

A Pioneer in Raising Issues Against the Mainstream—Lu Xun's »Difference between Literature and Politics«

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In the winter of 1927, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) made two public speeches, one entitled On the Intellectual Class,¹ the other entitled The Fundamental Difference Between Literature and Politics.² Although the two speeches take

- 1 Lu Xun, »Guanyu zhishi jieji« 關於知識階級 [Speech given on 25 Oct 1927 in the Jiangwan laodong daxue 江灣勞動大學 of Shanghai; recorded by Huang Heqing 黃河清, i.e. Huang Yuan 黃源 (1905–2003)], in *Lu Xun quanji* 全集, 18 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 8: 223–231.
- 2 Lu Xun, »Wenyi yu zhengzhi de qitu« 文藝與政治的歧途 [Speech given on 21 Dec 1927 at Shanghai Ji'nan University 暨南大學; recorded by Cao Juren 曹聚仁 (1900–1972), the later influential biographer of Lu Xun], in *Lu Xun quanji*, 7: 115–123; as »The Divergence of Art and Politics«, tr. by Donald Holoch and Shu-ying Tsau, in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought. Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. by Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 328–334.—This speech is among the few by Lu Xun existing in two different records. The other one, evidently not authorized as it was not selected for inclusion in the Collection of Uncollected Works (*Jiwai ji* 集外集, 1933), prepared by Zhang Tiemin 章鐵民 (b1899) and slightly moving its emphasis away from a generally critical concept of politics, is published in *Geming wenzue lunwenji* 革命文學論文集 [Collected Essays on Revolutionary Literature], ed. by Jilou 霽樓 [Wang Renshu 王任叔 (1901–1972)] (Shanghai: Shenglushe, 1928), 73–82—*Editor's note*.

different approaches, they do in fact merge his two core concerns: that is, the secular task of literature and the arts and of intellectuals to pronounce incessantly 'social criticism' and 'cultural criticism', and seriously reminding politicians of their responsibility to supervise so that the continuous development and progress of Chinese society may be fostered. Lu Xun says:

I have often felt that literature and politics are in constant conflict. Literature and revolution are not actually opposites, and in fact they both feel the same uneasiness with the status quo. But politics would maintain the status quo, and naturally its direction is different from literature, which is uneasy with the status quo. [...] Politicians take very poorly to anyone who opposes their opinions, anyone who means to think or speak out. [...] But the language of the writer is the language of society. He is simply sensitive, quick to feel and quick to express (too quickly, at times, so even society opposes and excludes him). [...] Politicians are convinced that the writer is an instigator of social disorder and intend to kill him off so society can have some peace. Little do they know that with the writer killed, society will still have revolution. The number of Russian writers killed or exiled isn't small, but the fires of revolution flared up everywhere, didn't they?³

Moreover, Lu Xun says:

After its [i.e. the revolution's] success [...] there may well have been sensitive writers who both felt discontent with the status quo and were ready to speak out. The political revolutionaries had previously endorsed the writers' words, but when the revolution succeeded, its politicians began to readopt the old methods of those they originally opposed. And with writers inevitably discontent, they had to be barred or beheaded.⁴

Therefore, Lu Xun believes that »literature and the arts encourage social evolution«, and that »politicians [however] do not allow everybody to have their own thoughts«. This is the place where conflicts and problems arise.

At the time when Lu Xun pronounced these words, more than half of China was already the world of the Guomindang Party, and the great purge in the party had been more than half a year earlier. Lu Xun's sympathies were on the side of those young people who had been seized and killed. When he had been teaching at the Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, he had asked the school's administration to try to rescue the arrested students, and as there was no response, he

3 Lu Xun, »Wenyi yu zhengzhi de qitu«, in *Lu Xun quanji*, 7: 115 and 118; quoted from »The Divergence of Art and Politics«, 329 and 331, with the term *wenyi* 文藝 rendered as »literature« throughout, given the usage in Lu Xun's speech, also common at the time.—*Editor's note.*

4 *Ibid.*, 7: 120; quoted from »The Divergence of Art and Politics«, 333.

angrily quitted his position and settled in Shanghai afterwards. So the spear-head of his social criticism was clearly directed against the Guomindang. In his speech entitled *On the Intellectual Class*, he adds with special emphasis:

