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*Baihua, Guanhua, Fangyan*  
and the May Fourth Reading of *Rulin waishi*

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***Baihua, Guanhua, Fangyan and the May Fourth Reading of Rulin waishi*<sup>1</sup>**

SHANG Wei

No other pre-modern Chinese novel occupies more important a position than *Rulin waishi* (by Wu Jingzi, 1701-54) does in the May Fourth scholars' advocacy of "*baihua* literature (vernacular literature)." Hu Shi (1891-1962) and Chen Duxiu, the leading scholars of the May Fourth movement, highly praised *Rulin waishi* for its adept use of *baihua*. Qian Xuantong recommended it as the standard textbook of *guoyu* (the national language) and ranked it above other novels, including *Honglou meng*. He declared that the emergence of *Rulin waishi* marked the era in which *baihua* literature had completely established itself.<sup>2</sup> In a similar effort to canonize the works of vernacular literature, Zhang Mingfei asserted that no other pre-modern novel better represents what he deemed to be "pure *baihua* (*chuncui zhi baihua*)" than does *Rulin waishi*.<sup>3</sup>

Before we ask why these scholars believed *Rulin waishi* to be the precise specimen of *baihua* literature, we have to question their definition and conceptualization of *baihua*. For the term *baihua* in reference to the vernacular did not come into wide use until the first decade of the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> and it was Hu Shi and other May Fourth scholars who elaborated the term and gave it historical, cultural, and ideological significance. Since the May Fourth scholars are themselves conscious participants in the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Sophie Volpp for her comments on my paper, Victor Mair for sharing with me his arguments on this subject, and Liu Lening with whom I have discussed the issues of *guanhua* and *fangyan*.

<sup>2</sup> Qian Xuantong, "Rulin waishi xinxi," in Zhu Yixuan and Liu Yuchen, ed., *Rulin waishi ziliao huibian* (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1998), pp. 445-453.

<sup>3</sup> See (Zhang) Mingfei, "Gujin xiaoshuo pinglun," *ibid.*, pp. 465-68.

<sup>4</sup> The term *baihua* is occasionally used in the pre-modern era, but it merely designates language that is "plain" and thus "easy" to understand. During the first decade of the twentieth century more than 100 newspapers and journals were published in *baihua* or entitled as *baihua bao*, such as *Suzhou baihua bao*. Some scholars have argued that it would be unfair to give all the credit to the May Fourth scholars for the rise of *baihua wen*. However, it is undeniable that Hu Shi and other May Fourth scholars did more than anyone else in redefining the term *baihua* by giving it new ideological import.

making of discourse and history, there is no reason for us to take *baihua* as an uninterrogated concept in our own studies of pre-modern Chinese literature. Instead, we should ask: How did the May Fourth scholars redefine *baihua* through their interpretation of such pre-modern novels as *Rulin waishi*? Surely, they often misinterpreted the novel, but what concerns me is their overall agenda about *baihua* and *baihua* literature. In the combative tone typical of the discourse of the time, May Fourth scholars often described Chinese literary history in terms of the struggle between classical (*wenyan*) and vernacular (*baihua*) literatures. Setting up a dichotomy of *baihua* and *wenyan*, they define *baihua* as a written language based on the spoken language used by "the people (*renmin*)," thereby granting it the qualities they are eager to promote—authenticity and the sense of immediacy. More specifically, *baihua* represents two things they find essential to the "progressive culture" they support: first, *baihua* is the people's language as opposed to *wenyan*, the language of the official elite; second, it is "a living language (*huo de yuyan*)" involved in daily communications and thus stands in a remarkable contrast with *wenyan* as "a dead language (*si de yuyan*)," which one learns only from books and through memorization.

