New Directions

Volume 11 | Issue 3 Article 7

4-1-1984

Insight:The Intellectual Journey of Lu Hsiin

Carolyn T. Brown

Follow this and additional works at: https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections

Recommended Citation
Brown, Carolyn T. (1984) "Insight:The Intellectual Journey of Lu Hsiin," *New Directions*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 7.
Available at: https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol11/iss3/7

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized editor of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact digitalservices@howard.edu.

Insight:

The Intellectual Journey of Lu Hsün

By Carolyn T. Brown

People often ask me why, as a Black woman, I decided to study Chinese literature. The real answer for me came through my long association with the literature and total absorption with the work of one contempoary Chinese literary figure.

There is a much repeated quip circulated among Americans who study Chinese literature: "China has over 3,000 years of distinguished literature; and half of it has been lost, thank goodness!" That expression of relief testifies to the massiveness and richness of China's unbroken literary tradition.

The Chinese have traditionally considered philosophy, history, and poetry—written in the classical language—to be their highest literary achievements and, naturally, have preserved them through the ages. Drama and fiction, most of it written in the vernacular, was considered morally inferior—hence not worthy of the same careful transmission to later generations.

That evaluation changed as a consequence of the assault of Western military power on Chinese territory and the intrusion of Western culture into the minds of the Chinese elite. This forced confrontation with the West, beginning in the 1950s, resulted in the Chinese undertaking a monumental reevaluation of their history and civilization. Teng Hsiao-p'ing's current decision to modernize China using Western technology is but the most recent stage in one civilization's coming to terms with another.

In the literary sphere, reevaluation meant both an increased respect for China's popular, vernacular literature—short stories, novels, dramas—and a hunger to read Western literature and experiment with Western literary forms.

While early experiments in poetry suffered from complex language issues, and early dramatic experiments struggled with problems of acting technique and audience response, beginning in the late 1910s and early 1920s, short story experiments in the Western mode found an eager readership among young intellectuals, many newly returned from Japan and the West. Thus began modern Chinese literature.

Lu Hsün, whose stories form the focus of my article to be published soon in the journal, *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews,* was one of the very first modern Chinese writers. He had been born in 1881 in a small town in east China to a family of scholars which had once been well-to-do but had fallen on hard times. He belonged to that single generation of men found in most of the non-Western world who are born into a traditional culture but come of age during its transition to a modernized or Westernized culture.

After an early traditional education in the Chinese classics, he attended a modernized middle school, and then traveled to Japan to study medicine. Deciding that China really needed men who would heal souls, not bodies, he and his brother tried to start a literary magazine. The times were not right, and it failed quickly.

Upon returning to China, he took up teaching and research, writing one of the first histories of Chinese vernacular literature. In 1918, he was approached by a friend who urged him to write something for a magazine that was being published. Reluctantly, Lu Hsün agreed. From then until 1926, he wrote the brilliant stories which have become the basis for his reputation in the West. Then political events forced him to flee Peking, and events in history turned him to the left, as they did many intellectuals of the period.

Lu Hsün eventually took up residence in Shanghai and became sympathetic with the just emerging Communist movement, emerging as the guiding force in the "sympathetic" League of Left-Wing Writers. He encouraged and supported—sometimes financially—young writers, even at times hiding them from the police. He died of tuberculosis, in 1936, before the civil war had fully broken out, before World War II had come full swing into China, long before the Communist Party gained ascendency.

Although he had dominated the literary scene of his time, his achievement was far greater. For he is still unanimously considered the greatest Chinese writer of the 20th century.

This is a particularly extraordinary accomplishment because this opinion is held both in the West and in China, based—as one might guess—on very differ- nt criteria.

In the West he is appreciated for his technical skills as a writer, for his understanding of Chinese society, and especially for the subtlty of his perceptiveness of human nature.

In China, while no doubt the same things are appreciated, until recently it was not popular to talk about them. Instead, the official press praised his political stand and the sharpness of his insight, his early awareness of the class struggle in China and his great and abiding sympathy for the Chinese masses. Both perspectives are true.

During the Cultural Revolution, Lu Hsün remained essentially the only author whose works were not snatched from the shelves. Mao Tse-tung praised him in extravagant terms. The chief commander of China's cultural revolution, he

was not only a great man of letters but a great thinker and revolutionary.

