

Lu Xun on Display: Memory, Space and Media in the Making of World Literary Heritage

or

The Materiality of World Literary Heritage: Memory, Space and Media in the Making of Lu Xun

Emily Graf examines social practices of commemorating writers as cultural heroes in memorial museums from a global perspective, placing the institutionalization of the Chinese writer Lu Xun (1881-1936) at the center of her investigation. She asks how writers are remembered and forgotten in and by space. If they are remembered, how does their display in memorial museums produce the image of the writer as hero?

Author museums have been treated with much skepticism in literary studies, as they encourage an author-focused reading rejected by scholars of New Criticism and reader-reception theorists alike. The concept of the “author-as-hero” immediately triggers a scholar’s hermeneutics of suspicion, rejecting such institutions for their instrumentalization of the author (most visibly by the nation- or more intensely the so-called “propaganda-state”) and for seducing the naïve reader to become a literary tourist or unwitting worshiper. Thus author museums still form an under-researched field in (world/ comparative) literary studies and within museology go unnoticed due to their marginality as a museum genre. Thus the cultural-moral proscription that the author *ought not* be treated as hero continues to exist largely detached from a world-wide *social practice* of commemorating writers as heroes by societies around the globe.

What agency do objects, human actors and institutional structures gain in the process of making a literary hero? And since a hero’s charisma is by definition volatile, how does this production change over time? Taking into account the interdependencies and inequalities within world literature, Graf also investigates how the display of one writer is connected to other writers in memorial museums across the globe. What kinds of material links can be found to other literary or political heroes in their living spaces, their collections of objects and books or their visual representations in photographs, paintings or sculptures? How can these connections within a larger hero genealogy hinder or facilitate the writer being remembered or forgotten?

Graf’s thesis approaches the existence of literary heroes as a social reality, arguing that the author-as-hero as he is mediated and commemorated in museum space forms a Second Body of the writer beyond his mortal physical one. This Second Body has proven resilient to critical approaches, which is why this thesis goes *beyond* such a critical approach, not unmasking the differences between the writer’s representation and the writer as a historical figure, but inquiring why these differences occur and how they affect a society’s memory of a particular writer. Three representatives of left-wing literature, Lu Xun, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) and Lai He (1894-1943), are the object of this research, precisely *because* processes of their valorization in the aesthetic and political realm are strongly entangled and are thus prone to be dismantled by critical approaches as mere ideologically motivated instrumentalizations of writers. Lu Xun was institutionalized in museum space in the PRC in the 1950s under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party, Bertolt Brecht in the GDR in the 1970s under the Socialist Unity Party and Lai He in Taiwan in the 1990s under the increasing influence of the Democratic Progressive Party. During their lifetime in the first-half of the twentieth century, these three figures had aesthetically

been connected in their roles as left-wing writers, remote from the literary and political center of left-wing literature localized in Moscow but stretched across national borders into China, Germany and Taiwan. Their institutionalization, however, took place each in a different temporal and socio-historical setting, revealing differing processes of valorization of the heroic.

As sources, Graf's study draws on written and oral histories of author museums. Interviews with current and retired museum directors, museum staff and literary scholars provide insights into the production of Lu Xun, Bertolt Brecht and Lai He. On-site interviews with visitors along with their guest-book entries from recent and past visits help understand their museums' reception. Archival material, such as photographs of past exhibitions, further enable her to reconstruct former representations of the writers for a diachronical reading of their display and recent reports to superior institutions (such as the State Administration of Cultural Heritage or the Akademie der Künste (Ost)) reveal where museums are localized in their national network of cultural institutions.

The transcultural research perspective taken in this project is mirrored in the overall structure of the thesis. It takes scale as its defining criterion and structuring element. The focus on scale avoids the pitfalls of case studies, as these would either remain within the boundaries of national literatures or allow only for comparative readings, which help to highlight similarities and differences, but can fail to explain where these derive from. Instead of the common linear book structure featuring chapters that build on one another, Graf's ambition is to analyze Lu Xun, Bertolt Brecht and Lai He by approaching them from two directions. The reader can either start from a specific "piece" of material literary heritage (e.g. Lu Xun's death mask) and *zoom out* to the field of world literary heritage (including the accessibility of Brecht's *Sterbezimmer* in the GDR or Lai He's entry into a literary martyr shrine in Taiwan ruled by martial law). Alternatively, the reader can start from the field of world literary heritage and *zoom in* to Lu Xun's museum – into the museum's attic – where discarded busts of Maxim Gorky and Mao Zedong, covered in dust, are slipping from the collective memory of Lu Xun. Accordingly, this thesis can be read from *two* directions. The reader can either choose to start with the macro or micro level, can choose to take a step closer or a step back. As a result, the thesis has two official titles:

- ◀ Lu Xun on Display: Memory, Space and Media in the Making of World Literary Heritage
- ▶ The Materiality of World Literary Heritage: Memory, Space and Media in the Making of Lu Xun.

The motivation to approach the material display of Lu Xun, Bertolt Brecht and Lai He in this manner is methodological. It has two main objectives. Firstly, it aims to tackle one of the fundamental challenges of interdisciplinarity in today's academic order, which recurrently confronts us with the crucial question: What readership do we address? By offering two starting points, the aim of this project is to address two different readerships in particular: Sinologists trained in Chinese history, literature and culture are very familiar with Lu Xun and can start from a specific object on display, well aware of the degree to which Lu Xun as writer and historic figure has been valorized in Chinese literary criticism and historiography. Readers who are not familiar with Chinese literature but have a background in (trans-) cultural studies, (comparative) literature or material heritage studies can start from the global perspective on what this thesis defines as

“world literary heritage” and slowly, step by step, approach the Chinese writer Lu Xun from a global perspective to learn more about his specific case. Secondly, the two directions aim to question a unilateral process of valorization in society, addressing the question: Who attributes value to whom? Read back to back, this thesis reveals that the process of attributing value to the writer Lu Xun is circular, not unilateral. It is not Lu Xun’s inherent value as a writer that inevitably leads him to be displayed in a museum (the author makes the museum), nor can his institutionalization in museum space guarantee his value in society (the museum makes the author). Especially in a globally interconnected museum landscape, in which literary tourists and pilgrims travel to sites of memories outside of their own linguistic and cultural sphere, both directions of valorization must be taken into consideration when trying to make sense of the making of the author-as-hero. This lesson from twentieth-century authors holds true in the context of the increased mobility of literary pilgrims and circulation of material heritage in the twenty-first century, in which their memories are being kept alive. But a return to the author as a “national hero” also shows indications of continued attempts to localize writers firmly within national borders, attempts which reveal the importance of taking author museums seriously as sites of collective memory.