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External Elements Integrated into the Core: A Review of Lu Zhouju's *A Study of American Influences in China's New Literature (1911-1949)*

Liu Min

Abstract: *A Study of American Influences in China's New Literature (1911-1949)* edited by Professor Lü Zhouju, offers a systematic investigation into the multi-dimensional and deep-seated effects of American intellectual and cultural trends on Chinese New Literature. Since the 20th century, American literature, as a strong cultural force, has deeply participated in the construction and transformation of modern Chinese literature. From the enlightenment of democratic consciousness, the advocacy of individual freedom, and the methodology of experimentalism to the renewal of concepts and the innovation of techniques in specific genres such as fiction, drama, poetry, and prose, American factors played a crucial role as both the “Other” and a “catalyst”. Particularly in the realm of modern fiction, American influence profoundly reshaped creative concepts, narrative techniques, and aesthetic styles, becoming an indispensable perspective for understanding the modernization process of Chinese literature.

Keywords: Modern Chinese Literature; American Influence; Cross-cultural Impact; Modern Fiction; Subjectivity; Localization

Author Biography: Liu Min, undergraduate at school of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University, research interest: American literature. E-mail: axxi1115@163.com

题目：他山之石与主体熔铸——评吕周聚《中国新文学中的美国因素研究（1911-1949）》

摘要：吕周聚教授主编的《中国新文学中的美国因素研究（1911-1949）》一书，系统考察了美国思想文化对中国新文学产生的多维度、深层次影响。20世纪以来，美国文学作为一股强劲的文化力量深度参与了现代中国文学的建构与变革。从民主意识启蒙、个性自由张扬、实验主义方法论，到小说、戏剧、诗歌、散文等具体文类的观念更新与技巧革新，美国因素在其中扮演了关键的“他者”与催化剂角色。尤其在中国的现代小说领域，美国因素深刻重塑了中国的文学创作者们的创作观念、叙事技法与美学风格，是理解中国新文学现代化进程不可或缺的视角。

关键词：中国新文学；美国因素；跨文化影响；现代小说；主体性；本土化

作者简介：刘敏，广州大学外国语学院硕士研究生，研究方向：美国文学。电邮：axxi1115@163.com。

Introduction

A Study of American Influences in Modern Chinese Literature (1911-1949), edited by Professor Lü Zhouju and featuring a preface by Professor David Der-wei Wang (published by SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2023), meticulously examines the American dimension within modern Chinese literature. Through its clear analytical framework and well-documented case studies, the work addresses a significant gap in the field of Sino-foreign literary relations. Scholarship on the modern transformation of Chinese literature has traditionally emphasized the prominent influences of the Soviet Union, Japan, and Western Europe, often simplifying or obscuring the role of American factors. The book's principal contribution lies in its systematic excavation, organization, and substantiation of the indispensable function played by American intellectual and cultural resources as both a "catalyst" and a "mirror of the Other" during the formative and early maturation phases of modern Chinese literature.

Structuring its analysis from the macro-level establishment of foundational ideas, such as democratic consciousness, individual freedom, and experimental-ism--to discussions of genre innovations in fiction, drama, and poetry, and further to analyses of travel writings about America, the book lucidly demonstrates that America represented not a monolithic or fixed symbol for Chinese intellectuals and writers seeking modernist breakthroughs during that era, but rather a complex and tension-filled entity. Furthermore, Professor Lü Zhouju avoids portraying modern Chinese literature as a passive receptacle for American influence. Instead, he carefully delineates the proactive agency of Chinese writers: their discerning choices, creative adaptations, and localized appropriations of American resources. Whether integrating democratic ideals with Chinese realities, interpreting individual freedom within the indigenous context, or applying experimentalist methods to specific literary practices, these processes

consistently reflect the writers' profound engagement with local concerns and socio-historical imperatives. American elements were selectively "appropriated" to address Chinese problems, accumulate Chinese experience, and ultimately shape the distinct contours of China's own modern literary form.

