《中國文化研究所學報》 Journal of Chinese Studies No. 57 - July 2013

Normal that accounted for the unusual number of early Communists. Her stress on the Confucian and moral influences bears great resemblance to Wen-hsin Yeh's study of the early Communists in Zhejiang,[5] but Liu has not accomplished as subtle and carefully contextualized account of the Hunan milieu.

In all, this is a useful account, for we have here a history of Hunan First Normal at a critical point in its history. But it does not break significant new ground in understanding the origins of the Chinese Communist Party, and fails to live up to the full promise of its *Red Genesis* title.

Joseph W. Esherick
University of California, San Diego

Lu Xun's Revolution: Writing in a Time of Violence. By Gloria Davies. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. xxvi + 408. $35.00/ £24.95.

The two decades between the First and Second World Wars saw a transformation in the cultural life of China. The classically schooled pioneers of late Qing reform were then succeeded by a generation whose leaders had been educated abroad. They thought in terms of revolution, and believed they had the right ideas to bring about changes in culture that would put China on level terms with other civilized nations. Central to nearly all fields of endeavour was the perceived need to nurture and mobilize the resources and abilities of the neglected masses, the key thereto being universal education in the accessible medium of the everyday spoken language, or *baihua* 白話, as distinct from the literary language, or *wenyan* 文言—a transition parallel to that from Latin to the national vernaculars which had taken place in Europe centuries earlier. Considerable progress had already been made in that respect, but the higher reaches of educated discourse and literary composition were still occupied by pure or modified *wenyan*. The aim of the New Culture movement which took off in 1918–19 was for the spoken language to sweep the board, become the one and only "national language" (*guoyu* 國語).

Since the literary language had historically been the sole repository for abstract concepts, cultural allusions, poeticisms, figures of speech, and the vocabulary of debate, while *baihua* had traditionally been largely confined to representing dialogue

5 Wen-hsin Yeh, *Provincial Passages: Culture, Space, and the Origins of Chinese Communism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

and action in popular fiction, it was a tall order for the latter to expand to fill the role of the former. The formation of new literary genres on Western lines to supersede the old-style essays, short stories, long novels, poems, and operas was also a formidable challenge, complicated by the plethora of foreign schools and exemplars to choose from. And all of these attempts at cultural revolution had to be carried on in the context of political and military chaos and factional suppression and sponsorship.

In the broadest of outlines, this was the situation in which the subject of this book was willy-nilly embroiled as author and journalist, and in many of whose controversies he zestfully entered: in fact it is hard to think of a more embattled individual. Of course the proverbial mutual belittling among literati was only to be expected, but ideological divides gave further cause for heated altercations. So Gloria Davies has a lot to write about in her appropriately entitled book; at the same time another wide-ranging work about Lu Xun at this stage in the game needs some justifying: his life and works have been studied from almost every conceivable angle, as she herself demonstrates by the English language publications alone that she is able to cite on the many topics she touches upon. Somehow new connections have to be made, new glosses given to statements previously thought to speak for themselves, explanations provided for the inexplicable, new depths uncovered; and indeed our author attempts all of those.

Short excursions are made to introduce Jiang Guangci 蔣光慈, Yu Dafu 郁達夫, and Guo Moruo 郭沫若, but of course the main part follows Lu Xun's engagements on various fronts. In these the opposition inevitably takes a back seat, but whether intentionally or not Lu Xun soon takes on the mantle of hero, and editorial comments grow surprisingly partial. Thus Lu Xun's own criticism of opponents is typically "withering," while his opponents' attacks tend to be "snide," "strident," "brazen," and the like, besides being given little exposure. Another bias to be aware of is the giving of undue credit for certain initiatives to Lu Xun. For instance, we are told on p. 9: "*Baihua* (ordinary language, or the language of common folk) was first proposed in the mid-1910s by Lu Xun and other prominent intellectuals who were associated with the journal *New Youth* based at Peking University." In fact Lu Xun published nothing of significance on the subject of *baihua* at that time; the pace setters were unchallengeably Hu Shi 胡適 and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀. To claim for Lu Xun an early interest in *baihua* is, however, of importance to Davies, as we can see from the way this paragraph begins: "To understand Lu Xun's overall cultural significance, we need to consider his literary achievements in *baihua*." His supposed dedication to *baihua* and conversely his detestation of *wenyan* is indeed the thread that runs through Davies's book, and what this review concentrates on.

