

## Congwen Shen's Criticism and Construction of Chinese National Character in *Alice's Adventures in China* in the Early 20th Century

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Congwen Shen's *Alice's Adventures in China* is much more than a fantasy novel for children, considering the abundant acrid social criticism of the national character of all Chinese citizens in the early 20th century based on what western colonizers saw and heard in China. This paper argues that Shen's criticism of the national character in his book is mainly reflected in three aspects: criticism of the national character of servility, attack on the national mentality of colonists-worship, and concerns about the dilemma of national cultural identity. At the same time, Shen, as a witness of the social realities of China during the colonial period, advocates building a "small Greek temple" to worship "human nature," which is the way out to reshape the national character. The essence is to take the Greek spirit as a cure to solve the chronic flaws of national culture. By learning from the European counterparts to reshape national character and achieve self-improvement, Chinese can ultimately resist colonialism, establish new institutional systems, and build the country into a diverse and creatively integrated multi-ethnic community. This is also the view shared by most Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century. We argue that though this view is, to some extent, historically progressive as it provides a solution to the issue of Chinese national character, it has inevitable limitations of the times if we take the position of "understanding contemporary China" and critically examine it. The development of national character should be based on refining and respecting one's own culture and learning from other ethnic groups in an inclusive manner—without being utterly complacent or belittling oneself. Throughout history, the characteristics of diligence, kindness, love for peace, and compassion that Chinese people have remain universal value to this day, but the national character needs to be supplemented by other qualities such as rationality, bravery, and innovation.

*Keywords:* post-colonialism, Congwen Shen, *Alice's Adventures in China*, criticism of national character

*Alice's Adventures in China* (1928) is a fantasy novel written by Congwen Shen (1902–1988), an author of fiction and prose who is commonly considered one of the greatest lyric novelists in modern China, and is regarded as the Chinese sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) written by Lewis Carroll (1832–1898). Drawing on the skills and style of Lewis Carroll, Shen makes Alice, a 12-year-old British young girl, and Mr. Nuoxi, a 45-year-old rabbit gentleman travel to China from a long distance and wander in the mysterious land of the East. If we examine Shen's *Alice's Adventures in China* from the perspective of post-colonialism, we can find that it is

not merely a fantasy for children since the author has carried out a lot of acrid social criticism.

In recent years, as more and more post-colonial issues being discussed, the exposure and criticism of those issues embodied in literary works are also being explored by researchers, and the works have aroused extensive discussion in the academic community. Shen's *Alice's Adventures in China* (Shen, 2000) is one of them. Most Chinese scholars have studied this literary work from the perspectives of the critique of the old society, Shanghai Concession culture and national consciousness, such as Wu (1992), Li (2005, 2006), Ma (2010) and Hu (2014). There are also relevant studies in the West, especially the scholars in the western sinological research circle such as Liu and Hsia (1961), Feuerwerker and Kinkley (1988) and David (2017). However, the current academic research on *Alice's Adventures in China* leaves much to be investigated. Although the above scholars have done some research on Shen's lyrical writing techniques, they have not further explored any national character issues embodied in his work, and few studies focus on the national character criticism of the Chinese people in the early 20th century.

In view of this age, it is worth mentioning that at the

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beginning of the 20th century, China was a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society. A semi-colonial society is relative to a complete colonized society, which refers to an independent country with its own government in form, but in fact, its politics, economy, and other social aspects are controlled by colonists. And a semi-feudal society is relative to a complete feudal society, which refers to the fact that the country is still under feudal rules, but that society has gradually modernized, and factors such as capitalist economy, politics and ideology are constantly developing and progressing. Because semi-feudalism focuses on examining a country from the perspective of its socioeconomic structure, while semi-colonies are viewed from the political status of the country, the focus of this article is on examining China, which is then a western colony, from the perspective of western colonizers.

The purpose of this paper is to explore and examine Shen's criticism and construction of Chinese national character in the early 20th century in *Alice's Adventures in China* from the perspective of post-colonialism. This paper investigates the following three research questions:

1. How does the work reflect the criticism of the national character of servility, colonists-worship and the dilemma of national cultural identity?
2. In response to the dilemma of Chinese national character, what is the scheme of Chinese national character reconstruction proposed by Shen?
3. Different from the accepted and even radical anti-colonial activities, what was unique about the anti-colonial thoughts and activities of the Chinese intelligentsia in the early 20th century?

