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On "learning from the people:" Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's demands in the early 1930's literary debate

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Content

1. Introduction

1.1 Background	1
1.2 Key questioning	1
1.3 Approach to research.....	2
1.4 Goal	3

2. Main

2.1 Context

2.1.2 Nationalization, the politicization of culture, and the turn to folklore	3
2.1.1 The Chinese framework of "taking popular culture seriously"	4
2.1.4 Conceptions of propaganda, education, and folklore	5
2.1.3 The debate on mass literature and art	6

2.2 Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's positions

2.2.1 The relationship of Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai.....	6
2.2.2 Lu Xun.....	7
2.2.3 Qu Qiubai	8
2.2.4 Other camps in the debate	10

2.3 Related endeavours

2.3.1 Folklore studies	10
2.3.2 Native-soil literature	12
2.3.3 The Rural Reconstruction Movement	12
2.3.4 Language for the masses	13
2.3.5 New popular media and national forms.....	13
2.3.5 Cultural policy in the 1940s	14

2.4 Interpreting these findings.....

3. Coda

References.....

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

At a talk in Shanghai 1927, Chinese writer Lu Xun described what he considered the unsettling quality of art in relation to politics: "Contemporary art describes our own society (...). Previous art, like a fire across a river, had little to do with us. In contemporary art even we ourselves are burning; we certainly feel it deeply. And once we feel it, we certainly want to take part in society!" (Lu 1927: 333) With his defense of realist literature, he addressed a still valid concern.

For me, it has become more urgent that the energy I expend daily makes a meaningful social contribution. At this moment, I feel urged to enter working politically, because everybody is (and, by extension, all actions, futures, and kinships are) implicated in the way hegemony goes (and for the majority, not in power, it looks quite bad right now). (Glissant 2004: 191) Is what Lu Xun proposes really possible, then – if literature steps into relation with contemporary ongoingings, can it make common readers "burn" to engage? In which role can intellectuals and their work contribute to the well-being of their fellows? What should they be concerned with? How would they have to write? These were questions other Chinese intellectuals in the early 20th century asked as well. (Li 2001: 55)

Looking at historical literary debates and their practical reverberations provides an opportunity to learn from specific settings on the basis of a limited amount of transmitted and translated documents. (Idema 2012: 2) When I first read about Chinese debates on literature and art for the masses (*dàzhòng wényì* 大众文艺) in the early 1930s and specifically looked at Lu Xun's text "An Outsider's Chats about Written Language" (*Ménwài wéntán* 门外文谈), and a call put forward by Communist theorist Qu Qiubai to "go learning from the people," (*xiàng dàzhòng qù xuéxí* 向大众去学习) (Shi 1931: 855; Li 2001: 56-7; Pickowicz 1977: 374) my interest was sparked to research further for this purpose. Thus, my goal in this paper is to simply open up a playing field for a more articulate understanding of situated sociocultural practices in 1930's China.

1.2 Key questioning

How should I understand Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's contributions to the literary debate of the early 1930s? This I am obliged to ask first, because my inclination to believe in the 'sincerely altruistic intellectual' will otherwise lead to an all too easy adoption of the studies claiming that this is what Lu and Qu were. Reading them, I should also also be cautious about the fact that Qu, as one of the first leaders of the CCP, occupies a special

place in the PRC's historical narrative, just like Lu Xun who is frequently called the "father of modern Chinese literature." (Wang 1992: 1) It is reasonable to assume that in most of their representations they have been enlarged enormously, which possibly leaves others in their shadow, or makes their actual contributions hard to see.

As for the formulation of my topic, I believe it is relevant to link Qu Qiubai and Lu Xun, because, at the time in question and within this debate, they were collaborating closely. I also assume that, even if exaggerated, because "the two men (...) dominated the leftist literary scene in the 1930s," (Pickowicz 1976: 360) their thoughts will have had a strong impact on their peers. Accordingly, I have to ask how they were actually received, and if there had been local precursors or parallel projects pursuing the same goals, which could shed more light on Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai in turn. It has been mentioned across various studies that there was near to no literature of the kind they were demanding at the time, though. (Lee 1986: 445) In fact, this was one of their own criticisms – lots of "empty talk." (Pickowicz 1977: 374) Of course it should be clear that the two were not the only ones in their loosely associated camp (the 'realists'). If I am focussing my attention on them it's not to dismiss the contributions of others. My choice at this stage is practical.