Lu Hsün was a man of unyielding integrity, free from all sycophancy or obsequiousness; this quality is invaluable among colonial and semi-colonial peoples. Representing the great majority of the nation, he breached and stormed the enemy citadel; on the cultural front he was the bravest and most correct, the firmest, the most loyal and the most ardent national hero. The road he took was the very road of China's new national culture. (See Mao Tse-tung, "The Culture of the New Democracy," 1940, in William A. Lyell, Jr's *Lu Hsün's Vision of Reality*—Berkeley, University of California Press, 1976, vii.)

My topic is the short stories he wrote between 1918-1926. In the preface to the first collection of these stories, he recalls his response to his friend's request that he write them. He uses the metaphor of the iron house, a paradigm for the underlying structure of all of his stories. He says:

Suppose there were an iron house without windows which was impossible to destroy. Inside are many sound sleepers who, in a short while, will have suffocated to death. But because they will die in a deep sleep, they won't feel the suffering of death. Now if you shout loudly, rousing some of the comparatively light sleepers, and causing these unfortunate few to experience the suffering of irrevocable death, do you think you've done them a favor?"

"But if a few people are aroused," replies his friend, "you can't say absolutely that there is no hope of destroying that iron house."

True. Although I had my own evidence, still hope can't absolutely be obliterated because it lies in the future. Certainly I couldn't use my evidence that it didn't exist to overcome their claim that it might. (Lu Hsün Chuan Chi—collected Works of Lu Hsün—Peking: Wen-min wen-hsüeh ch'u-pan-she, 1973, I, 274. Translation is mine.)

Lu Hsün sees Chinese culture and tradition as an iron house which is slowly suffocating all of its residents. Since he believes that there is no escape, that all action is futile, he is afraid that if he awakens people to the reality he sees, they will not only suffer as he is suffering, but will still be unable to alter the reality.

But if there is the slightest possibility that maybe they can find a solution which he himself cannot even imagine, then there may be a way out. So he cannot figure out whether if he shouts the suffering will grow worse, or whether his shouting will faciliate the possibility that it will end. He decides to shout—he writes the stories. But what he shouts is not ringing social protest but his understanding of the dilemma described in the metaphor.

My involvement with Lu Hsün dates back to my undergraduate days [Cornell University] when I first read translations of some of the stories in a survey course in Chinese literature. I can still remember very clearly my initial reaction to the story, "The New Year's Sacrifice." This story, one of Lu Hsün's three or four most important, is in three parts and begins by describing the first person narrator's return to his hometown for a visit, his discomfort with his uncle's reactionary politics, his four days of visiting friends, and his unexplained decision to leave the next day. In the second part, he recounts his startling encounter with a peasant woman, Hsianglin Sao, who accosts him with three questions: Does a person become a ghost at death? Is there a Hell? Will relatives meet there after death? Initially, he tries to tell her what he thinks she wants to hear. But as he realizes that there is some purpose that he does not understand behind her questions, they scare him. Again, he announces his decision to leave prematurely the next day. This time we understand why: Believing that his inept, dishonest responses may have terrible and unforeseen consequences, he panics and wants to flee. But that evening he hears that the peasant woman has died—from poverty, he is told.

Now immensely relieved, he relaxes some and reviews her life. He recalls how she was brought to his uncle's house as a servant. She had worked so diligently that when time for the new year's sacrifice came, the family did not need to hire extra help.

Shortly thereafter, her mother-in-law arrives to take her home. Since her son is dead, the mother-in-law plans to have Hsianglin Sao remarried so as to pocket the dowry money. Despite Hsianglin Sao's extreme opposition to remarriage, which violates the moral tenets of her society, she is forced. Surprisingly, the second marriage works well until her husband dies unexpectedly, and then her two-year-old son is eaten by a wolf. Evicted by her husband's family, without means, she returns to the uncle's household where, however, her earlier efficiency has vanished. And because of her bad luck, the family will not allow her to participate in the preparations for the new year's sacrifice. Her attempts to expiate her sin of remarriage fail. Losing all hope, mentally destroyed, completely useless, she is thrown on the street to beg.

