Creativity in Troubled Times: Factors Associated with Recognitions of Chinese Literary Creativity in the 20th Century

Most studies of writers have focused on Western writers, including studies of personal characteristics and success. The Chinese culture has traditionally had a much different view of creativity. Would a study of modern Chinese writers mirror past Western findings, indicating that Chinese and Western conceptions of creativity may be converging, or would there be different results? This study examined 722 twentieth-century Chinese writers and yielded two main findings, which generally correspond to past, Western-based research. First, female writers, particularly poets and fiction writers, were more likely to suffer a personal tragedy than male writers. Second, writers who were politically persecuted were more likely to eventually receive an award than those not politically persecuted. Explanations and implications for future studies are then discussed.

How would Chinese writers compare to writers from Western cultures? Most studies of writers focus on American or English writers (see Kaufman, 2002, for a review of creative writing in Western cultures, and Perry, 1999, for a recent overview of American writers). Cultures differ, of course, on conceptions of creativity, yet the Chinese culture may represent one of the richest and complex viewpoints that differ from the Western perspective. Chinese beliefs about creativity have been influenced by such philosophies as Confucianism and Taoism (Berthrong, 1998; Chang, 1970; Niu, in press; Rudowicz & Hui, 1997).

For example, when judging creativity, Chinese people value the characteristic of “goodness,” including “moral goodness,” “contribution to the society,” as well as the “connections...
between old and new knowledge” much more than Westerners (Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Rudowicz & Yue, 2000; Wu, 1994). According to the standard Chinese traditions, a great person (such as a highly creative writer) must not only satisfy his or her own needs as a human being but must also be devoted to other people and the interests of the society as a whole (Niu, 2001). Thus, people would expect a creative writer to behave and speak properly with a social context, to possess good virtue, and to live harmoniously with nature and other people.

The 20th century, however, has seen traditional Chinese values be challenged by various social movements and changes. Such changes include the fall of the Qing dynasty, the termination of feudalism and the royal system in 1911, the permeation of Western sciences and technology and its values, two world wars, the Communist movement, the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and economic reform of the recent two decades. Some of these changes have been gradual, whereas others have been radical (Phillips, 1996; Spence, 1981). All of these social changes and movements have inevitably made an impact on Chinese people’s lives — including, of course, writers. Twentieth century Chinese writers would thus represent a particularly interesting group of writers to study.

Many studies of Western writers have focused on a writer’s personal characteristics. Some studies have examined creative writing and mental illness (e.g., Andreasen, 1987; Jamieson, 1989; Kaufman, 2001b; Ludwig, 1994; Post, 1994). Writers are typically found to have higher rates of mental illness than the general population, particularly poets. Kaufman (2001b) found that female poets were significantly more likely to suffer from mental illness than other types of female writers (fiction writers, playwrights, and non-fiction writers), male writers (fiction writers, poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers), and other eminent women (journalists, politicians, actresses, and visual artists); this finding was given the preliminary name of the “Sylvia Plath” effect, after a particularly troubled American poet who eventually took her own life. In addition, female poets were more likely to experience personal tragedy in their lives, with male non-fiction writers less likely. Kaufman (2001a) also found that the most eminent writers, as measured by those who won the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, were more likely to suffer from mental illness than non-prize-winners, all of whom were included in a volume of accomplished writers. Ludwig (1995) found similar results in a large study of eminent individuals.
In studying both the personal lives and the successes of eminent Chinese writers, there may be two different types of results. One possibility is that Chinese writers might exhibit different patterns in their lives and successes than Western writers, reflecting the traditionally different approaching to creative writing. The second possibility is that the results would match previous, Western-focused research, indicating that modern Chinese writers may be growing more similar to Western writers. This study examined 722 twentieth-century Chinese writers on a variety of personal characters to determine whether or not they would echo patterns found in earlier research.

