

A Fruitful Journey to the West— Lu Xun on the Sunny Side of the Alps

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Plodná Cesta na západ—Lu Xun na slnečnej strane Álp

Resumé V tomto článku autorka, ktorá tiež preložila niekoľko Lu Xunových poviedok do slovinského jazyka, predstaví svoje rané stretnutia s dielami tohto spisovateľa. Autorka aj podáva krátku porovnávaciu analýzu tohto významného spisovateľa a jedného z najvýznamnejších slovinských modernistického spisovateľov Ivana Cankara, ktorý žil a pracoval na prelome 19. a 20. storočia. Odkrýva tak kultúrou podmienené rozdiely medzi dvoma významnými spisovateľmi, ktorých spájali podobné ambície, ideály i stratené ilúzie.

Abstract In the present article, the author who is also a translator of several Lu Xun's short stories into Slovene, recalls her first encounters with his work. It also provides a short comparative analysis of this important Chinese writer and one of the most important Slovene *fin-de-siècle* modernist writer Ivan Cankar. It exposes the culturally conditioned differences between the two significant writers who are connected by many similar aspirations, common ideals and lost illusions.

Keywords China, Literature (20th c.) · Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936), *Naban* 吶喊 (1923), *Panghuang* 彷徨 (1926), *Yecao* 野草 (1927) · Slovenia, Literature (19th–20th c.) · Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), *Na klanču* (1903), *Martin Kačur* (1905), *Hlapec Jernej in jegova pravica* (1907) · Comparative Literature (Chinese-Slovenian)

1 *Lu Xun and Me*

When I first met Lu Xun in 1981, that is to say, when I first had the pleasure and joy of immersing myself in his short stories and essays, I was a twenty-one years

old exchange student at Nankai University, in Tianjin. The chaos prevailing in my soul in that youthful time resembled the turmoil observed and described by Lu Xun in the Chinese society of his own day. In looking back, I think it was for this reason that there was an immediate »shock of recognition« between Lu Xun and myself. As the months went by, I was increasingly drawn to his message and the overwhelming beauty of his language, to his despair and melancholy but also to the revolutionary radicalism of his literary stance, and the portent of a better world which he gave me in exchange for my devotion to his texts. Our relationship was thus conditioned by a 'love at first sight' and I have never felt that this love was unilateral, or came exclusively from me. For I was also offered all of his unconditional love, the somewhat melancholy love he felt not only towards his Chinese homeland, but towards all of humanity, to each and every human being, no matter how marginal and insignificant they might be.

As I discovered many years later, long after my return to Europe, Lu Xun's short stories had already been translated into Slovene, though based on the German translation of his work. During the last term of my study exchange in China, I translated his short novel, *The New Year's Sacrifice* (»Zhufu« 祝福; 1924) which had moved me deeply. When this story was published in one of the leading Slovene literary journals, *Književni listi* (Literary Journal) in 1982, it represented the first translation of one of his novellas prepared directly from Chinese into Slovene.

Almost twenty years later, a collection of his best known short stories which I had translated into Slovene with two of my former sinology students, Katja Kolšek and Andrej Stopar, appeared under the title *The Madman's Diary and Other Stories* (*Dnevnik nekega norca in druge zgodbe*, 2008). A third student, Tina Ilgo, who was completing her doctoral dissertation »Kritika tradicionalne kitajske družbe skozi simboliko v Lu Xunovih novelah« (A Critique of Traditional Chinese Society through the Symbolism in Lu Xun's Works; 2011) on this writer at that time, wrote the Afterword. Our intention in publishing this volume was to show the Slovene reader that Lu Xun was a giant of modern Asian literature, a great writer who possessed that rare but precious ability of combining a sophisticated style with profound content. This anthology, which was the first collection of his short fiction translated directly from the Chinese in Slovenia, can still contribute significantly to a better understanding of modern Chinese culture and society in our country and hopefully broaden the horizons of its readers. The significance of Chinese modernism in the context of China's own literary tradition, as well as in the context of international cultural exchange, has so far been little appreciated in our country.

