Did the Chinese modernists internalize Orientalism? Lu Xun on the appropriation of the foreign

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Lu Xun, one of the most radical thinkers in modern Chinese history, is also one of the superb satirists in modern Chinese literature. He once ridiculed those cultural conservatives who worried about the assimilation of foreign ideas from the West as a dangerous process in which the Chinese would lose their identity and become foreigners themselves. Using a metaphor of eating and digestion, Lu Xun argues that "when we eat, we just eat, and it won't do if we are overly cautious this way or that, fearing indigestion when eating beef and falling into suspicion when drinking a cup of tea." He then further develops the metaphor, saying: "Even if it is Western civilization, insofar as we can assimilate it, what is Western will become part of

our own. This is just like eating beef; no one will ever turn into a cow because one has eaten beef."[1] The metaphor of eating is of course one of the basic metaphors often used in conceptualizing the process of absorbing ideas as a kind of spiritual or intellectual food. Such metaphors, as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson observe, "partially structure our everyday concepts," and such a structure is "reflected in our literal language."[2]

In the Western tradition, the famous manna with which God feeds the hungry Israelites in the wilderness to teach them that "man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live" (Deut. 8: 3) is probably one of the earliest examples that makes an explicit contrast between bread as material food and God's word as spiritual nourishment. At the beginning of Book III of his Confessions, St. Augustine speaks of his hunger for "inward food," which is God.[3] The metaphorical eating of God's word as "inward food" may very well be conceptualized as a means to revert the disastrous effect of a much earlier act of eating, namely, the eating of the forbidden tree by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, which Augustine famously identified as

1. Lu Xun, *On the intellectual class*, *in Lu Xun Quanji* [*The complete works of Lu Xun*], 16 vols., Beijing, Renmin wenxue, 1981, v. 8, p. 192.

2. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 1980, p. 46.

3. St. Augustine, *The confessions*, trans. J. G. Pilkington, *in Basic writings of St. Augustine*, 2 vols., ed. Whitney J. Oates, New York, Random House, 1948, v. 1, p. 29.

the original sin. From this we can see that metaphorical eating may produce very different and even opposite results. "As a consequence of the IDEAS ARE FOOD metaphor," Lakoff and Johnson argue, "we get new (metaphorical) similarities between ideas and food: both can be swallowed, digested, and devoured, and both can nourish you."[4] That may remind us of what Francis Bacon says of reading: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."[5] But as Augustine's notion of the original sin suggests, the metaphorical eating of ideas as food, symbolized by Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, can also poison you and bring about bad consequences.

During the May Fourth new culture movement, when many Chinese intellectuals tried to introduce new ideas from the West for the rejuvenation of China, Lu Xun had no problem arguing with confidence and conviction that eating was good for you, and that without first eating and tasting, and perhaps even getting poisoned in the process, you would not have any medical knowledge about your own health. Thus he had great respect for those ancient predecessors who were courageous enough to try out different herbs and food, and thereby "learned that such and such was the medicine for a particular disease."[6] As Lu Xun understood it, China was

4. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors we live by*, p. 148.

5. Francis Bacon, "Of studies," *in The essays or counsels civil and moral*, ed. Brian Vickers, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 114.

6. Lu Xun, "Of experience," *Complete works*, v. 4, p. 539.

weak at the time and badly in need of new ideas as spiritual nourishment, and no rejuvenation or transformation of China was possible without tasting and eating the various ideas as intellectual food from the modern West.

Since the 1990s, however, as China is changing rapidly from a state-controlled and planned socialist economy toward limited privatization and market economy, and particularly as the new ideas now assimilated from the contemporary West are the theories of Orientalism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism, a number of serious and ironic questions have emerged with regard to the absorption of foreign ideas at the beginning of the twentieth century, namely: was Lu Xun and his May Fourth contemporaries doing the right thing in assimilating modern Western ideas? Was the consequence of the metaphorical eating and digestion Lu Xun advocated a disastrous one for China? Did the Chinese modernists completely internalize Orientalism and become "self-colonized"? If Lu Xun and his generation of May Fourth intellectuals were confident of the spiritual nourishment of foreign ideas, some contemporary critics in China, in a way like Augustine contemplating the eating of the forbidden tree, tend to think of the assimilation of foreign ideas as a disaster. I said that those questions raised above are "ironic," because the very questioning of the assimilation of Western ideas during the May Fourth is predicated on the newly assimilated contemporary Western ideas of postmodernism, Orientalism, and postcolonialism. The critique of modernity first started in the West, and it is then introduced into China, but with

this significant difference—while in the West, theories of Orientalism and postmodernism function as a self-critique, that is, a critique of the Western tradition of culture, politics, and the infamous history of Western imperialism and colonialism, in China the introduced theories of Orientalism and postmodernism function not as a self-critique, but as a critique of Western hegemony, colonialism, and imperialism, and therefore wittingly or unwittingly serve as a defense of the native Chinese tradition against the modernist culture originated in the West, represented by the May Fourth generation of intellectuals, of whom Lu Xun has always been a radical and influential exponent.

