

Article

Looking Beyond the Social: Religion as a Solution to Alienation in Xu Dishan's, Bing Xin's, and Su Xuelin's Republican Era Literature

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Received: 17 July 2019; Accepted: 2 December 2019; Published: 6 December 2019



Abstract: I argue that by participating in religious cultural phenomena, the protagonists of Xu Dishan's and Su Xuelin's fiction cultivate values that allow them to overcome their sense of social alienation by making them feel more confident about their ability to strengthen their relationships with others. These values include selflessness in the literature of both authors, as well as compassion in Su Xuelin's literature. I further argue that these two authors' literary narratives use the category of religion to label these values as existing outside of the space of human social interactions. This then allows protagonists to view the cultivation of these values as an ostensibly perfected resolution to their feeling of social alienation, which in the first place is caused by the imperfect sphere of human social interactions. The two case studies upon which this study draws to exemplify the argument include *Yuguan* from Xu Dishan's *Yuguan* and *Xingqiu* from Su Xuelin's *Thorny Heart*.

Keywords: religion; Republican Era literature; Xu Dishan; Su Xuelin; modernization; social alienation; individual subjectivity

1. Introduction

The argument of this article is based on two observations concerning the literature of Su Xuelin 苏雪林 (1897–1999) and Xu Dishan 许地山 (1893–1941)¹. The first is that protagonists in their literature resolve their feelings of social alienation, becoming confident that they understand how to form relationships with others. The second is that protagonists in the works of these two authors identify with cultural phenomena that could be considered “religious” (see the definition of “religion” utilized in this article in the “Introduction” below). This stands in stark contrast to protagonists in the literature of other well-known May Fourth intellectuals such as Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978), and Yu Dafu 郁达夫 (1896–1945), whose protagonists observe, critique, or sympathize with religion from afar but do not consider themselves participants in religious cultural phenomena². Furthermore, Xu's and Su's protagonists always resolve their feelings of social alienation after participating in religious cultural phenomena—they never exhibit just one or the other of these

¹ All individuals with Chinese names whose work is written predominantly in Chinese will first be listed with their last names first. Additionally, the first time that they are mentioned, they will be listed with their names in both pinyin and Chinese characters. This convention also holds for the names of all Chinese-language articles and book titles.

² This is obvious in works that are critical of participation in religious cultural phenomena, such as Guo Moruo's “Two-Man Comic Show [双簧 Shuang Huang]” (Guo [1936] 1985) and Lu Xun's “Revenge (Part II) [Fu chou (qi er) 复仇 (其二)]” (Lu 1927). However, even protagonists who express admiration of Christianity, such as those who admire Biblical values in Yu Dafu's “Turning to the South [Nan qian 南迁]” (Yu [1921] 2013) and Ba Jin's 巴金 (1904–2005) novel *Fire* [火 Huo] (Ba Jin 1940), stop short of identifying with the religion or participating in its activities.

characteristics. It is the observation of this correlative relationship that led to the research undertaken in this article.

I first argue that in Su's and Xu's fictional narratives, participation in or identification with religious cultural phenomena is in fact the reason that protagonists overcome their feelings of social alienation. When they participate in religious cultural phenomena, they learn values such as selflessness [无私 *wu si*] and compassion [同情 *tong qing*] that allow them to overcome their obsessive self-consciousness and learn how to focus on the well-being of others, thus leading them to feel more confident about their ability to form relationships. Second, I propose that Su's and Xu's fiction portrays identification with religious cultural phenomena as a solution to feelings of social alienation because labeling these values as "religious" enables the narrative to depict them as an alternative option to the social values that cause protagonists to feel alienated in the first place, namely what the protagonists terms "selfishness [自私 *zi si*]." In other words, categorizing these values as "religious" is a narrative method of portraying them as existing apart from and in contrast to values that protagonists have learned from the human social realm and felt disconnected from.

In arguing for a causative relationship between these protagonists' participation in religious cultural phenomena and their ability to overcome their feelings of social alienation, the purpose of the following study is twofold. First, the study demonstrates that Su's and Xu's literary representations of "religion" can be understood as a solution to China's problem of social alienation, and need not exclusively be read as expressions of the authors' personal beliefs. Previous scholars such as Robinson (1986) and Galik (2004) have assumed that the religiosity of Su's and Xu's literature reflects only their biographical experience and personal belief, not their sociopolitical ideas about what it would mean for China and its people to "modernize" (See "Introduction" below for more on this scholarly trend). On the one hand, it is likely that the personal beliefs of Su and Xu did contribute to their positive portrayal of "religion" in their literature, since they both identified with religion at some point in their lives³. Nevertheless, literature should not be analyzed exclusively in terms of the biographical experiences of its authors, as it is difficult or impossible to conclusively demonstrate links between an author's personal experience and the content of his or her literature. In this study, I assume in my reading that the religiosity of Su's and Xu's protagonists should be viewed as a component of the authors' narratives that functions independently of their personal backgrounds, just as any component of any literary narrative can and should be viewed.

