Lu Xun, Social Darwinism and Mahatma Gandhi

Mark Lindley

(Samskar Ashram Vidyalayam, Varni (Nizamabad Dist., A.P.) - 503 201, India.
lindley@boun.edu.tr)

Abstract: Lu Xun (1881-1936) was one of the most influential Chinese intellectuals of the 20th century. Some of his important ideas were that Darwinian evolution implies moral progress and that the Chinese should therefore no longer behave politically like cannibals, and yet that after the viciously reactionary human "dogs" have been kicked out of power, it is necessary to prevent their resurgence by "beating dogs in the water." This latter idea is contrary to Mahatma Gandhi's radical political precept that "win-win" works better than "win-lose." [The Journal of American Science. 2008;4(3):1-10]. (ISSN: 1545-1003).

Keywords: Lu Xun, Mahatma Gandhi; anti-imperialism; social Darwinism; modern Chinese history; "beat dogs."

Lu Xun, though little known in the West, was a brilliant writer of such importance in 20th-century China that anyone who considers it worthwhile to know about the most important 20th-century Asian political leaders such as Mao Zedong and Mahatma Gandhi may find it worthwhile to know about him as well. ("Lu Xun" was his pen name. It is pronounced rather like the last two syllables of "evolution.") This essay provides an introductory sketch of his life, a critical assessment of some of his ideas and of certain aspects of his reception in modern China, and a fresh translation of a famous example of his art.

He was born in 1881 into a highly educated family whose fortunes declined when, during his childhood, his grandfather was arrested for trying to procure by bribery an office for his father (who then became chronically ill — maybe due to alcoholism — and died during Lu Xun's adolescence). Lu Xun's formal education included a year at a naval academy and three years at a school of mining and railways, during which he read translations of T. H. Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics*, which profoundly impressed him, J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*, and some novels including *Ivanhoe* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

He spent most of 1902-09 in Japan, where, after studying modern Western medicine for two years, he decided to become a writer instead of a doctor, because a journalistic picture of a contemporary crowd of healthy-looking Chinese folks attending a public execution — and the disgustingly enthusiastic reaction of his healthy classmates to the same picture — convinced him that the Chinese needed to cure their spiritual callousness more than they needed medical care. But he was in those days an ineffective writer because he cultivated an arcane kind of Chinese rhetoric that few people would bother to read.

He stopped writing for a while and, upon returning to China in 1909, became a schoolteacher. But then in 1918 the first of his many masterworks was published, a short story entitled "A Madman's Diary" (implicitly in homage to Gogol) and employing an influential new kind of "plain-language" rhetoric and vocabulary.

Readers with access to the internet can find further bionotes at Wikipedia etc. Suffice it here to mention that in 1927 Lu Xun moved to Shanghai, where he co-founded a "League of Left-Wing Writers" and died in 1936; he never joined the Communist Party, but when the Long March succeeded in reaching northwest China in 1935 he telegraphed congratulations to the Party's Central Committee, saying, "In you lies the hope of China and all humanity." I will describe here certain aspects of his significance by means of a some extracts adapted very freely (with permission) from a book by James R. Pusey, *Lu Xun and Evolution* (State University of New York Press, Albany 1998; if you wish to cite from this material, please revert to Pusey's text):

"From 1949 to 1966, more than 90 books were published about Lu Xun. And later, after the fall of the Gang of Four, the Academy of Social Sciences initiated an unprecedented national research effort, with research units organized in every province. In 1981, the centenary of his birth, in addition to a new edition of the (ever more) *Complete Works of Lu Xun*, at least 119 major books were published about him, and over 3000 scholarly articles, not to mention the thousands of newspaper articles. And then 1986, the 50th anniversary of his death, was another such 'big year'." (See pp.146-47.)

"'Mankind', Lu Xun said, 'has not yet grown up.' Most people were somewhere in between beasts and 'true humans.' Some were more 'human' than others; some more 'brutal'." (See p.85.)