The sources of biographical data were three reference books. They were *Bibliographical Dictionary of Modern Chinese Writers* (English) (including 636 prominent modern Chinese writers; Yang, 1994); *Biography of Modern Chinese Eminent Writers* (Chinese) (including 68 influential modern Chinese writers; He, 1990); and *Biography of Modern Chinese Female Writers* (Chinese)(including 67 modern Chinese female writers; Lu, Gan, & Lu, 1990). Repetitive entries were deleted. All three resources combined to produce information on 722 writers. Entries in these reference books ranged from a few paragraphs to a few pages. Several details were consistent throughout, such as birth and death dates. Four different types of writer were included in the book: fiction writers (of both novels and short stories), poets, playwrights, and non-fiction writers. The full breakdown by gender and type of writer is presented in Table 1.

### TABLE 1. Gender Breakdown for Four Groups of Writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Writers</th>
<th>Fiction Writers</th>
<th>Poets</th>
<th>Playwrights</th>
<th>Non-Fiction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>722</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several different variables were identified for each writer, including gender, age at death, and a number of "setback" measures. These measures included signs of mental illness, lingering physical illness, experiencing a significant personal tragedy in one's life (e.g., losing a child or having parents died.
early in one’s life), and being the victim of political persecution (e.g., being forced to go countryside to do labor work during the Cultural Revolution or being sent to prison in any time solely for political reasons). These items were scored as dichotomous 0-1 variables.

In addition, the variable of award was identified and scored dichotomously (0-1). This variable was derived from five major national awards on literature during the time of 1978-1990. They include the Mao Dun Literature Award (the highest award in modern Chinese literature), the National Best Novels Award, the National Best Poems Award, the National Best Plays Award, and the National Non-fiction Writing Award. Of the 722 writers, 120 won at least one of the prizes once. It should be noted that these awards only applied to works published after the Cultural Revolution of 1976.

How were gender and type of writing affected by the “setback” variables? Logistic regression was chosen as the appropriate analysis, because this statistical test uses multiple regression techniques as applied to dichotomous variables (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Logistic regression was performed on all four setback variables (mental illness, physical illness, personal tragedy, and political persecution) using the Quasi-Newton estimation method to assess differences among male fiction writers, female fiction writers, male poets, female poets, male playwrights, and male non-fiction writers on various indices of psychological disturbance. All groups had to be included for a logistical regression to be conducted, but there were not enough female playwrights and female non-fiction writers to be measured adequately. Table 2 shows breakdown of the means and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Total Writers (n = 722)</th>
<th>Fiction Writers (n = 388)</th>
<th>Poets (n = 180)</th>
<th>Playwrights (n = 38)</th>
<th>Non-Fiction (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental illness?</td>
<td>0.04 0.21</td>
<td>0.03 0.18</td>
<td>0.09 0.29</td>
<td>0.03 0.17</td>
<td>0.01 0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Illness?</td>
<td>0.04 0.18</td>
<td>0.04 0.19</td>
<td>0.04 0.19</td>
<td>0.03 0.17</td>
<td>0.03 0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Tragedy?</td>
<td>0.07 0.26</td>
<td>0.08 0.28</td>
<td>0.09 0.29</td>
<td>0.03 0.17</td>
<td>0.03 0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political?</td>
<td>0.25 0.44</td>
<td>0.27 0.44</td>
<td>0.22 0.42</td>
<td>0.24 0.43</td>
<td>0.25 0.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
standard deviations of the four “setback” variables of the four types of writers.

No significant results were discovered for physical illness, mental illness, or political persecution, but significant differences among these groups were found for personal tragedy. Female fiction writers and female poets were significantly more likely to suffer a personal tragedy than any other type of writer. The final loss was 162.04, with $-2 \log \text{Likelihood}$ of 324.07. The Chi-Square fit was $39.53 (7), p < .0001$. The logits can be seen in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Estimate</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male Fiction Writers</td>
<td>-2.87</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Fiction Writers</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>4.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Poets</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Poets</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>6.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Playwrights</td>
<td>-391.51</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Playwrights</td>
<td>-230.45</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male Non-Fiction Writers</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female Non-Fiction Writers</td>
<td>-230.45</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Final loss: 162.04
$\chi^2(7) = 39.53$
$p < .0001$

Because there were not enough female playwrights or female non-fiction writers to be significantly represented in the logistic regression, another analysis, a Chi-Square, was performed to further compare the gender difference on the variable of personal tragedy. The percentage of all female writers to suffer a personal tragedy was 20.9%, whereas this percentage for male writers was 4.3%. The Chi-Square was significant, $\chi^2 (1) = 41.17, p < .001$. This significant finding suggests that female writers were more likely suffer personal tragedy than male writers.

