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**Self-Debasement and Westernization: Yu Dafu and the Development of China's National Identity****Carter Powers****Publication Date**

24-05-2023

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**Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)**

Powers, C. (2023). *Self-Debasement and Westernization: Yu Dafu and the Development of China's National Identity* (Version 1). University of Notre Dame. <https://doi.org/10.7274/24870366.v1>

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Modern Chinese Literature

8 May 2023

Self-Debasement and Westernization: Yu Dafu and the Development of China's National Identity

## 1. Introduction

At the turn of the 20th century, the Qing Dynasty was failing, causing significant unrest that led to the 1911 Xinhai Rebellion. This turmoil brought about the New Culture Movement, obsessed with the idea of saving China, often through the rejection of traditional ideals and ways of life in favor of Western ones. As this movement progressed, intellectuals became concerned with China as a national identity, which was reflected in the first writings of modern Chinese literature. However, this push for a strong "Chinese" identity was rife with self-loathing and a catering to Western perspectives which resulted in an exacerbation of Chinese weakness, harmful sino-centric practices, and negative effects on the Chinese youth who were hurt by the heavy push for westernized education and study abroad. In this paper, I will argue that the pains felt from the New Culture Movement, while initially caused by Western influence, were perpetuated by the detrimental effects of ideology pushed by Chinese intellectuals obsessed with China's sickness. This paper will examine the development of Chineseness during the New Culture Movement through analysis of the Chinese sickness metaphor in historical context and close reading of Yu Dafu's 1921 short story "Sinking". The paper will focus on the development of Chineseness and "Sinking" and the complications that arose from modernization and how Yu Dafu addresses the complications of study abroad and the standardization of language through the protagonist's thoughts and experiences.

## 2. Development of Chineseness

In order to analyze Chineseness as a national identity, one must first understand its beginnings in the historical context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After China's defeat in the Opium Wars and other conflicts with the West, the country was forced into unequal treaties that gave Western nations and Japan the ability to dominate China's economy and inhabit special legal concessions. As expected, these concessions caused significant political unrest in China and were one of the primary concerns of the new political factions of the 1912-1928 republic who both attempted to show their "true patriotism" by claiming credit for the dismantling of the treaties (Wang 401). Author Dong Wang writes that the focus of Guomindang (GMD) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) on "*upingdeng tiaoyue* (the Unequal Treaties) and *guochi* (national shame)" represents the political groups' actions in building a national identity and show the Chinese perspective of their country's place in the world at the current time (Wang 400). Contrary to the Tang dynasty's melting pot of foreign influences of literature and art (Yi 157), due to China's weakness in world politics, it responded to foreign influence with a nationalist movement that attempted to preserve "Chinese characteristics".

Naturally, as intellectuals began to view China as a weak nation, they became obsessed with ways to save their country and restore it to the Central Kingdom world power that it used to be. The development of this phenomenon can be seen in the evolution of the infamous phrase "Sick Man of East Asia," popularized by the film *Fist of Fury*. While many see the phrase as one of national humiliation felt by all Chinese, Distinguished Professor at National Chengchi University Yui-Sung Yang writes that the Chinese and Western perspectives of the phrase are quite different. While Chinese scholars were obsessed over the phrase, Western scholars mentioned it sparingly and only used it to refer to the Qing government. In fact, according to

Yang, the phrase “Sick Man” was a phrase used in Western discourse to refer to many different nations who had failing governments or reform movements (39), and the use of “Sick Man of East Asia” was originally used solely to refer to the failing reforms of the Qing dynasty. It was not until Yan Fu introduced Social Darwinism (47) and Liang Qichao wrote that in comparison to the West, Chinese society was backwards, primitive, and needed to be changed (52) that the phrase was applied to all of Chinese society. This is significant because Liang had a considerable impact on intellectual discourse, which in turn greatly influenced the writers of the time, creating the traits of writings of national allegory and realism that define scholarly understanding of Chinese Literature today. Indeed, as Chinese Historian C.T. Hsia writes, no modern Chinese writer analyzed the human condition like Dostoyevsky or Tolstoy, but every notable modern Chinese writer has an obsession with China and writes about China’s corruption (Hsia 536). While it may be excessive to claim that every single writer in China was writing about a national allegory, it is clear that the idea of nationalistic writing was dominated by seeing China’s society as sick.

