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Exhibiting Text as a Spatial Object in the Beijing Lu Xun Museum

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Exhibiting Text as a Spatial Object in the Beijing Lu Xun Museum

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ABSTRACT

Lu Xun preserves a certain complexity and reflectivity in his writings that avoid overly simplistic interpretations. But what happens when a text is taken out of its literary context and exhibited as visual art? By examining the two cases of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum and the Former Residence of Lu Xun, we observe different inversions of meanings that allow for new forms of heterogeneity to be played out in a spatial realm. The text-focused curative style of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum decontextualizes Lu Xun’s quotes to create more generalizable meanings for viewers. The Former Residence of Lu Xun relies on the immersive quality of space – and lack of text – to allow visitors to re-imagine Lu Xun’s daily life, and see him not as a grandiose literary figure, but as a regular person in material reality. What results from the combined comparison of these two exhibits is a new physical portrayal of Lu Xun that integrates its heterogenous components into a unified exhibition.

INTRODUCTION

China’s most famous modern writer Lu Xun aspired to transform society through literature. He wrote in the preface to a collection of his short stories, Call to Arms, that “the most important thing,” is to “change their spirit” — the people’s spirit — and the best way to do that is to “promote a literary movement” (Lu 1981, vii). Lu Xun took part in both the May Fourth (1919) and the New Culture Movements (1910s–1920s), which advocated to break from traditional social structures and to manifest democracy, individual freedoms, modernization, and literature written in vernacular language, also known as baihua. While Lu Xun strongly supported baihua as a “common property of the masses,” in his own writing he mixes both vernacular and classical Chinese, serving to preserve an interesting literary heterogeneity (Davies 2013, 13). He was acutely aware of his own critical legacy, and by mixing the two styles of writing, he maintains a certain tension that avoids overly simplistic interpretations. As Gloria Davies points out, in the “very strangeness of his baihua there inheres a desire not merely to represent but to ‘perform’ the struggle for free expression,” sustaining a level of activity in his writings to be passed down and debated in future generations (2013, 16). His common reference to the notions of “miscellaneous writings” and “miscellaneous feelings” privilege the “complexities of human experience” and “negat[e] the exactitude of correct ideas” (Davies 2013, 16). This insistence in preserving complexity and mixed impressions provides an important framework under which to analyze museum exhibitions and collections related to Lu Xun today.

In the backdrop of highly curated biographical timelines, the quotes stand out as de-contextualized, broad, and emotionally-charged – making them open to visitors’ diverse interpretations. By contrast, the Former Residence has only scarcely placed and dryly written plaques, but a much larger focus on the recreations of Lu Xun’s living conditions. It is therefore more experientially straightforward, providing enough spatial context to allow for uniform re-imaginations of Lu Xun’s daily life. These different elements between the two museums combine to form a divergent, but — opposite to Lu Xun’s primary writings — more cohesive and wholistic representation of Lu Xun and his ideas, revealing disparate differences between the form of writing and literary exhibitions.

THE BEIJING LU XUN MUSEUM (BEIJING LUXÜN BOW-UGUAN)

The courtyard of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum is full of abundant greenery. Before walking into the red pillared, traditional-style roofed building titled “chenlieting” or “Display Room,” visitors face first, a giant sculpture of one of Lu Xun’s handwritten manuscripts and second, a tall marble statue of him sitting contemplatively. Through the gate and past the “Display Room,” is the Former Residence of Lu Xun, a self-built courtyard house, where he lived for a little over two years with his mother, Lu Rui. This exhibition complex is known in association with the New Culture Movement Memorial of Beijing, which is a 20-minute drive East. The two areas are combined into what is called the New Culture Movement Memorial Area. Compared to the Lu Xun exhibits, the political ideology of the New Culture Movement Memorial is quite pronounced. Located just beyond the old Peking University Red Building, building with a revolutionary history and tradition, it was a center of student activism and an important location for the early development of the Chinese Communist Party (He 2006, 27-28).
The Lu Xun Museum appears to be more focused on biography, celebration, and remembrance of the literary figure. The name association and proximity to the New Culture Movement Memorial, however, as well as the eye-catching bright red colors in the beams of the museum, still lends itself to be portrayed with political allegiance to the Communist Party. A more significant difference between the two is that, whereas the New Culture Movement Museum represents a comprehensive, larger historically and politically-spanning exhibit, focusing on major events, and a wide range of political figures, the Lu Xun Museum takes the political emphasis away from the spatial aspect of the architecture and focuses instead on the textuality of literature. The museum attempts to spread ideas, share information, and spark discussion through a more generically literary presentation.

