

22. Lau, p. 73.

23. Shui Jing, "Chang ye manman yu shu tian" (Long night slowly gives way to dawn), Ming Pao Monthly 15.6 (June 1980): 80.

Impromptu Reflections No. 38
"On Conceitedness and Inheritance"

by Lu Hsun

Translated by Kirk A. Denton

This essay,[1] frequently referred to but never to my knowledge translated into English in its entirety, was written on the heels of Lu Xun's first vernacular short story, "Kuangren riji" (The Diary of a Madman; May, 1918). In some sense, the essay blends the messianic message of "The Diary" with the famous critique of the Chinese national character embodied in Ah Q, the protagonist of Lu Xun's most famous short story, "Ah Q zhengzhuan" (The Official Biography of Ah Q, 1921). The sardonic tone of "Impromptu Reflections No. 38" is consistent with the stridency and sense of crisis which characterizes these two fictional works. The essay may help us to understand the urgency for social change felt by May Fourth writers and explain the hyperbole of the "cannibal" imagery in "The Diary" and the occasional inelegance of the satire of "Ah Q."

If the thoughts expressed in the essay are typical of Lu Xun in this period, they also speak more generally for the early May Fourth iconoclasts: totalistic rejection of Chinese tradition; a view of Chinese society as emasculated by a devastating psychological disease. What is uniquely Lu Xun, if somewhat atypically un-subtle, are the satirical style and mocking tone of the essay. Lu Xun's bitter critique of the Chinese character in the list of five types of "national self-aggrandizement" is essentially that reiterated in fictional form in "The Official Biography of Ah Q": the self-delusion of seeking spiritual victories in the face of obvious defeat and a slavish mentality, a willingness to subject oneself to all authority. For Lu Xun, the Chinese are culturally ethnocentric. They pusillanimously draw strength from the mob and revel nostalgically in the glories of the past. Their thought is hopelessly muddled and unscientific. Lu Xun indulges in a particularly caustic assault on the promoters of the "national essence," a conservative group of intellectuals calling for preservation of the cultural past in the face of the May Fourth cry for a "smashing of idols." Typical of the early Lu Xun is the elitist appeal for a Nietzschean "madman" to enlighten the masses to the blindness which is their national arrogance. The Marxist beatification of Lu Xun as a revolutionary cannot disguise the decided scorn for the common masses which appears in this essay, as in "The Diary of a Madman."

Random Thoughts No. 38 [2]

The Chinese have always been a little conceited. What a pity it is not the "self-aggrandizement of the individual" and only the "self-aggrandizement of mass patriotism." [3] This is why they can-

not extricate themselves and move forward after they fail in cultural competition.[4]

The "self-aggrandizement of the individual" is eccentricity, a declaration of war against the common masses. Except for those who suffer clinically from delusions of grandeur, most with this sort of self-aggrandizement possess an element of genius or, as Nordau and others claim,[5] of madness. They are bound to feel that their own thought and knowledge is superior to that of the common masses and that they are misunderstood by the masses, so they rail at the vulgarity and mundaneness of the world and gradually become cynics or "enemies of the people." [6] And yet, all new thought must come from them; political, religious, and moral reform originates with them. A country whose citizens possess more of this "self-aggrandizement of the individual" is certainly blessed with a happy future. [7]

"Collective self-aggrandizement" and "patriotic self-aggrandizement" represent the uniting of various groups against heretics, a declaration of war against a minority of geniuses. (They are also a declaration of war against the civilizations of other countries, but to a lesser extent.) These people themselves have no particular talent that they can boast of to others, so they use the country as their shadow, [8] they raise high the country's customs and institutions and praise them to no end; since their "national essence" is so glorious, [9] naturally they, too, are glorious. There is no need for them to fight back if attacked, for those crouching in this shadow, eyes wide and tongues wagging, need only make use of "the mob" to cause a commotion and secure victory. [10] As part of the collective, the "I" naturally shares in any victory; and with so many others in the group, how can the "I" be singled out for losses in defeat. In general, this kind of psychology is most in evidence when the group unites to stir things up; it is the psychology of the group. Their actions seem to be fierce, when in reality they are base and cowardly. What results then are restorations of the ancient ways, royalism, xenophobic appeals in support of the dynasty and the elimination of foreigners, and the like, for which we have long had a deep appreciation. [11] A people who manifest this "collective, patriotic self-aggrandizement" are indeed a tragic and sorry lot.

