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**NIHILISM AND CRISIS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF YU DA-FU'S *SINKING*
AND AKUTAGAWA RYŪNOSUKE'S *RASHŌMON***

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Overview

This article argues that nihilism, generally understood as a Western philosophical concept popularised by thinkers such as Nietzsche, was equally in evidence in both China and Japan during the turbulent early decades of the twentieth century. I argue that during these years, Northeast Asian writers embraced nihilism – understood simultaneously as an interrogation of traditional moral values and their ultimate rejection – as a response to internal and external crises faced by their respective nations. While scholars such as Shih Shu-mei and Donald Keene have hitherto considered the literary production of China and Japan in terms of a bilateral interaction between China and the West, or Japan and the West, few have examined domestic factors that might have given rise to nihilistic tendencies in Chinese and Japanese literatures of the period.

Through close readings of Yu Da-fu's (郁达夫) short story "Sinking" (沉沦) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's (芥川龍之介) "Rashōmon" (羅生門), written respectively in 1921 and 1915, and traditionally understood as examples of Western literary influence, I suggest that nihilism, together with decadence, its cultural expression, are not unique to Europe but are universal responses to crisis. I further argue that the Japanese nation, long-regarded as an Asian superpower following its victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904, underwent a crisis of identity in the early decades of the twentieth century comparable to, although different from, the crisis faced by China over the same years.

Introduction

The early twentieth century was one of the most tumultuous times in world history. Between 1914 and 1918, Europe experienced the devastation of the First World War. From 1917 to 1927, China embraced its "May Fourth era,"¹ and during the same years, Japan was rising to world

¹Shih Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China 1917–1937* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 49.

prominence as an industrial nation after the Meiji restoration, fuelled by growing national confidence.² War and the new imperatives of global commerce radically transformed the horizons of the individual, and intellectuals became increasingly exposed to foreign culture through foreign study programmes and secondments. The Chinese author Yu Da-fu (1896–1945), for example, was sent to Japan to study between 1914 and 1922 on a Chinese government scholarship, translating numerous Japanese works during his sojourn.³ The Japanese writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke likewise travelled to China as a “special correspondent” of the *Ōsaka Mainichi Shimbun*⁴ for four months. The correspondence between Ezra Pound, Mary Fenellosa, Katue Kitasono and other Japanese poets, meanwhile, reveals the profound influence of Chinese and Japanese aesthetics on Pound’s poetry.⁵ These examples clearly illustrate the fact that cultural movements should never be seen as one-way traffic, but rather as intersecting moments of cultural transference – instances of what Karen L. Thornber has termed the process of “transculturation” whereby artistic cultures are forced to interrogate their own (national) identity as a result of trans-national events, such as war and trade.⁶

Despite this, there has been a strong tendency to place Chinese and Japanese writers of the period in the same category as Western decadent writers. Yu Da-fu has been labelled a British decadent writer by Shih Shu-mei,⁷ while C. T. Hsia⁸ claims that his works “stem from the Japanese and

² Christopher Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 62.

³ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 116.

⁴ Donald Keene, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke,” in *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature of the Modern Era: Fiction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984), 571.

⁵ Sanehide Kodama, ed., *Ezra Pound & Japan: Letters & Essays* (London: Black Swan Books, 1987).

⁶ Karen L. Thornber, “Collaborating, Acquiescing, Resisting: Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Transculturation of Japanese Literature,” in Richard King, Cody Poulton and Katsuhiko Endo, eds., *Sino-Japanese Transculturation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 99.

⁷ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 110.

⁸ C. T. Hsia, *A History of Chinese Modern Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 103.

European decadent writers.” Akutagawa Ryūnosuke meanwhile has been understood by Kinya Tsuruta as simply a “voracious reader”⁹ whose stories were inspired in “form and subject matter” from the West.¹⁰ This article takes issue with such reductive readings and seeks to place the works of both writers in the wider context of historical circumstance: to read their works as a negotiated response to both personal crisis and to the class, cultural and national redetermination which so profoundly coloured their understanding of themselves – both as citizens of the wider polity and participants in its ongoing process of self-definition. Their works, often imbued with a sense of human darkness and moral interrogation (sometimes perceived as moral decay), a function of the relatively low class and limited power of both authors,¹¹ can, in fact, be usefully viewed in terms of nihilism.

This article will seek to demonstrate that similarities between contemporary writers from widely different cultures are not merely a result of stylistic imitation (as Shih et al. would have it) but rather authentic responses to personal, social and political crisis that draw on a common lexicon of despair. To date, there have been few studies of the pervasiveness of nihilism in global literary cultures, with most Asian scholars categorizing Chinese and Japanese literary production as imitative of Western movements.¹² Hence, I hope to show, through close readings of

⁹ Kinya Tsuruta, “Akutagawa Ryunosuke and I-Novelists,” *Journal of Monumenta Nipponica* (1970): 13–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Akutagawa’s early years were particularly difficult: his mother, who was insane, died young and he was subsequently maltreated by his stepmother. He lived in poverty during his early career. See Satoru Miyasaka, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: hito to sakuhin* (Tokyo: Kanrin Shobō, 1998). Yu came from a poor family, receiving a traditional Chinese education before going to Japan. See Hsia, C. T (op. cit) for a biographical overview. See also Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 102–111.

¹² See, for example, Bonnie S. McDougall who sees Yu’s early works as “modelled on Japanese confessional fiction” and Donald Keene who considers Akutagawa’s fiction to borrow from European styles. Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst and Company, 1997), 105–109; Keene, “Akutagawa Ryūnosuke,” 556–593.

two works by Yu Dafu and Akutagawa, how nihilism was an authentic literary response to political and social crises in Southeast Asia – rather than a matter of stylistic imitation – and thereby to map out an alternative approach to the study of wartime comparative literatures.

