

From the Perspective of Aesthetic Modernity: Yu Dafu's Literary Trajectory and Spiritual Transformation Before His Martyrdom

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Abstract. This study traces Yu Dafu's pre-martyrdom writing through the lens of aesthetic modernity and maps shifts in his self-representation and literary register. In early fiction, he adopts an autobiographical stance and sketches a "marginalized individual," using a sentimental, lyrical mode to stage the tension between individualism and national belonging. From 1927 to the eve of the Anti-Japanese War, travel writing and essays broaden his repertoire: nature scenes and humanistic motifs serve as vehicles for introspection and ethical reflection, marking a turn from Romanticist introspection toward a humanist orientation. During the war years, his output grows more instrumental—polemical essays and literary criticism foreground national-salvation themes, while regulated verse continues to voice patriotic sentiment. Read across these phases, the movement from the critical label of "decadent writer" to posthumous "martyr" status illustrates how aesthetic and social modernities intersect in Republican-era Chinese literature without presuming a single, linear culmination.

Keywords: aesthetic modernity, Yu Dafu, superfluous man, spiritual transformation

1. Introduction

In the constellation of modern Chinese literature, Yu Dafu is undoubtedly a star marked by controversy yet impossible to ignore. His literary trajectory consistently navigated and collided between the individual and the nation, between aesthetics and reality, shaping a distinctive spiritual character. Amid the flames of the Anti-Japanese War, his literary creation underwent a transformation from personal concerns to the broader concerns of the era. His literary practice and spiritual traits have always been closely linked to the concept of "aesthetic modernity," making him an important exemplar for interpreting the transformations of modern Chinese literature. In the context of the "Literature of the Anti-Japanese War and the Eightieth Anniversary of Yu Dafu's Martyrdom," revisiting this literary master's wartime shift in focus and steadfast spirit is not only a reflection on history but also a profound consideration of the application and influence of aesthetic modernity in China.

The concept of aesthetic modernity was first introduced by Matei Calinescu in *Five Faces of Modernity*. It refers primarily to an aesthetic orientation—rooted in Baudelaire's notion of

“modernité”—that opposes bourgeois modernity by emphasizing art and literature’s autonomy. Its defining feature lies in “a tendency toward contemporaneity, an effort to identify with a sensuous present, a reality grasped in its fleetingness; in its spontaneity, it stands in contrast to the frozen, lifeless stillness of the past enshrined in rigid tradition” [1]. In essence, aesthetic modernity is characterized by ephemerality, anti-vulgarity, and resistance to alienation. Some Chinese scholars employ the term to denote a spirit that critiques bourgeois or social modernity, arguing that aesthetic modernity and social modernity form a dialectical and oppositional structure. The distinctive function of aesthetic modernity, they suggest, lies in its capacity to “continually reflect upon and critique social modernization and its problems, offering an alternative possibility beyond the dominance of instrumental rationality” [2]. Within Yu Dafu’s literary universe, aesthetic modernity reveals a dynamic developmental trajectory: from the early assertion of individual desire, to the mid-career engagement with social realities, and ultimately to the wartime embodiment of aesthetic ideals through personal sacrifice. Throughout this evolution, his spiritual world wrestled with, and was refined by, the turbulent currents of modernity.

2. Expression of modernity and the awakening of national consciousness

2.1. The modern features of aesthetic content and form

In his early creative period, Yu Dafu constructed the image of the “superfluous man” through an autobiographical mode of writing, portraying the existential plight of marginal figures during China’s social transformation. This literary innovation exerted a far-reaching influence on later generations of Chinese writers. At the same time, Yu skillfully blended Western romanticism and symbolism with the poetic imagery of traditional Chinese verse, thereby forming a unique sentimental and lyrical style that made a significant contribution to the linguistic and narrative transformation of modern Chinese literature.

Yu Dafu crafts the “marginalized individual” through an autobiographical vantage, as seen in figures such as Wen Pu and Yu Zhifu. Formed amid new intellectual currents, these protagonists question feudal ethics and test the limits of received morality. They worry about the nation’s future but face a social climate that affords few avenues for effective action. Under such constraint, they often adopt a bleak, ironic, and socially withdrawn bearing. At the same time, they claim dignity and lawful rights, press for a sensuous and unembarrassed mode of living, and argue for the emancipation of individual identity.

