

## Beyond “the West/the Rest”: Modernism as Context

Ningjie Dan\*

**Abstract:** The question whether there is modernism outside of the West has been on debate for a long time. To answer this question, this essay argues that it is necessary to introduce a new perspective which is beyond what Stuart Hall called “the West/ the Rest” dichotomy. Based on recent research on modernism, this essay takes modernism as context where the aesthetic innovative practice occurs to respond to radical social change of modernity. Taking modernism in China as an example, this essay attempts to show modernism as dynamic and constructive power rather than the collection of static innovative forms.

**Keywords:** modernism; constructive power; aesthetic response; modernity; Chinese modernization

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## 1 Introduction

Modern, modernity, and modernism have been favourite terms of critics ever since their appearance in the critical discourse. Unlike the former two terms always taken as important terms designated to social change, modernism has been considered as a term of arts and literature, avant-garde in form. However, modernism is also a term which suffers a long term misread. Fierce debates around this term are caused by misread. Its constructive power has been ignored, as it is not only the representation of arts and literature, but also social change force as practice.

The misread is the result of the “the West/ the Rest” discourse called by Stuart Hall. The critical discourse based on this dichotomy as a system of representation wipes out the differences for the convenience of criticism. In this way, the inner contradiction in the practice of modernism is overlooked. Therefore, we need to re-examine modernism from its inner logic, how and why the modernist practice emerges.

The reflection on “the West/ the Rest” dichotomy was introduced on the discussion of modernism when the post-colonial perspective was adopted. However, this reflection is no more than political perspective, focusing on the question of the subject of modernism, such as whether there is modernism outside of the West and whether it is legitimate to use

modernism to denote to the formal innovation movement outside of the West. However, those debates use the already established problematic discourse and pay little attention to examine these movements themselves. There are few achievements from those debates, as the “the West/ the Rest”-based critical discourse is used to fight against the dichotomy.

This essay thus attempts to re-examine the concept of modernism by returning to the scene of the emergence of modernism, and demonstrate a new approach beyond the “the West/ the Rest”-based critical discourse: seeing modernism as a practice which is aesthetic response to modernity. For one thing, a new critical discourse focusing on practice rather than form is formulated based on the previous studies. For another thing, the emergence of modernism in China, where modernist practice outside of the West, is taken as example.

## 2 A Problematic Concept of Modernism

The definition of modernism has been contained in a Western critical discourse since the term coined. The development of the understanding of the term was driven by the unsettled differences presented by different works. The concept of modernism, with an attempt to reconcile the differences, thus becomes obscure and inclusive, as the critics focus on discrete individual practices which

are wrapped up by the holistic idea of the “West”.

The conventional understanding, focusing on the aesthetic principles and practice of the so-called “Men of 1914”,<sup>1</sup> views modernism as a loose affiliation of aesthetic movements beginning from the late nineteenth century and thriving in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the term originated in response to the imperative to define the new form of works in the early twentieth century literature and art, its conventional definition has been subsumed under existing terms rather than retaining independent meanings. For examples, Edmund Wilson describes modernism as the development of symbolism in his influential *Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* <sup>[1]</sup>. Northrop Frye argues for modernism as a post-Romantic movement in the book *Romanticism Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute* (1963). These efforts by critics aim to explain modernism by the establishing critical discourse.

When more phenomena had taken into account, modernism required more precise and independent definition. In the 1970s, modernism gained a series of independent

meanings in critical discourse, but the definition remained oversimplified as an aesthetic revolution of form. For instance, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane take modernism merely as a “stylistic abstraction” in *Modernism: 1890-1930*<sup>[2]</sup>.

