

The Hand, the Gaze, and the Voice: Lu Xun's Transcription of Ancient Inscriptions

Guangchen CHEN
Princeton University

This paper analyzes *chao gubei* 抄古碑 (transcribing ancient steles) as a significant obsession of Lu Xun's prior to his becoming a famous writer in the May Fourth period. Striking moments in his literary works stemmed from this personal obsession. Even though Lu Xun's transcribing of ancient steles can be considered a means to anesthetize himself, this paper argues that this act of transcription also serves to circumvent thinking and speech against the grain of the May Fourth period, when revolutionaries sought to facilitate the flow of thinking and speech in Chinese society by replacing the Chinese script with phonetic ones. After looking at Lu Xun's transcribing of ancient steles, this paper examines how the purposelessness and materiality of this practice appears in Lu Xun's fictional works, such as "A Madman's Diary," "Epitaph," and "Kong Yiji."

New Year's Eve. Sat up alone at night, transcribing
stele inscriptions. No feeling of years changing.
— Lu Xun's Diary of January 22, 1917¹

The Chinese script, with its long and continual history, has seldom been a neutral tool of communication, and is frequently taken to task for being in the service of certain political and ideological agenda.² At the beginning of the unified Chinese empire, the mighty Shi Huangdi (the first emperor) issued a decree to standardize the writing system across his territory, which was essentially a political decision. After more than two millennia, at the very end of the empire's history, came the iconoclastic May Fourth generation, which advocated for a total abolition of the Chinese script. This generation of intellectuals fiercely attacked it for hindering social progress, upholding disgraced traditional values, and representing perverse ideologies. This debate involved many of the leading figures of the time, such as Hu Shi, Qian Xuantong, Zhao Yuanren (Yuen

¹ Lu Xun 鲁迅, *Lu Xun quanji* 鲁迅全集, vol. 15, 273 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005).

² For a general discussion of this issue, especially its contemporary significance, see Andrea Bachner, *Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Ren Chao), and, last but not least, Lu Xun.³ After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the character simplification movement took off in earnest, and has since become predominant in today's global proliferation of the Chinese script; however, this script continues to be a problematic issue that attracts debates. For example, at the end of the 1980s, a time of cultural and political crisis, the script was again criticized for representing an oppressive but crumbling meaning system, against which Xu Bing's *Tianshu* (*Book from the Sky*) staged another coup by creating fake characters that looked like real ones but meant absolutely nothing. By deconstructing the script's semiotic functions, Xu Bing's work frustrated its viewers and called the very authority of the script into question.⁴

Among the many problems with the Chinese script, this paper focuses on how the cultural-political debates surrounding it relate to its materiality, in terms of both its material medium and the bodily aspects that it involves, such as the hand and the voice.

From a material perspective, the problematic nature of the script is not an exclusively Chinese issue but has global relevance. Xu Bing's most recent take on this topic highlights a different crisis that is common to the world's writing systems in general. With the use of symbols, the *Book from the Ground* reinforces the digital age's tendency to conceptualize writing in a purely virtual way, i.e., free from any consideration of the medium's materiality. However, since the scripts we continue to use today originated long before the digital age, their material condition cannot be ignored. For example, without consideration of the material condition, we would not be able to make sense of the basic nature of oracle bone script, an early form of the modern Chinese script. According to Qiu Xigui, the carved oracle bone script is a *simplified* version of formal script written with a brush, because manually carving on the hard surface of bones and turtle shells makes it too difficult to achieve certain oval forms, while they can easily be executed with a brush.⁵

Another reason we should pay more attention to the materiality of writing has to do with the importance of the voice—not in its everyday sense, but rather according to Mladen Dolar's formulation. Dolar powerfully demonstrates that the line between speech and the corporeal voice that *speaks* has to be maintained. According to him,

from the point of view of signifying structure, of signifiers as mere bundles of differential oppositions, materiality seems to be irrelevant But it is by no means irrelevant to the voice. Indeed, the voice appears as the link which ties the signifier to the body. It indicates that the signifier, however purely logical and differential, must have a point of origin and emission in the body.⁶

³ For a general history of Chinese script reform, see Zhou Youguang 周有光, *Hanzi gaige gailun* 漢字改革概論 (Beijing: Wenzhi gaige chubanshe, 1961).

⁴ For a primary source about the reception of *Tianshu* at the time of its exhibition and its interpretations—political and otherwise—see Katherine Spears, ed, *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book* (London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009).

⁵ Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, *Wenzixue gaiyao* 文字學概要 (Taipei: Wanjuanlou tushu gongsi, 1995), 57–58.

⁶ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 59.

Here Dolar reminds us that the line between speech and the corporeal voice that *speaks* it needs to be maintained. The relationship between written and spoken language dominated much of the May Fourth debate over the Chinese script. For the abolitionists, compared with alphabetic scripts, the Chinese script shows obvious deficiency in recording speech, hence the urgent need to replace it.⁷ However, this speech as conceived by the abolitionists is an abstract, metaphysical, and impersonal one, thus leaving the corporeal aspect of the speaking individual unattended.

