

Active or Passive? — On the "Initiative" of Three Types of Modernists in Shu-mei Shih's "Semi-colonial" Context

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Abstract. This paper argues against the issue of the "initiative" of the three types of modernists in *The Lure of the Modern*. By analyzing the core cases and argumentative logic of the whole book, it demonstrates that the "initiative" of these three groups of intellectuals points more to passive acceptance and even shows a tendency of "self-colonization". Although Shu-mei Shih touches upon the issue of subjectivity construction in the stance of "anti-imperialism" and "anti-colonization", her analytical framework relies on the Western-centric reference of the "Other", which covers up the agentive practices of these intellectuals in cultural translation and local criticism. The theoretical root of this problem lies in the researcher's overemphasis on understanding China as a "region" within the "global" and the decisive influence of the "Other" when Chinese intellectuals construct their own subjectivity.

Keywords: Semi-colonial, Modernism, Shu-mei Shih

1. Introduction

In her book *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-colonial China, 1917–1937*, Shu-mei Shih formally introduces her concept of "semi-colonialism" into the discussion of modernity in the Republican period. First, she intends to correct the practice of directly grafting the absolute colonial theoretical framework onto China. The so-called "semi-colonial" refers to an incomplete colonial social form. Compared with countries completely reduced to colonies such as India, Chinese mainland presented fragmented, multi-layered and diversified colonial characteristics from 1917 to 1937, which also provided opportunities for intellectual groups of different camps to exert limited political autonomy. Second, taking up the topic of "modernity" in the field of modern Chinese literature initiated by Leo Ou-fan Lee, Shu-mei Shih supplements the historical context from the perspective of "semi-colonialism" and injects a more politically charged impetus into it. In addition, she repeatedly emphasizes that the study of Chinese modernism must be examined from a "globalization" perspective to explore its interactive relations with the Western world, Japan and third-world countries. That is to say, China must be treated as an object of "area studies" relative to the globe, so that the construction of its subjectivity can gain wider academic recognition.

Instead of adopting Sun Yat-sen's concept of "sub-colonialism", she superficially uses the prefix "semi-" adopted by Marxists to name the social and cultural form in which Chinese modernism emerged. This is because the former already carries a certain hierarchical presupposition in its naming—that China's incomplete colonial status was made worse by the joint oppression of

different imperial colonial powers—while the latter aims to reveal the complexity and fragmentation of plural colonialism. Of course, this does not mean a direct appropriation of Marxist theory. Shu-mei Shih attempts to use the research paradigm of "semi-colonialism" to warn us against "a kind of self-Orientalism based on a consensus between Western Orientalism and Chinese Occidentalism", rather than the traditional binary discourse of catching up with or opposing the West under a linear progressive narrative [1].

The research paradigm of "semi-colonialism" places the field of modern Chinese literature in the context of world history and sharply reveals the ideological output and imperialist structures that accompany Western modernism. However, even though she repeatedly states in the book that she will not subjectively simplify the creations of Chinese modernists into a process of "passive submission" to Western cultural imperialism, it can still be found in her specific discussions that the so-called "Chinese initiative" shown by the three types of early Chinese modernists she classifies—the May Fourth Occidentalists, the Beijing School philosophers and writers, and the Shanghai New Sensationalists—suffers from a serious lack of momentum, or is rather a false appearance of initiative under passivity.

In the conclusion chapter of her book, Shu-mei Shih writes: "In the global context of uneven cosmopolitanism and self-particularizing Occidentalism, this initiative is questionable. When imperial powers use force to protect their economic and political interests, this open attitude toward the West and Japan weakens the cultural project of nationalism and thus becomes a form of self-colonial consciousness." [1] The boundary between self-colonization and the so-called "initiative" is obviously vague here and throughout the book. One may ask: can self-colonization also be regarded as a system of "initiative"? If so, how can the critical stance warned in the book hold? In other words, since the author has realized that cultural colonization is often not in the form of violence but packaged as a kind of "lure", can the varying degrees of acceptance by intellectual groups be seen as a construction of "initiative"? The term "initiative" is proposed in contrast to the intellectuals of fully colonized countries. Can we understand Shu-mei Shih's logic in this way: because China was not completely oppressed like India, it would not develop the same level of resistance, so China's "semi-colonial" status would inevitably produce incomplete resistance and incomplete initiative? Then the question arises: must the degree of oppression be directly proportional to the effect of resistance? Does this not fall back into the binary vortex of impact-response as criticized by Paul A. Cohen? If we are to discuss the "initiative" that she is eager to grant to Chinese modernists in order to emphasize "locality", where should we start?

