

# ***“Disinterested” and Critical: A Comparative Study of the Social Implications of Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold’s Literary Thinking***

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**Abstract:** According to previous scholarship, China’s Xueheng literary school in the early 20th century is an antagonist to the then prevalent New Culture Movement as the former is claimed to insist on a conservation of traditional thoughts. Matthew Arnold’s thinking is a major source of one representative figure of the Xueheng school, Miu Fenglin. A comparative analysis of the literary thinking of Matthew Arnold and Miu Fenglin suggests that both thinkers have actually shed light on how literature should be relevant to its time and transcend it with a pursuit of truth. With references to the thinkers’ respective social backgrounds, the paper contends that their literary thoughts offer critical perspectives into the societies. By bringing in the cases of Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold, the paper also intends to further the discussion of the role of literature in the society.

**Keywords:** Matthew Arnold, Miu Fenglin, function of literature, modern China

## **1. Introduction**

In 1915, Chen Duxiu founded the *New Youth* journal in Shanghai, which marked the beginning of China’s New Culture Movement. The magazine acted as a robust platform of the movement, in which in 1917, Hu Shih published his influential “A Preliminary Discussion of Literature Reform.” Hu’s promotion of literature written in the vernacular instead of the classical Chinese and his fierce objections to the imitation of the ancient classics swayed China’s literary and educational circles during the following five years. Meanwhile, however, some dissidents of the New Culture Movement began to seek for their own literary organization. In 1921, Mei Guangdi and Wu Mi began their preparations for the *Xueheng* journal, also known as *The Critical Review* in English, the first volume of which was successfully published by the renowned Chung Hwa Book Company. The third volume of the journal laid out “The General Statement of *Xueheng* Journal” edited by Wu Mi, in which the aim of the journal was claimed as: to “discuss scholarship, expound truth, promote the national classic and merge new knowledge” under the principle of “being objective, critical without partisanship and radicalism” [1]. When this volume was published, the notion of so-called “national classic” was popular among the literati. According to the definition by Zhang Binglin, the flagship member of the

National Classic literary school of the time, upholding the national classic was to treasure the history of the Chinese breed, which involved the language, the institution and the personages [2]. Classifying the emergent Xueheng school as an equivalent of the National Classic, the predominant figures of the New Culture Movement, Lu Xun and Hu Shih, dispraised Xueheng as “false light of fake antiquity” [3] and “mourners for old texts” [4]. Though not as denigratory as the critique of the New Culture school, current scholarship into the Xueheng school also attributes the school’s essence to an opposition to the New Culture Movement, the seemingly logical explication of which is that the Xueheng school “maintained and was infatuated by the traditional culture” [5] and “supported the classic literary schools” [6]. This prevailing stance on the one hand, downplays Xueheng school’s efforts to “merge new knowledge,” and on the other, diminishes the school’s liaison with its own time.

Miu Fengli was the student of the professor of history and Chinese literature in Nanjing Higher Normal School, Liu Yizheng, who was one of the three primary authors of *Xueheng* journal [7]. Miu started his publication in the second volume of *Xueheng*, which made him “the first ever student author of the Xueheng group” [6]. Among the 250 authors of *Xueheng* journal, Miu ranked the twelfth with 24 publications in total. Shortly before the journal ceased publication in 1933, Miu was even nominated as the new editor.

During the first meeting for the publication of the journal, Mei Guangdi proclaimed that “as long as one’s writing is published in *Xueheng*, the author is a member of the school” while “one who has become a member of the school but has stopped publishing is no longer a member” [8]. As a literary school, Xueheng is not united by personal relationship, but by intellectual and literary engagement. Thus, the articles published in *Xueheng* journal are reasonable representation of the thought of Xueheng school.

