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### Spiritual Warrior in Search of Meaning: An Existential View of Lu Xun Through His Life Incidents and Analogies

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With the emergence of Modern Chinese Literature and the upsurge of the New Cultural Movement in China, Lu Xun emerged as the most brilliant writer and acute observer of the Chinese psyche during the early 20th century. He directed his critical gaze at what he considered the cultural backwardness and the psychological cowardice of the Chinese people throughout history up to the time when he was writing. His penetrating perception and exposure of the shadowy realm of the Chinese Psyche is evident throughout his novels and essays.

#### Grandfather's Case

Lu Xun was born to a scholar/official family in Shaoxin, in Southeastern China. When he was 13 years old, his grandfather, a retired government official (of Qing Dynasty), was convicted of fraud and spent a number of years in jail. This led to the family's decline. Lu Xun's (1981a) early years were deeply affected by this sudden change, as he commented, "He who plummets from the heights may gain perspective to discern human snobbishness to the core" (p. 415).

#### Father's Illness and Death

Another incident that profoundly influenced Lu Xun was his father's chronic disease and eventual death. From the age of 14 to 16, Lu Xun was a frequent visitor to the pawnshops and drugstores in Shaoxin. He used to pawn his family belongings and "take the money given to me with contempt" (Lu Xun, 1922/2000). He went to all possible places to purchase unusual drugs and supplements prescribed by quack doctors of Chinese medicine. This included items such as aloe roots dug up in the winter,

sugar-cane exposed to frost for three years, original mating pairs of crickets, and an essentially non-existent fecund ardisia plant that is usually characterized by its barrenness.<sup>1</sup> However, his father's illness went from bad to worse until he died at age 37. This experience engraved in Lu Xun's (1922/2000) mind with a skeptical view toward Chinese medicine: "I gradually came to the conclusion that those physicians were charlatans, either unintended or deliberate" (p. 5). Such skepticism deeply affected his later examination of the long feudal history of China.

### Seeking a New Path

From his childhood to the age of 18, Lu Xun studied classical Chinese at the Three Flavor Study (三味书屋), which led to official examinations. After the death of his father, Lu Xun's family financial situation worsened. He decided to leave his hometown to study Western knowledge and technology, because it was a more affordable program. As Lu Xun recalled, "Anyone who studied 'foreign subjects' was a social outcast regarded as someone who could find no way out and was forced to sell his soul to foreign devils" (Lu Xun, 1922/2000, p. 5). To the contrary, Lu Xun's acting out of his own convictions "struck out on new paths, opening himself to novel places, while searching for a new breed of people with different characteristics – a new personality" (Lu Xun, 1981a, p. 415).

Lu Xun went to Nanjing to study physics, arithmetic, geography, history, drawing, and physical training at the Jiangnan Naval Academy (江南水师学堂). He also gained some knowledge regarding physiology. It was during this period that Lu Xun opened his mind and began to assimilate the influence of foreign cultures. By this time, many books on science, philosophy, and literature of the West were translated into Chinese. Lu Xun read Western literature through Lin Shu's translation of foreign novels (林译小说). He also recalled how he was engrossed in reading the works of famous figures in science and philosophy of the West, such as Huxley, Socrates, Plato, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche. After years of traditional education of classical Chinese, Lu Xun's worldview was, for the first time, broadened by the new thoughts from the West.

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<sup>1</sup> The essence of all these quack remedies is that they are rare to the point of absurdity. The idea was, the more absurd, the more healing power was ascribed to these charlatans.

