

## **Another Form of "Modern": An Exploration of Left-Wing Literature in the 1930s through Mu Shiyong's Writing**

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**Abstract:** This paper adopts a socio-historical criticism approach to thoroughly analyze the 1930s works of Mu Shiyong, a notable author of the New Sensation School, and explores their relationship with contemporary Left-wing literature. Critical discourse from the leftist camp towards Mu Shiyong upon his literary debut produced a complex performative effect that influenced his psychological alignment with Left-wing literature. This genre became a significant aspect of his dual writing endeavors, representing an alternative form of "Modern" in his literary technique. Mu Shiyong's Left-wing writings and his debates with the leftist camp highlight the strengths and weaknesses of 1930s Left-wing literature, suggesting that Left-wing literature itself might embody another form of "Modern" within 1930s literary history, both in terms of form and rhetoric.

**Keywords:** Mu Shiyong; Proletarian Novels; Left-Wing Literature; Modern

### **1. Introduction**

Mu Shiyong was celebrated as a leading figure of the New Sensation School in the 1930s Chinese literary arena. The term "Modern", often linked with notions of fashion and modernity, is closely associated with his work. His cultural context, the characters he portrayed, and the stylistic techniques he employed all embodied aspects of Modernism. In *Shanghai Modern*, Leo Ou-fan Lee offers an in-depth exploration of Mu Shiyong's portrayal of "faces, bodies, and cities", using the vibrant city of Shanghai as a lens through which to examine his work [1].

However, Lee's analysis does not place significant emphasis on Mu Shiyong's contributions to proletarian literature, despite his reputation as "the most distinguished of proletarian writers" in this genre. As Kuang

Xinnian notes in his analysis of *1931 China*, Lee's approach appears to selectively focus on aspects of Mu Shiyong's work that highlight the arrival of Western modernity, almost as though performing a surgical dissection of the topic. While Mu Shiyong's expertise in novels like *Shanghai Foxtrot* earned him recognition for mastering New Sensation techniques, his contributions to proletarian or pseudo-proletarian fiction should not be overlooked.

In recent years, academic research on Mu Shiyong has become increasingly comprehensive, addressing both the distinctive value of his style and his connections to proletarian and Left-wing literature movements. Mu Shiyong's works are deeply intertwined with the dominant currents of 1930s Left-wing literature, a period in which this literature experienced both immense admiration and harsh criticism. Today, with a more balanced evaluation of Left-wing literature, revisiting Mu Shiyong's literary output offers significant academic insights, shedding new light on the complexities of 1930s Chinese Left-wing literary culture.

### **2. Experimental Techniques and Psychological Affiliation**

Since the publication of the novel *Our World* in the first volume of *La Nouvelle Littérature* in 1930, Mu Shiyong made his debut in the literary scene with a notable mastery of technique. The story, narrated by the pirate Li Er, depicts the tale of the poor resorting to robbery and kidnapping the rich. It was highly praised by the then editor, Shi Zhecun, who lauded the work as "a significant artistic success" and deemed Mu "a young author in whom we can place our greatest hopes"[2]. Following this success, works like *Black Whirlwind* and others soon followed, with their narratives consistently reflecting the

same thematic exploration of the stark divide between the rich and the poor, portraying a kind of "North Pole, South Pole" opposition. In the *preface to the revised edition* of the *North Pole, South Pole* short story collection, Mu Shiyong reflected on his approach to writing stories about the struggles of the lower classes: "At the time, I wrote with the aim of experimentation and self-training." While the author's own words cannot be taken as definitive, it is undeniable that Mu Shiyong had a remarkable ability to tap into current trends and grasp the prevailing currents of writing. Engaging with popular topics and emulating the literary styles of predecessors are natural steps for any novice entering the field.

Mu Shiyong's first work, *Communication*, explores themes of bitter revenge and tragic love, clearly influenced by the \*Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School\* of writing. Similarly, his *North Pole, South Pole* stories, written between 1930 and 1932, were steeped in common literary themes of the time, which soon became central to the larger literary debates and were incorporated into the broader Left-wing literary movement. In this sense, the stories also mark a clear shift toward a more formal affiliation with Left-wing literature, at least on a structural level, as Mu sought to merge with and further the rising tide of proletarian fiction.

However, the Left-wing literary community did not respond favorably to Mu Shiyong's work. Although leftist critics acknowledged his technical achievements, they unanimously criticized his unsophisticated ideological reflections as "imbued with a strong proletarian consciousness"[3]. An article titled *The Lumpenproletariat in the Social Slag Heap and Mr. Mu Shiyong* went so far as to declare his consciousness, form, and technique as failures. While characters like "Lao Niu" are described as relying solely on brute force with a proletarian thug spirit, the novel *Lianhualuo* stands out as a refreshing exception.

This story, which depicts two marginalized people supporting each other only to be ultimately separated by fate, is considered a fine piece of proletarian literature. Reflecting on the incubation period of the Left-wing movement, including calls by figures like Guo Moruo for literature that sympathizes with the

proletariat through realism, it is evident that Mu Shiyong's work did align with certain standards of Left-wing literature during this time.