2 *Lu Xun and Ivan Cankar*

Part of my general fascination and identification with Lu Xun's work was rooted in the fact that, in reading him, I often felt an intimate resonance in this early 20th century Chinese author with the works of the Slovene writer Ivan Cankar (1876–1918). Coincidentally, Cankar's short stories were themselves translated from their English version into Chinese by Gou Chengyi 勾承益, a visiting lecturer of Chinese at the Department of Asian and African Studies at Ljubljana University, in 2001.

Although Cankar, who is not only considered to be the chief exponent of Slovene modernism, but was also one of Europe's most important *fin-de-siècle* writers, died the same year in which Lu Xun wrote his first important novella *A Madman's Diary* (»Kuangren riji« 狂人日記; 1918), both writers lived in periods of turbulent transition and of the breakdown of values, in which the old, outdated worlds were collapsing, but with no new ones visible on the horizon to take their place. Thus, both bodies of work are dominated by themes connected to the struggles of individuals in conflict with the rural petty bourgeoisie and their daily working lives, and are defined by social criticism. At the same time, in a more concrete sense, the very different circumstances in which they lived and worked

manifested themselves in their divergent literary approaches and treatment of similar social symptoms.

While in his story, *The Bailiff Jernej and his Rights* (»Hlapec Jernej in jegova pravica«; 1907), Ivan Cankar symbolically introduced the struggle of the oppressed working class against their exploiters; in his short novel *The True Story of Ah Q* (»A Q zhengzhuàn« 阿 Q 正傳; 1921–22), Lu Xun used a completely different approach in treating problems of social collapse that stemmed from widespread poverty. The dominant trait of its protagonist, Ah Q, or his ‘spiritual victories’ (*jingshen shenli* 精神勝利) which can transform any defeat into a self-serving moral victory, can thus be seen as both a pitiless analysis of the mindset of the humiliated Chinese people, and a scathing criticism of the Chinese government’s servile but self-satisfied responses to Japanese imperialist aggression and European intimidation. And while in Cankar’s work one often senses his social-democratic convictions and class-consciousness, in Lu Xun it is the very idea of social classes that is being questioned. In the short novel »Kong Yiji« (孔乙己; 1919) in which a traditional Confucian scholar is shown to be a total failure, the writer demonstrates how social classes can simply disintegrate if the conditions are ripe for their decline. As many of his works confirm, resistance does not necessarily arise out of situations of social crisis. On the contrary, his depictions of the humble and oppressed Chinese people reveal an apathetic fatalism rather than the hope that salvation might be found in the solidarity among the most humiliated and despised members of society.

Their differences aside, Lu Xun and Cankar are united by a fundamental resignation, in which the glowing aspirations of young revolutionary intellectuals are often shattered by the hard edges of reality, whether it be in the tragedy of the Slovene ‘idealist’ in *Življenjepis nekega idealista* (Biography of an Idealist; 1904) or that of the Chinese ‘loner’ (»Guduzhe« 孤独者, in *Panghuang* 彷徨; 1925).

3 *Monuments for Women*

I suspect I am not the only Slovene reader of Lu Xun’s work who finds certain parallels with Ivan Cankar. Their short stories, novels and essays confirm that both writers were indignant, pessimistic and at times mordantly witty enemies of a social *status quo* as universally accepted as it was unjust. Both were pioneers in the struggle for social justice and the broadening of the spiritual horizons of their respective homelands. And both believed in the emancipation of women.

In his novel *On the Hill* (*Na klanču*; 1903) Cankar took a new approach to the idea of maternity. In writing this work, which is clearly autobiographical, Cankar erected a monument to his own mother and to all those women who were fighting to survive in an unjust, exclusionary society. While written in a symbolic style, with the narrative based on leitmotifs, in depicting the social context Cankar also used certain naturalistic elements. The novel is essentially the life story of the female protagonist, Francka, who is followed from her illegitimate birth to her death. The ending of the story remains open. Despite the despairing cries of her son («Sentenced to death! All suffering is useless, life is useless!»), the story concludes with a spark of hope in the form of a tiny, trembling red lamp in the window of a village teacher. This optimism is not limited to women or even the individual as such, but symbolizes the faith in a better future for all of humanity. As in Lu Xun's early works, in which he explores the same themes with great subtlety, education, knowledge and thought are seen as mankind's only hope for rising above material poverty and spiritual deprivation.