The indifference toward the fact that the script records the human voice, which has a corporeal dimension, predates the advent of the digital age. This was indeed how Lu Xun formulated his arguments in two essays dealing with this subject: “Chinese Script and Latinization” (1934) and “On New Script” (1935). Here, he simply dismisses the script’s ability to record and represent pronunciations. Because of this, his attitude toward the traditional writing system was not only downright negative, but also completely unequivocal:

It is true that the Chinese script is a treasure passed down from ancient times. But our ancestors were older than the script, so we ourselves are more a treasure passed down from ancient times. To sacrifice us for the script, or to sacrifice the script for us? This is a question that anyone not yet completely mad can instantly answer.⁸

The judgment cannot be more bluntly put forward, and it is not difficult to see its bias and limitation. However, Lu Xun was not merely a polemicist; his literary imagination tells a different story. If we go back almost two decades to “A Madman’s Diary” (1918) and “Kong Yiji” (1919), or even one decade to “Epitaph” (1925) in the prose poem collection *Wild Grass*, we see that contrary to the black-and-white and reductionist approach of the essays, Lu Xun’s fictional world shows us a much subtler and more complex scenario. Several episodes to be discussed below stem from Lu Xun’s personal experience, particularly those that show the protagonist contemplating the script. The nuance is retained because much more care is given to the material medium of writing. One can detect two different mentalities at work here: the fantastical worlds created by Lu Xun the fiction writer are in stark contrast with the slogans made by the unforgiving polemicist. The purpose of this essay is to show the more nuanced view Lu Xun holds regarding the Chinese script through his fictional creations.

⁷ See Lu Xun, “Guanyu xin wenzi” 關於新文字, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 6, 165–66.

⁸ Lu Xun, “Hanzi he ladinghua” 漢字和拉丁化, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 5, 586.

Chao gubei: *The Scribe's Hand and the Circumvention of Thinking*

On the afternoon of May 12, 1912, seven days after arriving in Beijing to take up his position at the recently relocated Ministry of Education, Lu Xun visited the Liu Li Chang antique market for the first time. This marks the beginning of his intense collecting activities during his fourteen-year sojourn in Beijing from 1912 to 1926.

Though hailed as one of the greatest writers in modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun had another life that has often been minimized, if not totally overlooked. Before becoming the literary giant and youth mentor he is remembered as, he devoted most of his free time to collecting antiques, transcribing and editing ancient texts, and producing a substantial body of works in paleography and philology. He described his main activity of this period as “transcribing ancient steles” (*chao gubei* 抄古碑), many of which were tombstones. Lu Xun’s own account of this activity gives the impression that it is merely an insignificant prelude to his later literary achievements.

In the preface to his collection of stories *Outcry* (*Nahan* 呐喊),⁹ Lu Xun recounted major phases in his intellectual life up to 1922, four years before he left Beijing. It starts with an explanation of why he first decided to study medicine. Then he describes the famous “slideshow episode,” the now legendary moment of his literary awakening, after which he decided to give up medicine for literature, because sickness of the soul cannot be cured by medicine.¹⁰ However, literary enlightenment and youthful ambition did not automatically generate success. His first attempt at using literature to cure the Chinese people’s souls was a failure. With some friends, he founded *Xin Sheng* (New Life), but a lack of funding nipped this fledgling project in the bud. This made him realize that he did not have a leadership personality, leading to feelings of loneliness, purposelessness, and pain. In his own words:

my loneliness had to be dispelled because it was causing me agony. So I used various means to anesthetize my soul, to immerse myself among my fellow nationals and to turn to the past . . .

. . . For years I stayed in this house, transcribing ancient inscriptions. I had few visitors, and there were no problems or “isms” in ancient inscriptions, so my life dimly faded away, which was all that I desired. On summer nights, when mosquitoes swarmed, I would sit under the locust tree waving my fan and looking at specks of blue sky through chinks in the thick foliage, while belated caterpillars would fall, icy-cold, on to my head and neck.¹¹

⁹ Also translated as *Call to Arms*.

¹⁰ Lu Xun, “Nahan zixu” 呐喊自序, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wuxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1, 439.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 439–40.

A conversation between Lu Xun and Qian Xuantong (nicknamed Jin Xinyi), a fierce and unrelenting critic of the Chinese script, reveals the uselessness of this activity, as well as Lu Xun's emptiness, boredom, and utter indifference:

"What's the use of copying these?" One night, while leafing through the inscriptions I had transcribed, he posed this searching question.

"There isn't any use."

"What's the meaning, then, of transcribing them?"

"There isn't any meaning."¹²

Lu Xun's last sentence is likely a pun: It can mean either "There isn't any meaning" or simply "It's no fun." Such blunt indifference is rather striking, especially when we consider the persistence and obsession with which he transcribed the texts. One cannot but detect a certain ironic, belittling, and self-effacing tone here. Transcribing ancient inscriptions is such a mechanical, repetitive chore, involving little if any intellectual or creative input, that it seems no more than an empty pastime. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why this activity is thought to be vastly inferior to the inspirational work of a great writer.

