

# A Discussion of the Reform of National Characteristics by Writers in the New Literary Period of the 1920s

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## Abstract:

Chinese literature in the 1920s shouldered the mission of illumination and renovation, and the discovery of the “human being” is the most groundbreaking innovation in the new literature period. The research on “human beings” in the New Literature period is of great significance and urgency for the reformation of national characteristics. This article focuses on the reformation of national characteristics during the New Literature period in the 1920s, and explores the features of national characteristics in China from diverse perspectives both domestic and international. The paper analyzes the views on the national characteristics reformation of the writers in the New Literature period. It examines the viewpoints of Lu Xun, Hu Shi, and Li Dazhao and finds that all three writers had the experience of studying abroad. Combined with the fact that Western thoughts were widely disseminated in China during the May Fourth period, the article arrives at the opinion that the reformation of China’s national characteristics was influenced by Western thoughts. In addition, this paper takes *The True Story of Ah Q* of Lu Xun as an example to explore the reformation of national characteristics by writers in the May Fourth period. The reformation of national characteristics during the New Literature period was a prerequisite for the salvation of the country and the citizens, and it laying a solid foundation for social progress and the development of modern Chinese literature.

**Keywords:** New Literature of the May 4th Movement, Reform of National Characteristics, Lu Xun

## 1. Introduction

The period of new literature in the 1920s was a daz-

zling milestone in the history of modern Chinese literature. Living through prolonged oppression, the nationals were in spiritual chaos and decadent in ide-

ology. The nation could not be saved unless the thoughts were corrected. Thus, there was an urgent need to remodel the national Characteristics of the citizens.

In 1840, The First Anglo-Chinese War forced China to open up to the outside world. It was the first time that the awakened realized the material gap between China and the West, represented by Lin Zexu. With the signing of a sequence of treaties that humiliated the country and forfeited its sovereignty, the Self - Self-Strengthening Movement launched a reform on a national scale, with the slogans of “self-improvement” and “wealth-seeking”. The failure of the Sino-Japanese War made the Chinese nation suffer a crippling blow, while exposing the underdevelopment of the Self - Strengthening Movement. The Sino-Japanese War enabled nationals to undertake the national introspection for the first time. At this time, the visionary realized that reforming the national mindset was fundamental to rescue the country. This thought established a basis for the national reformation in the May Fourth period.

*The Research of “Cannibalism” Narrative in Modern China Literature* by Wang Haiquan points out that the third period of modern national introspection ideological trend is the May Fourth period [1]. The national introspection in this period was more in-depth than that during the Opium War and the Self - Strengthening Movement. The New Culture Movement was born with the slogans of “democracy” and “science”, which brought new ideologies into the vision of the youth. Later, the May Fourth Movement, with its appeal of “national salvation out of patriotism”, led new concepts achieved more prevalent spreading among the youth. The spread of Western thoughts in Chinese society made the progressive intellectuals gain a deeper sense of the backward national ideology. Thus, the transformation of the national Characteristics became the most urgent demand for realizing the reform of China.

Writers are the announcers of their times, and their compositions are usually imprinted with the hallmarks of the age. Literature is the carrier of culture, and the spiritual power it contains is the inexhaustible driving force to supports the advancement of human beings. In the 1920s, because of the rapid development of society, modern written media like newspapers and Literary periodicals influenced the thinking patterns of the people, and the visionary realized that the function of the modern media can transmit their thoughts to the general public [2]. Therefore, entertaining compositions were scarce at this time, furthermore, awakening the masses and striving for innovation and progress became the unanimous goal of the writers in the May Fourth period.

Comprehending the May Fourth New Literature is a process that cannot be ignored in the study of modern

Chinese literary history. Throughout the years, myriads of brilliant scholars have conducted profound research on the ideas, historical background and social significance of it. Writers have been shouldering the mission of literary dissemination all along, but there is little research on their influence on literature and society. Therefore, this paper takes the reformation of the national Characteristics by the writers of the New Literature period in the 1920s as a research problem, intending to make a deeper comprehension of the literature in the May Fourth New Literature period.

## 2. A Recapitulation of National Characteristics in the 1920s

### 2.1 The National Characteristics of Intellectually Chaotic

The American scholar Arthur Henderson Smith, who has been in China for more than 50 years, wrote the book *The Chinese Characteristics*. It is mentioned the view that the Chinese people are “intellectually chaotic”. The Chinese nation has been able to stand firm up to now is sufficient to prove that they are not an intellectually inferior nation. So, the “intellectual chaos” herein means: Due to the excessively serious social wealth gap during the period, most of the general public in society was poor and ignorant. The social condition of not being able to receive education causes a large proportion of the masses to be too narrow-minded in vision, and ultimately presents the phenomenon of intellectual chaos [3]. What is the effect of this prevalent intellectual condition on China’s modernization development?

