

# LITERATURE, HISTORY, AND NARRATIVE: A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF YAN GELING'S "CELESTIAL BATH"

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594

Once again I wave at Beijing,  
I want to grab her collar  
And shout out loud;  
"Remember me forever, Mama Beijing!"

At last, I have grasped something.  
Who cares whose hand it is—I won't let it go!  
For this is my Beijing,  
This is my last Beijing.  
—Shi Zhi, "This Is Beijing at Four-o-eight,"  
written on Dec 20, 1968

The relationship between history and literature has long been a key element in literary studies: Marxism, old historicism, and new historicism all relate text to context, and comparative literature as a discipline has stressed literary history and textual analysis. Since the 1960s, there has been an increased emphasis on the role of history in the study of literature and culture. Beginning in the 1980s, new historicism has made significant contributions to comparative and world literature, history, and culture. This article discusses Yan Geling's short story "Celestial Bath" by combining text and context and taking a historical approach to textual analysis; the discussion takes Aristotle into account, and also follows Fredric Jameson's advice to read history through the text and narratives. I have chosen Yan Geling as the subject of this study because she is an overseas Chinese writer who, by definition, lives in a comparative or double context.

The disciplines of history and literature are different in terms of methodology, but what they have in common is that both deal with types of narratives. In *The Writing of History*, Michel de Certeau asserts, "What we initially call history is nothing more

than a narrative” (287), and Fredric Jameson has made a similar observation:

[H]istory—Althusser’s “absent cause,” Lacan’s “Real”—is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form.... (82; emphasis in original)

Both agree that what one reads in historical books is in fact a kind of narrative, and not necessarily what indeed happens in the past; furthermore, they agree that no one, except for witnesses to the event, has access to history without textualized narratives.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle provides the classic outline of the disparity between literature and history. Aristotle contends that poetry, the earliest form of literature, which can be expanded to include all literary productions, is more universal and more general than things as they are because “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity” (32). Aristotle declares that the historian, not the poet, writes about what has already happened, whereas the poet’s task is to write about what *could* happen. For Aristotle, poetry is a more philosophical type of writing and a higher form of writing than history, because “poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular” (33).

595

One point of Aristotle’s perspective on history may require some clarification. For Aristotle, historical writing deals with that which has happened. This seems to suggest that historical writing is objective as it describes events in the world. According to the poststructuralist perspective of historiography, however, historical writing may not necessarily be as objective as it should be or is supposed to be. In the preface to *The Content of the Form*, Hayden White points out the differences between narrative discourse and historical representation:

narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or may not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications. (ix)

What White emphasizes here is that all narratives are merely a kind of discourse, and that all discourses must contain a kind of ideology. This point of view is certainly true in the case of a writer’s creation of fictional worlds. In the creation of a fictional world, the author may draw upon the actual world by borrowing facts or anchoring the fictional story in a historical event or series of events. However, the author’s description, representation, and narration of those facts may not be entirely objective, but may be tinged with the colour of the writer’s judgement or ideological prejudice.

Different scholars have different answers to the questions of whether literature can be used as historical source material, or whether historical or literary narratives are closer to reality. For example, in *The Pursuit of History*, John Tosh notes that novels and other literary works cannot be treated as factual reports. Even historical novels and historical plays do not carry any authority as historical statements about the periods to which they refer; however, all creative literature “offers insights into the

social and intellectual milieu in which the writer lived, and often vivid descriptions of the physical setting as well” (67-68).

Chinese literary scholars have said of the paradox of literature and history that except for names, everything in history is faked; whereas in literature, all is true except names. According to Taiwanese critic Peng Ruijin, “when history lands itself in a predicament, literature can assume the role of navigator to bring it back to port” (6); he further points out that it “was actually an elegant paradox” (4) that literature shoulders the responsibility for historical knowledge and its sources. In fact, literature cannot do for history what history cannot do for itself, and cannot take the place of history, but rather “looks at history from an alternative perspective, finding solutions to problems from this different point of view” (Peng 6).