The situation is ironic because Edward Said himself has mentioned "the intellectuals of the May 4th Movement" as exemplary intellectuals who could "provocatively disturb the monumental calm and inviolate aloofness of the tradition."[7] And yet, it is on the authority of Said's theory of Orientalism that the May Fourth intellectuals are now being chastised by postmodernist critics in China for destroying the indigenous tradition. Having assimilated theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism, or what is known in China as post-ism (*houxue*), those critics consciously represent a new trend in what they call a "post-new era," defined against the cultural critique in the 1980s that continued the May Fourth quest for democracy, freedom, and liberal ideas. However, the crucial moment or event that precipitated China from the self-critical 1980s into the more

7. Edward W. Said, *Representations of the intellectual*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 37.

complacent "post-new era" of the 1990s is undoubtedly the traumatic experience of the crackdown of pro-democracy student demonstrations in Tiananmen in 1989. After the Tiananmen incident, it became difficult to voice any internal critique in the tightened ideological control despite the relaxation of social life in many other aspects, especially in economic development that encourages the rise of commercialism and consumerism in China. In fact, even today, the Tiananmen massacre and the Cultural Revolution remain taboo subjects in China, and they have never been brought into clear reflection in the post-ist theorizing about Chinese modernity and its critique. The subject of the Tiananmen trauma, as Xu Ben observes, "remains a forbidden zone of public discussion in China," but without understanding that traumatic experience as an important part of the general background for the rise of postmodernism and Orientalism in China in the 1990s, Chinese post-ism only "conceals its own historicity."[8] It is not surprising, then, that many critics find Chinese post-ist theory culturally and politically conservative because of

> its repudiation of basic democratic ideals and values of social change that were introduced by the May Fourth Movement and its denigration of the May Fourth Movement as a dangerous initiator of radicalism in modern China.[9]

Given the changed historical situation and the questions raised about the assimilation of foreign and Western ideas

8. Xu Ben, *Disenchanted democracy: Chinese cultural criticism after 1989*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 103.

9. *Ibid*., p. 178-9.

during the May Fourth, it is perhaps necessary to revisit those moments of modern history within which Lu Xun's radical proposals and arguments would make sense. To fully understand Lu Xun, we need to go back not just to the May Fourth of 1919, but the cultural and political conditions in the late Qing, which eventually led to the collapse of China's last imperial dynasty at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is no exaggeration to say that there had been a strong sense of a crisis of national survival in modern Chinese history since the late Qing, and for the traditional literati it was first and foremost a crisis of Chinese culture and tradition. Defeated first by Western powers in the Opium Wars and then by Japan as a rising power in Asia after the Meiji reformation, the Qing empire was fully exposed to be weak and in decline. All those who had any sense of the situation realized at the time that China was in danger of being vanquished if the Chinese should refuse to reform and change.

In as early as 1814 and 1815, some thirty years before the Opium Wars, Gong Zizhen already called upon the Qing government to carry out "self-reform," and remarked that the rise of a new dynasty had always depended on change and reform:

> when we think of the rise of the first emperor of our own dynasty, was it not the result of overcoming the failures of the previous dynasty? And of the rise of that previous dynasty, was it not the result of overcoming the failures of the dynasty before it?[10]

10. Gong Zizhen, *Gong Zizhen quanji* [*Gong Zizhen's Complete works*], ed. Wang Peizheng, Shanghai, Shanghai guji, 1999, p. 6.

Half a century later, in 1879, Xue Fucheng, a brilliant scholar and diplomat in the late Qing, argued for the necessity of reform and pointed out that the challenge China faced then was nothing like the threat that the Han, the Tang, the Song, or the Ming dynasties had to encounter, because it was no longer the threat posed by the ethnic minorities in the northwestern border regions, but the unprecedented danger posed by the Western powers never seen before in Chinese history. Facing all those Western nations, Xue Fucheng remarks, "all countries in the world have to establish diplomatic and trade relations," and China "cannot be the exception by simply closing its doors and maintaining its rule in isolation."[11] In a competitive world of nations, he saw no other way out for China except through reform: "without reform, we shall be poor while others rich," says Xue; "without reform, we shall be clumsy while others agile; (…) without reform, we shall be retarded while others quick; (…) without reform, we shall be isolated while others united, and we shall be weak while others strong."[12] The conservatives at the time charged the reformers with the crime of "following Westerners and changing China with barbarian ways," to which Xue gave a resounding answer:

> No! The Chinese and the foreign are indeed different in clothing, language, and customs, but they are the same in making use of nature's gifts to benefit their own people. The Westerners are just one step

11. Xue Fucheng, 1994. *Chou yang chuyi—Xue Fucheng ji* [*Preliminary argument for dealing with foreign affairs and other essays—Xue Fucheng's Collected works*], ed. Xu Suhua, Shenyang, Liaoning renmin, 1994, p. 88.

12. *Ibid*., p. 89.

