

STUDI E SAGGI

– 196 –

FLORIENTALIA  
ASIAN STUDIES SERIES – UNIVERSITY OF FLORENCE



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# Trajectories

Selected papers in East Asian studies  
軌跡

edited by  
IKUKO SAGIYAMA, MIRIAM CASTORINA

FIRENZE UNIVERSITY PRESS

2019

Trajectories : selected papers in East Asian studies 軌跡 /  
edited by Ikuko Sagiyama, Miriam Castorina. – Firenze :  
Firenze University Press, 2019.  
(Studi e saggi ; 196)

<http://digital.casalini.it/9788884533944>

ISBN 978-88-8453-335-7 (print)  
ISBN 978-88-8453-394-4 (online PDF)  
ISBN 978-88-6453-835-8 (online ePub)

Graphic design: Alberto Pizarro Fernández, Lettera Meccanica  
Front cover photo: © Rafael Abdrakhmanov | Dreamstime.com

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Published by Firenze University Press

Firenze University Press  
Università degli Studi di Firenze  
via Cittadella, 7, 50144 Firenze, Italy  
[www.fupress.com](http://www.fupress.com)

*This book is printed on acid-free paper  
Printed in Italy*

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## PREFACE

*Miriam Castorina, Ikuko Sagiyama*

For the third collection in the Florientalia Asian Studies Series we have chosen the title *Trajectories* 軌跡 to celebrate how scholars can always draw new routes, paths and directions with their research, even when it seems that everything has already been said and written on a specific matter. Trajectories cannot exist alone, they need an action to move them and give them direction, they can draw a straight line but also a curved one; they can fall afar or return to the starting point. So does research work, and we believe the scholars hosted in this volume, can really enrich the field of Chinese and Japanese Studies with the trajectories they have chosen for their research.

This volume gathers articles by six contributors interested in different research areas within the field of East Asian Studies. The articles, organized in a Japanese and a Chinese section, use different approaches within humanities disciplines to explore topics ranging from classical and contemporary East Asian literature to the study of second language acquisition across European and Asian languages.

The Japanese section essentially follows a chronological line. The opening contribution by Claudia Iazzetta analyses a particular group of Buddhist religious plays of the Nō theater, where the protagonist is the spirit of a plant, focusing on how these plays, despite their apparent homogeneity, can have a different characters construction and Buddhist teaching approach. The second contribution, by Luca Capponcelli, takes into consideration the *Rōmaji Nikki* by Ishikawa Takuboku 石川啄木 (1886-1912) and examines how structural features and phonocentrism employed in this work contribute in constructing the complex self-representation of the author. Gala Maria Follaco closes this section with an article dedicated to Yoshida Shūichi 吉田修一 (b. 1968) and his literature, which mirrors the alienation and solitude of today's urban life and his influence on interhuman relationships.

In the Chinese section, the first two contributions are dedicated to contemporary Chinese literature. Lara Colangelo explores the early production of Li Er 李洱 (b. 1966), an author still not well known outside Asia, and focuses on the existential condition of the Chinese intellectual during the 1990s; Franco

Ficetola's contribution focuses on the contemporary phenomenon of "soccer fiction" and introduces it as a branch of online literature in China, trying to map its features and singularities in the present-day Chinese literary panorama. The last article takes on a different trajectory and falls within the field of linguistics focusing on the benefits of visualizing tones in improving Chinese Mandarin learners' pronunciation.

We are grateful to all the contributors and the referees who participated in the volume and helped us with ideas and suggestions, creating a fruitful climate of academic collaboration and exchange and we hope to contribute, explore and trace new trajectories within the field of East Asian Studies.

JAPANESE STUDIES



# ENLIGHTENED AND ENLIGHTENING PLANTS IN NŌ THEATRE

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## *Abstract*

*Sōmoku jōbutsu*, the possibility that plants and trees can become Buddha, is the shared theme of a group of Nō plays where the protagonist is the spirit of a plant. Some of these are among the best-known plays in the current repertory and give even the modern spectator the opportunity to witness the extraordinary event of a plant appearing in human form and debating Buddhist teachings or poetry. But a closer look at three plays, namely *Sagyōzakura*, *Bashō* and *Yūgyō yanagi* shows how many differences in character construction and Buddhist teaching can arise in a group of plays that are homogeneous in appearance alone.

## *Keywords*

Enlightenment of plants, Nō, anthropomorphication, acquired enlightenment, innate enlightenment

## 要旨

草木成仏は、つまり心のない草木が仏となる可能性を持つこと、草木の精をシテにするいくつかの謡曲の共通のテーマとして現れている。その謡曲の中に現在上演する名曲もある。それで現在の観客も、草木の精は人間の様子で現れて仏教の教義や和歌に関する論じる意外な事情を経験できる。でも、草木成仏に関する謡曲のグループに属する『西行桜』『芭蕉』『遊行柳』という曲を分析してみると、人物設定や仏教の教義にはかなりの相違が生じ、そのグループに属するすべての謡曲は実際は同質の曲ではないとわかってくる。

## キーワード

草木成仏、能、擬人化、始覚、本

## 1. Introduction

As is widely known, Nō plays are loosely divided into five groups depending on the mood or the character of the play, and considering that there are groups

\* I am sincerely thankful and deeply indebted to Professor Chiara Ghidini for suggesting and encouraging me in carrying out this research.

for gods, warriors, or demons, it may seem strange that plants, as protagonists, do not have a group of their own, especially as Maruoka Kei lists up to 33 plays with plants in the main role in his *Kokin yōkyoku kaidai* (Maruoka 1984, 439-55). With their calm and serene atmosphere, they are usually classed in the first or third group. In fact, plants do not appear as disturbing and ominous vengeful ghosts or violent creatures but much more like uncanny beings performing quiet and elegant dances in their temporary human form. These plays share some common features, such as the anthropomorphic appearance of the plants and the variously in-depth discussion on *sōmoku jōbutsu*<sup>1</sup> Buddhist theory. However, the human form adopted is not always the same, ranging from old man to beautiful young girl. The question of *sōmoku jōbutsu* may also be presented in various ways, depending especially on the perspective – either *hongaku*<sup>2</sup> and *shikaku*<sup>3</sup> – used to convey it. Furthermore, in some cases the *shite*,<sup>4</sup> diverging from the traditional pattern found in *Nō* plays, does not explicitly ask for prayers and salvation, but offers the *waki*,<sup>5</sup> who is anyway a religious figure, a new point of reflection on the attainment of Buddhahood. In effect, scholars have identified two main types of plays about nonsentient beings: “one type whose *shite* needs our help and the other type whose *shite* helps us” (Klein 2013, 230). Another important aspect of these types of play is that sometimes what causes the *shite* to appear is not a request for prayer but a poem whose true meaning needs explanation.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, plants, despite being nonsentient, are able to talk and dance and possess wit, feeling, and emotions equal to or even surpassing those of humans. From this point of view, their human form on stage does not seem odd but actually appropriate. Underlying this phenomenon is the Japanese idea of nature that would later support the *sōmoku jōbutsu* theory.

[In the plays about the nonsentient being] the flower, tree, or butterfly is represented as having thoughts and yearnings of its own. [...] The appearance of a plant on the stage, able to speak and to reason—seeming to be, in fact, rather sentient—was not as difficult for the Muromachi audience to accept as we might at first suspect. Both the conventions of *nō* presentation and the elements of animism in early Buddhism and Shintō contribute to this.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 草木成仏.

<sup>2</sup> 本覚.

<sup>3</sup> 始覚.

<sup>4</sup> シテ.

<sup>5</sup> ワキ.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller discussion in English of the religious power of Japanese poetry see Kimbrough (2005) and Bushelle (2015).

<sup>7</sup> Shively 1957, 158-9.

## 2. Humanized nature

The belief that plants and trees possessed by a spirit may speak or assume human behaviour is commonly expressed in early Japanese native folklore. Some examples can be found in ancient folktales or in *Man'yōshū*<sup>8</sup> poems. Of course, they attest the widespread idea that man and nature are closely joined simply by virtue of their “life” (*seimei*)<sup>9</sup> so natural phenomena and human emotions appear perfectly at one in some verses.<sup>10</sup> But in aristocratic literary works of the Heian period this connection began to be elegantly conveyed through metaphor. In many poems, even the simplest and clearest landscape description may conceal a human emotional state. Furthermore, as Haruo Shirane points out, nature in eleventh-century aristocratic people poems and narratives, far from being a faithful reproduction of reality, was rather a kind of reconstruction where the emphasis was not so much on what nature is but on what it ought to be.

This kind of re-created or represented nature, which I refer to as secondary nature (*nijiteki shizen*), was not regarded as being opposed to the human world so much as an extension of it. Indeed, this secondary nature became a substitute for a more primary nature that was often remote from or rarely seen by aristocrats who lived in the center of Heian (Kyoto), the capital of Japan during the Heian period (794-1185). [...] Court poetry of the Heian period thus did not reflect the actual climate so much as create a highly aestheticized and [...] ideological representation of the four seasons. Imperial *waka* anthologies, such as the *Kokinshū*, selected the most appealing aspects of the seasons as they conformed to aristocratic standards and for which there was often a Chinese literary precedent.<sup>11</sup>

Especially in seasonal poems, where empathy toward plants is easy to discern, we can note the tendency to personify nature by treating it as a friend or lover. As a result, plants and animals are often gendered and mostly associated with women. The propensity to humanize nature was so deep-seated that even in *Sakuteiki*<sup>12</sup>, the most ancient essay on the construction of gardens dating back to the Heian period, there are phrases like “*ishi no kibō ni shitagatte*”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 『万葉集』.

<sup>9</sup> 生命.

<sup>10</sup> See poems 82, 209 and 4290 in *Man'yōshū* (Satonaga 2013, 122).

<sup>11</sup> Shirane 2012, 4, 12.

<sup>12</sup> 『作庭記』.

<sup>13</sup> 石の希望に従って.

(following the desire of the stone), borrowing expressions usually reserved to humans to describe the inanimate world of rocks.<sup>14</sup>

Kamakura narratives continue to offer folktales with plants showing emotions just like any human being. The literature of the Muromachi period, both popular and dramatic, is marked by a major re-emergence of animism previously found in ancient chronicles. The *iruimono*<sup>15</sup> type of *otogizōshi*<sup>16</sup> provides a number of tales<sup>17</sup> with plants that temporarily take on human features. It is such a common theme that it occurs even in *Tsurezuregusa*<sup>18</sup> (68 *dan*) and will continue to spread during the Edo period, when it reaches its height. But, as Haruo Shirane suggests,

the emergence of spirits of plants and animals in Muromachi popular literature can also be traced, at least in part, to the increasingly widespread Buddhist belief in the notion that “trees, grasses, and earth all become buddhas”. [...] animals and plants were thought in this new Buddhist view to have the potential to be enlightened and achieve salvation.<sup>19</sup>

Plants in human guise and *sōmoku jōbutsu* belief can usually both be found in the Nō plays where the spirits of plants are protagonists. So basic knowledge of *sōmoku jōbutsu* theory, its dissemination and establishment in mediaeval Japan thus proves to be indispensable in the analysis of this kind of Nō play.

### 3. *Sōmoku jōbutsu theory in Japan*

In China the possibility of plants achieving Buddhahood was principally an abstract matter for doctrinal discussion. But in Japan this theory was soon accepted almost without opposition and was well assimilated into the already existing animistic view of nature. While Saichō<sup>20</sup> (767-822), upon returning from China, was the first to talk about *mokuseki busshō* (the Buddha-nature of

<sup>14</sup> Satonaga 2013, 122.

<sup>15</sup> 異類物.

<sup>16</sup> お伽草子.

<sup>17</sup> Some examples are *Asakaho no tsuyu* 『あさかほのつゆ』, *Kachōfūgetsu no monogatari* 『花鳥風月の物語』, *Getsurinsō* 『月林草』, *Sakuraume no sōshi* 『桜姫の草子』, *Himeyuri* 『姫百合』, *Sumizomezakura* 『墨染桜』, and others (Itō 2009, 4).

<sup>18</sup> 『徒然草』.

<sup>19</sup> Shirane 2012, 129-30.

<sup>20</sup> 最澄.

trees and rocks) in Japan, Kūkai<sup>21</sup> (774-835), the founder of the Shingon Buddhist school, was the first to theorize *sōmoku jōbutsu*. He believed that plants can attain Buddhahood, not because they are sentient beings but precisely by virtue of being plants. In his *Unjigi*<sup>22</sup> he argues that if even plants may attain Buddhahood then why not the sentient beings?,<sup>23</sup> indeed, “in his view plants and trees are capable of having Buddha-nature simply because they, along with everything else in the phenomenal world, are ontologically one with the Absolute, the dharmakaya” (La Fleur 1973a, 98).

Also, in the Tendai school, the monk Ryōgen<sup>24</sup> (912-985) maintained that everything in this world shares the Buddha nature (*issai kai jōbutsu*<sup>25</sup>), and in his *Sōmoku hosshin shugyō jōbutsu ki*<sup>26</sup> tried to bolster the still quite weak position of plants identifying a correspondence between the four stages of the life cycle (*shisō*<sup>27</sup>) of plants and the four stages of the process of human enlightenment (*shiten*<sup>28</sup>). In other words, nonsentient and sentient beings share the same path to salvation, and so plants too began to be considered as creatures possessing a mind (*sōmoku yūshin jōbutsu*<sup>29</sup>). But Ryōgen’s position is close to Kūkai’s belief only on the surface: according to Kūkai, plants already possess Buddha nature, whereas Ryōgen claimed that plants, just like human beings, need to attain it undergoing an ascetic process. Thus, what was a matter of fact for Kūkai became a matter of Buddhahood potential for Ryōgen, and he portrayed the respective positions of both the Shingon and Tendai schools at the time, namely the *hongaku* and the *shikaku* doctrines.

In the twelfth century, Tendai scholar Chūjin<sup>30</sup> (1065-1138) felt the need to summarize the various arguments circulating up to his day on the Buddhahood-of-plants question in 7 points in his *Kankō ruijū*.<sup>31</sup> But Chūjin, perhaps not so unwittingly, selected only those theories where plants are considered to already possess Buddha nature, excluding Ryōgen’s eminent view. In his fourth argument especially, Chūjin saw in the pure mode of being of plants, namely their

<sup>21</sup> 空海.

<sup>22</sup> 『吽字義』.

<sup>23</sup> “Sōmoku mata nasu, nani ni iwan ya yūjō o ya”. Cited in Hagiwara 1994, 257.

<sup>24</sup> 良源.

<sup>25</sup> 一切皆成仏。

<sup>26</sup> 『草木発心修行成仏記』.

<sup>27</sup> 四相.

<sup>28</sup> 四転.

<sup>29</sup> 草木有心成仏.

<sup>30</sup> 忠尋.

<sup>31</sup> 漢光類聚.

having branches, roots, leaves and so on, the possession of enlightenment in their present form. Any similarity to human beings were no longer necessary. By this time, it seems that plants and trees are allowed to be what they are, and no assimilation to humanity was required to achieve Buddhahood, especially as they already possess it. “Without recourse to the human model of enlightenment, [Chūjin] did not simply “naturalize” nature. Inasmuch as he wrote of the “Buddha-nature” of plants and trees, he attributed religious meaning and value to the natural world” (La Fleur 1973a, 110).

So it is clear that in the twelfth century, the Tendai school gradually shifted from a *shikaku* stance to a *hongaku* position. In contrast with the gradual and acquired enlightenment of the *shikaku* approach, the innate and original concept of enlightenment in the *hongaku* doctrine focuses on *being* rather than *becoming* Buddha. In medieval Japan the idea of the original enlightenment of plants resulted in what was referred to as *sōmoku fu jōbutsu* (the non-necessity for plants and trees to become Buddha) as they are innately enlightened in themselves. After all, the most radical thirteenth-century *hongaku* theories established a sameness between plants and Buddha so that no need or possibility for the former to become the latter was envisaged at all (Rambelli 1992, 200). Essentially, “the discussion that began with the question of the possibility of salvation *for* plants and trees eventually led to the position that there existed a salvation for man derived *from* plants and trees” (La Fleur 1974b, 227). Contemplation of nature became a viable alternative to reciting sutras or undertaking pilgrimage in order to attain Buddhahood. In fact, although in *hongaku* theory everything in the phenomenal world is inherently enlightened, it seems that man still has to achieve salvation through an experience-based process, as in *shikaku*. Thus, nature fully possesses what man has only in part.

#### 4. *Sōmoku jōbutsu* in *Nō*

*Sōmoku jōbutsu* theory transcended Shingon and Tendai religious circles and permeated the whole of medieval Japanese society influencing the arts and literature, including *Nō* theatre. According to Hagiwara Jinryō, in the 236 *Nō* plays collected in *Yōkyoku taikan*,<sup>32</sup> as many as 28 plays, that is to say nearly a tenth, mention the idea of *sōmoku jōbutsu*, but the protagonist is the spirit of a plant in only 7 of them.<sup>33</sup> In *Nō*, the *sōmoku jōbutsu* doctrine is conveyed mainly by

<sup>32</sup> 『謡曲大観』.

<sup>33</sup> *Kakitsubata* 『杜若』, *Saigyōzakura* 『西行桜』, *Sumizomezakura* 『墨染桜』, *Bashō* 『芭蕉』, *Fuji* 『藤』, *Mutsuura* 『六浦』, *Yugyō yanagi* 『遊行柳』.

quoting the entire—or most often—just the second half of the verse *ichi butsu jōdō kanken hōkai sōmoku kokudō shikkai jōbutsu*,<sup>34</sup> or by reference to the “Parable of medicinal herbs” of the *Lotus sutra*. But scholars have found that both these doctrinal supports prove to be in some way misquoted or misunderstood.

In *Shikanshiki*,<sup>35</sup> written in the thirteenth century, Hocchibō Shōshin<sup>36</sup> declares that the “sōmoku jōbutsu” verse is drawn from *Chūingyō*<sup>37</sup> (the Sutra on intermediate existence) and, in line with this, the same statement appears in some Nō plays, such as *Sumizomezakura*.<sup>38</sup> But in the seventeenth century Nō commentary *Yōkyoku shūyōshō* the author Inui Teijo<sup>39</sup> declares that there is no trace of this verse in *Chūingyō*, thus undermining the first scriptural support used by Nō playwrights. In point of fact, it originally appeared in Dōsui’s *Makashikanron guketsusangi*<sup>40</sup> in the twelfth century.

For the Tendai school and other Amida sects, the parable contained in the *Lotus sutra* became the chief evidence supporting the conviction that plants are innately enlightened. Since the most influential Muromachi Buddhist sects accepted this evidence, there was no need to discuss its veracity in Nō. A famous passage in this parable says that three grasses and three trees are equally watered by the rain of Buddha’s preaching. There is no better way to communicate the Truth than to explain it through concrete examples drawn from the real world, and in Buddhist scriptures, nature is often used just like a *hōben*<sup>41</sup> for this purpose. It therefore seems quite clear that in this parable too, grasses, plants and rain should be interpreted as metaphor. But in medieval Japan, scholars tended to take this passage literally, as did the Nō playwrights. This was a time when Buddhism began to spread to the most rural and remote areas where preachers needed more readily understandable explanations of the most obscure passages and dogmas. Thus, in Sonshun’s *Shūrin shūyō shū*<sup>42</sup> and Eishin’s *Hokkeikyō jikiden shō*,<sup>43</sup> the “Parable of medicinal herbs” is interpreted

<sup>34</sup> 一仏成道 觀見法界 草木国土 悉皆成仏. “When one Buddha attains the Way and contemplates the realm of the Law, the grasses and the trees and the land will all become Buddha” (Shively 1957, 140).

<sup>35</sup> 『止觀私記』.

<sup>36</sup> 宝地房証真.

<sup>37</sup> 『中陰經』.

<sup>38</sup> 『墨染桜』.

<sup>39</sup> 犬井貞恕『謡曲拾葉抄』.

<sup>40</sup> 道邃『摩訶止觀論弘決纂義』.

<sup>41</sup> 方便.

<sup>42</sup> 尊舜『鷲林拾葉鈔』.

<sup>43</sup> 栄心『法華經直談鈔』.

as an effective rendering of *sōmoku jōbutsu* theory. In reality, these texts appeared after the majority of Nō plays dealing with this theme were composed, but it is most likely that Sonshun and Eishin simply wrote down what was already widely acknowledged to be true.

Lastly, other expressions related to the Tendai view whereby every phenomenon contains the entire cosmos are equally frequent in Nō plays containing a plant spirit as *shite*. “One thought contains the three thousand [*dharmā*]”, “one speck of dust contains the *dharmā*-element” and “one color and one fragrance is nothing other than the Middle Way” are just a few examples of those most commonly used (Shively 1957, 143).

### 5. *Saigyōzakura*<sup>44</sup>

In his *Sarugaku dangi*,<sup>45</sup> in which Zeami<sup>46</sup> (1363-1443) discusses this play<sup>47</sup> he displays a good deal of pride, declaring that

*Saigyō Akoya no matsu, ōkata nitaru nō nari. Nochi no yo kakaru nō kaku mono ya arumajiki to oboete, kono niban wa kakioku nari.*<sup>48</sup>

The two plays [*Saigyō*] and *Akoya no matsu* resemble each other in many ways. Thinking that, in times to come, there would be no one who could write plays of this character, [I] therefore wished to leave them as [my] testament.<sup>49</sup>

The play starts with the famous poet Saigyō<sup>50</sup> (118-1190) in the role of the *waki* who, come springtime, wishes to stay alone and enjoy the calm of his hut in the western hills of the capital and the beauty of the single old cherry tree that stands there. But droves of visitors come from all over the country to see

<sup>44</sup> 『西行桜』.

<sup>45</sup> 『申楽談儀』.

<sup>46</sup> 世阿弥.

<sup>47</sup> There is still some doubt about which play Zeami really refers to as *Saigyō* 『西行』, and some scholars assume that he actually meant *Sanekata* 『実方』. Debate also continues on the authorship of *Saigyōzakura*. While the majority believe that it is undoubtedly Zeami's work, others think that it could be the work of Zenchiku or at any rate that the current version was revised by him. In this article I follow the mainstream view that *Saigyō* is *Saigyōzakura* and that it was composed by Zeami.

<sup>48</sup> 西行・阿古屋の松、大かた似たる能也。後の世、かかる能書く者や有るまじきと覚へて、此二番は書き置く也。(Omote and Katō 1974, 286).

<sup>49</sup> Rimer and Yamazaki 1984, 214.

<sup>50</sup> 西行.

cherry trees in full bloom, thus disturbing Saigyō's longed-for tranquillity. In fact, a group of these visitors asks for permission to see precisely this one, ancient, cherry tree by Saigyō's hut. Won over by their insistence, the poet somewhat reluctantly lets them in. But the servant's words on this cherry tree are worthy of note.

*Satemo anjitsu no hana haru migoto nite sōrō aida miyako yori kisen gunshū tsukamatsuri sōrō.*<sup>51</sup>

The cherry tree here in the hermitage garden is famous. Every spring, visitors high and low, rich and poor, crowd in to see it.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, this is no ordinary cherry tree but a particularly famous one able to draw not only the aristocrats of the capital but people from all levels of society. In fact, one of the visitors says he comes from the southern district where only ordinary people live. As we have seen, nature had now acquired a religious significance, and this tree, as a means of salvation, makes no distinction: every person, regardless of their social standing, is equally eligible for enlightenment.

Saigyō stresses this saving power of nature some lines later in the following words,

*Sore haru no hana wa jōguhonrai no kozue ni araware aki no tsuki gekemeian no mizu ni yadoru. Dare ka shiru yuku mizu ni sanpuku no natsu mo naku, kan-tei no matsu no kaze issei no aki o moyoosu koto. Sōmoku kokudō onozukara kenbutsu monbō no kechien tari.*<sup>53</sup>

Yes, the blossoms of spring opening on the highest boughs, display the upward urge to true knowledge; the autumn moon, shining from the water's depths, shows light from on high transforming darkest ignorance. Ah, who is there who comprehends such truths? Flowing water knows no summer heat. Wind through pines in the valley sounds the coming of fall. So plants, trees and all the land, of themselves, direct our gaze to enlightenment and guide our ears to harken to the Law.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> さても庵室の花春毎に見事にて候間。都より貴賤群集仕り候。(YT 2, 1169). Every Nō play cited in this article is from *Yōkyoku taikan* from now on referred to as YT.

<sup>52</sup> Tyler 1992, 216.

<sup>53</sup> それ春の花は上求本来の梢にあらはれ。秋の月下化冥闇の水に宿る。誰か知る行く水に。三伏の夏もなく。癩底の松の風。一声の秋を催すこと。草木国土。おのづから。見佛聞法の。結縁たり。(YT 2, 1171).

<sup>54</sup> Tyler 1992, 217-8.

These words remind us of Chūjin's position according to which nature shows its Buddha nature just by being itself without the need to imitate man. And this very nature can lead human beings to enlightenment. This view of nature reflects Saigyō's thinking too. Sharing Kūkai's vision, he was very close to the Shingon and Tendai temples in the capital and soon embraced the *hongaku* approach to plant Buddhahood. Actually, also in *Saigyōzakura* he distinguishes himself from those visitors who merely behold the external beauty of nature with their eyes.

*Ware wa mata kokoro koto naru hana no moto ni hikarakuyō o kanjitsutsu.*<sup>55</sup>

My own heart, I find, differs, for to me the flowers speak differently, telling how blossoms scatter and summer leaves fall.<sup>56</sup>

Nature alone is not sufficient if man is not capable of looking at it in the correct way. Its beauty, that draws visitors from far and wide is a good start, but it is just a vehicle for a deeper truth. It is nature in its most true and genuine form, in its regularly changing appearance with the changing of the seasons, that truly reveals its Buddha nature.

The moon is shining high in the sky and, at nightfall, when all the visitors have fallen asleep, an old man comes up out of the cherry tree. He approaches Saigyō to ask him the meaning of the poem he has just recited in which the poet blames the cherry blossoms for drawing so many visitors. The poem is a very famous one and, in this play, reveals its power to prompt, exactly like a prayer, the emergence of the spirit. The *shite* wears a *shiwa jo* mask and his appearance is that of a very old white-haired man. A perplexed Saigyō explains that it was the fault of the blossoms if his hut is no longer a quiet place as they have caused the visitors' distressing arrival. But soon the spirit wittily rebuts,

*Osorenagara kono gyoi koso sukoshi fushin ni soroe to yo. Ukiyo to miru mo yama to miru mo tada sono hito no kokoro ni ari. Hijōmushin no sōmoku no hana ni ukiyo no toga wa araji.*<sup>57</sup>

Forgive me but it is just this feeling of yours that troubles me so. The eyes can see any spot as the world of sorrows or as a mountain retreat; that depends wholly on the seer's own heart. Surely no flowers upon a tree, which after all

<sup>55</sup> われは又心ことなる花の本に。飛花落葉を覩じつつ。(YT 2, 1173).

<sup>56</sup> Tyler 1992, 218.

<sup>57</sup> 恐れながらこの御意こそ。少し不審に候えとよ。浮世と見るも山と見るも。唯その人の心にあり。非情無心の草木の。花に浮世のとがはあらじ。(YT 2, 1176).

is insentient and without feelings of its own, can be held to blame for the vexation of the world.<sup>58</sup>

Again, nature is ontologically what it is and the remaining problem is epistemological and this, then, is man's problem. Man has to discard his bodily eyes and open those of the heart to become capable of true sight. However, what is more interesting is a spirit of a plant that he declares has no feelings and no heart but shows a greater knowledge and wisdom than a man like Saigyō, proving in so doing that plants are far from unworthy of attaining Buddhahood. With the expedient of the words of the poem, the spirit makes clear that plants have no sins to atone for nor do they need to undergo any ascetic process: they are already enlightened by simply following their nature.

This play presents the *hongaku* idea of enlightenment: in fact, the spirit does not ask Saigyō for prayers. Quite the contrary, the spirit actually helps the *waki* on the path to enlightenment revealing to him – and to the spectators too, of course – how nature, if perceived correctly, may become an inspiring model of innate enlightenment for human beings. Just as it was for Saigyō, here the world of nature is the primary world of Buddhist values and an adequate substitute for the rites and actions normally associated with religious practice.

Lastly, a brief consideration on the spirit's human features. Even if he clearly states that he is the spirit of the flowers blooming on the old tree, he reveals himself as an old man. Usually, flowers are associated with beautiful young girls, but in this case the spirit claims that the flowers and the tree have grown old together, thus justifying his aged figure. However, it may well be that an important person like Saigyō, despite not playing the lead, is able to influence the mood of the entire play, affecting even the *shite*'s image. In reality, in later years, Saigyō's poems often lamented his old age, and many of his verses speak of his sad departure from beautiful springtime, surely a metaphor for his approaching departure from life. Furthermore, mention is made in this play of the tree continuing to produce flowers every spring despite being old and quite withered. Zeami often uses this image in his treatises when he describes the impression that a dance performed by an old character ought to convey: the performer should resemble an old tree that puts forth flowers.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Tyler 1992, 220-1.

<sup>59</sup> This expression is used twice in *Fūshikaden* 風姿花伝 and once in *Nikyoku santai ningyōzu* 二曲三体人形図 (Omote and Katō 1974, 22, 58, 125).

6. *Bashō*<sup>60</sup>

This play is unquestionably by Zenchiku<sup>61</sup> (1405-1470) and, compared to *Saigyōzakura* is clearly much more focused on the *sōmoku jōbutsu* theme but from a different perspective: *shikaku*. Here, salvation is achieved by incessantly hearing the *Lotus sutra*, which inspires feeling of gratitude.

The *waki* soon presents himself, giving the following information.

*Sankyo suru sō nite sōrō. Satemo ware Hokkejikyō no mi nareba, nichiyachōbo kano onkyō o yomitatematsuri sōrō. [...] yo na yo na dokkyō no orifushi anjitsu no atari ni hito no otonai kikoe sōrō. Konnya mo kitarite sōrowaba, ikanaru mono zo to na o tazuneba ya to omoi sōrō.*<sup>62</sup>

I am a monk who lives among the hills [...]. As I am a believer in the *Lotus Sutra*, I chant it aloud morning and evening, day and night. [...] night after night while I am reciting the sutra, I hear someone outside my hermit's cell. If he should come again tonight, I think I will ask his name.<sup>63</sup>

Thus the *waki* is a religious man who, secluded in a remote place, devotedly and incessantly recites the *Lotus sutra* which he always carries on his person. In other words, he embodies the perfect Buddhist devotee who fulfils all the required ascetic duties. He is on the road to salvation. As a hermit he would be alone but, unlike Saigyō, he is not reluctant to welcome other people, and this attitude gives him from the role of saviour rather than saved right from the start.

At nightfall the *shite* appears bearing a Buddhist rosary and a spray of leaves, clearly suggesting that it is a plant seeking enlightenment. The *shite* wears a *fukai*<sup>64</sup> mask, so it is a middle-aged woman, lamenting her solitary life surrounded only by plants and rocks with not even one human friend. In this play, nature is no longer a *locus* for attaining Buddhahood, and plants have to find their concealed Buddha-nature by undergoing an ascetic process preferably guided by a religious figure. In her conversation with the hermit, she displays an unexpected wit and knowledge that overcome the hermit's initial reticence to let her into his hut. Then the woman says

<sup>60</sup> 芭蕉.

<sup>61</sup> 禅竹.

