

# “Repressed Modernity” and the Turn of Literary History to the “Modernity” Model

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## Abstract

With the introduction of “modernity” in the 1990s, the limitation of the “modernized” model was exposed and finally replaced; thus the new turn of literary history research models from the “modernized” model to the “modernity” one has been started. Li Oufan and David Der-wei Wang’s discussion about the “modernity of the late Qing Dynasty” had a huge influence on academic circles in mainland China, after which, lots of mainland scholars began to study the literature of late Qing Dynasty from the angle of “modernity”, broadening the narrative range of modern literary history and renewing the research perspectives. The writer takes the example of Li Oufan and David Der-wei Wang to study the turn of literary history to the “Modernity” Model.

## Keywords

Modernity, Research Model, Literature

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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, there has been an internally dialectical development in the overseas research on Chinese Modern and Contemporary Literature, which has made outstanding achievements. At the same time, the research model of literary history in mainland China has also turned constantly. On the one hand, each turn of the research model can’t be separated from the overseas influences. On the other hand, the overseas research pedigree of Chinese modern and contemporary literature has not developed alone but “starts with its incomplete identity to the mainland discourse tradition” (Li, 2011). We can say that, at the time of dramatic changes in history, with the close interaction between the home and abroad, there has developed a dynamic relation of confrontation and interlocu-

tion, a relation of both dialectics and complementation; therefore, the several turns of literature history research models in mainland China have been promoted: from the revolutionary model to the modernized model, and then to the model of modernity with some internal divisions.

The first turn started from the revolutionary model to the modernized model, rooted deeply in not only the profound historical turn of the history of China but also the influence overseas. China was experiencing a time of a profound historical transformation in the 1980s, ranging from the class struggle to the modern construction, from “revolutionary” narrative to “modernized” narrative. If we say that Chinese intellectual circles’ “modernized” narrative in 1980s, also called “new-enlightenment” narrative, was influenced by American “modernization theories” directly or indirectly and took part in the spreading and reproducing process of the “modernized” theories (He, 2010), as for the turn of literary history research models specifically, one of its most important practical and theoretical origins was from *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction* of Xia Zhiqing, a Chinese-American scholar. Although the mainland edition of the book wasn’t published until 2005, its English, Taiwan and Hong Kong editions had come into view for mainland intellectuals.

The second turn refers to the one to “modernity”. If we say that the construction of the “modernized” model in the 1980s is directly related to the aesthetic enlightenment of Xia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, then the turning of the literary history research model to “modernity” was mainly from the promotion and influence of overseas scholars after Xia Zhiqing. Li Oufan and David Der-wei Wang are the most famous representatives. Taking the examples of Li Oufan and David Der-wei Wang, the paper tries to demonstrate the turn of Literary History to the “Modernity” Model.

## 2. Social and Literary Background of the Turn

Some scholars call the turn to modernity a “gorgeous turn-back” (Zhang, 2009) and we are still in the process of that turn-back on the way to the “modernity” model. It is absolutely not just a makeover of concepts but has implied the turning of the visual field in literary history: from “the pursuit of modernization” to “the reflection on modernity” (Kuang, 2013). With an internal tension conflict, a wide content, a complicated form and twists and turns, the “modernity” has become a very inclusive concept which is the dominant clue of the new literary history narrative. Ever since the 1990s, the concept of “modernity” has been increasingly expanded and extremely prevailing. Just as Wen Rumins pointed, since the 1990s, “modernity” has become a governing concept. Whether it is the research on culture or on intellectual history, the visual field of “modernity” has always been adopted. For example, the mutual conflicting and dependent relation between “modernity” and “anti-modernity” and the concept taking literature as the “national allegory” have become the logical starting point of the literary history rewriting and tended to subvert the old research patterns and habits

with a “grand narrative” attitude (Wen et al., 2005).

If we say that the construction of the “modernized” model in the 1980s is directly related to the aesthetic enlightenment of Xia’s *A History of Modern Chinese Fiction*, then the turning of the literary history research model to “modernity” was mainly from the promotion and influence of overseas scholars after Xia Zhiqing. David Der-wei Wang has pointed that the overseas scholars’ “the discussion on ‘modernity’ is one of the most important achievements in the field of Chinese modern literature research” (Wang, 2006). Liu Jianmei also said, “lots of research on Chinese modern literature in America recently can be seen as the result of questioning about modernity, especially the questioning about the internal connection between modernity and advance, innovation, revolution, enlightenment, national liberation, and so on, whose significance lies in its questioning about the literature standard set up by the May fourth movement writers” (Liu, 2009). Although Wang and Liu pointed out the limitation of the “modernity”-related discussion hereafter, which was the neglect of the “historicity”, the following facts were told by both of them. For one thing, in the overseas research on Chinese modern literature, “modernity” has been the most outstanding general concept. For another, through the repeatedly questioning about “modernity”, overseas scholars have obtained numerous meaningful achievements. At the time of frequent interaction at home and abroad, the question of “modernity” has been introduced to mainland China, together with the related achievements. Whether to jump into borrowing something or to debate and blame fiercely, the overseas scholars’ discussion on Chinese modernity and the subsequent construction of Chinese modern and contemporary literary history have both constituted important references and had profound influence on the academic circle in mainland China.

