

主体性的生成与危机：

现代中国文学生产的文化政治

The Making of Subjectivity and Its Crisis:

On the Cultrual Politics of Modern Chinese Literary Production

王晓平 著



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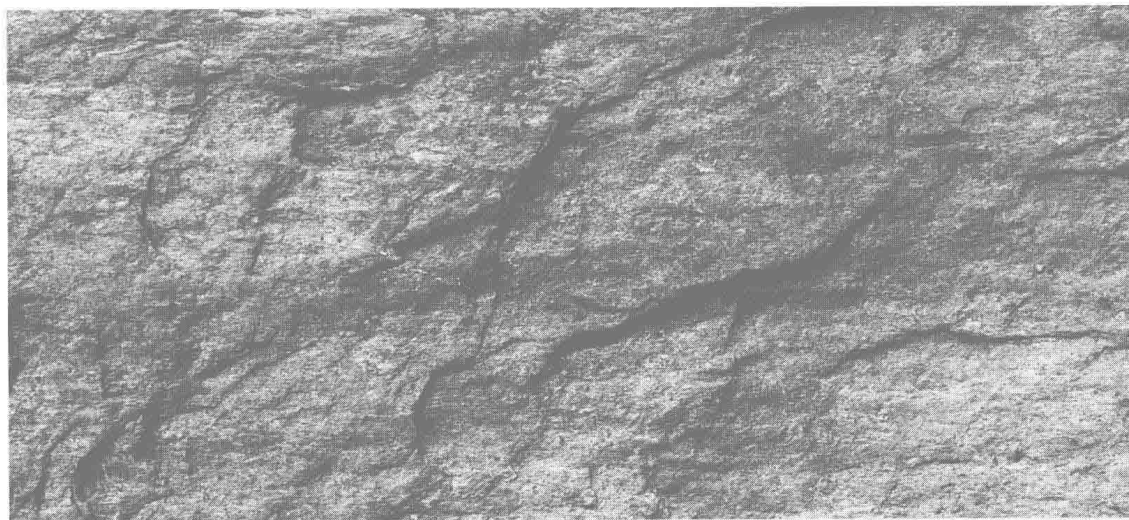
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Introduction

Three Trends in Recent Studies of Modern Chinese Literature and Culture

As an academic discipline or field, the study of modern Chinese literature and culture in North America has seen profound changes since the late 1980s, culminating in a “theoretical turn” in the field. This new situation has produced an array of works that can be broadly classified under “cultural studies.” Compared with the field in Chinese mainland, which still stresses empirical research, in North America this theoretical turn is marked by a conscious application of various cutting-edge theories in scholarly studies that support their theoretical frameworks. Many of these works follow postmodernist and post-structuralist trends, especially in the early period of the turn. The arrival of the global media age and the ensuing media studies fever has been accompanied by the emergence of a new tendency that emphasises studying literary and cultural texts and phenomena from the perspective of cultural production. The scholarship in the field has generally followed the theoretical paradigm-shift seen in the Anglo-American world: from structuralism to post-structuralism, from historicism to new historicism, and from modernist-oriented new criticism to postmodern, postcolonial criticism. Recent years have seen the emergence of a renewed interest in historical experience, which in turn has proven conducive to the formation of a hermeneutical paradigm.

一、Postmodern Approach and Postcolonial Criticism

Postmodern theory holds that various “grand narratives,” such as

modernity and revolution, in their teleological narrative of a linear, progressive modernity, all disregard the plurality of historical experience and repress alternative choices and opportunities. As a counter-move, postmodernists stress local experience, “suppressed voice,” and exploration of “plural modernities.”^① This tendency in the field manifests itself mainly in critiques of the “May Fourth Paradigm” as a master narrative, and the argument for “repressed modernities” existing in the late Qing period.

David Wang has strongly advocated this thesis over the last decade, especially in his work *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*.^② In this highly influential and inspiring book, Wang argues that promising sprouts of incipient modernity burgeoned in the late Qing period, but were either eradicated or repressed following the May Fourth transformation. In challenging the orthodox view of May Fourth literature as the beginning of modern Chinese literature, this thesis provides many insights for studying late Qing literature.