This method is in fact the second purpose of this study, to analyze "religion" in Su's and Xu's literature as a conceptual category, a narrative technique that drives the conflict of the authors' stories forward toward a positive resolution, rather than as a symbol that signifies one substantive meaning based on how a given protagonist defines it. For example, I will not try to substantively define how Xingqiu 醒秋, the protagonist of Su Xuelin's *Thorny Heart* [Ji xin 棘心] (Su 1929), understands Catholicism. This is the argumentative approach that mainland Chinese scholars like Chen (2007), Wang (2006), and Liang (1983) have taken regarding religiosity in Su's and Xu's literature. However, this is a problematic methodology because it is in most cases impossible to determine based on a text how protagonists precisely define a religious phenomenon in which they participate. The difficulty in ascertaining the specific definition of "religion" to a protagonist is due to several factors, including but not limited to lack of evidence and the mutability of the concept of "religion"—even if a narrative does explicitly state that a protagonist defines "religion" in a certain way at one point in the text, there is

³ Su Xuelin converted to Catholicism while she studied abroad in France as a youth, and became heavily involved in Catholic circles upon her return to China (Ni 2014). Xu Dishan believed that it was good for individuals to participate in religion generally, regardless of the specific tradition(s) they followed, because it served a useful conceptual purpose in helping them to consistently strive for improvement in their personal conduct and relations in their everyday lives ((Xu [1923] 2014). See also "'Religion" as Narrative Device: Using "Religion" as a Method of Categorizing Certain Values as Non-Social" below). For recent biographies on Su Xuelin and Xu Dishan, see *The Female Scholar of the Century: A Biography of Su Xuelin* [Shi ji cai nǚ: Su Xuelin zhuan 世纪才女: 苏雪林传] (2006) by Fan Zhenwei 范震威, and *A Life of Spinning Webs: A Biography of Xu Dishan* [Zhui wang ren sheng: Xu Dishan zhuan 缀网人生: 许地山传] (2006) by Wang Sheng 王盛 respectively.

no guarantee that the protagonist's views on the subject do not change as the narrative evolves. It is impossible to conclude anything about the inner life of that protagonist that is not explicitly described in the narrative. Any aspects of that protagonist's character not explicitly described must be imagined and thus will differ from reader to reader. It is equally impossible to discern Su's and Xu's intended meaning for the religious terminology in their work, or if they had even ever articulated to themselves a certain meaning that they hoped the religious terminology in their work would have for their readers. This chapter by no means purports to be able to discern what their *intentions* in writing religiosity into their literature were. Rather, it is an argument for a viable method of reading their literature that allows for "religion" in their narratives to operate as more than just a reflection of their personal beliefs.

In my analysis, I shift the point of view from which I am viewing "religion:" rather than attempting to delineate how protagonists define the religious cultural phenomena in which they participate—for example, how Xingqiu defines "Catholicism"—, I examine how the category of "religion" operates within the narrative structure of Su's and Xu's stories. This represents a shift from trying to substantively define what "religion" *means* from the protagonists' perspectives to analyzing how "religion" *operates* as a conceptual category, an empty signifier in of itself, that enables certain narrative possibilities when particular phenomena are categorized as "religious." This methodology aligns the study of religion and Chinese literature with contemporary Religious Studies methods, acknowledging that just as "religion" works as a conceptual strategy in the human social realm, so it accordingly functions in artistic representations of the concept (See "Religious Cultural Phenomena in Su's and Xu's Literature" below for more on how "religion" is conceptualized in contemporary Religious Studies scholarship). It is hoped that this methodology will be employed in future studies of religion in Chinese literature, and ultimately in studies of religion in literature more broadly. Indeed, it is especially important to revisit Su Xuelin and Xu Dishan because this twenty-first century analytical shift in how to treat the concept "religion" opens up many unexplored possibilities for how to read their literature.

"Religion" is not an ineffable, unchanging, timeless entity that exists in the natural world the same way that tangible objects do. 'Religion' in the sense in which I use it is an invention of modernity⁴. One of the main approaches to the study of religion, "functionalism," seeks to understand what the category of 'religion' accomplishes for specific groups. Functionalist approaches determine what social problems religion helps individuals or groups to solve. Another contemporary approach, 'constructivism,' seeks to understand why groups label certain cultural phenomena as 'religious,' or in other words, what they gain from doing so. Constructivism assumes that groups have specific agendas in designating certain cultural phenomena as "religious," and therefore as not "political," "economic," or "social." Labelling cultural phenomena as "religious" suggests that they exist outside of these dimensions of human experience.⁵ This is perhaps the one characteristic of "religion" that is true across time and geographic locale, since as philosophy of religion scholar Kevin Schilbrack points out, the term "religion" is used to differentiate certain cultural phenomena from others by claiming that they have a justification for being that exists beyond the social realm (the superempirical reality) and that they allegedly fulfill some need on earth (the promissory function) (See Religious Cultural Phenomena in Xu Dishan's and Su Xuelin's Literature" below). Given this understanding of "religion," the category becomes a useful means of labeling certain traits as existing outside of human social phenomena. Su's and Xu's protagonists find traits like selflessness and compassion that help them connect more deeply with other people more accessible when labeled as "religious," or in other words as best cultivated through participation in religious phenomena. Labelled as such, these values lose any sense of being association with the human social realm. They exist independently of the social phenomena that make the protagonists

⁴ To understand the process of how "religion" was created by intellectuals of the European Enlightenment, see Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Asad 1993).

