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Difference and Diversity: A Comparative Study of Hu Shi's and Lu Xun's Research on Water Margin

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Abstract: Both Hu Shi(胡适)and Lu Xun(鲁迅)conducted considerable research and evaluations on *Water Margin*(《水浒传》)and its major sequels. Various factors, such as historical context and personal perspectives, contributed to the divergence in their views. Hu Shi distinguished between *Water Margin*'s utility in the New Literature Movement and its ideological content. While he elevated *Water Margin*'s status as "vernacular" literature, he did not endorse certain ideological aspects within the text. Lu Xun, on the other hand, affirmed the revolutionary spirit in *Water Margin* but criticized its incompleteness and feudal characteristics. The contrasting evaluations of the same text by Hu Shi and Lu Xun in the same era stem from their differing perspectives and positions.

Keywords: Hu Shi, Lu Xun, *Water Margin*, Comparative Study.

1. Introduction

As China's first full-length novel written in vernacular Chinese and one of the "Four Great Classical Novels", *Water Margin* has profoundly impacted subsequent narrative literature and even peasant uprisings. Since its composition, relevant studies on the work have emerged. In the first half of the 20th century, amidst cultural shifts between the old and the new, research on *Water Margin* embarked on a path toward modernization. Among these, the research findings of Hu Shi and Lu Xun have had a significant influence in contemporary times and are particularly noteworthy.

Over the past forty years, scholarly discussions have primarily centered on several key aspects. Current academic research mainly focuses on the comparison of Hu Shi's and Lu Xun's contributions to the study of classical novels, their respective views on literary history, and their methodological approaches. In addition, considerable attention has been given to their textual analyses and evaluations of *Water Margin* and other representative classical novels. Topics such as Hu Shi's academic methods and Lu Xun's critical approach have become focal points of attention and debate.

In terms of Hu Shi's method of textual research on classical novels, Zhu Wenhua summarized Hu Shi's approach to investigating Chinese chapter novels as adopting and modifying Dewey's "instrumentalism", which involves extracting it from the system of pragmatism and reinforcing its truth-seeking spirit.[1] Bai Zhenkui and Jiang Fan pointed out that both Hu Shi and Lu Xun's early views on literary history were influenced by the theory of evolution. In methodology, both demonstrated the influence of the Qing Dynasty's empirical studies, but Hu Shi applied Western

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"positivism" more extensively, promoting innovation.[2] Zhang Yang provided an academic review, noting that later research on Hu Shi's method of textual research often discusses the influence of Qing scholarship and Dewey's positivism, but less attention is paid to how Hu Shi also integrated Huxley's "skepticism" as an important methodological principle in his research on *Water Margin*.[3]

Lu Xun frequently expressed his views on *Water Margin* in various essays and letters, and the "writing from the heart" theory has often been a topic of academic debate. In the 27th chapter of *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction*(《中国小说史略》), Lu Xun mentioned, "*Three Heroes and Five Gallants*(《三侠五义》)writes from the heart of common folk, seemingly inheriting some aspects of *Water Margin*, but only its external appearance, not its spirit." From this, Ouyang Jian interpreted that Lu Xun believed the spirit of *Water Margin* was "writing from the heart for the common folk", which marked the earliest mention of the "writing from the heart" theory.[4] Later, Huang Nanshan refuted this interpretation, arguing it was "misappropriating concepts". [5] Ouyang Jian and Xiao Xiangkai reaffirmed the "writing from the heart" theory in *New Discussions on *Water Margin*, while Huang Nanshan continued to counter it in a 1984 article, asserting that Lu Xun's original intention was to distinguish between the *Three Heroes and Five Gallants'* support for the government and the rebellious heroes of *Water Margin*. In fact, both interpretations show certain misunderstandings or are constructed solely for the sake of debate, lacking comprehensiveness. The academic community has also focused heavily on Hu Shi's *textual research of Water Margin*(《<水浒传>考证》)while paying relatively less attention to his attitude towards and changing views on the work.

