

THE REAL STORY OF AH-Q AND OTHER TALES OF CHINA

LU XUN is one of the paradigmatic figures of twentieth-century Chinese literature, celebrated during and since his lifetime for his powerful diagnoses of his nation's social and political crisis, and for his contributions to reinventing the vernacular as a literary language. Born in 1881 into a scholar-gentry family in Shaoxing (south-east China), he was thoroughly schooled as a child in China's classical literary heritage. After abandoning in 1899 the orthodox Confucian path of studying for the imperial civil service examinations, Lu Xun read widely in translations of foreign literature and applied himself to Western science, first in China and then in Japan, where he began training as a doctor. Intensely troubled by his country's weakness in the face of foreign imperialism, at the age of twenty-five he decided to give up medicine for a career in literary and cultural reform. In 1918, the forceful iconoclasm of his first short story in vernacular Chinese, 'Diary of a Madman', helped propel him to the centre of the New Culture Movement of the late 1910s – modern China's pivotal moment of westernizing cultural revolution. The two volumes of short fiction he produced between 1918 and 1925, *Outcry* and *Hesitation*, won broad acclaim for their highly crafted portrayals of a China in a state of spiritual emergency – of its superstition, backwardness, poverty and complacency. Like many radical intellectuals of his time, Lu Xun began to look leftwards after the rise to power of the repressively right-wing Nationalist Party in the late 1920s. Despite his public commitment to Marxist literary ideals and his posthumous canonization by Mao Zedong, Lu Xun's final years were spent mired in squabbles with the Chinese Communist Party's representatives of ideological orthodoxy. When he died of tuberculosis in 1936, he bequeathed to modern Chinese letters a contradictory legacy of cosmopolitan independence, polemical fractiousness and anxious patriotism that continues to resonate in Chinese intellectual life today.

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The Real Story of Ah-Q and
Other Tales of China

The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun

Translated with an Introduction by

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With an Afterword by

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Chronology

- 1881** Born Zhou Shuren in Shaoxing, south-east China.
- 1884** Following its defeat of the Chinese navy, France asserts control of Indo-China.
- 1893** Grandfather imprisoned (on suspended death sentence) for corruption in the civil service examinations.
- 1894–5** China defeated in first Sino-Japanese War.
- 1896** Father dies after consistent misdiagnosis by Chinese doctors.
- 1898** Leaves home to study at the Jiangnan Naval Academy in Nanjing. Returns briefly to pass the first, district level of the civil service examination.
- Influenced by reformist intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, the Guangxu emperor issues a series of radical, reforming edicts (the ‘Hundred Days’ Reforms’). The conservative empress dowager Cixi responds by putting the emperor under house arrest and executing some of the leaders of the reform movement.
- 1899** Transfers to the School of Mines and Railways in Nanjing. Refuses to return to Shaoxing for the second and third levels of the civil service examination.
- 1900** Foreign (mainly Japanese, Russian, British, American and French) troops enter Beijing and bring to an end the Boxer Rebels’ siege of the foreign legations. The Qing government agrees to an indemnity of 450 million taels of silver (c. £67 million).
- 1902** Graduates and leaves China for Tokyo on a government scholarship; begins studying Japanese language.
- 1903** Cuts off his queue – the long braid that the Manchu Qing dynasty forced all Chinese men to wear as a public symbol of their submission to Manchu rule after 1644. Completes his first translation, of Jules Verne’s *De la terre à la lune* (from Japanese).
- 1904** Leaves Tokyo for medical school in rural Sendai.
- 1905** The Qing government abolishes the old-style civil service examinations.
- 1906** Abandons medical studies. Returns to Shaoxing to take part in a marriage arranged by his mother. Soon after, returns to Tokyo without his wife but with his younger brother

Zhou Zuoren.

1907 An attempt, with Zhou Zuoren, to launch a new literary magazine, *New Life*, fails.

Qiu Jin, a female revolutionary, is arrested and executed in Shaoxing for an alleged plot against the Qing government.

1908 Publishes 'On the Power of Mara Poetry', acclaiming the power of the individual literary genius to awaken a nation.

1909 Translates with Zhou Zuoren and publishes a two-volume collection of foreign fiction, which barely sells. Returns to China and begins teaching physiology and chemistry at the south-eastern city of Hangzhou.

1911 Writes his first short story, in classical Chinese, 'Nostalgia'. The Qing dynasty is toppled by republican revolution.

1912 Sun Yat-sen briefly becomes the first president of the new Republic before ceding leadership to Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general.

Disappointed by the aftermath of the Revolution, Lu Xun leaves the south-east to take up a job in the new Ministry of Education in Nanjing, then Beijing, where he absorbs himself in antiquarian research.