> ahead of us, how can one say that they should monopolize the benefits from nature's secrets? And who is to say that China cannot surpass them in a hundred years?[13]

Xue Fucheng clearly understood reform as a process of learning from the West, but the goal was not and could not be the change of China into a foreign country; rather, it could only be the search for a way of self-strengthening that would eventually lead China out of the quagmire of poverty and weakness toward prosperity and power. In a letter to a friend written a few years earlier (1875), he mentioned that someone had attacked reform as "nothing but mimicry of others and praise of the strength of others, contrary to the sense of the word 'self.'" He replied by using food and medicine metaphors that remind us of Lu Xun's metaphorical expressions discussed earlier:

> but if one refuses self-strengthening because of one's aversion to the strength of others, that would be as foolish as giving up eating for fear of choking or keeping away from doctors for fear of exposure of one's diseases.[14]

Like Lu Xun many decades later, Xue Fucheng argued that to learn from the West was as necessary as eating food or taking medicine, which would provide all the nutrition China needed to recover its health and strength.

Around the time of the Opium Wars, the self-reform or self-strengthening movement in the late Qing started with the recognition that the West was more advanced in mili-

13. *Ibid*., p. 90.

14. *Ibid*., p. 51.

tary technologies and equipments. Those who realized the necessity to change the situation, e.g., Lin Zexu and Wei Yuan, proposed to "learn the barbarians' superior technologies," which gradually developed into a discourse of "Chinese essence and Western functionalities." For example, Feng Guifen proposed to "have our basis in the Chinese teachings of ethical relationships, supplemented by the techniques of all the other countries in strengthening the nation."[15] Then Zhang Zhidong further argued for

> Chinese learning as inner knowledge, while Western learning as external knowledge; Chinese learning for the cultivation of the mind and the body, while Western learning for dealing with practical matters.[16]

He then summarized his ideas in the principle of "traditional learning as essence and new learning as functionalities," and clarified what he meant by these through further specification that

> the Four Books and the Five Classics, books on Chinese history, political theory and geography constitute traditional learning, while Western politics, Western arts and Western history constitute the new learning.[17]

This famous principle of "Chinese essence and Western functionalities" can be said to offer a theoretical justification of the late Qing effort at "self-reform," and it did

15. Feng Guifen, *Jiaobinlu kangyi* [*Candid proposals from the Jiaobin Studio*], Shanghai, Shanghai shudian, 2002, p. 57.

16. Zhang Zhidong, *Quan xue pian* [*Exhortation to study*], Shanghai, Shanghai shudian, 2002, p. 71.

17. *Ibid*., p. 41.

have a remarkable impact at the time for the introduction of new ideas and technologies from the West. The precise nature of what he called the essence and the functionalities, as well as their relationships, however, were difficult to define and even more difficult to balance; and as the reform movement pushed further forward, their limitations became more and more prominent.

Some scholars have argued that Zhang Zhidong's ideas, though originally meant to justify the effort to learn from the West, had then become "an impediment to learning from the West in fundamental ways," which proves that

> all those attempts to persistently define cultural integration of Chinese and Western ideas in China in terms of "essence" and "functionality," "roots" and "twigs," "the main" and "the subordinate," "the way" and "the tool" etc., must eventually fall into the difficulties of self-contradictory claims and inconsistencies.[18]

Although Zhang Zhidong advocated for practical knowledge and engaged in matters related to foreign countries, his ultimate goal was to preserve the political establishment of the Qing empire and therefore fundamentally different from the idea of constitutional monarchy proposed by the more radical reformers. As a matter of fact, he published *Quan xue pian* or *Exhortation to study* precisely to make a clear distinction between his own ideas and the reformist proposal of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. Thus he declared in no ambiguous terms that the three eth-

18. Ding Weizhi and Chen Song, *Zhong Xi ti yong zhijian* [*Between China and the West, essence and functionalities*], Beijing, Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1995, p. 173.

ical principles, that is, "the monarch rules over the subjects, the father rules over the son, and the husband rules over the wife," were absolute principles that made China what it was and should never be questioned or challenged. "Once we know the principle of monarch over the subjects, we cannot put into practice the idea of the rights of the people," says Zhang Zhidong; "once we know the principle of father over the son, we cannot have them bear the same legal responsibilities or abolish ancestor worship or funeral rituals; once we know the principle of husband over wife, we cannot implement the idea of equal rights for men and women."[19] Now, if we admit that rights of the people or democracy and equal rights for men and women are two of the most basic ideas of a modern society, we can see clearly how utterly contrary to such ideas is Zhang Zhidong and his fundamentally royalist political agenda. Such a political tendency was understandable when the Qing imperial regime was still in control, but the conservative nature of the principle of "Chinese essence and Western functionalities" became increasingly obvious as the reform deepened.