However, the complexity of modernism remains and it becomes more imperative to set the boundary of this term. Since the term of modernism contains multiple layers and discrete aspects, it is hardly possible to reach a universal consensus. In order to minimize this difficulty, some scholars make efforts to describe its features rather than defining it in an abstract way. For instances, Rainer Emig describes the term in his book *Modernism in Poetry: Motivation, Structure, and Limits* (1995) in the following way: “Somewhere between the achievements of modernity (or perhaps at its very end) and the radical gestures of the avant-garde is the place of modernism” (3). M. H. Abrams’ definition is more expanding. The entry of modernism in *A Glossary of Literary Terms (Seventh Edition)* (1993) writes:

The term modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the present century, but especially after World War I (1914-18). The specific features signified by “*modernism*” (or by the adjective modernist) vary with the user, but many critics

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<sup>1</sup> Wyndham Lewis coined the term in his autobiographical work, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937). This term now usually refers to the coterie of writers and artists centred around James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis in the early twentieth century England, who created so-called *high modernism*.

agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general. (Abrams 167)

However, these attempts hardly reach the solution. These attempts show discreetness and also blur and vagueness. These approaches endorse the multi-dimension and disparate discreteness, but fail to grasp the inner connection between the traits. The inner connection was buried by the myriad innovated forms.

All the differences are reconciled by taking modernism as a solid thing within the concept of the “West”. The self-contained concept of “West” assumes oversimplified homogeneity among differences which excludes other possibilities and experiences. Stuart Hall points out that the concept of “the West” functions in four ways in discourse. It categorises the society into a simple dichotomy-the West/the Rest. It imposes a set of images, or a system of representation that reduces differences and diversity into static and oversimplified picture. This concept of West also provides a standard or model of comparison. At this point, this concept formulates a set of criteria against which societies are ranked in certain values by comparison. Most importantly, the concept of West is dependent on oversimplified differences<sup>[3]</sup>. The concept of “the West” thus replaces deeper factors of the emergence of

modernism. Consequently, the differences of each practice are covered by and ignored in the Western-centred critical discourse.

Within the Western-centred critical discourse, the meaning of modernism thus is self-evident without reaching agreement, because the concept of “West” is the guarantee of consensus. The concept of “West” assumes everything can be understood without being proved. In other words, wrapping the whole practices of modernism in a concept of the “West” wipes out the differences and heterogeneity between each practice. Under this circumstance, the concept of modernism becomes inclusive.

At this point, the term is exclusively to the Western culture and to some extent, it gains superiority in the critical discourse, which makes modernism as myth beyond the touch of the world outside of Western culture. On the other hand, the flattened concept of modernism loses effectiveness in the practice of criticism. The inclusiveness of this term, as Susan Friedman argues, may endanger its functionality. Friedman warns that “the danger of an expansionist modernism lapsing into meaninglessness or colonising gestures is real”<sup>[4]</sup>. Although multi-faced, the term has its own boundaries.

### 3 The Dismantle of “the West”: new possibilities

The boundary lays on the inner logic of modernism. In order to set the boundary, it is necessary to unpack the modernism from the monolith of the West. The new modernist studies from late 1980s have attempted to explore the boundary and open this term to a broader field.<sup>2</sup> More forms of innovation have been introduced as modernism.

Modernism needs to be pluralised for historical accuracy. According to Peter Childs’s research in *Modernism* (2000), “modernisms” as the plural form can be dated back to the 1960s (12). The practice of criticism enriches the connotation of the plural modernism. Andreas Huyssen’s *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*<sup>[5]</sup> locates modernism in a larger social and historical framework, Bonnie Scott’s *Refiguring Modernism*<sup>[6]</sup> claims a feminist perspective and Peter Nicholls’ book *Modernisms*<sup>[7]</sup> proposes a notion of multi-dimensions of modernism. The proliferation of post-colonialism and multi-culturalism invites a new interest in understanding modernism in a global context. *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*<sup>[8]</sup> provides a new

perspective on modernism breaking the racial and geographical barriers by devising a *geomodernism* to call for the equality of races and locations in modernism. Under these initiatives, the “Men of 1914” have ‘abdicated’; dominance of the masculine Western voice has thus been dismissed. The resulting polylogue in modernism welcomes diverse voices from different races, classes, genders, and cultures. Modernism, therefore, is indissolubly attached to cultural and political significance.

Friedman thus calls for recapitulating the logic of modernism itself. She points out that its inner logic builds on “the far-reaching implications of the linkage of modernism with modernity”<sup>[4]</sup>, regarding the term as the aesthetic dimension of any given modernity. Her formulation thus solves the problem of the inclusiveness of this term by linking it to modernity. It also balances the aesthetic and political significance in this term, and it solves the problem of periodisation and geography of this term by dismantling the temporal and spatial boundaries of the conventional Western-centred definition.

