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The Author is Dead! Long Live the Author!

The Death and Legacy of Lu Xun in Chinese *Lianhuanhua* Comics

Lena Henningsen (Heidelberg)[1]

Literary theory has long declared the author dead. Despite this, editors, readers, critics, and others continue to care about authors, their lives and their deaths. The death of the Chinese author Lu Xun (鲁迅 1881–1936)—the father of modern Chinese literature, important intellectual and media celebrity of his time—and its remediation in Chinese *lianhuanhua* comics (连环画) is a case in point: While this death ended the life of a person, it marked the beginning of something new, the posthumous legacy of the author. Lu Xun's funeral was a massive spectacle and media event, despite the author's wishes for the contrary; the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) then turned him from a modernist author into a model for all authors and artists and into a fighter wielding his pen in the revolutionary struggle; his stern looking face appeared on countless propaganda posters calling upon spectators to »learn from the revolutionary spirit of Lu Xun«[2]; and not only his fictional texts, but also his life was rendered in comics form: there exist over 30 biographical comics about the life of Lu Xun, published between 1949 and 2019, with some of them also detailing the last years, months, or days of Lu Xun's life. However, Lu Xun as a dead person is depicted in only one *lianhuanhua*: an undated booklet published in Hongkong without information about its writers and artists (*Lu Xun* (n.d.)). The illustration depicting the dead Lu Xun is clearly adapted from the widely published photograph of Lu Xun on his deathbed by Sha Fei 沙飞 (1912–1950). However, because of the unclear provenance of the *lianhuanhua*, I am not discussing it below. Instead, I focus on *lianhuanhua* published around the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and during the transformation period at the end and after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. These *lianhuanhua* depict Lu Xun at the end of his life and adaptations of his fiction from the same period depicting the death of their protagonists.

The depictions of the end of the author's life—together with depictions of death in comics adaptations of the fiction of Lu Xun—are deliberations on the meaning of life and

death in general as well as on the lives and deaths of concrete individuals and on their suffering and pain. Moreover, these depictions also negotiate the status and the legacy of the author; they feed into discourses (re-)evaluating the role of literature and the arts in China. They also may appear to illustrate how *lianhuanhua* with their clear visual and textual language could be appropriated by propaganda. But on closer scrutiny, they show that the modernism and ambivalence in the biography and in the writings of Lu Xun cannot be easily purged from adaptations of his texts. The death of Lu Xun may have marked the end of his life and an end to his creativity; yet, it opened up a discourse on his legacy, that also is a discourse on the role of literature and art in China. *Lianhuanhua* artists contributed to this discourse and reasserted their own position in the artistic field while also expanding the aesthetics of the genre.

Much as the death of Lu Xun forty years before that of Mao opened up a discourse on his legacy which also is a discourse on the role of literature and art in China, the death of Mao Zedong furthered this discourse with *lianhuanhua* artists reasserting their own positions and expanding the aesthetics of the genre. To demonstrate these points, I first delineate Lu Xun's view on his approaching death, and sketch the circumstances of his death and funeral. Second, I discuss the narrative strategies in the comics and how the death of Lu Xun operates as a means to transcend the mundane world and elevate the author into the Communist pantheon. As common for *lianhuanhua* adaptations of Lu Xun's biography, the comics draw on extant visual and textual sources, making the death of Lu Xun an event that is, essentially, transmedial. Third, I parallel these observations to the depictions of the deaths of fictional characters in *lianhuanhua* adaptations of Lu Xun. I conclude on how these endings invite us to probe the sequential nature of Chinese comics. Death marks an end, but when rendered in literature and art, it also marks the beginning of something new: both within a narrative and within the larger cultural sphere. The *lianhuanhua* thus not only represent occurrences of death as part of sequential narratives, interpreting a biographical or fictional story and giving meaning to the individual life that just ended in death. More than that, exploring a *series* or *sequence* of *lianhuanhua* focusing on the topos of death, all of them related to the life and work of Lu Xun and originating from the late Mao and early post-Mao years, one can extrapolate from the individual work of art and see how the topos was seen at the time: As an event causing pain to the person whose life is coming to an end as well as to those near that person, but also as an event opening possibilities to reflect upon the meaning of life, upon suffering in general, and on the building of a legacy in *lianhuanhua* but also in other fields of cultural practice.

Lu Xun, Comics Art and Death

Lu Xun was a leftist author, intellectual, translator, cultural entrepreneur and celebrity during his life time. He contributed significantly to the modernization of Chinese language, literature and culture and to debates surrounding various fields of culture and art, promoting Western avant-gardist woodcut art as well as the *lianhuanhua* comics genre in China (Davies; Corban; Tang). He was leftist, but never a member of the CCP. Nonetheless, Mao Zedong turned him into a poster boy of the communist revolution: In Mao's 1942 *Yan'an Talks* which are the binding dogma for state-sanctioned art in the PRC to this day, Mao heralded Lu Xun as the role model for all artists and their creations, even ending the talk with a couplet by Lu Xun (Denton 2016; Mao). Lu Xun continues to be read widely and to be cherished by Chinese readers—this can be explained by the wide propagation of the author and his works in the decades since 1942 as well as by the outstanding literary quality of his writings which continue to remain meaningful for Chinese readers into the 21st century.

Lu Xun died a rather unheroic death, of tuberculosis, in the early hours of October 19, 1936, aged 55. Whether his premature death might have been averted through better medical treatment given that he was treated by a Japanese doctor not specializing in lung diseases at a time when China and Japan found themselves as enemies, has been debated widely (Kowallis). Yet, together with his massive and outstanding oeuvre including fiction, essays and poetry as well as his other intellectual contributions to the field of modern Chinese culture his death in 1936 clearly proved advantageous for the creation of his legacy: He was dead before the CCP held its first rectification campaign in 1942 which targeted other influential leftist authors such as Ding Ling 丁玲 (1904–1986) who even had enlisted themselves to the service of the CCP. Considering his outspokenness and the ambiguity of his writings, Lu Xun would have been a likely target during this, or later campaigns as well.

