

On the Image of Xia Yu in Lu Xun's *Medicine* from the Perspective of Cultural Poetics

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Abstract: Cultural Poetics emphasizes the interactive relationship between literature and culture, advocating for the exploration of a work's deeper connotations through the integration of historical context and close textual analysis. Lu Xun, a "giant of culture and thought," demonstrated remarkable ingenuity in naming and characterizing Xia Yu, the protagonist of his short story *Medicine*. Guided by Cultural Poetics, this paper analyzes the logic behind the creation of Xia Yu's image and its connection to the historical figure Qiu Jin. The research reveals that through the dual metaphors of the "human-blood steamed bun" and the "tragedy of Huaxia (China)," Lu Xun exposes the profound contradiction between the "disease" of the national spirit and the "medicine" offered by revolutionaries. Meanwhile, the symbolic substitution and gender transformation of Xia Yu embody Lu Xun's profound reflection on the predicaments of revolution. By integrating Cultural Poetics with Lu Xun studies, this paper offers a fresh perspective for interpreting *Medicine* while demonstrating the practical application of cultural poetics.

Keywords: Cultural Poetics; Xia Yu / Qiu Jin; Enlightenment narrative; Disease and medicine metaphor

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1. Introduction

Cultural Poetics encompasses various dimensions: as a lexical category, a concept related to New Historicism, a literary critical framework, and a foundational theoretical discourse in literature^[1]. This paper adopts the theoretical framework of "Cultural Poetics" as defined by Tong Qingbing—that is, "interdisciplinary research at the intersection of literature and culture"^[2]—to examine the creative logic behind the character Xia Yu in Lu Xun's short story *Medicine*, exploring its connection to the prototype, Qiu Jin. Lu Xun alludes to Qiu Jin through symbols such as the character's name and the execution ground, while also constructing irony through gender transformation and the naming of "Hua," "Xia," and "Kang," thereby revealing the deep-seated contradiction between revolutionary ideals and contemporary realities. This study aims to interpret the symbolic significance of Xia Yu's character through Cultural Poetics, specifically addressing two questions: why Lu Xun chose Qiu Jin as the prototype, and how Xia Yu's gender transformation serves the narrative of enlightenment. This provides a new pathway for interpreting Lu Xun's fiction culturally and deepens the application of this theory in modern and contemporary literary studies.

2. The Historical Context and Creative Motives of *Medicine*

“Placing the research subject back into its original historical and cultural context”^[3] constitutes the core tenet of cultural poetics. This section examines the historical context and enlightenment mission of *Medicine* by exploring Lu Xun’s motivation for shifting to vernacular fiction and the genesis of the story’s theme, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the work.

Lu Xun began writing vernacular fiction after accepting Qian Xuantong’s invitation to contribute to *New Youth*. Though initially skeptical of the literary revolution, the “hope that could not be extinguished” during the Iron House debate ultimately led him to embrace writing as an enlightenment practice. *Medicine* emerged from this backdrop; its creation is inextricably linked to the intellectual awakening of the May Fourth era.

The title “*Medicine*” serves as a metaphor for Lu Xun’s profound insight into the national character. He described his writing as “embracing over a decade of ‘enlightenmentism,’” “for the sake of life,” and to “improve this life.” Thus, he “drew extensively from the misfortunes of people in a diseased society, intending to expose suffering and draw attention to the need for healing”^[4]. Written in 1919 at the height of the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun constructs a symbolic system of “disease” and “remedy” by juxtaposing Hua Xiaoshuan’s tuberculosis with the chronic ailments of the populace: the former seeks a cure in “human-blood buns,” while the latter is implicitly embodied in the wreaths adorning a martyr’s grave. This dual metaphor points not only to physical ailments but also directly to the spiritual poison of feudal ignorance. Through the tragedies of the Hua and Xia families, Lu Xun reveals the rupture between the ideal of “a healthy China” and the reality of “a suffering China,” thereby highlighting his enlightenment appeal to use literature as “medicine” to awaken and heal.

3. The Conceptualization of *Medicine* and Lu Xun’s Enlightenment Narrative

Cultural poetics emphasizes integrating historical context with close textual analysis when examining works^[5]. This section explores the conceptual logic behind *Medicine* by examining both the text and historical facts.

