

FEI MING'S SHORT STORIES: A POETRY OF FOLK ELEMENTS

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Fei Ming, the penname of Feng Wenbing (1901-1967), was a pioneer of lyrically descriptive fiction based on ordinary daily life.¹ He was an innovator in adapting poetic language into short stories during the New Culture Movement. In the first stage of developing new literature in China (1900-1937), writers were encouraged to speak on behalf of the oppressed classes and help create a social revolution in literature.² Some activists advocated that literature at that time could be defined as one way of promoting social changes. Obviously, Fei Ming's writings do not conform to this function; instead, he expressed his love of folk culture and the peaceful life in the countryside around his hometown. He refused to accept the left-wing line of displaying social revolutions in literary creation and this refusal freed him from social burdens when writing fiction. Believing in his own principles of literature, he also refused to be well known among the public, as the meaning of his pen-name suggests: abolishing names. Few histories of modern Chinese literature in English or Chinese mention Fei Ming and his works or if he is introduced, it is only briefly as one of the writers in Peking literary circles in the 1920s.

Feng Wenbing was born in the small town of Huangmei in Hubei province, which is famous for the local Buddhist culture. As one of the May Fourth generation, he was interested in New Culture and was admitted to English department of Peking University in 1922. From the 1920s to the 1930s, Fei Ming was one of the chief writers in *Thread of Talk Society* (*Yusi she*) and created a number of poems, short stories, and essays. After his graduation in 1929, Fei Ming became a lecturer in Chinese department of Peking University. But soon turmoil caused by students spread among universities in Beijing and this event influenced his thinking. He moved his attention from literary creation to social revolution and more realistic problems. In 1932, he gave up composing short stories.

Fei Ming's short stories contain three main characteristics. Influenced by the popular religious beliefs of his hometown, he was interested in the local folk customs and the thoughts of Dhyana (one branch of Chinese Buddhism), which was the dominant belief of the local people. As a disciple of Zhou Zuoren (1885-1967), a Chinese essayist, critic, and literary scholar who translated fiction and myths from many languages into vernacular Chinese, he follows Zhou's aesthetics of "blandness" (*pingdan*) and "naturalness" (*ziran*) when describing the life in his hometown. Learning from the theory of "blandness," he puts

¹ This article was researched and written as one part of my PhD thesis at the Scottish Centre for Chinese Studies in Edinburgh University. I translated the sentences and paragraphs cited from Fei Ming's works. I would like to thank Professor Bonnie McDougall and Miss Lisa Ballantyne for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² Bonnie S. McDougall and Kam Louie, *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century* (London: Hurst, 1997), 23.

across deep feelings and serious thoughts in a flat and unemotional way; while following the theory of “naturalness,” he reduces the complex and colorful plots into a plain and unextravagant story.³ Being fond of traditional Chinese poetry, he uses poetic languages (syntax and semantics) in composing fiction, which may cause modern readers some difficulty in understanding the plots and interpreting the sentences.

In the preface to the fourth volume of *Zhongguo xin wenxue da xi* [The Series of New Literature in China], Lu Xun (1881-1936) commented that Fei Ming’s first collection of short stories is plain and simple but readers can still comprehend the author’s sadness and anxieties.⁴ He also stated that readers who are straightforward may regard Fei Ming’s self-pity as a kind of artificially low-keyed emotion for he is too grudging when expressing his feelings.⁵ Lu Xun’s comments reveal the first layer of Fei Ming’s conceptualization, which emphasizes a concealment of personal emotion in a peaceful mind. However, his concealment of feelings and neglect of social problems do not stem from emotional repressiveness but from his appreciation of a traditional Chinese taste in art: *wu wo zhi jing* (an artistic concept which ignores the author’s personal feelings).⁶ Shu-mei Shih called Fei Ming’s portrayal of rural life as “the painting-scroll form.” In traditional Chinese paintings, natural scenery shares an equal significance with human figures.⁷ Fei Ming’s writing portrays a detailed picture of the life in his hometown, and conveys his deep sadness, although he never mentions it.

Lu Xun did not understand Fei Ming’s stories completely but his brother, the writer Zhou Zuoren, gave his student’s writings a high evaluation. Fei Ming does not ignore ongoing social changes in his writings. His records of ordinary life are most lifelike.⁸ Although after graduation Fei Ming’s writings gradually turned into a more critical style exposing socio-political problems, for example, in the novel *Moxuyou xiansheng zhuan* [The Biography of Mr. Neverwas] (1932), his special angle of observing life provides readers with

³ David E. Pollard, *A Chinese Look at Literature: The Literary Values of Chou Tso-jen in Relation to the Tradition* (London: Hurst, 1973), 87, 97.

