The True Story of Lu Xun

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The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press

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ISBN 978-962-996-060-5 (paperback)
ISBN 978-962-996-061-3 (hardcover)

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG PRESS
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
SHA TIN, N.T., HONG KONG
Fax: +8522603 7355
E-mail: cup@cuhk.edu.hk
Web-site: cup.cuhk.edu.hk

Printed in Hong Kong

Contents

Preface
Lu Xun Outline Chronology
Illustrations

1. Lu Xun: Family and Childhood
2. Education
3. Japan
4. Shaoxing and Peking
5. Marriage with Zhu An
6. Happy Days
7. The Break with Zhou Zuoren
8. The Xi'an Interlude
9. Embattled and In Love
10. Lu Xun in Transit: Xiamen and Guangzhou
11. Settling in Shanghai
12. Uneasy Leadership
13. Commitment
14. The Middle Years in Shanghai
15. The Last Phase: Downhill
16. Dissolution and Death
17. Epilogue

Sketches of Lu Xun Literature

To Remember in Order to Forget
Sources

Illustrations

1. Lu Xun in Japanese kimono. Tokyo, 1909.
2. Lu Xun in Western suit. Hangzhou, 1909/1910.
3. Lu Xun in Shanghai, 1927.
4. Lu Xun with Yao Ke in 1933.
5. Lu Xun with wife and child in 1931.
6. Lu Xun lecturing at Peking Normal University, November 1932.
7. Lu Xun and Feng Xuefeng, each with wife and baby, 1931.
8. Lu Xun in death, October 1936.
9. Part of Lu Xun funeral cortège.
10. Scroll presented by Lu Xun to Qu Qiubai, 1933.
11. Zhu An
12. Zhou Zuoren

Preface

The question of nationhood did not arise in China until near the end of the nineteenth century. The name of the state that we know as China was taken from the ruling dynasty up until 1912, when the last dynasty was overthrown and the title of Republic of China (Zhonghua minguo) was adopted. For the previous two and a half centuries the state was known as the Great Qing Empire. Ethnically speaking, the great majority of the population were Han Chinese, but the ruling Qing dynasty itself was Manchu, the Manchus being a tribe from the northeast borderlands that ruled by right of conquest. The empire also embraced Mongolians, Tibetans, and many other minorities in the west. Obviously it would have been impolitic to base a notion of 'Chinese' identity on ethnicity under the empire. In fact it was not necessary to ask what it meant to be Chinese at all then, as the rest of the world did not count very much. A people only feels the need to define itself in order to differentiate itself from other peoples, and until the second half of the nineteenth century other peoples were no more than aliens (or 'barbarians') to be kept their side of the frontiers of the empire. The personal ideal, therefore, was not to be a good Chinese (as others might aspire to be 'a fine American'), but simply to be fully human, because Chinese equalled human.

The distinction of being fully human was achieved by embodying the tradition and culture of China. The Manchu rulers themselves preserved their authority after military conquest by demonstrating allegiance to that heritage. Culturally that full humanity was realized

through mastering the history, literature and arts of China, and in the moral and behavioural sphere it meant living out the doctrines of the great sage Confucius. The values of Confucianism underpinned the laws and practices of the state, and permeated society from top to bottom. The administrators who ran the empire all underwent lengthy examination in the Confucian books, hence the description of them in Western writings as 'scholar-officials'. As Confucianism was by no means an ignoble philosophy for a semi-feudal empire, there was little or no objection to it being taken as orthodox. For the spiritual needs it did not satisfy, there was always Taoism and Buddhism, which had their recognized place. As long as the world about them did not change, the Chinese could be contented with their way of life, indeed feel so superior to other peoples that they could ignore them. The trouble was, the world did change.

From being the dominant power in its part of the world, China declined in the nineteenth century to be 'the sick man' of East Asia. Internal rebellion, brought about by natural disasters, bureaucratic corruption and inefficiency, combined with inability to match the military might of the European powers to undermine the Chinese faith in their system and in themselves. Most devastating of all was China's defeat in 1895 by a fellow Asian country, Japan, in a war that ceded Taiwan to Japanese rule. In the space of fifty years, unchallenged Chinese superiority gave way to indisputable inferiority. Inevitably that led to them asking what was wrong with themselves. It was in those circumstances that the subject of this biography grew up, and that question that he sought to answer.

At first the Chinese leaders thought that survival could be secured by copying the armaments and manufactures of the West without affecting the established Chinese way of life, but more enlightened thinkers came to realize that basic change was needed, because

industrial strength rested on a very different kind of educational base from the traditional one, and the resources of the nation could not be mobilized under the semi-feudal system that they had. Political reform therefore came onto the agenda too. Han Chinese put the blame on the reactionary nature of Manchu rule, and a rising tide of antagonism eventually toppled the dynasty in the rebellion of 1911. The progressive intellectuals were able to provide the political model for the new republic, and a nominal national government came into being, but the armed forces largely remained under the control of the former military governors, who now set themselves up as regional warlords. Most of the warlords and a large proportion of the civilian population were conservative in outlook, so the stage was set for a confrontation between the old and new social forces, the latter being led by the younger generation who had been educated abroad or in the new modern schools in China. Essentially they wanted to establish the civil liberties and humanitarian values currently respected in the West. That meant dethroning Confucius and dismantling the social hierarchy which gave superior classes and senior family members authority over inferior ones. This ideological struggle was fought out in the magazines that flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, and was the implicit background to most of the creative literature of the time. Lu Xun played a prominent part both as a social critic and as a writer of fiction.

Though new standards of liberty, equality and tolerance were set in civil society, the nation's destiny was still in the hands of the groups that commanded armies. Among those, the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) led by Sun Yatsen offered the most hope, as it had an egalitarian socio-economic policy and promised eventual full democracy, although in the first stage of its rule the country would come under the party's 'tutelage'. To wide rejoicing the Guomindang did succeed in uniting China under one flag in

1928, but the alliances and compromises it made to gain support for that victory soon diminished its prestige and adulterated its policies. The comparatively small but ideologically pure Chinese Communist Party therefore grew in numbers and influence, despite ruthless suppression by the Guomindang and allied warlords. The war against Japan from 1937 to 1945 gave the Chinese Communist Party the chance to build up its battered armies, and when all-out civil war came the Communists swept to victory in 1949.

With the defeat of Japan in 1945 China regained its self-respect as a military power — the Chinese saw it as *their* victory — but the question of its civilization remained. The Communist line was that the 'old society' was thoroughly bad, but if all traces of the past were stamped out, the country would be left blank and characterless, without a distinctive culture. That prospect was very nearly realized in the years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when vast quantities of books and historical relics were destroyed. Fortunately China has recovered from those excesses, the past has been retrieved, including the more recent past in which Lu Xun lived, and the danger its culture faces is similar to that of all countries in the world, namely mass ignorance and triviality of pursuits.

