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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Uyghur Concubine and a French Juggler Resisting Japanese Imperialism: Jue Qing's Aesopian Language in Manchukuo's Official Literature

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Contrary to general knowledge, there was a vibrant literary world in Manchukuo. One of the most accomplished writers in this Japanese puppet state was Jue Qing (1917-62). After the Japanese surrender, he was labeled "a traitor to the Chinese nation" and, until recently, his fiction works were erased from the history of Chinese literature. However, some of his works seem to express anti-colonial sentiments. This paper analyses two stories from 1943, namely "Xiang Fei" (The Fragrant Concubine) and "Yiren Yang Kun" (The Acrobat Yang Kun). It focuses on their intertextual references to the Chinese legend of Xiang Fei and a story about a juggler by Anatole France (1844-1924), respectively. This study suggests that Jue Qing uses Aesopian language in these stories to bypass official censorship. More specifically, it explores how he uses intertextual references and other rhetorical devices to camouflage praise for resistance against the Japanese coloniser and, at the same time, to draw the reader's attention to it.

與常識相反，滿洲國的文學世界曾經非常活躍。在這個日本傀儡政權裡，爵青（1917-1962）是最有成就的作家之一。日本投降後，他被貼上“漢奸”的標籤，而到了最近，他的小說作品也從中國文學史上被抹去了。但是，他的一些作品似乎表達了反殖民的態度。本文分析了兩篇 1943 年出版的小說，《香妃》與《藝人楊崑》。本文的重點在於它們對中國香妃傳說以及阿納托爾·法朗士（1844-1924）的《聖母的江湖藝人》的互文引用。本研究試圖指出，爵青使用伊索式語言來繞過殖民地文化審查制度。具體而言，本文探討了他如何使用互文參考和其他修辭手法以掩飾起其作品的反日本殖民主義批判，而同時引起讀者的注意。

Keywords: China, Manchukuo, literature, censorship, Jue Qing (1917-62)

關鍵詞：中國，滿洲國，文學，審查制度，爵青（1917-1962）

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Between 1932 and 1945, Manchukuo, *Manzhouguo* 滿洲國, was a Japanese puppet state established in the Chinese Northeast.¹ The new capital Xinjing 新京 was built in the old city of Changchun. Instead of a supreme leader, it was ruled by the Japanese Kantō army; thus, it can be characterised as a “military fascist” regime (Duara 2003, 60–6). Historians of East Asia have often taken an overly schematic view of it, regarding it simply as a place where the local inhabitants were cruelly oppressed by the Japanese. Furthermore, Manchukuo’s Chinese-language literary production was erased from the history of Chinese literature, that is, until recently. This applies also to the work of Jue Qing 爵青 (1917–62),² one of the most accomplished writers in Manchukuo, who remains nearly unknown today.³

In the 1950s, Jue Qing was labeled “a traitor to the Chinese nation,” *Hanjian* 漢奸. He was sentenced to prison for treason, and five years in captivity led to his early death at the age of forty-five (Personal interview with Liu Weicong 劉維聰, b. 1941, Jue Qing’s daughter, 18 September 2019, in Changchun). To be sure, there were solid grounds for accusing him of supporting the Japanese-controlled puppet state: he not only published in official literary journals and was a member of the official Manchukuo art institutions, but he also worked as a translator for the Kantō army. Furthermore, some of his works can be read as supportive of the colonial regime. On the other hand, such condemnation does not reflect the efforts he made after 1941 to delegitimise the coloniser.

¹ This output was created as part of the project “Places of Clashing: Strategic Regions between Europe, North Africa and Asia,” subproject “Resistance and Collaboration in Jue Qing’s Fiction” realised at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, with additional financial support from a specific university research grant in 2019. I am most grateful to Olga Lomová, Eva Chou, Alexis Lycas, Liu Xiaoli, Liu Shuqin, and the two anonymous reviewers for their thoughts and comments.

² Jue Qing is the most prominent penname of Liu Pei 劉佩, born in Changchun. He also used the pen names Liu Jueqing 劉爵青, Ke Qin 可欽, Liao Ding 遼丁, and A Jue 阿爵. For biographical information, see Xie (2017).

³ In the People’s Republic of China, Manchukuo literature research was established in the 1980s. Liu Xiaoli (2008) was the first published study to closely analyse Jue Qing’s fiction. Since then, Taiwanese scholars have also focused on Jue Qing. Liu Shuqin (2014) explores how literary modernism spread from Shanghai to Jue Qing’s Harbin. Cai Peijun (2017) analyses the identity of modern man depicted in two of Jue Qing’s tales. Junko Agnew’s dissertation (2009) includes a chapter on two short stories by Jue Qing. As far as I know, this is the only published text in English dealing with this writer so far. Culver and Smith (2020) provides many deep insights into various aspects of Manchukuo literature, but none of the chapters is devoted to Jue Qing’s fiction works in detail.

Jue Qing was a very active member of Manchukuo's official literary world. From 1935, when he was only eighteen years old, onward, he was involved in editing the Manchukuo literary journal *Xin qingnian* 新青年 (*New Young Man*).⁴ His first short story, "Harbin" 哈爾濱, was published in *Xin qingnian* in 1936; it met with great success and was translated into Japanese the same year. When he received the Greater East Asia Literature Award, *Da Dongya wenxue shang* 大東亞文學賞,⁵ in 1943 for his novel *Huangjin de zhai men* 黃金的窄門 (*The Golden Narrow Gate*), he became even more famous in the Japanese colonial empire. Contemporary literary critics in Manchukuo recognised his superb writing abilities and referred to him as a "genius," *guicai* 鬼才.

Jue Qing's oeuvre can be divided into three periods. His early stories such as "Harbin" were significantly influenced by Shanghai's modernist authors and most importantly by Taiwan-born Liu Na'ou 劉訥鷗 (1905–40) and Mu Shiyong 穆時英 (1912–40) (Liu Shuqin 2014: 38–46). In these works of fiction, Jue Qing reveals the poverty of the working class in Manchukuo and dramatises the social unrest of the period. They feature male protagonists who are shocked by the poor living conditions of workers but also tempted by various modern phenomena (technological progress, "modern girls," etc.). Indirect criticism of fascism can be found in these works (45).

Cai Peijun has noted a major change in the focus of Jue Qing's literary output around 1938, concluding that his works transformed from "urban criticism" into "feudal family criticism" because the tightening literary control in Manchukuo (discussed

⁴ The English subtitle "New Young Man" was used on the cover together with the Chinese title, which is identical to the title of the famous May Fourth journal published from 1915 to 1926 at Beijing University. It had the French subtitle "La Jeunesse," usually translated as "New Youth." Based in Fengtian (the former name of Shenyang), *Xin qingnian*, published from 1935 to 1940, was one of the most prominent literary platforms in Manchukuo in this period.

⁵ Following the outbreak of the Pacific War, Japan promoted the concept of Greater East Asian literature. For this purpose, the three sessions of the Greater East Asian Writers' Congress, *Da Dongya wenxue zhe dahui* 大東亞文學者大會, were held in 1942, 1943, and 1944. They were attended by representatives from various Japanese-held territories, including North China, Shanghai, Taiwan, Korea, and Manchukuo (Gunn 1980, 32–3). At the second congress, convened in Tokyo, the first Greater East Asia Literature Award was presented to several writers, including Jue Qing (Smith 2007, 55–6).

below) made it no longer possible to publish works of “urban criticism” (2017, 464–5). In 1939 Jue Qing moved from Harbin, where he had been working for about five years, back home to Xinjing to get married. At that time, he also participated in launching a new literary journal *Yiwenzhi* 藝文志 (Record of Art and Literature)⁶ together with Gu Ding 古丁 (1914–60) and others. The group of writers associated with *Yiwenzhi* advocated artistic freedom and independence; however, they were criticised by other Manchukuo writers for creating “art for art’s sake,” for a lack of nationalism, and for their “pro-Japanese inclination” (Liu Chao 2020, 143–5).

Indeed, some of Jue Qing’s works from this period seem to express his indirect support for the coloniser.⁷ It is possible that the changes in the political situation and his family situation put stronger pressure on him to which he succumbed. At the same time, he apparently believed, at least partially, that independent Manchukuo under Japanese leadership (discussed below), although not ideal, was tolerable. Duara has noted that many politicians, merchants, landowners, and others promised support for the Manchukuo regime in return for stability (2003, 64).

After the Pacific War broke out in 1941, Jue Qing’s literary works changed significantly once again. This paper suggests that in this period he rejected the colonial regime and began depicting China much more favorably.⁸ To express his newly aroused anti-colonial sentiments (discussed below) to the reader and bypass the censorship of the official press, he mainly used two strategies. First, in several stories he adopted the genre of historical fiction to camouflage his subversive messages. Second, in most of his other stories published after 1941 he used intertextual references to literary works by Western authors, mainly from France. Like the historical settings of historical fiction, references to famous French tales allowed Jue Qing to hide his subversive meanings and, at the same time, to draw the reader’s

⁶ This Xinjing-based journal that was established in June 1939 focused on literature. Only three issues of *Yiwenzhi* were published, the last one in June 1940 (Liu Xiaoli 2008, 69).

