

# Re-examining Modern National Character in Lu Xun's Essays

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**Abstract:** As a pioneer of modern literature in China and a great figure in the history of intellectuals in China, Lu Xun used his prose as a very sharp sword to cut off the bad things in the traditional national character of China. His literary struggle seems to be very difficult; in fact, it comes from his deep and painful love for his country and his strong need to save the country when China is in great danger. More than a century has passed, and the Chinese nation has undergone incredible changes and is proud and prosperous on the world stage. However, when we are moving towards the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, it is still very helpful to look at Lu Xun's criticism again. Great changes have taken place in people's culture and psychology, but some old psychological habits have changed their forms and still exist today. This paper aims to review Lu Xun's main thoughts on national character, analyze how they change in today's society, find out why they continue and change, and show what Lu Xun's thoughts can teach us today. Finally, this analysis tells us that cultivating modern, independent, rational, and patriotic citizens is closely related to the historical mission of building a strong, culturally advanced, and innovative modern China.

**Keywords:** Lu Xun's essays; National character; Ah Q spirit; Establishing the individual (Liren)

**Online publication:** April 26, 2026

## 1. Looking back at the core dimensions of Lu Xun's critique of national character

Lu Xun's great anthology is an important monument in the spiritual history of the Chinese nation. He wrote about a dark and turbulent era. China became a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, attacked by imperialist powers and torn by internal corruption. Lu Xun understood that military and technological progress alone could not save the country. To truly save China, we need a profound change in people's thinking. His criticism is a great patriotic act-giving a seriously ill patient a bitter medicine in the hope of bringing a miraculous psychological and cultural recovery<sup>[1]</sup>.

### 1.1. Deep exposure of servile psychology and dependent personality

The core of Lu Xun's criticism is people's slave psychology and dependent personality in the traditional era. It is the product of a very harsh autocratic feudal regime for thousands of years. For thousands of years, feudal hierarchy and orthodoxy taught people always to obey authority. This shattered their own ability to think, criticize, and resist. In a very powerful article, Lu Xun ruthlessly shows how sad this dependent personality is among people: they are very obedient and kind to the powerful, but evil to the weak. Sadly, he divided the history of China into two periods: "the era when people did not succeed in becoming slaves" and "the era when they succeeded in becoming slaves temporarily". This lack of self-will

and self-esteem deprived the country of its vitality. This makes the motherland weak and vulnerable to foreign imperialist powers. Lu Xun constantly shows this deep bondage and wants to break the psychological chain of his compatriots. He wants to awaken a strong and independent national spirit. He knows that a country composed of obedient people will never be great, sovereign, and dignified on the world stage. His ultimate goal is to liberate the spirit of China. This is a necessary condition for national independence.

### **1.2. Cold dissection of the spectator mentality and collective numbness**

Perhaps the most terrible and sad national character discovered by Lu Xun is the “bystander” mentality. Besucher Kank, it’s everywhere. In his essays and short stories, he shows the idle people in a very strong and sad way, who regard the tragedy, execution, and pain of their compatriots as simple public entertainment. Whether drinking the blood of martyrs to cure tuberculosis in his stories or the real indifference that Chinese students saw when watching the slides of compatriots executed by foreign soldiers, Lu Xun regarded this collective numbness as a social disease that killed everything. A country where citizens are completely isolated from the sufferings of their compatriots lacks the emotional and moral cohesion needed for survival and resistance. This profound indifference means that the sacrifice of patriotic revolutionaries is welcomed by empty eyes instead of just anger. His calm and clinical analysis of this indifference does not come from his aversion to human beings, but from his urgent and enthusiastic appeal for national unity. Lu Xun believes that true patriotism needs an unbreakable bond of sympathy between people. To love your country is to feel the pain of your compatriots. Only by eliminating this collective numbness can Chinese people form a common sense of destiny and unite to defend the motherland from extinction.