596 The use of history in literature as a means of expression or a compromise is particularly common in environments of ideological repression, especially when specific historical factors are in operation. It is in this sense that we say that literary productions can be seen as footnotes to history. Salman Rushdie, the controversial British-Indian writer, expresses a similar point of view, with a plain but rather firm tone, in his monumental essay, “Imaginary Homelands”: “I must say first of all that description is itself a political act. [...] And the novel is one way of denying the official, politicians’ version of truth” (430). His assertion is equally applicable to all overseas writers, whether British-Indian, like himself, or Chinese-American, like Yan Geling and Ha Jin.

In essence, we can say that history contains more facts, while literature reveals more truth. To some extent, literary texts, or serious literature, have filled in the gaps left by dominant official narratives, and overcome the weaknesses or limits of personal memoirs that result from negotiations and compromises of ideological controls. In this sense, it is feasible to approach history through literary works, such as Yan’s “Celestial Bath.”

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Yan Geling’s “Celestial Bath” is set in the grasslands of the Tibetan pastoral countryside in the mid-1970s, during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution. At this time, many young people born in the cities who had “gone up to the mountain and down to the countryside,” known as rusticated youth, were making their way back to the cities. Yan’s story narrates the short, tragic life of Wen Xiu (nicknamed Xiu Xiu), a teenage girl who was labelled as a rusticated youth. It inspired Joan Chen, a Chinese actress best known for her performance in the film *The Last Emperor*, to direct and produce *Xiu Xiu: The Sent-Down Girl* in 1988. Though it was officially banned in mainland China due to its political and sexual content, Chen’s film has won many prizes, including the Special Jury Award at the 1999 Paris Film Festival, Best Dramatic Feature at the 1998 Fort Lauderdale Film Festival, seven Golden Horse

Awards in Taiwan, and a nomination for a Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival in 1998.

In both Yan's story and Chen's film, the suffering and misfortune of the teenage Wen Xiu during this chaotic historical period haunts readers and viewers. Though Wen Xiu's tragedy was the direct result of government policies, what aggravated her situation and ultimately led to her death was the people around her. For reasons of space, this essay focuses mainly on the protagonist's degeneration and fall from innocence, from the perspective of her changes in setting; however, it also explores the story's political and ideological interpellations.

## “TO THE COUNTRYSIDE! TO THE FRONTIER!”: POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PITFALLS

Starting in the 1950s, in order to solve the problem of employment and decrease the pressure of urbanization in China, some youth from urban areas were moved into rural areas, especially the remote frontier provinces, to establish farms. On December 3, 1953, the *People's Daily* published the editorial “Organize Higher Primary School Graduates to Participate in Agricultural Production,” intended to affirm and promote the model of the State organizing and sending urban educated youth to labour in rural areas. In December 1955, Mao Zedong, the Chairman, asserted that “the countryside is a vast world where much can be accomplished” (translation mine), which became the slogan for the later “Down to the Countryside” Movement.

597

On December 22, 1968, during the height of the Red Guards movement, the *People's Daily* published another editorial that directly quoted Mao's highest order: “It is *very necessary* for the educated youths to go to the countryside to be re-educated by the poor and lower-middle peasants” (emphasis mine). From then on, the countrywide movement followed. Millions of urban youth, consisting mainly of secondary school graduates, were mobilized and sent “up to the mountains and down to the villages.” Until the policy ended in 1979, approximately 18,000,000 urban youths were sent down to the various corners of the countryside and remote frontier areas.

Impressed by the pictures of success and victory, and filled with pride and enthusiasm, most young people departed for their destinations without fully realizing the extent of the hardships that would await them. After the excitingly deafening ceremonies of gongs and drums seeing them off and welcoming them in, the first and most important thing they needed was to feed themselves, which was not always easy even for the locals. In order to survive, some young women married local peasants and remained for the rest of their lives in the rural area. By the time they were allowed to return to their city homes, their dreams and passions had been completely worn down. What was worse, once they had returned to the cities, they discovered that their social status had declined and they were not welcomed as they had expected, either at home or in the job market, for various practical reasons. They became alien-

ated in the cities in which they were born and had grown up.

Some “educated youths,” aiming to improve the backward conditions of the rural areas, volunteered to go to the countryside out of lofty sentiments and heroic aspiration. However, it is undeniable that many of those who were sent down had no choice. According to one of these rusticated youths: “though nobody stood behind you with a gun and you yourself voluntarily signed up, withdrew your city household register and jumped on the truck delivering students to the countryside, it is a fact that you have no choice, which nobody dared to admit openly” (Tang sec. 1).

