


1-1-2013

# Revisiting a Chinese Intellectual Through the Russian Lens: Lu Xun's Dilemma During 1925-1927

Yang Hua

Lawrence University, yhua.alex@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lux.lawrence.edu/harrison>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), and the [Intellectual History Commons](#)

© Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

---

## Recommended Citation

Hua, Yang, "Revisiting a Chinese Intellectual Through the Russian Lens: Lu Xun's Dilemma During 1925-1927" (2013). *Richard A. Harrison Symposium*. Paper 2.  
<http://lux.lawrence.edu/harrison/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Lux. It has been accepted for inclusion in Richard A. Harrison Symposium by an authorized administrator of Lux. For more information, please contact [colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu](mailto:colette.brautigam@lawrence.edu).

Revisiting a Chinese Intellectual through the Russian Lens:

Lu Xun's Dilemma during 1925-1927

Yang Hua

In a letter dated September 4, 1927 and published about one month later in Shanghai's *Bei Xin* journal, the Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) gave his reasons for "being silent" since the previous summer.<sup>1</sup> The letter was a response to Shi Youheng, a young reader of the writer who commented a month earlier in an article published in the same journal that "attacks from Lu Xun on blind thinking were not seen for a long time." He expected that Lu Xun would provoke an intellectual revolution again by, for example, proceeding with "a Second true story of Ah Q."<sup>2</sup> Composing his response in a sober and sincere tone, free of the satirical humor characteristic of his style, Lu Xun stated that since departing from Xiamen in January, his ideas had changed and therefore he had decided to remain silent for two years. The silence, according to him, stemmed from an unprecedented "fear" that manifested itself in two ways. First, his "vain hope" for a new China fell apart because he noticed that those slaughtering youth were also young people rather than people of old generations whose passing, he believed, might raise China's livelihood. Second, he found himself also partaking in "cannibalism," a term referring to China's century-old Confucian conventions he had denounced in his short story *Diary of a Madman* nine years earlier. His reasoning was that as the young people read his work, they might develop a mind sensitive to reality and be tormented, if political disasters befell them, by greater agonies that would be rather more enjoyable to the people conducting persecutions.<sup>3</sup> In short, he started to cast doubt on the practical implications of his own works and his role as a writer coming from the May Fourth period.

Lu Xun's fear initially appears quite unusual, for he is generally recognized as one of the most uncompromising combatants against the old conventions of Chinese society during the May

---

<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun, "Da Youheng Xiansheng" (In Reply to Mr. Youheng), *Eryi ji, Lu Xun Quan Ji (LXQJ, Complete Works of Lu Xun)* (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 2005), 3:473-478.

<sup>2</sup> You Heng, "Zhe Shi jie" (this season), *Bei Xin* Vol. 49-50 (October 1927), 71-73.

<sup>3</sup> Lu Xun, "Da Youheng Xiansheng" *LXQJ*, 3:473-478.

Fourth period, ranging roughly from 1917-1921. Born in a well-educated family in Shaoxing, Zhejiang in September 25, 1881, he finished early education in Nanjing where he began to touch on Western learning which covers, mostly, readings on British liberalism as those from J.S.Mill, Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Huxley. In 1902, he set out to Japan to study medicine. Besides normal academic works, he devoted most of his time reading Chinese classics and foreign literature during the seven-year life overseas, while simultaneously developed a position that ideological “illness” of the Chinese people should be addressed more urgently than the physical ones. Returning to China in 1909, he began to teach at high schools at Zhejiang and for the next decade keenly experienced the failures of 1911 revolution and the subsequent political disintegration. A period of “totalistic rejection of Chinese culture” replaced by “the yearning for a new totalistic cultural-political order of the future”<sup>4</sup> soon came to stage around 1915 and culminated in the May Fourth New Culture Movement. It is of this movement that Lu Xun was always seen as a major protagonist since the publication of his short story *Diary of a Madman*, the first modern work written in vernacular Chinese in which he criticized the “cannibalism,” as he called, that was hidden in China’s century-old Confucian tradition. Another of his most famous short fictions, *A True Story of Ah Q*, came out in 1921, by means of which, based on his contemporary’s understanding, he exposed a specific “national character” of the Chinese people. In short, he was considered a powerful figure in the camp of those Chinese intellectuals who asked for a “literary revolution” in order to transform people’s mentalities in order to “save” China from both imperialist humiliations and “poisons” of old cultural traditions. It is based on this May Fourth expectation that Lu Xun’s fear in his 1927 letter looks quite uncommon.

---

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, “The Limits of ‘Tradition versus Modernity’ as Categories of Explanation: The Case of the Chinese Intellectuals,” *Daedalus* Vol. 101, No.2 (Spring, 1972), 84.

The fact is that this fear came at 1927 – a post-May-Fourth era. Therefore, his fear and silence imply that his time in Xiamen and Canton, since moving out from Beijing in late 1926 until finally settling down at Shanghai in late 1927, marked a period of an intellectual transformation. As this transformation presumably culminated in his official conversion to the left when he joined the League of Chinese Left-Wing Writers in 1930, this transitional period is hence considered by many historians as the initial stage of his so-called “leftist years,” which covers the interval from 1926 until his death in 1937.

