



# Analysis of Mu Shiyong's Shanghai Fox-Trot from the Perspective of Modernity

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**Abstract.** Under the influence of worldwide modernism and Japanese neo-sensationalism, Chinese neo-sensationalism comes into being. Mu Shiyong, one of the neo-sensationalist writers in Shanghai, pushes the literary movement to its climax with his masterful piece Shanghai Fox-trot. This paper approaches to primary Chinese neo-sensationalist writing features including montage editing and stream-of-consciousness writing to explore how Mu Shiyong transports visual sensations to readers in Shanghai Fox-trot.

**Keywords:** Shanghai Fox-trot · Modernity · Neo-sensationalism · Montage · Stream-of-consciousness

## 1 Introduction

Shanghai Fox-trot has long been considered Mu Shiyong's representative work, featuring his distinctive writing skill, and revealing the suppression of morbidly fast-paced modern life. It depicts various facets of Shanghai life, murder, incest, obscenity, modernity, the uncivilized, and so forth. The masterful manifestation of montage and stream-of-consciousness in this story engages the readers in a novel and rapid experience of mixed senses and transports readers back to Shanghai in the 1920s-1930s, a modern and international cosmopolitan.

It is originally published in *Xiandai (Les Contemporains)* in 1932 when Chinese neo-sensationalist literature led by writers including Shi Zhecun, Liu Naou, and Mu Shiyong, starts booming in Shanghai, as the first Chinese modernist literary current. [1] Meanwhile, fox-trot, a ballroom dance, is introduced into modern Shanghai from European and America. Named after comedian Harry Fox, fox-trot comprises different variations, but mainly of "walking steps, chassés (step side, close step), and quarter turns". [2] The appearance and popularization of the fox-trot have certainly attracted Mu Shiyong and thus take a significant symbolic role in Shanghai Fox-trot.

In the 1930s, the worldwide modernist literary movement impacts Chinese scholars while social conflicts intensify unprecedentedly in China, leaving Chinese intellectuals bewildered and vacuous which prepares them to embrace western modernist literature

and Japanese neo-sensationalism. Thus, Chinese neo-sensationalism has formed comprising inclusively of various modernist expressive forms, highlighting writers' subjective feelings, and pursuing innovative forms. Their works employ multiple city life fragments and morose figures and deliver their mental plight of self-doubt and skepticism. [1].

## 1.1 Related Work

### 1.1.1 Interactions with Left-Wing

Many critics analyze the interactions between Mu Shiyong and left-wing critics in their articles as contexts, claiming that the influence the left wings has on Mu Shiyong leads him to his later developed and mature writing style, which is represented in Shanghai Fox-trot. When Mu Shiyong begins his writing career in the early 1920s, his works mainly address and represent the impoverished laborers' life, with less rhetorical or cultivated language, criticizing the dark reality, and earn attention and praise from left-wing critics. Later as Mu Shiyong shifts his writing target to modern urban life in 1932, the harsh critiques Mu Shiyong receives from left-wing critics push him to further debates and sarcasm in his later works. [3].

Li Songrui holds the opinion that interestingly left-wing critics' harsh words pushed Mu Shiyong away from the Marxist way he might have chosen and to be somehow rebellious disobeying the left-wing's expectations. [3] Comparatively, Xing Cheng tends to believe that even given the unpleasant experience Mu Shiyong has with the left-wing critics, Shanghai Fox-trot still reveals his left-wing ideological tendency at the end of the story. [4].

### 1.1.2 Neo-sensationalism

Since Mu Shiyong is widely considered a neo-sensationalist writer. In the 1920s and 1930s, Japan faces both external and internal social conflicts. Under such circumstances, neo-sensation is born. It aims at exploring and presenting human psychological reality in depth with sensational narrative, and it emphasizes sensational and emotional descriptions.

During the same period, China experiences similar conditions and Shanghai can be considered a typical example of where western and eastern values and ideologies conflict with each other. Shen Rifang thus concludes that given the similarity in both countries' situations, writers like Mu Shiyong might tend to imitate Japanese neo-sensationalist to figure out a literature way out, therefore, Mu Shiyong chose neo-sensational techniques to construct their literary world. [5].

