

# On the Foundational Role of A Madman's Diary in Shaping the Narrative Paradigm of Modern Chinese Fiction

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## Abstract

Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary" (1918) is universally acknowledged as the genesis of modern Chinese literature. This paper argues that its significance transcends this chronological primacy, positing that the story is a foundational text that deliberately constructed a new narrative paradigm that defined Chinese literary modernity. This paradigm is characterized by a revolutionary synthesis of three elements: (1) a radical shift to subjective, psychological interiority enabled by a first-person, unreliable narrator; (2) the strategic weaponization of literary form—specifically allegory and satire—as a tool for incisive socio-cultural critique; and (3) the ideological and aesthetic championing of vernacular Chinese (baihua) over its classical counterpart (wenyan). This paper first establishes the historical and intellectual context of the New Culture and May Fourth Movements that necessitated this literary break. It then conducts a close formal and thematic analysis of the story, dissecting its "diglossic warfare" (the wenyan frame versus the baihua diary), its modernist exploration of consciousness, and its central "cannibalism" metaphor as a multi-layered deconstruction of Confucian tradition. Finally, the paper traces this paradigm's profound and enduring legacy, examining its immediate influence on May Fourth literature, its complex canonization during the Mao era, and its continued resonance in the works of contemporary authors such as Mo Yan and Yu Hua. The paper concludes that "A Madman's Diary" functions as both a national allegory and a work of world literature, whose final plea to "Save the children" remains a timeless call for humanistic renewal.

## Keywords

Lu Xun, A Madman's Diary, Modern Chinese Literature, Narrative Paradigm, New Culture Movement, Cannibalism (Allegory), Vernacular (Baihua), May Fourth Movement, Subjectivity.

## Chapter 1: A New Voice for a New China

### 1.1 Thesis Statement and Argument

Published in the May 1918 issue of *New Youth* magazine, Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary" is universally acknowledged as a watershed moment in the history of Chinese literature. It is celebrated not only for its chronological primacy as the first modern short story written in vernacular Chinese but also for its profound cultural impact. This paper argues, however, that the story's significance extends far beyond these foundational accolades. "A Madman's Diary" was not merely a pioneering work; it was a foundational text that deliberately constructed a new narrative paradigm for Chinese fiction, a paradigm that would define the trajectory of literary modernity in China for the next century. This new model is characterized by three revolutionary and interconnected shifts: first, a radical turn toward subjective, psychological

interiority, achieved through the unprecedented use of a first-person, unreliable narrator; second, the strategic weaponization of literary form—specifically allegory and satire—as a tool for incisive socio-cultural critique; and third, the ideological and aesthetic championing of vernacular Chinese (baihua) over its classical counterpart (wenyan). In synthesizing these elements, Lu Xun's story functions as both a literary artifact and a cultural "manifesto," providing the genetic code for the subsequent development of modern Chinese literature [1].

## 1.2 The "Iron House" Metaphor and the Story's Significance

To grasp the story's explosive impact, one must understand the context from which it emerged, a context Lu Xun himself famously articulated in the preface to his first collection of short stories, *Nahan* (呐喊), or *Outcry*. He described China as an "iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation". The question he posed was whether it was right to wake the sleepers, only to make them conscious of their "irretrievable doom." His ultimate decision was that if even a few could be awakened, there was still hope for the destruction of the house. "A Madman's Diary" was the first, desperate scream from within this suffocating enclosure, a shocking and deliberate attempt to awaken the sleepers to their dire predicament [2].

Its publication was a calculated act of literary and cultural iconoclasm. Appearing in *New Youth* (*Xin Qingnian*), the radical journal at the epicenter of China's intellectual ferment, the story immediately captured the zeitgeist of the burgeoning New Culture Movement. It is consistently recognized by scholars as the definitive "start of China's era of modern literature" and a "cornerstone of the New Culture Movement". The story's innovations were not an accidental evolution but a strategic synthesis of Western literary forms and a targeted rejection of Chinese tradition, meticulously designed by Lu Xun to serve the specific ideological goals of cultural revolution. Having studied Western medicine, literature, and philosophy in Japan, Lu Xun was deeply engaged with the works of Nikolai Gogol and Friedrich Nietzsche, as well as the theories of Charles Darwin. He selected the diary form from Gogol, the philosophical critique from Nietzsche, and the linguistic medium of the vernacular because they were the most potent weapons available for his project: to diagnose and treat the spiritual sickness of a nation. The new paradigm he forged was, therefore, the intended outcome of a deliberate act of literary engineering aimed at nothing less than total cultural transformation [3].

