DISCURSIVE MODES OF NEW LITERATURE IN CHINESE IN THE CONTRAST OF WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract: This article interrogates the discursive modes of New Literature in Chinese within the context of world literature, highlighting how modern Chinese writers navigated the transformation of classical Chinese, vernacular speech, and translation styles under a global literary gaze. It argues that the New Culture Movement and the Vernacular Movement were deeply informed by comparative and world-literary perspectives. While these perspectives enabled Chinese literature to engage internationally, they also introduced blind spots regarding the vitality of classical Chinese, the adaptability of the vernacular (spoken) mode, the significance of the written mode, and the unique expressive power of translational aesthetics. Furthermore, the study explores realism as the dominant orientation, tracing its genealogy through French, Japanese, and Russian traditions. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that these discursive modes were shaped by a complex interplay between local linguistic resources and a global literary consciousness, reflecting the dual nature of innovation and continuity in Chinese literary evolution.

To examine Literature in Chinese (汉语文学)—and even New Literature in Chinese (汉语新文学)—within the theoretical and spatiotemporal framework of world literature is not the same as studying the relationship between Literature in Chinese and foreign-language literatures through the general "methods" of comparative literature. Comparisons between specific works or authors are not frequent; rather, the focus lies on investigating the cultural and scholarly formations that New Literature in Chinese presents within the horizon of world literature and in contrast with different linguistic and cultural traditions.

I. Chinese Discursive Modes from the Perspective of World Literature

The moment literature within the scope of Chinese culture and scholarship came to be designated as "Chinese literature," the very agents who bestowed, formulated, and employed this name already possessed a horizon of world literature. What we call Chinese literature today was not originally termed "Chinese literature"; it was not even necessarily called "literature." Poetry was simply poetry, ci was ci（lyrics）, and qu was qu（song）. Although the term wenxue (文学) existed in the pre-Qin period, it was then listed among the Four Subjects of Confucian teaching, primarily referring to writing and erudition rather than to "literature" in the modern Western sense.

The Western concept of *literature* was later rendered—quite felicitously—into Chinese as wenxue. This highly successful translation was far superior to alternatives such as "a system of textual representation" or other formulations, as it resonated with both the indigenous Chinese term wenxue and the long-standing Chinese understanding of literary activity itself. Influenced by Japanese scholarship and culture, the concept of "Chinese literature" began to be used domestically in the late nineteenth century. At the time, many specialized terms and academic vocabularies were introduced into China via Japan. The emergence of the concept of "Chinese literature" was precisely grounded in the formation of a global horizon in the comparative-literary sense; it was only with the advent of such a global perspective that "China" came to

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be distinctly foregrounded and emphasized.

Not only the notion of "Chinese literature," but also concepts such as "new Chinese literature," the "New Culture Movement," and the "literature revolution" of the May Fourth period were articulated in the context of the establishment and self-conscious awareness of an international and global horizon.

The establishment of a horizon of world literature enabled the examination of Chinese literature and culture from the perspectives of other nations' literatures. Modern Chinese literature began with the vernacular movement; the operation of modern vernacular Chinese within the sphere of the Chinese language constituted the core of the Language Revolution.

Conventional views often hold that, in the late nineteenth century, pioneering reformers in China were the first to recognize the limitations of classical Chinese (wenyan) and the importance of the vernacular. Liang Qichao, for example, proposed the doctrine of "new citizens" and experimented with a reformed classical prose, while Huang Zunxian(黄遵宪) advocated that "farmers, workers, merchants, women, and children throughout the land should all be able to make use of written language."(Chen, 2014, p. 358) In this view, writing was to serve the enlightenment of the masses, and the masses were to be capable of mastering and using written language. Such interpretations accord with historical facts, yet they overlook a crucial premise: the very conception and aspiration for script and language reform first arose from the formation of a global horizon—more specifically, a horizon of world literature.

Seen from the perspective of world literature and a global outlook, the disjunction between traditional classical Chinese and the spirit of the age was strikingly evident. In terms of readership, Chinese literature was accessible only to the educated stratum among the Chinese populace. At the same time, mastery of the written language was confined to an elite within that group. It was precisely because there emerged an initial awareness that the traditional wenyan mode was detached from everyday life, from the broader populace, and from the demands of the times that subsequent movements for script and language reform took shape—from the vernacular movement to the advocacy of phoneticization and Latinization, and ultimately toward alignment with world literary and cultural currents.

To understand the literature revolution and literary reform solely in terms of the Enlightenment undoubtedly has its rationale; yet such an approach cannot explain why, after the shift from classical Chinese to the vernacular, there was continued advocacy for phoneticization and Latinization. For ordinary people—farmers, workers, merchants, and others—the transition from *wenyan* to the vernacular was followed by the prospect of replacing Chinese characters with "ABCD"; the inconvenience of such changes would have been self-evident. Therefore, to interpret linguistic and literary reform purely from the perspective of enlightenment is overly simplistic and superficial. It should instead be understood from the standpoint of the formation and self-conscious awareness of a world-literary horizon. Only in this way can we comprehend why figures such as Lu Xun actively promoted Latinization and related initiatives.