⁷ For example, the main protagonist of Jue Qing’s story “Dang’er” 盪兒 (Prodigal Son, 1939) condemns the “backward” traditional society and hopes for a “new world and life,” *xin de shijie he rensheng* 新的世界和人生 (Jue Qing 1941, 139), which can be read as his affirmation of colonial rule and the ideology of “New Manchuria,” *Xin Manzhou* 新滿洲. For more on this ideology, see Liu Xiaoli 2020.

⁸ In this paper I address Jue Qing’s resistance efforts and his collaboration as revealed in his literary work; I do not attempt to judge his personal choices.

attention to them. Both of these strategies involve the specific use of Aesopian language as described by Lev Loseff.⁹ This paper examines Jue Qing's Aesopian language by focus on two tales from this period, namely the 1943 historical short story "Xiang Fei" 香妃 (The Fragrant Concubine) and "Yiren Yang Kun" 藝人楊崑 (The Acrobat Yang Kun) in which Jue Qing refers to a tale by Anatole France (1844-1924).¹⁰ The analysis of these two short stories is preceded by a discussion of their historical context and the tightening censorship in Manchukuo in this period.

The Demise of the Idea of Independent Manchukuo

In the earliest days of Manchukuo, the colonial government presented itself as the ruler of a sovereign nation that embodied noble ideas--multiculturalism, the universalism of "Eastern" religions, and the notion of creating a modern state (Duara 2003, 60-1). Manchukuo was allegedly intended to synthesise the traditional East and the modern West, to blend the best each had to offer. Therefore, the building of a modern state went hand in hand with the traditional Chinese ideal of the "kingly way," *Wangdao* 王道, which strove to establish a harmonious Confucian society.

Incorporating regional traditions into the Manchukuo ideology was meant to gain the local inhabitants' support and the recognition of Manchukuo as a sovereign state by the League of Nations. Besides purportedly following the kingly way, by adopting the name *Manchukuo* and enthroning Puyi 溥儀 (1906-67), the last emperor of the former Qing dynasty who had been dethroned, the state presented itself as the successor of the Manchu dynasty. Furthermore, an important part of Manchukuo ideology was the concept of "harmony of the five ethnicities," *wuzu xiehe* 五族協和,

⁹ In Russian cultural circles the practice of making aesthetic changes to literature affected by censorship has been referred to as using "Aesopian language" for more than a century (Loseff 1984, x). Lev Loseff's theory of Aesopian language (introduced below) has thus far been applied mostly to fiction created in Russia and East-Central European communist regimes.

¹⁰ As far as I know, nobody has previously analysed these stories in detail. Only Liu Xiaoli has explored some aspects of "Yiren Yang Kun." However, in a chapter called, symptomatically, "Jue Qing zhi mi" 爵青之謎 (Jue Qing Mysteries), she does not attempt to interpret the story (2008, 217).

which was supposed to ensure equality between the Han (who made up the majority of the population), Manchus, Japanese, Koreans, and Mongolians in the state (Shao 2011, 141).

The Manchukuo ideology clearly contrasted with the Japanese assimilation strategies applied in Taiwan and Korea. This is certainly one reason why many of the members of Manchukuo society, from local Manchu and Han elites to “war weary masses,” were willing to support the regime despite Japanese military control (Duara 2003, 64). However, by 1937, and especially after the outbreak of the Pacific War, “the symbolic independence of Manchukuo was seriously compromised, as it increasingly became an important supply base for the Japanese war machine in mainland China” (66–7). At this time, the principle of “ethnic harmony” became an empty phrase, and Manchukuo’s ethnic groups were lumped into a single “independent nation” that was granted lower status than the Japanese (Shao 2011, 152).

Manchukuo ended as a fascist state that did not represent its ethnic groups any more but represented only itself (Duara 2003, 253). Jue Qing referred to these events in his 1943 autobiographical essay “*Huangjīn de zhaimen qianhou*” 《黄金的窄门》前后 (Before and After *The Golden Narrow Gate*) published in the journal *Qingnian wenhua* 青年文化 (Youth Culture),¹¹ in which he describes his mood when he was writing the award-winning novel. In this essay he states that in the fall of 1942 he felt so anxious and isolated that he found himself on the verge of suicide:

[During my nearly thirty years of life] I heard tens of doctrines, tens of theories. At that time, those who instilled these doctrines and theories in me were full of confidence, they had no doubts, but it is a pity that now they are gone. No, I can still meet some of them from time to time. We meet, and let’s suppose that I want to express deep thanks for the doctrines and theories that he instilled in me, but he looks annoyed and says: “Strange! Has such a thing ever happened? I was talking with you about doctrines? Theories? It must be a joke! Oh! Yes,

¹¹ This journal was established in 1943 to build on the tradition of *Xin qingnian*, which had ceased publication in 1940. Both these periodicals were created to spread the official Manchukuo ideology, but at the same time they also published many valuable literary works. The Xinjing-based *Qingnian wenhua* was the most important Manchukuo literary journal of this period; it published novels, short stories, drama, poems, etc. (Liu Xiaoli 2008, 171–2). Jue Qing published several essays, stories, and translations in *Qingnian wenhua* from August 1943 to February 1945.

maybe I really said that, it's difficult to say if I really said that or not; however, times change, what does it matter now?" I do not doubt doctrines, nor do I doubt theories. For those who instill these doctrines and theories with good intention, I only feel gratitude. But it gave me a hard time. And not only a hard time; I am actually quite pitiable.

[像我這樣將近三十歲的人] 我聽過數十種教義，聽過數十種說法，把這些教義和說法灌輸給我的人，當時雖都自信滿滿，毫無疑色，可惜的很，如今卻都不見了。不，有的也還能時常見到，見到之後，假設對於他所灌輸的教義和說法，要想再往深處領教一番，他卻要面現不悅之色，說：“奇怪！世間曾有過這種事情嗎？我還給你講過教義？說過法？笑話！啊！是的，也許我真講過，真說過也未可知，但是，此一時，彼一時，那有什麼關係？”我不懷疑教義，也不懷疑說法，對於好心灌輸這些教義和說法的人，也只有感謝之一念。然而卻苦了我自己；豈只是苦，簡直是有些可憐了。(Jue Qing 1943a, 83)

Even though Jue Qing only hints at the reasons for his depression, his statement can be understood as an expression of disappointment over the fact that the original concept of Manchukuo that he had supported in his earlier writings had been abandoned. In different circumstances, in the 1930s and 1940s, other Chinese intellectuals also found it difficult to cope with the collapse of social order: for example, the suicide of historian and aesthician Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) is mostly attributed to Qing loyalism, and writer Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902-1988) tried to kill himself in 1949, when the communist revolution engulfed Chinese society, including his family (Wang 2015, 52-3; 79). Jue Qing seems to have been driven to the verge of death by the demise of the idea of independent Manchukuo.

In “*Huangjin de zhaimen qianhou*,” he describes how, at the time of his deepest crisis, he looked up at the starry sky:

I awakened; I realised that there was nothing that could save me, the only thing that could save me was my life, the only thing that can transcend death and crisis

is the vigor of life itself. From the windy night I went back inside, leaned over the table and wrote the piece called “Joy” that people consider a stupid work, to commemorate my rebirth.

我覺醒了；我知道什麼也不會拯救自己，拯救自己的，只有自己的生命，超越了死和危機的生命，才是生命自身的活力。我由夜風中退回房裡，伏在桌子上，就寫了那篇人們評為愚作的《喜悅》，紀念了我的再生。(Jue Qing 1943a, 84)

The 1943 short story “Xiyue” 喜悅 (Joy) depicts a male protagonist who goes to the mountains to commit suicide, but at the last moment the scenery and stars amaze him so much that he rediscovers his love for life (Jue Qing 1943d, 68). The works I analyse in this paper are among those that Jue Qing wrote after his rebirth following the outbreak of the Pacific War. It seems that it was the experience described in “*Huangjin de zhaimen* qianhou” that made Jue Qing reject the Japanese colonial regime in his work.

Censorship of Manchukuo Literature and Aesopian Language

During the second half of the 1930s, “cultural control had been relatively lax and did not intrude into all dimensions of cultural production” (Duara 2003, 224). The Manchukuo government made significant efforts in 1936 and 1937 to control public opinion; however, it lacked personnel and resources to enforce censorship of literature extensively (Smith 2007, 44–5). Later, when Japan allied itself with Germany and Italy in September 1940, cultural control in Manchukuo intensified dramatically. In February 1941, through the State Propaganda Office, the government announced the “Eight Abstentions,” *ba bu* 八不, which under the threat of imprisonment forbade in literature rebellious tendencies, criticism of national policy, exclusive use of darkness to depict the life of the nation, the use of decadent thoughts as the main point, abnormal sexual desire, excessive cruelty, and exaggerated descriptions of the “entertainment districts” (50).