## 1.3 Outline of Chapters

This paper will trace the construction and legacy of this new narrative paradigm across five chapters. Chapter 2 will establish the historical and intellectual crucible of the early Republican era, detailing the national crisis and the revolutionary fervor of the New Culture and May Fourth Movements that necessitated such a radical literary break. Chapter 3 will conduct a close formal and thematic analysis of "A Madman's Diary" itself, dissecting its narrative architecture, its use of an unreliable narrator, its complex symbolic network, and its revolutionary deployment of language, supported by comparative data. Chapter 4 will then trace the story's profound and enduring legacy, examining its immediate influence on May Fourth literature, its complex canonization during the Mao era, and its continued resonance in the works of major contemporary authors like Mo Yan and Yu Hua. Finally, Chapter 5 will

conclude by synthesizing these findings to reaffirm the story's paradigmatic status and reflect on its timeless plea to "Save the children," a cry that continues to echo in the landscape of world literature.

## **Chapter 2: The Crucible of Modernity: Historical and Intellectual Context**

### **2.1 A Nation in Crisis: The Fall of the Qing and the Republican Era**

"A Madman's Diary" was born from a period of profound national trauma and existential crisis. The 1911 Xinhai Revolution brought an end to the Qing Dynasty, shattering over two millennia of imperial rule and ushering in the Republican era. However, the promise of a modern republic quickly dissolved into chaos. The new nation was characterized by political fragmentation, the rise of regional warlords, endemic civil unrest, and a pervasive sense of national humiliation in the face of ongoing Western and Japanese imperialism. This political failure engendered a deep disillusionment among China's intellectuals. They came to believe that merely changing political institutions was insufficient; the nation's weakness was rooted in its culture, specifically the moribund traditions of Confucianism that had governed Chinese thought and society for centuries [4]. This realization—that a true revolution had to be a cultural one—created the fertile ground for the radical intellectual movements of the 1910s and 1920s [5].

### **2.2 The New Culture and May Fourth Movements: A Call for Totalistic Iconoclasm**

The intellectual response to this national crisis coalesced into the New Culture Movement (c. 1915–1925), an ideological revolution centered around the journal *New Youth* and led by progressive thinkers such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shih, and Lu Xun himself. The movement's core objective was totalistic iconoclasm: a complete rejection of traditional Confucian culture, which reformers viewed as a system that promoted hierarchy, obedience, and social passivity, thereby stifling the individual and rendering China unable to compete in the modern world. In its place, they championed the twin ideals of "Mr. Science" (*sai xiansheng*) and "Mr. Democracy" (*de xiansheng*), believing that only through a wholesale adoption of Western thought could China be saved [6].

While the terms are often used interchangeably, the May Fourth Movement refers specifically to the student-led anti-imperialist protests that erupted in Beijing on May 4, 1919, in response to the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred German concessions in Shandong to Japan. This incident acted as a political catalyst, transforming the elite intellectual debates of the New Culture Movement into a mass political and social awakening that swept across the country. "A Madman's Diary," published exactly one year before the protests, is a powerful testament to the fact that the intellectual and cultural energies of the "May Fourth spirit" were already at a boiling point before the political trigger of 1919. The story contains all the core themes later associated with the movement: a vehement anti-Confucianism, a critique of the culture that enabled foreign oppression, a celebration of individualism, and a desperate call for a new future. It served as a literary crystallization of this revolutionary consciousness, shaping the movement as much as it was shaped by it.

## 2.3 The Politics of Language: *Wenyan* vs. *Baihua*

At the heart of the New Culture Movement's project was a revolution in language. For millennia, the official, literary, and bureaucratic language of China was *wenyan*, or classical Chinese. It was a language of the educated elite, divorced from the spoken tongue of the masses. To reformers like Hu Shih, *wenyan* was a "dead language" that not only perpetuated the feudal mindset of the Confucian classics but also served as a formidable barrier to mass literacy and national modernization [7].

