

Langston Hughes' s Visit to China: Its Facts and Impacts

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Abstract: This article presents a historical outline of Langston Hughes's only visit to China in 1933, re-examines some important facts including Hughes's meeting with Lu Xun, and corrects some inaccurate account in Hughes's autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*. Furthermore, this article explores the significance of Hughes's visit to China for Chinese intellectual circles, and the impact of this visit upon Hughes himself as a writer and thinker. It is probable that Hughes's visit demonstrates his favorable views on Marxism and contributes to his using China metonymically as a strategy of political expression.

Key words: Langston Hughes; China; Lu Xun; Hughes scholarship in China; world view; political expression

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标题: 兰斯顿·休斯的中国行：史实与影响

内容提要: 美国非裔诗人兰斯顿·休斯于 1933 年访问了中国，这是他毕生唯一的一次中国之行。本文对休斯的中国之行进行了历史梳理，重新考察了鲁迅会见休斯等重要史实，纠正了休斯的自传《我漫游，我求索》中关于这次中国之行的几处不准确记述。在此基础上，本文还讨论了休斯的中国之行对中国知识界的意义以及对他本人的创作和思想的影响。本文认为，休斯的中国之行反映了他对马克思主义的积极态度，也为他后来在文学创作中将中国作为转喻进行政治表达的策略奠定了基础。

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Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was always on the move in his lifetime, from his childhood to adulthood. As a writer and thinker, Hughes traveled extensively to enlarge his spiritual and artistic growth, a fact noted by many scholars. However, there is still much space for a reevaluation of Hughes's travels such as his 1933 visit to China. Hughes visited China once in July 1933 on his journey back to San Francisco from Moscow after his one-year visit in the USSR. Though he stayed in Shanghai and Nanjing just for less than 3 weeks, the visit has great impact not only upon Langston Hughes as a social writer but also upon Chinese scholarship on Hughes himself. While some scholars focus more on Hughes's travel to the USSR, some Chinese scholars still argue over whether Hughes met Lu Xun or not during his 1933 trip to Shanghai. The argument has contributed to the popularity of Hughes in China. Thus this article is intended to clarify some historical facts concerned with Hughes's trip to China and explore the impact of his visit to Chinese scholarship and upon his own thoughts and literary creation.

1. Hughes's Trip to China

Langston Hughes's 1933 trip to China was obviously personal, or in his own words, "to circle the globe" (212) by going back the United States via the Orient. This is probably because of two reasons. First, his "wonderlust," as Amiri Baraka put it (Hughes, Back cover), drove him to choose a route of going home different from that of his coming so as to see China and its Beijing, "the ancient city I had never dreamed" (213). Hughes used funds earned by writing in Russia to pay for the trip (213). The second reason may lie in his contact with Sylvia (Si-Lan) Chen, a woman dancer Hughes acclaimed that he "was in love with" in the winter of 1932 when he stayed in Moscow. Sylvia Chen was the daughter of Eugene Chen, the former Trinidad merchant and lawyer who had given his early savings to the founding of the Republic of China and had been Minister of Foreign Relations in the Kuomintang (Nationalist) Government. He was a pro-Soviet and pro-Communist Kuomintang Leftist and in 1927, together with Madame Sun Yat-Sen (Song Qingling), openly denounced Chiang Kai-Shek for Chiang's purging

Communists, which put Eugene Chen and his family in so much danger that they fled to the Soviet Union in two groups — his two sons (Percy and Jack) together with the Soviet adviser Mikhail Markovich Borodin (1884-1951) by train via the Gobi Desert in Northwestern China to Russia, and him and his two daughters (Si-Lan and Yolanda) together with Madame Sun Yat-sen by sea to Moscow. When Hughes was in Moscow, Si-Lan usually visited him or invited him to her apartment, treating him with tea and tales about her family, as remembered by Hughes:

Si-Lan Chen [...] had been a winter's delight in Moscow, serving me tea and cakes in her lovely room overlooking the Bolshoi Square on snowy afternoon, and telling me dramatic tales of the Chinese Revolution and the family flight over the Gobi Desert into Turkestan when the counter-revolution took over. (256)

These tales, for Hughes, are not just the Chen family stories but also stories about Chinese politics, and seem to be of remarkable interest for Hughes, who turned to pro-communism in the early 1930s and began hailing the Soviet Union as a good example of social organization for other countries. This is why Hughes requested an interview with Madame Sun Yat Sen (Hughes 255) when newly arriving in Shanghai and attended gatherings with Chinese leftist writers in Shanghai.