By far the most interesting and deceptively simple explanation is given by Lu Xun's younger brother Zhou Zuoren, who witnessed and sometimes participated in these activities after joining the former in Beijing in 1917. Summarized as the "escaping attention theory," Zhou's account is rather similar to Lu Xun's own narrative. According to Zhou, when Yuan Shikai was plotting a restoration of the monarchy, close surveillance was widely imposed on officials in Beijing, so they tried to avoid attention by indulging in relatively harmless obsessions such as gambling or prostitution. Lu Xun was not interested in, nor could he afford, such activities, so he would instead "pretend to *play with antiques*."¹³ To save money, instead of buying ancient steles, he collected rubbings of inscriptions. To pass the time and save money even more effectively, he started to transcribe them:

Thus a Han dynasty stele could *give* him half a month to transcribe. This was a rather cost-effective activity. Unlike manuscripts, these steles were large in scale, and had many characters. What's more, Han steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one has to position oneself from afar, near, left and right to recognize roughly what it was. As a result, there was no better way of killing time, though this did require lots of care.¹⁴

At this point it is worth asking a very basic question: What was Lu Xun really doing here? He was surely not channeling his own thinking nor engaging in calligraphy as a

¹² *Ibid.*, 440.

¹³ Zhou Zuoren 周作人, "Chao bei de mudu" 抄古碑的目的, in Zhi An 止庵, ed., *Lu Xun de gujia* 鲁迅的故家 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2002), 345.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 345–46; italics mine.

form of aesthetic expression. Neither was such transcription for the practical purpose of communication. It is true that, as a result of this practice, he produced substantial scholarly works such as *Kuaiji jun gushu jiji* (Hybrid collection of Kuaiji prefecture old books) and *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen* (Sunken old novels fished), but if his own narrative is to be trusted, these scholarly works were merely a byproduct of his obsession. He was “collecting” these texts through manual copying, rather than actually “owning” them. Just as Zhou Zuoren says, the expressed aim was simply to “kill time.”

Let me pause here for a moment to consider the meaning of manual copying in this specific context. For book collectors, numbered copies of a limited edition or copies with the author’s autograph are more valuable than identical copies. An even more precious copy is one that has a relation to us, such as a book with a dedication from the author; we all want our collected object to be unique and personal. Therefore, arguably the most intimate and exclusive way of owning an object is to manually recreate it. In the attempt to preserve such uniqueness, collectors tend to push ownership beyond the legal sense, to the point of making the object part of, or a corporeal extension of, him- or herself.

Writing can be understood as an interactive process between the mind and the hand. The mind thinks through language, which is represented by the script; the mind also directs the hand to write down the script. For Martin Heidegger, the hand is what distinguishes humans from animals, because “doch nur insofern der Mensch spricht, denkt er; nicht umgekehrt, wie die Metaphysik es noch meint . . . Nur ein Wesen, das spricht, d. h. denkt, kann die Hand haben und in der Handhabung Werke der Hand vollbringen” (only when man speaks, does he think—not the other way around, as metaphysics still believes. . . . Only a being that speaks, that is, thinks, can have the hand and can be handy in achieving works of handicraft).¹⁵ According to this definition, the hand and its product (the script) are subordinate to and defined by speech. In other words, the hand has become a social product, conditioned by its relationship to writing, which in turn is dictated by thinking/speech. The writing hand is but a tool of speech.

An explication of this hierarchy can be found in Derrida’s discussion of the typewriter in an essay entitled “Heidegger’s Hand.” Derrida notes that Heidegger sees the typewriter’s mechanization of writing as a “destruction of the word” or of speech, because

typographic mechanization destroys this unity of the word, this integral identity, this proper integrity of *the spoken word* that writing manuscripts, at once because it appears closer to *the voice or body proper* and because it ties together the letters, conserves and gathers together . . . The machine “degrades (*degradiert*)” the word or the speech it

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 16.

reduces to a simple means of transport (*Verkehrsmittel*), to the instrument of commerce and communication.¹⁶

Here, the hierarchy is apparent: Speech occupies—or should have occupied—the top position, as Derrida further remarks, “manuscripture *immediately* bound to speech, that is, more probably the system of phonetic writing.”¹⁷ Now, however, it is in danger of being denigrated to a simple instrument.

Therefore, for Heidegger and especially Derrida, only human beings have the hand because it makes it possible for the word and speech—another uniquely human product—to manifest itself. This part of the body deserves to be called a hand only when it is in the process of writing, dictated by thinking/speech. From this we can infer that writing is also subordinate to thinking/speech. This view is consistent with Derrida's own argument in *Of Grammatology* that one should not consider writing “as the eclipse that comes to surprise and obscure the glory of the word” even in a language based on ideogram such as Chinese, except in the realms of “literature and poetic writing.”¹⁸ Zhang Longxi even argues that the inseparability of thinking and speech is a fundamental premise for metaphysics, not just in European but also in Chinese cultures, as the words *logos* and *tao* demonstrate.¹⁹

In light of this analysis, we are in a better position to understand Lu Xun's *chao gubei* activity. It is true that this enterprise did have meaningful byproducts, but it was in itself characterized by a lack of practical or aesthetic purpose. In other words, thinking/speech is conspicuously lacking, while the hand is thrown into relief.

