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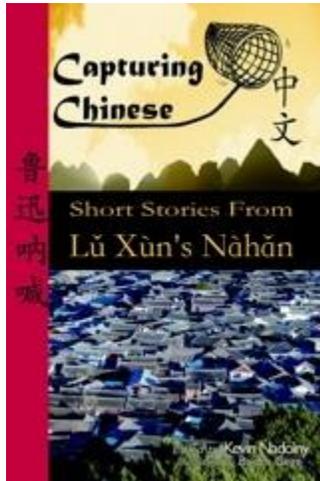
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Capturing Chinese With Help from Lu Xun

March 25, 2010 in [Interview](#) by [kmerkelhess](#) | [2 comments](#)

We've run several posts on Lu Xun at China Beat recently (including [this one](#) by Julia Lovell and [this one](#) by Sean Macdonald). While Lovell's new translation of Lu Xun's stories caters to an Anglophone audience, Kevin Nadolny wanted to create a reader that made Lu Xun more accessible to Chinese-language learners. His new text, [Capturing Chinese: Short Stories from Lu Xun's Nahan](#), features a fully glossed text of Lu Xun's short stories so that language learners can focus on reading and comprehension rather than their dictionaries. Here, Kevin answers questions about his motivations for creating the reader and his own language-learning inspirations.



Kate Merkel-Hess: Your goal is to help Chinese language learners read real Chinese literature — not just textbook lessons. Why do you think this approach to language learning has value, and why begin with Lu Xun?

Kevin Nadolny: The ultimate goal for language learners is to read literature, newspapers, etc. in the original language. Reading original literature provides a raw path to understanding the history, social structure and philosophies of another culture. Textbook lessons are great and necessary for beginning and intermediate students, but reading original literature is the cornerstone of becoming an advanced student.

Lu Xun's stories are great for students for two reasons.

First: Lu Xun's stories are short yet the plot and characters are complex. Longer novels are quite a challenge for students making their first attempt into literature. Since some of Lu Xun's stories are just a few pages long, you can begin learning by tackling the easier ones first.

Secondly: Lu Xun is extremely important in Chinese history. The Chinese Communist Party has canonized him as the Father of modern Chinese literature and Chinese students have to read his works in school. In addition, reading Lu Xun is like a short history lesson. During his lifetime China transformed from the imperial Qing dynasty into the Republic of China. Reading his works is an opportunity to experience and understand the changing times in which he lived.

KMH: In addition to Lu Xun, what other authors do you consider critical reads for those attempting to get a better sense of Chinese literature? Are you at work on readers of material by any other authors?

KN: I'm currently wrapping up Lu Xun's "Ah Q: The Real Story" (阿Q正传). This story was too long to include in my first book and will be published by the end of this year. After finishing this book I'll be turning my attention to other authors.

Chinese literature has a long history. Students who are up for the challenge should read Cao Xueqin's (曹雪芹) *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦). I also recommend 20th century authors Hu Shih (胡适) and Eileen Chang (张爱玲). Contemporary authors Ma Jian (马建) and Mo Yan (莫言) have also written important material.

KMH: What value does reading literature in its original language have for language learners? Did you find that knowledge of Chinese literature translated into day-to-day communications for you, say in better understanding the culture or in conversations with friends?

KN: So many idioms and cultural references come from literature. Without cultural frames of reference you will find yourself lost discussing many topics. Thus, reading literature is extremely valuable. As I have started to read more Chinese literature I have become more confident to take on such difficult texts as the Chinese Building Code (I am a practicing engineer). In addition, my vocabulary has grown. My Chinese would have improved with normal studying as well, but I find literature so much more fun and engaging.

KMH: What sparked your own interest in learning Chinese? What methods worked for you while you were studying and which didn't?

KN: The rich culture and history that my Chinese friends shared with me in college sparked my interest in China and in learning Chinese. Previously, I had no plans to study Chinese but by my second week of university I decided to pursue the language.

My favorite method for studying foreign languages is to use tapes/MP3s and memorize short practical dialogues. I am currently using this method to learn Japanese. I find the podcasting services for learning languages extremely helpful.

My second bit of advice is to never give up on learning the characters. Don't trick yourself and think they are not that important. They are absolutely essential for learning Chinese. Make flashcards and drill yourself.

On that note however, I have not practiced writing characters enough. When studying the characters, it is important to learn to write them as well as to recognize them. I have found that handwriting a journal and letters (not using a computer) is a good way to practice.

KMH: How did you come up with the idea for this book — were you teaching Chinese, or did it grow out of your own experiences learning Chinese?

KN: The idea for this book grew out of my own experience while learning Chinese in Beijing. After class I would periodically go to the book store to look for interesting Chinese books. I was especially looking out for books that would help me read original Chinese literature. I was yearning to break away from the textbook lessons that we had to read in class every morning. However, my Chinese was not good enough to handle a book on my own (without a lot of struggle anyway). I had to look up 10 to 20 characters on each page of the books that I bought and write copious notes. Looking up characters by radical is tedious. While I got pretty quick with a dictionary, I could never be certain that I had the correct definition.

I just knew there had to be a better way of reading Chinese literature so I wrote this book in exactly the way I had always needed one.

KMH: Your book is a collection of short stories. Which short story is your favorite and why?

KN: "A Village Opera" (社戏) is definitely my favorite. Lu Xun's stories can be dark and sad. I love his satirical style, but I enjoyed this uplifting story from his childhood the most. He begins by discussing his dislike of contemporary Beijing opera. While reflecting on this, he digresses into a story of his boyhood visit to his mother's hometown. He wanted to see a village opera with the local children, and

so planned a trip to a neighboring town. Since this part of China (close to Shanghai) is full of rivers and canals, the boys rented a boat, paddled over and watched the opera from their boat. The story reminds me of the exciting adventures I had when I was a child and elicited some magical feelings about China.

KMH: According to your website, you are now learning Japanese as well. What prompts your interest in learning Asian languages? Do you have any advice for those just beginning the (daunting!) study of Chinese or Japanese?

KN: I touched on why I embarked on learning Chinese in college, but now why Japanese? Well, I met my lovely wife while at Beijing Language and Culture University. She is Japanese and studied Chinese in college and in Beijing. After months pursuing her after class and four years of long distance romance, we married last year and are now living in Tokyo. When I proposed to Tomoko I also promised her mother that I would learn Japanese. I am now working on fulfilling that promise.

My advice to aspiring students is to find your passion for the language. Chinese and Japanese are too tough to study on a whim. You need passion to maintain your desire to learn since it will be a multi-year effort. Studying for a few years will just be skimming the surface of the culture and history. The two languages and cultures are beautiful so your hard work will be rewarded many times over.

Tags: [Learning Chinese](#), [Lu Xun](#)