Over the years, however, challenges have arisen to Wang's thesis, in particular regarding its concept of “modernity.” Disparaging the May Fourth pursuit of (literary) modernity, Wang persistently contends that in their effort to save and change China, writers of the period passionately and blindly embraced any “newness” from the Western world, yet their “discourse of the modern” was less modern than that of the late Qing period, which was imbued with an energetic spirit of experimentation. Yet if the modern or modernity only refers to the new and the innovative, we might say the modern has appeared numerous times in human history, and the term therefore becomes vacuous.

The crucial point lies in identifying modernity. Anthony Giddens defines it as the emergence of industrialisation, imperialism, nation-states, etc.,

① Best, S., Kellner, D., *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

② Wang, D. D., *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

terms that for the most part refer to concrete institutions or historical phenomena,^① while Jameson connects it with the new, capitalist mode of production.^② In terms of cultural modernity, the “modernness” of the May Fourth period lies in the spread and entrenchment of modern Western ideas (science, democracy, liberty, equality, individualism, etc.), which formed the base on which intellectuals envisioned a modern world for the Chinese. In the West, modern ideas had become institutionalised in the course of fundamental social, political, and cultural changes over hundreds of years; for China, the pursuit of modernity as new set of social and economic as well as political and cultural institutions by which to reorganise the nation and society in a belated industrial stage had substantial significance; it was not blindly dreaming up something that was “new” in a merely discursive sense.

However, confusion between the substance and the discourse of the modern is evident throughout the book’s discussion of four fictional sub-genres. In the analysis of chivalric and court-case fiction, on one hand, Wang acknowledges that the writers “continued under the spell of traditional concepts of legitimacy”;^③ on the other hand, he proposes that “by flagrantly playing with the complicitous relationship between law and violence, between justice and terror,” fiction “marks a radical re-thinking of legitimacy, whether imperial or ideological.”^④ Rather than serving as a form of literary modernity, however, this cynicism showcases the bankruptcy of imperial legitimacy, calling for a modern replacement. Likewise, depraved novels are said to “anticipate a new epitome of concepts such as self, sexuality, and gender in the May Fourth period,” contributing to the intense

① Giddens, A., *The Consequence of Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.

② Jameson, F., *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, London: Verso, 2002.

③ Wang, D. D., *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; 121.

④ Wang, D. D., *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; 120.

interest in desire in the latter period.^① Yet the sexual promiscuity that imbues these novels neither offers nor heralds more equal gender relations. Thus, the word “anticipation” here does not connote a causal relationship, much less denote a modern form of literature. Here, the application of Foucauldian discourse of genealogy might be confounded with an examination of the origin itself.

Similarly, chivalric and court-case fiction is viewed as foreshadowing later concerns with patriotism, altruism, and the forms of brotherhood exemplified in revolutionary literature, a view that is also based on thematic similarity. Undoubtedly, certain elements of traditional ethics persisted in the later revolutionary era; yet this does not testify to their modernity, which is defined much more by qualitatively different elements that emerged during the epistemological shift. In a similar vein, the “moral ambiguity” illustrated through the cynicism, exaggeration, and vulgar disfiguration of reality in exposé novels is not in itself the manifestation of literary modernity,^② but only reveals an anxiety mired in the Hegelian “unhappy consciousness” that leads to, but has not arrived at, the stage of new reason.

In a nutshell, while self-consciously westernised writing is only one of several forms of literary modernisation pursued at the time, this does not mean that the seeds of modernity would sprout from indigenous sources. The author’s key concept of “involution,” defined as the failure of a social or cultural pattern to transform itself into a new pattern, implies an inability to break away from tradition to achieve modernity. Put differently, most of the aforementioned novels stood at the crossroads of the traditional and the modern, but lost the competition with other emerging literary voices and experiments and were ultimately forgotten. This failure of metamorphosis from traditional to modern cannot simply be attributed to external social-political pressure, especially in light of the fact that the cultural market was

① Wang, D. D., *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997: 50, 52-61.