### Slides at Sendai Medical College

Lu Xun's thinking on national salvation originated from the most profound recesses of his soul. In 1902, Lu Xun went to Sendai Medical College in Japan to study Western medicine. His intention was to save his fellow countrymen who, like his father, suffered from inadequate treatment. He continued to read widely in philosophy and literature while studying medicine. At the same time, he began to ponder the Chinese character: "What is the ideal human character? What is most lacking in the Chinese character? What is the root cause of the problem?" (Shouchang Xu, 1999, pp. 226, 443, 487). An incident occurring during this period of study at Sendai Medical College prompted Lu Xun to give up medicine for literature. In the preface to *Call to Arms*, Lu Xun (1922/2000) recalls, "If the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. Since this was during the Russo-Japanese War, there were many war slides." One day, during a class interval, Lu Xun saw his fellow Chinese compatriots on the slides. One of them was bound in the middle and the rest were standing around him. They were all strong and capable but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, Lu Xun (1922/2000) stated:

the one with his hands bound was a spy accused of working for the Russians, who was to be beheaded by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese people beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle. (p. 7)

The disparity between his people's physical sturdiness and spiritual apathy caused Lu Xun much sadness. He became convinced that medical science was not as important as he originally assumed. Thus, Lu Xun decided to give up the study of medicine in order to pursue literature because he believed that literature had the ability to transform the mind, spirit, and character of the Chinese people.

### The Boundless Desert and Huge Poisonous Snake

Lu Xun's enthusiasm was initially channeled into starting a magazine named *New Life* (新生). He put his all into this endeavor but, due to lack of support, the enterprise eventually failed. Lu Xun then dedicated his time and energy to the translation of foreign literature. In collaboration with his brother Zhou Zhuoren, he published two volumes. He sold only 21

copies of Volume 1 and 20 copies of Volume 2. Lu Xun returned to China in 1909, but the political situation caused him more disappointment. He became lonely and sighed,

If a man's proposals were met with approval, this should encourage him to advance; if they were met with opposition, they should make him fight back; but the real tragedy was for him to lift up his voice among the living and be met with no response, neither approval nor opposition, just as if he were stranded in a boundless desert completely at a loss. That was when I became conscious of loneliness. (Lu Xun, 1922/2000, p. 8-11)

Lu Xun (1992/2000) continues, "And this sense of loneliness grew from day to day, entwining itself about my soul like a huge poisonous snake." Here, the huge poisonous snake and related themes, such as, poison, inner darkness, ghost, etc., were analogies symbolizing hopelessness or meaninglessness.

Lu Xun's greatness lies in the fact that he was able to respond to the tragedy of his times. He confronted the contradictions of his ego, undertaking an extremely painful self-critique in the form of vigilant self-observation and profound and trenchant self-analysis. In his self analysis, Lu Xun was conscious of inner darkness, which he sometimes referred to as ghosts dwelling in the recess of his mind. However, in his writings, Lu Xun conscientiously kept such darkness to himself lest he poison his young readers. His wife likened him to a cow eating grass but producing milk (rather than a snake eating grass while producing poison). Ultimately, upon consuming the "grass" of various other thinkers, Lu Xun realized that he could not avoid assimilating some poisonous ingredients such as the nihilism of the ancient Chinese philosopher, Zhuang Zi, or and the pessimism of Schopenhauer and various Buddhist teachers. Paradoxically, Lu Xun also admired the higher realm of wisdom to be found in these same poisonous ingredients.

Lu Xun was often in conflict. He frequently battled between his strong desire for meaning and his skeptical attitude toward life, which resulted in his occasional retreats into nothingness and despair. Yet, in the depth of his heart he maintained a fire that refused to be extinguished. And that fire was easily rekindled whenever new possibilities of life were presented.

Lu Xun was not a superficial optimist who chose to live by ignoring the negative aspects of life. On the contrary, he endeavored to seek

meaning through staring directly at reality in the face (直面). His suspicious, discerning eye uncovered all kinds of duplicity in the feudal society, exposing its rotten roots. He sometimes fluctuated between hope and despair, but his despair could never keep him from seeking hope.