Since Lu Xun and Hu Shi's research on *Water Margin*, numerous articles have explored their studies, which can be roughly divided into two phases, with the reform and opening-up as the dividing line. In the earlier stage, scholars like Diao Yunzhan and Zhou Laixiang viewed Hu Shi's "experimentalism" from the perspective of peasant class struggle and nearly entirely dismissed his research as a "reactionary bourgeois" approach[6]. Si Youhe similarly critiqued Hu Shi as a reactionary figure opposing Marxism[7], while Yu Shaochu exaggerated Hu Shi's endorsement of Jin Shengtan(金圣叹)to argue that Hu Shi was defending feudal interests[8]. Fang Yanliang highlighted that Lu Xun exposed *Water Margin*'s inherent promotion of capitulationism[9]. After the reform and opening-up, relevant studies continued to develop. Lu Lin, who conducted research on Jin Shengtan, argued that Hu Shi's An Investigation of *Water Margin* hindered the progress of Jin Shengtan's literary criticism studies, suggesting that Hu Shi's research was somewhat influenced by a preconceived subjective bias[10].

Both Lu Xun and Hu Shi also discussed the sequels to *Water Margin*—mainly Chen Chen(陈忱)*'s Sequel to Water Margin*(《水浒后传》)and Yu Wanchun(俞万春)*'s The Suppression of the Rebels*(《荡寇志》)—which have received some academic attention. Ding Yanmo pointed out their differing perspectives on *Sequel to Water Margin*, criticizing Hu Shi for overly praising the work and overlooking its feudal elements, though his approach was more of a summary than a systematic review[11]. Song Changli extended Lu Xun's analysis, suggesting that the two sequels reflected monarchist ideas from different historical contexts. While Song's conclusions were sound, his article focused on the sequels themselves, mentioning Lu Xun only in passing without delving into his research on the sequels[12].

This paper aims to conduct a comparative study of Lu Xun's and Hu Shi's textual research, evaluations, and attitudes toward *Water Margin*. By doing so, it seeks to deepen the understanding of their research objectives, emotional values, and criteria for judgment, thereby offering insights into the development of *Water Margin* studies in modern times and the underlying reasons for these outcomes.

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2. "Inhuman" and "Extraordinary Work"—Hu Shi's Dual Attitude Towards *Water Margin*

Hu Shi had two completely different attitudes towards *Water Margin*. Hu Shi's evaluation of *Water Margin* partly overlaps with Zhou Zuoren's. On the one hand, Hu Shi strongly agreed with Zhou's perspective, believing that *Water Margin* could not be considered "human literature"[13]. On the other hand, Hu Shi also praised *Water Margin* as a "remarkable book that holds a much more significant position in the history of Chinese literature than *Zuo Zhuan*(《左传》)or *Records of the Grand Historian*(《史记》)", even going so far as to call it "immortal". [14]

The reason for this is the difference in evaluation dimensions. The former focuses more on cultural popularization, while the latter focuses on ideological content. Regarding the former, in his *Suggestions for Literary Reform*(《文学改良刍议》), Hu Shi first classified vernacular novel writers such as Shi Nai'an and Cao Xueqin as the "orthodox of literature" and used this as a basis to discuss the new literature movement. He believed that "popular books such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms, *Water Margin*, *Investiture of the Gods*(《封神演义》), and *Journey to the West* are the ones that truly qualify as "deeply rooted among the people".

At the same time, however, Hu made it clear that these old novels were merely "literary tools (vernacular)", and their "ideological content was not profound". *Water Margin* was also included in this category, being described as a work that "teaches theft and is crude and vulgar". However, he did not completely negate it, but rather believed that "the portrayal of the bandits is indeed admirable and endearing". He acknowledged the original work's positive portrayal and commendatory emotional attitude towards the heroes.