Genuine intellectuals do not care whether something is harmful to themselves. If they even think about any harm they may suffer, they are false and pretend to be intellectuals; [...]. Only if an intellectual movement is turning into a genuine social movement, it is becoming dangerous. Everywhere resistance will be considered an old force and become extinguished. [...] Yet I certainly do not intend call for young people to seek danger, nor that they should sacrifice themselves. [...] To pay with one's life would present a minor return in interest and is not worth it. That is why never asked anybody sacrifice his life.⁵

As for Lu Xun himself, he evidently acted according to his principles, and criticized any outworn or filthy social behaviour and habit. While he tried to enlighten the masses, he also polemically exposed the preposterous, decadent and ruthless actions of politicians of the time. After the 18 September Incident of 1931, when three provinces in the Chinese northeast were occupied by the Japanese army, a great many organizations and individuals called for uniting in the resistance against Japan, yet the Guomindang government of the time chose the principle of non-resistance and made the troops stationed in the northeast retreat until they were within the former Great Wall, issuing the slogan »to resist foreign aggression, the country needs to be pacified inside first« (*rang wai bi xian an nei* 攘外必先安內). In several essays, such as *Above and Below*, *On Writing and the Choice of Subject*, and *The Chinese People's »Lifebelt«*,⁶ he emphasized that when the Guomindang said »resisting foreign aggression«, it was just an empty phrase, and in fact had the meaning of 'pacifying the country inside, but there is no need of resisting foreign aggression', and to put it even more clearly, it even meant 'welcoming foreign aggression in order to pacify the country'. These facts were generally well-known in the population.

Of course Lu Xun also took strategies of fight into consideration, and kept insisting that one's position should be based on firm principles, not even fearing death. For instance, when Yang Xingfo 楊杏佛 (1893–1933), who devoted himself

5 Lu Xun, »Guanyu zhishi jieji«, in *Lu Xun quanji*, 8: 226, 227 and 229.

6 »Tianshang dixia« 天上地下 [16/19 May 1933], »Wenzhang yu timu« 文章與題目 [29 Apr./5 May 1933], and »Zhongguoren de shengmingquan« 中國人的生命圈 [10 Apr. 1933], in *Lu Xun quanji*, 5: 147–149, 128–131, and 104–106; English in Lu Xun, *Selected Works*, 4 vols., tr. by Yang Hsien-yi 楊憲益 and Gladys Yang 戴乃迭 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1959), 3: 280–282, 272–274, 270–271.

to activities for the protection of human rights, was killed by a secret agent, Lu Xun participated in person in the mourning ceremony and left his home without taking any keys with him. According to Agnes Smedley's memoirs, she was very concerned about him after he had sent the essay *The Present Situation of Art in Darkest China* to the foreign journal *New Masses*, and urged him to take some more care about his own safety, but Lu Xun without showing the least flinch just said: »Don't worry! Somebody has to speak out, somebody has to say the truth!«⁷ Lu Xun's attitude here is without any ambiguity.

But to understand Lu Xun's essay on the Fundamental Difference Between Literature and Politics in a too simplistic mode and to consider it just the expression of his opposition to the Guomindang dictatorship would be mistaken. To say that in the 1930s Lu Xun was opposed to the rule of the Guomindang government and protested against it is certainly in accord with the facts. The problem is simply that such an understanding is incomplete. Would Lu Xun not have been in contradiction with another government, let us say the Communist Party? It seems not, yet at least Lu Xun's Fundamental Difference between Literature and Politics sings in a tune different from »literature has to serve politics« that we have heard emphasized so frequently in the past. To give another example, in the years 1934 to 1936, Lu Xun talked many times about his conflicts with the Communist Party. On 30 April 1934, he wrote to Cao Juren: »If [the Guomindang power] collapsed, I would finally be happy when begging red coats sweep Shanghai's streets.«⁸ A few months before he passed away, Lu Xun told Feng Xuefeng 馮雪峰 (1903–1976) with deliberate emphasis: »When you are coming, I shall escape because I am afraid the first one you will kill is me.«⁹ How could Lu Xun develop such a presentiment? It could either be by chance or on the contrary based on his everyday experience with 'leftist' ideas and the quite despotic attitude of some Communist Party members that he

7 Agnes Smedley, *Chinese Destinies. Sketches of Present-Day China* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1934); quoted from Smedley & al., *Haiwai buxiang: Guoji youeren yi Lu Xun* 海外回響——國際友人憶魯迅 [Echoes from Abroad: Foreign Friends Remembering Lu Xun] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

8 *Lu Xun quanji*, 13: 87.

