

From the Province to the Metropolis: Exotic Hu'nan in the Writings of Shen Congwen and Xiang Kairan

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Z provincie do metropoly: exotický Hu'nan v diele Shen Congwena a Xiang Kairana

Resumé Autor analyzuje a porovnáva dvoch spisovateľov, Shen Congwena a Xiang Kairana, a ich vybrané diela. Shen, zástanca 'čistej literatúry' a Xiang, plodný a populárny autor románov o potulných bojovníkoch, reprezentujú protikladné typy autorov. Okrem toho, že obidvaja pochádzajú z čínskej provincie Hu'nan, možno v ich diele vystopovať viaceré podobnosti. Dva zo Xiangových románov (Neoficiálne dejiny čínskych študentov v Japonsku a Príbehy o zvláštnych udalostiach od riek a jazier) a jeho čiastočne fiktívne dielo Náhodné zápisky o poľovníkoch autor analyzuje v kontexte viacerých poviedok, noviel a esejí Shena, v ktorých sa venuje témam súvisiacim s Hu'nanom. Autor štúdie argumentuje, že tradičnou literárnou históriou vytýčené hranice medzi na jednej strane populárnou literatúrou (tú v príspevku reprezentuje Xiang Kairan) a 'čistou literatúrou' (zastúpenou Shen Congwenom) na strane druhej, treba prehodnotiť a hranicu medzi nimi treba vnímať ako premenlivú a priepustnú. Prekročenie konvenčných a sterilných dichotómií nám umožní pozrieť sa z novej perspektívy na vývoj modernej čínskej literatúry v 1. polovici 20. storočia.

Keywords China · Literature (20th c.) · Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902–1988) · Xiang Kairan 向凱然 (1889–1957) · Regional Literature, Hu'nan Province

1 *Comparing Two Incomparable Writers*

The two writers and their works to be discussed in this paper on first view seem to have nothing in common except the fact that both of them were born and grew up in Hu'nan province. One of them, Shen Congwen, has by now been

admitted to the pantheon of Modern Chinese literature. He is regarded and also painted an image of himself as a strict and consistent proponent of ‘pure literature’, who claimed not to be interested in commercial considerations. The other one, Xiang Kairan 向凱然 (pseudonym Pingjiang Buxiaosheng 平江不肖生, the ‘unworthy person from Pingjiang’), represents the opposite type. In orthodox histories of modern Chinese literature he is not mentioned. Xiang Kairan was a prolific writer of *wuxia* 武俠 or ‘knight errant’ novels; his *Jianghu qixia zhuan* 江湖奇俠傳 (Tales of the Heroes of the Rivers and Lakes)¹ was not only one of the most popular and commercially most successful novels of this genre in the Republican period, but the author also was the pioneer of the ‘new school of knight errant novels’ (*xinpai wuxia xiaoshuo* 新派武俠小說).² One episode of this novel was rewritten as screenplay for the first and immensely successful Chinese martial arts movie (*wuxiapian* 武俠片) in 1928.³ In his literary writings, Xiang Kairan catered to the tastes of a mass reading public. Thus, the contrast between the author of pure literature and the writer of what Liu Ts’un-yan has called »middle-brow literature«⁴ could hardly be more conspicuous.

To confront these writers with each other and compare their works, may therefore seem far-fetched and arbitrary. My aim in comparing some of their works is not to prove direct literary influences. Rather, I am suggesting to re-read Shen Congwen’s work in the context of more traditional and popular (*tongsu* 通俗) literary texts. From this perspective, it may be possible to show that the lines of demarcation between ‘pure literature’ and ‘popular literature’ on the one

1 Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu qixia zhuan*, 2 vols. (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, new ed. 1986). On another one of his novels, *Xiayi yingxiong zhuan* 狹義英雄傳 [Stories of Heroic Knight Errants], with a new edition published in Xi’an 1989 under the title *Shenzhou jingying chuanqi* 神州精英傳奇 [Stories of the Heroes of the Empire], see James J. Y. Liu, *The Chinese Knight Errant* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967), 134–135. On the *wuxia* novels of the Republican period in general, on the criticism of this genre as superficial and trivial, and especially on a more positive evaluation of the works of Xiang Kairan, see also Chen Pingyuan 陳平原, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng* 千古文人俠客夢 [The Eternal Knight Errant Dream of the Scholars] (Beijing: Beijing wenxue chubanshe, 1994), 63–85.

2 Chen Pingyuan, *Qianggu wenren xiake meng*, 65–66.

3 *Huosao Huangliansi* 火燒黃連寺 [Burning the Red Lotos Temple]; as many as nine sequels were shot in the late twenties. For the story see *Dianguang buanying. Shang shiji qian banye dianying gushi cunzhen* 電光幻影。上世紀前半葉電影故事存真 [Electric Shadows. Repository of the Stories of Films from the First Half of the Century] (Shanghai: Shanghai kexue jishu wenxian chubanshe, 2004), 8–10.