Upon entering the museum, viewers are presented immediately with a quote of Lu Xun embossed on a wall with a gray mountainous landscape (Figure 1). “What is a road? It is when someone has trod where there was no previous road, and cut through and opened up brambles for the first time” (Lu 1944, 89; my translation). One way to interpret this statement is that the museum is trying to draw out a self-reliant and revolutionary attitude from Lu Xun. The effect is one that inspires visitors but also persuade them to align with ideology of the Party. Putting the quote back into its context, however, shows a more cynical meaning. The passage is taken from essay number sixty-six, “The Road of Life” 生命的路, of Lu Xun’s collection titled “Re Feng” 熱風, in which he discusses observations about attitudes towards life and death (Lu 1944, 89). In describing the “death of humanity” as “lonely,” but not the “death of people,” and characterizing “life as a path of progress,” Lu Xun seems interested in preserving a strictly observational tension between the way the living and the dead interact (Lu 1944, 89). He writes: “The living are not afraid of death. They laugh and jump in front of death, and leap over the dead in order to continue forward” (Lu 1944, 89; my translation). This portrayal is self-conscious about the brutality and disregarding attitude the living exhibit towards the deceased, which builds a much different message than one might read from the quote exhibited out of context in the Lu Xun Museum. After being converted into the spatial realm of the museum, the multi-layered and skeptical nature of Lu Xun’s texts is re-interpreted.

Walking inside, one starts from the first of the museum’s eight-part exhibit which organizes Lu Xun’s life by chronology and geography, moving from his hometown Shaoxing, to Nanjing, Japan, Hangzhou, Beijing, Xiamen, Guangzhou, and Shanghai. The curations include maps, portrait photos, documents, newspaper articles, Lu Xun’s hand-written manuscripts, and prints of his quotes (Exhibition of Lu Xun’s Life, 2013). They provide biographical information as well as historical context in a clear presentation. The transitions from part to part are uniformly colored tall grey columns displaying various selected quotes from Lu Xun’s writings. They serve as check-points to inform and set an ideological dynamic for...
the visitor to consider before entering into the next part.
The quote below serves as the transition between the “Shaoxing” section and “Nanjing” section:

It is my belief that those who come down in the world will probably learn in the process what society is really like. My eagerness to go to N— and study in the K— Academy seems to have shown a desire to strike out for myself, escape, and find people of a different kind. My mother had no choice but to raise eight dollars for my travelling expenses and say I might do as I pleased. That she cried was only natural…

(Lu 1981, v)

Written in bold, white, standard type-font, the vertically aligned quote demands visitors’ attention and establishes its own sense of drama by being pronounced within the space it inhabits (Figure 2).

Museum visitors have just finished learning about Lu Xun’s childhood hometown, Shaoxing. They now enter the Nanjing section, which is where Lu Xun studied. Reading the quote, one feels sentiments of nostalgia, melancholy at the reality of moving away from home, and, most poignantly, sadness—caused by the harsh materiality of the sacrifices families make in order to send their children away in pursuit of success. He is describing the process of growing up, leaving home, encountering foreignness, and eventually realizing what is truly important to one’s being. It seems that the museum chose this passage because these feelings and experiences are accessible to anyone, so the quote can be generalized and related to easily.

The quote for the transition from the “Nanjing” section into the “Japan” section is an excerpt from the same piece as the previous one, it says:

The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they might be, could only serve to be made examples of or as witnesses of such futile spectacles; and it was not necessarily deplorable if many of them died of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I decided to promote a literary movement.