In March of the same year, the “Gangyao yiwén zhǐdǎo” 綱要藝文指導 (Summary of Guidelines to Art and Literature) was issued to fundamentally transform the role of arts and culture in the state. The guidelines dictated the adoption of Japanese literary traditions to create Manchukuo’s “independent” literature (51). In July 1941, the Manchurian Writers’ and Artists’ Association, *Manzhou wenyijia xiehe* 滿洲文藝家協和, was established. All writers in Manchukuo were required to register with this organisation. Jue Qing and Gu Ding, who were well known for their good relations with the Japanese, were appointed committee members (Ying 2014, 307). The main goal of the new cultural policies was to increase literary production and thus contribute to establishing a Manchurian identity that would be independent of China and, at the same time, inferior to the identity of the Japanese (Duara 2003, 224–5).

The promulgation of cultural policies was followed by the mass arrest of writers in December 1941 known as the Harbin Left-Wing Literature Incident, *Ha’erbin zuoyi wenyue shijian* 哈爾濱左翼文學事件. During the incident, more than 160 people were arrested and more than 20 executed (Feng 1992, 102). Consequently, many important Manchukuo writers fled to Beijing, where they continued to publish (Smith 2007, 54).¹² The high-profile writers who stayed in Manchukuo were mobilised to promote the Greater East Asia Sacred War. And that was the case of Jue Qing. After the outbreak of the Pacific War, his declarations glorifying the Japanese empire appeared in the official press from time to time.¹³

During the Pacific War, Jue Qing also served as the assistant head of the Censorship Office’s second division, *Shencha di er bu* 審查第二部 (Liu Huijuan 2013, 258). He described his work as a censor in one of the articles that directly support the coloniser, the August 1944 “*Shenchazhe de hua: Ganxiang*” 審查者的話：感想 (The Censor’s Words: Impressions), which was published in *Qingnian wenhua*:

¹² Although Beijing was also occupied by the Japanese, surveillance of writers there was looser than in Manchukuo (Smith 2007, 54).

¹³ Xie Chaokun has noted that such declarations enabled Jue Qing to survive and strengthen his position as a writer in Manchukuo but also made him feel guilty. That is reflected in some of his fiction works (2017, 10).

I was in charge of investigating six or seven books altogether; after numerous detailed readings I thought that only Yi Mei's *Tropic* deserved to be called a work for the contemporary time. ... Only this literary work that strengthens the military power necessary to annihilate the US and the UK is a work that embodies the spirit of Greater Asia; only this work intensifies the spirit of the nation.

我擔任審查的作品共有六七部，詳讀數遍之後，我以為只有乙梅作的《回歸線》還稱得起是現時下的作品。... 唯有這增強戰力殲滅美英的文學作品，才是包蘊了大東亞魂的作品，才是深湛了國心的作品。(Jue Qing 1944, 36)

Censorship became so commonplace in Manchukuo that writers openly discussed their impressions of investigating other writers' books. However, Norman Smith has pointed out that even though the surveillance intensified rapidly, it had only limited success in altering the content of literature in Manchukuo. In this period, Chinese-language journals "typically blended pro-Manchukuo, pro-Sacred War news with dark and pessimistic literature. Most journals were structured with officially sanctioned news editorials in the front sections, followed by literature in the back" (Smith 2007, 51-52). Because censorship was not applied comprehensively, some of the most subversive works to date were published in Manchukuo in 1943 and 1944 (56).

Like the editors of Manchukuo journals who tried to sidetrack the censors by including positive news in the front pages, writers in Manchukuo commonly put on masks under which another face was sometimes hidden (Liu Xiaoli 2018, 90). This paper suggests that Jue Qing was one such writer: while he was examining the work of other authors, he was also publishing subversive literature. As a result, the censor Jue Qing's work was being subjected to censorship.

We know this from a 1943 secret report on Manchukuo literature written by police censors called "Guanyu dui yiwu yanju huodong zhong de sixiang yundong jinxing zhencha de baogao" 關於對藝文演劇活動中的思想運動進行偵察的報告 (Report

on Undertaking Investigation of Thinking in Arts, Literature, and Performance).¹⁴ Whereas the first part of the report focuses on Manchukuo films, the second part titled “Zuijin Manzhou zuoyi zuojia de miaoxie qingxiang” 最近滿洲左翼作家的描寫傾向 (The Recent Tendency of Writings by Manchukuo Left-wing Writers) is dedicated to literature:

Because Manchukuo left-wing literature has doubted the political situation right since its inception, it takes abstract appearance and ambiguous form as its starting point. And therefore other nations [particularly the Japanese], which lack knowledge about this literature, have difficulties grasping the core thought. Especially when the government adopted reporting and repressions against the anti-Manchukuo Resist-Japan movements after the outbreak of the Pacific War, the left-wing writers' vigilance increased and their works became more abstract and ambiguous than before.

因滿洲的左翼文學從其誕生起便顧慮政治情勢，從抽象的表面含糊的形式出發，因此對本文學缺乏認識的他民族，在中心思想的把握方面就更困難了。尤其是大東亞戰爭爆發後，政府對反滿抗日運動者採取檢舉彈壓等對策，越發引起了左翼作家的警覺，作品比從前愈發抽象和曖昧了。(Anon. 2017, 371)

The third part of the report, titled “Zuoyi zuojia zuopin de faxian” 左翼作品的發現 (Findings about the Left-wing Works), analyses the writings of several authors, including Jue Qing.¹⁵ Some of the censors' interpretations are quite direct. For example, they make the following comment about “Ming” 鳴 (Howl) by Wu Ying 吳瑛 (1915–61):

¹⁴ The order to write this report came on 25 June 1942, and it was submitted on 29 November 1943. It was discovered by Howard Goldblatt in Taiwan (Okada 2017, 362).

¹⁵ Considering his early works of social criticism, it is not surprising that the censors regarded Jue Qing as a left-wing writer.

The husband refers to Japan, the wife refers to Manchuria, the father hints at China. The writing says that the extremely greedy Japan occupied Manchuria, after that invaded China, and is trying to annihilate the Chinese nation.

丈夫指日本，妻子指滿洲，父親暗指中國。文章是說，無比貪婪的日本佔領了滿洲，進而侵略中國，企圖滅亡中華民族。(382)

As suggested above and illustrated below, in this period Jue Qing published fiction that expressed anti-colonial sentiments. Police censors, however, did not focus on his fiction but instead on his 1943 essay “Mei yue pinglun: Wenxue he guojing” 每月評論：文學和國境 (Monthly Review: Literature and National Territory), in which he claims that imbuing literature with an international character is beneficial for everyone, but nonetheless, also states that a good literary work must be rooted in its own “national territory,” *guo jing* 國境. He mentions examples of classical literary characters such as Miguel de Cervantes’s (1544–1616) Don Quijote and Lu Xun’s 魯迅 (1881–1936) Ah Q, 阿 Q, who, in Jue Qing’s opinion, succeed in reflecting universal human foibles precisely because they depict the national (Spanish, Chinese) character. In his criticism of overcoming national borders he goes as far as to say that “seeking to discard national borders is only idiotic dreaming” 要想棄開國境，那只是癡人的夢想 (Jue Qing 1943b, 81). Even though this statement can be quite clearly understood as a declaration of resistance against increasing Japanese demands that Manchukuo be subordinate to Japan and that Manchukuo literature follow Japanese literary trends, the censors did not judge Jue Qing as harshly as Wu Ying and only summarised that he stressed that Manchukuo literature should not “lose its national consciousness” (Anon. 2017, 380–81). The fact that Jue Qing based his argument on a quote from Japanese writer, literary critic, and war propagandist Kobayashi Hideo 小林秀雄 (1902–1983)¹⁶ (Jue Qing 1943b, 80) obviously took the wind out of the censors’ sails.

¹⁶ Jue Qing quoted Kobayashi’s statement that Japanese people read Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) not from a Russian perspective but “from a Japanese perspective” 用日本的觀點 (Jue Qing 1943b, 80), thus implying that in Manchukuo, people read foreign literature from their own perspective and not the Japanese one.

This paper focuses on Jue Qing's works of fiction that can be read in a way somewhat similar to the censors' reading of Wu Ying's "Ming," that is, as allegories veiling references to the contemporary political situation. The possibility of such readings of Jue Qing's works written after 1941 has already been suggested by scholar Liu Xiaoli. Namely, she has noted that Jue Qing's historical short stories can be understood as commentaries on contemporary Manchukuo society (2018, 102-3). No detailed study, however, has yet been made to support this argument.¹⁷

Lev Loseff's theory of Aesopian language can be applied to interpret allegorical meanings hidden in literature subjected to official censorship. In the study *On the Beneficence of Censorship* (1984) Loseff examines basic methods used by Russian writers to bypass censorship in both the Tsarist and Soviet eras. When an author wishes to transmit a taboo message to the reader, he or she creates an ambiguous text that aims to baffle the censor. Fundamental elements of such texts are "screens" and "markers." Screens are stylistic devices used to conceal a hidden message (they may take the form of a segment that is agreeable to the censor or which distracts the censor's attention), whereas markers draw attention to it and open up a space for reading between the lines (Loseff 1984, 51). By drawing screens and markers from an area of knowledge with which only learned readers are familiar or with which the censor is believed to be unacquainted, the author allows a limited circle of readers access to the allegorical meaning (87). Loseff has also defined six Aesopian genres: historical fiction, exotic fiction, science fiction, nature-writing parables, anecdotes, and translations. He defined the most common rhetorical figures that function as screens or markers as allegory, parody, intertextual references, inconsistencies, and puns (53-121).