This paper will further discuss and argue against the issue of the "initiative" of the three types of intellectuals below.

2. The May Fourth Occidentalists

The May Fourth scholars fiercely criticized the "tradition" created by the linear view of time, and at the same time legitimized themselves and shaped themselves as cultural leaders with words such as "new" and "progress", in an attempt to catch up with the "universal world" established by the West, which Japan had already taken the lead in entering. They are named "Occidentalists" in the book. Shu-mei Shih cites a series of intellectuals' pursuit of "new" artistic innovative forms, including Lu Xun and Tao Jingsun's experimentalism, Guo Moruo's psychoanalysis, and the decadentism of Yu Dafu, Teng Gu and others. She points out how the May Fourth group used linguistic revolution and the power of translation to subvert the original dominant discourse to obtain linguistic capital, cultural capital, and corresponding symbolic and economic capital after modernism entered China. Meanwhile, she analyzes how colonialism suppressed masculine temperament, leading to the

collective "melancholia" and "anxiety" that shifted from narcissism to alloeroticism and even anaesthesia in their texts.

At the same time, she agrees with Wu Xiaoming's view: "China is no longer the narrator, but the narrated; no longer the master, but the slave; no longer a superior race and culture, but an inferior one. For this willingness to discover oneself through the presuppositions of the Western perspective, the shock it causes leads to a deceptive and shameless self-image." [1] That is to say, this textual "new" attempt is a "narrated" act with a preset goal, conducting self-examination under a set of "modernity" standards already constructed by the West, or even collective self-"ugliness examination"... Indeed, a series of "depressed" emotions and self-flagellation can be regarded to some extent as an overreaction to "self-colonization". The book also cites Xia Mianzun's high recognition of Akutagawa Ryunosuke's *Travels in China*—a typical work of "Japanized Orientalism"—and holds that Xia's practice in translating this book is highly consistent with the ruthless criticism of the "national character" by May Fourth spokesmen such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo and Yu Dafu.

Obviously, Shu-mei Shih basically interprets the May Fourth new textual form experiments and the psychological state of intellectuals passively. However, this conceptual reflection is aimed at the academic circle, not specific humanistic care at the practical level. From a post-colonial perspective, we can easily label the May Fourth scholars as "self-colonizers" or even classify them as an elite group of "imperial compradors", but we cannot deny that this is another kind of contempt from a Western theoretical perspective. Even though it seems to speak for the "people" of China on the surface, isn't the binary opposition she first created by dividing classes through knowledge another form of elitism that "forgets experience for the sake of thought"? Not to mention the bold self-exposure and criticism of Lu Xun, Yu Dafu and others, the May Fourth generation of intellectuals' literary appeals and practical interventions in human rights activities such as foot-binding abolition, freedom of love and women's liberation have been easily erased in the "semi-colonial" context. The "semi-feudal" that follows "semi-colonial" is a more subjective issue for most Chinese intellectuals, rather than voluntary "colonization" for the sake of "enlightenment".

From another perspective, some critics argue that Benedict Anderson's theory of the "nation-state" is still suspect of Eurocentrism, because it seems to limit the possibilities of imagination with "media" and "capitalism". This precisely reminds us that the imagination of the nation-state is on the one hand a product of modernity, and on the other hand, it also stems from the common emotional needs of human beings. May Fourth literature is first and foremost "nation-state" literature. The novels, poems and other textual forms that conduct textual experiments are precisely powerful media for carrying the "imagination of China". In the process of constructing the "imagined community", modern Chinese intellectuals relied not only on modern ideas, but also on emotional resonance and collusion. Collective depression is one of them. They possessed not only linguistic and cultural capital but also emotional capital, an emotional strategy to actively expand cultural influence. On the one hand, Shu-mei Shih tries to prove that if India was deeply tied to the "Other" due to its deep resistance to colonizers, the imaginative space of Chinese intellectuals was relatively flexible. On the other hand, when targeting the May Fourth generation, the main force of imagination, she criticizes them for not resisting as thoroughly as Indian intellectuals, regarding their collective emotions as "self-degradation", and failing to pay attention to their deliberate use of emotional self-blame and humiliation to initiate a new round of collective imagination and construction of the nation-state. Doesn't the self-flagellation in the face of foreign powerful civilizations also deepen the Chinese people's strong sense of remedy and crisis, making them eager for collective identity recognition related to the nation and country?

