

# Salome's Influence on the Creation of May 4th Literature

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Salome was widely disseminated and used for reference in the May 4th period of China. Based on the need of social change and public inspiration, Tian Han, Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo, Su Xuelin, Xiang Peiliang, and other writers misread and accepted Salome in good faith, and recreated literature to change society. Tian Han also localized Salome drama in China background. Salome has exerted great influence on Chinese drama and literary creation in a potential and intangible way, and participated in the creation of the first-level model of modern Chinese literature to a great extent.

*Keywords:* Salome, May 4th literature, creative work, influence

## Acceptance Based on Well-intentioned Misinterpretation

The translation boom of Wilde's works did not last long in China at the beginning of the 20th century, but it had a great influence on the new culture and new literature of China during the May 4th period, and to a great extent participated in the creation of the first-level model of modern Chinese literature. *Salome*, in particular, was widely spread and exerted a great influence on Chinese drama and literary creation. This play is full of aesthetic tendencies. It is unrivalled in rendering atmosphere and in highlighting the seductive and mysterious beauty. Salome, at the cost of her life, performs extremely in persistently seeking for the satisfaction of desire, which arouses the resonance of those passionate young people who strongly oppose feudal asceticism and marriage arrangement. *Salome* advocated the freedom of love and the liberation of human nature during the May 4th period.

The forerunners of the May 4th Revolution in China initially interpreted and even intentionally misinterpreted, idealized, and romanticized aestheticism out of the need of social reform, literary revolution and enlightening public opinion. Wilde is known as "a person who absolutely advocates art and the supremacy of beauty" (Zhang, 1922; Cheng, 1999, p. 108). Wilde used to criticize aestheticism in the Victorian era for its advocating materialism, and his idea of art for art's sake has been misread as an outlook towards life. But Salome's rebellious spirit of breaking all the constraints of traditional morality is actually the point that the Chinese May 4th literature appreciates. Salome's rebellious spirit is deliberately exaggerated to awaken the Chinese people's long-suppressed resistance to the feudal traditional moral constraints. Salome is regarded as the negation and criticism of the traditional feudal culture. Although such misinterpretation limits the spread of Oscar Wilde's real artistic view, new-vernacular literature pioneers accepted and were influenced by *Salome*, and they created specific technique and practice in writing, strengthening the Oscar Wilde's literary image of art for art's sake in China, and promoting the construction of the May 4th new literature. The pioneers of the

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May 4th new literature almost wrapped the core of Ibsen with the shell of Wilde to promote human liberation and human free spirit, and to pursue a new literary revolution.

### **Literary Creation Aiming to Revolutionize Society**

The period of the May 4th new literature is the peak of Chinese literature creation. The new theme and new character depiction fully exhibit the humanistic thought of the new literature. Influenced by Wilde's aestheticism, Guo Moruo, Cheng Fangwu, Liang Shiqiu, Xu Zhimo, Yu Dafu, Tian Han, and others created a spectacular number of novels, poems, and plays concerned all kinds of love and marriage. Guo Moruo agrees with Wilde's view of literature and art, believing that art itself has no purpose, but is only the outflow of genius and that literary men should be engaged in literary and artistic activities in line with their inner demands.

The traces of the layout, narrative form and creation technique of *Salome* are also implied in the creation of the May 4th new literature, although each author has his own strong subjectivity. Su Xuelin (1998, pp. 74-81) said bluntly, "I wrote this play, *The Eyes of Cunara*, under the influence of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*". Xiang Peiliang thinks it is not the beauty of John's head with its crimson blood that moves us, but Salome's determination to kiss John on the lips. In imitation of *Salome*, Xiang Peiliang created *Amnon*, which is based on the Old Testament of Samuel in the Bible. It tells the story of the pursuit of Amnon, the son of David, for Tamar and Amnon's psychological process of fear, desire, and disgust in love. In the form of expression, it highlights the addiction of the functional body and the mysterious sense. In Ye Lingfeng's *Temptation of the Moga*, the heroine is very similar to *Salome*, who seduces the Moga into the abyss of desire. Like *Salome*, the atmosphere of the novel is full of grotesque and stunning aesthetic impact.

Yu Dafu is influenced by *Salome*. Yu Dafu's novel, *Chenlun*, can be regarded as the representative of the Lakeside poetry. The decadent aesthetic, melancholy and sentimental description in the novel is obviously consistent with Wilde's writing style.

Wilde's aesthetic thought resonated with Yu Dafu. Yu Dafu thinks that the pursuit of art is the beauty in form and spirit and that the pursuit of beauty is the core of art. In his opinion, a writer should create and translate literature with the spirit of being only true and only beautiful, and the artistic value of a novel can be determined by two conditions: truth and beauty. If a novel is true and beautifully written, its purpose has been achieved. As for social values, as well as ethical values, the author is free to ignore them when he is writing. Yu Dafu also accepts Wilde's non-utilitarian view of literature and art, holding that "literature is the creation of genius and cannot be measured by rules" (1922, p. 10). However, Yu Dafu does not accept Wilde's view that art is superior to life and that life is the mirror of art. He also does not agree with Wilde's view that good art is beautiful but unreal. He thinks the life of novels lies in reality.

