

TRANSLATION

## Lu Xun, a “Knot” that Pulls Together China’s Modernity

Yi Li

Sichuan University

**ABSTRACT:**

The impact of Lu Xun on modern Chinese literature is complex, permeating every branch of modern Chinese literature and connecting them with itself as a junction. Tracing the logical web of Lu Xun’s thoughts helps reveal a grand landscape of modern Chinese literature. Lu Xun’s ability to move us with his spiritual pursuit after more than half a century symbolizes his trans-epochal value as well as our own self-growth.

**KEYWORDS:** Lu Xun, modern Chinese culture, *Warnings and Road Signs*, encounter

China no longer wonders who Lu Xun (魯迅, 1881-1936) was, or what he means to our culture. What China asks, rather, is how Lu Xun’s iconicity develops in pursuit of a Chinese zeitgeist, or how he manages to inform social process or historicity. How is this literary figure so prominent throughout China’s modernity? How is Lu Xun such a fundamental figure of China’s intellectual paradigm?<sup>1</sup>

As early as September of 1927, Lu Xun related:

There is a scholar in Guangzhou who says, “Lu Xun is spent. He has nothing more to say, it’s unnecessary to read the *Yusi* (語絲, *Tattler*).” Indeed, I’ve already said all I came to say. I was right then, I’m right now, and I’ll be right next year. I sincerely hope, however, that what I say will not be true ten or twenty years from now. If it is, then we’re all finished, although I’ll have a clear conscience (*Complete Works* 3: ‘公理’之所在).

So how did Lu Xun come to play such a formative role in Chinese cultural consciousness? How has he come to vitalize modern Chinese history? In reading Lu Xun, how do we pull and stretch him? History since Lu Xun seems inseparable from the shadow he cast. Regardless of how we read or think about him today, history decided whether to make Lu Xun a modern hero or to plunge him into dark abyss. We behold the curious play of Chinese culture and history and see that Lu Xun pulls together Chinese modernity.

### Chinese Thought in the New Century

Individual social and philosophical values form the bulk of modern Enlightenment thinking. Lu Xun contributed to these values by structuring

1. Originally published as “Zuo wei xiandai Zhongguo wenhua zhi ‘jie’ de Lu Xun 作為現代中國文化之“結”的魯迅,” Shantou University Journal: Humanities and Social Sciences Monthly (*Shantou daxue xuebao*—*renwen shehui kexue bao* 汕頭大學學報——人文社會科學報), vol. 34, no. 12, pp. 9-13. Translated and published with permission.

individual subjectivity. While studying abroad in Japan, he began to emphasize individual existence, urging us toward the singular and divergent, and away from convergent multitudes. During the May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun advocated individualist non-governance and humanism. However, his thoughts do not inhere in Enlightenment thinking. Rather his meditations hover upon how Enlightenment thinking failed to take root in society. In the preface to *Outcry* (*Nahan* 呐喊), Lu Xun said:

I have since then felt a malaise unlike any before. I didn't know what to make of it then but thought if there were but one person to advocate for, who approved, then I would encourage him. If I met with objection, it would spur him on. The tragedy reveals itself when there is a call to arms, to which no one approves or objects, as if there were not a soul in the land, no horizon in sight, nor hand being lifted. I have been despondent ever since" (*Complete Works* 1: 417).

Also:

This gives one pause to reflect that the rallying cry calls a hero into being (ibid.).

Lu Xun's rationalist Enlightenment thinking integrated his stance on individuality. It has been written that, "Lu Xun was a pioneer of the New Culture movement. He was the only one to realize that Enlightenment intellectuals are destined to be tragic" (Wang F. and Zhao 46).

Today's scholars make distinctions between Lu Xun and other Enlightenment thinkers, preferring to explore his work through Existentialism or modern Vitalist philosophy. The "darkness" and "nothingness" of Lu Xun have been explored, such as in the passages, "My thinking is too dark, and as for whether I am correct right now, I have no way of knowing" (*Complete Works* 11:79), or "I often feel that 'darkness' and 'illusion' are the only reality" (11: 20), or even, "I am certain of only one thing, the grave" (1: 284). Parallels are made between Lu Xun's rebellious despair and the absurd hero of Albert Camus, but Lu Xun was in a class of his own. In Lu Xun, we find absurdity but no outsider. In his own milieu, he was not an outsider. He was, however, somewhat marginalized as an outlier (Wang F. and Zhao 78). Lu Xun was very sensitive to mortality, and his rebellion in despair had a strong sense of personal responsibility. This pursuit of reformation and personal feeling of responsibility formed his subjective structure. "The history of China is destined to follow the tragedy of Chinese Enlightenment intellectuals, building a dyke of modernization against the ignorance of past traditions" (ibid. 47). If Western Existentialism bore the banner of vitalist philosophy as it exited the 18<sup>th</sup> century, then Lu Xun carried the banner of vitalist philosophy as a Chinese Enlightenment thinker.