② Wang, D. D., *Fin-de-siecle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997: 186.

still relatively autonomous and was not subject to complete political control in late Qing and Republican China.

Among the four subgenres, only science fantasy bears the clear imprint of modernity. These works appealed to readers by dramatising new social-political ideas that combined knowledge of modern Western concepts and indigenous utopian traditions to depict scenarios that were often unimaginable in that society. Most of them were written only after Liang Qichao's 1902 promotion of a "new novel," which aimed to propagate new Western ideas, especially political ideas calling for more enlightened and equal socio-political relations and the establishment of a "new morality." Thus, this brand of fiction does not demonstrate involution, but rather is the beginning of a revolution deriving its inspiration from imported "new" ideas to experiment with literary modernity.

Through discussions of Chinese representation and conception of history in the 20th century, David Wang's most recent work, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* explores the violence and brutality of 20th-century China through a critique of enlightenment, rationality, and revolution as discourses or movements that re-envision history in the image of a monster.^① In a formal analysis that sees both literature and cultural phenomena as linguistically structured texts, David Wang tries to relate various sorts of violence to tradition, modernity, and Chinese identity, with a view to opening "a new critical dimension by looking into the rich repository of Chinese historiographical imagination."^②

For this purpose, the author intentionally does not differentiate between the related subjects of history and representation, and modernity and monstrosity. This exercise is legitimised by the post-structuralist discourse to which David Wang subscribes, in which history is nothing but

① Wang, D. D., *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

② Wang, D. D., *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004:5.

representation; it also shows the imprint of postmodernism, in that “postmodernism is a response to a crisis of representation, and loss of faith in the truth-claims of representation.”^① Thus fiction is sometimes treated as journalistic reporting. Undoubtedly, handling texts as sociological documents or even historical fact lead to engaged and meticulous reading of various texts that debunks their ideological underpinnings, but the conflation of literary texts with historical documents is problematic, and can lead to erroneous conclusions.

Meanwhile, the question of the nature of modernity remains unclear; for instance, what constitutes the “modernity” of the violence, the “bodily rupture,” or suicide that occurred in the modern era? The disenchantment with historically radical ruptures accentuates the critics’ wholehearted embrace of continuity, yet this sometimes ends up creating another myth and neglecting the particular and the non-identical in history. The connection between violence and modern, and the entanglement of revolution and modernity, call for more historical explication. Relying on thematic resemblances alone might also lead to an over-deterministic and teleological narrative. For instance, if May Fourth literature was believed to be directly responsible for the rise of communist literature, the argument needs a historical study to explain how the former developed into the latter and under what political-cultural conditions.

The postmodern-postcolonial paradigm often engages in deconstructive analysis. The deconstruction of colonialism relies much on textual analysis, in which we continuously witness a shift from historical-social examination to discursive analysis, from interrogations pertaining to political economy towards questions regarding cultural identity.

Deconstruction, as it is commonly held, involves the close reading of texts in order to demonstrate that any given text has irreconcilably contradictory meanings. David Wang’s first book, *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen, typically

① Dirlik, A., Contemporary Challenges to Marxism: Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Globalization, *Amerasia Journal*, 2007, 33(3):4-5.

applies deconstructive skills to challenge officially-sanctioned hegemonic realism as a unified discourse,^① and forcefully downplays mimesis in favour of mimicry. For instance, David Wang points out that Lao She's stories, rather than faithfully representing reality, "indulge in emotional spectacle, gestural hyperbole, and verbal extravagance,"^② revealing through melodramatic or farcical literary technique the absurdity of Chinese reality. The book also stresses that reality is always mediated in the text; there is "a fantastic inscription of textuality and memory in a past which is always already mediated" in Shen Congwen's "self-reflexive display of nostalgia."^③ By demonstrating that there are many polyphonic, often irreconcilably contradictory elements contained in the stories of these writers, the monolithic discourse of realism is dismantled.