Besides the theory of Aesopian language, James C. Scott's theory of relationships between superiors and subordinates within systems of domination informs some of my interpretations. His book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990) analyses hidden forms of popular resistance as a counter-ideology that provides "a general normative form to the host of resistant practices invented in self-defense by any

¹⁷ Norman Smith has analysed the tropes used to criticise Manchukuo rule in fiction written by Manchukuo female authors. See Smith 2007, 106-25.

subordinate group” (Scott 1990, 118). His characterisation of “hidden transcripts” includes forms of disguise, such as trickster tales and rituals of symbolic reversal that represent the counterculture to a dominant transcript of hierarchy (162–79).

The Resisting Fragrant Concubine

Jue Qing’s 1943 short story “Xiang Fei”¹⁸ is an adaptation of a legend about Qing emperor Qianlong’s 乾隆 (1711–99) imperial concubine, a story that has been known in East Asia since the eighteenth century.¹⁹ The various tales about Xiang Fei that exist are based on Manchu records about a Uyghur Muslim woman known as Rong Fei 容妃 who was part of the Qing imperial harem between 1760 and 1788 (Millward 1994, 431). In China, these stories were especially popular from the 1910s to the 1930s, when Xiang Fei was featured as the main protagonist in many romances and plays, including works of Beijing opera (427). These early-twentieth-century adaptations of the legend of Xiang Fei mostly reflect the authors’ political attitudes toward Xinjiang’s position in the Qing empire (431).

Most versions of the legend describe Xiang Fei as the consort of Khoja Jihan (d. 1759) who resisted the Qing invasion of southern Xinjiang (Altishahr) in the mid-eighteenth century. At that time, Qianlong heard about the beauty of this woman whose body was

¹⁸ “Xiang Fei” first appeared in February 1943 in one of the most prominent journals of the Japanese Empire, *Huawen Daban meiri* 華文大阪每日 (Chinese Osaka Daily), which was published from 1938 to 1945 in Japan and distributed across Asia. Even though it was an instrument for spreading Japanese propaganda in the Chinese language, the editors claimed to be independent of the Japanese state and army. In fact, in addition to articles supporting Japan’s leading role in Asia, it is indeed known for publishing highly critical works by Manchukuo authors on subjects officially prohibited in Manchukuo (Smith 2007, 53). In November 1943, “Xiang Fei” was included in Jue Qing’s collection of short stories *Gui xiang* 歸鄉 (Returning Home) published in Xinjing.

¹⁹ Besides “Xiang Fei,” Jue Qing also wrote three other historical stories from 1942 to 1945. First, in his 1942 “Chang’an cheng de youyu” 長安城的憂鬱 (Melancholy in Chang’an) Jue Qing modifies the story “Lu Yong” 陸顯 (Lu Yong) from *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Extensive Records of the Taiping Era) and “Du Shiniang nu chen baibaoxiang” 杜十娘怒沉百寶箱 (Du Shiniang Angrily Sinks Her Jewel-Box) compiled by Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646). Second, Jue Qing’s 1943 sketch “Sima Qian” 司馬遷 refers to the story of humiliation of the historian Sima Qian (145–85 BC). Third, his 1945 “Beitiao Shizong he Yuanjue Dashi” 北條時宗與圓覺大師 (Hōjō Tokimune and Master of Perfect Enlightenment) is modelled on the tale about the Japanese ruler Hōjō Tokimune 北條時宗 (1251–1284) who repelled an attack by the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368).

said to emit a mysterious fragrance and sent General Zhaohui 兆惠 (1708–64) to bring her back to the capital of Beijing. She was captured, but because she was committed to avenging the loss of her husband and country, she decided to remain chaste in the harem. Qianlong tried to win her over slowly by building a mosque next to the imperial palace and presenting her with Hami melons. But these acts did not relieve her homesickness. Later on, as Xiang Fei remained defiant, the empress dowager grew anxious for her son's safety. One day, when Qianlong left for the Temple of Heaven, she fulfilled Xiang Fei's wish to be killed and ended her life before the emperor returned (428–29).

James Millward has noted that whereas the Manchu documents about the Muslim concubine stress the marital alliance that was supposed to consolidate Qing rule in Xinjiang, the later Han versions of the story are rather “Orientalist” and describe Xiang Fei as an exotic femme fatale who was as uneasy in the imperial harem as was Xinjiang in the empire.²⁰ However, a common denominator can be found throughout the various versions of the story: “As a Uyghur woman whose marriage to the Manchu emperor coincided with the Qing conquest of Xinjiang, she appears as a symbol of Xinjiang; her induction into the palace serves as an allegory for the incorporation of Xinjiang within the Qing empire, and, later, the Chinese nation. Conversely, her defiance mirrors the perennial resistance of [her homeland of] Altishahr to rule from Beijing” (431).

In contrast with the earlier stories that focused mainly on the Manchu court, the 1933 Beijing opera *Xiang Fei hen* 香妃恨 (The Fragrant Concubine's Grief) shifts attention toward the concubine herself. The implicit meaning of the play is revealed in a passage that depicts Xiang Fei being driven to Beijing with other captives. During the journey, she blames her nation for its corruptibility and insufficient patriotism, using standard terms associated with Chinese nationalism, such as *aiguo* 愛國 (patriotism), *zuguo* 祖國 (fatherland), and *tongbao* 同胞 (compatriots) (Anon 1985, 292–93). Millward has pointed out that through the use of nationalist language, Han audiences sympathised

²⁰ Millward has also drawn attention to the Uyghur version of the story, which was obviously inspired by the Chinese version. However, it is not relevant for this analysis (Millward 1994, 448).

with Xiang Fei and perceived the Manchus as an enemy. In the face of foreign aggression, such exhortation to unity and selflessness “was probably intended as a commentary on China’s dilatory resistance to Japanese encroachment” (Millward 1994, 443).

Another dramatic work about the Fragrant Concubine from this period is Gu Qinghai’s 顧青海 1934 *Xiang Fei* 香妃. As in *Xiang Fei hen*, the concubine’s Muslim origin is downplayed so that the protagonist can easily function as a symbol of the subjugated Chinese nation. For example, in the first dialogue of Gu Qinghai’s script, as three guards heat alcohol, one admonishes one of the others for carelessly preparing the king’s chopsticks (Gu 1985, 311). The mention of alcohol might have diminished the Muslim identity of the soldiers, and their use of chopsticks could have made Chinese audiences identify more closely with them.

Gu Qinghai’s story highlights the concubine’s unyieldingness in the face of the Qing army’s imminent attack, which contrasts with the timidity of the soldiers. Even the “king of the desert” loses his determination. On the eve of the battle he calls his men to arms and says that he is not “a spy who sells his own country,” *maiguo de jianxi* 賣國的姦細 (a term that was often used in China to refer to collaborators with the Japanese). However, after getting drunk he suggests to Xiang Fei that they hide together in the mountains. But Xiang Fei insists that they must defend their country to the death. When the king is killed and she ends up a prisoner, she is equally adamant. Although after six months of captivity she feels affection for Qianlong, who is very kind to her, in order to maintain her honor, she asks the empress dowager to kill her (311–43).

A comparison with Gu Qinghai’s 1934 autobiographical travelogue *Jichou Dongbei de yiban* 劫後東北的一斑 (A Glimpse of the Northeast after Its Fall) about a business trip to occupied Manchuria in 1933 may help clarify the implicit support of the Chinese resistance against Japan contained in his drama. Some of the events described in this record resemble scenes from the dramatic work. For example, the following is Gu Qinghai’s description of how he traveled with his young and timid assistant in a train full of Japanese soldiers:

Actually, we did not encounter too many problems at the places that we passed during the journey or where we transferred. Just once, when we were in the sleeping car, we heard a bang. My assistant was startled and turned white in the face. He thought it was a pistol. He poked his head out into the corridor and looked to all sides. I spoke a few words to him, telling him that he should not be flustered and, more importantly, that he should not meddle in other people's business. Anyway, we have already been entrapped. In the best case, there will be nothing to do with us. If something happens, we will need to think of a last-minute solution. Afterwards, I quietly observed that the sound was the wind blowing shut the door next to us! The Russians sitting with us smiled as well.

一路經過的地方，下站，換車，到也很少麻煩。就是一次，在睡車小房中聽到乒的一響，我的助手把臉都駭白了，意謂是手槍，他伸着頭向車子的小衙衙裏四望，給我好說了兩句，叫他不用慌張，更不用管閒事的亂看。反正，我們是已經走進了網裏，沒有我們的事情那是最好；有事，也得再想臨時辦法。後來我默默的觀察，這一聲原來是風刮關了旁邊的車門！我們同坐的俄國人也笑了。(Gu 1934, 6)

In the play, the guardians of the desert kingdom's palace seem to be as afraid of the Qing soldiers as were Gu Qinghai and his assistant of the Japanese:

A: Don't make trouble. I am panicking already. The Qing soldiers are terrible.