9 Li Jiye 李霽野, »Yi Lu Xun xiansheng« 憶魯迅先生 [Remembering Mr Lu Xun], first published in *Wenji yuekan* 文季月刊 12/1936.—It seems that the author has removed this remark from the version he collected in *Wenman ji* 溫暖集 (1984) and dated »Tianjin, 11 Nov 1936«, repr. in *Li Jiye wenji* 李霽野文集, 9 vols., ed. by Wang Shaoming 王紹明 (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2004), 1: 50–62—*Editor's note*.

knew from books and newspaper reports about the frightening political life under the single-party dictatorship in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Lu Xun was not only concerned about the destiny of the Chinese people, but also about the future of comprehensive social ideals for the whole of humankind. According to Lu Xun, it was not just necessary that China become independent, wealthy and strong, but inside the country genuine equality should be realized and any human should be capable of living a worthy life. What Lu Xun hated and despised most in [his character from the namesake story] AQ was that after the revolution he wanted to become one of the administrators of the village of Weizhuang in order to suppress the people there, and that he had a slave mentality that made him let others beat and kill him. Lu Xun with seriousness and grief was afraid that even after the 1920s and 1930s there would still be many people of AQ's kind in China, and if he said the Guomindang was permanently fostering AQs, it would be for the same reason.

Lu Xun passed away too early to see Ding Ling's 丁玲 (1904–1986), Ai Qing's 艾青 (1910–1996) and Wang Shiwei's 王實味 (1906–1947) efforts to develop ideological enlightenment in the liberated areas [around Yan'an, 1935–46] and who as a result suffered the worst disasters. To write critical essays in the style of Lu Xun was banned in the liberated areas, and for writing *Wild Lilies* (»Ye baihehua« 野百合花) and *Politicians and Artists* (»Zhengzhijia · Yishujia« 政治家 · 藝術家, both 1942), Wang Shiwei even lost his life. Even less did he witness the 'campaign against rightists' in the 1950s, which after the rectification campaign in the Communist Party and the 'free airing of views' affected nearly 500,000 'rightist elements'. It was hence not surprising that when on 8 July 1957 Mao Zedong 毛澤東 (1893–1976) received representative figures from the cultural and scientific world in the Shanghai House of Chinese-Soviet Friendship, Luo Ji'nan 羅稷南 (1898–1971) raised this topic and Mao Zedong's response was well considered and elaborate, to the extent that I think he had read *On the Fundamental Difference between Literature and Politics*. Luo Ji'nan asked: »If Lu Xun were still alive, how would he fare?« Mao Zedong thought for a moment and then gave his answer: »If Lu Xun were still alive, he would probably not be in prison, but he would have fallen silent.«

Mao Zedong had strong autocratic ideas that reached back for some time already. According to Ding Ling's recollections, when she came to Yan'an in 1937 Mao Zedong once held on the arms He Zizhen's 賀子珍 (1910–1984) one-year-old son. The child urinated and made his trousers wet. Then Mao Zedong asked

Ding Ling: »Tell me please, Ding Ling, is that not princely urine?«¹⁰ Maybe Mao Zedong wanted to make a joke, but still the joke carries quite some autocrat ideas. When Mao Zedong's Song »Snow« was published in November 1945 in a Chongqing paper,^[11] many people, particularly among revolutionaries and Marxists of leftist tendency were astonished. The thoughts expressed in Wu Zuxiang's 吳組緇 (1908–1994) diary entry put down on 29 November that same year are very telling: »Mao maintains that everything should be for the masses, in literature, he particularly proposes that “common people should love to hear and see” it. Yet he writes such a song. Mao is opposed to individualist heroism, and at the same time, his song abounds with the flavour of old-style individualist heroism. I see how he praises the superiority of tyrants such as Qinshi Huangdi [reg 221–210 BCE], Han Wudi [reg BCE 140–87], Tang Taizong [reg 627–649 CE] and Song Taizong [reg 976–997], saying: “for truly great men / look to this age alone.”^[12] This means winning the battle over Mr Jiang [Jieshi; i.e. Chiang Kai-shek] and displays enormous pride in his own success. Such things make me feel enormously uncomfortable.«¹³