Yu Dafu’s exploration of the aesthetics of pathology and imperfection also exemplified his avant-garde approach to aesthetic form. Instead of pursuing the flawless beauty idealized in traditional literature, he turned his attention to what mainstream aesthetics excluded—the morbid and the incomplete—and unearthed within them unique aesthetic value. This embrace and affirmation of unorthodox beauty constitutes a key hallmark of aesthetic modernity.

At the heart of aesthetic modernity lies the question of how humanity should find meaning and spiritual grounding in the aftermath of the “death of God”—how to establish new sources of ultimate concern. For Yu Dafu, this aesthetic impulse manifested in his confrontation with post-return disillusionment and decadence amid China’s modern transformation. Through autobiographical writing, he treated self-consciousness as a refuge after the loss of spiritual certainty. Yet, in China, aesthetic modernity grounded in artistic autonomy never achieved an overwhelming triumph. Even in Yu Dafu’s case, aesthetic modernity was often understood—and practiced—more as an aesthetic form that carried the content of modernity [3]. Under the long-standing influence of Confucian orthodoxy and feudal moral codes, the reflective and subversive

dimensions of aesthetic modernity could never reach the same depth as in the West. In China, aesthetic modernity emerged as a response against Enlightenment modernity, yet its politicization in turn rekindled the function of Enlightenment itself.

2.2. Individualism and national consciousness

Beyond his decadent personal sensibility, Yu Dafu's early spiritual world was imbued with a distinct tone of individualism. In his works, the value and dignity of the individual consistently occupy a central place. Whether it is the protagonist's existential questioning in *Sinking* (Chenlun) or the steadfast defense of personal integrity in *An Intoxicating Night of Spring Breeze* (Chunfeng Chenzuide Wanshang), Yu Dafu's writing reveals his persistent pursuit of individualism—an affirmation of human value redefined within the context of modernity.

He longed to free himself from the constraints of national identity on the individual, yet he could not relinquish his deep attachment to his homeland. This inner conflict reflects the broader struggle of modern Chinese intellectuals to seek self-identity amid the tensions between tradition and modernity, and between East and West, while also laying the groundwork for the later transformation of his spiritual orientation.

3. From romanticism to humanism

3.1. A modern vision

As history moved into the period of domestic political revolution, the crises facing both the nation and society deepened. At the same time, the disintegration of traditional humanistic culture and the collapse of the spiritual space of the nation—caused by the confrontation between Enlightenment ideals and political forces—became increasingly apparent. The limitations of romanticism, with its one-sided emphasis on destruction rather than reconstruction, were also laid bare. Coupled with Yu Dafu's growing maturity and middle-aged sobriety, the romantic rebellion that once characterized his early deconstructive approach to history gradually gave way to a form of humanistic redemption imbued with the spirit and moral grace of China's traditional literati [4].

Yu Dafu's travel writings departed from the conventional model of descriptive observation. Rather than focusing solely on landscapes, he infused his travel notes with deep emotion and reflection. The natural scenery in his works thus became not merely an external environment, but a spiritual vessel carrying individual feeling and philosophical contemplation. For instance, in *A Spring Day at the Fishing Terrace*, Yu's portrayal of Yan Ziling's fishing platform simultaneously expresses admiration for the ancient recluse's integrity and disillusionment with the moral decay of contemporary society—revealing the spiritual anxiety and disorientation of the modern Chinese intellectual.

Cast as a “wanderer,” Yu Dafu writes from a mobile vantage. His trips to major scenic sites in China and to locations abroad prompt side-by-side reading of cultures and repeated stock-taking of the self. Along this route, he treats Western achievements with interest yet flags their attendant risks; he values Chinese traditions while noting points of fatigue and blind spots. The toggling between affirmation and critique—rather than a fixed allegiance—marks the modernist temper that informs his prose.

The shift from the sentimental “small self” to the reflective “greater self” represents an important transformation in Yu Dafu's travel writing and essays. In his early works, he focused primarily on personal emotional experiences, expressing a private, almost compulsive melancholy. This

transformation reflects Yu Dafu's elevation from individual sentiment to humanistic consciousness and illustrates the evolution of aesthetic modernity within the context of his time.