### The Iron House

Lu Xun's loneliness stemmed from his experience of calling out but receiving no response. He reflected that he was not the type of hero who could rally multitudes with one call. Lu Xun's disappointment with his fellow countrymen led him to sink into a disheartened silence for nearly 10 years (1909-1918). During that time he lived a fairly secluded life at the Shaoxin Hostel in Beijing. Instead of standing out as a hero, he withdrew to the hordes of commoners. In order to deaden his senses to reality, he retreated to the past by copying ancient tablet inscriptions. This was the period that Lu Xun was entangled and poisoned by the serpent of helplessness from within his heart. He assumed that he could do nothing except allow his life to slip quietly away.

This changed with a visit from his friend, Qian Xuantong, who questioned Lu Xun's work on copying the inscriptions:

"What's the use of copying these?"

"There isn't any use," was Lu Xun's reply.

"What's the point, then, of copying them?"

"There isn't any point," again answered Lu Xun ("No use" and "No point" indicate *No meaning*).

After appreciating Lu Xun's current state, Qian Xuantong began to persuade him to write something for *New Youth*, a leading magazine of the New Cultural Movement. It was a light of hope brought into the darkness of Lu Xun's life that would ignite something for meaning.

Being fully aware of his mission as a writer, Lu Xun expressed his thoughts through an image of an iron house, showing an attitude of hesitation:

Imagine an iron house having not a single window and virtually indestructible, with all its inmates asleep and about to die of suffocation. Dying in their sleep, they won't feel the pain of death. Now if you raise a shout, and awaken a few of the light sleepers,

making these unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you really think you are doing them a good turn? But if a few wake up, you can't say that there is no hope of destroying the iron house. (Lu Xun, 1922/2000, p. 12-15)

Symbolically, "the iron house" was the China in which people had long fallen asleep. Lu Xun was the man standing in front of "the iron house." Hesitating for some time, he finally determined to shout and bang on the outside of the house. Lu Xun had reason to hesitate. Even though the people inside might die if they were not awakened, their death would be peaceful. However, if they awoke and found no way out, they would die a painful death. Lu Xun also had reason to take action by calling them to awake. There was hope, however slight, that if awakened, they would be able to break "the iron house" and free themselves.

An examination of Lu Xun's past experience of his father's illness would also reveal a similar desire to bring about salvation and the related hesitation before uttering the shout. Interestingly, in the Chinese culture, filial duty would have the eldest son of the family repeatedly calling out to the father upon his deathbed. Lu Xun, being the eldest son, called numerous times for his father to "wake up," intending to hold him back from dying. However, Lu Xun's father was so annoyed that he asked Lu Xun to stop calling. This might explain some of the unconscious motivation behind Xun's reluctance for calling out. Nevertheless, over and over again, we hear Lu Xun's calls outside the gate of the "iron house" of China. Lu Xun never stopped calling for the rest of his life.

#### A Madman's Diary

*A Madman's Diary* (狂人日记) (1918) was Lu Xun's first short story published in *New Youth*. It is considered to be one of the first and most influential modern works written in vernacular Chinese, marking the beginning of modern Chinese literature. *A Madman's Diary* is Lu Xun's first "shout" (呐喊) in front of "the iron house," attempting to reveal the oppression of feudal values imposed upon the Chinese people. The imagery of cannibalism is applied to describe and symbolize the ways in which feudalistic Confucian values were eating away at the individual.

The main character of the story, a madman, suffers from paranoid delusions. However, this is not merely a medical case of schizophrenia; it has deeper implications. Symbolically, the madman is the one who sees through the hypocritical veil of the tyrannical tradition. He made an

extensive study of Chinese history as outlined in the Four Books and Five Classics (四书五经), all of which were filled with statements of virtue and morality. But in a sleepless night he read them over and over again and saw the words “Eat People!” written between the lines of the texts. He therefore realized that the whole history of China is but a cannibalistic history. Seeing the people in his village as potential cannibals, he is gripped by the fear that everyone, including his brother, his venerable doctor, and his neighbors are plotting to eat him. The narrator (the author of the diary in the story) allegorically integrates two roles: one is a mental patient who sees a perverse, confused world through his delusional mental lens; the other is an acute thinker who discerns the covered-up truths of a feudal society that is the callousness of “cannibalism” under the gloss of virtue and morality. At last the madman, with the help of his brother and the doctor, is “restored to health” and went on to fill a vacant official position. This, again, is symbolic of a “warrior of the spiritual realm” (精神界之战士), or the loner in the crowd who, after a strenuous fight with feudal traditions, became compromised by the power of darkness, often represented by the ignorant masses or “subjects of the tyrant” (暴君的臣民), as termed by Lu Xun.