The May Fourth scholars' reading of *Rulin waishi* is extended from this preconceived agenda and is thus largely predictable. Granted, their approach toward *Rulin waishi* is not entirely groundless, for unlike previous novels *Rulin waishi* reduces the use of verse and parallel prose to the minimum, and classical phrases can only occasionally be seen in the speech of the elite characters. It is perhaps for this reason that some May Fourth scholars asserted that *Rulin waishi* represents what they called pure *baihua*. But how can *baihua* be pure, if it has its roots in "low" or non-elite culture as the May Fourth scholars would like us to believe? Furthermore, does *baihua* carry any inherent and coherent ideological import? For instance, does Wu Jingzi's use of *baihua* in *Rulin waishi* allow him to transcend the limitations of his social class in his critique of the civil service examination system, Confucian ritualism, and official elite culture? Although the May Fourth scholars do not attribute all the qualities they see in *Rulin waishi* to its

use of the vernacular language, they do argue that *Rulin waishi* represents certain revolutionary ideas that can rarely be found in classical literature. Hu Shi, for example, speaks favorably of *Rulin waishi*'s representation of Jing Yuan in Chapter 55, a tailor who is nevertheless known for his distinguished taste in calligraphy and music.

"Since you want to be so refined," said his friends and acquaintances, "why do you stick to your honorable profession? Why not mix with some college scholars?" "I'm not trying to be refined," replied Jing Yuan. "I just happen to like these things: that's why I take them up from time to time. As for my humble trade, it was handed down to me by my ancestors, and I'm not disgracing my studies by tailoring. Those college scholars don't look at things the way we do. They would never be friends with us. As it is, I make six or seven cents a day; and when I've had my fill, if I want to strum my lyre or do some writing, there's nobody to stop me. I don't want to be rich or noble, or to make up to any man. Isn't it pleasant to be one's own master like this?"<sup>5</sup>

Like the other three townsmen in Chapter 55, Jing Yuan embodies all the qualities that Wu Jingzi wishes for literati: taste, sincerity, and self-cultivation. And his sincerity is guaranteed by his humble profession, which removes him from the ladder of social-mobility and thus rules out the possibility for him to capitalize upon the noble rhetoric of self-cultivation. Wu Jingzi does not give the commoners their own voice; instead, he depicts them as disguised literati who can restore authenticity to elite values. But Hu Shi

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<sup>5</sup> See Li Hanqiu, ed., *Rulin waishi huijiao huiping ben* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), p. 747. Here I use Yang Hsien-yi's and Gladys Yang's English translation. See *The Scholars* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1957), p. 600.

sees something else in the above passage: “This is true freedom and true equality—the social climate that Wu Jingzi, the literary master of our Anhui, intends to evoke!”<sup>6</sup>

Hu Shi’s argument about *Rulin waishi* is derived from his overall view of *baihua* literature as representing a progressive, liberating force opposed to the repressive elite-official culture. Yet Hu Shi did not substantiate his argument about the non-official, non-elite nature of *baihua*. Instead, he immediately contradicted himself by admitting that *baihua* as a written language is based on *guanhua*, literally, the speech of the officials. Interestingly enough, he referred to *guanhua* as the language commonly used in the Yangzi River region, but deliberately glossed over its official origins.<sup>7</sup>

Based primarily on a northern dialect, *guanhua* was used in government as a common language by which to overcome the barriers of oral communication; it was a kind of lingua franca among the officials who came from all over the country but spoke mutually unintelligible dialects or languages as their mother tongues; it was also shared by monks and merchants whose occupations required the mobility to cross regional boundaries. During the Ming and Qing periods, there was a standard version of *guanhua* spoken in Nanjing and other areas, and urban residents of these areas might well have been versed in it. But this does not necessarily make *guanhua* “the people’s language (*renmin de yuyan*)” nor obscure its connections with elite-official praxis. Around the turn of the century when the editors of *Suzhou baihua bao* began to address the local reading public in *guanhua*, they were merely using an official language that was “plain” and thus “easy” to understand, not their readers’ language (Their readers spoke the Wu dialect, which is certainly not identical to *guanhua* either in vocabulary or in pronunciation.) Since *baihua* as a written language is based on *guanhua*, it is inaccurate to describe its relation with *wenyan* in terms of the distinction between official and popular, high and low, and between center and periphery. Clarifying this point may help us to reflect upon the

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<sup>6</sup> Hu Shi, “Wu Jingzi zhuan,” in *Hu shi gudian wenxue yanjiu lunji* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988), p. 1064

nature of *baihua* and that of the May Fourth *baihua wen* movement. Indeed, May Fourth scholars did not launch a language revolution as they themselves claimed; all they did is replace one official language with another in the name of the people.