Before we come to Davies's interpretation of what Lu Xun meant by *baihua* and *wenyan* (and other kinds of language) we need to clarify what was generally

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

understood by those terms at the time of the New Literature movement. *Baihua,* literally "plain language," had been used for popular fiction for centuries, and that kind of "storyteller" mode still survived, but alongside it, largely unnoticed, an idiomatic, flowing, modern *baihua* had been used from the turn of the twentieth century to translate Western literature. The proposed new creative Chinese literature would fill out that common language with the intellectual vocabulary of the new age, but also judiciously draw on the riches of the classical language for embellishment, and on regional dialects to add local colour. That was the programme Hu Shi set out in his 1918 essay "A Constructive Literary Revolution" 建設的文學革命論. Four years on from there, Zhou Zuoren 周作人, Lu Xun's younger brother and then close collaborator, endorsed essentially the same formula, saying that the "common language" 普通語 had to be expanded by including classical expressions, new terms, and dialect, and also become more precise syntactically.[1] By the same year of 1922, as Chow Tse-tsung concluded in his authoritative study, *The May Fourth Movement,* "the literary revolution had triumphed," the opposition thereafter being limited to "isolated skirmishes."[2] That is to say, the vernacular language had won out over the literary language, though further wars were to be fought over how remote the new *guoyu* should be allowed to get from the speech of common people.

As for Lu Xun's own journey to *baihua,* we may recall that as a student in Japan, when he was already well into his twenties, he used pure classical Chinese (*guwen* 古文) for his published essays and translations of Russian short stories, storyteller *baihua* for translating Jules Verne novels, and *wenyan* for his own 1912 original story "Remembering the Past" 懷舊. In 1918, of course, he made his debut in publishing in modern *baihua*. For his academic publications, for example *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* 中國小說史略, he continued to use *wenyan*. So the evidence is that he used "horses for courses," employing different styles of language as the media appropriate for particular purposes, though there is no doubt about his total conversion to the cause of the vernacular as the medium for the "expression of thought and feelings," to use Zhou Zuoren's words. Hence in the 1920s he energetically fought in the "skirmishes" against the classical cultural diehards, the warlord moves to restore the old language, and the academic conservatives of the *Xueheng* 學衡 group.

Let us now return to Gloria Davies. In her usage *baihua* seems in Lu Xun's case to stand for both medium and message, total immersion in the whole of which

---

1 Zhou Zuoren, "A View on the Reform of the National Language" 國語改造的意見, *Dongfang zazhi* 東方雜誌 19, no. 17 (September 1922), pp. 7–15.

2 Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 282.

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

would effect for him a cleansing of the soul, releasing it from the bondage of ancient Chinese and all that stood for. She may have taken her cue from Lu Xun's epilogue to his collection *The Grave* 墳 (end of 1926), where in response to another's attribution of his skill in *baihua* to his good grounding in *guwen,* he lamented that indeed he could not entirely rid himself of the phraseology and style of "old books," which he felt as a burden; and even in thought he had been infected by "the poison of Zhuang Zhou and Han Fei: now being very casual, now being very precipitate." As for Confucius and Mencius, whose influence as founders of the state ideology would have been genuinely disturbing, he felt they had nothing to do with him, therefore no real cause for alarm: having one foot in the past, so to speak, actually gave him the advantage of knowing the enemy from within. So he resigned himself to the role of a transitional character, to whom writing in pure *baihua* did not come naturally, as it would to the younger generation. Here he does present the interference of *guwen* as a handicap, though objectively speaking his ability to glide across the whole keyboard of the Chinese language made his essays much more arresting than they would otherwise have been had he kept to the one register of *baihua,* but he was not inclined to admit that to himself. The question is, how heavily did the "ghosts of the past" genuinely weigh upon him? It is Davies's thesis that he really did feel *guwen* as an incubus or curse, and envisaged *baihua* as his salvation. To illustrate with some of her formulations: "his figurations of *baihua* as a moral journey" (p. 13); his "summoning plebeian spirits as champions to keep *baihua* safe from the clutches of power" (p. 13); "the human path that Lu Xun sought to forge in *baihua*" (p. 20). And on the other side: "throughout his career as Lu Xun, he was keen to claim the destruction of *wenyan* as his guiding purpose" (p. 16); public executions were for Lu Xun "merely the grotesque obverse of the same tyranny beatified as the belletristic orthodoxy of *wenyan:* two sides of the same coin" (p. 97); "in 1919 he had written that *wenyan* was a language that . . . had become constitutively oriented toward 'bestial desires for power and prestige, progeny, riches and treasures'" (p. 97). In none of those cases have I found any overt reference to language in the texts concerned: seemingly Davies has come to think that *wenyan* by itself emblazoned or even engendered the nastier aspects of feudalism. Looked at simply as a means of communication, however, *wenyan* had of course borne many anti-feudal, satirical, and denunciatory messages in its time, as Lu Xun himself proclaimed elsewhere, and as Davies herself notes.

