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The Technique and Philosophy of Close Reading: A Review of *Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*

Jian Meiru

Abstract: Professor Xian Liqiang's *Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature* is a monograph on close reading that combines profound academic depth with significant pedagogical value. By selecting and reconfiguring ten classic works from modern and contemporary literary history, the author constructs a non-chronological and multi-dimensional network of textual interpretation. This approach guides readers to spark personalized insights into literary history through the juxtaposition and dialogue of these works. Employing the critical method of "deciphering characters and interpreting imagery," the book establishes a replicable and transferable research paradigm that bridges micro-textual analysis and macro-historical narratives, thereby providing significant methodological implications for contemporary literary education and critical practice.

Keywords: *Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature*; close reading; research paradigm

Author Biography: Jian Meiru.

题目：文本细读的术与道：读《中国现当代文学作品十讲》

摘要：咸立强教授著《中国现当代文学作品十讲》是一部兼具学术深度与教学示范意义的文本细读专著。作者选取十部现当代文学史经典作家作品进行重组重组，构建了一个非时序、多向度的文本阐释网络，引导读者在作品的并置与对话中激活个性化的文学史思考。运用了“解字释象”的批评方法，在微观字象分析与宏观历史叙述之间建立了一个可模仿可迁移的研究范式，为当下的文学教育与批评实践提供了方法论层面的意义。

关键词：《中国现当代文学作品十讲》；文本细读；研究范式

作者介绍：简美茹，华南师范大学文学院现当代文学专业研究生，电子邮箱：yuyuyu0822@126.com

In recent years, close reading has become a widely accepted practice in the study and teaching of modern and contemporary Chinese literature. A core issue, however, urgently requires attention: how should readers be guided to conduct effective close readings and establish meaningful interpretive bridges between historical and cultural contexts and formal analysis? A concentrated close reading of existing modern and contemporary literary texts allows readers to deepen their understanding of literary history from multiple perspectives and angles. Such analysis yields valuable insights into the creative background of works, the spiritual characteristics of authors, and the evolution of literary thought. At the same time, it sparks new reflections on literary themes. Consequently, readers become better equipped to grasp the pulse of the times and the state of public thought, thereby fostering a strengthened sense of national and cultural confidence (Yu Lu, 2025, p.105). Building upon this foundation, a perusal of excellent close-reading essays can enable readers to grasp the methodology of close textual analysis in its entirety. These essays offer valuable insights into compositional structure, writing style, and interpretive perspectives.

This volume, Professor Xian Liqiang's *Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature* (Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2025 edition), constitutes an outstanding collection of close readings of modern and contemporary literary works. It is not merely a compilation of individual analyses. Rather, ten works from the history of modern and contemporary Chinese literature are ingeniously selected, ranging from Lu Xun's "Mending the Sky" to Shi Tiesheng's "Me and the Temple of Earth." These selections cover various genres such as fiction, modern poetry, and drama and span key junctures and pivotal authors in literary history. Through the analysis of these ten specific texts, readers are enabled to engage in highly individualistic reinterpretations and comparative reflections within the textual network constructed by the author. Furthermore, through concrete critical practice, the author demonstrates specific close-reading methods for "deciphering characters and interpreting imagery." A rigorous and clear writing paradigm is thereby established for emulation. The publication of this volume undoubtedly holds significant methodological implications and exemplary value for contemporary humanities education and academic writing.

