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The Subversion of Modernity and Socialism in Mu Shiyong's Early Fiction

By Christopher Rosenmeier

Abstract: Mu Shiyong's first short story collection, *Nanbeiji* from 1932, is usually seen as socialist or proletarian literature preceding his later modernist writings. I argue that this view needs to be revised. In one short story Mu deliberately parodies the social agenda of contemporary leftist writers. The protagonists are neither enlightened workers nor victims of social injustice. On the contrary, they turn to rage, misogyny, and self-righteous violence, and their motives are based on sexual frustrations and inability to cope with modern life. Their righteous ideals are based on fiction and imagined tradition. Mu's construction of fictive tradition plays an important part in these early short stories, and I compare them with Shi Zhecun's writings in this respect.

Mu Shiyong 穆時英 (1912–1940) is mostly known today for his modernist short stories from the 1930s in which Shanghai is portrayed as the center of vice, glamour and corruption with its sophisticated coffee shops, dance halls and alluring femmes fatales. His writing experiments with fragmented, expressionist narrative styles and novel typographical setups representing a whirling and disjointed experience of the metropolis. Yet these are Mu's later works, and they do not represent the type of writing with which Mu Shiyong originally made his name.

Mu Shiyong's first short stories were put together and published in the collection *Nanbeiji* 南北極 (*North Pole, South Pole*) in January 1932. The precocious author was still only nineteen.¹ By this time, Mu had already received a certain level of recognition in literary circles, and one of these short stories had been published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (*The Short Story Magazine*), the prestigious New Culture Movement journal. *Nanbeiji* contained five short stories initially, but it was expanded to eight in a second edition the following year. Other short story collections followed in quick succession, such as *Gongmu* 公墓 (*Public Cemetery*, 1933) and *Baijin de nüti suxiang* 白金的女體塑像 (*Statue of a Platinum Woman*, 1934).² Mu became known in literary circles as a dashing young man who lived a glamorous modern life, enjoying the pleasures of the dance halls and coffee houses, much like the personas in his later short stories.³

The early short stories in *Nanbeiji* are rarely studied more than cursorily, and this is a sad oversight since they present much interesting material, as well as indicating how the young

¹ Li Jin 李今, "Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian" 穆時英年譜簡編, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 2005 (6), p. 243.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 237–268.

³ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, p. 305.

author related to the highly politicized literary field of the time. They are mostly described as leftist or proletarian without much further detail, and I argue here that they are far more complex than these labels imply. Indeed, I believe they presented a challenge to contemporary precepts of socialist literature. Already in these works, Mu was presenting radical portrayals of clashes between modernity, tradition, and literature. While my analysis focuses mainly on close readings of the short stories, I also take a brief look at some critical reviews from the time and compare with the fiction of Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 (1905–2003). Shi's role is worth exploring further, since the two authors worked closely together, and Shi had a profound influence on Mu's literary outlook.

Studies

Mu Shiyong is usually mentioned alongside Shi Zhecun and Liu Na'ou 劉呐鷗 (1900–1939) as a “New Perceptionist” (*xin ganjue pai* 新感覺派) writer.⁴ Together, the three authors have come to be seen as the foremost writers of modernist fiction in Republican Shanghai. This wave of interest in the modernist writers this period follows Yan Jiayan's 嚴家炎 seminal study of New Perceptionist writing in the mid-1980s.⁵ Scholars in both China and in the West have followed, often reading Mu's writings in a socioeconomic context reflecting Shanghai's modernity and unique political status. For example, Shu-mei Shih employs a postcolonial theoretical framework in her readings of his work, demonstrating how Mu Shiyong's short stories can be understood as a critique of modern capitalism.⁶ As she notes, the “male protagonist is often a tired urban man caught in the commodity logic of capitalism from which he cannot escape.”⁷ Similarly, Leo Ou-fan Lee largely reads Mu Shiyong's works within the context of Shanghai's history and development.⁸ To some extent, such studies see Mu's writings as a consequence of their settings, replete with jai alai courts, coffee houses, race tracks, and gambling halls. When Mu's writings are viewed principally as the result of trends of history and society, his relation to the literary scene is somewhat overlooked. His literary style becomes a natural extension of the city's political and social characteristics.

As mentioned, Mu Shiyong's early works have mostly been presented as variously “realist”, “leftist”, and “proletarian”. Yingjin Zhang writes that Mu's early works were “hailed as

⁴ *Zhongguo wenxue da cidian* 中國文學大辭典, s.v. “Xin ganjue pai” 新感覺派, vol. 8, p. 6070.

⁵ Yan Jiayan 嚴家炎, “Lue tan Shi Zhecun de xiaoshuo” 略談施蛰存的小說, in Ying Guojing 應國靖 (ed.), *Zhongguo xiandai zuojia xuanji: Shi Zhecun* 中國現代作家選集: 施蛰存, p. 309.

⁶ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, p. 303.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁸ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, p. 211 ff.

important contributions to ‘proletarian literature’.”⁹ Shu-mei Shih sees the five short stories in *Nanbeiji* as “groundbreaking exercises in proletarian fiction”.¹⁰ Liu Jianmei calls them “proletarian realism”.¹¹ According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, contemporary leftist critics saw his later fiction with urban settings as “a process of moral regression”.¹² Yan Jiayan also finds that Mu’s modernist stage began with *Gongmu*.¹³

Thus Mu Shiyong’s oeuvre can supposedly be divided into two distinct phases: the early proletarian period and the later modernist period. It is also implied with this division that his later works are far more radical, experimental, and contentious, whereas his earlier writings conformed more to the expectations of the highly politicized literary field at the time. There is a subtext here that his early writings are perhaps less original, less interesting, than his later modernist experiments. Indeed, Mu style did change dramatically in the period, and this was noted already in 1933 by Du Heng 杜衡 (1907–1964) (also known as Su Wen 蘇汶) who remarked that *Gongmu* (*Public cemetery*, 1933) was completely different in style from the earlier works in *Nanbeiji*.¹⁴ But a closer look reveals that while Mu’s early short stories indeed are quite different, they cannot be simply classified as leftist or realist.

