BREAKING WITH THE PAST:
MEMORY, MOURNING, AND HOPE IN LU XUN’S WRITING

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Jeanne Tao, A.B.

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The Ohio State University
2005

Master’s Examination Committee:

Dr. Kirk A. Denton, Advisor
Dr. Mark Bender

Approved by

Advisor
Graduate Program in East Asian Languages and Literatures
ABSTRACT

Much of Lu Xun’s creative writing often deals with trauma, loss, and problems of memory, and as such should be analyzed using theories on memory and trauma. This thesis examines selected short stories, reminiscences, and prose poems from Lu Xun’s oeuvre that present and attempt to resolve problems of memory faced by May Fourth intellectuals who prescribe, or at least experience, a break with the past and tradition in order to modernize China and ensure its survival as a modern nation.

As a result of this break with the past and the imposition of the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, what Richard Terdiman terms a “crisis of memory” can be observed in the literature of Lu Xun. This memory crisis manifests itself in a focus on lapses and excesses of memory—in particular an obsessive preoccupation with the past (especially in nostalgic accounts of an idyllic childhood), and expressions of fear and anxiety about being caught between a demonized past and a bleak future. Through readings in light of psychoanalytic theory and work on memory and trauma, I show how these symptoms resemble responses to trauma and how Lu Xun’s creative writings attempt to grieve multiple personal and national losses and lacks. In his struggle to effect social change through writing, Lu Xun must first address the paralyzing disillusionment with the past and present that characterizes the intellectual mood of early twentieth-
century China, in order to find the energy to take action for the future. The “working through” of loss and grief attempted by the works analyzed here may facilitate action toward social transformation, yet this necessary mourning process falters in a climate of what Lin Yü-sheng calls radical antitraditionalism, when “who we have been” must be repudiated to become “who we should be.” This agonizing imperative lies beneath much of Lu Xun’s writing, affecting the possibility of mourning properly for loss and, therefore, the possibility of hope for the future.

This thesis highlights three major problems resulting from a rejection of the past/tradition, observed in selected works from three different genres of Lu Xun’s writing—nostalgia and regression into the past in short stories, anxiety over “in-between-ness” expressed in prose poetry, and the construction of memory and identity to counteract trauma in autobiographical reminiscences.

I argue that Lu Xun’s preoccupation with memory and the past motivated him to write in order to “get over” the traumatizing effects of the Confucian tradition in China. In dealing with the impulse to nostalgia and the desire to return to a lost Real, I suggest that Lu Xun began to incorporate some parts of an idealized past into a vision for the future. Basing a vision of the future on nostalgic images of an idealized childhood paradise, however, undermines the possibility for hope, because the “lost” past may not ever be regained in a perfect future.
Dedicated to Tigger and Bibbo
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Kirk Denton, for providing me with intellectual stimulation and much-needed encouragement throughout the formulation and writing of this thesis. He has shown great patience in guiding my scholarship, from the first course I took from him—which inspired this project—to the very end of the degree program.

I thank Dr. Mark Bender for repeatedly bringing my focus to the larger picture of twentieth-century China, as well as for giving vital information on navigating through the master's program. I also thank Dr. Nina Ha for encouragement and constructive critique on portions of this thesis. I am grateful to Dr. Maurice Stevens for his expert advice on studies of trauma as well as for his friendly support. Thanks also to all on the Asian American Studies Committee and in the Asian Pacific American Caucus of Graduate and Professional Students for warm social, academic, and professional support.

I am indebted to Penny Winkle and Chikako Cox of Counseling and Consultation Services for getting me through my rough periods and for helping me find the strength to reach my potential. To my DEALL comrades, especially Kaori Nakata, Lea Ekeberg, Bao Ying, and Wang Wei, thanks for your support. Thanks to my dearest friends, for bearing with me: Tricia, Veronica, Julia S., Julia O., Lissa, Sandy—you are all incredible women. Gracias a Luis por todo; no te voy a olvidar.
VITA

October 13, 1976 ......................... Born – Tucson, Arizona

1998 ....................................... A.B. Music, Brown University

2002 – 2005 .............................. Graduate Teaching and Research

Associate, The Ohio State University

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: East Asian Languages and Literatures

Chinese literature
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INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on the modern Chinese author Lu Xun (1881-1936) often tends to extol him as a revolutionary, focusing on his criticism of China’s outdated Confucian tradition and his attempts to transform Chinese society through literature. His famous works, such as the much discussed short stories “Diary of a Madman” (Kuangren riji) and “Ah Q—The Real Story” (A Q zhengzhuan), demonstrate the characteristics Lu Xun’s work is known for: scathing criticism of both the Confucian tradition (by equating it with cannibalism) and the Chinese people as a whole (through Ah Q, the unfeeling ignoramus representative of all Chinese).

Yet many of Lu Xun’s other works show different sides of the author that are not as often discussed. For an author who advocated rejection of tradition and China’s past, he wrote surprisingly nostalgic pieces longing for the lost paradise of childhood and home. For a writer who advocated revolution and action, he produced surprisingly despairing works that wondered at the possibilities of hope for the future. It is not that scholars ignore these sides of Lu Xun, especially in recent scholarship, for in fact studies usually end up assessing his works’ degrees of hopefulness or hopelessness, and biographical information usually points to his depressive tendencies. However, while these readings may address the relationship between these different sides of Lu Xun, the
revolutionary and the nostalgic/depressive, they do not necessarily focus on the factors that appear to cause this split, particularly the suffering that memory inflicts upon him.

This thesis springs out of curiosity about the prominence of memory problems in Lu Xun's writing. Throughout much of his creative writing, Lu Xun and his narrators and protagonists often express difficulties with remembering and forgetting. Too much remembering means the past won't go away as it should; too much forgetting means sadness for parts of the past disappearing. In both cases, Lu Xun seems preoccupied with the past, and for someone who generally characterizes the past as harmful and to be rejected, this is a problem—psychologically for Lu Xun, but also interpretatively for critics. This thesis attempts to explain this preoccupation with the past and problems of memory in Lu Xun's writing as indications of a general crisis of memory affecting China at the time—a period of revolution and modernization—and of multiple traumatic losses and lacks affecting both Lu Xun and the nation as a whole.

In discussing the problems of memory raised in Lu Xun's writing, this study also highlights several related questions with which his writing struggles and which may still be relevant to readers everywhere today. Lu Xun lived in uncertain and troubling times, when the future, of the nation as well as his own personal life, was unclear and perhaps rather bleak. How did he keep on writing with the intent of social change? How did he maintain a hope that his writing could affect the future, especially in light of the disheartening present? How do his writings work through a past that seems to haunt him? Do they mourn losses and allow him to move on, and if so, how? How do they connect the disparate fragments of his life into a meaningful sense of self, if they even attempt to do so? Lu Xun wrote about tradition and China's past as traumatic and
harmful, yet some of his works still show an attachment to what was good about the past or at least grief for its passing. In examining how his works approach the haunting past, one may see how writing expresses or even alleviates feelings of fragmentariness and despair over the omnipresence or loss of memories.

Goals

The goals of this thesis are to identify through close readings the memory problems that appear in selected writings by Lu Xun, to suggest some reasons for these memory problems, and to discover how Lu Xun resolved (or didn’t resolve) these problems through his writing.

In identifying problems of memory in his writing, this thesis examines selected works that exhibit and focus on particular kinds of memory problems. In the first chapter, for instance, I read three short stories that present images of or narrate visits to Lu Xun’s old home. These stories display and critique nostalgia and other regressions into the past, indicating the narrators’ difficult relationships to the past. Nostalgia also appears as an issue in Lu Xun’s collection of prose poems, Yecao (Wild grass, 1924-1926), but the second chapter focuses on select prose poems that express anxiety and effects of trauma in Lu Xun’s personal life as well as at the national level. Cathy Caruth’s work on trauma and writing prove useful in explaining the effects of trauma and their expression in writing. Trauma and nostalgia also inform Lu Xun’s volume of reminiscences, Zhaohua xishi (Dawn blossoms plucked at dusk, 1927). Because of their autobiographical nature, issues of constructing identity through narrative come up. The third chapter explains how the reminiscences narrate a life story (and thus an identity)
through memories, drawing on Nicola King’s work on autobiographical writing and psychoanalytic theory. Below, I summarize some of the theories of literary criticism that are used in this thesis.

Methodology

The memory crisis and nostalgia

“All that was is no longer; all that will be is not yet. Look nowhere else for the secret of our suffering.” - Alfred de Musset

All writing, of course, not just Lu Xun’s, is about the past and memory, because we couldn’t conceivably write much about a future we have not experienced yet (and if we do, we narrate it as an experienced past) or a present that we cannot grasp (since the moment we start writing about it, it is already in the past).

Some writers, however, seem to focus specifically on problems of memory and our relation to the past, organizing their fiction around memory, as Richard Terdiman points out in Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis (1993). Terdiman works mainly with French literature and theory after the French Revolution and throughout the “long nineteenth century” (1789-1920), but his description of a crisis of memory as a problem of relating to the past shows striking resemblances to a similar crisis experienced in China in the post-1911 period. How could one fail to see China’s predicament after the 1911 revolution in a passage like this one?

In a world of change, memory becomes complicated. Any revolution, any rapid alteration of the givens of the present places a society’s connection

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1 Quoted in Richard Terdiman (1993), Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis, p. 4.
with its history under pressure. But in Europe in the period after the 1789-1815 Revolution, and particularly in France, the uncertainty of relation with the past became especially intense. In this period people experienced the insecurity of their culture’s involvement with its past, the perturbation of the link to their own inheritance, as what I want to term a “memory crisis”: a sense that their past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated. (Terdiman 1993: 3-4)

If the past was problematic for Europe in the nineteenth century, surely this is doubly true of China in the twentieth century because the break with the past and the “rapid alteration of the givens of the present” in China were immense. Lin Yü-sheng argues that universal kingship had dominated China for centuries, and “its continuity over the centuries and its integrative function in Chinese society meant that the collapse had particularly devastating consequences” (Lin 1979: 17). The fall of universal kingship (around the 1911 revolution) led to the breakdown of the sociopolitical order and the cultural-moral order that it held together. The world of China as it had been known fell apart. Even before 1911, however, an intellectual movement had been growing that critiqued Chinese civilization as outmoded compared to the stronger nations of the world, calling for social and political reform. This later grew into full-fledged iconoclasm for the antitrADitionalist intellectuals of the May Fourth period, who opposed traditionalists skeptical of Western learning and intent upon preserving a Chinese cultural essence. The May Fourth intellectuals believed that only a rejection of the past and of tradition would allow China to survive and progress.

But how do people live in a world in which the past is to be rejected? How does one represent that past? Lu Xun wrote, and experimented as he wrote, to deal with these
problems. It would be difficult not to see parallels between Lu Xun’s literature and that of post-revolutionary France, especially when Edward Shils describes the impulse of writers to repudiate “the burden of the past” in this way:

Civilization seemed to have gone too far. It had become heavy with elaborate codes of conduct which had no rationale other than the fact that they were ‘alone’; it had become so drawn into the complex, rule-bound institutions which had grown up that a great simplification seemed called for.... European civilization came under the criticism that it had reached a point where its traditions were suppressing the physical vitality necessary for its survival. (Quoted in Terdiman 1993: 50)

Lu Xun wrote specifically in reaction to this same tendency toward cultural ossification, which he saw in China. He wrote precisely in order to save China from the traditions that “were suppressing the physical vitality necessary for its survival.”

Adopting the new, “modern” concept of time as linear progression and teleological evolution, China’s May Fourth intellectuals viewed tradition as malignant, since it prevented the nation and its people from progressing into modernity. They therefore felt an urgent need to re-present the past and tradition in new ways, constructing the past from their “memory” of it. Since memory is “the means by which the coherence of our identity and history is constructed and sustained” (Terdiman 1993: vii), that identity or history is often a construction influenced by ideology. Foucault points out the importance of harnessing memory in controlling people: “Memory is actually a very important factor in struggle.... If one controls people’s memory, one

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2 Lu Xun and other late Qing and May Fourth intellectuals often understood the problems facing China as problems of “survival of the fittest” amongst other, imperialist nations. The main influence on this thinking was social Darwinism, introduced in China via a translation of Thomas Huxley’s *Ethics and Evolution* by Yan Fu. More on the influence of evolutionary theory on Lu Xun can be found in James Pusey’s book *Lu Xun and Evolution* (1998).
controls their dynamism.... It is vital to have possession of this memory" (quoted in Terdiman 1993: 19n). But memory may also be contestatory, as Terdiman acknowledges, in that alternative memories may be recalled to subvert dominant discourses (20). The May Fourth antitraditionalist intellectuals used their view of the past (their version of history) to contest more conservative (traditionalist) views of Chinese civilization and to convince the Chinese people of the importance of rejecting tradition and the past.

This optimistic view of the nation progressing from stagnant tradition into modernity probably did generate hope for the future, as it was meant to do, yet the break with the past caused disruptions that appeared as a form of pessimism. In the case of Europe, Terdiman writes: “A myth of progress makes the loss of memory less troubling. But alongside such optimistic readings of history’s new forms, there remained a deep perception of the memory crisis as a historical disaster” (24). Some literature demonstrated this with a preoccupation with memory, displaying the two mnemonic dysfunctions of too much and too little memory: “memory is represented either in monstrous hypertrophy or in pitiful underdevelopment” (25). Yet another memory problem manifests itself in literature during the crisis of memory—a serious questioning of memory and the past. Terdiman notes that the characters in this type of literature often come to the realization of the constructed-ness of their memories and their versions of the past (31). They also experience frustration in the inability to integrate that past into their lives (27). These memory problems appear in Lu Xun’s writing as well, indicating the existence of a similar crisis of memory in early modern China.
The break with the past results as well in nostalgia. Because the past is felt to be lost, and because it is invented anew each time it is remembered, there arises a longing for that which was lost. Svetlana Boym addresses nostalgia in literature in her book, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). She defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (xiii). Nostalgia spread in nineteenth-century Europe, she explains, because of a changing conception of time. Nostalgia is the flipside of progress: they are both "dependent on the modern conception of unrepeateable and irreversible time" (13). The object of longing, the past or home, is separated from the sufferer by distance as well as time. There exist tensions between nostalgia and progress, tradition and revolution, these opposites appearing together because of new ways of conceiving of time, wherein we cannot return to times past.

According to Boym, the nostalgia she observes takes two forms: restorative and reflective. A person or community engaging in restorative nostalgia takes the remembered image of home or the past as a model to rebuild that home or past in the present location and time, in an attempt to get it back. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, results from a recognition that, because of the irreversible flow of time, the home or past that is lost can never be regained, causing grief. Discussing literature that displays reflective nostalgia, Boym explains that a melancholic feeling of distance from home motivates these authors to write. Seeing that one's home is in ruins or unrecognizable because changed, the authors feel compelled to write down their experiences: "This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their stories, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future" (50). Lu Xun's stories of home also exhibit reflective nostalgia, which Boym explains as a combination of mourning and
melancholia, as well as “a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future” (55). Thus, an examination of memory problems leads me to consider Lu Xun’s writing as acts of grieving loss. Because memory problems are so often a result of feelings of loss, psychoanalytic theory on trauma will be useful in reading works preoccupied with memory.

Trauma theory

Lu Xun may have known something about dream interpretation and seems to have understood, particularly in the poems of Wild Grass, something of the nature of disturbing dreams and trauma. Like the repetitions of overwhelming events that sufferers of trauma go through, recurring nightmares, whether literal (as with trauma) or symbolic (as with repressed fears), can “possess” or “haunt” someone against his or her will. Whether or not Lu Xun truly experienced trauma himself one cannot fully ascertain, yet the reader can identify some of the symptoms of trauma in his writing.

In asking whether Lu Xun might have experienced trauma, one might first focus on the events in his life. While his experiences did not include the horrific occurrences usually identified with trauma—systematic genocide, enslavement, sexual abuse, near-fatal accidents, to name a few—they might also warrant characterization as traumatic events. After all, the failures of the Nationalist revolution in 1911, the violence of those
years, and especially the deaths of innocent student protesters, some of whom were Lu Xun’s own students, could very well have been traumatic.

Marston Anderson uses the term “traumatic” to describe this historical period in his discussion of modern Chinese literature: “The period that produced the new literature was thus a frankly traumatic one, during which repeated shocks and dislocations were visited on individuals and on the nation at large” (Anderson 1990: 3). On the national level, then, one may very well use the word “traumatic” to describe the times. Starting further back in history, the decline of the Qing dynasty in the nineteenth century, itself a “foreign” dynasty controlled by the Manchus, as well as numerous embarrassing concessions to foreign powers, left China with very low morale and in a semi-colonial state by the turn of the century. Intellectuals calling for reform and modernization saw China in a life-and-death crisis. In their discourse, they talked of China’s tradition losing out to Western science and technology, saying that if China did not progress or evolve, it would perish.

In this spirit, the young Lu Xun took up studies of science and later, in Japan, Western medicine, in hopes of aiding China with modern knowledge. It was during his study abroad in Japan, however, that he changed his mind and decided to take up writing. In a now famous incident explained in the preface to his first collection of short stories, Cheering from the Sidelines (Nahan, 1923), he tells of a slide show in one of his medical classes that included a slide of a Chinese prisoner about to be executed by the Japanese.


4 I offer a more detailed reading of this preface below, and the slide incident is further discussed in the third chapter on Lu Xun’s reminiscences, which also narrate the incident.
for spying for the Russians. What disturbed, or perhaps traumatized, Lu Xun was the fact that the other Chinese in the photo looked on passively, enjoying the spectacle of the execution of one of their own people.\(^5\) He writes:

> Before that academic year was out, I had already returned to Tokyo, for after this experience I felt that the practice of medicine was nothing urgent to begin with, since no matter \textit{how} healthy or strong the bodies of a weak-spirited citizenry might be, they’d still be fit for nothing better than to serve as victims or onlookers at such ridiculous spectacles. There was no need to fret about how many of them might die of illness. The most important thing to be done was to transform their \textit{spirits}, and of the course the best way to effect a spiritual transformation—or so I thought at the time—would be through literature and art. All right then, I would promote a literary movement. (Lu 1990: 23-24)

The realization of the lack of sympathy on the part of the Chinese people in general is narrated as a traumatic memory that he claims made him quit his medical studies.\(^6\)

Viewing the slide causes trauma, as I use the term in this study, as an overwhelming event that is not fully comprehended until later recognized as intensely significant and inscribed with meaning. The overwhelming event repeats and returns in the sufferer’s present until it is understood and incorporated into his life as a comprehensible part of his past. The story of the slide incident repeats and returns in Lu Xun’s writings, begging to be explained.

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\(^5\) Rey Chow (1995) points out this trauma in her reading of the preface, but only in terms of the trauma of the \textit{visuality} of the slide. She explains the slide incident as “shocking” Lu Xun by making him realize that the Chinese were a spectacle for the world and that visual art like film and photography would usurp the traditional medium of writing.

\(^6\) Whether or not this incident truly caused Lu Xun to quit studying medicine, or whether it even really occurred at all, is arguable and has been touched on by many scholars, who generally agree that this single incident was probably not enough to change his mind and that he had likely been contemplating it for a long time. The point, however, is not to determine the veracity of this claim but to examine his representation of it as traumatic.
In 1911, the Nationalists led by Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing empire and established the Republic of China. Though in name China was now a republic, the revolution proved shaky, encountering numerous setbacks, with attempts by some to reestablish an emperor and with the “nation” divided into several regions ruled over by warlords. This state of affairs only seemed to reinforce the idea that the Chinese people needed education to lead them out of the old ways. After finally gaining control of most of the area, the Nationalist government still could not achieve much stability, coming into conflict constantly with a growing group of Communists, leading eventually to purges and even killings of protesting students. It is against this historical backdrop that Lu Xun struggled and wrote.

His writings tend to cast certain experiences as traumatic at the national level. His most well-known stories, already mentioned above, narrate the trauma of a madman discovering cannibalism in the Confucian tradition (“Diary of a Madman”) and a town of pathetic figures who lack sympathy for each other, practically devouring each other as well (“Ah Q—The Real Story”). Lu Xun may have viewed these supposed Chinese characteristics as traumatizing; he often criticizes “Chinese” characteristics and feels shame upon seeing his fellow Chinese in the slide incident—yet he is, in fact, also Chinese.7

Insistence on the inferiority of a particular race or nation may, of course, lead to trauma for individuals of that race or nation. Not only might they suffer at the hands of oppressors (colonizers, for example), they may also come to believe in this inferiority and

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7 Lydia Liu (1995) argues that Lu Xun took these negative characteristics directly from American missionary Arthur Smith’s book, Chinese Characteristics (published in 1894). Haiyan Lee also points out the appearance of several of the negative traits observed by Smith in Lu Xun’s “Ah Q—The Real Story” in her article, “Sympathy, Hypocrisy, and the Trauma of Chineseness” (2004).
turn oppression upon themselves. In a process more complicated than the pop-
psychological term “inferiority complex” suggests, the victim of racial prejudice and
oppression truly suffers psychological harm, as Anne Anling Cheng explains in The
Melancholy of Race (2001). Aspiring to an unattainable racial ideal can be traumatic.
Cheng states: “There are still deep-seated, intangible, psychical complications for people
living within a ruling episteme that privileges that which they can never be” (7). Lu Xun
seems also to have believed in the inferiority of the Chinese in character, which allows
scholars like Haiyan Lee to speak intelligibly of the “trauma of Chineseness” (2004).