In its place, they championed *baihua*, the vernacular language based on the spoken tongue. They argued that only a "living language" could produce a "living literature" and convey the new ideas of science and democracy to the broader population. Lu Xun's decision to write the main body of "A Madman's Diary" in *baihua* was therefore a profoundly political act. It was one of the very first major works of modern fiction to do so, marking a definitive and shocking break with two thousand years of literary tradition and providing a powerful model for the new national literature that the movement sought to create.

## 2.4 Foreign Winds: Western Literary and Philosophical Influences

Lu Xun's new paradigm was not created in a vacuum; it was a masterful synthesis of foreign influences, which he adapted to diagnose China's specific ailments. Three streams of Western thought were particularly crucial [8].

First was the influence of the Russian writer **Nikolai Gogol**. Lu Xun explicitly borrowed the title and the epistolary diary form from Gogol's 1835 short story, "Diary of a Madman". While Gogol's protagonist descends into a personal madness, believing himself to be the King of Spain, Lu Xun repurposed the form for social critique. Gogol's model provided the perfect narrative vehicle: a subjective, first-person account from a marginalized figure whose "madness" serves as a grotesque mirror, revealing the deeper absurdity and inhumanity of the supposedly sane society around him.

Second was the German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche**. Lu Xun's early essays show a deep engagement with Nietzschean thought, particularly the ideas presented in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. This provided the story's philosophical core. The Madman embodies the Nietzschean rebel who breaks with a decadent "slave morality"—in this case, Confucianism—and calls for the emergence of a new kind of human being. His final vision of "real men" (*zhen de ren*) who do not eat others is a clear parallel to Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (Overman). Lu Xun's very choice of the character *kuang* (狂) for "mad" is telling; as scholar Tang Xiaobing notes, *kuang* carries connotations of a Nietzschean, defiant wildness, distinct from the more clinical term for insanity, *feng* (瘋) [9].

Finally, the story is infused with the logic of **Social Darwinism**, influenced by thinkers like T. H. Huxley, whose work Lu Xun had encountered in Japan. The Madman's argument to his brother in the tenth diary entry is explicitly evolutionary. He frames cannibalism as a primitive, savage practice that civilized humans must overcome, just as reptiles evolved into higher life forms. He argues that those who refuse to change will be eradicated like wild animals. This framing lent the New Culture Movement's attack on tradition the weight of

scientific inevitability, portraying cultural change as a necessary step in the evolution and survival of the Chinese nation.

## Chapter 3: The Architecture of a Mad Consciousness: Narrative Form and Symbolic Structure

### 3.1 The Fractured Form: Frame Narrative and Diglossic Warfare

The narrative architecture of “A Madman’s Diary” is a masterclass in formal innovation, designed to embody the story’s central ideological conflict. The work is a framed narrative, split into two linguistically and tonally distinct parts. It opens with a brief preface written in elegant, formal classical Chinese (*wenyan*). The narrator of this preface presents himself as a detached, scholarly observer who, upon visiting old friends, is shown the diary of the younger brother. He explains that the brother had suffered from a “persecution complex” but has since “recovered” and departed to take up an official post, leaving the diary behind for “medical research”. This classical frame immediately establishes the perspective of the “sane,” traditional world, which pathologizes the diary’s contents as the ravings of a sick mind [10].

The story then abruptly shifts. The body of the text consists of thirteen diary entries written in raw, urgent, and emotionally charged vernacular Chinese (*baihua*). This stark linguistic divide is not merely a stylistic choice but a deliberate act of “diglossic warfare”. The classical language of the Confucian establishment—the language of the oppressor—is used to frame, contain, and ultimately dismiss the vernacular cry of the victim. However, this binary is subtly complicated. As scholar Lena Rydholm points out, the preface contains the Sino-Japanese loanword for paranoia (*hakugaikyō*), suggesting that the “sane” narrator is not a pure traditionalist but a modern man himself, fluent in the language of Western psychology. This ambiguity hints that the two narrators may be two facets of a single, conflicted modern consciousness, and that the entire text is a unified, if internally fractured, critique of tradition.

### 3.2 The Vision of the Unreliable: Subjectivity and Modernist Consciousness

Lu Xun’s choice of a first-person diarist was a radical departure from the narrative conventions of classical Chinese fiction. Whereas great novels like *Dream of the Red Chamber* employed an omniscient, third-person perspective to survey a vast social landscape, “A Madman’s Diary” plunges the reader into the claustrophobic, paranoid, and intensely subjective consciousness of a single individual. This “I-narration” was unprecedented in Chinese literature and proved to be a powerful tool for exploring psychological interiority and social alienation [11].

