

Mark Twain's Critical Reception in China

Yang Jincai & Yu Lei

Abstract: Early at the beginning of the 20th century, the name of Mark Twain appeared in Chinese literary journals, but serious critical interest in him came much later in the 1930s when a few of his works were translated. Gradually there have occurred various critical remarks among literary scholars who are well trained in literary studies. They write about Mark Twain displaying a multifaceted writer who followed a course from politics to poetics. The critical reception of Mark Twain in China is not a one-dimensional matter. What governs this reception, though sometimes a matter of chance, are intricately connected to the features of Chinese culture of politics and mentality. In this sense, if we want to explain the way Mark Twain and his works have found their place in Chinese culture, it is necessary to consider the specific development of the Chinese literary consciousness from the beginning of the 20th century till now. There could be discerned three distinct sociocultural periods. Mark Twain's reception in China has followed the national agenda of each of the three different periods of sociocultural development as well as the tastes and reading horizons of the audience.

Key words: Mark Twain; China; criticism; reception

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标题: 马克·吐温在中国的接受

内容摘要: 马克·吐温的名字早在 20 世纪初即频现于中国的文学刊物，然而围绕其所展开的严肃的学术探讨却表现出明显的滞后，直到 20 世纪 30 年代方才伴随吐温作品的翻译而有所呈现，并产生了一批具有文学修养的批评家。他们循着从政治到诗学的轨迹揭示马克·吐温的多重面相。吐温在中国的批评接受表现出多维度的特质，其背后的诱因尽管有偶然性，但与中国的政治与思想文化有着内在关联。因此，倘若我们要理解马克·吐温在中国文化中得以立足的途径，就有必要考察中国的文学观变迁，尤其是自 20 世纪初至今

所见证的具体演化。它包括三个独特的社会文化阶段，而每一个阶段又均对应着各自所处的国家发展进程以及受众的审美和阅读视野。

关键词：马克·吐温；中国；批评；接受

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Mark Twain is the pen name for Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910) who took the river boatman cry of “Two Fathoms” on board in his time to mean that water is 12 feet (3.7 m) deep and that it is safe to pass. This weird expression, for Chinese readers, has no *raison d’être* except referring to that pompous, famous, and humorous American writer. Interestingly, the literati in China have rendered both misunderstanding and worthwhile academic scholarship as a result of translating and interpreting Mark Twain’s works. Although Mark Twain was introduced in China during the first decade of the 20th century, his literary influence, artistic orientation and political and humanistic concerns have never failed to catch the curiosity of the Chinese academic circles. Does Mark Twain debunk or cultivate American capitalist discursive power? Is his writing directed more towards human goodness than towards the seamy side of humanity or the other way round? Is he merely a “misanthropic cynicist” (Lu 340) or an optimistic social activist? These are the questions that have prevailed among Chinese scholars of American literary studies.

While we have notable fruits of academic Mark Twain studies in China, especially in recent years, when scholars began to incorporate into their studies the results of innovative criticism of Mark Twain in the United States, his reception by Chinese literary critics may not seem to be very conspicuous or significant. Yet, when we inquire into the reception, seeking its true core, we find several important facts that tell us Mark Twain has had a great impact on Chinese critics as he has influenced twentieth-century writers and critics throughout the world. Also, we find Chinese reception of Mark Twain has been largely and intricately connected to the features of Chinese culture of politics and mentality. Here we will give a survey of how Mark Twain is introduced, reviewed, and received in China.