3.2. The enlightener's solitude and the awakening of responsibility

In the later years of his life, Yu Dafu's spiritual world was filled with contradictions. As an intellectual deeply shaped by the May Fourth Enlightenment, he longed to free himself from collective constraints and to pursue individual liberty and independence. Yet he could not ignore his moral responsibility amid the nation's peril.

Yu Dafu consistently resisted being absorbed into any collective narrative. He upheld the independence and autonomy of literature, advocating "art for art's sake." However, confronted with intensifying class conflicts and national crises, he could not remain aloof. After 1927, Yu wrote "several short essays on the transformation of literary direction and class-based art" [5]. Both publicly and privately, he expressed a genuine determination to "change course." Intellectually, he moved closer to left-wing thought, and his literary practice was soon faced with the urgent demand for transformation [6].

In later fiction, Yu Dafu moves beyond overtly confessional Romanticism. He threads extended landscape description through the narrative and lets scene and psyche answer one another, rather than stand apart. The strategy signals a reorientation: by situating interior life against natural settings, the prose invites ethical reflection without claiming a single didactic end. In this sense, the pages often shade toward a Rousseau-inflected Romanticism while keeping a humanist emphasis on lived experience. Late *Osmanthus* offers a representative case. Prolonged attention to season, light, and foliage cools the acute melancholy typical of earlier work and favors a quieter poise between person and environment. The resulting effect draws on resources associated with classical Chinese aesthetics—composure, proportion, and balance—without asserting a program. Such pastoral imagining does not so much cancel urban modernity as hold it at a distance, and it gestures toward Yu Dafu's ongoing reconsideration of what "modern" might entail.

Yu Dafu's inward tension tracks dilemmas shared by Republican-era intellectuals negotiating tradition and modernity, East and West. He seeks personal autonomy yet remains tied to a national identity; he explores Western cultural resources while retaining attachments to inherited forms. The strain is palpable, but it enlarges the imaginative field in which his characters think and act.

4. The reconstruction of aesthetic modernity

4.1. The pragmatization of literature

In 1937, with the full outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan, Yu Dafu's literary creation underwent a profound transformation. Invited by *The Sin Chew Daily*, he left Fuzhou for Southeast Asia on December 18, 1938. There, he abandoned the pursuit of pure literature and turned instead to essays, literary criticism, reportage, and anti-Japanese manifestos—a shift that reflected the transformation of aesthetic modernity from "artistic autonomy" to "engaged realism."

Essay writing became one of Yu Dafu's principal literary forms during the war. His essays were sharp, vigorous, and full of a militant awareness of the times. In works such as *The Dynamics of Chinese Literature and Art Since the Outbreak of the War*, Yu fiercely condemned the traitorous literature produced by collaborators and called on writers to "take up their pens as the stronghold of our nation." These essays no longer pursued formal perfection but derived their aesthetic power

from directness, urgency, and combative energy, becoming potent weapons for inspiring patriotic resistance.

Yu Dafu's wartime literary theories also broke through the confines of purely aesthetic discussion and engaged actively with current political realities. He asserted that "under the nationwide war of resistance, literature and art must be closely connected with politics" [7]. Whereas his early literary philosophy emphasized that art was the writer's "self-confession," advocating for works centered on subjective emotion and personal experience, Yu's wartime stance evolved with the times. He came to believe that if writers continued to indulge in private sentiment during a national crisis, they would be hopelessly detached from reality. For Yu, war had become the era's greatest political event, and literature—as a product of its age—must therefore be popularized and politicized. As he put it, "In times of political upheaval—wars or great transformations—pure art that is too lofty cannot keep pace with the times; furthermore, the literature of the future must develop a closer relationship with politics and with the people" [8]. Yu's essays and polemical writings intertwined literature with the anti-Japanese cause. He exposed the aggressive ambitions of the Japanese imperialists, called for national unity and democratic solidarity, appealed for international support while emphasizing self-reliance, and urged unrelenting resistance until final victory. These writings not only heightened public awareness of the national crisis and galvanized popular morale but also embodied Yu Dafu's steadfast adherence to aesthetic modernity in a time of historical peril.

