

---

## Literary Evidence of Continuities from Zhou Shuren to Lu Xun

EVA SHAN CHOU

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, BARUCH COLLEGE

In 1918, at the relatively late age of thirty-seven and using the pen name of Lu Xun, Zhou Shuren (1881-1936) began to write the fiction and essays that came to be regarded as the earliest masterpieces of a modern Chinese literature. He was responding to the request of a friend who, with others among the new elite, were calling for a serious literature that could in turn foster a modern China. In line with prevailing proposals, Lu Xun employed the vernacular, then untried for serious literature, and the unfamiliar, realistic style of nineteenth-century European fiction. Almost from the first, the caustic tone and electrifying images of his essays and stories marked him as the most striking voice of the new iconoclasm and made him an influential force in the social and moral criticism that the New Literature took as its mission. Within a few short years, he had assumed a leading position in the emerging literary world, a preeminence that he is still accorded today.

The years that precede the unexpected launching of such a literary career have a peculiar interest that sets it apart from the usual study of an author's preparatory years. The command of style and message that appeared immediately, the late age of thirty-seven at which he began to write, the mature literary voice that was released by the seeming chance of a friend's request—these features suggest accumulated experiences and reflections of unusual dimensions. The interest in investigating these antecedent experiences is intensified by the seemingly personal nature of many of Lu Xun's writings. In both fiction and essay, he often drew upon settings and character types from his youth in Shaoxing, and in fiction he sometimes used as narrators educated men who shared features with his own biography. Such parallels have accentuated the great scholarly interest in his early life, despite the fragmentary and retrospective nature of the evidence.

For the early life, strictly speaking, contemporary evidence is provided only by the few surviving writings of Zhou Shuren. Whether they contain anything that is predictive of the themes and concerns of the later Lu Xun has depended in large part on the period in question. In this respect, the most productive area for scholarly inquiry has been the study of the dozen or so essays and historical writings from the

eight years that Zhou lived in Japan (1902-1909). They provide much information about the author's interest in new political and cultural ideas, his experiments in making them more broadly known, and his growing sense that writing was somehow to be a component of political and social change. These characteristics provide us with an early view of the person that Lu Xun would become, and they guarantee a place for the Japan writings in any study of him.

By contrast, the nearly ten years between Zhou's return to China and 1918 seem to yield little that looks forward to Lu Xun. Consequently, scant scholarly attention has been paid to the half dozen pieces Zhou wrote between 1909 and 1912, when he lived in the south, nor to the dozen or so from 1912-1918, when he lived in Beijing but before he began to write as Lu Xun. Perhaps the reason is that not only is their language classical, but their genres are those favored by the traditional scholar: they are prefaces, epigraphs, epitaphs, and scholarly studies of texts, artifacts, and historical sites. Thus in spirit as well as in style, they seem to belong wholly to the traditions of the past. On their evidence, in the years after his return to China, Zhou seemed to have disengaged himself from the social and moral concerns of the new elite to which he belonged, to have become, as he wrote a friend, "a provincial" (11:343), with the scholarly interests of a traditional literatus.

This article presents evidence that one of these seemingly traditional works contains features that can be found later in Lu Xun's vernacular fiction. The work is "Xinhai yuji" ("Excursions in the Year 1911"; 8:40), an essay published in 1912, and its connections are to two short stories, "Guxiang" ("Hometown"; 1:474-483) written in 1921, and "Zhufu" ("New Year's Sacrifice"; 2:5-21) from 1924. The latter are two of Lu Xun's best known works, often anthologized and much analyzed. "Excursions" is linked to their most famous scenes, moments which are often interpreted as providing insights into the author. The connections traced here will shed light on the works from both periods: new information is brought to bear on key scenes in two famous works, and an early essay that, with one exception (Semantov 24-26), has been overlooked by critics gains unexpected significance. Their analysis will identify important characteristics and show that they can be extended back to the early years.

"Excursions in the Year 1911" was written during the initial years after Zhou's return from Japan, when he lived first in Hangzhou and then in his hometown of Shaoxing. His activities during these years are studied more than his writings, though our knowledge of both is sparse. The year in question, 1911, was particularly eventful, for in that year, after nearly a decade of unsuccessful uprisings, the Qing dynasty was overthrown and a republic established. As it happens, we know something about Zhou's activities when Shaoxing went over to the revolution in

December. At this time, as research and very late memoirs show, Zhou played a small but active role: for two days, he led some students who went into the streets on outreach missions to explain the new republican government to the populace (Lu Xun *bowuguan* 1:241-242). He was also sufficiently known to be appointed by the new government as principal of Shaoxing Normal College. (He held this post for only a few months before politics as usual caused him to resign.) Such actions on his part, unusually overt if very brief, have diverted attention from this essay and these excursions of slightly earlier in the year and relegated them to phenomena of the old order. Thus the excursions are not mentioned in highly detailed biographies such as Lin Zhihao's. Nevertheless, as we shall see, it is significant that the essay was written in this year.