### **1.3. Biting satire of the spiritual victory method and self-deception**

Lu Xun is famous all over the world for his cleverly created role Ah Q. The “victory spirit method” represents a very destructive psychological defense mechanism. In real life, failure, humiliation, and submission are absurdly distorted into imaginary superiority. Through his harsh satire, Lu Xun criticized how the country often took refuge in blind cultural arrogance or poor self-deception when it suffered terrible foreign technical, military, and diplomatic failures, instead of looking at the cruel and humiliating reality and striving for real and difficult self-improvement. The “victory spirit method” paralyzed the country’s progressive will; It gave false comfort, and the house caught fire. Lu Xun’s mockery originated from a desperate patriotic emergency. He understood that as long as the people of China actively obeyed and still comforted the past great or moral superiority fantasy, the nation would perish. His satire needs national honesty. Only by bravely admitting our serious weaknesses, facing the cruel reality of our backwardness and completely giving up self-deception, can the Chinese nation truly become strong, carry out fundamental reforms and successfully resist foreign domination<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **2. The evolution and manifestation of national character in modern society**

With the turning of the wheel of history, China has undergone great changes in the world, from a poor semi-colonial society to a strong, dynamic, and prosperous country. As a result, the national character has really changed, reflecting the spirit of modernization, reform, and national rejuvenation. But the psychological shadow that Lu Xun saw has not completely disappeared. On the contrary, they changed their forms and adapted to the complex contours of the 21st century.

### **2.1. The disintegration of traditional constraints and the initial awakening of individual subjectivity**

The most important, positive, and fundamental development in modern times is the complete disappearance of feudal constraints and the strong awakening of individual subjectivity. After decades of continuous reform, miraculous economic development, and comprehensive patriotism and civic education, the citizens of modern China are very different from

the oppressed and ignorant subjects in Lu Xun's era. Today, there is a vivid and obvious sense of self-determination, innovation, and great national trust. Hundreds of millions of Chinese have got rid of absolute poverty through hard work, education, and entrepreneurship, and have actively taken control of their own destiny. Today's young people have a global awareness, are born with technology, and are proud of their country's achievements. This profound awakening is a beautiful testimony of Chinese people's tenacity and greatness. It represents the historical realization of Lu Xun's basic dream: a country that is no longer composed of enslaved people, but is composed of independent, enlightened, and dignified individuals, making positive contributions to the unprecedented prosperity and great rejuvenation of the motherland <sup>[3]</sup>.

## **2.2. The collective reshaping of the spectator phenomenon in the virtual cyber space**

Although the country has made great historical progress, unfortunately, the wrong mentality of "bystanders" has found a new life that has changed a lot in the digital age. The virtual network is infinite and often anonymous, which turns the old Kangke phenomenon into a huge collective and digital indifference. Today, tragic events, social injustice, personal scandals, and even national emergencies are rapidly consumed on social networks. Millions of netizens often gather in virtual crowds, leaving ruthless comments, creating insensitive memes, or engaging in malicious cyberbullying, and then quickly moving on to the next topic. This digital audience reduces real human suffering and complex social problems to simple data points and short-term entertainment. The way of observation has changed a lot: people use smartphones instead of gathering in the village square, but the main problem remains the same: a lack of real constructive sympathy, moral courage, and useful actions in real life. In order to build a great modern and powerful socialist country, this digital indifference is a huge obstacle. A truly great country needs not only economic strength, but also a high degree of digital civilization. The Internet serves national unity and mutual assistance, rather than creating a cold and distant digital audience.

## **2.3. The invisible variants and generalization of Ah Q spirit in the context of modern anxiety**

Under the rapid and harsh background of modern social transformation and global competition, "victory spirit method" has been transformed into a hidden and intangible variant. Faced with fierce school competition, huge economic pressure, high cost of living in cities, and the complexity of modern social mobility, some people have adopted a cynical attitude of "tying" or "breaking". This can sometimes be used as a temporary and safe psychological buffer to prevent fatigue, but when it becomes common in the crowd, this attitude will become a modern and complicated form of self-deception. This becomes a mechanism to rationalize personal failure or social retreat, so as to avoid the hard work needed to overcome modern obstacles. Because Ah Q avoids facing the reality of its oppression, modern varieties may lead to dangerous social responsibility, patriotic obligation, and personal ambition retreat. For a country that is in the key and final stage of its great rejuvenation, the vitality, fighting spirit, and unshakable ambition of its people, especially the young people, are indispensable. The popularization of the modern Ah Q spirit may weaken the collective energy needed to promote the country's progress in the increasingly fierce global situation.