Debut in La Nouvelle Littérature

Mu Shiyong’s first published works were to be found in a fairly minor literary journal run by Shi Zhecun and a group of his friends. This group had been established a few years earlier when Shi had formed *Lan she* 蘭社 (the Orchid Society) together with Dai Wangshu 戴望舒 (1905–1950) and Du Heng 杜衡. They edited two journals, *Yingluo xunkan* 瓔珞旬刊 (*Pearl Necklace Trimonthly*) and later *Wugui lieche* 無軌列車 (*Trackless Train*) with Liu Na’ou.¹⁵ In 1929, Shi Zhecun, Liu Na’ou, Dai Wangshu, and Xu Xiacun 徐霞村 (1907–1986) started a monthly journal, *Xin wenyi* 新文藝 (*La Nouvelle Littérature*), containing modernist works and various translations from Western and Japanese literature. The journal also eventually took a leftist stance on political issues under the influence of Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰 (1907–1976)

⁹ Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film: Configurations of Space, Time, & Gender*, p. 160.

¹⁰ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937*, p. 307.

¹¹ Jianmei Liu, *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women’s Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003, p. 147.

¹² Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, p. 192.

¹³ Yan Jiayan 嚴家炎, Introduction to *Xin ganjue pai xiaoshuo xuan* 新感覺派小說選, p. 13.

¹⁴ Li Jin 李今, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian” 穆時英年譜簡編, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 2005 (6), p. 247.

¹⁵ Shi Zhecun 施蛰存, “Zhendan er nian” 震旦二年, in Tang Wenyi 唐文一 and Liu Pin 劉屏 (eds.), *Wangshi suixiang* 往事隨想, pp. 185–196.

who eventually became one of the leaders of the League of Left-wing Writers (*Zhongguo zuoyi zuojia lianmeng* 中國左翼作家聯盟).¹⁶ After eight months and as many issues, *Xin wenyi* was closed by Guomindang censors.

Mu Shiyong had his literary debut in the short-lived journal. The February 1930 issue carried Mu's first short story entitled "Zanmen de shijie" 咱們的世界 (Our World). Mu was only seventeen at the time and still studying Chinese literature at Guanghua University 光華大學 in Shanghai.¹⁷ Shi Zhecun saw great promise in the young author and wrote the following in the editorial comments of that issue:

Mu Shiyong is a name that is unfamiliar to readers. He is a new author who can make the "great authors" who merely flaunt their undeserved reputations feel ashamed. With respect to Ideologie, "Our World" is admittedly somewhat lacking, but artistically it is very successful. This is a young author of whom we can have great expectations.¹⁸

As mentioned, *Xin wenyi* was largely a leftist publication under the influence of Feng Xuefeng, and thus Mu is gently reproached for his faulty ideology. But more importantly, we also see Shi Zhecun here putting Mu Shiyong in opposition to the current literary establishment—the "great authors" with their "undeserved reputations." This is presumably an attack directed against the New Culture Movement writers and their high prestige in cultural circles. The relationship between Shi and Mu continued over the following years with Mu contributing to Shi's next journal venture, the cosmopolitan *Xiandai* 現代 (*Les Contemporains*).¹⁹

Thugs and Pirates

"Zanmen de shijie" is immediately notable for its violence and the pleasure the protagonist takes in inflicting it.²⁰ The narrator, Li Er 李二, is a pirate who introduces the listener, addressed throughout as "Mister", to his world of killing, rape, and plunder. He is infused with

¹⁶ Tang Yuan 唐沅 et al. (eds.), *Zhongguo xiandai wenque qikan mulu huibian* 中國現代文學期刊目錄彙編, p. 1009.

¹⁷ Wu Fuhui 吳福輝, *Dushi xuanliu zhong de haipai xiaoshuo* 都市旋流中的海派小說, p. 327.

¹⁸ Quoted in Li Jin 李今, "Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian" 穆時英年譜簡編, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 2005 (6), p. 240.

¹⁹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, pp. 130-150.

²⁰ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, "Zanmen de shijie" 咱們的世界, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 27-52.

rage and resentment against the wealthy and his sexual frustration plays a central role. From the first sentence in the short story, he addresses his audience directly:

Mister, since you care so much for us poor people, I'll be direct with you. You shouldn't concern yourself with our affairs, we can take care of ourselves. We have our own world.²¹

Li Er continues in this confiding tone throughout, as he recounts how he was introduced to a life of crime and the pleasure he takes in killing, raping, and torturing the rich. He starts by telling how his parents died when he was 12 and how his father on his deathbed asked the boy when he grew up to avenge his parents against the rich who have always harmed them. Following this, Li Er harbors a constant hatred of the wealthy. After his parents' death, he goes to live with an uncle and works selling newspapers. His poverty and fury go hand in hand with his sexual frustration. As he grows older, he curses the ugliness and coarseness of poor girls and desires the rich girls he cannot attain:

I really love those (girls) in high heeled leather shoes. The kind of girl with metallic shining silk stockings and really becoming *qipaos*, those rosy lips, that loose hair, and a face so delicate it looks like you could squeeze water out of it. Now that's a woman! I always followed behind them, just following, watching their backs—Ah, I really want to take a bite out of them! But that kind of woman likes guys in Western suits. Shit, always two of them together! I really want to strangle him! All he has is a bit more money, how is he better than me?²²

Eventually he meets a man, Lao Jiang 老蔣, who befriends him and explains that the only way to counter the injustices of society is to resort to crime in order to even the score. In this manner, the protagonist is induced to join Lao Jiang's gang of thugs and pirates.