"Examined from the historical process of the West and China, it is not modernity theory that promoted the establishment of the nation-state; on the contrary, it is in the process of establishing the nation-state that we summarized what is called 'modern' content." [2] To directly classify the May Fourth scholars as "Occidentalists" without considering their national salvation crisis and collective imagination of the nation-state— isn't this also ignoring the space and specific "local" needs? Must the issue of "colonization" be prioritized over the issue of "enlightenment"? Must we better understand and construct China itself under the colonial system?

3. The Shanghai "cosmopolitans"

Shu-mei Shih proposes that Chinese intellectuals deliberately divided the concept of the "West" into the "urban West" and the "colonial West" in order to gain legitimate reasons for accepting "modernity". This way of splitting the colonizer gave them a subtle third identity between "traitors" and "nationalists"—the so-called "cosmopolitans" later typified by the Shanghai writer group. They seemingly cared little about the social contradictions, racial crises and economic collapse in the specific space they lived in, and instead focused their vision on Western metropolises, immersing themselves fully in the colorful material achievements of the city to gain spiritual comfort and escape from political problems. This indeed acutely reveals the compromising and self-deceptive bifurcated strategy of colonial intellectuals toward colonizers, and the word "lure" expresses the ambiguous attitude of the colonized. However, the description of the specific acceptance rules and forms of the "lure" is somewhat oversimplified.

"In the context of China's semi-coloniality, these two forms of control—occupation without hegemony and hegemony without occupation—form a dialectical relationship and affect different intellectuals to varying degrees." [1] Because there was no such strong form of oppression as in India, the New Sensationalists had a certain degree of autonomous choice. For example, they adopted a bifurcated strategy between "urban civilization" and "colonial civilization" to stay away from nationalism. Shu-mei Shih cites Joseph R. Levenson's evaluation of the Shanghai "cosmopolitans"—that they were "rootless" and "denationalized" "puppets of imperialism", with "the naivety of respectable cosmopolitanism that takes no account of the nation and its people"—and expresses deep agreement based on "his complex understanding of the cultural choices and limitations of Chinese cultural workers in the semi-colonial context" [1].

The above statement implies that the Shanghai New Sensationalists had certain cultural choices due to the incompleteness of colonization, but instead chose to become puppets of imperialism due to "cultural limitations". However, what Shu-mei Shih fails to tell us is why colonial oppression must necessarily arouse "nationalist actions and resistance", and why the Shanghai modernists in incompletely oppressed China would favor and attach themselves to the temptation of "imperialism". Does she take the proportional relationship between oppression and resistance for granted? At the same time, does this so-called "free choice" tend to weaken the colonial influence of colonizers? Levenson's criticism is full of irony and regret, making it seem as if Mu Shiying, Liu Na'ou, Shi Zhecun and others "went astray" and "missed the opportunity" due to personal choices.

In addition, Shi Zhecun's historical novels are described as "imposing modern ideas on traditional materials", and this new textual experiment is again interpreted passively by Shu-mei Shih. Shi Zhecun tried to integrate modern writing techniques into ancient Chinese stories, especially Buddhist stories, "wanting to take a new path alone in creation" [3]. This is undoubtedly an interlingual experiment. He introduced Kumarajiva, one of the four great translators of Buddhist sutras in Han Chinese Buddhism, and Shi Xiu, who killed his sister-in-law for justice in Water Margin, into his modernist works, and Freudianly intensified the conflicts between their instinctive