Scholars widely recognize that Xia Yu’s prototype is Qiu Jin, a connection established through correspondences in their names. The character “Xia” (夏 , summer) corresponds to “Qiu” (秋 , autumn), both being seasons. “Yu” (瑜) and “Jin” (瑾) both refer to jade. Furthermore, the execution site “Gu Ting Kou” alludes to the actual “Gu Xuan Ting Kou” in Shaoxing. Lu Xun employs this symbolic substitution to tightly link the historical figure with the literary character.

Research indicates that Lu Xun had already referenced Xu Xilin’s assassination and the “blood-soaked steamed bun” motif in *A Madman’s Diary*, suggesting the conceptual framework for *Medicine* was already taking shape at that time. Both works function as sister pieces in exposing the cannibalistic essence of feudalism^[6]. In character naming, the surnames “Hua” (华), “Xia” (夏), and “Kang” (康) collectively form the patriotic phrase “Huaxia Kang” (华夏康 , a prosperous China), while the novel portrays the tragic reality of “Huaxia Can” (华夏惨 , China’s agony), creating profound irony that reinforces its enlightenment theme^[7].

Xia Yu sacrifices himself for proclaiming, “This Great Qing empire belongs to us all,” yet his blood becomes a “medicinal ingredient” in the eyes of the ignorant masses. This plotline critiques feudal superstition while revealing the divide between revolutionaries and the masses. Yet Lu Xun does not entirely abandon hope: the red-and-white wreaths adorning Xia Yu’s grave employ a “subtle brushstroke” to inject a symbolic splash of light into the tragedy, suggesting that the spiritual “medicine” may yet cure the nation’s “disease.”

4. Symbolic Substitution of the Revolutionary Figure

In naming conventions, “Xia Yu” and “Qiu Jin” establish a profound cultural resonance through seasonal parallels (“Xia”/summer and “Qiu”/autumn) and the shared connotation of precious jade (“Jin”/“Yu”). The combination of “Xia” (夏) and “Hua” (华) forms “Huaxia” (华夏, China), elevating the individual revolutionary’s image to a symbol of the national community. Meanwhile, the characters “Jin” and “Yu” inherit the ancient literary tradition of using jade to symbolize virtue and scholarly ideals, thereby portraying Xia Yu as a vessel of the national spirit.

The deliberate omission of the character “Xuan” (轩) in the inscription at the execution site, “Gu □ Ting Kou,” serves as a meticulously crafted blank space. This missing character functions both as a scenic detail and as a metaphor for obscured historical memory, creating a multi-layered interpretive space that resonates with Xia Yu’s state of “physical demise yet eternal spirit.”

Lu Xun deliberately cast Xia Yu’s uncle, Xia Sanye, as the informant. This subverts the traditional patrilineal principle of “concealing the crimes of one’s kin,” exposing the collapse of feudal ethics. The betrayal by kin, coupled with the apathy of citizens like Hua Laoshuan, collectively forms an “anonymous, unconscious killing mob,” highlighting the dual siege endured by enlightened individuals.

Xia Yu’s cry in prison—“This Great Qing empire belongs to us all!”—resonates with Qiu Jin’s final words, “The autumn wind, the autumn rain, they fill my heart with sadness.” Yet his plea only invites the guard’s beating and the onlookers’ bewilderment, starkly revealing the chasm between the “enlightened individual” and the “mediocre masses.” The wreaths on the graves, rather than embodying tangible hope, serve as faint symbols of the enlightener’s solitary spirit.

By substituting the historical figure Qiu Jin with the literary character Xia Yu and ultimately integrating them into the national allegory of “Huaxia,” Lu Xun elevates the revolutionary narrative to the level of reshaping the national spirit. Within the metaphorical framework of *Medicine*, Xia Yu embodies both the concrete revolutionary and the abstract spiritual “remedy” for the nation’s chronic ailments. This reflects Lu Xun’s complex attitude toward enlightenment: paying tribute to the pioneers’ sacrifice while maintaining a sober awareness of their practical predicaments.

5. The Rationale Behind Lu Xun’s Choice of Qiu Jin as the Prototype

Within the framework of cultural poetics, historical “reconstruction” demands a thorough tracing of the real-life models behind textual representations. Lu Xun’s selection of Qiu Jin as the prototype for Xia Yu, among numerous revolutionaries, resulted from the combined influence of her ideological exemplarity, social impact, and personal emotional connections.