"Excursions in the Year 1911" consists of two brief essays which record outings made in the third and the eighth lunar months,<sup>1</sup> both to well-known sites. Only the first essay concerns us here. On this excursion, Zhou's destination was the Temple to Yu outside Shaoxing. Yu was the emperor in prehistoric times whose ceaseless efforts over many years saved China from devastating floods. Zhou's research showed that a temple to him had existed on this site since the sixth century (1:50-51). The previous year, Zhou and others from Shaoxing Middle School had visited this temple, and a surviving photograph shows nearly two hundred students and teachers on the grand flight of steps that forms its approach. On the present excursion, despite the impression given of a solitary outing, he was probably accompanied by his youngest brother Zhou Jianren, with whom he often botanized (Pollard 40) and whose name he used for the published work. (The translation below uses no paragraphing, after the classical Chinese style, but adds punctuation.)

18th day of the third month. A clear day. About six or seven *li* outside the gates of Kuaishan is situated the Temple to Yu. Old thyme covers the walls with green. Rotted vegetation carpets the ground. Two or three farmers sat on the stone steps. To the right lies the base of Kuaiji Mountain. If you follow it for a few *li* and turn left, you reach a small mountain. It is not high, pines and cypresses stand in orderly arrays, and thorny trees catch at your clothing. As you climb up, the thorny trees become fewer and only grasses are to be seen. All are ordinary grasses, but I took samples of two kinds. At the peak, a sheer drop appears at your feet and it is not possible to go any further. Lying down to look [over the drop], you see ancient moss covering everything, thick as pelt, with small flowers interspersed. They were clustered five or six together. I could count about ten in a range a *zhang* across. I gathered what lay nearby, each consisting of a leaf and a flower, the leaf green and the flower purple. It is known as *yiyelan* (single-leaf orchid), a name descriptive of the leaf and of the flower's genus. A light rain suddenly began to fall. A woodcutter passed by and asked what I was doing, but my purpose would have been incomprehensible to him, so I prevaricated, saying, "I am looking for

medicinal plants.” “What for?” he returned. I said, “For long life.” “Long life can come from medicine?” “That’s what I am trying to find out,” I replied. Together we then descended the transverse path that lay along the curve of the mountain. Vertical paths on a mountain are easy to use in ascents but are difficult in descents. For this reason, transverse paths develop along a mountain’s curve. Without prearrangement, people use them, and thus they are sure to become paths and are no longer wild.

It seems unlikely that an essay of such a calm, even tone would have elements in common with the vivid, sardonic writings of Lu Xun. Every feature about this essay seems to mark it as wholly traditional: its leisurely style and precise observation, the chosen topic of an unremarkable outing, the initial destination of a historical site, the botanical goals that give a kind of point and interest to the day, and the meeting with a woodcutter, that archetypal figure of poetry and personal essay. These civilized, mild features typify the informal essay whose seventeenth-century practitioners we know Lu Xun admired.

Before presenting the connections to Lu Xun, I should mention a factor that increases the likelihood of an allegorical, political reading, and hence the likelihood of a connection to the writings of Lu Xun, which are political in the broadest sense. This is that the periodical in which this essay was published, *Yueshe congkan* (*Yue Society Magazine*), is sufficient in itself to belie the essay’s apparent traditionalism. *Yueshe congkan* was one of the many periodicals, typically short-lived, of the literary society The Southern Society (Nanshe), in this case of its branch organization, the Yue Society (Yueshe) (Yang 116-117; Liu 258-259). The Southern Society had been formed in 1909 by anti-Qing dynasty gentry in the south, the region that was most advanced in revolutionary sentiments. Other writings published under the sponsorship of Southern Society are, like “Excursions,” traditional in form, language, and tone, although, unlike “Excursions,” they are overtly topical on political matters. Thus Zhou’s account is bound to have more topical, political meaning than is apparent to the casual reader.<sup>2</sup> As Semanov has pointed out, “simple landscape sketches would hardly have been of any interest to an anthology of the revolutionary Yue Society” (25). Further support is lent by the possibility that Zhou was more than a contributor. In material compiled by the Shaoxing Lu Xun Museum, we find that two contemporaries, his brother Zhou Jianren and an old friend, Zhang Nengdi, recall decades later that he had been editor of this issue (191-192). If so, he set its overall tenor of political engagement, although, as is to be true of the later writer, his particular contribution raises questions about its revolutionary setting rather than conform to it. Be that as it may, this is the only issue the Shaoxing Museum has located and perhaps the only issue ever published (191).

Of the connections between “Excursions” and the two short stories, the one with “Hometown” is obvious: only the obscurity of this essay has kept it from general notice. The common element is the image used at the essay’s end, when the author and the woodcutter are descending the mountain. “Vertical paths on a mountain,” Zhou writes, “are easy to use in ascents but are difficult in descents. For this reason, transverse paths develop along a mountain’s curve. Without prearrangement, people use them and thus they are sure to become paths and are no longer wild.”

The same image of a path that is created by repeated use famously occurs in the conclusion of “Hometown.” This 1921 story is based on a trip to Shaoxing which Lu Xun had made a month earlier to close up the family home and move its members to Beijing. The narrator, who has had a discouraging time on this return, turns his thoughts to the next generation, and wonders whether things might not be better for them. He considers the various likely outcomes and concludes with this image, which is also the final sentence in the story: hope may exist for them, for it may be “just like a path on the earth. Originally there is no path on the earth, but when many people pass, a path is formed” (1:483).