Lu Xun's health had been deteriorating over the course of the year, and both he and his family and friends knew that his death was imminent, as evident from a number of his writings that year. In a famous essay, »Death« (死, Sept. 5, 1936), he ponders death in general and ends with a number of provisions for his own demise. These include both practicalities dealing with his funeral (»2. Just quickly put the body in the coffin and bury it at once. 3. Do not hold any commemorative activities. 4. Forget me and mind your own lives. If you don't, you're just fools.« Lu Xun 2017, translated by Eileen J. Cheng, 66), as well as his views on dealing with his erstwhile and present enemies (»Let them go on hating me, I shan't forgive a single one of them either.« Lu Xun 2017, 67). Yet, the essay is ambivalent, like many of the writings of Lu Xun. Gloria Davies argues that the latter proclamation »bespeaks an aspiration of immortality« (Davies, 303). Taking this aspiration seriously renders Lu Xun's profane and absolute renunciation of commemorative actions rather implausible. However, Lu Xun differentiates between his authorial identity and the immortality of his textual identity on

the one side and the mortality and humbleness of himself as a mortal being. Considering the ambivalence that characterizes Lu Xun's essays and fiction, his remarks about his funeral may be taken literally (»bury it at once«), or they may be read for what they do *not* say: as the desire of the author for a massive funeral paralleling the recent and much reported state funeral of Maxim Gorky in June of the same year with Stalin serving as one of the bearers of the urn (at least for part of the procession). Not only had Gorky been influential among the leftist writers and intellectuals of Lu Xun's generation. Moreover, with their thick hair and moustaches, there is also a visual resemblance among the two authors.

Despite his call for the opposite, his family and friends set up massive commemoration and funeral activities. These need to be seen both as a backdrop to their intentions to enshrine Lu Xun as well as an attempt to use his death as a positive event to unite people and give momentum to the leftist cause vis-à-vis threats by the Nationalists (GMD) and encroaching Japanese forces (Liu). 4462 individuals and 46 groups came to pay Lu Xun their respects when his body was exhibited at the funeral parlor; the procession that accompanied the author on his last journey likewise was massive, despite (or, likely, because of) the politically fragile situation and the threats by the GMD that leftist individuals were exposed to (Liu). Lu Xun's coffin was covered with a cloth which had the characters *minzuhun* 民族魂 »soul of the nation« stitched on it, clearly indicating that this was not the funeral of an ordinary person but of a public figure who even dead had to fulfill other people's aspirations. Both the death of Lu Xun and the funeral were widely reported in the media, and photographs of both circulated widely (Liu). These media reports contributed to the narrating, visualizing and interpreting the death (and life) of Lu Xun in the days, months, years and decades that would follow: Biographies, paintings, museums all would set out to retell the story of the life and death of Lu Xun. *Lianhuanhua* were no exception.

So, while it can be ascertained for sure that Lu Xun died on Oct. 19, 1936, the representations of his death (and, consequently, the meanings attributed to it) are more fluid. This can be seen in the representation of his death in book publications, in Lu Xun museums and memorials (Graf), and in *lianhuanhua*. His death thus not only marked the end of a productive literary career, but also the onset of the conscious construction of Lu Xun's legacy by his family, friends, as well as by the CCP. Lu Xun's rather early death—during the mid-1930s and in his mid-fifties—can be seen as rather beneficial to this endeavor. The ambivalence inscribed into his writings and his constant disputes with other leftist and communist intellectuals and public figures would have landed him in massive trouble in later points in Chinese history. In July 1957, Mao Zedong himself speculated that Lu Xun »would either be in prison and still writing or he would have stopped writing altogether« (quoted in Davies, 328). *Lianhuanhua* depictions of his death mirror the ambivalent meanings attributed to Lu Xun and his writings. They further the legacy of the famous author as if scripted by the CCP, while at the same time presenting a more nuanced picture serving as a blueprint to reflect on

the issues looming large when these *lianhuanhua* were first produced in the late Maoist to early post-Mao transition era.

Lianhuanhua, literally translated as »sequential images« and also translated as picture stories, are an influential type of graphic narratives of 20th century China (Lent, Xu; Seifert). They were published mostly as pocket size booklets, or in magazines. They came into being and enjoyed a first wave of major success during the 1920s and 1930s in parallel with the success of the medium of film, as many movies were adapted with original drawings from the big screen to the small pocket size booklet. Intellectuals, among them Lu Xun, promoted *lianhuanhua* as they could help—they were convinced—with the modernization of the country and the mobilization of the people. After all, *lianhuanhua* were a means to bring new thoughts to readers not fully literate, as well as to children. As such, they would exert transformative power over their readers. After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the CCP banked in on their popularity and distribution channels and began to use *lianhuanhua* for its own purposes. *Lianhuanhua* were seen as an efficient tool to communicate information about practical matters and propaganda messages to those parts of the population not fully literate, as well as to increase literacy (Chen). While pre-1949 *lianhuanhua* continued to circulate and enjoy popularity, the 1950s and early 1960s saw another wave of popularity, both of old and new titles, including adaptations of film and literature of traditional literature, modern, pre-1949 literature and contemporary socialist realist literature. During the early years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the entire publication system experienced major disruptions. Countless *lianhuanhua* artists were persecuted and not allowed to draw. When publication of *lianhuanhua* resumed in the early 1970s, these were heavily political stories. In parallel to developments in other fields of literature and art, the end of the Cultural Revolution brought about great liberties to artists and readers alike: After the death of Mao and the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, we see a massive influx of foreign ideas, comics, and styles; Chinese artists resorted to more expressive styles and topics aside of the narrow confines of what was deemed politically accepted during the preceding decades. This era, then, saw the next—and to date—last major wave of popularity of the genre. It was an era of political turmoil, but also a time of great artistic freedom, both in terms of aesthetics and of content. Therefore, the focus of this paper lies on works from this last wave of comic production, with two *lianhuanhua* produced shortly before the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

Lu Xun, Dead and Remediated in *lianhuanhua*

The depictions of Lu Xun's death and its aftermath in the *lianhuanhua* share a number of characteristics: they authenticate their contents by reference to the writings of Lu Xun; they

are in transmedial dialogue with other sources depicting Lu Xun, most notably photography, but also with his writings; and they balance depictions of Lu Xun's frailty and of the tirelessness with which he continued to write and work. I will explicate these characteristics with three exemplary autobiographical *lianhuanhua* and then move to a set of adaptations of Lu Xun's fiction in the next section.