⁵ As part of a larger argument, Schilbrack provides a useful delineation of constructivist and functionalist approaches to "religion," which he subsumes under the single term "functionalist," as opposed to substantive or essentialist approaches to the concept (Schilbrack 2013).

feel alienated in the first place. Thinking of these values as originating outside of the human social realm enables protagonists to discover them as an allegedly objective method of overcoming their struggles to build relationships with others, without having the face the contradiction that these values are inventions of the very society that has alienated them.

Religious cultural phenomena in Su's and Xu's literature is consistently represented as resolving protagonists' feelings of social alienation. The widespread experience of social alienation among Republican Era literary protagonists can be traced to the interest of that era's intellectuals in individual subjectivity and agency⁶. Paradoxically, research from C.T. Hsia, Leo Ou-Fan Lee, and Sabina Knight shows that authors' increased focus on the individualism of their protagonists often translates to those same protagonists sense that their own progressive thinking alienates them from the rest of society and makes it hard for them to effectively communicate the importance of social improvements to others. The recognition of this pattern began when Hsia pointed out that Mao Dun's 茅盾 (1896–1981) protagonists feel powerless to improve their societies. "The social evil depicted . . . is usually of such weight and magnitude that the characters caught under it cannot possibly counteract it in any human manner . . ." (Hsia 1961, p. 162). Leo Ou-Fan Lee echoes this observation in the literature of Mao Dun as well as of Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun 叶少军 (1894–1988). Furthermore, he posits that protagonists' inability to reform society, in conjunction with their increased self-awareness of how enlightened they are compared to their peers, leads them to feel socially alienated. Lu Xun's protagonists, for example, feel that they have great insight to offer on how to modernize Chinese society, but that they have no way of communicating this insight to others because they do not know how to connect with others to build meaningful relationships (Lee 1987, pp. 69–88). Lu had so many characters who experienced this type of phenomenon in his work that Lee coined the term "the loner and the crowd" to describe the recurring theme (Lee 1987, p. 76). Sabina Knight more explicitly links protagonists' inability to carry out social reform and subsequent feelings of social alienation in Lu Xun's and Ye Shaojun's literature to their increased self-awareness. She does this by making a distinction between the terms "subjectivity" and "agency." She defines "subjectivity" as a capacity for reflection, an intellectual awareness and self-consciousness. "Agency," on the other hand, refers to an individual's ability to act on and change his surroundings (Knight 2006, pp. 19–20). Knight uses her distinction between "subjectivity" and "agency" to argue that while the literature of Republican Era authors Lu Xun and Ye Shaojun emphasizes the subjectivity of protagonists, it tends to portray them as unable to act in the world, constrained by social and political forces beyond their control. In short, they are overwhelmed by their rigid social structure, which ensures that those who hold powerless positions will never be able to enact social reform. The result is a mentality where they feel doomed to possess the self-awareness to educate themselves on how to best reform their societies without being able to initiate those reforms (Knight 2006, pp. 73–103).

Su's and Xu's literary protagonists, on the other hand, resolve their feelings of social alienation through participating in religious cultural phenomena. Su and Xu are far from the only Republican Era authors to have incorporated religiosity into their literary narratives. Yet, only since the beginning of the twenty-first century have scholars began to seriously analyze the roles that religiosity played in literature of that time. The initial characterization of Republican Era thought as monolithically anti-religious surely is due at least in part to Hsia's early monograph, which claims that literature of the period lacks spiritual depth. He writes, "The superficiality of modern Chinese literature is ultimately seen in its intellectual unawareness of Original Sin or some comparable religious interpretation of evil." He comes to this conclusion based on his perception that Chinese people tend to be Confucian rationalists. He argues that, while historically such rationalism has been "kept in check" by competing,

⁶ See Jones (2011) on Republican Era intellectuals' interest in individualism as relating to their debates on the ideal characteristics of "modernized" Chinese citizens and the proper methods to cultivate them. See Prusek (1980) on Republican Era intellectuals' embrace of individual subjectivity as a mode of resistance to what they labelled as China's "traditional" society, specifically the deterministic nature of some Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucianist philosophies.

less rationalistic ideologies such as Buddhism and Daoism, Republican Era rejection of religion led this so-called Chinese tendency toward extreme rationalism to dominate literary writing and thought of the era (Hsia 1961). His conclusion is echoed in Vera Schwarcz's overview of the May Fourth Movement in her monograph *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Schwarcz 1986), in which she emphasizes the value May Fourth intellectuals placed on breaking with tradition and modernizing China.