Sometimes I think that Lu Xun's presentiment of that year about the 'fundamental difference between politics and literature' would have spread at a broader scope, and if the movement of ideological enlightenment initiated by Ding Ling, Ai Qing and Wang Shiwei had managed to enjoy the Party's central institutions' support, it would have shown some result in Yan'an and the liberated areas. In that way, no such strong flavour of individualist superstition in *The East is Red* (»Dongfang hong« 東方紅, 1943) with verses like »he is the people's great saviour« and similar hymns—by the way exactly contrary to »No saviour from on high delivers« in *The Internationale* (»L'Internationale«, 1871/88)—would ever have emerged, and the 1958 'Great Leap Forward' in China, which robbed hundreds of millions of farmers of their soil and transforming farms into People's Communes might not have occurred. Such great tragedies as the subsequent death of more than three million people¹⁴ could have possibly

10 Yang Guixin 楊桂欣, »Wo Ding Ling jiushi Ding Ling!« “我丁玲就是丁玲!” [I Am as I Am, Me, Ding Ling!], *Yanbuang chunqiu* 炎黃春秋 (Beijing) 7/1993, 43b.

11 »Xue (Qinyuanchun)« 雪 (沁園春), *Dagongbao* 大公報 (Chongqing), 28 Nov 1945—*Editor's note*.

12 Quoted from Mao Zedong, *Nineteen Poems* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1958), see <www.marxist.org> (last retrieval 23 Mar 2012).

13 »Wu Zuxiang riji zhaichao« 吳組緇日記摘抄 [Excerpts from Wu Zuxiang's Diaries], *Xin wenxue shiliao* 新文學史料 1/2008, 33b–34a.

14 See *Gongheguo zhongda shijian jishi* 共和國重大事件紀實 [Record of Important Events in the

been avoided, and the utmost disaster of ten years of the 'Cultural Revolution' also never might have happened. If at the end of this essay, I still cannot help being verbose, and expressly propose such a comprehensive hypothesis, it is just because it seems to have some far-reaching implications indeed for the whole process.

In his essay entitled *On The Reform of the System of Party and State Leadership*, Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平 (1904–1997) has expressed it well: individualist superstition and

the appetite for personal privilege shows that there are still lingering feudal influences. From old China we inherited a strong tradition of feudal autocracy and a weak tradition of democratic legality. Moreover, in the post-Liberation years we did not consciously draw up systematic rules and regulations to safeguard the people's democratic rights. Our legal system is far from perfect and has not received anywhere near the attention it deserves. [...] After the criticism of the opposition to rash advance in 1958 and the campaign against 'Right Deviation' in 1959, democratic life in the Party and the state gradually ceased to function normally. There was a constant growth of such patriarchal ways as letting only one person have their say and make important decisions, practising the cult of personality and placing individuals above the organization. Lin Biao [林彪 (1907–1971)] propagated the 'peak theory' [*dingfenglun* 頂峰論], saying that Chairman Mao's words were supreme instructions. This theory was widespread throughout the Party, army and country.¹⁵

Under such conditions, it appears almost necessary that the great calamity of the 'Cultural Revolution' happened and that it was inevitable. It is just as Deng Xiaoping said, directed to the Communist Party, that »there is a most profound lesson to be learned from this«.¹⁶

{People's} Republic], 2 vols. (Bxiaoaping eijing: Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao chubanshe, 1998), 1: 570.

15 »Dang he guojia lingdao zhidu de gaige« 黨和國家領導制度的改革 [18 Aug 1980], in *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* 鄧小平文選, 3 vols. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 2nd ed. 1994), vol. 2; quoted from *Selected Works, 1975–1982* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1984), 315 and 313.

16 Deng Xiaoping, *Selected Works*, 2: 241.

It is my firm belief that although such a great writer and cultural critic as Lu Xun lived in his own period, it still is the mission of a whole era to struggle for his goals every day.

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to commemorate the 130th anniversary of Lu Xun's birth

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