The occurrence of an image in two works draws attention to both and allows us to understand each with more resources at our disposal than a single occurrence provides. This is particularly true in this case because “Excursions” leads us to an important third example of this image, not by Lu Xun but by Mencius, whose use is the source for both “Excursions” and “Hometown.” The allusion in the two works to this fourth-century BCE philosopher, second only to Confucius in importance in the official orthodoxy, has not been noticed because the famous image in the vernacular-language “Hometown” does not use its classical language while “Excursion,” which does, is obscure. As it happens, Mencius adds considerably to our analysis of the image in both works. In “Excursions,” the fact that the image contains an allusion to Mencius argues for singling it out as allegorically important, and in “Hometown,” it supports a literal reading of Lu Xun’s words, which provide not an optimistic ending, as generally held, but rather one that is conditional in its optimism, as it is in Mencius.

Mencius uses the image of a path to convey to the ruler Gaozi the nature of moral development:

A trail through the mountains, if used, [is sure to become] a path in a short time, but, if unused, becomes blocked by grass in an equally short time. Now your heart is blocked by grass. (7B.21; trans. Lau 198)

Mencius typically taught by the use of analogies based on readily observable phenomena. Here he compares the creation of a path through repeated use to moral development through frequent practice. Emphasizing the capacity of man to become

good, he says that one will surely follow the other, a path will surely be created. It is important, however, to note that his words contain a condition: if it is used often.

That Zhou Shuren alludes to Mencius is certain, for he employs Mencius' language nearly verbatim. Here is Mencius' phrasing of his sentence: "a trail through the mountains, if used, is sure to become a path in a short time"—山之蹊間介然用之而成路. This is Zhou's phrasing: "without prearrangement, people use them, and thus they are sure to become paths"—人不期而用之介然成路. Six of his ten words repeat Mencius': 用之 (use them), 介然 (sure to), and 成路 (become roads). Especially noteworthy is Lu Xun's use of Mencius' adverb, *jieran* 介然 (sure to), which guarantees the sequence of practice and result. In "Hometown," by contrast, the allusion is not obvious because the vocabulary of its vernacular language is different: 走的人多, 也便成了路. The sense is the same, however: "when many people pass, a path is formed." Without the essay as connector between the modern and the classical, the relation to Mencius, even if noticed, may seem accidental.

Their common source in Mencius means that because we know so much about Mencius' teachings and his use of imagery and analogy, this information lends weight and clarity to the image in both contexts. It is not necessary to suppose piety towards Mencius on either occasion or to suppose that in 1921 Lu Xun recollected its use in 1911. Rather, their common source means that something about Mencius' formulation of his lesson to the ruler remained a significant resource for Lu Xun at very different times in his writing life. That this should be the case illustrates an interesting, contradictory aspect of a writer whose "totalistic antitraditionalism" (Lin Yusheng 10) is the hallmark of his fiction and early essays. His retention of a positive value for tradition is, as Lin notes, a "logical fallacy" (139) in a "complex consciousness" (142). The two allusions here, employed ten years apart, show how deeply embedded in and useful to the mode of his imagination was Mencius' use of imagery in the development of philosophical positions.

Let us first turn to the essay to consider what the Mencius allusion can tell us about Zhou's thinking in 1911. This must be inferred because Zhou provides only the literal or physical image. In the essay, the mountain path that he and the woodcutter use on their descent is an actual example of Mencius' general observation, but whereas Mencius provides the analogy he has in mind, Zhou does not. External information, however, suggests that there is one and that it lies in the political sphere. The clues were mentioned above: the venue of *Yueshe congkan*, probably the most important factor; the prevailing political climate among Zhou's cohorts in 1911; and Zhou's known actions later this year. Any proposal about his thinking remains speculative, but the allusion to Mencius forces us to recognize that *something* is intended.

A reading of this image must recognize both Mencius' precedent and Zhou's direct allusion to it. I suggest that Zhou is making the same point as Mencius but in a political context: that for paths to be created, say, for the declared hopes of the revolution to be realized, frequent practice is required. On the surface, this suggestion is quite slight, not much of a reading. But in the context of Lu Xun's life and writings, it is in fact interesting on several points. For one thing, it suggests that the author, who is always elusive, at this time actually made a statement contemporary to the event, rather than, as is his habit, a retrospective one. The exception represented by "Excursions," however veiled his phrasing, however brief the moment, is also reflected in his temporary leadership—such a strange word to use with this author—of the students shortly after Shaoxing declared for the revolution later this year. He was soon to be disillusioned, as shown by his classical-language short story "Huaijiu" ("The Past"; 7.210-217). Another point of interest here regards his perspective. This reading suggests that at a time of great changes, he chooses to counsel patience, saying that repeated actions over the long run is required. That is, sudden changes are unlikely. Indeed, the one phrase he adds to Mencius' words is a further condition: 不期 (buqi, without prearrangement). When people create a path, it is done without prearrangement. Just so, a desired end is achieved not by explicit individual decisions but rather because conditions lead to it. A de-emphasis on individual volition and an emphasize on the long term: it hardly seems likely that such counsel at an eventful juncture in national history could be popular. This phenomenon is also seen later, in the way Lu Xun is willing to take positions contrary to his natural allies.