First, Qiu Jin’s revolutionary career exemplified the breaking of feudal shackles and embodied ideological progressiveness. Born into a scholarly family in Shaoxing, she resolutely escaped an unhappy marriage and self-funded her studies in Japan. There, she composed *Song of the Precious Sword*, founded the vernacular *Baihua Baoto* to promote democracy, joined the Restoration Society and the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance, and organized the Mutual Love Association to advocate for women’s liberation. Her declaration in “A Letter to Wang Shize”—“Ever since the national crisis of 1900, I have held my own life in disregard”^[8]—revealed an unwavering resolve to sacrifice herself for her cause. Arrested after a failed uprising in 1907, she calmly faced execution at the ancient pavilion in Shaoxing, leaving behind the poignant line: “The autumn wind, the autumn rain, they fill my heart with sadness.” In an era of entrenched feudal ideology and severe oppression of women, Qiu Jin’s fierce courage and indomitable spirit as a female revolutionary possessed immense spiritual impact and representativeness. This made her, in Lu Xun’s eyes, an ideal symbolic “remedy”

capable of awakening the nation's "fighting spirit" and curing its "spiritual ailments."

Secondly, the widespread sympathy and public outcry sparked by Qiu Jin's execution transformed her into a powerful symbolic figure. Despite differing political stances, major newspapers of the time "unanimously condemned the government's brutality and expressed grief and sympathy for Qiu Jin's death"^[9]. Lu Xun, aware of the power of symbols, chose Qiu Jin as his prototype precisely to harness this image, already imbued with widespread empathy in public discourse, to channel readers' real-world emotions into the literary narrative. Through the symbolic substitution of Qiu Jin for Xia Yu, the novel could more effectively evoke readers' identification with the fate of revolutionaries, thereby achieving its enlightenment purpose.

Finally, Lu Xun's personal connection and emotional stance toward Qiu Jin infused this literary transformation with authentic historical warmth. Both were from Shaoxing and had interacted in Japan. According to Masuda Wataru's manuscript *Biography of Lu Xun*, Lu Xun was once a member of the Restoration Society and may have been a comrade of Qiu Jin and Xu Xilin^[10]. Furthermore, Qiu Jin's fierce stance during the "Regulations Banning" incident, where she drew her sword and declared, "Those who betray their friends for personal gain shall receive my blade," left a deep impression on Lu Xun^[11]. Yet Lu Xun diverged from Qiu Jin in his revolutionary approach. He described himself as "cautious" and "prone to doubt," "most unwilling to see others sacrifice themselves"^[12], embodying a cool-headed "thinker" rather than a fiery "doer." This difference, however, did not diminish his profound respect. The creation of Xia Yu stands as Lu Xun's literary tribute to this fellow townsman and comrade-in-arms, embodying his profound regret and remembrance for the pioneer.

Thus, Lu Xun's selection of Qiu Jin represents a triple choice: ideological, symbolic, and personal. With her advanced revolutionary spirit, powerful social resonance, and personal connection to the author, Qiu Jin became the ideal historical prototype for the revolutionary figure in *Medicine*.

6. The Gender Transformation of Xia Yu

Why was Qiu Jin, a female revolutionary, transformed into a male character in the novel? The underlying logic of this gender shift must be explored through the relationship between Lu Xun's literary strategy and revolutionary narrative.

Lu Xun once stated: "The events I write about generally have some basis in things I have seen or heard, but I never use these facts entirely. I merely take one aspect, transform it, or develop it further until it is sufficient to express my meaning almost completely. The same applies to the models for my characters—I never use a single person exclusively. Often, the mouth is from Zhejiang, the face from Beijing, the clothes from Shanxi—it is a character pieced together^[4]." This indicates that while Lu Xun's fictional content drew from real people and events, it was not a simple replication. Instead, he employed artistic processing and reconstruction to achieve his expressive goals. The creation of Xia Yu exemplifies this approach. Behind the gender transformation, Lu Xun likely had multiple considerations. This paper proposes three possible lines of reasoning:

First, the fusion of Qiu Jin's revolutionary spirit with Xu Xilin's masculine identity. The revolutionary alliance between Qiu Jin and Xu Xilin provided a factual basis for Xia Yu's gender transformation. As a leader of the Restoration Society, Xu Xilin suffered the Qing court's brutal punishment of having his heart cut out after the failed Anqing Uprising. His male identity and heroic sacrifice became symbols of

revolutionary fortitude. By blending Qiu Jin's ideological core with Xu Xilin's gender characteristics, Lu Xun created the composite figure of "Xia Yu." This fusion circumvented the censorship risks associated with directly portraying a female revolutionary while embodying Qiu Jin's "martyr woman" spirit within a male vessel, potentially amplifying the tragic grandeur of the revolutionary figure.

