

The Education University of Hong Kong

**Bachelor of Education (Honour) (Secondary)
in History**

Honours Project

**The National Consciousness of Chinese Historical
Novels: with *Li Zicheng* First Volume *Battling South of
the Pass* As Example**

論當代中國歷史小說之民族意識：以小說《李自成》
第一卷〈潼關南原大戰〉為例

Supervisor: Dr. Hui Kwok-wai

Student: Chak Man LAU

Table of Contents

Thesis Statement & Purpose and Rationale.....	P.3
Methodological Approach.....	P.5
History Novels and Nationalism in Popular Cultural Representations.....	P.8
Historical Novels Under New Historiography.....	P.14
The Literary Ambition of Yao Xueyin.....	P.18
Li Zicheng: Publication and Reception.....	P.20
Ancient Revolution: The Plot of <i>Li Zicheng</i>	P.24
Language Across Time and Place: The Language in <i>Li Zicheng</i>	P.30
Summary and Further Discussion.....	P.36
Bibliography.....	P.39

Thesis Statement

This article will study the famous history novel *Li Zicheng* by leftist writer Yao Xueyin (姚雪垠, 1910-99), as in its influence and implications on the development of contemporary Chinese nationalism. By investigating the plot and language of the novel, it might be revealed, through the fusion of historical research and literary work, how the narrative of Chinese nationalism came into being in its popular cultural representations, ultimately setting up the paradigm of the Chinese Nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中華民族) historical discourse that is in harmony with the Revolutionary History (*geming lishi* 革命歷史) historiography.

Purpose and Rationale

Literature serves to spring human imagination by transforming recollection of long-gone memories into stories of vivid moments. These moments are symbolic in regards to those memories the writer recollected. A work of fiction novel, however fantastical it may be in its setting, very much mirrors concepts and emotions of real-life experiences. Thus, a work of historical novel reveals how the writer perceived and imagined a certain period of history, whilst, intentionally or not, mirrored his contemporary times in the process. Thus, to study a history novel means studying two periods of history, the one the writer wrote and the one he or she lived. Subsequently, how the writer interpreted events of the past within the work shows how he or she identified and correlated its elements common with the events of the contemporary.

Due to the tumultuous political development in the past two centuries, Chinese nationalism is still an emerging political school of thoughts with both historians and literatis alike debating

some of its principles and values, resulting in a variety of answers to the definition of the Chinese Nation.

Historians and literatis both formulate narratives to relate their experience to their memories of the past. It is through the use of narratives that history and literature collided. As the first historical novel of the People's Republic of China¹, *Li Zicheng* has shown a vantage point of the development of a “national” historical discourse, particularly at praising the role of peasant rebellions as the righteous, progressive force for “the nation” by necessitating the fall of “corrupted” imperial dynasties, thus propelling Chinese history linearly in the correct direction.

This novella was created between 1962-72, its first two chapters published in 1975 under endorsement from Chairman Mao; it won the First Mao Dun Literature Prize in 1982. Yet, research regarding this famous work by Yao was lacking, in the major works of literary history in China, the full five-volume novella was usually summarised in no more than three pages as a classical appropriation of the early Red Army experience in China. This article would try to show how this work in fact help cemented the contemporary national consciousness in China, by unifying impressions and memories of modern communist revolutionaries with the imaginations of ancient peasant rebellion, *Li Zicheng* provided a new literary narrative that set the stage for legitimizing the history of “New China (*Xin Zhongguo* 新中國)” and bridging it with the history of “Old China” (classical China) into one linear timeline that headed towards communism, in which the late Ming rebellion depicted was one of the focal points in the line. It was from this novel, that a pre-modern historical event could be harmonised within the narrative of

¹ Mao Dun, “About the Historical Novel *Li Zicheng*,” in *Mao Dun Jinzuo (The Recent Works of Mao Dun)*, (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1980), 28.

Revolutionary History. Within such interpretation, the classical historical legend has been replayed through the language and plot of contemporary novel literature: by equalizing two unrelated historical events together as of the same socio-political nature; by classifying socio-political elements within both imperial and contemporary histories as similarities and derive metaphors from it; by establishing historical narrative on these metaphorical devices; also by juxtaposing contemporary concepts on interpreting classical events; the classical historical event has been displayed as if it was a foreshadowing failure of its contemporary successful counterpart.

Therefore, *Li Zicheng* set up a paradigm for later history novelists to adopt events of imperial China under the progress of the revolution, as a progenitor to the chronicle of Revolutionary History, ultimately forming the national consciousness of China.

A function of literary history is to cover or promote chosen works within the scope of a discourse, which implies some other works would inevitably be rejected or erased from that scope². This article aims to shine more light on *Li Zicheng* within the current scope of literary history, with a wish to help to canonise it in the pantheon of contemporary Chinese literature classics.

Methodological Approach

² Wang Ziping, *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo (Revolution, History, Novels.)* (Oxford University Press: 2018), 25.

The object of research will overlap both fields of history and literature, which will borrow the results from past research of literary criticism within the context of literary history and the history of Chinese nationalism, in terms of the formation of Chinese nationalist thoughts.

The study object will be the First Volume of the Novel series, namely the Volume of *Battling South of the Pass* (*Tongguan Nanyuan Dazhan* 潼關南原大戰).

The framework of this article will be literary history. This article will focus on analysing how Yao applies literary interpretation on the history of late Ming peasant rebellions led by Li Zicheng (李自成, 1606-45) in his novel, particularly its meaning to, and effects on, the emerging socio-political consciousness of Chinese nationalism.

This article would borrow the framework mentioned before already well-established by past literary historians in mainland China. They also pointed out concerns and research gaps within the literary history of contemporary China which some of them this article aims to fulfil.

As a famous literary work, mainstream academics in China already commented and criticised *Li Zicheng*. In *Zhongguo Dandai Wenxueshi (A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)* by Hong Zicheng at 1999 --- second edition in 2007. This encyclopedic work became textbook material for Chinese General Higher Education curriculum (mainly Full-time Masters Degrees), thus it provided definitions on key concepts of contemporary Chinese literature that one may deem it mainstream if not official. Therefore this textbook of literary history was helpful in

confining the scope of this article. For the sake of accuracy in translating the author's concept, the article would also use its translated edition from Brill. Another work to use as references to the general discussions on contemporary Chinese literature would be *Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxue Fazhanshi* ("A Developmental History on Contemporary Chinese Literature"). Published in 2011, it is a more recent textbook material that also focused on providing critical definitions to the development of contemporary Chinese literature. It is a comprehensive work that explained the main development of contemporary literature in China. As a topical research, the article can base off of the historiography it provided. The book also contained a brief commentary on *Li Zicheng*, which is representative of the mainstream academic standpoint in China on this canonical work.

This article would also mention the contribution of the Chinese scholar-cum-historian Liang Qichao (1873-1929), who declared the "Revolution of Fictions (*xiaoxuejie geming* 小說界革命)," a literary movement that sought to disseminate nationalist ideas through the writing of novels, in terms of both the translated ones about European and American revolutionaries and the ones written by himself about a future China as a successful national republic³. Subsequently, he also coined the term *zhonghua minzu*, the Chinese Nation, in his works of historiography and modern historical studies, as his effort to develop a national China historiography.