As the preeminent genre of modern Chinese literature, fiction receives particular attention. Professor Lü's exploration of American impact delves into the very core of the genre's evolution from classical to modern forms--its conceptual frameworks, narrative techniques, and aesthetic sensibilities. The interconnected arguments within this section effectively outline the texture and characteristics of modern Chinese fiction as profoundly shaped, in part, by its engagement with American literary resources.

1. The Transformation of Modern Fiction: From the "Minor Path" to the "Crown Jewel of Literature"

From a historical perspective, the development of Chinese fiction traces its origins to mythological legends and historical-biographical writings. While these early narratives did not strictly conform to the formal criteria of the fictional genre, they contained essential elements germane to it. By the Wei-Jin period, distinct forms of classical tales emerged, exemplified by Gan Bao's *Soushen Ji* and Liu Yiqing's *Shishuo Xinyu*, marking a more formal inception of traditional Chinese fiction. The Tang dynasty witnessed the flourishing of chuanqi tales (marvel tales), such as Yuan Zhen's *Yingying Zhuan* and Li Chaowei's *Liu Yi Zhuan*. During the Song dynasty, a transition occurred from classical Chinese fictions towards vernacular narratives, giving rise to "storyteller scripts", characterized by their popular and accessible style. The Ming-Qing era saw the pinnacle of traditional fiction achieved through the chapter-based novel, masterfully represented by the Four Great Classical Novels, solidifying this form as the quintessential fictional genre.

Under the dominant Confucian literary ethos of "literature conveying the Truth", traditional fiction was long relegated to the status of a minor path or unofficial histories. Consequently, the modernization of Chinese fiction necessitated, first and foremost, a revolution in its conceptual standing to elevate its literary prestige and social value. In the modern era, figures like Liang Qichao vigorously championed a Revolution in Fiction, emphasizing its potential for political enlightenment and striving to alter its lowly status. His assertion that to renew a nation's people, one must first renew its fiction, and his advocacy for fiction as the highest class of literature aimed at social reform, fundamentally challenged the traditional view of fiction as insignificant. However, this very effort still reflected the historical reality of its prior marginalization. The influx of Western concepts of fiction into China during the late 19th and early 20th centuries delivered a profound shock to traditional Chinese notions of the genre, catalyzing its transformation and the gradual formation of a modern Chinese conception of the novel (Lü

Zhouju, 2023, p. 140). Crucially, the robust spirit of social engagement and realist critique evident in American literature provided modern Chinese writers with concrete and actionable models.

American muckraking writers, epitomized by Sinclair Lewis and Theodore Dreiser, exposed and denounced the injustices and darkness inherent in the American capitalist system, depicting the plight of the proletariat with profound humanitarian sentiment (Lü Zhouju, 2016, p. 165). This conception of literature as an instrument for social investigation and reform resonated powerfully with the dire realities of early 20th-century China and the intense national salvation mission felt by its intellectuals. It provided a tangible framework for the Leftist literary tenets of literature for life and literature as a weapon of struggle, spurring the creation of critical realist works aimed at exposing societal ills and awakening the populace. Mao Dun's novel *Midnight*, hailed as the first successful modern Chinese realist epic, exemplifies this. It sought to diagnose China's fundamental societal crisis by dissecting the socio-economic structure of a modern metropolis. Its grand narrative architecture, panoramic portrayal of the tragic fate of the national bourgeoisie, and meticulous depiction of various social strata in Shanghai also bear the imprint of Dreiser's socio-panoramic novels.

American realist and naturalist literature, through its unflinching exposure and dissection of class oppression, capitalist alienation, and human distortion, provided Chinese writers with a powerful exemplar of literature engaging with reality. These American works demonstrated that fiction could be not merely an aesthetic art form but also a scalpel for analyzing society and a clarion call for awakening the masses. This conceptual shift propelled the transformation of traditional Chinese fiction into its modern form: it moved away from plot-centric, formulaic storytelling towards a focus on social reality, the creation of complex characters, and the exploration of inner psychological worlds. Through translation, critical commentary, and theoretical introduction, American fiction played a vital role in legitimizing fiction within the New Literature movement. Such exposure and adoption of techniques contributed significantly to fiction becoming the most dynamic and influential genre within modern Chinese literature.