In *Subjects of the Tyrant* (1919), Lu Xun reveals, in extreme form, the indignation of the tyranny subjects:

A tyrant’s subject will, in the main, be much more violent and vicious than the tyrant. The tyrant’s tyranny frequently cannot satisfy the wishes of the subjects under his rule. Instead of China, let us take an example from overseas. When the prosecutor wanted to release Jesus, the crowd demanded that he be crucified. The tyrant’s subjects have a simple wish, that tyranny takes its toll on someone else. This they watch happily. Cruelty is their pleasure, the suffering of others their enjoyment and comfort. These subjects’ own talents lie in their lucky escape, to safety, from which they again choose the sacrifice of others, satiating their thirst for blood, but no one understands. The one who is tortured to death is groaning in pain, saying ‘aiya,’ while others around him are enjoying his painful groans by showing much happiness. (Lu Xun, 1981a, p. 366)

This is what prompts Jesus, while dying on the cross, to say, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Persecution of the hero by the subjects of the tyrant is a common theme in Lu Xun's literary creation. The persecution often takes the form of framing the madman. This is not uncommon in reality. Lu Xun's teacher, Zhang Taiyan, a radical thinker of modern China, was called "Zhang Fengzi" (Madman Zhang). In some of Lu Xun's novels, there are characters who are revolutionaries and anti-tradition activists. These include Xia Yu in *Medicine* (1919, in Lu Xun 1981a), who is despised as 'mad' by the people in the teahouse; and the fool in the *Lamp that Was Kept Afloat* (1925, in Lu Xun, 1981b), who claims to burn down the temple, extinguishing the lamp, symbolizing the spiritual oppression of the feudal tradition. Also in *Revenge II* (1924, in Lu Xun 1981b), Lu Xun wrote a new version of the crucifixion of Jesus, one that is contrary to the Biblical account in which Jesus pleads for the forgiveness of the persecuting crowds. In this new account, Jesus, tortured and mocked (as a madman who claimed himself a King) by the evil crowd, shouted forth accusations, curses, and threats of revenge upon the crowd and their posterity. However, in *A Madman's Diary* (1918), Lu Xun, through the lips of the madman, raised perhaps the most significant question regarding the cannibalistic history of China. As accounted in the novel, when the madman brought up cannibalism (symbolizing the cruelty of feudalism) from cover-up of feudal hypocrisy, his brother's (representing feudal moralist) facial expression grew ghastly pale as he said "That's the way it's always been..." "Does that make it right?" was the reply of the madman. (Lu Xun, 1922/2000, p. 41). This question directly points at the passivity of the Chinese national character.

#### The Dark House

The goal of Lu Xun's literary creation is based on the premise that to establish a nation, one must first establish its people. And, in order to establish the people, one must first enlighten them. In regards to enlightenment, Lu Xun chose to expose the rotten roots of the Chinese national character, such as servility, passivity, compromising attitude, and fear of change.

The dark house is another metaphor Lu Xun (1981a) created to expose the deep-rooted concessionary attitude in the Chinese psyche:

The disposition of the Chinese is an irredeemable compromise, ready to take a middle course with everything. Supposed that you are in a house that is too dark. If you suggest opening up a window, all others will not allow such a change. Yet if you make a strong



enough proposition of removing the roof so as to let the light in, all the rest will then approach to make the concession by agreeing to your former suggestion of opening a window. So without a strong enough proposition people will not bother to budge even a moderate step for reform. (pp. 13-14)

So Lu Xun's observation is that in order to achieve any kind of significant change with such a conforming/concessionary/compromising society, one needs to simply rise above one's peers. If one's proposition is of sufficient strength, perhaps the masses will grant a small percentage of what was originally requested.