1913 'Nostalgia' published in the journal *Short Story Monthly*.

1915 The progressive journal *New Youth* is founded by Chen Duxiu. The Japanese government serves Yuan Shikai with their Twenty-One Demands, asserting greater Japanese economic and political sovereignty over areas of Manchuria and Mongolia.

1916 Yuan Shikai dies, soon after widespread resistance to his attempt to declare himself emperor breaks out. Military and political control of China lapses into the hands of warlords. Cai Yuanpei becomes chancellor of Beijing University, assembling about him many of the key intellectual players in the New Culture Movement.

1917 An attempt by Zhang Xun, a local military governor, to restore the Manchu dynasty is swiftly defeated by warlords.

Qian Xuantong, an editor of *New Youth*, asks Lu Xun to write something for the journal.

1918 His first vernacular short story, 'Diary of a Madman', published in *New Youth* under the pseudonym Lu Xun.

1919 Sets up home in Beijing with his mother, his wife, his two brothers and their Japanese wives.

On 4 May, violent anti-imperialist demonstrations and strikes break out in Beijing in

protest against the decision at Versailles to award Japan territorial concessions in north-east China.

1921 'The Real Story of Ah-Q' serialized.

The Chinese Communist Party is founded in Shanghai. Sun Yat-sen forms a Nationalist Party government in Guangzhou. The Beijing government establishes the vernacular as the national language for textbooks.

1922 Completes his first collection of short fiction, *Outcry* (published the following year).

1923–4 Publishes his pioneering *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*. Following estrangement from Zhou Zuoren, moves out to a separate residence with his mother and wife. Takes various teaching posts in Beijing colleges while still working at the Ministry of Education.

Sun Yat-sen forms a United Front between the Nationalist Party and the Communist Party, in exchange for Soviet financial and military aid.

1925 Publishes a collection of essays, *Hot Air*. Begins a love affair with Xu Guangping, a former student.

Sun Yat-sen dies of liver cancer. Violent anti-imperialist protests break out across Chinese cities after British-directed police in Shanghai kill eleven demonstrators demanding the release of Chinese students imprisoned by the British. The Nationalist–Communist alliance launches the Northern Expedition, winning a series of victories against warlords in southern and eastern China. Major writers of the New Culture Movement begin to convert to Marxism.

1926 Publishes his second collection of short fiction, *Hesitation*. Several of his students are shot and killed by Beijing's warlord government in a peaceful demonstration. He leaves his job at the Ministry of Education after publicly attacking in print his minister. Lu Xun and Xu Guangping leave Beijing that summer to take up teaching posts in Xiamen (south-east China) and Guangzhou, respectively.

1927 Joins Xu Guangping in Guangzhou; from there they move together to Shanghai.

Publishes a volume of prose poetry, *Wild Grass*, and two further volumes of essays, *Unlucky Star* and *Grave*.

Chiang Kai-shek, Sun Yat-sen's successor as leader of the Nationalist Party, launches the White Terror against the Communist Party, beginning a nationwide purge of left-wing activists.

1928 Publishes another volume of essays, *That's That*, and a volume of reminiscences, *Dawn*

Flowers Picked at Dusk. Begins reading and translating Marxist literary criticism. Quarrels publicly with members of the literary left.

1929 Xu Guangping gives birth to Lu Xun's only son, Zhou Haiying.

Establishment of the Jiangxi Soviet in south-east China.

1930 Makes inaugural speech at the founding of the League of Left-wing Writers, confirming his commitment to revolutionary, proletarian literature.

Chiang Kai-shek launches his encirclement campaigns to destroy the Communists in Jiangxi.

1931 The Nationalist government executes five Communist writers, one of whom is a friend of Lu Xun. As the prelude to the 1937 outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese establish an independent state (Manchukuo) in north-east China.

1932 Publishes two further collections of essays, *Three Leisures* and *Two Hearts*.

1933 Publishes his correspondence with Xu Guangping, *Letters between Two*, and a further collection of essays, *False Freedom*.

1934 Publishes two further collections of essays, *Quasi-Romance* and *Mixed Accents*.

Eighty thousand Communist troops break out of Chiang Kai-shek's encirclement of Jiangxi in the south-east, to embark on the Long March to Shaanxi in the north-west.

1936 Publishes his last collection of fiction, *Old Stories Retold*, and a further collection of essays, *Fringed Literature*. Quarrels openly with the Communist literary leadership in Shanghai. Dies of tuberculosis in Shanghai.

1937 Three-volume essay collection, *Pieces Written in a Semi-Concession*, published posthumously. Mao Zedong proclaims Lu Xun the 'saint of modern China'.

