

# Lu Xun, the Canon, and Cultural Capital in China from 1920s to 2017 by Yang Ke

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The book *Lu Xun, the Canon, and Cultural Capital in China from 1920s to 2017* by Yang Ke, published in 2021 by University of Santo Tomas Publishing House and launched by UNITAS, joins in the fray of the subject on the canon war. It examines the process of putting together a literary canon and canon formation, which is largely understood by many as an exercise that is unproblematic, natural, and stable. The book particularly unmasks and interrogates the process in which the canon is formed in the Middle and High School Curriculum in China, specifically looking at the works of Lu Xun, the Father of Modern Chinese literature and a much-canonized author.

The process of canon formation entails sifting through and problematizing particular texts, titles, and authors that need to be included in the curriculum and the syllabus. John Guillory points out that an individual assertion of a work's greatness does not hold up, unless such "judgement is made in a certain institutional context, a setting in which it is possible to ensure the reproduction, its continual reintroduction to generations of readers" (Yang Ke quoting Guillory 2). The curriculum is a powerful and an important site in shaping young, impressionable minds and readers. Thus, canon wars happen in this very site with the key sticking point of pushing for "a unitary canon or one that advocates pluralism" (Yang Ke quoting Benton

1). In turn, institutions which are fully cognizant of the power of the canon appropriate its ideological functions and determinations.

Moreover, the book points out that “it is in the arena of education, particularly in the curriculum in which the canon formation wars where it has been fiercest [and] most vigorous” (Yang Ke quoting Hunter 2). Necessarily, what is included in the curriculum is based on the standards of representations- like for example, whether to include the classics or contemporary writings/ literature, or which particular authors are included or excluded in the canon. In principle, the canon war is about balanced representation and plurality, on one side, and a more exclusive or a “unitary” canon, based on criteria, on the other. Thus, we can never underestimate the power of educational institution and the curriculum as one “relay of power” in which the canon is designed, reproduced, circulated, and put together.

On this note, the book *Lu Xun* by Yang Ke, particularly problematizes an exigent observation in reference to Lu Xun’s inclusion/exclusion in the Middle High and High School Chinese Curricula from 1920s - 2017.

Lu Xun is of a particular interest to the study as he is not only acclaimed as the Father of Modern Chinese Literature but is accorded a figure of superstar status with a huge fandom or following, so to speak. His body of work has had a great influence on China, even after his death, such that different institutions would use his name for “merching” opportunities, endeavors, and other various gimmickry for the State. Mao Zedong even “canonized” him and declared him a modern saint of China ( Yang Ke 6; Lovel xxxii). His Nanjing training and cosmopolitan mindset and orientation were deeply entrenched in him, rendering him this paradoxical, controversial, and avant- garde reputation (whether for good or otherwise). When it comes to his national aspirations, he was one unassailable critic and mover, fiercely driven by a singular vision of enlightening and changing the spirit of the people through his new writings. His aspiration was to regenerate China of his time, mired then in “stagnation and decline” (Lovel xiii). Through literature and the arts and through his pioneering work on satire and vernacular fiction (in contrast to the Confucian classics and its formal language), he uncompromisingly created a national imagination that envisioned China’s

transformation into a modern, cosmopolitan state. It is no surprise then that much of his oeuvre is canonized and included in the Middle School and High School Chinese Curricula.

The book points out that while Lu Xun is declared as the Father of Modern Chinese literature and a highly- canonical figure throughout much of the 20th century, the book's research and study yield that across history, especially in the more recent times, the inclusion of his works in Chinese textbooks has been spotty, in that "some of his works with historically long-standing canonical status in Chinese textbooks [are being] replaced in the Middle School and High School Chinese curricula " (Yang Ke 3). It is observed though, that academic studies on Lu Xun remain strong (Ibid.).

The book points out that the shifts in the status of Lu Xun's works are also attributed to the phenomenon of globalization which has had profound effects on China. The effects of globalization became very apparent in the 1980s, and thus, explaining the ensuing changes in Chinese state policies and educational reforms, which in turn, are made to creep into the curriculum and the canon. On this note, in understanding the very contours of Lu Xun's status in the formation of the canon, the book or the study necessitates the interrogation of the political, cultural, social dynamics of Lu Xun's representation in Chinese textbooks, and the work's corresponding inclusion/ exclusion in the Middle School and High School Chinese curricula. The book specifically asserts that Lu Xun's "canonicity has been rather unstable historically, owing to specific political and ideological reasons viewed in terms of China's cultural and historical context" (Yang Ke 9). This is understandable due to the onrush of chaotic global and transnational forces which tend to transgress penetrable or porous borders.

As mentioned in the book, a staggering 30, 000 studies have been done on Lu Xun, and while a whole slew of studies have been written about this literary figure, the direction in which the study takes is pioneering because it problematizes on the finer contours of Lu Xun's canonicity. Specifically, the book posits that Lu Xun is appropriated as a "cultural capital" to shape the Chinese curriculum. Thus, his inclusion or exclusion in the canon of the Chinese curriculum is contingent on global forces. The intersection and

constitution of complex global forces with external and internal educational reforms in China from 1920s to the present (Yang Ke 16), are especially informed by the ideological interests and motives of the State.

The book entailed a massive task of research, particularly on the demands of tracing and tallying of Middle School and High School textbooks in the Chinese curricula that span a timeline of almost a century. In the process of understanding the shifts in the representation of Lu Xun's works, the book problematizes the following questions: how are the works selected; why are they selected; and why do some works disappear from the curriculum. The answers to these main questions were uncovered through the backbone framework of John Guillory, Pierre Bourdieu, and Barbara Hernstein-Smith.