In such a mechanical but intimate experience with the materiality of writing, Lu Xun was engaging language and writing without treating them as such. Indeed, this explains why he chose this pastime to “anesthetize” himself. It superficially resembles the act of writing, but thinking (and hence speech) is eclipsed by the script, thus receding into a nonessential, almost irrelevant position. This purposeless manual transcription is a peculiar practice that helped Lu Xun to free the hand from the logocentric hierarchy. Perhaps even more importantly, it allowed him to *circumvent* thinking.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Heidegger's Hand,” John P. Leavey, Jr., trans., in John Sallis, ed., *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 178–79; italics mine.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 92.

¹⁹ Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 32.

The Gaze, the Uncanny Script, and the Dissolution of Reason

Through *chao gubei*, Lu Xun was not just passively avoiding thinking/speech. Something else was emerging from this process, which would eventually prove to be far more radical than a mere “pastime.”

This phase in Lu Xun’s life ended with the groundbreaking publication of “A Madman’s Diary” in 1918, followed by a stream of other fictional works, which launched him into the turbulent New Culture Movement. On the surface, he was leaving the scribe’s quiet and solitary lifestyle behind him, but it continued to lurk in some of his fictional characters. It is true that unless hitherto unknown evidence is discovered in the future, it is impossible to establish any factual link between Lu Xun’s *chao gubei* activity and his fictional works, but I think it would not be entirely unjustified to point out some striking images of scripts and inscriptions in these works.

“Kong Yiji,” published in 1919, is a short story about a miserable scholar who failed the imperial examination. It is a satire not only on the imperial examination system but also on the entire traditional education. Despite support from Voltaire, Montesquieu, and other Enlightenment philosophers, the Chinese imperial examination represented for Lu Xun an archaic backwardness because it stubbornly evaluated all scholars according to how well they acquired orthodox Confucian learning, which had little practical use. The examination was then used to select scholars to govern the country. Thus, the scholar Kong Yiji, who is well-versed in all kinds of traditional knowledge, remains a practically useless residue of the old society. One episode in the story, depicting a conversation between Kong Yiji and the narrator, a boy working at a tavern, pokes fun at his knowledge of how to write a character in four different ways:

Once he asked me:

“Have you had any schooling?”

When I nodded curtly he said, “Well then, I’ll test you. How do you write the *hui* character as in aniseed-peas?”

Who did this beggar think he was, testing me! I turned away and ignored him. After waiting for a while he said, earnestly:

“You can’t write it, right? I’ll show you. Remember this. You should remember such characters, because you’ll need them to write your accounts when you have a shop of your own.”

It seemed to me I was still very far from having my own shop; what’s more, our boss never entered aniseed-peas in his account book. Half amused and half exasperated, I drawled, “I don’t need you to show me. Isn’t it the *hui* written with the element for grass?”

Kong Yiji’s face lit up. Tapping two long finger-nails on the bar, he nodded. “Quite correct! There are four different ways of writing *hui*. Do you know them?”

But I ran out of my patience. I scowled and turned away. Having dipped his finger in wine, and about to write the characters on the bar, Kong Yiji saw my indifference; his face fell and he sighed.²⁰

This skill of writing the same character in its multiple forms now looks ridiculously trivial and useless, but it would have been part of the traditional learning a scholar was expected to master in order to excel in the imperial examination. Besides Lu Xun's trademark satire of the tradition, which has been extensively commented upon, this episode also foregrounds the strangeness of the otherwise familiar written characters. In an effective system of signification, a symbol points to some external meanings by negating itself, by deflecting our attention from its own existence. However, when a character such as this *hui*, apart from denoting a kind of herb, also has four—or possibly more—variations in writing, it ceases to be a meaningful symbol. It becomes itself. This is precisely what Derrida means by writing being “the eclipse that comes to surprise and obscure the glory of the word.”²¹

In a sense, the destiny of this skill of writing Chinese script symbolizes much of traditional culture. The Revolution of 1911 caused a radical break not so much in reality as in symbolic meaning and context. Rather than destroying culture itself, familiar objects were transformed into the uncanny. Lu Xun was among those sensitive enough to detect this subtle change and observe the breaking down of an entire system of signification.

Going a step forward, “A Madman's Diary” directs our attention to the thingness of the Chinese script and its unreliability as a medium for recording history. This short story, which gave Lu Xun instant fame, assumes the form of a diary written by a presumably “mad” man. He is in constant fear of being persecuted and especially of falling victim to cannibalism. He keeps thinking that his fellow villagers, including even his brother, have long been plotting to eat him.

