

# The Relationship between the Mad Imagery in Lu Xun's "the Eternal Lamp" and Taoist Philosophy of Life

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## Abstract:

Lu Xun's works have always been one of the key research topics, and many researchers focus on the relationship between Lu Xun and Taoism. However, there is still a gap in the study of linking his crazy imagery with Taoism. Therefore, this paper takes "The Eternal Lamp" as an example to analyze the relationship between the madman image and the Taoist philosophy of life. Firstly, the paper points out the unique significance of the image of the madman in "The Eternal Lamp" and then explores the connection between his character image and Taoism in order to obtain Lu Xun's attitude towards traditional religion. The study argues that Lu Xun unconsciously inherited the positive aspects of the Taoist philosophy of life in shaping his literary image, especially drawing on the prominent power of the subject's personality. Future academic research can focus on studying traditional philosophy and religion in Lu Xun's novels, which can help provide a comprehensive understanding of Lu Xun and his works.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun; mad narrative; Taoism; philosophy of life.

## 1. Introduction

Since „Diary of a Madman,“ Lu Xun has portrayed multiple „madman“ images in his novels, each with meaning and rich connotations. He seems to have a particular fondness for such characters with mental illnesses, which has become one of his writing characteristics. Although influenced by Western philosophers like Nietzsche, Lu Xun was a scholar rooted in ancient Chinese culture before participating in the New Culture Movement. He favored Zhuangzi and Han Feizi, enjoyed Wei-Jin prose, and believed that Taoist culture was the root of Chinese culture. These ideas symbolized that he was destined to be a warrior against Confucian tradition.

Scholars have conducted research to explore the metaphor of „madness“ and Lu Xun's attitude towards Taoist culture. However, not many scholars have combined the two for analysis. Yang Rong and others believe that scholars nowadays mostly focus on the character images, artistic characteristics of narration, and the social culture reflected in „madness“ narratives [1]. For the study of Lu Xun's thoughts, Lü Youyun and Li Gang discuss Lu Xun's critical attitude towards Taoist culture in a broad sense [2,3]. So far, only Wang Xueqian explicitly examines Lu Xun's mad narrative within the context of Taoist culture [4].

So, what is the connection between Lu Xun's mad narrative and traditional Chinese Taoist culture? How did Lu Xun apply the concept of Taoist culture to his writing?

This paper aims to trace the origin of the portrayal of the „madman“ in „The Eternal Lamp“ and to find its connection with the Taoist philosophy of life through its metaphors, thus reflecting the relationship between Lu Xun and classical Chinese culture. By delving deeper into this topic, the study deepens the understanding of the symbolic significance of madman images in Lu Xun's works and how he used the concepts of Taoist culture to express criticism of social phenomena and reflect on human nature.

## 2. The Unique Meaning of "Madman" in "the Eternal Lamp"

Madman refers to a person with serious mental or psychological disorders manifested as psychological or behavioral disorders. Lu Xun's literary works have some pathological „crazy“ characters. Han Huijin points out that the „madman“ in Lu Xun's works is no longer just a disease but also a value judgment made by the general public on special individuals at the social, cultural, and psychological levels [5]. The most well-known example is „Diary of a Madman,“ which criticizes the feudal ethics of „cannibalism“ from the perspective of a madman-like character, calling for society to „save the children.“ For example, Tao Laotou in "Self-talk" and Kong Yiji in "Kong Yiji," who refuses to take off his long robes and insists on showing off his literary talent, is out of place in the crowd. In addition, there is Xianglin Sao in „Blessing,“ the madman in „The Eternal Lamp,“ and the fool in „Smart People and

Fools and Servants.“ Of course, these novels also depict representative images of intellectuals and revolutionaries. These „mad“ figures form a „mad family,“ which has been refined over time.