<sup>62</sup> 山居する僧にて候。さてもわあれ法華持經の身なれば。日夜朝暮かの御經を讀み奉り候。[...] 夜な夜な讀經の折節。庵室のあたりに人のおとなひ聞え候。今夜も来りて候はば。如何なる者ぞと名を尋ねばやと思ひ候。(YT 4, 2530-1).

<sup>63</sup> Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai (hereinafter NGS) 1959, 129-30.

<sup>64</sup> 深井.

*Ara arigata ya kono onkyō o chōmon mōseba warera gotoki no nyonin hijō sōmoku no tagui made mo tanomoshū koso sōroe.*<sup>65</sup>

How grateful I am! As I listen, the words of the sutra bring hope not only to a woman such as I but also to the insentient things like herbs and trees.<sup>66</sup>

It appears clear enough that in this character merge the two beings that in Buddhist teaching strive the most to attain salvation, namely women and insentient plants, and thus need help the most. Furthermore, in his description of this *shite* the author uses expressions suitable both for human beings and plants. For example, her wretched figure with wind-torn sleeves reminds us of a *bashō* tree with its long leaves beaten and shattered by the autumn squalls. The spirit appears as a rather unattractive woman – just like the *bashō* tree, which is also not particularly attractive – but her description nevertheless recalls her true botanical nature. And even when, in the second part of the play, she reveals that she is the spirit of the *bashō* tree, she is always referred to as “the *bashō* woman” (*bashō no onna*<sup>67</sup>). She is a plant, but to attain Buddhahood, she needs to act like a human being, and women are the ones who share the condition closest to that of a plant. She declares,

*Iya hito to wa hazukashi ya. Makoto wa ware wa hijō no sei, bashō no onna to arawaretari [...] nani ka sadame wa arakane no tsuchi mo sōmoku mo ame yori kudarū uro no megumi wo uke.*<sup>68</sup>

I am not worthy of the name of woman. In truth I am an insentient being, a *bashō* tree changed into woman. [...] no dividing line separates being from being. Earth, herbs and trees receive from heaven the selfsame dew and rain.<sup>69</sup>

This view is in some way similar to Ryōgen’s because a plant acting like a human being becomes eligible for salvation. The *bashō* spirit feels ashamed when she is considered like a sentient being, because she is aware of their superiority. Just like women who must first become men to attain enlightenment, this plant temporarily becomes a woman to approach the hermit; she talks with him and, thanks to his help, reaches Buddhahood. She is not even a famous *bashō* tree celebrated in some poem or associated with an episode drawn from

<sup>65</sup> あらありがたやこの御経を聴聞申せば。われ等如きの女人。非情草木の類までも頼もしくこそ候へ。(YT 4, 2534).

<sup>66</sup> NGS 1959, 133-4.

<sup>67</sup> 芭蕉の女.

<sup>68</sup> いや人とは恥ずかしや。真はわれは非情の精。芭蕉の女と現れたり[...]何か定めは荒金の土も草木も天より降る雨露の恵みを受け。(YT 4, 2540).

<sup>69</sup> NGS 1959, 138.

the classics. This makes her an even more modest and ordinary figure with no significant traits at all.

In conclusion, the structure of this play is inspired by Buddhist teaching, with the *Lotus sutra* at its core. Moreover, only in *Bashō* and *Teika*,<sup>70</sup> both by Zenchiku, the *sōmoku jōbutsu* theory and truthfulness are explained through explicit reference to the “Parable of medicinal herbs”, making *Bashō* unique among the other Nō plays that have the spirit of a plant as protagonist.

### 7. *Yugyō yanagi*<sup>71</sup>

This play was written by Kanze Kojirō Nobumitsu<sup>72</sup> (1435-1516) and, like *Saigyōzakura*, is largely inspired by a famous poem by Saigyō. It begins with the arrival of the *waki* in Iwaki province. He is a *yugyō shōnin*,<sup>73</sup> an errant priest or, more literally, a wandering saint, belonging to the Jishū sect of Pure Land Buddhism. The distinctive aspect of the Jishū sect is perpetual invocation of Nenbutsu and its errant priests wandered all over the country distributing *mi-fuda*<sup>74</sup> (prayer cards). Thus, this *waki*, as an accredited religious figure, might fit the savior role, but in this play the *shite* and *waki* are both the savior and the saved, advocating both *hongaku* and *shikaku* views at the same time.

The *waki*, having come to a crossroads and not knowing which direction to take, encounters an old man from the area who suggests the right path to choose, most likely a metaphor for the right way to attain salvation through nature instead of prayers or pilgrimages.

*Mazu sennen yugyō no ongekō no toki mo furumichi to te mukashi no kaidō o ontōri sōroishi nari. Sareba mukashi no michi o oshie mōsan to te harubaru kore made mairitari.*<sup>75</sup>

But first, I have something else to tell you. Years ago, another errant priest come here. But he took the other road, the abandoned one, saying that he preferred old ways. I have come here from a great distance, to show you the path he took.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>70</sup> 『定家』.

<sup>71</sup> 『遊行柳』.

<sup>72</sup> 観世小次郎信光.

<sup>73</sup> 遊行上人.

<sup>74</sup> 御札.

<sup>75</sup> まづ先年遊行の御下向の時も。古道とて昔の街道をオン通り候ひしなり。されば昔の道を教へ申さんとて。遙々これまで参りたり。(YT 5, 3194-5).

<sup>76</sup> Keene 1970, 224.

Again, the prominent influence of Saigyō – who is not even present but only recalled – conditions the *waki* because, like Saigyō, he is an errant priest and the *shite*, reflecting the Saigyō's religious idea of nature. The main source of this play is a poem that describes a refreshing pause that Saigyō took under a willow near a flowing stream during his travels. But the spot was so pleasant that he felt it had been there for a long time.

But the poet here seems eager to suggest that the willow and the stream offered him more than a moment's coolness and drink; it offered also this opportunity to lose all sense of time and all concern about pushing on toward a destination. [...] This is interesting especially inasmuch as most commentators agree that the road he is on is one traversed by him for the sake of a pilgrimage. [...] It is as if, in being drawn into this natural setting, he has been induced into something that has its own sacrality for him. [...] He has been drawn into the world of nature, and it rather than a goal of pilgrimage which is distant and cultically formed is for Saigyō salvific.<sup>77</sup>

It is in this natural setting that he finds the Way. So the *shite*, who is actually the spirit of the willow, does not appear to have been lured by a poem or to have come to ask for prayers: his purpose is to show the *waki* the Way, and in this sense he has a salvific role. But soon after, he switches to the role of the saved, pointing to the willow, which has now become withered, and he asks prayers for its sake.

*Kuchiki no yanagi to te meiboku ari. Kakaru tattoki shōnin no minori no koe wa sōmoku made mo jōbutsu no en aru kechien tari.*<sup>78</sup>

A famous tree, known as the Withered Willow, stands there on the path; if a saintly priest like you would pray before it, then even a tree or a blade of grass could achieve Buddhahood.<sup>79</sup>

But the prayers he receives are the ten invocations, calling on the name of Amida ten times. In fact, it was believed that if this practice was performed by a high-ranking priest it was possible to attain Buddhahood by joining him in the recitation. Hence the plant is no longer enlightened but needs to undertake, consistent with *shikaku*, a process that will lead it to salvation. And in this play, it is the Nenbutsu and not the *Lotus sutra* that ensures salvation for plants. The *shite*,

<sup>77</sup> La Fleur 1973a, 115.

<sup>78</sup> 朽木の柳とて名木あり。かかる貴き上人の。御法の聲は草木までも。成佛の縁ある結縁たり。(YT 5, 3195).

<sup>79</sup> Keene 1970, 224-5.

wearing an *akobu jō*<sup>80</sup> mask in the first half of the play appears wearing a *shiwa jo* in the second half: the same used by the *shite* in *Saigyōzakura* and already enlightened. Thus, the *waki*'s prayers saved him and led him to enlightenment. Here the *sōmoku jōbutsu* idea is incorporated into the Jōdo framework, relying on a verse of the *Muryōjukyō*,<sup>81</sup> one of the most important texts in Jōdo Buddhism.

*Ima zo minori ni aitake no sugu ni michibiku Mida no oshie shujō shōnen hitoku ōjō no kuriki ni hikarete sōmoku made mo bukka ni itaru.*<sup>82</sup>

Now it has encountered the holy Law, the teaching of Amida, who guides even the crooked straight to Paradise. Drawn by the blessed power of his vow: "Let all beings call my name, and they shall be reborn into my Pure Land" even trees and grasses can attain Enlightenment.<sup>83</sup>

As for the human form taken by the *shite*, just as in *Bashō*, every human trait recalls a plant: his hair is like willow twigs and his frame droops like a willow tree. He is above all the spirit of the willow, and as he is an old and withered tree, his human form too is that of an old man. Also, the closing lines of this play and the seasonal setting are very similar to those of *Bashō* that ends with the following words,

*Hana mo chigusa mo chirijiri ni, hana mo chigusa mo chirijiri ni nareba bashō wa yaburete nokorikeri.*<sup>84</sup>

[the wind] tears up flowers and grasses, tears up flowers and grasses. Alone stands the *bashō*, its leaves all torn to shreds.<sup>85</sup>

While in *Yugyō yanagi* we find

*Tsuyu mo ko no ha mo chirijiri ni nari hatete nokoru kuchiki to narinikeri.*<sup>86</sup>

[the autumn winds sweep] scattering dew, scattering leaves; they leave nothing but a withered willow tree.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>80</sup> 阿古父尉.

<sup>81</sup> 『無量寿経』.

<sup>82</sup> 今ぞ御法に合竹の直に導く。弥陀の教へ衆生称念。必得往生の功力に引かれて草木までも。佛果に至る。(YT 5, 3200).

<sup>83</sup> Keene 1970, 229.

<sup>84</sup> 花も千草もちりぢりに。花も千草もちりぢりになれば。芭蕉は破れて残りけり。(YT 4, 2543).

<sup>85</sup> NGS 1959, 141.

<sup>86</sup> 露も木の葉も散り散りになり果てて。残る朽木となりにけり。(YT 5, 3205).

<sup>87</sup> Keene 1970, 234.

Nobumitsu belonged to the new generation, that of great masters like Zeami and Zenchiku, and perhaps he felt the need to refer to them in some way. As a result, *Yugyō yanagi* seems a perfect combination of the other two plays examined in this paper. It features Saigyō, as poet and religious man with his idea of nature, and we also find autumn, the image of a withered tree beaten by the wind, as well as a request for salvation. Central roles are attributed to poetry and, at the same time, the importance of Buddhism and its discourse on the salvation of plants. Lastly, the spirit of the willow helps and is helped by the *waki* in equal measure.

### 8. Conclusions

An analysis of just three plays with the spirit of a plant as protagonist is sufficient to understand that there is no established model to be complied with: the model for the roles of *shite* and *waki* changes as much as the road to salvation does. Furthermore, Zeami, Zenchiku, and Nobumitsu have their own individual and distinct styles. Zeami is more concerned with literary refinement than philosophical Buddhist themes. On the contrary, Zenchiku adopts a much soberer, but highly erudite, style to present insightful Buddhist concepts. Nobumitsu tries to emulate both without sacrificing either of them. One shared feature of these three plays, however, is old age: all three spirits choose to appear in the form of an old person because in plant form they are old and withered too. After all, it is in the twilight years that one is mostly concerned with salvation or, at least acquires the appropriate wisdom to discuss it.

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# SELF-REPRESENTATION IN ISHIKAWA TAKUBOKU'S *RŌMAJI NIKKI*: PHONOCENTRISM AND HIS INNER WORLD

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## *Abstract*

*Rōmaji Nikki* (1909) is the most widely known diary of Ishikawa Takuboku – particularly for its experimental orthography, being completely written in roman letters (*rōmaji*). The author explains his phonocentric writing as a device to preserve the secrecy of his script. Indeed, *Rōmaji Nikki* describes his most intimate thoughts and episodes, including the striking descriptions of his sexual experiences. Besides the questionable authenticity of the premise of secrecy, in the romanization of the Japanese language we should seek other meanings strictly tied to the description of his inner world and his literary experimentation. This paper examines the way in which the *Rōmaji Nikki* uses structural features (such as narrative elements) and phonocentrism in connection with the representation of Self, aiming to identify how all these elements contribute to the psychological complexity of Takuboku's Self-representation.

## *Keywords*

Autobiographical and narrative writing, phonocentric writing, sexual agency, subjective agency, inner life and Self-examination

## 要旨

石川啄木の『ローマ字日記』は、アルファベットで表記されているという点で、彼の日記の中で最も広く知られたものである。啄木自身は、日記の秘密性を守るためにローマ字表記を採用したと述べており、確かにこの日記においては性描写も含めて、彼の体験や思いが赤裸々に記録されている。しかしローマ字を用いた理由の真偽は別として、啄木が選んだローマ字表記に、彼の内面世界および文学的な実験に密接にかかわる、さらに広い意味を求めべきであろう。本稿では、この日記における物語性および音声中心表記などの構造的な特徴と啄木の自己像に注目しながら、これらの要素が『ローマ字日記』に表れる作者の深い心理描写といかに関わっているかを論じる。

## キーワード

自叙伝的・物語的記述、音声中心表記、性の能動性、主体的能動性、内部世界および自己分析

### 1. Introduction

In spite of his brief existence, Ishikawa Takuboku<sup>1</sup> (1886-1912) is one of the most representative authors of the late Meiji period (1868-1912). His literary career began with the *Myōjō*,<sup>2</sup> a leading magazine of Japanese Romanticism at the dawn of the twentieth century, then he was attracted by Naturalism, but soon became one of its sharpest critics and finally his engagement with political issues became more and more explicit leading him to an interest in Socialism. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that Takuboku in his short life met some of principal ideas that were in vogue during the Meiji period. Much of his popularity is posthumous and mainly linked to the tanka repertory dealing with both his personal life and social issues through a straightforward lyricism free from the passionate and elegant phraseology of Romanticism. But he gained his reputation also due to the vicissitudes of his disordered life of hardships, for his idealism and rationalism, for his quest for literary glory and his self-aggrandizement and self-disapproval. A mingling of contrasting attitudes that epitomized the restless conscience of modern Japan.

The search for self-examination and authenticity are, together with his interest in social and political issues, consistent elements in Takuboku's literary production. Besides romantic poetries and tanka, Takuboku also wrote prose works. His novels did not match the success of his verse production, while the diaries, published posthumously, have been object of much study, mainly because they are helpful sources of insight to his inner world. As Donald Keene points out, in his diaries Takuboku shows himself naked detailing his deplorable actions – occasionally the diaries provided material for his works of fiction (Keene 2016, 4-5). Among these diaries, *Rōmaji Nikki*<sup>3</sup> (1909) is the most widely known – particularly for its experimental orthography, being completely written in roman letters. *Rōmaji Nikki*, as with Takuboku's previous diaries, is a non-fictional day-by-day chronicle, from April 7<sup>th</sup> to June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1909, concealing none of the author's intimate thoughts and episodes, so it perhaps, also serves a certain voyeuristic interest. Undoubtedly the diary is a work of great literary interest. It contains critical thoughts regarding Naturalism, dominant in the contemporary Japanese literary scene, reports of poetic meetings at Yosano's house, information about some of Takuboku's tanka and about other members of the major poetic groups and magazine at that time – such as *Pan no Kai*<sup>4</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> 石川啄木.

<sup>2</sup> 明星.

<sup>3</sup> ローマ字日記.

<sup>4</sup> パンの会.

*Subaru*.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the unquestionable literary significance of *Rōmaji Nikki*, it is not clear if Takuboku wrote the diary presuming the existence of a reader other than himself and to what extent we should take into account the relationship between author and reader in his chronicle.

In Western tradition, the diary as autobiography and progressive discovery of the Self, has gained increasing interest from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward (Heehs 2013, 9) becoming a new aesthetic challenge which, compared with the continuous narrative patterns of the novel, allowed unfinishedness, fragmentary thoughts, and irregular disposition of the material (for example, entries may differ in length and style). The readership's expectations and how they were satisfied were therefore different from those of the novel and poetry.

In modern Japan too, major figures like Mori Ōgai (1862-1922)<sup>6</sup> and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916)<sup>7</sup> wrote diaries reporting their experiences in Europe. Since the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century more and more Japanese writers have kept diaries, not just as private writing but also with a view to publication. Takuboku was no exception. In 1906 he wrote a diary today known as *Shibutami Nikki*<sup>8</sup> (A Diary of Shibutami). In the entry for December 6 he reports that he had sent the first section of this diary to *Myōjō* for publication after revising and renaming it as *Rinchū Nikki*<sup>9</sup> (A Diary of the Forest, Iwaki and Odagiri 1978a, 117).<sup>10</sup> In 1908 Takuboku made further revisions to his diary while planning its publication. Considering his belief in writing diaries as a part of creative process and as material for his works, *Rōmaji Nikki* makes us wonder about the purpose of this writing and how the choice of the roman letters should be interpreted.

As Voloshinov points out, "each person's inner world and thought has its stabilized *social audience* that comprises the social environment in which reasons, motives, values, and so on are fashioned" (Voloshinov 1973, 86). Thus, even a private diary cannot be considered as a text isolated from the public space of the outer world. On that basis, the question that this paper aims to bring into focus is not whether Takuboku wrote his diary presuming the existence of a readership, but what strategy did he adopt while performing his Self-analysis and which literary meaning is discernible from the use of romanization in relation to his Self-representation?

<sup>5</sup> スバル.

<sup>6</sup> 森鷗外.

<sup>7</sup> 夏目漱石.

<sup>8</sup> 渋民日記.

<sup>9</sup> 林中日記.

<sup>10</sup> The diary was then published in the December 1913 issue of the literary magazine *Subaru*.

## 2. Narrative elements of *Rōmaji Nikki*

The diary contains some very sarcastic thoughts about the people closest to the author that could hardly be openly revealed without jeopardizing relationships. This aspect may well substantiate the hypothesis that the diary was a private writing:

There are times when, without exception, I wanted to kill all the people I knew, from the most intimate on down. The more intimately I knew the person, the more I hated him. (Saturday, April 10) <sup>11</sup>

[...]

As for Kindaichi,<sup>12</sup> though, there's no denying he's a very jealous person, and what's more, a very weak one. And there's no denying there are two sides to a man's character. Though gentle, good-natured, kind and considerate, he is, on the other hand, a quite jealous, weak, and effeminate man with petty vanities. (Thursday, April 8)

[...]

I had to attend a tanka meeting at Mr. Yosano's house. As I expected the meeting was a bore. [...] Akiko-san had invited us to continue composing all night. I devised some unconvincing pretext and hurried home. [...] Tanka meeting! How dull and stupid! (Sunday, April 11)

[...]

I don't of course regard Mr. Yosano as an elder brother or a father. He's merely a person who has been helpful to me. [...]. I now have no respect for Mr. Yosano. Though we are both following literature as a profession, I feel we are walking along different paths. I do not have any desire for a closer relationship with him, nor do I feel any particular need to separate from him. (Monday, April 12)

One more passage from the diary suggesting it was written with a view to secrecy is the following explanation given by Takuboku about his choice of writing in *rōmaji*: “Why then have I decided to write this diary in Roman letters? I love my wife, and for the very reason I love her, I don't want her to read it.” (Wednesday, April 7). Perhaps this premise alludes to the detailed descriptions of Takuboku's encounters with prostitutes and the decision to write in Roman

<sup>11</sup> All the quotations in English from *Rōmaji Nikki* are based on Goldstein and Shinoda 1985.

<sup>12</sup> Kindaichi Kyōsuke 金田一京助 (1882-1971), was a linguist who pioneered the studies on Ainu language in Japan. He later became professor at Kokugakuin, Keio and Tokyo universities and had been a friend of Takuboku since the time when together they attended the Morioka Middle School. When Takuboku decided to come to live in Tokyo, Kindaichi looked after him, providing lodging and financial support.

letters may have been an expedient to keep his diary from undesired readers. It is a matter of fact that in 1909 most Japanese people were not familiar with *rōmaji* and reading roman letters may have been as difficult and discouraging as reading Esperanto today (Keene 1958, 211).

Nevertheless, there are some incongruencies that suggest considering other reasons to explain the choice of roman letters. First, Takuboku's wife Setsuko learned English at her all-girl high school (Ikeda 2011, 123) and she should have been able to read roman letters, since she was a certified school teacher, as was her husband. Nagahama (2013, 82) suggests that Takuboku, instead of being concerned about Setsuko, actually wanted to conceal the sexual experiences described in the diary from his parents. In both cases, in the first day of his diary Takuboku seems to already know what he is going to write in the following pages, and this makes it difficult to consider this work as a private diary in the conventional meaning of a daily chronicle. There are also some other peculiarities of the diary with its high degree of creative consciousness, revealing a structure closer to a narrative work than a journal's random records. For example, in the initial entries of *Rōmaji Nikki*, Takuboku writes:

Having nothing else to do, I made a chart of *rōmaji* spellings. From the chart images of my mother and wife living beyond the Sea of Tsugaru came floating towards me. [...] Already it's a year since I came to Tokyo. And still I am not ready to send for my family and support them! (Wednesday, April 7)  
[...]

The present system of matrimony-all the social systems-full of errors! Why must I be shackled because of my parents, my wife, my child? Why must my parents, my wife, my child, be sacrificed for me? (Thursday, April 15)

In these words, clearly appears the perception of his lack of literary success as the main reason for the hardships of his family. The *rōmaji* spelling chart referred to in the April 7 entry, actually appears at the end of the page for April 12. This further incongruency also gives room for the hypothesis that Takuboku had already partially planned what he was going to write and that the association of a *rōmaji* chart with his family is somewhat fictional.

The year before, on April 24, 1908, Takuboku left his family in Hakodate, where his brother-in-law Miyazaki Ikuu gave financial support to his mother, his wife Setsuko and their two-year-old daughter Kyōko. Takuboku came to Tokyo in the hope of improving his financial situation and his literary career. But in the entry for September 23, 1908 in his diary, Takuboku reports that Setsuko was intending to join him in Tokyo, together with Kyōko (Iwaki and Odagiri, 1978a, 338). Subsequent to that date, Takuboku's mothers and Setsuko wrote letters several times exhorting him to call them or to send money. In this

period, he tried to earn a living by writing. He submitted a long novel, *Chōei*<sup>13</sup> (Shadow of a Bird), to the publisher Daigakukan, but his draft was refused. In the March 30 entry of his diary before *Rōmaji Nikki*, Takuboku wrote: “I deeply miss Kyōko and my wife. It is the end of March and the draft I expected to be published by Daigakukan has been rejected: I’ve failed them. The end of the month and I haven’t written a thing!” (Iwaki and Odagiri 1978b, 41). The association of literary failure with the hardships of his family had already taken shape in his perception before *Rōmaji Nikki*. This means that his family’s problems and the promise to bring them to Tokyo was not at all a new thought that came to him as he was deciding to use the *rōmaji* chart spelling. If *Rōmaji Nikki* was just a private piece of writing, it would not have been necessary to repeat again what Takuboku just reported in the preceding diaries of February and March. It rather seems that the opening of the diary is a device to introduce to a potential reader the narrating Self’s mental distress due to conflicting feelings like the sense of duty and love for his family opposed to his sense of inadequacy, guilt and the desire of being free from responsibility.

The diary opens with the image of Takuboku’s family in Hokkaidō and the prospect of their arrival in Tokyo. In the April 26 entry Takuboku learns through a letter from his brother in law, Miyazaki, that he will cover the expenses required for sending the family to Tokyo in June. The *rōmaji* diary ends in June and this month has only two very short entries. In “Tuesday, June 1”, Takuboku reports his second encounter with Hanako, the only prostitute that impressed him for her beauty and resemblance to Koyakko.<sup>14</sup> The second entry of June, “Twenty days”, describes moving to a larger apartment and ends with the following words:

On the morning of the sixteenth before the sun had risen, the three of us—Kindaichi, Iwamoto and me—were on the platform at Ueno Station. The train arrived an hour late. My friend, my mother, my wife, and my child. We arrived at our new home by jinrikisha.

The *Rōmaji Nikki* opens with the image of the family far away in Hokkaidō and ends with their arrival at Ueno Station. It is possible to see in this beginning and end of the diary a narrative consciousness intended to set time and space coordinates in its structure. Except for the last lines above quoted, throughout the diary Takuboku’s family appears only in his thoughts and in the not very

<sup>13</sup> 鳥影.

<sup>14</sup> 小奴 (Umekawa Misao, 梅川みさお). A geisha he loved during his stay in Kushiro in 1908.

frequent epistolary exchanges. Nevertheless, their distance and their forthcoming arrival in Tokyo configure a frame of space and time working as background scenario also for the immediate face-to-face environment in which Takuboku unfolds his Self-analysis. In this sense, the particular setting of time and space in *Rōmaji Nikki* is not neutral but is closely tied to the description of his complex psychological state.

In February 1909 Takuboku was hired by *Asahi Shinbun*<sup>15</sup> as proofreader. The new job should have meant the end of his financial turmoil and made it possible to bring his family to Tokyo. But he was still in arrears for the rent on his previous apartment and had other debts, too, so his economic distress was not yet over, and he was neither able nor eager to meet his family's expectations. Various entries in the diary express vividly Takuboku's complex feelings towards this situation.

“I want to be ill!”

Lurking in my mind for a long time has been this desire. Disease! This word, detested by man, sounds as precious to me as the name of the mountain in my native province. Oh! For a life of freedom, released from all responsibility! (Saturday, April 10)

[...]

And the dreadful summer is coming again on me—the penniless novelist! [...] If I do not send the money, or call up *they* [them] to Tokyo, they—my mother and my wife will take other manner to eat. I am young, and young and young: and I have the pen, the brain, the eyes, the heart and the mind. (Wednesday, 21 April)<sup>16</sup>

The hesitation to call his family is not only due to his monetary distress, but even more to his fear of being entangled with responsibilities and losing the freedom he felt necessary to write. These complex feelings give him a sense of guilt but also generate the desire to escape his responsibilities —expressed elsewhere in the diary through very destructive thoughts.

“I wish my family would die!” Even though I've desired that, no one dies. “I wish my friend would regard me as their enemy.” For that I wish too, but no one regards me seriously as their foe. All my friends pity me.<sup>17</sup> (Saturday, April 10)

<sup>15</sup> 朝日新聞.

<sup>16</sup> Takuboku wrote this part of the April 21 entry in English. It contains some misspelled words underlined in the translation by Goldstein and Shinoda (1985), while in Iwaki and Odagiri (1967) the spelling mistakes have been corrected.

<sup>17</sup> The original sentence in the diary is “‘minna sinde kurereba ii’. Sō omotte mo tare mo sinanu. ‘Minna ga Ore wo Teki ni site kurereba ii’. Sō omotte mo tare mo betudan

Throughout the diary, Takuboku does not express any joy for reuniting with his family. In the very last entry (Twenty days) he writes:

In bed on the morning of the tenth, I read the letters sent from Morioka by Miyazaki and Setsuko. They said they had left Hakodate on the seventh, my mother stopping at Nohechi, and Setsuko and Kyōko staying at Morioka with my friend Miyazaki. I thought: “And so at last!”

The Japanese expression “*tsui ni*”<sup>18</sup> (at last) is used without conveying a sense of happiness for a desirable accomplishment but rather a sense of fatalistic acceptance. The distant frame of space and time separating him from his family is now about to be merged with his day-to-day environment, and this coincides with the end the *Rōmaji Nikki*.

Besides the narrative structure based on the remoteness in space and time of his family, it is possible to see in the *Rōmaji Nikki* some other elements offering the sensation that the diary has been written with the same awareness as a novel. It is the case that some descriptions of the characters contain details that would be superfluous if Takuboku had been writing only for himself. For example, in the April 7 entry, there is a description of his friend Sakaushi, an old friend now a member of a tennis team from Kyoto University. Takuboku writes that he hadn’t seen him for eight years since they were classmates at high school. This description appears intended to let a potential reader understand who Sakaushi is. Some other pages of the diary include dialogues between Takuboku and other characters that provide a narrative tone that partially drifts the diary away from the conventional process of inner monologue. For example, in the entry of April 8, Takuboku reports his meeting with Mr. Hinomura, an engineer wearing Western-style suits, described as a petty member

Teki ni mo site kurenu. Tomo-dati wa minna Ore wo awarende iru” (Iwaki and Odagiri 1967, 68). The translation by Donald Keene (1956, 221) of this sentence is literally faithful to the original: “I think: I wish they would all die. But nobody dies. I think: I wish they would all be my enemies. But nobody shows me any special enmity, and my friends all pity me”. On the other hand, Goldstein and Shinoda (1985, 73) interpret the first “minna” as referred to Takuboku’s family, the second “minna” as referred to his friends. Though much more explicit than Takuboku’s words, the translation by Goldstein and Shinoda may be deemed correct if seen together with the immediately preceding passage in which Takuboku envies Gorky’s character, Ilya, able to escape from his troubled life because he was bachelor. Also, this reading is coherent with the thoughts more clearly expressed in the April 16 entry quoted above. For this reason, the present paper follows the interpretation of Goldstein and Shinoda.

<sup>18</sup> ついに.

of the elite. The word Takuboku uses in the original Japanese is “haikarakko”, deriving from “haikara (high collar)”.<sup>19</sup> This term was coined in 1889 by the journalist Ishikawa Yasujirō (1872-1925),<sup>20</sup> indicating the fashionable dress and the affected manners of those members of the elite who had traveled to the West (Karin 2002, 61). The term soon took a pejorative meaning indicating the frivolous attitude of the Western fashionable social elite. Takuboku contrasts Hinosawa’s suit with his old padded kimono. There is a caricatural exaggeration in the description of both and in the way Takuboku tries to embarrass Hinosawa in their short conversation.

The following dialogue describes the encounter with Hanako, the young prostitute that Takuboku liked.

The skin of that young girl was so soft, it fascinated me. The clock in the next room kept on ticking.

“You tired already?” she asked.

I heard the old woman quietly entering, but nothing more came to me.

“What’s she doing now?”

“Crouching in the kitchen. I am sure she is.”

“She’s pathetic, isn’t she?”

“Don’t mind her.”

“But she is really pitiful!”

“Well, yes, she’s pathetic. She’s really all alone”.

“You’ll be like that too when you get old.”

“Oh no, not me!”

After a while she said, “Stop staring at me!”

“You really do look alike.”

“Like who?”

“My kid sister.”

“Oh, I am so happy!” Hanako said, burying her face against my chest. (Saturday, May 1)

Takuboku doesn’t tell her the truth. Comparing the description of other prostitutes in the diary,<sup>21</sup> he seems to want to preserve an image of tender innocence he sees in Hanako and one may wonder if Hanako would have buried her face

<sup>19</sup> ハイカラ.

<sup>20</sup> 石川安次郎.

<sup>21</sup> “Their faces without gloss, their skin cold and rough, these women are inured to men, are insensitive to all stimuli. [...] Those genitals which have been pounded by thousands of men, are flabby, the contractile action of the muscles gone. In them mere discharge takes place. There isn’t an iota of pleasure ravishing either body or mind.” (Saturday, April 10)

in happiness against Takuboku's chest if he had told her that she resembled a geisha he used to meet in Kushiro.

The above examples are just a few of the numerous narrative elements—dialogues, detailed character description, exaggeration or romanticism—that inform the unfolding of the events reported in the diary.

