

# Lu Xun's Fiction

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## *Lu Xunove poviedky*

*Resumé* Lu Xun, vynikajúci spisovateľ dvadsiateho storočia v Číne, vo svojom diele často odhaľuje obdivuhodné osobné rysy postáv. V tomto krátkom pojednaní autorka predstavuje dve Lu Xunove poviedky, v ktorých čitateľ nachádza krásne opisy ľudskej pokory a súcitu.

*Abstract* As China's outstanding twentieth century writer, Lu Xun often reveals in his creative works admirable personal traits. In this brief essay two stories by Lu Xun are explored for permitting readers to glimpse the cherished values of humility and compassion.

*Keywords* China, Literature (20th c.) · Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), »Guxiang« 故鄉 (1921), »Zhufu« 祝福 (1924), »Xiwang« 希望 (1925) · Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849) · Harold Isaacs (1910–1986)

The perceptive reader does not passively skim over the pages of a novel or short story. He need not be a literary critic, the text leads him to ask various questions. Such questions don not necessarily have to be technical dealing with the techniques of writing or the veracity of the text. The perceptive reader may very well pose a different set of questions, such as those dealing with the author who penned the text. What kind of person was he? Was he morally concerned with his time, or the society of which he was a part? Did he search for solutions to problems of his day by means of his writing?

These and many others are significant when we discuss Lu Xun and his role in modern Chinese literature. For, without doubt, his artistic contribution,

whether as poet, essayist or short story writer was unprecedented at his time. Just what was it that led Lu Xun to assume his pre-eminent role will engage writers and critics about Lu Xun and his works for much time to come.

Many years ago I was permitted a small glimpse of Lu Xun as a person. Viola Isaacs, Harold Isaacs's wife, told me the following story.<sup>1</sup> While in Shanghai, the couple had invited Lu Xun for dinner. He came and presented them with a book. When Viola exclaimed that it was not one of his books, Lu Xun replied that it would have been immodest of him to bring his own book. When reading Lu Xun's works, this characteristic of modesty, at times well hidden and sometimes not, is always there.

Another glimpse of Lu Xun, the human being, came to me when reading his short story *New Year's Sacrifice* (»Zhufu« 祝福, 1924). The characteristic that the story hides, yet also reveals to the reader is that of compassion. The author asks us to feel compassion not only for Xiang Lin's wife, but for the narrator as well; for his inability to understand, to empathize, to extend a helping hand. Lu Xun is critical, but he abstains from judgmentalism, for he could have easily passed judgment and condemned. Instead the reader is asked to be generous to both the woman and the narrator in their delusions.

Let me take a closer look at this story. A widowed maid servant is hired by a scholar's family. She turns out to be excellent, hard working and willing to do any work. Then, one day, she is kidnapped by her dead husband's kinsmen and

This essay, as well as the three following (Findeisen, Katz-Goehr, and Rošker), was originally written for an edition devoted to Lu Xun of the »Jingdian zuojia zhuankan« 經典作家專刊 supplement to the journal *Wenyi bao* 文藝報 in September 2013, but for technical reasons unfortunately did not reach the especially appointed editor Zhang Mengyang 張夢陽 in due time. However, two of them have been already published in Chinese translation, i.e. Katz-Goehr's as »Wo he Lu Xun« 我和魯迅, tr. by Qiao Lihua 喬麗華, and Rošker's as »Wangjiu de xiyouji:zai A'erbeisishan en'guang xia de Lu Xun« 旺玖的西遊記：在阿爾卑斯山恩光的魯迅, tr. by Shi Xiaoyan 施曉燕, in *Shanghai Lu Xun yanjiu* 上海魯迅研究 (Winter 2013), 127-139. Should be noted that the original requirement by *Wenyi bao* was to convey a subjective approach; whence the following contributions have to be read under this perspective, and not as articles with scholarly claims—*The Editor*.

1 Harold Isaacs (1910-1986) was a journalist who lived in China from 1930 to 1935 and again during WW II. From 1932 to 1934 he published the *China Forum*. Two early translations of Lu Xun's short stories appeared in English in its pages. See »K'ung I-chi«, tr. by George A. Kennedy, *China Forum* 1,5 (March 1932), 7-8; »Medicine«, tr. by Kennedy, *China Forum* 1,14 (May 1932), 7. For a brief biography of Isaacs, see Matthias Messmer, *Jewish Wayfarers in Modern China* (Lanham; Boulder, CD: Lexington Books, 2012), 47-59.

carried off to his village. It emerges that she had run away from her mother-in-law who wanted to marry her off to another man.

Here two important facts must be remembered. Due to the custom of exogamous marriages, a daughter upon marriage belonged to her husband's family who could dispose of her as it wished, even after she was widowed. In this particular case, the mother-in-law wanted to remarry her to obtain the bride price in order to finance another son's marriage. Widow remarriage was, however, generally frowned upon and chaste widowhood was extolled. Indeed, memorial arches were often erected for chaste widows in traditional China.