The central irony of the story is that the Madman, while ostensibly an “unreliable” narrator, is the only character who perceives the horrifying truth of his “man-eat-man” society. His paranoia is not a delusion but a form of heightened perception. He embodies a “modernist sensibility” that pierces the placid surface of Confucian benevolence to see the cannibalistic reality lurking beneath. His madness, therefore, becomes a form of profound clarity in a world built on the collective delusion of civility. The thirteen diary entries meticulously trace the progression of this terrible awakening. The journey begins with a vague, unsettling suspicion triggered by the moonlight and the hostile gaze of a dog, escalates into horrifying certainty as he deciphers the hidden meaning of the Confucian classics, and culminates in a desperate,

revolutionary hope for the future. This carefully structured psychological development reveals the Madman not as a chaotic lunatic, but as a tragic prophet whose consciousness is being systematically broken by the weight of his discovery [12].

The following tables provide a structured analysis of the story's narrative innovations and symbolic system, highlighting its paradigmatic break from classical tradition.

Table 3.1: Comparative Analysis of Narrative Conventions

| <i>Narrative Feature</i> | <i>Classical Paradigm<br/>(Dream of the Red Chamber)</i>  | <i>Modern Paradigm (A Madman's Diary)</i>   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Point of View</i>     | Primarily omniscient third-person, with a complex frame story involving a sentient stone.                                 | First-person subjective and unreliable, filtered through a diary format within a classical frame.   |
| <i>Language</i>          | Written vernacular (baihua) dialogue, but within a narrative prose still heavily influenced by classical aesthetics.      | Deliberate diglossic conflict between classical (wenyan) preface and vernacular (baihua) diary.   |
| <i>Characterization</i>  | Detailed psychological realism within a large ensemble cast, exploring nuanced social relations and karmic fate.          | Intense focus on the singular, alienated consciousness of one protagonist; other characters are largely symbolic archetypes (oppressors, victims) . |
| <i>Structure</i>         | Episodic, sprawling, following the rise and fall of a clan over many years; often with a predestined, cyclical framework. | Fragmented, compressed, and intensely linear, tracing a rapid psychological descent/ascent over a short period.                                     |
| <i>Thematic Focus</i>    | Exploration of Buddhist/Daoist themes, love, loss, and the transient nature of wealth within a detailed social tapestry.  | Direct, allegorical critique of the entire social/cultural system (Confucianism) as fundamentally dehumanizing and “cannibalistic”.                 |

Table 3.2: Psychological and Symbolic Progression in the Diary

| <i>Diary Entry</i> | <i>Key Event / Observation</i>    | <i>Psychological State</i>              | <i>Key Symbol Encountered</i> |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>I-II</i>        | Sees the moon; notices suspicious | Initial awakening, paranoia, suspicion. | Moonlight, Dog, Eyes.         |



|                |   |   |                            |
|----------------|---|---|----------------------------|
|                | looks from villagers, children, and Zhao's dog.   |   |                            |
| <b>III</b>     | Reads "Eat people!" between the lines of Confucian classics.  | Terrifying certainty, historical realization.                     | Ancient Texts.             |
| <b>IV-VII</b>  | Suspects his food is human flesh; confronts the doctor; recalls story of a man eaten in Wolf Cub Village. | Fear of immediate danger, conspiracy extends to family.           | Fish, Doctor, Wolf.        |
| <b>VIII-IX</b> | Tries to reason with a young man who defends tradition ("It has always been so").                         | Frustration, sense of isolation, deepening social critique.       | The Complacent Youth.      |
| <b>X</b>       | Confronts his brother with evolutionary theory; is locked away.   | Revolutionary fervor, attempt to enlighten, ultimate suppression. | Brother as Chief Cannibal. |
| <b>XI-XII</b>  | Realizes he may have unwittingly eaten his own sister's flesh.  | Crushing guilt, self-implication, despair.                        | The Consumed Sister.       |
| <b>XIII</b>    | Final plea: "Perhaps there are still children who have not eaten men? Save the children..."               | Desperate hope, shift from self-preservation to future salvation. | The Uncorrupted Child.     |

### 3.3 The Allegory of Consumption: Deconstructing "Cannibalism"

The story's enduring power lies in its central metaphor: cannibalism. This is not merely a shocking image but a multi-layered allegory for the systemic violence of traditional Chinese culture.

