

【专访王晓明】 AI 时代，我们如何读鲁迅

**Exclusive Interview with Wang Xiaoming:
How do we Read Lu Xun in the AI Era?**

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This translation is the second part of a series where articles on Lu Xun and Chinese society today shall be translated from Chinese to English. This limited series on Lu Xun today is translated by Snigdha. The first part in the series can be accessed [here](#).

Summary

The article “**How do we Read Lu Xun in the AI Era?**” features an interview with Wang Xiaoming, a renowned cultural studies scholar, discussing the enduring relevance of Lu Xun’s ideas in contemporary society, especially amidst advancements in artificial intelligence (AI). Lu Xun always believed that the more the people in a nation are dissatisfied with themselves and engage in self-criticism, the greater hope it has. Wang highlights that Lu Xun’s concept of “self-confidence” for the Chinese people stems from introspection, self-criticism and social critique. Recognising and addressing flaws, as Lu Xun advocated, is essential for progress, thereby countering the notion that such critique is pessimistic. Wang assesses that if Lu Xun were alive today, he might have embraced the modern digital landscape and made a conscious effort to use the new media to raise his voice to awaken people and reform national character, thereby underscoring his timeless commitment to social critique and enlightenment. In the AI-driven era, Wang emphasises the importance of qualities that distinguish humans from machines, such as critical thinking, creativity, and emotional depth. He argues that these traits, which machines cannot replicate, align with Lu Xun’s advocacy for introspection and humanistic values.

The interview underscores Lu Xun’s continued relevance in addressing contemporary challenges, advocating for self-awareness, adaptability, and the nurturing of uniquely human attributes in an increasingly AI-dominated world.



Wang Xiaoming delivering a lecture on Lu Xun
Source: 360doc.com

Translation

On 15 May 1918, Lu Xun’s first short story in the form of a diary, and China’s first modern vernacular short story, *Diary of a Madman*, was officially published in vernacular Chinese. After 105 years, how do we read Lu Xun today? According to Wang Xiaoming, a professor at Shanghai University, the continuous advancement of technology not only challenges but also “enlightens” us, compelling us to reconsider: What is the essential quality that defines us as “human beings”? How can we cultivate our “non-mechanised” or

“anti-mechanised” abilities and thereby reduce our “replaceability”?

Wang Xiaoming: Cultural studies scholar, Professor of Chinese Literature, Department of Cultural Studies, Shanghai University; and Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

I

Reporter: After 20 years, your biography of Lu Xun, *Life Cannot Be Faced Straight On* has been revised and reprinted. Moreover, the series of online courses conducted by you on your thoughts on “Lu Xun and the Self-Confidence of the Chinese”, has garnered widespread acclaim. How should we interpret Lu Xun’s thoughts on “self-confidence” in today’s context?

Wang Xiaoming: Lu Xun wrote a famous essay titled, “Have the Chinese People Lost Their Self-Confidence?” The article begins by saying that since ancient times, we have had people who worked doggedly in silence,risking their lives, people who strove to save others and who braved death in pursuit of truth. They are the backbone of China. While they persevere in their struggles undeterred, they are always forgotten, erased, and even eventually destroyed in the darkness, and

most people do not know about them. But they still continue to fight. Lu Xun said that this is “the Chinese who have not lost their self-confidence”. It is these people who sustain the confidence in China and the Chinese people.

Many readers see pessimism and nihilism in Lu Xun’s works. Perhaps some feeble-minded people will take this perception further to assert that Lu Xun wrote novels like *The True Story of Ah Q* to expose his own shortcomings and expose the dark side of China, providing no positivity.

However, Lu Xun himself argued otherwise. He asserted that the more the people in a nation are dissatisfied with themselves and engage in self-criticism, the greater its hope. Therefore, he included *The True Story of Ah Q* in his collection *Call to Arms*. This expresses his thoughts on the relationship between self-reflection, self-criticism, and the advancement of individuals, societies, and nations.

The self-confidence that Lu Xun understood is not self-praise, superstition, or self-deception and lethargy, but the opposite of all these. In fact, this is in line with the common sense of life that we still maintain today. If you have a friend who constantly boasts about himself but reacts

defensively or anxiously when their shortcomings are pointed out, one instinctively recognises their lack of confidence. Conversely, if someone can calmly reflect on their flaws, acknowledge them, and strive for improvement, we are likely to see them as more promising and resilient. The same principle applies to individuals, societies, and nations alike.

