CONTENTS

1 Lu Xun's Disturbing Greatness
   W. J. F. Jenner

27 The Early-Qing Discourse on Loyalty
   Wing-ming Chan

53 The Dariyanya, the State of the Uriyangqai of the Altai, the Qasay and the Qamniyan
   Čeveng (C. Ž. Žamcarâno)
   —translated by I. de Rachewiltz and J. R. Krueger

87 Edwardian Theatre and the Lost Shape of Asia: Some Remarks on Behalf of a Cinderella Subject
   Timothy Barrett

103 Crossed Legs in 1930s Shanghai: How ‘Modern’ the Modern Woman?
   Francesca Dal Lago

145 San Mao Makes History
   Miriam Lang
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LU XUN’S DISTURBING GREATNESS

W. J. F. Jenner

1

Lu Xun 鲁迅 disturbs. Whenever you think you know where you are with him there turns out to be another aspect to the man. Read an unfamiliar piece of his or reread something that you think know already and he appears in a slightly or even alarmingly different light from the way you saw him before. His writing is always becoming something else. He is rich with contradictions, with apparent inconsistencies that are never resolved. His writing can be sheer magic or embarrassingly pedestrian, and move between profundity, wrongheadedness and brilliance. At his best he is penetratingly concise, and at his worst he goes on and on. This inconsistency is disturbing.

He is also disturbing when he is brought into discussions of May Fourth. If we use the term to refer to the wave of demonstrations, strikes and other protests that started on 4 May 1919 in Peking and swept across the cities of China it is very hard to find any connection between Lu Xun and what is generally regarded as a great patriotic movement. The embarrassing and inescapable fact is that as Zhou Shuren 周樹人 he was a bureaucrat in the service of the very Peking government that was the target of the May Fourth protests because of its sell-out of China’s sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference. One looks in vain in his diary for any reaction in May or June to the excitement.1 There is nothing about them in his few surviving letters from 1919, but on 4 May 1920—the date surely cannot be a coincidence—he writes a letter to Song Chongyi 宋崇艾, a former student from his time as a teacher in Zhejiang. The language is classical, not baibuwen 白話文, and the line he takes is hardly what the caricatured Lu Xun of his biographers would lead us to expect:

In recent years the country has been unstable, which has influenced the student world: the disturbances have already lasted a year. Conservatives think that these really are a source of chaos, while modernizers praise them

This is the text of a speech given in Peking in 1999 in commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement.

1 Lu Xun quan ji [The complete works of Lu Xun] (Peking: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), vol.14, Riji [Diary]. The silence will be found on pages 355–9. All references to Lu Xun’s works in this essay will be to this edition of Lu Xun quan ji, abbreviated as LXQ, unless otherwise specified.
exceedingly. The country’s students are sometimes called a disaster in the making and sometimes lauded as heroes. In my humble opinion they really do not affect China in the least. This is merely a passing phenomenon. To call them heroes is certainly to overpraise them, and to say that they are a disaster in the making is also very unfair.

This cool approach to the sound and fury of both conservatives and radicals is extended later in the same letter to the whole of the new culture movement. If we take a broader definition of the May Fourth Movement to include all of that push for cultural change that had been going on for years before 1919, Lu Xun, for all his involvement in it over many years, is just as dismissive of its prospects for making the slightest difference to China as he is of May Fourth more narrowly defined.

The recent so-called new thought is already a universal principle abroad, but it has caused great alarm ever since its arrival in China. Its advocates are half-baked in their ideas and fail to live up to their words, which leads to frequent abuses. This cannot be blamed on the new thought itself.

In short, everything old in China is bound to collapse, come what may. If new ideas can be used to help the transformation the reforms will be orderly, and surely be less of a disaster than a catastrophic collapse that happens of itself. But society sticks to its old ways, and the new faction does not act as it talks. There is no way that the dish of loose sand can be stuck together. The only road ahead is to irremediable disaster.

Today’s view is to be afraid that if Russian ideas infect China this will cause chaos. This looks plausible but is wrong. There will indeed be chaos, but not necessarily as a result of any intellectual infection. The Chinese are not susceptible to infection, and foreign ideas are very hard to transplant here. The future chaos will be Chinese chaos, not Russian chaos. And whether Chinese-style chaos will be better than any other kind is beyond what someone of my shallow knowledge can fathom.

To sum up, the old state of affairs cannot last: that is virtually certain. But what it will turn into will be neither the reality for which officials hope nor the new ways that the innovators preach. It will simply be an utter mess.  

Though one can find him later in life taking a more radical position, it is only when his hatred for the rulers of the day outweighs his reservations about revolutionaries. And he never peddles optimism about a bright future. How right he was. Where almost all other writers and other intellectuals of the early decades of the twentieth century were only too keen to immerse themselves in a cause, a movement, a party, Lu Xun was by nature not a joiner. When he did associate himself with anything organized it was always on his own terms, and it was only a matter of time before he quarrelled ferociously with it. He must have been a disturbing ally.

There are other ways in which he disturbs, and in that he does what the greatest artists do long after the times in which they lived have passed. He seizes on not only the issues of the day, but also on dilemmas to which there are no answers. By bringing out or letting us glimpse the contradictions in
himself he makes his readers uncomfortably aware of the contradictions in themselves. In doing this he steps beyond the limitations of his age.

The zest for words, for thought and for life that runs through all his best writings are some of the obvious reasons why his readers keep coming back to him, and why a Lu Xun industry will remain in business long after readers refuse to accept the unsufferable Lu Xun invented by and for official propaganda. But his contradictions are what keep his readers disturbed and fascinated as they go through life and change themselves. And there is no end to him. When you think you know one Lu Xun there is always another to be found.

Yet readers are discouraged from finding their own Lu Xuns. The lingering influence of political and academic authority gets in the way. What perhaps has to be done now is to move the lifeless plaster propaganda busts of Lu Xun aside and leave room for all sorts of Lu Xuns to delight, disappoint, entertain, confuse, bewitch, enlighten and infuriate us. We should not as readers be required any longer to pay respectful homage to Lu Xun as the Great Writer and Great Revolutionary who is as safe and as dead as the statue of him by his grave. Nor should we be required to accept unquestioningly views that prevail outside China about which of his writings are important and worthy and which are best passed over with as little said as possible. If Lu Xun is still almost unknown in the English-speaking world much of the blame must go to the failure of most academic writers to let their readers into a secret: much Lu Xun is not dull and boring.

These pages are intended to be not so much a Naban 吹号, a Call to Arms, against the official image of Lu Xun, as an appeal to stop Panghuang 剃鬚, Hanging About, and do more in exploring and celebrating the contradictions that make his writing now matter in a way that hardly anything else of the May Fourth era does. Nearly all May Fourth era writing is now best left to literary and political historians. Lu Xun still lives for those are not put off by the created images of him. And, as with the few artists in any culture who really matter long after their age has passed, we have to keep on rediscovering, rethinking and, whether we want to or not, reinventing him. What follows will deliberately avoid any attempt to suggest a new canon of Lu Xun’s writings to replace the official one that has been to a greater or lesser extent followed by foreign academia, but will try to open things up.

I do not propose to reconsider here Lu Xun’s place in the literary-political

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**Figure 1**

*Portrait of Lu Xun by Qiu Sha and Wang Weijun* (from Qian Ligun, *Huashuo Zhou shi xiongdi—Beida yanjiang lu* [Speaking of the Zhou brothers—a record of lectures at Peking University] (Jinan: Shandong Huabao Chubanshe, 1999), p.296)
history of his age. Instead I’m trying as a reader to take a very selective look at some of his pieces as writing, because this might be a way of freeing ourselves from having to think that the politics and the tracing of influences are what really matters now. The reader does not have to be primarily a literary or political historian. The reader who wants to get to know Lu Xun must first read him and also—terribly old-fashioned though it may be to say this—sort the wonderful from the less inspired. Only then is it worth bothering with all the other stuff.

