

Profound Rejection and Fatal Infection — A Comparison of Lu Xun and Carl Schmitt's Criticism of Romantic Art and Their View of "Human Nature" Hidden Behind

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Abstract—This research aims to (1) provide an etymological and philosophical distinction of the word "romanticism" in different languages, (2) analyse Lu Xun and Carl Schmitt's criticism of romantic art and compare the similarities and differences of their view of "human nature" hidden behind, (3) prove that these two profound critics of romantic arts never fully purged themselves of the romantic spirit they criticized.

Index Terms—Carl Schmitt, Lu Xun, modernity, romanticism, China, Germany.

I. INTRODUCTION

Carl Schmitt and Lu Xun were contemporaries. They both lived in the transition period their countries faced and were fully aware of the fate of modernity. While the majority of people were ignorant and benighted, Schmitt and Lu Xun represented intellectuals who bore the crisis with sober and clear heads. Not following the times blindly, they both urged the spiritual reconstruction of the nation and the individual on one hand, and were opposed to sheer materialism on the other hand. They both worked diligently to find a way out of the crisis for national culture and the individual soul. Furthermore, both of them tried not to be narrow scholars and mere learned men: Lu Xun diverted himself from medical science into literature, attempting to look for the future of both national and individual existence through literary practice; Schmitt remained a jurist his whole life long, yet he remained absorbed in world literature, which initiated some of his very influential political and theological thinking. We can say that they are both great modern thinkers with deep concerns and broad horizons.

The main resource, which Lu Xun used for reference and with which he built dialogue, is western culture. Yet what Chinese academia often neglects is, his first dialogist is German culture. Before he went to Japan for study, he learned German in China. Ever since then, the chief way for him to know about western culture was always through the German language; moreover, even his knowledge of Eastern Europe and Soviet Russia was acquired through the German language. German was a more important medium for Lu Xun than Japanese. The Japanese scholars were mainly focusing on translation and introducing foreign cultures to Japan at that time. Today, we might make another interesting comparison: Although Lu Xun and Carl Schmitt didn't know about each

other, another suitable German dialogist of Lu Xun might be his peer Carl Schmitt.

What is equally interesting is that a lot of Chinese scholars, who are keen on Lu Xun, are also particularly concerned with the research on Schmitt. In recent years, Schmitt is not only a major topic of academic discourse in the world, but also has become almost a fashion among Chinese scholars. Elites from all walks of life are connecting Schmitt's thinking directly with a lot of major problems in contemporary China, which has formed a fierce debate.

There are already quite a lot of comparative studies of Lu Xun with other thinkers. However, a comparison of Lu Xun and Schmitt was only slightly mentioned in the massive discussion in China and has never been thoroughly studied. There is no specific research and of course no comparative study from a literary aspect. Thus, this article would be pioneering in this field.

II. SOME CLARIFICATIONS OF "ROMANTICISM"

What is "romanticism"? Although opinions about this question vary immensely, it is inevitable to re-examine this big issue affecting contemporary literature and modernity profoundly. Hence I have to make some clarification at first.

Romanticism is defined as a cultural epoch in Europe, with its climax between 1820 and 1850, and its achievements especially in sculpture, literature and music. Later on, the "romantic elements" outlast this epoch and remain in all kinds of western ideas. In German literary history, the conception of "romanticism" refers to the epoch from the end of 18th century to around the 1840s. The Romantics saw themselves as the polarity of German Classicism, but in fact, the early Romanticism is a development of the Classicism. Romanticism flourished for a period in Germany. Even today, German culture still bears the imprints of Romanticism. Rüdiger Safranski wrote in the preface of his book *Romantik. Eine deutsche Affäre*, that the spirit of "Romanticism" is not simply a German phenomenon, but it has experienced special refinements in Germany. This refinement is so strong that people in foreign countries will equate German culture with "romanticism" or "romantic".

