

DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES

DP19577

**THE LONE SCREAM IN THE DARK:
CULTURAL CHANGE AND
INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN
MODERN CHINA AS SEEN THROUGH LU
XUN'S NOVEL**

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ECONOMIC HISTORY

CEPR

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Discussion Paper DP19577
Published 11 October 2024
Submitted 11 October 2024

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www.cepr.org

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Abstract

Lu Xun (1881-1936), regarded as the single most important and influential writer of modern China and East Asia, is surprisingly little-known in the West. His stories and personalities - now household names and symbols - had touched the nerves of a once profound nation caught in the depth of an identity crisis faced with decline and collapse. Through an analysis of "The Diary of a Madman", "Medicine" and the characters of Ah-Q, Kong Yiji and Runtu in his collection of stories "Scream", this paper unveils Lu Xun's penetrating insights on the complexity and nuance of culture as both determinants and impediments to social and economic transformation at historical crossroads. I show that theoretical framework of political economy and economics of identity are of particular relevance in understanding Lu Xun's penetrating and satirical critique on the paradoxical aspect of how the Chinese elites and masses both exploit and are exploited by traditional Chinese ideology. This paper concludes that Lu Xun - as a writer and a concept - remains highly relevant for understanding China's past, present and future.

JEL Classification: N0, B30

Keywords: N/A

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Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Jean-Philippe Platteau, François Bourguignon and Avinash Dixit and for comments and encouragement. All errors are mine. My research is partly supported by the AoE scheme awarded by the Research Grants Council of Hong Kong government.

The Lone Scream in the Dark: Cultural Change and Institutional Transformation in Modern China as seen through Lu Xun's Novel¹

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This Version: September 2024

Abstract:

Lu Xun (1881-1936), regarded as the single most important and influential writer of modern China and East Asia, is surprisingly little-known in the West. His stories and personalities - now household names and symbols - had touched the nerves of a once profound nation caught in the depth of an identity crisis faced with decline and collapse. Through an analysis of “The Diary of a Madman”, “Medicine” and the characters of Ah-Q, Kong Yiji and Runtu in his collection of stories “Scream”, this paper unveils Lu Xun’s penetrating insights on the complexity and nuance of culture as both determinants and impediments to social and economic transformation at historical crossroads. I show that theoretical framework of political economy and economics of identity are of particular relevance in understanding Lu Xun’s penetrating and satirical critique on the paradoxical aspect of how the Chinese elites and masses both exploit and are exploited by traditional Chinese ideology. This paper concludes that Lu Xun - as a writer and a concept – remains highly relevant for understanding China’s past, present and future.

Keywords: Lu Xun, culture, identity, institutions, tradition, modernity, medicine, anatomy

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**The Lone Scream in the Dark:
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Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881 -1936), undoubtedly the most famous writer in China, is the pen name of Zhou Shuren 周树人. Although relatively little known in the West, Lu Xun is more than just a writer in China, but also a cultural and political symbol and icon. With his essays used in school textbook, he is a household name throughout Japan and Korea as well.

As a literary figure, he is classified as a short-story writer, essayist, literary critic and poet. Born in 1881 and lived through a time of profound political and cultural change that culminated in the fall of China's last imperial dynasty, Lu Xun pioneered the use of vernacular Chinese Baihuawen 白话文 to create a new literary writing style that broke away from the classical Chinese syntax. With Baihuawen being now the foundation of modern contemporary Chinese literature and prose, Lu Xun is often considered as "the Father of Modern Chinese Literature" His style of prose is peculiar and distinctive: dry, restrained, ascetic and stoic that often belie a pungency that would suddenly catch the readers off-guard, reeling. As a satirist, he writes with humor and irony but his satire is more often biting and grating. His short stories are largely autobiographical and most of his characters were no inspiring figures but bordering between pitiful, pathetic and sometimes even despicable. Today the Lu Xun phrases and lines are part of modern Chinese lexicon and many of his characters are household names and symbols of meanings.

The unusual influence and peculiar style of Lu Xun reflected the struggle and tension stemming from the wrenching transformation at the turn of China's tumultuous century. The once proud and giant nation self-placed at the center of the universe, suddenly lost her footing and took a bad fall back to humility. In the looming shadow of the national pessimism emerged the so-called New Cultural Movement by the 1910s that had sought to create a new culture and a national character in place of the old. The visible outbreak of the New Culture Movement was the so-called May Fourth Movement, a mass student protest that exploded in Beijing on 4 May 1919. Initially launched as a nationalist outcry against Western and

Japanese imperialist erosion of Chinese sovereignty, the Movement developed into a thorough re-examination and sometimes, a wholesale rejection of Chinese culture and ideology as encapsulated by Confucianism. China's perceived backwardness in material and economic conditions had given rise to a broader revolt against her political and social traditions ranging from native superstitions as embodied - for Lu Xun - in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine to female foot-binding, male hair-duo (imposed by China's Manchu minority rulers), polygamy, physical cruelty, traditional clothes and education or even the use of ideographic Chinese characters and classical Chinese syntax. In its place, it advocated a new culture based on science, democracy, freedom, equality and progress, all fancy terms imported from the West (or via Japan).

