

WHAT IS THE SECRET TO GOOD WRITING?
by Lu Xun

A REPLY TO THE MAGAZINE 'THE DIPPER'

Dear Sir,

You should have addressed your question to American writers or Chinese professors in Shanghai, whose heads are full of "rules of writing" and "the art of writing fiction." Though I have written a score or so of short stories I have never had any set views on the subject, in much the same way as I can speak Chinese but could never write AN INTRODUCTION TO CHINESE GRAMMAR. But since you did me the honour of consulting me, here are a few tips from my experience:

1. Take an interest in everything and see as much as you can. Don't write as soon as you have seen a little.
2. Don't force yourself to write when not in the mood.
3. Don't choose definite models for your characters, but create them out of all that you have seen.
4. Read your story through at least twice after finishing it, and ruthlessly cut all words, phrases and sections that are not essential. It is better to compress the material for a story into a sketch than to stretch the material for a sketch into a story.
5. Read foreign stories, especially those of Eastern and Northern Europe, as well as Japanese works.
6. Never make up adjectives or phrases that no one else can understand.
7. Never believe any talk about "rules of writing."
8. Never trust Chinese "literary critics," but read the works of reliable foreign critics.

That is all I can say on this subject.

I send you my greetings!

Lu Xun
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{Comment from Michael LaRocca: The eighth point is probably out of date, but the first seven still very much apply.}