In his “On the Virtue of Literature,” Miu Fengling acclaimed Matthew Arnold as “the greatest English literary critic.” Miu also quoted from Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” and analyzed Arnold’s idea of “disinterested” which he pinned down as “with no aspiration for interest” [9] with an attempt to establish his own idea of the virtue of literature. The teacher of many forerunners of the Xueheng school, Irving Babbitt, also inherited from Matthew Arnold’s intellectual resources. Babbitt’s students, Mei and Wu, founded *Xueheng* journal after their return from the United States and began to “translate and evaluate Arnold’s works in abundance” [10]. As a representative figure of the Xueheng school, Miu also championed the literary thought of Matthew Arnold. To what extent does Miu’s reception of Arnold’s literary thought correspond to Arnold’s original thinking? What is Miu’s essential heritage from Arnold? This research aims to address these inquiries concerning the relationship between the literary ideas of Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold.

## 2. The Neglected Literary Thinking: A Literature Review

Chinese scholarship has shed light on many aspects of Miu Fenglin’s thinking, including historical theory, philosophy and politics. There exists, however, few that concerns Miu’s literary thinking. Even in Gu Zhenyan’s Ph.D dissertation specialized in Miu, little explanation of Miu’s ideas on literature is entailed. Among the rich academic literature about the literary ideas of the Xueheng school, Miu is sparsely mentioned but hardly analyzed. Hu Jihua’s journal article notices Miu’s evocation of Arnold’s idea of “disinterested,” but does not provide a thorough analysis of its significance. Zhu Xianfeng and Li Renyun’s dissertations are about Xueheng school’s focus on the

ethical and educational functions of literary criticism, which is also the subject of Arnold's writing. Neither, nevertheless, has explored Miu's position of it. Miu Fenglin hardly receives much attention from the English scholarship in which one can only find two papers on his historical thinking.

As for the relationship between Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold, so far it hasn't been the focus of any single research. The sole mention of such a link exists in Li Wei's journal article where the author notices Miu's "re-writing" of Arnold [11] but does not investigate further as to analyze the specific differences.

Since the 1940s, the contemporary Chinese literary criticism has tended to disparage Arnold's underscoring of "literary criticism" [12], the reasons of which include regarding Arnold as "a defender of traditional values" who diverged from his own time [13] or inscribing Arnold's name on the list of "cultural conservatives" [14]. A similar label of conservatism is also present in the most recent English scholarship published in 2022, as Xueheng school is understood as simply "an organized and purposeful counterattack against the New Culture Movement" [15]. None of the aforementioned research has scrutinized the thinkers' concern for their own times, which Miu and Arnold shared in their literary thoughts.

This research undertakes the task of making a scrutiny of Miu Fenglin and Arnold's literary thoughts with the purpose of analyzing their standpoints on the relationship between literature and its time. A thorough examination of Miu Fenglin's complete works suggests that his literary thoughts are most elucidated in these two *Xueheng* articles, "On the Virtue of Literature" and "On the Emotion of Literature." This research focuses on Matthew Arnold's "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" as the counterpart to Miu's thinking.

### **3. The Function of Literature: Comparing Miu and Arnold's Literary Thinking**

#### **3.1 "Disinterested" and Beneficial**

One important "consensus" between Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold is that literature should transcend the material. In his "On the Virtue of Literature," Miu bespeaks that literary authors and critics should preoccupy themselves with fulfilling the ideal of culture and be exempt from any desire for material gains, as "the true value of literature extolled by literati far exceeds what can be calculated in an economic vein" [9]. Arnold expresses a similar wish for literary works to be "disinterested": when he appraises the French Revolution, he points out that the intellectual movements which can benefit the humankind are those "in which the human spirit looked for its satisfaction in itself and in the increased play of its own activity" and nothing else [16]. Both Miu and Arnold disentangle the purpose of literature from pursuing economic and political profits for one's own.