That then is the broad context for the life and after-life of our hero, Lu Xun. His biography is of general interest because he lived through a period of spectacular transformation, and changed along with his country's changes. Having been born and grown up in a provincial town, his early youth was of unquestioning observance of the established norms and order of the old empire. Then he converted to a 'modern' education, discovered the wide world outside, and was caught up in the quest of his generation to save his country. He witnessed the creation of a new republic, but felt that the political revolution had left the moral fabric of the nation

unreformed. After having resigned himself to obscurity when his first attempts to make a difference failed, he answered the call of the New Culture movement in 1918, and emerged to become the most prominent of China's dissident intellectuals. His personal importance was that he contributed as much as an unempowered individual could to the direction his country took.

Lu Xun was not a politician. He did not make a blueprint for a model society. He did not promote culture heroes. He wrote much more about things that he was against than what he was for. Above all he was a moralist who made it his task to satirize and castigate bad Chinese characteristics, customs and practices. Chinese characteristics were considered positive in the Chinese Communist Party formulation of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' in the 1980s, but in Lu Xun's day they were very suspect. 'Social Darwinism' was in the air then: Darwin's notion of 'the survival of the fittest' in natural evolution was applied to human societies and nations, and China seemed to be in danger of going under as 'unfit'. Lu Xun looked for the causes of Chinese weakness in his compatriots' ingrained habits of mind and behaviour, relating contemporary abuses that came to his notice to historical vices. He aimed his arrows at so many targets that to attempt to represent them all would turn this small book from a biography into a general history of modern China. There is space only to deal with a few campaigns he conducted. One point that should be made here, though, is that despite his unremitting criticism of the Chinese, Lu Xun never pretended that he was anything but a Chinese himself. Except for a brief spell on his return from study in Japan he never wore Western suits, as did many of his contemporaries. In family matters he honoured his mother and generously supported his brothers. In personal relations he likewise accepted the customary obligations. He wrote poems in classical Chinese to mark occasions

in the time-honoured fashion. And though urged to go abroad in later life for his own health and safety, he never did. He thought of himself as a true patriot.

Particularly since his preeminence was proclaimed by Chairman Mao, there has been a veritable industry of 'Lu Xun studies' in China, and until very recently all accounts had to be laudatory. These accounts have to be read, but obviously cannot be taken at face value. Even the purely biographical material presented has to be treated with some scepticism. I have tried to strike a balance, offering neither a flattering view, nor in reaction an unduly negative one. Studies of Lu Xun's life and works in English and other European languages, which are also fairly numerous, are not so biased, but there is to date no reliable full-length biography. This is an attempt to provide one. The difficulty is that without sufficient detail the biography would read too blandly; with too much detail, especially as it relates to a culture unfamiliar to most readers, it would be indigestible. Again I have tried to strike a balance, but cannot hope to satisfy everyone. I make my apology in advance.

Perhaps the majority of biographies of writers are based on the presumption that readers will be familiar with their writings, and hardly more than a bare mention of titles is needed. If, to the contrary, extensive description and analysis is included in the biography, you not only end up with a thick book, but also continually break the thread of the historical narrative. In Lu Xun's case I cannot presume great familiarity, but neither can I afford to try the reader's patience too far with unhistorical digressions. The compromise has been to provide some thumbnail sketches of his literary works in an appendix which readers can refer to if and when they feel the need.

Finally, readers of this book may notice occasional lapses from the austere language of scholarship into the common speech of normal

human beings. These I attribute wholly to the influence of Lu Xun, for good or ill.

Since the events described in this book took place, spelling conventions for Chinese place names have changed. Somewhat arbitrarily, we retain the old spelling for Peking (now Beijing) and Nanking (now Nanjing), but adopt the new spelling for other places, including Guangzhou (formerly Canton) and Xiamen (formerly Amoy).

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Lu Xun Outline Chronology

Year	Family/person	Nation
1881	Born into gentry clan in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province. Name at birth Zhou Zhangshou. First son of Zhou Boyi, who held the first degree of xiucai (comparable to bachelor degree). Mother Lu Rui, from rural gentry. Grandfather an official in Peking.	*Following defeats in wars with European powers, the ruling Qing dynasty has allowed foreign businesses and missions to operate in China, and has given the administration of zones in major ports over to foreign countries (the so-called 'foreign concessions').*
1887	Started education under home tutor.	
1892	Entered local private school and began formal classical education.	
1893	Grandfather imprisoned. Lu Xun sent to mother's family in country to escape trouble.	
1894	Resumed school. Father fell ill.	
1894-1895		*War with Japan, resulting in cession of Taiwan to Japan.*
1896	Father died. Lu Xun now nominally head of family.	
1898	Entered Nanking Naval Academy. Changed name to Zhou Shuren. Passed first round of state examination. Did not enter further rounds.	*Reform movement supported by reigning emperor supp. ressed by Empress Dowager Cixi.*
1899	Changed to School of Mines and Railways.	

1900		*Anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion leads to siege of foreign legations in Peking. An international relief force occupies Peking for some months.*
1902	Graduated and selected for further study in Japan. Entered Kobun Academy in Tokyo to learn Japanese.	
1903	Translated Jules Verne novels from Japanese.	
1904	Went on to study medicine at Sendai University.	
1906	Withdrew from Sendai, returned to Tokyo to study German. In June returned briefly to Shaoxing to perform marriage ceremony with Zhu An, as arranged by mother. Returned to Tokyo, accompanied by brother Zhou Zuoren. Later made abortive attempt to launch magazine.	
1909	Published collection *Stories from Abroad*, translated with Zhou Zuoren. Returned to China to teach at Hangzhou Normal College.	
1910	Took new post at Shaoxing Prefectural Middle School as dean of studies.	
1911	Lu Xun appointed Principal of Shaoxing Normal College. Wrote first short story, in classical Chinese.	*National revolution overthrows the Qing dynasty.*
1912	In February joined new Ministry of Education in Nanking. In May moved with ministry to Peking.	*Republic of China proclaimed. Veteran revolution.ary Sun Yatsen appointed provisional president, but yields presidency to army commander Yuan Shikai.*