Unfortunately, it is just this sort of self-aggrandizement which the Chinese have: "Nothing the ancients ever said or did was wrong; how dare we talk of reform when we cannot even emulate them?" Although various schools each have their own type of patriotic self-aggrandizement, they are fundamentally alike. We can divide them into the following five types:

1) "China is a vast land of great material abundance, the first to be civilized; it is first in the world in morality."

2) "Although foreign material civilization is advanced, Chinese spiritual civilization is far superior."

3) "All things foreign existed first in China: this particular science or that philosophical precept, for example." (These last two schools of thought are branches of the larger Ancient-Modern Chinese-Foreign School, which follow Zhang Zhidong's maxim, "Chinese learning for the essence, Western learning for practical matters." [12])

4) "Foreign countries have beggars too." Or alternatively: "They, too, have mud huts, prostitutes, and bedbugs." (This being a negative argument.)

5) "China is better off with barbarism." Or: "So you say Chinese thought is muddled, [13] fine, but it is the crystallization of the enduring efforts of our race. It has been muddled since the ancestors and will continue to be muddled down through our descendants, muddled from the past to the future.... We are four hundred million strong, can we be annihilated?" (This is a level deeper than the fourth category; instead of dragging others down with us, it revels in our own ugliness. As for the uncompromising language, it smacks of Niu Er's attitude in The Water Margin. [14])

Of the five schools, the language of the first four, though preposterous, is more excusable than that of the last, because their proponents still show a bit of nerve. For example, when the sons of a declining family look on another that is in ascendancy, they spout great words and put on airs, or they seek out a flaw in the other to somehow relieve their own embarrassment. Though extremely laughable, this can still be considered a slight step above someone whose nose has fallen off and shows his face to everyone, because it came from a venerable disease inherited from his ancestors. [15]

The patriotism of category five is the last to make an appearance and most disappoints me when I hear it, not only because its intentions are awful, but because it comes closest to the truth. Muddle-headed ancestors raise muddle-headed descendants, this is a principle of heredity. Once the racial essence has been created, for good or for bad, changes are difficult to come by. In his "Les lois psychologiques de l'évolution des peuples," the Frenchman Gustave le Bon says (I present the gist of the original wording, which I have forgotten): "Our every movement and action, though it may appear to be self-motivated, is in fact restrained by the ghosts of the dead. In sheer numbers, the living today are no match for the ghosts of their ancestors." [16] Our own ancestors going back several hundred generations have no scarcity of the muddle-headed. There are Neo-Confucians who discourse on the Way and Daoists who speak of yin and yang and the Five Elements; there are sages who mediate and practice alchemy, and actors who paint their faces and do acrobatics. Though at present we all mean to be fully "human," it is difficult to prevent the muddled elements in our veins from doing their mischief. We are not our own masters; suddenly we find ourselves studying Daoist physiognomy or the art of theater faces.

This is most distressing. But I keep hoping that the harm inherited from this muddled thought will be less severe than that of syphilis and ultimately present no real risk. We have discovered a 606 medicine to cure syphilis of the body. I hope that there is also a 707 to cure the disease of the mind. Indeed, this medicine has already been discovered, and it is science. I only hope that those friends who have spiritually "lost their noses" will not again raise the banner of "venerable disease inherited from the ancestors" to oppose the use of this medicine. Then the day will come when this disease of being muddled will be completely cured. Though the influence of our ancestors is great, if we set our sights and change at once, if we sweep away all muddled thought and the things that foster it (the texts of the Confucians and Daoists) and take the appropriate medicine, we might be able to reduce the virus ever so slightly, even if not immediately. That way, several generations from now, when we have become ancestors, we will have thrown off the influences of our own muddled ancestry and reached a turning point at which we will no longer have to fear Le Bon's words.

This is my cure for "a people in arrested development." As for the part about "annihilation," that is a load of nonsense not worth mentioning. Why should mankind fear that awful word "annihilation"? Only those like the brutal Zhang Xianzhong have had such intentions, and today they are cursed by mankind; [17] moreover, how effective were they in the end? But I do have a few words of advice for the good sirs who espouse the views of the final category mentioned above. The word "annihilation" can frighten people, but not nature, for the nature has no regard for others; when it sees a people heading toward its own annihilation, it invites them to proceed without the least courtesy. We all want to live and hope that others live. We cannot bear to speak of others' annihilation, for we fear that if they tread that path, they will drag us to annihilation with them. So we become anxious. I would not object even to being "barbarians," if it were possible to prosper and live truly free and happy lives with things the way they are now. But is there anyone who dares say that this is possible?