desires and disciplinary rules, jianghu loyalty, and national missions to create fierce clashes between spirit and flesh. We can naturally interpret this as a "blasphemy" against traditional Chinese writing and a "deconstruction" of the heroic and positive images of eminent monks, righteous men and generals in official Chinese history. But from another angle, this is also an attempt to stylize or sinicize modernist writing. Leo Ou-fan Lee also mentioned this: "Mr. Shi's novels are worth reading precisely because he adds a layer of poems and songs of traditional Chinese culture to these horrible things, creating an enchantment of his own style." [4] Regardless of the aesthetic value or success of Shi Zhecun's historical novels, the creator clearly intended to combine foreign modernism with indigenous Chinese story-telling and legendary materials. Lu Xun's *Old Tales Retold* is similar, but more intended for satire, while *The General's Head* is a solid modernist experiment. The reason why Shu-mei Shih uses the word "imposing" in her evaluation of "imposing modern ideas on traditional materials" is probably that she finds such works "awkward". But this precisely proves the incongruity of Western modernist techniques, including Freudian psychoanalysis, with the Chinese and Oriental atmosphere, and this incongruity can only be better perceived through Shi Zhecun's "challenge".

By comparing India and China, Shu-mei Shih describes the proportional relationship between oppression and resistance, and the flexible space and "initiative" she grants to the New Sensationalists, namely the Shanghai "cosmopolitans", are questionable in their logical judgment. On the contrary, her neglect of the subjectivity construction stimulated by the textual "challenges" of Shanghai writers needs to be further mentioned and discussed.

4. The Beijing School neo-conservatives

Habermas calls those who criticize "modernity" and "reason" in post-structuralist theories "conservatives", among those who split "modernity" into two, accepting its technological development while rejecting its moral impact are called "neo-conservatives". Borrowing Habermas's subversive redefinition of "conservatives" and "radicals", Shu-mei Shih reminds us to pay attention to the opposite camp of the May Fourth group in modern literary history—the Chinese modern neo-conservative "Beijing School".

Different from the May Fourth Occidentalists and the Shanghai New Sensationalists discussed above, this group of thinkers and philosophers did not completely respect the West. On the one hand, they advocated part of China's "tradition", and on the other hand, they criticized the "degenerate" elements of Western "modernity". The regional diversity and local writing advocated by Zhou Zuoren and others made the West no longer "universal" but a "particular" region like China. Fei Ming's poetic writing is a kind of "aesthetics of interactive influence", and female writers achieved gender negotiation through the revival of regions and "traditions". However, this by no means means they had an active exclusive tendency. Shu-mei Shih emphasizes to us that the limited critical motive of the Beijing School still came from the West. From Liang Qichao's *Impressions of European Travel*, encouraged by European intellectuals to resolve to use Chinese culture again, to the Critical Review Group and New Confucians gaining theoretical strength from New Humanism and the continental philosophies of Bergson and Eucken respectively, the overall depressed and introspective atmosphere of the West after World War II made them turn to the East for a "cure". That is to say, it was the West that took the initiative to encourage Chinese intellectuals to participate in this "global" reflection, and China presented a cultural performance to prove itself to gain admission. In this view, the issue of "initiative" of the Beijing School, with extremely limited critical power, falls into embarrassment again. What's more, Shu-mei Shih also states that Chinese neo-traditionalists are perhaps closer to Western "modernity": "On the surface, it is farther away from the

areas occupied by Western colonial powers, but ironically, it has thoroughly absorbed Western modernity." [1]

To illustrate this point, she selects three Beijing School writers: Fei Ming from the English Department of Peking University Preparatory School, Lin Huiyin and Ling Shuhua from prominent families with overseas study backgrounds. In the discussion, she fully talks about their interactive relations with Western texts and intellectuals, especially taking Ling Shuhua's English autobiography *Ancient Melodies* with strong Orientalist colors written under the advice and guidance of Woolf as a typical example. Compared with Lin Huiyin's versatility, Ling Shuhua, who came from a prominent background and deliberately cooperated with the British writer, is considered to have: "a female subjectivity largely determined by the unequal relationship between her and Woolf in the process of writing *Ancient Melodies*." [1]

This is obviously another passive interpretation. In fact, Ling Shuhua's interlingual practice through translation is rare among modern literary writers. She used domestication translation to convey her feminist works with a unique Oriental female perspective to Britain, which is undoubtedly driven by a stronger creative ambition than Lin Huiyin. Before *Ancient Melodies*, Ling Shuhua had cooperated with Julian Bell to translate her novels *Boredom* and *The Mad Poet* into English and published them in *T'ien Hsia Monthly*, the most prestigious English journal in China at that time. The translation then adopted literal translation, but it received no response due to the journal's circulation limitations [5]. Later, being able to correspond with the famous Woolf naturally meant asking for advice. When Shu-mei Shih talks about Woolf's letters to Ling in the book, she focuses on the guidance for Orientalist writing. But in fact, Woolf mostly guided Ling Shuhua in English writing (translation).