However, the critiques from the Left-wing camp were always incisive, especially during the peak of the Left-wing movement. Faced with the blending of "New Sensation" and "Proletarian" literatures, the Left-wing critics were eager to solidify their stance by extensively criticizing various works. This included not only numerous critiques of Mu Shiyong's creations but also "deliberately organizing large-scale critiques"[4].

From this perspective, Mu Shiyong seemed to serve as an ideal subject for the Left-wing to establish its identity; as the distinctions between these literary trends became clearer, he was gradually marginalized from the Left-wing. Returning to the *foreword of the revised edition of North Pole, South Pole*, in his first anthology, Mu Shiyong initially expressed appreciation towards critics for not abandoning him, valuing their efforts to explore and urge him to overcome the "incorrect elements". However, he then transitioned by stating, "But my heartfelt gratitude goes to those who pointed out the flaws in my technique."

This shift indicates an evolution in his attitude towards Left-wing literature, transitioning from initial respect and imitation to a more critical stance. This change is even more pronounced in the preface to *anthology Public Cemetery*, where he boldly declared, "I do not wish to, like many others today, disguise my true self with protective coloration, living a hypocritical life and shouting hypocritical slogans."

It can be said that Mu Shiyong's literary creation was both shaped and hindered by the Left-wing movement. Xie Lizhe, in his research, has analyzed the actual connotation of the title "the exceptional Proletarian novelist", pointing out that it was merely a label attached to Mu Shiyong after he initially gained the attention of readers. This title was used to describe his literary style, which sought to infuse his writing with a fresh and vibrant air, later adopting the guise of the "New Sensation" literary group.

This style was characterized by its use of innovative, colloquial techniques aimed at appealing to the masses [5]. In other words,

the "exceptional" refers to the mastery of form and technique, rather than a deep engagement with the scientific consciousness of the proletariat. Despite this, Mu Shiyong was still subjected to various criticisms. The extent of Mu Shiyong's psychological identification with Left-wing literature is difficult to determine. However, what is certain is that Left-wing literature did not embrace Mu Shiyong. In this complex relationship, what the writer referred to as his "technical experimentation" truly remained just that—an experiment in technique. For him, the incorporation of Left-wing themes could not evolve into a deeper engagement with the content; it could only reflect another pursuit of "Modern" and its associated pleasures.

### **3. A Different "Modern" and the Gains and Losses for the Left Wing**

As Mu Shiyong mentioned in the preface to anthology *Public Cemetery*, his "proletarian tendencies" and "New Sensation" style coexist: "At the same time, there exist two completely different moods, writing entirely different works," which stem from his dual personality. As previously noted, from the beginning of *Communication*, Mu Shiyong sought novelty and modernity in his themes and an extraordinary and unconventional approach in his techniques. Therefore, the traditional view of a stylistic transformation in Mu Shiyong's work is inaccurate; under the distinct manifestations of two completely different Modern styles lies the expression of his literary talent. Mu Shiyong managed to masterfully use his left hand to practice vernacular expressions, depicting the sufferings and struggles of the lower classes, while his right hand returned to the life fields where he was nurtured, thus achieving the stature of a grandmaster in the New Sensationist movement.

While the New Sensationist style of Mu Shiyong has been extensively discussed, it is particularly intriguing to examine the latter part of his career. During this period, after both passively and actively distancing himself from the Left-wing camp, Mu Shiyong's left hand did not cease writing. In fact, he produced a major work that was not only aligned with Leftist tendencies but also adhered more closely to the standards of Left-wing literature—*China on the Move*.

This novel sheds light on the writer's complex relationship with his "alternative Modern" in his left-handed writing and also reflects the inherent appeal of Left-wing literature itself. The opening of *China 1931* features a return of a fragment from his earlier renowned work, *Shanghai Foxtrot*. It begins with a portrayal of the revelry and decadence of the upper class, only to quickly align with the central themes of *China on the Move*: depicting the 1931 floods and the decline of rural China on the eve of the September 18th incident. The novel moves on to depict the entire course of peasant uprisings, their ultimate failure, and the subsequent reflections on those events. Despite the fact that Mu Shiyong's left-hand writing was less successful than his right due to his lack of genuine experience—resulting in a narrative that feels "one step removed from life", "false", and "flimsy"[6]—the novel still addresses capitalist conflicts, oppression, and resistance.

However, it does so with fewer profanities than *Howl from the Prison* and less of the violent, criminal atmosphere of *Our World*. The novel also offers a more thoughtful analysis of the failure of the uprisings, allowing characters to realize the limitations of petty peasant. This could be described as distinctly Leftist, with the only difference from traditional Left-wing literature being the author's name. Li Oubei praised Mu Shiyong's ambition in *China on the Move*, suggesting that the novel might have been a direct challenge to the works of Mao Dun. In other words, even though Mu Shiyong was increasingly alienated from the Left, he continued to work within the framework of Left-wing literature tradition. This approach reflects a complex attitude toward the Left.