Nihilism in Europe

In a notebook entry of 1885, Nietzsche defined nihilism as the proclivity of “the highest values [to] devalue themselves.”¹³ The term, which gained currency from the middle of the nineteenth century, became a central pillar of the intellectual response to the French revolution of 1789, often associated, by extension, with modernism and even existentialism. For Nietzsche, however, nihilism was a product of three principle tenets: unity, purpose, or aim and truth.¹⁴ Any person who espoused these values would inevitably be led to question political structures, such as class hierarchies and educational systems, and also deconstruct and dismantle existing knowledge. Indeed, a state of nihilism has been described as one “in which man rolls from the centre towards X.”¹⁵

In this formula, the capitalization of the letter X suggests that something unknown gradually rules both physically and mentally over individuals. Since this unknown can neither be solved nor resolved (according to Nietzsche), any attempt to understand it is *ipso facto* meaningless. This concept of nihilism clearly resembles Heidegger’s later formulation of Nichts – literally, “*there is nothing left.*”¹⁶ For both Nietzsche and Heidegger, humanistic modes of thought and established moral and political systems were in crisis, poised “at the moment of decline.”¹⁷ In Heidegger’s terms, it was a crisis that necessitated the devaluation and “revaluation of all values.”¹⁸

¹³ Shane Weller, *Modernism and Nihilism* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-Modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1985), 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁸ Daniel W. Conway, *Heidegger, Nietzsche, and the Origins of Nihilism* (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, 1992), 20.

Crisis has been defined by Anne Wright as “not merely the perception of change [...] and accelerating deterioration in the quality of life [but also] the fracturing or dismantling of personal relations, of social institutions, of civilization.”¹⁹ These were conditions amply furnished by Europe of the late eighteenth century: if the French revolution had destroyed all accepted social norms, industrial revolution alienated individuals from their traditional habitat and radically reorganised the very business of living, with massive shifts from country to city.²⁰ The subsequent rise in the population of cities, and the sharp increase in the cost of staple foods only exacerbated the gap in living conditions between the rich and the poor.²¹ Charles Baudelaire prefaced his *Flowers of Evil* (French: *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857) with a poem entitled ‘*To the Reader*’ (French: *Au Lector*):

Folly and error, avarice and vice
Employ our souls and waste our bodies’ force
As mangle beggars incubate their lice,
We nourish our innocuous remorse.²²

His ringing indictment of bourgeois moeurs and the savage grotesquerie they masked; the acute alienation of author and reader, individual and society, can be read as symptomatic of this modernist fracturing. Indeed, the poem reads as a catalogue of Nietzschean decadence. The poet, challenging and devaluing the old system of hierarchies as traditional society disintegrates – the nihilist response to crisis – is himself left isolated as he struggles to flee the reassuring constraints of majority morality.²³

¹⁹ Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910–1922 Howards End, Heartbreak House, Women in Love and the Waste Land* (Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press, 1984), 3.

²⁰ See Christopher Harvie and H. C. G. Matthew, *Nineteenth Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²¹ Philip T. Hoffman, et al., “Real Inequality in Europe since 1500,” *Journal of Economic History* 62 (2002).

²² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), trans. Roy Campbell (London: The Harvill Press, 1952), 4–5.

²³ Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 26–28.

Debilitated by his struggle, he sickens and his opposition to ruling norms is perceived as decadent. Guy de Maupassant's *The Devil* (French: *Le diable*, 1886) can be read, in fact, as a questioning of moral values per se. The doctor upholds traditional moral principles, insisting that the dying mother of Honore should be well cared for. Honore, however, values his wheat more highly than his mother's life. The nurse, employed by Honore, disguises herself as a devil to menace the mother to death in order to not waste the money.²⁴ The theme of the selfish pursuit of wealth and the neglect of human need can be seen as a reflection of the decay in moral values brought about by structural societal change. Honore never mourns for the death of his mother, and the nurse never feels guilty about the deliberate murder.

Traditional Christian values have been summarily dismissed – it is as if they never existed in the minds of Honore or the nurse. Maupassant's story maps out the comprehensive dismantling of society's supreme values – God and morality – neatly illustrating what, in Freudian terms, would be read as the collapse of the superego and the resulting uncontrolled *id*. It was this, perhaps, that Nietzsche had in mind when he wrote, "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."²⁵

Asian Nihilism in Pre-Modern Ages

Yet if nihilism and decadence were responses to social and political crisis, they were hardly peculiar to the West. The process of modernity in southeast Asia presented similar problems for the individual, giving rise here too to a radical re-evaluation of accepted norms – Heidegger's de- and re-evaluation of social parameters. Nihilism, that is, was as much a function of the individual's response to crisis in Southeast Asia as it was in the West. So if it left its mark on contemporary Chinese and Japanese literary production, this was not a consequence of Western literary influence but a symptom of the individual and social crises that marked its context of production. Nihilism, that is, was not a uniquely Western philosophical response but a universal one.

²⁴ Guy de Maupassant, "The Devil," *Classical Literature*, trans. Albert M.C. McMaster (accessed November 12, 2014, <http://classiclitter.about.com/library/bl-etexts/gdemaupassant/bl-gdemaup-devil.htm>).

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 203.