4 Liu Ts’un-yan, »Middlebrow“ in Perspective«, *Renditions* no 17/18 (1982), 1–40.

hand, and between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ on the other, as drawn by the ‘grand narratives’ of the history of modern Chinese literature, should be re-examined. Reading Shen Congwen’s texts against the background of the texts by his older fellow Hu’nanese dealing with regional subjects will also allow us to have a clearer vision of the development of a modern Hu’nanese regional literature in its initial phase. Of course, Shen Congwen was a writer with many facets, skilled in different genres and literary styles. He has written rural idylls, but also has tried his hands at avant-garde modes of narration as well as satirical portraits of urban intellectuals and artists. This paper, however, will primarily discuss some of his fictional texts and autobiographical essays dealing with West-Hu’nanese topics and characters.

Apart from the common origin of the two writers, there are two textual links connecting Shen Congwen with his older Hu’nanese fellow countryman: Shen Congwen himself in one of his essays praises Xiang Kairan as an important and very skillful writer. The essay I am referring to here, written in August 1945, was entitled *The Contribution of Hu’nanese to the Movement for a New Literature*.⁵ At that time, Shen Congwen’s home province Hu’nan was politically and militarily torn between different local and regional power-holders, and suffered from the destructions by war and occupation. Apparently, Shen Congwen thought that strengthening regional identity was indispensable for economic reconstruction and political unity. By constructing a specific Hu’nanese line of tradition in modern Chinese literature, his article of 1945 primarily pursues an extra-literary aim, namely to contribute to regional unity and identity. According to Shen Congwen, the Hu’nan line of tradition in modern literature starts with Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) and Xiong Xiling 熊希齡 (1870–1937), like Shen Congwen a native of Fenghuang 鳳凰, then continues through the ‘new culture movement’ up to representatives of the *Wenxue yanjiu hui* 文學研究會 (Society for Literary Research) and the *Chuangzao she* 創造社 (Creation Society), such as Tian Han 田漢 (1898–1968) and Cheng Fangwu 成仿吾 (1897–1984), as well as his contemporaries Li Jinming 黎錦明 (1905–1999), Liu Dajie 劉大傑 (1904–1977), Zhang Tianyi 張天翼 (1906–1985) and Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986).

5 »Xiangren dui yu xin wenxue yundong de gongxian« 湘人對於新文學運動的貢獻, in *Shen Congwen quanji* 沈從文全集 [Complete Works], 34 vols. (Taiyuan: Bei yue wenyi chubanshe, 2002; hereafter *SCWQJ*), 17: 159–165. For the historical background of this essay, for biographical information on Shen Congwen and especially for his ideas on regional autonomy, see Jeffrey C. Kinkley, *The Odyssey of Shen Congwen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 229–245.

Whether such a line of tradition did in fact exist is open to discussion, since at first view one hardly can detect any common Hu'ninese traits in such an assemblage of very diverse writers and characters. But this is not the question I intend to discuss here. What is surprising in this text, rather, is the fact that Shen Congwen mentions Xiang Kairan in this context—an author who in this illustrious group of serious, orthodox writers seems to be strangely out of place.

Xiang Kairan, who is omitted from the conventional narratives of modern Chinese literature, is praised by Shen Congwen as follows:

The most interesting novel of the period before May Fourth narrating events in the lives of the overseas students of the time in a very colourful manner, with clear descriptions of characters and background, is the one written by [...] Xiang Kairan from Xinhua 新化 in Hu'nan. [...] Although [his] *Liudong waishi* 留東外史 [Unofficial History of the Overseas Students in Japan⁶] is often called one of the representative works of the 'Saturday School' [...], up to the present time there is no other new work that handles this subject as broadly, as deeply and as comprehensively.⁷

The fact that Shen Congwen includes this 'unorthodox' writer in his 'orthodox' line of tradition of Hu'nan literature is especially surprising when taking into account his critical attitude towards commercialized *haipai* 海派 literature (literature of the 'Shanghai school'). His praise for Xiang Kairan may indicate a hidden link between the two writers or a literary affinity which Shen Congwen may have been aware of, which, however, he preferred not to refer to explicitly because it might have conflicted with the image of himself he endeavoured to create.

The second link connecting the two writers is to be found in the autobiographical notes of the influential editor, translator and author of popular novels Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876–1973). In his Memoirs from the Shadow-Surrounded Mansion he writes:

There is one person I have to mention here: It is Xiang Kairan. [...] He studied in Japan and wrote a novel called *Liudong waishi*. When returning home, nobody wanted to buy the manuscript, so someone bought it at a very low price, but then, it sold extremely well, and from that time on, people in Shanghai knew about him. [...] I invited him to write for my weekly *Xingqi* 星期 and he agreed to contribute a Sequel to the Unofficial History of the Overseas Students in Japan [*Liudong waishi bu* 補], and also Random Notes on Hunters [*Lieren ouji* 獵人偶記]. This text is very

6 The edition of the novel used in this article is Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Liudong waishi*, 3 vols. (Nanzhang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 1991. Zhongguo jindai xiaoshuo daxi 中國近代小說大系).

