

## Xia Yu and Jesus: A Comparison

Lu Xun's thinking on salvation sprang from the most profound recesses of his soul. He had the "desire to strike out...to escape,"(A Call to Arms, 1923) to seek a plan for national salvation. When he went to Sendai Medical College in Japan to study medicine, his intention was to save people, to save his countrymen who, like father, had suffered from the wrong treatment. However, the contrast between his people's sturdiness and spiritual apathy led him to deep and painful thought and impelled him to a new choice—to give up medicine for literature. In his belief that literature could change people's spirits he was influenced by Japanese naturalistic literature. In order to establish the nation, one must first establish the people. Thus Lu Xun began to ponder the Chinese character: "What is the ideal human character? What is most lacking in the Chinese character? What is the root cause of the problem?"<sup>1</sup>

He sought "warriors of the spirit;" and "voices in alien lands."<sup>2</sup> What "new voice" did he find there? That is the Mara poet. "Mara" means the devil or Satan, and for Lu Xun this meant the European Romantic poets who represented the negative forces which moved society forward, poets such as Shelley and Byron. It was Lu Xun's fervent hope that visionaries such as these would appear in China, "speak with the voice of the power," break the bonds of loneliness, bring new life to his compatriots, and make the country prosper in the world. His emotional call to arms was:

"If we search all China today, where will we find the warrior of the spirit? Are there any who speak out in sincerity, any who call our people to goodness, beauty, strength and vigor? Are there compassionate voices which would save our people from desolation?"<sup>3</sup>

The mission of the poet is to be vigilant and to speak out on behalf of the people, to be the soul and mind of the people, one able to scrutinize past and present weaknesses and discern the signs of future developments.

"Gazing at the sunrise or watching the stars come out at night (he) would look down upon great cities, how the fortunes of men waxed and waned, pondering the vestiges of oppression and resistance from former times, while ruined cities and their impoverished inhabitants, crying out with hunger and with cold, passed vividly before his eyes."<sup>4</sup> (Compare with the prophets in the Bible)

Yet finally Lu Xun had the painful feelings that in China, "though the disappearance of poets may seem a trifling matter, it heralds the onset of greater desolation (in society)."<sup>5</sup> Filled with sorrow, he wrote: "Our nation is laid waster, but we have as yet no Jeremiah

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<sup>1</sup> Xu Shoutang, *Remembering My Friend, Lu Xun*.

<sup>2</sup> Lu Xun, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry*, (1907)

<sup>3</sup> Lu Xun, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry*, (1907)

<sup>4</sup> Lu Xun, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry*, (1907)

<sup>5</sup> Lu Xun, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry*, (1907)

to compose a lamentation for us that the world and future generations (may hear of our plight).”<sup>6</sup>

Jeremiah was a prophet-poet of the Israelites. For the regeneration of the nation he went about crying out for help, exhorting the people to faith, and admonishing them not to give up hope, because the Messiah would come in the end. He has been called the “weeping prophet.” In the Old Testament book Lamentations, he sings thus: “For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me...”<sup>7</sup>

Lu Xun is the Jeremiah of the Chinese people. He was concerned about his country and his people, he always had a compassionate heart, always raised a sincere voice. He wanted to awaken the deeply slumbering spirit of his people across the vast land of China, yet: “What a chill desert, how boundless! Though Lu Xun raised his solitary ‘call to arms’,<sup>8</sup> only echoes rose from the emptiness in reply...”<sup>9</sup> The madman and Kong Yi Ji along with their supporting characters, Ah Q and the people of Weizhuang, Old Shuan and the people in the teahouse...with profound sorrow Lu Xun has portrayed group after group of apathetic and cruel souls in his fiction, “grieving over their misfortune” and “feeling indignant when they let him down.”

At first Lu Xun was influenced by Nietzsche. But his (Lu Xun) intent was to enlighten. As for Nietzsche’s superman philosophy which regarded the masses as a congenital “mob”, as “trash”, “mere dirt”, who needed to be controlled, as insects who should give absolute obedience to the genius, this was completely at odds with Lu Xun’s thinking. Though in his treatment of the national character he enumerates the drawbacks, he does so in order to draw attention to a cure. In a letter to his friend Qian Xuantong, we find this passage:

“Jesus said, if you see a cart about to overturn, put out a hand to hold it up. Nietzsche said, if you see a cart about to overturn, give it a push. I naturally agree with Jesus, but I think that if a person is not willing to have your support, then there’s no reason to force it on them. Do what they say and have done with it. If later the cart hasn’t overturned, all well and good. If it does overturn in the end, then go and give practical help in raising it. My elder brother, it takes less energy to raise the cart than to force it to stay upright, and in the latter case it is even more difficult to see results. To raise the cart after it falls is much more beneficial to them (the owners of the cart) than to put out a hand to hold it up when it is on the point of falling.” (*On Extremities in Culture*, 1907)

Lu Xun was thus unrelenting in the task of “holding up” and “raising” in a practical manner in the great and difficult task of reforming the national character. His greatness lies in the fact that through superhuman willpower he was able to fix the tragedy of his times and the contradictions of the ego within himself where he then undertook extremely painful and strict observation and critique, profound and trenchant analysis, from which an idea would crystallize. His short story “Medicine” is based on the premise

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<sup>6</sup> Lu Xun, *On the Power of the Mara Poetry*, (1907)

<sup>7</sup> Lamentations, (chapter and verse?)

