

## Book Review

**Lixin Yang and Hongle Jiao**, *Virginia Woolf: The eternal British lily*. Wuhan: Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press, 2020, pp. 468, Paperback, RMB 62, ISBN: 9787568063661

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During the COVID-19 outbreak, when I was reviewing *Virginia Woolf: The eternal British lily*, written by Lixin Yang and Hongle Jia, I was deeply touched by this delicate biographical work for combining the vivid life writing and literary creation of Virginia Woolf (1882–1941). As an excellent launch to the book series “Female Talents: Lives, Thoughts and Words,” this book concentrates on Woolf’s spiritual experience, literary thinking, and creative writing throughout her whole life using rich evidence and detailed exposition.

The year 2021 marked the 80th anniversary of the death of this globally celebrated master of stream of consciousness novels and pioneer of feminist thought and culture. It has been nearly a century since Zhimo Xu, the renowned Chinese “New Moon” poet, first introduced Woolf’s remarkable piece *A room of one’s own* (1929) to the Chinese intellectual community. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the works of Woolf had a significant influence on many Chinese writers of the “New Moon School” and the “Beijing School,” driven by their enthusiasm for the translation and introduction of British and American modernist literature. From the 1980s to the 21st century, the Chinese translation of Woolf’s works and research on Woolf have made impressive achievements thanks to the energetic exploration of Chinese modernism, the rise of feminist criticism, and the development of comparative literature. The translation of Woolf biographies and the life writing of Woolf have a prominent role in these transformations.

The acknowledged foreign biographies of Woolf, including Lyndall Gordon’s *Virginia Woolf: A writer’s life* (Gordon 1993), Quentin Bell’s *Virginia Woolf* (Bell 1972), Alexandra Harris’s *Virginia Woolf* (Harris 2011), and the collection of essays *Moments of Being* (Woolf 1978), and certain biographical material written by Woolf herself, edited and published as *A writer’s diary* (Woolf 2003a, 2003b), together with their Chinese translations, contribute jointly to the study of Woolf here in China. The biographies and related critical biographies have revealed Chinese scholars’ distinctive interpretation of her creative personality and aesthetic charm, which constitutes an important feature of Chinese studies on Woolf.

Study on Woolf has been carried out since the late 1980s, when Shijing Qu, the first Asian researcher of Woolf, published his pioneering work *Woolf: Stream of*

*consciousness novelist* (《意识流小说家伍尔夫》1989). After the 1990s, more biographies written by Chinese authors were published, such as Yang Lu and Dingqing Li's *How Woolf read and wrote* (《伍尔夫是怎样读书写作的》1998), Houkai Wu's *Virginia Woolf: Moments of being* (《弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫:存在的瞬间》1999), and Xiaoming Yi's *Grace and madness: A biography of Virginia Woolf* (《优美与疯癫——弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫传》2002).

As editor-in-chief, Lixin Yang launched the first four books of the biography series in 2020 with the support of Huazhong University of Science and Technology Press. In particular the book *Virginia Woolf: The eternal British lily*, written by Professor Yang with the assistance of her student Dr. Hongle Jiao, is a reader-oriented endeavor that achieves great balance between readability and research when presenting the biography of such a celebrity and member of the literary elite.

Combining the details of Woolf's life experience with a close reading of her writing, *Virginia Woolf: The eternal British lily* is a six-chapter volume that successfully explores her inner thoughts and traces her spiritual growth following the real-life chronological order of Woolf's publications. Consisting of several extensive sections, each chapter begins with a quotation deliberately chosen from her works, echoing the development and transformation of her mind. For instance, when she was recovering from a mental breakdown and moved to the now-famous Gordon Square, today a notable cultural landmark, Woolf wrote excitedly: "Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial" (Woolf 1985: 185).

The first chapter, "Joy and sorrow in childhood: The early memories (1882–1894)," traces Woolf's family history and many significant fragments of little Virginia's life, describing her literary family, the characteristics of her intellectual parents, and the intimate relationship developed with her companion and dear elder sister Vanessa over the decades, and even the harm done by her older brothers, which led to her later sexual apathy. The second chapter, "Shadow of death: Loss of loved ones (1895–1904)," then reveals her suffering at the loss of her parents and a loving sister, Stella, implying the root of her long-term psychological depression, mental breakdown, and suicidal impulses. After this family upheaval and her move to Gordon Square, the third chapter (1905–1912) gives witness to two major changes that benefit Woolf both as a woman and a writer, the loss of her dearest brother Toby Stephens and her acquaintance with many like-minded friends and elite personages in different fields who later become the "Bloomsbury Group." Hosting regular parties every Thursday evening, the two sisters meet their life partners: Vanessa happily marries Clive Bell, and Virginia first becomes engaged to Lytton Strachey, but then finds her true companion and marries Leonard Woolf, a good friend and loyal husband.

The fourth chapter, “The prelude to a legendary life (1913–1922),” examines the beginning of Woolf’s marriage and writing. After several years of difficult search and struggle, she finally manages to “voyage out” in 1915 with the publication of her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, and Leonard even establishes Hogarth Press as a present and base for her modernist literature. In chapter five, “Rising fame and creative peak (1923–1931),” five representative works by Woolf are presented, along with the inspiration for these that came from her life experiences, showing the experiments and applications of various writing techniques during this productive eight-year period. Finally, the last chapter, “The end of the aging British beauty (1932–1941),” records her inner conflict over her last decade. Due to illness and sorrow, several close friends and relatives pass away, Bloomsbury member Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry in particular, as well as her nephew Julian – Vanessa’s firstborn – her half-brother George Duckworth, and her teenage tutor of Greek and close friend, Janet Cass. The shadow of death filled her heart again together with the creation of *The Waves* (1931), *Flush: A Biography* (1933), and *The Years* (1937). In the end, when Woolf could neither face the ruin of London after the continuous air attack of Hitler’s army, nor stand the pain of intermittent nervous breakdowns to both herself and her family and friends, she ultimately makes up her mind to end her life.