The universality of nihilism as a literary phenomenon has been explored by Ikuho Amano in her *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan*, where she points to numerous instances of decadence in traditional Japanese literature, which nonetheless have their own culturally-specific modes of expression.²⁶ One early example is that of *The Ise Stories*, written in the mid-tenth century.²⁷ Episodes 7, 8 and 9 of the Ise Stories, show Narihira leaving the capital in a mood of political disenchantment:²⁸

Episode 7: 京にありわびて, he is lonely in Kyoto;

Episode 8: 京や住み憂かりけむ, he feels dejected in Kyoto

Episode 9: 身をえうなき者に思ひなして京にはあらじ, he feels useless and leaves Kyoto.

His dejection and sense of disempowerment are not simply the “rendition of [his] alienated position in the political mainstream”, however, but also a pessimistic response towards society as a whole, as indicated by his self-exile to the east in Episodes 8 and 9. The ninth and tenth centuries in Japan saw the rise of the Fujiwara family who successfully maneuvered to “exclude outsiders from important public offices.”²⁹ Narihira and his family were victims of Fujiwara political machinations and saw their careers suffer accordingly. His recognition of his political impotence, lack of social worth and his consequent sense of isolation and hopelessness are classic presentations of the decadent response to social and political crisis. Similar responses can be found in early Chinese literature. Take, for example, Li Bai (李白)’s *A Drinking Song*, written around the mid-eighth century:³⁰

²⁶ Ikuho Amano, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Helen Craig McCullough, trans., *Tales of Ise: Lyrical Episodes from Tenth-Century Japan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), 42.

³⁰ Li Bai, “A Drinking Song,” in Soame Jenyns, et al, trans., *Selections from the Three Hundred Poems of the T’ang Dynasty* (London: Murray, 1940), 37.

If you would taste of life and enjoy it to the limit,
 Do not let the golden goblet stand empty under
 the moon.
 All talents come from heaven and they must be
 used.
 If ten thousand gold pieces are scattered to the
 winds, yet
 Are you not repaid?

The poem speaks on the surface of a poet encouraging others to enjoy an instant of material joy and freedom. Upon close examination, however, it reveals Li Bai's despondency towards the political turmoil currently destroying the nation and his failure in office. Despite his best efforts, Li Bai had both failed to secure a job in government and failed in the Civil Service Examination (*Ke ju*); he had experienced, moreover, the devastation of the An Lu-shan Rebellion.³¹ This poem is, in reality, a rhetorical question – why is it so hard to secure a position in government under the public examination system? This pertains to the devaluation of the tradition, for example, and at the same time, it is an embrace of hedonism and decadence (collapse of the superego, and the free reign of the id).

Indeed, it is also possible to trace Chinese nihilism back even further, to the third century. *Speaking My Mind*, a poem composed by Ruan Ji (AD 210–263), one of the Seven Sages in the Bamboo Forest, once again uses the trope of play to express despair at the turbulence of society:³²

When I was thirteen or fourteen
 I delighted in the study of history and the odes.
 My plain clothes covered a heart of jade.
 In morals I was greater than Yen and Ming.
 [...]
 I occupied myself with the study of great books,
 And now I laugh at this folly.

³¹ Arthur Waley details the literary life of Li Po in Waley, *The Poetry and Career of Li Po, 701–762 A.D.* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1950).

³² Ruan Ji, "Speaking My Mind," in Yang Chi-sing, trans., and Robert Payne, ed., *The White Pony: An Anthology of Chinese Poetry from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: A Mentor Book, 1947), 128.

In the present age, Ruan Ji suggests, conventional moral teachings have lost their usefulness: he laughs at his previous studious endeavours. Pessimism as a literary trope in fact recurs time and again throughout Chinese history, whenever the nation experienced war or misgovernment. But these brief examples make clear the fact that nihilism as an intellectual response to social crisis was not new to the nineteenth century; nor was it the privileged domain of the West. But under what terms did it present itself in the 1910s and 1920s in Southeast Asian nations?

Beset by both internal and external crises,³³ China found itself, at the turn of the twentieth century, in a state of “semicolonialism,” with the looming threat of complete colonization.³⁴ At the same time, however, a new sense of patriotism was emerging as intellectuals bolstered their crippled sense of national identity by turning to the achievements of the past – Confucianism and the teachings of the sages, artistic and literary achievements, and glorious passages in China’s long history. I argue that it is precisely the conflict between Western learning and these traditional values and teachings, that led to the “nihilism and irrationality” of Chinese modern literature.³⁵

Yu Da-fu’s *Sinking*

Although many Chinese intellectuals continued to travel to Europe after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 (both independently and as part of government missions), more began to make their way to Japan. This led to a rapid acceleration in intercultural exchange between the two countries. The most prominent literary movement in China, the May-Fourth Movement of 1919 – a concerted

³³ The Opium War of 1842 marked a critical moment in China’s modern history. Thereafter, the Taiping War 1851–64, the Boxer Uprising of 1900, and the failure of a series of domestic reforms forced China to sign a number of unequal treaties, open a number of ports and pay a huge sum of indemnity. For more details, see Rana Mitter, *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction*, in particular Chapter 2. C. T. Hsia notes that intellectuals’ cultural superiority began to be challenged after the Opium War. See Hsia, *A History of Chinese Modern Fiction*, in particular, the Appendix, “Obsession with China.”

³⁴ See Shih Shu-mei’s definition of semicolonialism in *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China 1917–1937*, 35–36.

³⁵ Hsia, *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, 536.

response to domestic perceptions that China had become a 'weak nation' – was driven by writers who had studied either in the West or Japan. While some of these writers such as Guo Mo-ruo (郭沫若) (1892–1978) foresaw China rising from the ashes like a phoenix,³⁶ others, such as Yu Da-fu focused on the pathological elements of China's situation, which Yu represented in the person of the morally corrupt protagonist. Shih has argued that tropes of desire and its repression in Yu, seen as metaphors of China as a whole, which can be read as signs of disappointed patriotism.³⁷ I take this analysis a step further by arguing that Yu's nihilism and his ultimate moral decadence strengthen such an idea.