Not only do Miu and Arnold deny these practical interests, but they also ask for a deprecation of personal emotion. In "On the Emotion of Literature," Miu highlights that one important function of literature is to express human emotions. The expressed emotion, however, should not be "beneficial to one individual only" as in the cases of greed, horror, gratitude or complaint [9]. Similar to Miu's rebuff to particular sentiments, Arnold's thinking raises that "the best spiritual work" of criticism is "to keep man from a self satisfaction which is retarding and vulgarizing," as such refusal of self-absorption can "lead him towards perfection, making his mind dwell upon what is excellent in itself, and the absolute beauty and fitness of things" [16]. By describing one's expression of private emotions as imperfect, even harmful, Miu and Arnold warn that it should not be of the interest of

good literary works.

Now that it is clear what being “disinterested” excludes, the question of what being “disinterested” does denote remains. Miu and Arnold share this one crucial point that a certain *commonness* should be reflected in literature: Miu asserts that “expressing common emotion is a must for literature” [9] while Arnold solicits “all political, religious and social fractions” to devote to “the common pleasure of a free disinterested play of mind” [16]. Such a call for commonness seems to be contradictory to the two thinkers’ previous claims of upholding an independence of mind, which are most notable in Miu’s claim that a literary author and critic should “hold fast to his own aspiration” and “act with fairness and autonomy” [9]. Regarding the denial of personal interest as a sign of being autonomous is based on such a premise: the common humanity erroneously pursues personal gains, and literature should keep away from such a tendency. The plausible paradox here is that if literature aims to express a “common pleasure,” it inevitably pursues some personal interest. How is it possible, then, for a literary author or critic, to be free from personal interest on the one hand, and to speak for the common on the other? The key to solve this paradox is to comprehend the relationship between the literati and their own time.

Miu Fenglin believes that literati do not always conform to their time. They “often clash with” and “are not appreciated” by their contemporaries. Despite deploring such nonconformity, Miu encourages the literati to “withstand the dissent” [9]. Such discordance, however, does not mean that literati should turn their backs on their own time. Miu requires that literary writing should be beneficial to the society. A good piece of literary work should “chronicle political events, detect the hidden truth among the populace and record people’s virtue” [9]. The aim of literature, Miu contends, is to “reflect truth,” the most important of which is to “teach the people and enlighten the time” [9]. Literature influences the society and brings about the superior aspects of it. Literature, in Miu’s words, serves as the “container” of “truth, virtue, and beauty” [9] and should be sublime and devoid of the contamination of the society [9]. In Miu’s eyes, a prime piece of literary work does not necessarily agree with the mainstream, but through its political and social insights, serves the advancement of the society.

Matthew Arnold also disagrees with yielding to any sort of particular political trend. In his discussion of the French Revolution, Arnold praises the Revolution as being a “more spiritual event” which “appeals to an order of ideas which are universal, certain, permanent” [16]. As he acclaims the Revolution’s pursuit of universality, he ascribes the error of the movement to the “fatal” “mania” for “giving an immediate political and practical application to all these fine ideas.” He laments how the movement deviates from the intellectual realm and rushes “furiously into the political sphere” [16]. For Arnold, the essence of literary endeavor should not be overwhelmed by any political practice, but to remain a “disinterested love of a free play of the mind” [16]. The function of literature is more epistemic than physical, as critics seek for “fresh knowledge” [16] that enables people to “see things as they are” [16]. It is worth noticing that such knowledge is not abstract, but what that can always “retain an intimate and lively consciousness of the truth” [16]. Literature should help people pursue such “truth and culture” in life [16]. The truth that literature presents should stem from contemporaneous investigation of the time itself.

The best literary ideas, according to Arnold, should be “current at the time.” The work of a literary genius should synthesize and explain “the best that is known and thought in the world” [16], the gift of which “lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual

atmosphere.” In other words, literature can only be fruitful when it is closely connected with its intellectual environment. The relationship between a work of literature and its author is that the “two powers must concur”: “the man is not enough without the moment” [16]. While admitting the role of the man, Arnold emphasizes the importance of the time by illustrating such characteristics of a great time that breeds grand works— “permeated by fresh thought, intelligent and alive”— a state of things that is “the true basis for the creative power’s exercise” [16]. The vigor of literary works and ideas is a result of an intellectually dynamic time, but it is a responsibility of literature to “establish a current of fresh and true ideas” [16]. Literati should embrace the time, and by extracting the best of it, help create a flourishing time.