In Lu Xun's critical analysis, the compromising character is the result of self-yielding constriction under the deprivation of feudal tyranny. With limited space to live, people have to constrict themselves, almost without limits, in order to gain a margin for survival in this abnormal social environment. By way of unending concessions, they sink to the level of slavery, readily paying any price for security. From this perspective, Lu Xun divides the history of China, despite its many dynasties, into but two ages—one that people can live securely as slaves and the other where people cannot even gain themselves a secure life of slavery. This degradation of living status under the endless of feudal oppression has left a deep-rooted sense of insecurity in Chinese psyche and passivity in Chinese character. People become terrified of any change that might affect their minimum security. That is why in China, even present times, any kind of reform will be met with strong opposition.

Lu Xun's analogies of the iron house, the madman, and the dark house are reminiscent of Nels F. S. Fere's (1953) old barn parable. The parable described an old barn that was wide with no windows and a low ceiling. The lighting within the barn was dim as the lamps of the Law were smoky and easily extinguished. The people were busy keeping these lamps lit. The people sighed, waiting for a new and brighter light to appear. But century after century would pass while people went to their graves disappointed. Then one day a prophet with a bright countenance arrived telling the people of the bright sunshine outside. All they needed to do was to step outside and see for themselves. The prophet said, "I come from the Light. I know the Light. I am the Light. Trust me. Follow me into the Light" (p. 12). Many heard and marveled. But there was much fear. The prophet kept imploring the people to leave the dark barn and step into the Light but they became angry and hated him.

Similar to Lu Xun's allegories, this parable indicates that people living in the old barn have become habitually accustomed to the darkness. They may harbor a secret desire for light, but are also possessed by a stronger fear of the light. They are afraid of stepping out. They even deny the existence of the light outside. Finally, as the parable of the old barn points out, they eventually kill the prophet of Light.

So, contrary to Lu Xun's admonition regarding "zhi-mian" (直面), literally translated to mean "direct facing," people tend to employ innumerable defense mechanisms to escape the realities of life. They do not know who they are or what they are doing. Their behavior is motivated by an unconscious sense of insecurity. They avoid calls for change because they are afraid of activating a sensor that would bring trouble. In order to maintain security, they keep everything in order by adhering to status quo. Anyone who proposes change will be regarded as a potential threat and trouble-maker. If they cannot coax him to conform, they will plot to get rid of him.

In May 2008, Mark Yang and I led a workshop on existential psychology at Zhi-Mian Institute for Psychotherapy in Nanjing. Yang introduced the following story found in the opening of the chapter on meaninglessness in Irvin Yalom's (1980) book *Existential Psychotherapy*:

Imagine a happy group of morons who are engaged in work. They are carrying bricks in an open field. As soon as they have stacked all the bricks at one end of the field, they proceed to transport them to the opposite end. This continues without stop and everyday of every year they are busy doing the same thing. One day one of the morons stops long enough to ask himself what he is doing. He wonders what purpose there is in carrying the bricks. And from that instant on he is not quite as content with his occupation as he had been before.

I am that moron who wonders why he is carrying the bricks. (p. 419)

As Yalom informed us, this was a suicide note left behind by a despairing soul who killed himself because he saw no meaning in life.

How would Lu Xun understand this story? I imagined that Lu Xun would suggest that this moron has discerned the meaninglessness of traditional society and decided to depart and seek meaning from elsewhere. The moron may have even tried to raise similar questions to the other morons. In the beginning, the other morons do not respond. But

gradually pressure is applied to the one questioning moron to conform. If the questioning moron continues his line of inquiry, the other morons may even plot to get rid of him. Perhaps it is this pressure that drives the questioning moron to end his life. This has been the case repeated many times in Chinese history.