Introduction

Lu Xun (1881–1936) was born into the fading world of late-imperial China, his childhood spent within the high walls of a traditional Chinese compound – amid the courtyards, gardens, bridges and winding alleys typical of the mansions of provincial grandees. One of the better families of the humid south-eastern town of Shaoxing, his clan had for centuries prospered on the profits of landowning, pawnbroking and government; and through Lu Xun's early years he and his elders staunchly upheld the social and intellectual orthodoxies of the empire. In 1871 his grandfather Zhou Fuqing had – to the beating of six gongs – received the honour of appointment by the ruling Qing dynasty to the Imperial Academy in Beijing, the pinnacle of the civil service. As befitted the son of a respectable gentry family, Lu Xun was schooled in the cultural archaisms of the Chinese classics. Near the start of his first short story, 'Nostalgia', he evoked the tedium of a teacher's Confucian drone, allowing his schoolboy narrator to fantasize about his tutor falling ill and dying overnight – just to preserve him from another day spent reciting *The Analects*. In 1926, Lu Xun resentfully recounted from four decades' distance how his father once forced him to recite from memory thirty lines of *The Outline of History* (a school primer of the ancient Chinese past) before he was allowed to sail off to watch a gaudy local temple procession: 'To me, it was all so much gibberish,' he remembered, contrasting the intellectual pedantry of the classroom with the liberating extravagance of China's popular folk traditions: his illiterate nurse's stories of ghosts and demons lurking in the back garden; the phantasmagoria of local operas; the bizarre, monstrous illustrations of the mythological compilation *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.¹

His grandfather's triumph notwithstanding, the young Lu Xun's domestic landscape bore traces of the stagnation and decline broadly apparent through the society around him. Since the early years of the nineteenth century, the vast Qing imperium had been visibly showing the strains of rampant population growth (generating an acute land shortage, rural destitution and rising food prices) and endemic government corruption. A string of domestic rebellions

ensued, which the overstretched state suppressed only by substantially decentralizing power and initiative to local elites and militias. The weakness of the ruling dynasty was in turn exploited, and compounded, by opportunistic European, American and Japanese imperialists. Since the defeat of the first Opium War of 1839–42, Chinese politicians had been struggling to make sense of a new world order in which the Qing's cultural self-assurance was confidently challenged by alien aggressors scornful of Confucian civilization. Late-Qing China was a country in identity crisis, battling to reconcile the traditions of imperial government and society with the ways of gunboat diplomacy and the modern world.

Lu Xun's own family life seems to have been inflected by a certain *fin de siècle* melancholy: the clan compounds scattered with lonely older wives neglected for younger concubines, and lethargic males – Lu Xun's father included – stifled by failure in the fiercely competitive civil service examinations (the tests of Confucian orthodoxy that controlled the paths to wealth and social success). In the main courtyard of the mansion in which Lu Xun grew up, a mound of broken tiles commemorated the repairs made to the house after the fourteen-year-long Taiping Rebellion, the most serious of the nineteenth-century revolts that undermined Qing authority. Adjoining was the 'ghost courtyard', into which were sunk the graves of the many who had died during the appalling violence.

In 1893 the gentility of Lu Xun's early years faded into impoverished disgrace when his grandfather was imprisoned for seven years (on suspended death sentence) for attempting to suborn a civil service examiner. Over the following three years, as Lu Xun's father destroyed his health through a weakness for liquor and opium, the costs of ruinously ineffective medical treatment – together with the bribes necessary to buy the grandfather a stay of execution – undid the family finances. In 1896, after ingesting a series of quack prescriptions from traditional Chinese doctors (sugar cane thrice exposed to frost, monogamous crickets, drum-skin, ink), Lu Xun's father died of an asthma attack.

By 1899, after a half-hearted attempt at the civil service examination, Lu Xun had turned his back on the Confucian system of education that seemed to have led China (and his family) into disaster, permitting the country to be 'carved up like a melon' by foreign imperialists. (A year before his father's death, China had suffered the humiliation of military defeat against Japan, a country that the Middle Kingdom had always viewed as a cultural tributary.) Instead, he committed himself to Western learning – English, political science, natural sciences, geology and mineralogy – at new-style academies in Nanjing, one of the major east

coast cities. His mother wept at his decision, he recalled, ‘which was natural enough, because back then a Confucian education was still the route to respectability. Only the utterly desperate, society deemed, stooped to studying Western sciences. By following the course I had fixed upon, I would be selling my soul to foreign devils, only intensifying the contempt which we were already steeped’ (p. 16). A distant uncle of Lu Xun’s charged with keeping an eye on him in Nanjing even instructed him to change his name, presumably to avoid further disgracing the clan through his dubious career choice. In fact, for all their suspect veneer of foreign novelty, these institutions seem to have been rather restrained in their modernizing zeal: a swimming pool originally built to teach aspiring naval officers to swim was filled in and converted into a shrine to the God of War after one of the students drowned in it.

