

BEYOND THE IRON HOUSE

LU XUN AND THE MODERN
CHINESE LITERARY FIELD

鲁迅与中国现代文场

Saiyin Sun
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内 容 简 介

本书是作者在英国剑桥大学的博士研究成果。全书英文行文,通过详尽的史料研究,以独特的角度分析鲁迅及其同时代文人作家在中国现代文场中的地位、形象以及影响。

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by Saiyin Sun

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Preface

I first read Sun Saiyin's eye-opening work on Lu Xun when I was finishing my translation of Lu Xun's complete short stories. For months, I had been absorbed in Lu Xun's fictional language: in trying to understand his choice of words and tone, and trying to replicate them faithfully in English. Saiyin's work drew me back outside Lu Xun's abstract, fictional worlds, pushing me to re-engage with the writer as an individual and with his context.

Lu Xun is broadly acknowledged both in China and in Western sinology as one of the paradigmatic figures of 20th-century Chinese literature, celebrated for his powerful diagnoses of his nation's social and political crisis, and for his achievements in reinventing the vernacular as a literary language during the radical New Culture Movement of the late 1910s and 1920s. Like many radical intellectuals of his time, Lu Xun began to look leftwards after the rise to power of the right-wing Nationalist Party in the late 1920s. During the Mao era, Lu Xun was arguably deified as the stand-out, infallibly correct figure in modern Chinese literature. During the "Cultural Revolution," anyone the writer had criticised in his prolific speeches, essays or letters was vulnerable to persecution. Sun's great contribution is to reconstruct

the man behind the political hagiography: to contextualise Lu Xun's political and personal judgements, and to illuminate his engagements with the highly fractious literary scene of the 1920s and 1930s.

Sun Saiyin's careful research into Lu Xun's career stands alongside other thought-provoking rereadings of Lu Xun's life and work that have been published in English since 2000: Bonnie McDougall's 2002 analysis of Lu Xun's personal life in *Love-Letters and Privacy in Modern China: The Intimate Lives of Lu Xun and Xu Guangping*; Eva Chou's 2012 *Memory, Violence, Queues: Lu Xun Interprets China*. Sun's project of re-examining—in their local context—the ways in which Lu Xun wrote and argued with his contemporaries is thus timely, astutely chosen, and original. By posing, in an independent and thoroughly documented way, the issue of how we should evaluate a paradigmatic figure such as Lu Xun, she opens out the issue of a modern Chinese canon, persuasively recommending additional study of new, previously neglected writers such as Gao Changhong, the young writer-critic whose conflict with Lu Xun forms the centrepiece of the book.

In many respects, Sun has gone back to first principles in making her sociological assessment of Lu Xun's private and public persona, stripping away the assumptions and sources of bias inherent in existing scholarship, and plotting out her own conclusions, drawn from intricate and painstaking detective work on the mass of journals, letters and diaries generated by Lu Xun and his contemporaries. She demonstrates an impressive tenacity in, for example, tracing

out influence, friendships and exchanges of correspondence, and in discovering the identities hiding behind the many pseudonyms used by writers of the 1920s. Through reconstructing both sides of disputes in which Lu Xun (sometimes vituperatively) engaged, she offers evidence for doubting Lu Xun's quasi-mythical infallibility, both as a social and literary critic, and as an original artist.

To carry out such a study shows significant intellectual courage. Given Lu Xun's canonical status both inside and outside China, undertaking a reappraisal of the man and of his place in literary history is a task that would daunt many scholars. There is an intimidating mass of material already produced upon Lu Xun, in both Chinese and Western languages; it is a very considerable feat of scholarship and independent thinking to absorb this body of work, to look so carefully at original materials, and to draw fresh conclusions. In English, Bonnie McDougall began the task of looking behind political myth-making, to depict Lu Xun as a flesh-and-blood figure, in her study of the letters exchanged between Lu Xun and his partner, Xu Guangping. Sun valuably continues this enterprise by reconsidering, even more radically, received wisdom on the nature of Lu Xun's personality and interactions with his contemporaries.