Despite bravely resisting remarriage, the woman was sent off in a bridal chair to her new husband. Living together as husband and wife, she bore a son. But misfortune followed, her husband died, the little son was carried off by a wolf and was devoured. Once again she is brought to the scholar's house and hired as a maid servant. But now, and this is when the »I« narrator meets up with her again, she is a vastly changed woman. No longer as hard working, her memory has begun to fail, and she insists on telling everyone over and over the sad story of her loss. Having remarried, she is moreover polluted. The woman of the house prevents her from touching any items used in sacred observance.

It is the New Year and the narrator, an intellectual, has arrived at his relations' home for the holiday where he meets her again. She questions him about the afterlife and the narrator is at a loss what to tell her. Her concern with the afterlife was caused by someone having informed her that by marrying two husbands their ghosts would fight over her in the netherworld. Yama, king of that other world, would have no choice but to cut her in two and give each man one half.

What to do? It was proposed she go to the local temple, buy a threshold as a substitute for herself so that people could step on it at all times. In this way she would atone for her transgression. However, even this remedy brought no improvement in her condition. She deteriorated further and was finally dismissed by the narrator's relatives. By the time he meets her she has become a beggar. Soon after he is told of her death. At the end of the story the narrator's perplexity of what to tell the woman is at last resolved. He is relieved. Hearing the celebration of the sacrifice, »the doubt which had preyed on me from dawn to early night was swept clean away.«<sup>2</sup>

2 *Selected Stories of Lu Hsün*, tr. by Yang Hsien-yi [Yang Xianyi 楊憲益] and Gladys Yang [Dai Naidie 戴乃迭] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960), 188.

The New Year Sacrifice conveys more than the encounter between members of the upper and lower classes. The author repeatedly tells the reader that the narrator is at a loss for words, feels uncomfortable, wants to tell the woman that he is not sure whether there are ghosts and if there is a netherworld. He does not find the right words, the necessary empathy to relieve her anxiety about afterlife. Yet, we the readers, are not led to judge Xiang Lin's wife for trying to find solace in superstitious practices. The narrator's impotence rather conveys the author's compassion (perhaps also his own impotence) when confronted by Chinese cultural practices. I would like to suggest that the author's compassion, instead of assertive judgment is precisely related to the modesty Lu Xun expressed in small matters, like presenting not his own book.

A very different, yet also similar, story is related in *My Old Home* (»Gu-xiang« 故鄉). Here too the upper class »I« narrator, meets a member of the lower classes,<sup>3</sup> a childhood playmate, he has not seen in many years. The occasion of their meeting is the liquidation of the narrator's ancestral home that has been sold and he has come to fetch his family for relocation elsewhere. The story deals with the narrator's recollection of his and Juntu, his playmate's childhood and the present when they are two grown men. A useful contrast is provided by having his young nephew meet Juntu's small son. An instant friendship develops between the two youngsters whereas the grown men are uncomfortable with one another. Although in this story too is the encounter of members of the two classes, the intellectual and the toiling villager, it is also an encounter between childhood and adulthood. No barriers existed earlier. They exist now. Not only on the part of the visitor, but on the part of the villager who assumes a deferential attitude. The distance between them is reaffirmed when Juntu chooses among the items to be given away an incense burner and candle sticks he will take home. To the narrator this signifies the extent to which Juntu adheres to old beliefs.

Lu Xun had written *My Old Home* in 1921, three years earlier than *New Year Sacrifice*. Still, he abstained in this story also from judgmentalism. Putting his faith in gods by burning incense in the incense burner, lighting candles in candlesticks are a kind of hope he dared no longer have. Among children barriers might not yet exist. But they will inevitably among adults. »[...] hope was no

3 Marston Anderson has noted that Lu Xun employs the »I« narrator in those stories where a member of the upper classes encounters a lower class person. See Anderson's essay in Leo Ou-fan Lee, ed., *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, ed. by Leo Lee Ou-fan (Berkeley, CA; London: University of California Press, 1985), 41.

more than an idol I had created myself«, the narrator muses.<sup>4</sup> Expecting salvation from the gods or from the future are both delusions. In a prose poem from 1925 («Xiwang» 希望, 1925; Hope) Lu Xun underscores the problem of hope with a quotation by the Hungarian poet Petőfi about hope like despair being equally delusions.<sup>5</sup> Unlike in the 1918 story *A Madman's Diary* («Kuangren riji» 狂人日記) he could no longer write »Save the children«, the final sentence in this powerful tale.

But why bring modesty in conjunction with compassion? Modesty suggests an unassuming attitude of diffidence and moderation. A modest person will refrain from overstating a case and from judging others. Compassion is often used synonymously with pity and, while certainly related, it is also different. Compassion implies commiseration and kindness in understanding. It is more than sympathy which is the basis of pity.

Lu Xun does not have sympathy for either the barriers between adults of different classes nor for the intellectuals' impotence that afflicts them as adults. Neither the illusion of hope or escape from it all, nor refuge in superstitious practices are remedies for the ills of his day. Here Lu Xun's modesty in everyday matters, like presenting a book, is as obvious as in his literary works. Compassionate, even tender, understanding is first necessary. Only then can solutions be proposed. Lu Xun's combination of modesty with compassion is an important lesson even for our own day.

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4 *Selected Stories of Lu Hsün*, 92.

5 Lu Hsün, *Wild Grass*, anon. tr. [Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie] (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 19.