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Not peer-reviewed version

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Posted Date: 13 March 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202503.0969.v1

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Article

A Brief Discussion on the Russian and Soviet Literature Influence on the Chinese-ness of Modern Chinese Literature

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Abstract: This study examines the transformation of modern Chinese literary discourse following the May Fourth Movement's repudiation of Confucianism, focusing on the substantial influence of Russian literature. Through the lens of Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, it analyzes how Chinese intellectuals, particularly prominent translators like Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Yu Dafu, assimilated Russian literary models during the formative stage of modern Chinese literature. The research demonstrates how the translation and adaptation of works by Chekhov, Turgenev, and Tolstoy led to the displacement of traditional Chinese characteristics by Russian literary elements in both form and creative conceptualization. Employing an indirect methodological approach, the study investigates the absence of Chinese-ness in modern literary texts through the interpretation of Russian influences, offering insights into the complex process of literary modernization in China.

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Introduction

Since the repudiation of Confucianism (traditional culture) during the May Fourth Movement, traditional Chinese literary theory has experienced significant marginalization [1]. This phenomenon can be attributed to the New Culture Movement's comprehensive rejection of the classical Chinese discourse system and traditional cultural paradigms. In the urgent endeavor to establish a new literary discourse system, Chinese intellectuals primarily focused on assimilating advanced Western literary theories. During the 1920s, the Soviet Union provided significant financial and military aid to the Kuomintang (KMT) in China, aiming to foster a revolutionary alliance against imperialist powers [2]. This objective undoubtedly facilitated the concurrent intellectual and cultural progressive movements, with Russian literature exerting the most substantial influence. As Feng observes, the adoption of Soviet literary models constituted the fundamental trajectory of Chinese literature during and after the May Fourth Movement, with translation activities playing an indispensable role in shaping literary production [3].

The majority of modern Chinese authors engaged in foreign literature translation during their formative years, driven by their exploration of and perplexity regarding the nascent discourse system of modern Chinese vernacular literature. Prominent among Russian literary translators were Lu Xun, Ba Jin, and Yu Dafu, whose translation efforts primarily focused on works by Chekhov, Turgenev, and Tolstoy. The stylistic elements of these Russian authors are markedly evident in the literary productions of these Chinese writers.

Drawing upon Israeli scholar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, when a literary system remains in its formative and developmental stages, translated literature assumes a central position, functioning as an innovative force that introduces new formal and substantive elements [4]. Consequently, modern Chinese writers, through their engagement with foreign literary translation, assimilated foreign writing techniques and styles, which they subsequently synthesized with Chinese

vernacular writing methods. This process resulted in the diminution of intrinsic Chinese characteristics within modern Chinese literary style. Particularly in terms of formal structures and creative conceptualization, Russian literary elements substantially displaced traditional Chinese characteristics within the writing discourse system.

While this study does not purport to define the precise nature of Chinese-ness in modern Chinese literature or identify its specific deficiencies, it endeavors to demonstrate the absence of Chinese characteristics through the interpretation of Russian elements in modern literary texts. This approach constitutes an indirect methodological strategy for examining the transformation of literary discourse in modern Chinese literature.

Discussion 1

A distinctive characteristic of Russian literature lies in its pioneering depiction of "the little man" (маленький человек), which serves as a vehicle for expressing compassion toward the struggles of the lower classes while simultaneously critiquing the social system through a distinctive aesthetic lens [5]. Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji" exemplifies this tradition through its vivid portrayal of a marginalized figure, thereby articulating a critique of traditional Chinese society. This representational approach marked a significant departure in Chinese literature, as feudal society, shaped by Confucian ideology, predominantly featured literati and scholar-officials as literary protagonists – individuals who were, at minimum, beneficiaries of Confucian thought, and to which class the authors themselves typically belonged.

Lu Xun's creation of a destitute character profoundly affected by the Confucian ideology of feudal society, whose tragic experiences serve to critique Confucianism's shortcomings, represents, to some extent, a manifestation of anti-Chinese-ness. This phenomenon can be attributed to Lu Xun's thorough assimilation of Russian literary characteristics. From an intertextual perspective, "Kong Yiji" demonstrates remarkable parallels with Chekhov's "The Man in a Case." Beyond their shared thematic focus on marginalized individuals, the characterizations reveal striking similarities. Kong Yiji, a scholar of classical Chinese, mirrors Belikov, a teacher of ancient Greek, in their shared pedantry and obstinacy – traits stemming from comparable intellectual contexts. This represents a characteristic identity conflict prevalent in Russian literature's portrayal of little people: individuals who, while belonging to the lower classes, paradoxically advocate for the feudal ruling class.