The failure of the 1898 Reform made it clear that the Qing Empire could not possibly carry out a "self-reform" to success. Quoting the line of a poem written by Kang Youwei after the failed Reform—"The old dream of reform has vanished like smoke"—, the distinguished historian Zhu Weizheng observes that this line "can be said to have summed up very succinctly the one hundred year's process

19. Zhang Zhidong, *Exhortation to study*, p. 12.

of the Qing empire's self-reform from fantasy to complete disillusionment."[20] The disillusioned Chinese now realized that it was only wishful thinking to expect any meaningful "self-reform" of those in power under the old regime; thus Liang Qichao published *On the new people* at the beginning of the twentieth century to argue for a new political program. "A new nation does not mean that we abandon all the old things to follow others," says Liang. "What I mean by 'new' has two senses: first, temper what we already have to make it new; and second, take as supplement what we do not have to acquire the new."[21] Obviously, nothing new could come out of the blue, completely assimilated from the West, but Liang did emphasize the necessity of a more open-minded attitude towards Western learning as the only way to self-strengthening. "We don't have to bother if we do not desire a stronger China," says Liang.

> But if we do, then we have no choice but to investigate widely the ways in which various other nations have established themselves, and choose and take whatever is their advantage to make up what we lack.[22]

Commenting on Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's "new theories," Ding Weizhi and Chen Song maintain that the most important new insight in Kang and Liang was their

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20. Zhu Weizheng, intro to Zhu Weizheng and Lung Yingtai (eds.), *Wei wancheng de geming: wuxu bainian ji* [*The unfinished revolution: the centenary of the 1898 reform*], Taipei, The Commercial Press, 1998, p. 26.

21. Liang Qichao, *Xinmin Shuo* ["On the new people"], *in Liang Qichao xuanji* [*Liang Qichao's Selected Works*], eds. Li Huaxing and Wu Jiaxun, Shanghai, Shanghai renmin, 1984, p. 211.

22. *Ibid*., p. 212.

realization that it was imperative "to break through the old framework of 'Chinese essence and Western functionalities,' and to draw on Western learning to transform Chinese learning."[23] That is to say, "Chinese essence and Western functionalities" as an idea was already bankrupt even before the 1911 Revolution, while "Westernization" gradually emerged as a new current of thought, which became more influential after the 1911 Revolution that overthrew the last imperial dynasty in China. In the early years of the twentieth century, therefore, Westernization or assimilating what was "foreign" can be said to characterize most Chinese intellectuals' understanding of modernization, of which science and democracy constitute the core ideas.

It is in such a historical context that we must understand Lu Xun and his radical iconoclasm, which in many ways represent the May Fourth generation of Chinese intellectuals. An essay Lu Xun wrote in 1934, "Reflections starting from my son's photographs," may be read as an exemplary piece that clearly shows his idea of appropriation of the foreign and why he thought China should have such appropriations. He begins with the observation that the Chinese always prefer their children, either at home or in a photographer's studio, to look docile and submissive, "for only an obedient child with his eyes looking down and saying yes to every command is considered a good child," whereas

23. Ding Weizhi and Chen Song, *Between China and the West, essence and functionalities*, p. 191.

> being active, healthy, having one's own will, holding one's head high and looking upward, (…) or whatever belongs to "moving around," would send the adults shaking their heads, or even be blamed for posing a "foreign air."[24]

The Chinese, as Lu Xun describes them, generally tend to repress the natural qualities of vitality and activeness, and it is the so-called "foreign air" that encourages uninhibited development of one's own nature, which is precisely what is badly needed in China. Deliberately speaking in ironic exaggeration and throwing sarcasm on those conservatives who would have absolutely nothing to do with the dreaded "foreign air," Lu Xun depicted them in a striking caricature:

> And because we have been suffering from aggression for years, we become inimical to this "foreign air." We even go one step further and deliberately run counter to this "foreign air": as they like to act, we would sit still; as they talk science, we would depend on divination; as they dress in short shirts, we would put on long robes; as they emphasize hygiene, we would eat flies; as they are strong and healthy, we would rather stay sick. (…) Only this qualifies as preservation of our indigenous Chinese culture; only this qualifies as patriotism; and only this is not falling into subservience.[25]

Obviously, "patriotism" and "preservation of China's indigenous culture" were touted by the conservatives as their virtues, while they attacked the effort to learn from the West as a symptom of "subservience." Lu Xun goes on to say, however, that the Chinese used to be in possession of

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24. Lu Xun, "Reflections starting from my son's photographs," *Complete works*, v. 6, p. 81.

25. *Ibid*., v. 6, p. 82.

some of the good qualities now considered to be part of the "foreign air," for "having been repressed throughout history in various dynasties, these have long withered away and become unrecognizable even to ourselves, so they are now all consigned to foreigners." But even if those good qualities are not what we have, says Lu Xun, "we should learn as long as they are good. And we should learn even if the teacher is an enemy of ours."[26] This reminds us of Liang Qichao's argument in *On the new people*, published some thirty years earlier, in which Liang already remarked that what is new means "first, refine what we already have to make it new; and second, take as supplement what we do not have to acquire the new." The aim in promoting a "new nation" is

> to find out the root of our nation's corruption and decline, to compare that with the reason of other nations' growth and development, so that our people will know where we go wrong, alert ourselves to the crisis, and try to move forward.[27]

From this it is clear that the notion of reforming the Chinese nation, reshaping it with new ideas and new learning from foreign countries, particularly "nations of the extreme West," had been put forward in a definitive form at least in Liang Qichao's works.

