

Literary Consecration and Spiritual Naturalization: A Study on Ruth Weiss' Writing of Lu Xun

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Abstract

Among the many writings on Lu Xun, the book *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times* (1985) by Ruth Weiss has its unique cultural value. As a biography of Lu Xun written by a naturalized Chinese who communicated with Lu Xun personally when he was alive, it provided useful clues for understanding the extensive and fruitful interactions between Lu Xun and the young foreign expats in China in the 1930s. Ruth Weiss was one of those foreigners who joined China for most of their lives, the rationales of her consistent writing of Lu Xun are explored in this paper. "Literary consecration" and "spiritual naturalization" are taken as the main ways to understand her cultural pursuit after she gained Chinese citizenship. Constructing new identity and rebuilding the new national recognition were the thrust for Ruth Weiss to write Lu Xun in different forms spanning for more than three decades. As a relatively less mentioned name, Ruth Weiss and her identity reconstruction process are discussed in the first part of the paper. Her writing as literary consecration and spiritual naturalization is analyzed in depth by using historical records and evidences presented in the book as well as her other writings of Lu Xun in the following two parts, which concluded with a discussion on the significance of the study. It is hoped that the study on Ruth Weiss and her writing of Lu Xun will offer insight into the relationship between (non)literary writing and identity construction.

Keywords

Ruth Weiss, *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times*, Literary Consecration, Spiritual Naturalization

1. Introduction

Lu Xun has kept being an important topic on the study of Chinese literature and

society in the twentieth century. The relationship between Lu Xun and those who were influenced by his life experiences and works has already been probed from different perspectives (Wang, 1986; Lee, 1985; Wang & Wang, 2004; Yue, 2021). But the interpersonal communication between Lu Xun and those foreign young people who came to China around the 1930s is still open to further discussion (Li, 1996; Fang, 2001). Records show that Lu Xun maintained close contact with foreigners in China and was a mentor to young people who travelled to China from foreign countries. Ruth Weiss was one of them and met Lu Xun several times and communicated with him in person.

The book, *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times*, (or “文豪鲁迅”, *wenhao luxun* in Chinese *pinyin*), a biography of Lu Xun published in 1985 by Ruth Weiss provided clues for understanding the extensive and fruitful interactions between Lu Xun and those young foreign expats in China. It was regarded as the only biography of Lu Xun after the disastrous “Cultural Revolution” written by a naturalized Chinese who interacted personally with Lu Xun when he was alive. The book is forward-looking and realistic, as it put forward the concepts of “returning to the sound, reasonable road of Yan’an days” and “journey to the beginning” (Weiss, 1985). Ruth Weiss took Lu Xun as “a guiding star” and called all Chinese and readers of the book to follow suit. In this paper, the rationales of her consistent writing of Lu Xun are explored to make clear the probable reasons behind her cultural and political pursuit. “Literary consecration” and “spiritual naturalization” are taken as the main ways to understand Ruth Weiss’ writing of Lu Xun after gaining her Chinese citizenship. Constructing the new identity as well as re-building her new national recognition was the underlining thrust for her to write Lu Xun in different forms for more than thirty years.

2. Ruth F. Weiss and Her Writing of Lu Xun

Ruth Felicitas Weiss (1908-2006), whose Chinese name was *wei lu shi* (魏璐诗 is the transliteration of her original name with Chinese characters of similar sounds), was born in Vienna, Austria. She went to China in 1933 and obtained China’s citizenship twice in her life time (Shen, 2018). Her linkage with China was the result of the turbulent world situation in the twentieth century. Vienna, the place where Ruth Weiss was born and bred was one of the most important political, economic and cultural centers of Europe before and after the World War I. It attracted tourists and international students from all over the world. Living and studying there, Ruth Weiss came into contact with students from Asian countries and visited the Castle of Schoenbrunn in Vienna frequently to entertain herself with the exhibitions of Chinese arts. The musical “*Roar, China!*”, directed by the former Soviet playwright Sergei Tretyakov was on stage in Vienna, which gave her the first glimpse of imperialist invasion of China (Cui, 1999). Moreover, her doctoral supervisor was an ardent supporter of Goethe’s idea of “world literature” and encouraged her to learn more about Asian literature. Ruth Weiss won her doctorate from the University of Vienna in 1932.

In September 1933, Ruth arrived in Shanghai from the port city of Trieste in northeastern Italy by boat for three weeks, beginning what was expected to be a six-month study trip and being a correspondent for some European newspapers. With the growing anti-Semitism in Europe and a deeper understanding of China, she changed her plan of returning to Europe after the study trip and settled in China. With the exception of working in the United States for the United Nations Radio from the year 1945 to 1951, she spent most of her life in China.

