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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lu Xun in the Post-Mao Era: Refashioning His Image through Wang Xiaoming's *The Cold Face of Reality*

Yihan HE
Soochow University, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Suzhou, China
Corresponding Author: Yihan HE**, E-mail**: 20244201031@stu.suda.edu.cn

| ABSTRACT
Wang Xiaoming's *The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun* stands as a pivotal work in the reshaping of Lu Xun's image in the post-Mao era, also known as the New Era. Breaking away from earlier biographical paradigms centered on a "revolutionary" Lu Xun, the work portrays him as a writer and thinker caught in profound spiritual agony. The Lu Xun who emerges from this biography resonates with many intellectual and cultural currents of the 1980s and 1990s, entering into a deep dialogue with the concerns surrounding movements such as the "Rewriting Literary History" movement and the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit." *The Cold Face of Reality* is thus both a classic New Era biography of Lu Xun and a vivid window onto the intellectual and cultural landscape of China during those decades.

| KEYWORDS
The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun; image of Lu Xun; Wang Xiaoming; Rewriting Literary History; Debate on Humanistic Spirit

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1. Introduction

Lu Xun (1881–1936), originally named Zhou Shuren, is widely recognized as the preeminent figure in modern Chinese literature. He is not only the founding figure of modern Chinese literature, but also a writer whose works have long since entered the bloodstream of world literature. As early as 1936, Edgar Snow compiled *Living China: Modern Chinese Short Stories*, the first major English-language anthology to present Lu Xun to Western readers; the collection included translations of "Medicine" and "A Small Incident" (Snow, 1936). A few years later, Wang Chi-chen's 1941 volume *Ah Q and Others* introduced English audiences to the full tragicomic power of "The True Story of Ah Q" (Wang, 1941). In the twenty-first century, Penguin Classics published *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, translated by Julia Lovell. This volume further expanded Lu Xun's global influence (Lovell, 2009). The recently published *A New Literary History of Modern China* (edited by David Der-wei Wang, 2017) breaks through the linear narrative paradigm of conventional literary histories and adopts a polyphonic, experimental narrative framework. In this volume, the Chinese American writer Ha Jin vividly reconstructs the scene of Lu Xun writing Diary of a Madman, redefining Chinese literary modernity as a cross-cultural undertaking co-authored by multiple agents, shaped by multilingual exchange, and deeply entangled with the world. In both *How to Read World Literature* and *Around the World in 80 Books*, David Damrosch situates Lu Xun within the global literary system and offers an innovative reading of his magnum opus Diary of a Madman that pushes beyond conventional interpretive boundaries (Damrosch, 2017, 2021). Taken together, these cultural practices attest to the enduring significance of Lu Xun and his writings on the landscape of world literature.

Within China, Lu Xun has consistently been regarded as the greatest and most profound writer of the modern era and remains the central focus of modern Chinese literary scholarship. This preeminence derives not only from the complexity and depth of his thought but also from his unique political status in contemporary China: throughout successive political campaigns, Lu Xun remained one of the very few modern writers whom the authorities officially sanctioned for continued study. More than a hundred biographies of Lu Xun have been published to date, and a survey of the portraits of Lu Xun they present reveals a close

correspondence between his image and the intellectual and cultural features of the era in which each biography was written. Wu Xiangyu has analyzed this phenomenon by distinguishing between an "original image"—defined as "what is unique to Lu Xun and possesses universality"—and a "new image," which is shaped by the constructor through a process of selection and filtering and assumes different forms as social and historical contexts change. Building on the determinacy of "Lu Xun the person," Wu argues that "the image of Lu Xun" constitutes a dynamic "image stream" composed of successive "new images" (Wu, 2018). In short, Lu Xun's image is neither an eternally fixed objective entity nor a sheer fabrication of the constructor's imagination; rather, it is a dynamic new subject generated through the interaction between "the image itself" and "the image constructor."