Both Miu and Arnold acknowledge that literature should be perceptive of the time. Instead of being defiled by particular interests, literary works and thoughts should uncover the commanding truth of the time, which brings benefits to the human society.

### 3.2 Critical of the Time

Neither Matthew Arnold nor Miu Fenglin’s literary thinking is a mere murmur in the circle of literary art: both reflect a critical stance on their current time. Matthew Arnold makes the famous categorization of the three social classes of English and name the middle-class “the Philistines” [17], a group of men who regard “the possession of...practical conveniences as something sufficient in itself” and can surrender “the idea of reason” for such practicality [16]. Such a mass of people, according to Arnold, cannot shoulder up the responsibility of a “time of great change” [18]: the philistines need to be transformed into a group of “enthusiast[s] for the idea, for reason” [16]. The reason behind such a calling is explained in Arnold’s essay “Democracy,” in which he points out that in order to avoid the possible foolishness of despotism, it is important to cultivate a mass of “enlightened” community [18]. Literature reflects upon the most important issues of its own time, and through the education of the middle-class, exerts a substantial influence on the society.

The early 20th century for China was also a time of immense crisis and change. The ancient country had undergone the invasion of the Western industrial powers and the corruption of its own imperial rulers. Since its debut among Chinese scholars, the literary idea of Matthew Arnold has been denounced as outdated as many believed the nation needed immediate transformation. As recent as in 2018, Matthew Arnold and Xueheng school’s acceptance of his idea are still considered “out of time” [19]. While most critics and scholars focus on Xueheng school’s embrace of traditional classics, few have paid attention to the critical standpoint of the school, which is clearly proclaimed in its “General Statement”: the principle of “being objective” and “critical” [20]. It is worth noticing, however, that Miu Fenglin’s contemporaries have indeed acknowledged Arnold’s critical spirit. In 1921, the scholar Hu Yuzhi commented that Arnold’s idea of “disinterested,” though not as fierce as that of the New Culture school, is a significant form of learning which is in no lack of “constructive criticism” [21]. With the crushing influence of the New Culture Movement at the time, few voices of objective evaluation of Xueheng school’s promotion of Matthew Arnold’s literary idea could be heard.

Despite the heated progression of social and literary movements of their times, both Matthew Arnold and Miu Fenglin adopt a critical viewpoint and avoid resorting to any radical clan of thought. Instead, they keep faith in the incremental progress that an education of literature can, and should, bring.

## 4. Conclusion

In her famous essay that re-opened the discussion of Xueheng school in 1989, Yue Daiyun points out that the difference between the cultural enlightenment of China and that of the West is that the former demands the construction of a reasonable community as a prerequisite for individual achievement while the latter supports the value of individuals first [22]. Such juxtaposition of the individual and the community as opposites is not rare in the debate of Xueheng school and its reception of the West. From the comparative analysis above, it can be seen that both Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold emphasize the influence that literature should act upon its environment: for one, literary thought should not be detached from the need of its own time by remaining disinterested and critical; for another, it should play a role in preserving truth and educating the public. Rather than dividing individuals from its community, literature acts as a crucial medium that communicates both. By offering this new perspective of evaluating Miu and Arnold's thinking, this paper calls for more nuanced research on the literary ideas of Xueheng figures and their social implication. From Plato and Aristotle in the Greek time to Foucault and Derrida in the postmodern era, the issue of literature's function in the society is by no means a newly emerged one: thinkers have oscillated between optimism and pessimism and pondered whether the individual or the collective should bear more responsibility or blame. The cases of Miu Fenglin and Matthew Arnold illuminate that literary thinking can find a way out of the mire of binary radicalism if it means to influence the society, which at the same time reveal a prospect where the role literature actually plays in its current time is still a significant question that awaits more close investigation.

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