(Lu 1981, vii)

Looking again at the quote from the perspective a museum visitor, the most noticeable point is Lu Xun’s strong emphasis on the “spirit” of a country. Many Chinese visitors will approach the exhibit with the awareness of the famous story of how Lu Xun went to Japan to study to become a doctor, but upon viewing slides depicting an “apathetic Chinese crowd betraying no outward show of emotion as they gather to witness the decapitation of their compatriots” which prompted Lu Xun to drop out of medical school and focus on developing a collection of literature to change unjust societal ideologies (Cheng 2013, 23). This quote promotes a deeply human and activist philosophy with a strong capability to invigorate its audiences. The material orientation and variation of font size is conducive to leading audiences through Lu Xun’s logic agreeing that his decision “to promote a literary movement” (in enlarged characters) was most noble, apt, and effective to achieve his goals for changing society (Figure 3).

Now to consider quotes in their original contexts, it is notable that they are both excerpts from Lu Xun’s famous piece “Preface to Call to Arms.” The title itself alludes to a reinvigoration and a re-motivation of the crowd: Lu Xun calls for people to not lose heart and to reaffirm their faith in humanity, which appears fitting and accurate in this position in the museum. The attentive reader, however, will notice a phrase within the second quote that hints at another layer of Lu Xun’s projected meanings. He writes: “The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit; and since at that time I felt…” (Lu 1981, vii; my italics). Deliberately written in past tense, these few words reveal Lu Xun’s self-critical, reflective, and disillusioned attitude embedded in this piece. Eileen J. Cheng writes: “the form of his autobiographical essays turns against itself and undermines the authority of the writer, exposing the limits of the writing subject and the narrative he composes,” but he also through a “process of intense self-scrutiny—of one’s investment in telling the tale—” addresses “the possibility of its own failure,” which Cheng describes as a “process performatively reenacted in the much quoted preface to his first short story collection, Call to Arms” (2013, 21). The implication is that Lu Xun in this preface is actually engaging in an intense process of self-criticism as a method with which to examine and review his failures. It is also a confrontation of his own disappointment and gradual process of disenchantment. Now understanding the more complicated context of the primary text, a larger question in relation to both the original piece and museum exhibit comes to the surface: why did Lu Xun feel disenchanted by his literary movement, and why does this museum present the opposite interpretation — that the movement was a success? This points to important and distinctive formal features of writing and spatial exhibition, where text encompasses conflict, paradox, and criticality, and the museum space embodies unifying, holistic, and universal themes.
The quote acting as a transition point from the Hangzhou, Shaoxing, and Nanjing section to the Beijing section is presented in a different manner from the previously typed, clear, and bold font—it is in messy, free-flowing calligraphy (Figure 4). It is also placed beside a large, pensive portrait of Lu Xun. This different style of font as well as the placement gives it a new sense of dynamism, in which the handwritten-style script placed alongside the person seems to convey a more active liveliness, as if Lu Xun is present and had just finished writing his new thought. The changed aesthetics push visitors to interpret its content in a more artistic, deliberative manner. It says:

“To speak of the beginning of the Republic, back then everything seemed more promising, at that time I was also still at the Nanjing Department of Education, and I had the feeling that China would have a hopeful future. But at the same time, naturally, there also existed some vile person here and there, but he always failed.”

(Lu 1973, 26; my translation)

The previous discussion of hidden disenchantment in Lu Xun’s *Preface to Call to Arms*, is inverted here. What are the museum’s motivations in including this obscure and yet optimistic statement, in which Lu Xun writes that the certain vile person always failed? The evil deeds to which Lu Xun refers to are not exactly clear from the quote, therefore making the viewer unsure how to interpret its meaning. Context clarifies some of these questions: the quote notably originates from a personal letter written by Lu Xun to Xu Guangping in March 1925 about the birth of the Republic of China in 1912, and criticizing what it has become (Lu 1973, 26). Through the medium of a pseudo-letter, the museum subtly shows that Lu Xun aligns correctly on the political scale in this much more personal and artistic representation of his thoughts. The form of the letter, opposite to published text, reflects an interior and ‘true’ Lu Xun, and in this claim of authenticity and sincerity, is able to show Lu Xun’s once optimistic, but now faded, view of the Republic. In this situation, the medium of the letter becomes an artistic and political object that includes connotations from its original context, but now has new emphasized meanings after being curated into the spatial realm.