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Notes

1. The "impromptu reflections" (suiganlu), a rendering I have borrowed from David Pollard, was a prose form to which selections of the early issues of the influential May Fourth journals, New Youth and Weekly Critic (Meizhou pinglun), were devoted. The "impromptu reflections" is a generic antecedent to Lu Xun's more famous zawen, or miscellaneous essay. Though

early examples of this literary form in New Youth are written in the classical language, the "impromptu reflections" is generally considered one of the "new" vernacular forms to emerge from the literary revolution. One should not overlook the possibility, however, that the "impromptu reflections" has generic ties with the traditional essay, in particular the xiaopinwen, "little essay," of the Ming. For a discussion of Lu Xun's essays, see David E. Pollard, "Lu Xun's Zawen," in Leo Ou-fan Lee, ed., Lu Xun and His Legacy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 54-89.

2. This essay was first published in New Youth (Xin qingnian) (November 15, 1918). It was later included in the collection Hot Wind (Re feng, 1925). Lin Yusheng points out that Zhou Zuoren actually claimed to have written this essay, though it was originally published under the name Xun, one of Lu Xun's pen names, and was selected by Lu to be included in Hot Wind. Though the authorship remains somewhat in the doubt, no one seems to question that the ideas in the essays are those of Lu. See Lin Yusheng, The Crisis of Chinese Consciousness: Radical Anti-Traditionalism in the May Fourth (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1919), p. 116, n. 27.
3. The opposition between "individualism" and "patriotism" was a major paradox of May Fourth thinkers. Chen Duxiu, in his 1915 article, "Patriotism and Self-consciousness" (Aiguoxin yu zijuexin) (Jiayin zazhi, April 1915), shared Lu Xun's fear of the emotionalism of blind patriotism, which in the Chinese context manifests itself as respect for authority. For Chen, patriotism precludes the development of self-conscious individuals able to help their country through exercising their autonomous faculty of reason. Li Dazhao's response to Chen's article, "Pessimism and Self-consciousness" (Yanshixin yu zijuexin) (Jiayin zazhi, August 1915), sees patriotism as necessary to the development of the self-conscious individual. Lu Xun's sympathies are clearly with Chen. For a brief discussion of these two articles, see Maurice Meisner, Li Ta-chao: The Origins of a Marxist (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).
4. That their culture was impotent and unable to compete in the Darwinian struggle among nations was a common view of May Fourth intellectuals, as it had been for intellectuals like Yen Fu and Liang Qichao of the late Qing. The Social Darwinist theory (as presented in Yen's 1898 translation of Huxley's Evolution and Ethics) offered Chinese intellectuals a new discourse of historical development, which obviated the traditional view of history as moral accomplishment. It underlined the gravity of China's situation with the threat of cultural extinction. At the same time, it provided a means of rationalizing China's plight as something determined by the unstoppable movement of nature, thus freeing intellectuals

from personal responsibility. It followed that a country on the verge of extinction required a totalistic transformation of its national character for salvation.

5. Lu Xun likely first encountered the notion that men of unconventionality and madness are required to see through the falseness of inherited social custom in Nordau's The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization, first published in German in 1883. The chapter on "The Political Lie" is especially appropriate. Max Nordau, The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization (New York: Arno Press, 1975).
6. This is an allusion to Ibsen's Enemy of the People which, along with A Doll's House, was first presented to Chinese readers in a special issue of New Youth in 1917. Enemy of the People is the story of a Dr. Stockmann, who holds resolutely to the empirical truth about the contamination of local spa water, in the face of fierce opposition by the villagers who depend on the spa for their living. Dr. Stockmann is the "awakened one" among ignorant "sleepers," to put it in Nietzschean terms that Lu used elsewhere.
7. This whole paragraph, of course, reeks of Nietzsche's Also Sprach Zarathustra, with which Lu was very familiar. Lu translated the "Prologue" of this work into Chinese.
8. This may be an allusion to "The Shadow" in Also Sprach Zarathustra. In this section, Zarathustra discourses with, his shadow, from whom he has begun to feel estranged. The shadow has a tendency to imprison himself with "narrow faith," "some harsh and severe illusion," and Zarathustra feels a need to be alone. Lu returns to the image of the shadow in his prose-poem collection, Yecao (Wild Grass), in a poem entitled "The Shadow's Leave-Taking" (Ying de gaobie).
9. The term guocui, "national essence," refers to a group of conservative scholars who wrote for the Guocui xuebao (founded 1905) and to members of the Nanshe (Southern Society, 1909). The term was appropriated from the late Qing and applied by May Fourth intellectuals to the Xue heng (The Critical Review, 1922) group. The proponents of the "national essence" sought to preserve aspects of the traditional culture from the iconoclastic attack of radical May Fourth intellectuals like Lu.
10. This term appears in English in the original.
11. Lu may be referring to late Qing reformers like Kang Youwei, Yen Fu, and Liang Qichao, who, originally radical in thought, reverted to calls for an enlightened constitutional monarchy.