To illustrate Lu Xun’s internalization of racist ideas of China, one can compare
the views of Lu Xun with those of his brother, as Susan Daruvala does (2000). If Lu Xun
internalized racism and suffered because of this, his brother Zhou Zuoren probably fared
better. Daruvala explains that Zhou Zuoren (like traditionalists) did not believe “that in
certain crucial epistemological respects, Chinese civilization was inferior to the modern
civilization of the West. Consequently, he rejected the idea that the mission of literature
was to help usher in the new forms of scientific thinking and political power that would
overcome this inferiority and enable the constitution of a modern Chinese nation” (11).
He also never saw the past as completely cut off from the present or himself as cut off
from his home region, as Lu Xun did (70). Zhou Zuoren’s view, however, did not win

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8 Cheng writes on racial melancholia in the case of racial minorities in the United States, but I believe her
work is still relevant in colonial or semi-colonial situations, where the colonized are treated as inferior to
the colonizers. Cheng argues that racism involves a melancholic process on the parts of both the victim and
oppressor, whereby a “lost” other is incorporated by the ego, which then identifies with the lost object
instead of mourning the loss and eventually substituting the lost object with a replacement. The point is
that racism causes endless grief (melancholia) that is not resolved through a period of mourning.
out in the larger cultural arena, though it could have provided a healthier vision of Chinese modernity and the future.⁹

In addition to these more general national conditions (semi-colonialism, racism, disunity and political strife, and even Confucianism as Lu Xun sees it), particular events in Lu Xun’s personal life may also have been traumatic. Biographer David Pollard describes the period between 1924 and 1926 (during which Lu Xun wrote his prose poetry, which express effects of trauma most directly) as

the period of greatest distress in Lu Xun’s private life, but also the time of his highest productivity. In June 1924 had occurred the final confrontation with his brother, when they almost came to blows. By then Lu Xun had moved out of the family compound and enjoyed only cold comfort in his new small house with his mother and the wife he did not want. He was frequently ill and financially hard-pressed. In August 1925 he was sacked from his ministry job. (Pollard 2003: xxx-xxxi)

Though these events may not have traumatized Lu Xun, this period was still one during which Lu Xun must have experienced a great amount of stress.

Trauma, however, is not defined as an event, but as the condition that an event may provoke in a person. A particular event may not traumatize all who experience it, nor traumatize them to the same degree. Scholarly definitions of trauma are quite broad. These definitions may be taken from descriptions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cathy Caruth explains PTSD as the condition of being possessed by an image

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⁹ While I agree generally with Daruvala’s assessment of the difference between the views of the brothers, I also hope to show in this thesis that Lu Xun can, at times, surprise us by deviating from the monolithic image that scholars often assign him. Lu Xun did find some things that were good about the past (especially a pre-neo-Confucian past) and also sometimes critiques the rejection of the past in toto through his pessimistic and despairing stories of failed intellectuals (like “Upstairs in a Wineshop,” discussed in Chapter 1).
or event that has not been appropriately integrated into the narrative that makes one's life coherent. In other words, overwhelming events cause intrusive images and thoughts (like recurring dreams or behavior) over which one has no control. She describes some symptoms of PTSD: intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event; numbing that may have begun during or after the experience; and increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event (Caruth 1995: 4). Caruth also emphasizes the response to the event as more critical than the event itself: "The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5).

Going back to the source of theory on what is now called "trauma," Caruth explains that Freud had to adjust his earlier theories on dreams in light of the experiences of veterans of the First World War. The traumatic dream had nothing to do with wish fulfillment or unacceptable, repressed desires, but was instead "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (5). Pierre Janet, a French predecessor to Freud, had observed this very phenomenon in a case study in which a woman who witnessed the death of her mother denied the very fact of the death through a kind of amnesia but also engaged involuntarily in long, real-time reenactments of the night of the death (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 160-162).

While "literal return" does not adequately describe what happens in the examples of Lu Xun's writing examined here, the problems of not having enough memory and having too much memory, which come hand-in-hand in trauma, both seem to plague the
author and/or narrators/protagonists of his works. This is pronounced in the amnesia contrasted by vivid recollections of the past in many of his works. One may also notice other indicators of possible trauma in some of the pieces and, through the very writing of certain past experiences, attempts to recover from trauma. After all, one cannot deny that Lu Xun’s narrators often seem “possessed” by certain images or events, nor can one say that they do not experience intrusive dreams and thoughts of the past. Janet himself would not have said that they were healthy psychologically, since “Healthy psychological functioning depends on the proper operation of the memory system” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 159). Janet’s observations had led him to note that “certain memories became obstacles that kept people from going on with their lives” (158). The depression that certain memories may have brought Lu Xun’s narrators might well have kept them from going on with their lives in some way.

From the great concern about the past Lu Xun displays in his writings, it seems that Lu Xun’s past often refuses to go away. In trauma, the past does not appear to the sufferer to be in the past, and it will remain in the present unless the anxiety is finally experienced and worked through. Returning to Freud to discuss current representations of the Holocaust, Eric Santner explains Freud’s thought that the anxiety that should be produced by a traumatic event is actually missing at the time of occurrence: “the absence of appropriate affect—anxiety—rather than loss per se is what leads to traumatization. Until such anxiety has been recuperated and worked through, the loss will continue to represent a past that refuses to go away” (Santner 1992: 147).

Santner quotes Freud in another broad definition of trauma: “We describe as ‘traumatic’ any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the
protective shield [Reizschutz]" (151). This protective shield normally filters out a great deal of stimuli from the outside world by anticipating events, but when an unexpected event breaks through, one becomes traumatized, unable to incorporate the event into the continuum one constructs to make sense of one's life. Side effects of this intrusion, Freud continues, include a heightened sense of alarm and the inability to deal with the large amounts of stimuli flooding in on the wake of the traumatic event (151-152).

The heightened sensitivity and perception of danger in sufferers of trauma lead to a change in worldview.\textsuperscript{10} Kai Erikson observes of survivors of large-scale disasters such as floods that they feel they have become different because of the traumatic event. They now come to "an understanding that the laws by which the natural world has always been governed as well as the decencies by which the human world has always been governed are now suspended—or were never active to begin with" (Erikson 1995: 194). It would seem that Lu Xun had come to a similar understanding of the world: the numerous instances of inhumanity that he had witnessed probably led to his violent rejection of tradition (former decencies never having been active to begin with) and to his characteristic pessimism and negativity, which he sometimes attempted to suppress in order not to depress the younger generations. Survivors of traumatic events also come to view life very pessimistically, questioning all that has been taught them before. They sense "that the universe is not regulated by order and continuity, as clerics and schoolteachers have been telling us for so many centuries, but by change and a kind of

\textsuperscript{10} Kai Erikson (1995) explains this change in perception, pointing out feelings of susceptibility and constant anticipation of danger: "Traumatized people often come to feel that they have lost an important measure of control over the circumstances of their own lives and are thus very vulnerable. That is easy to understand. But they also come to feel that they have lost a natural immunity to misfortune and that something awful is almost bound to happen. ... People stripped of the ability to screen out signs of peril, naturally, are unusually vigilant and unusually anxious" (194-195).
natural malice that lurks everywhere" (195-196). In Lu Xun’s case, pessimism and the perception of malice “lurking everywhere” may be a sign simply of depression, but Lu Xun’s descriptions of his experience of Confucian tradition resemble narratives of trauma. This trauma inflicted by Confucianism appears clearly in his reminiscences, which are discussed in Chapter 3. A traumatic experience with Confucian tradition or of Chineseness in general may have caused him to question the order and continuity that previous generations had taken for granted. It caused him, perhaps, to feel helpless and paralyzed—fundamental characteristics of trauma.

It is the underlying assumption of this thesis that a perceived break in time between past and present led to the anxiety over the past that Lu Xun foregrounds in his writing. The perception of a break in time, according to Caruth in her explanation of Freud’s theory, also characterizes trauma:

What causes trauma, then, is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind’s experience of time.... The breach in the mind—the psyche’s awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. (Caruth 2000: 79-80)

Between the time of the traumatic event and the time of recovery from the event, the traumatized individual feels caught between two worlds: that of trauma and that of ordinary life. Van der Kolk and van der Hart explain that traumatized people often feel it is impossible to bridge these worlds (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 176). If the past event is not converted into a story, through language, to be neatly folded away in narrative memory, it still exists within the present. The sufferer lives in two different
stages of life at once—the traumatic past and the bleached present—but the past self stops developing, and the present self remains confused about how to integrate the past into an understanding of his life (177). For Lu Xun's narrators, the traumatic past to be left behind but ever reasserting itself against their wills, a past that is incompletely bridged to an equally discomfiting "bleached present," splits their experience of time and begs them to create a narrative. Only by incorporating that traumatic past into narrative memory can they begin to forget it, in order to move on.

Identity and the Oedipus complex

If the construction of a life narrative becomes difficult for someone experiencing a possibly traumatic break with the past, the construction of identity or sense of self must also become difficult. Since construction of memory and identity is a major issue in Lu Xun's autobiography, *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, psychoanalytical theories on identity formation and narrative of the self can give insight into a reading of this work, as well as others by Lu Xun.

In *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, Nicola King (2000) addresses the narration of traumatic memory and the creation of continuity across past and present selves through writing. Since narrative constructs identity, and since narratives are made up of memories, identity depends upon memory. Thus, King observes that someone experiencing memory problems, such as those triggered by trauma, will have difficulty creating a coherent sense of self. There is a paradox here, however, because coherence of self, according to Lacan, is never completely possible: "the human subject whose identity and sense of life-continuity have been profoundly disrupted by trauma might be in need
of the restoration of the kind of ‘wholeness’ which (particularly) Lacanian psychoanalysis calls into question” (King 2000: 4). King examines autobiographical and fictional texts to show how various authors create or have trouble creating these narratives to stabilize identity and recover from trauma.

Lacanian theory is especially useful for discussions of identity in Lu Xun’s work, particularly his autobiographical reminiscences, because it can address the Oedipal overtones of May Fourth iconoclasm, the emphasis on language (in the May Fourth promotion of the vernacular over the traditional, classical written language for literature), and nostalgia for the lost paradise of childhood (what is often configured as the Real in Lu Xun’s writing). This will be elaborated on in the third chapter, which analyzes the reminiscences in terms of identity-making.

**Remembering and Forgetting: The Example of the Preface to Nahan**

A good example of Lu Xun’s struggle with memory appears in the preface to the short story collection *Nahan*. Scholars writing on Lu Xun almost always begin with a reading of this preface, probably because it clearly explains his motivation to take up writing. Most of these studies, however, do not focus particularly on the problems of remembering and forgetting that Lu Xun foregrounds in this piece. This preface conveniently outlines many of the issues his writings address, and all of these relate to memory in some way or another.

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11 Nicholas Kaldis (1998) is the exception; he notes remembering and forgetting and analyzes Lu Xun’s preface using psychological ideas. While he traces remembering and forgetting in the preface much as I do below, and while I agree with his conclusion that Lu Xun wrote in order to rework traumatic experiences (7), he does not explain mnemonic problems as symptoms of trauma or discuss the possibility of hope for the future as matters of mourning or melancholia.
The preface begins by drawing attention to forgetting and remembering, lamenting that reminiscence is useless yet unavoidable. He explains that *Nahan* contains the residues of memory that he does not know how to eradicate:

As a young man I had my share of dreams too. Later on I forgot most of them but saw nothing in the least regrettable about that. To be sure, reminiscence can afford us pleasure, but it can occasionally make us lonely too, and keep the threads of our spirits attached to still other periods of loneliness that have long since gone by. In that case, what point can there possibly be in reminiscing? The trouble is that I have not been able to forget everything, and the part I *haven't* been able to forget is the source of this volume, *Cheering from the Sidelines*. (Lu 1990: 21)\(^\text{12}\)

Too much remembering leads to loneliness, Lu Xun says, and it keeps one attached to earlier periods of loneliness. Thus remembering can do no good to reduce loneliness, which is repeatedly mentioned in the preface as Lu Xun's main ailment. This inability to forget then causes a turn to the act of writing, as a way of enabling that forgetting. The preface explains the reasons for this turn to writing.

The preface offers a brief autobiography that traces Lu Xun's life from the illness and death of his father, “escape” from his home, a failed attempt to change China through writing, a period of disillusionment and intentional forgetting marked by immersion in studies of antiquity, to the adoption of writing once again. In describing the stage of retreat directly preceding his taking up writing again, he likens the period to a “drugging” during which he attempted to forget many things and get rid of the loneliness he felt when his dream of changing China through literature failed:

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\(^{12}\) Translations of *Nahan* that appear here are William Lyell's (Lu 1990).
That feeling of loneliness, on the other hand, was far too painful to bear. I simply had to find some way of shaking it off. I tried everything I could find to drug my soul, to make myself sink back into the depths of my people, to retreat into the recesses of antiquity. In the following years, I personally experienced or was witness to things that carried an even greater freight of sorrow and loneliness, things I don’t want to be reminded of, things whose very memory I would gladly have disappear into the earth together with my brain. And yet the drugging was, apparently, quite effective, for I no longer reacted to any of those things with the magnanimity and ardor of my youth. (25)

This “drugging” meant to sedate him, by making him forget those unmentioned “things,” most likely traumatic events in the turmoil of the young republic. While he claims the drugging was effective, he is still unable in the long term to forget what he wanted to forget.

Thus numbed and deeply immersed in his studies of antiquity, Lu Xun is confronted by a friend who asks him why he is copying old inscriptions. Lu Xun answers that there is no reason for it. His friend then requests that Lu Xun write something for their new journal. In answer, Lu Xun uses the image of people sleeping in an iron house—they will suffocate to death in any case, so should one wake them so that they die knowing their fate, or let them sleep and die peacefully? This story has come to stand for the main dilemma Lu Xun struggled against—should one write when it will not change anything? The friend responds that waking some of them may allow them to find a way to break out of the house:

“But since I’d awakened some of them, you can’t say that they would have absolutely no hope of finding some way to break out.”

Yes, he had his point. Though I was convinced to my own satisfaction that it wouldn’t be possible to break out, I still couldn’t dismiss hope entirely, for hope belongs to the future. My conviction that
such a thing would never happen wasn't sufficient grounds for entirely dismissing his hope that it might. (27)

In allowing his friend's hope for the future, Lu Xun seems to recuperate some of his own hope for the future and begins writing again, though he repeatedly expresses pessimism as to the efficacy of that writing. He likens his writing to "cheers from the sidelines" (nahan, the name of the collection, means "to shout loudly, cry out, cheer"),

13 encouraging other "bold warriors" to persevere despite his own loneliness and loss of dreams. He says he could not, however, do much about letting his pessimism color his cheering, besides adding a few notes of hope at the advice of these "bold warriors":

As to whether the sound of my cheers was heroic, woebegone, detestable, or even downright ridiculous—I couldn't really be bothered about that. Since I was cheering, however, I had to obey the orders of the bold warriors still out on the field. Therefore it often happened that I did not balk at twisting things a bit on their command.... At the time our frontline officers were in no mood to tolerate negativity. And for my own part, I had no desire to take the loneliness that still afflicted me and infect young people with it, young people who were still dreaming the same sweet dreams that I had dreamed when I was their age. (28)

Though Lu Xun does end up calling his stories "cheers from the sidelines," they are so not necessarily because they might express hope, but because they wrestle with the question of whether hope is possible at all. By not really being "bothered" about whether the sound of his cheers are "heroic, woebegone, detestable, or even downright ridiculous," Lu Xun suggests that the motivation for writing these stories does not lie in encouraging hope for those who would fight, but mainly to address his own loneliness (and therefore hopelessness) and inability to forget, both of which are intimately

13 The translation "cheers from the sidelines" is from William Lyell (Lu 1990).
connected, as he implies at the start of the preface. The "threads of his spirit," after all, seem still connected to other periods of loneliness (21), and it is in writing that the unforgettable might be forgotten.

It is through narration that memories can become packaged, in a sense, for more convenient handling. Lu Xun does this throughout his brief, autobiographical preface, delineating clearly his progression from a youth faced with the death of his father to failed fighter to new cheerleader. It is indeed significant that Lu Xun feels the need to narrate or mention traumatic events—the death of his father, the racism of (and internalization of that racism in) the famous slide incident, certain unspeakable events that he wishes to forget—in order to explain his decision to write. Trauma is, after all, the unresolved past that insists on remaining in the present, that which ties one's spirit to the past, preventing it from moving on into the future. Through writing, Lu Xun seeks to remember in order to forget haunting memories of the past, whether traumatic, repressed, or nostalgic, to purge that past—to render it as past—so that he, so that China, can finally enter a better era.

I take cues from the theories I mentioned above to examine Lu Xun's writing from a perspective that focuses on memory and a problematic relationship to the past. This scholarship has helped me think about what Lu Xun's writing might have done for him, but it has primarily given insight into what his writing does for his readers—how the

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14 The narration of memory has a violent effect upon memory, solidifying it and therefore making it more forgettable (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995; Caruth 1995). Trauma is marked by literal repetition, because a sufferer cannot comprehend the overwhelming event or package it in another form. Recovery, however, is marked by the ability to tell the story of the event differently every time. Caruth explains, "the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases, ... may mean the capacity simply to forget" (153-154).
reader, along with the author, focuses on the purpose of his writing, which involves a struggle with the past.

While some may question the use of Western literary and psychoanalytic theories to discuss non-Western literature, and while it is always rather dangerous to make claims on the psychology of any author, it is nevertheless useful to examine Lu Xun's work in this way to explain what is compelling about it. In analyzing his writing as attempts to work through trauma so that he and his nation can move on, I touch upon a theme that resonates with all who relate to that struggle, or who wish to understand more about that struggle with the past.
CHAPTER 1

NOSTALGIA AND BURYING THE “DEAD”: 
LU XUN’S VIEW OF THE PAST IN HIS SHORT STORIES

This thesis argues that a crisis of memory resulting from the rejection of tradition during the May Fourth period manifested itself in the writings of Lu Xun, often as a preoccupation with remembering or forgetting things from the past. The symptoms of this crisis of memory can be read clearly in several of Lu Xun’s short stories. In this chapter, I analyze three short stories that display such a preoccupation with the past: “Shexi” (Village opera), “Guxiang” (Hometown), and “Zai jiulou shang” (Upstairs in a wineshop). Using Richard Terdiman’s notion of the crisis of memory, Svetlana Boym’s work on nostalgia, and theories on trauma, readings of these stories show Lu Xun’s focus on memory and his struggle to work through this crisis of memory through narration.

As I set out in the introduction, Terdiman and Boym argue that a break with the past (usually felt after revolution or other rapid change) radically disrupts one’s concepts of history and memory. The past becomes forever lost and irrecoverable, often sparking nostalgia. If this break with the past further fails to improve the present situation, disillusionment with present conditions may lead to strengthened feelings of nostalgia and crisis. The three stories examined here represent varying responses to feelings of disillusionment with the present and grief for the loss of the past. “Village Opera,” a story about a childhood visit to the opera, is an example of the nostalgia and idealization
of the past that seem to occur easily in times of memory crisis. "Hometown" tells of a visit to the narrator's hometown, a sobering experience that confronts his idealized notions of his past. In "Upstairs in a Wineshop," a jaded intellectual returning to his hometown tries to justify his immersion in the past after giving up on trying to change society.

The short story form facilitates, in its self-contained space for creative and fictional narrative, a more or less complete treatment of a specific problem brought on by a lost, repressed, and haunting past. Narration, after all, allows a solidification or convenient packaging of what may otherwise be felt to be unmanageable or incomprehensible, as in recovery from trauma. These short stories in particular narrate various regressions into the past and suggest the consequences of these for the possibility of hope for the future. "Hometown" and "Upstairs in a Wineshop" offer two different responses that Lu Xun seems subtly to critique, despite a characteristically ambivalent attitude toward his narrators. In order to first clearly point out manifestations of the memory crisis in Lu Xun's short stories, however, a discussion of the highly nostalgic story "Village Opera" proves particularly useful.

"Village Opera": Can Anything Ever Live up to the Past?