Never Stop Fighting (1975/1976): Frailty and Heroism

Never Stop Fighting (Shi (W), Lei (A)), is a story of 27 panels by Shi Yige created during the waning months of the Cultural Revolution published in a collection of *lianhuanhua* entitled *Lu Xun's Stories*.[3] It covers the last year of Lu Xun's life and depicts a frail Lu Xun yet emphasizes his fighting spirit and willingness to write on. Also, its aesthetics are firmly grounded in the Cultural Revolution, with positive figures in the center of the panels to attract attention of the reader and with negative characters depicted as small in stature, crouching, and wearing false smiles or even dark glasses (Fig. 1). Lu Xun's participation in an event commemorating the October Revolution serves as the background to depicting his humor and wit, as well as his friends' worries about his deteriorating health (panels 1–6). The American journalist Agnes Smedley in particular, suggests that he go abroad for treatment, which Lu Xun clearly does not want

Fig. 1.1: Panels 14 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

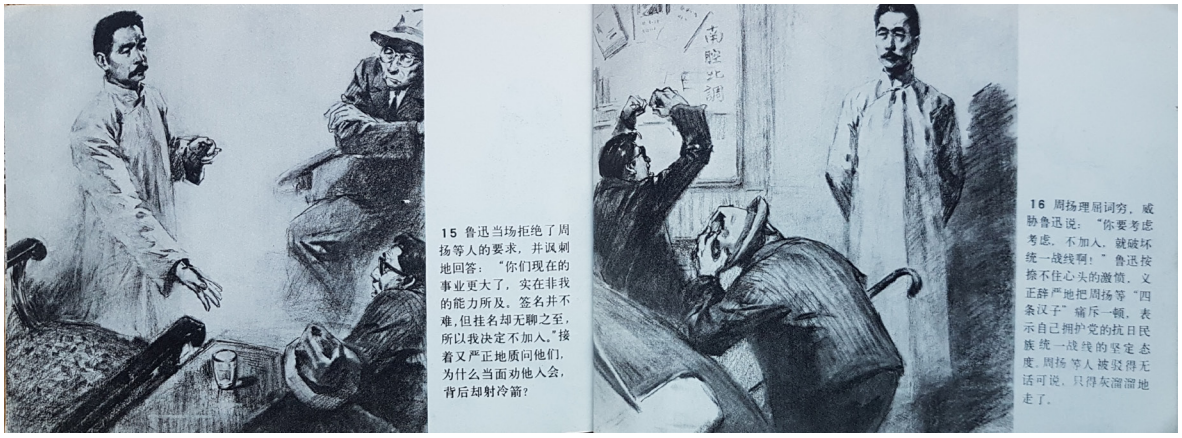

Fig. 1.2: Panels 15–16 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

to do. Soon after, they meet again, with even the newspapers reporting that Lu Xun is planning to go abroad (panels 7–9). In spring 1936, Zhou Yang, who would rise to prominence in the Chinese cultural field after 1949 but fell from grace at the end of the Cultural Revolution when this *lianhuanhua* was produced, and others urge Lu Xun to take part in their endeavors to found the Chinese Artists Association, which Lu Xun refuses to do. Zhou Yang et al. are depicted in line with Cultural Revolution aesthetics: falsely enquiring about Lu Xun's health, thus clearly marked as the evil persons. This episode grounds the *lianhuanhua* within the lived reality of Lu Xun's life, as towards the end of his life he had massive disagreements with Zhou (Holm; Davies) and within the reality of the late 1970s when Zhou was out of favor.

His frailty notwithstanding, Lu Xun makes plans for further writing thinking that his health will take a turn for the better. To Lu Xun, there are things in life that are more important than one's health (panel 23), and the remaining panels (Fig. 2) depict him as he writes, sitting on his iconic wicker chair, propped up with a big cushion and kept warm by a woolen blanket

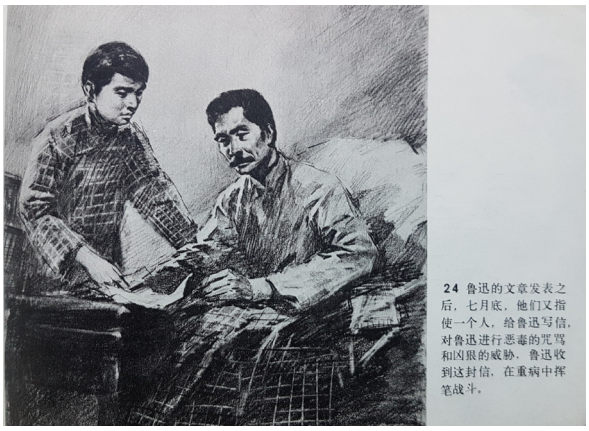

Fig. 2.1: Panel 24 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

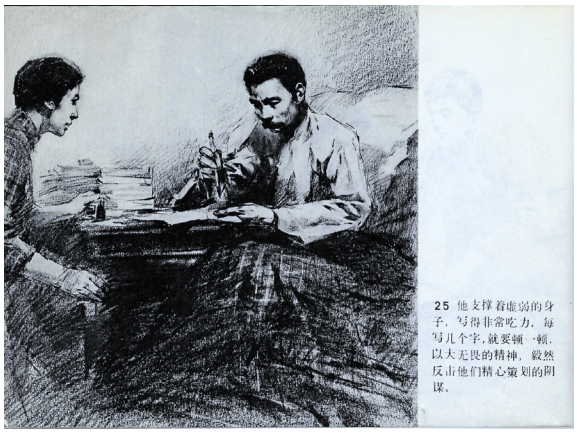

Fig. 2.2: Panel 25 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

Fig. 2.3: Panel 26 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

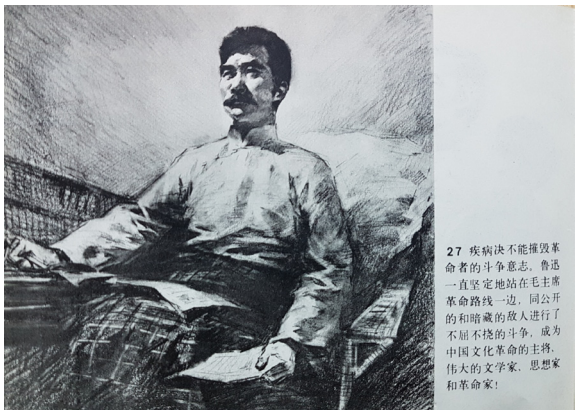

Fig. 2.4: Panel 27 of *Never Stop Fighting*.

wrapped around his legs. As in the written narration, the visuals balance elements of frailty and resolution in their depictions of Lu Xun. The blanket and him sitting in the wicker chair point towards his illness and need for rest and care; in the third to last panel he visibly needs all his strength to hold the brush when writing. His face shows signs of tiredness, yet he remains resolute to remain in Shanghai and continue fighting and writing. The final panel accentuates his visionary glance into the distance, creating a halo effect by adding a source of light behind his back. Lu Xun is attributed with thick hair, eyebrows and moustache to the point that, intended or not, the author bears resemblance to Maxim Gorky. This *lianhuanhua* thus portrays Lu Xun both as frail and as heroic. The topos of the writer who writes as his health is failing and who sees his death nearing yet continues to write is, of course, not exclusive to Lu Xun. Rather, this topos was also propagated in the PRC with the novel *How the Steel was Tempered* and its protagonist Pavel (Wagner). The comic thus portrays approaching death in a heroic way; it anticipates the declaration of the soon-to-be-dead person into a heroic fighter for the revolution and into a martyr.