Yu Dafu's early literary theories, especially in literary thoughts or creative skills, are influenced by Wilde's aesthetics. The shadow of *Salome* is hidden in the first collection of Yu Dafu's works *Chenlun*. The bold self-exposure in *Chenlun* is a storm of lightning to the scholar-officials hidden in the back armor of thousands of years.

### **Localized Re-creation of Salome in China**

Tian Han is particularly appreciative of Wilde, thinking that Wilde's works are most personal and very artistic. Tian Han's early creation has a very strong tendency of art supremacy. He holds a special fondness for and profound understanding of *Salome*. He has translated *Salome* in Chinese almost perfectly and made it a

widely influential classic translation. Tian Han is crazy for *Salome* that reflects both the darkness and the deliberate beautifies in life. He believes that *Salome* has the most obvious attitude towards the resistance against the inherited society and that it can make people forget the pain in real life.

Besides translating, Tian Han also sinicized *Salome* according to Chinese tradition to meet the demand and expectation of the May 4th new literature pioneers who advocate reform and pursue individuality. Tian Han enhances the realistic meaning of anti-feudal tradition of *Salome* ideologically by exploring the realistic significance of betraying religion and resisting society. He publicizes *Salome* as an artistic carrier of rebellion and rebellion and endows *Salome* with the realistic connotation in line with the spirit of that time, which spontaneously expands the influence of Wilde's literary and artistic view.

In 1929, Tian Han put the drama *Salome*, which is full of the conflict and fusion mode of love and death, officially on the Chinese stage for public performance. It was the first time that a drama with the themes of the dialogue between life and death and the battle between spirit and flesh was performed on the Chinese stage. In order to ensure the successful performance of *Salome*, Tian Han published articles to affirm the artistic value of *Salome* and to downplay its sensual tone. He also emphasized the pursuit of freedom and eccentric rebellious spirit in *Salome* were just what China needed. With the great effort of Tian Han, *Salome* became a household name of the best play.

Wilde's *Salome*, written in French, is intended to create a fine pure art form. To put *Salome* onto stage, Tian Han, with struggle between art aesthetic and political constraints, betrayed Wilde's original style and features in *Salome*. He offloaded the pure artistic lust and dug its realistic meaning. He made great efforts to endow *Salome* with positive romanticism and utilitarianism and made her a symbol of anti-feudalism and anti-tradition. In the script, he emphasized that *Salome* broke through all the traditional moral constraints and pursued free love, highlighting *Salome*'s unique individualism and rebellious thoughts, so as to meet the taste of Chinese audiences. Starting from the realistic perspective of Chinese local cultural characteristics, Tian Han simplified and narrowed the connotation of western romanticism, and rewrote *Salome* only focusing on the attributes of western romanticism in promoting human freedom, individual liberation and resisting the oppression of power politics. Tian Han sublimated the image of *Salome* to the height of a woman of the new age who wanted to break away from the feudal cage and seek the freedom of personality at the cost of her life, and a woman of the new age who burst all traditional moral spirit of rebellion. *Salome* made the youth in the May 4th desire to break free from the shackles of feudal ethics, to seek love and freedom in the bottom of their heart.

*Salome* adapted by Tian Han shows the artistic beauty of sensory stimulation as well as love and desire in an extreme form, which greatly affects audience and causes a great influence at that time. A trend of aestheticism has been quickly set off in the Chinese literary world. Meanwhile, the performance of *Salome* quickly spread Wilde's literary influence from the literati circle to the ordinary people, making Wilde become a well-known British writer during the May 4th period. In the 1920s, the Chinese modern drama with aesthetic tendency mostly used the metaphor of *Salome* to express the love of the senses and the flesh.

### Conclusion

The influence of *Salome* on the new Chinese literature of the May 4th period is enormous, and it is carried out in a potential and invisible way. Although the shadow of *Salome* can be felt in the works of Tian Han, Yu Dafu, Su Xuelin, Xiang Peiliang, and other writers, it cannot be simply attributed to the single factor of Wilde's

influence. Wilde conceals his dissatisfaction and satire to the politics of the Victorian period in his narration, and he combines the breaking through the bondage of politics with the publicity of human's natural desire. But *Salome* in the Chinese traditional literature narrative has deliberately avoided the taboo of love lust, and highlighted the strong pursuit of aestheticism and perfection in human nature, which gives the May 4th period characteristics of free personality and literary liberation, and makes Chinese literature pioneers against the feudal autocracy and ethics produced a strong psychological identity of human nature. Under the background of the May 4th period in China, the discussion of love and carnal desire in *Salome* has unconsciously sublimated into an indictment and judgment of totalitarian politics and repressive human nature system.

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