

Lu Xun's Affirmative Biopolitics: Nothingness and the Power of Self-Transcendence

Wenjin Cui. New York and London: Routledge, 2022. x+260 pp. \$170.00 (hbk). ISBN 9781032102030

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Much recent Anglophone scholarship on Lu Xun has sought to recover his intellectual, thematic and emotional depth. Wenjin Cui's monograph is a welcome contribution to this project as it presents Lu Xun not only as a major Chinese writer and public intellectual, but also as a proleptic contributor to a global and very contemporary philosophical discourse.

The book seeks to resolve, or at least explain, the contradictions between Lu Xun's more humanistically oriented early essays and the darker turn in his later writing. Cui takes a different, though not incompatible, approach from accounts of his Marxist awakening or disillusionment with reformist politics. She instead makes a sophisticated argument that casts Lu Xun as attempting to construct a theory of individual autonomy that both respects others and is feasible within a primarily Daoist metaphysics.

At its core the book is grounded in close readings of Lu Xun's work, in particular his essays and letters. The prose poem collection *Yecao* also gets significant attention. Although the book is conversant with English and Chinese scholarship on Lu Xun, it offers extensive and valuable engagement with Japanese work on the author, in particular that of Takeuchi Yoshimi, Kitaoka Masako, Kiyama Hideo and Mizoguchi Yuzo. Nietzschean philosophy and its contemporary interpretations also run throughout the book.

The first half of the book articulates a philosophical and political project for Lu Xun on the basis of three major influences. Chapter one looks at Lu Xun's definition and critique of a received Chinese culture, as well as his position in relation to it. Here, Cui presents Lu Xun's negotiations of cultural identity and difference as a means for positive change, following his attacks on the defenders of a static national essence and his investment in lived experience. The second chapter expands this project by linking Lu Xun's Romanticist iconoclasm in the early essays to an explicitly Nietzschean sentiment, arguing for a naturalistic, even bodily will to power as the basis for cultural renewal. Chapter three tempers the ethnocentrist possibilities of such a cultural programme by investigating Lu Xun's relationship to Darwin and evolutionary thought. Cui stresses that Lu Xun sees naturalistic change as broadly non-teleological, and individually fatalist, but, following the first chapter, worth challenging.

The short fourth chapter moves away from establishing a philosophical programme for Lu Xun, on the basis of his work, toward contextualizing him among other philosophers. Cui portrays Lu Xun's investigations of bodily experience, counter-Enlightenment thought, and evolutionary metaphors as exemplary of an "affirmative biopolitics." With this, Cui positions Lu Xun among contemporary thinkers who see life as generative of culture and politics, as opposed to the often-monstrous converse. Foucault is of course implicated here, but Cui sees figures like Georges Canguilhem and Gilles Deleuze as better company for the vigorous and resistant Lu Xun that is shown in the first half of the book. This is a hasty juxtaposition, but the point in the chapter is less to establish filiations than it is to place Lu Xun among the first rank of global philosophy.

The second half of the book explicitly presents Lu Xun as a philosopher. Chapter five examines Lu Xun's relationship to a largely Daoist ontology. At stake here is the possibility of meaningful



action in the face of a hazy demarcation between spiritual and material realms. Cui resolves this for Lu Xun by investigating his writings on the Wei-Jin period and portraying him as engaging the tension between the possibility of an idealist escapism and a vigorous materialism. This parallels the presentation of his reconciliation of Chinese history and culture with imported iconoclasm discussed in the first half of the book. Chapter six turns to nihilistic elements in Lu Xun's work. Despite his frequent bleakness, Lu Xun is for Cui not hopeless, but is energized by his confrontation with what she characterizes as a Daoist nothingness that challenges stable configurations in the world. Again, this echoes the first half's tensions between the inevitability of death and a bodily will to live. The final chapter outlines a possible theory of community based on Lu Xun's ontology and encounter with nothingness. Cui argues that these positions enable Lu Xun to theorize a modern, Chinese community that respects the striving of the individual without abandoning the ground of a group identity.

This is an exciting project, if at the limits of what Lu Xun's corpus can support. The fundamental tensions in his work that Cui traces through both the personal and the philosophical are justified and consistent with recent scholarship on Lu Xun, if not at this level of sustained detail. However, the broader attempt to use these tensions to construct a coherent, contemporary philosophy out of the author's catalogue moves quickly in the second half. This is not to say that it is implausible to see Lu Xun as a philosopher; in fact, this is a refreshing approach that recognizes his extensive reading in Buddhist and Daoist texts. Nevertheless, much is left unsaid in the second half about the technical philosophy (and philology) undergirding many of the concepts deployed. Again, the argument is engaging and compelling, but relies on Cui's capacious knowledge of several different fields of Chinese and European philosophy to gloss complicated textual lineages.

That said, Cui's mobilization of so much of Lu Xun's textual support, even if in the abstract, adds to the value of this work. Working through the book and tracing its references is exceptionally rewarding for the scholar of Lu Xun or cross-cultural exchange, both for its insightful close readings and for the scope of the material under discussion. More provocatively, the book is valuable to the scholar of intellectual history through its construction of Lu Xun as a major philosopher on the global scene.

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Internationalist Aesthetics: China and Early Soviet Culture

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The focus of this ground-breaking, erudite and sophisticated book is the relationship between Soviet Russia and China as imagined and mediated by writers and theorists of the Soviet avant-garde in the 1920s. The book is made up of four chapters framed by an introduction and epilogue. The introduction lays out the main questions and conceptual foci that it seeks to explore, central of which is the concept of "internationalist aesthetics" of the book's title. It describes "internationalist aesthetics" in terms of the Soviet cultural aspiration to "render the world knowable as a site of a global