"Never asking how evolution could mean *progress*, he echoed the great confusion of the day:

'Mankind had made daily progress without end.'

'The fact of mankind's progressive evolution is clear beyond a shadow of a doubt.'" (See p.71.)

"In 1908 (while still in Japan) he expressed great hope: 'I listen for the true voice of the knowing, and look for his inner light. Inner light is what will break the darkness. A true voice will eschew deceit. For a people, these two things will be like thunder in the early spring. A hundred grasses will begin to sprout, the color of dawn will light the east, and the dark night shall pass.'" (See p.88.)

"In an exceptionally patriotic moment during that same year, he called his own people very nearly 'human'. The imperialists were beasts, but the Chinese 'treasured peace, as few others on earth':

'Hating to spill blood, hating to kill people, abhorring separation, finding contentment in labor — *human* nature is like that. If only the whole world behaved as China did, then what Tolstoy said could be true: All the races of this earth, all the different states, would respect each other's borders and not invade each other, and order would reign for ten thousand generations.'

"But he would rarely again call his people good-natured. After the tragedy of the successful Revolution of 1911, he spent the rest of his life exposing his own people's 'national nature', which, though different, was as brutal and barbaric in his eyes as that of the imperialists. In 1918 he wrote, in *A Madman's Diary*:

'I opened a history book and found, scrawled over every page, the words *ren-yi daode* (benevolence, righteousness, or morality). I perused the book half the night before I made out the words between the words — two words that filled the book: *chi ren* [eat people].'" (See pp.85-86.)

"He said the Revolution of 1911 had failed because it had not wrested power from the ruling, people-eating, gentry class. When that revolution was over, the Manchus were gone but the Chinese who had held local power under the Manchus held power still — and still ate people. He wrote (in 1925):

'When the revolution [of 1911] finally began, the whole pack of gentry with their stinking pretensions immediately became as scared as stray dogs, and coiled their queues on top of their heads. The revolutionaries behaved in a "civilized" manner, saying, "All shall be reformed. We do not beat dogs in the water.[1] Let them climb out." So they climbed out, they lay low until the latter half of 1913, the time of the Second Revolution, and then they burst out to help Yuan Shikai bite a host of revolutionaries to death, and China once again sank day by day into darkness. And so it is to this day.'

"He said the Chinese revolutionaries should therefore 'postpone "fair play"', otherwise 'this present state of chaos could last forever'." (See pp.111-112.)

"He said that *future* human beings, 'true human beings', would be completely humane — but also that it would not be inhumane to be inhumane to the inhumane, because the inhumane were not truly human. He did not see the danger: that those who dehumanize their enemies dehumanize themselves." (See pp.127 & 124.)

"During 'The Decade of Disaster' (1966-76), Chairman Mao and the Gang of Four used 'Lu Xun's revolutionary spirit' of 'beating dogs in the water' to justify the mental or physical beating of millions of people. This explains Han Shaohua's lament (1982):

---

* In a message kindly accepting my unusual way of drawing on his book, Prof. Pusey has mentioned that Lu Xun did not invent the metaphor of "beating dogs in the water"; it was already a known Chinese-language counterpart to the Western concept of "kicking a man when he is down."

'I remember a few years ago, when I spoke with some young people in their early twenties about Lu Xun, they either said not a word (I do not know whether they had nothing to say or whether they had other reservations), or else they said such things as "Lu Xun was pretty brazen".'" (See pp.145-46.)

"Lu Xun would have rejoiced in his [posthumous] gradual liberation throughout the 'liberal' decade from 1979 until 1989. But then June 4th 1989 [the Tienanmen-Square massacre] confirmed his most pessimistic views." (See pp. xiii-xiv.)

"Thumb through his works and you can hear him speak:

'China is especially ferocious towards its own.'

'The tears have been wiped away,

The blood has been washed away,

And the butchers go free and take their ease.'" (See p.168.)