Hu Shi's seemingly polarized evaluation of *Water Margin*, acknowledging it as a "remarkable book" while also labeling it as "inhumane", is not contradictory. His recognition of the novel's value in language evolution aligns with his critique of Confucian classics, traditional prose, and poetry, and includes a critique of the feudal elements within the work. This stance is consistent with his criticism of the traditional ideological values in *Water Margin*.

Hu Shi also highly praised *The Sequel to Water Margin.* He especially admired the scene where Yan Qing infiltrates the Jin camp, meets with Emperor Huizong, and presents green tangerines and yellow oranges, describing it with three consecutive exclamations of "there is no better writing than this" in praise of its portrayal of the emperor's downfall and the sorrow of a nation's demise. Hu Shi also included *The Sequel to Water Margin* in his educational materials for teaching traditional Chinese knowledge alongside *Water Margin*.

3. "Peasant Revolutionary Army"—Lu Xun's High Praise for *Water Margin*

In peaceful times, there are no bandits, but when petty officials hold power and the nation is in peril, bandits emerge. The portrayal of the Northern Song dynasty's corrupt officials in *Water Margin* mirrors this sentiment. Against this backdrop, Lu Xun pointed out the result that "ordinary people, en masse, turn into bandits" and stated, "So I believe Yuan Zeng(源增)'s words: 'On the surface, they seem like mere thieves and bandits, but in fact, they are a peasant revolutionary army'". [15] Lu Xun highly affirmed the revolutionary rebellious spirit of the heroes in *Water Margin*, while also seriously criticizing the feudal nature and incomplete nature of the "revolution". This point is evident in his studies of the sequels to *Water Margin*.

Lu Xun acknowledged the connection between *The Sequel to Water Margin* and the fall of the Ming Dynasty. The author wrote this book under the name of "the remnants of the ancient Song", expressing the sorrow of the fallen nation. The preface reveals deep emotions and loyalty, echoing the lament of *Li Sao*(《离骚》)about the "falling of the Central Plains". In 1924, Lu Xun wrote a letter

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to Hu Shi expressing his disagreement with "borrowing ancient events and altering them to vent one's own grievances" in *The Sequel to Water Margin*.[15] This also revealed the divergence of views between the two.Hu Shi believed that the sincere emotion of mourning for the lost homeland elevated its literary value, while Lu Xun thought that plot elements such as the "violent deaths" of treacherous officials essentially represented a compromise and surrender to feudal imperial power. Lu Xun described *The Sequel to Water Margin* as "though a playful work, it also conveys the intention of seeking refuge"; however, Hu Shi refuted this, asserting that it was absolutely not a "playful work", but rather a "book of venting grievances", emphasizing its central theme of "thoughts of a lost nation and feelings of ethnicity". Furthermore, Chen Chen lived through the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties, while Yu Wanchun was born in the late Qing Dynasty. Lu Xun pointed out that scholars who had experienced the long rule of the Qing Dynasty "had no divided loyalties" and thus opposed peasant rebellions. Hu Shi, on the other hand, explained Yu Wanchun's deep hatred for the heroes of Liangshan from the social background of widespread banditry.

Lu Xun evaluated The Suppression of the Rebels in *A Brief History of Chinese Novels* as "standing out among similar novels entangled with old works". This indicates that while the literary content and style of *The Suppression of the Rebels* are relatively prominent among sequels. Lu Xun strongly opposed the "view of officials and assistants" that advocated "government troops suppressing bandits". "What they oppose are treacherous ministers, not the emperor; what they rob are common people, not the ministers... Because they do not oppose the emperor, once the army arrives, they surrender and serve the state against other bandits—not bandits who 'act on behalf of heaven.' Ultimately, they are still lackeys" In his *discussions about Jin Shengtan*(《谈金圣叹》), Lu Xun evaluated Song Jiang as someone who, although he commits robbery, does so with the intention of "robbing the rich to help the poor", opposing the ideals of officials and gentry from the perspective of the common people. Regarding the opposition between "officials" and "the people", Lu Xun points out that Chinese people "wish for Liu Xuande(刘玄德)'s success in Ba Shu while also desiring Song Gongming(宋公明)to succeed in robbing homes"[15]. Lu Xun uses *Water Margin* to critique the Confucian values of loyalty to the emperor under the feudal system, pointing not only to the recruitment and stabilization of the state but also to the later generations of scholars and gentry who continue to pen stories about "suppressing bandits".

