

## Two Tiers of Nostalgia and a Chronotopic Aura: Xu Zhimo and his Literary Cambridge Identity

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**Abstract.** More than a turning point in his life, Xu Zhimo's (1897–1931) Cambridge experience is pivotal in producing and shaping one of the most romantic writers in modern China. Xu created a literary Cambridge that, more than any other foreign places that were portrayed in modern Chinese literature, is Chinese readers' "dreamland" of the West. When the native Chinese Xu addressed Cambridge as "xiang" (native place), how should we see Xu's nostalgia for his second homeland? Through his Cambridge works, Xu created a perceived image of the place to his readers, and this image possessed an aura that stood the test of time and space, which we would term as "chronotopic aura". Furthermore, we shall analyse Xu's Cambridge experience that evoked his nostalgia and to propose a new reading of Xu's works on Cambridge in terms of the chronotopic aura between his literary Cambridge identity and his readers.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, Xu Zhimo, Literary Cambridge, chronotopic aura, identity

### 1. Introduction

If Shaoxing of China is identified with Lu Xun, West Hunan with Shen Congwen and Beijing with Lao She, then the mention of Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) will invoke the image of Cambridge among readers of modern Chinese literature. In fact, the most celebrated work of Xu is his poem entitled "Farewell again, Cambridge" (再别康桥), which has been included in Chinese literature textbooks around Asia, such as Singapore and Taiwan.

Unlike many of the May Fourth realist writers whose magnum opus are often set in their homeland in China, the romantic writer Xu composed many of his great works on foreign land, like "Scraps of Paris" (巴黎的鳞爪). Xu's frequent overseas travel could be traced to his family's affluence. With the expectation that his son would continue the family banking business, Xu's father sent him overseas to study banking at Clark University in America in 1918. Later, Xu went on to Columbia University and the London School of Economics in 1919 and 1920, respectively. However, it was only during his short stint in Cambridge from 1921 to 1922 that Xu was inspired to seriously write modern poetry. The majority of Xu's Cambridge works were written after he returned to China, such as poems "Spring" (春, 1922), "Wild west Cambridge at dusk" (康桥西野暮色, 1922), "Farewell to Cambridge" (再会吧! 康桥, 1922), "Farewell again, Cambridge" (1928), and a prose "The Cambridge I know" (我所知道的康桥, 1926).

Xu once declared that Cambridge was his best overseas study experience and in his prose, "The Cambridge I know", even addressed Cambridge as "*xiang*" (native place). How should we see Xu's nostalgia for his second homeland? Was it really Cambridge he missed or was it the loss of a part of himself that had evoked this nostalgia? Furthermore, through his works on Cambridge, Xu created a perceived image of the place to his readers, and this image possessed an aura that stood the test of time and space, which I wish to term as "chronotopic aura." In this essay, I will attempt to analyse Xu Zhimo's Cambridge experience that evoked his nostalgia and also propose a new reading of Xu's works on Cambridge in terms of the chronotopic aura between literary Cambridge and its readers.

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## 2. Two Tiers of Nostalgia -- Cambridge Experience and the True Self

Prior to Cambridge, Xu had studied in Massachusetts, New York and London, majoring in history, French or Economics. Although Xu obtained first class honours at Clark University, there is no record reflecting his love for his studies then. In *Unpublished Diaries of Xu Zhimo* (徐志摩未刊日记), "Diary written in the States" (留美日记) records his response to events in China, particularly the May Fourth Movement. This diary, written in 1919, is heavy in its political slant, contrasting with "Diary written in Britain" (留英日记), a record of profound personal emotions.

Xu went to England in 1920 "to be a follower of Russell."<sup>1</sup> However, his hopes were shattered as upon arrival, the philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) had just been ousted from Trinity College of Cambridge University. After studying half a year in the London School of Economics, Xu finally managed to enroll in Cambridge as a "special student" at King's College, through the arrangement of Cambridge historian Goldsworthy Dickinson (1862-1932).

Returning to China after a one-year stint in Cambridge, Xu published "The Cambridge I know" in *Chenbao fukan* (Supplement of Chenbao) in 1926, in which he notably employed the word "nostalgia" (思乡) when recollecting his Cambridge days. While "sixiang" means the sentimental recollection of one's native place, there are in fact two tiers of nostalgia Xu experienced – the Cambridge experience, and his "past self" in Cambridge.