The last quote appears at the end of the Beijing part and the beginning of the “Xiamen” part. Returning to a similar style and background of the excerpts from *Preface to A Call to Arms*, orientation and variation of size do work to communicate emotion. Viewers may observe a significant difference in tone from the previous quotes: “Horrifying image, I can’t even bear to look; rumors, I can’t even bear to hear. What can I possibly say? I now understand the reason why suffering peoples remain in silence. Sinking ah, sinking ah! If we don’t erupt whilst sinking, we perish” (Lu 1926, 111-113; my translation).

Viewers are struck with the emotive force behind these urgent and despairing words. These, similar to the first quote which induces empathy by portraying relatable experiences, also have generalizing power in their ability to draw out emotional reactions. The combination of the enlargement of the first and the last sentences and more dynamic and rhythmic punctuation – commas, semi-colons, periods, question marks, and exclamations points – that not only emphasizes the text’s distinctly literary feel, but also creates more visual diversity, results in a shift of the text from strictly literary to visual art (Figure 5).

Understanding the history behind the excerpt contributes to its tragedy. It is taken from a eulogy Lu Xun wrote for one of his students, Liu Hezhen, who died in an anti-imperialist protest that turned into what is now known as the March 18th Massacre in 1926 (1926, 111-113.) Lu Xun expresses complete indignation and disgust at the event, and in the essay, he expands upon it to develop a ‘Call to Arms-esque’ theory of resilience, but ultimately still dedicates it to
the remembrance and memorialization of Liu and her classmates. From a comparison of the original text to its abridged, quoted-form in space, a new conflict arises: what are the moral implications or consequences of quoting from a tragic incident out of context? In simplifying and eradicating Liu Hezhen from the quote written in dedication to her, the result is one that is more emotionally accessible to visitors from all backgrounds, but also one that holds an active role in distorting memory.

**THE FORMER RESIDENCE OF LU XUN (LUXÜN GUJÜ)**

Located at lane 3, number 21 Fucheng Gate Avenue in Beijing just through the gates of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum is the self-built, ordinary courtyard house of Lu Xun. Divided into four houses, the north and south houses with three narrow rooms, and the east and west houses with only one room each. Surrounded by clove flowers and hand-planted jujube trees, the courtyard was a place full of greenery perfect for Lu Xun’s contemplations. This small and simple residence was where Lu Xun lived for around two years, from 1924 to 1926. In 1956 it was restored by the Ministry of Culture, along with the establishment and construction of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum (Beijing Lu Xun Museum 1959).

Lu Xun lived simply. We can see this by the set-up of his study, which had only a bare wooden desk with an oil lamp, calligraphy cartridges and brush holders, and a tea set. This is where he stayed up late every night working and writing. Just a year before moving to this Beijing residence, Lu Xun published what would become known as his most famous collection of short stories, *Call To Arms*. While in Beijing, his productivity never slowed. He worked on a number of literary works, essays, and translations while also teaching at the Peking University, Beijing Normal University, and the Peking Women’s College of Education. He also helped manage the magazine *Tattler*, which had just been founded in November of 1924 by Sun Fuyuan. This time-specific contextual information, however, is not directly available to visitors in the Former Residence itself. The curation is much less involved than that of the Beijing Lu Xun Museum, revealing a different focus of the exhibit. There are no extended literary quotations, and only a limited number of signs that relay basic information. Text in the Former Residence therefore does not function as the quotes do in the Museum — which are creative, artistic, and require interpretation — but instead as simple, direct sources of empirical facts. For example, the plaque laid outside the entrance gives biographical details and an encyclopedic list of works by Lu Xun (Figure 6). Next to it is the official declaration of the site being a designated “Cultural Site of National Importance,” which is a decidedly non-literary governmental message not meant to be critically interpreted (Figure 7). Inside, too, only a single information card is displayed, which describes in two sentences the layout of the house and who lived in which rooms (Figure 8).

