Urban and Intellectual Beauty: Aspects of Oscar Wilde's Influence

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Abstract: *In the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese scholars exalted Oscar Wilde as a worthy model for others to follow. His ideas about freedom, iconoclasm, and passion without limits tremendously influenced Chinese intellectuals, more so than did his dramatic techniques. This paper examines the literary influence of* Salomé *on certain Chinese literary works. The Chinese intellectuals of the era understood the fatal physical desires and the meaning and consequence of ultimate defiance in Salomé, but they also saw her invincibility, which in turn was thought to be helpful in achieving breakthroughs in a traditional feudalistic society. In those days, the play was regarded as an unconventional discourse that exemplified a radical personality that was deemed to be suitable for China. The Chinese stories are all set in cities that foreground the individual's search for assertion and love. Salomé, instead of being a femme fatale, is redefined with a positive and rational attitude that reflects a deeper concern for the role of intellectuals. The transformation is fueled by the desire to affect a change in cultural consciousness in terms of the search for one's role and the striving for freedom, especially for women. An intellectual and bourgeoisie overtone is apparent in these stories, and it is connected to the underlying urban discourse. The indebtedness to Wilde is more a kind of inspiration than a blind imitation. By studying* Salomé*'s literary representations in selected Chinese works and by investigating the poetical devices and treatment of certain themes in relation to the sociocultural and intellectual concerns of the Chinese authors, I hope to broaden our understanding on major intellectual concepts in those days.*

The Chinese literary renaissance took place during the May Fourth period, which is thus named because of a students' demonstration in Peking on the Fourth of May, 1919. In the process of replacing the old with the new, Chinese intellectuals inevitably looked to the West for inspiration. The goal was to rebuild China in light of what was seen as advantageous in Western modes of thought, behavior, and attitudes. This was

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also in line with the traditional concept that intellectuals should use literature as the means to help and change the country. Chinese ethics, values, and concepts were considered to be too outdated and binding for a country that had to move forward. Some radical youths even advocated the complete abolishment of any Chinese socio-political heritage. In the words of Leo Lee, "it was the Chinese writers' fervent espousal of Occidental exoticism that turned Western culture itself into an "other" in the process of constructing their own modern imaginary [...]. In their minds modernity itself was in the service of nationalism" (Lee 1999, 309). This was a period that saw a great rewriting of the canons – Chinese writers did not just read and translate Western, Russian, and Japanese literary works, they also redefined and revised them to spread their own messages. This zeal in educating Chinese readers about various cultural, political, and philosophical ideas opened up a new public space for literary creation and assimilation among writers.

Andre Lefervere explains the relationship between "cultural capital" and translation: "cultural capital is what you need to be seen to belong to the 'right circles' in the society in which you live [...]. That cultural capital is transmitted, distributed, and regulated by means of translation, among other factors, not only between cultures, but also within one given culture" (Lefervere 1998, 41). According to Lefevere's definition, the mass translation of foreign texts in modern China can be considered as the transmission of cross-cultural capital, or, in the words of Shih Shu-mei, "the importation of Western literature [was] naturalized" (Shih 2001, 57). Who, then, belonged to the "right circles" that Lefevere mentions? The answer can be found in T.D. Huters' statement that "the new literature after 1919 had been urban, produced by the educated largely for the educated and highly influenced by Western forms" (Huters 1984, 55). Cities became the stage for all of these interactions and exchanges. Only the better-off intellectuals could afford to enjoy modern convenience and a Western lifestyle that included such activities as going to theatres and movies. As one scholar points out, "the unfolding of Western exoticism in modern Chinese literature is closely tied to two events: the spatial development of urban Western enclaves in China, and the creative input of foreign-trained Chinese students who had returned home" (Fruehauf 1993, 134). This urban scenario was part of the discourse of "Westernizing" China. Jonathan Friedman states that there are generally four aspects to cultural identity: "race", "Western (modern) ethnicity", "traditional ethnicity", and "lifestyle" (Friedman 1994, 30). To rephrase Friedman's words for the Chinese context, during the modern period Chinese intellectuals embraced Western models and concepts with the hope of changing the traditional personality of China and bringing forth an identity that was compatible with the West.