After the Cultural Revolution, China entered the New Era of socialist construction and underwent a drastic ideological and cultural transition. The image of Lu Xun was correspondingly transformed. Wang Xiaoming's The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun, published in the early 1990s, represents a landmark work in this reshaping of Lu Xun's image. One scholar has observed that the work "marks a major breakthrough in the style, theoretical framework, and paradigm of Lu Xun biography writing in China" (Zhang, 2019). Focusing on Lu Xun's intellectual journey, the biography foregrounds the spiritual crises he endured as a writer and thinker. The mode of portraying Lu Xun advanced in this biography resonates deeply with many features of Chinese intellectual culture in the 1980s and 1990s, and it echoes literary and cultural events such as the "Rewriting Literary History" movement and the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit," both co-initiated by Wang Xiaoming himself. Wang did not shy away from acknowledging the considerable personal investment he brought to this biographical project; in the preface to the first edition, he writes: "Perhaps what I have finally written goes beyond my understanding of Lu Xun and his era; it also includes my understanding of myself and this era" (Wang, 2021, p. 3). The present essay examines the intellectual and historical significance of this refashioning of Lu Xun's image and analyzes how Wang Xiaoming's biography participates in the broader discursive reconstruction of Lu Xun's image in the post-Mao era(the New Era).

2. The Presentation of the Image: A Thinker and Writer in Anguish and Contradiction

At the outset of writing a biography, the author must first determine in what capacity the subject will be presented. This is precisely the question of the subject's image. In Wang Xiaoming's portrait, "Lu Xun is not only the most important writer but also the most important thinker" (Wang,2021,p.2)."Anguish" and "contradiction" emerge as the two keywords shaping Lu Xun in the biography. As a thinker, Lu Xun's psychological structure was fraught with contradictions; in order to overcome them, he embarked upon an arduous path of ceaseless struggle against despair. As a writer, his literary works reveal two sharply contrasting creative impulses, and the fierce conflict between them eventually compelled Lu Xun to cease writing fiction in his later years.

The biographical scholar Yang Zhengrun points out that "theme is a summation of the subject's life significance built upon the subject's identity" and "is the biographer's synthesis of the meaning of all biographical materials"(Yang,2009,p.520-521) .Once the theme of a biography is established, scattered biographical facts can be assembled to acquire internal coherence, thereby completing the shaping of the subject's image. The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun adopts "fighting against despair" as its central theme, seeking to convey the anguish and contradiction of Lu Xun "constantly forcing a way out, only to step again and again into a new dead end" (Wang,2021,p.231).The biography accordingly delineates four stages of Lu Xun's life: his childhood, falling from family prosperity and tasting the bitterness of the human world; his youth, launching a journal in Tokyo to an indifferent audience; his middle age, plunging into enlightenment work only to begin with "a call to arms" and end with "wandering"; and his later years, allying with revolutionaries yet forced to maintain a posture of "standing sideways." In sum, in presenting the subject's image, the biography consistently follows a structural pattern of "discovering hope—sinking into despair." Chapter One, "The Fortunate One," recounts Lu Xun's happy childhood, his comfortable family circumstances, and his relaxed and lively upbringing; yet the very next chapter, "The Sky Suddenly Collapses," describes the family's decline and the cold looks Lu Xun endured from relatives. The stark contrast delivers a profound shock to the young Lu Xun's understanding of human indifference and cruelty. Chapters Four, "The Ecstasy of First Conversion to the Gods," through Six, "The Chamber of Awaited Death," form the second narrative unit: Lu Xun's enlightenment fervor, once ignited in Tokyo, is dealt a heavy blow by reality, and he experiences once more the agony of hope turning to disappointment, beginning a long period of intellectual dormancy in the Shaoxing Guild Hall. Chapters Seven through Ten narrate Lu Xun's life and literary activities during his middle-age participation in the New Culture Movement; after the "National Beijing Women's Normal College Unrest," the "March 18 Massacre," and other events, the enlightenment camp gradually fractures, and the rupture between the brothers deals Lu Xun a crushing psychological blow. The pessimistic and nihilistic side of his inner life regains the upper hand, plunging him into a grueling struggle against what he termed a "spectral darkness." In the chapters treating Lu Xun's later life, Chapter Sixteen, "A New Posture," and Chapter Seventeen, "Still a Down-and-Out," the very titles suggest the turn from hope to disappointment. This same structural pattern is also evident within individual chapters. Chapter Twelve, "Woman, Love, and 'Youth,'" for example, describes in its first half the revival of Lu Xun's inner vitality as he falls in love with Xu Guangping, then turns in its second half to his hesitations and calculations within that love. Whether turning to enlightenment, embracing love, or aligning with revolution, each of Lu Xun's struggles against despair, however modestly successful, encounters an even greater failure. It is precisely through this narrative structure—"hope, yet more despair; small success, yet greater defeat"—that The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun portrays a thinker who ceaselessly fights against despair, suffers defeat after defeat, and ultimately finds no way out.