Shen's novels have been popular with readers all around the world since there is a close connection between the national character issues discussed in his works and the social problems of China in that era. Up to now, his views still have guiding significance for the transformation of contemporary people's thoughts. His criticism of the 1920s national character and his appeal for recognition of national cultural values, undoubtedly have a high reference value in contemporary times. Shen's criticism of national character is a wake-up call for people in the post-modern and post-colonial context.

### Criticism of the National Character of Servility

Shen's criticism of the Chinese national character is first reflected in his criticism of the national servile image. We will draw Shen's point of view by comparing with Xun Lu's

criticism of the servility (Lu, 2006) because they both saw the slavish nature of Chinese people but their objects and perspectives of criticism were different, and Shen's criticism of servility could be more easily obtained through comparison.

Shen and Lu have many differences in the object of criticism, because Lu's national character criticism mainly focused on the criticism of the servility of the Pariah (Chen, 2018) in Zhejiang and Jiangsu, provinces in the southern China, while Shen's criticism focused on the criticism of the national servile personality of the Chinese ragtag people, ethnic minorities and intellectuals, which also implied the criticism of the colonialists who caused this situation.

Firstly, Shen criticized the obedience of the ragtag people, that is, the obedience to the West and the non-resistance to oppression. His criticism in this book, for instance, in the fifth chapter of Volume I of *Alice's Adventures in China*, when Alice and Mr. Nuoxi first arrived in China, they saw all kinds of people in the underclass, one of whom was the waiter in the hotel. Facing Alice and Mr. Nuoxi from the western continent, the waiter blurted out, "You honorable foreigners would never go wrong here." And then he added, "If Mr. Nuoxi ran over a person in a car, he could finish the lawsuit for only 50 yuan." The so-called 50 yuan was a way for westerners to run over a Chinese and to settle the lawsuit in China. That means if a westerner ran over and killed a Chinese on the street in China, he only needed to pay a small amount of money to the victim's family to settle it. Moreover, the victim's families who took money would not resist, and those westerners not only did not have to worry about being put in jail, but needed not to know the name of that Chinese victim. The lower social strata in China at that time complied with the West and did not resist that potential oppression. With the development of the times, this compliance and obedience was deeply imprinted in their minds and gradually became part of the national character. Another thing we need to point out is that in Shen's criticism of the servility of the ragtag people, he actually criticized the entire community of Chinese people and did not exclude himself. Firstly, Shen himself came from the bottom of the social ladder. He was from an impoverished family background and became a soldier at the age of 14 when he finished his primary school, which was his only experience for formal education.<sup>1</sup> Also, Shen was very critical of himself, even in his preface to his novel *Alice's Adventures in China*,

<sup>1</sup> In the preface to *Alice's Adventures in China*, Shen mentioned, "When it comes to academic ability, I haven't read any books and received education." He himself only received primary education, which was his only experience of receiving formal education. However, it was worth mentioning that although he did not receive much education, he longed for education. In 1922, Shen came to Beijing and often audited classes in Peking University to improve himself.

Shen severely attacked himself by saying that he was too feeble-minded and irresolute and sentimental. So Shen was critical of the Chinese ragtag people as a whole.

Besides, it is also reflected in the criticism of the national inferiority complex of ethnic minority groups, and the criticism of the convergence mentality (Yang, 2008) of the Han people derived from this consciousness. In Chapter Ten of Volume I, Miss Alice wanted to go to the Miao people's residential area because she had heard that "the Miao people here were tamer than dogs and horses" (Ch. 10 of Volume I) and "this 'dongxi (things)'<sup>2</sup> were useless except that it was suitable for being beaten by his master!" (Ch. 10 of Volume I) The so-called "this 'dongxi (things)'" here referred to slaves. The local officials nominally "rewarded" the Miao people to serve the Han people, but actually oppressed the Miao people into slavery. Fox et al. (1989) believed that there were also classes within the oppressed, and the social condition of local elites and the lower class during colonization was vastly different, while the vast majority of oppressed lower class even had no room for speech. The Miao groups at that time were under that condition. As a result, the national inferiority of Miao groups was formed, gradually developed into a cultural convergence mentality, and finally, they lost their self, becoming slaves of local officials and westerners. Shen deplored this national mentality. Then, what about the intellectuals or politicians who were in the upper social class with reputation and prestige at that time?

