

Religion Reconsidered: Redemption and Women's Emancipation in Xu Dishan's

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The turn of the twentieth century brought unprecedented change to Chinese society and literature. Two thousand years of imperial rule ended in an intellectual revolution as reformers called for science and democracy and attacked all things traditional, including Confucianism, the philosophical system that had provided a foundation for defining and structuring both the Chinese state and family. Chief among the social changes taking place in China in the period from 1919 to the mid-1920s, now known as the May Fourth Era, was a reassessment of the roles of women. Women were no longer to be viewed as property, nor would they depend on their male relatives—fathers, husbands, and sons—for their identity and fate. Students and intellectuals not only agitated for abandoning such restrictive practices as foot binding and arranged marriages, but they also called for greater equality for women both in terms of access to education and employment and in the freedom to choose romantic relationships without parental interference.

The reform-minded devoted equal enthusiasm to critiquing a second remnant of traditional society: religion.¹ Most frequently equated with

¹I am grateful to Richard McBride for his assistance on matters pertaining to Buddhist doctrine and religious practices.

superstition, traditional religious beliefs and practices were often viewed as symbols of ignorance and tools for oppression. Intellectuals attacked ancestral worship, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religions as unenlightened and outmoded. Christianity, a religion with strong overseas ties as seen in the large population of foreign missionaries and ministers resident in China in the early years of the twentieth century, was viewed with suspicion for its connections to foreign powers with imperialist motives.

At the same time writers and intellectual reformers called for the creation of a new Chinese literature. This entailed putting aside the classical language, that is, the language of the Confucian canon, and adopting a written equivalent of an evolving modern spoken Chinese or vernacular (*baihua*) as the vehicle for writing new works. Reformist intellectuals, who saw fiction as a tool for enlightening and educating a wider segment of the Chinese population, called for writers to share the responsibility of promoting social change. Thus, this evolving vernacular writing, known as modern or in Chinese “new” (*xin*) literature, took the form of socially engaged stories and eventually novels that identified for their readers current problems that needed to be addressed.

One of the earliest practitioners of this new mode of writing was Xu Dishan, a student and later scholar of Chinese religion and literature. As a student in Beijing, Xu began to write both essays and fiction which he published first in journals and later in book form. Like many young authors of his age, Xu addressed contemporary social issues such as the emancipation of women in several of his early works. Yet his point of entry for such explorations centered on the seemingly passé topic of religion in general and the notion of redemption in particular. For example, Xiguan from his story “The Merchant’s Wife” (Shangren fu) struggled and ultimately achieved independence because of her encounters and associations with religions such as Islam and Christianity. Xu borrows strategically from various religious traditions to create pathways for greater freedom that allow his female characters to develop identities independent of a still predominantly patriarchal social structure. In so doing, he promotes progressive social reform by using the seemingly retrograde concept of religion, an approach unique in the history of twen-

tieth-century Chinese literature.

Born in Tainan, Taiwan, on February 4, 1893, Xu spent his early years living in various locations in southern China, where his father worked as a lower-level government official. After studying in private academies and with tutors for several years, Xu became an instructor at a teacher's school in 1911 and two years later traveled to Rangoon, Burma, where he spent the next two years teaching at a Chinese school. Returning to China in 1915, he taught at several local schools in Fujian. After gaining admission to Yanjing University in 1917, he moved to Beijing to study literature. While in the capital, he became an active participant in student organizations and in 1921 became a charter member of the newly-founded Literary Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*), a leading literary society of the May Fourth period that dedicated itself to using literature as a tool for reflecting the realities of life and encouraging positive social change. The Association also edited the magazine *Xi-aoshuo yuebao* (*Short Story Monthly*), in which Xu's first stories appeared later that year under the pen name of Luo Huasheng.