As a famous writer Lu Xun was studying in Japan, he was heartbroken when he saw the picture of insensitive but strong Chinese compatriots “appreciating” the beheading of their countrymen in the pictorial. So in the preface of the *Call To Arms*, he wrote that “All the weak-minded and feeble people of the nation, no matter how sound and robust their physiques may be, can only serve as meaningless materials for public display and onlookers. It is not necessarily to be regarded as unfortunate even if many of them die of illness [4].” Intellectual chaos made the Chinese populace lose their basic thinking ability. Grassroots civilians are numb to the fate of their compatriots and the survival of the country, thus sinking to brainless spectators. In this case, intellectually chaotic civilians could not promote the social development of the time. That’s why Lu Xun concluded: “Therefore, our top priority lies in changing their mentality [4].”

## 2.2 The National Characteristics of Spiritual Numbness

*The Chinese Characteristics* proposed a concept that the Chinese people have a state of “spiritual numbness”. By giving examples, the author Arthur Henderson Smith substantiated this viewpoint. However, the examples focus on the phenomenon of “spiritual numbness” and make no mention of the causes of Chinese people’s “spiritual numbness” [3]. About the issue of Chinese people’s “spiritual numbness”, the views of this article are as follows:

The spiritual numbness of the Chinese people is not in-born but molded by the social environment of the time. In the first place, the Chinese people went through more than 2,000 years of feudal autocratic monarchy. Although there were periods of flourishing and liberalism, the feudal monarchy still dominated the civilians for more than 2,000 years. That was the source of the mass’s slavishness and the reason for its lack of rebellious consciousness.

On the impact of feudal autocracy on national characteristics, the scholar Xiong Chongxu pointed out that: “The inferiority of the national character of the Chinese people is all due to the long existence of the autocratic political system... Coupled with the successive disasters of wars over generations, the people have suffered extremely from being displaced and relocated. The people live in a precarious situation, having only the mentality of seeking temporary peace and security from day to day without any long-term considerations. However, they still have the longing for lasting peace and order. Moreover, the means of fooling the people by emperors over generations have been passed down continuously. Both the superiors and the inferiors are accustomed to deception, and the whole nation is willing to go through the motions perfunctorily. Thus, their beliefs are weak [5].”

Meanwhile, the blockage of information for the Chinese people was started by the policy of cutting off the country from the outside world in the Qing Dynasty. This wrong decision not only limited the development of technology, but more seriously imprisoned the minds of the people. Until the First Opium War forced China to open up to the outside world modern Chinese history began. From the First Opium War to the May Fourth Movement, the Chinese people suffered seventy-nine years of turmoil and unrest.

Wang Xuan in her study *A Discourse Study on the Chinese National Character in the North China Daily News* mentions the ravages of war on the Chinese underclass described by several missionaries [6]. The letters of the missionaries highlight the social turmoil, the countless Chinese families broken up, and the tragic scene of women and children being bought and sold. During the period

described in the article, the Chinese people in the war were helpless and cruel. It can be seen that the brutal and protracted war has had an indelible effect on the national characteristics of the Chinese people.

“When the country prospers, the civilians still suffer; when the country perishes, the civilians also suffer.” The underprivileged who were forced to accept the war, survived the ordeal and were unable to reflect and struggle in a period when they failed to meet the basic needs of food and clothing. Moreover, the Chinese society at that time was unable to give education opportunities to the grassroots, causing unenlightenment and poverty to become a vicious circle.

## 2.3 Salvageable National Characteristics

The writers of the New Literature period expect to achieve social reform by means of the transformation of the national characteristics. But it will be impossible to change if the national characteristics of the country are callous and deep-rooted. So have China’s national characteristics been chaotic and numb since ancient times? With regard to this question, the author examines the roots of Chinese national characteristics as follows:

Works of literature can reflect the value - guidance of the period. At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the poet Cai Yan composed *A Poem of Grief and Indignation* based on her observations and feelings. “The corpses piled up, supporting each other. Men’s heads were hung on the horses’ sides, Women were carried behind the horses.” It is a crusade against the brutal war that Cai Yan experienced. The sentence “Oh, Heaven, what crime had we committed? To suffer such a disaster”, further reflects her affectionate commiseration for common people in the war. The wars were frequent during The Song Dynasty, and The Song Dynasty was seriously disturbed by northern ethnic groups. So poets of the Song Dynasty have deeply touched on this. Therefore, there are a considerable number of military lyrics in the Song Dynasty, which made the Song literati’s ambition of serving the country spread [7]. Just as Lu You still harbored the aspiration to serve the country even though he was in frail health in his later years. Thus, he wrote “In the dead of night, I lie awake listening to the howling wind and pelting rain, with images of iron steeds trampling on icy rivers invading my dreams.” Express his own ambition and patriotic heart. The famous novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* of the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty emphasizes the concept of “loyalty and righteousness”, and its main character Song Jiang is loyal to his country and affectionate towards the masses. Although Song Jiang’s characterization is complex, whether it is before he

fell into the Liangshan Mountain, during the Liangshan Mountain Gathering, or after he was accepted amnesty, Song Jiang always protects and rescues the people, reflecting his love for the people.

Through the above research on ancient Chinese literature of different historical periods and genres, it can be obvious that the thoughts of “loving the people” and “serving the country” have evolved over a long-term time and have been passed down from generation to generation through literary works in China.

Because ordinary citizens found it difficult to access educational resources in ancient China, and literature was generally the private property of the upper class, it is rather one-sided to merely rely on literature to analyze China’s national characteristics. Therefore, this paper adds Confucianism, which has a much wider range of influence, to explore the salvageability of nationalism.

Confucianism is an important part of Chinese culture, and its influence in China continues to this day, covering aspects of education, politics and social ethics. From the Confucian ideology of “policy of benevolence”, we can sense the ancient Chinese educators’ moralization of human nature.

The “People-oriented thoughts” is an important theory of Confucianism. Through the evolution of Confucius, Laozi, Mozi and other Confucian figures, “People-oriented thoughts” became the foundation of Mencius’ theory of “policy of benevolence”. Mencius believed that the power of the citizenry was the core of governing the country and managing state affairs, which highly overlaps with the May Fourth Movement’s view that “reforming the national character of the citizens is crucial in saving China”.

“Sympathetic heart” is an important basis of Confucianism’s theory of “benevolent government”, which originates from Mencius’ ideology of “the inherent goodness of human nature”. Mencius regarded the “sympathetic heart” as the origin of human moral emotion. It is a non-utilitarian purpose, and is a naturally - generated sense of compassion for the cruel scene and suffering of the people. Traditional Chinese culture does not advocate insensitivity to the suffering of others.

The above research on the ideological and emotional aspects of ancient Chinese literature and the value orientation in traditional Confucian culture has provided us with new perspectives for understanding the diversity of national characteristics. It also illustrates that national characteristics are not immutable, but are constantly being remodeled during historical revolutions and social progress. It can be seen that it is not in the inborn nature of Chinese people to be dull and indifferent to the crisis of national existence. This is also an important prerequisite

for carrying out the reform of national character in the period of new literature.

### 3. Writers’ View of National Reformation

#### 3.1 Views of Writers on National Characteristics in the New Literature Period

Lu Xun was incisively and urgently concerned with the reform of the national characteristics. According to Lu Xun, the reason why the spirit of masses “wither” is national characteristics [8]. There is no lack of exposure and criticism of national characteristics in Lu Xun’s novels. The contents of his efforts to reform the national character include criticism of slavishness, self-deception, onlooker mentality and superstitious mentality [9].

The two main themes of the modern ideological reformation of national characteristics are “Establishing a Country and Shaping the People” [10]. Hu Shih has made a profound contribution to the thoughts of “Establishing a Country and Shaping the People”. His description of the inherent vice of the nation characteristics includes the lack of independent personality, indifference to the sense of resistance, laziness, conservative, and the lack of patriotic spirit [11].

Li Dazhao’s concept of reforming the national character can be divided into three steps. The first step is to reform the mind from the popular sentiments and conventional customs, the second is to mold the citizens with independence, freedom and democracy, and the third is to shape the “all-round development person”.

The above three writers were all influenced by foreign thoughts. During his studies in Japan, Lu Xun observed his compatriots’ ignorance of the country’s survival, and thus realized that the most serious trouble was the numbness of the national spirit. Hu Shih was shocked by the modern industrial civilization during his study in the United States, and the American philosophy of experimentalism and the social and cultural morality of individualism had a huge influence on Hu Shih’s view of the reformation of national characteristics [11]. Evidently, in the period of new literature, the western culture brought by the imperialist invasion considerably influenced the development of Chinese thought.