Further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the “setback” variables and receiving an award. The percentage of writers who suffered from mental illness, personal tragedy, physical illness, and political persecution for both
groups are presented in Table 4 for those who won at least one award and those who won no awards. A Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted with receiving an award (scored dichotomously as 0-1) serving as the independent variable and the four “setback” variables (mental illness, personal tragedy, physical illness, and political persecution) serving as the dependent variables.

**TABLE 4.** Percentage of Writers with Mental Illness, Personal Tragedy, Physical Illness, and Political Persecution for “Award” condition and “No Award” condition.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Award (N = 120)</th>
<th>No Award (N = 602)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Illness</td>
<td>1.7 %</td>
<td>2.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Tragedy</td>
<td>6.7 %</td>
<td>7.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Illness</td>
<td>0.8 %</td>
<td>2.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Persecution</td>
<td>39.2 %*</td>
<td>22.6 %*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .01

The MANOVA was significant [Rao’s R (4, 717) = 4.04, p < .01]. To further investigate the significant MANOVA, univariate ANOVAs were conducted separately for each of the setback variables. Although mental illness, personal tragedy, and physical illness were not significant, political persecution was significant [F (1, 720) = 14.79, p < .01]. Writers who were politically persecuted were more likely eventually to receive an award in their career than writers who had never been politically persecuted (see Table 4).

**DISCUSSION**

This study yielded two main findings. First, female writers, particularly female poets and female fiction writers, were more likely to suffer a personal tragedy than male writers. Second, writers who were politically persecuted (primarily during the time of the Cultural Revolution or before) were more likely eventually to receive an award (after the Cultural Revolution) than those who were not politically persecuted. While not identical to Western findings, the general trends showed convergence to past research.

Several reasons could explain why female writers were more likely to suffer a personal tragedy than male writers. First, it is possible that the personal tragedy itself enables female writers to defy their traditional roles and write (Yip & Tay, 1979). In
China, the traditional role of a Chinese woman is to serve her parents, husband, and the family of her husband. Chinese women generally suffer more difficulties in their lives than men; thus, a Chinese woman has more need than a man does for liberation from her status of serfdom (Knapp, 1991). Suffering from a personal tragedy, such as losing her parents, her husband, or her child, may become enough of a force for a Chinese woman to acknowledge her suffering and pursue an independence of spirit and have her own career (Duke, 1989; Gerstlacher, Keen, Kubin, Miosga, & Schon, 1985). And, certainly, being a creative writer would be one such career that would defy traditional roles.

Another explanation could be that suffering from a personal tragedy might become an important resource for a female writer, especially when first entering the field of literature. In China, most female writers write emotional stories about their own experiences (McDougall, 1995; Zhang, 1986). Having a personal tragedy may create source material for female writers — which may also be a reason why female writers in Western cultures are more likely to experience a personal tragedy (Kaufman, 2001b).

The second major finding of this study involves writers whose troubles were more related to politics than to their personal life. Why were writers who were politically persecuted more likely to receive an award than those who were not politically persecuted? It is worth noting that most of these political persecutions happened during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), or even earlier, during the times of two anti-Rightist campaigns (around 1942 and 1958). The main theme of the Cultural Revolution and anti-Rightist campaign was to fight against the political dissidents or those who presumably represented the interest of anti-Communism, such as capitalism, feudalism, and any other “anti-revolutionary” ideologies (MacFarquhar, 1998, Spence, 1981). Many world-renowned scholars, especially eminent writers who had education in the “old society” — the society before the People’s Republic of China was established in 1949 — became victims of these movements and suffered different levels of persecution. Some were banished to the commune to “reform themselves” through physical labor; others were severely beaten or killed (Tay, 1991).