Last Visit (1976): The Vanishing of Lu Xun

The Last Visit is a 10-panel *lianhuanhua* from a 1976 collection *Stories about Lu Xun and Young People* (Shi (W), Sheng (A)).[4] The story describes how shortly before his death and despite his frail health, Lu Xun visits a woodcut exhibition in Shanghai. It interweaves the death of Lu Xun with his engagement in the woodcut movement and refers to the death of Lu Xun in the subtlest way: Lu Xun vanishes from the story, and from life. Death lingers above the entire plot: the title refers to Lu Xun's »last visit«. The young people at the exhibition are

Fig. 3.1: Panel 6 of *Last Visit*.

Fig. 3.2: Panel 7 of *Last Visit*.

worried about his health; similar to *Never Stop Fighting* this is contrasted with Lu Xun's willingness to continue his work (Fig. 3). The photographs of the real-life visit of Lu Xun to the exhibition clearly were used in the preparation of this *lianhuanhua* thus visually authenticating the story.

Fig. 3.3: Photograph *Lu Xun at the woodcut exhibition.*

As foreshadowed by the title of the *lianhuanhua*, in the last panel (Fig. 4), the young artists watch as Lu Xun disappears from their view. Lu Xun is not visible any more, only the young artists are as they watch Lu Xun walking off, one of them waving goodbye. In this moment, they even are reminded—the reader learns from the captions—of a couplet by Lu Xun: the same that Mao Zedong quotes at the end of his 1942 *Yan'an Talks*. Much as the preceding panel emphasizes the author's willingness to fight on despite his frail health, this last panel shifts the perspective and thus invites the reader to approach the entire comic from a different angle. Not from the angle of Lu Xun who seems to be in the center of attention: as long as he is visible, he is center stage in the carefully arranged panels drawing the attention of all the onlookers and bystanders in the exhibition. Even in the last panel, their eyes continue to be on him, as he disappears. However, as the readers of the *lianhuanhua* no longer see Lu Xun, the young artists take up center stage, and with them their grief as they seem to anticipate the nearing death of their friend and mentor.

The *lianhuanhua* thus may be read, from this last panel, less about Lu Xun, his frailness and heroism; but about how he is being viewed, read and cherished by the people around him. Much as Lu Xun aimed to create an image of himself, the *lianhuanhua* shows how his legacy was built in complicity with those around him (or further away like Mao Zedong). And as Lu Xun silently disappears from the plot, it is they who take over: They are depicted caring for and mourning the author; and they do so by using his words, yet refracted through decades of Maoist Lu Xun veneration. The truth value of this part of the story is, of course, questionable:

Fig. 4: Panel 10 of *Last Visit.*

It seems rather unlikely that the young people thought of exactly those two lines that Mao Zedong would use (and that would be reprinted across major newspapers for decades to follow) in his Yan'an Talks six years after the death of Lu Xun. Quoting this couplet thus also is an implicit legitimization of Mao's dictum that art needs to serve the interest of the party and the people. Considering that the *lianhuanhua* was first published a month before the death of Mao and before the end of the Cultural Revolution, one may read it not only as a veneration of Lu Xun, but also from the perspective of artists experiencing the Cultural Revolution: Many artists, including woodcut and *lianhuanhua* artists were persecuted, forbidden to do their work, or even killed during these years. The reference back to Lu Xun / Mao Zedong may thus also be an attempt to legitimize their own trade and to portray themselves as willing to continue the revolutionary struggle amidst adverse conditions.

The Story of a Red Army Map (1979): The Legacy of Lu Xun's Writings

The Story of a Red Army Map, does not depict the death of Lu Xun, yet, it is exemplary for how it frames the narrative within the author's written legacy (Tai (W), Hang (A)). Many biographical Lu Xun *lianhuanhua* end with a reference to a text by Lu Xun, essay or fiction, on which the respective story is based. The accompanying illustration often depicts the text mentioned and/or Lu Xun as he writes the respective text. These endings thus serve as authentication devices, grounding a story within the written oeuvre of Lu Xun. *The Story of a Red Army Map* works similarly. At the same time, it is the story of a failure of the revolutionary superstar, narrating how he failed to do what he committed to do for the CCP—yet, the framing of the story turns this failure into success: In 1932, Lu Xun is approached by the underground CCP and urged to write a novel about the situation in the revolutionary base areas to mobilize readers for the communist cause. Lu Xun is happy to do that, and receives material from them. Chen Geng 陈赓 (1903–1961), a member of the underground CCP, visits him to report about the situation and leaves a map of the base areas in his care. However, in the end, Lu Xun never writes the story. Considering the wide propagation of Lu Xun as a revolutionary fighter wielding his pen for the revolutionary cause and heralded as a model to study, this ending is quite remarkable: How can a revolutionary fail the task he is assigned? Moreover, Lu Xun fails the approach to artistic creation propagated by the CCP: to take original material and then turn this into art. So, is this story an attempt to free Lu Xun from the narrow confines of the CCP?

The answers to these questions are ambivalent: Indeed, Lu Xun never wrote the novel the CCP had commissioned him. In fact, there is not a single novel to his name. He had been writing short pieces of fiction early in his literary career. But he later stopped writing fiction altogether, feeling that during this time of political danger he had lost contact with

society and was lacking material to write fiction (Pollard, 175). Nonetheless, the story firmly establishes Lu Xun within the revolutionary pantheon with the last panel depicting the bust of Lu Xun presiding over a row of books, likely his collected works (Fig. 5). The captions to this image (translated below) guide readers in their reading of the image. Lu Xun may have failed to deliver the manuscript of a novel, yet he still did not fail to contribute to the revolutionary cause.