Called by Theodore Huters "perhaps the most sentimental of all of Lu Xun's stories" (Huters 1984: 64), "Village Opera" (1922) indeed seems to stand apart from Lu Xun's other stories as predominantly a reminiscence. The narrator begins the story by discussing Chinese opera and his aversion to it, pointing out that he has only been to two performances, both highly unsatisfactory, in the twenty years before the time of this
account. He acknowledges, however, that he did enjoy the opera once, early in his life. This begins a long and detailed description of his childhood visit to the opera, which makes up the bulk of the story. Most striking is the narrator’s insistent feeling that his subsequent visits to the opera could not possibly measure up to this early visit, even when it becomes clear that this prior performance may not have been so wonderful as he remembers it. The narrative thus implies an idealization of the past and a belief in the inferiority of the present. The manner in which the narrator recounts this visit, drawing attention alternately to lapses of memory and moments of over-remembering, complicates the story and begs a critical reading of such nostalgia. Rather than dismissing this story as mere reminiscence, I point out its excesses of memory and nostalgia as manifestations of the memory problems facing intellectuals of the time.

Characteristically, Lu Xun employs an unreliable first-person narrator to foreground problems of perception and moral accountability.\(^1\) One noticeable unreliability in the narrator’s account appears in the contrasting characterizations of his childhood and recent visits to the opera. Recounting the recent visits, the narrator goes so far as to suggest twice in the story that he is not “fitted” to exist in the opera audience.\(^2\) He writes of the first visit, “…[T]hat opera must have been singularly bad—the only other explanation would be that I had somehow become ‘unfitted’ for existence in front of stages” (Lu 1990: 203). After describing the second visit he says, “Everything conspired and pushed me to the verge of a sudden enlightenment: I was not ‘fitted’ to

\(^{1}\) For more on Lu Xun’s deployment of unreliable narrators, see Huters 1984.

\(^{2}\) Here one also sees the influence of social evolutionary theory on Lu Xun to demonstrate the inappropriateness of past traditions (such as the opera) in the context of a new, modern China. See Pusey 1998 for more on the influence of evolutionary theory on Lu Xun.
exist in such an environment” (204). The crowded theater, the discomfort of sitting on bad benches for long periods of time next to rude, panting, chubby gentry, the constant barrage of singing and fighting, the “boom-boom clang-clang” (203-205) all seem to him a torture. Then he goes on to say, however, that there was indeed a time, during his childhood, that he had enjoyed the opera.

It becomes clear in the following narrative, however, that he never really liked Chinese opera itself, even during that one time he claims to have enjoyed himself. In the midst of describing this singular visit to the opera, he complains that “the famous acrobat didn’t do a single somersault” and likens a young dan’s voice to a rusty hinge (210). The audience had already petered out, the acrobats were running out of steam, there was no soup left, neither the Snake Spirit nor the acrobatic tiger ever made an appearance, the young sheng was not young, and an old dan’s interminable singing finally drove them away. The only amusement in the opera seems to have been the whipping of a clown, which got everybody’s attention and made the audience lively (an obvious and characteristic dig at the masses, as well as the narrator himself, for deriving pleasure and mirth only from scenes of torture). The only pleasant sound in the opera orchestra was the flute.

Only because of everything else that happened around that visit to the opera did he remember it as a pleasant experience—pleasant enough, in fact, for him to idealize it. First, in this memory he was already in “paradise”—his mother’s village. Visiting the village of his mother’s home was always a welcome respite, especially for a young master doomed to study the classics day in and day out, “from all that Percolate, percolate doth the rill / Distant, distant lieth the hill stuff” (206). What’s more, he had
friends to play with; they took him shrimp-fishing or draft-animal-grazing, and he was treated always as a privileged guest. Stealing, cooking, and devouring beans with the other kids after the opera turned out to be the highlight of the evening.

The amazing detail of his recollection of this visit to the opera also strikes the reader, especially in contrast to the relative lack of detail in which he remembers other things in the story. One cannot but notice how well his memory works at one description and how badly it works elsewhere, indicating the two memory dysfunctions of too much and too little memory mentioned by Terdiman as resulting from a crisis of memory (1993: 25). Lu Xun draws our attention to memory several times, pointing to it as a major theme in this story.

In the first few pages, he repeatedly confesses to forgetting certain details. At the beginning, in a description of the first disappointing visit to the opera, he mentions going off to "some theater or other"17 (202). When he discusses the Japanese book he read recently, in which the author remarks on the charm of an outdoor performance of Chinese opera (the only place it has charm, apparently), he says twice in one paragraph that he cannot recall the name of the book or the author: "A few days back I came across a Japanese book on Chinese opera. Unfortunately I can recall neither title nor author. ... (Unfortunately I’ve completely forgotten the title of that Japanese book)" (205). He could just as easily say "a theater" or "a Japanese book I read" without drawing attention to his forgetfulness; but he does point out his lapses of memory for a reason: to contrast his forgetting with his remembering.

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17 "Shenme yuan" (Lu 1995: 149).
In his description of the ideal visit to the opera, in contrast, details spring lyrically from every turn. On the boat trip to Zhao Village, where the opera is being held, his companions’ “talking, laughing, and shouting were accompanied by the rhythmic slap-slap of water against the bow....” He continues:

Beanfields of emerald green flashed by on our right and left. Blended in with the mists, the fresh fragrance of beans and the scent of floating river grasses swept gently across our faces. Moonlight shone softly through the haze. At a fair distance on either side, like dancing animals cast of iron, the rising-falling ridges of dull dark hills converged on a point far to our stern and galloped toward it. (209)

Such detailed descriptions of natural landscape, so rare in Lu Xun’s writings overall, mark his nostalgic writings of a lost home. In describing these memories of home in such detail, the narrator attempts to preserve them before they are lost entirely. Yet, how can he possibly recall this scene so vividly? Is he making it up? Do his subsequent disappointments with Chinese opera color his remembrance of this past? The conspicuous contrast between present and past raises questions about the nature of memory, implying that it necessitates interpretation and representation, that every time something is remembered, it is invented anew.

Memory and its “inventedness” are clearly problematized at the end of the story, when the narrator remarks, “As a matter of fact, down to this very day, I have really never eaten beans as good as those I had that night, nor have I ever seen such fine opera either” (245). As he remembers the beauty of that night, he clearly forgets that the opera

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18 Detailed descriptions of the characters’ surroundings almost never appear in stories like “Ah Q—The Real Story,” but they proliferate in nostalgic pieces like the prose poem “Xue” (Snow; discussed in the next chapter) or the reminiscence in which Lu Xun describes a garden from his childhood, “Cong baicao yuan dao sanwei shuwu” (From hundred-plant garden to three-flavor study; discussed in Chapter 3).
itself wasn’t very good. He has even already idealized the visit to the opera by the morning after, when he has the beans again: “But when I ate the beans, they weren’t nearly as good as the ones I’d had the night before” (245).

Such idealization often accompanies nostalgia in accounts of a past or childhood that seems lost forever. Leszek Drong (1999) explains in “Self-inscription and Self-oblivion” that Nabokov also made what he calls “idyllic excursions” into his childhood. He says of Speak, Memory that Nabokov urges his memory to speak of the past with an “almost pathological keenness.” Drong describes how the excursions lend themselves to idealization:

The return to his childhood, which is both topographically and chronologically distant, is an idyllic excursion into his native region of Russia. Irretrievably lost, it yields easily to idealization and seems to beckon hospitably to Nabokov’s recollections. His memory is pervaded by “a sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth.” ... The past revisits him unexpectedly; vivid recollections overwhelm his time-consciousness.... (Drong 1999: 118)

The reason for Nabokov’s vivid differentiation between present and past, Drong says, lies in the uncertain future he faces upon leaving his home of Vyra, Russia to go to America, the unknown. Nabokov allows his memories to appropriate the present and, accordingly, they project their climate—surprisingly mild and warm for their original continental location—onto the present condition of the writer. Nabokov allows the past to immobilize the present. His retrospection is photographic par excellence; the stills of Vyra check the flux of time that is carrying him further and further away from his childhood. (118)
By describing in “photographic” detail his memories of the past, he tries to counter the irreversibility of time and preserve his lost childhood.

Lu Xun’s narrator attempts to stop the flow of time away from the past in the same way. The extremes to which he goes, the detail with which he recalls this scene, and the lapses of memory about the nearer past and the present, seem neurotic at the very least. There is too much memory as well as too little (which Terdiman calls the two disorders in which disquiet about memory manifests itself). Lu Xun’s nostalgia for his past here also indicates apprehension about continuing into the uncertain future. For Nabokov and other émigré writers, that unknown future lies in another country that must become a new home, while for Lu Xun, it lies in the new republic whose path led precariously into the dark, or the modern, urban society so different from the traditional, rural community of the past. Feeling increasing disillusionment with present conditions and the failure of the 1911 revolution to deliver on promises of a brighter future, it seems that the “enlightenment” rhetoric of the May Fourth generation sometimes gave way to pessimism and nostalgia for the past.

Recalling a lost past in this story allows the narrator/author an escape into the remembered pleasures and freedoms of this childhood society (whether they are real or not). Maurice Halbwachs mentions the appeal of such escape in his book *On Collective Memory* (1992), remarking on the embeddedness of people in their present society and the relief from the present that memory provides. According to Halbwachs, the various oppressions of the present color the image of a past society, and we prefer the latter because it “does not impose itself on us and we are free to evoke it whenever we wish” (Halbwachs 1992: 50). The past society that exists in our nostalgic thoughts does not
imprison us as the present one does; we can choose when we want to go there and which parts we revisit (as long as we are not in the throes of trauma, of course). Halbwachs points out, "one can escape from a society only by opposing it to another society" (49), usually a past one. If a present society is especially bleak, as Lu Xun's seems to have been, an escape to a past paradise becomes even more appealing, and Lu Xun indulges in this excursion by writing on the past in such loving detail here. By emphasizing the lost beauty of the past, however, he points to the inadequacy of the present; thus his escape into nostalgia is an incomplete escape. One becomes even more aware of the narrator's (and/or Lu Xun's) dissatisfaction with the present and his anxiety over the unknown future.

Taking into account the problematics of memory in "Village Opera" opens up the story to being more than a simple reminiscence that betrays the narrator's dissatisfaction with the present. In drawing attention to problems of remembering and forgetting, from the declared absences of names (of the theater and the Japanese book, for example) to the contrastingly vivid details of childhood memory, the story seems to comment upon the inadequacy of memory to represent reality, and the invented nature of a childhood paradise. The narrator's almost annoying conviction in the present's inability to live up to the past, despite giving evidence to the contrary (in mistakenly insisting on his never having seen "such fine opera"), may signal a dangerous obliviousness to the seductive powers of nostalgia. The story seems to caution against such uncritical nostalgia by displaying it and focusing on the incompleteness and irresponsibility of escape offered by nostalgia.
True to the character of many of Lu Xun’s stories, however, this story offers another perspective. In this case, the narrator may be seen as oblivious to the dangers of nostalgia, yet great sympathy for the narrator’s situation is generated by the narrative. Far from simply saying that nostalgia is “bad,” the story’s strongest sentiment is in fact a longing for a return to the past. Because of this, the story presents a view of the past that conflicts with the accepted May Fourth view (namely, as harmful and cannibalistic).

While nostalgia and longing for the past seem to contradict the May Fourth project of rejecting tradition, the narrator’s account of this opera visit reveals a longing for an idealized past that is itself devoid of the traditions that he so vehemently opposes. His childhood paradise—his mother’s hometown—in fact remains untainted, at least in this account, by traditional Confucian education and values, as when he describes the village as a refuge from his normal studies of such classics as the Shi jing (the “Percolate, percolate doth the rill...” mentioned above). He finds that the society of the village is even organized differently:

Though the children were all just about my age, in the generational pecking order they ran all the way from uncle clear up to great-grandfather, for everyone in the village had my mother’s maiden name Lu, and thus we were all related. But more than that, we were all friends, so that even if we did get into a squabble and someone took a poke at “great-grandfather,” none of the villagers, young or old, would have thought of the term “generational insubordination,” a term they wouldn’t have recognized even if they had seen it, since ninety-nine out of a hundred of them didn’t know how to read in the first place. (Lu 1990: 206)

The villagers’ ignorance of such concepts as “generational insubordination” (fanshang) counters the negative May Fourth connotations of the past. In this pastoral paradise, people ignore damaging divisions between generations, they all belong to the same
family and behave as friends, and they enjoy freedom from the authority of the traditional texts so revered by conservatives of the time. This may indicate a yearning for a return to a sort of primordial, pre-Confucian, and utopian collective society.

Simultaneously longing for a lost, invented past and criticizing this very longing, the story shows one of the major dilemmas facing the May Fourth intellectual: the past should be rejected in exchange for a better, modern future, but the past refuses to go away quietly, precisely because parts of that past are longed for in attempts to counteract dissatisfaction with present conditions. The result in this and other writings by Lu Xun is a distinction between a pre-Confucian and a Confucian past, the former idealized and the latter demonized. The goal of the May Fourth intellectual is to reject Confucian tradition while putting forth a new vision of a modern Chinese future, yet this vision of the future might rely on ideal, nostalgic visions of a different past, resulting in a seeming contradiction. This story thus conveys an unease with nostalgia even as it indulges in it.

“Hometown”: The Possibility of Hope in Our Dreams of the Past

Another nostalgic return to a childhood paradise occurs in the story “Hometown” (1921). However, as the narrator also makes a literal return to his hometown (not just an imagined one), the return to the past becomes much more complicated than in “Village Opera.” Reality confronts nostalgic idealization in this story, disallowing the simpler imaginary return that appears in “Village Opera” and causing the narrator to experience much more discomfort upon recognizing his idealization of the past.

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19 Lu Xun’s disdain for the authority of Confucian texts, which he often describes as ruining childhood pleasures, appears more distinctly in his reminiscences, Zhaohua xishi (Dawn blossoms plucked at dusk; discussed in Chapter 3).
The narrative of "Hometown" is framed by the return to the narrator's hometown and his departure from it. During his short stay, he helps his mother finalize the move out of the old family compound. While there, he meets with a childhood friend, Runtu, whom he has not seen in several years. The meeting conjures up fond memories in the narrator, which are then dashed in the face of reality: Runtu has not aged well, symbolizing in his decrepitude the harsh reality of the present.

The town in general exudes this harsh reality and runs up against any idealizations of the past the narrator may be tempted to make. The story opens with the narrator's disenchantment upon return to his hometown, from which he has been "separated by over six hundred miles and more than twenty years" (Lu 1990: 89). Depressed by the bleak winter view of the village upon his approach, he protests: "No! This was not the countryside I had recalled time and again for more than twenty years. The area I remembered was far, far more lovely." The narrator then acknowledges the problem of idealizing his hometown, realizing that his memory of it may not be reliable. He admits to not really being able to call up detailed images of the lovely hometown he imagines he remembers:

And yet, had you demanded that I summon its beauties from the recesses of memory or catalog its various excellences, no concrete image would have appeared in my mind's eye and I would have been unable to reply. My "hometown" was probably nothing more than what lay before me. "This is probably what it really was like," I told myself. (89)

He then posits that it may only appear depressing because of his own state of mind—he has come home to say goodbye to it, fetch his mother, and move out of the old family compound.
The main focus of the story is on the childhood friend, Runtu, who has changed dramatically. The disenchantment he experiences with his hometown repeats itself in the disappointment he feels when he meets Runtu again. When his mother mentions Runtu for the first time during the narrator’s return, a beautiful image suddenly flashes before him:

...a round moon hanging against a blue black sky, beneath it a stretch of sandy ground planted with emerald green watermelons stretching as far as the eye could see, and standing in the midst of all those melons a twelve-year-old boy, a silver ring around his neck, a pitchfork in his hand. Suddenly and with all his might the boy stabs at a zha,\(^{20}\) but the crafty animal makes a lightning turn, runs back between his legs, and makes good its escape. (90-91)

The narrator then delves into an account of how he had met Runtu, things they had done together and said to each other during their brief time together as boys. He explains that the flood of memories triggered by his mother’s mention of Runtu allows him to return to the home he thinks he has lost: “Now, when my mother said that Runtu might drop by, memories of my boyhood suddenly came alive again as though illumined by a brilliant flash of lightning. For a fraction of a second, I even seemed to recapture that beautiful homeland I thought I had lost” (93-94).

When he finally sees Runtu again, however, he feels immediate disappointment. His detailed description of the present Runtu contrasts greatly with the preceding account of the Runtu he remembers:

Although I recognized him right off, he was not at all the Runtu who lived in my memory. He seemed twice as tall now. The round and ruddy face

\(^{20}\) The zha was a badger-like animal indigenous to the region (note 2 in Lyell’s translation, Lu 1990: 91).
of yesteryear had already turned pale and grey, and it was etched with deep wrinkles. The rims of his eyes were swollen and red just like his father's. I knew that most farmers who worked close to the sea got that way because of the wind. He was wearing a battered old felt hat, and his cotton clothes were so thin that he was shivering. His hands held a paper package along with his pipe. They were not the smooth and nimble hands that I remembered. Now they were rough, clumsy, and as cracked as pine bark. (96)

Runtu had become "a lifeless wooden figure" (97-98), plagued by the hardships of farm life and reduced to uttering mere formalities—nothing like the Runtu of the past who animatedly told stories of collecting seashells and catching birds and mysterious watermelon-eating zha. The great difference between the child Runtu and the adult Runtu makes the narrator's return home even more disappointing. Rantu seems to have stood as a link to the past, a link to collective memory and the village life that was disappearing in modern times. This link, however, didn't turn out to amount to much in the end.

The extent of the disillusionment the narrator experiences can be measured in the disparity between the "before" and "after" images he has of Runtu. The first is a magical, idyllic scene alive with color—a blue-black sky, emerald green watermelons, a silver ring—and full of action as the boy stabs at the zha with his pitchfork. The second is a static, colorless reality—a picture of a battered, thin, and brittle man.

What is striking about the first "memory" is that it is not a memory at all; it is an idealized image of Runtu invented by the narrator based on the stories Runtu told him. He has actually never even seen a zha, only imagines what it would look like according to Runtu's stories. In his description of a conversation he'd had with Runtu as a child, the narrator says: "At the time I didn't know what sort of thing a zha was to begin with—
still don’t as a matter of fact—but somehow I felt that it must look like some sort of little dog and be fierce as all get-out” (93). Neither has he visited Runtu’s watermelon patch by the sea, which is described so vividly here. In addition, his account of childhood adventures with Runtu lack the visual details present in his “memory” of the watermelon field. Describing the first day he met Runtu, the narrator even admits forgetting what they talked about: “Before half the day was out, we had actually gotten to know each other quite well. I can’t recall what we talked about—I only remember how excited and happy Runtu was” (92). None of the narrator’s “real” memories then, let alone the real thing, can even compare to his invented image with all its vividness. After all, at the beginning of the story he cannot even describe the remembered loveliness of his hometown. Unlike in “Village Opera,” the memory of the narrator fails to enable a convincing journey into the past, and by offering up only this invented image that masquerades unsuccessfully as a memory, he draws attention to a perhaps unfounded nostalgia. This dream image that pretends to be memory may actually hold a real remembered affect, but the obvious investedness of the image points to the powerful interference of the present in memories of the past.

As if to emphasize the inadequacy of his memory, he inserts another account of memory failure into the story. Second Sister Yang, the “Beancurd Beauty” whom the narrator has forgotten, wreaks havoc upon him, literally haunting him by hanging around the house trying to steal their things, as if in revenge for his forgetting her. He describes her negative reaction to his inability to remember her: “She looked at me with utter disdain and the kind of smile that one might wear upon discovering a Frenchman who
had never heard of Napoleon or an American who didn’t know who Washington was” (Lu 1990: 95).

Despite the narrator’s deep disillusionment, however, he abruptly transitions to a positive note. Becoming disenchanted with his hometown, coming face to face with reality, and realizing that his memories are inventions seem to help him put the past behind him, without regret. Of course, he says, he feels a melancholy and an isolation that comes from breaking with the past and with the memory that would bind all together, “a wall that was squeezing the breath out” of his body (99), but in it lie, of all things, hope.

As his nephew and Runtu’s son—those of the next generation—wish to stay and play together, the narrator expresses hope for their future, saying to himself:

“...I hope they’ll never live like my generation with everyone cut off from everyone else. And yet, just to keep that from happening, I wouldn’t want them to have this vagabond life of mine, any more than I’d want them to have Runtu’s barren one. Still less would I want them to muddle through the hedonistic lives other people lead. There ought to be a new life for them, a life none of us has ever known.” (99)

The feeling of isolation seems to result precisely from the modern condition of lonely existence in urban centers, separated from others, but the narrator manages to have hope for the future. He realizes that his hope does not differ very much from the superstitions Runtu believes and that he had disdained earlier. His hopes differ only in that they are for the more distant future, “somewhere far off in the murky distance” (99). Then, in a rather unexpected conclusion, he says:
“Hope isn’t the kind of thing that you can say either exists or doesn’t exist,” I thought to myself. “It’s like a path across the land—it’s not there to begin with, but when lots of people go the same way, it comes into being.” (100)

Fittingly, he concludes with this passage after imagining/remembering again the emerald green plot of land under a deep blue sky and the round, golden moon. Not a real memory after all, it is rather a dream-image, holding both the past and the future.