### 2.1. First tier of nostalgia: The Cambridge experience

Soon after Xu arrived in Spring 1921, his then-wife Zhang Youyi joined him in Sawston, a small town southwest of Cambridge. For the entire spring, he led a mundane life: "I was still a stranger in Cambridge, with no acquaintances – I have yet to taste the Cambridge life. All I knew was a library, some classrooms and eateries that sell cheap meals."<sup>2</sup> It was only from that autumn after Zhang Youyi left did he have "the opportunity to live the real Cambridge life."<sup>3</sup> One vital event took place alongside his discovery of Cambridge—the discovery of himself and his literary identity. Leo Lee calls it a "spiritual rebirth"—a new sense of identity after a long period of "moratorium in China and the United States."<sup>4</sup> Amidst setbacks in his love life (he divorced Zhang Youyi in March 1922 but received no affirmation from his lover, Lin Huiyin), Xu underwent a momentous transformation in his intellectual and literary pursuits, as he argues: "My eyes are opened by Cambridge. My desire for knowledge is stirred by Cambridge. My self-consciousness takes its embryonic form in Cambridge."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the discovery of Cambridge is the discovery of the Self.

As a "special student" who could sit in for any subject, Xu attained his much cherished freedom: active intellectual engagement free of examinations. Consequently, he spent his time taking long strolls, smoking, discussing and drinking afternoon teas with English friends. To begin with, Cambridge is a unique town with an assembly of intellectuals. It was not his only overseas institution, yet Xu singled out Cambridge's greatest significance:

I spent two years in America, and two years in England... If I was a pure dunce when I came to America, I remained unchanged when I left the Goddess of Liberty. But if I was unenlightened in America, my days at Cambridge at least made me realize that previously I was full of ignorance. This difference is by no means little.<sup>6</sup>

Leo Lee argues that the "intrusion" of literati G.L. Dickinson, E.M. Forster and new-found love Lin Huiyin had gradually steered Xu's "path" to literature.<sup>7</sup> Association with these "British gentlemen of repute" too played a significant role in guiding him to "self-discovery." Besides being a close acquaintance, Dickinson had a great impact on Xu's life. In his letter to artist-critic Roger Fry, Xu admits: "I have always thought it the greatest occasion in my life to meet Mr. Dickinson. It is due to him that I could have come to Cambridge and been [sic] enjoying all these happy days; that my interest in literature and arts began to shape and perpetuate itself."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji* (Taipei: Fuxin shuju, 1983), p.17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>4</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), p.138.

<sup>5</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo zhuan* (Beijing: Zhongguo Renmin daxue chubanshe, 1989), p.19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, p.130.

<sup>8</sup> Xu Zhimo, Letters to Roger Fry, 7 August 1922 to 5 June 1923, Fry Papers File, King's College Archives, Cambridge, U.K.

Through Dickinson, Xu got to know Roger Fry and other English writers, Edward Carpenter, Katherine Mansfield and L.A. Richards. Although Xu's initial plan to "follow Russell" did not materialize, his admiration for Russell intensified after attending Russell's talks in the Cambridge Heretics' Club (a discussion group for philosophers). These acquaintances and activities during his Cambridge days highlighted his "pure belief".<sup>9</sup> This "pure belief," according to Hu Shi, consists of "Love, Freedom and Beauty",<sup>10</sup> and Xu's pursuit of these ultimate goals from his Cambridge days formed the basis not only of his literary self, but his true self—"xingling" (innate sensibility).<sup>11</sup>

The concept of "xingling" is the most distinctive characteristic of the Gong'an school of poetry and has become the hallmark of its leader, Yuan Hongdao's (1568-1610) literary theory. Yuan maintains that one should "uniquely express [one's] personality and innate sensibility without being restrained by convention and form".<sup>12</sup>

"Xingling" is specifically mentioned by Xu in "The Cambridge I know":

...listening to the sounds of water under starlight, listening to the sounds of night bells in nearby village, listening to the mooing of tired cows at the riverside, is one of the most magical experiences I have in Cambridge: the beauty of nature, serenity, harmonize in the privities of this starlight and light of the wave, by chance flood into your *innate sensibility*.<sup>13</sup>

Xu's "xingling" can be seen as a convergence of the external Cambridge environment and his internal spiritual realm—which takes both the form of a temperament and an unconventional manner of expressing this temperament. Not only does the idyllic environ of Cambridge provoke a sublimation effect, it forcefully "floods" his consciousness and emotions, so much so that his inner sensibility harmonizes with the slow-paced, reclusive atmosphere of Cambridge. This innate sensibility is then translated into his works as they are "unconstrained by specific styles or conventions" technically. For instance, Xu's poetry did not adhere to specific poetics such as the standardised classical or the totally free-versed modern forms, but selectively inherited the emphases on rhythm and structure from classical poetry, techniques from Western poetics, and the vernacular language from modern Chinese literary movement. An example would be "Farewell again, Cambridge." Content-wise, he allows his Cambridge experience to be "flown from his thoughts and feelings," to capture his experience in the pursuit of love, freedom and beauty.

