Introduction

Names

> *The time is around the New Year. The chilly wind outside is still blowing strong, discouraging people from venturing out. The paper windows of the study are tightly closed, and the doors are carefully locked up. Works of calligraphy and paintings by ancient artists hang on the wall of the study, and a pot of narcissus in full bloom sits on the table. Fragrant incense comes wafting from the golden burner shaped like the mythic animal* ni *on the desk. The master takes a snuffbox from his pocket; after taking a few sniffs, he caresses the jade ring on his thumb. All of the sudden, he seems to think of something, gets up, and walks toward the pot of narcissus to see whether the few buds that have remained unopened have bloomed. He stands there and looks at the plant for a while. Then, holding his hands behind him, he begins to pace back and forth in the study.*
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> *The day feels as long as a year. Not knowing how to pass the time, he walks up to the bookshelf and picks out a book at random. He lies down on a couch and begins to read. Thus does he come to enjoy a conversation with the ancients, as his spirit roams in a realm of timeless enjoyment, forgetting the frigid wind outside and the hustle and bustle of the city. By the time he puts down his book, he feels as if, in this world of turmoil, only he has remained unsullied.*
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> *And what is the book that he reads, one might ask? It is not* Dream of the Red Chamber *or* The Western Chamber, *but a volume of Ming essays.*
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> *Qian Gechuan (1935, 200)*

Like the essays that the man of leisure in this passage picks up to while away a long wintry day, the works introduced in this anthology are

known in Chinese by the name *xiaopin wen*.[1] Having a common name is but one of the resemblances between essays of the Ming and those of the modern period, which echo each other in many significant ways across a time span of three centuries. Modern scholars of *xiaopin wen* of either period have often felt obliged to include in their studies speculations on their similar aesthetic orientations and cultural underpinnings, as well as the social and intellectual climates that account for their emergence.[2] Indeed, our understanding of essays from both periods has benefited from many such instances of mutual illumination.

Unlike the majority of essays found in the West nowadays, *xiaopin* essays are almost always meditative, casual, and intimate in tone.[3]

1 While the meaning of *xiaopin*, the first component of the term *xiaopin wen*, will be the subject of this introduction, it should be noted here that the other component, *wen*, in the present context simply means either writings or essays. The traditional philosophical connotations of the concept of *wen* or *wenxue*, so crucial in the investigation of prose writings up to the late Qing period (see Huters 1987 and 1988), have very little relevance here. For all intents and purposes, *xiaopin wen* simply means the kind of prose known as *xiaopin*; in other words, *xiaopin* essays. *Sanwen*, which means prose as opposed to verse, is also sometimes paired with *xiaopin* in the place of *wen*, in which case it has the same meaning as the latter.

2 See Chen Shaotang (1981) and Gong Pengcheng (1994) for examples of scholarship on late Ming *xiaopin wen* that also touch on modern *xiaopin wen*. Even though Chen thinks that modern *xiaopin wen* should not be confused with the kind found in the late Ming, he deems it necessary to devote five pages to comparing the two. Gong's topic is a late Ming *xiaopin* collection, *Caigentan*. In accounting for its popularity in present-day Taiwan, he goes to considerable length in discussing the different ways in which Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren interpreted late Ming *xiaopin*.

Early twentieth-century writers and critics of *xiaopin wen* were just as obsessed, if not more so, with late Ming *xiaopin wen*, betraying no doubt an anxiety of influence. See the section on "Disputes" below for a discussion of their interminable arguments over the relationship between the two periods.

3 A word of qualification is called for here. Surely, as my account below will show, Chinese essayists have often regarded the tradition of the familiar essay in the West as addressing the same aesthetic concerns as their own works. Yet, the present-day Western understanding of the word "essay" is predominantly "expository essay," to which the Chinese essays included in this anthology bear little resemblance, if any at all. See, for example, William Zeiger, 1985.

There are, however, indications that the tradition of the familiar essay is experiencing a revival in the West. For example, two publications in recent years are devoted to such essays. See Phillip Lopate, 1994, and Joseph Epstein, 1997.

I have used the English word "essay" for the convenience of English readers, in much the same way as Martin Woesler (2000a, 2000b) and David Pollard (2000). Unless specified by the context, the term "modern Chinese essays" in my discussion should be taken to refer to modern Chinese *xiaopin wen*.

Argumentation is not their forte, but philosophizing is. They tend to shy away from topics charged with political and social significance, but are inclined instead to explore ethical and interpersonal situations. Their scope ranges widely, from ruminations on large existential issues to contemplation of mundane daily objects and activities. And though their medium is prose, they more often recall the characteristics of poetry.