The symbolic representations in both works further reinforce this intertextual relationship. Kong Yiji's distinctive long gown and Belikov's characteristic case function as analogous symbols, representing the ideological constraints that bind their respective protagonists [6]. Narratively, both works employ a linear, character-centric structure with first-person narration. "Kong Yiji" unfolds through the perspective of a young waiter, while "The Man in a Case" utilizes the viewpoint of Belikov's colleague. Both narratives employ concise chapters to encapsulate the protagonists' lives, culminating in their deaths – a parable-like narrative technique characteristic of Chekhov's style and prominently adopted by Lu Xun in his early literary career.

Thematic parallels extend to specific plot elements as well. The scene in "Kong Yiji" where the protagonist engages in a debate about book theft with the tavern owner, serving as a critique of Confucian feudal ideology, finds its counterpart in Belikov's argument with Kovalenko regarding bicycle riding as a critique of Tsarist feudal ideology. This satirical realism, serving as a vehicle for social criticism, represents a fundamental function of Russian literature. Consequently, in terms of both thematic content and functional purpose, "Kong Yiji" manifests distinct Russian literary characteristics.

Discussion 2

Regrettably, modern Chinese literature initially became thoroughly imbued with Russian literary characteristics. However, this phenomenon was largely confined to the nascent stage of modern Chinese discourse formation. By the 1930s, the Russian influence manifested in modern

Chinese literature evolved into a more nuanced and sophisticated form, transcending mere stylistic imitation and beginning to synthesize with indigenous Chinese literary sensibilities, thereby revealing elements of authentic Chinese-ness. Among Chinese writers, Ba Jin demonstrated particular artistic affinity with Turgenev, successfully assimilating the Russian author's characteristic implicit yet profoundly emotive writing style [7].

Thematic analysis reveals significant intertextuality between Ba Jin's "Dog" and Turgenev's "Mumu." While Turgenev's work critiques social injustice and the oppression of the underprivileged through the emotional bond between Gerasim and his dog Mumu, Ba Jin addresses similar societal issues through a canine perspective. However, in terms of narrative construction, Ba Jin's transformation of a marginalized individual into a "dog" appears to draw inspiration from Bulgakov's satirical masterpiece "Heart of a Dog," which conversely depicts a dog's metamorphosis into a "little man." This sophisticated adaptation of Russian literary elements demonstrates Chinese writers' emerging capacity to develop distinctive satirical approaches to China's unique social issues, grounded in but not limited by Russian literary models.

Narratively, "The Dog" extensively employs interior monologue, a technique pioneered by Russian authors and subsequently developed into the stream-of-consciousness method, with Dostoevsky as its foremost exponent [8]. The protagonist's repeated supplication before a statue – "I kneel in front of the altar with tears in my eyes and pray: 'God, God as my father, please make me a dog, just like that white puppy'" – exemplifies this Russian-inspired psychological narrative technique. Such literary devices, emphasizing individualism and humanism, were largely absent in traditional Chinese literature and significantly contributed to the modern Chinese novel's role in fostering new intellectual paradigms in China.

The confessional monologues in "The Dog" bear striking resemblance to similar passages in Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," revealing another layer of Russian influence. Russian literature frequently incorporates consciousness of guilt and psychological alienation, often expressing sentiments of existential superfluity and religious estrangement at the socioliterary level [9]. The protagonist's self-identification as a dog in Ba Jin's work reflects both this Russian literary tradition and the author's critique of his own social class. This narrative approach, emphasizing authorial consciousness absent in traditional Chinese literature, significantly advanced the modernization of Chinese literary expression.

Furthermore, "The Dog" engages with the concept of nationality, a fundamental concern in Russian literature [8] that emerged from Soviet writers' attempts to redefine national identity following the Tsarist era. Ba Jin's juxtaposition of privileged white colonizers with oppressed yellow-skinned Chinese, paralleled by the opportunistic bystanders in "Kong Yiji," reflects this Russian-inspired exploration of national identity. This literary approach – whether seeking to establish new national identities or critique outdated national characteristics – fundamentally aligns with the discourse reconstruction objectives of China's New Culture Movement.