Sun makes especial efforts to challenge portrayals of Lu Xun as a uniquely creative, original figure amongst his immediate peers, and to trace out the process by which he came to be acclaimed a "literary authority" during and after his lifetime. Her analysis raises very important questions about the construction of a modern Chinese

literary canon, implicitly urging a careful re-evaluation of Lu Xun's creative achievements and bringing other, less-studied writers (such as Gao Changhong) to critical attention. During the post-Mao period, literary scholars have been working to broaden understanding of the range of literary voices that made up 20th-century Chinese literature—a diversity that for years was obscured by the triumph of the Maoist literary line between 1949 and the late 1970s. Sun excitingly extends this wider academic project. Her research suggests many new and fruitful avenues for investigation into the richness of Chinese literature in the 1920s and 1930s: into the oeuvre of the tragic figure of Gao Changhong, and that of others like him.

Beyond the Iron House, therefore, is a fascinating study: for its fresh insights into Lu Xun's life and times, and for the new possibilities for modern Chinese literature that it suggests. It is a crucial text for anyone interested in China's 20th-century literary canon and its plurality of possibilities.

Julia Lovell

August 2014

To my mother
Zhao Xiufeng 赵秀峰

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Chapter One

The State of the Field

This book is a critical study of a crucial period in the life and work of Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), a writer who has been regarded as “the inevitable figure in every canon of modern Chinese literature,”¹ and “the greatest of twentieth-century Chinese writers” “by common consent.”² He stands as the most read modern author in China’s school textbooks for the past few decades. There are several hundred academics in universities or similar institutions who specialize in research on Lu Xun, dozens of museums and academies named after him, and more than a score of biographies written on him. It could easily take a scholar’s lifetime to go through the tens of thousands of books and papers dedicated to him. In the words of Leo Ou-fan Lee: “It is hard to think of any modern writer in the world so extravagantly honoured by an entire nation.”³

Despite his extraordinary status in literary historiography, many of the most important questions about Lu Xun’s literary and intellectual achievement remain to be answered. How was the author received and perceived during his own lifetime, for instance, in Beijing in the 1920s

1 David Der-wei Wang, *Fictional Realism in 20th Century China: Mao Dun, Lao She, Shen Congwen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 1. For Chinese proper names of persons, periodicals and societies, I give at the first mention pinyin, Chinese characters and English translations and use their pinyin names for subsequent references with the only exception of *Xin Qingnian*, to which I refer with the conventional English title *New Youth*.

2 Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 1.

3 Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 191.

and in Shanghai in the 1930s? Did he enjoy an outstanding fame that shadowed all his contemporaries even then? How unique, original and experimental was he as a modern writer? How influential and inspirational were his literary output and intellectual philosophy at the historical moments of their production, in comparison with other contemporaries? What were his relationships with them? How did he grow into a prominent and dominant figure as the “paradigmatic writer and intellectual” of modern China? When did this transformation take place? Who and what elements might have contributed to it? While it is beyond the scope of this book to answer all the above questions satisfactorily, my study, with a thorough historical investigation into the earlier period of Lu Xun’s literary and intellectual career, sets out to provide answers to at least some of the urgent ones.

Born on 25 September 1881 in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, Lu Xun, whose real name was Zhou Shuren 周树人, had a traditional education in his childhood and then went to a new-style school in Nanjing. Supported by a government scholarship, he went to Japan in 1902, where he became interested in literature and published in classical Chinese some essays and translations of western literature. He returned to China in 1909 without any academic degrees and worked as a teacher both in his hometown and in the provincial capital Hangzhou. He moved to Beijing in 1912 to serve as a petty official in the Ministry of Education and spent his spare time in traditional textual study and art collection. At the persuasion of a friend, he started to write to *Xin Qingnian* 新青年 (*New Youth*), a major journal for China’s New Culture movement that started around 1917.⁴ It is widely believed that he suddenly achieved literary success in 1918 with the story “Kuangren riji” (Diary of a madman), which has been “hailed as China’s first modern story because of its use of the vernacular and its highly subjective and devastating critique of traditional Chinese culture.”⁵

4 The journal was first launched in Shanghai in 1915 by the name of *Qingnian Zazhi* 青年杂志 (Youths’ Journal) and only adopted the title *Xin Qingnian* when it began publishing in Beijing in 1917.