Partly due to an overemphasis on the concept of “leftist years,” this transitional period of Lu Xun has been overly used, in scholarly discussion, as evidence in explaining why he chose to cooperate with Communist members after 1929. In terms of this version, Lu Xun has been portrayed as someone coming gradually out of a period of hesitation during 1925-27 (the initial stage), towards, in terms of Marxist influence tinted by a teleological hue, a firm “fellow-traveler” of the Communist Party since 1929. However, the subject of his intellectual transformation roughly throughout 1925-1927 is not fully addressed on its own terms. In those scholars this transitional period has been specifically discussed, some have identified it by a single phenomenon, arguing that the period began when Lu Xun started to doubt literature’s power to shape revolution, and ended when he reconfirmed the former’s decisive role in the latter. Others have pointed out that in terms of his speeches during 1927, Lu Xun’s conversion to Communist politics and ideology during 1930s should be seen as a Chinese intellectual’s moral devotion to the injured and humiliated, rather than as a political conviction.<sup>5</sup> Both arguments, again, approach this historical period with the intention of explaining subsequent actions and therefore

---

<sup>5</sup> Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literature on the Eve of Revolution: Reflections on Lu Xun’s Leftist Years, 1927-1936,” *Modern China* Vol.2, No.3 (July 1976): 277-326; Lin Yu-sheng, “The Morality of Mind and Immorality of Politics: Reflections on Lu Xun, the Intellectual,” in *Lu Xun and his Legacy*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 107-128.

have, by being dependent on the concept of the “leftist years”, perhaps mischaracterized Lu Xun. Such potential mischaracterization has prevented scholars from understanding Lu Xun’s general thinking during this period and resulted in disregarding a significant intellectual stage that started to take shape in 1925 and was finally coherently conveyed in his publications throughout 1927.

This more careful approach – to consider this period on its own terms – entails recognizing that Lu Xun’s discourses on the relationship between revolution and literature, which revealed his intellectual concerns, were neither restricted to pure philosophical contemplation nor simply “directed against the naïve exultations of the self-styled ‘revolutionary writers’.”<sup>6</sup> They were, in fact, the fragmented beginnings of a new ideological framework. This novel paradigm helped him to systematically analyze the larger picture of China’s revolutionary reality and simultaneously to position himself within it. Moreover, a closer look at his literary activities during 1925-1927 suggests that Lu Xun derived this framework from his knowledge of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet literary scene. In terms of this framework, Lu Xun’s seemingly paroxysm of “fear” can be understood as exposing a fundamental predicament he confronted during this transitional stage: he was entangled in a profound conflict between his intellectual pursuits and moral sensibility, a tragic dilemma from which he extracted himself only by becoming “numb” and “oblivious”<sup>7</sup> and which might help illuminate the problems confronting the generation of Chinese intellectuals during the 1920s.

---

<sup>6</sup> Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literature on the Eve of Revolution: Reflections on Lu Xun’s Leftist Years, 1927-1936,” 280.

<sup>7</sup> Lu Xun, “Da Youheng Xiansheng,” *LXQJ*, 3:477.

### ***The Ideological Framework – an Intertwining between Literature and Revolution***

On May 8, 1925, Lu Xun wrote to his student Xu Guangping, who later started a family with him in Shanghai, that he “increasingly believed that commentators and literati were the most useless people because their words, no matter how reasonable, were just vain, while those people [in power], no matter how unreasonable, always obtained victory.”<sup>8</sup> This expression of the powerlessness of written words seemed to be a portent of his new ideological framework that became recognizable in 1927: it stipulated that literature was at most an indicator of revolution but never its cause, while revolution had its own regular pattern of development.

In a speech entitled “Literature in a Revolutionary Period” delivered to the cadets of the Whampoa Military Academy in Canton on April 8, 1927, Lu Xun most unequivocally articulated that revolution adopted its own law of evolution, independent of literature’s influences. He explicated the relationship between literature and the “Great Revolution” in terms of three stages. In the pre-revolutionary stage, all literature displayed discontent with society and condemnation of injustice. Realizing that pure condemnation was too weak to fight against the oppressing power, writers began to express their indignation, to revenge and to rebel. This then heralded the arrival of revolution. During the second stage – the “Great Revolution” – words turned into action. Everyone was so occupied with revolutionary activities and at once so carried away by material deprivation that there was no “leisure time” for literature. In the third stage, as the society recovered, literature returned in two distinct forms: “panegyric songs” that extolled the collapse of the old and construction of the new, and “elegiac songs” that mourned nostalgically the death of the old society. The elegies were not signs of degeneration, for the very fact of old

---

<sup>8</sup> Lu Xun, “250518 Zhi Xu Guangping” (May 18 1925 To Xu Guangping), *liangdi shu*, *LXQJ*, 11:490.

things being lamented proved that revolution had been attained.<sup>9</sup> In general, Lu Xun delineated how literature manifested itself in each stage, yet did not in the slightest imply or in fact intentionally deny that literature caused revolution. Revolution, therefore, seems to progress according to its own dynamics.

