

Rereading Lu Xun's 魯迅 "Diary of a Madman" 《狂人日記》 on the Centenary of Its Publication

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In his 1925 "Required reading for youth" 青年必讀書, Lu Xun exhorted young Chinese to read more foreign works and fewer Chinese works, if any at all.¹ It is thus somewhat ironic to suggest here that Lu Xun's works, in particular "Diary of a Madman" (1918), be considered in discussions of what students should read in the Chinese canon. This choice is not radical, however, since Lu Xun is firmly established in the Chinese literary pantheon. I have used his "Diary of a Madman," which has been well received by students, in my Chinese literature in translation course at Benedictine University, UCLA, and the University of Colorado, Boulder. The Benedictine University course satisfies four general education requirements (literary and rhetorical analysis; global perspectives; learning community, and; writing intensive).² This helps to generate student interest, if only initially instrumental in nature. The literary and rhetorical analysis requirement is described as:

This mode of inquiry introduces students to common practices in literary, language, textual, and rhetorical analysis. Subjects of study may include well established works of literature and rhetoric *as well as less established*,

¹ 《京報副刊》1925.2.10. “我以為要少——或者竟不——看中國書，多看外國書。少看中國書，其結果不過不能作文而已。”

²The course title is, "Narrating the Nation: The Dialectics of Reform and Revolution in Modern Chinese Literature."

emerging, vernacular, and even experimental texts. Students will acquire a critical vocabulary for engaging in literary and rhetorical analysis, and will learn to *study both the formal properties of texts and their meanings and significance within particular historical and cultural contexts* (emphasis mine).

As a work of non-Western literature, “Diary of a Madman” by default qualifies as “less established.” Although “lost in translation,” the work is significant because it represents the first Chinese short story written in the modern vernacular, which is important given the Chinese historical and cultural context of the period. The work is also experimental in terms of both form and content. Formally, the short story employs a framing narrative and is epistolary. The depiction of the interiority of the madman and an exploration of intensely psychological themes, such as madness and paranoia, are radical innovations in Chinese fictional narratives. The significance of the choice of the vernacular for the diary entries as well as the formal and thematic innovations will be discussed later in the paper.

For the Global Perspectives learning goal, students are expected to:

- a. Recognize the interdependence of peoples and nations, and understand the forces that connect and divide them
- b. Understand the benefits of a diversity of perspectives, abilities, and cultures
- c. Understand the relationship between language and culture, and communicate effectively and respectfully across cultural boundaries

d. Relate the person to community and the local to the global

Given the general education requirements of the university and my own curricular design, what I hope students will learn in this course then is: a) knowledge of late-imperial and modern China in a global context (in a historical trajectory from the Opium Wars to today); b) how to analyze a literary text in terms of both form and content and ascribe meaning and significance to that analysis, and; c) how to think critically. “Diary of a Madman” works well, I believe, to achieve all of these specific goals.

Published in 1918, “Diary of a Madman” is considered to be China’s first “modern” work of fiction because of its radical content (its depiction of madness and a modern subjectivity, the struggle of the individual vs society, and its iconoclastic critique of traditional society, namely Confucianism), the use of a new vernacular language for the diary section, the framing narrative of the story, and a focus on the madman’s interiority. Heavily influenced by Gogol’s short story of the same title, Lu Xun’s work opens with the narrator relating, in classical Chinese, how he learned during a trip back home that a former close friend had gone mad for a spell. The madman’s brother informs the narrator of his sibling’s illness (a form of paranoia that creates delusions of others wanting to cannibalize the madman), and shares with him a diary that the madman has left behind after purportedly making a full recovery and leaving to look for a new post. The “narrator” assures the implied reader that no changes have been made at all to the original text, including the madman’s mistakes. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent. One noteworthy feature of the diary, written in the vernacular, is that it includes no dates; the narrator, however, claims to be able to differentiate entries based the different inks and

brush writing styles used. The diary entries record how the madman becomes increasingly paranoid of those around him as he realizes that traditional Chinese society is cannibalistic. The story concludes with the madman suspecting that he, too, has consumed the flesh of others, just as those he has suspected and condemned. After this realization, he makes an eleventh-hour appeal to “save the children” to conclude his diary.