In regards to the development of the Revolutionary History Novel, the commentary work of *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo (Revolution, History, Novels)* by Wang Ziping (2018) provided

³ Wang, *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo*, 26-7.

insightful observations. In this work, Wang wished to investigate “the dynamic between the literary forms and the revolutions and politics,” thus showing “the spectacle” that was “the establishment, defense and subversion of the literary order and the social order,” as in history “the novels” had been inevitably dragged into the duty of constructing narratives of “revolution,” leading to the change of ways on imagining, fantasising and narrating history and reality, it was in this process that “revolutions” also happened on “novels” themselves⁴. Wang suggested useful angles to analyse literary texts in the context of history, especially his exciting analysis on the change of “historical time” from traditional historical romances to modern historical novels. The analysis would be beneficial to the purpose of this essay, in how novels influenced the narratives of history and displayed its changes thusly.

One of the main concerns of this essay is the representation of nationalism in contemporary China. The dissemination of a localised nationalist ideology leading to it being a widespread social phenomenon is what one may call it “national consciousness.” In analysing this phenomenon in the scope of the literary world, a critically acclaimed work would be immensely helpful to be referenced: *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* by Benedict Anderson (2006). Anderson’s work provided useful groundworks of nationalism studies, as in how, why and when nationalism, a Western ideology, formed and radiated across the non-Western cultures including China. It argued that the literary language of novels helped foster common imaginations of “nations” in the minds of its readers. In

⁴ 「文學形式與革命、政治之間的互動關係」；「文本秩序與社會秩序的建立、維護與顛覆的...奇觀。」 Ibid, xi.

investigating the interrelations of literary narrative and historical narrative, the conclusions and observations of *Imagined communities* would help to analyse *Li Zicheng*.

History Novels and Nationalism in Popular Cultural Representations

This article will have two focuses: the practice of novel writing in contemporary China and the formation and dissemination of Chinese nationalism through said novel writing.

According to Hong, in the mainland Chinese conventions in literary periodisation, the “20th Century Chinese Literature” consisted of two sections: the “Modern Literature” that included works produced around the May Fourth Movement to late 1940s, and the “Contemporary Literature” follows works created after 1950s. This periodisation emphasises the socio-political elements of a literary work above all else, correlating the development of literature to changes in societal and political trends. In the eyes of leftist critics and literary historians in the 30s and 40s, literature after the May Fourth Movement were representations of the socialist “New Democratic Revolution”. After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the consensus in the literary field was that literary development has now reached a new height since the Movement, as respective social and political situations changed⁵.

Since the 1940s, leftist literature focused on themes of human modernisation and modern nation-building, under the national crisis during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45). Thus, the leftist writers found it vital to provide a historical discourse in which the victory of communist

⁵ Zicheng Hong, *Zhongguo Dandai Wenxueshi*. 2nd. Ed. (Peking University Press: 2007), 1-2.

revolution would be a vital development to New China⁶. Based on depicting personal experiences on social hardship, their experimental works adopted folk literature and art forms and infused ideals of historical optimism⁷. After the communist victory in 1949, the “revolutionary history” theme was common as it was important. Although there had been a lot of novels that depicted the memories of the Revolutions since 1911, it was not until Mao Dun (茅盾, 1896-1981), who was an important literary figure and also a close friend of Yao, mentioned the term “revolutionary history subject matter” at the 1960 conference of the China Writers Association, which really made “revolutionary history” into a theme of fiction.

Commonly, the term “revolutionary history” refers to the origins of the revolution led by the Communist Party, and the tortuous path towards victory⁸. Even though the tin says “history”, most of the works written were about the not-so-distant memories by the authors themselves, as, personally, they sought to commemorate their participation in the communist revolution, whilst, collectively, contributing to the contemporary “canonisation” of the revolutionary narrative within the greater scope of Chinese historical progression. Revolutionary History fictions serve to legitimise the communist regime and social norms for its citizens, whilst providing ideological examples on life and ways of thinking that could stabilise a changing society that was the war-torn China. By reading revolutionary history fictions, readers were expected to realise that

⁶ Hong, *Zhongguo Dandai Wenxueshi*, 5-6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 94-5.

revolution, if not a communist one, was crucial to the linear progress of the long history of China⁹.

Despite having nothing to do with communist revolutionaries, *Li Zicheng* still examined under the category of Revolutionary History fictions. As Hong proposed, the writer may began his imagination about the late Ming peasant rebel army on experiences of the Red Army, which explained all the noticeable similarities in the novel, which included but not limited to the military genius and discipline of the revolutionary leader, the way to power for the rebel army from its humble beginnings and the “fish and water” rapport between rebel soldiers and the people¹⁰. Therefore, critics claimed the novel as an overt modernisation on historical figures; these similarities nonetheless made the novel apt as a contemporary addition to the genre¹¹. Hong regarded *Li Zicheng* helpful in revealing “the nature of modern history,” as, quoting from Mao Dun, it dissected the “feudal society” through “historical materialism and dialectical materialism¹².” Hong also noticed the ideological framework of the novel in presenting “the root of the complex social class contradictions” including that of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the ones within different factions of both the Ming court and the peasant armies, which manifested into a colossal display of Ming-Qing transition that already included more than 200 characters in its first two volumes¹³.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 108-10.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, 108-10.

Meanwhile, Meng and Cheng argued that literary historians have to be wary of the shared nature of history and literature, since both fields are building narratives of the past, despite differences in methods and purposes. By merely choosing, arranging, presenting and even omitting historical facts in their language, a historian and a historical epic writer would have many common languages together. Therefore a history of literature is a history of changing narratives, which is already a narrative by itself as a collection of historical discourses, while historical narratives are up for constant changes¹⁴. Therefore they suggested if a literary historian tries to generate a history of literature, it would be viable for them to begin with the vicissitude of narratives through the times¹⁵. One of many narrative topics they gave was “a history of the evolution of the national spirit (*Minzu jingshen yanbian de lishi* 民族精神衍变的歷史).”¹⁶ In a way, they echoed back the effort Hong had made four years ago with clearer demarcation on the historicity of literary history.

As renowned as this novel is, it already gathered attention from the literary field that the time. Six years after the publication, when the Cultural Revolution came to a halt, Mao Dun made this piece of commentary. It not only provided a brief biography of Yao himself but also described as well as applauded in length the literary techniques Yao used in this novel. It would be useful to

¹⁴ Fanhua Meng and Guangwei Cheng, *Zhongguo Dangdai Wenxue Fazhanshi (A Developmental History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)*, (Peking University Press: 2011), 1-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

clarify the purpose and functions of the novel in relation to the category of Contemporary Literature¹⁷.

As of late, literary critic Dong Zhilin discussed the methodology of *Li Zicheng* in his dissertation in 2008. Dong focused on Yao's literary techniques to depict his version of Li Zicheng's journey of a rebel uprising. He discussed the speciality of historical novel writing about other novel writing themes, in which the novel itself would become a form of historical narrative. That history and literature have striking semblance in terms of "fictions of language (*yuyan xugou* 語言虛構)," that both writers of historical works and fictional works would tailor real-world events to fit the story they wanted to tell.¹⁸

In regards to the formation and dissemination of Chinese nationalism, works from the West perhaps would provide a theoretical understanding to this ideology. In *Chinese Nationalism* by Townsend (1992), it has been known that nationalism was no product of Chinese tradition, as prior to the age of modern nationalism, Chinese political loyalty and patriotism was heavily tied towards her culture --- "a common historical heritage and acceptance of shared beliefs." The idea of changing the culture to cater to the state's need was unjustified, rather, it should be the other way around. This uniquely Chinese political thought has been named by James Harrison as "culturalism." The change of heart that has made the Chinese abandoning culturalism for

¹⁷ Mao Dun, "About the Historical Novel *Li Zicheng*," in *Mao Dun Jinzuo (The Recent Works of Mao Dun)*, (Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1980), 25-37.