If what I am testing to be an adequate reading of Lu and Qu's standpoint holds up, what this tells me about the 1930's situation still results in the if there really was a development from instrumentalizing popular culture as a relatively undifferentiated vehicle to genuinely engaging with and in folk culture? (Li 2001: 58-9) Which integrated approaches existed? As it stands, I question the correspondence of what was claimed with what was implemented, because, for one, claims are rather easy to make and document while memories of practical attempts to realize them will most likely have vanished in the absence of documentation, and for another, because there was little time until the outbreak of war in 1937 to experiment or even develop the new ideas further.

1.3 Approach to research

In order to be able to understand Lu and Qu more adequately on the question of cultural mobilization and the role of the writer, I will examine the context leading up to the time under focus, posit the contributions to the debate made by them, to then review related endeavours in the same period, such as the Folklore Studies Movement, native-soil fiction, and the Rural Reconstruction Movement, and briefly view what followed later. With the help of this multifaceted perspective, I hope to then be able to critically situate the ideas

Lu and Qu threw into the cultural arena of their time. I start with Lu Xun's slightly later position for convenience, because his statements are laid out plainly in one consistent text.

Due to my lacking ability to read Chinese, I have tried to find relevant texts from the debate in English translation, and paid attention to the work of scholars who were able to read and evaluate original sources.

For stylistic consistency, all Chinese characters in this paper are given in their simplified form and the phonetic transcription used is *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* 汉语拼音. Chinese names appear latinized following Pinyin without tonal indication only.

1.4 Goal

It is my hypothesis that both Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai were arguing for an approach to cultural production which would consider the emic perspectives (and needs) of those it addressed. They were fully aware of the rift separating intellectuals from common people in 1930's China, and warned their peers of both – assuming to know the masses without ever having led a similar life, or assuming that the masses were an empty, ready ground awaiting fertilization, completely void of their own culture. I am looking to confirm, at least in tendency, that they thought it was possible for writers to represent others meaningfully, and consequently make art which could benefit the others' interests rather than imposing on them ideas which did not relate in the least, given enough care and effort to understand their lives immersively. I also assume that there were more approaches along these lines before, in parallel to, and after the two scholars.

2. Main

2.1 Context

2.1.1 Nationalization, the politicization of culture, and the turn to folklore

In the early 20th century in China, intellectuals were focussed on developing a national identity for the Chinese culturally while modernizing its governing structures into a nation-state to resist the imperialist threat from Japan and the West, as well as generally lifting the quality of Chinese life. (Hu 1936: 415) Starting in the late 19th century, the approach of considering a "new narrative paradigm" to be the Chinese saviour became the ontology of progressive cultural producers. (Wang 1992: 2) During the resulting New Culture Movement traditional culture was not rejected outright, but filtered for its "healthy" aspects. (Geng 2015: 4) Popular culture was seen to be able to rejuvenate the old, and fill in what the new national culture should be among many cultural imports from

modernization processes elsewhere. (Hon 1996: 321; Lu Xun 1934: 625) Realism became the prevalent trend in cultural production with the aim of an evaluation of the present and social mobilization. (Hu 1936: 415) While the New Culture Movement had been primarily cultural, the mid-1920s saw the same intellectuals' disillusionment with liberalism and other Western political systems, as it became clear how far-reaching Western imperialism had already impacted China. (Pickowicz 1976: 348) Despite the heightened politicization, Qu Qiubai noted, "several old problems, such as the isolation of writers from the masses and the factionalism that separated the various literary groups, continued to haunt the movement." (Pickowicz 1977: 367) Rural folk culture became the locus of cultural authenticity to draw from, for it had not yet been "denatured." However, it most often was "left to the elite to select and collect the true tradition, to formulate its correct interpretation, and to rewrite the reinterpreted tradition so it may best serve its envisioned role in the process of nation-building." (Idema 2012: 4-5)

2.1.2 The Chinese framework of "taking popular culture seriously"

The milestones of the "'taking popular culture seriously' genealogy" (Li 2001: 30) in this process therefore were the appropriation of popular culture for enlightenment work, done by liberal intellectuals in the 1900s, the cultural policy pursued in the 1930s by Qu Qiubai who urged intellectuals to "go learning from the people," and Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1943, telling cultural producers to learn from the masses what they needed, to then use folk forms to teach them how to improve their lives. (Li 2001: 30) The New Culture Movement's drawing on folk culture as well as its related focus on education in the 1910s and 1920s should, in my opinion, also be part of the "genealogy," as it resonated with the central call to "go to the people" made in 1919 by Li Dazhao (co-founder of the CCP with Qu). (Hayford 1990: 33; Li 2001: 47)

All of these stages essentially discussed the "relationships between the local, the national, and the global in regard to language and form." (Wang 2011: 97-98) In this paper, I will focus on the period when "going to the people" was designated a process or even task of "learning," localizing an otherwise detached activism. But first one more word on the origins of this debate.