Semanov's reading is quite different. He says the passage means that "having climbed to the summit, people choose crooked and roundabout paths" by which to descend (25). Such a reading means that at this point Zhou is already doubtful about what Semanov calls "the oncoming bougeois revolution" (25). This suggestion is biographically defensible and interesting. Because it seems so plausible, it is important to note its problems. First, given the allusion to Mencius, the path created has to be a positive, not a negative. Second, semantically, to arrive at his reading of a "crooked and roundabout path," Semanov has to translate the image as "people, without hesitation, have trampled down the transverse slope," but the words "without hesitation" and "trampled down" are inaccurate. What he translates as "without hesitation" (buqi不期) means "without pre-arrangement." That is, while many people have individually walked this way and created a path, it is not done by agreement beforehand. Rather, the lay of the land invites it. Similarly, the Chinese of Semanov's "trampled down" is merely a neutral verb, "to use" 用之. Finally, a literary objection is that such a reading assumes that metaphorically ascent

is good and descent is bad. This association cannot be taken for granted: Mencius, for example, compares human nature's inclination towards good to water's natural tendency to run downward (6A.2; Lau 160). I do not mean that in this part of his account Zhou makes a second allusion to Mencius, but Mencius' metaphor does counter Semanov's assumption that descent is necessarily bad and it is certainly satisfying that a counterexample can be found in Mencius.

The image's use by Mencius and Zhou gives us the opportunity to reconsider this famous moment in the short story "Hometown." Occurring at the story's conclusion, this ending is overwhelmingly judged to be optimistic: it is "cited by many Chinese admirers as evidence of Lu Xun's positive faith" (Lee 81); it is an "optimistic conclusion" (Semanov 25) and "a vision of the children's 'new life'" (Anderson 39); in it, "he seeks and opens the road of hope" (Peng 59-60). Optimistic interpretations prevail in illustrations of this work as well. In a famous drawing by Feng Zikai (1954), people are shown walking sturdily in twos and threes on a path that leads to the mountains in the distance, behind which the sun is rising (41). Another work, by Han Heping (1979), portrays the narrator as Lu Xun, posed in kindly attitudes throughout and especially so in the final scene. Some partial dissent from this universal view does exist, chiefly expressed by qualifying the optimism. Thus a few critics note that it "sounds forced in the context of the despondent mood of the story" (Lee 81) or suggest that it is an example of the author's known attempt to lessen the distress caused by his pessimism (Anderson 39).

The prevailing reading of the conclusion as optimistic is probably due to the fact that Lu Xun explicitly positions it as the antidote to the most discouraging moment in a dispiriting visit home. This occurs when the narrator meets a peasant whom he remembers as a hero of his youth. A little older than the narrator, the boy had come with his father to the narrator's home the month before New Year's to help with preparations. "Within a few minutes, we were fast friends." Now an adult, the peasant, Runtu, comes in and humbly addresses the narrator as "Master." Bringing forward his own son, he tells him to greet the narrator as "Master." A painful conversation follows, in which the narrator cannot recover even a flicker of the wonderful boy of his memory. On his journey back to Beijing, he comes up with a kind of answer: he imagines that a better future may await the next generation, his nephew and Runtu's son, who have been playing together for a few days, and hoping that this will become true, he makes the analogy of hope with the path. Given its structural positioning as a remedy, perhaps the over-reading of optimism is not surprising.

When we turn to the words themselves, however, it is clear that contrary to critical consensus, they are only conditionally optimistic: "originally there is no path on the

earth, but when many people pass, a path is formed.” They express just what Zhou said in “Excursions,” that paths are conditional upon use, and what Mencius said, that a heart can become good if the path is used often enough. Lu Xun’s meaning is clear without having to invoke either Mencius or “Excursions,” but these precedents make plain that he knows exactly how conditional is his qualifier “when many people pass.” As in the earlier uses, the optimism lies only in the guarantee of a certain sequence of action and result while the sequence in turn is conditional on the action being taken repeatedly over a period of time.

There is, however, one important difference when the two images are compared. This is the appearance in “Hometown” of pessimism, a characteristic of Lu Xun’s noted by nearly all critics but whose presence in this passage has not been really appreciated. Yet pessimism is the dominant tone of the reasoning whose apparently glowing end is this image. Indeed, the image’s simpler, briefer context in “Excursions” highlights the pessimism that has developed since 1911. Where in 1911, Zhou’s reserved type of optimism can borrow straightforwardly from Mencius, by 1921, the expression of even this much hope is a final concession coaxed out from a sequence of bleaker views. It is in the context of this sequence that the image needs to be read. At its start, his thoughts are the most despairing. He thinks that men are born alike but that living separated them, just as he and Rentu have become irremediably separated. (That men are born alike is, incidentally, a wholly Mencian thought, although for Mencius it is a source of optimism.<sup>3</sup>) He wants to feel hope that this will not be the fate of the next generation, his nephew and Rentu’s son, but he believes that his hope is illusory. It is worth noting that the comparison he uses here for illusory hope is as effective as the famous image of the path and that, unlike that one, this image contains no hedging: his hope, he feels, is no less imaginary an idol than the deity to whom Runtu sacrifices and it is even more distant. After this devastating image, he makes a concession and amends this despairing view to a studied neutrality. He says, “hope may exist, or it may not.” Only then does he make a final, slight change and say that hope is a path that can be created. Both outcomes remain possible, hope may exist or it may not, but there is a way to bring hope into being. It is hard to see a series of such careful, incremental adjustments as a triumph of optimism. As Anderson suggests, we should instead see the ending as an example of what Lu Xun has termed a “distortion” (39), elicited from him by pity for his readers rather than faithfulness to his own feelings.