Furthermore, Ji Xin addresses that left-wing literature is prosperous during that period when literature and the proletarian movement are bounded, whereas neo-sensationalists' stance is liberation and against collectivist politics. They prefer to write about urban society and life and love artistic experiments. [6].

### 1.1.3 Film-Related Study

When examining Shanghai Fox-trot, the film characteristics Mu Shiyong masterfully adapts in his work are frequently discussed. In the 1930s, cinema has become popular in Shanghai which to a large extent exposes the audience to western culture and lifestyle and affected writers' works, especially neo-sensationalists including Mu Shiyong, Liu Naou, Shi Zhecun, and Ye Lingfeng, who are movie enthusiasts and have theoretical debates with the left-wings regarding movies. These writers creatively adapt film elements into composition and form a style most suitable for representing grotesque urban life.

Li Honghua deems that Mu Shiyong uses his unique language to make cinema shots and fragments, then uses montage to compose them, which topples the traditional linear narrative technique and shows a modern fragmented style. [7] Li Songrui discusses this special writing technique by exploring the writing context of Shanghai Fox-trot that Mu Shiyong considers the novel as an experiment and practice of writing techniques. He utilizes various writing methods such as synesthesia, repetition, and antithetical parallelism to create the effect of movie scenes looping. [3].

Similarly, Xing Cheng explores the effect created by film language and summarizes that the rapid change of focus impresses the audience with a blurry and fragmented urban experience. Xing refers to such effect as a sense of continuity and brokenness. [4].

Shen Rifang adds to the discussion by emphasizing how Mu Shiyong applies montage in his writing language which engages the audience in a strange and dizzy mental state where the time of a story is broken. Meanwhile, Shen addresses that Hollywood movies affected the way Mu Shiyong depicts female figures. Under Mu's pen, females are no more confined to traditions but liberated to pursue sexual freedom. The major content of Mu's works is also influenced to focus more on urban hedonism. [5].

### 1.1.4 Modernity

As Baudelaire illustrates, modernity is "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable". [8] In the 1930s, Shanghai has become a metropolis, with boosted economy and a highly urbanized lifestyle. The commercial and consumer urban culture offers the modern experience to writers and influences their aesthetics.

Li Oufan first connects Chinese modernist literature with modernity and dedicates to its study. He claims that Chinese modernity cannot be separated from historical and social background and that writers like Mu Shiyong are the expressers and carriers of the time and emotions. [9].

To explore Mu Shiyong's attitude, Li Songrui concentrates on one plot where the writer is shocked and flees when an old woman and her daughter-in-law want to exchange sex for money. Li thinks that such a reaction embodies Mu Shiyong's disability to face the strike of modernity that Mu Shiyong refuses to understand Shanghai depending on Marxism for he received fierce criticism from left-wing critics. Abandoning left-wing ideology leaves Mu Shiyong no other option but to describe his feelings most straightforwardly. [3].

Additionally, Xing Cheng criticizes Mu Shiyong for merely offering the urban experience, yet not utilizing Fox-trot as a modernist metaphor. He sees more confusion in Mu

Shiyong rather than the struggle from a complex relationship of loathing and dependence between Mu and the urban society. However, Xing believes that near the end of Shanghai Fox-trot, Mu Shiyong reveals his left-wing tendency which contradicts the preceding part, therefore, breaking the text, and the connection of the novel form and theme, or revealing the collision between left-wing ideology and naturally presented modernist writing techniques. [4] Ji Xin also notices the same issue and summarizes in her article that Mu Shiyong ponders on the question of where we should go yet could not achieve an answer because he is lost in the modern thrill and pessimistic about the current state. [6].

### 1.1.5 Space

Another focus on understanding Shanghai Fox-trot is the study of how space in Mu Shiyong's work influences the overall effect. Song Xiaoping reckons that Mu Shiyong's works are centered on external spaces such as ballrooms, cabarets, and streets, which, with fragmentized descriptions, deliver thrilling sensuality and apparent hollowness. [10].