Liu Chuanxia’s classification of „madmen“ in modern literature has been widely accepted by scholars [6]. The first category is the pioneer of thought and cultural enlightenment, the second category is the patient of the times, the third category is the mystic close to nature and extraordinary, and the fourth category is the accuser of historical and real sins. It is not difficult to see that the madman in „The Eternal Lamp“ belongs to the first category, just like the „madman“ in „Diary of a Madman“; they are both cultural rebels and ideological pioneers. Their subjective spirit of personality shines brightly in the absurd and pathological survival situation. Zhou Qi’er and others emphasize the intertextual relationship between “the Eternal Lamp” and “Diary of a Madman” [7]. However, scholars represented by Wang Xueqian believe that “The Eternal Lamp” is a replica of “Diary of a Madman” [4]. The author cannot agree with this.

From the perspective of narrative methods, „Diary of a Madman“ uses a first-person narrative perspective, while „The Eternal Lamp“ uses a third-person narrative perspective to indirectly shape the image and depict the „madman“ in the eyes of ordinary people. The objective description of the non-omniscient perspective forms an integrated narrative. From an object perspective, although both are pioneers of crazy awakening, their reactions to the old society differ. After witnessing that feudal ethics were cannibalistic, the madman finally shouted, „Save the child,“ believing that the old world had decayed and that hope should be placed on the „new youth.“

However, the madman in „The Eternal Lamp“ almost lost hope, and even the children who hoped for the future sang nursery rhymes mocking him. He can only choose to resist and destroy decisively. From this perspective, the „madman“ in „The Eternal Lamp“ has a stronger belief than the „madman“ and a greater determination to overthrow the old society.

Meanwhile, in terms of the theme of the novel, „Madman“ criticizes feudal ethics. However, „The Eternal Lamp“ criticizes folk superstition and highlights the spirit of human subjectivity. From this, we can see Lu Xun’s unique thought of „establishing people“ and their philosophy of life.

### **3. The Connection between the “Madness” Imagery in “the Eternal Lamp” and Traditional Taoism**

Lu Xun constantly tells stories of the „ordinary world“ and the „madman’s world,“ symbolizing that the pioneers of enlightenment often appear in mad or unusual images,

showcasing the tragic fate of revolutionaries. The same goes for „the Eternal Lamp“. The madman in „The Eternal Lamp“ enthusiastically displays the spirit of the „true person“ as the subject of his personality. He is extremely impulsive and yearns to control his life, breaking away from ignorance and superstition. His crazy behaviors aligned with the slogans of democracy and science prevalent then. Ji Guangtun enshrines the lamp, which has been preserved since the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang. Apart from the madman and his father, no one has questioned the authority of the lamp. These are people who „check the almanac every time they move.“ They believe in worshipping gods and that only when the eternal lamp is lit can people be blessed with good weather and no illness or disaster. These images of those ignorant masses who believe in divine power form a strong contrast with madmen who possess a strong individualistic spirit. The madman has a passionate vision, and his insistence on extinguishing the eternal light symbolizes his firm belief in shifting from divine authority to human rights, actively defending his value system. In the social context of the 1920s, this also symbolizes the evolution of science over superstition and democracy over authoritarianism in personal ideology.

#### **3.1 Lu Xun’s Research and Attitude towards Taoism and Taoism**

Lu Xun pointed out that „China is fundamentally rooted in Taoism“ and stated that China does not need religion. Current researchers generally believe Lu Xun, a pioneer of a new culture, holds a critical and negative attitude towards Taoist culture. Song Shengquan believed that during the May Fourth period, Lu Xun and his colleagues in “New Youth” realized that the Yin Yang family was far more harmful than Confucianism [8]; Liang Huicheng believed that Lu Xun had a contradictory attitude towards Taoist culture before and after participating in the New Culture Movement. His criticism of Taoism aimed to better carry out the New Democratic Revolution but could not prevent its long-term and profound influence [9].

