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## Lu Xun's Stories and Modern Chinese Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** *One of the most famous figures in the world literature of the twentieth century is Lu Xun. Lu Xun has an irreplaceable place in the history of Chinese literature not only as a writer, but also as one of the signatures that shaped modern literary thought and introduced Chinese literature to the world. The writer began his artistic career with essays, and later wrote different kind of stories, and published a book of poems. Lu Xun, who was interested in European and Russian literature from a young age, underwent a fundamental change in his literary thinking by translating various writers, and later tried to reflect it in his stories. The author of the books "Call to Arms", "The True History of Ah-Q" and numerous critical articles and essays, always tried to demonstrate the problems of his people. Bringing the shortcomings that hindered the development of society to the literary level, Lu Xun considered literature to be the best method of struggle.*

*The article examines Lu Xun's life and creativity, the socio-political events that brought him to literature, and analyzes his stories from different periods. He enunciated the realities of his time and the difficult life of an oppressed Chinese man in his stories. The author, who turned ordinary people into heroes of the story, fought for modern thought without forgetting the tradition and denying Confucianism. Writing his stories in a colloquial Bay-Hua language was also a new phenomenon in the history of Chinese literature. Throughout the article, Lu Xun's stories that differ in plot and composition, such as "Kong Yiji", "Medicine", "A Madman's diary", "An incident", are taken as the subject analysis. The ideological and artistic features of these stories were studied, the theme and content were analyzed.*

**KEYWORDS:** Lu Xun, story, modernity, Chinese literature

**ÖZET :** *Yirminci yüzyılın dünya edebiyatındaki en ünlü figürlerden biri Lu Xun'dur. Lu Xun, Çin edebiyatı tarihinde sadece bir yazar olarak değil, aynı zamanda modern edebi düşüncüyü şekillendiren ve Çin edebiyatını dünyaya tanıtan imzalardan biri olarak vazgeçilmez bir yere sahiptir. Yazar sanatsal kariyerine denemelerle başladı ve daha sonra farklı türlerde hikayeler yazdı ve bir şiir kitabı yayınladı. Küçük yaştan itibaren Avrupa ve Rus edebiyatıyla ilgilenen Lu Xun, çeşitli yazarları çevirerek edebi düşüncesinde köklü bir değişim geçirdi ve daha sonra onu hikayelerine yansıtmaya çalıştı. "Call to Arms", "Ah-Q'nun Gerçek Tarihi" ve sayısız eleştirel makale ve deneme kitabının yazarı, her zaman halkın sorunlarını göstermeye çalıştı. Toplumun gelişmesini engelleyen eksiklikleri edebi düzeye getiren Lu Xun, edebiyatı en iyi mücadele yöntemi olarak görüyordu.*

*Makale, Lu Xun'un yaşamını ve yaratıcılığını, onu edebiyata getiren sosyo-politik olayları inceliyor ve farklı dönemlerden hikayelerini analiz ediyor. Yazarın zamanının gerçeklerini ve ezilen Çinli adamın zor hayatını anlattığı öyküleri çok çarpıcı ve etkileyicidir. Sıradan insanları hikayenin kahramanlarına dönüştüren yazar, geleneği unutmadan ve Konfüçyüsçülüğü inkâr etmeden modern düşünce için savaştı. Hikayeleri konuşma dilinde Bay-Hua dilinde yazmak da Çin edebiyatı tarihinde yeni bir fenomendi. Makale boyunca Lu Xun'un "Kong Yiji", "İlaç", "Bir Delinin Güncesi", "Küçük Bir Olay" gibi kurgu ve kompozisyon bakımından farklı hikayeleri konu analizi olarak ele alınmıştır. Bu öykülerin ideolojik ve sanatsal özellikleri incelenmiş, tema ve içeriği incelenmiştir.*

**KEYWORDS:** Lu Xun, öykü, modernite, Çin edebiyatı

## Introduction

Lu Xun is one of the literary figures who played a major role in the formation and development of Chinese literature and socio-political culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The writer Lu Xun, whose real name was Zhou Shuren, but known as Lu Hong in the West is one of the pioneers of modern Chinese literature and Chinese literary thought. He was born into an intelligent and wealthy family. Although Zhou Shu Zen lived in deprivation due to the loss of his grandfather and father at an early age, he knew poverty and hardship with all his being, but he did not shy away from education and showed a special interest in Western thought. In one of his works, Lu Xun describes his life story in detail and tells interesting facts about the beginning of his educational life: "We became so poor that we did not even have enough money to

pay for my education. Since I did not want to be a merchant's personal secretary (this is a common way for the children of educated people in our villages), my mother ordered me to save some money and find a free school" [Lu, 1959:12].

