

How I Came to Do Lu Xun Research

Raoul David Findeisen

Ako som sa dostal k skúmaniu Lu Xuna

Resumé Táto esej ponúka autorovo zamyslenie sa nad vlastnou cestou na poli čínskych štúdií, počínajúc jeho zameraním na modernú filozofiu, ktoré sa postupne presúva na porovnávaciu literatúru, neskôr na sociológiu literatúry a nakoniec na históriu prekladu a štúdium rukopisov. V článku sa snaží ukázať, prečo a ako slávny spisovateľ Lu Xun hral takú významnú a tiež inšpiratívnu úlohu v rámci všetkých uvedených disciplín.

Abstract This essay attempts to provide a self-account of an education and subsequent scholarly itinerary in Chinese studies resulting first in a focus in modern philosophy, shifting to comparative literature, then to the sociology of literature and finally to translation history and manuscript studies. It tries to highlight why the famed writer Lu Xun came to play a prominent and also inspirative role under all perspectives mentioned.

Keywords China, Literature (20th c.), Translation History · Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), *Yecao* 野草 (1926) · Xu Guangping 許廣平 (1898–1968) · Xu Fancheng 徐梵澄 (1909 to 2000) · China, Literature, Criticism · *shiliao yanjiu* 史料研究 · *banben yanjiu* 版本研究

I first took interest in Lu Xun in the dawn of an early morning in February 1979. I had just started to study Chinese in the Free University of Berlin when, to formally mark the end of the term, my teacher Wolfgang Kubin (b1945) invited a bunch of his students to his home, at the time situated at the »Mehringplatz«,

named after the famous Marxist critic Franz Mehring (1846–1919)—and one of the many German authors Lu Xun has also taken notice of.¹

As it happened, I found myself as the last guest, helping my host to make disappear the traces of the long feast with many animated discussions about things Chinese and non-Chinese. After we had washed dishes together, my host gave me as a present his then freshly published volume of Lu Xun stories and poems, *Die Methode wilde Tiere abzurichten* (Berlin: Oberbaum, 1979). I read it assiduously, so that the admittedly very poor binding broke very soon, and I soon had to use brute force by applying a large-size stapler (to be precise: 24/72), in order to avoid that the book would decompose into loose sheets. At the time, having attended Chinese classes for just four months, I was unaware of the actual difficulties of reading Lu Xun's works, and even more of translating them. It is only years later that I knew that the tiny volume had in fact been a 'pilot edition' in view of a multi-volume version of the writer's selected if not complete works, to be translated into German anew. And it is also only years later that I had the opportunity to appreciate the well-done thread-binding quality of the 16-volume edition of Lu Xun's Complete Works of 1981—although I have to admit that the paper-flap going with it has not survived for a number of volumes. Yet at the time, I would not have dared even to dream of being involved as a translator when 15 years later a truncated version of the original project was published, the six volumes of Lu Xun's Works, but in fact contributed a number of translations, and became an unplanned co-editor, spending many late evenings with the responsible copy-editor in the publishing house in Zurich, Switzerland, where I was working at the time.² Strictly speaking, the edition even consisted of seven volumes, as the translation of *Liangdi shu* 兩地書 (1933) was separately published in German many years later.³

1 See his introduction to *Erxin ji* 二心集 [Two Hearts; 1932], in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works], 18 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 4: 195; and his translation on Mehring by a hitherto unidentified female scholar or journalist named »Barin«, with her piece »Meilingge de "Guanyu wenzue shi"« 梅令格的《關於文學史》 [*Zur Literaturgeschichte* (1929) by Franz Mehring], in *Lu Xun yiwen quanji* 魯迅譯文全集 [Complete Translations of Lu Xun], 8 vols. (Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 2008), 8: 449–452.

2 *Lu Xun Werke*, 6 vols., ed. by Wolfgang Kubin (Zürich: Unionsverlag, 1994). My translations were from the famous »Zixu« 自序 in *Naban* 吶喊, from »Yao« 藥, »Mingtian« 明天, »Yi jian xiaoshi« 一件小事, »Toufa de gushi« 頭髮的故事, »Duanwujie« 端午節, »Baiguang« 白光, »Tu he mao« 兔和貓, »Ya de xiju« 鴨的戲劇, and »Shexi« 社戲.

3 *Briefe aus zwei Welten*, ed. by Wolfgang Kubin (München: Edition Global, 2009).