### 3. “Modernized” and “Modernity”

The pursuit of “modernized” was the theme and consensus of the whole intellectual circle in the 1980s, while the coming of the 1990s welcomed “modernity” as the new trend in the cultural and ideological field. Zhang Yiwu (2005) believes that the key issue of Chinese ideology in the 1990s was about the exploration and divergence caused by “modernity”. At the same time, Li Yang also pointed that the concept of “modernity” had been really fashionable in the 1990s, and he told the difference between “modernized” and “modernity”: “modernized” belongs to modernism which is a positive concept, while “modernity” involves in the post-modernism, which is a reflective one. The changes and differences of concepts have shown the turning of the ideology in China, and the reflection and pursuit of “modernity” have encouraged a new process to rewrite the literary history.

Just as most of the scholars have said, the introduction of overseas study on Chinese modern literature is the key reason for the replacement of “modernized” by “modernity”, which has become the key word and academic model in

the field of Chinese modern literature study (Li, 2011).

## 4. Li Oufan and David Der-wei Wang's Studies on "Modernity"

### 4.1. Li Oufan: The First One to Introduce "Modernity"

Define Li Oufan, the first one to introduce "modernity" into Chinese modern literature research, took the lead and generalized that the overall trend of the Chinese literature from 1895 to 1927 was "the pursuit of modernity". He is famous and praised for the research on the "modernity" of Chinese literature and culture, who has achieved great success and made a wide influence at home. He borrowed the idea of "two types of modernity" from Matei Calinescu as the framework of interpretation. One type of modernity is the "modernity of history", evolved from the enlightenment and industrial revolution, which refers to the "rationalized" process of the society, politics and economy and has an optimistic attitude towards the technological development and rational progress. The other type, the "modernity of aesthetics", which is the rebellion, isolation and negation against the former one, originated from the Romantic Movement and led to the subsequent Modern Movement. In Li's opinion, the "literary revolution", the "revolutionary literature" and even the "contemporary literature" are all controlled by the modernity of history, while others such as the "decadent" narrative of the "New Sensational School" and Eileen Chang's desolate aesthetic have formed a confrontation against the modernity of history and developed into an opposite idea to the process of enlightenment and revolution, which is the modernity of aesthetics. He thinks that being transformed by the May 4th Movement, in which the modernity of history, humanitarianism, reformism, revolutionary ideas and nationalism were added, the modernity of history has turned into dominant values, which must be kept in mind by "literature and art" (Li, 2010). However, realism, as a narrative mode of novels, was considered to be the best way to express the modernity of history, so it was highly valued, became the main trend, even dominated the period, and was regarded to be more valuable than the other literary forms. By contrast, the modernity of aesthetics suffered a repression, which signified an inadequate reflection on the modernity of history, forming an ideology and historical burden, becoming a "monologue" discourse mode. The modernity of history dominated not only the trend of Chinese modern literary history but also its mainstream narratives in mainland China. As for the study on the mainland China, Li Oufan held an opposite attitude on purpose, devoting to explore the repressed modernity of aesthetics. He adopted a "marginal view", keeping a distance away from the mainland—the "center" and "mainstream"—and started all over again with a distinct insight and method to see the marginalized of the literary history and its system clearly and to subvert and discriminate against the mainstream narrative. Just as what he said, "for so many years, I have attempted to 'surpass' the realistic and revolutionary mainstream in the mainland academic circles" (Li, 2010).

Therefore, his study emphasized on romanticism and modernism. He explored the “emotional process” in the realism of literary history, tracked the ups and downs of the “romantic generation of Chinese modern writers” and brought out the romantic literary system. At the same time, he still rambled about the beauty and inspiration of “decadence”, from the dispirited beauty of *A Dream in Red Mansions* to the dark side of Lu Xun, the decadence of Yu Dafu and Shanghai urban literature in the 1930s, having the “decadent” realistic tradition “come to the surface of the history”.