The gang books onto a large passenger ship with the plan of capturing it. Li Er is put in fourth class. After an impatient wait, the group launches a surprise attack on the ship, resulting in much killing and bloodshed. Li Er recounts the violence with great elation and heads off to look for the pretty wife of a rich man who had tried to strike up a conversation with him earlier:

²¹ Ibid., p. 28.

²² Ibid., p. 32.

Oh, Mister, you haven't seen it. We were like crazy, turning over tables and everything. If we saw (guys in) western suits we grabbed them and stomped on them like rugs. The rich ones were pulled out into the hallway for beatings, getting punched by one and kicked by another—really fun! I hit all those I saw, punching them from one end to the other. When I was done beating, I stepped into the first class cabin. The brothers were dragging the foreign devil captain along the ground and there were three more guys sitting on his fat stomach. I went to find the cabin where the little tease lived. The tall guy was saying to her: “Don't worry, I'm here.” Fuck you being here! I jumped in and slammed the door shut. When the little tease saw me, she trembled and quickly pulled her silk gown tightly around her. The guy was still playing a damn hero. I grabbed him and pulled him over. He clenched his hand into a fist, but I caught it and then he couldn't move anymore. “How dare you bastard touch a hair on me!” I pulled him up and threw him to the ground.²³

The distinctive narrative style shown here, full of cursing and furious invective, is consistent and pervades most of the short stories in *Nanbeiji*. Li Er rips off the girl's gown and proceeds to rape her after comparing the whiteness of her skin with the rough skin of poor girls. The next morning, when he learns that the husband in the cabin is an important official, Li Er throws him into the sea as a rite of initiation to join the gang. More pillaging and violence follow, thus launching Li Er's career as a pirate.

“Zanmen de shijie” has many references to the *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*The Water Margin*). Lao Jiang's gang refer to one another as “brothers” and espouse traditional virtues of righteousness. The whole rite of initiation is also based on that cultural ethos, as well as the talk of revenge and vendettas. Yet the characters in this short story are not virtuous in any sense. While talking constantly about money and social injustice, Li Er's frustration is principally sexual. His resentment against rich men derives from their contact with attractive women. Even before the ship is fully under the gang's control, Li Er's first action is to find a woman he desired earlier. These personal weaknesses and sexual frustrations are not a part of the literary universe of the *Shuihu zhuan*. Li Er's supposed commitment to social change and the plight of the poor is nothing but senseless personal gratification and violence.

Li Er is remarkable in the context of contemporary Chinese literature for being such a highly

²³ Ibid., p. 49.

unsympathetic protagonist and narrator. The short story initially tends towards representing Li Er as a victim to be pitied due to the many hardships he faced as a child, but any sympathy that might have been generated is eventually undermined as the narrative progresses. His cursing narrative style reinforces his offensiveness. In his study of this short story, Philip F. Williams notes that there is a gap between the narrator and “implied reader” which widens “when the narrator comes across as both ethically base and rather untutored in self-expression”.²⁴ Williams concludes that this gap reaches its maximum with a wholly detestable character like Li Er.

The “Mister” addressed by Li Er is specifically male, middle class, and socially engaged, and of course the average reader of *Xin wenyi* might well have had much in common with Mister, but in terms of narrative structure, Li Er’s audience cannot be considered the “implied reader”. He is spoken to as an outsider in Li’s world of violence but is addressed personally and affably, as a friend. Other things can be deduced about the meeting between Li Er and “Mister”. Li does not apologize for his actions nor show any sign of regret. It is not a confession but rather an explanation or introduction. Li Er’s narrative ends with what seems unmistakably a warning:

Mister, I’ll be honest, we poor people are not to be pitied and rich people aren’t to be pitied either. It’s only people like you who don’t have a lot of money or a lot of strength that should be pitied. You climb up one pole afraid of offending somebody and then you climb up that pole afraid of offending the first one! I tell you Mister, this world is going to be ours sooner or later. But I don’t have time for chat anymore. You wait until I’ve completed doing what’s right and then I’ll come and take you to our world. It’s a deal! I’m off! See you later!²⁵

This ending thus combines Li Er’s friendly banter with an ominous forewarning of more violence to come. Li Er is fully in charge of the narrative situation and controls the premises of the meeting. Here, Mister is placed in an uncomfortably close relation with Li Er and is under his control. While the gap between the narrator and the reader widens, there is another gap between the narrator and Mister which becomes ever narrower, as Li Er becomes increasingly more friendly. This creates a constant and evolving tension between the narrator’s chummy familiarity and his threatening promise of violence. Thus Mu Shiyong has not only created a

²⁴ Philip F. Williams, “20th-Century Chinese Fiction’s Growing Tensions Between Narrator and Implied Reader: The Case of Mu Shiyong”, *Chinese Culture* 40 (1) (March 1999), p. 75.

²⁵ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, “Zanmen de shijie” 咱們的世界, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, p. 52.

particularly vile narrator, he also experiments with the role of the audience in novel ways.