Therefore, Lu Xun believes that the real characteristics of the so-called “self-confident Chinese” lie in taking up responsibility for themselves, exposing all kinds of social darkness that destroy and obliterate the “backbone of China”, and portraying all the “national character” that erodes and corrupts this “backbone”. In this sense, what Lu Xun reveals in his writings is not negativity and pessimism. His writings, such as *The True Story of Ah Q*, are important prerequisites for the Chinese people to maintain their self-confidence. His choice of such writing also reflects his belief that China should be a country with lush trees and not overgrown with weeds, which is a strong manifestation of the self-confidence of the Chinese people.

II

Reporter: In the preface to the first edition of *Life Cannot Be Faced Straight-On*, you mentioned that as time flies by and one

accumulates life experiences, one “no longer worship him as much as before, but I feel that I am getting closer to him in terms of deep psychological and emotional distance. I no longer see him as a lofty idol; instead, he is clearly one of us, struggling with the same profound crises as we.” Could you elaborate on this?

Wang Xiaoming: Yes, this was my genuine feeling at the time in the early 1990s. Even for someone as strong as Lu Xun, it was difficult to consistently maintain what he called the “self-confidence of the Chinese” in the society of his times. The more one witnesses the slow progress of society and the fragility of human nature, the more likely one is to fall into depression—a sense of “things not going well”. Even fighters like Lu Xun could be engulfed by the “ghostly spirit” of nihilism, as he himself said.

In his essay, “On Opening Your Eyes”, Lu Xun asserted that the Chinese literati lacked the courage to face life—especially social realities. He urged people to “take off their masks and look at life sincerely, deeply, and boldly”. Yet, in the harsh social circumstances of his time, even he could not always live up to this ideal. While he managed to confront life directly most of the time, there were moments when he, too, hit the wall and had no way

out. This is not hard to understand. If facing life honestly means admitting failure and acknowledging life's futility, who could bear such a burden indefinitely? Despite this, Lu Xun was unwilling to give up his hopes for China. To sustain his fight and “cries” for social progress, he had to confront and “expel” the nihilism within himself. He used many intellectual strategies to drive out the “ghostly spirit”. The concept of “great era” was one of them.

As someone who studied medicine, Lu Xun often used medical terms to make analogies. He felt that society was like a person. Once infected with a virus, the healthy forces in him would be mobilised to drive the virus away. In this way, the two armies face each other, and the struggle becomes more and more intense until it reaches a decisive moment — a critical point that determines victory or defeat. It was at this critical point that it was decided which side would win, or in other words, whether the person would eventually recover or succumb to illness. He called this critical point the “great era”, which would determine the life and death of a society.

The key to this historical view is to first confirm the conflict between the two

forces, and then further confirm that this conflict does not guarantee that either side will necessarily win. Both of these confirmations contain a negation of nihilism, because one of the keys to nihilism is to eliminate the difference between "here" and "there," believing that this and that are almost the same and meaningless. The idea of the “great era” is precisely to emphasise that not only are the two forces real, but the contradictions and conflicts between them are also real. Because there is no other God-like power that can guarantee that the virus will be eliminated in the end, each of us should take responsibility for the future of society and join the forces of health to fight the virus, to “work hard”, to “speak for the people”, and even to “sacrifice ourselves for the law”. For Lu Xun, one of the great meanings of life is to join such a struggle.

Although the era we live in today is very different from the era in which Lu Xun lived, many of the problems that Lu Xun faced at that time, such as confirming the meaning of his life and understanding the era in which he lived, are also what we need to face today. Although history has been changing, in many cases, the social and life conditions in different historical periods are not as different as we imagine. It is precisely because of this

understanding that I was able to express the emotion you quoted. I no longer regard Lu Xun as an idol in a shrine, but as a writer, a scholar, and an intellectual around us, and therefore have a better understanding of him.

Ideals are not abstract pictures of the future, detached from reality. Instead, they exist within reality, in sharp opposition and conflict with other forces. Often, it is us who only fail to recognise this. As Lu Xun noted, it is like those who work tirelessly and sacrifice for the greater good.

III

Reporter: This question has been asked at different times in history: ‘If Lu Xun were alive today, what might he do?’ How would you answer this question now?

Wang Xiaoming: Through his ever-changing styles, Lu Xun revealed the deep-seated yet slowly evolving essence of society in his works. These works, like a bridge, connect the Lu Xun of those times with us today.

While introducing Lu Xun to students and young people, I often emphasise that when Lu Xun evaluated a society, he always judged it from the perspective of “people”

and “hearts” rather than from a material viewpoint, such as skyscrapers or GDP indicators. This can be considered a shared ideological trait among many intellectuals of his time, possibly even many of his predecessors.

