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## The Undertaker and His Spectator: A Review of Zhu Chaoya's *Xia Yan: A Master of the Century*

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**Abstract:** In recent years, the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature has witnessed an academic turn back to revolutionary literature, with academic scholarship transcending a single aesthetic or political interpretation to re-examine the complex relationship between revolution and literature. As an important representative of revolutionary literature and literary practice, Xia Yan has become a key object in this academic turn. From the perspective of “The Bearer and His Witness”, this paper reviews the book *Xia Yan: A Master of the Century* published by People’s Literature Publishing House. With a concise layout, solid historical materials, and a combination of pictures and texts, the book integrates popularity and academic nature, presenting Xia Yan’s lifelong sense of responsibility and restoring his spiritual world with warm writing. The dual images of “bearing” and “witnessing” not only provide a new path for Xia Yan’s research, but also offer an important reference for understanding how a generation of intellectuals forged revolution and literature into the same life choice.

**Keywords:** Zhu Chaoya; *Xia Yan: A Master of the Century*; Biography Writing; Xia Yan Studies

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**标题:** 承担者, 与他的看见者: 评朱超亚《夏衍: 百年巨匠》

**摘要:** 近年来, 现当代文学研究呈现向革命文学回归的学术转向, 学界超越单一审美或政治解读, 重审革命与文学的复杂关系。夏衍作为革命文学与文艺实践的重要代表, 成为这一研究转向中的关键对象。本文以《承担者, 与他的看见者》为视角, 评析人民文学出版社《夏衍: 百年巨匠》一书。该书篇幅精炼、史料扎实、图文并茂, 兼具普及性与学术性, 既呈现夏衍一生的责任担当, 又以温情书写还原其精神世界。“承担”与“看见”的双重意象, 不仅为夏衍研究提供新路径, 也为理解一代知识分子如何将革命与文学熔铸为生命选择提供重要参照。

**关键词:** 朱超亚; 《夏衍: 百年巨匠》; 传记写作; 夏衍

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For most Chinese people, the name “Xia Yan” is tied together with “The Contract Workers” in their high school Chinese textbook. That piece of reportage acted like a scalpel, slicing open the darkness of its era and revealing the emaciated backs of the “reed-stick girls.” Yet we rarely ask: the one who wielded the scalpel—how did he himself walk his own path?

The Xia Yan: A Centenary Master published by People’s Literature Publishing House offers a complete and warm answer.

After reading this book, a scene keeps emerging in my mind: Elder Xia walking alone, leaving behind only a lean yet resolute silhouette, while not far away a young person stands quietly gazing. The scene contains two subtle elements: first, the sense of responsibility that ran through Xia Yan’s entire life; second, the gaze the author casts upon his subject, full of warmth and humanistic concern. The former is the moral character of the biographical subject; the latter is the sincere stance of the writer. When these two merge, they produce a biography that possesses both historical gravitas and the warmth of a lived reading experience.

In the autumn of 1929, Xia Yan was twenty-nine, on the threshold of thirty. Before that, he was the translator Shen Duanxian, who had rendered Gorky’s *Mother* into Chinese and had already begun to show promise in literary circles. That year, together with a few friends, he organized a group called the Shanghai Art Theatre Society—the first theatre society directly led by the Chinese Communist Party. A man who had never written a play thus burst through the gates of drama. Three years later, he burst into the film world as well. In 1932, at thirty-two, Xia Yan joined the Star Film Company as a script consultant. The difficulties he

faced shifting from theatre to cinema were still many. But he entered movie theatres with a stopwatch and a flashlight, breaking down films shot by shot, calculating durations and recording scene types, forcing himself from an outsider into an expert.

In today's context, this kind of courage fills me with particular emotion. In an age of information overload, people are constantly anxious; we desperately chase the dust raised by the galloping times, trapped by "sunk costs" and afraid to seek change. Xia Yan himself probably never imagined that the theatre and film he encountered only at the age of thirty would become so tightly intertwined with the rest of his fate. The beginning of that story was simply that the times required someone to do it. One scholarly paper points out: "For a long time, academic research on Xia Yan's creative work has focused mainly on his post-1930 works, concluding that Xia Yan was a rigorous realist playwright. Moreover, the impression Xia Yan gave after he burst onto the literary scene was that of a steadfast Marxist-revolutionary artist. But is this historical truth?" (Yao Chengli, 2011, p.4). The labels "realist playwright" or "revolutionary" flatten the real choices made by the person behind the story. Precisely because he was a revolutionary, he needed to cross boundaries at twenty-nine. Precisely because he was a playwright, he made that cross-boundary move so thoroughly. Precisely because of his sense of responsibility, he bore the weight of those titles.