Moreover, the book is something to reckon with in its breadth and its navigation of extensive material. It entailed both library work and leg/field work- flying back and forth China and Manila, like it was just getting a train or an LRT ride from Manila to Ateneo, where Yang Ke earned her PhD Degree. In order to accomplish the study, it entailed wading through and synthesizing an extensive and a massive amount of data, not just tracing and making sense of the "social roots of Lu Xun's ideas and evolution of his ideas across history" (Yang Ke 18), and linking the latter (which initially, probably came out unfathomable or obscure due to the work's vastness), to understand and theorize the inclusion or retreat of Lu Xun's works in the curriculum, a data that encompass a century.

The State is fully aware of Lu Xun's immense influence on the people, recognizing that his "true greatness belongs to an intellectual and ethical order" (Yang Ke quoting Simon Ley 6-7). The man, Lu Xun, remains an icon to this day, notwithstanding the fact that this giant and his works are seen as ironic and controversial. Since Lu Xun is a phenomenon and a much controversial figure, the question the author problematizes are the following: how does the State appropriate him, his works, or more particularly, why are some of his former canonical writings been discarded, and thus, the disappearance of many of his works in the curriculum, running through in the more recent years.

Since the book is trying to understand the discourse of Lu Xun's history of reception, it focuses on the role of institutions. Now, a discursive analysis interrogates the alliance with and the coherence of different institutions to each other to analyze how a paradigm or a certain world view is effected. What is central about the study's method is its deployment of discourse and its raising of some genealogical questions; and by deploying discourse and genealogy, using Foucault's categories, it is able, in turn, to solidly and critically confront how knowledge is produced, systematized, circulated, naturalized or normalized- which in turn, unravels an otherwise elusive understanding of the institutionalization and the transformation of "Lu Xun" into a cultural capital for a particular time by the dominant power, in this case, the central government of China.

In the deployment of the materiality of discourse as an umbrella analytical tool with other related framing lens and disciplines mentioned earlier, the critical and crucial questions the study employed, yielded not only productive answers to the huge success of Lu Xun as a paradigm and a cultural capital but in understanding the shifts and growing instability of Lu Xun's inclusion in the canon. To interrogate the discourse of entering and appropriating Lu Xun into a cultural capital, genealogical questions are fielded by the study. These are the following:

1. Deployed as an institutional system, what is the function of discourse to enable the production of knowledge in a regulated site? This question problematizes how things/institutions work, unraveling the beginnings of the role of discourse and its functions. Specifically, the questions asked are the following: Why was Lu Xun acclaimed and canonized as the Father of Modern Literature of China; What values does he uphold and how these represent the state, and consequently, how do these values appropriated by the State, with the school/education as the primary institution in the cultivation of this discourse, and the curriculum, canon, and textbooks as relays of dominant values and power.
2. How is the efficacy of "Lu Xun" as a cultural capital ensured? This question would quiz the network or relays of power that help

disseminate, preserve, and legitimate such cultural capital into a discourse. Here, this question tries to understand the existence and the materiality or the nitty gritty of the discourse- where it can be found and its dissemination. As discourse becomes entrenched in a regulated site, and thus, becoming “normalized,” this question interrogates the very place of discourse within the realm of “common sense,” bringing into scrutiny their effects and ideologies (Bove quoting Gramsci 53). It interrogates the “normalcy” of discourse which gives it the very power (Ibid.).

3. In understanding the contours or the materiality of discourse, an important follow through question is how discourse gets produced and regulated. Thus, this entails the interrogation of the complex interplay and linkages of discourse with various ideological institutions, vis-à-vis historical, social, political, economic, and global forces. Necessarily, it interrogates how these forces are constituted and their role and function in the control of populations (Bove 54). This method necessitates the rendering of their “adjacencies” to “make up a coherent system of thought spread across a range of institutions and discourse” (Bove quoting Said 55). This question recognizes as well, the cogency of context and the power of external forces, thus, a discursive analysis scrutinizes the way/s dominant institutions contend with them, bring them to heel, such as in their deployment of strategic mechanisms to constitute, domesticate, and subjugate these external forces to bring elements to cohere with the project of Lu Xun as a cultural capital. This question illuminates the shifts and instability of Lu Xun germane to the canon.
4. Finally, the question on the social effects of Lu Xun as a discourse and a cultural capital is crucial as it interrogates the consequences on the production of subjects, in this case, all the students that pass through Middle High and High School and the long-term effects onto adulthood- of this systematic “subjectification” and disciplining of body and mind that is overseen by the institution of instruction and its arms and networks, such as the curriculum, the canon, and

the textbook. This question allows as well, the Central Government through the schools to make adjustments in the curriculum, the canon, and the textbook. This explains the instability of Lu Xun's inclusion in the formation of the Chinese canon, especially with the advent of transnationalism.

The power and the productiveness of this book by Yang Ke is twofold: firstly, the resolute decision to study China's process of canon formation and the task of unravelling how Lu Xun is coopted as a cultural capital, despite the hegemony of the Communist Party, "closely overseeing every aspect of life in the country" (Josephine Ma), and practically influencing "every aspect of life in China, from the government, to the army, society, and business" (Jane Cai). The method and framework used reveal, in turn, the formative power of the discursive method, allowing us a glimpse of the consolidation of power by an otherwise, inscrutable China. Secondly, it is a work that attempts to decipher the discourse that has produced, disseminated, and legitimated knowledge that is systematically institutionalized by China's Central government, in coordination primarily, with the educational institution, and in sync with the curriculum and the canon, as relays of power.

Thus, this review believes that the very intention and vision of the book is a critique of China, and by studying its discourse and its ensuing publication, this inevitably opens it up to untold ramifications and possible complications.

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