1. The Purpose of Anthologies: Free Interpretation and Innovation of the Literary-Historical Paradigm

Modern and contemporary Chinese literature has spanned a century since the May Fourth New Culture Movement, a period marked by a succession of intellectual currents, a profusion of celebrated authors, and a wealth of distinguished works. Faced with this vast corpus of writing, questions concerning the constitution of a classic and the appropriate methods for its study have consistently been the focus of scholarly attention. A review of existing anthologies reveals that they may generally be divided into two categories. The first category is centred upon literary history and frequently serves as a supplement to, or an echo of, literary history textbooks. Its primary objective is the clear delineation of the historical trajectory of literary development. Its defining characteristic is comprehensiveness. It endeavours to encompass all literary genres, all significant authors, and all representative works that mark pivotal junctures in literary history. The inclusion of a work is largely determined by its status as a landmark within that historical narrative. The second category places the text itself at the centre of exposition. Such collections often downplay linear historical narratives and focus instead upon universally recognised classics or masterpieces from literary history. They aim to guide readers into the depths of the text for close reading and sustained exploration. They place greater emphasis upon uncovering the enduring artistic charm, complex structures, and polysemy inherent in the works themselves. Their defining characteristic is a pursuit of excellence. Selection criteria are contingent upon a text's capacity to withstand close scrutiny and its potential to generate broad interpretive possibilities. In contrast, *Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature* constructs a textual network brimming with

interpretive possibilities while remaining firmly grounded in the texts themselves. In doing so, it innovates the cognitive paradigm of literary history.

The choice of the title “Ten Lectures on Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature”, rather than “Ten Lectures on Classic Works of Modern and Contemporary Chinese Literature”, makes it evident that the author has no intention of prescribing a definition of the classic. Instead, ten works have been carefully selected, ranging from Guo Moruo’s relatively obscure modern poem “Returning to My Old Home” to the renowned play “Thunderstorm”. It is evident that in its selection of works, the volume is characterised by a broad temporal span, generic diversity, and meticulous focus. First, the temporal scope is extensive. The selected works are arranged chronologically and span nearly a century, from Lu Xun’s “Mending the Sky” (1922) to “Me and the Temple of Earth” (1991). From a literary-historical perspective, the selections encompass the three decades of modern literature as well as the “Chinese Literature in the First Seventeen Years of the PRC (1949-1966),” 1980s literature, and 1990s literature of the contemporary period. Lu Xun’s “Mending the Sky” and Guo Moruo’s “Returning to My Old Home” belong to the first decade of modern literature (1917 – 1927). The second decade is represented by Xu Zhimo’s “Farewell to Cambridge,” Cao Yu’s “Thunderstorm” and “Sunrise”, and Lao She’s “Camel Xiangzi”. Zhao Shuli’s “The Marriage of Xiao Erhei” typifies the third decade. In terms of contemporary literature, “A Young Man Arrives at the Organisation Department” belongs to the Seventeen-Year Literature. “Ordinary World” and “Me and the Temple of Earth” were written in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. In addition to its broad chronological coverage, the selected works encompass a wide variety of genres. In the realm of fiction, the collection includes full-length novels, novellas, and short stories, with one full-length novel and one short story selected from both modern and contemporary literature. In poetry, the collection includes modern verse by Guo Moruo, a core figure of the Creation Society, as well as “Farewell to Cambridge,” a representative work of the New Moon School. Drama is represented by Cao Yu’s “Thunderstorm” and “Sunrise”. The volume concludes with Shi Tiesheng’s essay “Me and the Temple of Earth.” These ten works encompass all four major literary genres, rendering the selection quite comprehensive. With such a diverse array of texts, the collection might easily have appeared disorganised. Yet, without exception, each selection is focused upon an extremely specific and nuanced interpretive angle. Whether it is the “art of metaphor” in “Camel Xiangzi”, the “tears” in “Returning to My Old Home,” or the “narrative of grassroots power” in “The Marriage of Xiao Erhei,” these entry points do not purport to represent the entirety of the works. Rather, they function as gateways, anchoring the starting point for engaging with both the individual texts and literary history.

Though the list of works appears diverse, two or more essays may be linked together to collectively illuminate a series of core themes that run through modern and contemporary Chinese literature. For instance, by placing “Mending the Sky” at the beginning and “Me and the Temple of Earth” at the end, a resonance is created around the grand philosophical question of humanity’s origins and ultimate destination. This is clearly no coincidence but a deliberate choice on the author’s part. Through its selection of works, this volume breaks free from the mental rigidity and fixed meanings imposed by a linear view of history. It creates a textual network rich with diverse interpretive possibilities.