Moreover, the historical context of the phoneticization of Chinese characters in modern China differed profoundly from that of today. At present, the nationwide promotion of Putonghua (Common Spoken Chinese) has largely been carried out at the state level, and the standardization of written Chinese characters has been largely achieved. In earlier periods, however, phoneticization did not imply that reformed characters would naturally be easy for the masses to accept and use. Pronunciations of

the same characters varied widely across different provinces and regions. Hence, Hu Shih's discussions in 1917 and 1918 concerning "a national language for literature" and "a literature of the national language" possessed significant practical relevance. He understood that without linguistic unification—without a nationally unified language system—many problems would not merely be difficult to resolve; they would in fact have no possibility of resolution at all.

In fact, behind the trajectory of Chinese language reform—from the vernacular movement to the Latinization movement—there lay a distinct and urgent objective, one even more pressing than the goals of "new citizen" formation or enlightenment: namely, to promote the globalization of Chinese literature and the Chinese characters, to propel Chinese literature outward and ultimately integrate it into world literature. This orientation was a clearly articulated direction of the New Culture Movement at the level of linguistic and language reform.

In addition to advocating Latinization, Lu Xun also vigorously promoted Esperanto. Esperanto is an artificial language invented and established by Dr. Lazarz Ludwik Zamenhof, a Polish-Jewish, at the end of the 19th century, based on the Indo-European language family. It attracted considerable attention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Figures such as Cai Yuanpei, Qian Xuantong, Liu Shipei, and Wu Zhihui actively supported and promoted it. At that time, China lacked a nationally unified and standardized writing and pronunciation system; thus, the Latinization of Chinese characters appeared to be an inevitable path toward the world, while Esperanto presented itself as a ready-made and relatively simple alternative.

The course of China's modern Literature Revolution, Character Revolution, Language Revolution, and vernacular movement resembles, in retrospect, a parabola. When cultural pioneers broke the constraints of classical Chinese, the language moved toward the vernacular, drawing closer to the common people—farmers, workers, merchants, peddlers, and the broader populace. Yet the subsequent path of Latinization gradually moved away from the masses and increasingly toward world literature and world culture. Therefore, the important formulation that "farmers, workers, merchants, women, and children throughout the land should all be able to make use of language" embodies first and foremost a kind of world consciousness, rather than a simple program of enlightenment.

Not only Huang Zunxian but many cultural elites of the late Qing and early Republican period consciously adopted a sense of *tianxia*—an awareness of "all under Heaven," of "the nations," of "the globe"—that is, a global perspective and a vision of world culture. Many of these cultural pioneers were admirable and deserving of respect; their horizons were broad and far-reaching. After vernacular language came into close contact with ordinary people, the discursive mode of Chinese underwent a further adjustment, moving away from the common populace and toward the world. This is not a criticism, for the very adjustment reflects the precious and widespread global outlook among intellectuals of that time.

Not only did Sun Yat-sen (孙中山) proclaim that "the tide of the world rolls on in mighty currents; those who follow it prosper, those who resist it perish," and Lu Xun observe that "the wise must comprehend the great tendencies of the world,"(Lu, 2005, p. 57) but numerous politicians, writers, and even young students of the era frequently invoked terms such as "all under Heaven," "the world," and "humanity." Such expressions were both rare and deeply valuable. Conservatism and isolation were regarded as common enemies of the age. Lu Xun was acutely sensitive and anxious about self-enclosure: "The Chinese have lost the world, yet for the time being must still dwell in it—this is my great fear." (Lu, 2005, p. 323)

A world horizon makes it easier for global attention to focus on the Chinese language, China, Chinese literature, and literature in Chinese. It further enables

analysis of the strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, and developmental paths and directions of Chinese literature from the perspective of world literature. Thus, phenomena such as the New Culture Movement, the Enlightenment movement, and the reform of Chinese characters first and foremost reflect the global vision and world-literary horizon of the intellectual elite of that era, as well as the broad and inclusive world consciousness that underlay that vision.

A global horizon and world consciousness fostered and reinforced a reflexive mode of self-examination among China's modern intellectual elites, prompting them to focus on the Chinese language and literature. These elements constituted an important foundation for the emergence of New Literature in Chinese. Yet within this global horizon, there were also blind spots. At least the following phenomena and issues have either gone unnoticed or remain insufficiently recognized: the vitality of the classical Chinese mode, the adaptability of the Vernacular (Spoken) mode, the significance of the written mode, and the strategic advantage of the translational register.

1. The Vitality of the Classical *Wenyan* Mode

From the perspectives of comparative literature and world culture, the limitations and deficiencies of traditional classical Chinese appeared particularly striking. It's pronounced detachment from the broad masses was especially conspicuous, and this detachment was not only one of competence but also one of taste. However, while many scrutinized the *wenyan style* primarily in negative terms, its inherent vitality was consistently overlooked.

