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Lu Xun, Mao Zedong, Perhaps a Badger

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Urbanatomy has been running a series called "Why I Write" for the past several months, and we've noticed that when asked for their favorite Chinese author, many interviewees name Lu Xun (though [Ian Johnson](#) is a vocal dissenter). It's likely that Lu Xun's work will be known to even more non-Chinese speakers in the future, since [Julia Lovell's new translation of his complete fiction](#) has hit bookshelves — read an excerpt from her introduction [here](#), and see [Jeff Wasserstrom's review of the book here](#). So many decades after his death, why does Lu Xun remain one of China's best-known authors, both at home and abroad? The answer, suggests Sean Macdonald, lies not only in Lu Xun's talents as a writer, but also in the construction of "Lu Xun" as a cultural and political figure during the Mao era.

By Sean Macdonald

Pronouncements about influential figures in history always seem to have an air of exaggeration, but I think it would be safe to say that the modern writer Lu Xun (鲁迅) (1881-1936) is one of the most important twentieth century cultural figures from China. And Lu Xun is important for another reason. Although things have changed a lot in the last thirty years, the relationship between cultural production (in print and electronic media) and government intervention remains a concern in studies of the culture of the People's Republic of China (PRC). The writer Lu Xun is a cultural figure constructed somewhere in the intersection between state intervention and modern literary and cultural criticism.

Lu Xun is perhaps better known in English for his fiction, usually short but tremendously dense pieces that have been made into operas, plays and films. Character like Ah Q (阿Q) and Sister Xianglin (祥林嫂), read as social types of turn-of-the-nineteenth and early twentieth century China, would later become archetypes for revolutionary figures in the PRC. [1] However, despite its predominance, Lu Xun's fiction only occupies a small part of his output.

Lu Xun was a much more prolific essayist than he was an author of fiction. The True Story of Ah Q (阿Q正传), his longest piece of fiction, was published in installments from 1921-1922 and runs approximately 40 or so pages in the original. In contrast, Lu Xun's longest single piece of writing, running around 300 pages in dense classical Chinese, is his *Outline of Chinese Fiction* (中国小说史略). A significant work of literary history based on lectures he gave at Beijing University in the early 1920s, *Outline* represents another aspect of Lu Xun's oeuvre. Not only was he a fictional writer, essayist and editor, just as importantly, Lu Xun was an educator, working at first as an administrator, and then a lecturer, in universities in North and South China.

Lu Xun lived during a tumultuous time that included the fall of the last dynasty, the Qing (1642-1911), the rise of the Republic of China (1912-1949), and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. During this time China was a semi-colonial nation, with foreign concessions dotting the southeast coast from Hong Kong to Shandong. If the nineteenth century was a time for English and French aggression in China, Japan would take the aggressor's role in China by the late 1920s, and this would culminate with the Sino-Japanese war beginning in 1937.

Lu Xun was among the first generation of intellectuals in China at the turn-of-the-nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be educated abroad in Japan, and he maintained a deep respect for Japanese culture throughout his life. In his essays and fiction, Lu Xun seems to have cultivated an almost *fin-de-siècle* pessimism; nevertheless, he is often linked to the New Culture or May Fourth period, when many other notable cultural reformers and political thinkers of modern China took their place on the national stage. Before he died from tuberculosis at the age of 55, Lu Xun was a dominant figure in the literary and cultural scene of his time. Eva Shan Chou convincingly shows how, although critical readership was slow to respond, Lu Xun's writing gained in importance gradually, at least amongst educated readers of the time, from the time he published "Diary of a Madman" right up until his death. [2]

But the reason Lu Xun is still read today as a canonical modern writer in Chinese is complicated by reception of his work after he died. One of the most important commentators on Lu Xun was Mao Zedong (毛泽东). For Mao, Lu Xun was “modern China’s saint” (现代中国的圣人). [3] In “Talks at the Yan’an conference on literature and art” (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) Mao contextualizes Lu Xun’s writing, especially his essays. Mao’s reading of Lu Xun in the “Talks” is quite interesting, not only for what he has to say about Lu Xun and the uses of literature, but for the way he positions Lu Xun within a particular tradition of writing. In the introduction to her own translation of the talks, Bonnie McDougall notes: “it can hardly be argued that a cohesive and comprehensive ‘theory’ emerges in the course of Mao’s ‘Talks.’ ” [4] This may be true, but Mao’s discussion of Lu Xun is quite nuanced, linking his work to (then) contemporary history, and a particular mode of writing called *fengci* (讽刺).