(A whistle outside the window, very loudly, and clattering again, the guardians begin to scream. "A," very scared, breaks the glass in his hand into pieces. "B" turns in confusion, looks out of the window. "C," wanting to hide under the small table, screams loudly. Finally, "B" calms down, approaches the table, and kicks "C.")

B: It is the changing of the guards! Haha! You are just little rabbits. Weren't you scared?

...

(Two laughing dancers come on stage.)

乙：你們別胡鬧罷。我心裡怪慌的。清兵真是兇呀。

（窗外一陣胡笳，分外響亮，又間丁當金甲聲，衛士傳呼聲。乙驚極，把手中盃打碎。甲亂轉，忽趨向窗外望。丙想鑽入几底，大叫。終於甲一手按心，走到桌側，踢丙）

甲：是巡夜的換班！哈哈。你們簡直是小兔子。嚇壞了沒有？

...

（二舞女笑上）(Gu 1985, 313)

The presence of Chinese nationalist vocabulary, such as the term *zuguo* in the two plays about Xiang Fei, and the connection between Gu Qinghai's play and the record of his journey to Manchukuo support Millward's thesis that the legend of Xiang Fei was used in the Republic of China as an allegory of Chinese resistance against Japan. As indicated above, the authors further allowed for allegorical readings by downplaying the Uyghur identity of the defiant concubine and her nation, so that the Chinese audience could more easily identify with her and her people.

Now, let us return to Jue Qing and focus on his short story. The main message about the concubine defying the emperor remains unchanged. However, the plot differs in many ways from the above-mentioned plays.²¹ Above all, Jue Qing uses different rhetorical devices to open up space for an allegorical reading. Indeed, Jue Qing could hardly afford to drop hints as transparent as those contained in the plays that were published in the Republic of China before the Japanese invasion.

In his story about Xiang Fei we can identify screens and markers that he used to simultaneously hint at and conceal an allegorical reading. Jue Qing's use of the historical-fiction genre undoubtedly acts as a screen. Lev Loseff has provided accounts

²¹ The main differences between Jue Qing's story and the two plays are as follows: First, Jue Qing's story is depicted exclusively from the perspective of Xiang Fei. At the beginning, Xiang Fei remembers how, before her wedding to Khoja, a prophet warned her that she would be punished for her beauty--her greatest sin. In this manner, Jue Qing emphasises the predestined fate of the protagonist. Second, Jue Qing's version highlights her homesickness rather than her desire for revenge. Third, a significant difference between Jue Qing's story and the two plays lies in the open ending. Whereas in the plays the concubine dies at the end, Jue Qing's main protagonist rejects Qianlong and then "only" finds herself in a hopeless situation: looking out of a window, remembering home, but seeing not Xinjiang's Tianshan Mountains 天山 in the west but only the palace chambers (Jue Qing 1943c, 33-38).

of how describing life in the time of Ivan the Terrible (1530–84) became one of the main devices used by Russian authors to refer to contemporary Soviet reality in the years of Stalinist terror (1984, 62–4). This paper suggests that Jue Qing, similarly to the Russian authors, used the historical story to address contemporary issues.

Additionally, the emphasis on the exotic origin of the desert kingdom's inhabitants (unlike in the two above-mentioned plays) can be considered the main screen of Jue Qing's "Xiang Fei." In contrast to Gu Qinghai, who calls Xiang Fei's husband "the great king of the desert," Jue Qing refers to him as "Khoja," *hezhuo* 和卓 (Jue Qing 1943c, 33). Indeed, whereas the above-mentioned plays avoid references to the Uyghur world almost completely, Jue Qing's story abounds with designations such as "Islam," *Yisilan* 伊斯蘭, and "a prophet," *yuyanzhe* 預言者 (34). For example, the following scene describes Xiang Fei's prayer in Beijing:

First, the concubine and the slave performed the ritual washing. During the prayer, they faced the direction of the Qibla as usual; nonetheless, they did not have an Imam as in Yili, nor could they practice communal prayer with other worshippers. There were only two slaves captured in Yili, one qalandar, and that was it.

妃和奴隸先小淨了身體，禮拜的時候雖然如例朝向開希拉，可是既沒有伊犁城中那樣的伊媽目，也沒有眾人排列著，只有由伊犁虜來的兩個奴隸和一個海蘭達爾而已。(34)

Apparently, besides the Aesopian genre of historical-fiction, "Xiang Fei" also falls into the category of exotic fiction, which Lev Loseff describes as "the attribution of properly Russian concerns to realms which are geographically far-removed" (1984, 64). Like the Russian authors analyzed by Loseff, Jue Qing uses these screens to distract the attention not only of the reader but also of the censor.²²

²² In order to make the story understandable, the original text is supplemented with explanatory notes to clarify the terms. For example, "Khoja: Muslim religious leader" 和卓—回民的教長 or "Qalandar: responsible for the prayer of the followers, analogous to a Taoist priest" 海蘭達爾—專司祈禱之教徒，類似道士 (Jue Qing 1943c, 38).

We can also find markers in Jue Qing's story. Take, for example, the remarkably ambiguous style with which the author depicts Qianlong:

The emperor was an extremely exceptional hero. Since his enthronement, the yellow soil of the Eastern country was even more glorious. The emperor's ancestors raised the great project of building the state from the North, the emperor lengthened the ancestors' imperial epoch, expanded the ancestors' great plan, subjugated the four borderlands, and established a domain with vassal states that the previous generations had never heard of.

帝是百代不遇的英主，自從踐祚以來，東邦的黃土更見輝耀了。帝的先祖是由北方興起了肇國的大業，帝為祖先闡明了皇紀，拓展了先祖的宏謀，鎮服了四疆，而確立了前代未聞的版圖和藩屬。(36)

In this passage we can discern several markers that correspond with the dual nature of Aesopian utterances as described by Loseff (1984, 51–52). Here we find motifs that refer to the Qing empire but which are at the same time also strikingly suitable for describing Japan's imperialist expansionism. In Jue Qing's story the Qing empire is consistently referred to by the unusual name of *Dongbang* 東邦, literally "Eastern country." On the fundamental narrative plane this designation makes sense because China truly does lie east of Xinjiang. However, in standard Chinese, the name *Dongbang* refers either to Qilu 齊魯 (another name of Shandong 山東) or to Japan (Luo 1989, 827). Therefore, it might also hint at an allegorical plane on which the Qing empire symbolises the Japanese empire.

Furthermore, the mention of the country's founders coming from the north can be understood not only as reference to the Manchus who defeated the Ming dynasty but also to Emperor Meiji, who began the colonisation of China from the north by gaining control over the Liaodong Peninsula after the First Sino-Japanese War. References to pacifying the borderlands and establishing vassal states can be understood as applying to Manchukuo in a similar way.

Finally, this excerpt also mentions *huangji* 皇紀, which I translate as "imperial epoch." However, while this is not a common word in Chinese, in the Japanese language *kōki*

皇紀 means “Japanese imperial year,” a unique calendar system used since 1872 in Japan that emphasises the Japanese imperial dynasty’s long history.

When we also consider the patriotic message of the Xiang Fei legend in the Republic of China, the depiction of the powerful Qianlong can clearly be read as a reference to the Japanese coloniser. Moreover, such reference seems to be meaningful considering that Qianlong, who is well known for his literary inquisition, apparently hints at the Japanese coloniser that imposed censorship on literature. Subsequently, the possibility of understanding Xiang Fei’s unyielding resistance as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance in Manchukuo is obvious.

At first sight, using the Chinese emperor’s expansionism as a symbol of Japanese aggression against China may seem absurd. However, exploring mostly examples from European popular culture, James C. Scott has described several analogous voices under domination. For example, he has analysed the European tradition of “world-upside-down” drawings and prints that were popular especially in the sixteenth century and depicted “a topsy-turvy world in which all the normal relations and hierarchies were inverted. Mice ate cats, children spanked parents, the hare snared the hunter. . .” (1990, 167). Even though this tradition did not have any political significance, Jue Qing’s “symbolic inversion” uses the same logic of envisioning a world upside down to hint at a mirror image, a world right side up, described as a cultural negation by Scott (168). In the same way the image of a conquering China can be understood as a reference to China that was being conquered.

In this light, some of the other details in Jue Qing’s “Xiang Fei” can be read allegorically as well, for example, the cruelty of Qianlong. During his conquest of Xinjiang, he spared Xiang Fei’s life during the “great massacre in Badakshan in which even the old, the young, the women, and the children turned into corpses stained with blood that covered the mountainous area” 在巴達克山的大戮殺, 連老幼婦孺都變成血肉模糊的屍體, 擺滿了山野 (Jue Qing 1943c, 37). Badakshan corresponds to a place where a real Qianlong-era battle was fought by the Qing army against the Altishahr Khojas in 1759. However, on the allegorical plane, this description can be understood as a reference to the massacres committed in China by the Japanese.