Among the Western writers who were highly regarded in those days, Chinese scholars exalted Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) as a worthy model for others to follow. His ideas about art, beauty, melancholy, iconoclasm, and passion without limits tremendously influenced Chinese intellectuals, more so than did his dramatic techniques. From the publication of Wilde's "The Happy Prince" (1888) in Chinese translation during 1909, his work was frequently commented upon until the 1930s. Wilde's most popular work

in translation included his essays and short fiction, *Salomé* (which was published in English 1894), and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). His plays, such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* (which was published in 1893), were staged successfully in China (Zhou 2000, 98). From the 1920s onwards, there was a wave of "Wilde-mania" (98). Lesser-known poems such as "In the Forest" and "From Spring Days to Winter" were translated into Chinese by Ke Wei, and published in 1925 in the well-known *Morning Post Supplement*. Five of Wilde's *Poems in Prose* (1894) were translated by Liu Fu in 1921 and published in 1923 in *Short Story Magazine*. They were "The Artist", "Doer of Good", "The Disciple", "The Master", and "The House of Judgment".

In this paper I shall focus on *Salomé* because it had the greatest influence on modern Chinese writers. "With the translations of *Salomé* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the staging of *Salomé* in China", writes Xu Jingan, "the spread of aestheticism reached its zenith" (Xu 1996, 171).[1] Wilde was not just a famous writer, but also "the symbol of an artistic lifestyle" (Zhou 2000, 95). The following artistic and literary personalities can illustrate this point. Shao Xunmei (1906-1968), for example, was known for adopting dandyism in his life and work. Ye Lingfeng (1904-1975) was often criticized for his overt but unskillful imitation of Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898), whose illustrations for *Salomé* were considered to be his best work, and were as well known as the play itself (Wong 1998, 59). Zhu Yingpeng, a painter-writer who promoted art education in modern China, encouraged the image of "the good, sophisticated, and [...] physically cultivated citizen" by creating "a full-bosomed Chinese-style Venus, or a vivacious Asian Salomé" in his work (Fruehauf 1993, 138). Leo Lee puts it succinctly: "it was in fact the Salome figure – particularly as depicted by Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley – that became the center of attraction in a number of literary journals published by Shao [Xunmei] and other Chinese writers who shared a 'decadent' imagination" (Lee 1999, 254).

In Western scholarship on it, *Salomé* is considered as representing Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic in its ability to destabilize the audience's ideals of gender, desire, and power" (Price 1996, 162). Richard Ellmann explains how *Salomé* has long excited the imaginations of European writers, artists, and musicians (Ellmann 1985, 77). Scholars such as Julia Brown (Brown 1997, 83) and Neil Sammells (Sammells 2000, 72) agree that *Salomé* exhibits a wide array of Western influences such as those of Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), and Gustav Klimt (1862-1918), to name but a few. In addition, Patricia Kellogg-Dennis mentions that "three female archetypes from biblical, classical, and Celtic culture inform Wilde's figure of Salome" (Kellogg-Dennis 1994, 227). How did Chinese writers redefine this character of multiple lineage who was so different from conventional Chinese characters? How did they transform a Jewish princess who wanted to kiss a prophet, but only after killing him? *Salomé* and Oscar Wilde were equivalent to aestheticism and decadence in the eyes of many readers. Very often, aestheticism was associated with neoromanticism in modern China. According to Shih Shu-mei, "Neoromanticism served as a discourse with which to criticize Chinese national character [...]. Neoromanticism benefited from both char-

acteristics by maintaining romanticism's mystical tendencies and tempering it with naturalism's rationality" (Shih 2001, 57). In 1936, Zheng Junli commented that from the May Fourth era there branched out two dominant literary and artistic trends: "romanticism" and "naturalism" (Zheng 1989, 35). These two trends converge in *Salomé*, which was appropriated in the search for a new cultural identity and gender. The play was an unconventional discourse that exemplified a radical personality that was deemed to be suitable for China.