When she first arrived in China, Ruth Weiss met with many young Westerners in Shanghai, including Louis Alley from New Zealand, Talitha Gerlach and Agnes Smedley from the United States and many others. She visited factories in Shanghai and realized what capitalism mean to workers. Those close contacts with Chinese society helped her gain insight into the real difficulties of China and the cruel exploitation on Chinese people. With the help of Agnes Smedley, Ruth became concerned with and sympathetic to social revolution in China. She opposed imperialists' territorial aggression upon China as well as the weakness of the Chinese government in reacting to foreign invasions and insults. During the World War II, through Agnes Smedley, Ruth met Madame Soon Ching Ling (wife of Dr. Sun Yat-sen) and helped her rebuild the "China Defense League". Ruth Weiss' communication with Lu Xun was also the result of Agnes Smedley's introduction. During her conversations with Lu Xun, Ruth began her "study of Chinese history" and her "education of politics" (Weiss, 1985). Lu Xun once gave her a print of Kaethe Kollwitz's woodcut as a gift to help her understand the *status quo* of China and to encourage her to support and participate in the revolutionary struggle of the people. Lu Xun's patriotism and enthusiasm for young people influenced her. Fluent in German and well versed in European culture, Lu Xun became "a key to the understanding of China" and "a path to the heart of the Chinese people" (ibid) for the young Westerners such as Ruth Weiss who had come all the way to China.

Ruth published six English articles on Lu Xun (Weiss, 1975, 1976), which laid the groundwork for the finalization of her book of Lu Xun in the 1980s. But these articles were flawed with the influence of the "Cultural Revolution", in which "everything was either affirmed or denied". Due to the limited information about Lu Xun and the lack of references during the chaotic years, her articles about Lu Xun were with unavoidable shortcomings as being too heavy with "political atmosphere" that was easy to lead readers "to misunderstand that Lu Xun was born a revolutionary" (Weiss, 1985). The end of the intensified social upheavals made it possible for objective and independent academic study on Lu Xun. And the complex human nature exposed in the catastrophe also required the revival of Lu Xun's courage of criticism. "In order to move forward better, the whole of China is looking back and summing up its past experiences and lessons" (ibid). Guided by this idea, Ruth Weiss re-examined her research on Lu Xun, and set out to finish *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times* in a rather holistic and rational way.

The book which divided Lu Xun's life experience into seven major stages chronologically was in essence Ruth Weiss' answers to what happened in China in the past decades of political radicalness and social restlessness. She "kept the political background at each point in focus", and tried to "present a picture of Lu Xun that did not make him a plaster cast but a full-blooded human writer and thinker in the whirlpool of China's historical development" (Weiss, 1985). This method of study Lu Xun requires a rich collection of materials, in-depth research, and the ability to think independently, without which one cannot truly understand the Lu Xun who devoted his life for the transformation and modernization of China.

3. Writing Lu Xun for Literary Consecration

The word "consecration" refers to the ritual practiced by most religions around the world which means the solemn dedication to a special purpose or service. To consecrate means to associate with the sacred. The truth is that not only persons, but also places, or things can be consecrated. Different cultural groups use the term "consecration" differently. Take Catholicism as an example, consecration is the act by which a person or thing is put into the service of God or is used as a salutation to God. In the ordination performed by all churches, it is common to find some appeal to God for his promises, and to expect them to be fulfilled either now or at some time to come (Flinn, 2007). And there is a similar mechanism of consecration in the "world republic of letters", a complex system that transcends place and time (Casanova, 2004), though which writers win the expected symbolic recognition for their literary investment (Sapiro, 2016). As a multidimensional phenomenon, literary consecration is not only reduced to critical reception and acceptance of the writers and their works who are still at the periphery by various literary mediators from the center of "the republic", but also the writing and rewriting of the central figure(s) by the ones who are waiting to be consecrated.

Opposition between the literary capital and the frontier, as well as the central and the peripheral, exists universally in the literary space (Casanova, 2004). And this is the premise for the existence of the literary consecration mechanism. The tension is not only between the capital of the literary space and other literary regions, but also between the central literary figures and the marginal writers (such as novice writers or immigrant/diasporic writers). Consecration from the literary center is an identification and adjudication that gives value to those spaces that are still outside "the republic", and to the writers that are still in the periphery, or that have yet to reveal their value in the "capital" of the invisible "republic of letters". The process by which the capital of "the republic" recognizing marginal writers is the process of "consecration", just as a Christian becomes formally approved after the priest gives him/her bread and wine.