In shaping Lu Xun as a writer, the biography particularly foregrounds two contradictory tendencies in his creative psychology. In 1989, Wang Xiaoming published a lengthy essay, "The Overturning of a Two-Horse Chariot: On Lu Xun's Fictional Writing" (Wang,2021,p.312) ,in which he argued that Lu Xun's creative work harbors two distinct impulses: one outward-facing, aimed at disseminating enlightenment ideas among the masses; the other inward-facing, giving direct expression to spiritual torment and wandering. "Lu Xun's two different inner activities produced two different modes of expression in his fiction." In The Cold Face of Reality, Wang Xiaoming further deepens this argument. Chapter Seven, titled "A Masked Call to Arms," describes Lu Xun's literary activities during the New Culture Movement. The biography notes that while Lu Xun willingly and gladly threw himself into cultural enlightenment, he in fact lacked full confidence in the enlightenment prospects so vigorously promoted by his New Youth colleagues. As a result, behind those fictions intended to propagate new ideas, a dark silhouette invariably lurks. The "madman" in "Diary of a Madman" ultimately recovers and returns to the social norms he had previously defied; the motionless crow in "Medicine," standing iron-cast in silence, signals the incommensurable fates of the enlightener and those to be enlightened; the ending of "The True Story of Ah Q" abruptly abandons the earlier sardonic tone and reveals bottomless despair; and in "New Year's Sacrifice," Xianglin's Wife's question about whether heaven exists plunges the narrator "I" into profound doubt. In short, in order to keep pace with the dominant current of enlightenment thought, Lu Xun strove to display in his work a side consonant with the times, yet the profound pessimism he harbored deep within rose irrepressibly to his pen, endowing these enlightenment-minded works with a far more complex texture. In Wang Xiaoming's view, out of a desire to escape despair, Lu Xun did not wish to dwell long on pessimistic and gloomy states of mind, yet literary creation also offered him a transcendent space in which to dissect his own mind and recount his traumas through literature. To a certain extent, the irreconcilable conflict between these two creative impulses hindered Lu Xun from developing his gifts further; when his spiritual conflicts grew increasingly acute, he had no choice but to abandon fiction writing.

It is not difficult to see that, organized around the theme of "fighting against despair," the image of Lu Xun presented in *The Cold Face of Reality* departs radically from the image-construction system centered on "Lu Xun the revolutionary" that had taken shape since the 1940s. [1]In other words, in shaping "Lu Xun the writer" and "Lu Xun the thinker," Wang Xiaoming was simultaneously bidding farewell to "Lu Xun the revolutionary." The biography adopts two principal strategies for this "farewell to revolution": first, it evaluates Lu Xun's literary creation through the lens of "pure literary ideology" to reconstruct his literary map; second, it re-examines Lu Xun's relationship with left-wing revolutionaries, highlighting his independent stance as an intellectual "standing sideways" amid political turmoil. Both strategies are closely intertwined with the cultural climate of China in the 1980s and 1990s and echo the cultural and intellectual events—"Rewriting Literary History," the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit"—that Wang Xiaoming himself helped initiate and in which he participated. The biography's refashioning of Lu Xun's image thus provides an exceptionally revealing case study for examining the intellectual culture of this period.

3. Farewell to Revolution: " the ideology of pure literature " and the Refashioning of Lu Xun the Writer

As the primary discursive instrument for "farewell to revolution" in literary circles, " the ideology of pure literature " upholds the aesthetic nature of literature and stresses the role of the writer's personal artistic sensibility in the creative process. Non-political literary elements such as "language," "form," and "artistic conception," long neglected and denigrated, regained due attention. The "Rewriting Literary History" movement, launched in 1988 under the direction of scholars including Chen Sihe and Wang Xiaoming, was a forceful enactment of "pure literary ideology" in the literary field. Re-evaluating canonical writers was a central task of this movement. If we place the portrayal of "Lu Xun the writer" in *The Cold Face of Reality* within the context of "Rewriting Literary History," we can clearly discern behind it the practical demands and discursive structures of 1980s "pure literary ideology" itself.