During this period, Beijing with its several major universities became a center of student activism. Ibsen's works, which first appeared in Chinese translation in 1918, almost immediately caught the attention of Chinese youth. They read *A Doll's House* (1879) as a call for women's emancipation and saw in its heroine Nora a model for a new, independent woman who courageously breaks free from the bonds of the traditional patriarchal family structure (Ono 99–100). High-profile intellectuals as diverse as Hu Shi, who helped introduce Ibsen to a Chinese audience, and Li Dazhao, who would later help found the Communist Party, assisted in bringing the issue of women's liberation to a wider audience. The leading periodicals of the day—those read by reformist intellectuals and students alike—actively discussed women's liberation. As Ono Kazuko points out, “the youth of the May Fourth generation made the woman question their own personal question” (101).

Many of Xu's early stories center on strong female characters who persevere in their struggles against adversity. In “Birds Fated for Each Other” (*Mingming niao*), two teenagers from different social back-

grounds seek the freedom to marry. The young woman, however, seems the more enlightened and attuned to changing times and eventually chooses to pursue her own spiritual liberation over marriage. In "The Merchant's Wife" Xu depicts a woman's successful struggle to break free from the influence of men and traditional family structures to establish herself as an independent individual with a home, career, and family life of her own. Relatively weak male characters in supporting roles and strong female protagonists who overcome challenges remain important features in some of Xu's finest works, including "Spring Peach" (Chuntao) and "Yuguan." In each case women emerge as self-assured characters emancipated from the patriarchal constraints imposed by traditional Chinese society.

Religion played an important role in Xu's personal life. Following his return from Burma, he joined the Fujian London Church, a Christian sect, in 1916 and entered Yanjing University on a church scholarship (Robinson 56), graduating in 1922 with a bachelor's degree in religious studies. The following year he traveled to the United States and entered Columbia University, where he studied comparative religion and the history of religion, again with the financial support of his home congregation (56-57). After earning his master's in 1924, he continued his studies at Oxford, where he read Indian philosophy, Sanskrit, religious history, and folklore, earning a second bachelor's degree in 1926, after which he returned to China and joined the faculty at his alma mater. While he wrote on Christian topics during his college years (Robinson 56), his mature religious scholarship focused almost exclusively on non-Christian religions and included the preparation of an index to the Buddhist canon and the first volume of what was to be a comprehensive history of Daoism in China.

During the late 1920s and the early 1930s, Xu changed the focus of his creative writing as he criticized the corruption and questionable morals of intellectuals and officials in China. In "Director Fei's Reception Room" (Zai Fei zongli de ketingli), for example, he reveals the profiteering of a corrupt businessman who conceals his questionable conduct behind a veneer of traditional Confucian propriety and

strategic political connections as represented by carefully displayed Confucian classical texts and calligraphic scrolls presented by leading government officials and intellectuals that decorate the room of the story's title.

In 1935 Xu accepted a post as the first professor of Chinese literature at Hong Kong University, where he would teach Confucian classics and traditional poetry for the remainder of his life. In 1939 he published his longest and greatest work, *Yuguan*, which brought together the satirical style of his late 1920s and early 1930s works and the interest in woman's emancipation and religious salvation of his earlier short stories. Written two years before his death, the novella intricately weaves together Buddhist and Christian values with traditional folk and ancestral worship practices, thus bringing the author back to his life-long personal and scholarly interest in world religions. With *Yuguan* Xu's career comes full circle when, just as in "The Merchant's Wife," religion becomes the vehicle by which a female protagonist establishes her own life and identity within the greater social community.

Among the first stories Xu wrote, "The Merchant's Wife" stands out for its sophisticated framing of a Chinese woman's struggle for emancipation. Protagonist Xiguan becomes aware of and ultimately pursues independence from her husbands through encounters with non-Chinese religions; indeed, the theme of redemption plays a central role in the story and facilitates Xiguan's search for independence.