⁴ Lu Xun, “Preface”, in *Zhongguo xin wenxue da xi* [The Serials of New Literature of China], Vol. 4: Fiction, ed. by Lu Xun (Shanghai: Liangyou tushu gongsi, 1935), 6.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ The concept *wu wo zhi jing* is used by Wang Guowei (1877-1927) in *Renjian cihua* [Talks on *ci* in the Human World] to analyse lyrics in the Song dynasty (960-1279). *Wu wo zhi jing* means that authors only give an objective description about a natural scene while suppressing their personal feelings. The book contains the essence of Wang’s literary theory: the concept of *jingjie*, which means a state of reality delineated by a boundary that assures the uniqueness of the object it describes. See Nienhauser, *The Indiana Companion*, Vol. 1., 870.

⁷ Shu-mei Shih, “Writing English with a Chinese Brush: The Work of Fei Ming”, in *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 197-98.

⁸ Zhou Zuoren, *Zhou Zuoren zaoqi sanwen xuan* [Early Essays of Zhou Zuoren] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1984), 332.

a new lens through which to see the ordinary rural life of his hometown in the 1920s and the 1930s.

The majority of Fei Ming's writings are poems and short stories. As his good friend Bian Zhiling said, Fei Ming's stories are better than his poems.⁹ He depicted the poetry of life in his hometown in three collections of short stories: *Zhulin de gushi* [Stories of a Bamboo Grove] (1925), *Taoyuan* [The Peach Garden] (1927), and *Zao* [Jujubes] (1929), and one novel: *Qiao*

[Bridges] (1925-30).¹⁰

Children's Insight: A Pastoral Kingdom

Fei Ming tries to display a complete picture of his hometown, a typical small town in the North. Since he simply cares about the interests and charm of his stories, his writings have neither the kind of rapid development nor sharp climax, which make stories exciting and dramatic. His favorite topic is local people's ordinary life, especially the life of the younger generation. Children and teenagers usually are protagonists in his stories. Through children's innocent insights, even evil and unhappiness can turn out to be kind and warm to some extent. Sadness and tragedies along the process of life can be alleviated through teenagers' positive attitude toward the future. Although Fei Ming seldom expresses his personal thinking in his stories, he describes his hometown as a pastoral kingdom, in which suffering and misfortune appear beautiful and peaceful.

In his first collection of short stories *Zhulin de gushi*, Fei Ming analysed young people's mental world. Their spirit, mood, sentiments, and understanding of love and beauty form an important part of the social environment. Three stories all completed in 1923: "Youzi," "Ah Mei" [Little Sister], and "Bannian" [Six Months] are good examples. There is no plot in the story "Youzi". The author recorded Yan'er's memory of his childhood with his cousin Youzi, who is a lovely and kind girl. In Yan'er's eyes, Youzi is the symbol of his hometown and their profound friendship represents Yan'er's love for his hometown.

Fei Ming did not suggest any kind of dubious relationship between Yan'er and his cousin. Even at the end of the story, when Yan'er sees Youzi leave with her mother to prepare for her marriage, the author did not deliver any personal comment. Readers can sense the cherished feelings between the two young people from two details. When they were both children in the village, the naughty boy often ate up Youzi's sweets secretly. Youzi discovered his trick but always pretended she did not know about it. Moreover, as soon as Yan'er knew that Youzi would soon be married, he wants to see her future husband first and to check whether he is reliable and sincere. Like the story "Youzi," the author depicted the folk customs of a local funeral for Yan'er's little sister in the story "Ah Mei". The theme is the seven-year-old boy Yan'er's memories of the happy times he spent with his six-year-old sister

⁹ Bian Zhiling, "Preface", in *Feng Wenbing xuanji* [Selected Works of Feng Wenbing], ed. by Feng Jiannan. (Beijing: Remin wenzue chubanshe, 1985), 5.

¹⁰ All the references to Fei Ming's works are from *Feng Wenbing xuanji* [Selected Works of Feng Wenbing], ed. by Feng Jiannan (Beijing: Remin wenzue chubanshe, 1985); in the following cited as *FWXJ*; variations are noted where relevant.

Lian.

Parting of friends in one's childhood and loss of family members are sorrowful. But in children's eyes, sadness is temporary while hope is lasting. In the story "Bannian," Yan'er grows up into a young man. As the result of an illness, he enjoys a rest with his wife in the southern part of the town. The author described every detail of the peaceful life during Yan'er stay with his wife. The leisurely lifestyle, resting while recovering from illness, becomes an ideal. Fei Ming gives no information about Yan'er's marriage, but he displays the newly-married couple's happiness indirectly by mentioning how Yan'er's mother blamed her son for a perceived "mistreatment" of her daughter-in-law.