Conceding the existence of hope because it is still logically possible is a notable characteristic of Lu Xun’s reasoning in his essays. A famous example occurs nearly three years after the writing of “Hometown” in his 1923 Preface to his anthology *Nahan* (*Call to Arms*), which contains this story. In the Preface, he recounts the

conversation that led to his agreement to write for *Xin qingnian* (*New Youth*), the foremost magazine of those seeking to create a new culture for a new China. In his conversation with the editor, he makes the same careful extraction of a slender possibility of hope out of a series of nearly hopeless situations (1:417-418). In the end, he agrees that it may be the case that readers can be awakened and that therefore he should write.<sup>4</sup> In both instances, he carefully picks his way through a series of negatives to arrive at an outcome that he concedes is at least a possibility. As Lin Yusheng writes, “Since the future had not arrived, no one could, logically speaking, know what it would be. Thus, as long as there is a future, there exists a possibility for hope” (136). In the case of the Preface as in “Hometown,” readers have tended to remember that concluding glimpse of hope rather than the series of concessions which narrowly produced it.

The other connection of “Excursions” with Lu Xun’s writings lies in the exchange with the woodcutter. The basic situation is a standard one in traditional essays and poetry: a literatus on an outing sees a woodcutter or a fisherman whose presence provides the human motif in the landscape. If an exchange is recorded, the implicit meaning is often allegorical, usually in a philosophical vein and on the level of the literatus. What is unusual with “Excursions” is that it provides a window onto the relation between the literatus and the commoner.

The resemblance between the two works is in the dynamics of the encounter rather than, as with “Hometown,” the image or language. This is the conversation in “Excursions”:

A light rain suddenly began to fall. A woodcutter passed by and asked what I was doing, but my purpose would have been incomprehensible, so I prevaricated, saying, “I am looking for medicinal plants.” “What for?” he returned. I said, “For long life.” “Long life can come from medicine?” “That is what I am trying to find out,” I replied.

The speaker makes an assumption about his questioner (“my purpose would have been incomprehensible”) and adjusts his reply accordingly: he changes his botanical interests to practical, medical ones. The result is that a pointless conversation ensues: his first, already false, reply leads to the speaker having to make up more false replies, none of them adequate to satisfying the questioner.

The entire episode is brief, not underlined in any way, so that it would have seemed unremarkable if not for a similar episode in the 1924 short story “New Year’s Sacrifice.” The encounter that begins this story, one between the narrator and a servant, has at its core the same dynamics as the essayist’s encounter with the woodcutter. It differs, however, in being prominently located as the frame for the rest of the story and in being narrated with much detail and emotion. Thus loaded

with significance, it has never been overlooked. Now its structural similarity with the exchange in “Excursions” causes us to re-read this much-discussed moment and to reassess the moral implications that are often drawn from this encounter.

This is the episode. In “New Year’s Sacrifice,” the narrator is approached by Xianglin-sao, a one-time maid for the family of his uncle, whom he is visiting. As she comes up to him, he vaguely remembers who she is and, observing her appearance, now clearly that of a beggar, he stops, prepared to give her the money she will be asking for. But what she asks him instead is a question about the soul: she wants to know whether it exists after death. Taken aback, he makes several inadequate attempts to answer her as she questions him further. Eventually they part, both dissatisfied with his responses.

Any discussion of this encounter must engage with the many analyses in Lu Xun scholarship of this key scene, especially questions of why the narrator answers as inadequately as he does. Analytical frameworks vary, but critical interpretations share a focus on the narrator as an intellectual whose feeble replies show him to be, variously, weak (Gan 25), typically intellectual (Li 214), “evasive and vacuous” (Lee 75), “guilty” (Anderson 41), or not “facing up to” his responsibility (Feuerwerker 85). In sum, critics tend to consider the type and degree of his culpability. One reason for focus on the narrator may be that, in the course of the story, as Xianglin-sao’s life is gradually revealed to the reader, everyone else’s guilt is quite clear—the complacency and hypocrisy of the gentry, especially as embodied by his uncle; the casual cruelty of her own class, including the other servants; and her first husband’s relations, who sold her after his death to her second husband. The only party whose guilt is unmeasured is the narrator and he, significantly, frames her sad story: hence perhaps the interest in defining his part.