What should also be pointed out is that the various "realistic representations" that emerged in specific historical and political circumstances profoundly self-problematise the claim of fidelity to the real. Lu Xun acknowledged that he was not totally faithful to the real; instead, in order to adhere to the order of the revolutionaries, he deliberately added a tinge of hope by contriving a detail at the end of his story—here the writer had self-consciously explored other possibilities of reality beyond any orthodox discourse of realism. Lao She's comic effects were also deliberately intended; he surely would not concern himself with any taboos of "realistic description." In this light, the monolithic discourse of realism did not have ideologically hegemonic effects on these writers; therefore, the object of deconstruction points more to the discourse of realism than to the "realistic" texts themselves. In short, the deconstructive impulse is led more by an urge to find textual evidence to support its predetermined argument than by

① Wang, D. D., *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

② Wang, D. D., *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992:15.

③ Wang, D. D., *Fictional Realism in Twentieth-Century China*, Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992:21.

the motivation of literary study itself. The inadequate attention given to historical experience as the condition and context of the text can therefore result in a neo-formalist approach.

David Wang's three books can be seen as a coherent entity that applies postmodern epistemology to reflect on existent scholarship and remap the literary and cultural contours of modern China. They are coherent in the sense that the crisis of modernity leads to a challenge to its value-system, which furthermore leads to a re-evaluation of tradition; meanwhile, the loss of faith in modernity's truth-claims of representation leads to a re-examination of literary realism, which was the most-often used vehicle to represent reality.

As noted, postmodern-oriented postcolonial criticism disclaims any essentialised identities, and tends towards "a preoccupation with fluid, unstable, and hybrid identities of borderlands against the claims of stable political and cultural entities."^① Thus Rey Chow sets out to deconstruct "Chineseness" in her various books, revealing the historical untenability of westernised third-world intellectuals' clinging to the illusion of return to a "pure ethnic origin."^② In *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, especially, the myth of origin as a traditionalist, essentialist discourse is legitimately debunked. But the critique often stops short of further explicating historical experience apart from discourse-deconstruction. For instance, if, as Rey Chow acknowledges, subjectivity "is not individual but an effect of historical forces that are beyond any individuated consciousness,"^③ where this collective-based consciousness lies needs to be clarified.

Postcolonial criticism often collaborates with Western feminism to

① Dirlik, A., Contemporary Challenges to Marxism: Postmodernism, Postcolonialism, Globalization, *Amerasia Journal*, 2007, 33(3):5.

② Chow, R., *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

③ Chow, R., *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Minnesota and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991: xii.

assert its critical edge. In her path-breaking (in terms of application of critical theory) work *Women and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, which is an interpretation of history based on literary analysis with the instrument of power-relationship analysis, Rey Chow argues that women were “othered” for exclusion from the nation by the modernising drive that claimed to enlighten and liberate Chinese women. As a reflection, Rey Chow proposes the possibility of a reconstruction emphasising the female body and sexuality that are repressed in world history.^①

These arguments are inspired by a (postcolonial) feminist stance that asserts women’s rights and calls attention to their repressed status. But what feminist discourse often overlooks is that the well-being of women is always subject to socio-economic conditions. Instead of exploring real historical experience, it often projects later insights back onto the historical site. A case in point is Rey Chow’s argument that when young Chinese men in May Fourth theatres adopted Western feminism to substantiate their attacks against the Confucian establishment, it was “another way in which Western fathers subjugated and colonized non-Western women.”^② Here the efforts of progressive Chinese intellectuals to liberate women from traditional oppression are not sufficiently acknowledged. Rather than assuming that there should be a postmodern feminism actively working at that time, it is necessary for us to keep the historical context in mind and focus on historical investigation; for example, to inquire why and how women were excluded from history, and under what conditions they could have avoided exclusion; or, in what historical circumstances the open staging of the female body and sexuality was possible, if it was really possible. Leaving these questions unexamined, merely holding the postmodern feminist stance verges precariously on anachronism.

① Chow, R., *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East*, Minnesota and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991: xii.

② Chow, R., *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995: 138.

