pleases her. In resigning her position as artistic designer of *Weekend Woman* and embarking on her "restless" journey of life, Zhou Er achieves her expectations in some sense. Yet, freedom has its limits and absolute freedom does not exist. We find that each of Zhuo Er's whimsical freedom flights has something to do with her relationships, especially her relationships with three men. From Zhuo Er's point of view, Old Qiao, Lu Hui, and Zheng Dalei are but symbols of sexuality, civilization, and money respectively. Should this argument hold water, Zhuo Er's restless moves can be said to be always linked to her desires. In other words, Zhuo Er's quest for freedom is no more than seeking to have it all. She indeed experiences the joy of freedom: traveling anywhere at will, having sex with strangers on the spur of the moment, summoning or dismissing men under her spell as she pleases, seizing opportunities to showcase her talents through artistic imagination. . . . Yet, she ends up achieving nothing. Only Zhuo Er knows the cost of her freedom—worrying about funding for her trip to the Antarctica and weeping alone at night. At the end of the novel, Zhuo Er exiles herself, fulfilling nothing but what might be called Movement of "Restless Women."

Zhuo Er's self-exile is profoundly significant. Since the 20th century, every period of change or transition in China has seen figures like Zhuo Er who determine to stand apart from conventional society. However, they are not tolerated by society, or rather, society is not designed for any one individual. Ideology is a passport to society. In other words, to what extent one identifies with the hegemonic ideology determines the extent of their social integration. The failure of "Zhuo Ers" since the 20th century lies in their failure to obtain such a "passport." In an identity-based society, Zhuo Er should renounce her identities—abandoning her social roles in quitting one job after another and rejecting family roles as a wife and mother, she ends up not accepted by the society, for there is something unsettling about her. Zhuo Er's restlessness is what makes her success as a fictional character. Her desires are our desires, only more intense, more direct, and more daring. A "typical" character driven by extremism, she is missed the moment she bids us adieu.

### 3. Intellectuals' Death

The death or treason of intellectuals has long been announced in the West.<sup>5</sup> The statement expresses the disappointment and even despair toward intellectuals based on a Western understanding of the social duties of intellectuals. French thinker Julien Benda holds that intellectuals are those who seek their joy in the practice of an art, science, or metaphysical speculation, and that their activity essentially is not the pursuit of practical aims. Benda's understanding of the intellectual's role is broadly similar to that of Immanuel Kant and Antonio Gramsci. However, Benda is criticized for trying to assign a duty of eternal values and



contemplation to intellectuals. Indeed, accusations of treason or the death of intellectuals largely stem from the interpretation of this duty. The present undertaking may not be a theoretical analysis of the “death” of intellectuals in the novels of the new millennium, but the epithet serves as a significant metaphor nevertheless.

Zhang Zhe’s *Peaches and Plums* (2002) can be viewed as a contemporary version of *The Scholars* (1749) or *Fortress Besieged* (1947). Wu Jingzi’s *Scholars* reveals rather sharply the dilemmas of the scholars who are expected and expect to be officials in imperial China. The great anxiety of the intellectuals then is whether or not they can pass the imperial examination and become officials, as becoming an official is widely considered by the intelligentsia as the way to realize the value of their life. The abolition of the imperial examination system in 1905 resulted in the birth of modern intellectuals and a subsequent identity revolution. Liberated from the prescribed desirable identity of being officials, modern intellectuals could choose to become officials, teachers, journalists, freelance writers, etc. The identity revolution meant significant liberation for the modern intellectuals, but it did not liberate them from other issues, the story of which is told in *Fortress*. Both *Scholars* and *Fortress* address issues about intellectuals rather satirically and unveil the alternative interior of their inner world. In so doing they represent an alternative stream, as the mainstream focuses on the issue of intellectuals and revolution. So far as the mainstream is concerned, this issue finds expression in the Thought Reform of intellectuals in novels of the 1950s, and how to maintain political “chastity” in the novels of the 1980s written by the “returnees.” With the mainstream setting the trend for writing about intellectuals as such, the alternative stream was almost nowhere to see until the publication of *Keep Practicing* (1989) by Li Xiao, wherein the humble desires of the intellectuals and funny spectacles of their lives are made visible.

The onset of the 1990s hardly saw any alleviation of anxieties for intellectuals working or studying in colleges and universities. The anxieties of these intellectuals are represented in *Peaches and Plums* in a very humorous manner akin to that of *Scholars* and *Fortress*. Primarily, it addresses the issue of uncontrolled and unlimited release of desires following repression, desires not fundamentally different from those of the general public. The story of Professor Shao Jingwen and his students in the novel is a story of unleashed desires of intellectuals in response to contemporary secularization.