Finally, Shen expressed his criticism of some intellectuals who were willing to be "onlookers," who were indifferent to national affairs and conditions. In Chapter Seven of Volume I "Reception of Doctor Myna," one day Miss Alice saw "an announcement in the newspaper welcoming Doctor Myna. It said that Doctor Myna was a rare figure among Chinese intellectuals. It was indispensable to welcome him because of his social, political, economic, linguistic and literary skills. All the people who would participate in the welcome meeting were well known." However, when she went there, she just saw intellectuals "greeting each other intimately or perfunctorily," as well as confused by Doctor Myna's compliment to her just because she came from Britain and his endless boasting of himself. In this example, the image of the intellectual community at that time could be roughly drawn

<sup>2</sup> Dongxi (things): Slaves. This sentence ("This 'dongxi (things)' are useless except that it is suitable for being beaten by his master!") comes from the tenth chapter of Volume I of *Alice's Adventures in China*. "Dongxi" is a Chinese word which means "things" instead of human beings, so this is an insulting word for Miao people by Han people and the so-called "dongxi" here refers to "slaves."

from Shen's satire, which was that although they had fame among the society, they were full of empty talk about political, economic, literary and other issues, complimenting each other, and showing indifference to social reality, this could be said to be the group image of intellectuals at that time. Here, Shen used two vivid metaphors. Firstly, he compared the representatives of intellectuals to Myna. Myna was a bird that was good at chirping and could even learn human language. This metaphor vividly portrayed their "onlooker" behavior of empty talk and actual disregard for national affairs, and also implied Shen's satire of intellectuals' indifferent behavior; secondly, he also compared parliamentarians to blind fortune tellers, saying that those who participated in the discussion of national affairs were like blind people, blindly following western politicians, and even daring to decide crucial national affairs like blind fortune tellers. This metaphor vividly reflected the slavish nature of intellectuals or politicians at that time who volunteered to become slaves of the West.

Shen and Lu also choose different perspectives of criticism. Lu mainly exposed the darkness and corruption of "the old society" and criticized servility through novels and essays. For instance, in Lu's *The True Story of Ah Q* (1922), the attitude towards Ah Q and the indifferent people around him was his "mourning their misfortune while being angry at their servility" (Lu, 2005). Lu created distinctive characters such as Yiji Kong and Ah Q in his works such as *The Story of Yiji Kong* (1919), *Medicine* (1919) and *The True Story of Ah Q* (1922) to represent a social group image (Lu, 1981). While Shen tried to examine China and its citizens from the perspective of western colonialists through children's literature, more specific, fantasy novel. In Chapter Ten of Volume I, Shen showed and criticized the "slave trade" through Alice's eyes: Alice roamed the countryside of China and saw the scene of the slave trade. Here, Shen made a detailed carving of the "slave image": these slaves "didn't need to be tied with ropes," "behaved well and waited for inspection," "made strange smiles to their future master." It was not difficult to infer that in Alice's eyes these slaves were not dissatisfied or angry at all, but deeply servile and submissive.

To sum up, Shen criticized the servility of Chinese national character mainly in three aspects through the form of fantasy novel and the perspective of western colonialists. The following will focus on the criticism of the national mentality of worshipping the colonists, which is the extension of that servile image and psychology.

### Attack on the National Mentality of Colonists- Worship

Chinese people's worship of the western colonists is reflected in two aspects: the material worship and the spiritual worship of the colonists. The material worship is the basis, and eventually developed into the spiritual worship of the colonists.

Material worship means Chinese people's over-reliance on the colonists in economy and overall acceptance of the western colonists' material civilization. In *Alice's Adventures in China*, Shen showed that when Miss Alice and Mr. Nuoxi, first arrived in China, Mr. Nuoxi saw that "what he was walking on was a road built of mahogany, cement, iron plates and steel columns transported by Europeans from our Europe." And, when they walked in the streets they even did not know that they had arrived at China, because the shops were full of foreign goods, the houses were of European style, and even half the people walking and riding on the street were Europeans. As described by Shen earlier, Miss Alice and Mr. Nuoxi's gaze was on European style building and shops when they first came to China. Moreover, when they wanted to drink some "Chinese tea," they only found that the shops were filled with western popular drinks such as milk, coffee, and cocoa. This chapter showed Chinese people's gradual acceptance of western material civilization at that time, and then this trend even evolved into "total westernization" (Yazar & Kishal, 2019) in the 1930s, which was a portrayal of Chinese society's adoption of the practices and culture of Europe. In the 1930s, there were many people in China who agreed with total westernization, such as Hu (His ideas could be seen at *Cultural Conflict in China Today* which was published in 1929 and now collected in Volume 36 of *The Complete Works of Shi Hu* (2003)) and Chen (2004) in 1934, but Shen disagreed with them and criticized that phenomenon. He also saw that Chinese had gradually evolved into the spiritual worship of the West, which was manifested as the worship of western character, ideas and even culture under the appearance of material reception.