5 Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, p. viii.

After settling in Shanghai in 1927, and with the changes of China's political situation, Lu Xun turned toward the left, culminating in his becoming a founding member of the League of Chinese Leftwing Writers (*Zhongguo Zuoyi Zuoqia Lianmeng*), established in March 1930. He died of tuberculosis on 19 October 1936, when a nation-wide anti-Japanese war was imminent.⁶

In a speech given at the author's first death anniversary, Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) hailed Lu Xun as “the sage of China's modern era,” and in his 1940 article “Xin minzhu zhuyi lun” (On new democracy), Mao gave Lu Xun a unique endorsement as “the greatest and the most courageous standard-bearer of the new cultural force,” “the chief commander of China's ‘Cultural Revolution,’” “a great man of letters” and “a great thinker and revolutionary.”⁷ From then on up to the late 1970s, there was virtually only one possible interpretation of all aspects of Lu Xun in China, and this was not open to question. This applied especially during the devastating ten years of the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976) when of all his contemporaries, only Lu Xun's works were “legal reading.” There were, for instance, hardly any studies of his brother Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885–1967) until the late 1980s, even though the latter had enjoyed a high literary reputation in the 1920s—a claim that shall be substantiated in the later chapters of the book.

In recent years, alongside the debate about the role that politics has played in Lu Xun's eminence and consequent doubts about the real literary and artistic value of his works, critics of a younger generation have boldly voiced the view that Lu Xun is just an old block of stone in the Chinese literary world. They maintain that he is standing in the way of the emergence of new writers, and that only by burying him and saying farewell to the past with its so-called “literary masters” can Chinese

6 Ibid., pp. ix, 25.

7 Mao Zedong, “Lu Xun lun” 鲁迅论 (1937), full text cited in Zhang Mengyang, *Zhongguo Lu Xun xue tongshi* 中国鲁迅学通史, vol. 1 (Guangzhou: Guangdong jiaoyu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 310–313; and Mao Zedong [Tse-tung], “On new democracy” (1940), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1967), pp. 339–384, see p. 372.

literature have new hope and really develop.⁸ Not too surprisingly, such views are scorned by many established critics as not only radical but also irrational, naive, and superficial.⁹ And, since China's economic reform and the introduction of the market economy in the early 1980s, in the literary and cultural sphere there has been a wave of new interest in Lu Xun and his works. The publication of his eighteen-volume complete works in 2005 to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the author's death is only the latest reminder of Lu Xun's apparently incomparable status.¹⁰

The overt Maoist distortions of Lu Xun's image contributed a great deal to his canonical status in new China (1949–) but they should not be held as the sole or even major elements responsible for the author's unusual status in modern literary history. His literary talent and output, and his role as a modern experimental writer, have long been recognised and praised by many independent scholars, both inside and outside China. The few short stories Lu Xun wrote during the earlier period of his literary career have been accorded a "preeminent position" by "both Chinese and foreign critics of modern Chinese literature."¹¹ Leo Lee, who

8 Ge Hongbing, "Wei ershi shiji zhongguo wenxue xie yifen daoci" 为二十世纪中国文学写一份悼词 (2002), pp. 376–387; Zhu Wen, "Duanlie: yifen wenjuan he wushiliu fen dajuan (jiexuan)" 断裂：一份问卷和五十六份答卷（节选）(2002), pp. 362–366; in Chen Shuyu, ed., *Shui tiaozhan Lu Xun: xinshiqi guanyu Lu Xun de lunzheng* 谁挑战鲁迅：新时期关于鲁迅的论争 (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 2002).

9 For example, Guo Zhigang, "Lijie Lu Xun" 理解鲁迅 (2002), pp. 388–392; Qin Gong, "Xueshu piping yaoyou lishizhuyi taidu" 学术批评要有历史主义态度 (2002), pp. 393–397; in Chen Shuyu ed., *Shui tiaozhan Lu Xun*. Wu Zhongjie, "Chongxin jiedu Lu Xun" 重新解读鲁迅 (2001), in Yi Tu, ed., *Ershiji shiji: Lu Xun he women* 21 世纪：鲁迅和我们 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2001), pp. 225–233.