*Peaches* is an intriguing novel, transcending the distinction between highbrow and popular literature. It goes beyond the stark polarization of serious and popular literature in the current literary landscape and showcases how a novel can be both entertaining and profound, allowing interpretations of all kinds of readers. The novel presents a complex array of symbols: professors, doctoral students, master students, bosses, prostitutes, impoverished peasants, villainous local officials, one-night stands, love affairs that turn real, murders, and so on. Modernity is defined by complexity and contradiction, and the dual elements of modernity define the fictional campus life. Universities are expected to keep a certain distance from the society, a prerequisite for them to maintain their independence, but in today’s tumultuous world, almost everything present in

the larger society can be found in universities, sometimes even more vividly. Humorous as it is, *Peaches* is not without sharpness. It mercilessly strips away the genteel veneer of its environment to expose the falseness and pretense of what was once considered a mysterious, sacred, and pure place. A supervisor of doctoral candidates, Professor Shao is referred to by his students as “boss.” He seems perfectly placed in this era, full of vigor and satisfied ambitions. As a professor of the new era, he embodies everything expected of an elite intellectual by the secular world. Open-minded and generous, he is on good terms with his students, and his academic status allows him free play of department politics. But he “plays too freely” and ends up having his body stabbed a hundred and eight times by his lover, with a pearl placed in each wound. The death of Professor Shao, who ceases to perform his duty as an intellectual and becomes a businessman driven by his inflated desires, is the death of an intellectual.

Following the death of Professor Shao is the death of Hu Ran, a writer in *The So-Called Writers* by Wang Jiada. Written in the historical context of the diminished halo of writers in a commodity society, *Writers* is an engaging narrative that weaves a series of tragicomedies around the writer Hu Ran. With its vivid depiction of writers with distinctive character and their awkward fate in our era, it is also a final elegy for writers as a group of once “mysteriously” privileged intellectuals. The brief careers of Hu Ran, Ye Feng, and others, whether they mingle with women of easy virtue or seek fulfillment and disappointment through “literary power,” and their spiritual world hidden beneath the veil of “elegance” as writers, thoroughly erase the final boundary between writers’ real lives and spiritual worlds. The incident revolving around the publication of a journal article in Ancient City and the ultimate fate and destiny of the writers also seem to reflect the decline of the intelligentsia in our era.

The death of Hu Ran is represented with profound reference to the social environment and to personal psychology. Hu spends most of his energies navigating relationships with four women: Tian Zhen, Zhang Guiying, Yang Xiaoxia, and Shen Ping. The Ancient City, where Hu lives, is not unlike the “ruined city” in Jia Pingwa’s novel of the same name, the viewpoint of which is endorsed by the “Four Celebrities” of the Writers’ Association of the Ancient City, where Hu works. Although the novel is not without stereotyped characters that serve more like concepts rather than real characters, which can be seen in its portrayal of women of easy virtue as well as the rural woman Tian Zhen, it is not without depth in its depiction and critique of the old-school literati with their tastes, sentiments, and attitudes toward women. If the death of Professor Shao is a result of destructive desires manipulated by the spirit of commodity society, the death of Hu Ran is a result of historical abandonment. The present era no longer offers what people like Hu Ran want. Bankruptcy in life and spirit is inevitable for Hu Rans, as the last relics of an outdated culture. Thus, Hu Ran’s death also symbolizes writers’ exile or abandonment of the remnants of the outdated culture.

The betrayal, self-exile, and death of intellectuals in the novels of the new millennium highlighted thus may be a coincidental process, or an imposed “structure.” Either way, it reveals unresolved issues of “identity,” a sense of belonging (or lack thereof), or spiritual drift for the

intelligentsia. As the progression of time strips intellectuals in the humanities off their once-held superiority, discomfort and lack of inner strength have led them to their self-exile, their self-abandonment as misfits, or their death. If this is indeed the case, the road for the intellectuals to integrate into society and reconcile their own roles remains arduously long.

Translated by Jian'e Ling

### Notes

1. This paper is originally published in Chinese in 文艺研究 [*Literature and Art Studies*], no. 2, 2005, pp. 5-12, 158.
2. Throughout the essay the term “intellectual” is used in its common understanding in China, a person with some years of formal education. For further information, see Weigui Fang, “The Chinese Version of ‘Intellectual.’” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2009, pp. 321–347. All notes are added by the translator.
3. See, for instance, Yicheng Zhong in *Bolshevik's Salute* (1980) by Meng Wang and Yonglin Zhang in *Greenbelt Tree* (1984) by Xianliang Zhang.
4. “The Superfluous Man” is an archetypal character in 19th-century Russian literature that is often well-educated but is ill at ease with social norms. The term became popular after the publication of Ivan Turgenev's novella *The Dairy of a Superfluous Man* (1850).
5. *La Trahison des Clercs* by Julien Benda (1857–1956) was first published in 1927. It was translated into English by Richard Aldington as *The Treason of the Intellectuals* in 1928. A British edition of the book is titled *The Great Betrayal*.

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