"In 1988 one of the most promising of the younger Lu-Xun scholars, Wang Hui, wrote an important, and controversial, article, entitled 'An Historical Criticism of Lu Xun Research'. Among other things he said:

'In the development of human thought all unified theories that explain everything, all normative ideological systems, are necessarily coercive. They necessarily rely on religious or political authority. Under such an ideology the individual can no longer think freely, but can only explain anything he encounters according to the ideology's prescribed concepts.'" (See pp.148-150.)

"In the current ferment in China, officials and the disenchanted both tell people, on occasion, to 'study Lu Xun'. But study what? What, if they actually listened to him, would they hear? Would officials hear 'You can change' or 'Beat dogs in the water'? Would the disenchanted hear 'To rebel is justified' or 'Eating people is wrong'? The way is not clear; the dilemma is still there; but who can look at China's century of civil strife and wish for more? Who would not say 'amen' to the prayer (in the ancient Greek play, *The Eumenides*, by Aeschylus):

'I pray that civil strife,
Which knows no end of evil,
Shall never [again] roar within this city.
And may the dust
That drinks the black blood of its people
Wreak not havoc on the state,
In rage demanding recompense,
Life for life.'" (See pp.129-30.)

"Lu Xun wrote about Chinese, because he was most worried about Chinese, but he is great because, without trying to, he wrote about us all. The dog in 'The Dog's Retort', the one dog in all Lu Xun's works who puts people in their place, puts *all* people in their place:

'I dreamt that I was walking in a narrow lane, wearing tattered clothes and worn-out shoes, looking like a beggar.

'A dog started barking behind my back.

'I haughtily turned my head and cursed him, saying "Hey! Shut up! You snobbish cur!"

'"Hee, hee," he laughed, and then said, "I dare not so presume. To my shame, I'm no match for you people."

'"What!?" I was furious, thinking this an intolerable insult.

'"I'm ashamed to say I still can't distinguish copper and silver. I still can't distinguish cotton and silk. I still can't distinguish officials and people. I still can't distinguish masters and slaves. I still can't distinguish..."

'I fled.

'"But wait! Let us talk some more...": He loudly tried to hold me back.

‘I fled all the way, as fast as I could, until I fled out of my dream, and back to my bed.’” (See pp.169-170.)

“‘Marxists believe’, said Yi Zhuxian, ‘that Darwin's scientific theory of evolution “can be used as the basis in natural science of the class struggle in history”.’ That was Marx's view; and Lenin's view was that ‘Marx's dialectic is the newest scientific theory of evolution.’ But Marx and Lenin never distinguished themselves less as scientists than when they made such claims. How could their hopelessly muddled mixture of idealism, materialism, determinism, voluntarism, moral indignation, moral exhortation, and faith in the inevitable triumph of the forces of history, ‘independent of human will,’ over the evil of human alienation, have a basis in [valid] Darwinian science? Marx and Lenin, [Herbert] Spencer and [William Graham] Sumner, all were Social Darwinists. Yet [orthodox Communist] Chinese scholars insist that Lu Xun was not a Social Darwinist since ‘he stood on the side of the weak’.” (See p.158.)

“In modern China the term *jinhua lun* (literally the theory of progressive change) has been used indiscriminately to refer to Darwin's theory of evolution (understood or misunderstood) and to all sorts of theories of progress. No term in 2500 years of Chinese intellectual history has done more to confirm Confucius' famous dictum: ‘When names are not correct, discourse is difficult.’” (See p.157.)

“Would Lu Xun have accepted *all* the violence of the [Communist] Revolution as necessary dog-beating? Would he have sat silent through thought-reform? It is not only infidels who speculate. Here is a translation of a poem written by Zhang Yu’an in 1980:

‘If he were still living, I do not know
What people would call him.
If he were still living, I do not know
What he would urge people to do.
Perhaps he would hold high position,
But perhaps he would be only a soldier.
In high office, he would not forget his
promise to be an ox for the young.
In low estate, he would not act the fawning slave!
Perhaps he would already have received many
honors.
But perhaps he would just have been let out of
jail.
Honored, he would cry out and pace back and
forth anew.
In jail, he would rewrite his *Permitted Discussions of Wind and Moon* and
On False Liberty.
Perhaps he would no longer carry his notes in
that patterned paper bag.
But surely he would not disdainfully walk about
with his nose in the air.
Perhaps he would attend important meetings,
But not followed by two secretaries and three
bodyguards.
Perhaps he would ride in a modern sedan,
But surely he would not use curtains to shut out
the outside.
He would reach out to the destitute.
He would quietly read the complaints of the many
young still waiting to be employed.
Perhaps he would be spilling ink in hymns to

"the new life."
But perhaps he would be lancing with his pen
the ills of the age.
Perhaps he would enjoy more joy and laughter.
But perhaps he would feel new uneasiness
and rage.'" (See pp.163-64.)

This concludes my notes adapted from Pusey's book. Much information could be added to outline more amply Lu Xun's work and its historical context; but instead of undertaking to do that here, I would like to comment on *(1)* one of the most salient points in Pusey's account, *(2)* a Western analogy to Lu Xun's precept of beating counter-revolutionary dogs in the water, and *(3)* the conclusion reached at the end of the poem cited just above. In connection with each of these three comments I will cite some relevant remarks made by the greatest of the Indian anti-imperialists, Mahatma Gandhi.

(1) Pusey acknowledges (p.200) that Lu Xun used the phrase "eat people" in "'a large and metaphorical sense' — as Darwin said of his famous phrase 'Struggle for Existence'." But it seems to me that Pusey's way of drawing the contrast between "eating people" and "beating dogs" might cause some readers to lose sight of the fact that people cowed by the mere threat of force may be "eaten" metaphorically — exploited very unfairly — without a constant use of force such as evoked by the phrase "beat dogs in the water." It is important to understand that a fair and hence *genuinely* non-violent socio-economic order would differ substantially from an ostensibly non-violent one in which people are exploited very unfairly. Gandhi's perspective in this regard was clear (and can explain why, in India today, the "Naxalite" peasant revolutionaries are achieving a remarkable expansion of their sway):

"A violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one day unless there is a voluntary abdication of… the power that riches give, and sharing them for the common good." [1]

(2) A salient precept of the Jacobins in the French Revolution was Saint-Just's motto: "No liberty for the enemies of liberty." The director of the revolutionary *Terreur*, Robespierre, spoke out against the "treacherous insinuations" of those citizens who questioned the "severity of measures prescribed by the public interest." He said: "This severity is alarming only for the conspirators, only for the enemies of liberty." In Western history, Robespierre's directorship is a *locus classicus* of governmental use of terror ostensibly in the public interest. Gandhi doubted the benefit; he said, in 1909:

"There is a forceful book by Carlyle on the French Revolution. I realized after reading it that it is not from the white nations that India can learn the way out of her present degradation. It is my belief that the French people have gained nothing of value through the Revolution." [2]

—And, in 1920 (in a passage just after another allusion to the French Revolution):

"[O]rder established by a tyrant in order to get hold of the tyrannical reins of Government... is no order for me but it is disorder. I want to evolve justice out of this injustice." [3]

—And, in 1942:

"I believe that in the history of the world there has not been a more genuinely democratic struggle for freedom than ours [in colonial India]. I read Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution* while I was in prison, and Pandit Jawaharlal [Nehru] has told me something about the Russian revolution. But it is my conviction that inasmuch as these struggles were fought with the weapon of violence they failed to realize the democratic ideal. In the democracy which I have envisaged, a democracy established by non-violence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master. It is to join a struggle for such democracy that I invite you today." [4]

Here the phrase "everybody… his own master" is a call to self-discipline among the citizens of free India. Only such inner moral strength, so widespread as to be culturally predominant, could compensate adequately for the absence of tyrannical or quasi-tyrannical authority imposed by Government. I detect, in

Gandhi's call for universal self-discipline, an idealism that may be nearly as extreme (given modern capitalism's massive investment in persuading us to be idiotically ruthless consumers) than the kind of social Darwinism that Pusey sees in Lu Xun. There is always *some* kind of dilemma. However:

(3) When Gandhi felt outraged (which was often the case) he normally did not express it directly as outspoken rage, but instead took up certain forms of vigorous dialogue, political activism and constructive work. It seems to me that Mao's concept of political common sense:

"We cannot love our enemies. We cannot love the ugly things in society; our goal is to wipe out such things; that is human common sense" [5]

—is nowadays gradually being superceded in some quarters by Gandhi's common-sense view that win-win solutions to social conflicts are better than win-lose. I don't mean that a nonviolent approach to socially pathological people willing to devour other people (in one way and another) is so problem-free as to be a simple panacea. It was, in Gandhi's opinion, a necessary but insufficient precept of effective liberation. This can be a mere platitude but I would suggest that it is better than a likewise simple precept of "beating dogs in the water."

Appendix: Translation of a story by Lu Xun

Several anthologies of writings by Lu Xun are available in standard English translations, which are, however, nowadays a little outdated in style.[6] The following is a fresh translation, prepared in collaboration with a young Chinese student,[7] of one of the best known short stories, a tale of parental love and desperate superstition, of a blood-thirsty mob, of callous men, of a heroic rebel with a democratic ideal in opposition to imperial authoritarianism, and of ordinary people's failure (even that of the hero's mother) to understand. The story was written and published in 1919 but refers back to the era of the last Chinese dynasty (i.e. before 1911).

MEDICINE

I

It was the start of an autumn day. The moon had set but the sun had not yet begun to rise; the sky was dark. Every creature (except some nocturnal animals) was deep asleep.

Old Shuan Hua suddenly sat up, ignited a match and lit a dirty oil-lamp which filled the tea house's rooms with a feeble light.

"So you're going now, Papà?" It was the voice of an elderly woman; and meanwhile there came from the inner room a sound of coughing.

"Uh-huh," Old Shuan nodded as he buttoned up his clothes; "Give it to me," he murmured, and stretched out his hand. His wife reached beneath the pillow, probed, and pulled out a bag of silver coins which she handed him. He tipped the bag for a moment and put it in his pocket and secured it there. He lit a portable lantern, put out the tiny flame of the indoor lamp, and, holding the lantern, went into the inner room. There was a rustling noise, and more coughing; he waited till it died down, then murmured: "Little Shuan my son,... stay still, don't sit up.... Your mother will look after the tea-house."

There was no reply from the boy, so Old Shuan, presuming that he had gone back to sleep, stepped outside and walked along the street. It was dark; all that could be seen was the grey road. His feet went ahead by the light of the lantern. Some dogs were about; but they were not barking on this unusual morning.

It was much colder out on the street than it had been indoors, but Old Shuan felt encouraged by it, as if suddenly rejuvenated: like a teenager with some kind of religious inspiration.

The darkness gradually faded, and as he walked on ahead, he was suddenly taken aback to see the T-crossroad just a bit further on. He stopped in his tracks for a moment, went over to a shop that hadn't yet opened, hid himself under the eaves and leaned against the door. He began to feel the chill.

"Some old guy." — "Satisfied this time, eh?" — Old Shuan was disconcerted again as a few people passed by and one of them gazed back at him. Their faces were too dim to recognize, but he could tell that their eyes were glinting with a strange, greedy lust. He looked down at his lantern, and saw that it had run out of oil. He tapped his pocket to make sure that the coins still there. He looked out again — and saw quite a few people. They seemed like ghosts, but as he looked harder he could see that they were real.

Some soldiers came by. Their uniforms were easy to recognize: a white circle was stitched on the chest and on the back, and as they came closer he could see the crimson-lace ornaments on the uniforms.

And now a throng of people came along, like a tide, but suddenly stopped at the T-crossroad and gathered into a half-circle. Old Shuan stared in their direction but the only thing he could see was the backs of the crowd. They were all standing on their toes and stretching their necks so much that they looked like ducks hanging from an invisible hand. There was a brief silence, and then a loud bang, and the crowd surged back past Old Shuan and almost knocked him over.