One of Yu's most famous stories, *Sinking* (1921), took as its subject matter the isolation and solitude the author experienced as a student in Japan:

Lately he had been feeling pitifully lonesome. His emotional precocity had placed him at constant odds with his fellow men, and inevitably the wall separating him from them had gradually grown thicker and thicker.³⁸

It is possible to interpret this sense of solitude as part of a "national inferiority complex."³⁹ Elsewhere Yu writes, of his Japanese peers: "I am a Chinaman; otherwise why didn't they even look at me once?"⁴⁰ But it also reflects archetypal Chinese feelings of distance and isolation from more successful nations, Europe and Japan: China was perceived as a sick nation, cut off from other more powerful nations, as the wall in the story cuts off the protagonist from his Japanese peers. Read in this light, the text becomes nationally allegorical in Jamesonian terms.⁴¹

³⁶ In his first collection of poetry *The Goddesses* (女神) (1921), Guo likens the reborn phoenix to a new China, a nation bathed in brightness and hope.

³⁷ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 117.

³⁸ Yu Da-fu, "Sinking," (1921) in *Modern Chinese Stories And Novellas 1919–1949*, trans. Joseph S. M. Lau and C. T. Hsia, ed., Joseph S. M. Lau, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 125.

³⁹ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 117.

⁴⁰ Da-fu, "Sinking," 128.

⁴¹ Fredric Jameson, *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), 69.

At the opening of the story, the protagonist is reading Wordsworth and other Western poetry – a symbolic interrogation of Chinese traditional values. But he finds himself unable to build a bridge – translate – between the two cultures: “What kind of translation is that? [...] why bother to translate?”⁴² This refusal to engage in translation suggests Yu did not only suspect the viability of the Chinese language, but also devalued it; all Chinese people, he believed, should learn Western languages because the beauty of poetry would be lost once rendered into their own language. His opposition to the project of translation does not signify, however, that he had other alternatives. With this last resource gone, his melancholy only increases.⁴³ The world becomes ‘lifeless’⁴⁴ and he feels only “intolerable loneliness.”⁴⁵ The language echoes that of Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*: “when you realize that there are no goals or objectives, then you realize, too, that there is no chance.”⁴⁶ The same nihilistic attitude extends, beyond the individual, to the Chinese nation as a whole: without direction, without a unifying leader, “split into rival regions ruled by militarist leaders,”⁴⁷ and without hope. Yu’s despair was that of a whole generation of intellectuals.

In the beginning of the second section, the male protagonist imagines himself as Zarathustra – the eponymous voice of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (TSZ) written between 1883 and 1885. *The Drunken Song*, one of the many poems in TSZ, concludes with the following lines:

Joy-deeper than heart’s agony:
Woe says: Fade! Go!
But all joy wants eternity,
Wants deep, deep, deep eternity!⁴⁸

The poem apparently encourages the reader to leave behind the sorrow of this world and to pursue eternal joy. The preceding lines, however, state

⁴² Da-fu, “Sinking,” 126.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 201.

⁴⁷ Rana Mitter, *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 31.

⁴⁸ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 258.

“The world is deep,”⁴⁹ suggesting rather than yearning for another world, the desire for an ideal world with only joy and no woe. Read in this light, it is true (as Michael Tanner proposes) that Nietzsche’s thought was deeply imbued with nostalgia.⁵⁰ Nostalgia is indeed one of the principal themes of Yu’s *Sinking*, and it seems likely that Yu had read Freud and Nietzsche’s work.⁵¹ Yet Yu’s nostalgia for his motherland was further complicated by other feelings such as self-hatred and a “megalomania [which grew] in exact proportion to his hypochondria.”⁵² Megolomania and hypochondria were identified and explained in Freud’s “On Narcissism” (ON).⁵³ The complexity of the protagonist’s emotions is captured in the following soliloquy:

Why did I come to Japan? Why did I come here to
pursue my studies? Since you have come, is it a
wonder that the Japanese treat you with contempt?

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 53.

⁵¹ Yu also read a number of philosophical works and in his diary of 1932, he mentioned that he had a number of Nietzsche’s works to hand, respected his talent greatly wanted to write a novel with Nietzsche as the protagonist. See Ko Kintei, “Yu Dafu’s Acceptance of Foreign Ideas and Cultures,” [郁達夫における外国思想・文化の受容] *Journal of the Institute for Language and Culture* 3 (1999): 115–122. Nietzsche’s works caught the attention of the Chinese literati in the early twentieth century and were frequently translated into Chinese, appearing in both books and journals. See Zhao-yi Zhang, *Nietzsche in China 1904–1992: An Annotated Bibliography* (Canberra, Australia: Australian National University Press, 1992). Freud’s works first spread to Japan in the 1920s – at the same time as they were gaining readerships in Europe. The first Chinese translations of Freud were published in 1920. For more details, see Ning Wang, “Freudianism and Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature,” in Tao Jiang and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds., *The Reception and Rendition of Freud in China: China’s Freudian Slip*, (New York: Routledge, 2013): 3–23.

⁵² Da-fu, “*Sinking*,” 127.

⁵³ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in Joan Riviere, trans., *Collected Papers Vol. IV* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1956): 30–59.