Debut of Chinese Interest in Mark Twain

The first Chinese translation of Mark Twain came out in 1905 when his political satire *The Czar’s Soliloquy* appeared in the Gazette titled *Zhixue* (*Ways of Learning*). The translation is not at all a random choice, for it was made in special

response to the political and social milieu in China in 1900 when Western powers were joining their hands to crack down on the Boxers' Rebellion. Czarist Russia seized the chance and invaded China desiring to occupy its Northeastern provinces. From February 1904 to September 1905, Russia and Japan got entangled in a war rivaling for the region, leaving China war-torn and causing heavy losses. Seen as a revolutionary pamphlet by the revolution-oriented Chinese literati, "The Czar's Soliloquy" was not simply a satire against Nicholas II, but more importantly taken as a strong support for the then Chinese anti-imperialist campaign. It was perceived as a text to expose Czar Nicholas II's absurd autocracy and cruelty. Soon Mark Twain's another story "The Californian's Tale" was translated and appeared as "Qi" ("Wife") in the 70th issue of *Illustrated Fiction* in 1906 (Tarumoto 618).

Set in a lifeless and depressing scene after the futile Californian gold-mining frenzy, "The Californian's Tale", in a woeful tone, portrays a man named Henry, who spends the past 19 years waiting for his wife to return, irrespective of the fact that she has long been captured by the Indians on her way back. Mark Twain, though still assuming his colloquial texture, did not seem to intend it for a humorous one. What strikes as most impressive however remains overlooked, for it buries under its guise of love romance a hidden gadget of social criticism, in which the absurdity of the gold-rush fantasy is metaphorically embodied in a lunatic husband who was waiting in vain for his never-to-return wife. In his "Foreword" Zhou Shoujuan called Mark Twain "the first modern American author"(qtd in Bao 17), but such extolment was ironically contrasted with the scanty attention paid him in the late-Qing Dynasty. For obvious practical reasons, the work was translated in line with then the purpose of translation that should aim at enlightening common Chinese and hence fortifying their national sense (Meng and Li 43-45). In an age when China was ravaged by allied Western powers with the United States as one of their leaders, the translation of "The Californian's Tale" aimed at a critique of U. S. imperialism, conforming to the cultural and political climate of late Qing.

There lied a mystery why *The Californian's Tale* was first brought out in *Illustrated Fiction*, a short-lived popular magazine, with altogether 72 issues published from 1905 to 1906. The most important hint is offered by the time of its publication—1906, a year when the 1905-1906 anti-American boycott movement was still in full swing throughout China due to the U. S. government's enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act.¹ Though an ephemeral literary magazine, *Illustrated*

1 See Tao Wenzhao, *The Sino-U.S. Diplomatic History* (Beijing: Beijing Social Science Document Press, 2000) 44; for more information, see also Wang Guanhua, *Searching for Justice: The 1905-1906 Chinese Anti-American Boycott* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2007).

Fiction did echo the phase's call for a cultural, social and national revolution. One of the purposes of this magazine was to introduce ideologically-oriented fiction, both at home and abroad, to disseminate revolutionary thoughts, to reform the late-Qing society and to fight against the imperialist assaults from Western powers. Undoubtedly, "the Exclusion Act" provoked anger in the Chinese to start a national drive, and *Illustrated Fiction* was playing a leading role in calling for the activities. In a nutshell, just like Yan Tong's rendition of The Czar's Soliloquy, Wu Tao's translation of The Californian's Tale and its publication in *Illustrated Fiction* were not only closely-knit with the anti-imperialist historical backdrop but opened up a way for Mark Twain's journey of reception in China. What follows may offer a glimpse of such undertaking.

Translations of Mark Twain's Works in China

From the 1930s on, a small proportion of Mark Twain's works were introduced to Chinese readers. His *Eve's Diary*, for example, was released in 1931 and Lu Xun, known as the vanguard of the Left Wing, wrote an introductory note for the Chinese version, exhibiting his attitudes towards American literature. According to Lu Xun,