In the Former Residence space overwhelms text. Very few plaques are sparsely located across the exhibit (Youkexiaoyudeboke 2018). From a literary tourism standpoint, the Lu Xun Former Residence retains more of what is called “authenticity.” In other words, a place that is “preserved in [its] original state” (Wang 2017, 251). By contrast, the Lu Xun Museum is entirely constructed and curated from...
beginning to end. The Former Residence promises a real place that Lu Xun lived and breathed in, and the lack of text is one indication of its authenticity. To perfectly preserve a space, however, is impossible. David Herbert provides us with a more nuanced definition of authenticity in literary places as a “subjective experience” accumulated by “the developers’ intentions, the consumers’ interpretations, and the interactions among them” (2001, 316). Therefore, despite the Former Residence not being exactly as it stood when Lu Xun lived in it, the kind of site authenticity, or impression of authenticity, gives more freedom to visitors to imagine Lu Xun’s life in their own ways. The space provides a direct and first-hand personal experience that is not filtered through a specific narration. By contrast the Lu Xun Museum does not offer site authenticity, but instead textual exhibitions that curate specific avenue of thoughts. Combining the two experiences creates a multi-faceted impression of Lu Xun and his works.

Another aspect of an exhibit more focused on text-less space is that visitors tend to “relax and gain a sense of leisure” from inhabiting the space (Wang & Zhang 2017, 251). Huey-jun Wang and Dan Zhang in their comparative study on literary tourism in the Lu Xun Native Place and the Lin Yutang House (in Taiwan) observe that the “historical architectures and scenes” revived “visitors’ memories of traditional architecture and their childhood” which in turn generated a “strong sense of nostalgia” (2017, 251). Wang and Zhang’s study involved categorizing tourists’ ratings of their experiences based on five categories: literariness, authenticity, affectivity, service, and convenience (2017, 236-7). In the framework of our discussion, the “literariness” dimension perhaps maps onto our idea of text-focused exhibits, and the “authenticity” dimension our space-focused exhibits. “Affectivity,” however, is a dimension pertinent to both. Both moving literary quotations and nostalgic historical architecture are capable of emotionally touching viewers.

We now see that the Former Residence of Lu Xun, instead of intellectual and critical reflection, emphasizes a more immersive, physical experience. Daily objects like the desks, beds, chairs, windows, etc. prompt the visitor to imagine Lu Xun as a living, breathing person in material reality, and not a grandiose idolized figure. A combination of the sparsity of text, as well as its non-interpretive nature, contributes to its de-contextualization. This presentation of Lu Xun portrays him as much more confident, at ease, and not nearly as conflicted or tortured as he appears in his written works. The “authenticity” attributed to a space without text also gives visitors a reason to interpret it, rather than to experience the space without contemplation. The Former Residence therefore promotes a unified, holistic, and balanced image of Lu Xun through its dynamic use of non-textual curations. This leads to an accumulating effect from both the Beijing Lu Xun Museum and the Former Residence of Lu Xun — one through emphasis on visuality in text, the other through emphasis on visuality through material — to create a harmonious and cohesive narrative through heterogenous space quite different from Lu Xun’s fragmented, self-critical original works.

CONCLUSION

What results from comparing the text-focused curative style in the Beijing Lu Xun Museum to the text-free exhibition in the Former Residence is a new physical portrayal of Lu Xun that integrates its heterogenous components into a unified exhibition. While Lu Xun maintains a performative, self-critical, and reflective tone in his writings, the Bejing Museum and Former Residence portray him as a patriot who has re-enchanted society through his literature. The exhibitions emphasize a story of struggle, despair, and strength in the pursuit of happiness and social justice. They also allude to and highlight specific historical events like the New Culture Movement, the founding of the Kuomintang party (and its failure), and the March 18th Massacre through Lu Xun’s quotes, but de-contextualize them to allow for more accessible generalization on the part of the visitor. The museum accentuates the unique function of text as exhibited in space, transforming excerpts of his writing into the visual art objects and bestowing upon them different emotive capacities. In contrast, the text-less Former Residence uses its display to draw out more of a physical experience from the visitor. Realizing that all art mediums have their advantages and limitations, Lu Xun’s original writings, despite being adept at maintaining conflict and multiplicity, are still restricted by their medium. The Beijing Lu Xun Museum and the Former Residence present an intermix of various art mediums to create a new kind of heterogeneity in the presentation of Lu Xun. The de-contextualized, broad, and emotionally-charged nature of the quotes not only invite and require new interpretations, but they also place responsibility onto the viewer to reflect on their own knowledge, biases, and experiences.

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REFERENCES