The spiritual worship originates from "spiritual colonization," which refers to the fact that the aggressor country disintegrates the resistance of the colonized people from the field of consciousness, forces the colonized to accept their own ideology to form subservient cultural cognition. It is the main means for colonialists to carry out colonial activities in the post-colonial period. According to *Beware of Western "Spiritual Colonization"* written by Zheng (2016), there are

three signs that a nation is colonized in spirit. Firstly, the colonized people consciously regard the colonists as masters. The outward expression of this is servility, which we have discussed above. Secondly, the colonized people consciously accept the power of spiritual conquerors over them, for instance, religious power. In *Alice's Adventures in China*, "Chinese priests" (Ch. 1 of Volume I), "worship of God" (Ch. 1 of Volume I) and "waiters expected tips on Jesus' birthday" (Ch. 3 of Volume I) were all the religious powers that the West had constructed for Chinese people through missionary work. In addition, the colonists were good at spreading news to construct power in China. For instance, when referring to China, Mr. Nuoxi was thinking of the guidebook offered by Mr. Habu, which referred China to "low and shabby houses, dirty bodies, bare feet, opium smoking and playing Pai gow!" (Ch. 1 of Volume I) According to Fanon et al. (2008), all mental illnesses, all abnormal manifestations, are consequences of cultural contexts. That is to say, a cultural convention has been formed. With the help of a large number of books, newspapers, advertisements, movies, and radios, a series of propaganda slowly and cleverly acted on the human brain, changing colonized people's views on the world they belonged to. It can be seen that the books and reports on China by western media at that time tended to disparage China to a large extent. In Shen's view, it was one of the ways to destroy the confidence of Chinese people, especially in their own cultural traditions. Thirdly, the work shows that the colonized change themselves according to the will of the colonists and abandon their own traditions to imitate western customs and habits. For one thing, imitation of colonist customs and habits could be found everywhere in *Alice's Adventures in China*. For example, tips, the amount of money given to the waiter, were one of them. In Chapter Three of Volume I, Shen criticized in an ironic tone: "In China, tipping was mandatory three times in a twelvemonth year. It even became an unwritten rule." There was also adherence to western eating habits. A few days before Miss Alice and Mr. Nuoxi first arrived in China, Mr. Nuoxi wanted to go to a Chinese restaurant to eat and drink some food with Chinese characteristics, but he went to three shops in a row and the owners just said they only offered milk, coffee and cocoa, while traditional Chinese tea was not sold. It showed that more and more westerners were attracted by traditional Chinese food culture and wanted to experience authentic local food in China. But what caught their eyes was the influx of milk, coffee, and other food from the West into China, and more and more Chinese merchants blindly catered to the wishes of colonizers and instead abandoned their proud traditions, which harmed Chinese characteristics to some

extent and caused the decline of national culture. For another, there are imitations of colonists' literature and culture. The Chinese litterateurs in *Alice's Adventures in China* were called "Chinese France,<sup>3</sup> Chinese Byron,<sup>4</sup> Chinese..." (Ch. 3 of Volume I). It can be seen that the literary achievements at that time were based on western standards. In addition, the admiration of intellectuals for western culture was vividly reflected in Chapter Seven of Volume I. Alice was invited to participate in the bird gathering. With a soft and flattering voice, Doctor Myna talked about heroism with the goshawk, about immortality with the red crowned crane, and about western culture with other birds. They were actually talking about things that had nothing to do with the current situation in China at that time. Upon seeing Miss Alice from "advanced" Europe, Doctor Myna even showed a sense of flattery. Observing the content they were discussing, such as heroism, immortality and western culture, were all concepts with strong western centrism characteristics. Here, the "western centrism" mentality slowly evolved western colonial discourse such as biological evolution, sociology, civilization mission theory, and cultural theory into publicly accepted knowledge among the colonized society (Hobson, 1968). The so-called "birds" also had a strong symbolic significance, which were the intellectuals who blindly worship colonist culture and were indifferent to the current situation of their own country. They unconsciously accepted the discourses and knowledge of the colonizers and produced a worship of their spiritual culture from their hearts. Through this symbol, Shen was actually attacking the post-colonial cultural aggression and the spiritual worship of Chinese intellectuals to the colonists.