In this paper, I focus on three aspects of “Diary of a Madman” that make it, I believe, a good choice for our general education curriculum. First, the text has a universal appeal but is also particular enough to convey much of interest in the modern Chinese historical experience. Second, in terms of content the text has rich themes and tropes, such as madness and cannibalism, that can stimulate productive classroom discussion. Third, formal aspects of the text, such as its epistolary nature, language issues, and the framing narrative used, allow for an exploration of its formal literary qualities as well. In the end, however, it is the open-ended nature of the text and the madman as exemplary critical reader that make “Diary of a Madman” valuable, I believe, as a core text for a general education curriculum.

For any exercise in cross-cultural interpretation, the productive tension between the potential universality of a work and its particularity merits pedagogic consideration. A work should be universal enough to appeal to and be accessible to readers. Yet, if its particularity is not highlighted or acknowledged, readers may also run the risk of misunderstanding, at worst, or, at best, interpreting a text based on their own cultural values and assumptions, which may then only serve to reaffirm or revalidate their own views or attitudes as a type of false universal. Given certain cosmopolitan influences on Lu Xun’s work, its literary appeal to students in the American

classroom is understandable. To highlight its particularity, I introduce a fair amount of Chinese historical and cultural background. This includes biographical information about Lu Xun (his family's declining fortunes; an education both traditional and modern; his time in Sendai, Japan, where he felt doubly alienated, and the moment when he famously decided to become a writer instead of a doctor because he believed that saving souls was more important than healing bodies).³ I also include extensive historical background on late-imperial China, the 1911 revolution, the transition from empire to Republic, China's changing place in the world order, and, of course, the ethos of the New Culture Movement (1915-1925), which is the period when "Diary of a Madman" was published.⁴ Although students may not recall precisely all the historical facts of this period, they do pick up on the general ethos of early Republican-era China (especially the warlords, whom they find intriguing). This background information is framed in a larger global context of modernization as process, modernism as movement, and modernity as condition. It is also tied to the overall theme of the course, which is "narrating the nation: the dialectics of reform and revolution" through literature in translation. In the text there is an interesting interplay between the deeply personal narrative of the madman and the greater national narrative it invokes implicitly. In addition to providing context in which to read the text, the inclusion of background history is also beneficial, I believe, for students since most have

³For more on useful biographical and background information, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Lu Xun and His Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985) and *Voices From the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁴Chow Tse-tsung's [Zhou Cezong] work provides an excellent introduction and overview on the period. See his *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), especially Chapter 11 "The Literary Revolution."

little to no knowledge of modern Chinese history. Anecdotally, it has also helped them to produce better papers (both formal and informal).

In terms of content, “Diary of a Madman” has themes, tropes, and symbols which invite interpretation, and thus make for good classroom discussion. For example, the moon is featured prominently in the beginning of the diary. The madman records that “the moon is bright tonight. I had not seen it for thirty years” and “No moon tonight. Bad sign.” The moon is a rich symbol that has obvious associations with madness (lunacy). It may also represent a spot of light in an otherwise benighted sky, just as the madman sees himself as the enlightened one amidst the darkness of surrounding society. This alludes to one of the aims of the New Culture Movement as a force for enlightening traditional Chinese society in its developmental drive toward modernization. Madness, too, can be a fruitful topic of discussion.⁵ Is the madman really crazy or is it society that has lost its way? (good for sociology and psychology majors). A central trope in the story, cannibalism, also intrigues students and is invariably on the list of discussion questions. Although the madman in his rereading of Chinese classics offers up actual textual evidence as proof that society is cannibalistic, students are encouraged to go beyond the literal interpretation given in the text and read symbolically or hermeneutically. This is one of the greater challenges for many undergraduates in reading literature, I find. Background information about Social Darwinism is provided to students as additional context. We ask, “could

⁵For an intriguing discussion of madness, see Xiaobing Tang’s “Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman’ and a Chinese Modernism” in *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000). The last section, “The Madness of the Madman,” includes useful background information on the Chinese terms used to refer to madness (狂 and 瘋) and the significance of these terms for understanding the text.

