



FACULTÉ
DE LETTRES, TRADUCTION
& COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITÉ LIBRE DE BRUXELLES

Pronominal Politics: (Un)Gendering Narrative and Framing Ambiguity in Chinese Literature, 1917-1937

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with a view to obtaining the PhD Degree in Languages, Letters, and Translation Studies (“Docteur en Langues, Lettres et Traductologie”)

Academic year 2019-2020

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Pronominal Politics

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Abstract

The introduction of gendered third person pronouns in written Chinese in the late 1910s has been hailed as one of the seismic linguistic shifts of May Fourth (1919), a period which was rife with debates on the position of women and men in Chinese society. While research on the topic has mainly framed this event as being about linguistic progress and about “her,” little attention has been paid to the specific ways in which the new pronouns were vocally opposed, quietly subverted, or leveraged by writers of the period and how this affected gender representation in literary texts, especially at a time when literature was deemed the foremost tool for the unification of the language and the education of the people.

Rather than focusing on “the invention” of a third person feminine as customary of existing scholarship, my dissertation aims to retrieve the diversity of literary uses of linguistic gender that often went hand in hand with political goals. As the introduction of a new feminine pronoun ushered in the formerly gender-inclusive third-person pronoun being rewritten as masculine, I scrutinize the works of four writers representative of both early adopters and outspoken opponents of the new pronouns: Liu Dabai 劉大白 (1880-1932), Ling Shuhua 凌叔華 (1900-1990), Zhao Yuanren 趙元任 (1892-1982), and Xiao Hong 蕭紅 (1911-1942). Together, they exemplify different generations of writers working with a variety of genres (prose, poetry, drama, translation) and a variety of linguistic and social movements. This corpus allows to uncover not only how each of them plays with linguistic and gendered norms prevalent at the time (through homophony, creation of characters, deictic shifts, etc.), but also how genre itself impacted pronominal manipulations. These debates are contextualised against an historicization of “pronouns” as a linguistic category which came to be understood as open-ended and “lacking” gender over the course of the nineteenth century. This dissertation probes how these views paved the way for a wide variety of gendered pronouns being quickly incorporated after 1917 when the stakes moved from a specialty issue of interest to literary translators and linguists to one that involved institutionalizing the language and gender equality in general.

Beyond its contribution to the field of Republican Chinese literature, this dissertation shows how relevant Chinese literary “pronominal politics” from 1917-1937 are to contemporary debates on inclusive writing and helps (re)place sinophone literature on the map of contemporary theoretical developments in pronoun studies, historical and comparative linguistics, translation studies, and feminist literary studies, where Anglo-European canonical works tend to remain overwhelmingly the focus of inquiry.

Keywords: Chinese literature, pronoun studies, linguistic gender, Liu Dabai, Ling Shuhua, Xiao Hong, Zhao Yuanren

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