The Lure of the Modern
by Shu-mei Shih
The Lure of the Modern

Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937

Shu-mei Shih
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In the fall of 1990 I visited Shi Zhecun, the only surviving modernist from the 1930s, then eighty-five years old. His flat was in an old building from the Republican era standing in crowded proximity to many other similar buildings on a narrow tree-lined street in the heart of Shanghai. In the main room of the three-room flat, moldings along the edges of the ceiling, a fireplace, and a small veranda with iron railings were all remnants of bygone Shanghai, particularly conspicuous in a nation filled with functionalistic architecture born from a Marxist-nationalist, ascetic ideology in the preceding decades. Had the fireplace been operational or the veranda filled with potted plants, one might have thought the room had been frozen in the time of the late 1920s and early 1930s, when a European lifestyle was the trend among the Shanghai cosmopolitan cultural elites. The fireplace was empty though, and there were no tools. Since they were made of iron, the tools had been taken for smelting during the Great Leap Forward and had never been replaced. From the veranda, there was also no view to speak of. In the middle of this crowded but otherwise clean and pleasant room that served simultaneously as the writer’s study, bedroom, dining room, and living room was Shi Zhecun, seated grandly at his desk, wearing a green terry cloth bathrobe over a white dress shirt and black-grey dress pants tightened around the waist with an old-fashioned leather belt, smoking a pipe. Wearing a hearing device in one ear, Shi had an oval face with gentle and delicate features befitting a Southern gentleman. For three full days, he graciously entertained my questions about his work and the time of his youth as a writer in old Shanghai. He talked passionately not only about French symbolists, Emily Dickinson, and Virginia Woolf, who had been some of his favorite writers back then, but also about various contemporary Western writers, including the latest developments in literary theory such as deconstruction.
I was all ears for his nostalgic reconstruction of his youthful days as a young, aspiring writer and editor, and was especially struck by how deeply he remained so “contemporary” and well-informed. It was as though we were connecting in a place where all the gaps between us—of history, geography, gender, age—evaporated and his participation in the great upheavals of modern Chinese history were but detours that could be readily sidestepped or forgotten. Many cultural critics have noted the similarity between the Republican era and the 1980s, noting that the 1980s was an age of “new” enlightenment that pursued similar goals of cultural cosmopolitanism. An important writer and editor in his youth, Shi was predictably “rehabilitated” in this period of new enlightenment as a major modern writer, his main works all reprinted, and even entire sets of the journal he edited, Les Contemporaines, made available in bookstores. One could say that in the 1980s there was a wave of nostalgia for the literature of the Republican era, as young writers of various persuasions found in the earlier generation justification as well as inspiration for a more transnationally articulated form of culture writing. This kind of culture writing was crucial to the “culture craze” or “culture fever” (wenhua re) zeitgeist of the 1980s, whose motto was “walk out into the world” (zouxiang shijie), a neologism that in the 1990s would be transformed to “going global.” From a historical perspective, this nostalgia was by no means an accident. From 1949 to the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the so-called cosmopolitan and modernist writers were categorically dismissed as Westernized, i.e., ideologically backward and morally decadent, and marginalized in all literary histories. But the tables were turned during the culture craze, as the same modernists became models to recuperate and to emulate. When I visited Shi in the fall of 1990, it was at the tail end of the culture craze, as the Tiananmen massacre of the previous year had brought it to a dramatic close.

The 1980s nostalgia for the Republican era is an understandable, yet extremely curious phenomenon. The objects of this nostalgia were, to some degree, the cultural products of semicolonialism, a political, social and cultural formation rejected by the Chinese Communist Party’s agenda of anti-imperialism. Ironically, then, one may say that this nostalgia for the past was a colonial nostalgia, not by the colonizers but by the ex-colonized, a peculiar cultural phenomenon perhaps only possible in China due to the Party’s cultural isolationism and ideological inflexibility. Passionate in their criticism of the government, though expressing it obliquely, the culture-craze proponents utilized this colonial nostalgia as a counterdiscourse to domination by the

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Party-cum-government. No text better captures this nostalgia for semicolonial Shanghai than Wang Anyi’s widely acclaimed novel *Song of Sorrow* (*Changhen ge*, 1995), replete with a celebration of capitalist bourgeois sensibilities and lifestyle and a categorical negation of the intervening years. The culture craze of the 1980s was sublated into a popular passion for the re-institution of capitalist economy and lifestyle of the Republican era in the 1990s. The availability of calendars, posters, and numerous other artifacts from the Republican era in the 1990s marked a retro trend which commodified precisely the nostalgia for semicolonial cultural products. In this sense, we see a continuation of the 1980s culture craze in the 1990s commodification of culture, with the latter displacing the high seriousness of the former after a violent chastening by the Party.