Li Honghua examines this idea in more detail, looking into how public space affects modernist literary works. He believes that modern transportation and streets make people's life and emotion more linear and fast-paced, which weakens traditional morality and values, yet highlights straightforward sensuality. [7].

### 1.1.6 Shanghai Image Construction

The image construction of Shanghai is essential to understanding Mu Shiyong's work. Ji Xin discusses it in detail from the essence of hell and the reasons behind it. She points out how Mu Shiyong uses color to separate the two symbolic heaven and hell which presents the isolation caused by modernization. Yet, the border is blurred that heaven and hell have many overlaps, or that the two can be inverted. The reasons behind such construction can be divided into two, the collision among multiple cultures and the influence of neo-sensation from foreign lands. The collision creates a paradoxical modern Shanghai image, while the neo-sensation trend leads Mu Shiyong to focus on emotions when writing. [6].

## 2 Discussion

A Chinese scholar Wu Fuhui once concludes that Chinese neo-sensationalism is that "they immigrate western modernist literature rooted in metropolitan culture to the East... extremely exhilarating and dynamic visuals form a brand-new aesthetic realm". [11] Due to the influence of Japanese neo-sensationalist literature and western modern literature, many Chinese writers including Mu Shiyong attempt to realize various expressive forms (e.g., psychological analysis, stream of consciousness, montage) compatible with realistic writing themes and thus form Chinese-styled neo-sensationalism. This genre emphasizes subjective perceptions rather than objective depictions.

## 2.1 Montage

Montage, commonly perceived as a filmmaking technique, makes sequential pictures by piecing fragments together within a manipulative order. As Russian filmmaker Lev Kuleshov examines, by connecting sequences of shots instead of one single shot, montage helps the audience receive more meanings. [12] Editing fragmental pieces of writing with the montage technique is one of the outstanding features of stream-of-consciousness writing.

Under the huge impact of Hollywood movies, Mu Shiyong adopts such a technique in writing *Shanghai Fox-trot*. Most of the descriptions in *Shanghai Fox-trot* appear to be fragmental and spliced in an order that seemingly resembles the camera's focus shifting, they work collectively to create vivid and colorful images in readers' minds.

"Onto white painted street tree legs, electricity pole legs, all inanimate legs—like a revue, girls' powdered legs crisscrossing outward... A series of white painted legs. Following the quiet avenue, from the windows of houses, like the eyes of the city, penetrating the window shades, seeping out pink, purple, green, everywhere lights." [13].

From different "legs" to lights of different colors, the camera lens of the text shifts incessantly. The "legs" Mu Shiyong depicts are still and painted white, delivering a sense of perishing and withering, while the "lights" are vibrant like "city's eyes". Such a comparison, as Ji Xin argues, sets the line by color between hell and heaven which are two crucial symbols in *Shanghai Fox-trot*, indicating the differentiation of classes. In addition, these objects are modern products that sketch modernity; the illusively varicolored sight signals the thriving nightlife. Through focusing and zooming in on individual pieces of images such as "tree legs", "powered legs", and "green lights", the text manipulates readers' attention and imagination to create and cast vivid images in their minds, and through connecting these fragmental images, it enables readers to imagine a street view of the extravagant feasting and revelry nightlife in modern Shanghai.

Another classic Mu Shiyong-styled montage description portrays a cabaret where Rongzhu and Xiaode go:

"The azure dusk blankets the whole scene. A saxophone stretches out its neck, opens its great mouth, and bles at them, Woo woo. Inside on the smooth floor, floating skirts, floating robes, exquisite heels, heels, heels, heels, heels. Free-flowing hair and men's faces. Men's white-collared shirts and women's smiling faces. Arms outstretched, kingfisher-green earrings dragging on shoulders. A group of tightly arranged round tables, but with scattered chairs. Waiters in white stand in dark corners. Scent of alcohol, perfume, ham and eggs, smoke... someone sits alone in the corner holding a coffee to stimulate his energy." [13].