Xu foreshadows the themes of liberation and redemption early in the story when the narrator, an educated Chinese man, notices a woman in Indian dress near a "Pond for Releasing Life" (*fangsheng chi*) at the Temple of Supreme Harmony (*Jile si*), a Buddhist temple in Sin-

²According to Joanna F. Handlin Smith, the practice of *fangsheng* or the releasing of the living dates back some fifteen hundred years (52). The earliest mention is a reference to the construction of a pavilion for such a pond during the reign of Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty (Yü 72). While livestock, birds, and other living creatures could also be set free, both the passage of time and convenience have necessitated that small aquatic animals

gapore. According to Holmes Welch, most large Buddhist monasteries commonly included such ponds (378).² Believers would purchase a fish, turtle, or other aquatic creature that they would then release or set free in the pond. This charitable act revealed not only believers' respect for life but also their compassion for other living creatures, since compassion and wisdom marked the two key virtues cultivated by followers of Mahayana Buddhism as practiced in China. The act served several purposes. It allowed Buddhist practitioners to accumulate merit that could be applied to a variety of personal causes: healing from illness, relief from natural disasters, the birth of a son, increased longevity, prosperity, advancement in one's career, or purification from sin (Yü 80; Welch 377). More abstractly, it reaffirmed ties believers shared with other living beings and helped to "free [them] from [their] innate desire, greed and hatred" (Yü 74). Since the practice of *fangsheng* has continued to recent times, it was certainly in evidence in Xu's lifetime (Smith 52; Welch 382).

Fangsheng involves several steps, two of which bear further mention. In the first the believer buys and thus symbolically redeems a living creature, earning blessings in the process (Yü 83). In the second the believer releases the creature, thus saving its life by granting it freedom and receiving added merit (84). This cycle of redemption by purchase and then release becomes a key transactional paradigm that operates throughout "The Merchant's Wife." By first introducing Xiguan at the Pond for Releasing Life, Xu thus links the symbolism of the pool with the protagonist herself.

When the narrator later discovers that Xiguan is traveling on the same ship as himself, he strikes up a conversation with her through which he also learns that they hail from the same province in China. Her autobiographical account comprises most of the remainder of the story, embedding in it the theme of redemption through its focus on a series of transactions that lead first to Xiguan's bondage and eventually to her liberation. She reveals that at fifteen she married Lin Yinqiao and lived happily with him until he gambled away his business several years later. Unable to find a job, he decides to travel to Singapore to seek his fortune. Prior to his journey Xiguan seals the story's first trans-

action by giving Lin a pair of jade bracelets to sell in order to cover his travel expenses, allowing him to recover his losses and start his career anew, thereby both redeeming him financially and professionally and freeing him to pursue his goals. In exchange Lin promises to write and vows to return for her within five years.

When the allotted time has passed, with no recent word from her husband, Xiguan decides to journey to Singapore herself to search for him. There she discovers that he is now a wealthy merchant and has taken a local Malaysian woman as his wife. After she stays only a few days in their home, her husband, repaying her redemption of him by casting her into bondage, sells her to Ahuja, a Muslim textile merchant in his fifties, who takes her to India as his sixth wife. In keeping with Indian custom regarding married women, she must wear a diamond nose ring. Her purchase, signified by the nose ring, thus represents the next link in the transactional chain. When her second husband, to whom she bears a son, suddenly dies, she flees, selling the nose ring and using the money to buy a small home for herself and her young son. The removal and sale of the nose ring, the last segment of the transactional chain, is a double act of redemption that not only frees her from any ties to either husband but also provides her with a place to live and the freedom this financial security affords. Not long after this, Xiguan meets Elizabeth, a Christian, who agrees to watch her son while Xiguan attends a woman's school in Madras. Near the end of the story Xiguan becomes a schoolteacher and with her home and profession secures the economic resources she needs to build an independent life for both herself and her son.