Establishing the subjectivity of literature and the "individual" it expresses, overturning the narrative framework of politics overriding literature prevalent from the 1950s to the 1970s, and liberating literature from the shackles of revolutionary political discourse were the principal aims of "pure literary ideology." The "purity" and "impurity" of pure literature can only be accurately understood in this sense. Cai Xiang offers an incisive formulation: "The very proposal of the concept of 'pure literature' represented from the outset intellectuals' claims to rights, including: the independent status of literature (in effect, of spirit), freedom of thought and expression, the diversity of individual existence and choices, resistance to ultra-left politics or homogeneity, and demands for the expansion and openness of the public sphere, among others" (Cai,2002).Wang Xiaoming himself, in retrospect, noted that terms such as "pure literature" and "aesthetics" were political concepts with strong political connotations in the 1980s(Li,Wang,2007). As a cultural strategy by which intellectuals intervened in the public sphere under specific historical conditions, the discourse of "pure literature" participated in shaping the various literary and cultural imaginaries of modernity in the 1980s and also directly molded the image of "Lu Xun the writer" in the biography. Through its

[1] Within the above-mentioned system, Lu Xun's significance in literary and intellectual history was subsumed under the narrative of modern Chinese revolutionary history. Because he created a series of "typical characters" of the old Chinese peasantry—such as Ah Q and Xianglin's Wife—Lu Xun was upheld as an outstanding representative of realism, and his intellectual trajectory was likewise aligned with the political-revolutionary progression from "democracy" to "communism."

portrayal of Lu Xun the writer, *The Cold Face of Reality* reaffirmed a series of aesthetic principles "rediscovered" in the 1980s: it emphasizes aesthetic autonomy and non-utilitarianism, rejects mechanistic "reflection theory" and political determinism, takes "individuality" as the essential determinant of literature, and particularly values the artistic world constructed by textual language and form as well as the writer's individualized lens through which the world is viewed. At the operational level, the intellectual articulation of "pure literature" is established through a series of binary oppositions that imply a predetermined hierarchy. "Politics" and "aesthetics" form a core pair within the "pure literature" vision, in which "politics" carries negative connotations of repression and control, while "aesthetics" represents spiritual freedom and subjective liberation, thereby naturally acquiring a legitimacy superior to that of "politics." This binary structure undergirds the portrayal of "Lu Xun the writer" in *The Cold Face of Reality*. Lu Xun's creative work is thus decomposed into a series of oppositions: "spirit/utility," "lyrical impulse/enlightenment impulse," "prose style/essay style," and so forth. Under the constraints of this new intellectual framework, the former term in each pair is naturally placed above the latter. While those strokes in Lu Xun's fiction that point toward reality may demonstrate the profundity and progressive character of his thought, they also betray an overly explicit utilitarian consciousness that undermines the harmony of the works' overall artistic atmosphere; a "typical character" such as Ah Q, while revealing the author's depth of reflection, to some degree also exposes the shortcoming of "the idea preceding the writing." By contrast, passages in Lu Xun's work directly connected to his individual life experience are regarded as the most authentic expressions of his inner self and thus receive higher evaluation. In Call to Arms, "Kong Yiji" and "My Old Home,"[2] favored by the biography for their melancholy and lyrical sensibility rather than their anti-feudal themes, serve as examples. The biography devotes particular attention to analyzing the dialogic structure between protagonist and narrator in the collection Wandering, arguing that these two figures represent different facets of Lu Xun's inner world; through their mutual dialogue and questioning, Lu Xun was able to dissect his soul in a circuitous manner. In " Upstairs in the Tavern," Lü Weifu confides to "I" that his life has circled like a bee only to return to its starting point. This existential state of an outsider wandering without ground is precisely the anguish the biography's narrative so frequently ascribes to Lu Xun himself. Wei Lianshu in " The Loner," from his physical appearance to his life experience, is almost identical to Lu Xun and can be seen as a product of Lu Xun's inner psychology. Faced with Wei Lianshu's rhetorical question "Who wove this cocoon?", the narrator "I" can only respond with pallid silence, signaling the desperate suffering into which Lu Xun had sunk at that moment.