Already in 1985, Yan Fu's essay "On Strength" had laid the groundwork for popularization stating that 'the individual parts determined the quality of the whole social body.' This implied that all people, common or elite, shared the responsibility of the state's destiny. Therefore, intellectuals had to reconsider popular culture to develop

populism and "enlightenment." Opera and local tunes were already used then to transmit new ideas. Chen Duxiu's treatise "On Opera" in *Anhui Vernacular*, 1904, makes it clear that these forms were seen as educational, (Li 2001: 33-35) even if he did not yet mutually conceptualize them as teaching back to the intellectuals. To understand the later locus of popular culture, it is important to be aware of the traditional relation of propaganda and education in China.

2.1.3 Conceptions of propaganda, education, and folklore

Being a practice of vertical as well as horizontal oral transmission, (Lin 2017: 458) one of folklore's qualities is that it has 'spread' (interestingly, the corresponding Chinese adjective meaning 'popular' also signifies a contagious quality: *liúxíng* 流行). This is the same principle foundation as that of the Chinese conception of propaganda, *xuānchuán* 宣传 – "disseminating purposeful information," which does not correspond to the Western print-media based and nowadays negative concept of mass manipulation. (Lin 2017: 451) As an ancient practice, *xuānchuán* 宣传 has always linked propaganda to education (Lin, 2017: 455) in that education is also one of the essential tools of a government for social ideological integration – it equally selects, distributes, and trains knowledge, therefore the teacher is in a separate position from the taught, though. In this understanding, propaganda as "enlightenment" was one of the central concerns of progressive intellectuals starting with the early Republicans, (Zhang 2011: 220) so when debates on populism started later on, intellectuals considered *xuānchuán* the most proper way of spreading their ideas, and this concerned word-of-mouth more than printed media. It can come as no surprise then, that folklore was central to determine the form of populism.

Furthermore, it is easy to forget that the intellectuals had imported an inherently emancipatory aspect from the production of popular culture: although their revolutionary literature existed as "conscientiously theorized and constructed (...) propaganda," as popular folk culture it also served popular collective memory (Williams 2010: 658) and was therefore contestable by people's experiences and memories during its retelling – the most important aspect of *xuānchuán* and folk, (Williams 2010: 661) which was perhaps also the reason why Chinese empires since old had collected folk songs and tales to know what was going on among the population. (Li 2007: 90; Lu Xun 1934: 625)

2.1.4 The debate on mass literature and art

In his 1932 preface to Lu Xun's collected writings, Qu Qiubai himself categorized modern literary activism into three consecutive periods of conflict: 1915-1925, the New Culture and May Fourth Movements – a bourgeois-democratic cultural movement split into traditionalists and Westernized writers aiming at a literary revolution; 1925-1927, a transitional period of "national" revolution happened (and the mass character of the population started to be appealed to [Li 2001: 46]) – a split between explicitly political and nonpolitical content, as well as escalated political polarization; and 1928-1932 (Qu's present), the question if writers should be political had been settled in favour of leftist activism, so what followed was an internal split between revolutionary romantic and realist writers. The revolution led by intellectuals now had to merge with a socialist revolution, (Pickowicz 1977: 370-71) and so culture had to become massified.

In 1930 began the debate on mass literature and art (*dàzhòng wényì* 大众文艺). (Li 2001: 47) The most important point of conflict was about the nature of revolutionary literature. (Pickowicz 1976: 349) The following year was a turning point for the Chinese, as the outward threat became more acute when the Japanese invaded Manchuria, (Hong 1994: 88; Lee 1986: 421) so the urgency to act, according to Lu Xun's associate Hu Feng, had to be reflected in "mass literature of national revolutionary struggle," (a slogan by Lu Xun) uniting anti-imperial, ideological, and nationalist struggle in China. (Hu 1936: 416-7)