Fig. 5: Panel 42 of *The Story of a Red Army Map.*

> The struggle in reality required Lu Xun to participate in the battle with essays. Even though he could not write this novel praising the battles of the people in the base areas, Lu Xun still left for us precious battle essays of a few million characters. The map which Lu Xun carefully hid in difficult and dangerous conditions also testifies to his fervent love for the revolutionary line of Mao Zedong. (Tai/Hang)

The *lianhuanhua* thus ends with a reference to the many essays Lu Xun wrote, how they contributed to the revolutionary cause and how they attest to his veneration of Mao Zedong. The illustration consists of a long row of books—presumably Lu Xun's collected works—overseen by a large bust of the author, thus combining his textual legacy with a representation of his physical appearance (the statue). The statue, moreover, is not a representation of the »real« Lu Xun, but it is already a signifier pointing to the discourses about Lu Xun and the (revolutionary) representations of him in visual media across China, and it can also be seen as another parallel to the legacy of Gorky, considering their similarities in appearance.

At the same time, the spectator is left with a distinct sense of ambivalence: After all, the revolutionary Lu Xun is depicted as a human who failed a task—unthinkable within revolutionary discourses prevalent only a few years before. Yet, it is this ambivalence that is at the core of Lu Xun's writings. Neither his fiction nor his essays provide clear answers; and with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 artists could take greater liberty to explore this ambivalence.

All three *lianhuanhua* presented here originate from the transition period at the end of the Cultural Revolution. None of them portray Lu Xun as a dead man. Moreover, by putting Lu Xun writing and his writings center stage, by foregrounding his textual legacy they abstract Lu Xun the mortal being into a function of these texts. If the death of Lu Xun represents a disembodiment, as he is reduced from actual person into an item of the propagandistic discourse, then these images continue this by foregrounding depictions of the works of Lu Xun instead of illustrations of the frail, dying, or dead person. The person vanishes from

the plot and seems to disappear into transcendence. Lu Xun the person is deemphasized, while Lu Xun the author is foregrounded. Despite the emphasis on his revolutionary spirit in the text of the various *lianhuanhua*, what matters most to the legacy of Lu Xun are the texts he left for posteriority. As a number of his fictional writings detail the death of their protagonists, let us now look into the textual side of Lu Xun's legacy and consider how death is represented in *lianhuanhua* adaptations of Lu Xuns fiction produced at the same time. In these adaptations, the death of the characters serves as a foil to ponder the meaning of death, and of individual lives. While these stories are set in China of the early 20th century and deal with the morals and transformations of Chinese society at the time, the suffering and pain depicted in the *lianhuanhua* adaptations can be read as a reflection on the suffering that many people experienced in China during the Cultural Revolution—just as Lu Xun's encounters with woodcut artists details in *The Last Visit* also reflects both on the early 20th century and serves as background for artists in the second half of the 20th century to detail their own outlook on the value of art.

Dead Characters from Lu Xun's Fiction Remediated in *lianhuanhua*

In Lu Xun's fictional texts, a number of characters suffer death. These deaths are not heroic in the revolutionary sense; rather, the characters die after lives of misery and neglect by society. One way to render this in *lianhuanhua* adaptation is by emphasizing that these stories took place in the pre-communist past, thus feeding into a stream of works of literature and art that bring forward accusations against past injustice and the suffering of ordinary people. By purging Lu Xun's texts of their ambivalence (often in the person of first-person narrators and their involvement into the stories) a number of *lianhuanhua* adaptations during the Mao era attempted to normalize the literature of Lu Xun within the confines of revolutionary literature.

These stories saw new adaptations in the early post-Mao years. Their depictions of the death of their characters, mostly at or towards the end of the stories, represent an exploration into the expressive aesthetics of the genre and a restitution of the ambivalence of Lu Xun's texts. They also invite readers to interpret them as mirrors of the trauma that artists and ordinary people alike suffered during the violent years of the Cultural Revolution. Both *The True Story of Ah Q* 啊Q正传 (1921) and *White Light* 白光 (1922) tell of characters destroyed by societal norms. Again and again, Chen Shicheng, the protagonist in *White Light* had participated in the examination that would gain him respect and access to a government post. Yet, he remains unsuccessful and loses his mind. Following a vision of a hidden family treasure he leaves his home in the middle of the night and drowns in a river—and no one in town cares. In the second story discussed here, *The True Story of Ah Q*, Lu Xun's vision of the Chinese everyman, who lives at the margin of society, never has much money, and

whatever he has he spends on eating, drinking and gambling, while constantly getting into fights. He has a distinct character trait: declaring whatever failure he suffers a moral victory, he manages to uphold his vision of reality (and his dreams of future material and marital bliss). Later, he tries to integrate notions of revolution into his world view, yet never quite gets it right. In the end, he is arrested, convicted, paraded through the street and executed for a crime he never committed, while the onlookers are disappointed for his lack of putting up a show and they lament their material loss: Ah Q may be sentenced, but the victims of the robbery cannot be restituted the items stolen as Ah Q never stole them.

Two *lianhuanhua* adapt Lu Xun's story, using the original, yet shortened texts of Lu Xun. They depict this suffering of the individual particularly well, exploring the expressive qualities of the medium and of two distinct artistic styles: watercolor and woodcut.

White Light: Death as Transcendence?

He Youzhi's 1980 adaptation of *White Light* (Lu Xun 2017/1980, see also Denton forthcoming) throughout depicts the unsuccessful scholar with haunted facial expressions, visibly losing his mind. As he exits town, following a light that only exists in his imagination, he is depicted disappearing into this light, dancing with his arms erect, as if, finally, unburdened of all his earthly worries. The following panels depict the small town at night, a candle and part of a skull and birds in the sky: These items are all referred to in the story. On the one hand, this may seem a »mere« replication of the text in the illustrations. However, they are more: the expressive nature of He's hand reinforces the eerie feeling of the text, in particular the candle flickering at the lower part of a skull (panel 32, see below fig. 6.2). Chen Shicheng had dug it up from the floor below his house in search of the hidden family treasure. An omen for death lingering about him, this increases his own delusion as he continues to follow the white light out of town and into his own death.