Just as authors of the 1920s focused on the sickness of China, Yu Dafu is no exception to this rule. Published in Tokyo while he was studying abroad, Dafu’s short story “Sinking” follows a young Chinese hypochondriac studying in Japan who suffers from mental struggles and eventually commits suicide, blaming China’s weak state for his own death. Notably, the way that the unnamed protagonist of the story views himself as persecuted and looked down upon by his Japanese peers mirrors the way that early Chinese intellectuals such as Liang Qichao reacted to the phrase “Sick Man of East Asia”. In the story, there is little evidence of direct slander uttered to the protagonist by his Japanese classmates on account of his nationality, yet the student obsesses over the insults he believes he has received. For example, at the start of the story, Dafu

details the student's gradual isolation from the other students. While the student sees national pride as the root of the problem, thinking phrases such as, "They are all Japanese, all my enemies" (Dafu 34), "They are Japanese, and of course they have no sympathy for you" (34), and "They must have known that I am a 'Chinaman'" (35), the Japanese students themselves show little interest in his Chinese identity. In fact, Dafu presents alternative motives for their ignoring the student, suggesting that it is the student's own unapproachable appearance and silent manner that caused his classmates to abandon him (34-35). Additionally, the protagonist becomes estranged from his fellow Chinese classmates, even becoming enemies equated at the same level as the Japanese students (43-44).

If Dafu was writing about the West causing China's sickness, why did Dafu portray the protagonist in this manner? Yu Dafu was also a Chinese student in Japan, and his experience of the Japanese perspective of China inspired him to write "Sinking". While it is true that China was in a weakened state and there definitely were cases of direct discrimination by the Japanese — Dafu experienced it himself — the fact that Dafu chose to portray the student's isolation as coming from his own perception of discrimination rather than coming from direct discrimination is important. He could have written the Japanese students as the aggressors of the story, yet he focused on the Chinese student's own mental state as the cause of all of his own ailments, the isolation from his peers being one of them. In fact, Dafu himself wrote that he intentionally de-emphasized mentions of oppression due to Japanese nationalism (Lan 106). Rather, Dafu wrote about the protagonist's sickness in this way precisely to avoid making "Sinking" a propaganda piece of Chinese nationalism in favor of focusing on the true, nuanced situation that China and her study abroad students faced. For these reasons, Dafu's argument in "Sinking" is

that the humiliation that the Chinese feel is not entirely due to outside influences such as Japanese nationalism but rather the internal perception of their country's state in the world.

Considering the importance of Yu Dafu writing of the weakness of China coming from the protagonist's internal perspective, it is important to understand what the protagonist represents. Primarily, the protagonist's struggles stem from a mental sickness that Dafu describes as hypochondria (Lan 106). This disease is significant because hypochondria is a person's detrimentally obsessive worrying that they are sick, regardless of whether they truly have a disease. Since the disease is a mental one caused by the brain's own anxiety about sickness, the protagonist ironically eats himself up from the inside. Furthermore, the term for hypochondria is one of Western origin, a term Dafu likely learned from his study abroad in Japan. In his article on "Sinking", Florida State University Professor Feng Lan argues that Dafu's explicit use of the English term shows that he is emphasizing that the sickness affecting the student is of foreign origin. So, Dafu's use of a disease of Western origin that describes an internal ailment of mental anxiety is a metaphor that says that the situation the protagonist is in was originally caused by something from the West, but the actual effects are caused by the protagonist's own obsession sickness. Notably, the metaphor of the sick protagonist connects directly to the trend of Chinese intellectuals's portrayal of China's spiritual sickness and the nickname "Sick Man of East Asia". The sick protagonist could be seen as a metaphor, representing the sick China ridiculed by the Western world. But in "Sinking", the pain China feels from its sickness is because the sickness originated from tradition or Western subjugation, but rather the pain comes from the internal forces of obsession and anxiety over that sickness coming from China itself. So, from Dafu's perspective, China was placed into its predicament on account of Western influence, but the direct cause of its problems is the obsessive internal response to that predicament.