Considering that Lu Xun’s works are full of intense willingness to reform the national characteristics, and his article has a sense of pioneering and distinctive features of the times. So, the author of this paper focuses on the critique of national characteristics in Lu Xun’s *The True Story of Ah Q*.



### 3.2 Critique of National Characteristics in Lu Xun's *The True Story of Ah Q*

Lu Xun's critique of China's national characteristics is sharp, and penetrating and reaches the Achilles' heel directly. He has portrayed a lot of apathy, dullness and cowardly - bully characters in his novels. This paper will analyze the national characteristics described in his novel *The True Story of Ah Q*.

*The True Story of Ah Q* depicts a characteristic figure--Ah Q, a self-righteous and arrogant man who escapes reality by numbing himself. Ah Q is a character with no name and a native place, and the description of his appearance is vague. About such a writing technique, Lu Xun expressed: "My approach is to make readers unable to figure out who else other than themselves is being written about, so that they can't easily shrug it off and instead become onlookers, while suspecting that it seems to be about themselves and yet also about everyone. In this way, a path for self-reflection is paved [12]." Lu Xun intended to insinuate into every reader an Ah Q who symbolizes the vast masses of people without self-consciousness and who are strongly featured by the national characteristics. Thus arouses national reflection and achieves the purpose of reforming the national characteristics. Therefore, Lu Xun's criticism of the national characteristics carries a strong implication of awakening and reforming.

*The True Story of Ah Q* narrates the story of Ah Q's persecution and eventual death in Weizhuang. At the end of the article, it describes what Q observations at the end of his life: "The cart kept moving forward. Amid the cheers, Ah Q rolled his eyes to look at Mama Wu. It seemed that she had never noticed him before and was indeed staring intently at the foreign guns on the soldiers' backs. Ah Q then looked at those people who were cheering again [13]." Mama Wu is a three-dimensional character in *The True Story of Ah Q*. Her existence manifests the complexity of the spirit of the underclass citizens in Lu Xun's novel. She is both a victim of the feudal ethical code and an insensitive spectator. The above passage is the ultimate manifestation of the relationship between Ah Q and Mama Wu. On the way to Ah Q's execution, "Her was indeed staring intently at the foreign guns on the soldiers' backs." For such a character who had acquaintance, Mama Wu did not show any pity or sympathy, not even hatred or pleasure. In Mama Wu, the indifference and numbness of the national characteristics are embodied.

In the article, the cheers and Ah Q's current situation form a sharp contrast. There is no other description of the wronged Ah Q, who is about to be executed, except for the sentence "Being executed by shooting was not as 'spectacular' as being beheaded." At this point, the specta-

tors Lu Xun depicts are not only indifferent spectators, but also deepened into a schadenfreude-like spectator mentality. Lu Xun compares the gazes of the spectators with the vicious wolves that Ah Q had seen four years ago: "They were fierce yet cowardly, glittering like two will-o'-the-wisps, seemingly piercing through his flesh from afar [13]." The "cannibalistic" nature of the feudal society catalyzes the insensitive spectators, then, one cold-blooded spectator after another forms the "cannibalistic" feudal society.

### 4. Conclusion

The contribution of the literature during the May Fourth period to Chinese literature can be radiated into modern times.

The most significant feature of literature in the May Fourth period was revolutionizing the literature into popular and commonplace literature. Before the Literary Revolution, the lower classes were unable to get away from their labor to ideological edification because of the pressure of life. The vernacular language movement advocated "Write in the way I speak", which made the new literature understandable to the masses. It was only when the people could read and understand that thoughts could be disseminated, thus achieving the goal of ideological enlightenment. This change laid the foundation for the reformation of the national characteristics.

The literature of the 1920s provided a rich source for literary creation in the later period. Literary works of this period are full of exploration of human nature. At the same time, intellectuals translated a great deal of foreign literature, which made it possible to study Chinese culture more objectively.

Most importantly, the literature of the May Fourth period filled the blank of ancient China's ideology of "human emancipation". By now, the study of the concept of "human being" has permeated and completed Chinese literature in the twentieth century, and has contributed to the literary trends of the 1930s and the social development of the later period.

Nowadays, is there still a remnant of national characteristics in China's modernized society? Does the high demand for material goods inhibit people's ability to draw on their spiritual strength? The national spirit of the May Fourth period reminds society must not repeat the same mistakes, and the research and reformation of national character must not stagnate because of the improvement of material conditions.

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