There were many manifestations of this vitality. Even cultural pioneers of the New Culture Movement who actively championed the vernacular and devoted themselves to writing in it often continued to choose classical Chinese when composing private diaries or personal letters. For intellectuals of the time—especially elite intellectuals—*wenyan* was intuitive and readily manageable, whereas writing in the vernacular was, in reality, difficult to command. Thus, in responding to Hu Shih's (胡适) criticisms, Zhang Shizhao (章士钊) remarked,

> To write in the vernacular now, since no one in antiquity practiced it, requires groping experimentation, with nothing to rely upon; it is fundamentally an act of creation. Creative undertakings beneath the level of literature can be accomplished only by men of genius—how can one expect this of everyone? … To write vernacular prose and expect it to be beautiful—this is a task as difficult as ascending to heaven; I dare to assert it. (Zhang, 2001, p. 236)

Later, during his tenure as Minister of Education, Zhang even abolished the vernacular writing course previously established for primary school students, defending the decision on the grounds that vernacular writing was too difficult for children. Today, this may seem almost inconceivable. Modern individuals, educated from childhood in the vernacular and in Putonghua (Common Spoken Chinese), devote extensive time to vernacular language training and comparatively little to classical Chinese; their habitual modes of thinking and writing are carried out through the vernacular. Cultural figures such as Zhang Shizhao, however, were fundamentally different: their language and thought operated through the medium of classical Chinese. Zhang himself had actively engaged in vernacular writing and was keenly aware of its inconveniences and difficulties—although, from the vantage point of a global horizon, traditional

wenyan indeed appeared out of step with the times.

Looking back on that historical period, it is evident that the vitality and charm of the wenyan style were dismissed rather brusquely. Even today, classical Chinese continues to display tenacious vitality; there remain those who genuinely appreciate writing and reading in wenyan. The classical mode possesses its own distinctive stylistic refinement and can indeed satisfy certain textual desires—particularly those of a purely aesthetic or expressive nature. Despite appearing anachronistic in the eyes of the world and comparative literature, wenyan was never truly abandoned by its age.

It is especially worthy of attention that figures of the May Fourth generation—Lu Xun(鲁迅), Hu Shih(胡适), Chen Duxiu(陈独秀), Qian Xuantong (钱玄同), Liu Bannong (刘半农), and others—often chose classical Chinese in private and informal contexts. Yet the vitality of the wenyan Style, a blind spot of considerable significance, has long been neglected in scholarly research. In truth, both in the past and in the present, classical Chinese has possessed not only charm but also vitality. In a global context, its vitality has often been overlooked precisely because it lay in a blind spot. Once the perspective returns to the internal developmental trajectory of traditional Chinese culture itself, however, the value of *wenyan* as a distinct linguistic mode becomes strikingly tangible. Any facile or categorical negation appears insufficiently fair or objective.

2. The Adaptability of the Vernacular (Spoken) Mode

A second blind spot emerges when the modes of the Chinese language are examined from the perspectives of comparative literature and world literature: the adaptability of the spoken vernacular to the needs of literature and culture is often overlooked. As the language used by common folk like cart drivers and peddlers, everyday spoken Chinese can indeed meet certain cultural, literary, and communicative needs of the populace—but its degree of adaptability is quite limited.

Although figures such as Huang Zunxian and Hu Shih advocated the principle of "writing as one speaks," the actual implementation of this ideal proved extremely difficult. Speakers of Cantonese enjoyed a relative advantage in this respect, since the Guangdong region had long witnessed the phenomenon of incorporating Cantonese into written form, with a set of characters specifically corresponding to Cantonese usage. This enabled Cantonese speakers, to a considerable extent, to write as they spoke. In Hong Kong, for instance, a number of newspapers—such as *Oriental Daily News* (东方日报) and The Sun (太阳报)—have employed written Cantonese. In most other regions, however, rendering genuine spoken language directly into writing has been exceedingly difficult.

Spoken language, closely bound to the daily lives of ordinary people, is vivid, lively, dynamic, and appealing. Yet its adaptability to literature is highly limited. In literary expression, colloquial speech can be used, but primarily as a rhetorical device, serving character portrayal or highlighting a particular speaker's linguistic style. It is difficult, if not impossible, for spoken language to sustain lyricism or philosophical exposition. For the most part, writers employ colloquial speech in a rhetorical sense. The adaptability of the vernacular style was long exaggerated, and pioneers such as Hu Shih did not fully or systematically reflect on this issue.

During the Republican period, perceptive participants in New Literature in Chinese undertook certain experiments, attempting to write in regional dialects. Xu Zhimo (徐志摩) composed the poem "Xieshi Tuhua" (硖石土白)in the Xieshi dialect of his native Zhejiang; Liu Bannong produced the poetry collection *WaFu Ji* (瓦釜集)in the Jiangyin vernacular of his native Jiangsu. Yet such experiments were few in number and rarely successful. Writers seemed almost instinctively aware of the limited

adaptability of the spoken style. Lu Xun, for example, experimented with his story collection *New Stories*(故事新编), and composed *Wild Grass*(野草), but he never attempted to write in the Shaoxing dialect.