In 1930, a few months after the publication of “Zanmen de shijie,” Mu Shiyong had a short story published in *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 (The short story magazine). This was “Nanbeiji” which eventually became the title story in Mu Shiyong’s first collection of fiction.²⁶ It resembles “Zanmen de shijie” in its use of rough language and virtues taken from popular literature. This time the narrator is a naïve and self-righteous young man who leaves the countryside to go to Shanghai.²⁷ These two opposite worlds are the “poles” of the title. In a manner foreshadowing Mu Shiyong’s later work, the countryside is represented as a place of youthful bliss and innocence, whereas the city is an enigmatic place of sex, brutality, and inequality. While the descriptions of Shanghai’s urban vices are somewhat stereotypical, the short story is striking in the way it establishes an unreliable narrator, Yu Shangyi 於尚義, whose coarseness, unrelenting indignation, and superficial commitment to misplaced martial virtues stand out in Chinese fiction. Like “Zanmen de shijie,” the language is full of cursing and relentless fury, with constant ranting against the injustices of society in a highly colloquial style. Throughout the narrative, Yu mostly refers to himself in the third person as “Little Lion” (*xiao shizi* 小獅子) or “our Little Lion” (*zanmen xiao shizi* 咱們小獅子) in a manner reminiscent of martial arts novels (*wuxia xiaoshuo* 武俠小說) and storyteller conventions. He portrays himself repeatedly as a righteous man who is big, powerful, and physically handsome. Yet despite his given name, which means “values righteousness,” he is mostly a violent and unsympathetic character who stalks people through the streets, steals, and turns his resentment against people who have done little to deserve it.

The plot of the story is simple and mainly serves as a framework for conveying Little Lion’s narrative as he moves through various levels of Shanghai society. The first part of the story takes place in Little Lion’s countryside village. It is a backwater outside a specific time or definite location. It is indistinct and could be anywhere and anytime in China. In this village, Little Lion is taught martial arts by his father. He is in love with a local girl from one of the better-off families in the area. The two young people play together innocently, but this idyll is broken when she goes to Shanghai to visit relatives. On her return, she is altered, speaking and acting differently after having learned city manners. Years pass and eventually she is engaged to marry a wealthy man from the city. Furious and grief-struck, Little Lion steals some money

²⁶ Li Jin 李今, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian” 穆時英年譜簡編, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 2005 (6), p. 240.

²⁷ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, “Nanbeiji” 南北極, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 61-118.

from his mother's purse and flees to Shanghai.²⁸

In Shanghai, Little Lion is baffled by the strange new sights and sounds, and feels quite lost in the big city. Rapidly his money is spent and he is thrown out on the street. He turns to begging but retains his haughtiness and pride when ill treated. A constant rage against women is also pervasive. Like Li Er, Little Lion is attracted to the young women in fur coats and high heels but knows that they are unattainable. Fuelled by his sexual frustration, they become "whores" and "bitches."

The seasons pass with Little Lion learning to cope. He hangs around department stores and cinemas begging and being pursued by Sikh policemen. He lashes out against pretty women and stalks a fat man through the streets simply because he is irritated by his weight. Eventually he saves enough money to rent a rickshaw. Moving gradually upwards in Shanghai society, a kind elderly couple, the Zhangs, help him get a job as a bodyguard with a rich family where he is both enraged and confounded by their frivolous lives of wealth and leisure. He has a brief affair with the master's mistress, a sexy independent woman who uses him for her amusement. In a gunfight, he saves his master from a kidnapping attempt thereby winning his favour. Just as it seems that Little Lion has secured himself a stable position in Shanghai society, he finds the elderly Mrs Zhang killed in a traffic accident. After being scolded by his boss for disappearing without leave and refusing to polish the shoes of the young mistress, his repressed fury returns:

I shouted back: "Who are you cursing? I..." I went over, grabbed him and lifted him up, turned around and threw him out. The young mistress was so frightened that her legs went all wobbly and she just stood there unable to budge. I slapped her on both sides of the head: "You? You whoring bitch! You take me for a joke? Just you wait and see, your days of fun are over! You think that our Little Lion who takes knife cuts without crying, a guy who'd put anything at stake, would go and be your flunky? What makes you better than me? What makes you deserve to be master? Just you wait and see..."

He who has the strongest arms and the biggest fists is master. Just wait and see, your days of fun are over! I left the same night.²⁹

Thus the story ends. Once again, Little Lion's victories seem hollow and senseless. His

²⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

defiance echoes the warnings of the narrator in “Zanmen de shijie”, but Little Lion’s threats are hollow since he is once again without a job and at the bottom of society where he started. His anger is the result of his powerlessness, sexual frustration, and failure to comprehend his modern surroundings.

The clash between modernity and tradition is a recurrent motif throughout many of the short stories in *Nanbeiji*. Of course many short stories by Lu Xun 魯迅, Ye Shengtao 葉聖陶, and other New Literature writers revolve around how Chinese traditions and beliefs hold China back and lead to various tragic ends. This persistence of tradition is also reflected in Little Lion’s view of himself as a traditional martial arts hero. Similarly, his beliefs are a source of his undoing. Yet in Mu Shiyong’s short story, the role of tradition is quite distinct. Little Lion’s reliance on martial rhetoric and motifs from novels like *Shuihu zhuan* is an individual failing. He is no everyman like Lu Xun’s Ah Q or other such New Literature allegorical figures representing China’s backwardness.

It is also worth noting that Little Lion’s beliefs are not grounded in any real tradition or Confucian convictions, but rather in fiction—they are imagined and unreal. His foolishness does not spring out of common social mores but goes directly against them, leading to delusions about his own power and place in society. And where Lu Xun’s famous “madman” glimpsed the barbarous state of the Chinese nation, Little Lion has no such deeper insight. His reliance on his own strength and persistence perhaps makes him more akin to Lao She’s 老舍 Camel Xiangzi 駱駝祥子 whose attempts to secure a position as a rickshaw driver in Beijing is similar. What sets Little Lion apart is his constant rage and violence. Like Camel Xiangzi, Little Lion is a victim of social injustice, but he is not a sympathetic character. His posturing and vain espousal of masculine heroics are misguided and out of place in modern Shanghai. His boasts of male strength and valor only serve to highlight his impotence and make his individual brutality and coarseness all the more striking. Little Lion’s reliance on values and narrative conventions drawn from fiction highlights that he is in a dream world of his own making, and when it clashes with Shanghai’s harsh reality, his only resort is to violence and cursing.