Roger A. Salerno, a scholar who holds similar ideas to Friedman, provides sociological insights into the relationship between modernity and modernism in *Landscapes of Abandonment: Capitalism, Modernity, and Estrangement*<sup>[9]</sup>. Because modernity is a loose concept, Salerno’s observations help to narrow this term down,

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<sup>2</sup> Susan Friedman points out that this definition with a fixed time span obviously privileges Anglo-American modernism. See the details in Susan S. Friedman’s “Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies”.

defining modernity as a quality of life that is associated with modernisation. He claims that modernity is:

“a set of features that are a result of social forces— the most significant of which are capitalistic development and the Enlightenment project. The values that guide it are parallel to those that govern capitalistic development and those characteristic[s] of the Enlightenment itself: total conquest and control of nature, the dismantling of tradition-based relationships, the veneration of power, the ascent of secular individualism, an intensification of bureaucratization, a heightened emphasis on binary opposition, rationality in the service of personal industry, and a morality governed by competitive self-interest.” (37-38)

Modernity begins with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. In this sense, according to Salerno, both Romanticism and modernism are the aesthetic responses to modernity. The difference is that modernism, emerging from more radical changes along with the rapid capitalistic development after the Second Industrial Revolution, is more radical and more self-reflexive (43).

As demonstrated above, in the history of criticism here has been a remarkable development of this term from the original singular form of modernism to a plural form of modernisms.<sup>3</sup> Modernism has been a controversial and dazzling term in literary criticism, having evolved from a singular concept denoting a series of avant-garde

movements in formal and aesthetic innovation to a plural and discursive concept denoting a large-scale cultural phenomenon. As Friedman argues in “Planetarity”<sup>[4]</sup>, “All that is solid melts into air. We know that. Why should we want a stability for the field that the modernists themselves rebelled against?” (471) Modernism is now generally agreed to be a term with multi-layers and facets, a global phenomenon beyond the boundaries of time, space, nation and culture.<sup>4</sup> In *Modernism and Theory: A Critical Debate* <sup>[10]</sup>, Stephen Ross announces that “The old geographical, temporal, and material limits on what qualified as modernism have been determinedly dismantled” (1). At this point, the Western-centred critical discourse is questioned. Although critics, such as Friedman, advocate global modernism and challenge the establishing critical discourse, problem remains: how can we find alternative discourse?

#### 4 Beyond the Western-Centred Discourse: modernism as a context

The key to formulate a different discourse is not to treat modernism as the collection of static forms but a type of practice. At the scene of the emergence of modernism, we can see modernism is a practice of aesthetic response

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<sup>3</sup> However, “modernisms” adopted by different scholars refers to different aspects of modernism for their particular concerns.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Friedman gives an overview of recent modernist studies in her book *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*.

to modernity. In other words, a fierce aesthetic challenge to convention, the negative oldness.

In *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science, and Culture, 1880–1930* <sup>[11]</sup>, Ronald Schleifer points out that the revolutions in modernism are derived from the profound change of the perception of time, from a linear and progressive sense to a focus on the moment (1-2). He attributes this change to the rapid expansion of the material world driven by the development of economy and technology since the late nineteenth century. He writes:

“the overwhelming multiplication of commodities transformed the experience of time for people living through it. Concomitant with the vast multiplication of commodities in the last decades of the nineteenth century were vast multiplications of knowledge, enormous increases in data within the remarkable creation and professionalization of intellectual disciplines in the emerging system of research universities in the West, and the vast multiplication of populations in Europe and North America in both the relative peacefulness of Europe since the Napoleonic wars and the remarkably temperate weather patterns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.” (4)

These radical changes multiplied the experience of time and space for people living through it (6). As Schleifer notes, these changes caused a remarkable sense of dislocations in time and space (5). The experience in modernism thus is bound to the momentary, to a sense of temporal instability.