When New Literature writers reflected internally on their own linguistic expression, the limited adaptability of the spoken style could readily be perceived. However, when Chinese was viewed from a global horizon—from the vantage point of world literature—Chinese appeared merely as one "point" among many languages in the world. Its internal complexities and distinctions became difficult to discern clearly. Consequently, in the eyes of many observers, once China had abolished classical *wenyan* and promoted the vernacular, it seemed only natural that Chinese people should be able to communicate with one another smoothly and without obstacle. Hu Shih did not handle this issue particularly well. In essays such as "On Literary Reform," he largely overlooked the limited adaptability of the spoken style. He failed to recognize that he was examining Chinese characters and literature entirely from a global, world-literary perspective. Judging from his writings, the operation of Chinese seemed remarkably simple: once vernacular Chinese was adopted, success was almost assured, and adaptation to the vernacular posed no real problem. This may also have been related to the fact that he was from Anhui; the Anhui dialect is, in many cases, relatively intelligible to speakers from different regions.

In any case, disregarding the limited adaptability of spoken Chinese constitutes a blind spot generated by a global horizon and a world-literary perspective.

3. The Significance of the Written Mode

The third blind spot is closely related to the second. While many observers, from the perspective of world literature, failed to recognize the limited adaptability of the spoken style, they also gravely underestimated the importance of the written style in Chinese and overlooked significant differences between the two.

Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman* (狂人日记) is remarkable, and its most exceptional quality lies in the author's clear awareness that, on the path toward modernizing China, vernacular writing needed its own written form. New Literature in Chinese emerged precisely through the exploration, experimentation, and refinement of outstanding writers such as Lu Xun. Through countless creative trials, they ultimately established a written style suitable for modern Chinese.

From the perspective of world literature, the written style of a particular language—such as Chinese—tends not to receive sufficient attention. A common assumption is that, as long as a text is written in Chinese, Chinese readers will automatically understand it and judge its quality. Under the gaze of world literature or within comparative-literary frameworks, the internal differences between linguistic modes are rarely considered, much as English learners seldom focus on the distinctions between spoken and written English for most of their learning experience.

In Lu Xun's short story *A Happy Family* (幸福的家庭), the protagonist creates a novel of the same title. In one scene, a bowl of "Dragon-Tiger Duel" (a dish the protagonist imagined might be made from frog and eel or even snake meat) is placed before the male and female protagonists, prompting the following dialogue:

> "'My dear, please.'
> 'Please, you eat first, my dear.'
> 'Oh no, please you!'
> And then they simultaneously reached with their chopsticks, both picking up a piece

of snake meat…" (Lu, 2005, 38)

The irony is unmistakable, arising precisely from the awkward, quasi-written dialogue of the two characters. Such a satirical effect depends on a carefully crafted written style. Yet, from the perspectives of world or comparative literature, the importance of such a written style is easily overlooked—it remains a blind spot.

In the context of a specific linguistic and literary environment, however, the cultivation of the written style is crucial. Without the successful development of a modern written vernacular, Lu Xun's *The Diary of a Madman* would have had far less impact, and the subsequent development of New Literature in Chinese would have been far more difficult and prolonged. The importance of the written style for the evolution of New Literature in Chinese cannot be overstated.

4. The Strategic Advantage of the Translational Register

The fourth blind spot concerns the superiority of the Chinese translational register. As a language with an extraordinarily long and rich developmental history, Chinese possesses many unique characteristics. Among them, one particularly important and praiseworthy feature is that Chinese has developed its own distinct translational register. Such a phenomenon is almost unimaginable in other linguistic systems. It powerfully demonstrates the remarkable richness of Chinese linguistic resources: within the language, there exists a specialized form used for translation alongside another form dedicated to daily writing and literary creation. In fact, the elegance and refinement of the Chinese translational register can even surpass that of the native written literary style.

This feature is particularly fascinating because the translational register was extracted and created from within the Chinese language itself, yet it is often more delicate and graceful than the ordinary literary style used by native writers. While poor handling by a translator can render a Chinese translation awkward or clumsy, when skillfully executed, the translational register becomes vivid rather than stiff, elegant rather than awkward. Chinese translational prose not only contributes significantly to Literature in Chinese but also to world literature.

Because Chinese literary translation can be so impressive—even surpassing some native literary creations—it ought to be recognized and encouraged as an important component of both Literature in Chinese and New Literature in Chinese. For example, *Hamlet*—while undoubtedly a work of English literature—when rendered into Chinese, produces texts in Chinese translational prose. Characters such as Hamlet, Claudius, and Ophelia, in Chinese, are not creations of Shakespeare nor of English literature, yet they read naturally and comfortably to Chinese readers. While such works cannot be classified as Chinese literature per se, they belong to the domain of Literature in Chinese. The original charm of these works does not diminish in Chinese; on the contrary, it can be enhanced.