In the conclusion to Present Past, Terdiman recalls Carlos Fuentes’ idea of rearticulating memory—“remembering the future, inventing the past”—in discussing Freud’s conclusion to The Interpretation of Dreams. Terdiman quotes Freud:

Dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been molded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past. (Quoted in Terdiman 1993: 358)

The narrator’s versions of the past, the made-up memories and the perfected representations of the past, are also dreams for the future. In this way, hope is expressed yet seems tenuous precisely because it is based on nostalgia for the past. The narrator hopes for his nephew and Runtu’s son to live connected to others, as people were in his vision of the pre-modern past; he wishes that they retain their lively, childish spirits and continue their play, as embodied in his invented image of the child Runtu, instead of being beaten down by life’s injustices. He calls his vision of “a new life” for the next generation “a life none of us have ever known,” yet he reverts to his “memories” of his
childhood friendship with Runtu for an image of this life none of them have ever known. Thus his hopeful vision is both known and unknown (or knowable and unknowable).

Whether this story actually conveys a truly hopeful message is debatable. Huters (1984) argues that the abruptness of the narrator’s hopeful feeling and its coinciding with his departure from the town render any message of hope unconvincing (63-64). While I agree that the story comes across as more pessimistic than optimistic, I believe the tenuousness of the hope expressed here comes mainly from the seemingly unreal visual embodiment of this hope—an image that uncomfortably echoes the kind of nostalgia that also troubles “Village Opera.” Just like the narrator of “Village Opera,” the narrator of this story is not fully conscious of his nostalgic idealization of his childhood—how much he is melancholically attached to the lost object—making the tone of the story, again, ambivalent.

“Upstairs in a Wineshop”: Re-burying the “Dead”

While the tone of a few of Lu Xun’s stories (such as “Hometown”) might allow for a small possibility of hope for the future, the author more often tells of failure of hope in his short stories. Lu Xun’s main characters are sometimes jaded intellectuals who have lost hope and given up on trying to effect change in society (as in “New Year’s Sacrifice” and “Upstairs in a Wineshop”). In a sense, these stories can also be interpreted as cautionary tales against this kind of jadedness, especially in light of sentiments Lu Xun expresses in the preface to his short story collection Nahan: apologetic awareness of his

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21 His famous short story “Diary of a Madman,” in which the diary’s author comes to the realization that tradition is damaging Chinese society but later becomes rehabilitated into society and dismisses this “mad” revelation, also carries this failure as one of its main themes.
pessimism and a professed desire not to infect the younger generation with such negativity. These stories describe the problematic situation of the intellectual during this time—a contradictory attitude toward the past and the notion of "home"—and how this position may very well lead to the disillusionment and hopelessness that Lu Xun himself claims often to have felt (in the preface to Nahan, for instance).

Two main characters people “Upstairs in a Wineshop” (1924)—the first-person narrator and Lü Weifu, the narrator’s former colleague and a rebellious firebrand turned soft. The two happen to meet in a wineshop in their hometown in the South, years after they have last seen each other. The story Weifu tells the narrator during this chance encounter constitutes the center of “Upstairs in a Wineshop.” Weifu tells of returning to his hometown to complete two tasks at the request of his mother: to rebury the remains of his younger brother, which are in danger of slipping into a river whose banks are receding, and to deliver a velvet flower ornament to the daughter of an old neighbor.

When pressed by the narrator to explain what he is doing in the town, Weifu begins by saying his tasks don’t “amount to anything,” a disclaimer that gets repeated throughout his narration:

“Just to do some more stuff that doesn’t amount to anything.” He downed a cup of wine with a single gulp, took several drags on his cigarette, and

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22 He writes near the end of his preface: “Since I was cheering, however, I had to obey the orders of the bold warriors still out on the field. Therefore it often happened that I did not balk at twisting things a bit on their command: in ‘Medicine’ I have a wreath appear out of nowhere on Yu Er’s grave, and in ‘Tomorrow’ I don’t go so far as to say that Sister Shan never did see her son in her dreams. At the time our frontline officers were in no mood to tolerate negativity. And for my own part, I had no desire to take the loneliness that still afflicted me and infect young people with it, young people who were still dreaming the same sweet dreams that I had dreamed when I was their age” (Lu 1990: 28).
opened his eyes a bit wider. “Doesn’t amount to a darned thing really, but I suppose it won’t do any harm to tell you about it.” (Lu 1990: 246)\textsuperscript{23}

He then describes the task of moving his brother’s grave. A few days prior, upon digging up the remains, Weifu finds that there is nothing left of his brother’s body among the shreds of rotting wood from the coffin. The two options he sees open to him are to abandon the project altogether, since there is no body left to slip into the river anyway, or to rebury some of the dirt, which would stand for his brother, so that he can lie and put his mother’s mind to rest. In choosing the latter, he knows that he has turned into “a man who goes through the motions of living without taking anything seriously” (248) and whose friends might feel ashamed of him, yet he claims not to care.

Weifu had tried to reject the past in his earlier, rebellious behavior, but he cannot leave it behind. He remains attached to the past—here, to a memory of his little brother that is fictionalized from the suggestions of his mother, who tells Weifu his brother was “a lovable little guy who got along very well” with him (246). He ends up actually wanting to dig up the grave “to have a look at the dead bones of the little brother who had once been so close” to him (247), believes this invented, falsified memory. When he finds nothing there, \textit{nothing in the past}, he denies this nothingness and decides to lie to his mother and to himself (telling her that he had re-interred his brother’s remains instead of some handfuls of dirt). Weifu has already forsaken the present, which to him is meaningless, because of the failures of revolution to change society. He then reverts to

\textsuperscript{23} Throughout their conversation, Weifu repeats a phrase that belies his depression: he says he does things that don’t “amount to anything” (246), or he asks rhetorically, “What’s it all amount to anyway?” (253, 254). Through this repetition, Weifu attempts to convince the listener of the futility of changing anything and to justify his continued inaction and regression into the past (teaching the classics instead of modern subjects, dwelling on his memories of the past).
the past, deceiving himself and forgetting that he has found nothing in the past, teaches the classics he once repudiated, and gives up on trying to change anything.

His act of reburying the “remains” of his little brother becomes a powerful symbol of what is at work here in this story. An attempt at reburial implies the failure of a first burial. The failure of the second burial—because there is in effect nothing to bury this time around—thus points to the difficulty or impossibility of attaining closure. Neither attempt succeeds in preserving what Weifu and his mother want to preserve—the dead brother now lost except in their (or rather the mother’s) memory of him.

A burial is a preservation of something that is lost or about to be forgotten (by matter of course and in order to move on with life). Terdiman describes attempts to preserve the past (such as the construction of history, similarly a type of tomb) as concealing a “dispossession of the past” (Terdiman 1993: 31). 24 By going through with the burial, Weifu tries to preserve something he has “lost” forever—his relationship with this dead brother. The reburial, however, fails; there is nothing to bury but the dirt found in place of his brother’s body. This failure to find anything in the grave symbolizes Weifu’s inability to retrieve the memory of his (supposedly) beloved brother, which is an inability to confirm the existence of his brother at all. He cannot mourn properly what he feels he should mourn, precisely because he may not feel a real loss. This would explain his guilt surrounding the forgetting of this brother and his depressed feelings—he has not fulfilled what is expected of him. Having found nothing in the past, he should take on the responsibility this entails, namely, to accept the past as past and move on. Yet for some

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24 Terdiman’s discussion of preservation of the past as dispossession of the past derives from Pierre Nora’s work on lieux de memoire (Nora 1996).
reason he still wishes to remain in the past, as if melancholically attached not to the lost object (the brother) but to lost memory.

Contrasting with Weifu’s forgetting of his brother is his mother’s hyper-sensitive remembrance of her son. A burial that attempts to remember and preserve something, also allows one to forget that same thing; forgetting must precede remembering, after all. Weifu goes through the motions of reburying the past rather than leaving the disintegrating grave alone mainly to placate his mother, whose memory is too good and whose past haunts her. In pretending to her to bury his brothers’ remains, he yearns to alleviate what could be considered her trauma. She is practically hysterical with anxiety that the past will be lost forever in a river, neurotic in her remembrance of her son, eyes tearing up every time she thinks of him. Through burying him, she may mourn him successfully and begin to forget some of her sorrow. Weifu, who cannot relinquish his traditional role as the dutiful son, as Yü-sheng Lin (1979) argues, as well as the role of the dutiful brother, cannot shake off the feelings of guilt over having forgotten his brother and at failing in the reburial.25

Discussing his mother’s almost pathological memory, Weifu marvels at the memory of old people. “Funny what long memories old people have,” he says of his mother (Lu 1990: 249).26 Another thing she remembers in great detail concerns their old

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25 Lin sees Weifu’s conflict as tension between two incompatible moral commitments: iconoclastic rejection of tradition, on the one hand, and a traditional devotion or responsibility to his relationship with his mother, on the other (rather than an attachment to China’s past in general) (1979: 147-149). Agreeing with this, I argue further that instances of forgetting and remembering in Weifu’s interpretation may constitute violations of one or the other of these commitments.

26 Halbwachs remarks in On Collective Memory that because old people have the leisure to think of the past more often than the younger generations do, they are often expected to act as guardians of the past and tradition (Halbwachs 1992: 48). Here, it appears the narrator sees his mother as the guardian of memory and thus of truth. Since he has no memory in this case, he defers to hers.
neighbor and his daughter Ah-shun, whose desire for a red velvet flower to wear in her hair seems stuck in the memory of Weifu’s mother. Weifu’s mother remembers that Ah-shun once had wanted an artificial flower and had gotten a beating over it. She requests that Weifu buy one and bring it to Ah-shun. Weifu takes up the task his mother suggests, and in doing something for this girl a passion reawakens in him. His memory of visiting her family just the year before had made him wish, “for her sake, the world would take a turn for the better,” before he completely dismissed such dreams again and “put her completely out of mind” (251).

It is significant that Weifu feels energized, something he has not felt in a long time, to do this for Ah-shun. He seems to want to do it to alleviate her trauma, to alleviate some feminine trauma. In fact, Ah-shun has had a hard life, having to take care of the household after her mother’s death. She is also victimized by the men around her—her father beats her for being sad over not having a velvet flower to wear in her hair, and an uncle pesters her for money, then leads her to believe that her husband-to-be is undesirable, which precipitates her untimely death. Having no further hope in her fate or her future, she gives in to her disease. The pattern that the narrator displays is a desire to help (female) others mourn (since he himself cannot). His new energy may come also from the discovery that he does in fact remember some things. He recalls and recounts a time that Ah-shun had given him some buckwheat cereal to eat, and he thus feels motivated to help her.

Ah-shun’s desire for the red velvet flower shows that she, too, is caught up in a memory crisis. Why yearn for artificial reproductions of red flowers, which, one learns
from the numerous mentions of them in this story, are so abundant in that region that they
even bloom in the winter? Because a reproduction is dead already, it cannot die, as real
flowers do. Significantly, both women characters, Weifu’s mother and Ah-shun, appear
to wish for some form of eternal preservation—the mother for her son, Ah-shun more
trivially for a flower. Undertaking both these projects with a rare enthusiasm, Weifu also
exhibits a preoccupation with keeping the past alive in the present, something that seems
to be a priority for everyone in the story.

When Weifu finds out from yet another old woman with a good memory, Granny
Laofa, that Ah-shun has died, Weifu finds himself in another dilemma—what to do with
the velvet flowers he has bought. To placate his mother again and put her mind to rest,
he decides to give the flowers to Ah-shun’s sister and to lie to his mother that she
received them happily. His inability to deal with either the present or the past manifests
itself in such decisions—to go on living as if nothing had ever changed, to prolong the
past into the future.

Weifu is thus mired in the past, both involuntarily and voluntarily. The trauma
experienced by the women in his life causes their suffering and excesses of remembering
(the mother of her son, Ah-shun of her uncle’s words, and traditional patriarchal
oppression), but this also requires him to “remember” as well, whether or not he really
can. He also becomes aware of his unfilial forgetting of his brother; his unconscious
rejection of the past creates a great sense of guilt for having gone against the traditional
values that are most likely still alive in the mind of his mother.

In addition to his haunting loss of memory, his past as a rebel fighting to overturn
tradition also haunts him, causing him to feel the need to explain to the narrator over and
over his drastic retreat into those same traditions. His voluntary retreat into tradition, signaled by his teaching of the classics rather than the modern subjects of mathematics and English, is Weifu’s reaction to the nostalgia that arises from disillusionment with the present and hopelessness about future progress. Such nostalgia, seen in both “Village Opera” and “Hometown” above, ties together the two characters of this story, Weifu and the narrator.

The narrator begins “Upstairs in a Wineshop” by telling his own story, but it is interrupted by Weifu’s story and, gradually, even seems to merge with Weifu’s. The narrator returns to his hometown for a visit, feeling nostalgic, but soon becomes disenchanted with it, because he finds himself a stranger to it, “transformed into a newcomer” (243). He goes to a familiar wineshop, where, to his relief, almost everything is the same as it was previously. After a while, though, he realizes he is looking at it through very different eyes: “to forgetful eyes that had become accustomed to the scenery of north China, there were things in that courtyard well worth marveling at.” He notices the bright red flowers blooming in the snow and the nature of the snow itself in comparison to that of the North.27

The moist snow of the South clings to things—it anchors itself—while the dry snow of the North flies up like dust and creates a white mist, drifting aimlessly. This implies that the past is clear while the present/future is opaque—the dry, flying snow

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27 This is also the subject of the prose poem “Snow” (in Lu 2003), discussed in the next chapter.
creating a kind of screen. In the South, the snow is alive—red flowers stand out like fire from it, birds still live in it—but in the North, the ground is frozen and barren. If the South is home and the past, then the past can be seen as alive in the present, in representations of the past in memory, while the present/future sits still and barren. On contemplating this, however, the narrator realizes that he can no longer really call the South his home:

It occurred to me that while it was true the north wasn’t my home, the south wasn’t my home anymore either, for I was treated as a guest here too. No matter how the dry snow of the north scattered in the wind, no matter how the moist snow of the south clung to things—none of that had anything to do with me. (244)

No matter what he knew of either the past or the present, neither would be “home” to him.

When Weifu interrupts his telling of the reburial of his brother to comment on the snow, he expresses surprise at the strangely alien quality of the Southern winter, in which nothing seems to die: “When would you ever see anything like this up north—flowers blooming in all that snow, the ground underneath not even frozen?” (247).

The flowers recur as a theme just as the snow does. In addition to causing Weifu to interrupt himself, the flowers even loudly interrupt him mid-sentence all on their own, just as he tells his story about Ah-shun, like a comment upon the artificial flowers he speaks of buying for her:

28 The contrast between “clinging” and “drifting” snow is also a contrast between the cohesiveness of traditional society in the past and the lack of such in the modern society of the present. The prose poem “Snow” elaborates this thought by saying that in the past the snowflakes stuck together and could be molded together into bodies like that of a snow Buddha, while the snow of the North is “lonely snow” (Lu 2003: 40).
“I hadn’t known that she’d once gotten a beating over an artificial velvet flower, but hearing my mother bring it up, my experience with the buckwheat cereal came back to mind and the memory of it made me especially diligent on Ah-shun’s behalf. I searched the town over in Taiyuan without finding one. It wasn’t until I got to—"

Shish! Outside the window, an accumulation of snow that had been weighing upon a camellia branch, bending it down into an arc, now slid to the ground as the branch stretched itself straight out, showing off its dark glistening leaves and blood-red blossoms. (251)

The tree and its flowers are personified in the story. The branches of the tree “stretch” themselves and “show off,” and they are described earlier as “passionate and proud, seeming to scorn the wanderer’s willingness to have ventured so far from home” (243). In this sense they actively implore both the narrator and Weifu to pay attention to them, to acknowledge that they are alive, to see their resistance to death or forgetting. As they scorn the wanderers for going “so far from home,” they imply that it is neither easy nor advisable to run away from the memories or the problems of the past; the past will reappear and demand attention just as they do.

Through all of these themes, the story focuses on problems of remembering and forgetting. As with other of Lu Xun’s stories dealing with nostalgia, characters apparently suffer from failures to either forget or remember things. Weifu’s forgetting of his brother, for instance, causes him to feel guilt, and he then seems to suffer from the “loss” of the memory of his brother—a double loss, of the brother as well as of the memory of the brother. Paradoxically, in failing to remember things from the past, characters in this story find they cannot move on. Here, Weifu concentrates on his mother’s inability to forget her son or Ah-shun (and on Ah-shun’s inability to forget the slurs of her uncle or escape tradition’s patriarchal victimization of women), in effect
attempting to distract attention away from his own inabilities to let go of the past, perhaps even blaming these women for not letting him let go of it. By failing to help his mother or Ah-shun grieve their losses effectively, he finds he cannot mourn properly for himself either. Almost in punishment he grieves endlessly for memory in a kind of melancholia. His own losses or lacks, however, seem to remain hidden behind other people’s losses, though his own most likely plague him and cause his preoccupation with the past.

Likewise unclear up to this point in the story are losses or lacks the narrator himself suffers. He gives hints of alienation expressed in his perception of the town, and Weifu’s remarks reveal the fact that the narrator had once also engaged in iconoclastic activity, but the narrator from early on shifts focus off himself onto Weifu. His narration is replaced by Weifu’s, which itself obscures Weifu’s own history by focusing on the traumatic stories of women in his life. In these repeated transfers, both the narrator and Weifu appear to bypass their own processes of grieving for the past. Narration can help one to get over some trauma or loss, but both these intellectuals narrate not their own losses or traumas, but those of others, and in particular, feminized others.29 The narrator in particular draws attention to this avoidance mechanism when, in the abrupt conclusion, he describes himself as feeling “refreshed”:

Weifu and I walked out of the wineshop together, but since his hotel lay in the opposite direction to mine, we parted at the door. As I walked off toward the Luosi, with the cold wind and snowflakes blowing against my face, I felt refreshed. Judging from the color of the sky, it was already dusk. Along with the surrounding buildings and streets, I too became woven into a pure white and ever-shifting web of snow. (254)

29 Weifu appears “feminized” in that he has no way of alleviating his mother’s trauma nor of saving Ah-shun, and in turning to the feminized Confucian tradition he has lost a revolution-oriented masculinity.
By neglecting to process Weifu’s narrative, simply stepping outside, feeling refreshed, and disappearing into a blur of snow, the narrator fails to recognize the significance of the story, which is the importance of mourning a loss properly, or more accurately, the difficulty or even impossibility of proper mourning for something that seems at times not to have been “lost” at all.

Analyzing the story’s ending, Marston Anderson (1990) likewise explains the narrator’s refreshed feeling as an avoidance of responsibility, in terms of unhealthy purgation through catharsis (88-89). Anderson argues that Lu Xun criticized the mechanics of realist narrative through this kind of ironic narrator, showing a refusal to allow the reader to feel “refreshed” and leave the story undigested, as these narrators do. In agreement with this assessment, I argue further that the significance of this story is not only that Weifu demonstrates a contradictory attachment to traditional moral values of “cherishing old ties,” as Lin argues, but that this tension is primarily a question of mourning a past that does not go away, whether the haunting is done by real losses of loved ones or by disconcerting losses of memory.

In this story, the act of reburial symbolizes an attempt to grieve a past that is both dead (over-forgotten by some) and alive (over-remembered by others). The reburial fails to allow an overcoming of real traumatic losses and fails to preserve memory. Lu Xun leaves us wondering, where are the corpses? The ghosts? Are they dead or living, and in what sense?
Conclusion
In this chapter, I have attempted to point out symptoms of a memory crisis, embodied as problems of remembering and forgetting, in three of Lu Xun’s short stories, and to show that the stories present responses to this crisis. In all three stories, regression into the past is the immediate response to disillusionment with the present and hopelessness about future progress. In “Village Opera,” regression as nostalgic memory is critiqued as dangerous and imaginary yet hard to resist, because aspects of the remembered past may be desirable. In “Hometown,” this nostalgia is further shown to be mistaken for “real” memory, but it may be the only way to formulate hopeful visions of the future at a time when the future is otherwise felt to be unimaginable. In “Upstairs in a Wineshop,” regression into the past is criticized as cowardly but understandable, because the task of resolving the problem of an unmanageable and ever-present past is exceedingly daunting (even when it is not present, as in the loss of memory). In this way Lu Xun’s stories explore the possibility of mourning something that cannot be mourned (if it is not lost or dead, or too lost or dead), and therefore, they also explore the possibility of hope for future progress within a project that demands a rejection of tradition.
CHAPTER 2
INTOLERABLE IN-BETWEEN-NESS
ANXIETY AND TRAUMA IN LU XUN’S WILD GRASS

In the previous chapter, I read three of Lu Xun’s short stories as exhibiting problems of memory after a break with the past. This crisis of memory is ultimately, in his stories, a problem of mourning a past that should have, but does not feel like it has, passed. Linked to the possibility of mourning this “lost” past is the possibility of hope for the future, which is why hopefulness is so often an issue in scholarship on Lu Xun’s writing.