Apparently, neither mistreatment nor anger can be found in the story "Bannian" but only jokes and relaxation. Fei Ming explained his understanding of a pastoral kingdom by narrating the relationship and experiences of these children, teenagers and young people. Because their minds are unpolluted, they hold a more natural and easygoing attitude toward life. They do not negate pain and sadness but they feel confident that people can overcome any difficulty. They cherish the beautiful natural environment of their hometown and respect friendship and love. Meanwhile, the author portrayed the beauty of the village and the friendship and love among local people in subdued tones.

The most typical description of a pastoral kingdom can be found in Fei Ming's loosely arranged novel *Qiao*, of which each chapter can be considered as a complete short story. The first part of the novel is a dreamlike record of three children's experiences in Shi village. The author mainly depicts the natural scenes and local customs from the point of view of three children. In the second half of the novel, the children grow up and the young man Xiaolin leaves the village and moves to the town to receive education. Xiaolin and the two sisters Qinzi and Xizhu keep their innocence and cherish the peaceful life they had together even after they become adults. Even though they part, they keep in touch, exchanging new and modern thinking they learn from the outside. Unlike the usual description of a triangular relationship, there is no jealousy, suspicion or intrigue among the three young persons. Xiaolin, Qinzi and Xizhu get on with each other harmoniously without stress, as Fei Ming wants to portray a pastoral picture of a local village with no intention of leading readers to contemplate realistic problems.

Natural scenery in the pastoral kingdom of Shi village has a flavor of loneliness, mysteries and quietness according to the three children's memory. Fei Ming created a peaceful environment by using negative images, such as graves, the sunset, a lonely wild goose in the vast sky, Aeolian bells hung on the eaves of temples and shades of a tree. A piece of doggerel arranged by Xiaolin to teach Qinzi Chinese characters can be regarded as a summary of Shi village:

Once a time, we walk leisurely for two or three miles.
On the way, we see four or five villages,
Six or seven temples and towers,
Eight, nine or ten branches of flowers.¹¹

¹¹ *FWXJ*, 136.

Besides these beautiful scenes, Fei Ming depicted the folk customs of his hometown in the novel. For instance, children fold willows' branches as their toys in spring; they fear of going to abandoned overgrown temples alone because it is said that fox spirits lives there; local villagers organize small ceremonies around their dead relatives' graves in *Qingming* Festival (Pure Brightness), and family members will go to local temples to hold memorial services for their dead relatives, holding lanterns on their hands.¹²

In the chapter "Tianjing" [The Courtyard], Fei Ming explained the process of growing up. Xiaolin, Qinzi and Xizhu become teenagers, and "their minds are not as simple as before".¹³ The lovely appearance of Qinzi's little sister Xizhu and the two girls' different types of beauty make Xiaolin hesitate to choose his love and awaken his sexual passion. Fei Ming used the images of clouds, rain, and a vertical bamboo flute, all of which symbolize sex in traditional Chinese culture, to represent sexual impulse of the youth in the chapter "Xiao" [A Vertical Bamboo Flute]. The author praised the power of human nature.

Two themes of the novel *Qiao* are children's understanding of different situations they may face to when seeking happiness and young people's perplexity over puberty. When exploring the life in Shi village, the author on the one hand referred to his own memories of childhood; on the other hand, he suggested adults' loneliness in society and their helplessness at having no alternative. The pastoral kingdom from children's insight means the enjoyment of a peaceful life; at the same time, it contains the realm of the author's ideologies in folklore and psychology.

Behind a Smiling Face: Life's Interests

Fei Ming cares more about the temperament and interest of his writings than the plots of stories. His stories are made up of fragmentary settings, intermittent events and lonely people's shadows in the dusk. To Fei Ming, these fragments and details are the best way to display his hometown. The local people in his stories all lead simple lives as depicted in a style similar to the descriptions in the essays of the Wei and Jin period (220-589) and the lyrics of the Song dynasty (960-1279). Their personalities are tranquil and they always keep a smiling face even though they are experiencing suffering and feel unsatisfied with society. Like the mothers in the story "Huanyi mu" [Laundering Mothers] (1923) and the third daughter in the story "Zhulin de gushi" [Stories of a Bamboo Grove] (1924), behind their smiling faces they sob silently and bear up patiently.

The protagonists of the three stories "Zhulin de gushi" "Huanyi mu", and "Huoshenmiao de heshang" [The Monk of the Fire Deity Temple] (1923) in the collection *Zhulin de gushi* all enjoy life in difficult situations. In the story "Huoshenmiao de heshang," Jin Xi is an orphan and makes a living by begging. Thanks a recommendation from Old Man Wang, Jin Xi becomes a monk in a local temple so that he can feed himself. Although Jin Xi is poor and is looked down upon by other villagers, he keeps an optimistic attitude and enjoys his simple

¹² A festival: Chinese people memorize the dead on 5th of April (the lunar calendar) every year.

