

***Hope and Destruction:  
A Comparative Analysis on the Consciousness of Death  
between Patriotism and Sinking***

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**Abstract**

*Sinking* (沉淪, 1921), the renowned Chinese novel by Yu Dafu was often compared with a Japanese novel, *Melancholy in the Country* (田園の憂鬱, 1919), given that both are categorized as I-novel. Nevertheless, another Japanese novel, *Patriotism*(憂国, 1961) by Mishima Yukio actually shares more similarities with *Sinking* in the aspects of content and the core theme behind. Both Yu Dafu and Mishima Yukio were obsessed with death as a theme, especially when it is linked with sex. Yet, they reflected two totally different attitudes toward death. The paper presents a further discussion on the consciousness of death shown in these two works. Firstly, it focuses on how the core theme of *Patriotism* is actually the beauty of death instead of patriotism, and *Sinking* is the one that talks about patriotism. Then, the differences in the roles played by death in these two works are discussed. It ends with the analysis of the cultural reasons why there is such kind of differences between the Japanese and the Chinese novel. The paper aims to provide a brand new angle for the current academic discussion about *Sinking* by comparing with a rarely compared Japanese novel.

Keywords: Yu Dafu; Mishima Yukio; death; sex; patriotism

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## Introduction

Except the studies of independent text analysis, most of the research compared Yu Dafu(郁達夫, 1896-1945) 's *Sinking* (《沉淪》, 1921) with Haruo Satō (佐藤春夫, 1892-1964)'s *Melancholy in the Country* (《田園の憂鬱》, 1919). The main reason is that Yu Dafu once admitted that his writing style was deeply influenced by Haruo Satō: “*Among contemporary Japanese novelists, I admire Haruo Satō the most. ... Every time I want to learn from him, it finally ended up a travesty.*” (Yu, 1982, p.73)

Japanese scholar Takeo Oda also pointed out “*Dafu is not only admiring Haruo Satō, but was also influenced by his creation. It could be proved by lots of common parts between Sinking and Melancholy in the Country.*” (Oda, trans. Li, Yan, 1984, p.33) Many scholars use this quote as a guide to compare the characteristics of I-novel and the depression found in the main characters between *Sinking* and *Melancholy in the Country*.

However, I believe that the greatest influence of *Melancholy in the Country* on *Sinking* is reflected in the genre and the story setting. In contrast, *Patriotism* (《憂國》, 1961) by Yukio Mishima(三島由紀夫, 1925-1970) seems to be more comparable with *Sinking* in terms of the content.

Both Yu Dafu and Yukio Mishima had special preferences for the subject of death. Yu Dafu believes that “*Sexual desire and death are the two fundamental problems of life, so creations containing these two essences are more favored than other works.*” (Yu, 1992, p.91) Mishima said, “*The scenes depicting sex and death...could be named as the only blessing that I look forward to in this life.*” (Mishima, 2002, p.793). It could be seen that both of them also attached to the work of death, especially when death is linked with sex. However, Yu Dafu's *Sinking* and Yukio Mishima's *Patriotism* reflect two different views of death. The paper aims to compare *Patriotism* with *Sinking* to explore the theme of death and the differences between the traditional Japanese and Chinese views toward death.

## Death and nation

In the days of Yu Dafu, China had been defeated repeatedly in several wars and national affairs were just like chaos. Yu Dafu “*witnessed the decline of the old country, felt humiliated as a foreigner*” (Xu, 1984, p.138) when he was studying in Japan. *Sinking* is the work written in the sorrow of being humiliated.

The main character feels self-conscious because of being a Chinese and always assumes that the Japanese classmates isolate him:

“*They must have known that I am a ‘Chinaman’; otherwise why didn’t they even look at me once?...Is it a wonder that the Japanese treat you with contempt? China, O my China! Why don’t you grow rich and strong? I cannot bear your shame in silence any longer!*” (Yu, 2007, p.35)

One of the main themes in the works is the pursuit of love and the sexual frustration.

The main character has no chance of falling in love because he is a Chinese. He thinks the Japanese girls do not favor him because he comes from a weak nation. Therefore, when he goes to the tavern and the waitress asks where he comes from, he is too shameful to answer and screams in his heart: “*Oh China, my China, why don't you grow strong?*” (Yu, 2007, p.52) At the end of the work, he shouted before his suicide: “*O China, my China, you are the cause of my death! ... I wish you could become rich and strong soon! ...Many, many of your children are still suffering.*” ” (Yu, 2007, p.55) The death and the nation are tightly linked together in *Sinking*. The death could also be seen as the author's protest against the low status of the Motherland.

Yu Dafu wrote about death in *Sinking*, but he did not aim to depict “death.” The death of the character is due to the humiliation of being a national from a weak foreign country. We find that there is not a lot of text describing the process of death. The text subtly hints that the character has decided to drown himself:

“*Suddenly he had an inexplicable urge to drown himself in the sea... 'My poor shadow! You have followed me for twenty-one years, and now his sea is going to bury you.' ...Such were his despondent, self-pitying thoughts as he walked back and forth along the shore.*” (Yu, 2007, p.54-55)

In *Sinking*, nation is the main theme and focus of the novel. “Death” is the tool presenting the theme only, the result of worrying about the country, which indicates that Yu Dafu was deeply disappointed with the nation.