First and foremost, "cannibalism" is a direct and blistering attack on the "cannibalistic feudal society" and its Confucian underpinnings. The Madman's claim that China has a "four thousand years of man-eating history" is a transparent reference to the long reign of Confucian ethics. By discovering the hidden injunction to "Eat people!" within the classical texts that preach "benevolence, righteousness, and morality," the Madman performs a radical act of interpretive rebellion. He exposes the revered classics as a facade for a system that consumes individuality, enforces brutal hierarchies, and demands the sacrifice of the young for the sake of patriarchal authority—a critique aimed squarely at concepts like filial piety.

On a broader social and political level, the act of “eating” symbolizes all forms of oppression: the strong devouring the weak, landlords exploiting tenants, and a rigid, conformist society crushing any spark of dissent. The pervasive fear of being eaten reflects the atmosphere of mutual suspicion that Lu Xun believed paralyzed Chinese society, preventing any collective action for change. This powerful metaphor is made all the more potent by its grounding in literal historical practices. Lu Xun was well aware of instances of survival cannibalism during famines, as well as ritualized acts of revenge or medicinal cannibalism, such as the case of the revolutionary Xu Xilin, whose heart and liver were eaten by Qing officials. This historical resonance prevents the allegory from becoming purely abstract, rooting its horror in tangible reality [13].

This central metaphor is supported by a network of secondary symbols. The **moonlight** that appears in the first entry, which the Madman has not seen for thirty years, symbolizes the sudden, shocking moment of enlightenment that jolts him out of his spiritual slumber. The **dogs, wolves, and hyenas** that populate his thoughts serve to equate the seemingly civilized villagers with savage, primal beasts. The suspicious gaze of the neighbor's dog is the first concrete sign of the conspiracy, collapsing the boundary between the human and animal worlds and revealing the bestial nature of the social order [14].

Perhaps the most insidious act of “eating” in the story, however, is performed by the narrative frame itself. The classical preface diagnoses the diarist as “mad” and concludes with the news of his “recovery” and re-integration into the system as a government official. This act of framing is the ultimate narrative cannibalism. The sane, traditional world effectively consumes, silences, and neutralizes the Madman’s radical critique by absorbing him back into the very structure he condemned. His “cure” is his final defeat. The story’s form thus becomes a perfect microcosm of its theme: the rebellion of the individual consciousness is ultimately devoured by the oppressive social order, making the tragedy not the madness, but the return to “sanity.”

Table 3.3: Symbolic Network Analysis

| <i>Symbol</i>                  | <i>Social/Political Interpretation</i>   | <i>Psychological/Philosophical Interpretation</i>  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| <b><i>Cannibalism</i></b>      | The oppressive, dehumanizing nature of the feudal-Confucian social hierarchy and its ethical system. | The destruction of individuality and spirit by tradition; a state of mutual suspicion and fear.                              |
| <b><i>The Madman</i></b>       | The revolutionary intellectual, the iconoclast who dares to challenge the old order.                 | The Nietzschean “overman” ( <i>zhen de ren</i> ); a state of higher consciousness that appears as madness to a sick society. |
| <b><i>The “Sane” Crowd</i></b> | The numb, complicit masses who perpetuate and enforce the oppressive system                          | The “herd morality” that fears and persecutes the exceptional individual; a  |



|                      |  |  |
|----------------------|--|--|
|                      | through conformity and ignorance.  | state of spiritual slumber.  |
| <i>Ancient Texts</i> | The canonical works of Confucianism, revealed as a facade for a violent and oppressive ideology. | The weight of history as a source of trauma and corruption rather than wisdom.               |
| <i>Children</i>      | The future generation of China; the last hope for a new, non-cannibalistic culture.              | A state of pre-corruption; the potential for a new beginning and the creation of new values. |