China, O my China! Why don't you grow rich and strong? [...] I shall be wholly content if you grant me an Eve from the Garden of Eden, allowing me to possess her body and soul.⁵⁴

The protagonist's struggle between his desperate yearnings for a stronger China and his disappointment at the country's current powerlessness was, to some extent, the dilemma faced by every Chinese intellectual during their overseas study. On the other hand, however, the metaphor of Eve and the Garden of Eden conveyed his inability to think constructively about the issue of "Japanese ascendancy in China as an imperialist power."⁵⁵ The biblical metaphor, on the literary level symptomatic of Yu's aspirations towards Western culture rather than a committed Christian allusion, was intended to convey the idea – not of original sin – but of available womanhood.⁵⁶ Abandoning hopes of Chinese political power, Yu distracted himself from the failure of the mother nation through fantasies of the mythical mother of humanity.

The passage actually trawls through several levels of the protagonist's thinking process. Interrogating the meaning and purpose of his every act, his interrogation slips from the level of personal to political and national identity. His impotence to provide constructive answers to his own questions propels him into that Nietzschean state of X, in which the individual wants "neither knowledge nor fame."⁵⁷ Consequently, having

⁵⁴ Da-fu, "Sinking," 128.

⁵⁵ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 117.

⁵⁶ Bible translation and the spread of Christianity exercised significant influence on May fourth writers. Yu Da-fu himself was educated in several Christian schools. See Jian-long Yang, *The Influence of Christian Culture over May Fourth New Literature Taiwan* (Taipei: Xinruiwen chuang, 2012), 263. Chinese writers used biblical allusions simply as a "eulogy to the spirits of Christ" and showed little concern with concepts of Original Sin. The naming of the Creation Society, the literary group to which Yu belonged, also referred to the work of creating new spirits and new thoughts just as "God created the world," in Jian-long Yang, "The Christian Influence in May Fourth Movement" *Journal of The Institute of Chinese Studies* 16 (1993): 88.

⁵⁷ Da-fu, "Sinking," 128.

deconstructed everything in his mind, he reconstructs his own utopian world, one in which he can release his sexual libido – or what we see in the society as moral decay, at least from our “moral interception of phenomena”⁵⁸ – the moral lens through which we view our activities.

The third section of the story furnishes the biographical details of the protagonist, his family background and the traditional Chinese education system within which he was raised. It is here that we see some of the reasons for his subsequent descent into moral decadence and nihilism. His elder brother, for example, is “forced to resign his position in Peking”⁵⁹ on account of his moral uprightness while his second brother abuses his military rank for financial gain, illustrating the cruel fact that conventional morality is now meaningless. Corruption was rife and civil wars between various warlords frequent. The worst fate, the protagonist reflects, is to “belong to a swarm of subject, powerless people who have no sense of belonging together.”⁶⁰

Both his brothers exemplified, in their different ways, the powerlessness of subjecthood in a society that has no direction. Thus, while he had been raised with the belief that he would live his life in accordance with conventional notions of right and wrong, governed by the dictates of custom, the very concept of traditional morality had been shattered.⁶¹ His preliminary response is therefore to isolate himself in study – to turn his back on the world. It is in the passivity of this response that we glimpse the initial “seeds of hypochondria”⁶² with all its various Freudian symptoms: the withdrawal of interest and libido from the outer world, the focus on the pathology of a particular bodily organ,⁶³ here allegorised in the protagonist’s blind obedience to his elder brother’s order to study medicine. In a broader sense, however, his commitment to study also points to the problematic legacy of the 1300-year-old imperial examination system (*Keju*), once the only way for scholars to serve in government and to advance in the world. The “eight-legged essay” (*Baguwen*) had long been

⁵⁸ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 104.

⁵⁹ Da-fu, “Sinking,” 129.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 73.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁶² Da-fu, “Sinking,” 129.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

criticized as out of touch with current political and military realities.⁶⁴ Thus the protagonist himself belongs to that body of Chinese students who valued study as the unique route to worldly success.

In Freudian terms, their primary drive (id) overrides their secondary response (ego). The protagonist's early history is to some extent autobiographical: scholars have pointed out similarities with Yu's own childhood.⁶⁵ Yet it also functions as an interrogation of the old education system. This is significant because the publication of *Sinking* coincided with the wave of literary reforms that were currently transforming the Chinese literary landscape. Yu's fiction was written in loose vernacular Chinese and included references in other languages (some of the English poetry Yu quotes in his fiction, for example, is given without Chinese translation).

Particularly, it is the sight of his elder brother's suffering in the story that triggers his subsequent abandonment of the strictures of conventional morality: he spies on a Japanese girl bathing and goes to a brothel, narrative moves which mirror the Freudian "surplus of unutilized libido."⁶⁶ His failure to suppress his libidinous desires in turn reflects the fact that conventional concepts of good and evil no longer hold any relevance for him. Was it the Japanese who branded all Chinese as "Chinamen" (*Zhinaren*) who were at fault or the powerlessness of China itself? His shame, that is, is no longer uniquely personal: he simultaneously bears the burden of shame of China as a nation.

Sinking, therefore, cannot be read independently of its context of its production: it bears the marks of its political and social background.⁶⁷ Whether Yu deliberately set out to write political fiction is to some extent irrelevant: in the re-telling of the personal suffering which led to his nihilistic outlook, he inevitably reflects contemporary social and political issues. The individual narrative – the gradual descent into decadence –

⁶⁴ See Chapter 6 of Liu Hai-feng and Li Bing. *Zhongguo ke ju shi* [The History of Chinese Imperial Examination] (Shanghai: Dong fang chu ban zhong xin, 2004) for a detailed account of problems with the examination system as well as reasons behind the repeated failure of reforms.