As the beacon of the Chinese New Culture Movement and one of the most important literary figures of modern China, Lu Xun is regarded as an "unprece-

dedicated national hero” whose literary works represent the peak of Chinese literature in the twentieth century. Since the 1930s, there have been numerous studies on Lu Xun’s life, thought, and works (Lee, 1985). For quite a long time after the mid-twentieth century, reading and studying Lu Xun was an enduring theme in Chinese literary studies (Wang, 1982). Although the narratives of paying tribute to Lu Xun has changed according to different contexts, and the image of Lu Xun has undergone transformations from “political” to “literary”, the study of Lu Xun has always been at the center of Chinese literary studies. From the 1930s until the publication of the book in 1985, the centrality of Lu Xun has been repeatedly confirmed in different ways in China. As a figure of high status in modern Chinese literature and history, Lu Xun and his works have an unquestionable function of “consecration” for researchers and writers who take Lu Xun as topic. All translations, reviews, adaptations and creations of Lu Xun have naturally the practical effect of paying homage to the center (Gao, 2001), and thus gaining the “consecration” from there. The function of empowerment by Lu Xun to those who (re)writes him is obvious.

Writing biography for the one who is at the center of the literary space is a way to obtain “consecration”. Ruth Weiss was fluent in several languages, and during her service at the *China International Press Bureau* and the *China Pictorial*, she had engaged in translating and proofreading translations of works of Lu Xun and other Chinese writers and politicians into German and English. As a “naturalized” Chinese and a non-professional writer, Ruth was undoubtedly at the periphery of Chinese literary space. Her translation of Lu Xun’s works, and her research and writings of Lu Xun (including the series of articles in the 1970s and the book published in 1985), were not only a tribute paid to Lu Xun and her responses to the needs of the times, but also had the actual effect of inviting the center of Chinese literary space, namely Lu Xun, to “consecrate” her. She was thus empowered through her cultural practices related to Lu Xun. Lu Xun became a protection of her when she criticized the society directly and all Lu Xun’s sharp remarks turns out to be her reflections of the times.

4. Writing Lu Xun for Spiritual Naturalization

All the above mentioned literary practices showed Ruth Weiss’ efforts in constructing her personal cultural identity as well. By calling for “returning to Lu Xun” (Weiss, 1985), Ruth realized her dream of “joining China” spiritually, thus fulfilled her long wish of being a “real” Chinese. Her acquisition of Chinese nationality brought about the change of her nationality legally. But the official agreement for acquisition was only the starting point for the naturalized to enjoy the political rights of the country and also the necessary prerequisite to undertake the corresponding legal obligations. However, legal naturalization does not guarantee spiritual consistency between the naturalized person and the country’s natives. Ruth Weiss finished the procedure and obtained her new legal identity in 1955, but her “spiritual naturalization”, which means her identity construc-

tion as being a Chinese faced a more complicated and lengthy process. It was the process of reconstructing personal identity and re-building national recognition. As identity is not given in advance, but is acquired through a process of identification, it is internalized and constructed by the person through the process of individualization, and is the source of meaning of being a citizen of the naturalized (Zhang, 2013). The construction of the naturalized identity needs to go through the process of individuation, so as to obtain the meaning of being a citizen of a country, and finally complete the construction of the new identity.

Ruth Weiss' spiritual naturalization began earlier than the legal procedures. From 1933 to 1945, she took part in China's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, witnessed the hardship and final victory of China. She returned to China in 1951 and embraced the great change of the society: "Beijing was truly liberated and the people were now masters of their own country" (Weiss & Li, 2016). From 1951 to 1955, she wrote letters to the central government of China expressing her sincerity of joining China. For this reason, she divorced her husband who insisted to stay in the United States and refuse to go back. She returned China with their two sons. In 1955 she was granted citizenship of the People's Republic of China. "The People's Republic of China has granted me citizenship! For a whole year, I have been proud to say that I am a Chinese citizen, and that my two children have become as naturally Chinese as any children with a Chinese father. I feel more of a human here than ever" (Shen, 2018). She was naturalized with joy and willingness.

After unremitting efforts, Ruth Weiss finally completed the legal process of being a new Chinese citizen. But legal identification is not equal to spiritual naturalization, let alone the personal formation of a new national recognition. Because the former is the investigation of a citizen's legal identity, which has the characteristics of certainty and standardization, while the latter is the continuous approaching and internalization process to this particular legal status. Personal identity and the recognition of a nation of the newly naturalized people cannot be achieved overnight. This spiritual naturalization does not go hand in hand with the legal procedures. The individual person expresses a strong sense of belonging to the country through such emotions, attitudes and behaviors as approval, love and loyalty. National identity is the result of the dual construction of objective and subjective factors. It is not only reflected in the recognition of the country in the geographical, political and legal sense, but also includes the sharing of meaning in the historical and cultural level (Wang, 2019). Ruth Weiss shared the history of being a Chinese by submerging into the society.