Shen showed his criticism of the Chinese people's mentality of colonialist worship from two aspects. He believed that, whether worshipping colonists in material or in spirit, it damaged the Chinese national character to a certain extent, leading to the dilemma of national cultural identity.

### Concerns About the Dilemma of National Cultural Identity

Shen's criticism of the Chinese national character is also reflected in his criticism of the dilemma of national cultural identity. Cultural identity (Yan, 2006) is a cultural consensus and recognition, including three levels, i.e., identity of forms, identity of norms, and identity of values (Zuo & Wen, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Anatole France (1844–1924): a French writer and also a literary critic.

<sup>4</sup> George Gordon Byron (1788–1824): an English romantic poet of the early 19th century.

Shen's concerns are mainly reflected in: the absence of identity of forms; the lack of identity of norms; the loss of identity of values.

Firstly, Shen criticizes the lack of identity of forms at the beginning of the 20th century. Cultural identity is usually represented by forms including symbols or habits, and the community's recognition of a national culture has always taken various forms of expression. It has visible forms, such as flags, crescents, and even crosses, while the invisible form of expression is generally traditional customs and habits. By criticizing the "bad habits" prevailing in the society, the work showed the absence of identity of forms in Chinese society at that time. In *Alice's Adventures in China*, Shen noticed various bad habits of Chinese people. For example, from the perspective of Miss Alice, the author described a ubiquitous bad social habit at that time, which is spitting everywhere. In Chapter Five "The First Day" of Volume I, Mr. Nuoxi's feelings on his first day in China were: "I only heard coughs everywhere, and I only saw people spit everywhere. When I went into a shop, I saw spittoons, which were mostly delicate Chinese magnets. However, for convenience, most of people just freely spitted things in their throat onto the floor, oh, that seemed to be a unique thing in China." Here, the western colonist identified the dominant cultural form as a Chinese magnetic instrument such as "spittoon," and believed that "spitting" was a typical symbol of Chinese cultural form. Through the accounts of western colonists, Shen showed the prevalence of bad habits at that time. Shen noticed China's bad social habits, which would be very striking in the eyes of westerners, and even thought that "to be a unique thing in China" (Ch. 5 of Volume I). People were generally trapped in vicious bad habits, which led to the absence of the identity of excellent cultural forms in Chinese society.

Secondly, Shen criticizes the loss of identity of social norms at that time, that is, the lack of practicing ethical norms and social norms in the community at both ideological and behavioral levels. Cultural group identity and group norms are significantly related to social exclusion evaluations (Bennett, 2014). The study shows that the more social exclusion an individual received, the less identity of social norms will be recognized, and the social behavior will deviate from the mainstream of society. Shen gives two examples of the lack of identity of social norms. One is the absurd assumption that the bottom people's call for "eating children." In Chapter Six of Volume I, the thin, pointy-faced man Mr. Nuoxi and Miss Alice met on their way to the countryside handed Mr. Nuoxi *The Deliberation on a Convenient Solution for All Poor Chinese Friends* (hereafter *The Deliberation*), signed as "a starving, upright civilian." Although it drew inspiration from