Within the research paradigm centered on "Lu Xun the revolutionary," works such as " The Loner "—somber in tone and complex in thought—were often marginalized in Lu Xun's literary map. "Pure literary ideology" restored attention to precisely these works that carry Lu Xun's most personal, lived experience, thereby enormously enriching the image of Lu Xun as a writer. Yet another body of works, typified by "The True Story of Ah Q," seems profoundly out of place within this framework. On closer examination, both phenomena stem from the inherent limitations of "pure literary ideology" itself. Although the advocates of "rewriting" repeatedly stressed that they had no intention of replacing political criteria with aesthetic ones, in practice they could not avoid being constrained by a simplistic binary discursive mode. In fact, the core of "pure literature's" evaluative mechanism—the opposition between "politics" and "aesthetics"—can exert its greatest efficacy only within a specific historical context. It was precisely because, over a period of time, a narrow understanding of literature's "political nature" had severely damaged its aesthetic attributes that "pure literary ideology" could possess such stirring theoretical vitality in the 1980s. As the 1990s unfolded, mass culture rose abruptly to become a new dominant force on China's cultural stage, and the adversary that "pure literary ideology" sought to counter shifted from "politics" to "commerce." In the view of some scholars, this caused "pure literature" to lose its original theoretical passion, moving from "avant-garde" to "conservative," no longer able to "intervene in the immense social transformations underway through literature's unique means," and eventually absorbed into the mainstream academic system. Other scholars have warned that under new historical conditions, "pure literature" could itself become a new mechanism of repression—taken as a self-evident premise, it risks losing its critical efficacy and "replacing the object it criticizes to become the embodiment of a new political ideal" (He,2007).Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that no text is born in a vacuum: every practice is inevitably conditioned by social and historical factors, and these very constraints are the preconditions and grounding that enable practice to unfold. In this sense, the "insights" and "blind spots" in *The Cold Face of Reality*'s portrayal of Lu Xun the writer can truly be called twin brothers born of a specific historical context.

Although "Rewriting Literary History" came to a somewhat hasty close in the late 1980s, a retrospective examination of this literary trend, now absorbed into academic history, reveals that the series of issues on which "rewriting" and the "pure literary ideology" it rested were focused have by no means vanished with the changing times; rather, they have taken on more complex and diverse forms under new historical conditions. Of particular importance among these is the sustained reflection on the independent spirit and critical stance of intellectuals. As Zhang Jun observed in assessing the gains and losses of "rewriting": "The more important academic value of 'rewriting' lies in the reconstruction of the intellectual scholarly tradition," touching upon "the question of an intellectual's moral integrity in an increasingly complex realistic environment"(Zhang,2024,p.84-86) .This observation not only discloses the internal logic connecting "Rewriting Literary History" with the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit" that erupted soon after, but also pinpoints a core thread in the transmission and transformation of intellectual culture from the

[2] All references to Lu Xun's stories in this essay adopt the English titles as translated by Julia Lovell.

1980s into the 1990s—the question of intellectual identity. Shaken by the market-economy tide of the 1990s, Wang Xiaoming consciously took Lu Xun as a spiritual coordinate for reflecting on intellectuals' self-positioning, and this became the inner impetus behind his biographical project on "Lu Xun the thinker".