cannibalism represent a version of the survival of the fittest?” Spencer’s writings had already been introduced to China when Lu Xun was writing “Diary of a Madman,” and his ideas were influential, especially in how China saw itself geopolitically and its position as a new nation amidst others in the world. In the wake of multiple imperialist humiliations, reformers and revolutionaries alike thought it necessary for China to modernize and become strong again or else perish (which is relevant to China’s current rise and for the historical trajectory laid out in the course). Many understood modern geopolitics in the age of imperialism and colonialism as “dog-eat-dog.”⁶

Finally, in terms of form, “Diary of a Madman” also has much to offer textually. Relatively short yet dense, the text invites close reading. Students generally find such an exercise in close reading useful and beneficial for learning about literature. Moreover, there are opportunities to introduce various technical literary terms, which give students tools to analyze and language to discuss literature. The diary as discovered text touches on issues of realism, which was given a privileged status in China as a new fictional mode that could serve to “renew the nation.” It also is a good starting point for discussions of authorship, authority, and authorial voice. What is the role of the dramatic narrator in this text and what tension exists between the two texts (the introduction and the diary itself)? The framed narrative is significant because of the use of classical Chinese for the introduction and a modern vernacular for the diary. Although this is “lost in translation,” it is worth pointing out to students. Comparisons can be made to

⁶Incidentally, “Diary of a Madman” includes menacing depictions of dogs and a reference to hyenas.

Europe and the role of the vernacular in the emergence of modern nation states and “imagined communities” there.

Perhaps most important, “Diary of a Madman” is ultimately a text about reading critically or reading between the lines. “I finally glimpsed what lay between every line, of every book—‘Eat people!’” Students thus read the madman reading. The madman’s reading is radical, original, and critical of the received wisdom of classical texts, which were viewed at the time as antithetical to modernization. It is important to contextualize this by pointing out the fallacy of such an argument. (Or conversely, Confucianism being precisely the reason for China’s economic success, as argued by Lee Kuan Yew and others). I also inform students of the re-emergence of Confucius as the new global face of the PRC (made evident in the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremony) after being roundly criticized during the New Culture Movement and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The point here, however, is that the madman is a critical reader and a critical thinker—something we wish our students to be.

As an open-ended text, “Diary of a Madman” puts the burden of understanding and interpretation on the reader. For example, what does the madman’s full recovery and return to society, claimed by the narrator’s brother, suggest about his “enlightenment” and the state of society, especially to a Chinese reader in 1918? Why the enigmatic “save the children” plea at the end of the story? In much of Lu Xun’s fictional corpus, whether it be in his first collection of short stories (*Outcry* 呐喊) or his second (*Hesitation* 徬徨), his works conclude in a way that leave the reader somewhat unsettled since there is inadequate resolution to the main conflict in the story. In *Outcry*, Lu Xun uses the “crooked brush” technique to add a note of hope or

optimism to his otherwise dark and pessimistic short stories (“crooked brush” 曲筆 was used by Chinese historiographers to conceal matters from those in power and hence avoid their possible wrath).⁷ In the *Hesitation* anthology, there is a cathartic moment of relief for the narrator, which absolves him of the moral and existential burdens that trouble him and are narrated in the body of the story. By not offering a resolution in his fiction and by shifting the burden of understanding to the reader, Lu Xun creates engaging texts that require an ethics of reading. His works are not didactic in any direct or explicit way, which runs somewhat contrary to what was seen as the potential power of fiction to “save” or “renew” the nation in late-Qing and early Republican era China. Lu Xun was skeptical of any instrumental use of literature to accomplish such ends. But he could also not not write fiction, as he shares in the famous “Preface” to *Outcry*.⁸ This moral burden is hence transferred to the reader.

In conclusion, in addition to learning about Chinese history and literature, analyzing a fecund literary work, and hopefully thinking critically, students reading “Diary of a Madman” also engage with ethical issues in the act of reading the text that can be productive for a general education course in any liberal arts curriculum.

Additional Resources

The most complete online bibliography, including abstracts and links to publications, can

⁷See Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), pp. 86-87.

⁸The “Preface” itself merits reading since it sets the tone for the collection in terms of thematic content and style. Hence, it is always assigned reading for my course.

be found on the [Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center](#) site. References below include translations as well as scholarship on “Diary of a Madman” and other works by Lu Xun.

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