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Shu-mei Shih. The lure of the modern : writing modernism in semicolonial China, 1917-1937

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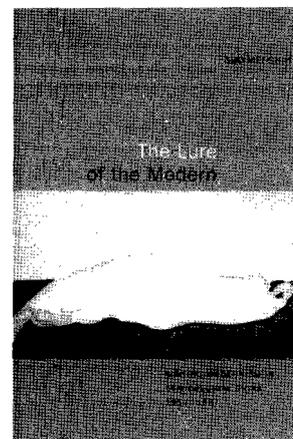
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The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937. By Shu-mei Shih. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. xiii + 427pp. ISBN 0520220633 (Cloth); ISBN 0520220641 (Paperback).

By tracing a genealogy of Chinese modernists from the teens to the thirties, and addressing Beijing School modernism as well as Shanghai new sensationism, Shu-mei Shih provides one of the most comprehensive studies of early Chinese modernism to emerge in recent years. The book also constitutes one of the most cohesive analyses to date of how the dynamics of semicolonial culture differ from those of colonial culture. Shih's thoroughly researched account of the literary developments of the period are convincingly historicized both in relation to the broad political and cultural context of semicolonialism and the biographical details of the writers. The twelve-chapter book is divided into three parts: "May Fourth Occidentalism and Japanism," "The Beijing School," and "Shanghai New Sensationism." It includes a lengthy introduction defining the theoretical terms of the analysis (revisited in the conclusion) and an appendix, "Later Modernisms," that briefly addresses developments in the 1940s and the 1960s Taiwan modernist movement.

The premise underlying Shih's analysis of the aesthetic and ideological features of early Chinese modernism is that each of its three major manifestations must be understood in relation to China's semicolonial condition. She takes issue with Edward Said's articulation of the unilinear traveling of ideas (Said 1983: 226-27) because it fails to account for the complexities of cross-fertilization between China and the West. As imperialists did not assume outright domination and formal sovereignty over China, "the domination was exercised through less formal, although no less destructive or transformative, channels" (35). This fragmentation in political and cultural spheres allowed for multidirectional pursuits among Chinese intellectuals rather than creating clear distinctions between resistance and collaboration.



Hence, “the Chinese cultural imaginary, infused with a heterogeneity of often ambivalent and shifting positions . . . [meant that] nationalism, in many cases, took a backseat in these searches” (35). For the enlightenment thinker, the urgency of criticizing feudalism and forwarding Westernization often displaced the immediate need to confront and criticize colonial domination. Shih argues repeatedly that this displacement was often accompanied by a split in the concept of “the West” (or Japan, as “the honorary West”) between what she terms “the metropolitan West” (Western culture in the West) and “the colonial West” (the culture of Western colonizers in China). She claims that by bifurcating the two, modernists could proselytize for the former type of Westernization without being perceived as collaborationists.

In Part One, arguably the weakest of the three sections, Shih discusses May Fourth subjectivity by analyzing the ideology of linear temporality underlying May Fourth enlightenment discourse. Her key assertion is that by constructing China as the past of the West, intellectuals could invent a cosmopolitan subjectivity that did not take the nation-state or ethnicity as the sole marker of identity, and could instead establish a transnationally mediated identity in the global terrain. Shih argues that this ideology allowed May Fourth intellectuals to harbor a fantasy of equality with the West—“if time was the only measure of difference, China could become an equal partner by simply catching up as fast as it could” (50)—yet she fails to address the multiple anxieties that underlie this rhetoric in May Fourth fiction. For example, in her reading of Lu Xun’s story “Lamenting Loss” (Shangshi), she states that “the male narrator as the translator of Western ideas is presented unambiguously as a murderer” (71), yet rather than analyzing the anxiety informing such a representation, she merely concludes that this illustrates the power derived from knowledge of Euro-Japanese literature. In her chapter on Lu Xun and Tao Jingsun, she states that, like his essays, Lu Xun’s “creative works are also underlied by an evolutionary, future-oriented perspective” (90), an interpretation convincingly countered in studies on Lu Xun by Leo Ou-fan Lee, T.A. Hsia, and others.

To her credit, Shih’s inclusion of Tao Jingsun as an early precursor to 1930s new sensationism, and her discussion of

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Teng Gu and other decadent-aesthetic writers in addition to Yu Dafu, fill in significant gaps in the literary history of modernism. And Shih acknowledges that “for the non-West, modernity is the condition of a forcible repudiation of the self and the often self-imposed internalization of a new identity structured in the image of the West. Hence, modernity for the non-West is not merely the site of geopolitical, cultural, and psychological trauma, but also the site of an identity crisis” (145). The attempt to resolve the identity crisis, according to Shih, took two different routes by the mid-1920s. One was a cultural recuperation of Chinese tradition as inherently modern, especially evident in the aesthetics of the Beijing School. The other approach was an ideological turn to the left as a way to salvage nationalism, creating a much more volatile ideological milieu for the Shanghai modernists who wanted to assert the autonomy of literature.