### 3. Complications of “Chineseness”

Seeing that the development of China’s national identity was rife with self-debasement of Chinese values and eventually the state of the Chinese people themselves, there were bound to be problems that arose from such rhetoric. Duke Professor Rey Chow in “On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem” writes that the messages on “Chineseness” function to box individuals into a determinist box based on an intangible genealogy and culture (7). Yang also argues that these messages caused many mistaken beliefs (Yang 32), and Chow elaborates on these beliefs and what they mean for China. Chow argues that sinologists, in retroactively defining the Chinese identity as literal-minded in order to differentiate from “(the bad Western attributes of) allegorical, metaphorical, and fictive transformation”, create an identity that is “virtuous primitive – a noble savage” (16). As intellectuals respond to the sickness they perceive, the identity they create to combat it is diminutive and rigid. This process, Chow argues, is racist as it identifies the entire population of China with such terms (17). The problem Chow sees is that “the effort to promote China [...] is made through an a priori surrender to Western perspectives and categories” (14). Moreover, as Sichuan University Professor Dan Yi points out, a major issue plaguing writers that should be addressed is the use of “foreign tools to describe the Chinese Experience” (137-38). These Chinese intellectuals such as Liang Qichao, in attempting to build up a Chinese identity to compete with the West, actually fail to compete with the West because they operate within the bounds of the Western perspective. This phenomenon is what Dafu portrays. The protagonist develops hypochondria and self-loathing as a result of him viewing himself as the Japanese and the West sees him, just as Liang writes about the backwardness and sickness of the Chinese people because he accepts the Western perspective of his people and applies the idea of sickness to his own nation. The damage comes from the

acceptance and internalization of Western perspectives of China and working from within those boxes to try and cure the sickness. Instead of taking a rational approach to understanding the root causes of China's predicament, Chinese nationalists reacted strongly to China's weakened state and jumped to irrational conclusions based on an oversimplified binary of China vs the West.

One specific problem that arises with the acceptance of Western perspectives is that the Chinese intellectuals believed that the only way to save China was to completely abandon traditional ideals and replace them with western ones. This idea seems completely contradictory, as sinologists on one hand were blaming the "foreign devils" and the Unequal Treaties for their country's weakness, but would ironically say that the only way to save China was to use ideals from the West to rejuvenate Chinese civilization. For example, Tian Han, in a continuation of thoughts popularized by the "Wuxu Reform" (Yi 139), wrote that the only way to create a new China was to "transplant "Americanism" and "democracy" into this civilization" (Yi 138). One method that this westernization was implemented was through an overhaul of the Chinese education system, based on the destruction of the civil service system (Lan 114), replacing traditional curriculum on ethics and writings with Western knowledge of geography and science (Yi 141-42), and an emphasis on studying abroad (Lan 114-15). While the introduction of Western education may have ultimately improved education in China, the abruptness of the overhaul caused severe issues for a society that was based entirely on the legitimacy of the merits of Confucianism, and so the Chinese "men of learning" began to lose their social status (Lan 114). Lan writes that this loss of foundation resulted in a "de-based" generation, the effects of which were felt twofold by Chinese study abroad students who not only were socially separated from their country but were constantly aware of how their Western contemporaries viewed them. Based on the experiences of Yu Dafu and how he chooses to portray the protagonist as suffering



from mental diseases of hypochondria and social anxiety as a result of how he views himself as Chinese in Japan, Lan's conclusions seem reasonable. Chinese students transitioned from a place in society where they were valued and saw opportunities in civil service to being isolated and disconnected from their Chinese roots, living in the once considered "barbarian peripheries" of foreign countries (Lan 116). While the efforts to send students abroad to learn from the successful Western nations were noble in intention, Dafu's portrayal of the mental state of the student shows that the program came with a price.

Interestingly, despite "Sinking" being considered a piece criticizing China's weakness as much as any other piece of the time period, upon deeper analysis it appears that many details in the story critique parts of the national movement. To this end, Feng Lan argues that contrary to many critics who say that "Sinking" "champions Western modernity," "Sinking" is actually a piece nostalgic of Confucian tradition and situated against the Westernization and modernization of China (109). Here, Lan overemphasizes points of criticism and overlooks points of praise of modernity in "Sinking" by failing to consider Yu Dafu's background and opinions. For example, Dafu portrays nature as a relief for the student's sickness by using references to Christianity rather than Confucianism (48), and refrains from portraying traditional Confucian values in a positive light, if at all. Furthermore, as Dafu uses the Western term of hypochondria as the driving force of the sickness metaphor in the story and in Lan himself mentions Dafu "worshiping" western writers such as Goethe and Dostoyevsky (Lan 110), it would be unreasonable to conclude that Dafu would be nostalgic of a China before contact to the West and argue against the foreign influences that he himself used as influences in his writing of "Sinking". However, Lan does consider many valid points about Dafu portraying the shortcomings of the study abroad system and its effects on students such as Dafu himself who

became educational expatriates. Perhaps a more reasonable conclusion would be to say that Dafu wrote "Sinking" not only to highlight the weakened state of China on account of the West but also to show the failings of the movement in trying to save China through brute force Westernization and the destruction of all things Confucian and traditional.