The other early short stories by Mu Shiyong that eventually were collected in *Nanbeiji* are mostly of a similar nature and combine many of the same elements in different ways. Violence, righteous fury, and a hatred of wealth runs through several of them. In “Hei xuanfeng” 黑旋風 (Black whirlwind), the eponymous narrator once again belongs to a gang in a small town.³⁰

³⁰ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, “Hei xuanfeng” 黑旋風, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai*

The members of this gang also see themselves as characters in the *Shuihu zhuan* tradition and dream of moving to Liangshan 梁山 in Shandong like their heroes. From there they intend to drive out the foreign devils and their hated cars. There is much that they hate, but their strongest antipathy is directed towards the wealthy young university students who court and marry the attractive girls in town. The gang's leader, Big Wang (*Wang dage* 王大哥) goes out of town for a few days during which his girlfriend flirts with the foreign students and even takes a trip to Shanghai with them. The gang is outraged at her shamelessness. To defend Big Wang's honour, the gang confront the girl and the protagonist hits her as well as a student who tries to defend her. The narrative is told retrospectively after the protagonist is released from a three-month jail sentence. Reinforcing his cluelessness, he wonders where his gang has gone while he was away. In "Shenghuo zai haishang de renmen" 生活在海上的人們 (The people who live on the sea), a group of islanders who make their living fishing for the local landlord revolt and a complete bloodbath ensues in which the rich and their helpers and families are beaten, burned, and executed.³¹ The violence in the story is taken to an extreme with bloody beatings and murder described in much detail. The protagonist's love interest betrays the islanders by reporting the uprising to the mainland Magistrate who eventually puts it down and executes the leader. Once again, frustrated female relations become central aspects in the protagonist's fury. The story ends with the protagonist promising that another revolt will follow.

Apart from their constant rage and crude vulgar language, the brash, male protagonists in all these short stories see themselves as righteous warriors in a degenerate world which has lost its sense of proper morals and values. They hate all things western with a passion and are sure that their time for vengeance is at hand. A strong binary is thereby established in which everything they dislike—cars, students, corruption, and urban wealth—is affiliated with modernity and thereby opposed to their own upright values and morals. Their anger is particularly directed towards modern women who remain elusive and incomprehensible to them. This in turn translates into general misogyny and a poorly directed fury with modern society in general.

Not only do the characters fail to understand modern life, they set themselves outside ordinary life as well. Their notions of valor and strength stem from a *Shuihu zhuan* ethos. Their world is seen through the perspective of Chinese martial arts fiction of the *wuxia xiaoshuo* genre. The characters are unable to understand or penetrate modern society, and so they resort to imagined

shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 1–26.

³¹ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, "Shenghuo zai haishang de renmen" 生活在海上的人們, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 119–180.

tradition as a source of identity. This identity is primarily a counter-identity, developed in opposition to the wealthy, the modern, and the successful. In essence, the invention of tradition becomes a counter to modernity, and modernity becomes a boundary against which the group defines itself.

The protagonists' constructed identity in relation to an imagined tradition distinguishes them from most other characters in New Culture fiction. Mu Shiyong's use of fiction in representing these characters serves to underscore the degree to which they have lost touch with reality and the modern world as it is changing around them. They are outsiders and their misplaced belief in their own power and their loyal adherence to outdated ideals and names invariably comes across as foolish. Even Li Er, despite his narrative authority, remains a character who has isolated himself as a bandit. As indicated in the title, the pirates have their own "world", but they are outcasts from society and from progress.

The characters in Mu Shiyong's short stories use Chinese literary tradition as a lens through which to present themselves and frame their actions in a certain way. In both "Zanmen de shijie" and "Nanbeiji" the narrators imbue their narration with a degree of performance. As Li Er addresses Mister and gradually takes control over the premises of the meeting, the narrative increasingly becomes a display of dominance over Mister. There is an evolving balance of power between the two characters which culminates with Li Er's final warning. Little Lion does not address his audience as directly as Li Er, but he is still clearly staging himself by using phrases like "our Little Lion" throughout the narrative. He becomes the storyteller with an audience to entertain. Both narrators rely on a certain style to represent themselves, and this creates a mismatch between their narrative voice and story events.

Comparing with Mu Shiyong's later short stories, it is perhaps also worth noting that there are no seductive *femmes fatales* in these short stories. The enticing Shanghai mirage of fast cars, dance halls, coffee shops, and urban temptresses that Mu rolls out in his later short stories is largely absent. The female characters in *Nanbeiji* are indeed modern and alluring, but they are far from the stereotyped seductresses found in some of his later short stories. Incidentally, Mu Shiyong was already experimenting with the femme fatale stereotype in this period. The short story "Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi" 被當做消遣品的男子 (The man who was made a plaything) was first published in 1931, the year before *Nanbeiji* came out. The narrator falls in love with a modern vixen who flirts and dances with other men, insisting that they are merely

“playthings”.³² This short story was left out of *Nanbeiji* and included in *Gongmu* instead. Consequently we should be wary of dividing Mu’s oeuvre too sharply based on differences between his short story collections.

Proletarian Fiction?