Chinese and foreign commentary on Lu Xun tends—with honourable exceptions—to do everything except to look at him as a writer who put words on paper. We have had to endure decades of stuff about him as a Great Writer that sets the work into this or that construct of May Fourth history but does not really read what he wrote. The aim of this essay is not to chisel a new statue of a dead Great Writer to replace old ones but to urge everyone to find their own Lu Xun and make him dance. I offer some of my suggestions in the hope that others will feel free to set their own Lu Xuns leaping about. These suggestions will be based on looking closely at a few short passages from Lu Xun’s oeuvre, some from parts of it that deserve rather more attention than they have had so far, and some from pieces that seem to my eyes to have been valued for all sorts of wrong reasons when they are in artistic terms—and let us be honest enough to admit it—boring failures. Let us start by watching the dying Lu Xun dance.

2

Lu Xun? Dance? But why not? He did sometimes. One of the last few essays he ever wrote, “The Hanged Woman” (Nü diào 女吊) is all about dancing, and much of it macabre and dangerous dancing at that. It also dances on the page, like much of Lu Xun’s prose when he is writing what he really wants to write rather than performing what he sees to be his duty. It repays a close reading. (See the accompanying Chinese passages quoted from the 1981 Collected Works of Lu Xun [Lu Xun quanji 魯迅全集].)

The first paragraph starts with some slightly misquoted words from a Ming loyalist about Shaoxing’s addiction to revenge, expresses delight in them, then deflates them. Whereupon the next paragraph, with a passing swipe at Shanghai’s “progressive” intellectuals, jumps back to Shaoxing’s delight in vengeance as expressed in the beautiful, strong and dangerous Ghost of the Hanged Woman in local opera. The third paragraph changes the tempo of the music and the steps to explore the etymology of the term, yet keeps the reader interested and wondering where the piece is going. The fourth paragraph leaps again into the nature of theatre in the Shaoxing of the 1890s, and in this and the fifth Lu Xun sets out the difference between the Daxi大戲 plays, in which the key performers were professionals, and the Mulian目連 play cycle that was acted entirely by amateurs.

3 LuXun, vol.6, pp.614–21.
LU XUN'S DISTURBING GREATNESS

女 吊^{(3)}

1. 大概是明末的王思任^{(2)}说的罢：“会稽乃报仇雪耻之乡，非藏垢纳污之地！”这对于绍兴人很有光彩，我也很喜欢听到，或引用这两句话。但其实，并不如此的；这地方，无论为那一样都可以用。

2. 不过一般的绍兴人，并不像上海的“前进作家”那样憎恶报复，却也是事实。单就文艺而言，他们就在戏剧上创造了一个带复仇性的，比别的任何鬼魂更美，更强的鬼魂。这就是“女吊”。我以为绍兴有这两种特色的鬼，一种是表现对于死的无可奈何，而且随随便便的“无常”^{(4)}，我已在《朝华夕拾》里得了绍介给全国读者的光荣了，这回就轮到别一种。

3. “女吊”也许是方言，翻成普通的白话，只好说是“女性的吊死鬼”。其实，在平时，说起“吊死鬼”，就已经含有“女性的”意思的，因为投缳而死者，向来以妇人女子为最多。有一种蜘蛛，用一枝丝挂下自己的身体，悬在空中，《尔雅^{(4)}》上已谓之“蚬，缢女”可见在周朝或汉朝，自经的已经大抵是女性了，所以那时不称它为男性的“缢夫”或中性的“缢者”。不过一到做“大戏”或“目连戏”的时候，我们便能在看客的嘴里听到“女吊”的称呼。也叫作“吊神”。横死的鬼魂而得到“神”的尊号的，我还没有见过第二位，则其受民众之爱戴可以想。但为什么这独要称她“女吊”呢？很容易解：因为在戏台上，也要有“男吊”出现了。

4. 我所知道的是四十年前的绍兴，那时没有达官显宦，所以未闻有专门为（堂会？）的演剧。凡做戏，总带着一点社戏性，供着神位，是看戏的主体，人们去看，不过敛光。但“大戏”或“目连戏”所邀请的看客，范围较广了，自然请神，而又请鬼，尤其是横死的怨鬼。所以仪式就更紧张，更严重。一请怨鬼，仪式就格外紧张严肃，我觉得这道理是有趣的。

5. 也许我在别处已经说过。“大戏”和“目连”^{(5)}，虽然同是演给神、人，鬼看的戏文，但两者又很不同。不同之点：一在演员，前者是专门的戏子，后者则是临时集合的 Amateur^{(8)}——农
All this nimble footwork has intrigued and entertained readers while setting us up for the main part of the essay. Again comes a change of pace as the prose stretches itself out to set the scene for what is presented as childhood memories of an open-air performance of the drama in the long paragraph six. The passage may be long, but it makes a comfortable start in strings of grammatically paratactical clauses that avoid the complicated syntactical structures of dependence that make much May Fourth writing, including some of Lu Xun’s, rather a pain to read. It builds up an atmosphere of expectation that something special is going to happen, then speeds up the tempo.

Lu Xun then introduces himself playing a bit part in the ritual preparations for the main acts as one of a dozen or so young boys who volunteer to be devil soldiers. The boys are made up on stage, jump down to mount waiting horses, ride off at a wild gallop three times around, and end up among the local grave mounds, stabbing them with steel tridents and great roars. Then they climb back on stage to thrust their tridents into the boards, leave the stage, wipe off their make-up, and hope they can get home undetected. The air of dramatic violence is immediately countered as the author smiles at himself as a small boy savouring his symbolic defiance with the forces of darkness. It is a paragraph that carries the reader along with its accelerating pace. We feel that we are witnessing something very spectacular and more than a little scary. And the author is evidently loving every sentence of it, not just the way he makes the words move but also the subject matter.

The next stage of the dance, the seventh paragraph, opens with more minor demons proceeding slowly across the stage until a bolt of cloth unrolls from the roofbeam above the stage. Then to the mournful braying of a \textit{laba} trumpet the first star of the night appears, a man naked but for a
毅兮为鬼雄”，当然连战死者在内。明社垂绝，越人起义而死者不少，至清册称为叛贼，我们就这样的一同对待他们的英灵。在暮春中，十几匹马，站在台下了；戏子扮好一个鬼王，蓝面鳞纹，手执钢叉，还得有十几名鬼卒，则普通的孩子都可以应募。我在十余岁时候，就曾经充过这样的义勇鬼，爬上台去，说明志愿，他们就给在脸上涂上几笔彩色，交付一柄钢叉。待到有十多人了，即一拥上马，疾驰到野方的许多无主孤坟之处，环绕三匝，下马大叫，将钢叉用力的连连刺在坟墓上，然后拔叉驰回，上了前台，一同大叫一声，将钢叉一掷，钉在台板上。我们的责任，这就算完结，洗脸下台，可以回家了，但倘被父母所知，往往不免挨一顿竹箍（这是绍兴打孩子的最普通的东西），一以罚其带有鬼气，二以贺其没有跌死，但我却幸而从来没有被觉察，也许是因为得了恶鬼保佑的缘故罢。