¹³ "Tianjing", in *Qiao*, <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/ff/feiming/q/index.html>.

and poor life. The happiest time for him is playing with a lost dog and collecting local villagers' offerings for the Fire Deity to give Wang Si's grandchildren as small gifts. He regards Wang Si as his father and does everything he can to show his gratitude by helping the old man. He always keeps a smiling face and no one has ever seen him crying. Until the end of the story, after suffering for several days because of an accident in which he nearly died, he weeps, but still "it is difficult to see tears clearly in his eyes."¹⁴

Similar descriptions about local people's tranquil and sober personalities can be seen in the story "Xiaowu fangniu" [Young Five Herds Cows] (1927) in Fei Ming's third collection *Zao*. Writers usually narrate the subject of a rich landlord forcibly seizing a poor peasant's beautiful wife with swords drawn and bows bent to show anger and indignation. In Fei Ming's writing, the event becomes interesting and even funny, for the narrator of the whole story is the little cowherd Xiaowu. Readers can sense the author's cynical inclination, but the satiric meaning is expressed in a mild tone. Xiaowu affirms that "the rich butcher Fat Wang always wearing a pair of silk trousers lives in Uncle Chen's home for a long period, but obviously Aunt Chen is not Fat Wang's wife".¹⁵

The sad story is told in an amusing way. Xiaowu sympathizes with Uncle Chen's misfortune but neither quarrels nor fighting happens among the four persons: Fat Wang, Uncle Chen, Aunt Chen and Xiaowu. They lead a peaceful life together and all seem quite satisfied with the present situation. Sadness is lightened by narrating the story through children's innocent and curious eyes. Even when Xiaowu mocks Aunt Chen and Fat Wang, readers will believe that life is full of interest rather than pain and unfairness. An example is Xiaowu's introduction about the fat bodies of both Aunt Chen and Fat Wang:

I figure, her feet cannot prop up her body even if she gets one more kilo of weight [...] Fat Wang gets drunk and his face turns into red; he sits there untying his belt but cannot manage it.¹⁶

Fei Ming's most successful experiment of exploring local people's interests in life and their taste of life's bitterness in an understated manner is the short story "Taoyuan" [The Peach Garden] (1927) in his second collection. The author gave the story a terse beginning:

Wang Laoda has only one daughter who is thirteen years old. She has been ill for nearly a fortnight.¹⁷

The story is about the deep love between the father Wang Laoda and his daughter Ah Mao. Ah Mao is suffering from a serious disease but still cares for her father. Although she knows that excessive drinking will damage her father's health, she persuades her father to buy some

¹⁴ *FWXJ*, 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *FWXJ*, 62.

wine when she finds his favourite beverage bottle become empty. Ah Mao's health is Wang Laoda's only concern. Because Ah Mao mentions that peaches are quite tasty, the father makes every effort to satisfy his daughter's wish. Even though the harvest season for peaches has already passed, Wang Laoda buys a glass peach for his daughter to look at, using as payment his favourite beverage bottle plus a small amount of money.

The story is set in a warm atmosphere. The father and the daughter face financial difficulty and the danger of death together. But they cherish the love between them and encourage each other to live positively. To Ah Mao, life is still filled with interest. She gains a lot of pleasure from observing local villagers passing by their peach garden. However, a smiling face is not the theme of the story. The author ended the story sadly: the glass peach was broken into small pieces by a group of running children.

One of the children felt that his heart seemed broken into pieces silently.
He and Wang Laoda stared at each other.¹⁸

Not only has the glass peach been broken, so has Wang Laoda's heart full of his love for his daughter. Wang Laoda's staunch attitude toward life depends on his daughter's happiness. The author described poor people's true love artistically.

Fei Ming displays a beautiful picture of the local setting. He used poetic descriptions, such as a little girl standing in the sunset in a garden of peach blossoms and her joy of seeing two red suns: one in the sky, the other in the shadow on the wall. The green leaves covering up the earth of the garden make her two big eyes shine. The young girl Ah Mao in the bright spring brimming with love of life contrasts with her father's heavy heart worrying about his daughter's illness. Combining beautiful nature with people's loneliness and the implicit helplessness behind their smiling faces is one of Fei Ming's favorite techniques. The relationship between nature and emotion in Fei Ming's stories echoes back a kind of poetic harmony between *qing* (feeling) and *jing* (landscape) in traditional lyricism.¹⁹

Moreover, Fei Ming shared local people's belief in the mystery of peaches in the story "Taoyuan." Chinese people along the Yangtze River traditionally regard peach trees as their ancestors. There are many folk stories about the Spirit of peach trees and the Goddess of peach blossoms. People along the river worship peach trees as they believe that peaches can bring them love, marriage, and happiness.²⁰ A mysterious forest called "Peach Forest" in which a group of deities and ghosts live was recorded in the early classic *Shanhaijing* [The Classic of Mountains and Seas]. Local people have the custom of curving images of peach trees on a slate board on New Year's Day to pray for auspiciousness.²¹ In the story "Taoyuan," Ah Mao's love for peaches and her life in the peach garden represent the awakening of the

¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹⁹ Shih, "Writing English with a Chinese Brush: The Work of Fei Ming", 196.