“A Madman's Diary” was instantly received—and is still universally understood—as a powerful allegory in which the inhuman, suffocating cruelty of traditional Confucian society is compared to cannibalism. However, if the narrative only told of the “mad” man imagining others' conspiracy, then the allegorical reading would have been no more than one among many possible interpretations. After all, it is uncertain whether he is really mad, or whether he is the only normal person in a mad community. One could also read the story literally, as though the villagers were indeed plotting cannibalism, if not for one scene in the story that serves as unmistakable evidence that Lu Xun indeed intended it as an allegory. As a result, cannibalism has a specific meaning in the story, as a metaphor for the oppressive feudal system:

²⁰ Lu Xun, “Kong Yiji” 孔乙己, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1, 459.

²¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 92.

Everything needs careful research if one wants to understand it. In ancient times, as I recall, people often ate human beings, but I am not very sure about it. I try to look this up in history books—this history has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words “Virtue Justice and Morality.” Since I can’t sleep anyway, I read intently for half the night, until I begin to see words between the lines. The whole book is filled with the two words—“Eat people!”²²

The equation of “Virtue Justice and Morality” (referring to Confucian teachings) with “Eat people!” unequivocally exposes the allegorical structure underlying the whole story. This allegorical reading is so widely accepted that for a long time the term “Confucian teachings” was—and sometimes still is—accompanied by the adjective “cannibalistic.” However, what is most remarkable for the current discussion is that this equation is achieved through the act of (mis)reading, or rather, the act of intently gazing and laboriously recognizing something that gradually becomes unintelligible.

This moment in the story bears an unmistakable resemblance to Zhou Zuoren’s description of Lu Xun’s *chao gubei* activity, highlighting its paleographic nature:

[A] Han dynasty stele could give him half a month to transcribe. This was a rather cost-effective activity. Unlike manuscripts, these steles were large in scale, and had many characters. What’s more, Han steles had lots of blemishes, so when a character on the rubbing was rather obscure, one has to position oneself from afar, near, left and right to recognize roughly what it was. As a result, there was no better way of killing time, though this did require lots of care.²³

The parallel between the “mad” man staring at these pages and Lu Xun the scribe obsessively deciphering obscure inscriptions cannot be overstated. This resembles Walter Benjamin’s distinction between two types of relationships between people and objects. According to him, “possession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts . . . The flâneur optical, the collector tactile.”²⁴ For Lu Xun, *chao gubei* effectively combined the tactile as well as the optical. In both cases, reading is a laboriously active process of searching and deciphering, but ultimately of defamiliarizing, as formerly known symbols yield some outlandish message.

Another aspect that shows the significance of script in this story is madness, which is also one of its main themes. Among other reasons, the man is thought to be mad because he is not able to *read* properly. The people around him are subscribing to the aforementioned metaphysical hierarchy, where a rational being is defined by thinking, manifesting as speech. To be able to read properly means treating the script as

²² Lu Xun, “Kuangren riji” 狂人日記, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1, 447.

²³ Zhou Zuoren, “Chao bei de mudi,” 345–46.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 206–7.

transparent symbols that refer to a semiotic system. The Chinese scripts, like all other writing systems, are conceived as such; they do not conceptually rely on their material medium. However, the obscurity of ancient inscriptions blocks such a transparent and smooth transition across the planes. In the process of intently gazing and laboriously recognizing the obscure inscriptions on blemished surfaces, signs cease to be efficient references to meaning, assuming instead a certain opaqueness that retains the reader's sight on the surface. Thus, a stable and coherent system of reference between signs and meanings starts to dissolve. It is reduced to a material existence, as these Chinese characters become strange and illegible patterns. In other words, the characters become things in themselves.

It is safe to say that Lu Xun's ingenious attempt to expose the problematic nature of history as written records was inspired by his tactile experience as a scribe. History has seldom been able to distance itself from writing, as is testified by the fact that a historian is called a "scribe," a cognate of "script," "scratch," and the German verb "schreiben" (to write) among others. If historic discourse is always mediated, it is mediated first of all through the very material instability of writing. The May Fourth era gave rise to widespread distrust of established narratives of history, with Lu Xun as a leading voice. However, few have acknowledged the irony that such distrust came precisely through tactile contact with history's material texture. Steeped in the script's uncanny opaqueness, Lu Xun was inevitably exposed to the inauthenticity of historic discourses. If traditional Chinese morality is a form of cannibalism in "A Madman's Diary," this exposure is accomplished through none other than the "mad" man's gaze, deflected and retained on the surface of written history, with all its abject obscurity.

Vocalizing the Dead

Along with visual alienation of the script, there is another way to circumvent thinking in the process of writing, namely by audial means, which the Dadaists experimented with using sound poems. And audial experiences are more advanced in their interiority than visual ones. After dissolving the script as a system of symbols and tropological substitutions, if the scribe wants to push the tactile engagement with texts further into the intimate, bodily realm, then the farthest point one can reach is the complete transformation of texts from tropological substitutions, through speech acts, back to writing's corporeal origin, namely the *voice*. Within the cold textual objects as abstract symbols, the pulsating vocal cords are waiting to be heard.