⁶⁵ Anna Dolezalova, *Yu Ta-Fu: Specific Traits of His Literary Creation*, trans. P. Tkac (Prague: Hurst Paragon, 1971), 12.

⁶⁶ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 116.

⁶⁷ Jameson, *Third-World Literature*, 72.

becomes analogous with the larger political narrative of a society in collapse. The protagonist's embrace of nihilism in its Nietzschean sense thus serves as a criticism of China itself. Nietzschean paradigms of human motivation – “to desire pleasure [or] to ward off displeasure” – in fact extend like a canopy over the whole narrative.⁶⁸ Japan's use of its rising international status to bully the Chinese can be read as a signifier of the Nietzschean desire for pleasure at a national level; the protagonist's (ab)use of his financial power to purchase the Japanese prostitute is the same signifier operating at the individual level.

His ultimate submissiveness to the tormenting “dull and dry”⁶⁹ mundanity of daily existence after his indulgence in physical pleasure, and his growing recognition of the “suffering”⁷⁰ of many other Chinese people, reflects the Nietzschean concept of eternal return. Pain and shame, he realises at the end of *Sinking*, have patterned his life “in the same series and sequence”⁷¹ for the past twenty-one years. He must accept that there is no antidote, no solution: beyond the inevitable fate of any Chinese persons, it is the broader human condition. Society was terminally corrupt and in decline, and “all possible modes of thought,”⁷² the threads of Confucian morality, the vast literary legacy of the classics were no more than the jetsam and flotsam of the past. His final weary exhortation, “[China,] I wish you could become rich and strong soon,” carries little conviction.

The surface narrative of *Sinking* maps out the career of an individual whose damaging experience of life leads him to a state of nihilism where sexual depravity provides a temporary escape from the meaninglessness of contemporary reality. At a deeper level, however, the descent into nihilism can be read as an allegory of contemporary anxieties about society, modernity and the political prospects of the whole Chinese nation. The fact that Nietzsche was widely translated and discussed in China in the early twentieth century clearly exerted a powerful influence upon Yu,⁷³ but his response differed markedly from that of most writers. Where others such as Li Shicen were content to simply manipulate elements

⁶⁸ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 77.

⁶⁹ Da-fu, “Sinking,” 141.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 249.

⁷² Ibid., 258.

⁷³ Shu-mei, *The Lure of the Modern*, 58–59.

of Nietzschean philosophy as tools of reform and change, Yu embraced nihilism both as a consequence of social collapse and a tool of political criticism.⁷⁴ Yu's protagonist, beset by impotence and inaction, can be understood, in fact, as a Chinese embodiment of the German philosopher.

Akutagawa's *Rashōmon*

A major theme of *Sinking* is Japan's growing dominance over China as well as its emergence on the global political stage, which was equally problematic for Japanese intellectuals. The country's abrupt transformation after the Meiji reforms of 1868, from feudalist state to the only superpower in Asia, bolstered by military victories over China in 1894 and Russia 1904,⁷⁵ brought with it a radical re-evaluation of the issue of national identity.⁷⁶ The birth of a new "political consciousness"⁷⁷ at a popular level gave rise to new political and cultural movements. Westernization and nationalization became the subjects of heated debate. Did modernity mean to simply imitate Western nations, or could it go hand in hand with the retention of traditional Japanese values? It was a dilemma faced at both individual and national levels. Should Japan be regarded as an ally of Western powers, or invest in East Asian political alliances?⁷⁸ Between 1901 and 1914, the year when Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's *Rashōmon* was published, a number of socialist and radical political

⁷⁴ In *Life's Philosophy* [人生哲學] first published in 1926, the Chinese philosopher and writer Li Shicen sees Nietzsche as a great admirer of the life of art and considers art as a way to survive and acquire immortal life. See Li Shicen, "Similarities and Differences in Responses to the Problems of Life in East and West Philosophy," [東西哲學對於人生問題解答之異同] in *Rensheng zhexue* (Taipei: The Horizon Publishing Company, 1972): 100–470.

⁷⁵ For more details about the course of Japanese modern history, see Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁷⁷ Akira Iriye, "Japan's Drive to Great Power Status" in Marius B. Jansen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 5* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 1989), 730.

⁷⁸ Shikano Masanao, *Kindai Nihon shisō annai* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1999), 84.

movements emerged.⁷⁹ In particular, issues of national identity (as constructed by the government) and its imbrication on individual identities left few untouched.⁸⁰

Akutagawa was no exception. Through the careful selection of old Japanese tales reinterpreted in the light of contemporary imperatives, he exposed some of the contradictions of Japan's modern plight. An "exemplary Taisho intellectual"⁸¹ who "distance[d] the world of his fiction from that of his own experience,"⁸² Akutagawa's *Rashōmon*, set in the Kyoto of the twelfth century, was a perfect vehicle for the expression of his nihilistic attitude towards the Japan of the present. The story originally derived from two one-page passages in *Tales of Times Now Past*⁸³ (or *Konjaku Monogatari*) written during the early half of the twelfth century but Akutagawa elaborated the narratives by providing a more detailed background setting, greater focus on the mental states of the hero and by changing the status of the male protagonist from thief to servant.

These are significant modifications. Akutagawa's *Rashōmon* depicts a society in collapse, torn by wars and plagued by natural disasters.⁸⁴ It is this shattered world – a world that goes unmentioned in the original – that forms the background to the servant's moral dilemmas. The

⁷⁹ Peter Duus and Irwin Scheiner provide a detailed account of socialist and radical movements from 1901 to 1931 in "Socialism, Liberalism, and Marxism, 1901–1931" in *The Cambridge History of Japan, Volume 6* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press: 1989).