<sup>8</sup> The title of a collection of Lu Xun’s short stories.

<sup>9</sup> Qu Qiubai, *In the Desert*.

that to save the nation one must first save the people and that in order to save people one must first enlighten them. The unique depth of this idea arises from his use of two families, the Hua's and the Xia's, as metaphors for the fate of the Chinese people and of "medicine" as a metaphor of the pursuit of the means to salvation of the nation and the soul. The story was published in the New Youth Magazine (No.5, vol.6) edited by Li Dazhao, a special issue on research into Marxism. Was this meant to suggest to the people that they should reflect on whether the prescription for national salvation of the Chinese people which Lu Xun was seeking was to be found in Marxism? There is considerable food for thought in the idea.

Before writing "Medicine," Lu Xun wrote an essay titled: "Subjects of the Tyrant," in which we find the following passage:

"A tyrant's subjects will, in the main, be very more violent than the tyrant. The tyrant's tyranny frequently cannot satisfy the wishes of the subjects under his rule. Let us leave China aside and take an example from overseas. When the procurator wanted to release Jesus, the crowd demanded that he be crucified. The tyrant's subjects simply wish that the tyranny takes its toll on someone else. This they watch happily. Cruelty is their pleasure, the suffering of others their enjoyment and comfort. Their own talent lies in the lucky escape, from the safety of which they again choose sacrifice, which sates their thirst for blood, but no one understands. The one who dies says, 'aiya'; the one who lives is happy."

Such reflections permeate Lu Xun's short story "Medicine." He links the reformation of the national character with a critique of the feudal clan system, searching for the roots of national character and exposing them as if digging up the ancestral grave. The story also expresses Lu Xun's resentment toward and sorrow over the hostility which existed toward the early revolutionaries, towards the pleasure taken in their sacrifice, towards those "subjects of tyrants" who found consolation in it.

Lu Xun's early essay "On the Power of Mara Poetry," reveals his comprehensive and profound knowledge of Biblical literature. He appreciates Lamentations, considering it the masterpiece of Hebraic literature. The book transmits the hope of the coming of the Messiah (that is, Jesus Christ of the New Testament). Like the Messiah awaited by the Israelites, what Lu Xun was seeking for his people was an iron-fisted, powerful Saviour to whom he could entrust the ideals of the early revolutionaries. Like many intellectuals of the May Fourth era, Lu Xun accepted the historical person of Jesus as the liberator of political justice, the reformer of the spirit, but not as the Saviour in a religious and spiritual sense. In the story "Medicine" he portrays an early revolutionary seeking liberation for the people—one Xia Yu who bears many similarities to the Biblical Jesus. In what follows, I will attempt to make some comparisons between the two.

Jesus was sold out by his own disciple Judas, who obtained 32 ounces of silver as blood money; Xia Yu was sold out by his own third uncle Xia for 25 ounces of silver.

Early in the morning after Jesus' arrest he suffered the humiliation of being slapped in the face by the guards, and after he was nailed upon the cross, the guards divided his garments among them. In prison, Xia Yu was also beaten by the jealous guard Red-eye and after his execution, this same guard took his clothes for himself, making the executioner, Uncle Kang, extremely indignant. Prior to Jesus' crucifixion, the Roman procurator, fearing he would have the blood of an innocent man on his hands, wanted to release him, but the crowd shouted for his crucifixion, asking that Jesus' blood be on them and upon their children. This "evil mob" was the same one which Lu Xun described in "Subjects of a Tyrant," one with a bloodthirsty ruthlessness. This theme is echoed in "Medicine": Uncle Kang, Red-eye, the hunchback, the guy in his twenties and the rest—among them we have the brute who beat Xia Yu, his executioner, and those for whom he was a distraction, an amusement and a comfort, as then enjoyed "Red-eye's blows."