From the late Qing "self-reform" to the concept of a "New Nation" before the 1911 Revolution, and then to the reshaping of "national character" during the May Fourth,

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26. *Ibid*.

27. Liang Qichao, *Liang Qichao's Selected works*, p. 355.

represented by Lu Xun, we can detect an inner connection, which also shows the trajectory of change and intellectual development in modern Chinese history from a royalist ideology to the advocacy of democracy and freedom. In his preface to *A call to arms*, Lu Xun describes the late Qing and early Republican China he knew and experienced as an "iron house with absolutely no windows and utterly indestructible."[28] This famous metaphor puts emphasis on the enormous difficulty of reform, and in publishing short stories such as "A madman's diary" and "The true story of Ah Q" in the *New Youth* magazine and the *Morning Post Literary Supplement*, Lu Xun clearly aimed at changing the Chinese "national character" or the "Chinese spirit," for which he believed that "arts and literature are first and foremost" among all the tools "effective in spiritual transformation."[29] Very quickly Lu Xun found the most effective form in the essay, with which he engaged in the critique of "national character" and launched vehement attacks on the conservative notion of "national essence." He was more radical and more thorough in his critique of the old tradition than any reformers before, and his influence was also much greater in the transformation of Chinese culture from the pre-modern to the modern form. He called for the Chinese to take the initiative, to choose and grab all the new ideas and concepts that are beneficial, though foreign, to China for its self-strengthening. What

28. Lu Xun, "Preface to A call to arms," *Complete works*, v. 1, p. 419.
29. *Ibid*., v. 1, p. 417.

was "grabbed" by the Chinese themselves would be totally different from what was "sent over" by the imperialists and colonialists. In that sense, what he called "grabism" was an important means for the reshaping of "national character."[30] Lu Xun realized, as did many intellectuals since the late Qing, that for China to survive the crisis and to grow strong, it was absolutely necessary to learn from foreign nations, and from the West in particular. Therefore, after the May Fourth, Lu Xun became one of the most influential figures during the 1920s and the 1930s in criticizing the old tradition and advocating new ideas and knowledge drawn from foreign sources.

In January 1925, the *Peking Daily Literary Supplement* set up a column of "Young Readers' Must-Read Books" and asked several prominent scholars for suggestions. Lu Xun's reply was definitely the most controversial as it reads: "I suppose one should read less—or even no—Chinese books, but read more foreign books." He further explains that

> Even though Chinese books may contain remarks to persuade you to engage in the world's affairs, that is most likely a kind of optimism of the zombies; while foreign books, even those decadent and misanthropic ones, have at least the decadence and misanthropy of people alive.[31]

At that time, cultural conservatism dominated the scene, and reading Confucian classics was being promoted by the

30. Lu Xun, "Grabism," *ibid*., v. 6, p. 38-41.

31. Lu Xun, "Must-read books for the youth," *ibid*., v. 3, p. 12.

government, the war lords, the powerful and the wealthy; and it was against such efforts to promote Confucian classics in all the schools that Lu Xun made that radical statement. His radicalism, however, shocked many readers and enraged those self-appointed defenders of the "national essence," who questioned Lu Xun's motivation and wondered whether he was in favor of "a Europeanized life style." Some called Lu Xun a traitor and alleged that "all traitors are return students from foreign countries with doctor's or master's degrees."[32] A self-styled "young reader" even published an open letter to Lu Xun, demanding that he "move out of China."[33] From the various personal attacks Lu Xun himself collected, we may have a sense of how intense and heated the debate was at the time. Some tried to mock Lu Xun and said: "Those slaves of a foreign master can speak the foreign tongue. As you argue for reading foreign books, you have shown your personality completely bankrupt!" They went even further and asked: "As you say China is no good, are you a foreigner? Why don't you go to a foreign country? Perhaps foreigners don't see you as qualified…"[34]

All this ridiculous nonsense deserved no reply, but as long as there was a proposal for change and reform, such nonsense and personal attacks would appear. Thus when Lu Xun discussed the issue of "foreign air," he had no choice but

32. Lu Xun, "In answer to '…'," *ibid*., v. 7, p. 250.

33. Lu Xun, "My genealogy," *ibid*., v. 3, p. 81.

34. Lu Xun, "The soul of debate," *ibid*., v. 3, p. 29.

> to make this apparently unnecessary statement: I believe that my proposal is not "directed by imperialists" to seduce the Chinese into slavery; while talking patriotism all day and oozing national essence all over the body do not prevent you from being a slave in reality.[35]