Eser once proposed the concept of the “evocative structure,” arguing that a text’s “evocative structure” is constituted by “blanks.” These blanks invite readers to fill them with their own imagination and experience, thereby completing the final realisation of meaning (Ren Weidong, 2022, p.115). When this concept is borrowed, it becomes clear that through the selection of texts, numerous “gaps” have been intentionally created by the author within the textual network. Readers are invited to fill these gaps with their

own imagination and experience to achieve the final realisation of meaning. Readers are able to compare the female characters portrayed by the same author: Shiping in “Thunderstorm” and Chen Bailu in “Sunrise”. From feudal families to cosmopolitan cities, Cao Yu’s pessimism and disappointment in the face of the conflict between mundane existence and romantic love can readily be discerned through these similar tragedies presented in different forms. From the perspective of literary form, one can see a clear pursuit of modernity in modern Chinese literature. This is evident in works ranging from the modern poetry of “Farewell to Cambridge” to the structural design of Cao Yu’s plays and the metaphorical techniques in Lao She’s “Camel Xiangzi”. In terms of the worlds depicted, both “The Marriage of Xiao Erhei” and “A Young Man Arrives at the Organisation Department” portray power structures. The former reveals, from the perspective of the common people, their imaginings and expectations of government. The latter narrates the “alienation” of an individual within the power apparatus of the Organisation Department. Through these works, readers are enabled to delve deeply into the relationship between the individual and the collective across different eras. Thus, this volume uses ten texts as anchor points, linking them together to construct a polyphonic interpretive space that may be freely combined and approached from various angles. Readers are able to connect these ten works to address a specific theme collectively. They complement, contrast, and challenge one another, presenting a multidimensional and three-dimensional literary history. Within this network, any number of texts can be linked from multiple perspectives, including form, genre, thematic content, and authorship. Readers’ own reflections are employed to fill the productive “gaps” in meaning created by juxtaposition. In this way, a dynamic, diverse, and personalised imagination of literary history is truly realised.

Overall, ten works have been carefully selected in this volume to present an all-encompassing field. The cognitive activity of literary history is transformed from the passive reception of authoritative narratives into a dynamic process. In this process, readers actively participate and autonomously construct meaning through interaction within the textual network. The volume aims to cultivate a capacity for critical thinking that involves association, comparison, analysis, and synthesis across multiple reference points. It guides readers toward a truly personalised construction and understanding of the deep logic of literary history.

2. Why Close Reading? Deconstructing Characters and Interpreting Symbols to Reconstruct Innovative Pathways for Close Reading

From the perspective of the history of literary research and teaching, the continuous introduction of Western theoretical doctrines in the 1980s and 1990s caused a significant shift. Theoretical research in literary history gradually supplanted the study of specific authors and works. This gave rise to a tendency for theory to take precedence, with research becoming “overshadowed by macro-systematic theories” (Chen Sihe, 2004, p.109). Precisely for this reason, close reading has garnered significant attention in recent research and higher literary education. As a critical method, it focuses upon the intrinsic form and language of the text. However, no consensus has yet been reached regarding the manner in which close reading should be conducted or the extent to which it should be pursued. In the preface, the author’s views and perspectives are set forth. Close reading is argued to emphasise the “reading” of the text, with “reading” taken as its foundation and “closeness” as its essence. One should not speak without having read, and one should be cautious in speech without having read closely (Xian Liqiang, 2025, p. 03). Therefore, close reading must return to the smallest unit constituting the text: the character. Beginning with the analysis of characters, a process of “scrutinising every word and phrase,” an understanding is gained of language and its imagery. A corner of the history and era beyond the text is thereby glimpsed. Drawing upon the relationship between language, imagery, and meaning in traditional culture, the author ingeniously builds a bridge between Eastern and Western traditions.

Using the ten close readings presented in this volume as examples, he constructs a path of close reading centred upon the analysis of characters and the interpretation of imagery.