#### The Wounded Wolf

Qu Qiubai (1953), one of Lu Xun's friends, likened Lu Xun to the legendary figure of Remus from Roman mythology. According to this myth, Numitor was the king of Alba Longa but was dethroned by his brother Amulius ('Romulus and Reomus,' 2008). Out of fear that Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, would produce children who would one day overthrow him as king, Amulius forced Rhea to become a Vestal Virgin, a priestess sworn to abstinence. But Mars, god of war, was smitten by her and secretly, while she slept, bore her two sons. The twins were of remarkable size and beauty, and named Romulus and Remus. Amulius was enraged and ordered that Rhea be buried alive and the twins thrown into the Tiber River. The servant could not bear to carry out the order, but instead placed the twins in a basket and laid the basket on the banks of the Tiber River. The river, in flood season, rose and gently carried the basket downstream. Romulus and Remus were kept safe by the river god Tiberinus, who brought them up onto the Palatine Hill. There they were nursed by a wolf. Later, Romulus became the founder of Rome while Remus was killed over a dispute about which one of the two brothers had the support of the local deities to rule the new city and give it his name.

Similarly, Lu Xun was born into a official-scholar gentry but was symbolically nursed by the milk of wild animals, the revolutionary figures of both China and abroad. Under their tutelage, he grew up to be a rebellious son of the feudal patriarchal clan society. Instead of paying allegiance to the gentry class of the feudal society, he became a revolutionary leading thinker who spread forth his thoughts to many commoners. Lu Xun suffered numerous injuries in his battle against the "old stronghold" of feudalism, but he concealed his wounds and kept on fighting. He likened himself to a wounded wolf, limping deep into the woods. Sad and lonely, he lay down to lick his wounds and later emerged from the woods again, only to fight. From his own feudal gentry he is viewed as a rebellious wolf. But in the eyes of the Chinese people he represents a fighting spirit for the transformation of China. He fought continuously until the time of his death in 1936, and was eulogized as "the soul of the nation." (民族魂)

While studying abroad, Lu Xun began laying the foundation of his axiom: In order to establish a nation, one must first establish her people (立国必先立人). He searched all over China and abroad for a spiritual model that could become an antidote to the weakened Chinese personality. He exclaimed, "If we search all over China today, where will we find such a warrior spirit? Will anyone speak out in sincerity; anyone to call our people to goodness, beauty, strength and vigor? Where are the compassionate voices to save our people from desolation?" (Lu Xun, 1981a, p. 100). Then he found the rebellious "Mara Poets" in foreign, alien lands. "Mara" means the devil or Satan, representing the European Romantic thinkers who are the positive (originally perceived as negative) forces that moved society forward, but nicknamed by the ignorant society as "Mara poets." Lu Xun began to admire figures such as, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Shelley, Byron, to name only a few. Lu Xun's early writings, including, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry* (1907, in Lu Xun, 1981a), *On Extremities of Cultures* (1907, in Lu Xun, 1981a), etc., can be understood as a chronology of Western heroes of the spiritual/moral/intellectual<sup>2</sup> realm. It was Lu Xun's fervent hope that visionaries such as these would emerge in China and "speak with powerful voices, breaking bonds of loneliness, bringing new life to his compatriots, and helping to advance China's prominence in the eyes of the world."

At his birthday gathering, Lu Xun was presented with a couplet of praise from his friend Liu Bannong (刘半农). The couplet, loosely translated to mean "Teachings of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, Writing Style of Wei and Jin Dynasty" (托尼学说, 魏晋文章), recognized Lu Xun's integration of the teaching of Tolstoy and Nietzsche with the literary heritage from ancient China. This accomplishment is especially enlightening given that the divergent teachings of Tolstoy and Nietzsche, not to mention the culture divergence between Russia, Europe, and China. Lu Xun, especially during his youth, advocated Tolstoy's humanitarian values derived from Christianity. As perceived by Cao Juren (2006), one of the Lu Xun's biographers, Lu Xun's protestations against war and advocacy for international communication and exchange are influenced by Tolstoy's writings. At the same time, he admired Nietzsche's individualism and the writing style of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 1892/1954). We find traces of Nietzsche's philosophy and writing style in Lu Xun's *Wild Grass*

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese word is difficult to translate here. It encompasses both the spiritual/moral and the intellectual realm. In the East, Lu Xun is understood more as a "spiritual" warrior. In the West, Lu Xun can be better appreciated as an "intellectual" warrior or giant akin to that of Nietzsche.