In the second half of the twentieth century, several scholars questioned the above conclusions of Hsia and Schwarcz. Lewis Robinson's monograph *Double-Edged Sword: Christianity and 20th Century Fiction* (1986) surveys the usage of Christian imagery in Chinese literature from the Republican Era through to the 1970s, as well as in 1970s Taiwanese literature. Irene Eber edited an essay collection entitled *Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact* (Eber et al. 1999) which includes essays detailing the influence of the Bible on several specific Chinese theologians and authors. Marian Galik's *Influence, Translation, and Parallels: Selected Studies on the Bible in China* (Galik 2004) provides an updated survey of Christian imagery in Chinese and Taiwanese literature through the 1990s, focusing specifically on Christian imagery taken from Biblical stories. Scholars Chen Weihua, Yang Jianlong 杨剑龙, and Wang Benchao 王本朝, writing in Chinese, have produced many essays and monographs researching Republican Era literary usage of Christian imagery.⁷ All of the above scholars primarily analyze the religiosity of Republican Era literature to learn more about authors' personal religious beliefs. This assumption is clear from the arguments the aforementioned scholars make, which generally involve determining which religion exerted the greatest influence on each author and how to best define what "religion" meant to each author based on its manifestation within their literary narratives. Yang, Chen, and Wang additionally analyze how Republican Era religious movements influenced the production and content of literature at the time. Many Chinese scholars who have written journal articles on religiosity in Su's and Xu's literature focus mainly on identifying relative amounts of Christian and other religious imagery in their work, their goal to determine which religions exerted the greatest amount of influence on them.⁸

In the twenty-first century, Zhan Ni and Steven Riep were two of the first scholars writing in English to read reference to religious cultural phenomena in Republican Era literature as relating to the social and cultural context of that time. Riep has analyzed the social and political relevance of religiosity in Xu Dishan's short story, "The Merchant's Wife" (商人妇) (1925). Riep understands Xu Dishan's short story "The Merchant's Wife" as a representation of how religious institutions can be efficacious in allowing women to attain more social mobility and equality with men (Riep 2004). In addition to Riep's work, Ni's scholarship also presumes that the religiosity of Republican Era authors' literature can be read as relating to the sociopolitical context of the time. Her essay "Rewriting Jesus in Republican China: Religion, Literature, and Cultural Nationalism" (Ni 2011) analyzes the ideological import of the decision of six Republican Era authors to focus on Christian motifs and themes in their literature. She argues that these authors' choices reflect their efforts to indigenize an ideology imported from the West as a way of challenging their oppressors by adapting the religion to suit their own needs (Ni 2011). Ni has also written extensively on Su Xuelin. In her essay, "Making Religion, Making the

⁷ Representative examples of Yang's, Chen's, and Wang's work include respectively *The "May Fourth" New Culture Movement and its Trend of Thought Regarding Christian Culture* ["Wusi" xin wen hua yun dong yu Jidu jiao wen hua si chao "五四" 新文化运动与基督教文化思潮] (Yang 2012), *New Material on Christian Culture and Chinese Fictional Narrative* [Jidu jiao wen hua yu Zhongguo xiao shuo xu shi xin zhi 基督教文化与中国小说叙事新质] (Chen 2007), and *20th-Century Chinese Literature and Christian Culture* [20 shi ji Zhongguo wen xue yu Jidu jiao wen hua 20 世纪中国文学与基督教文化] (Wang 2000).

⁸ See for example Wang Wensheng's "Meeting with Jesus: A Discussion of Chinese-Language Theological Thought in Xu Dishan's Literary Works [Yu Jidu xiang yu: lun Xu Dishan wen xue zuo pin zhong de han yu Jidu shen xue si xiang 与基督相遇: 论许地山文学作品中的汉语基督神学思想] (Wang 2006), Feng Hong's 冯弘 "Buddhist Fate in Xu Dishan's Works [Xu Dishan Zuo pin zhong de fo yuan 许地山作品中的佛缘]" (Feng 2010), Sun Yusheng's 孙玉生 "A Perspective on Religiosity in Xu Dishan's Literary Works [Xu Dishan Wen xue zuo pin zhong de zong jiao wen hua tou shi 许地山文学作品中的宗教文化透视]" (Sun 2006), and Liang Yanghua's "Bing Xin's Religious Belief [Bing Xin de zong jiao xin yang 冰心的宗教信仰]" (Liang 1983).

New Woman: Reading Su Xuelin's Autobiographical Novel *Jixin* (Thorny Heart)" (2014), she argues that contemporaneous critics of Su Xuelin's novel *Thorny Heart* were divided between Christians who admired its advocacy of Catholicism and followers of the May Fourth Movement who admired its promotion of May Fourth ideals. Ni has pointed out that more nuanced theoretical work needs to be done to understand the role religiosity plays in Su Xuelin's fiction, arguing that a theory of reading Su Xuelin's literature should be delineated that integrates its simultaneous promotion of May Fourth values and Catholic identity (Ni 2014).