1917	Brother Zhou Zuoren joined him in Peking.	
1918	Published first short story in *New Youth* magazine, entitled "Diary of a Madman". Used the penname Lu Xun.	
1919	Purchased large compound in Badaowan Lane, brought whole family (mother, wife, brothers with wives and children) to live there.	*May Fourth patriotic movement gives boost to 'New Culture'.*
1920	Appointed part-time lecturer at Peking University and other schools. Continued to publish fiction, essays and translations.	
1921		*Founding of Chinese Communist Party.*
1923	Rupture with brother Zhou Zuoren, moved out of Badaowan compound. Published first volume of A Brief History of Chinese Fiction.	
1924	Moved to small house near Fucheng Gate (the site of present Lu Xun Museum) with wife and mother.	
1925	Began correspondence with student Xu Guangping, and supported student struggle against principal at her college, the Women's Normal College. In August dismissed from post at Ministry of Education. In November completed second collection of short stories.	*Death of Sun Yatsen.*

1926	Post at Ministry restored by court order in January. Following 18th March shooting of students at demonstration, Lu Xun wrote articles in condemnation. Later put on blacklist by government, went into hiding. In September left Peking to take up post as professor in School of Chinese at University of Xiamen. Xu Guangping left Peking with him, but went on to Guangzhou to teach school.	*Launch of Guomindang (Nationalist Party) Northern Expedition from Canton, led by Chiang Kaishek and supported by communists.*
1927	Transferred to Sun Yatsen University in Guangzhou, reunited with Xu Guangping. In April resigned post because of internal disagreements and failure of university to support students arrested in purge by Guomindang authorities. Moved to Shanghai and began openly cohabiting with Xu Guangping. Thereafter gave up teaching, apart	*Nanking made capital of Guomindang government.*
1927 *(cont'd)*	from invitation lectures, and earned his living by editing magazines and publishing essays and translations.	
1928	Began to buy and read Marxist books on being attacked by young firebrands as feudal in his thinking.	
1929	Son Haiying born.	
1930	Joined League of Leftwing Writers and other communist front organi.zations. Writings increasingly politically committed.	
1931		*Japanese occupy Manchuria.*
1932		*War in Shanghai: Chinese city invaded by Japanese marines.*

1934-1935		*Long March of Red Army from south-east to north-west China. Mao Zedong becomes leader of Chinese Communist Party.*
1930-1936	Reigned as grand old man of letters in Shanghai, the scourge of the authorities and all 'proper gentlemen', and patron of radical youth. But chafed under the 'foremen' of the Communist Party who attempted to whip him into line, and never became a party member.	
1936	Died of tuberculosis on 19th October.	
1937-1945		*Sino-Japanese War.*
1949		*Foundation of People's Republic of China.*

Plate 1. Lu Xun in Japanese kimono. Tokyo, 1909.

Plate 2. Lu Xun in Western suit. Hangzhou, 1909/1910.

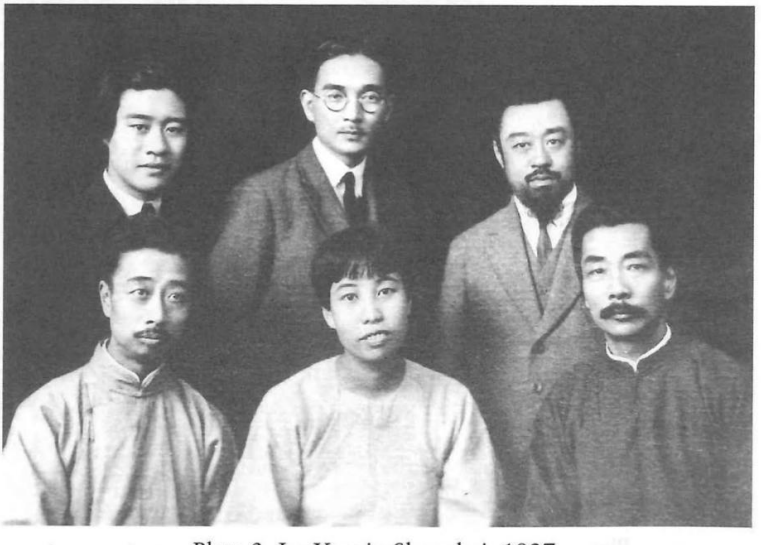

Plate 3. Lu Xun in Shanghai, 1927.
Front row (from right to left): Lu Xun, Xu Guangping, Zhou Jianren.
Back row (from right to left): Sun Fuyuan, Lin Yutang, Sun Fuxi.

Plate 4. Lu Xun with Yao Ke in 1933.

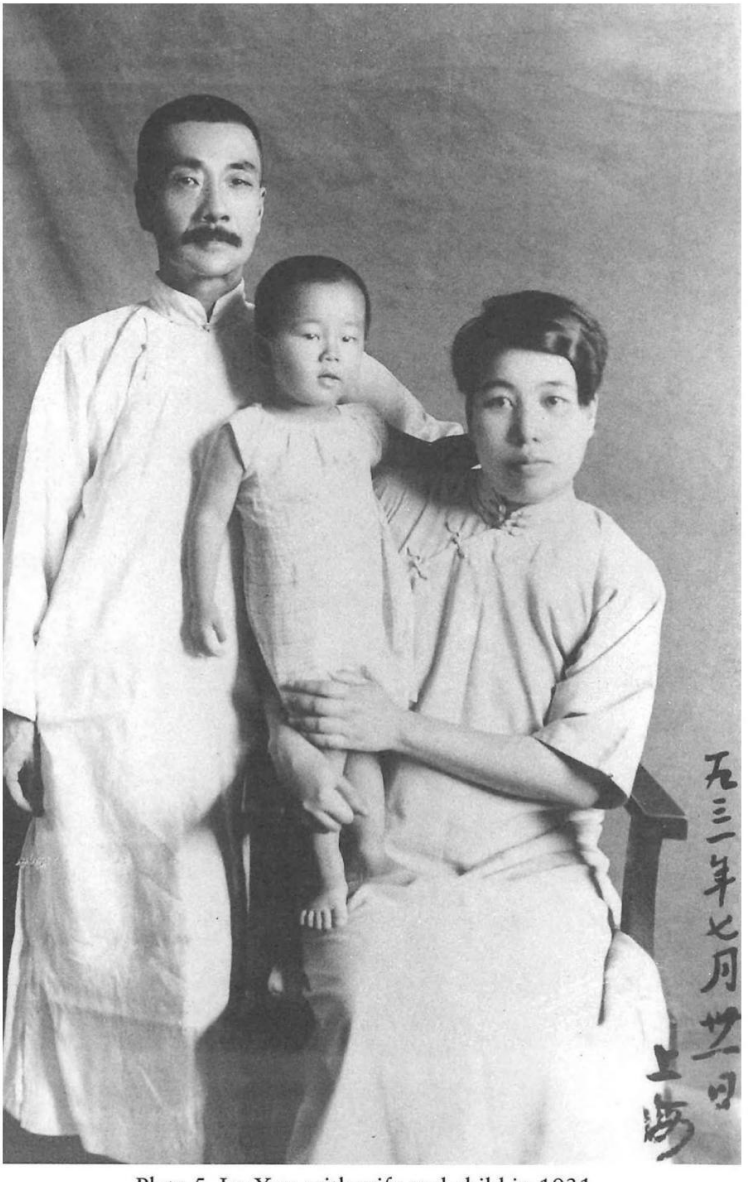

Plate 5. Lu Xun with wife and child in 1931.