### 3. *Implications of Phonocentrism in Rōmaji Nikki*

The *Rōmaji Nikki* contains elements of narrative prose which render controversial its placement among the literary genres of novel or private diary. Indeed, most of the critical studies on this work stress its literary importance and tend not to believe Takuboku's premise about his choice of a phonocentric writing system to preserve its secrecy. For example, in his studies published in the 1960s, Kuwabara Takeo (1992, 263) praises it as the greater masterpiece of Japanese diaristic literature and, though neglected for a long time, one of the best works of Japanese modern literature. Ikeda Isao (2008, ii-iii) believes that *Rōmaji Nikki* was written as a literary work and not as a private diary. Ikeda also states that Takuboku just borrows the forms of the diaristic style with the intention of writing a novel (2011, 137). Charles Shirō Inouye (1994, 14), recognizes points of similarity between *Rōmaji Nikki* and the confessional style of the I novel, there being common representational qualities (as opposed to the pictorial and presentational nature of early modern narrative) which identify the search for a new conception of literary authorship in modern Japan. In this way, even more than the I novel, Takuboku's use of *rōmaji* restricts the author to a privileged readership sharing only with them his secrecy. This is what perhaps happened when Takuboku, in his last days, entrusted all his diaries to Kindaichi Kyōsuke, asking him to decide whether to burn them or not. Kindaichi then gave them to Setsuko who, before dying shortly after her husband, handed them to Miyazaki Daishirō. The diaries were published for the first time in 1948-49, despite Kindaichi's opposition (Kuwabara 1992, 243).<sup>22</sup>

The need for secrecy cannot sufficiently explain the motivation driving Takuboku to adopt roman letters for his diary. This choice should also be considered in relation to his contemporary context. During the second decade of the

<sup>22</sup> Kindaichi initially opposed the diaries' publication because there were parts describing his visits to Tokyo's brothels that would have damaged his reputation in private and public spheres (he was an important academic). But later he changed his mind and he is one of the editors of the edition of Takuboku's complete works published by Chikuma Shobō, used as reference material for this paper.

Meiji period the debate around the qualities of a modern National language had its most representative voice in the *genbun itchi*<sup>23</sup> (unifying spoken and written languages) movement that also advocated the abolition of kanji. This movement linked the issue of a modern national language to a reform of the writing system – undermining the privileged status of kanji (Karatani 1993, 47). In 1886 the *Rōmaji kai*<sup>24</sup> (Society of Roman letters) was also established, promoting the adoption of roman letters instead of a Japanese writing system. Both these movements were urging a radical change within a context of frenetic social and cultural upheaval and both expressed a phonocentric view originally grounded on utilitarian and pragmatic positions, the modernization and empowerment of Japan, but which also influenced the literary discourse of those years. As Karatani points out, the *genbun itchi* played a significant role in the gradual discovery of realism and inner world at the origins of modern Japanese literature (Karatani 1993, 57).

Roman letters were not equally successful, but have a story much longer than *genbun itchi*, since they were first introduced in Japan in the late Muromachi period by the Jesuit mission, and were initially based on the Portuguese romanization. Later, Dutch and then English romanizations were also used and *rōmaji* became a helpful system to represent the pronunciation of Japanese words.

The first Japanese English dictionary, the *Waeigo rinshūsei* (1867),<sup>25</sup> adopted the style developed by the missionary James Hepburn. Until the first half of the twentieth century different spelling systems, such as the *Hebon shiki*<sup>26</sup> (Hepburn style), the *Nihon shiki*<sup>27</sup> (Japanese style) and the *Kunrei shiki*<sup>28</sup> (Cabinet style) coexisted. The debate around *rōmaji* in the Meiji period was deeply intertwined with the issue of the modernization of Japan. Nishi Amane (1829-1897),<sup>29</sup> member of the *Meirokeisha*<sup>30</sup> (Meiji Six Society) and important reformer of Japanese educational system, took the view that the adoption of a more effective orthography was one of the strategic steps taken in order to facilitate the absorption of foreign knowledge and technology. In 1905 the *Rōmaji Hirome Kai*<sup>31</sup> (Association for the Diffusion of Romanization) was founded, which in 1908 preferred the Hepburn style, with some modification. On the other hand,

<sup>23</sup> 言文一致.

<sup>24</sup> 羅馬字会.

<sup>25</sup> 和英語林集成.

<sup>26</sup> ヘボン式.

<sup>27</sup> 日本式.

<sup>28</sup> 訓令式.

<sup>29</sup> 西周.

<sup>30</sup> 明六社.

<sup>31</sup> ローマ字広め会.

academics and scientists, led by the scientist Tanakadate Aikitsu (1856-1952),<sup>32</sup> gave birth to the *Nippon-no-Rōmazi-Sya*<sup>33</sup> (Japan's Rōmaji Company) supporting the *Nihon shiki* style.<sup>34</sup>

Concerning the literary usage of *rōmaji*, in 1909 issues of the literary magazine *Subaru*, there appeared tanka including words in roman letters like *Montmatre*, *rendez vous*, *Hotel* (Yoshii Isamu), *Niscioree* and *Absinthe* (Mori Ōgai),<sup>35</sup> while the poet Kitahara Hakushū<sup>36</sup> tried to explore the aesthetic potentiality of *rōmaji* also in his first collection *Jashūmon*<sup>37</sup> (Heretics, 1909), using words like *Hachisch*, *Whisky*, *Piano*, *Trombone*, *Wagner*. In these cases, words in roman letters in combination with kanji, hiragana and katakana, were used essentially for their evocative exoticism and for their innovative visual impact. A bit different is the case of the tanka collection *Nakiwarai* (Tearful Laughter, 1910) by Toki Zenmaro (1885-1980),<sup>38</sup> written totally in roman letters, that gained an enthusiastic review by Takuboku (Iwaki and Odagiri 1978b, 259).

Takuboku started to write his *rōmaji* diary when a sort of rivalry between the two different romanization styles, *hebon shiki* and *nihon shiki*, was taking shape. Nevertheless, he did not clearly prefer one over the other, and his romanization style in the diary switched from *nihon shiki* (first half of April) to *hebon shiki* (late April until June), to be corrected again to *nihon shiki* in 1911 (Kuwabara 1992, 266). A detailed study by Kikuchi Satoru on the romanization of *Rōmaji Nikki* points out that in some cases the romanization applies neither the *hebon shiki* nor the *nihon shiki* system (Kikuchi 2006, 109).

It is possible that Takuboku was stimulated to explore the literary possibilities of *rōmaji* by the poetic experiments preceding *Rōmaji Nikki*, especially the poetry collection of Kitahara Hakushū, that Takuboku reports he had received from the author on April 3 1909 (Iwaki, Odagiri 1978b, 42).<sup>39</sup> On the other hand,

<sup>32</sup> 田中館愛橘.

<sup>33</sup> 日本のローマ字社.

<sup>34</sup> For a detailed study on the subject, refer to Nakagawa 1998.

<sup>35</sup> Niscioree is the name of a small town near Lake Como in Northern Italy, where the homonymous wine is produced. This wine was praised in Antonio Fogazzaro's novel *Piccolo mondo antico* (The Little World of the Past, 1895). Ōgai read the German translation of this novel during his stay in Europe, presumably inspiring these lines.

<sup>36</sup> 北原白秋.

<sup>37</sup> 邪宗門

<sup>38</sup> 土岐善麿.

<sup>39</sup> This entry was entirely written in *rōmaji*. It was the first time that Takuboku used roman letters in his diaries and the correlation with the poetry collection given to him as a gift by Kitahara should not be overlooked.

in *Rōmaji Nikki* the use of roman letters is clearly different from the poetry of Hakushū, not being used for its evocative and visual possibilities.

Kimata Satoshi, comparing a piece of prose in colloquial style by Tayama Katai (1872-1930)<sup>40</sup> with the very beginning of the April 26 entry in *Rōmaji Nikki*, points out that in Tayama the descriptions of the psychology of the characters still require kanji expressions, thereby revealing the binding force of the kanji in shaping conceptually the psychological state, while in Takuboku the psychology of the Self appears simultaneously with the act of writing (Kimata 1981, 39-40). In line with Kimata, it is possible to say that the changes in writing system informed a qualitative shift also in the possibilities of literary expression. Kuwabara Takeo interprets Takuboku's choice of a phonocentric writing as a way to gain total freedom of expression and escape from three kinds of repression: mental and ethical (since his family was not going to read his diary), repression deriving from Japanese traditional literature, and social repression in general (Kuwabara 1992, 253). He acknowledges the literary value of *Rōmaji Nikki* in the conflict between the individual desire for freedom and the outside world's oppression and identifies, in the use of roman letters, the instrument that granted Takuboku total freedom of expression.

From a stylistic viewpoint, *Rōmaji Nikki* shows a plain colloquial use of Japanese, which is partly the logical consequence of phonocentric writing. Without a visually-based writing like kanji, the use of homophonies and polysemic image associations cannot be grasped. This means that the choice of *rōmaji* makes possible the removal of the range of visual and semantic connotations of traditional Japanese writing that work as a filter between the words and the inner world of the author. This in turn allows a more straightforward representation of psychological complexity.

This may explain the Takuboku's need to express his quest for Self-representation through roman letters. The debate around *rōmaji* in the Meiji period stimulated him to explore the possibilities of phonocentrism in literature. In this sense his use of *rōmaji* may be interpreted as going to extremes in the *genbun itchi* call for unity of spoken and written language. For him it meant the possibility of representing his inner world more freely.

Apart from their connection with the agenda of modernization, the perception of a superior authenticity of the spoken compared to the written word underpins the stance of the *genbun itchi* and the *rōmaji* movements. This primacy of orality shares points of contact with an idea of the oral dimension of the literary expression inspiring the conception of poetry in Japan from past to modern times. The importance of sung, therefore oral, qualities of poetry was

<sup>40</sup> 田山花袋.

already being stressed by Motoori Noorinaga (1730-1801) in his *Isonokami no sasamegoto*<sup>41</sup> (Personal Views on Poetry, 1763). Again, in the Meiji and Taishō periods, poets like Yosano Tekkan and Hagiwara Sakutarō stressed the authenticity of rhythm and musicality in poetry as privileged modes of connection with the inner world. Takuboku was a poet too, and in the same years he was writing the *Rōmaji Nikki* he composed many of the tanka later included in the collection *Ichi aku no suna*<sup>42</sup> (A Handful of Sand, 1910). His choice in adopting *rōmaji* writing conflated several factors: the will to write something never written before, also motivated by the failure of his former narrative production; the Meiji debate regarding *rōmaji* writing; his sensibility as a poet who felt that his primary task was to describe his inner world with the appropriate form of literary expression.

#### 4. Representation of Self in *Rōmaji Nikki*

How Takuboku pursued his Self-representation is hinted at in the April 17 entry.

Thinking I would definitely work on my story today, I stayed away from the office. —No, it was because I wanted to have a holiday that I decided to scribble. At any rate, I did try to write something entitled “Red Ink” which I had thought through the night before. It was to be an account of my suicide. I set down about three pages in my notebook, and then I couldn’t write a single word more. Why couldn’t I? Because it was absolutely impossible for me to objectify myself.

Frustration and self-destructive thoughts are linked to the impossibility of writing. In the sentence quoted above, the act of writing for Takuboku consists of objectifying himself.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of literature as objective representation of truth was influenced by Japanese Naturalism. But the representation of truth in naturalist novels gradually took the form of a confession based on the plain observation of one’s own experience (Arima 1969, 93). The entry for April 10 in *Rōmaji Nikki* contains critical thoughts about the idea of a flat description of truth and the attitude of a bystander promoted by the naturalist writers: “I could no longer be content with

<sup>41</sup> 石上私淑言.

<sup>42</sup> 一握の砂.

<sup>43</sup> The Japanese word he uses is *kakukan*, today read *kyakkan* (客観), meaning to see things with objective detachment.

the attitude of an onlooker. The attitude of a writer toward life must not be that of a spectator; a writer must be a critic". Takuboku yearns for a literature with ideals, "even if this ideal is after all only a *life illusion*,<sup>44</sup> we cannot live without it." But he is not able to set a theoretical base for his own idea of literature and his opposition to Naturalism is weakened by a sense of skepticism: "the last passage I wrote this morning does not really express what I mean. At least it's not of primary importance to me. I do not believe that man's projects, whatever they may be, can be great". Thus, in *Rōmaji Nikki* the radical rebuttal of naturalist literature that Takuboku would express beginning with the essay *Kire gire ni Kokoro ni Ukanda Kanji to Kaisō*<sup>45</sup> ("Sporadic feelings and reflections floating in my heart", published in December 1909 in *Subaru* magazine) has not yet appeared.

Aware that being a gifted tanka poet was not enough to gain literary success, Takuboku tried to write fiction too. Though unhappy with Naturalism, especially with its ego-focused lack of criticism or social concern, his novels like *Kumo wa tensai de aru*<sup>46</sup> (*The Cloud is a Genius*, 1906) and *Sokuseki*<sup>47</sup> (*Footprints*, 1909) are accounts of individual experiences like most of the Naturalist novels, with the difference that Takuboku had a poorer ability when inventing plot and characters.

Conversely, the *Rōmaji Nikki*, since it is a diary and is not based on the premise of fiction, allowed him to enact the process of differentiation between the Self as Subject (the author) and Self as Object (the representation of Self) that he failed to enact in his novels. It is a matter of fact that *Rōmaji Nikki* is generally regarded as the best prose work of Takuboku. This accomplishment cannot be unrelated to the writing system he adopts.

The phonocentric writing of *Rōmaji Nikki*, as we have seen, made possible a modality of connection between text and author's inner world that was free from the semantic and visual background of the Japanese writing system. In this sense, the choice of roman letters was a radical form of expression serving the process of Self-representation. As Tanizaki states in his essay on style (*Bunshō dokuhon*, 1934),<sup>48</sup> the appearance of the written character, good or bad, influences the content of a literary work (Tanizaki 1958, 26). Tanizaki wrote this with critical intent towards the standardization of *genbun itchi* language, but his assertion may be deemed true also for the *Rōmaji Nikki*. The radicality of the orthography parallels the radicality of the contents of the diary.

<sup>44</sup> Italics mean that "life illusion" is written in English.

<sup>45</sup> きれぎれに心に浮かんだ感じと回想.

<sup>46</sup> 雲は天才である.

<sup>47</sup> 足跡.

<sup>48</sup> 文書讀本.

Takuboku's inner monologues reach points of highly disruptive thoughts ("I wanted to kill all the people I knew, from the most intimate on down") that do not spare even his family. But the most radical and striking description is one of the accounts of his sexual experiences with a prostitute of Asakusa in the entry for April 10.

The skin of eighteen-year-old Masa's body was as dry and rough as that of a poverty-stricken, middle aged woman. The narrow six-by-six foot room did not even have a light. The room was so stuffy and close that it had only the odor of flesh. Before long the woman had fallen asleep.

I was so unbearably irritated I couldn't sleep. I put my fingers in the woman's vagina and roughly churned around inside. Finally, put my five fingers in and pushed as vigorously as possible. Even then the woman did not wake up. Perhaps she was so inured to men that her vagina had become totally insensitive. A woman who had slept with thousands of men! [...]

A girl of eighteen no longer able to feel pleasure from the usual stimuli. I wiped my hand against her face. I wanted to insert both my hands or even my foot into her vagina and rip it apart. And—and I wanted to see, even in a vision, her body covered with blood, lying dead in the darkness. Men have the right to murder women by the cruelest methods. What a terrible, disgusting thought that is! (Saturday, April 10)<sup>49</sup>

Though a person with a libertine attitude, Takuboku was not a misogynist. On the contrary, on February 28, 1908 he wrote an article published in *Kushiro Shinbun*<sup>50</sup> showing approval for British suffragism and advocating equality of civil rights in Japan too. In the following years Takuboku affirmed this opinion in other essays too. If the above description does not accurately reflect the attitude of Takuboku, it must be interpreted as an intentional exaggeration strictly for literary representation of his sexual behavior.

The Self comes into existence in relation with the Other and in Takuboku's process of discovering his subjectivity, sexuality plays a key role. He aggrandizes his maleness through the description of the cheap prostitutes in the red-light street of Asakusa, represented as Otherness in terms of filthy flesh and abjection.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Here Takuboku's description is so explicit that even the transcription in Japanese characters of *Rōmaji Nikki*, published in the *Ishikawa Takuboku Zenshū* 石川啄木全集 of 1978, omits obscene words replacing them by lines of dots. (see Iwaki and Odagiri 1978b, 130-131).

<sup>50</sup> 釧路新聞.

<sup>51</sup> Here "abject" is used as not only synonym of "pervert" but also with reference to Julia Kristeva's study on abjection (Kristeva 1982, 6-7). Takuboku's disgusted con-

Ikeda Isao (2011, 143) notes that a *shunpon*<sup>52</sup> (erotic book) entitled *Manpuku Wagōjin* (The Gods of Conjugal Delights, 1821),<sup>53</sup> illustrated by Katsushika Hokusai, contains two pictures representing the act of putting the hand in the woman's genitals, similar to what Takuboku does to the young prostitute Masa.<sup>54</sup> The analogy with the exploration of the girl's body is remarkable. If these illustrations inspired Takuboku, as Ikeda suggests, his description is a demonstration of how he tried to transpose the representation of sexuality from the visual dimension to a phonocentric orthography. It should be thus pointed out that the description in *Rōmaji Nikki* reaches a tone of psychological amplification expressed by contempt for the woman, violence and self-loathing that are not recognizable in the works of Hokusai. For this reason, it is important to stress Takuboku's interest in the erotic books of the Edo period. This is clearly revealed in the entry for April 14, when he reports having borrowed two erotic books from the keeper of the lending library (*kashihonya*<sup>55</sup>): *Hana no Oborozukiyo* (Flowery Night of the Hazy Moon)<sup>56</sup> and *Nasake no Tora no Maki* (Trade Secrets of Love).<sup>57</sup> Even more important is that in the entry for April 16 Takuboku reports having copied in *rōmaji Hana no Oborozukiyo* in its entirety, a job that took until three o'clock in the morning.

The act of rewriting an illustrated erotic book of the Edo period in *rōmaji* can be understood through the usage of romanization as a modality of connection between written text and inner Self. Through the romanization, Takuboku consciously erases the visual qualities of both illustrations and Japanese characters,

tempt for the body of the girl entails the loss of desire (object), and the vision of him killing the woman implies the denial of her existence as object.

<sup>52</sup> 春本.

<sup>53</sup> 万福和合神.

<sup>54</sup> The illustrations by Hokusai are on the website of the Ritsumeikan University Art Research Center, Early Japanese Book Portal Database (<http://www.dh-jac.net/db1/books/search.php>) at these URLs:

<http://www.dh-jac.net/db1/books/results1024.php?f1=Ebi1075&f12=1&enter=portal&max=1&skip=5&enter=portal#>

<http://www.dh-jac.net/db1/books/results1024.php?f1=Ebi1039&f12=1&enter=portal&max=1&skip=5&enter=portal#>

<sup>55</sup> 貸本屋.

<sup>56</sup> 花の朧夜.

<sup>57</sup> 情けの虎の巻.

It should be remembered that the Meiji government instigated severe controls on the public representation of sexuality that forbade the commercialization of works with sexual content. Censorship was also retroactive, and many works of the Edo period were banned too. For a detailed study on the subject, refer to Rubin 1984.

and with them also neutralizes the historical, social, individual and interpersonal context of the book's author and its readership. This entails a new understanding of that sexuality through a different sensibility. Doing so, Takuboku takes possession of traditional sexuality, linking it to the inner Self. Therefore, *rōmaji* letters are functional to his process of interiorization of sexuality as a part of the definition of his subjectivity.

As already pointed out by Inouye, the contempt for prostitutes and the Self-aggrandizement associated with it, fuel Takuboku's discovery of subjectivity in the Cartesian sense of thinking being (Inouye 1994, 15). Expanding further Inouye's interpretation, the correlation between sexuality and Self brings into play the question of Takuboku's agency. In other words, the bodily Self through which Takuboku unfolds his sexual agency is not just in a dualistic relation with the mind. Takuboku's sexual behavior triggers his reflective Self's inner thoughts both in the direction of Self-aggrandizement and unfulfillment. The sexual pursuits he reports meticulously in the diary express his craving for freedom from family and social bonds. This appears clearly in the negotiation of his sexuality with his feelings towards Setsuko, and by extension with the institutions of family and marriage—namely what defines the Self from the point of view of the outside world.

Does my need for Setsuko come merely from sexual appetite? No! Never!  
 My love for her has sobered. That's a fact, a deplorable but inevitable fact.  
 But love is not all one's life. It's a part of it. [...] Yes, I have longed for other women besides her. And there have been times when I wanted to sleep with other women. As a matter of fact, I sometimes thought about sleeping with other women while I was sleeping with Setsuko. [...] But what does that have to do with Setsuko? It doesn't mean I was dissatisfied with her. It merely means that men's desires are not simple. [...]  
 Is there any other wife in the world that has been placed in as miserable a circumstance as Setsuko?  
 The present system of matrimony—all the social systems—full of error!  
 (Thursday, April 15)

His feelings towards Setsuko reveal his awareness of a lack of self-integrity. A sense of unresolved desires weakens his connection with the external words.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, or as a reaction to this, he uses the money that he and his family

<sup>58</sup> “The feeling of loneliness when I go back home without fulfilling that desire! It's not merely a loneliness stemming from unfulfilled sexual desire; it's a deep, terrible, despairing realization which forces me to see that I am unable to obtain anything I want” (Saturday, April 10).

desperately need on prostitutes.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Takuboku is neither able nor willing to take a position regarding his family's imminent arrival in Tokyo, perceived as a threat to his freedom, and neither is he able to take steps for improving his reality. He just seeks escape in sex and illness. The fragmented subjectivity outlined in the diary is the chronicle of the crisis of his agency as an individual.

### 5. Conclusion

The psychological complexity and depth brought to light by *Rōmaji Nikki* is not to be found in any other prose work by Takuboku. Here he traces the chronicle of his existential despair as a writer and as a person. Though this path towards the quest for identity takes the form of the diary, there are narrative elements suggesting that *Rōmaji Nikki* was not just a spontaneous succession of accounts, but an experimental writing in which the author tried to delineate the coordinates of his Self.

Roman letters served the process of differentiating between the Self as Subject (the writer) and the Self as Object (the represented Self), but there could be no pure homogeneity between the former and the latter. Though reporting the real experiences of the author presented as truthful accounts, still the diary contains a degree of fictionalized Self, due to its exaggerations, caricatural representations, and radical images. As the adoption of a different writing system like *rōmaji* itself entails a degree of awareness, it does not necessarily mean that Takuboku was more authentic than he would have been using kanji and kana. It is possible to find a similar awareness of Self-fragmentation also in some of the poems included in his tanka collection *Ichi Aku no Suna*, already discussed elsewhere (Capponcelli 2018, 170-175).

The peculiar and very modern aspect of *Rōmaji Nikki* lies then in the fragmented subjectivity emerging through the representation of sexuality as the primary essence of selfhood. In this sense, the use of roman letters plays a fundamental role in the connection between the written text and the author's inner world, nurturing the correlation between sexuality and inner psychology. From this point of view, *Rōmaji Nikki* represents a challenging mode of Self-expression, unprecedented in Japan.

<sup>59</sup> “When I had money, I went without the slightest hesitation, to those narrow dirty streets filled with lewd voices [...] From the fall of last year to the present moment, I have gone about thirteen or fourteen times and bought about ten prostitutes” (Saturday, April 10).

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TO THE LIGHTHOUSE  
URBAN SOLITUDE AND MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS IN *AKUNIN*,  
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*Abstract*

In his literature, Yoshida Shūichi (Nagasaki, 1968) presents a critique of contemporary urban life as an alienating experience occurring in delocalized and dehumanized spaces; his acclaimed novel *Akunin* (*Villain*, 2007) depicts secondary cities and peripheries where mobile phones, websites, dating services, street networks and mass media mark the edges of a postmodern cartography of urban Japan whose main features are an inescapable sense of solitude, the complexity of intersubjectivity and human relationships and the segmentation of selfhood. Authors of the last decades appear specifically concerned with solitude, and Yoshida represents a telling example of this tendency, because solitude is, in his works, first and foremost the incapacity and unwillingness to deal with otherness: such a pessimistic view conveys a profoundly critical stance vis-à-vis the current state of global communities and raises key questions about the meaning of life and emotions in contemporary society.

*Keywords*

Japanese literature, Twenty-first century, urban space, solitude, criticism

要旨

吉田修一の文学では、現代都市の中の生活が帰属性や人間性に欠けている経験として批判的に扱われている。有名な小説『悪人』（2007年）では、第二都市や郊外などが描かれており、それは携帯電話、ウェブサイト、出会い系サイト、道路網、大量伝達媒体からなる日本の都市空間のポストモダン的な地図の要素になっており、その特徴は避けられない孤独感、複雑な間主観性と人間関係、自我の分裂であると

\* I presented an earlier version of this study at the German Anthropological Association Conference 2017 “Belonging: Affective, moral and political practices in an interconnected world” at Freie Universität, Berlin, in the workshop *Transient Identities: Shifting Urbanity, Media Infrastructure, and the Unsettling of Belonging in Asia*. I am grateful to the workshop organizers, Michael Dickhardt, Karin Klenke, Hans-Martin Kunz, Saikat Maitra and Markus Schleiter, and to the other participants, who offered valuable comments and feedbacks.

されている。ここ数十年間活躍してきた作家たちは孤独に興味を示しており、特に吉田はその傾向を著しくしていると思われる。彼の作品の中で孤独というのはまず他者とのコミュニケーションに対する無能力、不本意という意味を持っている。上のような厭世的な態度は、国際社会の現状に対する非常に批判的なスタンスを含んでおり、現在の社会における人生と感情に関して重要な問いかけを生み出している。

キーワード

現代文学; 孤独; 都市空間; 批評

### 1. Introduction

Early in *Akunin*<sup>1</sup> (2007; *Villain*, 2011), Yoshida Shūichi<sup>2</sup> (b. 1968) introduces us to the crime scene, an “infamous” location in Kyūshū, in the south of Japan. The place is called Mitsuse Pass and it is a liminal, transitional space that nonetheless I would hesitate to define a “non-place,” because it has plenty of history and connotations, also for being the setting of a variety of urban legends; in other words, it is a transitional space which is charged with anthropological meaning, thus it does not fit into the existing negative definition of “non-places”.<sup>3</sup> The pass is described as follows:

Mitsuse Pass has always had ghostly, otherworldly stories connected to it. In the beginning of the Edo period it was rumored to be a hideout for robbers. In the mid-1920s rumor had it that someone murdered seven women in Kitagata township in Saga Prefecture and escaped to the pass. More recently the pass has become infamous as the place where, so the story goes, someone staying at a nearby inn went crazy and killed another guest. Aware of this tale, young people liked to dare each other to drive over the pass. There have been supposed sightings of ghosts as well, usually near the exit to the Mitsuse Tunnel on the border between Fukuoka and Saga. (Yoshida 2011, 28)<sup>4</sup>

Reference to the “stories,” the “rumors,” and the “supposed sightings” reported by the extradiegetic narrator of this section of the novel are of particular

<sup>1</sup> 悪人.

<sup>2</sup> 吉田修一.

<sup>3</sup> Here I refer, obviously, to Marc Augé’s work and to de Certeau’s seminal notion of space, a direct reference for Augé himself. See Augé 1995, 77-78; Certeau 2002, 115-130.

<sup>4</sup> Quotations of Yoshida 2011 come from the Kindle edition of the book, so I cite location numbers instead of page numbers.

interest if we think that one of the main themes of *Akunin* is human communication—and especially its absence and annihilation. The idea that multiple stories conjuring up the shared meaning of a place can circulate by word of mouth and be the object of a sort of oral tradition contrasts markedly with the overall narrative, dominated by a pessimistic notion of humanity, whose main culpability resides in the inability to build whatever natural and un-mediated relationship between individuals.

Born in Nagasaki, Kyūshū, in 1968, Yoshida later moved to Tōkyō where he set many of his novels, such as *Parēdo*<sup>5</sup> (2002; *Parade*, 2014), *Tōkyōwankei*<sup>6</sup> (A View of Tōkyō Bay, 2003) and *Randomāku*<sup>7</sup> (Landmark, 2004), that reveal a predilection for urban settings. His critique addresses contemporary urban life, narrated as an alienating experience unfolding in delocalized spaces devoid of any proper humanity; alongside the representative works mentioned above, *Akunin* shows how this author implicitly dismantles the modern myth of Tōkyō's homogeneity and particularism and depicts secondary cities and peripheries where the urban diseases of solitude and anguish develop within an intricate web of urban transportation, social media and urban icons systematically deconstructed and turned into a set of incoherent signs. What I set out to investigate is to what extent, in *Akunin*, mobile phones, websites, dating services, street networks and mass media mark the edges of a postmodern cartography of urban Japan whose main features are an inescapable sense of solitude, the complexity of intersubjectivity and human relationships and the segmentation of selfhood.

As a novel, *Akunin* challenges widely-held assumptions underlying the notions of genre and narrativity and is inherently subversive in its construction – and deconstruction – of shared moral values. Despite being about a murder and revolving around a police investigation, the murderer's identity is clear from the beginning. Often labelled a “thriller,” Yoshida's work does not so much rely on the mysterious and frightening events occurring throughout the narrative; rather, it emphasizes what is intrinsically uncanny in the human condition in the global twenty-first century. The plot revolves around the topic of violence, but the young woman brutally killed and dumped near the infamous mountain pass close to the highway is hardly the only victim; violence is in the everyday experience of urban spatialities, depicted as tangled webs that frustrate and inhibit people's desire for mutual understanding and truthful communication. The characters can only express their emotions

<sup>5</sup> パレード.

<sup>6</sup> 東京湾景.

<sup>7</sup> ランドマーク.

via telephone or by text message; they only seem to feel alive along the internet line, and hope to find love, or only a surrogate of it, through online dating services. “Love” is thus conceived in two distinct forms, either as a commodity – massage parlors, virtual sex, subscription-based dating services – or as an abstract, and mostly delusional, state of mind that can only exist in the parallel dimension of memory and reverie and in the interstitial and peripheral spaces of the city.

Yoshida calls into question the notion of agency in his meditation about truth and guilt, belonging and solitariness, empathy and sacrifice. The Japanese title, *Akunin*, refers explicitly to evil (*aku*<sup>8</sup>), but, as I argue, the greatest evil is to be found in one of the author’s paramount concerns: the inability to communicate and the avoidance of any direct encounter, or clash, with the “Other”. Failing to face alterity, Yoshida’s characters appear ill at ease formulating any kind of coherent self-image.

Further, I contend that Yoshida’s claim testifies to an important transition within the recent history of Japanese literature. While literary works from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thematized otherness as the essential marker of Japanese modernity, authors of recent decades appear specifically concerned with solitude, and Yoshida is a remarkably telling example of this tendency because solitude is, in his works, first and foremost the incapacity and unwillingness to deal with otherness: such a pessimistic view conveys a profoundly critical stance upon the current state of global communities and raises key questions about the meaning of life and emotions in contemporary society.