Lu Xun regards the heroes of Liangshan as a "peasant revolutionary army" that robs the rich to help the poor, but believes they are limited by feudalism and the peasant class, potentially "overthrowing the emperor to satisfy their own desire to be emperor" and then opposing other "bandits" who oppose them. However, among them, there is a spirit of "revolution" and a heart of "rebellious".

4. Purpose and Perspective: The Reasons for the Different Evaluations by Lu Xun and Hu Shi

Lu Xun and Hu Shi have provided different research and evaluations of *Water Margin* from multiple angles and perspectives, which stem from distinct underlying reasons.

Hu Shi expressed dissatisfaction with Jin Shengtan's critiques, yet he highly praised Jin's recognition of the literary status of *Water Margin*, referring to him as "a great eccentric of the 17th century", highlighting "what vision and what courage".[14] This can also be seen as Hu Shi's way of legitimizing *Water Margin* as a model for vernacular literature through Jin Shengtan's endorsement. Beyond viewing classical vernacular novels like *Water Margin* as tools for promoting the vernacular language, Hu Shi treated the examination of these novels as a means to advocate for academic methodology. He predicted that *Water Margin* would become a "practical textbook for the use of new punctuation marks". Hu Shi stated that his original intention in conducting research on "*Water*

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Margin" was to promote a "method of doing scholarly research". Influenced by Huxley's agnosticism and Dewey's pragmatism methodology, Hu Shi made an assumption about the existence of a 70-chapter version from the mid-Ming Dynasty when examining the evolution of different editions. Over the next nine years, he continuously collected and discovered evidence, ultimately overturning his own hypothesis.

Lu Xun's opposition to Jin Shengtan primarily revolves around the issues of "cutting" (truncating) and "distorting" the text. From the perspective of the gentry, Jin despised the "bandits" of the time, while Lu Xun highlighted that the common people's fear stemmed from the "flow" of these bandits, noting that later "seated bandits" similarly exploited the masses. Thus, the people had no choice but to rely on "their own strength", which was "the only path left". As a prominent figure in the Left League, Lu Xun's perspectives on revolutionary ethical motivations can help illuminate certain aspects of *Water Margin*, further clarifying his stance on the spirit of rebellion within the text. Both Yu Wanchun and Jin Shengtan deny the coexistence of "banditry" and "loyalty", but from the leftist literary viewpoint, this is not necessarily the case. While robbery and murder are indeed heinous acts, the root of these "evils" lies not in individual morality but in the unequal relations of production. The lower classes are subjected to comprehensive exploitation within moral, institutional, legal, and economic structures; thus, any attempt at subversion must break through the boundaries of morality and law in "extreme" ways. In *Water Margin*, the identities of bandits, fugitives, and death row inmates place them in opposition to the government and society. Though they resort to banditry and robbery, they represent those who are exploited in every facet of life and law, rendering "morality" a false concept.

In this context, the "bandits" who claim to "act on behalf of heaven" become what Lu Xun refers to as "heroes of the marginalized", where their act of robbing the rich to aid the poor can be viewed as a reasonable "good". However, after the 70 chapters, when Liangshan accepts amnesty and stops resisting the imperial court, this justification no longer applies. From Hu Shi's perspective, rooted in bourgeois reformism, he naturally cannot agree with the revolutionary spirit of the peasant uprising inherent in *Water Margin*, thus labeling it as "encouraging banditry". This contrast highlights that Lu Xun advocates for establishing a "classless society" through violent revolution, while Hu Shi opposes such violence, advocating instead for constitutional and legal means to "transform" society into a liberal one. Consequently, Hu Shi opposes the uprisings and violent conflicts of bandits.