Plate 6. Lu Xun lecturing at Peking Normal University, November 1932.

Plate 7. Lu Xun and Feng Xuefeng, each with wife and baby, 1931.

Plate 8. Lu Xun in death, October 1936.

Plate 9. Part of Lu Xun's funeral cortège.

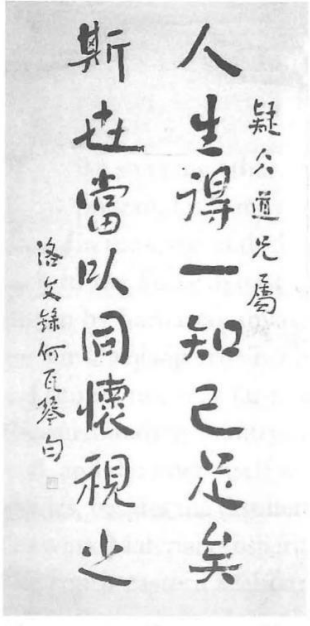

Plate 10. Scroll presented by Lu Xun to Qu Qiubai, 1933.

Plate 11. Zhu An

Plate 12. Zhou Zuoren

1

Lu Xun: Family and Childhood

Like so many other troublesome intellectuals of the past and present, Lu Xun was born into a prominent family that was in the stage of decline. His clan genealogy traced its origins back to the Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1279). Driven south from Henan by barbarian invasions, it settled in Shaoxing, a sizeable town in Zhejiang province, situated on a plain intersected by rivers and canals, not very far from the provincial capital of Hangzhou. The surrounding countryside produced an abundance of 'fish and rice', and the town itself was a centre for handicrafts, pottery and textiles, besides the distilleries that produced the famous Shaoxing rice wine. Material prosperity commonly brings with it high culture. The south-eastern seaboard as a whole had the highest success rate in the nationwide civil service examinations, and Shaoxing in particular was famous for its *shiye*, the secretaries in government offices who were expert in legal, tax, and other administrative areas. The Zhou clan, to which Lu Xun belonged, had its share of such higher and middle ranking bureaucrats over the centuries to stiffen its fabric. According to Lu Xun's grandfather, the Zhou clan reached the height of its prosperity in the Qianlong period (eighteenth century), owning ten thousand *mu* (roughly 1,500 acres) of agricultural land, and some dozen pawnshops besides other businesses in town. By the nineteenth century the subdivisions of the Zhou clan, called 'houses' (*fang*), occupied three mansions in town, all within a stone's throw of each other. The New Mansion (Xintaimen) where Lu Xun was

born accommodated six such houses.

Expanding numbers of family members who were successful neither in scholarship nor in enterprise but still were accustomed to living in gentry style gradually reduced the family fortunes. In that it conformed to the usual pattern. But in the middle of the nineteenth century came an unexpected blow. Shaoxing was caught up in the Taiping Rebellion, which devastated the southern half of the empire. The town itself was occupied from 1861 to 1863. The destruction of war and the taxes exacted by both government and rebels to pay for the war impoverished the region and further depleted the clan's resources. The Zhou clan nevertheless emerged intact, and with enough property to support itself at a modest level. It was still able to celebrate festivals in a proper manner and observe traditional rituals and ceremonies as befitted its superior class. Its members maintained their dignity by not working with their hands, and were able to employ adequate numbers of live-in servants. If the men left the house after dark they were preceded by a manservant with a lantern bearing the name of the clan.

At this point Lu Xun's grandfather comes into our story. Zhou Fuqing (1838-1904) was a man of strong will and autocratic tendencies. He came out of the hard times of the Taiping Rebellion determined to succeed in life and raise the fortunes of his branch of the clan. After some reverses he managed to pass the highest examination in the empire, conducted in the imperial palace in Peking, and was appointed a Hanlin scholar in 1871. This achievement, announced in Shaoxing by six special runners from the capital all banging gongs, brought great glory to his house. Unfortunately, a brilliant career did not follow for Zhou Fuqing. He had to study three years in the Hanlin Academy for a post, which turned out to be a minor one as a magistrate in Jiangxi province. There his prickly character did not make him popular, and he was

sacked after three years for insubordination. He then returned to Peking and bought himself the position of Intendant Official (i.e. candidate for a regular posting) in 1879. A substantive appointment as secretary in the Grand Secretariat (*neige zhongshu*) did not come along until 1888, and that was still a lowly post. In the meantime he sold off land to support himself.

In the course of his life Zhou Fuqing had two wives and three concubines. The first wife bore him a son, Lu Xun's father Zhou Boyi, in 1861, but died in 1865. His second wife, née Jiang, bore him a daughter. This wife was with him while he was a magistrate in Jiangxi, but was sent home to Shaoxing when Zhou Fuqing went back to Peking, and hardly saw her husband again until 1893. In the family there she enjoyed the full status of and honours due to the patriarch's wife, and was treated as mother by her stepson and as grandmother by his children. To those children, born in the 1880s, she was indeed the only grandmother they ever knew, and they all remembered her fondly as a kind person, who entertained them with children's stories.

Away from home much of the time though he was, Zhou Fuqing vested high hopes in his son, Zhou Boyi. He ensured for him an education that would enable him to climb the ladder to officialdom, and indeed Zhou Boyi did pass the local level examination to earn the first degree commonly known as *xiucai* ('outstanding talent') in 1881. But Boyi failed to improve on that by passing the provincial level examination, despite repeated attempts. To the end of his life — he died in 1896 — he had no employment, and lived on the rents from the house's land. In the 1880s his house owned 40 to 50 *mu* of paddy fields, which yielded 4,000 or so catties of cereals per year, enough to comfortably sustain a family of ten. Other houses were worse off. The richest house in the clan, who lived in another mansion, owned around 500 *mu*, but that was fast dissipated. In

fact very few of Lu Xun's father's generation had secure incomes; ill health and early death were common, and addiction to opium not unusual. As a result the clan's land bank gradually drained away.