As the New Culture Movement was championed by elites who were heavily influenced by the West – some educated in the West or Japan – as well as deeply immersed in Chinese tradition, the revolt created as much progress forward as setbacks and confusions of cultural and national identities. Lu Xun was part of that national soul-searching process that opened up a new horizon but leaving behind trails of debris. For some, Lu Xun was the voice of enlightenment, conscience, compassion and modernity, but for others his strident satire and critiques displayed nihilism, cynicism, animosity and irreverence.

Lu Xun's writings – both their substances and style - speak directly to some of the core issues of long run economic development: the political economy of vested interests and ruling elites, the role of institutions and culture and more importantly the more recent literature of how identities and ideas help explain historical persistence and resistance to economic and social transformation. Below, I will start with a discussion on the underlying economic theories for interpreting Lu Xun's work. I then turn to his brief biography and focus two short stories and other well-known characters contained in his most well-known collection of stories titled "Scream". Finally, I will comment how the works of Lu Xun could speak to the recent burgeoning literature among the global economic historians on the so-called Great Divergence debate and the Needham Puzzle.

Lu Xun: an Economic Analysis?

What truly explains long-run economic growth? Which is more important, institutions or culture? Scholars such as Acemoglu et al (2005) highlighted the role played by the “vested interests” of ruling elites and rent-seeking groups to explain the persistent inequality and non-inclusive policy choices through their establishment of extractive institutions. On the other hand, works going back to the European enlightenment thinkers and Max Weber had long emphasized the importance of culture to economic outcome. Indeed, these scholars argue that fundamental economic transformation cannot occur or sustain without comparable changes in underlying cultural values. While shifts in institutions and regimes could occur relatively swiftly, cultural values and their associated human behavior change far more gradually and slowly (North 2005, Boyd and Richerson 1985, Mokyr 2016, Acemoglu and Robinson 2021, Greif 2016, Williamson 2000).

A recent related literature on the economics of identities and ideas or ideology challenges the simplistic “interest” perspective and the dichotomy between culture and institutions (Akerlof 1976, Akerlof and Kranton 2005, Rodrik 2014, Ash, Mukand and Rodrik 2024). As succinctly summarized by Dani Rodrik (2014), the so-called “self-interest” or “vested-interest” presumes the idea of a self which itself is a social construct. How we evaluate and advance our interests depends how we define our identities in terms of class, ethnicity, religion, demographic cohort, nation or a combination of several identities. Interests are one form of idea that shapes our preferences and worldviews. Alternatively, ideas shape interests.

Moreover, ideas or ideology is subject to manipulation and innovation. Various actors routinely invest in persuasion and ideology (Rodrik 2014, p. 190-1). As Timur Kuran argued independently, as personal preferences can be highly interdependent between individuals, a system of false preferences can sustain publicly when each individual tailors one’s expressed preferences to what appears socially acceptable or politically advantageous. This leads to an equilibrium which can easily support oppressive social norms and is thus essentially determined by beliefs of a certain type: if I am moderately or even radically against a certain type of behavior (say, the prohibition of remarriage of widows in India, or the footbinding obligation for Chinese women) which I deem to be oppressive but I believe at the same time

that other people will behave oppressively, it may be rational for me to follow suit when I may fear a punishment (formal or informal) justified by my being out-of-line with the behavior of the majority.² And this outcome is possible even though a great majority of the individuals abhor the prevailing oppressive norm. In the terminologies of Kuran, an equilibrium based on public lies can sustain as long as each individual concealed private truths in isolation.

More importantly, Given that ideas represent a way of evaluating and interpreting the world and evidences, any divergences in beliefs need not disappear even asymptotically when there is disagreement over the interpretation of evidences received (Rodrik 2014, p. 193, Denzau and North 1994, Ma and Rubin 2024). With culture and ideology deeply embedded in society and history, attempts to change the status-quo by individuals or groups of individuals would encounter what economists would call the problems of a coordination game (David 1985, North 2005).

The writings by Lu Xun's work offers the most striking and poignant illustration of cultural values as the single most important catalyst or impediments to political and economic transformation. Living through a life of sharp contrasts between a childhood of growing up in a traditional Chinese village and a youth abruptly exposed to the new world of a rapidly modernizing and Westernizing Japan in the 1900s, Lu Xun experienced an epiphany while in Japan. Like that group of small elites who acquired a radically new identity and worldview of modernization, Lu Xun returned to his hometown or home country to find himself a loner, outsider and eventually a rebel amidst the teeming masses steeped in cultural values or ideologies shaped by two millennia of indoctrination. Having "seen through" the ruling elites' manipulation of ideologies by the traditional ruling-elites, Lu Xun and his generation of self-avowed enlightenment thinkers found greater despair in realizing how pervasive the ideology had become among the masses and how what they identified as the "oppressed" identified with and perpetuated the ideology of the oppressors. Lu Xun's works were as much

² For an insightful paper on the case of the persistence of female foot-binding in traditional China, see Pleatteau, Gamilotti and Auriol 2018.

an attack on the hypocrisies of ruling elites or vest-interests as a lament on the numbness of the oppressed masses.