The reading proposed here emphasizes the similarities to the exchange in “Excursions.”<sup>5</sup> As with the parallels among Mencius, “Hometown,” and “Excursions,” the proposed reading is reinforced by the similarity, but it does not depend upon it. Like Zhou on being approached by the woodcutter, the narrator in “New Year’s Sacrifice” feels unsure of how to answer Xianglin-sao, so he makes a guess (“the people around here must all believe in ghosts, and she must too”), and thinking to spare her, he adjusts his answer and hazards a temporizing yes. (This empathy is passed over in the more severe critical views of the narrator.) As in the essay, this untruth leads the narrator to further makeshift lies until in the end he takes it all back with, “It’s hard to say.” In “Excursions,” the woodcutter’s role is small, limited to three brief utterances, yet his persistence and his unexpected ability to pin down the narrator are echoed in Xianglin-sao. Even the number of follow-up questions that the two narrators must scramble to answer is the same. In “New

Year's Sacrifice," Lu Xun actually has his narrator count them up when he reflects, "I could not even deal with three questions." As a check of the passage shows, there are indeed only three questions in the long passage. That Lu Xun has kept track of the number shows how aware he was of the dynamics of this exchange. In the simpler essay, the woodcutter's role then ends, but in Xianglin-sao's case, Lu Xun arranges for the results to be devastating. As the narrator finds out afterwards, she has had two husbands and a son, now all dead. A fellow servant, tired of hearing about her tragedies, suggested that in an afterlife she might be literally torn in two between the two men. Logically, then, it would have been better for her to hear that there is no soul or afterlife; yet it is doubtful that any answer could have relieved her mind. As it is, the narrator escapes her intense questions at the earliest possible moment, and Lu Xun times her death to occur the next day, increasing the weight to be borne by the incident.

An inadequate protagonist, an exchange which he falls into and then bumbles—these characteristics suggest that a framework can be applied here that has been well developed in regard to other fiction of Lu Xun's. This is the influence on his work of nineteenth-century Russian literature, specifically its type or motif of the weak hero. Lu Xun's long and deep engagement with Russian literature is well documented, both by himself and by scholars. Its influence on specific characters and key scenes in his fiction has been meticulously traced (Hanan 61-72; Ng 219-262; Fokkema 89-102). Though these scholars do not discuss "New Year's Sacrifice," a comment of Fokkema's is especially pertinent to it. He notes that "one of the principal devices Lu Xun appears to have borrowed from nineteenth-century Russian literature is that of introducing a point of view that does not coincide with that of most readers" (97), that is, he did not use characters who were either "acceptable or plainly rejectable" (98). Fokkema's description fits the narrator of "New Year's Sacrifice" well, and also helps us see that analyses of the narrator tend to be directed at placing him in either an acceptable or a rejectable category.

In situating the protagonist of "New Year's Sacrifice" as a type of Russian hero, it is nearly sufficient to quote copiously from Ng Mau-sang's study, *The Russian Hero in Chinese Literature*. Although he does not cite "New Year's Sacrifice" in his chapter on Lu Xun (219-262), his general descriptions of the Russian themes influential in China are eloquently applicable to this story: he writes of "a hero who is in some way inadequate as a human being" (50); the "unhappiness in the homes of the gentry" that is revealed in the stories (65); and the profound sense among authors of "the fallibility of mankind...embodied in the unheroic intellectual hero" (66). Typically, the hero's new education and sensitivities render him unfit in all his relations, with family, with women, with love, and, as here, with peasants: he finds the old modes

of relationships repugnant but is paralyzed in forming new patterns. The portrayal of a protagonist of this type is inescapably moral, but its moral nature lies in a thorough apprehension of human weakness and only secondarily in the judgment of it. I suggest that in line with a Russian literature where the inadequacy of the hero is a given, critical focus in "New Year's Sacrifice" should be shifted away from judgment per se, since understanding, even pity, might be the motive instead. As was the case with his Russian predecessors, Lu Xun's literary aims might likewise be to "explore, clarify, and then generalize the human experience" (Ng 50).

Besides the Russian type of hero, the interchange that a diffident protagonist undertakes with a peasant, as seen in "Excursions" and "New Year's Sacrifice," also has precedents in Russian literature. This exchange is rooted in a world where, as Turgenev depicts it, "the injustice and ineptitude of the system of serfdom" (Ng 65) are unquestioned. Typically, in Russian literature as in both our examples, on the one side is a protagonist with a sensitivity that disturbs the age-old patterns of gentry encounters with peasants, but it does so without producing a better outcome. He is often discomfited, for he is aware of the irrelevance of his intentions both to the peasant and to the eventual outcome. Others of the gentry class are not handicapped by his scruples, as the narrator's uncle is not in "New Year's Sacrifice." This contrast highlights the newness of his outlook and the paralysis that it induces. On the other side of the exchange is the peasant. Given the conventional limits in "Excursions," the author can convey only the essence of an uneasy encounter within this inept system. By contrast, in the broader scope of realist fiction, Lu Xun is able to create a new kind of character in Xianglin-sao, a servant who is a person rather than an archetype. Driven by her sufferings, she poses questions about the existence of the soul, of hell, and of an afterlife that strike the narrator's ear with great force. Constituted to be vulnerable, he shows himself to be, in Ng's perceptive words on the typical May Fourth hero, an "inadequate, unheroic character vacillating between feeling and intellect, and circumscribed by his consciousness of impending tragedy" (Ng 4).