Beginning the reading habits of a lifetime, Lu Xun immersed himself in the mass of translations generated by the late-Qing literary press – of novels (by Dickens, Rider Haggard and others), of Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* – and in the nationalist sermons of the leading reformist intellectuals of the day, Yan Fu and Liang Qichao. It was Yan and Liang’s sense of a modern, international world that threw late-imperial Confucianism into a provincial, complacent light, convincing Lu Xun and others like him that China was no longer the centre of the civilized world, but one nation among many struggling for survival in a global system dominated by the West. For the time being, Lu Xun replicated Liang’s utilitarian visions for saving China through science, technology and constitutional reform: ‘A glorious future unfurled in my mind,’ Lu Xun later recalled of his Nanjing years, ‘in which I would return to my homeland after graduation and set about medicating its suffering sick – people like my father, to whom Chinese doctors had denied a cure. In times of war, I would become an army doctor, all the while converting my fellow countrymen to the religion of political reform’ (p. 16).

Dissatisfied with the training he had picked up at the Nanjing Academy (‘climbing a mast a few times did not qualify me as a sailor’²), Lu Xun, like many ambitious and patriotic young men of his generation, decided to leave China to study Western science overseas, enrolling in a Japanese medical school in rural Sendai. In 1906, at the close of a biology lecture in his second year, one of his teachers showed the class a slide depicting a scene from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, part of which was fought on Chinese territory disputed by the two nations. A crowd of Chinese apathetically watched while one of their compatriots was beheaded by the Japanese as a Russian spy. ‘Though they were all of them perfectly sturdy

physical specimens,' Lu Xun later remembered in the Preface to his first short-story collection,

every face was utterly, stupidly blank. The man tied up, the caption informed us, had been caught spying for the Russians and was about to be beheaded by the Japanese as a public example to the appreciative mob.

...I no longer believed in the overwhelming importance of medical science. However rude a nation was in physical health, if its people were intellectually feeble, they would never become anything other than cannon fodder or gaping spectators, their loss to the world through illness no cause for regret. The first task was to change their spirit; and literature and the arts, I decided at the time, were the best means to this end. And so I reinvented myself as a crusader for cultural reform. (p. 17)

A few months after this Damascene moment – the most famous conversion in modern Chinese literature – Lu Xun abandoned his medical studies and began a career as self-appointed literary physician of China's spiritual ills.

Lu Xun was not alone in identifying literary culture as the key to China's survival. By 1902 the reformists Yan Fu and Liang Qichao had begun to prize vernacular fiction as an essential vehicle of political enlightenment. While bemoaning the degeneracy of Chinese writing – 'Chinese novels teach us either robbery or lust' – Liang commented that in Western countries 'a newly published book could often influence and change the views and arguments of the whole nation. Indeed, political novels should be given the highest credit for being instrumental in the steady progress made in the political sphere in America, England, Germany, France, Austria, Italy, and Japan.'³ Why, Liang asked, were the Chinese at present superstitious, avaricious, obsequious, heartless and crafty? 'All because of our fiction.'⁴ Traditionally scorned by scholarly elites as a disreputably popular form beyond the orthodox Confucian pale of classical history and poetry, vernacular fiction was now speedily promoted up the literary hierarchy. 'If one intends to renovate the people of a nation,' Liang enthused, 'one must first renovate its fiction.'⁵ Previously the preserve of a small, overeducated elite, literature was now recast (by another small, overeducated elite) in a utilitarian, collective mould. Lu Xun's vocational epiphany, with its powerful evocation of the lone, enlightened intellectual pledging to transform the benighted Chinese masses, was mired in the uncertainties of this new nationalist vision: in a combination of high-minded contempt and patriotic sympathy that he would later shape into a fictional oeuvre of ingenious moral ambiguity.

For more than ten years, however, Lu Xun's personal ambitions for regenerating China through writing foundered: a magazine, *New Life*, failed before it had produced its first issue

only forty-one copies were sold of a one thousand five hundred print-run of translations of new European fiction; and a Romantic manifesto proclaiming the writer a demonic midwife to a nation's rebirth was read by almost no one.⁶ He discarded his first short story in 1911, too dissatisfied even to give it a name. It was his brother Zhou Zuoren (himself destined to become a celebrated essayist and literary scholar) who entitled it 'Nostalgia' and guided it towards publication two years later. After returning to China in 1909, Lu Xun meandered through a number of unsatisfactory teaching posts in his native province. Initially enthusiastic about the 1911 Revolution that brought to an end some two thousand years of imperial rule, he soon grew disillusioned with the warlord regime that swiftly took over local government, and escaped to a post in the new Ministry of Education in Beijing.