Fengci is usually translated as satire. However, while *fengci* shares some of the features of satire, certain aspects of *fengci* are quite specific to writing in Chinese. *Fengci* is a type of ironic critique (with or without the utopian-based critiques of satire in Western culture). [5] One of the earliest formulations of one aspect of *fengci* goes back to the “Great Preface” to the classic Confucian anthology the *Shijing* (诗经), or *Book of Songs*. *Fengci* as a mode of writing can be found in many genres, but one sense of “*fengci*” has been described as a type of admonition. This concept established a view of writing that still remains relevant to reading cultural production which imparts a message tacitly criticizing a person or institution. *Fengci* as ironic critique may be an attempt to educate the masses (from the top down) or, just as importantly, an attempt to indirectly criticize those in power (from the bottom up, so to speak). [6]

In the Yan’an “Talks,” when Mao Zedong describes Lu Xun’s essays as a form of *fengci* or ironic critique, he is linking Lu Xun to a mode of writing, a specific literary and cultural history, and redefining ironic critique to suit his own purposes. Nevertheless, Mao makes some relevant points about Lu Xun. Mao is not ready to throw out the possibility of ironically criticizing others, especially from a political point of view. In a similar way as classical poetics, Mao reads ironic critique as potentially coming from within a collectivity, except that the collectivities he is describing are linked to his own political concerns.

For Mao, the important thing about ironic critique was who would wield the pen, and against whom and in what manner it would be directed. There is more than a little of the ‘us and them’ mentality in Mao’s discussion. Used against the enemy (them), ironic critique was fine. However, if used as an internal critique (of us), it should be used carefully, and with an identification with, and understanding of, those being criticized. Against the enemy, ironic critique could be a weapon, but if a writer were to criticize those in his own camp, he should do it “from genuine identification with the people and total devotion to their protection and education.” [7] Implicit in the “Talks” is the idea that ironic critique can be politically divisive.

Mao certainly wasn’t the first or last critic to highlight the *fengci* quality in Lu Xun’s work, but Mao’s assessment of Lu Xun in the “Talks” and other writings had an enormous impact on the place of Lu Xun in modern Chinese literature. There will always be calls to read Lu Xun without the baggage of literary historiography (the “Lu Xun-ology”) that resulted from Mao’s canonization, and the subsequent institutionalization of Lu Xun studies. But history has made it impossible to simply allow Lu Xun to speak for himself. As Wang Hui 汪晖 noted two decades ago, the contemporary critic is obligated to read Lu Xun through a critical corpus that is political-ideological from the outset. [8]

And who can say when the political canonization of Lu Xun started? Although he never became a member of the CCP, Lu Xun was on intimate terms with leftists and communists from the early 1930s until his death. While he was attacked by younger revolutionaries, his good friend Qu Qiubai (瞿秋白 1899-1935), an ex-General Secretary of the CCP and a very important cultural critic, had already begun to position Lu Xun in revolutionary history by the early 1930s, once describing him as a Remus, the twin brother to Romulus, the mythic founder of Rome. [9]

Because of the historical roles *preassigned* to him, Lu Xun’s own autobiographical recollections have been projected from the individual onto the national. The story Lu Xun told as the justification for his

decision to leave medicine for a career in literature is a good example. Lu Xun twice recounts in his writings an incident he experienced as a young student in Sendai, Japan, when he was attending a lecture on microbiology. One day when there was extra time the teacher showed slides of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) still on at the time, and one slide was inserted that depicted a Chinese man being executed by a Japanese soldier. **[10]**

Literary history thrives on the truth or fiction of the autobiographies of authors, but the problem isn't whether such and such an incident actually happened; more to the point is the very story of how Lu Xun became one of the most important figures of twentieth-century Chinese culture. What do we make of the very name Lu Xun, which everyone knows was a pseudonym for Zhou Shuren (周树人)? How did Lu Xun become the pseudonym of choice amongst 116 different pseudonyms (which in a sense gives credence to Mao's assessment of Lu Xun's use of ironic critique as potentially divisive, since he used many of these pseudonyms in attacks on other writers)? **[11]**

No matter what the case, I find myself returning to Lu Xun again and again like that startled fly that takes to the air, makes a small circle, and returns to the same spot. I find there are few authors in any language that move me like Lu Xun. And yet he is more than just a writer — he is an institution. Would Lu Xun have been read to the degree he has been if it weren't for his political canonization? Probably not.

