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Lu Xun and Translation

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I recently wrote an essay called "China’s Orwell" for the Asian edition of *Time Magazine*. In the article, I deal with the conundrum of Lu Xun’s enormous influence within China yet continued relative obscurity outside of the Sinophone world. Among other things, I ponder the possibility that an attractive new collection of his complete fiction, which features spirited translations by Julia Lovell and was published as part of the Penguin Classics series (click here for a “Paper Republic” interview with the translator about the book), could help right this imbalance by introducing figures such as Ah-Q to Western readers who had never before come across his name. As a follow-up to that essay, which set me thinking about both the important work done by translators of fiction and about Lu Xun’s legacy as a writer, here is a top five list of places to go for more on one or both of these issues:

1) Two towering figures in the history of English language renditions of major Chinese works of fiction have died in recent months. One of these was David Hawkes, who passed away at the end of July. Moving reflections on his life and work can be found in the October issue of *China Heritage Quarterly*, in essays that also have much new information to offer China specialists in fields other than literature. Before reading that issue, for example, I had no idea that one of the big challenges that faced translators of *The Story of the Stone* (Hong Lou Meng), the subject of the best-known of all of Hawkes’ publications, is capturing the feel of passages written in “lively (and often difficult) colloquial Beijing dialect.” See, in particular, Geremie Barmé’s "Vale" (a piece that opens with a few lines of verse that remind us of Hawkes’ skills as a translator of poetry as well as prose, and that later mentions the role of Beijing dialect in the novel alluded to above) and John Minford’s "David Hawkes: scholar and Chinese translator," an insightful overview of the translator's life and his contributions to Western understanding of China.

2) The other gifted and influential translator to die recently was Yang Xianyi, who both translated Western works into Chinese and Chinese works into English. He was part of a prolific husband-and-wife team (his wife Gladys Yang passed away a decade ago) who were the creative team behind important editions of an amazingly wide range of Chinese texts by everyone from the Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian to Lu Xun. For details on his publications and also his fascinating life story, which included study at a missionary school in Tianjin and then at Oxford (where he met his wife) and later suffering during the Cultural Revolution and speaking out against the June 4 Massacre, see this wide-ranging obituary by Delia Davin.

3) Turning from translators to Lu Xun’s legacy, Danwei.org recently ran an interview with Zhou Lingfei, the great author's grandson. (Zhou Lingfei was a guest of honor at the Beijing book launch for the latest Penguin Classic, incidentally, a book that is now available in Britain but not due out in the U.S. until January.)

4) I’ve recently learned about a new book that promises to use Lu Xun’s stories as a multidimensional teaching tool, which provides insights into language, culture, and history. I have not seen a copy yet but it looks promising from the information provided on its website. It’s called *Capturing Chinese: Short Stories from Lu Xun’s Nahan*, and there will likely be more about it in future here at China Beat.

5) Finally, for a cornucopia of citations dealing with Lu Xun’s work, translations of Lu Xun’s fiction and non-fiction, and even studies of Lu Xun’s own translations (he did a lot of translating himself, including an early rendition into Chinese of a Jules Verne’s sci-fi novel) and ideas about translation, go to the “Lu Xun Studies” section of the invaluable *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* website. In addition to pointing the visitor to many articles and books, once there you will only be a click away from Chinese language websites filled with discussions of and texts by Lu Xun.