At the beginning of the 1890s, however, the long-term prospects of Lu Xun's house were good. Zhou Boyi's wife had delivered three sons, Shuren (Lu Xun) in 1881, Zuoren in 1885, and Jianren in 1888, all of whom were bright lads, and promised to be eminently educable. Zhou Boyi himself, though a disappointed man, was still a responsible father. But in 1893, the year in which a fourth son was born, there came a bolt from the blue. In February Lu Xun's great grandmother Dai died, at the age of seventy-nine, and her son Zhou Fuqing had to retire from office in Peking to observe the statutory twenty-seven months of mourning. He arrived back in Shaoxing in March, bringing with him a concubine and young son, born of a previous concubine. This son, Zhou Fengsheng, was thus uncle to Lu Xun, though one year younger than him. In the autumn of the same year the thunder broke. One day two runners from the local yamen (magistrate's office) turned up at the mansion door yelling "Arrest the criminal official Zhou Fuqing!". In an instant, everyone within earshot knew that the pillar of the house had fallen: overnight its chief asset had become its chief liability. The story is worth telling in some detail, for what it tells of the times.

Zhou Fuqing's temporary withdrawal from office came at a bad time for him. His appointment had not come easily, and to secure another one in his late fifties, when the mourning period ended, would be even more difficult, given the over-supply of candidates qualified for office at the time. On the other hand, he had not acquired great wealth from his previous service, and could not live out his old age in comfortable retirement in a pleasant haven. The home mansion in Shaoxing was anything but pleasing to him. Its

fabric was deteriorating, and some of its rooms had had to be let to outsiders. In the clan itself there was no shortage of oddballs, decadents and fainéants, but very few people he could enjoy talking with. In that situation of frustrating idleness the opportunity to use his connections for gainful purposes must have been very tempting. Though he had the reputation of an honest official, he agreed to arrange a bribe for the high official who came down from the capital to superintend the triennial provincial examination in Hangzhou. This official had passed the Palace Examination at the same time as Zhou Fuqing, which made for a strong bond between them.

Five local Shaoxing families clubbed together to offer a bribe of 10,000 taels of silver to obtain preference for their sons who were to be examined. To the list of names Zhou Fuqing added that of his own son, Zhou Boyi: it was, after all, a golden opportunity for Boyi to break his string of failures. The operation was well planned, but ended in farce. In order to prevent bribery of the kind contemplated, the chief examiner was not allowed to receive guests on his journey from the capital, and once in his destination of Hangzhou would be totally secluded. Zhou Fuqing therefore arranged to intercept him in Suzhou. Since he could not pass over his letter containing the draft for the 10,000 taels in person, he sent his servant to deliver it to the chief examiner on his boat. Unfortunately, the chief examiner was closeted with his deputy at the time. After handing in his letter, the stupid servant got impatient, and loudly enquired why he had been kept waiting for a receipt for all that money. The chief examiner was thus forced to open the letter in front of his deputy, and the cat was out of the bag. That at least was the story passed down in the family.

The fact that the five eminently respectable families proposed the bribe, that the 'honest official' Zhou Fuqing agreed to transact the bribe, and further that the high official from the capital was expected to accept the bribe, indicates that subversion of the due processes

of the examination system was by no means uncommon. Indeed, the literature of the time was full of tales of malpractices. There was even a regular scale of fees for stand-ins to take the place of nominal candidates. Such cheating was all right if it stayed undercover, but if exposed could not be condoned, as the statutory penalties were very severe. Zhou Fuqing was therefore very fearful when he learned that his servant had been arrested, and pulled strings to have the matter smoothed over, but again was unfortunate in that he had in the past offended some of the officials handling his case. They insisted on following the letter of the law. An even greater misfortune was that the reigning emperor, Guangxu, had come into his majority, and was set on reimposing discipline. When Zhou Fuqing's case came up to him he rejected the proposed verdict of banishment to the frontiers and decreed the penalty of beheading. Zhou Fuqing's was one of the three cases of corruption that the emperor made public throughout his realm in 1893 in order to act as a warning to others, thus adding to Zhou Fuqing's shame.

In the event, Zhou Fuqing was not beheaded. He was imprisoned, awaiting execution in the autumn of 1894, but he was reprieved at the last minute, though not released until a general amnesty was declared in 1901, after the Boxer Rebellion. Imprisonment came at a price. Apart from the bribes that were no doubt passed to soften the hearts of the prison authorities, a house had to be rented for his concubine and young son near to the prison in Hangzhou, so that they could keep him company. Whatever personal savings Zhou Fuqing had put by, they were obviously not adequate, because more family land had to be sold off, reducing the holdings to 20 mu, the bare minimum for sufficiency.

To return to that fateful day when yamen runners came to the family mansion in Shaoxing to demand the surrender to them of the criminal official Zhou Fuqing, it was his neglected second wife

Jiang who took charge of things. She persuaded the runners to withdraw, and personally went by sedan chair to see the magistrate in his yamen to get his agreement not to pursue the matter actively. The runners did not reappear. Again, large sums of money were disbursed to secure those considerations. Yet there was still the danger of further repercussions, because for serious crimes the whole family of the guilty party could be held guilty. The male members of Zhou Fuqing's family therefore had to go into hiding. For Lu Xun and his brother Zhou Zuoren that meant taking refuge in their mother's native village. They stayed in the country with a succession of relatives for six months until the affair blew over, a to them not unpleasurable exile, though Lu Xun later emphasized the shame he felt. For their father Zhou Boyi, though, it was the end of the road. His degree of *xiucai* was stripped from him, and he was debarred from presenting himself ever again as a candidate. Thus the move that could (illicitly) have launched him on the career that decades of study had been directed towards resulted in that only avenue being closed. Not surprisingly, he fell into depression, took to drink, became ill, took to opium, fell ill again, took to his bed, and finally expired in 1896.

According to the third brother, Zhou Jianren, the disgrace of their father Zhou Boyi did not lead to him (the father) being ostracized by family and friends, or indeed any withdrawal of the courtesy shown him. Even less, therefore, would his innocent sons have been cold-shouldered and treated with contempt. Nothing in the multitudinous accounts of the three brothers' relations with clan members, schoolfellows, teachers, or miscellaneous adults in the following years points to any discrimination against them. The malpractice grandfather Zhou Fuqing was guilty of was evidently accepted as standard practice, so much so that some years later Lu Xun's mother actually paid for someone to substitute for him when it

was his turn to take the local examination, despite what should have been the awful warning of Zhou Fuqing's sentence. Nonetheless, Lu Xun felt the disgrace keenly. It left a permanent scar on his psyche, an injury which was subsequently aggravated by the humiliation of having to make repeated visits to the pawnshop to hand over the family valuables in exchange for cash to pay his father's doctor's bills. The pain of being reduced from the status of 'young master', the scion of a gentry family deferred to by neighbours and tradesmen, to that of a 'beggar' (to use his own term), condescended to by clerks (as he thought), and the object of snide gossip (real or imagined), must have cut deep, for he recollected in his forties, after he had become a famous author, in words that have been quoted time and again:

> Anyone who has fallen from comfortable circumstances onto hard times will on that road have seen the true features of his fellow men.