Social issues feature prominently in Mu Shiyong’s early short stories in *Nanbeiji*. His fiction clearly echoes some of the main New Culture Movement themes with the explorations of how people from rural backwaters, rooted in tradition, cope with social change, urban modernity, and modern femininity. “Nanbeiji” revolves around presenting a tableau of life in modern Shanghai as Little Lion comes into contact with people with various levels of wealth and social status. In that respect, it is similar to Mao Dun’s *Ziye* 子夜 (*Midnight*) in which practically every aspect of the city is touched upon. Compressed into the format of a short story, it seems that Mu Shiyong had a similar aim. Given the concerns and actions of his protagonists, Mu is certainly entering the realm of social commentary.

But while *Nanbeiji* as a whole takes up many of the themes found in New Culture Movement literature, Mu’s protagonists are neither romantics nor social victims. On the contrary, the naiveté and wanton brutality of Mu’s protagonists constantly undermines their concerns with social injustice. While pitying the plight of the poor abused prostitutes in Shanghai, Little Lion finds himself a frequent customer once he earns the money to afford them himself. His social commitment has little depth or meaning beyond his personal frustrations. The pirates in “Zanmen de shijie” and the islanders of “Shenghuo zai haishang de renmen” rise up against the wealthy and the privileged, but these uprisings are more in the tradition of secret brotherhoods and gangs with millenarian goals. They are certainly not informed by a Marxist agenda. Their anger against the wealthy might spring from some real social injustice, but it mostly seems to be fuelled by a sense of powerlessness in a modern society which they cannot comprehend and where the most attractive women are beyond their reach. Their wishes for social change seem to be based on a shallow rhetoric that they have appropriated for their own personal ends. Their visions for the future are based on outmoded ideals from the *Shuihu zhuan*, misogyny, and a wish for personal gratification. Thus their threatening promises of popular uprisings invariably envisage a course for China which is diametrically opposed to the ideals of progressive intellectuals or any notions of modernity, national progress, and enlightenment. In fact, such notions are under constant attack. Given the fierce debates being waged by Mu’s

³² Mu Shiyong 穆時英, “Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi” 被當做消遣品的男子, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, p. 153.

contemporaries concerning the political and cultural directions of the nation, it is hard not to read these short stories as an ironic comment on their social engagement.

One example underscores this point. “Tou mianbao de mianbaoshi” 偷麵包的麵包師 (The baker who stole bread) seems to be a deliberate parody of leftist social concerns in fiction.³³ This short story was originally published in *Xiandai* in June 1932, but it was later included in the second edition of *Nanbeiji* from 1933 alongside two other short stories, “Youbu” 油布 (The oilcloth) and “Duan le yi tiao gebo de ren” (The man who broke an arm). “Tou mianbao de mianbaoshi” revolves around the husband and father of a family who works in a large bakery that produces various expensive Western cakes, pastries, and buns. His entire family—wife, son, and mother—are completely obsessed with the idea of tasting the delicious pastries on display in the bakery window, but he cannot afford to bring any home for them since they are too expensive. They all dream incessantly of how delicious the cakes must be and this presents a mounting pressure on the baker. Finally giving in to family expectations, he steals a large cake on his mother’s 60th birthday. They are all overjoyed, but his theft is discovered and he is fired the following day.

“Tou mianbao de mianbaoshi” contains all the requisite parts of the typical socially concerned realist short story. The father laments his poverty as only foreigners and the wealthy can afford the fancy pastries and cakes on display. The writing highlights the injustice as he toils all day without being able to afford the even the simplest fruits of his labour. Yet any such social message is entirely undermined by the utter silliness of the cake-obsessed family and the very nature of their desire: cake. Here it represents the most frivolous of consumer luxuries. Consequently, the family’s desire to eat cake only shows that they are in fact moderately well off and have no more pressing needs. There is no shortage of other material comforts, such as space, heating, clothing, or other foods. Instead, cake is compared with the monotonous humdrum of once again eating “long-life noodles” (*changshoumian* 長壽麵), the traditional birthday food, on the mother’s birthday. The family is simply obsessed with the superficial glamour of foreign goods, but there is no more serious social injustice to be found underneath. Instead, as a whole, the short story reads as a parody of the socially outraged writings produced at the time.

The issue is not entirely clear-cut, though. Clearly Mu did not intend for his violent

³³ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, “Tou mianbao de mianbaoshi” 偷麵包的麵包師, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 181–204.

protagonists to be seen as enlightened visionaries, but this does not mean that his short stories make light of the social problems facing China. As mentioned, social issues are quite prominent in Mu's short stories and they often demonstrate a marked attention to class differences and injustices. Attention to social issues is particularly clear in the short story "Shouzhi" 手指 (Fingers), in which a young girl, a child bride, is worked to death in a silk factory.³⁴ The short story retains much of the tone of massive fury and vulgar invective, but at the same time the conditions of poverty come more clearly to the foreground as the focus of the characters' rage. The tale is recounted by the dead girl's father-in-law who forced her to work at the factory because they needed her wages. After her death, he is now stricken with grief and remorse. The young boy who was her child husband wants to extract a martial arts style revenge without knowing whom to direct his anger against. This short story contains a strong social message which is further underlined by the father-in-law's direct indictment of fashion and consumerism, pleasures that can only be enjoyed by the wealthy. The boy does not even know what silk is used for.

Another example of a clear social message is found in "Youbu" from the second edition.³⁵ It tells the story of the worker A Chuan 阿川 who pulls carts for an enamelware company in Shanghai. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the poor weather and the constant rain. A Chuan is sickly and has a poor constitution, easily catching colds in wet weather. In order to protect himself from the incessant rain, he finally covers himself with the oilcloth which is intended to keep the wares dry. This leads to heated discussions with the other workers and the factory assistant who oversees their transports, with A Chuan arguing that enamelware does not suffer from being exposed to water. In this short story, there is a distinct demarcation of class differences. A Chuan and the workers who invariably get soaked in the rain as they pull the wares through the streets of Shanghai are clearly way beneath the assistant with his umbrella and the fat boss of the factory. Eventually A Chuan gets so sick that he coughs blood and presumably dies.