7 SCW 17: 160.

special, since he had lived in West Hu'nan where in the mountains there were many tigers, and he had close contacts with the hunters, so the works of other talented scribblers of the Bund [*yangchang caizi* 洋場才子] could not compete with him.⁸ This passage shows that Xiang Kairan had already written about regional topics in which a few years later Shen Congwen would be very interested.

2 The Career of the 'Unworthy Person from Pingjiang'

Xiang Kairan was born in 1890 in Xiangtan 湘潭 in Hu'nan province as son of a wealthy merchant family. His father wanted him to pursue the traditional career of a scholar and official. Because of the historical circumstances, however, this path was blocked. Instead, he attended a modern style school, and after having been expelled from this school in 1905, he went to study in Japan with financial support from his family.⁹ He returned from Japan in 1913 and found a job as secretary to the manager of a leather factory in Yuezhou 岳州. The factory manager was Cheng Qian 程潛 (1882–1968), who later rose to become general under the Nationalist Party and an important figure in Hu'nanese politics. From this time onward, Xiang Kairan maintained close relationships with the regional warlords. Thus, when soldiers were mobilized against Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 (1859–1916) in 1913, he participated in the campaign as 'Legal Officer of the 1st Army of the Northern Expedition'. After their defeat, however, he again had to leave for Japan where he started to write his first novel. After his second return to China in 1915, Xiang Kairan became a member of the Revolutionary Party and once again took part in the movement against Yuan Shikai. After this episode, as he himself tells in his short autobiography, »I returned to Shanghai, and since I had

8 Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyilu* 釧影樓回憶錄 [1971–73], 3 vols. (Taipei: Longwen chubanshe, 1990), 1: 383.

9 The following four sources were used for my short biographical sketch of Xiang Kairan's life: 1) Xiang Kairan, »Zizhuan« 自傳 [Autobiography], in *Jiangbu qixia zhuàn*, 1: 1–2; 2) Xiang Yixue 向一學 (Xiang Kairan's son), »Huiyi fuqin yisheng« 回憶父親一生 [Recollections of My Farther's Life], in *Jiangbu qixia zhuàn*, 2: 563–586; 3) Anon., »Pingjiang Buxiaosheng xiaozhuan« 小傳 [A Short Biography], in *Pingjiang buxiaosheng daibiaozuo* 平江不肖生代表作 [Representative Works by Pingjiang Buxiaosheng], ed. by Zhongguo xiandai wenxue guan 中國現代文學館 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 1999. Zhongguo xiandai wenxue baijia 中國現代文學百家), 322–324; 4) Cheng Yize 成儀則 (Xiang's wife): »Yi Kairan xiansheng« 憶凱然先生 [Remembering Mr Kairan], in *Jiangbu qixia zhuàn*, 2: 558–562.

nothing else to do, I started to write literature in order to make a living.¹⁰ The commercial success of his *Liudong waishi* then encouraged him to become a professional writer of fiction. It is Bao Tianxiao who gives an explanation for Xiang Kairan's turn from the writing of novels of social criticism such as *Liudong waishi* to the writing of fantastic knight errant novels, or, as Bao Tianxiao calls them, *chuanqi xiaoshuo* 傳奇小說:

Later, the boss of *Shijie shuju* 世界書局 made a contract with Xiang and paid him high royalties, however, he was not supposed to write on such subjects as in *Liudong waishi*, but he wanted him to write knight errant novels of the *chuanqi* type. We cannot but call this a good commercial eye: People in Shanghai at the time already were fed up with love stories, so they wanted to taste something different, just like people who had enough of sweet southern food and wanted to try some spicy Hu'nanese food for a change, and thus the novels of Xiang Kairan started the stream of knight errant novels in Shanghai.¹¹

In Shanghai, Xiang Kairan seems to have been a celebrity, and his lifestyle apparently was that of a typical *yangchang caizi*. As Bao Tianxiao notes, visitors were supposed to see him not earlier than 3 o'clock in the afternoon, or even better in the evening, since it was known that »Mister Xiang was an opium addict«.¹² In 1927, he took part in the Northern Expedition, and in 1932 Hu'nan governor He Jian 何健 (1887–1956) invited him to come to Changsha and establish a school for the training in martial arts there (Guoshu xunlian suo 國術訓練所). From then on, he was engaged in the promotion of traditional Chinese martial arts which he had practiced already in his childhood and youth. Furthermore, he had befriended some of the most famous fighters such as Liu Baichuan 劉百川 (1870–1964), Du Xinwu 杜心五 (1869–1953) and others. This personal experience qualified him for a leading position in the martial arts movement and also provided him with the material for his stories on the heroes of the 'rivers and lakes'.

After 1949, as a conservative and representative of the old regime, Xiang Kairan was disoriented. His descendants tell that the Chinese Writers' Association assigned him the task to study revolutionary Soviet literature and then write a novel on some peasant uprising. He proved to be unable to meet the expectations, however, and never wrote fiction again.¹³

10 Xiang Kairan, *Jiangbu qixia zhuàn*, 1: 2.

11 Bao Tianxiao, *Chuanyinglou huiyilu*, 1: 383.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Cheng Yize, »Yi Kairan xiansheng«, 561.