Nostalgia for the past also had important implications for the temporal-ity and spatiality of a Chinese modernity. If Republican-era culture was being recuperated as “modern,” the literature of the intervening years appeared to belong to a different category, while the 1980s connected to the Republican era by somehow miraculously jumping over the intervening years. It is as if Chinese modernity, as a construct that is always defined along the lines of Westernization, can only exist in spurts, without historical continuity, and as if it is always ineluctably a by-product of some form of capitalism, whether protocapitalism, semicolonial capitalism, or a market economy with socialist characteristics. Hence the discourse of enlightenment from the Republican period, in a leap of space and time, endured in the period of the new enlightenment, repeating issues of Chinese modernity and literary modernism, albeit of course with significant variations. One can only imagine, if the earlier enlightenment continued in the decolonized terrain without the leap over the intervening years to the 1980s, how questions of Chinese modernity would have been posed and interrogated differently. If Chinese modernity was in any way emblematic of Third World modernities in general as a by-product of colonialism and capitalism, the continued and sustained investigation into its problems, limits, and possibilities might have given us a different scenario of how modernity in the Third World is to be construed. What this scenario might have been, or whether such a scenario would even have developed, we of course do not know. This does not mean that semicolonialism should or would have persisted, but rather that, without violent ruptures of history, the Chinese might have been able to conceive of modernity in ways not imaginable today in their rush to integrate with capitalist modernity, and could have been spared the anxious and some may say hopeless resistance to capitalist modernity among the so-called New Left intellectuals in China in the 1990s.

Is this book, one that theorizes and studies semicolonial modernism of the Republican era, then party to the nostalgia of the 1980s and 1990s? Al-
though as an ethnic Chinese who is not a Chinese national, I could deny any participatory role in the collective nostalgia in China, semicolonial Shanghai has also been the object of considerable nostalgia for scholars in the United States in the past decade, with many conferences held and books published on the subject, and Shanghai modernism has itself become a fashionable topic in Chinese literary studies. During one conference on Shanghai, I once asked the self-reflexive question of why we loved to study old Shanghai so much. Instead of a reasoned response, I received an emotionally charged dismissal of the question. If there was any complicity between scholars of China and the collective nostalgia in China, these nostalgias were nevertheless, of course, qualitatively different, and colored by individual subject positions. Multiply diasporic and having been exposed to the Taiwan modernism of the 1960s, my own perspective had to be more self-reflexive of the ways in which our discourses are partly structured by various experiences of colonialism: how Taiwan modernism was aided by the Guomindang’s anticommunist hysteria in the 1960s, which promoted Western cultural prestige and sanctioned Western modernism; how growing up in modernization-crazy postwar South Korea may have induced me to cultural expressions of capitalist modernity without serious reflection; how earning degrees in English and American literature has paradoxically prepared me for the study of Chinese modernism. It is no secret that various humanities departments, when reviewing applicants from East Asia, look for some background in English and American literature: for linguistic proficiency, but also for conceptual frameworks that are compatible with those in the United States. We live every day with these subtle subjections to and exercises of neocolonial cultural domination, glossed over in the name of cosmopolitanism or academic rigor.

But it would be too easy to reduce the complex processes of subject formation to neocolonial influences today, just as it would be unfair to examine Chinese modernism of the Republic era from a strictly colonial framework. Just as I would not reduce my own subject formation to being a passive process of subjection to Western cultural imperialism, neither could I do so when thinking and writing about Chinese modernists such as Shi Zhe-cun. Thus the desire to think through the historical, political, and cultural exigencies of Shi’s and others’ modernism in Republican China across the local/global divide has motivated and energized the writing of this book over the years.