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729)<sup>5</sup> in its critical form, Shen's prominent focus in writing this book leaned more towards criticizing the cultural identity dilemma of Chinese people. It could be said that Shen's *The Deliberation* and Swift's *A Modest Proposal* both have profound satire, but the difference between the two was that Swift made a critical response to the social problem of the Great Irish Famine in his age, while Shen concerned more with the criticism of the dilemma of identity of social norms. The content of *The Deliberation* included: "I dared to conclude that all the yellow people who said they wanted to co-exist and prosper with China, as long as their children were preserved carefully, didn't let salt mar the flesh, diminishing its original beauty when cooking them, people should be willing to spend a little money to buy Chinese children's flesh to have a try" (Ch. 6 of Volume I). Though they used the racial symbol of yellow as the norm, they were actually violating the norms of the mainstream culture. Chinese people who claimed to "coexist and prosper" with China had lost their moral integrity, their recognition of social norms, and their common "identity"—Chinese. They regarded buying and selling children's meat as a "good" way to deal with social issues, and had actually fallen into a moral and ethical crisis. The second example is the absence of recognition of the cultural norm of "nationality." In *The Deliberation*, one of the solutions was that "all Chinese citizens could join another nationality." Here Shen incisively launched his criticism: "as long as people were willing, just as Koreans were willing to be slaves to Japan and Indians to Britain, they should also ask the colonists to simply be their masters." In the eyes of the people at that time, "they (western colonists) could all understand that we were the most culturally-advanced citizens," and this so-called culturally-advanced was actually a departure from traditional social norms. People could even betray their nationality and national culture to join other nationalities in order to survive and for money, so they fell into the trap built by the colonists.

Thirdly, Shen also criticizes Chinese people's lack of identity of cultural values. Identity of cultural values means identifying the value orientation of the community from the deep ideological level, which refers to a sense of group cultural identity, a sense of individual being affected by the group's culture. However, the lack of identity of values and the recognition of western cultural values are enough to disrupt the value basis of a country. The western colonists not only invade China by force, but also construct the relative

cultural values. It leads to the loss of Chinese national pride. In the book, Miss Alice mentioned that when she went to the post office to buy stamps, she should also give the waiter some tips, because "the waiter should not lose face, and China was a country where people's face was more important than everything!" Through the perspective of colonizers, it reflected the satire of Europeans on Chinese people's love for face, which also implied the western cultural identity construction of the East. However, through the indifference and lack of resistance of the majority of people in the society towards western colonizers' construction of their cultural status, it could be seen that the sense of identity was facing a dilemma. The criticism of cultural value loss was also the reason why Shen chose to write *Alice's Adventures in China*. Shen had mentioned this reason in the preface of the second volume of the book. He said, "Because life affected my mood, and recently I got illness, so I changed Miss Alice's character, but I found my creative power in an illusion of theoretical inversion. This was like a very precious discovery of me. However, the work could be said to be 'a failure' because I lost my consistent spirit." In fact, his Alice was not as naive and carefree as Lewis's, but looked at the East in an adult's point of view. In that sense, his "consistent spirit" was not "lost," but more like the turn of the author's writing style. Instead of describing the customs of his hometown, he began to pay attention to social problems in which problems of national character were very prevalent at the time. He described the so-called figures of the new era in China in a pungent tone, saying that they were "those who wore Western-style clothes were called figures of the new era," however, this kind of behavior was what the society accepted, which triggered the excessive pursuit of western values and the indifference and contempt for Chinese cultural values.

However, with the failure of China in anti-aggression wars such as the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, and the use of legislation by Chinese southern and northern authorities in the 1920s to stop young people from resisting Japan's atrocities and governing in Jinan, Shandong Province, the drawbacks of the loss of national cultural identity began to emerge, and Shen began to explore the way out for national development with his works, to reconstruct national character.

### Construction of "Small Greek Temple"—Exploration of Way out of National Character Reconstruction

Shen's way out of reconstructing Chinese national character was to build a "small Greek temple" to worship "human nature" (Shen, 2002a), and at the same time, to cultivate the

<sup>5</sup> *A Modest Proposal: For Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public*, written by Jonathan Swift, 1729. Jonathan Swift, an Anglo-Irish author, who was the foremost prose satirist in the English language.

strong recognition of their own culture. The idea of building a small Greek temple to worship human nature proposed by Shen was the way out to reshape the national character. In essence, the Greek spirit of rationality, wisdom, justice, courage and temperance was used to restore the human nature in Chinese people, and the new national character could be shaped by learning from Europe, by establishing new institutions to build a unified multi-ethnic country with diversity and creativity.

Different from the accepted and even radical anti-colonial activities, the unique character of the anti-colonial thoughts and activities of the Chinese intelligentsia in the early 20th century was embodied in learning from the European counterparts to reform the national character, achieving self-strengthening and finally resisting colonialism. This kind of thinking was very prevalent in China at that time. Famous writers such as Xun Lu, Qichao Liang, Shi Hu, Zuoren Zhou and Shen all held this view and expressed it in their works. In their views, learning from the progressive West could be an effective way to save the country from colonial rule and lead China toward modernization.