To borrow Hillis Miller's concept, Left-wing literature had various performative effects on Mu Shiyong's thinking [7]—an active, positive intervention. Despite the novel's less polished artistic techniques, the closing line in its advertisement—"the author not only maintains his distinctive light tone and narrative structure, but also presents new discoveries"—suggests that Mu Shiyong was still experimenting with his "alternative Modern". This reveals the writer's multifaceted and conflicted emotions toward the Left.

Nevertheless, both Mu Shiyong and his works

ultimately descended into obscurity. Much like the debates waged between the "third way" advocates such as Hu Qiuyao and the Left-wing literary circles, Mu Shiyong transitioned from an initial attitude of implicit gratitude to eventually engaging in a conflict of hard versus soft cinema with the "Dianlian Society".

Despite a pseudonymous writer, Ji Kangyi, once defending Mu Shiyong and briefly convincing scholars like Yan Jiayan, Xie Zhixi has thoroughly debunked Ji Kangyi's claims through concrete documentation and meticulous research [8].

During this period, Mu Shiyong's debates and his writings while holding a fictitious position reveal some critical issues within Left-wing literature. For example, Mu Shiyong criticized Lu Si as a Don Quixote, accusing him of failing to "examine the strengths and weaknesses of his own weapons and the extent of his abilities". He also took issue with the leftist camp for applying principles too rigidly, offering simplistic, one-size-fits-all definitions for superstructural elements such as literature, history, and philosophy.

Furthermore, the Left's emphasis on the unity of form and content was, in reality, a focus solely on content, with the idea of unity presented merely in a formalistic way. These criticisms of the Left's superficial understanding of theory and its tendency to apply rigid terminology were not new; they had already appeared in earlier debates with the Crescent Moon Society [9]. It became clear that merely using appropriate theoretical terms and shouting slogans did not qualify one as truly Leftist.

A stark example of this is seen in Mu Shiyong's final work, *The Chinese Cultural World in the Past Year*, written in the last year of his life, which demonstrated his equally impressive command of scientific theory. As a key modality in advertising discourse, image modality is vital for conveying information and meaning. Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, this section examines how image modality constructs and expresses meaning from three perspectives: representational meaning, compositional meaning, and interactive meaning.

This analysis reveals the deeper connotations conveyed by advertisements. As Mao Dun remarked, "Many who shake their heads at the

new works of today initially held great expectations for them. However, they inevitably express disappointment because these new works eventually reveal they cannot escape the confines of slogan-driven literature." This observation highlights a paradox within Left-wing literature. Mu Shiyong, who engaged in dual-style writing, emerged as a "standout figure in proletarian fiction", while other writers with strong Leftist inclinations, such as Ding Ling, were also known for their versatility in writing.

This paradox can be seen in the broader context of Left-wing literature. Lu Xun lamented that literature under Leftist influence "has no voice", while Liang Shiqiu declared that Left-wing literature "cannot be established". The fundamental issue is that those capable of effectively writing or researching Left-wing literature often do not come from the proletariat. "In times of poverty, there are no literary works", and individuals from the corresponding class struggle to produce quality Left-wing literature. This situation mirrors the predicament of a writer living at the bottom of a well who is familiar with his environment but can never see the sky. Conversely, a writer standing at the edge of the well can appreciate both the vast sky and the depths, making dual-style writers more likely to produce superior works.

Mu Shiyong, who grew up in comfort, finds himself at this advantageous vantage point. The crux of Left-wing literature lies in its significant influence overshadowing its efficacy in practice. Mu Shiyong saw Left-wing literature as another form of Modern, a tool for exploring his technique. From today's perspective, one might argue that Left-wing literature was another modernist trend in the literary landscape of the 1930s, a rhetorical flourish that remained superficially fashionable. The resolution of the inherent issues within Left-wing literature and its further development and evolution present yet another topic for exploration.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Mu Shiyong's relationship with Left-wing literature is complex. The Leftist literature movement, aiming to establish its distinct identity, often criticized Mu Shiyong, who was a newcomer to the literary arena. This critical

stance from the Leftists contributed to his alienation from the mainstream, as he turned to alternative Modernist techniques to develop his own style.

Despite this estrangement, in the latter part of his career, Mu Shiyong balanced his urban narratives with works that adhered to Leftist literary standards. His novel *China on the Move* exemplifies this effort, showing his intricate feelings towards Left-wing literature and the substantial influence it wielded over him. Ultimately, Mu Shiyong "aligned with the enemy", a move that reflected his conflicted relationship with Left-wing literature. His debates with the "Dianlian Society" and his later works reveal the theoretical weaknesses and limitations of the Leftist literary movement of the 1930s.

Therefore, even though 1930s Left-wing literature prioritized content correctness, its impact was often more rhetorical than substantive. It became another form of Modern, distinct from the "New Sensationism" but similarly superficial. This rhetorical Modernism was a part of Mu Shiyong's identity and a significant element of 1930s literary history.

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