On closer scrutiny, the illustration not just replicates the text by Lu Xun, but intensifies it: The candle, just extinguished and with smoke rising into the air is part of the text, and so is the skull—but Lu Xun does not mention the latter at this point, Chen had dug it up earlier in the text. Including the skull (as a symbol for death) with the candle (that likewise just lost its life) intensifies the text. The following panel (33) can be read as a blurry house amid clouds in the sky (up in the sky, likely where Chen had run to?) with a flock of birds accompanying Chen's last words and the last sign of life of Chen in the story: »›Open the gates!‹ Over by the town's western wall, a fearful wail of hope pierced the dawn light.« (translation Julia Lovell, Lu Xun 2009, 137). The image thus clearly is not a realistic illustration of the text. Rather—and with the images before and after – it may reflect the inner world of Chen illustrating his own loss of contact with reality (Fig. 6.3).

Fig. 6.1: Panel 31 of *White Light*.

Fig. 6.2: Panel 32 of *White Light*.

Fig. 6.3: Panel 33 of *White Light*.

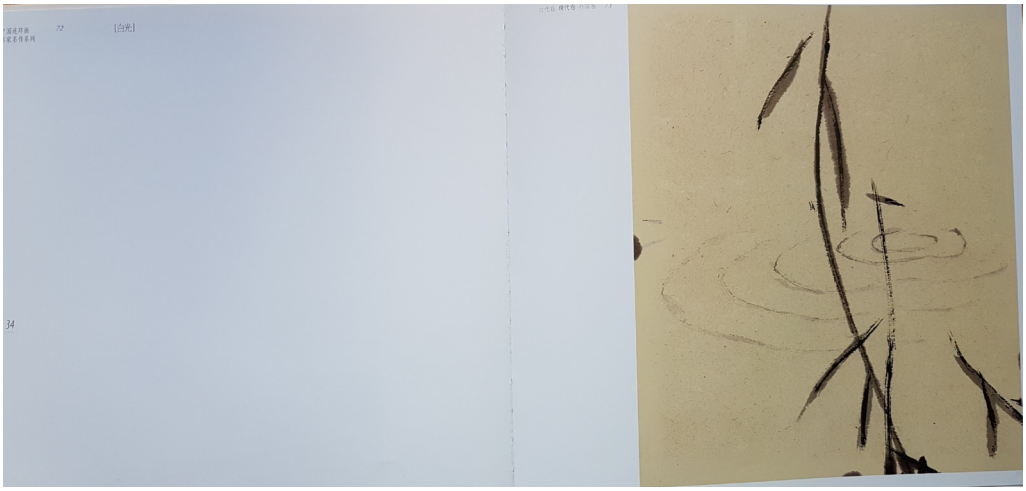

Fig. 6.4: Panel 34 of *White Light*.

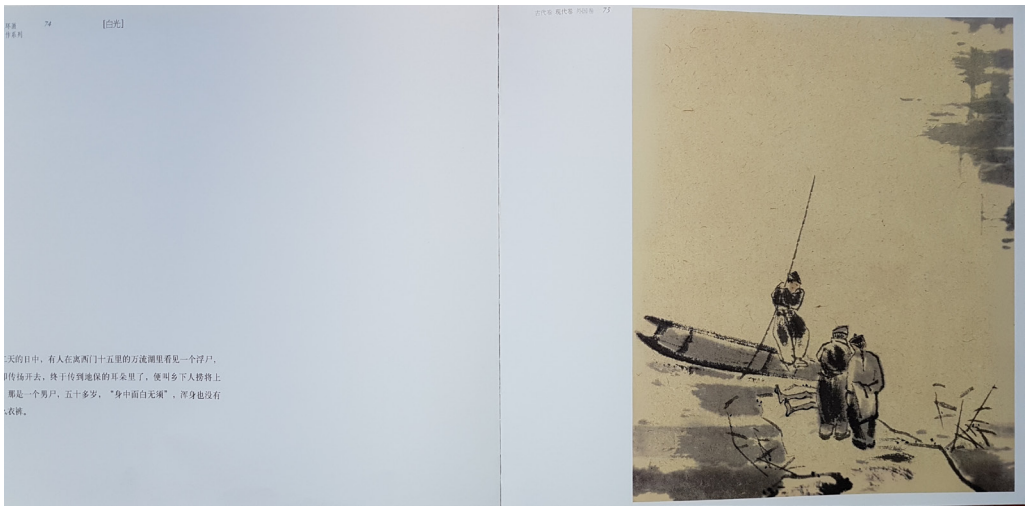

Fig. 6.5: Panel 35 of *White Light*.

Fig. 6.6: Panel 36 of *White Light*.

Next, we see a bamboo twig lightly stirring the surface of the water. This panel (34, see Fig. 6.4) has no text adjacent to it, thus representing authorial silence in the face of the protagonist's death. There is nothing to say about this death, it is for readers to make sense of it themselves. The absence of captions to this panel needs to be considered for its contents and for its visual aesthetics: Faced with the death of the protagonist, which is likely a suicide, the author—Lu Xun—is silenced by the illustrator. There are no words to explain and express what happened. Moreover, the blank page of the *lianhuanhua* also has a strong visual dimension. Where, on the other pages, there is text, here, there is a void. The page thus also visualizes the void that is an effect of death.

The last two panels, like the text in the short story by Lu Xun, then depict the indifference of society around him, including three figures surrounding the dead body as he is pulled from the water (panel 35): of the dead, we only see his two thin legs, while readers' attention is drawn to the three persons who are at loss as to what to do, but who don't care too much about him either. The void caused by Chen's death and visualized with the blank caption page accompanying panel 34 goes unnoticed by the rest of society. For them, the death of Chen Shicheng represents, if anything, a nuisance. Chen sees no redemption.

The True Story of Ah Q: Redemption in Death?

In the same year, Zhao Yannian rendered the Ah Q story as woodcut (Lu Xun 2002 / 1980). The modernist woodcut style employed by Zhao allows for expressionist depictions of the characters and their emotions. While the watercolors used by He have a distinct softness and lightness to them pointing towards transcendence of the character, black dominates the woodcut of Zhao. With white lines amid the darkness of the scenery, this adds a distinct sense of gloominess to the entire story. As many other woodcut art *lianhuanhua*, this one also deviates from mainstream *lianhuanhua* style in the exaggerated ways the characters and their inner lives are depicted. Throughout the *lianhuanhua*, Ah Q often appears with a stubborn, sulking face, yet, in many panels the tragedy of his character remains visible behind this façade of stubbornness and sulkiness. This is especially true for the first and last two panels (Fig. 7).