Implicit in this determined historical process concerning relations between revolution and literature is Lu Xun's belief that literature assumes the agency of informing revolutionary reality. "As the newspapers nowadays are still talking about old literature in the old style [...], neither condemning injustice nor singing elegies [...], Chinese society did not change [...] and "Canton was not influenced by revolution – it is still the Canton of ten years ago." In other words, literary works indicated that China was still lingering on the pre-revolutionary stage, which explained why Lu Xun concluded his speech by asking his audience, the "revolutionary soldiers" at the Military Academy, not to admire literature, because while "one poem cannot scare off Sun Chuanfang" – a local warlord who was the target of Nationalist Party's Northern Expedition – "one bomb would easily finish him."<sup>10</sup>

The futility of literature in inciting revolution was further discussed in Lu Xun's speeches later on in Shanghai. In a lecture on "The Divergent Roads of Literature and Politics" at Ji Nan University on December 21, 1927, he started by defining the fundamental conflict between politics and literature: the former "preserved the status quo at all costs," while the latter "shared with revolution" discontentment with reality. As the speech went on, however, he shifted the focus to writers' standing with regard to social revolution. Although it was always men of letters that agitated for social unrest and therefore became targets of political suppression, he argued,

---

<sup>9</sup> Lu Xun, "Geming Shidai de Wenxue" (Literature in a Revolutionary Period), *eryi ji, LXQJ*, 3:436-443.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



“Do not think that society would not be revolutionized without writers.” Literary works by no means carried out social change, though he did not clarify in his speech what could. Using the theory of the second-stage mentioned above, he also disputed the validity of “revolutionary literature,” for “when literature reemerges, the revolution has been accomplished.”<sup>11</sup> He more directly addressed the interplay between literature and revolution one month earlier, in a speech to the students of Guang Hua University in Shanghai. He was resolute to assert then that “social revolution preceded literary revolution” because “the social revolution would still arise even if poets did not write poems.”<sup>12</sup>

While specifying the role of literature in each stage, Lu Xun is, as mentioned before, remains ambiguous on how the revolution itself progresses. However, his sporadic remarks throughout these speeches at least shed some light on what he means by “revolution” and its historical process. It refers to, on one hand, the Northern Expedition led by the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) to end the rule of local warlords and to unify China. However, the specific operation of this political revolution, the complex associations among the KMT, the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) and the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) as well as the concomitant issue of how to define its nature, which remained a focused issue in Stalin-Trotsky debate, do not loom in Lu Xun’s conception, at least not in his words. That is, Lu Xun speaks of the revolution as a political one related to the implementation of power, yet he seems not be interested in how the politics works in this revolutionary agenda; neither does he try to bring up a Marxist analysis of this political revolution as discussed in the party leadership of Soviet Union.

---

<sup>11</sup> Lu Xun, “Wenyi yu Zhengzhi de Qitu” (The Divergent Roads of Literature and Politics), *ji wai ji, LXQJ*, 7:115-123.

<sup>12</sup> Lu Xun, “Wenxue yu Shehui – zai Shanghai Guang Hua Daxue de Jiangyan (Literature and Society – Speech at Guang Hua University in Shanghai),” *Lu Xun Yan Jiang Quan Ji* (Complete Speeches of Lu Xun), ed. Tong Bingguo (Wuhan: Chang jiang Wen yi Chu ban she), 174-179.

Not only does “revolution” have a concrete reference as a specific political agenda, it also possesses a general connotation which might be called “social revolution” scattered in Lu Xun’s discourse. The term “social” should be distinguished from that used in the May Fourth period. Such Chinese intellectuals as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi and Lu Xun himself during the May Fourth Movement connected “social revolution” specifically with revolting against feudal conventions, mostly Confucian ones including filial piety and women’s demeaning roles. The term used by Lu Xun in this post-May Fourth context refers more to a general situation in which people are dissatisfied with the status quo. One may notice that social and political revolutions are even interchangeable in Lu Xun’s view during this time, and they share a common fate in that both happen independently of literature.

This is not to state that Lu Xun equates political with social revolution, nor to suggest that he does not have an understanding of modern politics. What needs to be noted is that by delineating a circular historical process in his lecture<sup>13</sup>, Lu Xun shows a kinship between politics and revolution, which is manifested in his term “revolutionary politicians.” He states that although both literature and revolution represent discontentment with the status quo, the agents of revolution – revolutionaries – would finally become the agents of politics; the people who initiated the revolution in order to overturn the status quo will be the very ones who try to retain the status quo once they take power. Once that happens, a new tide of revolutionaries would come out and repeat the same historical process. The literati might become revolutionaries during the revolution, yet they never transform into politicians; instead, by incessantly attacking the status quo, they are the permanent victims of political executions and at the same time, they actually do not cause the revolution to happen. Thus, the futility of literature, according to Lu

---

<sup>13</sup> Lu Xun, “Wenyi yu Zhengzhi de Qitu” (The Divergent Roads of Literature and Politics).

Xun, has a two-fold message: first, the writers should not believe that literature will cause revolution; second, the politicians should not think that the revolution would not happen without writers.