When I embarked on the project, I had not anticipated that the historical, textual, and theoretical matrix of Chinese modernism would be as expansive as it turned out to be. This matrix involved, first of all, local contingencies and exigencies in modernist articulation, hence I theorize semicolonialism as a social formation distinct from formal colonialisms. Secondly, it involved the linkages of Chinese modernism to other modernisms (par-
ticularly Western and Japanese), its transnationalism expressed within multiple fields of discursive and political power. These are what I term the local and global contexts of Chinese modernism, whose interactions account for diachronically changing constitutions of meaning and agency. From my own discursive predilections, the matrix further involved comparative considerations of theories of Third World modernism, colonialism and postcoloniality, and local/global cultural studies.

The result is a book that I hope offers something to a range of readers. To scholars and students of modern Chinese literature and history, I offer an account of Chinese literary modernism from the beginning of the May Fourth era in 1917 to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, combining textual and historical coverage with theoretical inquiries. To theorists of modernism in the West, I chart modernist crossings among China, Japan, and the West, and delineate the cultural politics of this transnational circuit as tracing multiple colonial trajectories and cultural encounters, thereby unsettling the center-periphery and East-West binaries often assumed in comparative studies of culture. To theorists of colonialism and postcoloniality, I theorize how Chinese semicolonialism registered a set of cultural politics and practices different from formal colonialism. Situated at the intersection of the local and the global, Chinese modernism, in my view, was always defined by both axes simultaneously, albeit differently. It seems to me that the synchronous and diachronic implications of the local and the global outline a much more complex circulation and articulation of Chinese agency than previously assumed.

These different directions of analysis also required me to develop a methodology that integrates the historical, the textual, and the theoretical. These three perspectives crisscross in application, and it is often impossible to delineate where one ends and another begins. I use this methodological amalgam deliberately against the compartmentalization of research methods: the traditional “empirical” and “theoretical” divide in historical studies, the “textual” and “extratextual” divide in literary studies, and the “Western theory” and “non-Western text” divide in cross-cultural studies. As to the organization of the chapters, this book is divided into three parts—covering the May Fourth era, the Beijing School, and Shanghai’s new sensationism—after an introductory chapter, where I lay the theoretical and historical groundwork for my discussion of Chinese modernism. Each part starts with an opening chapter where I attempt to theorize the cultural zeitgeist of the moment under examination, within which specific definitions of sociocultural modernity give rise to different formulations of aesthetic modernism. Then follow chapters on particular modernist writers and their works, in which I analyze the specific ways they negotiated issues of cultural modernity in expressive forms.

Finally, a word about the title of the book, *The Lure of the Modern*. By “lure,”
I suggest both the processes of subjection and sublation. Chinese modernists saw modernity as alluring, enticing, and desirable, an external category to which they were subjected both involuntarily and voluntarily. This subjection can be said to have produced Chinese cosmopolitan subjectivities. In a different sense, Chinese modernists proactively desired and lured modernity, turning modernity into an internal category as in a process of Hegelian sublation, thus revising, redefining, and reinventing modernity on the local terrain. Subjectivities were also thus engendered. The entanglement of the two processes of subjection and sublation, I argue, are endemic to semi-colonial subject formation in modern China. Thus the writing of modernism both subjected and subjectivized Chinese writers within the local and global contexts, disrupting any Manichean assumptions of cultural colonization and agency.

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INTRODUCTION

The Global and Local Terms of Chinese Modernism

*Formal analysis . . . [has to be] firmly grounded in formational analysis.*

**Raymond Williams (1989)**

*It is at the end of capitalism—during the era of imperialism . . . that Kipling eulogized British imperialism in his poetry, and Italian futurists became the hired poets of Fascism.*

**Hu Qiuyuan (1931)**

*Suppose a being which is neither an object itself, nor has an object. Such a being, in the first place, would be the unique being: there would exist no being outside it—it would exist solitary and alone. For as soon as there are objects outside me, as soon as I am not alone, I am another—another reality than the object outside me. For this third object I am thus an other reality than it; that is, I am its object. Thus to suppose a being which is not the object of another being is to presuppose that no objective being exists. As soon as I have an object, this object has me for an object.*

**Karl Marx (1844)**

*What does need to be recognized, if the area studies tradition is to be revitalized, is that locality itself is a historical product and that the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global.*