For those who had been living in the first 30 years of the People’s Republic of China, the most eminent writers were at great risk of political persecution. Many renowned writers had to struggle for both their academic freedom and their lives.
(Spence, 1981). It was only after the fall of the “Gang of Four” in 1976 that eminent scholars, including writers, began to express their creativity more openly and freely. Many of those who were politically persecuted in earlier times went on to become the most important leaders in their field. Given that all of the awards were authorized after the Cultural Revolution, and that the field of literature was composed primarily of those who had been politically persecuted, it is not surprising that most of the awards were authorized to those who may have shared the same experience with the leaders of the field, or those people who wrote about the same experiences that the important leaders also had during that time. As we discussed earlier, the Chinese conception of creativity includes moral goodness and contribution to the society. In Chinese society, recognition of literary creativity may be inevitably associated with the political stands of writers — unlike Western notions of creativity.

Unlike earlier studies (Kaufman, 2001a), this study does not reveal the interaction among mental illness, gender, and type of writers. In fact, very little mental illness was found in the sample of Chinese writers in this study (16 out of 722 writers were reported to have various mental illnesses, which is only 2.2% of the sample, in comparison with 10.7% of the sample in Kaufman’s study).

What can account for this lack of mental illness in Chinese writers? One strong possibility is that mental illness is simply drastically under-reported. Influenced by traditional Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism and Taoism, Chinese people may be more likely to regard people who can live harmoniously with nature and with other people as more creative (Niu, in press). Having a mental illness could be regarded as a shame or an insult to many Chinese people. As a result, Chinese people may tend to avoid and neglect the variable of mental illness when writing biographies, choosing to focus more on academic and professional achievements. We suspect that a “true” study of how mental illness affects Chinese writers may need to be much more in-depth, perhaps using first-hand data instead of biographical sources.

This study did produce some results that were consistent with past studies (Kaufman, 2001a, 2001b). Female writers were more prone to personal tragedy than male writers, a finding similar to Kaufman’s (2001a), and the most eminent writers were also more likely to experience a “setback” variable. In Kaufman’s (2001b) study, the most eminent authors suffered
from mental illness; in the present study, the most eminent authors suffered from political persecution.

We see at least three paths for future investigations. First, this study reveals that Chinese female writers suffer from personal tragedy more than male writers. This finding suggests that eminent Chinese women may struggle with the double roles of their lives—their traditional role of being a good daughter, wife, and mother, and their role of being a writer, pursuing academic development and spiritual freedom. Future studies can examine larger groups of eminent Chinese women to see if this finding is also found in prominent scholars, painters, politicians, actors, and so forth.

The second line of study could scrutinize the factor of mental health of eminent Chinese people, including writers. A more detailed biographical resource will be needed to do this examination. A personal diagnostic interview with a variety of contemporary Chinese eminent writers would be one way to investigate this variable.

Finally, there are different groups of modern Chinese writers who live in different political and economic environments. Some live in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong; others live overseas. This study primarily focused on one group of Chinese eminent writers—those who lived or published primarily in Mainland China. It could be a worthwhile pursuit to compare the psychological factors among different subgroups of Chinese writers, and to see how these different groups compare with Western writers. Such an investigation could shed further light on the factors that may influence the creativity of writers in different countries.

Despite some differences, particularly in the relationship of mental illness to writing method and success, this study also reveals some similarities in the relationship between creativity and psychological factors for Chinese writers as found for Western writers. These similarities might suggest a somewhat convergent tendency of people’s conceptions of creativity. This convergence of the conceptions of creativity is also found in other studies, in which people tend to use similar concepts to understand the concept of creativity, even if these conceptions are rooted in different cultures (Niu & Sternberg, 2002; Rudowicz & Yue, 2000). Our results are still preliminary and limited to one domain, creative writing. But we believe that with increased academic and artistic exchange between the East and West, the similarities in the conception, execution, and analysis of creativity may well continue to converge.
REFERENCES:


**AUTHOR NOTES**

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