## 2. *Multiple polycentric selves*

In the modern period, within the context of intensive modernization wrought by the Meiji Restoration (1868), the encounter with the foreign “Other” represented by Europe and the United States, but also with a rediscovered Asia, and especially China, was a paramount concern and influenced the country’s urbanization and its perception in literature.<sup>9</sup> For some writers, Tōkyō itself,

<sup>8</sup> 悪.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough discussion of this topic in English, refer to Maeda Ai’s *Text and the City*. Another essential reference is Isoda 1990. Satō Yoshio’s 2010 monograph also highlights important aspect of the relationship between Tōkyō and modern Japanese literature. A study that also takes in other urban realities (Shanghai, Okinawa) is Taguchi 2006.

with its foreign architecture, became the “Other” against which to best assess the modern experience, so they engaged in a confrontation with the city, approaching a variety of topics from the perspective of the relationship between the individual and Tōkyō, and conceptualizing a notion of “native place” (*furusato*<sup>10</sup>) as a complement to the capital (Narita 1993, 20).

Now that concrete buildings and iron bridges are as familiar in Japanese cityscapes as in the United States and Europe, the urban experience reflected in literature seems to be characterized by a fractioning of the center, both in the polycentric representation of Tōkyō’s spatiality and in the narrative rendering of life in secondary cities. The “dramatic” transformation that occurred in most Japanese cities during the last three decades (Waley 2013, 46) is something that literary characters struggle to cope with, more intensely so since the 1980s, when no effort was spared to make Tōkyō the next global financial center (Sand 2013, 14), and after the bursting of the economic bubble in the early 1990s, when a widespread sentiment of precarity<sup>11</sup> and nostalgia emerged in conjunction with the period of economic downturn known as the “lost decade,” contributing to the recasting of *furusato* as an emblem of “temporal and spatial situatedness” no longer identified with spaces *other than* the capital, but also *in* the capital: its neighborhoods (Thornbury and Schulz 2018, x).

Yet the reappraisal of Tōkyō’s neighborhoods and the proliferation of centers within the city had been underway long before the 1980s. In 1969, Yoshimoto Takaaki<sup>12</sup> (1924-2012) founded a magazine titled *Toshi*<sup>13</sup> (City) whose introductory essay encouraged readers to re-discover the “old” Tōkyō, the popular neighborhoods of the city, left behind by the Meiji architectural revolution and pushing back urban (and human) standardization (Yoshimoto 1969, 32). Further, Yoshimi Shun’ya discusses the fragmentation of the urban self in pho-

<sup>10</sup> 故郷.

<sup>11</sup> Precarity is indeed the prism through which Japanese contemporary culture is seen by the contributors of a timely and thought-provoking volume edited by Kristina Iwata-Weickgenannt and Roman Rosenbaum in 2015. Suzuki Sadami’s foreword adds this notion to the debate on social stratification that is closely related to the collapse of the bubble economy, and many of the contributors whose work focuses on literature address the fracturing of the self and identity issues, including the difficulty of conceiving an idea of self within a specific group or social type, often connected to the workplace. Iwata-Weickgenannt and Rosenbaum 2015. Anne Allison’s ethnography of contemporary Japan through the lens of precarity provides valuable insights especially as regards the interconnections between this very sense of precarity and instability and notions of home and belonging (Allison 2013).

<sup>12</sup> 吉本隆明.

<sup>13</sup> 都市.

tographic terms in relation to the transformation of city imagery over the last few decades, theorizing a “double take” on the urban fabric enhanced by contemporary familiarity with satellite images and the street-level of smartphone photographs. Despite Google Earth and iPhones, however, this dual perspective is not entirely a prerogative of the 2000s but should be considered as a continuation of wartime aerial photography and the multiplication of viewpoints that occurred when people started to go out in the street with their cameras and chronicle the conditions in post-war Japan (Yoshimi 2016, 435-436).<sup>14</sup> Japanese artists in the last decades seem to have acknowledged and absorbed these ideas, hence notions such as instability, nostalgia, precarity and solitude recur so often in recent critical debates.

Of the writers whose work testifies to this kind of approach, Yoshida is particularly interesting for many reasons, including his tendency to interweave the lives of individuals and the life of the city itself into his narratives. To be sure, other writers, including Murakami Haruki<sup>15</sup> (b. 1949), Yoshimoto Banana<sup>16</sup> (b. 1964),<sup>17</sup> Furukawa Hideo<sup>18</sup> (b. 1966), and authors of noir fiction such as Nakamura Fuminori<sup>19</sup> (b. 1977), Miyabe Miyuki<sup>20</sup> (b. 1960), Kirino Natsuo<sup>21</sup> (b. 1951)<sup>22</sup> and so forth, often place their characters in urban settings, emphasiz-

<sup>14</sup> This dual perspective is at work, for instance, in *Pāku raifu*, where panoptic views of Hibiya Park and photographs portraying a residential district that stirs a sense of intimacy and nostalgia in one of the characters appear to complement a narrative of loss, desolation and individuation of identity. An in-depth analysis of this work can be found in Fukagawa 2011.

<sup>15</sup> 村上春樹.

<sup>16</sup> 吉本ばなな.

<sup>17</sup> On the urban paysage and media culture in writers from the 1980s—and in particular Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana—see Amitrano 1996, 10-11. On the representation of Tōkyō in the works of these two authors see also Chilton 2009.

<sup>18</sup> 古川日出男.

<sup>19</sup> 中村文則.

<sup>20</sup> 宮部みゆき.

<sup>21</sup> 桐野夏生.

<sup>22</sup> For a recent survey of contemporary noir fiction (selected within a corpus of works translated into English and focusing on the perspective of the non-Japanese reader of these translations) representing Tōkyō as a locus of violence refer to Widmaier Capo 2018. Widmaier-Capo takes into account also translated novels from different genres, such as *Parēdo* and Yoshimoto’s *Moshi moshi Shimokitazawa* もしもし下北沢 (2010), whose urban implications I have myself discussed in my 2014 contribution, sometimes providing similar interpretations. While timely in its emphasis on global resonance, Widmaier Capo’s focus on translated novels does not appear en-

ing the deep-rooted relationship and tensions between humans and the space they live in, but in Yoshida's fiction space appears more closely connected to the sense of unease and seemingly inescapable solitude that characterizes urban existence in contemporary literature. From this perspective, we may argue that Yoshida's claim eloquently testifies to the important transition from the thematization of otherness as the essential marker of Japanese modernity, typical of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century authors, to the concern with solitude and longing for stability that characterizes literary works from the last decades. The novelist Murakami Ryū<sup>23</sup> (b. 1952), a member of the committee that awarded Yoshida's novel *Pāku raifu*<sup>24</sup> (Park Life, 2002) with the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 2002, praised his work for being effective in grasping the sense of hopelessness, immobility and distress of an entire generation, that awkward feeling of "something that might be about to begin, but that has not begun yet" (Murakami 2002, 386).

Masubuchi Toshiyuki has likened Yoshida's mode of description to the bird's-eye view characterizing the maps of another Yoshida, Hatsusaburō<sup>25</sup> (1884-1955), cartographies of real spaces that nonetheless subsumed the cartographer's imagination and his idea of what prospective users (tourists) expected to see (Masubuchi 2008, 49). In these maps, as well as in Yoshida Shūichi's visual descriptions of urban environments, the "double filter" of "individual experience and [...] conventions of representation" that Peter Burke considers an essential part of urban sources (Burke 2013, 439) is certainly at work, but in the writer's case it is yet another critical device alerting the readers to the risks of urban homogenization and destabilizing their sense of belonging. As Marco Del Corona pointed out in his review of the Italian translation of *Akunin*, Japan is described as "hostile, inhospitable, anti-touristic, steering clear of stereotypes." (Del Corona 2017, 19)

### 3. *About a boy*

Serialized at first in the *Asahi shinbun*<sup>26</sup> between late March 2006 and late January 2007, *Akunin* became a best-seller shortly after its publication in 2007;

tirely convincing because it fails to highlight a number of dynamics of the "politics" of translation and the publishing industry.

<sup>23</sup> 村上龍.

<sup>24</sup> パークライフ.

<sup>25</sup> 吉田初三郎.

<sup>26</sup> 朝日新聞.

following the book's success, the story was adapted for cinema in 2010 and the movie, directed by Lee Sang-il<sup>27</sup> (b. 1974), featuring Hisaishi Jō's<sup>28</sup> (b. 1950) soundtrack, and with Tsumabuki Satoshi<sup>29</sup> (b. 1980) and Fukatsu Eri<sup>30</sup> (b. 1973) playing Yūichi and Mitsuyo respectively, was also a big hit.

Although the book is fairly long, the story is quite simple. A young woman, Yoshino, is found dead near the Mitsuse Pass as her murderer, Yūichi, falls in love with another woman, Mitsuyo; pursued by the police, Yūichi and Mitsuyo desperately try to escape, hiding in an abandoned lighthouse, but, when he hears the policemen approaching, Yūichi is caught trying to kill Mitsuyo. While Mitsuyo is extremely confused, the reader is left with the firm impression that Yūichi's alleged attempt to murder her was in fact a way to save her from being accused of complicity, thus an act of love. Fairly soon, we discover that Yoshino met Yūichi through a dating service and had sex with him and let him take nude photos of her for money. As the police investigation goes on, testimonies and flashbacks inform us that there was more to the characters' lives than the single murder episode seems to suggest. Yoshino appears superficial and prone to lying, obsessed with luxury brands and status symbols and incapable of figuring out what her true aspirations are. Yūichi has been abandoned and betrayed all his life; he has sought love relentlessly, but in the form of virtual sex and prostitution, always avoiding direct and honest communication.

The majority of critics commenting on *Akunin* stressed the novel's insight into the complexities of selfhood, adulthood and, of course, evil. The *New Yorker* noted the absence of heroes or a "clear-cut villain," with the author constantly "widening the frame, exposing cruelty and alienation at all levels of Japanese society" (Sept. 27, 2010); Jessa Crispin wrote that *Akunin* "plays with our modern identity issues" (Crispin 2010); writing about the movie, Ryan Cook invites the reader to take into account other characters' responsibilities to explain the crime committed by Yūichi – including the "mean-spirited" Yoshino herself (Cook 2011, 65). As these comments seem to imply, despite the abundance of secondary characters and subplots, and the emphasis Yoshida places on the spatial setting of the narrative, *Akunin*'s greatest interest arguably lies in the characterization of the protagonist, Yūichi. Through his personal story, a universal narrative of isolation, social estrangement, vulnerability and loss of self unfolds. This is, however, a familiar pattern in Yoshida's literature. Many of his novels portray young characters coming up against, and usually oppos-

<sup>27</sup> Korean: 이상일; Japanese: 季相日.

<sup>28</sup> 久石讓.

<sup>29</sup> 妻夫木聡.

<sup>30</sup> 深津絵里.

ing, the values and logic of the dominant culture that they often fail to embrace, missing the chance to become assimilated into the adult society. They must either align themselves with dominant patterns of proper “adult” behavior or exist as juxtaposed – and contrasting – alternatives to the normative (male) subject.

According to the scholar Kuroiwa Yūichi, the topic of masculinity is a central concern in Yoshida’s literature and is closely related to that of youth (Kuroiwa 2011, 330-331). Not only in *Akunin*, but also in other works – *Parēdo* is probably the most striking example – his characters have to face the difficult, twofold challenge of finding a place in the world as male adults, of fitting in to a society whose notions of adulthood and masculinity appear excessively fixed and inhibiting. Yoshida’s strategy to overcome this rigidity seeks to deconstruct his characters’ selves, a process of segmentation that brings to the surface the incongruities and misconceptions underlying the notion of “social being”: he pursues this with great clarity in *Parēdo*, a novel structured in five chapters narrated by five characters who describe each other in sometimes diametrically opposing ways, stressing the inevitable partiality of all human perspectives. In *Akunin*, he resorts once again to the stratagem of multifocalization (the alternation between several focalizers) but also makes strategic use of a variety of communication devices to offer multiple, and systematically contrasting, perspectives on each character and situation. These devices include traditional narrative stratagems such as flashback and interior monologue, as well as tools of communication like newspapers, television and mobile phones.

Let us now look more closely at how this complex characterization applies to the protagonist of the novel. Yūichi is a young man whom women find physically, but not emotionally attractive; he is not rich nor successful, so not a great “catch” according to the “regular” young women’s criteria. Yoshino’s opinion of him is quite clear:

“He’s good-looking, all right, but a complete bore. It’s no fun being with him. Plus he’s a construction worker, which doesn’t turn me on [...] The only thing is, he’s good in bed. [...] The sex is great,” Yoshino whispered again, a knowing smile on her lips [...] “He’s like, so good at it [...] It’s like I completely lose it, and can’t help screaming. [...] And the more I cry out, the more I lose control, and it’s like I know we’re in a small hotel room but it feels like we’re in some vast open place [...]” (Yoshida 2011, 847-863)

Unlike Yūichi, whose interest in Yoshino seems deeper than sexual attraction, Yoshino keeps on seeing Yūichi because “he’s good in bed,” which asserts his masculinity, whereas her comments on his being “a complete bore” and a construction worker seem to negate it, while framing her notion of the desirable man within a general discourse that values social status and de-emphasizes ethical virtues, completely absent from Yoshino’s assessment of Yūichi.

Conversely, such virtues occupy a central position in another woman's account of her acquaintance with him – that nonetheless does not fail to stress Yūichi's fitness as well. The woman's name is Miho; she is a sex worker at a massage parlor who, frightened by Yūichi's strong attachment to her, has left her job. In fact, thanks to the testimony of Yūichi's only friend, we discover that he had fallen in love with Miho and, misinterpreting her kindness, had gone as far as to rent an apartment where he wished to live with her. It was at this point that Miho disappeared. However, there was nothing in Yūichi's behavior that could possibly justify Miho's fears: from the very beginning, the man had appeared respectful and even naïve; he took her delicious, often homemade, food every time he went to see her, treating her like a kind boyfriend would do, and she felt so much at ease in his company that at times she would even fall asleep while lying next to him. In the Miho episode, the inconsistency between space and emotions is dramatized to great effect. Yūichi's good intentions, his sincere, caring affection for Miho and his longing for love produce a comforting atmosphere that is out of place in the claustrophobic space of the massage parlor room. As part of a microcosm with its rules and customs, where "love" does not exist as such, but as an overtly decontextualized concept sustaining the system of commodity transaction that is the sex industry, Miho feels threatened rather than flattered or moved by Yūichi's feelings for her, becoming one of the many women who would ultimately betray him.

Even Mitsuyo, who would fall genuinely in love with Yūichi, gets to know him through the same dating service used by Yoshino and accepts meeting him because she wants to have sex with him: "Sex I can take or leave. I just want somebody to hold me. For years that's what I've been looking for. Somebody to hold me" (Yoshida 2011, 2493). Though this sentence clearly suggests that Mitsuyo is trying to escape solitude rather than seeking sex as a merely physical act, at the beginning of her short relationship with Yūichi she also appears driven towards a surrogate of love rather than the real thing. The couple's life on the run is a trajectory leading towards true love, and it comes as no surprise that it culminates in a non-urban environment: the abandoned (thus non-functioning) lighthouse. The farther they get from the efficient, functional, mechanized and thus de-humanized city the truer, and less commodified their feeling becomes.

Through the many different accounts – often contrasting and always incomplete – about Yūichi, Yoshida brings to the reader's attention the inherent multiplicity of the individual's self. There are as many Yūichis as there are people looking at him and commenting on his life and personality. His self is fragmented, each of the other characters can only see him partially, yet they seem to entertain the illusion that the Yūichi they know is the real one rather than the sum of their convictions, projections and prejudices. In order to enhance this opacity regarding the main character's identity, Yoshida resorts to

a stratagem that he had successfully employed in *Parēdo*: polyphony. In the 2002 novel, the alternation of narrative voices, with the five characters telling the same story from different points of view, determines a systematic deferral of each character's definition (Follaco 2014, 108). By the same token, in *Akunin*, Yūichi's story is told by several secondary characters who are either long-time acquaintances like Hifumi, relatives like his mother, or strangers who nonetheless played a part in his life, albeit briefly, like Miho. As the accounts multiply, the image of Yūichi fades into this conflation of reality and representations, resulting in a multifaceted and fragmentary simulacrum of the self rather than a comprehensive definition of its reality.<sup>31</sup> This disconnectedness from other people, their incapacity to grasp Yūichi's character in its entirety, sanctions his marginalization from society. While none of them actually seems able to explain why, Yūichi is the villain; what led him to murder, and whether he deserves forgiveness or not, are questions nobody will ask.

#### 4. *Urban solitude*

Despite being the “villain,” the monster who killed a young woman apparently without reason, Yūichi seems to be the only character who comes to know what he is looking for. In the middle of the crisis that ensues from the murder, he receives an unexpected message from Mitsuyo through the dating service and feels a sudden, desperate urge to meet her. At the same moment, he realizes something that strikes the reader who, after knowing his story, is most likely left with the impression that Yūichi has felt lonely all his life:

He'd never felt lonely before. He hadn't even known what it meant. But ever since that night he'd felt terribly lonely. Loneliness, he thought, must mean being anxious for somebody to listen to you. He'd never had anything he really wanted to tell someone else, before this. But now he did. And he wanted someone to tell it to. (Yoshida 2011, 2062)

Abandoned by his mother and reared in a backward neighborhood surrounded by old people, betrayed by every woman he has ever felt affection for, lacking ambitions and aspirations, Yūichi did not know the meaning of the word “loneliness,” and the reason is that he never felt he had anything to *tell*. The author, here, places emphasis on the most direct form of communication: the

<sup>31</sup> The opacity of Yūichi's character is further emphasized by the fact that he is the only one who accesses the dating service with his real name rather than resorting to a pseudonym.

act of speaking, a mode of relationality completely cut off from the notions of masculinity, social status and commodification that hamper Yūichi's attempts to find a place in the world and lead a fulfilling existence. This is indeed a crucial scene, for it marks the moment when, as literary critic Yamagami Hideo notes, "a young man who has fallen to the lowest depth tries to carry out a self-revolution." (Yamagami 2011, 48) A revolution that he will never be able to accomplish, for he has already made the mistake that would cost him his freedom: murder, a further demonstration of the inherent hopelessness of Yoshida's literary world, described so brilliantly by Murakami Ryū.

The kind of solitude that Yūichi acknowledges at this point in the novel brings him closer to Mitsuyo, who has been living a dreary life that the author seems to graft on to the streetscape in the sequence that introduces her:

Mitsuyo Magome was staring out the window of the men's clothing store Wakaba as the rain-swept cars went rushing by. The shop was on the outskirts of Saga City, next to Highway 34, a kind of bypass route around the city. There was usually a lot of traffic on the highway, but all the drivers saw was a monotonous repetition of the same scenery they'd seen a few minutes before. (Yoshida 2011, 1866-1870)

The scene described could be visible from any window in any part of Japan. The Wakaba clothing store was most likely inspired by the retail chain AOKI, that counts several hundred shops across the country, most of which are usually built along major highways in suburban areas and so-called "newtowns".

Japan experienced a sharp increase in the urban population immediately after World War II and especially since the mid-1960s. Alongside the three metropolitan areas – Tōkyō, Nagoya, and Ōsaka – Fukuoka, where the novel is set, underwent rapid and steady population growth that prevented the city from suffering demographic loss even between 2000 and 2005, when all the other prefectures in southwest Japan experienced a drop in population (Flüchter 2012, 18-21). The region is thus a densely populated urban area whose landmarks are shops and street segments differing little from one another. Yoshida seems particularly concerned with these processes of delocalization. In his analysis of *Randomāku*, Masubuchi has convincingly argued that Yoshida uses the quintessential urban nomenclature made of shop signs, brands, and means of transportation, to describe peripheries that all look the same and secondary cities that renounce and destroy their local cultures only to become a partial reproduction of Tōkyō (Masubuchi 2008, 44-49). In *Randomāku*, the so-called Saitama-shintoshin (literally "Saitama new city center") provides the spatial setting for a narrative whose overall aim seems to be a cynical reproduction, and deconstruction, of the newtowns built in the proximity of Tōkyō, resulting in

a replica of the capital but without any of its appeal and dynamism. The Kantō region is imagined as having the shape of a donut, with Tōkyō in the middle—being the hole—as something removed from the rest, and protected (Yoshida 2004, 130). Protected from what? From a homogenization that deprives other urban spaces of the possibility of providing people with a home, and thus of their inevitable fate as temporary havens for (young) people whose final destination, and promised land, is and always will be Tōkyō (116).<sup>32</sup>

The juxtaposition of cityscapes, with the illusion of the capital's particularism fading into the background of a proliferation of reproductions and imitations, seems to be confirmed by the resemblance between the scene described above and the opening sentence of *Parēdo*, which is set in Tōkyō:

It was such a weird sight. I was on the fourth-floor balcony looking directly down on Kyukoshu Kaido Boulevard, and though thousands of cars passed by here every day, I'd never seen an accident. There's an intersection directly below the balcony, and when the traffic light turned red a car stopped right at the line. The car behind it came to a halt, leaving just the right amount of distance so they didn't collide, and the car behind that one also stopped, leaving the same exact gap. When the light turned green the lead car slowly pulled away, with the second and third cars following at a safe distance, just like they were being pulled along. (Yoshida 2014, 1)

This chapter of *Parēdo* is narrated by Sugimoto Ryōsuke, a third-year student at the Faculty of Economy of H. University who is trying to figure out his place in the world and in the meanwhile shares an apartment in the quiet suburb of Setagaya with Kotomi, Mirai, Satoru and Naoki. One of the main themes of *Parēdo* is the devaluing of friendship and human relations in contemporary urban society, and the scene quoted above is a powerful metaphor representing the impossibility and unlikelihood of direct communication. The sense of urban boredom suffusing the five flat mates' lives is anticipated in the endless, monotonous traffic sequence witnessed by Ryōsuke, who notices that the cars never collide, that there has never been an accident, and the vehicles follow one another as if “being pulled along” rather than by their own will; likewise,

<sup>32</sup> The space of Tōkyō is juxtaposed to the *urusato* in another work by Yoshida, the short story *flowers*, published in the literary magazine *Bungakukai* 文学界 in 1998 and later included in the *Pāku raifu* volume (2002). Here, the I-narrator (*boku* 僕), a man from Nagasaki, moves to Tōkyō hoping to forget the past only to realize, as Kido suggested, that the past stays with us wherever we go (Kido 2016, 39), thus Tōkyō, despite not being *lieu de mémoire* in the personal history of *boku*, does not provide a refuge from his distress either.

the five characters lead a seemingly peaceful existence and never come into conflict with each other, but the reason is that they cannot, or do not desire to come into contact, to be in touch with one another, they do not communicate, nor do they make decisions about their lives: they drag themselves through life, trying to avoid disturbance, sacrificing companionship for tranquility. Harmony in the house is preserved at the expense of truthful communication—and the apartment becomes an allegory of the entire nation.

Ryōsuke and Mitsuyo share the feeling of solitude and boredom that she tries to overcome by going out with Yūichi. In time, however, the bond between the two main characters of *Akunin* becomes increasingly stronger, until they realize they cannot live without each other. After Yūichi confesses the murder to Mitsuyo, they run away and head towards a lighthouse in an isolated area far from the city. The farther they go, the deeper their love grows; ironically, however, they experience this genuine feeling in spaces that epitomize the homogenization and commodification of romantic love: love hotels. Once again, Yūichi's emotional life unfolds in spaces that do not befit the truthfulness of his intentions. What follows is the description of the place where they make love for the first time:

A panel at the self-service check-in counter showed that two rooms were vacant. Yūichi chose the one named Firenze. He hesitated for a moment, then selected “Short Time” above the panel. Immediately the panel indicated the price, ¥4,800. [...] A room called Firenze, ¥4,800 for a short-time stay. A room in a love hotel that tried to have its own personality, but from which all sense of the personal had vanished. (Yoshida 2011, 2491-2510)

The hotel reception is automated, one could enter and leave without meeting any human being. This impersonal and neutral space, devoid of humanity, contrasts markedly with the intensity of the emotions the two experience during the “Short Time” they spend in the room.

Although Yūichi is the only young character in the novel who does not lie throughout the narrative, he lies in the epilogue, when he and Mitsuyo have finally reached the lighthouse, a place detached from urban areas and surrounded by a nearly pristine nature, where they spend the last hours of their love story with a peace of mind they could not possibly find in their daily lives. The image of the lighthouse has brought the two together, because during their first contacts through messages they discovered a shared passion for lighthouses. At some point while they are on the run they begin to long for the lighthouse as one longs for home. And it is there, *at home*, that they can experience true love until the denouement, when Yūichi's first and single lie is told; he lies when he pushes Mitsuyo away, with the patrolmen approaching, and tells her: “I'm not... the kind of guy you think I am.” (4746)

## 5. Conclusion

Back in 1994, Yokoo Kazuhiro stressed how challenging it is, in post-capitalistic societies, to establish true communication among human beings. Accordingly, such difficulties hamper the individuals' efforts at self-definition because it is only through contact and dialogue (*taiwa*<sup>33</sup>) with other people that identities can emerge; in present-day societies, however, people merely cross each other while avoiding any direct contact (Yokoo 1994, 148-149).

Drawing on Yokoo, Fukagawa considered the absence of communication a trademark of Yoshida's *Pāku raifu* and placed it in direct relation to the sense of precarity that dominates the narrative (Fukagawa 2011, 54). The panoptic view of Hibiya Park suggests to the I-narrator the idea that the park itself might resemble the human body, with the pond representing the heart, and this body-metaphor was anticipated by a meditation on organ transplantation that led him to think that everything we own is borrowed, and therefore temporary (51-52).

This idea of impermanence and temporariness colors Yoshida's entire literary output and intertwines with his major concerns: human relationships, identity issues, youth, and masculinity. Urban centers are increasingly indistinguishable from one another and are temporary; they are transitory havens for young people heading towards adulthood, like Ōmiya in *Randomāku*: a partial reproduction of Tōkyō whose inhabitants' major aspiration is to leave for the real thing as soon as they can (Yoshida 2004, 116). Given this temporary nature, urban areas neither favor nor support the emergence of sincere, long-lasting feelings; their structures and mechanisms interfere with direct communication, thus with mutual understanding and identity individuation. This is clear in *Akunin*, where Yūichi and Mitsuyo can live their love to the fullest once they are far removed from the urban *paysage*, and where Yūichi, the only truthful character, is out of place as long as he is in the city because he cannot adapt to its system. Yūichi's drama originates from his inability to relate to other people no matter how hard he tries, which will ultimately determine his failure to achieve self-definition. In the sequence describing the murder, he and Yoshino seem to speak different languages, to live in two separate dimensions, hence the absurdity of that violence surfaces. Ironically, none of them will ever know that they did meet once, when they were children, and the ingenuousness and spontaneity of their age allowed them to communicate; the reader knows it thanks to a recollection of Yoshino's father who, however, does not realize that the small, cute boy his daughter ran into was the same man who would kill her several years later. This

<sup>33</sup> 対話.

single episode seems to suggest that human contact is only possible before the struggle with adulthood begins.

Truthful communication, dialogue, sharing, and mutual understanding are increasingly at risk as efforts at assimilation into dominant models intensify. The spaces of everyday life seem to frustrate individuals' attempts to live life, experience feelings and find themselves through interaction with other individuals. Yoshida's literature aims to bring to the surface the incoherencies imposed by contemporary society, explore the possibilities of retrieving a sense of self and belonging, and pose questions about the meaning of being and emotions in the individual and collective dimensions of contemporary urban life.

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## CHINESE STUDIES



LI ER'S EARLY NARRATIVE WORKS:  
A VIEW OF THE EXISTENTIAL CONDITION OF THE CHINESE  
INTELLECTUAL OF THE TIME

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*Abstract*

An author still relatively little known outside China, albeit highly successful in some foreign countries, Li Er 李洱 represents one of the main exponents of the current commonly referred to as *xinshengdai* 新生代, "new generation". Starting from a general illustration of the salient features of the Chinese literary landscape of the '90s, the present investigation focuses more particularly on the early production of this author, with the specific aim of identifying from his writings the figure of the Chinese intellectual of that specific historical context. It will, thus, be seen how this figure emerges, in line with the socio-political and cultural transformations of the time, as a "marginal" individual, socially "useless" and privately no master of his own existence, in stark contrast to the role traditionally assigned to him even in the literature of the preceding decade.

*Keywords*

Li Er, Chinese intellectual, *xinshengdai*, Chinese contemporary literature

摘要

李洱是当前被称为“新生代”作者的典型代表之一，虽然在一些国家获得了成功，但是他始终在中国以外的地方鲜为人知。从对90年代中国文学景观的显著特征总体概述开始，本研究更着重于作者的早期作品，其具体目的是从他的作品中来确定那段特殊历史时期里中国知识分子的形象。因此，可以看出，这个人物是随着当时的社会政治和文化转变而显现的，作为一个“边缘”个体、对社会“无用”且私下无法成为自己命运主人的人，与传统意义上赋予他的角色形成鲜明对比，甚至是在前十年的文学作品中。

关键词

李洱，中国知识分子，新生代，中国当代文学

*1. Introduction*

Chinese literary production in the decades immediately following the end of the Maoist era was greatly affected by the changed political and social cli-

mate and the profound transformations underway. The end of the '70s and the '80s see a succession of currents closely connected with the denunciation or the rethinking of the experiences accumulated during the Cultural Revolution (such as the *shanghen wenxue*,<sup>1</sup> "literature of scars", or the *zhiqing wenxue*,<sup>2</sup> "literature of the educated youth") and subsequent currents (from the avant-garde, *xianfengpai*,<sup>3</sup> to neo-realism, *xin xieshizhuyi*<sup>4</sup>) which, as a reflection of a new socio-political reality, show in a lesser way or less openly the burden and traces of the country's recent history and embody the attempt to create a new literature of the present (albeit quite distinctly from one another in form and content). One of the main factors that, subsequently, influences and in a broad sense determines the formation of the literature of the '90s as an entity at least partially distinct from that of the previous decade, is the shift from a planned economy to a market economy which finds further consolidation in these years.<sup>5</sup> This process involves and, in many ways, disrupts the mechanisms within the system of employment and work of writers: released from state control and at the mercy of the market, they must now adapt to hitherto unknown phenomena stemming from the nature of the new economic system, in an unprecedented perspective according to which the literary work is merchandise, sold like any other product.

In parallel with the emergence of a new mass culture and a consumerist literature, we witness the spread of a trend perceived, at times, by the writers themselves as distressing or even alarming, which consists in the gradual devaluation of the figure of the intellectual, in his alienation or, more specifically, "marginalization" (*bianyuanhua*<sup>6</sup>), as unproductive, useless, non-profitable. This explains the flowering of a new type of more commercial writing, which offers original prospects for development, profit, and survival for writers. At the same time, in those who are reluctant or unable to fit into or be enslaved to this system, we find the emergence of a new state of mind, a darker mood, a tendency to fall back on themselves. This in some rare cases leads

<sup>1</sup> 伤痕文学.

<sup>2</sup> 知青文学.

<sup>3</sup> 先锋派.

<sup>4</sup> 新写实主义.

<sup>5</sup> The journey made by Deng Xiaoping in '92 to southern China, in the special economic Zone of Shenzhen and Zhuhai, and to Guangzhou, Shanghai etc. is usually regarded as a fundamental event in this process because it confirms the importance of the Open Door policy and the enhancement of private enterprise as elements in line with socialism with Chinese characteristics.