The affinity between this play and certain Chinese works lies not just in characterization, but also in the choice of stylistic devices. Wilde greatly influenced Chinese dramatists, and in relation to *Salomé* I shall discuss poems, short stories, and a collection of love letters that give evidence of his effect on various Chinese genres. The Chinese stories were all set in cities that foregrounded the individual's search for freedom and love. Given the context, we can consider these stories as works of urban fiction. The authors were all educated, foreign-trained and known for their aesthetic inclinations. Shih defines urban fiction as any work about the decadence and Western-ness of a city, especially Shanghai, which was then a foreign concession (Shih 2001, 265). The influence of *Salomé* amidst the city context could have been of interest to its playwright because "for Wilde, the city is the center of value" (Paglia 1991, 566).

Although Salomé's beauty, passion, and rebellious character are imitated in these stories, she is redefined with a positive and rational attitude that reflects a deeper concern for the role of intellectuals. What is worth noting is the multifarious approaches in these works that help to reflect the writers' own personal, literary, and philosophical concerns. Of particular interest is the transformation of this decadent femme fatale into a zealous and visionary heroine with the ability to open up territory for newly enlightened youths in China. This transformation has to do with the aforementioned sense of duty inherent in the hearts of the intellectuals. It was not only fueled by the desire to directly borrow material, but also by the desire to affect a change in cultural consciousness in terms of the search for one's role and the striving for freedom, especially for women. An intellectual and bourgeoisie overtone is apparent in these stories, and it is connected to the underlying urban discourse. What should also be noted is the clash of the modern and the traditional, romance and reality, and desire and suppression.

Guo Morou (1892-1978), who was one of the literary giants in modern China, was inspired by *Salomé* and wrote several of his early plays by assimilating its patterns and themes. His anthology of poems entitled *Goddess* was published in 1921 and became one of the masterpieces of Chinese literature. His "Misanthrope's Night Song", was printed as an introduction to Tian Han's (1898-1968) translation of *Salomé* in 1921, which was staged in 1929. Yang Cunren pointed out in 1936 in a treatise on drama that "the play of aestheticism", *Salomé*, made a great stir all over Shanghai (Yang 1989, 21). Indeed, Guo Morou's poem was included in his *Goddess* with a dedication "to *Salomé*'s writer and Shouchang [Tian Han]". The reprinting and the addition of the dedication in a book that promoted new thinking in a new China surely reflected Guo Morou's

admiration of Wilde. The poem also revealed something of the psychology of his early literary career (Ding 1984, 89).

This short poem contains two stanzas. In the first stanza the persona is alone, wearing a white peacock robe and gazing at the boundless horizon. He expresses his aspiration for the future in the second stanza by exclaiming: "Advance! [...] Advance! / Don't disappoint the bright moon that is in front of me" ("Misanthrope's Night Song" 67). It is interesting to note that by having the character wear the peacock robe, Guo Morou identifies with the tradition-defying Salomé. As did others who wrote after Wilde, Guo Morou assimilated Salomé in both male and female characters. This kind of borrowing is not so much a surface copy as an intellectual inspiration. The lonesomeness also reinforces Guo Morou's determination to go into the unknown. He makes use of white, ivory, and silver to show the beauty of the night sky and the immense universe, which reflects his energy, hope in the new era, and passionate pursuit of infinity. This poem is a first example that shows the Chinese transformation of the heroine into a positive and promising model for a new country. In another of Guo's poems in *Goddess*, "The Temptation of Death" (1921), a dagger that is personified as a woman invites the persona to cast off worries by kissing her. The death-kiss again shows the inspiration of Wilde. These two poems may not be the most popular of the poet's corpus, but they clearly register his personal revision of Salomé and aspiration for himself and China.