"OK, give me the money and take the thing you want!": a man dressed in black stood in front of Old Shuan. His eyes were like two daggers; Old Shuan cringed; one of the man's hands reached out for the money; the other one held a small, red, steamed bun from which blood was dripping. Old Shuan quickly got the money from his pocket, but quivered for a moment, not daring to take the blood-red thing. The man shouted impatiently, "What are you afraid of? — Take it!" Old Shuan still hesitated, so the man grabbed his lantern and tore off its paper cover, wrapped the bun in it and jammed the packet into Old Shuan's hand.

"Who is sick in your family?", Old Shuan heard someone ask him. But he didn't reply: his mind was focused on the red steamed-bun, and all his thoughts now were of infusing a new vitality from it into his home and bringing happiness to his family.

The sun had risen. The broad road, leading straight home, stretched out ahead. Behind him was the crossroad, with its faded sign: "Execution Square."

II

By the time Old Shuan got home the tea house had already been cleaned up and the rows of tea tables were set out and shining with reflected morning sunlight; but no customers had yet arrived. Little Shuan was seated at a table near the wall, eating his breakfast quietly. Beads of sweat dripped from his head, dampening his shirt and making it stick to his spine so that his shoulder blades stuck out and made an inverted V. Looking at the boy, Old Shuan contracted his brows. His wife hurried out of the kitchen and asked, tremulously: "Did you get it?"

"Yes." The two of them went into the kitchen. They talked briefly; then she went out and in a few moments came back with a big lotus-leaf which she spread out on the kitchen table. Old Shuan took out the red bun and wrapped it in the leaf. Little Shuan had finished his breakfast by now; Madam Hua called out from kitchen, "Stay there, Little Shuan, don't come in." Old Shuan put the wrapped bun in the stove to cook. The fire flared up, and the tea house was filled with the aroma.

"What a delicious smell! What are you guys eating?" It was the hunchback who took tea here every day — usually the first to come in the morning and last to leave in afternoon. No one answered him, so he persisted: "Is it porridge?" There was still no reply, but Old Shuan hurried out of the kitchen and served him his morning tea.

"Little Shuan, come in now," Madam Hua called from the kitchen. The boy came and sat on a chair that was set out for him. His mother gave him a plate with a ball of black food on it and whispered to him:

“Eat it up — you’re going to get well now!” Little Shuan picked up the black thing with care and looked at it. He had a strange feeling, as if he was holding his life in his own hands. He tore the bun slowly in two; the smell of white-flour steam flowed out from inside the charred crust; he looked at the stuff inside and realized that it was just a rice-meal bun. Soon he had eaten it, and forgotten the flavor, and left the plate empty in front of him. His parents were standing next to him and watched anxiously as he chewed. Their gaze seemed to pour something into him, and pull something out. His heart beat faster; he patted his chest gently and resumed coughing. “Go to sleep, you’ll soon be well.” Little Shuan obeyed his mother and went to bed, coughing. She waited until it stopped, and then covered him with a patched blanket.

III

The tea house was crowded with customers and Old Shuan was busy serving tea from a big copper kettle.

There were dark circles under his eyes. “Old Shuan, are you OK? What’s wrong?” mumbled an old man with white beard. — “Nothing!” — “Nothing? Oh, OK, then maybe I was wrong,” the bearded man said. The hunchback spoke up: “Old Shuan is just busy and tired. If his son...” — but here he was interrupted by a heavy-jowled man wearing a dark brown, unbuttoned shirt and a brown girdle at his waist. He had just now come into the tea-house, and he shouted to Old Shuan: “Has your son eaten it? Does he feel better? You were lucky, Old Shuan! If I hadn't told you....”

Old Shuan, still holding the big kettle with one hand, put his other arm straight down (as a sign of respect) and listened to the heavy-jowled man quietly and with a smile on his face; and indeed all the tea-house customers listened respectfully, and Madam Hua — who also had deep circles under her eyes — hurried out from the kitchen and served him some specially brewed tea which Old Shuan topped up with steaming-hot water.