Another point suggested in the three-stage paradigm is that the futility of literature does not mean that the writers should hide themselves or be removed from the revolution. This view is mostly influenced by Lu Xun's reading of Leon Trotsky and Karl Radek, which will be discussed later.<sup>14</sup> For now, it should be pointed out that he somehow assumes that literature, under the circular historical process he gives, is always "for human life" rather than "for entertainment" as was the case for eighteenth-century English literature. On the basis of this distinction, he goes on to assert that even that camp of literature in China, which departs from human lives yet centers on "birds, flowers and dreams," cannot live long in their ivory tower, because the tower itself has to be located in the real life that is suppressed by politics. In other words, Lu Xun argues that in this era every literature, regardless of its characteristics, has to be caught up in a revolutionary scheme. Even though literature does not give rise to revolution, it cannot escape from it either.<sup>15</sup> This is indeed the most pessimistic dimension of Lu Xun's view: every writer, it would seem, has to confront a predicament during the revolutionary period: he should not dream of leading the revolution to success or a golden future, neither should he get away from reality. He has to be discontent with reality and simultaneously risks political persecution. The only way to break away from this dilemma would be to serve in the army as a warring revolutionary.

---

<sup>14</sup> I mean discussed in the Honors Thesis which will be finished next term.

<sup>15</sup> Lu Xun, "Wenyi yu Zhengzhi de Qitu" (The Divergent Roads of Literature and Politics).

Obviously Lu Xun did not become a militant, and the person mostly troubled by this dilemma was, predictably, himself. He had long ago started working as someone who favored revolution: since the New Cultural movement his novels exposed discontent with an “old China” that has been injured and humiliated by the imperialist powers and its own “malicious” traditions. His furious critique of the Duan Qirui government in Beijing during the March 18 Massacre in 1926 directly put himself at risk of political persecution, which led to his shift to Xiamen for some months. He knew that he was in an epoch of China’s grand transformation therefore is destined to be influenced by it; he could not afford to be a bystander.

In that sense, he did use the three-stage paradigm to analyze the Chinese revolution. More than being an observer, he is as much concerned with his own role as a writer confronting the revolution, especially since he already sensed that his words were “in vain.” The three-stage paradigm helped him to position himself. The “rebellions and vengeance” – omens of the arrival of the “Great Revolution” – were in fact the very thematic concerns of Lu Xun’s literary creations. In the previously cited letter to Xu Guangping in which he addresses the futility of words, he assured her that in any case he “would continue to rebel.”<sup>16</sup> He also said in different places that he composed “Revenge,” a poem-in-prose later collected in his book *Wild Weed*, primarily because there were too many “bystanders” in society, whom he loathed and then placed in a fictional work where they were subjects of retribution.<sup>17</sup> By emphasizing “revenge” and “rebellion” in his speech, Lu Xun identified himself as a writer in the pre-revolutionary stage. He was not allowed by his own ideological framework to transcend this role, for he also had a tangible idea of what kind of people should come after him. As “Chinese literature has come to a

---

<sup>16</sup> Lu Xun, “250518 Zhi Xu Guangping,” *LXQJ*, 11:491.

<sup>17</sup> Lu Xun, “ye cao ying wen yi ben xu” (Preface to the English Translation of “Wild Weed”), *er xin ji*, *LXQJ*, 4:365; Lu Xun, “340516 Zhi Zheng Zhenzhuo” (May 16 1934 To Zheng Zhenzhuo), *shu xin*, *LXQJ*, 13:105.

dead end,” he asserted, “a sort of new man ought to emerge, whose ideas completely differ from our old ones’,... they will convey new ideas in new styles which are destined to be explored in the future.”<sup>18</sup>

While setting himself apart from the “new man” of the future, Lu Xun also employed the framework to show an inclination to detach himself from his own past. Writing a preface on October 3, 1925 to *Hot Wind*, a collection of his essays (*zawen*) written from 1918 to 1924, he laments that his “shallow” criticisms of social maladies had survived, because he believed that “any criticism of a social malady should perish together with that malady.” He went on to reason that if his criticisms were preserved until the present, then the “harmful bacteria” were still alive and social advancement was not taking place.<sup>19</sup> In short, developing a consistent intellectual attachment to this framework, Lu Xun specified for himself a social position: he assumed the role of a resister in a pre-revolutionary age while simultaneously observing the status of China’s “Great Revolution.”

### ***The Soviet “Influence”***

It is acknowledged among both literary scholars and historians that Lu Xun owed tremendous intellectual debts to Soviet literature and literary criticism. On August 26, 1925, he recorded on his diary the purchasing of a copy of *Literature and Revolution* by Leon Trotsky,<sup>20</sup> whose views he incorporated into many of his own writings from that point on. According to Xu Guangping, from 1925 Lu Xun started to read extensively, in Japanese translation, Soviet post-

---

<sup>18</sup> Lu Xun, “Wenxue yu Shehui – zai Shanghai Guang Hua Daxue de Jiangyan,” 174-179.

<sup>19</sup> Lu Xun, “Ti Ji” (A Note on the Title), *re feng, LXQJ*, 1:308.