The first panel displays Ah Q looking over his shoulder and at the reader, with an ambivalent look, defiant and with tired and weary eyes. The next panel zooms out from this close-up to display a dog and Mr. Zhao—then employer of Ah Q—pointing a finger at Ah Q who is taken aback and upset. From then on, Zhao Yannian depicts Ah Q in a grotesque and exaggerated manner. Ah Q's facial expressions seem to be a caricature of himself. Woodcut style is particularly well suited for such exaggerations of the irrationality of the protagonist. On the last two panels, when he is taken to the execution ground, fear takes hold of Ah Q.

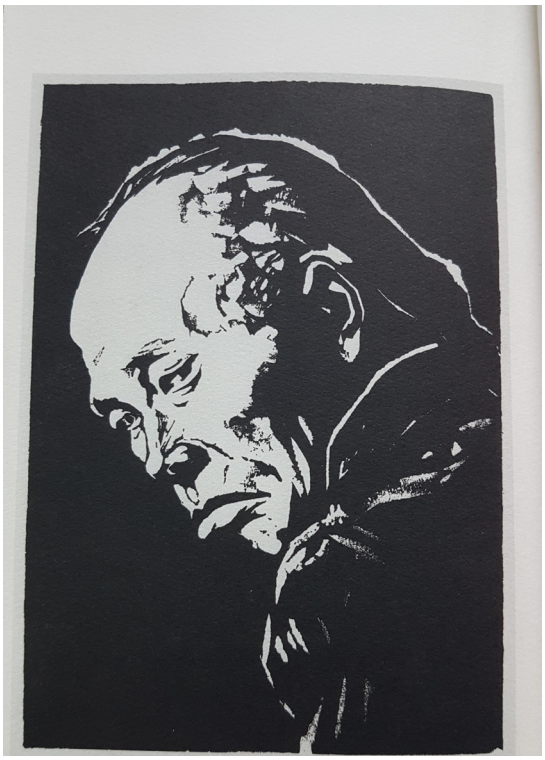

Fig. 7.1: Panel 1 of *Ah Q*.

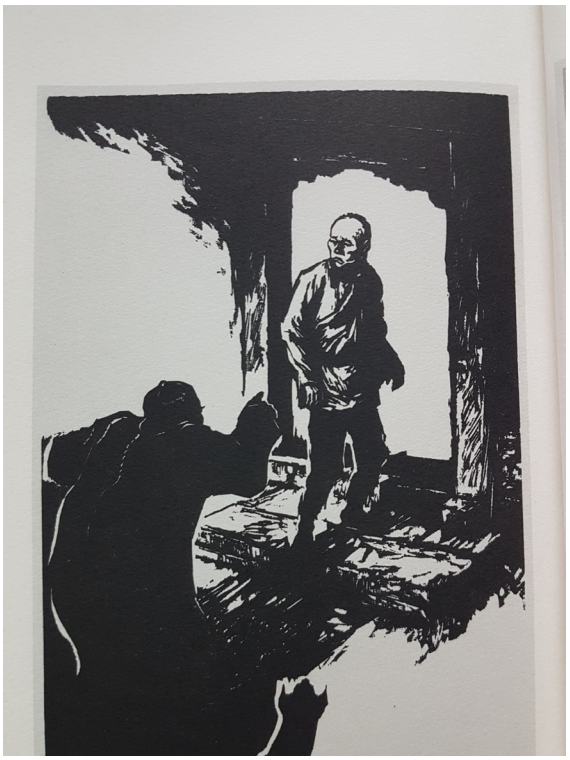

Fig. 7.2: Panel 2 of *Ah Q*.

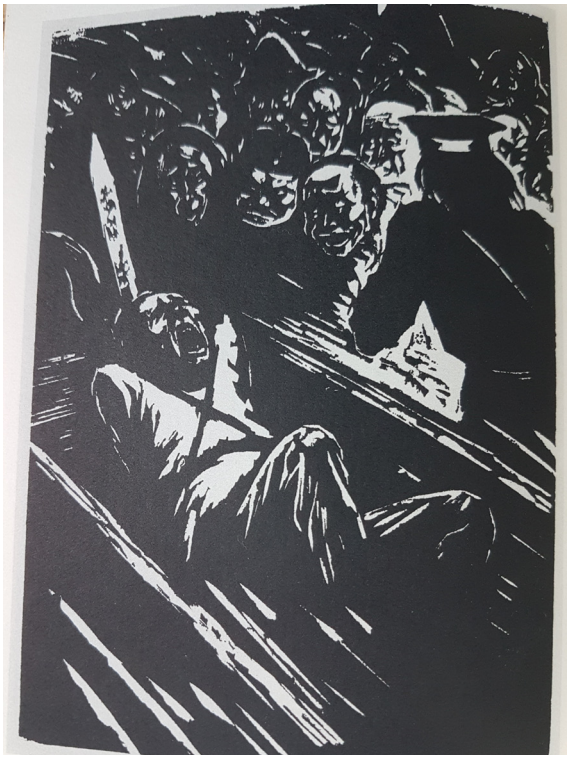

Fig. 7.3: Panel 59 of *Ah Q*.

Fig. 7.4: Panel 60 of *Ah Q*.

On the penultimate panel all faces are turned into grimaces: the onlookers of the spectacle looking at Ah Q and Ah Q himself who is lying on a cart, his arms strapped behind his body, his mouth opened in agony and fear for his life—yet no words coming out from it, as the reader learns from the text. The spectators clearly wait for him to say something memorable, hopefully entertaining. The last panel then is almost all black, with two characters in the top right-hand corner: »Help!« 救命 and Ah Q, as a tiny figure, surrounded by what could be a halo, and still with hands tied to his back falling into emptiness as he seems call out for help. The illustration seems to be slightly at odds with Lu Xun's text:

> A monstrous coalition of eyes, gnawing into his soul.
> »Help…«
> But Ah-Q said nothing. His eyes were blind, his ears were buzzing, as if his body was scattered into so much dust. (translation Julia Lovell, Lu Xun 2009, 123)

With his illustration, Zhao makes the unspoken word visible to the reader, returning agency to Ah Q. The spectators in the story do not get their piece of entertainment as Ah Q is executed, but the reader of the *lianhuanhua* sees emotions bursting out of Ah Q as he dies. There is a clear mismatch between the word »help« on the illustration looking almost like a speech bubble (when there are no such speech bubbles throughout the entire *lianhuanhua*) and the mouth of Ah Q opened as if he were screaming on the one hand and the silence of Ah Q according to the lines of Lu Xun in the captions to the illustration on the other hand. Yet this mismatch, has a powerful effect on the reader creating a dissonance in perception, not unlike what Ah Q is experiencing. Zhao also refocuses on Ah Q in so far as the remaining two paragraphs of the story, narrating the disappointment of the other people in the story are not illustrated.