In the last months of his one-year stay in the Soviet Union, firstly as a member of an artist group to make a movie and then a tourist after the collapse of the movie project, Hughes decided to go back to the United States via China. According to *I Wonder as I Wander*, Hughes spent three months arranging his journey back to the States via China and Japan by travelling by train via Siberia and then Beijing to Shanghai, where he would take a voyage to Japan and then to the United States. But a couple of weeks before his departure, he learned that the Japanese had cut the Chinese Eastern Railway line at the Siberian border and that he had to change his itinerary for a trip to China via Vladivostok in the USSR's Far East and then Japan (226). When it was spring in Moscow, Hughes left for the Far East by way of the *Orient Express*, the Trans-Siberian train to Vladivostok. The next day, he took a ship for Japan, via Korea, where he stayed for one day in a little town named Seishin. He arrived on an afternoon of June at Tsuruga on the western coast of Honsu, Japan's main island. In Japan he visited Kyoto and Tokyo, where he stayed for about two weeks before he boarded a ship for Shanghai on June 30, 1933, according to Rampersad (272, 273).

Hughes arrived in Shanghai at the very beginning of July 1933, getting off the

ship at the Bund and checked in at a little Chinese-owned but European-style hotel in the International Settlement, thus beginning his nearly 3-week stay in China. In one of the first days he requested an interview with Madame Sun Yat-Sen, or Song Qingling, then chief of the Chinese Civil Rights Defense League, an anti-Chiang Kai-shek left-wing organization with Lu Xun as executive director of its Shanghai Branch, and was invited to a private banquet given by the latter on July 5. During his stay in Shanghai, he visited many places in this city, such as the factories with boy slaves, relics of Chapei (Zhabei) bombed by Japanese army in the late January 1932, slums outside the International Settlement, as well as what he said he saw, "from the Bund to Bubbling Well Road and the race tracks and outlying districts, the theaters, amusement parks, and the Canidrome Gardens where the best American jazz band in the Orient was playing" (251). He met Agnes Smedley¹, though he did not mention it in his autobiography. He also declared that he met Lun Xun at a private banquet. On July 13, he had a meeting with a group of Chinese journalists and writers. In the following days, he traveled to Nanjing by train and visited Sun Yat Sen's Tomb in the Purple Mountain, the Nanjing Circumvallation or the city wall built about 500 years ago in Ming Dynasty. From Nanjing he wished to go to Beijing. That was not possible due to the Japanese armies, so he returned to Shanghai with his money running low. He bought a ticket on the *Taiyo Maru* sailing via Yokahama for San Francisco. Just after the mid-July he went onboard for his return journey, and on July 22 he arrives in Japan's Kobe and the next day Yokohama, from where he sailed off for the States on July 26. But in the interval when the ship was in port, he went to Tokyo, and was questioned by Japanese police there for his supposedly dangerous thoughts and deeds in China and Japan.

One of the cases the Japanese police questioned him about was, besides his meeting with Madame Sun Yat Sen, his meeting with Chinese writers and journalists on the afternoon of July 13. This meeting was co-hosted by the magazines of *Literature* (1933-37) and *Les Contemporains* (1932-35), Chinese News Agency and other non-governmental organizations in the office of Chinese News Agency, but actually was organized by the Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers (1930-1936), according to Huang Yuan.² *Literature* was initiated by Zheng Zhenduo and Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing), two communist party members, and thus served in some sense as the mouthpiece of the Left-Wing Writers League when its

1 Agnes Smedley, "Letter to Aino Taylor" (July 26, 1943), July 1, 2010 <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALangston.html>>.

2 See Huang Yuan, Chapter 6, *Huang Yuan's Memoirs (Huang Yuan Huiyi Lu)* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 2001).