<sup>20</sup> Lu Xun, “ri ji Fourteen (1925), August” *Diaries, LXQJ*, 15:578.

revolutionary literary works bought from the Dong Ya Company in Beijing. During this time, he also dedicated himself to introducing Soviet publications to the Chinese public; he drafted prefaces to anthologies ranging from Soviet literary debates to novels and poems. This reading stage, however, was suspended as he moved to Xiamen in August 1926 where access to Soviet publications was extremely limited. He was never able to continue after moving to Canton in 1927, as Chiang Kai-Shek's military forces began suppressing the Chinese Communist Party in April of that year.<sup>21</sup> Hence, it is fair to suppose that his reading of Soviet literary works after 1925 contributed to the ideological framework voiced in his speeches in 1927.

However, one's method of studying "influence" in this historical context requires special attention. One might compare two articles written by Lu Xun and Trotsky, find similarities, and then conclude that one "influenced" the other. Such a conclusion, however, is almost meaningless; it does not explain the degree of importance that such similar ideas contributed to forming an overall conceptual framework, and it risks reflecting the historian's own ideological bias. A more effective method of handling this topic is to search for the writer's own words on impact and then to investigate such significance. If he did not directly note his intellectual predecessors, his style of writing and line of reasoning might still imply "impact."

This approach initially turns on the implications of the preface Lu Xun wrote for an anthology entitled *Literary Debates of Soviet Russia* that covered articles from such Soviet literary journals as *LEF* and *Red Virgin Soil*. He started by offering a brief history of Russian-Soviet literature:

Living through 1917 October Revolution, Russia entered the age of War Communism pressing on iron and blood; Literature and Art were almost paralyzed. [...] However, they

---

<sup>21</sup> Xu Guangping, *Lu Xun Hui Yi Lu shou gao ben* (A Memoirs of Lu Xun, Manuscript) (Wuhan: Chang jiang Wen yi Chu ban she, 2010), 46-60.

were immediately activated as the situation changed since 1921. [...] Four or five years after the suppression from government and merchant class in 1905... Imaginists eventually opened fire, battled for three years, and transformed into Futurists initiating more violent attacks on old lives and organizations.<sup>22</sup>

This presentation of the history of the Russian Revolution implies that Lu Xun derived his three-stage paradigm directly from his understanding of Russia's revolutionary history from 1905 through the period of War Communism until the years of NEP (New Economic Policy), and, to be emphasized, this understanding sprang up not from his direct involvement in either Russian Revolution or Soviet Reality, but from his intellectual inference by reading Soviet publications. This period filled with "iron and blood" displayed for him a revolutionary reality in which society suffered from poor economic conditions and men of letters ceased to have any voice. Following this outline, he then assumed that poems returned because the New Economic Policy was implemented in 1921. Such a definite correlation between material conditions and literary activities exactly mirrored his conception of the second stage, when no literature would be produced because everyone had to fill their stomachs first. He also wrote in a postscript to Alexander Blok's poem *Twelve* that "The Russian Revolution in October was a violent storm...even musicians and painters were confounded ... [it was also a time when] old poems were all silent, yet new ones had not played their novel instruments."<sup>23</sup> Such a disappearance of literary voice again recalls his interpretation of the second stage, the Great Revolution when "words disappeared and sound vanished [...] and literature had to be silent."<sup>24</sup>

The stage of the Great Revolution in Russia, based on Lu Xun's paradigm, therefore ranges from 1917 until 1921 when "the situation changed." On the other hand, the way he talks

---

<sup>22</sup> Lu Xun, "Su er de Wen yi Lun Zhan Qian Ji" (Preface to 'Literary Debates of Soviet-Russia'), *ji wai ji shi yi, LXQJ*, 7:277.

<sup>23</sup> Lu Xun, "Shi er ge hou ji" (Postscript to 'Twelve'), *ji wai ji shi yi, LXQJ*, 7:310.

<sup>24</sup> Lu Xun, "Geming Shidai de Wenxue" (Literature in a Revolutionary Period), *eryi ji, LXQJ*, 3:438-439.

about literary development between the 1905 revolution and the one in 1917 also suggests that he sees that period as the pre-revolutionary stage in his framework. The 1905 revolution, which he does not explicate but only regards as the “first revolution” caused by “the oppression of government and merchant class,” led to the establishment of constitutional monarch and a legislative assembly called the State Duma in Russia. Instead of discussing political turbulence, of which he might have only limited knowledge, Lu Xun again emphasized the association of literature with this revolution from which “special arts,” according to him, “therefore emerged.” This included “symbolism, mysticism, and abnormal sexualism.”<sup>25</sup> In the past several years, then, “the imagists,” Lu Xun states, “finally came out and fought against the status quo.” Three years later, they transformed into “futurists” who initiated “fiercer attacks on the old life and old organizations.” He further points out that the old society struggled to counter the reformers by all means, and the government proscribed the circulation of these publications. In short, this is a period when literature rebelled against the Old society. Furthermore, that the society recovered as a signpost of the third stage in Lu Xun’s view<sup>26</sup> is also grounded on his conception of Russian reality which, in this case, refers to the effect of Lenin’s New Economic Policy in 1921. He believes that only at this moment does LEF (the journal “Left Front of the Arts”) come into activity; it attempts to “tear down the old traditions [...] and bourgeois arts” and to “build new and live art.” It would seem, then, that the Russian revolution(s) became the major source for Lu Xun’s abstract revolutionary paradigm, which he thought would be applicable to the Chinese Revolution. This is more convincing in that he even used a similar language to explain the three-stage scheme as he used in describing Russia’s revolutionary history.