Of course, the dichotomy between patriotism or loving China and Westernization or appropriation of the foreign is a false one. The reformers argued for change and for learning from the West because they felt strongly that China must get out of poverty and weakness to stand up in the modern world without being bullied by foreign powers; therefore their appropriation of the foreign and Westernization originated precisely from their love of the country and their desire to make China strong. On the other hand, shutting their eyes on the outside world and mistaking conservatism for patriotism, those cultural conservatives actually served only to aggravate the nation's weak position in their refusal to change, while their narrow-minded nationalism could not be equated with love of China. More importantly, loving one's country cannot be the same as blindly following the powers that be or conforming to the mainstream, while abandoning the task of the intellectual to carry out social criticism. Lu Xun was in that sense a great patriot whose critique of the Chinese "national character," whose praise of "foreign air" and advocacy of "grabism" were all expressions of his deep concerns about China and his fellow countrymen. Indeed, notions of Westernization, mod-

35. Lu Xun, "Reflections starting from my son's photographs," *ibid*., v. 6, p. 82.

ernization, and appropriation of the foreign are all intertwined with the fabric of modern Chinese history, and so are the constant attacks on these notions from conservative quarters. Conservatives in the late Qing opposed reform with such stale ideas as "the great divide between the Chinese and the barbarians," while after the establishment of Republican China they did so in the name of "patriotism" and "national essence," attacking reformers for "Westernization," "foreign air," "subservience to the foreign," or even "selling out our country." Of course, there are also those who genuinely worried about losing the nation's tradition and dignity in the process of modernization and Westernization, to which Lu Xun had responded in many of his essays, and which Lu Xun scholars have often commented on and closely examined. Since the 1990s, however, questions and debates have flared up again that make it necessary to revisit the old debates on Lu Xun's critique of the Chinese "national character" and his advocacy of appropriating the foreign, and try to understand the relevancy of such debates under the new social and political circumstances.

From the 1950's till the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Chinese literary criticism was highly politicized and ideological. Because Mao Zedong himself had made some positive remarks on Lu Xun, this modern writer was "deified" as a "standard-bearer and pioneer" of the Chinese Revolution, and as a result the richness and complexity of his thoughts were reduced to a simplistic transparency, and Lu Xun scholarship could hardly do anything more than of-

fering a reading in conformity with the official communist ideology. At the time when the dead Lu Xun was being "deified," many intellectuals who had been his friends, students, and close associates when he was alive, e. g., Hu Feng, Feng Xuefeng, etc., were put under attack one by one in ideological campaigns, even branded as "counter-revolutionaries" and put in jail for decades. During that long period of time, particularly during the Cultural Revolution, the name of Lu Xun was completely turned into a tool in political strife, a weapon used by politicians to attack rivals and enemies. Lu Xun was totally disfigured at the very moment when he was "deified," which actually fulfilled what he had himself predicted when he said:

> The misery of a man of letters is not being attacked or ignored when he is alive, but what happens as soon as he is dead and both his words and deeds are gone, when some idiots proclaim to be his close friends and cause a lot of gossip and trouble, with which they can step in the spotlight and make a profit, and turn the corpse into a bait to fish fame and popularity. Now that is truly pathetic.[36]

Given the serious distortion of Lu Xun, it is quite understandable that many have argued for a "de-deification" of Lu Xun after the Cultural Revolution, and it becomes a sign of progress in scholarship to reconsider Lu Xun as an influential writer of the May Fourth period and re-examine his ideas in all their depth and complexity. At the same time, as Chinese society is changing rapidly, great changes are taking place in Chinese intellectual circles and in

36. Lu Xun, "In memory of mr. Wei Suyuan," *ibid*., v. 6, p. 68.

literary scholarship. Of particular interest is the introduction of Western theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism in the 1990s, which have precipitated a rethinking and critique of the efforts at modernization in China since the late Qing, with the critique of Lu Xun as part of this general intellectual trend. Therefore, an examination of these debates and critiques may give us some insight into the main currents of thought in China today.

Breaking up the myth of a deified Lu Xun is indeed a precondition of normal literary criticism and scholarship, but blaming Lu Xun for advocating "Westernization" and appropriation of the foreign deserves our special attention because it has a larger background in the changes of cultural and intellectual conditions in the 1990s. Drawing on newly introduced Western theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism, some critics maintain that China has taken a wrong turn in recent history, particularly in striving for modernization since the May Fourth, and that intellectuals like Lu Xun have made fundamental mistakes in destroying our indigenous tradition, promoting foreign ideas, and arguing for learning from the West. That is to say, the introduced contemporary Western theories provide some cultural and ideological tools for some of the debates in China today, and it is in this context that an article published in 2000 by Feng Jicai, who takes Lu Xun to task in the same old debate on the critique of "national character," may call the attention it may otherwise not deserve. Now, Feng Jicai is a writer, not a scholar, and his article is distinguished by neither origi-

nality nor theoretical sophistication, but the debate it started may be quite revealing of the current tendencies on the cultural scene in China. Put in the historical context of endless debates between reformers and conservatives since the late Qing, Feng's article has nothing particularly distinctive, and its argument does not go beyond the familiar charges against reformers for "changing China with barbarian ways" and "worshipping whatever is foreign." What is different from old arguments in the past, however, is Feng's evocation of the newly introduced idea of Edward Said's Orientalism as the theoretical foundation for his critique of Lu Xun, even though he never directly quotes from Orientalism or mentions Said by name. But it is all the more telling that the idea of Orientalism can be evoked to lay the foundation for argumentation as some kind of an axiom or self-evident truth, the veracity of which needs no proof.