Many of the rusticated youths, especially those who were sent down after the “supreme instruction” in December 1968, used to be Red Guards who participated in the Cultural Revolution at school and were pioneers in activities such as “Breaking the Four Olds.” Mao reviewed the Red Guards gathering in Beijing eleven times in 1968 before he decided to launch the nationwide “Down to the Countryside” campaign. As it happened, the Red Guards were like chess pieces in a board game.

**598** Addressed as “revolutionary generals,” the Red Guards rose up at the beck and call of Chairman Mao, but lost favour when they became seen as challenges and potential threats to the social order. Hence, sending them down was seen as a means of caging a fierce tiger in the wild, of transferring potential troublemakers to a less dangerous place. Though the official view holds that the movement was simply a continuation of the collectivization program that had begun in the early 1950s that had nothing to do with Cultural Revolution policies, the rustication campaign was understood as a government measure to silence radical voices (Vittinghoff 287).

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser proposes the concept of Ideological State Apparatus (ISAs), in contrast to the Repressive State Apparatus, which refers to a series of institutions that function invisibly, “by ideology.” He asserts that individuals are *always already* subjects of ideologies, and that ideologies interpellate concrete individuals as concrete subjects (172-73). As a result, “the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right ‘all by themselves’, i.e. by ideology” (181). As Althusser points out, institutions such as the school, the army, and the family play important roles in the “reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology” (132). In the case of mainland China, various levels of Party committees also perform the tasks of ideological education. For the “Down to the Countryside” project, schools, residents’ committees, and Party committees of working units of parents formed an alliance to persuade middle school graduates, and even those students who had not yet graduated, to leave their homes in the cities. After being constantly bombarded with slogans such as “Go to the countryside! Go to the frontier! Go wherever we are needed!” it was difficult for young people to remain indifferent to this official pressure. Many would have gladly answered the call to go to the countryside, the frontiers, wherever they were needed. Yet, as mentioned above, in the end they had no choice. Universities were closed; factories were not hiring new employees; even supplies, which were based on the manning quota, were not enough. One could not help but ponder the words of Chairman Mao, “We too have two hands.

We should not idle about in the city!” (*People’s Daily*, 22 Dec. 1968) and conclude that they could do something to feed themselves: taking a risk might be a way out of poverty and uncertainty. Young people were most likely to dream of the possibilities, then discuss their concerns with classmates in the same situation, and they would excitedly, though apprehensively, enter their names. The day would come when they were presented with a red paper flower, under the watchful and admiring eyes of everyone, and departed for their destination.

This sequence of events demonstrates the process of interpellation, accepting recognition, and taking action. However, few people, including those who volunteered and those who were coerced, realized the truth of the “Unique, Absolute Subject” behind the manipulation of the process. When Chairman Mao was mythologized as a saint who delivered the Chinese people from the abyss of suffering, nobody would doubt his purpose; they believed that the Great Leader was leading them toward another victory. Only later did people realize that they had been cheated, and that a whole generation had been lost in the muddle of the countryside. When the universities were reopened, only a fortunate few managed to leave the agricultural life and successfully return to the cities, while many other rusticated youths could only find low-paying jobs, competing with people who were ten or more years younger than themselves.

599

Wang Anyi, a Shanghai-based writer of the generation of the rusticated youths, insisted on going to the countryside, despite the efforts of her mother, a well-known writer, to dissuade her. She said when discussing her past in an interview: “At that time, we elementary school students were very enthusiastic about the Cultural Revolution. We wanted to do something, but we were not allowed. I particularly admired those older ones who could participate in the Red Guard Movement and go to other cities to join the ‘Mass Exchange of Revolutionary Experiences’” (Leung 180). In her adolescent mind, she believed that if she could not go, she would have no future. Yet, from the first day she arrived, she regretted her decision deeply and began to doubt whether she could transform the countryside.

Today, more than four decades later, former rusticated youths who have stood out among their fellows still gather occasionally to recall their rural past, and some have even revisited the places in which they once laboured. While many writers owed a great deal to their rural experience in the Rustication Movement, Wang Anyi negated her experience by saying that if that was the way to become a writer, she would rather not be one (Leung 177). Yet, the point of regret seems inexplicable: what had happened has happened, and nobody can hold back the wheels of time and history.