When Chinese is used to render literary works such as Shakespeare's, the resulting poetic quality can surpass that of many native Chinese compositions. This represents a unique, precious, and highly inclusive capability of the Chinese language—a quality almost entirely overlooked under the gaze of comparative or world literature. Scholars often focus on the poor aesthetic effect of translating classical Chinese poetry into other languages, which can feel flat or lifeless. Yet when foreign poetry is translated into Chinese, many translations are unexpectedly exquisite. This owes much to the rich tradition of imagery in Chinese characters and language, which is exceptionally well-suited to producing deeply satisfying aesthetic experiences.

The linguistic and cultural richness of Chinese not only allows for the faithful translation of foreign literature but often generates unexpectedly beautiful effects. Even phonetic transliterations of foreign proper nouns into Chinese may acquire a

striking elegance. A well-known example is Florence, which Xu Zhimo rendered as 翡冷翠 (Feilengcui), a highly evocative and poetically resonant name. Other notable instances include Fontainebleau, rendered as 枫丹白露; carnival, translated as 嘉年华; the Champs-Élysées, rendered as 香榭丽舍; and the well-known automobile brand Benz, translated as 奔驰.

These Chinese transliterations are remarkable: they simultaneously convey the phonetic essence of the original while perfectly expressing its semantic and cultural connotations. Combined with the polysemy and imagery inherent in Chinese characters, the aesthetic and expressive richness of transliteration is further enhanced, producing a beauty and charm uniquely native to Chinese. Unfortunately, this distinctive allure of the Chinese translational register is rarely fully recognized or appreciated in the frameworks of comparative literature and world literature.

II. Literature in Chinese and Its Written Style

Even pioneers such as Lu Xun and Hu Shih did not recognize the blind spots mentioned above—regarding classical *wenyan*, the spoken vernacular, the written style, and the translational register—because they were deeply immersed in, and accustomed to, examining Chinese language and literature through the perspectives of world literature and comparative literature. These global and comparative frameworks tended to induce a pronounced sense of self-enclosure and anxiety in an ancient literary language like Chinese, especially regarding its traditional literature. They generated concern—and even fear—that Chinese literature might be inherently insular. From the vantage point of comparative literature or world literature, when Chinese Literature in Chinese appeared self-contained and inaccessible to the outside world, many Chinese intellectuals undoubtedly perceived it as lacking vitality, failing to meet the demands of the contemporary era, and facing a precarious future.

When vernacular writing and New Literature were being promoted, there were indeed voices of opposition tinged with this sense of insularity. Those who opposed the reforms were later labeled "feudal defenders of the Way," with Tomson Ku Hung-Ming (辜鸿铭) as a prominent example. Ku not only held deep admiration for traditional Chinese culture—becoming one of its staunchest defenders—but also expressed respect and support for Empress Dowager Cixi and the Qing dynasty she led.

The presence of Tomson Ku Hung-Ming, particularly on the campus of Peking University, was highly symbolic. It demonstrated that, even as Chinese culture was beginning to extend beyond its borders, it could still manifest tendencies of relative insularity. Tomson Ku Hung-Ming exemplified this paradox. With his profound mastery of both Chinese and Western learning, he could have served as a key intermediary, helping Chinese Literature and Chinese culture engage meaningfully with world literature and culture. Yet when he appeared at Red Building of Peking University—wearing a skullcap (a kind of cap resembling the rind of half a watermelon), a Yellow Riding Jacket, and a long braid—his strikingly distinctive appearance repeatedly reminded advocates of the New Culture Movement and practitioners of New Literature that, no matter how strong the momentum for Chinese culture to reach the world, forces of self-limitation and self-enclosure could always emerge.

Ku Hung-Ming had a profound understanding of world literature and world

culture, yet he remained immersed in and complacent about the perceived superiority of his own national culture. His presence served as a warning to the forward-looking advocates of the New Culture Movement, reminding them not to underestimate or ignore the forces of insularity. In response, radical New Literature writers and cultural scholars continuously urged the Chinese public to break free from attachment to tradition and engage with perspectives from world literature, comparative literature, world culture, and comparative culture. Many pioneers approached world literature and Western culture with deep reverence, precisely to prevent the Chinese from falling into self-enclosed patterns of national literature and culture.

In 1925, Lu Xun even made a statement that some considered extreme: "I think one should read fewer—or perhaps no—Chinese books, and read more foreign books." (Lu, 2005, p. 274)

He devoted considerable energy to studying, evaluating, and translating Russian literature, and even expressed high regard for the literary works of small, lesser-known nations abroad. Lu Xun overcame numerous obstacles to translate the Dutch author Frederik van Eeden's long fairy tale *De kleine Johannes*. Frederik van Eeden was primarily a physician and psychoanalyst who had participated in the Dutch literary movement of the 1880s but later abandoned literary writing, focusing entirely on the medical analysis of dreams. In a sense, he was not a professional writer, yet Lu Xun held him in the highest esteem.