The Sincere Acrobat Yang Kun

In the short story “The Acrobat Yang Kun”²³ Jue Qing uses a similar strategy of Aesopian utterances to bypass the censorship of Manchukuo literature. However, this time his source material that functions as the main screen is not a Chinese legend but the 1892 French short story “Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame” (The Juggler of Notre Dame) by Anatole France.²⁴

The narrator-character of Jue Qing’s story is a famous writer. He recalls his friend Yang Kun, whom he met in August 1931 when he was fifteen years old, just before the Mukden Incident, *Jiu yi ba shibian* 九一八事變, of 18 September 1931.²⁵ At that time, Yang Kun, who was about twenty, became the leader of a group of “wandering youngsters” who met regularly under a bridge in Changchun (to win respect, he beat up two boys who did not want to obey him). Yang Kun’s background was somewhat mysterious: allegedly, he came from Harbin, where he was fired from a job, and, because he had no family, became a wanderer who slept on a park bench. In August he moved to Changchun.

Yang Kun was older than the rest of the boys, who all feared him. He is also described as having a comical face with sunken cheeks that makes him look like a chimpanzee. The young narrator became friends with him. After the Mukden Incident, Yang Kun began putting on juggling performances as part of a magic show, which, thanks to his ape-like appearance, became famous. Even though Yang Kun’s favorite prostitute did not appreciate his show (she watched it impassively and was more concerned with the seeds she was cracking), Yang Kun became rich and could often visit her. To make

²³ “The Acrobat Yang Kun” was published in August 1943 in the first issue of *Qingnian wenhua*.

²⁴ References to Western fiction are common in Jue Qing’s essays and stories; he frequently mentions works by Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616), William Shakespeare (1564–1616), Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81), and others, and he was obviously familiar with them. However, French writers were his favorite. He translated several of André Gide’s (1869–1951) stories, and besides “Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame” he also alluded to stories by Stendhal (1783–1824), Auguste de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam (1838–89), Maurice Barrès (1862–1923), and others. Jue Qing has noted that in his teens he read Gide’s works in Japanese translation (Anon. 1944, 13). Later, he seems to have read in French. His daughter claims that he translated directly from French and was fluent not only in Japanese and French but also in English, German, and Russian (Liu Weicong, interview, 2019).

²⁵ In Jue Qing’s story it is referred to as the “Manchurian Incident,” *Manzhou shibian* 滿洲事變. This is a noteworthy mention because in Manchukuo literature direct references to the Japanese occupation, including representations of Japanese people in Manchukuo, were extremely rare. This was due to the racist nature of Manchukuo society, where “direct Chinese criticism of Japanese rule was impermissible” (Smith 2007, 125).

his show even better, he tried hard to emphasise his ape-like appearance. Therefore, the narrator perceived him as a great artist comparable to Michelangelo (1475–1546):

He used the great effort of cutting his jaws and losing weight to transform his own body, to make himself descend from being a member of the human race to being a chimpanzee. On the stage, he spared no effort to enthrall the audience, to persuade the audience with every single movement that he really was a chimpanzee. This effort was equally matched with that of Michelangelo when he designed St. Peter's Basilica in Rome with his skilled hand. When he took to the stage to make art, he went so far as to completely forget that he was Yang Kun, he thought that he really was a chimpanzee brought to the stage from the African jungle. . . The artistic spirit he adopted was how to discard human nature, how to descend from human nature to ape nature.

他用削骨瘦身的努力，改造著自己的肉態，使自己由人類的一員下降為黑猩猩，在舞台上盡力征服著觀眾，讓觀眾在自己的一舉手一投足之間，發現他就是黑猩猩。這努力和米開朗其羅設計羅馬聖彼德寺院的靈腕是不相上下的。他登上舞台作藝，居然到了完全忘指自己本是楊崑的心境，而覺得自己真是由菲洲的大密林裡被帶到舞台上來的黑猩猩。... 他所採取得藝術精神，是怎樣拋棄人性，由人性下降到猿性去。(Jue Qing 1943e, 96)

The narrator tells us that ten years later he became a famous writer, nicknamed *guicai* (a genius, the same nickname that was applied to Jue Qing), and forgot about Yang Kun. One day he received a letter in which Yang Kun, who was now poor and sick, asked him for financial help. But the narrator put off meeting with his former friend for so long that Yang Kun died in the meantime. On the day of his funeral, the narrator finally learned from Yang Kun's wife (the former prostitute) how Yang Kun's career developed since they had last seen each other. After Yang Kun became famous in Changchun, he went to Beijing and Shanghai with the magic show and became well known throughout China for his chimpanzee performance. However, because he missed his beloved prostitute, he returned to Changchun (which had been already

renamed Xinjing), redeemed her from prostitution and married her. At that time, his performance ceased to flourish because he became fat and no longer resembled a monkey. He ended up at a circus where he performed a miserable magic act called “the immortal picks beans,” *xianren zhai dou* 仙人摘豆. In the end, he died of disease (91-7).

At the end of the story, the narrator mentions Anatole France’s tale about the juggler Barnabé:

France’s story called “Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame” also described a juggler. This juggler became a monk in a monastery and wanted to praise the Virgin Mary. But because he had no skills, he could not praise her virtues with noble talent like the other monks. He felt ashamed and questioned himself; after that he went secretly in front of the Madonna’s altar to play with his six copper balls, of which he was most proud. Eventually, he moved the Virgin Mary, and made her manifest herself, so that she came down from the altar and wiped away the sweat from this juggler’s forehead with her azure robe.

法朗士的一篇題名《聖母的江湖藝人》的小說裡，也寫過一個江湖藝人。這個江湖藝人到僧院裡做修道僧，要讚美聖母，但是因為身無一技長，不能和其他的同道一樣用崇高的才能去讚美的諸德，捫心自愧，就私自到聖母瑪利亞的祭壇前面耍其最得意的六個銅球來，終於感動了聖母，使聖母由祭壇上走下來顯了聖，用青色的外套給這個江湖藝人擦額角的汗。(97)

In the story “Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame,” which France included in the 1892 collection *L’étui de nacre* (Mother of Pearl), France develops a medieval European legend about a poor juggler who experiences a divine miracle. In the above-quoted excerpt Jue Qing summarises the core of the story. Nonetheless, he omits the ending, in which Barnabé is standing on his head in front of the altar, juggling. The prior sees him through a hole in a door. At first the prior cries out against this sacrilege, but then, to his surprise, he witnesses how the Virgin Mary on the altar bows to Barnabé. The prior falls to the ground and exclaims “Heureux les simples, car ils verront Dieu!” (Blessed are the simple-hearted, for they shall see God!; France 1899, 93-105).

This short story can be understood as an expression of France's nostalgia for simple medieval beliefs whose disappearance he equated to society's loss of innocence. Indeed, it is mostly read as a depiction of simple, whole-hearted faith (Ziolkowski 2018, 211-2). It seems that simplicity and sincerity are the values that Jue Qing appreciated in France's short story too. In the last paragraph of "The Acrobat Yang Kun," the narrator compares Yang Kun to himself:

I am ashamed that I have never managed to become the wandering youngster whose sincerity moves heaven. Neither have I managed to become the writer whose sincerity moves heaven. I was only looking for some kind of God of arts who could save me. But now I don't need to open my eyes to look for some kind of God of arts anymore. When I pray for Yang Kun's happiness in the afterlife, it is as if I feel God's love, I feel unusually peaceful and happy. People with a heart under heaven, let's kneel down together and pray for the great artist's happiness in the afterlife.

我很慚愧，不曾作到至誠感天的浮浪少年，也不曾作到至誠感天的文士，只想找什麼藝術之神來拯救自己，可是現在不必睜開眼再去找什麼藝術之神了。為楊崑祈求冥福的時候，我就像受著神寵一樣，覺得自己是非常和平而幸福的。天下的有心人，我們來一同跪下為這位大藝術家祈求冥福罷。(Jue Qing 1943e, 97)

As indicated above, the narrator, who is the rich writer referred to as "a genius," is an apparent autobiographical protagonist representing Jue Qing.²⁶ He became a famous "member of the literati" 文士, but only because he also became an "overanxious and forgetful gentleman" 多慮而健忘的君子 (94) and "was only looking for some kind of God of arts who could save him." If we consider Jue Qing's writing career, the "God of arts" may refer to the concept of artistic freedom and independence that was advocated by Jue Qing and other *Yiwenzhi* writers in the above-mentioned literary

²⁶ Jue Qing's protagonists were often considered autobiographical by contemporary literary critics. For example, see Gu Ding's 1940 review of Jue Qing's story "Mai" 麦 (Wheat): "Jue Qing has created a protagonist: Chen Mu. To carve this statue, he used precisely his own 'naked chest' as a model." 爵青創造了一個人物：陳穆。這完全是用他自己的"裸然之胸廓"為模特兒雕成的塑像 (Gu Ding 2017, 219).

debate, at the time when Jue Qing published several fiction works that were indirectly pro-Japanese. Therefore, the above-quoted excerpt can be read as the declaration of a writer who succeeded thanks to his opportunism.

However, to analyze the allegorical meanings of this enigmatic story, it is crucial to interpret the symbolic role of the protagonist Yang Kun. This paper suggests that he can be understood as a representation of the Northeastern female writer Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911–42), known at the beginning of her career as Qiao Yin 悄吟, a famous member of the anti-Japanese literary movement in Harbin after the Japanese occupation, who fled Manchukuo in 1934 (Duara 2003, 223). She and her husband, Xiao Jun 蕭軍 (1907–88), “produced a radical literary culture that survived even after their departure from the region” (145–6). Such a reading interprets the development of Yang Kun’s juggling career as a reference to Xiao Hong’s career as a writer.