Equally noteworthy is Yu Dafu's prolific creation of classical-style poetry during the war. As one scholar observes, "In an era of cultural collisions and the transition between old and new epochs, while struggling to locate his identity and cultural belonging, Yu Dafu continued to find in classical verse his most instinctive and beloved form of expression" [9]. These poems adhered to the metrical discipline of traditional forms while expressing thoroughly modern themes of national resistance and patriotic fervor. In his *Miscellaneous Poems of Turmoil*, for example, he wrote: "Heaven's will seems to assign a great mission; why should a frail body fear hunger and cold?" and "Cease aping the East's indulgent jesters—behold, a true man of the South stands firm!" Through such verse, Yu Dafu fused classical expression with modern consciousness, blending personal conviction, national sentiment, and historical responsibility—thus opening a new path for the expression of aesthetic modernity in a wartime context.

4.2. Wartime writing and cultural resistance

Thwarted repeatedly by the interference of a corrupt domestic regime, Yu Dafu turned his gaze outward. The more open intellectual climate of Southeast Asia offered him a freer arena in which to act upon his patriotic ideals and promote the anti-Japanese cause. As he once told his friend Qinwen Xu, "I want to go to Nanyang to do some publicity work—to explain certain things. That's why I won't go to Yong'an. I've always wanted to do something out there" [10].

During his Southeast Asian years, Yu Dafu carried out anti-Japanese work through translation, editing, and cultural projects that provided cover for public activity. The writings from this phase register a marked shift from the highly individual tone of his early fiction. Melancholy and self-absorption give way to a more outward-facing stance toward war and community. Security risks shaped his practice: output is intermittent, and short forms—reportage and position pieces—dominate. These texts track events and civilian distress with little concern for polish, preferring immediacy and witness. Notes on overseas Chinese mobilization and records of Japanese military abuses move the "anti-alienation" strain in his aesthetics toward explicit criticism of coercion and harm.

Correspondence also became a vital medium of Yu Dafu's "covert writing" during this time. In letters to friends, beyond discussing resistance activities, he often reflected concisely on the relationship between literature and national destiny, insisting that "in times of turmoil, the pen must preserve the truth of human nature." Even under extreme conditions, he sustained a profound awareness of art's ethical essence. Through his cultural endeavors—such as editing journals that promoted local Southeast Asian culture and exposing the corrosive effects of colonialism—Yu extended the "anti-vulgar" dimension of aesthetic modernity into a cross-cultural sphere, turning cultural resistance into an act of defending national dignity.

Through this pragmatic adaptation of literary form and the creative revitalization of classical modes, Yu Dafu's wartime writings endowed aesthetic modernity with a new, action-oriented vitality amid the flames of war

4.3. Transformation of identity

From the early "decadent" figure to the ultimate "martyr," Yu Dafu's spiritual world underwent a profound refinement, culminating in the full realization of his aesthetic modernity.

The courage and resolve he displayed in times of crisis stand in stark contrast to the despairing "superfluous man" of his early works, marking a decisive transcendence of the self—a process of spiritual growth and sublimation.

Yu Dafu's death has often been read not as passive suffering but as a choice consistent with his public commitments. In his writings and acts, he links national dignity with human worth, treating the two as mutually implicating. Seen from this vantage, the line between aesthetic commitment and ethical action grows explicit: the movement runs from artistic self-reflection toward ethical self-risk. In this retrospective frame, his end functions less as an "ultimate fulfillment" than as a concentrated statement of how aesthetic modernity might be lived within the Chinese literary tradition.

5. Conclusion

Read across his early, middle, and wartime phases, Yu Dafu's writing shows a sustained rebalancing of self, society, and form. Early work privileges sensuous self-scrutiny; the middle period turns outward to social scenes; the war years bring writing into closer contact with action and risk. Taken together, these shifts sketch one working shape of aesthetic modernity and foreground how historical pressure redirects literary choices.

The inner stance that emerges is knotted rather than uniform. Yu Dafu insists on personal autonomy while arguing for collective obligation; he seeks craft independence yet keeps sight of literature's civic address. Decadence and defiance appear side by side, not as a stable pairing but as alternating tacks under changing conditions. In this light, his case provides one instructive route for thinking about aesthetic modernity in Republican-era China without claiming to settle its scope or meaning.

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