# **3. In-depth analysis of the underlying causes of the continuation and mutation of modern national character**

In order to fully understand why some elements of traditional national characteristics still exist and change even in the case of material progress, we must make a very profound sociological, historical, and technical analysis of the forces that constitute modern China <sup>[4]</sup>.

## **3.1. Long-term accumulation of historical and cultural genes and psychological inertia**

The psychological inertia of a great civilization has lasted for more than 5,000 years without interruption, and it is

impossible to eliminate or reprogram it in a century completely. Traditional Chinese culture is incredibly rich, and it strongly emphasizes important virtues, such as deep patriotism, family loyalty, social harmony, and collective responsibility, which are the strong foundation of the country. However, in addition to these great historical forces, culture has been subjected to strict hierarchical obedience for thousands of years, undoubtedly obeying patriarchy and avoiding conflicts. These specific “historical and cultural genes” have a strong long-term cumulative effect on the subconscious collective. Although the formal political and social structure of feudalism has been completely dismantled by revolution and reform, the subtle subconscious habits of over-obeying authority, seeking safety in the crowd, and giving priority to group conformity instead of personal critical and innovative thinking still resonate in some family dynamics, teaching methods, and modern work culture. Overcoming this inertia requires continuous cultural improvement and active promotion of modern socialist culture, and balancing social harmony with individual intellectual courage.

### **3.2. Value conflicts and disorders triggered by the rapid modernization transition**

China’s modernization process in recent decades has been carried out at an incredible and unprecedented speed, creating an unprecedented economic miracle in human history. The economic, social, and technological achievements that Western countries have spent centuries achieving have been boldly realized in China in just a few decades. However, this ultra-high-speed transformation from a society dominated by agriculture to a superpower with high digitalization, urbanization, and globalization inevitably leads to profound value conflicts and certain psychological and social chaos. The deep-rooted traditional moral framework and the super-competitive, efficiency-driven, and sometimes materialistic reality of the modern market economy make many people live in a state of moral ambiguity and anxiety. The great pressure of urbanization and changes in housing and family life structure have created fertile soil for psychological fatigue. Modern anxiety has promoted the new “Ah Q” spirit and the withdrawal of citizen participation, which is the direct by-product of this transitional friction. It is difficult for individuals to fix their personal identity and moral compass in the social landscape moving at an alarming speed under their feet <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **3.3. The dual impact of media environment transformation on public collective rationality**

In today’s media environment, there are many algorithms, artificial intelligence, and highly dispersed information flows, which have a strong dual impact on the collective rationality of the public. On the positive side, the Internet has made access to information more democratic, greatly improved communication efficiency, and quickly mobilized unprecedented public awareness and patriotic unity in times of victory such as natural disasters or national crisis. On the other hand, the business algorithms that make these platforms run first put sensationalism, emotional polarization, and anger in the first place, in order to get the maximum user participation and profit. This special environment is conducive to the development of the modern “bystander” phenomenon. The constant and huge obstacles of fragmented information and persistent tragedy are beyond the psychological ability of human beings to have deep and lasting sympathy. This directly leads to emotional fatigue, the collapse of sympathy, and then collective numbness. In addition, the personalized “echo room” created by modern algorithmic media can greatly enhance psychological self-deception. This makes it easy for modern Ah Q to find isolated online communities, which constantly verify their withdrawal from reality and encourage collective cynicism, which undermines the unified and rational public sphere needed for national progress.

## **4. The contemporary guidance of Lu Xun’s essays on reshaping modern national character**

Lu Xun’s profound criticism is not an old story only seen in textbooks at all. They are still very important compasses to help us build a modern, advanced socialist society. Today, reading and understanding Lu Xun is a very strong and future-oriented patriotic act. This is also the firm commitment of the Chinese nation to make continuous progress and become better, stronger and nobler.

