

Neo-sensualists' Imagination of Shanghai—A Comparative Study between Shanghai and Shanghai Foxtrot Dance

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Abstract: The Neo-Sensationalist literature that emerged in the 1920s has been an important object of study in the history of Chinese and Japanese literature. While many researchers have examined the history of Neo-Sensationalist literature, few have compared Chinese and Japanese works from the same period. This thesis, therefore, selects texts published in 1931 by Chinese and Japanese neo-sensationalist writers about the city of Shanghai. By analyzing the depiction of the city of Shanghai in the two texts and comparing the similarities and differences, it is ultimately clear that the authors' writing positions resulted in different degrees of literary imagination, which made it impossible to depict the city of Shanghai in literature in a completely objective manner. This conclusion will not only contribute to the refinement of Neo-Sensationalist studies but will also contribute to the understanding and knowledge of Shanghai in the literary imagination and the real Shanghai.

Keywords: Shanghai, The New Sensationalist, Literary Imagination, Rikichi Yokomitsu, Shiying Mu

1. Introduction

Neo-Sensationalism originated in Japan in the 1920s as a modern literary genre. The genre is defined by the use of multiple physical senses to capture the objective, incorporating personal experience into the depicted object. One of the greatest achievements of Riichi Yokomitsu, the representative writer of the Japanese New Sensationalism, is his long novel *Shanghai*, which took him three years to write from 1928 to 1931 and was published in 1932. The book is based on the story of the May 30 Incident, which the author experienced in Shanghai, and focuses on a number of Japanese residents in Shanghai. The author looked at the conflict and integration between the local population and various foreign cultures from the perspective of these foreigners. In the process of writing this book, author Riichi Yokomitsu hid the names of specific places in Shanghai in order to present a fictional novel. He noted that he did not want to write an unadorned travelogue, but rather to describe 'the dump of the East', 'the wonderful metropolis' [1]. Because of this, the city presented in his work has many regional qualities of Shanghai, but it also presents a mixed state of imagination and reality.

Japanese neo-sensationalist literature was introduced to China in the 1920s and profoundly influenced the Chinese literary world, represented by Mu Shiying's *Foxtrot in Shanghai*, published in 1932. Mu Shiying, a pioneering writer of Chinese urban literature, presents us in this novel with a deformed city in which consumerism is the main characteristic. The work does not have a consistent main character; the author uses a stream-of-consciousness, and temporal and spatial interplay to

constantly move from one character to another, portraying characters including socialites, businessmen, and prostitutes who are capitalist in nature and have fluid identities. The author's writing perfectly illustrates the novel's theme of Shanghai as a paradise built on hell [2]. Although both works were published in 1932, Riichi Yokomitsu's *Shanghai* focuses on the number and outdated side of the city. In his writing, the embassy district, inhabited by foreigners, is glamorous, while the houses of local Shanghai residents are dirty and dilapidated. In contrast, in *Foxtrot in Shanghai*, the author mainly depicts the wealth and extravagance of China's upper class but rarely goes into the lives of the poor. The reason for this difference is ultimately due to cultural identity. Stuart Hall, who focuses on contemporary cultural studies thinks that rather than seeing identity as a fact that has been completed and then recreated by new cultural practices, it should be seen as a 'production' that is never finished, always in process, and always reproduced internally rather than in external structures [3]. In his opinion, Cultural identity needs to be expressed through narratives, which are often influenced by history, culture, and power relations, so different people's perspectives on Shanghai can lead to different understandings and imaginations of the city.

Based on the above concept, this essay takes neo-sensationalist literature as its subject of study because one of its most important features is the portrayal of things through multiple senses, such as smelling and hearing. And this genre of literature does a good job of combining personal experience with practicality, making it easy to capture the richness of the author's imagination of the city presented in his work. Previous studies of neo-sensationalist works have mostly focused on longitudinal studies of different periods in a country's history, but there is a lack of cross-sectional studies comparing works from different countries in the same period, so it is necessary to refine the relevant studies. In addition, these two Chinese and Japanese neo-sensationalists' works deal with two opposing aspects of people's imagination of Shanghai, so comparing the similarities and differences in the depiction of the city in these two works can help us to further explore the image of Shanghai from different perspectives and thus clarify the influence of cultural identity on the literary imagination.