Like Riep's and Ni's scholarship, this article also assumes that the representation of religion within the literature of Su and Xu, as a conceptual category, has as much potential as any other element of fiction to be read as having a sociopolitical meaning. Why do the authors choose to label certain cultural phenomena as "religious," and why do they portray their protagonists as resolving their feelings of social alienation by participating in so-called "religious" cultural phenomena? Addressing these questions enables a greater understanding of what is at stake politically, culturally, and socially in each of these narrative choices.

2. Religious Cultural Phenomena in Xu Dishan's and Su Xuelin's Literature

No one "essentialist" definition of "religion" is possible because it is a category of thought used to designate certain cultural phenomena as existing outside of the realm of human social interaction, and as such is always contingent on historically specific political, social, and economic contexts. People designate certain cultural phenomena as "religious" because they have a political, social, or other agenda in doing so.⁹ Furthermore, because the category of "religion" in the literature of these three authors is notable for how it operates in their fictional narratives, rather than for having a specific substantive meaning, the name by which protagonists call the religious cultural phenomena in which they participate is not in itself significant, and varies from author to author. Su Xuelin's protagonist Xingqiu and her mother identify as Catholic, while Xu Dishan's oeuvre includes protagonists who are Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, and devotees of Fujianese ancestral worship. In all of these cases, participating in religious cultural phenomena aids protagonists in overcoming a social problem. For the two case studies in the following section, I have selected the Catholic protagonist Xingqiu of Su's *Thorny Heart* and the eponymous Protestant protagonist of Xu's *Yuguan* because they belong to novella-length or novel-length works, and thus are more well-developed than protagonists in Su's and Xu's other works. In Su's case, *Thorny Heart* is one of her only works of fiction.

If the significance of the category of "religion" is that it labels certain phenomena as existing outside of the human social realm, then it is still necessary to delineate some definition of what kind of cultural phenomena can possibly be designated as "religious." Otherwise, if any component at all of Su's and Xu's narratives could potentially be considered religious, the distinction between "religious" and "non-religious" phenomena in their work would become meaningless. Furthermore, cultural phenomena explicitly identified as "religious" can serve many functions in narrative, acting for example as satire or aesthetic enhancement, and does not necessarily indicate "religion" in the sense I employ here. I use Schilbrack's definition of "religion" to determine which cultural phenomena represented in the Su's and Xu's fiction be categorized as "religious." I have chosen Schilbrack because he exerts great care to come up with a definition that is narrow enough to exclude some cultural phenomena from the possibility of being considered "religious," while still broad enough to avoid the trap of privileging Protestant-like conceptualizations of "religion."

According to Schilbrack, cultural phenomena that can be designated as "religious" by individuals and groups necessarily have two features in common. First, they purport to resolve some social problem, what Schilbrack calls their "promissory function." Secondly, they acknowledge some ostensible reality

⁹ Schilbrack provides an overview of the debate between Religious Studies scholars regarding the best combination of these approaches for characterizing "religion" as accurately as possible within research (Schilbrack 2013).

that exists beyond the realm of human perception as the justification for carrying out the practices that they claim will resolve social problems. Shilbrack calls this the “superempirical reality” of religious cultural phenomena (Schilbrack 2013). Using Schilbrack’s definition as a basis for my study, all cultural phenomena represented within Su’s and Xu’s literature necessarily needs to be presented in their fictional narratives as resolving some social problem and as relying on a superempirical reality as the main rationale and justification for their existence to be considered “religious” cultural phenomena. In the following section, I will argue that Catholicism in Su Xuelin’s *Thorny Heart* and Protestantism in Xu Dishan’s *Yuguan* meet both of these criteria to be considered “religious”—they resolve protagonists’ feelings of social alienation, and the justification for the values protagonists see each religion as espousing rests in the existence of the Protestant God (上帝 Shangdi) and the Catholic God (天主 Tianzhu) respectively.

3. Compassion, Love, and Selflessness: Resolving Social Alienation through Religious Cultural Phenomena

To arrive at my results, I examined the basic narrative structure of Xu’s and Su’s fiction and established patterns regarding how religious cultural phenomena operate within those narratives. As a result of this analysis, I found that religious cultural phenomena serve a pivotal function on the level of narrative structure. They serve as the tool which enables protagonists to resolve their feelings of social alienation, thus pivoting the narrative towards its positive resolution. All three protagonists eventually resolve their unhappiness by identifying with or participating in religion. In each case, the narratives of these three authors’ stories represent protagonists as learning to focus on the well-being of others through values such as selflessness and compassion, which they cultivate from participating in religious cultural phenomena. The cultivation of these values in turn helps protagonists to become more optimistic that they will be able to form relationships with others. In this section, I will provide a sampling of Su’s and Xu’s works that demonstrate this narrative pattern. Specifically, my case examples are Xingqiu from Su’s novel *Thorny Heart* and the eponymous protagonist of Xu Dishan’s novella *Yuguan* 玉官 (Xu [1939] 1997).

