11-3-2009

Coming Distractions: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun–A New Translation

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We’re pleased to present here an excerpt from the introduction of Julia Lovell’s forthcoming translation of Lu Xun’s fiction. Lovell examines the uses (and abuses) of Lu Xun’s writings by Mao Zedong in the decades after the author’s death, pointing out the ways in which the CCP smoothed over rough edges and ignored inconvenient truths as it disseminated Lu Xun’s work for the Chinese public to study. Since the reforms of the late 1970s, Lu Xun has been transformed yet again, and now occupies a status equivalent to that of Charles Dickens in Britain: while his work might be respected, it strikes some students as out-of-date. Yet, as Lovell notes, Lu Xun is a ripe target for commercialization—a topic that China Beat will explore later this week.

On 19 October 1936, Lu Xun died of tuberculosis in Shanghai, still mired in quarrels with the leadership of the League of Left-wing Writers, and especially with Zhou Yang, the literary politico who would become Mao’s cultural tsar after 1949. “Hold the funeral quickly,” he set out in a mock testament written a month before his death. “Do not stage any memorial services. Forget about me, and care about your own life—you’re a fool if you don’t.” And finally, a message for his son: “On no account let him become a good-for-nothing writer or artist.”[1]

In perfect disregard of Lu Xun’s instructions, the writer was swiftly adopted by Mao Zedong—who would within twenty years crush into socialist realism the sardonic irreverence that defined Lu Xun’s legacy to Chinese literature—as “the saint of modern China”. “He knew how to fight back against a rotten society and the evil imperialist forces,” Mao lectured school children in 1937. . . . Since Mao commandeered Lu Xun for his revolution by focusing on his late leftward turn, an entire Lu Xun industry has blown up on the Mainland: museums, plaster busts, spin-off books, dedicated journals, plays, television adaptations, wine-brands. For decades, 19 October was celebrated—with mass rallies or memorials—as Lu Xun Day. During the Cultural Revolution—Mao’s decade-long war on the Western influences that Lu Xun had worked so hard to introduce to China—anyone the writer had criticised in his prolific speeches, essays or letters was persecuted. In the feverish commercialism of post-Mao China, entrepreneurial developers even created a dazzlingly tacky theme park offering tourists the “Lu Xun experience”—the chance to meet actors hamming it up as the author’s most famous characters (Ah-Q, Kong Yiji and so on), to gamble in traditional wineries, and generally to savour the darkness of pre-Communist “Old Society”.

Somewhere within the Communists’ over-simplification of Lu Xun into an exemplary Servant of the People lie seeds of biographical truth: in his anxieties about the moral responsibility of the writer in an era of traumatic social transformation. . . . Lu Xun hesitated between a commitment to literature, both for its aesthetic and political potency, a sense of intellectual helplessness, and a patriotic moral principle that eventually drove him to Marxism to remedy the inequities of Chinese society. It is this compound of literary prestige, integrity and self-distrust that made him—once he was safely dead, of course, and unable to fight back in one of his vicious essays—such an attractive trophy for the Communist revolution.
But Mao’s glorification of Lu Xun erased the writer’s complexity, and tried to consign his critical impulses to the dustbin of history. Turning, in 1942, on contrarian writers within the Communist ranks who continued to argue for freedom of expression, Mao again appropriated Lu Xun: “Living under the rule of dark forces and deprived of freedom of speech, Lu Xun used burning satire and freezing irony...to do battle; and he was entirely right. We, too, must hold up to sharp ridicule the fascists, the Chinese reactionaries, and everything that harms the people; but in our Communist bases, where democracy and freedom are granted in full...our style does not need to be like Lu Xun’s.”[2] . . .

Every one of Lu Xun’s close leftist disciples from the early 1930s was purged after 1949; Mao himself is said to have admitted, in one of his flashes of honesty, that Lu Xun would “either have gone silent, or gone to prison” if he had lived on through the political violence that the Great Helmsman unleashed from the 1950s onwards. Until the post-Mao thaw in cultural life, the writer’s left-wing idolisers struggled to reconcile the writer’s spiky individualism with the political correctness of his official cult. . . .

Seventy years after his death, Lu Xun continues to generate controversy in China. While his short stories are still trotted out in high schools as orthodox denunciations of the evils of feudalism, in 2007 the beginnings of a Lu Xun withdrawal from textbooks began, partly to make way for escapist kung-fu texts. Perhaps the intention was to vary the literary diet of the Chinese young; or perhaps to redirect their impressionable minds from Lu Xun’s dark introspection towards a more exuberant self-confidence. Perhaps also it was an attempt to discourage the youth of today from Lu Xun’s inconveniently critical habits. One of the excised works was a bitterly sad 1926 essay written to commemorate a female student killed by government forces in a peaceful demonstration; this has prompted commentators to suggest the present Chinese government is anxious to suppress anything that might encourage public memory of the bloody 1989 repression of civil protestors around Tiananmen Square.[3]

Amongst the younger generations of a post-Mao China in which consumerism has largely replaced communism as the state-ordained religion, it is probably fair to say that Lu Xun has swung out of fashion as Dickens has done in Britain, even while both writers continue to enjoy an unassailable position in both nation’s respective literary canons. Writers who emerged into the 1990s market economy tend to ignore, puzzle over or sneer at Lu Xun’s astringently serious vision of literature. In “Rupture”, a 1998 survey polling the cultural opinions of a new, hedonistic and individualist post-Tiananmen generation of writers, the “saint of modern China” was contemptuously dismissed as “an old stone”, and the state literary prize named after him was referred to as a “dressed-up pile of shit”. [4]

Nonetheless, his literary legacy continues to exercise a clear, if often unacknowledged, influence on every new generation of rebels. It can be sensed, perhaps, in the unofficial post-Mao enquiry into the collective madness of the Cultural Revolution; in the re-examination of the Maoist countryside by the groundbreaking “Roots-seeking” authors of the 1980s; and in Chinese intellectuals’ and writers’ continuing struggle for freedom of expression. Even a post-Tiananmen novelist such as Zhu Wen, mastermind of “Rupture” and leader of the 1990s avant-garde, is prone to an obsession with a heartlessly congested society that seems to have trickled directly down from Lu Xun. The two writers share both a bleak vision of the China that surrounds them and an ability to alleviate the oppressive effects of pessimism through the use of irony.[5]

More generally, Lu Xun’s paradoxical brand of nationalism (of passionate attachment to, yet disgust with, China) still retains a powerful hold over Chinese consciousness. Even as China prepared to host the 2008 Olympics – global confirmation of China’s euphoric twenty-first-century resurgence – Lu Xun’s self-critical patriotism seemed to be epidemic through Beijing. While the capital bubbled over with a desire to showcase the achievements of the post-Mao economic miracle, government and civilians alike worried about the city’s “spiritual civilisation”, waging mass education campaigns to eradicate bad public habits (spitting, littering, sloppy personal hygiene) that might offend sensitive foreigners.

Lu Xun’s life, work and afterlife are a testament to the creativity, cosmopolitanism and intellectual independence of 20th-century Chinese culture, and to the uncertainties and constraints imposed upon
it. Though too often he allowed his own creativity to be derailed by an uncertain temper and provincial in-fighting, though he subjected his own responses and actions to an almost paralysing self-scrutiny that prevented him from moving beyond short fiction to the novel, he at least succeeded in never falling silent – reading, thinking and writing through exceptional political, social and personal upheaval. For his tonal control, his restless experimentalism and his passionate seriousness of purpose, Lu Xun deserves his accolades; and still has much to teach his contemporary counterparts.

Notes