This kind of essay is definitely not what the literary reformers of early twentieth-century China had been expecting. New poetry, yes, and new fiction and new drama, too, all of which they sought to promote in their ambitious cultural agenda; but modern *xiaopin wen*, so new in its sensibilities and yet so old in its associations, so unmindful of social issues and yet so in tune with the expression of individuality that the search for modernity seemed to call for, no. At first, critics were perplexed. Although they were quite ready to acknowledge the remarkable success of these essays, they could not help but register a note of surprise and, in some cases, dismay. In offering the first summation of the success of modern Chinese literature, Hu Shi (1922, 149–150) wrote:

> Vernacular prose has made remarkable improvement. There is no need for us to go into the progress made in the genre of long argumentative essays here; rather, in recent years, the most notable development in prose has been the "*xiaopin sanwen*" promoted by writers such as Zhou Zuoren. This kind of essay [is able to express] profound meanings in plain and casual language. At times these essays appear awkward, but in fact they are quite witty (*huaji*). The success of this type of writing has once and for all exploded the myth that "aesthetic writing cannot be done in the vernacular language."

Similarly, Zhong Jingwen (1927, 33) also had this to say:

> Since the beginning of the New Literature Movement, most of us have seemed to rush in droves to the major thoroughfares of fiction, poetry, and drama. Prose—the *xiaopin wen*—has seemed to remain a path in the wilderness covered with thorny bushes. Few have been willing to blaze that path.

Despite the general lack of interest in this form of writing, however, Zhong went on to point out that the very few who had ventured down this path had produced impressive results. Zhou Zuoren, Yu Pingbo, Zhu Ziqing, Ye Shengtao, and Xu Zhimo were the few that he held up as models of success.

Although Hu Shi and Zhong Jingwen used the names "*xiaopin sanwen*" and "*xiaopin wen,*" respectively, in their accounts, these were by no means commonly accepted terms. Instead, until at least the late 1920s, a plethora of names were used, a few of which will be discussed below. The proliferation of terms went even further due to the many sub-genres of this type of essay: *kexue xiaopin* (*xiaopin* about science), *lishi xiaopin* (*xiaopin* about history), *shuqing xiaopin* (lyrical *xiaopin*), and so on. Understandably, these terms have proved as confusing for general readers as for professional critics, indicating as they do the multifaceted nature of this genre of writing on the one hand, and the entrenched positions from which critics have chosen to articulate their understanding of its aesthetics and social significance on the other. Chinese literary critics have been well known for their contentiousness throughout the ages, but in the period covered in this anthology, encompassing what are generally called the May Fourth and post-May Fourth generations, literary disagreements were further fueled by political convictions. In this context, literature was but one of the many venues for people to air their thoughts about the future of China. Whether and how one wrote or read essays, and what brand one chose, very often became a litmus test of one's political stance, whereby more than one's literary reputation was at stake. An exercise in naming thus soon descended into a battle of name-calling. One recalls, for instance, the utter contempt with which Liang Shiqiu and Zhou Zuoren were viewed in some quarters.[4] In this regard, the polemics surrounding *xiaopin wen* were not too much different from other debates in the history of modern Chinese literature.

[4] See Gaylord Kai Loh Leung (1990) for a discussion of the ostracism that Liang Shiqiu suffered at the hands of writers of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Workers for the War of Resistance. Liang's essay collection, *Yashe xiaopin*, moreover, had often been singled out for criticism for its pointed silence on anti-Japanese themes that pervaded writing of the time. See also Chen Suyu (1989) for a description of Liang Shiqiu's antagonistic reception in the Yan'an area during the 1940s.

The case of Zhou Zuoren will be discussed below.

Part of the confusion over nomenclature no doubt came as a result of foreign influences. According to the prevalent views of the time, there were many forms in foreign literature similar to that of the modern Chinese essay, and critics were fond of weighing the relative importance of foreign and indigenous elements in the works of contemporary essayists. From the West, they discerned a tradition of essay writing that started with Montaigne, was popularized by Francis Bacon, and came to develop and prosper in the hands of English and American essayists of subsequent generations. Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Washington Irving, G. K. Chesterton and Ralph Waldo Emerson are just a few of those mentioned in this connection. From Japan, the genealogy was not as clear-cut, although it was generally recognized that the works of Lafcadio Hearn (who went by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo in his most productive years), Matsuo Bashō, Kobayashi Issa, Abe Jiro, Saitō Mokichi, and a few others belonged to this literary family that had yet to come up with a name acceptable to all. If indeed all of these literary dignitaries had a shaping hand in the formation of modern Chinese essays, then perhaps one could borrow a foreign term to label them. But which term? Which of the foreign literary forms most approximated what modern Chinese essayists were producing? Was it the British familiar essay, the French *essais* and prose poem, the Japanese *zuihitsu*, "sketches" of the kind introduced by Lafcadio Hearn, or the Japanese *manga*, which, as a form of drawing, was somehow believed to share the spirit of the essay as well?[5]

While all of these foreign terms have been proposed as names for the modern Chinese essay, serious contenders for the title remain few in number, namely, *meiwen*, *chun sanwen*, *xuyu sanwen*, and, of course, *xiaopin wen*, all of which I will examine below.