In Su Xuelin’s *Thorny Heart*, Xingqiu is unhappy even though she is living her dream of studying art in France. Tragedy strikes her family when her brother dies of illness. The death causes Xingqiu to reflect on her own distance from home and especially from her mother. Worrying that her mother might die as well before they have a chance to see each other again, Xingqiu wonders why she even wanted to come to France to begin with. She remembers stubbornly insisting on leaving home despite her mother’s plaintive entreaties of her to stay, telling herself that the kind of self-improvement she would achieve by studying abroad would enable her to more effectively reform Chinese culture upon her return. However, her brother’s death makes her admit to herself that more than a little of her motivation to come to France stemmed not from a nationalistic desire to improve China, but from her own vanity and wish to advance her studies. Xingqiu’s anxiety that she will lose more family members without having a chance to see them again impacts her ability to live happily in France and makes her yearn for her mother. She also becomes suspicious of her earlier prioritization of her individual desires and self-development over her family ties.

Eventually, Xingqiu links her suspicion of individualism to dissatisfaction with her contemporaries’ efforts to modernize China. In her diary, she expresses admiration for the selflessness, compassion, and love of French Catholics she has met, all of whom credit their religious identity with their successful cultivation of these traits within themselves. Xingqiu writes that she believes the cultivation of these values have strengthened France as a nation, since they inculcate in individuals a greater sense of care for others and thus improve social relationships. Besides merely being identified as “Catholic,” these values also clearly meet the two requirements to be considered “religious” cultural phenomena according to Schilbrack’s definition. Xingqiu portrays them as having the promissory function of strengthening French social relationships and thus the nation as a whole. Furthermore, these values have a superempirical reality in the form of the Catholic god, in whose name Xingqiu’s Catholic friends

practice them. Xingqiu writes that she would not mind having a God to believe in to compel her to act selflessly like her friends have. This further affirms that the values labeled as “Catholic” in the novel rely on the existence of the Catholic god to validate them.

Based on her observation of their high-quality relationships with others, Xingqiu determines that “to save China and to promote science are as a matter of course urgent tasks, but it is first necessary to strive for the transformation of the spirit. To strive for the transformation of the spirit, it is first necessary to break through the traditional selfish outlook [自私自利 *zi si zi li*] and attend to moral life.”¹⁰ She feels that without discarding the selfishness that she believes was encouraged by traditional society, Chinese citizens will never be able to effectively modernize China. Observing the behavior of Catholics she knows in France, she has come to believe that “the moral life,” by which she evidently means prioritization of the needs of others, is crucial to fundamentally transforming the “spirits” of the Chinese people. Without such a transformation on the individual level, she argues, China will never modernize on the social level. Xingqiu eventually converts [皈依 *guiyi*] to Catholicism, with which she associates the traits of selflessness and maternal love toward others that she has admired in her French friends throughout the novel. Her decision to convert demonstrates the extent to which she sees the values she admires in her Catholic friends as crucial to improved interpersonal relations with others, and also the degree to which she sees these values as distinctly “Catholic,” and only achievable through participation in Catholicism. Once she converts, she feels more at peace than she did for the first two-thirds of the novel. She also resolves her anxiety about her mother by returning home to China and spending much time with her deepening their relationship, so that by the time her mother finally does pass, she feels satisfied that they have made amends (Su 1929). In forging a stronger connection with her mother, she overcomes her sense of social alienation and becomes at peace. Her newfound state of mind gives her more resolve than she used to have, so that she can face trials like her mother’s death with fortitude. Thus, her change of mind represents a strengthening of her character.

Unlike Xingqiu, Xu Dishan’s Yuguan is not concerned with the inability of May Fourth Movement rhetoric to reach the hearts of the Chinese people. As an uneducated peasant woman, she shows no indication of even having heard of the May Fourth Movement or its ideals. Still, she also struggles to connect with those around her. The catalyst of her realization that she struggles from a sense of social alienation is her relationship with Annie [An ni 安妮], her daughter-in-law. Annie resents living together with Yuguan because she had originally wanted to live alone with her husband. She disdains Yuguan’s house for being too unfashionable and poor. Furthermore, Annie insists on managing the affairs of the household, refusing to allow Yuguan say in any matter. She also continually speaks with her husband in either English or Mandarin, neither of which Yuguan understands. This leaves Yuguan feeling isolated in her own home. Eventually, Annie starts insisting on her and Yuguan’s son moving out, so unbearable does she find the living situation. This decision infuriates Yuguan. The terrible relationship between them also depresses her and leads to her realization that that despite the independence she has enjoyed for most of her life because of her husband’s untimely death, she has never felt happy in her life (Xu [1939] 1997).