After graduating from college, Zhou Shu Zen, who witnessed the difficult days of his father with tuberculosis, went to Japan to study medicine with scholarship by Ching Dynasty. He entered KoBun University and attended a preparatory class for Chinese students. Although he wrote his first essay in classical Chinese, he later cut his ponytail, a symbol of loyalty to the palace. These were the first sparks of Lu Xun's future socio-political activity, who carried a sense of freedom and struggle in his soul.

Lu Xun, who studied in Japan for a year, dropped out of school as a result of an accident and began working as a writer. The fate of a Chinese man executed on suspicion of espionage on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War got no reaction, which turned the world of the future writer upside down. He was especially shocked by the indifference of Chinese students to this scene. He writes about this event in the foreword of the book "Call to arms". "It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle" [Lu, 1959:14].

After this event, Zhou Shu Zen realized that China did not need doctors or engineers, but needed art and the treatment of sick souls. A concept of art that criticizes, destroys, recreates and does not bow down to power would heal China and save it from troubles ... Only through the power of art can the Chinese people achieve the modern man they deserve. Therefore, he refuses medical education and took pen in hand. The young writer who lived in Tokyo for some time, translated novels by Jules Verne, as well as Russian and Eastern European stories, into Chinese, and published articles on literature, religion, and social issues [Semantov,1967: 6]. Although the Xunjiang Revolution of 1911 and the overthrow of dictatorship made him hopeful, this feeling was gradually

replaced by despair. Because he realized that the republic he hoped for was incapable of creating the human model he desired. In the new Chinese government led by the bourgeoisie, the people were still hungry, helpless, and continued to be oppressed by the feudal yoke. Numerous murders over the years have completely alienated him from this society. However, the events of 1919, the anti-imperialist the May Fourth Movement, which began as a wave of the October Revolution of 1917, spread throughout China and paved the way for the expansion of revolutionary ideas in literature. Zhou Shu Zen was at the forefront of the intellectuals who revolutionized culture. We see that Lu Xun's political consciousness was formed in the years immediately before and after the May Fourth Movement. He understood the fact that it was possible to liberate the people from oppression, not by enlightenment as previously thought, but only by active struggle, and in the second half of the 1920's he became a "communist by faith", as Mao Zedong called him. Zhou, who began to take an active part in revolutionary literature, opposed the "wen-yan" language used by the authorities, and fought for the "bay-hua" language, which was close to the spoken language.

### **Lu Xun's struggle for a new life and new literature**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, not only China's government system, but also its cultural spheres changed. The country was going through a difficult period, riots and protests were burning. In such a tense socio-political environment, it took courage to write texts that contained revolutionary ideas and addressed ordinary people. Inspired by the change of government and the revolution, Zhou Shu Zen wrote his first stories based on these points. Published in the spoken Chinese language, "bay-hua", stories about criticism of Chinese customs and feudal relations resonated, making Zhou Shu Zen a well-known writer. These stories were also the first works of art to be published under the signature of Lu Xun - over the years, he chose the pseudonym of his mother's surname, Lu, and continued all his work under this name. Although he has books of essays and poems, Lu Xun is better known in the world literature as a storyteller.