(1927/1981b), a collection of prose, especially pieces like *Preface to Wild Grass*, *The Passer-By*, *Such A Fighter*, etc. This collection of prose or short essays, possibly the most existential literary work by Lu Xun, touched on the topics of hope and despair, darkness and light, meaning and sense of void or nothingness, choice, fighting with hypocrites, and living and dying. In fact, Lu Xun, for a period of time, was regarded as “China’s Nietzsche.” The two figures shared many similarities. Both Nietzsche and Lu Xun launched vigorous, wholesale attacks on their respective cultural traditions. Nietzsche (1892/1954) declared “God is dead,” which shocked the entire Western Christian world. Lu Xun (1981b), on the other side of the world, exposed unrelentingly how “Confucian morality was eating its people.” Ironically, however, both figures were more deeply connected to the essence of their own cultures than most of their fellow countrymen. Upon deeper examination, we find Nietzsche’s spiritual attachment to Jesus echoing Lu Xun’s personal similarities with Confucius. Both figures were critical of the degenerated parts of their own culture. Both sought to enlighten and inspire people to transcend from lower realms of awareness and to seek freedom from their bondage to the culture and environment. In his treatment of the national character, Lu Xun, exactly like Nietzsche, enumerated all the drawbacks in order to draw attention to a cure. In one of Lu Xun’s (1981a) letter to Qian Xuantong, we find this passage:

Jesus said if you see a cart about to overturn, put out a hand to hold it up. Nietzsche said if you see a cart about to overturn, give it a push. I naturally agree with Jesus, but I also think that if a person is not willing to receive your support, then there’s no reason to force it on him. Do what they say and be done with it. If later the cart hasn’t overturned, all well and good. If it does overturn in the end, then go and give practical help in raising it. My elder brother, it takes less energy to raise a cart than to support it from falling; and in the latter case, the results are less evident. To raise the cart after it falls is much more beneficial than to give a supporting hand when it’s on the verge of falling. (p. 36)

In this passage we find evidence of Lu Xun’s preference to integrate both the teachings of Jesus and Nietzsche. Lu Xun was practical and unrelenting while holding up and raising the great and difficult task of reforming the national character. But other times, similar to Nietzsche, he would be deliberately provocative in his words and behaviors so as to “give a push,” but harbor a private intention “to raise the cart.” Lu Xun was deeply

concerned about his country and his people and was persistent and sincere in raising his concerns. But often times he kept his fervent compassion behind an austere exterior. Lu Xun desperately sought to awaken the deep slumbering spirit of his people across the vast land of China. Yet, with profound sorrow, Lu Xun portrayed group after group of apathetic and cruel souls in his fiction, displaying an attitude of “Grief Over Their Misfortune” and “Indignant Toward Their Servility” (哀其不幸，怒其不争).<sup>3</sup>

### The Lock Gate of Darkness

In *A Madman's Diary* (1918), Lu Xun depicts a world of callousness in which people eat people. However, Lu Xun's peers remarked to him that this novel was too dark. To which Lu Xun finally added the phrase “save the children” to the novel as the ending sentence, upon whom he placed the hope of the Chinese society, because, as he stated, “Perhaps there are still children who haven't eaten men?” (p. 53).