7  这一种仪式，就是说，种种孤魂聚鬼，已经跟着鬼王和鬼卒，前来和我们一同看戏了，但人们用不着担心，他们深知道理，这一夜决不丝毫作怪。于是戏文也接着开场，徐徐进行，人事之中，夹以出鬼：火烧鬼，淹死鬼，科场鬼（死在考场里的），虎伤鬼……孩子们也可以自由去扮，但这种没出息鬼，愿意去扮的并不多，看客也不将它当作一回事。一到“跳吊”时分——“跳”是动词，意义和“跳加官”⑨之“跳”同——情形的松紧可就大不相同了。台上演起悲凉的喇叭来，中央的横梁上，原有一团布，也在这时放下，长约戏台高度的五分之二。看客们都屏着气，台上就闯出一个不穿衣裤，只有一条犊鼻裈⑩，面施几笔粉墨的男人，他就是“男吊”。一登台，径奔悬布，像蜘蛛的死守着蛛丝，也如结网，在这上面钻，挂。他用布吊着各处：腰，胁，胯下，肘弯，腿弯，后项窝……一共七七四十九处。最后才是脖子，但是并不真套进去的，两手扳着布，将颈子一伸，就跳下，走掉了。这“男吊”最不易跳，演目连戏时，独有这一个脚色须特请专门的戏子。那时的老年人告诉我，这也是最危险的时候，因为也许会招出真的“男吊”来。所以后台要专门扮一个王灵官⑪，一手捏诀，一手执鞭，目不转
loincloth. He runs straight for the cloth and hangs himself from it from every possible part of his body in forty-nine different ways. When the contortionist reaches the last and most dangerous part of the act, hanging himself by the neck, he has to be protected from supernatural interference that could really kill him. Another actor watches him in a mirror in case a second figure, a real hanged ghost, appears. If that happened the contortionist had to be flogged off the stage at once and plunge himself into the river to wash off his make-up and then slip into the audience. A moment's delay in leaving the stage and the performer would really die. If he escaped that peril but was too slow washing himself the ghost would follow him. Having built up for us the fear and excitement he felt as a child and almost hypnotized us Lu Xun snaps his fingers in our faces when he once more switches mood by making a contemporary political crack. The tension is released.

But the master is only relaxing it to tighten it all the better again in paragraph eight. The second star of the night, the Hanged Woman Ghost, enters in a scarlet tunic and a long black sleeveless coat. She paces out the character xin 心 (heart) around the stage. Just when the atmosphere is becoming quite frightening Lu Xun deliberately goes off into a scholarly little disquisition on the significance of scarlet as a ghostly colour. A woman who was about to hang herself wanted to hurt the living. Even in his lifetime Shaoxing women would dress in red before putting their heads in the noose so as to give themselves all the posthumous life-force they could get for their future careers as avenging ghosts. Here Lu Xun can't restrain himself from getting in another dig at the Shanghai lefties.

Self-indulgence, or the old dramatist's trick of slipping in a joke at a time of rising tension as the performance reaches its climax in order to stretch out the build up? I believe the latter. While the tension is ratcheted up the frantic movement slows down in the ninth paragraph to a terrible stillness as we see her lime-white face with its black eyebrows and eye-sockets and scarlet lips —whereupon Lu Xun switches back to his modern chatty mode for several lines, discussing the finer points of the make-up and how well it might have worked in luring potential victims to their doom on a dark night. Only then are we allowed to return to her as she gives a slight shrug of her shoulders, looks all around her, listens, then with fear, delight and anger finally begins to sing her lament in a voice full of grief.

In the tenth paragraph, after she has sung her tale of the woes that drove her to suicide, the Hanged Woman hears with delight another woman weeping in the distance as she too prepares to hang herself. When the Hanged Woman Ghost is just about to grab the other woman as a substitute for herself the Hanged Man Ghost comes back to fight her. The stage battle ends when the character who earlier had been protecting the Hanged Man does his bit to prevent violence against women—or at any rate, against women ghosts—by killing the Hanged Man Ghost before the physically stronger male ghost can slay his female counterpart.
睛的看着一面照见前台的镜子。镜中见有两个, 那么,一个
就是真鬼了, 他得立刻跳出去, 用鞭将假鬼打落台下。假鬼一
落台, 就该跑到河边, 洗去粉墨, 挤在人丛中看戏, 然后慢慢的
回家。倘打的慢, 他就会在戏台上吊死; 洗得慢, 真鬼也还会
认识, 跟住他。这挤在人丛中看自己们所做的戏, 就如要人
下野而念佛, 或出洋游历一样, 也是一种缺少不得的过渡
仪式。
8 这之后, 就是“跳女吊”。自然先有悲凉的喇叭; 少顷, 门
幕一掀, 她出场了。大红衫子, 黑色长背心, 长发蓬松, 颈挂两
条纸链, 垂头, 垂手, 弯弯曲曲的走一个全台, 内行人说: 这是
走了一个“心”字。为什么要走“心”字呢? 我不明白。我只知
道她何以要穿红衫。看王充的《论衡》[12], 知道汉朝的鬼的颜
色是红的, 但在看后来的文学和图画, 却又并无一定颜色, 而
在戏文里, 穿红的则只有这“吊神”。意思是很容易了然的; 因
为她投缳之际, 准备作厉鬼以复仇; 红色较有阳气, 易于和生
人相接近, ……绍兴的妇女, 至今还偶有搽粉穿红之后, 这才
上吊的。自然, 自杀是卑怯的行为, 鬼魂报仇更不合于科学,
但那些都是愚妇人, 连字也不认识, 敢请“前进”的文学家和
“战斗”的勇士们不要十分生气罢。我真怕你们要变乌鱼。
9 她将披着的头发向后一抖, 人这才看清了脸孔: 石灰一样
白的圆脸, 漆黑的浓眉, 乌黑的眼眶, 鳕红的嘴唇。听说浙东
的有几府的戏文里, 吊神又拖着几寸长的假舌头, 但在绍兴没
有。不是我袒护故乡, 我以为还是没有好; 那么, 比起现在将
眼眶染成淡灰色的时式打扮来, 可以说是更彻底, 更可爱。不
过下嘴角应该略略向上, 使嘴巴成为三角形: 这也不是丑模
样。假使半夜之后, 在薄暗中, 远处隐约着一位这样的粉面朱
唇, 就是现在的我, 也许会跑过去看看的, 但自然, 却未必就
被诱惑得上吊。她两肩微耸, 两顾, 倾听, 似惊, 似喜, 似怒, 终于
发出悲哀的声音, 慢慢地唱道:
“奴奴本是杨家女[11],
啊呀, 苦呀, 天哪! ……”

[12] 王充（27—约 97）字仲任，
会稽上虞（今浙江上虞）人，东汉思
想家和散文家。《论衡》是他的论文集，
今存八十四篇。《论衡·订鬼篇》说：
“鬼，阳气也，时藏时见。阳气赤，故世人
尽见鬼，其色纯朱。”

[13] 杨家女 应为良家女。据目连
戏的故事说：她幼年时父母双亡，
继母将她领给杨家做童养媳，后又被
婆婆卖入妓院，终于自缢身死。在目
连戏中，她的唱词是：“奴奴本是良家
女，将奴卖入勾栏里；生前受不过王
婆气，将奴逼死勾栏里。阿呀，苦呀，
天哪！将奴逼死勾栏里。”

[cont.]
From here we switch from the vividly recreated childhood memories of terrifying and fascinating theatre that are told in short clauses set next to each other in paratactical arrangements. During the tenth paragraph Lu Xun brings down the tension level as he moves from narrative to explanations set out in more syntactical, more complex and interdependent sentence structures. The prose too changes its rhythms from the choppy, short groups of words to longer patterns as he leaves the drama that has us holding our breath as we wonder what is going to happen next. Now he tells us what the elders told him forty years earlier about the consequences of the feminist sympathizer’s well-meant intervention. As the Hanged Man Ghost was now a dead ghost he no longer sought substitutes, unlike the Hanged Woman Ghost—which was why many more women hanged themselves than men.

The transition from narrative to discussion is completed in the eleventh and final paragraph. Because we readers are all intrigued by the issues raised as Lu Xun relives childhood experience we now find ourselves fascinated by his thoughts on whether the ghosts of hanged women care more concerned with revenge on those who had wronged them or on finding a substitute to release them from their ghostly status. Clearly village women in his home area thought the main thing was finding the substitute, which was why when scraping the soot off the bottom of their iron rice pots they never let it fall in a circle that a hanged woman ghost could use as a trap in which to ensnare a substitute. And at this point he brings us back to the issue of revenge with which the essay started: the village women’s fear of ghosts was nothing to do with fear of being the victims of a revenge attack, unlike the “bloodsucking, cannibalistic murderers or their henchmen” whose secrets Lu Xun understands better than ever.