However, the conception "romanticism" itself was set up afterwards, just like the conception of "classicism". The representatives of these two epochs have never used "classicism" or "romanticism" to summarize their times. The definition of "romanticism" has become extremely blurred and muddled in the following political, historical and philosophical discourse. Among the various things labeled as

“romantic”, it is hard to find a general but restrictive criterion to draw the boundaries of romanticism. The American historian Arthur Lovejoy said in the article *On the Discrimination of Romanticisms*, that this conception includes so many things, that it means nothing by itself [1]. Because of the ambiguity of this word, he even suggested its plural form: romanticisms.

In French language, there are two kindred words: “romantique”, which means “sensitive, gentle and melancholic”, and “romanesque”, which means “fantastic, extraordinary and exaggerating”. The French literary critic and cultural anthropologist René Girard elaborates the extremely vast difference between these two seemingly similar words in his influential literary critique *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*. The German word “romantisch” is in fact borrowed from the French word “romanesque” in 17th Century. That is to say, its original meaning refers to those “extraordinary literature” according to Girard’s theory. But from mid 18th Century, the meaning of this word changed gradually and became closer to the English word “romantic”, which means “sensitive and melancholic”, obviously tends to be similar to the word “romantique” according to Girard.

III. ROMANTIC ELEMENTS IN MODERN CHINESE CULTURE

We may find that the Chinese culture is full of romantic elements. From Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism to the local and folk, the classical Chinese culture is filled with romantic temperaments. During the long and painful period of modernization in China, a variety of romantic artistic elements have been hyperactive. Some of them come from traditional Chinese culture, some of them from western culture. With the conflicts and assimilation with each other, they have very complicated but profound influence on both Chinese elitists and masses. For example, a large number of novels with strong romantic temperaments sprung up in the late Qing Dynasty. Exaggerated emotion and craziness was flooding in many of these talented works. David Wang (王德威) said that in the world described by those writers in the late Qing Dynasty, values form and break just like bubbles, morality is just a façade. [2] As the traditional Confucian classics were cast aside, these kinds of novels became the main reading materials for a lot of Chinese intellectuals. Most of the contemporary writers in the “May 4th Movement” grew up with this “vicious romantic mentality”. Although they haven’t originated a movement of Romanticism consciously, “romantic” is definitely one of the main spiritual temperaments during the May 4th era. It was clearly represented by literature of the “Creation Society” (创造社) with writers such as Guo Moruo as one of its main members. Those writers advocate “l’art pour l’art”, obviously influenced deeply by “Sturm und Drang” and German Romanticism. In a poem named “I am an idolater” of 1920, Guo Moruo gave full expression to the expanding of personal emotion and misrepresentation of the existing values in modern China.

Despite the distance in time and space with the European Romanticism, the romantic mentality continued to inform the

thinking and doing of intellectuals in Lu Xun’s generation. So Oufan Lee (李欧梵) concluded in his book *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese*, the influence of western romanticism upon Chinese literature dominated at least for ten years and it provided the prevalent spiritual characteristics [3]. The literary revolution in China can be compared with the Romanticism Movement in Europe, because they both represent the opposition to the traditional order, reason, observance and life structure found in Classicism. They both provided a new emphasis on sincerity, initiative, passion and imagination, as well as the pouring out of individual vitality (all in all, a priority of subjective human emotion) [4]. It is fair to say, if we don’t examine modern China from the literary perspective of Romanticism, our understanding of modern China is incomplete.

IV. SCHMITT’S CRITICISM OF ROMANTICISM

Criticism of romanticism remains one of the main themes throughout Schmitt’s lifetime. His criticism doesn’t only aim at some certain viewpoints or writers or phases of romanticism, but rather at the whole romantic spirit presented in literature, politics and philosophy. He described romanticism as an era of neutralization and depolitization in which all righteous or moral decisions lose their seriousness. Schmitt showed particularly his antipathy towards the political speculation of romantic intellectuals who were good at balancing and temporizing. He believed that the political romantics “lack resistance to the strongest and straightest shock which takes place occasionally.” He concluded further that political romanticism is “the associated emotional reaction of romantics to political affairs” [5]. The absolute aesthetic and emotional factors forced reality and politics to be subordinate or even distorted.