Lu Xun would later write of these years as a search for 'intellectual narcotics' to soothe the disappointment of his radical hopes (p. 18). Returning to traditional literati pursuits, he bought old books, edited classical texts, researched pre-modern Chinese fiction and reconstructed ancient tombstone inscriptions. He also began drinking heavily, a habit that stayed with him for the rest of his life. But through the years of Lu Xun's early failures and self-imposed exile from the world of cultural reform, the contradictory principles of his later literary personality emerged. Patriotism battled against his disgust for a diseased China; an early belief in the power of the crusading literary genius was corroded by a self-mockery at the futility of his own demagogic impulse; and an evolutionary hope for the future remained in thrall to the ghosts of the past.

By 1916, the new Republic had regressed into authoritarianism, when the president (and former Qing-dynasty general), Yuan Shikai, tried to have himself crowned emperor. Following his death later that year, his subordinates divided the country into personal warlord enclaves and began battling each other for overall control. Taking advantage of China's post-revolutionary chaos, the Japanese government had in 1915 served Yuan Shikai with their Twenty-One Demands, asserting greater Japanese economic and political sovereignty over areas of Manchuria and Mongolia; after a few months of negotiations, Yuan capitulated. Four years later, the British, French and Americans at Versailles rewarded Japanese naval assistance in the First World War with a large slice of north-east China. Indignant Chinese youth responded by plunging into the protest of the May Fourth Movement – a surge of nationalism named after the violent anti-imperialist demonstrations of 4 May 1919.

The intellectual backdrop to the turmoil of 1919 was already in place by 1916, with the formation of a group of progressive scholars and writers at Beijing University and at the editorial board of *New Youth*, the flagship journal of May Fourth enlightenment. Abandoning the moderation of earlier reformers who had searched for a reconciliation between modern Western and traditional Chinese values, *New Youth's* editor-in-chief, Chen Duxiu, and his associates challenged China to move in a radically new direction. The basic task, proclaimed Chen, was 'to import the foundation of Western society – that is, the new belief in equality and human rights. We must be thoroughly aware of the incompatibility between Confucianism and the new belief, the new society, and the new state.'⁷ Their project was to clear out – by means of thoroughgoing westernization – the horrors of traditional China ('hypocritical, conservative, passive, constrained, classicist, imitative, ugly, evil, belligerent, disorderly, lazy') and replace them with the dream of a 'sincere, progressive, activist, free, egalitarian, creative, beautiful, good, peaceful, cooperative, industrious' new nation.⁸

At the centre of this New Culture Movement lay far-reaching calls for a reformed literary style that would represent and speak directly to the masses. 'Down with the ornate, obsequious literature of the aristocrats – up with the plain expressive literature of the people!' shouted Chen Duxiu. 'Down with the stale, ostentatious literature of the classics; up with the fresh, sincere literature of realism! Down with the pedantic, obscure literature of the recluse; up with the clear, popular literature of society!'⁹ The new literature was to be infused with individualism, paradoxically to serve the collective good: 'What I would like most to see happen to you is a true and pure form of egocentrism,' another celebrated reformer, Hu Shi, approvingly quoted Ibsen, 'one that can sometimes give you the feeling that your own needs are the most important thing of all and that nothing else matters... If you wish to serve society, the best way to do it would be to put some effort into yourself.'¹⁰

In 1917, Lu Xun was roused from his despondency by a request from Qian Xuantong, an old friend and one of Chen's co-editors on *New Youth*, to produce something for the magazine. 'Imagine an iron house.' 'Lu Xun gloomily argued back, "without windows or doors, utterly indestructible, and full of sound sleepers – all about to suffocate to death. Let them die in their sleep, and they will feel nothing. Is it right to cry out, to rouse the light sleepers among them, causing them inconsolable agony before they die?"' ' "But even if we succeed in waking only the few," ' Qian replied, "there is still hope – hope that the iron house may one day be destroyed." ' 'He was right,' Lu Xun relented. '[H]owever hard I tried, I couldn't quit

obliterate my own sense of hope' (p. 19). His first work of vernacular fiction, 'Diary of a Madman', resulted.

In content alone, 'Diary' reads as a neat propaganda piece for the anti-Confucian rebellion of the 1910s and 1920s: a forceful attack on traditional China, constructed as the journal of a provincial who believes he has made a terrible discovery – that the Chinese have for centuries been 'eating people' – and who, as a result, has been confined as insane by his family. But the formal complexity of the story makes it far more than a work of agitprop. Through the claustrophobic surrealism of his premise, through labelling (in the diary's pompous classical Chinese Preface) his visionary narrator a madman, Lu Xun produced a profoundly unsettling denunciation of China's past and present: a howl of despair at a civilization incapable of diagnosing its own state of crisis.