3

As a piece of writing “Nü diao” is a tour de force. But because it does not match conventional notions of May Fourth Literature held in China and the West it has been neglected, it does not fit into a recognized pre-existing genre in China, though readers of Hazlitt will find some similarities. It isn’t a ‘short story’ or an essay of the zawen or zagan type. It has no obvious political purpose. It does not expose the evils of tradition or call for resistance to Japan. Indeed, the only gestures in the direction of the political correctness of the day are hostile ones: the invitations to get lost made in passing to trendy lefties. It is not just an immense and poignant pleasure to follow the movement of the words as we watch the master dance. It is also an exploration of how we humans cope with the mysteries of life and death.

But there is another very well known piece of his on a similar theatrical theme that has been given a lot of attention for decades, “Village Opera” (She xi). Because it is classified as a short story and included in a ‘canonical’ collection, Naban, it is to be taken seriously. And yet as a piece
下文我不知道。就是这一句，也还是刚从克士(14)那里听来的。但那大略，是说后来去做童养媳，备受虐待，终于弄到投缳。唱完就听到远处的哭声，这也是一个女人，在衔冤泣，准备自杀。她万分惊喜，要去“讨替代”了，却不料突然跳出“男吊”来，主张应该他去讨。他们由争论而至动武，女的当然不敌，幸而王灵官虽然脸相并不漂亮，却是热烈的女权拥护家，就在危急之际出现，一鞭把男吊打死，放女的独去活动了。老年人告诉我说：古时候，是男女一样的要上吊的，自从王灵官打死了男吊神，才少有男人上吊；而且古时候，是身上有七七四十九处，都可以吊死的，自从王灵官打死了男吊神，使劲处才只在脖子上。中国的鬼有些奇怪，好像是做鬼之后，还是要死的，那时的名称，绍兴叫作“鬼里鬼”。但男吊既然早被王灵官打死，为什么现在“跳吊”，还会引出真的来呢？我不懂这道理，问问老年人，他们也讲说不明白。

而且中国的鬼还有一种坏脾气，就是“讨替代”，这才完全是利己主义；倘不然，是可以十分坦然的和他们相处的。习俗相沿，虽女吊不免，她有时也单是“讨替代”，忘记了复仇。绍兴煮饭，多用铁锅，烧的是柴或草，烟煤一厚，火力就不灵了，因此我们就常在地上看见刮下的烟煤。但一定是散乱的，凡村姑妇，谁都决不肯省些力，把锅子伏在地面上，团团一刮，使烟煤落成一个黑圈子。这是因为吊神诱人的圈套，就用烟煤圈炼成的缘故。散掉烟煤，正是消极的抵制，不过为的是反对“讨替代”，并非因为怕她去报仇。被压迫者即使没有报复的毒心，也决无被报复的恐惧，只有明明暗暗，吸血吃肉的凶手或其帮闲们，这才趁人以“犯而勿校”或“勿念旧恶”(15)的格言，——我到今年，也愈加看透了这些人面东西的秘密。

(14)  克士  周建人的笔名。周建人，字乔峰，作者的三弟。生物学家，当时任商务印书馆编辑。

(15)  “犯而勿校”语出《论语·泰伯》，原作“犯而不校”。校，计较的意思。“勿念旧恶”，语出《论语·公冶长》，原作“不念旧恶”。
of writing it wanders around but never really gets anywhere or engages the reader’s interest, so that by the time we get to the end of it—assuming, that is, that we have the patience to do so—readers who don’t share the author’s childhood in Shaoxing in the late nineteenth century are left wondering if there has been much point to it.

It is perhaps time to start asking more general questions about the primacy traditionally given to the first two collections of short fiction that Lu Xun published when the whole of his oeuvre is considered. Let me put it more bluntly. Which if any of the twenty-five stories in the standard editions of Nahan and Panghuang are really of any great interest in themselves? Of course they were very influential in the teens and twenties of the twentieth century. And of course they are landmarks in the introduction of European techniques of fiction writing to China. I would not want to dismiss Nahan and Panghuang. Both collections have some very good things in them. The figures of Ah Q (阿Q) and Kong Yiji (孔乙己) embodied some features of the culture that needed to be mocked. They serve as representative figures of their country and their age in the way that Oblomov was of the Russia of his time. But can we find in these two collections much that one would go back to, to reread again and again through life and find new depths, new insights in them as one’s own experience accumulates? Are these stories at all remarkable when set against the nineteenth-century European realist and symbolist fiction to which Lu Xun had been exposed? Going back to them over the years I used to think that there was something lacking in me that left me less than captivated. I now find myself looking at them as apprentice efforts in foreign techniques rather than as achieved masterpieces.

At the risk of being a little provocative, could it be that those two heavily publicised collections of rather ordinary stories are the main obstacle to Lu Xun’s real quality as a writer being properly appreciated? To be sure, they have long been the best known of his writings, but that is perhaps because they are all most of his readers see through the distorting lenses of textbooks and readers. And they are hardly likely to make readers want more. They are not brilliantly successful. To take one of the most heavily praised of the stories in them, “In the Wineshop” (Zai jiulou shang 在酒楼上), there is no way in which as a piece of writing it can be set beside either “The Hanged Woman” or one of Chekhov’s stories. It takes pages to get anywhere and clutters itself up with unnecessary and pointless detail in its clumsy imitation of foreign realism. Like too many of the other pieces in these collections it falls into a rather tiresome category of Chinese writing in the May Fourth era broadly defined—the pamphlet on social and cultural ills lightly disguised as fiction.

While these two collections get star billing in general studies of Lu Xun’s writings, his third collection of fiction, the mixed and in places truly innovative Old Tales Retold (Gu shi xin bian 古事新编), is nearly always dismissed briefly or even totally disregarded. One Western author of a monograph
about Lu Xun even has him giving up writing short stories after Panghuang. Yet this collection contains his most interesting and engaging fiction.

Most of the stories in Old Tales Retold play with their material and its readers. The author uses his scholarly grasp of textual traditions and the lively reassessment of it that had been one of the most creative parts of May Fourth cultural activity. It may well be that the refusal of Lu Xun to be solemn or whimsily nostalgic in most of the eight stories in this collection has offended an unstated but deeply held assumption of much writing about ‘May Fourth’ or ‘modern’ or ‘twentieth-century’ Chinese literature: that there are only a limited number of acceptable authorial attitudes. Proper fiction directly or indirectly addresses current social and political issues and gives its readers nothing so trivial as pleasure. It educates them and does them good. It does not play with the past and with ancient myths.

Curiously enough, it is quite common for discussions of Nahan to say little if anything about the last story he included in it—“Mount Buzhou” (Buzhou shan 不周山), an entertaining reworking of the myth of Nüwa 女媧 and the creation of humanity—and kept there till the thirteenth printing of 1930. People tend to write about Nahan as if this remarkable tale had never been part of it. Yet it was in that collection for eight years from first publication in 1922, the period when its influence was greatest. In removing it Lu Xun was not censoring himself but saving it up for another fiction-writing project that he had held in mind from the time he wrote “Mount Buzhou” in November 1922 till his last and sublime burst of fiction writing in late November and December 1935 in which he wrote four of the eight stories that made up the collection. Along the way he had written three more of these reworkings of history and mythology, two when his life was in upheaval in late 1926 and 1927, and one in 1934. It was after his serious illness of late 1935, when he was moved by awareness of his mortality to stop wasting time and get down on paper the things he really needed to do, that he chose to write the fiction that was most his own.