In this chapter, I look at some of Lu Xun’s prose poetry collected in Yecao (Wild grass, 1924-1926) as also displaying these same problems of memory, and thus as trying to answer problems of mourning and hope. Formally, however, the prose poems do not attempt closed narratives that comment almost didactically on responses to the modern crisis of memory (as the short stories do), so much as express the wishes, anxieties, and fears associated with this memory crisis. In particular, the prose poems of Wild Grass focus on a fear of “living death,” which represents the limbo of being in the present, caught “in-between” the past (often seen as remembered or forgotten too much) and the future (often seen as reached by a healthy forgetting). Such feelings of “in-between-ness” are common in post-traumatic stress. I will therefore examine the “in-between-ness” in Lu Xun’s prose poems as an effect of trauma experienced by the poet/Lu Xun, and perhaps by many May Fourth intellectuals.

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Wild Grass as Dreams

Scholars on Lu Xun characterize many of the prose poems collected in Wild Grass as highly symbolic expressions of fear and anxiety, noting how the poems seem to be products of the sub- or unconscious, akin to dreams. Indeed, many of the poems in Wild Grass are cast as accounts of dreams; seven consecutive poems, starting with “Si huo” (Dead fire) and ending with “Si hou” (After death), all begin with the words “Wo mengjian ziji...” (I dreamed I...).

While the other poems do not take the forms of records of dreams, several still possess dreamlike qualities in their brevity and fragmentariness, their symbolism, or their reverie. T. A. Hsia notes the latter’s similarity to dreams: “Even pieces not marked out as dreams have that nightmarish quality of inconsequence and the shock of misplaced reality. In The Wild Grass, therefore, Lu Hsün glanced into the unconscious” (Hsia 1968: 152). Leo Ou-fan Lee takes this further by pointing out the likelihood of Lu Xun’s intention to simulate manifestations of the subconscious in Wild Grass, noting the influence of the theories of Kuriyagawa Hakuson on Lu Xun at the time the poems were written (Lee 1985: 14). David Pollard explains this influence in his introduction to the bilingual edition of Wild Grass: “The nearest inspiration, or perhaps we should say authorization, for Wild Grass was Kuriyagawa’s The Symbols of Anguish, which Lu Xun translated in the autumn of 1924. Drawing on the theories of Bergson and Freud, the Japanese critic posited that ‘the root of literature and art is the anguish and frustrations created by the repression of the life force, and the means of expression is symbolism in the broad sense’” (Pollard 2003: xxvi). Lu Xun’s translation of and familiarity with Kuriyagawa’s

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work would therefore suggest that Lu Xun desired to express through such symbolic poetry something repressed. Though Lu Xun apparently found fault with some aspects of Freudian theory,\textsuperscript{30} he still seems to have been fascinated by dream interpretation and psychoanalytic theory and to have agreed with the basic ideas behind the work of Kuriyagawa.

This interest in the repressed manifested itself in the poems of *Wild Grass*, which often take the form of dreams and exhibit neuroses, driven by wish fulfillment or fear and anxiety stemming from trauma. Within these poems lies the poet’s entrapment in an intolerable “in-between-ness”: between past and future, life and death, tradition and modernity.\textsuperscript{31}

The form of prose poetry itself embodies this in-between-ness, being neither prose nor poetry, or both at once. Poetry, the exalted genre in the Chinese literary tradition, usually utilized the erudite, classical written language, while prose was increasingly written in the vernacular. Combining the two in prose poetry then creates a sense of being in-between the two literary traditions as well as, perhaps, being between the past and the future. Richard Terdiman notes that in the Western tradition, the new form of the prose poem appropriated prose in an experiment “to see how far it might be possible to

\textsuperscript{30} It is noted in a translation of Lu Xun’s preface to *Old Tales Retold* that Lu Xun had been interested in Freudian psychoanalytic theory but disagreed with it in the 1933 essay “Listening to a Talk on Dreams” (Ting shuo meng, Lu 1991) (Lu 1961).

\textsuperscript{31} William Lyell uses the term “in-between” to describe Lu Xun and other intellectuals of his time, calling them “In-between intellectuals” (1976: 161-196). He uses this word to refer to the position of these intellectuals as culturally and temporally between tradition and modernity; having been educated in both the classic Confucian texts and in modern, Western learning, they also lived during the transition from “old” China to “new” China (162). I use the term “in-between-ness” here to refer to this same straddling of two different worlds—past and future—newly demarcated by the break with the past that intellectuals had been making around the May Fourth period, but I also point out in *Wild Grass* anxiety over being between death and life (often expressed as fear of living death) as symbolic of anxiety over the uncertainty of the present.
transform our own memory of language” (Terdiman 1993: 47). Lu Xun’s prose poetry also engages in a similar experiment, appropriating the poetic genre of the literary tradition, with a view to erasing the reader’s memory of both poetry and previous prose and creating something new.\(^{32}\)

By examining his prose poetry, in effect psychoanalyzing the products of the poet’s sub- or unconscious, one sees the problems facing Lu Xun and perhaps other Chinese intellectuals of the time, and possibly of all who are caught “in-between” tradition and modernity. Nicholas Kaldis also attempts a kind of “psychoanalysis” through close readings of these prose poems in his dissertation (1998). He convincingly points out the lack of attention to the psychological in much scholarship on Lu Xun’s writing and reads the poems as addressing psychological trauma. This chapter attempts a similar project but differs from previous scholarship by taking into account recent work in memory studies and trauma theory, which allows a recognition of the important effects of trauma and memory function that organize the collection. By noticing problems of memory and feelings of anxiety characteristic of trauma, I identify a pervasive theme of in-between-ness and recognize it as an effect of trauma. Tracing the poems’ focus on memory also reveals a working through of trauma that leads beyond the overwhelming presence of the past to a return to healthy memory function (passing first through nostalgia and then anxiety and confusion over death). While many scholars mention trauma when discussing Lu Xun, and while Kaldis argues that these poems partially

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\(^{32}\) In Terdiman’s case, avant-garde writers of the nineteenth century appropriated the language of the bourgeoisie (prose) in attempt to transform the memory of prose. They thus “sought to explore how language carried the past within itself, and how such alien contents might be managed” (Terdiman 1993: 47).
attempt “to alleviate trauma, by gaining objective distance through recording it in literary form” (5), none of these scholars have pointed out how these poems display symptoms of trauma or what this says about the possibility of mourning a “lost” past. These are the goals of this chapter.

First, I examine the notion of nostalgia as wish fulfillment in the poem “Xue” (Snow), which was mentioned in the previous chapter and is related to the discussion of nostalgia as material for visions of the future. In the next section, I give examples of poems expressing a fear of living death, a theme that runs through several of the poems in this collection and symbolizes in-between-ness. I point out problems of remembering and forgetting as intricately connected to feelings of in-between-ness. I then read the poem “The Blighted Leaf” as a comment on the function of memory and the nature of writing memory. I end the chapter by reading “The Kite,” which attempts a working through of trauma.

Wish Fulfillment

Though most of the poems collected in Wild Grass depict disturbing scenes of blood and death, a few of them function in the normal capacity of dreams, that is, as wish fulfillment. Surely describing the coming of a hero to save all humanity fulfills a basic wish of Lu Xun’s, as in the poems “Dandan de xiehen zhong” (Amid pale bloodstains). One understands such a desire in light of Lu Xun’s project of social transformation and saving China from its outdated traditions.

More interestingly, however, Lu Xun also often dreams of the past in a way that seems to express a desire to return to that past, which would obviously go against his
iconoclastic project. Nostalgia for the past, a longing for a lost home or past, appears as a common theme in Lu Xun's writing. Idealization of the past colors many of his short stories, such as "Shexi" (Village opera) and "Guxiang" (Hometown), discussed in the previous chapter. One instance of such idealization also occurs in the prose poem "Snow." This poem develops an idea from "Zai jiulou shang" (Upstairs in a wineshop), written a year earlier in 1924, also discussed in the previous chapter. The poet compares the snow of the South, where his home is, with that of the North, where he is living now. Though Lu Xun never explicitly connects the South to the past and the North to the present, this connection is strongly implied by an equation of southern snow to home, spring, and youth and northern snow to his present living situation, deep winter, and death. He writes,

The snow south of the Yangtze is extremely moist and pretty, like the first indefinable intimation of spring, or the bloom of a young girl radiant with health. In the snowy wilderness are blood-red camellias, pale, white plum blossom tinged with green, and the golden, bell-shaped flowers of the winter plum; while beneath the snow lurk cold green weeds. Butterflies there are certainly none, and whether or no bees come to gather honey from the camellias and plum blossom I cannot clearly remember. But before my eyes I can see the wintry flowers in the snowy wilderness, with bees flying busily to and fro—I can hear their humming and droning. (Lu 2003: 38)\(^3\)

Following this description is a wonderful scene of children building a snow Buddha. As the snow Buddha melts and time passes, he goes on to contrast the scene with a present one:

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\(^{33}\) All translations are those of Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Lu 2003) unless otherwise noted.
But the snowflakes that fall in the north remain to the last like powder or sand and never hold together, whether scattered on roofs, the ground or the withered grass. The warmth from the stoves inside has melted some of the snow on the roofs. As for the rest, when a whirlwind springs up under a clear sky, it flies up wildly, glittering in the sunlight like thick mist around a flame, revolving and rising till it fills the sky, and the whole sky glitters as it whirls and rises. On the boundless wilderness, under heaven's chilly vault, this glittering, spiraling wraith is the ghost of rain. [...] Yes, it is lonely snow, dead rain, the ghost of rain. (40)

The beginning description of the snow and the winter in the South, full of the life and youthful energy of spring, clearly describes the beauty of the past and the comfort of home. In this "dream" of home, plants and insects thrive despite the snow and winter; vivid recollection brings both the poet and the reader back to this paradise, recreating the immediacy of the past. In a sense, this dreamlike visit, however brief, fulfills the wish to return to a lost past, to relive that past within the present. Yet such a reenactment inevitably fails, as writing the past implies belatedness: we can only write about something after it has occurred or after we have imagined that it has occurred. Nicola King points out, "It is in and through writing that memory constructs itself as inevitably 'belated,' but it is through writing that its 'immediacy' is also re-created" (King 2000: 9). Thus, a consciousness of the present interrupts the reverie; the snow Buddha melts and brings us back to reality. The poet "awakens" from a dream of wish fulfillment.

The poet's attitude toward the present becomes obvious with the description of the North. Unlike in the South, the snowflakes never hold together—they just scatter with the wind. The difference between the snow of the two locales seems also to point to a contrast between the cohesiveness of traditional society in the past and the lack of such in the modern society of the present: while in the past the snowflakes stuck together and
could be molded together into bodies like that of the snow Buddha (even though this religious idol may be considered negative), the snow of the North is "lonely snow." Interestingly, his characterization of the snow as the ghost of rain, as dead rain, echoes a theme that pervades the poetry of the Wild Grass collection: the in-between-ness or limbo the poet feels, between life and death and between the future and the past. From the point of awakening, Wild Grass leaves the realm in which dreams serve as wish fulfillment—or the realm of what Freud termed the pleasure principle, which maximizes pleasure and minimizes unpleasure—and enters a much darker world where fear and anxiety reign.

Intolerable “In-between-ness”: The Surfacing of Fear

"Behind them a past forever destroyed; before them ... the first glow of the future; and between these two worlds ... something vague and unsettled ... separating past and future, but yet neither the one nor the other: the present.”
- Alfred de Musset

Death comes up several times in Lu Xun’s prose poems. In “Mujie wen” (The epitaph), the poet dreams that he is reading the cryptic words of a gravestone. They tell of a spirit that takes the form of a serpent that bites itself until it dies, of tearing one’s own heart out to eat it, to know its taste. The cannibalistic imagery, a recurring nightmare in Lu Xun’s oeuvre, reminds us of his first short story, “Kuangren riji” (Diary of a madman). As such, I tend to take the obvious path of reading this engraving in terms of national allegory: it describes the self-destructive behavior of China or the Chinese individual, hurting itself or oneself, unwittingly or not.

34 Quoted in Terdiman 1993: 23.
"... There is a wandering spirit which takes the form of a serpent with poisonous fangs. Instead of biting others, it bites itself, and so it perishes.....

"... Begone!...

"... I tore out my heart to eat it, wanting to know its true taste. But the pain was so agonizing, how could I tell its taste?...

"... When the pain subsided I savoured the heart slowly. But since by then it was stale, how could I know its true taste?...

"... Answer me. Or, begone!..." (Lu 2003: 80-82)

The poet sees the corpse in the grave, disemboweled and missing the heart and liver. Suddenly the corpse sits up and speaks to him, frightening the poet and causing him to flee:

I was eager to be gone. But the corpse had sat up in the grave. Without moving its lips, it said:

"When I turn to ashes you will see me smile!"

I hurried away, not daring to look back, for fear I should see it coming after me. (82)

As a dream, or rather nightmare, this poem expresses fear not just of death but of a death that is not really death. The corpse, being a corpse, should not be able to sit up and speak, or demand, through the epitaph, answers to his questions; nor should it be able to come after the poet, as he so fears. What I see manifested here is a fear that what should be dead is not actually dead—and in Lu Xun's case, what should be dead, as proclaimed in the foreword ("Tici") of this collection, is the past: "The past life has died. I exult over its death, because from this I know that it once existed. The dead life has decayed. I exult over its decay, because from this I know that it has not been empty" (2). Thus the corpse echoes the desire for decay, or "real" death, in its enigmatic utterance: "When I turn to ashes, you will see me smile!" Why should a no longer existent corpse smile in
contentment, if not because it has achieved final and real death through decay? Conversely, why should a released spirit (released through decay) smile, if not because it escapes some sort of partial paralysis and is finally able to smile, in effect to express emotion?

Similar ideas pervade the poem “Si hou” (After death), which also expresses a fear of death not being complete death. The poet dreams that he has died by the roadside, but his worst fears are confirmed as he is still conscious while being buried:

I felt a sudden stab of fear through my heart. When I was alive it used to amuse me to think: If a man’s death were simply the paralysis of his motor nerves while sensation still remained, that would be more frightful than death. Who could tell that my prophecy would come true, or that I was to testify to its truth myself? (94)

He then describes overhearing people talking about him, carrying him around and then burying him, being unable to move as ants crawl on his face. Suddenly, he hears a voice from the past, the voice of a bookshop messenger coming to sell him some Ming Dynasty edition of the Gongyang Commentaries to the Spring and Autumn Annals, a classical text the likes of which Lu Xun rejected vehemently for its neo-Confucian teachings.35 The messenger and these texts, which should all be dead, harass the poet. And, though dead, the poet is able to see and speak in this spirit realm, dismissing the bookseller by telling him off. The past is alive and able to haunt its victims.

35 This text was also promoted in the late Qing by intellectuals like Kang Youwei, who sought to reform China through the use of Western philosophies while retaining traditional Chinese values. Kang reinterpreted canonical Confucian texts in order to argue their relevance to the emerging Chinese nation (Denton 1996: 8).
The living dead of the past symbolizes the in-between-ness of the present, or the condition of living in a kind of limbo. Caught between past and future, the present resembles a grey area between life and death. Another poem, “Guo ke” (The passer-by), in the form of a play script, illustrates this in-between-ness well. A traveler who cannot remember much about his past—his name, his place of origin—nevertheless remembers that the past is bad: “If I go back, there’s not a place without celebrities, not a place without landlords, not a place without expulsion and cages, not a place without smiles on the face and hypocritical tears. I hate them. I am not going back” (60). He happens upon an old man and young girl. Though tired and bleeding from a gash on his foot, he insists on pushing on into the unknown and the darkness—the future—following a voice that calls to him. The old man, offering water, beckons to him to rest, and the girl offers him a bandage to bind his wound. The traveler, however, refuses all but the water, asking only questions about what lies beyond the graves in the west. These graves repeat the theme of death and point to a mourning that must occur before moving into the future.

His amnesia here may be a good quality; perhaps by finding nothing appealing about the past, he can push on and progress. Nicholas Kaldis (1998) views the passer-by as rather heroic, symbolizing the poet’s arduous journey deep into his psyche (222-223). In refusing the help of the old man and the girl, the passer-by refuses nostalgia. Kaldis notes this refusal: “Both [the reader and the passerby] are set adrift in this modernistic, unfamiliar, and unpredictable landscape, with no recourse to nostalgic escape or utopian horizons around the bend” (214). This refusal of nostalgia becomes clearer when they discuss the graves, because the girl insists that there are no graves but wild roses and lilies, in a sense denying death and emphasizing the beauty of the graveyard.
PASSER-BY: ... Do you know what kind of place that is ahead?
OLD MAN: Ahead? Ahead are graves.
PASSER-BY (startled): Graves?
GIRL: No, no, no! There are ever so many wild roses and lilies there. I often go there to play, to look at them.
PASSER-BY (looking west, appears to smile): Yes, there are many wild roses and lilies there; I have often gone there myself to enjoy looking at them. But those are graves. (58)

It seems confusing when the traveler says that he himself has often gone there before; how could he have been there before if he neither recognizes this place nor knows what is beyond the house? And how does he remember going there often to enjoy looking at the flowers? His enigmatic answer seems to say that however alive the graves appear, or however enjoyable it is to indulge in nostalgia and delight in what has passed, they are still graves, and those buried there are still dead and gone. He thus rejects the presence of the past within the present. In this interpretation, the poet offers something of a wish fulfillment. A Nietzschean superman who is able to forget the past, or at least to remember that the past was bad, will be able to move into the future. Overriding any hope that this forgetful hero might convey, however, are more prominent expressions of anxiety about and discomfort with the in-between-ness that nevertheless stands between the future and a dark past. In the end, the poem mainly describes the discomfort and confusion arising from the in-between position of the passer-by (Lu Xun), suggesting that these are the results of forgetfulness and a blind movement forward into the west/West.

Contradictions surface in these few poems, in which the past is idealized and almost yearned for (as in "Snow") but also forgotten in order to progress (as in "The Passer-by"). Now the image of a forgetful hero in "The Passer-by" seems contradicted
by the other poem in the collection that calls for a hero to save humanity, “Amid Pale Bloodstains.” “In memory of some who are dead, some live, and some yet unborn,” the poet here laments that things are forgotten, that people cannot remember forever, that bloodstains become diluted. In-between-ness is lamented as well:

At present the creator is still a weakling. In secret, he causes heaven and earth to change, but dares not destroy this world. In secret, he causes living creatures to die, but dares not preserve their dead bodies. In secret, he causes mankind to shed blood, but dares not keep the bloodstains fresh forever. In secret, he causes mankind to suffer pain, but dares not let them remember it forever. (118)

It seems that vague memory can exist—of death, of blood that is shed, of pain that is suffered—but not completely. A rebellious fighter then arises and sees through all the deserted ruins and lonely tombs of the past and the present. He remembers all the intense and unending agony; he faces squarely the whole welter of clotted blood; he understands all that is dead and all that is living, as well as all yet unborn. He sees through the creator’s game. And he will arise to resuscitate or else destroy mankind, these loyal subjects of the creator. (120; emphasis added)

Why does he call now for a savior who remembers, rather than forgets, everything? Is this not a contradiction? In fact, there is no contradiction. The poet here expresses preference for either life or death, resuscitation or destruction, all or nothing, complete memory or complete forgetfulness—he wants none of the in-between-ness that exists now.

This in-between-ness can be seen as a feeling that arises during trauma. As van der Kolk and van der Hart (1995) point out, “traumatized persons often experience long periods in which they live in two different worlds”—the realm of trauma and that of
ordinary life (1995: 177). As the traumatized person continues living everyday life, the
traumatized part of his or her personality cannot mature:

Switching from one’s present-day world to the world of traumatic memory
does not only imply the simultaneity of two utterly incompatible worlds,
of an ordinary and a traumatic state of mind. As the trauma is fixed at a
certain moment in a person’s life, people live out their existences in two
different stages of the life cycle, the traumatic past, and the bleached
present. The traumatized, fixated, inflexible part of the personality has
stopped developing. (177)

Thus the traveler in “The Passer-by” does not only live simultaneously in the two worlds
of the present and of traumatic memory, but also experiences life in the present as
strangely disconnected from the past. For the poet of *Wild Grass*, the traumatic past to be
left behind but ever reasserting itself against his will, a past that is incompletely bridged
to an equally discomforting “bleached present,” splits his experience of time and begs
him to create a narrative to mend this discontinuity. Only by incorporating that traumatic
past into narrative memory can the poet, like the passer-by, begin to forget it in order to
move on with his life.