'Diary' challenged norms in its use of language as well as in its form and message. Lu Xun's short story now declared to readers that the new vernacular fiction could serve sophisticated and intensely serious purposes. (Though Lu Xun was an early advocate of literary reform, his first attempt at fiction was in classical Chinese, hovering between the traditionalism of its language and the modernism of its ironic first-person narrator.) A few years after being offered to an untutored reading public, the elliptical experimentalism of 'Diary' had helped win Lu Xun acclaim as one of the leading literary rebels of the New Culture Movement: with its assault on tradition, its foreign inspiration (derived from Gogol's story of the same name) and its skilful manipulation of narrative voice.

'Diary' began a two-volume oeuvre of realist fiction, *Outcry* (1922) and *Hesitation* (1925), twenty-five stories that ranged across the central social, political and cultural issues of Lu Xun's time, and created characters who swiftly rooted themselves in the national imagination. In both his fiction and essays (a form at which he also excelled), Lu Xun distinguished himself from less disciplined contemporaries through the controlled craftsmanship of his narratives, his critical intelligence, and the sardonic humour that overlays his recounting of even the blackest episodes. The traces of Lu Xun's cosmopolitan reading habits (in Chinese, Japanese and German translations) are in evidence throughout: in a lofty command of satire picked up from the Polish Sienkiewicz; in an eerie symbolism refined by his translations of the Russian Andreev. 'Read no Chinese books,' he once advised China's youth. 'Or as few as you can. But read more foreign books.'¹¹

Lu Xun publicly regarded his fiction as a kind of cultural medicine, designed to draw the

poison out of the Chinese national character. ‘As for why I wrote fiction,’ he reflected in 1933, ‘I still uphold the principle of “enlightenment” of more than a decade ago. I think it must “serve life” and furthermore reform life... Thus my subjects were often drawn from the unfortunates of this sick society; my aim was to expose the disease so as to draw attention to its cure.’¹² And many of the stories collected in *Outcry* and *Hesitation* are, on one level, straightforwardly obsessed with China’s predicament. Lu Xun’s favoured narrative tone of supercilious irony appears designed to advance his stories’ therapeutic aspirations: distancing the reader from the people and events described, bolstering our faith in the objectivity of our literary doctor. Lu Xun’s early fiction is a search for subjects, situations and forms (character sketches, reminiscences, parodies, dense symbolic realism, melancholy nostalgia) by which to represent the national emergency.

Ever-present – in the boorish inhumanity of the drinkers in the Universal Prosperity Tavern, for example, or the bestial gurning of the villagers in ‘Diary of a Madman’ – is the Crowd, a collective illustration of China’s moral bankruptcy. Within years of his creation, Ah-Q – Lu Xun’s most extended denunciation of the idiotic, able-bodied everyman – had begun to enter the language as expressive shorthand for every imaginable blemish on the national character: its obsession with face; its superiority complex; its servility before authority and cruelty towards the weak; its conceited delight in ignorance. (According to one account, Lu Xun chose the Roman letter of his hero’s name for its resemblance to a blank face with a pigtail – an all-purpose signifier for Chinese manhood.) Lu Xun’s mock-biography seems determined to channel the reader’s contempt at the abject Ah-Q: in the narrator’s facetious struggles to fit his subject into the parameters of respectable historiography; in the sardonic chapter headings; in the convolutions by which Ah-Q takes his ‘moral victories’.

But Lu Xun’s complexity as a writer goes beyond the bitterness of his vision of China; beyond a self-righteous condemnation of the backward Chinese masses. At the heart of the catechisms of *Outcry* and *Hesitation* lies a string of unreliable narrators who transform his stories into shrewdly crafted vehicles for casting doubt on literature’s ability to shoulder the political burdens it had taken on at the start of the century.

Modern Chinese fiction was, from its inception, compromised by the motives of its inventors. In their calls for a ‘realist’ literature to save the country, intellectuals such as Chen Duxiu envisioned a kind of fiction that would both diagnose and cure the sickness of modern China. The New Culture Movement was aiming not so much for a distanced grasp of reality

as for an instrument with which to reform it. Almost as soon as they seized upon realism as the key to China's survival, Chinese writers began to soften their concept of mimesis, fearing that an 'excessive' stress on objectivity might prove 'destructive'. 'Merely to criticize without interpreting can cause melancholy and deep sorrow,' counselled Mao Dun, one of the period's leading exponents of literary realism and naturalism, 'and these can lead to despondency.'¹³ (This was an anxiety that Lu Xun admitted to sharing, writing regretfully in his Preface to *Outcry* that 'I often stooped to distortions and untruths: adding a fictitious wreath of flowers to Yu'er's grave in "Medicine"; forbearing to write that Mrs Shan never dreams of her son in "Tomorrow", because my generalissimos did not approve of pessimism. And I didn't want to infect younger generations – dreaming the glorious dreams that I too had dreamed when I was young – with the loneliness that came to torment me' (p. 20).)