Shen proposed the idea of building a “small Greek temple” after moving to the Shanghai Concession in 1928. He believed that there might be many people in the world who built a grandiose skyscraper on the sand or on the water. Those people were not him. He just wanted to build a small Greek temple. To build this temple, people only needed to choose a small land as the foundation and stack it with hard stones. Shen’s ideal architecture was delicate, sturdy and symmetrical, and that temple was dedicated to “human nature” (Shen, 2002b). The “human nature” here referred to the common values and moral principles of humanity. Under Shen’s pen, human nature was exposed and analyzed. Undoubtedly, Shen also praised the kindness and simplicity of the people of western Hunan<sup>6</sup> whom he encountered when he was a child. At that time, he witnessed and experienced the simplicity and kindness of western Hunan world with the eyes of a child. He once said, “What I pursued was a beautiful, healthy, natural and not contrary to human nature form of life.” *Border Town* was the most concentrated manifestation of his pursuit. Shen, who regarded himself as a “rural person,” recognized the truth, goodness, and beauty of the western Hunan world in his childhood.

However, in his embrace of the western Hunan world, there

<sup>6</sup> Hunan: Hunan Province, abbreviated as “Xiang,” is a provincial-level administrative region in China. Shen called the place where he once lived “Xiangxi,” which roughly means the western Hunan.

seemed to be a faint sadness, and the fate of the characters in the story also had a bleak and sentimental color, mixed with feelings of uncertainty and helplessness towards fate. Compared to Shen’s nostalgia for the western Hunan world, he had a cold and critical attitude towards modern people living in the city, deeply and sharply exposing the lives and human nature of the upper class in the city. At the same time, as an adult, Shen saw the impact of rural people’s persistence in the face of money and colonial discourse, and saw that the simple and kind-hearted nature of rural people in western Hunan had become somewhat distorted, and the mentality of retaliation and selfishness began to manifest .... Faced with the problems of national character that exist in both rural and urban areas, Shen conducted in-depth thinking and exploration of the national character of Chinese people. He saw a way out from the Greek spirit, and he believed that the Greek spirit was a cure to solve the chronic disease of national character and culture. And the “Greek temple” he proposed could be seen as a social form. In his mind, the Greek temple could be the lost western Hunan world, or a beautiful, free, rational, and vibrant kingdom. Shen believed that building a Greek temple to worship human nature could be used to reshape the national character of Chinese people. He tried to treat people through the Greek spirit of reason, wisdom, justice, courage and moderation. Shen’s view was actually a query and reflection on modern civilization. When social science generally had entered the stage of reflective development, the drawbacks of overall westernization gradually emerged. Therefore, some advanced intellectuals in developing countries began to consciously advocate retaining some characteristics of their own nation, and taking the road of critical inheritance in the process of national modernization, Shen was one of them.

Shen’s exploration of the way out of national character reconstruction was closely related to his personal experience. The preface of the second volume of *Alice’s Adventures in China* was written on May 20, 1928, the time when Shen left Beijing and went to Shanghai alone to seek opportunities for making a living and literary writing. In the 1920s–1930s, a society full of war and turmoil, Shen devoted his profound ridicule to the society in his work. He adopted the external structure of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, transforming the original children’s fantasy into a satirical novel reflecting reality. Shen accused the commercialization and politicization of modern society (Kinkley, 2010). In the preface to the second volume of the book, Shen proposed that in real life, the spiritual connection between people was hopeless. People could neither live carelessly nor die

decisively. What he could do was only to build a world from his own mind, entrust writing to preserve it, and look forward to the communication between hearts in words (Volume II). In fact, Shen wanted to reveal the social problems of Chinese national character in the post-colonial era through his work, and hoped to reconstruct the national character through writing.

Shen never placed the hope of reconstructing the national character on the colonists. In the story, the western guests Alice and Rabbit Mr. Nuoxi just acted as onlookers, and they finally left China with doubts, without making any efforts to change China's condition. So, in Shen's opinion, where is the hope of national character reconstruction?