Tien Gu (1901-1941) studied art in China, Japan, and Germany, and was known as one of the young and romantic writers whose work reflected strong aesthetic and sentimental elements. A landmark in his literary career was in 1927 when he published a systematic study of aestheticism in the West that covered major poets from John Keats (1795-1821) to the Pre-Raphaelites and Wilde. In one critic's words, "Teng Gu's contribution to May Fourth [modern] decadent literature was emotionally more powerful and aesthetically more sophisticated" (Shih 2001, 125). Teng Gu was interested in exploring psychological reactions and change in his characters. In his short story, "The Resurrection of the Statue", (1922) a man studies theology in Japan and leads an ascetic life. Having visited an art gallery, he becomes obsessed with the beauty of a marble statue. He buys a portrait of it, puts it in his bedroom and gazes fixedly at it all night long. He praises its beauty by quoting the Song of Songs from the Bible. Examples are: "your eyes behind your veil are doves. / Your hair is like a flock of goats descending from Mount Gilead. / Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn, coming up from the washing" (Song of Songs 4,1-2). In Wilde's play, when she sees Jokanaan for the first time, Salomé thinks that he "is like a thin ivory statue" and "his flesh must be cool like ivory" (*Salomé*, 326). She also praises his body with the elaborate imagery from the Song of Songs. Tien Gu's character continues to recite the Song of Songs before the statue, especially Chapters 4 and 7 ("The Resurrection of the Statue", 72). Both he and Wilde's Salomé vocally express their interest in physical beauty. Moreover, Tien Gu's character resembles the Jewish princess in the extremity of his emotions. Salomé says that "the moon is cold and chaste [...] She has never abandoned herself to men" (*Salomé*,

323). Salomé is also "cold and chaste", rejecting all of the men who desire her, yet she risks herself just to have the man she desires killed. Similarly, Tien Gu's theology student is "cold and chaste", and rejects any pleasures in life, but when he falls in love with the statue his world crumbles. He goes from one extreme to another. Like Salomé, he pays for the cause that he fatally desires. What is interesting is that the man can be seen as a reversal of John the Baptist (Jokanaan), who in Wilde's play remains pure and faithful to God and does not pay attention to Salomé's request and desire.

The man is later interested in a beautiful Japanese girl who cannot speak. Unable to communicate with her, he transfers all of his affection to the statue that has already held his fancy. He embraces and kisses the portrait of the statue as if it were the Japanese girl. In Wilde's play, Salomé has Jokanaan's head cut off so that she can kiss his lips. She declares triumphantly at the end: "I have kissed thy mouth, Jokanaan" (*Salomé,* 348). In a dream, the student's statue comes alive nude. When he is about to embrace her, she is broken to pieces. "Like Dorian Gray, she [Salomé] kisses her own portrait", writes Camille Paglia (Paglia 1991, 563). Destruction, selfishness, and passion in both cases are summed up in the one touch – a kiss. The interest in the statue and then the Japanese girl is ironic because both of them cannot speak. One time, Tien Gu's character sees a beautiful mannequin in a department store. He breaks the window with the hope of delivering her from the glass prison. He gets caught and is finally admitted to a lunatic asylum. As the statue in his dream and the mannequin are shattered, so is his mental health. Here is a young man whose puritanical way of life is challenged by sheer physical beauty. What Paglia writes of Salomé is also applicable to the harmful imaginary passion of the student: "Salomé creates a Decadent work of art: the severed head is male destiny sculpted by the female will" (Paglia 1991, 563). Anne Varty remarks similarly, "The ultimate form of duologue within the play is the dialogue between self and soul, between lover and beloved, between Salome and her mirror, Jokanaan" (Varty 1998, 148). Salomé and Jokanaan indeed can be seen as Janus having two faces that gaze at opposite directions – flesh and spirit, individualistic desire and heavenward aspiration. In a similar vein, Tien Gu's student and the statue he fancies reflect a battle between superego and id. Herod, often seen as an authoritative, paternal and patriarchal power, commands the princess to be killed after observing her monstrous kiss: "Kill that woman" (*Salomé,* 348). As Salomé pays with her own life, so the student is doomed by his own imagination. That he is arrested and then imprisoned for the rest of his life reflects the social and communal judgement for his unbridled lust. The explosion of his repressed passion runs its full course, and his sanity is finally ruined. On the part of the author, writing about this kind of passion was exotic and sensual. Though the imagery, passion, obsession, and fanciful kiss are clear borrowings from *Salomé*, intellectual consciousness prevails. The character's passion and sensual imagination are finally condemned by society. The rational solution at the end points out that obsession is unhealthy and costly, and this reflects Tien Gu's deeper concern for sanity in the real world.