The implication of this is that his fellow men are a bad lot, who are pleasant to those who are well off and unkind to those who are badly off. Common experience tells us that this is true only of the worst of humanity, those whose complaisant behaviour should not be valued, and about whom one should be glad to be disabused. The tone of Lu Xun's words is not, however, grateful. Yet ultimately his later preeminence as an author and mordant social critic was rooted in his unhappy experiences of that period. His *Battlecries* (*Nahan*) collection of short stories, almost all set against the grey-black background of the hometown of his youth, brought out into the light the demons that haunted him. If there is any doubt about it, his feeling for Shaoxing can be plainly seen in his wish expressed shortly before he left it in 1912 to see the whole town drowned in a flood. Likewise, his social critiques found an ugly face behind every

grinning mask.

It is impossible to tell what would have become of Lu Xun had his family not been brought to its knees then. He might well have gone on to pursue classical studies and become one of the last *xiucai* of the Qing dynasty, or have entered one of the new schools with a modern curriculum, progressed from there to college, and fulfilled his father's last wish that he study in the West — in either case, ending up as a member of the contented bourgeoisie. As it was, lack of funds headed him to the Naval Academy in Nanking (Nanjing). The road from there led to Japan, where his character was formed and he was set against authority.

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2
Education

On balance, Lu Xun was fortunate in the education he received in his youth, given that the end to which it was directed was, as it had to be for all boys of his class, success in the state examinations, which required writing highly formalistic essays using only the terms and concepts of Confucianism ('speaking in the person of the Sage'), and executing elaborate rhetorical exercises. His good fortune lay in having relatively free-thinking and tolerant mentors and teachers, who did not stick to a narrow syllabus or impose on him the most stultifying methods of learning.

Though the patriarch Zhou Fuqing was away in Peking during Lu Xun's childhood, he still decreed the broad lines of his grandson's education. It was he who decided when Lu Xun entered the clan primary school at the age of six (1887) that the first text he read should be an outline history of China, and who sensibly prescribed and graded the poets of Tang and Song for him at the age of nine. In his tenth year Lu Xun started on the core syllabus with the Confucian *Analects*, but more entertainingly had access to a book illustrating the plants and creatures referred to in the classical *Book of Songs*, another book of flower illustrations, and — his favourite — *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (*Shanhai jing*), which had pictures of bizarre creatures said to inhabit the lands beyond the Chinese frontiers. These created a lifelong interest in graphic art. He spent hours copying these illustrations with tracing paper, and then attempting to imitate them. In his teens he enlisted his younger

brothers as assistants, under severe discipline, and bound his copies together in volumes. He got so good at copying that boys at school asked him to do some for them. Ming and Qing dynasty novels, which he found at home, yielded more illustrations. Though an absorbing interest to him, his hobby was regarded as frivolous and time wasting by his tutors, and he hid from his father the books he bought with his pocket money (though when discovered his father did not in fact reprimand him).

Lu Xun did not become an artist himself, but his brother Zhou Zuoren continued to send him books on oriental and occidental art when Lu Xun was working in Peking in his thirties, and he did design covers for his own and other publications. Lu Xun's most conspicuous association with art came in the 1930s, when he supported the woodcut movement, which graphically portrayed the life and lineaments of the poor and suffering. That he should have applied himself in boyhood and adolescence so single-mindedly to the illustrations in books while ignoring their content is, however, significant. It shows how limited his horizons were in the family mansion and in the town of Shaoxing. True, boys must be boys, and have their hobbies, but the world around him was being transformed under the invasion of Western arms and ideologies. In his environment there appears to have been no stimulus for him to consider the way things were and the way they might be. The assumption in his circles appeared to be unquestioning adherence to the culture they had followed for hundreds of years. Thinking was not part of it. Conformity was the key to a career in the bureaucracy, and in retirement time was passed in private pleasures like reading, collecting curios, chess and gardening. In a sense, Lu Xun was devoting himself to such a private pastime prematurely.

On the other hand, Lu Xun was not the youth he depicted in his later story "Hometown" (*Guxiang*), secluded behind the high

walls of his family compound. In fact he regularly accompanied his mother on her annual visits to her paternal home in the country, and being a boy he was allowed to go onto the streets in town, besides taking family boat trips to see plays staged on the river banks, and such like. There was also a vacant plot of land opposite their mansion where visiting troupes and local artisans put on seasonal plays, rather like the miracle plays of medieval Europe. Naturally the Zhou boys joined the audience for those too. For all that, Lu Xun thought of himself in his youth as belonging to a class apart from the peasants and 'base mechanics' he had contact with, regarding them as part of the natural world like 'birds and flowers' (to use his words) — certainly not his equals.

Lu Xun's formal education began in 1892, when he entered the leading private school in Shaoxing, the Three-Flavour Studio (the three 'flavours' being classics, history and philosophy). This was presided over by Shou Jingwu (1849-1930), who embodied the philosophy of high thinking and plain living. Unlike many others who took up teaching for lack of an alternative, Shou Jingwu chose not to pursue office after passing the *xiucai* examination at the age of twenty, dedicating himself instead to teaching the young. He was one of the very few persons in Shaoxing who won and retained Lu Xun's respect. They kept in touch in later years.

Shou Jingwu taught his pupils by himself, with occasional help from his son. His schoolroom could accommodate only a dozen pupils, who each paid fees of eight yuan per year. The pupils provided their own desks and chairs. Being of different ages, their progress was monitored individually by their teacher. Traditionally the relationship between teacher and pupil was taken very seriously: it is reflected in the phrase still current in the language, 'reverence [someone] as teacher'. As such, the teacher had the authority of a master over his disciple or apprentice. He demanded unquestioning

obedience, and could apply corporal punishment. Fortunately Shou Jingwu, though stern, was not cruel, and punished only lightly. In any case, Lu Xun presented no occasion for punishment, as he was very bright and had an unusually good memory. Many tales are told about him being commended by his teacher.

The faculty of memory was very important. Almost universally in China pupils were required to memorize the texts prescribed for them, and in Lu Xun's school it was no different. The boys (at that time girls normally received no schooling) had to get their texts by heart — which was no mean feat, as the language they were written in was archaic — and recite them correctly before their teacher explained what they were about, and that only roughly. As a result very few got to understand properly what they were reading at that stage, and none understand fully, as some passages of the classics they read defy understanding even by distinguished scholars. Yet the fact that the texts were memorized in boyhood was of course a great help when in a student's maturity they were required to yield up their secrets for the purposes of the state examinations. For Lu Xun personally the benefit of having trained his memory was made manifest in his eventual career as historian of Chinese fiction and more generally as a polemicist, where instant and accurate recall of people's past words was useful to him. The rhetorical skills he learned from classical literature also far surpassed those of his modern-educated adversaries.