<sup>6</sup> 边缘化.

to the posing of issues of an existential nature, to indulging in a contemplative state developing an upward tension, an interest in the transcendental and the metaphysical, as in *Xinling shi*<sup>7</sup> (1991) by Zhang Chengzhi,<sup>8</sup> in *Maqiao cidian*<sup>9</sup> (1996) by Han Shaogong<sup>10</sup> or in *Wutuobang shipian*<sup>11</sup> by Wang Anyi<sup>12</sup> (1993),<sup>13</sup> but more frequently leads to an opposite attitude, of indifference towards the spiritual dimension and towards history, to a lack of ideological inspiration and ideals (this attitude, as will be seen, is generally recognizable in the authors of the *xinshengdai* current).

The key word, assuming there is one, in the variegated panorama of the '90's literature, is the expression *duoyuanhua*,<sup>14</sup> "pluralism". In fact, in the literary scene of the period, there is a conflux of several pre-existing strands, co-existing in parallel or mixing in a syncretistic way such as neo-realism and the avant-garde, and more recent ones such as, in general, all forms of consumer literature as opposed to "pure literature", together with the brand-new currents *xinshengdai* (new generation) or *wanshengdai*<sup>15</sup> (belated generation) and *yinsi wenxue*,<sup>16</sup> "private literature".<sup>17</sup> There is, in any case, a unifying tendency, a bonding element in the works of the writers of the '90s, which consists in a

<sup>7</sup> 心灵史.

<sup>8</sup> 张承志.

<sup>9</sup> 马桥词典.

<sup>10</sup> 韩少功.

<sup>11</sup> 乌托邦诗篇.

<sup>12</sup> 王安忆.

<sup>13</sup> Hong Zicheng 洪子诚 sees an interest on the part of these authors in spiritual matters (Hong 1999, 391) and, in the specific case of Zhang Chengzhi, a religious vein traceable in his writings (Hong 1999, 350).

<sup>14</sup> 多元化.

<sup>15</sup> 晚生代.

<sup>16</sup> 隐私文学. An expression used interchangeably with *siren wenxue* 私人文学 with which it is customary to refer to the literary production of a group of writers (Chen Ran 陈染, Lin Bai 林白, Hai Nan 海男, etc.) who explore in their works the world of women and their identity with specific attention to private life and the physical and sensual dimension (Scheen 2013, 118).

<sup>17</sup> The identification of literary currents has a purely indicative value and always presents, of course, a certain degree of conventionality and arbitrariness. There are also numerous authors of this period who cannot easily be placed in this specific strand and those whose literary output over time reveals features at times closer to one current and at times to another.

preference for an individualistic or private writing style and defined, precisely, as *gerenhua xiezu* or *siren xiezu*.<sup>18</sup>

After decades of artistic production imbued with ideology and reduced to a mere tool of propaganda, the stylistic hallmarks of Chinese authors, besides the specific differences typical of the various currents, all reflect, from the first years after the end of the Maoist era, an irrepressible desire for self-affirmation, for creating a different kind of literature, subjective and eminently personal. A careful analysis of the literature of the '80s, however, still reveals a strong "political" presence. Being an elitist writing, the product of a circle of authoritative writers and destined in turn to a circle of educated readers, it is in fact often too conceptualized and intellectualized to speak to the common man, it shies away from the masses and this being folded in on itself creates its limit. The writing of the '90s and, in particular, that of the literary strand called, after much debate, the "new generation", represents an attempt to reconvert literature from an activity having an essentially "collective" character into individual and unrepeatable creation, using at the same time forms and styles more accessible to the general public compared to the experiments of the previous decade.

The '80s saw the modernization and changes to the socio-economic system linked to it, which had generally been perceived as promoting progress and development, generating an optimistic and positive state of mind. This started to fall away as from the middle of the decade with a "rethinking" and cultural "fever" in which the "root-seeking literature", *xungen wenxue*,<sup>19</sup> and the avant-garde strand emerged. Then, after the events of Tian'anmen, the Chinese intellectual of the '90s, conscious of the gap between the ideals advocated by that development and the contemporary material reality, and aware at the same time of the process of marginalization which he was subject to, took on a more pessimistic and disillusioned vision of the world. Inclined to introspection and to questioning the principles of a crumbling system of values, he develops a nihil-

<sup>18</sup> The expression *gerenhua xiezu* 个人化写作 and some of its synonyms are very often used by critics with reference to a series of female authors (Lin Bai, Chen Ran and in general the aforementioned writers also cited as exponents of the *siren wenxue*), but the specifically personal nature, which is declined in various forms, is, in fact, a constant of the writing of the '90s, regardless of whether the authors are men or women. Among the critics who, while recognizing the expression *gerenhua xiezu* as employed mainly in the female sphere, underline in a more general way the individual character of the works of these years and use *gerenhua xiezu* also in reference to the male field, there are, for example, Hong Zicheng, who quotes the writer Zhang Min 张旻 among the exponents of this current (Hong 1999, 392), and Anne Wedell-Wedellsborg (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2010, 164-192), etc.

<sup>19</sup> 寻根文学.

istic sense of total extraneousness to the ethical and political sphere. And where that propensity for a “rethinking of history” (*fansi lishi*<sup>20</sup>) survives, it is dealt with from an individual point of view, that is, it no longer focuses on “great history” (like the Cultural Revolution), but on personal experiences lived out against that background. This is perfectly in line with individualistic writing, as is another distinctive feature of nineteenth-century literary production, namely focusing attention on the reality of the individual and on the everyday life of the common man and his inner world. From the *da xie*<sup>21</sup> (lit. “big writing”) to the *xiao xie*<sup>22</sup> (lit. “small writing”): no one writes now about the collective destiny of a nation, nor about glorious and grand personalities, but about the events of the ordinary man and of his microcosm, his impotence, his struggle. This aspect, after all, is in line with the more general “anti-noble”, “anti-heroic” and “anti-cultural” character of post-modernism.

## 2. Chinese literature in the '90s: the *xinshengdai* current

As has been said, Li Er is usually included in that current called *xinshengdai*, “new generation” or *wanshengdai*, “belated generation”, referring to a group of authors born in the early 60s, among them: He Dun, Shu Ping, Zhu Wen, Han Dong, Bi Feiyu, Dongxi, Guizi, Li Feng, Qiu Huadong, Luo Wangzi, Ding Tian, Jing Ge, Wang Biao,<sup>23</sup> etc. The term *wanshengdai* was coined by Chen Xiaoming (Xu and Ding 2002, 611), who first used it in an essay published in 1991 in the literary review *Wenxue pinglun*,<sup>24</sup> *Literary Criticism*, and entitled *Zuihou de yishi*,<sup>25</sup> *The Last Ceremony*. On that occasion he actually wanted to indicate the current of the avant-garde, but as this vein was more generally known as *xianfengpai*, the tendency on the part of critics was to use the expression *wanshengdai* to refer to the writers born more or less in the early '60s, active as from the '90s and with characteristics clearly different from those of the avant-garde (Chen 2003, 141). The term “belated generation” not only refers to the age difference – not so very significant – between the authors of this current and those of the *xianfengpai*, but rather

<sup>20</sup> 反思历史.

<sup>21</sup> 大写.

<sup>22</sup> 小写.

<sup>23</sup> 何顿, 述平, 朱文, 韩东, 毕飞宇, 东西, 鬼子, 李冯, 邱华栋, 罗望子, 丁天, 荆歌, 王彪.

<sup>24</sup> 文学评论.

<sup>25</sup> 最后的仪式.

to the “generational artistic gap” between the writers of the two strands. The avant-garde was in fact historically opposed to classical realism, while the *wanshengdai* had no precedent with which to feel more or less directly connected or in antithesis (Chen, 2003, 142); the writing of the “belated generation” also possesses a personal and individual character at a content and not purely formal level. This character is absent or however present in a different way in avant-garde literature which, in turn, features a constant search for innovative forms of expression and new styles. Apart from these general indications, however, it should be kept in mind that several critics have repeatedly denounced the insufficient clarity of the terms “belated generation”, “new generation” and similar names, which appear excessively vague and obscure (Xu and Ding 2002, 612-14).

As for the character of the literary production of the ‘90s and, in particular, of the *xinshengdai*, especially fitting is the illustration offered by Chen Xiaoming. When defining this strand, Chen tends to adopt, implicitly, a negative and comparative procedure, identifying what the literature of the ‘90s is in contrast with, what it is *not*, what are the aspects and characteristics present in the previous Chinese literary panorama and absent instead in the scenario of the time. The traits he identifies can thus be summed up in: anti-essentialism,<sup>26</sup> ahistoricity, un-sociability, un-poeticalness, non-revolutionarity (“non-rebellious character”).<sup>27</sup> Regarding the sense he bestows on the term “anti-essentialism”, Chen explains: “Essentialism has to do with metaphysics, ontology and rationalism [...], anti-essentialism with the irrationalism of modern philosophy, with the skepticism of democracy, [...]” (Chen 2003, 128), and from his subsequent considerations one may assume that by “anti-essentialism” he means a renouncing of metaphysical speculation and in general of open and explicit reflection on existential issues, together with the collapse of any faith or ideal and the weakening of the ideological system.

In any case, most of the *xinshengdai* writers were children during the last Maoist decade and it is perhaps because of this that Chen Xiaoming writes of them: “They have no memories of history [...]. They look at contemporary reality which for them is nothing more than an arbitrary, subjective present time” (Chen 2000, 252). The manifestations of the present constitute in fact the raw material of the narration of these authors. Hence the character of ahistoricity or

<sup>26</sup> *Fanbenzhizhuyi* 反本质主义 (Chen 2003, 138-183).

<sup>27</sup> To describe the narrative of the *xinshengdai*, he specifically uses the expressions: *feilishihua* 非历史化, *feishehuihua* 非社会化, *wushiyi* 无诗意, *feipannixing* 非叛逆性 (Chen 2000, 244-262).

*xianzaizhuyi*,<sup>28</sup> which consists in turning the gaze to focus the narrative on contemporary reality and not on events belonging to the past – if not very recent, as is the case in the tales of Li Er. And being individuals deprived of historical or political missions, as well as of an effective social role, if on the one hand they suffer in some way from an identity crisis due to their “marginalization”, on the other they acquire and can enjoy unprecedented freedom, independence and relaxation. Their “lack of memories” prompts these authors to write about contemporary reality which is a dimension in continuous and unceasing transformation. Their mistrust for that “inspiring” and “enlightening” attitude of a part of traditional literature (i.e. that related to the May Fourth Movement) and of the resurrected humanistic spirit of the early post-Mao era, plus their repulsion for the politicized and populist literary production of the past and their preference for shying away from the elevated and committed character of “pure literature”, cause them to place the life of the individual with his baggage of experiences and emotions at the center of their narrative. In doing so, they attribute importance to the realism and plausibility of their writing rather than to its complexity of content or formal tortuosity. That a series of authors choose the more immediate and unhistoricized present as narrative content is not in itself a shocking fact, but it must be considered that at the time in China, literature was not concerned with describing the present except in a politicized way, and that even the *xin xieshizhuyi* which emerged in the ‘80s had chosen to reflect contemporary reality with an approach which was not devoid of social instances. Besides, not only do these writers not describe history, but they also don’t feel connected to the literature of the past. As pointed out by Han Dong, the authors of the “new generation” are essentially self-made writers. They spent their childhood reading texts like *Lei Feng riji*<sup>29</sup> and therefore they weren’t much influenced by the literary tradition of the past. Instead, foreign literature exerts a greater influence on them (Wang *et al.* 2001, 357).

The weakening and partial dismantling of the ideological system resulting from the advent of market economy, as highlighted in the previous paragraph, allowed writers to have at their disposal a wider scope of action and to develop a new relationship with social concerns. In fact, they seem to maintain a certain distance from the society to which they nonetheless belong. Hence the “un-social” character of the “new generation” and, in general, of much of the literature of the ‘90s. What is lacking in these authors is that convinced adhesion, that enthusiastic participation in the sphere of the collective, as well as that “social pain” shared with the great masses which, in the past, had characterized

<sup>28</sup> 现在主义.

<sup>29</sup> 雷锋日记 (Lei Feng’s Diary).

writers' relationship with the society of the time. The *xinshengdai* writers, as has been said, share a private, anti-collectivist and therefore ahistorical writing. This feature, as previously mentioned, is taken to its extreme by the group of coeval female writers, Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Hai Nan, Hong Ying,<sup>30</sup> etc., who, with their writings fathom and unravel the most intimate aspects of their own interiority and physicality, becoming the major exponents of the *yinsi wenxue* (also known as *sirenhua xiezu*). Individual writing is often transformed into what has been called *yuwanghua xiezu*<sup>31</sup> – “writing of desire” –, a narrative that has as its object the pulsions, physical and immanent desires, affections and sexuality and more generally all that has to do with the carnality of the individual. Ding Fan and Xu Zhiying explain that the May Fourth Movement can be seen as a great (albeit limited in time) stimulus to rediscover the dimension of “desire” in the broad sense, as a liberation of the individual from certain aspects of a backward-looking, conservative culture; after that, for a period of about fifty years, there was at the literary and cultural level a sort of puritanism in China, a repression of the emotional, sensual sphere, in general of the aspirations of the individual, and only as from the ‘80s and then in a more explosive way in the ‘90s, a kind of awakening of the senses, an enfranchisement or rather a releasing of long-repressed desire.<sup>32</sup> In the ‘90s this process intensified and in part diversified. Whereas in the 1920s as well as mostly also in the *xin xieshi* literature of the late ‘80s, the liberation of desire always implied, as if deeply rooted within, a strong social and cultural component, the libido or lust in the works of the *xinshengdai* writers is completely subjectivized and physiologized, it is stripped of its cultural connotation. Its awakening, within a society empty of values, is the awakening of pure desire, in and of itself. The lack of social and family burden is the premise for the individualization and the “corporalization” of the writing of the authors of the “new generation”, who listen exclusively to their inner instincts (Xu and Ding 2002, 668-673).

It has already been pointed out how the works of these authors are often imbued with a strange languor, with a tension towards pleasure as an end in itself, with a lust to be extinguished in a rather mechanical, sometimes animal way. Therefore, there seems to be very little room for genuine feelings – or even just for feelings – in the works of the *xinshengdai* authors. Their works are populated instead by adulterous or otherwise illegitimate relationships that

<sup>30</sup> 虹影.

<sup>31</sup> 欲望化写作.

<sup>32</sup> An exemplary text of the phenomenon described is *Nanren de yi ban shi nüren* 男人的一半是女人 (Half of Man is Woman, 1985) by Zhang Xianliang 张贤亮, which at the time caused a stir due to the presence of elements considered indecent, taboo until then.

are often deviated and pathological, and above all by “aseptic” affairs almost devoid of emotion and “poetry”. In the literary production of this strand, the individual, as mentioned, is described in the everyday life of his prosaic existence as a common man, a further reason why this current is referred to as un-poetic, deprived of depth, of intrinsicality. If the *xin shiqi*<sup>33</sup> literature (“new era literature”), which developed between the end of the ‘70s and the end of the ‘80s, had often had, in its various forms, a “heroic” character and the avant-garde, in particular, with its various strands had always manifested as a distinctive characteristic a sort of elitist flavor, the affirmation and consolidation of the market economy, the emergence of a mass culture and the inevitable influence on and contamination of “pure” literature prompt all ‘90s literary production to assume a “popularized”, *pingminhua*<sup>34</sup> (Wang et al. 2001, 405-406), and secularized hue. In this sense, most critics have also underlined that the *xinshengdai* writers do not show any interest in the moral sphere. Yang Jianlong, for instance, firmly claims that their writings are devoid of both aesthetic and ethical values (Wang et al. 2001, 356-57). Instead, Visser’s opinion departs from the prevalent point of view, since he thinks that “there is, however, an ethic dimension to these narratives, which [...] is their most defining feature” and according to him this is proved by the fact that the characters of – at least some of – the *xinshengdai* writers not only act, they eventually reflect on their actions with the recognition that something is amiss in their modern urban lifestyles. Though the protagonists of their stories may not achieve satisfactory answers to their attempt to change their lives from a moralistic perspective, “yet these authors unquestionably probe ethical issues arising in relation to their urban reality” (Visser 2005, 213-14). Leaving aside the conflicting opinions of the critics, it is undeniable, however, that where a moralistic vein is traceable in the works of these writers, it is much less evident and explicit than in the literature of the past. The authors of the “new generation” rather than writing in a moralizing manner, tend to recount their protagonists’ thoughts and actions in a realistic way, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions.

Another feature of ‘90s literature highlighted by Chen Xiaoming is its “non-revolutionary” character, its scarcity of highly innovative traits. In this sense, if it is an objective fact that from the point of view of formal experimentation, the *wanshengdai* writers cannot – and do not want to – compete with the avant-garde of the ‘80s, what is more difficult to accomplish is an evaluation of the originality of their narration from the point of view of its contents. For some critics, the authors of this strand are often lacking in ideas and their production

<sup>33</sup> 新时期.

<sup>34</sup> 平民化.

reflects the anxiety of a literature which, deprived of ideology, is frantically in search of a purpose. This opinion, however, is not shared by many writers belonging to the *xinshengdai*, who have instead emphasized the clear distance between their works and both previous and, in many ways, contemporary literary production, becoming promoters of the so-called “Rupture Movement”.<sup>35</sup> In any case, besides the opinions of the critics and authors, an objective feature that can be kept in mind is the rediscovery of the de-ideologized and purely individual dimension, which operates in a perspective of “dismantling” rather than “building”, and the unprecedented character of the literary landscape of the “new generation” would seem to reside precisely in this.

### 3. *Li Er's '90s production: the figure of the intellectual*

The themes addressed in the works of Li Er range from living conditions in the Chinese countryside (as in *Long feng cheng xiang*<sup>36</sup> 2003, *Shiliushu shang jie yingtao*<sup>37</sup> 2004, etc.), to the daily life of the intellectuals (*Daoshi si le*<sup>38</sup> 1993, *Wuhou de shixue*<sup>39</sup> 1998, *Rao she de yaba*<sup>40</sup> 1995, *Huaqiang*<sup>41</sup> 2001, etc.), up to the alienation of the modern man and in particular of the lower social strata (*Guang yu ying*<sup>42</sup> 2004, *Ni zai na*<sup>43</sup> 2009, etc.). Among these subjects, one of the most deeply felt and most frequently dealt with topics within his short stories and novels published in the ‘90s is undoubtedly the existential condition of the

<sup>35</sup> A movement launched by Zhu Wen through the administration to about sixty of his fellow writers of a questionnaire ranging from the relationship of the writers of the “new generation” with the other authors – their contemporaries – to the influence exercised on them by the traditional culture, and their opinions on the literature presented by the most popular magazines in the field and on the literary awards “Mao Dun Literature Prize” and “Lu Xun Literature Prize”. The document’s questions and the data reworked and published by Zhu Wen reflect a voluntary denial, a rejection by these writers of the literary establishment and of all that in some way represents authority, whether it concerns figures from the Chinese literary tradition, or their contemporaries.

<sup>36</sup> 龙凤呈祥 (In Extremely Good Fortune).

<sup>37</sup> 石榴树上结樱桃 (Cherries Grow on a Pomegranate Tree).

<sup>38</sup> 导师死了 (The Professor Is Dead, Lit. “mentor”).

<sup>39</sup> 午后的诗学 (Afternoon Poetics).

<sup>40</sup> 饶舌的哑巴 (The Chatty Mute).

<sup>41</sup> 花腔 (Coloratura).

<sup>42</sup> 光与影 (Lights and Shadows).

<sup>43</sup> 你在哪 (Where Are You?).

Chinese intellectual,<sup>44</sup> a human category that Li Er knew well, having always lived in close contact with the academic and cultural environment.<sup>45</sup>

The figure of intellectual outlined by Li Er in his writings is, essentially, that of an “anti-hero”. The stereotype of scholar he depicts is that of an isolated thinker, surrounded by a crowd of colleagues or casual listeners, but substantially detached from the dynamics of real life in which he is portrayed, incapable of influencing in any way what goes on around him. He is in the grip of life's events, a helpless victim, a passive observer. A feeling of impotence is the leitmotiv of several of Li Er's tales, in particular, as will be seen, in *The Professor is Dead*, and, anyway, in all his stories, the characters are not protagonists of their own lives, they take no part, passively scrutinizing the course of events, reflecting and commenting on what is happening around them.

The intellectual painted by Li Er is first and foremost an acute spectator who, sometimes compulsively, spends his time thinking, speculating, brooding, and then disclosing the fruit of his reflections reworked in literary or even, more frequently, poetic form. “Analyzing”, *Fenxi*,<sup>46</sup> is one of the key words of Li Er's

<sup>44</sup> The novel *Huaqiang* (Coloratura, 2001) also features a protagonist who is an intellectual. This figure is, however, quite different from those of Li Er's previous stories (see, for example, Zhang 2002, 369-378), since the historical context described is not the contemporary, but that of the '40s, against the backdrop of the civil war and the Japanese invasion.

<sup>45</sup> Li Er was born in Jiyuan (Henan) in 1966, the year which saw the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. His father was a junior high school teacher, which is why, even though it was very difficult at the time to follow a regular course of study, he was able to achieve a fairly complete education. In '83 he undertook his university studies at *Huadong Shifan Daxue* 华东师范大学 in Shanghai and after completing his studies, Li Er returned to Henan, where he taught at a high school in Zhengzhou. As from 1991 a phase of literary production was set in motion, characterized by a series of publications including the stories: *Wangcheng* 惘城, *Desolate City* (in *Zhongshan* 钟山, 1991.4), *Xun wu qishi* 寻物启事, *Notice on Lost Item* (in *Lijiang* 漓江 1996.4), *Baise de wuya* 白色的乌鸦, *The White Raven* (in *Shanhua* 山花, 1996.12) etc. This intense short story production phase culminated in 2001 with his first novel, the aforementioned *Huaqiang* (in *Huacheng* 花城 2001.6, then published in 2002 by Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe). In 2004 Li Er published his second novel, *Shiliushu shang jie yingtao*, *Cherries Grow on a Pomegranate Tree*, (Jiangsu Wenyi Chubanshe), in which he abandons the theme of the contemporary intellectual and goes on to describe the situation of the countryside in modern China. His last novel, *Ying Wuxiong* 应物兄, is now being published in serial form on *Shouhuo* 收获 and is scheduled to be republished by Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe in a few months' time. Li Er currently lives in Beijing and has been a researcher at the National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature since 2012.

<sup>46</sup> 分析.

writings, whose characters have a strong tendency to make an all-encompassing analysis of reality in all its facets. A literary essay, a philosophical work, an event of any kind, dramatic or comical, fundamental in the existence of the individual or completely insignificant, or even any particular, a trifle that stimulates the hypersensitive imagination of the protagonist, everything is potentially subjected to analysis, everything goes through the filter of his constantly active mind. And this same intellectual stereotype, when called upon, also presents great oratory gifts. Among his favorite pastimes are long discussions in which he can exhibit and masterfully articulate his own theories or points of view. Diatribes of all kinds animate the lives of these men of letters, enliven their days and seem to fill them with – purely illusory – meaning. There is, however, a fundamental element that cannot be separated from this intense intellectual activity and that makes them losers: the fact that all this turmoil and intellectual fervor are simply an empty speculation for its own sake, devoid of a minimum of incisiveness on real life. This cerebral hyperactivism does not lead the individual to a deeper knowledge of the real or to a more fruitful interrelation with it, but rather to the widening of the gap existing between his inner world and the external reality that is the object of his analysis. The intellectual in question, in fact, merely peers at the world, probing its pettiest aspects, debating at length on academic issues or everyday events with the precision of a surgeon, without this leading him to the acquisition of the truth or an active intervention in the construction of his existence. As pointed out by Lu, the frame of mind of post-modern Chinese intellectuals can be characterized in psychoanalytical terms as “schizophrenic”, in the sense that it cannot grasp its own relationship to the social totality. The literary production of this time reflects the main factors linked to China’s transformation into a socialist market economy, like corruption, commercialization, sexual indulgence and the impotence of the intellectual to effect change (Lu 2002, 253). Pessimism, impotence and disenchantment therefore seep out from these early writings of Li Er, flanked however by an irony which is sometimes acute, subtle, sometimes blatant and explosive, and which permeates the whole narrative making it pleasant and more acceptable.

In an era of openness, globalization and pluralism, the imperative is to renounce the search for absolute truths, unique moral values to refer to constantly; the individual is abandoned or, rather, “returned” to himself, to his own standards, to the acceptance of relativism as an existential condition. In essence, the intellectuals of the tales of Li Er find themselves facing, in a grotesque and tragic-comical climate, the reality that “God is dead” and that consequently also “the *professor* is dead”. The poet, be he a professor or a student, is no longer the traditional literate above the masses, strengthened by his cultural superiority, worthy of respect and consideration. At the same time, he is no longer the thinker of the Maoist era, exploited by the authorities and spokesman of a strongly ideologized official

culture that deprives him of his creativity and at times even subjects him to the most painful humiliations, but which still grants him an official role, a place in society, a very precise function. The contemporary Chinese intellectual is struggling to carve out a new role, to build an original identity both in the public and in the private spheres, and with the outside world maintains a semi-distant relationship or “safe distance” that enables him to sound it out and to delve into the most hidden meanders without acting or getting particularly involved.

Immersed in the dimension of everyday life, dedicated to alienated forms of communication interwoven with learned references, literary reminiscences understandable only to the speaker and referred to trivial and prosaic areas with a consequent alienating effect, Li Er's intellectuals, when they choose not to “fall” from the dome of a church, as happens in *The Professor is Dead*, sigh at the unpredictability of life and the inescapability of events. Their restlessness and their discomfort do not take on the extreme and lyrical forms of depression or fear, yet they always emanate a sense of inadequacy, of inconsistency with respect to a context in contact with which they often generate a grinding contrast.

One of Li Er's most representative texts containing the profile of an intellectual is the above-mentioned *Afternoon Poetics*. The protagonist Fei Bian and his colleagues and friends – who include the narrator – are all men of learning who love arguing about philosophy and literature, filling out their arguments with quotations of Chinese or, much more often, Western authors. In one of the many discussions in the cultural salon their ingenious, witty, forward-looking minds even compel them to think ahead of their epitaph and Fei Bian does not waste a chance to show off his knowledge, using for this purpose two verses of Dante Alighieri:<sup>47</sup>

I remember that one day a poet who was a good talker came from Beijing. He was a friend of Fei Bian's, and while he was talking about Heidegger's concept of “being-toward-death”, all of a sudden he started to recite his epitaph and reminded us that we too should have an “epitaph consciousness”. [...] And so someone suggested that we all write down our own epitaph and then showed it to the others. The reason why I still remember Fei Bian's, is that later I heard him repeat it many times. It was actually made up of two verses of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: “The vase wherein time's roots are plunged, thou seest; look elsewhere for the leaves”. That day Fei Bian, in his following speech, also provided an illustration of the meaning of these two verses.<sup>48</sup> (Li Er 2002, 179)

<sup>47</sup> Dante, *Paradise*, XXVII, 118-119.

<sup>48</sup> 我记得有一天从北京来了一位谈锋甚健的诗人，他是费边的朋友，他在谈到海德格尔的“向死而声”的时候，突然朗诵起了自己的墓志铭，并提醒大家也要具备这种“墓志铭意识”。[...] 有人 [...] 就建议大家都把墓志铭写下来，互相传看一下儿。我 [...] 之所以能记住费边的，是因为我后来又听他说过几次。

Yet these people are not in search of truth, they neither avail themselves of culture to nourish their own spirit and improve their individual existence, nor to pursue ideals or to accomplish deeds in the service of humanity; for them, culture is a mere expedient to impress the interlocutor, to persuade him on small matters of daily life or to beat him in academic disputes for their own sake. And here we have Nietzsche, Heidegger and Mallarmé together with an infinite number of other names, recycled in the most unthinkable contexts and with the least noble of ends, their thoughts diminished, misrepresented, their messages corrupted. In this perspective, the myth of the androgyne of Plato's *Symposium* is used to conquer the woman, the object of desire:

That time he didn't talk to Du Li about the dialogue on love by Plato. He wanted to keep it for a better time and imprint that story on her mind like a stamp. [...] One day, while he was eating some shrimps she had cooked, Fei Bian felt like he had really fallen in love with her, a little bit. And so he played the Plato card with her. He told that story in such a vivid, realistic way, as if there were really two halves of the same person wandering in the air, trying to reconnect with each other. From the look in her eyes you could clearly see how fascinated she was by his words. He said to her: "It's alright now. We are finally stitched together, we've become a whole person".<sup>49</sup> (Li Er 2002, 191-92)

Knowledge is a miserable tool at the service of worldly life,<sup>50</sup> a status symbol that distinguishes intellectuals from the masses. In *Afternoon Poetics* the innumerable quotes of famous literates and thinkers used improperly in the dimension of daily life lose their greatness, they are emptied of their depth. Prisoners of everyday life, Fei Bian and his friends parade their erudition, abusing it to such an extent as to arouse compassion or hilarity in the reader.

The cultural salon is soon abandoned due to the disagreements among the members and Fei Bian remains alone. From here begins the second part of the story,

那其实是但丁《神曲》里的两句诗：时间就在这只器皿里有他的根，而在其余的器皿里有它的枝叶。这一天，在随后的发言中，费边对《天堂篇》中的这两句诗还进行了一翻解释。This and all other translations of excerpts cited from Li Er's short stories are my own.

<sup>49</sup> 这一次，他没跟杜莉谈柏拉图的爱情说。他得留一手，他要在合适的时候，像盖章那样，把这句话盖到她的脑子里。[...] 有一天，吃着她烧的对虾，费边感到自己确实有点爱上了她，就把柏拉图搬了出来。他讲得是那么形象、逼真，好像真的有两个半边人在天空漫游。他从杜莉的眼睛中看到她听得很入迷。他对她说：“现在好了，我们已经缝合到了一起，成了一个完整的人。”

<sup>50</sup> The short novel cited here, *Wuhou de shixue* 午后的诗学, was published, however, initially in 1998, in the second issue of *Dajia* 大家.

the encounter with Du Li, their married life, the background related to it, unveiled only at the end, and the resulting picture is certainly not rosy. The love between the protagonist and his woman grows in verbal intensity without being substantiated by feelings; Fei Bian himself is aware of resorting to a declaration of love with impressive words just in order to set a suitable atmosphere for a passionate scene. And not only is he aware of it, but as usual he makes a brief analysis of the situation stripping it of all poetry and creating comic realism. Similarly, a quarrel between Fei Bian and the new director of Department, Han Ming, is fought out with literary citations, from Shakespeare to Nietzsche. Then, when Fei Bian, indignant at being offended for the umpteenth time by his adversary, loses his temper and they finally come to blows, he tries to punch Han Ming but misses:

They were like puppets, whose strings were pulled by the Great Masters whom they admired so much. They were used to arguing like that, they were sort of addicted to it. They quarrelled for a while, then Han Ming said: "A great man does not harbor grievance for past wrongs. I won't fight with you any longer. Fei Bian, if you don't feel like singing, you might as well leave now". Fei Bian didn't leave, he said he wanted to hear the Head of Department, Han Ming, sing. [...] Han Ming answered calmly: "[...] If you guys really want to hear someone sing, then we should go to Fei Bian's house. You probably don't know that his lady, Mrs. Du, before being expelled from university, was a singer loved by everyone on campus. [...] Fei Bian, with your permission, we can all go to get a taste of your wife's graceful appearance. Let me call a taxi, I'll pay for it". Fei Bian just felt like hitting him. He struck a blow at Han Ming. There was a time when Fei Bian during our conversations always ended up mentioning his "punching" Han Ming. "If that punch had struck the target, I would have certainly broken his nose". [...] (Han Ming smartly bent down and dodged the punch, Fei Bian missed and almost fell on the floor).<sup>51</sup> (Li Er 2002, 198)

In actual fact, the entire married life of Fei Bian and his wife has the flavor of a farce, staged for reasons of convenience. And the protagonist, faced with

<sup>51</sup> 他们就像两个提线木偶，在后面提线头的，都是他们景仰的导师。他们就那样闹着，好像都对此上了瘾。闹了一会儿，韩明说：“大人不计小人过，我不跟你闹了。费边，你要是不想唱，现在就可以走。”费边不走，他说他想听韩主任唱。（...）韩明慢悠悠地说：“（...）你们要是真想听歌，那就到费边家去听。你们大概还不知道，费边的夫人杜莉女士，在被学校开除之前，曾是一个人人人爱的校园歌手。”（...）“你要是允许大家去，我现在就出去叫车，车钱由我来付，让大家领略一下儿杜莉的风采。”费边出手了，他朝韩明捅了一拳。有那么一段时间，我每次见到费边，聊着聊着，他就提起他的出拳。“那一拳要是打着他的话，非把他的鼻子打歪不可。”（...）（韩明当时机灵地闪了过去，费边打空了，还差点摔倒在地）。

this secret reality, the double life of his woman, reveals all the emptiness and futility of his intellectual acumen, which he knows how to use exclusively to get the best in verbal *querelles* with friends. Not only that: certain of the identity of the man with whom his wife has an extramarital relationship, he thinks to punish him with what he considers a true gentleman's revenge. He writes an essay in which he narrates a situation analogous to theirs, alluding in a more or less veiled way to his wife's lover, trying to put him to shame. His initiative, however, not only does not arouse any shame in the man, but it does not cause him slightest embarrassment, insinuating from that moment in the reader the doubt that Fei Bian has aimed at the wrong target.