Perhaps because she is uneducated, Yuguan’s realization of the cause of her unhappiness comes much later in her life than it does for either Xingqiu or Ling Yu. In fact, for her, this realization occurs in the same moment that she decides to identify with Christianity, as a way of combatting the selfishness that she realizes has been at the root of her depression. This entire process of recognizing her discontent and identifying with religion as a solution is condensed into a single paragraph:

While her daughter-in-law was out, house-hunting day after day, Yü-kuan spent most of the time in her room doing nothing. She began to realize that everything that she had done for her son since her husband’s death was out of selfish [自私自利 *zi si zi li*] motives. Decades of missionary life could be summarized

¹⁰ 要救中国，提倡科学固是急务，然而先要讲究心灵的改造，讲究心灵的改造，第一须得打破传统的自私自利人生观，注意道德的生活。

by the old saying, 'A chinaware dealer who used broken bowls himself,' because she herself had never benefited from what she had preached. When she thought about this, she got up from her chair as if suddenly she grasped some priceless truth. She began to realize that her brother-in-law's words to her when she first became a widow had been right. Her widowhood was nothing but vanity; her missionary work was close to hypocrisy; and her present suffering was, in fact, a natural outcome of her past deeds. She wanted to go back to the country to start a genuine missionary life. But first she must repent. She felt that she should do at least one good deed for someone (Hsü 1981).¹¹

Yuguan realizes that all her actions throughout her life have been selfish, and believes that her present suffering is a direct consequence of this. Her newfound turn to Christianity is evidenced by her self-admonishment that she has never practiced what she preached, and by her decision to return to the countryside to "start a genuine missionary life." She inaugurates her newfound turn to Christianity by determining to do something kind for somebody. This reflects her willingness to live her life in service to others from this moment on. In her case, she has already been exposed to Christian teaching for many years before this moment. As such, when she determines that the cause of her present suffering is her long history of selfishly-motivated actions, her intuitive next step is to identify with Christianity. She turns to Christianity because she views it as advocating the practice of selflessness and service to others. Furthermore, phenomena labeled as "Christian" in *Yuguan* meets Schilbrack's criteria to be considered "religious." The promissory function of "Christian" cultural phenomena is that they improve social relationships through the cultivation of selflessness, while the superempirical reality that justifies their existence is the Christian God. Yuguan's resolution to convert, like Xingqiu's, also indicates that she sees these character traits as only able to be cultivated through participation in and identification with religious cultural phenomena.

4. "Religion" as Narrative Device: Using "Religion" as a Method of Categorizing Certain Values as Non-Social

In a period as allegedly lukewarm toward the idea of "religion" as the Republican Era was, it is at first glance surprising that Su's and Xu's protagonists would turn to religious cultural phenomena to resolve their feelings of social alienation. I contend that by portraying the values that make their protagonists feel more confident about their ability to improve their relationships with others as learned from participation in religious cultural phenomena, these authors' narratives represent those values as existing in the universe beyond the human realm. In other words, they are depicted as existing in opposition to and in contrast with values the protagonists have learned previously from their social circles. The category of "religion" creates a clean distinction between the two sets of cultural phenomena, therefore avoiding a potential conflict within the narrative if protagonists were to resolve their feelings of social alienation through values learned from the very society whose ideas and behaviors have alienated them. My contention stems from a consideration of several factors, including Xu Dishan's essay "What Kind of Religion Do We Need? [我们要什么样的宗教? Wo men yao shen me yang de zong jiao?]," and the contrast in Su's narratives between so-called "religious" cultural phenomena and other, non-religious cultural phenomena.

Xu Dishan's discussion of the social role of "religion" in his essay, "What Kind of Religion Do We Need?" reinforces the idea that, in his literature at least, "religion" is used as a narrative technique to categorize interpersonal values protagonists need to cultivate as existing outside of the social realm from which they feel alienated. In the essay, Xu lists three major problems with humanity:

¹¹ 安妮每天出去找房子，玉官只坐在屋里出神。她回想自守寡以来，所有的行为虽是为儿子的成功，归根，还是自私的。她几十年来的传教生活，一向都如“卖瓷器的用破碗”一般，自己没享受过教训的利益。在这时候，她忽然觉悟到这一点，立刻站起来，像在她生活里找出一件无价宝一般。她觉得在初寡时，她小叔子对她说的话是对的。她觉得从前的守节是为虚荣，从前的传教是近于虚伪目前的痛苦是以前种种的自然结果，她要回乡去真正做她的传教生活，不过她先要忏悔，她至少要为人做一件好事，在她心里打定了一个主意 (Xu [1939] 1997).

sensuality [Rou yu 肉欲], selfishness [Wo yu 我欲], and willingness [Yi yu 意欲].¹² The first two are self-explanatory. Xu never defines “willingness,” but says that it is the most powerful of the three, and that it has the power to destroy life, but also to create. He thus seems to be referring to mankind’s willpower, which can be used for evil as readily as it can be used for good. After listing these three vices of humanity, Xu writes:

... In the universe or solar system, man cannot be considered the best; just so on the planet, man cannot be considered the most complete or the freest. So in addition to the rationalism we have now, we need to seek a wiser “god” to obey. Whether a god exists is not the issue we are discussing tonight. What I am calling “God” is simply the expression of mankind’s high aspirations. Man would build him up as a model; it would not be any kind of despotism, nor would it restrain man’s reason. (Xu [1923] 2014).¹³