²⁰ Zong Li and Liu Jie, *Zhongguo minjian zhu shen* [Popular Deities in China] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1987), 412.

²¹ Yuan Ke, ed., *Zhongguo shenhua chuanshuo cidian* [Dictionary of Chinese Myths and Legends] (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1986), 315.

sick girl's youth along with the spring. Ah Mao, just approaching puberty, has the same feelings and desires as every ordinary girl. The young girl's joy and anxieties are expressed in a peaceful environment. Fei Ming's view, related to his own inner philosophy, demonstrates that life's interest can be enjoyed by everyone regardless social status.

A Peaceful Mind: Dhyana

Fei Ming began his interest in Dhyana when he was studying in Peking University. Dhyana is one branch of Chinese Buddhism, which flourished in the late Tang dynasty (618-907) and the early Song dynasty (960-1279). Its doctrines are quite similar to Daoist thinking and attitudes toward nature. Dhyanaists and Daoists both believe in Pantheism and they regard themselves as one part of nature. They try to free themselves from the secular world and gain mental liberation through religious practice.²² In his short stories, Fei Ming expressed his understanding and appreciation of ordinary life, using doctrines of Dhyana for reference. Local people in his writings seem to have a philosophical understanding of life and their stories stem from their personal experiences. Meanwhile, Fei Ming explained his thinking on the relationship among images, time, and space as inherited from artistic concepts in late Tang poetry and Song painting.

The first period of Fei Ming's development in understanding of Dhyana during the 1920s can be seen in his stories before 1928. He dreams of an empty, quiet, and clean kingdom in which he can attain a lofty realm of thought, free himself from turmoil, and examine his inner mind. This peaceful kingdom is described in the story "Ling dang" [Water Chestnut Lake] (1927) in the collection *Taoyuan*. The author portrays Tao village as a kingdom separated from the outside by a big pond where local people lead a simple life and try to ignore social changes.

Tao village is a quiet place all the year round. It hides behind a dense forest and is distanced from the populous local town by a small river and a pond where water chestnuts grow. The author creates a peaceful environment by describing the sounds of flowing water and rustling leaves, disappearing and melting into silence around the village. The protagonist, Chen Longzi (Deaf Chen), communicates with others using sight language. In the story, he symbolizes an ideal personality. The world around him is always silent; he seldom communicates with others and is never disturbed by noise from the secular world. The implication is that people can realize their inner mind, observe the world objectively and appreciate the meaning of life only when they keep far away from loud noises and colorful images. To live in a tranquil place such as Tao village is one of the essential conditions for achieving serenity. In the ideal kingdom, human beings and the natural environment are in perfect harmony.

Fei Ming's search for peace and emptiness is also shown in his depiction of intuition and sudden enlightenment (*dunwu*). He described visitors from the outside seeking the right way to enter Tao village as follows:

If you are a frequent visitor, you make a detour to find the entrance to the

²² Li Zehou, *Mei de licheng* [The Path of Beauty] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1981), 169.

village catching a view of water in the pond and the sky converging into a line. You stop for a second and can hear the sound of the flowing water. . . . You keep silent and go outside. This process is similar to local villagers' going outside to the town. As soon as you reach the outside streets, you realize that you are simply a traveller passing through Dao village.²³

Above, the author describes the visitors' difficulty in seeking the right direction. It seems that the search does not flow naturally and meets a few obstacles. Tao villagers separate themselves in this way so that no one can easily enter their world. The story produces an effect of desolation, which implies a negation of the outside world with its unmanageable urban chaos. In these stories, local villagers enjoy the beauty of nature that is neglected by urban dwellers.

In the second period of his work, 1928-1932, Fei Ming shifted emphasis from peace of mind in a silent kingdom to an empty mind in the boundless universe, again combining Daoism with his beliefs in Dhyana. According to his understanding, people would feel at ease only when they care for nothing in the world: achieving serenity is the first stage of enlightenment. Freeing one's mind means to empty the mind of all thoughts, no matter whether one lives in a peaceful or a noisy world. His belief in emptiness finally makes him give up writing short stories after 1932. Readers can see the transition in his short stories composed during the second period of his work.