## Modern Chinese Political Revolutionary Thought

Lu Xun joined the anti-Manchurian movement whilst in Japan, in perpetual revolt against oppression. He was a leading member of the League of Left-Wing

Writers, developing his own unique take on revolution. He sympathized with the oppressed, and held revolution as an ideal, but was very realistic about the outcomes of revolution. “Rise and revolt, then revolt against the revolution, then form an anti-anti-revolution, and so on” (*Complete Works* 3:16), pointing to Chinese history as a long series of revolutions, seeing revolt as a discursive method. In speaking of the Xinhai Revolution, he stated, “Before the revolution, I was a slave. After the revolution, I was tricked by the former slaves, who made me into their slave.” He spoke fondly of the “golden world” awaiting the revolutionary, although at times sarcastically. He even said to Feng Xuefeng (馮雪峰, 1903-1976), “When I see you coming, I want to run for fear I’ll be the first you kill” (Li 115). In correspondence with a friend, he suggested that after the revolution triumphed, he would put on a red vest and sweep the streets, “After the collapse, if we’re still here, you’ll find me with a beggar’s red vest, sweeping up the streets of Shanghai” (*Complete Works* 12). Lu Xun had his own difficulties with China’s revolution and social reform.

### Conceptual Developments in Modern Chinese Literature

Lu Xun carried the banner of literature for the people, excavating the value of Enlightenment literature by advocating literature’s social function, and had done so since his time in Japan. “I devote my blood to the ancestors of the Chinese people, to taking on their illness so that I may bring on our cure.” The slideshow incident is a familiar example of where Lu Xun strived to give literature a realistic mission. People today who criticize his utilitarian view of literature still admit Lu Xun was distinct from opportunist literature. Lu Xun had his own sense of literature’s limitations.

In the Preface to *Outcry*, he expresses his doubts:

Take an iron room. There are no windows to break. There are many people sleeping inside, and they will all suffocate to death, but they feel no sorrow, merely passing from drowsiness into death. Now you holler at them, rousing a few unlucky souls who will now suffer to the very end. Do you feel you’ve done right by them? (*Complete Works* 12: 419)

This raises the question once again for us. Can literature take on this much responsibility? Might the experiment go badly, producing an opposite effect? In Lu Xun’s life, the writer spoke of using literature to make social reforms in boring ways. In *Literature of a Revolutionary Period* (*Geming shidai de wenzue* 革命時代的文學) there was the well-known saying, “One little poem won’t scare away Sun Chuanfang,<sup>2</sup> but a cannonball would.” The essay “In Answer to Mr. Youheng (*Da Youheng xiansheng* 答有恆先生)” in *And That’s That* (*Eryi ji* 而已集), gives the provocative case of the “drunken shrimp”:

I found I was a...a...? For a while there I couldn’t even articulate it. I’ve said

2. Translator’s Note: Sun Chuanfang (孫傳芳, 1885-1935) was a protégé of Yuan Shikai (袁世凱, 1859-1916) and later a warlord with his base in Nanjing.

that Chinese history is a cannibalistic feast. Some eat. Others get eaten. The eaten have eaten others before, and those eating now have once been bitten into. Only now do I discover the part I've played in this. Sir, you've read my works. Let me ask you a question. When you read it, did you feel numb, or did you feel clear-minded? Did you feel muddled and confused, or did you feel alive? If it were the latter each time, then from what I can see, my judgement confirms a lot. There is a kind of "drunken shrimp" always present at Chinese feasts. The livelier and fresher the shrimp, the happier the eaters. I help the shrimp. I understand the mind and honesty of the young, sensitizing them, so that they will experience double the pain in any disastrous case. I give rise to those who hate the young and enjoy their clever and exquisite pain, helping the eaters have extra pleasure in eating (*Complete Works* 3: 454).

Mr. Qian Liqun reminds us in his writings on Lu Xun to revisit Feng Xuefeng's remarks. It was said that Lu Xun's will in *Death* had seven items. Item number five said, "If my son has no talent by the time he's come of age, he can take up a trade or some other small matter for his livelihood. Under no condition may he become an emptyheaded writer or artist." Feng Xuefeng recalled that the word "empty-headed" was not originally written (Feng).