4 Wandering Without Ground: The "Standing Sideways" Posture and the Refashioning of Lu Xun the Thinker

The term "standing sideways" comes from a letter Lu Xun wrote to Yang Jiyun in 1934, in which he recounted his awkward predicament of being caught between "enemies" (the Kuomintang authorities) and "comrades" (the left-wing camp), forced to look ahead and behind at once. As a matter of fact, Lu Xun did take the initiative to approach Marxism in his later years, and he did share many objectives with the revolutionaries—opposing the Kuomintang autocracy, recognizing the power of the grassroots masses, actively championing proletarian literature, and so on. Nevertheless, the biography does not treat Lu Xun simply as a revolutionary fighter; rather, it consistently emphasizes that Lu Xun "was at heart still a May Fourth-style intellectual" (Wang,2021,p.197)."May Fourth-style," in broad outline, refers to a commitment to the enlightenment ethos, a defense of the independence of literature and art, and an autonomous stance unaffiliated with any particular political group. In Wang Xiaoming's narrative, it is precisely because Lu Xun was unwilling to entrust his thought entirely to any external ideology that he always maintained a subtle distance from the revolutionaries. He remained at all times skeptical of the revolutionary view of linear historical progress, and he harbored reservations about the "sanctity of the people" the revolutionaries proclaimed. However forcefully he insisted on the propagandistic function of literature, he was equally convinced that art must not become a political appendage. Beyond this, in the course of his actual interactions with revolutionaries, Lu Xun keenly perceived the narrow utilitarianism, factional tendencies, and authoritarianism within the revolutionary camp. The anonymous attacks that periodically came from the left-wing camp particularly disgusted him, and the utilitarian attitude of the cultural leaders—"who clearly did not respect him, yet sought to leverage and use him"(Wang,2021,p.205)—left him deeply disillusioned. Ideological differences, compounded by personal entanglements, forced Lu Xun to adopt a posture of "standing sideways": at once fighting against enemies while guarding against sneak attacks from "comrades." "Because they faced a common enemy, they appeared to be united, but in their bones they were in fact two different kinds of people" (Wang,2021,p.206).Organizing the relevant biographical facts about Lu Xun and the revolutionaries around the keyword "standing sideways," the biography vividly depicts the profound loneliness and physical and mental exhaustion Lu Xun experienced in his later years trapped in political turmoil, thereby bringing into relief the side of Lu Xun that maintained a critical distance from revolution. An image of Lu Xun as a thinker who, for the sake of maintaining intellectual independence, was willing to confront despair and suffering head-on is hereby constructed.

The far more important reason why the biography places such value on Lu Xun's "standing sideways" cultural posture in his later years is, perhaps, that these two words give expression to the predicament of some intellectuals in the 1990s, at a loss between the old and the new, the mainstream and the marginal. In Lu Xun's "standing sideways" posture, Wang Xiaoming could clearly see his own reflection. In multiple interviews, Wang Xiaoming has spoken of a profound "shock" (or traumatic experience) he underwent in the 1990s: the binary intellectual structures and discursive modes were gradually losing their effectiveness, and the "modern imagination" in which most intellectuals had once placed such high hopes, when realized in actuality, bore bitter fruits of money worship and moral decline, prompting a segment of intellectuals to re-examine their earlier pro-modernization and pro-Westernization stances. Against this background, in 1993 Shanghai Literature published Wang Xiaoming's dialogue with his students, "Ruins on the Wilderness—The Crisis of Literature and Humanistic Spirit," which immediately provoked immense social repercussions and raised the curtain on the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit." Wang Xiaoming and other "humanistic spirit advocates" argued that contemporary Chinese cultural life was confronting a profound crisis, manifested above all in people abandoning the pursuit of a transcendent spiritual dimension to worship secular utility instead—litterateurs and scholars one after another plunging into business, readers of serious literature dwindling by the day. Unlike the "secular spirit advocates" who held an optimistic view of modernization, the "humanistic spirit advocates" did not believe that the market economy was a panacea for all social ills, nor that spiritual civilization would grow in tandem with material civilization. At the same time, they deeply detested the autocracy and radical violence brought about by the earlier ultra-left ideology, which placed them in a predicament similar to Lu Xun's "standing sideways": they had to defend an abstract "humanistic spirit" while remaining perpetually vigilant against its reversal into its opposite, its regression into a new repressive discourse. Wang Xiaoming's particular fondness for the phrase "standing sideways" arises precisely from its condensation of the unique spiritual trajectory of his generation of intellectuals—from the ecstasy of "setting things right" in the late 1970s to the sudden aphasia and disorientation following the collapse of the "modernity myth" in the 1990s. Lu Xun's "standing sideways" posture provided Wang Xiaoming with a historical reference point for confronting his own dilemma, and Lu Xun himself, as a thinker, thereby became an example from which later generations of intellectuals could draw lessons.