"Lu Xun's critique of the national character originated from Westerners' Orientalist views," says Feng Jicai, and he reminds the reader that

> We must see that his critique of national character came from Western missionaries since 1840 [i.e., the Opium Wars]. These Western missionaries who came earliest to China had written many memoirs, with the national character of the Chinese as their most favorite topic, which became the root and origin of Westerners' Orientalist outlook.[37]

37. Feng Jicai, "Lu Xun's merits and 'faults'," *in* Chen Shuyu (ed.), *Shui tiaozhan Lu Xun? Xin shiqi guanyu Lu Xun de lunzheng* [*Who challenges Lu Xun? Debates on Lu Xun in the new era*], Chengdu, Sichuan wenyi, 2002, p. 405.

There are some factual errors in Feng's remark, because "Western missionaries who came earliest to China" were Jesuits like Matteo Ricci, who arrived in the late Ming China, that is, in the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries, not around the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. These early missionaries were very different from those who arrived after the Opium Wars, and the China they saw was not necessarily weaker in comparison with Europe at that time. Early Western missionaries like Ricci held a view of China drastically different from that of Westerners in the age of colonialism three hundred years later. In the eyes of those opposed to "Westernization," however, all these differentiations do not seem to matter, because Western missionaries are all representatives of Western cultural invasion, who cannot look at China except "from the discriminatory perspective of a self-assured superior race," and their observation and analysis of the Chinese national character are thus "not only one-sided, but also pejorative and damning."[38] The critique of "national character," according to Feng, is "one concept but two contents: one, we criticize ourselves; and the other, Westerners criticize us."[39] He seems to think that Chinese criticizing Chinese belongs to what in the official parlance would be called "internal contradictions among the people," but any foreigner criticizing China would cause

38. *Ibid*., p. 406.

39. *Ibid*., p. 407.

the Chinese to lose face and therefore can only be seen as the Westerner's malicious attempt to "demonize" China.

On this very issue, Lu Xun held an exactly opposite view, for he said: "To whoever comes to China and is able to knit his brows and detests China, I dare to offer my gratitude in respect, because he is definitely not willing to eat the flesh of the Chinese."[40] That does not mean, of course, that Lu Xun considered all foreigners' criticisms of China justifiable, but he did have strong animosity towards those Westerners who appreciated China in the same way as they did an antique, and in that Lu Xun was actually close to Edward Said in spirit, to Said's critique of Orientalism as the Western view of the East as its Other, the exotic object of cultural difference. Thus Lu Xun argues that among foreigners who praise China, there are two kinds that are "unforgivable":

> One kind is those who consider the Chinese to be of an inferior race and deserve to remain so forever, and therefore they purposely praise the old things in China. Another kind is those who wish people all over the world are so very different as to add to their interest in traveling, so they may go to China to see pigtails, to Japan to watch clogs, and to Korea to look at bamboo hats. If people all dress alike, they would feel terribly bored; so they object to the Europeanization of Asia. All these are quite despicable[41]

In Lu Xun's understanding, then, foreigners' criticism of China is not a bad thing insofar as it can goad us into

40. Lu Xun, "Random jottings under the lamp," *Complete works*, v. 1, p. 214.

41. *Ibid*., v. 1, p. 216.

changing and moving forward, whereas indulging oneself in the old tradition and old things, and turning a blind eye to the reality of China's poverty and vulnerability—that would be a real and great danger.

Feng Jicai singles out Chinese characteristics, a book written by the American missionary Arthur H. Smith, and argues that anyone taking a glance at the book, "noticing the general observations of the Chinese national character in that book, would discover how directly such a perspective has influenced Lu Xun." Following this line of argument, then, one should conclude that Arthur Smith, being a missionary from the West, exemplifies Western cultural invasion with his criticism of the Chinese; and that Lu Xun's critique of the Chinese national character, having been influenced by Arthur Smith, cannot be anything but an echo of the Western colonial discourse, and therefore presents a case of self-colonization. Feng chastises Lu Xun for "not seeing the discourse of Western hegemony lurking in the Westerners' analysis of our national character in his time."[42] Moreover, because Lu Xun "with his outstanding short stories has unawares covered up completely the Western ethnocentrism contained in the discourse of national character," for a very long period of time "no one has ever tried to look at the old and arrogant looks of those missionaries hidden behind the concept of national character."[43] According to Feng, then, Lu Xun's critique

42. Feng Jicai, "Lu Xun's merits and 'faults'," p. 405.

43. *Ibid*., p. 406.