Thus, in Xiang Kairan's career there are some parallels to the fate of Shen Congwen: Both were descendents of the traditional local elite, and both strongly identified with their home province and region and were committed to its fate. Both were professional writers, and in addition, in many of their works, they returned to their home province and region, described the local customs and told stories and legends from their childhood and youth in Hu'nan. Finally, their fate under the new Communist regime was somewhat similar: Both were unable to adapt themselves and their writing to the new literary doctrines after 1949 and stopped writing fiction altogether.

There are, however, striking differences in their attitude towards tradition, to politics and to literature. Thus, until 1949, Xiang Kairan was closely affiliated with a number of warlords and regional power-holders of the Nationalist Party. Furthermore, he was committed to the promotion of traditional martial arts because he believed that this would strengthen national unity and regional identity. He hoped that he would thus contribute to the resistance against both western influence and against the Japanese invasion. In fact, during the Japanese occupation, he organized the students of his Martial Arts' School to participate in the Nationalist Party's military resistance activities.¹⁴ Compared to Xiang Kairan's, Shen Congwen's attitude was more prudent: He kept his distance from politics, and as far as tradition is concerned, he was a realist and harboured no illusions: Shen Congwen was aware of the fact that the old society was doomed, and it was only possible to preserve its memories in literature.

3 *Novels of Social Satire*

Xiang Kairan's first novel *Liudong waishi* was begun in 1914 and first published in 1916.¹⁵ This 'novel of exposure' (*qianze xiaoshuo* 譴責小說) in its 160 chapters tells anecdotes about the life of Chinese in Japan, concentrating on all kinds of questionable behaviour and characters: erotic adventures, visits in brothels, gambling, frauds and cheating etc. Not only in the explicit reference to its title, but also in stylistic and topical respects, the influence of such novels from Qing times as *Rulin waishi* 儒林外史 (Unofficial History of the Forest of Scholars; 1750) or *Guanchang xianxing ji* 官場現形記 (The Bureaucrats Exposed; 1903-05) is obvious. This affinity to mid- and late Qing satirical novels can also be sensed from the introductory remarks of the author in the first chapter:

14 Xiang Yixue, »Yi Kairan xiansheng«, 583.

15 »Pingjiang Buxiaosheng xiaozhuan«, 322.

At present, the number of citizens of our country [sojourning in Japan] is more than ten thousand [...] . They can be divided into four groups: The first group are those who [...] study here seriously. The second group are those who are doing business here [...]. The third group are those who are here with government money, but do not study nor are they doing business, but devote themselves to the recitation of the scriptures of the whorehouses and the reading of the menus. The fourth group are those who have come here after the failure of the second revolution and live in exile. [...] The third group shamelessly wastes the government's money, feeds their mouths from morn till night and has nothing to do, so all kinds of interesting dramas and comedies are performed by them. The fourth group, the exiles, are even more interesting: [...] Most of them brought their own funding with them, [...] every day they dress well and enjoy copious foods: Having just arrived, they don't know any Japanese, but are intent on experiencing all kinds of fresh tastes, they either have disputes about money, or they fight because they are jealous of each other. All kinds of immoral behaviour can be seen and ugly sounds can be heard time and again. [...] When writing this book, Buxiaosheng had three wishes: Firstly, he hoped that people in the future will not follow the example of the people in the books and will commit the same mistakes committed by the people in this book. Secondly, he hoped that the people described in the book will not again commit the deeds they committed in the book and thus become models for others. Thirdly, if nevertheless people in later times should follow the example of the people in the book, and the people described in the book again should commit such deeds, it is his hope that there will be another Buxiaosheng who will, for the sake of a declaration of war against these evils, sacrifice his personal integrity and write a sequel to the Unofficial History of the Chinese Students in Japan.¹⁶

Just like earlier authors of 'novels of exposure', Xiang Kairan presents himself here as a moralist, motivated by moral and political commitment. He claims that, by exposing and criticizing the moral degeneration of his countrymen, he intends to reform society and, eventually, save the country. The book was a commercial success. It is open to question, however, whether the readers were motivated by moral indignation, or whether they were just curious and enjoyed the exotic flair, the strange customs described in the novel and all the erotic affairs the protagonists were involved in. It certainly was the descriptions of the liberal attitudes of Japanese women towards sexuality and of the Japanese culture of 'water-trade' (*mizushôbai* 水商賣) that enhanced the success of the book. When reading the book, one can still sense that the author himself enjoys describing in detail all the 'immoral' wheeling and dealing of his countrymen.