2.2 Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's positions

2.2.1 The relationship of Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai

To unify the leftist writers and create an organ for their literary activism, the League of Left-Wing Writers was founded 1930 in Shanghai. Lu Xun became the head of the League. Lu Xun's status was contested until Qu Qiubai took over official leadership in 1931 and again after he left. (Pickowicz 1976: 333) They met first in the summer of 1932 (Pickowicz 1976: 327), but had been in touch already in 1931, collaborating on smaller translation projects of Russian literature. (Pickowicz 1976: 334) Lu started publishing Qu's essays under his own name. At times their voices were hardly differentiable, because the texts emerged from long conversations. (Pickowicz 1976: 339) In April 1933, Qu Qiubai compiled a selection of Lu Xun's writings. He used the preface to give a Marxist reading of his work, legitimating Lu Xun's standing in the leftist literary world by underlining his intellectual contributions to the revolution, (Pickowicz 1976: 343) contrasting Lu to the majority of writers in the League who were content in embellishing their cause with Lu's elevated status. (Pickowicz 1976: 330) Lu Xun, in turn, spent the

year before his death, 1935, to compile and publish a careful collection of Qu's writings. (Hsia 1968: 128; Pickowicz 1976: 348) This was certainly not a functional relationship.

2.2.2 Lu Xun

Lu Xun stated 1927 that "the ideal and the real don't coincide," calling on writers to work with what was there. (Lu Xun 1927: 333-34) He had an essentially realist outlook. This, I take as a clear indication that he wanted cultural production to be based on and stick to local conditions instead of theorizing in the supposedly objective abstract.

Likewise, the final note in the "Outsider's Chats" was to urge educated intellectuals to start with practice in media res, and develop it according to circumstances, (Lu Xun 1934: 631) as time was pressing hard. To clarify Lu Xun's idea of where writers should stand in relation to their fellow Chinese, a look at the opening passage of the essay is useful. Here, he claimed that he had just been chatting with some neighbors outdoors – integrating himself with the masses as an 'outsider' to the debates – and was now recording the questions coming up. In its form, the article thus reflects the demand to learn from the people what to work on. His neighbors this time were concerned with the Chinese language. (Lu Xun 1934: 618) So the essay continues with a historical outline of written Chinese, explaining its corruption into a codified "possession of the privileged" and a form of cultural capital scholars wanted to keep a "rare commodity" by complicating it further – which had led to the stark cultural segregation of literate and illiterate. (Lu Xun 1934: 623-4) The responsibility resulting in scholars having this resource, according to Lu Xun, was to close the gap and enable existing but illiterate "authors to write, and, at the same time, (...) [to] enable readers to be literate and even to be able to write themselves." (Lu Xun 1934: 626) He thus opposed the idea that the masses were an untapped innocent force. They did not need indoctrination, but means of learning and communication. Although common people were "by no means as stupid as the scholars imagine," he pointed out that this emancipation would take time. (Lu Xun 1934: 627-28)

Regarding already 'enlightened' elites, Lu Xun had fundamentally disqualifying criticism which paints a clear picture of the literary situation and, I believe, cannot be misunderstood. Despite their good intentions, he wrote, they were not reflecting their own relationship to the masses, dumbing down what they 'fed' them, patronizing them, and thus holding them back, while most people, according to Lu Xun, were actually eager to learn, and, again, an effort had to be made to give them in a pedagogical way what they needed to emancipate themselves. (Lu Xun 1934: 630) His idea was that the intellectuals

had to understand themselves as part of the masses in order to not put another hierarchy in place. (Lu Xun 1934: 631) This related directly to Qu Qiubai's major criticism of the prevailing social isolation of intellectuals.

2.2.3 Qu Qiubai

In the intellectual output of the early 1930s Qu thus recognized, just as Lu Xun had (corresponding diagnoses follow in [brackets]), unacknowledged problems inherited from the May Fourth Movement, among them "the inclination of the New Culture leaders to be the "guides of the young" [progressive scholars were socially segregated], the tendency in new vernacular writing to deliberately create experimental works which were difficult to understand [scholars vainly protected their capital], and finally the overriding idealism of the period – that is, the belief that the "revolution of ideas" by itself could effect revolutionary social change [opposed to a realist approach]." (Pickowicz 1976: 347)