Lu Xun wrote his stories in 1918-1926, when he was a "non-communist." He believed that ordinary people would not be able to endure the oppression and torture they were subjected to and would fight

for freedom. The protagonists of Lu Xun's stories were ordinary workers, mostly peasants and educated people, despairing of hard work, hunger and poverty. Officials did not want to see how poor the people were, and at the beginning of the century of technological development and progress, they did not care that the majority of the population was completely illiterate. The feudal system that had existed for centuries had long been forcing revolutionary change. Lu Xun was one of the first authors to express this in his works. It was Lu Xun who drew attention by producing texts in which the voice of the people could be heard, and he was able to express his opinion on this issue. "Lu Xun has always sought to paint modern life. However, at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, with a gradual transition to socialist realism, he was looking for a wider field of image" [Semanov,1967: 459—462 ].

### **A realistic picture of Chinese life in the stories**

In particular, the writer penetrated into the difficult life of the people in the stories "Kong Yiji", "Medicine", "A Madman's diary", "An incident" and wrote about their sad fate. Lu Xun reveals the complex inner world of a simple Chinese man, talking about how the most ordinary person, who is not distinguished by any personality, has deep thoughts.

This point is highlighted in the story "An incident", which is dedicated to the promotion of moral behaviour. The story is about an ordinary chariot driver who teaches a well-dressed educated woman a life lesson as a result of an accident. The story compares two types of people. A middle-class educated woman who does not care about anyone and accepts this as a reality, living with this belief and an uneducated and inexperienced driver with caring behaviour. The rickshaw rider takes it upon himself to help a woman who is crushed on the road without fear of losing his job, and the middle-class educated woman who travels opposes this humanity firstly, but then realizes her mistake and begins to think about her behaviour. "Even now, this remains fresh in my memory. It often causes me distress, and makes me try to think about myself. The military and political affairs of those years I have forgotten as completely as the classics I read in my childhood. Yet this incident keeps coming back to me, often more vivid than in actual life, teaching me shame,

urging me to reform, and giving me fresh courage and hope”[Selected Stories].

The author openly touched on the impact of events happening in China such as revolutionary and political issues on human psychology. One of the main concerns of the author was the elimination of compassion in the existing society, the growth of a generation of people who are more self-interested.

The story of "Kong Yiji" is about a young man who repeatedly tries to get a job, but fails. Faced with many events, this young man lives a miserable life in his middle age, begging and stealing. In a tavern his job is to cheer local workers who regularly visit there after work. One day he disappears, and the detective finds out that he was caught stealing and injured. After this incident, the half-dead Kong Yiji appears only once in the store, accompanied by laughter, and then disappears completely.

Kong Yiji's name also reflected the society's attitude towards him. Because the protagonist has only a surname and the hieroglyphs that make up his name have no meaning, although giving a child a meaningless name was not typical of Chinese culture. The story focuses on this issue: "His last name was Kong, and someone took the first two meaningless hieroglyphs from the school records that followed the Kong hieroglyph and gave him the nickname Kong Yiji"[Lu Xun, 1956:12].

Kong Yiji, Lu Xun's main character in the story is presented as a remnant of the Confucius. He thinks himself superior to everyone and tries to be distinguished by his intelligence that is why he is ridiculed by those around him. What he thinks do not coincide with what he does. Although Kong Yiji promulgates Confucianism, he loses his legs while stealing. The writer decides that Confucian morality has no meaning for people like him, and they have no place in this society.

People around Kong Yiji were also targeted by Lu Xun. Unconscious and insensitive members of society, who are indifferent to human tragedy, no matter what their guilt was, were portrayed in a very realistic way. The tavern keeper noticed that Kong Yiji had not come to drink for days. He thought that he was dead and deleted his unpaid bills, and this man was completely forgotten. Lu Xun was extremely concerned about the insensitive people's indifference to death. In one of his articles, the author writes: "I began to write short stories in order to revive and

rebuild life. Therefore, all my topics are related to the lives of unfortunate people in our sick society. By writing about the pain and illnesses of these people, I wanted to heal them and rebuild society through the power of my work” [Lu ].