Such short stories make it rather difficult to pinpoint a clear direction in how Mu's works relate to social issues. Clearly they form a central theme of his early authorship and presumably it is this element in his writings which have led some contemporary readers to see his early works as proletarian literature. Yet in most of these short stories the social issues are merely

³⁴ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, "Shouzhi" 手指, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 53–60.

³⁵ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, "Youbu" 油布, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, pp. 247–275.

convenient excuses for the characters' misplaced outrage and their anger against women. Given the politicized climate among Chinese intellectuals and artists at the time, it is highly unlikely that Mu Shiyong should not have been aware that political interpretations would play an important role in the reception of these short stories.

Facing the Critics

As noted earlier, Shi Zhecun pointed out that “Zanmen de shijie” was somewhat lacking in ideological correctness. More damningly, the short story “Nanbeiji” was reviewed by the playwright Yang Hansheng 陽翰笙 (1902-1993) in the inaugural issue of *Beidou*, one of the journals associated with the League of Left-Wing Writers.³⁶ Using the pseudonym Han Sheng 寒生, Yang praises Mu's narrative technique and notes approvingly that Little Lion basically is a good character since he sympathizes with the poor and mostly directs his anger towards the wealthy. Yet the protagonist is also criticized for being clueless and ineffectual in his view of society. His understanding of social issues is faulty and he lacks a proper method in his approach to social injustice. This is considered a substantial flaw with the short story as a whole. Yang's overall view is that Mu Shiyong is a promising young author, but that his ideological views still need to be refined. The final sentence sums up his opinion: “The author of ‘Nanbeiji’ is quite promising, but only if he is able to rectify the ideology that is shown in his writing”.³⁷ Over the following year, the criticism from leftist circles mounted. In a harsh review of *Nanbeiji* in *Xiandai chubanjie* 現代出版界 in 1932, Shu Yue 舒月 dismissed Mu's creative writings from an ideological standpoint: “The topic is not the upright struggle of the proletarian classes, to say nothing of collective political consciousness. Therefore this is not proletarian literature in any way”.³⁸ Shu Yue argues that since Mu's writings only reflect the views of beggars and bandits—the lumpenproletariat—they are basically worthless and he exhorts the author to gain a better understanding of the times and events around him.

Mu Shiyong generally stayed out of the ideological debates raging through cultural circles at the time and mostly tried to dodge the political attacks directed towards him. In the preface to the second edition of *Nanbeiji* from 1933, he responded to the critique leveled against him by stating that he was mainly interested in improving his narrative technique:

³⁶ Yang Hansheng 陽翰笙 (pseud. Han Sheng 寒生), “Nanbei ji” 南北極, *Beidou* 北斗, pp. 121–123.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

³⁸ Quoted in Li Jin 李今, “Mu Shiyong nianpu jianbian” 穆時英年譜簡編, *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan* 中國現代文學研究叢刊 2005 (6), p. 245.

After the publication (of the first edition), the critics kindly took it up and looked into my ideological outlook, urging me to enrich my life and to suppress the incorrect parts of my ideology. For this I am extremely grateful, but my heartfelt gratitude is towards the people who have pointed out the shortcomings in my technique.³⁹

The gratitude which Mu here expresses towards his critics seems somewhat ironic and he clearly does little to defend himself beyond simply dismissing the issue. Mu's literary defense here amounts to claiming that ideology is simply unimportant to him. Of course in his later works Mu seems to be quite deliberate in his provocations of the literary establishment. With his turn towards modernist narratives in urban settings, he was clearly going against leftist dictates and the wishes of critics who earlier had seen "promising" tendencies in his writings. His awareness of this is demonstrated most clearly in the preface to his next short story collection, *Gongmu* from 1933:

Some have said that the stories in *North Pole*, *South Pole* are works that belong to my early period and that the eight stories in this collection constitute my later period. If you disregard the dates of my writings and consider only the order of publication, judging from the content and technique in these stories, this would seem to make a lot of sense. But in fact, two stories completely different in style were written at the same time—that I could have two such very different emotions and write such different pieces at the same time is something others have seen as inexplicable (I myself don't understand it) and has become a cause for many people to censure me. The source of this paradox, as Du Heng has said, is the dual nature of my personality. I am a rather straightforward and sincere person; there is nothing I won't say openly for all to hear. I am unwilling, as so many today are, to adorn my true face with some protective pigment, or to pass my days in hypocrisy shouting hypocritical slogans, or to manipulate the psychology of the masses, political maneuvering, self-propaganda, and the like to maintain a position once held in the past or raise up my personal prestige. I feel this is base and narrow-minded behavior, and I won't do it. If I am called a fence sitter, a peeled radish, whatever it may be, at

³⁹ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, "Gaiding bentiji" 改訂本題記, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, p. 2.

least I can stand on top of the world and shout out loud: “I am true to myself and to others.”⁴⁰

This attack against “hypocritical slogans” and those who “manipulate the psychology of the masses” seems to reference the League of Left-Wing Writers and the 1932 debate on politically independent authors—the so-called “third category” (*di san zhong ren* 第三種人) debate. The reference to a “peeled radish” is Mu’s response to a phrase used by Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935). Qu attacked the “third category” writers and targeted Mu’s short story “Bei dangzuo xiaoqianpin de nanzi”. According to Qu, this work revealed Mu to be a “radish”, red outside but white inside, i.e. a traitor to the leftist cause and the supporters of mass literature.⁴¹

Mu’s denunciation here of the literary elite and the politicization of literature is the closest he came to a manifesto. While scarcely a reasoned display of literary philosophy, this diatribe at least demonstrates that he was quite aware of going against current literary and political trends, and that he did so willfully in the face of criticism.