Mu Shiyong wittingly selects details, for instance, "neck", "heels", "earrings", "ham and eggs", and so forth, as if he takes off pieces from a whole picture for the readers, who will perceive the fragments to form a huge and rolling picture. Mu Shiyong's portrayal of the cabaret certainly grasps the essential details of the prosperity and corruption of a metropolitan Shanghai. The order of these details seems to resemble using a one-take technique to present a common film scene of dance halls – from the instruments and the band to men and women dancing in the center of a dance floor, from their bottom feet to

their top hair, and finally shifting to tables and people around the dance floor. The fluent and rapid shift of images impresses the readers with a sybaritic Shanghai night.

Although Mu Shiyong depicts only inanimate objects' images, when readers read while forming images in their minds following the order of Mu's language, the individual images can be dynamic, connective, and uninterruptedly rolling as a cinema screen. The order he puts all the individual images together intentionally leads the readers to constantly change the images in their head, which makes each image stay for only an extremely short period; by prompting readers to go through, readers can experience senses of dizziness and unreality, as if skimming the surface of modern Shanghai. Such an experience plays with readers' senses and more intuitively and sensuously brings the readers Mu Shiyong's impression of a conflicting and fast-paced metropolis.

Near the end of Shanghai Fox-trot, Mu Shiyong flaunts his technical virtuosity in montage editing once more. Yet, instead of solely creating a speedy shifting picture like the previous twos, Mu intensifies the visual impact:

"Over a tall-stemmed glass, Liu Yan Rongzhu's pair of eyes are smiling.

In the Baker, those two eyeballs saturated with cocktails are smiling out of tousled hair.

In the hall of the Huamao Hotel, those two eyeballs saturated with cocktails are smiling out of tousled hair.

On the elevator, those two eyeballs are smiling out of purple eye-shadow.

On the seventh floor of the Huamao Hotel inside a room, those two eyeballs are smiling above fiery red cheeks.

The jewel broker discovers those smiling eyeballs under his nose.

Smiling eyeballs!" [13].

Each sentence in this passage sketches out different pictures briefly, yet Mu Shiyong seizes the same and most powerful element – "smiling eyeballs" and uses montage techniques to edit these pieces together. These montage-edited eyeball images produce a huge visual impact for readers as if the pair of smiling eyeballs are freeze-framed in Mu's film-picture-like passage while each frame of it rapidly changes but somewhat in a similar pattern. Instead of directly depicting the eyeballs, Mu utilizes the shifting frames to filter them, which transports the sensation of illusiveness and suffocation as the eyeballs have grasped readers' hearts by the impulsion and magic power of Shanghai.

## 2.2 Stream-of-Consciousness Writing

Influenced by modern western literature, Mu Shiyong adapts a stream-of-consciousness narrative style to his writing. Throughout the story, the narrative shifts swiftly from frame to frame following the movement of focus. It breaks the common linear narrative instead of following ordinary logic, concentrates more on exposing characters' inner conscious activity and sensitivity, and encompasses great expressive force, high concentration, and cohesion. Besides the rapid pace of the narrative, two noticeable and proficient characteristics of Mu Shiyong's stream-of-consciousness writing are interior monologue and repetition.

### 2.2.1 Interior Monologue

As can be seen from the former part of *Shanghai Fox-trot*, Mu Shiyong maintains an observational tone to depict Shanghai, yet in the latter half where the writer's character appears, Mu inserts direct interior monologues and has the focus of narrative shift following the writer's concentration shift. A direct interior monologue presents the flow of consciousness directly to readers without the author acting as an intermediary or a hypothetical audience. It breaks the traditional narrative and temporal or spatial logical order, intersects with reality filtered by intentional selecting, and mystifies the narrative.

"On the side a long-haired, unshaven writer is enjoying the spectacle, and he thinks of a topic: 'The second round of pilgrim-ages—city's dark side pilgrimage sonata.'

(The writer thinks to himself.)

First round of investigations gambling halls second round of investigations street hookers third round of investigations dance halls fourth round of investigations decide at a later time Eastern Magazine, Fiction Monthly, Literary Arts Monthly first sentence write Nanjing Road Beijing Road street hooker meeting place... no, that won't do—

China's tragedy here is definitely material for a novel 1931 is my year 'Eastern Fiction' 'Northern Dipper' each month one entry one version translated into Japanese one into Russian one into each language all published Nobel Prize great riches..." [13].

