

# On the Spiritual Connection Between Characters in Lu Xun's Works and Wei-Jin Literati

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## Abstract

Throughout his life, Lu Xun had a deep affection for Wei-Jin culture. The intellectual traits and spiritual core of Wei-Jin literati profoundly influenced his creative works. The "madman" and "loner" characters in Lu Xun's writings share similarities with the eccentric and desolate scholars of the Wei-Jin period, both in their external manifestations and ideological cores. The spiritual connection between them, transcending time and space, reflects Lu Xun's strong "Wei-Jin complex" and his courage to confront reality head-on.

## Keywords

Lu Xun; Wei-Jin literati; spiritual connection.

## 1. Introduction

The Wei-Jin period is famously known as a "chaotic era" in Chinese history. During this tumultuous time, Wei-Jin literati drank, engaged in pure conversation, indulged in eccentric behavior, and immersed themselves in nature to dilute their inner pain. As one of the founders of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun lived and created during a time when old and new cultures intersected and clashed, leading to his literary thought and creative practice being deeply influenced by both Chinese and Western cultures. Lu Xun had a lifelong passion for Wei-Jin culture, systematically collecting, organizing, and studying various ancient texts and historical materials from the Wei-Jin period. His thoughts and works were deeply imprinted with the marks of Wei-Jin culture. Liu Bannong once presented Lu Xun with a couplet: "Theories of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, the prose of Wei-Jin," which Lu Xun acknowledged, further demonstrating the depth of Wei-Jin culture's influence on him. In his creative practice, Lu Xun's writing style and tone often bore the shadow of Wei-Jin prose, and the characters in his works transcended time, establishing a profound spiritual connection with Wei-Jin literati.

In previous research on the relationship between Lu Xun and Wei-Jin culture, various angles have been explored, such as the connection between Lu Xun's spiritual temperament and Wei-Jin demeanor [1], the commonalities between Lu Xun and Wei-Jin literati [2], the influence of Wei-Jin culture on Lu Xun's spiritual structure [3], and specialized studies on Lu Xun's "Wei-Jin Demeanor and the Relationship Between Literature, Medicine, and Wine" [4]. However, while the connection between Lu Xun's characters and Wei-Jin culture has been touched upon in these studies, it has often been limited to specific sections or briefly mentioned in passing. The few existing articles on this topic have focused on specific characters [5][6], and there has yet to be a comprehensive discussion. Therefore, this paper will attempt to explore the spiritual connection between Lu Xun's characters and Wei-Jin literati by focusing on the characters in Lu Xun's works.

## 2. Wei-Jin Eccentric Scholars and the "Madman" in the "Iron House"

The "madman" image has a long tradition in Chinese culture. Confucius once said, "If I cannot find a person who follows the Middle Way to associate with, I would rather be with the mad and the eccentric. The mad are ambitious, and the eccentric are principled." Li Bai wrote, "I am a madman of Chu, singing of the phoenix and laughing at Confucius." Qian Zhongshu also analyzed the madness of Chinese literati in his works: "Ji Kang and Ruan Ji were both mad scholars, but Ruan Ji's madness was a way to avoid disaster, while Ji Kang's madness was a rebellion against the world, thus inviting disaster" [7]. This shows that although the "madman" in Lu Xun's works is a fictional character, he embodies the deep cultural connotations of traditional "mad scholars."

It is well known that Ji Kang and Ruan Ji were famous Wei-Jin literati. Although their "madness" had different characteristics, both were products of the turbulent and politically dark Wei-Jin society, representing the common spiritual state of literati of that era. The Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties period was a famously chaotic era in Chinese history. After more than four hundred years of unified Han rule, the Han dynasty gradually declined and eventually collapsed, ushering in a three-hundred-year "dark age." During this period, political power changed frequently, wars broke out repeatedly, and famines and plagues threatened the lives of the people. As literary creators, Wei-Jin literati faced not only social turmoil but also the strict hierarchical system, limited upward mobility, and oppressive political atmosphere, making their political situation even more difficult. Thus, they adopted an outwardly carefree attitude, expressing the contradiction between their ideals and reality through "madness." They rejected secular etiquette, pursued freedom and individuality, drank, took drugs, and indulged in eccentric behavior to alleviate their inner depression. Although the external manifestations of Wei-Jin eccentric scholars were madness, detachment, eccentricity, and chivalry, their core was deep emotion, sincerity, and a strong rebellious tendency, using a unique way to voice their discontent with the dark reality.