Table 3.4: Linguistic Feature Comparison: *Wenyan* vs. *Baihua*

| <i>Linguistic Feature</i> | <i>Preface (Wenyan)</i>   | <i>Diary Entries (Baihua)</i>   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| <i>Sentence Structure</i> | Long, complex sentences with classical parallelisms and formal structure. | Short, choppy, often fragmented sentences reflecting psychological urgency. |
| <i>Lexicon</i>            | Elevated, literary vocabulary; formal and archaic terms.                  | Colloquial, everyday language; simple and direct vocabulary.                |
| <i>Tone</i>               | Detached, scholarly, objective, and formal.                               | Highly emotional, paranoid, subjective, and confessional.                   |
| <i>Pronouns</i>           | Formal third-person and first-person pronouns (e.g., 余, yú).              | Simple, direct first-person pronoun (我, wǒ).                                |
| <i>Rhetorical Devices</i> | Formal allusions to classical texts and concepts.                         | Raw metaphors, repetition for emphasis, direct questions.                   |

Chapter 4: The Echo of the Madman: The Legacy of a New Paradigm

4.1 The Immediate Impact: Shaping May Fourth Literature

The publication of “A Madman’s Diary” sent shockwaves through China’s literary world. It did not just introduce new themes; it provided a tangible and powerful model for what the “new literature” could be. The story immediately established the modern short story, as opposed to the sprawling novel or classical essay, as the preeminent vehicle for social critique and psychological exploration. Its success helped gain widespread acceptance for the short-story form as an effective literary vehicle. Furthermore, it popularized a set of themes that would dominate the fiction of the May Fourth era: the alienation of the modern intellectual, the critique of the traditional family as a repressive and suffocating institution, and the use of the “sick man” as an allegory for a sick nation. Writers who followed, such as Mao Dun and Yu Dafu, would continue to explore these themes of social malaise and individual despair,

building directly on the narrative and thematic foundation that Lu Xun had so powerfully laid [15].

#### 4.2 The Canonization of a Rebel: Lu Xun in the Mao Era

The legacy of Lu Xun underwent a complex transformation following the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. The anti-authoritarian iconoclast, whose work was filled with ambiguity, pessimism, and a deep skepticism of all political systems, was posthumously canonized by the Party as a great revolutionary saint. Mao Zedong himself held Lu Xun in the highest esteem, calling him the “commander of China’s cultural revolution”. In this process, the story’s fierce critique of “feudal society” was strategically repurposed to serve the CCP’s political narrative, which positioned itself as the sole force capable of saving China from its backward, “man-eating” past.

This official canonization had a dual effect. On one hand, it ensured Lu Xun’s pervasive and undeniable influence on all subsequent Chinese literature. His works became required reading in schools, making him a foundational figure that every writer and reader had to confront. On the other hand, this process often involved simplifying and distorting the profound complexities of his work. The deep existential despair and the critique of the “numb” masses—who were often the object of Lu Xun’s scorn—were downplayed in favor of a more straightforward revolutionary narrative. Nonetheless, this enshrinement cemented the paradigm he created as the dominant mode of modern Chinese literary expression [16].

#### 4.3 The Persistence of Cannibalism: The Lu Xun Spirit in Contemporary Fiction

The most compelling evidence for the enduring power of the narrative paradigm established by “A Madman’s Diary” is its continued resonance in the works of major contemporary Chinese authors. Even decades after Lu Xun’s death, his thematic concerns and narrative strategies remain a vital point of reference for writers grappling with the traumas and contradictions of a rapidly changing China.

The Nobel laureate **Mo Yan** provides a clear example. His work is replete with what one critic calls a “virtual reencounter” with Lu Xun’s stories. His novel *The Republic of Wine* (1992) explicitly revives the cannibalism metaphor, using lurid tales of officials feasting on infant boys to satirize the moral corruption and grotesque consumerism of the post-Mao reform era. Furthermore, many of Mo Yan’s stories adopt Lu Xun’s narrative structure of an alienated intellectual returning to his rural hometown, where he confronts the vast and often unbridgeable gap between his modern consciousness and the harsh realities of the countryside. This structure allows Mo Yan, like Lu Xun before him, to explore the persistent tensions between tradition and modernity, the individual and the collective.

