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| **Lu, Xun (1881-1936)** |
| **鲁迅;** Zhou Shuren; 周树人 |
| Lu Xun, a preeminent man of letters in twentieth-century China, is widely regarded as the father of modern Chinese literature. Writing during China’s tumultuous transition from a dynastic empire into modern nation-state, Lu Xun was one of the leading practitioners of the nationalist ‘New Literature’ as well as a driving force behind the iconoclastic New Culture Movement and other intellectual reforms. His works have been celebrated for their trenchant critique of the cultural malaise of the Chinese society. His inimitable style of acute self-reflexivity, combined with dark sarcasm, set an example for later writers who were similarly engaged in literature as a form of social critique. |
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Throughout the history of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun has been a much emulated model for novel modes of literary conception and expression, and his role as a cultural icon has also been widely appropriated for different ideological ends.  A native of Shaoxing, Zhejiang province, the young Lu Xun was dispirited by Confucian Classics and travelled to Nanjing to study Western science in 1898. There he developed an enduring interest in Social Darwinism and recognized the significance of literature in reformist nationalism. In 1906, while studying medicine in Japan, he saw a lanternslide that depicts a group of indifferent Chinese bystanders watching an execution of a Chinese spy by the Japanese soldiers. Dumbfounded by the apathy of his countrymen, Lu Xun resolved to give up medicine for literature, in hopes of diagnosing and curing the more urgent spiritual disease of the Chinese nation.  After turning to literary pursuits, he published several early essays, including ‘On the Aberrant Development of Culture’ (文化偏至论, 1906) and ‘On the Power of Mara Poetry’ (摩罗诗力说, 1908). Displaying an evolutionary mode of thinking conjoined with Nietzschean individualism, these essays advocate the fostering of individual personalities and call for an enlightened national voice. *Stories from Abroad* (域外小说集, 1909), a collection of primarily translated Russian and Eastern European fiction, champions the spirit of militant, patriotic resistance of the oppressed nations. Although these attempts provoked little popular reaction at the time, Lu Xun’s work continued to dissect the ills of modern China under a national and international lens.  In 1918, Lu Xun published ‘Diary of a Madman’ (狂人日记) in *New Youth*, a leading forum for attacking Confucianism and promoting Western thought. This story depicts a mad intellectual who, upon suspecting his family and friends for conspiring to murder him, indicts China for engaging in a four thousand-year history of cannibalism. The madman’s metaphorical critique of the Chinese culture’s barbarism dovetailed with the prevailing anti-traditionalist pathos of the era and took the audience by storm. Most readers read the story as a straightforward indictment of Chinese society. Its complex narrative devices--mixed linguistic styles, shifting authorial voices, and reliance on the perspective of a madman who in the end recovers from his madness--suggest Lu Xun’s equivocal attitude towards the revelatory force of literature and set a bar for a new literature that privileged the short story form as a new, modern platform. The image of the ‘madman’, which embodies the notions of lunacy and enlightenment, recurs in later stories, such as ‘The White Light’ (白光, 1922) and ‘The Eternal Lamp’ (长明灯, 1925).  The doomed fate of the lone madman is sharpened by the image of the masses. The crowd, due to its apathy and atomized consciousness, is also held responsible for China’s stagnation. ‘The True Story of Ah Q’ (阿Q正传, 1921) depicts a peasant who reconciles himself to misfortune by reversing the blame of his own failures through self-declared psychological victories. Situated against the backdrop of the 1911 Revolution, the story is often taken as a critique of the Chinese national character, scathingly presented as parochial, hierarchical, and opportunistic. Nonetheless, the character Ah Q has been defended, at other times, as a more charitable model of the Chinese national character.  Lu Xun’s second story collection, *Wandering* (彷徨, 1926), like his first collection, the similarly artistically innovative *Outcry* (呐喊, 1923), engages with the turbulent politics of the Republican period while also inquiring into the social meaning of individual existence. Most of the characters are frustrated, hesitating intellectuals who are uncertain about their own course of action and that of the society at large. Si Ming, a character from ‘Soap’ (肥皂, 1924), for instance, is a conservative scholar who abhors Western learning and commodities. ‘Master Gao’ (高老夫子, 1925) features a teacher who is torn between a revolutionary self who admires Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) and values grand historical views, and a cowardly self that could not even control a classroom. ‘A Happy Family’ (幸福的家庭, 1924) renders more explicitly the discrepancy between an ideal, westernized marital life and the petty, sometimes suffocating, reality of everyday existence.  In addition to fiction, Lu Xun’s corpus encompasses prose poetry, essays, and literary criticism. The prose poetry collection, *Wild Grass* (野草, 1927) in particular, is important for its remarkable expression of philosophical aesthetics and use of paradoxical figures. He was also a passionate advocate for woodblock printing as an expressive modern art form. He left a most important literary legacy in modern China, which earned him the name of, among others, the ‘Chinese Gorky’. Selected Works *Complete works of Lu Xun* (2005)  *Outcry* (1923)  *Brief History of Chinese Fiction* (1925)  *Wandering* (1926)  *Grave* (1927)  *Wiled Grass* (1927)  *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk* (1928)  *Old Tales Retold* (1936) |
| Further reading:  (Lee)  (Lee, Lu Xun and His Legacy) |