In his article "A Constructive Theory of Literary Revolution" written in 1918, Hu Shi added four additional points to his famous "Eight Don'ts (*babu zhuyi*)" and thus made the following requirements for the new literature:

First, speak only when you have things to speak of; second, speak whatever you want to speak of, and speak in the way you normally do; third, speak in the voice of your own, not that of others; fourth, speak in the language befitting your own time.<sup>8</sup>

Hu Shi insists on using the verb "speak" (*shuo*) to refer to both the act of speaking and that of writing, thereby deliberately obscuring the line of demarcation between the two. His point is clear: only an ideal *baihua* literature is able to express the unmediated reality of the spoken word and thus release us from the grasp of the dead *wenyan* literature. Here the dichotomy of *baihua* versus *wenyan* is once again reinforced, and this time with the emphasis placed on the contrast between *baihua* and *wenyan* in terms of their relationship with the spoken language. It would be tempting to read Hu Shi's argument above in the light of logo-centrism.<sup>9</sup> But for me the question to ask is: what if a *baihua* writer happens to be unable to speak *guanhua*?

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<sup>7</sup> Hu Shi, Introduction to "Jianshe lilun ji," in *Hu Shi gudian wenxue lunji*, pp. 264-65 in *Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi*.

<sup>8</sup> Hu Shi, "Jianshe de wenxue geming lun," in *Hu Shi gudian wenxue yanjiu lunji*, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> In her introduction to Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination* Barbara Johnson summarizes Logo-centrism as follows: "Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics focuses on its privileging of the spoken word over the written word. The spoken word is given a higher value because the speaker and listener are both present to the utterance simultaneously. There is no temporal or spatial distance between speaker, speech, and listener, since the

When encouraging his contemporaries to write in *baihua*, Hu Shi cites his own experience as an example. Born in Anhui, he grew up speaking the local dialect, which bore little resemblance to *guanhua*. Later he managed to learn Shanghai dialect that, too, had little in common with *guanhua*. Nevertheless, he was able to write decent *baihua* essays even at the age of sixteen or seventeen, and he explained this as due to his extensive reading of *baihua* novels such as *Shuihu zhuan* from his childhood.<sup>10</sup> In another essay, he tells us a similar story about his fifteen-year-old nephew, who wrote him a letter in *baihua*, although the boy had never left home and exposed himself to the *guanhua* speaking environment.<sup>11</sup> It did not matter, he concluded, if you were not able to speak *guanhua*; you could learn to write *baihua* with the novels of the Ming and Qing as your models, and this, according to him, was precisely what his contemporary writers had done and were still doing.<sup>12</sup> Despite his intention to encourage those from the non-*guanhua* area to write *baihua*, his conclusion, nevertheless, puts the opposition of *baihua* and *wenyan* into question. How then should one measure the differences between *baihua* and *wenyan*, if *baihua*, just like *wenyan*, is merely a written language that one learns from books composed three or four hundred years ago? If *wenyan* is dead, how much alive can *baihua* be if it is just as alien as *wenyan* is to one's mother tongue?

Hu Shi once quoted Fu Sinaian's suggestion that one should learn to speak *baihua* before beginning to write it. He welcomed the suggestion but doubted its feasibility, for

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speaker hears himself speak at the same moment the listener does. This immediacy seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know what we mean, mean what we say, say what we mean, and know what we have said. Whether or not perfect understanding always occurs in fact, this image of perfectly self-present meaning is, according to Derrida, the underlying ideal of Western culture. Derrida has termed this belief in the self-presentation of meaning "Logo-centrism," from the Greek word *Logos* (meaning speech, logic, reason, the Word of God). Writing, on the other hand, is considered by the logocentric system to be only a representation of speech, a secondary substitute designed for use only when speaking is impossible." Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>10</sup> Hu Shi, Introduction to "Jianshe lilun ji," pp. 263-64.