## FROM CHENGDU (THE CITY) TO KANGXI STEPPE (THE COUNTRYSIDE): THE DEGENERATION OF THE SENT-DOWN

Shi Zhi’s poem, “This Is Beijing at Four-o-eight,” was widely read among rusticated

youths in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The poem is a vivid description of the grand and moving scene of thousands of urban youths waving farewell to their parents. The long and sharp whistle of the moving train, like a needle, pricked through the softest part of their hearts. The trembling earth under the tall buildings of the station coincided with their apprehensions. Gripped by pain and desperation, they tried to grasp onto something that they themselves did not know. Subconsciously, they may have realized that from that moment on, they would be floating helplessly and aimlessly, like a kite without a string, and they may have wished to be like a kite with the end of the cord still held firmly in their mothers' hands.

For many of them, Beijing was indeed their "last Beijing." Once they left, they would never again be able to set foot there. Though they considered Beijing, the place where they were born and grew up, as dear as their mothers, and desperately and passionately called, "Remember me forever, Mama Beijing!" the city would not show any mercy, and it would not belong to them any longer. As Ha Jin states, nostalgia is "merely the exiled individual's one-sided wish" (72). Beijing would haunt them in their dreams, and they would long to return one day, but compared to a city, an individual is trivial: from the perspective of Beijing as a city, the rusticated youths were forgotten and considered a loss. Moreover, the rusticated youths left as a group on a grand scale, but those who returned to the cities returned as individuals. Some of them died on their way back, missing the opportunity to return to their city forever. The female protagonist of Yan Geling's story, Wen Xiu, is an example of the latter, in her pain over leaving, and her desperation to return to, Chengdu. She is an embodiment of the many rusticated youths who longed to return to their homes but lost their lives in the process.

As her name suggests, Wen Xiu is an ordinary but pretty urban girl born in Chengdu, the capital city of Sichuan Province. At home, she was the apple of her parents' eyes; once she left Chengdu, however, all the comforts of her home and family were gone. The red seal stamped on her hand, like a pool of blood, became a symbol of her destiny, to be removed from her familiar urban environment in favour of the hardships she would face in the countryside. From then on, the title of rusticated youth would become her permanent identity.

The question that must be asked here is whether the rustication program did alter the urban youths who underwent the process. In this regard, we may draw an analogy to Yang Jiang's novel *Baptism*, which describes how intellectuals faced the first wave of ideological reforms following the establishment of the PRC, the "Three-Anti Campaign" of 1951. As the title of Yang's novel indicates, the "baptism" was intended to remove "self-deceptions, ambitions, complacencies, resentments, and dreams" (Amory x) and "wash off the filth of the old Regime so they could be reborn" (Amory xi), but in the end, it washed away very little. In her novel, Yang ponders the point of being "baptized" and doubts the efficacy of the program. Though the characters of *Baptism* and Wen Xiu live in different times, they share common elements. The initial purpose of the "Down to the Countryside" movement was to re-educate the

rusticated youth by making them live like the local people, but in practice, many of them, unlike a phoenix experiencing a baptism by fire, failed to acclimate to their new surroundings.

After being sent down, Wen Xiu continues her habit of regular baths, a symbol of the civilized life she left behind. Her baths relate not only to her feelings of being physically and spiritually clean, but also to the complicated affections Lao Jin has for her. Lao Jin's providing her with the opportunity for a bath on the steppe at which sanitary conditions were of low priority, and Wen Xiu's final bath in the snow water after her death, form the climax of the story and, thus, the origin of its title.

On their first night in the tent, after Lao Jin went to bed, Wen Xiu hesitated and cautiously began her routine work:

[S]he ladled out a basin of water and put it at the foot of her straw bedroll and blew out the lamp. Just as she had stripped off her panties, she heard the rustling sound of Lao Jin's straw bedroll stirring.

As she squatted, straddling the basin of water, carefully dipping the towel in the water so as not to make a sound, Lao Jin had become deathly quiet. She felt as if Lao Jin's ear hairs were standing on end.

"Bathing?" Lao Jin had finally said in an intimate tone.