This method of “deciphering characters and interpreting imagery” entails a return to the original meanings of characters or words. It requires an analysis of semantic nuances and subtle differences in conventional usage. It also involves an examination of the concrete imagery formed by characters, such as a specific action or a plant of a clearly identified species. Yet a single action or story alone cannot reveal the gaps within the text. Between consciousness and imagery, imagination is required to touch upon the deeper emotional expressions and the author’s spiritual essence lying behind the text. Consider the analysis of “Farewell to Cambridge.” Readers are led by the author, beginning with a semantic analysis of the pair of hand gestures: “招” (waving to beckon) at the opening and “挥” (waving to bid farewell) at the conclusion. Not only are the subtle cultural nuances of these two gestures discerned, but when the image of waving to draw the clouds closer in farewell emerges in the mind, the emotional weight becomes clear. It is not difficult to glimpse the lingering reluctance behind the character “招” and the final parting behind the character “挥”. The echo they form within the poem’s structure serves to weave a continuous thread of sorrow and longing throughout the entire work. After several rounds of such analysis of the core characters and imagery, the reader no longer remains at the level of a general perception of the poem’s light and airy form. Instead, the reader is naturally brought to the core aesthetic quality described in Xu Zhimo’s poetry: “pain and joy are one and the same.” In this way, a connection and sublimation is achieved, moving from an analysis of the text’s internal form to a grasp of its overall style and the poet’s philosophy of life. The method of interpreting characters and imagery is by no means at odds with theory. On the contrary, theory can be effectively integrated with the text through its application. When an attempt is made to analyse Lao She’s “Camel Xiangzi” through the lens of metaphorical rhetoric, the author provides an excellent demonstration of this method. The analysis begins with the “metaphorical terms” observed. The underlying reality of the voicelessness of the working class is then astutely pointed out before stylistic characteristics are discussed. The application of the “deciphering characters to interpret imagery” theory lends the argument a natural and compelling persuasiveness. The benefit of this in-depth exploration from “characters” to “imagery” lies in the provision of a solid and reliable foundation for achieving the principle of “seeing the big picture through the small details.” It ensures that the elucidation of macro-level meanings or the application of theory is firmly rooted within the text’s own structure. This effectively avoids the vagueness and inconsistency that can arise when theory is applied to textual interpretation.

Furthermore, the method of “interpreting characters to elucidate imagery” is highly accessible and practical, with a broad scope of application. Unlike flashes of genius or impressionistic textual criticism, this approach offers clear points of entry and a stable framework. As discussed above, it can be used to link theory with the text. It can also be employed to establish connections between the four elements of literature. In the interpretation of Guo Moruo’s “Returning to My Old Home,” the author begins the discussion with the renaming of the collection in which the poem was included, from “Tears” to “Returning to My Old Home”. He then provides an analysis of the characters in the original manuscript’s “cannot help but” and the revised “could not help but.” From there, he moves to the formal expression of “blood and tears” in Guo Moruo’s writing as a Romanticist. The author does not stop there. He returns to Guo Moruo’s cluster of poetic imagery centred upon “tears,” thereby ascending to a discussion of the imagination of New Literature. The logical chain progresses step-by-step from the work itself to the author’s mode of expression, then to the author’s imagery, and finally to reflections on the era. Each step is substantiated and interlinked, firmly

grounded in the preceding argument. The method of analysing characters and interpreting imagery functions like a latch. It can be applied to the relationship between a specific work and its specific mode of expression or expanded to examine the relationship between the imagery within the entire work and the era. It flexibly scales up or down as required, connecting the work, the author, and the world for the reader. This approach to interpreting characters and imagery can also serve as a foundation for character analysis. In analysing the character of Shiping, the author offers a perspective on her “fair” appearance that stands in stark contrast to previous scholarship. Shiping’s “suffering” is shown to stem from the disparity in her life, and her tragedy arises from the relentless destruction of what were once happy times. Simultaneously, the “purity” of her appearance is indicated to point to a personality characterised by self-respect and dignity. The character’s image thus becomes crystal clear, and Shiping’s character is summarised by the author with a single word: “purity.” Finally, it is logically posited that the tragic aesthetic of the character stems from the struggle against an irresistible tragic process. It is evident that the method of “interpreting characters and symbols” serves as a key approach running through the analysis of the text. The standardisation of the analytical framework and its broad applicability enable scholars to adapt and draw upon it when studying other texts. In this way, the cultivation of literary sensibility is transformed by the author into a teachable academic model.