Fiction Monthly dissolved due to the 1932 Japanese bombing and Kuomintang's political pressure. *Les Contemporains* was politically neutral. Little was known about how this meeting was initiated, but it probably had much to do with Madame Sun, who was closely connected with the Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers and the pro-communist American journalist Harold Isaacs who hosted Hughes in Shanghai. Lou Shiyi of Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers was the liaison for the July 13 meeting with Hughes and chaired the meeting, and Yao Ke served as interpreter as he had the previous week at Madame Sun's banquet for Hughes. This meeting was attended by about 10 people, including Lou and Yao, Fu Donghua, Chief-Editor of *Literature*, Huang Yuan, assistant editor of *Literature*, Shi Zhecun, Chief Editor of *Les Contemporains*, Harold Robert Isaacs (1910-1986), executive director of the Chinese Civil Rights Defense League, and probably Xia Zhengnong, a member of the League of Left-Wing Writers and a contributor to *Literature*, who co-translated Hughes's first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1936) and might be the translator Hughes thought he met then in *I Wonder as I Wander* (256).

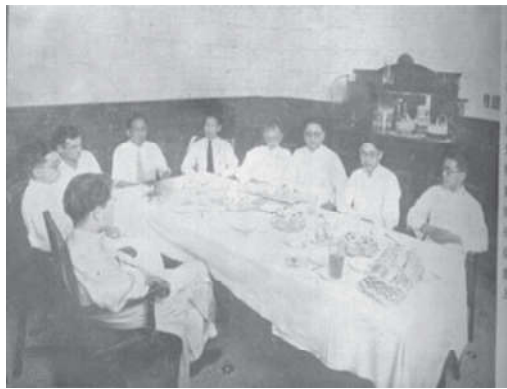
This meeting centered mainly around Hughes's literary and life experiences in the United States and the Soviet Union. There are five major questions raised on behalf of the group and Hughes gave his answer and comment one by one. The five questions are:

- (1) How do you think of the influence of the 2nd Five-year Plan of the USSR on its culture?
- (2) There are currently two literary schools — socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism — co-existing in the USSR. How do you understand their theory and practice?
- (3) What is the status quo of the USSR movie?
- (4) Please make a general introduction to American Negro Literature.
- (5) How do you think of the proletarian literature develops in the capitalist America? (Wu 257-258).

All the questions and answers are preserved in Fu Donghua's article entitled "Langston Hughes in China," which was published, in his pen name of Wu Shi, in *Literature* 1.2 (1933). The same issue of this journal carries Wu Shi's translation of Hughes's "People without Shoes," Hughes's signature and two photos, one being his portrait sitting in a chair and the other being of the group attending this meeting with Hughes sitting beside Harold Isaacs. Thus this issue makes a great documentary of Hughes's visit to China.



Pic 1 Hughes in Shanghai



Pic 2 Hughes meeting Chinese writers and journalists in Shanghai, July 13, 1933.

2. Controversy over Lu Xun's Meeting Hughes

What was unknown to Hughes when he sailed back for America is that he left behind a controversy over whether he met Lu Xun or not during his visit to China. Lu Xun was regarded as a flag of Chinese left-wing literature in the 1930s and his presence at or absence from the Hughes reception could be of great social and political significance. The controversy, unsolved until the beginning of the 21st century, was first presented by Fu Donghua's article "Langston Hughes in China" between him and Lu Xun, and then involved more writers and intellectuals of the coming generations. In this article published in *Literature*, Fu's opening paragraph compared the reception of Hughes and that of George Bernard Shaw who visited Shanghai in February 1933:

Langston Hughes, an American negro writer, came to China in early July after his trip to the Soviet Union. His reception can never match that of George Bernard Shaw, for there were no welcoming groups waiting at the wharf or any newspaper reporting his coming. The reason is simple enough. Mr. Shaw is celebrity and deserves our celebrities at the reception. Only because of the celebrity for celebrity practice did it make a rare chance of having Lu Xun and Dr. Mei Lanfang gathering together. Unfortunately, Langston Hughes is not that kind of celebrity for our celebrities, and, what is worse, there is a scruple about the color line. (254)

This really enraged Lu Xun, and he wrote a letter on July 29 to the editorial office of *Literature*, complaining sardonically that:

I was invited to attend the reception of Shaw last time. But as to the reception of Langston Hughes, I had not received any information and knew nothing about this event, so how could I attend it? Even if I had been invited, there must be some reason for my absence. It is advisable that he should make some investigation before criticizing me and [...] making a hasty judgment that I look down upon negroes. [...] I don't believe I am so mean and snobbish. (498)

Lu Xun, in this letter, confirmed his absence because of having not been invited, but neither claimed nor denied his meeting with Hughes on another occasion. This leaves the controversy in suspension, and, with the greater influence of *Literature*, it prevailed for quite a long time.