2. Shanghai in the New Sensationalist Works of China and Japan

2.1. Background of Shanghai

Shanghai is a very special city among all Chinese cities. According to the Dictionary, Shanghai was set up as a county dating back to 1292 [4]. Despite this, it is frequently seen as a city that was set apart from traditional Chinese cities and integrated into the global capitalist economy after the Opium Wars. In a way, therefore, Shanghai is a city cut off from ancient China and focused on modern history, which is why it is called an enclave. By the 1930s, Shanghai had become the largest city in China, as well as the economic, trade, and cultural center of the country. By this time, it was no longer just a Chinese city, but more of a cultural symbol to be interpreted and imagination. At the same time, the 1930s saw the emergence of neo-sensationalist literature, which documented Shanghai's urban space from a modern urban perspective, which is the subject of this thesis.

2.2. Basic Overview of Shanghai and Shanghai Foxtrot Dance

Before talking about the genre of New Sensationalism, it is necessary to take a look at the image of China in modern Japanese literature. Since the Meiji Restoration, Japan has gradually modernized under the influence of the capitalist powers. The desire for advanced European civilization and reflection on itself led Japanese literature to abandon its emphasis on Sinology and instead pursue 'Westernization'. But the reverse was evident, and as the imitation of the West reached a pathological level, Japanese literary figures began to return to Chinese culture as a haven from the chaos of the world. In the Taisho period that followed, European civilization inevitably had an even more

significant impact on society, while Japan's domestic imperialist expansionist policies were in turmoil. For the literati, who had lost their spiritual home in these troubled times, it was essential to find a conceptual foreign country, and this was the period in which 'Chinoiserie' became popular. China during this period was a distant and mysterious country for the rapidly modernizing Japanese society. The Chinese studies tradition from ancient times to the present day had given the Japanese literati a vague idea of China, an idea that was constantly confirmed by the texts, and eventually, in the minds of the Taisho writers, China became a flawless, 'conceptual' country that was beyond the real world. During the Meiji and Taisho periods, Shanghai received the most attention as the metropolis of the late Qing Dynasty, which made it the Chinese city that many Japanese writers could not get around when writing their travelogues of China. The reason why Riichi Yokomitsu traveled to Shanghai and took the city as his subject was because of a recommendation from a Japanese friend.[5]

Neo-Sensationalism emerged in Japan in the early 1920s, just after the Great Kanto Earthquake, when the economy was in the doldrums, and Western notions of pleasure and futility were widespread in society. In the field of literature, various literary ideas emerged and developed. Neo-Sensationalism caught people's attention with its dynamic style and rhythm, which relied on multiple senses to grasp things.

One of the leading figures of this genre was Riichi Yokomitsu, whose book *Shanghai* is a masterpiece of the genre. Unlike the typical Japanese writer of his time or earlier, Yokomitsu Riichi did not entertain fond imagination of traditional China because of the Sinological tradition of the Japanese literati. He traveled alone to Shanghai and explored the city's streets in depth. This allowed him to look at Shanghai through the eyes of an outsider, outside of historical sentiment. The author said he wanted to write about the rubbish heap of the East and create an incredible city, so under his pen, Shanghai took on a double face of modesty and squalor. Set against the background of the May 4 tragedy that took place in Shanghai in 1925, *Shanghai* was written from the point of view of several Japanese people that lived in the tenements, interspersed with a variety of characters, including Chinese communists, British gendarmes, and Russians fleeing the revolution, the author intended to present the mixture and conflict between eastern and western forces in the city of Shanghai. Because the author made it clear from the outset that he wanted to write about a city like a rubbish dump, he used imagery such as gutters and rubbish to describe the city, and he saw the local inhabitants of Shanghai as opium-addicted, numb, and dull people. In contrast to this was the scene in the tenement area, where there were beautiful spas, gentlemen in suits, and the people were elegant and noble. Although the *Shanghai* depicted by Riichi Yokomitsu was already modern and in step with the West (for example, there were numerous descriptions of modern companies and banks), this progress was indeed brought about and enjoyed by foreigners, and the city was still dirty.

