Realism and revolution

LU HSUN'S "CALL TO ARMS"

by Robert M. Bartlett

When Party Chairman Hu Yao-bang chose the centennial of China's famous author Lu Hsun (1881-1936) to launch a condemnation of the "bourgeois liberalism" among China's contemporary writers, he acted within an established tradition of the Communist party to claim Lu Hsun as its own. In 1939, three years after Lu Hsun's death, Mao Tse-tung issued a statement praising "Lu Hsun the Communist, the giant of China's cultural Revolution," ignoring the fact that the writer never joined the Party and never accepted the precepts of Marx and Lenin.

Born Chou Shu-jen, Lu Hsun received a classical education, revealing an early affinity for books and art. He entered the Kiangnan Naval Academy and shortly thereafter transferred to the Army Academy, both in Nanking. Here he was introduced to translations of Western literature, notably the works of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley. The influence of the theory of evolution on Lu Hsun was profound. Exposed to the evidence of man's upward climb from the primitive, Lu Hsun became convinced that his own backward country could rise up and throw off the yoke of foreign domination.

In 1901, Lu Hsun traveled to Tokyo, where he studied medicine for two years, at the same time applying himself to the Japanese language and reading widely in Western science and literature. It was at this time too that he began to write articles exhorting his people to examine the outside world and to practice the "self-disciplined spirit of Sparta."

According to historians, Lu Hsun's career underwent an abrupt change when, during an anatomy class, he was exposed to photographs of purported Chinese spies who had been beheaded by the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War. Filled with shame and resentment, Lu Hsun decided that he would leave the field of medicine and work with his pen in an effort to save China.

Lu Hsun returned to China to carry out a prearranged marriage, and in the summer of 1906 he sailed back to Japan with his brother Chou Tso-jen. There the Chous launched a magazine, New Life, that expounded on Western culture and showed how these new concepts could be applied in China. Lu Hsun admired realists like Nietzsche, Chekhov, and Gogol. He championed material values and change, yet he sought more than industrial revolution and economic transformation, which he called "the tyranny of a million unreliable rascals." He retained an appreciation of spiritual values and longed for a poet like Byron to call China out of its stagnation. He condemned the acquiescence of the masses, yet he felt compassion for them. He demanded the modernization of his country, yet he wished to preserve "established blood vessels" of its cultural heritage. With his brother he translated the writings of European and Russian authors, especially those of such men as Gogol, Andreyev, and Sienkiewicz who dealt with the plight of oppressed peoples.

In 1909, Lu Hsun left Japan to teach science in Hangchow and serve as principal of a school in Shaohsing. His enthusiasm for his crusade to regenerate China ebbed as he discovered that the public disregarded his translations, which offered them new insight into the ways of the West, and was hostile to ideas of change and improvement. This frustration and sense of futility were deepened by the discouraging events that followed the revolution of 1911.

With the establishment of a republican government, Ts'ai Yuan-p'ai invited Lu Hsun to Nanking to a post in his ministry of education. When Dr. Sun Yat-sen resigned as president in favor of Yuan Shih-k'ai, Ts'ai was called to Peking to act as minister of education. Lu Hsun followed him and assumed duties in the department.

The political intrigues of the capital deepened Lu Hsun's pessimism regarding the reform of the country. He withdrew from the turmoil of intrigue to pursue his study of ancient Chinese texts, where "there were no political problems." Lu Hsun wrote on the history of literature, delving into the old traditional tales, and published numerous short stories and poems of former dynasties in An Outline History of Chinese Literature, A Brief History of Chinese Fiction, and Notes of Old Tales.

The literary revolution of 1919 rekindled Lu Hsun's interest in reform. Asked to contribute to New Youth, he wrote—in the spirit of Gogol—A Madman's Diary, a Western-style story that satirized the Chinese family system through the fantasies of a madman. This madman was a psychotic who lived in dread

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of being devoured by cannibals. The victim of a sick society, he nevertheless was able to point out the malaise that surrounded him: "In ancient times, as I recollect, people often ate human beings, but I am rather hazy about it. I tried to look it up, but my historybook has no chronology, and scrawled all over each page are the words 'virtue' and 'morality.' Since I could not sleep anyway, I read hard half the night, until I began to see words between the lines, the whole book being filled with the two words—'Eat People.' "

The madman was possessed by the thought that cannibalism was not just a relic of the past but a contemporary practice. "The eater of human flesh is my elder brother!" he cried. "I myself will be eaten by others." China, said the satirist, was a land where human beings had devoured one another for centuries. The sickness could be cured only by the most radical of programs; the old culture had to be uprooted and plowed under. As the madman put it: "You should change, change from the bottom of your heart...If you don't change, you may all be eaten by each other."