Overall, the volume’s core contribution at the level of textual interpretation lies in its successful re-establishment of close reading as a rigorous modern academic method. Through “character analysis and image interpretation,” a clear and viable path has been carved out between the micro-level forms of the text and the macro-level historical or literary-historical contexts beyond the text. This approach not only guides readers from within the text to beyond it but also establishes a highly instructive model through its clear methodology, solid argumentation, and profound insights. It serves as a guide for how modern and contemporary literary studies might undertake textual interpretation that is both deeply substantive and highly productive.

3. The Value: Establishing a Benchmark for Academic Education

At the macro-level of literary history, the author has constructed an interpretive textual network for the reader through his selection of texts. At the specific micro-level of writing, the “interpreting characters and symbols” methodology provides a viable paradigm for the reader. Through concrete critical practice, the volume seeks to address deeper disciplinary anxieties. What constitutes effective close reading in contemporary academic education? What constitutes adequate academic training? Consequently, the core value of this volume lies not only in offering new interpretative perspectives on modern and contemporary texts. It also lies in building an effective bridge between academic research and postgraduate education, thereby establishing a benchmark for the academic education paradigm.

Firstly, through concrete textual analysis, the volume demonstrates precisely how intuitive, sensory reading is to be transformed into rigorous academic writing. In doing so, it resolves the common dilemma in academic training of “having feelings but no questions.” In contemporary postgraduate education, students often possess the close-reading sensitivity described in Chapter Two. They are capable of capturing moments of heterogeneity within a text, such as an abrupt function word in Lu Xun’s writing or an anomalous image in an Eileen Chang novel. Yet many students frequently struggle to elevate their personal aesthetic experiences into academic topics of public significance. They find it difficult to arrive at conclusions or viewpoints of depth and breadth. This process of theoretical transformation is clearly demonstrated by the argumentative strategy of this volume. The author is never content merely to list the fragmented discoveries gleaned from “character analysis.” Instead, he continually probes the logical motivations behind these shifts in

vocabulary and subsequently situates them within literary history to establish their precise position. By making this implicit thought process explicit, the volume demonstrates that academic research does not begin with the accumulation of materials or a chance, intuitive flash of inspiration. It begins with the acute detection of fissures within the text and culminates in the complete closure of a logical chain. This line of argumentation begins with micro-level linguistic analysis and advances steadily towards macro-level propositions. It provides beginners with a model of academic training that is both emulatable and practical.

Secondly, this volume sets a benchmark for writing that bridges the gap between the text and its external context. A marked polarisation is observable in current academic writing education. One type of research is confined to a closed-off close reading of the text. It becomes bogged down in the minutiae of words and phrases, unable to engage with the historical context in which the text was produced. Such research appears narrow-minded, and its conclusions are flimsy and lacking in substance. The other type becomes overly preoccupied with the accumulation of external historical materials. It descends into a mere compendium of textual and historical trivia, neglecting the formal significance of literature itself. It merely repeats textbook conclusions without arriving at concrete and valuable insights. Throughout the volume, the author's adherence to a dialectical stance is clearly seen. The text is a historical text, and history is the history of the text. The author is committed to revealing how the fissures within the text's form are compressed and shaped by external forces. Simultaneously, he uses micro-level analysis of linguistic forms to inform a broader understanding of literary history and the author's emotional and spiritual world. This strategy involves repeatedly shuttling between the text and its extra-textual creative context and engaging in back-and-forth argumentation. It not only ensures the literary nature of literary research but also endows it with a broad perspective and depth of argumentation.