¹⁸ Zhilin Dong, "Guannian yu Xiaoshuo —— Guanyu Yao Xueyin de Wujuanben 'Li Zicheng'." *Literary Review*, no. 2 (2008): 76-7.

nationalism, to Harrison, was when Western imperialism proved to the Chinese that not only did the Chinese civilisation could be inferior to other cultures, but the fact that when the political loyalty-cum-patriotism within and confidence without became rootless because of it, nationalism all of a sudden seemed attractive to the disillusioned Chinese to have faith in their homeland once more, on this world of cultural competition and national survival. Thus the crumbling of imperial China and the rise of national China. Levinson expanded upon Harrison's thesis of the Chinese transformation from culturalism to nationalism in describing this process by analysing the works of the famous late Qing Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao, as Liang sought a new path towards the survival of the dynasty through his writings and studies, Levinson concluded, he became a trademark of when "nationalism invades the Chinese scene as culturalism helplessly gives way"¹⁹.

As to the representation of this new-born nationalism, another piece of popular cultural commentary might give invaluable insights. In *Zeng Guofan Phenomenon* written by Guo and He in 1999, the rebirth of traditional culture in mainland Chinese nationalism was also being attributed to factors of the Cold War ending and the subsequent need to fulfil the "crisis of faith" in the modern times, coupling with the societal impacts brought by modernisation plans, the loss of national cultural confidence had become so severe, they argued, that the Communist authority felt the need to readjust their ideology to become more nationalistic so their legitimacy was to be reinforced. Wang Huning, strategist of former Chairman Jiang Zemin: "nationalism is a useful tool" to build the state; series of patriotic campaigns were crafted, focusing on promoting the

¹⁹ Townsend, James. "Chinese Nationalism." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 27 (1992): 97-103.

“outstanding elements of Chinese culture” and “loyalty to the nation” before the party allegiance²⁰. The Party-state is the embodiment of the Chinese Nation and the promoter of a “Cultural China”, the change in the official narrative regarding nationalism and culture has only heated up the already rising “national essence fever” starting in the early 80s while forcing calls for Westernisation and the Western-rooted Marxist ideology to retreat from mainstream politics and society; the “fever” also calls for every self-identifying Chinese to search for the root in their own grassroot culture and ancient traditions, once again as a reaction to Westernisation²¹.

Therefore, the popularity of studying and re-enacting Zeng’s personal history, in relation to the history of the late Qing era, can be seen as a popular cultural reaction of the mainland traditional revival; these reactions then spiked new discussions among the historians in mainland China to redefine the national identity and historicity of mainland China, creating a feedback loop of historical discussion. Similarly, this article will argue that Yao wrote his novels as a recreation of Li Zicheng as a heroic figure of the contemporary times, to embrace the historical characteristics of the Chinese Nation that resembled that of the communist revolution.

These works helped to delineate the disposition and features of modern Chinese nationalism, as well as its contemporary evolution and how it can be represented in popular cultural materials.

Historical Novel Under New Historiography

²⁰ Yingjie Guo and Baogang He, “Reimagining the Chinese Nation: The ‘Zeng Guofan Phenomenon’”. *Modern China*, 25, no.2 (April 1999): 146.

²¹ Guo and He, “Reimagining the Chinese Nation: The ‘Zeng Guofan Phenomenon’”: 147.

The instance that novels work with a political purpose had been discussed in Liang Qichao's *About the Relations between Novels and Governance* (1902), in which Liang, through a series of Buddhist karmic reasoning, argued that it was the novel that was the most powerful literary device to shape the minds of the people, such that he even implied the spring of triad groups like Gelaohui as a result of popular heroic novels like *the Water Margins* and *the Romance of Three Kingdoms*, therefore the writing of novels is crucial in rejuvenating the governance of a nation's people²². After then, the Chinese literary field suddenly recognised the significance of novel literature and its influence on the minds of the readers, they became devices and vehicles of various ideologies and life philosophies. Therefore, the change of literary style in historical novels after modernity reflected a change in the popular perception of historical reality.

Before modernity, traditional historical novels in China was a product of cyclical historiography, the code of famous historical romances like *Romance of Three Kingdoms* and *the Water Margins* is the fatalistic cycle of succeeding dynasties, that "the empire, long divided, must unite, long united, must divide²³." The future is definite to repeat the past, the same moral lessons would be learnt again and again; in these romances, the contradictions, obscurities and chaos of the world outside the novels was concentrated within as an analogy to a universal moral order²⁴, in the plot sequence showed a doomed process of both the protagonists and antagonists following the circle of fate. In a traditional romance, history has no "future" in a modern sense that life would change

²² Qichao Liang, "Lun Xiaoshuo yu Qunzhi zhi Guanxi" (About the relations between Novels and Governance), in *Yinbinshihejiwenji 4* (The Collected Works from the Ice-Drinker's Studio 4), (Shanghai: Chunghwa Book Company), 117.

²³ Wang, *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo*, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

for the better or worse and new patterns and ways of living would be formed from it. Since modern times, as a result of intense, almost traumatic, westernisation, the intelligentsia decided to adapt to a new historical reality from the West, in that instead of a cycle, history goes in a straight line or a spiral directed forward or upward; the future is never a repetition of the past, but rather its improvement and advancement, “tomorrow” is definitely better than “yesterday” or even “today”²⁵. Under this new reality, history becomes a process of constant evolution, propelled by reforms and revolutions; historical stories, thus, became products of linear historiography.

In the historiography of the socialist New China, peasant rebellions have become the focal points that lined up the straight line of national history. In *Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party*, part of the 1939 wartime textbook Mao Zedong and his party members had been writing, the Communist Party in Yanan claimed the Chinese Nation was “known throughout the world... for... its rich revolutionary traditions (*geming chuantong* 革命傳統)²⁶,” redefining the code of dynastic cycle by reframing the “hundreds of peasant uprisings” as its causes, without which dynasties would not arise and fall and history would not progress. Some notable “peasant revolts or peasant revolutionary wars” included, of course, “Li Zicheng in the Ming Dynasty,” listed as the second last examples before the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Qing²⁷. They then went on to conclude that these peasant rebellions “constituted the real motive force of

²⁵ Ibid, 28-9.

²⁶ "The Chinese Revolutions and The Chinese Communist Party." Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol, II, Marxists Internet Archive, revised 2004, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_23.htm.

²⁷ Ibid.

historical development in Chinese feudal society²⁸,” yet inevitably they all failed due to a lack of more advanced socio-economic conditions and political leadership “such as the proletariat and the Communist Party provide today²⁹,” these peasant rebellions only served to give minimal “social progress” that were too little to change “the feudal economic relations and political system³⁰.” The textbook article, after much current social and political analysis, concluded that “there can be no doubt that the ultimate perspective of the Chinese revolution is not capitalism but socialism and communism³¹” and its success depends on “the Chinese Communist Party, the party of the proletariat, without whose leadership no revolution can succeed³².” Thus, one can see that under this new revolutionary historiography, by placing peasant rebellions at the center of the linear timeline, the communists became the vital factor that could guide this “real motive force” to the correct direction for the good of the Nation. Therefore, infused with the leftist writers around the formation of the Proletariat Literary Movement, history novels under the influence of this new historiography became known as the Revolutionary History novels.