Similarly, the work of **Yu Hua** is deeply indebted to Lu Xun’s unflinching focus on the violence underlying social structures and the suffering of ordinary people. The academic study “Dynasties of Demons: Cannibalism from Lu Xun to Yu Hua” explicitly traces this lineage, arguing that post-Mao writers like Yu Hua took up Lu Xun’s central metaphor to announce that “the human feast did not end with Confucianism; on the contrary, with the advent of Maoism the feasting began in earnest”. Yu Hua’s stark, often brutal narratives deconstruct the body as a site of state-inflicted violence, continuing the diagnostic project that Lu Xun began. Yu Hua himself has written in his non-fiction work *China in Ten Words* about his own evolving

relationship with Lu Xun, whom he was forced to read as a child. He recounts moving from youthful hatred of the canonical figure to a profound, mature appreciation for his literary genius upon rereading him as an adult, underscoring Lu Xun's inescapable presence in the modern Chinese literary imagination [17].

The enduring legacy of "A Madman's Diary" lies not just in the specific theme of cannibalism, but in its adaptability as a critical tool. For Lu Xun, it was the perfect signifier for the oppressive nature of feudal-Confucian tradition. For later generations of writers, however, the metaphor became a "floating signifier," a flexible and powerful allegorical language that could be repurposed to diagnose the spiritual illnesses of their own times. Whether critiquing the political violence of the Cultural Revolution, the moral vacuum of market-driven capitalism, or the dehumanizing logic of state power, contemporary writers have continued to draw upon the paradigm Lu Xun created. The scream from the iron house persists, but it now warns of new and different dangers [18].

## Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Perennial Cry to "Save the Children"

### 5.1 Synthesizing the Paradigm Shift

This analysis has demonstrated that Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary" was far more than the inaugural work of modern Chinese literature; it was its foundational text. It engineered a comprehensive paradigm shift that redefined the possibilities of fiction in China. This shift was achieved through a strategic confluence of elements born from a moment of profound national crisis. Historically, the collapse of the imperial system and the failures of the early Republic created an urgent demand for a new culture, a call answered by the New Culture Movement. Linguistically, Lu Xun's championing of the vernacular *baihua* over the classical *wenyan* was a revolutionary act that democratized literature and broke the shackles of tradition. Formally, his adoption of a subjective, first-person unreliable narrator shattered the omniscient mode of classical fiction, opening up the new territory of psychological interiority and modernist consciousness. Thematically, his deployment of the powerful allegory of cannibalism provided a new, potent language for social critique, transforming the short story into a weapon for cultural warfare. The combination of these innovations—the subjective voice, the allegorical method, and the vernacular medium—constituted a definitive and irreversible break from the past, establishing the narrative paradigm that would dominate modern Chinese fiction for a century to come.

### 5.2 From National Allegory to World Literature

While "A Madman's Diary" was born of a uniquely Chinese crisis, its profound exploration of the human condition ensures its place as a masterpiece of world literature. The story's central themes resonate far beyond the specific context of early 20th-century China. The struggle of the individual consciousness against a suffocating and irrational social order, the terror of realizing that cherished traditions may conceal a deep-seated violence, the alienation of the truth-teller in a world that prefers comfortable illusions, and the desperate search for a path toward a more humane future are universal concerns.

The story's final, poignant plea—"Perhaps there are still children who have not yet eaten men? Save the children..."—transcends its immediate historical function as a call for the salvation of

China's next generation. It becomes a timeless, existential injunction. It is a desperate cry to protect the potential for innocence, empathy, and renewal from the corrupting influence of any and all "cannibalistic" systems of thought, whether they be feudal, political, or economic. This universal appeal is what allows the story to speak to readers across cultures and generations, securing its status as a vital part of the global literary canon.

### 5.3 The Unfinished Revolution

Ultimately, the continued relevance of "A Madman's Diary" suggests that the "madness" it diagnoses is a perennial human condition. The iron house is not a uniquely Chinese structure, but a metaphor for any closed-off, self-satisfied society on the brink of suffocating its own future. The revolutionary project Lu Xun called for—not merely a change of government, but a profound transformation of the human spirit—is an ongoing and unfinished struggle. The fact that new generations of writers continue to find in his work the tools to critique their own societies is the greatest testament to his genius. He did not provide easy answers, but rather a powerful and enduring way of asking the most difficult questions. The scream he let out in 1918 was not silenced by his Madman's tragic "recovery." It continues to echo, a permanent warning against the dangers of spiritual slumber and a perennial cry for a more enlightened humanity.

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