Known for the poetic and aesthetic feel in writings, Lin Weiyin (1899-1982) showed his appreciation and sensitivity for romance and imagination even in the complexity of city life. He believed in art for art's sake and his works manifested sentimental elements and themes. In his short story "White Rose" (1929), a man named Yimin is in love with two women, his wife Lanruo and a friend, Zhiqian, who is described as a bold city girl who travels all of the time. Even though he is married Yimin keeps thinking about Zhiqian, who gives him a few of her pictures and a white rose, which he keeps in his house. Of special interest to readers is the episode in which the two watch the movie *Salomé* (1922). Leo Lee remarks, "The early movie theater in Shanghai was itself a communal setting in which the spectators celebrated the wonders of their shared public space, *the city* [my emphasis] [...]. Moviegoing had become part and parcel of the modern way of life in the metropolis" (Lee 1999, 118). In those days, going to the theatre or the movies was for the rich and intellectual. "Modern-ness" and "metropolis" are again the defining factors in this activity for the educated. Zhiqian expresses how much she longs to see *Salomé* performed after having read the play some time ago. Yimin explains to Zhiqian the career of Nazimova (1879-1945), the successful Russian actress who played the title role in *Salomé*. Such knowledge reflects the fascination of the author with this unusual actress.

As Zhiqian is watching the movie, her heart is stirred by Salomé. She admires Salomé who disregards everything to love, and finally sacrifices the life of Jokanaan to kiss him. For Zhiqian, Salomé's most impressive line is "the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death" (*Salomé,* 347). She deeply admires Salomé's iron will and fearless spirit. As she reflects on her relationship with Yimin, she thinks: "O great Salomé, I worship at your feet. Indeed, 'the mystery of love is greater than the mystery of death!' It is not natural of me to behave like this. I shouldn't be like this. I need to let things take their own course" ("White Rose" 369). Being an educated career woman, Zhiqian has her romantic desire restrained by rationality. Though she tries to be reasonable, she finally kisses Yimin passionately ("White Rose" 372). Yimin's wife has long sensed that there is something between them and leaves her husband when she sees the two together. Having torn her own pictures and the white rose to pieces, Zhiqian also decides to leave Yimin for good. At the end, Zhiqian is with a man who has loved her for a long time while Yimin dwells in emptiness and loneliness and wallows in self-pity. The influence of Wilde is seen in the direct reference to *Salomé* and not in any similarity of theme and plot. What is worth noting is the more rational stance that is taken by the two women than that which is taken by Yimin. Both feel that it is torturing to love the same man, and thus take the initiative to break up with him. The female characters are presented as being brave, passionate, sensuous, and willing to find a better future for themselves. The author clearly shows his own interest in *Salomé*, yet lends his characters a spirit that is befitting new woman who are daring and independent. The resemblance between the two women and Salomé lies in the firmness of following up on their own decisions.

Shanghai was a metropolis in those days, and a favorite place in the literary imagination of many authors. Zhang Kebiao (b. 1900), a writer whose work also reflected