FISH IN A MUDDY STREAM
In 1921 Lu Hsun published The Story of Ah-Q, perhaps the most famous piece of modern Chinese fiction. Ah-Q was a poor, illiterate peasant who lived during the time of the 1911 revolution, a social outcast buffeted by change. In the midst of humiliations he reasoned in his naive way that lowliness was a virtue and that he was better off than the ambitious and successful. For the author, Ah-Q was a symbol of China, abject and humble before the industrial and military power of the West, stupid enough to argue that its traditional heritage was superior to the culture of the barbarians.

Lu Hsun's collections of short stories, Call to Arms and Hesitation, established him as the leading fiction writer of China. Yet, though his writings won him a large following, he abandoned fiction when he left Peking in 1926 for Amoy and Canton. During the next three years he became embroiled in a tortuous controversy with the Communists, and in 1929 he made an accommodation with the Party without becoming a member. It was at this time that his literary creativity ebbed.

During the early 1920's Lu Hsun lectured in Chinese literature at Peita University while carrying on his duties at the ministry of education. He was dismissed for a time from the ministry for backing the students at the Women's Higher Normal School during a dispute over the appointment of a conservative principal. The leader of the dissident students was Hsu Kuang-p'ing, who was suspended for her radicalism. Miss Hsu, an admirer of Lu Hsun, wrote to him for advice, and they carried on a long correspondence, which was later published. After graduation she taught in Canton and when Lu Hsun was made head of the Chinese literature department and dean at Sun Yat-sen University, she became his assistant and common-law wife. Their years together were filled with controversy, but she was loyal and helpful. After his death Miss Hsu edited and published Lu Hsun's works together with her writings about him.

Young writers sought Lu Hsun's counsel and he helped them freely. When, under the reactionary Tuan Ch'i-ju government, student demonstrators were massacred on March 18, 1926, Lu Hsun labeled the act "the blackest day in Chinese history." Branded as a dangerous radical, he was forced to go into hiding for several weeks. That summer he left for Amoy University, where he taught for a short period, and the next year went on to Sun Yat-sen University in Canton.

Despite Lu Hsun's yen for Russian literature and thought, he made no close studies of Leninism. Disillusionment with the Kuomintang led him to delve further into Russian thought and Marxism, but he never read Das Kapital. He remained close to Ch'en Tu-hsiu and Li Ta-chao, founder of the Chinese Communist party, but did not participate in political organizations. Communist propaganda papers considered him hostile. In 1928 he was condemned for his critical pronouncements on the writing of revolutionists, rebukes that led him to reconsider his position. In 1930 he affiliated with the Freedom League, which protested the control measures imposed upon dissenters. He supported the League of Left-Wing Writers and the International Union of Revolutionary Writers in Moscow. He gave protection to certain Communist friends and sympathized with some Communist objectives out of his resentment of social evils, economic injustices, foreign intervention, and the ineptitude of Kuomintang leaders. Yet always he shied away from the dogmas of Marx and Lenin, distrusting their promises and the Party hierarchy.

Lu Hsun died of tuberculosis on October 19, 1936. During his last years he attacked the censorship of the Kuomintang and the terror tactics employed by those who differed with them. The people, he said, remain slaves in their misery, exploited by false leaders. "We in China...[live like] fish in a muddy stream, incoherent and confused." China was a "black vat of human flesh," corrupt and unawakened. Yet despite the severity of his pronouncements, Lu Hsun clung to hope that his country would yet be aroused and saved. "To say that there is no place for us on the twentieth-century stage is nonsense."

Feng Chih, one of Lu Hsun's proteges, wrote in memory of his mentor:

In the deep night many years ago
You were awakened by your youthful courage.
God knows, you were disillusioned many times,
But in your mind the awakening never faded.
Therefore I shall always be grateful to you.
And gaze up at you on behalf of our age,
Wherein the fools reign untrammelled,
But the real nurse of our age was always

An exile from the world.
Sometimes you saw the light come clear through the clouds,
Then—a turn of the hand—the clouds came again.
Now you have come to the end of your remorseless journey.
During those trials only the roadside grass
Called forth from you a hopeful smile.