12. Zhang Zhidong was one of the most celebrated officials of the late Qing period, holding a variety of high posts in government. Though a modernizer during the last two decades of the 19th century, he was reviled by late-Qing reformers (and all subsequent progressive intellectuals) for having assisted Empress Cixi in her suppression of the Hundred Days Reform Movement of the summer of 1898. The maxim comes from Zhang's Quan xue bian (Exhortation to Study, 1898), which called for a revival of Confucian learning by blending ancient Chinese knowledge with that of the modern West.
13. Here Lu is making reference to a letter written by Ren Hongjun to Hu Shi, who served on the editorial board of New Youth. It is the conservative and ethnocentric attitude of the letter which Lu is mocking: "No matter how muddled our country's history, language, and thought, they have still been created by our people and bequeathed to us. These muddled seed are not only in our language and our history, but exist now in our brains and will exist in our descendants' brains" (Xin qing-nian, August 15, 1918).
14. Niu Er is a loud-mouth bully in chapter 11 of the The Water Margin (Shuihu zhuan). One day he comes across Yang Zhi (later one of the Water Margin heroes), who has been forced to sell his precious dagger on the streets. Yang tells Niu the dagger has three special properties: it can cut copper and iron, split hairs, and slice human flesh so quickly that it will not be soiled with blood. After seeing a demonstration of the first two properties, Niu decides he must have the dagger, though he refused to pay the high asking price. Yang's anger is sparked by Niu's insolence, and he ends up stabbing him (with the dagger, of course, bloodless).
15. That "venerable disease," of course, is venereal disease, a symptom of which is the infection of mucous membranes, which can lead to the rotting away of facial features.
16. "The dead, besides being infinitely more numerous than the living, are infinitely more powerful. They reign over the vast domain of the unconscious, that invisible domain which exerts its sway over all the manifestations of the intelligence and of character. A people is guided far more by its dead than by its living members." Gustave le Bon, The Psychology of Peoples: Its Influence on Their Evolution (New York: Macmillan, 1898), p. 11. This is no doubt the passage (an English translation thereof) that Lu was attempting to recall. It is interesting that he chose to remember "the dead" as ghosts (sigui). Consciously or not, given the earlier reference to venereal disease, this may be an allusion to Ibsen's Ghosts, in which the venereal disease of a father is inherited by a son.

17. Zhang Xianzhong (1606-46) was the peasant leader of a late-Ming-dynasty rebellion. Lu is alluding to Zhang's reputation as a cruel and barbarous military commander. When his "Western Kingdom" in Sichuan province was on the verge of collapse, Zhang engaged in systematic slaughter of people and destruction of property, so as to make the province undesirable for future conquerors.

Glossary

Ah Q zhengzhuan 阿Q正傳

Aiguoxin yu zijuexin 愛國心與自覺心

Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀

guocui 國粹

Guocui xuebao 國粹學報

Hu Shi 胡適

Jiayin zazhi 甲寅雜誌

Kang Youwei 康有為

Kuangren riji 狂人日記

Li Dazhao 李大釗

Liang Qichao 梁啟超

Lu Xun 魯迅

Meizhou pinglun 每周評論

Nanshe 南社

Niu Er 牛二

Quan xue pian 勸學篇

Re feng 熱風

Ren Hongjun 任鴻雋

Shui hu zhuan 水滸傳

sigui 死鬼

suiganlu 隨感錄

xiaopinwen 小品文

Xin qingnian 新青年

Xue heng 學衡

Xun 迅

Yan Fu 嚴復

Yanshixin yu zijuexin 厭世心與自覺心

Yang Zhi 楊志

Yecao 野草

Ying de gaobie 影的告別

zawen 雜文

Zhang Xianzhong 張獻忠

Zhang Zhidong 張之洞