These two *lianhuanhua* depict the suffering of the two characters not as some abstract trope of bad old society, but as the misery that two individuals live through and in which readers can see a reflection of their own—more recent—suffering. And they represent death not as the heroic last breath of the revolutionary martyr, but as the transcendence into a different realm, likely a deliverance of the individual from his suffering on this world, in China. These journeys of transcendence, however, differ significantly, aesthetically and in terms of the state of the individual. In He Youzhi's watercolor *lianhuanhua*, light colors dominate, and Chen Shicheng is depicted ascending upwards into a different realm, likely delivered from his earthly worries —yet disappearing from the plot and from the panels. When found dead, only his thin legs are visible, reducing his bodily remains to just a set of faceless and nameless bones. Conversely, in Zhao Yannian's woodcut, black dominates, giving the entire story a much more gloomy and heavy feeling. The dying Ah Q, in turn, is gliding, or falling down into a seemingly bottomless dark abyss. In both cases, the protagonists are dead, and in both cases, they transcend into a void. Both *lianhuanhua* thus move beyond the confines of the Maoist and Cultural Revolutio-

nary mainstream: firstly, in aesthetic terms, as they opt for a visual language that does not aim at a photographic representation of the realist world. Likewise, they are not rendered in the simple black and white drawings that dominated *lianhuanhua* practices during the Mao years. These *lianhuanhua* do not subject the individual to some larger ideological narrative. Rather, they depict the inner turmoil of the individual in utterly expressive ways. As such, they are thoroughly linked to the early post-Mao years in their individualistic turn and in their treatment of the suffering of the individual. These *lianhuanhua*, of course, are not the first ones to depict death. Dead persons do appear in Mao era mainstream *lianhuanhua* as well. However, these deaths in earlier stories about the struggle of the CCP against its enemies, often set in war time China, foreground the heroic. They elevate death into the realm of the sublime and the heroic, suppressing individual trauma and suffering. Adaptations such as the ones by He and Zhao thus represent a distinctly different approach to death in *lianhuanhua*, foregrounding individuals and their suffering.

Conclusion: Death as an Ending, Ending as Beginning

The *lianhuanhua* discussed here all rest as much on the life of Lu Xun as they do on his death: They rest on his life during which he wrote literary works that continue to move his readers to this day and during which he also consciously crafted a public image of himself through letters, photographs and texts, many of which contain autobiographical elements. His death marks the end of his writing career and of his own efforts to style his public image. At the same time, it marks the beginning of a discourse about his works and his legacy as an author. After all, the adaptations of his works are both distinct interpretations of the original works by Lu Xun and, at the same time, they are also works of art in their own light. They reveal as much about Lu Xun and his works as they do about the artists who created the adaptations and about the issues that mattered to *them*. Moreover, given the saint-like status of Lu Xun within Chinese politics, reinterpretations and adaptations of his works may have been safe ground for reflection during the politically fraught decades after his death: A *lianhuanhua* artist may be depicting the suffering of a fictional character set in the pre-Communist past when making a statement about the suffering of his fellow countrymen during the Cultural Revolution.

In turn, the death of Mao Zedong, the person who cemented the sanctification and political appropriation of Lu Xun, in 1976 marks the beginning of a new liberty in how Lu Xun and his works could be interpreted. Traces of ambivalence can be detected even in some of the Mao era *lianhuanhua* adaptations of Lu Xun's life and works, yet with the overall changes in artistic practices in early post-Mao China, this liberty reached an unprecedented level. The reevaluation of Lu Xun thus coincided with the reevaluation of the legacy of another key

figure in Chinese culture and politics: Mao Zedong. After all, much as Lu Xun was heralded (and misinterpreted) by Mao Zedong in his 1942 *Yan'an Talks* and after, the veneration of Lu Xun contributed to the cult of Mao Zedong. Thus, any view on Lu Xun after 1976 also reflects changing attitudes about, or attempts to rewrite the legacy of Mao Zedong, as much as that of Lu Xun. After all, the death of Mao precipitated the end of the Cultural Revolution which in turn initiated a new phase in which artists could take greater liberties, aesthetically and thematically, by revisiting the stories of Lu Xun and the country's recent suffering during the Maoist years.

If deaths are endings, but endings mark the beginning of something new, then one may ask how far this relates to the sequential nature of *lianhuanhua*. As other graphic narratives, these *lianhuanhua* are sequential in their story telling mode. Second, they are sequential, because as adaptations they are follow-ups to earlier »original« texts, and very often part of a web of *lianhuanhua* adaptations of the same story that stand in a distinct chronological, and historical order (but may as well be read in a different order or as singular works). Third, also, like other *lianhuanhua*, they are sequential in relation to the larger cultural realm from which they originate: they need to be read alongside photographs or propaganda images to which they have a transmedial relationship and which belong to the (revolutionary) visual landscape of their time. Many of the *lianhuanhua* have explicit connections to distinct texts of Lu Xun, or—in *The Last Visit* or the Lu Xun biography mentioned at the outset of this paper (*Lu Xun*) which depicts the dead Lu Xun—photographs of the real Lu Xun. Fourth, this particular set of *lianhuanhua* show how the topos of death and the aesthetics and narrative strategies of its depiction also develop over time. Lastly, as the depictions of death develop from representations of heroism to the death of the individual and of its suffering they represent a link to the realities of life of the individual reader.

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Table of Figures

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2] For an overview of the Lu Xun themed propaganda posters, see the online exhibition within the Landsberger Collection: https://chineseposters.net/themes/luxun. The sternness in Lu Xun's face matches with the »revolutionary spirit of Lu Xun« that observers of the posters are urged to learn from.

3] The *lianhuanhua* is dated 1975, the preface 1976.

4] See https://chinacomx.github.io/translations/luxun/zuihouyicixunli/ for the *lianhuanhua* and a translation into German [as of 30 April 2025].