Of all Lu Xun’s three collections of stories it is in this that he escapes from his ill-judged attempts to imitate late nineteenth-century European fiction. Indeed, Lu Xun was so far ahead of his time in a story such as “Leaving the Pass” (Chu guan 出關) that some of his readers are still struggling to catch up with him. Perhaps it needed Jorge Luis Borges to make a new kind of fiction in another continent and another culture by playing with history and textual tradition to teach us to read a late masterpiece such as this. (By an agreeable coincidence his first such collection, the Historia universal de la infamia, was completed only a few months earlier in 1935.) From beginning to end of “Leaving the Pass” the author denies us the comfort of knowing how we are meant to react to the words on the page. This goes against the conventions of traditional vernacular fiction in China or of European realism, which both generally let readers know where they stand.

"Leaving the Pass" is built around a central figure who is never created as a flesh-and-blood fictional ‘character’ in the way Lu Xun had generally tried to portray believable people in his two collections of apprentice fiction. The elderly Lao zi 老子 is in all the scenes of the tale from being visited by an ambitious Confucius at the beginning till he disappears from view as he rides his ox along the dusty road to the west at the end of second of the three parts or movements that make up the story. And even after his departure he is being discussed by the border guards and petty officials in the short third movement. Yet throughout the story the author deliberately avoids ever letting us get a good look at him.

The disruption of readers’ expectations goes right through the story from its first lines:

Lao zi sat motionless, just like a senseless piece of wood.

“That Confucius is back again, Master,” said his disciple Gengsang Chu with quiet irritation as he came in.

“Enter…..”

“How are you, Master?” asked Confucius with an extremely deferential bow.

“The same as ever,” Lao zi replied. “And how are you? I suppose you have read all the books here.”

“Yes, I’ve read them. But…..” Confucius seemed rather fretful, which he never had before. “I reckon I’ve put a long time into studying the Six Classics—the Songs, the History, the Rites, the Music, the Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. I know them back to front. But not one of the seventy-two rulers I’ve called on will follow them. It really is hard to make people understand. Or is it that the ‘Way’ is inexplicable?”

“Think yourself lucky,” said Lao zi, “that you haven’t met a capable ruler. These Six Classics you go on about are only the old footprints of the former kings. And what is it that makes footprints? All your talk is just like footprints. Shoes make footprints, but surely you’re not going to tell me that footprints are the same as shoes.” He paused for a moment before continuing, “White herons only have to look at each other to conceive without so much as a flicker of an eye. With some insects the male only has to call upwind for the female to conceive downwind. The lei is male and female, so it can just conceive by itself ….”7
“请……”
“先生，您好吗？”孔子恭敬地行礼，一面说。
“我总是这样子，”老子答道。“您怎么样？所有这里的藏书，都看过了罢？”
“都看过了。不过……”孔子有些焦躁，这是他从未所没有的。“我研究《诗》、《书》、《礼》、《乐》、《易》、《春秋》六经，自以为很长期了，够熟悉了。去拜见了七十二位主子，谁也不采用。人可真是难得说明白呵。还是‘道’的难以说明白呢？”

你还算运气的哩，”老子说，“没有遇着能干的主子。六经这玩艺儿，只是先王的陈迹呀。那里是弄出迹来的东西呢？你的话，可是和迹一样的。迹是鞋子踏成的，但迹难道就是鞋子吗？”停了一会，又接着说道：“白鸥们只要瞧着，眼珠子动也不动，然而自然有孕；虫呢，雄的在上风叫，雌的在下风应，自然有孕；类是一身上兼具雌雄的，所以自然有孕。 …”[5]

【2】cont.
姓李氏，名耳，字聃，周守藏室之史也。孔子适周，将问礼于老子，老子曰：‘子所言者，其人与骨皆已朽矣，独其言在耳。’……老子修道德，其学以自隐无名为务。居周久之，见周之衰，遂遂去。至关，关令尹喜曰：‘子将隐矣，遂为我著书。’于是老子著书上下篇，言道德之意五千余言而去，莫知其所终。关于老聃接见孔丘时的情形，《庄子·问上而》记有下文的传说：
“孔子见老聃，老聃新沐，方将被发而干，颜然似非人；孔子便而待之，少焉见曰：‘丘也眩与？其信然与？向者先生形休，据（倔）若槁木，似遗物离人而立于独也。’”

【3】关于老聃接见孔丘时的情形，《庄子·山木》中记有下文的传说：
“孔子见老聃，老聃新沐，方将被发而干，颜然似非人；孔子便而待之，少焉见曰：‘丘也眩与？其信然与？向者先生形休，据（倔）若槁木，似遗物离人而立于独也。’”

【4】庚桑楚 老聃弟子。《庄子·庚桑楚》中说：“老聃之役，有庚桑楚者，偏得老聃之道，以北居探垒之山。”据司马彪注，“役”就是门徒、弟子。
This splendid nonsense is nearly all borrowed straight from another deeply irreverent work, the Zhuangzi. Even these first few paragraphs show a writer who knows what he's doing, including how and what to steal. Unlike with most of Lu Xun's wordy and worthy realist fiction this first part of the story wastes no time with long descriptions but gets straight into its first scene and does nearly all of the storytelling with dialogue. It doesn't matter at this point in the story what anyone is wearing or how the place is furnished. Compare it with the opening of “In the Wineshop,” where it takes two long paragraphs full of rather pointless description just to get the narrator into the pub and several more before we meet the story's central character. It is not till the beginning of the third page (as printed in the standard 1981 Complete works) that the narrator recognizes him and opens the conversation that is to be the story.⁸

To return to the first movement of “Leaving the Pass,” the dialogue between Laozi and Confucius of which we have just heard the opening is, like the next dialogue between them that follows three months later, doing a lot of things at once, enabling different readers to enjoy it at different levels. We can take it at face value as a rather fantastical conversation between two comic-book figures, noting how the author deliberately breaks up any sense of realism by deliberately introducing such anachronisms as time being measured in intervals of eight minutes, or Laozi saying “like a gramophone, ‘Are you going? Won't you stay for a cup of tea?’”⁹ Evidently Lu Xun is playing alienation with us and reminding us that this is only a word game and not a representation of anything that could ever have happened. Although we are told Laozi is in a library hardly anything is said about it, and we have to provide our own knowledge of the tradition that had Lao Dan 老聃 as the Zhou 周 librarian.

If we know early texts well enough or have the benefit of the kind of good annotated edition that was not available to Lu Xun’s original readers we can observe another performance going on at the same time. Our author plays with a number of passages in Zhuangzi. Confucius calling on Lao Dan and finding him sitting like a piece of wood comes from chapter 21, “Tian Zifang” 田子方, but Lu Xun has moved the comparison from Confucius’ mouth to the narrator’s pen (see text note (3) above). The disciple Gengsang Chu is brought in from the chapter that bears his name, number 23 (see note (4)); and nearly all of the dialogue between Laozi and Confucius is translated into modern Chinese from chapter 14, “Tian yun” 天運, with only minimal changes from the original (see note (5)). That the original conversations (like other dialogues between Laozi and Confucius in the collection Zhuangzi) are clearly fictional ones written centuries after Confucius and Lao Dan (whoever the author of the Laozi may have been in reality) adds another layer to the playfulness of Lu Xun’s text: what he is fooling around with was itself word games. In his treatment of the dialogues between Laozi and Confucius Lu Xun keeps very close to the Zhuangzi originals, simply translating passages into modern Chinese.
He adds some inventions of his own just before and after these borrowings, but it is all worked so well in together that one has to check carefully to find the joins. Thus, the conversations between Lao zi and Gengsang Chu 龔桑楚 that precede, intersperse and follow the Lao zi/Confucius dialogues are Lu Xun’s own improvisations. In the case of the longer conversation between Lao zi and Gengsang Chu that follows Confucius’ second departure Lu Xun elaborates on a theory advanced by Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 thirty years earlier: that Lao zi’s decision to head off for the west was prompted by his sense that Confucius, having finally mastered what he had to teach, was now a threat to him.¹⁰

¹⁰ Lu Xun acknowledged this debt in an essay published in April 1936, “Chu guan” de ‘guan’ [The ‘pass’ in ‘Leaving the Pass’] (LXQ, vol.6, p.520).