**Arjun Appadurai (1996)**

The deployment of Western critical terminology in the analysis of non-Western writing can readily unsettle Eurocentric paradigms of cultural discourse. This is particularly the case when we use the term *modernism*, which has been invested with decades of scholarly attention and has acquired a kind of hegemonic cultural value in the West.¹ Although Western discourse con-

¹ Besides referring to the nations of Europe and North America, I also evoke the West as a symbolic construct, following its definition by the Indian Subaltern Studies group as “an imaginary though powerful entity created by a historical process that authorized it as the home of Reason, Progress, and Modernity,” a construct distributed and universalized by imperialism and
ceived modernism as an “international” movement, it systematically denied a membership in its pantheon to the nonwhite non-West. A quick look at the geography of modernism as mapped by the classic textbook of modernist criticism and history, *Modernism*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, is sufficient to illustrate that no city with a nonwhite majority inhabits the landscape.\(^2\) Geopolitical, cultural, and racial centrisms discredited the participation of nonwhite peoples in modernism even while the West heralded the supposedly international tenor of the movement. These centrisms sanctioned the way Euro-American modernism displaced the significance of the periphery and constituted and justified itself as center, hence various evidence carrying the critical potential for challenging the center-periphery notions of modernism went unnoticed. It has been pointed out, for instance, that use of the term *modernism* to designate an aesthetic movement is an appropriation from the Latin American *el modernismo* founded by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío in the early 1890s.\(^3\) In this historical example of the metropolitan center appropriating the discourse of the periphery,\(^4\) a relationship of discursive domination is made explicit, exposing the blindspot in literary histories that construct the center as origin. Discursive domination was explicit not only in the way modernism was characterized as exclusively Western, but also in the way modernisms in the non-West, if recognized as such, were later examined as but variations of Western modernism. Tautologically, Western modernism defined itself as the ultimate criterion and frame of reference for all “belated” non-Western modernisms, contextual differences constituting merely “variations.” Modernism was always described as moving to non-Western sites, its place of origin without question the metropolitan West. That modernism was the agent of cultural power over non-Western sites necessitates a geopolitically situated critique of cultural imperialism. That modernism’s travel was viewed as one-way traffic further exposes the discursive imbalance between the West and non-Western sites.

In recent years, attempts to challenge the colonizing conceptions of metropolitan modernism have resulted in various revisions, although no fundamental questioning of the one-directional travel narrative of modernism has been articulated. Recent theorizations of non-Western modernism have marked modernism as a heterogeneous event, exposing the parochial, Eu-

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4. I use the word “metropolitan” chiefly to designate the West as an industrially developed, geopolitical location. I also use it to make a distinction: “the metropolitan West” for the geopolitical West outside China, and “the colonial West” for the West’s imperialist presence in China.
rocentric, racial, and patriarchal biases in the very ways metropolitan modernism was theorized. Third World critics working inside and outside the United States have demonstrated that modernism in the non-West not only co-opted but also challenged metropolitan modernism. Recuperative efforts have also been made within the metropolitan centers by modernism’s perennial Others: feminists have rewritten the history of modernism from the perspectives of feminist critique and women’s literary history; minority views have exposed the racial and cultural biases in the conception of modernism. The new emphasis in international modernist studies is on the specific “situatedness” of non-Western modernisms in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, which were dialogically connected to Western modernism but fundamentally different from it. Non-Western modernisms arose from different notions of modernity, nationhood, and nationalism, and in many cases were closely linked to the history of colonialism and imperialism. Each had its own mode of negotiation with the West, ranging from willing, unpoliticized participation in the Western modernist movement (though unacknowledged by the West as such), to modulating modernism for local needs and negotiating anxieties about the colonial legacy of modernism, to a thorough subversion of Eurocentric modernism. Periodization of modernism also differs in each situation, disrupting Western chronologies of modernism and registering different histories, each “belatedness” becoming a distinct marker of the local.