2. Linguistic Liberation and Innovation in Narrative Technique

Following the conceptual transformation of fiction's status, the primary obstacle was the issue of linguistic tools. Classical Chinese long entrenched as the orthodox medium for literary composition, had become ossified and rigid, suffering a severe disconnect from the everyday language of the populace. As a pivotal advocate of the Vernacular Language Movement, Hu Shi vigorously championed the use of practical, living language for literary creation. In his influential 1918 essay, *Toward a Constructive Theory of Literary Revolution*, he emphatically proclaimed the resonant slogan: A national literature requires a literary national language. He sharply critiqued the inflexibility and inadequacy of classical Chinese for modern expression,

asserting: A dead language can never produce living literature.

Consequently, Hu Shi fervently advocated for a writing method, which unconstrained by colloquialisms or common characters, boldly employing the vibrant language used daily by ordinary people. This stance was elaborated earlier in his seminal article, *A Tentative Proposal for Literary Reform*, where he firmly declared: We can state with certainty that vernacular literature is not only the authentic mainstream of Chinese literature but also the indispensable instrument for its future development. Hu Shi's spirit of experimentation and advocacy drew significant inspiration from John Dewey's philosophy of experimentalism. This orientation stood in direct opposition to traditional Chinese inclinations towards archaism and revivalism. The exploratory ethos Hu Shi established has since become an enduring legacy within the New Literature tradition (Lü Zhouju, 2023, p. 31).

American writer Mark Twain's work served as a model that Hu Shi hoped the New Literature movement would emulate. Mark Twain liberally employed colloquial speech and dialects in his writing, which was deeply rooted in American vernacular life and characterized by its vibrant, potent satire and humor. This localized, colloquial style held an inherent affinity and offered significant referential value for modern Chinese writers striving to break free from the constraints of classical Chinese, establish a vernacular literature, and utilize literature to critique contemporary social ills.

Lao She stands as a quintessential example of successfully localizing Twain-esque humor. His depictions of the Beijing citizenry in works such as *The Philosophy of Old Zhang*, *The Biography of Master Zhao*, and *Luotuo Xiangzi* are imbued with genial satire and affectionate ribbing aimed at the inherent flaws of the petty bourgeoisie--their selfishness, complacency, conservatism, and vanity. The humorous effect in these works often arises from the incongruities and contradictions inherent in the characters' personalities, speech, and actions, a technique remarkably akin to Twain's portrayal of figures like Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. While absorbing the folkloric quality, colloquialism, hyperbole, and satirical force characteristic of Mark Twain, modern Chinese satirical and humorous fiction also integrated these elements tightly with the specific contradictions of Chinese society and its indigenous comedic traditions, achieving a process of creative transformation. Twain's influence infused modern Chinese literature with a robust, earthy satirical vitality, adding a richer dimension to its literary aesthetics beyond serious social critique.

Lu Xun's *Diary of a Madman (Kuang Ren Ri Ji)*, published in 1918, stands as the first short story written in vernacular Chinese and the foundational work of modern Chinese literature. Its profound significance lies not only in its ideological content--issuing a powerful "anti-feudal" manifesto, but also in its radical revolution in linguistic form. The seemingly chaotic yet piercingly insightful inner thoughts of the madman, such as the repeated accusation "They eat human flesh!", derive their immense power precisely from the vernacular language's directness,

force, and proximity to everyday human experience.

This linguistic liberation paved the way for formal innovation. Traditional Chinese fiction was predominantly plot-centered, employing linear narratives and relatively limited perspectives, which constrained its ability to portray complex inner worlds. The bold explorations in narrative technique found in modern American fiction provided crucial reference points for Chinese writers seeking to break free from established conventions.

