

# How I Came to Translate Lu Xun

Amira Katz-Goehr

## *Ako som sa pustila do prekladu Lu Xuna*

*Resumé* Prvým impulzom pre prekladanie čínskej literatúry do hebrejčiny bol kurz profesorky Irene Eber na Hebrejskej univerzite v Jeruzaleme, ktorý som absolvovala koncom 60. rokov. Lu Xun bol s nami od samého začiatku. Vďaka svojej komplexnej osobnosti, statusu hrdinu, turbulentnej dobe jeho života, pretrvávajúceho symbolu a mýtického postavenia sa pravdepodobne mohol úplne prirodzene stať mojou prvou voľbou. Avšak nebolo to tak. Predchádzali mu iní spisovatelia, kým som získala dostatok odvahy na to, aby som sa pustila do Lu Xuna ako človeka a ako autora. Zbierka jeho poviedok (z antológií *Naban*, *Panghuang* a *Gushi xinbian*) vyšla vo vydavateľstve Am Oved Publishers v Tel Avive roku 1992.

*Abstract* My first inspiration to translate modern Chinese literature into Hebrew came from a course given by Professor Irene Eber at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in the late 1960s. Lu Xun was with us right from the beginning. The complex personality, hero of his turbulent time, ongoing symbol and myth up to our day, would perhaps, naturally, be the first choice. But he wasn't. Other writers preceded, before I felt brave enough to tackle Lu Xun, the man and his writings. The collection of his stories (from *Naban*, *Panghuang*, and *Gushi xinbian*) was published by Am Oved Publishers, Tel Aviv, 1992.

*Keywords* China, Literature (20th c.) · Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936), *Naban* 呐喊 (1923), *Panghuang* 彷徨 (1926), *Gushi xinbian* 故事新編 (1936)

The department of Chinese and Japanese Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, later to become the Department of East Asian Studies, only recently

to change yet again to the Department of Asian Studies, was founded in the late 1960s. I started my life as a convert to Chinese Studies with the establishment of this department.

We were no more than five or six students at the time, a number increasing for quite some years now to more than a hundred candidates registering each new academic year. Staff was scarce but wholly dedicated and enthusiastic, leading us, their students, into what we gradually recognized as a 'China germ' which once set in, remains for ever.

Other than the world renowned scholars who founded the Department—Harold Z. Schiffrin, Avraham Altman and Ellis Joffe, we had the good luck to have yet another such scholar arriving a bit later from the US—Irene Eber, a specialist in modern Chinese literature. She was my inspiration from that time on, and with our beloved Beijing teacher of the Chinese language—Dora Shikman (a Chinese who married a Jewish resident of China and emigrated with him to Israel), gave me the great gift of a life long love and profession—Chinese literature and the translation of it into my mother tongue—Hebrew.

Professor Eber who taught a course titled »Writers and Intellectuals in Modern China«, started her course by introducing us to classical and traditional Chinese culture, but soon got us into the hub of what kept me continually enthralled—the transitional period from the 'old' to the 'new', incorporating in it seminal discussions of literary and political ideologies and strategies. Lu Xun was not late to arrive on the scene. Even before one was sufficiently familiar (and one was never to be that anyway) with his writings and with the detail of his biography and circumstances, the immensity of his personality and the role he played in the China of his time and later, somehow caught my imagination right away.

My first attempt at translation with a number of co-students—a collection of eleven stories of modern Chinese writers—was in 1983. Lu Xun was the main writer represented with five of his stories—the Introduction to Call to Arms, Kong Yiji, Medicine, The True Story of Ah Q and In the Wineshop. Ours was probably a premature enterprise—we were graduates and we probably did not yet perceive the enormity of the task. With the years, I came to realize this when further studying of the complexities of the period—political and cultural—which confronted its writers. All this was very much in my mind when I set out to translate a volume exclusively dedicated to Lu Xun's stories.

Perhaps appropriately though not calculated, I found myself postponing this project and starting with what seemed to be 'less ambitious' ventures—translations of Lao She's 老舍 (1899–1966) *Luotuo Xiangzi* (Camel Xiangzi; 1939/55) in

1985, and Shen Congwen's 沈從文 (1902–1988) *Biancheng* 邊城 (Border Town; 1934) in 1989. Or putting it slightly differently; did I really want to translate Lu Xun? Did I sincerely 'like' his writing? Presumably 'liking' is not the right word. One adores and admires, perhaps even without asking or clearly understanding why. What was involved then, I tend to think now, was a certain feeling of duty. One could not claim to be translating modern Chinese literature and leave him out.

In any case, when the time seemed to be ripe and I dared to tackle Lu Xun, the difficulty of the task right away became apparent as soon as starting the actual work of translation. But the book was born and emerged. It was published in 1992 by Am Oved Publishers (Tel Aviv) and I assembled in it 16 stories from three of Lu Xun's collections: (1) *Naban* 吶喊 (Call to Arms; 1923): Introduction, Diary of a Madman, Kong Yiji, Medicine, Tomorrow, Story of Hair, Storm in a Teacup, My Homestead, The True Story of Ah Q, Dragon Boat Festival, The White Light. (2) *Panghuang* 彷徨 (Wandering; 1926): Autumn Sacrifice, In the Wineshop, Soap, Regretting the Past. (3) *Gusbi xinbian* 故事新編 (Old Stories Retold; 1936): Forging Swords. 15 pages of notes and a postscript follow the stories.

I don't need to describe here in detail what are the well-known problems of translating Lu Xun into any language—the amount of footnotes to explain current and past events, cultural terms and concepts, allusions and hints; not to mention the laconic, terse style which needs rounding in translation so as to be made comprehensible; the variety of forms, structures and tones of voice which configure each story and which ideally demand appropriate stylistic equivalents. The attempt to reflect Lu Xun's unique language and narrative forms, and the particular temptation when translating into Hebrew to find parallels for different linguistic registers and idioms (of the Chinese), could not but be frustrating, if not doomed to failure.

An additional and massive problem appeared when trying to write a postscript to the book—the attempt to 'summarize' the man and his writings seemed to be not only impossible, but a kind of an impertinence. Trying to describe Lu Xun's intellectual beliefs as they developed and arose from the turbulences and changing demands of the time, the varying stages and genres of his literary output, his political writings and activities, and combining all this with his skeptical, pessimistic and stormy personality, seemed to be an act of folly. Still, it had to be done—Lu Xun and his stories could not be presented without being substantially introduced.

Those were far off days—the translations go back to the late 1980s. However, Lu Xun's stories ever since have been accompanying me not now as a translator, but as a teacher trying to convey them to my students. In the last 20 years of my teaching at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, they have been with me either in their original form in my classes of translation, or in their Hebrew dress, when teaching classes introducing modern Chinese literature. The experience, the distance of time, the additional familiarity with Lu Xun and his period, have, so it seems to me today, reshaped the awe-inspiring if somewhat vague awe the stories and their author aroused in me in the past. They have in a way »softened«, and what initially felt as over-structured (and edgy, at least in their translated form) literary pieces, has been shorn away. The vulnerability of Lu Xun transpires not only, as 'proclaimed' states of mind (in stories like *In the Wineshop*, *Regretting the Past* or *The Misanthrope*), reflect a touching and fragile personality. The stories have grown on me more and more. The icon, myth or deified fighter, the depressive and heroic pessimist that he was, are still all there; but his writings have become for me genuine and exquisite works of literature.

*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Asian Studies*