In 1930, despite the popularity of Marxist literary theories, no Chinese form of Marxist literary criticism had been developed yet to address such local problems. Li Hsiao-t'i in fact argues that, even though the instrumentalization of old forms was integral to the Comintern line, in devising a Chinese Marxist criticism, Qu followed an "indigenous discourse in turning popular culture into an enlightening business as political propaganda." (Li 2001: 30-31) Already in 1923, but largely unknown, Qu had argued that writers could only become accomplices of the masses if they went and lived like the masses. (Pickowicz 1977: 362-62) So his 1930s approach was not new in his thinking. In 1932, he wrote that "revolutionary literature for the masses must begin with the utilization of the advantages of the old forms – the kinds of fiction, poetry, and drama to which the masses are accustomed – and then gradually introduce new elements, so that, as the masses are getting used to this new art, the art level of both writers and readers will be raised." (Hsia 1961: 129) This echoed earlier literary movements, but added a new reciprocal idea of the relationship between producers and audiences. His awareness of the organic processing of change and the time it took to educate a whole country while the educators themselves were just learning how to do it, however, was resounded in Lu Xun urging scholars to just 'get in there'. Cultural producers had to be able to empathize with the masses and surround themselves with popular culture in order to create works that spoke to common people. While he admitted that probably most people wouldn't be able to give up their comfortable lives to join the masses, he made it clear that merely instrumentalizing their culture without making an "emotional commitment" was

manifesting the same old class separations. (Li 2001: 60) Despite being aware of the unlikelihood of intellectuals putting his thoughts into practice, insisting on developing practices which engaged with popular culture in relation to locally lived realities shows that he, like Lu Xun, knew that their cultural undertaking of an emancipated nation would, apart from time, take the support of political forces and continued stability. (Li 2001: 52)

Qu sensed the "cultural deprivation" of the masses as a result of writers' actual disregard of folklore, contrary to their claims. (Pickowicz 1977: 358) This ideological criticism of entertainment culture, stupefying people instead of educating them, became pronounced in the mass culture debate, (Li 2001; Villard 2007: 4) leading to the distinction of 'mass culture' as culture serving the masses in form and content, and not cultural products using the masses as a profitable market. (Hong 1994: 87) He furthermore explained that, while on other levels of society, the mass political movement had been gaining speed and importance, in literature the import of Western models simultaneously had had a conservative effect which alienated the literary movement from other developments – substituting traditional Chinese literature with bourgeois European literature which the masses did not relate to. (Pickowicz 1977: 377) However, Pickowicz also points out "that Qu himself placed great faith in the ability of petty-bourgeois intellectuals to join the ranks of the revolution and work on behalf of the workers and peasants." (Pickowicz 1976: 350)

Qu Qiubai had never study Marxist theory in depth (Qu 1935: 153), and while heading the party he saw himself more as a mediator among the communists than a leader. (Qu 1935: 159) Considering his outspokenly anti-imperialist critique of the limitations of Marxist history during the literary debates, (Villard 2007: 9) Qu appears as an idiosyncratic thinker. He was looking for a way out which would fit local Chinese conditions instead of imposing foreign models. In the 1935 (admittedly contestable) "Superfluous Words" which he wrote shortly before his death in KMT imprisonment, he even described it as a "historical misunderstanding" that he should have become the leader of the CCP, as he had always found himself unsuited for the job, underlining his genuinely preferred interest in literary questions. (Qu 1935: 146) So I take it that his position in the literary debates of the 1930s reflected his own ideas. He criticized himself for being just like the other scholars, void of 'real' experience. His ideas on the writer's relationship with ordinary people have to be read through this desire, also attested to Lu Xun (Hsia 1968: 104-5), to become more 'real' and to 'have something to say' from experience – to become a part of the masses. (Qu 1935: 165-66)

2.2.4 Other camps in the debate

To briefly contrast the realist position in the mass literature debate with the major opponents: the 'romantic' left-wing Creation Society did not believe that the masses could produce their own literature, but had to be written for by 'class-conscious' intellectuals who would be leading the proletarian revolution with culture. A 'third position' thought political involvement was outright wrong. (Pickowicz 1977: 367-68) Both these positions envisioned a clearer and less involved position for writers compared to the realists.