The U.S. has turned into an industrialized society, in which individualism is subdued and personalities are cast into the same mold. Instead of promoting self, one has to strive for conformity. Anyone who claims it will be persecuted. What writers care about nowadays is not how to express their personalities but how to write in order to market their works for fame by catering to the public tastes. Even W. D. Howells already so well-known has to give in and begins to believe that entertainment is what enables a man of letters to be recognized in the world. Therefore a few of those untamable find themselves displaced and flee to foreign lands, just as Henry James did; some others such as Mark Twain have to cajole and find pleasure in cracking jokes. In consequence, [Twain] turns humorist just for bread and butter, but this sort of life cannot always guarantee laughter, for woe and satire soon set in. It is because of this little protest against American reality that children in the New Land, say Soviet Union, are happy to claim: "Mark Twain is ours." (Lu 340-341)

As far as Lu Xun was concerned, American realism had more or less been reduced to a medium of entertainment. Henry James turned worshipper of European culture while Twain was actually received within the Soviet literary framework.

Meanwhile, Lu Xun, far-sighted, noted that Twain's Eve in fact is symbolic of an Americanized girl, rather than what the author took for granted, "a portrait of all ladies." Ironically, Lu Xun in his concluding remarks displays his interest in the original illustrations of the story by Ralph Lester, appreciating them highly as "delicate," "fresh," and "healthy." Later, Yang Yi, author of *The Illustration of New Literature in China*, noted in particular Lu Xun's support for the translation of *Eve's Diary*, saying that it is Lu Xun's interest in the book's illustrations that has allowed him to advocate its translation. China's New Literature, Yang continues, saddled with its Herculean task of social reformation, can hardly reflect upon humanity as *Eve's Diary*. He then pointed out that if we have focused so much attention on its illustration we should have forgotten this work (Yang Yi 7-8). As a matter of fact, Chinese literary circles have never overlooked Twain's *Eve's Diary* as they still have with them both the text and illustrations and, above all, Lu Xun's precious introductory note. Regardless of his biased views for the illustrations, Lu Xun did not really undermine his willful pursuit for revolutionary literature. Here is his interesting observation: Such illustrations may have the advantage of clarification for the eyes of those in China who have long been accustomed to the portraits of "sidewise-looking and narrow-shouldered beauties" (Lu 341).

The beginning of the 1930s saw a moment of disputes over the introduction of American literature in which many Chinese scholars became enthusiastic about American writers like Mark Twain while some others, driven by an ideological orientation, found it hard to recognize the significance of American literature. The mainstream literary periodicals at the time such as *Xin Qingnian* (*New Youth*) and *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* (*The Short Story Magazine*), to name a few, all favored special issues, introducing Ibsen, Tagore, Byron, Russian literature and French literature, without showing any interest in American writers. It was not until October 1934 when a special issue of "Modern American Literature" was released in the journal *Modern* (no. 6, vol. 5). With the advent of the issue, Chinese scholars began to redress the hereditary depreciative evaluation of American authors and their works (Ma 672-673). Despite doubts, disputes and even reproaches, this special issue, after all, ushered in an unprecedented era of translations of American literature. Under this circumstance, Mark Twain's literary traits were for the first time appreciated by Chinese readers. Zhao Jiabi, for instance, spoke highly of Twain's sense of humor and saw it as a unique feature of Western American literature. In his discussion he quoted from Bret Hart to recognize Mark Twain as the father of American humor.

Alongside this scholarly observation came the translations of several of Mark

Twain's stories and novels. In 1932, Yue Qi put into Chinese *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and his Chinese version was soon followed by four other different renditions respectively by Wu Jingxin in 1933, Wu Guangjian in 1934, Zhou Shixiong in 1939, and Zhang Duosheng in 1949. It is noteworthy that Zhang Duosheng's version, finished in December 1939, carries not only two pages of black-and-white pictures from Norman Taurog's film version, but also a very impressive scholarly "foreword" by Zhao Jinshen who reiterated the fiction's childish tone and a sense of humor typical of Mark Twain. In 1934, Chung Hwa Book Company in Shanghai brought out *A Collection of Humorous Stories* in which Zhang Menglin, one of the noted translators, put into Chinese Mark Twain's short story "Is He Living or Dead" and gave it a Chinese title that literally means "The Death of a Painter." In 1949 Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in Chinese.