In terms of biography, the Russian roots of these two encounters add details to our picture of this great writer both before and after he created an identity as Lu Xun. Considering first his life in the years before the 1911 "Excursions," the Russian link enables us to appreciate differently his literary studies of these years, when he first discovered European literatures. In 1906-1909, while in Japan, Zhou Shuren and his brother Zhou Zuoren avidly purchased and read European fiction in translation, in particular Russian literature (Hanan 57-60). Their dedication culminated in their selection and translation into Chinese of *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji* (*Anthology of Fiction from Foreign Lands*), published in two volumes in 1909 just before Zhou

Shuren returned to China. However, “the first attempt to introduce Russian literature systematically” to a Chinese readership met with almost no sales (Ng 14).<sup>6</sup> Back in China, he continued to purchase translations from Japan (Hanan 60), but his interest in Russian literature is usually seen by critics as lying dormant until its appearance in the famed vernacular fiction. Now the encounter in “Excursions,” made visible of its 1924 parallel, provides us with a fleeting, early application of the subtle lessons absorbed from his study of Russian literature.

In contrast to “Excursions,” the 1924 “New Year’s Sacrifice” chiefly adds a new example to the influence of Russian literature on his vernacular fiction that is already known from the writings of the scholars quoted above. Furthermore, this short story falls well within the time frame of his later engagement with Russian literature, which began in 1920. At this time, hospitable magazine outlets were created by like-minded editors, and Lu Xun began a heavy schedule of translations of Russian literature and literary theory that lasted until the end of his life. (In his last decade, he shifted focus to Soviet literature and theory.) He also wrote prefaces and introductions for translations by others that he had helped to commission. In the context of this time-consuming (though paying) work, stories like “New Year’s Sacrifice” serve to remind readers that the work, while undertaken for the overall advancement of Chinese knowledge of foreign literatures, is founded on a personal conviction of its value to his own creativity.

The material analyzed here suggests a number of possible directions in which to proceed. One is the exploration of Lu Xun’s connection with Mencius, for it is possible that other Mencian allusions may be found in his fiction. For example, as mentioned above, “Hometown” had a second example of Mencian thought, in the protagonist’s feeling that he and Runtu were born alike, but that living had separated them. A connection between the two figures, though it runs counter to assumptions about Lu Xun’s iconoclasm, would explore wider views of his social thought and stylistic resources. To take literary terms alone here, Mencius’ images are many and varied because he uses them to make the case for both sides of his philosophical arguments. These plain, unforgettable images, based on aspects of the visible natural world, could well have a place in the imagination of a writer like Lu Xun, whose sparing, exact use of imagery is never casual.

A second direction is the possibility of uncovering more literary continuities between Zhou Shuren and the writer he became. It is not surprising that there should be continuities in temperament and habits of mind over the stretch of time examined here: after all, in 1911, Zhou was already thirty. It is the lack of continuity in our evidence that has caused the field of Lu Xun studies to regard his step into modern literature seven years later as such a distinct break. The appearance of

discontinuity is reinforced by the nature of New Literature with its vastly different genres and its much greater range of subject matter. Furthermore, discontinuity is also consistent with the new writers' proclaimed iconoclasm. Yet in the case of Lu Xun, whose attempt to make writing relevant to a new China dates back to 1903, this picture of newness in 1918 is likely overdrawn. The connections must only have receded from open view, rather than been severed. The continuities presented here among three pieces of writing are perforce slender ones, but that they exist at all is significant and may be indications of how much remains to be discovered about this complex literary figure.

### Appendix

The opening scene from "New Year's Sacrifice" (2:6-7) is translated here. All the dashes and ellipses are in the original. The selection begins where the narrator pauses when he recognizes Xianglin-sao, expecting her to ask for money. Instead, this exchange ensues:

"You are an educated man, you have seen things and know a lot. I want to ask you something—." Those listless eyes of hers suddenly glowed with light.

This was the last thing I expected to hear her say and, taken aback, I stood stock still.

"I want to ask—," she came a few steps closer, lowered her voice, and asked with great secrecy, "after a person dies, is there a soul or not?"

A terror struck me. As soon as her eyes fastened on me, I felt as though I had sharp sticks in my back. I felt much more panicked than at a surprise test in school for which I was unprepared, with the teacher standing next to me. As for whether there is a soul or not, I had never thought about it. But at this moment, how to answer her? In that very short time for hesitation, I thought, the people here must all believe in ghosts, and she must too, but then I wondered, — perhaps it would be better to say I hope: I hope there is, and I hope there isn't ..... Why add to the burdens of someone who has reached the end of the road? It would be better to say there is, for her to feel some encouragement.

"Maybe there is, — I think," I said in a fumbling way.

"Then, that means there is hell too, right?"

"Ah, hell?" I was startled and could only falter, "Hell? — in principle, there should also be one. — but, not necessarily so, ... anyway, who cares about these things..."

"Then, the dead from one family can all meet each other?"

"Ah, can they meet or not? ....." At this point I really knew that I was totally stupid, that my hesitations, my calculations, could not even withstand three questions. Right then I became quite apprehensive, and thought to take back everything

I had just said. “Well, . . . in fact, it’s hard to say. . . . Really, it’s hard to say whether there is actually a soul or not.”