⁸⁰ See Carol Gluck, "The Late Meiji Period" in *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985). Gluck examines the construction of the new nation through the promulgation of the constitution and establishing a national religion. In *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan*, Takashi Fujitani (1998) explains how monarchy was created in Japan by inventing new rituals and ceremonies.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸³ The English translation I use here is from Marian Ury's *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection* published in 1979 by University of California Press.

⁸⁴ Akutagawa Ryunosuke, "Rashōmon," in Rubin Jay, trans., *Rashōmon and Seventeen Other Stories* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), 3.

original *Konjaku Monogatari* episode simply introduces the protagonist in the following terms: “At a time now past, there was a man who had come to the capital from the direction of Settsu Province to steal.”⁸⁵ Akutakawa’s allusions to social and political disarray, however, provide a rationale for his own protagonist’s sense of incapacitating confusion: “his thoughts wandered the same path again and again, always arriving at the same destination.”⁸⁶ The circularity of the servant’s thoughts – his conviction that he is destined to “become a thief”⁸⁷ – echoes the classic Freudian topos of the struggle between the libido and the super-ego. More significantly, for our purposes, however, it evokes the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return, in particular the ultimate submission to conventional codes of morality – what Nietzsche called the “herd instinct.”⁸⁸ A product of the deeply entrenched hierarchical system of the Heian period, the servant has been indoctrinated to obey his lord and to conduct himself within the limits of his station. The collapse of the system and the consequent dissolution of the traditional mechanics of society presents him with a conflict: he must either starve to death or release himself from the herd and give free rein to his instinct for survival.⁸⁹

Read in Jamesonian terms, the dilemma of the servant in *Rashōmon* can be seen as an allegory of the crisis faced by Japan herself in the early twentieth century: to abide by traditional indigenous codes of morality or to modernize in line with European models. It is the same conflict mapped out so poignantly by Yu in *Sinking* – the willingness to sacrifice indigenous culture for the sake of a politically stronger China. Superficially similar, the crises faced by the two neighbouring countries were ultimately different however. For Japan, the speedy transformation of the nation from a third world nation in 1868 to a first world nation in 1904 and its technological successes may have propelled it onto the world stage,⁹⁰ but intellectually and culturally the nation struggled with its new identity. Akutagawa’s *Rashōmon*, illustrating the moral dilemma of the servant – to abandon outmoded codes of conduct and become a thief or to

⁸⁵ Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 182.

⁸⁶ Akutagawa, “Rashōmon,” 4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁸ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 102.

⁸⁹ Akutagawa, “Rashōmon,” 5.

⁹⁰ Jameson, *Third-World Literature*.

die – neatly encapsulated the conflict faced by Japan as a nation and its people. Nietzschean patterns of thought evident in the narrative were not imitative of Western literary styles, they were part of the intellectual tools with which Japanese intellectuals sought to understand and articulate the crisis of modernity.⁹¹ Particularly, Akutagawa's reinterpretation of an old story in terms of Western notions of psychological motivation gave birth to a new Japanese literary style which embodied, in its merging of old and new, native and foreign, the dilemma of a nation.

At the same time, however, *Rashōmon* also illustrates the Nietzschean process of the deconstruction of good and evil. In the original account, upon seeing the old woman plucking the corpse's hair, the thief addresses a few words to her, then "stripped the corpse and the old woman of the clothes they wore and stole the hair. He ran to the ground and made his getaway."⁹² Akutagawa elaborates the psychological state of both the old woman and the servant/thief significantly. Catching sight of the woman plucking at the corpse from his vantage point on Rashōmon gate, the servant initially feels revulsion for the old woman.⁹³ His sudden awareness that her life in fact lies immediately within his control leads to a surge of "pride and satisfaction,"⁹⁴ mixed with a certain pity. But when her response to his question is so "ordinary" he feels "disappointed" – disappointed, that is, in her bestial acceptance of the way things are – and his own internal conflict between "starving to death or becoming a thief" disappears.⁹⁵ He strips her of her robe, gives her a kick, and runs away. The account of the servant's rationalisation of the situation has strong Nietzschean echoes.

In the first place, the servant is held hostage to conventional moral principle – he is clear that his impulse to become a thief is wrong, that the old woman's deed, moreover, is "an unpardonable evil"⁹⁶ But his clear moral judgement becomes blurred when the sudden awareness of his ability to control his own life comes to dominate his whole mind: he experiences the shift from impotence – a jobless man on the brink of starvation - to the

⁹¹ Keene, "Akutagawa Ryūnosuke," 559.

⁹² Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 183.

⁹³ Akutagawa, "Rashōmon," 6.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

sense of superiority of the “free-doer”⁹⁷ intent on his own “gratification.”⁹⁸ Akutagawa’s fiction may have drawn on personal experience, as Keene and Lippit have argued: it also embraced larger political issues. The transformation in the servant’s apprehension of his world clearly maps out the now familiar Nietzschean shift of morality/authority from the centre to X: this same centrifugal shift served as a powerful allegory of the political and ethical choices faced by Japan on its road to modernization. Read in these terms, the servant protagonist is the embodiment of Akutagawa’s own nihilism and his despair at the political immaturity of modern Japan.