Not by coincidence, this transformation is present in another of Lu Xun's fictional works, the apocalyptically harrowing "Epitaph," a prose poem in *Wild Grass*. Before analyzing this horrifying piece in full, it is necessary to take a look at its connection with Lu Xun's textual scholarship, namely the collecting and editing of the Six Dynasties' epitaphs.

Among Lu Xun's transcribing work is the unfinished *Liu Chao muzhi mulu* (Catalogue of Six Dynasties epitaphs), together with individual cases of philological

research on epitaphs, such as “Gong mu kao” (An investigation of Gong’s epitaph), “Xu Fazhi mu kao” (An investigation of Xu Fazhi’s epitaph), “Lü Chao muzhimin ba” (Epilogue to Lü Chao’s epitaph), and others. Due to the fragmentary and blemished state of the stones or rubbings, much in these epitaphs is unintelligible, and these short notes by Lu Xun contain no more than extremely cautious guesswork, as well as accurate (but dry) editorial suggestions about the original characters.

These epitaphs of the Six Dynasties (220 or 222–589), like most epitaphs in the classical Chinese tradition, are typically brief biographies, though some of them have a verse attached at the end called *Ming* 銘. As a result, they are read and studied mostly for their historic, documentary, and biographical value rather than as poetic works. They are usually inscribed on stone tablets buried in front of tombs, thus are not to be confused with epitaphs inscribed on headstones. In this way, the Chinese epitaph is distinctively different from some of its European counterparts, which—with their utilization of the voice and the bidirectional act of reading as key elements in the genre—have acquired an additional poetic dimension, manifesting itself not only in literature but also in the visual arts. Two outstanding examples that represent and consciously reflect upon the literary and artistic aspects of epitaphs in the European tradition are William Wordsworth’s series of essays on epitaphs and Nicolas Poussin’s two paintings sharing the same title, *Et in Arcadia Ego* (The Arcadian Shepherds).

As has been mentioned, the invocation of the human voice is the most striking rhetorical tool used by the European epitaph. This is shown in the ideal *gestalt* of an epitaph that Wordsworth emphasizes in his essay:

We might ruminare upon the beauty which the monuments, thus placed, must have borrowed from the surrounding images of nature—from the trees, the wild flowers, from a stream running perhaps within sight or hearing, from the beaten road stretching its weary length hard by. Many tender similitudes must these objects have presented to the mind of the traveller leaning upon one of the tombs, or reposing in the coolness of its shade, whether he had halted from weariness or in compliance with the invitation, “Pause, Traveller!” so often found upon the monuments. And to its epitaph also must have been supplied strong appeals to visible appearances or immediate impressions, lively and affecting analogies of life as a journey . . . These, and similar suggestions, must have given, formerly, to the language of the senseless stone a voice enforced and endeared by the benignity of that Nature with which it was in unison.²⁵

Clearly all these aspects of the tranquil and idyllic environment recommended by Wordsworth serve the same purpose: to give voice to the epitaph inscribed on the tombstone. In this way, the text not only lies by the roadside, passively waiting to be read, but transforms itself into an active force, a speech act that *halts* the passersby.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, “Upon Epitaphs,” in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, vol. II: Aesthetical and Literary* (New York: AMS Press, 1967), 31–32.

Poussin's two paintings, on the other hand, visualize two major interpretations of the Latin motto "Et in Arcadia Ego," actually representing the two expressive possibilities of epitaphs in general. The gloomy, dramatic, and deliberately unbalanced baroque painting of 1627 interprets the epitaph as a horrifying utterance by Death, who halts and haunts the passersby, reminding them that "even in Arcady I, Death, hold sway."²⁶ The much more famous 1637–38 painting, now on display in the Louvre, is of a tranquilly classical style, representing the epitaph as consoling words spoken by the deceased, buried under the tombstone: "I, too, lived in Arcady where you now live; I, too, enjoyed the pleasures which you now enjoy."²⁷

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these two works play an important role in the movements that are now part of modern Western intellectual history. Wordsworth's essays are the subject of Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-facement," one of an important series of essays in the Deconstruction Movement, while Poussin's painting is the subject of Erwin Panofsky's "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," which helps define methods in iconology in the first half of the twentieth century.

In both cases, epitaph takes the form not just of a text, but particularly of an *inscription* that is intended to be read aloud. As such, epitaph as a text is considered complete only when complemented with a voice. What is so crucially present in these epitaphs is their desire to reach beyond being an inscription, to become a voice that actually *speaks*. A natural result is that epitaph becomes associated with the rhetorical device "prosopopoeia," where a person speaks while assuming a different identity. In other words, it is a kind of role-play, wherein speech is masked by another face ("prosopopoeia" has its root in *πρόσωπο*, the Greek word for both "face" and "person"). The surface of the tombstone becomes a face, assuming the identity of the deceased; it speaks though the inscription, which is the epitaph.