In all his stories, Lu Xun portrayed the Chinese village, a realm of oppression. Feudal laws prevailed in village life, and everyone was obliged to obey these laws. In the story of "Medicine" the events took place in one of such villages. The story focuses on the execution of revolutionary Xiao-Shuan and the death of a man with tuberculosis. In this story, Lu Xun targeted ignorant, as well as indifferent Chinese people. Even though they live in the 20th century, those who believe that a blood-soaked ash cake will cure tuberculosis and who sell their young relatives for a small reward are proud of their deeds in the story and hope for a happier future. We see the consequences of this blindness at the end of the story - the millennial myth is shattered, and the young Xiao-shuan dies even if he eats the cake soaked in the blood of the revolutionary Xian. Ordinary people keep losing, but they are still unaware of that. The writer tries to awaken them, writing in the spirit of the urge to struggle. It was no coincidence that he called the first collection of stories "Nakhan" - a challenge.

The author has another influential story called "Tomorrow", which speaks of the same environment and describes and criticizes a society plunged into darkness. At the height of the revolutions and riots, Lucjan was known for its tranquillity. The tranquillity of such a village is disturbed by the death of Shan's son from illness. A woman who is worried about her sick child and is going through difficult times tries to cure him by visiting a fortune teller and making a vow. In the passage from the story, we can clearly see the writer's attitude to what happened. "Fourth Shan's Wife was a simple woman, who did not know what a fearful word "but" is. Thanks to this "but," many bad things turn out well, many good things turn out badly. A summer night is short. Soon after Old Kung and the others stopped singing the sky grew bright in the east; and presently through the cracks in the window filtered the silvery light of dawn” [Lu, 1959:32]. When the child was taken to the doctor, it was too late and impossible to save her life. Lu Xun thought that the more he criticized the existing society, the faster it would learn from its mistakes.

The desire for a new day, more thoughtful, more open-minded society, was at the heart of most of Xun's stories.

### **The first example of modern literature - "A Madman's Diary".**

What made Lu Xun famous and loved by the whole nation was the story of "A Madman's Diary". The story of "A Madman's diary" was first published in the magazine "New Youth" ("*Xunqingnian*") in 1918 and made an overwhelming impression and brought great fame to the author. "Madman's diary" was published at a time when unrest was on the rise in China and the revolution in Russia inspired the struggle for national liberation. To understand the weight and power of an ideologically oriented literary work, it is necessary to imagine the importance traditionally given to the written works in China.

The influence of Russian literature, especially Gogol's work, is felt in this story. Lou Sin "borrowed a form of narration (diary) and a reception of criticism of public evil (perception of the world through the eyes of the mentally ill) from Gogol. [Petrov,1960:151]

The story of "A Madman's diary" consists of daily notes of a schizophrenic patient. In the beginning of the story a young man with serious illness finds his diary and starts reading it. Here we get acquainted with the thoughts of a sick person who doubts everything, does not trust anyone, and interprets the actions of those around him in different ways. Neither the introduction nor the diary discusses the reasons for this, and the ending remains unclear to us. The author focuses only on the shortcomings of society and the wounds in human psychology caused by social problems.

The story, rich in metaphorical nuances, was intended to cover the grim realities of Lu Xun's time. Lu Xun, who opposed Confucianism and considered the human being to be superior to all other values, did not accept the values that oppressed man and destroyed his morality. Although qualities such as honesty and humanity were often mentioned in classical literature, there were also moments that encouraged obedience to the elders and not to oppose them, even if they were wrong.

"In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look this up, but my history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words: "Virtue and Morality." Since I could not sleep anyway, I read intently half the night,



until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words—"Eat people."

All these words written in the book, all the words spoken by our tenant, gaze at me strangely with an enigmatic smile.

I too am a man, and they want to eat me!" [Eydlin 1971:25].

Cannibalism was a deliberately chosen concept that was emphasized throughout the story and makes the people sick of this society. Cannibalism mentioned by Lu Xun was, in fact, a conventional name given to a society dominated by feudalism, where human beings were not valued and where slavery took place. In a society where the strong dominate over the weak, the fact that the weak have the right to live only as long as they obey makes the author think a lot and makes him the main driving force of the Cultural Revolution.

Recalling old books and events, the storyteller explains how people ate each other throughout history and talks about them in separate passages. By associating the behaviour of the people around him with these events, we better understand his feelings and fears. Our hero, who cannot digest the fact that his brother and family are also cannibals, expresses the difficulty of living with this feeling and blames himself for living in this environment and society.