If Xia Yan's sense of responsibility fills me with admiration, then the author's stance in writing this book moves me deeply.

The author's warmth is seeded as early as the first chapter. He writes that Xia Yan's earliest memories of theatre came from his mother. As a child, his mother would tell him stories of the stage and take him to see plays. Those ancient tales, the warmth and coldness of human relationships on stage, gradually settled into the child's heart through his mother's voice. Decades later, when Xia Yan picked up his pen to write *Under the Shanghai Eaves*, portraying ordinary people in alleyway homes, that perception of and compassion for the human world had perhaps already sprouted quietly back then.

What moves me even more is how the author explains the origins of the pen name "Xia Yan."

Xia Yan was born Shen Naxi. His father was named Shen Yayan. When Xia Yan was three years old, his father died. His impression of his father was vague, but in 1936, when he first needed a new pen name to publish his work, he chose "Xia Yan"—a homophone in the Hangzhou dialect for "Yayan."

This is what I understand as "the author's warmth"—not deliberate sentimentality, but a willingness to see those tender things: to see a mother's influence on a child, to see a son's consolation to his father, to see those parts of a person that are not "great" but profoundly "human." And because of this seeing, Xia Yan is no longer just a name, a stretch of history, a symbol, but a human being with a living warmth. When a biographical subject becomes a human being with warmth, his "sense of responsibility" ceases to be a cold moral label—it becomes the warm choice made by someone who learned to see the world from his mother and inherited his surname from his father, in response to the summons of his era.

Thus, this book stands before me: a person who shouldered his era, and another person who, with warmth, saw him.

### 1. The “Lightweight” Narrative Between the Detailed and the Omitted

Xia Yan: A Centenary Master is one volume in the “Drama” section of the Centenary Masters book series. Based on the eponymous documentary series on major cultural figures, this collection seeks to highlight those masters and giants who made outstanding contributions to Chinese civilization in the twentieth century. The book, 203,000 characters in length and divided into eleven chapters, arranges its chapter titles so that, when read in sequence, they trace the complete arc of Xia Yan’s life: from his early years in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, to his student days in Japan; from his translation of Gorky’s *Mother* under the name “Shen Duanxian” and his involvement in the left-wing literary movement, to his “mid-career conversion” at twenty-nine when he founded the Shanghai Art Theatre Society, and at thirty-two his self-taught foray into cinema armed only with a flashlight and a stopwatch; from his wartime efforts running *Salvation Daily* as a pen warrior amid the flames of the War of Resistance, to his post-1949 leadership of the Shanghai Culture Bureau and his role in shaping China’s film industry; from his silencing during the turbulent years to his late-life composition of *Lazily Searching for Old Dreams* while bedridden, until the very end of his days.

Amidst a sea of biographies that often run to several hundred thousand characters with unrestrained expansiveness, this one is not a weighty tome. Yet, interestingly, after reading it you will find that Xia Yan’s complete life trajectory, his core artistic achievements, and the key facets of his character have all been clearly etched into your memory. That long and winding life has been securely and gracefully contained within the book’s pages.

In the afterword, the author notes: “Regarding Xia Yan, there is no shortage of historical material; the real difficulty lies in selection.” This statement reveals a fundamental truth about writing—it is easy to write a thick story, for the most effortless approach is to pile up raw materials. Indeed, his autobiographical writings, including *Dreams Old Dreams* while bedridden, amount to some 500,000 characters. But to condense a story while preserving its essence is far more difficult, for it requires a clear vision of what you want to convey and a precise sense of what must be kept and what can be left out. The author acts like an experienced guide, leading readers through the most significant stations in Xia Yan’s life: the seeds planted by his mother in childhood, the courage to cross into theatre at twenty-nine, the awkward yet persistent entry into cinema at thirty-two, the wartime mobilization with the pen as a banner, the collecting and donating in his later years... Where a pause is warranted, the narrative dwells; where brisk progress serves better, it sweeps past. The rhythm is distinct, the balance well struck. If the historical material is a forest, the author is one who cuts a path through it—clearing a way so that readers may see the shape of the forest without getting lost in it.