Lu Xun, the undisputed pioneer of modern Chinese fiction, was primarily influenced by Russian and Eastern European literature. However, his profound revelation of characters' psychological anguish and subconscious activities undoubtedly resonated with the contemporaneous global trend of psychological realism, including its manifestations in American literature. In *The Story of Ah Q*, the incisive portrayal of Ah Q's spiritual victory method stems directly from Lu Xun's extensive use of techniques like interior monologue, stream of consciousness, and psychological analysis to delve deep into the character's psyche. This intense focus on internal psychology was remarkably rare in traditional Chinese fiction. Similarly, the presentation of Xianglin's Wife's tragic fate in *Zhu Fu* displays modernity: it eschews the dramatic plot twists typical of traditional fiction, instead relying on the recurring image of her numb gaze, her obsessive retelling of the story of her son being taken by a wolf, and the pervasive atmosphere of surrounding indifference. These elements converge to form an expressionist undertone of accusation.

The influence of this psychological focus was even more direct and pronounced in Yu Dafu. His autobiographical fiction, exemplified by *Sinking (Chen Lun)*, employs bold and explicit language to depict the protagonist's sexual repression, inferiority complex, isolation, and psychological fragmentation. The intensity of the psychological depiction, the depth of self-scrutiny, and the exploration of obscure inner darkness evident in these works were demonstrably influenced by the psychologically analytical fiction popular in America at the time. It was precisely this shift in focus towards the inner world that endowed modern Chinese fiction with an unprecedented psychological realism and enabled it to achieve new depths in exploring human nature.

The influx of American fictional elements into China, absorbed and adapted by Chinese writers, ultimately contributed to the formation of a distinct modern Chinese fictional character. American concepts of fiction functioned as a potent exogenous force. At the critical juncture of Chinese literature's quest for modernity in the 20th century, this wind vigorously propelled the sails of indigenous transformation, accelerating the process through which Chinese fiction evolved from its classical forms into a new genre equipped with modern consciousness, modern forms, and modern functions.

3. The Fleeting Resonance and Unfinished Journey of the Modernist Avant-garde

Compared to the relatively mainstream American influences of realism, naturalism, and psychological analysis, the impact of American modernist fiction on China's own modernist fiction was decidedly more avant-garde, transient, and characterized by its exploratory and experimental nature. Ultimately, however, this trajectory remained incomplete, curtailed by the profound upheavals of the era.

The very introduction and reception of American modernism in China from the early 1920s to the 1930s carried an intrinsically avant-garde character. Unlike realist works, which reached a broader audience through more extensive translation channels, the dissemination of American modernism relied primarily on avant-garde literary and artistic journals in internationalized metropolises like Shanghai. The journal *Les Contemporains* undoubtedly served as its central platform. Editors such as Shi Zhecun, Du Heng, and Liu Naou were themselves practitioners of modernist creation. They keenly apprehended the new literary tides emerging across the ocean and actively introduced them to China through translation and critical commentary. Key elements of American modernism--including Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory, William Faulkner's stream of consciousness, John Dos Passos's Camera Eye and Newsreel techniques, Gertrude Stein's linguistic experimentation, and even the shadowy psychological landscapes of small-town characters in Sherwood Anderson's work--were all featured and discussed in *Les Contemporains* and similar publications. These magazines effectively created a modernist cultural space (Leo Ou-fan Lee, 2001), facilitating the convergence and propagation of avant-garde literature and art from Paris, London, New York, and Tokyo. This mode of dissemination inherently limited its audience primarily to urban intellectual elites, young cultural enthusiasts, and writers possessing an experimental spirit, thus imbuing it with a natural niche and avant-garde character.

Naturally, the New Sensationists, represented by writers such as Liu Naou, Mu Shiying, and Shi Zhecun, became the earliest explorers of modernist fiction in China. Mu Shiying's fiction is often regarded as China's Jazz Age narrative. His work *Shanghai Foxtrot*, with its rapid scene shifts, juxtaposition of sensory imagery, and montage-like structure, clearly reveals the influence of John Dos Passos's techniques--the Camera Eye and Newsreel--used to depict the panoramic spectacle of the modern metropolis in his U.S.A. trilogy. Gertrude Stein's experiments with linguistic signifiers and repetitive rhythms also inspired Mu Shiying and others in their pursuit of defamiliarization effects through language.

Shi Zhecun explicitly linked the modernity of American literature with its national character, independence, and creativity. He explored the relationship between the modern in American literature and that in China's New Literature, positioning the new tradition of American literature as a model for forging China's own new tradition. This perspective marked a new height in understanding American literature's influence on Chinese New Literature (Lü Zhouju, 2021, p.