---

<sup>25</sup> The “abnormal sexualism” might refer to treating sexual perversion as a literary topic which is usually seen in the works by the Russian writers Leonid Andreyev (1871-1919) and Mikhail Artsybashev (1878-1927), whom Lu Xun has been reading and translating since his study in Japan.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



In addition to the Russia's revolutionary macrocosm from which a general revolutionary blueprint was extracted, the individual experiences of Soviet intellectuals, particularly the suicides of Sergei Yesenin (1895-1925) and Andrey Soboly (1888-1926), also helped develop Lu Xun's ideological paradigm. He publicly addressed their suicides three times during two months in 1927. For example:

Any revolutionary poets who have illusions or ideals before the revolution are likely to suffer the fate of crashing themselves to death on the reality for which they have sung paeans of hope. Yet, if the revolutionary reality does not pulverize their fantasies or ideals, then this revolution is nothing but empty talk.<sup>27</sup>

He formulated this original view after reading an article entitled "Homeless Artists" which, published first on June 16, 1926 in *Pravda*<sup>28</sup> and soon in *China Youth*<sup>29</sup> in Chinese translation, gave rise to "many miscellaneous feelings and thoughts."<sup>30</sup> Two beliefs, which characterized the three-stage framework, also flowed from above arguments. On the one hand, the revolution always unfolded autonomously; it always pointed somewhere beyond what was expected in literary "hopes." Those who committed suicide, thus, should be held responsible for their own deaths because they did not see the revolution's fateful historical process but instead harbored illusions. On the other hand, the condition of men of letters revealed the dynamics of revolution: that they were disillusioned demonstrated that a revolution was in progress. This point is explicated more vividly when Lu Xun criticized the "so-called revolutionary writers" in China. He believed that writers in time of revolution must suffer as did Yesenin and Soboly, who

---

<sup>27</sup> Lu Xun, "Wenyi yu Zhengzhi de Qitu," *LXQJ*, 7:121. Translated in Lin Yu-sheng, "The Morality of Mind and Immorality of Politics: Reflections on Lu Xun, the Intellectual," in *Lu Xun and his Legacy*, ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 122.

<sup>28</sup> Karl Radek, "Bezdomnye lyudy" (Homeless People), *Pravda*, 16 June 1926, L2.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Radek, "Wu Jia ke gui de yi shu jia" (Homeless artists), *China Youth* (June 1926), 529-537.

<sup>30</sup> Lu Xun, "Zai Zhong Lou Shang" (On the bell tower), *Sanxian ji*, *LXQJ*, 4:36.

“had the courage of exclaiming ‘I cannot live anymore!’” That so many “revolutionary writers” were working as literary hacks only confirmed the lack of real revolution in Chinese society.<sup>31</sup>

It can be concluded that Lu Xun indeed relied on the Russian revolutionary reality as reflected in the Soviet literary scene to formulate his ideological framework. As Mark Mancall points out, Russia exerted tremendous impact on China both before and after 1917 in that it “did not just fill a vacancy” but also “added a new dimension to (or filled a lacuna in) the very structure of Chinese perception.”<sup>32</sup> The “new dimension” for Lu Xun was exactly this system of analysis, which he used to structure stages and conflicts of Chinese Revolution and to organize a position for himself. It seems that by doing so he also filled a “lacuna,” a lexical gap in that he used the language he acquired from talking about the Russian Revolution to discourse on China’s domestic situation.

### ***A Tragic Dilemma***

Having detailed the ideological framework and identified its source, it ultimately helps to understand in more depth the “fear” and “silence” that haunted Lu Xun during this transitional period. As suggested in his letter to Shi Youheng quoted at the beginning, his awareness of “dissecting” himself gave rise to his doubts about the social implications of his creative works.<sup>33</sup> He thought that his writings should be responsible for death of the young people, whom he believed embodied China’s future. However, in terms of the ideological framework, he also felt the urgency to write more because his position at the “first stage” required him to engage in

---

<sup>31</sup> Lu Xun, “Ge Ming Wen Xue” (Revolutionary Literature), *eryi ji, LXQJ*, 3:568.

<sup>32</sup> Mark Mancall, “Russia and China: The Structure of Contact,” in *Russia and Asia: Essays on the Influences of Russia on the Asian Peoples*, ed. Wayne S. Vucinich (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1972),

<sup>33</sup> Lu Xun, “Da Youheng Xiansheng” (In Reply to Mr. Youheng), *Eryi ji, LXQJ*, 3:473-478.

“battles” against the old. This constituted a tragic dilemma in that his role as pre-revolutionary resister implicated him in the death of the youth; thus to attack the old in fact even ruined the new, the future.