For those works that are landmark achievements in Xia Yan's creative career, such as *Spring Silkworms* and *Sai Jinhua*, the author does not hesitate to devote ample space. *Spring Silkworms*, as "the first attempt to bring a new literary work from post-May Fourth China to the silver screen," was hailed as "a marvel in the 1933 film world." *Sai Jinhua*, Xia Yan's first multi-act play, represented an experiment in the "allegorical history play" and stirred a major uproar—the "spittoon incident"—because of its satirical attack on the Nationalist government. These works not only concern Xia Yan's personal artistic explorations but also touch the very nerves of their era; the author recounts them in detail precisely because they deserve to be seen.

For those works that are relatively minor or merely written to meet an occasion, the author only touches on them lightly, noting their existence before moving on. This "balance of detail and omission" is not a matter of sparing ink for its own sake, but rather a form of narrative responsibility—knowing what the reader needs and where the subject's vital coordinates lie.

Thus, 203,000 characters suffice.

## 2. Characters Brought to Life: Warmth and Moral Integrity Through Details

What is most commendable in the author's portrayal of the character is that he breaks free from traditional biographical perspectives—neither defining Xia Yan solely by his political identity nor evaluating him merely through his literary achievements. Instead, he chooses a softer and warmer path: using those seemingly trivial yet truly constitutive details to make his subject stand up from the page.

In recent years, the focus of research on modern and contemporary Chinese literature has been quietly returning to revolutionary literature. Some scholars have pointed out that "discussions of left-wing literature have always fallen into a dilemma: as a cultural phenomenon where politics and literature intersect, traditional aesthetic, political, or combined perspectives have all failed to provide a comprehensive and objective assessment of left-wing literature" (Liu Cheng, 2005, p. 1). This "dilemma" is now being reanimated in academia, as scholars attempt to re-examine and reinterpret revolutionary literature from new dimensions (such as the perspectives of propaganda, the interplay between historical fields and aesthetics, etc.). For Xia Yan—a name unavoidable in revolutionary literature—the most immediate and crucial question we face is: "How did Xia Yan, under the guidance and discipline of left-wing literary policies, amid the demands of militant literature and national discourse, find a balance between political discourse and aesthetic consciousness? How did he participate in constructing the aesthetic tradition of left-wing literature through everyday life, gender writing, and a uniquely charming personal style—through a Xia Yan-esque 'detailed politics of aesthetics'" (Liang Yanli, 2017, pp. 182-183)? How do we bring Xia Yan back from a "revolutionary symbol" to a warm, individual human being?

The answer given by Zhu Chaoya is not through vague praise, but through concrete, specific moments.

Take, for example, the detail of Xia Yan renaming Yan Chuntang. In 1932, Yan Chuntang, who had made his fortune from the opium trade, founded the Yihua Film Company and invited Xia Yan and others to take charge of its creative work. Xia Yan said to him: “You rose to wealth through opium. The character ‘wood’ (木) in your given name is not appropriate. Why not change the lower part to ‘hall’ (堂)—the character for ‘upright and open hall’?” The author passes over this detail lightly, yet it instantly illuminates a facet of Xia Yan’s character: he had a sense of right and wrong and dared to speak directly; he also had a benevolent heart, willing to help the other find something better. Moral integrity and warmth appear together in a single sentence.

Then, in Chapter Eleven, the author uses another means to let us “see” Xia Yan. This chapter describes his late-life donations—how he gave to the state, without compensation, the precious paintings, calligraphies, and stamp collections he had amassed over a lifetime. It turns out that Xia Yan had another identity: that of a passionate collector. Thus we also see this side of Xia Yan: he loved stamp collecting, loved the paintings of Qi Baishi, and saved up little by little from his salary and royalties to acquire those treasured items. He went antiquing in Beijing’s Liulichang, got to know the elderly Qi Baishi, and the old master would sometimes inscribe on his paintings “To my younger brother Xia Yan.” In his later years, he donated ninety-four pieces of painting and calligraphy to the Zhejiang Provincial Museum and 233 stamps to the Shanghai Museum. He even specially asked a friend to carve a seal for him, which read “Once in the collection of Shen of Renhe”—using the character for “once in” rather than “preciously in”. The difference of a single character changes the meaning entirely: these things, I once collected and appreciated, but in the end they do not belong to me.