102). His psychoanalytical stories, such as *One Rainy Evening* and *General's Head*, delve deeply into characters' subconscious, dreams, and abnormal psychology. While the application of psychoanalysis certainly drew on Sigmund Freud's theories, its literary manifestation--particularly in techniques like multi-perspective narration, interior monologue, and temporal/spatial leaps used to render complex, distorted inner worlds shows a distinct resonance with William Faulkner's artistry in works like *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. This appropriation of Western modernism by Chinese writers embodied a form of semi-colonial modernity (Shi Shu-mei, 2007), an active choice employed to articulate their own urban experiences and anxieties of modernity.

Furthermore, Ernest Hemingway's concise, implicit, and hard-boiled telegraphic style and iceberg principle served as crucial references for Shi Zhecun, Mu Shiyong, and others in their pursuit of narrative economy and heightened tension.

Thus, the Shanghai New Sensationists constituted not only the first substantial modernist fiction practice in the history of modern Chinese literature but also, through their unique grasp of urban modernity, their localized application of Western modernist techniques, and their bold exploration of the depths of the human psyche, opened up entirely new aesthetic dimensions for the Chinese novel. Their efforts secured their significant avant-garde position in literary history.

However, the full-scale outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan in 1937 fundamentally transformed China's social atmosphere. National survival became the overriding imperative of the era. Within this torrent of monumental historical events, modernist writing--focused on the nuances of individual interiority, urban sensory experience, and formal experimentation--appeared incongruous, even denounced as detached from reality and self-indulgent whining. As Yan Jiayan observes: Once the guns of the War of Resistance sounded in 1937, political and literary united fronts formed, and the modernist school lost its *raison d'être*... The vicissitudes of the times caused this school to wither before it could fully develop (Yan Jiayan, 1989). On another level, the narrative techniques and writing styles of American modernism proved excessively obscure and difficult for most contemporary Chinese readers and critics, diverging sharply from the traditional expectation of Literature Conveying the Truth and the prevailing demands for realism. This barrier to reception confined its influence largely to a small coterie, preventing it from attaining the broad social foundation and sustained vitality enjoyed by realism.

Therefore, although American modernist fiction provided Chinese writers with new technical tools and profoundly influenced the avant-garde literature of the 1980s, during its initial introduction in the 1930s, it functioned more as a potent yet transient vanguard wave. Unlike realism, it ultimately failed to develop into a broad and enduring mainstream current within Chinese literature of that period.

Conclusion

A Study of American Influences in China's New Literature (1911-1949) vividly delineates the catalytic role played by American fictional resources in pivotal aspects of modern Chinese fiction's development: the renovation of literary concepts, the expansion of narrative techniques, and the diversification of aesthetic styles. It profoundly reveals the proactive selection, creative transformation, and localized application undertaken by Chinese writers in embracing the Other. American realism and naturalism, imbued with potent social critical power, propelled the revolution in Chinese conceptions of the novel and fostered the formation of a robust tradition of social critique. This endowed the novel with its status as a preeminent literary form and its value as an enlightening instrument for engaging with reality.

Furthermore, the colloquial and localized writing exemplified by Mark Twain provided a powerful model for China's Vernacular Language Movement and linguistic liberation, invigorating the modern literary language with vitality. Simultaneously, American explorations in psychological depiction and narrative techniques opened new pathways for Chinese writers to break free from traditional constraints and delve deeper into characters' inner worlds. Although the influence of American modernism on China's own modernist endeavors could not fully expand, it nonetheless sowed seeds of germination within the soil of New Literature.

American ideas, literature, and methods were perceived by the pioneers of Chinese New Literature as valuable stones from other hills that could be used to polish their own jade. Ultimately, forged through the crucible of local experience and specific demands, these elements were integrated to become solid and distinctive components within the edifice of China's own modern literature. The wisdom and dynamism manifest in this intercultural interaction constitute a vital fountainhead of the enduring vitality of Chinese New Literature.

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ORCID

Liu Min ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3684-3374>

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