The theme of emancipation also informs how Xu uses narrative technique in his story. Xiguan tells her own story, but the comments of an educated Chinese male narrator, who initially looks down on her because he assumes she is an Indian woman, frame her account. Only after he learns she is Chinese and comes from his home province does the narrator put aside his condescending curiosity and begin to pay serious attention to her. He initially maintains a sense of haughty superiority, noting with satisfaction that she shifts from addressing him by the familiar title "uncle" (*laoshu*) to the more respectful "sir" (*xiansheng*),

which appeals to his ego (42). Putting aside his book to focus his “undivided attention” (*zhushenting*) on Xiguan’s story indicates that his attitude toward her has changed. However, while Xiguan occasionally anticipates questions the narrator might be thinking of and addresses him to clarify the events she is recounting, he does not intrude further on her narrative.

When she concludes her account, Xu shifts the narrative point of view back to the male narrator. Moved by Xiguan’s story and impressed by her ability to make her own way in the world, the narrator finds new respect for her. In a tone free from condescension and filled with sincerity, he offers to help her look for her husband. As the story concludes after the narrator reports that he has failed to find Lin, the narrator comments rather naïvely and insensitively, “Your life is really full of misfortune, isn’t it?” (50). Revealing herself to be far more experienced than the male narrator in dealing with life’s vicissitudes and possessed of wisdom and compassion, the two key virtues, as noted previously, in Mahayana Buddhism, Xiguan shows her superior insight into and understanding of life. While she notes that “everything in the present is filled with suffering” (50), she also experiences the peace and satisfaction the recollection of past events brings, particularly to a woman as forgiving as Xiguan. Having already won the narrator over with her courage, quiet dignity, and patience in overcoming trials, she now proceeds to enlighten him. Such complex narration thus liberates Xiguan’s story from the male narrator’s condescension and hasty judgments that pepper the opening section of the tale by first allowing Xiguan to recount her past in her own words and then, only when she has finished, permitting a now respectful and even deferential male voice to report the final pages of the story.

Finally, the emancipation and fiscal independence Xiguan achieves work against the story’s title, “The Merchant’s Wife.” In keeping with traditional Chinese custom, the title identifies the protagonist in relation to her primary male relatives, in this case both of her merchant

³Lu Xun, for example, used this practice in naming many of his female characters. Notable examples include Fourth Shan’s Wife (Shansi saozhi) in “Tomorrow” (Mingtian), Mrs. Siming (Siming Taitai) in “Soap” (Feizao), and Sister Xianglin (Xianglin Sao) in “New Year’s Sacrifice” (Zhufu).

husbands. Early May Fourth era fiction that depicted traditional women, particularly uneducated women of lower social classes, often referred to them in relation to their nearest male relative, seldom using their given names.³ However, though Xu's title identifies Xiguan in reference to her husbands, both of whom were merchants by profession, by the end of the story Xiguan has established her own identity, independent of both men, and is in fact no longer in the subordinate position suggested by the title, since she no longer depends on either husband for her support, her identity, or her social standing. Thus, she comes to be known by her given name, Xiguan, reinforcing her new, independent identity.

While Xu's tale of a woman's emancipation captures the new views concerning women espoused by many intellectuals of the May Fourth era, the vehicle of emancipation Xu employs—religion, a sign of tradition often equated with superstition—does not. More accurately, everyday cultural aspects of belief and religious culture rather than grand doctrines of spiritual salvation or redemption facilitate Xiguan's liberation from patriarchal domination, as is apparent in her dogged pursuit of literacy. She deems her inability to read letters from Lin or write to him in Singapore one of the key reasons for her sale and marriage to Ahuja. While still living with Ahuja, she decides to learn to read, and Akolima, Ahuja's third wife, helps her become literate by teaching her to read Bengali and later the Koran in Arabic, a possibility afforded by her marriage into a Muslim family with means. Similarly, Elizabeth's selfless charity allows Xiguan to gain an education and establish herself as a teacher. Ironically, characteristics of religious culture such as compassion, charity, and learning permit Xiguan to achieve in India something she could never have accomplished in China: literacy, an education, a career, and, as a result, independence. She acquires a full and satisfying life apart from her neglectful and abusive husbands, who by selling and buying her treat her more as commodity than companion.