Xu points out that humanity is not more perfect or successful than anything else that is observable in the solar system or on earth. Given humanity’s imperfections, he believes it is natural for people to create a god to look up to, even if this god is simply an amalgamation of their highest aspirations. He envisions this god as providing a “model” for people to aspire to in their imperfection, a reminder of their own ideals that they should continue to strive for in their perpetual struggle to overcome their weaknesses. In other words, Xu advocates for the adoption of a social “religion” because he believes it will be beneficial for people to have a perfect, ideal role model to aspire to. This role model, the deity of which Xu speaks, is perfect precisely because humans would conceive of it as existing beyond and impervious to the imperfect realm of human affairs. Xu’s essay basically presents a functionalist definition of religion, in which conceptualizing of one’s highest ideals as embodied in the form of a perfect deity who exists beyond the imperfect human realm serves as a conceptual strategy to give individuals a road map of what traits and behaviors they should aspire to.

Su never discusses the social role of “religion” in her nonfiction writings as directly as Xu does. Nevertheless, in the following close-reading analysis of *Thorny Heart*, I demonstrate that she portrays cultural phenomena designated as “religious” as superior in some shape or form to cultural phenomena which originate in the human social realm. Xingqiu explicitly admires values she considers “Catholic,” namely compassion and maternal love, as allowing practitioners to cultivate more compassionate relationships with others than non-Catholics have. Long before she converts herself, she begins to think that she would not mind having a god to believe in as a perpetual reminder not to let self-interest overtake her decision-making. Here, Xingqiu hints at a similar conceptualization of “religion” to Xu’s, as a useful conceptual category for creating a role model, perfect because of its alleged disassociation from the imperfect human realm, which would constantly remind her of her ideal-self and which she could strive to emulate. Later, she writes in her diary that her Catholic friends credit their compassionate natures to their religious identity. In other words, her friends characterize their compassion and selflessness as “religious” traits, which they were only able to cultivate through the practice of Catholicism. She eventually converts to Catholicism and attributes her ability to resolve the inner turmoil and sense of social alienation she has felt throughout the narrative to God (Su 1929). This suggests that Xingqiu understands the traits she admires that enable her to forge stronger connections with others as uniquely “Catholic,” and the cultivation of them as possible only through active participation in and identification with religion.

¹² These terms are translated into English by Xu himself within the essay.

¹³ ... 人在宇宙，或太阳系之中本来不能算是最好的；就是在地球之上，人类也不能算是最完全的，最自由的。所以我们，于现有之理智以外，要想求得一位更高明的“神”，来服从。神的有无，不是今晚我们所说的问题。但所谓神，不过人类更高理想的表现，人设立他来，作个模范；并不算是怎样专制，或约束人的理性。

5. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that “religion” in the literature of Su Xuelin and Xu Dishan acts as a narrative device that drives the plot and narrative structure of their works toward a positive resolution. On the level of plot, protagonists resolve their feelings of social alienation through identifying with or participating in cultural phenomena they designate as “religious.” This is because they feel that these “religious” cultural phenomena teach them values such as selflessness and compassion that help them escape the trap of their obsessive self-consciousness and cultivate social relationships with others. On the level of narrative structure, protagonists’ turn to religious cultural phenomena is the pivot that directs the narrative away from the protagonists’ point of lowest morale and toward a positive resolution. Furthermore, Su’s and Xu’s narratives depict these interpersonal values as only able to be cultivated through participation in or identification with religious cultural phenomena because this allows protagonists to see those traits as unaffected by and unrelated to the realm of human social interaction that causes them to feel alienated in the first place. This allows them to understand those values as an allegedly objective set of tools for resolving their inability to feel connected to others without having to face the contradiction that those tools are themselves products of the society from which they feel alienated.

This research accomplishes several goals. First, it establishes a new understanding of Xu’s and Su’s literature that avoids assuming the religiosity of their narratives is simply a reflection of their personal beliefs, without any potential social or political meaning. Second, it uses their literature to exemplify a method of reading representations of “religion” in literature that treat it as a narrative device, an empty signifier in of itself into which certain elements of the narrative are categorized in order to achieve a certain narrative goal. This method of reading “religion” is more aligned with contemporary methods of understanding the concept in Religious Studies scholarship than a method which attempts to read representations of “religion” within a given narrative as consistently signifying one specific idea. It is hoped that future studies of literature and religion will employ this method of analyzing the role representations of religion play within fictional narratives, as it reflects the way that “religion” is in general employed in social discourse.

Funding: This research was funded by the University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, School of Arts and Sciences Government, Graduate Student Government, Department of East Asian Languages and Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, as well as by a Fulbright Research Award to Taiwan administered by the U.S. Department of State.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the many institutions who have contributed funding to the completion of this research, including the University of Pennsylvania School of Arts and Sciences, School of Arts and Sciences Government, Graduate Student Government, and Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, as well as the the U.S. Department of State’s Fulbright grant.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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