Without the political canonization of Lu Xun, we wouldn't have the 16-volume *Complete Works of Lu Xun* (鲁迅全集), a remarkable text in its own right, and unique as the most thoroughly annotated and indexed edition of any modern Chinese author's work. The 16th volume, the index, may be read as a lexicon of the period that includes lists of authors, publications, and political and literary movements cited by Lu Xun, as well as functioning as a concordance of the author's writing. Just the incredibly detailed annotations in the *Complete Works* deserve to be studied in their own right, for the way Lu Xun (in tandem with subsequent editors) damned or praised contemporaries depending on the period. The *Complete Works* are the product of one author, Lu Xun, within a collectivity of editors (and readers).

Views of Lu Xun have changed considerably over the last thirty years, and Lu Xun has become less of a saint, and more like one important writer amongst many. But one word has always intrigued me. In his story *Guxiang* (故乡 Hometown), Lu Xun refers to an animal called a *cha* (獾), and the annotation to this word in the *Complete Works* says that in 1919 Lu Xun claimed this was a local dialect word "but now come to think of it, perhaps it was a *huan* (獾 badger)." **[12]**

Dictionaries are troublesome at times. Have you ever had the experience of looking a word up in the dictionary only to be referred to another definition to define the first, and then frustrated when the second definition refers back to the first? The word *cha* is interesting in this sense. Look up the word *cha* in *Xinhua zidian* (新华字典) and you won't be referred to a dictionary definition:

獾 chá 獾类野兽·喜欢吃瓜(见鲁迅小说《故乡》)。

Cha, a badger-like wild animal, likes to eat melons (see the story by Lu Xun "Hometown"). **[13]**

I realize this might appear to be a trivial example. However, it reminds me of when I was an undergrad listening to pretentious philosophy students who referred to the hermeneutic circle, the circle of reading that goes from the part to the whole of a work and then back again. Well, here the circle of meaning is closed because Lu Xun has been taken at his word. In a small way, this is a sign of the historical importance of Lu Xun. And yet I still hold out hope of perhaps one day seeing a watermelon-eating *cha* escaping between my legs.

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Notes

[1] The figural resonance of some of Lu Xun's characters is complex. Sister Xianglin, often associated with sentimental portrayals of downtrodden women in society, is represented in a woodblock print, an opera, and a possible inspiration for *The White Haired Girl* (白毛女) in *Wutai jiemei* (舞台姐妹 Stage Sisters), 1964, d. Xie Jin (谢晋).

[2] Eva Shan Chou, "Learning to Read Lu Xun, 1918-1923: The Emergence of a Readership," in *The China Quarterly*, No. 172 (Dec. 2002), pp. 1042-1064.

[3] See "On Lu Xun," in *Mao's Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949*, ed. Stuart R. Schram. (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), p. 97.

[4] See Bonnie S. McDougall, "Introduction: The Yan'an 'Talks' as Literary Theory," in Bonnie S. McDougall, trans., *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an conference on literature and art."* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980), p. 5.

[5] Thomas More's *Utopia* is one of the more well known examples from Western literature (in Latin). McDougall translates *fengci* in Mao's speech as "satire," see, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an conference on literature and art."* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980), p. 81. For an online version of Mao and his discussion of *fengci* as "satire," see marxists.org. Accessed February 7, 2010.

[6] See James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 64; and Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1992), p. 46.

[7] See McDougall, p. 81. At marxists.org this passage reads: "To criticize the people's shortcomings is necessary, as we have already said, but in doing so we must truly take the stand of the people and speak out of whole-hearted eagerness to protect and educate them." Accessed February 7, 2010.

[8] See Wang Hui, "Lu Xun yanjiu de lishi pipan" (鲁迅研究的历史批判 An historic critique of Lu Xun Research), *Wudi panghuang: "Wusi" ji qi huisheng* (无地彷徨: "五四"及其回声 No place to wander: "May Fourth" and its echoes) Zhejiang wenyi, 1994, pp. 249-279. Wang signs the article as having been written in 1988.

[9] For a recent study of Qu Qiubai see Florent Villard, *Le Gramsci chinois: Penseur de la modernité chinois*. (Lyons: Tigre de Papier, 2009).

[10] See Lu Xun, *Lu Xun quanji* (Complete works of Lu Xun). 16 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 416-417; vol. 2, pp. 306.

[11] For a count of the pseudonyms 笔名 at the back of the *Complete Works*, see *Lu Xun quanji*, vol. 16, pp. 614-618.

[12] *Lu Xun quanji*, Vol 1, p. 486, footnote 2.

[13] "Cha," in *Xinhua zidian*. (Beijing: Shangwu, 2006).

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