To give romanticism his own definition, Schmitt didn’t start from any objects considered to be romantic, but rather from the romantic subjects and their special romantic relationship with the world [6]. In *Politische Romantik*, published in 1921, he made an extensive and thorough critique of the “romantic individuals”, who are satisfied with different kinds of experience as well as the personal and emotional description of their experience, and reject serious decisions. On this basis, he defined the core of romanticism as “subjective occasionalism”. He said:

Romanticism is subjective occasionalism, because it is based on the occasional relationship with the world. Romantic subjects have replaced God to take the central position, and turn this world and everything into a pure occasion. Since the ultimate authority has become the genius “Individuals”, not God any more, the whole perspective has also changed accordingly, and something sheer occasional appeared [7].

In his definition, “occasio” is considered as the opposite to “causa”, that means the isolation or abolishment of the necessity between cause and effect. Therefore, Schmitt described “romanticism” as a kind of uprooting [8], which is the deepening and intensification of the “sick alienation” [9] described by Nietzsche.

V. LU XUN'S CRITICISM OF ROMANTICISM

As the most important thinker who made a critical and original response to modernity in the East as a whole, Lu Xun has seldom used the word "romanticism" directly to criticize the massive romantic artistic trend at his time. But in fact, the examination and criticism of romantic elements has always been a part of his entire career as a litterateur and thinker. In *Historical Change of Chinese Fiction*, he noticed the "excessive emotion" in the novels of the Late Qing Dynasty—"flattering at first, then almost realistic, and abomination at last", but only out of "occasional" impulse rather than "causal" relationship with the reality. Behind the exaggerated emotion, there hides the bankruptcy of morals and the indecision in values. Polarities such as "good and evil", "beautiful and ugly", "friend and enemy" have gradually lost their moral meaning and served merely for the expression of personal emotion.

However, Lu Xun's literary creation must also have been influenced by the spirit of the time. It can't be denied that romanticism was a very important part in his early thinking about literature and art. But it is more important that we can't ignore his anti-romanticism and realism. Wang Furen says that compared with Lu Xun, all the members from "Creation Society" lacked "the complicated life experience during the rise and fall. Their works were all too shallow and simple." [10] So it is appropriate to say that there are romantic elements in Lu Xun's literature, but he has never allowed them to be absolute, since he found potential risks hidden behind.

According to Girard's theory, Lu Xun's fiction *Shang Shi* (*Grieve over the Deceased*) is exactly the "romanesque (extraordinary) literature" who exposes the existence of "secret mediums". What Juan Sheng and Zi Jun adore is the prevailing "free" and "romantic" love at that time. After Yuan Sheng, the "romantic subject" has gained Zi Jun, the "romantic object", he realizes that Zi Jun is not only that brave woman who declared: "I belong to me myself, none of them has the right to interfere me." Life turns back to the trivial and mundane. Again he has to face the hollowness, which remains unchanged. The romantic ideal for beautiful love has turned sour in reality. This story was written in 1925. Three years before, Guo Moruo translated the masterpiece of young Goethe *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) into Chinese and started a feverous craze for Werther in China. In the following ten years, his Chinese translation was reprinted 37 times and triggered the quest for free love and marriage among numerous young Chinese intellectuals who had suffered from traditional arranged marriages. Even suicides done in Werther style became a big social issue during that period. *Shang Shi* is a clear rejection of the romantic interpretation of Goethe's *Werther*.