## 2.2. Second tier of nostalgia: Nostalgia of the past Self

In his Cambridge works, Xu describes the beauty of River Cam and its surroundings, the famous "backs," the spring and the tranquility at dusk. However, his works such as "Tattling while living in the mountains of Firenze" (翡冷翠山居闲话), also focus on nature, which are not dissimilar from Cambridge. In fact, his Cambridge works sometimes pale in terms of foreign experiences and interpersonal encounters. But what stands out in his Cambridge works is the Self he portrays—a debonair and unrestrained poet who quietly takes his leave from Cambridge and "flicks his sleeves without bringing away a wisp of cloud", and a carefree youth who devotes himself to the beauty of nature. This state of life coincides with what Xu relishes – his pure belief; in particular, his freedom and carefree Self.

Xu repeatedly emphasizes the importance of solitude. In "The Cambridge I know", he writes:

If you want to discover your true self, you have to give yourself an opportunity to be alone. If you want to discover a place (which may also be spiritual), you would also need to have a chance to play alone.<sup>14</sup>

Notice that Xu's solitary self precedes his appreciation of a locality. Hence, the inner states of aloneness and selfhood at Cambridge are later dearly missed by him. In "Another self-dissection" (再自剖), Xu claims that to evade the state of depression, he has to attain "loneliness", which is precisely what Cambridge offers – absolute solitariness.

However, this state of solitude was burdened by realities after he returned to China in August 1922. His grandmother's demise was followed by the death of close acquaintance Lin Changmin and his second son. His lover Lin Huiyin married Liang Sicheng, and his new love, Lu Xiaoman, was already married. Political

<sup>9</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1983), p.302.

<sup>10</sup> Hu Shi, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.10.

<sup>11</sup> Translation of "xingling" as in Susan Daruvala, *Zhou Zuoren and an alternative Chinese response to Modernity*(Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard UP, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Chou, Chih-P'ing, *Yuan Huang-Tao and the Kung-an School*(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp.44-48.

<sup>13</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.19. Italics mine.

<sup>14</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.18.

upheavals in China also contradicted with his yearning for peace. Lastly, “Creation Society” and Lu Xun harshly criticised his editorial stance and poetics. Xu’s essays, such as “Self-dissection” (自剖, 1926), reflected such misery,:

Previously, when I see the golden waves glittering in the sunlight, it was as if seeing the immortal or the imperial palace—credible and beautiful hallucination would sweep past my mind; but it is different now, sunlight is merely sunlight, flowing waves are merely flowing waves, no matter how splendid, it cannot affect my dull heart anymore.<sup>15</sup>

Such writings contrast strikingly with his Cambridge writings, in which, for instance in “Wild west Cambridge at dusk”, a star is like a light boat sailing through the clouds. Another essay, “Consulting a doctor” (求医), expresses his fear of being misunderstood and the desire to escape from the worldly miseries.<sup>16</sup> It is significant that at the end of the essay, he quotes from Mansfield to echo his innermost feelings. It seems that when despondency dawn on him, Xu turns not to his immediate surroundings but to his Cambridge days, the intellectuals that had inspired him and to the state of the past self. Though I would not go as far as critic Zhao Xiaqiu who contends that upon return to China, Xu’s “pure belief” gradually turns to doubt,<sup>17</sup> I would argue that the tension caused by the disjuncture between his strongly held beliefs and the external situations accounts for his ‘self-nostalgia’ and longing for Cambridge days, when both the external environ and his inner self achieved a high degree of harmony.

The above argument thus sums up the complicated state of nostalgia Xu experienced when he mentioned the word “*sixiang*”. His nostalgia for Cambridge comes in two tiers, firstly, the possibilities that Cambridge had given him, in particular, the discovery of his true self; secondly, he was also subconsciously missing his previous self in Cambridge.