After the narrator recounts this tale of the destruction of a hardworking peasant woman through no fault of her own and by powers she could not fight, a destruction marked by events surrounding the new year's sacrifice, the narrator wakes up to hear the firecrackers going off in celebration of the new year and lies in his bed rejoicing in the good luck the sacrifice will bring to the village. In that moment the narrator forgets everything she suffered. Everything!

I can still remember how I felt as I finished reading that story 20 years ago, but at the time I could not account for the effect. I only knew that it was like the feeling one gets when chalk squeaks across a blackboard.

Years later, as I was contemplating giving up Chinese altogether, something I do periodically, I finally figured out why I had studied this impossible, frustrating language in the first place and something about why these stories had haunted me over the years.

My studying Chinese had been an intellectual defense against being the only Black student in an all-white high school in New York City, which acclaimed European culture as the only glory of human achievement. At some point I realized those doing the acclaiming had no place in their picture for me, and I went in search of some reply to their intellectual parochialism, which had been such a cruel assault on my blackness. China provided a logical refutation, for whatever Europe had by way of culture—literature, art, philosophy, history,

political organization—China had as much or more, and had a quality indisputably as good. Hence my study of Chinese. As I had outgrown the need to reply to such narrow-minded teachers, I had wondered whether to continue with this confounded language.

In that context, I realized that in this—"The New Year's Sacrifice"—and the other stories, Lu Hsün was articulating my struggle over what it meant to be a Black intellectual. Having been trained in the schools and the university of the dominant culture, and having acquired a certain status and power thereby, I was very tempted to forget my Black origins, to forget the situation of the ordinary Black person in America.

Lu Hsün understood those temptations and acknowledged that part of himself: Just as I did not like to look at depressing ghettos, so he too did not like beggars who die of poverty in front of one's eyes. Just as I wanted to say, "let the government take care of *them*," so he too did not like feeling responsible for the Hsianglin Saos of China. When questions like Hsianglin Sao's inspired his anxiety, he too wanted to say, "it's not my problem; go away; forget her." He did not want to know about her pain any more than I wanted to know about 14th Street, N.W. in Washington, D.C.

But both he and I had a double vision. I, because to be Black in America means always knowing that however privileged you are, in some way, at some point, you are always in danger of being seen as a "nigger." And Lu Hsün's double consciousness came from having learned enough of the Western world to be able to see his own culture from the outside even as he lived it from the inside.

I was pleased with this insight, this self-revelation, and admired Lu Hsün's decision to side with the Chinese masses, while I continued enjoying my splendid middle class life with its privileges. Lu Hsün's moral commitment exceeded my own—he didn't let the Hsianglin Saos suffer silently and be forgotten.

I, in fact, didn't give up Chinese but went on to the Literature Department of American University to study Western literary theory and see how I could apply it to Chinese literature. I never seriously considered leaving the city to find a department on Chinese literature, which would have been my professional choice, since my real profession was being a housewife.

In my first graduate seminar, I wrote about Lu Hsün, and the next year undertook a paper on him for my major writing project. Working on the stories slowly and in great detail, I discovered many things which had eluded my undergraduate understanding. First, all the scholars before me had read "The New Year's Sacrifice" as the story of the woman, but—as I explained it earlier—I understood the plot to be about the relationship of the woman to the narrator. This was a radical reading. Second, I discovered that Lu Hsün had used the literary techniques of doubling and splitting in the stories. (Doubling occurs when two characters who appear to be separate, usually opposite, turn out to have a strong affinity, a bonding which exceeds rational explanation. They embody a paradox of simultaneous identity and difference. Splitting occurs when a single character, through madness or some other device, embodies two opposite tendencies or personalities.)

In "The New Year's Sacrifice," the narrator and the woman were doubles, opposite in social position and history, but bound through their positions as outcasts in the uncle's eyes—and more clearly in the startling affinity they feel for one another. Lu Hsün had punctuated this bonding by using the same seven-character phrase to describe both of them. Also, I discovered that so many of his stories were circular, beginning and ending in the same circumstance, sometimes even with the same phrases.