Difference and similarity therefore inform non-Western modernisms precisely because they were closely related to Western modernism. Where their difference from Western modernism is emphasized, we perceive them as offering different experiences and narratives of modernity, and we understand that they hybridize and heterogenize metropolitan concepts of modernity and modernism. Where similarity is emphasized, we perceive a transnational and deterritorialized modernism that promises the possibility of a cosmopolitan cultural politics, even as it necessarily hides a fundamentally hierarchical notion of center and periphery. When concerns over cul-


tural domination are projected onto similarity, however, non-Western modernisms become sites of anxiety and paranoia. All of these modes of seeing non-Western modernisms acknowledge a necessary confrontation with the West.

It is from the perspective of this necessity that Chinese modernism must also be understood. But this necessity is different for China, not only because of historical and contextual differences but also because China was not simply the destination of Western modernism. Historical interactions between the West and China in the cultural arena in general, and in the writing of Western modernism in particular, have shown China to be an important part of the non-Western alterity that constituted Western modernism. According to recent “multiculturalist” arguments, China was one of the major “influences” on Western modernism—it was the “misuse” of Chinese culture that contributed to the making of such modernist giants as Ezra Pound.

I will be explicating this interrelationship between Western modernism and China in fuller detail later, but it suffices here to suggest that Chinese modernism both challenges the constructed history of modernism as primarily a Euro-American event, and destabilizes Western modernism’s claim to ontological primacy and aesthetic uniqueness.

Chinese modernism departs further from the usual binary models of the non-West’s confrontation with the West—“China versus the West” or “East versus West.” Most significant in this regard was the prominent role played by Japan as the mediating transmitter of Western culture and a potent force in the formation of Chinese modernism. This triangular relationship is indicative of the political and cultural condition of China under multiple domination from Euro-American and Japanese imperialisms, which in turn problematizes the China/West binary model privileged in comparative culture studies. “Modern Japan,” which was dramatically transformed by the modernization campaigns in the wake of the Meiji Restoration (1868), played a number of important roles for Chinese intellectuals. Japan was the sole Asian example of successful Westernization and hence the primary model for similar efforts in China; it was the pan-Asianist ally in the struggle against Western imperialism for nationalists like Sun Yat-sen; it loomed as the imperialist tiger hungering for Chinese territory; and it also mediated Western literature through Japanese translations and other productive cultural forms. The complex relationship between Japan and China not only refracts the China-West binary model of confrontation, but sometimes displaces the role of Western modernism entirely. The binary model therefore limits under-

standing of non-Western modernism by solipsistically honoring the hegemonic, narcissistic West as the ultimate frame of reference, and reinforces the construction of the West as the Hegelian third term triumphant in its successful absorption of the non-West.

Debunking the myths of Eurocentric modernism and the binary model of cultural confrontation is thereby a central task in any discussion of Chinese modernism. In the sections below, this introductory chapter first exposes the mythmaking strategies of Western modernism by analyzing the ways in which “China” operates within those strategies, which foregrounds the intimate discursive and historical relationship between China and the West. This intimate relationship underlies my contention that Chinese modernism must be considered within the intersecting contexts of the local and the global, wherein the question of Chinese agency has to be dialectically posed in its historical specificity and difference across contexts, not via tropes of equivalence. This chapter then presents a historically specific argument regarding the relationship between Japanese and Chinese modernisms, troubling the binary model of cross-cultural studies, before moving on to a theorization of semicolonial cultural formation as the manifestation of global/local intersections.

WESTERN MODERNISM AND CHINA

While the imperial metropolis tends to understand itself as determining the periphery, . . . it habitually blinds itself to the ways in which the periphery determines the metropolis.

MARY LOUISE PRATT (1992)

The connection between European realist travel literature of the nineteenth century and the geographical expansion of British imperialism and colonialism has been persuasively established by Edward Said. His by now famous argument is that Western realist literature helped legitimate and consolidate the empire through a discourse that posited the Orient as the colonizable, self-consolidating Other. Until recently, however, the similar connection between Western modernism and expansionist politics has seldom been the subject of critical attention, chiefly because Western modernism has been canonized (through the endeavors of New Critics and those I call New Critical deconstructionists such as Paul de Man) as a conglomeration of autonomous textual entities, disconnected from politics and history. Contemporary Marxian literary critics, however, have challenged such a perceived disconnection as the mark of something else. Fredric Jameson argues that it is precisely modernism’s willful aloofness from the history of Western imperialism from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries—the era of Western literary modernism—that reveals how the “structure of imperialism” marks