Lü Youyun specifically studies Lu Xun’s criticism of Taoism and points out that he mainly opposed Laozi’s retro political ideals [2]. Lu Xun believed this was a negative and opposing relativism of Zhuangzi, as it would cause people to lose their principles and lack ideological „conviction“ on issues of right and wrong [2]. The belief in immortality advocated by Taoism only played a role in deceiving the masses, and this superstitious ideology is filled with selfishness and self-interest, endangering society.

#### **3.2 The Image of “Madness” and Taoist Philosophy**

However, the author believes Lu Xun did not completely negate Taoist culture. Even though his works publicly opposed Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism multiple

times, he unconsciously nurtured ideas and concepts that echo the philosophy of life in Taoism when shaping character images. A part of Taoist culture always flows through the hearts of Chinese people, and the call for complete negation cannot dispel it.

In Chinese culture, the imagery of “madness” has existed throughout history. For example, “Chukuang Jieyu” and „Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove“ all demonstrate their attitudes towards life with an „arrogant“ shell, pursuing spiritual transcendence and freedom, thus resisting the constraints of the feudal system on individuals. This is exactly the core that Taoist life philosophy emphasizes. The „Valley Spirit Fu“ mentions that „nourishing the mind, and immortality lies within me.“ Similarly, in the „Records of Nurturing Nature and Extending Life,“ it is also said that „the way of heaven is natural, and the way of man is oneself.“ „What is precious to a person is precious in life.“ „The immortal scripture says, „My life lies within me, not in the heaven“ [10].

Taoism believes that the length of human life is determined by oneself, morality is determined by the heart, and human value is created by oneself. Therefore, it emphasizes that humans have strong subjective initiative. At this level, the spirit of the „empowerment of the individual“ in the New Culture Movement coincides. Wang Yao believes that Lu Xun inherits the tradition of „Wei-Jin Literature“ [11]. From this, it can be seen that the imagery of „madness“ frequently appears in modern literary works after the May Fourth Movement, and most writers like Lu Xun use it as a symbol, such as the character of the madman in „The Eternal Lamp.“ Lu Xun exaggerates his arrogance, attempting to create a „feigned madness“ posture with irrational stubbornness, calling on society to cast its gaze on the capitalized „humanity.“

At the same time, Taoism is inherently critical and skeptical, consistent with the anti-traditional ideas of the New Democratic Revolution. The *Dao* of Taoism is a natural state, reflected in humans as advocating for an untamed free personality and the externalization of the individual spirit. Therefore, it is inherently opposed to the feudal system that imprisons nature. Taoism suspects any alienated civilization. The madman in „The Eternal Lamp,“ as a pioneer of enlightenment, firmly opposes the meaning that people give to „the eternal lamp.“ Failing to extinguish the lantern, he even thinks of setting it on fire. The rebellious thoughts and behaviors of „lunatics“ are besieged by both authoritarian rulers and the ignorant masses. Children also follow in their parents’ footsteps and blindly compose satirical songs. The persistent pursuit of the madman and his father confirms the skeptical tradition of Taoist philosophy of life.

## 4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the relationship between Lu Xun’s portrayal of madness and the Taoist philosophy of life, using the example of a madman in his specific work „The Eternal Lamp.“ It can be concluded that while Lu Xun advocates for comprehensive opposition to religion, he unconsciously inherits the positive aspects of the Taoist philosophy of life in shaping literary images. In „The Eternal Lamp,“ which coincides with Taoist philosophy, he portrays a madman with a strong subjective personality to fight against despair, hoping to provoke critical thinking among the people about the dark society through the symbolic imagery of extraordinary people.

The paper primarily discusses the relationship between the imagery of madness in Lu Xun’s novels and Taoist philosophy from the perspective of an enlightener. The images in Lu Xun’s novels are closely related to traditional Chinese culture and religion. Although Lu Xun advocated for complete Westernization as a prominent figure of the New Culture Movement, the paper reveals that Lu Xun still acknowledged the essence of Chinese traditional culture. He could not completely separate his creation of works from tradition. Therefore, future academic research can further explore other images from a religious aspect to investigate Lu Xun’s hesitation and choices under the enlightenment of the masses.

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