2.3 Related endeavours

2.3.1 Folklore studies

The Folksong Studies Movement started at Beijing University in 1918 as part of the New Culture Movement with the motivation of creating popular resistance, and "connected folkloristics in China with the influence of European "nationalism"." (Zhang 2018: 7-8; also see Liu 2012: 191; 197) At first, the main purpose of collecting folksongs was to enrich vernacular literature, and "hundreds of amateur folklorists" started sending in local folk songs to the university. (Jie 2015: 5; 25) The developing "folklorist populism" among intellectuals was based on Yan Fu's model, the peasants as the deciding factor for China's destiny, but stating that intellectuals ultimately should "learn from them and eventually "merge" with them." (Hung 1986: 174) One of the central figures of this movement was Lu Xun's brother Zhou Zuoren. (Jie 2015: 15-18) Another was historian Gu Jiegang. In the mid-1920s he said, intellectuals "should approach the subject of popular culture with understanding, sensitivity, and respect, not with condescension or abstraction. Their efforts to awaken the masses would yield results only if they paid sufficient attention to the people's practical needs and emotions." (Hung 1994: 194) The 1928 preface to the periodical Folklore Weekly (central in publishing Chinese studies as well as foreign theory) documents the politicization of the folklorists, reading like a manifesto. One part in particular out of a sequence of calls strikes me to show the shifting awareness – some years in advance of the writers they were clearly demanding social integration in a mass discourse: "We must take the position of the masses in order to understand the masses! (...) We ourselves are the masses and should try to appreciate each life of our own." (Li 2001: 43-4; see link in references for whole text in Chinese)

By 1928, folklorists had adopted sociological and ethnographic methods. (Li 2015: 260; Jie 2015: 14) Their increasingly translated and disseminated theoretical sources

however stemmed from a colonial context in Europe and Japan, and this influence could then also be observed in China in a widening divide between unmarked observer-scholars and their 'primitive subjects.' (Liu 2012: 198-99) This development seems similar to the nursing of European culture within iconoclast Chinese intellectual circles criticized by Qu Qiubai, the result of which was that existing structures of inequality even were solidified. Hon Tze-ki writes, however, that "(i)n his writings, Gu presented China as a land of diversity and change, as an organic entity constantly undergoing transformation." (Hon 1996: 333) This awareness and valorization of multiethnicity and cultural pluralism contradicts Liu's idea that folklorism of the late 1920s was in large part colonial mimicry.

I will not go on to discuss the specifics of the Folklore Studies Movement, but what is relevant here is, for one thing, that it did make common people's culture visible from the outset, and thereby pursued emancipation at least on a level of simple representation. Folklorists made space for the others within their own cultural zone of production – still represented within the borders of social isolation, but transgressive in terms of appearance, because what they found was not edited before publication (its status had changed in a modern sense to be 'objective' source material). (Li 2001: 40-1)

For another, I think it is necessary to emphasize that due to a shared linear temporal conception of progress of Marxist history with ethnographic imagination, it does not surprise me that the anti-imperial folklore movement of the time also made space for an imperialist methodology. Lydia H. Liu writes that "the likelihood of allowing the other to inhabit the same time and space as does the anthropologist and enter into a real-life dialogue or disputation with their work, seems rather remote. It would contradict the logic of ethnographic research and threaten to abolish both the subjectivity and objectivity of the observer." (Liu 2012: 200; also see Wang, 1992: 2) This is, however, what I am looking for. Gu Jiegang, working on national history and ethnography, might have been in a similar exceptional camp to Lu and Qu when defending those non-Western ideals.

2.3.2 Native-soil literature (*xiāngtǔ wénxué* 乡土文学)

Native-soil literature was one of those streams in cultural production running alongside but relatively independently to the much louder May Fourth Movement in the 1920s. Lu Xun, an early nativist writer himself, had followed the output of other nativist writers steadily. (Wang 1992: 18; see Lu Xun's introduction to the Modern Chinese Literature Compendium (*Zhōngguó xiàndài wénxué dàxì* 中国现代文学大系)) Interestingly, the call to "go to the villages" did not concern the nativist writers much, as they had already been

doing so and would continue to. (Haddon 1994: 107) Neither as popular and entertaining as the urban entertainment culture, nor as limited by complicated Europeanized language as May Fourth literature, native-soil literature in the 1920s was "closer, stylistically and thematically, to the popular storytelling tradition of pre-modern China, owing in part to its inclusion of dialect and a greater degree of mimetic representation of the life of China's masses." (Haddon 1994: 104) After 1927, many nativist writers became engaged leftists writing with a nationalist perspective. They carried motives, settings, and themes of native-soil literature into revolutionary literature of the 1930s. (Haddon 1994: 115; 125)

2.3.3 The Rural Reconstruction Movement

"In 1923 the Headquarters for the Promotion of Education for the Ordinary People [the Mass Education Movement] was established in Beijing, with James Yan as its general secretary. In 1926 the headquarters extended its experiments in the village of Dingxian, Hobei, which eventually evolved into a large-scale rural reconstruction movement." (Li 2001: 49) Showing his early devotion to Tolstoyan anarchist utopianism, (Qu 1935: 141) Qu Qiubai in 1920 had actually co-edited the issue of the reform journal *Rendao* (L'Humanité) on the New Village Movement in Tennessee. (Hayford 1990: 33) Qu's uncle, philosopher Qu Shiying, worked in Dinxian for many years, (Hayward 1990: 124) so apart from his early interest in the topic, I assume that Qu Qiubai was very familiar with the experiment.