Second, conformity with gender norms within contemporary revolutionary narratives. In late Qing and early Republican revolutionary discourse, men were consistently regarded as the primary agents of violent revolution. Lu Xun once noted: "The courage and resolve of Chinese women, though suppressed by conspiracy and intrigue for millennia, have never truly perished." Yet public imagination of revolutionaries remained largely confined to the male hero paradigm. By substituting Qiu Jin with the male Xia Yu, Lu Xun accommodated readers' gendered cognitive habits while elevating the individual fate of a female revolutionary into a microcosm of national destiny through the nationalistic metaphor of the "Hua" and "Xia" surnames. Here, gender transposition becomes a strategic choice within the Enlightenment narrative.

Third, identity reconstruction as a literary projection of Qiu Jin's "masculine qualities." Qiu Jin's self-identity inherently blurred gender boundaries. She rejected foot-binding, trained in martial arts, and once declared, "Though my body cannot stand among men, my spirit surpasses theirs in fierceness." Her indomitable spirit starkly contrasted with traditional female ideals. Through Xia Yu's male identity, Lu Xun transforms Qiu Jin's real-life "gender transgression" into a literary symbol: the revolutionary spirit transcends physical gender, becoming a pure force for awakening the masses. Xia Yu's "male form" is, in essence, an idealized projection of Qiu Jin's "female spirit."

Xia Yu's gender transformation does not erase Qiu Jin's female identity but represents Lu Xun's creative reconstruction grounded in literary strategy and historical context. By blending archetypes, conforming to narrative conventions, and reconstructing identity, Lu Xun preserves Qiu Jin's revolutionary essence while endowing her with more universal symbolic significance. This "male form, female essence" narrative profoundly reveals the revolutionary's spiritual power transcending gender constraints, while also hinting at Lu Xun's complex reflections on gender issues within the Enlightenment movement.

7. Conclusion

Cultural poetics theory, through the dialectical integration of historical context and close textual reading, provides a significant pathway for interpreting the enlightenment narrative in Lu Xun's *Medicine*. This study reveals that Lu Xun employs "medicine" as a central image to construct a dual metaphorical system of "disease" and "remedy": Hua Xiaoshuan's tuberculosis represents the physical frailty of the nation, while the numbness of execution spectators and the ignorance of teahouse patrons point directly to a spiritual "disease." The futility of the "human-blood bun" and the symbolic significance of the grave wreath reveal Lu Xun's profound understanding of the enlightenment dilemma—the blood of revolutionaries may not necessarily awaken souls.

The creation of Xia Yu represents a significant act in Lu Xun's literary practice. As a literary projection of Qiu Jin, Xia Yu's naming ("Xia" and "Hua" subtly echoing "Huaxia"), execution site ("Gu □ Ting Kou" echoing "Gu Xuan Ting Kou"), and revolutionary resolve ("This Great Qing empire belongs to us all") all pay homage to her real-life counterpart. Lu Xun chose Qiu Jin not only for her exemplary status as a female revolutionary but also because her sacrifice had become a focal point of late Qing discourse, possessing powerful symbolic mobilization potential. Xia Yu's "male form" embodies Lu Xun's strategic writing: gender transposition circumvented the historical constraints of directly portraying female revolutionaries while highlighting, through the paradox of "male in form, female in essence," how revolutionary spirit transcends gender constraints.

This creative practice profoundly reflects Lu Xun's enlightenment anxieties and aspirations. On one hand, the tragic conclusion epitomized by "China's agony" exposes the brutal reality of feudal rule colluding with the nation's inherent flaws; on the other, the "red and white wreath" atop Xia Yu's grave suggests the enduring vitality of revolutionary spirit. Lu Xun employs literature as "medicine," striving to carve a glimmer of hope from despair—suggesting that even amidst the thorny path of enlightenment, the blood of revolutionaries may still become the "spark" that awakens the nation.

The introduction of a cultural poetics perspective not only opens new dimensions for interpreting *Medicine* but also validates the interpretive vitality of indigenous literary theory. Through historical contextualization and the decoding of textual symbols, Lu Xun's reflections on the complexity of enlightenment come into focus: the revolutionary's sacrifice is both noble and tragic; the ideal of enlightenment is fiery yet must confront history's harsh realities. This dialectical essence constitutes the timeless literary value of *Medicine*.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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