Discussion 3

A contrasting scholarly perspective contends that Chinese researchers have not substantiated conclusive evidence demonstrating the direct influence of Russian authors on prominent Chinese writers, primarily due to the absence of comparable primary sources in Russian [10]. This perspective is further reinforced by recent archival studies conducted by Wang, which reveal significant gaps in the documentation of Russian literary works circulating in China during the early 20th century, particularly in terms of their reception and interpretation by Chinese intellectuals [11]. It is crucial to differentiate that the Russian literary characteristics informing the reconstruction of modern Chinese literature were mediated through an emerging Chinese discourse system, albeit one that had not yet achieved systematic formulation. This mediation process, as argued by Zhang, created a unique hybrid literary form that combined foreign narrative techniques with indigenous cultural elements [12].

When literary texts undergo linguistic transposition, the inherent national ideology embedded within the target language inevitably modifies the original textual qualities. This phenomenon, known as "cultural refraction" in translation studies, is particularly evident in the Chinese translations of Russian literary works, which consequently manifested an abstract and nascent form of Chinese discourse, representing experimental ventures in vernacular Chinese writing [13]. The case of Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji" exemplifies this complex process of cultural adaptation and transformation.

Although "Kong Yiji" is composed entirely in vernacular Chinese, it retains certain pedantic stylistic elements. Huang's research substantiates that classical literary components were never entirely eradicated from Chinese literature during the 1920s [14]. This persistence of traditional elements, according to Chen's quantitative stylistic analysis, accounts for approximately 23% of the lexical and syntactic features in early modern Chinese literary works [15]. While "Kong Yiji" employs a Russian-derived narrative framework, its thematic focus remains firmly rooted in the critique of Confucian ideology, with its emphasis on the plight of the common people reflecting traditional Chinese humanistic values. S. Yakimova's analysis further corroborates that the reception of Russian culture in China occurred within the parameters of traditional Chinese cultural paradigms [16], a view supported by recent comparative studies showing that Chinese writers selectively appropriated foreign literary techniques while maintaining core cultural values.

This investigation into the Chinese-ness of modern literature reveals its inherently interdisciplinary nature, characterized by multicultural influences, traditional aesthetic sensibilities, and logical coherence. Essentially, the New Culture Movement may have directly established a new paradigm for modern Chinese literary identity, rendering excessive emphasis on foreign influences potentially reductive and unnecessary. This conclusion aligns with recent scholarship in postcolonial studies, which emphasizes the agency of local writers in shaping their literary traditions through selective adaptation of foreign influences [17]. The case of modern Chinese literature thus serves as a compelling example of how global literary exchanges can lead to the creation of distinctive national literatures rather than mere cultural derivatives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, modern Chinese literature emerged through a complex process of assimilation and adaptation of Russian literary models, reflecting a dynamic interplay between foreign influences and indigenous cultural traditions. Initially characterized by a significant displacement of traditional Chinese elements, it subsequently evolved to develop a distinctive modern Chinese identity, one that balanced innovation with cultural continuity. From a semiotic perspective, this transformation was fundamentally enabled by the continuity of Chinese characters and the enduring nature of Chinese cultural ideology, which served as a stabilizing force amidst the influx of foreign literary forms. The Chinese writing system, with its deep historical and cultural connotations, allowed for the reinterpretation of traditional values within modern frameworks, while the persistence of themes such as humanism and social critique ensured that foreign influences were adapted to address local concerns.

The translation of Russian literary works by modern Chinese authors constituted an interactive learning process, facilitating the gradual organic synthesis of Russian literary characteristics with emerging modern Chinese sensibilities. This process was not a passive imitation but an active recontextualization, as seen in works like Lu Xun's "Kong Yiji," where Russian narrative structures were employed to critique Confucian ideology and explore the plight of the common people. Such adaptations highlight the agency of Chinese writers in reshaping foreign models to reflect their own cultural and social realities. This evolutionary process ultimately fostered the development of a unique literary discourse in modern Chinese literature, one that balanced global influences with local traditions.

Such a developmental trajectory aligns with the inherent linguistic principles governing the establishment of new discourse systems, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between continuity and

change. The synthesis of foreign and domestic elements in modern Chinese literature underscores its dual nature as both a product of global exchange and a reflection of local agency. By navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, Chinese writers not only reshaped their literary heritage but also contributed to the broader narrative of global literary modernization, demonstrating how cultural adaptation can lead to the creation of innovative and hybrid literary forms.

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