Similarly with traditional romances, stories of revolutionary history novels also began with protagonists placed in difficult situations and progressed through even more difficulties, but their implications were entirely different to its traditional counterparts. For a romance, the disaster opening was merely a moment of one fatalistic cycle out of many and, as the story moved on, the

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Wang, *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo*, 25.

plot would unfold into an ending that saw no improvement to the situation in the beginning; it was a poetic showcase of human drama³³. But in a revolutionary history novel, the opening was a definitive moment of humanity, as it saw the beginning of the revolution, when history was truly made³⁴. From then on, the plot unfolds into a continuous advancement from worst to best, the antagonists were to be defeated again and again, whilst the protagonists went “from victories to greater victories”, eventually arriving on the clear affirming hope for a glorious future³⁵. The novel functioned as a propagation of revolutionary tradition, encouraging a continual of the revolution to prevent restoration of the past³⁶.

Subsequently, depiction of the past served as a reminder of “how bad it used to be” for the readers, it was all the disasters and obstacles that defined the protagonists’ struggles existed, “the old unreasonable regime, the cruel class exploitations and oppressions, the persecutions and exterminations from the reactionaries, everything that is said to 'never be back' in real life³⁷,” without all this, the plot would be baseless and the story purposeless. In the imagination of a revolutionary history novel, the past was to be examined, criticised and abandoned by “future,” a harsh reminder for the world outside of the novel.

³³ Ibid, 29-30.

³⁴ Ibid, 30-1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ 「不合理的舊制度，殘酷的階級剝削與壓迫，反革命勢力的迫害和殘殺，據說已經在現實生活中『一去不復返』的這一切，」 Ibid, 28-9.

The Literary Ambition of Yao Xueyin

Yao was a novelist that had the ambition of a historian. In his words, *Li Zicheng* opened a new avenue for novel writing, as whilst other novels in China before his simply retold old stories for modern appetites, *Li Zicheng* sought to express the old times for what it really is --- “to honestly present the lives on history, to present the essence and order of historical facts³⁸.” That even though a lot of stories in the novel, including most of the First Volume, were not at all factual, these dramatic displays were aimed at accurately portray the class dynamics, regional cultures and social orders of late Ming China³⁹.

In the mind of Yao, novel writing was not at all in conflict with historical research, “history novel should be the product of the organic combination between the science of history and the art of novels,” he continued with the duty as a historical novelist, “when managing the relations between the two, a historical novelist shall dig deep within history and jump out of it. Without digging deep, the science of history cannot be reached; without jumping out, the artistic mission cannot be accomplished⁴⁰.” But between history and literature, he put historical authenticity before literary artistry, that “one cannot jump out of history without first digging deep within

38 「……忠實地反映歷史生活，反映歷史事實的本質和規律，」 Jian Du and Xueyin Yao, “Yao Xueyin xiansheng tan lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng de chuanguo” (Mister Xueyin Yao talks about his creation of the history novel *Li Zicheng*), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, 22-3.

39 Ibid, 23.

40 「歷史小說應該是歷史科學和小說藝術的有機結合，而歷史小說家在處理兩者的關係時必須做到深入歷史，跳出歷史。不深入歷史就不能達到歷史科學，不跳出歷史就完不成藝術使命。」 Xueyin Yao, “Li Zicheng Diyijuan Qianyan” (Preface of First Volume in *Li Zicheng*), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 290.

it⁴¹.” Literary expressions were the vehicle of historical truths, the artistic imaginations of “the historical life (*lishi shenghuo* 歷史生活)” was a showcase of historical dynamics⁴². This intermingling of history and literature was discussed more thoroughly by Dong’s *Guanlian yu Xiaoshuo* (*Perspectives and Novels*), as, quoting from American literary historian Hayden White (1928-2018), he argued that historians had been doing similar things when writing history, that “No one historical fact that is randomly recorded can form a story by itself, to historians, they are but factors to a story. These facts are factors of suppressing and highlighting, of omitting and emphasising, to be used in shaping personalities, recurring themes, changing voices and perspectives, in a variety of writing strategies available, et cetera --- all in all, through all the techniques that we used in writing plots for novels and dramas --- can they become a story⁴³.”

In *Li Zicheng*, Yao showed the commonality between narratives of history and of literature, in expressing his well-researched historical arguments through literary writing. In the pool of historical facts, of both the late Ming era and of traditions and customs of classical China, Yao constructed the plot of the First Volume, imaginatively celebrating the “revolutionary tradition” in a bygone era.

Li Zicheng: Publication and Reception

⁴¹ Yao, “Li Zicheng Diyijuan Qianyan” (*Li Zicheng* First Volume Preface), 290.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dong, “Guanlian yu Xiaoshuo --- Guanyu Yao Xueyin de Wujuanben ‘Li Zicheng’,” 77.

Yao Xueyin, born October 10, 1910 and passed away at 29 April, 1999, was a native of Dengzhou in Henan Province. During the 1930s and 40s he became a famed short novel writer, with works such as “Half a Cartload of Straw Short” and “Niu Quande and Radishes.⁴⁴” In 1947 he wrote the novel *Long Night* (*Changye* 長夜), which was a story of bandits with morals and code of honour⁴⁵. After being denounced as a rightist in 1957, he devoted himself to writing *Li Zicheng*⁴⁶.

The idea of writing a modern novel for this late Ming rebel hero was already in the mind of Yao early on during the Second Sino-Japanese War. For this purpose, research on historical records had been going underway while writing short novels such as *Changye*⁴⁷, a memorial work that referred to part of his early life as an adoptive son of a bandit leader for a season,⁴⁸ which posed a huge influence on *Li Zicheng* that will discuss later.

The trend of the Proletariat Literary Movement contributed in shaping his political and historical worldviews. As he said, intense debates on applying the historical materialism on understanding the natures of Chinese society and the issues in her social history made him intrigued in studying

⁴⁴ Hong, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 140.

⁴⁵ Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, ed. *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature: 1900-1949*. Vol. 1, (Brill, 1988): 197-9.

⁴⁶ Hong, *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 140.

⁴⁷ Kongwei Gao, “Yao Xueyin Jianjie” (Introduction of Yao Xueyin), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji* (*Collected Works of Yao Xueyin*), ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 6.

⁴⁸ Xueyin Yao, “Wuo De Daolu” (My Way), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji* (*Collected Works of Yao Xueyin*), ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 45.

Marxist theories of politics and history, which inspired his future studies. Besides that, his upbringing has cultivated in him an interest in classical Chinese history and literature⁴⁹. With Marxism as the tool, his “thought weapons” to crush through the problems of history, and classical history as the target, his research and writing effort *Li Zicheng* came into being.

But the writing process was really begun at 1957, when almost all of his duty as a literary critic and editor had been halted due to intense criticism on his “radical right-leaning politics”, forcing him into a period of reclusion and “self-criticism”, it was at this period of writing “self-reflection” by official demand that he began writing his novel in secret⁵⁰. In the preface of the First Volume, Yao explained why he began his writing now but not earlier: “before Liberation (the founding of the P.R.C.), I could not seriously begin my preparation work on *Li Zicheng* despite my great interest in doing so... mostly because I was unable to grasp the scientific weaponry that was Marxist-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thoughts to conquer such an important historical subject matter, that I did not know what to write and how to write;⁵¹” therefore, after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, Yao claimed that he “acquired a new understanding on historical materials that I touched upon” as he became more fluent in the socialist ideologies, that refreshed by the ideological understanding on the story of the late Ming

⁴⁹ Yao, “Wuo De Daolu,” 46.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ 「解放前我之所以對寫《李自成》空有興趣而不能認真著手做準備工作，...首要原因還是沒有掌握馬克思列寧主義、毛澤東思想的科學武器去征服這一重大的歷史題材，不明白應該寫什麼和怎樣寫。」 Xueyin Yao, “Li Zicheng Diyijuan Qianyan,” 286.

rebel leader, he could finally be confident enough to begin writing the novel⁵². In an interview conducted after the publication of the trilogy, Yao stated that what ignited his interest in the story of *Li Zicheng* was his “combinations of qualifications”, that is his interests in Marxism, his foundation in classical Chinese literature and his years of experience in novel writing⁵³. Despite these, Yao also emphasised from time to time, that his own research contributed a lot in constructing most of the scenes, especially scenes of wars between the peasant rebels and the Ming imperial armies, which became the focus of the First Volume.