“A guaranteed cure! It’s not like other things. Just think! You bring it back and eat it while it’s still warm,” the heavy-jowled man shouted. — “It’s true, and we couldn’t have done it without Mr. Kang's help,” Madam Hua said with gratitude. — “A sure cure, a sure cure! You eat it while it’s still warm! A rice-bun drenched in human blood will cure *any* kind of consumption,” Kang went on barking. At the word “consumption” Madam Hua registered dismay, but still forced a smile on her face, and then left quietly. Kang took no notice but went on speaking loudly. Little Shuan in the inner room was awakened by the noise and started coughing.

“So, Little Shuan is in luck — and of course his sickness will be cured — and that’s why Old Shuan has been smiling all this time,” the white-bearded man beard mused. He went over to Kang and asked him, in a low voice: “Mr. Kang, I heard that a man was executed this morning, and that he was from the Shia family. Who the devil was he, and why was he executed?” — “You ask me who it was? It was Madame Shia's son, of course!” Mr. Kang replied. Everyone turned quiet and concentrated on hearing him, so he raised his voice even higher (and by now his jowls were quivering): “That crazy guy didn’t want to live, you know, he just didn’t *want* to live! *I* got nothing! Even his clothes were ripped off by the jailer before the execution. Old Shuan’s the lucky one — and that crazy bastard's uncle was lucky too: *he* informed on him and got the reward — twenty-five thousand! *He* was lucky....”

Little Shuan came out from the inner room, coughing and with his two hands on his chest. He went to the kitchen, filled a bowl with cold rice and hot water, and started eating. Madam Hua followed and asked him: “Little Shuan, are you better now?... Are you still hungry?...” Kang glanced at him — “A sure cure!” — and turned back to the others: “That Uncle Shia is a smart man, you know. If he hadn’t informed on his crazy nephew, *his* family would have been executed; but now, you see, he got the reward, he got the money! The nephew was so crazy! In prison he tried to persuade the jailer to join him in the rebellion!” — “The bastard! He *had* to be executed!”, an angry young man seated in the back of the tea house growled. — “He told the jailer the Empire doesn’t belong to the Emperor but to the people! It's evil!... The jailer knew he lived with his mother but had never imagined the crazy sonofabitch was so poor; he simply couldn’t get any money out of him. He was so mad he worked him over when he come out with that idea of his.” — “Yeah, I hear the jailer used to be a boxer. He must have punched him out pretty good!”, the hunchback

chimed in. — “But that crazy bastard wasn't scared; he told the jailer how *sorry* he felt!” — “Who would feel sorry for a sonofabitch like that?”, the bearded man said. Kang looked at him superciliously: “You don’t get it: the crazy sonofabitch meant he was sorry *for the jailer*!” Everyone was dumbfounded by this. (By now Little Shuan had finished his meal and his head was steaming with sweat.) — “Sorry for the jailer?! He was loony, he must have been out of his mind,” the bearded man said, suddenly seeing the light. — “That’s it, he must have gone loony,” a young man agreed. And conversation began to pick up again among the customers. Little Shuan started coughing. Kang walked over to him and clapped his shoulder and said: “A sure cure! Stop coughing! It’s a guaranteed cure!” — “A loony!”, the hunchback muttered, shaking his head gently.

IV

The land just outside the city’s west wall had originally been government property. A small path worn down out by passers-by meandered through it and had became a kind of boundary. Convicts who had been executed were buried on the left side; the land to the right was for paupers’ graves. Both sides were crowded with countless grave mounds looking like steamed-rice buns in a rich family’s birthday celebration.

This year the weather was unusually cold for the Commemoration Festival in April; the willow trees had tiny shoots no larger than grains.

It was early morning. Madam Hua laid four dishes and a bowl of rice in front of the fresh grave on the right side of the path. She wept, and burned some paper money, and sat, as if numb, on the ground. She felt like waiting for something, but didn’t know what it was. A breeze rippled her hair; it was whiter now than a year ago.