Witnessing a procuress luring random men to erotic deal at night, instead of sympathizing small fries or criticizing morality loss, the writer observes pleasantly for it can be his writing materials and revels secretly in imagining him publishing impressive writing pieces based on what he sees and gaining huge reputations. Mu Shiyong dissects the darkest inner world of this character and intuitively shapes him in depth. The bare exposition of the writer's most secret thoughts increases the anomy and complexity of humanity to *Shanghai Fox-trot* and enhances the hellish image of modern Shanghai.

By breaking the common logic and intentionally omitting grammar and punctuation, the monologue helps the novel escape the traditional narrative frame and records completely the stream of consciousness. Due to the lack of logical illustration, readers must depend on their association to interpret and complete the whole picture of the story and therefore become more immersed in Mu's language and sense the flow of consciousness more intuitively.

### 2.2.2 Repetition

Mu Shiyong employs multiple repetitions to form aesthetic structures mimicking the fox-trot's dance steps in *Shanghai Fox-trot*. The most delicately designed repetition describes the cabaret scene where people enjoy dancing and flirting; the exquisite repetition form frames the luxuriant but promiscuous scene neatly:

"The azure dusk blankets the whole scene. A saxophone stretches out its neck, opens its great mouth, and blares at them, Woo woo. Inside on the smooth floor, floating skirts, floating robes, exquisite heels, heels, heels, heels, heels. Free-flowing hair and men's faces. Men's white-collared shirts and women's smiling faces. Arms outstretched, kingfisher-green earrings dragging on shoulders. A group of tightly arranged round tables, but with scattered chairs. Waiters in white stand in dark corners. Scent of alcohol,

perfume, ham and eggs, smoke... someone sits alone in the corner holding a coffee to stimulate his energy.

Dancing: the waltz melody enwraps their legs, their legs stand on the waltz melody floating, floating. The son whispers in his mother's ear, 'There are many things that can only be said during a waltz, and you are the greatest waltzing partner—and, Rongzhu, I love you!'

She lightly kisses his temple—mother snuggles into son's embrace, snickering.” [13].

The depiction begins with detailed descriptions of the surroundings in the cabaret and continues onto Xiaode philandering Rongzhu during a dance; then Mu Shiyong adds three more nearly identical flirtatious conversations, each between one man and one woman out of four people, Liu Yan Rongzhu, Yan Furong, Xiaode, and a Belgian jewel broker. Despite how absurd it is that the four characters are sharing and exchanging their romantic partners and that moreover, Liu Yan Rongzhu is Xiaode's legal stepmother, it epitomizes the chaotic and licentious facet of modern Shanghai. After the four conversations, instead of depicting a new scene, Mu Shiyong ends the cabaret scene by repeating the beginning paragraph (“The azure dusk.....his energy”) in reverse order. [13].

Mu Shiyong crafts undoubtedly elegant and subtle structural repetition in this passage using his ingenious narrative method that provides aesthetic experience. In the four pairs of similar conversations with highly alike actions, Mu Shiyong emphasizes the ambiguity between men and women by reiteratively changing the objects which reduces the difference between individuals and enhances the impression of promiscuous and frivolous Shanghai nightlife to readers.

Additionally, Mu Shiyong pushes the shock and excitement for readers to a peak starting from the unethical relationship between Rongzhu and Xiaode to the design of the four people exchanging their erotic partners with no sense of guilt, which incidentally brings out the extreme manifestation of a metropolitan. Besides the sensual impact on readers, the formal beauty in this repetition is noticeable as well – the two mirrored paragraphs wrap up the four repeating descriptions that separate the cabaret scene from other parts of the novel.

### 2.3 Objectification of Subjective Sensation

One of the characteristics of neo-sensationalist literature is the writer's pursuit of novel language and form. They emphasize the function of language to recreate the world of sensory impressions, to express their unique feelings about life with unexpected combinations and techniques, and to create a novel and uncommon artistic effect. Mu Shiyong utilizes his whimsical imagination, incorporating metaphors and similes in his descriptions of the environmental objects, implementing bold transformations on objects to give them a human sense of life – projecting subjective sensations onto objective existences. It brings the entire Shanghai to life, accelerates the narrative pace, and makes this city even more vicious.