In 1933, against the backdrop of increasingly serious anti-Semitism in Europe and imminent world war, Ruth Weiss came to China. She participated actively in China's War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression, and established deep friendship with Madame Soong Ching Ling, Lu Xun and members of the Communist Party of China. She understood China deeply after witnessing its transformation over the past half century. During this period, she married a Chinese

man and set up her own family. She raised children and formed good and extensive social relations with Chinese. The complete social relationship had become an important way for Ruth Weiss to understand China, participate in social construction, and then generate emotional belonging and cultural identity to China.

For the naturalized persons, gaining legal identity is as important as building up the national recognition and spiritual identity. Because only those shared values, symbols and mutually accepted legal and political order can provide the necessary and widespread legitimacy (Tishkov, 1997). After the “Cultural Revolution”, through study of Lu Xun’s life and literary works, Ruth Weiss further understood the history of China and realized the transformation from political identity to historical and cultural identity. In the process, she enriched her knowledge of China’s long and twisting history as well as the painful revolutionary process, which should be possessed by common Chinese. “We should know that a writer with profound social insight like Zhou Shuren became Lu Xun only after going through various personal and family tribulations and witnessing many humiliations and defeats suffered by his country” (Weiss, 1985).

This understanding of Lu Xun’s sufferings and criticisms made Ruth Weiss’ writings of Lu Xun integrated into the general understanding of the overall development and change of modern Chinese to form a firm identification of the new China. “Fifty years ago, I intended to study in China for a short period of time, but I ended up staying here for a long time. I feel I belong to China and I feel I have a part to play in China’s destiny” (Xing & Li, 1985). In 1983, in the article “Lu Xun’s Judgment is Still Right!” (Weiss, 1985), she highlighted the value of Lu Xun’s thought passionately. She made it clear that Lu Xun’s criticisms on the society, such as the status of women, the relationship between father and son, education reform and social progress, etc. still applied to recent China.

The completion of *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times* signified the completion of Ruth Weiss from a “legal Chinese citizen” to a “spiritual/cultural Chinese” who was familiar with the modern history of China and had sufficient sense of Chinese identity. She had become a Chinese who shared the memory of sufferings with the contemporary Chinese people. She became a complete Chinese by achieving the most important “spiritual naturalization” in the process of forming her personal and national identity. This spiritual naturalization was a process of gradual internalization of the Chinese identity and an individual choice based on empathy.

5. Conclusion

Among the many research results on Lu Xun, the book by Ruth Weiss has its unique cultural value. Written in English and published by the New World Press, the book has a precise and distinct publishing purpose and audience expectation. In the “Preface” of the book, the author made it clear that she wrote “for people who are interested in China but do not know too much about her...I hope that some people will be interested in my kaleidoscopic impressions and

see their way clear to read more about Lu Xun...and other Chinese writers of yesterday and today”. Her purpose was to make more foreigners to know China well “through the person of Lu Xun” (Weiss, 1985). According to Worldcat, the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the book *Lu Xun: A Chinese Writer for All Times* has been collected by 117 libraries in 16 foreign countries since its publication. This shows that the book has certain worldwide presence and played a role in spreading Lu Xun’s thought and Chinese literature and culture abroad. Ruth Weiss’ aim of writing was achieved significantly.

The writing and publication strategies of Lu Xun employed by Ruth Weiss supported the realization of her purpose. She wrote Lu Xun from the perspective of Chinese culture and evaluated him as a former friend and ardent supporter of his thought in fluent English. By doing so, she merged the different roles relating to Lu Xun, i.e. a friend, a translator, an author, a researcher, a commenter and a reader all into herself. Moreover, various paratexts, such as photos, paintings, footnotes and appendixes were used by Ruth to make it easier for readers to understand Lu Xun in a comprehensive way. Therefore, the book “which makes no pretensions to scholarship but is written for a general audience, holds greater value for the scholar” (Brown, 1986). All messages conveyed by multi-modal means had played a role in spreading Lu Xun’s thought to the English world. Methods of realizing communicative purposes employed by Ruth Weiss shed light for promoting the “going global” of Chinese literature in general.

Ruth Weiss’s praise and detailed analysis of Lu Xun’s works were her responses to problems arising in Chinese society under the condition before and during the reform and opening-up (since 1978). It can be regarded as her concrete engagement into the social reform and practice of her civil rights and obligations as a citizen. Ruth’s reading, research and writing of Lu Xu, together with her continuous membership in the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference from 1983 to 1993, as a representative of the press, reflected her efforts in constructing her personal identity and new national recognition. Her frankness in criticism and her attitude towards Lu Xun showed her unswerving love for her acquired identity. In the narrative of China’s opening up more widely to foreign countries, it is significant to study the process and reasons for Ruth Weiss, a naturalized Chinese to grow into a determined Chinese.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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