Another woman, gray-haired and dressed in rags, came along. She held an old basket with paper money in it, and walked with staggering steps. Suddenly she noticed Madam Hua sitting on the ground, and hesitated for a while, embarrassed, but then after a brief silence forced herself to go on to a grave near where Madam Hua was sitting, but on the left side of the path. She put down her basket. This other grave was just opposite Little Shuan’s on the other side of the path; Madam Hua saw the old woman put four dishes on the grave, burn paper money, and weep: no doubt she too was mourning a dead son. The grey-haired woman gazed ahead for a while, and then suddenly seemed to register shock, stepping backwards, her hands and legs quivering. Madam Hua thought sorrow had driven her delirious, so she stood up and crossed the path and said, gently, “Let’s not grieve too much; let’s go home.” The old woman nodded, but stared ahead with dull eyes and said, in a low voice: “Look at that!, what is that?” Madam Hua looked at where the old woman was pointing to on the grave-mound in front of them. It was covered with ugly patches of fresh soil, but as she looked harder she could make out, to her surprise, a wreath of red and white flowers on top of the mound. The old women had suffered from poor eyesight for many years, but they could see the flowers clearly: not fresh, but set out in a neat circle. Madam Hua looked over at her own son’s grave-mound and at the others nearby. Each one had a few small pale flowers growing on it like dots. She felt disappointed, and her curiosity about the red and white flowers began to fade; but now the other woman stepped closer to them, and murmured to herself: “They don’t have roots. Someone must have put them there. But who would come here? Kids never play here. Our relatives haven’t come for a long time. How can it be?” She thought for a while, then burst into tears: “Dear son! They have wronged you, and you can’t forget, and you’re still grieving in the other world, and you’ve done this to let me know — is that it?” She looked around and saw a crow perched on a leafless branch. “Yes, they murdered you; but someday, God knows, they’ll get the punishment they deserve! Rest in peace now — and if you can hear what I’m saying, let that crow fly to the top of your grave-mound in front of my eyes!”

The breeze had stopped, and the dry grass stood straight like copper wires. A trembling sound vibrated in the air and faded away. There was a deathly stillness. The two women standing in the grass looked up at the crow perched on the bare branch.

Some time passed. Some other people came to visit graves — old people, holding children's hands and walking along the path. Madam Hua felt as if a burden had been lifted from her soul. She wanted to leave, and urged the old woman: "Let's go now." The old woman sighed, and put her dishes and bowl back in her basket, and after hesitating for a moment started to leave with slow steps and still muttering, "How can it be?"

When they had walked about twenty steps they heard a loud cawing, and they turned, startled, and saw the crow fan out its wings and soar like an arrow to the far sky.

References

(The citations from Gandhi are available in every edition of his collected works.)

[1] Gandhi, 1941. Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place. Navajivan, Ahmedabad (the section headed "ECONOMIC EQUALITY").

[2] Gandhi, 1909. My Third Experience in Jail. Indian Opinion 5 (the second paragraph under the heading "MY READING").

[3] Gandhi, 1920. Speech given in Madras on 12 August (the section entitled "THE DUTY OF TITLE-HOLDERS").

[4] Gandhi, 1942. Speech given on 7 August at an All-India Congress Committee meeting in Bombay (as reported by Gandhi in Item 56 of a letter of 15 July 1943 to an Additional Secretary in the Home Dept. of the colonial Government of India).

[5] James R. Pusey, 1998. Lu Xun and Evolution. State University of New York Press. Albany (p.111, translated from Mao Zedong xuanji, Beijing 1969, III/828).

[6] The following anthologies of writings by Lu Xun have been published in Beijing by the Foreign Languages Press: Selected Stories (1972), Selected Works (4 vols., 1980); The Complete Stories (1981, published also by Indiana University Press in the USA), Selected Poems (1982). This particular story was first published in 1919.

[7] Peng Chennan.