Before we turn to Jue Qing and analyze his short story, it should be stressed again that censorship was not applied comprehensively in Manchukuo. Therefore, references to Xiao Hong in Manchukuo’s official press were not necessarily uncommon. In China proper, Xiao Hong’s death was commemorated in a spate of eulogies, articles and poems (Goldblatt 1976, 132). In Manchukuo, Shan Ding 山丁 (1914–97), also known as Liang Shanding 梁山丁, one of the prominent writers who did not emigrate, published the 1943 poem “Liaoyuan de hai’an: Dao Qiao Yin” 遼遠的海岸：悼悄吟 (Distant Shores: Mourning Qiao Yin).²⁷ In it, he sums up her and Xiao Jun’s emigration, expresses his love for her novel *Sheng si chang* 生死場 (The Field of Life and Death) and the collection of her and Xiao Jun’s essays *Shangshi jie* 商市街 (Market Street), remembers the day he met both of them personally in Harbin, and mourns her death (Shan Ding 1998, 349–51). Wu Ying openly discussed Xiao Hong, too. In her May 1944 essay “Manzhou nüxing wenxue de ren yu zuopin” 滿洲女性文學的人與作品 (Female Writers and Their Works in Manchuria), published in *Qingnian wenhua*, she commemorated Xiao Hong’s premature death and proudly called her the founder of “Manchurian women’s New Literature” (Wu Ying 1944, 24).

²⁷ The poem was originally published in 1943 in the Xinjing-based journal *Xing Ya* 興亞 (Flourishing Asia), no. 10.

However, the possibility of reading Jue Qing's "Yiren Yang Kun" as a reference to Xiao Hong has thus far remained screened from scholars of Manchukuo literature.

Now let us explore the markers that hint at the possibility of such an interpretation. Some of Yang Kun's biographical information presented by the narrator corresponds to that of Xiao Hong, especially dates. By performing simple arithmetic, we can assume that Yang Kun, who was "about twenty" at the time of the Mukden Incident, was born in 1911, like Xiao Hong. Yang Kun began putting on juggling performances shortly after the Mukden Incident. Similarly, Xiao Hong's first poems were published in the spring of 1932. Yang Kun soon became famous and started touring Manchuria as part of a magic show. "This happened ten years ago" 以上是十年前的事情, says the narrator (Jue Qing 1943e, 94). Thus, we can assume that this happened in 1933 (ten years before the story was published), the same year when Xiao Hong and Xiao Jun's first collection of stories and essays, *Bashe* 跋涉 (Arduous Journey), was published in Harbin (Goldblatt 1976, 31). After that, Yang Kun left Manchuria:

Ten years ago, Yang Kun left Xinjing and went to the regions of Jing-Jin [Beijing and Tianjin] and Jiang-Zhe [Jiangsu and Zhejiang] to perform. Less than three years passed, and he, as he said in his letter himself, really became a famous clown of the Eight Great Sea Ports.

楊崑在十年前離開了新京，到京津江浙一帶賣藝，未出三年，正如他自己在信裡所說的一樣，真個成為八大海口的有名小丑。(Jue Qing 1943e, 96)

This excerpt can be seen as a reference to Xiao Hong's escape from Manchukuo to China in the spring of 1934. Yang Kun's becoming a famous clown throughout all of China in less than three years seems to hint at the publication of Xiao Hong's first novel *Sheng si chang* in December 1935. Thanks to Lu Xun's help with publishing, Xiao Hong (and Xiao Jun) became "overnight sensations among leftist circles" (Chou 2017, 468).

However, after "two or three years," Yang Kun got married and became fat. Again, the decline of Yang Kun's career evokes the literary career of Xiao Hong, who

returned from Japan to Shanghai in 1937 and, together with Xiao Jun, fled to Wuhan. There, she separated from Xiao Jun because of his violent behavior and began a relationship with another Northeastern writer, Duanmu Hongliang 端木蕻良 (1912-96), whom she later married. In the two years after her return from Japan, for both personal and political reasons she rarely wrote anything (Goldblatt 1976, 77-9). Howard Goldblatt has remarked that “the little writing she did publish in Wuhan bespeaks a somewhat half-hearted attempt to write in accordance with the Association’s [the nationalist Chinese Writers’ Anti-Aggression Association] policy of strident wartime propaganda” (78). Let us compare this statement with Jue Qing’s narrator’s assessment of Yang Kun’s performance in this period, when his career was damaged by “love desire”: “After that [becoming fat], every show that he appeared in became a failure” 其後，凡是有他出演的劇目，竟都成了失敗的場面 (Jue Qing 1943e, 96).

At the very end of his career, “two years ago,” says the narrator, Yang Kun ended up at a circus (97). This can be read as roughly corresponding to Xiao Hong’s departure from Chongqing to Hong Kong in the spring of 1940. After his short circus career, Yang Kun died of dysentery. Xiao Hong died of tuberculosis in January 1942, that is, one and a half years before Jue Qing published “Yiren Yang Kun.” The acrobat’s funeral was very simple; “they didn’t even hire music” 連一場吹鼓也沒有僱 (Jue Qing 1943e, 95). Correspondingly, Xiao Hong was buried in a simple grave (Goldblatt 1976, 115).

Although some of the turning points in the careers of Yang Kun and Xiao Hong occurred within months of each other, they mostly match up perfectly. We can also find many other striking similarities between Yang Kun and Xiao Hong. For example, Yang Kun came from Harbin and “had no family.” Before he came to Changchun, “at night, [he] slept on a wooden bench on Central Street”²⁸ 晚上睡在中央大街的木椅上 (92). Xiao Hong came from Hulan, a suburb of Harbin, where she attended the First Municipal Girls’ Middle School. She lost her mother when she was nine, and in 1930 she ran away from home when her father arranged a wedding for her. After that,

²⁸ The famous main street in the city of Harbin.

“a long period of aimless wanderings” (Goldblatt 1976, 17-32) left her physically and mentally worn down. She was a famous wanderer, indeed; “You [and Xiao Jun] were a pitiful gypsy, expelled by people, roaming here and there” 你們是一隻可憐的茨岡，給人趕出來了，到處流浪， wrote Shan Ding about Xiao Hong in the above-mentioned poem (Shan Ding 1998, 349).

Not only Harbin, but also most of the other places related to Yang Kun’s career evoke those that were important for Xiao Hong. Besides the region of Jiang-Zhe, which is apparently a reference to Shanghai, where she rose to prominence, in his letter in which he asks the narrator for financial help, Yang Kun tells the narrator that he has also been to Tianjin and Jinan (Jue Qing 1943e, 94). In this context, his reference to Jinan evokes Xiao Hong’s well-known stay in Shandong, where she in reality lived in Qingdao (Goldblatt 1976, 33).

In addition, some of Yang Kun’s psychological features also seem to hint at those of Xiao Hong. For example, Xiao Hong revealed in her autobiographical essays her “overpowering need to be dependent on others, primarily men” (130). When Yang Kun finished the first show to which he invited his impassive girlfriend, he came to her and whispered in her ear: “This is all for you!” 這都是為了你呀！ (Jue Qing 1943e, 94). Considering the distinctive personal appeal of Xiao Hong’s writings (Goldblatt 1976, 134), Yang Kun’s eagerness to transform his body to improve his juggling show can be interpreted as a reference to Xiao Hong’s willingness to include autobiographical elements in her works.

The name of the short story can be seen as another important marker. Apparently to draw attention to the allegorical plane on which Yang Kun represents not merely an acrobat but possibly a more serious artist, Jue Qing chose to title the story “Yiren Yang Kun” 藝人楊昆 (The Acrobat/Artist Yang Kun) and not “Jianghu yiren Yang Kun” 江湖藝人楊昆 (The Juggler Yang Kun).

At this point in my interpretation, most of the screens that Jue Qing deploys in the story to camouflage the taboo meaning seem to be obvious. First of all, Yang Kun’s male gender is one such screen. Considering this aspect of “Yiren Yang Kun,” this

story, like “Xiang Fei,” falls into the category of symbolic reversals, or the “world upside down” allegory, which James C. Scott describes as veiled expressions of subordinate groups’ cultural resistance. Specifically, this allegory corresponds to the reversal of gender roles mentioned by Scott (1990, 166–8). However, some of Yang Kun’s “masculine” features, for example, his violent nature, apparently refer to Xiao Hong’s husband Xiao Jun, who was infamous for beating her (Goldblatt 1976, 77). Therefore, this specific screen functions as a rhetorical device that veils the allegorical meaning but also indirectly hints at Xiao Hong through a reference to her husband.