The Dingxian experiment linked education to economics, health, and politics, and the scientists oriented their own organizational scheme on resources and structures already in place, providing those kinds of learning useful to the villagers' concerns. The Rural Reconstruction Movement was an absolute exception in its time in China, (Hayward 1990: 113) although rural reconstruction became a big topic of debate in the 1930s along with other mass debates. (Hayward 1990: 158) The Ding Xian experiment brought forward an interesting alternative for improvement to the two loudest directions which were ideological in nature, liberalism and communism.

2.3.4 Language for the masses (*dàzhòng yǔ* 大众语)

Intellectuals had long acknowledged that written language itself was a problem on the way to massification. (Wang, 2011: 133; Li 2015: 260) In terms of a national language, Qu argued for *pǔtōnghuà* 普通话 precisely because, in his idea, it would not be a cultural innovation imposed on the people by a small elite 'outside' of the everyday, but it

constituted a language connecting the Chinese people already by having originated and evolved among them in modern places of increased exchange, like factories and harbours, which meant it was a product of the proletarian sphere. (Wang 2016: 159-60)

Regarding writing, in 1934 the League of Left-Wing Writers started to actively promote Sin Wenz as "the language of the masses" (*dàzhòng yǔ* 大众语), a Latinized phonetic transcription Qu Qiubai had developed with a Soviet linguist in the end of the 1920s, to replace Chinese characters. (Hsia 1961: 131) Lu Xun's promotion was incremental to the successful spread of and experimentation with Sin Wenz across China before war broke out. (DeFrancis 1950: 117)

2.3.5 New popular media and national forms

At around the same time that Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai introduced the Chinese public to Russian graphic art with a publication in 1934, (Pickowicz 1976: 342) cartoons and wood cuts gained in popularity. They were aware of the need for a plurality of forms and media, as the masses were by no means homogenous either. (Li 2001: 50-52)

Literary debates and social experiments of this kind were halted or radically changed by the onset of the war against Japan in 1937. Both Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai had already died in the middle of this decade. What is referred to with Chinese literature of the 1930s then is the time before the war, and the war is often periodized by itself when popular cultural production saw a dispersal into the rural periphery. Regional popular culture also became more influential as the war finally provided enough leverage to put into practice what Qu Qiubai had already lamented years before. (Fitzgerald 2013: 6; Wang 2011: 104) In the starting debate over national forms, the writer Lao She polarized (and summarized the debate) with the dictum of pouring "new wine into old bottles" (*jiùpíng xīnjiǔ* 旧瓶新酒) [a parable in the new testament of the bible]. (Fitzgerald 2013: 11-14)

2.3.5 Cultural policy in the 1940s

In this period, Mao Zedong's "learning from the people" (*xiàng qúnzhòng xuéxí* 向群众学习) came up in parallel to the popular call "to the village" (*xiàxiàng* 下乡), and both have roots in earlier debates. The first almost literally replicated Qu Qiubai's demands for a more devoted treatment of popular culture in the 1930s, and the latter also recalled the folklorists' commitment to "go to the people" in the 1920s. (Hung 1986: 173-74; Wang 2011: 97-98) Mao formulated the Communist "mass line" as follows: "We should

go to the masses and learn from them [*xiàng qúnzhòng xuéxí* 向群众学习], synthesize their experience into better, articulated principles and methods, then do propaganda among the masses, and call upon them to put these principles and methods into practice so as to solve their problems and help them achieve liberation and happiness." (Mao 1943)

2.4 Interpreting these findings

To clear up with the earlier concerns first, my research shows that Qu Qiubai was actually the one who placed Lu Xun in the historical position he occupies today with the help of his Marxist reading Mao later used as well. Qu himself was distanced from party politics in the years of the debates. Resultingly, the stances discussed here seemed relatively unaffected by later claims made on the figures Lu and Qu. The two intellectuals, critical of careerism, even attested a general lack in good work resulting from the debate, so it is also unlikely that their historical status hides potential material in their proximity.