#### **4.1. Maintaining sober self-examination and rejecting spiritual sinking**

True mature patriotism does not mean boasting without seeing anything, being chauvinist and arrogant, or ignoring the problems of the country. On the contrary, it asks for love for one's country, which is very sober, critical, and responsible. Lu Xun told us that a truly strong and confident country must have great courage, treat itself objectively, bravely admit its social defects, and make unremitting efforts to correct them through constant self-revolution. In an era when China has made very important economic and technological progress in world history, it is easy for people to become arrogant or complacent. However, we must always regard Lu Xun's very sharp prose as a historical alarm to keep clear self-reflection. By resolutely refusing to give up the spirit, resolutely resisting the temptation of modern self-deception and toxic cynicism, and always striving to improve themselves morally and intellectually, every citizen directly contributes to making China's spirit stronger, more resilient, and more invincible. A country that dares to look directly at its shortcomings is a country that will never be defeated <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### **4.2. Discarding spectator apathy and reconstructing public participation awareness**

In order to eliminate the chance of digital audiences' mentality forever, modern Chinese citizens must consciously and actively rebuild their sense of public participation and civic responsibility. This requires a fundamental change: from a passive and ruthless observer of Internet trends to a very active, responsible, and compassionate participant in community, social, and national life. Empathy must be actively transformed into tangible and practical actions. Whether doing local community service, rationally defending social fairness and the rule of law, protecting the environment, or just showing sincere and positive sympathy to citizens in trouble, it is essential to give up indifference. As a saying goes in China, "The rise and fall of a country is everyone's responsibility. A country composed of mutual concern, active citizen participation and common commitment to socialist core values is almost indestructible. This completely rebuilt public spirit and profound solidarity spirit constitute an indestructible foundation for the cohesion, harmony and extremely strong modern country.

#### **4.3. Practicing the thought of "establishing the individual" (Liren) and cultivating independent modern citizen personality**

The ultimate and most important goal of Lu Xun's painful lifelong literary struggle is perfectly summed up in his ancient philosophical concept of Liren - "Establishing the Individual. Lu Xun passionately said: "To establish a nation, one must first establish its people; when the people are established, the nation will rise naturally. "The brilliant material facilities of modern China, the great skylines, the vast high-speed rail networks, the advanced aerospace technology, are ultimately hollow and fragile without the indispensable 'software' of a very strong, noble and resilient national character. To cultivate the personality of an independent modern citizen means actively encouraging rigorous critical thinking, a strong sense of unshakable moral responsibility, an innovative spirit, and a deep and unshakable love for the nation. When hundreds of millions of people become highly autonomous, with an ethical foundation, a scientific mind, and deeply socially responsible, they come together to form an unstoppable collective force that changes the world. Practicing Liren in the contemporary era is the deepest and most important patriotic duty of every citizen, for the ultimate greatness, durability, and glory of China entirely depend on the inner strength, high moral character, and unyielding dignity of the Chinese people.

### **5. Conclusion**

Lu Xun's prose is still a huge and eternal light in China's long and complicated spiritual history. His ruthless and often painful analysis of slave spirit, indifferent bystander mentality, and delusional spiritual victory method is not out of hatred or despair, but out of deep, painful, and very protective love for his country and suffering compatriots. He dares to criticize the darkness mercilessly only because he is eager for the light to come. He sacrificed his inner peace and became a psychiatrist of the Chinese nation.

When we carefully observe the modern national character through the lens of his immortal work, we must understand that even these external signs, the psychological problems in the past have changed and adapted to the complex digital and highly modern environment, and the main philosophical remedies are still very similar. The great change from the traditional theme and obedience to a complete and responsible modern citizen is a constantly changing historical process, which requires constant efforts. Today, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) is full of confidence and pride, it is going through the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and is standing closer to the center of the Chinese nation. The world stage is unprecedented, and we should deeply inherit and carry forward Lu Xun's indomitable self-improvement and national self-revolutionary spirit.

By actively overcoming the modern temptation of digital indifference, systematically giving up the psychological crutches of self-deception and cynicism, and wholeheartedly embracing the responsible philosophy of "building individuals", we are shaping a modern national character, which is intellectually confident, deeply empathetic, very rational and unshakable. Finally, Lu Xun's real lasting legacy is not social despair, but profound and intense hope: absolute belief that the people of China have inner strength, wisdom and resilience, and constantly renew themselves. It is through the continuous improvement of citizens' spirit and morality that the motherland can prosper and shine forever in the forests of all countries and realize its glorious historical destiny.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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