Realizing the fragile and hollow spiritual status of the romantics of his time, Lu Xun also distanced himself with those radical liberalists who regard liberalism as their highest value and ultimate answer. Lu Xun found these "romantic liberalists" being bound to the ideology of "liberalism". As a result, they not only lost true freedom, but also tried to bring hypocritical freedom to China. Lu Xun was fully aware, that the deep-rooted depravity and slavery of Chinese people can't

be simply solved by Liberalism and Democracy of the West.

As early as when he studied in Japan, Lu Xun was involved in a robust debate with some celebrities such as Liang Qichao. Lu Xun showed a clear rejection of their romantic view to save the nation from extinction with science. He asserted that "the urgent task before us today is to rid ourselves of the hypocritical gentry; superstition itself may remain!" (*Po E Sheng Lun/ On dispelling false ideas*) His extreme hatred for these romantic "hypocritical gentries" echoes Schmitt's attack on "occasional romanticists". Lu Xun believed that neither Chinese mainstream "true belief" nor western science would provide the right way to solve the national and individual crisis. Furthermore, Lu Xun brought to light that a lot of hypocritical gentries, who celebrated freedom and individuality, were actually only attempting to play a role in the cultural or political world. What they really cared about was the praise from the masses. They have never seen "science" or "true belief" which they projected as the answer to the crisis in a serious and objective way. Outwardly, they appeared to stand their ground and speak their mind and theory loudly. Yet in fact, it was just a play with language. "Magnificent or profound, romantic or classic, it has nothing to do with them, because they are satisfied with admiration from each other and self-sufficiency in their small cubicle." (*Two Hearts Collection*) On the contrary, the real reformers who "are willing to burn themselves" will absolutely not abandon the reality and isolate themselves from the masses of people.

VI. THE "ROMANTIC ELEMENTS" REMAINED IN LU XUN AND SCHMITT

Both Schmitt and Lu Xun started from the criticism of individuals in their nations and went further to seek solutions to the national crisis. They both realized clearly that romantic and rootless individuals could only build a spiritless and soulless society. Therefore, Lu Xun tried to establish a soul for the nation through literature, whereas Schmitt tried to find a position for the nation through political authority. According to Lu Xun, the "true humanity" must be firstly built before the national soul can be set up. Only when every individual becomes "human" with soul, there would be the possibility to build a humane nation. Therefore, when China was experiencing the transition period facing the shock from western culture, the most important thing is to build the "interior life". On the contrary, Schmitt has the Christian tradition as background and made sharp criticism towards the self-expansion of romantic individuals in the process of modernization. Meanwhile, he had to accept this irreversible process and thus look for a modern political authority to defend against the decadent morality in modernity and to seek for the self-reliance of his nation. So we may say that they were both looking for the salvation of the individual and national spirit. With Chinese tradition as cultural background, Lu Xun started from the "individual" to search for a breakthrough (from inside to outside), from building the "human" to reconstructing the national soul; Schmitt was in the circumstances of a rapid development of modernization in Europe, and he started from Christian belief to regain God's

full authority as well as the sovereignty of a state of law.

However, there still remain some romantic elements in their own thinking, especially in their view of “human”.

With his Catholic belief, Schmitt’s view of the “human” shows an extremely strong awareness of original sin. This reflects in almost all of his works. In the time when absolute liberalism dominated Europe, Schmitt still insisted on the impossibility of self-salvation of humans and launched the criticism of the strong current of liberalism. In politics, he pushed for dictatorial legitimacy within a constitutional system and left his mark on the history of modern philosophy. But, pathetically, he excused himself of the general original sin he claimed to believe in. He conceptualized himself as “minority” in the first place, who surveys the weak and incompetent human being with a condescending attitude. Although he emphasized that original sin binds human beings as a whole, he didn’t see himself in this bondage; he even tried to justify himself in the name of Christian belief, which finally led to his notorious blot as a Nazi and made him one of the most controversial people in modern philosophical history. Ultimately, he hasn’t escaped from the romanticism he so harshly criticized.