But Akutagawa’s despair was also a product of the dissolution of conventional societal bonds. Up until the Meiji period, Japanese society had been strictly structured around status differentials – principally those of samurai, farmer and, at the bottom of the system, merchant.⁹⁹ The breakdown of this structure following the Meiji reforms and the adoption of a Western capitalist system was traumatic for many – conventional markers of identity had been swept away. Akutagawa’s servant, despised by his aristocratic masters and gradually taking responsibility for his own conducts, was an expression of the author’s anxiety towards the contemporary regime. A whole new era of politics had been ushered in following the death of Emperor Meiji in 1912.¹⁰⁰ During the 1910s there were a series of radical anarchist and communist movements, the cities saw the rise of new middle class of white-collar workers.¹⁰¹ The past no longer served as a guide to the present, traditional societal mores had been discarded, and the individual, like the servant, was left to fend for himself. It is hard not to recognise in the servant’s decision to become a thief the Nietzschean moment of modernity:

Whoever has overthrown an existing law of custom
has hitherto always first been accounted a *bad man*:
but when, as did happen, the law could not
afterwards be reinstated and this fact was accepted

⁹⁷ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 91.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁹⁹ David L. Howell, “Territoriality and Collective Identity in Tokugawa Japan,” *Daedalus* (1998), 118.

¹⁰⁰ Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 70.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

the predicate gradually changed; history treats almost exclusively of these *bad men* who subsequently became *good men*!¹⁰²

Akutagawa's originally concluded the story with: "The thief told someone what had happened, and whoever heard his story passed it on."¹⁰³ He subsequently altered it to read, "What happened to the lowly servant, no one knows."¹⁰⁴ He leaves us with the possibility, that is, that the servant's actions are not punished, and that his transgression ushers in a new regime.

Nihilism in Asia with various causes

Read in socio-political terms, as products of their historical context, Yu's *Sinking* and Akutagawa's *Rashōmon*, superficially dissimilar, become surprisingly congruent. This only underscores the point made by Said that Asian literary works cannot be understood in the absence of a proper social and historical context of production. A straightforward formalist reading will always prove inadequate to the task of interpretation.¹⁰⁵ In the case of China, intellectuals such as Yu dwelt extensively on the nation's defeat at the hands of imperial nations. Their hopes that the country would re-gather and emerge stronger faded as they were confronted with the reality of a corrupt political regime. Akutagawa was actually sent to China as a reporter in the very year that *Sinking* appeared, and was aghast at the dirt as well as the number of beggars lining the streets of Shanghai.¹⁰⁶

Even from an outsider's perspective, China was a chaotic, disordered and impoverished nation. Contemporary Chinese intellectuals were acutely aware of the need for social reform, but the path towards prosperity remained unclear. Yu's *Sinking* can be read as an expression of his despair over China's political situation. His sense of cultural inferiority, exacerbated by his time in Japan, ultimately led him to the point where he

¹⁰² Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Reader*, 91.

¹⁰³ Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 183.

¹⁰⁴ Akutagawa, "Rashōmon," 9.

¹⁰⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 2.

¹⁰⁶ Joshua A. Fogel, "Novelists, Poets, Critics and Artists," in *The Literature of Travel in the Japanese Rediscovery of China: 1862–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996): 250–275.

abandoned those codes of conduct which had informed his old world, liberating his free-will and libido.¹⁰⁷

But if Japan's military successes succeeded in demonstrating to other nations that she was on a par with other European superpowers, the Japanese themselves, beset by "the problem of self,"¹⁰⁸ were less assured of their national identity. Debate over the way forward was rife, whether to remain secluded from the other nations or be more engaged with superpowers. Naoki Sakai described it as "the imperialist superiority complex...as the strange coexistence of an uncritical identification with the West and an equally uncritical rejection of the West."¹⁰⁹ This conflict between old and new is, in fact, embodied in Akutagawa's modern psychological exploration of traditional Japanese stories – a strategy which, while in one sense was radically different from Yu's negation of Chinese traditional culture, was nonetheless, premised on the same nihilistic response to the agonizing problems of modernity. Akutagawa originally concluded his story "The thief told someone what had happened, and whoever heard his story passed it on"¹¹⁰ to "what happened to the lowly servant, no one knows"¹¹¹ is to hint at the possible escape from the law, and to leave mental space for readers to reconsider the concept of morality in case the custom vanished or was reordered.

Conclusion

The works of Yu and Akutagawa demonstrate that nihilism, conventionally understood as a Western philosophical trend, emerges wherever and whenever people experience social and political change such as civil war or regime transition. In *Sinking*, Yu firstly looked to classical Chinese culture for a solution to his troubles, but ultimately rejected the wisdom of the past and in a spirit of despair turned to venal pleasures. Beset

¹⁰⁷ A number of Japanese literary works were translated into Chinese at this period, illustrating the contemporary importance of Japan in the Chinese mind. See Thornber, "Collaborating, Acquiescing, Resisting," 99–117.

¹⁰⁸ David Pollack, *Reading against Culture: Ideology and Narrative in Japanese Novel* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 40.

¹⁰⁹ Naoki Sakai, "Subject and/or Shutai and the Inscription of Cultural Difference," in *Translation and Subjectivity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 117–152.

¹¹⁰ Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, 183.

¹¹¹ Akutagawa, "Rashōmon," 9.

by guilt, the vicious cycle of suffering then began again, in line with Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence. Akutagawa, for his part, expressed the moral dilemma faced by both Japan and the Japanese as the nation emerged from its "sense of isolation, insecurity and lack of direction"¹¹² to become the only "non-white"¹¹³ power to emerge as an international player. Despite their dissimilarities, both works ultimately describe the rejection of traditional values and the attempt to reconstruct new values fit for a new world. It is this process of rejection and reconstruction that characterises much of the literary production of the 1910s and 1920s, as intellectuals embraced nihilism as a response to changes in their respective social and political systems.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Iriye, "Japan's Drive to Great-Power Status," 778.