Beyond gender, many of Yang Kun’s other characteristics that are obviously unrelated to Xiao Hong, some of which are rather bizarre, function as screens, that is, they draw attention away from possible similarities to Xiao Hong. For example, towards the end of the story, after he became fat, Yang Kun has plastic surgery on his face in a German hospital in Tianjin to make him resemble a monkey again. Yang Kun’s ape-like appearance though seems to function not only as a screen but also as a marker. Interestingly enough, in traditional Chinese literature, we can find a well-known story featuring a monkey protagonist that refers to a real famous artist. The Tang dynasty (618–907) tale “Bu Jiang Zong *Baiyuan zhuan*” 補江總白猿傳 (A Supplement to Jiang Zong’s *Biography of a White Ape*), written by an anonymous author, is sometimes regarded as one of the earliest examples of a *roman à clef* in the history of Chinese fiction.²⁹ It ridicules the early Tang calligrapher Ouyang Xun 歐陽詢 (557–641) (Chen Jue, 76–7). Given Jue Qing’s interest in traditional Chinese literature, which is manifested in his historical stories published from 1942 to 1945 (see above), we can guess that he used this device to indicate to a learned reader that Yang Kun also represents a real artist.

One more screen is vital for conveying the allegorical meaning hidden in Jue Qing’s story to the reader. Namely, Jue Qing uses intertextual references to Anatole France’s tale in order to confuse the censor. Hence, Yang Kun resembles not only Xiao Hong but also Barnabé. For example, Yang Kun’s devotion to the prostitute is explicitly compared with that of Barnabé’s to the Virgin Mary (Jue Qing 1943e, 97). Most

²⁹ A *roman à clef* is a kind of European novel that presents real persons under fictitious names.

importantly, at the end of the story, when the narrator praises the sincerity of Yang Kun and indicates that he is the real “God of arts” that he was looking for, Jue Qing makes the reader, as well as the censor, think that it is the abstract value of sincerity, for which Barnabé was redeemed, that the author worships.

This strategy can be understood as a specific case of adopting exotic fiction, one of the Aesopian genres defined by Loseff. The use of this screen in “Xiang Fei” is analogous to Russian cases that shift the locale of tales to geographically remote surroundings (Loseff 1984, 64). However, the story of the acrobat is set in Manchuria, and hence the exotic screen in “Yiren Yang Kun” seems to function in a more complex way. Specifically, to veil the message that China had an artist as great as Yang Kun, at the end of the story the narrator presents information about a similarly great artist who once lived in France.

To gain access to the allegorical meaning, readers must do more than closely analyse the story’s many details. Above all, they need to have a good knowledge of Xiao Hong’s biography. Therefore, we can conclude that “Yiren Yang Kun” involves the use of Aesopian language that draws screens and markers from an area of knowledge with which only learned readers were familiar or with which the censor was believed to be unacquainted, as described by Loseff (1984, 87).

As Liu Xiaoli has noted, one contemporary literary critic thought that the comparison of Yang Kun to Michelangelo was redundant and believed that it detracted from the work’s gravity and depth (2008, 217). Indeed, on the fundamental plane of meaning, when the narrator compares the chimpanzee-like Yang Kun with Michelangelo, the great artist the narrator admires the most (Jue Qing 1943e, 96), he comes off as mocking his friend. Therefore, this comparison can be seen as another screen in Jue Qing’s story because it makes the story look like a parody.

Nevertheless, however absurd it may seem, this comparison makes the reader think about the symbolic role of the protagonist. Loseff has noted that such figures, which he defines as “*reductio ad absurdum*,” can be found in Tsarist-era Russian literature (Loseff 1984, 111). In the case of “Yiren Yang Kun,” in addition to functioning as a screen, this figure can be also seen as a marker that compares Yang Kun with Xiao

Hong, who is considered by some to be “probably the most successful and talented woman writer in China during most of her short career” (Goldblatt 1976, 133). Moreover, the pathetic comparison of Yang Kun to Michelangelo and the repeated praise of Yang Kun as a “great artist” draw attention to the possibility of reading “Yiren Yang Kun” as a eulogy, a genre for which such pathos and praise are characteristic-- that is, a eulogy written by probably the most well-known Manchukuo author, who was associated with Harbin, Jue Qing, for the most famous Harbin female émigré.³⁰

Presumably, it was very daring to commemorate Xiao Hong’s death in Manchukuo’s official press as openly as Shan Ding and Wu Ying did. However, their openness was apparently tempered by their somewhat ambiguous and weak form of expression. Shan Ding does recall that the two Xiaos were driven out of Manchuria, but he also states that before he learned about Xiao Hong’s death, he had been looking forward to meeting them again on the “day when East Asia wins the war” 東亞勝戰的一日 (Shan Ding 1998, 350). Wu Ying does not employ figures of speech associated with Japanese propaganda; however, she commemorates Xiao Hong merely as a feminist writer who was skilled at describing the Manchurian countryside (Wu Ying 1944, 24).

At the end of Jue Qing’s “Yiren Yang Kun,” the autobiographical narrator, who admits that he was not always sincere in his work (he was a “forgetful gentleman”), declares that he “no longer needs to open his eyes to look for some kind of God of arts anymore.” It seems that he has already found one – Xiao Hong. However, Xiao Hong, as represented by Jue Qing through the character of Yang Kun, is not merely a feminist author. Before Yang Kun came from Harbin to Changchun, he had allegedly been in prison for theft, and he had a scar on his knee “which was evidence that he had been tortured” 就是他受過拷問的證據. The narrator, alongside recounting the events of the Mukden Incident, also mentions that in addition to “some mental defects” 心理上有什麼缺陷, such as kleptomania, “the instinct of mankind lies in desire to attack”

³⁰ Jue Qing’s daughter Liu Weicong claims that “some people say that in Harbin, Jue Qing was in contact with the two Xiaos, but they had different opinions.” However, any materials that could have documented this claim were burned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) by his family (2019, interview). I can only state with any certainty that they potentially could have met in Harbin. In the February 1937 autobiographical essay “Yiguo qingdiao” 異國情調 (Exotic Atmosphere), Jue Qing notes that he had already been living in Harbin for three years at that point. If this figure is accurate, it means that he was already living there in the spring of 1934, that is, before the two Xiaos emigrated (Jue Qing 1937, 3). In the same period, Shan Ding met them in Harbin (Wang Yue 2020, 159).

人類的本能在攻擊欲。When the narrator describes how he peered from the street into a cheap brothel, he says that “I have kept that memory of the helplessness of life in the time of the defeat in my heart until today” 那種人生在敗北時的莫可奈何的印象，至今還留在我的胸裡 (Jue Qing 1943e, 91-3). Considering the suggested interpretation of the story, and in the context of portraying the Mukden Incident from the perspective of the defeated, these hints can be understood as implicit criticism of Japanese aggression and of the persecution of leftist writers in Manchukuo. Hence, Xiao Hong, as represented and commemorated by Jue Qing through the character of Yang Kun, can be seen as engaged in the fight against the colonial regime.

Conclusion

Liu Xiaoli has noted that in many literary works from Manchukuo indirect criticism of the colonial regime goes hand in hand with aspects that seem to support the government (2018, 101-2). This observation clearly applies to the above-mentioned poem by Shan Ding, which commemorates the rebellious Xiao Hong but which at the same time can be accused of spreading Japanese propaganda. We can also argue that it applies to Jue Qing’s “Xiang Fei” and “Yiren Yang Kun.”

The routing of cruel Chinese warlords and bringing security from warlord disorder were significant achievements that Manchukuo propaganda attributed to the new regime (Duara 2003, 71). The rule of the cruel emperor Qianlong in “Xiang Fei,” in addition to the interpretation mentioned above, can also be read as an allegorical representation of the former Chinese warlord regime; hence this story reflects ideas present in Japanese propaganda. In “Yiren Yang Kun,” the sad end of the acrobat’s career could be read as an imagining of the fate of an artist in Manchukuo who was as sincere as the French juggler Barnabé. If the story is understood in this way, its moral would be that one should be cautious and satisfied with one’s well-being and that standing out from the crowd might result in sharing Yang Kun’s unhappy fate.

However, I suggest that such readings only apply to the layers of these texts that are agreeable to the censor but deliver hidden allegorical meanings to the reader. This study of Jue Qing's short stories "Xiang Fei" and "Yiren Yang Kun" in the context of the political and cultural changes in Manchukuo brought about by the outbreak of the Pacific War indicates that after 1941 Jue Qing began to use Aesopian language to reject the colonial regime and dissociate himself from his earlier works that had supported it. After this man of many faces became a member of Manchukuo's official art and censorship institutions, he managed to camouflage taboo messages and bypass censorship by including references to Chinese and French tales, which acted as literary screens.

In the specific context of censored official Manchukuo literature, among the variety of interpretations offered by these stories, it is possible to recognise subversive readings. Jue Qing's version of a legend about Qianlong's concubine can be read as a rejection of the cruelty of the Japanese colonial regime, represented here by Emperor Qianlong, and as an expression of compassion for the oppressed Chinese subjects, represented here by the Uyghur concubine. Jue Qing's version of a medieval European legend about a poor juggler can be understood as a rejection of opportunism and praise for the leftist writer Xiao Hong, a member of the anti-Japanese movement. As a result, "Xiang Fei" and "Yiren Yang Kun," written by a Manchukuo censor and "traitor to the Chinese nation," Jue Qing, can be considered subtle literary attempts at delegitimising the Japanese colonial regime.

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