The relationship between the (implicitly) intellectual, upper-class narrator and the lower-class protagonists that realist literary texts favoured soon became troubling to May Fourth writers. Quite apart from the difficulties of developing sufficient familiarity with a labouring milieu to write convincingly about it, such writers had to ponder awkward issues of narrative distance: how to prevent realism's aura of objectivity morphing into contempt for the suffering masses for whom they felt instinctive sympathy. A self-confidence in the writer's ability to doctor the nation (through a Europeanized literature incomprehensible to the Chinese masses) collided with an acute sense of intellectual guilt and a self-loathing urge to erase bourgeois authorship with a literature 'of the people'. Lu Xun's genius lay in his grasp of this paradox: in his ability both to express a critical vision of reality, and – through his handling of narrative form and perspective – to expose the limitations of China's realist manifesto.¹⁴

To see this in action, we might return to 'The Real Story of Ah-Q'. Our condescending biographer, we realize, is a thoroughly compromised man who slips between the various worlds that he parodies: the flatulent Confucian literary tradition; the new learning; the parochial Weizhuang; the cannibalistic crowd. He can, as he pleases, keep his distance as an observer and yet gain privileged access to Ah-Q's thought processes. When Ah-Q leaves Weizhuang for the city, our supposedly omniscient biographer unconventionally stays behind and waits for his subject to return before taking up the story again, merging himself into the ranks of the villagers. 'I wrote "The Real Story",' Lu Xun once recalled, 'with the intention of exposing the weakness of my fellow citizens – I did not specify whether or not I myself was

included therein.’¹⁵ Throughout, his narrator’s satirical stance is made possible only by his mastery of the written word – by his collusion in an authoritarian literate tradition that delights in terrorizing illiterate plebeians, and that in the final courtroom scene at last crushes Ah-Q’s nerve. In Lu Xun’s grand finale, the reader himself – richly entertained over some fifty pages by Ah-Q’s idiocies – is drawn guiltily into the execution’s bestial audience: into its ‘monstrous coalition of eyes, gnawing into his soul’, ogling the horror of Ah-Q’s ritual sacrifice (p. 123).

Time and again, Lu Xun pulls this trick, drawing himself and his audience into his crowds of numb spectators. In ‘A Public Example’, the narration pans across the mob, leaving the reader a spectator of dehumanized surfaces. But it is in ‘New Year’s Sacrifice’ that he most unsettlingly implicates the intellectual narrator, the crowd and the reader in the violence of literary voyeurism. In telling the story of a peasant woman’s persecution to death by bad luck and social circumstance – the kind of material that would lend itself nicely to a Communist morality tale – Lu Xun averts the plot’s melodrama through framing her tale to expose the failures both of Confucian society and of the story’s progressive narrator, unable to bring a shred of comfort to a desperate beggar-woman near the end of her life. In a deliberate repetition of the account of the tragic death of the woman’s son, Lu Xun forces his readers to join Luzhen’s callous listeners, allowing us first to ‘chew deliciously’ on her sorrow then to share the townspeople’s sense of boredom, ‘spitting it out in disgust’ as dregs (p. 174). Recycling a device deployed at the end of ‘Upstairs in the Tavern’ and ‘The Loner’, the story ends with an incongruous exhalation of relief by the narrator, his spirits lifted by the recital just passed – a jibe at the moral cheapness of catharsis.

‘It is true that I dissect other people all the time,’ Lu Xun once wrote. ‘But I dissect myself far more often, and far more savagely.’¹⁶ (It cannot be accidental that his anatomizations always take place in transparently autobiographical landscapes: in Luzhen, a fictional version of his birthplace, Shaoxing, and its satellite villages; or in Beijing, Lu Xun’s adopted hometown between 1912 and 1926.) In his movement between irony, despair and hope, and with his talent for diagnosis but refusal to prescribe, he engineered a meditation on the ethics of reading and writing – and laid bare the dilemmas of China’s modern literature.