The author places this detail in the final part of the book, and the intention is clear. What he wants us to see is not just a playwright, a filmmaker, a cultural official, but a whole person—someone who loved Qi Baishi’s paintings, could be fascinated by a single postage stamp, and in his later years carefully arranged all his affairs. Here, the political Xia Yan and the literary-artistic Xia Yan step back; the “human being with a living warmth” steps forward.

I believe this is what I sensed from the beginning as “the author’s warmth”—not a sentimental technique, but a certain vision in selecting material. The author is willing to see those things that make a person who they truly are, and to piece together a complete, warm life through these seemingly minute moments. Because of this vision, Xia Yan is no longer just a name, a stretch of history, a symbol, but a person we can understand and feel close to.

### 3. Authenticity in Historical Material, Depth in Literary Flair

This book demonstrates considerable depth in its handling of historical sources. The author quotes extensively from Xia Yan’s own writings—from Lazily Searching for Old Dreams to his diaries and

letters—allowing the subject to “speak” at appropriate moments. These quotations are not isolated embellishments but are organically integrated into the narrative. What is even more rare is that the book clearly annotates the sources of all citations and images, specifying both the chapter from which a memoir is quoted and which institution holds a given manuscript. This rigorous approach ensures that, while remaining eminently readable, the book also preserves its value as a historical document in the genre of biography.

Most pleasantly surprising is the author’s unique archival discovery: a translation entitled “The Ninth Day Memorial of the Fundraising Fair at West Lake Park,” which has never before been mentioned in the Complete Works of Xia Yan or by any other scholar. For a biography intended for a general audience, achieving this is no small feat. It means that this book does not merely retell Xia Yan’s life, but in a certain sense enriches our understanding of him.

In terms of layout and design, the author has clearly invested considerable care. The illustration-rich arrangement gives the reading experience both texture and warmth. Interspersed throughout the book are numerous precious historical images: photographs of Xia Yan from different periods, facsimiles of his manuscripts, original letters, and group photographs with other contemporary cultural luminaries. What left the deepest impression on me is the manuscript of the film script for *Blessing*—presented as a facsimile, with Xia Yan’s revisions in red pen clearly visible, almost allowing us to glimpse him bent over his desk. These images are not decorative embellishments; they are documents with independent historical value, making the “human being with a living warmth” described in the text feel more tangible. On the level of editorial details, the book likewise shows thoughtfulness toward its readers. When a specialized term such as “kaijian” (a type of bay in traditional Chinese architecture) appears, the author provides a concise explanation. Quoted passages, image captions, and source attributions are set in red type to visually distinguish them from the main text. Beneath each chapter title, a summary of the chapter’s content is provided, so that opening any chapter and reading this summary first tells you what the chapter is mainly about. These design choices all serve a clear purpose: to lower the threshold of reading. The People’s Literature Publishing House, in producing this series, clearly does not want ordinary readers to be intimidated by the word “biography.” This book has no entry barrier; anyone interested in Xia Yan can pick it up and read it with ease.

Although this book is a popular biography aimed at a general audience and is not difficult to read, the author, Zhu Chaoya, nevertheless maintains a conscious attention to literariness throughout his prose.

This is evident first in the chapter titles. All eleven chapter titles employ balanced, parallel constructions: “Born in the Turmoil of the Boxer Year, Riding the Crest of the May Fourth Torrent”; “Sneaking Forward Amid Thorns, Fighting Through the Mire” ... These titles are themselves miniature literary compositions. They both encapsulate the core content of each chapter and imply the author’s interpretation of the subject’s life stages—so that from the table of contents onward, the book has already entered a state of “narrative.”

The author's skill is even more apparent in his explication of Xia Yan's representative works. Taking *Spring Silkworms* as an example, although there are inevitably some shortcomings, such as oversimplified characterization. "The character of Hehua is endowed with a rebellious nature, and such rebellion is manifested in her behaviors as a form of destruction. Yet as a marginalized figure in the film, the driving motivation behind Hehua's actions is not fully explained." (Wu Jie, 2021, p. 14) The book analyzes the many changes made from the original story to the film and the effects ultimately achieved. For instance, the film's alteration of narrative space—adding an "elementary school classroom," the "Huangpu River and wharves," and a "pawnshop"—serves to reinforce the theme. The careful observation of characters such as Old Tongbao (his stubbornness and superstition) and Duoduotou (his openness and awakening) also demonstrates the author's eye as a literary scholar.

The author enables ordinary readers to understand "what the story is about" while simultaneously allowing those with a literary background to appreciate "what makes it good." This ability to retain "depth" within "popularization" is precisely what makes the book so valuable.