Lu Xun and His Epiphany

Born in 1881 and grew up in a family of landlords and government officials in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, at the heart of the highly commercialized Lower Yangzi region, Lu Xun saw his family fortune take a turn for the worse due to his father's drawn-out illness that slowly drained family resources. The teenage Lu Xun would recall years spent shuttling between his home and the local pawnshops to secure the cash needed to procure medicine at the local Chinese medicine store. The memory of those high counters at both pawn and medicine shops towering above his boyish statue would haunt him (Lu Xun, 2014, vol. 1. p. 3). As his father's health continued to deteriorate and family desperation deepened, the Chinese medical prescription became increasingly expensive with more and more "exotic" plants and insects. In the end, his father died an exasperating death in front of the young and traumatized Lu Xun (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 2, p. 40). The young Lu Xun was to feel compelled to become a doctor as the son.

National events outside his village were even more tumultuous with China caught in whirlwind of transformative political and social changes following her disastrous military defeat by Japan in 1894-96: the rise and fall of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) - China's radical political reform modelled after Meiji Japan - the Boxer Rebellion of 1899 and eventually the late Qing Constitutional Reform implemented in 1905 by the humiliated Qing regime (see Ma 2021). One part of the Late Qing reform was the 1905 abolishment of China's Imperial Civil Service Examination centered on the teachings of Confucian classics and the rise of new type of modern education and the opportunities for study overseas in the wake of the late Constitutional reform.³

Given the deterioration of his family wealth partly due to his father's long illness and death, Lu Xun had to abandon the traditional route of social mobility of pursuing a Confucian

³ For the importance of Civil Service Examination for traditional Chinese social structure and social mobility, see Ho 1962. Also, see Brandt et al 2011 for the political economy aspect of the Examination system.

education. Instead, he went to newly established modern schools in nearby urban centers in 1899, where he got exposure to Western education subjects such as physics, arithmetic, geography and etc. More importantly, it was there that he saw for the first time the Chinese translation of Western medical books. Thinking back his boyhood trauma with his father's illness, it dawned on him that "I gradually came to the recognition that Chinese medicine was nothing but an utter fraud intentionally or unintentionally but managed to capture the sympathy of those defrauded patients and their families" (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 1 p. 3). Lu Xun's aspiration for medical profession was bolstered by his fundamental distrust of traditional Chinese medicine rooted in superstition and ignorance.

In 1902, Lu Xun left China to study in Japan on a Qing governmental scholarship. Like many of the first generation of Chinese students going abroad, Lu Xun's time in Japan became a turning point in his worldviews.⁴ Two years after he started in Japan, Lu Xun – having decided to study Western medicine prompted by his childhood experience - left the cosmopolitan Tokyo to begin his study at the relatively remote Sendai Medical Academy in northern Japan. In his autobiographic essay, Lu Xun recalled his dream plan for his study. Learning and mastering modern (Western) medicine would give him a chance to save patients like his father who were once failed or fooled by traditional Chinese medicine. During war times, he can become a military doctor to help fallen soldiers during war times.

Lu Xun's career plan seemed further assured by his learning that even Japan's own modernization in the Meiji era owed much to the translation of Western medicine (Lu Xun 2014 vol. 1, p. 4). For that, Lu Xun might be thinking of the case the 18th century Japanese "Dutch Studies" (*Rangaku*) scholars' painstaking translation of Western anatomy. Based on a rare imported Western medical work at the time of a closed Tokugawa era, a couple of these scholars secretly performed their own anatomy and were able to verify its far greater anatomical accuracy than in the known Chinese texts of medicine.⁵ Nonetheless, the formal

⁴ See Kung and Wang 2024 for the surge of Chinese students in Japan in the early twentieth century.

⁵ See Sugita 1969 and Bowers 1970 on the Japanese "Dutch Studies" scholars' translation of Western medical texts in the Tokugawa era. See Ogawa 1975 for the account of anatomy in Japan. See Ma and Rubin 2024 for a comparison of ideological transformation in modern Japan and China.

introduction of modern anatomy and medical science to Japan had to wait until after the Meiji Reform after 1868.

However, things did not pan out as Lu Xun had hoped after his particular moment of epiphany. The medical class taught in Sendai tended to use movie slide to display the size and shapes of microbiology. Often, the class showed some scenic or news documentaries if there was still time left to spare. At the time Lu Xun was attending medical school, the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) broke out on disputed Northern eastern provinces of China. In one of the classes, Lu Xun described what he witnessed on the slide show:

“At the time, I hadn't seen any of my fellow Chinese in a long time, but one day some of them showed up in a slide. One, with his hands tied behind him, was in the middle of the picture; the others were gathered around him. Physically, they were as strong and healthy as anyone could ask, but their expressions revealed all too clearly that spiritually they were calloused and numb. According to the caption, the Chinese whose hands were bound had been spying on the Japanese military for the Russians. He was about to be decapitated as a 'public display.' The other Chinese gathered around him had come to enjoy the spectacle.”