an aesthetic tendency, was no exception. His story "The Mirage" (1930) takes place in Shanghai, and there is a lengthy description of a lavishly decorated casino in which there are rooms for dancing, bathing, and even opium smoking. The decadent context is obvious. The protagonist, Zhuang Boguang, goes to the casino and meets a beautiful dancer who looks like his past lover. She tells him that they are in the palace of pleasure, a place that exists before the birth of Jesus Christ and is a section of Eden ("The Mirage" 421). In his study of Shanghai, Leo Lee mentions that the names of two of the city's famous ballrooms when transliterated meant "fairy land of pleasures" and "gate to a hundred pleasures" (Lee 1999, 23). Zhang Kebiao would have been familiar with these two places. There is also an elaborate description of the woman's beautiful body as the protagonist Zhuang watches her dance before him. She is scantily dressed and her dance resembles that of Salomé. Both women dance with naked feet and mesmerize the onlookers. Wilde writes, "Slaves bring perfumes and the seven veils, and take off the sandals of Salomé" (*Salomé* 340). There is not much interaction between characters or any exploration of their psychology, but the story reveals the decadent and exotic lifestyle of the rich in modern China. Aesthetic tendency, sensuality, and exoticism were interconnected, and it was the bourgeoisie who could afford to be exposed to these things. As already seen in the words of Shih Shu-mei, decadence is often associated with a city context.

At the casino, Zhuang is a little drunk and cannot distinguish between reality and his imagination. He later falls into subconsciousness and is taken back to his house. When he inquires about the casino, nobody has ever heard of it and it is nowhere to be found. Hence, Zhuang resolves to think that the dancing woman exists in his mind. Wilde's influence, though superficial in this story, is obvious. The borrowing is like an inspiration rather than a surface imitation. Heinrich Fruehauf explains that "typically the modernist short story's most common protagonist is thus the male seeker of romance who has yet to come to terms with the rapidly unfolding urban jungle outside" (Fruehauf 1993, 152). The entire story is therefore the author's own fantasy. It also exemplifies "Western exoticism in modern Chinese literature" (Fruehauf 1993, 134). The story can be regarded as an example of urban literature displaying an urban myth. Traces of Salomé further enlarge the urban myth and reinforce the mystic and decadent feel of a city seen through the eyes of a writer. Historical reality and fantasy (as represented by the dancing girl and the ballroom) are interwoven to further exoticize and marginalize Salomé, who is seen as only a dream woman of sensual pleasure. In the words of Leo Lee, "the allure of female flesh as commodity" in a commercial city is often emphasized (Lee 1999, 26). Some cities in modern China were foreign concessions. In this sense, the woman and the city share the same symbolism – they are both colonized and subdued by a foreign power that is often rendered as a patriarchal representation.

Bai Wei (1894-1987) lived the life of a new woman. She left her family to pursue her studies and her love. According to Zhou Xiaoyi, "Bai Wei even wrote drama and poetry in open imitation of the Wildean style" (Zhou 2000, 96). In her dramas, women take the initiative to deliver themselves from cultural and conventional bondage.

However, only in her personal letters can readers understand how she internalized Salomé. The letters that she and Yang Sao (1900-1957) wrote to one another between 1924 and 1932 were compiled as short pieces of prose and entitled *Last Night*. The book was thus named because their love was over and it could be seen as a nightmare of last night (Yang Sao 1995, 3). Raoul David Findeisen notes that the love-letter was an important genre in modern China. The first section of the book contains Bai Wei's letters, and the second section contains those of Yang Sao. Bai Wei wrote fearlessly and openly about her love for Yang Sao. In a letter in 1924, she stated, "I am Salomé, I am more murderous than Salomé [...]. But I must kiss you. Isn't kissing you the same as killing you?" (*Last Night*, 20). Though being rejected and scorned by Jokanaan, Salomé determines to kiss him by exclaiming repetitively this statement, "I will kiss thy mouth, Jokanaan; I will kiss thy mouth" (*Salomé*, 328-9). In several of her letters in the same year, Bai Wei mentioned how she desired just one thing – to kiss Yang Sao. Her desire was definitely inspired by Salomé's. After the kiss, all of her love, beauty, and pleasure would be turned to ashes (*Last Night*, 24). She was willing to die if she was given the one and only chance to kiss her love (*Last Night*, 29). All of these references are clearly borrowings from Salomé, who wills to kiss Jokanaan and pays with her life immediately after she has done so. To Bai Wei, Yang Sao was like a beautiful spirit who was afraid to fall in love. When she was sick and coughed blood, she wrote, "I am not sure if life to you is like an ocean of blood or if you are the John of my desire" (*Last Night*, 43). The analogy is obvious in her outcry: John/Yang Sao was to Bai Wei what Jokanaan is to Salomé. As Bai Wei felt that she might die soon, she wanted to declare her undisguised love: "I desire more and more of Salomé's murder [...]. I am above the murderous Salomé in my desire [...]. I take greater pains than she to do just that" (*Last Night*, 44). What is interesting (and sad) is that Yang Sao, as reflected in his letters, did not react to the characterization in *Salomé*, but merely felt that he was not worthy of being loved by a great writer. In her day, Bai Wei was already recognized as an extraordinary and revolutionary personality defying traditions and boundaries. Her identification with Salomé as shown in her letters reflects the extent of influence and emotionalism in her life.

