Jin Yi's "Other people's stories"

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New Culture Movement writers in Republican China, including such household names as Lu Xun, Lao She, Bing Xin, Ding Ling, Mao Dun and Ba Jin, infused their fiction with a critique of the cruelties of "old" China. By exposing the injustices suffered by the poor and the weak, including women, they hoped to build a new national culture of humanity and compassion. A modern and better China could be achieved, they felt, through a national literature that drew attention to oppression and suffering in everyday life.

With eagerness and energy, young intellectuals set about writing fiction in the emerging modern vernacular and established a host of new literary journals and societies. Jin Yi was among their number. In 1930s' Beijing and Shanghai, he co-edited well-known literary periodicals with influential figures such as Zheng Zhenduo and Ba Jin. Although they were not members of the explicitly revolutionary group, the League of Left-Wing Writers, Jin Yi and his colleagues produced fiction that similarly sought to expose corruption and decadence in the Republican ruling class. As a result, they were often persecuted by the authorities.

In 1938, during the War of Resistance against Japan, Jin Yi took up a professorship at Fudan University in Chongqing; in 1941, he moved to Fujian's wartime capital, Yong'an, to teach at Fujian Normal College. Throughout the war years, Jin Yi continued his editorial work and published novels and short stories that explored the effects of the war upon society. Taking his stance firmly on the side of the ordinary people, he was scathing in his condemnation of the Kuomintang authorities and their acolytes. It was during this period, in 1942, that Jin Yi wrote the short story "Other peoples' stories".

The events in the story are revealed through a conversation between the narrator and his friend, a kind-hearted teacher, who having initially flung himself into the war effort, subsequently becomes disillusioned and retreats to a life of self-sufficiency in the countryside, occasionally visiting the narrator in town. The storyline and characterisation emerge as the two men chat in the narrator's house on a scorchingly hot day.

As his opening gambit, the narrator's friend announces dramatically that the husband of a local woman has returned from the dead. Before that moment, the husband is presumed killed on the front line, leading his mother and wife to hire a long-term worker to help in the fields, whom they eventually also take in as a new husband and son-in-law. The narrator's friend paints a sympathetic picture of all three: the two "good women" stoically carrying out their farm work, the mother shedding tears silently in private for her lost son; the hired worker, a "nice fellow" from an unknown faraway part of the country, generally keeping to himself and saying little. The arrangement the three come to may be unusual, the narrator's friend admits, but asks whether in these times of upheaval such a change in the lives of three "nobodies" is important.

The sudden return of the given-up-for-dead husband paradoxically does not seem to cause any overt tension. The fears of anxious neighbours gradually subside. Until one day, the two men and two women arrive at the house of the narrator's friend in the company of a middle-aged male stranger, whom the narrator's friend assumes to be a middleman or relative brought in to mediate between the two husbands. But there is a surprising twist, related in breathless fashion by the narrator's friend: the two husbands want the narrator's

friend to write a Transfer of Wife document to solemnise the sale of the young woman to the stranger, a street food vendor from town.

At this point, the narrator interrupts his friend to point out the illegality and immorality of wife-selling; his friend counters by defending the right of ordinary people to come to their own arrangements in the face of so much illegality and irrationality elsewhere in society.

The story continues: names and thumbprints are put to the document, with the narrator's friend providing a given name for the hired man, who only knows his surname. The soldier husband's loss of his right hand in the war also comes to light. The deal proceeds and the two husbands and the mother receive a share of the money that the vendor pays for the young woman.

During this process, there is no reaction from the young woman. Her silence suggests her powerlessness: she has no voice; and presumably has had no part in the decision making. It is only when the money is about to be paid that the narrator's friend notices the two women suddenly hugging and silently crying. Only the snack food vendor is painted unsympathetically in this scene: his laughter and self-promotion provoke irritation in the narrator's friend. When the vendor leaves, the young woman follows him out, pausing only to accept the gift of a small towel from her soldier husband; she then turns and walks after the vendor and out of the story.

Once the mother and son have departed, there only remains the hired worker, lingering by the window, who offers to help bring in the narrator's friend's rice harvest in exchange for lodgings. The narrator's friend agrees to take in this silent wanderer. It transpires that the worker has a name after all, but it is a "feminine" name he is ashamed of, which can be read as a reference to the dominance of a masculinist culture. After a few weeks, when the harvesting and threshing is all done, the hired man simply leaves without a word. His hard work and abrupt departure leave the narrator's friend with an uneasy sense of debt and a heaviness of heart that spreads to the narrator as well. Thereupon the story ends.

With its focus on the plight of women and the downtrodden, especially during conditions of great social upheaval and iniquity, "Other People's Stories" exemplifies the concerns of New Culture Movement writers. Jin Yi calls attention to the persistence of the long-embedded practice of wife-selling, despite its outlawing, due to the hopelessness of poverty that some unfortunates find themselves in. It is poverty that drives the first husband to join the army: as an only son he would not have been conscripted; and when seriously injured, he is given but a small hand towel as recognition of his sacrifice. It is poverty, too, that forces the long-term worker to move around the country in search of work, in rootless fashion. Through telling such heart-wrenching stories, Jin Yi indirectly condemns the Kuomintang authorities for their tolerance of wife-selling, failure to help the poor, and lack of care even for their own soldiers' suffering; at the same time, he paints wife-buyers as heartless opportunists. By contrast, the narrator and his friend are portrayed as caring and conscientious intellectuals who are greatly saddened by these circumstances and uneasily aware of their own relatively privileged positions.

Despite its good intentions, however, the rendering of the women in "Other people's stories" is vulnerable to wider criticisms of gender representations in the fiction of New Culture Movement writers. For example, Jin Yi's collaborator and friend, Ba Jin, has been targeted by feminist critics such as Rey Chow for pulling readers' sympathies towards male characters and failing to flesh out the life contexts of female characters in his magnum opus, *Family*. In "Other people's stories", Jin Yi gives minimal treatment to the women, yet more

fully renders the hired worker as an everyman of the suffering underclass; he also employs two male intellectuals as the vehicle through which to tell “other people’s stories”. The story is therefore susceptible to accusations of androcentrism; ironically so, given that wife-selling is its major plotline device.

Nevertheless, the story presents a powerful and realistic portrayal of the ways in which people are caught up in and facilitate social iniquities, even if it is with feelings of helplessness and despair. Other people’s stories, Jin Yi thus reminds us, are also our own. His message deserves telling in many languages.