Lu Xun was absolutely disgusted by the apathy of his fellow countrymen cheering on the public execution of one of their own who himself had by then looked completely resigned. That imagery drove Lu Xun to the recognition that the root of the Chinese ails is not physical but mental; not individual but collective and national. He blurted out: “From that time, I no longer felt it was so urgent to study medicine. For a weak nation, even though those individuals can be physically healthy and strong, they are only useful materials for public display or as bystanders. No need to feel sad for them and it does not matter how many of them die of sickness. Our first priority is to change their spirit; and for that, we need to turn to art and literature” (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 1, p. 4). Lu Xun's once life-long aspiration to cure physical illness in individuals as medical doctor had by then morphed into treating the collective spiritual and cultural maladies of a nation. For that, Lu Xun wanted to become a writer taking up a pen sharper than a scalpel.

Intellectually, Lu Xun linked this fateful career turn with another Japanese personality during his time in Sendai. At the Sendai academy, Lu Xun met his anatomy teacher, Fujino

Genkurō who noted his lone Chinese student with imperfect command of Japanese language. Mr. Fujino made special efforts to reach out to him to review and revise his class notes. At the start of the anatomy class, Mr. Fujino was worried if Lu Xun could cope with dissecting human corpses given the Chinese beliefs in afterlife ghost. He was relieved to see Lu Xun did well. At one point Mr Fujino also inquired with him about the practice of Chinese female foot-binding and how it would impact the bone structure of the foot (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 2, p. 49).

In one of his most celebrated autobiographic essay plainly titled “Mr. Fujino” (which is used in school textbook in China and Japan), Lu Xun gave a subtle and endearing portrayal of the lasting impact of those simple acts of kindness by his Japanese mentor. Lu Xun remembered how much Mr. Fujino had hoped he would pursue his medical profession to bring back his advanced new (Western) medical knowledge to his ancient motherland of China. Hence, Lu Xun’s decision to abandon his medical study in Sendai after one year came as a big disappointment to Mr. Fujino. Lu Xun was to remain forever remorseful to his Japanese mentor as the student.

Lu Xun brought back to China entire three boxes of his lecture notes from Mr. Fujino’s class and his photo given to him at the time of their farewell in Sendai. Years after returning to China, Lu Xun would often recall his quiet soliloquys with Mr. Fujino in the depth of the night completely discouraged and exhausted from his own writing. As soon as he raised his head to catch the stern gaze of Mr. Fujino from the framed photo hung on the wall of his study, Lu Xun would hear Mr Fujino’s anatomy lecture all over again in his characteristically accentuated tone. Each time, Lu Xun immediately became alert, sit tight and plough on with his writing - in full courage - to draw the ire of those so-called “gentlemen” (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 2, p.51).⁶ It was in Mr. Fujino that Lu Xun found reconciliation between

⁶ The essay “Mr. Fujino” has brought unprecedented fame to an otherwise obscure academy professor in remote rural Japan. Largely unaware of Lu Xun’s portrayal of him until much later, Mr. Fujino, when interviewed, recalled the presence of anti-Chinese ultra-nationalism in Sendai medical academy right after the 1894-96 Sino-Japanese war and Chinese students were often mocked for their Manchu hairdo. Mr. Fujino himself had studied Chinese and harboured deep respect for Chinese civilization. That could be one reason Mr. Fujino did feel certain affinity to his lone Chinese student. See Lu Xun 2017, pp. 1-3.

aspirations lost and rediscovered, between medicine and literature, between personal belonging and nationalist sentiments.

The Scream

Foreword

“Scream” 呐喊, a collection of short stories originally published in 1923, probably ranked as the single most influential piece of writing in modern China. The title “scream” seems to echo the terrifying image of the identically titled painting by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch in 1893. While Munch’s scream came to symbolize the horrifying individual suffering from a feeling of distortion of the environment and one’s self in a time of turmoil around the world, Lu Xun’s story of scream in words invoked similar depth of emotions but with a vastly different context.⁷

In his forward to the book, Lu Xun wrote of that profound and crushing sense of despair and isolation confronted by him and other enlightened new generations in the midst of seamless and bottomless mass of apathy and numbness. The foreword presents one of Lu Xun’s most iconic analogy of this situation in a conversation with a compatriot who tried to encourage him to write for a journal called “New Youth” which was to become the most important publication of the New Cultural Movement:

"Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. But they will die in their sleep without feeling the pain of death. Now if you scream and end up waking up a few of those more conscious, all you have done is to awake those unfortunate few to the agony of recognizing their irrevocable death, are you doing them any good?"