For Chinese writers in the 1930s, it was hard to ask for confirmation over such triviality from other people who might have some information, for Lu Xun, like many other leftists, was under close surveillance by Kuomintang and Japanese spies; or to request Hughes himself for help, not alone reading his autobiography *I Wonder as I Wander*, which was published until 1956. In fact, though Hughes in his autobiography did write of his meeting with Lu Xun — “At a private gathering one evening I met the elderly Lu Hsin [Lu Xun], then under a cloud for his ‘dangerous thoughts’ but nevertheless one of the most revered writers and scholars in China” (256), he did not mention its time or place or witness, so it is still hard to conclude that the two great writers met in 1933. But Hughes is historically right in his observation of Lu Xun who, as a leftist and executive director of the Chinese Civil Rights Defense League, was really under a cloud for his thoughts dangerous for Kuomintang and was faced with a serious threat when his comrade in the League, Yang Xinfo, was murdered by Kuomintang the previous month. This might also be the reason why he, as a leading writer of the League of Chinese Left-Wing Writers, was not invited to the open Hughes reception.

Some Chinese scholars, like Shen Pengnian, tend to believe Lu Xun met Hughes at Madame Sun Yat Sen's banquet for Hughes. Shen is a well-known Lu Xun scholar in China and was an important figure in preparing for the movie *The Life of Lu Xun*, a project proposed by Premiere Zhou Enlai in 1960. Doing research for the film, Shen together with his colleagues of the Lu Xun documents section interviewed over 400 people under the leadership of Ye Yiqun, who, as a member of the then underground Communist Party, worked with Lu Xun in the 1930s without knowledge about Lu Xun's meeting with Hughes. So he asked Shen to take advantage of the interview to draw a conclusion about this long-pending riddle.

So Shen tried to seek for help from Liao Mengxing, daughter of Liao Zhongkai — a founding father of Kuomintang — and assistant to Madame Sun in the 1930s, by requesting her to make a confirmation from Madame Sun Yat Sen, then Vice Chairperson of China, and Yao Yao, daughter of Yao Ke, the interpreter at Madame Sun's banquet for Hughes, hoping to get some words from her father. On April 18, 1960, Shen listened to Liao repeating Madame Sun's words in Beijing as below:

It was Harold Isaacs, the American, who took charge of hosting Langston Hughes. Hughes had requested a meeting with me and Lu Xun, and I agreed. As to Lu Xun, I asked Isaacs to contact him for they were acquainted with each other. It was not convenient to host a meeting with Hughes in a public place, since there was a white terror then with Yang Xingfo murdered shortly before. So we chose to meet at Isaacs's home — it was comparatively safe. I ordered some traditional Chinese dishes with a restaurant to be taken there for a banquet to receive Hughes. We ate and talked, largely in a polite way. I don't remember the exact date. (Shen, Web)

Half a year later, Shen also heard from Yao Yao about this banquet, which was retold by He Lu, a movie director and Yao Yao's stepfather:

Yao Ke served for twice as interpreter for Hughes. The first time took place at Harold Isaacs's home, where Song Qingling offered a banquet for Hughes. Mr. Lu Xun was there. There were five or six people altogether, including Hughes, Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs, Song Qingling, and Lu Xun. They talked little, and mostly about the translation of Chinese dishes. The second time was at Hughes's meeting with Chinese writers and journalists.... It was many year ago and he could remember little about the details. (Shen, Web)

These two pieces of information were somehow not included in the 5-volume interviews for the preparation of *The Life of Lu Xun*, and thus reliability was an issue for such scholars as Chen Shuyu and Chen Fukang. But scholars like Li Yong refuted Chen's arguments and defended Shen's arguments as well as his personality.¹

To a great extent, Shen Pengnian may be close to the truth. Firstly it was not wise to invent some lies about a nearly hallowed Lu Xun or a political figure like

1 See Li Yong, "Tang Tao: His Character in Life and Art" (*Tang Tao de Renpin yu Wenpin*), *Shanxi Literature (Shanxi Wenxue)* 12 (2006): 70-75.