While Xiguan's conduct and attitude indicate that she has embraced such religious values as charity, compassion, and forgiveness, the story specifies neither her religious awakening or enlightenment, nor does it describe her spiritual conversion. The only awakening Xiguan experiences occurs after she escapes from Ahuja's home when she sees the

planet Venus in the sky and hears it speaking to her in her mind. The message she thus receives disabuses her of the folk wisdom that Akolima had imparted to her that the planet seeks to bewitch men. Instead, she realizes that Venus is a source of reassurance and hope, since it is always the first heavenly body to appear at dusk and the last to disappear in the morning, making it a harbinger of both nightfall and sunrise (48). Rather than referring to specific religious doctrine, values, or themes, it counters the bias that women use their beauty somehow to bewitch men, thus liberating Xiguan from superstition and providing her with a new source of hope and needed encouragement when she is taking her first tentative steps toward an independent life. Thereafter, Venus continues to serve as a source of reassurance and hope for her.

“The Merchant’s Wife,” then, focuses on the emancipation of women from traditional constraints. Muslim and Christian cultural and religious practices enhance this emancipation by facilitating Xiguan’s literacy, education, and even financial independence. Re-demptive transactions take precedence over epiphanies, awakenings, and charismatic conversions: enlightenment centers not on religious conversion but on displacing mistaken stereotypes regarding women to give a female protagonist greater hope to lead a life independent of abusive and negligent men.

The notion that religion could help facilitate woman’s emancipation in an increasingly modernizing China was an idea unique to Xu and of great importance to him. That he returned to it nearly two decades later in his last and longest work, *Yuguan*, bears this out. Set over a period of more than three decades beginning with the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, the novella focuses on the life of Yuguan, a widowed woman who turns to Christianity to better herself. Here, Xu recurs to many of the themes he addresses in his treatment of Xiguan’s search for emancipation. Religion, for example, provides Yuguan with the skills and means she needs to rear her son. A nexus of divergent religious traditions, including ancestor worship, Chinese folk practices, and Buddhist principles coupled with Christian doctrine also provides the protagonist with core beliefs that allow her to endure misfortune while bettering herself. Rather than aid-

ing Yuguan in a quest for transcendental wisdom and enlightenment, religious belief helps her to cope with the practical problems of daily life, much as it does Xiguan in “The Merchant’s Wife.”

In *Yuguan* Xu also analyzes the growing independence of a largely traditional woman and her struggle for economic sufficiency and purposeful life. As with Xiguan, Yuguan gains independence through her interaction with non-Chinese religion, in this case Christian missionaries and converts. She learns to read a Romanized Chinese Bible with the help of Xingguan, a Christian convert who becomes her close friend; Xingguan’s minister also provides her employment by helping her find work first as a nanny and later as a missionary. The latter job particularly attracts Yuguan because it offers as a fringe benefit the promise of free education for her son, whom she is grooming for a job in government so that he can one day build a memorial arch to honor her as a chaste widow.⁴ The church finances his education through college in China and then sends him for advanced training to America, where he meets the woman who eventually becomes his wife. As the story concludes, his mother puts aside her desires for recognition of her good works in order to rededicate herself to her church work and to performing a final act of kindness: traveling to Borneo in search of Xingguan’s long lost husband.