Not only does Yu Dafu bring up the complications regarding the modernization of education, his writing in "Sinking" brings to light the complications that occurred during the push for the modernization and standardization of the Chinese language. University of Chicago Professor Valerie Levan writes in her article analyzing foreign texts in "Sinking" that Chinese intellectuals sought to modernize and standardize Chinese and some tried to address perceived creative inadequacies by incorporating European elements (56). This claim is corroborated by Yi who states that it was a trend during the New Culture Movement that new writers would often write in "new" ways that would cram foreign loanwords and other new figures of speech into their works (146). At first glance, Yu Dafu appears to have been swept up by this new trend, as the writings of the "Sinking" collection of short stories, which includes "Sinking" itself and other stories, are filled with foreign words, many of them left in their original languages with notes explaining references to the reader. However, while contemporary opinions often consider foreign texts in Chinese literature to have little value or context in the story outside of being foreign, Levan disagrees, believing that the foreign texts in the "Sinking" collection to be inherently valuable to understanding Dafu's works as a whole in its historical context (49).

Despite the fact that Dafu was a part of the movement to modernize the Chinese language, his heavy use of foreign language in "Sinking" and references to the protagonist's failed attempts to translate foreign literary works actually illustrate the deficiencies of foreign language and highlight the loss of meaning when works are translated across cultures. According

to Levan, Dafu supported the standardization of language, believing that it would unite the country (52-53). But, Levan also shows that Dafu admits that the spoken language was not unified, arguing that the Chinese writers had given themselves “an impossible task” of unifying a written language on a splintered oral one (53). Chinese writers faced their own ailments of being stuck between the unfavorable traditional language, an undeveloped new vernacular, and a widely inaccessible foreign alternative, a predicament that Levan argues is shown in Dafu’s protagonists (60). In one example, the protagonist in “Sinking” encounters a barrier to translating “The Solitary Reaper” to Chinese, saying that “English poetry is English poetry, and Chinese poetry is Chinese poetry. Why bother to translate?” (Dafu 33). The protagonist exemplifies Dafu’s struggles in desiring to “seamlessly incorporate” (Levan 69) foreign texts but ultimately failing to do so, as Dafu tries but fails to do so in the writing of “Sinking” itself. Furthermore, Levan adds that “The Solitary Reaper” was about the writer’s failure to convey his emotions (70). Dafu chose this specific foreign text among others to show the universality of writers facing the limits of language. The protagonist in “Sinking” represents Chinese writers’ unique predicament of futilely trying to create a better vernacular as part of this push of modernization as there ultimately will never be a perfect language as all writers deal with this ailment. In this way, Dafu shows that while one can try standardizing Chinese and add Western elements in order to create the perfect medium of expression, Chinese and language in general will always have limitations. While one could argue from this position that the push for a new Chinese language was useless and simply put Chinese writers in an impossible position, the standardization of Chinese did help people communicate with each other. Nevertheless, it is clear that the modernization of Chinese was flawed and affected writers during the New Culture Movement.

#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, while the weakness of China was originally caused by the West's economic and political domination of the Chinese government, many of the problems that arose during the New Culture Movement's push for a development of a strong national identity was partly the result of the Chinese nationalists and intellectuals themselves as they saw their country in the same way that the West saw it: weak and backwards. Yu Dafu's "Sinking" is a unique example of both the obsession with saving a sick China but also how Chinese people were negatively affected by this push for social change and modernization. Dafu provides a unique perspective about how while China's sickness was foreign in origin, it was exacerbated by the hypochondria of the Chinese nationalists who were preoccupied with China's weakened state. He also highlighted the often overlooked plight of the Chinese student abroad, and brought to light the losses that happen when one tries to standardize language and incorporate western language aspects into Chinese. These issues are often neglected or dismissed as byproducts of the West's brutalization of China, but it is important to understand that these issues also come from the Chinese nationalists' damaging obsession over China's "sickness". Rather than blaming the West or the backwardness of Chinese tradition for all of China's ailments during the New Culture Movement, we must understand that working within the arbitrary boundaries of West versus China diminishes the experience of entire groups of people who are lumped into a single label, whether it be Westerners who call China a "sick man" or Chinese who do the labeling. We must see that these labels cause problems that obstruct people from seeing the fullness of their condition, rather than being relegated to a predetermined ethnicity. By understanding the nuances of China's modernization through Chinese literature such as "Sinking", we can better understand the perspectives of that modernization and how nationalistic ideals affect different groups of people.

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