This kind of self-pleading was mainly presented with literature as a medium. He conceptualized himself in different literary figures, for example, through his interpretation of Herman Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno*, or through his self-recognition as a Christian Epimetheus. He believed that the very few elites, including himself, are to examine and bear the national crisis, yet were still unable to turn the aimless drifting of Europa into real sailing. So they could only hesitate between resistance, disappointment and fear. Here lays Schmitt’s problem: He only saw himself as a victim of the time and pleaded for the tradition of Catholic church, but he forgot one key fact, every individual in the broken order, including himself, gets entangled with original sin. The image as sufferer and victim in European crisis made him unable to look into his own responsibility and sins. As a spiritual authority, he allowed himself to judge like the “Grand Inquisitor”. His belief turned out to be a theoretical tool to accuse others and justify himself.

Similar to Schmitt’s despair facing the reality, the anxiety of the few sober intellectuals and criticism of the numb masses also compose a very important part of Lu Xun’s work. His A-Q is a typical representative who lives in such an illusionary and hypocritical world. He manages to keep his self-esteem in a pathetic way by “psychological victory” and is even proud of his ugliness and evil. Lu Xun also regarded himself as an isolator and victim of the old society and criticized it with a great sense of justice. But beyond that, he realized that he has also “eaten others”, he was also a victimizer (*Kuangren Riji/A Madman’s Diary*). Different from Schmitt, he always distanced himself with the so-called social elites. He even published *A Q Zhengzhuan (Biography of A Q)* under the name of “Ba Ren”, which means the countrified common, in opposition to the highbrow. In his works such as *Kong Yiji* or *Yao (Drug)*, we can find his deep understanding and sympathy for the illiterate ordinary people as well as the great gulf between uneducated and well-educated people. He has never conceptualized himself as an elite, but rather fought at the margin as a writer with

literature from the “soul” against the rigid deception of the romantic hypocritical gentries. Most of the intellectuals unconsciously expect to be somehow romantic idols of national culture. It is rare and valuable that Lu Xun rejected it and tried to stand by the side of the wordless majority in China.

Although Lu Xun is not a Christian, his thoughts must be influenced by Christian theology to a certain extent. His accusations are not only aimed at others, but also at himself at the same time. His statement “no difference between a slave and a slaveholder” pointed out the sad fact that even when the weak become the strong, human nature won’t be changed. There are some similarities between Lu Xun’s view of the human and that of Christianity. In *History of Chinese Modern Novels*, C.T. Hsia (夏志清) put the blame of the “shallowness of Chinese modern literature” on the fact that Chinese literature “is not interested in original sin or any other religious theories related to evilness” [11]. Actually, we can definitely find out a sense of Christian original sin in some of Lu Xun’s work — not only from the horrible “devil” in those who apathetically watch A Q being executed, but also from the hidden “devil” in the weak such as A Q (He attempts to violate the little nun who is even weaker than him.) At this point, it seems that some Japanese scholars’ observations have been more attentive to this aspect. Takeuchi Yoshimi believed that Lu Xun has a consciousness of general sin; Maruo Tsuneki also argues that Lu Xun’s deep fear of the “demoniac” in Chinese folk culture includes himself. This awareness, which is very similar to the idea of original sin in Christianity, allowed Lu Xun to realize that victims are also victimizers. He was not satisfied with Nietzsche’s idea of *Übermensch*, but further found out that China is lacking “sincerity” and “love” most of all. An active and strong-willed man must also have sincerity and love. Only with a consciousness of general sin is there the possibility of gaining real self-consciousness, to get rid of hypocritical deception.