In *Patriotism*, Mishima used a historical event, February 26 Incident, the aborted coup d'état as the story background. On 26 February 1936, a group of young officers of the Imperial Japanese Army attempted to purge the government and military leaders of the moderate Faction to establish an ultranationalist military government under the name **the Righteous Army**, succeeded in occupying Tokyo and assassinating several leading officials. The Emperor was angry with that and demanded to suppress the uprising.

Lieutenant Takeyama in *Patriotism* is one of the officers who support the coup. Because Takeyama is still in the new marriage with Reiko, his batch mates did not find him to participate in the coup. After the coup, the Lieutenant was ordered to suppress the insurgents by force. He does not want to arrest his batch mates by himself but at the same time he could not defy the command of the emperor and finally decided to commit suicide.

However, there are only three details hinting the historical background. The first one is the date of the event: “On the twenty-eighth of February, 1936...” (Mishima, 1989, 102) The second one is that Reiko heard from the radio that a few friends of her husband have staged the coup d'état. The third one is that Lieutenant Takeyama informed his wife that he was responsible for suppressing the insurgent by force. The novel only vaguely implied the relationship between the story and the historical event and did not detail the incident and the author's political views.

In 1965, Mishima directed the film based on the novel. He named the film title as *The Rite of Love and Death* instead of naming as *Patriotism*. Mishima set the film to use no dialogue and monologue and insisted on using Wagner's *Eros and Thanatos* as the

background music. “Mishima decided to use Wagner’s work very early, and insisted in using *Eros and Thanatos* recorded by Wilhelm Furtwängler to run through the play.” (Fujii, 2007, p.11) *Eros and Thanatos* usually refer to sexual instincts and death drive in Freudian theory. The English title and background music name have clearly revealed the theme of the work, which is “love and death”.

Mishima once said, “*Although the event is used as the background, the story jumps out of the event itself, a story about life and death.*” (Tang, 1994, p. 187) Mishima set the February 26 Incident as the story background to justify the righteousness of the suicide of the lieutenant. The critics and poet Ueda directly pointed out that “*the book is named as Yūkoku (憂国 in Japanese, which literally means “worrying about the country”), but there is almost no concern for the country could be found, mainly revealing the solemn and tragic beauty by depicting the process of seppuku, implementing the aesthetic of destruction.*” (Saigusa, 1976, p.184) Therefore, I boldly believe that the English film title *The Rite of Love and Death* could deliver the theme of the novel better: beauty of the death.

### **Death and sex**

During the study of Japan, Yu Dafu mainly concerned about China’s international status and sexual intimacy with the opposite sex. The first part has been discussed in the former section and the latter will be discussed in this section.

In *Sinking*, as same as Yu, the main character is very eager for a deep love: “*O ye heavens above, I want neither knowledge nor fame nor useless lucre. I shall be wholly content if you can grant me an Eve from the Garden of Eden, allowing me to possess her body and soul.*” (Yu, 2007, p.36) However, “*his loneliness became most intolerable after he had cut himself off from all social contacts.*” (Yu, 2007, p.44) He gets no chance to reach out to girls. Therefore, he masturbated several times, peeked at the landlord’s daughter bathing, eavesdropped on a couple making love outdoor to satisfy his sexual desire. Finally, after having a relationship with the maid after getting drunk in the tavern, he broke down and felt like “*I really have become a most degraded person...I may as well end my life here, since I’ll probably never get the kind of love I want. And what would life be without love? Isn’t it as dead as ashes?*” (Yu, 2007, p.54) He committed suicide after that. Therefore, we could conclude that sexual frustration is the immediate cause of suicide and the nation is actually the underlying cause.

Sex and death in *Patriotism* are more closely linked. Before suicide, Lieutenant Takeyama and his wife Reiko made love with the eager anticipation of death. Mishima depicted the sex scene and the process of seppuku in detail. For Mishima, the sublime physical pleasure brought by life and sex is actually similar to the sublime physical pain of seppuku and dying. Before having the cruel pleasure of death and the sublime physical pain, Takeyama first enjoys the joy of sex and the sublime physical pleasure:

“*...in the sweetness of this odour was contained, somehow, the essence of the young death. The lieutenant’s naked skin glowed like a field of barley and everywhere the muscles showed in sharp relief...What ecstasies they experienced after these tender exchanges may well be imagined. The lieutenant raised himself and enfolded his wife*

*in a powerful embrace... Passionately they held their faces close...Their breast, moist with sweat, were tightly joined, and every inch of the young and beautiful bodies had become so much one with the other that it seemed impossible there should ever again be a separation... From the heights they plunged into the abyss, and from the abyss they took wing and soared once more to dizzying heights. The lieutenant panted like the regimental standard-bearer on a route march...*" (Mishima, 1971, p.116)

*Patriotism* firmly grasps the heroic image of the lieutenant to express Mishima's affection toward the vitality and the body's strength. "Life" and "death" are absolute opposites, but they are both true, fierce, and powerful. This common trait is exactly what attracted Mishima. Mishima's pursuit of "death" does not rule out "life", but in line with his belief that "*consciously capture the best moment of life in tragedy, pursue the blissful death.*" (Mishima, 1989, p.359).