For instance, Gong Zizhen of the late Qing Dynasty divided society into three stages: prosperous, declining, and chaotic times. How to distinguish among these three? It depends on “talents” — whether society can produce a large number of outstanding individuals. Gong Zizhen's famous saying, “I advise the God to shake himself up and send down talents in all kinds of ways”, reflects the notion of “talent”. However, his concept differs from our understanding today; it refers not to a professional expert but to an individual with ideals, a pure heart, a broad vision, the ability to distinguish right from wrong, a sense of outrage at injustice, and the ability to reform society. It pertains to a comprehensive spiritual and psychological quality.

The same applies to Yan Fu. While reflecting on the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, he wrote that if China had won the war by chance, it would have been worse. The Chinese people might have fallen into a state of arrogance, thinking, “We are so great”, and would have missed

the opportunity for social reform and self-improvement. Clearly, Yan Fu believed that whether the general population is complacent or sober and reflective is far more important than victory or defeat in a specific war.

However, as a modern writer, Lu Xun placed greater emphasis on people and the human heart than Gong Zizhen and Yan Fu. He not only valued elites and “gentlemen”, but he also cared equally, if not more, about ordinary people and “villains”, and cared about their hearts. This is one of the most prominent aspects of Lu Xun. The reason why Lu Xun’s analysis of society at that time and his portrayal of characters like Ah Q continue to resonate with readers today — evoking a range of meanings, such as warning and reflection — is that Lu Xun did not merely depict the outward forms of social life, but also explored the heart of those living in such conditions. Who can say that there is no trace of Ah Q within us?

If he were alive today, I believe he would still be most concerned with the mental and psychological state of ordinary people, striving to portray the human heart, especially the morbid aspects.

Reporter: Do you think he would become a “prominent streamer” on social media platforms?

Wang Xiaoming: I am not sure if he would become a “top streamer” because it depends not only on how well he writes and expresses himself but also on the broader public opinion and the mental and psychological state of his readers and listeners. No matter how well he expresses himself, if readers and listeners — assuming Lu Xun started a podcast — lacked the necessary understanding or acceptance ability, or if the environmental conditions were not right, he could not become a “prominent streamer”.

Of course, I firmly believe that even if he could not become a “prominent streamer”, there would still be a large audience who would continue to pay attention to him, listen to him, and engage with the world seriously alongside him. Just look at the sales and widespread dissemination of Lu Xun's works today, and you will know that my “belief” is well-founded.

Reporter: Will he embrace new media?

Wang Xiaoming: Lu Xun’s attitude towards new media is quite interesting.

In that era, Lu Xun was highly sensitive to changes in the media landscape. When he decided to raise his voice to awaken the people and reform the national character, his sensitivity to new media evolved into a conscious effort to use new media as much as possible.

This is hardly surprising. Lu Xun understood clearly that the endless emergence of new media was driven not only by technological advancements but also by the basic trend of cultural popularisation in modern society. Therefore, in most cases, new media inevitably is bound to be associated with a “broader audience”. It is precisely such convictions that drove Lu Xun to consistently explore various new forms of media whenever he raised his voice in protest. He embraced vernacular Chinese, engaged in translations, edited magazines, and wrote essays — each of them was a new medium or innovative mode of expression of that time. Only when he fell into a state of despondency, doubting the efficacy of his efforts and yearning for solitude (retreat), would he turn to writing scholarly works and abandon his experimentation with new media.

Let's put it this way. A person like Lu Xun, who has a sense of social responsibility, would definitely try his best

to try out the diverse new media forms within his ability. If he were alive today, I believe he would probably be one of the first to start a blog, a public account, or even a Weibo account. At the very least, I think this is possible.

IV

Reporter: The hearts of ordinary people change with shifts in the external environment. Thirty years ago, an article published in *Shanghai Literature* proposed that the market economy had significantly influenced the evolution and development of Chinese society. People increasingly focused on economic development but lost interest in developing their spiritual lives. The article sparked a nationwide discussion on “humanistic spirit”. You were one of the key initiators of the debate. Now, three decades later, literature, culture, and media have undergone profound changes. Today, we must revisit the concept of the humanistic spirit through the perspective of artificial intelligence.

Wang Xiaoming: Whether you like it or not, we are entering the era of artificial intelligence, and this trend is irreversible. But I think the importance of culture has not diminished with the advancement of science and technology. In fact, culture has

always been one of the crucial factors that determine the direction of a society.

For the past two years, I have taught a discussion-based course titled, “Humanities Education in the AI Era”. The objective of the course is to help young people gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between new technologies and social life as well as confront the implications and challenges that AI technology poses to individuals and society.

In class, I often quote this statement: “If your job meets the following characteristics, then you are very likely to be replaced by a robot: 1. No talent is required, and skills can be mastered through training; 2. A lot of repetitive labour and daily tasks require no critical thinking; 3. The workspace is small, work can be done sitting in a cubicle, isolated from the world.”