<sup>11</sup> Hu Shi, "Jianshe de wenxue geming lun," in *Hu Shi gudian wenxue lunji*, p. 60.



most *baihua* writers of the time could not speak fluent *guanhua*.<sup>13</sup> In other words, for those writers *guanhua* was, to a large degree, an imagined colloquial language. Fu Sinian believed that the effort should be made to turn this imagined colloquial language into a real one. But, in so doing, he somehow reversed the relation between the written and spoken languages that Hu Shi elaborated in his "eight don'ts": rather than write as one speaks, Fu Sinian now suggests that one change (or improve) one's colloquial language to accommodate the written model of *baihua*.

At this point, we cannot help but question the May Fourth scholars' equation of *baihua* or *guanhua* with the vernacular. Two elements set *guanhua* apart from the vernacular: first, *guanhua* is, by definition, the speech of the officials, with its geographical center moving along with the change of capital cities in the course of history, from Dadu of the Yuan, to Nanjing of the Ming, and to Beijing of the Qing period; second, despite its origin in the northern dialects, *guanhua* is, nevertheless, meant to be a common language (later called *putonghua*) crossing over the geographical boundaries of local dialects. If we insist on using the term "vernacular," then it is *fangyan* (local dialects or topolects), not *guanhua*, that are closer to the vernacular.

Like his fellow May Fourth scholars, Hu Shi defined *baihua* as vernacular by contrasting it with *wenyan* (the classical language). Setting up the dichotomy of *wenyan* versus *baihua*, he was able to reinforce the underlying binary structure of high and low, center and periphery, official and popular, and the written and the spoken. However, when telling his story of writing *baihua* without being able to speak in *guanhua*, he unwittingly evoked the dichotomy of *baihua* versus *fangyan*, which allows us to see *baihua* from an entirely different angle. In this dichotomy, it is *fangyan* that somehow bears the seminal characteristics that Hu Shi previously attributed to *baihua*. And accordingly, for someone like Hu Shi who spoke Anhui *fangyan* as his mother tongue,

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> Hu Shi, Introduction to "Jianshe lilun ji," p. 264.

*baihua* ultimately embodied the problems he accused *wenyan* of having: it is not a living language as he claimed, and he learnt it through reading just as he did with *wenyan*.

Hu Shi was aware of the differences between *baihua* and *fangyan*; in fact, he even had a lengthy discussion about the relation between *fangyan* literature and *guoyu* literature (literature of the national language), which he believed must be based on *baihua*.<sup>14</sup> But he insisted on perceiving *baihua* through its contrast with *wenyan*. And his use of the dichotomy of *baihua* and *wenyan* did not permit him to explore the relation between *baihua* and *fangyan*. He argued, instead, that *baihua* itself was *fangyan*.

One can certainly make such an argument if one is concerned only with the origin of *baihua*. For *baihua*, as I mentioned above, is probably based either on the northern dialects (such as Dadu dialects of Yuan times) or on the dialects of central China (so-called Zhongzhou dialects such as that of Luoyang and Bianliang of the Song). But, in asserting that *baihua* is *fangyan*, Hu Shi seemed to have deliberately obscured the distinction between written language and spoken language, and the distinction between an ideographic system of writing and an alphabetic system of writing. In fact, just like *wenyan*, *baihua* is a written language; and its use of the same ideographic system of Chinese script makes it difficult to accommodate the pronunciation and vocabulary of extremely diversified Chinese *fangyan*.