[5] The most systematic articulation of Western influences in Chinese *xiaopin wen* is to be found in Liang Yuchun (1930). Citing an unnamed English critic, Lin Yutang (1934a) further outlined two lines of development in English essays, with one beginning with Chaucer, which was characterized by a casual and intimate style, and the other with Bacon, which was known for its weighty and reasoned style.

Japanese influences, however, are recognized but have so far not received any in-depth examination, even though Kuriyagawa Hakuson is quoted in a large number of studies on modern *xiaopin wen*. The 1935 collection, *Xiaopin wen yu manhua*, for example, contains only superficial discussion of the *manga* tradition in Japan.

Zhou Zuoren, who discerned two kinds of essays in Western literature, proposed the term *meiwen* in 1921. The first was analytical and academic in nature, while the second, narrative and descriptive, was hence artistic. He called the second kind "*meiwen*" (aesthetic writing), describing it as a bridge between poetry and prose. Since the term was ostensibly derived from the Western literary tradition, it is only to be expected that, by this account, *meiwen* writers abounded in the West, and included some of the best-known familiar essayists mentioned above. Zhou Zuoren, however, went on to point out that *meiwen* could be found in classical Chinese literature as well. Traditional forms such as *xu* (prefaces), *ji* (chronicles), and *shuo* (argumentative essays) were early instances of *meiwen*. It was only in the modern period, Zhou maintained, that one looked in vain for similar literary creations. This view helps to explain Zhou's apparent need to draw attention to the flourishing state that this form of writing was enjoying in the West at the time.

Similarly, Wang Tongzhao's "*chun sanwen*" (which he glossed in English as "pure prose") was an importation from the West. Like Zhou, Wang believed there to be a paucity of artistic essays in the Chinese literature of their time, which he attributed to four factors: 1) the lack of precision which characterized Chinese thinking; 2) linguistic and rhetorical inflexibility on the part of most Chinese writers; 3) an overemphasis on rational knowledge, without giving due attention to literary sensibilities in their writings; and 4) the failure of supporters of modern Chinese literature to promote "*chun sanwen.*" Leaving aside the possible contradictions among the four factors (especially between the first and third), it should be clear that Wang was attempting here to describe a kind of essay that placed equal emphasis on the impartation of knowledge and the cultivation of pleasurable reading—a twentieth-century reformulation of the age-old charge for literature to instruct and delight.

The defining attributes of the two terms proposed by Zhou and Wang—*mei* (beautiful) and *chun* (pure)—suggest that both writers sought to highlight the belle-lettristic quality of modern Chinese essays. However, without further elaboration, the terms merely beg the question of what constitutes "beauty" on the one hand, and "purity" on the other, and neither Zhou nor Wang ended up convincing their colleagues of the appropriateness of their terms. When Zhou later produced a prodigious body of theoretical writing on the modern Chinese essay, he too would give up the term *meiwen*, and adopt the term *xiaopin wen* in its stead.

If both Zhou Zuoren and Wang Tongzhao were insufficiently specific about the characteristics of their own terms, they had nevertheless succeeded in articulating the ideal for the kind of essay they were advocating. Pedantry, rationality, and argument were to be avoided, whereas flexible language, precise thinking, and a proclivity for description and narration were to be encouraged. They had also taken the first step toward delineating a tradition for the essay. Zhou presented both British and American writers as well as traditional Chinese forms as models, while Wang Tongzhao made special mention of William James and Herbert Spencer, who, in his view, were known for integrating their argumentative writings with aesthetically pleasing language. Admittedly, at this point both Zhou's and Wang's conceptions of the essay tradition were still sketchy and sometimes even self-contradictory.

With the publication of Hu Menghua's and Wu Shuzhen's "Xuyu sanwen" in 1928, however, discussion of the essay had reached such a stage that it was no longer enough for critics to throw out a name for consideration without at the same time elaborating on the aesthetic and cultural implications of the term. In this regard, Hu Menghua and Wu Shuzhen managed to touch on areas not discussed by either Zhou Zuoren or Wang Tongzhao. Hu and Wu began their analysis by pointing out that the name that they had come up with, *xuyu sanwen,* was a translation of the English term, "familiar essay," and *xuyu,* like its English counterpart, described an attitude or a tone. If, on occasion, *xuyu sanwen* wandered into areas of analysis and argumentation, it did so in a detached, impressionistic, and "familiar" way:

> How does a *xuyu sanwen* writer report and comment on a subject of topical reference? Here is an example: Let's say that you come across something in the newspaper or that you come home with news that you've heard somewhere outside. You sit down at the table and tell it in your soft-spoken voice to your kind mother, your loving wife, or your good friend. Let me be even more explicit—[a *xuyu sanwen* is] just like the kind of idle chat you engage in after a cup of tea or wine.
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> Hu and Wu (1928, 15)

Later in the same article, they continue:

> If you are so good as to go to a teahouse, a bathhouse, or the park to listen to the words of the idle, romantic scholars there and set down their words with your pen, you will end up with a wonderful piece of *xuyu sanwen.*
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> Hu and Wu (1928, 15)