As Dai Jinhua has observed, the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit" touched on many important social and cultural issues in 1990s China, one of which was intellectuals' reflection on their own role and function(Dai,2018,p.67). As the debate neared its conclusion, Wang Xiaoming likewise emphasized that the controversy "can to a large extent be seen as intellectuals' self-interrogation and self-purification" (Wang.1996,p.272),with the main content of this reflection being a critique of "the defects in intellectuals' own consciousness structure" and an examination of the historical and cultural traditions through which

that structure was formed. It is this spirit of reflection, sustained throughout, that enables the biography to face Lu Xun with an attitude of equality. The biography both praises Lu Xun's transcendence of the "modernization" myth and reveals the constraints imposed on his thought by the traditional culture of the ancient Chinese literati, its aim being to take Lu Xun as a spiritual coordinate in order to find a way out of the predicament intellectuals faced in the "post-New Era." Wang Xiaoming maintains that modern culture since the May Fourth Movement has tended to solve practical problems—a utilitarian-oriented culture—leading to a neglect of ultimate values such as the meaning of existence, while traditional Chinese scholar-official culture, when encountering setbacks, was prone to lapse into a passive, world-withdrawing nihilism. Lu Xun's exceptional quality lay in the fact that he consistently evaluated people and the world from a spiritual dimension; what concerned him was not only the growth of material civilization but, still more, humankind's spiritual self-perfection and transcendence. Yet immersed over a long period in a utilitarian culture, Lu Xun could not entirely avoid wavering: in his middle age, he threw himself into enlightenment together with his fellow New Literature writers; in his later years, he formed an alliance with left-wing revolutionaries. While these can be seen as efforts to resist his own despair, they were nonetheless in some measure motivated by utilitarian considerations and to a certain extent compromised the intellectual's precious independent stance. In sum, Wang Xiaoming affirms Lu Xun's transcendence of "modern superstition" and his concern for the "greater human being" in a spiritual sense, but he also points out that, when faced with setbacks, Lu Xun sometimes revealed a "nihilistic urge" to simply play around or attend to his own private concerns, and at other times anxiously sought new spiritual sustenance, displaying an overly optimistic credulity. The lack of courage to carry pessimism through to the end, turning instead to nihilism or practical utility—this is a spiritual defect lodged deep in the bones of Chinese intellectuals. [3]Wang Xiaoming cannot help sighing in the biography: "Intellectuals who under no circumstances will shift their convictions and who continue to uphold the dimensions of thought and speech—truly, how few they are." (Wang,2021,p.185)This is at once his portrait of the ideal intellectual and an expression of his own aspirations. In this sense, writing Lu Xun's biography became for Wang Xiaoming a means of intervening in his era and society through his own action, and it is precisely here that one finds a precious spiritual legacy left by intellectuals during the "Debate on Humanistic Spirit."

4. Conclusion

To supplement and revise the public's established impression of the subject is a hallmark shared by all outstanding biographies the world over, and *The Cold Face of Reality*: A Biography of Lu Xun is precisely such a work—a biography of Lu Xun imbued with deep-seated concern for reality and abundant personal experience. "Pure literary ideology" underpins the biography's refashioning of "Lu Xun the writer," restoring attention to a body of works that represent the height of Lu Xun's thought and literary achievement. Confronting the impact of commercialization in the 1990s, Wang Xiaoming and other intellectuals found resonance in Lu Xun's independent posture of "standing sideways" amidst contending intellectual currents. Wang Furen, a leading figure in New Era Lu Xun studies, once designated his own research as "enlightenment-school Lu Xun studies," noting that its principal characteristic is "striving to break free from the interference of yet another authoritative language imposed on the self and on Lu Xun, and using one's own lived experience of reality to communicate directly with Lu Xun and his works in thought and emotion" (Wang,2006,p.179).This is indeed the most distinctive feature of a whole body of New Era Lu Xun scholarship, including *The Cold Face of Reality*. For precisely this reason, the image of Lu Xun trapped in contradiction and anguish that the biography sculpts has become a deeply valuable and compelling face of "Lu Xun in the New Era," joining with the work of other researchers to liberate Lu Xun from the instrumentalizing and dogmatizing system of image construction.

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[3] It is worth noting that in the newly revised 2021 edition of *The Cold Face of Reality: A Biography of Lu Xun*, Wang Xiaoming adopts a more positive understanding of Lu Xun's "fighting against despair." Thirty years ago, he deeply regretted that Lu Xun had not carried his pessimistic conviction to its logical conclusion, and he was not without some criticism of Lu Xun's eagerness to find spiritual support. Now, he is more inclined to attribute this eagerness to Lu Xun's stubborn refusal ever to come to terms with reality. This spirit—taking despair as the precondition for resistance, and in turn endowing despair with meaning through that resistance—is precisely Lu Xun's distinctive contribution to modern thought and the enduring source of his greatness.

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