16 Xiang Kairan, *Liudong waishi* 1: 1-2.

Thus the book gives the impression that the moral motives and commitment, just as in other Chinese and foreign novels, were merely a pretext legitimizing the detailed description of 'immoral behaviour'. Just in order to give an impression of the reasons why Chinese readers may have enjoyed the book, let me mention two of the countless anecdotes: One passage describes the experience of a Chinese girl with bound feet who, in order to wash herself, has to go to a Japanese bathhouse, where, of course, all women are naked. She has to undress as well, being utterly ashamed of showing her feet. The other anecdote tells of another girl from China who had come to Japan to study. As an ardent 'champion of women's rights and free love' (*shenzhang nüquan, tan lian'ai ziyou* 伸張女權·談戀愛自由), she gets into an awkward situation when she is pestered by two Chinese students and in the end sees no other way out but to return to China.¹⁷

Among the works of Shen Congwen, let me just mention two stories or novellas dealing with topics comparable to those of *Liudong waishi*. Both the novella *The Life of an Actress* (1930–31)¹⁸ and the story *Eight Steeds* (1935)¹⁹ are in a way satirical works of social criticism, describing the world of artists, actors, students in Shanghai and the university and academic life. Like Xiang Kairan, Shen Congwen was personally familiar with the worlds represented in these stories, and vanity, love and jealousy, triangular relationships and erotic adventures are central to their plots. Furthermore, in *The Life of an Actress* as in *Liudong waishi*, dialogue is the most important narrative technique. In these rather short works by Shen Congwen, in contrast to the monstrously long novel by Xiang Kairan (the modern edition has 1761 pages), the author uses subjective modes of narration in order to explore and represent the inner worlds of the protagonists. The reader is thus enabled to sympathize with the fate of the protagonists and to understand their inner conflicts. Xiang Kairan, on the other hand, uses the third person narrator and tells the stories from an external perspective. He is primarily interested in satisfying the curiosity of the readers and in denouncing immoral and corrupt behaviour. Compared to the characters in Shen Congwen's works, his characters are psychologically one-dimensional.

17 Xiang Kairan, *Liudong waishi*, 1: 40–42, and 87–92.

18 *Yi ge nüjuyuan de shenghuo* 一個女劇員的生活 (Shanghai: Dadong shudian, 1931); also in *SCW* 6: 243–370.

19 »Bajuntu« 八駿圖, in *SCW* 8: 197–225; English translation in *Imperfect Paradise: Stories by Shen Congwen*, ed. by Jeffrey C. Kinkley (Honolulu, HI: Hawaii University Press, 1995), 346–377.

4 *Hu'nanese Topics in the Works of Xiang Kairan*

Among the many semi-fictional *biji* 筆記 and fictional texts by Xiang Kairan two works are, with respect to their setting, their topics and the characters described, relevant for a discussion of the development of a regional Hu'nanese literature and therefore lend themselves best to a comparison with Shen Congwen's stories and novels »Jianghu guaiyi zhuan« 江湖怪異傳 (Tales of Strange Events from the Rivers and Lakes) and »Lieren ouji« (Random Notes on Hunters). »Jianghu guaiyi zhuan«, first published in 1923, deals with events in and around Changsha,²⁰ while *Lieren ouji* tells stories about the life of professional hunters in eastern Hu'nan.²¹ The first text is a rather short novel in twenty chapters in the style of the traditional *zhanghui xiaoshuo* 章回小說, while the second text is written in classical Chinese and belongs to the *biji* genre.

In his *Jianghu guaiyi zhuan* which is set in the Hu'nanese underworld of sects and secret societies, Xiang Kairan shows his familiarity with and knowledge of regional customs, traditions and legends. Protagonists in this novel are swordsmen with superman-like talents, thieves and swindlers, murderers, opium addicts, prostitutes, sorcerers and sect-leaders, Miao shamans and Miao jinxes, and finally a group of three young and wealthy gentlemen. Looking for a new kind of entertainment and influenced by the reading of detective novels about Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930), these three have formed an association of detectives and make it their task to investigate unsolved criminal cases. The narrative is rather complicated, but there is one central thread, a detective story. The initial situation is that of a detective novel: A scholar named Peng Lihe 彭禮和 has disappeared and is finally found dead in the provincial examination grounds. While the prefect states a case of suicide, the detectives find out that he in fact was brought to death by force. They then uncover a complicated story in which two secret sects, the Black Mountain Sect (Heishanjiao 黑山教) and the Sect of the Heavenly Masters (Zhutianjiao 諸天教) are involved, and also a protective amulet which was in the possession of Mr. Peng. Apparently he had been killed by the sorceress Heishan Guimu 黑山鬼母 (Mother Demon of the Black Mountain Sect). Spectacular battles between the heroes, the magicians and the sorceress are the climax of the narrative. In the end, however, the case finds a very different and rational explanation: All the

20 Pingjiang Buxiaosheng, *Jianghu guaiyi zhuan* (Taipei 1980; reprint of the 1923 edition).

21 Xiang Kairan, »Lieren ouji«, published serially in *Xingqi* nos 27, 28, 29, 33, 34, and 39 (Aug–Nov 1922).

stories about sorcerers, sects and swordsmen had been made up by a group of swindlers who had killed Peng Lihe, because, as their accomplice in a case of fraud, he had claimed more than his proper share.

The book has its weaknesses. The solution of the case comes as something of an anti-climax: All the exciting stories about swordsmen, fights, magicians and sorceresses turn out to be lies, and the solution is rational: calculated murder out of greed. Also, the construction of the narrative is sometimes too involved and technically clumsy. Typically, in chapter 7, the reader learns about some decisive events in the following way: One of the suspects tells the detective what the victim (Peng Lihe) had told him about what the victim's friend Li Bingyong 李炳榮 had told him (the suspect) what a friend of this Li Bingyong in turn had told to Li. Nevertheless, the novel has its interest as a detective story.