In a famous letter to Tai Jingnong (台静农) in September 1927, discussing the suggestion that he might be considered for the Nobel Prize, Lu Xun wrote: "The Nobel Prize—Liang Qichao certainly does not deserve it, nor do I; to take this money would still be a debt of effort. Countless writers better than I do not receive it. Look at the *Little John* I translated; How could I possibly have written it? However, the author did not obtain it." (Lu, 2005, p. 73) In this private letter, Lu Xun made no pretense or formulaic statements. His praise for a relatively obscure foreign author and work was heartfelt and sincere. Within this sincerity, one sees the deep commitment of Lu Xun and many other great Chinese writers to a global horizon and to the values of world literature. From this perspective, creating in a Western language might appear more significant than writing in traditional Chinese. The New Culture Movement, the establishment of New Literature, and the broader literature revolution all aimed at engaging the world. Their value judgments were based on whether they could help overcome the cultural barriers of traditional Chinese and ultimately establish a place for Chinese literature within the context of world literature.

In modern China, few people were willing to devote their lives to upholding tradition as Tomson Ku Hung-Ming did. Most supported traditional Chinese culture to some extent, but more importantly, they endorsed the idea that China should leverage its cultural strengths to engage with the world, embracing the correctness and superiority of a global perspective and comparative-literary horizon. One prominent example is the Xueheng School (学衡派). Founded in Nanjing in 1922, *The Critical Review (学衡)* was established by some of China's earliest scholars of comparative literature. Core figures such as Wu Mi and Mei Guangdi were comparative literature students at Harvard University. Their backgrounds made it impossible for them to become, as Tomson Ku Hung-Ming did, obsessively attached to ancient Chinese traditions. While Wu Mi and others highly respected Chinese language and literary traditions, they simultaneously possessed a global and comparative-literary vision. Nearly every issue of *The Critical Review* combined reverence for Confucianism with enthusiastic promotion of Western literature.

The Xueheng School's attitude toward Chinese tradition was highly representative: respectful rather than servile. They treated Chinese tradition as a resource and a cultural belief to be acknowledged and valued, but never as an absolute

standard to be rigidly imitated or followed. The Xueheng School should not be seen as the adversary of New Literature in Chinese or the New Culture; rather, it should be understood as both a companion and a balancing force—aligned with, yet critically engaging, the development of New Literature in Chinese and New Culture.

On the path of modern China's engagement with the world, three representative cultural forces can be distinguished, each with its own characteristics: The first force is represented by the "feudal defenders of the Way," who sincerely and steadfastly uphold traditional culture. Even when exposed to world culture, they are willing to reject it entirely. This force embodies insularity. The second force is exemplified by the Xueheng School, which reveres traditional culture without rigidly following it, and approaches foreign culture with openness and appreciation—neither self-abasing nor insular. The third force is represented by figures like Lu Xun, who, adopting a posture akin to that of a student toward foreign literature and culture, approach Chinese culture and literature with a thoroughly global perspective and a comparative-literary horizon, remaining highly sensitive and vigilant against insularity.

In the society of the time, the more a cultural force leaned toward insularity and ethnocentric closure, the less influence it held. Conversely, the more a force actively opposed tradition and strove to overcome cultural barriers by establishing a world-literary perspective, the more likely it was to gain public support. For this reason, the Xueheng School had much less influence compared to Lu Xun and similar figures. In this sense, New Literature in Chinese and the New Cultural tradition, equipped with perspectives from world and comparative literature, held a clear temporal advantage and occupied the dominant cultural high ground of that era.

Several issues regarding the written style of Chinese merit close attention and study. One important background factor is the influence of Japanese culture on China after the Meiji Restoration in the 1860s, a topic widely discussed in recent scholarship. Japan's impact on Chinese culture was profound, manifesting in several ways: Many Western cultural and intellectual resources in the Chinese New Culture Movement were introduced to China via Japan; A considerable number of pioneers of New Culture and New Literature had studied in Japan; Several literary mechanisms in China were directly modeled on Japanese systems. For example, the establishment of Chinese literature as an academic discipline in universities was influenced by Japanese and Russian models, and the study of Chinese literary history domestically was stimulated by Japanese scholarship on Chinese literature. Similarly, the editorial and publication practices of Chinese newspapers and magazines were largely modeled on Japanese examples. From the late 19th to the mid-20th century, *Shun Pao* (申报), China's most influential newspaper at the time, adopted a layout directly modeled on Japanese newspapers. Liang Qichao's (梁启超) periodicals, such as *Shiwubao* (时务报) and *Sein Min Choong Bou* (新民丛报), also imitated Japanese formats. Additionally, many terms used in the New Culture and New Literature movements, as well as in broader social discourse, were first rendered in Chinese to Japanese and then reintroduced into China, leading some scholars to suggest that without Japan, the emergence and development of New Culture in China might have been delayed for years.