“With a clang, a headlight shines out from beyond the horizon. The steel rail rumbles, its wooden bed crawls forward like a centipede in the light, electricity poles appear then are immediately hidden in the darkness, a ‘Shanghai express’ pushes out its belly, ta



ta ta, in the rhythm of the fox-trot, holding its ‘night pearl’: dragon-like it rushes by, rounding the bowline.”

“The coral knot on Liu Youde’s ‘watermelon skin’ hat pokes out the car door, out of two pockets of his black velvet waistcoat hangs a gold chain, its gold links tittering, taking him out of the car and carrying him into the house.”

“Red traffic light, green traffic light, traffic light pole and Sikh traffic guard stand upright on the ground.”

“The well-slept buildings stand up, lift their heads, remove their grey pyjamas, the water walla walla flows towards the east, factory steam whistles scream.” [13].

In Mu Shiyong’s writing, all the still objects in Shanghai seems to come to life, making every scene of the novel more vivid and dynamic: the railway track becomes a “centipede crawling forward”; the train moves forward on a dancing beat; the gold jewelry worn by people is no longer merely an accessory, but actively controls human behavior and laughs like a human being; the traffic lights and the guards are intentionally placed on the same level doing same actions; the buildings, the river, and the steam whistle wake up like humans in the early morning. Such a method assists in capturing momentary sensations and projecting them onto objects.

Similar anthropomorphic techniques are used throughout the novel, giving the whole story a vivid and three-dimensional tone and adding magical charm to Shanghai in Mu Shiyong’s language. In addition, this arrangement makes the objects in the novel more personified, while the characters are more objectified, implying that in a modern metropolis, material desire is reinforced, yet humans become attached and dominated by materials, and gradually lose their self, value, and living space. [14].

### 3 Conclusion

Resulting from the influential world modernist current and reflection on increasingly intensified social contradictions, writers and scholars fail to find any resolutions and thus turn to accept western modernism and Japanese neo-sensationalism for emotional catharsis. They approach to Shanghai with modern insights, depict it with novel representations, and concentrate primarily on subjective feelings. [1] Their works tend to manifest their doubts about life and society, critiques of abnormal modern life, consumptions, and desires; they intend to express their anxieties about modernity and complex attitude towards it. As one who drives the Chinese neo-sensationalist literary movement to its peak, Mu Shiyong is skilled for presenting modern suppression by depicting fast-paced Shanghai life.

For readers back in Mu Shiyong’s time, such literary works stand for emotional expression liberation and focus more on individualism and the inner world, which has been a revolutionary step in the Chinese literary movement history. For current readers, Shanghai Fox-trot can be a significant literary reference to Chinese modernist literature and controversial discussions of conflicts between humanity and modernity, spirits and materials, as well as cultivation and uncivilization. Though some critics find Shanghai Fox-trot somewhat disappointing such as Xing Cheng who claims the modernity it presents to be unfinished, for that Mu Shiyong merely transports the visual experience to readers without deeper exploration into content and meanings. [4] However, Mu

Shiyong may have never exposed any intention to still take the content of Shanghai Fox-trot as his writing priority since he considers it “an experiment and exercise of writing techniques” [15]. To criticize one’s work on a notion that the writer may never intend on exploring might be slightly presumptuous and self-consciousness excessive. As Mu Shiyong said, he pursues unprecedented expressions and techniques in writing. Shanghai Fox-trot makes it possible and becomes admittedly his most brilliant and remarkable work. Shanghai Fox-trot successfully manifests Chinese neo-sensationalist literature’s core value of personal feeling expressions and pursuit of creative expressive forms. It depicts an exhilarating modern metropolis, filled with conflicts and tension, while also criticizing unmercifully how modernity devastates humanity and civilization. Mu Shiyong impresses readers with his masterful techniques in his writings. His film language and editing methods certainly highlight the story and present a vivid modern Shanghai, providing readers with his exquisite grasp of the social condition in Shanghai.

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