"I can't bear to think of it. I have only just realized that I have been living all these years in a place where for four thousand years they have been eating human flesh. My brother had just taken over the charge of the house when our sister died, and he may well have used her flesh in our rice and dishes, making us eat it unwittingly. It is possible that I ate several pieces of my sister's flesh unwittingly, and now it is my turn, . . . How can a man like myself, after four thousand years of man-caring history—even though I knew nothing about it at first—ever hope to face real men?" [Eydlin, 1971:28].

It is clear that these thoughts are more logical and reasonable than the thoughts of a schizophrenic patient. The story, rich in metaphorical nuances, was intended to cover the grim realities of Lu Xun's time. Lu Xun, who opposed Confucianism and considered the human being to be superior to all other values, did not accept the values that oppressed man and destroyed his morality. Although qualities such as honesty and humanity were often mentioned in classical literature, there were also

moments that encouraged obedience to the elders and not to oppose them, even if they were wrong.

## **Conclusion**

These values, which did not accept human as an independent person with desires and choices, strengthened the love of revolution in the heart of the innovative Lu Xun day by day. Noticing the impact of Confucianism on the development of Chinese society, the author realized that without getting rid of it was impossible to move forward and make China a modern country. However, when considering Lu Xun's work and biography, it is noteworthy that he did not completely deny Confucianism and tradition. Lu Xun wanted to combine tradition and innovation, to see classic and modernity on the same plane, and realized that there was no other way to modernize China.

In all of his stories, with the aim of saving society from this scourge, Lu Xun preached not strength, power, or wealth, but qualities that served humanity and exalted man. Undoubtedly, only a society based on high moral values such as compassion, love, friendship and justice can move the country forward with its free and modern thinking and dynamism.

In all his works, Lu Xun tried to rebuild China and change the system, but as the realities dashed his hopes, he was discouraged. That is why, despite being one of the leading forces of the May Fourth Movement, he has never become a member of the Communist Party or any other. Lu Xun emphasized the importance of governing people with humanism rather than political parties.

## **Sonuç**

İnsanı arzu ve seçimlerle bağımsız bir insan olarak kabul etmeyen bu değerler, yenilikçi Lu Xun'un kalbinde her geçen gün devrim sevgisini güçlendirdi. Konfüçyüsçülüğün Çin toplumunun gelişimi üzerindeki etkisini fark eden yazar, ondan kurtulmadan ilerlemenin ve Çin'i modern bir ülke yapmanın imkansız olduğunu fark etti. Bununla birlikte, Lu Xun'un çalışması ve biyografisi göz önüne alındığında, Konfüçyüsçülük ve geleneği tamamen reddetmediği dikkat çekicidir. Lu Xun, gelenek ve yeniliği birleştirmek, klasik ve modernliği aynı düzlemde görmek istedi ve Çin'i modernleştirmenin başka bir yolu olmadığını fark etmekteydi.

Genel olarak bakarsak, Lu Xun tüm öykülerinde toplumu bu beladan kurtarmak amacıyla güç, iktidar ve ya serveti değil, insanlığa hizmet eden ve insanı ruhen yükselten nitelikleri vaaz etmekteydi. Kuşkusuz, yalnızca şefkat, sevgi, dostluk ve adalet gibi yüksek ahlaki değerlere dayanan bir toplum özgür ve modern düşüncesi ve dinamizmi ile ülkeyi ileriye taşıyabilir

Tüm çalışmalarında Lu Xun, Çin'i yeniden inşa etmeye ve sistemi değiştirmeye çalıştı, ancak gerçekler umutlarını kestiğinde cesaretini kırdı. Bu nedenle, antiemperyalist 4 Mayıs Hareketinin önde gelen güçlerinden biri olmasına rağmen, hiçbir zaman Çin Komünist Partisi'ne ve ya başka bir gruba üye olamadı. Lu Xun, insanları siyasi partilerden ziyade hümanizmle yönetmenin önemini vurgulamakdaydı.

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