The other side of this ahistorical critique of women's roles in society based on the contemporary standard of postcolonial perspective is aggrandisement. Nicole Huang's work *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*, which studies Shanghai literature and popular culture of the 1940s, inflates the role of women writers in the occupied area to the extent of lionising them as the heroes of cultural construction in the era, and argues that their production was a cultural resistance and ethnography of the Chinese people.^① Essentially middle-brow in nature, this new boudoir literature, focusing on life in a certain class stratum, has much less to do with ethnography; it is located in a different position within genre hierarchies in comparison to the literature of cultural resistance.

In short, this trend of postmodern methodology with postcolonial critique has a tendency to embrace new historicism, which ostensibly reads texts in its contexts. Still, this study of context is not an exploration of historical genesis but an interweaving of various personal relationships, debates, memoirs, and diaries, with a tendency to project the scholars' historically-conditioned vantage-point back to the historical objects. Inspiration from the postmodern-postcolonial critical paradigm has brought many insights into modern Chinese studies; however, the various flawed arguments that have resulted also underscore the necessity to recall and reflect upon the validity and applicability of theories when applied to the study of modern Chinese literature and history.

二、Studying Works within the “Field of Cultural Production”

The key to genuine historicising is to explore the historical conditions and situation that explain the origin and development of a historical phenomenon. A case in point is the study of literary institutions, which are constantly changing in the frame of a cultural field. This kind of

^① Huang, N., *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s*, Leiden and Boston: Brill Publishers, 2005.

contextualised study can avoid the pitfalls of postmodern, imaginative historiography.

More than three decades ago, Leo Lee took notes of the structural context of literary activities. One feature of his classic *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers* that distinguishes it from previous works is its interest in literary industries.^① In his delineation of the cultural arena and the rise of professional writers within it, Leo Lee's work implied the idea that a shared understanding of the role of the writer and the function of literature constitutes a cultural institution.

The attention to cultural industries was continued in Perry Link's seminal work studying "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly" writers.^② Edward Gunn's *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Beijing*, which studies Chinese literature in Shanghai and Beijing during the Resistance War, also investigates this cultural field,^③ but remains a form of traditional historical account by generally defining the field in terms of geographical area. Political conditions are only treated as background, and Edward Gunn disavows any interests in the sociology of literature. The 1990s has seen the emergence of a clearer intent to delve into specific historical formations and practices based on studies of relational nexus and structural context.

In *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Jing Wang argues that her study of cultural experiments in contemporary China intends "to examine it in the changing context that yields different, and perhaps conflicting, vantage points";^④ this, however, is less a study of literature per se than of cultural politics. Lydia Liu in

① Lee, L. O., *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.

② Link, P., *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

③ Gunn, E., *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Beijing, 1937-1945*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

④ Wang, J., *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng's China*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; 6.

Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China also aims to “enter the changing field of meaning in relation to other discursive constructs” and believes that “it is only with reference to the performability of such relations that a particular construction is meaningful in its context.”^① Nevertheless, the various subjects in her project, “literature, national culture, and translated modernity,” are different in nature.

In recent years, the tendency to integrate studies of cultural industry, or broadly speaking, industrialised culture, with analysis of literary works and cultural phenomena has become more salient, demonstrating increasing attention to the perspective of cultural production as a “field.” Leo Lee’s new book on Shanghai’s modern urban culture is one of the first studies of this kind, aiming to explore “what may be called the cultural imaginary, which was a contour of collective sensibilities and significations resulting from cultural production.”^② For this purpose, Leo Lee not only continues with his earlier interest in the industrial aspects of cultural production, but goes a step further in heeding “both the social and the institutional context” of production, such as the cultural and industrial institutions of the publishing and film industries. This approach sees urban culture as the result of a process of production as well as consumption, which involves the development of new public structures and spaces that serve as material background for new forms of cultural activity.

Nicole Huang’s *Women, War, Domesticity: Shanghai Literature and Popular Culture of the 1940s* follows the same direction. It studies Shanghai literature and popular culture during the period of Japanese occupation in the 1940s, and includes an examination of the emergence of the women’s print culture, especially the features of women’s popular magazines. Its contextual discussions underline the analytical importance of the “field of cultural

① Liu, L., *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995:197.

② Lee, L. O., *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999:63.