Before writing "Diary of a Madman," Lu Xun experienced a decade-long period of silence. A decade earlier, while studying in Japan, he had advocated for a literary movement but received no response. He and his companions attempted to launch the magazine "New Life," but it ultimately failed. These failures caused great torment for the once passionate Lu Xun, and the grim political situation in China further exacerbated his spiritual pain. As a result, he "used various methods to numb his soul... immersed himself among the people... and returned to ancient times" [8]. Clearly, "returning to ancient times" alleviated Lu Xun's loneliness and pain. In Wei-Jin literature, he saw a similarly chaotic and dark political situation and sharp social contradictions, leading to a "resonance of the chaotic era." The period in which Lu Xun lived and created was not only a time of political upheaval but also a period of cultural collision between the old and the new, bearing many similarities to the chaotic and dark background of the Wei-Jin period. He once described Chinese society at the time as an "iron house". However, the "May Fourth" New Culture Movement gave Lu Xun hope. In the preface to "Call to Arms," he wrote, "Yes, although I have my own convictions, when it comes to hope, it cannot be denied, because hope lies in the future. It cannot be disproven by my certainty of its impossibility" and "Sometimes I still cannot help but shout a few times to comfort the warriors running in the wilderness, so that they do not fear to charge forward" [8]. Subsequently, Lu Xun wrote "Diary of a Madman." The "madman" running amok in the "iron house," both in external manifestation and ideological core, seems like a reincarnation of Ji Kang and Ruan Ji, sharing a profound spiritual connection with the Wei-Jin literati of a thousand years ago.

The "madman" in "Diary of a Madman" appears to be a real paranoid schizophrenic. His speech and behavior exhibit the characteristics of a paranoid patient, always believing that people around him are plotting against him. The Zhao family's dog looking at him twice, Zhao

Guiweng's strange glances, and the gossip of passersby all arouse his suspicions. Due to these unexpected behaviors, he is often ostracized and suppressed, seen as an outcast by those around him. This mirrors the external manifestations of Wei-Jin eccentric scholars. Although Wei-Jin literati did not suffer from actual mental illness, they exhibited many shocking behaviors. For example, the famous scholar Liu Ling "stripped naked and walked around his house." When others mocked him, he replied, "I take heaven and earth as my house, and my room as my pants. Why are you all entering my pants?" [9], showcasing the Wei-Jin literati's defiance of etiquette and their pursuit of individuality. Similar to the ideological core of Wei-Jin literati, the "madman" created by Lu Xun, though outwardly insane, is essentially a clear awakening man, a rebel and a "soldier" of anti-feudal ideological enlightenment. He once "kicked over Mr. Gu Jiu's old ledger" [8], where the "old ledger" symbolizes the long-standing feudal rule and feudal ethics in China. Here, the "madman" already demonstrates a skeptical and disdainful attitude toward feudal culture. The "madman" continuously observes his surroundings and people, begins to study and reflect, and eventually discovers the "cannibalism" nature of feudal ethics: "eating people." After awakening, he realizes that he himself is one of the "eaten" and that his brother is one of the "eaters." He immediately takes action, urging the "eaters" to "repent sincerely! Understand that in the future, there will be no place for those who eat people in this world" [8], and questions, "Has it always been this way, and is it right?" Finally, he begins to reflect on and deny himself, realizing that he may have also "eaten" his younger sister, and cries out, "Save the children." The thought process of Lu Xun's "madman" vividly illustrates the ideological liberation journey of an awakened irradiator. Though mentally insane, he dares to deny everything, fearlessly reflecting on and exposing reality, criticizing and subverting the old feudal ethics. Among Wei-Jin literati, Ji Kang, with his "upright and vicious disposition," was considered by Qian Zhongshu to possess "rebellious madness" and was the most "madman"-like among the literati. He tried to break free from the shackles of ritual, publicly declaring that he "rejects Tang and Wu, and belittles Zhou and Confucius," expressing his disdain for orthodox ideology and pursuit of independent personality, aligning perfectly with the "madman" image created by Lu Xun.