Culture's loss of its "high function" and its concrete usefulness is also an issue apparent in *Rao she de yaba*, "The Chatty Mute". The main character is once again a scholar, Fei Ding, a university professor endowed in theory with great oratorical gifts, but whose language, despite the display of his technical knowledge in the field of language and linguistics, is actually counter-productive for communicative purposes:

Fei Ding was still at his desk, teaching class, copiously citing classical works. His speech was about comparative studies of China and the West. He was saying that "subject", "predicate", "object", "adjective", "adverb", "complement", all these concepts derive from English, and therefore they cannot explain exhaustively the complexity of Chinese language. "The sentence 'Fei Ding is standing at his desk' cannot be analyzed using the categories of 'subject', 'predicate' and 'object' because I'm not the object, how can I be the object?"<sup>52</sup> Obviously I'm the subject, but I don't look like the subject, I'm the 'center word'...". At the end of this rambling speech, he didn't even know who he was. He asked his students: "What am I?" "You are a man", one of them unexpectedly answered.<sup>53</sup> (Li Er 2004, 360)<sup>54</sup>

In the face of his inability to organize his thoughts – which is accompanied on an oral level by a slight stutter – his verbal opulence is not only of no help

<sup>52</sup> In Chinese this sentence is constructed as an "existential sentence" in which "Fei Ding" is the object.

<sup>53</sup> 费定还在讲台上引经据典地讲着，他的讲述已经进入了中西文化比较的范围，他说“主、谓、宾、定、状、补”这些概念都来自英语，所以无法穷尽复杂的汉语现象。“讲台上站着费定”这句话就无法用“主”、“谓”、“宾”来分析，“因为我不是宾语，我怎么会是宾语呢？我显然是主语，但我不像是主语，我是个中心词……”他的话题绕来绕去，到最后，他连他是谁都不知道。他问下面的学生：“我是什么？”“你是人。”有个学生冷不防地冒了一句。

<sup>54</sup> Here we have used a collection of 2004, but *Rao she de yaba* (The Chatty Mute), was first published in 1995 (in the fourth issue of *Dajia*) and later released in 2000 by Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe in a homonymous anthology of stories.

to the transmission of content, but is indeed a hindrance to its expression. When the girl he refers to as his ex-girlfriend, who no longer wants to have anything to do with him, sends him a letter stating as much and places a symbolically threatening razor blade in the envelope, he replies with an incoherent letter, full of terminological considerations without any logical connection:

Fan Lihua,<sup>55</sup>

at the moment, osmanthus blossoms are blooming. Osmanthus blossoms are similar in color and shape to pear blossoms. Oshmanthus is also called *muxu*, “osmanthus fragrans”. There’s a dish that is called “Muxu pork” and is made up of scrambled eggs mixed with ripe “Jew’s ear” mushrooms and golden needle flowers. This dish doesn’t have much to do with osmanthus, it is instead related, to some extent, to the eunuchs who once lived in Beijing. The character *xu* of the compound *muxu* also has a variant, but this variant cannot be used to write *xuniu*, “rhinoceros”. There are so many counterfeit products! We’d better watch out.

Fei Ding<sup>56</sup> (Li Er 2004, 356).

And even more tragic is the fate that befalls professor Wu Zhigang in *The Professor is Dead*. Although he is also an “antiheroic” intellectual figure like the protagonists of the other stories, he has a much different dramatic intensity. Professor Wu Zhigang accompanies his wife, Miao Qian, to a thermal clinic. She turns out to be completely healthy, while he is the one who is judged to be ill and is erroneously diagnosed with liver cancer. In actual fact he just has hepatitis B. Being an illustrious scholar, the clinic wants him to stay to provide favorable publicity and they do what they can to keep him there, even resorting to distorting his diagnosis. Thus, begins his spiritual and physical descent, he is now condemned. Oppressed by the threat of the disease, conditioned in his will thanks to the “friendly” drinking sessions with the director of the clinic, under pressure from the strict control exerted on him by his supervisor, depressed by the criticism from academia of the book he has edited and the failure of his marriage, he falls subject to a gradual psychological and physical breakdown. During a conference, in the face of the harsh criticisms from young students, the professor appears intellectually asthenic, totally unable to react, even stirring to pity some of his listeners:

<sup>55</sup> The name Lihua literally means “pear tree blossom”.

<sup>56</sup> 范梨花:

眼下，桂花盛开。桂花的颜色、形状都与梨花相似。桂花也叫木樨。有一道菜肴就叫木樨肉，即把鸡蛋炒得星星点点的，放到熟木耳和金针花之上。这种菜肴和木樨关系不大，倒是和北京旧时的太监有点关系。木樨可以写成木犀，但是犀牛不能写成樨牛。伪劣产品真多啊。应该保持警觉。 费定

Those tender-hearted women took pity on him, they just couldn't bear to see young students at the conference pointing out the shortcomings in his work. He was such a famous scholar, they had never imagined he could be this faint-hearted: the young students were criticizing him by quoting the classics, and he just stood there, his head lowered, without uttering a word. Someone obviously resorted to sophistry and groundless reasonings, but he kept silent, while his breathing got slightly irregular.<sup>57</sup> (Li Er 2004, 356)

As the academic hierarchy imposes, Wu Zhigang, although he is now a successful scholar, is strongly bound by the will of his supervisor, the elderly professor Chang Tongsheng: such is his hold on him that he maneuvers him almost as if he were a puppet. For this reason, for example, Wu Zhigang absolutely “must” correct the draft volume on which he has worked busily for years trying to meet the demands of Chang, although these are not at all clear:

Professor Wu had thrown himself into the harsh work of revising his book and I was temporarily staying there to help him. I thus found out that many of the criticisms made on the last day of the conference were totally unfounded. Correcting the book according to those criticisms would have made it senseless. I suggested he not care about those objections and only refine the language of the draft. “Of course, I have to correct it according to professor Chang’s opinion. Otherwise, he’ll be mad at me”. He said.  
 “What’s his opinion on the draft?” I asked him.  
 “I don’t know. I don’t know his opinion”.  
 He looked depressed. His stooped figure sat on the arm-chair, his weak hands hanging down.<sup>58</sup> (Li Er 2002, 149)

If, as has been seen, the protagonist of the *Afternoon Poetics* is a poet of prominence in the professional field, but inept on a human level, nevertheless managing

<sup>57</sup> 那些心肠软的女子倒有点同情他的境遇，不忍心看他在会上受年轻人数落。他的名声很大，她们想不到他会是这副熊样：年轻人已经据典批评他时，他低着头一声不吭，有些人显然强词夺理，批评得毫无根据，但他也照旧不置一辞，只是喘气有些不均匀。

<sup>58</sup> 导师很快投入了修改书稿的繁琐事物里，我也暂时留下来帮他整理。这时候我才发现审稿会最后一天总结出的许多条修改意见都是无稽之谈。如果照那些意见修改，这本书反倒会显得不伦不类。我劝导师把那些意见扔到一边，只在文字上稍加润色即可。

“当然得照常老的意思改动，否则他会生气的。”导师说。

“常老对书稿有什么看法？”我问导师。

“我不知道，”导师说，“我不知道他有什么看法。”

导师神情沮丧，他佝偻着背坐在扶手椅里，双手无力地垂挂在身边。

to blunder along, the protagonist of *The Professor is Dead* is instead a desperado, a wretch, an individual deprived of his decision-making power because he has been “deceived” (more or less voluntarily), kept in the dark, watched, sedated. The thermal clinic in this sense turns into a prison where he is forced to spend the rest of his days, and when he finally tries to rebel and claim his right to leave this cosseted but confining universe, the resistance is such that his body and his now debilitated psyche are unable to bear it. Hence death, accidental or, most likely, sought for – the suicide scene is only imagined, rebuilt by the narrator.

Even this tale, like Li Er’s others, is entrusted to the narrator’s ironic voice, but here the humor is tinged black with the depiction of grotesque scenes: from the director of the clinic whose “hobby” is collecting famous corpses in the graveyard of the clinic, to the patient who sublimates his venereal disease to a topic for an elevated academic disquisition, to the professor’s “fall” from the dome of the church. Yet the tone of the whole narrative is quite different from the light, disengaged, at times playful tone of *Afternoon Poetics* and other writings of Li Er. There is in this story a sense of physical compulsion and psychological manipulation of the professor on the part of the doctors which makes the atmosphere dark and gloomy. Professor Wu, the intellectual he represents, is a loser, subjugated, subjected to others’ wills and destined to succumb, to encounter physical ruin, nervous breakdown and death. His desperate scream a few moments before the fall is but a feeble attempt at rebellion that fails even to cause the other patients to stir in their sleep. And even when dead the image of his person is in a way trampled, with the refusal by the director to bury him in the clinic so as not to ruin the appearance of their cemetery by overcrowding it, and the decision to cremate him, despite the objections of his wife Miao Qian:

When director Wang came back, Miao Qian asked him how he thought that should be handled.

“What do you think?” He asked her.

“Let’s bury him in the cemetery”.

The director kept looking at that coffin which, ready to be buried, was similar to a *sampan*, and sank into silence. Then he said:

“I’m afraid that is not possible because the cemetery is already full. I think it’s better to cremate him. We will store the ashes here until the new cemetery is ready and then we will move the urn there. That’s a good compromise”.

“Isn’t there some space in the cemetery, just for one more person?”

“The cemetery should not look crowded, otherwise it would lose its beauty”.<sup>59</sup>

(Li Er 2002, 123-24)

<sup>59</sup> 王院长回来之后，缪师母问他该怎么处理。院长说：“你看呢？”“也埋在墓园吧。”

The humanity that populates this early narrative production of Li Er is portrayed in very gloomy tones: insensitive, arid, sometimes even subtly low or mean. Not infrequently, moreover, the intellectual protagonists of Li Er's stories are themselves less interested in their academic life than in their own sex life and within the sphere of their affections appear to have a superficial and hedonistic approach: in constant seeking of self-congratulation and self-assertion, their relations are often dominated by hypocrisy and duplicity in a tangle of ill-concealed adulterous relationships and a mere façade of married life. This is particularly evident in some of Li Er's writings. In *Shuqing shidai*,<sup>60</sup> (Lyrical Times, 1995, *Xiaoshuo Jie*,<sup>61</sup> 4), there are, for example, the extramarital relationships of three university professors, like the situation described in *Xuanfu*,<sup>62</sup> (Suspension, 1998, *Jiangnan*,<sup>63</sup> 6), where an old lover who has resurfaced from the past involves the protagonists in a series of subterfuges and betrayals. In any case, whether it be sentimental or professional relationships, most of the time what the reader is left with is a vision of the world that leaves little room for feelings of optimism or confidence in mankind. A perception that the author's bitter irony can only attenuate.

#### 4. Conclusions

The analysis carried out in the present study is, as we have seen, an attempt to outline the figure of the intellectual depicted in Li Er's early writings, by making specific reference to some passages in his works which are particularly significant and emblematic in this regard and, at the same time, interpreting this figure in the light of the broader literary and socio-cultural context of that time.

Having shed light on how disenchanting, pessimistic and disheartening the vision of the world which emerges from Li Er's tales is, it should be noted at this point that this does not imply in any way an evaluation on his part of the characters or of the world portrayed in his works. He confines himself to describing a crude reality lacking in embellishment, not leading, however, to any

院长看着已经准备好的那口舳板一样的棺材，陷入了沉思。后来他说：“恐怕不行，因为墓园已挤满了。我看还是火化了好，火化之后，骨灰先存放在里，等我们新建了墓园，再把他挪进去。这是折衷方案。”

“墓园里不是还有空地吗？一个人也挤不进去？”缪芊说。

“墓园里应该保持疏朗的感觉，塞得太满会不好看。”

<sup>60</sup> 抒情时代。

<sup>61</sup> 小说界。

<sup>62</sup> 悬浮。

<sup>63</sup> 江南。

value judgment. His denunciation, therefore, does not correspond to any explicit condemnation. The aim of most of the writers who emerged in the '90s is, in fact, to represent reality *as it is* and not to indicate *how it should be*, accomplishing the transition from the deontological to the ontological, from macro to micro-narration hinted at in *Afternoon Poetics*.<sup>64</sup> It is clear, then, that a narrative without teleological or idealizing intent can only echo the voluntary and conscious choice of the author not to express any opinion about the characters and events he describes and to renounce any moralistic or didactic purpose.

However, if Li Er's writings aim at faithfully reproducing man's daily reality and that of the contemporary intellectual without addressing the problem from ethical or finalistic perspectives, it is possible, reading between the lines, to glimpse the suffering, the regret of the author because of the limits and the abject condition of a human category to which he belongs himself and whose downfall or mere sense of loss are also his own. The satire directed by Li Er towards the intellectuals of his stories is primarily directed towards himself, as he himself points out. Such satire, however, is accompanied by a "prayer" of a nature not specified by the writer, but which is plausibly interpretable as the hope of redemption of the intellectual of his time from the state in which he flounders, "the intellectual being the most sensitive and receptive of all in the face of the complexity of human experience".<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Li Er 2002, 222-23.

<sup>65</sup> See Wang and Du, who directly quote Li Er (Wang Kan - Du Ying 2016, 206).

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# CHINESE INTERNET LITERATURE AS A DREAM FULFILLER: THE CASE OF SOCCER FICTION

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## *Abstract*

This essay aims at introducing the topic of soccer fiction as a branch of online literature in China. In order to do so, some important texts belonging to this genre have been taken into account, trying to map their shared features as well as their singularities. An effort has been made to try and relate all this not only with Xi Jinping's "Soccer Dream", but also with the whole of Chinese internet literature, as it has been studied by, among others, Michel Hockx. After a preliminary overview, it is shown how this sub-genre can add a new, sports-related, dimension to the already well-researched concept of YY literature. In the end, thanks to the analysis of a big portion of what can be defined as "grey sources" like blogs, forums and online comments, it has been possible to assess, although preliminarily, the opinion of common people toward the novels studied.

## *Keywords*

Chinese internet literature, soccer literature, YY literature, Soccer Dream, Qidian

## 摘要

本文旨在介绍作为中国网络文学一个分支的足球小说。为此，笔者参考了一些属于这一类型的重要文献，并试图归纳其中的共性和差异。此项研究不仅仅是与习近平的“足球梦”相联系，更是与整个中国互联网文学联系在一起，正如米歇尔·霍克斯等前人所做的先行研究一样。在简要概述之后，本文将展示，足球文学是如何以一个与体育相关的新身份加入到已经被深入研究的YY文学概念中的。最后，通过分析了大部分可以被定义为“灰色来源”：如博客，论坛和在线评论的内容，虽然很浅显初步，但对于了解民众对此类文学作品的态度大有裨益。

## 关键词

中国网络文学，足球文学，YY文学，足球梦，起点

## *1. Introduction: Chinese internet literature and its bond with society*

Right from the early 2000s, Michel Hockx has contributed to lift the veil on Chinese internet literature (CIL) with a series of brilliant articles (Hockx 2004;

2005; 2012). In 2015, over a decade of research, studies and first-hand observation was condensed into *Internet Literature in China*, a book in which the British sinologist gives account of his journey through the intricacies of Chinese internet, that took him in uncharted waters while also allowing him to get in touch with singular literary styles (Hockx 2015). For this reason, Hockx's work is, in the Western world, the only exhaustive map that can be used in order to find one's bearings inside the vast universe of CIL. He traced its chronological evolution and, most importantly, he charted some recurring elements of the genre, providing everyone wishing to explore this field with some useful analysis tools in the process. In the end, those very tools are what made this article possible.

Among CIL's distinctive features, Hockx suggests on several occasions a very close relationship with society (Hockx 2015). Although every kind of literature has been affected by the era in which it was created, the internet-born one has brought this link to another level, making it into the most essential of its characteristics. Here, readers play an active role instead of a passive one: outside the internet, the audience simply receives literary texts, while on the web, and especially on the Chinese portion of it, the masses can criticize novels and interact with authors while works are being published. Accordingly, suggestions are passed on to writers, who can decide to embody them into their work as they proceed (Hockx 2015). Sometimes, readers go as far as to spontaneously re-write parts of the story, giving life to alternative versions of a given novel (Zhang 2011). Moreover, since a computer and an internet connection are enough to start writing (and publishing), the boundary between writers and readers has become somehow blurred, leading to what has been defined as a "democratization" of literature (Ouyang 2011). Both production and consumption of literary works have become increasingly mass-oriented: these novels' great availability, derived from the fact they can be comfortably enjoyed via smartphones and tablets, paired with a great variety of themes and with the writers' receptive ears, caused CIL to spread like wildfire, becoming a phenomenon of enormous scope (Ouyang 2011).

At the end of *Internet Literature in China*, Hockx issued a warning: recently, more and more persons have been considering the label "internet literature" as being synonymous with "commercial internet fiction". In fact, this is an oversimplification people should refrain from, but also one that is fully understandable in light of the traits this kind of literature has been acquiring since the early years of the twenty-first century (Hockx 2015). The biggest part of CIL is published and read on websites that thrive according to a particular business model, where the best amateur writers are offered a contract that allows them to make money out of their novels, while readers need to pay a small sum to download the stories they like, after the first few chapters had been made available free of charge in order to lure them. The main website acting this way is *The Start-*

*ing Point*,<sup>1</sup> but a number of other portals are accustomed to the same practice, selling what can be rightfully described as “commercial internet fiction”. The latter one certainly accounts for the biggest share of online literature published in China, leading to the aforementioned misunderstanding, but not every text uploaded on the internet is fiction, nor must it necessarily be commercial – lots of websites focus on poetry, while some other ones, although full of novels, allow users to download them for free (Hockx 2015).

Despite this essential premise, commercial internet literature is what this study is all about. Given the number of texts and readers involved, it is a literary phenomenon whose proportions can't be overlooked, and the fact that it originates at grass-roots level and maintains a link with common people makes it necessary to pay great attention to its social dimension.

Even bearing in mind Hockx's other admonishment about the declining phase in which certain online practices have entered recently, making a future methodological re-orientation into something more than just an option (Hockx 2015), we still have to acknowledge the existence of a corpus made up of thousands of novels, that have crystallized into something not only worth studying, but also extremely revelatory as far as the Chinese internet is concerned.

The main goal of this paper is that of analyzing the relationship between Chinese commercial internet fiction and the society that consumes it. The motivation came from the will to assess how and to what extent does CIL embody the needs of the population, shaping them through texts that can be easily enjoyed by the masses. In order to do so, the decision has been taken to only take into account a particular and completely uncharted segment of commercial internet literature: soccer fiction. This subgenre is not only a microcosm whose limited dimensions make every comprehensive research easier, but it is also connected to a topic that is very dear to modern China, and that carries many social and political implications with itself.

<sup>1</sup> *Qidian* 起点 (qidian.com).

The “Soccer Dream”<sup>2</sup> has become a part of the more generic “Chinese Dream”,<sup>3</sup> earning consensus from common citizens as well as from the Chinese Communist Party, which officially formulated the goals China wish to achieve in the upcoming decades. However, turning dreams into reality is not always easy, especially in soccer, and China’s good intentions are being repeatedly frustrated by stinging defeats that threaten to wreck their hopes of glory.

Bearing such premises in mind, this study tries to provide an answer to the following questions: how has internet literature become a vehicle for China’s “Soccer Dream”? To what extent has it helped the country to give substance to hopes that are often betrayed by reality? How important internet literature is in a time when China’s interest toward soccer has reached unprecedented heights?

In the end, going from the particular to the general, the main query is: can online literature, given its increased interaction with society (as compared to printed texts), embody a common interest to the point of giving substance to the masses’ dreams and expectations? In order to find an answer to this question, it was decided to consider a social phenomenon like China’s new-found enthusiasm for soccer and to put it alongside a kind of literature which is “social” in its own right, with the only aim of analyzing how the two terms of the equation have interacted with one another.

While trying to do so, with the strong awareness that a total comprehension of this phenomenon must be delegated to subsequent studies, the chosen ap-

<sup>2</sup> “Soccer Dream” (*Zuqiu meng* 足球梦) is a term referring to China’s will to emerge as a strong soccer nation. In light of Xi Jinping’s proposal to host and win the World Cup within a reasonably short amount of time, the word “dream” is meant to draw a parallel with the “Chinese dream”. For an exhaustive explanation of this topic, see: Bairner A. 2017, “Xi Jinping’s Football Dream and the Nightmare Scenario”, *China Policy Institute: Analysis*, April 10, accessed October 28, 2017, [cpianalysis.org/2017/04/10/xi-jinpings-football-dream-and-the-nightmare-scenario](http://cpianalysis.org/2017/04/10/xi-jinpings-football-dream-and-the-nightmare-scenario); Campbell C. 2016, “China Wants to Become a ‘Soccer Superpower’ by 2050”, *Time*, April 12, accessed October 28, 2017, [time.com/4290251/china-soccer-superpower-2050-football-fifa-world-cup](http://time.com/4290251/china-soccer-superpower-2050-football-fifa-world-cup); Xin S. 2017, “Xin Shiping: zuqiu meng, Zhongguo meng!” , *Xinhua*, March 25, accessed October 3, 2017 [news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/25/c\\_1120694033.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-03/25/c_1120694033.htm).

<sup>3</sup> The “Chinese Dream” (*Zhongguo meng* 中国梦), the name given to Xi Jinping’s signature ideology, is a concept the General Secretary has often referred to over the course of his presidency. It revolves around the project of turning China into an all-round well-off society in the span of a few decades. For a comprehensive analysis of the subject, see: Kuhn R. L. 2014, “Structuring the Chinese Dream”, *China Daily*, January 25, accessed October 26, 2017, [usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-01/25/content\\_17257856.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-01/25/content_17257856.htm); Wang, Z. 2013, “The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context”, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, 19 (1): 1-13.

proach has been that of a Hockx-inspired overview of some significant works and their characteristics, which aims at presenting the reader with a picture as thorough as possible of something that has never been really researched before. Such a method must be considered in relation to two peculiar aspects of the topic. First of all, we are talking about works that, although numerous, still belong to niche literature and, as such, are probably best studied as a group; an exclusive focus on a single novel, while still a viable option for future papers, would have possibly resulted in a dissertation hardly capable of peaking anybody's interest. Secondly, given the nearly complete lack of studies in this field, a paper that touches upon different works can make for a more solid foundation on which a comprehensive exploration of this genre could be potentially built. Accordingly, the relative lack of depth in certain aspects of the present study must be regarded as a necessary choice, consciously made in order to attain a horizontal knowledge that best suits a preliminary contribution.

## 2. *Evolution of Chinese soccer literature*

In light of the absence of previous studies on the topic, it may be useful to start with a quick overview of the evolution of soccer literature in China.

While in the Western world a number of literary works related to soccer have been created throughout much of the 20th century (Serafini 2014), China only saw something similar in 1997, when Zhu Wen<sup>4</sup> published a short story titled *The Culprit Is Maradona*<sup>5</sup> that, despite being the first story to ever feature a Western player inside its plot, lacks most of the elements shared by soccer novels published on the Chinese internet since the early 2000s (Zhu 2013).

In China, where “the beautiful game” went through a long and winding path before becoming what it is today, the fact the development of soccer literature has been absolutely unique and particular comes as no surprise.<sup>6</sup> As a matter of

<sup>4</sup> Zhu Wen 朱文 (b. 1967) is a Chinese short story author turned director. As a writer, he was one of the main figures behind the Rupture Movement in the late 1990s.

<sup>5</sup> *Zuikui huoshou shi Maladuna* 罪魁祸首是马拉多纳.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the history of Chinese soccer, see: Dong J. and Mangan J. A. 2001, “Football in the New China: Political Statement, Entrepreneurial Enticement and Patriotic Passion”, *Soccer and Society* 2 (3): 79-100; Fan H. and Lu Z. 2013, “The Professionalisation and Commercialisation of Football in China (1993–2013)”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 30 (14): 1637-1654; Simons R. 2008, *The Bamboo Goalposts*, London: Macmillan; Twydell D. 2001, *The Little Red Book of Chinese Football*, Harefield: Yore Publications.

fact, only after the internet had become a fully-fledged platform for writers longing to publish their work did soccer literature come to the fore in the country.

The starting point of Chinese internet literature about soccer (CILAS) is 2003, when the novel *I Play Soccer, Are You Paying Attention?*<sup>7</sup> was first published on the world wide web. The novel was signed by “A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves”<sup>8</sup> the curious moniker chosen by a certain Zhang Lintao.<sup>9</sup> The novel originally came out on *The League of Imaginary Swords*,<sup>10</sup> just to be serialized on *The Starting Point* a few months later, demonstrating how big a success it had achieved (Zhou 2017).

*I Play Soccer, Are You Paying Attention?* is made up of 100 chapters. Accordingly, it is a work of relatively small dimensions if compared to other ones from the same author or to the average length of those offered by *The Starting Point*. This novel originated from its author’s passion for soccer, but it can also be linked to one of the major peculiarities of CIL, namely the possibility every reader has to turn into a writer overnight, bringing something personal to the literary arena and contributing to a better understanding of the needs of an ever-changing society. In the 1990s, Zhang Lintao was a middle school student forced to cross Luoyang every morning and, like every kid with a soft spot for soccer, he daydreamed about being a famous player dribbling past passersby. After some years, that kid went from middle to high school, he kept playing soccer at every occasion and, in the end, he decided to turn all his fantasies into a piece of writing that he distributed among classmates. In his university days, Zhang Lintao, who had already become an avid reader of online fiction, finally realized that there were no stories about sports on the Chinese internet, a thing that made him want to review, expand and upload his teenage novel online, giving life to CILAS (Zhou 2017).

The good reception obtained by his first effort led Zhang Lintao to work on a sequel titled *We Are the Champions*,<sup>11</sup> that eventually came out on *The Starting Point* between 2005 and 2006. The novel legitimized its author’s success and kept telling the story of the protagonist of his previous work, who went from adolescent to a young adult (Zhou 2017).

After *We Are the Champions*, Zhang Lintao decided to devote himself to online literature full-time, becoming one of the most famous authors around within a few years (Zhou 2017). Between 2006 and 2007, he published *Born*

<sup>7</sup> *Wo ti qiu ni zai yi ma* 我踢球你在意吗.

<sup>8</sup> *Lin hai ting tao* 林海听涛.

<sup>9</sup> 张琳韬.

<sup>10</sup> *Huan jian shu meng* 幻剑书盟.

<sup>11</sup> *Women shi guan jun* 我们是冠军.

*Loser*<sup>12</sup> on 17K, while all of his subsequent novels were hosted by *The Starting Point: The Champions' Godfather*<sup>13</sup> (2007 - 2009), *The Legend of the Champion*<sup>14</sup> (2009 - 2011), *The Hero of the Penalty Area*<sup>15</sup> (2011 - 2012), *A Winner is Like a King*<sup>16</sup> (2013), *The Light of the Champion*<sup>17</sup> (2014 - 2015) and *The Heart of the Champion*<sup>18</sup> (2015 - 2017).<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1 – *The Starting Point*: first page of the list of novels labeled as “Soccer”. Caught on May 29, 2018 (www.qidian.com/all?chanId=8&subCateId=82).



A typical trait of online literature is its high degree of replicability, that allows every story to be copy-pasted on unauthorized portals, favoring piracy but helping novels to gain great visibility and to inspire other people willing to engage in writing (Abrams 2016). For this reason, the Chinese web was soon crowded with copycats of Zhang Lintao. While some of them simply mimicked what he had already written, others were able to add a much-needed pinch of innovation to the genre. In May 2018, the novels inside the “Soccer”<sup>20</sup> section of *The Starting*

<sup>12</sup> *Tiansheng feichai* 天生废柴.

<sup>13</sup> *Guanjun jiaofu* 冠军教父.

<sup>14</sup> *Guanjun chuanqi* 冠军传奇.

<sup>15</sup> *Jinqu zhi xiong* 禁区之雄.

<sup>16</sup> *Shengzhe wei wang* 胜者为王.

<sup>17</sup> *Guanjun zhi guang* 冠军之光.

<sup>18</sup> *Guanjun zhi xin* 冠军之心.

<sup>19</sup> Unless otherwise specified, every date refers to the publication on *The Starting Point*.

<sup>20</sup> *Zuqiu yundong* 足球运动.

*Point* were 1.178.<sup>21</sup> If we think that only one of them was online in 2003, this number gives us an idea of how prolific this genre has proven over the last 15 years.

Among the most active writers, “XX Spirit”<sup>22</sup> deserves a mention for having created works as successful as *The Soccer Journey of Xu Zhu’s Successor*<sup>23</sup> (2010 - 2011), *Zhang Tiehan, Soccer God of Our Times*<sup>24</sup> (2014 - 2015) and *The Master of Super Training*<sup>25</sup> (2014 - 2017).

Given the massive presence of similar authors on *The Starting Point*, it is impossible and probably not essential to give account of all of them, not least because a much more restricted group is sufficient to analyze the main features of the genre. For this reason, other writers will be only cited when deemed necessary.

In the end, it is worth noting how the tendency to write about soccer has overcome the boundaries of *The Starting Point*, taking root in a number of other websites. If some authors, like “Pighead Seven”<sup>26</sup> and Zhang Lintao himself, have published their work either on *The Starting Point* and outside of it, there are some who never made it to the most famous container of CIL, but are nonetheless quite famous among aficionados: it is the case of “The Long Song of Elegance”,<sup>27</sup> whose *Phoenix of Fire: The Chinese Soccer Dream*<sup>28</sup> can be read on several websites but not on *Qidian*.

### 3. Distinctive features

On the basis of the novels analyzed, it is possible to take note of some recurring features that have left an undeniable mark on CILAS. Most of them can be found in Zhang Lintao’s pioneering work, but there is no shortage of innovative elements coming from other sources.