Then, taking advantage of a moment when she did not quickly follow up with a question, I stepped away with long strides. ✱

### Notes

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York, whose award of three credits of release time from my teaching load aided greatly in the writing of this article.

<sup>1</sup> These are lunar months, not March 18th and August 15th, as Semanov has it (25). We know this because the second excursion was made to watch the famous tidal bore at Qiantang. This would have taken place at full moon in the eighth lunar month, when the tides would be most spectacular.

<sup>2</sup> The writer Tang Tao, who as a young man knew Lu Xun in his last years, does see a moral in this essay, although it is not a political one. That he finds a moral is a useful reminder of how readily the Chinese tradition spots another layer of meaning and also suggests how often authors might intend them. The single-leaf orchid provides Tang’s moral. He says that since this plant is only found above a certain altitude, its growth here shows that a “small mountain,” which had been described as “not high,” is in fact quite high. We see therefore that a subjective conclusion cannot stand up to reality (63). Tang does not analyze the essay. He is using it for biography and only incidentally draws this moral. (As is often the case among Chinese biographers, he paraphrases all sources equally and without citation as biographical information. In this case, he paraphrases only up to the picking of the specimen.)

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Mencius* 6A.7: “Heaven has not sent down men whose endowment differs so greatly. The difference is due to what ensnares their hearts” (trans. Lau 164). In contrast to the narrator of “Hometown,” Mencius views this shared essence as the basis of hope that man can return to good, not of discouragement that the divergence is irreversible.

<sup>4</sup> Another example from a 1918 essay: “If a step were to be made, one could not definitely deny that it would lead to success in the future” (Lin Yusheng 117).

<sup>5</sup> There are no parallels in the fiction to look to, for Lu Xun wrote only twenty-four short stories and he seldom repeated or reworked their technical elements. The narrator of “Zai jiulou shang” (“Above the Tavern” 2:23-33) is also caught in an uneasy conversation, but he is with an equal and the exchange takes up the entire story.

<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun did give the translations a second life with a reissue in 1920, when the two brothers had achieved considerable renown and when admiration of Russian literature among the new elite had caught up with his and his brother’s work.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Marston. "The Morality of Form: Lu Xun and the Modern Chinese Short Story." *Lu Xun and His Legacy*. Ed. Leo Ou-fan Lee. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 32-53.
- Feng Zikai. *Huihua Lu Xun xiaoshuo (Illustrations of Lu Xun's Fiction)*. Hong Kong: Xianggang wanye shudian, 1954.
- Feuerwerker, Yi-tsi Mei. *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant "Other" in Modern Chinese Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Fokkema, Douwe W. "Lu Xun: The Impact of Russian Literature." *Modern Chinese Literature in the May 4th Era*. Ed. Merle Goldman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977. 89-102.
- Gan Zhigang. "'Zhufu' gushi yuankao" ("The sources of 'New Year's Sacrifice'"). *Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan* 7 (2002): 25-28.
- Han Heping. *Guxiang: Lu Xun xiaoshuo lianhuanhua ("Hometown": Illustrations of Lu Xun's Fiction)*. Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 1979.
- Hanan, Patrick. "The Technique of Lu Hsun's Fiction." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 34 (1974): 53-96.
- Lau, D.C., trans. *Mencius*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Li Yunjing. "Shi lun 'Zhufu' zhong de 'wo'" ("On the 'I' in 'New Year's Sacrifice'"). *Zhongxue Lu Xun zuopin zhudu (High school Reading Aids for Lu Xun's Works)*. Beijing: Beijing Lu Xun bowuguan, 1990.
- Lin Yusheng. *The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Antitraditionalism in the May Fourth Era*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.
- Lin Zhihao. *Lu Xun zhuan (Biography of Lu Xun)*. Beijing: Beijing shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1991.
- Liu Wuji. *Nanshe shi changbian (Materials on the History of Southern Society)*. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin da xue chubanshe, 1995.
- Lu Xun. *Lu Xun quanji (Collected Works of Lu Xun)*. 16 vols. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1981.
- Lu Xun bowuguan Lu Xun yanjiushi (Lu Xun Museum, Lu Xun Research Office), ed. *Lu Xun nianpu (Lu Xun Chronology)*. Rev. ed. 4 vols. Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2000.

Ng Mau-sang. *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press and Chinese University Press, 1988.

Peng Bo. *Lu Xun xiaoshuo juewang yu xiwang de duibi jiegou (The Structural Comparison of Hopelessness and Hope in the Stories of Lu Xun)*. Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 2001.

Pollard, David. *The True Story of Lu Xun*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2002.

Semanov, V. I. *Lu Hsun and His Predecessors*. Trans. Charles J. Alber. White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1980.

Shaoxing Lu Xun jinianguan (Shaoxing Lu Xun Museum), ed. *Lu Xun zai Shao zongji duoshi (In the Footsteps of Lu Xun in Shaoxing)*. Hangzhou: Hangzhou daxue chubanshe, 1991.

Tang Tao. *Lu Xun de gushi (The Story of Lu Xun)*. Beijing: Zhongguo shaonian ertong chubanshe, 1980.

Yang Tianshi and Liu Yancheng. *Nanshe (Southern Society)*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980.