She had paid no attention to him but splashed temperamentally with her hands, making the water sound like a flock of ducks landing on a pond.

Lao Jin then took the initiative to break the embarrassing silence, saying, "Heh, heh! You Chengdu girls just can't get along without bathing."

It was from that time that her hatred for Lao Jin had begun.... (70)

The great circumspection she displayed on the first night, and her extreme, but understandable, reaction to Lao Jin's good-natured words create a sharp contrast to her behaviour later on, after she has become a whore, open to all kinds of men except for Lao Jin.

From her position in the boundless grassland far away from the power centre at the headquarters of the Livestock Bureau, Wen Xiu is unaware of what goes on outside her tent. At the end of the Cultural Revolution, many rusticated youth with influence at home were attempting to return to the cities; Wen Xiu is informed of this by a demon disguised as a peddler, who has seen through the mentality of the young girl before him. Knowing that she must want to return, he hints that he can establish a "good connection" for her to the Livestock Bureau. As a young girl of sixteen or seventeen years old, she fails to recognize his temptations and falls into the trap he has set for her.

After the peddler leaves, Wen Xiu receives, not good news from the Livestock Bureau as she expected, but male visitors of various backgrounds who assure her that they have connections in the Livestock Bureau and can help her return to the city, until she becomes pregnant and is brought to the clinic. After each love affair with each of her male visitors, she bathes herself in the water Lao Jin has brought her from the brook ten kilometres away, but she no longer seems to display shame or embarrassment. Perhaps, in her mind, bathing is her way of restoring her origi-

nal cleanliness, like her response of touching herself after being touched by other men. She particularly displays shamelessness when her frequent visitor, an important figure in the Livestock Bureau, takes her to confront Lao Jin:

“What are you, a yak? Don’t you understand people-talk?!” Wen Xiu huffed as she squatted down on the ground in front of him, the bottom of the overcoat parting, revealing both that which may be exposed and that which may not be. It was as if in front of livestock there was nothing to be ashamed of, as if human modesty were superfluous. (79)

Prior to this moment, she has degenerated from an angelic young girl to an ugly shameless prostitute. She is similar in this respect to the female protagonist of Lao She’s *Crescent Moon*, who had to engage in prostitution for the sole reason of survival. Only when she stared at the crescent moon in the sky could she think of her parents far away and sigh at her miserable life.

602 Wen Xiu’s decline invites readers to think about the factors that led to her fall. The mass rustication movement must bear some of the responsibility, but so do the desires of those around her, from the men who take advantage of her to the doctors and nurses who show little sympathy toward her. In their eyes, Wen Xiu was obviously a degenerate woman who deserved all the criticism they gave her. They do not ask who or what is responsible for what has become of her, and blame the innocent girl for her downfall.

The dramatic change in Wen Xiu’s character can also be viewed through the eyes of Lao Jin. It is not entirely clear why Lao Jin chooses Wen Xiu amongst hundreds of fellow rusticated youth. In his eyes, she is like a child, and he is like an elder brother or even a father; perhaps he found her petty and childish behaviour entertaining. When Wen Xiu complained of feeling an itch, Lao Jin builds her an open bathtub on the summit of the slope. When she wants to look at her image in the broken mirror, he raises and lowers it according to her unspoken wish. When she asked for water after her being violated, he would ride twenty kilometres away to find it. He regards Wen Xiu as a newborn lamb needing his care and protection; this metaphor signals Wen Xiu’s vulnerable position as well as her fate as a sacrificial victim.

The Chinese words “天浴” (tiān yù ‘celestial bath’) and “天欲” (tiān yù ‘natural desire’) are pronounced the same way. However, in this case, the bath under the heavens is a beautiful thing while natural desires lead to ruin; were it not for men’s desires, Wen Xiu might have enjoyed more pleasure from her baths. Her situation and those of other rusticated youths bring to mind the Chinese proverb that people will decline after leaving their hometown; these young people were abandoned and doomed to live like orphans without the love and care of their families.

Wen Xiu’s attempts to return to her home ultimately cost her life. She had believed that resorting to prostitution was her only means of paying her way back to Chengdu, and she even began to justify her decision as follows: “Think of it, a girl with no money and no connections, isn’t this the only asset she’s got left” (78). Her tragedy, which was common among women who were involved in the rustification movement,

should inspire readers to consider who should be blamed, and take responsibility, for the fall of women like Wen Xiu.