In his six years of education under Shou Jingwu, corresponding to secondary school nowadays, Lu Xun conned the obligatory Four Books and Five Classics, and three other classical texts. In addition he was introduced to the prose literature of the Wei-Jin period (roughly the third to the fifth century A.D.), which he liked and which is said to have influenced his style. In his teenage years Lu Xun became something of a bibliophile, buying a large range

of classical books, one category of which related to his hometown. Those he could not buy he borrowed, copied out in part or in full, and stitched together. The fact that he had enough pocket money to buy so many books, incidentally, shows that his family was not as destitute as is commonly made out, even after his grandfather was imprisoned. For lighter reading, like the old novels and pictorial volumes, he was able to draw on the collections of senior relatives. He had no particular interest in poetry, then or later, though he learned the techniques and rules of classical verse and in his maturity frequently composed poems in classical style to mark occasions.

Between 1912 and 1919, when Lu Xun led a bachelor existence in Peking, collecting books, collating texts and copying inscriptions became his sole enjoyment. In that, he took to an extreme hobbies he had developed in his boyhood, which represented a curatorial and antiquarian approach to the civilization in which he lived. Other men who rose to eminence in modern China have told of the grand ambitions they conceived in their youth to improve the world; right up to the time of leaving for the Naval Academy, Lu Xun preferred to ignore it. No doubt the disgrace of his grandfather and his sense of loss of social status had a dampening effect on potential youthful flamboyance.

The only trend in his mental make-up which might be deemed 'progressive' in his teenage was his distaste for the 'eight-legged essay' — the principal test at the state examinations. But his rigidly conservative teacher Shou Jingwu himself detested the eight-legged essay, and gave teaching in it over to his son. Lu Xun still half-heartedly persisted, and took part in the first round of the local three-part series after his first term at the Naval Academy, in December 1898. He was placed 137th out of 500 candidates. As for concern for contemporary events, the only sign of it was that in 1898 he did see copies of the *New Knowledge Paper* (*Zhixin bao*,

published in Macau), because he wrote from Shaoxing to his brother Zhou Zuoren, then in Hangzhou, of a threat to their province of Zhejiang in the plan of the foreign powers to 'slice up' China, and of a rumour that three thousand mercenaries had invaded Hangzhou. But of broader issues there is no mention.

The impression should not be given, however, that Lu Xun was a bookworm and a milk-and-water child. On the contrary, he was given the nickname of 'lamb's tail' because of his liveliness, and got up to boyish pranks, like teasing his grandmother by pretending to fall over in front of her. And in his teens he indulged in quite elaborate escapades. Two famous ones were leading his schoolmates to wreck the classroom of another school where the teacher was said to beat his pupils cruelly, and to ambush an obnoxious military man who was known to cuff small boys who passed his door. On the latter occasion Lu Xun took along his grandfather's short sword. Luckily for all concerned, the military man did not show his face. The episode still provided the makings of a little play which Lu Xun and the other boys acted out at home. Playacting was in fact a regular diversion for them.

The chance to play the dashing hero for real came — briefly — when Lu Xun entered the Naval Academy in Nanking. This cadet training school, set up in 1890 to modernize the military as part of China's 'self-strengthening' movement, was not his first choice for further education. He would have preferred to go to a civilian college in Hangzhou, but the fees were too high. Yet it was not a totally novel choice in his family either. His uncle Fengsheng (that is, his grandfather's young son) was already studying at the academy, and a grand uncle had a supervisory post there. Incidentally, this grand uncle, who held the second degree of *juren* and was a staunch conservative, was responsible for Lu Xun changing his birth name of Zhou Zhangshou to Zhou Shuren on becoming a cadet, so as

not to reflect dishonour on his clan by membership of the armed forces: the old adage that 'fine fellows do not become soldiers' was still widely believed. Predictably, Lu Xun was treated with disdain by some clan members when he returned to Shaoxing in uniform for vacations. Zhou Shuren remained Lu Xun's official name for the rest of his life. His younger brothers changed their names to match his: Zhou Zuoren and Zhou Jianren.

At the Naval Academy board, lodging and uniform were all provided free, and students received a small allowance. The preliminary stage of the course was language instruction: four days of English and two days of Chinese per week. Lu Xun found the teaching uninspiring. What irked him most, though, was the distinctions and privileges of rank observed even between students: he thought the place was run with the rigmarole of a prefect's yamen. Finally disappointed at being assigned to the Engine Room class (*guanlun ban*), which would destine him for a career below deck, he transferred to the new School of Mines and Railways, attached to the Nanking Army Academy.

While waiting for the new school to begin operation, Lu Xun returned to Shaoxing at the end of 1898, and took part in the first round of the state civil service examination, as we have said. Sadly, during his stay his youngest brother, born in 1893, fell ill and died, to general lamentation, as he was a much loved little boy.

Back in Nanking, Lu Xun found his new course, which started in February 1899, more to his liking. The foreign language used for it was German, which he did not like much better than English, but his Chinese essay topics were more interesting, and above all he was introduced to an entirely new field of knowledge: Western science. The technology of mining being the main component of his course, he studied textbooks on geology, mineralogy, hydraulics, mathematics and chemistry. The textbooks had been translated

in previous decades by government translation bureaus. Because printed books were few, students made full copies for themselves in class. As copying texts had been Lu Xun's hobby, this came easily to him. Some examples of his bound copies are still extant.

At this stage Lu Xun seemed to take some pride in his martial status, first in attachment to the navy, then to the army. He had a seal carved with the sobriquet 'swordsman of the rasping blade' (*jiajian sheng*), referring to the sound made as the sword clears its sheath. That was an empty title, but another he gave himself, 'student on a charger' (*rongma shusheng*), had some substance to it. The latter is worthy of remark, because it does not at all tally with the image gained of Lu Xun in his mature years — slight, frail and deskbound. According to his own account, in his army days in Nanking he used to go horse riding every day after class, and even went as far as to compete in galloping with Manchu youths from their nearby cantonment, in response to their taunts. Less expert than they were, on one occasion he ended up bloody from a fall from his horse, but remounted and carried on. Another seal of his cut around the same time read 'book learning ruined me' (*wenzhang hai wo*). Taking the three seals together, we have the picture of a valiant youth ready to throw away his books and ride out to do battle. The vision was never physically realized, but did contribute to his later self-image as a 'warrior of the spirit'.