That Lu Xun felt guilty for the deaths of young people presumably stemmed from his innate sympathy at all times for the weak and the oppressed. Such strong moral concerns were most exemplified in his reaction to the “March 18 Massacre” in Beijing at 1926 in which some of his students died in a confrontation with the Duan Qirui government. Hearing this news, Lu Xun was deeply shocked and frustrated, and was even more furious as he found out that these students only died in vain; nothing was changed. “In a welter of more than forty young people's blood I can barely see, hear or breathe, so what can I say?,” he asked in a profoundly agitated and regretful tone in the famous *In Memory of Liu Hezhen* drafted one month later.<sup>34</sup> On October 14, 1926, he wrote that “I saw much blood and tears in past six months; however, I have only sundry thoughts. The tears dried, the blood passed off, butchers strolled in freedom; however, I have only sundry thoughts.”<sup>35</sup> This mentality continued throughout 1927 as many of his students and friends were arrested and executed under Chiang Kai-Shek’s purge of Communist Party members; on September 1, 1927 he wrote that “This year seems to be a year when young people died quite easily.”<sup>36</sup> At the end of his letter of “fear,” he again wrote that he was not sure if he could recover when the “pale-red bloodstains” – also the title of his poem-in-prose in memorial of the deceased in the “Massacre” – faded.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Lu Xun, “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen,” trans. Mike B., *Selected Works of Lu Hsun Volume 2* (Foreign Language Press, 1980), 267-272. Accessed online at “Marxist Internet Archives” (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1926/04/01.htm>).

<sup>35</sup> Lu Xun, “[unnamed],” *hua gai ji xu bian*, *LXQJ*, 3:384.

<sup>36</sup> Lu Xun, “tan ji lie” (On Radicals), *eryi ji*, *LXQJ*, 3:497.

<sup>37</sup> Lu Xun, “Da Youheng Xiansheng,” *LXQJ*, 3:477-478.

This moral sensibility for loss of human lives, however, contradicted the intellectual framework he had created to identify himself and his purpose in life. The Soviet-influenced paradigm persuaded him to continue fighting in rebellion against the “old” and in revenge for the sacrifices of young people. On the other hand, his sensitive sympathy suggested him that his practice would only bring more blood and even destroy the “new.” Thus, as he said in the letter, “to again remark on ‘saving the children’ would be no more than empty talk.” He was hesitant about whether he would have anything to say in the future.<sup>38</sup>

In fact, Lu Xun himself was not unconscious of the perplexing conflict between his intellectual pursuits and his high moral-emotional feelings. In his correspondence to Zhao Qiwen, one of his young readers, on April 11, 1925, he claimed that “gratitude... in any case is a kind of virtue. However it sometimes generates impediment... what if some day we fight against each other in opposite camps?” This question suggests that emotion and moral attachment hinders one’s resolution on the battlefield. He proceeded by explaining the message of his fictional work, *The Passerby*: “to revolt from hopelessness is more valiant and more tragic than to fight for hope; however, the rebellion always easily tumbles on ‘love’.”<sup>39</sup> It seems that in 1925 he was already conflicted about “love” as opposed to “fighting.” For the next two years, he attempted to formulate an analytic framework that allowed him to conceive of the revolutionary reality on a large scale. However, the new paradigm just exacerbated his inner conflict; his moral-emotional devotion prevented him from losing his concern for individual lives. There was no way out, as Lu Xun himself realized in 1927: “I can do nothing but to become numb and oblivious.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Lu Xun, “250411 Zhi Zhao Qiwen” (April 04 1925 To Zhao Qiwen), *liang di shu, LXQJ*, 11:477-478.

<sup>40</sup> Lu Xun, “Da Youheng Xiansheng,” *LXQJ*, 3:478.

### ***Conclusion: “Tragic dilemma” vs. “Leftist years”?***

To some extent, Lu Xun might be categorized as one of those writers who is gifted with writing about particularities. His keen sense of reality and history led him to expose tragic moments of individual human experience in a profound and artful way that would incur the reader’s sympathy for even the most ridiculous figure in his fictional stories, although he might claim – as he always did – that he was just attacking malevolent social conventions. However, to focus just on details of life and reality is, one may say, insufficient in a time of grand turbulence, a time when the passions from the May Fourth were almost worn out. That might account for the reason that he, as always a man of action, started conceptualizing a novel ideological framework in 1925, a theoretical weapon which helped to capture a general reality of both China’s revolution and his historical role.

Yet, his natural concern for the individual, it seems, also conflicted with his intellectual goal of reaching a bigger picture. He was ensnared in this dilemma without a way out. However, he could never become “numb” and “oblivious” as he imagined, because six years after 1927 he wrote another famous memorial entitled “Remembering in Order to Forget,” which was dedicated to the five young martyrs from the League of Chinese Leftist Writers. He deplored once again, as he had seven years earlier in regard to Miss Liu Hezhen, that “the past thirty years led me to behold so much youth’s blood, which deposited level by level and suffocated me...” Once again, he told himself that he “had better forget, and had better not speak.”<sup>41</sup>

This suggests that an ongoing inner conflict plagued Lu Xun from his transitional period until his death in 1936. His literary activities should be seen as either manifestations of his

---

<sup>41</sup> Lu Xun, “Wei le Wang Que de Ji Nian” (Remembering in order to forget), *nan qiang bei diao ji, LXQJ*, 4:493-504.