To that, his compatriot responded firmly: “Perhaps if only just those few woke up, you cannot say there is no hope of tearing down this iron house”. Lu Xun wanted to believe

⁷ See description of Munch’s scream in Simeon and Abugel 2006. I owe Avinash Dixit to this particular point of analogy between the two forms of expressions of “scream” although I cannot find any direct relationship between the two artists. I also want to thank him for pointing me to the linkage between Lu Xun and the Russian writer Nikolay Gogol.

him and wrote for the “New Youth” journal what was later to become the disturbing masterpiece “The Diary of a Mad Man”.⁸

Diary of a Mad Man

Heavily influenced by Western literature, Lu Xun pioneered the Chinese translation of Western stories and also read as many works from Russia and other Eastern European countries as he could find in German and Japanese translation (Chinnery 1960, p. 309). The title of “Diary of a Mad Man” was taken from a story written by the Russian author Nikolay Gogol written in 1834. While Gogol’s story of madman was an attempt to escape the censors by attacking the high officials in Russia’s St. Petersburg through the words of a madman, Lu Xun’s tale was an allegory used as a direct attack on traditional society through the inverted worldview of a “madman” (Chinnery 1960, p.310-311).

Indeed, everything in the sensory world of this little depressing novel was inverted. The “madman” in this novel was conscious but was considered mad because he had exposure to the brand new world of ideas whose norms and values stood in sharp contrast to the ancient values of two millennium held by people around him. The “madman” exhibited behaviors similar to what modern psychiatry would diagnose as paranoid, a close correspondence that reveals Lu Xun’s long-standing interest in medical study. The application of modern psychology to literature allows Lu Xun to convey his individual outlook on society concealed through the imagination of a schizophrenia (Chinnery 1960, p.312).

Returning to his village after years being away (perhaps being abroad in Lu Xun’s case), the madman found himself a complete outsider, ultra-suspicious of everybody around him, neighbors, peasants, random hooligans on the street or even his brother and mother. All seemed out to conspire to persecute him. Every one of their words, facial expressions and seemingly random acts all aimed at one objective – to eat him live. While Lu Xun did evokes tales of cannibalism in classical Chinese tradition, his madman analogy broadly represented a frontal assault on how brutality and repression were couched in the most benevolent terms

⁸ Apart from those specifically referenced, most of the English translation of Lu Xun’ original Chinese works is based on my own.

of classical Chinese teaching and ideology. Through the mouth of a “truth-telling” madman came Lu Xun’s most memorable lines:

“You have to study in order to understand things. People eat people from ancient times, as I kind of seem to remember, but I am not totally certain. So I turn to history to check but this history seems to have no timeline, but scribbled over its every page are the characters of Benevolence and Morality 仁义道德. I tossed and turned in bed, unable to fall sleep. After half of a night of ruminating, I finally discovered that hidden between the cracks of every character in the entire book were inscribed two words: ‘Eat People’`吃人`!”

The central idea of the story is that society is cannibalistic while orthodox Confucian morality was merely a cover for cannibalism. Discussing about the writing of `Diary of a madman`, Lu Xun later wrote bluntly: “What we call Chinese civilization is really only a feast of human flesh for the delectation of the rich. What we call China is only the kitchen where this feast is prepared.” (quoted in Chinnery 1960, p. 314).

So this is not just a story of “elite” dominance or class repression with a minority rich cannibals over the majority poor victims. In fact, given their identification with the ideology, everyone including the so-called oppressed is a victim as well a cannibal. Those who wanted to eat him also wanted to eat others but were also afraid of being eaten themselves, they all looked at each other with the deepest suspicion. A few years later, Lui Xun put this idea more systematically:

' ... we have long ago arranged everything with perfect convenience. We have the noble and the common, the rich and the poor, the high and the lowly. We are oppressed by others, but we can oppress others in turn. We are devoured by others, but can devour others in turn. Each level is held in check. It cannot move, nor has it any desire to move, for any change, even if it has advantages, will also bring disadvantages '. (quoted in Chinnery 1960, p. 315). Hence, the reason for the cannibals' desire to kill the madman is that he is a rebel that the cannibals would unite to snuff out.

What drove that madman madder is that he himself, like all others, were the inheritor of a four thousand years of history of cannibalism. Is there any hope for any person with that

kind of history? The madman went on to ask: “Perhaps there are children who have not eaten anyone yet?”

“Please save the children” was the last plea of desperation at the end of the story.

Medicine

“Medicine” was a haunting and tragic short story of those self-assuming revolutionaries who shed their blood as an act of martyrdom intended to awaken the masses but only to see their very blood shed to feed the superstition of those very masses. Martyrdom was turned on its head and made a brutal mockery of it.

The story starts with an elderly couple by the name of Hua who ran a local teahouse in the village. It turned out their only son had caught what seemed like tuberculosis that may have once killed Lu Xun’s father. The local superstition or traditional Chinese medicine had it that their son’s illness can be cured by the eating of “Steamed Bun” soaked inside by live human blood. One way of acquiring such kind of human blood is to bribe the local executioners for a fee to collect them illegally from the corpses of newly executed criminals. On a dark night, the elderly Mr. Hua went out and did exactly that to bring back two steamed buns for his ailing son. The elderly couple watched their son swallow them instantly. Later, the customers and neighbors of the teahouse who learnt about Hua’s acquisition of the blood-soaked bun also came to congratulate them with assurances that their son’s recovery would be a matter of time.