of the Chinese "national character" only looks deceptively radical as a program of reform, for it is completely propped up by "the discourse of Western hegemony" and hides behind its radical façade "the old and arrogant looks of those missionaries." Such a criticism is not really very far from the charge brought against Lu Xun of being a "foreigner's slave," guilty of "selling out our country." And yet, from our discussion earlier of the contention since the late Qing, we can see clearly that learning from foreign nations, including Japan, or appropriation of the foreign, has always been part of China's progression towards a modern society, ever since Lin Zexu and Wei Yuan proposed, after the Opium Wars, to "learn the barbarians' superior technologies"; and that the reshaping of the Chinese national character had been put forward as early as the beginning of the twentieth century when Liang Qichao published *On the new people*, in which he pledged "to find out the root of our nation's corruption and decline." Lu Xun did appreciate Arthur Smith's book, and he found it useful both in materials and ideas, but it is simply not true that prior to reading *Chinese characteristics* Lu Xun had no concept of "critique of the national character." To assume that "Lu Xun's critique of the national character originated from Westerners' Orientalist views" only discloses Feng's total ignorance of modern Chinese history; to present his position as one meant to protect China's dignity and interest, and yet to set that position on the basis of the theory of Orientalism newly introduced from the United States, only renders his whole argument dubious.

It is interesting to note that ignorance of history may unwittingly indicate changes in historical conditions. The kind of questioning and critique we see in Feng's article published in 2000 would be difficult to imagine in the two hundred years from the late Qing to early Republican China. During that long period of time, facing the threat of Western powers and a world of "might is right," Westernization seemed to be the unquestionable choice for many Chinese intellectuals. If we go even further back to the history of the late Ming and early Qing, we may agree with the historian Zhu Weizheng that Wang Yangming's argument in the late Ming for an introspective understanding of one's own mind without blindly following the authority of ancient sages already created an intellectual space favorable for the spread of "Western learning," and already displayed a positive tendency of "out of the Middle Ages," because "the logic of Wang's teachings necessarily led to the breaking up of all the mental shackles of Confucian doctrines of ethical relationships, including that of the 'great divide between the Chinese and the barbarians.'"[44] According to Zhu Weizheng, the Qing evidential scholarship from the reign of emperor Kangxi to that of emperor Qianlong had unexpected affinities with "Western learning" in nature, structure, methodology, and intentions. That is to say, the rise of "Western learning" and the formation of "Westernization" as an important current

44. Zhu Weizheng, *Zouchu zhong shiji* [*Out of the Middle Ages*], Shanghai, Shanghai renmin, 1987, p. 160.

of the times were not the mere result of external impact or stimulation, but logical outcomes of a process of historical evolvement in China with all its internal reasoning and transactions. A nation's history cannot be completely determined by external factors, and it would not be true to the inner matrix of historical development or the reality of China in Lu Xun's time if one assumed that China could have developed the way it did only because of the outside pressure, that is, China could only be "forced into" modernity and modernization by the West. From this we may conclude that to assume that Lu Xun's advocacy of appropriating the foreign and his critique of the Chinese "national character" all originated from "Western missionaries," adopting a Westerner's "Orientalist outlook," is in fact to make an argument without realizing how shallow and superficial that argument really is.

We have, however, entered the world of the 21st century, a world very different from that of a hundred years ago. China has changed, and particularly drastically since the end of the Cultural Revolution, and has become a formidable power not to be neglected by the international community either in economic or in political terms. Under such circumstances, most Chinese, including many Chinese intellectuals, no longer have the sense of a crisis, and they no longer feel, as their predecessors did in the late Qing and early Republican period, that the survival of China is at stake in the struggle for reform and self-strengthening. On the contrary, they have much more confidence and take more pride in themselves;

patriotic and nationalistic feelings have easily replaced the desire for self-critique, while the latest theories now introduced from the West happen to be all strongly self-critical, that is, critical of the West and its tradition. When transported to China, Said's Orientalism and the theories of postmodernism and postcolonialism have thus provided new tools for the negation of China's search for modernization since the May Fourth. This is of course highly ironic, because ever since the late Qing attempt at "self-reform," Chinese intellectuals have always tried to introduce new ideas and theories from the West, and the introduction of postmodern and postcolonial theories from the West today can be said to continue this intellectual trend. Contemporary Western theories are critical of the West itself, and thus, in the very different situation in China they serve to question and criticize all the efforts in China to learn from the West, to reform, to "Westernize" and to "modernize," and at the same time they tend to endorse the preservation of the Chinese "national essence" against any foreign and Western influence. In this sense, the critique of Lu Xun can be seen as indicative of the historical changes taking place in China at the present.

Compared with the time from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, it may be true that we are now in a brave new world, where China's survival is no longer an issue. Instead, we often hear the optimistic prediction that the new 21st century will be China's century, and that optimistic prediction comes from no less an authority than the great British historian Arnold Toynbee. That is certainly encour-

aging, but for a more sober-minded understanding of the present and the future, informed with historical knowledge, we may do well to remember what Lu Xun counseled the Chinese of his own generation many years ago:

> The race that has many who are not self-content will always move forward and always have hope.
> The race that knows only to blame others without reflecting on itself is rife with imminent danger and disasters![45]

45. Lu Xun, "Discontent," *Complete works*, v. 1, p. 359.