Jesus was made fun of. While he was being nailed to the cross, his great compassion for the ignorant, apathetic people showed itself, as from a surpassing spiritual plane he said: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." We cannot explain this statement as unprincipled love and forgiveness (at least not to Lu Xun's eyes), it is composed much more of Jesus' spirit rising above his human suffering, looking down and pitying the simple-minded, ignorant people: even then do not know what they are about, how pitiable they are! They did not know what was going on. In "Medicine," though Xia Yu suffered tremendous physical cruelty at the hands of Red-eye, he responded with a compassion borne of spiritual superiority which Red-eye had no way to understand: "Poor, poor thing!" This is the Xia Yu who, his expression like that of a Saviour, announced to the people: "The great Qing Empire belongs to all of us."

In the course of his ministry, Jesus was rejected by the people, especially those from his hometown. They looked down on him: "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?" Things got to the point where Jesus could but leave his home, and as he was leaving, lament: A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.

Xia Yu also met with rejection in the course of trying to spread revolution. His mother's remarks on visiting his grave: "none of our relatives have ever been," indicate this; furthermore it was Xia Yu's own uncle who sold him out. The people from his own village looked down on him even more. Uncle Kang said without compunction: "Who is he? Son of Widow Xia of course! Young rascal! The rogue simply didn't want to live, simply didn't want to." Remarks such as these show the people's apathetic cruelty and the resultant solitariness and tragedy of the revolutionaries. When Jesus spoke upon the cross, how could the foolish crowd understand the import of what he was saying? They made a joke of him, taunting him as "king," which they inscribed on a sign to ridicule him, to indicate that he was a madman. This is similar to the crowd in the teahouse. When they heard that after Xia Yu had been beaten, he said: "Poor, Poor thing!" they thought he was begging for mercy from Red-eye's blows. When they understood that his was not the case, they were thrown into confusion, "suddenly saw the light" and said "He must have been crazy!" "He must have been crazy" passed from person to person, resounding

cruelly and shrilly in the teahouse, like the sounds which lingered, endlessly resounding, in the air over Golgotha. The souls of the foolish Israelite crowd of one thousand nine hundred-odd years before had not dispersed, but had been reborn in China as evil spirits and monsters.

In the sombre conclusion to “Medicine” we see Widow Xia and Old Shuan’s wife at the cemetery. Here we have a strong, shocking contrast with a gloomy tenor overlying the whole. There is the contrast between the characters and their surroundings, between the characters, between the living and the dead, between the dead, between two hearts, and the contrast of psychological states to the surroundings. All without exception show forth the profound depths of Lu Xun’s pen. We can also make a comparison in this scene between Widow Xia and Old Shuan’s wife and Jesus’ mother Mary and the women at the tomb:

As his mother, Mary did not entirely understand Jesus’ mission, and this failure to understand had begun in Jesus’ youth. The Bible records that once when Joseph and Mary took the boy Jesus into the town for a religious festival, Jesus left them while they were on the road and went to the temple to discuss the word of God with the elders there. His parents thought he was lost. When they found him in the temple, Mary scolded her son as a mother would and Jesus said: “Don’t you know I must be about my father’s business!” This happened when Jesus was twelve years old and he was then already preparing to leave his parents in order to preach the gospel. When Jesus was an adult he took part in a wedding feast in Cana where he performed his first miracle. Then the son scolded his mother for her lack of understanding of him: “What have you to do with me?” Finally, when Mary saw her son nailed upon the cross, her sorrow as a mother was naturally uncontrollable; yet as a human being, she felt the same sort of shame at her son’s suffering as Widow Xia, because crucifixion was the most shameful and cruel punishment, and at that time Jesus had been rejected by the multitude. The crucified Jesus was very clear on this point, saying to his mother: “Woman, behold your son!” “Son” meant his beloved disciple John. To John he said, “Behold your mother!” And in this way he gave his mother to John to alleviate her suffering and same at losing her son, and Mary became part of John’s family. These two statements of Jesus are imbued with his deep love for and understanding of his mother. He had seen into the deepest recesses of her heart. Lu Xun grasped this point with great acuity. At the cemetery when Widow Xia saw Old Shuan’s wife, “she hesitated and a flush of shame spread over her pale face. However, she summoned up courage to cross over to a grave in the left section, where she set down her basket.”

Because she had no way to understand Xia Yu’s revolutionary activities and death, Widow Xia felt estranged from her own and ashamed in front of others. Only when alone did she let her sorrow show. Lu Xun’s “distortion” –the wreath of flowers on the son’s grave—makes the mother even more bewildered. Her old eyes are blurry, at first she thought there were just a few scattered pale flowers. But when “...the old woman had gone up to the grave to look more closely. ‘They have no roots,’ she said to herself. ‘They can’t have grown here. Who could have been here? Children don’t come here to

play, and none of our relatives have ever been. What could have happened?’ She puzzled over it, until suddenly her tears began to fall, and she cried...”