When "Diary of a Madman" was written, the "May Fourth" New Culture Movement was in full swing. The traitor represented by the "madman," such as Xia Yu in "Medicine" and the madman in "The Eternal Lamp," carried Lu Xun's hope, scurried in the "iron house" of Chinese society, aiming to awaken the numbed masses and rebuild the spirit of the Chinese nation. Their rebellious appearance and ideological liberation have resonated with Wei and Jin literati across history, showing a profound spiritual connection.

### **3. Wei-Jin Desolate Literati and the "Loner" Who "Wakes Up from a Dream with No Path to Follow"**

When discussing Wei-Jin literati, Li Zehou once said in his book "The Path of Beauty" that "although their outward appearance was adorned with disdain for worldly affairs and free and easy, their inner hearts were more intensely persisting life, very painful, which constitutes the Wei Jin style of the inner profound side" [10]. Indeed, during the turbulent Wei-Jin period, how could the literati truly be so carefree and at ease? Correspondingly, after the vigorous "May Fourth" movement receded, Lu Xun fell into his second period of disappointment and pain following the failure of the Xinhai Revolution. If Lu Xun's creation of "Diary of a Madman" showed "some brightness," then his later works such as "In the Wine Shop" and "The Loner" displayed "a cooling of fighting spirit," expressing doubt and disappointment in initiate, and resonating deeply with the inner world of Wei-Jin literati.

First, in "In the Wine Shop," when the first-person narrator "I" returns to his hometown after a long absence, he unexpectedly meets his old friend Lü Weifu in a wine shop. The author

describes Lü Weifu as follows: "Looking closely at his appearance, his beard and hair were still disheveled; his long, pale face had become thinner. His spirit was calm, or perhaps dispirited; the eyes beneath his thick, dark eyebrows had lost their sparkle" [11]. Who would have thought that this man, who once went to the Town God's Temple to pull out the statues' beards and spent days discussing methods to reform China, was once so vigorous and sharp? Now, he had become "perfunctory, vague," no longer possessing the vigour of the past. Wang Yao was the first to point out the connection between Lü Weifu and Wei-Jin literati, noting that Lü Weifu's "dispirited" and "dejected," especially his "love of wine and happy-go-lucky mood," were quite similar to Liu Ling [12]. Lu Xun once said, "Liu Ling drank until he was reeking of alcohol, had someone carry a shovel behind him, and said, 'Bury me when I die.' Although he thought himself free and easy, this could only deceive the extremely naive" [8]. Behind this seemingly calm and unrestrained behavior was actually a strong hatred of the dark reality and nothing can be done of his own dilemma. Lü Weifu was the same. As a typical intellectual after the "May Fourth" movement's decline, enlighteners who had experienced the vigorous ideological liberation movement found themselves in a new spiritual dilemma. On one hand, they advocated new ideas and longed for freedom and happiness; on the other hand, they had to compromise with the deeply rooted old traditions. This separation of spirit and flesh brought them great spiritual pain. As a former traitor, Lü Weifu was aware of his changes. He used the metaphor of a fly flying in a small circle and returning to its original spot to describe his life, showing a self-mocking attitude toward his current decadent and nihilistic attitude towards life, and deepening the tragic color that connected him with the desolate literati of Wei-Jin.