Of course, Lu Xun's doubts about literature and the role it could play did not mean he had given up. He made no excuses for his escapism or powerlessness. Many Western intellectuals concern themselves with death, parsing out the limitations of human life, viewing life through the lens of death. In these times, people treasure life more than ever, cherishing its meaning and value. In discussing the limitations of literature, we see more clearly the efficacy of intellectuals, understanding just what lies within or outside of their grasp. Mr. Wang Dehou addresses Qian Liqun by reminding us that when reading Lu Xun, we should examine gestalts, returning his words to the complexity and richness befitting the writer, rather than dwelling on isolated words and phrases (Wang D.).

## Ethics of Modern China

Whether talking about those who studied in the UK and US in the 1920s and 30s, overseas Sinologists, or cutting-edge mainland Chinese scholars today, we see that critique of Lu Xun focuses on his extremism and intolerance. The usual problem with this is an extension of attitude to character. Critics of Lu Xun's personality think they can gauge his inner character through his actions and behaviors. The spirit of a person is very different from the spirit of a text. As such, critics find themselves looking down from a lofty castle of their own ethical norms. When we judge Lu Xun, we find that our judgement has superseded that of which we have any certainty. In these days of opportunism, we see people judging rather than thinking, as if toppling

a figure such as Lu Xun could bring us any ultimate or personal profit. Thus, we refrain from discussing the personality of Lu Xun, leaving off discussion of ethics and virtue when it comes to the writer's life. Looking at the matter in a balanced way, we can admit that there were those Lu Xun hurt, but we admit that Lu Xun's ethical choices tended to be more stable and consistent than most in China. Even now, we also find it difficult to completely unite individualism and humanitarianism. Being for oneself and also being for others has always posed an insurmountable moral conundrum for people. Moreover, when relinquishing "being for oneself" still offers no method for genuinely "being for others," Lu Xun's choices have an undeniable ethical value. By causing as little harm to others as possible, he won many friends—and particularly earned the esteem of the innocent, weak, and unimportant. Yes, Lu Xun scolded and reprimanded, but the subjects of his scorn were often powerful and righteous. His intolerance was aimed at a deformed social system concealing cracks and fissures with the objective and just. The crux of the problem here is that dictatorial regimes (and their helpers) retain all the discursive power, defining what is objective as opposed to subjective, and just as opposed to unjust. In the end, objectivity and justice are a means to consolidate legitimacy of the system. Lu Xun was extreme, and he did curse people. However, what motivated him to be so extreme was his vitriolic anger towards a deformed social system. Lu Xun wanted to turn the tables on the absurdities of reality, expanding real justice to society. Advocating tolerance had degenerated into a fancy excuse for safeguarding the system and its vested interests in China. Lu Xun soberly understood and accepted this cruel nature of life early on. In the essay "I Suddenly Thought of It (*Huran xiangdao* 忽然想到)" from *The Canopy Collection* (*Huagai ji* 華蓋集), Lu Xun describes this survivalist aspect of Chinese society.

However, before the arrival of the golden world, people will be rife with these contradictions. Just look at the situation in times of discovery. No small difference arises between bravery and cowardice. It is a pity that the Chinese people show the appearance of beasts to sheep, and that of sheep to beasts. Even beasts are cowardly citizens. We have to resolve this if we are to go on.

I think, that in order to save China, there is no need to bring anything external to it. The youth only need study hard these contradictory forces, and how history has dealt with them. When facing the beasts, act like a beast; and when dealing with sheep be a sheep (*Complete Works* 3:25).

In order to prevent China from ending in chaos, Lu Xun was a beast in the face of beasts, a sheep before sheep, and intolerant towards intolerance, always working to construct a new ethics.

### Complicated Intertwining of Lu Xun and Modern Chinese Literary Circles

Lu Xun's rich contributions to modern Chinese literature rely not only on his activities as a left-wing writer but extend also to speak for the consistency

of his actions and words. He was able to face life directly and to discern value in human lives. Lu Xun's humanism outshone many academic intellectuals. He never failed to face real connection between one's spirituality and Chinese aesthetic development. In this sense, he made, perhaps, the largest contribution to modern Chinese art and literature. His broad view of literature as well as integrated approach to understanding the spirit of the times allowed him to relate more closely to changes in modern Chinese literature than many other Chinese writers could at the time.

When it came to the League of Left-wing Writers, Lu Xun directly intervened, supporting young writers such as Rou Shi, the writer from Northeast China. He also maintained relations with various directors and leaders, such as Feng Xuefeng and Hu Feng (胡風, 1902-1985), while distancing himself from others due to strained relations, such as Zhou Yang (周揚, 1908-1989) and Xu Maoyong (徐懋庸, 1911-1977).