In the Bible, before Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the tomb, they saw that the stone that had been blocking the tomb had been rolled away, and upon entering the tomb they saw the grave clothes to one side, but did not realize that this was the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning Jesus’ resurrection after death. Mary stood outside the tomb and wept, tears obscuring her sight. She could not see clearly and when Jesus appeared to her she did not recognize him, she thought he was a gardener. Only when Jesus called her name did she know him and cried out joyfully in Hebrew “Rabboni!”

The wreath in “Medicine” and the grave clothes in the Bible have a symbolic meaning, revealing a new hope to people. Lu Xun used the wreath to hint that there were successors to the revolution who would be carrying on the revolutionary activities in secret, that they secretly honored their revolutionary martyrs with flowers and carried on the struggle. The grave clothes left at the tomb in the Bible suggest a future hope for Jesus’ disciples: He had fulfilled the words of the prophets and had risen again after three days. However, neither Widow Xia nor Mary could comprehend these signs.

When the women reached the tomb in the Bible, they saw that the stone had been rolled away and upon entering the tomb they saw an angel, “his face was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow,” sitting on the stone which had been rolled away, who asked them why they were seeking the living in the place of the dead, because Jesus had risen. The angel ran from the tomb, trembling and amazed to tell Jesus’ disciples, but those men did not believe it. The risen Jesus appeared to the disciples and scolded them: “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”

In “Medicine” as Widow Xia looks around she sees a crow standing on a bare tree and asks superstitiously that her murdered son’s soul give her a sign through the crow. In the Bible, Jesus’ spirit appears through the body of the angel, to tell the people the news that he who was dead has risen. But unlike the Biblical cemetery which shook like an earthquake, this cemetery is “deathly silent.” Unlike the angel with the “face like lightning” and “raiment white as snow”, the crow (black) “its head drawn in, stood immobile as iron” (silent). The understanding of Mary and the other women, like that of Widow Xia, was to mourn the murdered Jesus. When they met the angel and heard his words, they were terrified. In “Medicine”, the crow’s final loud “caw,” caused the two women “startled” to turn their heads. In the Bible, the risen Jesus scolds the disciples for not having believed the words of the prophets: “O foolish men.” In “Medicine” Xia Yu in his tomb is silent, but Lu Xun uses the flower wreath on the tomb to designate his hope: the heroic soul of the revolutionary is risen in the hearts of others. With these profound touches, full of grief and indignation, Lu Xun accuses ignorant souls; with bold strokes he describes the ignorant common places of this feudal town and the sombre graveyard. As if he can no longer bear these desolate feelings, in the denouement there is a sudden raucous sound as the crow stretches its wings. The crow symbolizes the visionaries who “speak with heroic voice,” who are “strong” and “rapidly advancing,” shattering the

gravelike solitude that is China. At the same time he deals a severe metaphorical caution to Widow Xia's superstitious hope. We seem to hear Lu Xun's stern shout: Fools! All the prophets have spoken, but you have been too slow to believe.

Jesus held the Last Supper the night before he was crucified. During the meal, he instructed the disciple to eat the bread and drink the wine which he had blessed, because the bread represented his body and the wine the blood of his covenant with the people. They were to do this in memory of him. This is the source of the Communion service of the Christian Church, demonstrating Christians' loyalty to the Lord's Way and the hope to carry forward the gospel.

In "Medicine" Lu Xun turns this symbolism on its head. For Lu Xun the steamed bread and human blood are metaphors: Little Shuan eats the bread dipped in the blood of a revolutionary martyr, but his cannot cure the malady of apathy which afflicts the national character. This superstition-imbued tragedy continues in the graveyard with its spectral air, continues across the vast land of China. This caused Lu Xun to say "Throughout our country we find not one good image." Despite this, Lu Xun yet shouts his call to arms and his mighty pen still industriously cultivates the desert of the souls of China.

During the creative process of writing "Medicine" Lu Xun was influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by the image of Jesus. He does not directly describe the revolutionary activities of Xia Yu, but devotes most his effort to the suffering of the revolutionary and the responses these engendered in others. This makes the comparison with Jesus all the more apt, and is a wonderful and profound way to draw lessons. At the same time, this is in line with Lu Xun's thinking on visionaries: "Not that none has been born to us, but rather that when they appear, they are struck down immediately by the masses." (*On Extremities in Culture*) Jesus said to the multitude: "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me?" This is what Lu Xun means. The visionaries have been murdered, China is thereby desolated, and there is no visionary voice to break through the desolation. Filled with indignation and fury, Lu Xun wrote: "Does this then mean we are to stay lost in silent thought, that this is all we can do?" (*Addenda Collection*, 1935) Lu Xun lifted his head from silent thought to raise his call to arms. "Medicine" is his most indignant, profound cry.