Fei Ming began to focus on the relationship among images, time, and space in his last stories. Disconnecting from his initial attempts to hide his personal emotions in fiction, from 1928 on, he allowed his likes and dislikes to emerge when he wrote about ordinary urban and village life. As he explained,

Now I only care about facts and reality and do not like imagination any longer.²⁴

Some people complain that my stories are obscure and they cannot understand them thoroughly. Who knows that I have already tried my best to show my inner feelings? I am even afraid that my personal thinking is displayed too clearly.²⁵

His short story "Zao" [Jujubes] (1929) in the collection *Zao* offers a sample of his transitional period.

The story is told in the first person narrative by a drifter in Beijing. The narrator first sighs about time flying by and reminisces nostalgically about his hometown. Then he recalls the time when he was chatting with his teacher about the beauty of rain. Finally he mentions his new neighbor who comes from his hometown. He talks with the neighbor cordially. In the

²³ *FWXJ*, 72.

²⁴ *FWXJ*, 366.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 321.

end, looking back to his childhood, he suddenly discovers that his new neighbor is trying to shake down jujubes from the tree in his garden. The story reads like a diary of a boring life and reveals the author's practice of Western modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness. Time and space change several times in his mind though his body stays in the room. The narrator expresses his disappointment with the new neighbor and with his boring life indirectly as "only those who take shelter from the rain can really appreciate the beauty of rain".²⁶ Only those who sense time's flowing and have no alternative can really appreciate life. Here Fei Ming shows how memory can provoke sudden enlightenment.

Another short story "Mao'er de baba" [Mao'er's Father] (1928) in the collection *Zao* has a similar theme but is set in the countryside. Fei Ming regarded this story as an observation of ordinary life.²⁷ He changed direction from creating an ideal kingdom to paying close attention to the secular occurrences. However, life in his stories remains peaceful and free. These stories do not convey any depressing feelings even though the characters are struggling for a living. In his last stories, Fei Ming tries to achieve his ideal of mental freedom in ordinary life rather than in his imaginary kingdom.

Intermittence and Emptiness: Poetic Elements and Characteristics of Prose

Fei Ming's stories, in the view of many critics, are better than his poems,²⁸ but there are poetic elements in his stories. Edward Gunn regarded these poetic elements as a variety of Europeanised constructions: "unmediated dialogue with unplanned sentences," "anastrophe," and "a relatively rare use of synonym."²⁹ Shu-mei Shih explained the poetic practices in Fei Ming's stories as destroying spatial and temporal continuity, and breaking up causal associational thinking.³⁰ The sentences, which tend to be short and concise, are constructed as in a poem. The topics change from one sentence to another, giving an impression of incoherence or, alternatively, of hidden-connections. Even within a short piece, there is a frequent change of ideas, making his stories abrupt, fragmental, and seemingly illogical. As in traditional Chinese poetry, these techniques leave space for readers to meditate on the meaning. What readers find is an artistic realm filled with interest and charm rather than narrative. A Song writer on poetry, Yan Yu (1198-1241), concluded that good poems are like music in the air, colors in a picture, the moon under water, and images in a mirror. Sentences are short but meanings are deep.³¹ Fei Ming adopted Yan Yu's principles of poetry in his stories.

²⁶ "Zao", in *Zao*, <http://www.bwsk.com/xd/f/feiming/000/021.htm>.

²⁷ *FWXJ*, 395.

²⁸ Bian, "Preface," *Feng Wenbing xuanji*, 5.

²⁹ Edward Gunn, *Rewriting Chinese: Style and Innovation in Twentieth-century Chinese Prose* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 127.

³⁰ Shih, "Writing English with a Chinese Brush: The Work of Fei Ming", 194.

³¹ Yan Yu, *Canglang shihua* [Poetry Talks by (the Escapist of) the Canglang River], comp. by Guo Shaoyu (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1961), 24.

Was Xiaolin looking at something patiently? He only caught a small image. His eyes could not surpass the limitation of the vision; within his gaze there was something pale--Qinzi's eyebrows. The unpainted light eyebrows indeed destroyed the beauty of a forest. Scenes of hills and waters from ancient to modern time combined together--really, that was the irrelevant word 'black.' He did not know whether that type of brow could be considered pretty. Her eyes merged into his instantly as in poets' descriptions. He was only an onlooker and dared not to applaud.³²

Here Fei Ming linked different things together illogically from "Qinzi's eyebrows" to a beautiful forest and from "scenes of hills and waters" to a pair of eyes. He admitted that he would begin his writing with descriptions of a pretty girl and end it with descriptions of a natural scene far away. He could link unconnected things together and let his ideas jump from eyebrows to forests.