Nevertheless, whether due to the demands of biography or popularization, certain inevitable shortcomings exist under the weight of various constraints. The book's "lightweight" scope, while successfully outlining Xia Yan's entire life, also brings a problem: the complexity of certain historical periods is relatively simplified. The author approaches Xia Yan with a certain warmth and reverence—this is the book's fundamental tone—but at times this also means that some sharp edges are gently smoothed over. For example, the author mentions Xia Yan's half-century-long association with Pan Hannian, but does not dwell much on the human dilemmas involved. Likewise, regarding Xia Yan's silences and compromises during political campaigns, the book largely explains them in terms of "forbearance," leaving considerable room for the reader to imagine the complex inner world behind that forbearance.

The book handles Xia Yan's works with an appropriate balance of detail and omission, as already acknowledged earlier. But for masterpieces such as *Under the Shanghai Eaves* and *Fascist Germs*, the discussion of their textual connotations and artistic achievements remains more introductory than analytical. If readers wish not only to "know" what Xia Yan wrote, but also to "understand" why these works are important and what makes them good, they may need to consult other scholarly studies to supplement this book. This is the trade-off that the book makes between "popularization" and "depth"—a dilemma faced by all biographies intended for a general audience.

#### **4. Writing History Through a Person, Establishing a Biography with Emotion**

At the end of this writing, I want to return to the two phrases that moved me from the very beginning: Xia Yan's "sense of responsibility" and the author's "warmth."

For Xia Yan himself, this book allows us to see a "bearer with living warmth."



In the past, when we discussed Xia Yan, we easily fell into two perspectives: the political or the literary. The former defines him as “one of the leaders of the left-wing cultural movement,” while the latter positions him as “one of the founders of Chinese cinema and drama.” Neither perspective is wrong, but they share a common problem—they turn a person into a label. The author of this book has chosen a different path. He uses a wealth of details that seem unrelated to “grand narratives”—details that have nothing to do with political stance or literary achievement, yet precisely constitute a person’s flesh and blood. Because of these details, Xia Yan is no longer just a name, a stretch of history, or a symbol, but a person we can understand and feel close to. Thus we finally see clearly: the man who crossed into theatre at twenty-nine and entered cinema at thirty-two was not a cold revolutionary brick, but a human being who learned to see the world from his mother and inherited his surname from his father.

For the era, this book allows us, through one person’s eyes, to glimpse the collective portrait of a generation.

Xia Yan’s life spanned the late Qing, the Republic, and New China, vibrating in near resonance with the twentieth century. Following his footsteps, we see the youth in the May Fourth torrent, the clandestine walker during the Left-League period, the journalist in the flames of the War of Resistance, the cultural official after the founding of New China, and the reflective donor in his later years. He did not walk alone; by his side were Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Tian Han, Pan Hannian ... a whole generation’s gallery of intellectuals.

The “warmth” of this book lies in the fact that it does not write these figures as towering “masters” placed on a pedestal, but lets them appear as human beings. We see their interactions, disagreements, mutual support, and estrangements; we see their choices and helplessness in the torrent of the times. History thus ceases to be a timeline and a list of events in a textbook, and becomes concrete individuals, in concrete situations, making concrete commitments.

For the readers of today—every age has its own tasks that call for people to step forward. Xia Yan’s choices were to cross into theatre, to enter cinema, to run a newspaper in the resistance, to collect and donate. We need not replicate his path, but we can learn from his way of facing his era: to see what is lacking, and then step forward.

And the author’s “warmth” at this point reveals another layer of meaning. Because, through those details, he has let us see Xia Yan’s tenderness and warmth, we no longer feel that “sense of responsibility” is a cold moral demand. It has an origin—coming from a mother’s enlightenment, from a father’s surname, from a person’s perception of and compassion for the world.

Finally, let us return to the title of this book: Centenary Master.

The word “master” often intimidates. But this book tells us that masters are also human beings. They have origins, attachments, places of softness. In his thirties, he ventured into unfamiliar fields; in his later

years, he gave away his beloved collections to the country, piece by piece. He bore the weight of his era with his entire life, and with his entire life preserved a person's due warmth. And the author of this book, with his warmth and sincerity, has shouldered the responsibility of letting later generations "see" Xia Yan.

Thus, the bearer and the one who sees him meet in these pages.

Closing the book, the lean, bespectacled figure lingers long, unwilling to fade.

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