Now I had an explanation for the sense of chalk on the blackboard from my undergraduate days: How could the narrator return to his original obtuseness, his forgetfulness, celebrating the very festival which had marked Hsianglin Sao's destruction? The narrator's resistance to telling her life, which he avoided in the first two parts of the story, was akin to silence in the iron house, and his finally telling it was the shouting. But that shouting turned out to be futile because the narrator himself had forgotten the meaning of his own story. So he had ended where he began—in forgetfulness. The story's structure modeled the iron house metaphor. Additionally, Hsianglin Sao, as the suffering victim, was silent; and the narrator, as the one telling of her destruction, was shouting, yet all was futile. Except that Lu Hsün did not allow the reader to forget—chalk on the blackboard—so maybe shouting would break the walls of the house, at least for the reader.

I was delighted. It looked like I had put the pieces together. So I decided to publish my reading of the story. But the first journal I approached, after an initially favorable response, rejected the manuscript, not realizing that the plot summary, which the editors did not like, was not plot summary but a whole new reading. A second journal, which loved it, went out of print before publishing it.

Meanwhile, I had decided I wanted to do more with doubling and splitting as it occurred throughout the stories. I applied for a faculty research grant from Howard to work on this, while the first part of the manuscript sat on desks and in cubbyholes. In the process of doing the grant research, I clarified my definitions of doubling and splitting and planned what was to be the second article.

Meanwhile the woman's movement was in full swing, as women—tired of being victims—rebelled, demanding equal treatment and equal opportunities.

I tried to lay low, until the facts of my own creeping assertion undid me. My hobby of being a graduate student had gotten out of hand, and as I was an assistant professor at Howard, I was having a hard time pretending that my "real" work was taking care of the now rather grown up children. Eventually the pressures that my growing assertion was putting on my marriage got the better of that.

Some days I walked around feeling like Ah Q, Lu Hsün's most famous character, a split character who acts either as the victim—the Hsianglin Sao, or the victimizer—the narrator. A friend who was a psychotherapist helped me find the vocabulary to understand what I was seeing and what I was living out. He talked about sadomasochism, not in its popular, kinky, sexual meaning, but as Erich Fromm had used it in his book *Escape from Freedom*.

I headed for the library. Looking around himself during World War II, Fromm observed an authoritarian personality which he saw as making possible fascism. This sadomasochistic personality he described this way: the masochist, feeling inferior and insignificant, seeks to compensate by becoming part of a more powerful whole outside of himself. The sadist strives to gain complete mastery over another by turning that other into a helpless object. In making him suffer, he finds evidence of his ultimate power. Thus he gains security by engulfing or "swallowing" the other. The two appear opposites in that the sadist strives for domination and the masochist for submission, but both spring from the same source of insecurity, and neither can survive without the cooperation of the other.

Then I found in Lu Hsün the passage that made it clear that this is what he was seeing in China:

When the Chinese are confronted with the powerful, they dare not resist but use the words "taking the middle course" to put a good face on their real behavior so that they feel consoled. If they have power and realize that others cannot interfere with them, or they are supported by the "majority," most of them are cruel, heartless, and tyrannical, just like despots; they do not take the middle course. When they have lost power and cannot help taking the "middle course," they readily talk about its wisdom. As soon as they are totally defeated, they are ready to resign themselves to fate. By the time they become slaves, they do not feel moved by their plight. (I am indebted to Lin Yü-sheng, "The Complex Consciousness of Lu Hsün" in his *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness, Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era* —Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979—128-9, for his translation and for bringing this quotation to my attention.)

At last I had the whole thing. Lu Hsün had looked at Chinese society with sensitive scrutiny. He had illuminated the basic human issue of bondage in human relatedness. Lu Hsün perceived Chinese society, the relationships between groups and between individuals, as based on a pattern of sadomasochistic behavior, a pattern which was causing great suffering.

As Fromm had said, even if it is the social norm, the suffering is just as painful. Lu Hsün encoded this insight in the iron house metaphor. Shouting becomes a form of sadism if change is futile, while silence becomes a form of masochism. This pattern shapes not only the "New Year's Sacrifice" but all of his stories. The affinity between Hsianglin Sao and the narrator is that of the sadist and masochist who, bound to one another, need one another. But they appear to be separate, with the sadist having the upper hand.

Lu Hsün saw this pattern in Chinese behavior as so pervasive that it was not apt to be changed by anything as simple as a political revolution. For the iron house was not just a political condition but also a psychological one of human interaction. Hence his despair. And yet, perhaps! Revolution might help the politics of it. Those in our culture who look to a new relationship between men and women based on equality and full respect for the personhood of each are struggling towards the type of psychological resolution that Lu Hsün hoped was possible but could not find.