A more accurate and objective perspective, however, recognizes that many Chinese characters used by Japan to translate Western literary and cultural terms were already part of the Chinese linguistic repertoire—terms such as 革命 (revolution), 可惜 (regrettable), 政府 (government), 纪律 (discipline), 宗旨(purpose), 契约

(contract), 宗教 (religion), and 阶级 (class). Their meanings were clear and precise, even if they had fallen out of frequent use in China. When the Japanese employed these characters to translate corresponding Western concepts, in a sense, they reactivated and revitalized these lexical items. From this viewpoint, Japan indeed played a pioneering cultural role, but it simultaneously "fed back" to Chinese culture by reinvigorating these ancient terms.

It is well known that while Japan has its own language, for a long period, its written language relied heavily on Chinese characters. Classical Chinese remained the primary written medium, while Japan's indigenous language was primarily oral. Even today, some Japanese scholars of traditional culture still consider writing in Chinese characters elegant—a practice reminiscent of the Chinese use of *wenyan*. Chinese characters formed Japan's literary or "elegant" written system, whereas kana (hiragana and katakana) constituted the spoken vernacular system. When large amounts of Western cultural resources were introduced to Japan, the only script suitable for translation was Chinese characters. While the native Japanese script had its advantages, it could not easily accommodate foreign words. Katakana was used for phonetic transcription of foreign terms, but Chinese characters remained the preferred solution whenever possible. Here, Chinese demonstrates remarkable adaptability: whether by using existing words or by creatively recombining characters, it can seamlessly transform any foreign term into a native expression. For example, a *computer* becomes 电脑 (*diànnǎo*)—a wholly Chinese expression that also contains a rhetorical description of the concept. By contrast, the Japanese struggles to achieve the same elegance and must render it phonetically as コンピュータ (*konpyūta*).

After the Meiji Restoration, while Japan had already opened its doors to the West, China still had very limited exposure to the outside world. Japan's role as a cultural pioneer and its positive influence on China should certainly be acknowledged. However, it is equally important to recognize that, in terms of cultural feedback, the Japanese made very beneficial use of existing Chinese linguistic resources, borrowing and expanding them in productive ways. To overemphasize Japan's contribution—arguing that without the Japanese, the emergence and development of China's New Culture would have been delayed by many years—is fundamentally mistaken.

As long as the Chinese could access and engage with Western cultural resources, translating related concepts and terminology into Chinese posed no real difficulty. Chinese possesses extraordinarily deep resources, sufficient to develop a distinctive translational register. Its capacity for regeneration and integration is virtually immeasurable. When confronted with the challenge of translating Western cultural and literary terms, the Chinese exhibit remarkable adaptability, far surpassing the Japanese. Both phonetic transcription and semantic translation can be handled skillfully, giving Chinese speakers ample reason for pride. Moreover, the Chinese willingness to adopt and utilize translations developed first by the Japanese reflects a characteristic openness and inclusiveness inherent to Chinese culture. Across its history, Chinese has never rejected foreign terms from any era or background. On the contrary, it has consistently demonstrated the ability to assimilate them, integrating them with existing linguistic resources in a way that renders them even more vivid and aesthetically refined than their original forms.

By contrast, Japanese exhibits certain limitations, especially in introducing Western resources while adapting Chinese cultural elements. For instance, the term 党 (*dǎng*, "party") is now commonly understood in the political sense largely because the Japanese used it to classify political factions. Yet in Chinese, 党 originally carried a strongly negative connotation. In its traditional form 黨, the bottom component of the character is "black" (黑), and whether judged by visual form or phonetic sense, 党

was neither a neutral nor a positive term. Its use by the Japanese, likely due to a weaker intuitive sense of Chinese semantics, shifted its meaning. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the term was highly pejorative, and calling someone a 党 was almost an insult. This example illustrates the inherent limitations faced by non-native Chinese speakers when employing the language.

III. The Role of ISM and the Achievements of New Literature in Chinese

Within the context of New Literature in Chinese and Chinese culture, the perspectives of world culture and world literature provided profound intellectual cultivation and inspiration for China's modern cultural pioneers. Among these ideas, one concept had an almost universal influence on New Literature in Chinese writers. Originally a conceptual term, it evolved in practice into a method of thinking—an extremely important intellectual resource for understanding and managing literature and culture in China amid globalization. This concept is "-ism", or ISM. "ISM" originated as a political term in the West, but in China, it became most active and influential in literature and culture, including realism, romanticism, naturalism, and so on. Chinese writers adopted ISM with great frequency and skill, and the term underwent a process of highly positive valorization.