In spite of her professional affiliation with Christian religion and its attendant doctrine and practices, Yuguan retains a tight grasp on traditional Chinese ancestor worship practices and folk beliefs which help her deal with mundane matters rather than transcendent problems. Despite her occupation as a Christian missionary and her knowledge that the Chinese practice of sacrificing to deceased family members is not acceptable to the foreign minister who supervises her work, she continues to make regular sacrifices to her husband’s ancestors. Deathly afraid of ghosts, a superstition also decried by foreign Christians, she carries with her not only her Bible but also a copy of the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*,

⁴This traditional practice reflects the reward for a woman who strictly adhered to Confucian views of chastity for a wife by refraining from remarriage as well as the filial devotion of son to mother.

which she believes offers her protection from ghosts and other malevolent spirits. This classical Confucian text thus becomes a talisman with special powers to ward off evil influences. This odd admixture of religious beliefs serves a most pragmatic purpose for Yuguan: it affords her, a single mother who travels and works on her own, peace of mind so that she can complete her missionary assignments, support herself, and educate her son.

As it is for Xiguan, for Yuguan the issues of religious faith and belief are secondary to the search for an independent life. While she becomes an eloquent preacher, she fails to convert herself and doubts the knowledge and conversion of the foreign missionaries and ministers with whom she works. Ultimately, she believes that as long as one performs good works, then rites, beliefs, and modes of worship specific to a particular denomination or faith become irrelevant.⁵ When an “awakening,” if it can be called that, does occur for her, it is more a quiet refocusing of her priorities and a realignment of her motives than a grand moment of charismatic belief and conversion. In fact, the epiphany that Yuguan experiences at the climax of the story—what Lewis Stewart Robinson terms a “self-confrontation” rather than a “spiritual awakening” (151)—does not increase her knowledge of or faith in religious beliefs; rather, it recommits her to doing good works in order to serve selflessly the villagers she has come to love and respect.

As in “The Merchant’s Wife,” Xu stresses in “Yuguan” the role of the everyday rather than the transcendent, which corresponds to the focus on the quotidian over the transcendental that characterizes Chinese religious belief generally. In their study of modern and contemporary Chinese religious beliefs and practices, Chan Hoiman and Ambrose King note that

[t]he secret of Chinese religion does not lie in the quest for immortality, salvation, or ecstatic liberation. Rather, it is only in re-

⁵The practice of good works and pious acts is found not only in Christian beliefs and practices but also in Buddhism, where they are termed “meritorious

nouncing all these perhaps mystical ideals that the worldly reality would emerge as the only reality there is and hence the only source of meaning and value to questions both profane and sacred. (In brief, Chinese religious tradition renders the human world . . . itself sacred.) (367)

Thus, Yuguan's awakening refocuses her efforts on bettering the lives of the villagers she serves and helping locate her friend's lost husband, which may also explain why for Yuguan man is not fundamentally evil and "the way of men was [not] as dreadful and loathsome as her mistress had described it" (57).

Clearly, religion played a key role in Xu Dishan's short fiction. The author's complex intertwining of native and foreign religious concepts suggests his belief in a plurality of religious practices that respect but do not privilege one system over another. Further, religious belief met primarily practical needs since it both provided an avenue for helping his female characters achieve independence from the traditional Chinese social order and conveyed meaning in what C. T. Hsia terms "the practical world of love and work" (91). Xu thus embraces two antithetical trends in his writing. On the one hand, he champions new views on the role of women in China by offering sympathetic portraits of female characters seeking liberation and freedom from the older patriarchal family order. On the other, he chooses religion, generally perceived as traditional and retrograde during this time period, as the vehicle by which his female protagonists achieve their emancipation. In spite of its focus at times on the mundane and practical side of things, *Yuguan* takes readers on what Wayne Booth calls a "spiritual quest" (171), helping them escape the world of "animal brutishness" and competition with its "conflicting, paradoxical demands" (166-67). Xiguan, who acquires patience and forgiveness in her search for personal liberation, and Yuguan, who learns to suppress personal desires by extending assistance to others, become independent women with lives of their own, for whom religion offers insight and meaning that allow them to meet the daily challenges of life in modern India and China.

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