Modern theorists of change have said that the way to get free of the kind of paradoxical bipolar system represented by doubles has four steps: analyze the situation, explore the attempted solutions, define the change to be achieved, and make a plan of action. Lu Hsün, in his stories, does the first three. It took Mao Tse-tung to suggest a solution, if only in the political arena.

Finally, one day came a letter saying that my first article had received an enthusiastic reception in the journal with the very best audience. However, the editors wanted me to talk about more than just "New Year's Sacrifice." Since I had claimed that it was typical of the dynamics of most of Lu Hsün's stories, I was asked to explain that statement. So I added all that I had discovered in the interim about doubling, splitting, and sadomasochism, and doubled the size of the manuscript. It was accepted with enthusiasm.

The advantage of working in a new field, which Chinese literature is for Westerners, is that there is so much new and important work to be done, and very little danger of duplication. Although I was familiar with the scholarship as I proceeded with the paper, it was not until the whole thing was conceived and nearly written in final form that I added all the scholarly apparatus. The paper had grown so much out of my own life experiences that I never had any worries about repeating anyone else's insight.

That might not have been the scholarly way to proceed, but in retrospect it is clear that the scholarship was as much an occasion for an inward intellectual journey to self-understanding—into sorting out the meaning of being Black and a woman in late 20th century America—as it was a very illuminating journey into understanding this sensitive, important Chinese writer.

That might not have been the scholarly way to proceed, but in retrospect it is clear that the scholarship was as much an occasion for an inward intellectual journey to self-understanding—into sorting out the meaning of being Black and a women in late 20th century America—as it was a very illuminating journey into understanding this sensitive, important Chinese writer.

Instead of spinning off a pile of smaller, easier pieces to fill up my academic vita, I have spent so much of my life and substance working my way through this one issue. My work should be in print in time to make the fifth item in my "count" for tenure. But on some level, as important as my job is to me, that does not even matter. There are a few things in life we do because we have to do them for ourselves, and for me this was one them. □

Carolyn Brown, Ph.D., is assistant professor, Department of English, Howard University.

Apartheid

Gazing out the window
I watch rain
beating on the rooftops
whose storage tanks
are bloated spiders.

Across the street,
an American bank
selling South Africa's Krugerrand
I think
of what is distance,

Bleeding,
my fellow Africans'
blood scatter
on the hills
like red blossoms
crushed against rocks.

Lightning flashes
against the window.

I sit
staring at a white stain
on the ceiling
just above my head

Suddenly newspaper headlines
knock
heavy fists
at my door.

Girma Tessema Wubishet
Silver Spring, Md.

To Reap the Splendor!

Rejoice when the sun
Has devoured the dark
And the last dregs of dreams,
And the day is a time
Of jubilant penance
At flogging the mind to the yoke
Ploughing the fallow promise
Through clods of distraction . . .

When, from the jarring
By the inarticulate stones
Come rebel words, flung up
By the compulsive harrow, Habit . . .

And in the porous soil
Of mole-tunnel dryness
That afflicts the idea,
Lies unforgiven despair!

Rejoice, when within
Your reaper's cradle
Seed whispers throb meaning
Of all the laboring . . .

And on the threshing floor—
Scrutiny's finality,
Lies the spent vigor
Of your passion
Tracing a dedication
In each agonized accent
That has descended as silently
As images of autumn

In a winnowing of words!

Nathalie V. Cole-Johnson
Monterey, Ca.

Reaching

insofar as typically
I'm untired of
light (Only maybe even
less so than others)
I want to go too
high in a low boat
a door in the wind
the winged shoes
how many men with wings
are flying there

I want to go
too through the darkened air
till it's so dark light
rips free to the
other side

to the beyond bone
beyond imaginative wind
which creates stark owls

out of sight of
the deepened leaf
rotting in death-stink
at a place of lakes
where I can walk on the
water like chosen-ones and
behold the brush-stroked
and begoldened bellies
of angelic fish

be a connoisseur of stars

I want to be starreader
but also maker of
stars

Robert Bowie
College Park, Md.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Department of Publications
Howard University
Washington, D.C. 20008