#### 3.1 Coming-of-age structure

Most of the novels taken into account in this study can be regarded as coming-of-age stories. The main characters, often very young or even in their pu-

<sup>21</sup> [www.qidian.com/all?chanId=8&subCatId=82](http://www.qidian.com/all?chanId=8&subCatId=82).

<sup>22</sup> XX shen XX神.

<sup>23</sup> *Xu Zhu chuanren de zuqiu zhi lu* 虚竹传人的足球之旅.

<sup>24</sup> *Yidai qiushen Zhang Tiehan* 一代球神张铁汉.

<sup>25</sup> *Chaoji xunlian dashi* 超级训练大师.

<sup>26</sup> *Zhutou qi* 猪头七.

<sup>27</sup> *Fenghua chang ge* 风华长歌.

<sup>28</sup> *Huo fenghuang: Zhongguo zuqiu meng* 火凤凰：中国足球梦.

berty, usually act in stories that revolve around their will to attain success in the world of soccer, either as a player or as a coach.

*I Play Soccer, Are You Paying Attention?* represents a real archetype in this respect. This semi-autobiographical novel tells the story of a Chinese kid named Zhang Jun,<sup>29</sup> who is about to start the high school and cherishes the dream of becoming a soccer player (Lin hai ting tao 2003). The author's goal was that of narrating the life of someone who grows up chasing a soccer ball, while also relating the life experience that has him growing up as an individual, learning how to behave in certain situations and how to cope with difficulties (Zhou 2017). A similar path is shared by both the author and the character he created, to whom he gave his own surname in an attempt to make the parallel even clearer (Zhou 2017). Even if his style was unripe and a little childish back then, Zhang Lintao prompted many others to follow in his footsteps.

*We Are the Champions*, the sequel of *I Play Soccer, Are You Paying Attention?*, was itself another contribution to the same theme, dealing with Zhang Jun once again and following him through his adulthood and his professional soccer career (Lin hai ting tao 2005b).

The same narrative structure was used in other works from the same author, such as *Born Loser*, where the main character Buting<sup>30</sup> is a 15-year-old student with no particular talent, who has no other choice but to roll up his sleeves and prove everybody he can stand out in the sporting world (Lin hai ting tao n.d.).

Other writers too have considered this genre as an occasion to write coming-of-age stories. It is the case of "XX Spirit" who, in his *The Soccer Journey of Xu Zhu's Successor*, made the protagonist go from one club to another in search of a contract that would allow him to start his journey through professional soccer (XX shen 2010). The author known as "Every Day with No Rest",<sup>31</sup> in the novel *The Soccer Emperor*,<sup>32</sup> decided to stick with this tendency as well and wrote about Qin Xiong,<sup>33</sup> a boy determined to become the strongest player in the world (Tiantian bu xiu n.d.).

Some other novels, on the other hand, deal with characters who have to win back something they had until a disgraceful event occurred. Stories with this kind of plot include *The Light of the Soccer World*<sup>34</sup> by "Promises Aren't

<sup>29</sup> 张俊.

<sup>30</sup> 布挺.

<sup>31</sup> Tiantian bu xiu 天天不休.

<sup>32</sup> *Zuqiu huangdi* 足球皇帝.

<sup>33</sup> 秦雄.

<sup>34</sup> *Zutan zhi guang* 足坛之光.

Salty”,<sup>35</sup> about a former player who had to hang up his boots because of an accident and wants to get back on the pitch (Nuoyan bu xian n.d.), and *The Glorious Forward*<sup>36</sup> by “If Only There Was That Scholar”,<sup>37</sup> whose protagonist is a former inmate willing to embrace his old passion again and make a name for himself as a soccer player (Ruo you qi shi n.d.).

As it can be inferred from this brief overview of Chinese novels about soccer, many of the works involved have a structure that takes the main character throughout a series of obstacles and setbacks, with the only aim of getting to a position that is somewhat higher than the one where the story had its beginning.

### 3.2 References to Western soccer

The appeal that Western soccer and its stars have in China (Simons 2008, Chadwick 2017a) reverberates itself into internet fiction. The importance of European leagues in the life of a Chinese fan must always be taken into account when trying to assess the massive presence of foreign elements in CILAS.

A glimpse at the “Soccer” section of *The Starting Point* is enough to get an idea of how important foreign players and teams are to both authors and readers. Novels like *I am Vardy*<sup>38</sup> by Wang Dabu,<sup>39</sup> with English player Jamie Vardy<sup>40</sup> dominating the cover (Wang n.d.), or *The Era of Florence*<sup>41</sup> by NTR Cavalier,<sup>42</sup> based on Italian side Fiorentina (NTR qishi n.d.), are perfect examples in this sense. Another proof of the position Europe occupies in the mind of every Chinese soccer enthusiast is *The Soccer Emperor*, whose main character arrives in the Netherlands from China while affected by depression but finds the strength to lift his head and improve his life after having watched the amazing Ajax of the early 2000s playing soccer (Tiantian bu xiu n.d.).

From time to time, online authors have gone as far as to create stories in which the protagonist, although born in Europe or South America, maintains a strong link with China thanks to his lineage. In the first chapter of *We Are*

<sup>35</sup> Chengnuo bu xian 诺言不咸.

<sup>36</sup> Rongyao qianfeng 荣耀前锋.

<sup>37</sup> Ruo you qi shi 若有其士.

<sup>38</sup> Woshi Wa'erdi 我是瓦尔迪.

<sup>39</sup> 王大布.

<sup>40</sup> Jamie Richard Vardy (b. 1987) is an English professional footballer who plays as a striker for Premier League club Leicester City and the English national team.

<sup>41</sup> Feilengcui de shidai 翡冷翠的时代.

<sup>42</sup> NTR qishi NTR骑士.

*the Champions*, for example, we discover that Zhang Jun was actually born in Brazil to a Chinese father and a Brazilian mother (Lin hai ting tao 2005b), a narrative choice reminiscent of the (unsuccessful) plan laid out by the Chinese Communist Party in 1994, when they sent 22 teenagers to the South American country in order to turn them into champions (Bernstein 1995).

The story of *We Are the Champions* unfolds through the streets of São Paulo, where Zhang Jun goes in search of a professional contract with a local club, but keeps being systematically turned down because of his Asian features (Lin hai ting tao 2005b). Only after many doors have been shut in front of his face does the boy find a club that is interested in him. Before he can produce a contract, the coach needs to make sure Zhang Jun was born on Brazilian soil, in an umpteenth reminder of how wary Western eyes are in front of Chinese football (Lin hai ting tao 2005b). It is only at the end of the chapter that we discover that the boy's Brazilian name is Kaká,<sup>43</sup> just like the real-life player who spent most of his career at AC Milan and Real Madrid (Lin hai ting tao 2005b).

Another interesting case of a mixed-blood character is the one we find in *The Soccer Journey of Xu Zhu's Successor*, where London born and raised Wang Li<sup>44</sup> is the son of a Chinese-English couple (XX shen 2010). His dream of becoming a professional soccer player leads him to take part in several trials at some of England's most famous clubs, making the audience hope for a boy with a little of Chinese blood running through his veins to hit the big time in the Premier League, the oldest league in the world (XX shen 2010).

### 3.3 Fan fiction

Fan fiction is a kind of narration that draws upon the characters of already-existing movies, TV series, videogames or literary works, decontextualizing and adapting them in order to fit new situations, with the goal of creating something new, regardless of its absurdity (Downes 2014; Minkel 2015). In China, where fan fiction enjoys great popularity, a wide variety of sources are used in this process – from classic Chinese novels to American soap operas, whose borrowed characters are employed at the discretion of online writers (Abad-Santos 2014). Judging from the novels examined, it seems that CI-LAS too is affected by fan fiction, since some stories feature characters taken from external sources.

<sup>43</sup> Ricardo Izecson dos Santos Leite (b. 1982), commonly known as Kaká, is a Brazilian retired professional soccer player who played as an attacking midfielder.

<sup>44</sup> 王利.

Among internet writers' major influences there is the work of Jin Yong,<sup>45</sup> one of the fathers of the *wuxia*<sup>46</sup> genre. References to characters created by him can be found throughout the whole of CIL, especially in novels as famous as *Local Youth*<sup>47</sup> by Jiangnan<sup>48</sup> or *Records of the Heroes*<sup>49</sup> by Sun Xiao<sup>50</sup> (Ma 2011).

Sure enough, CILAS is not exempt from Jin Yong's influence, as it can be inferred by a quick glance at *The Soccer Journey of Xu Zhu's Successor*. To begin with, we can spot the name of Xu Zhu<sup>51</sup> in the title. He is a fighting monk featured in *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*,<sup>52</sup> one of Jin Yong's masterpieces, and reading the first chapter is enough to understand the reason behind such a reference. Before turning to Londoner Wang Li, this novel briefly tells the story of Duan Song,<sup>53</sup> the young son of Duan Yu,<sup>54</sup> Xu Zhu's blood brother in *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils*. Everything happens at the time of Song<sup>55</sup> dynasty, when the boy asks his father to be sent on Tian Shan mountains to learn martial arts and become Xu Zhu's last disciple. Aged 19, he is proficient enough to descend and use what he learnt to perform some good deeds, but instead decides to pursue a frivolous and lustful life. Nevertheless, he soon finds himself magically teleported into Wang Li's body, as a kind of punishment for his bad intentions. Once in today's London, he would use what Xu Zhu taught him to fulfill the Chinese-English boy's dream of becoming a professional soccer player (XX shen 2010).

Another interesting case of fan fiction applied to soccer is that of *Phoenix of Fire: The Chinese Soccer Dream*, a novel published by "The Long Song of Elegance" between 2013 and 2014 on *Motie*,<sup>56</sup> that draws upon the Three Kingdoms

<sup>45</sup> Jin Yong 金庸 is the pen name of Louis Cha Leung-yung (1924 - 2018), a Chinese novelist whose 15 works written between 1955 and 1972 earned him a reputation as one of the greatest and most popular *wuxia* 武侠 writers ever.

<sup>46</sup> *Wuxia*, which literally means "martial heroes", is a genre of Chinese fiction concerning the adventures of martial artists in ancient China.

<sup>47</sup> *Cijian de shaonian* 此间的少年.

<sup>48</sup> 江南.

<sup>49</sup> *Yingxiong zhi* 英雄志.

<sup>50</sup> 孙晓.

<sup>51</sup> 虚竹.

<sup>52</sup> *Tian long ba bu* 天龙八部.

<sup>53</sup> 段松.

<sup>54</sup> 段誉.

<sup>55</sup> 宋.

<sup>56</sup> 磨铁.

period as it has been recounted by Chen Shou's<sup>57</sup> *Records of Three Kingdoms*<sup>58</sup> and Luo Guanzhong's<sup>59</sup> *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.<sup>60</sup> The novel by "The Long Song of Elegance" tells the story of an ideal Chinese national team, that takes part in the 2018 World Cup with a line-up entirely composed of famous generals from the Three Kingdoms period. Everyone is assigned to a particular role on the basis of his peculiarities, as these have been passed on by literary texts. For example, Dian Wei,<sup>61</sup> Cao Cao's<sup>62</sup> personal guard, has always been depicted as a strong and dutiful man and, accordingly, plays as center-back in the team, where he can fiercely hold back the opponents' attempts to score a goal. Zhou Yu,<sup>63</sup> on the other hand, for the fact of being among the finest strategists of ancient times, acts as the main man of China's midfield, and is portrayed in the same way he was described back in the Three Kingdoms period: tactically clever, able to dictate the pace, elegant and graceful. The last one to be described is the coach who, quite unsurprisingly, goes by the name of Zhuge Liang.<sup>64</sup> Universally regarded as the best strategist in Chinese history, he shows up dressed in classic fashion, despite being at Saint-Petersburg Stadium in 2018: long robe, silk hat on his head and feather fan in his hand (Fenghua chang ge 2013).

It is worth noting that "The Long Song of Elegance" didn't just take characters from the Three Kingdoms, but even ventured to use some quotes directly borrowed from the two main texts about this period. When he introduces center-forward Guan Yu,<sup>65</sup> for example, the author tells that he is never afraid to take

<sup>57</sup> Chen Shou 陈寿 (233 - 297) was an official and writer who lived during the Three Kingdoms period and Jin 金 dynasty of China.

<sup>58</sup> *San guo zhi* 三国志.

<sup>59</sup> Luo Guanzhong 罗贯中, courtesy name of Luo Ben 罗本 (c. 1330 - 1400, or c. 1280 - 1360), was a Chinese writer who lived during the Yuan 元 and Ming 明 periods.

<sup>60</sup> *San guo yanyi* 三国演义.

<sup>61</sup> Dian Wei 典韦 (? - 197) was a military officer serving under the warlord Cao Cao 曹操 in the late Eastern Han 汉 dynasty of China, famed for his enormous strength.

<sup>62</sup> 曹操 (c. 155 - 220), one of the central figures of the Three Kingdoms period, was a Chinese warlord and the penultimate Chancellor of the Eastern Han dynasty.

<sup>63</sup> Zhou Yu 周瑜 (175 - 210) was a military general and strategist serving under the warlord Sun Ce 孙策 in the late Eastern Han dynasty of China.

<sup>64</sup> Zhuge Liang 诸葛亮 (181 - 234) was a Chinese politician, military strategist, writer, engineer and inventor. He served as the regent of the state of Shu 蜀 during the Three Kingdoms period.

<sup>65</sup> Guan Yu 关羽 (? - 220) was a general serving under the warlord Liu Bei 刘备 in the late Eastern Han dynasty. He played a significant role in the events that led to the end of the dynasty and the establishment of the state of Shu – founded by Liu Bei – in the Three Kingdoms period.

on opponent defenders, even if alone. To do so, the writer takes advantage of an expression that literally translates as “he attends the meeting carrying just a single sword with him”<sup>66</sup> (Fenghua chang ge 2013). This expression comes from *Records of Three Kingdoms*, where it was used when Guan Yu, after being invited to a feast in an enemy kingdom, honored the commitment armed with nothing but a sword and with a few men in tow (*Baidu* n.d.).

Three Kingdoms fan fiction is very successful in China (Tian 2015). Writers who are interested in it play with powerful cultural elements, that lure readers by means of a powerful link with Chinese history and literature; thanks to this, figures like Zhuge Liang are connected to “national sentiment”, to the love for one’s own country and for its glorious past (Tian 2015). Such feelings are not far from those at play when it comes to support the Chinese national team (Horne and Manzenreiter 2007), and that is why they can be easily embedded into a novel about soccer.

There is one last aspect of fan fiction that deserves to be mentioned when talking of CILAS, namely that of web-game fiction, called *wangyou xiaoshuo*<sup>67</sup> in Chinese. Novels belonging to this category originate from the mutual influence of online literature and video games, when plots and characters borrowed from the latter are turned into written stories (Inwood 2014). Despite what one may think, novels about soccer are not alien to the influence of web-game fiction, as proved by “XX Spirit”’s *Warcraft’s Soccer Gods*,<sup>68</sup> published between 2011 and 2012 on *The Starting Point*. This work deals with the debut on the soccer scene of some characters coming from the popular video game *Warcraft*,<sup>69</sup> who can take advantage of particular “abilities” in order to boost their stamina or improve their shooting accuracy (XX shen n.d.).

The link between CILAS and web-game fiction can be explained in light of the peculiarities possessed by the latter. This genre tends to recreate the experience lived by those playing video games, making use of plots where characters need to overcome obstacles and to move up from one level to another (Inwood 2014). Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to see a parallel with soccer fiction and its typical structure, so close to that of coming-of-age stories.

<sup>66</sup> *Dan dao fuhui* 单刀赴会.

<sup>67</sup> 网游小说.

<sup>68</sup> *Moshou zhi yidai qiushen* 魔兽之一代球神.

<sup>69</sup> *Warcraft* is a franchise of video games, novels, and other media created by Blizzard Entertainment. The series is made up of five core games: *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness*, *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Hearthstone*.

### 3.4 Buddhist elements

Another element that contributes to the differentiation of CILAS from Western soccer literature is the steady presence of references to Asian spirituality, with a particular focus on the Buddhist doctrine.

Sometimes writers do not even try to disguise such references, integrating them into the story with great ease. It is the case of *We Are the Champions*, whose first chapter is preceded by a short introduction titled *There's Such a Story*<sup>70</sup> that takes the reader to a Buddhist temple nestled between China's snowy mountains (Lin hai ting tao 2005a). Inside the temple, there is a powerful *bodhisattva* who constantly lures visitors willing to pose their questions. One day, a group formed by a South Korean, a Japanese and a Chinese reaches the temple, and the *bodhisattva* allows each of them to ask only one question. Every one of them wants to know the same thing: when will my country win the World Cup? To the South Korean, the illuminated one tells that his country will triumph in 40 years, while the Japanese apprehends his national team will lift the trophy aloft in 100 years. When it comes to the Chinese, the *bodhisattva* can do nothing but cry, because he has just foreseen what kind of impact will Zhang Jun (the Chinese-Brazilian protagonist of the novel) have on the soccer world (Lin hai ting tao 2005a).

Nonetheless, the most patent mark left by Buddhism on CILAS can be found in the concept of reincarnation, that pops up from time to time in the stories belonging to this genre. This principle can be explained as an energy transfer between two bodies. That energy represents the “self” of a living being that, once its old body has somehow ceased to work properly, simply migrates to a new one (O'Brien 2017). The plot of many CILAS works that have been taken into account for this study is based on this very concept.

The already-mentioned *Phoenix of Fire: The Chinese Soccer Dream* relies heavily on reincarnation, as every player of the national team is a general coming from the Three Kingdoms period (Fenghua chang ge 2013). In the first chapter, we find a lengthy description of how Zhuge Liang's “self” managed to get across 1.800 years of history in order to guide China through the 2018 World Cup. Constant references are made to the fact that Heaven has assigned the strategist a task as important as the one he had back in the Three Kingdoms period, drawing a parallel between the troops he used to guide in third century AD and the players of the Chinese national team (Fenghua chang ge 2013).

*The Soccer Journey of Xu Zhu's Successor* features reincarnation too. Duan Song finds himself trapped in the body of 16-year-old Wang Li, after the latter

<sup>70</sup> *You zheme yi ge gushi* 有这么一个故事.

has swallowed a huge quantity of sleeping pills and has fainted on his bed, only because he was depressed for not having been able to find a team willing to sign him (XX shen 2010). The scene where the “self” of Duan Song transmigrates from one epoch to another is vividly described by “XX Spirit”: the sky above Duan Song suddenly splits apart, revealing a dark crevice that swallows up an indistinct mass that is forcefully separated from the protagonist’s coal-black body. That thing is nothing but his “self”, that gets across many centuries in order to land into Wang Li’s body, while the Londoner is passed out on the bed (XX shen 2010). Another hint to Buddhism in the novel is the presence of the Chinese deity King Yanluo,<sup>71</sup> a monstrous creature who lives in the netherworld and seems to supervise the whole process of transmigration, aided by his bull-headed servant (XX shen 2010).

In conclusion, we can’t overlook a novel that perfectly epitomizes all the peculiarities described thus far. Not only is its plot built upon spiritual concepts such as reincarnation, but it also shows other typical characteristics of CILAS. Its title is *The Champions’ Godfather*, by “A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves”. Inside, we find the story of Tony Twain, a fictional coach in charge of real-life English team Nottingham Forest (Lin hai ting tao 2007). The story begins when Twain, during a match, gets trampled by one of his players, who has been pushed out of the pitch by an opponent. The impact is extremely violent, leaving coach Twain on the grass and making all bystanders think that he has passed away (Lin hai ting tao 2007). Quite surprisingly, after some agitated and endless minutes, coach Twain gets back on his feet, but we suddenly realize that there is something strange about him. He does not know where he is, nor who the people around him are. Moreover, despite being aware that the language he is hearing is English, he does not seem to understand the meaning of any sentences (Lin hai ting tao 2007). After a few bewildering lines, the author finally explains what has just happened. We are told that a few moments before, a Chinese soccer enthusiast was watching a game in a pub in his country, when he had an argument with two other men who, aided by alcohol, hit him on the nape with a stick, making him fall to the ground and pass out (Lin hai ting tao 2007). Only at that point do we understand that Tony Twain is not inside Tony Twain’s body anymore. He has been replaced by the “self” of a Chinese man.

Beside the process of reincarnation, *The Champions’ Godfather* also embodies other tenets of CILAS. First of all, it is a sort of coming-of-age story, being the Chinese citizen a good-for-nothing who has been given the unique chance to start all over again, proving his worth as a soccer manager (Lin hai ting tao

<sup>71</sup> 阎罗. King Yanluo is a Chinese deity with Buddhist origin. He took hold in China’s public imagination thanks to iconography and folk tales.

2007). Secondly, the novel is full of references to Western (particularly English) soccer, beginning with some real-life players featured in the first chapter, like David Johnson<sup>72</sup> and Desmond Walker<sup>73</sup> (Lin hai ting tao 2007). In the end, the choice of linking this work to the name of Nottingham Forest seems all but casual. The English club, established in 1865, is indeed one of the oldest in the world, and enjoyed a successful spell in the 1970s that brought many trophies on their shelves, including two Champions Leagues. From then on, the club has experienced a slow decline that took it to the lowest tiers of English football, earning the nickname of “impoverished aristocrat” par excellence (Soar n.d.). Behind the choice of picking Nottingham Forest instead of clubs that are undoubtedly more famous in Asia, like Manchester United and Chelsea to name but a few, there may be a will to draw a parallel with China, a glorious empire until the arrival of Westerners in the 19th century, and a place whose subtle thirst for revenge often goes together with a desire for soccer rebirth (Campbell 2016) that is, sure enough, the main theme inside *The Champions’ Godfather*, where Tony Twain will try and bring Nottingham where they deserve to be.

### 3.5 Success of the Chinese national team

According to the tendency of a big part of CIL to fall under the label of “YY literature”,<sup>74</sup> a phenomenon thoroughly described by Michel Hockx in his book (Hockx 2015), we find a strong idealization of the Chinese national team throughout most works belonging to CILAS.

Right from the first novels of the genre, there have been characters who reach the goal of winning the World Cup with China, just like it happens in *We Are the Champions* (Lin hai ting tao n.d.).

Some authors often mention “a golden age<sup>75</sup> of Chinese soccer”, placing it at different times in history (Diyu xixuegui 2016). “The Long Song of Ele-

<sup>72</sup> David Anthony Johnson (b. 1976) is a Jamaican former soccer player who spent all of his career in England and played for Nottingham Forest from 2001 to 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Desmond Sinclair Walker (b. 1965) is an English former soccer player, a pillar of Nottingham Forest throughout the 1980s.

<sup>74</sup> YY stands for *yiyin* 意淫, a term literally referring to the pleasure in visualizing sexual acts that, with regards to literature, is often translated as “lust of the mind”. Because of its resemblance to *shouyin* 手淫 (meaning “masturbation”), the habit of translating it into “mental masturbation” has recently taken hold. The reason lies in the tendency, shared by many CIL novels, to take the reader into dream-like worlds, where his longing for fame, love, money and sex is fulfilled through the experiences lived by fictional characters.

<sup>75</sup> *Huangjin shiqi* 黄金时期 or *huangjin shidai* 黄金时代.

gance”, for example, placed it in 2022, when the reborn generals of the Three Kingdoms, after having impressed at Russia 2018 and having moved to big European clubs, go on to claim the World Cup (Fenghua chang ge n.d.).

Other novels show similar references to a glorious spell for the national team. It is the case of *Center Forward*,<sup>76</sup> whose author Guo Nu<sup>77</sup> imagined a moment when China churns out top-level talents and fills the gap with Western soccer powerhouses, or *On the Road*<sup>78</sup> by “Used to the Vomit”,<sup>79</sup> where the golden age is placed in the past, namely in the last decade of the 20th century (Diyu xixuegui 2016).

From a brief overview of the themes that are dealt with within CILAS, it is clear how prominent is the position occupied by the national team. It is a thing that underlies the plot of a great number of novels and that, in light of the emotional involvement the Chinese feel with a team that represents them as a nation, may lie at the foundation of the success enjoyed by this genre.

#### 4. Influence on the audience

Wandering through Chinese forums and social networks, it is possible to have an idea of the influx CILAS has had on those who are interested in football. Obviously, not every novel has brought about broad debate, since it must always be borne in mind that CILAS is a subgenre of sports fiction, a category that, although successful, keeps ranking behind *wuxia* and urban novels as per number of publications – the digits displayed on *The Starting Point* are clear about it. Despite this, the most famous works belonging to CILAS have sparked a vivid discussion among soccer fans.

A good demonstration is the Shanghai-based sporting website *Hupu*,<sup>80</sup> and its forum in particular. Here, on November 1, 2014, a user called Chalvid started a lively thread by asking “Which literary works about soccer have you read?”<sup>81</sup> He didn’t make any reference to internet literature, and actually mentioned three printed books. Replies flowed in copiously, and it is worth noting that, beside

<sup>76</sup> *Zhongfeng* 中锋.

<sup>77</sup> 郭怒.

<sup>78</sup> *Zai lu shang* 在路上.

<sup>79</sup> Xiguan outu 习惯呕吐.

<sup>80</sup> 虎扑 (bbs.hupu.com).

<sup>81</sup> The thread, with all the comments cited in the following lines, can be found at bbs.hupu.com/10842199.html (accessed October 2, 2017).

those citing Western books such as Roberto Baggio's<sup>82</sup> biography or *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*<sup>83</sup> by Eduardo Galeano,<sup>84</sup> there is a huge majority of people who mentioned Chinese online novels. User "Bigger Brother Keeps Kevan Under Control",<sup>85</sup> for example, highlighted the importance of *The Champions' Godfather*, while "Borderless Yun\_Raul"<sup>86</sup> referred to "Something from 'A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves'", without mentioning any title. User "As Devout as a Song"<sup>87</sup> stated to have read the whole trilogy made up of *The Champions' Godfather*, *The Legend of the Champion* and *We Are the Champions*. The person concealed by the nickname "Dioxide"<sup>88</sup> went well beyond all this, writing that "'A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves' accompanied me through the dark days of the second and third year in high school, when there was no trace of a soccer ball", and explaining how this kind of literature can help to catalyze the sporting passion of those unable to play. The thread is not devoid of references to other authors, like the one made by "The New Kaka",<sup>89</sup> who suggested *On the Road* by "Used to the Vomit" and *With a Ball Below Your Foot*<sup>90</sup> by Dleer, another famous novel about soccer.

A useful tool for those wishing to analyze the audience's opinion about online novels is *Yousuu*,<sup>91</sup> a website that gathers feedback from everyone willing to give a brief review of a certain work. Looking at those referring to *I Play Soccer, Are You Paying Attention?*, one can easily understand what has this story meant for some of its readers<sup>92</sup>. User Nomad245, for example, explained how the debut of "A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves" gave him his first ever contact with soccer literature. The same thought is shared by Xia Ci<sup>93</sup> who, at

<sup>82</sup> Roberto Baggio (b. 1967) is an Italian former professional soccer player, who mainly played as a forward, regarded as one of the best in the history of world soccer.

<sup>83</sup> *El fútbol a sol y sombra*.

<sup>84</sup> Eduardo Hughes Galeano (1940 – 2015) was a Uruguayan journalist, writer and novelist, considered a literary giant of Latin America.

<sup>85</sup> Xiong kong Kaifeng 兄控凯冯.

<sup>86</sup> Raul Yun wuya 云无涯 Yun wuya\_Raul 云无涯\_Raul

<sup>87</sup> *Qiancheng ru ge* 虔诚如歌.

<sup>88</sup> Eryanghuawu 二氧化物.

<sup>89</sup> Niu Kaka 纽卡卡.

<sup>90</sup> *Qiu zai jiao xia* 球在脚下.

<sup>91</sup> *You shu wang* 优书网 (yousuu.com).

<sup>92</sup> All of the following posts were found on *Yousuu*, and can be seen at: [yousuu.com/book/1735](http://yousuu.com/book/1735) (accessed October 2, 2017).

<sup>93</sup> 夏茨.

the end of his judgment, hinted at an association between this kind of fiction and the lightheartedness typical of teenagers:

It's the first sporting novel about soccer that I've ever read, but I used a pirated edition back then. From then on, even if I don't watch the league or the World Cup, I've liked novels like this, especially those by "A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves". Those teenage years, so carefree...

Another *Yousuu* user, named Jinwei86, observed the importance the pioneer of CILAS has had for both his personal growth and that of the entire genre, reminding us how, in the world of internet literature, readers are the first and most severe critics:

As one who didn't understand soccer very much, "A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves" taught me many of the things I know about this sport. He's the father of many basic concepts that are still widely used today in soccer novels but, starting from *The Champions' Godfather*, I couldn't help but notice a deterioration in his work that has brought him on the path to decline. I haven't even read the things he wrote in the last couple of years.

China's most famous microblogging platform *Sina Weibo*<sup>94</sup> makes for one more way to understand how the audience relates to the work of online writers. What stands out on *Weibo* is the tendency, showed by many, to overlap reality and fiction, linking a sporting event to a soccer novel they have read.<sup>95</sup>

The last game of 2016/17 Football League Championship, the second tier of English soccer, took place on May 7, 2017, and Nottingham Forest managed to avoid relegation by the skin of their teeth, defeating Ipswich Town. On that very day, user "Tony Gets You into Trouble"<sup>96</sup> suddenly recalled the events described in *The Champions' Godfather*, and posted on *Weibo* a photo of his television, tuned in to the match when the score was 0 - 0 and Nottingham, who had to win at all costs, were seriously running the risk of getting relegated. The image was captioned as follows:

"A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves": It's a crucial game for Nottingham Forest if they want to avoid relegation from Football League Championship. In that

<sup>94</sup> *Xinlang weibo* 新浪微博 (s.weibo.com).

<sup>95</sup> All the *Weibo* posts referred to hereafter can be found at: s.weibo.com/weibo/%25E6%259E%2597%25E6%25B5%25B7%25E5%2590%25AC%25E6%25B6%259B?topnav=1&wvr=6&b=1 (accessed October 2, 2017).

<sup>96</sup> Tony tuo ni xia shui Tony 拖你下水.

novel of yours you made me hope that they could return where they deserve to be, but now I can only pray for them to stay where they are...

Another post which reveals the relation between Chinese soccer enthusiasts and internet literature appeared in September 2017, right after BBC commentator John Motson<sup>97</sup> had announced he would end his 50-year career in 2018, much to the dismay of millions of spectators that saw his retirement as the end of an era (MacInnes 2017). Given the reputation of this figure, the fact “A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves” decided to put him inside one of his novels comes as no surprise. Indeed, in the first chapter of *The Champions’ Godfather*, we find Motson alternating his voice with that of the third-person narrator in the description of what happens on the pitch where coach Tony Twain has been violently hit by a running player (Lin hai ting tao 2017). On September 7, 2017, user “Ai Niaoshu, the Savior from Art Class No. 853”,<sup>98</sup> shared on *Weibo* a photo of Motson paired with a comment directed at “A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves”: “I just found out... I read your novels, and I can say he’s my favorite commentator”.