Free association and interpretation find fertile ground in Lu Xun's mid-1920s collection of prose poems entitled *Yecao* 野草, translated as *Wild Grass,* which paraded spectral, indeed terrifying images. Here again Davies discovers allegories for *baihua* and *wenyan*. Thus "Lu Xun's *Wild Grass* was a poetic celebration of *baihua,* aimed at nurturing a language of common belonging into being" (p. 261); Lu Xun "intended 'The Wayfarer' as an allegory of unwavering dedication to *baihua*"

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

(p. 253); and so on. At the same time, Davies does acknowledge that despite Lu Xun's attack on contemporary writers on both left and right for making *baihua* elitist, his essays "feature a plenitude of allusions drawn from *guwen* and *wenyan* and literary puns opaque to the untutored reader. In particular, the experimentalism of *Wild Grass* demands a connoisseurship quite at odds with his desire to create an egalitarian language." But that fact does not undermine her thesis, because she continues: "Yet the writings that make up this anthology also demonstrate Lu Xun at his most passionate in his willful embrace of *baihua* as a language in the making" (pp. 250–51).

One more window onto language is opened by the issue of *dazhongyu* 大衆語, mass or proletarian language, which arose in the early 1930s. Here the arguments are clearly stated, there is no need for ladders of inference. As a preliminary, let us recall Lu Xun's previous formula for written *baihua,* set out at the end of 1926: "In terms of diction, there is no need to keep on living in old books; instead one's source should be the tongue of living people, thus making written compositions closer to speech, and have more vitality. As for how to make up for the poverty and shortcomings of current popular language, and make it richer and more varied, that is a big problem—perhaps certain material in old literature can be taken over and put to work."[3] Travelling on from there, we learn from Davies that in order to replace the Chinese character or ideograph Lu Xun in 1934 "proposed a new 'Latinized' (*ladinghua*) script that he believed would be easy to master and that would both desacralize the idea of writing and accelerate the spread of mass literacy in China" (p. 283). The word "propose" might give the impression that Latinization was Lu Xun's own idea. In fact Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, Lu Xun's bosom friend, had for two years been advocating this system of Romanization developed by Soviet linguists as a means of writing *dazhongyu,* a lingua franca being forged among urban migrant workers. And that in turn fitted into the great debate on the left about "mass literature," initiated by Qu in 1932. Davies does not fill out this picture, but she does note that in another essay of 1934, "Lu Xun wrote that the 'language of the masses' he had in mind was versatile and open-ended and that, according to need, the language could borrow from *wenyan,* from *baihua,* and even from foreign expressions. He remarked that this was happening to the Chinese language in any case" (p. 309).

If this *dazhongyu* could borrow from *baihua,* it must have been some kind of patois he had in mind, with *baihua* now being used for the modern standard Chinese of the media and educated classes. That signified a recasting of the language debate. In practice there was very little actual difference over the kind of common language

---

3 Lu Xun, "Xie zai *Fen* houmian" 寫在《墳》後面, in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), vol. 1, p. 286.

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong

envisaged for writing in the new age. From Hu Shi in 1918, Zhou Zuoren in 1922, to Lu Xun in 1926 and 1934, the formula was always essentially the same: the spoken language as base, enriched and elevated as necessary by borrowings from classical and dialectal Chinese and foreign tongues. Once any "mass language" was used for more than everyday purposes and functioned as an all-purpose "national language," it would have to evolve in that way. The difference as far as *dazhongyu* was concerned was that for its left-wing advocates it would have the imprimatur of the working class and locate its wellspring in class consciousness.

That leaves unresolved the puzzle of what the *baihua* was that Lu Xun felt to have such great personal importance, and why on its behalf he supposedly had to conduct a Herculean struggle against the "elite *wenyan,* the written language that constituted his very being" (p. 293). Is it the contention that the notion of *dazhongyu* was the goal he altruistically had been working for all along? Certainly, as Davies rightly points out, he unreservedly praised the work of possibly illiterate folk composers, attributing to them "an authenticity and dignity he saw as lacking among the elite initiates of written Chinese" (p. 293), but that was something he could hardly aspire to himself, given his education. Perhaps his personal pilgrimage had a different end. In my view, if his life-long quest has to be characterized, its goal would be the ancient virtue of *cheng* 誠, translatable as "sincerity." *Cheng* is the centrepiece of *The Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, one of the Confucian Four Books. In Wing-tsit Chan's translation, "Sincerity means the completion of the self, and the Way is self-directing. Sincerity is the beginning and the end of things. Without sincerity there would be nothing. . . . Sincerity is not only the completion of one's own self, it is that by which all things are completed. The completion of the self means humanity. The completion of all things means wisdom" and "Only those who are absolutely sincere can transform others."[4] Stripped of its mystical dressing, "sincerity" could indeed serve to define Lu Xun's moral imperative, but I fear that idea would be unacceptable to the author of this book, and probably to Lu Xun himself; as a matter of fact it even surprises me.

David E. Pollard
Old Sarum, Salisbury

[4] Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 108.

© 香港中文大學 The Chinese University of Hong Kong