Lu Xun’s outward radicalism through these years stood at curious odds with his conservative private life. In 1906, he had submitted to a loveless marriage arranged by his mother. Although the match was possibly never consummated, for years he kept up a façade of

marital cohabitation, and supported his wife financially throughout his lifetime. For all the energy that he expended on attacking Confucian values, he was himself a devotedly filial son setting up home in 1919 with his mother, his wife, his two brothers and their Japanese wives. (He enjoyed an especially close relationship with his essayist brother Zhou Zuoren. Returning to Japan in 1906 after his marriage, Lu Xun took back with him not his new wife but Zhou, enabling them to embark upon various ill-fated early literary collaborations.) Several of the lighter pieces in *Outcry* and *Hesitation* offer snapshots of the extended family's intriguing menage: the eccentricities of his sister-in-law's rabbit rearing in 'A Cat among the Rabbits', the household's trickle of bohemian visitors in 'A Comedy of Ducks'. On his arranged marriage, though, Lu Xun publicly maintained a stolid silence.

In 1923, however, Lu Xun and Zhou became mysteriously estranged from each other, the older brother moving his mother and wife out to a separate Beijing residence. Although neither brother convincingly explained the causes of the rift, Zhou's Japanese wife accused her brother-in-law of making sexual advances at her. (Through the 1910s and early 1920s, Lu Xun may well have remained largely celibate; according to one account, he refused to wear padded trousers through Beijing's bitter winters in order to freeze out his sexual frustration.¹⁷)

Whatever the truth behind the split, within another couple of years Lu Xun had found emotional solace in, at last, a meaningful romantic attachment: with Xu Guangping, a former student who would give birth to his only son in 1929. Conjugal happiness seems rather to have blunted his creative impulse: while the seven years from 1918 to 1925 produced two short-story collections and a darkly surreal prose-poetry sequence, *Wild Grass*, his remaining eleven years yielded only one further volume of fiction. Domestic pleasures did little, however, to temper his professional and personal belligerence. Throughout his working life, he had a habit of falling out with colleagues and acquaintances, abandoning most of his teaching jobs and publishing projects a few months after beginning them. Having somehow survived at the Ministry of Education for fourteen years, he was forced out in 1926 after a noisy vendetta against his minister. Though capable of generously mentoring younger writers, he could also violently overreact to perceived criticisms or slights. One analysis of his correspondence estimates that the fingers of one hand would not be needed to count the number of Lu Xun's peers that he managed to be consistently kind about.¹⁸ After 1925, his instinctive spikiness was further sharpened by paranoid suspicions about gossip over his adulterous liaison with a woman sixteen years his junior (divorce from his arranged marriage).

was, apparently, out of the question). When Xu Guangping was expelled for radical insubordination on her Student Committee, Lu Xun saved some of his most chilling public vitriol for her college principal, whom he denounced – with perplexing misogyny, given the sympathy he expressed in his fiction and essays for Chinese women – as a withered, twisted widow, stirring up slander about his beloved.¹⁹

As the middle years of the 1920s firmly established Lu Xun as a literary celebrity – through his polemical essays and editing of prestigious literary magazines – he energetically kept up his profile in aggressive quarrels with writers, scholars and politicians. China's new-style, post-May Fourth intellectuals were much given to temper and melodrama: one noted writer, Yu Dafu, considered drowning himself after his proficiency in German was questioned by a rival; when one of Lu Xun's poems was rejected by a newspaper's editor-in-chief, a junior editor (and promoter of Lu Xun's work) slapped his boss in the face and resigned. Lu Xun's abundant capacity for grudges (eleven years after a Beijing professor criticized him for failing to acknowledge a source, Lu Xun was still publicly sniping at the 'lying dog' who accused him of plagiarism) did little to cool this overheated world.

While China's fractious literati squabbled, the country was embarking on a further bloody phase of its intermittent twentieth-century revolution. In 1923, the Soviet Union brokered – and financed – an improbable United Front between the young Chinese Communist Party (founded in 1921 by the New Culture luminaries Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao) and the right-wing Nationalist Party. By helping to defeat the warlords who had carved China up among themselves, the theory went, the Soviets would drive forward the national bourgeois revolution which would in turn provide a launching pad for Communism. But in 1927, with the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek on the brink of taking the great urban prizes of Shanghai and Nanjing, and with the Communists becoming, in Chiang's eyes, unacceptably radical in their efforts to mobilize against landowners and businessmen, the alliance ruptured. On 12 April, he set an armed force of some one thousand men at Shanghai's labour unions; one hundred unionists were gunned down at a single protest rally alone. Later that year, forces rallied by the Communists were similarly massacred in Changsha, Wuhan, Nanchang and, finally, Guangzhou, where leftists, quickly identified by the dye marks left round their necks from their red kerchiefs, were drowned in bundles of ten or twelve in the river by the city.

'I am terrorized,' wrote Lu Xun in the immediate aftermath, temporarily paralysed by the

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