The transition to the second movement of the story is also a change in style. The storytelling in the first part uses a minimal narrative with hardly any description. Nothing gets in the way of the dialogues, whether reworked from Zhuang zi or Lu Xun’s own, and it is the conversation that draws us into this subtle and elusive story. Now that we want to know what is going to happen next—something that does not always happen in Lu Xun’s earlier stories—the author can fill out the plot and bring on a new cast of characters at the customs post in Hangu 函谷 Pass to give Lao zi a new set of problems to deal with before he can make his getaway. From the rather quiet and orderly atmosphere of the first part we switch to the bustling, noisy chaos of the post and its bored occupants desperate for a bit of novelty.

Just as we switch from a series of orderly duologues to everything happening at once there is also a less obvious but equally effective switch in the use of anachronism. Anachronism, as we have already seen, is brought in soon after the beginning of the story and it runs all through it. In the first movement the occasional modernism disrupts the credibility of the prevailing sense of being in a cartoon version of the ancient world. In the longer second movement, however, we feel most of the time that we are in the China of the
18

For a disclaimer of Lao zi being a self-portrait see “Chu guan' de 'guan,'” pp. 519-21. The request for lecture notes is on p. 445 of the story.

11 “Chu guan' de 'guan'” (LXQJ, vol. 6, pp. 517-21.)

1930s—with perhaps some specific touches of the western Henan through which Lu Xun travelled on his journey from Peking to Xi'an in 1924. In this second movement of the story it is the occasional archaism that seems anachronistic. Though readers may not consciously notice this transformation of the dominant but occasionally contradicted setting from the ancient to the modern world, the move contributes to the feeling that our feet are not firmly planted on the ground and that we don't know when we are supposed to be imagining the impossible action. This subversion of time is also a device to stop us from taking Lao zi too seriously as a wise and mistreated sage.

If the Lao zi who left the library after his encounters with Confucius was a dignified, even a wronged figure, the Lao zi who reaches the Hangu Pass enters the world of petty officials and soldiers. One way of describing this world, if we may join Lu Xun in being facetious, is as a humble part of the Republican nation-building and state-building project about which some historians in the West have been eloquent in recent years. For all Lu Xun's disclaimers about Lao zi being a self-portrait we find ourselves wondering whether Lao zi's lecture to an incomprehending and rapidly bored audience of petty officials, clerks and soldiers is not a reworking of Lu Xun's own experiences as a visiting lecturer, including the pitiful request from a delegation after the talk for written lecture notes to be issued as he had spoken his badly pronounced standard Chinese (guoyu 国语) too fast for them to be able to take it down.11 And there may be an element of personal revenge by Shaoxing-accented Lu Xun in rendering some of his interlocutors as speaking almost incomprehensible dialects.

The writing of the Dao de jing 道德經 thus becomes a tiresome chore that Lao zi has to perform himself if he is to be allowed to leave; and if he is an unwilling writer, his text is not much appreciated either. Yet he wins in the end when he is allowed to go on his way and disappear into the dust to the west.

In case we might be left with a sense of mystery the third and final movement of the story takes us from the possibly sublime to the banal and ridiculous comments of the staff of the customs post on the silly old man who has just left and turned out to be a serious disappointment. Right to the end we still don't know what to make of it all—which was evidently Lu Xun's intention, to judge not only from the story itself but from the article he wrote about it the following April, an essay whose main point seems to be to reject interpretations of it that had been offered in the press while refusing to provide his own explanation.12

Keeping readers off balance and disrupting the familiar versions of antiquity is essential to the success of the whole collection of Old tales retold from the touches of slapstick humour in the creation myth of “Mount Buzhou,” renamed “Mending Heaven” (Bu tian 補天) and given a new role at the beginning instead of the end of a collection, to the disturbing irreverence with which Zhuang zi is treated in the last story. The collection works as a whole precisely by its contrariness, switching writing techniques,
mood and attitude within and between stories. Two of the eight are told quite straight, the dungeons-and-dragons Sino-Gothic “Casting the Swords” (Zhu jian 鎮劍), and the reworking of Mo zi’s 墨子 journey to Chu 楚 to avert an invasion of Song 宋 in “Against Aggression” (Fei gong 非攻). Why not? A collection does not have to consist of eight similar items.

For most of his writing life and in most of what he published Lu Xun came out with very clear messages on the issues of the day. His earlier stories, like nearly all his essays, leave little room for doubt about the position he is taking, although Lu Xun was a much more complicated and contradictory man than he sometimes pretended to be.

Thus it is that while it is possible to use much of his writing as evidence to support the construction of a Lu Xun who follows a line of approved political development from “bourgeois reformer” to “Marxist-Leninist revolutionary”—the story told in nearly all the writing about him published in China in the fifty years after his death in 1936—that does not tell the whole story. One could also—just as incompletely, I would argue—go in for another kind of distortion to invent another Lu Xun, a timeless, ‘essential’ Lu Xun who is best represented by Weeds (Ye cao 野草) and whose political writings, like his secondhand translations of Soviet literary doctrine, were embarrassing distractions from the great art to which he should have been devoting all his energies. Yet whatever selective Lu Xun one may create for whatever purpose, there is always the problem of other aspects of him that don’t fit in with the picture one is trying to draw. While I am tempted to dwell most on the writings of his last year or so, and have argued that it was only at the end of his life that he found the freedom to write what he really wanted to, there are always the other sides to him.

Whichever selectively drawn Lu Xun we prefer, he disturbs us by refusing to stay in any box into which we may put him. If we admire him for his moral sensitivity and his hatred of hypocrisy, we also have to note that he was an unwavering and uncritical supporter of Stalin’s Soviet Union. If we want to see him only as a militant and a revolutionary, how come that in what seems to be his frankest and most personal writing on revolution it is shown as another kind of hell? If he is held up as a leader of the new culture movement and a fearless critic of the traditional dominant culture—and he undoubtedly was both in many ways—we are left to explain how he was in practice so devoted to classical texts and even such archaic and exclusive forms of expression as heavily allusive classical verse. Why at the end of his life did he write his letters on delightful and expensive polychromatic woodblock-printed paper with designs ranging from flowers to young girls in Western dancing costumes? His patriotism did not lead him to hate Japan’s rulers any more than he hated China’s or to break off relations with

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13 As in my “Lu Xun’s last days and after,” China Quarterly 32 (Sept. 1982): 424–45.
14 As, for example, in “Shidiao de hao diyu” [The good hell that was lost] in Ye cao, LXQJ, vol.2, pp.199–200.
15 The facsimile reprints of his letters in Lu Xun sbougao quanji [The complete manuscripts of Lu Xun], Shuxin [Letters], 7 vols (Peking: WenwuChubanshe, 1978–80), show that in the 1930s, and especially from 1935, he used woodblock-decorated paper most freely. See Shuxin, especially vols 6 and 7.
See, for example, the rough verse on pp. 108–23 of Lu Xun, Selected Poems, transl. W. J. F. Jenner (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1982) and the notes on pp. 157–60. The originals are almost as corny as the English versions.

His phases of political engagement seem to be prompted as much by personal feelings as by high principle. Or, to put it another way, the political commitment was real enough, but what really gave it its edge was the personal. His reaction to the problems at the Women’s Normal College in 1925 seems a little over the top when one considers China’s other problems at the time until we remember his personal relationship with one of his students there, Xu Guangping 杨广平. And it was only when another of his students at the college was among the demonstrators shot by the Peking government on 18 March 1926 that his quarrel with the regime he had served became so serious that he had to leave town. This is in contrast with the distance he previously had kept from the politics of street protest. It took the murder by the Guomindang authorities of some young writers he knew in 1931 to push him into being most active in his cooperation with the Communist Party and its League of Left-Wing Writers, even writing doggerel propaganda for their publications for a while.16

But his political involvement was always on his own terms. He was not willing, like many others of the May Fourth generation, to abandon his independent judgement for the sake of permanently submerging himself in a cause. When his personal relationships with the Communist Party went bad he turned his back on it, even while keeping up his Soviet contacts. He was not interested in the balancing of interests and forming of alliances that are central to real politics. What he enjoyed was a good fight with people he hated. Hence the visceral refusal to join a united front with people he despised when the communists switched from ultra-militancy to allying with anyone who was even nominally anti-Japanese. And what finally turned him against the communists as an organization was when underground party officials tried to tell him with whom he could or could not associate.