Next, in "The Loner," compared to "In the Wine Shop," it more deeply shows Lu Xun after the "May Fourth", "the Lotus Halberd alone hesitation" of confusion and despair. In the novel, through the first-person narrator's perspective, Lu Xun conveys the judgment and evaluation of the surrounding environment on Wei Lianshu: "They say he's a little weird," "Not like any of us," "An outlier indeed" [11], which connects with the eccentric image of Wei-Jin literati. The reasons why Wei Lianshu is regarded as "different" include "He studied zoology, but became a history teacher in a middle school. Always indifferent to people, but often like to meddle in other people's business; Often said that the family should be broken, but as soon as he received his salary, he would send it to his grandmother without a day's delay" [11], and so on. At the beginning of the novel, Wei Lianshu returns to his hometown for his grandmother's funeral. During the funeral ceremony, everyone is weeping and bowing, but he does not shed a single tear. When the ceremony ends and everyone is about to leave, "Suddenly he began to cry, then lost his voice, and at once became a long howl, like that of a wounded Wolf, when it howls in the wilderness at night, with grief mixed with anger and sorrow" [11]. Wei Lianshu's reaction to the death of a loved one forms a spatio-temporal comparison with Wei-Jin literati Ruan Ji. When Ruan Ji heard of his mother's death, "he was playing Weiqi; his opponent asked to stop, but Ruan Ji insisted on finishing the game," showing no sign of grief. However, afterward, he "drank two buckets of wine, let out a loud cry, and vomited blood several times" [13]. Clearly, both are deeply emotional people who disdain external etiquette, refuse to follow procedural red tape, and only follow their own hearts, freely expressing their true feelings. In fact, Wei Lianshu's deep feeling and truth beneath his weird exterior are also shown in many other parts of the text. For example, after his grandmother's death, he burns most of the household items for her, gives the rest to the female servants, and lends out the house. He is close to the frustrated person and innocent children, and publishes discussions on current affairs in newspapers. However, the oppression of society, the shattering of ideals, and the intolerance of reality distorts the awakened cynical intellectual. He begins to consciously practice all that you previously hated and opposed, and calls himself a true loser. In this fanatical revenge, he chooses the extreme way of suicide to fight against the hopeless reality and goes on the road of self-destruction.

Both Lü Weifu and Wei Lianshu are the epitome of the intellectuals who fell into despair after the "May Fourth" movement's decline. They show deep inner consistency with the desolate literati of the Wei-Jin period. "The dissolute of Ji Kang and Ruan Ji was all for a purpose, either to avoid disaster or to express cynicism. The Verde is not Verde for Verde, also do not want to get the high name of Verde" [14], and Lü Weifu and Wei Lianshu are no different, appearing "perfunctory, vague" on the surface but there's "grief mixed with anger and sadness inside." This is the existential tragedy of intellectuals in a chaotic era who "wake up from a dream with no path to follow," and it is also the emotional resonance shared across two eras.

#### 4. Lu Xun's Wei-Jin Complex and "A Different Way of Fighting"

Hu Feng once recalled that Lu Xun told him about the novel "The Loner," saying, "That is about myself" [15]. Indeed, most of the characters in Lu Xun's works reflect Lu Xun's disclosure and thinking about his own predicament, and shows the struggle of his innermost thoughts. In fact, the spiritual connection between Lu Xun's characters and Wei-Jin literati reveals the profound spiritual resonance between Lu Xun and Wei-Jin literati, showcasing his strong "Wei Jin complex."