The aesthetic response to these radical changes of experiences is centred on the experiments with form. As Paul, Poplawski remarks in the *Encyclopaedia of Literary Modernism*<sup>[12]</sup>:

“The most prominent and constant element in definitions of modernism is modernism’s avant-garde experimentalism and its concern for radical innovation in artistic form, style, content, and method. This emphasis, in turn, is linked to what is often seen as the revolutionary dynamic within modernism.” (ix)

Thus, modernism in literature and the arts consists of two fundamental aspects: one is to comprehensively rebel against the conventionalised and therefore stagnated aesthetic in the arts; the other is to self-consciously establish new flexible structures that would more faithfully represent perception at the present. This definition of modernism suggests that modernists chose to propose a solution to the uncertainty of the world by means of innovative forms such as Pound’s Imagist experiment on poetry and Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique in fiction.

In this sense, modernism is aesthetic response to the temporal and fragmented perception of the world. The form is the result of the practice of modernists. It underscores the momentary. Therefore, it emphasises the “new” which challenges the past. Moreover, the uncertainty and distrust towards the convention causes revolutionary response. Therefore, the dynamic of modernism is not

only something to do with the form, but related to social change. In other words, the form manifested the revolutionary practice of individuals.

From this perspective, modernism can be treated as a context, a field taking all the forces and factors into account and dismantling all the facets of modernism without breaking the logical interrelations between them. Context, etymologically deriving from Latin *contextus*, means to weave together, which indicates the inner plurality, multiplicity and the interaction of the elements of the whole. In this sense, modernism is the dynamic constructive outcome. This treatment, beyond the established critical discourse, empower the term modernism to explain not only certain authors or artists and their works but also the process of creation, aesthetic response to their momentary experiences. In other words, it reveals the deep drive force of the moment of aesthetic revolution emergence. Without the time-geography constrain, this term gains more explanatory power.

This new approach thus returns the concept of modernism to individual experiences rooted in practice. In this sense, it has no burden of historical and geographic legacy, as the Western-centred discourse indicates. The differences between individual practice are reconciled in this discourse. Now, we can apply this concept of modernism to

explain the practice outside of conventional Western culture.

## 5 Modernism in China: a context in the process of modernization

The commensurability of terminology between cultures is always suspicious. The situation becomes worse when the political perspective is involved.

There have been fierce debates on whether there is modernism in China. This debate propels a debate on the concept of Chinese modernism. Corresponding to the debate on expanding modernism, literary scholars show growing interest in modernism in China. At the beginning of this debate some scholars contest that there is no apt modernism in China by Western definition, the singular and narrow definition. Some scholars even refused to consider the possibility of modernism in China, because the term is from the West.<sup>5</sup> As we can see from the debates, the

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<sup>5</sup> There was a fierce debate about whether there is modernism and whether we need modernism in China in the 1980s. Many scholars and writers involved in it. Scholars like Ji Hongzhen, who published an essay "Chinese Fictions in Recent Year and Modernist Literature in the West" ("Zhongguo Jinnian Xiaoshuo yu Xifang Xiandaizhuyiwenxue") in 1988 on a national newspaper *Wenyi Bao* (*Literature and Art*) contended that according to the criteria of modernism in the West, there is no proper modernism in China, and critics such as Liu Xiaobo and Chen Chong held similar ideas. As for the latter attitude, the leading exponent is Cao Shunqing who wrote a series of essays about the "aphasia of literature theory" against deploying terms and theories from the West in Chinese literature.



problem is not about the practice of Chinese literature or arts, but contained in a Hall called the discourse of “West/ the Rest”.

However, it is more effective to seek the answer from the practice rather than the enclosed critical discourse. Modernism in China, first imported as an idea and soon incorporated in the campaign of social revolution, shares the same spirit with the Western model. However, the Chinese modernism is not copied or purely transplanted; the transition in China is more complicated and more radical as the result of its own inner contradiction.

At the turn of the twentieth century Chinese society also underwent an ideological shift in line with modernisation, from a traditional agricultural society to an industrial society. In “*Chinese Literature from 1841 to 1937*”<sup>[13]</sup>, David Der-Wei Wang introduces three important moments in the modernization in China in regarding to the evolution of literature. The first one is the end of the First Opium War (1840–1842), the second is the end of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and the third is the May Fourth Movement, a nationwide cultural and political campaign begun on May 4, 1919 that called for self-rejuvenation in response to China’s setbacks in post-World War I international politics (413-467). However, this essay sees the modernisation in China from the end of the first Sino-Japanese War, when the modern

industry and the systematic importation of the Western modern technology and thoughts originated.