Forgetting the past, however, allows a healthy remembering; one does not recall
something unless it has been forgotten first. In traumatic memory, on the other hand, the
past is not seen as *past*; coexisting with the present, it is neither forgotten nor
remembered in any normal sense, subjecting one to cycles of literal return to the past
interspersed with a kind of amnesia. A hero who forgets is thus also a hero who
remembers. In “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” the poet prefers a remembering because it leads
to understanding, saying of the hero, “He *remembers* all the intense and unending agony;
... he *understands* all that is dead and all that is living, as well as all yet unborn.” In
“The Passer-by,” on the other hand, simply forgetting in an amnesiac way keeps the poet in an uncomfortable in-between world marked by a lack of understanding. The fighter of “Amid Pale Bloodstains,” however, has moved beyond trauma, which is marked by incomprehensibility and repetition, to an understanding, which is made possible by healthy forgetting and remembering. In this sense, in-between-ness might come not only from being caught between complete memory or complete forgetfulness but also from lying in the divide between pre-traumatic normalcy and the return to healthy memory function. The in-between is an area of darkness and incomprehensibility. As a lament, an act of mourning, as well as a call for a better future, the sentiments of this poem indicate some experience of trauma and the attempt of the poet to master it through grappling with this dark divide.

The Tragedy of Healthy Memory Function: “The Blighted Leaf”

Overcoming trauma and returning to healthy memory function requires narration and its attendant forgetting. The normal function of the psyche causes memories to deteriorate; Janet likens memory to the action of telling a story (van der Kolk and van der Hart 1995: 175). Caruth summarizes this storytelling of memory as a kind of “talking cure,” indicated by the way in which a woman in Janet’s case study begins to deal with the death of her mother.36 Instead of engaging in real-time reenactments of the night of the mother’s death, the woman learns to package the experience more concisely by narrating it.

36 This case is also mentioned in the Introduction.
... her cure is characterized by the fact that she can tell a “slightly different story” to different people: the capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases, as van der Kolk and van der Hart show, may mean the capacity simply to forget. (Caruth 1995: 153-154)

However, a kind of violence occurs when one transforms an event into a story: it begins to die and decay over time, losing its force:

Yet beyond the loss of precision there is another, more profound, disappearance: the loss, precisely, of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding. It is this dilemma that underlies many survivors’ reluctance to translate their experience into speech.... (154)

This is why, scholars point out, many survivors of the Holocaust do not wish to speak of those traumatic events in a narration that converts them into knowledge that can be easily forgotten.

The poem “Laye” (The blighted leaf) describes this normal but violent function of memory, though it does not explicitly concern a traumatic event. It appears towards the end of the collection, which orders the poems chronologically by completion date, before the final “Amid Pale Bloodstains” and “Yijue” (The awakening). Its appearance here may suggest a move toward normal memory function in this collection, toward an “awakening” from nightmares and from trauma.37

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37 This process of moving toward healthy memory function seems to begin with a nostalgia for the past, manifested in the poem “Snow,” and continues with anxiety over living death in several following poems that point to increasing anxiety and impatience over the haunting presence of the past. By the end of the collection, the poet seems able to work through these memory problems a little better, especially in this poem and “Amid Pale Bloodstains.”
Reading a book one night, the poet comes across a leaf placed inside it. This accidental discovery triggers the memory of the previous autumn when he had picked it up. This particular blighted leaf had spoken to something in the poet, causing him to attempt to preserve it, for he writes:

There was one in which an insect had made a hole, which, fringed with black, stared at you like some bright eye from the chequered red, yellow and green. “This leaf has been blighted!” I thought. So I plucked it and slipped it inside the book I had just bought. I suppose I hoped to preserve for a little time this blighted motley of colours so soon to fall, to prevent its drifting away with the other leaves. (Lu 2003: 114)

The blighted leaf, personified by the poet as “staring” out at him from its own trauma, the wound left from an insect’s feasting upon it, evokes his sympathy. Perhaps it calls to mind his own experience of trauma. In any case, time eventually takes its toll on this attempted preservation, causing the poet to lament:

But tonight it lies yellow and waxen before my gaze, its eye less bright than last year. In a few more years, when its former hues have faded from memory, I may even forget why I put it in the book. It seems the chequered tints of blighted leaves soon to fall can remain in my keeping for the shortest time only—to say nothing of those lush and green. (114-115)

Attempts to preserve such leaves, in books, inevitably fail. Preserving memory in text (or writing it down in books), likewise, will also cause the memory to deteriorate.38 The poet thus engages in a double mourning, for the loss of the leaf and for the loss of the memory of the leaf, through this memorial. Through doing the work of mourning and accepting

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38 Kaldis also notes this equation of the preservation of a leaf in a book with that of an experience in text: “Colors, images, poetry, and memories are sometimes beautiful, sometimes beautifully blighted, but the attempt to cling to them or preserve them in books or in the heart, is a doomed enterprise” (1998: 283). He also points out the homophony of the “ye” meaning “leaf” with the “ye” meaning “page” (282).
the inevitable forgetting required in mourning, healthy memory function becomes possible.

**The Trauma of Two Brothers: "The Kite"**

An attempt to work through a more concrete traumatic event underlies the poem "Fengzheng" (The kite) (which appears earlier in the collection), but to less satisfactory results than with "The Blighted Leaf." The poem appears after "Snow" and continues the nostalgia of that poem, harkening back from a bleak present (winter in the North) to an idealized past (spring in the South), a memory triggered by seeing kites flown nearby. It begins:

> A Peking winter dismays and depresses me: the thick snow on the ground and the bare trees' ashen branches thrusting up towards the clear blue sky, while in the distance one or two kites are floating.

> At home, the time for kites is early spring. ... By this time, though, the willows on the ground are putting out shoots, and the early mountain peaches have budded. Set off by the children's fancy-work in the sky, together they make up the warmth of spring. Where am I now? All round me dread winter reigns, while the long-departed spring of my long-forgotten home is floating in this northern sky. (42)

This begins a detailed account of an event that one could very well see as traumatic in one sense or another—the destruction of his brother's kite by the poet as a child. The vividness of the account is striking; he describes almost pathologically the scene of discovering and destroying his brother's kite, more like a simulation of literal return than a healthy narration:

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39 This is in line with my interpretation of the collection as continuing in a progression toward healthy memory function.
He had been sitting on a foot-stool in front of a big square stool; but now, standing up in confusion, he changed colour and shrank back. Propped up against the big stool was the bamboo framework of a butterfly-kite, not pasted yet with paper; while on the stool lay two small wind-wheels for the butterfly's eyes, which he had just been beautifying with red paper. This work was nearly done. I was pleased to have found out his secret; but furious that he could deceive me so long, while he toiled so single-heartedly to make the toy of a good-for-nothing child. I seized the framework at once and broke one of its wings, then swept the wheels to the ground and trampled on them. In size and strength he was no match for me; so of course I came off completely victorious. Then I stalked out proudly, leaving him standing in despair in that little room. What he did after that I neither knew or cared. (44)

The details of the colors and placement of everything in this memory come to the poet with great force. He then describes the trigger of the powerful, long-forgotten memory—his later reading of a book that explains "that play is a child's best occupation, and playthings his good angels." He describes the sinking feeling this memory causes: "At once this childhood tyranny over the spirit, forgotten for more than twenty years, came to my mind; and that instant my heart seemed to turn to lead and sink heavily down and down. My heart did not break; it simply sank down and down" (44).

He goes on to explain his attempt to make it up to his brother, first lamenting that he cannot return to that time to do so, then recounting his later attempt:

I knew how I could make it up to him: give him a kite, approve of his flying it, urge him to fly it, and fly it with him. We could shout, run, laugh!... But by this time he, like me, had long had a moustache. I knew another way I could make it up to him: go to ask his forgiveness, and wait for him to say: "But I didn't blame you at all." Then, surely, my heart would grow lighter. Yes, this way was feasible. There came a day when we met. The hardships of life had left their marks on our faces, and my heart was very heavy. We fell to talking of childhood happenings, and I referred to this episode, admitting that I had been a thoughtless boy. (44-46)
He then repeats the response that he wishes to hear: "But I didn’t blame you at all,’ I thought he would say. Then I should have felt forgiven, and my heart would henceforth have been lighter.” Instead, he gets the following reply: “‘Did that really happen?’ he smiled incredulously, as if he were hearing a tale about someone else. It had slipped his mind completely” (46).

His brother’s response may contain a possible symptom of trauma—amnesia for the event and an inability to recall it voluntarily. Indeed, it makes sense that the incident would be traumatic for the younger brother, whose hard work and joy was destroyed maliciously by the poet. However, the poet’s brother might not have felt traumatized by the event at all, and his forgetting of the incident might indicate a normal functioning of his memory; perhaps he has already dealt with it and forgotten it. The reader does not have access to the brother’s psychological condition, but one does at least glimpse that of the poet through the way he writes the story.

Now, without the closure he had wished for, the poet feels even sadder than before.

He ends the poem:

What hope is there for me now? My heart will always be heavy.
Now the spring of my home is in the air of these strange parts again. It carries me back to my long-departed childhood, and brings with it an indefinable sadness. I had better hide in dread winter. But clearly all about me winter reigns, and is even now offering me its utmost rigour and coldness. (46)

While the poet may not have considered the event traumatizing when it happened, in retrospect his sudden remembering of the incident seems to traumatize him, perhaps
shocking him into a kind of "perpetrator trauma." He experiences several symptoms of trauma—the literal and involuntary return of the past event in the present, the feeling of helplessness resulting from his inability to take any action to change the situation, depression and hypersensitivity to outside stimuli (the cold and rigor of the winter), and his feeling of entrapment between these two worlds.

The damage, then, has occurred to the tissues of the relationship of the brothers, damage that he has caused himself. The poet only now perceives the danger to the life of that relationship, a danger that was not perceived at the time of the event, and now too late. And as Caruth stresses in her work, the survival from this sort of danger is traumatic itself: "...for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis" (Caruth 1995: 9).

Yet another indication in this poem of such a crisis lies in omission—a reluctance to mention another, more serious danger to the poet/Lu Xun's relationship to his brother. Pollard finds fascinating the mystery behind Lu Xun's falling out with his brother Zhou Zuoren, the final confrontation of which, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, occurred almost immediately before Lu Xun began writing Wild Grass and only half a year before completion of "The Kite" (January 1925). Pollard suggests in his biography of Lu Xun that this incident, which began in July 1923 and ends up alienating the brothers for good by June 1924, involved Zhou Zuoren's wife, hinting at some improper conduct or other (Pollard 2002: 75-82). Since they had up to that point all lived in the same compound as a family, the possibility of such an occurrence may not be low. The result, however, points to the seriousness of the damage: Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren,
previously so close, did not meet or communicate directly again after their final confrontation in June 1924 (82). The omission of this grave incident, from this poem as well as from the entirety of Lu Xun’s writing,⁴⁰ might indicate a trauma that Lu Xun was unable to master, and which is only hinted at indirectly but which underlies and motivates this poem.

**Conclusion: Dealing with Transition**

Writing can be considered a kind of therapy, since narrating something traumatic helps to bring past and present into connection (King 2000: 24) and convert it into a more manageable form. As for the poems of *Wild Grass*, a therapeutic motive could be argued, yet the force of *Wild Grass* lies in its inability to fully overcome real traumatic events. This inability to overcome underlying trauma can be seen in “The Kite,” in the sense that Lu Xun cannot understand the real traumatizing event. The poems here do not narrate or work through these events completely but rather express effects of trauma: feeling haunted by the past, having nightmares of “living” corpses, conceiving of the self as between life and death, past and future. It may also be that Lu Xun fears the violence that narration would do to the memory of the traumatic event, what Caruth calls “the loss ... of the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding” (154). Perhaps, not ready to let go of this force, Lu Xun also refuses to mention at least certain traumatic events completely. Or, as Kaldis suggests, these poems point to the inadequacy of language to deal with certain losses (1998). These losses, in fact, may not

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⁴⁰ Pollard expresses frustration that the incident goes unrecorded in Lu Xun’s diary except for hints at the discomfort of being around either Zhou Zuoren or his wife, as well as at Zhou Zuoren’s cutting out the relevant entry when he later sold his diary to the Lu Xun archives (Pollard 2002: 77).
be mournable, at least for the time being because they may be too vague or even unreal (as with the loss of the past in general); they may not even be losses at all but are rather absences. The poet may be describing effects of melancholia (endless grief) rather than of mourning (terminable grief).

The reader might guess at the effect of the therapy of *Wild Grass* upon the poet, or rather the hoped-for effect upon him, from the foreword to this collection. In describing the poems as “wild grass”—nothing so lofty as a sturdy tree or as beautiful as flowers, he does not express modesty but a genuine conviction of their ugliness. In saying that he loves his wild grass but hates the ground on which it grows, he describes the poems as helpful products of an ugly present situation. In wishing for the swift destruction by fire and lava and real death of the wild grass and everything else, he hopes for a revolutionary end to the present world and the beginning of a new one in which the wild grass (a coping mechanism) will not be needed. These poems may express anxiety over the in-betweenness of the historical moment of China and its individuals, trapped between tradition and modernity. They may also express anxiety over personal traumas that remain to us a mystery. They do, in any case, in Lu Xun’s characteristically impatient manner, call for the future.

It is his attempt to work through the various traumas of his nation and his life, the expressions of fear and anxiety over being caught between two worlds in modern times, that makes his work so compelling to us even today. As Cathy Caruth writes:

In a catastrophic age, ... trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth 1995: 11)
It is not in the particular histories or historical traumas that cultures relate to each other so much as the similar effects that sufferers of trauma experience. Thus the form and expressions of fear and anxiety in *Wild Grass* may be familiar to many readers today.
CHAPTER 3
RETURN AND RECONCILIATION:
CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN LU XUN'S REMINISCENCES

The previous chapters examine a preoccupation with the past and memory in Lu Xun’s fiction and prose poetry, finding that these works attempt to work through loss, anxiety, and depression by narrating memory. Lu Xun’s reminiscences, collected in Zhaohua xishi (Dawn blossoms plucked at dusk, 1927), address the same preoccupation with the past seen in his earlier works, though they do not so much exhibit the same problems of memory as set down memories for the purpose of overcoming a haunting past. Their essay format also allows more room for polemics than the other genres examined by this thesis, and their autobiographical nature deals explicitly with problems of Lu Xun’s identity in particular (and not that of a fictional narrator). Not merely an autobiography that presents Lu Xun’s own identity, it comments also on China’s identity, with broader, political implications for the possibilities of mourning and moving beyond China’s “haunting” past.

Informed by psychoanalytic and trauma theory, this chapter examines how Lu Xun casts the narrative of his past as a narrative of trauma, analyzing the collection by looking at most of the essays contained in it as dealing with the traumatic effects of traditional Confucian education. The narration of tradition as traumatic results in Lu Xun’s subsequent rejection of tradition, yet this rejection is, partially, a rejection of the
self. I argue that it is through narrating these omnipresent memories that Lu Xun works through his "trauma" as well as his rejection of "Chineseness" and attempts to reconcile himself, at least in part, with that Chineseness. 41

This chapter first looks at the relationship of memory and identity, using Nicola King’s work on memory, narrative, and identity as a point of departure. The next sections note the haunting presence of the past in Lu Xun’s reminiscences, first in terms of nostalgia and memorialization, and then tracing in detail loss and its traumatic effects throughout the narrative. The chapter attempts to show that the traumatic loss of childhood innocence and humanity that Lu Xun narrates results in his rejection of China. By the end of the autobiography, Lu Xun attempts a reconciliation with China, through partially recovering what has been perceived as lost: sympathy and humanity.

While previous scholars view this autobiographical work as formulating Lu Xun’s identity, they do not take its preoccupation with the past and memory as a major focus, nor do they delve into the psychoanalytic discussion of the traumatic effects of Chinese tradition on his identity, though they may point it out. 42 The chapter does, however, draw upon Wendy Larson’s (1991) reading of this autobiography. While Larson provides much insight into the work, I believe that Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk is not so

41 By arguing that Lu Xun “casts” the story of his life as a story of trauma and (partial) recovery, I do not make any claims that Lu Xun was in fact traumatized by traditional Confucian education, or even that he viewed this tradition as traumatizing. I am only pointing out that the narrative of his life resembles a narrative of traumatic loss and that this enables the political message of the work.

42 I mean mainly Wendy Larson’s reading of this work in Larson 1991, and also Janet Ng’s consideration of it in Ng 2003.
much about a contradiction between writing and revolutionary action as it is about coming to terms with (what Haiyan Lee would call) "the trauma of Chineseness."\footnote{This term comes from H. Lee 2004.}

**Memory and Identity**

Without memory, we would be unable to construct identity. Not only must we remember what has happened to us to have an idea of who we are, we must be able to organize those memories through narrative in order to construct a life story for ourselves and others (King 2000: 2).

The construction of a life narrative of memory becomes imperative at times when identity suffers a crisis. Affected by trauma, for instance, one will have difficulty relating a past self with a present one. When the continuity that one normally feels throughout one's day-to-day experiences has been interrupted by some unexpected event, one may find it difficult to bridge the now broken chunks of time, may find it hard to tell a story that connects the two worlds now separated by some incomprehensible occurrence. As van der Kolk and van der Hart write, "traumatized persons often experience long periods in which they live in two different worlds" (1995: 177), and this simultaneity makes it hard for one to unify memories into a single, linear narrative.

While Lacanian psychology argues that a person's life narrative is never a representation of any real unity of identity, this narrative may still be necessary for mental health and normal functioning in society. Nicola King (2000) points this out: "The paradox here is that the human subject whose identity and sense of life-continuity
have been profoundly disrupted by trauma might be in need of the restoration of the kind of 'wholeness' which (particularly) Lacanian psychoanalysis calls into question" (4).

In writing *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, Lu Xun attempts to construct a story of his life, organizing select memories concerning his education into this collection of short pieces. What can most be gleaned from reading these selections is a struggle with the identity crisis of the intellectual in a weak and floundering China. This struggle involves traumatic memories associated with the Confucian tradition that Lu Xun so vehemently opposes yet which dominates his life story and defines part of his identity.

King's work and Lacanian psychoanalysis can in fact be immensely useful in discussing Lu Xun's attempt at constructing a life narrative. Nicola King focuses on the articulation of identity through narrative for sufferers of trauma, bringing in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to discuss nostalgia and other problems of memory. Lacan proves useful in examining the highly Oedipal undertones of Lu Xun's autobiography as well as the work's concerns about language, social authority, and lost paradise.

**The Presence of the Past—Nostalgia and Memorial**

Lu Xun shows the omnipresence of memory in his life from the start of the preface to *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk:*

> I often hanker after a little peace and respite from confusion, but it is really hard to come by. The present is so bizarre and my state of mind so confused. When a man reaches the stage when all that remains to him is memories, his life should probably count as futile enough, yet sometimes even memories may be lacking. (Lu 1976: 1)\(^{44}\)

\(^{44}\) All translations that appear are those of Yang Hsien-yi and Gladys Yang (Lu 1976).
In this passage he points out the exact conditions of his life at the time—the confusion of the present, the way memories make up one’s life and the unreliability of those memories, and thus the precariousness of identity itself. At the time that Lu Xun wrote this preface, politics were indeed disheartening; only a month before, the alliance between the Guomindang and the Chinese Communist Party had broken up, and the Guomindang government was conducting purges of suspected communists in Shanghai and Guangzhou, where he was living.\textsuperscript{45} Throughout 1926, when he wrote the ten pieces collected in \textit{Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk}, Lu Xun may have experienced stress due to his open criticism of the government, especially following the March 18th shootings of demonstrating students in Beijing, and to the tense atmosphere in Xiamen where his colleagues ostracized him.\textsuperscript{46} Against this backdrop, he may very well have wanted to escape from the present for a while.

He goes on to say in the preface that in retrospect he gathers these bits of his past together, likening this “gathering” to plucking at dusk blossoms that were much sweeter and fresher at dawn (Lu 1976: 2). He explains, “These ten pieces are records transcribed from memory, perhaps deviating somewhat from the facts, but this is just how I remember things today” (2). Lu Xun shows that he is aware of the impossibility of perfect memory retrieval, pointing to the invention that goes into remembering. He also notes the possible idealization (as something sweeter and fresher) in this invention. He continues:

\textsuperscript{45} These occurred in April of 1927. Lu Xun completed the preface in May 1927.