Judging from the six complete existing letters from Woolf to Ling Shuhua, Ling Shuhua was not in a good situation when she first wrote, at least not in a peaceful state of mind. So Woolf began her letters by comforting her and urging her to accomplish a career of her own. In the fourth reply, she wrote: "I feel that the only relief is work." [6] That is to say, Woolf, who had fluctuating mental states, suggested that Ling Shuhua complete an English autobiography based on personal experience, also to free her from her predicament through work (English writing) that required high concentration, rather than out of the "hierarchy of language and audience" as Shu-mei Shih claimed. Second, Shu-mei Shih cites the inequality in the gifts between the two, arguing that the 18th-century British novels Woolf gave Ling Shuhua were to demonstrate the literary tradition of her own nation. But in fact, it is clear from the letters that this was to help Ling Shuhua, who felt her English was poor, learn English vocabulary—"I feel that if some English person revised your writing into regular English prose, the whole mood of the book would be destroyed." [6]

This is not to deny Woolf's Orientalist tendencies, but as two female modernists corresponding sincerely amid war, the implication of "inequality" need not be deliberately exaggerated. Ling Shuhua's interlingual subjectivity as a Chinese female writer should not be easily "determined".

Compared with the novelist group, Shu-mei Shih expresses more direct affirmation of Zhou Zuoren's proposed "non-nationalist localism". Zhou Zuoren was dissatisfied with the May Fourth practice of regarding the West as universalism, but also scorned the nationalist practice of essentializing Chinese tradition. He sought a third path between "questionable European universalism and narrow nationalism"—localization. Localization emphasizes the innate natural individualism, which has local characteristics without deliberately rejecting foreign influences. It is indeed a harmonious, natural and moderate approach. Thus, China and the West are both special "places", neither possessing universality but each with its own characteristics, gaining the possibility of communication.

But the problem is that Zhou Zuoren's theory of "regionality" is actually ambiguous, because for Zhou Zuoren, he had more than one hometown. "Every place I have lived is my hometown. I have no special affection for my hometown, but because I fished and wandered there, we met day and night and became acquainted, just like neighbors in a village. Although not relatives, I sometimes miss them after leaving." He indeed grew naturally and had no narrow nationalism, but he had no exclusive affection for his hometowns. Beijing was his hometown, and Tokyo was also his hometown. It is precisely this relative "locality" that allowed him to expand his "local scope" and adjust his "local attributes" at any time in front of colonizers, and eventually become a traitor to semi-colonial China. This not only makes one doubt whether this individualism born of "nature" is precisely anti-"local"?

5. Conclusion

This paper further argues against the issue of the "initiative" of the three types of modernists in *The Lure of the Modern*. Shu-mei Shih proposes "giving priority to the initiative of Chinese modernists as leaders of regional cultural production before the global context" [1] to strengthen area studies and deconstruct the original imperial-centric research paradigm and the East-West binary opposition. The special attribute of "semi-colonialism" gave Chinese modernists the opportunity to strive for certain cultural rights, but the construction of "initiative" of the three types of intellectuals in the whole book points more to passive acceptance and even "self-colonization". This is caused by the researcher's overemphasis on treating China as a "region" within the "global". The essence of China indeed no longer exists, but has the influence of the "Other" been overstated when Chinese intellectuals construct their own subjectivity?

If we ask again: Where does China's cultural production "lead"? Is it ahead of the world or ahead of Siam? Once the prefix "leading" is added, can we understand that regional culture is precisely a discussion within the backward groups relative to the so-called "advanced"? Even if "global" is carefully chosen to contrast with "regional", it is clear that "global" here mostly refers to European and American imperialist countries.

This paper has no intention of questioning Shu-mei Shih's incisive analysis of colonialism and her efforts to trace the pedigree of early Chinese modernists through her post-colonial research theory. However, as Li Yang said when discussing Sinophone literature: "What is really questioned is still the 'West'—or rather, China here is only a medium for him to question and reflect on the 'West'." [7] Because most of the criticisms are actually directed at the West, the "initiative" of Chinese modernists still tends to be in the passive state of being colonized, and some debatable subjectivity constructions are thus obscured.

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