Regarding the literary qualities of *Water Margin*, Hu Shi evaluates the episode of "Song Jiang's death" similarly to the scene in *Water Margin: The Sequel* where the offering of "yellow tangerines and green oranges" is described as "tragically beautiful"[14], appreciating its genuine emotional expression stemming from the killing of loyal ministers in the early Ming period. He acknowledges that the character portrayals in *Water Margin* are superior to those in *The Three Heroes and Five Gallants*. However, he also critiques *Water Margin* for being a novel "without structure or organization".

Lu Xun's evaluation of the literary language in *Water Margin* reflects his own insights as a novelist. He praises the phrase "the snow is falling heavily" as having a superior artistic quality compared to "heavy snow falling".[15] Chen Yixuan points out the intertextual relationship between Lu Xun's novel *In the Restaurant*(《在酒楼上》)and the chapters describing Lin Chong(林冲) in *Water Margin*. In *In the Restaurant*, the protagonist ultimately chooses to continue the struggle, which embodies Lu Xun's unwavering revolutionary spirit—a form of "unconscious textual interplay"[16]. Thus, it can be said that Lu Xun's literary creations carry the influence of classical novels, reflecting his fundamental attitudes and value orientations. His novels can serve as a complement to the study of *Water Margin*.

To supplement this, the main viewpoints and research outcomes of Lu Xun and Hu Shi regarding *Water Margin* and its sequels are summarized in the following table.

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5. Conclusion

Lu Xun and Hu Shi were contemporaries in the early 20th century, and their evaluations emerged against the backdrop of the New Culture Movement and the modern democratic revolution. Due to their differing positions, they each held distinct viewpoints; with multiple perspectives, even the same person could have varying attitudes. *Water Margin* has long been subject to diverse evaluations, and the readers' positions and perspectives significantly influence the direction of these evaluations.

For example, Jin Shengtan places *Water Margin* alongside *Records of the Grand Historian*, yet he labels the originally loyal and positively portrayed Liangshan heroes as "a group of ugly characters who gather in the mountains and bring calamity to the court", even subjectively critiquing and rewriting the image of Song Jiang. The purpose of such an evaluation was to denounce the declining moral standards of the late Ming period, where "hypocrites" formed cliques to amass wealth and indulged in extravagance, thereby crafting Song Jiang's image as a "petty man" of false loyalty and deceit. Additionally, the rampant banditry and instability of the time compelled Jin Shengtan to deny the notion of rebellion against oppressive officials and to uphold the feudal order. Centuries later, Mao Zedong(毛泽东)read Jin Shengtan's "truncated version" of *Water Margin*, viewing the Liangshan heroes as a model for the peasant class's armed resistance against class oppression, citing "Three Attacks on Zhu's Manor" as "the best example of dialectical materialism"[17]. This also represented a contemporary and revolutionary interpretation of *Water Margin*. Later, Mao combined discussions on the "latter half" beyond Jin's version, stating that *Water Margin* was valuable for its portrayal of surrender, serving as a counterexample to ensure the people recognized the surrenderist faction. Mao's views praised rebellion against oppressive officials and valorized heroes, criticizing the court's invitation to surrender, all rooted in the major contradictions of the society at that time. Although both read the same literary work, and even the text was identical, their understandings differed greatly. This highlights the expansion and transformation of cultural factors within personal experiences and societal development.

In different historical contexts, cultural settings, and personal experiences, the classic *Water Margin* continues to receive a rich and expanding array of evaluations. This not only reflects the reception aesthetics of "a hundred readers have a hundred Hamlets", but also underscores the reason why it remains a classic. As researchers, we should respect and uphold each reader's right to evaluate while striving to return to the work itself and restore the author's original intent, aiming to provide as objective and comprehensive an evaluation as possible.

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