### **Different views on Death**

To Yu Dafu, "*human suicide as the last resort. They only kill themselves when the mental pains exceeds the physical pains.*" (Yu, 1982, p.93) Therefore, we could not find anything about the beauty of death when reading *Sinking*. The main character is a weak, gloomy person: "*the bluish-gray circles around his eyes even bigger, and his once-bright pupils as expressionless as those of a dead fish*". (Yu, 2007, p.43) When he was studying in Japan, he was afraid of the dark night when there is no one, and even feared to cry. Before he chose to die, he also complained to the motherland that he was not willing to die. If he was not so anxious and desperate, the main character would not choose to die. In *Sinking*, death is passive and pessimistic.

On the contrary, the image of Lieutenant and Reiko who died in *Patriotism* is glorious. The two are willing to die. Lieutenant is happy and cheerful before his suicide: "*The lieutenant, who had never once before helped with the bedding, now cheerfully slid back the door of closet, lifted the mattress across the room by himself...*" (Mishima, 1989, p.117). Moreover, they beautify death. For them, death is beautiful when they died righteously: "*Looking at the slender white figure of his wife the lieutenant experienced a bizarre excitement. What he was about to perform was an act in his public capacity as a soldier, something he had never previously shown his wife. It called for a resolution equal to the courage to enter battle; it was a death of no less degree and quality than death in the front line. It was his conduct on the battlefield that he was now to display.*" (Mishima, 1989, p.120).

The main characters in the two works present two different images because the traditional views on death are completely different. In traditional Chinese literature, water has a special symbolic meaning. People like Qu Yuan and Wang Guowei would drown themselves as a way to cleanse their souls by death because they could not stand the world's filth. Yu Dafu set the character to commit suicide by drowning. It is actually a soundless protest against the falling international status and decline of China.

The death of *Patriotism* is a way to reflect the beauty with blood and death. That is the reason Mishima chose seppuku, a vigorous and bloody way of suicide. In Japanese traditional aesthetics: "*The Japanese sometimes think that death is more beautiful than life. This is a kind of destruction aesthetics. The Japanese think that the*

*blooming cherry blossoms are beautiful, but the withering ones are more beautiful.”* (Ye, 1997, p.143) Life is beautiful, but the moment of death is more beautiful. Yukio Mishima inherits the “tradition of Japanese beauty” as he said.

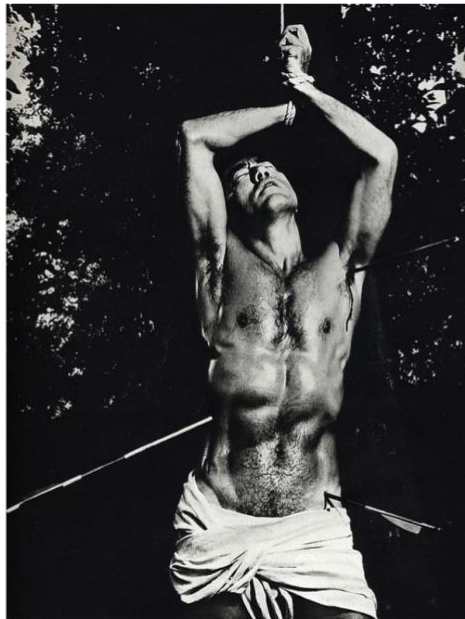


Figure 1. *Mishima as St. Sebastian*, Kishin Shinoyama, 1966, presenting the tragic death of romanticism

## Conclusion

Death is tied with nation and sex in both *Sinking* and *Patriotism*. In *Sinking*, sexual desire and patriotism are the causes of death and death is the following result. There is a causal relation between these three elements. Death is the way out and the solution to the problem. The death in *Patriotism* is unified with patriotism and sex in a high degree. There is no contradiction or conflict between the desire for sexual love and the sorrow of the country. Death in *Sinking* is a tool and means of liberation from sorrow; death in *Patriotism* is purely a world of blood, and the greatness of the country is a tool to bring death to the theatre.

As mentioned above, most of the research compared *Sinking* with Haruo Satō's *Melancholy in the Country* to discuss the elements of I-novels. Satō undoubtedly influenced Yu in writing techniques and genre. However, in terms of the theme, death, country and sex play an indispensable part in both *Sinking* and *Patriotism*. Interestingly, *Sinking* was written in 1921, and *Patriotism* was written 40 years after but both of them explored death, nation and sex coincidentally. I hope this paper could give a glimpse of the different views on death between the two Chinese and Japanese writers.

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