In its Western context, ISM carries connotations of restriction. When someone is closely associated with a particular "-ism," it signals that their thinking is constrained or defined by that ideology. While not necessarily pejorative, being labeled as a follower of a certain "-ism" is far from an unequivocal compliment—it implies the person is bound or limited by the doctrine. From an etymological standpoint, the original Western ISM is therefore negatively inflected and sometimes even carries a hint of ridicule. This is very different from the way ISM was received in China. Once introduced, ISM was immediately recast as highly positive, and in Chinese literary, cultural, academic, political, and social discourse, ISM became a primary marker of cultural expression, aspiration, and identity. Almost every concept associated with a "-ism" was affirmed, praised, and regarded positively.

In modern China, ISMs with originally neutral or even slightly negative connotations were comprehensively valorized, making a significant contribution to world language and world culture in the context of New Literature in Chinese. ISM thus became a high-level cultural identifier and a symbol of relatively positive cultural values. Particularly in literature, movements such as realism, romanticism, classicism, and modernism were all embraced positively, except that classicism, due to its historical context, carried some negative connotations. Linguistic and cultural comparison on this point is highly worthwhile.

The dominant literary orientation of New Literature in Chinese was realism. Leading figures such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shih, Shen Yanbing (沈雁冰), and Lu Xun strongly endorsed realism, then often called "Literalism" (写实主义). Realism was revered as the mainstream direction for literary development, providing enormous guidance for 20th-century New Literature in Chinese. By contrast, consider the view of the great Danish literary critic Georg Brandes in *Main Currents in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, where he characterized 19th-century European literary trends largely as romanticism. In Brandes's treatment, "romanticism" is not entirely appreciative; he uses the term descriptively rather than approvingly. For example, Balzac, widely recognized in Chinese contexts as a representative of critical realism,

is positioned by Brandes under the rubric of romanticism. In *The Romantic School in France*, Brandes devotes a substantial discussion to Balzac, noting that:
"He paid the utmost respect to aristocratic politics, holding it in the highest esteem; in his eyes, noble-born, pampered, beautiful women were the flowers of humanity… Balzac depicted the beauties of the Saint-Germain suburb with forgiving strokes and flattering hues." (Brandes, 1982, pp. 207-208)

Regarding modern civilization, Brandes writes,

> The title of *Les Illusions Perdues* bears the hallmark of Balzac. In a sense, it could be said to serve as the title for his entire body of work. Yet no other of his works encapsulates his attitude towards modern civilization so perfectly. (Brandes, 1982, 226)

> He delighted in mocking the people, democracy, liberal politics, the upper and lower houses, and parliamentary institutions from the perspective of Church- and autocracy-centered superiority. (Brandes, 1982, p. 235)

This aligns closely with Marx's critique of Balzac: he observed emerging bourgeois society with strong prejudice, despised newly wealthy upstarts, and sympathized primarily with isolated, impoverished members of the old aristocracy. In Brandes's view, the sympathy for the declining aristocracy and the critique of the rise of capitalism constitute romanticism.

For the entire 20th-century history of New Literature in Chinese, realism was the absolute leading force and the unquestioned mainstream. Realism dominated the literary development of every period in China: wartime realism during China's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, proletarian realism—or dialectical-materialist realism—during the Period of the League of Leftist Writers, and, of course, the May Fourth period. After the founding of the People's Republic, realism's position became even more unshakable. Thus, realism consistently remained the dominant trend. Claims that the mainstream of Chinese literature is romanticism are clearly biased and overlook historical evidence.

The mainstream of realism in New Literature in Chinese was entirely built upon the perspectives of Western literature, world literature, and comparative literature. It was precisely because of this world-literary vision and comparative-literary insight that realism became the absolute mainstream of Chinese New Literature for over a century. Moreover, realism in this tradition has three particularly important sources. The first one is French Realism. Chen Duxiu and Shen Yanbing placed great emphasis on realism, as represented by Émile Zola. In most literary histories, Zola is regarded as both a realist and a naturalist. His French naturalism introduced a form of writing with naturalist tendencies, yet capable of reproducing life with extremely detailed realism. This method of writing is reflected in the works of Mao Dun (茅盾) and Li Jieren (李劼人). The second source lies in a creative tendency emphasizing the depiction of personal psychological experiences and the portrayal of individual lives, led primarily by Japanese writers and exemplified by the Japanese I-novel. This influence was particularly strong on writers such as Guo Moruo (郭沫若) and Yu Dafu(郁达夫). Some scholars have incorrectly labeled intensely personal works like *Degradation* (沉沦) as romanticist; in reality, these works are psychological realism shaped by the Japanese I-novel tradition. The third source, Russian realism, was perhaps the most influential. Highly admired by Lu Xun, it occupied a dominant position in 20th-century China and emphasized the representation of life as well as literature's critical engagement with human existence. Writers such as Gogol, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky exemplify this tradition. Their works often interrogate the soul and

critique the human psyche, with strong critical realism and social consciousness.

In short, from the perspectives of world literature and comparative literature, realism was the absolute mainstream in New Literature in Chinese. In any period, "realism" was a positively connoted term. Once the three sources of realism in New Literature in Chinese are fully recognized, there is little room for other "-isms" to challenge or complicate this judgment.

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