In 1960, his working condition was slightly improved as he was allowed to come back home in Wuhan, yet his work was still constantly disrupted by the local government, thus as he completed the First Volume in 1963, he sent it to Mao Zedong for review, attached with it a letter pleading for further support⁵⁴. Mao, apparently impressed by the novel, accepted his pleading and issued that local bureaus and departments to assist him in completing his novel, thus in 1966, the very first year of the Cultural Revolution, Yao was able to continue writing *Li Zicheng* with relative comfort⁵⁵; in 1977, Mao again stressed his support to him in a response to another letter from a disrupted Yao, this time he had a visit from officials of the Central Government, along with promises of conveniences in all his field trips and providing necessary library catalogue to

⁵² 「隨著我在新的條件下不斷地學習馬克思列寧主義、毛澤東思想的機會，我對接觸過的歷史資料獲得了新的認識，從而形成了《李自成》的主義思想。一旦初步形成了主題思想，它一方面可以繼續豐富和深化，一方面也可以幫助我在繼續準備的工作上打主動仗、並且增長了勇氣，堅定了信心。」 Ibid, 287.

⁵³ Guy Alitto and Xueyin Yao, "Yao Xueyin and His "Li Zicheng": An Interview." *Modern Chinese Literature* 2, no. 2 (1986): 212.

⁵⁴ Gao, “Yao Xueyin Jianjie”, 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 7.

conduct his historical research⁵⁶. Yao's access to official historical records and resources under direct and increasingly open official support, showed the weight of *Li Zicheng* in the contemporary literary canon of China. As of 1981, when the Third Volume was just published, the trilogy instantly became the bestseller, coming with it were an explosion of newspaper commentaries on the novel and a Chinese opera (戲曲 *xiqu*) stage adaptation, critics praised it as “possibly an epic comparable to every famous literary work of China and foreign world”⁵⁷, the passionate public reception reflected the popular acceptance of the historical story-telling and portrayal that Yao diligently presented to them.

Li Zicheng perhaps received its impacts on popular culture on earlier appraisals in the literary field. Famous historians and literatis at the time like Mao Dun, Guo Moruo (郭沫若, 1892-1978), Hu Sheng (胡繩, 1918-2000), Xia Xian (夏衍, 1900-95), Qin Mu (秦牧, 1919-92), Lin Mohan (林默涵, 1913-2008) have all sent letters to Yao discussing his works. These were all letters of congratulations, some of them included in-depth criticism, suggesting how the writing could be improved to be more accessible for its readers. In these letters, most of them focused on its historicity, they praised that the depth and width of the writer's historical knowledge were integrated well with the realist writing style that gave the plot a fascinating plausibility⁵⁸; they

⁵⁶ Ibid, 7-9.

⁵⁷ 「有可能成為一部可以和中外文學名著相媲美的傳世之作」 Ibid, 9.

⁵⁸ Qin Mu, “Qin Mu zhi Yao Xueyin” (Qin Mu to Yao Xueyin), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 506-7.

even took the novella as an “encyclopedia” of the “feudal society” of ancient China⁵⁹, that through the journey of Li’s peasant rebellion, the readers were being shown “an exhibition” of the intricate yet broad social class relations in the late Ming era⁶¹. As mentioned earlier, the novella was written during the times of Cultural Revolution, since it began as an literary movement, these literatis seemingly took *Li Zicheng* as their icon of resentment on it, regarding the dominance of the Gang of Four. Some of them thought that the deep historicity of *Li Zicheng* was an effective “weapon” to oppose the literary theories proposed by the Gang at the time; as the correct representation of Maoist thoughts, *Li Zicheng* demonstrated how Marxist theories could be incorporated into realistic historical depictions, to much defiance of the contemporary-focused Gang⁶², some of them even thought that this novella foreshadowed the releasing of the literary “creative passion” once repressed by the Gang⁶³, speaking much of how well-received *Li Zicheng* was in the post-Cultural Revolution China.

Ancient Revolution: The Plot of *Li Zicheng*

The plot of *Battling South of the Pass* resembled the tenets of revolutionary history: the

⁵⁹ Hu Sheng, “Hu Sheng zhi Yao Xueyin” (Hu Sheng to Yao Xueyin), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 499.

⁶⁰ Qin Mu, “Qin Mu zhi Yao Xueyin”, 507.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Xia Xian, “Xia Xian zhi Yao Xueyin” (Xia Xian to Yao Xueyin), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 501-2.

⁶³ Mohan Lin, “Lin Mohan zhi Yao Xueyin” (Lin Mohan to Yao Xueyin), in *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, ed. Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 512.

unrelenting commitment to the ultimate victory of the revolution. The protagonists were first introduced to the readers in a difficult situation: they were being encircled by the government forces, unfed and unsupplied, they had to find ways to break free from a better equipped and supplied enemy to rejoin their allies. As leader of the army, Li Zicheng had to give a speech to his disillusioned fellow:

闖王……望著眾人說：「一連三天，咱們不是行軍就是廝殺，人馬都沒有得到休息。今晚大家痛痛快快睡半夜，只要明天從潼關附近衝過去，到了河南，官兵就再也包圍不住咱們啦。到那時，咱們想走就走，想休息就休息，糧草也不發愁啦。」⁶⁴

[The Prince Valiant (self-made title of Li)... looked at everyone and said: “for the last three days, we marched and killed, our men and horses never had a rest. So tonight, everyone take a good half-night sleep, and tomorrow we will dash through the Tong Pass and get to Henan, where the government forces can no longer encircle us! And by then, we can move and rest as we please, and we don’t need to worry about food anymore!”]

幾個月中，李自成為著打破官軍的包圍，率領著農民軍從甘肅進入西番地，在羌族游牧人的地區轉來轉去。農民軍缺乏糧食，又不得休息，在西番地犧牲很大，仍然擺不脫官軍的追趕。⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Xueyin Yao. *Di Yi Juan Tongguan nanyuan dazhan (First Volume: Battling South of the Pass)*, in Li Zicheng Chuan 10 ce (Li Zicheng Full 10 Volumes). Mao Dun Literature Award Winning Works Complete Works. (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2018), chap. 4, Kindle.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

[For the last couple of months, Li Zicheng led the peasant armies from Gansu to Xifandi (citation from author: currently Eastern Qinghai (西番地——如今的青海东部。)) to break the encirclement of the government forces, moving around in the pastoral lands of the Jiang people. The peasant armies lacked food and could not rest, a lot of casualties had been made, yet still they could not be rid of the government forces.]

兩三個月前，李自成還在隴東南和漢中一帶的大山中同官兵兜圈子時就派人給曹操送信，要曹操率領在河南的各家義軍到潼關牽制孫傳庭，迎接他進入河南。曹操當時同意按照他的計策行事。李自成得了曹操的回信，不顧官兵的重重攔截，向東殺來。兩天來已進入商洛地區，離河南邊界日近，才看出來官軍並沒有受到曹操的牽制。⁶⁶

[About two or three months ago, when Li Zicheng was still leading his army to escape from the government forces in the mountains between southern Shaanxi and Hanzhong, he sent a letter to Cao Cao (the ally of Li), requesting him to lead his armies from Henan to hold back Sun Chuangting (the government commissioner responsible for capturing Li)'s forces in Tong Pass, receiving him to enter Henan. Cao Cao agreed to follow his plan. When Li Zicheng received his response, he came eastward, overcoming all the blockades from the government forces. Two days ago, they arrived in the Shangluo region, and day by day they were closing into Henan, it was until then that he knew the government forces had not been held back at all by Cao Cao.]