In Mu’s early works found in *Nanbeiji*, his anti-establishment views regarding Chinese culture are not as clear. As mentioned earlier, the short stories point in several directions. And while leftist critics might have harbored some misgivings about his ideological direction, they also saw promising tendencies in his early writings. With the later expressionistic modernist style Mu displayed in *Gongmu*, these promising tendencies vanished and the lines of opposition were drawn more sharply.

The Role of Literature and the Influence of Shi Zhecun

The juxtaposition between modernity and imagined tradition in *Nanbeiji* brings to mind the works of Shi Zhecun who also successfully borrows themes and tropes from traditional Chinese fiction. Since Shi took the young Mu Shiyong into his group, it is natural to briefly compare their writings in this respect.

The short stories in *Nanbeiji* notably feature Shi’s characteristic interest in the effects of

⁴⁰ Mu Shiyong 穆時英, Preface 自序 to *Gongmu* 公墓, in Yue Qi 樂齊 (ed.), *Zhongguo xin ganjue pai shengshou: Mu Shiyong xiaoshuo quanji* 中國新感覺派聖手: 穆時英小說全集, p. 148.

⁴¹ Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (pseud. Sima Jin 司馬今), “Caishen haishi fan caishen” 財神還是反財神 (For or against the God of wealth), *Beidou* 2 (3-4) (1932), pp. 493–494. See also Wang Shu 王姝, “Mu Shiyong yanjiu shuping” 穆時英研究述評, *Nanjing shifan daxue wenxueyuan xuebao* 南京師範大學文學院學報 2001 (4), p. 44.

classical Chinese literature as well as sexuality and, occasionally, irrational violence. In Shi Zhecun's short story collection *Jiangjun de tou* 將軍的頭 (The general's head) from 1932, he recasts passages from *Shuihu zhuan* and other classical works of Chinese literature. These works have been carefully analyzed by William Schaefer, so there is no need to revisit them here.⁴² Other short stories by Shi Zhecun that recast popular literature and myth include "Li Shishi" 李師師 and "Huangxin dashi" 黃心大師 (Master Huangxin). In addition, Shi Zhecun wrote several works in which modern characters are influenced by classical literature. Examples of such short stories include "Yecha" 夜叉 (Yaksha), "Modao" 魔道 (Sorcery), and "Lüshe" 旅舍 (The Inn), all of which were included in the 1933 short story collection *Meiyu zhi xi* 梅雨之夕 (An evening of spring rain). They are reminiscent of the gothic works of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) or J. S. Le Fanu (1814–1873). In all three of these stories, a modern urban protagonist travels to the countryside where he is faced with his own fears and sexual desires. But the fantasy worlds in which the protagonists find themselves are not real, they are induced by literature. The fears and sexual conflicts are based on ghost stories and histories, creating a space where modernity is undone, resulting in the male protagonist's neurasthenia or nervous collapse. Classical texts undermine the modern sensibilities of the protagonists and make them susceptible to their delusions.

In both authors' works, the references to the past are not rooted in historical reality but rather manifest themselves indirectly through memory, delusion, legend, and text. Much like in Mu Shiyong's texts, it is the indirect representation and refraction of China's past which is important, rather than the occurrence of actual events, so for this reason I think we should be wary of labels like "historical fiction".⁴³ The past and tradition are always distorted through an intermediary lens. Mu Shiyong and Shi Zhecun use this distortion to reflect back on modernity. The lingering presence of cultural and literary tradition invariably clashes with that which is real, modern, and rational. In that respect, the delusions of power shared by the protagonists in Mu's early short stories play a similar role to the madness and neurasthenia suffered by Shi Zhecun's modern urbanites—they undermine any supposed modernity and rationality, and they ultimately derive from literature and an imagined past.

The differences between the authors' works are of course striking as well. Shi Zhecun's characters tend to see themselves as sophisticated and rational men who navigate cosmopolitan Shanghai with ease and confidence, at least until they are undone by their own irrational fears

⁴² William Schaefer, "Kumarajiva's Foreign Tongue: Shi Zhecun's Modernist Historical Fiction", *Modern Chinese Literature* 10 (1, 2) (1998).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

and desires. At the opposite end of this spectrum, the narrators in “Zanmen de shijie” and “Nanbeiji” see themselves as staunch defenders of Chinese tradition, and they are thoroughly vulgar and brutal. In a simplistic juxtaposition, it could be said that Shi Zhecun has modern narrators whose narratives are undermined by their own delusions, whereas Mu Shiyong presents traditional narrators whose narratives are undermined by their inability to comprehend modernity.

In any case it should be clear that Mu Shiyong’s early short stories are at least as complex, rebellious, and innovative as his later modernist works. They also reveal important continuities that are overlooked by applying labels such as “proletarian literature”. First, it is impossible to pin a simple political position on these early works as they consciously undermine or even mock leftist literary ideals. There is clearly a subversive element in these early short stories that carries over into Mu’s later writings. Second, Mu’s early work also represents modernity as something that is inherently elusive, alienating, or corrupting. As Leo Ou-fan Lee notes, Mu’s later short stories set in Shanghai can be seen as “a devastating satire of commodified modernity”.⁴⁴ So where *Nanbeiji*’s protagonists look at modern life as outsiders who fail to understand it, the protagonists in his later works are consummate insiders who in some cases simply want to escape from the incessant grind of keeping up with the times. Modernity remains alluring and perhaps glamorous throughout Mu’s works, but it is ultimately impossible to grasp for more than a fleeting moment.

⁴⁴ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, p. 210.

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