Madame Sun who was then Vice Chairperson of China in China. Secondly, whether Lu Xun met Hughes would cause no harm to Lu Xun's image in Chinese culture and politics, so there is no meaning to take a political risk in inventing such details. What is most important, there are so many details in both Madame Sun's and Yao's accounts that are in conformity with each other and with Lu Xun's diary, as noticed by Shen: "July 5, 1933. Evening. Mr. Harold Isaacs invited me to his home for dinner, together with other 5 people" (qtd in Shen, Web)¹. In the short sentence, typical of Lu Xun's style and especially good for security in the treacherous 1930s, Lu Xun somehow provided evidence about when, where and who for this banquet. These facts are also in conformity with Hughes's own memory about this event. Hughes did present a detailed description of this private gathering:

Madame Sun Yat Sen [...] invited me to dinner at her home in the French Concession. A daughter of the wealthy Soong family, she had educated in the United States, and spoke beautiful English. Dinner that night was a traditional Chinese banquet with intriguing dishes from bird's nest soup to "thousand-year-old" eggs. I found Madame Sun as lovely to look at as her pictures, with jet-black hair, soft, luminous eyes and a complexion of delicate amber. She asked me for news of the Chen children in Moscow — Percy, Yolanda, Jack and Si-Lan (Sylvia) [...]. ((255-256)

There are obviously many details shared in all the sources. It was Hughes who first requested an interview with Madame Sun as both Madame Sun and Hughes mentioned; it was Chinese dishes ordered as remembered by Madame Sun and Hughes and suggested by Yao Ke by mentioning the talk about how to translate Chinese food, and served for an evening dinner as all agreed on. For the three Chinese witnesses, both Lu Xun and Hughes were at the banquet, which helps to lead to a conclusion that Hughes's meeting with Madame Sun and with Lu Xun as in his seemingly irrelevant account coincide in time and place. That is to say, Hughes met Lu Xun at Madame Sun's banquet on July 5. Then the only difference between the three Chinese witnesses and Hughes himself lies in "where." Hughes believed it was at Madame Sun's home in the French Concession while the Chinese witnesses thought it was at Isaacs's home. In fact, both their homes were in the French Concession and Hughes probably mistook Isaacs's home for Madame Sun's because of his strangeness to this city or his confusion over Madame Sun's hosting the reception at Isaacs's home.

¹ See Lu Xun, *Diaries of Lu Xun* (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 2006).

The meeting between Lu Xun and Langston Hughes is not of so much literary or historical meaning as its symbolic meaning. The controversy over the meeting between Lu Xun and Hughes has objectively contributed to the popularity of Hughes in Chinese intellectual circles. But breaking the riddle about this meeting is still helpful for clarifying the history of Hughes's only visit to China.

3. Hughes's Visit: An Impact on China

Langston Hughes's visit to China was a personal experience, but also a case of cultural and literary exchange, and thus is significant in different ways. In fact, it has remarkable impact on contemporary thinking about Chinese intellectual circles.

Firstly, Hughes's visit to China is objectively a self-demonstration, and has promoted a boom of introducing and translating Langston Hughes in China, laying a solid foundation for the research on him since the 1980s. Based on the interview with Hughes on July 13, 1933, Fu Donghua, under the pen name of Wu Shi, published in *Literature* 1.2 (1933) an article entitled "Langston Hughes in China" as part of a special column on Hughes. This article is the first devoted to a comprehensive introduction to Hughes ever published in China. This article uses more than 3 pages to introduce Hughes's literary career, works and features, believing that — (1) Hughes was almost among the first-class writers with *The Weary Blues*; (2) the publication of *Not Without Laughter* was a great event in American literature; (3) Hughes had already got rid of his idealistic dream and become a realist; (4) Hughes was a "revolutionary artist" (254-257). Some of the ideas are justified even in the 21st-century. This article provided Chinese intellectuals with a shortcut to this African American writer. In this special column, Fu Donghua's translation of Hughes's "People Without Shoes" — published also under the pen name of Wu Shi — helps to demonstrate Hughes's social engagement in his creation, while two pictures of Hughes and his signature present an immediate impression of Hughes. In the following issue of this magazine, Lu Xun's letter complaining of Fu Donghua's blaming him for absence from the July 13 reception, together with Fu's apology to Lu Xun and a reply to Lu Xun in the name of the editorial board are carried together, which, by linking together Hughes and Lu Xun, contributes a lot to expose Hughes's name to the intellectual circle. The same issue carries an article entitled "Langston Hughes in the Soviet Union," summarizing Hughes's experience in the USSR. In the following years more poems and stories by Hughes were translated into Chinese. Three poems — "Black Gal," "Sharecropper," and "October 16" — were published as part of a special column for African American poetry, entitled "Black Wreath" in *Literature* 2.5 (1934);