In his satirical essays, as well as in his life, Lu Xun was relentless in pointing his critical pen, or more exactly, the top of his writing brush at many of his enemies. But he always showed leniency toward the young, even if they offended him. He likened himself to a cow, ready to serve the young. He pinned his hope for change in China upon the young. In one of his early articles, *How Should We Be Fathers Today?* Lu Xun (1981) employed the metaphor of “the gate of darkness” by writing “We, as fathers, should ‘shoulder’ the sinking gate of darkness and guide our children out to a vast land full of brightness, to live happy lives as normal, upright human beings.” This metaphor originated from a parable of a dungeon in the evil underworld. Every day a giant monster captured children from the human world and locked them in the dungeon. A hero ventured into the underworld to attempt to save the children. The dungeon is in complete darkness and the locked gate is heavy and impregnable. The gate is only lifted briefly everyday when the monster leaves the dungeon to snatch more children. This becomes the only chance for the hero to enter and rescue the children. The hero took the initiative one day and guided the children out while the gate was open. However, while the gate was dropping, the hero saw that some of the children have yet to escape. Thus, he propped up the sinking gate with his shoulder in

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<sup>3</sup> A term most often used in association with Lu Xun's attitude toward Chinese, but its resource cannot be found.

order for the rest of the children to escape. This resulted in the hero's death in the end as he was crushed by the gate of darkness.

This is Lu Xun: a hero who chose to fight and even "sink with the darkness." In his contemporary periods of gloom, Lu Xun explored his own path and sometimes found nowhere to turn. Instead of crying and turning back at the end of the road, as the case with Ruan Ji (阮籍), one of his favorite ancient poets, Lu Xun chose to remain and ponder his fate, before eventually resuming his exploration. Throughout his life, Lu Xun never stopped exploring lonely paths in his quest to discover and create new meaning. His quest is not just for himself, but for China as a nation, and even for all humanity.

The parable of "shouldering the lock gate of the dungeon" expresses the full sense of existential psychology in terms of choosing suffering for meaning. This reminds me of Victor Frankl, who was thrown into the concentration camp by monstrous forces of evil. There he had to face the reality that his life was devoid of everything except for cold, hunger, and all kinds of brutal torture and humiliation. In his famous book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1963) questioned his existence when everything was deprived. What does it mean for me to exist when living in such a state? What is there still left for me to live for? These were questions that launched his school of logotherapy. "The main tenets of logotherapy were justified by the acid test of the concentration camp" (as cited in Hall, 1968, p. 63). Frankl had to find answer for himself, for his inmates who despaired, and for all of us who cannot escape the suffering in our lives. Frankl witnessed that the basic motivation in humanity is the "will to meaning", rather than "will to pleasure" (as Freud assumed) or "will to power" (as Adler assumed). It is this "will to meaning" that motivates human beings to seek meaning in their life and to fulfill it in various ways. According to Frankl, there are three ways to make life meaningful: love, work, and suffering.

Similar to Frankl's experience, from the existential point of view, we find that Lu Xun's life is essentially also a process of the "will to meaning." First, he obtained the highest value of creativity through his literary work that turned out to be a spiritual contribution to his nation. Second, he practiced genuine love for his fellow countrymen, through which he gained what Frankl (1963) termed "the value of experience." Finally, through the experience of his personal suffering and the suffering of the Chinese people, Lu Xun realized "the value of attitude" by "shouldering the gate of darkness" so people may pursue a better, more meaningful life. His pain found its meaning. We can always hear his sincere

voice calling his people of “the iron house” to wake up and seek meaning in a seemingly meaningless environment.

Lu Xun’s (1981c) existential attitude is fully revealed in his term of “zhi mian,” which means “directly facing” reality. He champions the “zhi mian warrior,” as one who “dares to face life as it is, no matter how gloomy it might be” (真的勇士，敢于直面惨淡的人生; p. 271). Lu Xun lived out Nietzsche’s axioms “He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*” (as cited in Frankl, 1963, p. 12) and “That which does not kill me, makes me stronger” (as cited in Frankl, 1963, p. 103). These remarks found meaning with Frankl as well. Both Lu Xun and Frankl, in my opinion, are meaning-making heroes. They fully agree with Nietzsche in believing that, for human beings, ultimately, there is no other choice except the choice of living as heroes.

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