Contradiction was central to Lu Xun. He was by his very nature a contrarian, someone who was always much more clearly aware of what he was against than what he was for. And sometimes he was in favour of things mainly because of other people’s disapproval. What drew him to some young writers who were rough and wild was precisely the hostility with which some saw them. It may well be that his wilfully blind pro-Sovietism was emotionally driven by the hostility to the USSR of individuals and groups he loathed, notably the pro-American, English-speaking establishment intellectuals of the Guomindang era.

Contrariness and contradictions were also intrinsic to his writing and part of the reason why it remains so absorbing to those who still read it. The more obvious contrariness is immediately attractive, especially at a safe distance. There is much pleasure to be had from dipping into his polemical essays and watching him dancing like a bantamweight boxer around a much heavier but clumsier victim and landing fast, clever punches that impress the audience, but do not do much lasting damage to the target. They hurt but do not destroy. I feel when reading some of his more pugnacious essays that I am watching
a tour-de-force performance, as when half-guiltily enjoying the kind of late-night, up-market television chat show to which some noted contrarian is invited precisely because they will say outrageous things neatly. Contrarians may imagine that they persuade, but they rarely do. That is more often done by their solid, plodding targets.

This is not to belittle Lu Xun as polemicist. The best evidence of his combative brilliance is that the essays can be read with zest long after the issues and events that prompted them have faded into the past. While we may wonder what made him quite so vitriolic at times, especially when the victims are some minor figures who hardly deserve to go down in history mainly because Lu Xun did a demolition job on them, my aim today is to analyse some of his other writing, not his psyche. The polemical writing deserves more attention another time, developing David Pollard’s approach in looking primarily at the writing itself rather than only at its subject matter.17

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In some of his other non-fiction we see not point-scoring but the cautious exploration of ambiguities and irresolvable contradictions. The struggle at the heart of his most profound writing is, of course, with himself. And of all his collections it is to Weeds (Ye cao)18 that commentators most often turn when pursuing an essential Lu Xun. With that I have no quarrel. It certainly gives us one side of him, and, is, despite one striking anomaly, a masterpiece of a collection and a collection of miniature masterpieces. But if we wanted to get a rounded view of the Lu Xun of 1924–26 we would have to look at all the other things he was writing while creating this miraculous little collection, not only at it. It is only a part of what he was doing, though what a part. In it we see him not dancing or fighting but being very quiet. Even when there is action in these pieces it is quiet, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope. There is plenty of pugilism in some of his polemical writing of the time.

There is no need to go over that collection again in search of its supposed gloom and its refusal to offer bright skies just around the corner. That has been done well already in English, notably by Leo Ou-fan Lee. Instead I would like to look at one or two pieces in the collection as performances and consider how successfully he used European examples. Were this a longer study I would also ask whether Weeds is quite as dark a work as it is sometimes thought to be.

Before focussing on one or two individual pieces in it let us start by looking at the collection as a surprisingly integrated whole with a huge and deliberate flaw. It is unusual among his works in being conceived of as a discrete collection for which each of the pieces included in it were specifically intended.

Nearly all his other writings were one-off pieces written for immediate

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17 David Pollard, “Lu Xun’s zawen” in Leo Ou-fan Lee, Lu Xun and his legacy, pp.54–89.

18 The translation of this title as Wild Grass has overtones of freedom and wide open spaces that are not implied by the Chinese.
purposes. Most of them do not appear to have been conceived of as forming part of a future coherent volume. Every so often Lu Xun would gather together articles written for newspapers and magazines over the previous year or so and put a number of them together as a book. *Weeds* is different. Each of the pieces was first published in the same magazine, *Yusi*, and bore at its foot the note “*Weeds*, number 1,” “*Weeds*, number 2” and so on.

While he cannot have known when he wrote the first Weed in September 1924 how his world was to change before he wrote the last one in April 1926 and what some of the Weeds would contain, he evidently saw them all as having things in common that distinguished them from the huge quantity of other things he was writing over this year and a half for *Yusi* and for other papers and magazines. And when he turned them into a book in 1927 the series of 23 Weeds were printed in the same order as they had appeared in *Yusi* with nothing added except a foreword and nothing removed.

Yet Lu Xun perversely breaks up the consistency of tone with Weed number 4, “My Lost Love” (Wode shi lian 我的失恋), a doggerel parody of the new poetry of the day that is completely incongruous in these surroundings. It floats in the collection like a mouse dropping in a bowl of delicately flavoured consommé. It really belongs not here, but in one of his noisily polemical volumes. He could easily have put it into the collection *Tombs* (Fen 墓) that covered the period when “My lost love” was written. But it is characteristic of Lu Xun’s contrariness that the demands of art had to take second place to a quarrel with someone he saw as an establishment figure and to a gesture of loyalty to a friend and protegé. “My lost love” was not originally written for the Weeds series that Lu Xun had already started publishing in *Yusi*, but was intended for another paper, the *Chenbao* 晨報, that had commissioned it. A new, European-educated editor of a supplement to the *Chenbao*, the *Chenbao jukan* 晨報副刊 (also called *Chenbao fujuan* 晨報副卷) had spiked this irreverent doggerel of Lu Xun’s when the regular editor, Lu Xun’s friend Sun Fuyuan 孫伏園, who had accepted the piece from him for the supplement, was away from the office. As soon as Sun Fuyuan found out what had happened he threw in his job.

Loyalty to Sun meant that Lu Xun now added a fourth verse to the original three sent to the *Chenbao supplement*, relabelled them as Weed number 4, and gave them to Sun to use in the little weekly magazine *Yusi* which he was helping to fund and where Sun was now working.19 And having made this gesture he stood by it when putting the pieces together for book publication in the spring of 1927. Lu Xun the contrarian insisted on spoiling a masterpiece, a decision that made no sense in artistic terms, but paradoxically makes his most personal volume even truer to him than an unflawed and perfect whole would have been. This was the same contrarian who in his last months was writing not only the late masterpieces such as “Nü diao” with their generous and indulgent approach to human weakness but also the vituperative public attacks on Xu Maoyong 徐懋庸 and on the Trotskyists.

To return to the rest of *Weeds* while disregarding this discrepancy, this
was the place in which he showed that he really could use foreign models but turn them into his own. Scholars have long pointed to the influence of Baudelaire’s *Le spleen de Paris*, also known as *Petits poèmes en prose*, of Nietzsche, and of Turgenev’s late collection of prose poems. Not only does Lu Xun borrow the form of the prose poem. Some of the Weeds take up themes found in these three authors. But what Lu Xun borrows is an idea or an image that he turns into his own. Consider this dreamlike encounter with a beggar:

I am walking through the loose dust along a high, flaking wall. A few others are each going their own way. There is a slight breeze, and the branches of the tall trees that can be seen behind the wall, their leaves still unwithered, sway above my head.

There is a slight breeze. Everywhere is dust.

A child begs from me. He is also wearing lined clothes and does not appear to be distressed. He kneels in my way to kowtow then follows me and whines.

His tone of voice and his manner disgust me. I loathe him for almost making a game of it instead of being distressed. He irritates me by following me and whining.

I am walking along. A few others are each going their own way. There is a slight breeze. Everywhere is dust.

A child begs from me. He is also wearing lined clothes and does not appear to be distressed, but is dumb, spreading his arms, putting on a gesture.

I detest his gesture. Besides, he is not necessarily dumb at all: this is just a technique for begging.

I give no charity. My heart is not charitable. I am above the charitable. I give disgust, suspicion, loathing.