Shanghai Liang You (Good Friends) Press published Hughes's first novel *Not Without Laughter* co-translated by Xia Zhengnong and Zhu Xiuxia in 1936; Yang Ren published his *Selected Poems by Negro Poets* at Li Ming (Dawn) Bookstore in 1937, including several poems by Hughes; Yuan Shuipai translated and published two poems by Hughes in *Literature Monthly* 3 (1941) and 9 Hughes's poems as part of his edited book of Hughes's poetry named *A New Song*, published by Chen Guang (Morning Sunshine) Press in 1953; Zou Jiang translated and published a book entitled *Selected Poems by Negro Poets* in 1952, including some by Hughes; in 1957, another book came out entitled *Selected Poems by Negro Poets* (Writers' Publishing House) translated by Zhang Qi. In 1957, Shi Xianrong, a writer and translator who was believed to have met Hughes in Shanghai, published his two translated books: *Selected Short Stories by Negro Writers* (Shanghai: New Literature and Art Press), including Hughes's "Father and Son," "Home," and "A Friday Morning," all selected from Hughes's Moscow-based writings, *The Ways of White Folks*, (1933); *Selected Poems of Negro Poets* (Beijing: People's Literature Press), including Hughes "Brass Spittoons," "Songs to the Dark Virgin," "Let America Be America Again," "Negro Speaks of Rivers," and "I Too." All these translated works have made Hughes the best known African American writer in China, and also one of the most studied African American writers in Chinese scholarship since the 1980s.¹



Pics 3-4 *Not Without Laughter* translated by Xia Zhengnong and Zhu Xiuxia, 1936

Secondly, Hughes's visit to China also stimulated Chinese intellectuals' interest in African American literature. In the issue of *Literature* following Hughes's visit, poems by other African American poets were translated and published together with

1 See Luo Lianggong, "From Monologue to Dialogue: Langston Hughes Study in China since 1978," *World Literature Criticism* 1(2010): 93-98.

Hughes's, including Claude McKay and Frances S. Harper. In the special columns and books mentioned in the previous paragraph, more African American writers are included such as George Moses Horton, James M. Whitfield, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Fenton Johnson, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, etc. Though in all the books and special columns Hughes's works form the major part, they in total present a synopsis of African American literature and allow Chinese people to see another aspect of American literature.

Hughes's visit to China also promoted Chinese intellectuals' identification with Hughes and African American literature. Hughes visited China just at the time Chinese left-wing writers were fighting against imperialism and capitalism for liberation of the people. On the one hand, Hughes was viewed by Chinese writers as a warrior against imperialism, capitalism and racism for his people, and thus an authoritative example for Chinese leftist writers. Fu Donghua said when making a comment upon Hughes, "This warrior who is fighting for the people at the bottom of society deserves our knowing" (Wu Shi 254). Fu and other Chinese intellectuals chose to translate the poems by Hughes and other African American writers that are comparatively militant and critical against exploitation and oppression, intending to borrow strength from them to solve Chinese problems in reality. Thus the Chinese intellectuals accepted or at least shared Hughes's literary view of literature for social change. What is more, both Hughes and Chinese leftist writers viewed the Soviet Union as their example and source of power, as demonstrated in the questions the Chinese writers raised to Hughes on July 13. In this sense, Hughes and African American writers were viewed as comrades in a common cause of liberating the working people and their nation from enslavement to imperialism, capitalism and feudalism or racism.