As for the thoughts of internet users, these few examples are nothing but the tip of an iceberg. Nonetheless, they can be useful in order to understand the mark CILAS has left on those Chinese who care about soccer. Such information can’t be overlooked when trying to assess this kind of literature. To begin with, the novels by “A Sea of Trees Listens to the Waves” are the first stories about soccer some people have read in their life; for many others, on the other hand, we are on safe ground if we state that these are the first ones that come to mind when asked about soccer literature. Secondly, some had their first contact with soccer through this fiction, with the latter contributing to the success of this sport in the country. In the end, we can affirm that CILAS has other functions beyond that of entertaining the masses: it has contributed to expand the knowledge the Chinese have about soccer, helping to instill into their minds a set of figures and teams that, quite inevitably, may have shaped the country’s passion for this sport.

## 5. Conclusions

After an in-depth analysis of the features shared by the novels taken into account in this paper, it is possible to postulate the existence of “soccer fiction

<sup>97</sup> John Walker Motson (b. 1945) is a retired English soccer commentator. Since 1971, he has commented on over 2,000 games on television and radio.

<sup>98</sup> 853 yishu ban jiefangzhe Ai Niaoshu 853艺术班解放者爱鸟叔.

with Chinese characteristics”. Not only is it intimately linked to internet and to what this literary arena can offer in China, but it also takes advantage of certain elements that could hardly be used in its Western counterpart.

China aims high with soccer. Most of the goals they have set do not seem close to fulfillment yet, but they find fertile soil in literature. In internet novels, the “Soccer Dream” looks less utopic, and China churns out top-class players who often guide the national team to World Cup victory, turning the hope of a whole nation into reality. A further proof of this can be found in the structure of coming-of-age stories, that calls to mind the rhetoric of Xi Jinping’s two “Dreams”, based on the idea that China has been involved in a self-determinative process that brought it from Western rule to the country it is today, and that will lead the People’s Republic to unprecedented heights over the next decades, in both economy and soccer (Bairner and Tan 2018; Wang 2013).

Many of the novels in question are interspersed with elements intimately connected to Chinese culture and tradition, as if writers intended to give some local “flavor” to their national soccer movement, or at least to the image of it they try to convey in their work, with the aim of making it unique when compared to those of other nations. A good example of this is *We Are the Champions*, where Zhang Jun receives a de facto endorsement from a divine being like the *bodhisattva* featured in the introduction, hinting at how the success of the protagonist, that adds luster to the whole of China, is backed by a spiritual entity that Western powerhouses simply do not have on their side.

Anyway, this kind of fiction does not only speak volumes about China’s dreams of glory, but also about those influences that have shaped its soccer movement, like the British, Italian or Brazilian models that had a great impact on local enthusiasts and are part and parcel of the “Soccer Dream” (Chadwick 2017; Phillips 2017).

Reading CILAS, we have the impression that this genre’s final aim is that of making Chinese soccer reach a level it can’t even get close to in the real world, at least for now. What is most interesting is that elements completely unrelated to this sport are often brought into play, like Buddhist demi-gods, Zhuge Liang or monks created by Jin Yong’s pen. It is almost as if authors would like to bring the sporting contest on another level, one which is more congenial to China, where the gaps in terms of soccer tradition can be filled in with spiritual, historical and literary richness. In light of it all, attention must be shifted again on the concept of YY literature, rightfully regarded as the core of all commercial internet fiction in China (Hockx 2015).

In the end, taking stock of those websites where users can have their say about novels allows us to close the loop and provide an answer to the questions posed at the beginning of this study. Those referred to in the last paragraph are nothing but a few examples of users that have read internet novels about soccer;

using their feedback to draw full-scale results would mean jumping to conclusions, and it is known how harmful this could be for a serious analysis. Bearing all this in mind, we can still acknowledge how this literary genre has created a dialog around itself, finding its way in the world of soccer enthusiasm, binding to it and providing an alternative to real-life sport.

This can be considered as the ultimate distinguishing feature of Chinese soccer fiction. It filled a gap brought about by scarcity of on-pitch success, giving substance to a “Soccer Dream” that keeps bumping upon many setbacks. In these novels, readers can find a way to imagine their nation on the same level as any other in soccer, with athletes playing in some of the best clubs of the planet and raising their flag higher than they have ever been able to do. This genre makes for a Chinese version of soccer fiction and, at the same time, it also represents a soccer version of YY literature.

The conclusions we arrived at can also be used as a tool for a thorough examination of internet fiction in general. This paper should contribute to make clear how this kind of literature may serve another purpose in addition to that of mere entertainment. Given its indissoluble and daily relationship with society, it can absorb its dreams and wishes only to give them back to the world in a written, romanticized and highly-idealized form.

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# THE EFFECTIVENESS OF VISUALIZING PITCH CURVES FOR CHINESE TONE TRAINING: TAKING ITALIAN LEARNERS AS AN EXAMPLE

声调的可视化在汉语学习中的重要性——以意大利学习者为例

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## *Abstract*

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the analysis of the interlanguage has focused mainly on morpho syntactic features (Osborn 1989, Richard and Rodgers 2001), while less attention has been paid to the acquisition of phonological and phonetic aspects. For a tonal language such as Mandarin Chinese, the correct pronunciation of tone is one of the most important aspects of both learning and teaching (Lu 2010) and some studies conducted previously suggest that computer-based programs that allow for visualization of pitch contours are helpful for improving learners' pronunciation. (Chun 1998; Hardison 2004; Levis and Pickering 2004). The goal of this study is to determine the effectiveness of visualizing pitch curves for Chinese tone learning and so to find a current way that facilitate the learning of Mandarin Chinese tones.

## *Keywords*

Mandarin Chinese, language acquisition, tones, pitch curves, Praat

## 摘要

在第二语言习得 (SLA) 领域, 对中介语的分析主要集中在词法句法等特征上 (Osborn 1989, 9; Richard and Rodgers 2001, 12), 而对语音以及音韵习得方面的关注相对较少。对于像汉语普通话这样的音调语言, 正确的声调和发音是学习和教学中最重要的方面之一 (Lu 2010, 4), 之前进行的一些研究表明, 允许音高可视化的计算机程序对于提高汉语学习者的发音是有一定帮助的 (Chun 1998, 669-680; Hardison 2004, 34-52; Levis and Pickering 2004, 505-524)。本项研究的目的是论证声调曲线的可视化在汉语学习过程中有效性, 从而找到促进普通话音调学习的方法。

## 关键词

汉语, 语言习得, 声调, 音高曲线, Praat.

## 一. 研究概况

汉语是最具代表性的声调语言之一，声调的独特性使它们在演讲中起到了极为重要的作用。在汉语作为第二外语的教学和学习的研究领域中，声调一直都是一个难点，因为声调非常的抽象，既看不见也摸不着，没有舌位，没有唇形，发音的方法也很难具体描述。2000年进行的一项研究表明，在中国学习汉语的所有留学生都是通过老师而不是通过教材来学声调的（Yu 2007, 77-81）。

声调可以说是语音学中最微妙的元素，一般认为声调是音调之间差异，尽管声音的强度和持续时间也为识别不同声调提供了重要的辅助线索（Norman 1988, 145）。

关于语音的教学，早在半个世纪以前，汉语语言学家赵元任就做过大量的研究和实践。在赵元任的教学模式中，被提到首位的就是语音的教学。在很多著作中，赵元任都强调了语音在外语教学中的地位。他认为语音是语言的本身，也是最难和最重要的部分，学习一种语言首先就必须抓住那个语言的要素，任何一种语言的要素都不会太多，只有几十个音。在语音教学中，他十分重视对音位的区分，强调“不同的音在听、说时一定要有所分别，因为语音构成的词语的内容并区别意义”。另外他把语音学习叫做“基础工作”，在这个基础工作上花费再多的时间也不为多，花费再大的精力也不为过。他甚至认为“如果一个学生在前两周的学习中双倍努力，那他未来学习所需要的时间会减少一半，但是如果他基础打得太差，他常常会根本学不到这种语言”。这充分说明了，先学习语音，并且学好语音在赵元任的教学模式中有多么重要的地位（Zhao 1947, 445-449）。

有关汉语作为第二外语习得的研究表明，对于母语为非声调语言的学习者，比如意大利学生、英国学生、法语学生等来说，声调的感知和发音有一定困难，因此对这类学生来说，声调的感知和发音训练都是有必要的（Wang, Sereno, and Jongman 2006, 250）。为了学习声调，模仿和记忆是两个必要步骤。关于哪一个声调最难，目前并没有普遍一致意见，因为这在很大程度上取决于学习者的语言背景。例如，一些研究发现，对于母语是亚洲语言（如日语，韩语，越南语等）的学习者来说，普通话的声调似乎相对容易掌握，因为这些亚洲语言即使与汉语声调不同，但也有自己的声调系统。然而，对于那些母语是非声调语言，比如欧洲语言的学习者来说，普通话声调的习得则是更加困难（An and Zhang 2007, 63-77）。

2002年进行的研究表明，外国学生通常可以比较快速的掌握第四声，而二声和三声似乎更难以正确的感知和发音（Wang 2003, 61-70）。

## 二. 汉语四声的呈现方式

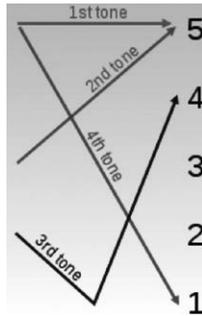
多年来，普通话的语调有过不同的描述和呈现方式。1930年，赵元任发明了一种非常方便和准确的声调标记方法，即五度制调值标记法。

在五度标记法中，用一条竖线作为标尺，从低到高分为四段，各个端点从低到高分别表示相对音值的低、次低、中、次高、高。其中1是最低点，5是最高点，3是中间点，4是次高，2是次低。每一个声调可以通过标明其开始点和结束点来描述（Norman 1988, 146-148）。

图1是赵元任发明的五度标记法：

图1：汉语中的四声

例图来源：[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Pinyin\\_Tone\\_Chart.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Pinyin_Tone_Chart.svg)



一声是高平调。它的强度相对恒定，长于二声和四声，但短于三声。在赵元仁的标记法中以55代表。

二声是中升调。它开始于正常说话发音范围的中间位置，并快速地上升到最高范围。二声在五度标记法中以35代表。

三声低平调。声音下降到最低限度，然后上升到次高调，它也是持续时间最长的音调，在五度标记法中以214代表。

四声是高降调。声音从音高范围的顶部开始，并急剧下降到最低限度。它的持续时间是四个声调中最短的，在五度标记法中以51代表。

汉语四声的数字标记一般写在国际音标的右上方。而现代汉语拼音则使用以下四种注音符号来表示普通话中的四个声调。

图2：现代汉语拼音中的四个注音符号

例图来源：<https://chinesefor.us/lessons/mandarin-pinyin-first-tone-pairs/>

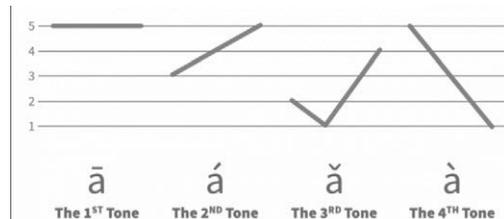


图2显示了传统教学材料中用来表示四声的注音符号。通常注音符号会写在元音上方。一声用直线表示；二声由上升线表示，三声由曲线表

示，四声由下降线表示。今天，当学生们开始接触中文音调时，参考点总是拼音中的这四个变音符号。

在这项研究中，我使用了语音分析软件Praat，它可以在让学生听到汉语母语者发音的同时看到母语者的音高曲线的走势。下图显示了Praat软件给出的四种声调的音高曲线。图中的蓝线代表单字音的声调，如果在双字或者多字组合的情况下，声线的起伏受前后音以及另外一些因素（如：变调）的影响会稍微有一些变化。

图3: Praat软件呈现的四个声调的音高曲线

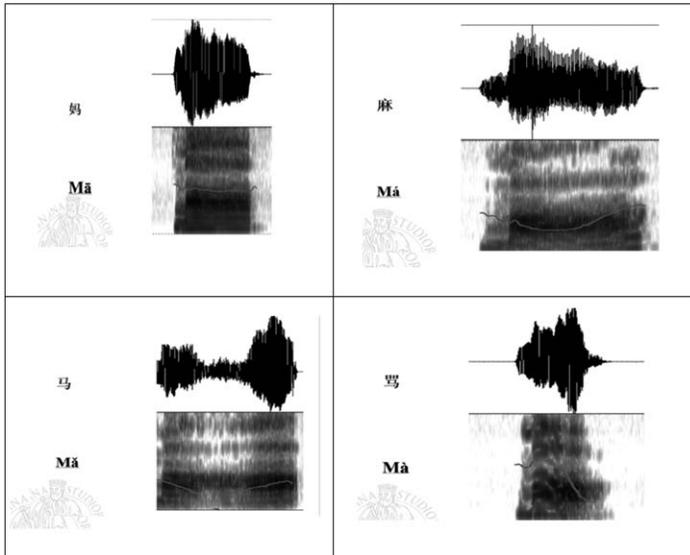
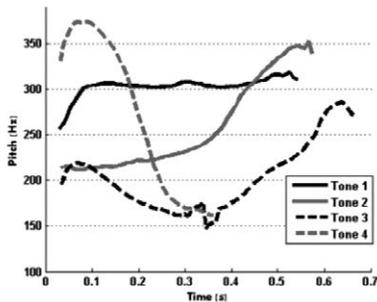


图4: 汉语四个声调的声学表现



该例图是汉语中四个声调的声学表现形式。四种声调分别呈现了不同的音调水平，也就是语音学和声学中所谓的基本频或F0。例图3展示的是汉语母语者（女性）的四声发音，一声为高平音，二声为中升音，三声为低平音，四声为高降音。轻声因为强度较弱，持续时间较短，在这

里没有列举出来。另外，男性和女性的声音特征，在频率（音调）方面存在较为显著的差异，在声学上一般女性声音的频率比男性要高。女声的频率一般在200到300赫兹，最高可以达到400，而男声的频率一般会在100到200赫兹之间（Russell等 1995, 61-70）。如果只观察声线，走势区别并不显著，但在分析数值的时候就会有很明显的区别。所以我在分析数据的时候，采用了一男一女两个母语者的声音作为参考值，并且也把参与实验的学生分成了男女两组，分别进行比较。

### 三. 语音实验介绍

本次实验的目的是评估为汉语学习者提供母语者声调曲线图形是否能提高声调学习的效率。

#### 1) 实验参与者

本次实验的参与者是佛罗伦萨大学汉语专业本科一年级的20名学生（10位男生和10为女生）。参与者的年龄介于18至20岁之间，母语均为意大利语。

#### 2) 实验材料及过程

语音实验使用了20个双音词作为材料。这些词选自用于佛罗伦萨大学中文课程所用的教科书：Federico Masini主编的《意大利人学汉语》。单词是下面列表中显示的这些，这20个单词包含了所有可能的音调组合。为了避免天花板效应，即测验题目过于容易，而致使大部分个体得分普遍较高的现象，所选单词是第二学期课程内容的一部分，所以在实验时，学生不知道单词的发音和意思。

Cū xīn	Lǐng dǎo
Jīn nián	Fǎ lù
Shēn tǐ	Qì chē
Zhī dào	Rè qíng
Shí jiān	Hàn yǔ
Xué xí	Làng màn
Pí jiù	Zhuō zi
Bú cuò	Shén me
Yǎn jīng	Zěn me
Jǔ xíng	Piào liang

实验分四部分进行：基本信息调查问卷、测试1、测试2和反馈问卷。基本信息调查问卷中的问题见附录A。

在第一次测试中，参与者听到了由汉语母语者朗读的20个双音节词，然后他们被要求看着拼音阅读相同单词。Praat软件录制参与者的声音。

第二次测试在第一次测试之后立即进行，参与者坐在一台电脑前，电脑屏幕上显示由软件Praat（可从<http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/>免费获取）制作的，汉语母语者的声调曲线，参与者根据自己所看到的声调曲

线的走势阅读相同的单词。Praat 软件第二次录制参与者的声音，并与第一次的录音以及汉语母语者的声音进行比对。

最后，反馈问卷询问了参与者对声调难易程度的看法以及声调曲线可视化的有效程度。反馈问卷中的问题见附录B。

### 3) 数据分析

由于前面提到的男性和女性声音在基础频率上差异，所以实验中分别采用了汉语母语男声和女声作为参考。而在数据分析中，参与实验的学生也根据性别被分为两组，男学生的基础频率和汉语母语男声进行比较，女学生的基础频率与汉语母语女声进行比较。

在有关声调可视化的其他研究中（例如Hardison 2004, 34-52），通常使用的是可以在被试者读完单词以后立即生成声调曲线的商业软件。而我的这次语音实验使用了开源软件Praat，它不会自动提供音高曲线，而是要求录制参与者的声音以后进行“手动”处理。

图5显示的是由汉语母语zhe3（男）发音的单词píjiǔ的声调曲线。

图5：汉语母语者（男）声调曲线 píjiǔ

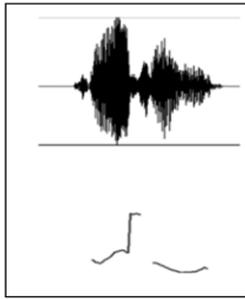


图6显示的是汉语母语者（男）píjiǔ的发音与男生被试的第一次测试结果的对比，这时单词是由学生看着汉语拼音来读的。

图6：汉语母语者（男）的声调曲线（左）和被试男生第一次测试时的声调曲线(右) 单词为：píjiǔ

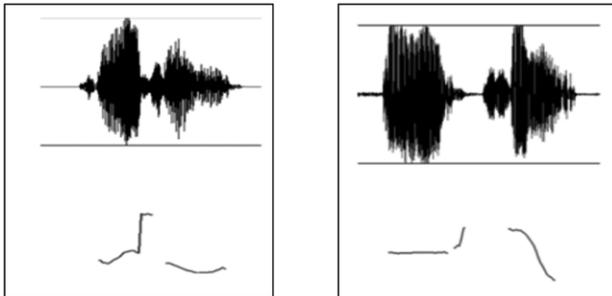


图7显示的是同一个单词的男性母语者的发音与被试男生的第二次测试结果之间的对比，这一次被试在读单词时所参照的是母语者的声调曲线。

图7: 汉语母语者(男)的声调曲线(左)和被试男生第二次测试时的声调曲线(右)单词为: píjiǔ

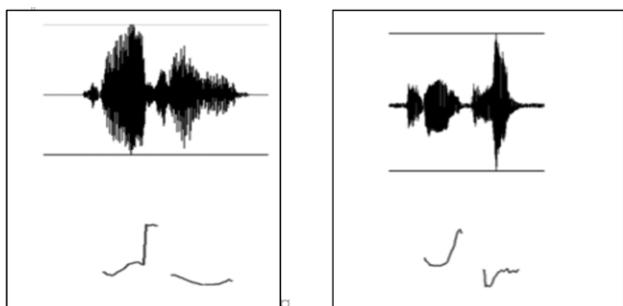
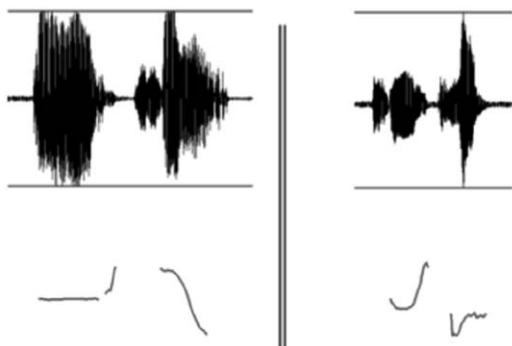


图8显示的是，针对同样的单词 (píjiǔ)，被试男生的第一次测试结果和第二次测试结果之间的对比。

图8: 被试男生第一次测试结果(左)和第二次测试结果(右)



现在已经可以看到被试者在第一次测试中被录制的声调曲线与母语者的声调曲线有很大差别，而同一学生在第二次测试中被录制的声调曲线已经非常接近母语者了。

随后，笔者分别计算了母语者和被试者的基频值(F0)，并对每个单词进行比较。

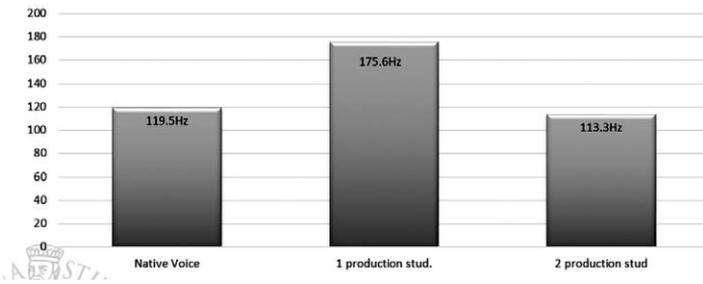
这里列举了一些比较有意义的词汇的结果。最后的反馈问卷证明，出现在初始音节里的二声和三声对学生来说通常更有难度，尤其是Bù和Jǔ。而对于被试学生来说，相对难的声调组合有以下三个: Shíjiān, Xuéxi和Yǎnjīng。

表格1  
被分析的音节

	独立音节	双音词
二声	Bú	<u>Bú</u> cuò
三声	Jǔ	<u>Jǔ</u> xíng

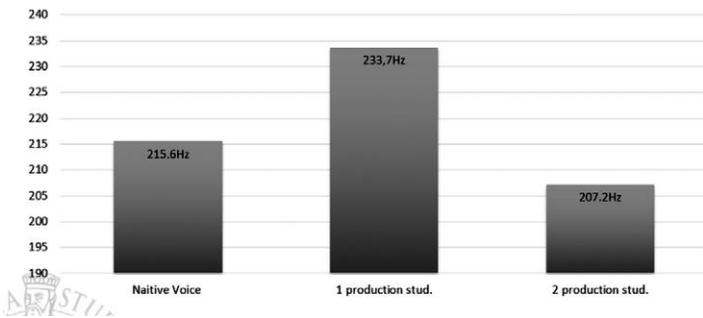
分析图1

音节: *Bú*。男性母语基频值(左), 被试男生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



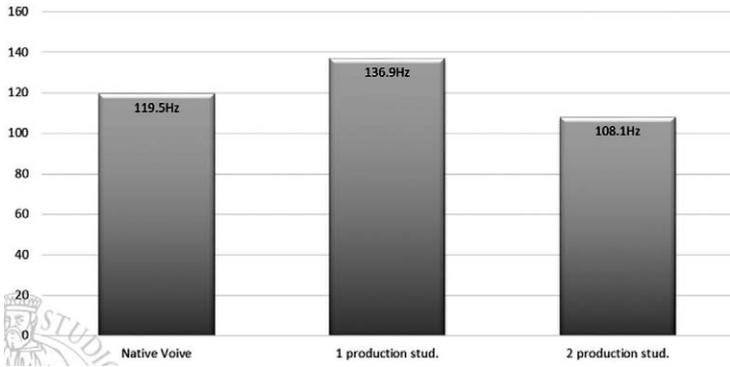
分析图2

音节: *Bú*。女性母语基频值(左), 被试女生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



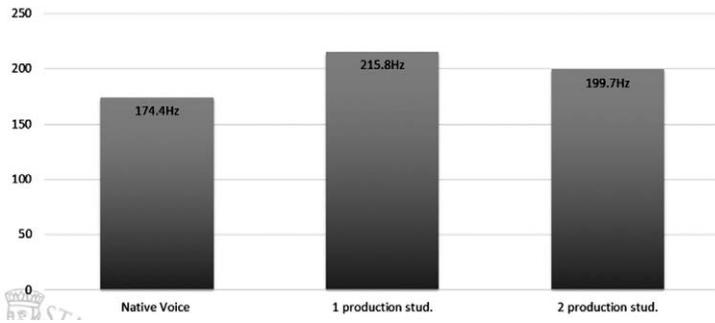
分析图3

音节: *Jū*。男性母语基频值(左), 被试男生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



分析图4

音节: *Jū*。女性母语基频值(左), 被试女生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



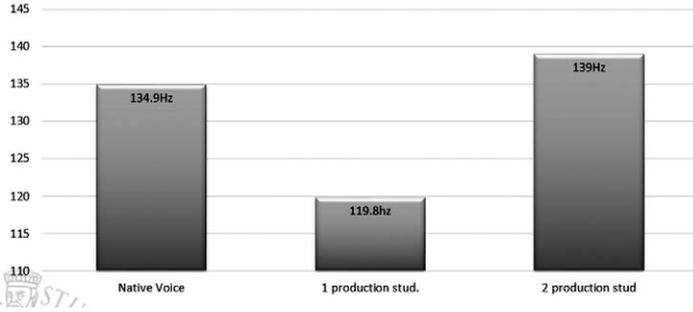
表格2

被分析的双字音

	双字音词汇
二声+ 一声	Shí jiān
二声+二声	Xué xí
三声+一声	Yǎn jīng

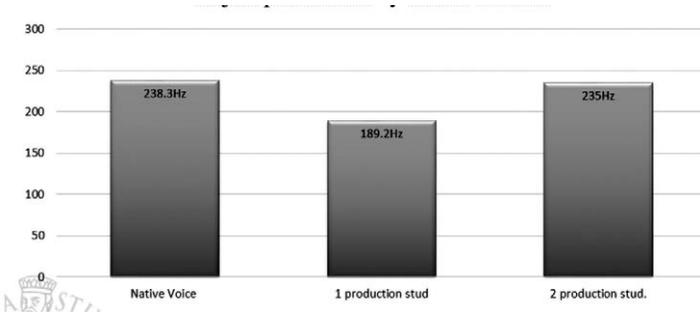
分析图5

单词: Shǐjiān。男性母语基频值(左), 被试男生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



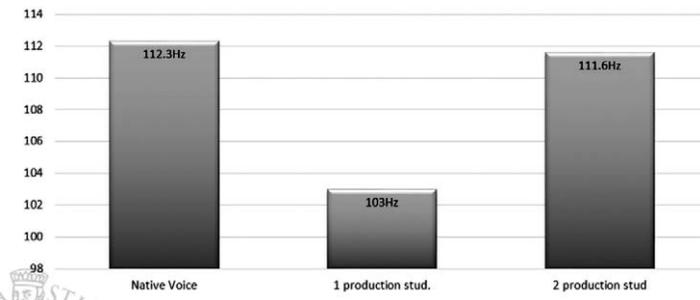
分析图6

单词: Shǐjiān。女性母语基频值(左), 被试女生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



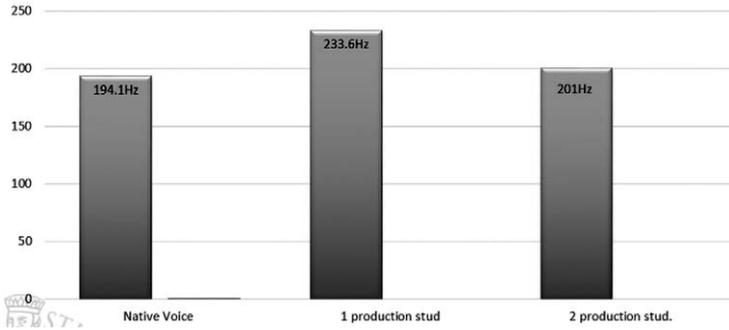
分析图7

单词: Xué xí。男性母语基频值(左), 被试男生第一次测试基频值(中)和第二次测试基频值(右)的对比:



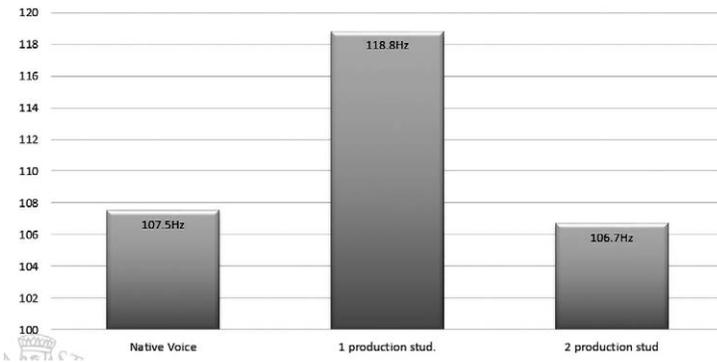
分析图8

单词: *Xué xí*。女性母语基频值（左），被试女生第一次测试基频值（中）和第二次测试基频值（右）的对比：



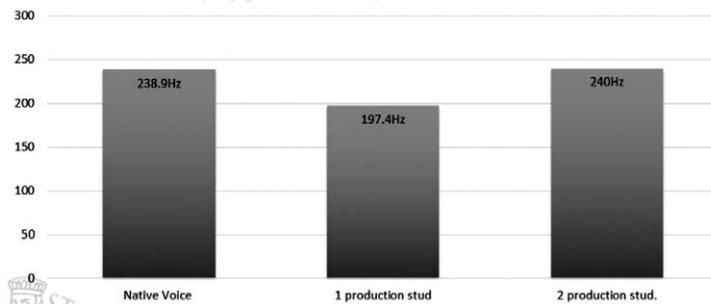
分析图9

单词: *Yǎn jīng*。男性母语基频值（左），被试男生第一次测试基频值（中）和第二次测试基频值（右）的对比：



分析图10

单词: *Yǎn jīng*。女性母语基频值（左），被试女生第一次测试基频值（中）和第二次测试基频值（右）的对比：



#### 四. 实验结果

本次实验一共选择了36个音节用于声调分析。其中包括九个一声，九音二声，九个三声和九个四声。每种声调与其他四种声调（包括轻声）相结合。所有这些音调组合在普通话中都很常见，掌握它们对于学习者习得正确的发音至关重要。

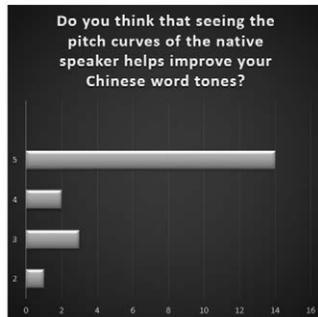
在声调发音的准确率上，被试学生的基频值图形表现出明显的提高。被试者第一次测试的结果与第二次之间的比较显示，在第一次测试中，一声的准确率为88%，二声为50%，三声为61%，四声为79%。由此得出的结论似乎与先前研究的结果一致，被试者的最终调查证实，对于母语为意大利语的汉语学习者来说，相对难发音的声调是二声和三声。

如果只从单音节来分析，通常一声给学习者造成的难度较小，第二次测试相对于第一次来说准确率提高了6%；对于学习者而言，二声和三声通常更难，在这两个声调上第二次测试的准确率较第一次来说提高了25%；最后，四声的准确率提高了17%。

分析被试者在声调发音时的准确性，可以看出哪些声调和声调组合对学习来说最成问题。这也是一种系统的方法，可以用来测试声调的可视化在汉语学习过程中是否有效。

最后这个分析图显示了学生对这种练习方式的看法，大多数参与者认为声调曲线的可视化是非常有用的。事实上，他们获得的结果也证实了这一点。

5 - <u>Very much</u>	14	70%
4	2	10%
3	3	13%
2	1	5%
1 - <u>Not very much</u>	0	



#### 五. 结语

目前，汉语口语学习的研究仍然存在许多局限性。就目前来说，语音实验的手段还没有非常普遍的被采用，大多都采用传统的研究手段，即使采用实验手段，样本量也有限，所以结论的准确性会受到一定影响。对单字研究较多，其他很少涉及。从理论上说，单字的声调是静态的，

是一种理想状态,但是现实语言是以语流为基本生存环境的,语流中的声调是单字的动态组合,它在声调和语调层面都会受到不同规则的制约,这就使得动态声调比静态声调复杂的多。所以现在的研究可以是一个切入点,还需要进一步的向前推进。希望这项研究的结果能为将来设计有更多的参与者、单词和句子的更全面的研究做一个铺垫。

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