This speech involves two further peculiarities. First, as Freud remarks, "writing was in its origin the voice of an absent person."²⁸ Mladen Dolar, quoting Jacques Lacan's reversed interpretation of the classical proverb "*Verba volant, scripta manent*" (spoken words fly away), argues that "it is only the voice which remains there, on the spot where . . . it is born and where it dies at the same moment . . . while the letters fly around and, by flying, form the whirlwind of history."²⁹ Writing inherently contains a lapse in time, a deferral, marking the absence of the speaker. In Jesper Svenbro's words, "What is written is present, the writer is absent At the moment of reading, the reader finds himself before a written word that is present in the absence of the writer.

²⁶ Erwin Panofsky, "Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition," In *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 257.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, James Strachey, trans. (New York: Norton, 1961), 38.

²⁹ Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 59.

Just as he foresees his own absence, the writer foresees the presence of his writing before the reader."³⁰

What makes epitaph even more peculiar and difficult to pin down is the fact that the speaker, who makes the speech when he or she is alive, is supposed to be dead, buried in the grave under the tombstone, when the words are being read. Alternatively, it is written by the living who imagine a speech made by the dead when he or she was still alive. It is an imaginary speech from across the threshold.

The second indication of this process points to an intense play of power dynamics. Svenbro again notes that

the writer, who is present only at the action of producing the written statement and soon disappears for good, has foreseen the vocalization of his writing. Absent as he is, he depends on the voice that the reader will lend him. By writing, he deferred the production of his speech in sound . . . The most [the writing] can do is provoke a reading, prompt its own rendering in sound, get the reader's voice going—the voice that . . . is part of the text. For the text to achieve complete fulfillment, the reader must lend his voice to the writing (or, in the last analysis, to the writer).³¹

In other words, by borrowing the reader's voice, the epitaph transforms itself into the dictator of speech. The active reader turns out to be nothing but a voice, a mere instrument of the text. The defining characteristic of epitaph is thus its goal toward a speech act that reaches beyond the flat surface of text to cause an actual consequence, exercising a real power that halts the passersby, reminds them, and even reprimands them, with their very own voice.

As far as I know, there is no epitaphic tradition in China that is similar to the one described above, but with the striking "Epitaph" in *Wild Grass*, Lu Xun brings into life what amounts to a response to this tradition, combining it with his experience as a scribe of obscure tombstone inscriptions:

I dreamed of myself facing a tombstone, reading its inscriptions. That tombstone seemed made of sandstone, with lots of blemishes and mosses growing on it. Only a few words remained—

. . . Catching a cold during fervent singing;
Seeing abyss in the sky.
Seeing nothingness in all eyes;
Redeemed in hopelessness.

. . . There is a wandering spirit, which transforms itself into a long snake; there are poisonous teeth in its mouth. It doesn't use them to bite others, but bites itself, until it dies.

. . . Go away! . . .

³⁰ Jesper Svenbro, *Phrasikleia: An Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 44.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

I turned to the back, and saw the lonely grave; there wasn't any grass or tree on it; it was crumbling. Right away I saw the corpse through the big crack; its chest and stomach all broken, without heart or liver. But its face showed neither sadness nor joy, only smoke-like haziness.

In suspicion and horror, before I could turn back, I already spotted the fragmented words on the back of the tombstone—

. . . Picking one's own heart to eat, hoping to know one's own taste. So intense is the pain, how can one's own taste be known?

. . . With the pain reducing, eating it slowly. But the heart is already old, how can one's own taste be known?

. . . Answer me. Otherwise, go away! . . .

As I was about to leave, the corpse already sat up in the grave, and with its lips unmoved, uttered this—

"When I become dust, you will see me smile!"

I rushed away, and didn't dare to look back, fearing it would follow.

June 17, 1925³²

This piece is extremely rich in allusions. For example, the phrase "all eyes" (*yiqie yan* 一切眼) likely comes from Buddhist scriptures, while "seeing nothingness in all eyes" contains such complex references to Buddhist philosophy that it merits a separate study. Self-cannibalism is also a prominent theme in Lu Xun's writing, while the image of the snake reminds us of a line from the already quoted preface to *Outcry*: "this loneliness grows day by day, like a huge poisonous snake, entangling my soul."³³ One may also make a mythological connection with the Chinese goddess Nüwa in snake form, about whom Lu Xun wrote the story "Repairing Heaven" (*Bu Tian* 补天).

And yet all these allusions are contained within the dreaming framework of the "I" reading two obscure epitaphs on both sides of the tombstone. In both cases, what initially seems like a neutral reporting of the words abruptly turns into a shocking imperative. In the latter case, what one would think of as a rhetorical question—"but the heart is already old, how can one's own taste be known?"—is actually a real question, and the text sternly demands an answer from the reader. Here, we see how the horrified reader, by unwittingly lending his voice to the epitaphs, is deprived of his control over the situation, becoming the subject of interrogation by the dead.

In this piece, one can further interpret the reading of the epitaph as hallucination, as Nicholas Kaldis does in his reading, distinguishing between the dream self and the corpse. He insightfully observes that "the mouth and lips of the corpse do not move as it speaks."³⁴ But contrary to his interpretation that "its voice is actually in the mind of

³² Lu Xun, *Ye cao* 野草, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 2, 207–8.