Due to the so-called *unequal treaties* signed with the Western countries as the consequence of its military failures, China was forced to join the global market and gradually become involved with the process of globalisation. The emergence of national capitalism was the outcome of the internal changes of Chinese social and economic conditions compounded by their forced open market to the West. Commodities, native and imported alike, rapidly changed the traditional agricultural economy and people’s lives. Modern ideas and thoughts that had developed over generations in the Western world, from Renaissance to modernism, poured into Chinese intellectual circles of the time. The scholar David Der-Wei Wang remarks “social changes ran the gamut from technological and commercial advancement to epistemological renovation” (413). This *abundance* with the sudden presence of the unfolding world profoundly changed Chinese intellectuals’ perception of time and space.

Although the modernisation of Chinese society began about 1895, the revolution of aesthetics occurred about two decades later, marked by the inauguration of New Culture Movement (*Xin Wenhua Yundong*) in 1916.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is also known as New Literature Movement (Xin Wenxue Yundong). According to the literary historian Xie Mian, it began

This aesthetic and literary revolution Shared the same purpose with the economic and politic revolutions and inevitably linked itself to the discourse of national salvation, for the Chinese cultural forerunners believed that empowering their less developed nation required not only modern industry and a modern political system but also a “modern mind”: the Western system of knowledge and even, its lifestyle. In the general preface to the *Compendium of China’s New Literature* (*Zhongguo Xin wenxue Daxi*)<sup>[14]</sup>, Cai Yuanpei, one of the key figures of this movement, compared the New Culture Movement with the European Renaissance and pointed out that there was more-than-a-three-hundred-year gap between China and the West. He thus claimed: “We have to work extremely hard in decades to catch up with the centuries of progress in Europe,” because “our history and the modern condition urge us to stride and rush forward.” (11)

Compared to its so-called advanced Western counterpart, Chinese tradition was criticised and challenged as corrupt and outdated. This rebellion can be seen in two editorials of the journal *New Youth* (*Xin Qinnian*), which is considered to be the headquarter of the New Culture Movement. In “*The Manifesto of Xin Qinnian*” (“*Ben Zhi*

*Xuanyan*”)<sup>[16]</sup>, Chen Duxiu, the editor and also its founder, announced:

“To seek social progress, we must challenge the preconception that the tradition or custom is always right. We are determined to forsake this old belief on the one hand and on the other create new ideas for politics, morality, and economy ourselves, based on the thoughts and ideas of previous and contemporary prominent intellectuals. We strive to establish a new spirit of the age and adapt to new social environment.”<sup>7</sup>

In the earlier “*A Defense of Xin Qinnian*” (“*Ben Zhi Zuian Zhi Dabian Shu*”)<sup>[16]</sup>, Chen Duxiu defined what the tradition and custom was and showed a more radical attitude:

“What they accuse us was nothing more than damaging Confucianism, rites and disciplines, the essence of the Chinese culture, chastity, traditional ethics (loyalty, filial piety, and integrity), old art (Chinese drama), religion (beliefs in ghosts and gods), old literature, and old politics (the privileged class and the rule of man). As a matter of fact, we agree with all these accusations. However, we are not guilty if the cause for subverting all these is to be examined. We committed these “crimes” because we support Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. If we have to advocate democracy, we have to undermine Confucianism, rites and disciplines, chastity, old ethics, and old politics; if we have to advocate science, we have to reject the

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around 1916 and continued until the eve of the “War of Resistance”. See the details in Xie Mian’s *Ideological Transformation of 20th Century Chinese Literature* (2015). p. 2

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<sup>7</sup> This editorial is in *New Youth* vol.7, No. 1, 1919. The English translation here is revised from Xie Mian’s *Ideological Transformation of 20th Century Chinese Literature*.

essence of Chinese literature and old literature.” (qtd. in Xie, 32-33)<sup>8</sup>

These quotations suggest the determinations of these Chinese revolutionary forerunners and the fierce dispute between radicals and conservatives.