Observed from a historical view, translations of Mark Twain in China witnessed a dramatic change in number from 1949 to the early years of China's reform and opening-up. Due to whatever political or ideological reasons, Chinese scholars were in favor of Soviet Union in the late 1950s when China and Soviet Union were allies, rebuking the military and political antagonism between China and the United States. Naturally, Soviet-Russian literature became the focus of China's literary academia. According to official statistics, the Soviet-Russian literary works rendered into Chinese accounted for 74.4% of the total of the printed translation of foreign literature from October 1949 up to September 1958 (Bian 45-48). American literature was generally rejected except a few "progressive" writers so called were taken into serious consideration and often treated as instruments for political purposes. Mark Twain, on account of his "political awareness" and critique of American capitalism, was lucky enough to have been well received. Translations of his works in the 1950s displayed two striking features namely a growing number of translators and translations and various re-translations and different editions of the same work. As has been exhibited by the statistics from the National Library of China, around 30 Mark Twain's works were translated from 1950 to 1959, of which the majority are new versions and quite a few are only re-translations. Among the new versions are *Life on the Mississippi*, *The Innocents Abroad*, *A Man Who Corrupts Hadleburg*, *Tom Sawyer, Detective*, *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, *The Canvasser's Tale*, *Pudd'n'head Wilson*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Gilded Age*, *A Mysterious Stranger*, *A Connecticut in the Court of King Arthur*. Re-translations focused mainly on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, rendered by excellent translators such as Zhang Yousong and

Zhang Wanli. The 1957 Beijing edition of *The Gilded Age* was prefaced with the information that this novel was “a full panorama of American politics, laws, and social life boasted of by the American capitalists” and an exposé of the “origin of the American autocracy in politics and economy of today” (Twain, “Preface” to *The Gilded Age* 1), while the 1958 translation of *Life on the Mississippi* extolled the work as “an ode in praise of the power of the working class” (Twain, “Preface” to *Life on the Mississippi* 2). But from 1960 to 1978 there was not any translation of Mark Twain in mainland China.

As China's reform and opening-up set in, many scholars turned to American literature again. Mark Twain's literary charisma was then attended. During this period, translation of Twain's literary works became more extensive, highlighting his canonical position. According to the data collected from the National Library of China, the total of Mark Twain's translations, both new and reprinted, numbered around 40 during the 1980s, 90 during the 1990s, and more than 200 during the first 8 years of the 21st century. The bulk of these translations are Mark Twain's most renowned works, such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Prince and the Pauper*. Obviously, these translations have helped to give a full view of “authentic Twain,” an ambitious undertaking embodied in the 2001 publication of the 8-million-word Chinese-rendered *Nineteen Volumes of Mark Twain*, edited by Wu Juntao and published by Hebei Education Press.

Studies of Mark Twain in China

Mark Twain studies during the late-Qing period remained all but a dreary desert. Bidding farewell to the Qing Dynasty, China was ushered into the Republic era from 1911 to 1949, whose first decade and a half witnessed a series of political and military upheavals including, among many, 1911 Revolution, May 4 Movement, and War-lord Clearance Drive. Translations headed by *New Youth* primarily focused on European realism, including Soviet-Russian literature and those of other nations under colonial rule, giving rise to the New Culture Movement which calls for a literary revolution. It is against such political orientation that American literature was rejected. Mark Twain was unexceptionally targeted. It was not until the late 1920s when Chinese literary scholars underwent a backlash against the long-term negligence of American authors (Ma 671-672). Soon Mark Twain caught attention again because of his literary influence. Books of American literature came out in the late 1920s, nearly all of which handled Mark Twain though in varying degrees. Zeng Xubai, the author of *The ABC of American Literature* (1929), wrote jocosely

about Mark Twain:

Those youths anxiously seeking stories in Twain do not know that Twain is, over their heads, discussing with their parents the most serious and the most thought-provoking issues of human life. Twain's works take on two-fold significance, referring to one thing literally and the other symbolically. His cultivation of profundity in both humor and meaning and exposé of human stupidity are far more gratifying. Indeed, he is a human philosopher dressed like a clown. (Zeng 92)

In 1934, The Commercial Press in Shanghai released two books *American Literature* and *An Overview of American Literature* which offered a remarkable survey of Twain's writing, with the former dealing with Huckleberry Finn's "Hamlet problem of making a decision" (Zhang Yuerui, *American Literature* 99), and the latter throwing light on Twain's "hyperbolic touch towards paradox and absurdity, as well as the resultant natural astonishment" (Zhang Yuerui, *An Overview of American Literature* 122).

By and large, translations of Twain in China, for quite a long time, was given a head start against his criticism, which, if there was any value, primarily centered round Twain's life experiences, publications and ways of composition (Ma 683). Of particular note is Zhao Jingshen's "Foreword" to the Chinese version of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*:

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer writes about the barbarity of children life that may go beyond rule, but it is imbued with a high human sense...*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* covers a much wider range; hence it is not simply a book for children, nor a book about children, but one of various social studies through the saintly eyes of innocent minors... Mark Twain is far more a social novelist and a precursor of American realism than an American humourist. (Zhao 44)

It is true that early studies of Mark Twain partook of literary criticism. But they were mostly "borrowed" from the U.S., for Zhao Jingshen once said jokingly: "If there are any drawbacks in my article, they all belong to foreign spooks, and I am not to blame" (Zhao 35).

During the 3 decades from 1949 to 1978, China's Mark Twain scholars still followed the footsteps of those in the late-Qing and Republic eras, privileging

translation over criticism. In the then mainstream literary journals were discussions about literatures from the former U.S.S.R., Eastern Europe, Asian countries, Africa and Latin America. In 1979, the 5th and the 9th issue of the well-known journal *Reading* carried respectively Professor Zhou Jueliang's article "A Review of *A Short History of American Literature*" and Professor Wang Zuoliang's essay "Editor's Words to *Selected American Short Stories*," both speaking in favour of Twain's famous story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" with the consensus that Mark Twain studies in China should break the convention of ideological reading and widen its scope of criticism.¹

China's Mark Twain studies at the moment, though lacking in originality and solid scholarship, did make great strides in comparison with the previous biased eras filled with ideological concerns. The 1980s saw an unprecedented flourishing of Twain studies, taking on a more professional merit. Ye Shuifu spoke highly of this change, maintaining that foreign literary studies in China have made remarkable achievements despite the affective impact of successive political movements (Ye 3-8). In contrast with Ye's panoramic view of foreign literary studies, Shao Xudong's article "A Review of the Domestic Twain Studies" was more specific, illustrating how an American writer was perceived in the new era. Shao summed up Chinese reception of Mark Twain from three aspects, say, "edification," "aesthetics" and "localization." He not only commented favorably on the achievements made so far but also pointed out various inadequacies in Twain studies (Shao 132-136).

Since the mid-1980s Chinese Twain scholars have tried to incorporate contemporary Western critical theories into their approaches. They have gradually abandoned the stereotyped model of "exposure and satire" and begun to approach his aesthetical realm, displaying a wide interest in Twain's long-neglected minor works. *Foreign Literature Studies* carried in 1986 an article titled "The Three Phases of Twain's Composition," which observed Mark Twain as a humorist, maintaining that Twain's humor is not all along withering satire but light-hearted, comical and jocose as well (Shen 60-65, 59). Follow-up researches also stand out dealing with Twain's "putative artistic loopholes" (Wang Disheng 3-8) as well as his underestimated ability of "cultivating melancholy" (Dong 3).