It turned out that the “criminal” whose blood used for the bun was actually a revolutionary by the name of Xia Yu executed for his crime of treason against the Qing regime. One customer in the teahouse had even met him in the cell and recalled how, to his complete disbelief, that this poor criminal even in his cell would have the arrogance to incite him to turn against the Qing regime. So, “I roughed him up”, he gloated to everyone’s delight and cheer at the teahouse.

Meanwhile, the son, the Junior Mr. Hua, sadly, died not too long after having eaten up the human blood steamed bun. The story ends with the scene of the deeply aggrieved mother - Mrs. Hua staggering her way to sweep the very modest tomb of her deceased son.

On her way, she ran into another elderly, disheveled and unkempt lady by the name of Mrs. Xia who was on her way to sweep the tomb of her own son. It turned out Mrs. Xia was the mother of that executed (criminal) revolutionary. The Chinese characters of the two last families, Hua 华 and Xia 夏 combined, is a compound term for “Chinese Civilization” 华夏.

It was the saddest encounter of two heirless mothers. They consoled each other’s loss in their deepest moments of grief at the graveyard. Now both heirless, they shared a complete sense of abandonment – perhaps like the Chinese Civilization itself - by the whole world. Trudging their way home, they only had the company of a black crow who gingerly followed only to fly far away into the sky with a long caw.

The pointless nature of the revolutionary martyrdom became more poignant in real life as it turned out Mr. Xia Yu 夏瑜, the executed revolutionary in the story, was actually a woman in real life widely known as Ms. Qiu Jin 秋瑾. As a married mother of two but chose to dress as a man and behaved as an equal towards men, Qiu Jin became a symbol of the new women: educated, independent, and active in public affairs. The brutal execution of China’s first feminist heroin in 1907 sparked outrage and partly triggered the eventual downfall of the Qing regime in 1911. Qiu Jin was from the same town as Lu Xun and went to study in Japan where they met each other. The Chinese character, “Xia” 夏 in Xia Yu used by Lu Xun also means “Summer,” to match the Chinese character “Qiu” 秋 as in Qiu Jin, meaning “Autumn” (Ying, Hu 2016). For Lu Xun, the story of Medicine was highly personal.

The Personalities of Ah-Q, Kong Yiji and Runtu

“Scream” is also most memorable for some tales of the most colorful tragicomic personalities. In “The Story of Ah-Q,” the curiously named protagonist, “Ah-Q” 阿 Q is now almost alter ego of a perverse aspect of Chinese national character molded by the traditional ideology. Ah-Q, a part time domestic helper who eked out a living by working for different households, was among the lowest and poorest of the village social hierarchy and income ladder. Abused and beaten up practically by anybody in the village, Ah-Q dealt with each humiliation with what Lu Xun famously coined as the coping “strategy of spiritual triumph,” which took the

form of Ah-Q declaring a mental victory over his abuser behind his back after each humiliation or beating. Ah-Q, the perennial loser, came out the winner each time, self-declared.

In “Kong Yiji”, the protagonist, Kong Yiji 孔乙己, was as downtrodden as Ah-Q except for his past distinction of having received some Confucian education possibly during his failed attempts at passing the Civil Service Examination. Impoverished, debt-ridden and sickly, Kong Yiji painstakingly held on to his elevated sense of identity in the social hierarchy, moving around the village in his utterly tattered “gentlemanly” robe and with his pretentious “learned” speech. The distinctive and hilarious Kong Yiji phraseology and syntax that Lu Xun had created has become the parody of a man who had nothing left except his “public” mask.

In in “Home Town,” the character of Runtu is relatively speaking the most benign by comparison. Lu Xun described his return to his native village after nearly twenty years of being away. Among many other things, he was looking forward to reuniting with his childhood mate Runtu. The Chinese character of Runtu 闰土 (润土) literally means Surplus (or alternatively as moist and fertile) Soil, a nickname that represented the humble and teeming masses of the vast rural China, was the son of a house servant at Lu Xun’s household. Incognizant of their gap in social status as children, the two enjoyed many happy innocent children playing times together in the winter snow and summer beach. Lu Xun remembered him as full of joy, fun, intelligence and resourcefulness.

But when Lu Xun saw Runtu again more than twenty years later, that childhood Runtu was gone. No longer playful and resourceful, the senior Runtu was then an adult man totally worn down by the marks of age and the burden of raising a large family at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But it was the change in demeanor than appearance at the meeting that sent a chill through Lu Xun’s spine. Before Lu Xun even had a chance to reminisce their past playtimes, the senior Runtu immediately bowed in front of him and addressed him as what would translate to the English equivalent as “master.” Lu Xun was subsequently introduced to his fifth son. “Ah, there was the young Runtu I seemed to remember from twenty years

ago”, Lu Xun thought to himself. In the next minute, the boy was made to kneel in front of Lu Xun to pay respect to his father’s master.