Hughes's visit also provided a chance for Chinese intellectuals to see how to deal with European and American mainstream literature in forging a new Chinese literature. From the May 4, 1919, Movement to the 1930s, these intellectuals experienced a radical literary transformation. They learned techniques from western literature and modified classical Chinese tradition based on their understanding of and attitudes toward Chinese society. In the 1930s when China was faced with the threats of invasion and colonization, there were different tendencies in the circle of intellectuals in advocating literature of different kinds such as western-style modernism, Chinese-style modernism, National Defense literature, and genteel literature. When learning from western literature, some intellectuals concentrated on mainstream literature or elitist literature. For example, Shao Xunmei, a scholar well known in the 1930s, focused more on white American

literature while depreciating African American literature by saying that the Negro literature would never go beyond the English circle. Hughes's visit to China, which demonstrates a rhetorical compensation to George Bernard Shaw's visit just five months earlier, not only drew Chinese intellectuals' attention to his and other African American writers, a different aspect of the western literature, but also proved that these works created by him and African American writers were accepted and acceptable beyond his own nation. Their black vernacular, black poetic form and idea of literature for social change were all accepted as both artistic and social advantages by many Chinese intellectuals. Thus 15 months after his visit to China, Lu Xun wrote, by referring ironically to Shao Xunmei, that "even the negro poetry has gone beyond the English circle" (215).

4. Impact of the China Visit on Hughes

For Langston Hughes, his visit to China was not just a tour for pleasure but a journey of discovery. This experience broadened his social horizon and recast his mind, which eventually led to his further progress as a writer and thinker.

Undoubtedly Hughes's trip to China reshaped his understanding about racism. As an acknowledged spokesman of African American people, Hughes was wholly devoted to examination of and criticism against racism. Even in his only visit to the distant ancient China, he could not escape racism. Just as he observed,

At this Chinese YMCA, I might have rented a room — but I could not stay at the "white" YMCA in another section of the city. There only white Americans and Europeans could secure accommodations. And none of the leading hotels in the International Settlement accepted the Asiatic or negro guests. The British and French clubs, of course, excluded Orientals. I was constantly amazed in Shanghai at the impudence of white foreigners in drawing a color line against Chinese in *China itself*. (248-249)

It seems for Hughes that racism was everywhere, but outside the International Settlement there was no color-line at all. Obviously Hughes noticed that the color-line was drawn by no other than white foreigners and was used against Chinese and other colored people in China or outside the white countries. Hughes seemed to have found a secret of the white people — conspiracy of racism and imperialism. Racism helps distinguishing the white from the colored, and also the rich and the powerful from the poor and the powerless as suggested by the racism practiced institutionally by the leading hotels.

Furthermore, he also noticed that, "[A]s everywhere in the world, there were white people in China who did not approve of color lines. Such people included the two gentle American women on the staff of the Shanghai Y.W.C.A. who took me one day to see the children workers in a large textile factory" (249). So race or color is not necessarily what distinguishes the oppressing and the oppressed, or the noble and the humble. He made more observations in Shanghai in seeking of the answer. For example, he found that "Children were prostituted quite openly. Adult prostitution was everywhere [...]. Women of all nationalities from White Russians to Japanese, French, English, or Chinese, were easily available" (249). Here what the sexual and/or economic exploitation of women of different colors demonstrates is an issue not concerned with race or color but with social class opposition and capitalism. Hughes seemed to realize that capitalism instead of racism is the very problem that caused social class opposition in every race or every nation, and being of the same race does not mean freedom from exploitation or oppression.

This observation in China actually presents a contradiction with what he said, though more or less out of occasional politeness, at a tea ceremony in Japan together with officials from American Embassy: many black American people sympathized the Japanese nation, "the only large group of dark people in the world who are free and independent"; blacks need psychological assurance that some dark people are "not down and oppressed. So the American Negro is glad that Japan is able to enjoy her ceremonial tea without the unwelcome intrusion of the imperialist powers of the west" (Rampersad 273). This race-based theory was obviously challenged by his observation in China, where "[T]he Japanese were muscling in ever more aggressively on Shanghai's various rackets, legitimate and illegitimate, and everyone was aware of their presence, although officially in the city itself they had not yet taken over" (247). For Hughes, Japan was carrying out its imperialist policy and joined the western imperialist powers as demonstrated in Huangpu River, "the harbor full of Chinese junks, foreign liners and warships from all over the world" (246). So when he was questioned by Japanese police at his return to Japan from Shanghai, his reply indicates a changed view of race. The police asked, "Japan is trying to make Asia free of that Jim Crow you speak of, which the white people have imported here...", and he answered, "But for your country or any other Asiatic country to make colonies of other people's lands in Asia, that would not be good" (264-265). In answering so, Hughes demonstrates his clearer understanding of the relationship between racism and imperialism. For Hughes, capitalism and imperialism are the very cause of opposition between social classes and between nations all over the world, and thus are the major and general contradiction the

world was faced with. This is the very sign of his accepting and using Marxism in his understanding of the world.