Another significant feature of this period's Mark Twain studies is that scholars began to incorporate disciplines other than literary studies such as anthropology and ethnology into a diversified frame of criticism. In 1999, for instance, the 4th issue

1 See Zhou Jueliang, "A Review of *A Short History of American Literature*," *Reading* 5(1979): 27-30; Wang Zuoliang, "Editor's Words to *Selected American Short Stories*," *Reading* 9 (1979): 75-78.

of the *Journal of Zhejiang University* published an anthropological study of Twain titled “*Huckleberry Finn* and the Rite of Passage,” revealing the “conflicts between culture and personality, society and individual, selfness and otherness,” and the primitive unconscious positioned in the writer’s mind (Zhang Deming 91-97). This study offers another thought-provoking observation of the work’s local cultural features in question. In 2006, there appeared in the 5th issue of *Foreign Literature Studies* a study of racism in American literature entitled *The Indians in the 19th-Century White American Literary Classics*, in which Mark Twain is critiqued as an advocate for “white colonialism” (Zou 45-51). Obviously, such a view is oversimplified as regards Twain’s sympathetic attitudes towards other ethnic minorities such as African Americans and Chinese immigrants. In 2003, *Foreign Literature Review* released an article probing into Mark Twain’s perception of China from a post-colonial perspective. For the first time in China, Twain was seen as both a humanitarian and an Orientalist (Cui 123-130). It may be claimed that Chinese observation of Mark Twain since the mid-1980s has gradually departed from a simplistic political/ideological reading and become more committed to an exploration of a true Mark Twain. In short, Mark Twain’s writings, as these and other critical studies suggest, are now commonly read as comprehensive manifestations of a variety of nineteenth-century American cultural phenomena (Yang Jincai 27). Chinese scholarship on Mark Twain, as Yuping Wang has noted, includes studies about his humor and terror, his depiction of children, as well as his views on race, morality, and China in addition to postcolonial perspectives on his representation of Hawaii with the production of American colonial space (Wang Yuping 658).

Looking back on his centennial passage in China, we find that Mark Twain has earned a large measure of Chinese popularity though he often stands at the crossroads, just like a statue, frequently passed by and quite well known to us, but far from being perused. In terms of text selection and theoretical approaches, Mark Twain scholarship in China in the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s is quite varied. Nevertheless, there is still in Mark Twain’s literary hoard plenty of treasure that may be worthy of further exploration. While we read notable fruits of academic Mark Twain studies in the United States, especially in recent years, when American Mark Twain Scholars have begun to incorporate into their approaches the results of innovative criticism of the writer, there has also occasioned the most intense period of the critical reception of Mark Twain in China, which provides readers with comprehensive analyses of the major writings and motifs of a canonized master of world literature. Obviously, literary criticism has always played a significant

role in Chinese studies of American literature as well as in the critical reception of Mark Twain in China. Chinese perception of Mark Twain is closely related to the political and cultural development of the whole Chinese society. Social changes and ideologies have exerted profound influences on the trend of foreign literary studies in which Chinese scholarship on Mark Twain stands out.

To Conclude, We are pleased to release that the future of Mark Twain studies in China looks bright, for the number of degree theses on Mark Twain has been growing steadily in China since 1980. Today, editions of Mark Twain's works are generally available in Chinese bookstores and libraries. English editions with Chinese footnotes are standard texts in Chinese colleges and universities. Reviewers, scholars and degree candidates in China are now joining their hands to fathom the complexities in Mark Twain's works. While responding to the Anglo-American tradition of criticism, Chinese scholars are nowadays making great efforts to found their own. And no doubt such efforts will be contributive to a global perspective of Mark Twain. That is also why Mark Twain has continued showing us not only his masterly art and changeable qualities, but also his own anxieties, concerning different human races as well as his search for humanity which attempts to "translate natural substances into flesh-and-blood stories" (Dawson 381) worthy of moral and ethical selections despite humorous characterization and improbable innocence.

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