The reunion with Runtu left Lu Xun in a profound state of sadness. If in the “Diary of a Mad Man”, Lu Xun had once pinned his hope on the future generation of children, Lu Xun witnessed then the forfeit of childhood innocence in “Home Town”. Where is hope? Lu Xun exclaimed at the end of the story. Recalling his childhood beach playing times with Runtu, Lu Xun penned what was to become the most plainly spoken but iconic line for trailblazers in in China:

“In a moment of haze, before my eye laid open a stretch of pure blue beach, with a golden full moon hanging in the deep blue sky above. I thought that after all, there was not anything like hope to begin with; just like there were not any trails to begin with on the ground. But when more people started walking, they became trails” (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 1, pp. 54-56).

Lu Xun and Debates in Chinese and Global Economic History

The satires of Lu Xun would throw some curious insights or enlightenment on the two ongoing grand revisionist theses of the past four decades on China’s historical achievements in a global context. The first is the so-called Needham hypothesis raised by Professor Joseph Needham, a historian of science based in Cambridge University. Given China’s astounding achievements in science and technology as exemplified by her epochal inventions of paper, printing, compass and gunpowder during the medieval era, Needham asked why Song China (960-1279 AD), the world’s leading economy at the time, did not become the first country to industrialize (See Lin 1995, Brandt, Ma and Rawski 2014).

During the past three decades, the so-called California School pushed the Needham thesis even further by arguing that the core region of China such as the Lower Yangzi remained as the world’s leading economic areas with living standards comparable to contemporaneous England and Holland as late as the eighteenth century. On the question of why it was England rather than China that industrialized during the eighteenth century, the

California School emphasizes the role of new resources in England such as coal and the discovery of the New World (Pomeranz 2001, Brandt et al 2011).

The Needham question and the California School turned the whole thesis of modernization and Westernization on its head: it was China rather than the West that had been the forerunner of technology and economy in medieval and early modern era. The California School's resurrection of the Lower Yangzi region where Lu Xun's native hometown of Shaoxing was located would have most likely amused if not shocked Lu Xun. Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, Lu Xun spent a lifetime attacking or trying to awaken people in his native hometown to become culturally "fit" for modernization. Characters such as Kong Yiji or Ah-Q had become the prototypes of those traditional "national characters or traits" that could account for China's stagnation and backwardness. Culture and ideology that Lu Xun had highlighted as major impediments to progress figured little if at all in the California School thesis.

On the question of China's past inventiveness argued by Needham, Lu Xun's satire written in 1933 would seem quite unsparing: "While foreign (or Western) countries used gun-powder to produce bullets fending off enemies, Chinese used it to make firecrackers to worship gods; While foreign countries used the compass to sail the sea, Chinese used it or *fengshui* (geomancy); while foreigners used opium for medical treatment, Chinese made it their staple food." (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 4, p. 76).

As expected, Lu Xun reserved his most unsparing and poignant satire to his favorite subject of anatomy. In reference to China's relative backwardness in medical science and anatomy partly due to the taboo of dissecting human bodies, this one-time student of anatomy in Japan wrote the following in 1934:⁹

"Both Medicine and Torture would require knowledge in biology and anatomy. In China it was very strange, all those drawings of internal organ system in old Chinese medical books were full of embarrassing and gross errors. But when it comes to the method of torture,

⁹ Teizo Ogawa (1975) noted the Song China's achievement in anatomy and its subsequent stagnation in contrast to advances made in the West. Ogawa specifically noted Needham's contribution on Song scientific achievements.

it seems our ancestors had full mastery of modern science” (Lu Xun 2014, vol. 2, p 277-284, 1934).

The torture Lu Xun alluded to refers to the cruelest of all capital punishment called “Lingchi” 凌迟 which literally meant “death by a thousand cuts” where a criminal was sliced to death piece by piece by knives while kept alive for days on public display. In 1905, the year the millennium old Chinese imperial Civil Service examination that had indoctrinated the Confucius ethics of benevolence was abolished, Lingchi was also officially outlawed (Bourgon 2003).

Epilogue: the Ghost of Lu Xun

At first reading, Lu Xun’s unreserved attack on the so-called “gentlemanly” ruling class or the ideology of “benevolence” in Confucian classics seems to fall very much in line with the political economy framework of how rent-seeking elites perpetuating the status-quo. But on a deeper level, what Lu Xun unveils is how the oppressed, the victims of traditional regime such as Runtu, Ah-Q, Kong Yiji came to identify, perpetuate or even defend the regime and status-quo. After all, no ideology by the ruling class can easily rule or dominate without gaining some form of legitimacy and compliance by the public and masses.

In this regard, the pioneering theoretical economic works of George Akerlof (1976), Timur Kuran and others help shed light on the seemingly paradoxical behavior of someone being a victimizer and victim at the same time. Literary works like that of Lu Xun help convey the full complexity, ambiguity and nuances behind the underlying theories. At a time of rapid shifts in national and global systems within just a few decades, Lu Xun captured the tensions between the elites and the masses, the divergence between private truths and public lies and the crisis of conflicting identities and worldviews.