³³ Lu Xun, "Nahan zixu" 呐喊自序, in *Lu Xun quanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2005), vol. 1, 439.

³⁴ Nicholas A. Kaldis, *The Chinese Prose Poem: A Study of Lu Xun's "Wild Grass"* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014), 229.

the dream self,"³⁵ I argue that the voice is not imagined, but has indeed been pronounced, and by no one but the dream self. The trick lies in the dead's ingenious borrowing of the reader/dream self's voice. What is more, the former takes over the latter's control of the situation as well.

This horrifying moment, in a striking manner, destabilizes what Adriana Cavarero calls "the theater of consciousness," in which "the natural relationality of the vocal . . . is preemptively neutralized in favor of a silent and internal voice that produces a self-referential type of relation, an ego-logical relation between the self and itself."³⁶ With the help of the epitaph's ability to unite the living and the dead, the absent and the present, Lu Xun skillfully twists an ordinary act of reading into an evocation of the dead's voice. Initially imprisoned in the script, this voice is not neutral, abstract, or nonphysical anymore, but instead threatens to materialize by turning itself into a speech act. When *read* as an epitaph, it becomes so powerful and present that it bursts forth from the stone surface, takes control of the living reader, and eventually scares him away.

With this macabre scene, Lu Xun achieves something even more crucial: he translates the abstract script back to an individual voice that exclusively belongs to an identity. Here the script is not a vehicle for communicating shared, disembodied ideas, but a means of vocalizing something intensely personal and private.

Conclusion

In the 1934 essay "Chinese Script and Latinization," quoted at the beginning of this paper, Lu Xun notes that

every Chinese character has its own meaning. When they are used to transcribe dialects, some are used for their own meanings, but some are only borrowed for their pronunciations. So when we read them, we have to analyze which ones are used for their own meanings, which are only for their pronunciations . . . [so if the Chinese characters] only recorded sounds that had no intrinsic meaning, then there would not have been any misunderstanding.³⁷

He criticizes the Chinese script for having meanings inherent to its visual construction, causing confusion when it is used to record speech that refers to something else. In other words, the script's visual signification makes it impossible to build an exclusive relationship between script and speech. Here, Lu Xun subscribes, albeit in a very limited and quotidian sense, to the hierarchy of speech over writing. The emphasis on speech is at the heart of Lu Xun's argument to abolish the Chinese script, which he

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

³⁶ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, A. Kottman, trans. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 46.

³⁷ Lu Xun, "Hanzi he ladinghua," 585.

believed required too much effort to learn and was too inefficient in terms of transcribing speech.

If we only look to polemical essays such as this one to gain a sense of Lu Xun's ideas about the Chinese script, we would have the impression that his position was in line with the mainstream thinkers of the New Culture Movement. But as this paper demonstrates, his fictional works have some significant moments, stemming from his personal experiences and acute observations, that reveal a much more complex landscape. These writings show that the ghost of history, incarnated in the script, cannot be so easily discarded, as the reductionist essays resolutely argue. Here, the hand, the gaze, and the voice—all of which are corporeal elements—constitute the complexity of the script that cannot be fully grasped without careful consideration of its materiality and corporeality. It is this very materiality that explains the persistence of the script and the difficulty of abolishing it. In other words, the problems of the Chinese script cannot be easily explained away by blaming its being non-phonetic.

Cavarero notes that although Derrida shows “the phonocentric order of metaphysics,” he only reserves the task to destabilize this order for writing.³⁸ This is why Cavarero finds it necessary to add another dimension, the “vocal phenomenology of uniqueness,” which she argues deserves a share in the task.³⁹ In a sense, Lu Xun makes use of both concepts in his fictional world to achieve both dimensions: Kong Yiji's skillful hand alienates the script to the point of being absurd; the madman's gaze, in its search for intelligible signs, turns normal scripts into a kind of “indefinite deferral of one sign to another”;⁴⁰ and the “I” unwittingly realizes the unique identity of the dead by waking up the corporeal voice within the epitaph and disrupting the normal order of reading.

These moments in Lu Xun's literary works also reflect another aspect symptomatic of modernity in China: The distrust of the script appeared at a moment when the whole system of meaning was in danger of breaking down due to the clash between tradition and modernity. Lu Xun, with his depiction of noncommunication in literature, was one of the few who sensitively captured this moment. Today, no one would take the May Fourth proposals to abolish the Chinese script seriously. For us, this argument—not just by Lu Xun, but by others as well—represented only a stage in history that has fortunately passed, but the ghostly presence of the script described in Lu Xun's fictions remains and will potentially return to haunt us at any time. It indeed comes back at the end of the 1980s, when Xu Bing's *Tianshu* or *Book from the Sky* reflected another moment of crisis. But some seventy years before Xu Bing, Lu Xun unwittingly (or perhaps consciously) created a piece of performing art with *chao gubei* that continues to represent a no less profound reflection upon the complexity of the Chinese script.

³⁸ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, 214.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.