The rapid development of AI technology has made us realise that many seemingly prestigious blue-collar and white-collar jobs are, in essence, forms of modern “slave paddling”. For this reason, I told my students that AI is not merely a challenge but also a source of “enlightenment”.

The most significant point of this “enlightenment” is that it forces us to rethink: What is the essential quality that defines us as “human beings”? For instance, from a young age, we have taken the initiative or have been forced to spend a lot of time in solving problems, pursuing standard answers, and developing uniform habits. As adults, we follow these procedures rigidly and fear stepping outside established boundaries. Reflecting on this now — have we become more human-like — or more machine-like?

In fact, with the rapid growth of the global population and the global economy shifting from “growth without job creation” to “growth with fewer jobs”, the “surplus population” in the sense of “employment labour” as described by Marx, is bound to increase. At the same time, in order to improve efficiency, human production labour is increasingly moving towards assembly-line production; many “non-market labour” unique to humans, such as knowledge learning, emotional communication, literary creation, spatial mobility, etc., are also being actively or passively digitised and even mechanised on a large scale.

The combined effect of these changes in social conditions has collectively driven

the physical and mental mechanisation of human beings. This trend — the loss of individual uniqueness and the rise in replaceability — is becoming increasingly apparent. The advent of ChatGPT has drawn widespread attention precisely because these social conditions have nudged us toward greater mechanisation in every aspect of life. It is our own mechanisation that amplifies the threat of AI technologies. In other words, the most critical issue lies not in the technology itself but in the social conditions that enable its rapid advancement.

V

Reporter: Nowadays, people's attention is largely occupied by algorithms. The spread of videos has allowed many people who originally had no reading habits to directly access the Internet. What changes will the participation of these people bring to the humanities education you talked about? What kind of answer can humanities education give when facing the endless challenges of new technologies?

Wang Xiaoming: We can observe that the time interval between the introduction of new technologies and their impact on human life is becoming increasingly shorter: fire (1 million years ago), dynamite (over 1,000 years ago), the steam

engine (over 300 years ago), electricity (over 200 years ago), nuclear energy (over 70 years ago), the Internet (over 50 years ago), and now artificial intelligence. While it may seem that most people struggling with technologies like electronic payments are middle-aged or elderly, the rapid pace of technological development — combined with increasing life expectancy — means that nearly everyone, including today's younger generations, will face challenges posed by new technologies that are beyond the scope of personal ability.

In the near future, we are highly likely to encounter a scenario where mass-produced, inexpensive robots surpass most humans not only in physical strength but also in general intelligence. At that point, it will be impossible for individuals to tackle these challenges alone. So, what should we do? The solution lies in building a rational and civilised society, one that leverages collective human power to address these challenges and transform them into opportunities for progress.

Such a society has enough willingness and ability to fully understand the realistic possibility and long-term potential of new technologies in affecting many aspects of human life; it can consider technology and other aspects of social life together — developing technology to provide

convenience is only one aspect of human life, and it should serve the overall direction of human life; it makes appropriate distinctions for technological innovations that are bound to accelerate: guide new technologies to develop in the direction of benefiting mankind, suppress the development of new technologies that may harm mankind, and, if necessary, freeze those new technologies that do more harm than good to mankind.

Building such a society is not easy and takes a long time. Before that, we can only save ourselves with individual strength, that is, cultivate our own “non/anti-mechanised” ability and reduce our “replaceability”.

In order to develop the uniqueness and irreplaceability of individuals, we can list some personal abilities and work hard to use and develop them. They include: interest (curiosity) and attention to “others” in a broad sense (including the world, mountains, rivers, plants, fish and insects), the ability to understand, learn and accept “others”; imagination, description and practical ability from the heart of “me” (not formed according to popular trends), thereby developing the uniqueness of “me” (because it is difficult to quantify, it cannot be standardised);

cultivating a sense of history and the open-mindedness and courage that comes from it; and the ambition to be an excellent person. Here, “excellence” means: being moral to oneself and society, rather than just self-interested requirements.

The cultivation of the above abilities is the basic content and training goal of humanities education (i.e., general education of humanities, rather than academic education of literature, history and philosophy). From this perspective, it is the rapid development of AI technology that stimulates us to rethink basic questions such as “What is human?” and “What is human nature?”, and guides us to once again confirm the importance of humanities education to individuals and society. In this sense, humanities education is more important than ever before.

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The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of the Institute of Chinese Studies.

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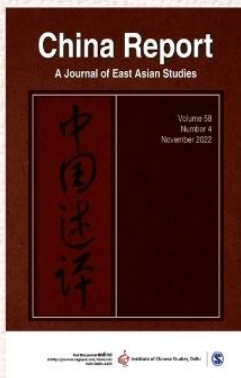


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