Through my research, I have seen that the "number of scholars in the 1920s and 1930s who were really interested in popular and oral literature is very limited indeed." (Idema 2012: 6; for similar statements also see Li 2007: 90-91 and Zhang 2011: 220) The general atmosphere in China at this point must have been stifling – war with Japan was equally impending as the conflict between KMT and CCP escalating ever since the violent failing of the common front in 1927. Many writers in the debates were looking for the most effective way to melt the large uneducated and rural part of the population – a vast resource – into a national self-aware force, and were therefore ready to make concessions to quality, adequacy, and form in order to propagate and popularize their messages. (Li 2001: 51) In this framework, Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's views seem exceptional.

As seen in the detailed account of their positions, my initial hypothesis was accurate. I had wanted to know if they were defending horizontal practices of cultural production, and if yes, how. I wanted to know how they took the Chinese lower classes seriously as cultural spheres in their own right. It turns out that what they meant by "learning from the people" was in fact to acknowledge the importance of a local base for a national process of cultural mobilization, and recognizing the mutual nature of the necessary productive relationship. They chastized traditional as well as progressive intellectual elites for their selfish conservatism. Both Lu and Qu had been involved in such work before the debate on mass literature and art, which goes to show that these were fundamental concerns of theirs. In their writing and publishing activities, they also tried to practice their claims. What is more, the idea of a reciprocally affective production of knowledge is contrary to

a prevalent modern idea of scientific objectivity. Defending such a conduct meant that Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai were refusing the oppressive Western approach to social order. Along with the two, the heads of other movements, Gu Jiegang and James Yen, looked for a properly translated and indigenous mode of conduct and proved comparatively successful.

Concerning Lu and Qu's entanglement outside the mass literature debate, I have been able to draw connections from them to other endeavours presented in this paper. Lu Xun himself had been part of native-soil fiction, and kept publishing native-soil authors' works in the 1930s. His brother was one of the main forces starting the Folklore Studies Movement. Apart from Qu showing interest in rural reconstruction early on, his uncle was an integral part of the Rural Reconstruction Movement. While Qu had even co-developed *Sin Wenz* and brought it to China, Lu then became Latinization's eminent supporter. Both Qu Qiubai and Lu Xun published diverse works of popular culture they deemed important to share, often on their own budgets. (Hsia 1968: 128) Not least, despite their disagreement with many of the other leftist writers, they ran the League together trying to solve the internal debates and get to work productively.

Hence, Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai were not limiting themselves to working on culture from the perspective of realist revolutionary literature only, but they can be posited as important nodes of situated practices in their time and place.

3.Coda

To conclude on a general note of a "more articulate understanding of situated socio-cultural practices in 1930's China" mentioned at the beginning, I found that at the time of the mass debates, mass mobilization was not really happening. Intellectuals were caught up in a debate which in itself seemed a distraction. Based on Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai's criticism and the developments leading up to the debate, I saw that progressive intellectuals were confused about their own place and culture – understandably, after having been on the May Fourth carousel of "denaturalization." (Idema 2012) First they scrapped their traditional gentry culture for Europeanized knowledges, then found these unsuitable, but later also did not really belong to popular culture, weren't intimate with folklore, while in shifting to Marxism, their final outlook was that of eliminating their entire identity to progress into the vanguard class. By setting cultural nationalization in motion, they had dealt themselves new cards with a very short amount of time to cope. Even Lu Xun and Qu Qiubai – convinced the necessary work was possible and rather at the center of action themselves – felt alienated. The masses seemed like an unattainable

object of desire. And last, the intellectuals were paralyzed by a feeling of utter crisis. Few were able to see a sustainable path to merge their own identity with the still-to-be-created population of the new 'nation.' Only few were emotionally able to resituate themselves and their work radically enough to integrate in the still-present, and pursue their goals. The actual practical approaches were singular in appearance and scope, and the most progressive projects were certainly not happening from within the literary debate. Rural reconstruction and literacy campaigns seemed the most productive, but all of these were cut short by declining conditions, latest by the war in 1937.

What Lu and Qu brought into focus for me is the necessity to be cautious about losing the local connection in a social endeavour, be it fiction writing or scientific study – their criticism at times resembling that of phenomenological, postcolonial, and posthumanist critics of the ontology of scientific objectivism elsewhere later on. Now I would like to continue looking much closer at specific socially engaged outputs of culture at the time.

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