With respect to literature, this revolution largely follows two threads. One is the revolution of literary form, replacing the traditional style with vernacular language. In 1917, Hu Shi’s publication of “*A Proposal for Reforming Literature*” (“*Wenxue Gailiang Chuyi*”)<sup>[17]</sup> in *New Youth* inaugurated this formalist revolution. The most radical change took place in poetry. Inspired by Ezra Pound’s Imagist principles and practice, Hu began to promote free verse in China, elucidating his conception of *new poetry* in “On New Poetry”. He writes:

“Formal restrictions limit the free development of the spirit and constrain the full expression of good content. If we yearn for new content and a new spirit, we must break away from the manacles that chain our spirit. Therefore, the recent new poetry movement in China is an emancipation of poetic form.” (295)

To promote this revolution, he also published a volume of so-called new poetry titled *The Experiment* (1920) to set an example. The other thread of the aesthetic revolution involved advocating the spirit of humanism. Zhou Zuoren borrowed from the Western idea

of individualism and proposed an idea of *human literature* and wrote an essay of the same title which was published in *New Youth* in 1918. In this essay, he emphasises that new literature is a type of literature concerning both body and soul. (195)<sup>[18]</sup>

At this point, both Hu and Zhou’s groundbreaking essays prepared the form and content for a new literature in China. Following these two threads, assorted ideas were tested to serve the purpose of fostering the “modern mind”, from enlightenment to Romanticism.

During 1930s and 1940s, modernist literature in China, inspired by Western modernist practice, began to take shape. In 1932, Shi Zhezun and other friends founded the literary magazine *Les Contemporains* (*Xiandai*), which published translations of symbolists, imagists, and modernists such as Mallarmé, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. As David Wang observes, *Les Contemporains* was the main forum for Chinese avant-garde works. The Beijing literary circle, as Wang notes, was deeply influenced by Anglo-English culture. (527)<sup>[13]</sup> Moreover, literary modernism in China, as the studies of Carolyn FitzGerald and Long Quanming suggest, was maturing during the War of Resistance and achieved a new height in mid-1940s.<sup>9</sup> Xie Mian notes the similarity

<sup>8</sup> See the original Chinese text in Chen, Duxiu. “A Defense of Xin qingnian”, *New Youth*, vol. 6, No. 1, 1919. p. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> See the details in Carolyn FitzGerald’s *Fragmenting*

*Modernisms: Chinese Wartime Literature, Art, and Film, 1937-49* (2014) and Long Quanming’s “*The Adjustment and*

between modernism in the Western world and in China:

“[The intellectuals and writers] were caught in a sense of existential anxiety and absurdity; hence they no longer pursued a realist approach to portray social life and human relationships. This was the context for the similarity between China’s modernist literature and its Western counterpart.” (114)<sup>[15]</sup>

Chinese modernists, deeply influenced by Western modernists and their ideas, also aimed to search for a new form of language to accommodate the experience outside of traditional symbolism and thus to grasp the bewildering, changing world.

As it shows above, when the conditions prepared and the modernity of Chinese society progress, modernism as aesthetic practice responding to social changes occurred, and this aesthetic revolution forms a context, where individual experience of abundance is woven into artistic representation.

## 6 Conclusion

As it shows above, the established critical discourse on modernism based on “the West/the Rest” dichotomy solves problems as much as it causes. The main reason is that it takes modernism as a transparent concept which automatically ignores the differences within the category of so-called “the West”.

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*Transformation of Chinese Modernist Poetry in 1940s”*

(“Zhongguo Xiandai zhuyi Shige zai Sishi Niandai de Tiaozheng yu Zhuanhua”) (2002).

However, the solution to this problem is not simply appeal to more studies on modernism outside the West, as the critical discourse remains problematic. In so doing, more questions raise complicated by nationalist sentiment: whether there is modernism outside of the West; who sets the criteria and who are the followers. Based on “the West/the Rest” dichotomy, the debate will never end.

Although the concept of modernism is a huge topic in its own right and we can only examine it here in a small part, this essay suggests a new perspective of understanding modernism as a context where the revolutionary power of subject is released. In this discourse, modernism is no longer static innovated forms but practices of the creative subject. In this concept, there is no “the West/the Rest” dichotomy, but human activities in a rapid changing situations. Moreover, taking modernism as practice which is aesthetic response to modernity will not only deepen the understanding of modernism *per se*, but also the understanding of modernity. This will also provide a new perspective to interpret the Chinese modernization right in the process.

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