I am walking beside a dilapidated mud wall. Broken bricks are piled in the gaps. On the other side of the wall is nothing. There is a slight breeze. It blows the chill of autumn through my lined clothes. Everywhere is dust.

I am wondering what technique I shall use for begging.

If I speak, what kind of voice? If I feign dumbness, what kind of gesture? …

A few others are each going their own way.

I shall get no charity, no charitable heart. I shall get the disgust, suspicion and loathing of those who think themselves above charity.

I shall beg with inactivity and silence……

At least I shall get emptiness.

There is a slight breeze. Everywhere is dust. A few others are each going their own way.

Dust, dust……

........................

Dust……
Dark, gloomy and depressing? I don’t think so. There is no pain, no suffering, no distress, just emptiness, and an emptiness that is celebrated. But it is certainly disturbing. It first sets up in the reader the sort of complicated emotional responses that will be familiar to those who have been put off in more recent times by the unconvincing performances of beggars in Peking and other cities but have at the same time felt uncomfortable about their own lack of sympathy and charity. That is disquieting. But we have hardly had enough time to realize that Lu Xun can read our minds before the narrator has worked a trick on us and turned into a supplicant himself. The expressions that are repeated have an incantatory effect that turns what is initially a fairly realistic scene into a dreamlike one. The economy of words is masterly. So too is the handling of mood, with its disturbing contempt for human hypocrisy and its final suggestion that nothingness is best, nothingness won’t let you down. Dust is the answer.

Compare this with encounters with beggars in two of Baudelaire’s prose poems included in the 1869 collection Le spleen de Paris with which he is generally held to have invented the genre. In “La fausse monnaie” (The counterfeit coin) the writer uses an anecdote about a friend giving a beggar a counterfeit silver coin of apparent high value to analyse the possible motivations of a gift that might have such a wide range of good or ill consequences for the recipient.21 In the other, “Assommons les pauvres!” (Beat up the poor!), the violence is physical rather than moral.22 The author imagines himself carrying out a vicious onslaught on an old beggar as a principled act intended to give the old man a chance to assert his equality by fighting for it, and reacts with delight when the victim gets back on his feet and hits back, doing the narrator even more damage than he had suffered himself. This latter piece may have given Lu Xun the idea of a reversal of roles between non­giver and supplicant, but Lu Xun’s encounter is completely different from Baudelaire’s, negative instead of active, celebrating withdrawal rather than advocating getting stuck into life, and blurring the distinction between characters.

Turgenev’s encounter with a beggar, written in 1878 and included in his late volume of prose poems charmingly entitled Senilia, offered Lu Xun yet another model. Turgenev’s piece is quite unlike Baudelaire’s two poems in tone, and is in many ways closer to Lu Xun’s. Apart from the age of the mendicant, Lu Xun seems to be picking up directly from Turgenev’s piece, which opens thus:

I was walking along the street . . . A beggar stopped me, a decrepit old man.

Turgenev’s meeting with his beggar has neither the moral or physical violence of Baudelaire’s poems, nor the utter lack of human contact in Lu Xun’s piece. When the old man stretches out his hand to beg for charity the kind­hearted Turgenev persona searches his pockets, only to find to his embarrassment that he has nothing on him. The piece ends in a warm glow.
of fraternity and compassion all round as the narrator apologizes to the old man:

“Sorry, brother. I have nothing on me, brother.”

The beggar settled his inflamed eyes on me. His blue lips smiled, and in his turn he squeezed my fingers that were getting cold.

“That’s all right, brother,” he mumbled, “and thank you all the same. It’s charity too, brother.”

I realized that I too had received charity from my brother.23

Looking at these three possible models for Lu Xun it is clear that he had, like the great artist he was when he allowed himself to be, the ability to take what he needed from anywhere and make it his own. His piece is as characteristically Lu Xun as the other ones are distilled Baudelaire and Turgenev.

We could go through a number of the pieces in Weeds and find other examples of just how well he borrowed and transformed form and content and made them utterly his. Lu Xun’s conversation with his shadow, for example, is quite unlike Baudelaire’s and Nietzsche’s talks with shadows, but probably could not have been written without them. Let us confine ourselves here to the way he puts his own disturbing spin on the account of the crucifixion in St Matthew’s Gospel. The title is a warning: “Revenge (2)” (Fuchou—qi er 復仇(其二)). Almost everything in it is taken from Matthew until this:

He does not drink the wine mixed with myrrh. He wants to savour clearly how the Israelites treat their son of god, and prolong the time in which to feel compassion for their future while yet hating their present.

He returns to the theme a few lines later:

In the agony of his hands and feet he savours the sorrow of the pitiable wretches crucifying their son of god, and the bliss that execrable people are going to kill their son of god on the cross and that the son of god is going to die on the cross. Suddenly the great agony of his smashed bones reaches his heart, and he is intoxicated with great bliss and great compassion.24

23 “Nishchii” [The beggar] in I. S. Turgenev, Pолнoe sobranie sochinennii i pisem [Complete collected works and letters] (Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka, 1967), vol.13, p.151. It can also be found on pp.72–3 of vol.9 of the 1893 less amply Complete Collected Works of Turgenev in Twelve Volumes published in St Petersburg by Marks in 1898. This piece was one of the fifty-one of his prose poems that were published in the collection Seniln in 1883 and may have been available to Lu Xun.

24 “Fuchou (qi er)” [Revenge (2)] in LXQJ, vol 2, pp.174–5.
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25 They are included in volume 8 of *LXQJ*, *Jiwaiji shiyi bubian* [Supplement to the addenda to the collected uncollected works], pp.91–6. It was probably preceded by the story "Mingtian" [Tomorrow], if that is the manuscript that according to his diary he entrusted to Qian Xuantong to post for him on 8 July (*LXQJ*, vol.14, *Riji* [Diary], p.360 and note on p.362. The story was dated July 1920 when later included in *Nahan*.

Whether one likes its message or not this is an extraordinarily striking reinterpretation of the central story of Christianity: the son of god savouring his hatred of those who are crucifying him and becoming intoxicated with the bliss and the pity of the terrible things that they are doing to him. Compassion and loathing, and enjoying both. What, we have to ask ourselves, does this tell us about what drove its author? And what else do all the other pieces in that remarkable collection reveal about the man we know as Lu Xun? Curiously enough, one element in its ancestry is Lu Xun's reactions to the excitements that began on 4 May 1919.

It was in the summer of that year that Lu Xun made a first attempt at a set of prose poems, dating the first one to eighth day of the eighth month of the eighth year of the Republic, making it only the second clearly datable piece that he wrote after the protests began in May. This was a series of seven short sketches that appeared under the general title “Talking to Myself” (*Zi yan zi yu* 自言自語) in five issues of the paper *Guomin gongbao* 國民公報 during August and September 1919, a period when he wrote very little indeed by his later highly productive standards. Among them were what can be seen as very preliminary drafts of what later became “Kite” (*Fengzheng*) and “Dead Fire” (*Si huo* 死火) in *Weeds*. He evidently intended even then to write more along those lines as the last piece carried a note “To be continued.”25 Though they are not in the same league as *Weeds* and it is understandable that he never included them in any of his volumes and allowed them to be so well forgotten about that they dropped out of his recognized oeuvre until over forty years after his death, they share with *Weeds* an atmosphere of quiet hopelessness and a withdrawal from the fashionable militancy. If we take “Talking to Myself” as an unsuccessful attempt to do what he did so triumphantly in *Weeds* then *Weeds* can be seen as completing some of Lu Xun’s own unfinished business from the tumultuous spring and summer of 1919, events from which he distanced himself at the time and later.

Which is as appropriately awkward a place as any to leave this exploration of only a few aspects of Lu Xun’s disturbing greatness, a greatness that lifts him far above the usual concerns of writing about the months of nationalist protest that started on 4 May 1919, or the whole sad story of May Fourth in the wider sense of the new culture movement.