In addition to the concept of *wu wo zhi jing* in poetry mentioned above, a second type of artistic concept: *you wo zhi jing*, i.e. objective things convey the author's emotions,³³ can be seen in Fei Ming's stories. In the second half of the novel *Qiao*, Xiaolin grows up and he is no longer a boy in the countryside but a young man with modern notions. From then on, Xiaolin turns out to be a young philosopher, who thinks deeply about life. The author uses the character Xiaolin as a medium to express his own feelings. Once in the story, Xiaolin talks about fallen flowers with his two friends: "the petals and flowers on the tree will not fall down on the ground but fly up into the sky".³⁴ In the author's eyes, the negative image of fallen flowers can be described positively.

Many other examples, such as "the rain in one's imagination will not make people wet" (the chapter "Qingming" in *Qiao*) and "your saying makes me desire to ride a horse" (the chapter "Lushang" [On the Way] in *Qiao*),³⁵ can be regarded as Fei Ming's re-creation of mixing unconnected things together according to his own feelings. Although he does not express his personal views on any event in his stories, he uses many literary techniques that make his stories like poetry. The blurring and strange meaning in these sentences is the author's challenge to the real world.

Xiaolin's saying in the chapter "Gushi" [Stories] in *Qiao* reveals Fei Ming's thinking about writing stories: "The meaning of life does not exist in stories but in the techniques of how to play up stories."³⁶ The plots of his stories are not clear and the content is not compact. Readers can feel that Fei Ming's train of thoughts drifts from one point to another in a disorderly fashion, and his descriptions of images are divided into several separated parts in

³² *FWXJ*, 157.

³³ Wang Guowei, *Renjian cihua* [Talks on *ci* in the Human World] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1961) 1.

³⁴ *Qiao*, <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/ff/feiming/q/index.html>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ "Gushi", in *Qiao*, <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/ff/feiming/q/index.html>.

his stories. To create an empty space for readers, Fei Ming emphasized time's passage and its relation to changes of destinations. These literary characteristics make readers think of another literary form: prose.

Qinzi's eyes, however, stared at the lights; she stood under a willow-tree for a little while and [then] ran into the wheat field opposite the house in the next moment. Her eyes still stared at the lights——suddenly she blossomed into a tree of flowers on behalf of the only plum tree in Shi village.³⁷

I'm afraid it was a fault in his timing for he was thinking about drops of sweat flowing down his expressionless face. Thereupon, he did not see her any more.³⁸

The opposite shore is oblique and full of grasses. His eyes watched from one place to another following the shadow of trees. Among the green grasses, Sister Dog wore a white coat. She had black hair and her face was smiling, giving people an impression of completion. But he separated the thing (Sister Dog's hands washing clothes) apart as he remembered two arms in a picture and a white pigeon he saw inside the grasses. He became an observer in such a short minute.³⁹

These paragraphs—especially the third—display the disjunctive relationship between time and space. The images are all from the author's imagination in one second, so they change quickly. The technique is somewhat similar to stream of consciousness, but Fei Ming's adaptation is learned from the literary conventions in traditional Chinese prose.

Another characteristic of prose in Fei Ming's stories is his use of *tonggan* (synaesthesia).⁴⁰ He combines different feelings together and disrupts different senses. For example, a mountain covered by flowers is described as a volcano, on which “the bright sunshine and the blue sky are adding flames”.⁴¹ Thanks to the profusion of flowers, the

³⁷ Qiao, <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/ff/feiming/q/index.html>.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Synaesthesia means a condition in which one type of stimulation evokes the sensation of another, as when the hearing of a sound produces the visualization of a color. In Western theories of literature, it relates to the description of one kind of sense impression by using words that normally describe another. This technique is also known in traditional Chinese literature as *tonggan*, which refers to the association of one sense with another. A good example is in Zhu Ziqing's essay “Hetang yuese” [The Moonlight around a Lotus Pond]. Zhu described the fragrance of lotuses as the singing from the far end of a building, associating the sense of smell with hearing.

⁴¹ Qiao, <http://www.sinology.cn/main/book1/mjwj/ff/feiming/q/index.html>.

mountain looks like a burning volcano. The author writes down the change of feelings from the visual sense to the tactile sense. The bright sunshine and the blue sky in the summer make people feel hot, like someone walking close to a volcano.

Many other examples can be seen, such as “the depth of the water chestnut lake is stirred by them” in the story “Ling dang” (association of the sense of sight with the sense of touch);⁴² “willows are gradually growing in Laodie’s heart” in the story “Heshang liu” [Willows on Banks of a River] (association of personal emotion with a developing process);⁴³ and “you stop for a second and can hear the sound of the flowing water—the lake is filled up by one sound after another” in the story “Ling dang” (association of the sense of sight with hearing).⁴⁴ These examples reveal Fei Ming’s mode of techniques learned from both Chinese and Western sources.