My M.A. thesis was on Nietzsche's reception in China, up to 1937—just one year after Lu Xun's death. Of course, I dwelled extensively in Lu Xun's various references, not only in translation and providing Xu Fancheng 徐梵澄 (1909–2000) with a Nietzsche portrait in his possession, but more extensively in his collection of prose-poems in *Wild Grass* (*Yecao* 野草; 1927). I actually intended to expand my M.A. topic into a Ph.D. thesis covering also the period beyond 1937. This thesis never came to light, also because I considered too complex the ways and modes how Western philosophy was read and understood in China up to the 1980s to be succinctly analyzed. Instead I proposed to my supervisor Wolfgang Kubin to produce a study on Lu Xun, namely with emphasis on texts that were taken into consideration in Kubin's German edition of his 'collected works', i.e. *zawen* 雜文. Translated versions of these would form the backbone of my future Ph.D. thesis. However, during the elaboration my focuses of attention shifted and expanded into a number of additional fields, such as the many 'brushwars' (*bizhan* 筆戰) rather than just the involved *zawen*, Lu Xun's translation activities, his iconography and his Chinese reception in the 1940s and 1950s—in brief, perspectives that may be listed under the heading of sociology of literature and allowed me to become familiar with the whole range of what is known in China as *shiliao yanjiu* 史料研究 or 'historical source studies'. The result was a compendium ranging from copiously annotated translations of hitherto untranslated texts, to the ambition of covering systematically also Lu Xun's readings, followed by a critical biographical account of Lu Xun's life that also takes into account the distortions and manipulations that had been enacted in the past, for sometimes obvious and sometimes less obvious reasons.⁴

After delivering my thesis I was certain that I would be relieved once for ever of dealing with the tricky issues related to Lu Xun. The contrary came true, for two reasons: 1) a photograph of Xu Guangping 許廣平 (1898–1968) copying manuscripts of Lu Xun's diaries (that is what the caption tells) sharpened the suspicion that there might be an intentional lacune in the years 1921–22 (where supposedly the original diaries had disappeared altogether), and thus arose my generally extant interest in all aspects of *jiaokan yanjiu* 校勘研究 ('textual criticism'); 2) the great number of Lu Xun's translations (by far outnumbering his

4 Raoul David Findeisen, *Lu Xun. Texte, Chronik, Bilder, Dokumente* (Frankfurt a. M.; Basel: Stroemfeld, 2001). See the representative reviews by Denise Gimpel, in *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 15,1 (Spring 2003), 197–201; and by Wang Xirong 王錫榮, in *Wenbui dusbu zhoubao* 文匯讀書週報 no 1105 (28 Apr 2006), 8.

so-called ‘creative works’), so that ‘translation’ must be a prominent field of activity.

From Philosophy to Literature

My own interest, originally focused on philosophical issues, for which I literally ‘abused’ (as I became aware afterwards) Lu Xun’s texts, namely from *Yecao*, soon collapsed under the impact of problems I considered unsolvable indeed: How should the reception of Western philosophy in China’s 1920s be assessed under a so-called ‘philosophical’ perspective? It became evident to me that May Fourth intellectuals’ ambition and aim was not so much to systematically integrate the ideas of an admittedly ‘crazy’ philosopher as Nietzsche into a curriculum shaped according to Western standards—but that his reflections might radiate into all conceivable genres of expression: this is why I turned to literature.

I consider it significant that Lu Xun (whom I originally read as a source for processing philosophical ideas, such as in *Yecao*) contributed heavily to alienate me from philosophy, and it proved to be the right choice. To abandon the retrospectively biased philosophical reading of Lu Xun proved an inspiration in several respects:

- 1) The photograph taken of Xu Guangping copying her companion’s diaries intended to be included in the Complete Works (20 vols., 1938), while parts of the 1921–22 diaries were declared ‘lost’ or ‘inextant’, inspired my interest in editorial practice and, by extension, manuscript studies.
- 2) The fact that Lu Xun is among the very few authors whose translations, into *wenyanwen* 文言文 as well as *baibhua wen* 白話文, have both survived, contributed heavily to my vivid interest in translation history and translation research.

Lu Xun, deified with all might of a totalitarian apparatus since the early 1950s and far into the 1980s—beyond the pleasure of reading a sophisticated author—also had the advantage to be thoroughly mapped by research, given he was a monument officially approved and integrated into the canon of foreign literatures in the Socialist realm, but also of ‘accessibility’ uncommon for other contemporaries of Lu Xun: It includes 1) plethora of MS publications (which facilitated my respective research); as well as 2) of translations not only at occasions done into different registers, but also from three intermediary languages, based upon more than 20 original source languages.

Lu Xun will ever inspire me to aspire for new break-throughs in modern Chinese literature research, not only because of the unusual wealth of material available on his work and his person, probably more than on any other field in modern China—but also as a wise old man whose opinions and advice, although pronounced under very particular historical circumstances, still find their beginning and end in existential questions: Is it possible to change China? Is it possible to change the world?—And if so, how?

Comenius University in Bratislava, Department for East Asian Studies