More interesting, however, are the detailed and obviously authentic descriptions of all kinds of local superstitions and beliefs. In the introductory chapter Xiang Kairan gives a quasi-ethnographic introduction to all kinds of superstitious and magical practices common in Changsha. Another chapter describes the customs of the Miao who figure so prominently in Shen Congwen's work as well. The Miao, Xiang Kairan writes, have kept many of their old customs and religious beliefs, and therefore »the Miao shamans know many mysterious arts.«²² One of the magic techniques described is the so-called *gan shi* 趕尸 or 'driving corpses'. Shamans who master this art are able to make corpses walk by themselves over long distances, and they have made a business out of this art. Thus, when people from Hu'nán die in other provinces, their families can avoid the high costs of the transport of the corpses in coffins by hiring shamans who let their deceased ones return home walking. Therefore, Xiang Kairan writes, »everywhere in Guizhou, Sichuan and Hu'nán one can encounter these Shamans with one or more pale corpses following him.«²³

Another form of magic practiced by female Shamans called *miaopo* 苗婆 is a form of casting spells on somebody (*fang gu* 放蠱). These Miao jinxes are said to be able to cause others to fall ill or even to die. Sometimes it is a jealous girl who wants to punish its unfaithful lover, sometimes these jinxes take revenge on someone who committed evil deeds. In the novel, we find one such story: The owner of a brothel leads an innocent girl from the countryside into his establishment and then hands it over to some scoundrels. The girl is raped and finally dies from this maltreatment. One Miao jinx revenges the girl by casting a spell on the culprit, causing him to catch some mental disorder of which he finally dies.

22 Xiang Kairan, *Jianghu guaiyi zhuàn*, 97.

23 *Ibid.*

To describe the actions of religious sects, superhuman feats and superstitious practices was not at all respectable at a time when the scientific and anti-traditional views of the New Culture Movement dominated public discourse. It is presumably for this reason that Xiang Kairan claims that his description of evil and immoral actions and of superstitious beliefs serves the aim of popular enlightenment. Thus, the second chapter of the novel presents a quasi-scientific and rationalistic explanation of the phenomenon of popular beliefs in ghosts, devils and magicians. These explanations imply that the aim of the novel is to criticize the secret sects and the ignorance of the believers. Reading the novel, however, it becomes obvious that both the author and his readers were more interested in the fantastic fights and the instances of witchcraft and magic than in the rationalistic explanations, and thus, the declared intent to enlighten the public is undermined by the fascination with the uncanny and exotic. It therefore appears that the moral intentions just serve as a pretext that legitimizes the description of practices otherwise frowned upon. Xiang Kairan thus uses a ploy that is well known in ancient literature: Immoral behaviour, customs and beliefs that were frowned upon could only be written about when this happened under the pretext of criticism, admonition and deterrence.

Lieren ouji, a *biji* text in six chapters, appeared in Bao Tianxiao's short-lived literary weekly *Xingqi* in 1922. This text is made up of reminiscences of the community of hunters that dwelled in the mountains near Pingjiang in eastern Hu'nan. In his youth, Xiang Kairan had got to know them well. In the text, he gives interesting factual information about their life, their techniques of hunting and their weapons, and in addition he tells a few stories about extraordinary characters. One is the story about an old and experienced head or leader of the hunters and his best and favourite apprentice who, in youthful arrogance, does not listen to the warning words of his master and gets killed by a tiger. Another story describes a mysterious clan of tiger hunters who are able to kill a tiger with their bare hands.

5 *Shamans, Hunters, and Knight Errants*

As far as literary sophistication and psychological depth are concerned, Xiang Kairan's and Shen Congwen's works belong to two different categories. The construction of the plots, the description of scenes and scenery and the psychological characterization in Shen Congwen's works are superior to those in Xiang Kairan.

There are, however, a few aspects the two authors' works have in common. Shen Congwen in many of his stories and essays writes about topics similar to the ones Xiang Kairan treated in his novels. The topic of shamans, for example, appears in stories by Shen Congwen such as *Love of a Shaman* (*Shenwu zhi ai* 神巫之愛)²⁴ or *Day and Night* (»Ri yu ye« 日與夜).²⁵ The novella *Love of a Shaman* is characterized by the tension between the ethnographic perspective on the one hand, and the description of the romantic relationship between the shaman and the girls in the Miao village on the other. In this double perspective, *Love of a Shaman* and *Jianghu guaiyi zhuan* resemble each other. Xiang Kairan describes the beliefs, the magic rituals practiced by magicians and shamans, and the popular superstitions, while Shen Congwen presents to the reader a detailed description of customs in the Miao village and shamanistic rituals; Xiang Kairan then goes on to tell a story of fights between ghosts, demons and magicians and other fantastic events, while Shen Congwen is interested in the psychological and emotional conflicts and the relationship between the shaman and the girls who admire him and want to seduce him.