In this regard, changes cannot come about through regimes or institutions alone but also the ideas and identities. In a massive nation with homogenous preferences indoctrinated through millennia of traditional ideology, this is a tall order. As economic jargons would frame it: the rise of a new generation whose preferences are influenced by a new “exogenous” and “foreign” ideology would insert certain element of heterogeneity. This would set off a process of changes first among a group of people relatively averse to a given norm or status-

quo, then later among the more averse population (Platteau et al 2018). Hence, changes may come gradually one-step at a time through persuasion. However, having himself died prematurely in 1936, Lu Xun would not see the day that changes by persuasion through fiction and satire would eventually give way to revolution imposed through violence and coercion.

Today, as the terms such as “Iron House”, “Eat People”, “Benevolence”, “Human blood Steam Bun” and names such as Ah-Q and Kong Yiji have entered daily Chinese lexicon, one wonders how much the works of Lu Xun and the New Cultural Movement had already altered the course of Chinese history. Eventually, the radicalization of the New Cultural Movement later led to the rise of the Communist movement initially sponsored directly by the Communist International from Moscow. The Communist leader, Mao Zedong, was himself was a product of the New Cultural Movement.

Armed with the belief in Communism being the most “advanced” or modern form of Western ideology, the new Communist regime founded in 1949 were poised to carry out the most massive social engineering program of radical modernization the world would ever see. The infamous Culture Revolution launched in 1965 unleashed the most destructive force to eradicate all vestiges of Chinese tradition such as Confucian classics texts, religious buildings, lineage halls, traditional operas or even intellectuals. Although ideologically left-leaning and praised by Mao Zedong personally, Lu Xun was claimed ownership by camps both left and right. Ironically, had he not died in 1936, Lu Xun, the man most credited with his attack on traditional culture, would have most been purged in Mao’s Cultural Revolution given his characteristically sacrilegious and iconoclastic inclination.

When an impoverished and self-isolated China re-emerged out of isolation at the end of the radical Mao era, it became an eerie moment of reckoning: China’s East Asian neighbors of Japan and Asian tigers had – in the interval of three decades - blossomed into modern miracles of economic growth partly through a transformation – rather than eradication – of their common Confucian heritage. This wake-up call to China’s second fall from grace within the same century was made all the more cruel as China this time was left behind not just by the West but by her Asian neighbor long designated at the periphery of

Chinese culture. In this moment of profound mental shock and crisis of identities, the ghost of a scathing Lu Xun hovered over again.¹⁰ Perhaps the demons of traditional Chinese culture that Lu Xun had awakened a century ago never really left China. They came under a different guise: traditional robes replaced by modern jackets, “benevolence” ditched by “progress”. But nothing of substance - as the new enlightenment thinkers of the 1980s would go on to argue - has changed. Indeed, a social engineering program in the name of modernization was pushed through by a totalitarian regime partly founded on the ancient roots of Chinese imperial despotism. The 1960s Cultural Revolution set China backward rather than forward and took her back to some of her darkest eras of repression in ancient Chinese dynasties. The fanaticism of the young Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution were just vulnerable to ideological manipulation by the new regime as were the numbness of the masses by the old regime. The process of mutual victimization continued.

Ironically, China’s new era of opening and reform during the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping saw a drastic moderation of radicalism and partial restoration of cultural traditions. Indeed, many would argue that China’s economic miracles for the next four decades after the 1980s owed much to the same Confucian tradition of work ethics, respect for education, the legacy of bureaucracy and state capacity shared with her East Asian neighbors. In that regard, the scholarship of the California School, Joseph Needham and others are timely reminders of those positive historical legacies (See Brandt et al 2011s). Even Chinese medicine – purged of the superstitious elements – transformed and thrived as a viable medical profession.

Nonetheless, Lu Xun has become a symbol and a concept: as long as Lu Xun was relevant, true modernity remained far aloof from China. A case in point is the outbreak of the global pandemic Covid from 2019. China’s anti-covid policy based on strict surveillance and control had been hailed as a huge success in the initial stage globally thanks to the teeming masses like Lu Xun’s Runtu who willingly or unwillingly accepted massive and often coercive restrictions to their personal freedom. However, with the covid virus mutating

¹⁰ The epic six part TV series “River Elegy” 河殇 released in 1988 became the defining piece of this new wave of Chinese enlightenment for the reform era.

into the more infectious but less lethal Omicron variety, the human cost of strict lock-down mounted sharply threatening the very livelihood of hundreds of millions of Chinese citizens.

In the winter of 2022, Chinese government's continued adherence to the world's strictest anti-covid lock-down and have began led to widespread dissent. In the Halloween night of 2022, many young people gathered in Shanghai – the city where Lu Xun spent most of his adult life – with some taking advantage of the festival to turn up with costumes disguised as veiled protest against the government's draconian policy of lock-down. In particular, quite a few dressed up as Lu Xun look-likes. One young man held up paper card poster that read: "Studying Medicine cannot save Chinese People."¹¹ Suddenly on that cold Halloween night, Lu Xun's scream from a century ago came back haunting.

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¹¹ See news report at: [Shanghai Halloween Costumes Raise Specter of Censorship \(chinadigitaltimes.net\)](https://chinadigitaltimes.net).

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