Fei Ming creates a new way of writing fiction by combining poetic expressions and techniques from prose writing into narrative stories. The literary form of his writings does not have a clear definition. Some of his short stories can also be regarded as essays and some of the sentences in his stories can be arranged into poems. The intermittence between the sentences leaves many empty spaces for readers, which, in the hands of Fei Ming, are full of vitality.

Conclusion

Using the themes of rural life and local customs, Fei Ming created a new style of fiction in modern Chinese literature. As a young man from the countryside observing the urban culture, he emphasized an ideal farming civilization of the rural areas to criticize the urban civilization, although he received a modern education in Beijing. In his short stories, readers can see his identification with local villagers’ simple life and their innocence; meanwhile, Fei Ming displayed the beauty of both natural scenery and local customs in his hometown. He rebuilt a simple and unadorned kingdom and gave a rebirth to traditional Chinese culture in his stories.

Fei Ming sought past experiences of ordinary life through creating fiction. Happiness and joy in his stories come from life’s small fragments, such as a local festival, a good meal, and a beautiful scene. As the way of cultivating oneself according to religious doctrines, the author creates a peaceful environment for the characters in his fiction and conceals his personal emotions to achieve the temperament of writing about life honestly. Therefore, Fei Ming’s stories are all imbued with harmony, flexibility, and silence.

To create a traditional style of life in dreams, Fei Ming learned from traditional Chinese literature and adopted aesthetics used by traditional poets. When describing the local villages, he used many poetic sentences, but the content of his stories is based on his own experiences. Bian Zhiling mentioned in his preface to Fei Ming’s selected works that his own poetic style

⁴² *FWXJ*, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

had been influenced by Fei Ming.⁴⁵ When introducing the local culture, Fei Ming adopted the aesthetics of traditional Chinese prose to elaborate the sentences in his stories. As Zhou Zuoren summarized in the preface to Fei Ming's two collections of short stories *Zao* and *Qiao*, the value of Fei Ming's writings lies in his expression of beauty.⁴⁶ Fei Ming is one of the few writers of the early twentieth century who could liberate himself from utilitarian and social purposes of literature. This tradition of treating literature primarily as a tool can be traced back to the theories of *shi yan zhi* (Poetry Expresses Intention) and *wen yi zai dao* (Literature Conveys Principles).⁴⁷ At the same time, he frees himself from the burden of revealing realistic problems and awakening the common people's consciousness of a modern society, as advocated by most May Fourth period writers.

Fei Ming opposes dramatic changes, interesting plots, or characters with special personalities in his stories. His fiction displays the natural qualities of ordinary life. Zhou Zuoren compared the characteristics of Fei Ming's stories with the movement of water and wind: although water and wind will meet with many impediments when they flow forward or blow, such as waterweeds and caves, they will go on as if nothing has happened.⁴⁸ Fei Ming's abstruse writing demonstrates his highly developed techniques learned from different sources to describe complicated things within a short piece.

Edward Gunn and Shi-mei Shu have discussed Fei Ming's writing style in detail. Both emphasized how Fei Ming used Western literary techniques and Chinese classical forms in his fiction. Shih characterized Fei Ming's aesthetics as "mutual implication."⁴⁹ In this article, I have focused on the influence of the theories and conventions of traditional Chinese poetry and prose on Fei Ming's writing. When his style of language was criticized as too simple to be understood, he retorted by explaining a metaphor in his story "Yangliu" [Willows]. In the story, he described eyes with tears as two willow balls moistened by dew and he thought that it is easy to perceive the meaning.⁵⁰ In summary, even though Fei Ming does not belong to the left-wing mainstream of Chinese literature from the 1920s to the 1930s, his intention of creating a pastoral kingdom, his descriptions of the folk culture, and his use of poetic language into composing stories have had a great influence on the following generations, including such writers as Shen Congwen from the 1930s to the 1940s, Wang Zengqi in the 1970s, and Ah Cheng, Jia Pingwa, and Han Shaogong in the 1980s.

⁴⁵ Bian, "Preface," *Feng Wenbing xuanji*, 9-10.

⁴⁶ Zhou, *Zhou Zuoren xuanji*, 104.

⁴⁷ Nienhauser, *The Indiana Companion*, Vol. 1, 60.

⁴⁸ Zhou, *Zhou Zuoren xuanji*, 102.

⁴⁹ Shih, "Writing English with a Chinese Brush: The Work of Fei Ming," 192.

⁵⁰ *FWXJ*, 321.