#### 4.2. David Der-wei Wang: A Stimulating and Controversial Model

Compared with Li Oufan, David Der-wei Wang’s ideas about the “modernity of the late Qing Dynasty” are more stimulating and more controversial, among which, the put-forward of “repressed modernity” and the startling assertion that “if there were not the late Qing Dynasty, where would the ‘May 4th’ come from?” have got huge echoes in mainland China up to now. It can be said that “after ‘rewriting literary history’ in the 1980s and ‘the 20th Century Chinese literature’, there have seldom been a proposition in Chinese modern literature research discussed so often as David Der-wei Wang’s idea that if there were not the late Qing Dynasty, where would the ‘May 4th’ come from?” (Li, 2006). David Der-wei Wang has not only broken the “May 4th” origin theory as Li Oufan and dated the pursuit of modernity back to the late Qing Dynasty, but given a literary history significance to the literature of the late Qing Dynasty, which was considered to be broader and richer, far more various and energetic with more complexity, creativity and more experimentality and lead to a “multiple modernity”. In his opinion, the “May 4th” literature revolution is just a “unitary modernity”, so it is not a great beginning of Chinese literary modernity but a narrowing of the modernity in the late Qing Dynasty, which has repressed the multiple modernity of the late Qing Dynasty with its dominant model and shielded a more complicated and varied possibility. On the one hand, David Der-wei Wang shared the same idea with Xia Zhiqing and Li Oufan to belittle the “obsession with China” tradition after the “May 4th” and criticize modern writers’ obsession with the “modernity of history” and preference for realism. He thinks that they suppressed far more abundant literary practice and hindered the art of literature from becoming mature. On the other hand, he was still dissatisfied, so a further step was taken to tell us that the energetic art practice and various faces of modernity had shown up in the late Qing Dynasty, highly colorful and complicated, not as unitary as the “May 4th” one, unfortunately, they didn’t get enough development and were repressed. Wang thinks that as the present readers, although we cannot change the “already” trend of the history but we can “imagine” the multiple “possibility” of the late Qing Dynasty. “These hidden trends, if were once practiced, would make our assessment on the modernity of Chinese literature suddenly clear” (Wang, 2005). That is to say, the “imagination” about the hidden and repressed modernity helps us get out of the “May

4th” pattern, break through the mainstream discussion about the “May 4th” in mainland China and see “another charming face of Chinese modern literature” in a new horizon. Therefore, David Der-wei Wang has questioned the traditional mainland narrative of modern literary history to invite us to revalue the modernity of Chinese literature, “We must ask ourselves when we are revaluing the modernity of Chinese literature, whether we are still stuck in the ‘May 4th’ model and ignorant of the colorful world except it”.

## 5. Conclusion

Both Li Oufan’s delineation of the “modernity of aesthetics” and David Der-wei Wang’s construction of the “modernity of the late Qing Dynasty” tend to subvert the “center” from the “margin”, which can be regarded as an exploration and manifestation of the “repressed modernity” and an important approach of overseas study on Chinese modern literature—to revalue the mainstream narrative of literary history, to question the grand narrative and expose its repressed mechanism, and at the same time, to rediscover what has been repressed by the grand narrative. In the conversations and communication between the academic circles at home and abroad, the “repressed modernity” is put forward by the overseas academic circle to counter the mainstream and centralized narrative mainly refers to that of literary history in mainland China, and the latter one is considered to be the unitary “center” and the repressed mechanism which needs to self-criticize. Indeed, the overseas study full of new ideas has its blind areas; however, it has also found out the blind spots of the study in mainland China and pointed out where the rigidity and parochialism lie, which generally forms complementarity and dialectics with the mainland, thereby helping the diversity of modernity and complexity of the history emerge (Wang, 2005).

It is the scholars above who look into the interaction in the field of Chinese literature between the home and abroad. The writer wants to say that although the sound from overseas may form another kind of shield, which is hard to avoid bringing in something full of attraction and illusion, it shows more possibilities in the field of imagination and narration, and we have to make conversations with it over and over again, working hard on both the translation, study and localization of Sinology overseas.

The main drawback of the paper is that it doesn’t involve the fierce debate on “Sinophone” between home and abroad in recent years. As a new project, Sinophone Studies has attracted much attention in the field of Chinese literature study overseas and also initiated a complex echo in the academic circle in mainland China, which brings in a dramatically theoretical challenge to the nation-state model which has dominated the study on Chinese modern literature history in China for a long time. At present, the spread of Sinophone Studies is still growing, and the influence and divergence brought by it is still to be seen. Meanwhile, how the academic circle in China treats the theories of Sinophone Studies is also the same. Chinese researchers are supposed to face the uniqueness

and impact of Sinophone properly, so it is for the differences and conversations between home and abroad. Instead of considering it as something unkind, we should communicate with each other actively to break through the limitations respectively and get enlightenment and amendment for each other. As we can see, Sinophone system cannot replace the nation-state model for the time being, while the new conception and impact brought by it can provide an enlightening direction of amendment for the nation-state model and can encourage Chinese scholars to reconsider the relation between literature and nation.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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