Lu Xun also dealt extensively with the oppressed condition of Chinese women. Among the texts that impressed me at the very start of our relationship was his essay *What Happened after Nora Left* («Nuola zou hou zenyang» 娜拉走後怎樣; 1924). In his short novels we find women characters who despite their suffering and apparently hopeless status are often stronger and much less fatalistic than their male counterparts. For example, the young widow Shan 單, in the short story, *A New Day* («Mingtian» 明天; 1919), whose two-years old boy dies from tuberculosis even after she has given all her meager savings to the village healer. Or Xiang Lin's wife 祥林嫂, the central, tragic character in the story *The New Year's Sacrifice* who due to a presumed 'state of impurity' is not allowed to participate in the holy rituals. After the only positive experience in her marginalized life, that of motherhood, ends with the unexpected death of her infant child, she increasingly seeks escape in an illusory sphere beyond reality. Her suffering is at the very limits of human endurance, both mental and physical. Her escape into insanity and the false consolation of lofty dreams, confirms a cultural bankruptcy even as it offers her the hope of being reunited with the object of her longing. Or again, the two mothers in the story *Medicine* («Yao» 藥; 1919) who meet at the gravesides of their sons, graves which are separated by a rigorous distinction, that of a 'worthy' from an 'unworthy' death. One son died of tuberculosis, even after his parents tried to save him with a cure based on cannibalism, or the essence of human flesh, while the other died due to his revolutionary activities. Both mothers know that their sons are equally the

victims of injustice: the first due to superstition, the second sacrificed to his ideals. Ultimately, both are victims of a social context where dreams cannot survive, as they inevitably become the nightmare of reality.

4 *At the Crossroads of Tradition and Modernity*

While Ivan Cankar is one of the great pioneers of Slovene modernism, Lu Xun's work stands like a milestone marking the beginning of contemporary Chinese culture, and thus also has strong political connotations. However, the significance of Lu Xun's literary production is primarily artistic, for he managed to produce short stories, essays, dramas and poems in a language that had been previously excluded from the domain of »great« literature. In a subtle and extraordinarily expressive way he managed to unite elements of the Chinese tradition with the mainstream of modern world literature.

Like Cankar, Lu Xun also sought a fruitful confrontation between his homeland and the most progressive European thought of that time. His works introduce us to a writer who writes from the heart and with the hope for a better world, but who at the same time does not nurture any illusions concerning the very real circumstances which underlie his work: »Freedom cannot be bought, it can, however, be sold. Man's biggest mistake is his constant hunger.«¹

This phrase is typical of a man who could sum up the most dramatic situations with a pithy aphorism. But behind his alleged lack of emotion there is the search for a precise analysis of Chinese society and its people. Reading between the lines of his prose, one can often detect a desire for change, a desire unburdened by resignation or distorted by false hopes, illusions or excessive enthusiasm. For Lu Xun, the hope for a better world was something »which is or is not. It's like a path on the ground. There was nothing in the beginning, but since many people went in the same direction, a path was formed.«²

This universal, unambiguous truth can most definitely be understood and appreciated by the Slovene reader, for hope also represented the heritage of Europe—and also of tiny Slovenia—and their history in the process of social

1 自由固不是錢所能買到的，但能夠為錢賣掉。人類有一個大缺點，就是常常藥飢餓。 »Nuola zou hou zenyang«, in *Lu Xun quanji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works], 18 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2005), 1: 168.

