



**Society of East Asian Studies 6th Annual Graduate Symposium:
Lives Across Borders
April 13, 2019, University of Illinois**

ABSTRACT

Poetic Machines: Literary Representations of Machines in the 1920s and 1930s China

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This paper investigates the literary representation of machines in the 1920s and 1930s China. Working against the normative assumption of the machine culture, which emphasizes the rivalry between industrial machinery and human creativity, I argue that the writings about machines in the 1920s and 1930s China have created a discursive space that enables the boundary crossing between intellectual and laborer, fiction and action.

Specifically, I examine two works of the prominent leftwing writer and critic Ah Ying, the short story “In the Machine Room” (1926) and the play “A City without Night” (1938), both of which address the identity switch between the intellectual and the worker in the setting of mechanical production. I argue that by imagining themselves as part of the industrial production, Chinese intellectuals aspire to overcome their class background and join symbolically with the workers. Through that union, the intellectual is empowered to speak for the voiceless subaltern. Moreover, I engage with the contemporary debate regarding the “literature of force” (力的文学). I pay special attention to the borrowing of mechanical terms in this debate and tackle with the paradox between scientific determinism and the agency of literature.

By situating the representation of machines in the historical context of the imperialism, modernization and the introduction of Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s China, this paper sheds new light on the discourse of technological optimism that accompanies the modernization of China till today.