In the stories that have been discussed, there is no hint that the woman is a femme fatale, despite the influence from Wilde. The indebtedness is more a kind of inspiration than a blind imitation. Joseph Donohue explains that "however perverse Salome's desire for Jokanaan's head may be, the immutable strength of that desire itself – so great that it overcomes all the world and life itself – is, fundamentally, what the play is about" (Donohue 1997, 131). Likewise, the Chinese intellectuals of the era understood the fatal physical desires and the meaning and consequence of ultimate defiance in Salomé, but they also saw her invincibility, which in turn was thought to be helpful in achieving breakthroughs in a traditional society. Even though the writers are considered as aesthetic and decadent practitioners, their works do not negate the importance of the role of the educated and thinking young people. Human passion is restrained and gives way to an intellectual articulation. All of the writers seem to adopt

the proverbial wisdom that sheer physical desire and passion is only rottenness to the bone. This type of romanticism, albeit fascinating, is illusory. Though the characters in the Chinese stories are highly educated, they cannot completely fight emotional excess. Education can only help so much. A higher director is needed so that the characters realize that they are only mortal.

Salomé is an apt example of Oriental and Occidental concepts of woman. Doubtless she is sensuous and beautiful, but she is also radical enough to go beyond any moral, emotional, or gendered boundary. She is male and female, the victor and the victim, the mysterious and the materialistic. Though she is the center of attention and the focus of the male gaze and desire, she is on the periphery that overlooks the debates of the Nazarenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees, and immorality in the court. It is all of these contrasting qualities that make her stand out among other Wildean characters and other literary figures in the West. The stories that are described above reflect a China in transition, and Salomé is a fitting character in such a context. Her "dance is a watershed between the Old and the New Testaments, between the reign of Judaism and the coming Christianity. Dancing on her hands is a visually succinct way of representing the overturning of the old" (Varty 1998, 137). Amazingly, Zhang Kebiao's dancing girl seems to echo Varty's words when she says that the palace of pleasure is found before the Messiah's birth and is a part of Eden. In a way, the palace is the crossroads between primitive desires and rational awakening. *Salomé* matched the emotional, romantic, and intellectual desires of the era, and its influence propelled the rise of a sentimental trend in modern Chinese writings that carried themes of love, passion, and death. The universality in *Salomé* facilitated Chinese reading and rewriting, and a multinational and broad-based reconstruction that brought together different cultural elements with a city touch. The Chinese intellectuals refashioned this complex woman into a non-conforming spokeswoman who reacted against traditions and mores. Indeed, their high regard for this play was a fair judgment because Wilde created his Salomé out of different concepts and sources, as it is aptly put, "Wilde's achievement as a cosmopolitan artist is no doubt most evident in *Salomé*" (Brown 1997, 83). The Chinese literary revision of *Salomé* was both old and new. It was *old* in the sense that the Chinese authors shared ideas and understanding with critics in the West, as shown in their commentaries and critical essays. However, it was also *new* because the Chinese refashionings were fueled by an ideology that was closely linked to the cultural context of modern China.

Note

1 All translations are the author's unless otherwise stated.

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