2 希望本是無所謂有，無所謂無的。這正如地上的路：其實地上本沒有路，走的人多了，也便成了路。 »Guxiang«, in *Lu Xun quanji*, 1: 510.

change. Like many European intellectuals of his time, Ivan Cankar believed that despite the dramatic events of history, courage could be contagious and hope take on a life of its own. In his short novel, *Nina*, he described the significance of human hope as follows: »*A hope which has been chosen by a human being as the vessel of his Life can never be betrayed. It cannot be betrayed by anything, not even by death itself, for it has been achieved, even if that life ends a half second later*«.

5 *Aspects of Difference: Confucian Cannibalism,
the False Faith in Innocence and the Critique of Spiritual Victories*

Any Slovene reader who takes the time to understand and appreciate this great Chinese writer will find many parallels between Ivan Cankar and Lu Xun. But Lu Xun offers something more. For the inhabitants of a small country located at the southern foot of the Alps, what he gives us are numerous insights into the uniqueness of the culture that produced him. For example, while madness is a universal human condition which can afflict anyone in any given society, the vision of cannibalistic madness which unfolds before our eyes while reading *A Madman's Diary* is the vision of a specifically Chinese madness. In Lu Xun's »madman« we can thus also recognize ourselves, even though we will never be able to fully understand certain very specific nuances of this madness, as reflected in Lu Xun's way of seeing and experiencing reality.

Comparing certain aspects of Lu Xun's inner perception of reality with certain aspects or levels of Cankar's expressive power in no way means equating their artistic styles or genres. While the works of both authors belong to early modern literature, and both imply a certain social realism or even naturalism, together with certain elements of symbolism and impressionism, they cannot be said to belong to a comparable current of modernity. And not only because the political and cultural modernization processes they represent are rooted in such different backgrounds, but also because their literary works reflect very different culturally conditioned interpretations of social problems, interpretations which are linked in turn to different intellectual histories, moral philosophies, social criticism, aesthetic training, etc., in short, all those areas which affect the ways in which human beings interpret reality and produce meaning.

While Lu Xun has often been called »the Chinese Gorki«, the reality from which Lu Xun's »madman« is escaping and which terrifies him, a reality which consumes the lives and destinies of many of Lu Xun's characters, is completely different from the one from which Gorki's heroes are fleeing and in which they

are inextricably trapped. A fact which European (and Slovene) literary theorists should bear in mind, given their all too common tendency to force the creative work of 'other' cultures into the moulds of their own methodological classifications. Lu Xun's work should not be read through the lense of Eurocentric categories of so-called 'World literature'. In such culturally determined and delimited categories, Lu Xun's *œuvre* could—at best—be classified as belonging to the lowest rank of social realism. On the contrary, we must read his work outside of such frameworks, for only in this way can we maintain the sort of openness required in order to obtain insights into a very different emotional and pragmatic stance, one which is alien to our everyday life, and to our own artistic procedures.

Cannibalism in Confucian society cannot be understood solely in terms of cannibalism in our own society. If the ancient Romans already spoke of a society in which 'man is a wolf to man' (»homo homini lupus«), then this trait is certainly deeply embedded in 'our' European culture. But the fact that the methods and ends of cannibalism differ depending on their cultural context is not the crucial point here. For while cannibalism is a phenomenon which can assume countless different images, manifest itself in many different forms, and for many different ends, what is common to all forms of cannibalism is the unbearable fact of swallowing another human being, even those closest to us, and thus of consuming, devouring ourselves.

All of Lu Xun's heroes are engaged in this self-consumption. Fearing that the world might swallow him, the madman consumes himself in his unbearable isolation, in which he takes refuge because he sees no alternative. Likewise, Ah Q who stands as a metaphor for the apathy of China at that time, consumes himself through his 'spiritual victories', while the figure of the suffering mother, which is recurrent in many of his short stories and novellas, instead devours herself due to the intrinsic falseness of the patriarchal tradition.

The traditional Chinese response to an essentially violent and unjust reality, is the path of obedience and patience (*ren* 忍), one of the prime canonical virtues of the Chinese tradition. The recompense for this apparently meaningless 'patience' is the promise of a spiritual victory. Ah Q, who is one of the most important characters in Lu Xun's fiction, embodies the unconscious faith in the power of such a 'victory', and of the positive identity deriving from it; an identity which, despite its illusory nature, can still guarantee the spiritual survival of those who, like himself, are abused, despised and condemned to failure.