Shih is the first theorist to categorize explicitly the aesthetics of the Beijing School as modernist. Many have characterized the *jingpai* as a conservative backlash against modernist developments during May Fourth. For example, Wu Fuhui describes *jingpai* writers as “insisting on the perspective of ‘rural China’ with its suspicion of modern urban civilization, in sharp contrast with what they perceive as metropolitan trends, employing a distinctive lyrical mode when narrating the countryside” (Wu 232-46). He concludes that space dominates the *jingpai* configuration of the country, and is absolutized as “eternal,” transcending historical change, whereas time, which governs the metropolis, is relativized and diminished in importance. Shih agrees that *jingpai* aesthetics are dominated by space, but astutely notes that the nonteleological emphasis is similar to Western aesthetic modernism in that the particular culture of a given locality has claims to the universal. She rightly insists that *jingpai* intellectuals “were opposed to the May Fourth Occidentalism according to which being modern means negating all that is Chinese—but they were not antimodern” (153). At the same time, Shih believes China’s semicolonial condition compromised the agency of Chinese neotraditionalists, given post-WWI encouragement by the West of Eastern intellectuals to revitalize their traditions, and their uneven relationship in the synthesis-driven civilizational discourse. Though the *jingpai* flaunted a global vision, it was one mediated by the Western confirmation that Chinese culture could finally enter the global.

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In Shih's chapter on the eclectic *jingpai* writer, Fei Ming, one of the fullest accounts available in English, she describes his aesthetics as one of "mutual implication" which subverted binary and essentialist conceptions of cultural difference. Although his access to traditional Chinese literature was mediated by Western literature, his practice of Western modernist techniques such as stream of consciousness was more informed by his engagement with the peculiar properties of the Chinese poetic language than by Western modernist writing itself. Shih's chapter on the subtle gender politics in the work of Lin Huiyin and Ling Shuhua is equally informative. She argues that both of these writers wrestled with a sanctioned recuperation of the local and its subsumption of women's issues. Further, both were engaged in a double conversation with a Chinese feminine literary tradition and a Western feminine modernism, thus the construction of a gendered modernity in the specific context of their time often required a parodic style and content.

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Finally, in Part Three, Shih provides a plethora of information on the material and textual culture that informed the work of the new sensationists, including lengthy chapters detailing the lives and writings of Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiying, and Shi Zhecun. Other recent works have also addressed the Shanghai modernists. Randolph Trumbull's unpublished dissertation, *The Shanghai Modernists*, was one of the first works in English on the subject. Leo Lee's *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China: 1930-1945* and Yingjin Zhang's *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, and Gender* both include discussions of the three modernists mentioned above. Yang Yi's *Jingpai yu haipai bijiao yanjiu* [A comparative study of the Beijing and Shanghai Schools] offers a wealth of detail on both the Shanghai modernists and the Beijing School. Shih's contribution, in addition to providing the most detailed readings of new sensationist fiction (with the exception of Trumbull), is her persistent interpretation of these works in relation to the semicolonial conditions and implications laid out in her introduction. It is here that the force of her argument is at its height, albeit also the most controversial.

Shih argues that, diverging from the Baudelaire/Benjamin flaneur, and lacking the defense mechanisms of Simmel's "metropolitan man," Mu Shiyong's male protagonist is utterly overwhelmed by the sensations of the city, his lack of autonomy and coherence inherent in his semicolonial condition. Hence Shih attributes Mu's modernist focus on "textual autonomy" (and concomitant lack of nationalist consciousness) to the fact that it "can offer a semblance of fulfillment" (331). This insightful argument is less convincing, however, when she uses it to interpret all readings. For example, Shih reads Shi Zhecun's "The Evening of Spring Rain" (Meiyu zhi xi) exclusively in terms of the protagonist's economic emasculation, a state that she solely ties to semicolonial identity. Her reading is problematic in that it discounts the degree to which these writers delineate other pressures inherent in Shanghai's capitalist modernity, such as the sense of alienation commonly experienced in urban settings. Again, in her discussion of Liu Na'ou's empowered "modern girls" in stories such as "Two Men Out of Tune with Time" (Liang ge shijian de buganzhengzhe, better translated as "Two Men Out of Step with Time"), Shih oddly concludes that "denationalized cosmopolitanism may be the only position from which women's emancipation from patriarchal control can be expressed" (300). While this may be the case, women's equality hardly seems the driving motivation behind Liu's work, and contradicts Shih's earlier statement that this "modern girl" is in no sense a reflection on the social reality of Chinese women, but is rather "a dissimulated image from Franco-Japanese literary sources and Hollywood cinema . . . construed as a part of the phantasmagoric reality of Shanghai, to which the Chinese subject has dubious access" (278).

In conclusion, Shih's reading of Chinese modernism through the lens of semicoloniality provides crucial insights into the asymmetrical discourse of modernism between China, Japan, and the West, but overstates the degree to which Chinese modernism is mediated through aesthetic Others rather than also arising from a lived sense of modernity. Nonetheless, her cohesive analysis, meticulous research, and comprehensive scope make *The Lure of the Modern* an essential resource on early Chinese modernism, and a welcome addition to the literature.

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