In other ways, too, the Nanking years were formative. 1898 was the year when things started moving fast at the centre of imperial government. After decades of urging by progressive intellectuals that internal changes were necessary to prevent the empire being dismembered by foreign powers, the Guangxu emperor promulgated a programme of sweeping reforms. They were soon rescinded by the Empress Dowager Cixi, who took power back into her own hands,

and gave tacit encouragement to the anti-foreign Boxer movement. But after the Boxer siege of the foreign legations in Peking was broken by the Eight Nation expeditionary force, Cixi reversed her stand and enacted the Guangxu measures herself. These included abolishing the classics-based state examinations, supporting modern education (including female schooling), and sending students abroad — principally to Japan — for advanced study, so as to create an able cadre for the future management of the nation's business.

The upheavals in the north do not seem to have disturbed Lu Xun's life as a cadet in Nanking, but a new element began to work on his consciousness. He began to take notice not only of the sciences of the 'foreign devils', but also of their thought. He started to read magazines informed by Western ideas and others consisting of translated articles. These were introduced to his school by a new head in 1901. In the same year he read Yan Fu's translation of Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*. Published as a book in 1898, Yan's free translation, which incorporated much commentary by himself relating to the Chinese situation, succeeded almost single-handedly in reversing the mindset of Chinese intellectuals, replacing their backward-looking or cyclical philosophy with a forward-looking Social Darwinist one, and sounding the alarm that their previously superior civilization (and race) was in danger of going under in the 'struggle for existence'. Lu Xun was immediately converted. Darwinism was to dominate his thought for decades to come.

Western literature also swam into his field of vision, mainly through the translations into classical Chinese of Lin Shu and his collaborators. Lin Shu broke through to a national readership with his translation of Dumas' *La dame aux camélias*. Lu Xun read this and the many novels that followed, by Dickens, Walter Scott, Rider

cause as the highest and overriding duty of every citizen. Its fiery spirit echoed that of Zou Rong's *Revolutionary Army* (*Geming jun*), published in April of that year in Shanghai — for which Zou Rong was imprisoned.

Although Lu Xun's later actions were not lacking in moral courage, he never again expressed himself willing, even by implication, to literally take up the sword and lay his life on the line. Political assassinations were on the agenda of radical student groups in Japan, and some were actually carried out, but according to report, when Lu Xun was offered such an assignment he refused, asking who would support his mother if he were executed. And he hung back from joining revolutionary societies.

Leaving the heady atmosphere of Tokyo in August 1903, Lu Xun's first holiday at home brought him down to earth. Close-cropped hair was a badge of emancipation in Tokyo, to be shown to family and friends in photographs sent home, but in Shaoxing the lack of a queue was a pure embarrassment. His photograph had already scandalized members of the Zhou clan, and when he appeared in person wearing leather boots and a Japanese-style student's uniform, there was further wonder, shock and even outrage. The response of his grandfather, now out of prison, was a notable exception: he did not think it was anything to make a fuss about. Lu Xun had taken the precaution of buying a false queue on the way home, and he wore it on his first venture out onto the streets, complete with traditional long gown, but it was not very convincing, and it attracted catcalls from passers-by. The next day he resumed his foreign-style dress and abandoned the false queue, but the results were even worse: people shouted insults of 'false foreign devil' and worse. After that he gave up and stayed at home.

However, Lu Xun's reunion with his brothers was joyful. He

or English, Lu Xun translated Verne's other novel from an existing Japanese version. Though the novel had undergone some changes in the Japanese translation, and Lu Xun added more to accord with Chinese conventions, by and large enough of the content of the original survived to justify Lu Xun's claim in his preface that he was introducing modern science by the back door, in the guise of entertainment. At the same time, he was not averse to supplementing his income by the venture: he sold his manuscript for thirty yuan. In December of the same year he published the first two chapters of a third Verne novel, *Voyage au centre de la terre* (*Journey to the Centre of the Earth*) in *Zhejiang Tide*. That translation was not completed and issued in book form until 1906, in Nanking.

Clearly, 1903 was a busy year for Lu Xun. Apart from attending classes (not very diligently, it must be admitted), his keeping up with the magazines, buying and reading new books, working on translations, and mixing with radical elements kept him at full stretch. He read and wrote and smoked cigarettes late into the night; by morning his makeshift ashtray was filled with cigarette ends. Both the late nights and the smoking became lifelong habits, the latter much to the detriment of his health.

There are very few clues to Lu Xun's private thoughts in this, his first Tokyo period (1902 904). About the only reliable account of his doings is from his schoolmate of the time, Xu Shouchang, and he is not very forthcoming. However, a brief memoir Xu published in 1944 does reveal something very significant. Xu writes that a constant topic of conversation between him and Lu Xun was the national character of the Chinese. They discussed three related questions:

> The first was, what is the ideal human character? The second was, what is most lacking in the Chinese race? The third was, what

amused or bemused by the attitudes he discovers, though he has some very serious things to say, too; his impressions are by no means superficial or uninformed. Lu Xun, being on the inside, obviously understood some things better than Smith, but on the other hand Smith got around in China more than he did, and noticed more peculiarities. In that first period in Japan, Lu Xun made more pressing and factual matters his business, besides which neither his experience nor intellectual development were mature enough for him to comment very wisely on the Chinese character. But when he blossomed as an author in his late thirties, it was precisely the Chinese character that was his abiding preoccupation. In a sense it was his own ongoing task that he was talking about when he wrote in October 1936:

> I still hope that someone will translate Smith's *Chinese Characteristics*. Having read it, we can examine ourselves, analyse, realize what points he got right; then reform, struggle, get on with the job ourselves, without seeking for the pardon or praise of others. In that way we shall establish what the Chinese people are really like.

Here Lu Xun admits, by implication, that Smith did get some things right. That reassurance is not needed, though, as it is clear from the main body of Lu Xun's work that on several major points he shared Smith's view. To sum up our speculation, already at this point in his life Lu Xun was alerted by Smith's book to look beyond 'self-strengthening' measures to a 'deeper diagnosis' (Smith's words) of what needed to be done to make China a fit place to live in.

A small sign that Lu Xun's diagnosis would throw up more obnoxious than admirable traits is given by a sentence he interpolated in his 1903 translation of Verne's *Voyage au centre de la*


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literature himself. He had mixed with Chinese radicals in Tokyo, some eminent, some to become eminent, but had remained on the periphery of revolutionary activity, essentially a bystander.

On the other hand, he had enormously broadened his knowledge in Japan. His eyes had been opened onto the wide world. He had acquired a very good competence in Japanese, which would not only continue to be useful to him as a conduit, but would also underpin very helpful relationships in Shanghai. His reading knowledge of German would be called on in his future translation work. What he had learned of the natural sciences, mostly at Sendai University, would enable him to teach school back in Zhejiang province. Last but far from least, the friends and acquaintances he made in Tokyo would form a mutual aid network that would support him in times of need and give him a way out of future predicaments.


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