The concept of 'spiritual victory' is inherent to all of the negative heroes in Lu Xun's work, transforming every defeat into a victory via a hermeneutical and

axiological shift typical of the Chinese tradition—a victory which is Pyrrhic, however, serving only the interests of the Chinese social elites. Lacking religion, in the sense of the »opium for the people«, in order to silence the voices of the humiliated and abused, the ruling classes had recourse to the outmoded ideology of 'patience'.

The Madman's Diary describes a different (although equally fruitless) reaction to the strategies of patience and spiritual victory. As we learn in the prologue, Lu Xun's »madman« has finally abandoned the realm of spiritual victory and accepted his destiny. He relinquishes his madness, i.e. his insight into the true nature of reality, in order to survive. He is 'cured' and like the protagonist of the Loner (»Guduzhe« 孤獨者; 1925) who also surrenders his ideals in order to survive, is able to go on living as a minor public official who now exists at only the most superficial level of his personality. But the madman's delirium ends with his final cry: »Save the children!« which being a form of insanity is also the expression of the most realistic of hopes.

The novella's theme of faith in children as the embodiments of innocence and the limitless possibilities of education, while profoundly Confucian can also be found in many currents of traditional Slovene intellectual history. Both discourses are grounded in a belief in the creative power of socialization. However, if we trace the full arc of Lu Xun's literary production—and here we find another parallel with Cankar—we will find that his belief in the positive potential of socialization is ultimately negated and reduced to dust.

The progressive degeneration of the self-protective and creative powers of »his« culture was of great concern to Lu Xun, both personally and intellectually. This motif appears in several of his stories, as well as in the novella Kong Yiji, in which the protagonist's decline charts the downfall of the economic, moral and political paradigms of Confucianism, and in the Loner, which has some striking similarities with Cankar's *Martin Kačur* (1905). For all his insights into the cannibalistic nature of a semi-colonial and proto-capitalist China, the Loner of the title still maintains his faith in the innocence of children. Only at the very end of the story does he realize that this faith was nothing more than the projection of his own, illusory ideals and his belief in the essential goodness of human nature. Both characters arrive at the painful understanding that the cruelty of this »innocence« cannot be corrected only through well-intentioned attempts at education which, in any case, is not available to all.

6 *Literary Bridges*

These first (and hopefully not the last) translations of Lu Xun's works offer Slovene readers the possibility of broadening their spiritual and intellectual horizons. I also like to think that the author would be happy to know that his works are being published in a minor country like Slovenia, which did not even exist when they were being written. This year a group of teachers and students of the Slovene Chair of Sinology presented Lu Xun's short drama *The Passerby* («Guoke» 過客; 1925). As a prelude to the drama, we chose Li Bai's 李白 (701–762) poem *Preface to the Feast in Peach and Plum Garden on a Spring Night* («Chunye yan Taoliyuan xu» 春夜宴桃李園序):

夫天地者，萬物之逆旅；
光陰者，百代之過客。
而浮生若夢，為歡幾何。

The universe is a temporary inn for all living things.

Time is the transit of visitors over the span of one hundred generations.

This drifting life is like a dream. There is too little time to enjoy the pleasure of living.

This poem may have served Lu Xun as an inspiration. It certainly would have inspired Ivan Cankar, for both writers were extremely sensitive to transient nature of the pleasures of life (*wei huan* 為歡).

The historical periods in which these two writers lived were anything but pleasurable, a fact which might help contemporary Slovene readers to identify with Lu Xun and his constant longing for a secret, still unformed path. Alongside his awareness of the cannibalistic nature of modern society, Lu Xun also offers us the possibility of meaningful survival in a world defined by a mechanistic view of reality. And through his art, we may come to understand that new paths are possible, and that the search for such paths is, in and of itself, a form of hope.

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