## A TRAUMA FOREVER: A COUNTER-NARRATIVE OF “NO-REGRET YOUTH”

Yan Geling summarizes Wen Xiu’s tragedy through the inner monologue of the boy who once secretly loved her: “Wen Xiu’s life is very short, but in my mind, in the story I wrote on her behalf, her life is very long, at least as long as mine” (187). For the generation that followed the rustification movement, the deaths of young women like Wen Xiu faded quickly from public memory; yet, to the families left behind, those deaths were traumatic events that can never be touched nor cured.

Even over forty years afterward, the topic of the rusticated youth/Red Guards remains a particularly sensitive one, and any publication related to the subject must be approved and reported to the Press and Publications Administration for concerns that “people will be mobilized” (Du 3, qtd. in Sausmikat 262) if the downsides of the movement are discussed and especially if any responsibility is ascribed to the CCP. The official ban on discussion of the Red Guards’ role in the Cultural Revolution has also prevented a proper assessment of the rustification movement. Even so, various groups in Chinese society have responded to the high interest in the subject of *zhiqing* (“educated youth”) in the 1990s, and this interest has produced two very different images of rusticated youth. On the one hand, the term “Red Guards” is used to “stigmatize them as victimizers and hooligans, while the label *laosanjie* (graduates of 1966, 1967, and 1968) portrays them as loyal and patriotic contributors to the country’s modernization” (Sausmikat 261). Consequently, an artificial distinction was made between the role of the “educated youth” before 1968, when they were considered as “rustication heroes,” and after 1968, when they became part of the exiled Red Guards.

Along with the publication of the *Reports of the Stormy Times in Beidahuang* (1990), reflections on the rustication movement became national concerns. The twentieth anniversary of the movement saw many exhibitions in cities such as Guangzhou, Chengdu, and Nanjing; the exhibition “Souls Are Attached to the Black Land” attracted many visitors and much discussion. The exhibition of Chengdu, ironically and coincidentally the birthplace of Wen Xiu, was titled “The Youth Have No Regrets”; this slogan gradually became dominant in the public media and represented official discourse about rusticated youth. A former rusticated youth commented on the transformation of the official discourse on the movement as follows:

I know, human beings have developed, through evolution or by instinct, a kind of psychological mechanism that would automatically conceal its traumatic experience, covering up the bleeding wound. In order to affirm and identify with oneself psychologically, one has a tendency to seek positive factors from a totally negative experience. This

is certainly beneficial for one's survival in the long term. On the contrary, those who tend to get to the root of the matters are more likely to collapse and become insane. Human beings are more or less like Ah Q, who cannot face oneself honestly, nor is it necessary to do so. And therefore, the announcement of "No-Regret Youth" has its significance of existence. If I could, I would rather accept the public proclamation. Lu Xun writes, "The real warrior has the courage to face directly the gloomy life, looking squarely at the bleeding wounds." I am not that courageous. What qualification do I have to talk freely about "facing directly" and "looking squarely" at the bleeding past? (Wu sec. 2)

Yan Geling's "Celestial Bath" was written in 1994, during a wave of nostalgia mixed with idealistic views of loyalty and heroism; whether this was a coincidence or intentional is uncertain. Taking into account that individual traumatic memory easily fades from the public imagination and historical discourse is likely to be distorted by official narratives, my interpretation is that Yan Geling was making a conscious effort to write against unreliable memory and enforced historical ideology. Underneath all the praise of youth without regrets, we must remember the loss of young female lives unknown to the public.

604

"Celestial Bath" is a text we can read historically. It provides us with insights into double or comparative contexts, and is an example of the kind of fiction that lends itself well to comparative and world literature. Reading the relationships among literature, history, and narrative according to theories such as those of Aristotle, Jameson, and White help us discover the tragedy of Yan's female protagonist and the political interpellation present in her story. The tragic circumstances Yan describes are a product not simply of history and politics, but also of human behaviour. As a counter-narrative to official historical discourse, Yan's text helps us to read history not merely as history, but as the tragic consequences of politics and human behaviour. The text has wider implications not simply for the literature of overseas Chinese, and of Chinese literature, but also of comparative and world literature.

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