\textsuperscript{46} Pollard explains that some of the students killed in the March 18 shootings were Lu Xun’s. In Xiamen, Lu Xun had a strong dislike for one of his colleagues, Gu Jiegang, who was part of the Hu Shi clique. For more biographical details on Lu Xun’s activities around the time of his writing of \textit{Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk}, see Pollard 2002 (97-117).
For a time I kept recalling the vegetables and fruits I ate as a child in my old home: caltrops, horse-beans, water bamboo shoots, musk-melons. So succulent, so delicious were they all, they beguiled me into longing for my old home. Later, tasting these things again after a protracted absence, I found them nothing special. It was only in retrospect that they retained their old flavor. They may keep on deceiving me my whole life long, *making my thoughts turn constantly to the past*. (2, emphasis added)

Lu Xun here hints at the possible motivation behind writing these reminiscences: a preoccupation with the past, which haunts him in its perpetual "deception"—the attraction and danger of nostalgia.

Nostalgia appears frequently in the collection, but especially in the sixth piece, "Cong baicao yuan dao sanwei shuwu" (From hundred-plant garden to three-flavor study, hereafter "Hundred-Plant Garden"), which tells of Lu Xun being sent to his first school. Lu Xun describes the garden behind his old house as his childhood "paradise" and begins a long passage that re-creates the garden:

I need not speak of the green vegetable plots, the slippery stone coping round the well, the tall honey-locust tree, or the purple mulberries. Nor need I speak of the long shrilling of the cicadas among the leaves, the fat wasps couched in the flowering rape, or the nimble skylarks who suddenly soared straight up from the grass to the sky.... (Lu 1976: 53)

Through this sort of detailed description, Lu Xun attempts to preserve his fond memories of his childhood, but in doing so he demonstrates at the same time the distance he feels from them, by virtue of the fact that he must write them down to preserve them. His saying that he need not speak of these things draws attention to the fact that he *does* indeed feel the need to speak of them.
In the fourth essay, "Wu chang hui" (The fair of the five fierce gods, hereafter "The Fair") and, to a lesser extent, the fifth essay, "Wu Chang" (Wu Chang or Life-Is-Transient, hereafter "Wu Chang"), Lu Xun displays nostalgia not only for the parades and dramas of his childhood but for those of a past he never experienced directly—Ming dynasty pageants as described by seventeenth-century scholar Zhang Dai in Dai’s own reminiscences. In "The Fair," Lu Xun writes of the Ming pageants and cites a long passage from Zhang, remarking afterwards: "Who could resist watching such a lifelike pageant of the men and women of days gone by? The pity is that such brave shows disappeared long ago along with the Ming Dynasty" (37). In "Wu Chang," Lu Xun mentions Zhang Dai again, remarking on the "grandness" of the dramas in the old days and the decline of these by the time of his childhood (48). Nostalgia for these aspects of Chinese tradition may be surprising in light of Lu Xun’s rejection of Chinese tradition in his political writings. However, because these dramas and the characters he loves to see in them are not actually part of mainstream Confucian tradition, this nostalgia is not so contradictory as it might first appear.

Other fond memories are preserved later in the collection as memorials rather than nostalgia per se. The last two essays, for example, memorialize two figures important in his life: a Mr. Fujino, who was his teacher at medical school in Japan, and Fan Aiong, another intellectual who had studied in Japan at the same time as Lu Xun and whom Lu Xun befriended later after they returned to China. His description of Mr. Fujino is particularly moving when detailing the help the teacher extended to the student Lu Xun, whose notes the teacher meticulously marked every week, or revealing Lu Xun’s sentimental handling of souvenirs that remind him of Mr. Fujino. He describes his
memory of Mr. Fujino this way: "... somehow or other I still remember him from time to
time, for of all those whom I consider as my teachers he is the one to whom I feel most
grateful and who gave me the most encouragement" (87). He ends the piece lamenting
the loss of some souvenirs he had of Mr. Fujino and describing the inspiring effect that a
portrait of his former teacher has upon his morale: "At night if I am tired and want to take
it easy, when I look up and see his thin, dark face in the lamplight, as if about to speak in
measured tones, my better nature asserts itself and my courage returns" (88). Thus Lu
Xun's reminiscences record the impact others might have had on his life in relation to his
education, in order to preserve the memory of those who, to him, have been lost.

In expressing nostalgia and writing memorials, Lu Xun uses *Dawn Blossoms
Plucked at Dusk* partly to preserve positive memories. Though positive, they are still
memories that Lu Xun may wish to set down in writing and put aside, since he has
explained in the preface that memories of the past often disturb or get in the way of his
present life.

**The Presence of the Past—Traumatic Effects**

It is not only fond memories that enjoy preservation, though. The bitter ones
demonstrating the bankruptcy of tradition must also be preserved, as lessons for the
present and future. In the third piece, "Ershisi xiao tu" (*The picture-book of twenty-four
acts of filial piety*, hereafter "The Picture-Book"), discussed in more detail below, Lu
Xun describes the detrimental effects of misguided Confucian ideology, which perverts
any reasonable understanding of filial piety. After learning certain stories of filial piety,
the child Lu Xun begins to fear, rather than respect, his father and grandmother. Lu Xun
records such a memory in order to drive home his point that the old way of teaching children should be abandoned. In “The Fair” (also discussed further below), Lu Xun details not a much-anticipated trip to the fair but the lesson his father suddenly demands Lu Xun the child to memorize, which in the end ruins both the trip and the memory of the fair. By telling these kinds of stories, Lu Xun hopes to show how the paradise of childhood and the memory of it can be ruined by the traditional schooling system.

It is this message attacking traditional Chinese education that the collection as a whole conveys to the reader. An overarching structure does exist to Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk—tracing his life from childhood innocence to its loss, and from a rejection of China to a reconciliation with it—despite the fragmented and unconnected narrative of these rather disparate pieces, which, even within themselves, often jump from present conflicts with other writers to recollections of a more distant past. Such a loose narrative perhaps purposely reflects the fragmentary nature of his life experience. Larson notices this overarching structure in her reading of Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk (Larson 1991: 87-101). The pieces together constitute from beginning to end a story of his passage from childhood to adulthood. Larson posits that Lu Xun focuses on textual studies in these pieces because he understands them as that which has formed his personality and his life, creating a coherent story by means of this theme.

Larson points out that the collection begins generally with Lu Xun as a small child and continues chronologically. In the first two pieces, “Gou, mao, shu” (Dogs, cats,

\[47\] In these pieces, Lu Xun frequently alludes to criticisms that writers of the Modern Critic clique (like Xu Zhimo and Chen Xiyi) directed at Lu Xun. For instance, in “Mr. Fujino,” Lu Xun remarks that from looking at the portrait of his teacher, he gets the courage to continue writing articles detested by “just minds and gentlemen,” no doubt referring to something Lu Xun’s opponents called themselves. Lu Xun also deals more directly with his critics in much of the first piece, “Dogs, Cats, and Mice.”
and mice) and “A Chang yu Shan hai jing” (Ah Chang and the Book of hills and seas, hereafter “Ah Chang”), Lu Xun is fascinated by texts and pictures, but as he grows older he learns the treacherous ideologies of texts such as the Ershisi xiao tu (The picture-book of twenty-four acts of filial piety). By the fourth piece, “The Fair,” Larson says he has found that “The authorities of text and father combine to kill the spirit and joy that derive from an active involvement in the physical activities the community provides” (Larson 1991: 96).

The turning point of the autobiography, Larson continues, occurs during the fifth piece, “Wu Chang.” This is when the story moves out of the childhood fantasy world into the “real” world of social order, or, from another perspective, out of the “human” world of children into the “inhuman” world of social institutions (Larson 1991: 96). In the next piece, “Hundred-Plant Garden,” the fabulous garden of his childhood is supplanted by the stale schoolroom. In the following pieces, Lu Xun flees the stagnant environment of Chinese schooling to Japan, where he realizes (in the famous slide incident) that he must return to and help China by reforming its literature. The last piece, “Fan Ai-nung,” relates Lu Xun’s reconciliation with certain aspects of the China he so violently despised, becoming friends with and feeling sympathy for someone whom he saw as a victim of China’s ills: “Fan possesses the combination of qualities Lu Xun despises, and yet Lu ends up friends with Fan. Fan Aönong is an ambivalent character with which to conclude his text, yet he is an appropriate symbol for the resolution which Lu Xun effects” (Larson 1991: 101).

In Larson’s reading, Lu Xun attacks the authority of “text” in the Confucian tradition, extending this to a distrust of the efficacy of his own textual work, while
advocating revolutionary action. Quite clearly, Lu Xun struggled with the high expectations he and other intellectuals of the time may have placed upon literature's ability to transform society. In a famous speech he gave at Whampoa, Lu Xun did voice serious doubts about literature's ability to do any revolutionary work at all. However, Larson's explanation of the dichotomy of textual work vs. revolutionary action as the major significance of this work loses force when one takes into account Lu Xun's continuing commitment to writing, which indicates an overriding belief on his part, however faint, in literature's ability to have some positive effect upon society. Rather than stopping at his perhaps contradictory attitude towards the work of writing, a reading of this work can delve further into Lu Xun's attack on the Confucian tradition and, using psychoanalytic theory, examine its nostalgia, traumatic effects, and Oedipal undertones as motivating the work more significantly, in an attempt to deal with multiple losses and/or lacks. He also reworks his memories and personal history into a testimony to the evils of Confucian tradition, validating the May Fourth project to reject the past, while at the same time seeming to caution against totalistic rejection.

**Loss, Rejection, and Reconciliation**

The first loss that the work deals with, in the first piece, "Dogs, Cats, and Mice," is the death of a pet mouse Lu Xun had as a small child. After a rambling prologue that begins by addressing criticisms involving his short story "Tu he mao" (Rabbits and cats), Lu Xun explains his dislike of cats in terms of the loss of this beloved mouse. Interestingly, however, it is not a cat who kills the mouse, as his nanny leads him to believe, but his nanny herself, who tramples the mouse to death when it tries to run up her leg. He learns
the true cause of death too late, however, because after days of abusing cats, he is still unable to forget his dislike of them. He writes of his discovery that his nanny, Mama Chang, has killed the mouse:

The possibility had never occurred to me. I no longer remember my immediate reaction, but I was never reconciled to cats. After I came to Peking, the havoc wreaked among my small rabbits by a cat added to my former animosity, and I took sterner measures of reprisal. (15)

He continues by explaining his attempt to reconcile himself to cats, aware that his animosity was perhaps misdirected and unjust, yet he also shows that the reconciliation is incomplete, or perhaps even insincere, since he has only stopped beating and killing them and continues to drive them away: “But today these are all things of the past and my attitude to cats has changed to one of extreme politeness. If forced to it I simply drive them away, never beating or hurting them let alone killing them. This is a mark of my progress in recent years” (15).

It is the attitude of reconciliation, however, particularly following traumatic loss, that I find resonates in the collection, which I argue traverses a trajectory from rejection of China to a reconciliation with it. At times in the piece, cats can be seen to represent the Chinese, displaying some of the tendencies that Lu Xun elsewhere professed were negative characteristics of the Chinese as a race. For instance, he lists some reasons why he dislikes cats in general: 1) that they cruelly play with their victims before finally killing them, and 2) their vulgarity, which includes their annoying “caterwauling” when mating (8). Clearly the first refers to a perverse lack of sympathy Lu Xun felt to be part of the Chinese character, and the second points to a lack of sincerity manifested in
elaborate rituals like those dictating marriage etiquette, which Lu Xun attacks at length in the piece. It may be that the mouse represents, then, a childlike innocence, humanity, sincerity, and sympathy that has somehow been lost from the Chinese character. His attempt at reconciliation with cats is thus an attempt at reconciliation with “Chineseness,” admitting that perhaps his dislike is unjust and could incur disgust from others:

Accumulated experience led me to the sudden realization that nine persons out of ten are naturally disgusted by the way cats steal fish and meat, carry off chickens, or caterwaul late at night, and this disgust is centred on the cat. Should I attempt to rid men of this disgust by beating or killing cats, these would instantly become objects of pity while that disgust would be transferred to me. Accordingly my present method is: whenever I find cats making a nuisance of themselves, I step on my doorway and shout, “Hey! Scram!” When things quieten down a little I return to my study. (15-16)

“Dogs, Cats, and Mice” poses a question that becomes a theme of the collection: what is to be done about a perhaps unjust revulsion towards Chineseness? The passage that concludes the essay, however, seems to renege on this attitude of reconciliation, or at least the method of simply chasing the “cats” away from his vicinity.

In this way I preserve my capacity of safeguarding our home against foreign aggression. Actually this method is one commonly practiced by officers and soldiers in China, who prefer not to wipe out all brigands or exterminate the enemy completely, for if they did so they would cease to be highly regarded and might even lose their function and their posts. To my mind, if I can get more people to use this tactic, I can hope to become one of the “elders responsible for guiding the youth.” But I have not yet decided whether or not to put this into practice. I am still studying and pondering the matter. (16)

Lu Xun is here mocking his opponents, who speak of being “elders responsible for guiding the youth,” and likening them to the officers and soldiers who do not exterminate the enemy but only attack them with a lot of hot air. He seems to go back to advocating
an "extermination of the enemy," a rather revolutionary attitude. That he admits to "still studying and pondering the matter," however, expresses a level of uncertainty and ambivalence about any possibility of reconciliation.

**Lost Paradise**

The second and third pieces, "Ah Chang" and "The Picture-Book," describe Lu Xun's experience with books before entering the traditional schooling system. At first, in "Ah Chang," Lu Xun delights in books like the one his nanny Ah Chang gives to him, the *Shan hai jing* (Book of hills and seas). His fascination with the book and inability to procure it himself lead him to forgive Ah Chang completely for killing his mouse; when she returns from a trip with the book, Lu Xun says she "really did have tremendous spiritual power" (24). The piece is, in fact, a sort of memorial to his nanny, at the end regretting that he never knew her name or found out what happened to her. "Dark, kindly Mother Earth," he writes at the conclusion, "may her spirit ever rest peacefully in your bosom" (25). It appears that his fondness for her stems primarily from her gift of the *Shan hai jing*, which is full of monsters and other fantastic creatures and which stimulates his imagination greatly.

"The Picture-Book" also tells of an illustrated book Lu Xun had as a child, but it is a book that does not bring so much joy to Lu Xun as fear and confusion. Here, Lu Xun the child is introduced to Confucian ideology's interference in a child's enjoyment of books. In this story, Lu Xun describes a rather traumatic realization he had as a child concerning filial piety. He originally believes that being filial is rather simple, but after learning the stories in the picture book, he begins to fear that it is not so desirable or easy
after all. He feels aversion to one story that implies some hypocritical behavior is filial: an old man pretends to stumble and cry like a baby to make his parents laugh and prevent them from worrying about him. Children, he insists, despise hypocrisy and lies, which are apparently characteristic of Confucian ideology. Lu Xun interestingly mentions that this hypocrisy only appears later, through the perversion of the stories by later scholars, so it is not actually the original Confucian texts that are so hypocritical. He writes, “Who knows why gentlemen of a later age had to change him [the old man in the previous story] into a hypocrite before they could rest easy in their minds? … Like ‘taking delight in what is nauseating,’ this presentation of inhumanity as morality vilifies the ancients and perverts posterity” (33). Lu Xun defends the ancients in this way.

According to the Confucian ideology set out by the book, one may also be expected to put his own life in danger in order to be filial. Hearing the story of the father who plans to bury his baby alive in order to better feed and take care of his own mother, Lu Xun the child begins to fear that his own father will kill him out of filial piety. He then begins to fear his father and his grandmother (whose needs were to be prioritized above his own). He even begins to hope for the death of his grandmother—an entirely unfilial sentiment—which he says “is something that the Confucian scholar who gave me The Picture-Book of Twenty-Four Acts of Filial Piety could never have foreseen” (35). This story thus introduces the hypocritical and harmful effects of Confucian ideology.

From enjoyment of books, Lu Xun the child then enters the world of Confucian ideology. In “The Fair,” mentioned above, Lu Xun’s father’s demand that he memorize and recite a passage from a classic text ruins any enjoyment he can derive from a much anticipated visit to a fair. Retelling the incident, Lu Xun notes a complete forgetting of
the visit to the fair, remembering in great detail only the memorizing and reciting of the passage:

Now everything else is forgotten, vanished without a trace. Only my recitation from the *Rhymed History* is as clear in my mind as if it happened yesterday.

Even now, when I think of it, I still wonder why my father made me learn a lesson by heart at a time like that. (42)

This is the first appearance of the father in this collection, and it is significant that Lu Xun remembers his father's incomprehensible perpetration of him but forgets everything about the subsequent visit to the fair—pointing to both an overabundance of memory as well as a dearth of it. That he remarks that the recitation is "as clear in my mind as if it happened yesterday" and that even at the time of writing he cannot understand why his father made him do this point to the traumatic effects of the incident upon Lu Xun. This particular incident and its incomprehensibility haunts and disturbs him "even to this day" (42).

The placement of the following piece, "Wu Chang," seems perplexing and contributes to the perception of fragmentariness in the overall narrative structure of the collection. An account of a beloved god that appears in parades and dramas, "Wu Chang" displays nostalgia and continues a thought begun by "The Fair" about old gods, parades, and dramas, but the preoccupation with this character must be explained further. As ghostlike yet human, with a dislike of injustice, and as a figure embodying death and mourning, Wu Chang enjoys popularity among audiences of these pageants, according to Lu Xun. People love Wu Chang, the god who fetches those who are to die, because he would like to extend mercy to those whom he must eventually condemn to hell. The
King of Hell, however, punishes Wu Chang for showing mercy, and Wu Chang decides never to do so again. "Of all the ghosts," Lu Xun writes, "he is the only one with any human feeling" (50). And describing Wu Chang as "wearing deep mourning" (45), this piece points to the mourning that occurs with death and loss while also lamenting the "in-between-ness" of Wu Chang, who is between the human realm and the netherworld of ghosts, where spirits are judged rigidly and unmercifully. Thus, as Larson points out, Lu Xun transitions from the "human" world of the child to the unsympathetic world of adult social order (the hell of unsympathetic, Confucian China). Through the "human" figure of Wu Chang, who is said to be a man who travels to the spirit realm in his sleep, Lu Xun laments a loss of innocence, human sympathy, and mercy through a kind of "death."

Between these two worlds, Lu Xun experiences a change in worldview, a change in his sense of self and how he relates to others, which are also symptoms of traumatic loss (Erikson 1995: 194). At the midpoint of the collection, amidst this transition from the child and adult world, this piece describes Wu Chang as a figure of the in-between-ness that marks such a transition.

In "Hundred-Plant Garden," as mentioned above, Lu Xun contrasts the childhood paradise of the garden at home to the school where he is sent. This piece clearly sets apart the idyllic joys of childhood play from the displeasure of the school. The child Lu Xun even wonders what he did that made him deserve the punishment of being sent to this school:

I don't know why my family decided to send me to school, or why they chose the school reputed to be the strictest in the town. Perhaps it was because I had spoiled the mud wall by uprooting milkwort, perhaps because I had thrown bricks into the Liangs' courtyard next door, perhaps because I had climbed the
well coping to jump off it.... There is no means of knowing. At all events, this meant an end to my frequent visits to Hundred-Plant Garden. Adieu, my crickets! Adieu, my raspberries and climbing figs! (56)

As Janet Ng (2003) also notes in her reading of this piece, the theme of falling from grace cannot be mistaken here; punishment comes for some wrongdoing or other, and Lu Xun the child is exiled from paradise. There is even a snake purported to exist in the garden, which reminds him of a story his nanny had told him about a snake-demon with the head of a beautiful woman, who calls one’s name and, if answered, devours the answerer. Interestingly, this story signals his departure from paradise with the advent of language—naming—and textual study. It points to the dangers of being “hailed,”48 society’s incorporation of one into its strict world of rules and taboos through language, assigning roles and relationships in order to regulate and discipline. This hailing becomes traumatic—indeed cast as a danger (a snake or snake demon) for which Lu Xun seems to have been unprepared. By narrating his exile from the garden as a loss, Lu Xun constructs the memory of his childhood as the memory of trauma, “remembering” this loss as a site of identity formation.