VII. THE UNBEATABLE ROMANTIC VIRUS

The extreme emphasis of original sin, which is one part of human nature according to Christianity, makes Schmitt’s criticism sharp and profound, yet it also makes him ignore the other part of human nature according to Christianity — the divine aspect of humanity, that human beings are created in God’s image. Consequently, Schmitt deviated from the essence of Christian agape. In contrast, Lu Xun believed in the countrified simplicity and honesty of the Chinese folk, which makes him closer to the idea of human divinity in Christianity. He believed that the soul of the nation could not be acquired from the traditional intellectuals, but only from the honesty and simplicity of the poorest people. The folk beliefs, which are regarded as superstitions by those hypocritical gentries, are for him the products created from the pure heart and imagination of the Chinese folk and should be the origin of national spirituality. He borrowed ideas from the West and tried to find self-consciousness for the Eastern nation he lived in. His affirmation of the “superstition” is actually a critique of the mainstream “right belief”. Deep rooted in the reality of China, Lu Xun was fully aware of the enslaved status of the nation and understood the necessity of

“individual emancipation” and “individual freedom” for China. Even puzzled individuals are better than “right” groups without freedom. At this point, he is totally the opposite of Schmitt and the Grand Inquisitor.

However, there is another fatal and serious romantic virus in Lu Xun’s thinking which restricts him to remaining a profound criticizer. His determined rejection of all kind of romantic idols has also caused the rejection of an absolute and sacred supremacy. Therefore, he has left a fatal spiritual hole for himself as well as for Chinese culture, and has even opened a space for more dangerous romantic idols.

It is undeniable that Lu Xun had the so-called “ultimate concern”, according to Ito Toramaru. He realized the fear and respect man has while facing death, the responsibility that man has to take as a human being, the possibility of redemption and the hope of resurrection through confession of sins. But, pathetically, he still didn’t get rid of the tragic circle of “desperation and anti-desperation”. It seems that Lu Xun realized that Eastern culture lacks the awareness of coexistence of the two parts of human nature — Man’s Sin and Man’s Divinity. He said: “From the hand of Devil, there must be light leaking out. The Devil’s hand can’t cover brightness.” (*Sui Gan Lu* 40), But he still hasn’t found the brightness in spite of the leak of light, and he thus struggled in endless pursuit. His romantic pain is described in *Guo Ke (Passerby)*: The naive little girl says there are many wild lilies and roses at the end of the roads, but the old wise man tells the passerby that there are only graves at the end of the road. Nevertheless, the passerby still wants to keep going. Basically, this kind of “keeping going” is romantic — what really matters is not a clear way out or the hope of life, but “keep going” itself. This is the “ultimate romantic virus” with which Lu Xun was eventually also infected, although he spent his whole life trying to expel the “demons” from others as well as from himself.

Just as Gao Yuanbao saw, “life is the only definite reality” for Lu Xun. Therefore, he had to hold fast to a thorough “Nothingness” in his thinking [12]. He expressed it in a sorrowful way: “The most painful thing in life is, you wake up and find that there is no way to go. The dream-makers are lucky; if there is no way out, then don’t wake them up. ... So I believe, if we can’t find way out, we should keep making dreams.” This status of “no way to go” has not only a romantic sense of resistance towards tradition, but also shows his romantic skepticism. He spent most of his life in destroying the so-called “right beliefs”, and pathetically ended up on an endless way of seeking.

VIII. CONCLUSION

From the perspective of the relationship between Chinese and European culture, it is obvious that Lu Xun has distanced

himself with a lot of “Werther-style” romantic writers of his time, but eventually hasn’t escaped from the “Promethean style” romantic model. In contrast, after having experienced a series of revolutions in Europe, Schmitt saw in the “Promethean style” personal heroism the risk of going astray from God. Therefore, he elevated “original sin” to be the highest value and the grounding of all political ideas, which allows his political philosophy to have the depth of a political theology. Unfortunately, he only left himself out of this bondage and remains a self-glorified romantic elite after all.

It is a shocking fact! Both in China and Germany, two great thinkers during the transition period made such profound criticisms of romanticism and yet couldn’t totally get rid of it! Meanwhile, this leaves us such an enlightening question: what kind of concern might eventually make elites get rid of the nightmare of romanticism thoroughly!

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