First of all, Shen saw hope from the May Fourth writers. The writers since the May Fourth Movement had a deep influence on him, especially Zuoren Zhou. In his article, Shen (1984) highly praised Zhou's plain writing, "Since May Fourth, some people's literary tastes had been dominated by simple and plain characters, primitive simplicity, and the beauty of sketch. Up to now, there was still an unshakable force, and Zhou seemed to be an advocate of that style." Like Zhou, Shen tried to create a new literature in modern vernacular, and he chose the lyrical route to explore the potential resistance in the national slavery. Shen not only criticized the slavish nature of the Chinese, but also criticized people who negate the world and escape from reality. What he advocated was the brave, strong, honest, free, enthusiastic and healthy character and outlook on life like the Greek spirit (Li, 2014).

In addition, Shen wanted to establish a multi-ethnic country through his literary works to imperceptibly reconstruct the national character. In the 1930s, Shen's creation began to pursue simple beauty and kindness and he began to build a small Greek temple in his heart, which was different from the sharp satire and criticism of his writing style in the 1920s. He wrote a series of novels and essays with pastoral colors. Most of his novels took western Hunan as the background, especially in his representative work *Border Town* (1934). From his works with western Hunan as the background, he established a "Yoknapatawpha"—a literary topographic map like that in Faulkner's works, which included the oppressed minorities in the map. Shen's national character transformation was actually centered on national unity. Whether it was the western Hunan world he built or the Greek temple he constructed, what he cared about was the fate of people in the community (Kinkley, 2010). He wanted to build this community into a unified multi-ethnic country with diversity

and creativity. In his expectation, a unified multi-ethnic country, in which all ethnic groups were interdependent and inseparable, had a common national cultural identity, which was a great spiritual force for a country to stand on its own in the world. The premise of this was that people must be able to awaken from the slavery consciousness, and realized that they were not slaves, but their own masters. People could better obtain spiritual freedom by reflecting on colonialism and the shortcomings of national character from the perspective of post-colonialism.

The previous text has mentioned the widely held view of Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century, including Shen, that is, to learn from the West to reshape the national character of Chinese people and ultimately fight against European colonialism. On the one hand, it has progressiveness, because it provides a solution to the issue of national character at that time, and also provokes extensive thinking from all walks of life. On the other hand, from a modern perspective, the views of writers such as Shen inevitably have limitations, because for a nation, the development of its national character should be based on respecting and inheriting the excellent cultural traits of its own, and then learning from the advantages of other ethnic groups, neither being complacent nor belittling oneself. In short, the national character reconstruction wayout proposed by Shen, which aims to restore the human nature of Chinese people through the Greek spirit of rationality, courage, innovation and build the community into a unified multi-ethnic country, is still meaningful to this day. However, the traditional virtues of diligence, kindness, love for peace, and compassion of the Chinese people still have universal value and need to be revitalized.

## Conclusion

From the perspective of post-colonialism, this article has studied Shen's criticism of national character in his work *Alice's Adventures in China* in three aspects: criticism of the image of national slavery, criticism of the colonial worship and criticism of the plight of national cultural identity. Then this article shows that there is an implied relationship between the national character issues discussed by Shen and the social problems of China at the beginning of the 20th century. It could be said that Shen's criticism was trenchant and in-depth, because he exposed the severe social reality and even dilemma that China faced at that time. Shen was optimistic and positive about the future of China and the Chinese national character,



and he also put forward his unique way out of Chinese national character reconstruction in response to the dilemma of Chinese national character: to build a small Greek temple to worship the reason, wisdom, justice, courage and moderation in human nature, which also shows the uniqueness of Chinese intellectuals and writers at that time in responding to the national dilemma, that is, learning from advanced Europe and reshaping Chinese national character, to achieve self-improvement and ultimately resist colonialism. On the one hand, this viewpoint is beneficial, because it provides one of the possible solutions to the issue of national character. On the other hand, from a modern and “understanding contemporary China” perspective, the above views inevitably have some limitations, since the development of a country’s national character should be based on respecting and inheriting the excellent cultural traits of its own, and then learning from the merits of other ethnic groups, neither being complacent nor belittling oneself. In general, although this viewpoint has limitations, it needs to be acknowledged that it has played a positive role in reshaping Chinese national character at that time.

Throughout history, Chinese people’s qualities of diligence, kindness, love for peace, and compassion still have universal value to this day. On this basis, they can supplement and absorb other excellent qualities that were learned from other cultures such as rationality, courage and innovation.

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