Lu Xun maintained a critical stance towards the Right-wing Writers; but with the Freedom School (*ziyou pai* 自由派), he collaborated closely (the May Fourth Movement), while having very public schisms with the group. These schisms had to do with Lu Xun's journey of subjective discovery and structuring, a process of accreting his own independent thinking, seeking other literary ideals and characteristics for his writing practice.

Looking at these fields of Lu Xun's activities, we see that his intervention took forms and trajectories, embracing, supporting, and refusing. This warp and weft created a tapestry that incorporated many aspects of China's modernity. This is his crucial importance to modern Chinese literature. It is true that during the Cultural Revolution, there were those who took advantage of Lu Xun's crack-downs upon political dissidents. However, as soon as the Revolution ended and Chinese people's thought returned to a more normal state, when we once again needed the flourishing prosperity of modern Chinese literature, the people of that time could, by following the web of logic formed by the complex interweavings of Lu Xun thought, restore to the highest degree the integral structure of literature.

Many modern writers, especially the Freedom School writers, seem to talk only to themselves, avoiding ideological confrontations. They exclude themselves in this way from the greater historical importance we give to Lu Xun. They fail to incorporate many other threads into their own "knots." Not only are their knots ineffective at holding together the fabric of the times, they are also unable to discern or open up essential cores of history. Nowadays, almost all thinkers and literary critics begin with Lu Xun. Li Zehou (李澤厚, 1930-2021), Liu Zaifu (劉再復, b. 1941), Wang Furen (王富仁, 1941-2017), Qian Liqun (錢理群, b. 1939), and Wang Hui (汪暉, b. 1959) are good examples of how combing through Lu Xun forces one to comb just as closely through all of modern Chinese history and literature, restoring the richness

of the Chinese literary ethos. “We can say without exaggeration that Lu Xun saved Chinese culture for the second time” (Wang F. 174).

In pulling modern Chinese literature together, Lu Xun makes a great contribution to letters today. Li Jinlong’s (李金龍) treatment of Lu Xun, the editor, gives us an informed sense of Lu Xun’s gifts for us today, mining the treasures of Mr. Li’s work and experience with Lu Xun’s literary activities. Li is a doctoral student majoring in modern and contemporary Chinese literature, engaged for some time now in journal editing. Through his research on Lu Xun’s editorial activities, Li has met Lu Xun on another level. In addition to views in his own writing, I was particularly moved by his life experience. Academic writing and research that correspond with one’s life is moving and worth reading. After more than half a century of wind, frost, rain, and snow, we are still moved by Lu Xun’s spiritual pursuit and existential choices. Lu Xun’s value spans generations and eras, guiding our self-growth. We are most fortunate to have in Lu Xun a ‘knot’ that pulls together China’s literary modernity.

#### Works Cited

- Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰. “Remembering Lu Xun (*Huiyi Lu Xun* 回憶魯迅).” *Collected Works of Xuefeng* (Xuefeng wenji 雪峰文集). Vol. 4. Renmin wenzue chubanshe. 1985.
- Li Jiye 李霽野. “Remembering Mr. Lu Xun (*Yi Lu Xun xiansheng* 憶魯迅先生).” *Compilation of Academic Works and Materials on Lu Xun Studies* (*Lu Xun yanjiu xueshu lunzhu ziliao huibian* 魯迅研究學術論著資料匯編). Vol. 2. Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe. 1986
- Lu Xun 魯迅. *Complete Works of Lu Xun* (*Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集). Vol. 1. Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981.
- . *Complete Works of Lu Xun* (*Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集). Vol. 3. Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981.
- . *Complete Works of Lu Xun* (*Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集). Vol. 11. Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981.
- . *Complete Works of Lu Xun* (*Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集). Vol. 12. Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1981.
- Wang Dehou 王得後. “On Discovering and Interpreting Lu Xun: A Discussion with Mr. Qian Liqun (*Duiyu Lu Xun de faxian he jiedu* 對於魯迅的發現和解讀——和錢理群學兄討論).” *Lu Xun Research Monthly* 魯迅研究月刊. Vol. 9, 2003.

Wang Furen 王富仁. *The History and Current Situation of Lu Xun Studies in China* (*Zhongguo Lu Xun yanjiu de lishi yu xianzhuang* 中國魯迅研究的歷史與現狀). Zhengjiang renmin chubanshe, 1999.

Wang Furen 王富仁 and Zhao Zhuo 趙卓. *To Break through the Blind Spots* (*Tupo mangdian* 突破盲點). Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2001.