10 It is true that many other writers' (e.g. Shen Congwen) complete works have also been published in recent years, but only Lu Xun's works are in their fourth edition, and except for the first edition (in 1938), all the rest were published by the most prestigious official publishing house in P.R. China, i.e. Renmin wenxue chubanshe 人民文学出版社 (People's Literature Publishing House). The four editions of complete works of Lu Xun: 20 volumes in 1938, edited by Lu Xun Xiansheng Jinian Weiyuanhui 鲁迅先生纪念委员会, published by Lu Xun quanji chubanshe 鲁迅全集出版社; 10 volumes in 1956–1958; 16 volumes in 1981; and 18 volumes in 2005. The last three editions were all published by Renmin wenxue chubanshe.

11 Anderson, *The Limits of Realism*, p. 76.

claimed that his reading of Lu Xun was free from Maoist politics, asserted that the author succeeded in creatively transforming each genre he wrote in—not only his short stories and *zawen* (miscellaneous essays) but also his personal reminiscences, prose poetry, and classical-style poetry.¹² Like many scholars, Lee held that it was “Diary of a madman” published in *New Youth* in 1918 that “catapulted” the author into “nationwide prominence as a writer and a leader of ‘New Literature.’”¹³

All these views contribute to our understanding or misunderstanding of Lu Xun, but it is still far from clear who he really is. Through a thorough historical investigation, this book aims to argue four main points. First, Lu Xun was recognised in the literary field much later than has hitherto been argued; second, in comparison with his contemporaries, neither was his literary work as original and unique as many have claimed, nor were his ideas and “discourse” as popular and influential as many have believed; third, like many other agents in the field, Lu Xun was actively involved in power struggles over what is at stake in the field; and fourth, he was later built into an iconic figure and the blind worship of his intellectual ideas and arguments hindered a better and more historical understanding of the literary and intellectual fields.

Before drawing deep into this investigation, I shall, in the rest of this chapter, deal with three issues. I shall first discuss the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field and consider how it might be useful in providing the broad theoretical background to my project. I shall then discuss the “sociological approach” based on Bourdieu’s theories that has been developed in recent years in the research of modern Chinese literature. Following this, I shall give a brief review of Lu Xun’s publications and financial income to give a preliminary and more general understanding of the rise and fall of Lu Xun’s fame and fortune.

12 Leo Ou-fan Lee, “Tradition and modernity in the writings of Lu Xun,” in Leo Ou-fan Lee, ed. *Lu Xun and His Legacy* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 3–31.

13 Lee, *Voices from the Iron House*, p. 49.

1. The Literary Field

According to Bourdieu, the invention of the writer, in the modern sense of the term, is inseparable from the progressive invention of a particular social game, which he terms the *literary field* and which is constituted as it establishes its autonomy within the field of power (economic and political). Bourdieu defines the literary field as an independent social universe with its own specific laws of functioning, which is neither a vague social background nor even a *milieu artistique* like a universe of personal relations between writers.¹⁴

Bourdieu indicated that writers were among the least professionalized occupations and were “able to exercise what they regard as their main occupation only on condition that they have a secondary occupation which provides their main income.”¹⁵ In view of the historical reality of nineteenth-century France, Bourdieu pointed out that “to come into the world with money (inheritance)” was “absolutely indispensable to anyone who wants to get anywhere in art.” For artists to be able to distance themselves from the economic necessity, to be “disinterested,” economic insurance was a pre-condition to enable a writer’s freedom to grow. It was “still (inherited) money that assures freedom from money.”¹⁶

The literary field, in a simpler formulation of Bourdieu’s, constitutes an “economic world reversed.” It is based on two fundamental principles: one is the heteronomous and the other autonomous. The heteronomous principle is subject to laws of another (especially those of the economic field) and its measurement of hierarchization is success, as judged by indices such as book sales, print runs or awards and honours etc. If this fundamental principle were allowed to reign unchallenged, it would lead to the loss of all autonomy in the literary field and eventually to its disappearance. In the extreme situation of a totally heteronomous field,

14 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), pp. 163-164.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 170.