In other texts, Shen Congwen also describes the legends and stories about the supernatural abilities of Miao shamans and Miao jinxes, similar to those in Xiang Kairan's texts. Thus, in his essay »Yuanling de ren« 沅陵的人 (People from Yuanling), Shen Congwen explains and discusses the legendary *gan shi* practice, although in a slightly ironic manner:

The legend about making the dead walk is really stirring. All the new-style gentlemen from other parts of the country, who have had some education, yet have primitive superstitions in their veins and are eager to satisfy their fanciful notions, always have a chance here to review this legend. The local gentry, students or inn-attendants feel in duty bound [...] to relate this strange tale again. They may claim that some friend or relative witnessed such a happening, or that some corpse was driven back to its home.²⁶

In another essay named after his birthplace »Fenghuang« 鳳凰, Shen Congwen also discusses Miao jinxes and the *fang gu* practice that was introduced into literature by Xiang Kairan. Yet Shen Congwen explains these practices in

24 SCW 9: 365-430.

25 First published in *Hongbei* 紅黑 no 3 (Mar 3rd, 1929), 197-213; then as ch. »Di er tian wanshang de shi« 第二天晚上的事 in *Shenwu zhi ai* (1929); in SCW 9: 402-411.

26 In *Xiangxi* 湘西 (1939); in SCW 11: 351; English version in Shen Congwen, *Recollections of West-Hunan*, tr. by Gladys Yang (Beijing: Chinese Literature, 1982), 92-93.

psychoanalytical terms: In his view, it is a pathological phenomenon, originating in the repression of sexual desires.²⁷

It is also not difficult to find in Shen Congwen's work parallels to the stories told in the Random Notes on Hunters. Thus, the character of the old hunter and his apprentices and also the mysterious clan of hunters would fit well into his fictional world. I have to admit, however, that Shen Congwen would have treated these characters and events in a more creative way. We may think here of the old master hunter in Seven Barbarians and the Last Spring Festival²⁸, or the officer in Mountain Paths.²⁹

As far as literary sophistication and psychological depth are concerned, Xiang Kairan's and Shen Congwen's works obviously belong to two different categories. Placing Shen Congwen in the vicinity of popular *chuanqi* and *wuxia* novels also conflicts with the image of himself he consistently projected and created. In his theoretical pronouncements, he explicitly stated that he is not interested in commercial success, and that he is not writing for the popular tastes, but is trying to reach perfection in art.³⁰ In direct contradiction to the positive evaluation of Xiang Kairan's works in his text of 1945, in the early 1930s Shen had explicitly condemned the commercialized and superficial mentality of such Shanghai *literati* (or *haipai* writers, as he called them) like Xiang Kairan.³¹

Whether Shen Congwen's self-image as a writer not influenced by commercial considerations is congruent with reality is, however, doubtful. Shen, like Xiang, 'sold literary texts in order to make a living' (*mai wen wei sheng* 賣文為生). When he published reminiscences of his friend Ding Ling after she had

27 *Ibid.*, in *SCWQJ* 11: 395; English in *Recollections of West-Hunan*, 107.

28 »Qige yeren he zuihou de yingchunjie« 七個野人和最後的迎春節, in *SCWQJ* 4: 182-192.

29 »Shandao zhong, 山道中, in *SCWQJ* 8: 265-277.

30 See, e.g., his »Congwen xiaoshuo xizuo xuan« daixu 《從文小說習作選》代序 (1936); in *SCWQJ* 9: 1-7.

31 Shen Congwen (quoted here according to Fu Jialing, *Die haipai-Erzähl-literatur* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2004), 98, had made the following comments: »[When they] talk about love, literature, film, and other things, they produce a specific Shanghai taste and do nothing else but continue the project of the literature of the mandarin ducks and butterflies. They are assisted by students of Christian universities who try their best to imitate an American way of life. One of the magazines that poses today as an opponent of the old *Libailiu* 禮拜六 movement, while in fact just continuing it with modern means, is the magazine *Liangyou*.« On the *Libailiu* (Saturday) school see Clemens Treter, *Zwischen Kunst, Markt und Moral. Die Debatte um die Erzähl-literatur im China des frühen 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 183-189.

been abducted by GMD agents, he sent his manuscript to the Liangyou publishing house, that is to the very same company which, in his eyes, represented the worst qualities of Shanghai-style writing and mentality. The book appeared in the series »Liangyou wenxue congshu« 良友文學叢書 and turned out to become a bestseller.³²

His claimed independence from commercial considerations may, therefore, have represented an ideal rather than a reality. In another respect, however, Shen Congwen differed from Xiang Kairan and other earlier writers: He transcended the discourse of political and moral aims of both late Qing *xiaoshuo* authors and the May Fourth generation. In his novels he does not claim that he wants to improve society or to contribute to the enlightenment of the people or even to 'save the country', and he does not try to justify his interest in strange and exotic phenomena by moral considerations. »I don't care about the fact that no one regards [my writings] as works that improve morality«, he once wrote.³³

This self-image has, of course, its specific place in the 1930s when modernist writers tried to establish an autonomous 'literary field' that was supposed to be independent of moral and political considerations, but above all, independent of the market. Shen Congwen participated in this project, and he and his literary friends were involved in the project of redefining the rules of the literary game and of redrawing the borderlines.