Lu Xun's connection with Wei-Jin culture was extremely deep. As early as when he studied at the Sanwei Bookstore, he was influenced by his teacher Shou Jingwu. "Mr. Shou often hand-copied classical literature of Han, Wei and six dynasties, but Lu Xun also enjoyed reading them, often neglecting his regular studies. His drawer was filled with novels, miscellany, classics, everything" [16]. Later, during the years between his return from Japan and the publication of "Diary of a Madman" in "New Youth," Lu Xun experienced a long period of silence. During most of this time, he was in the Shaoxing Guild Hall, copying inscriptions, mostly from Wei-Jin ancient texts such as "Ancient Novels Gleaned" and "Miscellaneous Collections of Ancient Books from Kuaiji." He also compiled "Catalog of Six Dynasties Statues" and "Catalog of Six Dynasties Tomb Names" (unfinished). Additionally, Lu Xun's diaries and friends' recollections contain many records of his research and collate of Wei-Jin texts. In September 1927, at the Guangzhou Summer Academic Lecture, Lu Xun delivered a speech titled "Wei-Jin Demeanor and the Relationship Between Literature, Medicine, and Wine." In this speech, Lu Xun deeply analyzed the social conditions and spiritual state of Wei-Jin literati, with sharp writing, to the point, pointing out the deep mechanism behind behaviors and phenomena, making it a classic in the study of Wei-Jin literature.

Lu Xun's love for Wei-Jin culture made Wei-Jin culture an important part of his intellectual source. During the May Fourth period, Liu Bannong presented Lu Xun with a couplet: "Theories of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, the prose of Wei-Jin," meaning that Lu Xun was deeply influenced by Tolstoy, Nietzsche, and Wei-Jin literati in his literature. "At the time, friends thought this couplet was very appropriate, and Lu Xun himself did not oppose" [17]. Although "Wei-Jin prose" here mainly refers to the tone and style of his essay, the spiritual connection between Lu Xun and Wei-Jin literature was also extremely close and profound. During the most painful and lonely period of his life, Lu Xun diluted his sorrow by "returning to ancient times." "Now we finally understand that the 'returning to ancient times' and 'immersing among the people' mentioned in the preface to 'Call to Arms' refer to immersing in Wei-Jin and eastern Zhejiang, forming his Wei-jin complex and Eastern Zhejiang complex; these are the roots of his life" [18].

From the creation of the "madman" image to the writing of the "loner" image, the characters in Lu Xun's works show his mood changes and mental course from the "May Fourth" new culture Movement to the "May Fourth" ebb, and these were all part of the recasting of the spirit of himself. However, while Ruan Ji once "often drove alone at will, not following the usual paths, and when the road ended, he would weep and return" [13], Lu Xun, facing the same "dead end," said, "I heard that Mr. Ruan Ji also wept and returned, but I, like at a crossroads, still step



forward and walk through the thorns" [19]. His tenacity and toughness in facing the reality, even in despair, still fighting against despair, is what makes him greater than Wei-Jin literati. He created the "madman" and the "loner" not only to express his inner feelings but also to use these characters to awaken intellectuals and citizens, fundamentally change the backward mental outlook of China. As Lu Xun deepened his understanding of Chinese history and investigated of Chinese reality, he continuously summed up the valuable experience of social revolution practice, gradually abandoned the stern temperament and decadent mood of Wei and Jin literati, cultivated his own extraordinary "tough" fighting spirit. He deeply realized the tragic fate of the literati in Wei and Jin dynasties, abandoned the old weapons, and sought "other ways of fighting", found hope from despair, fought against despair, and then created the practical road of modern intellectuals with the rebellious spirit of resisting doubt, resisting despair and resisting nihilism, which was also part of his transcendence of the literati in Wei and Jin dynasties.

## 5. Conclusion

The Wei-Jin period was an era of social turmoil and political darkness, but also a time of spiritual freedom and individual liberation. Similarly, living in the "Age of awakening," Lu Xun "returned to ancient times," resonating with the chaotic era of Wei-Jin and forming the connection of the soul with Wei-Jin literati. In fact, the eccentric and desolate literati of Wei-Jin were not two distinct groups but two sides of the same coin, showcasing the style and features of literati in that era. Similarly, whether it is the "madman" in the "iron house" or the "loner" who "wakes up from a dream with no path to follow," both reveal the real mental dilemmas faced by individuals in special historical period. Lu Xun projected his hot-blooded rebellion in the "May Fourth" period and his confused lonely pain after the "May Fourth" decline into the characters in his works, not only spanning time and space, realizing the communication between the two eras, but also penetrating the mind and completing the dialogue of two spirits.

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