This also explains how he came to identify himself with Chinese. When in China, he was often warned about “the color lines in public places and unclean food in Shanghai,” and was told “not to go outside the International Settlement alone at night or wander too far even by day into Chinese districts of Shanghai..., not to trust rickshaw boys outside the settlement boundaries — they might lead the unwary stranger into traps” (250). What he did is just opposite to the warning by behaving as Chinese people did. Nothing happened, and instead he was treated kindly by the Chinese people: the rickshaw boys were reliable and served patiently, and he found no color line between him and Chinese outside the International Settlement. This led him to realize that he is different from other “Occidentals”: “perhaps these well-meant warnings given me might have some validity for white foreigners” (250). This leads Hughes to his own understanding of Chinese people, just opposed to the white’s: “I found the Chinese in Shanghai a very jolly people, much like colored folks at home” (250). For him, the white people’s warnings are just some stereotypes against Chinese invented by the white to match their military arms displayed at the harbors of the Huangpu River, and thus suggest the white people’s colonialist prejudice and imperialist ambition of keeping Chinese people down and inferior, physically, spiritually and economically. Hughes was quite aware that this was how African American people were treated back in the United States and very often outside the States. He complained, “I was more afraid of going into the world famous Cathy Hotel than I was of going into any public place in the Chinese quarters. Colored people were not welcomed at the Cathy. But beyond the gates of the International Settlement, color was no barrier” (251-252). The luxurious Cathy Hotel, for Hughes, symbolizes the institutional power of racism and the social gap between the poor him and the rich, which kept himself away from the white and rich. The capitalist system, together with its racism, was exported to China with the imperialist warships and cannons, to make China their colony, and Chinese people their negroes in China. In a sense, what caused his identification is, besides his conviction in humanity, his awareness of the same discrimination and oppression he and his black people suffered as did Chinese people by imperialism and capitalism.

Hughes’s identification with China leads to his establishment of a metonymical relation in his poetry between China and his Black America or, in a sense, all nations suffering the oppression of capitalism and imperialism.¹ As a poet, Hughes

1 See Luo Lianggong, “China and the Political Imagination in Langston Hughes’s Poetry,” in *American Modernist Poetry and the Chinese Encounter*, eds. Zhang Yuejun and Stuart Christie (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 109-123.

was politically-committed in using “China” in about 20 poems he created since 1930. On one hand, he expressed his political ideas about China; on the other hand, he used “China” as a metonymy in his political expression about his race and the world. Hughes viewed China from political perspective from the very beginning when in 1930 he published “Merry Christmas,” his first poem about China. His use of “China” in this poem indicates the expansion of his political horizon and a radical change in his political mind. Geographically he went beyond the black zones of his nearly exclusive concern in his 1920s poetry. Ideologically, his use of “China” reflects his political turn to Marxism from moralism and humanism in the 1920s. It seems that Hughes’s writing about China, before his 1933 visit to China, is a kind of political imagination led by Marxist view of world, and his three-week visit to China provides abundant physically and spiritually perceived materials to consolidate his connection with China. In politics and humanity, Hughes constructed a world of his own political concern by connecting China with the black America and the whole “Third World” — as is later called. The close connections Hughes deliberately demonstrated in his poetry produces a strong contiguity for metonymy for his more complicated but covert political expression, especially during the Cold War years and the period of McCarthyism. Hughes’s metonymical use of China not only helps him survive the political harshness in reality but also endows his poetry with special aesthetic values. On one hand, this contributes to his stylistic simplicity that is usually of great ambiguity and complicated implications. On the other hand, it helps Hughes maximize his political imagination by relating the subjective to the objective, the ideal to the real, and the universal to the particular. By using China to speak about the world and his race, he succeeded in fusing his two roles into one and embodied a unity of an internationalist and a nationalist.

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