### 3. Chronotopic aura between literary Cambridge and its readers

Xu’s works on Cambridge are permeated with highly intense emotions, filtering out any despondency—what remains is joy and hope. Consequently, the Cambridge he portrays evokes romantic and heavenly imagination. Significantly, Xu crafts a Cambridge that is literary, representational and atemporal, therefore thrusting into his readers a great sense of desire to, not only visit Cambridge, but to visit Xu’s Cambridge. This creates a Cambridge that is imaginary or literary. This literary Cambridge does not come by easy as Xu discloses in “The Cambridge I know”:

When someone has to write his most beloved, be it someone or somewhere, it is the most difficult task. You are afraid of portraying a wrong picture, or to provoke it by overdoing it, you are afraid you will not do it justice by being reticent.<sup>18</sup>

Xu is in fact worried about the loss of aura when reconstructing Cambridge—his literary Cambridge. Henceforth, to write the unwritable—his past impressions on Cambridge without losing aesthetic distance, Xu brilliantly creates what I would like to term as a chronotopic aura between the literary Cambridge and its readers.

A term coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, chronotope literally means “time-space”.<sup>19</sup> The concept is based on the idea that spatial and temporal dimensions are inseparable in works of literature. Next, aura is the term used by Walter Benjamin to describe the mystical sense that surrounds artistic or ritual objects—the “semblance of distance” which gives an object a human presence as though it would look back at its viewer.<sup>20</sup> By saying that Xu has created a chronotopic aura between literary Cambridge and its readers, I mean that not only does he deliberately inject a ‘aesthetic distance’ by creating a mystical and artistic distance between the literary subject and its audience, he, intentionally or unintentionally, further compounds such ‘distancing effects’ by a protraction of the spatial and temporal gaps, both of which are inseparable, between his writings and his intended readers.

Firstly, the aesthetic distance is created by his dexterous use of imagery and rhetoric. In “Farewell Again, Cambridge”: “The golden willows by the riverside/Are brides in the setting sun/.../The creek under the elm tree/Holds not water but the rainbow from the sky”,<sup>21</sup> metaphors used—brides and rainbow—are not only

<sup>15</sup> Xu Zhimo *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.58.

<sup>16</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.130.

<sup>17</sup> Zhao Xiaqiu, *Xu Zhimo zhuan*, p.76.

<sup>18</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> Bakhtin M, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.234.

<sup>20</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, *Illuminations* (London: Cape, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p.403. Translation mine.

beautiful and romantic in nature, but also desirable yet unattainable, hence evoking imaginations in the readers' minds. Another poem "Wild West Cambridge at dusk" writes: "The sunglow is in the woods and fields/The sunglow is in the open country and deep in the brook/The sunglow is chasing in the front and back of the wind/The sunglow is between the eyebrows of the village girl/The sunglow is at the throat of the swallow and the back of the crow/The sunglow is hovering in the crowing of the cockerel and the barking of the dogs"<sup>22</sup> The sun's glow is constantly spreading from the woods to the girl, and to farm animals. Readers are mesmerized by these descriptions which, more than performing the rhetorical function of depicting the picturesque sceneries, create sceneries more stunning than the reality. With such powerful rhetoric, a realm that resembles scholar-critic Wang Guowei's (1877-1927) concept of *jingjie* (realm—an idealistic world internally constructed by artist and portrayed by art after continuous aesthetic pursuits) is created.

Secondly, the aesthetic gap Xu creates in his works is amplified by the spatial distance between Britain and China. Cambridge is geographically far from Xu's intended Chinese readers in China [his works were submitted to *Shishi xinbao*, *Chenbao*, *Xiaoshuo yuebao*]. Thus when they were led by Xu's poetic portrayal to gaze at the distant Cambridge, they were likely to conjure up a utopian image. As these works were published during the May Fourth Period when intellectuals carried forth the task of social "enlightenment", any information on the West and overseas studies was highly valued. While another May Fourth writer Yu Dafu's fiction based in Japan created a bleak overseas study experience, Xu's academic and idyllic experience was not only rare; the utopian-like image of Cambridge glorified and romanticized his experience. When the portrayal of Cambridge corresponds to the ideal image of overseas studies and the reader's personal yearning, it is as if the reader's gaze is reciprocated by the "returning gaze" of the distant Cambridge, thus making it more meaningful. As such gazes and returning gazes are further augmented by the insurmountable physical distance apart, Xu's Cambridge becomes all the more desirable and romanticized.