The differences in literary technique, in literary sophistication and in the self-images, however, should not blind us to the fact that the works of both authors have a great deal in common. They are, in my view, linked by the same tradition, i. e. the *chuanqi* tradition. Both authors are interested in writing tales about strange and exceptional, and sometimes also supernatural happenings and extraordinary character. They both tend to present Hu'nan as a region with very special, primitive and unspoilt characteristics. In his introduction to *Jiangbu guaiyi zhuàn*, Xiang Kairan stresses this regional aspect: »The author is from Hu'nan, and nowhere else I have seen as many superstitious beliefs as in Hu'nan.«³⁴ Shen Congwen, on the other hand, presents a portrait of West Hu'nan where bizarre stories are happening and mysterious customs are practiced and where the authentic spirit of the traditional knight errants is still alive. This is how he describes his native town Fenghuang as a kind of Conradian 'heart of darkness':

32 Shen Congwen, *Ji Ding Ling* 記丁玲 [Noted on Ding Ling] (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1934); in *SCW* 13: 49-231.

33 Shen Congwen, »Congwen xiaoshuo xizuo xuan" daixu«, in *SCW* 9: 5.

34 Xiang Kairan, *Jiangbu guaiyi zhuàn*, 5.

The legends about Miao jinxes originated here. And this was the centre of Chenzhou magic. Here, too, the Cadet Training Corps has kept up much of the chivalrous tradition of the descendants of Chu. This locality also has many distinctive religious observances. religious feeling (the belief in spirits and sorcery) is especially—inconceivably—ardent.³⁵

David Der-wei Wang has pointed to the contradictory strategy of Shen's narrative: being fascinated by the mysterious traditions and superstitions of the region while, on the other hand, presenting a realist and rational narrative which is supposed to de-mystify the region and its culture.³⁶ As shown above, Xiang Kairan's texts are characterized by a similar contradiction. Writing for an urban public, both authors were aware of the fact that the exotic flair of their stories, set in an imaginary Hu'nan, a far-distant place where all kinds of uncivilized and primitive behaviour could be observed, would appeal to the tastes of their urban readership.

According to the views of Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) and other proponents of a regional literature in Republican China, it is the region and not the nation that is central for the identity and self-image of a writer.³⁷ By describing the customs, legends and traditions of the region, Shen Congwen could realize his aesthetic ideals and also reflect the plurality of a culture, while avoiding the instrumentalisation of literature in the interests of a presumably unified national culture and its modernisation. Seen from this perspective, it seems justified to call Xiang Kairan a pioneer and precursor. With his *Jianghu guaiyi zhuàn* and with *Lieren ouji* he has treated regional topics, myths, legends and traditions that reappeared later in the works of Shen Congwen, but were transformed by him and told with greater literary sophistication. Xiang Kairan thus contributed to the formation of a regional Hu'nanese literature. Contemporary writers such as Han Shaogong 韓少功 (b1953) and Gao Xingjian 高興健 (b1940) are still—although indirectly—indebted to him.

The common points in the works of Xiang Kairan and Shen Congwen imply that the boundaries drawn by conventional literary history between popular literature on the one hand, represented here by Xiang Kairan, and 'pure

35 »Fenghuang«, in *SCW* 11: 393–394; English version quoted from Shen Congwen, *Recollections of West-Hunan*, 107.

36 The dialectics of exoticism and de-mystification in Shen Congwen's *Xiangxi* essays are discussed in David Der-wei Wang [Wang Dewei 王德威], *Fictional Realism in 20th Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 208–210.

37 On Zhou Zuoren, see Susan Daruvala, *Zhou Zuoren and an Alternative Chinese Response to Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 138–167 and 218–235.

literature' on the other, ought to be questioned. The inclusion of a writer into the canon of modern Chinese literature tends to cut off the links of his work both with tradition and with popular literature, and thus prevents its appreciation in all its facets and intertextual references. I am not suggesting to redraw these lines in such a way that popular *wuxia* and *chuanqi* writers could be included in the category of serious literature. It needs to be emphasized, however, that in present mainland Chinese literary history there are indeed such tendencies, as testified by the fact that Xiang Kairan is now included by the authoritative »National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature« (Zhongguo xiandai wenxue guan 中國現代文學館) into the list of the one hundred most important writers of the Republican era, and also by the recent re-evaluation of other authors of knight errant novels such as Jin Yong 金庸 (b1924).³⁸ Neither do I intend to exclude writers such as Shen Congwen from the category of serious literature just because they share in the *chuanqi* tradition. Rather, my parallel reading of texts by these two authors shows that it is helpful to see these borderlines as fluid and permeable, since this allows us to transcend conventional and sterile dichotomies. As the example of Shen Congwen has shown, the literary skill and quality of a writer prove themselves in his novel and original way of treating topics from traditional and popular literature and of transforming them.

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38 See Chen Pingyuan, *Qijiang wenren xiaoke meng*, 247–262.