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The story eventually culminated into a bloody battle between Li, now alone without help promised by his ally, and the vastly superior government forces⁶⁷. After massive casualties, Li and his associates managed to fled from the encirclement, but morale was at all time low, such that even Li was being affected:

過了一頓飯工夫，他才在一個磐石上坐下，一邊想著高迎祥，許許多多死去的親戚、族人、朋友和親兵愛將，一邊重新思索著今後怎麼辦，忽然嘆口氣，自言自語說：

“勝敗兵家常事，跌倒了爬起來，重新好生幹吧。自古打天下都不是一帆風順的！”⁶⁸

[After about a meal's time, he sat on a rock, thinking about Gao Xingchang (predecessor of Li) and many other deceased relatives, clan members, friends, soldiers and generals, while also pondering on the next step, and suddenly, he sighed, telling himself that:

“Victories and losses are typical in wars, just get back up from the fall, start things all over again. It was never easy to seize power!”]

The plot went on as he tried to distract himself by taking a stroll, then, all of a sudden:

這一陣，他的心情空前地平靜，一邊在小路上散步，一邊盤算著今後應該如何招集散亡，如何練兵，如何認真整頓軍紀，如何蒐集糧草，在商洛山中度過這一段困難日子。一個念頭突然跳到了他的心上，他想了想，在心中說：

⁶⁷ Ibid, chap. 5-13.

⁶⁸ Yao, *Di Yi Juan Tongguan nanyuan dazhan (First Volume: Battling South of the Pass)*, chap. 13, Kindle.

“對，對，趁如今朝廷在中原兵力空虛，一定得想辦法使敬軒重新起義。倘若他起義，全盤死棋都活了。”⁶⁹

[For now, his mind was in total calmness, as he was strolling down the path while planning on how to regroup the disarrayed members, how to train his army and disciplining them, and where to find food, to go through these hard days in the Shangluo Mountains. A thought suddenly appeared, he thought it over, then spoke it out in his mind:

“Yes, yes, the court retreated its forces in the Central Plain, let’s exploit the vacuum by having Jingxian rebel again. If he rebels again, this dead chess game shall be alive once more.”]

Jingxian was another name of his ally Zhang Xianzhong (1606-47), another late Ming rebel figure that also garnered much attention from historians.

The formula of a revolutionary history novel thus shown: the difficult opening and the development of a tortuous journey. But perhaps what made *Li Zicheng* different was the fact that the bloody battle, which became the main focus of the story, was a fabrication. While most revolutionary history novels based its battle stories on blood-soaked frontline experience, *Battling South of the Pass* was based on a rumour. From his research, Yao concluded that the battle did not actually happen, it was a rumour out of an inaccurate approximation, to much

⁶⁹ Ibid.

opposition of the mainstream historical opinion at his time⁷⁰. It seemed that Yao defied his mission of basing literary creation upon historicity by writing in a historical myth, but in his words the plot was still as historical as it could be. He insisted that legends and rumours of history could be applied, as long as it could help the story to show historical truths “in a more concentrated, descriptive and lively manner,” these fabrications had to be depicted in “a realist style,” its details had to be bounded by the conditions of historical life, it had to be plausible, otherwise, he feared, the artistic effect would be diluted or lost⁷¹. Without the bloody battles and the poor condition of the rebel army, Li Zicheng would hardly be a convincing protagonist that, in his words, never stops “to start another climax of revolution” in the face of unbearable loss, his undying faith in the eventual victory of the revolution could not be reflected⁷².

The plot of *Li Zicheng* was one of a linear timeline of revolution, in which Li became the solitary hero to pursue his agenda through a series of climaxes and anti-climaxes. Under the writing of Yao, despite being a “hero of the ancient peasantry⁷³” before modernity, when Marx was not

⁷⁰ 「關於這次戰爭的記載，較早的史料出於吳偉業的《綏寇紀略》卷六，為馮甦的《見聞隨筆》卷上所承襲。戴笠的《懷陵流寇始終錄》卷十一亦採取此說，但有異詞。《明史》採入《曹變蛟傳》中。這一說法在後來頗為流行，一直影響我國現代史學界有關李自成的一些著作。根據我的研究，根本沒有發生過這次戰爭。……從歷史的真實看，崇禎九年七月間前闖王高迎祥被俘犧牲以後，經過一段鬥爭，李自成被推為闖王。但一則他在當時沒有足夠的威望統率高迎祥的舊部，二則官軍的壓力還很強大，所以在不到兩年的奮戰中，原屬高迎祥的各隊首領或死或降或散。到崇禎十一年四月間，李自成只剩下大約一千三百人，被洪承疇親自督率總兵曹變蛟、左光先、祖大弼和王洪，以及副將馬科和賀人龍等圍堵窮追，李自成將殘部分為兩支，自己率領三百人（其中有婦女兒童）在隴東南的大山中日夜奔走，迂回曲折，未被左光先追上，逃到漢中府境內。崇禎十一年前後，在陝西和中原地區的農民戰爭處於低潮，許多首領有的死了，有的投降了，有的偽降了。李自成確實陷於孤軍作戰，幾乎被消滅。只是他幾乎被消滅的地點不在潼關附近，而戰爭的規模也不像所傳潼關南原之戰那麼大。」 Yao, “Li Zicheng Diyijuan Qianyan”, 291-3.

⁷¹ Ibid, 292.

⁷² Ibid, 291.

⁷³ 「古代農民英雄」 Ibid, 294.

even born yet, the definition of revolution expanded its temporality, it was no longer an affair of the modern world, a dramatic moment for the new and the contemporary to separate itself from the old and the ancient. Although Yao “did not want to write a hero that transcend his time⁷⁴,” Li Zicheng was “the peasant revolutionary hero⁷⁵” that, “to a certain extent,” “advanced the social productive forces by toppling centuries of corrupted feudal rule of Ming⁷⁶,” the tale of Li projected a spirit of revolution in “Old China” that was no different to that of New China, its appearance changed from the socio-economic conditions of the time, but the progressive essence stood its tests. The detailed research into the society of late Ming China, commitment to historicity, formulated what Anderson called “a sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside⁷⁷.” The material condition of the rebel army, the pyrrhic effort to be free from government encirclement all serves to relate to “the world outside,” to the harsh, battle-hardened memories of the People’s Republic’s readers that had been through, or heard of, the days of the Long March, the Japanese invasion (on an unrelated note, both the Nationalists and the Japanese employed encirclement tactics on the Communists) and the Civil Wars. The frequent mentions of locations like Gansu, Henan, including Eastern Qinghai in citing where Xifandi “currently” was, reminding readers of the People’s Republic that this “revolution,” much like the successful one they once supported and even participated before, happened in places that still exist, the same places that composed the same China regardless of

⁷⁴ 「我的原則是不寫超時代的英雄。」 Ibid, 296.

⁷⁵ 「農民革命英雄」 Ibid, 302.

⁷⁶ 「……打垮明朝將近三百年的腐朽的封建統治，在一定程度上推進了社會生產力的發展，……」 Ibid.