Thirdly, we look at the temporal aspect of Xu's writings. His Cambridge works were written between 1922 and 1928. Since their publications, almost a century has passed. In reality, the temporal distance between the reading and the writing can only continue to increase with time. However, we need not quantify such temporal distance in terms of years as Xu has successfully crafted a literary Cambridge that is crystallized in words and is atemporal. Most apparently, there are no time-specific events and historical narratives in these works that would invalidate them over time. Furthermore, Xu's descriptions of Cambridge, such as the beauty of the backs, the willow, the seasons and the activities like punting and leisure strolling, as well as the colleges, are still highly definitive of Cambridge.

Despite the changes to the 'real' Cambridge—the new town planning, pollution of River Cam, commercialization of punting, reconstruction of bridges or even restoration of the King's Chapel—Chinese readers associate the 'real' Cambridge directly with the literary Cambridge depicted by Xu. The following observations was made in the Summer of 2005: Pointing to St John's College, a Chinese tour guide was overheard telling Chinese tourists that was Xu Zhimo's college (to some, it is probable that every college belongs to Xu). Another group of Chinese tourists in front of Trinity College were self-declaring to be "taking photograph with Xu Zhimo's Cambridge." If Xu's literary Cambridge is crystallized in words, it has been further crystallized in photographs. "Xu Zhimo's Cambridge" is then another name for the literary Cambridge which these tourists first set out to visit, and eventually convinced that they have visited the 'real' Cambridge. From the tourists' enthusiasm in works like "Farewell again, Cambridge", this literary Cambridge must have stood the test of time as it continuously renders itself meaningful to tourists and readers. In this sense, Xu's literary Cambridge can be seen to be constantly maintaining a dialogical relationship with, or reciprocating the gaze back at, the reader from the distant 1920s. In essence, temporal aura is eternalized.

While highlighting the space-time chronotopic aura created by Xu as an important factor in "eternalizing" his works, it should be pointed out that there are other indirect yet significant factors. I have mentioned Hu Shi's summation of Xu's "real temperament" (*zhen xingqing*)—the pursuit of love, beauty and freedom. Xu's temperament in its purest form is reflected in his writings, such as "degrading" himself to be a waterweed in "Farewell again, Cambridge". And in describing a sunset he witnessed in "The Cambridge I know", Xu was so touched that he even knelt down before the magnificence—such naiveté and genuine purity is unconventionally and uniquely appealing.

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<sup>22</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo shi quanji* (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1992), p. 68. Translation mine.

According to Xu's teacher, the reformist-scholar Liang Qichao (1873-1929), Xu is "too frivolous".<sup>23</sup> It could be due to this spirited, self-willed personality that Xu leads a legendary life with several romances under his name—some widely perceived as scandalous, such as his divorce with his first wife and the marriage with Lu Xiaoman (whose own divorce was the result of their affair). However, this romantic image not only superimposes on to the romantic Cambridge he portrays, his love life has been used, or even exploited, by the media. In 2000, a highly popular China-Taiwan TV drama serial based on Xu's life story, "April Rhapsody", was released. In a way, the serial revitalized the glamour of Xu and Cambridge. Additionally, the pathos which the TV serial adds to Xu's image, especially after his unexpected tragic death in the 1931 plane crash, contributes to the continuous attraction of Xu's Cambridge writings.

#### 4. Conclusion

"Before the age of 24, my interest in poetry fell far below to that of my interest on theory of relativity or "The Social Contract"...my highest ambition is to become China's Hamilton! Before the age of 24, poetry, be it new or old, is totally irrelevant to me. If a person like me would really become a poet—what else is there to say?"<sup>24</sup> This famous statement written by Xu in the Preface of his poetry collection *Menghu Ji*, gives us an important insight of the beginning of Xu's poetic career. Xu was 24 in 1920, the year when he went to England.<sup>25</sup> More than a turning point in Xu's life, Cambridge is pivotal in shaping one of the most romantic writers in modern China. In turn, Xu returns the favour by creating a literary Cambridge that, more than any foreign places, is Chinese readers' "dreamland".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Liang Shiqiu, *Xu Zhimo quanji*, p3

<sup>24</sup> Xu Zhimo, *Xu Zhimo xuanji*, p.300.

<sup>25</sup> Withers, J.J. *Register of King's College Cambridge 1797-1925*. King's College Archive, Cambridge University

<sup>26</sup> Huimin "Cambridge Soliloquy".