overall ideological paradigm, or as efforts to extricate from this dilemma, or both. Therefore, a change of attitude towards revolutionary literature which resulted in, what one scholar calls it “the convergence of literature and revolution”<sup>42</sup> in him at the beginning of 1928, perhaps does not represent an important intellectual transformation. For one thing, this concept of “revolutionary literature” is only one segment of Lu Xun’s overall ideological paradigm in 1927; unless he experienced a paradigm shift, it is not convincing to clarify a change of mentality. For another, to argue for a discontinuity as if Lu Xun jumped from a transitional period when he casted doubt on “revolutionary literature,” to a leftist stage when he reconfirmed its significance, fails to account for his clear continuities – for example the abovementioned internal conflict that continued to dominate his intellectual and political attentions during the 1930s.

Furthermore, to reconstruct one stage of Lu Xun’s intellectual developments as has been done in this paper challenges the legitimacy of the term “leftist years” that has been used to characterize his life during 1927-1936. To divide his lifetime by a simple political label, which he may not have held, also fails to portray him as a complex human being struggling with important problems – such as the “tragic dilemma” suggested here – which might be singled out as an important characteristic of Chinese intellectual history from May Fourth to the Republican period. As Benjamin Schwartz points out in reference to the concepts of tradition and modernity, “If the two terminal categories ... are useful only as a short-hand way of referring to vast inchoate and by no means internally integrated areas of human experience, the unreflective use of these terms can only lead to... the fallacy of misplaced concreteness..., which obstructs our

---

<sup>42</sup> Leo Ou-Fan Lee, “Literature on the Eve of Revolution: Reflections on Lu Xun’s Leftist Years, 1927-1936,” *Modern China* Vol.2, No.3 (July 1976): 282.

contacts with true concreteness.”<sup>43</sup> A binary division between left and non-left quite obscures the concrete experience of Lu Xun and perhaps of an entire generation of Chinese intellectuals whose complications are only partly explored in this paper.

---

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, “The Limits of ‘Tradition versus Modernity’ as Categories of Explanation: The Case of the Chinese Intellectuals,” *Daedalus* Vol. 101, No.2 (Spring, 1972), 71.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources:

Clark, Katerina, E. A. Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov, and Oleg V. Naumov. *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Lu, Xun. *Lu xun yan jiang quan ji (Complete Speeches of Lu Xun)*. Edited by Tong Bingguo. Wuhan: Changjiang wen yi chu ban she, 2007.

———. *Lu Xun Quan Ji (Complete Works of Lu Xun)*. Beijing: Ren min wen xue chu ban she, 2005.

———. “In Memory of Miss Liu Hezhen.” Translated by Mike B. *Selected Works of Lu Xun Volume 2*. Foreign Language Press, 1980. Accessed online at “Marxist Internet Archives” (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lu-xun/1926/04/01.htm>.)

Radek, Karl. “bezdomnye lyudy” (Homeless People). *Pravda* 16 June 1926, L2.

Radek, Karl. “wu jia ke gui de yi shu jia” (Homeless Artists). *China Youth* (June 1926): 529-537.

Trotsky, Leon. *Literature and Revolution*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1957.

Xu, Guangping. *Lu Xun Hui Yi Lu (Memoirs of LuXun)*. Wuhan: Chang Jiang wen yi chu ban she, 2010.

*Pravda* Digital Archive provided by East Review

### Secondary Sources:

Clark, Katerina. *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Deutscher, Isaac. *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921-1929*. London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Eastman, Lloyd. *The Abortive Revolution: China under Nationalist Rule, 1927-1937*. Cambridge Mass.: Council on East Asian Studies Harvard University Distributed by Harvard University Press, 1990.

Goldman, Merle, and Leo Ou-fan Lee. *An Intellectual History of Modern China*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.



Goldman, Merle. *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977.

Hsia, Tsi-an. *The Gate of Darkness: Studies on the Leftist Literary Movement in China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968.

Lee, Leo Ou-Fan. "Literature on the eve of revolution: Reflections on Lu Xun's Leftist Years, 1927-1936." *Modern China* (July 1976): 277-326.

———. *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

———. *Lu Xun and His Legacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Lerner, Warren. *Karl Radek, the Last Internationalist*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1970.

Lin, Yüsheng. *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.

Liu, Lydia He. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity--China, 1900-1937*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Maguire, Robert A. *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920's*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968.

Mally, Lynn. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Ng, Mau-sang. *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1988.

Pickowicz, Paul. *Marxist Literary Thought and China: A Conceptual Framework*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980.

Schwartz, Benjamin. "The Limits of "Tradition versus Modernity" as Categories of Explanation: The Case of the Chinese intellectuals." *Daedalus* 101 (2, 1972): 71-88.

Smith, S. A. *Revolution and the People in Russia and China: A Comparative History*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Vucinich, Wayne S. *Russia and Asia: Essays on the Influence of Russia on the Asian Peoples*. Stanford, California: Stanford University, 1972.

Wakeman, Frederic. *Policing Shanghai, 1927-1937*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

Wang, Der-Wei. *The Monster that is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.