⁷⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, (Verso books, 2006), 30.

late Ming or the People's Republic. This Imagined Nation of China evolved through the "proto-revolution" of peasant rebellions, in which Li Zicheng symbolised one of these many moments of national evolution. *Li Zicheng* witnessed the national consciousness born out of the revolutionary continuity, through linearly reframing its moments of revolutions in place of the fatalistic cycle from moments of imperial dynastic successions. The fact that contemporary critics claiming this novel as a mere appropriation of the Red Army experience proves how effective this experiment of national imagination was, through tying "the world inside" and "the world outside" together.

Language Across Time and Place: The Language in *Li Zicheng*

Yao was definitely not the first to imbue nationalism in his literary work. In his words, *Li Zicheng* can only be the novel of his style, but not the style that represents all of the Chinese literature, despite how much effort it showed at pursuing for a "national style (*minzhu fengge* 民族風格),"⁷⁸ the literary style that best expresses the characteristics of the Chinese Nation.

Foremost of all was the language the novel has chosen.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson suggested that the modern novel acts as an agent of formation of a common print-language, which formed the basis of national consciousness, that "the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time"⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Xueyin Yao, "Tan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhongguo Fengge he Zhongguo Qipai Wenti" (About the Chinese Style and Chinese Manner in Novel Writing). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 174.

⁷⁹ Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 26.

was only formulated thanks to the writing and publishing of novel stories (together with newspapers). This new language “created unified fields of exchange and communication” between users of literary language and vernacular languages, as well as those of different regional vernaculars, “in the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that only those hundred of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community.⁸⁰” Through a common print-language, novels are written to tell stories that relate to its users, planting in their minds a collective fatalistic perspective that one refers to the national consciousness.

Yao also agreed that creating a common written language would foster national unity. Relating to the experience of promoting anti-Japanese war effort to different regions through literary works in the 1930s, Yao supported for a national “popular literature (*dazhong wenxue* 大眾文學)⁸¹”, for which a common literary language had to be created nation-wide, the “popular language (*dazhongyu* 大眾語)” inspired from the spoken tongues of the commoners⁸². Despite basing itself off from the commoners, Yao also thought it necessary for the language to relay the cultural past, through inheriting the older, previously exclusive, literary form that was the classic Chinese, which already contained many famous literary classics which the popular literature can

⁸⁰ Ibid, 44.

⁸¹ Yao, “Tan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhongguo Fengge he Zhongguo Qipai Wenti,” 166.

⁸² Ibid, 166-7.

retell and even appropriate; therefore, it became a necessity that the literary language needs to be “sinicised (*zhongguohua* 中國化),” to promote a new progressive ideal through a familiar popular language, “new wine in an old bottle (*jiupingzhuangxinzhou* 舊瓶裝新酒)⁸³.” As what Anderson proposed, that “in every instance, the ‘choice’ of language appears as a gradual, unselfconscious, pragmatic, not to say haphazard development⁸⁴,” from the example of *Li Zicheng*, despite the Popular Language being a consciously claimed literary creation, it was still being affected by unconscious ‘choices’ that still led towards the propagated goal of a Chinese national consciousness.

In the First Volume of *Li Zicheng*, the language choice was a blend of various Northern dialects and a mixture of the ancient classical and contemporary vernacular. Despite historically speaking, the hero himself was of Shaanxi native, in the novel the narration in his perspective composed of a mixture of Shaanxi and Henan dialects. Below is a list of words cited which seemingly Yao assumed need to be explained for readers of the time to understand, such citations indicated their place of origins:

Citations (Untranslated)	Place of Origins Indicated, Chapters
亮牌子——叫出名字，這是從前北方的江湖話。	Northern Triad slang (北方的江湖話), Chapter 4.

⁸³ Ibid, 167.

⁸⁴ Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 42.

先後——米脂方言稱兄弟的妻子為先後。	Shaanxi Mizhi County Dialect (米脂方言), Chapter 6.
桿子——明末商洛地區對本地小股農民叛亂部隊叫做桿子，統治階級則稱之為桿匪。在相鄰的豫西地區也是這樣稱呼。	Western Henan (豫西地區) Speech, Chapter 6.
背鍋——土語稱駝背為背鍋。	Vernacular (土語), Chapter 6.
抹——陡的反義詞。北方土話。	Northern Vernacular (北方土話), Chapter 10.
二爹——米脂縣方言，稱叔父為爹，稱父親為爸爸。李自成是李過父親李鴻名的同胞二弟。	Shaanxi Mizhi County Dialect (米脂縣方言), Chapter 10.
生澀——在北方口語中，鐵器生了鏽叫做生澀（例如董解元《西廂記》卷二：“生澀了雪刃霜尖”）。朋友間發生不和，好像鐵生了鏽，就說是犯了生澀。一般群眾是不說“芥蒂”或“齟齬”的。	Northern Vernacular (北方口語), Chapter 18.
場——音cháng，河南人對打麥場的簡稱。	Henan Speech (河南人...的簡稱), Chapter 21.

Total Cited Words: 8

Northern Vernaculars: 3

Henan Speech: 2

Shaanxi Mizhi County Dialect: 2

Unindicated Vernacular: 1

From the list, one could see most of the special words were of a generic “Northern” origin, while others were mostly from Shaanxi or Henan. Apparently the mix of two provinces was a personal choice, as Yao explained it was to let his Henanese fellow feel familiar reading his work, as well as, if not more importantly, that his early life as an adoptive son of a bandit leader posed such influence⁸⁵ that he claimed without these times he could not have written *Li Zicheng*⁸⁶.

Apparently, *Li Zicheng* stemmed a lot from his experience with peasant banditry, which not only contributed towards realistic depictions on the life of the similarly unruly peasant rebels, but also his choice of a sympathetic display on them as opposed to its antagonist the “extremely corrupt regime that was the Ming Dynasty⁸⁷”.

The choice of a mixed Northern dialect in depicting and describing the life of the protagonists in *Li Zicheng* created a sense of general “Chinese” tone that felt more ancient or peasant than it was provincial. Even though there were so much more jargons of Ming court elites and officials, as there were 31 in Chapter 1 alone⁸⁸, the regional vernacular words blended in with the Vernacular

⁸⁵ Yao, “Wuo De Daolu”, 45.

⁸⁶ 「河南人讀起來特別親切，……但用的是河南語言，因為我對河南熟悉，有感情；沒有河南的生活，我寫不出《李自成》。」 Yao, “Tan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhongguo Fengge he Zhongguo Qipai Wenti,” 172.

⁸⁷ 「……明朝的極其腐朽的政權……」 Xueyin Yao. *Di Yi Juan Tongguan nanyuan dazhan (First Volume: Battling South of the Pass)*, in *Li Zicheng Chuan 10 ce (Li Zicheng Full 10 Volumes)*. Mao Dun Literature Award Winning Works Complete Works. (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2018), chap. 1, Kindle.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

form (*baihuawen* 白話文) of the whole Volume so well, that after reading a reader might recall Li Zicheng first as a Chinese rebel hero against the evil regime, then as a late Ming Shaanxi local rebelling against a regime based in Beijing.

Besides the regional differences, the temporal differences also had to be tackled. To balance between historicity and accessibility, compromise was made between the archaic but temporally appropriate classical Chinese and the accessible but anachronistic vernacular Chinese (*baihuawen* 白話文). To emphasise the mannerisms of the times and the social classes⁸⁹, Yao wrote dialogues with words and expressions matching to the times and ranks of the characters in question: “you can’t use vernacular when writing the lines from the emperor; I generally follow the literary symmetry and flowery vocabularies that the emperors used in their memorials⁹⁰,” to stay loyal to the period he was depicting, Yao would refuse to use expressions that appeared after Ming, so much that he would not even those from the succeeding Qing dynasty⁹¹.