Furthermore, another major methodological contribution of this volume lies in the provision of an excellent model for addressing the dialectical relationship between micro-textual interpretation and macro-perspective. It effectively responds to the increasingly evident problem of fragmented writing in the academic world. In recent years, research on modern and contemporary literature has exhibited a trend towards "historicization," shifting from text-centred to history-centred approaches (Gao Yuanbao, 2017, p.1). A great deal of research has focused upon case studies with extremely narrow scopes. While this has yielded significant advances in the unearthing of historical facts, beginners often fall into the trap of seeing the trees but not the forest. They remain fixated upon the verification of a single detail, an interpersonal relationship, or a publishing event. They lack the ability to extend these fragments into a concrete discussion of a specific academic issue. As a result, academic writing devolves into a mere accumulation of materials. In this volume, however, it is demonstrated how literature and history may be integrated, using the small to illuminate the larger picture. Every micro-level "interpretation of characters and imagery" is consistently situated within its specific creative context. Through repeated scrutiny of micro-level phrases, the analysis aims for a return to the public discourse of existing literary history. The establishment of this tension is particularly crucial. The volume's re-reading of texts often begins with an inconspicuous detail. Yet, as the argument deepens layer by layer, it ultimately points towards reflections on core propositions. These include the mechanisms of modernity, the complexity of Enlightenment discourse, or the laws governing stylistic evolution. The value of micro-research lies not in the "micro" itself but in its ability to serve as a fulcrum for addressing macro-level issues. Without engagement with literary history, close reading risks remaining superficial. Conversely, without the analytical grounding provided by micro-level textual analysis, macro-narratives risk appearing hollow. An excellent balance is struck in this volume between the two. It possesses both the solid foundation of meticulous textual scrutiny and the grand scope of theoretical reflection. This research approach, which "sees the big picture through the small and unifies the small through the big," offers an excellent model for

overcoming the current fragmentation of academia.

Finally, the style of writing presented in this volume is characterised by clear reasoning, extensive cross-referencing, and rigorous logic. This style has the potential to correct the current academic climate. Under the present academic evaluation system, some research exhibits a superficial tendency to use obscure theories to mask intellectual poverty and to employ grand narratives to dilute specific issues. In contrast, a straightforward and down-to-earth style is demonstrated in this volume. New terms are not invented, nor are theories flaunted. Instead, issues are analysed layer by layer, much like peeling a bamboo shoot. This writing style, rooted in the text and characterised by interlocking logic, helps to exert a subtle influence upon readers. It contributes to the improvement of their overall writing skills. The resonance of an academic voice has never depended upon the number of technical terms used. It depends upon the depth and breadth of analysis of the text and the issues at hand.

In summary, readers are enlightened by this volume on how the intuitions gained from reading texts may be effectively transformed into the exploration of academic questions. The “interpreting characters and elucidating phenomena” method offers a bridge between the text and its context. It helps learners grasp how the big picture may be seen through small details and how an interaction between literature and history may be achieved. Furthermore, the volume’s writing style progresses from the simple to the complex and unfolds in a gentle, unhurried manner. It is undoubtedly the finest response and counter to the current trend of writing that is deliberately obscure and convoluted.

Academic rigour and methodological self-awareness are underpinned by a concern for “humanity.” As Qian Gurong observed, “Literature is the study of humanity.” The publication of this volume is, in fact, a practical embodiment of this humanistic spirit. From the preface to the selected texts, the theme and traces of “humanity” are ever-present. The journey begins with the origins of “humanity” in the opening piece, “Mending the Sky.” It proceeds through human emotions and the relationship between the individual and society and politics. It finally culminates in “Me and the Temple of Earth.” Is the author not offering a response to the pervasive anxiety of modern society? In the preface, the author proposes that the key to close reading lies in opening one’s heart, discovering the true “self,” and becoming a genuine human being. This clearly transcends the realm of literary scholarship. It represents the author’s expectation that readers may, through reading, achieve the shaping of their own character and a spiritual purification. In this sense, the volume reveals the profound sense of responsibility and mission that underlies Professor Xian Liqiang’s scholarly approach, both as a teacher and as a person. It establishes a true benchmark for being a person, a teacher, and a writer. Perhaps it is within such texts that the spirit of excellence in scholarship and the tradition of writing are passed down from generation to generation.

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ORCID

Jian Meiru ^{ID} <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8148-5664>

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