Four features of this work contribute to the discipline of studies on Woolf in relation to the present context of life writing in China.

First and foremost, this book illustrates the life of Woolf not only as a historical and cultural celebrity but as a remarkable author from the year 1913. In other words, I believe it addresses a distinctive feature of literary commentaries. The book is more than a simple introduction to her. It is an exploration taking Woolf’s life experience as a clue to dig in and interpret her works, and the other way around. These meaningful fragments and memories gradually emerge in her life-long writings after a certain literary transformation.

In contrast to previous Woolf biographies, the writers of this biography carefully select eight of the most influential works by Woolf for detailed text analysis, namely *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *A room of one’s own* (1929), *The Waves*, *Flush: A Biography*, and *The Years*. The essence of these works, the relevant plots to her past memory, and her acquaintance with several kindred spirits or literary intellectuals are all gradually presented in detail. In addition, this biography features various aspects of Woolf’s literary writing in terms of her writing strategies and the evolution of her narrative art, such as theme and perspective.

Specifically, it not only investigates certain delicate intertextualities between her fictional work *Orlando* and her theoretical piece *A room of one’s own*, but also concentrates on the close link between her literary creations and her life

experiences, especially a series of “moments of being” in her lifetime. As Woolf wrote herself in *Orlando*: “Every secret inside the soul of a writer, every experience in her life, every quality of her spirit, is written in her works” (2003a: 120). Woolf once states, “[i]f life has a base, it is memory” (Woolf 2003b: 78), which also explains her personal preference for biographical imitation in fiction writing. Hence, the co-authors of this biography have succeeded in creating a textual interpretation of and a contribution to the life writing of Woolf with the help of her works, turning this book into a starting point for readers to enter the literary world and decode the mystery of her soul.

The second contribution of this book worth noting is embodied in the respect paid to ordinary readers, to which Woolf herself attached great importance as well. The biography consciously minimizes the use of specialist terminology, academic language, and abstract concepts in writing in order to decrease reading difficulty, keeping historical and academic notes to a minimum. Instead, it focuses on the spiritual connections between the author’s reminiscences and her works, drawing pointedly on Woolf’s diaries and letters and the recollections of her dear friends. Thus, through reading, we are able to learn about Woolf’s childhood as a sensitive little girl at Hyde Park Gate and her wonderful vacations by the Cornwall sea, her early literary adventures, her association with the intellectuals of the Bloomsbury Group, and even the influence of her childhood trauma and intermittent mental disorders in adulthood on her life and writing style. “I can write and write and write: the happiest feeling in the world” (Woolf 1978: 323), and then an image of Woolf as an honorable priestess of British modernist literature, a writer who dares to speak for the public, especially for women, is constructed.

Moreover, the in-depth discussion reflects the conscious gender position of Chinese scholars in terms of topic design and writing. The authors of this series of books are all outstanding new and established female scholars in China. The writing of such biographies indicates their natural understanding, initiative, and sense of responsibility for female writing. This gender consciousness may be rooted in the shared ideal of gender equality among Chinese and foreign women. It has been over two centuries since the Western women’s liberation movement starting from the age of enlightenment in Europe in the 18th century, and more than a century of ups and downs since the feminist movement in China began. Chinese female intellectuals have always explored the ideal of gender equality, cooperation, gender harmony, and inclusiveness to promote the progress of our society. Written by female scholars, this biography of Woolf portrays a brave female artist in her persistent pursuit of self-actualization. And it addresses the essence of Woolf’s yearning for women to be free to write “a literature of their own” in “a room of [their] own.”

Lastly, *Virginia Woolf: The eternal British lily* can be regarded as a comprehensive overview and evaluation of the thoughts and literary achievements of Woolf, a wonderful representative of elite Western women. From Yang and Jiao's oriental perspective, I can safely conclude that contemporary Chinese women have come up with a valuable interpretation of and interaction with these talented Western female authors. For hundreds of years, many women have achieved outstanding things in Western literature, the arts, and academic thought, contributing remarkably to the development of human civilization.

The feminist movement and female literary and cultural studies in China not only absorb the essence of scholars like Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, but also preserve the distinctive Chinese logic of cultural development and local characteristics. From the perspective of Sino-British literary and cultural exchange, this book focuses on Woolf's communication with and understanding of Chinese modern writers along with several members of the famous "Bloomsbury Group," like her dear older sister Vanessa Bell (1879–1961) and Vanessa's son, Virginia's nephew Julian Bell. In particular, Woolf developed a comforting, rare, and precious wartime friendship with modernist Chinese writer Shuhua Ling (1900–1990) based on mutual literary appreciation between English and Chinese contemporary female writers. Struggling with mental disorder, childhood trauma, and the loss of loved ones, Woolf struggled to survive World War II, but ultimately surrendered to the mental strain. Her loving husband Leonard fittingly chose a quote, the last sentence from *The Waves* (Woolf 1980: 200) as the inscription on her gravestone: "Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!"

To conclude, this subtle and beautifully written work offers a substantial exploration and distinctive understanding of Woolf's legendary life and experimental writing from a Chinese scholarly perspective. Its broad vision stressing the positive significance of Sino-Western literary and cultural exchange provides us with a good example for the intrinsic and extrinsic study of Woolf in China.

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