After the May 4 Movement, various foreign literary and artistic trends were introduced to China, and Japan became a transit point for China to learn from other countries' literary and artistic ideas, among which the Japanese Neo-Sensationalist literature had a profound impact on the Chinese literary scene, and in March 1925, Naou Liu and Zhecun Shi founded the literary and artistic journal *The Trackless Train*, which marked the birth of the Chinese Neo-Sensationalist literature [6]. Although it was only active in the Chinese literary scene for six years, its emergence and development had its historical inevitability, and it is worth highlighting its relationship with Shanghai, the cultural center of China in the 1930s, where more than 70 percent of Chinese writers and 70 percent of literary magazines were concentrated. At the same time, Shanghai was also an important economic and political center in China, consisting of three parts: the public concession (22.6 square kilometers), the French concession (10.2 square kilometers), and the Chinese concession (860 square kilometers), making it a cosmopolitan city where feudalism and sophistication coexisted [6]. Based on the superior political and economic status of Shanghai, although the writers of the Chinese New Sensationalism had their own themes and fields of work, the portrayal of Shanghai's developed consumerism, East-

meets-West confrontation, and perverse pleasures was always an important theme in the literature of the Chinese New Sensationalism.

One of the representative writers of the Chinese New Sensationalist literature is Shiying Mu, who was regarded as “the master of Chinese neo-sensationalism”. Shiying Mu’s writing was characterized by the fast-paced and bizarre nature of urban life. In *Shanghai Foxtrot Dance*, the author did not set up the main character of the story but repeatedly drew on the technique of film montage to link the scene transitions with the characters appearing in the scene, thus increasing the fluidity of the temporal scenes and the characters appearing in the scene, showing the transient nature of the inner city of Shanghai. In addition to this, the author’s descriptions of the environment mostly portrayed the racecourse Villa-style townhouse、 Horse Racing Hall、 International Club、 Grand Hotel、 Bar Ballroom, in which the characters were mostly prostitutes, merchants, and gentlemen. Such depictions showed Shanghai as a capitalist consumer space. In fact, in this work, the author tried to eliminate the specificity of Shanghai as a Chinese city and emphasize its westernized aspects.

2.3. Similarities and Differences

The similarities between the two works are, firstly, that they both follow the neo-sensationalist approach to writing that combines multiple senses. But instead of sticking to a glossy and nebulous depiction of the city, Yokomitsu Riichi’s *Shanghai* is a more nuanced portrait of the metropolis, with a specific focus on Shanghai’s stock exchanges, banks, and international companies. This is not because Riichi Yokomitsu did not follow the tenet of neo-sensationalist literature that focuses on the depiction of transient sensations, but because he believed that everything in Shanghai flowed on gold and silver, which could give a fresh feeling. The incredible city of Shanghai can be better grasped by observing the movement of gold and silver in the banks and money changers.

Secondly, they both wrote about the opposites of poverty and wealth in Shanghai, but here the differences between the two arise. The Chinese writer’s writing focused on the glamorous life of China’s upper classes. Although Mu Shiying is not a left-wing writer, he is able to express the reality of the gap between the rich and the poor in Shanghai, a metropolis. People living in heaven are leading a befuddled life as if drunk or in a dream, which is evil, corruption, and degeneration. The people in hell are struggling on the death line, which is heavy, hungry, and dark [7]. There were also depictions of workers from the lower classes, and these appeared to serve the main theme of “Shanghai is a paradise built on hell”. In fact, it was the ‘paradise-like’ aspect of Shanghai that enabled Chinese neo-sensationalist literature to emerge and flourish in the 1920s amidst internal and external troubles. The modern Shanghai of Mu Shiying’s time was strongly imported, and Western capitalist management methods and lifestyles were blindly transplanted to Shanghai regardless of the conditions, resulting in Shanghai becoming an ‘island’ among Chinese cities and creating abnormal prosperity. The literati living here were very different from the traditional scholars who had been influenced by thousands of years of Chinese agrarian culture. The Chinese neo-sensationalist writers borrowed the characteristics and writing style of the Japanese neo-sensationalist literature while at the same time using the bustling and exotic metropolis as their subject matter. However, Chinese neo-sensationalist literature, because of its excessive focus on superficial descriptions of imagination and life’s cross-sections, makes it difficult for their literature to touch real life, so their characters are more like a kind of characters that are difficult to resonate with and only appear in theatre. This resulted in the loss of the literary vitality of the Chinese New Sensationalist literature and only superficially depicted and described the prosperity [8].