Coupling with the personal sentimental emphasis, it might be said that by fusing “the world inside the novel with the world outside,” as Anderson described⁹², Yao managed to create a Chinese “national imagination” that transcends regional and temporal (late Ming-contemporary) differences, yet still connects with his contemporary readers in the sense of popular/”below-

⁸⁹ Yao, “Tan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhongguo Fengge he Zhongguo Qipai Wenti,” 173.

⁹⁰ 「皇帝講話你就不能用白話來寫。皇帝下的詔書一般要講究對仗，詞句典雅，我就大體按這個要求去寫。」 Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 30.

bourgeoisie-elites” commoners. It would seem to be that the formation of the Popular Language speaks well for a common “proletariat” national consciousness of New China.

Summary and Further Discussions

Li Zicheng intended to be a national history novel with an educational purpose. It reflected how Chinese nationalism changed under the socialist historiography of Revolutionary History. Under the influence of a “revolutionary culture”, *Li Zicheng* showed to the readers that the late Ming peasant rebellion as a glorious struggle for the future of the Chinese Nation, through depicting the revolutionary struggle of the Prince Valiant in the accessible Popular Language, it formulated a narrative of the “ancient revolutionary tradition” that has the potential of applying it on appropriating and retelling many other legends and romances of peasant rebellions for its backing with historical research, and for the same reason the narrative also serves as an alternate historical narrative on putting the same group of traditionally criticised rebellions in history in a better light, as an elaboration of the Maoist revolutionary historiography arguing peasant rebellions as a “real motive force” in national history, which legitimised the socialist rule of the People’s Republic, as the government of a rebellious nation defined by her history of peasant revolutionary wars.

This essay hopes to make a case for *Li Zicheng* by highlighting its significance on the literary history of contemporary China. It tries to be an introductory work to the non-Chinese academia by showing its achievements and contributions to the development of the literary canon of

Chinese historical novels, as well as the popular culture of China as a whole. *Li Zicheng* can be seen as a contemporary response to the Chinese novel literary tradition, as a reform upon the *zhanghui* (章回) novels of the Ming and Qing eras which Yao had discussed in interviews; the novella can perhaps be comparatively studied with historical romances like *Three Kingdoms* and *the Water Margins*, especially on the overlapping themes of dynastic cycles and peasant banditry, as well as their vernacular writing styles varied by the eras they published. That the emphasis of historicity on the history depicted in relation to the literary value and effects definitely saw its impact on the popular cultural products since 1980s, the realist trend started by this novella saw its continuation now, such as the film *Fall of Ming* (大明劫, 2013), which also focused on the same period of peasant rebellion through the perspective of the Ming court, depicting a rusty, decrepit imagery of a classical China in decay. By shedding lights on the significance of the novella on the history of modern Chinese cultural development, this essay also wishes to help on beginning the initiative on translating the novella into English and other languages, thus further facilitating the inter-cultural conversations between Chinese and non-Chinese literatures.

Word Count: 8488 words

Bibliography

1. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso books, 2006.
2. ALITTO, GUY, and Xueyin Yao. "Yao Xueyin and His "Li Zicheng": An Interview." *Modern Chinese Literature* 2, no. 2 (1986): 211-16. Accessed March 17, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41490584>.

3. Dong, Zhilin. "Guannian yu Xiaoshuo —— Guanyu Yao Xueyin de Wujianben ‘Li Zicheng’”(Perspectives and Novels --- About the Five Volumes of Li Zicheng by Yao Xueyin). *Literary Review*, no. 2 (2008): 74-84.
4. Doleželová-Velingerová, Milena, ed. *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature: 1900-1949*. Vol. 1. Brill, 1988.
5. DU, JIAN, and Yao, Xueyin, “Yao Xueyin xiansheng tan lishi xiaoshuo Li Zicheng de chuangzuo” (Mister Xueyin Yao talks about his creation of the history novel *Li Zicheng*). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 20-32. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
6. Gao, Kongwei, “Yao Xueyin Jianjie” (Introduction of Yao Xueyin). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu (Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985), 3-10.
7. Guo, Yingjie. and He, Baogang. “Reimagining the Chinese Nation: The ‘Zeng Guofan Phenomenon’”. *Modern China*, 25, no.2 (April 1999), 142-170.
8. Hong, Zicheng. *Zhongguo Dandai Wenxueshi*. Second Edition. Peking University Press: 2007.
9. Hong, Zicheng. *A History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*. Translated by Michael M. Day. Brill, 2007.
10. Hu Sheng, “Hu Sheng zhi Yao Xueyin” (Hu Sheng to Yao Xueyin). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 499-501. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
11. Liang, Qichao. "Lun Xiaoshuo yu Qunzhi zhi Guanxi" (About the relations between Novels and Governance). In *Yinbinshihejiwenji 4 (The Collected Works from the Ice-Drinker's Studio 4)*, 114-7. Shanghai: Chunghwa Book Company.
12. Liang, Qichao. Liang Rengong Jinzhe/*Recent Collected Writings of Liang Ch'i-ch'ao*. In *Minguo Chongshu*. Shanghai: The Commercial Press (1989): 43-106.
13. Liang, Qichao. *Xin min shuo*. Shanghai: Chunghwa Book Company (1936).

14. Lin, Mohan, "Lin Mohan zhi Yao Xueyin" (Lin Mohan to Yao Xueyin). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 512-15. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
15. Mao Dun. "Guanyu Changpian Lishi Xiaoshuo Li Zicheng" (About the Historical Novel *Li Zicheng*). In *Mao Dun Jinzuo (The Recent Works of Mao Dun)*, 25-37. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Press, 1980.
16. Marxists Internet Archive. "The Chinese Revolutions and The Chinese Communist Party." Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: Vol, II. Revised 2004. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_23.htm.
17. Meng, Fanhua and Cheng, Guangwei. *Zhonggho Dangdai Wenxue Fazhanshi (A Developmental History of Contemporary Chinese Literature)*. Peking University Press: 2011.
18. Qin Mu, "Qin Mu zhi Yao Xueyin" (Qin Mu to Yao Xueyin). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 503-11. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
19. Townsend, James. "Chinese Nationalism." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 27 (1992): 97-130. doi:10.2307/2950028
20. Wang Ziping, *Geming, Lishi, Xiaoshuo*. Oxford University Press: 2018.
21. Xia Xian, "Xia Xian zhi Yao Xueyin" (Xia Xian to Yao Xueyin). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 501-3. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
22. Yao, Xueyin, "Li Zicheng Diyijuan Qianyan" (Preface of First Volume in Li Zicheng). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 286-318. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
23. Yao, Xueyin, "Tan Xiaoshuo Chuangzuo de Zhongguo Fengge he Zhongguo Qipai Wenti" (About the Chinese Style and Chinese Manner in Novel Writing). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 165-74. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985.

24. Yao, Xueyin, “Wuo De Daolu” (My Way). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 45-56. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe.
25. Yao, Xueyin, “Xiaoshuo shi zenyang xie cheng de” (How Were Novels Being Written). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 98-110. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985.
26. Yao, Xueyin, “Zhuojia yao zhongshi xuexi lilun” (Writers Need to Prioritise on Learning Theories). In *Yao Xueyin Yanjiuzhuanji (Collected Works of Yao Xueyin)*, edited by Beihua Yao, Guozhang He and Runsheng Yu, 188-94. Zhengzhou: Huanghe Wenyi Chubanshe, 1985.