In an article written in 1925, Hu Shi spoke highly of *Haishang hua liezhuan*, a nineteenth century novel set in the brothels of Shanghai, for its adept use of the Wu *fangyan*. He then cited one of Xu Zhimo's poems that was also written in the Wu *fangyan*, and argued: "Those who know the Wu *fangyan* can immediately catch the flavor of the language. It (the language the novel uses) is the true *baihua* (or genuine *baihua*); it is truly a language that is alive."<sup>15</sup>

Hu Shi's comments on *fangyan* literature immediately raise two questions about his own concept of *baihua* literature:

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<sup>14</sup> Hu Shi, "Wuge jiaji xu," in *Hu Shi gudian wenxue lunji*, pp. 493-98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 495.

(1) Despite his assumption that *baihua* literature is *fangyan* literature, Hu Shi somehow highlighted the differences between the two when admiring *fangyan* literature. *Fangyan* literature, as represented by *Haishang hua liezhuan* and Xu Zhimo's poems, employs Chinese script only as a phonological system; it uses the graphs of Chinese script for sounds, whose meanings are largely incomprehensible to the speakers of *baihua* and other dialects. It is clear that if each *fangyan* writer uses the Chinese writing system in the same fashion, then Hu Shi's dream of creating a largely unified *baihua* literature or national literature (*guoyu de wenxue*) could never come true.

(2) In the same article under discussion, Hu Shi asked: "had Lu Xun used Shaoxing dialect in representing A Qiu (the protagonist of Lu Xun's *A Qiu zhengzhuan*), how vivid would it have been?" He also questioned *Rulin waishi*'s representation of the character's languages. "It would be absurd," he wrote, "if everyone spoke in *baihua* as the characters in *Rulin waishi* and *Honglou meng* do."<sup>16</sup> When praising *fangyan*, Hu Shi contrasted it with *baihua*, and thus ended up criticizing *baihua* literature for not reflecting the spoken language that people used in everyday life. It is interesting to see how he phrased his argument: by *baihua* he meant "a living language," but he then modified it by suggesting that only *fangyan* fits this definition; only *fangyan* is the true *baihua*.

I have so far revealed some fundamental contradictions in Hu Shi's conceptualization of *baihua*. The irony is that when Hu Shi engaged himself in "rediscovering" *baihua* literature as the living testimony to the repressed people's culture, the campaign to advocate *baihua* was moving in the opposite direction, becoming itself a national movement endorsed by the authorities. It was in their joint effort to establish *baihua* as the national language (*guoyu*) that the scholars and authorities once again restored *baihua* to its original status as *guanhua*, that is, the official language: they argued that this national language should base itself on Beijing *guanhua*, because Beijing was the Capital city, the political and cultural center, of the nation. The central issue that concerned them was no longer whether *baihua* should replace *wenyan* and become the new

official language, or whether the spoken language should be standardized on the basis of *baihua*—the answers to these questions were affirmative and obvious for them; the debate now concerned the choice between Beijing *guanhua* and the *guanhua* of other areas, such as Nanjing *guanhua*, or as some scholars put it, between *Honglou meng* and *Rulin waishi*. It is true that Nanjing *guanhua* as we presumably see it in *Rulin waishi* is compromised with the Nanjing local culture; yet as linguists have argued, during the Ming dynasty, which first established its Capital in Nanjing, Nanjing *guanhua* represented the standard *guanhua*. The choice of Beijing *guanhua* over Nanjing *guanhua* was thus contingent upon the politics of early twentieth-century China.

For Hu Shi and other May Fourth intellectuals, the issue of *baihua* is indeed a political one. But as a political movement, the *baihua wen* movement, as it turns out, presents the problems that Hu Shi refused to openly acknowledge in his own theories of the same subject. It is true that he should not be held responsible for what occurred later in the practice of the national language. In fact, he was rather critical of certain aspects of the contemporary trend toward the centralization and standardization of *baihua*, and his view of *baihua* also underwent transformation through time. However, problems that occur later can be traced to Hu Shi, who, despite his description of *baihua* as the people's language, initiated the *baihua wen* movement as an official elite movement. For, after all, the implicit logic of this movement has proven stronger than Hu Shi's statement about *baihua*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 494-95.

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