On the contrary, the Japanese writers depicted the residents of Shanghai from the point of view of the residents of the tenements, showing how they lagged behind the foreigners in terms of ideology, life, and economy, ultimately demonstrating the author’s desire to ‘rescue’ backward China through advanced Japan. Although there is an illuminating dialogue between the Japanese and the Chinese

Communists, who were influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideas, the author ends this dialogue with an insignificant and unsettling statement. This is evident in the fact that the author is always on the side of the colonialists and sees the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement in China as a blind and stupid ‘xenophobia’. In fact, skepticism and a wait-and-see attitude toward Marxism were common psychology among Japanese writers in the 1920s, and Yokomitsu Riichi came to Shanghai alone not only to create literature but also to solve his own intellectual confusion [9]. During his stay in Shanghai, Riichi Yokomitsu developed several basic impressions of the city based on what he had seen and heard. Firstly, the entire book *Shanghai* is set against the backdrop of the workers’ and mass movements of the May 4 Movement, depicting a series of bitter struggles between the local residents of Shanghai and the Japanese spinning mills, and the Indian police. In the eyes of Riichi Yokomitsu, this was not an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal movement but a maniacal riot, a phenomenon that arose in large part because of Soviet Russian agitation and the pushing of capitalists. Secondly, after creating a false sense of the significance of the May 4 Movement, the author then went on to deny the value of the strike, arguing that it brought inconvenience to the foreign colonialists while ignoring the demands of the locals living in the land of Shanghai. Thirdly, the author expresses his dissatisfaction with the British colonial power lurking in Shanghai but believes that reliance on Japanese rule is the only way to save the East [10]. *Shanghai* portrays a variety of Japanese expatriates who, despite their sympathy for China’s misery and communism, were unshakably supportive of Japanese interests in China. Yokomitsu makes his protagonist Sanki imagine maps in a geopolitical sense when threatened by the Chinese rioters, such as a “map in the head” and a “map of Asia”[11]. This subaltern further evolved into militaristic ideology during the subsequent Japanese war of aggression against China, which also indicates the author’s change from his original wait-and-see attitude towards Marxism to a fierce opponent.

Overall, the reasons for the differences in the depiction of Shanghai by Chinese and Japanese writers reflect the fact that “both history and literature are involved to varying degrees in the ‘imaginative’ resolution of ideological issues” [12].

3. Conclusions

Through the study, this thesis finds that despite being the same period of the Neo-Sensationalist works, there are still significant differences between the texts of Chinese and Japanese writers. The reason for this difference is attributed to the writers’ different living environments, cultural backgrounds, and ideologies, so the textual *Shanghai* does not need to be a factual account of actual Shanghai, which can be more visually presented by the neo-sensationalist literature’s focus on personal experience. Chinese Neo-Sensationalist writer Shiyong Mu was influenced by Japanese and Western modernity and tended to show more the side of the Shanghai metropolis and the West synchronously, with its consumerist nature, in his works. Japan, on the other hand, had been rapidly moving into the capitalist camp since the Meiji Restoration, and militaristic ideas were quietly being nurtured. Thus, in Riichi Yokomitsu’s *Shanghai*, the idea that Shanghai is poor and backward and needs to be ‘saved’ by Japan is presented. By comparing the two works, it is possible not only to promote an overall grasp of neo-sensationalist literature, but also to gain a deeper understanding of the fact that literature cannot be written in a completely objective manner, and that the authors, consciously or unconsciously, create different imaginations of the city of Shanghai, all of which serve their political stance and ideological system. The main contribution of this essay is to compare and contrast the transnational individual works of the New Sensationalists at different historical stages of their development, in order to gain a deeper understanding of this literary genre and to clarify the essential ideological differences of the authors presented by the two texts. However, due to the limited level of authorship and word count, the current study does not go into many details about the texts. Future

studies should focus on the statements that reflect the author's ideas, and the number of works to be compared could be increased to make the study more rigorous.

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