**Rejection of “Chineseness”**

The next essay, “Fuqin de bing” (Father’s illness), tells of Lu Xun’s father’s death, which could not be prevented despite long and costly treatment by doctors practicing traditional medicine. In this his second and last appearance, the father is merely depicted as sickly and dying, without much dialogue or action. Lu Xun focuses mainly on the loss of his

48 Althusser’s term.
father, the charlatanry of the Chinese doctors, and feelings of guilt over his father’s death. This guilt appears at the conclusion of the piece, when he expresses the hope that his father’s death go quickly and when he follows a neighbor’s advice to call him “father” repeatedly while he is dying:

Sometimes the thought flashed into my mind, “Better if it could all be over quickly....” At once I knew I should not think of such a thing, in fact I felt guilty. But at the same time I felt this idea was only proper, for I loved my father dearly. Even today, I still feel the same about it.

[...]

“Call him!” said Mrs. Yen. “Your father’s at his last gasp. Call him quickly!”
“Father! Father!” I called accordingly.
“Louder. He can’t hear. Hurry up, can’t you?”
“Father! Father!”
His face, which had been composed, grew suddenly tense again; and he raised his eyelids slightly, as if in pain.
“Call him!” she insisted. “Hurry up and call him!”
“Father!!!”
“What is it? ... Don’t shout.... Don’t....”
His voice was low, and once more he started panting for breath. It was some time before he recovered his earlier calm.
“Father!!!”
I went on calling him until he breathed his last.
I can still hear my voice as it sounded then. And each time I hear those cries, I feel this was the greatest wrong I ever did my father. (66-67)

He feels he should not have wished for a quick end, yet this was only a wish that his father not suffer too much. His guilt seems to stem from a belief that he had not allowed his father to die in peace. He feels he should not have called his father repeatedly as Mrs. Yen had insisted, obviously disturbing his father’s calm. Interestingly, this calling of one’s name echoes the snake-demon’s calling of one’s name in the previous piece, “Hundred-Plant Garden,” pointing again to the disturbing nature of “hailing” someone.
The discomfort Lu Xun feels in calling his father on his deathbed may have something to do with their reversed roles; the son’s calling the father may impose some kind of authority upon him through “hailing” him. In some way Lu Xun’s guilt indicates a feeling of responsibility for his father’s death, as if he kills his father through not getting him the right treatment and then by disturbing his father’s calm. Before this passage, he explains the difference between Western and Chinese medical philosophy: in China, a filial son gives his parents ginseng in order to prolong their lives, whereas in the West, the main concern is that someone who cannot be cured should not suffer in death (66). His experience at his father’s deathbed shows him how wrong the Chinese tradition is, in its blind adherence to empty performance of rites, compared to the more sympathetic and sincere Western practice. These expressions of guilt reveal concern about whether he has truly been filial to his father, showing the extent to which Lu Xun still holds these “traditional” values while at the same time questioning the conventional ways of showing filial piety (those prescribed by an expert on etiquette like Mrs. Yen). “Remembering” the story in this way, Lu Xun focuses on the haunting guilt that results from the traumatic loss of his father, coincidentally placing blame on the same Chinese conventions he attacks politically.

In the next essay, “Suo ji” (Fragmentary recollections), Mrs. Yen appears again, exposed as a gossip given to rather inappropriate behavior, such as neglecting responsibility around children but acting as if she was taking care of them. Lu Xun explains her rumor-mongering as part of the reason for his leaving the hometown to study elsewhere, because she implies to neighbors that he steals and sells his mother’s jewelry, after she herself suggested to him to do the same. The piece traces his leaving home to
study in schools in Nanjing that taught Western subjects, but in the end, since he hasn’t learned anything there, he decides to go to Japan to study. The message of this piece seems to be that China could not offer him anything, even though it was beginning the process of modernizing itself, and he had to travel abroad in order to really learn something useful.

Once in Japan, where the next piece, “Tengye xiansheng” (Mr. Fujino), begins, Lu Xun again becomes disillusioned, this time with Tokyo, which is full of Chinese students with their queues annoyingly piled up on their heads. So he decides to go to medical school in Sendai, where there are no other Chinese students, obviously fleeing anything or anybody Chinese. Once in Sendai, however, encounters with racism from Japanese classmates (including the famous slide incident) cause him to finally leave medical school and eventually to return to China, forcing him in a way to realize his Chineseness and the need for him to reconcile with it. In one incident, the students accuse Lu Xun of cheating by getting extra help from their teacher, Mr. Fujino, who marks Lu Xun’s notes weekly. Lu Xun writes of this incident, “China is a weak country, therefore the Chinese must be an inferior people, and for a Chinese to get more than sixty marks could not be due simply to his own efforts. No wonder they suspected me” (85). In this context, Lu Xun writes fondly of Mr. Fujino because he is one of the only people who shows concern and sympathy not only for himself but also for China:

And I often think: the keen faith he had in me and his indefatigable help were in a limited sense for China, for he wanted China to have modern medical science; but in a larger sense they were for science, for he wanted modern medical knowledge to spread to China. In my eyes he is a great man, and I feel this in my heart, though his name is not known to many people. (87)
Perhaps it is from Mr. Fujino that Lu Xun learns to feel sympathy for the Chinese people and China, from which he has tried to escape.

The repetition of the slide incident in *Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk*, which was first narrated in the preface to *Nahan*, suggests its haunting presence in Lu Xun’s memory. The incident is a traumatic event because in memory it is inscribed with intense meaning—as the moment of realization of the lacks of the Chinese people, as he notes, but also the realization that he is a reviled Chinese as well. It is the Lacanian mirror stage, when Lu Xun sees himself as others see him, a unified self, but it traumatizes because it is a completely negative self that embodies lack. The repercussions of this event are still felt much later, driving him to narrate it at least twice in his writings, indicating a continued working through of that trauma.

In the last piece, “Fan Ai-nung,” Lu Xun gives a clearer picture of his rejection of Chineseness and of his subsequent attempt at reconciliation with it. At first, Lu Xun feels deeply ashamed of Fan, a fellow Chinese student in Japan, and his compatriots. Lu Xun shows disgust for them from the moment they arrive from China. One of them had brought shoes for bound feet, which Lu Xun found extremely embarrassing, especially when the Japanese customs officer examined them with curiosity. Then they kept deferring to each other, unable to decide who should sit where, with the result that when the train started moving several of them fell down. Lu Xun felt annoyed with them for displaying these negative traits of the Chinese (footbinding and impractical politeness), and his obvious disdain of his fellow Chinese made the other Chinese students also dislike Lu Xun. Fan exhibits another negative trait that Lu Xun felt was characteristic of the Chinese—a lack of sympathy, which Lu Xun detected in Fan when Fan did not want
to send a telegram condemning the murder of his very own teacher, Xu Xilin. This inhumanity was inexcusable to Lu Xun, who from that moment on often opposed Fan. It was not until later, when they met again in China, that they became friends and Lu Xun began feeling sympathy for Fan, who was having a lot of trouble getting work. In the end, Fan dies by drowning, and it is unclear whether he has committed suicide. Lu Xun here also expresses some feelings of guilt for not being able to help his friend procure some work, but by extension these feelings of guilt are also for not being able to help China. In conclusion, Lu Xun expresses concern for Fan’s daughter and her education: “I wonder how his only daughter is faring now? If she is studying, she ought to have graduated from secondary school by this time” (100). Coming full circle, Lu Xun returns to concern for the young and their education in China, fearing for them and hoping they can have a better experience than he, Fan, and the rest of his generation have had.

Return

The literal return to China and the return to the concern for education in China embody part of the larger theme of return in this autobiography. By visiting these memories, Lu Xun also returns to his past, unable to forget or reject it, just as he is unable to forget or reject what has shaped his personality and identity. In addressing the trauma he suffered from traditional Chinese education and tradition, he attempts to mourn the loss of childhood joy and innocence.

By writing nostalgically of his childhood, characterizing it as full of humanity, sympathy, and joy, Lu Xun equates it to paradise, or the Lacanian Real, returning to this lost paradise in his nostalgic writings (as he does in “Hometown,” discussed in Chapter 102
1). The concept of the Real comes from Lacan’s reformulation of Freud’s Oedipus complex. According to Lacan, one does not necessarily desire the mother so much as desire that realm of experience perhaps associated with the mother—when experience was substantial—the Real. In the Real, a baby perceives itself to be unified with the mother. Once the child experiences the mirror stage and learns language, however, she begins to think of and see herself as a separate entity from others. Opposed to the Real, then, is the Symbolic, in which language creates separate and seemingly whole identities (by assigning names and pronouns) and experience is differential. The threat, then, is not necessarily from the father, but from any authority, such as that of society in general, which forces one to repress certain desires.

In the case of Lu Xun, the child’s urges to look at fantastic pictures, to go to a fair, to play in the garden, to learn about supernatural beings are all opposed by authority (or the name of the father). With the highly Oedipal tone of this work, where the father and the text ruin childhood fun in “The Fair,” or when the teacher ruins the students’ fun in “Hundred-Plant Garden,” or when Lu Xun feels guilt in the death of his father in “Father’s Illness,” it makes sense to consult psychoanalytic theory for a possible explanation. “Father’s Illness” most clearly brings out the Oedipal in this collection. Confessing guilt over his father’s death, Lu Xun implies that he somehow bears responsibility for it. Knowing from the earlier story “The Fair” that his father was strict in the son’s education, the reader would likely understand any inclination of the son to oppose the father. In light of the iconoclasm of the May Fourth period, antagonism toward any father-figure or authority (as well as guilt over this antagonism) is also understandable.
The opposition of play against Confucian textual study places critical emphasis upon play. This emphasis recurs in Lu Xun’s writing; he wrote in the prose poem “The Kite” (discussed in the previous chapter) that “play is a child’s best occupation, and playthings his good angels” (Lu 2003: 44). Lu Xun’s return to concern for the education of children at the close of Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk expresses hope that the children of the present, or at least of the future, will be able to keep on playing, to remain in paradise and never have to suffer the undue punishment of exile from the garden or condemnation to hell. If China can learn mercy and sympathy, if the King of Hell will allow these to reign, then the children (and China) can be saved. If the Symbolic (or tradition, represented by classical writing) is suppressed, the Real (pre-tradition, represented by the vernacular) may no longer be lost or inaccessible.

The nostalgia for a “lost” paradise that Lu Xun displays in Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk and elsewhere (in some short stories and prose poems examined in this thesis, for example) at times implies that a return to the pre-Confucian past could be a possible solution that Lu Xun suggests for a better future. By casting child’s play as access to the Real (here the idealized, prelapsarian past), Lu Xun seems to put forth something of a hopeful vision of the future.

Conclusion

As Svetlana Boym (2001) has pointed out, revolution and nostalgia are merely two sides of the same coin. The two seem contradictory, but one is not possible without the other. Lu Xun’s nostalgia for childhood paradise informs the May Fourth project for revolution to modernize China, in ways that appear contradictory but which are only natural when
considering that the most likely material for dreams of the future come from memories of the past (or that the material for memories of the past are dreams of the future).

These memories of the past may not represent the "true" past, after all, as Lu Xun himself points out in the preface to this collection: his memories of the vegetables and fruits of his childhood never corroborate with his later experiences tasting them, and he sees that they may keep on "deceiving" him and forcing him to think constantly of the past (2). He also admits that the ten pieces "are records transcribed from memory, perhaps deviating somewhat from the facts, but this is just how I remember things today" (2). Thus he emphasizes the dream-like and fantastic qualities of memory.

The veracity of the slide incident, here mentioned in "Mr. Fujino," has also been questioned by scholars, who wonder if this is really the turning point at which Lu Xun decided to abandon medical studies and turn to literature. This memory may be one of those that Primo Levi explains as a "frequently rehearsed or narrated memory" that "takes on a form which distorts the 'original' memory and then solidifies" (King 2000: 25). Yet in this way, even if a fantasy, the memory could still hold what King describes as the "affect of cumulative experience which has persisted in the unconscious" (45). It doesn’t really matter whether the incident really happened or not. As King quotes one of the texts she examines, "[w]hat actually happened is less important than what is felt to have happened" (41).49

Lu Xun’s memories, like all memories, can be said to be "retranslations" (King’s term) or reinterpretations of what "really" happened in light of what is known and needed now, at the time of remembering. This is what is meant when Christopher Bollas says we

49 This text is Ronald Fraser's In Search of a Past.
“make the past available for the self’s future” (quoted in King 2000: 180), using the past as a tool to move on in life. Freud explains this process as similar to the way in which national histories are constructed: “We must above all bear in mind that people’s ‘childhood memories’ are only consolidated at a later period … and that this involves a complicated process of remodeling, analogous in every way to the process by which a nation constructs legends about its own history” (quoted in King 2000: 19). In his reminiscences, Lu Xun constructs personal history as well as national history, pointing out that Confucian ideology has harmed not only his childhood but the life of the nation.

Nostalgia for that childhood and that paradise of pre-Confucian (pre-Oedipal) China indicates a desire to return to an idyllic state where sympathy and humanity exist, whether that idyllic state really existed then or not. This nostalgia demonstrates more the wishes of the present than the fact of the past. King explains the fascination with the pre-Oedipal on the individual and collective levels:

This evocation of early bliss and innocence demonstrates the way in which individual psychic and collective cultural myths mutually reinforce each other: they are so powerful because the pre-Oedipal is precisely what we cannot remember, but what we need to remember as what has been lost. (28)

This loss, then, is actually a myth, “constructed out of the needs of the present,” and so “mourning is in error” (28).

Dominick LaCapra (2001) also argues that mourning is impossible in cases where absence is misconstrued as loss. He points out that the imagined unity with the mother proposed by the Lacanian Oedipal story cannot be loss, since that unity is mythic and never existed anyway. This is the same for all narratives of fall from grace or loss of
innocence. These narratives, argues LaCapra, too often result in the desired erasure of a demonized past after the “Fall,” and utopic views of a redemptive future, which can end in scapegoating and other devastating consequences (as in Nazi Germany). The kind of anxiety brought on by such structural trauma (mythic narratives of absence) can only be minimized by accepting and learning to cope with it, since structural trauma is not an actual trauma to be recovered from in the sense that historical trauma (real loss) can be.

If the loss of this idyllic childhood or pre-Oedipal China is not real, then any amount of mourning may do no good. Herein lies the tenuousness of any hope Lu Xun may express through nostalgic writings; return or access to the Real may not be possible at all, precisely because it may never have existed in the first place. Mourning the “loss” (or absence) may never give way to recovery from anxiety or depression. Hopes for the future based on this mythic past may never lead anywhere. Lu Xun never does find himself able to suggest any concrete measures for the future in his creative writings; here he only alludes to childhood education and play as possible solutions.

Yet these suggestions may still stand as hope, and it is notable that Lu Xun eventually finds this hope within China, the nation and identity he rejects at first but must reconcile himself with in the end. At least certain aspects of Chineseness are acceptable; there are good things in his and China’s past that he can grasp. And it is in this very

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50 LaCapra finds it imperative to distinguish between absence and loss, because absence cannot be resolved through mourning or redemption, and because conflating absence with loss can lead to the projection of blame onto others. LaCapra explains: “The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome. By contrast, the anxiety attendant upon absence may never be entirely eliminated or overcome but must be lived in various ways” (57). In the case of Nazi Germany, non-Aryans were blamed for the fall of Germany, and a prelapsarian (purely Aryan) past was idealized as a vision for the future. (One may even imagine that in the case of China, totalistic May Fourth iconoclasm and rejection of tradition led in the end to devastating consequences by the time of the Cultural Revolution.) Absence should rather be accepted as absence, which is empowering in the sense that one can then realistically strive toward a more desirable life in the present rather than a perfect life in the future (58).
return to the good of the past that Lu Xun finds himself able to make this return to China, a return to lost sympathy that is traced by his autobiography. After the traumatic "loss" of childhood innocence, which Lu Xun claims is destroyed by the Confucian tradition, he moves from a rejection of all things Chinese (including himself) to a reconciliation, however partial, by discovering sympathy for the Chinese intellectual, and therefore for himself as well. This narrated return to the past helps him to construct his identity, to delineate all that has shaped him—"trauma" and memory—and to reconcile himself to himself. This individual journey may provide some hope, then, for the journey of the nation and its own identity.

Of course Lu Xun's construction of identity comes across precisely as such—a construction—and one that may not actually seem successful. The fragmentariness of the account draws attention to the fact that unity is only achieved through chronology; the disparate parts are only faintly connected by the political message he wishes to convey about Confucian tradition. The indirectness of the account—for example, ending with the story of Fan Ainong instead of with his own (a transference or avoidance like those in the story "Zai jiulong shang," discussed in Chapter 1)—likewise refuses the notion of identity as concrete and stable. The autobiography through its form and even content points out the failings of identity construction as much as it shows the perhaps political necessity of identity construction in times of historical turmoil. Once again, Lu Xun manages to problematize the very process he depicts as undertaking, conveying his characteristic ambivalence and begging the reader to do the work of finding resolution. Expressing hope, he seems to say, comes at great cost; it oversimplifies a history that is in fact much more complicated and that resists manipulation.

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CONCLUSION

Fascinated by the obsessive preoccupation with memory and the past in many of Lu Xun’s writings, I attempted in this thesis to point out how memory becomes a focus of these writings, to suggest possible causes for such preoccupation with the past, and to show how Lu Xun attempted to resolve these problems of memory. In discussing all of the various short stories, prose poems, and reminiscences examined here, I found that the many problems of memory exhibited therein are intimately connected to problems of mourning, because the disturbing omnipresence of memories of the past indicates a failure to adequately grieve their passing or loss. These same failures to mourn the lost past have implications for the possibility of hope for the future, which is the central dilemma in much of Lu Xun’s writing.

In the first chapter, I analyzed three short stories about “home” as responses to a crisis of memory. The stories tell of various regressions into the past, critiquing these regressions while at the same time sympathizing with the impetus to return to the past. They set out the problems China’s intellectuals might have faced—preoccupation with the past, disillusionment with the present, nostalgia, loss of hope leading to inaction—and in doing so imply the difficulty of mourning a lost past that won’t go away.

The second chapter discovered that Lu Xun’s prose poetry also communicates the same difficulty of mourning, through expressing the anxiety and fear that result from
feeling haunted by the past. Caught between past and future in a kind of limbo, the poet
discovers that his memories of the past are ghosts, existing between death and life.
Several of the poems express a fear of living death—in the guise of corpses that move
and talk, incomplete death. Other poems lament the way memory functions, trapping one
in between complete recall and complete forgetting, neither of which the poet
experiences. The prose poetry thus expresses the in-between-ness that Lu Xun, and other
Chinese intellectuals of the time, must have felt.

In the last chapter, I read Lu Xun’s reminiscences as constructing identity (of
himself and of the nation) through narrating (and constructing) the memories that haunt
him. This autobiography tells of a lost childhood paradise (or, metaphorically, an idyllic
pre-Confucian China) destroyed by the Confucian tradition, creating trauma from which
Lu Xun (China?) attempts to recover through writing. In constructing identity through
this autobiographical narrative, Lu Xun attempts to resolve the personal battles that may
also be battles of the nation—internalized racism, recovery from a traumatic past,
melancholia over the loss of innocence. That Lu Xun does not present a coherent, unified
story of his life but instead writes a fragmented, incomplete one points to his experience
of life as somewhat fragmented and incomplete. That the reader (and not the author
alone) must make connections between the different pieces emphasizes the constructed-
ness of a life story. Little narrative unity may signal the absence of full recovery from
trauma or depression, yet Lu Xun is still able to achieve some reconciliation with
Chineseness, and therefore expresses a little bit of hope.

The hope that sometimes appears in these pieces remains shaky, however,
because of Lu Xun’s continued preoccupation with the past, and because his hopefulness
only seems to come across in nostalgic images of an idealized childhood. Whether or not one sees hope in the messages of Lu Xun’s works depends upon whether one believes nostalgic memories can be interpretations of the past colored by present hopes for the future, the part of reflective nostalgia that Svetlana Boym calls “play that points to the future” (Boym 2001: 55). It depends on whether one sees these pieces as primarily engaged in mourning (working through a finite grieving period after which one recovers) or in melancholia (grieving that does not and cannot end because loss is vague or unreal). Both mourning and melancholia, according to Boym, are present in reflective nostalgia, so the question of hopefulness is a question of whether the pieces allow recovery from trauma or depression. Are there, in fact, glimmers of hope for the future and recovery—for instance, toward the end of Wild Grass when a return to healthy memory function is hinted at, or when the narrator of “Hometown” holds the fictitious image of the young Runtu in his mind, or when Lu Xun finds sympathy for Fan Ainong at the end of his reminiscences? Or do the absence of complete healing in the prose poems, the melancholic attachment to lost childhood (as embodied by the dream-image of the child Runtu), and the ambivalence towards China that remains in the reminiscences override all possible signs of hope? The latter case would seem more likely. The most hopeful sign of all, however, is the fact that Lu Xun wrote at all despite the heavy depression that pervades these writings. In the end, the message of his writing is that without adequate mourning of loss, hope can only remain tenuous. After a too-abrupt break with the past, therefore, that past will haunt one until it is dealt with.


